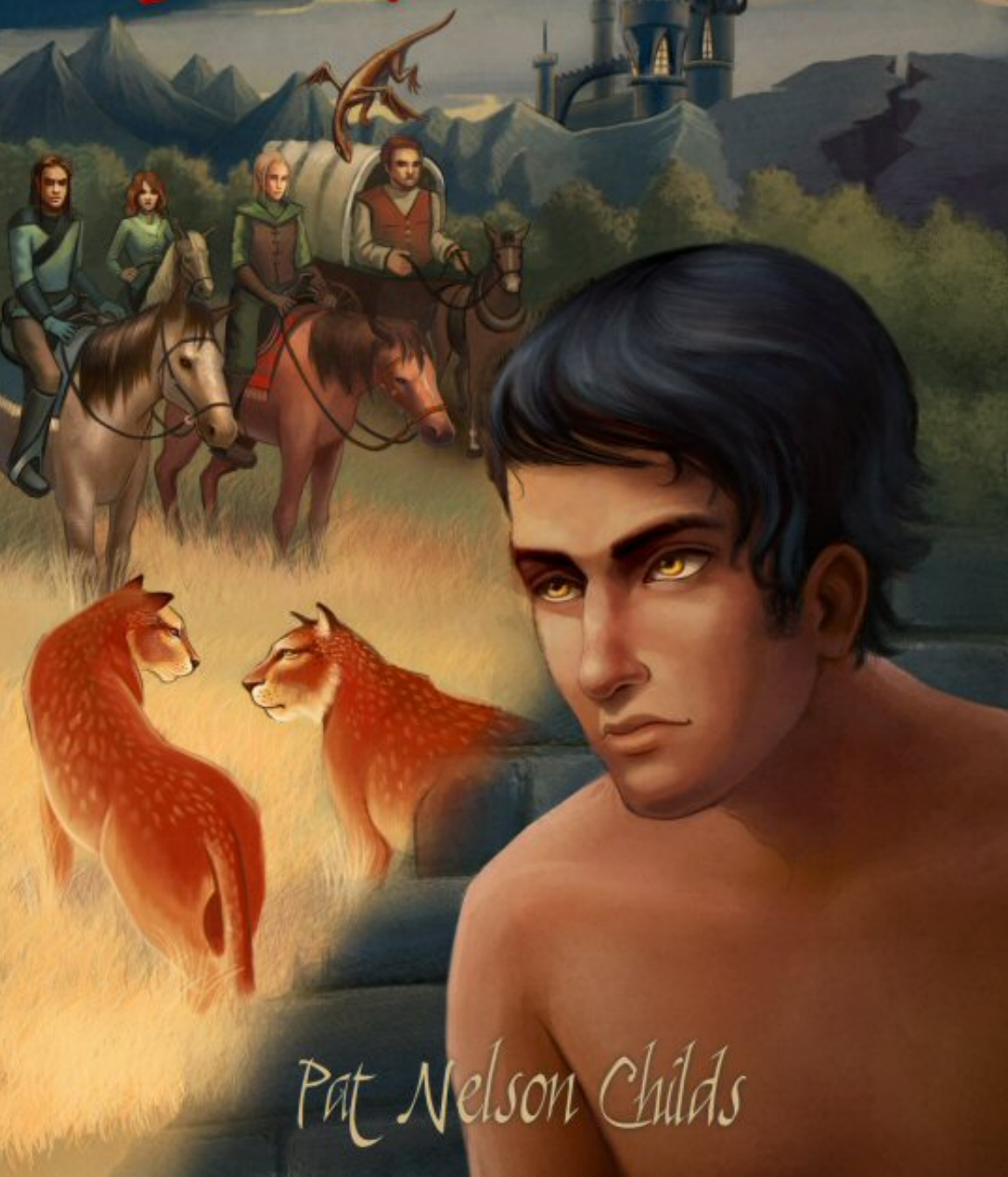


Book Two of the Chronicles of Firna

Scion's Blood



Pat Nelson Childs

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The Chronicles of Firma

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GLYNWORKS PUBLISHING

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For Heather

my dear friend, editor in chief and
Rock of Gibraltar. I haven't the words to express
my deep appreciation and affection.

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Three Quick Notes About Time on Firma

I.

Firma has no clocks, as we know them. The citizens there (those who use measuring devices at all) employ various types of candles and oil lamps that are made to burn at a constant and easily measured rate. These devices are standardized throughout most of Firma.

As far as the terminology goes, it is very simple:

1 mark = $1/20$ of a day

1 minmark = $1/50$ of a mark

1 tik = $1/50$ of a minmark

In other words, there are 50 tiks (about one Earth second) in a minmark, 50 minmarks (about one Earth minute) in a mark and 20 marks (about one Earth hour) in a day. Two other terms used are quartermark ($1/4$ of a mark) and halfmark ($1/2$ a mark).

Denizens of Firma also use mark glasses and minmark glasses, which are filled with a particular amount of fine sand. When the glass is turned over, the sand inside takes a fixed amount of time (normally a minmark, quartermark, halfmark or mark) to run from top to bottom.

The lengths of days, months and years are slightly different on Firma than on Earth, but not so different as to require technical specificity.

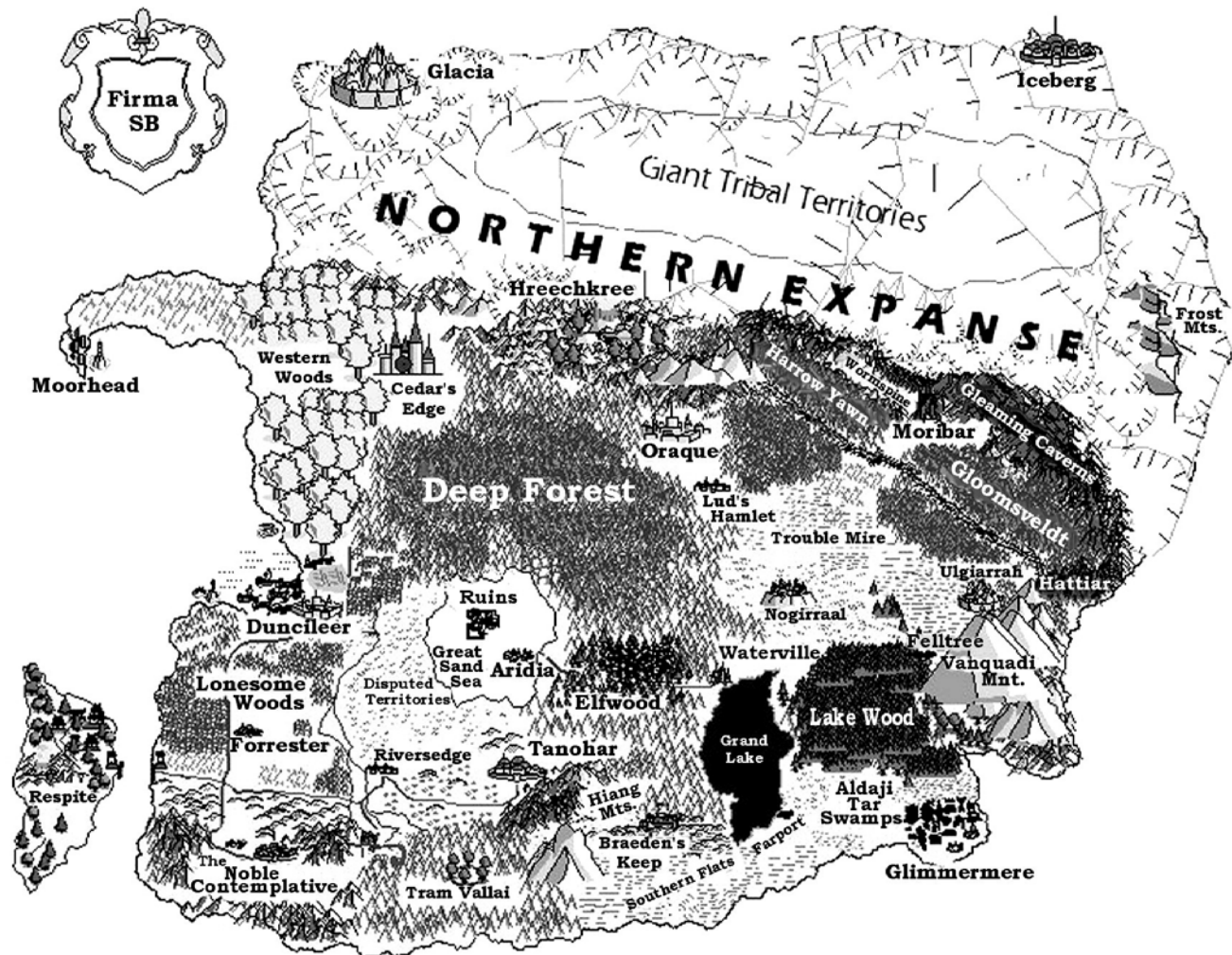
II.

The Faerie term *moonsround* refers to a period of approximately 29 days, or the amount of time that passes during one full phase of the moon. Unlike Earth's months, a moonsround on Firma has a fixed number of days. But Firma's months, like those on Earth, differ somewhat in the number of their days.

III.

Though the week has seven days, only the last day of the week, known in Common Firmish as *Wiksend*, is mentioned by name in *Scion's Blood*. Wiksend is a day of rest in some parts of Firma, principally the major cities, but it differs from our Sunday in that it has no religious foundation.

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Prologue

In the rear left tower, in the castle of Moribar, High Lord Hughn sat watching the fat, wet flakes of heavy snow cascading down outside his window. It was midwinter now, and Moribar, located high in the Wormspine mountain range and bordering the eastern edge of the Northern Expanse, had already seen more than its share of foul, wet weather. Thinking back, the High Lord could not easily remember the last time he had seen the sun shine in this place. It seemed as though the weather itself was reflecting the mood of the castle of late. Everyone was gloomy.

It had been three long years since their plan to overthrow the Brotherhood of the Noble Contemplative had failed. Three years during which, as far as the average denizen of Moribar was concerned, little had happened to further their cause. Though it had pained Hughn to leave them in the dark, to allow them to come so close to despair, maintaining the secrecy of their most recent plans had been of the utmost urgency. Only two... no, three others, besides himself, knew the details of the plot which was currently unfolding. Now, if all went as planned, things would soon grow brighter – much brighter indeed.

Hughn glanced at the time candle on the table across the room and frowned. They were late. That was worrisome. If something should go wrong at this late stage –

His thoughts were interrupted by a sudden feeling of electricity in the air, which made goose bumps erupt along both of his arms. A moment later, a jagged streak of blue, shimmering light appeared in the middle of the room. Two black-robed men emerged from it abruptly, as though stepping from thin air. They both bowed. None of

this surprised the High Lord. It was exactly what he had been expecting.

“Well?” he asked.

One of the men carried a red velvet bag beneath his arm. Now he placed it gently on the desk in front of Hughn. The High Lord’s eyes widened and he licked his lips in anticipation. Carefully, with great reverence, he opened the bag and removed the contents. After all this time...all these many centuries...it was at last theirs. The time of the ascendancy would happen in *his* lifetime. The excitement – and the joy – was almost too much for his mind to process.

He continued to stare for some time at the object he held in his hands, and the object – an enormous white, human-shaped skull – stared sightlessly back at him. Sightless for now, Hughn thought, but soon –

“Any trouble?” he asked, glancing up at the men, who were still waiting there patiently.

“None, High Lord,” one of them answered. “Everything went according to plan.”

“You had no difficulty with the spell of artifice?”

“No, High Lord,” said the other. “I cast it as you taught me and it worked just as you said it would. It will be some time before they discover that the skull is missing.”

“Not as long as I would like, I suspect,” said Hughn, “but it is of little consequence, provided the rest of our plans go off with similar success. Excellent work, brothers. Your names will be forever extolled in song for your fine work. Go and rest now. You should have more than adequate time to recover from your journey before you are needed for the final phase of your mission.”

The two men bowed again and left the room. High Lord Hughn began to stare ardently again at the skull – the skull of Cyure, his lord and master. As he ran his hands over its smoothly polished surface, he could feel the energy emanating from it, coursing up his arms and through his entire body. Even without his usual trance, he could hear the whisper of his God’s voice in his head.

“*Soon,*” it said. “*Soon, my fine and faithful servant.*”

“Yes, My Lord,” he said aloud to the skull. “The time of your ascendancy is nigh. Soon –” his voice broke “– soon you will rise again to rule this world...to free it from its oppressors.”

The voice sighed contentedly, and then the energy faded. Hughn stood and walked to the window. Though it was only late afternoon, the last of the day’s feeble light was already beginning to fade. To the High Lord, however, the dingy gray and white world now looked bright with hope and promise. There was but one task left to accomplish first.

“Rokey, my dear nephew,” he said softly to the falling snow. “It is, at last, time for us to meet, face to face.”

Part One

Chapter 1

Toil and Turmoil

“**C**oncentrate!” High Elf Mage, Ellispon, stood at the rear of the training room, watching and waiting. He was normally a patient instructor, but it had been a long day and he was nearly worn out. Nevertheless, he was hopeful that his pupil would get this one feat mastered before the end of the session.

The pupil in question was a handsome, strapping young man with short, blue-black hair and glittering, golden eyes. Though he lived among them, he was not an elf, but a mix of human and an ancient, nearly extinct race known as The Sidhe; some called them The Faerie. Ellispon had first been introduced to him nearly three years ago when the boy, in the company of his lover, had come back to Elfwood Forest, weary to the core from a long and perilous journey and in need of a good rest in the safety and comfort of a home. Elfwood *was* home to the boy’s lover, because he was an elf, and not just any elf; he was Prince Flaskamper, son of King Angorath and Queen Ferriwhyl, younger brother of Prince Alrontin. The boy’s name was Rokey, and though *he* possessed no titles, his name soon became well known among the denizens of Elfwood. This was chiefly because of his sidhe heritage, but there were other qualities which set him apart as well – qualities that came to be known only much later, and only by those high up in the hierarchy of elf mages.

“No, no,” barked Ellispon, reflexively tugging at his long, white beard. “You’re forgetting the fundamental order: call up your own

power first to initiate the flow, then weave the spell and infuse it with power from the articulation.”

“I’m trying, master,” Rokey responded wearily, “but it keeps dissolving mid-way through.”

“That’s because you’re not merging the two properly yet,” explained the elf mage. “You must pull the core power through you, taking just enough energy back to replenish what the spell cost you to invoke. You’re trying to stand outside of the loop instead of becoming part of the loop, and it won’t work that way.”

“Sorry.”

“Try again. Focus on the apple.”

Rokey concentrated on the apple in front of him on the pedestal, and called his own power to hand. Carefully, he began to weave the basic spell of concealment. Slowly, bit by bit, the apple began to disappear from view. So far so good, but now came the difficult part. With another part of his mind, he reached outward, downward – toward the articulation, a rich vein of raw magic that ran through the soil deep beneath them. There were articulations throughout Firma, but the one directly beneath Elfwood Forest was one of the strongest and most stable ones currently in existence. Although this made Elfwood an ideal place for magical training, few non-elves were offered such an opportunity. He touched the pulsating force gingerly, and then reached in slowly, careful to draw out only one small strand of the massive store of energy. Even so, it hit him hard, and he had to struggle to keep it under control. The apple faded in and out as Rokey worked to couple the borrowed energy with his own. The exertion brought beads of sweat to his forehead, and a ringing began in his ears. He persisted though, and at last the two forces merged, pulsing power throughout his entire body. He kept back enough to replenish his spent stores, and then focused the rest onto the spell. The apple vanished again, and this time remained invisible.

“Master!” Rokey cried breathlessly. “I did it!”

“Excellent,” his tutor replied. “Now reverse it, carefully.”

Rokey concentrated again, this time on powering down the spell. It was, in some ways, even more difficult to accomplish the process in reverse, for the raw energy, once released, was loath to return to its inactive state. Slowly, he drew the power back into himself, and then tried to carefully push it back down into the articulation. He had nearly succeeded when the stream suddenly wrenched itself free from his mental grasp. Raw, unharnessed power coursed through him; he felt every hair on his head and body stand up, and for a moment he panicked. But then he felt Ellispson’s own energies surrounding him, taking control of the wayward stream and expertly channeling it back into the ground from which it had been drawn. The small crisis was all over in only a few ticks, but to Rokey, it had felt like an eternity.

Rokey turned to face Ellispon, an apology ready on his lips, but before he could say the words, he suddenly became aware that his hair wasn't the only thing the stray energy had caused to stand up, and in his tight elvish leggings, the condition was painfully obvious. His hands flew to cover himself, and he spun around again, turning crimson with embarrassment.

"It's all right, son," Ellispon told him. "It happens to everybody in the beginning. It's just more noticeable with males, unfortunately. Once you've gotten more familiar with the energy flow, it will cease to occur," Ellispon allowed himself a small chuckle, "at least, accidentally."

"You might have warned me," Rokey said crossly, untucking his tunic to add a measure of concealment. His day had now officially plunged from bad straight to mortifying.

"I'm sorry, Rokey, I truly am," the mage said contritely. "I haven't taught a student as young and, well, magically inexperienced as you for, goodness, many score years. It simply didn't cross my mind."

"Gods," Rokey said, frustrated and close to tears, "it isn't bad enough that I'm a failure. I have to humiliate myself as well."

Ellispon strode across the room. He grasped Rokey's shoulders and spun the boy around to face him.

"Listen to me, Rokey," the old elf said sternly. "You are not, do you hear, *not* a failure. You've done very well up to this point in mastering the basics of magic. You can do things with ease now which, two years ago, you would never have imagined possible. Now we're moving to a phase beyond the basics, a point in the training that tests the mettle of *all* would-be mages. From now on, setbacks will be more numerous, and victories harder won. But those victories signify accomplishments far more critical than summoning lumen orbs to cast light, or floating a goblet in the air. The challenges before you now represent the fundamental differences that separate a skilled mage from a simple conjurer, and mastering them is not the work of a year, or even a decade. It is the work of a lifetime. It requires drive, perseverance and, above all, patience. I took you as my pupil because I believed that you possessed those qualities..."

"Master, I –"

Ellispon held up his hand for silence.

"I believed that you had those qualities then, Rokey, and I want to believe it still. But these indulgences in self-pity and defeatism do nothing to bolster that belief. Am I making myself clear?"

"Yes, master," Rokey said softly.

"I didn't hear you."

"Yes, master!" Rokey repeated loudly, his golden eyes flashing with irritation.

“There – some spirit at last,” said Ellispon, his blue-gray eyes twinkling. “Let us build on it a bit shall we?” He offered Rokey a small smile of encouragement. Rokey smiled in return.

“Yes, master,” Rokey answered again, “Thank you.”

“Thank me by setting your mind back to the task at hand,” Ellispon instructed him. He spun Rokey around again and pointed to the apple.

“Let us try again,” said the mage, backing out of the way. “And for pity’s sake, boy,” he added, “I’m two hundred and ninety-eight years old; I’ve seen a boy with his sword drawn before; so if it springs up again, tuck it in, stick it out or wave it like a wand if you wish; just make sure that whatever you do, you finish the blasted spell!”

“Yes, master!” Rokey hollered, grinning broadly. Then he grew serious, centering his thoughts, and focused once again on the apple.

* * *

Flaskamper lay alone in bed, trying unsuccessfully to sleep. A lone time candle burned on the night table beside the bed. With a groan of frustration, the elf sat up and looked at it. It was late, and Rokey had been due home marks before. He knew that he shouldn’t let them bother him – these increasingly late nights. The Council of Elf Mages had made it very clear how important it was that Rokey be trained as quickly as possible. The hope was that the grueling process would lead them to unlock the secret behind the massive burst of power he had displayed three years ago, which had resulted in the deaths of two members of the sinister group which called itself the Order of the Bone and also apparently brought Flaskamper himself back from near death. The mages were certain, even from the scant information that Rokey had been able to give them, that the threat from this dark order was by no means finished. They saw in Rokey – part human, part sidhe and, possibly, part something else entirely – the potential to become a great wizard, a champion in the future battles that the Council believed were almost certain to come. No, the late nights shouldn’t bother Flaskamper at all, given the circumstances, but they did, and he wasn’t entirely sure why. It seemed, lately, that more and more things were troubling him, making him increasingly discontented.

It hadn’t started out this way. Three years ago, when he and Rokey had first returned, things had been grand. Their quest to solve the riddle of Rokey’s origins and to discover the identity of his mysterious enemy had been difficult, even costing the life of their valued friend Stamford, and very nearly, the couple’s own lives as well. Nevertheless, by the time it was all over, and they had finally met up with his brother, Alrontin, and returned to Elfwood Forest, they were happy – painfully exhausted, but happy, and filled with optimism

about their future together. They were never under the illusion that their difficulties were over. There were many questions about Rokey still to be answered, and based on news they had begun receiving from other kingdoms, it was also clear that the Order of the Bone was making significant headway on other fronts, stirring up trouble and unrest throughout much of Firma. But in the midst of all the uncertainties, the one thing about which they *had* been certain was their love for one another. After a year of rest and recuperation, the two were married in a ceremony that, thanks to his mother the queen, was almost embarrassingly posh and overblown. In the elven tradition, it had taken place at night, just after the rise of the full moon. This was done so that the ceremony could be presided over by the moon goddess, Secta, the elves' principal deity. As Flaskamper thought back on that wonderful night, he once again felt a twinge of disappointment that none of their closest friends had been able to attend. At that time, they had still not known how to reach Fia, and although he and Rokey had traveled to Duncileer the previous Spring to attend Lorq and Kyzee's nuptials, their own wedding had fallen too close to the birth of the giant-sized couple's first child for the expectant parents to be able to reciprocate and make the journey to Elfwood.

Still, it had been a wonderful ceremony, and afterwards the couple had settled-in together at the palace. Flaskamper had argued that they should have a home of their own, but finally caved when his father offered to remodel an entire wing of the palace complex in order to give them a space that was uniquely their own. The memory of his first night there, making love to his new husband, brought a lump to his throat. They had been so blissfully happy that night.

So why, just two years later, am I so damned unhappy?

Flaskamper had joined the Elf Guard as soon as he had felt well and strong enough. At the time, mysterious creatures still prowled the forest, killing pets and livestock. Alrontin had needed his brother's help to find and eliminate the threat, which they believed was also responsible for the disappearance of two sentries from one of Elfwood's remote guard stations. It had taken nearly six months, some carefully laid traps and a great deal of patience, but they had finally managed to identify and eliminate them. The mysterious menace turned out to be strange wolf-like creatures with long curved fangs and lithe bodies that were equally at home on the ground or in the treetops. The first time they actually cornered one, a pair actually, in a small clearing that they had fenced off and baited with livestock, he'd thought the other guards were going to desert on the spot. They had never seen anything like the snarling, crimson-eyed creatures before, and the famous fortitude of the *Silver Sentinels*, as the Elf Guard was known abroad, seemed to have taken that day off. Fortunately, Flaskamper had been there to lead them – more like

shame them – into action. He had never encountered the things before either, but with recent memories of battling ratmen, harpies and rock giants still fresh in his mind, he saw nothing particularly frightening about these devils. Ordering the others to ready their bows, he had drawn his sword and charged in to flush them. They managed to kill one right off, but the other, apparently the dead one's mate, had charged Flaskamper at blinding speed, knocking him off his feet. It was lucky for him that the others had recovered their courage by then. They felled the beast an instant before it tore his throat out. The rest of the marauders were eventually dealt with in similar fashion, though without any further close calls. Since then, the forest had been peaceful, so peaceful in fact, that he now found his daily duties almost tearfully dull – dull and confining.

Confining, yes...there it was again; that awful feeling of being trapped like a caged bird. It was definitely part of his problem – and beyond that, the feeling that he was now completely and utterly useless.

First it was your brother, now it's your husband, he thought. Great Secta, is there no end to those in whose shadow I must stand?

Just then Flaskamper heard the outer door open and close. A moment later, Rokey walked in to the bedroom. He looked at Flaskamper with surprise.

"I thought you'd be asleep," he said.

"Tried. Couldn't," the elf replied. "Why so late tonight?"

"Damned articulation," he said. "Had to master powering down. I had to get the whole thing right at least once."

Flaskamper had no idea what he was talking about. He rarely did these days. At first, Rokey had tried to explain things to him, but the elf had never had any grasp of the intricacies of magic. Nowadays, Rokey simply talked as though Flaskamper understood it all, and Flaskamper nodded and pretended that he did.

"I made dinner," said the elf, smiling, "all by myself. There's still some left out in the kitchen if you're hungry. It's not quite up to royal standards, but hey – it beats trail rations."

"I'm sorry, my love," Rokey said. "I really didn't intend to be so late. I'm sure it's wonderful, but I'm too tired to eat now. I just need to crawl into bed and collapse."

Rokey disappeared into the lavatory for a few minmarks, then came out and began to undress. Flaskamper watched him appreciatively. Physically, little had changed about his husband these past three years. His stocky frame had filled out a bit, no doubt from the more sedentary life he now led. He was by no means overweight; he had simply made the transformation from a lean and hungry adolescent to a well-to-do (and well fed) married man. Without question though, the most striking change, in *both* their appearances, was their hairstyles. When they had met, Rokey's lustrous black hair

had fallen clear to his shoulders, and his own, light blond in color, had been short and spiky. Now the two of them had all but reversed; Rokey now wore his cropped short, while Flaskamper had grown his out to well below his shoulders. It hadn't been a deliberate switch, just one of those things. In fact, this was the first time he had really thought at all about it.

He held open the covers and Rokey climbed in, naked and shivering in the cold. Flaskamper rubbed his arms to warm him. It was late winter, and though there was a fireplace in their bedroom, it was not lit. They deliberately kept their sleeping quarters cold, preferring to stay warm under their thick down-filled quilt – a wedding gift from the king and queen. Rokey kissed Flaskamper goodnight and rolled over, but the elf had other ideas. He wrapped his arms around his spouse and began kissing his neck. As his passion grew, Flaskamper started to kiss him more ardently, running one hand slowly up his chest. Rokey moaned as his body responded to Flaskamper's touch. He turned over and their lips met. But then, even as Flaskamper's desire became stronger, he felt his lover's responses beginning to slow, until at last, Rokey laid his hand gently on Flaskamper's shoulder.

"Flash," he said. "I – I can't tonight, dearest. I'm – I'm just too worn out is all. I'm sorry. I really am."

Along with the crush of disappointment, the elf also felt a sudden and unwelcome stabbing of hurt and resentment. More and more late nights had meant less and less lovemaking of late as well. He swallowed his feelings as best he could and kissed Rokey, softly, on the forehead.

"It's alright, *chatka*," he told him, using the elvish term of endearment. "I understand. Go ahead and go to sleep now."

"I love you," Rokey said. He reached up to caress the elf's cheek. Flaskamper resisted the urge to pull away, cursing himself for feeling such an urge at all.

"I love you too, dearest," he said. Despite his annoyance and disappointment, this he meant with all his heart.

Rokey rolled over in the bed and, in minmarks, was sound asleep. Flaskamper, however, remained awake far into the night, his mind awash in hurt and confusion. Things had been so different that first night in this bed, and before that, when they had first met, first fallen in love – wandering all of Firma together. Even as slaves of the Saebrites, they had had an unquenchable passion for one another. Now –

Now, what?

He didn't have the answer. He knew that all passions eventually faded, but things were *not* supposed to be this way. He knew that much. Did Rokey feel it too, he wondered, this growing divide between them? Gods no. He knew nothing these days save spells and charms

and...*articulations*. He never had the time to notice anything else anymore.

Flaskamper got up, donned his robe and headed for the kitchen. He was not hungry, but he needed something to do. He ate, but barely tasted, the rest of the partridges he had cooked for their dinner, and then stirred up the fire in their great room and sat down in front of it. As he stared into the flames, he found himself wishing desperately that his mother was still alive. Queen Ferriwhy1 had passed over not long after their wedding, taken by a sudden, virulent illness unique to elven kind. Her death had devastated the entire family, but especially her younger son. Flaskamper had missed her every day since then, most particularly at times like these, when he felt lost and alone.

Oh, mother, I need you so much right now.

Unbidden tears welled up and began trickling down his cheeks.

I know that if you were here, you'd tell me what to do – how to handle... these... feelings.

He continued to sit there quietly for a while, watching the fire crackle and dance, before returning to bed. Rokey never stirred as he climbed back under the quilt. Flaskamper was no closer to an answer now than he had been before. Nevertheless, at some point in the early pre-dawn marks, weariness finally took over, and he slept.

Chapter 2

Emissary

Despite having slept little, Flaskamper was dressed and out of the house before Rokey awoke the next morning. This was hardly an unusual occurrence; the elf's duties as an Elf Guard Company Commander normally began before those of his husband, so he would often leave quietly without waking him. This morning had a different feel, though, as if he were sneaking out to avoid something; it was a feeling he hated.

Out of sorts during the morning troop inspection, he found himself constantly second-guessing himself, wondering if his mood was making him overly harsh on them, or not harsh enough; not a good position for a squad commander to be in, especially in dark times such as these. Normally, he managed quite well to keep the stresses of work from intruding on his home life, and vice versa. Lately though, the two had begun to blur together, making him both less effective on the job and even more tense at home.

Flaskamper muddled through the morning's routine as best he could; by now he could do most of it in his sleep, which was a good thing today, for he was so tired. He was not looking forward to the afternoon though, which largely consisted of a diplomatic luncheon with his father, King Angorath, and an emissary from Aridia, followed by a mercantile negotiation with said emissary. Though he was curious to hear the latest news of the desert city he and his companions had once visited, he wasn't at all sure he was up to either the social niceties or the business acumen the diplomatic occasion

would demand. As the time neared, however, Flaskamper managed to find his second wind, both physically and mentally.

As he headed through the palace complex toward the state dining room, his mind traveled back to his previous visit to the desert, to the clash with the skeleton prince in the ruined city near Aridia; that villain and his hordes of flesh-eating insects, the raveners, had so nearly succeeded in taking all their lives.

Gods, how I miss the others! Stamford, Fia...dear, gentle Lorq.

Yet despite the fact that the evil prince would have gleefully looked on as the raveners devoured him and his companions in their sleep, Rokey had still felt enough compassion to ask the Pasha of Aridia during their visit if there was not some way to help the poor mad creature. Pasha B'el Thazal had promised to try his best to find those with the skills to lift the curse and free the prince, and he had been true to his word. Shortly after returning to Elfwood, they had learned that the pasha had already assembled a group of sorcerers and magicians from throughout the region to tackle the problem. It had taken the better part of six months, but the team had finally been able to devise a probable means of breaking the curse that had first created the Great Sand Sea. The Aridian militia had escorted them to the ruined city and, knowing its secret, had been able to successfully gain access to the ancient temple and subdue the ancient prince. Then the team had set to work weaving the spells which would suppress the wild magic the prince had unwittingly let loose upon his realm so many centuries before.

When they were finished, nothing seemed to have changed. The prince still lived and the sun still burned. The magicians had faith though, and the party had returned to Aridia, dragging their captive, who screamed and cursed the entire way. The sunlight bothered him terribly, but did him no real harm. Out of kindness, though, they had given him proper desert clothes to cover what remained of his flesh, and offered him food and water, which he would not touch. They had finally conjectured that, having not eaten or drunk for centuries, his body must no longer have the facility to process such things. As Flaskamper himself had observed, there was little left of the creature but dry bones and a few tatters of withered flesh.

When the group got back to Aridia, there had been some confusion as to what to do with the wicked creature. They could hardly have let him go free, for he had been responsible, at least indirectly, for the deaths of hundreds of individuals over the years. Yet he was, they were certain, one of their ancient ancestors, and thus deserving of some reverence. At last, at the pasha's direction, they had created a comfortable, well-appointed section of dungeon for the prince, and locked him inside. There he would remain while the sorcerers continued to search for a way to end his eternal suffering. He made only one request, which he had finally been able to convey to his

captors even without the spell of translation that had aided Flaskamper and the others before: the prince wished to have a colony of ravens brought to his quarters to keep him company. Unfortunately, B'el Thazal had decided that the last thing he needed running loose in his fine palace was a horde of flesh-eating insects, so the request had been denied.

Less than a month later, remote scouts had begun to report rain clouds sighted over parts of the Great Sand Sea. There were only small showers at first, but they soon grew. Aridia itself got the first drops of rain in its recorded history only seven months after Rokey and Flaskamper returned to Elfwood. The pasha had sent a desert falcon with a message, and a beautiful glass vial of rainwater as a gift to the two of them. It had been a great cause for celebration, but also for concern, for no one knew at the time what the change in weather would mean for Aridia, or for the surrounding region. As Elfwood was their closest neighbor, Flaskamper's father had also been concerned, and had opened up further diplomatic ties with the pasha, largely in order to keep abreast of any changes that might affect his own kingdom. This had pleased Flaskamper, who had always thought their kingdom too isolated. Any excuse to open up more diplomatic channels had been just fine by him.

Over the following two years, things had changed more drastically than anyone could have predicted. Even the magicians who had lifted the curse had been taken completely by surprise. The Great Sand Sea, that massive, sprawling desert that had sat in the midst of Firma for century upon century, had begun to disappear. Not slowly, gradually, as one might have expected, but at a truly mind-boggling pace. It was as though the land itself were rushing to reclaim the ground that had been barren for so long. That first year, the desert had shrunk by fully a third. The year after, it had slowed a bit, though still nearly a quarter more had vanished. The pasha had then begun to worry about his realm's principal industry, glassmaking, which required prodigious quantities of the desert's fine white sand. Though there was still plenty left, he'd wondered how long it would last. Though the rate of shrinkage seemed to be slowing, he'd been afraid that in some few years their entire livelihood may simply disappear, taking their culture along with it. He had come up with a bold plan to stockpile enormous quantities of the sand, in order to provide them with a cushion, and thus allow his people more time to adapt to the coming change.

This was the reason that the emissary had come to Elfwood. The Aridians needed building materials, in order to construct the huge silos they would need to store the sand. Mud bricks could not be produced quickly enough or in sufficient quantities to suit their needs. They required wood – vast quantities of wood – that was something of which B'el Thazal's new friend, King Angorath, had

plenty to spare...for the right price. The emissary had come to negotiate a trade for the right to cull wood from the western region of Elfwood. It was unusual for the Elf King himself to work on an individual trade negotiation, but this was an unusual agreement, involving a sizeable tract of forest. Angorath had insisted on personally brokering the deal; he had brought Flaskamper in to gain experience.

“Negotiations are something every prince should be familiar with,” Angorath had told him, “and for something more weighty than the price of a bed in a boarding house.”

Flaskamper had not argued with him. It would have done no good, and besides, he was out of his mind with boredom. The prospect of something different to occupy him for a while had actually sounded pretty inviting.

The king and his Aridian guest had just arrived. Flaskamper could swear he knew the face of the dark-complexioned young man, but couldn't quite place it.

“You don't remember me?” The young man smiled as he shook Flaskamper's hand.

“Forgive me,” replied the elf. “I know we've met, I just...”

“I am Jiri,” he told him. “It was I who first met you and your party in the desert and brought you into Aridia.”

“Of course, Jiri, the scout!” cried Flaskamper. “It's good to see you again. Well, it seems you've come up a few ranks in the pasha's court. Congratulations.”

“Thank you, Prince Flaskamper” the young man said. “It was in no small part due to my bringing your story to the pasha's attention. He was kind enough to reward my initiative, and I made the most I could of his benevolence.”

“Ambassador Jiri had begun to tell me in court how things were progressing in Aridia,” the king told Flaskamper, “but I told him he must wait and tell us over lunch, for I knew you would be eager to hear it.”

“Indeed, I am,” Flaskamper replied. “Let's go and sit down. I'm very eager to catch up on all the news of Aridia.”

As they sat and ate, Jiri filled them in on the most recent progress. Over the past year, the desert had shrunk by another seven and three quarter miles. Though the progression was obviously continuing to slow, it was still a prodigious amount. Their scholars had calculated that, if the desert continued this rate of decline, it could possibly be gone entirely within the span of a single generation. Of course, since the rapid shrinkage was clearly magically driven, there was no way of assuring the soundness of these calculations. It had nevertheless caused the pasha a few sleepless nights.

Besides news of Aridia, Jiri also offered another bit of disturbing news. The retreating desert had left, in its wake, miles and miles of

new, fertile land to its south. This meant that the entire expanse between Duncileer and Tanohar, once a wasteland, was now highly desirable property. Both the powerful kingdoms had begun to lay claim to portions of the land, pushing further and further outward with their settlements. It seemed to the pasha that border clashes would be inevitable unless the two realms could negotiate a settlement.

"This is where the problem lies," Jiri told them, "for while Duncileer's King Hobar seems amenable to a peaceful negotiation, Edvar, the King of Tanohar, does not. For reasons no one can ascertain, he seems almost eager to force the issue. He has put troops on what has now become the tentative border – a most provocative act. Duncileer's ambassadors have been treated most belligerently in Tanohar, or so we hear. The pasha fears that, if things continue in this manner, the situation there may soon erupt, possibly resulting in a war between the two realms. This would, as you know, have a grave effect, not only on those two kingdoms, but on our entire region."

"It would, indeed," Angorath agreed. "Let us hope that Hobar will have some success on the diplomatic front. I knew his father to be a skilled statesman, so I have every reason to believe that his son will be up to the challenge."

The king gave his son a meaningful look. Flaskamper rolled his eyes.

"Nevertheless," Angorath continued, "you may inform the pasha that I, too, will be watching the situation closely."

They continued to talk about other matters, and when lunch was over, the king brought the conversation round to the topic of their negotiation. Jiri brought out the Aridian plans for the proposed silos, and the three of them discussed proposals and counter proposals throughout the afternoon. At day's end, they were close to an accord, but the king proposed that they sleep on it, and settle the details in the morning. Jiri happily agreed, and the three of them adjourned. Angorath had planned a small state dinner and entertainments for the young man. Flaskamper had expected this, but had not anticipated his father to invite him. He groaned inwardly. An invitation to a state affair, however small, was never optional for a prince. He was expected to attend and help entertain their guest. This duty usually fell squarely on Alrontin's shoulders, but lately, the king was determined that Flaskamper learn the proper duties of a Crown Prince, even if it killed him. With a promise to see them at dinner, Flaskamper returned to his quarters to rest before changing into evening attire.

Rokey was not home yet. The elf thought certain that he would return in time to join him that evening. Rokey did, in fact, return a short time later, but he was in no mood to attend a state dinner.

“Flash, I can’t,” Rokey complained. “I’ve been hard at it all day and I’m worn out.”

“Father will be expecting you,” Flaskamper argued. “Besides, it’s Jiri. Don’t you want to see him again?”

“For what?” Rokey replied testily. “He was someone we met once. It’s not as though we became great friends. Just make my apologies, Flash. I can’t do it.”

Flaskamper lost his temper.

“Rokey, why do you have to be so damned selfish?” he yelled. “Can’t you just suck it up this one time and do this one thing for me?”

“Selfish!” Rokey responded with equal ire. “You think I do this for *me*. You think I wear myself to the bone because I enjoy it?”

“Oh, for Secta’s sake!” the elf cried, “don’t give me the *I do it all for the good of Firma* speech. I’m not in the mood to hear it again right now. What about *my* good, Rokey? How about doing something for *my* blasted good for once?”

“And you’re calling *me* selfish?” Rokey retorted. “Listen to you! Alright, you want me to go; I’ll go, just for you.”

“Never mind,” said Flaskamper hotly. “You don’t need to do me any favors. I’d rather go alone.”

“Fine.” Rokey disappeared into the lavatory, slamming the door behind him.

Shaking with anger and misery, Flaskamper finished dressing and left for the king’s quarters. As there was just one guest, dinner would be held in the small private dining room instead of the huge room normally used for state dinners. Afterwards, Angorath had arranged for a private concert by the Elf Bardic Guild. That was sure to impress Jiri. Flaskamper hoped that the music, plus a generous portion of wine, would help to soothe all the anger and frustration he felt.

All through dinner, he was certain that he managed to maintain an air of joviality, though he was also sure that his father had noticed his heavy hand on the wine jug. He didn’t care; if he was to make it through this night, he needed buttressing. Things grew easier once they proceeded to the sitting room. There he was able to relax and lose himself in the fine music of the elvish bards. More wine went around, and by the end of the night, Flaskamper was quite drunk, though he didn’t show it outwardly. Years on the road with Stamford had taught him to hold his liquor well. When the concert concluded, the three said their goodnights and he made his way once more back to his own quarters.

Rokey was already asleep when he arrived home. Flaskamper stood at the bed as he undressed, unsure of what to do. Part of him wanted to wake his husband, but for what purpose? To make up, or to continue to fight? He was still angry, but lonely too. He wanted to be in Rokey’s arms, loving him. He did still love him so. Lately,

though, he had begun to wonder whether Rokey still felt the same way, and the doubt and uncertainty was killing him.

At last, he chose not to wake his sleeping spouse. Rather than going to bed though, he threw on a robe and headed out to the main bathhouse, deciding that a hot soak might help him to clear his head and sort out his feelings. No one was about at this late mark; he immediately shed his robe and descended into the large round tub, where he sat back on the seat and let the steaming hot water work away his stress. He had nearly fallen asleep when he heard a sound at the edge of the bath. He started awake and, when his eyes had focused, he saw Jiri standing there. The young man had obviously had the same plan, for he, too, was dressed in a light, silk robe.

"Forgive me, Prince," said Jiri. "I did not think anyone would be about so late. I shall leave you in peace."

"No, no," Flaskamper responded, a bit groggy from the steam and the wine. "Come on in. There's plenty of room."

"Very well," Jiri said, "as long as you don't mind."

It wasn't until Jiri removed his robe that Flaskamper remembered the Aridian custom of bathing naked. A moment later he recalled that he was naked as well. If someone were to find them together –

Well what if they do? So what? It's perfectly innocent.

And yet, as he watched Jiri enter the pool, his eyes sweeping appreciatively over the young man's hard, smooth body and soft, nut-brown skin, Flaskamper began to feel anything but innocent. To make matters worse, instead of sitting opposite him on the other side of the pool, the boy sat down directly beside him. As Jiri lay back and relaxed, Flaskamper felt the boy's leg slide under his own. He bit his lip and tried desperately to think of something else. Tomorrow afternoon he would rotate the guard postings. Morning would, of course, be filled completing the contract with Jiri – handsome, naked Jiri, sitting so close –

"Does it bother you, my sitting so close?" Jiri asked.

What is this boy – a mind reader? Say yes; just say yes!

"No, not at all," Flaskamper replied, cursing himself.

They sat quietly for a while, and Flaskamper's tension eased. It felt good to be close to someone – someone who was actually awake for a change. And what if the boy *was* handsome and...very...sexy. He wasn't a eunuch after all. How could he fail to notice these things? The two spoke only occasionally, making small talk. Jiri's Aridian accent was soft and pleasant to listen to, and Flaskamper soon found himself thoroughly relaxing, enjoying his company.

"Prince Flaskamper, do you mind if I ask you a personal question?" Jiri asked after a time.

"No, of course not," said Flaskamper, "but call me Flash, will you? I'm only a prince in the daytime."

“Flash, then,” said Jiri. “I could not help but notice that, at dinner, you seemed somewhat...despondent. It is not my intention to pry into your personal life. I merely wanted to tell you – to offer you – I don’t know...my friendship, I suppose.”

“Jiri, that’s – that’s kind of you,” Flaskamper responded. “I appreciate it. I really do.”

Silence fell between them again for a minmark, and then Jiri spoke again.

“I must confess something,” he said in nearly a whisper. “When I first met you there, in the desert, I thought –” he hesitated, and then continued. “I thought that you were the most beautiful man – sorry, I should say most beautiful *male*... that I had ever set eyes on before. I know that we spent only a short time together, and I know that you did not pay much heed to me then, but I – I was so captivated by you. After you and your party left Aridia, I often dreamed about you... about seeing you again.”

Flaskamper knew that he should stop him, but his words felt so good, like a balm for his wounded ego. It seemed like such a long time since anyone had given him a second look, his own husband included. So he lay quietly, letting the boy pour his heart out to him.

“When I heard that the pasha was looking for an ambassador to travel to Elfwood, where you lived,” Jiri went on, “I pleaded with him to send me. He was reluctant to trust someone so young and inexperienced, but I pledged upon my life that I would return with a contract worthy of his trust. He thought I was merely eager to get ahead in his court, to advance myself, but he finally relented; he told me he admired my zeal. Had he known that the reason for my zeal was the desire to see you again... my desire to –”

Flaskamper’s scruples finally got the best of him.

“Jiri –” he broke in softly, “Jiri, I’m... married.”

“I know this,” the young man admitted, sounding rather shamefaced. “When I saw the ring upon your finger today, I vowed that I would keep silent, and say nothing of my feelings. But then I saw you at dinner; you came alone and you seemed so – so full of sorrow. I thought that perhaps, though you were clearly married, perhaps the marriage was not a happy one. I don’t mean to sound like such an opportunist,” he added hastily. “I only meant that – I seek only... to comfort you.”

Flaskamper looked over into Jiri’s black, almond-shaped eyes. They were filled with a mixture of ardor and the vulnerability that comes when one has laid bare one’s soul to another. Flaskamper reached up to touch his long, brown hair and the boy fell abruptly into his arms and kissed him passionately. Pressed against him in the water, Jiri’s body made his own respond quickly, and in moments they had both reached a similar state of excitement.

"Come to my room with me, Prince... Flash" Jiri pleaded breathlessly. "Allow me to love you, if only for tonight. No one will ever know, I promise you. For this one night, let me be a comfort to you."

For a minmark or more, as they lay in the bath, kissing and holding one another, Flaskamper wanted nothing more in the world than to take Jiri to bed, to open the floodgates and pour all of his pent up frustration and desire onto this lad, who was clearly more than eager to accept it – to accept whatever brief love, or semblance of love that Flaskamper was willing to give him. But despite the elf's almost desperate need, in the end, his sleeping conscience awoke, and began to assert itself once again. No one would ever know – no one, that is... except him. To cross this line now would be admitting, to himself at least, that there was nothing left of his relationship with Rokey worth saving. And he was not ready to admit that... at least, not yet.

Using every bit of his remaining willpower, he grasped his would-be lover by the shoulders and gently separated from him.

"I – I can't, Jiri," he said dejectedly. "As you can plainly tell, I want to; I want to so much... I can hardly breathe for wanting it."

"Then why –" Jiri began, but the elf held his finger to the boy's lips.

"Because," Flaskamper explained haltingly, "although things might not be... all that... harmonious, between my husband and me right now, I still – I still love him. No matter how much I want to be with you right now – to betray his trust would... well, I just wouldn't be able to live with myself afterwards. He and I... we've been through too much together for me to do this now. Can you understand that, Jiri?"

Tears had sprung into the young man's eyes, but he nodded, and leaned down to give Flaskamper one last lingering kiss. Then he stood up quickly, and climbed out of the pool. Flaskamper remained where he was, his eyes closed, trying to compose himself. When Jiri had donned his robe again, he kneeled by the tub's edge. Tentatively, he placed his hand on the elf's shoulder.

"Flash, I want you to know that... I meant what I said before. I *shall* always be your friend," the boy said softly. "What we – what nearly happened... I'll always remember it, even more fondly, perhaps, because it *didn't* happen, even though you wanted it to so badly. I see now that I was wrong to tempt you so, but I was not wrong about my feelings. You are an extraordinary person, My Prince. I can only pray to the gods that, someday, another such as you will come along... one who *can* be mine to love."

"Thank you, Jiri," the elf answered, his voice husky with emotion. "Thank you for your friendship... and your understanding. You don't know how much it means to me."

He didn't quite dare look up for fear he would weep. A few moments later, when the boy had left the room, he let go, and the tears flowed freely down his face, into the steaming pool. He stayed and cried there for a long time, from both relief and sorrow: relief that

part of him had been able to hold out, to keep him from breaking his vows to Rokey, and sorrow that another part, perhaps even the greater one, had wanted... even needed so very much to give in.

Chapter 3

Dark Horizons

“**I**’ll be damned!” King Hobar of Duncileer read the scroll again, his brows knit together in consternation. Across the desk from him sat Yurek, the king’s General of Armies, and Bodwin, his Minister of State. Neither replied to his exclamation; both sat patiently, waiting for him to finish the communication, which had just come via special envoy from King Edvar of Tanohar. At last, the king set the paper down on the desk in front of him, and looked up at the other two men.

“Well,” he said, “I don’t believe it. Here we’ve been breaking our necks for the past eight months, trying to get that stubborn ass Edvar to enter into reasonable negotiations – and getting our faces slapped every time. So what does he do now?”

Hobar picked up the scroll again.

“He writes to me to offer a peace initiative,” he announced, and slapped the letter back down.

“Better late than never,” said Bodwin, holding his hand out for the scroll. He was a thin, frail-looking man of sixty-plus years, and what little hair remained around the back of his head was white as snow. His pale green eyes, however, were as bright and alert as those of a man half his age.

The king handed him the scroll.

“Better, if it can be believed,” Hobar replied. The king was nearly forty, but looked ten years younger, largely due to his fine sandy-

blonde hair and a baby face on which a beard, despite his best efforts over the years, stubbornly refused to grow.

General Yurek, a hulking, barrel-chested man, of an age that fell somewhere between the other two, barked a cynical laugh.

"I shouldn't count on that," he warned. "That old bastard's up to something. You can mark my words."

The minister finished reading and passed the message to Yurek, who merely glanced at it before tossing it back on King Hobar's desk.

"I'm no more willing to recommend sticking our foot in a trap than Yurek," said Bodwin, "but suppose it's not a trick? We all know how kingdoms evolve. Allegiances shift; politics change. Perhaps in Tanohar, cooler heads have at last garnered the king's attention."

"Rot," growled Yurek. The king held up his hand and nodded.

"I know, Yurek. I know," he said, "but Bodwin has a point. We can't just dismiss the overture out of hand, not when we ourselves have worked so hard trying to achieve the very thing it offers."

"Against my advice, if I may point it out," the General replied. "I warned you at the moment Tanohar first began to raid our settlements that we should sweep in and muzzle those curs. Tanohar has never been easy to cope with, most particularly over this past decade. You can no more reason with them now than you can housebreak a gryphon. This, *gesture*...is meant either as a stall or a snare. Whichever the case, I say send it back to them with a black feather."

"And have full-scale war?" cried Bodwin. A black feather had long been a symbolic declaration of war in Firma.

"We're already marching down that road," Yurek retorted gruffly, "we may as well set our own pace."

King Hobar shook his head.

"I'm not prepared to escalate the situation from our end, especially not when the possibility of a solution is at hand. I know of your distrust for the Tanohari, Yurek, and frankly I share it, to a certain extent. They've certainly shown us nothing in the past year that would have led me to expect this petition for peace, so believe me; I *do* look upon this with a certain degree of skepticism. However, it *is* just possible that the offer is sincere, and to me, even the remotest possible chance of averting a costly war – costly in all respects – is worthy of pursuit...*cautious* pursuit."

Bodwin nodded. Yurek growled. King Hobar smiled and glanced at the time candle on his desk.

"I'm due at court, gentlemen," he told them, rising. The other two stood with him and bowed. "I'll draft a reply to King Edvar tonight. Don't worry Yurek. We're only going to dip our toe in the water for now."

"All very well," said the General, "but there's likely to be a gnargut in there waiting to snap it off."

* * *

Kyzee was waiting outside the doorway with Lieutenant Shan when King Hobar emerged. The Saebrilite could not miss the look of anxiety on the monarch's face. He greeted them both and started down the long hallway toward his court. Kyzee fell into step behind him; Shan a step behind her.

"Bad tidings from Tanohar?" she ventured.

"Confusing tidings," he replied. "King Edvar now claims to want peace."

Kyzee muttered an expletive in her own language. The king chuckled.

"I'm not sure what you said," he remarked, "but my guess is that you and the general see eye to eye on this one."

"There's a first time for everything," Kyzee replied.

Just one year previously, after having personally saved the king from an assassination attempt, Kyzee had risen to the rank of Commander of the Royal Personal Guard, but the move had not come without controversy. As the General of Armies, the post would normally be left to Yurek to fill as he saw fit, and he had not approved of the king's recommendation, not even after her heroic deed. His rationale was that she had only joined the ranks of the king's army less than three years ago, not long after her new husband, Lorq, had been appointed Master Zookeeper. Kyzee, though, had felt it was something more. She always *had* sensed that the general somehow distrusted her, perhaps because of her heritage, or because of her and Lorq's giant stature, which others, especially men, often found threatening. But Hobar had not only been grateful, he had taken an immediate liking to the quiet, resolute Saebrilite; more importantly, he trusted her as well. So he had offered her the position over the protests of the General, a move which Yurek had deeply resented. He was never openly hostile to Kyzee now, but there had been a distinct chill between them ever since. To Kyzee, it didn't matter. She had experienced prejudice before, and always shrugged it off. Though the man technically outranked her, the Royal Personal Guard was largely an entity unto itself. Provided she did nothing which would constitute gross insubordination, she was free to run the small, elite detail more or less as she saw fit, which suited her perfectly. The only downside to the job was Lorq's constant worry that some harm might come to her. She always tried her best to reassure him, but could not truthfully deny that the position held its dangers, especially in times such as these.

They reached the King's Court and Hobar sat down at his throne. Kyzee and Shan took up their positions, a respectable distance behind it, yet close enough to act quickly should the situation demand it.

Though Kyzee did not know it, she and the general also agreed that Hobar ought not to be holding this type of open court. Separately, they had each warned him numerous times of the security threat it presented. Hobar, however, had been adamant.

"I will not be an absentee monarch, Kyzee," he had told her. "The people expect their king to be accessible, at least here in Duncileer. How would it look to them if I hid away at the first sign of trouble?"

"Like you were taking wise precautions?" Kyzee had offered.

"Like I was afraid of my own subjects," the king answered. "A ruler is meant to set an example for his people. If I show fear and panic in dangerous times, how can I counsel them not to? It would be hypocritical. No, I shall keep my schedule the same as it has always been. I realize it makes your job harder, and I expect only that you do the best that you can in the circumstances. I realize—" he paused and chuckled. "I was going to say *you're only human*, but you're more than that. That's one of the reasons you got the job."

"It's a good thing I *am*, too," she had retorted. "It takes a Saebrilite to even *try* and keep you safe. I only wish I had a squadron of them."

"You do a fine job, Kyzee," Hobar said warmly. "Your promotion was one of the best decisions I've ever made. I have never once questioned it."

"I hope that I shall never give you reason to," Kyzee had said, touched by his compliment.

Thinking back now on that conversation, she smiled again at his words of praise. She had grown to love this wise and gentle monarch during her time in his service. In many ways, he reminded her of her own dear husband, Lorq. As long as he placed his trust in her, she would strive to see to it that he came to no harm, nor his wife, Mara, nor their little daughter, Yisa.

The court session seemed to drag on that day, with several difficult disputes in need of settlement. The king, as always, listened patiently to each side of each case. The wealthier petitioners employed professional legalists to argue their cases, while those with more limited means were forced to fend for themselves. Hobar gave everyone his equal attention, regardless of their rank or social standing. That was one of the reasons his people adored him so, just as they had his father, Faradon. Though the arguments grew contentious once or twice, there had been no advances toward the throne, so neither Kyzee nor Shan (nor any of the other dozen guards posted throughout the room) had needed to interfere. Nevertheless, she was exhausted when the day ended and it was time to hand her duties off to Lieutenant Theril, who would head the evening detail. With a salute to the king, she turned and started for the guardroom, but Hobar called out to her.

"Yisa has been clamoring for playtime with your boy, Broq, again," he said. "How about we get them together on Wiksend afternoon?"

"I'm sure that would please Broq immensely," Kyzee answered, smiling. "I'll let Maella know."

"Why don't you and Lorq join us for dinner that night as well," he suggested. "I haven't seen the big fellow in ages it seems. No time lately for visits to the menagerie. It would be pleasant to see him again."

Pleased and flattered by the invitation, Kyzee nodded.

"I'm certain I can juggle our busy social schedule," she joked.

"Good!" he said, grinning broadly. "I shall let Mara know."

"You'd better," said Kyzee. "The queen really *does* have a busy social schedule."

"Indeed, it's getting so that I have to book our breakfast conversations at least a week in advance," quipped Hobar. "Goodnight Kyzee."

Kyzee waved again and left the court. Lorq would be pleased that the king had thought of him, and Broq would be ecstatic at the prospect of further play time with Yisa. Broq was Lorq and Kyzee's two-year-old son, who looked the spitting image of his father, with a fuzzy crop of reddish brown hair and bright violet eyes. Plus, as far as they could tell, Broq had inherited his father's giant stature. They had wondered about this before he was born, as Kyzee's size was not hereditary, but had been produced by the addition of the mineral Saebriore to her diet during her early childhood. Most people did not know that, were it not for this mineral, Saebriore women would possess only the size and strength of ordinary human females. This was a closely guarded secret among her people, so she had not mentioned her concerns, and was greatly relieved when little Broq had emerged...not so little.

There was no one else in the guardroom when Kyzee entered. Tired though she was, she decided that a quick workout was in order. While her duties these days were mentally exhausting, they tended, for the most part, to be physically undemanding, so the Saebriore spent considerable time in the guards' gymnasium, to ensure that she remained in top physical condition; she saw to it that her subordinates did the same. She did *not* wish to create the impression that being one of the King's Personal Guard was *soft duty*. She changed into her workout clothes and stashed her uniform in her locker, then spent three quarters of a mark on calisthenics, and lifting the weights that had been specially made to accommodate her size. She had just finished her routine when Commander Rochilar came in. He was her second in command, an extremely handsome fellow, with light brown hair cut short and a well-manicured beard. As Kyzee sat on the bench in front of her locker, catching her breath, Rochilar greeted her warmly. The young man was as charming as he was handsome, and he and Kyzee had become fast friends over the past year.

“It always amazes me that you can exercise like that after a full day’s work,” he said, walking behind her to reach his own locker. “When my day is over, the only thing I feel like lifting is a tankard.”

Kyzee laughed.

“Well, I don’t drink, as you know,” she explained. “The exercise is *my* way of coping with the stress of the job. These days, that tends to be considerable.”

Now dressed only in a snug pair of workout shorts, Rochilar came up behind Kyzee and began rubbing her shoulders.

“My, yes,” he said. “You are tense, Captain. Methinks you need to instruct that man of yours on how to properly... relax you.”

“Why... my dear Rochilar,” Kyzee cried dramatically, “if it weren’t for all those lovely young men I see coming from your quarters in the wee morning marks, I’d swear you were making a pass at me. As it is, I feel quite safe in saying *that that man of mine* knows a damn sight more than you about relaxing a woman... although this feels wonderful, keep it up.”

He continued the massage for a few minmarks as she told him about the day, and the king’s invitation to dinner on Wiksend, then he finished up with a smack on her back. “Alright I’ve got to get in there. I’ve got less than a mark before I have to be on princess duty.”

“Princess duty,” Kyzee remarked. “You make it sound like such a chore.”

“Not at all,” Rochilar assured her. “I adore guarding the little cherub. It’s just that conversation with a five year old can get a bit stale after a while. And it’s not any better with that horse-faced governess of hers. She’s forever trying to bed me. She *has* to be the only person in Duncileer who isn’t aware that I’m same.”

“Why don’t you introduce her to one of your numerous boyfriends?” Kyzee inquired.

“That’s a good idea,” he answered with a sigh. “I haven’t had the heart up until now to set her right on the issue. I keep hoping they’ll decide to replace her with a handsome man instead – someone I can chat with. Why don’t you mention it to the queen over dinner?”

“I’ll do no such thing,” said Kyzee. “Yisa would wind up dangling from the trellises while you and her caretaker were... *chatting*. No indeed, I find the thought of the horse-faced governess supremely comforting.”

“Fine, leave me to my fate then and get home to your handsome husband,” he told her. “I have nothing more to say to you.”

Kyzee chuckled, admiring his well-muscled body as he walked away toward the gymnasium. There was no mystery at all about what attracted the boys – and girls – to her second. He was, in all ways, a tremendously attractive man. She showered quickly, and then put her uniform back on and headed for home.

* * *

“MU-MU-MU-MU-MU-MU-MU!” Broq shouted happily as he ran naked through the living room. His governess, a young, stout, dark-haired girl named Maella, chased after him with a clean diaper in her hand.

“MA-MA-MA!” the litany became as Kyzee walked through the door, just in time to scoop her wayward son up into her arms.

“Well, hello there, little naked cabbage!” said Kyzee, kissing his plump cheek. “What are you up to, hmmm? Giving Maella the horrors again?”

“COW SAYS MOOOOOO!” Broq declared loudly, as Maella finally caught up with the diaper.

“Good evenin’, Missus,” said the governess breathlessly. “We’re just havin’ a nappy change – tryin’ to leastways.”

“Let’s let Maella put a new dydee on you, sweetie” Kyzee said to him, “then you can come and tell me all about what you did today.”

She squeezed her son again and handed him off to Maella, who groaned a bit under his weight. Kyzee shook her head. Soon Broq would be too large for the average-sized girl to carry. It would be one of her little boy’s first tastes of the difficulties posed by being a giant amongst *minnows*, as Lorq’s people called the smaller citizens of Firma. At some point soon, additional help would be needed to care for him; otherwise Maella would become worn to a frazzle. Kyzee planned to discuss this with her husband this evening when he got home, which – she looked at the time lamp on the hall table – should be any time now.

Except for the rare occasions on which Lorq needed to oversee a new acquisition to the menagerie, or some other odd chore, he tended to arrive home close to a quartermark past sixteen. Kyzee tried to do the same as often as she could, though her duties kept her late far more often than did his. It was one of those things about which other spouses might, and often did, complain. But Lorq always understood, and gladly pitched in to make up for any potential domestic shortfalls. Fortunately for them, their two incomes allowed them to employ enough help to make their busy lives manageable. Aside from Maella, they had a man who cleaned and a woman who cooked six days a week, leaving them only Wiksend to forage for themselves or, more often than not, eat out at one of the dining establishments in Duncileer – and there were a surprising number – which could accommodate people their size.

Such was not the case with houses. The couple had been extremely fortunate to have found employment at the palace, for married couples of their station were given the option of living in one of half dozen homes located on the palace grounds. As it was clear that large portions of the house would have to be remodeled for them,

and equally clear that, at the time, Lorq and Kyzee could not afford to do that, King Hobar had generously consented to front the renovation expenses and allow them to gradually repay the debt. This had allowed them to sacrifice one of the two spare bedrooms to expand the lavatory and turn it into a private, albeit cozy, bathing room as well. In Duncileer, as in most other kingdoms, bathing was done at communal bathhouses, except by the very few who were wealthy enough to afford their own private facilities. This was true at the palace as well. Though the royal family had bathing rooms of their own, the rest of the palace denizens used the common bathhouse in the center of the grounds. For Lorq and Kyzee, though, this presented problems. Not only did they take up an inordinate amount of space, but they also frequently felt like something of a sideshow whenever they were there. They were both relieved and grateful when the seneschal approved the additional underground channels that they'd need to provide sufficient water for their private facility.

Kyzee went to the bedroom, stripped off her uniform and put on a bright yellow shift made of soft, comfortable cotton. After taking a peek in the kitchen, she made for the living room again – and her favorite chair. A few minmarks later, Broq came bouncing out in his vivid orange pajamas, carrying a book and his favorite stuffed tiger, and climbed into her lap. By now he had been fed, and was ready to spend time with his mother and father until bedtime at half past seventeen or so. Kyzee had just managed to decipher most of the story she was being told when Lorq arrived home. He came over immediately to greet his wife and son.

“PAPA!” Broq cried happily, holding his arms up to be collected. Lorq shook his head though.

“Daddy needs a quick bath and change first, Broq,” he explained to his son. “He smells like manure.”

“Ma-dooooore,” the boy repeated, holding his nose. Lorq and Kyzee both laughed.

“Yes, madoore,” Lorq said. “I’ll be right back though.” With that, he headed off to the bathroom.

Later that evening, with Broq asleep and the rest of the household quiet for the night, Lorq and Kyzee finally had their chance to catch up with one another before it was time to go to bed. This night though, just as Lorq had poured himself a goblet of wine, and a fruit juice for Kyzee, there was a knock at the door. He opened it to find one of the gate guards standing there.

“Sorry to disturb you sir, “the young man said, looking up a bit nervously at the giant, “but there’s a visitor at the gate for you.”

Kyzee had come up behind Lorq, and now listened too as the guard continued.

“I told her we don’t admit people to the palace grounds after nightfall, you know, with things the way they are sir, but she was

most anxious to see you – said she'd only gotten in a short while ago... come all the way from Respite, and, well... she has this certain way about her... so I thought –"

"Fia!" cried Lorq and Kyzee together. Lorq quickly grabbed his cloak and accompanied the guard out to the gate. A few moments later he returned, a familiar figure at his side.

As far as Kyzee could see, Fia had changed little since they had parted over three years before. The cut of her hair was a bit shorter, and the cut of her clothing considerably more expensive. Other than that, she hadn't changed at all. Of course, the Saebrilite wouldn't expect her beauty to fade, since it was actually an illusion cast by the faerie amulet Fia wore perpetually around her neck. Without it, the scaly, gray skin and facial deformities caused by a childhood illness would quickly reappear. Kyzee had never seen her that way, but according to her husband, the difference was quite astonishing.

Fia hugged them both and gave Lorq her cloak, a beautiful garment, lined with purple silk and covered with the pure, white fur of northern snow hares. While he hung it up, Kyzee poured her a goblet of wine and invited her to sit in one of the average-sized chairs they kept in the room for company. They managed to wait until they were all seated comfortably before the couple began quizzing their guest.

"Why in the world didn't you tell us you were coming?" asked Kyzee. "We would have been better prepared for you."

"Why don't you have baggage?" asked Lorq.

"Well," Fia responded, "as to the first question, I didn't send word ahead because I wasn't sure when I was actually coming until the last minmark, and I wasn't certain even then that I was coming directly here. And as to my baggage, it's at the Monarch Inn, where I am staying."

"But why not stay with us, Fia?" Lorq inquired. "We've got guest quarters. We'd be happy to have you here."

"Absolutely not," Fia answered. "I'm here with no prior notice; I don't know exactly what my plans are, and I keep positively insane marks nowadays. It just wouldn't be fair to the two of you. I'm much better off at the inn. Besides, you both have your hands full. I believe your son turned two recently, did he not? I have a present for him, but I left it in my baggage. I shall give it to him tomorrow when we meet. I assume he's asleep by now."

"Yes," said Kyzee. "He sleeps like an angel, thank the Goddess."

"I imagine he makes up for it during the day," Fia quipped, and the three of them laughed.

"Tell us what you've been doing Fia," said Lorq, "and why you came. It wasn't just to visit us was it?"

Fia shook her head.

“Not entirely,” she answered, “though that was one important reason. In truth I’ve come to investigate the prospect of relocating to Duncileer permanently.”

“Fia, that’s wonderful!” Kyzee exclaimed, “But why? You seem to be doing quite well for yourself in Respite.” She glanced again at the expensive coat hanging on the rack.

“Have you been unhappy there, Fia?” Lorq asked, his eyes offered sympathy. Fia reached over and patted his huge hand. How she had missed her gentle giant!

“Not all the time, but –” she paused. “Well, I suppose I should start the story back at the beginning, back when we were still at the Noble Contemplative, recovering from our respective wounds. I can go back there now, without the pain of it overwhelming me. It was such a shock then, having to suddenly cope with losing Stamford when I –” her voice halted – “when I hadn’t even yet come to terms with the fact that I was in love with him. It was just... too much to process all at once.”

She looked up at Lorq.

“That’s why I had to get away,” she explained, “from you and the boys – from everything that forced me to think about how much more I could have had if I’d only –”

She stopped for a moment to collect herself, taking a hefty swig of her wine.

“Anyway,” she continued, after a few moments, “I got to Respite determined to take a nice, long holiday for myself before I even *began* looking for a position there. It didn’t work out that way though. After a week with only myself for company and nothing to do but eat, drink and wallow in self-pity... I decided enough was enough and went to see about a job in the Royal Court. You remember, Lorq, I had the letter of recommendation from the Mayor of Riversedge.”

Lorq nodded. If they had left the town of Riversedge even one day earlier that autumn, Flaskamper would not have been there to save Rokey from the roamers that were trying to rob and murder him. Their lives would all be so different now. He kept these thoughts to himself though, fearing it would upset Fia more if he voiced them.

“I went and auditioned for King Zol and his Chief of Entertainments,” Fia went on. “They had nothing suitable for me, but I must have impressed them somewhat, because they wrote me a note and sent me immediately over to Haven.”

“What’s Haven?” Kyzee asked.

“It’s a pleasure estate.” She laughed. “I know that sounds a bit like a brothel, but it isn’t really. Pleasure estates are the principal industry of Respite. They are places at which people stay, to relax and enjoy themselves. They vary from modest inn-like establishments to vast complexes, replete with every type of luxury you can imagine. Haven is one of the latter types of estates; they cater chiefly to royalty and

others of very high standing. A position in such a posh estate, though not quite as prestigious as the palace, can actually be more lucrative. Thanks to the king's note, I was auditioned and hired at Haven immediately."

Fia finished her wine. Kyzee hopped up and quickly refilled it. Fia thanked her and then continued her story.

"Things were perfect in Respite – a bard's dream, and just what I needed at the time. I could work as much as I chose, and I chose to a great deal. But outside of work, I shunned all the other things for which people often spend their life's savings to come to Respite. When I wasn't performing, I stayed largely on my own, reading or writing new songs. I sought neither friends nor lovers, though people tried to be one or the other to me from time to time. Before I knew it, I was trapped there, in a cold, hard shell that had been my own creation."

"Fia," said Lorq, placing his other hand over hers, "that's terrible. I wish I had known that you were so sad."

"Thank you, sweetie," Fia said. "But I didn't even know it myself for a long time. Not until Delle, a lovely older lady, and the owner of Haven, took me aside. She told me that I had the most beautiful voice she had ever heard, and that I was a phenomenal asset to the estate. And then – she fired me."

"What?" cried Lorq and Kyzee together. Fia smiled at them.

"Alright, she didn't *exactly* fire me," she said. "What she did was tell me that she had seen enough people who had run to Respite to escape something to know exactly what one looked like – and she was looking at one standing right in front of her. She said that she didn't care what I had come there to get away from, but she thought it was damned foolish of someone with my... well, qualities... to shut herself away from the world. She told me –" tears welled up in her eyes and her voice broke again – "she told me that I really ought to consider giving life another try."

She paused again and sipped, then dabbed her eyes with a linen handkerchief that she produced from her sleeve. Lorq and Kyzee sat quietly, not wanting to interrupt the thread of her story. When she had sufficiently composed herself, Fia continued again.

"I gave a lot of thought to what she had said in the week that followed," she said. "I started to see just how cut off from everything and – and everyone I had become, and I didn't like it, not one bit. I realized that I *wasn't* ready to sit there, safe in the transience and aloofness of Respite, and watch all my chances at life pass by. I took a week off, got drunk every night and cried my eyes out for all of the things I had done wrong, and all the things I had lost – including dear Stamford. After that, I dusted myself off and began planning my trip to Duncileer. When I told Delle I was leaving, she said that she had never been sorer *and* happier to lose someone, and assured me that, if I wanted to return one day, I would always be welcomed there."

Fia gazed brightly at her two friends.

“And so here I am,” she said, smiling. “As I said, I haven’t a clue what I’m going to do now, but I’ve got plenty of money saved up to tide me over for a while, so I’m just going to play it by ear, as the bards say.”

“I hope you’ll not be too disappointed in Duncileer,” said Kyzee. “We’ve had some bad times lately and worse times may yet lie ahead.”

As Fia listened, Kyzee, with help from Lorq, filled her in on the most recent events troubling to the kingdom.

“Amazing,” said Fia. “I had heard tales of the shrinkage of the Great Sand Sea, but you hear so many tales in Respite that I scarcely paid any attention to them. And war too, so close at hand. It sounds as though our struggle against the Order of the Bone may have been just the first battle in a larger war. Have you heard anything from Flash and Rokey?”

“Not since Broq’s birthday,” said Lorq, “but their messages haven’t mentioned anything about the Order.”

“I’ll bet my amulet that Stamford was right,” Fia said, her face clouding. “Rokey’s quest wasn’t even *close* to being finished there at the monastery. My guess is, if the two of them aren’t already caught up in something involving the Order, they soon will be.

Fia sat and talked with her old friends until well into the evening. It felt wonderful and soothing; in some ways, it was as though they had never parted at all. Whatever their topic of discussion, though, her mind kept wandering to Elfwood. With the situation so bad in Duncileer, she wondered what kind of trouble might already be heading the boys’ way. There was no way of knowing, or even guessing. For now, she could only hope that whatever it was, and whenever it came, the two of them would be prepared to handle it.

Of course they will, she assured herself. *Together, the two of them can handle anything.*

Chapter 4

Fall Into No-When

The conflict between Rokey and Flaskamper did not erupt again that week, but neither did it blow over exactly. Instead, it seemed to Rokey as though it had just healed over, like a deep wound often did. He and Flaskamper were speaking, when there was something to say. The elf was being cordial enough to him, smiling even. Yet he could not shake the feeling that beneath an innocent-looking scab, a raging infection festered. But what was he to do? Flaskamper would admit to no ill feelings or lingering grudge. They had even made love the other night, though he'd had the sense some of the time that his husband was there in body, but not in spirit.

You're just imagining things, you dolt. You fought and then you made up, that's all there is to it.

He didn't actually believe that for a moment, but he simply hadn't the skills necessary to get to the heart of the problem. So he did what he always did when things began to overwhelm him – he immersed himself in his studies.

An interesting idea had occurred to Rokey on his way to his lesson with High Mage Ellispon the other morning, and he had decided to run it past the old elf before they started in today. His teacher was not there when he arrived at the training room. He was early today; he had been early to arrive most days recently – and late to leave. A little voice somewhere inside him questioned the wisdom of that, given his circumstances at home. He tamped the little voice down, until he could no longer hear it.

Might as well warm up. Hmmm. Or else... I could just –

No! Not all by himself, without Ellispon here. What if something went wrong? He began to limber up instead – doing some simple mental exercises – but the idea wouldn't leave him alone.

Why not just give it a try... just a small test?

His chin jutted out, and his eyes swept around, as if defying anyone in the empty room to argue with him. No harm in a small test – a simple test. No harm in that at all. Ellispon was bound to be along any moment now anyway.

So go ahead.

Rokey closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath. Then he began gathering his power.

The idea itself was a simple one. Just like filling a bladder full of water to see how much it would hold before bursting, Rokey wondered what would happen if he attempted to gather in and hold large portions of the energy from the articulation. He was growing desperate to find a way to unleash the power that was hidden deep within him. He remembered only a little about the incident at the Noble Contemplative. Abbot Crinshire had cut Flaskamper's throat – that he remembered clearly enough. Apart from that, there were only the vague swirls of imagery from the nightmares – nightmares that had plagued him for almost a year after they had arrived back in Elfwood. However, there was one other memory...well, not a memory precisely...more of a remembered sensation; the sensation of growing larger within himself until, like the water-filled bladder, he had eventually burst out. It was this recollection from which the idea had sprung. Perhaps, he conjectured, if he were to fill himself up with enough magical energy, the same thing would happen again. Perhaps it would break this seemingly unbreakable shell that was holding him back – preventing him from becoming who he truly was.

When Rokey had gathered all his magical power, he began to reach out, tentatively, toward the articulation. Though it might be miles beneath his feet, he felt it almost immediately, urging him on. No, he reminded himself, the articulation had no such ideas. It was only raw natural power, without form or consciousness. All of the urging was his own. He formed a picture in his mind – the articulation as a golden, surging sea, with he himself floating on air just above it. He waited until the image was fixed securely in his mind, and then, the next instant, he plunged in. There was a massive rush of currents pushing and pulling him in all directions. For a moment, Rokey feared that they would rip him apart. He hung on though, and managed to keep himself and his illusion intact. He tried opening his eyes, but could see nothing but a wash of flickering yellow light, so bright it set his head to pounding. He quickly closed them again, and the pounding receded. He floated there quietly for several minmarks.

So far, so good. Now comes the hard part.

As though beneath an actual sea, Rokey had been holding his breath, at least, he thought he had; there was no real way of telling where his illusion ended and reality began. In any case, he now changed that illusion, and slowly began to inhale. He immediately felt the water rushing in and started to panic, so he stopped to collect himself. It wasn't actually water, but energy. He was not actually inhaling; that was just a trick he was playing on his mind, to make the process easier. Having thus reassured himself, he began to inhale once again. This time there was no fear, only the awareness of the articulation's energy flowing into him. He continued, well past the point where, in real life, his lungs would be full. In his illusion he could keep going on and on indefinitely...and he did so, until he felt the energy swell begin to hit – to hit what? The edges of his being, his soul? There was so much about all this he still didn't understand. He kept drawing it in, trying to push the invisible boundaries that were trying to contain the power. The pounding returned to his head, only stronger now – like a herd of wild horses thundering across a broad, open plain. The experience felt familiar to him. Was he getting close to his goal? He pulled harder on the articulation, straining to take in still more of its essence.

Then abruptly, something changed. He no longer felt as though he were floating in a sea; rather he had the sensation of falling, rapidly and uncontrollably, down into some bottomless ravine. As he plummeted, he felt his speed growing ever faster, and he no longer had any control. The brilliant golden light was now gone, replaced by utter blackness. There was no sound now but wind, rushing past his ears as he hurtled toward – toward what? What had happened? He tried to reach out again, tried to find something against which he could brace himself – some way to slow himself down, but the trail of his own thoughts simply disappeared into the vast empty space. There was nothing around him. He was completely alone.

Or was he?

Was it his imagination, or did he sense something more out there, a sound other than the rushing of the wind. He clamped his eyes shut and focused all of his attention on the sound, trying to pick his way past the white noise. After a while, he thought he was able to distinguish...to distinguish...yes, a voice! The voice of someone – or something – a faint whisper carrying just above the din, and not only faint, but distant. Far, far away from where he was – wherever he was. He renewed his efforts, and slowly, tentatively, the words began to take shape.

“--- revenge on --- who oppose ----- mine to command -----”

Damn! He was missing too much of it. He had to concentrate harder.

“--- who ----- someone else --- can feel --- listening ---”

Great gods! Could it be? Did the voice sense his presence? He considered trying to project a message, but decided to wait. After all, he still had no idea to whom the disembodied voice belonged.

“--- --embodied --- Yes --- disem-- --- but aware, more ----- each passing ---”

It was aware of him. It was reading his thoughts!

“Who are you?” Rokey sent the thought out to the voice.

“--- who will bring ----- to the world ----- be mine ----- as it should have ---”

Rokey felt it then – the being, the entity – probing inside his mind, trying to find out who *he* was, and where he was. Alarmed by this intrusion, he tried to block out all that he could, to hide the facts about himself, and those closest to him. He pictured a heavy oak door in his mind, and then tried to slam it – but it wouldn’t close. The being was pushing against it from the other side, trying to hold it open. Then Rokey saw tentacles – slimy, gray tendrils reaching around the door, trying to grab hold of him. He felt the thing’s curiosity transform into rage at his resistance, and heard it cursing and threatening as they struggled. At last, he was able to force the entity back with his mind, just enough to shut the door, and block it from learning any more about him. For a moment, he felt safe, as though he were sheltered inside a small room, where it was quiet and dark. But then he felt it again, no longer in front of him now, but just behind his ear, close enough for Rokey to feel its cold breath brush like a wet leaf over his neck. He felt a shiver crawl up the length of his spine as it spoke.

“Defy me,” it said. The voice was soft, no more than a ghostly whisper, yet filled with malice. *“Defy me, and perish in agony...as did those who dared before. Behold.”*

The blackness around him abruptly disappeared, and Rokey found himself high in the air over what, at first, appeared to be woodland. As he was propelled further downward though he saw, to his utter shock and revulsion, that it was not a woodland at all, but – posts; hundreds upon hundreds of wooden posts had been driven into the ground, all lined up in a multitude of neat, tidy rows. From each of them, a person, or at least, what had once *been* a person, was hanging... dead, or nearly so. Men, women... even children had been tied around the wrists and hung from an iron hook near the top of every post, so that their feet could almost, but not quite, touch the ground. Suspended in this excruciating manner, they had apparently been left at the mercy of the blistering sun, and of the wild beasts and carrion birds which prowled the ground and circled the skies. Rokey knew that this was an illusion, and yet he could still feel the suffocating heat of the air, and smell the cloying stench of death all around him. Abruptly, he was propelled forward again, toward one specific sufferer

– one who appeared to be still alive, though his skin was blistered and cracking. Blood dripped from open sores down to where some kind of wild canine stood, attempting to lap the liquid from the hot, dusty ground. As Rokey stared in horror, the man turned his head toward him, and it was then that he recognized – *merciful gods* – it was his own face, scorched and swollen, staring forlornly back at him. The dry, split lips parted painfully, and a single phrase, like a death rattle, escaped from his dying self.

“Defy me,” it said, *“and perish.”*

Rokey cried out in terror. His mind lashed out in fierce, blind panic, and suddenly he was tumbling again, away from the gruesome scene, back into the cool blackness. He forced himself to calm down, and righted himself. It seemed that he had somehow escaped the entity. He was alone once again.

But not for long. Away off in the distance, he could see something approaching him rapidly – more rapidly than he'd have thought any living thing could move. But of course, he was not among ordinary living things anymore. He was lost – lost forever, he feared. For the love of Firma, what had he managed to do to himself? He briefly considered trying to outrun the object, whatever it was, but soon gave up the idea.

Let it catch me and be done with it. Why prolong the inevitable?

As the thing grew ever closer, it began to take shape, as did the blackness around him; he now seemed to be standing on solid ground, though he couldn't see it. To his surprise, Rokey found his morbid fears beginning to give way to curiosity. For reasons he could not explain, he no longer felt threatened by this... this – yes, it *was* a creature – flying toward him. It was, in fact, the most remarkable creature he had ever seen. Rokey studied it closely as it drew near. It had what appeared to be the body and tail of a huge firecat, only without spots or stripes; yet it was topped with the head of a great-horned stag. From its back, an enormous set of wings extended, covered in thousands upon thousands of delicate, pristine feathers. Rokey had never seen the like of them on any type of bird before. Perhaps the most remarkable thing of all about the beast though, was its color – from antler top to tail tip, an almost unimaginably brilliant shade of white.

The creature landed effortlessly in front of him, then sat down and folded its magnificent wings in along its back. Rokey could only stand gaping as its enormous brown eyes regarded him thoughtfully. Then, a moment later, it spoke. Aloud, he heard what sounded like the trill of a flute, but in his head, its thoughts came to him translated into perfect Common Firmish, and in spite of the prominent antlers, Rokey heard a distinctly feminine timbre in the voice. The creature's first word astonished him, for it was his own name.

“Ro-key?” it asked.

“Uh -uh -uh...y-y-yes,” he finally managed to stammer. “I’m Rokey.”

The beast made a sharp clicking noise, which he heard in his head as an exclamation of relief.

“*I am Zhee Saal,*” said the beast. “*I was called to find you, and to bring you home.*”

“Called?” Rokey asked warily. “Called by whom?”

Zhee Saal gave a melodic laugh.

“*Why, called by your master, of course,*” she told him.

“Ellispon?” Rokey gasped. Zhee Saal looked around furtively, and then tossed her head in the affirmative. Rokey was dumbstruck. He’d had no clue at all that his teacher possessed that kind of power.

“Zhee Saal,” asked Rokey, “what is this place? How – how did I get here? And how did you ever find me?”

Zhee Saal sent a puff of air through her nose. Rokey could not tell if this signified amusement or exasperation.

“*Many questions,*” she said. “*Your master can explain them when you are safe once more. Now, you are still in great danger from... He Who Waits. Come quickly and get on my back – you will fit nicely right there on my shoulders – and hold onto my neck.*”

Without another word, Rokey scrambled on, and had just barely taken hold when Zhee Saal took to the air once again. A few tiks later, they were already moving so fast that the air shrieked wildly around his ears. Despite the noise though, when his bearer spoke to him a few minmarks later, he found that he could still hear her perfectly well.

“*You have been very naughty, young one,*” she said. “*You have worried your master deeply.*”

“Is he very angry?” Rokey asked, guilt and shame washing over him.

“*He may well be, once you are home safe again,*” the creature supposed. “*But mostly, I imagine he will simply be relieved. It was a close thing. I very nearly did not find you. For a time, you vanished from my sight entirely. He Who Waits had hold of you, and was blocking you from my view.*”

The horrible memory of those execution grounds came flooding back to him – the smell of rotting corpses, and his own face there, staring back at him. He suddenly felt extremely ill.

“Zhee Saal, I’m going to –”

Zhee Saal tucked one wing back, giving Rokey just enough room to lean over her shoulder before his stomach began to contract violently.

“*It is alright, dear one,*” she said soothingly, when he had finally finished. “*I also saw the memory you had just then. If thryzpiks could empty their stomachs in such a way, I might, perhaps, have joined you.*”

"Is that what you are, Zhee Saal," Rokey asked weakly, "a th... a thip –"

"*Thryz-pik*," she repeated slowly. "*That is what my kind is called.*"

"Are there many of your – your kind?" Rokey inquired.

"*No longer*," was her only answer.

"I see," Rokey said, not seeing at all, but not wishing to pry into anything that might upset her.

"When will we reach home?" he asked instead.

"*Just a short while after you left*," she answered. "*I am not going to attempt to return you to the exact moment. There is no need to take such a foolish risk as that.*"

"I'm afraid I don't follow you," Rokey said, baffled by the cryptic response.

"*It is... complicated*," said Zhee Saal, "*and I am not the best one to explain it to you. I only ride the flows of No-When, I do not study them.*"

"The flows of *what*?" Rokey was beginning to wonder if something was going wrong with the translation he was receiving in his head.

"*Your master will explain to you that which he feels you should know*," she answered maddeningly. Then another thought struck him.

"Why do you not say his name?" Rokey asked, wondering what kind of response this question would bring.

"*Names are powerful things*," she explained, "*most especially here. It is unwise to use them without necessity.*"

"But you used mine," he reminded her.

"*Only once*," she answered, "*out of necessity. I needed to make certain that you were the one I sought.*"

"I'm sorry," said Rokey. "I've used yours several times. I didn't know."

"*Fear not*," Zhee Saal told him. "*It is of no consequence; I am merely a thryzpik. We are known by name throughout No-When.*"

"That other thing," Rokey asked after a moment, "the one that you call *He Who Waits*... who or what is he?"

"*I cannot speak his name*," said the thryzpik, "*for he would hear it and come for us. As to who or what he is... I know only that he has been here for as long as I have lived, and for generations before me. His voice thunders often through No-When, like a great and terrible storm. Though he has no corporeal form here, he possesses great power nonetheless. All in No-When fear him.*"

"But why –"

"*Hold tightly, young one*," said Zhee Saal. "*We are approaching what you would call your articulation.*"

The articulation! At last, a term he understood. Rokey held on tight and peered out between Zhee Saal's antlers. Before them loomed an enormous golden sphere. The thryzpik poured on even more speed, and soon he could see nothing but gold ahead of them.

“How can it be so huge?” he said aloud.

“*The sphere is merely an illusion,*” Zhee Saal responded.

Of course. Just as it had helped *him* to form an illusion of the articulation as a golden sea, so she chose to project this particular image to assist *her*. And because he was presently sharing some manner of mental link with the thryzpik, he was able to share in the illusion as well. Rokey smiled, relieved that more and more things were starting to make sense once again. The two of them flew straight at the sphere, until it seemed to bend around, completely enveloping them. Its intensity forced Rokey to shut his eyes once more. Zhee Saal then spoke again, but this time, he could barely hear her. Though he was sitting right on top of her, she seemed a great distance away.

“*We have reached your destination now, Ro-key,*” she cried. “*Do not worry; in this place, I may say your name without risk. It is time for me to leave you, and for you to concentrate on returning to the place from whence you came. I have alerted Mage Ellispon that you will soon reemerge. He stands ready to assist you in releasing the power that you drew from the articulation. When I tell you, begin to concentrate. You understand?*”

“Yes, Zhee Saal,” Rokey yelled in reply, “I understand. I – I don’t know how to thank you... for saving my life. I wish there was some way I could repay you.”

“*You can do something,*” she replied. “*You can heed well the teachings of your master, and try to become as fine and wise a mage as he.*”

“I’ll try, Zhee Saal,” said Rokey. “I promise.” The wind had become so loud; he could scarcely hear his own voice above it now. He realized then that he could no longer feel the thryzpik’s body beneath him. Had something gone wrong? Had he missed her signal?

Then it came, the command to concentrate, so faint that he couldn’t actually make out the exact words, but he knew it was his cue. He closed his eyes and focused all of his attention on the training room where he had first begun this misadventure – how long ago?

Concentrate, you idiot!

In his mind, Rokey saw it ahead in the distance, drawing closer, but fast – much too fast. He forced himself to slow, but as he did, he became aware of the immense power behind him that was now catching up, the weight of it crashing down upon him like a tidal wave. He was suffocating, unable to draw breath. All around him, the blinding gold light of the articulation squeezed his lungs ever tighter, until he felt himself start to lose consciousness.

“*Ellispon, help me... please!*” his mind cried out frantically, “*I’m... here! I’m... drowning –*”

Then a terrible silence came, and the gold faded to black.

Chapter 5

Reunion

Flaskamper was losing the fight. He parried a blow, then dove to the ground and tried to roll underneath his opponent's next swipe, but he wasn't fast enough. He felt the sword come down and hit, stinging his leg. He yelped and got back on his feet, facing his enemy. Another rapid succession of chops and slashes came. He blocked them all, but was being driven steadily backwards. In a desperate effort to retake the offensive, he tried to execute a Pintarus feint, crouching low to try and make his opponent lean forward so he could score with a straight-up thrust. Unfortunately, he lost his footing and, the next moment, found the enemy's sword at his throat. The elf swore.

"Stand down," he commanded. His foe immediately stopped and stood up, rigid and straight. Flaskamper picked himself up and, with a cry of frustration, drove his sword into his opponent's heart – that is at least, where its heart would be if it had one. This opponent was only a golem – a figure made of wood and animated by magic. The elves often used them for swordsmanship practice. This one had just demonstrated to Flaskamper how horribly out of condition he was becoming. Thank the heavens Alrontin had not been here to witness his defeat at the hands of a golem. He would never have lived it down. He yanked his sword free and went for a drink from his water jug. After that he sat down for a brief rest, determined to try another round before ending his morning session. As he sat on the bench

catching his breath, though, he found his mind wandering to matters other than swordplay.

Things between himself and Rokey had gone from stormy, which he detested, to politely strained, which drove him absolutely mad. They had apologized to one another about the argument, but that had done little to close the widening chasm between them, and when they spoke to one another now, it was not generally about anything of consequence. The one time they had made love this past week had been, from his perspective at least, a disaster. The two may as well have had burlap between them for all the intimacy they had managed. Worse yet, Flaskamper had found himself thinking of Jiri, and the guilt of that had made it nearly impossible for him to finish at all.

Where is this all leading? he wondered. It couldn't possibly be the end of their relationship. How could it be, when he still loved Rokey so much? Was love enough? As to that, his doubts over whether Rokey still loved *him* had been growing steadily. Nowadays, his husband seemed so... *eager* to be away from him. As often as not now, he was already gone when Flaskamper awoke in the morning, and most times he kept away until well into the evening marks. If Flaskamper didn't know better...

No. Rokey was not the sort to do that kind of thing. *He* was the sort. True, he had managed to stop himself from yielding to temptation the other night in the bathhouse, but only barely. If Jiri had not left that next afternoon, he was not at all sure his resolve would have held, not given how lonely he felt. Gods, how had things gone so horribly wrong in such a short time?

When Flaskamper looked up at the time candle in the wall sconce nearby, he was shocked to see that nearly three quarters of a mark had passed since he had sat down for his 'brief' rest. He cursed at himself. Now he would not have time for another round. He had inspection in less than a mark, and then his father had asked to meet with him. He returned the practice sword to the rack and ordered the golem back to its closet, then left from the training room, hoping to grab a quick wash before beginning his afternoon duties. As he hurried toward the bathhouse though, a voice stopped him in his tracks.

"What's the hurry, Flaskamper? Too busy to say hello to an old friend?"

Flaskamper turned around, his mouth agape, for the voice was one which he had not heard in many years.

"Brandelynn?"

Standing in front of him was his dearest friend from childhood. Except for the fact that her once long auburn hair had been cut into a short, pageboy style, she had not changed a bit since he last saw her more than a dozen years ago. She stood tall, nearly his own height, and was dressed in a bright blue wool jacket with dark wooden

buttons down the front and loose-fitting, pale green breeches. While her pointed ears clearly identified her as an elf, her features were softer than most of her kinsmen, and though her mouth was small, her lips were full, making it often look as though she were pouting. Flaskamper was nearly overwhelmed with emotion. The way his life had been going lately, seeing her there made him want to weep with joy and relief. For once, his ready wit and sarcasm completely abandoned him.

"Brandelynn," he repeated.

"Yes, yes, it's me," she replied. "Do I get a hug or are you just going to stand there with your mouth open like a nagfish?"

Flaskamper strode over and embraced her fondly.

"Gods, glowbug," he said, using his childhood name for her, "it's so good to see you. You look wonderful."

Brandelynn stepped back, her wide, blue eyes examining him critically.

"I wish I could say the same about you, 'Pillar' she said candidly. '*Pillar*, short for caterpillar, was her pet name for him. "I can't though, because you look like shite. What on earth has happened to you?"

"I'm fine," he assured her. "Just a little tired, that's all."

"Mmm hmmm," she replied, unconvinced.

"What are you doing here, Brandelynn?" asked Flaskamper, grinning broadly. "Nobody has heard a word from you in years. I was beginning to worry that something terrible had happened to you."

"I'm not much of a correspondent," she admitted. "Besides, I only recently found out that you had returned to Elfwood. Instead of writing, I decided that we'd gone too long without seeing one another, so I came back for a visit."

"I'm glad," Flaskamper replied. "I'm so glad. You have no idea how happy I am to see you."

He hugged her again, tightly, as though afraid that she would suddenly disappear in a puff of smoke. It then struck him again how late he was.

"Brandelynn," he apologized, "I really need a bath before inspection, and I don't have much time."

"I'll go with you," she said. "I've seen you stark before. I'm completely immune. And I know full well that *I* have nothing to fear."

Flaskamper laughed – his first genuine laugh in weeks. He draped his arm around her shoulder, and the two of them made their way to the palace bathhouse.

"I want you to tell me everything you've been up to for the past twelve years," Flaskamper told her.

"Aye, and I expect the same from you," she said, "beginning with this man you've gone and married."

* * *

Rokey awoke to the sight of Ellispon standing over him. He was lying on the floor of the training room, winded, but otherwise undamaged. Thank the gods, he had made it.

“Master,” he said weakly, and attempted to sit up. The room began to spin.

“Easy, son,” said Ellispon gently. “Give yourself some time to recover your head.”

Rokey sat quietly for a few moments, until his surroundings became still once more.

“Master,” he said at last, “what happened to me?”

“You traveled,” the mage said simply.

“Yes,” Rokey said, “to No-When.”

“How much did Zhee Saal tell you about No-When?” Ellispon asked him.

“Maddeningly little,” his pupil answered, “and the more she said, the less I understood.”

Ellispon chuckled.

“The thryzpiiks are known for their cryptic manner,” he said. “You have to ask them things in just the right way if you are to get anything useful at all out of them.”

“What are they master?” Rokey asked. “What happened to me? Where was that place?”

“All in time, son,” the mage answered. “All in time. First, when you’re ready, we should like to hear your version of what occurred.”

It was only then that Rokey realized that they were not alone in the room. He turned around and saw Laomiel, the head of the Elf High Council, standing behind them, watching and listening with great interest. With some assistance from Ellispon, Rokey quickly rose to his feet.

“Forgive me, High Mage Laomiel,” he said, bowing respectfully to the wizened elf. “I did not know you were there.”

“I summoned Laomiel as soon as I had ascertained what had happened,” Ellispon explained. “What you have done has never been done by anyone before, as far as we know. I felt that he should be aware of what was transpiring.”

“I pray that you will explain it to *me*, master,” said Rokey, “for I am completely baffled by what has occurred.”

“If you are steady enough now to walk,” said High Mage Laomiel, “why don’t we adjourn to my offices. I should imagine that hunger and thirst will catch up with you shortly. We shall have something brought, and you can tell us your story. After that, we will explain things... that is, to the extent to which we are able.”

The three of them walked outside, across the open walkway to the other side of the complex, where the chambers of the Elf High Council

were located. Rokey asked how long he had been gone, and Ellispon told him that several marks had passed...in Firma at least. When they reached Laomiel's offices, the High Mage invited them to sit while he sent his assistant for food and drink. He then sat down with them.

"Now," he said, "while we wait for our lunch to arrive, why don't you begin your story, young man, while things are fresh in your mind. We are eager to hear everything, beginning with how you managed to accomplish this amazing feat."

Slowly and deliberately, Rokey began to explain what had happened. He tried to be as thorough as possible, leaving no details out. The two elders seemed far more interested in how he had done it than in what had occurred while he was there. They asked several detailed questions about precisely what his method had been. Their lunch arrived about halfway through his tale, but rather than stop, they all ate as they talked... and listened. When Rokey had finished, both Laomiel and Ellispon were astounded.

"Incredible," said the high mage. "Such a simple process, and yet I doubt any of us could have managed it and lived. The amount of energy involved must have been enormous."

"Indeed," said Ellispon. "I entered the workroom only a moment before Rokey vanished, but in that short time, I could see the power he had absorbed – a staggering amount. Certainly more than I could have withstood unchanneled."

"You realize, young man," said Laomiel sternly, "that it was very unwise of you to attempt such a thing unsupervised. If Ellispon had not entered that room in time to see what was happening to you, well..."

He left the thought unfinished, but Rokey understood perfectly. He might easily have wound up stuck in No-When forever, with no one ever the wiser as to where he had gone.

"I know it was foolhardy, High Mage," Rokey responded contritely. "I promise I'll never do it again."

Ellispon and the High Mage exchanged a look.

"Well, let's not be too hasty about that," said Laomiel. "It *was* a foolhardy thing to attempt on your own like that. However, what you have managed does open up some... interesting possibilities. We have studied No-When for centuries from without. The chance to further that study from within would be extremely valuable."

"But just what is No-When exactly?" Rokey asked impatiently, "and where is it?"

"No-When is not a place, strictly speaking," Ellispon explained. "It is an entirely separate plane of existence from ours. Time and space function differently there, as you discovered. In order to find you, our friend Zhee Saal had to travel not only to another place, but to another time as well. Such was the velocity at which you were traveling when you entered No-When that you broke the barriers of

time, which are much more fragile there than they are in our world. Fortunately for you, creatures such as the thryzpiks are also able to fly sufficiently fast to traverse time. Otherwise we might never have gotten you back.”

“How does No-When relate to the articulations?” Rokey inquired.

“As far as we are able to determine from the many studies we have made,” answered Laomiel, “the articulations... now how can I best explain this? If one were to envision a wall separating our world from No-When, the articulations could be thought of as the places where the wall was thinnest, enabling limited interactions between the two planes. Since they exist in both worlds, they can be used by the denizens of both worlds. These are the circumstances that allow the non-magical beings of Firma to perform magic.”

Rokey shook his head in confusion.

“I’m afraid you’ve lost me,” he said.

“It’s quite simple really,” Ellispon said picking up the lecture. “Among the denizens of No-When are beings with which we have dealings here on Firma, via the articulations. We call them *the Ethereals*. Non-magical creatures, such as humans, cannot perform feats of magic on their own. In order to become wizards and sorcerers, they must first cultivate the patronage of these ethereals. It is *they* who lend their magic to humans; the spirits for white magic, the demons for black.”

“Why would they be willing to do that?” Rokey asked.

“I’m not sure that anybody knows the true answer to that, my boy,” said Ellispon. “My personal belief is that it pleases them to wield such power over humans. The tolls which they exact on their petitioners can be very high, especially those who choose to work necromancy, the magic of the demons.”

Rokey shuddered briefly, thinking back on the dark ritual performed on him by the necromancer, Jamba, several years ago. He wondered what Jamba had given up for the use of such power.

“You said that my accident could prove valuable, High Mage Laomiel,” said Rokey. “In what way exactly?”

“I can immediately think of two ways,” the High Mage replied. “On the one hand, there are the purely scholarly advantages. As far as we are aware, we elves are the only race who has made any real study of No-When. Humans, though they have learned how to summon its residents, know nothing at all of the nature of the place from which they come. As for the magical creatures of Firma – they, as you know, have no need of such aid, and summon spirits only as a convenience. The lumen orbs, for instance. There are other ways to create mage light, but none as simple as summoning a lumen. For the elves, however, No-When and its inhabitants have always been more than a convenience; they have been an ongoing scholarly pursuit. Our library has several splendid volumes on the subject, which I encourage you to

begin studying at once. It was through these studies that we discovered the existence of the thryzpiks, and were eventually able to befriend them. Our studies have always been hampered, however, by the fact that no one has ever found a way to physically cross the barrier between the two worlds.”

“That is... until today,” said Ellispon.

“Precisely,” said Laomiel. “Think of what more we could learn if we were actually able to see No-When for ourselves... to explore it first hand as you did today. Who knows what secrets the place may hold?”

“You said that you could think of two ways that this could prove valuable, High Mage Laomiel,” said Rokey. “What is the other one?”

Laomiel’s gray eyes began to twinkle with excitement.

“Ahhhh,” he said, “now therein lays a truly exciting and infinitely more practical prospect, though it would take some work to achieve. You entered No-When by accident, far too quickly to be able to control your speed or direction. Fortunately, the thryzpiik was able to find you and bring you home. How? Because thryzpiks know the lay of the land. They navigate quite easily from place to place, just as we do in our world, with one critical difference.”

“The time barrier?” Rokey hazarded.

“Exactly!” said Laomiel, clapping his hands together. “During the time that I was studying No-When, I began to explore, using what bits of information I could garner from the thryzpiks, exactly what constraints on time there were in that world. It was not an easy undertaking... thryzpiks are so damned cryptic all the time, but eventually I learned enough to theorize that, if one were able to enter No-When from this world and map the location of all the articulations, it should be possible, using the differing rules of time there, to travel in very short order from any one articulation to another. And in fact, if one had the power to bend those articulations, as we Mages do, it should even be feasible for us to pop out anywhere on this world that we set our minds to. Just think of the possibilities of that, my boy: virtually immediate travel from any starting point to any destination. Imagine the time and energy saved.”

“Not to mention certain tactical advantages,” Ellispon observed.

Rokey sat quietly for a few moments, letting the implications sink in. Not only would such an ability be a tremendous convenience, it could, over time, change the way the entire world functioned. And in addition, as Ellispon pointed out, it would put those who had such a skill at a tremendous strategic advantage over those who did not. At that moment, the most disturbing aspect of his visit to the No-When sprang back to mind.

“Who was the being that spoke to me,” he asked them, “the one that showed me... those horrible things?”

The two old elves both shook their heads.

“We do not know, Rokey,” said Ellispon. “The thryzpiks have made reference to *He Who Waits* before, but they have offered us no information as to what he – or it – might be. Our best guess is that it is some vengeful demon. We know it to be a powerful entity, one that has been there for a very long time. Beyond that, we are completely in the dark.”

“That is a shame, master,” said Rokey, “for I think that, while the idea to study and traverse No-When is an exciting one, and one which is now within the realm of possibility, I fear that this being, this *He Who Waits*, will not wish us well in our endeavors. And with powers such as I have seen in him, such ill wishes could prove very dangerous to those on the edge of these explorations.”

“I concur,” said the high mage. “We shall have to be most cautious in our pursuit of this matter. Nevertheless, we must pursue it; the opportunities it offers, particularly in times such as these, are simply too great to pass up.”

High Mage Laomiel stood.

“I must go now and brief the rest of the high council about this,” he said. “You’d better come along Ellispon. Young man, go home and get some rest. You’ve had quite a day. Your tutor will inform you tomorrow what is decided in our meeting tonight.”

As Rokey followed the two elf mages out the door, Laomiel turned to him once again.

“One last thing,” he said. “Tell no one of this... no one at all, for the time being. Do you understand?”

“Surely, High Mage Laomiel, my husband –” Rokey began.

“No one!” the high mage said shortly. “To this you must swear.”

Rokey was troubled as he headed back toward their rooms in the other wing of the palace complex. He couldn’t imagine keeping such a secret from Flash, yet his orders had been explicit, and he had sworn to obey them.

Oh well, it’s not as if Flash is all that interested in my studies anyway...or me, for that matter, these days.

This thought saddened Rokey deeply. He had truly hoped that the troubles between him and Flaskamper would have resolved themselves by now. Though he had little time these days, he missed the comfort of loving arms around him at night. Lately, it was as though he were sleeping next to a stranger. A thought floated across his head – the thought that perhaps the elf had simply stopped loving him.

That’s ridiculous, he told himself angrily. Nevertheless, as he made his way down the long, enclosed corridor toward home, he found himself wiping away tears that had sprung, quite suddenly, into his eyes.

Flaskamper arrived home very late that night. He tried to enter their bedroom quietly, but stubbed his toe on the bed. His yelp of pain woke Rokey, who had only been dozing. He sat up in bed and looked at the time candle.

"Flash, where in the world have you been?" he asked sleepily.

"Sorry to wake you up, *chatka*," Flaskamper said. "I was out with an old friend. We got a bit potted and lost track of time."

"A friend?" Rokey asked, noting his husband's exceptionally good humor. "Which friend was that?"

"Not to worry, lover," he said. "It's a *she* friend, not a *he* friend. You've heard me talk about Brandelynn, my best friend from age zero? Well she's come back to Elfwood to visit for awhile. We've just been catching up on things."

Flaskamper got stuck in his tunic and collapsed on the bed, giggling helplessly. Rokey wasn't sure whether to be amused or annoyed, but at last he smiled, and came to the aid of the struggling elf. He grasped the offending tunic and pulled it off.

"Thanks, *chatka*," said Flaskamper, grinning broadly. He ran his hands seductively down his leggings, and then winked at Rokey. "You wanna help me off with these, too?"

Some time later, they lay side by side, still breathing heavily from their exertions. For the first time in a week, Rokey felt that perhaps their troubles were behind them. He'd never met this childhood friend of his husband's, but already he felt as though he owed her a debt of gratitude. He hadn't seen Flash this happy in months. A light had returned to his eyes – one that he hadn't even realized was gone until he saw it back again.

Flaskamper *was* happy in fact. Having his oldest friend back home seemed to have lifted a great weight from his shoulders. He had known for some time that he was lonely, but he hadn't fully realized until today just *how* lonely he had been. Even though he'd said nothing to Brandelynn tonight about his troubles at home, just having her there had been such a tremendous comfort. He'd gotten thoroughly sotted, but Rokey hadn't been angry. Instead they'd made love, eagerly, passionately... just as it had always been before. Could things possibly be on the mend for them this easily, after all the worries that had gone through his mind this past week? Well, there'd be plenty of time to ponder that later. Right now he was going to step back and enjoy the moment. He turned to Rokey, smiling, but no longer drunk. The exercise had taken care of that.

"So what happened to you today?" he asked.

The response surprised him. His spouse suddenly began to look nervous, even furtive.

“What happened?” Rokey answered cautiously, and then gave a shrug. “Oh you know, the usual. Practice and more practice.”

The elf decided to give it another try.

“Well, what kind of things are you working on now?” he asked. “You must be up to some pretty complex stuff by now, huh?”

“No, nothing important really,” Rokey answered quickly. “Just, you know, making things disappear and then...making them reappear again. Its hard work, dealing with all that energy, but pretty dull when you get right down to it.”

Maybe I'm still drunk after all, Flaskamper thought. If he didn't know better, he would swear that Rokey was lying to him. But that couldn't be. Rokey had never told him a lie before, and after what had just happened between them...

“What about you?” Rokey asked. “What's on your plate for tomorrow?”

“I'm going to play sick,” Flaskamper answered, glad for the chance to change the subject. He was too happy now to let wine-soaked suspicions ruin it all.

“Brandelynn and I are going to sneak off to Lake Ree,” he said. Abruptly, he reached out and grabbed Rokey by the arms. “Come with us, Rokey. I want you to meet Brandelynn, and you haven't had a day off for weeks. Come and splash in the lake with us.”

“Flash, it's the middle of winter,” Rokey said.

“Lake Ree is fed by the hot springs,” the elf reminded him. “Winter time is when it's most fun. You can play naked in the snow, then plunge into the steaming hot lake and warm up. I can't believe we've been here all this time and haven't been there together yet.”

“Flash,” Rokey said, “I'm not sure how comfortable I'd feel frolicking naked with someone I'd only just met. Why don't the two of you go and enjoy yourselves. You can tell me all about it when you get back. I really shouldn't take a day off now anyway.”

“But you just said you weren't working on anything important,” Flaskamper persisted. “You can keep your bathing shorts on. You can swim in all of your clothes if you want to. It doesn't matter. I just want you with us. Please, *chatka*. Please come.”

Rokey looked into his spouses pleading eyes. He so wanted to say yes, especially the way things were going tonight. But how would he ever explain to Ellispon and the High High Council that he had to take the day off from the most important discovery in centuries so that he could splash naked in the hot springs of Lake Ree? He could always lie...feign illness, but what if they should find out? It had only been a few days ago that Master Ellispon had questioned his commitment to his studies. How could he possibly convince him that he was truly devoted to his magecraft if he were caught in such a lie?

“I – I can't, my love,” he said at last. “I just...can't.”

Rokey watched, heartbroken, as the light in his husband's eyes faded, replaced by hurt and sorrow. It wasn't fair, keeping this secret from him, making him think that he wasn't as important as an ordinary day of studies. He ought to tell him the truth. Flash would understand then, and he would certainly keep the secret.

Yet he had promised the High Mage Laomiel. More than that, he had sworn an oath... an oath to tell no one, not even his own husband.

"It's alright, love," said Flaskamper quietly. "I understand."

But Rokey knew that he didn't understand; he couldn't. Flash leaned down and kissed him gently on the lips.

"Goodnight, *chatka*." The elf turned over to go to sleep.

"Flash –" Rokey began.

"Yes?" In Flaskamper's heart, hope flickered for an instant.

"I'm sorry."

The flicker died, along with the last threads of the joy he had felt before. Things hadn't really changed after all. The past few marks had been an illusion, a vision of water to one dying in the desert. It had seemed so real at the time, but turned out, in the end, to be merely a fistful of sand.

The two lay still there in their bed the rest of the night, back to back, with their eyes closed. Neither of them slept at all though, and in the morning when they finally arose, each of them left behind a pillow wet with tears.

Chapter 6

Gathering Storm

The clacking of Rochilar's boots echoed loudly through the cavernous halls of the palace dungeon. He hated it down here, in the castle's bowels. Though scrubbed regularly, it still smelled of dampness, mold and human waste. Horrible as it was, it had once been much worse. In the days before Hobar's father, Faradon, put an end to the practice, these dungeons often held men for years, lifetimes even. Nowadays it was only a holding area for detainees pending trial. Afterwards, if convicted, felons were sent to the prison that Faradon had built in the north central part of Duncileer. Conditions there, though harsh, were not nearly as ghastly as they had once been here in these dank cells.

The guard at the gate to the inner chambers stood up from his chair as Rochilar approached.

"Hello, Rochilar," he said, grinning broadly. "What you doing down here in the tombs?"

"Hello there, Dani," Rochilar said, smiling back at the dark, handsome youth. "I need to see one of your birds. A fellow named Gimley."

"Oh that one." Dani wrinkled his nose in disgust. "Don't know why you'd want to talk to him. You know what he is, don't you?"

"Yes I know," Rochilar replied with a sigh, "but it seems that he has some information he wants to try and barter to save his miserable neck. Since it apparently involves the king, I have to hear him out, even if it amounts to nothing."

"I understand," the lad replied, unlocking the inner gates. He then grabbed a key off the wall and handed it to Rochilar. "Your man's down the end on the left."

"Thanks, Dani." The king's guard started through the gate, but the young man stopped him.

"Roch," he said shyly, "how 'bout you an' me havin' another go round together? I know you're not a man what likes to be tied down... but I wouldn't mind it, if you catch my drift."

He winked at Rochilar, who smiled slyly in return.

"Well, now," Rochilar said, "we'll have to see what we can do about that." He reached around and quickly squeezed the young guard's backside. It was as firm as he remembered. "Why don't you meet me at Larraina's tonight at say... halfmark past eighteen?"

"I'll be there," Dani agreed happily. "You bet I will."

Rochilar walked away, smiling. It had been several months since he had first coaxed the young prison guard into his bed. If memory served, the enthusiastic lad had kept him up a good part of the night. With more than his mood elevated, Rochilar proceeded down the corridor to interrogate his man.

Gimley was a skinny little man with wispy brown hair and a crooked smile, which he flashed at Rochilar as he entered the man's gloomy cell.

"I was 'oping they'd send you," he said. "Word is you be the type o' man what can understand a feller like me."

Rochilar regarded him coldly.

"You aren't off to a very good beginning, Gimley," he told the man, "trying to draw comparisons between you and me. Having a taste for men is in no way equivalent to molesting little boys. If you try to make that inference again, some part of you is going to bleed. Am I making myself clear?"

Gimley shrunk back from Rochilar's hard stare.

"My apologies, good sir," he said. "I did not mean to give offence."

"Well you have," Rochilar snapped. "Just being in the room with you offends me. I'm here because you claim to have information pertinent to the king that you wish to reveal in order to save your sniveling hide. Tell me what it is and I'll tell you if it's worth that much. The king takes an especially harsh view of child rape. You know that the penalty is still the same, do you not? The king banned castration and garroting for all other sex crimes years ago, but he was most insistent that it be left in place for offences such as yours."

The wretched man paled and swallowed hard.

"I can assure you, sir," he said shakily, "that when the king hears what I have to say, he will be more than happy to commute my sentence. Provided, of course, I am convicted."

"Oh you'll be convicted this time, Gimley," Rochilar assured him. "Once more, you know it; else we would not be having this

conversation. You're no more a patriot than you are a parson. Now get on with what you have to say. I have other duties besides jabbering with the likes of you."

"Only the king must hear what I have to say," Gimley said. "I must be granted an audience with him."

"You're out of your mind," the king's guard scoffed.

"He must hear it from me directly," the man insisted. "The information I have is vital. I will not risk its loss or corruption by third parties. You think me not a patriot, but you are wrong, sir. Though I ask for a boon in exchange for this knowledge, I am nevertheless glad to share it. I will do so, however, only to King Hobar, himself."

Rochilar pondered this for a moment. Despite his loathing for the man, he was beginning to think that he might, in fact, be sincere.

"You'll have to give me some of it," Rochilar demanded. "I cannot ask the king to grant you an audience without something to convince him... and me."

Gimley considered this, and then nodded his head.

"I'll tell you this much," he said. "I was in The Shark's Tooth not long ago, conducting some... business."

"That figures." Rochilar knew of The Shark's Tooth. Everyone did. It was a seedy tavern and brothel in The Underside, where all manner of sordid vices could be indulged, including ones such as Gimley's. The place had been raided and closed several times in the past, only to crop up again in some other squalid location. It seemed to be as immutable as The Underside itself.

"I was in one of the upstairs rooms," Gimley continued. "When I had finished my business, I stayed to have a bit of a rest before I left. That's when I heard the two men in the next room. The walls are thin as bats' wings there, so I could hear everything they said clear as day."

"And what did they say exactly," Rochilar said impatiently.

"That I'll save for the king," he answered. "I'll tell *you* that a plot was being hatched, involving the king and... a certain member of his family. It was a vile thing they were plannin', a vile thing indeed. His Majesty will consider it a bargain, the details I can give him so's 'e can prevent it, for only the small price of me own sorry little life."

"Why should I believe any of this?" Rochilar asked. "You'd say anything to save your own skin."

"Maybe so," the man replied, "but what would be the point? If my story turned out to be false, I'd only get the garrote that much quicker, wouldn't I. No sir, the dirt I gots is real enough, believe you me. Now... do I gets to see the king or don'ts I?"

In a flash, Rochilar reached out and grabbed the little man, lifting him up off the dirt floor and slamming him hard into the stone wall. Gimley gasped, trying to catch his breath, but Rochilar tightened his

powerful hand around the man's neck until his eyes began to bulge wildly.

"The answer to your question is *no*," Rochilar growled, "I would never think of asking the king to sully his hands doing business with you. Nevertheless, you are going to tell *me* everything you heard in that room or you're not going to last long enough to see another sunrise through that window. Now do we understand one another?"

* * *

Dani heard Rochilar come out of the child rapist's cell and stood to unlock the gate for him.

"How'd it go?" the younger guard asked.

"He's stubborn," Rochilar answered, shaking his head "but I'll break him. Leave him alone for a while, Dani, until I come back tomorrow. And let's let him skip a meal or two. Hunger has a way of helping to loosen a man's tongue."

"Don't it just," said Dani, leaning close to Rochilar. "Why, I can feel hunger loosenin' my tongue even now."

He stuck out his tongue and curled it suggestively. Rochilar felt blood rushing down below his waist again.

"Enough of that, lad," he said sternly. "You're distracting me from my other duties."

The boy smiled wickedly, and made a show of adjusting his breeches.

"I'll see you tonight, eh?" he asked.

Rochilar nodded.

"Don't be late," he said, then yielded to temptation and drew Dani into his arms, giving the lad a deep, penetrating kiss. Afterwards he spun around and started down the corridor toward the exit.

"Don't you worry Roch," the young guard called breathlessly after him. "I'll be there...ready an' willin'."

"Oh, I know you will," Rochilar thought, and hoped fervently that the rest of his day would pass quickly."

* * *

Fia asked for Lorq at the Zoo's main gate and was directed to the Gryphon paddock just at the end of the east path. She made her way there slowly, stopping once or twice to admire some strange, exotic creature that she had never seen before. The entire zoo, at least what she was able to see, was immaculate. The cages were clean and in excellent repair. The animals all looked well fed and well groomed. Lorq was clearly doing a spectacular job here.

She heard the sharp squawk of the gryphon even before she rounded the corner leading to their paddock. There was no mistaking

their loud, shrill cry. As she came in sight of the enclosure, she immediately spotted Lorq. He was inside the compound, kneeling in front of the great beast, examining one of its huge razor-sharp clawed feet. Fia watched him with amazement, also with concern. Gryphons were known to be ill-tempered creatures under the best of circumstances. Had it chosen to, this one could have bitten Lorq's head clean off with one swipe of its powerful beak, yet it just stood patiently, letting out an occasional squawk as Lorq tended to whatever the problem was. He reached into the bucket beside him and pulled out a dripping wet brush, then proceeded to swab it all over the beast's feet, first one, and then the other. After that, apparently satisfied, he stood and gave the creature an affectionate pat on its feathered neck. It was only then that he turned and spotted Fia. Lorq smiled broadly and waved. Fia waved back as the giant headed for the plank which spanned the mote separating the gryphon from the spectators. He crossed the distance in two broad steps, bucket in hand, then stooped and removed the plank. Fia went to join him.

"Lorq," she said, "you never cease to amaze with the way you handle wild creatures. I know of no other man who could kneel in front of a gryphon like that and not have a worry in the world."

"Ledy's very sweet," Lorq answered, "once she gets to know you and understands that you're there to care for her."

"Is something wrong with her feet?" Fia asked.

Lorq nodded.

"Trypin," he explained. "Gryphons get it a lot. Makes their feet itch and burn like crazy. The medicine I put on for her feels good, and it kills the fungus eventually, so she's always happy to see me coming with the bucket."

Fia laughed.

"I'll just bet she is," she said. "Did I come too early? I can look around some more if you have things to do."

"No, I can stop for lunch now," Lorq said. "Come with me while I get the basket. I told Hampril, our cook, that we were going to have lunch together here, so he made us lots to eat. He's a good cook. I'm already starting to get fat. I should try and exercise more to keep skinny like Kyzee does."

"Nonsense, you look fit and handsome as ever," Fia said, and Lorq blushed at the compliment.

They picked up the basket from the staff building and went to the gardens. Fia thought it was awfully cold to be eating out of doors, but when they arrived, she saw that there was an area just in the center that was enclosed with glass. Inside it was warm and tables and chairs were situated among the many varieties of plants and flowers that bloomed in this protected greenhouse environment. Several other people were there also, enjoying their picnic lunches. Lorq and Fia

chose a table, and Lorq fetched an extra large chair for himself. Then they sat and unpacked the large wicker basket.

As they ate together and talked, it occurred to Fia that a significant change had taken place in her giant friend. Though his kind and gentle nature remained, gone was the child-like demeanor she had always observed in him. As he spoke fondly of Kyzee and Broq, she realized that he had grown, not physically, but mentally and emotionally, into a thoughtful and responsible young husband and father. The insight brought a tear to her eye, though she wasn't sure exactly the reason for it. Was she reluctant to let go of the past, of her days with the precocious elf, the naive behemoth and...?

Stamford.

Yes, that was it wasn't it? Seeing this change in Lorq brought home to her at last the fact that those days were forever gone...that *he* was gone.

"Fia, are you alright?" Lorq asked, concern in his voice.

Fia shook her head to clear the shadows, and then smiled at Lorq.

"I'm fine, sweetie," she said. "I was just...I don't know *what* I was doing."

"Thinking about the old days?" he asked.

"Why Lorq, you've been reading my mind," she said. "That is exactly what I was doing."

"I don't tell Kyzee this," he said quietly, "but sometimes I miss those days. Just the four of us on the road. Flash and Stamford pretending to fight with each other. I don't miss them all the time. I love it here, with Kyzee and Broq. But sometimes..."

The giant's voice trailed off, leaving the thought unfinished.

"It's natural to sometimes look back with some degree of longing to our more care-free days, I think" Fia said. "Especially when life begins to grow especially complicated."

"Complicated," Lorq repeated. "That's what it is. I have more to worry about now. A wife, with a dangerous job, and Broq."

"What worries you about Broq?" she asked him.

Lorq sighed.

"I know it's wrong to feel this way. I feel like I'm – betraying my own ancestors or something," he said, "but I keep hoping..."

"Hoping what, Lorq?" Fia prodded gently.

"Hoping that he'll stop growing," he said vehemently, and then colored with shame. "I don't want Broq to be a giant like Kyzee and me."

"But why?" Fia asked, a bit surprised by the force of his feelings.

"Because Fia," he said, "this isn't a place for giants. This world belongs to minnows, most of it at least. Even here in Duncileer, where everybody gathers and lives together...humans of different colors and ancestries, samers, even some elves. *They* all mix together. But giants

can't do that; they can't mix...and there aren't enough of us living outside of the northern tribe lands and Braeden's Keep to – to..."

Lorq faltered, unable to put the words to his thoughts. Fia, however, nodded as it dawned on her what the giant was trying to say.

"When you say giants can't *mix*," she said, "you're talking about sex aren't you?"

Lorq blushed again, and nodded.

"Who is Broq going to marry?" he asked miserably. "Who is his first love going to be? I was just that age when I left my tribe and came down here. It was terrible. Pretty minnow girls everywhere. Sometimes they'd flirt with me, but I knew that we could never... Fia it's hard for me to talk about things like this. It's embarrassing."

"Lorq it's me," Fia reminded him. "You don't have to be embarrassed with me. Does Kyzee share your concern?"

"No," said Lorq. "She thinks things like that will somehow work themselves out. But she's from a world full of minnow men and giant women. If Broq were a girl, I'd agree with her. She might be lonely sometimes, but she'd find someone to make her happy eventually, in *all* ways. But it's not the same with giant boys and minnow girls, or minnow boys for that matter. It's going to be rough enough for Broq before he matures. Afterwards I'm afraid he'll end up as miserable as I was."

"Well," Fia said, pondering, "maybe when Broq is of the proper age, he can journey to Braeden's Keep in search of a mate. Though most of the Saebrilites claimed to be samers, my observation was that there were many others there besides Kyzee who took more than a passing interest in men."

"Kyzee mentioned that possibility too," Lorq told her, "though she did say that women with those dox tendencies are so ostracized among her people that it would be a tricky matter to approach them about. Plus, like I pointed out, Kyzee is not exactly a Saebrilite in good standing in Braeden's Keep. We couldn't be sure that they wouldn't just enslave Broq like they did us."

"I think the best course of action in a situation like this would be to take a page from antiquity," Fia suggested. "Write to Lorinda and ask her to keep an eye out, on the sly, for a possible mate for your son. Remember, she owes Stamford a debt for saving her life partner, Hethra, from being crushed by that rock giant. Though Stamford is dead now, the debt remains, so you may find her amenable to pushing the boundaries of their taboos a bit, surreptitiously at least."

Lorq smiled.

"That's a good idea, Fia," he said. "I'll talk to Kyzee about that tonight and see what she thinks."

"You do that, dear" she said, then suddenly clasped Lorq's huge hand with both of hers.

"I'm so sorry, Lorq," she told him. "I must admit that I never reflected on what that aspect of your life must have been like. It was terribly thoughtless of me. But just remember, your own experience illustrates that all things are possible. Whatever size Broq grows up to be, with parents who love and believe in him, he will find happiness somehow. I'm sure of it."

"I guess you're right, Fia," he said. "I'm sure I worry too much."

"Well," she replied, "I suppose a parent's job is to worry, even to the point of heartache sometimes."

"I just want his life to be better than mine was at the beginning," said the giant.

"Isn't it already, Lorq?" asked Fia. "He already has parents, and even a community, who will accept him for who he is. Is that not already a vast improvement over the situation you found yourself in early in life?"

"I guess that's true," he agreed. "I never really considered it that way before."

"I think," Fia continued, "that although it is normal for a father to worry, it is also important that he sometimes look past those worries, and consider the good things too."

"Thanks, Fia," Lorq said with affection. "It helps talking to you."

"That's what friends are for, dear," she replied with a smile.

"Now if I can just stop worrying about Kyzee," he said.

"Kyzee seems to me infinitely capable of looking after herself," said Fia.

"She is that," Lorq agreed, "but things have grown so dangerous now. It's not apparent yet throughout the rest of the kingdom, but the palace is already full of plots and plans. Kyzee says it's hard to know who she can trust anymore."

"But Kyzee has a talent for seeing inside the true nature of people," Fia remarked. "Surely you see that, Lorq. She fell in love with you straight away."

Lorq grinned shyly at the compliment.

"Still," he said, "I can't help but be concerned, with her being so close to the king and all. Kyzee says something bad is in the air, and I feel it too whenever I'm in the palace. It's... I don't know how to say it better."

"I get the idea," Fia replied. "There's no chance of her taking a less dangerous position?"

Lorq shook his head.

"I've never asked her right out," he said, "but I know that she wouldn't. She's very loyal to King Hobar, as am I. I'm just not in the thick of everything like she is."

"Well, things are as they are," said Fia. "If one can't change them, it really does little good to labor over them I suppose."

"I know that's true," Lorq answered, "but it's hard not to worry with the kingdom so close to war and all, and the way things feel here. I know Kyzee's right. Something bad is coming. I just hope that, whatever it is, she's able to see it in time to stop it."

* * *

Kyzee was just dressing to leave for home when Rochilar came in, looking very cheerful.

"You look like the cat that's just swallowed the finch," she told him.

Rochilar grinned at her.

"Not yet," he said, as he began to strip off his uniform, "but the finch is in my grasp."

"I see," she said. "Plans laid for the evening."

"And laid for a good portion of the night as well," he said, and laughed.

Just then another guard, a stocky girl called Jauna, arrived carrying a note.

"Rochilar," she said, trying in vain not to notice his state of undress, "glad I caught you before you left. The inner guard down in the dungeon said to get this to you right away."

She handed him the slip of paper.

"Hmmm, speak of the finch," he muttered.

"How's that sir?" she said.

"Nothing, never mind," he replied absently. "Thanks Jauna."

The girl left. Rochilar studied the note with a frown of consternation.

"A kink in your plans?" Kyzee inquired.

"No, no," he told her. "Just a damned nuisance. It's that prisoner I interrogated earlier today."

"What about him?" she asked.

"He's dead."

"Good Goddess!" she exclaimed, her eyes widening. "How?"

"Apparently he strangled himself with his own belt," Rochilar explained.

"Do you have any idea why?" she asked.

Rochilar shook his head.

"He was trying to bargain with me, his life for some information about some supposed plot against the king, but he insisted on telling only the king himself. I... er... explained to him that that was not going to happen, and he still refused to give me the details, so I had him left alone and starved for the rest of the day to encourage him to open up."

"It makes no sense," Kyzee observed. "If he was so anxious to save his own life when he spoke to you, what in the world would motivate him to take his own life the very same day?"

"Good question," said Rochilar.

"We'd better go down and have a look at his cell before everything gets trampled," she said. Though Rochilar was anxious to leave, he knew that the point was not open for debate. She waited while he finished dressing in his civilian clothes and together they headed down to the dungeon.

Dani was no longer there, but had filled the night guard in on what had occurred.

"He said not to let no one touch nothin' until we heard from you, Rochilar," the man said, "so everything's just as it was found. Dani came upon the poor bastard when he went to do the count at the end of his shift. Hung up on the hook just like a turkey 'e was. The boy bout pissed hisself when he found 'im. Can't say's I blame 'im. Terrible lookin', a hanged man, eyes all bulgin'... tongue hangin' out. Ghastly sight it is."

It was, indeed, exactly as the guard had described. The manner of death certainly seemed straightforward enough. Gimley was suspended from a hook in the wall by a leather belt that was wrapped tightly around his gaunt neck. Kyzee wrinkled her nose with distaste. The man had soiled himself at the end, and the reek of waste filled the cell. They both had a thorough look at the man and the cell. Kyzee even examined the window, but there was nothing amiss... nothing, that is, except for the fact that the man had killed himself for no apparent reason.

"Well it's damned peculiar," she said, "but I don't see what else we can do except cut him down and bury him. There's no sign that he ran afoul of anyone... or anything, save his own conscience maybe."

"I doubt the bastard had any conscience to run afoul of," said Rochilar, "but I agree. There's nothing to investigate."

"What about the information he was trying to barter?" Kyzee asked him. "Anything there we can pursue?"

"Only that he overheard a conversation by two unknown plotters in the business rooms at the Shark's Tooth. The scheme involved some ill intention toward the king and some member of his family. That's all I got out of him before he insisted on seeing King Hobar in person."

"That tells us nothing," said Kyzee in disgust. "In a cesspool like the Shark's Tooth, it would be an event if there *wasn't* someone speaking ill of the king. Since we have no names, our only choice would be to question the owner. I see no point in that."

"None whatsoever," Rochilar concurred. "All we can do is to instruct the guard to be especially vigilant, but we're already on high alert as it is."

“Still, it won’t hurt to light a bit of a fire under everyone at tomorrow’s roll call,” she said. “Come on, let’s go tell the guard he can clear the body away and then get out of here. I gather you won’t lose any sleep over the loss of this good citizen.”

Rochilar shot her an evil grin.

“Oh, I’ll lose sleep alright,” he said as he left the foul-smelling cell, “but not over him.”

Kyzee shook her head and followed her second out the door.

Chapter 7

Confidences

“**A**lrighr,” said Ellispon, “perhaps we should try a different approach.”

Despite the fact that he was laying in a heap on the floor, breathing laboriously and smelling distinctly of brimstone, Rokey chuckled.

“Yes, master,” he agreed, “this one seems only to be succeeding in getting me cooked.”

As Rokey recovered, the High Mage paced back and forth, muttering to himself. For the past week, they had been hard at work on the problem of trying to create a controlled entry into No-When. After several meetings, the High Council members had all agreed that this discovery should receive the highest priority, and that all of Rokey’s other training should be temporarily suspended in order to explore the possibility of using No-When as a means of rapid travel. It was decided, given the sensitive times, that this could prove to be of vital strategic importance to the elves and their allies should war break out in Firma. Their decision had made life very difficult for Rokey. Not only was the work grueling, but he was still under oath to reveal nothing of the nature of his endeavors to anyone, including Flaskamper. Yesterday, in frustration, he had protested fiercely to Ellispon about the need to keep secrets from one’s own spouse. The old elf, while sympathetic, was not especially helpful.

“Confidences are part of the nature of sorcery, my boy,” he had said. “That is one reason why, if a sorcerer gets married at all, it is

usually to another sorcerer. Your husband is simply going to have to adjust to the fact that there will be portions of your life and your work to which he will not be privy.”

“But can’t I at least let him know that something vitally important is happening?” Rokey had begged. “I can’t stand to have him thinking that I view my studies as more important than him.”

“The High Council has made it most clear that there is to be no hint that anything unusual is happening here,” Ellispon had responded. “You know that as well as I, and you have sworn an oath to abide by their decision. I will *not* be the one to counsel you to break it.”

Lying on the floor of the workroom, Rokey thought back on this exchange and cursed to himself. No matter how he had tried to work out some way of letting Flash know what was happening while still remaining true to his oath, he had come up short. The secret stood between them like a wall, and each day it seemed to Rokey as though his husband grew more and more distant. There was more to it than that, though; he was sure of that. If he thought this secret alone was responsible for their difficulties, he would tell him, and to blazes with his oath. No, the problems went back further than this past week. It went back at least.... actually, he didn’t know for certain. All he was really certain about these days was that Flaskamper was slipping away from him, and he had to find some way to stop it.

“Ah ha!” Ellispon cried out, breaking his reverie. “I think I have an idea.”

“You’ve thought of a new direction, master?” Rokey asked.

“I think so,” he replied, “though it’s going to take some rethinking on your part.”

“Rethinking?” said Rokey. “In what way?”

“Well, what we’ve been doing these past few days is essentially trying to duplicate the accident that sent you careening into No-When,” said the elf, “except that we’ve been trying to do it in a slower, more controlled way. I think the reason that it hasn’t been working is because it didn’t happen that way in the first place. The objective you were trying to achieve was, in fact, completely different. You were trying to explode out into this world, not another. I’ve been making the mistake of thinking that, since you were essentially only trying to absorb energy until it broke your containment spell, you weren’t actually weaving a spell in the process.”

“You mean I was?” Rokey asked.

“Of course,” Ellispon answered, “and now that I truly think about it, the illusion you’ve been weaving – plunging into the golden lake and continuously inhaling the energy as water – is actually remarkably complex for someone at your stage of training. The problem in that is it’s flawed. It didn’t achieve the end result you

intended. What you need to do is to weave an entirely new spell scenario...one that will have *our* objective from beginning to end."

"But master," Rokey protested, "what I did – it was not a spell, it was just, just instinct. I wouldn't have any idea how to go about what you're suggesting."

"It may have been instinct for you," the elf mage explained, "but it most assuredly was a spell, or more precisely, a *spell scenario*. Had you reached the goal you had intended, then it truly *would* have been a spell. We would have covered all this later in your training, after you had mastered powering simple spells up and down using articulations. However, it seems that in your case we will be taking the curriculum in a somewhat different sequence. As to your not knowing how to go about weaving another spell, I can help you. Your instincts apparently run toward visual scenarios. There are actually many different ways to construct a spell scenario, but I think we should stick with what comes most naturally to you."

"Alright," said Rokey, growing rather excited at the prospect of actual spell-weaving, "how do we begin?"

Ellispon pondered this question for a few moments.

"First," he said, "we must distill the objective into a simple form, preferably one which can be easily visualized."

"You mean something that represents what we want to achieve?" Rokey asked. "How simple can it be?"

"As far as the final objective goes," said Ellispon, "the simpler the better."

"In that case, why not just choose opening a door?" Rokey suggested.

"Perfect," said the elf. "Now, from here, things get somewhat more complicated..."

* * *

Flaskamper sighed deeply as he sank down into the warm spring-fed waters of Lake Ree. This is the second time in as many weeks that he had completely shirked his duties in order to come here with his friend Brandelynn. He knew that, at some point, he would get a reprimand if he continued to take unscheduled time off. These days, however, reprimands were the least of his worries. His real concern, to the exclusion of all else now, was his marriage, or what remained of it. No matter how he had tried this past week, he simply couldn't formulate any solutions to their growing estrangement. The worse it got, the more depressed he got, and the less able to cope with anything at all. The only moments that brought him any peace at all were those he spent in the company of Brandelynn. That was why, when she had suggested another trip to Lake Ree, he had jumped at the chance. Though his troubles continued to haunt him, at least, for

a short while, they would seem just a bit more distant...a bit less painful. He shook his head briskly, hoping to shake the distressing thoughts from his head, and opened his eyes. To his surprise, he found Brandelynn studying him closely.

“What?” he said.

“Flaskamper, when are you going to tell me what it is that’s bothering you?” asked Brandelynn.

“I... don’t know what you mean, Brandelynn,” he said feebly.

“Horse shite,” she replied. “You can’t fool me even if you try, and you haven’t been trying that hard. Something’s tearing you to pieces, ‘Pillar. I’ve never seen you so miserable before. Now why don’t you just suck it up and spill it. Maybe I can help you.”

“I don’t think anyone can help me,” Flaskamper said morosely.

“It has to do with your husband, right?” she asked.

Flaskamper nodded silently.

“What’s he done? Is he cheating on you?”

“Oh no,” Flaskamper replied, “at least... NO! Rokey would never do that. I’m more the cheating type.”

“Oh?” his friend asked, her eyebrow arching.

“It didn’t actually happen, but...” his voice trailed off. Brandelynn grasped him by his bare shoulders.

“Flash, I want you to tell me what’s wrong,” she said. “Tell me all of it. If I can’t help, at least I can listen, right? So come on... give me the story.”

Flaskamper’s lips trembled as he searched for a place to begin. Slowly, haltingly, he told her about his ongoing problems with Rokey, his temptations with Jiri in the bath house... even the last night the two had made love together, and the subsequent feeling that Rokey had lied to him about something, and was still lying.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he told her, “but he’s not being unfaithful. I don’t know how I know... I just do. But something is going on, and it’s just making all the other things that have been driving us apart worse.”

“Well, have you asked him what it is that he’s hiding from you?” she asked him.

“No,” Flaskamper replied. “I don’t think it would do any good. Besides... I’m not sure I want to know, really. Whatever it is, it’s secondary to the real problem anyway.”

“What exactly do you see as the real problem?” Brandelynn asked.

Flaskamper sat pondering the question in silence for a bit, and then finally threw up his hands.

“I don’t know,” he told her.

“Yes you do,” she countered. “You know the problem is that you’re stuck in a sinking marriage. Your husband loves his magic more than he loves you, and you feel neglected. Also, you’ve wound up in the one place you always swore you’d never be – trapped in Elfwood, living in

the palace, serving in the guard. You feel stifled and betrayed and crushed by the disappointment of it all. The reason you don't want to admit it is that, once you do, the solution becomes obvious."

"I could never... leave Rokey," he said, the thought itself nearly choking him. "I love him more than my own life. I could never do anything to hurt him."

"You don't think it hurts him every day – seeing you this unhappy?"

"There must be some way for us to work it out," Flaskamper said. "Other couples have problems. They work them out."

"Flash," Brandelynn said gently, "I don't know Rokey well enough to say anything about him personally. I have known a sorcerer or two though – romantically even. The reason they so rarely get married is because, in a sense, they're already married...to the magecraft. Once that takes hold of a person, there's never much room left for anything else, in spite of their best intentions. Eventually, they find themselves looking for a way to – to let go of all other distractions."

Flaskamper looked up at his friend.

"Is that what I've become to him," he asked, "a distraction?"

"Of course not," she answered, "at least... not consciously. Look, I'm sure he loves you, just as you love him, but his life is heading in a whole different direction than it was when the two of you met and fell in love. And your life –"

"My life is heading nowhere at all," said Flaskamper in a hollow voice. "Rokey's outgrowing me. Even if I'm not one already, sooner or later, I *will* be only a distraction to him – something to get shed of."

"But 'Pillar,'" Brandelynn said, "if you're positive that that's where the road is leading, why don't you take it upon yourself to choose a different path? Do the two of you a favor and end things while there's still some love between you. There'll be so much less heartbreak for both of you that way."

Flaskamper sat back against the sandy bank of the lake and closed his eyes again, still trembling with emotion. Brandelynn, too, sat back, leaving him to his thoughts. The two of them continued to soak there in the steaming waters of the lake until the afternoon shadows grew long and thin. Then, at last, they emerged. The winter air was a shock, and they hurried to dry off and dress before either of them caught a chill. As they made their way back along the path leading to the elf settlement, Brandelynn asked her old friend whether he had come to any decisions. Flaskamper nodded.

"I know that you're right," he said. "You're right about everything you said. I'm only going to grow more and more miserable here, and the best thing to do is to just cut loose."

Brandelynn put her arm around Flaskamper's shoulder as he began to shake with sorrow and frustration.

“It’s the best thing to do,” he repeated, nearly choking with emotion, “but... I can’t. I don’t know anymore what I mean to him, Glowbug, but I know what he still means to me...and right now, no matter how unhappy I am, I just can’t let go of that one shred of hope that things will turn around somehow. It may never happen. One day, he might say to me, ‘look Flash, I just can’t do this anymore’. At that point, I’ll be able to let him go... but not before – not while that one shred is still left.”

When they reached the home of Brandelynn’s family, where she was staying for the duration of her visit, she hugged him fiercely.

“I’ll be hoping right along with you, ‘Pillar,” she said, “because above all I want you to be happy. And in the meantime, you know you’ve got my shoulder whenever you need it.”

Flaskamper hugged his friend back, but as he watched her go inside a feeling of anger began to tug at him from somewhere deep inside.

Anger? At what? At Brandelynn?

Yes, he *was* angry at her... angry for saying out loud all of the things he had been trying so hard not to think about for these last several weeks – months even. He had wanted her comfort and pity, not the truth. He wasn’t at all ready to face that. He should have known better, though. One of the things that made Brandelynn his best friend was that she was always honest with him. If he hadn’t been prepared to hear her honest advice, he shouldn’t have talked about Rokey at all.

When Flaskamper reached his quarters, he found a message waiting for him. He opened it to discover that it was from his father. King Angorath wanted to see him immediately on a matter of importance.

Damn!

What could his father want with him now? Perhaps he was going to get his reprimand sooner than expected? No, the king would not handle such a task. That would fall to his elder brother, Alrontin, Captain of the Elf Guard. Oh well, there was no point in standing there speculating. He quickly went to the bedroom to put on some fresh clothes, and then headed out toward the King’s Court via one of the narrow covered walkways that connected the various branches of the palace complex.

King Angorath was just finishing up the day’s court session. Flaskamper waited patiently while his father meted out judgment to a convicted thief who had appealed the lower magistrate’s sentence. The man left with a dose of the king’s ire in his ear and an extra year on his sentence.

Father never could abide thieves, Flaskamper thought, then allowed himself a wry smile. *Good thing he doesn’t know that I myself*

was a fairly prodigious thief during my years out on the road. He'd explode.

Court adjourned for the day, and the elf went to meet his father back in the king's chambers. By the time he got there, Angorath was already busy signing the dozen or so decrees and sentences he had passed over the course of the afternoon. He spotted Flaskamper and motioned for him to sit. Flaskamper took one of the stuffed chairs in front of the grand oak desk and waited patiently. Waiting was something to which the king's sons were both well-accustomed. For Angorath, the business of the realm always came first, and he had always tried to instill this same sense of duty in his children. Fortunately, with Alrontin, eldest son and heir to the throne, it had worked like a charm. As for Flaskamper, well, the king had never entirely given up hope.

Angorath finished his task and sent the clerk off to process their day's work. When he had gone, and they were alone in the room, the king turned his attention toward his younger son.

"You're a difficult fellow to reach," said Angorath. "I summoned you over three marks ago."

"I'm sorry, father," said Flaskamper, "I –"

The king waved his hand to cut him off.

"Save the explanations for your brother," he said, "but you'd better make it a good one. You know how it annoys him to have one of his flock go unexpectedly absent."

Flaskamper did indeed know, and he wasn't looking forward to the encounter one bit.

"Still, I'm sorry to have kept you waiting," said Flaskamper.

"No matter. I had plenty to keep me busy in the meantime," said the king. "The reason I summoned you is that I'm going to need someone to represent me in Oraque in about ten day's time. King Wassunbin's daughter Klyapra is getting married to some earl, or baron, or something of the kind. Oraque has so many titled nobles, it's a wonder there are any commoners left for them to overtax. In any case, the sly old bastard is using the wedding as a front to gather together the heads of state of the surrounding kingdoms, or their duly designated representatives, to feel them out on the issues of impending wars and likely alliances. I want you to go and play diplomat for a few weeks."

"Me?" Flaskamper asked in astonishment. "Father, I'm no diplomat. That's Alrontin's specialty."

"Ordinarily I'd agree with you," the king replied. "But this assignment will entail a bit more cunning and slyness, and those things are more your specialty."

Flaskamper grimaced.

"I'm not sure whether I should feel complimented or insulted," he said.

“Neither,” said Angorath. “It was simply a statement of fact. You have more worldly experience than your brother, and I want to take advantage of that.”

“But father, I wouldn’t know the first thing about what to say in an official meeting of that sort,” Flaskamper protested.

“Oh, that’s the easy part,” the king told him. “You say next to nothing. We elves always maintain the appearance of neutrality in these human conflicts – have for centuries now, yet they always invite us in the hope that, one day, we’ll take leave of our senses long enough to pledge aid to one side or another. No, the meetings will be all about *listening*, soaking up information, as will all of the parties and other social gatherings that a handsome young elf will most certainly be invited to attend. In fact, it is during those functions that a sharp ear will gather more useful intelligence than at any number of high-level conferences. Wine flows, guards drop and tongues, invariably, wag. The trick is to always make sure that it’s the other fellow’s tongue doing the wagging.”

“What about Rokey?” Flaskamper asked. “Would he be coming with me? Oraque isn’t exactly the most enlightened kingdom in Firma, as far as tolerance for samers goes anyway.”

Angorath shook his head.

“It’s true, Oraquean society isn’t quite as... progressive as we are here,” the king agreed. “I don’t think you’ll find any overt hostility toward samers, at least within the purview of the court. In fact, I understand that Klyapra’s older sister is notoriously partial to comely young maidens. However, I think that, even in royal society, a married same couple would be considered a bit beyond the pale.

“But why is that?” Flaskamper asked. “I never did understand.”

“Primarily religious reasons,” Angorath replied. “And although I respect their right to worship as they choose, I must say that I find Revelationism, the prevailing religious order in Oraque, quite staggering in its duplicity. While its followers seem quite content to blatantly disregard some of its strictest prohibitions, they stir themselves into absolute apoplexy over the commission of other far less serious offences – the so-called *carnal deviances* being among them. The Revelationist doctrines scarcely mention them at all, and give no specific injunctions against them. Yet until only a few decades ago, samers were regularly persecuted – even imprisoned in the name of Revelationism. On the other hand, blood sports are strictly and expressly forbidden by the doctrines, but are widely and openly practiced in Oraque, and have been for generations.”

“Great,” said Flaskamper. “Sounds even more charming than I remember.”

“As I said, you’ll not have any difficulties as a member of the royal court. I just think that to bring your husband would put you at – shall we say – a *diplomatic disadvantage*. You’ll learn much more if you go

there on your own and charm all of the lonely ladies... and gentlemen. Oh, don't look at me that way! By the heavens, I'm not asking you to bed anyone. I only want you to be your usual amiable self. Besides, your husband has plenty to keep him busy here. I've heard from Ellispon that he's thoroughly engrossed in his current field of study. You'll miss one another, I know, but it'll only be for a few weeks."

Flaskamper didn't know what to say. The thought of going away now, with things the way they were between him and Rokey – just seemed like a terrible idea. Could he possibly talk his father out of sending him without having to spill all of his personal troubles? He had to give it a try. For some reason, he felt certain that leaving now would prove to be disastrous for his already troubled relationship.

"Father, I really appreciate your confidence in me," Flaskamper began, "but... I really wish you would consider asking someone else to go – Rasentyl, for instance. He's young and handsome and sufficiently devious for the task at hand. I'm sure he'd be perfect, and thrilled to be of service."

"Rasentyl would be a fine choice," the king responded, "except for the fact that I've already chosen you."

"Father," Flaskamper begged, "please don't make me go away right now. I know that one's personal life should never interfere with the needs of the realm. You've always taught us that. It's just that now... now would be a terrible time for me to leave Elfwood. I can't say exactly how I know that, but I do. I'll do anything else you ask – meetings, state dinners, more trade negotiations – anything at all, just please let me stay here at home, father. Please."

King Angorath shifted uncomfortably, clearly afraid that his son was going to fall to his knees, or burst into tears, or – Secta forbid – both. He placed a tentative hand on Flaskamper's shoulder and patted it gently.

"Alright... son," he said cautiously. "If you feel that strongly about it, I'll send someone else instead. Rasentyl would, indeed, make a suitable spy. Before I talk to him, however, I want you to take a few more days to think it over. Perhaps things – circumstances – will change. If not... well, I certainly won't force you."

This was not at all the response Flaskamper had expected, and he nearly fell over with the shock of it.

"Thank you, father," he stammered, when he found his wits again. "I'll make it up to you. I will. I promise."

"I'm sure that you will, one of these days," the king said. "Now get out of here, before I recover from this rare bout of benevolence I seem to be suffering from."

Flaskamper wasn't sure what had just happened, but he was determined to quit while he was ahead. He shot his father a grateful smile, and then made quickly for the door.

King Angorath watched him go, a look of deep concern on his face. He, too, was uncertain of what had just occurred. He had never before seen his son in such a fragile emotional state, and it worried him. It was obvious that Flaskamper had not wanted to discuss the problem in detail, but that was not particularly surprising. The two of them had never enjoyed an especially close relationship. Granted, it had improved a great deal these past few years since Flaskamper's return, but that had been largely due to the expert diplomatic skills of Queen Ferriwhyl. Since her death, Angorath often found himself at a loss as to how best to deal with both his children...Flaskamper in particular. Now, apparently, some personal crisis was brewing in his younger son's life, and once again, he found himself lost. Perhaps Alrontin could provide some insight. The king pulled the bell cord next to his desk and, a moment later, his secretary entered.

"You rang for me, Sire?" he said.

"Yes, Bertrys," said Angorath. "Kindly send someone to fetch Captain Alrontin for me. Tell him it's most important that I see him immediately."

* * *

The next afternoon, Rokey and Brandelynn sat at the bar of Elfwood's only eating and drinking establishment. It was simply called *Paeolaun*, the elvish word for relax. At this time of day, the two of them were the only ones there. The barkeeper set their drinks down in front of them, then discreetly left them alone.

"Thanks for meeting me Brandelynn," Rokey said.

"My pleasure," she replied, "though I was a bit surprised to get your message, being that we only met that one time for a few minmarks."

Flaskamper had introduced Rokey to his friend the previous week when she came to pick him up for some adventure they had planned. Rokey, of course, had been on his way to meet Ellispon.

"I know," Rokey admitted, "it's a bit awkward for me as well, but—" he paused, and then decided to get right to the point. "I don't know anyone else who can help me."

"Help you with what exactly?" Brandelynn asked.

"Flaskamper," Rokey replied. "I know that he must have told you that things aren't... well, all that sunny between us right now."

"You have a gift for understatement," she said dryly.

Rokey laughed.

"So he *has* told you," he said. "Good. I'm glad that he's had someone to talk to. I only wish..." his voice trailed off.

"You only wish what?" Brandelynn asked.

"I wish that he could talk to *me*," Rokey answered. "We used to be able to talk. I don't know what's happened lately. No matter how hard we both try these days, we don't seem to be able to connect."

Brandelynn took a sip of her drink.

"Look, Rokey," she told him, "I don't know how much Flaskamper has told you about me, so let me just say up front – if you're looking for advice, I'll be happy to give it to you. You seem like a nice enough fellow, based on what little I know about you. I'm not so sure you'll be happy to get it though. I'm not the kind of person that dances around unpleasant truths, so before you ask for my opinion, ask yourself first whether you're really ready to hear it."

"I appreciate that," said Rokey, "and I *have* asked myself that question. The answer boils down to the fact that I want my husband to be happy, and he's not. If you can help me change that, then I want to hear what you have to say, however disagreeable it might be for me."

"You have to promise me you won't tell Flaskamper you talked to me," she said. "Nothing will cost someone a good friend faster than interfering in his relationship."

"I promise," said Rokey.

"Alright then," said Brandelynn. "Let me ask you a question right up front. What if making Flaskamper happy meant letting him go?"

Rokey felt suddenly sick to his stomach. He hadn't really considered separation as a serious option.

"You really think –" his voice faltered, "– you think things are that bad?"

"Oh, honey, things have been *that bad* for a while now," the elf replied.

Rokey grabbed his ale and took a long drink.

"I guess I should have known," he said. "I just haven't wanted to face it. To answer your question – I don't *want* to lose Flash, but if he'd really be happier without me..."

"It's not exactly that he'd be happier without *you*," Brandelynn explained. "Look, it's obvious what happened. The two of you came here half dead and madly in love with one another. Then, as soon as you were well, you got married, without giving any real thought to what direction you were each going to go in. Now, two years later, *you* seem to have found *your* direction, but Flaskamper hasn't. Flaskamper is now doing precisely what he always swore he'd never wind up doing: living in the palace, working in the Elf Guard. Is it any wonder he's miserable, trapped in the exact life he tried so hard to get away from?"

"But Flash seemed so eager to join the guard when we got back," Rokey argued. "We could barely make him wait until he recovered his health."

“That’s because Flash has a strong sense of duty,” Brandelynn replied. “From what I’ve heard, those nasty creatures were stalking the forest, giving everyone the horrors. His family needed him. But then, after the threat was gone, it didn’t take him very long to realize what he had gotten himself into. Of course, he did his best to adapt. He saw how happy you were and since he loves you so much, he didn’t want to throw a wet blanket on things. But a person like Flash can only pretend for so long before it starts to eat away at him, and that’s what’s happening now.”

“Well, if that’s what’s making him so unhappy,” said Rokey, “we’ll just leave. We can go wherever he wants.”

“Oh?” said the elf. “What about *your* sense of duty? Flaskamper says that what you’re doing right now is very important. Despite his own discontent, he’s actually very proud of you. Could you really abandon it all? And if so, how long do you think it would be before you found yourself in the exact same situation that your husband is in now?”

Rokey had no good answer for her. He downed the last of his ale, and resisted the temptation to order another. His head was already spinning. The last thing he needed was more alcohol.

“So what do I do now?” he asked despondently.

“This is where the real test of love comes in,” she told him. “Flaskamper will never leave you. He loves you far too much to hurt you, even if it means remaining miserable himself. If you really want to help him, you have to be the one to end your relationship.”

“Me? Leave Flash? But – but that’s crazy!” cried Rokey. “I adore him. Why would I ever want to leave him?”

“Well, that brings us back to my original question,” said Brandelynn. “What if making Flaskamper happy meant letting him go?”

Suddenly Rokey very much needed that second ale after all. The barkeeper brought it and the two of them sat drinking quietly for a few minmarks. Every argument Rokey tried to think of to counter what she had said came up short. She was basically right about his leaving his studies. He would almost certainly regret it, not only because he loved what he was doing, but because so many were counting on him. He had only her word that Flaskamper would rather stay in misery than hurt him, but it sounded like something Flash would say. His selflessness was, in fact, one of the things Rokey loved most about him. So where did that leave the two of them?

“You’re right,” he said quietly. “I can either continue to allow the person I love most in the world to sacrifice his dreams, or I can help him by hurting him. Gods, how did my options become so bleak?”

“You’ll probably think this sounds silly,” said Brandelynn, “but I agree with those around here who think destiny has a role for you to play, Rokey...an important one. You simply aren’t meant to settle

down and lead a quiet existence, at least, not at this point in your life. If you were, you wouldn't be so sorely tested."

"How am I going to face him," Rokey asked her, "and tell him that I want to separate?" He swallowed hard – the emotion of the idea nearly overwhelming him. "No matter how much better off he may be in the long run, it's still going to hurt him."

"Not as much as it will hurt you," Brandelynn answered, "and yet you know that what you're doing is best. It's not much to hold onto now, I know, but you may find it more comforting during the tough times ahead."

Rokey finished his drink and stood. Suddenly he had to get out of there. He desperately needed a long walk. Ellispon would be coming to meet him in the workroom soon, but he would understand, once Rokey explained it to him.

"I'll tell him tonight," he said hoarsely. "No point in dragging it out. Thank you, Brandelynn, for being so honest."

"Be strong, Rokey," she said, "for both of you."

Rokey headed through the door and down the steep staircase. On his way, he glanced back through the window at Brandelynn, who waved him good-bye. What he missed was the fact that, as soon as he had vanished from sight, her sympathetic frown also disappeared, transforming into a smile of pure satisfaction.

Chapter 8

Pain and Parting

As Flaskamper prepared to leave headquarters for the day, he received word that his brother, Captain Alrontin, wanted to see him at once.

Well, here it comes, he thought, as he headed out to the captain's Command Room. Flaskamper hated being in the position of having his older brother angry with him. He knew that he should have cleared his absences with him first. Still, part of him felt defiant. This was exactly the reason why he had sworn *never* to be in the military. He detested living this sort of regimented lifestyle. Plus, despite the fact that he loved his brother dearly, being under his command served as a daily reminder that Flaskamper was forever one step behind him. Nevertheless, he *was* in the military now. He had no right to make Alrontin and others suffer for his mistakes.

Flaskamper knocked on his brother's door.

"Come in," the captain called.

He entered to find his brother pacing around by the window. Flaskamper knew that Alrontin hated spending time in this room. He had yet to come in here and find him actually seated at his desk.

"Commander Flaskamper reporting as ordered, sir," he said.

"Close the door, Commander," said Captain Alrontin. Flaskamper did as he was told, and then Alrontin came around and sat on the front of his desk.

"All right, Flash," he said gently. "Tell me what's wrong."

Alrontin's tone surprised Flaskamper, as did his break with formality. The two brothers always maintained a strictly professional attitude while at work in order to make it clear to the other guards that there was no special treatment being given. When Flaskamper hesitated, Alrontin continued.

"Flash, father and I are worried about you," he said frankly. "It's not like you to be irresponsible about your duties. I was going to give you a good going over today, but he and I compared notes yesterday, and I realized that something obviously has you in a lot of pain. Why don't you talk to me about it, little brother? Maybe there's some way I can help."

This soft approach took Flaskamper completely off guard, and it was all he could do not to start blubbering right there in his brother's office. Alrontin apparently spotted this, for he quickly went and got the chair from across the room and sat his brother down. Then he fetched his own chair from behind his desk and brought it around.

"Alright, Skamper," he said, using his brother's childhood nickname, "now come on...spill. We've always been able to talk to each other in the past. To tell you the truth, it hurts me a little that you didn't feel like you could do that this time. Why is that?"

"I don't know, Ronti," said Flaskamper, using his brother's nickname as well. "I guess I just didn't want to worry you. You've got so much on your mind these days already, I just... all right, I'm sorry. I'm an idiot."

"Agreed," said Alrontin, smiling. "Now that we've established that, tell me what's happening."

Flaskamper filled his brother in on his recent problems with Rokey, and his own feelings of being trapped. He minimized his feelings of discontent about his job in the Elf Guard. The captain was very personally attached to his Elf Guard, and Flaskamper didn't want to hurt his feelings. Alrontin listened carefully, occasionally breaking in with a question. When Flaskamper finished, his brother sat back in his chair and pondered what he had heard.

"Well," he said after a short while, "I can certainly understand why you're so upset. But look, things don't sound to me as hopeless as you think they are. I mean, it looks like the two of you still love each other."

"I know that *I* love *him*," said Flaskamper. "As to how he feels about me... I just don't know anymore."

"Aw... I doubt Rokey has stopped loving you," Alrontin reassured him. "He's just wrapped up in his work right now. I can understand that. When I have troubles at home I tend to throw myself into work as well."

"You have problems at home?" Flaskamper asked.

"All married couples have problems, Flash," his brother replied. "Only couples in ballads live happy ever after. The rest of us have to

work at it. Mellynda and I have been married nearly fifty years now, and there have been plenty of rough spots along the way. I expect there will be more in the future. One of the things that always helps us most is...”

Alrontin paused, chewing his bottom lip in thought.

“Is *what?*” prompted Flaskamper.

“Flash,” Alrontin asked, “Have you and Rokey ever discussed having a child?”

“A child?” Flaskamper repeated, a bit taken aback. “Well, we talked about it before we were married. Rokey had no idea that such a thing was possible, and when I explained to him that some couples in Elfwood often choose to have children using surrogates, he seemed quite excited at the prospect. But then after we were married he started his training and...well, we just never discussed it again.”

“Look Flash,” said Alrontin, “I’m not one of those people who thinks that children are the solution to a bad marriage, but I don’t think you *have* a bad marriage. I think the two of you just need to reevaluate things a bit, and there’s nothing better to teach you how to reevaluate things than a child. You’d be amazed at how unimportant some things can suddenly become when you have a little person staring up at you, depending on you for everything. As I started to say, one of the things that helps Mellynda and I keep things in perspective is the fact that we have children together. I know it’s not for everyone, but for me, something really magical happened when Liesyll and Jontrin came along. My relationship with Mellynda... well... it evolved, to a much deeper level than I had ever thought was possible.”

“I’d like to have a child,” said Flaskamper. “I think probably Rokey would too, except he’s so insanely busy these days. I’m not sure it would be fair to have a child under those circumstances.”

“Busy people have children all the time, Flash,” said Alrontin. “You find yourself making time that you never thought you had before. Besides, lots of couples use a nanny to help out. We did before Mellynda decided to resign her commission.”

“A child is the last thing in the world I would have considered,” Flaskamper admitted, “but the more I think about it, the better the idea sounds. It couldn’t hurt to talk with Rokey about it. Maybe having something like this to talk about would help us to talk about other things as well. At the very least it would give me a way to force the issue of how he feels about me.”

“And at *most,*” said his brother, “it would bring the two of you closer together for a common purpose...raising a child. It’s a wonderful thing being a father, Skamper. Maybe even wonderful enough to chase that pesky wanderlust out of your system for good.”

Flaskamper smiled. Maybe it would at that. He stood up and embraced his brother.

"Thanks, Ronti," he said warmly. "I'll talk to Rokey about it tonight."

"Good," said Alrontin, "and I'll expect you to keep me abreast of things from now on."

"I will," Flaskamper replied.

"And the next time Brandelynn tempts you to skip out on your duties, Commander Flaskamper..."

"I'll resist, Captain. I promise."

"Damned right you will," said Alrontin. "Alright, dismissed. Go fortify yourself with an ale and then talk to your husband."

Flaskamper headed for home. Rokey wouldn't arrive for some time yet. That left him time to go over how he was going to approach the topic of a child. He knew that Rokey would have doubts, as did he, but the longer he pondered the idea of fatherhood, the more convinced he became that it was going to provide them with the opportunity they had been looking for to fix things.

Tonight, he thought happily, things are finally going to change.

* * *

Rokey's stomach was still churning. His walk had done little to help that, or to clear his head. He had been trying for the last mark or more to talk himself out of taking Brandelynn's advice and breaking things off with Flash. But every other alternative he had come up with had seemed selfish to him. If Flaskamper was that miserable, and Rokey could see that he was, then the best thing that he could do for him was to free him to go and lead the kind of life that would make him happy.

But how? How am I ever going to be able to look into those sweet, beautiful eyes and tell him I don't want to be with him anymore?

He was going to have to do it quickly and coldly. If he hesitated at all, he was sure to lose his nerve. He'd never been a very good liar, and this was by far the biggest lie he had ever been called upon to tell. This was different though. It wasn't a self-serving kind of lie. It was entirely for Flash's benefit, even if it did hurt him in the short run.

Rokey had not been all that late for his afternoon session with Ellispon, but little was accomplished anyway. He simply couldn't concentrate on his work. His tutor finally gave up and asked Rokey what was bothering him. Rokey gave him a somewhat expurgated version of what was about to occur, and asked him if he knew of someplace else he could stay until he and Flaskamper could work out the living arrangements.

"Of course," said Ellispon sympathetically. "The Mage Guild has quarters where we house students when they come to study with us. I'm certain that Laomiel would be glad to make one of the vacant ones

available to you. Come and find me when... when it becomes necessary, and we'll make arrangements."

"Thank you, master," said Rokey. "That will make things a little bit easier."

"I'm sorry that things are going so badly for you," said Ellispon, "but you mustn't blame yourself... or your husband. It is awfully difficult for a sorcerer to maintain a stable home life. I know of very few who have ever managed it. We are a breed apart, son, and loneliness is almost always a part of our lives, part of the dark underside of our vocation, if you will."

That night when Rokey walked into their home, the smell of venison and spices assailed his nostrils. Normally the smell would be wonderful, but today he could give no thought to food. Besides, if the smell was this powerful, it could only mean –

Flaskamper came in from the kitchen at that moment, an apron around his waist and a spoon in his hand. He smiled and Rokey's heart sank even further. Flash had cooked dinner for them again. Oh gods, why tonight of all nights?

"Welcome home, *chatka*," said the elf. "Dinner's almost ready. Why don't you go and change and I'll pour you some wine."

Chatka, Rokey thought miserably. *No one will call you chatka... ever again.*

Rokey went to the bedroom without a word and closed the door. He was sweating now, and had begun to tremble all over.

You have to do this, Rokey, the small part of his brain that could still think told him.

But he made me dinner! the nearly hysterical part responded fiercely. *How can I end our relationship on a night when he's made me dinner?*

It's only his way of trying to cope with things, the rational brain explained, *to make the best of an unhappy situation. Now get in there and get it over with before you lose what little nerve you've got.*

For the next few minmarks, it was as though Rokey had stepped outside of himself. He followed along silently as his other self walked calmly out of the bedroom, across the great room and into the kitchen, where Flaskamper was just putting some tubers on the stove to boil. The elf looked over at Rokey, and his smile immediately faltered.

"*Chatka, what's wrong?*" he asked in a worried tone of voice. "You look terrible. Are you sick?"

"Flash, there's something I need to tell you."

Somehow, Flaskamper immediately knew what it was he was about to be told. The serene thoughts of a family and children that had cheered him earlier abruptly vanished. He listened in a kind of daze as Rokey spelled out all the things he had suspected for some

time now – that Rokey's feelings for him had changed, that they had grown apart and that it was time for their relationship to come to an end. From somewhere far, far away he heard his own matter-of-fact response.

“All right Rokey. If that's the way you want it. I understand.”

When Rokey turned to leave, though, it took every ounce of inner fortitude the elf could muster not to throw himself at Rokey's feet and beg him to give things another go. He even took several steps in that direction. In the end, however, he stayed where he was and said no more. He heard the front door open and close. Then he was all alone. The pain came almost immediately afterwards – as though some large-hoofed animal had kicked him squarely in the guts – and along with that – the deep, dark feeling of utter emptiness. The agony of it all was nearly overwhelming. He sank down to the kitchen floor and simply sat there, his whole body shaking with silent, tortured sobs. Never before in his life had Flaskamper wanted to die, but at that moment, he truly did. His mind wandered to his dagger, just across in the bedroom, hanging on the chair in its leather sheath. It wouldn't be a difficult thing to do – and then all this horrible, excruciating pain would go away. He stood and staggered toward the bedroom, and had nearly reached it before his conscience managed to get through to him.

Suicide is a coward's death, it told him. The Goddess would not welcome a coward to her fold.

Funny, he'd never before noticed how much the voice of his conscience sounded like his father. That surely meant something very profound, but he was in no condition just now for profundity. He had to get out of this apartment. The walls were closing in on him... suffocating him. Flaskamper quickly grabbed his coat and made for the door. He would go and see Brandelynn. She would understand, and comfort him. Brandelynn had even predicted this was going to happen. Thank Secta she had come home to visit when she did. At the moment, he felt as though she was the only friend he had in the world.

* * *

Flaskamper did not return to his home until the next morning. He hadn't slept a wink and was hung-over and miserable. The apartment was full of stale odors from the previous night's ruined dinner, but the elf paid it little heed. He washed quickly, and then went directly to his father's chambers. The previous night, with the help of his oldest friend, he had worked out exactly what he intended to do, at least in the short run.

King Angorath was surprised to see his son so early, and in such a state of disarray.

“Flaskamper, what in the world happened to you?” the king asked. “You look like you spent the night in a ditch.”

“I apologize for my appearance, father,” said Flaskamper. “I did not sleep well last night. I wanted to see you today, though, as soon as possible.”

“Well then,” his father said, “sit down and tell me what it is that’s so urgent.”

Flaskamper did not want to sit. Instead he paced the floor like a caged animal.

“Father, I’ve changed my mind about going to Oraque,” he announced.

“Oh?” said Angorath. “What brought this on so suddenly?”

“I’ve decided that it would be good for me to get away for a while,” said Flaskamper, “and the sooner the better. When may I leave?”

The king eyed his son cautiously.

“What is it you’re *not* telling me, Flaskamper?” he asked.

“Nothing, father,” Flaskamper replied. “It’s just that – oh well, it’s not going to stay a secret for long I suppose – Rokey and I are separating.”

“What!” Angorath exclaimed. “Why... you can’t be serious. What ever for?”

Flaskamper tried his best to swallow the lump that had formed in his throat.

“I’d just as soon not get into it right now if you – please, father,” he said haltingly. “I just need to – to get away from here for a while. I’d very much appreciate your permission to leave immediately.”

“Alright, alright,” said the king, holding his hands up. “If you’re sure this is the right thing to do.”

“I’m sure,” Flaskamper answered.

“Very well, I’ll have your supplies assembled and your entourage prepared to leave this afternoon,” said Angorath.

“Entourage?” said Flaskamper. “Really, father, is that necessary?”

“Don’t forget why you’re going on this little excursion,” his father reminded him. “You’re on a diplomatic mission, with a little spying thrown in for good measure. A royal emissary, a crown prince no less, on an extended stay will be expected to have an entourage. Don’t worry; I’ll keep it down to a six member guard escort and two or three personal servants. They’ll all be experienced at this sort of journey, so they won’t be under your feet. You tell them how you want things and, other than that, just leave them to their work.”

“Very well, father,” said Flaskamper, feeling in no shape to argue. “With your permission, I’ll go now and get myself ready.”

“Yes, of course, go ahead.”

Flaskamper bowed his head and then turned to leave.

“Flaskamper,” the king said, stopping him.

“Yes, father?”

"I'm sorry, son," he said gently. "I'm... very sorry."

For a moment, Flaskamper's careful composure nearly cracked, but he took a deep breath and just managed to hold his emotions in check.

"I'm sorry too, father," he said shakily. "But things – things just are... as they are."

Later that afternoon, flanked by his royal entourage, Prince Flaskamper of Elfwood set off north on his mission to the distant kingdom of Oraque. Rokey watched him go from the window of his quarters in the Mage Guild complex. He had been unaware what was happening until a maidservant had filled him in. His husband's quick departure came as a shock, but only served to further convince Rokey that he had done the right thing. Clearly Flash had been dying to get out of Elfwood, probably for some time now. Nevertheless, as he watched the procession disappear into the forest, a steady flow of tears streamed down his pale, sunken cheeks. Rokey had not slept the night before either. Yes, in his head, he felt certain he had made the right decision, but somewhere, deep in his heart, a nagging feeling persisted – the feeling that, somehow, he had just faced a test of the utmost consequence... faced it – and failed.

Chapter 9

Gone In Shadow

“**Z**ee,” Lorq called, “have you had time to think about what we talked about the other night?”

“What thing was that, pumpkin?” Kyzee was still in the lavatory getting ready for bed. She always brushed her long, lustrous black hair at night just before bed, mostly for Lorq’s benefit. He loved playing with her hair, amongst other things.

“You know,” said Lorq, “about writing to Lorinda to ask her to look out for prospective mates for Broq.” Lorq was already in bed, dressed, as always, in his flannel bed shorts.

“Yes, I have thought about it,” she called back. “Initially it sounded rather far-fetched. I mean, you know that my people aren’t very tolerant of dox behavior outside of the accepted Union Festivals. Then the more I thought about it, the more I realized that, given the debt Lorinda owes Stamford, it really isn’t such a bad idea after all. Lorinda is very conscientious about repaying debts of honor, and she’d be especially anxious to clear up a debt to a male. But I think it’s a bit premature to do anything right this moment, don’t you? After all, Broq is only two years old. Lorinda would have no idea who amongst the two-year-old Saebrilites is going to possess dox tendencies. Goodness, I didn’t really know myself until I met you.”

“Oh, I know she wouldn’t just go out and pluck one out of the nursery,” Lorq replied. “I mean we’re not talking about tagging a good pig for our Winterfest ham. I just thought we should give her some

warning, you know, so she'd have it in mind as the girls are growing up”

“That would be fine,” said Kyzee. “But what if Broq turns out to be a samer? We'll have put her to all that trouble for nothing.”

“I hadn't thought of that,” Lorq answered. “I guess it is a little early. Goodness, I hope he doesn't turn out to be same. Where would he ever find a mate then?”

From the bathroom, he heard Kyzee laugh.

“From the way Rochilar talks,” she said, “there are always plenty of samer males in this city for whom Broq's size would be more of an exciting challenge than an obstacle to matrimony.”

Lorq blushed at her comment, and decided to let the subject drop.

“Zee?” he said.

“Still listening, pumpkin,” she answered.

“Do you think we should discourage Fia from staying in Duncileer?” he asked. “I'm worried about her staying on here with things getting so dangerous. What have you heard from the palace these past few days?”

“Nothing that would likely affect Fia,” Kyzee answered, “or anyone else outside of the palace...at least, I think not. *Something* is afoot. I can feel it, but it smacks more of some kind of internal plot. That dead prisoner is still irking me. It doesn't make sense that a man who wants to sell information in the morning decides to kill himself that same afternoon.”

“But what does it mean?” Lorq asked.

“I don't know,” she said. “But tomorrow I'm going to ask someone from the Sorcerers' Guild to go over every inch of that cell. There's nothing suspicious as far as ordinary eyes can see, but there might just be something in the way of residual magic to be found.

Kyzee finished brushing her hair and came into the bedroom.

“As far as the war front goes,” she continued, “I don't think there's anything to worry about just now, and I think Fia is safer within the city than she'd likely be traveling abroad.”

Lorq eyed his wife appreciatively. She was wearing a black silk nightdress, one that flatteringly hugged her curvaceous figure. The hem of the delicate garment fell wickedly high above the knee and was held in place only by shoulder straps that were thin as the strands of a spider's web.

“You're wearing that nightdress I like,” he said, grinning broadly. Desire immediately began to stir in him, and he promptly forgot what they had just been discussing.

“I know,” she said, climbing in next to him, swinging her hair around so that it hit him in the face.

Lorq snapped at it with his teeth and barked, then grabbed Kyzee around the waist and pulled her down onto the bed underneath him. The giant looked down adoringly at his beautiful wife.

“I hope Broq is as lucky as I am,” he said.

“As *both* of us are,” said the Saebrilite. “Now hush...we’ll talk about Broq tomorrow,” Kyzee ran her hands down her husband’s muscular body, and then began to tug at his flannel shorts. “Tonight I have other plans.”

“I always like your plans,” Lorq said, and reached over to turn down the lamp.

* * *

At that same time, just outside King Hobar’s Palace, another pair was carrying out plans of a much more sinister nature. With the help of a clever spell, their black clad bodies melted seamlessly into the shadows cast by a bright, half moon. If anyone *were* able to see them, it would be obvious that they were both male, given the snug fit of their clothing. Beyond that though, one could discern very little, as each of them was thoroughly masked, gloved and hooded. The men came to the castle’s south tower and paused, hugging the wall as closely as possible. One of them leaned close to the other.

“We climb here,” he whispered. The man’s voice was strange, distorted – another feature of the concealment spell protecting them.

The other man nodded. He opened a pouch that hung from the side of his belt and pulled out a handful of something that looked like fine, silver sand. Then he stood back a bit and threw it up at the side of the building. Instead of bouncing off and falling to the ground, the strange substance stuck to the stone wall. The man continued his task, sprinkling each of his feet and hands with some of the sand. He then gave a handful to his companion, who proceeded to sprinkle his own feet and hands. The man with the bag closed it up again and nodded. If anyone had been able to watch them, they would have been truly astonished at what they saw next. The two men, one right behind the other, began to crawl straight up the side of the wall. Just like lizards, they scurried up the smooth stone turret and, after a brief pause, climbed noiselessly into the window at the very top.

Baron, a lieutenant of the Royal Personal Guard, was sitting in front of the fire in Princess Yisa’s sitting room. More accurately, he was napping in front of the fire. He was a light sleeper, however, and the tiniest creak of the window shutter woke him. He peered across the room toward the open window, but saw nothing amiss amongst the shadows there. He glanced at the time candle burning on the mantle. Only two more marks to go before his shift was over.

Thank the good God, Endis, he thought. He hated these long, dull nights on princess duty.

He shifted in his chair and closed his eyes again. A few moments later, something clamped tightly over his nose and mouth. Gasping reflexively, Baron caught a whiff of something strong and sweet. He

tried to struggle, but suddenly had no strength in his arms or legs. Less than a minmark later, he was unconscious. The guards outside in the hall heard nothing.

One of the shadowy figures folded the small cloth he held in his hand and stuck it in his pocket. They would need it again soon, but he didn't want to risk either of them breathing in fumes from it, lest they wind up joining the sleeping guard. Soundlessly, the two of them crept over to the two doors on the far wall. The one on the right led to the hallway, where more guards patrolled. The door they wanted was on the left – the one that led to the little girl's room. It was already ajar. One of the dark pair pushed it open just far enough for them to slip in. Princess Yisa was sound asleep amongst her menagerie of stuffed toys. She never stirred as the man drew the sweet-smelling cloth once again from his pocket and placed it gently over her face.

* * *

Someone was pounding frantically on their front door. Kyzee managed to don her robe and get there first, with Lorq following closely behind. They found Lieutenant Shan on the other side, looking pale and harried in the scant predawn light.

"Shan, what is it?" Kyzee asked. "What's happened?"

"It's the princess, Captain," he said. "She's gone!"

"Gone?" said Kyzee. "How? Who was on duty?"

"Balron was in the sitting room, Captain," Shan replied. "Brace and Kilgar were in the hall outside. Balron says he was put out cold by something – he's not sure what. He's not sure of much at the moment though. We were only just able to wake him."

"Have you woken Commander Rochilar yet?" Kyzee asked.

Shan hesitated.

"We went to his quarters, Captain," he said, "but he wasn't at home."

The Saebrilite shook her head.

"Alright, send someone to find him," she told her Lieutenant. "He's likely somewhere on the palace grounds. Just search the bedrooms of all the young, male servants. He's sure to be in one of them."

Kyzee dressed quickly and headed to the princess's sitting room. Lorq went along too in case he was needed on the search. Shan rejoined them a moment later and informed Kyzee that the search for Rochilar was underway.

The guard, Balron, was still very groggy. Kyzee immediately had someone from the Sorcerers' Guild summoned. It was Markinus, the head of the Guild himself, who showed up.

"Markinus," Kyzee barked, "I need to know what this man was given, and how someone managed to get in here without alerting anyone?"

She then turned back to Shan.

“Where are the king and queen?” she asked.

“In the queen’s bedroom,” Shan replied. “Her Majesty is extremely distraught, and the king is trying to comfort her. There is also a healer in attendance.”

“Good,” she said. “They’re better off there, out of the way until we have something to report. Have the search parties been organized yet?”

“I put together two teams to search the palace and alerted the perimeter patrols and gate guards,” Shan reported, “but I haven’t yet organized the broader search. We came to get you as soon as we suspected abduction.”

“Understood,” said Kyzee, “but we must be quick. They’ll soon have her away and in hiding – whoever *they* are. See to the search parties now. Take my husband and put him in charge of one of them.”

Shan and Lorq hurried off without another word, and Kyzee rejoined the sorcerer standing by the listless guard.

“Well?” she demanded.

“Hort’s Root Tincture I should say,” said Markinus. “Nothing magical about it. Used by healers mostly, but anyone can produce it. When inhaled, it puts one almost instantly into a deep, though temporary sleep. As to the way the abductor, or abductors entered...”

The guild head fished into the pocket of his azure blue robe and pulled out what looked like a large gold medallion with a beautiful clear blue stone set in the center. He held it up toward the window.

“Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “The candles will all go out momentarily.”

Markinus began to murmur something to himself, and abruptly the candles were all extinguished – the fireplace too. The stone in the medallion began to glow and shortly thereafter, a bright beam of blue light began to shine from it. The sorcerer swept it over the room. Kyzee was amazed to see two sets of footprints that lit up the same bright blue whenever the beam passed over them. The footsteps led from the window, to where the guard had sat, then to the princess’s bedroom, and finally back to the window again. Markinus walked over to the window and peered out, still holding the medallion out in front of him.

“Aha!” he exclaimed, and leaned so far over the windowsill that Kyzee feared he would tumble out. After examining something outside very carefully, he stepped back in and lowered the medallion. The blue stone went dark and, a few ticks later, the fire and all the candles abruptly sprang back to life. Except for Kyzee, all the guards in the room started in alarm. Most of them had had little or no experience with magic.

“Alright Markinus,” said Kyzee, “Let’s have it.”

"The kidnappers entered through that window, as you could see," he replied. "They scaled the wall by covering the exterior, and probably their hands and feet as well, with a magic powder called Lizard Foot, which most definitely is *not* easy to produce; nor is it inexpensive, or readily available. Someone with abundant financial means and access to a skilled necromancer is behind this, you mark my words."

"Is there any way of determining which direction they headed in?" Kyzee asked.

"That all depends," said the sorcerer, scratching his short gray beard. "Let us go down to the base of the tower wall outside and take a look."

Outside, at the base of the south tower, Kyzee and Markinus were joined by a bleary-eyed Rochilar.

"Where in blazes have you been?" Kyzee snapped.

"I'm sorry Kyzee," Rochilar grumbled, "but it's not as though I was expecting something to happen tonight."

"I know, Rochilar," she said. "Under the circumstances, though, I'd appreciate it if you'd play at home until we recover the princess."

"Under the circumstances," Rochilar responded, "*playing* will be the last thing on my mind for awhile. What have we learned so far?"

"Hopefully we're about to learn how the kidnappers got onto the palace grounds," Kyzee informed him, "perhaps even which way they've headed."

They watched as Markinus repeated his magic ritual, sweeping the medallion's blue beam over the ground. The footsteps showed up once again, two sets leading away from the tower. The three followed them as they ran back towards the far northwest corner of wall surrounding the palace grounds. The grounds, and therefore the walls, were irregularly shaped, and this particular corner was more heavily shadowed than any other area. The footprints led to the base of the wall at this darkened corner, then stopped, but the medallion was able to pick up the traces of that same magic powder going up the wall. They picked up the trail on the outside, but the footsteps only ran for a few feet before vanishing into the tall grass that grew along the sandy beachhead. There was no way, the sorcerer informed them, to trace their movements beyond that point, at least, no way within his power. Kyzee swore in her own language.

"How is it that the perimeter guards didn't see them climbing the wall?" she demanded.

"I could only guess," said Markinus.

"I'd rather have your guesses than most men's facts," Kyzee informed him. "Out with it."

"There are concealment spells, ones that can enable people to blend into shadow," Markinus told her. "I should imagine that they chose the path that they did because there they would literally

disappear, become invisible in the heavy shadows there. It is only a supposition, but it fits the facts.”

“More magic,” Rochilar muttered.

Kyzee nodded.

“More signs of this powerful necromancer you spoke of,” she said to the sorcerer. “Who could it be Markinus? The Guild must have some notion of who in Duncileer could be capable of this kind of work.”

“I can give you two or three names of practitioners who could manage these sorts of spells,” replied Markinus, “However, we must also consider the possibility of an outsider, especially given the times.”

“Yes,” Kyzee agreed. “It does rather smell of Tanohar treachery. Nevertheless, we’ll question those closer to home first. If they weren’t a party to this, they may have information that could help us. With whom do we begin?”

“That’s easy,” said the guild leader. “The most powerful necromancer in the kingdom lives in the Underside. His name is Jamba.”

* * *

Jamba’s great room was more palatial than the palace itself. Had Kyzee not been forewarned, these opulently appointed rooms in the middle of the squalid Underside would have shocked her. But Lorq had already told her some of the details of Rokey and Flaskamper’s visit to see the powerful necromancer back before she had met any of them. Still, she wasn’t entirely sure how to play the fellow. His dark, narrow eyes gave away little, his smile... even less. After taking in the surroundings for a few moments, Kyzee decided that it couldn’t hurt to mention their common acquaintance, nor could it hurt to stroke the man’s ego a bit.

“Very nice,” she said simply, sitting down in the extra-large sized chair by the fire. It was unusual for there to be a proper chair big enough for her when she went somewhere unannounced. The fact that he had not even had to have it brought in made her feel just slightly ill-at-ease, as though he’d been expecting her. Lieutenant Shan remained standing at the doorway, ever alert.

Jamba smiled and seated himself in the chair next to hers.

“I do what I can, considering,” he replied. Though Kyzee was at least two heads taller than the sorcerer, somehow he managed to look her straight in the eye as they sat. She wondered what sort of spell made that possible.

“I believe you are acquainted with two friends of mine,” Kyzee said, “a young man and an elf. They consulted you a few years ago seeking information about the boy’s past. Their names are –”

"Rokey," Jamba said. "The boy was named Rokey. His friend's name escapes me at the moment."

"Flaskamper," Kyzee reminded him.

"Yes," Jamba went on, a bit distantly. "An adorable pair. Reluctantly in love at that time I recall. Tell me, did they ever get around to bedding one another?"

"They are married now," Kyzee informed him, "living in Elfwood."

"Good for them!" the sorcerer exclaimed. "It's nice that things like that still happen now and again isn't it? The world can be such a dire place these days. So tell me, Captain, has your visit tonight got something to do with my two young friends?"

"Not that I'm aware of," the Saebrilite said with a shake of her head. "I merely mentioned them to break the ice. My purpose in visiting you involves an urgent matter much closer to home."

"Well, as you are Commander of the Royal Personal Guard," Jamba surmised, "I would assume that this matter involves the person of the king, or some member of his immediate family?"

Kyzee studied him for a long moment, trying to assess whether the man already knew what she was about to tell him. His face, however, was still inscrutable. Slowly, she filled him in on the events of earlier that night, watching his face carefully. He didn't seem particularly surprised by the news of the princess's abduction, but Kyzee very much doubted that he ever allowed his face to show when he had been caught off guard. When she had given him all the information she had planned to, he sat back in his chair and began to stroke his cleanly shaven chin.

"Well, well," he said at last, "I suppose it is natural for you to wonder, given my somewhat... *unsavory* reputation, whether I had something to do with it all. I assure you that I did not, though I can offer no particular reason why you should believe me."

"Do you consider yourself a loyal subject of the crown, Jamba? Kyzee asked.

For some reason, the question seemed to startle him. Then he let out a short laugh.

"You know, Captain," he said, "I actually do, come to think about it."

Kyzee leaned closer and met Jamba's dark eyes with her own.

"My instincts are telling me that you are not a part of this," she told him. "And as to your reputation, unsavory as it may be, it seems unblemished as far as matters of state are concerned. Whatever dark trade you ply here, it has not, as far as we know, ever interfered with the governance of the kingdom. Therefore, those details do not concern me. What does concern me, Jamba, is the princess. The head of the Sorcerers' Guild assures me that she was taken with the aide of a powerful necromancer –"

“Ah yes,” Jamba broke in. “How is my dear friend Markinus these days? I notice he did not accompany you here tonight.”

“Markinus had – other duties to attend to,” Kyzee told him.

“Markinus would not sully his pristine azure robes by stepping across my threshold,” Jamba stated, not without some bitterness.

“Your issues with the Guild do not interest me either,” Kyzee snapped. “My sole interest at this moment is the welfare of Princess Yisa. Now, it occurs to me that the best way to track down one powerful necromancer would be to enlist the help of another. I’m told that you are the best there is in this part of Firma.”

“The best by far,” Jamba immodestly asserted.

“All right, then,” said Kyzee, “what will it take for you to help me? Can I appeal to your patriotism, your sense of honor... your vanity?”

“You could try all of those,” said the wizard, “but if I were you I’d skip them and appeal directly to my purse. I assume that a handsome reward will be forthcoming upon the safe return of Her Royal Highness?”

“It has not yet been discussed, but it is a safe assumption,” Kyzee replied.

“In that case,” said Jamba, “I shall do what I can to assist you. You see, Captain, money is not the *only* way to motivate me...but it is, by far, the quickest way.”

“Very well then,” Kyzee said. “What do you need?”

“First I’ll consult a few of my associates,” he answered, “just to get the word out. After that, I’ll need to see the area from which she was taken. I’m sure that the good Markinus did the best that he could, but there are certain avenues open to a necromancer that – well, let us just say those of his order would sooner not tread.”

Kyzee stood.

I shall leave you to your work then,” she said. “When you are ready to view the scene of the kidnapping, you have only to ask for me at the palace gate.”

“In general, I am not out and about during the daylight marks,” said Jamba. “However, as time is precious, I shall endeavor to be there by midday.”

“You have my gratitude, sir,” Kyzee told him, “as well as that of the king and queen.”

Jamba’s cadaverous manservant, Marrow, reappeared to show her and Lieutenant Shan out.

“You have only to remind His Majesty, Captain,” Jamba told her, “to keep in mind the old saying, *the best expression of gratitude is gold.*”

The first light of dawn was just beginning to spread through the streets of the Underside as Kyzee and Lieutenant Shan departed Jamba's home. Shan shook his head.

"This place looks even more squalid in the daylight," he remarked. "Why doesn't King Hobar flatten this cesspool and start all over again?"

"I'm not entirely certain," Kyzee answered, "But I believe there are politics involved. I haven't been here all that long, but from what I hear, any time a measure is introduced in the King's Council to try and clean up this place, something happens to ensure its defeat."

"But surely the king himself could order it done," Shan protested.

"Yes, it does *seem* simple and straightforward," Kyzee agreed, "but I've heard enough of the goings on in the chambers and halls of the Royal Court to realize that nothing in politics is either simple or straightforward."

"Captain Kyzee," Shan said, "are you really going to trust this Jamba character to help us find Princess Yisa? I mean, what makes you so certain he's not the one behind it all?"

"I'm not the least bit certain, Lieutenant," Kyzee responded, "nor do I trust him. I don't trust anyone who meddles in the Dark Arts. However, it is clear that a necromancer is at the bottom of this, which means that we'll need the help of another one to catch him – or her. This man Jamba is the best, and my first instincts tell me he's not involved. I'm not infallible though, so you can rest assured I'll be keeping my eye on him. And if it turns out that he is guilty, well, I'd much rather have him close by when he ultimately tips his hand."

Shan grinned at Kyzee.

"My apologies, Captain," he said, "for underestimating you."

"Don't worry about it, Lieutenant," she told him with a wry smile. "It happens all the time."

Chapter 10

Difficult Days

Rokey thought he was doing just fine those next few days. He had slept well through the nights alone, because all through the afternoons he had worked hard on convincing himself that he had done a wise and noble thing for someone that he cared for deeply. When you loved someone, *their* happiness was the important thing, and if you had to sacrifice to bring that happiness about, well, it made things easier... not *easy*, but easier. After all, there was important work to be done here – vital work that would require every bit of his time and energy. There was no place in a sorcerer’s life for a husband. Yes, he told himself, having done the right thing, he was going to manage just fine here on his own.

Then, four days after Flaskamper’s departure... he found the tunic. Rokey had gone back to their old rooms to pick up some clothes to bring over to his new quarters in the Mage Hall, and he saw it there – one of Flaskamper’s tunics, peeking out from under their – that is, what used to be – their bed. Flaskamper was notorious for always dropping his clothes wherever he happened to take them off. It was one of those things that had always galled Rokey who, having grown up in a monastery, had always been taught to be very neat, even to the point of fastidiousness. Shaking his head, he bent down to pick up the tunic and, for some reason, held it up to his face and smelled it. His husband’s familiar, earthy smell filled his nostrils, along with the faintest hint of evergreen. No matter where Flaskamper traveled,

he always smelled of the Elfwood forest. It was one of those little things... one of those...

It was at that moment that the dam broke inside Rokey, and he collapsed to the floor, sobbing inconsolably. He had never before felt such pain; such utter, all-consuming agony. When he had been banished from the Noble Contemplative, he had managed to cope by looking at his exile as a kind of grand adventure – a new, fresh start on life. He felt nothing grand or fresh now, though. He felt nothing but deep, penetrating grief. Curled up like a baby, he wailed into Flaskamper's soiled tunic – soaking it with all his misery and guilt and despair. Marks passed, and the sky grew dark as evening settled onto the forest. No one came to check on him. There *was* no one. His only true friends were far, far away... as was Flash.

A fresh wave overcame Rokey. A part of him wanted to run up to the King's Tower and fling himself off – anything to put an end to the excruciating pain. But Rokey was not one to entertain such thoughts for long. Besides, another part of him thought that it was only justice that he should suffer this way. It was *his* fault, after all, that this had happened. All this time he had thought only of himself, hiding his selfishness behind the nobility of his "*Great Cause*". Flash had tried to tell him. He now could think of a dozen times that the elf had tried to let Rokey know how unhappy he was. Sometimes it was with anger, but more often, Flash had taken repeated dismissals and slights with a kind of quiet, tender melancholy that Rokey could see so plainly now, in retrospect.

Why in blazes couldn't I see it then? he asked himself, self-directed fury momentarily replacing the gut-wrenching sorrow. *How could I have allowed him to suffer that way for so long?*

Yes, Rokey deserved to suffer in turn for what he had done to the one he had claimed to love so much. There would be no quick reprieve for him. No dash into merciful oblivion. Flaskamper *was* better off without him, but Rokey was not better off. Gods, no. He had been given everything, and had stupidly – ignorantly let it slip away, like desert sand between his unfeeling fingers.

Finally, when Rokey was able to stand again, he walked to the window and looked out onto the darkening woods.

"Someday I'm going to make it up to you, *chatka*," he whispered shakily to his absent spouse. "If it takes me the rest of my life, I'm going to make amends for what I've done to you."

He left their home then, leaving everything else behind, but still clutching the tunic. Right now, for Rokey, this was the only item in the world that held any value at all.

The days that followed brought Rokey little relief. Though he tried to push ahead with his work, the critically important Doorway Project, he made little headway. Though his teacher was well aware of the reason for his pupil's distraction, it vexed him nonetheless.

"Look, my boy," said Ellispon one day, after yet another spell scenario fizzled because of Rokey's lack of focus, "you really must try and pull yourself together."

"I'm trying, master," Rokey replied tonelessly. "I really am trying. I just can't make my magic go where I want it to anymore."

"That's because the magic isn't foremost on your mind," the elf mage remarked. "I know that these are difficult days for you, Rokey. I can't pretend to understand exactly what you're experiencing. I've neither had nor lost a love before."

"Never, master?" Rokey asked.

"Oh there were lovers in the past," Ellispon admitted dismissively, "but nothing so powerful as to drive me to despair when things ended. Magecraft has always been the focus of my life. Ever since I was a lad, that's been my calling, and as I told you before, there is usually room for little else."

"I can see why that is," said Rokey, "and yet, as powerfully as I am driven to become an accomplished mage, if I were given another chance to choose, between my husband and my vocation..."

Rokey's voice trailed off, and he sat quietly, staring ahead at the empty air.

"I have an idea," said Ellispon. "Why don't we put the project aside for awhile?"

"But – the Council..."

"The Council will simply have to wait," said the mage. "It's clear that you are not going to make any further progress until you can get your concentration back. I suggest that we go all the way back to the beginning and do some simple mental calisthenics – you remember the kind I mean..."

For the rest of the day they worked on simple exercises to focus one's attention, the sort of things that Rokey was doing during the very first days of his tutelage. To his surprise, the return to basics actually did help him to regain his concentration. In a few days, they were able to resume working on the Doorway, and Rokey once again began to find solace in his studies. At day's end, however, his mind always returned to Flaskamper. He spent his evenings in his room alone, writing long letters to him, none of which he actually sent, and crying himself to sleep, clutching a pillow covered with the elf's old tunic. These nights were grim for Rokey, each one seeming to last for an eternity. He slept very little, and even when he did drop off, he was plagued by troubling dreams.

Because work was now the only activity in which he found any peace, Rokey began again to put in longer and longer marks in the

workroom. At first, Ellispon thought that this was a good thing, one that would see his apprentice hale and hearty again before long. As the week wore on, though, he became aware that Rokey was neither sleeping nor eating; only working. His handsome face had begun to look pale and drawn, and deep, dark circles had formed beneath his eyes. As progress *was* being made, however, he could not convince Laomiel and the Council that Rokey needed time to rest and recuperate.

“Ellispon, we must continue with this project at all costs,” Laomiel had told him. “The portent watchers are dashing around with their hair all afire, warning us of dire events on the horizon. We must be prepared in all ways possible for the outbreak of war.”

“He won’t do any of us any good dead,” Ellispon protested, “or insane.”

“Ellispon,” the Head Mage said, “despite evidence to the contrary, I am not a heartless fellow. But what would you have me do? Dismiss the boy? Send him home – to what home? You yourself admit that the only time he shows any signs of life is when he’s at work. What would happen if we were to take that from him?”

Ellispon sighed heavily.

“You’re right,” he said, “but so am I. We must find a way to get the boy to eat something... and to sleep. At this moment, he is careening headlong toward a complete breakdown.”

Laomiel scratched his heavy, white beard.

“All right, I see your point,” he said. “I shall speak to Arenthyn about it. As head of the healers’ Guild, this is his purview. Personally, I think what the boy needs is a good friend... possibly a good tumble as well. To whom does one turn for that sort of thing these days, Ellispon? I’m a little out of touch.”

Ellispon colored.

“I’m afraid that I am no better informed than you on such matters, Laomiel,” he said, “nor am I certain that such a course of action would necessarily be advisable. The lad is heartbroken, and he is going to need to be handled delicately for the time being.”

“Very well,” said Laomiel. “I’ll speak to Arenthyn about it tonight. We shall see what remedy he recommends.”

Ellispon came back from his reverie, only to realize that Rokey had asked him a question.

“Forgive me, my boy,” he said. “I’m afraid I was woolgathering.”

“That’s alright,” said Rokey. “I don’t know where I am half the time lately myself.”

Ellispon felt another stab of pity for his young student. He hoped that the Master Healer would have some recommendations that would help him to recover soon.

“What were you saying?” asked the High Mage.

“I was just wondering if we shouldn’t modify the scenario a bit,” Rokey said, “specifically in terms of the application of the power from the articulation.”

“In what way?” Ellispon inquired.

“Well, we’ve been essentially trying to batter the door to No-When open by hurling masses of magical energy at it,” Rokey explained. “So far, that hasn’t worked in any sustainable way, so I was thinking; maybe we should use a different approach.”

“Such as?”

“Such as...a wedge,” Rokey answered. “It occurred to me that if I focus a narrow beam of energy at a small point, I could open a tiny hole to the other world. Then, while holding that hole open, I could insert progressively wider and wider beams, like wedges in a log, to slowly increase the size of the opening until it’s large enough to fit through. The gradual increase would prevent the opening from abruptly collapsing like it has been doing all along.”

“Let me see if I understand you,” said Ellispon, “You’re suggesting using the articulation not just to smash through to No-When, but also to buttress the opening and become part of the structure itself.”

“Exactly!” said Rokey. “Structure – that’s what’s been missing. It’s not enough for me to imagine a structure; I need to actually build one.”

“It’s a fascinating notion,” said Ellispon, warming to the idea. “The question is, will you be able to force the articulation’s energy to bend to your will in that fashion?”

“Only one way to find out,” said Rokey, smiling.

The smile lifted Ellispon’s spirits somewhat, for it was the first he had seen on the young man’s face in several days.

For the remainder of the afternoon, the two worked on developing Rokey’s suggested new spell scenario. As Ellispon had predicted, it was exceedingly difficult to form the magical energy of the articulation into a sustainable form. The old elf had to leap to the rescue on several occasions when stray bolts threatened to blast away parts of the walls or ceiling. In time, though, Rokey’s technique improved, and by the time night had fallen, he had not only managed to punch open a small hole into No-When, but also to construct a stable enough energy field to stretch and hold it open. Now, painstakingly, he began the process of enlarging the opening by adding larger and larger strips of formed magical energy. The room hummed and crackled as Rokey twisted and bent the raw, pulsing beams of borrowed magic with his mind, forcing it to do things that, prior to this night, Ellispon would not have thought *could* be done. Witnessing this incredible display of power and control gave the old elf a shiver of –

Of what? Excitement? Fear? Of what more, he wondered, was this intense, quiet young man capable?

Whatever the answer to that question, there was one thing Ellispon knew for certain: He was supremely relieved that Rokey was on *their* side.

When the opening had reached a size just slightly smaller than a man's head, Ellispon called for the thryzpik, Zhee Saal, to come. This would be the final test of the day's efforts – to see whether they could make physical contact with her through the hole. For Rokey, who was using every ounce of his own magical power to keep the small doorway open, her arrival seemed to take an eternity. Finally, though, he saw her snowy white muzzle poke through the aperture, and reached out to scratch her under the chin. The two of them then heard the rich, melodic trill of her voice that, once again, was magically translated into Common Firmish for them.

"Well done, young one," she told him. *"You are shaping into a fine, powerful sorcerer, just as you promised me you would."*

"Indeed he is!" Ellispon exclaimed. "This will have the council absolutely ecstatic. You should be very proud of yourself, my boy. You've accomplished a truly remarkable feat here this day."

"I appreciate that, master," Rokey said, sweat pouring down his face. "However I must admit that I'm not at all certain how much longer I can continue to hold this open."

"It is best that you not keep the portal open for too long in any case," the thryzpik told them. *"Its signature reverberates quite loudly across No-When, and the fewer here who know of your newfound capabilities, the better it will be for all of us."*

"Of course, of course," said Ellispon. "Many thanks, Zhee Saal."

"I am delighted to help you whenever I am able," she said. *"Hold fast, young one,"* she said gently to Rokey. *"The sun will reach you again in time, but I fear there is more darkness yet to come."*

After that, the thryzpik withdrew her nose from the portal and abruptly vanished. Rokey concentrated and tugged at the structure that held the aperture open. A moment later, it came loose and the doorway winked shut with a hiss, leaving behind only the snarled remains of the hard-wrought framework. Though he had little strength left, Rokey insisted on untangling and powering down the jumbled mess on his own. When it was all done, he collapsed on the ground, soaking wet and panting from exhaustion.

"Master," he gasped, "I – I did it. I... made... a Doorway!"

"You did indeed, my boy," Ellispon replied, his voice filled with something akin to awe. "You did a fine, fine job, and as soon as you're able to drag yourself up from the floor, we're going to go and have a meal and a flagon to celebrate."

Rokey pondered this idea for a moment.

"Yes," he finally agreed. "Yes, I'd like that."

For the first time in a long and miserable week, the thought of food and drink actually held some appeal to Rokey. He had done something to be proud of today, and he felt good about it. He wasn't at all certain what Zhee Saal had meant by her comment about the darkness and the sun, but as he and his mentor departed, he promised himself that, for the time being, he would try and keep his own dark feelings at bay, and bask for as long as he could in the warmth of that day's single, curative ray of sunshine.

Chapter 11

Allies and Adversaries

The Emissary flew in just after moonrise. No one was there to witness as it swooped down through the trees of Elfwood Forest and landed primly on the ledge of the King's Observation Tower. Here it paused, and closed its bright yellow eyes. To the casual observer, it would appear that the strange little creature had gone to sleep – but this was not the case.

Below the tower, in his private study, King Angorath was deeply embroiled in his weekly Allies and Adversaries match. A&A, as it was popularly known, was a complex war game requiring considerable skill and strategy. It had existed in some form in Firma for at least a millennium, and both elves and humans claimed to have invented it. In truth, though, no one knew exactly where the game had originated. Angorath, who had been intently pondering his next move, suddenly looked up from the ornately crafted board. A bemused look came over his face, prompting his opponent, who also happened to be his elder son, to ask whether something was the matter. The king only smiled – a very odd sort of smile.

“Alrontin, we have a visitor,” he said simply, then got up from his seat and made for the door. His son scrambled after him and followed along as the king made directly for his Observation Tower. Alrontin wondered briefly whether his father had gone mad, and what sort of action he ought to take if that should, in fact, prove to be the case. When they reached the top of the tower, however, he was surprised, and more than a little relieved, to observe that they did, indeed, have

a visitor, though it was quite unlike any visitor he had ever seen before. Though the creature had wings, and was approximately the size of a desert vulture, it was clearly not a bird. There was not a feather to be found on it anywhere. In fact, with the exception of a pair of leathery wings, it looked very much like an enormous lizard. Lizards, though, were almost always some shade of green or brown, at least, all the lizards Alrontin had ever encountered. This flying lizard, however, was a deep, dark copper color, with enormous bright yellow eyes that shone in the dark like a cat's.

King Angorath approached the strange creature as though it were an old friend, and bowed respectfully. To his son's amazement, the creature bowed in return. For some minutes, the three of them stood there in silence, Alrontin watching in fascination as the two seemed to fall into some kind of trance. At last, he couldn't stand it anymore.

"Father –" he began, but the king held up his hand for him to be still. A few moments later, he looked up and motioned his son forward.

"Alrontin," said Angorath, "may I present Outflyer Groog. Outflyer Groog, this is my elder son, Prince Alrontin."

To Alrontin's further astonishment, a mature male voice reverberated inside his head.

"I greet you, Son of Great Elf King," it said, in somewhat stilted Firmish.

Alrontin now began to wonder if it was he himself who had gone mad. He looked pleadingly over at his father, who could not help but chuckle at his son's consternation.

Outflyer Groog is an emissary from Hreechkree, son. He is a Bronze Dragon. I should hope that you were taught about them in school."

"Of course," said the prince. "It's just that – well, I feel rather a fool saying this with one of them sitting in front of me, but I had always assumed that the Bronze Dragons were only a myth – a tale for children. And besides, I had always pictured them as rather more – oh, do forgive me. I'm behaving like an idiot."

The dragon gave a knowing nod.

"Yes, the world imagines us to be larger," Groog said, "and more threatening. Roaring and... breathing flame, thus."

Before Alrontin's eyes, the little dragon suddenly transformed, growing many times larger. Its wingspan became enormous, and its neck grew long and thin. Then the creature opened its mouth, and a long stream of bright orange flame shot out. The prince stepped between the dragon and his father, his hand instinctively reaching for his shortsword, but Angorath placed a reassuring hand on his son's shoulder. A few ticks later, Outflyer Groog had returned to his normal size again.

"Fear not," the dragon said. "It is but an illusion. Our defenses are few. One of them is... deception."

"Come, Outflyer Groog," said the king. "Let us see to your comforts. Then we will discuss the urgent matter that has brought you on this long journey from your homeland."

The three of them proceeded back down to the king's study. Angorath rang for his attendant and at the dragon's request, ordered water and some honey-soaked mutton, apparently a dragon favorite. As they waited, Groog came directly to the reason for his visit.

"A terrible thing has happened, Your Majesty," he said. "A few days ago, it was discovered that our most sacred relic, the Ancestor Skull, had been stolen from our most securely guarded vault. We have conducted a thorough investigation and though we have not yet found the skull, we *have* uncovered some disturbing facts. Based on the information we now have, it was the decision of the Supreme Triad that we invoke our treaty of mutual aid, and ask you and your people to assist us."

"We will stand ready to assist our oath-brothers in any way we can, Groog," the king assured him. "Tell us more about what you have discovered, and how we can be of help."

The dragon's food arrived just then, though. Angorath and son left him to dine for a few moments, and Alrontin took the opportunity to query his father.

"What is this treaty he's talking about?" the prince asked.

"Well, it's not really a treaty as you would envision one nowadays," the king replied. "It's more of an ancient blood oath. The Bronze Dragons and the Elves have a bond that goes back many centuries, so far back, in fact, that no one knows the entire story behind it. The legend is that we once banded together to battle a common enemy, and that ever since that time, we have sworn to aid one another in times of great need. I am most eager to hear what facts their investigation into this theft has uncovered, for it is a rare circumstance indeed that brings a Bronze Dragon out of Hreechkree at all, let alone all the way to Elfwood. They are extremely reclusive by nature. This is the first time in my life that I have ever laid eyes on one of their kind, and I am reasonably certain that your grandmother, Queen Henessya, never met one at all during her reign. In fact, I'd be willing to wager that this is Outflyer Groog's first journey outside of his mountaintop home."

When Groog had finished his meal, Angorath and Alrontin rejoined him, seating themselves at the small table.

"I thank you," said Groog. "I did not realize how famished I was. I feel much better now. We dragons are not accustomed to travel. It is most taxing."

"I should imagine so," the king said sympathetically. "I am keen to hear what the leaders of your weyr have discovered. A matter that

would provoke them to send you all this distance to entreat our aid must be very grave indeed.”

“I assure you it is, Your Majesty,” said Groog. “Allow me to begin by telling you what little history I know about the relic that was stolen from us. Though it is called the *Ancestor Skull*, it is *not*, in fact, the skull of a dragon. I have laid eyes on it only once before, but to me, it looked distinctly two-footed in nature – a very large human or elf... or perhaps some form of creature that exists no longer. I cannot be certain, but I *am* certain that it is no direct ancestor of ours. As to how we came by this relic, or where, or when, this has also been lost in the fog of time. However, the story that is still passed from one generation to the next in Hreechkree is that we were entrusted with the skull many centuries back, well before the time of the First Kings. The reasons why have grown muddy, but legend has it that we have guarded the relic for all this time in order to keep it from falling into the hands of a great enemy – one who would somehow use it to wreak great havoc upon all of Firma. I know of no one in our weyr who puts great stock in these ancient tales these days. Nevertheless, we have always continued to watch over the skull, and when we discovered its theft, we began to worry a great deal more about the portions of our history which have been lost to us. Obviously someone went to great pains to get it. The troubling question is – now that they have it, what do they plan on doing with it?”

“Outflyer,” Alrontin asked, “have you developed any theories as to who might be behind the theft?”

The dragon made a noise of obvious discomfort.

“Ah, yes.” He replied. “In that respect, we were both fortunate and very dismayed. You see, the thieves, it was discovered, had assistance from – from one of our own.”

“A dragon betrayed his own kind?” the king exclaimed. “Unbelievable!”

Groog’s eyes suddenly looked very sad.

“Sad indeed,” he agreed. “And, as you say, almost beyond belief. We are much insulated in Hreechkree, nearly impervious to outside influences.”

“Nearly?” said the prince.

“Because our home borders the Northern Expanse, we belong to a coalition which pledges mutual aide in the event that one of the giant tribes should go on the attack. Every so often, representatives of this association meet and conduct business, usually in one of the other settlements. Hreechkree, as you may or may not know, is not particularly well-suited for any two-footed creatures. Thus, on the occasions when the coalition members meet, we send one of our weyr out to represent us. It was during one of these rare outings that the dragon who betrayed us was... recruited. He was a young dragon, too

young to have been sent out among *otherkind*. We realize that now, of course, but it is too late. The damage has been done.”

“So the one who assisted with the theft has talked?” the king asked.

“He has,” said Groog, “though most reluctantly. Such was the deep and insidious nature of his corruption.”

“And whom did he say was behind this theft?” Angorath continued.

“A very powerful group, apparently, yet one about which none of our weyr has any memory or knowledge, which is the principal reason why I was sent to you for help. They call themselves, The Order of the Bone.”

The king and his son both gasped.

“You know of this organization?” the dragon inquired.

“Indeed we do,” the king replied. “My younger son crossed swords with them only a few years back. I’m sorry to say that he is away on a diplomatic mission, but there is another here among us who also tangled with the Order – and defeated them. He should be in his quarters at the Mage Hall by now. Alrontin, please go at once and fetch Rokey.”

* * *

Rokey arrived home slightly tipsy from the flagon of wine he and Ellispon had shared. In truth, Ellispon had sipped from a single cup all evening, while Rokey had downed the rest of the generously sized vessel. Fortunately, he had also eaten – roasted forest hare with potatoes and a rich bread pudding for dessert. Ellispon had taken him to the one tavern in Elfwood, *Paeolaun*. Unlike his last visit there, however, on this occasion he had left in quite good spirits. It had been a long and painful week, and he knew there would be more difficult times to come, but today he had done something of which he could truly be proud, and he was determined to revel in the glory of the accomplishment, at least for a little while longer. He was glad to have been with Ellispon, not only because he enjoyed his mentor’s company, but also because his presence reminded him that he now lived in the Mage Hall. Had he accidentally returned to his old rooms at the palace, it would most certainly have destroyed his good humor.

As it was, the sight of his pillow, still sporting Flaskamper’s tunic, still brought his mood down abruptly, as did the sight of the latest half-finished letter to his estranged husband that sat on the night table. With a sigh, Rokey gathered up the pillow and tunic and brought them to the window, where he held them tightly, eyes closed, pretending for a moment that they were flesh and blood.

“It all feels so hollow,” he told the tunic, “without you to share it with. No matter how great a sorcerer I become, I’ll be so much less without you.”

Rokey felt it then, the severe fatigue caused by the frustrating days and long, sleepless nights he'd been experiencing this past week. The food and wine only intensified his feeling of complete and utter exhaustion. He put the garbed pillow down on the bed and tugged at his own tunic. Tonight, he was going to sleep. The wine would be just enough to do the trick. Thank the gods – he so desperately needed a good night's rest.

As he pulled his tunic over his head, he heard a strange noise – strange, and yet also familiar. It was a crackling sound, very much like the kind his portal to No-When had made earlier in the day. He let his tunic slide to the floor and turned around, only to be faced with an astounding sight. Two men, at least he thought they were men, dressed in black hooded robes stood in his room. Between them was a hole – a hole in mid air! Rokey instantly recognized it as a much more practiced and perfected version of the doorway he had made that afternoon. He was so fascinated by the sight of this that the danger did not immediately register. But as the men began to move rapidly toward him, things immediately became clear again.

Black robes. The Order of the Bone. They've found me again.

As the two fell upon him, his mind raced frantically to think of some type of magic he could use as a defense. He had no chance however. One of the men held up a wand – a simple length of ash with a bright green jewel at the tip. Rokey felt it touch his shoulder, and the next instant his brain exploded in a cacophony of confusion – sounds, smells, colors and tastes all flooded in, overloading his senses. He couldn't call his magic up; he couldn't even think. Hands grabbed hold of him and started dragging him roughly toward the magic doorway.

NO! Can't let them... take me. Can't...

Rokey wrenched himself free of their grasp and stumbled toward the door. The room was spinning. He hit the wall hard, banging his shoulder, but the pain was lost in the confusion of his senses. He felt down the wall, found the handle and pulled open the door. Someone was standing there in the doorway – another hooded figure, but beneath the hood, he was able to make out... a face he recognized.

"Help me," he said, or thought he said. He couldn't even hear the sound of his own voice for all the clamor in his head. If the figure in the doorway heard, it paid no attention, but instead, shoved Rokey back into the arms of his other two pursuers. Now held fast, Rokey watched in despair as the door swung shut again. He struggled fiercely, but he was so physically drained that he had little strength to fight.

"HELP!" he cried out, desperately hoping that someone else in the Mage Hall would hear him. "SOMEBODY...HELP ME!"

Now he was being dragged backwards again – several steps...then there was the sound of rushing air, so loud as to drown out even the

massive din inside his head. He was entering the portal. They were taking him –

Where? Gods, they could be taking me anywhere! No one will know. No one will ever find me.

“FLASH! HELP ME!” he screamed.

Then all sights and sounds ceased, and only blackness remained.

* * *

Alrontin had just stepped into the second-story corridor of the Mage Hall when he heard what he thought was a muffled cry for help. He hurried toward Rokey's room at the end of the hall and paused at the doorway for a moment, listening. From inside the room came three frantic words, loud and clear as day:

“FLASH! HELP ME!”

Certain that his brothersmate must be asleep and having a nightmare, he opened the door. By the light of the time candle on the night table, he was shocked to see the two robed figures clutching Rokey, dragging him into –

Into what? What in the world was that thing?

A few tiks later, the trio had vanished into the darkness. Alrontin had just started after them when a third figure came suddenly at him from behind. The prince reacted instinctively, his Guard training taking over. He raised his arms defensively and felt a blade bite into his arm. Grunting in pain, he reached out and grabbed his assailant's arms. His foe countered, however, by kneeling the elf hard in the groin. Alrontin saw stars for a moment, but bit his lip and bravely soldiered on. The robed figure was strong and agile though, and managed to free the hand holding a long dagger. It came down again, and the prince was barely able to turn aside in time to keep it from catching him squarely in the chest. As it was, the razor-sharp obsidian blade sunk deep into his shoulder. Alrontin's whole body was now on fire. His knees buckled, and he slipped on something wet on the floor.

Blood. Please Goddess, give me strength, he prayed. *Don't let me die here in my own blood.*

Instead of trying to finish off the wounded prince, though, the attacker wrenched free of Alrontin's grip and made for the strange hole still hovering in midair. But it was too late. With a quiet hiss, the opening vanished, leaving only a puff of acrid smoke. The figure stamped a foot in frustration, and then turned to run for the door, but Alrontin was ready now. His shortsword drawn, he now stood between his enemy and the only means of escape.

“If you take one more step,” the elf prince declared, “I swear that I will run you clean through.” His voice shook with pain and anger. “If you think me too weak to do it, go ahead and try me.”

The mysterious attacker hesitated for a moment, then dropped both arms, letting the bloody dagger fall to the floor. Alrontin drew closer, keeping his sword at the ready. With his free hand, he reached out and yanked back the cowl that obscured his opponent's identity. His jaw dropped, for the face that glared back at him with unvarnished hatred was one he knew well.

"Brandelynn," he nearly choked on the name. It *had* to be a trick of some kind. He had known this girl since her birth. She was his brother's oldest and closest friend. But when she spoke, all doubt vanished from his mind.

"You may as well kill me, Alrontin," she said coldly. "You'll learn nothing from me."

Her arrogance infuriated the prince, and it was all he could do to keep from swiping his sword across her haughty, outstretched neck. Instead, he forced himself to think of Rokey. The other two intruders had taken him through that mysterious hole in the air, and Brandelynn was probably the only other person in Elfwood who knew where it led.

"You're very sure of yourself, girl," he said through clenched teeth. "We'll see how defiant you are when my interrogators have finished with you."

Nothing more was said as he led Brandelynn from the Mage Hall and turned her over to three of his Guard subordinates.

"Chain her to the wall in the most uncomfortable cell we have," he commanded, "and don't let her out of your sight."

Two of the guards escorted her off; the third stayed behind to assist their wounded captain. This turned out to be a wise decision, for as soon as the guards and their prisoner disappeared from view, Alrontin collapsed to the ground. The remaining soldier, a sturdy young lieutenant named Serevyll, hoisted him over her shoulder and hurried to convey him to the Master Healer's quarters. Alrontin was still conscious, but hadn't the strength to protest this indignity. He had lost a considerable amount of blood, and knew that he required immediate aid. Still, his mind reeled over what had just happened. Rokey had been kidnapped from right under their noses, just as the Bronze Dragon had arrived with news of the Order of the Bone. It couldn't be coincidence. The two events must be connected somehow.

Father must be told immediately, he thought. If the Order of the Bone could appear and disappear with impunity, others in Elfwood might also be in danger, perhaps even the king himself.

"Serevyll," he groaned. "Serevyll, I must talk to my father."

"First you must see the healer, Captain," she replied, "before you bleed to death."

"It is urgent, Serevyll," Alrontin protested weakly. "I must speak to him at once. There is great danger afoot in Elfwood. He must hear what I have to say."

“Captain, His Majesty will learn nothing from a dead son,” she insisted.

“Lieutenant, don’t force me to give you an order from this position,” Alrontin said. “It would be too embarrassing.”

In the end, they compromised. Serevyll called to another guard, a young Sergeant, to deliver an urgent message to King Angorath.

“Bring a squad with you,” Alrontin instructed. “Their orders are not to let The king out of their sight until further notice. Tell His Majesty that – that his sonsmate, Rokey, has been abducted. Tell him... tell him that they appeared out of – out of nowhere, and that he may be... in grave danger. Also... we’ve captured... a... traitor...”

Alrontin sank back down over his Lieutenant’s shoulder. He was too weak now to talk or argue any more, and he let her continue on to the healer. He knew that his life was in jeopardy, and he was *not* ready to die just yet. Besides having a family who needed him, he had some personal scores to settle – both with the traitor Brandelynn and with his brother’s enemy (now his own): the nefarious Order of the Bone.

“Hang on, Rokey”, he whispered, as oblivion at last stole over him. “We’ll come for you. By the Goddess, I swear...we’ll come for you”.

Chapter 12

Dire Warnings

“**Y**oung man, you don’t understand... I have to speak with Lorq, immediately. It’s very urgent.”
The slender young guard at the palace gate sighed in frustration.

“Look ma’am,” he said, “I don’t know how many other ways I can say this. The palace is locked down. We’re on high alert. Visitors are not allowed unless they’re already expected... and you’re not.”

The woman threw back the hood of her woolen cloak and ran her fingers through her long, gray hair. She looked the young man up and down, then reached into her pocket and drew out a small glass bottle, which she held up to the sun.

“I understand,” she said. “You have your work to do. I would never think of asking you to shirk your duties.”

“I appreciate that ma’am,” the guard said, eyeing the bottle curiously.

“And I wouldn’t dream of trying to bribe you,” she continued, “even to do something as simple as giving my friend a message from me. You certainly don’t look like the type of fellow who would take a bribe.”

“Certainly not,” he answered stiffly, but continued to glance at the bottle she was holding. Finally, his curiosity got the better of him.

“What *is* that?” he asked.

“Oh, you mean this?” She said, indicating the bottle.

“Yes, that,” said the guard. “What is it?”

She smiled and leaned closer to him. Instinctively, the guard leaned in also.

"This is a potion of my own invention," she said in a conspiratorial whisper, "the culmination of years of meticulous study and testing. A delicate blend of rare herbs, steeped and distilled, then enchanted by spirits whose magical proficiencies relate exclusively with pleasures of the flesh. I call it *King Belgar's Sword*."

"Who is King Belgar?" the guard asked, also whispering.

The woman shook her head in disgust.

"What do they teach you in school these days?" she asked. "King Belgar was one of the First Kings of Firma, revered by all as a wise and benevolent monarch. He was also a champion of the battlefield, but more importantly to this story, of the bedroom as well."

The guard colored slightly, but smiled.

"He was, in fact, legendary for his sexual prowess and... stamina," she continued, letting just the right amount of lasciviousness creep into her voice. "After having spent a substantial portion of my life crafting this potion – a formula that not only stirs desire, but also imbues the user with the power to pleasure those he has enthralled for mark upon steamy, passion-filled mark. Well, what else could I possibly do but to name it for the king who's very name still invokes images of wild hot summer nights spent indulging in unbridled carnal pleasures with flocks of young, nubile.... eh... women?"

The young man smiled broadly. She had guessed right.

"I'll tell you what," she told him, holding out the bottle. "The client who commissioned this from me never returned to pick it up. Can't imagine why, but these things happen from time to time in my profession. Why don't you take it?"

"Oh no," the guard said, shaking his head. "I couldn't do that, ma'am." Nevertheless, his eyes never left the little bottle.

"Of course you can," she said. "Just call it a small token of appreciation for all the good work you do. Go ahead, son. Take it. *Indulge* yourself."

The guard took the bottle and examined it closely before tucking it carefully into his pocket.

"Use it wisely," she warned him. "First, a little drop behind the ear will cause your body's chemistry to alter, to exude a subtle aroma that will attract those to whom *you* are attracted. Then, when the time is right, another drop on the tongue will give you the strength and stamina of a bull, as well as a long and full... experience."

The young man licked his lips in anticipation, but then a look of consternation replaced his appreciative smile.

"It doesn't seem right, ma'am" he said, "accepting a gift from a total stranger, especially when I've just told you I can't let you in. I feel a little guilty."

The sorceress appeared to ponder this for a moment.

“Well, I wouldn’t want your enjoyment of this fine potion spoiled with guilt,” she said finally. “I’ll tell you what – if you were to do me... just a small favor, we could call it a trade then, couldn’t we?”

The young man nodded.

“That seems fair,” he said. “What do you want me to do?”

The woman’s thin lips crept up into a self-satisfied smile.

“Go and find the giant, Lorq,” she ordered. “Tell him Battista is here.”

* * *

The necromancer, Jamba, began his search in the princess’s bedroom suite. He gave the sitting room a cursory examination, but found no more than the Head sorcerer, Markinus, had earlier that morning. From there, he moved into Yisa’s bedroom. After looking around and carefully examining the bed, he shook his head and turned to Kyzee, who was hovering nearby.

“Where’s her lavatory?” he asked.

Kyzee pointed to the small door on the far side of the room.

“It’s there,” she replied, “but there’s no evidence that the abductors went in there.”

“Perhaps not,” he said. “But I believe I shall find something of use in there nonetheless.”

He disappeared through the lavatory door, and then reemerged a few tiks later, holding a small object – the princess’s hairbrush.

“What do you plan to do with that?” Kyzee asked.

“If I’m successful,” Jamba replied, “I plan to find our missing princess.”

He led Kyzee back to the sitting room, where he sat down at a small table and set the brush down in front of him.

“This may take some time,” he warned Kyzee. “Normally I do not allow anyone to observe me, but I trust that my trade secrets will be safe with you.”

“You may rest assured,” Kyzee said, smiling. “Even if I *did* have any idea what it is you’re doing, I would most certainly keep it to myself.”

She watched with great interest as Jamba opened the fine leather shoulder bag he carried and removed several items: a small pewter brazier filled with some type of rocks, a ceramic bowl covered with strange writing and two small glass bottles – one containing liquid, the other a dark-colored powder. The necromancer snapped the lid off the brazier and set it down in front of him. He then proceeded to put some of the contents from each bottle along with several hairs from Princess Yisa’s hairbrush into the ceramic bowl. Jamba was about to place the bowl atop the brazier when a thought seemed to strike him. He turned around to Kyzee.

"I do not know how you feel about Dark Magic, Captain," he said, "but it occurs to me that two sets of eyes and ears may be of considerable value here. It is possible for me to include you in this ritual, so that you will be privy to all that I see and hear. It would, however, require a drop of your blood."

Kyzee frowned.

"A drop of blood I can well afford, Jamba," she told him, "so long as that is, in fact, the only requirement. It is my understanding that Dark Magic can often incur *other* costs – ones that are not always immediately apparent."

"You are quite correct," Jamba admitted darkly. "The price of such rituals is very high indeed, but it is I who must bear those burdens. You have my word; you will experience no other repercussions."

Still, the Saebritelite hesitated. She was inclined to believe the charismatic wizard, but was she really ready to trust him with her blood? Finally, it was her loyalty to the king and his missing daughter that won out.

"Very well," she said. "I will participate. But I warn you –"

"I understand, Captain," Jamba said, looking up at the woman towering over him, "and believe me, you are one person I would *not* wish to have as an enemy."

He reached into his bag and removed a tiny obsidian knife. Kyzee held out her hand and allowed the necromancer to make a small cut on her finger. He then held the ceramic bowl out and collected a single drop of her blood.

"Since I am to be a part of this," Kyzee said, "I should like to know exactly what it is you plan on doing."

"To put it simply," Jamba explained, "we are going to attempt to join with Princess Yisa – to see what she is seeing and hear what she is hearing. It will tell us, first and foremost, whether or not she still lives. Furthermore, if we are fortunate, we will be able to garner sufficient information to determine exactly where she is being kept. Now, Captain, are you ready to proceed?"

Kyzee nodded, and Jamba placed the bowl on top of the brazier. Then he closed his eyes and began to concentrate.

"Pyrenikum."

Jamba's word caused the rocks in the brazier to glow bright red, and the contents of the bowl began to smolder. A few moments later, they burst into flame, and the necromancer began chanting under his breath. Kyzee stood by uncomfortably, trying not to choke on the foul-smelling fumes coming from the bowl.

For a while, nothing happened; but then, the room began to go dark, even though it was just past midday. From the silent blackness,

a sound rose up – the sound of a child crying. It tugged at Kyzee’s heart.

“Well, we know that she’s alive,” Jamba said softly.

“What’s happening?” Kyzee asked him. “Why can’t we see anything?”

“Because,” he answered, “she herself cannot see anything. Either she is in complete darkness, or else she has been blindfolded. There is no way of telling which.”

“Is there some way we can communicate,” Kyzee asked, “talk with her? She may be able to tell us something useful.”

“Unfortunately not,” Jamba explained. “To join the mind of another and simply observe is a benign enough action, but interaction entails manipulation, and that is much more dangerous, especially for one as young as the princess. No, I’m afraid that we must content ourselves with observation. Perhaps if we are patient, we may yet glean some clues as to her whereabouts.”

For nearly an entire mark they remained, listening in the blackness. At one point, when the princess had stopped crying for a time, they were able to pick out an unusual noise coming from somewhere nearby – a rhythmic creaking and groaning sound.

“Can you place the sound, Captain?” Jamba asked quietly.

“Nope, it doesn’t sound familiar to me,” Kyzee replied. “I would guess it to be the groaning of some wooden structure. Could she be on a ship?”

“I do not think so,” the wizard replied. “I’ve been on ships before. The sound is different. Of course, I am not an expert, so I would not entirely discount the possibility.”

Another noise came through just then – one that both eavesdroppers could easily identify: the sound of a door opening and closing. The princess was no longer alone.

“I have brought you something to eat, Your Highness.” The voice was strange, as though it had been altered. Kyzee could not even determine if it was a man or a woman.

“What’s going on with the person’s voice?” Kyzee asked.

“The voice has been distorted,” Jamba whispered. “It is a fairly simple spell.”

“I want my papa!” Princess Yisa cried.

“You shall rejoin him soon, little one,” said the voice, “very soon. Now you must eat something, so that you remain strong and healthy. We wouldn’t want your father to get the impression that we’re mistreating you.”

Yisa began to cry, and demanded her father again. Despite continued coaxing, the mysterious voice could not persuade her to eat. Finally he or she gave up and departed. Kyzee and Jamba listened as the door was once again closed and locked. The princess continued

to sob pitifully. In the background, the strange rhythmic noise continued.

"I'm afraid we shall learn no more here, Captain," Jamba said.

"Jamba is there any way to capture that noise," Kyzee asked, "so that others may listen to it?"

"Hmmm," the necromancer pondered the question for a moment. "Of course!" he answered. "There is a spell which I have used to capture conversations. It is quite a handy tool when dealing with scoundrels and thieves, who tend to have very selective memories. I see no reason why it could not be used to capture this particular sound."

Jamba began to mutter a spell. After he had finished, he brought their link with the princess to a close. When the light returned, Jamba held out his hand and showed Kyzee what appeared to be a small green jewel.

"The sound has been captured in this," he told her. "It takes only another small spell to release it. Unfortunately, it will degrade slightly each time it is called forth, so we must make the most of each use."

"We shall gather everyone we can to listen to the sound," said Kyzee. "Before we do that, however, I want you to take a look at the cell I told you about."

Kyzee led Jamba to the dungeons, to the cell of the man named Gimley, who had apparently hanged himself some days before. Jamba tried several reveal spells, but was unable to detect any residual magic.

"Now this does not definitively mean that no magic was used on the man," he told her. "It absolutely means that no magical potion or powder or anything of that nature was used. There are, of course, some spells that leave no residue at all, though they are relatively few. Normally, at the very least, a spell powerful enough to cause a man to take his own life would leave some kind of signature behind that a skilled necromancer could detect. If I had to hazard a conjecture, I should say, with reasonable certainty, that no such spell was used here."

"Damn!"

Kyzee's spirits plunged again. She had hoped that the necromancer would be able to give her something solid to go on with either the suicide or the kidnapping, which she suspected were related.

"I know the man was murdered," she said. "I can feel it in my bones."

"Speaking of bones," said Jamba, "where is the man's body?"

"In the crypt," Kyzee replied. "The ground will be too hard to bury him until spring."

“Well, then,” he said, “depending on how degraded the fellow has become, we may just be able to get a few answers straight from the corpse’s mouth.”

Kyzee stared at him, her eyes wide.

“Jamba, are you mad?” she asked. “Are you truly suggesting that we attempt to raise the dead?”

“No, no, no,” he responded. “I don’t mean to raise him. I only propose to wake him up and ask him a few questions. After that, we’ll put him right back to sleep.”

“You are aware, I presume, that tampering with the dead in any way is a capital crime?” Kyzee reminded him.

“Are you planning to arrest me?” asked Jamba.

“I merely point it out to illustrate the seriousness of the undertaking you propose,” she said.

The necromancer frowned.

“I fear that you have been somewhat misled by my blithe demeanor,” he said. “I remind you, Captain, that it is not ordinary magic I deal in – but necromancy, the very heart of which is powered by demons and the restless dead. It is a dark and solemn vocation, and, unlike sorcerers, every spell *I* cast costs me one more small, but irreplaceable piece of my life’s essence – what clerics would refer to as my immortal soul. Therefore I hope that you will believe me when I assure you that I undertake no endeavor lightly. I am willing to make this attempt in the hopes that we can obtain some further bit of information that will be of use to us, but I can make no guarantees. The choice is yours.”

It took Kyzee some time to reach a decision. The very thought of conversing with the dead repulsed the Saebrilite beyond words. On the other hand, so did the idea that a murderer might be running free amongst them. After weighing the options and implications for several minmarks, she at last heaved a heavy sigh.

“Very well, Jamba,” she said. “The notion is appalling, but I can’t live with the thought that a killer may be loose in the kingdom. Follow me; I’ll take you to him.”

They left the dungeon area and took a long narrow corridor, which led to the opposite side of the palace – to the crypts. The prisoner’s body was in a bare, frigid room in the very back of the crypt area, as far distant from the permanent resting places of the royal family members as was possible. With a word, Jamba lit the three torches on the walls, and then pulled back the sheet to examine the corpse.

“The cold has preserved his body well,” he observed, “which is of some small help, but each day that passes makes it more and more difficult to reassemble the spirit of the deceased into a coherent form. I should warn you, Captain, that any information we obtain may be jumbled and disjointed. It is somewhat akin to interrogating a

madman. One may glean useful details, but often only after sifting through a great deal of incoherent babble. Now, let us proceed.”

The previously unflappable necromancer seemed somewhat nervous, which made Kyzee even more apprehensive about the entire endeavor. She watched uneasily as he dug into his shoulder bag again and pulled out what looked like a long wooden stick with something attached to the end. Upon closer inspection, she determined that it was the skull of some small animal – a rat most likely. With his free hand, Jamba removed another bottle, uncorked it with his teeth and sprinkled the powder inside liberally over Gimley’s body. He then returned the bottle to the bag and began a series of incantations. As the necromancer chanted, he would periodically wave the strange wand back and forth over the corpse.

For a long time, nothing happened, and Kyzee began to wonder, a bit hopefully, if perhaps the man had been dead too long to revive. Soon afterwards, though, the atmosphere began to change. The already wintry room grew even colder, and despite the light cast by the torches, the darkness seemed to loom, closing in around them. To her horror, she then saw a tall, shimmering specter, decidedly human in size and form, appear next to where the body lay. Once the face had sufficiently coalesced, it became clear that this was the ghost of Gimley, though it had no eyes, and its head lolled grotesquely to one side. Kyzee felt her stomach turn over, and she had to turn away to keep from being sick. When the apparition spoke, its voice sounded like a spade scraping over wet gravel.

“Cooooold,” it said. “Why sooo coooold?”

“Because you’re dead, good sir,” Jamba told him. “I have brought you back so that we may learn more about the manner of your death.”

“Can’t... breathe,” said the ghost. “No! Stop! Choking... me.”

“Is someone there with you?” Jamba prompted the specter. “Is someone choking you?”

The ghost began to ramble incoherently, stopping at times to moan or to howl like some suffering animal. It jangled Kyzee’s every nerve, but Jamba patiently continued questioning the spirit, trying to lead it back to the subject of its demise. Finally, it seemed to return to the subject in question, and reached out to try and restrain some unseen hand as it closed around Gimley’s throat.

“Who’s choking you Gimley?” Jamba asked. “Tell us!”

“I told him... a plot was underway,” said the ghost, “... he closed his hands around my throat and squeezed.”

The apparition was beginning to fade, its voice growing fainter and fainter.

“We’re losing him,” Jamba told her.

“Who is it?” Kyzee demanded. “Who, dammit! By the Goddess, Gimley, do the right thing for once in your miserable life and give me a name!”

As Gimley's ghost dissolved into nothingness, it did, finally, give her a name, but it was the last name in all of Firma that she had expected to hear.

* * *

As Jamba and Kyzee emerged from the catacombs, she was surprised to find Lorq waiting for her. Beside him was a gray-haired woman whom she did not know. The look of concern on her husband's face made her momentarily forget the astounding information Gimley's corpse had just given her.

"What is it, Darling?" she asked Lorq.

"Honey, this is Battista," said the giant. "You remember I've told you about her."

Kyzee remembered Lorq telling her that Battista was a sorceress – and a friend of Flaskamper's. It had been she who'd saved the elf's life a few years back when he'd been wounded by a poisoned blade. Later, she had brought Rokey and Flash into the Underside to consult with Jamba. It was a strange coincidence, her turning up now – if it *was* a coincidence.

"Hello Jamba," said Battista. "I'm surprised to see you out and about. I had come to the conclusion that you would explode in a big ball of flame if the sun ever actually touched your skin."

"Ah Battista," Jamba replied, "droll in even the grimmest of circumstances."

"Battista has news about Elfwood," Lorq said. "It's not good."

"What about Elfwood?" Kyzee asked, looking back and forth between them. "Are Rokey and Flash alright?"

"It's like this," said Battista. "Ever since your husband and the rest of the group passed through Duncileer last time, I've been keeping tabs on Rokey and Flaskamper using fortune stones."

"Which are?" the Saebrilite asked impatiently.

"Fortune stones are a way of keeping an eye on someone at a distance," Jamba injected. "They change color depending on how the person in question is faring at any given time."

"All right," Kyzee said. "Go on."

"Both boys' stones have been dark red for some time," Battista continued. "That isn't good, but it isn't life threatening. But then yesterday, Rokey's stone suddenly went black."

"Good Goddess!" Kyzee exclaimed. "You don't mean –"

The sorceress shook her head.

"No," she said. "He's not dead, but he *is* in terrible danger. The kind that might make him dead in relatively short order. What has me confused is that Flaskamper's stone hasn't changed a bit – as though he isn't aware of the danger. Now these stones aren't very precise, but after two score years of studying them, you learn to read into them a

little bit. I think Rokey needs help right away, and even though the stone doesn't say so, I'm pretty certain Flash needs it too. That's why I came after the big boy here." She gestured to Lorq. "I thought he might want to take a little trip east to check on things."

"I'm worried, honey," Lorq told Kyzee," but I'm worried about the princess too. I want to be here in case you need me."

"I know you do, pumpkin," she said, "but we both made an oath to Rokey and Flash that we'd go to them when they needed us. Even if I had not also sworn an oath to King Hobar, I couldn't possibly go and leave Broq."

"Rokey and Flash would understand that," Lorq said. "They'd never ask you to leave our child alone. They wouldn't ask it of me either, but if I don't go, and something happens to them because I wasn't there..."

"There's no easy answer to this," said Kyzee. "The Goddess knows I don't want you riding off into danger either. But can we both abandon our pledges to Rokey and Flash, after all that we went through together?"

Lorq shook his head.

"You have to go, Lorq," Kyzee said, "and when we tell Fia, she'll insist on going too."

"Is Fia here," Battista asked, "in Duncileer?"

"Yes," Kyzee told her, "She arrived for a visit a few days ago."

"But, Kyzee," Lorq protested, "what about things here? What if you should need my help?"

"She'll have all the assistance she needs," Jamba told Lorq. "I promise you that. Peril for Rokey spells peril for all of Firma. My advice, for what it's worth, is for you to ride to his aid as soon as possible."

Lorq frowned, but ceased to protest.

"All right," said Kyzee, "We need to work this out quickly. I have no time to waste and neither do you, Lorq. Let's go home. Jamba, I regret that we'll have to show you both out of the palace grounds. Security is much too tight to leave anyone wandering about unescorted, even you two, and given what I've just heard in the crypt, I don't think I want any other guards in on this just yet."

"I understand," said Jamba. "You can meet me at Hamm's Inn when you're finished. I have some business to conduct there anyway. I shall wait for you"

"Good," Kyzee said. "I know where that is."

Kyzee and Lorq escorted the two magicians to the palace gate, and Kyzee sent a messenger to fetch Fia.

"Tell her there's an emergency," Kyzee told the lad, "and that she should pack a bag for fast travel to Elfwood."

Kyzee instructed the gate guards to be sure and admit Fia to the palace grounds when she arrived, then she and Lorq headed for their home.

“Honey,” Lorq said when they reached their front door, “I still don’t feel right leaving you like this.”

“I know you don’t,” she said, “and I don’t feel right about *not* going. I gave Rokey and Flash *my* word too, don’t forget. Even though I know they would never ask me to leave my son, and even though I have a missing little girl to find, I’m still going to feel badly about staying behind. But at least if you and Fia go, I won’t feel so guilty. Jamba is here, and he’ll help me. I can’t say that I really trust the man, but I’m growing more and more convinced that he isn’t involved in the abduction. In fact, things are beginning to point in another direction entirely... a very disturbing one.

“What do you mean?” Lorq asked.

Kyzee told Lorq about their conversation with Gimley’s ghost. Lorq’s eyes widened.

“Do you think it’s possible?” the giant asked.

“I don’t know,” Kyzee replied. “It’s too early. I need more evidence, one way or the other.”

“Promise me you’ll be careful, Zee,” he said. “If anything happened to you –”

“I’ll be fine,” she assured him. “I’m a Saebrilite warrior, remember?”

“I remember,” said Lorq, “but I also know where all the soft spots are.”

Kyzee smiled and wrapped her arms around her husband’s waist. Lorq engulfed her in his huge arms and held her tightly.

“I love you so much,” he said quietly. “You and Broq – you’re my whole life now. I wish we weren’t living in such a dangerous world. All I want is for us to have a quiet, peaceful life together.”

“We can’t choose the times we live in,” Kyzee replied. “All we can do is try our best to make them better.”

They stood there in the doorway for several minmarks, holding each other quietly. Then Kyzee gently disengaged herself and took Lorq’s hand.

“Come on, pumpkin” she said. “Let’s get your things packed.

Fia arrived a little over two marks later, ready to leave. She looked harried and rushed but, thanks to the magical properties of her pendant, still stunningly beautiful.

“I’m sorry I took so long,” she apologized, “I traded my travel ponies for a fast horse, but then I wondered about you, Lorq. Are there horses here big enough to carry you?”

“Yes, there’s a breed here similar to the Saebrilite horses,” said Lorq, “Kyzee and I each have one.”

"Oh, thank goodness," said Fia. "Now, will the two of you please tell me what in blazes is going on?"

While Kyzee explained what little they knew to Fia, Lorq loaded up his giant mare, Glassen, with all his supplies. In the time they had waited for Fia to arrive, Kyzee had put her cook to work packing adequate food, wine and water for the journey. When the horses were all loaded, Lorq went and said good-bye to their son Broq, then he and Kyzee went off to grab one last moment alone.

"I'll miss you," Lorq said, his large violet eyes moist with emotion.

"Now, stop that," Kyzee said, holding him tightly. "You'll make me cry, and you know I hate that."

"I know," he said. "If you or Broq need me, just send a messenger hawk and I'll come right back."

"Broq and I will be fine," she insisted. "*You* take care of *yourself*, do you hear me? I have no desire to find myself standing over your grave telling our son how brave you were."

"I'll be careful," Lorq promised.

They gave one another one last long, lingering kiss, and then rejoined Fia, who was waiting patiently with the horses. The two friends mounted up and headed off toward the main gate, with Lorq turning to wave every few yards. It wasn't until they had rounded the far corner and disappeared from view that Kyzee broke down and began to cry.

Chapter 13

Ill Winds

Flaskamper awoke with a start just as dawn broke. Hung-over and confused, he looked over to the other side of the bed and saw the familiar sight of long, blue-black hair cascading down onto the pillow. Reassured, he heaved a sigh of relief. He had been having the most terrible dreams of late – dreams of a wretched future. He moved over closer and touched the boy’s smooth shoulder. Still sleeping, the boy rolled over on his back with a contented moan. It was then that reality came rushing back, and Flaskamper came fully, miserably awake. It was not Rokey lying next to him. Now he remembered where he was...and when.

He had arrived in the kingdom of Oraque just over a week ago, servants and honor guard in tow. The entire trip had been a misery, for he had been able to think of nothing except how desperately he missed Rokey. The four days of travel had been spent in sullen silence, and the nights, in emptiness and tears. No one in his entourage had approached him, except to ask him when he wished to stop, what he wished to eat, and other similar questions of no consequence. Though it was perfectly clear that he was suffering, none of them would dare presume to inquire what was wrong, or to offer sympathy. It was one of the many reasons that Flaskamper hated being a prince.

Things improved marginally when they reached Lud’s Hamlet, one of the kingdom’s small outlying settlements only a day’s ride from Oraque Proper, which was the main city. The Settle Inn wasn’t much

to boast about, but at least it had a tavern, with decent Oraquean beer, a hot meal and one other pleasant surprise – a handsome stable keep named Karis. Clearly no one had ever informed this lad of the rules about keeping one's distance from royalty. He took one look at Flaskamper and, road grimy and exhausted though the elf was, Karis apparently decided he liked what he saw. So as he was taking Flaskamper's horse from him he leaned close and whispered to him that he'd be in the stable all night, should His Majesty require him for... *anything*. It wasn't until later, when Flaskamper was halfway through his third or fourth pint of stout, when the lad's emphasis on the word *anything* came rolling back into his mind.

Well, why in blazes not? he thought. You wanted back into your old life, and here you are – drunk and randy in a seedy tavern. Might as well go and make it official.

He made his excuses to the innkeeper, who had been fussing over him all night, and headed toward the stairway, except instead of taking the stairs, he ducked out the back door and made his way around to the stables. Karis was just finishing up his duties for the night and was putting out the lights. Flaskamper came up behind him and slid his arms around his slim waist. Without missing a beat, Karis spun around, grabbed the elf prince around the neck and began to kiss him fervently.

"I'd just about given up on you, Your Majesty," he said between kisses.

"I wasn't sure I needed *anything*," Flaskamper responded breathlessly.

"Well, you sure did look as though you needed somethin' to me," said the lad.

"Well, I guess you were right," said Flaskamper.

"May I offer you a tour of my quarters in the hay loft, Your Majesty?" Karis said wickedly.

"Lead the way," said the elf, "and please...call me Flash."

The next day, Flaskamper felt terrible – not just from the beer; not just from the emptiness that he had always felt after such one-night affairs. On top of all that, he now felt an overwhelming sense of guilt. He knew that that was ridiculous. Rokey had broken off with *him*. He was free to do whatever, or *whomever* he pleased. Still the guilt nagged at him all day, making the emptiness seem even deeper.

He arrived in Oraque Proper the next evening and immediately settled into a predictable, though progressively unhappy regime. He attended meeting after boring meeting by day, where he acted the part of reticent Elf Ambassador. In the evenings, he did his best to be charming at all the equally dull social gatherings, but always left as early as he possibly could in order to hit the same taverns, where there was better ale, livelier music and a much greater chance of

finding someone to share his bed for the night. Then, the next morning, after the usual awkward good-byes, he would curse himself for doing it, while at the same time looking forward to doing it again. It was a routine with which the elf was exceedingly familiar – with one exception. He continued to miss Rokey – miss him dreadfully – not at any particular time, but always – every waking moment, whether he was sitting in a high-level meeting or stripping the uniform off a handsome young army officer. It was a steady, constant ache – a longing that simply refused to go away, however many men he tried to suppress it with.

But then, Flaskamper met Briander.

To anyone who had known Rokey and Flaskamper, the reason for the elf's immediate and intense attraction to the young man would have been obvious. Though Briander was taller and more slender, in many other respects, he was the image of Rokey at age seventeen, most especially the deep brown eyes and long, blue-black hair. Amazingly, Flaskamper didn't consciously make any connection at all. He only knew that, from the moment he laid eyes on the strikingly handsome lad, he wanted to know him – not just to bed him – but to really know him.

Briander was an apprentice bard, still studying under the masters of the Bardic Guild, which was very strong and influential in Oraque. Part of his performance training was to play an early show at the Ruby House, one of the kingdom's finest eating and drinking establishments. His show was, in fact, so early that Flaskamper nearly missed seeing him entirely. However, one of the elf's formal gatherings had to be put off for some reason or other, and so he had found himself with an early evening free. He decided that, for once, he would treat himself like a prince and enjoy a lavish dinner at one of the nicer places.

To keep himself company, he invited the king's elder daughter, Alengra, with whom, it turned out, he had a great deal in common. Not only was the princess a samer, with an utterly irreverent sense of humor, but she also hated being a princess as much as he hated being a prince. She hated being called Your Highness or princess, and shocked everyone by refusing to wear dresses and cropping her dark brown hair very close to her head. Mothers throughout the kingdom, and most particularly in court, threw up their hands in despair when many of their daughters began to copy Alengra's outrageously masculine hairstyle and informal manner of dress. In many ways, she reminded him of Brandelynn. He had invited his best friend to come with him, but she had begged off, saying that she owed it to her parents to remain at home for at least a few more months before heading off again to parts unknown. Flaskamper could certainly understand that. He would have given anything with just a few more

months of time with his own departed mother. Fortunately, having Allengra around made him miss Brandelynn's company just a bit less.

"I'm not making any kind of statement," the princess told Flash as they ate. She also had an appetite that was positively *unladylike*. "I just like to be comfortable, that's all. Have you ever worn a dress? Don't laugh. I know plenty of men that do. Remind me and we'll catch one of the switcher shows at Saidron's Hall. Anyway, if you *had* ever worn one, you'd understand what a nuisance they are, and yet they continue to be a fashion staple year after year. Well I, for one, have had enough of it, and I'm taking some others along with me. Oh dear, I suppose I am making a statement after all, aren't I?"

"I suppose so," said Flaskamper, smiling. "Well, I imagine the Revelationist clerics are tearing their hair out over your behavior."

"They can all boil in oil," said the princess. "It makes me positively furious that father listens to them at all."

"I thought your whole family were Revelationists," Flaskamper said.

"We're *Neo* Revelationists," she explained. "That's why things have gotten so much better here since Grandfather died (may he rot in The Underworld). Once father took the throne, he was able to convert to Neo Revelationism, like mother, and begin striking down these horrible laws against 'deviance' that had been around for centuries. Unfortunately, just because something is no longer against the law doesn't mean that the people are ready to accept it. Old Revelationists are still the majority, so father has to at least listen to them sputter and fume and warn him that our mighty and glorious Kingdom is sliding headlong into depths of depravity – all because his daughter won't wear a dress and his Master at Arms likes to bugger the stable keeps."

Flaskamper blushed, remembering his own recent experience with a stable keep.

"What galls me," Alengra went on, "is that sometimes father actually makes concessions to the silly old fools. '*Diplomacy darling*', he tells me whenever I scream at him about some issue he's caved in to them on. Diplomacy my arse! I'd show them diplomacy if I were queen. Let *them* all rot in some horrid dungeon like all those poor 'deviants' did for all those years. In any case, it's going to take a lot more time for the attitudes of the people here to catch up with those in Duncileer – or Elfwood – don't you think?"

Flaskamper nodded, and the princess continued on.

One of the things that the elf enjoyed the most about Alengra's company was that he rarely had to speak at all. Reinforced with only a few nods and an occasional word or two of agreement, the princess could carry an entire conversation all by herself. Given Flaskamper's despondent mood of late, he was supremely grateful for this trait. He

was also grateful to have with him someone who was as busy watching the women as he was watching the men – especially on this night, when the lights dimmed for the early show, and Briander walked out onto the stage with his gittern.

“*Your Highness*, you’re looking very much like a carp,” the princess observed dryly, and Flaskamper quickly closed his mouth, which had been hanging open.

“Alengra, do you by any chance know that bard,” Flaskamper asked, trying unsuccessfully to sound nonchalant.

Alengra chuckled.

“Fancy him, do you?” she asked. “I don’t blame you. He is a pretty thing. *And*, as a matter of fact, I *do* know him. His name is Briander. He’s actually a bit older than he looks – a third-year Journeyman under Master Gelhorton, if I’m not mistaken – which would make him nearly nineteen. A very sweet boy, a bit capricious, but then again, so are you.”

She winked at Flaskamper, who actually laughed for the first time in days.

“Is he, by any chance –” Flaskamper began.

“Oh yes,” Alengra finished for him. “He likes men – exclusively as far as I know. After his set, I’ll be happy to introduce you. I think you two would hit it off nicely. And don’t worry about having to shuck me off later. As it happens, I have a date –” she lowered her voice to a whisper “– with a chambermaid! Can you imagine the scandal that would cause? Father would drop dead on the spot if he ever found out.”

The princess and Flaskamper both laughed heartily.

“So anyway,” she said, “I’ll be excusing myself in plenty of time for you to charm young Briander onto his back – or whatever position you prefer him in.”

“Alengra!”

“Why, Prince Flaskamper,” the princess exclaimed, “I do believe I’ve made you blush... again!

As captivated as Flaskamper was by the young bard’s looks, he was even more enchanted by his clear, sweet tenor voice. Midway through his set, Briander sang a song that brought a lump to Flaskamper’s throat.

*The blackbird sings a haunting hymn
And time is frozen in its shell.
Each night I sit alone and dream
Of someone who can make things well.*

*Of someone who can make things well -
The glowbugs scatter to and fro
And flicker hope in darkness' realm,*

But each night fewer of them glow.

*But each night fewer of them glow -
The outside world is clear and warm,
But deep within my mind there swirls
An ever-raging thunderstorm.*

*An ever-raging thunderstorm.
The glowbugs now are growing dim.
From high atop a lonely perch,
The blackbird sings a haunting hymn.*

It was only a simple ballad, completely forgettable but for the incredible pathos contained in the boy's performance. It made Flaskamper tingle all over.

At Alengra's invitation, Briander joined them at their table when he had finished his set. As it turned out, Flaskamper and the bard did indeed hit it off well. At first, the lad was a bit shy, being in the company of a prince and princess, but when he realized that Flaskamper was as unhappy being a royal as Alengra was, he relaxed and started to behave like himself.

Flaskamper, too, was uncharacteristically shy. Even after the wine had kicked in, he found himself unable to adopt his usual, smooth routine. It was very similar to the way it had been when he had first met Rokey, but again, the elf failed to make any conscious connection.

"I've threatened to take Flaskamper to Saidron's Hall for a switcher show," Alengra said. "Can you believe he's never been to one? Bri, you should come too. We'll catch the late show tomorrow night. What do you say?"

"Sounds like fun," said Briander, "if you can persuade the prince. He looks a bit doubtful to me."

"Nonsense," Flaskamper argued. "I'm up for anything. I do wish you'd give me some idea of what to expect though."

"Absolutely not!" said Alengra. "That would spoil all the fun."

"Oh, come on," the elf pleaded. "Just a hint. It won't spoil your fun just to give me a little inkling."

"Alengra, have mercy on him," said Briander. "Let's give him just a taste."

At this point, what Flaskamper really wanted was a taste of Briander, but he kept this thought to himself. Instead, he gave Alengra the most pitiable face he could manage. The princess laughed.

"Alright, I yield," said Alengra. "I can't really tell you what exactly will happen because the show changes every night, but just to give you an idea - try to imagine a man with a full heavy beard and

moustache dressed in a formal coronation gown singing Frita's Aria in full soprano."

As the image formed in his mind, Flaskamper burst out laughing.

"You're joking, right?" he said, his face red with mirth.

"Not at all," said Alengra. "That, in fact, was one of the tamer acts I've seen there. Tell him I'm not making it up, Bri."

"She's not," he said, "I swear."

"Well then, you can definitely count me in," said Flash. "You will come too, won't you Briander?"

"Call me Bri, all right?" said the boy.

"Only if you call me Flash," the elf retorted.

The two young men exchanged a look that told Alengra that it was time to make her excuses and head out for her own rendezvous. With a promise to meet her two companions the following evening at an eatery near Saidron's Hall, the princess kissed Briander on the head, gave Flaskamper a lascivious wink and departed. It wasn't until the princess had gone that the elf realized how much she had been facilitating his conversation with Briander. Now that the two of them were alone, Flash found himself positively tongue-tied. Fortunately, the lad seemed happy to pick up the slack. He told Flaskamper about himself, and asked the elf questions about his life and his home. Flaskamper tried to approach the subject of his recent separation lightly, but the pain behind it was not lost on the young bard, and he carefully steered the discussion elsewhere for the time being.

Before they knew it, the club was closing down, and the two found themselves outside, walking on the bridge that spanned the River Imperial. It was pleasant, but very cold, and Flaskamper was trying desperately to put the words together to invite Briander home with him. Once again the young apprentice came to his rescue, slipping his arms around the elf and kissing him warmly.

"I like you very much, Flash," Briander told him, "and I'd love to spend the night with you, that is, if you want me to."

Flaskamper kissed him again, silently thanking his Goddess, Secta, for this wonderful blessing. The next moment though, his thoughts were interrupted as someone grabbed his shoulder and spun him around. Flaskamper found himself facing two burly and thoroughly unpleasant-looking men.

"Well, what have we here?" the first one said, his scowl accentuating the large scar that ran up the side of his face.

"Couple a bungholers I'd say," said the second. "Seems as they was gettin' mighty friendly."

Both toughs took a step toward the boys. Flaskamper placed himself squarely between them and Briander.

"Look, we don't want any trouble with you fellows," said the elf.

The scarred man hawked and spit on the ground right at Flaskamper's feet.

"Oh you've already got trouble, matey," he said, "comin' to our city and spreadin' yer filthy habits. Wha'd I tell you, Gann," he said to the other man, "All them elves is bungblers. I don't even think they allow women there."

"They ought to stay down in the forest where they belongs," said Gann.

"I think we need to teach this one a lesson," the scarred man said. "Him and his little - friend."

He reached out to grab Flaskamper, but didn't count on his elven speed and strength. Flash grabbed the man's wrist and twisted his arm, until he had it pinned behind his back. The other man started forward, but then hesitated.

"I told you we don't want trouble, *matey*," the elf said, his voice cold and menacing. "That doesn't mean we can't handle a bit."

He twisted the man's arm tighter, until he cried out in pain.

"You know," Flaskamper said in an offhand way, "I could snap your arm like a twig. Do you believe me? Say you believe me."

He gave the arm another hard twist.

"I believe you!" the man cried.

"I thought I could convince you," said Flaskamper. "Now, why don't you just say you're sorry and go on your way, hmm?"

The man cursed and struggled, but could not break the elf's hold. The other man stood rooted in place, his mouth hanging open in surprise. Flaskamper grew impatient, and gave the arm another sharp twist, bringing another cry of pain from his would-be attacker.

"I swear to the Goddess I'll twist it right off, if you prefer, you bloody idiot," Flaskamper growled, "now say you're sorry, then bugger off before I get really mad."

"I'm sorry!" the man yelped at last, after a bit more painful convincing. Flaskamper shoved him hard into the other man, sending them both tumbling to the ground.

The men scraped themselves up off the ground and started off. When they were at a safe distance, the scarred man began hurling epithets at them again, but when Flaskamper began walking toward them, they quickly went quiet and hurried off. The elf turned back to Briander.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"I'm fine, thanks to you," said the bard. "You're incredibly brave."

"No more than the next fellow," Flaskamper replied diffidently.

"More than I," Briander told him. "I'm afraid I'm a terrible coward when it comes to fighting."

Flaskamper wrapped his arms around the boy.

"Briander, having a distaste for violence does not make you a coward," he said. "For someone like you – someone who creates such beauty and joy for others – well, I can't imagine you hurting anyone... even someone as wretched and hateful as that fellow."

“Those two aren’t the only ones,” said Briander. “Things here have improved since Alengra’s father became king, but there are still a lot of people who would like to see samers driven out of the kingdom, or put away in prison. Some even think we should be committed to madhouses. You don’t know how lucky you are to live in a place where you can be yourself everywhere.”

“Perhaps I didn’t before,” Flaskamper replied, “but I’m beginning to realize it now.”

They shared another defiant kiss on the bridge, and then Flaskamper led the boy back to the front of the club, where his carriage patiently awaited them.

Later, as they were making love, Flaskamper ran his hands through Briander’s thick, black hair and stared down into his dark soulful eyes...and that was when it finally struck him – the similarities between the young bard and his far distant husband. The realization hit him so hard that he had to stop what he was doing. Stifling an anguished cry, he rolled over and sat on the far edge of the bed, trembling as a sudden wave of guilt washed over him.

“I’m sorry,” Flaskamper said, as he felt Briander’s warm hands encircle his shoulders.

“Flash, you don’t have to be sorry,” the boy said gently. “I know that you’re hurting. It’s fairly plain to see. Perhaps it would help you if... if you talked about him. I don’t mind. I’d be happy to just lie here with you and listen. I want to comfort you.”

Comfort me, Flaskamper thought. Jiri had offered to comfort him too, months ago, back in the baths at Elfwood Palace. He hadn’t been able to let Jiri. The time had not been right. What would happen now, he wondered, if he opened up to Briander, this boy that so resembled his lost love? Would he resent the comparison – think he was being used? *Was he being used?*

In the end, Flaskamper elected to chance it. As earlier events had demonstrated, he was not averse to taking physical risks, and though he found emotional ones much tougher, he decided that, in this particular instance, he had little to lose and everything to gain. He lay back down on the bed, took Briander in his arms, and began to tell him all about Rokey. The bard listened attentively, holding on to him tightly, and occasionally asking a question. Some time later, when the elf had talked himself out, Briander leaned down and kissed him.

“I’m so sorry, Flash,” the young man told him. “I can only imagine how much pain you’re in now. I want to be there for you, to help you, whatever your needs might be. I know I can’t replace Rokey –”

“No,” Flaskamper told him. “No, you can’t replace him Bri. No one can. But I want you to know something. My initial attraction to you *may* have been your resemblance to Rokey. In fact, now that I’m aware of it, I can almost guarantee it. But that is *not* the reason that

you're here with me now. You're here because I like *you*, Bri, not just for all the ways you're like Rokey, but for all the ways you're different from him too. I hope that you can believe that in your heart, because it's true. I swear it."

"I believe it, Flash," said Briander, "and I don't care what brought you to me initially, as long as you're here now."

"I can't make you any promises," Flash warned him. "I'm just not ready for that yet. If I did, I'd likely break them."

"I know," said Briander. "I don't expect any promises. I just want to enjoy what time we have together, however long it turns out to be."

Flaskamper kissed him again, a long, passionate kiss that stirred him to desire once more. He rolled over on top of Briander and stared down again into his sweet, brown eyes.

"Are you too tired to finish what we started earlier?" the elf asked, grinning.

Briander slid his hands down Flaskamper's back and over his bottom, which he squeezed tightly.

"I'm never too tired for that," the lad replied.

"There, you see," Flaskamper said, "there's another thing we have in common.

It was well past dawn before the two finally slept.

The switcher show the next night was uproariously funny. Alengra also brought a "friend", a quiet young woman named Nedka, and the four of them had a wonderful time, laughing and drinking far into the night. When the party broke up, Flaskamper invited Briander home with him again, and again the bard accepted.

Now here it was, the morning after their third night together, and Flaskamper had awakened groggy and confused, momentarily mistaking Briander for Rokey. As the elf lay there, watching the morning sun kiss Briander's fine, slender body, he was forced to wonder again how much of Rokey he had been incorporating into this intense, albeit brief relationship. The question worried him, because the closer he grew to the boy, the more afraid he grew of hurting him. Briander had never pressed him, never showed the least bit of resentment or jealousy, even when Flaskamper had called out Rokey's name by mistake during their lovemaking the night before. Briander had assured him that it was all right, but Flash had felt guilty and ashamed, and since then, he had found himself repeatedly questioning the wisdom of continuing this liaison.

You're weak, Flash, he scolded himself. *Just because the lad is willing to be used doesn't give you the right to take advantage of him this way.*

That was entirely true, and yet he couldn't blame himself too much, especially as he gazed over at the beautiful young man, sleeping so peacefully in the bed next to him. Not only beautiful, but so sweet and... eager. Thoughts of lovemaking began to intrude on his

other deliberations, and when his body began to respond to them, he quickly donned his robe and went down the hall to grab a cold bath. He was certainly never going to reach any responsible conclusions in this state. After the cold water had brought him back down to reality, he added some hot water to the tub and began to wash up. Without Briander's lovely naked form there to distract him, he finally came to the decision that it was time to end this affair, before things began to deteriorate, as they inevitably would, into a painful disaster. He would explain it to Briander as gently as he could, and then set the boy free. Better a small hurt now than a deeper one later, he told himself.

But as Flaskamper headed back to his room, intent on immediately carrying out his plan, he was met in the corridor by one of his stewards.

"What is it, Dalwart?" Flaskamper asked the other elf.

"Your Highness, a red hawk has just arrived with this," Dalwart told him, and held out a small rolled message.

Flaskamper furrowed his brow. Red hawks carried only top-priority urgent messages. Something was seriously wrong at home. He unrolled the small sheet of paper, and his face fell as he read its brief content:

*My dear son,
Rokey has been abducted. Circumstances point to the
Order of the Bone. Brandelynn has been charged with
high treason. You must come home at once.
Angorath, King of Elfwood*

Flaskamper grew pale as he read and reread the note, unable, for the moment, to move. It wasn't until the steward requested instructions as to the reply that the prince snapped back into action.

"Send the following reply," he instructed, "*Will return immediately. Expect me in a day and a half.*"

"A day and a half?" Dalwart asked incredulously. "But, My Prince, we couldn't possibly reach –"

"Not *we*, Dalwart, *me*," said Flaskamper. "After you've sent a hawk back, find the fastest horse in Oraque and buy it for me, no matter what it costs. I'll need it saddled and ready to leave within the mark."

"But –"

"No *buts*, Dalwart, just do it!"

When Dalwart had hurried away, Flaskamper went into his room and began to pack a bag. He was completely oblivious to Briander's presence until the boy spoke.

"What is it, Flash," he asked. "What's happening?"

Flash groaned inwardly. This was not the way he had planned to have this conversation. He forced himself to stop packing and joined Briander on the bed.

“Bri,” he began. “I’ve just gotten an urgent message from home. Rokey has been abducted by our enemies. He’s in great danger, and I must return to Elfwood immediately. Even though he and I are separated, he’s still –”

“I understand, Flash,” said Briander. “I’m young, but I’m not a fool. I know what Rokey meant to you – what he still means to you. I tried to fool myself into thinking that you and I had some potential, but I really never honestly believed it. Even if this hadn’t happened, it just would never have worked out.”

“I want you to know how much I care for you,” said Flaskamper, his eyes tearing up, “and how terrible I feel.”

“Don’t Flash,” Briander told him. “Don’t feel bad. You didn’t do anything wrong. You told me the truth from the very beginning. If anyone was deceiving me...it was me. But I don’t regret it. I wouldn’t trade these few days with you for anything.”

He kissed the elf tenderly, and then pushed him gently away.

“Now get going. You’ve got a long journey ahead of you,” said the boy. “I’m going to take a long, hot bath. Don’t wait for me, please. Let’s just make this good-bye, all right?”

Flaskamper nodded and got up to resume dressing and packing, while Briander slipped on his own robe. Their eyes met once more as the young bard left the room. It was surely the last they would ever see of one another, though Flaskamper was certain he’d never forget him.

Well before the end of the mark, Dalwart returned. He had procured an excellent horse from the king’s own stables, courtesy of Princess Alengra.

“She sends her best wishes, whatever the nature of the emergency,” said the Steward.

“Bless you, Dalwart,” said Flaskamper gratefully. “Before you leave Oraque, be sure and pledge my eternal friendship to Princess Alengra.”

“I shall gladly do so, Your Highness.”

As his servants loaded up his saddlebags with provisions, Flaskamper took the king’s message out and read it again. Only then did the second part of the message really register in his brain.

Brandelynn has been charged with high treason.

He could only assume that this meant that Brandelynn, his oldest and dearest friend, had somehow been involved in Rokey’s abduction. Brandelynn, who had counseled him about his troubles with Rokey, and helped him to decide that leaving Elfwood immediately was his best option. The implications fell on him like a bag of rocks. Just how deeply had Brandelynn been involved in the actual breakup of his marriage? If she had given *him* a push in that direction, was it also possible that she had pushed Rokey? What if Rokey had sought out his husband’s closest friend, asked her for advice? He had no evidence

that this had happened, but the more he thought about it, the more the possibility made sense. She had returned to Elfwood with an agenda – to lay the groundwork for Rokey’s abduction, and once she had uncovered their marital troubles, she quickly seized on the opportunity to exploit that, steering Flaskamper deftly out of the picture and leaving Rokey alone and vulnerable. And he had accepted her flimsy excuse to stay in Elfwood. He had left her alone to finish her treacherous work without a second thought.

Flaskamper suddenly felt extremely sick to his stomach. This entire thing had been his own fault. If he hadn’t been so quick to take her advice, to throw everything away...

“Here she is, all packed and ready. Name’s Finney. Eh... are you all right, Your Majesty?”

Dalwart was there at his side, holding his horse’s reins. Flaskamper took them from him, absently shaking his head.

“No, Dalwart,” he said, his voice choked with grief and sorrow. “I am most definitely *not* all right.”

Flaskamper mounted Finney and then, with tears brimming in his eyes – eyes that blazed with a blistering fury, he galloped off into the cold winter dawn.

Part Two

Chapter 14

Coming Together

Alrontin awoke the next day from a horrible dream. The details faded in an instant, but the feeling of dread and foreboding remained. As his head cleared, he realized he was in his childhood room in the Princes' Wing of the palace. Momentarily confused, he sat up, and immediately felt a sharp pain in his shoulder. It was then he remembered what had happened. Rokey had been kidnapped, betrayed. Ignoring the pain, he swung himself around and sat on the edge of the bed, and began looking around for his clothes. He must question the traitor Brandelynn and force her to tell him where his brothersmate had been taken. As he rose unsteadily to his feet, his wife Mellynda entered the room.

"Alrontin, dearest, what are you doing?" she asked, rushing to his side. "Lie down, for pity's sake. You need to rest."

She wrapped her arms around him, gently so as not to cause him any pain. Alrontin returned her embrace. Though he yearned to get out of there, to take charge of the rescue effort, he was sensitive to the ordeal his wife must have gone through, for he realized how close to death he had come.

"It's all right now, Mel," he told her. "I'm all right."

"You are not all right," she told him, tears springing to her eyes. "You lost so much blood – the healer had to take blood from four of the guards to replace it. None of us knew whether you would even survive the night."

“But darling,” he said, smiling, “you ought to know that it would take more than a dagger to rid the world of me. I’m much too stubborn.”

Mellynda laughed, but the tears in her eyes remained.

“If you could have seen yourself last night,” she said, “how pale and lifeless you looked...”

“I know,” he said, his anger rising. “Believe me, I do. The traitor nearly did me in. She failed though, Mel. I’m alive and she’s in the dungeon. But Rokey is still missing, and it is my responsibility to get him back. Do you know if Flash has been notified?”

Mellynda nodded.

“Your father sent a Red Hawk out last night,” she said. “As far as I know, no response has arrived yet.”

“So only one night has passed?”

“Yes,” his wife replied, “though this day is nearly over. Still, you must rest. Duty and anger are giving you strength right now, but it will not last. You must allow yourself more time to recuperate.”

“I can’t, Mel,” Alrontin insisted. “There is no time to lose. These enemies are powerful, and deadly. I don’t know why they abducted Rokey when, before now, they sought only to kill him, but I can only imagine that there is some vile purpose behind it. I must force Brandelynn to tell me where they have taken him so that we can mount a rescue effort.”

“Listen to me,” Mellynda said forcefully. “You have an entire army out there, ready to do your bidding. Not to mention your father the king, who is every bit as furious as you. Commander Tomalyn has been here with me all night and day, waiting for you to regain consciousness. I’ll ask him to come in here so you can tell him what you want done and he’ll see to it. While you talk to him, I’ll go and fetch your father. He’s been agonizing over exactly how the intruders were able to get into Elfwood without anyone noticing, and your message was very cryptic. Now please, Ronti, my love, lie back down and rest. That way you may actually be ready once a rescue effort gets underway.”

Alrontin grinned as he gazed into his wife’s golden eyes.

“I think it is I who should have resigned my commission and left you to command the Guard,” he told her. “You’re really much more sensible than I.”

His wife smiled in return as she maneuvered him back into bed.

“Sensible enough to have decided I’d rather take care of our children instead,” she quipped. “Besides, your father would have been apoplectic. He began grooming you to command the Guard at your birth.”

“Nevertheless, the Guard lost a fine officer when you left,” he insisted.

“I’ve never regretted leaving for an instant,” she insisted.

With her husband settled once again, Mellynda went to fetch Commander Tomalyn and the king. Tomalyn had been waiting just outside the door.

"Watch him carefully," she ordered the young elf. "Don't let him exhaust himself."

"I won't, My Lady," he promised, and proceeded into the bedroom to report to his injured captain.

As Alrontin lay carefully back down in bed, he was suddenly glad that he had married someone even more stubborn than himself, for as the commander approached the bedside, he realized that he felt terribly weak.

"Commander Tomalyn reporting, sir," the young elf said, then let his formal demeanor drop. "I'm so glad you're going to be all right, Captain. Things were looking pretty grim there for a while."

"I understand you stayed here all night," Alrontin said.

"Yes Captain," said Tomalyn. "I stayed, but everyone was worried, sir. I doubt anyone in the company got much sleep last night, and guards have been stopping by all day today hoping for news of your recovery."

The sentiment touched Alrontin. He had always tried to be a decent and fair leader, but it was often difficult to tell just how those in his command actually regarded him.

"Well you can spread the word that I'm on the mend," he said, "and that I'll be on my feet again, soon."

"I will, Captain," said the commander. "Sir, what happened last night? Wild rumors are flying around that some kind of phantom appeared right in the middle of Elfwood – something that could make people disappear into thin air."

"It sounds incredible," Alrontin replied, "but believe it or not, the rumors aren't all that far from the truth. I'm expecting the king momentarily. Let's wait until he arrives, so I don't have to tell it twice."

King Angorath appeared only a few moments later. It was obvious that he had not slept, either. His cheeks were sunken, and dark circles had formed under his eyes. He strode over and clasped Alrontin's outstretched hand, then, to his son's astonishment, leaned down and kissed it.

"Thank the Goddess, you're alive," said Angorath. "I was so afraid."

The emotion that strained his voice nearly brought Alrontin to tears, for the prince now realized how deeply his brush with death had affected his father. Having so recently suffered the loss of his beloved wife, Queen Ferriwhyl, the possibility of losing his elder son seemed to have nearly driven the king to despair.

"I'm all right, father," Alrontin assured him, clutching his hand tightly, "I swear."

King Angorath straightened. Now the concern in his eyes turned to cold fury.

“We have imprisoned the traitor Brandelynn, as you instructed,” he said. “Was it she that did this to you?”

Alrontin nodded.

“What exactly occurred last night?” he asked. “I could make little sense of your message. I assume it is the Order of the Bone that has taken Rokey, but how in blazes did they get past the perimeter guards?”

Alrontin explained to the king and Commander Tomalyn about the abductors, about the mysterious hole in space, and how Brandelynn had attacked him to try and prevent him from interfering.

“Incredible,” said Angorath. “If it were not my own son telling me this, I could scarcely believe it. No elf has betrayed their own kind for centuries.”

“*That’s* what you find incredible?” Alrontin asked. “What about the hole – a hole in midair?”

“That,” Angorath replied, “can be explained.”

“What?” exclaimed the prince, his eyes widening. “You mean you know how this happened?”

“I am not entirely certain,” the king replied, “but I believe the method used to abduct your brothersmate may have been the very thing that Rokey himself was working on perfecting.”

Alrontin sat up, his ire rising. Tomalyn stooped to assist him, but he waved the commander away.

“And why is it that I knew nothing of this?” he asked. “I am Captain of the Guard, for pity’s sake. My job is to protect the citizenry here. Did no one think that this was something I ought to be informed about?”

“Calm down, son,” his father commanded. “The project was kept in complete secrecy. Only the High Council and I knew what Rokey was working on. We did not inform you because we had no idea that our enemies were either monitoring our efforts or attempting the same experiments. We thought that no one else on Firma had the power to do what Rokey was doing.”

“Which was?”

“To open a hole into another realm of existence,” Angorath answered. “A hole that would allow one to travel across Firma in the blink of an eye.”

“How is that possible?” the prince asked.

“I find the specifics a bit difficult to grasp,” the king admitted. “I certainly would not endeavor to impart them to anyone else. In due time I will summon High Mage Ellispon to give you the details, though I doubt they will be any more comprehensible to you.”

“I don’t understand, father,” said Alrontin, whose head was beginning to ache. “If Rokey has so much power, how were these people able to take him? Is this Order of the Bone really so strong?”

“We know little about the Order beyond what Rokey and Flaskamper were able to tell us,” said the king, “though the Mage Scholars *were* able to find a few obscure references in various texts, and I did receive, upon inquiring, some other bits of information from our neighboring kingdoms. As far as we can tell, the Order of the Bone is nothing but a religious cult. Their origins are murky, but it appears that their existence, in one form or another, can be traced back to the very beginnings of our recorded history. Of course, we have only fragments of documents predating the Great Wars. As with the other kingdoms of Firma, our civilization was all but destroyed during those dark times. It is possible that the Order has been around much longer. We simply haven't enough evidence to say one way or another. In any case, whatever they once were, they now seem to be nothing more than an obscure faction of a long-defunct religion, whose sole purpose is apparently to await the resurrection of their God, whom they call Cyure. Apart from that, the various chapters throughout Firma seem to have little in common with one another. In some kingdoms, for instance, they integrate with the community. In others, they are separatists.”

“Is there any other history of them resorting to violence?” Alrontin asked.

“Absolutely none,” said Angorath. “Though there is some mention of their being persecuted from time to time, there is no indication of any revolt or uprising anywhere. And yet, they are regarded by any who are aware of them as a menacing and sinister group. I must admit I found it all exceptionally baffling.

“Baffling by design perhaps.” Alrontin surmised.

“Possibly,” the king concurred. “As to their ability to take Rokey captive,” he continued, “there really is no mystery there. Your brothersmate is powerful indeed – just how powerful is still the subject of some debate among the Mage Scholars, but he is untrained. An accomplished sorcerer with but a fraction of his strength could call up his defenses in a mere tik. Not so with Rokey; he is a novice, and still struggles to master even the simple spells that every elf child learns in school. Since Ellispon began instructing him, I have received regular reports on his progress. He has managed well so far, but is still in the very beginning stages of his training.”

Alrontin groaned. He was exhausted, but needed to keep pushing himself long enough to get things underway.

“All right,” he said. “Before we can do anything at all, we must find out where they have taken Rokey and for what purpose. Tomalyn, put the Interrogation Team to work on our prisoner, Brandelynn. Tell them every minmark is crucial, and that they are authorized to use coercive tactics.”

“On a fellow elf, sir?” Tomalyn asked.

“She is a traitor, Commander,” the king answered, “and therefore no longer warrants the protections afforded a citizen of our realm. Given the potential stakes in play here, they may – they *must* – use any and all means at their disposal, short of outright brutality, to obtain the information we need.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” said Tomalyn, then turned back to his captain. “Are there any other orders, sir?”

“Yes,” said Alrontin. “Have someone from the Mage Guild inspect Rokey’s room for any clues the Guard couldn’t find,” he said. “I doubt there’s anything there, but we may as well be thorough. Other than that, there’s nothing we can do until Brandelynn gives us more information.”

As soon as the commander had gone, Alrontin fell back against his pillow, breathing heavily, and paler than before. The king placed his hand on his son’s forehead and frowned.

“You are feverish,” he said. “I am going to send for the healer.”

“I’m all right, father,” Alrontin protested.

“Nonsense,” barked Angorath. “You have already overtaxed yourself. You are not to leave this bed until I instruct otherwise. If I find you have disobeyed me, I shall order you tied down. I’ll not have Mellynda widowed because of your bull-headedness. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, Sire, perfectly clear.” Alrontin smiled weakly up at his father, who gently stroked his son’s head, then turned to go. Mellynda met him at the door.

“He is weak and feverish,” said the king. “I am going to send for the healer. Make sure your husband remains in bed until he is given leave to get up. If he becomes too stubborn, notify me immediately. I also want a guard on this door. Until Alrontin is well enough to resume his duties, all reports related to this business are to be directed to me. Commander Cinnador will take temporary command of the Guard. And if there is anything else you require, Mellynda, send word to me and you shall have it.”

“Thank you, Your Highness,” said Mellynda, kissing the king on the cheek.

Angorath smiled wearily at her, and then continued down the hall. A few moments later, the Royal Healer, Valaton, arrived to examine Alrontin and re-dress his wound. Alrontin pleaded with him for something to get him back on his feet more swiftly.

“Valaton,” said the prince, “it’s vital that I get out of this bed. I have a duty to my brother, to everyone. You must give me some battleroot.”

The old elf looked at Alrontin as though he had lost his mind.

“Where is your head, Captain?” he asked the prince. “You know very well that battleroot is dangerous. Even in battle, it is only used

under the most extreme circumstances. No, you must rest. All you need in order to get well is time.”

“But time is the one thing I don’t have,” Alrontin insisted. “If we are to have any hope at all of rescuing my brothersmate, we must move quickly. I can’t just lie here while all hope slips away.”

The healer would not be swayed, however. He changed the dressing on Alrontin’s wound and gave him some rembis tea to help build his strength, but absolutely refused to bring him any of the powerful root for which he pleaded. After Valaton left, Alrontin tried to stay awake, to think of some other way to procure the remedy he wanted, but he had no strength left. When Mellynda looked in on him a few minmarks later, he was fast asleep.

* * *

Later that evening, Angorath sat in his study with Outflyer Groog. The king had had little time to attend to his guest since Rokey’s abduction the previous night, though he had found the time to introduce him to High Mage Laomiel. It was Angorath’s hope that the Mage Guild could shed some light on why the Order of the Bone would want to steal the Ancestor Skull from the Bronze Dragons and what, if anything, it might have to do with the events that had just taken place in Elfwood. Laomiel himself could offer nothing in the way of assistance, but promised to put the scholars on the scent to see what they might discover in the archives.

The king and the dragon had only just returned to the study when a messenger came.

“Begging your pardon, Sire,” she said, “but this just arrived by Messenger hawk.”

Angorath read the brief message and sighed.

“Not more bad news I hope, Your Majesty,” said Groog.

“It’s from my younger son,” the king replied, “the one whose husband was kidnapped last night. He expects to arrive home by tomorrow evening. If I know Flaskamper, it will be even sooner than that. I only hope that we have something useful to tell him by the time he arrives.”

“I must apologize, King Angorath, for burdening you with additional troubles at this difficult time. I hope you’ll believe me when I tell you that, if there was anyone else to whom we could turn –”

Angorath held up his hand.

“There is no need for apologies, Outflyer Groog. I consider it a privilege to render you any assistance we possibly can. Besides, I am convinced that we will discover that these two events, having both been orchestrated by the Order of the Bone, are somehow related to one another. If so, it is also likely that the answers we seek will lie along similar paths.”

“You are sharp-witted, as well as generous, Your Majesty,” said the dragon. “Our ancestors were wise indeed to have bonded with yours in friendship.”

“Your kind words lift my spirits in these dark marks, Groog,” said the king. “I only hope that we shall both soon see our troubles firmly behind us.

“I share your hope, Sire,” said Groog, “even more for your sakes than for ours, for it is only a relic which has been taken from us. Valuable though it may be, its loss cannot equal the loss of flesh and blood that you have experienced.”

“Count neither of our treasures yet lost, good Dragon,” said the king. “If a way can be found to retrieve them, you may rest assured; my two sons will discover it.”

* * *

Flaskamper arrived at the edge of Elfwood Forest that next afternoon. He had ridden without food or rest all day and night, calling the lumen orb to light his way in the darkness, stopping only briefly for water, and to feed rembis leaves to both himself and to Finney, his horse. It gave them both the necessary stamina to endure such a long and grueling journey. The elf sincerely hoped that he had not ridden this fine new mare of his to death, but he would not know for certain how the animal fared until after the sustaining energy of the rembis wore off. The same, in fact, was true for him, so he moved along the narrow forest trail as quickly as he could, hoping to make it home before they both collapsed from exhaustion. He had not gone far when he heard an owl’s cry, followed closely by another. The sentries had spotted him. Soon he would be met by his brother’s troops. Sure enough, he hadn’t gone ten paces farther before he was challenged.

“Halt!” a voice called, “Who comes!”

Then another voice rang out from the other side of the trail, one Flaskamper recognized.

“Use your eyes, you fool,” it said. “It is Prince Flaskamper.”

Commander Limeron stepped out of the trees. Flaskamper dismounted to greet him, and nearly fell over with fatigue. The commander leapt forward to steady him.

“Steady, My Prince,” he said. “You’re better off on your horse, I think. It looks as though your legs will not carry you.”

“Limeron,” said Flaskamper, “is there any news of my husband?”

“None that I am privy to, I’m sorry to say, Highness,” he replied, helping the prince back onto his horse. “However, I *am* pleased to report that your brother has survived and is recovering rapidly.”

“Survived?” Flaskamper exclaimed. “Survived what?” His father’s message had not mentioned Alrontin.

"Forgive me, Prince," said Limeron. "I assumed you knew. The traitor, Brandelynn, nearly killed him. He only just managed to live through that night."

The traitor, Brandelynn. His oldest and dearest friend, was now *the traitor Brandelynn*, someone who had, he was certain, orchestrated the break-up of his marriage, his husband's abduction, and had apparently tried, with near success, to murder his brother. This was no longer the friend that he dearly loved. This was a stranger, and an enemy. His insides boiled with a mixture of grief, hurt and rage. He couldn't even imagine facing her again, but deep down he knew that he would. He would have to. He desperately required an explanation – from his *friend's* own lips.

When Flaskamper, flanked by his escort, arrived at the palace, Alrontin was out front waiting for him. The younger brother nearly fell into his elder brother's arms, but they managed to steady themselves. They embraced in silence for a few moments, while Limeron instructed his soldiers to see to Prince Flaskamper's horse. As they were leading the mare away, Flaskamper turned and stopped them.

"I'm afraid I may have ridden poor Finney here straight into the ground," he told the guard. "As soon as you get her settled you'd better fetch an animal healer. Tell him, or her, that she's been ridden hard for an entire day and night, sustained only by rembis. I fear that when the effects of the leaves wear off, she may collapse from exhaustion."

"I'll see to it, Your Highness," said the guard.

Flaskamper turned back to his brother, eyeing him critically.

"Are you all right, Ronti?" he asked, deeply concerned. "I heard what happened."

"I'm fit as a firecat," Alrontin replied, smiling. "Old Valaton was right. I only needed a good long rest to let my body recover."

"Well you certainly seem hale and hearty," his brother observed. "Gods, Ronti...I'm so sorry. This is all my fault."

"Your fault? Horse shite!" Flaskamper started. It was very unusual for his brother to curse, at least in public. "You trusted in a friend and she betrayed you – betrayed us all."

Alrontin's eyes blazed with anger.

"But she will pay for her misdeeds, little brother," he said, and before I am finished with her, she *will* tell us where Rokey is, and what our enemy's plans are. I swear by our mother, Flash, I will get him back. Our enemies shall not prevail in this."

"Has she said anything yet?" Flaskamper asked. Alrontin shook his head.

"She has kept her mouth shut tight as a tradesman's purse," he said, "despite the best efforts of my Interrogation Team. But fear not. There are other ways – ways that would deeply trouble the king's conscience, which is why I have not told him of my intention to

employ them. Let the onus fall upon me. Our father has endured enough these past two days.”

“Before you do – whatever it is you plan to do,” said Flaskamper, “I need to see her.”

“Are you sure that’s wise, Flash?” he said. “You are not in the best of conditions now, and I fear there is little time to waste. Why don’t you just greet father and then go straight to bed. While you rest, I will do what is necessary to get the information we require.”

“You’re right, Ronti,” said Flaskamper, “I’m a wreck. But I won’t be able to rest until I’ve seen her. For the last thirty marks or more, as I made my way back here, I wracked my brain trying to imagine some motivation – something that would explain how and why she was able to do these terrible things. But every excuse I could invent was sorely inadequate. I have to face her, to see if – if there is anything left of the person I once loved and trusted.”

Alrontin clasped his brother by the shoulders.

“I fear that you will only cause yourself needless suffering,” he said, “but if you feel that you must do this, I won’t stand in your way. Come, let us go and tell father you’ve arrived. After that, I will take you to see her.”

* * *

She was sleeping when he entered. He stood watching her for a few moments as she tossed and turned, wondering if her dreams now troubled her – wondering how they could not. He had spent the better part of these past two days swaying back and forth from deep hurt to blind rage. Now as he looked into the cell, at this girl who had once been his closest friend, he felt only sorrow.

“Why did you do this, Brandelynn?”

He had asked the question more or less to himself, but she heard him. Brandelynn awoke and stood up slowly... gingerly. Flaskamper wondered how far the Interrogation Team had gone in questioning her. Not far enough, apparently, for they had gotten nothing from her as yet. It didn’t surprise him. Brandelynn had always been willful and stubborn, even more so than he himself. Now she stood just on the other side of the bars. Though she managed to meet his eyes, he saw no defiance in them now, only the same sadness that he felt.

“Why?” he repeated, his voice no more than a whisper.

“Would it really matter to you, Flash?” she asked sadly. “Do you really want to hear what drew me to the Order? Why I believe so strongly in their cause, so strongly that I was willing to – to do what I’ve done? Would any of that make a bit of difference to you?”

“Yes, Brandelynn, it would,” said Flaskamper, fighting madly to maintain his calm composure. “I have to know. In my contact with the Order of the Bone, I’ve seen only evil, corruption and death – nothing

to which ordinary, decent people would be drawn. Clearly there is much more to it, because here you are, having turned your back on everything and everyone you once loved – for them, and whatever it is you think they represent. Either I'm missing something terribly important, or else you've just gone utterly mad. So I want you to tell me about them. No explanation can possibly justify what you've done to me...to my husband and my brother, but I want it anyway. You owe it to me Brandelynn."

"Yes," she admitted, "I suppose I do. All right, then."

Brandelynn paced back and forth nervously in her small cell, apparently trying to find the right words.

"I didn't tell you this before," she said, "but my experience out in the world was somewhat different than yours. You found friends relatively quickly. I did not, nor did I find work or housing. I had no idea how expensive it was to live outside of Elfwood, and my savings dried up in no time at all. I used the last of my money to get to Duncileer, thinking that such a large city would surely have plenty of work. But then I ran into the Guild system. No one would hire me as a carpenter or weaver or potter, even though I had all the necessary skills, because I was not a part of the Guild system. I didn't have the fighting skills to be a mercenary like you. I wound up living in the Underside, doing whatever I had to do to stay alive. I'd rather not go into any detail. I'm not telling you this so you'll feel sorry for me, only to illustrate that this is where I learned what a horrible place the world could be for those not born to the proper family – those without the means to buy into a Guild. There are thousands of starving people out there, Flash... and no one does anything about it. In Duncileer, they wall them off and leave them in squalor. Other kingdoms can be even worse, they say, though I can't imagine how. I saw children of no more than nine or ten selling their bodies on the street just to eat because the orphanages are overcrowded and lack resources. It was a nightmare, yet no one outside the walls of the Underside seemed to notice... or care."

"Brandelynn," Flash said shortly, "Why are you telling me this? What has it to do with me, or Rokey?"

"I'm telling you about the Order," she said, warming to her message. "Its purpose is to rid the world of places like the Underside. Everyone deserves a fair chance at life, and when the Order comes to power, that's what's going to happen. There'll be no more class system. Every person will have equal value. But to make that happen, the system in place now has to be abolished. That's what the Order is doing Flash, and sometimes it has to do unpleasant things – even ugly things, because the establishment isn't going to fall without fighting to hold onto what it has. The Order is doing what it has to do to free the people from oppression. When that's over, a new age will begin – a

glorious age where there'll be no more poverty, no more starvation. Everyone will be equal in the eyes of – of the Order.”

“I just can't understand how you could get mixed up in something like this, Brandelynn,” said Flaskamper. “I mean, I had rough times out there too. I never precisely sold myself, but to be completely honest, there *were* times when I went home with a man more for his soft bed than his winning smile. But even in my worst moments, I can't imagine being vulnerable enough to let somebody sell me this load of shite. How could you swallow all this garbage? Turn against your friends – your people?”

“It is NOT garbage,” she answered hotly, “and I have nothing against my people Flash. Things are better here than in any human settlement. Once the monarchy here is abolished, there'll be little need to change much else.”

Flaskamper could not believe he was hearing this. He fought to keep his temper in check.

“Why didn't you come home?” he asked her. “When things got bad for you out there, why didn't you just come home to Elfwood?”

“I wondered about that myself from time to time.” she said, “There are two reasons I think, depending on the circumstances. In the beginning, it was pride that kept me away, and in the end it was shame.”

“What do you mean?” Flaskamper asked.

“Well, I could have come home, early on,” she explained, “before things got really bad. But I was stubborn, like you. I wasn't about to come home with my tail between my legs – admit that I couldn't cope outside in the world. Then later, when things got so much worse, I couldn't bear to come back and face anyone here – my family, my friends – not after all the things I had done. My image of myself was so low that, in a way, I felt that I deserved what was happening to me.”

“And then you met a man,” Flaskamper muttered.

“What?” Brandelynn asked.

“That's what happened, isn't it?” Flaskamper said coldly. “You met a man who brought the sunshine back into your stormy life – mended your shattered ego and showed you the path to a better life.”

“You say it with such disdain,” she replied, “but that *is* what happened. Not so different than when you met your friends, and Rokey.”

“My friends never encouraged me to betray my own people!” Flaskamper cried, “and Rokey –” his voice broke. He continued after a moment, forcing himself to calm down. “Rokey never asked me to commit murder.”

“I didn't plan to kill Ronti,” she protested. “I never intended to kill anyone. They tell me he's going to be all right, and I'm glad. When he came into the room that night, I – I just panicked. I thought he might foil our plans or, as he did, prevent my escape. I knew what would

happen if I were captured – that I'd have to face you. I was prepared to do anything to prevent that.”

“Believe me Brandelynn,” Flaskamper said, still hoarse with emotion, “this is no easier for me. All the way back here I kept thinking back on those last few days here – reliving all the ways that you betrayed and lied to me, and wondering how I was ever going to be able to look you in the eye again after I'd let you play me for such a fool.”

“I'm sorry, 'Pillar –”

“DONT CALL ME THAT!” he shouted, his composure finally broken. “You're not my friend! You've ruined my life. I trusted you and you broke my heart, destroyed my relationship with Rokey so that you and your twisted cronies could get to my husband and steal him away. You're not Brandelynn anymore. You're someone I don't even know.”

“I'm sorry,” she whispered, tears spilling onto her cheeks. “I truly am.”

“Then tell me where Rokey is!” he begged. “Please, tell me before it's too late!”

Brandelynn closed her eyes and bowed her head.

“I can't, Flash,” she said quietly. “As you said, I've made my choice, and now I have to live with the consequences.”

“Then we have nothing more to talk about.” said Flaskamper, his eyes cold as stone. “You're our enemy now, and from what you've told me, it looks as though we're at war. Therefore you'll be treated accordingly.”

Flaskamper turned and walked away down the hall, halfway hoping that she would call him back – beg forgiveness, or at least tell him where Rokey was. But she said nothing. When he reached the gate at the end of the hall, he was shaking. Alrontin was waiting for him, accompanied by two guards and one of the High Mages – a tall, quiet elf named Farondyl.

“Well?” his brother asked. “Did she tell you where Rokey is, why they've taken him?”

Flaskamper shook his head.

“Then it's time for more drastic measures. Mage Farondyl is another member of my Interrogation Team, one whose skills have not been employed in a very long time. He will extract the information we require.”

“Through Sorcery?” Flaskamper surmised.

“Yes,” said Alrontin. “There are techniques that go back to the time of the Great Wars. Even though they're no longer allowed, the Mages still pass them on to at least one member of their ranks every generation.”

“Why are they no longer allowed?” Flaskamper asked.

“Because they often do permanent emotional harm to the people upon whom they’re used,” said Alrontin. “I know she is – or was your friend, but this is our last resort.”

“I don’t care anymore, Ronti,” Flaskamper said wearily. “All I want is my husband back alive – whatever it takes.”

His brother nodded. The four started down the hall, but then Alrontin stopped and turned back to Flaskamper.

“Go and get some rest now, Flash,” he ordered. “I don’t want you here for this.”

Flaskamper gave his brother a long, sad look, then turned and headed outside.

“All right Farondyl,” Alrontin said with a sigh. “Let’s get started.”

* * *

Despite his anguish, fatigue got the better of Flaskamper. He climbed into his old bed in the Princes’ Wing and managed to sleep, albeit fitfully, through the night. His brother awakened him early the next morning.

“Did you – ?” Flaskamper asked sleepily. “Did she – ?”

Alrontin nodded.

“Preparations are already underway,” said Alrontin. “Get up and dress quickly, then come to father’s study. I’ll fill you in on everything there.”

Then, to Flaskamper’s surprise, his brother smiled.

“There’s also a surprise for you,” he said. “This isn’t the time for such things, I know, but under the circumstances, I think you’ll be glad of it.” His face then grew serious again. “Hurry up now. There’s no time to be lost.”

Alrontin left before his brother could ask any questions. He washed and dressed quickly, then raced across the palace, down the narrow hallways to where his father’s study was located. When he entered the room, he saw the surprise immediately, standing next to Alrontin.

“Lorq! Fia!” he cried, and ran to greet his friends. Lorq engulfed him in a massive hug, and then he turned to embrace Fia. Nothing on Firma could have made Flaskamper happy at that moment, but the presence of his friends made him considerably more hopeful.

“How is it that you’re here?” he asked them. “It can’t be a coincidence.”

“Battista warned us that Rokey was in some kind of trouble,” said Fia, “so we came as fast as we could to see if we could help.”

“Thank the Goddess for Battista and her Gift,” he said. “Did Alrontin tell you what’s happened?”

“He told us the Order of the Bone took Rokey,” said Lorq. “Don’t worry Flash. We’ll get him back.”

Just then the other door opened. Flaskamper turned and saw his father enter. Then, to his amazement, a strange little creature flew in behind him and landed on the king's desk. He and the others gathered around the king and his extraordinary companion.

"Flaskamper," he said, "you did not meet Outflyer Groog last night. Outflyer Groog, may I present my younger son Flaskamper, and his two friends, Lorq and Fia."

Each of them started at the sound of the dragon's voice inside their heads, greeting each of them. After only a moment's hesitation, they all greeted him in return.

"Outflyer Groog is present," Angorath explained, because the Order of the Bone stole something of great value from his *weyr* – his clan. I am convinced that Rokey's abduction was somehow related to this theft, so I proposed to him that we work together for our mutual benefit, and the Outflyer has agreed. Alrontin, why don't you tell us now what your Interrogation Team was able to learn, and what we're doing about it?"

"Of course, father," said Alrontin. "What we learned is that we haven't much time. The Order of the Bone has taken Rokey all the way to Moribar, which, most of you probably know, is on the far eastern edge of Firma. The abduction was orchestrated so that –" he hesitated, glancing at his brother, "so that he could be sacrificed, in a ceremony that supposedly will bring their God Cyure back to life here on Firma."

"Exactly when is this sacrifice to take place?" Fia asked.

"According to Brandelynn," said Alrontin, "the ceremony will take place at the rising of the next new moon."

"The new moon!" Flash exclaimed. "When is that?"

"Only twelve days from now," Alrontin replied soberly. "As I said before, we haven't a moment to waste," he added into the stunned silence.

And with that, Flaskamper fainted.

Chapter 15

Blind Breakthrough

King Hobar's throne room was packed to capacity. Kyzee and her Guards had gathered everyone they could find into the spacious room – nobles, courtiers, servants and palace guards, as well as the many ordinary citizens who came to court each day to petition the king for one thing or another. The king and queen were also there, of course. So were Jamba and Battista. The necromancer held a small green jewel in his hand – the jewel that contained the only clue to Princess Yisa's whereabouts. Finally, just to the right of the king and queen's dais stood General Yurek, Hobar's Defense Minister and Bodwin, his Minister of State. Bodwin looked dismayed – Yurek, hostile.

Kyzee indicated to the king that they were ready to begin, and King Hobar stood. The chatter in the room immediately ceased.

"My friends," Hobar began. He had the endearing habit of calling everyone his "friend". "By now you have all heard that our beloved daughter Yisa, whom you all know and love, was brazenly abducted from her own bed two nights ago. Our fine palace guards have led search teams throughout the kingdom attempting to locate her, but have so far had no success. One thing that we do know – the abduction of the princess was accomplished with the aid of...a necromancer."

A murmur ran through the room. Hobar held up his hand, and once again, they were still.

"It is for this reason," the king continued, "that we have sought the assistance of another of their kind, for it is our belief that only another necromancer will have the necessary skills to locate our dear daughter."

The crowd buzzed again, somewhat louder this time. Some supported this decision. Others, indeed the majority, did not. Hobar waited patiently for the crowd to settle again.

"I am aware of your feelings," said Hobar, then turned briefly to Jamba, who stood just off to the side, "and while I have no wish to offend you, sir, I must admit that the notion of utilizing the Dark Arts, even for such a purpose as this, does give my wife and I some pause. We both agree with Captain Kyzee, however, that any and all means must be employed to try and recover our daughter unharmed."

Hobar turned back to the crowd.

"Therefore," he concluded, "I now yield my court to the necromancer Jamba, who will address you. I ask that you all hearken carefully to what he has to say. It may be that one of you will be able to provide us with the one clue that we need to bring this entire nightmare to a joyful conclusion. You may proceed, sir."

Jamba came forward and ascended the platform on which the royal thrones sat. He bowed respectfully to the king and queen.

"Your Majesty, you give me no offence," Jamba began, "for I am well aware of the dubious esteem in which those of my profession are generally held. I regret that it comes with the territory. But despite our unsavory reputation which, I must admit, is somewhat deserved, I assure you that the welfare of Princess Yisa is my primary concern here. I only hope that I shall be able to return her to you unharmed, and thus demonstrate my loyalty to you, Her Majesty the queen, and to the Kingdom of Duncleer."

This little speech took Kyzee by surprise, for she had thought Jamba to be motivated only by treasure, not loyalty to the crown. The king and queen also seemed somewhat taken aback, and they both nodded their heads in appreciation.

Jamba then held up the little green jewel for the crowd to see.

"This gem is the product of a spell I cast earlier today," he told them. "By means of the Dark Arts, I was able to make contact with the mind of Princess Yisa. I was unable to communicate with her directly, only to see what she could see, and hear what she could hear. Using a variation of the spell, I was able to allow Captain Kyzee to share this experience."

Kyzee felt the eyes of the assembly fall upon her. She felt embarrassed, as though she'd been caught doing something unseemly.

"Unfortunately," Jamba went on, "the kidnappers apparently took the precaution of obscuring the princess's vision, so we were unable to see anything at all. We were, however, able to hear, and as we

listened to the various goings on around her, we detected, in the background, a sound that neither of us was able to identify. Fortunately the commander is a clever woman, and asked me if there was a way to capture the sound so that others might hear it. There was... and I did, which brings us to this gem. Within this small jewel is the sound that I captured earlier. In a moment I shall invoke a small spell that will release it for all of you to hear. We beseech you all to listen carefully to this sound and, if any of you can identify it, to please come forward immediately.”

Jamba turned back to the king.

“Your Majesty,” he said, “have you anything to say before I release the sound?”

“Only this,” said King Hobar. “Should it lead to the discovery of our daughter’s whereabouts, the person who correctly identifies this noise shall receive a handsome reward, as well as the heartfelt gratitude of your king and queen. You may proceed now, sir.”

There was complete silence in the room as Jamba opened his hand and held the jewel out towards the audience. He then closed his eyes and muttered a few words. The jewel began to glow bright green, and the air all around them filled with the strange rhythmic creaking that they Kyzee and the necromancer had heard the previous day. The fact that magic was being used made the crowd uneasy. Nevertheless they listened carefully until the odd noise finally faded, and the jewel ceased to glow. Everyone remained silent.

“Well?” Hobar inquired expectantly. “Does anyone recognize it? Call out if you think you have an answer.”

No one did. There were a few conjectures, including, as Kyzee had surmised previously, a ship. But they had already searched all the vessels in the harbor, and none, according to the harbormaster, had left port these past several days. None of the other guesses amounted to anything useful. The king and queen were visibly shaken by this fruitless outcome. Hobar’s voice trembled slightly as he thanked and dismissed the crowd. Kyzee approached the royal couple as they, too, stood to depart. The strain in their pale, dejected faces filled the Saebrite with sorrow. For their sake, however, she was careful to make no show of it. To Kyzee’s dismay, Yurek and Bodwin approached at the same time.

“We will find her,” she reassured the king and queen. “Do not lose hope.”

Queen Mara looked up at Kyzee, her eyes bright with tears.

“I know you will do your best,” she said, but there was little hope in her voice.

“Remember,” said Kyzee, “we know she is alive. A ransom demand is certain to arrive at some point. Meanwhile, we shall continue to hunt for her. I’ll turn this entire kingdom inside out if I have to.”

"Your majesty," said Yurek, "I think we've carried all of this mumbo jumbo far enough. I know that this is officially the jurisdiction of the Personal Guard, but under the circumstances I think perhaps that I should take command of the search and rescue operations."

Before Captain Kyzee could respond, King Hobar shook his head.

"I think Kyzee is doing all that can be done, General Yurek," he said. "If you have any suggestions, however, I'm certain that she'd be happy to hear them."

He then turned back to Kyzee

"We know that you are doing everything possible," he told her, "and you're right; we mustn't lose hope."

King Hobar slipped his arm around his wife's waist. She looked as though she might collapse at any moment.

"Come, my dear," he said to her. "You must lie down and rest now."

He favored his Guard Captain with a rueful smile, and then led his ailing wife away. Yurek glared up at the Saebrilite with undisguised contempt.

"I only hope that their faith in you is not misplaced," he growled, then abruptly turned and strode away. Bodwin offered Kyzee a weak smile before he, too, departed. Kyzee's fury and frustration grew as she watched them go. She turned and strode over to where Jamba stood talking with Battista.

"Well, now what?" Kyzee asked them.

"I'm afraid I have no fresh ideas at present," Jamba replied. "I was just pondering with Battista the fact that no ransom demand has yet been made. We find that most worrisome."

"I must admit," said Kyzee, "it troubles me as well. I can't think what other reason they might have for kidnapping her."

"We can think of several," Battista said flatly, "and none of them are pleasant to discuss."

Kyzee had no idea what the sorceress meant, and she wasn't at all certain she wanted to know.

"We had best be going," Jamba said to Battista. "I took the liberty of keeping a few of the hairs from the princess's hairbrush," he told Kyzee. "I shall look, or at least, listen in on her again at home. If anything new comes to light, I shall inform you immediately."

"All right, Jamba," said Kyzee. "Thank you. Thank you both."

The two magicians departed, and Kyzee headed for the Guard's meeting room. It was nearly time for her search team leaders to report in, but she expected no good news. If anyone had found out anything useful, they would have sent word to her immediately. As she walked along through the empty corridors of the palace, she thought back on what Battista had said about the possible reasons for the kidnapping.

None of them are pleasant to discuss.

The phrase now sent a chill through her entire body, and she began imagining the princess being used in some demonic blood ritual.

Stop it Kyzee, she told herself. This is not helpful.

Nevertheless the sorceress's words continued to haunt her, as did another detail – the name that Gimley's ghost had uttered just before he vanished into a puff of fetid air.

"I told you," Jamba had said. "You cannot rely on the words of a ghost, any more than those of a lunatic. You saw how incoherent he was. Had I been able to recall him just after his death, we may have gotten something useful, but we were too late. He was already too far gone."

"But he said the name clearly enough," she had argued, though it was not an argument she wanted to win.

"He just got things the wrong way around," said Jamba. "He probably has no idea who it was who killed him."

Kyzee had accepted that at the time, but had continued to nag her ever since. True, Jamba had experience with ghosts, while she did not. If he wasn't troubled by what Gimley had said, why should *she* be? But she *was* troubled by it, for despite the ghost's previous howling rants, the last word he had spoken had been plain as day.

"Who is it?" Kyzee had demanded, as Gimley faded away. "Who, dammit! By the Goddess, Gimley, do the right thing for once in your miserable life and give me a name!"

And he had given her a name – a crystal clear, unequivocal name – a name she herself had spoken a thousand times in trust and friendship.

Rochilar.

* * *

It was nearly half past the third mark of the morning when Marrow came in to tell Jamba that he had visitors. Though it was the middle of the night, the necromancer was still in his study, awake and fully dressed. For him, this was normal. It was the daytime work he had been doing on behalf of the king that was unusual. Though he was sorry that they had not yet been able to locate the princess, he was somewhat relieved that he had done all that he could for them. It meant that he would finally be able to sleep, once daylight came.

"Who is it, Marrow?" he asked his tall, skeletal manservant.

"Bat-tis-ta and a-no-ther," he answered, his deep funereal voice carefully enunciating each syllable.

"Very well, show them in," he said. Marrow turned silently and left the room, returning a few tiks later with Battista and a ragged-looking old blind man, who Jamba recognized as a local beggar. To the necromancer's dismay, Battista guided the grubby fellow into one of

his finely upholstered chairs. She then seated herself and, before Jamba could offer, ordered Marrow to fetch them some brandy. Jamba smiled and joined them in front of the fireplace.

"You're being especially annoying tonight, Battista," he said. "Therefore I assume you have something of value to offer me."

"You think I'm that transparent?" Battista asked.

"Like a window glass," he replied. "Someday, however, you shall miscalculate, and I shall at last be free to incinerate you."

"You'd miss me," she declared. After a moment, Jamba chuckled.

"Yes," he agreed. "I fear I would at that. Now, what brings you and your aromatic friend here tonight? News of the princess?"

Jamba watched as Battista reached into her pocket and took out his green jewel. When they had parted company earlier that day, the sorceress had suggested that he give her the jewel to take along that night as she made her weekly sales calls to the various taverns throughout the city. The hope was that someone might be able to identify the sound before it became too faint for anyone to hear. Jamba had held out little hope of it producing any results, but had handed it over nonetheless. The spell to unlock it was simple – and one that Battista already knew. Now as Jamba accepted the jewel back from her, he found himself burning with a sense of anticipation that, he hoped, was not showing on his face. He wasn't about to give her that satisfaction.

"I won't keep you in suspense," she said, "since I can see you're dying of curiosity."

Damn!

"The taverns were all full tonight. I started in the Chestnut Mare. That one's always full of forty-year-old men who want to be twenty-year-old men again. I nearly sold out of *King Belgar's Sword* in that first stop. I need to make a note to start making that in larger batches –"

"If you please, Battista," Jamba broke in impatiently, "could we just stick to the subject at hand?"

"All right, all right," said Battista. "You never were a patient man, Jamba. Anyway, to return to the subject at hand, as you put it... none of the people in any of the taverns who were sober enough to pay attention had the first clue what the sound was. I even visited a few places that aren't on my route just to make certain no stones were left unturned. Then, on my way home, I passed old Traegar here and he said hello to me, like he always does, and that's what gave me the idea."

She paused maddeningly.

"The idea for what, for pity's sake?" Jamba asked. His impatience made the sorceress smile.

"Well, Traegar always knows it's me somehow," she replied, "don't you Traegar?"

“Sure thing,” the old man replied, after taking a generous gulp of brandy. “I always know who everyone is, unless a course I don’t know ‘em, if you follow my meanin’.”

“Battista, what in blazes –” Jamba began, but Battista cut off his protest.

“Well, that’s when it occurred to me –” she said, “who better to identify this sound than a blind fellow? Sighted people don’t pay much attention to all the various noises going on in the background, but blind people do, because they have to. See what I mean? So I let Traegar here have a listen. The sound had gotten so faint by then that I could barely make it out at all, but it came through perfectly clear to him, right Traegar?”

“Clear as a bell fer me,” Traegar answered, “though it took me some time to come up with it. That’s ‘cause we was in the city, and it ain’t a sound what I normally hears in the city.”

“And where exactly *do* you normally hear it?” Jamba prompted. The old man took an infuriatingly long drink from his brandy glass before answering.

“Why, out in the countryside,” he said at last. “I hear it every few weeks when I make my way out to the farms. Good folks out that way. Always willin’ to put somethin’ up fer me. All except fer Aldern. He’s a right stingy feller – and a mean ‘un too. Threatened me with his dogs last time I come out his way. Now I ask you, is that any way to treat yer fellow man? Er, now what was I sayin’ before?”

“You’re going to tell me what it is that you hear out in the countryside,” said Jamba, between clenched teeth. “The sound that Battista asked you to listen to.”

“Oh, that,” Traegar replied. Why it’s the windmills, a’ course. Not them what belong to the millers. Them don’t run in the midst o’ winter generally. But the pumpin’ stations...now them they keep a goin’ all year long – klunkety klunk. Gotta keep the water movin’ through the channels, otherwise the whole business’ll freeze up. You follow me?”

“The windmills?” Jamba asked. Battista nodded.

“Deserted most of the time,” she told him, “unless one breaks down. And all connected by underground tunnels. Sounds to me like the perfect place to hide – or to hide someone, provided you can make it warm enough without a telltale fire burning.”

“That’s child’s play,” said the necromancer, and then jumped to his feet. “I think we’ve found our missing princess! We must go to the palace immediately and inform Captain Kyzee.”

“Don’t you want to incinerate me first?” the sorceress asked, swallowing the last of her brandy.

“Not just now,” Jamba replied dryly. “Remind me again after we’ve finished with this business.”

“What’s happening anyhow?” Traegar asked. “What does the windmills have to do with anythin’?”

"I'll tell you on the way to the palace," said Battista.

"The palace?" the old man exclaimed. "I can't go to the palace, Battista. Look at the state I'm in. Would you want royalty to see you this way?"

"Don't worry, my good man," said Jamba. "If what you've told us turns out to be correct, you won't be in that state for long."

Marrow reappeared with their coats just then and, with their befuddled informant in tow, the necromancer and the sorceress left the cozy warmth of the study, and headed out into the frigid winter night.

Chapter 16

Rescue Party

Flaskamper awoke to the feeling of something being poured down his throat. Dazed and panicked, he choked as he struggled to spit it back out.

“Now, now... none of that,” said a familiar voice. “You must drink this all down.”

Flaskamper came to his senses then and realized that it was Valaton, the Royal Healer, who was speaking, and the liquid he was trying to make him drink was fruit juice.

“That’s better,” the healer said when Flaskamper stopped fighting him. “This will get you going again, but you must eat something too. I’ve sent for a tray and you are to stay right on this sofa until you’ve emptied it.”

“Is he all right, Valaton?” the king called from the other side of the room.

“He suffers from a deficiency of good sense, is all,” the old healer replied, “and nourishment. My guess is he hasn’t eaten anything in at least two days. Argema, the animal healer, told me that the horse he came in on had been ridden nearly to death – kept afoot only by rembis leaves. I suspect the prince showed little more regard for his own health.”

Flaskamper finished the juice and sat up, mortified that he had fainted.

“I’m sorry everyone,” he said sheepishly. “I was so concerned about Rokey I – I just didn’t think about food.”

"It's all right, son," said Angorath, "but the healer is right. You must sit there and rest until your food arrives. Then you must eat. It will do Rokey no good for you to make yourself ill."

"I know father," said Flaskamper. "I'll do as you say."

Valaton, who had been crouched next to him, now stood up with a groan.

"You should have no further need of me now," he said, "unless Prince Alrontin requires attention."

"Not me Valaton," said Alrontin. "I'm good as new."

"I must admit that you have amazing recuperative powers," said the healer, "even for an elf. As close to death as you came, I should have thought you'd be off your feet for at least a week."

"We're a stubborn family, Valaton," Prince Alrontin said, smiling. "You know that."

"Don't I though," the healer replied dryly, then turned to the king. "Is there anything further you require, Your Highness?"

"No, Valaton. That will be all," Angorath replied. "My thanks to you again for your service."

"No thanks are necessary, My King," Valaton replied as he departed. A moment later, a kitchen servant arrived with a tray laden with sliced mutton, cheese, fruit and bread, along with a jug of watered wine.

"I'll never be able to eat all this," said Flaskamper, but as he took his first bites, he realized that he was ravenous. In no time, the tray and the jug were both empty and Flaskamper went to rejoin the others at the king's desk.

The rest of the group was discussing various rescue scenarios. A large map of Firma was spread over the desk, and Alrontin and Angorath were having a dispute over the best tactics to employ. Based on the information they had forced from the traitor, Brandelynn, the prince felt that an all-out frontal assault on Moribar was the way to proceed, while the king insisted that a small stealth operation was best.

"A full assault would give them too much time," Angorath insisted. "They're bound to have scouting birds in the air looking for precisely what you're suggesting. If Moribar is like any other castle I've ever seen, they'll be able to button up tight and hold off your forces for – well, for far longer than we have in this particular situation. Better to send a small team to slip in quietly and effect a rescue that way."

"It's a suicide mission, father," Angorath insisted. "Even if they did manage to sneak in and free Rokey, his absence would immediately be noticed. They'd never be able to get out before an alarm was raised."

The two argued their respective points back and forth for some time, until Flaskamper grew exasperated.

“Father! Ronti!” he exclaimed. “We must come to some consensus here. Every moment we stand here arguing is precious time lost. Surely there must be some plan we can agree on.”

It was then that Groog’s voice came into their heads.

“If I may,” said the dragon, “I think I have a suggestion that would incorporate the best of both points of view.”

“By all means proceed, sir,” said the king. “We should be grateful to hear your thoughts on the matter.”

“Very well,” Groog replied, “It seems to me that what this proposed small rescue team lacks is something to distract the inhabitants of the castle while they make their escape. If we can agree that that is so, then I would further submit that I can think of nothing that would distract one more than having a hostile army approaching one’s front gate. So my proposal is to send the small team in to find a surreptitious route into Castle Moribar as the king has suggested. Then, a few days thereafter, send the army to mount a full frontal assault as Prince Alrontin has proposed. The siege should give the rescue team the necessary cover to make good their escape. Of course, it isn’t fool-proof by any means –”

“No it isn’t,” Alrontin agreed, “but it *is* a damn sight better than anything we’ve come up with so far.”

“I concur,” said Angorath. “Flaskamper, what about it? I think the final decision on how we proceed ought to be yours.”

“I think it could work,” Flaskamper answered, “and as Ronti said, it’s the best idea we’ve heard yet. And time is very short.”

“I’m afraid Flash is right,” said Fia. “Whatever we do, we must do it quickly.”

“All right then,” said Alrontin. “Moving ahead with Groog’s plan, the first thing we must do is assemble the rescue team.”

“I assume there will be no objections to my leading it,” said Flaskamper.

“I rather assumed that would be your role,” said the king.

“Very well then,” Flaskamper began. “Lorq, Fia, will you go with me?”

“Of course, Flash,” said Lorq.

“Try and stop us,” Fia added.

Alrontin cleared his throat then and spoke, obviously with some reluctance.

“Flash,” he began, “I don’t want to upset you any more than – well than things have already upset you...”

“What is it, Ronti?” Flaskamper asked.

“I think it is unwise for you to lead this mission, Flash,” said Alrontin.

“Oh, and why is that?” Flaskamper demanded, his eyes flashing with annoyance.

"Because you're too closely attached to the outcome," his brother explained. "Your judgment will be impaired by your emotions."

"I see," Flaskamper replied crossly. "Just who do you suggest then?"

"I think the logical choice would be me," said Alrontin.

"But you can't, son," the king protested. "Who would lead the army then?"

"Cinnador can lead them, father," Alrontin said. "It's only going in to be visible – to act as a distraction. I'm not needed for that. The real danger is to the rescue party. That is where I'll be most useful."

"How did I know this was coming?" Flaskamper said sarcastically. "Little brother can't cut it, father. Let me go in his place."

"I don't mean that you shouldn't go along, Flash," said Alrontin, "just that you shouldn't be burdened with command."

"No, of course not," Flaskamper shot back. "I could never handle the pressure, but you could. You're the perfect one, after all, right?"

"Flaskamper I'm not questioning your abilities," Alrontin argued. "Under any other circumstances I think you'd do a fine job of it, but not with your own husband's life at stake. For pity's sake, be sensible."

"What if it was Mellynda, Ronti?" Flaskamper asked. "Would you leave someone else to command this rescue mission if it was her life at risk, or would you insist on taking the lead yourself?"

"I would insist on taking the lead myself," Alrontin replied truthfully. "But I expect that, if there were any other alternative, father would overrule me."

Both brothers looked over at their father. The king took a deep breath and let it out very slowly.

"Alrontin," he said at last, "I see your point here. Intense emotions can lead to poor decision making in a crisis."

"Exactly –" Alrontin began, but the king held up his hand to silence him.

"I also know," Angorath continued, "that if the situation was reversed, and I overruled you and gave command to someone else, you would never forgive me, regardless of the outcome. Now we all want to see Rokey rescued and returned to us safe and sound, but none of us wants it more than Flaskamper. It is he who has the most to lose or to gain, depending on the outcome of this mission. Therefore, I am going to leave the decision in his hands."

King Angorath fixed his gaze upon his younger son.

"Flaskamper," he said, "this undertaking and its outcome are entirely in your hands, and the first decision that you must make is this one: who is going to lead this rescue mission? Your brother has given you what I believe is sound advice, but I will not humiliate you by making this choice for you. You are a full-grown adult, and I have faith in your ability to choose which option is best."

“You’re right, father,” said Alrontin. “I apologize, Flash. Whatever you decide, I hope you’ll allow me to come along with you.”

Flaskamper hesitated. A moment ago, he had been absolutely certain that he was the best person for the job. Now, he felt doubt creeping in. He had so often resented the fact that his brother outmatched him in every respect. Was he now letting that resentment cloud his judgment? Was he putting his desire to prove himself to his father ahead of what was best for Rokey? Just the idea that this could be so brought a lump to his throat. He took a moment to get hold of himself, and then turned to look his brother in the eye.

“You don’t have to apologize, Ronti,” he said, “I do. You were offering to do a very unpleasant job for me and I threw it back in your face. I let our childhood rivalry get in the way of good sense. You’re absolutely right. I tend to get too emotional even at the best of times, and this certainly isn’t the best of times. If you’re still willing, I’d be very grateful to have you leading us. I’d certainly make a complete mess of it.”

Alrontin clapped his brother on the shoulder.

“Don’t sell yourself short, little brother,” he said. “I don’t think I could have done what you just did. I’ll be honored to head things up, but I’ll rely on you to be right behind me.”

“I’m proud of both of you,” said the king. “You’ve both grown up to be fine princes. I only hope that, when the time comes,” he added darkly, “there’ll be a kingdom for you both to inherit.”

The gravity of the king’s remark brought a hush to the room. Finally, it was Groog who broke the silence.

“If you would consider it, Prince Alrontin...Prince Flaskamper,” said the dragon, “I should also be honored to accompany you on this task. I realize that I haven’t much to contribute –”

“Nonsense my friend,” Flaskamper broke in. “You not only have a keen mind, but you also maintain your composure well under pressure. I have to admit that the latter quality is one that I occasionally lack. I would consider you an asset to the team. Right Ronti?”

“I wholeheartedly concur,” said the elder prince.

“Very well,” said the king. “I do not relish the notion of sending either one my sons into such danger, let alone both of them. But I know that I would sway neither of you in your resolve, even if I thought it wise to try. I shall ask the Goddess to send you both her blessings.”

“Thank you, father,” said Flaskamper. “We’ll need all the blessings we can get.”

Next they began to make detailed plans regarding their route. This was something of a problem, for none of them had much knowledge of the lands to the east. Flaskamper at first proposed that they travel southeast to Waterville, where at least he, Lorq and Fia had been

before, skirting Grand Lake, then continuing east toward Ulgiarra and approaching Moribar from the south. King Angorath, however, had a different idea.

"I suggest that you travel northeast instead, through the plains," he said.

"But father," Alrontin objected, "that will leave us out in the open – visible to their scout birds."

"They will be looking for military units," said the king. "If you dress plainly, like traders, keep our dragon friend hidden and do nothing to call attention to yourselves, your presence should raise no alarms."

"But why through the plains, father?" asked Flaskamper.

Because in that direction, almost precisely midway between Elfwood and Moribar, you will come to a great mesa, upon which sits the kingdom of Nogirraal."

"Nogirraal?" said Flaskamper. "What's in Nogirraal?"

Alrontin shook his head.

"Skamper, did you *never* listen in school?" his brother teased. "The Eastern Plains are where the wild firecats dwell, and Nogirraal is the home of the humans who worship them as deities."

"Very good, son," said Angorath. "No doubt your brother was ill during that lesson. That is, indeed, the generally accepted truth about the inhabitants of Nogirraal. When you visit them, however, you will find that there is much more to the story than that."

"But why must we visit them at all father?" asked Flaskamper. "Surely you're not suggesting we take time out for a diplomatic mission with only twelve days until –"

Flaskamper's voice caught in his throat. Fia put an arm around her friend to comfort him.

"I'm certain there's more to it than that, Flash," she said. "What is it we will gain by visiting Nogirraal, Your Majesty? Something valuable, I surmise."

"I believe so," said Angorath. "You see we elves have a pact with the Nogirraalans, as they are called, a pact similar to that which we hold with the Bronze Dragons. Towards others they are generally inhospitable, to say the least. But if two princes of Elfwood should arrive seeking aid, under the terms of our pact, they will be obliged to give it."

"I can understand that well enough father," said Alrontin, "but what is it you think they can offer us?"

"Besides being excellent fighters" the king replied, "they are also masters of stealth and cunning – highly skilled hunters and trackers who have inhabited those plains for many centuries. I would assume that they know every rock and root from their own mesa to the Great Vast. If a way exists to sneak into Moribar undetected, the Nogirraalans will find it, if they have not already done so."

Alrontin thought the idea an excellent one, and Flaskamper, though he disliked the notion of having to stop anywhere at all, had come to value his father's wisdom and insights a great deal more these past several years. No one else objected to the plan, so it was agreed that they would make straight for Nogirraal at first light.

"We'll have to adopt a moderate pace," Alrontin warned. "If we head out across the plains at full gallop, we'll be spotted immediately. The route we propose to take is flat and easily traversed, however, so I believe we can still reach Nogirraal in just under three days' time without drawing any unnecessary attention upon ourselves."

"Three days!" Flaskamper exclaimed. "Surely we can make better time than –"

He checked himself and shook his head.

"I apologize," he said. "You're in charge here. I shouldn't be stepping on your toes."

"It's alright," he said. "I can understand your desire for haste, but above all, we mustn't alert the enemy to our presence. Now, here's the route we'll take..."

When they had finalized their plans for departure the following morning, they all left the king to attend to his other business. Alrontin went to see to the provisions, and Groog went off to sleep. Flaskamper invited Lorq and Fia to the sitting room of the Princes' Wing so that they could catch up and enjoy one another's company – as much as enjoyment was possible under the circumstances. The prince sent one of the servants after a jug of wine and some fruit when he realized his friends had not eaten that night. When it arrived, he filled goblets for the three of them and they settled down together on cushions they'd flung on the floor in front of the fireplace. Fia filled Flaskamper in on her activities since she had last written, and her reasons for deciding to relocate from Respite to Duncileer. She said little about her grief over Stamford, not wanting to cause her friend any further upset. Flaskamper listened attentively, but he knew that his friends were both eager to hear what had happened between him and Rokey. When Fia had finished her story, they sat quietly for a few moments, eating and drinking in silence. At last, Flaskamper decided that, ready or not, it was time to give it a go.

"There's no easy way to explain what happened," he told them, his voice so full of pain that both his friends instinctively reached out to touch him. Haltingly, the elf filled his friends in on the events that had taken place over the past few months.

"It's all my fault," he said miserably. "If I hadn't been feeling sorry for myself and sulking like a spoiled child, Brandelynn would never have been able to split us apart."

"Flash, I'm sure there was more to it than that," said Fia. "Blaming yourself isn't going to do either of you any good."

"I can't help it, Fia," said Flaskamper. "Rokey is not to blame. He was only doing what he was meant to do. He was thinking of the good of all Firma. I was only thinking about myself."

"I'm sure you're taking too much upon yourself," Fia insisted. "In any case, you must devote your energy now to the mission at hand. Whatever recriminations there may be can wait until the two of you are both safe and sound back here in Elfwood."

"I'm so afraid," said Flaskamper. "We have so little time and, in the meantime, what are they doing to him? What if they're beating him or... worse?"

"I actually don't think they're likely to hurt him, dear," Fia responded. "In a way, it's good that we know he's been chosen as a sacrifice. That means it's very likely that he'll be kept in good condition right up until... until they need him."

"Don't worry, Flash," said Lorq. "We're going get him back." He gave Flaskamper a reassuring smile. Flaskamper pounded the giant's back affectionately.

"Kyzee wanted me to tell you how much she wanted to come," Lorq continued. "She felt badly that she had to stay behind, but there's trouble in the court of Duncileer. King Hobar's daughter has been kidnapped and Kyzee is in charge of the effort to recover her."

"Another kidnapping?" Flaskamper exclaimed. "That seems an unlikely coincidence. Do they know who's behind it?"

Lorq shook his head.

"They know that the abduction was carried out with the aid of a necromancer," he said, "but they don't know which one, or who else is involved...exactly." Lorq did not pass Kyzee's suspicions along to his friends, for she had requested that he tell no one until she had more proof. "So far, though," he added, "there is no evidence that the Order is involved, if that's what you're wondering."

"It is indeed," Flaskamper replied. "Perhaps I am just being overly imaginative, but it would not surprise me at all to learn that the Order's influence had taken root in Duncileer as well. I shall be interested to hear how things turn out. I'm sure Kyzee will get to the bottom of it"

"She told me to tell you how sorry she was," said the giant. "She takes her oaths very seriously. If it weren't for the fact that we couldn't leave little Broq all alone, I'm not sure even her loyalty to the king could have kept her there."

"I understand, Lorq," said Flaskamper. "Believe me, I feel fortunate to have you and Fia, but if Battista hadn't sent you, I wouldn't have asked either one of you to put yourselves in danger like this. You each have lives of your own now, and other responsibilities."

"Nonsense," said Fia. "We all began this quest with Rokey. Stamford thought it important enough to give his life for. So we not

only owe it to Rokey to continue as a team, we owe it to Stamford as well.”

“That’s right, Flash,” Lorq agreed, “and I also want my son to learn that loyalty to friends is important, and when you make a promise to someone, you have to keep it.”

“I’m ashamed to admit that I hadn’t even thought about Stamford,” he told them. “You’re right, of course, and I’m glad you both are here, even under these circumstances. I’ve missed you.”

“We’ve missed you too, Flash,” said Fia. “Both you *and* Rokey.”

“When we rescue him, the first thing I’m going to do is beg him to forgive me,” said Flaskamper. “Even if he can’t though, or won’t... if I can just see him safe and well again –”

“You will,” Fia assured him. “We’re going to see to that. Now, we’d better go to bed and try to get some rest. I’ll wager your brother will have us up and underway at dawn.”

“Oh, no bet, Fia,” said Flaskamper with a smile. “You two go ahead. I’m going to see how the preparations are going. I won’t be able to sleep anyway.”

Lorq and Fia went off to their rooms, while Flaskamper went in search of Alrontin. He found his brother in the stables, seeing to the preparation of the horses.

“What are you doing up, Flash?” Alrontin asked shortly. “You should be resting up for tomorrow.”

“What about you?” Flaskamper retorted. “You’re the one who nearly bled to death. Why don’t you go to bed and let me see to this.”

“Two reasons,” Alrontin replied gruffly. “First, I’m not tired. Second, I’m in charge, remember? Now go to bed. That’s an order.”

“All right, all right,” Flash replied. “You don’t have to bite my head off.”

He turned to leave.

“Flash,” Alrontin reached out and took his brother’s arm. “I’m sorry. I’m just in a mood right now. Go on to bed, little brother. I’ll take care of everything here.”

“If you say so,” said Flaskamper reluctantly. “Just don’t overdo it.”

The two embraced, and Flaskamper turned once again to go, not noticing that his brother’s hands had begun to tremble visibly. As soon as he was out of sight, Alrontin quickly produced something from his pocket and popped it into his mouth. A moment later, a spasm ripped through his entire body. Afterwards, the shaking stopped, and the elf captain resolutely resumed his work.

Flaskamper made his way back up to his old room in the Princes’ Wing, undressed and climbed into bed. He had barely finished praying to the moon Goddess Secta, pleading for Rokey’s safe return, when he fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Chapter 17

Guilt and Grieving

To any casual observer they would appear to be just another group of tradesmen. Winter was not the busy season for trade, but with the exception of the Northern Expanse and high up in the mountainous areas, little snow fell in Firma. This meant that commerce took place in most areas the whole year round. Dressed in their hooded winter cloaks, the two elves could not be distinguished from ordinary men, and the dragon, Groog, remained hidden during the day in the wagon they had brought along. As for Lorq, they had done the best they could to hide his size from casual observers by lowering the seat of the wagon and assigning him the job of driver. It was a bit awkward for the giant, but he managed and, as usual, never complained.

The five-member rescue party had passed no other travelers during their first two days on the road. The first day had taken them back along the same slender forest trail that Flaskamper had raced down only two days before. On the second day, they left the forest and followed the road until it curved northward, at which point they departed from the path and headed due east across the scrubland. Few travelers ever ventured this way, for there were no kingdoms in this direction, except for Moribar, and few tradesmen would dare venture there. Alrontin worried about this, wondering if, even disguised, their presence in this rarely traveled country would put their enemies on alert. There was nothing to be done about it, though. The king had made a convincing argument that a stop in the kingdom

of Nogirraal would serve them well, and was worth the risk. At least, it had sounded convincing back in the safety of his father's study. Now that they were out in the open, Alrontin was beginning to have his doubts.

At the end of the second day, they reached the edge of the Firegrass Plains. In the summertime, the firegrass grew chest-high on an average man. Each blade was thin and flat, bright red on one side, bright yellow on the other. As the wind swirled through the valley, its color would constantly shift from red to yellow and back again, making it appear as though the entire area was aflame. This provided perfect cover for the firecats, which were also bright red in color with jagged yellow stripes, or sometimes blotches. During the summer months, according to the elven scholars, the great cats hunted the spotted antelope, which traveled in abundant herds back and forth across the plains. Then, in late fall, the antelope migrated to the comfort and relative safety of the forest surrounding Grand Lake. The firecats also disappeared at this time, but strangely, no one had ever been able to determine exactly where they went. None had ever been spotted in that same forest, and firecats were not known to be climbers.

The group set up their camp that evening in a small, level clearing just at the edge of the plains. After the sun set, the temperature plummeted, and the group sat huddled around the small cook fire just long enough to eat supper and warm themselves before heading off to bed. Lorq took first watch that night, first stretching out the kinks that had formed in his back from sitting hunched up in the wagon all day, then wrapping himself up tightly in his heavy fur-lined cloak. He and Groog were sharing a tent this journey. Flaskamper and Alrontin shared another, and Fia had one to herself.

Alrontin shook his head as Flaskamper stripped and crawled, shivering, in among his blankets.

"How can you sleep naked in the middle of winter?" Alrontin asked. He took only his outer clothes off before climbing into his bedroll. "Don't you get cold?"

"Not usually," Flaskamper replied. "I have plenty of blankets. I just can't stand to sleep with anything on. Every time I roll over I feel like my clothes are strangling me. Besides, I'm not often alone."

Alrontin was about to tease his brother about his boast, but as he looked over at Flaskamper, illuminated by the glow of their elf candle, he could plainly see that the remark had not been meant as a boast. In fact, his brother looked close to tears.

"What is it, Skamper?" Alrontin asked. "Thinking about Rokey? Look, we're going to get him back."

"We might," he said sadly, "but I wonder if *I* will. I know I don't deserve to."

“Why do you say that, little brother?” said Alrontin. “Surely this wasn’t all your doing. Rokey failed to notice how unhappy you were. Then you turned to Brandelynn for help, and she betrayed you – both of you.”

“I know,” said Flaskamper, “but Brandelynn wasn’t in Oraque, pushing me into bed with every attractive samer man I set my eyes on. Shite, I had hardly gotten past the boundaries of Elfwood before I started sizing up the possibilities. What’s wrong with me, Ronti? Why am I like this?”

“I don’t know, Flash,” his brother admitted. “Perhaps you’re afraid of being alone, even for the space of a single night.”

“I suppose I am, come to think of it,” he said, “though I don’t know why.”

“Well, think about it a minmark,” said Alrontin. “You’ve been trying your whole life to gain father’s approval, and barring that, to at least get his attention. Perhaps charming others into bed is an extension of that somehow. Maybe it’s your way of getting the approval from others that you weren’t able to get from him.”

“That makes a certain twisted amount of sense, I suppose,” said Flaskamper, “but it doesn’t excuse what I did.”

“No, but it does explain it somewhat,” said Alrontin. “You were feeling low and vulnerable, so you did what you’ve always done to feel better about yourself, that’s all”

“Yes, and wound up always feeling just as empty afterwards as before,” Flaskamper said, “that is until I met...”

He stopped abruptly and buried his head in his hands.

“Goddess,” Flaskamper muttered, “that’s even worse.”

“What’s worse?” his brother asked. “Come on, tell me.”

“What’s worse is that I met someone special,” Flaskamper replied, “someone who I actually cared for.”

“Well what’s wrong with that?” his brother asked.

“What’s wrong is it was too soon,” Flaskamper answered. “Rokey and I hadn’t been apart for even two weeks. It wasn’t fair of me to lead Briander on like I did. Oh, I told him the truth. I warned him not to let himself get too close, but then I allowed him to anyway. Then, when I got father’s message about Rokey, I dropped him with barely a word. Ronti, I seem to hurt everyone that gets close to me. Am I ever going to learn how to treat people properly?”

“Of course you will, Flash,” Alrontin assured him. “You’re learning more and more all the time. Why, I remember a time, and not so very long ago, when other people’s feelings didn’t mean much to you at all. You cared only about yourself and your own needs. Since that time, you’ve changed a great deal. You now put others ahead of yourself, and when you make mistakes, and people get hurt, you feel just as badly, if not worse, than they do. For pity’s sake, look at you now. You think of nothing but Rokey, and his safe return.”

“Thanks, Ronti,” said Flaskamper. “It’s kind of you to say, though it’s not entirely true. Yes, I want to rescue Rokey, to see him returned home safe and sound, but I also want him back. Even though I don’t deserve it, I want him back more than anything. When this is all over, and we’re safely back in Elfwood, I’m going to tell him everything and beg him to forgive me. I don’t expect he will, but I have to try. You see, I’m still selfish. I want him back even though I know I’m not what’s best for him.”

“Horse manure!” Alrontin exclaimed. “Now you’re just being silly. You and Rokey were made for one another. Anyone who has ever seen the two of you together has said the same thing. You both just lost sight of that fact for awhile, that’s all. Sometimes it takes a calamity like this to bring people to their senses. When the two of you are together again, you’ll work things out, because he loves you as much as you love him.”

“But after all that I’ve done...” Flaskamper began.

“Look Flash,” said Alrontin, “I know your instinct is to confess all of your sins to Rokey and beg his forgiveness, but I really think you should reconsider. Sometimes the best thing you can do for someone else is to leave them in the dark about your transgressions. Think about it – by telling Rokey all about your bad behavior, who is helped and who is hurt?”

Flaskamper hesitated.

“I’ll tell you,” his brother continued. “You are helped because, in your mind, you’ve done the right thing and told the truth. But what about Rokey? Does it do him any good to know all the terrible things you’ve done?”

“I suppose not,” Flaskamper muttered.

“You *suppose* correctly,” said Alrontin. “Look, I’m not saying you should lie. If he asks, he deserves to hear the truth. But I’ll wager you he won’t ask, and if he doesn’t, the only reason you have for telling him is to make yourself feel better. If I were you, I’d suffer in silence and make it up to him by being as good a husband as you can be. You’ll feel like dung, but you’ll spare him the pain of having to picture you in bed with someone else. Even if he were to forgive you, that picture would haunt him forever.”

Alrontin said goodnight and extinguished the candle, leaving his brother to mull his advice over in the dark. As he lay thinking, a thought suddenly occurred to Flaskamper.

“Ronti?”

His brother groaned.

“Now what?” he asked.

“Did you ever,” Flaskamper stammered, “I mean... have you ever...?”

“Flaskamper,” said Alrontin, “if I *had* ever cheated on Mellynda, I would tell no one... not you, not her... not anyone. I would live with

my guilt and let it be my punishment. I strongly suggest that you do the same. Now go to sleep.”

Flaskamper lay awake for quite some time, thinking about what Alrontin had said. It seemed wrong to him to keep such secrets, but he saw his brother's point. Confessing would ease Flaskamper's own conscience, but would hurt Rokey terribly. If he really wanted to atone for what he had done, the best way really was to keep it to himself, and suffer the guilt. And that was exactly what he would do, if only Rokey would take him back. If only they could get to him in time.

Later that night, Alrontin awoke, drenched with sweat and breathing heavily. His heart was pounding, and his shoulder ached horribly. He felt so weak that, for several minutes, he wasn't even able to sit up. When he finally did manage, he crawled over to his pack, quietly so as not to disturb his sleeping brother, and felt around inside. When he was unable to find the item he was looking for, a panic threatened to overtake him. Then a few moments later his hand came in contact with the small cloth pouch that he'd been seeking. He pulled it out and struggled with trembling hands to get the lacing undone. At last he succeeded, and reached in for the substance he so desperately needed – the substance that the Royal Healer Valaton had expressly forbidden him to have: battleroot. As he chewed the small fibrous section of the potent root, he felt a surge of energy course through him. The rush was so powerful it caused his entire body to spasm, but then the shaking ceased, and he stopped sweating. He would be all right now, but he would get no more sleep tonight. He pulled his outer clothes on over his damp underthings, then donned his heavy cloak and left the tent.

Fia was outside on watch, drinking tea in front of the fire. She greeted Alrontin and offered him a cup, which he politely declined.

“What are you doing up?” she asked him. “You're not due on watch for at least another mark.”

“My brother snores,” he lied. “I thought it would be quieter out here.”

“Well, you're right there,” she replied. “Other than the wind and an occasional owl's hoot, it's quiet as a tomb. Are you sure you're all right, Alrontin?”

“Of course,” he said, a bit too heartily. “I'm fit as can be. Why do you ask?”

“Well, for one thing,” Fia remarked, “I've traveled with your brother long enough to know that he doesn't snore.”

“Oh,” Alrontin replied sheepishly. “Very well, you caught me. I can't sleep. I'm worried about Flash, and Rokey...and all of Firma, truth be told. If we fail in this quest, I fear more will be lost than my brothersmate's life. This feels to me like much more than a mission to rescue one man.”

“It is,” Fia agreed, “though we haven’t yet learned what the stakes are precisely, or exactly what role Rokey is to play. It can be very frustrating, stumbling around in the darkness, not knowing what it is you’re fighting against, or why. We often felt that way during our last adventure together.”

“I sincerely hope that, in addition to foiling this – this *Order of the Bone*’s plan for Rokey, we’ll also learn what exactly their game is,” said the prince. “They’ve held the advantage of secrecy for too long now. It’s time we evened the score a bit – time to shine some light onto those dark ambitions of theirs.”

“Believe me,” said Fia, “I share your desire. The Order of the Bone has taken much from me. It would give me supreme satisfaction to be a part of their ultimate downfall, and the undoing of all for which they strive.”

“I’m sorry, Fia,” said Alrontin. “It nearly slipped my mind that you lost one of your group to them. The dark man. I regret that his name escapes me at the moment.”

“Stamford,” Fia reminded him. “His name was Stamford. He was the finest man I ever knew.”

“I am deeply sorry for your loss,” said Alrontin. “Was he... were the two of you...?”

“No,” Fia answered. “We were not lovers, though I loved him with all my heart.”

“Forgive me,” Alrontin said. “I did not mean to bring sorrow upon you.”

“You did not bring it, good prince,” Fia replied. “It has been upon me since his death, though I’ve tried every way I know to put it behind me. I’ve come at last to the realization that, until the Order is defeated, I shall have no peace. I had never before believed myself a vengeful person, yet every fiber of my being now cries out for it.”

“No,” said Alrontin, “it is not vengeance you crave; it is justice. I shall pray that you find it on this journey, so that you may once again enjoy peace in your life.”

“You are a fine person, Prince Alrontin,” said Fia. “I love your brother dearly, and shall be pleased to count you also as my friend.”

“Whatever his other faults,” Alrontin remarked, smiling, “my brother is truly a fine judge of character, as exemplified by his choice of friends. It does me great honor to be counted among yours.”

Fia laughed.

“You share your brother’s charm as well,” she said.

Alrontin laughed as well.

“If only it would still work on my wife,” he said.

“Your wife is a very lucky woman,” said Fia. “It must pain you to be apart from her, and from the children.”

"It does," he admitted. "They understand that my duties sometimes take me away from them, but it does not make it any easier to say good-bye."

Alrontin and Fia talked for a mark or more, after which she bade him goodnight and went off to bed. Once there, however, she found herself unable to fall asleep right away. She could not get Stamford out of her head. Though she tried to prevent it, her mind traveled back once again to that day at the Monastery – to the day when he was taken from her. Much of that day at the Noble Contemplative was merely a blur to her now, but one part still stood out in her mind as clear as mountain spring water – her final conversation with the man she loved.

After the battle, someone had found the healer, hiding in his infirmary. She imagined it had been Rokey's friend, Brother Ely, but she wasn't really certain. Everything had been in such a state of confusion, and she had been focused on keeping pressure on the dark man's wound until it could be bandaged up. She had not yet accepted the fact that the wound was a mortal one. Although it was clearly not a blow that anyone could be expected to survive, Fia simply could not process that fact. She continued to press down hard, staunching the blood flow. Had she not done this, Stamford would never have lasted as long as he did, and may never have regained consciousness. Everyone who had been able to talk to Stamford – to say their final good-byes – owed it to Fia's blind tenacity. This included Fia herself, and hers was the first face the dark man laid eyes upon when he awoke.

She was sitting next to his stretcher, dozing from exhaustion. She felt him squeeze her hand and her eyes fluttered open to find him smiling at her. Somehow, she managed to smile in return without bursting into tears. It was one of the most difficult things she had ever done, before or since. Typically, his first concern was not of himself.

"Are Rokey and Flash all right?" he asked. His voice was hoarse, and very weak. Fia nodded.

"They've just been found in a hidden underground chamber," she explained. "Both of them are unconscious. There were also two dead men there with them, and it looks as though the entire room was hit by a cyclone. The healer thinks that they'll both be all right though. Hopefully they can fill us in on what happened down there."

"Lorq?" Stamford asked. "Kyzee?"

"Both fine as well," she assured him. "I'm afraid you got the worst of it, my dear. But don't worry. We'll get you fixed up in no time."

A tear came unbidden and fell onto her cheek. Fia paid it no mind, but Stamford reached up and wiped it from her face.

"You never could lie worth a damn, Fia," said Stamford, "but there's no need of it now. I can hear the Piper's call. I know what's in store for me."

“Nonsense,” Fia insisted. “You’re going to be fine. You have to be. We need you, Stamford.”

“I’m sorry, dear,” he said. “I shouldn’t have been so careless. I let that young pup get in under my guard. Unfortunately, he made the best of his chance. The rest of you will have to go on without me.”

“Stam –”

“I think I’ve done it though, Fia,” he told her. “I think I’ve done just enough to atone for the sins of my past. The song of the Piper is a friendly one...soothing...inviting. Don’t be afraid for me. I’m not afraid.”

Tears were streaming freely down her cheeks now, but she made no effort to wipe them away. Instead she clasped Stamford’s hand in both of hers.

“Stamford,” she said shakily. “There’s something – something I must...tell you.”

The dark man shook his head.

“You don’t have to tell me how you feel, Fia,” he said. “I already know. I’ve known all along. I’m well aware of the fact that I act like an insensitive clod most of the time, but I’m not so dense that I can’t tell when a woman is in love with me.”

“But how could you have known?” she asked, a spark of anger momentarily burning through her distress. “How could you have known all this time...and said nothing?”

“Because there was no point,” Stamford explained. “I knew that nothing could come of it, and I didn’t want our friendship to be ruined by an impossible love.”

“I – I realize that you could not feel the same way about me,” Fia replied, stung. “Without this amulet, after all, I’m –”

“No, no, no,” Stamford said, realizing that his clumsy words had hurt her. “It’s not that at all. As far as your beauty, well, it was Rokey that put it best back when we were crossing Grand Lake. Remember? I was in a snit because that captain was fawning over you. I said that it made me angry because your looks were all a lie. But Rokey said that it wasn’t the amulet that was the lie. The lie was actually the way you looked without it. He said that when you wore the amulet, the beauty that showed outside matched the beauty you possessed inside. He said that that was the way it should be, and he was right. I was just jealous of the attention that pretty blonde-haired sailor was giving you.”

“You were jealous?” Fia asked, incredulously. “Even knowing how I look without the amulet, you were jealous? Over...me?”

Stamford nodded, and then was suddenly seized by a fit of coughing. He clutched his side, and the red stain on the bandages grew darker.

“I’ll go get the healer,” Fia said in alarm, but Stamford held her hand fast and would not let her go.

"No," he insisted, when the coughing had subsided. "There's not much time, and I need to tell you this. It's important to me."

"All right, Stam," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

"It wasn't love at first sight, Fia," he continued. "At first, my reaction to you was the same as any other's I should imagine, probably worse. It was Flaskamper who pushed me to help you at first, and then to befriend you. After we had begun traveling together, it still took some time for me to get to know you... and to realize what a special – what a kind and caring and... wonderful woman you were. And I need you to know this, Fia – to know this and to believe it. I loved you before you ever put on that amulet, before your outside beauty finally matched the beauty inside. You must believe me Fia, because I swear to you it's the truth. It wasn't your magical looks that I fell in love with, darling. It was you."

Fia bit her lip and squeezed her eyes shut, trying to process what she had just been told. Stamford had known all along that she loved him. Not only that, he had loved her as well. But if that was truly the case...

"Why?" she cried out. Her eyes opened again and flashed with ire and frustration. "Why did you say nothing? Why was there no point if my looks were not an obstacle?"

"Because of me, Fia," said the dark man. "I was the obstacle, not you. I could not allow love into my life while my soul was so undeserving of it. I had pledged the rest of my life to atoning for the evils I had wrought on others. To allow myself the luxury of love before that had been done would have been a betrayal of that pledge. I know you can't understand that, because you don't have any idea of the depths to which I sank as a member of the Black Guard. If you'd known me then, you never could have loved me. I know that it was unfair to you," he said gently, "but I had no alternative. I had to make amends, to regain my soul once more, before I could tell you the truth."

"And you have regained it," she said. "and so were able to tell me. But now you're going to leave me before – before we've even had a chance to begin."

"I'm sorry, my love," he told her. "I would have wished it another way, but it is beyond my power now. Better, perhaps, if I had not told you at all."

Fia shook her head vehemently.

"No," she said. "No I'm glad that you told me. A few moments of knowing love together isn't much, but it's infinitely better than no time at all. Now I will be able to look back on the time we spent together in a whole new light, knowing that you felt what I felt the whole time."

Stamford reached up and pulled Fia toward him, and they shared a kiss, for the first and only time. Afterwards, he had asked her to

fetch Lorq and, if they awoke in time, Flaskamper and Rokey, so that he could say good-bye to them also. As she stood to walk away, his last words to her were: *Be strong*.

"I've tried, Stamford," Fia said, alone now in her freezing cold tent. "I've tried to be strong, but I've failed." Once more, tears streamed freely from her eyes, just as they had that day. Three years had passed, but the pain was just as fresh and raw as if Stamford had died only yesterday.

"I can only hope that Alrontin's prayers on my behalf are answered," Fia whispered. "Perhaps if I can find justice for you, my love – perhaps then, my broken heart will finally be at peace."

She was still crying when she fell into a deep but troubled sleep.

* * *

The next day they spotted the mesa in the distance. It blended so well into the upward slope of the valley off to the east, even the keen-eyed elves had to strain their eyes to pick it out at first. Later though, as they rode further along through the dry, dead plains grass, the high flat mesa became more and more distinct.

"Do you suppose the Nogirraalans speak Common Firmish?" Flaskamper wondered aloud.

"I certainly hope at least some of them do," Alrontin replied. "If not, I fear it's going to be a very unpleasant visit."

Both brothers started as Groog's voice came into their heads. They still had not grown accustomed to the dragon's strange form of communication.

"Though I have never met any members of the Nogirraal Clan," said Groog, "it is quite possible that I shall be able to understand their communication. As we dragons communicate nonverbally, we are often able to perceive what is being said even in situations where we do not understand the language being spoken."

"Impressive," said Flaskamper.

"And very handy I should think," Alrontin added.

"What about other creatures, Groog?" asked Fia. "Can you communicate with horses or goats for example?"

"Not in the sense that I am communicating with you all now," Groog replied. "You see, animals of lesser intelligence do not form ideas in their heads in the same way as thinking creatures do. They are driven more by instinct and emotion. What I can detect from them is how they are feeling in a given moment. Now, for instance, the horses are – wait, something is wrong."

Just at that moment, the horses stopped and began to whinny nervously.

"What is it, Groog?" Alrontin asked trying to keep his voice low and steady. "Can you tell what's wrong with them?"

"Something is in the grass," Groog answered, flying out from the wagon. "I can smell it now, too – or them, I should say. There are several of them. I am not certain exactly how many, but they are surrounding us."

"Keep calm everyone," Alrontin cautioned them. "Just slowly bring your hands to where you can get at your weapons and –"

Before he could finish his instructions, two enormous red cats emerged from the thick dead grass on either side of the narrow trail. A few ticks later, two more appeared just behind them. There then came the sound of rustling on either side; they were, indeed, surrounded.

"I thought firecats disappeared in the wintertime," said Flaskamper.

"That's what the scholars said," Alrontin answered.

"Remind me to have a long talk with the scholars when – when whatever's left of me gets home," Flaskamper joked nervously.

One of the cats in front of them roared fiercely. He was an amazing creature, bright red and covered with large yellow splotches. One of the beasts behind them responded. She was somewhat smaller, adorned instead with jagged yellow stripes. The first cat roared again, even louder than before. Again, the female in the rear answered.

"Can you sense their intentions, Groog?" Fia quietly asked the dragon.

"I know you will find this strange, given what I have just told you, but not only can I sense their intentions, I can make out much of what is being said."

"Said?" Flaskamper exclaimed. "You mean they're actually talking? How is that possible?"

"I do not know, Prince Flaskamper," Groog replied. "I have never heard anything that would lead me to believe that firecats were intelligent creatures, yet they are clearly communicating complete, cogent ideas to one another."

"And what is the nature of these ideas, Groog?" Alrontin asked over another round of roars.

"They are arguing over what is to be done with us," said the dragon. "The male favors slaughtering us for food. The female behind us thinks we should be brought alive to – I can find no word for exactly whom she intends for us to be brought to. It could be their father, or their leader."

"This is incredible," Fia remarked.

"Groog," Flaskamper asked uneasily, "who is winning the argument?"

"He is," the dragon replied just as the two cats in front began to charge.

Chapter 18

Catacombs

They were damp, freezing cold and more vast than Kyzee had ever imagined. Rochilar explained that the catacombs had not been constructed just to connect the pumping stations. They were a natural creation of the sea and underground streams, both of which had eroded away the softer stone in the area over what the scholars estimated to be thousands upon thousands of years. The caves had been used in the Great Wars to hide the sick, the elderly and the young back when the great city-state of Braccara had stood on this land. There was little history left from those times, but a journal kept by one of the elders who had hidden in the caves during the sack of the city had survived and been passed down and translated through many generations. The original had long since turned to dust, but its first translation into the language that would become Common Firmish was still intact. It was now more than five centuries old and considered the single most valuable document in the scholarly archives.

As Kyzee listened to Rochilar's lecture on the catacombs, she could not help but think how convenient it was that her second knew so much about these caves.

And Gimley had named him.

Where had Rochilar been the night that the princess had been kidnapped? Come to think of it, where had he been last night? He had been fully dressed when they had gone to his home to fetch him in the

predawn marks of that morning. Though she had said nothing of it, it was obvious that he had only just arrived home.

"The trail leads off in this direction," said Jamba softly. The necromancer had used a tracking spell to pick up the path of the most recent activity within the tunnel system. This was fortuitous, for the maze was quite extensive. They could have wandered for days without getting any closer to the princess. As it happened, however, the path taken by the abductors very closely followed the trail markers that the maintenance workers had left in order to find their way from one windmill to the next. It only diverged after they had walked for longer than a mark along the well-established path.

The search party was made up of Kyzee, Rochilar, Jamba and two other members of the King's Personal Guard, a young man named Banat and a young woman, Remilee. Kyzee hadn't really anticipated the need for additional guards, but these two had been a part of the princess's permanent guard detail, and were very attached to the little girl, so when they pleaded with Kyzee to let them come along, she decided that having a bit of extra muscle couldn't hurt. Battista and Traegar had stayed behind in the guardhouse with Lieutenant Shan.

Now, with a lumen orb shining just behind Jamba's shoulder, the five were proceeding as quietly as possible through the bleak and dreary catacombs, listening for any signs of life over the din of the churning windmills. Up until this point, they had heard nothing, but as they rounded the next corner, the orb's light suddenly seemed to dim. Before their eyes could adjust to the change of light, their ears were assaulted by a cacophony of high-pitched screams.

Being by far the tallest, Kyzee was the first to feel the bats as they began to dart and swoop frantically around what she realized was a huge open chamber. Instinctively she began to wave her hands about over her head to shoo the creatures away from her.

"Everyone keep calm," Jamba shouted, not sounding the least bit calm. "Just keep moving forward. They're only bats. They're harmless."

The necromancer had no sooner uttered those words when Kyzee felt something bite into her hand. She cried out in pain and flung the creature off, and ducked down.

"Harmless, my arse!" she cried as another bat sunk its sharp little fangs into her shoulder. "They're biting me!"

By now they were beginning to attack the others as well. Kyzee could barely hear their cries above the din. The Saebrite kept as low as she could, but it did little good. The bats were now landing on her in clusters, biting right through her clothing. The light from the lumen orb was nearly obliterated by thousands of fluttering, swirling black wings. Then she heard Jamba's voice, carrying loudly above the noise.

"Kareth olodor invectus rebara"

Entiac lisistra vol tamin sedara.”

Suddenly there was a colossal flash of white-hot light, followed a tik later by an enormous bang. Kyzee saw stars and her ears rang loudly. However the dozens of bats that were clinging to her abruptly disappeared. When her eyes had adjusted, she could see that there were hundreds, even thousands of the creatures lying motionless on the floor of the cave.

“These are not natural,” Jamba observed. A trickle of blood ran from a bite on his forehead all the way down his face. “I have never known the bats of this area to be aggressive. I suspect they were conjured here to dissuade anyone from taking this route.”

“Is anyone seriously hurt?” Kyzee asked. The party compared injuries and determined that Kyzee had gotten the worst of it, though none of her bites were very deep either.

“It could have been worse,” the necromancer observed. “They could have been venomous or diseased. In fact, I strongly suggest that we consult a healer upon our return, just to make certain.”

The group continued on, stepping carefully over the lifeless bats. Most of them were dead, but some continued to twitch. They reached the far end of the passage, where Jamba led them down another narrow passageway. This one went on for only a few score yards before coming to a dead end. Kyzee cursed.

“Now what?” asked Rochilar.

“Now I attempt to discover where the door has been hidden,” Jamba replied. “I shall need to concentrate.”

His four companions were silent as he closed his eyes and began to chant softly to himself. He placed his hands on one wall then another, mumbling and running his fingers over the cold, damp stone. Finally when he got to a certain spot on the center wall, he stopped moving and placed both palms flat against the rock.

“Ena sobrit illumin contil dyr.”

No sooner had he finished this incantation than the blue outline of a doorway appeared on the wall where his hands were resting. As the rest of the group watched in fascination, the rock within the doorway slowly vanished, revealing an actual wooden door. The necromancer then tugged on the handle, but the door was locked. Jamba turned to Kyzee.

“Locked doors are not my specialty,” he told her, “but I’ll do my best to –”

“Never mind,” Kyzee said, and then shouted out “Stand away from the door!”

The Saebrilite then leaned to one side, and threw out a kick with one of her powerful legs. With a resounding crash, the door was promptly reduced to splinters and fittings.

"Locked doors *are* my specialty," she said wryly, and was about to enter when Jamba grasped her arm.

"We'd better test it first," Jamba cautioned, and picked up a piece of wood that had flown back to where they were standing. Carefully, he tossed it in through the doorway, shielding himself in case something should erupt out at him.

Nothing did.

"Alright," he said. "I think it's safe enough."

Kyzee hurried into the room, followed closely by the others. The lumen orb bobbed in a moment later, lighting the room for them. It was completely empty except for a small brazier filled with warm, glowing stones, and a little bed, on which Princess Yisa sat, huddled up in fear. Her eyes were not accustomed to the light, so she did not immediately recognize the faces in front of her.

"Yisa," Kyzee said, relief washing over her.

"Who – who is it?" asked the little girl in a high terrified voice.

"It's Kyzee, honey," said the Saebrilite, crossing the room quickly and kneeling by the bed. "We're here to take you home, sweetheart."

Princess Yisa threw her arms around Kyzee's neck and began to sob. Kyzee scooped the little girl up in her arms and stood up carefully.

"Let's see if we can get out of here without running into any more surprises," she said quietly to the others.

Jamba nodded and led the way out of the room. They made their way back the way they had come as quickly as they could. Nothing hindered them this time, and before long the party reached the point at which they had first entered the caverns. They climbed out into the windmill closest to the kingdom's main gates, where their horses patiently awaited their return. Kyzee kept the princess bundled in her cloak as she mounted Tressa, her fine gray Saebrilite mare.

"Let's go girl," she said to the horse. "Easy does it now."

Tressa started forward. Though the mare's pace was brisk, her gait was smooth and steady. Jamba, and the three soldiers, all riding their much smaller mounts, had to ride hard just to keep up with the huge horse's canter. It was not a long distance though, and soon they were all back at the main entrance to Duncileer. It was well past dawn now. Normally the gates would have been opened wide for the day, but the king had ordered the city shut tight until the princess was found. From atop one of the turrets, a stocky older guard named Pervis called down to Kyzee.

"What news, Captain?" he yelled. "Is that our little one you have wrapped up there like a sausage roll?"

"It is indeed, Pervis!" Kyzee called back. "Safe and sound and anxious to be back in her own bed."

"Well done, Captain!" said Pervis. "You'll get the King's Cross for certain!"

"Much as I should like to accept the credit," said Kyzee, "it all belongs to this fellow here." She gestured to Jamba.

"Our thanks to you as well then, sir," called the guard. "The entire kingdom is in your debt."

Surprisingly, Jamba seemed to find these accolades discomfiting, for he reddened and dismissed them with a wave of his hand.

"I think our necromancer is more comfortable being reviled than revered," Rochilar joked.

"You'd better get used to it, Jamba," said Kyzee. "You're a hero now."

"Perhaps," Jamba said simply.

The city gates were opened for them, and they proceeded on to the palace, which was only a short distance ahead. Someone had obviously run ahead with the news, for the palace gates had already been opened. Lieutenant Shan stood waiting for them, accompanied by Battista and the old beggar, Traegar, who had provided their first real clue to the whereabouts of the kidnapped princess.

"Everything go all right?" Shan asked as they dismounted.

"No trouble we couldn't handle with the help of a sorcerer...sorry, Jamba, I meant necromancer," Kyzee answered. "Has court begun yet?"

"Aye, just about a quartermark ago," Shan replied. "King Hobar put it off as long as he could, but you know how he is about maintaining routine, even in a crisis."

Kyzee and the others handed off their horses to the waiting handlers, and then all of them, nine including the princess, headed off toward the palace and the king's courtroom. Kyzee looked down and saw that the princess was fast asleep in her arms. She nudged her gently.

"Yisa," she said softly. "Wake up dear. We're nearly home."

"Papa," Yisa murmured. "Want Papa."

"You'll see him in just a moment." Kyzee assured her.

As usual, the courtroom was crowded, but as soon as the people saw Yisa, they parted to let the group through. An excited whisper began to quickly spread among the petitioners. Then the whisper was replaced by a burst of enthusiastic cheering. The king looked up from the dispute he was listening to, and when he saw his daughter advancing toward them, carried in Kyzee's arms, he stepped down from the platform on which the two thrones were situated and rushed to meet them. It took a moment for the queen to realize what was happening, but the moment she did, she too came down to meet the

returning rescue party. Princess Yisa stretched her arms out toward her father.

"Papa!" she squealed as the king swept her into his arms. "Papa, Papa!"

Queen Mara threw her arms around her husband and daughter and smothered the little princess with kisses.

"Are you all right, sweetheart?" the queen was asking. "Did they hurt you? Hobar we must fetch the healer to have a look at her."

"I woke up in the bad place, Papa," the princess told him, the words tumbling out almost too fast for them to comprehend. "It was dark and I cried, but no one heard me. Then the man with the funny voice came and – and then I don't remember what happened. And then...and then... Kyzee kicked open the door. I didn't know it was her at first and I was scared, but then I saw that it was her – and she told me she was going to take me home to you and Mama."

"And so she has, dearest," said the king. "And we shall be forever grateful." King Hobar looked up at Kyzee, and his eyes shone with tears of relief and gratitude. The queen was also in tears and most of the petitioners as well."

"I kicked in a door, Sire," Kyzee said depreciatively. "It was Jamba who found her, with the help of Battista...and this man, Traegar."

Kyzee hauled the old man forward to stand before the king. When King Hobar saw that the man was obviously a poor beggar, he clapped the man affectionately on the shoulder and favored him with a sympathetic smile. The blind man could not see the smile, but he felt the warm hand of the king on his shoulder and himself began to weep.

"I can see that life has been hard on you, good sir," said Hobar. "I cannot begin to know what indignities you have suffered in the past, but I can promise you that you shall suffer no more."

"You are most kind, Your Majesty," Traegar responded modestly, a tear spilling from one sightless eye, "but in truth I did very little."

"Nonsense," Kyzee argued. "We never would have found her if not for him. Is that not right, Jamba?"

"Right indeed," the necromancer agreed. "It was he who finally identified the sound of the windmills, which ultimately led us to the catacombs."

"You see, my good man," said Hobar. "Small the deed, perhaps, but monumental the results." He turned around and beckoned. A moment later they were joined by Rodrik, the Royal Seneschal. He was a tall man of about fifty, whose dress and grooming were always impeccable.

"Rodrik," King Hobar instructed him, "kindly take this gentleman to the guest wing. See to all his needs until tomorrow. We really must get Yisa to the healer, but tomorrow we shall take the time to properly reward you, sir – and the rest of you as well. Go ahead now Rodrik."

“With pleasure, Sire,” said the seneschal with a thin but genuine smile. “If you would care to take my arm sir –”

As Rodrik led the astonished Traegar away, Kyzee now realized that the entire royal family was standing down in the middle of a crowd, and her protective instincts began to assert themselves again.

“Sire, this is not a strategically safe place for the three of you to be,” she cautioned.

“What? Oh, yes of course, Kyzee,” said the king. “I apologize if I’m being foolish. I’m rather overwhelmed at the moment. We hadn’t dared hope – Well, we really must get Yisa to the healer, mustn’t we? Great Endis, Kyzee, you’re bleeding. Are you all right? What happened down there?”

“It’s nothing, Sire,” Kyzee replied. “Just some bats that didn’t care for our company. Nothing for you to concern yourself with.”

“You must get those tended to,” the king insisted. “Bats can carry disease. Mara dear, why don’t you take Yisa up to her room and send for the healer while I...”

He began to hand the princess over to her mother, but the child screamed in protest.

“No Papa, no!” she cried frantically, clutching him tightly. “I have to stay with you Papa! Please let me stay with you.”

“All right, all right,” said the king. “Calm down, sweetheart.”

“She always was a Daddy’s girl,” the queen remarked, laughter blending with her tears.

Hobar smiled broadly.

“And what’s wrong with that?” he asked, and then returned his attention momentarily to his Guard Commander. “In any case, Kyzee, I order you to get those wounds tended to at once. We mustn’t risk tragedy on the heels of triumph.”

“I will, Sire. I promise.”

The royal family ascended the platform once again. Though Yisa’s arms remained tightly around her father’s neck, she had now relaxed again somewhat. The king thanked the crowd for all of their love and support throughout this difficult crisis, and then concluded court for the day, apologizing sincerely for any inconvenience this unexpected delay might cause. A cheer came up from the crowd.

“As I said,” King Hobar said to the rescuers, “I shall send for you again tomorrow, and you shall all be rewarded. Now I must go and see to the princess.”

The royal family departed, but the crowd lingered. Kyzee sent Rochilar and her two guards to the infirmary to see to their bite wounds. Battista also said her good-byes and departed, leaving Kyzee and Jamba alone in the sea of courtiers and petitioners, who now had little to do with their morning except mill about and speculate on the rescue. The two decided to leave also before anyone latched onto

them. As they made their way out of the courtroom, Kyzee noticed that the necromancer seemed troubled.

"What is it, Jamba?" she asked. "You should be proud of yourself. You've done a fine job. The king will be more than generous, if that's what's concerning you."

Jamba shook his head.

"Not at all," he responded. "I have no doubt that King Hobar will reward me sufficiently, even excessively. But something is not right. Can you not see it?"

"I'm afraid not," said Kyzee. "What exactly is it that bothers you?"

"The girl was not bound and blindfolded, as I expected her to be," he replied.

"Well that's hardly surprising," the Saebrilite observed. "She was behind a locked and hidden door in the middle of a cold, dark labyrinth of caverns. What would have been the point of binding her?"

"The point of binding her would be to keep her from removing her blindfold," Jamba explained. "That is the part that troubles me. No blindfold – yet I was unable to see anything when I cast my spell. That brazier alone should have cast enough light for her (and consequently, me) to see her surroundings. And when her captor entered the room, surely he – or she, but let us assume that he is male as Yisa described him – he would have brought a light of some kind along."

"All right, I see your point," Kyzee replied. "What is your explanation?"

"The only possible explanation is that the necromancer behind this cast a spell to obscure her vision, one which was broken, probably when I broke the spell on the door. But if that were the case – if he took the trouble to obscure her vision with a spell rather than by ordinary means, the simplest thing would have been to obscure her hearing with the same spell. It takes barely a word added to the basic incantation. Instead though, he cast a separate spell, one on himself, to alter the timbre of his voice."

"Is that such an odd thing to have done?" Kyzee wondered.

"You are not a necromancer," Jamba said. "You do not realize the price we pay for each and every spell. Even a poor practitioner of the Dark Arts would not deliberately choose to cast two spells when one would suffice. And this fellow is *not* a poor practitioner. While his skills do not approach mine, he is clearly well versed in his craft. No Captain, I surmise that this person chose this course of action deliberately. It is as though he wanted us to hear. There are miles of caverns down there, many of which lie far from the windmills. Even if we assume that this fellow did not know how to adjust his spell to disguise the princess's hearing, which is unlikely, would it not have made more sense to conceal the princess in a spot away from the distinctive sound of the pumping stations?"

“Jamba, are you suggesting that they wanted the princess to be found?” Kyzee asked, shaking her head skeptically.

“That is exactly what I’m suggesting,” he answered. “What I haven’t worked out yet is why.”

“Why indeed,” said Kyzee, “and why, if he wanted Yisa to be found, did he make it so damned difficult? The sound of the pumping station is certainly distinctive, yet not one of the citizens in the king’s courtroom could identify it. If it weren’t for Battista and the old man, Traegar, we would still be running around in circles looking for her.”

“That is indeed how things turned out,” Jamba said, “but perhaps that was not the way things were *intended* to turn out. Perhaps to the princess’s captor, that sound *was* familiar, so familiar that he felt certain that it would be no time at all before it was identified. The flaw in his plan was that, for those of us who have never been to the kingdom’s outlands, the sound of the pumping stations is completely *unfamiliar*. Therefore it was pure chance that we stumbled upon the answer. I’ll tell you something though, Captain. I’d wager a large chunk of my coming reward that, had we not identified the sound when we did, another clue to the princess’s whereabouts would have soon fallen mysteriously into our laps.”

“But come now, Jamba,” Kyzee protested. “What about all the other obstacles? The bats, the hidden door –”

“Child’s play for another necromancer,” Jamba replied, “one of whom would certainly be consulted once it became obvious that the princess’s captor was a practitioner of the Dark Arts. I put it down to carelessness at the time, but I now begin to believe that even that trail of residual magic on the palace grounds was left deliberately. Granted it is difficult to hide such evidence, but our foe definitely has the skills to have at least made the attempt – had he chosen to do so.”

The two walked in silence for a moment, as Kyzee digested what the necromancer had just told her. Finally she sighed deeply.

“All right,” she said. “I’m not entirely convinced, but I’m willing to go with your instincts. Now what we need to figure out is why? Why kidnap the princess simply to let us find her again? It’s madness.”

“It seems like madness because we don’t know the reasoning behind it,” said Jamba. “But this person is not mad. He’s damned clever. Clever enough to have fooled us all – nearly.”

“Could the princess have been used for some kind of ritual,” Kyzee asked. “Perhaps the plan was to use her for their purposes, then let us find her.”

Jamba shook his head.

“The problem with that is that I know of no ritual that would leave the princess so – undamaged. And besides, why go to such lengths in that case? Why not simply release her, or kill her? Practitioners of the Dark Arts aren’t particularly squeamish about such things.”

"If the intention was not ransom," said Kyzee, "and it was not ritual, what does that leave?"

After a moment of thought, Jamba froze suddenly.

"What it leaves is exactly what has occurred," Jamba answered. "The princess was rescued and returned to her father. Captain, can you think of anything else that would go straight to the king these days without a complete and thorough examination?"

Kyzee's eyes grew wide with horror as she realized what the necromancer was saying.

"When King Hobar tried to give Yisa to her mother, she said –"

"I have to stay with you Papa!" Jamba repeated, and then his eyes grew wide. "The princess wasn't used in a ritual; she was enchanted. We've been duped, Captain. We must get to the king at once!"

The two turned and sprinted back toward the palace. Kyzee's long-legged stride rapidly outpaced Jamba's, who was soon panting and struggling to keep pace. This was, he believed, the first time he had broken into a run since childhood. Though he relished mental challenges, he loathed physical ones, unless of course they involved a bed and a beautiful woman. At the foot of the staircase leading up to the family's private quarters, Kyzee paused to speak to the two guards who stood watch there, which allowed the necromancer to catch up.

"Gorman, Razal," she asked them breathlessly, "where did the king and queen take the princess?"

"Up to her bedroom," said Gorman, the younger guard.

"They told us to send the healer there when he arrived," Razal added. "Is something –?"

He did not get the chance to finish his question, for the Saebrilite bolted past them, with Jamba at her heels. The two vaulted up the stairs and tore down the corridor toward Princess Yisa's bedroom suite. They were only a few feet from the door when they heard Queen Mara scream.

Chapter 19

Nogirraal

The fire cats were on them before they could even draw their swords. Instead of coming at them from the front, as Flaskamper and Alrontin had expected, two of the creatures hit the brothers from either side, knocking them clean off of their frightened horses. Another did the same to Fia, and two more launched themselves at Lorq. Flaskamper and Alrontin were both pinned down, unable to reach their weapons. All they could do was to grab the fur around their attackers' throats and try with all their strength to keep their huge snapping jaws at bay. In the scuffle, their hoods fell away from their heads. Barely a tik later, they heard a mighty roar from behind them. To the brothers' astonishment, the animals atop them backed off, and when they leapt to their feet, they saw that those threatening the rest of the party had also ceased their attack. The firecats now banded together, roaring and snarling in what was clearly some sort of conference.

"Groog, what are they saying?" Flaskamper called to the dragon, still hovering above them.

"They are discussing the fact that you two are elves," Groog answered. "The female who was originally arguing that we should be spared is now insisting that none of us be harmed. Apparently the cats are not only aware of the oath between Elfwood and Nogirraal; they are also bound by it. I am truly astounded."

"You're not the only one," Flaskamper remarked.

"Is anyone hurt?" Alrontin asked the rest of the group.

Lorq shook his head. Fia groaned as she picked herself up off the ground.

"I'm going to have one devil of a bruise," she said, rubbing her backside, "but otherwise I'm fine."

The cats had apparently finished their discussion, for they now returned to their original formation, surrounding the party of trespassers. The male in front let out another chilling roar, then he and the other male in front of them turned and started down the trail.

"I believe they mean to escort us to Nogirraal now," said Groog, "alive this time."

"Well, that's a relief. I didn't want to have to hurt them," quipped Flaskamper, then groaned in pain as he climbed back on Finney.

The rest mounted up also. The horses were all still skittish – being this close to a pride of firecats was neither a natural nor a pleasant experience for them. Nevertheless, they obeyed their riders, however tentatively, and started to move forward along the trail once more. The strange procession continued along without further incident until they reached the base of the mesa on which the kingdom of Nogirraal lay. In response to a snarl from the firecat leader, one of the cats bounded off out of sight.

"What did he say, Groog?" Fia asked.

"My apologies, my lady," the dragon replied, "but I was unable to make it out."

Nothing happened for several minmarks. But then, just as Alrontin was contemplating asking Groog to fly up and have a look around, the cat reappeared atop the mesa – accompanied by a man. The fellow was dressed only in a loin cloth and cape – both apparently made of antelope hide – tanned and dyed a deep blue color. His hair was long and thick, and white as fresh snow. The man studied the party below him for a short while, and then turned to the cat beside him and, a moment later, disappeared. The cat roared down to the lead male, who responded in kind, then led them around to the back side of the mesa. Here they discovered the way up to the top – an impossibly steep, narrow trail hewn into the side of the bare rock.

"How are we ever going to get up that thing?" Flaskamper wondered aloud.

"You must leave your horses and wagon."

They all started at the unfamiliar male voice, and looked around for its source. Fia spotted him first – standing just off to the side where, a moment ago, only the seven remaining firecats had stood. Now there were only six, which meant –

"You're shape shifters!" she exclaimed.

"Shape shifters!" Flaskamper repeated. "You mean he's...and all of them...?"

Fia nodded.

“Well...horse shite! Why didn’t one of you firecats say something back there on the trail?” Flaskamper sputtered indignantly.

Fia by now had identified the man as the lead male, the one who, before, in animal form, had argued at first to kill them all. In human form now, he stood naked before them. He was strikingly handsome, with a lean, muscular frame, pale yellow eyes and fiery orange hair, brighter even than Fia’s, which fell well below his shoulders. The only feature he shared with his animal form was his pair of long, rather pointy teeth.

“We did not know you then as Elf Brethren,” he said in response to Flaskamper’s query. “Caution has kept our secret for a thousand generations. Had our Sire not given me leave a moment ago, I should never have taken it upon myself to reveal it to you. Now if you will all dismount and follow me, our Sire awaits you in his tents.”

“But, sir,” Alrontin protested, “we can’t leave our mounts down here unprotected.”

“You need have no worry, Elf Brother,” said the man, indicating the remaining firecats. “Four of my pridemates will remain here to guard your horses, and they are under the strictest orders not to eat any of them.”

Flaskamper studied the fellow’s face, trying to decide if this was a joke. He decided it wasn’t.

“Well we can’t ask for more than that, can we?” said Fia, getting down from her saddle. “Lead the way, good sir.”

“My name is Bengarr,” the man said, and made a slightly awkward bow. “Forgive me, good lady. I have had little experience with humans of late.”

The rest dismounted, and handed the horses’ reins over to their four guardians, who had now also assumed human form. When everyone was ready, Bengarr led them up the steep, rocky ascent to the top of the mesa. At one point, Flaskamper lost his footing and fell backwards, only to be caught by a beautiful naked female, who looked so much like Bengarr, the elf was certain that they must be siblings.

“Oh hello!” said Flaskamper, coloring slightly with embarrassment, “and thanks. Er... my name’s Flaskamper. What’s yours?”

“Kachia,” the woman growled, and then favored him with a toothy smile that made the elf a trifle nervous. When her hand lingered on his backside just a little longer than was necessary, he swallowed hard and hurried to catch up with his brother.

“Making friends already, Skamper?” Alrontin teased, glancing back at Kachia.

“That’s not funny,” he whispered. “I think she likes me.”

“Well, what’s wrong with that?” his brother asked.

“What’s wrong with it,” Flaskamper replied, “is that I can’t tell if she likes me in a *“let’s be friends”* way or in a *“my, wouldn’t he make a tasty lunch”* way.

"Flash, don't be silly," said Alrontin. "They're not going to hurt us. We're oath-bound with them. It wouldn't be proper etiquette for them to eat us."

"Well what about mating etiquette?" Flaskamper asked under his breath. "If she wasn't squeezing my butt to check it for tenderness, then that's the only alternative I can think of."

"Why the panic?" Alrontin asked softly. "You've dealt with amorous women before."

"Yes," Flaskamper answered, "but none of them had the ability to tear my throat out with their teeth."

"It's all right, little brother," Alrontin said reassuringly. "I'll protect you."

"Do you think they even have samers in this culture?" Flaskamper wondered.

"Well, I'm aware of the places where it's still taboo," said Alrontin. "But I've never encountered a society in which they don't exist at all. Have you?"

"No," said Flaskamper. "Not yet anyway. My only other experience with shape shifters of this kind was with the Alahgeerie, during our journey to Glimmermere. The one that guided us was obviously dox. He only had eyes for Fia, even without her glamour pendant. Rokey was the one who figured out that it was the pendant that was making him shy away from her at first. I was so proud of him for that."

Flaskamper's eyes began to sting, and he fought to hold down his emotions. Alrontin put his arm around his brother's shoulder.

"Chin up, Skamper," he said gently. "We're going to win this battle. You've got to believe that – and hang on to hope."

"I'm trying, Ronti," said Flaskamper. "I'm trying as hard as I can. It's just that there's so little time left, and we've so far still to go."

There was little that Alrontin could say to argue with that, for it was the truth. Their chances for success were slim at best. Still, he told himself, a slim chance was a damn sight better than no chance at all.

At last they reached the end of the steep trail and stepped onto the top of the mesa. From this perspective, they could now see how truly huge the promontory actually was, and how spectacular the view. Strategically, one could not ask for a better natural fortification. The single narrow access point made it impossible to storm, and any approaching enemy would be spotted miles before they arrived, giving the inhabitants ample time to prepare for them. It was clear, however, that the citizens of Nogirraal had done nothing to expand upon the area's natural assets, as most ordinary human settlers would have done. There were no walls, no observation towers. In fact, there were no buildings of any kind. The entire kingdom of Nogirraal, if in fact one could call it that, consisted of a smattering of animal hide tents – some completely enclosed, others not – in a roughly circular

formation. In the center was a large open area with an enormous fire pit, several large wooden racks, which they assumed were for drying meat, and also a large, rock-lined pool of water. When Alrontin asked Bengarr about the water source, the firecat pointed out the many rain barrels situated all over the settlement, and explained that the abundant rainfall in the valley provided them with all the water that they needed, and trips to the tributary, located just off the base of the mesa, were rarely necessary.

Bengarr gave them a few moments to look around, and then led them to the massive group of connected tents that belonged to *The Sire*. Bengarr and Kachia accompanied them, while the rest of the cats went off to tend to other business. The interior of *The Sire's* quarters was as sparsely appointed as the rest of the settlement. There were no furnishings or decorations of any kind in the area to which they were brought, only a small fire, which vented smoke through a hole in the top of the tent and some furs scattered on the ground around it. The Sire was there, still in human form, sitting on one of the skins. He gestured for the rest of them to join him. Bengarr and Kachia sat on either side of their leader. Flaskamper carefully placed himself as far away from the female firecat as he possibly could, which drew a small chuckle from his brother, who sat beside him. When the rest had taken their places, *The Sire* said something to Bengarr in their own language, who responded in kind, and then spoke to the rest of them once again in Common Firmish.

“As it has been a considerable time since our Sire has been amongst other inhabitants of Firma,” he explained, “he wishes for me to act as his interpreter.”

Flaskamper considered telling them that Groog could understand and interpret for them as well, but then thought better of it, deciding it was better to keep the dragon's abilities a secret for the time being. That way, Groog could inform them if anything was being said that the firecats did *not* choose to translate for them.

Bengarr introduced each of the visitors to his leader, who nodded to each of them in turn. Then *The Sire*, whose name was Harggra, began to speak, with Bengarr translating his words.

“On behalf of myself and all the denizens of Nogirraal,” said *The Sire*, “I welcome you all to our pride lands. It has been far too long, young Elf Princes, since last our clans met with one another. We shall share meat tonight, and in deference to your customs, it shall be *prepared with fire*.”

“I have forgotten the Firmish word,” Bengarr admitted. Fia smiled sweetly and supplied it for him: *cooked*. Then *The Sire* continued.

“We shall try to make you all as comfortable as possible,” he said, “but as outland visitors are rare, we have little to offer in the way of

comforts. Most of our time is spent in animal form, so we do not surround ourselves with the trappings of humanity.”

Here The Sire paused, so Alrontin cleared his throat and spoke.

Your Highness,” he said, hoping that this was a proper way to address The Sire, “we thank you for your kind welcome. As you may have already surmised, however, our visit is not a purely social one. We shall enjoy your good company and gratefully accept your gracious hospitality, but regretfully cannot tarry in Nogirraal for more than one night. We are on an urgent mission, the outcome of which may greatly affect all of Firma. We chose to traverse the Firegrass Plains expressly for the purpose of meeting with you and beseeching your aid in this vital endeavor. I pray that you will heed our request and give it serious consideration.”

Hargrra did not hesitate to reply.

“Prince Alrontin,” he said through Bengarr, “though I am eager to hear what pressing business brings you our way, there is nothing for me to consider. The elves are brothers by our oath; thus your need is also ours, and what troubles you troubles us. Any request that is within my power I will gladly grant you.”

After thanking The Sire for his generosity and praising his eloquence, Alrontin went on to explain the reason for their visit, the details behind Rokey’s kidnapping and their need to find a way of secretly entering Moribar. Hargrra listened carefully as Bengarr translated the story to him, occasionally nodding his head or letting out a growl of outrage over the treachery involved in the audacious crime. Alrontin also gave him some of the background on Rokey and the Order of the Bone; not all the details, but enough to give the old firecat some idea of the importance of the task at hand. When the prince told them that Rokey and Flaskamper were married, it didn’t seem to upset any of them particularly, though Kachia looked distinctly disappointed. When Alrontin finished, The Sire sat quietly for several minmarks, pondering the amazing story he had just been told. At last he folded his hands and began to respond.

“The things you have told me,” he said, “though shocking, are not as much of a surprise to me as you might think. Being in close proximity to Harrow Yawn and the Wormspine Mountains, as well as to Moribar itself, we try to keep a watchful eye on all activities that take place to the east, the number of which have greatly increased in recent years. This worried us, and we did wonder what lay behind it, but we were unable to gather much in the way of specific information. Questions about Moribar in Ulgiarra, our only real neighbor, are often met with frightened silence, if not open hostility. To what degree that Kingdom may be in league with the dark forces that lurk across Harrow Yawn, I cannot say. I do know that Ulgiarra’s present King, Rinnetohl, in response to some wrong once done to him by a firecat, has forbidden my people all entry to his kingdom on pain of death. It

had always been a tradition for some of our young males and females to travel there, in human form of course, to live and work with the people, learn the common language of Firma and also something about the world outside of Nogirraal and the Firegrass Plains. Most came back to settle here eventually, though some chose to stay. Now that opportunity is no longer available. All firecats, whom Rinnetohl derisively calls “fangers”, were banished soon after his ascension to the throne with instructions to carry the message back that we were no longer welcome in Ulgiarra. Fortunately, we were able to maintain some contacts within the city. Occasionally I send Bengarr or one of my other cubs to gather what news they can. It is extremely dangerous; they must go in hooded cloaks, for their hair would give them away even if they did not show their teeth. However, given the king’s hatred of us, and the strange happenings across the Yawn, I feel that we cannot afford to be left completely in the dark. Now, having heard your tale, I am afraid that our efforts have not been sufficient. All of Firma seems imperiled, yet I knew nothing of it. I shall think solemnly on your news and its implications for my own realm. In the meantime, I can think of no better help to offer you than the services of these two,” he indicated Bengarr and Kachia, “my eldest cubs. I fear that your clandestine route to Moribar is something you will only learn by visiting Ulgiarra, and Bengarr has spent considerable time there both before and since their gates were closed to us. If anyone can help you to discover the answers you seek, it is he. They will also accompany you on your rescue mission, if you will have them.”

“How do you two feel about that?” Alrontin asked Bengarr.

“I am at your disposal,” said Bengarr.

“I too,” Kachia agreed.

“In that case, we shall be glad of your assistance,” Alrontin said, “though I do hesitate to ask you to accompany us into Moribar. It will be dangerous endeavor, to say the very least.”

“That does not concern us,” said Bengarr. “If you will have us, we will go.”

“Aye,” Kachia added, “Our ability to transform may prove useful to you.”

“Indeed it may,” said the prince. “We have no idea what we’re going to run into up there, but we’ll make use of whatever advantages we have. Our thanks to both of you, and to you, Sire.”

“Consider it done, then,” said The Sire when Bengarr had translated their acceptance for him. “Now let us go out to the gathering place. The rest of the pride will be anxious to inspect you. As I said, we rarely have visitors here.”

As they were leaving, Flaskamper took his brother by the arm and leaned close to him.

"Thanks for breaking the news about my marriage, Ronti," he said. "I owe you one. I feel safer now with Kachia off my behind... literally."

Alrontin chuckled.

"Anything for you, Skamper," he said, patting his brother's shoulder fondly.

The sun had set, and the fire was blazing brightly. The smell of roasting meat filled the air, making everyone's mouth water. Flaskamper asked Bengarr where they got fresh meat at this time of year.

"Normally, we do not," the firecat answered. "There is game in the winter, but it is not nearly as abundant. Generally we cure enough meat over the spring and summer to satisfy our needs through the winter. But as you are special guests, The Sire immediately sent one of the hunting teams out to catch something fresh to share with you."

The rest of the pride had come out to greet them. Most were in their animal form, which made for a spectacular sight: more than one hundred firecats, circling and sniffing their visitors (especially Groog, as none of them had ever before encountered a dragon) before settling down around the huge roaring blaze. The guests were invited to sit on either side of The Sire, a place of highest honor. A few moments later, several cats in human form came around with cups of honey mead for the humans and elves, and bowls for the animals. Bengarr explained that the mead was from Ulgiarra, and was a precious luxury now that relations between the two realms had been cut off. Alrontin excused himself for a moment and walked back into The Sire's tent. He returned a short time later with a jug of fine Elven wine that he had brought in his pack for precisely this occasion. When he presented it to the Hargrra, the old cat purred appreciatively, a sentiment that Bengarr did not need to translate. He gave it to one of the servants with a short, throaty growl.

"The Sire has instructed him to serve the elf wine only to him and his guests, and threatened to disembowel the servants should a drop of it go missing," Bengarr told them. "He is only partly joking."

They all sat and talked, about their mission and about their homelands. The Sire was very interested in how such a diverse group had come to undertake this rescue, which led to Fia telling them much of the story of their adventure three years ago, when she, Lorq, Flaskamper, Rokey and their late friend Stamford had first tangled with the nefarious Order of the Bone. Everyone within earshot listened to Bengarr's translation with fascination, and when she concluded her story, the night air filled with a cacophony of roars and growls, which Bengarr explained was the Nogirraalans' manner of expressing their sympathy and admiration.

Flaskamper could not help but notice that, while Kachia had clearly gotten the message about his availability for whatever it was she may have had in mind, Bengarr had successfully contrived to sit

next to Fia and was now chatting her up in a way that clearly demonstrated his interest. The elf wondered what, if anything, Fia thought about that. He mentioned his thoughts to Lorq, who was sitting beside him, and the giant's response surprised him.

"I think it would be good for Fia," Lorq said. "Even though she still misses Stamford, I think she's lonely. A little romantic encounter might be just the right thing now."

Flaskamper grinned and gave Lorq an affectionate punch.

"By the Goddess, Lorq," Flaskamper teased, "married life has turned you into a real romantic softy."

"I was always a romantic softy, Flash," Lorq corrected him. "Now I just have someone to be romantic with."

"I'm sure you miss Kyzee and Broq," said Flaskamper. "I'm sorry to drag you away from your home and your family this way."

"It's all right, Flash," Lorq replied. "I know you and Rokey would do the same thing for me."

"You're right about that, my friend," Flaskamper assured him.

Food was brought around then – sizzling chunks of meat skewered on sticks, the Nogirraalans' version of formal dining. The servant returned with the elven wine and fresh cups for The Sire and his guests, and they all ate and drank together. There was little talking at this time, for the Nogirraalans took their meals very seriously. When dinner was over, a group of the cats performed a fire dance in their honor. The visitors sat enthralled as the cats executed a series of spectacular leaps and somersaults over and around the fire, accompanied by a rhythmic series of roars and growls that Flaskamper assumed was their version of music. The elf overheard Bengarr telling Fia that the dance was an ancient tribute to their gods, one not often performed, and that they were the only non-firecats to witness it in at least a century. The sleek and sensuous bodies of the cats made a breathtaking display, silhouetted in front of the huge blazing fire, and the music that went with it was both soothing and exciting. The entire spectacle brought the visitors more deeply into the world of the firecats than they would ever have thought possible, and all of them – elves, humans and dragon – now felt a special bond with these strange and fantastic creatures.

When the evening was over, Alrontin and his party was shown to their tents. The Nogirraalans had made every effort to make them comfortable, setting up a separate tent for each of them, and piling them all with soft furs to make them warm and comfortable. The visitors each thanked The Sire and bid him goodnight, and when he had retired, the rest of them did the same. Bengarr assured Alrontin that he and Kachia would be ready to join them at first light. The two clasped arms and parted, and Alrontin entered his tent. He was more exhausted than he would admit to anyone, even bolstered as he was by regular doses of battleroot. He crawled into the warm, inviting bed

of furs and immediately fell asleep. The others, each in their own soft nest, were not far behind him.

* * *

The next morning, they were off. Bengarr and Kachia, now dressed in human clothing, rode in the back of the wagon along with Groog. It was their only option, as the horses were somewhat fearful of them, even in their human forms. It was a three-day trek to Ulgiarra. Flaskamper wanted them to pick up the pace, but Alrontin overruled him.

“We can’t afford to be spotted now, Flash,” he insisted patiently. “We’re nearing enemy territory now. We don’t want either Moribar or Ulgiarra to get wind of us now, do we?”

Flaskamper reluctantly agreed, but was quiet and morose for the rest of the day. Alrontin let him be. He knew there was little he could say to allay his fears, since he himself shared them. Once they reached Ulgiarra, they would have less than six days before the rising of the new moon, and the sacrifice they were striving to prevent. It was going to be close... much too close.

Chapter 20

Ulgiarrah

It was a hard trek from Nogirraal to the kingdom of Ulgiarrah, for between the two realms lay a vast expanse of swampland known as Trouble Mire. The party was extremely fortunate to have their newest members along, for Bengarr and Kachia both knew the best routes through the wet and soggy terrain. Nevertheless the going was slow and arduous, and it was not until late afternoon on their third day of travel before they finally cleared the mire and found themselves once again on solid ground. Flaskamper insisted that they quicken their pace for this final leg of the journey to make up the time they had lost. This time, Alrontin reluctantly agreed, and they set off at a brisk gallop, slowed only by the pace of the heavy wagon with Lorq and his three passengers – Groog, Bengarr and Kachia – aboard.

As the sun began to sink low in the western sky behind them, they came at last to the outskirts of Ulgiarrah. Here they made camp in a small clearing in a wooded area just outside of the city. Bengarr had said that it would not be wise for them all to go in, so they had decided that only he and Flaskamper would go – the firecat because of his contacts and knowledge of the city; the elf because of the many useful skills he had acquired during his years on the road with Stamford. In anticipation of the ride into the city proper, they had spent considerable time during their three-day journey getting the horses accustomed to the firecats' presence, so that Bengarr would be able to take one of them into the city.

“It would look far too suspicious for us to show up at the city gates on foot,” he had said, and the others had agreed. Though still not entirely happy with their close proximity to what they perceived to be

predators, the horses were now willing to tolerate the firecats' being around them while in human form, though Alrontin's mare, Stoblee, was the only one that would allow them to ride. So it was that, with the rest of the party safely camped in the wood, the two set off on the last short leg of the journey to Ulgiarrah – the elf riding Finney, and the firecat astride Stoblee.

"The guards will stop us and ask us our business," said Bengarr. "I must avoid speaking too much in front of the guards, for fear that one may spot my teeth and know me for a Nogirralan. Just be curt and evasive as to our actual business. Most people who come to Ulgiarrah are loath to discuss their reasons. The guard will expect a bribe, so have one ready."

"Don't worry," said Flaskamper. "I've handled gate guards before. I think they're all of the same oafish breed, except perhaps those in Duncileer."

"Ah, the great city to the west," said Bengarr. "I should love to have had the chance to see it."

"Well, perhaps you will one day," Flaskamper replied.

The firecat shook his head.

"I fear not," he said, "for I believe it is my destiny to challenge my Sire for the leadership of Nogirraal, and that will be soon in coming. Hargrra grows older now. Soon it shall be my obligation to tear out his throat, and take his place as ruler of our realm. After that, I can leave Nogirraal no more."

Flaskamper grimaced.

"Tear out his throat?" he asked gulping at the thought. "Isn't that...a bit harsh?"

"It is the way of my kind," he said. "When my time comes, one of my cubs shall do the same to me. Thus has it always been."

"Bengarr, I've been wondering," said Flaskamper, then searched carefully for the right words, "do firecats...I hope this doesn't offend you, but do firecats ever... fall in love, or is mating just, you know, to make little firecats?"

Bengarr let out a short growl, which Flaskamper had by now realized was the felines' version of a chuckle.

"Your question does not offend me, Elf Brother," Bengarr replied, "for how else does one learn but by questioning? I suppose we do love, though not in precisely the same way as humans... or elves. We love our pridemates, our brothers and sisters, for we are all family. And we take pleasure in mating, in the act itself as well as the creation of our offspring. But firecat culture is different. It is The Sire who has the right to mate with whom he chooses, and then to designate who else may mate besides him. We do not have the same freedom to – to pair up as you do for reasons of love. I must admit... "

"Admit what?" coaxed Flaskamper.

“During my time in Ulgiarrah,” he continued, “before the banishment of our kind from the kingdom, we were welcome there by most. There was a woman, Shilea...ah but that was long ago. I know not what became of her. But I did briefly experience those things enjoyed by your kind. Though I love my home and my pride, I sometimes miss that feeling – the feeling of... passion. Most of my kind never mate in human form. It is not natural to us. But once having tasted the pleasure it can bring, the joy...”

Bengarr trailed off and Flaskamper did not push him further. The two rode quietly the rest of the way to Ulgiarrah. As they neared the gates, they pulled their hoods up over their heads, hiding elven ears and Nogirralan hair. It was well after sunset now, and the gates were shut. Two guards stood on either side, and when the two figures approached, one of them stepped forward and held up his hand.

“Where do ye come from?” he asked, in heavily accented Firmish.

“Tanohar by way of Waterville,” Flaskamper answered in an impatient tone.

“What business have you in Ulgiarrah?” the guard asked.

“My business is my own,” the elf replied shortly. “But here is my calling card.”

Flaskamper placed a half-sovereign in the guard’s hand. The guard grunted and signaled his companion.

“Open up!” the other guard called inside. A moment later the huge wooden gate groaned open.

“Mind yerselves,” the guard said. “The sound o’ that gate is like a dinner bell for cutthroats.”

Flaskamper nodded thanks to him as he and Bengarr proceeded into the city. Once they had cleared the gatehouse, Bengarr took the lead, taking them immediately off to the right, down a set of narrow, uneven side streets. A light rain had begun to fall. The climate was warmer here in the southeastern part of Firma, and though it grew bitterly cold at times during these winter months, snow was a rare occurrence here. The exception to this was Moribar, located higher up in the Wormspine Mountains.

Finally the firecat stopped on a deserted, nondescript road in front of a partially open doorway. Yellow light from the interior lit up the swirling raindrops as it spilled out onto the blue-gray cobblestones. The faded sign above the door read *The Slaughtered Boar*.

“Charming,” Flaskamper muttered, as he read the sign.

“I have but one friend in Ulgiarrah who I think can help us,” said Bengarr. “He conducts most of his business dealings from here, so this is the most likely place for us to find him. If he is not here, there are other places to look - places that are less appealing.”

“Great,” the elf replied.

They tied up their horses alongside several others already at the hitching rail and headed into the tavern. Flaskamper was reluctant to

leave them unguarded, but the only choice was for him to stay outside with them, and his curiosity got the better of him.

Inside the room was crowded, with hardly a table or stool free. Raucous laughter and loud conversation blended with the music of a heavy-set woman on the stage platform, who was energetically belting out a bawdy song while accompanying herself on an old gittern. Pipe and cigar smoke thickened the air, giving the entire scene a sort of dream-like quality. Though he remained alert, a part of Flaskamper began to relax. This was a familiar scene to him, for he had frequented seedy taverns in kingdoms throughout the land. They were in danger here, and the reasons for their visit were grave; nevertheless a side of him would always feel at home in this sort of dense, ale-soaked atmosphere.

It took Bengarr a moment to get his bearings, but he soon spotted the man he was looking for. Motioning for the elf to follow, he led the way through the crowded room toward the bar, which ran the entire length of the room. At its far end sat a man who Flaskamper figured to be somewhere in his late-thirties, about Stamford's age when – when he last saw him. He wore a dark green woolen cloak that had seen better days. But then again, so had the man. He sported a few days growth on his chin, though not enough to be considered a beard. His eyes were red and puffy, and his nose had a permanent reddish hue – the sign of a man who drank most of his meals. Bengarr slid into the empty space next to the man without acknowledging him. Flaskamper sidled up next to the firecat and they each ordered an ale. Then the elf busied himself at being invisible as his companion got down to business.

Or rather didn't. The three sat contemplating their tankards in complete silence for several minmarks before anyone spoke. At last, it was the man who broke the silence.

"Bengarr, long time," he said simply.

The firecat acknowledged the truth of this with a nod.

"There's something I need," Bengarr said, after a bit more time had passed.

"Indeed," said the man, "why else would ye be 'ere." He sighed heavily. "All right, what it is this time?"

Bengarr leaned closer to the man, but Flaskamper's sensitive ears could still pick out their conversation above the din.

"I need a back route into the kingdom of Moribar," Bengarr muttered softly.

"MOR-" the man caught himself in time. "Moribar," he said more quietly. "Why the bloody blazes would ye want to go there for Bengarr? Why would anyone?"

"It's better that you don't know, Sturgrin," said Bengarr. "It's a dangerous errand... but a vital one."

“Vital my arse,” Sturgrin whispered sharply. “If ye get caught trespassin’ in... in that place... yer vitals’ll be hangin’ on a spike afore ye can say ‘Lil’s knickers’.”

“I don’t need a lecture, Sturgrin,” Bengarr growled. “I need a way in. Whatever the price.”

A full minmark passed, during which Flaskamper began to fear that he would refuse to help them. But then the man heaved another heavy sigh.

“Well, money’s another matter,” he said. “For my part of it...this clears things between ye an’ me...got it?”

Bengarr nodded.

“The feller we need to see don’t owe ye nuthin’ though, nor me neither,” said Sturgrin. “So it’s gunna cost a dear ducat, if ‘e’ll even agree at all...an’ I ain’t so sure as ‘e will.”

“He will,” Bengarr said, his voice stone cold.

The man grunted and got down off his barstool.

“All right, follow me,” he said. “And don’t lose yer little friend. ‘E’s a mite too pretty to get lost where we’re goin’.”

“My *little friend* can take care of himself,” Bengarr assured him.

“As ye please,” said Sturgrin. “but should ‘e wind up arse end up in an alleyway, jus’ don’t say I didn’t warn ye.”

They left the tavern and the two went to retrieve their mounts, but Sturgrin stopped them.

“Ye best leave those ‘ere,” he said. “They’s a damn sight safer here than where we’re goin’.”

Though hesitant, they took the man’s advice and left the horses tied to the rail. Sturgrin led them through the maze of mostly deserted streets. Aside from the occasional howl of a cat or scuttling of a rodent, this section of the city was eerily quiet. As they progressed, the streets grew distinctly smaller and dirtier, until they entered an area so run down that it reminded Flaskamper of the visit he had made to Duncileer’s Underside with Rokey and Battista. The memory stung him.

We’re coming for you, chatka. Just hang on.

Sturgrin finally came to a halt in front of an old, weathered door attached to a dilapidated building – one of many lining the streets in this particular neighborhood. Bengarr’s friend reached up and knocked once... then twice... then once more – clearly a code of some kind. A few moments later the door opened and a pale face peered out. The wisp of a woman studied them with suspicion. She was dressed in what could only be described as rags, her thin arms and legs poking out from the tattered cloth like twigs; her brown hair was long and stringy.

“*Cho benes?*” she asked nervously.

Sturgrin answered her back in what Flaskamper assumed was Ulgiarran, handing her a coin. Somewhat reluctantly, she stood aside

so that they could come in. The room they entered smelled of mold and dry rot...and something else. It took a moment for Flaskamper to place the strange, distinctive odor, but at last he recognized it.

Stillweed. This was a drug parlor.

The elf had been in one only once before, not to partake, but to retrieve someone. The person in question had been a wealthy merchant's daughter, and the merchant had employed Stamford and Flaskamper to find her and bring her back to him. The trail eventually led them to a place similar to this – a rickety old building where those who had become enslaved by the addictive stillweed gathered to smoke themselves into mindless oblivion.

"If the person we're going to see is a stillweed addict," Flaskamper whispered to Bengarr, "I should treat with great skepticism any information he might give us."

Sturgrin chuckled.

Don't ye worry, friend," he said. "The man we're goin' to see provides it, but 'e don't smoke it 'imself."

The woman led them through a large, dimly lit room. On either side of them, men and women lay on an assortment of straw mats, cots and blankets, smoking pipes filled with the intoxicating plant. Some of them were talking to themselves or, more likely, to others they imagined were in the room with them. Stillweed tended to cause powerful hallucinations.

On the other side of the room she led them through another door into a narrow hallway. Here a large window, wide open but secured with iron bars, dissipated most of the drug fumes. At the end of this hall was a third door. The woman paused, and then knocked on it quietly. From inside, a voice told them to enter. The woman opened the door and gestured for them to go in. Once they had, she quickly disappeared, closing the door behind her.

The office they entered was slightly less shabby than the rest of the building – but only slightly. There was a beat-up green velvet sofa along one wall, and in the opposite corner, an old desk with two chairs in front of it. The walls were bare and the one window in the room was boarded up. Behind the desk sat the man they had come to see.

"Ricktas," said Sturgrin, by way of a greeting.

Flaskamper studied the man who was, at the moment, studying them. He was large and heavily built; his barrel chest and muscular arms barely fit into the tunic he was wearing. He had thinning gray and black hair, a wide, cruel mouth and his eyes... Flaskamper had seen eyes like his before – black and cold; the eyes of a man to whom misery and death were second nature. Not someone to be crossed lightly, if one wanted to keep living.

“What have you brought me, Sturgrin,” Ricktas said in perfect Common Firmish. He was clearly not a man who wasted time on pleasantries. Sturgrin got straight to the point.

“My friends ‘ere ‘ave a need,” he said, “and the money to pay for it. I thought you would be the one who could get it for ‘em.”

“I can get anything,” Ricktas said. It was not a boast – merely a statement of fact. He gestured to the two empty chairs. Sturgrin and Bengarr sat. Flaskamper remained standing and alert. A drug parlor was not a safe place to be under any circumstances.

“All right,” the man said to Bengarr when they were seated. “What is this *need* of yours?”

“We need a route to Moribar,” said Bengarr. “One that will take us there without the inhabitants knowing it.”

Ricktas grunted.

“Well, well,” he said. “That’s a little more interesting than most of my requests. Why do you want to sneak into Moribar?”

“You will, I trust, forgive me if I decline to answer that question,” said Bengarr.

Sturgrin stiffened nervously, but the big man only laughed.

“I really didn’t expect you would,” he said. “I won’t waste your time being coy. I can get what you want. Now don’t waste mine trying to haggle the price. I already know you’ll pay whatever I ask. The price is fifty gold sovereigns, all in advance.”

Bengarr looked back at Flaskamper. The elf studied the man intently for a few moments, then shrugged and dug his purse out from under his cloak. They had plenty of money; King Angorath had seen to that. This was a hefty chunk to lay out on blind faith, but Flaskamper knew better than to try and negotiate. He placed the gold on the desk, hoping as he did so that there was honor among thieves here in Ulgiarra. Ricktas took out his purse and swept the coins into it.

“Wait here,” he said, and strode toward the door.

“Uh –” Flaskamper began.

The big man paused at the door and gave the elf a chilling smile.

“Don’t worry, sonny,” he said. “If I’d wanted to steal your gold, your guts would be on the floor by now.”

With that he left, closing the door behind him.

“Great Goddess!” Flaskamper exclaimed in a hushed undertone. “I’ve met some scary fellows in my time, but that one takes it. Brrr.”

“For the kind of thing ye two are looking for, one doesn’t exactly go askin’ around the Mapmakers’ Guild,” said Sturgrin. “Ricktas is the one feller I know of who can produce a hot item such as the one yer seeking – that is, without alertin’ lots of folks ye don’t want alerted.”

They waited. And waited. Flaskamper began pacing the floor, muttering to himself. He didn’t care about the money, but if this lead went down the drain, their hopes of rescuing Rokey went with it. Sturgrin assured the elf that Ricktas would return with the goods, but

nothing would make Flaskamper feel better until he witnessed that for himself.

At last, more than a mark later by Flaskamper's reckoning, the man did return, carrying what appeared to be a rolled up map. The elf breathed a small sigh of relief. Was it any good though? They would not know for sure until long after they had left the city. Ricktas handed the map to Bengarr, who opened it up and studied it by the light of the lamp on the desk. Flaskamper looked on over his shoulder.

"It looks genuine enough," Bengarr said after a few minmarks of study. "It takes us across Harrow Yawn at a point behind Hattiar Mountain."

Hattiar Mountain, Flaskamper thought, *where Stamford had spent many years as a prisoner, deep in its mines.*

"It means cutting a long path through Gloomsveldt," the firecat continued. "I've heard many unpleasant stories about the haunted wood."

"It's all a load o' dung," said Sturgrin, "just stories to make the kiddies behave. There ain't no such thing as ghosts."

Flaskamper knew otherwise, for he had actually met one before – in Glimmermere. But this he kept to himself.

"If you are satisfied, gentlemen," said Ricktas, "I do have a business to run."

The mousy woman appeared at the door again and showed them out. When they were safely on the other side of the door, Flaskamper heaved a huge sigh.

"Whew. I'm glad that's over with," he said. "Now let's get out of here while our luck holds out."

This turned out to be a fateful statement, for although they reached the tavern without incident, no sooner had Flaskamper and Bengarr retrieved their horses when all three of them suddenly found themselves surrounded by a dozen members of the king's infamous Black Guard. Had Flaskamper brought his sword, he might have been tempted to fight, though the odds would have been hopeless. Not only were the guards on horseback, but half of them were armed with crossbows. However, since Ulgiarra had not allowed the wearing of heavy arms within its walls, the elf had left his sword at their encampment to avoid a problem at the gate. He carried only a dagger, which the guards promptly confiscated along with his purse. Sturgrin's nasty-looking curved blade was also taken. Bengarr carried nothing, though it was him in whom the guards were chiefly interested. One of the men threw back each of their hoods and uttered a cry when the firecat's bright orange hair was revealed.

"So our information was correct," the guard captain said. "There was a *fanger* sneakin' about amongst us, and in the company of an elf, no less. Ye'll soon wish you'd stayed in your own forest, boy.

Cadrin, bind em good. We don't want 'em slippin' away from us. Yer all under arrest fer violatin' the king's law."

The three of them were bound, hands behind their backs, then placed on their horses and led off through the darkened streets of the city. The trek was long – clear to the other side of Ulgiarrah – to the king's castle, an imposing black stone edifice built up on an embankment not only to maximize security, but in order to tower over all other structures in the city. Once they arrived, their horses were taken to the stables, and the prisoners were handed over to a group of dungeon guards.

"This one goes straight down to the Workroom," one guard instructed the others with a smirk, and the firecat was led away. Flaskamper and Sturgrin were chained to the walls of a damp, narrow cell just off the main corridor of the prison.

"Uh, just out of curiosity, where exactly is the Workroom?" Flaskamper asked one of the guards. The guard laughed menacingly.

"Down in the guts," he replied, pointing at the floor. "Ye might just see it fer yerself after yer sentencin', that is, if they don't decide just to hang you instead."

The cell door clanged shut, and they heard the guard whistling as he made off down the long corridor. After that, there was only silence.

Chapter 21

Recriminations

The king was dead. Even as Kyzee worked to try and breathe life back into him, a part of her knew that it was no use. It had been nearly a quartermark since she began compressing his chest and breathing air into his lungs. Jamba had told her it would do no good – that the king had fallen victim to the spell known as the *Cockatrice Gaze*, which at very close range was always fatal. Yet she continued anyway, cursing at the king, at the person behind this, but mostly at herself for allowing it to happen.

Off to one side, Queen Mara sat on the princess's bed, holding her daughter tightly in her arms. Yisa was crying hysterically. Kyzee finally found the presence of mind to advise the stricken Mara (as gently as she could manage) to take the princess to her own quarters and to wait there. Queen Mara stood and walked out of the room, a blank expression on her face. The healer who had been summoned to examine Yisa finally arrived, but now was faced with the grim task of pronouncing the King of Duncileer officially dead. Soberly, he retrieved a sheet from the princess's bed and spread it over King Hobar's body, gingerly, as one would cover a sleeping child. He then went off to see to the queen and princess.

Kyzee felt dazed, and numb with the shock of what had just occurred. As she and Jamba had come running up the stairs only a few minmarks before, Queen Mara had begun to scream. They reached the princess's suite and flung open the door just in time to see the king fall straight backwards onto the floor, rigid as a stone

statue. Yisa, who had been in his arms, fell on top of him. The princess continued to stare at him for a moment, her eyes glazed and sightless. Then she seemed to come around, as though awakening from a trance. She saw her father lying there motionless and began to scream along with her mother.

“What happened?” Kyzee had demanded as she fell on her knees to attend to the king.

Queen Mara stopped screaming, but could say nothing at first. Finally she managed to haltingly describe what had just taken place. As the king was carrying Yisa to her bed, the princess’s eyes had suddenly begun to glow an eerie red. King Hobar had abruptly begun to gasp and choke. Queen Mara began to scream as he staggered backwards into the sitting room, then toppled back lifeless, just as he was now.

“It’s the *Cockatrice Gaze*,” said Jamba.

“Well undo it, dammit!” Kyzee had screamed at him. “If you know what’s wrong with him then fix it!”

“I’m sorry Captain, but there is no *fix* for that spell,” the necromancer replied gravely. “At the distance he was from the princess when the spell was invoked, he was no doubt dead before he even fell to the floor.”

“Like blazes,” Kyzee insisted, and had begun trying to blow air into King Hobar’s mouth to get him to breathe.

But Jamba had been right. All her efforts had come to nothing; her king was dead. Kyzee gave up her efforts to revive him and stood, trembling with rage and grief, wanting badly to hurt someone - anyone. For several minmarks, Jamba dared not speak to her, for fear that he would become that someone. Finally, the Saebrilite was able to take hold of her emotions. She heard a commotion outside and opened the door to find Lieutenant Shan and two more guards running up the stairs, the guards below having summoned reinforcements.

“Captain, what’s happened?” he called. “Is he - ?”

“What’s happened, Shan, is that our foe has outwitted us all,” she said between clenched teeth. “King Hobar is dead.”

“Dead?” he repeated in a whisper. “Great Gods!” He arrived at the door and looked past her into the room, and at the shrouded body.

Kyzee took a deep breath and set her shoulders back.

“The bastard is *not* going to get away with this,” she declared. “He’s been leading us a dance all this time, but it’s going to stop now. Before I give General Yurek his wish and resign my commission, I’m going to nail this monster to the dungeon wall. Shan, take two guards with you and go find Rochilar.”

“Yes Captain,” he said. “What should we do when we find him?”

“Arrest him,” she replied.

* * *

Rochilar paced back and forth in his cell. It seemed like marks had passed, though it had been only a little more than a halfmark since he had been brought in by Lieutenant Shan and two other guards. When he questioned them about the reason for this insane action, they had refused to tell him anything at all except that it was on Kyzee's orders.

He heard the rattling of the door locks at the end of the cellblock, then heavy footfalls coming down the long corridor. She was coming. At last he would get some answers.

Kyzee opened up the door to his cell and entered. He looked up at her, his eyes burning with anger and humiliation.

"Kyzee, what in blazes is this all about?" he demanded.

"The king is dead," she responded succinctly. "He was murdered just over two marks ago."

Rochilar took a step back and sat heavily down on the cell's stone bed.

"Dead?" he repeated in disbelief. "Who? How? Was the assassin caught?"

"It is *I* who need some answers from *you*, Rochilar," Kyzee went on, ignoring his questions.

Rochilar stared at her, the truth dawning on him at last.

"Gods Kyzee," he said. "You think I'm involved somehow? How could you possibly think such a thing?"

"What I think – no, what I *know* – is that there are unanswered questions regarding your behavior, Rochilar," she said. "With our king now lying dead, it is critical that these inconsistencies be explained to my satisfaction."

"What inconsistencies?" he asked. "What questions are you talking about?"

"Where were you on the night the princess was kidnapped?"

"I was at home," he replied, a bit too quickly.

"You're lying, Captain," she said icily. "That is an extremely unwise thing for you to do at this moment. I have always considered you a friend, but I cannot disregard the fact that during several critical moments this past week, you have been mysteriously absent. I need to know why that is and I need to know now. Otherwise you leave me no alternative but to think the worst of you."

Rochilar sighed and hung his head.

"All right," he said, "but can we keep it between us?"

"You *must* know that I can't make you any such assurances, Rochilar," said Kyzee. "We're talking about regicide damn it, not the theft of a melon. Now tell me the truth – where have you been sneaking off to at nights, and why?"

"Gods, it seems so silly now, under these circumstances," he said, trembling slightly, "so silly I'm afraid you won't believe it."

“Try me,” she said curtly.

“All right,” he said. “The truth is... I’m in love.”

“Don’t be coy Rochilar,” Kyzee snapped. “You’re trying my patience.”

“I’m not being coy; I’m telling you the truth,” he insisted. “For the first time in my life, I’ve fallen completely and totally in love.”

“Horse shite!” Kyzee exclaimed. “What does being in love have to do with sneaking around at nights? Last I knew it wasn’t a crime.”

“Try telling that to his *father*,” said Rochilar. “Loren – that’s his name – Loren is the only son of one of Duncileer’s wealthiest merchants, and he can’t abide the fact that his son is a samer. He’s arranged a dox marriage for him to some other rich merchant’s daughter and threatened to disinherit him if he doesn’t go through with it. We’ve kept our affair a secret while he attempts to talk his father out of the whole thing. It’s been dreadful, Kyzee, and I know it’s just as dreadful for me to have been sneaking out to meet a lover with all that’s been going on, but he’s been so lonely and despondent about it all I – I just couldn’t help but go to him when I could. I know I should have told you before. It just never occurred to me that you might think – Gods Kyzee, you do believe me don’t you?”

“Let’s say for a moment that I don’t,” said Kyzee. “Would this mysterious lover of yours be willing to back up your story?”

“Of course,” said Rochilar, “except –”

“Except what?” Kyzee asked.

“Except that he left with his father this morning for Moorhead,” Rochilar said miserably. “They’ll be gone for a month at least. We spent the night together last night to – to say goodbye.”

“You have to admit that’s awfully convenient, Rochilar,” said Kyzee skeptically.

“I know it is,” he replied miserably. “I know, but I’m telling you the truth. I swear on my soul I would never harm King Hobar. If his assassin is still at large, I want him as much as you do.”

Kyzee wanted to believe him. She *did* believe him. But now for the first time in her life, she found herself unable to trust her own judgment. After all, whoever was responsible for this had been manipulating her this entire time. Who better equipped than a friend to accomplish that? And his story was ridiculous, but in a way, that made it all the more believable. Why would someone smart enough to fool everyone all this time make up such a weak and unlikely tale? On the other hand, while impossible to prove, his tale was equally impossible to *disprove*, at least in the short term. As far as his reaction to news of the king’s death, Kyzee had noticed nothing odd about that. He had behaved exactly as one would expect a soldier of the Guard to behave upon learning of –

Abruptly her mind shifted gears, and something clicked – a slip, just the tiniest little slip. It had escaped her attention at the time, but

now it shone in her memory like a beacon. It was not enough though. She would need more.

She looked back down at Rochilar, who was studying her face expectantly, waiting for her answer.

Not yet, Captain, she thought. *Not until I have what I need.*

Without a word, she spun around and left the cell, closing and locking the big metal door behind her. Rochilar called after her, but she didn't hear him. She was busy formulating a plan – a plan to trap a murderer. Lieutenant Shan was waiting for her at the end of the corridor.

“Captain, what’s this all about?” he asked. “Do you think Rochilar is involved in all this?”

Kyzee hesitated. She needed more time to think. But there was no time. She suspected that General Yurek was probably already calling for her head and under the circumstances, the other ministers might be inclined to let him have it. Well, he would have her resignation, but first she would have her killer.

“I don’t know, Shan,” she said, “I still need more evidence before I can accuse anyone. What I need you to do is to first go to The Underside and fetch the necromancer, Jamba for me. It’s getting dark so bring one or two of the other guards with you. Tell him I must see him urgently and escort him back here to my office. After that I want you to search Rochilar’s quarters thoroughly for any evidence of his involvement in this. If there is none, we’ll have to let him go, but if you find something, well then I’ll have one of the answers I need.”

Shan hurried off to collect Jamba while Kyzee continued on to the Guard House. It wouldn't take Shan and the other guards long to return with the necromancer, and she had things that she needed to do before they arrived. The Saebrilite gave a very special set of orders to the three guards that were just coming on duty, and then went into her office to wait. She went back over the events of the day in her mind, trying to decide if she could possibly be wrong about what she had heard. It had been such a small mistake, so small that she had nearly missed it. But no. The error had been made and soon, if her plan worked, it would put the noose around the neck of a cold-blooded killer.

I failed to protect you, my beloved king, Kyzee thought, as the tears that she had held back all day at last began to flow, *but I swear by my Goddess, I shall not fail to avenge you.*

* * *

Kyzee stared down at her desk, at the book that Lieutenant Shan had just placed in front of her.

“Alright, Shan,” she said. “What is it?”

“It’s called the *Archopticus Grimatra*,” Shan replied. “From what I could see just from a quick scan, it’s essentially a text book on the Dark Arts.”

“Indeed,” said Kyzee, raising her eyebrows. She looked over to Jamba for confirmation. The necromancer nodded.

“It is not the kind of book that one reads for recreation,” he said. “It is a serious manual on the practice of necromancy, not the only one by any means, but it is one that every serious practitioner of the Dark Arts would be likely to own.”

“I see,” she said, and then picked up the other object that Shan had placed before her – a small wooden box filled with fine, silver powder.

“And this?” Kyzee asked.

“If I’m not mistaken,” said Jamba, “that would be Lizard Foot, the same type of powder that facilitated the abduction of the princess.”

“All right,” said Kyzee. “Now, where exactly did you find these things, Shan?”

“Well, the book was hidden behind a whole bunch of others on the bookshelf in Rochilar’s quarters,” he replied, “and the box was in the drawer of his night table – not hidden at all. Of course, since no one would have had reason to suspect him, I suppose he didn’t feel the need to hide it very carefully.”

Kyzee sighed and closed her eyes for a few moments, gathering her thoughts.

“Well,” she said at last, “this tells me everything I need to know.”

“I can’t believe Rochilar could be behind all this,” said Shan, shaking his head. “I mean, he seems like such a friendly chap.”

“I know exactly what you mean, Lieutenant,” said Kyzee. “It seems that it’s always the last person one would suspect.”

The Saebrilite stood and went to her office door. She opened it and beckoned to someone outside. A moment later, in came Rochilar, accompanied by three of the other guards. Kyzee folded her arms and regarded her second in command critically.

“Well, Rochilar,” she said. “It seems we now have ample evidence to try you for the kidnapping of Princess Yisa, as well as the subsequent murder of His Majesty, King Hobar.”

Rochilar looked back up at her, his eyes blazing with anger.

“Yes,” he said. “It seems that way, doesn’t it?”

Kyzee turned around and went back to her desk. She ran her hands over the incriminating objects once again, and then turned to Lieutenant Shan.

“What’s strange, Lieutenant,” she said, “is that while you were away fetching Jamba, I had Rochilar’s quarters searched top to bottom by several of your fellow guards. They found nothing. Why is that do you suppose?”

For a moment, Lieutenant Shan's face fell. He quickly recovered himself, but his eyes darted about nervously.

"I imagine they were just careless," he said.

Kyzee looked over at the three guards who had come in with Rochilar.

"What do you say?" she asked them. "Were you so careless that you missed these two very incriminating items? Items that, from what the Lieutenant says, were scarcely hidden at all?"

One of the guards, a burly fellow named Remlin, spoke up.

"No Captain," he said, staring daggers at Shan. "We searched every nook and cranny, just as you ordered."

"You have only their word for that, Captain," Shan stated. "You're trying to shift the blame onto me because of your friendship with Rochilar."

The Lieutenant glared back at her defiantly. Kyzee returned his gaze coolly, and then turned away, giving Jamba a slight nod.

"Lieutenant, have you ever heard of Ribeck's Principle?" she asked casually.

"No Captain," Shan snapped. "I don't believe I have."

"Jamba was just explaining it to me," she said. "It seems that, whenever a human interacts with a demon or spirit for the purpose of performing magic, it leaves a kind of residue on the person for, how long is it Jamba?"

"At least eleven or twelve marks," the necromancer replied.

"The residue is not visible to the naked eye," Kyzee went on, "but with the help of a certain incantation, it can be made to glow a bright red. Now, as it has been only," she looked over at the time lamp on the wall, "about six and a half marks since the spell which killed King Hobar was invoked, it should be a simple matter to determine whether it was Rochilar who has been behind this plot all along... or you. Go ahead Jamba. Speak the incantation."

"I protest!" Shan cried as Jamba stepped forward. "I demand legal representation! It is my right if I am to be accused of a crime."

"You're in the military, Lieutenant," she reminded him. "That means, in case you've forgotten, that you do not have quite the same rights as an ordinary private citizen. To put it bluntly, I own your arse and can do any damned thing I choose, so long as it falls within the bounds of military justice."

Kyzee turned back to Jamba.

"Go ahead," she told him.

As Jamba began to speak, however, Shan abruptly spat out an incantation of his own. The air around him began to crackle and spark.

"You overgrown bitch!" he cursed, his voice growing in power and intensity. "I should have killed *you* first."

A red ball of flame had begun to form in Shan's right hand. A moment later, he hurled it toward Kyzee. Instead of striking her, however, it simply fizzled out as it drew near. Shan's eyes widened in almost comic surprise.

"Come now, Shan," said Kyzee. "Do you think me such a fool as to have left us all unprotected? Why do you think I had you fetch Jamba for me in the first place?"

Shan tried again, calling up an even larger fireball, but once more it dissolved into thin air before it could do any damage. Shan cursed again and ran for the door. Rochilar reached out to grab him, but Shan had placed a protective shield around himself. When the captain touched the fleeing lieutenant, a powerful jolt shot through Rochilar, throwing him backwards against the wall. Before the lieutenant could get out through the door, however, Jamba hurled his own ball of energy. This one found its mark, striking Shan straight on. There was an explosion of sparks and flaring energy as his protective shield was destroyed, and he fell in a crumpled heap to the floor. Jamba regarded his unconscious foe with disgust.

"Amateurs," he said.

Kyzee went over to help Rochilar.

"Are you all right, Roch?" she asked the stricken commander.

Her second groaned as he picked himself up off the floor.

"My hair is a bit curlier than it was," he said, "but I'll be fine."

Kyzee looked back down at the lieutenant with concern.

"Jamba, will we be able to hold him once he wakes up?" she asked.

The necromancer nodded.

"I'll give your sorcerers a stronger spell to contain him," he said.

"Their own methods work well on fellow sorcerers, but they'll need a boost to hold a necromancer, even one such as this.

"Kyzee, how did you know it was Shan who was behind it all?" asked Rochilar.

"I almost didn't," she said. "He played us all brilliantly right up to the very end. Then he made one tiny slip. When he rushed up to the princess's room, ostensibly to find out what was going on, he blurted out the words – *'is he'* – before he stopped himself. I didn't think anything of it at the time because I was so distraught, but later I realized that, for someone rushing in who had no idea what had happened, it would make no sense to assume that something had happened to a *he*. If anything, one would likely assume that the problem was with Yisa. In any case, once my suspicions were aroused about Shan, I decided to set a little trap, thinking he would probably leap at the chance to frame someone else for the kidnapping and murder."

"Well he certainly did that," said Rochilar, "but there's something I don't understand. If Jamba can just cast a spell and find out who has been doing magic, why didn't you try that sooner, such as when you

had everyone gathered together in court to try and identify the windmill sound, for instance?"

Kyzee gave Rochilar a tight smile.

"It's a lucky thing that Shan doesn't think all that fast under pressure," she said. "Otherwise he might have asked himself the same question."

"Wait, are you saying that there isn't any such spell?" Rochilar asked.

"It was a calculated gamble," said the necromancer.

Rochilar stared at Kyzee and Jamba in stunned silence for a moment, and then he threw back his head and laughed.

* * *

The funeral for King Hobar was extravagant and emotional, as befitted a well-loved monarch. His body lay in state for three days, during which it seemed as though every resident of Duncileer came to pay their respects. Queen Mara, though not a terribly strong person generally, showed amazing calm and fortitude in the face of the seemingly endless processions and eulogies, though at times the pain of her loss showed quite vividly in her eyes. Their daughter, Yisa, was still too young to really grasp what all the fuss was about. She had never experienced death before, not even with a pet, so the idea that her father was not going to return made no sense to her whatsoever.

No sooner had the king been entombed in the depths of the palace mausoleum, however, when the political knives came out. Queen Mara, unfortunately, was queen only in name, having received the honorary title upon her marriage to King Hobar, the hereditary ruler. Normally, in cases such as this, a Regent would be appointed to rule until Yisa was old enough to assume the throne herself. But as soon as the Council of Elders met to ratify Yisa as lawful heir to the throne, the reason for the entire plot became clear. Certain members of the Council, supporters of King Hobar's cousin Elgray, began a loud and vociferous protest, claiming that since the princess had caused the death of her father, unintentionally or not, she was no longer eligible for ascension. To complicate things further, some investigation by Rochilar revealed that Elgray had been regularly seen in the company of known members of a religious group called the Brotherhood of Nilad, which Kyzee had long suspected was little more than a front for the Order of the Bone. The wrangling over the throne of Duncileer was likely to go on for months, if not years.

For Kyzee, however, this particular battle was over. The Commander of King Hobar's Personal Guard submitted her resignation as soon as the arrangements for Shan's confinement had been completed and a temporary Regent had been appointed to manage the day-to-day business of the Royal Court. There was some

protest over this as well, and had General Yurek not been so influential, the rest of the ministers may well have attempted to persuade her to stay. To Kyzee though, the gesture would not have mattered anyway. She knew that she was no hero, as some had tried to proclaim. She had failed her king at the price of his life – and at great cost to the Kingdom. As far as having caught his murderer, it was only by the merest chance that Shan had made that small mistake. Had he not, he would have gotten away clean. No, she was no hero by any measure.

Shan's trial, though a major public spectacle, was fairly straightforward. He had, after all, confessed in front of Kyzee, Rochilar, Jamba and three other soldiers of the Royal Personal Guard, all of whom were called to testify. In less than a week, he was convicted and sentenced to death. Though the High Magistrate had praised Kyzee for her work in bringing the guilty party to justice, for her, the victory was a hollow one, and by the time it was all over, she was more eager than ever to leave, and to put this unhappy piece of her life behind her.

"What are you going to do, Kyzee?" Rochilar asked her as she emptied the contents of her locker into a small wooden crate.

"I don't know, Roch," she said. "For now, I'm going to take Broq and head for Elfwood. According to Lorq's last communication, he was planning to join a rescue party to retrieve our friend Rokey from the Order of the Bone's clutches. Since I lost my battle with them here, I envy him his opportunity to deal them another serious blow. I only wish he wasn't on his way into such danger without me by his side."

"Your son needs one of you safe at home," said Rochilar.

"I know," Kyzee replied, "but it goes against my warrior nature to just sit by and wait. Besides, should he fail, there may soon be no safety anywhere in Firma."

"Is this Order of the Bone really that big a threat, Kyzee?" Rochilar asked.

"Have no doubt, Rochilar," Kyzee told him, "if those bastards have their way, you and I will both live to see the dawn of another age of darkness."

"It all sounds so gloomy and doomy – like those old legends of the Great Wars my grandfather used to tell me when I was a lad."

"You know, it sounds crazy," said Kyzee, "but I can't help but think that the roots of this whole sinister enterprise might actually be connected to those times. It does all have the feel of some ancient ballad – a larger than life hero battling to save the world from evil. Even the small part I played in our prior battle with the Order was enough to give me that impression, and if you had met Rokey – well, you'd know what I mean."

"Hmm, he sounds like a man worth meeting," Rochilar remarked, "even though he *is* already married."

Kyzee laughed.

"I should have known your mind couldn't stay clear of mischief for too long," she said.

Rochilar grinned.

"I'm off the market, remember?" he replied. "But with Loren away for a month or more, my fantasies are all I have."

In the moment of silence that followed, a thought struck Kyzee.

"You know, one thing still bothers me," she said. "I don't understand why Gimley's ghost named you as the one who strangled him. I know Jamba said that ghosts can't be relied on, especially so long after their deaths, but it still rankles me."

"Actually, I think I might have an explanation," said Rochilar. "When I questioned Gimley shortly before his death, I – well, I have to admit I got a bit rough with him – grabbed him by the throat and squeezed a little, just to try and coax the truth out of him. It could be that the ghost was remembering that and, since his actual murder was done by means of magic, the only face he could put to the one who actually killed him was mine."

"Well, it certainly fits the facts," said Kyzee. "and at this point, that's enough for me to be able to put it to rest. Thank you for that."

Kyzee had finished packing up her things. She paused for a last look around, and then clasped her friend's shoulder. He gazed up at her, his eyes glistening.

"I'm not good at farewells," he said hoarsely. "You've been a wonderful friend, Kyzee, as well as a skilled commander. I hope we shall see each other again."

"I think we shall, Roch," Kyzee replied. "I only hope that the circumstances are better then."

As Kyzee emerged from the Guard House, she saw Jamba and Battista heading toward her house and hurried to catch them.

"We weren't certain when you were leaving," said Jamba, "so we decided we'd better come now and say good-bye. Besides, the Royal Court may declare us undesirables at any moment and bar us entry to the palace grounds."

Kyzee chuckled.

"With Battista's potent bribes at the ready, I'm certain you could gain entry almost anywhere," she said.

"Funny you should mention potions," said the sorceress, rummaging around in a pocket of her voluminous russet-colored dress. At last she produced a small, small, dark blue glass bottle and held it out to Kyzee.

"What is it?" Kyzee asked as she accepted it.

"It's a sleep curative," Battista replied. "It comes in handy for wounds or illnesses that are difficult to cure and cause great suffering. I can't tell you who might need it, or when or even why – but

when I asked my spirit guides what gift would be most useful to you, this is what they suggested. “

“Well, Battista, “ said Kyzee, “I know better than to question your spirit guides. Thank you.”

“I could think of no parting gift to give you, Captain,” said Jamba, “and Demons do not give free advice, so I shall simply offer you my friendship, for what that is worth. Should you need anything of me at any time, you have only to contact me. I shall be happy to help you in any way I can...free of charge.”

“Why Jamba,” Kyzee teased, “that may be the most extravagant gift I’ve ever received.”

“I’m not surprised,” he replied with a thin but genuine smile. “It is by the far the most extravagant one I have ever given.”

After she had said her good-byes, Kyzee went home to make certain that the wagon she had hired was packed with enough for an extended stay in Elfwood. She had made arrangements with the seneschal to keep their house as it was until she and Lorq could make their plans. Though he still kept his position heading up the Royal Zoo, it was quite possible that the current political upheaval would deprive him of that position before long. Queen Mara had assured her that there was no hurry. She had also graciously forgiven the debt that the couple had incurred in remodeling their home. Though she had no official power, as the princess’s mother, she still wielded considerable influence.

Early the next morning, with her young son in tow, Kyzee departed from the Kingdom of Duncileer. The driver she had hired, a grizzled older man named Drabok, was not particularly chatty, which suited Kyzee perfectly. There was little she wanted to talk about just now, and she had a great deal of thinking to do. She shot a parting salute to the guards at the palace gates, and again to those at the main ones. Then they were off – away from the idyllic life that she and Lorq had lived these past three years. She took one last look back, watching the city grow smaller and smaller in the distance, and wondered if the three of them would ever enjoy such happy times again.

Part Three

Chapter 22

Bone Lore

If it weren't for his meals, which were horrible but regular, Rokey would have had no sense at all of the passage of time. The cell he was in had no window, and the door was of solid iron. There was no furniture in the room except for a simple bed of tightly woven straw on a wooden frame and a wooden bucket and lid which served as his toilet. He had no contact with anyone. His tray was shoved through flap-door cut into the larger cell door. In order to get his next meal, he had to push the empty tray back out (and the bucket, whenever necessary), so he couldn't even say with any certainty how many meals he had eaten. The walls were of solid gray stone, impervious to his attempts to scratch marks on them with his wooden spoon. He was naked, but felt neither hot nor cold. The only light in the room came from the ceiling, which glowed bright, pale blue with a spell that, Rokey had quickly learned, was to keep him from using any magic of his own. When he had tried to call up his power shortly after his arrival, a bolt of energy had come crackling down from the ceiling and struck him, knocking him unconscious for several minmarks. He had not tried it again.

As to the arrival itself, he had simply "awoken", naked and alone in this prison cell. He and the Elf Mage Counsel had both thought Rokey the only one capable of traveling by means of No-When. Apparently they had been wrong. Though stunned, Rokey was conscious during part of the trip through the black abyss of the alternate world called No-When. Not only was the Order of the Bone clearly capable of such

travel, they were far ahead of Rokey in terms of navigating the enormous void. The hooded figures who had taken him had seemed to know exactly where they were going. He hoped that the elves had also guessed the method of his abduction; though there would be little they could do at this point against an enemy who could literally appear out of nowhere.

With nothing else to do, Rokey spent his days in a kind of dazed reverie – thinking about all the past events of his life, of his childhood in the Noble Contemplative, his adventures with Flaskamper.

Flash. Oh, Gods, Flash I miss you so much.

Just the thought of his estranged husband would bring Rokey to tears, and he thought of little else. Over these past – however many – days, he had wept and wept, until his chest ached constantly. Yet the tears kept coming. Still, even in his deepest despair, he dared allow himself just the smallest hope that Flaskamper would come to rescue him. It was a silly hope of course. Even if Flaskamper returned from Oraque with the intention of searching for him, it was useless. No one would have the slightest idea where he had been taken. Even Rokey didn't know for certain, though he had a fairly good notion. If he was correct in his guess, he was somewhere deep in Moribar, high in the Wormspine Mountains – a prisoner of the Order of the Bone.

What he didn't understand was why they were keeping him alive. In all his previous encounters with the Order, their aim had clearly been to kill him with all possible haste. Now it seemed, rather than simply assassinate him, they had gone to all this trouble to capture and contain him. What had changed during these last three years, he wondered? Of what use was he now to the Order of the Bone? Besides thoughts of Flaskamper, this question filled his mind more than anything else – another of the host of questions about himself and the Order to which he had no answers. He wracked his brain over it all until he thought he would go mad, but he simply didn't have enough pieces of the puzzle to make even a reasoned guess. He could only hope and pray that before the Order of the Bone finally did away with him, someone would take pity on him and tell him what this whole business was all about. Surely that wasn't too much to ask.

He had just finished yet another dreadful meal, and lay down on his straw bed, curled up in a ball, his arms wrapped around his knees. For some reason, he found this position vaguely comforting. Then suddenly he heard a sound, something different than the scrape of a food tray or the monotonous hum of the spell above him. It sounded like perhaps –

Rokey stood up, fully alert now. The sound was that of a key turning a lock. Someone was unlocking the door of his cell. Was he going to get answers? Or were they going to finish him at last? The door swung open and a man stepped inside, carrying a small wooden chair. He was near Rokey's own height and weight, dressed in the

black robe of the Order, with its voluminous hood covering his head and most of his face. The man put the chair down and, for a few moments, he and Rokey simply stared at one another in silence. Then at last, the visitor spoke.

"Rokey," he said, "at long last. I am glad to finally meet you."

"You have the advantage of me, sir," Rokey replied. He tried to sound strong and arrogant, but inside, the fact that he was standing there naked made him feel vulnerable and helpless. No doubt this was by design.

"My name is Hughn," said the man, "High Lord of the Order of the Bone."

"I see," Rokey said, with measured calm, even though his heart was pounding. "And to what do I owe the honor of this visit, High Lord Hughn?"

"You're much as I imagined you'd be," the High Lord said softly, more to himself really than to Rokey. "So much the picture of..."

What? Rokey thought. The picture of what?

Instead of finishing the thought though, Hughn turned around and began to pace slowly back and forth, as though lost in his own thoughts. Deciding that he would get around to the reasons for his visit in his own time, Rokey sat back down on his bed – watching and waiting. At last the High Lord returned to the chair he had brought and sat down, facing Rokey.

"Forgive me," he said, taking a deep breath, "Apparently I was not so well-prepared for this meeting as I had thought."

Though it made no sense whatsoever, Rokey felt no fear of this man. He could not begin to comprehend the reason for this, but he decided to try and use it to his advantage. In the moment of silence that followed, he decided to hazard a direct question.

"High Lord Hughn," said Rokey, "Why am I here?"

The High Lord sighed heavily.

"Why indeed," he said, and paused. For a moment, Rokey was afraid that that was to be the extent of his answer. But then the High Lord continued.

"You've been through a great deal these past few years, haven't you?" Hughn asked. The question was clearly rhetorical. "I am aware of what little you were told by Brothers Barrow and Crinshire, just before – well, before you laid to waste all of our plans for you...and for the Noble Contemplative."

Instead of angry, the High Lord sounded almost amused.

"I must admit," he continued, "you forced us to make some rather hasty adjustments to our strategy. But after the bleeding had stopped, both literally and metaphorically, several important details came to light – details that brought me quickly to the realization that in defeat, we had actually been presented with a spectacular opportunity, one which would allow the Order to hasten its overall goal by years –

decades perhaps. When I think of how near Barrow came to success, how close we came to losing you – to losing this chance...”

Rokey wasn't sure what the High Lord was talking about, but he was fairly certain that they were getting close to the crux of the matter now.

“Chance, High Lord Hughn?” Rokey prodded gently.

“I will tell you,” he replied. “I came to see you expressly for that purpose, for I believe that you deserve to know the truth. You may not understand it. No, I cannot promise that much, for at times I truly wonder how much of it even I understand. Such is the nature of faith. However, I arrived where I am today by choice, whereas your role in all of this was simply thrust upon you at birth; no pardons asked – no explanations given. I'm sorry for that, Rokey. I truly am.”

And Rokey believed him. In fact, he was finding it very difficult to dislike this man – the leader of a fanatical religion that had been his sworn enemy for so many years now. He tried calling up a memory, a scene to remind him just how ruthless and unfeeling the Order of the Bone truly was. His mind flickered back to that room – the room in the Noble Contemplative in which he and Flaskamper had been held. He watched again as Abbot Crinshire grabbed his lover by the hair, pulling his head back, and drew his small obsidian blade over Flash's delicate throat –

But the memory backfired. Instead of bolstering his anger and outrage at High Lord Hughn, it merely reminded Rokey of how desperately he missed Flaskamper – how deeply he still loved him, and would always love him. Before he could stop it, tears were stinging his eyes.

Damn it! Damn it!

Rokey turned his head away, mortified that he had been reduced to weeping in front of this man who was still, after all, his enemy. Anger came also, but not at Hughn. It was at himself that he raged, furious at his own inability to control his emotions.

High Lord Hughn said nothing through this. He merely sat, still and quiet, until Rokey had managed to take hold of himself again. When Rokey finally looked back upon the High Lord, the man reached up, and with both hands, slowly folded back the large black hood that covered his head, revealing his face for the first time. Rokey's mouth fell open in astonishment, for no one but a blind man could fail to notice the striking resemblance between the two of them. High Lord Hughn, with his slightly rounded nose, his square jaw and blue-black hair now flecked with white, was the picture of how Rokey would likely appear in two decades' time. In fact, if he did not know for certain that his own father was long dead...

Wasn't he?

“My father –” Rokey gasped.

"His name was Danver," the High Lord looked straight at him. "He was my brother."

Suddenly Rokey felt dizzy, as though the entire room had just been spun like a child's top. He leaned forward, his hands over his face, trying not to faint.

He was my brother.

This man whose Order had so nearly killed him, so nearly killed Flash – the man whose decisions had brought so much misery and pain upon him was actually –

"NOOOOO!" Rokey screamed into his hands. "NO! It's a spell! You're trying to trick me!"

"No Rokey," said Hughn. "You know that it is not. The magic dampener above our heads prevents any spell from functioning in this room. You have discovered that for yourself. For better or for worse, it is true – you are my brother's son – my nephew."

Rokey dropped his hands and stared at the High Lord. He knew that he was telling the truth, and no amount of denial on his part was going to change it. He was flooded with conflicting feelings, but by far the strongest was that of betrayal.

"Was it you who ordered his murder?" Rokey asked, his voice hardened with hurt and fury.

To his surprise, the High Lord dropped his eyes. The question had stung him.

"No," he replied shaking his head sadly. "I was still just a Brother of the Order back then, as was your father. I tried to argue to my superiors that he could be captured and rehabilitated, but his defection had already left them suspicious of me, so I was ignored."

The two of them sat silently for several moments. Once again, Rokey found his anger at this man – his only living relative, it seemed – difficult to sustain, and this fact confused and vexed him even more.

"You said you came here to tell me the truth," Rokey said at last. "I'm ready to hear it now."

"Very well," said Hughn. "Let me begin by telling you about the Order of the Bone itself. The Order has been in existence, it seems, for as long as time itself. Like the rest of Firma's history, the history of the Order prior to the Great Wars was, up until a dozen years ago, virtually unknown. We knew only our primary mandate: to reassemble the scattered remains of our lost God, Cyure, and restore Him to life and power. To this end, the Brothers had worked for centuries, until only two of His bones remained to be found."

"The femur and the skull," said Rokey.

"Exactly," said Hughn. "You already know some of it then."

"Very little," said Rokey. "Brother Barrow told me what he knew before – well, in any case, it wasn't much."

"We are careful with whom we share information," Hughn told him. "Barrow knew only what he needed to know to accomplish his

mission. But to continue, the two final relics had been missing for more than a century, and at the time your father and I joined the Order, some were beginning to despair of ever finding them. It was an unhappy time, for we could all see how the state of the world was deteriorating, and we feared that Cyure might never be restored, and that Firma would remain forever a Godless wasteland.”

“What do you mean Godless?” Rokey interjected. “There are Gods galore in Firma.”

“False Gods, Rokey,” the High Lord explained darkly. “Gods created by men to serve their own interests. Cyure was and *is* the only true God, and soon he shall be back upon his throne. Soon, Firma shall be saved.”

Rokey could not doubt the man’s sincerity. His eyes shone with the same fervor that he had seen years ago in some of the devoutly religious members of the Brotherhood. Of course, they had believed the same “truth” about their Gods as well, but Rokey was not about to point this out to his uncle now.

“However,” the High Lord continued, “not long after Danver and I were ordained as full members of the Order, the ‘searchers’ – that is, those members whose task it was to actively scour the land for the remaining two relics, came upon a remarkable discovery. To the northeast of here, in the neighboring Frost Mountain Range, they discovered signs of the lost kingdom of Neurrea. This name will mean nothing to you. Indeed, it is mentioned only once in the few fragments we have left of our history preceding the Great Wars. We knew only that Neurrea was a once-powerful kingdom, and the central seat of the Order of the Bone during its peak. We all had high hopes that the excavation of this important site would yield valuable information. As it turned out, our hopes were well-founded.”

“They discovered something significant?” Rokey guessed.

“*Significant?*” the High Lord exclaimed. “It was nothing less than miraculous! While almost all traces of the kingdom itself had long since vanished, the searchers came upon a set of deep caves in one of the icy hillsides, and hidden therein, they discovered two clay pots – whole and unbroken – inscribed with the ancient markings of the Order. Then, when the pots were carefully unsealed and opened...they found a remarkable treasure inside.”

Rokey found himself on the edge of his bed, utterly fascinated by the story. Hughn had obviously told it before, for he knew just where to pause to build suspense. This was one such pause, and Rokey took the bait.

“What?” he asked. “What did they find?”

“What they found,” said Hughn, “were three scrolls, three *entire* scrolls – completely intact – covered with writing from top to bottom. You were raised in the Brotherhood; surely you understand the incredible value of such artifacts. Why, in all of Firma there survives

scarcely enough information from before the Great Wars to fill a single scroll, let alone three. Short of Our Lord's bones themselves, it was the most important find in our history, and certainly in anyone's memory. The effect on the Order's mood was instant and profound. It was as though Cyure himself had come and breathed life back into us all. The Order was on fire again, renewed by the promise of wisdom handed down from our predecessors."

Hughn seemed as excited to tell the story as Rokey was to hear it. He stood and paced as he talked and Rokey listened as an eager schoolboy would listen to a passionate instructor. Normally, Rokey found history a dull subject, but this was the story he and the elves had researched and investigated for years now and he hung engrossed on every word. Time seemed suspended; both of them forgot about their surroundings – and the circumstances that had brought them to this moment together.

"It took several years to translate the scrolls," the High Lord continued. "Most of the information was kept secret from all but the inner circle, so I did not learn it until I achieved the rank of Lord, but one of the things that *was* shared was the story of the epic battle between our great God Cyure and the Usurper Torrian in the days before Kings. This is a story that would come to directly affect me, your father and now you, Rokey. The scrolls do not go into detail about the early days of Firma. They say only that while Cyure tried to govern the world in a way that would bring peace and happiness to all, his brother Torrian was jealous of what he had created and wanted it for himself. At some point, Torrian tried to wrest control of the world from Cyure and a mighty battle ensued. The two brothers destroyed one another in the end; Cyure's bones were scattered to the four winds, and Torrian was boiled away into the ether.

"But here's where the story takes on real significance for you and me, Rokey. It seems that a child of the usurper Torrian, offspring of his union with a sidhe mother, survived. Torrian stole him away from The Sidhe and hid him amongst the primitive humans of the time where he thought the boy would be safest. The child's vast inherited power was quashed and concealed by his father using powerful magic. It had been the Usurper's hope that, should he lose the battle with his brother Cyure, one day his progeny would rise and challenge Cyure again. But both the brothers, God and Usurper were destroyed, and the child simply grew up with his adopted human family and had children of his own, never knowing of his true powers. Thus was this hidden threat to the world passed quietly down throughout the generations, with no one the wiser, until these scrolls were discovered and deciphered."

"Wait, let me understand this," said Rokey. "Are you trying to tell me that my father and you, and I...are part of this Usurper's bloodline?"

“Ah, you’ve jumped to the end of the story,” said Hughn, “but you are correct.”

“But how did you find out?” Rokey asked.

“That was the work of the Order’s necromancers,” the High Lord answered. “Once it was learned that the potential threat existed, the Lords instructed our necromancers to devise a way of identifying these descendants, so that we might deal with them.”

“You mean kill them!” Rokey cried, jumping to his feet. “Hunt them down and kill them, just like you tried to kill me!”

“Rokey, it’s more complicated than that,” Hughn said.

“Is it?” Rokey asked. “Or is the fact that your Order sanctions the murder of innocent people simply too difficult for you to acknowledge?”

“The Order does not take the death of anyone lightly,” the High Lord replied, growing equally heated in his response. “When the members of the Order were tested, and it was discovered that your father and I were among those descended from the Usurper, the matter was given great consideration. They could have simply done away with us. After all, we were just ordinary Brothers at the time – completely disposable – that is, if the Order were as ruthless and callous as you imagine us to be. But that is not what happened. The Lords recognized that we were both loyal members of the Order, so they chose to do nothing with this knowledge. It wasn’t until Danver began to doubt his convictions, until he ran off in the dead of night, that the Order began to fear that they might have made a terrible mistake by sparing our lives. Though I shared none of his doubts, for a time things became most unpleasant for me as well.”

“Just what was it that made my father doubt, High Lord?” Rokey asked. “What was it about the Order or the Bone that caused him to leave? People don’t normally just reject everything they’ve ever known on a whim.”

“Your father was a sensitive man,” Hughn answered, “and at times the Order is forced to do things that are admittedly unpleasant. One does not bring about world change without getting one’s hands dirty from time to time. I am not proud of all the things we do, but I recognize the need to do them nonetheless. Your father did not feel the same way.”

“So they hunted him down and killed him.” Rokey said.

“Yes,” was all Hughn said, looking down at the floor. There was little else he *could* say.

“And what about me, *uncle*?” Rokey asked. “Was ordering my death just one of those ‘unpleasant things’ you had to do?”

Hughn stood and began to pace again.

“You may believe that the decisions regarding you were made lightly, Rokey,” the High Lord said, “but I assure you they were not. The seers began to warn about the Brotherhood before you even

arrived at the Noble Contemplative. They did not know the nature of the threat to come, but they saw it clearly. It was these early warnings, in fact, that first led us to contemplate overthrowing the Noble Contemplative. As we could not isolate the specific danger to us, we decided it would be worthwhile to attempt to take control of your whole collective. That way, we could nip any potential problems in the bud, or so we believed. Even so, it was ten years before the Lords actually sent Barrow to infiltrate and begin putting our plan into effect. Then, when the seers finally narrowed in on you, we were taken completely by surprise. I had been elected High Lord by that time, and I was frankly doubtful that such a harmless lad could constitute such a dire threat to us. Neither I nor anyone else thought to test you for the blood of the Usurper. In hindsight, of course, it seems that it should have been the first thing we did; but it is an exceedingly difficult and costly spell, and we were confident that we had identified all of his descendents years ago – far too confident as it turned out.

“It never occurred to us that Danver might have fathered a child while on the run. The only time we lost track of him for any significant amount of time was when he disappeared into the Lower Wilds. Now, of course we know that The Sidhe are there. Had I known that then, I might have put two and two together earlier, but hubris, it seems, was muddling a lot of our thinking at that time.”

“What if you had known?” Rokey asked. “Would it have made any difference to you that I was your own nephew?”

“It would have made a difficult choice many times more difficult for me,” said Hughn, “but my decision would have been the same. Had I known at that early point that you carried the blood of the Usurper, the threat you posed to the Order would have been immediately clear. My only other choice then would have been to deliberately go against the good of the Order by doing nothing about it.”

“But nothing will make you go against the good of the Order, will it Uncle?” Rokey asked bitterly, “not even your own family.”

Hughn looked away, clearly moved. But after a moment, he drew himself up again and faced Rokey once more.

“I’ll tell you something that I never told the Lords of the Order,” he said. “Before your father disappeared, he told me he was leaving and begged me to leave with him. I said no, and should have reported him right away. Instead I kept my mouth shut. It was a farewell gift to my younger brother, letting him go, but I had already made my decision.

Yes, he was family, as are you, but the Order had also been our family since one of the Brothers rescued us from a squalid workhouse in Felltree when we were seven and nine years old. The overseer would entertain guests in the next room while we were fed bread baked with sawdust and watered-down soup. Afterwards, drunk, he would choose a boy to – to “strip and whip”, that is what we all came to call this nightly ritual. He didn’t need an excuse to beat us; it simply excited

him to hear us scream and to watch the fiery welts spring up on our young, bare flesh. By the time I was nine, my screams had grown weak and my scars too many for his liking, but Danver was now just the right age. Perhaps if he had endured the beatings for as long as I had, he would not have found it so easy to leave the Order behind when doubts crept into his mind. I don't know. I don't judge him though. We both did what we had to do then."

"And what about now?" Rokey asked him. "Why am I here? What new plot is the Order of the Bone hatching now?"

High Lord Hughn stopped pacing and closed his eyes, gripping the chair in front of him.

"The most important *plot* of all, to use your word" he said quietly, "and one which tests me once again. We have recovered the final bone – the skull of our God. Now all that remains is for us to reawaken him."

"Well then," said Rokey, "you win. You will have your God back, and I am in no position to stop you. So what am I missing? Why do you look ill instead of triumphant?"

"It was only my intention to explain things to you," said Hughn, who did indeed look rather pale. "I expected that the hatred you would feel for me would make it easy. Yet it does not seem that you hate me, at least, not to the degree that I expected."

"Perhaps you are swayed by the company you keep, Uncle," said Rokey. "I hate what you have done, and the methods of your Order, but I can't bring myself to hate a man I have only just met, especially as you are my only living relative."

Hughn opened his eyes and regarded his nephew with an inscrutable expression.

"Perhaps this next bit of news will change your mind," he said, sounding somewhat more detached. "You see, as soon as I learned your true identity, I realized that you could be a tremendous asset to us once we recovered the skull."

"Surely by now you know that I will never help you in this crazy endeavor," said Rokey.

"Not by choice," said the High Lord, "but you see Rokey, you won't be given a choice. During the Awakening Ceremony on the night of the new moon, you are to be sacrificed, so that our God Cyure may use the power within you to arise."

Rokey stared at him, his eyes widening with alarm.

"You're lying," he said. "You're lying to try and scare me."

Hughn shook his head.

"A human sacrifice has taken place each time that a new bone has been added to the God's skeleton," he said, struggling to keep his voice cool and steady. "After your battle at the monastery, when I learned from our spy in the Brotherhood about your human father and sidhe mother, and the fact that you had come to the Noble

Contemplative from the Lower Wilds, I knew you had to be Danver's son. And when I heard the story of what had become of Crinshire and Barrow, I further surmised that somehow the Usurper's Power had been rekindled in you. My theory is that it was the new infusion of sidhe blood from your mother that brought your powers closer to the surface, though I don't suppose we shall ever know for certain. In any case, it soon dawned on me that, if we were to sacrifice you at the Awakening Ceremony instead of some ordinary human, all of that power dwelling within you would immediately be transferred to our Lord Cyure. Instead of taking decades for him to recover his strength, as we had anticipated, it might only take months. All of Firma could be under our control within this generation instead of the next. The High Priest agreed, and before we had even located the skull, we began working on plans for your abduction. As it turned out, we learned the whereabouts of the skull at almost the same moment we heard the news that a lovely elf girl had fallen desperately in love with one of our Brothers in Duncileer –"

"Brandelynn," Rokey whispered.

"Yes," the High Lord confirmed. "She was ripe for the cause – reduced to the role of a sexual servant in the kingdom's Underside. You've heard of The Underside, I imagine; most people have. A cesspool of a place, but no worse really than the poverty and squalor one finds in any of our fine kingdoms. That will all change soon enough."

"After I've been bled to death to awaken your God," Rokey said. His own voice sounded distant to him, and he felt as though he'd been kicked in the stomach. It was then that he realized how much he had begun to hope, begun to think that perhaps a peaceful end to this nightmare could be reached. For a time, as he and his uncle had talked, he had felt a kinship with the man. Now he knew that it had only been a fantasy on his part – a desperate wish to form some bond with the only family he had left. But it was not to be, because Hughn was more than his long lost uncle. He was, first and foremost, the enemy. For a few moments, Rokey had forgotten – had let down his guard – and the pain he now felt was the price of that lapse in judgment.

Hughn saw that Rokey was staring, not *at* him it seemed, but *through* him. He saw the hurt in the boy's eyes, and guilt stabbed at his heart, but he forced it away. The Order was his family, and Cyure was his God. If he had any regrets, it was coming here to explain things – placing himself in this vulnerable position at such a critical time.

"I must go," he said, picking up the chair. He then went quickly and rapped on the door. The few ticks it took for the Brother out in the corridor to come seemed like an eternity to the High Lord. When at last the door was unlocked, however, Hughn could not stop himself

from turning around to look once more upon his – upon the boy. He was sitting on the bed, his eyes closed. Perhaps he was weeping – the High Lord could not be sure. Despite his certainty that the action he planned to take, though unfortunate, was entirely correct, a sinking feeling was now forming in the pit of his stomach, and the dungeon corridor had become stiflingly hot. He hurried to reach the open air, reaching the outer door just in time to vomit the contents of his stomach out onto the snow.

Damn it, he thought, It is only one boy's life. Is that too much to ask in order to hasten Our Lord's ascension? What of the lives that will be saved once we have attained paradise on Firma?

By the time he reached his quarters, he felt better. Once it was all over, he told himself, these misgivings would fade away. All night long though, he lay awake, haunted by the vacant, stunned look in his nephew's golden eyes.

Chapter 23

Thieves' Cache

“**W**hat in blazes are ye playing at over there?” Sturgrin growled over at Flaskamper.

The man couldn't see clearly in the dim light of their cell, but he was able to make out that the elf had been tinkering with something over in the corner for what seemed like nearly a mark. With no time lamp in sight though, he could not be certain. Flaskamper did not respond.

“Answer me, dammit!” Sturgrin repeated more loudly.

“Shh,” Flaskamper replied at last. “Keep your voice down. I've almost got it.”

“Got what?”

In answer, the man heard a click and the sound of a hinge creaking. A moment later, Flaskamper crawled over to Sturgrin's side of the cell.

“Ere, how did ye get out of that leg iron?” the man asked wide-eyed.

“With this,” said Flaskamper, holding up a slender strip of metal, slightly kinked at one end.

“Where did that come from?” asked Sturgrin. “And come to think of it, where did the map disappear to? I would a' sworn they'd a' taken that.”

“This,” Flaskamper replied, indicating the tool, “came from a hiding place in my tunic. Luckily, I took the precaution of wearing my thief's tunic. You never know when you might need to get out of a tight spot.”

“Well, I’ll be flogged,” said the man in amazement.

“As to the map,” Flaskamper went on, “I took a chance and hid it in the one spot most dox men will tend to keep their hands clear of.”

With a wicked grin, Flaskamper reached down and gave the crotch of his leggings a squeeze. Sturgrin chuckled as he heard the muffled crunch of the paper.

“And what made you so sure the guard that searched you wasn’t a screamin’ bungholer?” he asked.

“Because we *screaming bungholers* all know each other,” Flaskamper retorted. “Now shut your yap so I can get busy on your lock.”

Embarrassed by his clumsy remark, Sturgrin said nothing while Flaskamper worked at getting his ankle free of the leg iron. It seemed to take forever, and once the elf had to scurry back to his corner when a guard passed by. At last however, he was rewarded with the soft click of the lock. Sturgrin freed his foot and wiggled it.

“All right,” Flaskamper said, “now the door.”

Another halfmark later, the door started to swing open. Flaskamper had to grab it to stop the loud creak of the hinges, then slowly eased it open wide enough for them to slip through. Then he took a stone and placed it in front of the door to stop it from moving any further on its own. Once they were out in the dungeon corridor, they quickly looked around the nearest corner to check for guards. Fortunately there were none about. They then retrieved their boots, which the guards had made them remove in order to shackle them, from the crate located just outside their cell.

“Now then,” Flaskamper whispered, “we have to find Bengarr.”

“Have ye gone mad?” Sturgrin argued. “We can’t go looking fer ‘im. We’ll get caught fer sure. Let’s get outa here whilst we can.”

“I thought Bengarr was your friend,” said Flaskamper.

“Just what’s gettin’ meself killed gonna prove?” he said. “You ‘eard what the guard said. ‘E’s even further down in this maze. Even if we find ‘im, we’ll never get out without runnin’ into more guards.”

Flaskamper shot his hand out and grabbed Sturgrin by the neck. The man began gasping for air.

“We came in together,” Flaskamper hissed between clenched teeth, “and we’re going out together, or not at all. Got it...*friend?*”

Sturgrin nodded and Flaskamper released him.

“Shite,” he grumbled, “ye don’t ‘ave te get nasty about it.”

“Let’s go,” the elf ordered.

They crept along the dark damp corridor in the direction the guards had taken Bengarr. Soon they reached an intersecting path. One way was a set of stone stairs going down. Flaskamper decided this was the most likely route. Sturgrin followed, muttering to himself. At the bottom of the stairs was a large open area that split off into three different paths.

"Now what?" Sturgrin asked.

"Quiet," said Flaskamper. "Someone's coming."

The two crouched into the darkest corner of the chamber and waited. A moment later, a single guard emerged from one of the pathways. He passed the two without noticing them, and just as he was about to start up the stairs, Flaskamper pounced on him. Before he could call out, the elf grabbed him around the neck in a tight chokehold.

"I can kill you in about five tiks," Flaskamper whispered to the struggling guard, "or I can let you take a nap. Which is it to be?"

"Nap," the guard croaked out when Flaskamper applied a bit more pressure.

"All right then," he said, "just point me the way to The Workroom and I'll bid you goodnight."

The guard hesitated, but Flaskamper's hold was very persuasive. Before long he pointed to the middle path, then crooked his hand, indicating a right turn.

"Well done," said Flaskamper. "Now if you're lying, I'm going to come back and kill you. That sounds fair doesn't it?"

The panicked guard nodded in agreement.

"Good. Nighty night now."

Flaskamper carefully applied pressure to a spot under the guard's jaw, and a moment later the man slumped to the floor unconscious. The elf dragged him over into the dark corner where they had hidden, swiping the guard's dagger from its sheath, then turned to an astonished Sturgrin.

"Ready?" Flaskamper asked.

Sturgrin nodded, and they hurried, quickly and quietly down the path the guard had indicated. This path led to another large open room. This one was circular, and surrounding it was another group of small cells, all of which looked out onto the room. The reason for this design was immediately obvious, for this chamber was full of equipment – the kind of equipment used to inflict humiliation, pain and even death. This was a torture chamber – the place the guard had referred to as The Workroom.

Fortunately, no "work" was currently being done. Flaskamper peered cautiously out into the room. As far as he could see, there were no guards about. He turned back to Sturgrin.

"Bengarr must be in one of those cells," he whispered. "I'm going to go find him and get him out. You stay here and whistle if you hear anyone coming."

"Right," Sturgrin replied.

"And Sturgrin," the elf added, "if you run out on us, you'd better hope they kill me; otherwise, I'm going to do things to you that would make even the fellows who use this stuff heave up their dinners. You believe me don't you?"

Sturgrin's eyes widened, and he nodded silently. Flaskamper clapped him on the arm in a friendly manner, then crept out into the room.

The first two cells he came to were empty. Apparently it was the slow season for torture. In the third cell, another man lay in a pile of blood-soaked straw, moaning and trembling. Flaskamper felt deeply for the man, but realized that he may not even have time to free his friend, let alone a stranger. Still, he lingered for several moments, torn between pity and practicality, before finally moving on. Bengarr was in the next cell, pacing back and forth as far as the chain on his leg would allow. Flaskamper called his name quietly, and the firecat started.

"Elf Brother," he said quietly. "How did you escape?"

"I'll explain later," said Flaskamper. "Right now I have to hurry and get you out of here. We may not have much time."

"Is Sturgrin with you?" Bengarr asked.

"He's in the corridor over there, keeping watch – at least, he'd better be."

The elf set to work on the door lock. This one opened more easily than the last, and soon he was inside.

"Can you get out of your leg iron in animal form?" he asked Bengarr.

The Nogirraalan shook his head.

"I attempted to free myself earlier," he said, "but even in feline form, my paw is too large to fit through."

"All right then," said Flaskamper, "let's hope this leg iron comes open as easily as this door did."

It did not. In fact, this leg iron's lock was maddeningly difficult. Precious minmarks elapsed as the elf struggled with the rusty mechanism. Finally, he swore and stood up.

"It's no use," he said. "It's too rusty to pick."

"Go, my friend," said Bengarr. "Take Sturgrin and get out of here. You have risked enough already for me."

"Like blazes I will," said Flaskamper. "You're coming with us and that's that."

Flaskamper went to the cell doorway and looked out into the room. After a moment, he went back to rejoin the firecat.

"Bengarr," he said, "do me a favor and turn into your cat form. I need to see something."

"Very well," said Bengarr, and abruptly transformed into a firecat. Flaskamper couldn't help but chuckle at the sight of a firecat dressed in human clothing, but he recovered himself quickly and knelt to examine Bengarr's hind leg, the one around which the leg iron was clamped.

"I'll be right back," he told the cat, and quickly slipped out of the cell. Several minutes later, the elf returned carrying a small ceramic pot.

"All right, alternate plan," he said. Bengarr growled and sniffed at the pot.

"It's animal fat," Flaskamper said in response to the cat's unspoken question. "They use it to grease the equipment. I think if we put enough on your paw, we may just be able to slip it out of the leg iron."

Bengarr made no sound, but lay down and proffered his leg. Flaskamper set to work slathering the fat all over Bengarr's leg, as well as the iron shackle. Then, grasping both paw and shackle, he began trying to force his friend's paw out through the opening. At first it seemed that, even covered in the slippery grease, the paw was too large. At last, however, Flaskamper was able to twist and squeeze tightly enough to force it out of the leg iron.

"There," said Flaskamper, wiping his slippery hands on the straw. "Now let's get out of here before we find ourselves neck deep in guards."

Bengarr assumed his human form once again, adjusted his twisted clothing and then retrieved his own boots and put them on, after wiping as much of the grease off of his foot as he could manage. The two of them crept quietly out of the cell and made for the corridor. When they passed the cell with the other man in it though, a small, weak moan floated out to them.

Flaskamper looked at Bengarr, who shook his head. The elf agreed – it would be completely foolhardy to try and help him. Besides, he might well be in for murder, or some other heinous offence. But as they moved on past the cell, Flaskamper found himself unable to go another step. His conscience simply wouldn't allow him to leave the man to be brutalized.

"Go on ahead, Bengarr," he said. "Take Sturgrin and get out of here. I'll try to get this fellow out and meet you outside."

"No, Flaskamper," said the Nogirraalan. "I shall join Sturgrin in the passageway, and we shall wait for you there."

The elf clapped the firecat on the arm and smiled. Bengarr gave him back a toothy grin and headed for the passageway. Flaskamper stepped back to the stranger's cell and peered in. He was somewhat surprised to see that the prisoner was actually a boy, certainly not more than sixteen, with long brown hair that was thoroughly tangled and matted with blood. He wore only a pair of shredded breeches, and Flaskamper could see that his entire body was covered in cuts, burns and bruises. He was indeed a pitiful sight to behold.

"It's all right," Flaskamper called to him quietly, "I'm going to get you out of here."

The young man's head turned toward the source of the voice. His dry, bloody lips moved, but even the elf's sharp ears couldn't hear what, if anything, he was saying. Flaskamper shook his head sadly and began to work on the cell door. Again, it took little time to open. Now the trick would be getting this man's leg iron off. If it was as rusty as Bengarr's had been, it would be hopeless, unless this was another firecat. Curious, he reached over and took a quick peek at the young man's teeth.

Nope, not a firecat.

Fortunately, this shackle was not in bad shape at all, and Flaskamper had it open in only a few minmarks.

"All right, friend; you're free," he said, standing and holding his hand out. "Time to come along. Can you stand up?"

For the first time, the young man's hazel eyes opened wide, and he focused his gaze on Flaskamper. Tears began to slide down his grimy face.

"Now now, none of that," said Flaskamper. "Here give me your hand."

The boy could barely get to his feet, and Flaskamper wondered how the devil he was going to get him out of here. At last, he simply hoisted him up and carried him over his shoulder. There was no footwear in the crate outside the lad's cell, so the elf moved quickly back around to the passageway where Bengarr and Sturgrin were waiting.

"Now I know ye've gone mad. We can't—" Sturgrin began, but shut up when Flaskamper shot him an icy glare.

"Move quickly and quietly," Flaskamper whispered. "With any luck we can be out and away from this castle before the sun comes up."

They hurried back along the corridor, past the still unconscious guard and up the stairs. In no time they had reached the cell where Flaskamper and Sturgrin had been held.

"We can't have many minmarks left before the guard comes by again," said Flaskamper. "If we're still here when he walks by, that'll buy us some time. Bengarr, take the boy and hide in that far corner behind the piled-up straw. Sturgrin, go and sit over where your shackle is."

They took their positions and Flaskamper swung the cell door closed. To keep it from swinging open again, he jammed a small stone under one of the bars.

"That door won't stay if he grabs hold of it," said Flaskamper, sitting near his own shackle, "so be ready to rush him if he does."

"Ere what about the other one ye thumped?" asked Sturgrin. "When's 'e gonna wake up?"

"Hopefully not for another mark or so," Flaskamper replied. "I just hope that corner he's in is dark enough to keep him hidden in case someone else walks by."

A few minmarks later, the duty guard came along. It was only then that Flaskamper realized that they had forgotten to put their boots in the crate outside. He held his breath and prepared to spring. The guard paused at the cell door and for a moment, Flaskamper was certain he had noticed the missing footwear. But then, to his intense relief, he simply turned and continued down the corridor. They listened until his footsteps died away, then jumped up. When the elf mentioned their mistake with the boots, Sturgrin paled at first, but then chuckled.

"Well that's worth a bit o' thanks to the Gods," he remarked.

"Shh, keep your voice down," whispered Flaskamper. "Now the trick is going to be to find our way out from here. I tried to pay attention to the path when we were brought in, but there were so many twists and turns, I lost track.

"Bengarr," the elf said softly to the firecat. "It must be time by now for the cooks to have started the breakfast preparations. Do you think you could sniff out a path to the kitchens? That would most likely give us a way outside."

"You are clever, Elf Brother," said Bengarr, beginning to undress. "Sturgrin, I am about to entrust you with something that has been a secret amongst my people for centuries. I hope you will see fit to keep it."

"Don't ye worry about me none," Sturgrin replied, though he eyed the disrobing man nervously. "I'm in the business of secrets."

Bengarr handed his clothes and boots to Sturgrin. Once naked, he turned and abruptly transformed back into his firecat form. Sturgrin started visibly and his eyes bulged; then he swore.

"Great ballocks!" he exclaimed in a loud whisper. "If I'd only known this about 'im when I was a sneak thief. I'll bet there ain't a window in the city 'e couldn't a' climbed into."

Flaskamper ignored him. The boy seemed to have fainted, so he slung him over his shoulder again like a sack of beets and waited impatiently for the firecat to find the trail. There was still hope that they could all be out of the castle before their escape was discovered.

"Have you got the scent yet, Bengarr?" he asked the cat after a few moments. Bengarr growled and started off down one of the passageways.

"I guess so," said Sturgrin.

The firecat led them through the maze of dark corridors, stopping only to sniff the air occasionally. Twice they had to dive for cover as guards passed by, but Bengarr could smell them coming well ahead of time, so no one discovered them. Finally they came to the foot of another staircase. Bengarr began padding up the steps, stopped and sniffed, then abruptly became human again.

"I believe the kitchens are behind the door at the top of these stairs," he said, reaching out to retrieve his clothes from Sturgrin. "The smell of food is strongest there."

"Good work, Bengarr," said Flaskamper. The boy on his shoulder began to moan. "Everyone hold on a minmark."

Flaskamper kneeled down and laid the lad gently on the floor. In the dim light of the torches, the elf could see that the young man's eyes were now open again.

"Hey there?" said Flaskamper. "I'm glad you're awake. You were starting to wear my shoulder out. What's your name, lad?"

The boy said nothing, but clapped his hand over his mouth and shook his head.

"You can't talk?" Flaskamper guessed. The boy nodded.

"Can't talk you say?" said Sturgrin. "Ere, let me have a look at 'im."

The man leaned over and studied the boy for a few tiks. His eyes then grew wide with recognition.

"By my granny's tits!" he exclaimed. "You know who we got 'ere, Bengarr? This is Prince Borag's boy, the dumb one. Can't recall 'is name at the moment. I'm right ain't I lad? You're the late king's own grandson, ain't ye?"

They all looked down at the boy, who stared back, terrified. Flaskamper took him gently by the shoulders and offered his most disarming smile.

"It's all right," he told him. "We're not your enemies. We're going to get out of this place now, and you're going to come with us. Does that sound good to you?"

The prince, or whoever he was, gave Flaskamper a weak smile in return and nodded his head again vigorously.

"Good," said Flaskamper. "We'll sort out who you are later. Now can you walk?"

Another nod, and the boy got to his feet. He was obviously somewhat unsteady, but Flaskamper decided to chance letting him walk on his own. Then, he had another thought.

"If you're really the old king's grandson," he said, "then you would know this castle better than any of us, right?"

The young man looked all around, then back at Flaskamper. He shrugged his shoulders in confusion.

"We've come up through the dungeons," Flaskamper explained to him. "Bengarr says that the kitchens are right behind the door at the top of these stairs. Does that give you a better idea of where we are?"

The boy thought for another moment, then nodded. He pointed to the stairs and made an eating motion.

"All right, so that's where the kitchens are," said the elf. "You were right Bengarr. Now lad – that is – Your Highness, we need to get to the

stables to retrieve our horses. Should we go this way, through the kitchens, or is there a better route?"

The prince pointed to the stairs again and shook his head. Instead, he started off to the left, down a different passage. After a few steps though, his knees buckled and he fell in a heap. The others rushed to help him up.

"Here, take hold of my arm," Flaskamper told him. "I'll help you along. You lead the way."

The boy pointed to the torches, then down the pathway and then made a slashing motion across his neck.

"You're saying this way isn't lit?" asked Flaskamper. "Don't worry. I can fix that."

The elf called out the spell to summon the lumen spirit.

*"Al an te fatch
To miney duros
Al fieras mor
Nya pos na toros."*

Suddenly the chamber was ablaze with blinding white light. Flaskamper added a few more words, and the orb dimmed to where it cast just enough light for them to see the way in front of them. The boy gazed at Flaskamper in wonder, as did Sturgrin.

"An impressive trick, Elf Brother," was Bengarr's only comment.

Flaskamper grinned.

"It has its uses," he said. "Now let's get going. Someone's bound to discover our escape and raise the alarm soon."

They hurried along the corridor as quickly as they could, but they were slowed by the boy's injured leg. Finally Flaskamper hoisted him up onto Bengarr's back, and they broke into a run. When necessary, the young prince would point them in one direction or another. At last they climbed a flight of stairs, which brought them above ground. Now there were windows in the hallways, and they could see the predawn light creeping in.

"Are we almost there?" Flaskamper asked.

The boy nodded and they pressed on. Two turns later, they came to another door. A window on either side told them that this one led outside. Bengarr tried the handle, but the door was locked.

"Shitel!" Flaskamper cursed. "My thieves' tool isn't made to open this kind of lock."

The young man abruptly got down from Bengarr's back and hobbled over to a large vase in the corner of the hallway. He thrust his hand down into it, and a moment later came out with a large iron key, which he handed to Flaskamper with a triumphant smile.

"Your own private exit, eh?" he said to the boy. "Well done!"

They unlocked the door and stepped outside, and then Flaskamper carefully locked the door again so no one would follow them. He looked around and immediately saw the stables just across the compound. They had just begun to make their way carefully around when they heard a loud commotion coming from somewhere in the distance.

"I fear all that shouting may be about us, Flaskamper," said Bengarr.

"I fear you're right," the elf replied. "We'd better run."

Flaskamper scooped up the prince, and they all ran for the stables. They made it to the building easily, but were then confronted there by two armed, if somewhat astonished, guards. The two men drew their swords and challenged them, but the words were scarcely out when the one who spoke them went down, clutching at the dagger embedded in his chest. Before the other could react, he found himself on the business end of a huge set of firecat jaws. Though still encumbered by his clothing, Bengarr had no trouble crushing the guard's throat. Flaskamper retrieved the dagger from the dead guard's chest. He then politely asked the terrified stable boy, a lad of no more than twelve, to please lead them to their horses and fetch their saddles for them. The boy complied without a word. Bengarr resumed his human form and adjusted his garments again.

"Don't forget your boots," said Flaskamper, pointing out the footwear that Bengarr had jumped out of.

The firecat growled in annoyance as he retrieved the boots.

"One thing that I definitely do not miss about living amongst humans," he said, "is clothing. I find it a most irritating encumbrance."

Outside the racket was drawing closer. They saddled and mounted up quickly, Flaskamper and the prince on Finney, Bengarr and Sturgrin riding Stoblee. The elf nodded farewell to the wide-eyed stable hand, and the two horses took off like arrows loosed from a longbow. The path to the main gate, they soon realized, was also the direction from which all the commotion was coming. Fortunately, the young prince was able to steer them in another direction, around their pursuers. They proceeded slowly at first, so the horses' hooves would not be heard clattering on the cobblestones. When they reached the long open stretch of ground leading to the main gate, they paused.

"The gate is still open," Flaskamper said to Bengarr. "The gate guards haven't gotten the word to close them yet. I say we hit it full-speed. It's a risk, but we have to get there before they see that we're being pursued. Otherwise they'll close it on us before we can get there."

"Agreed," said Bengarr. "We shall proceed at full gallop."

Once again the four took off, driving the two horses on at top speed. They were only about three quarters of the way there, however,

when a squadron of mounted soldiers came up over the hill behind them. The prince, who had been watching, grabbed Flaskamper's shoulder. The elf turned and looked behind him.

"Shite!" he yelled, and urged Finney to lay on more speed.

The guards at the gate had also spotted the soldiers though, and one of them was running to close the gate. Bengarr veered his horse off the path to intercept him, while Flaskamper swerved to deal with the other guard, who was on the opposite side of the road with his sword drawn. Flaskamper drew the dagger once again from his belt and charged straight at the man. At the last minmark, the man panicked and tripped, falling backwards onto the ground. The elf pulled Finney up sharply and leapt on top of the guard, but he was a large, burly fellow and fought fiercely. Flaskamper was able to force him to drop his sword, but as the elf lunged with the dagger, the man grabbed his wrist in a crushing grip and kneed him hard in the stomach. The guard then forced him down to the muddy ground and grabbed him around the neck. Flaskamper fought to breathe, but his airway was cut off. He began to see stars.

The next moment, the hefty guard grunted and fell sideways onto the ground. When Flaskamper's vision cleared, he saw the young prince standing over him, a large rock in his hand. The elf smiled as he picked himself up, but there was no time for celebrations. The mounted soldiers were already plunging down the hill at top speed toward them. The elf and the boy quickly got back on Finney. Having dispatched the other guard, Bengarr and Sturgrin joined them a tik later, and the four sped off again, out the open gate and into the city.

Now Sturgrin took over as guide, directing them in and out of various narrow side streets in order to lose their pursuers. It was still early, so there were no crowds to lose themselves in, but Sturgrin knew every nook and cranny of the city, and soon they were in the clear – at least for the moment.

"They'll 'ave the city militia alerted before we can reach the main gates," Sturgrin warned. "We all need to take cover until I can arrange another way of getting' ye out."

He led them all to a house at the edge of the city, where he assured them they would be safe. Then Sturgrin went to make plans to smuggle them out of the city. He returned once with some food and fresh clothing and footwear for the young prince.

"I hope they fit," said Sturgrin. "I swiped 'em from me nephew. 'E looks about the same size." Then he was quickly off again.

Bengarr took the opportunity to grab a bit of sleep, but Flaskamper found that, though exhausted and bruised, he was too anxious to close his eyes. The prince limped off to wash and change clothes. Then, unable to sleep either, he rejoined the elf in the great room. While they waited for Sturgrin's return, Flaskamper quizzed the boy about how he had wound up in the dungeons. With the help of a

pen and paper he found in one of the other rooms, the lad was able to tell Flaskamper that his name was Baol, and he was indeed the grandson of the late King Darronen.

“How did you wind up in the dungeons?” Flaskamper asked the prince as they sat at a small round table, eating bread and cheese. Prince Baol scribbled furiously for several minmarks and handed the paper to Flaskamper.

“When my grandfather died, there was a delay in naming his successor,” Baol wrote. “My father and uncle fought over the throne. During the chaos, Rinnetohl, who was Viceroy of one of our rival houses, made his move. I don’t know how he managed it, but he made it appear as though my father and uncle had killed one another in a fight. He then imprisoned me and forced my sister, Clenna, to marry him by threatening to kill me. By marrying her, he could make a legitimate claim to the throne. That is the way our system works. Clenna and I are very close, so she did what he commanded. After that, the bastard kept me alive to keep her loyal to him. It sickens me that she was forced to wed, and now shares a bed with that...that MONSTER!

Baol wrote the word ‘monster’ in large block letters, making his disgust very clear.

“Great Goddess!” Flaskamper exclaimed. “How long has this been going on?”

“I lost track of time,” Baol wrote. “However I know that two Winterfests have passed, which is an annual holiday. So I know only that it has been more than two years, but less than three.”

“It’s a wonder you’re still alive at all,” Flaskamper remarked.

“The guards were under strict orders not to allow me to die,” Baol scribbled. “Other than that, they were free to do with me as they wished. I cannot tell you how grateful I am to you, sir...”

The young prince began to weep. Flaskamper could only imagine the abuses the young man had been subjected to during his two years in the dungeons. The elf reached out and squeezed his shoulder gently. After a few minmarks, Baol recovered himself. He looked at Flaskamper and suddenly slapped his head. He took the paper and began writing again.

“I am an idiot,” he wrote. “I have not even asked your name, or how you have come to be in Ulgiarra. I have never seen an elf before. What brings you here? And the man who turned into a firecat...is he a Nogirraalan? Can all Nogirraalans do that? I apologize if I seem to pry. It is only that... you risked your life – taking the time to rescue me – and I want to repay you in some way if I can.”

“It is not necessary to repay me, Prince Baol,” Flaskamper said, smiling. “I did what my conscience told me I had to do, that’s all. As to your questions, I can tell you only that we are on a secret mission to rescue someone else... someone very important to me, and yes – the

Nogirraalans and the firecats are one and the same. It is a closely guarded secret among their kind. I fear, though, that it will not remain a secret for much longer.”

“Upon my life, I will tell no one,” the young man wrote emphatically.

“It is not you I am worried about,” the elf replied. “But there is nothing to be done about that now. He does not seem worried, so I will not concern myself either. What about you, Your Highness? Have you thought about what you will do now that you are free of the King’s Dungeons?”

“I have thought of little else over the past two years,” The prince wrote. “I plan to free my sister, avenge the deaths of my father and uncle, and reclaim the birthright that was stolen from us.”

“That’s an ambitious undertaking for one young man,” said Flaskamper. “Do you have any ideas about how you’re going to manage it?”

“Not yet,” Baol admitted. “I must talk further with the Ulgiarran man – the one currently arranging your escape from the city. I suspect that Rinnetohl is not a popular king. Perhaps it is wishful thinking, but if true, I may be able to organize an uprising against him. It will not be easy, but thanks to you, I now at least have the chance. My grandfather was both a wise and fair king, and I yearn for the opportunity to emulate him. I shall even give the murderer Rinnetohl a fair trial... before I chop his head off.”

Flaskamper laughed when he read the last bit and ruffled the prince’s hair. Baol grinned back at him.

Sturgrin returned later that afternoon. With him was a little old man driving a wagon covered in canvas. Baol started for the door but Bengarr, who had awakened from his nap, placed a hand on his shoulder to stop him.

“We do not know who may be watching out there,” he told the boy.

Sturgrin strode into the house as though he hadn’t a care in the world. Once inside, though, he looked about furtively.

“Any problems?” he asked.

Flaskamper shook his head.

“It’s been quiet,” he replied.

“Good,” said Sturgrin. “It’s time to get ye’s out of here. Normally I’d suggest waitin’ til nightfall, but I’m afraid that’s what they’ll be expectin’, so we’re going to move out now. Wait here until I go out an’ make sure the way is clear. When I gives a whistle, you three hurry out an’ pile into the back o’ that wagon.”

Baol shook his head fiercely.

“The prince is staying here,” said Flaskamper. “He has business to discuss with you.” The elf quickly showed Sturgrin what the young prince had written earlier. The man wrinkled his brows.

“Neither I nor anyone I know has any great love for Rinnetohl, young prince” he said. “Yer granddad was a fine king indeed – the best this realm ‘as seen in some time. I can’t make no promises, but I’m willin’ to put ye in touch with some people. Right, then – ye stay put. Ye other two get ready fer my signal.”

Sturgrin disappeared back out the door. Flaskamper clasped Prince Baol’s hand.

“Good luck, Your Highness,” said Flaskamper. “I hope we meet again one day.”

Baol smiled and squeezed the elf’s hand, then turned and clasped Bengarr’s. At that moment, they heard a sharp whistle from outside. Baol waved one last time to them as they hurried out the door.

Outside, Flaskamper threw up the flap of the canvas wagon cover and was immediately assaulted by a foul and overpowering odor.

“Goddess!” he said, choking on the stench. “What in blazes is in here? It smells like horse shite.”

“It is,” said Sturgrin with a grin. “A whole wagonload o’ fertilizer for the outlying farms. The guards won’t be sniffing around that for too long. Go on, get in. You’ll find a couple o’ shallow places been scooped out toward the front. Unless they want to unlace the whole top o’ the wagon, it should keep ye well hidden ‘til we gets clear o’ the gates.”

“But what about - ?” Flaskamper was about to ask about their horses, but stopped when he realized that Finney and Stoblee, covered by a pair of moth-eaten blankets, were pulling the cart, though neither horse looked particularly happy about it.

“How are you going to get the wagon back in?” he asked Sturgrin.

“Let me worry about that,” the man replied shortly. “Now get in will ye, before yer spotted?”

Flaskamper turned toward Bengarr, only to discover that the Nogirraalan was already in the back of the cart. Flaskamper sighed and took a deep breath, then crawled in over the heaps of freshly shoveled horse dung. He grimaced with disgust as one hand sunk into an especially squishy pile, and then looked around in vain for a place to wipe it off. Having no luck, he soldiered on until he reached the hollowed out depression next to Bengarr. The firecat was watching him with some amusement.

“How can you stand this Bengarr?” Flaskamper asked, gagging as he took a breath.

“In my animal form, I am used to strong odors,” he replied, chuckling, “They do not bother me as they do ordinary humans...or elves apparently.”

“All right you two,” Sturgrin called. “Keep quiet and low in there. Jentril will be takin’ ye to a farm that’s located just shy of a mark from the wood where ye said yer people was camped. If ye get spotted at the gates, ye’ll just have to fight yer way out. I’ve done all I kin do.”

"Many thanks to you, Sturgrin," said Bengarr. "*I am now in your debt it seems.*"

"We'll call it even," the man replied. "Jus' don't be askin' me fer no more favors, ye hear?"

"Take care of Prince Baol," said Flaskamper.

"Now wha'd I just go an' say about not askin' fer favors?" Sturgrin answered. "Ah, don't worry 'bout 'im. I'll see 'e gets to a safe place."

Sturgrin pulled the flap down over the back of the wagon, sealing the two of them in with their fetid cargo. They heard the old man call out to the horses, and then the wagon jerked into motion, covering them both with clods of the loosely piled dung.

"And here I thought things were as bad as they could get," said Flaskamper, wiping his face with the sleeve of his tunic.

The pair lay quietly as the wagon rolled on for easily a halfmark. Flaskamper assumed the man was taking a roundabout route to avoid any roadblocks that may have been set up. At last they drew to a halt. The elf heard the clink of armor approaching, and the gruff voice of a guard questioning their driver. He couldn't understand the driver's muffled response, but he tensed as he clearly heard one of the guards say "check it". Flaskamper and Bengarr hunkered down as low as they could. A moment later, the canvas flap was folded back. Though neither looked up, the sound of the guard choking and cursing was unmistakable. A few tiks later, the flap was lowered again, and they heard laughter from another guard.

"Did you check it thoroughly?" he said, still chuckling.

"Very funny," the other replied. "You can check the next one."

The next moment, there was a shout, and the wagon was in motion again. The two passengers both sighed with relief as they rolled out through the city gates. Now they began at last to move again at a fair clip, and Flaskamper was tempted after a few minmarks to stick his head out for a breath of fresh air. He resisted the urge, however, knowing that the wagon could probably still be seen by the tower guards. Instead he hunkered down in his smelly hiding place with Bengarr, holding his breath as much as possible as the wagon sped away from Ulgiarra and out into the open countryside.

Chapter 24

Crossing to Oblivion

Flaskamper and Bengarr rode back into camp just as the sun was setting. The others had only to get a whiff of them before agreeing that their story could wait until they had gone to wash. The pair grabbed fresh clothing and headed off to the nearby stream. Though there was no snow or ice this far to the south, the water was freezing cold. Nevertheless it was well worth a few shivers to be free of the odor of horse manure that clung to them. Once bathed, they washed out their smelly clothing and headed back to camp. By the time they'd returned, Lorq had the fire going. Fia took their wet clothes and hung them near the fire to dry. It was only when they had finally sat down that Flaskamper noticed that two of the party were missing.

"Your brother and Kachia went hunting," Fia explained. "They should be back any moment now."

As if on cue, Alrontin and Kachia stepped into the clearing. The elf carried a large hare, while Kachia bore two partridges. Lorq took charge of the spoils and began preparing them to roast, along with some tubers he had gathered on one of their earlier stops. Alrontin shook Bengarr's hand and hugged his brother warmly.

"We feared the worst when you did not return last night," Alrontin said, "and we had no idea where to begin looking for you."

"Well, things got a bit dicey for a while," Flaskamper said, "but we managed well enough."

As dinner cooked, Flaskamper filled them in on the events of the previous night and day.

"Well done, you two!" said Fia when the tale was finished.

"That was a very nice thing to do, rescuing the boy," Groog observed.

"I must admit," said Bengarr, "it was Flaskamper's kindness that saved the boy. Though I am glad of his good deed, I can take no credit for it."

"Don't fault yourself, Bengarr," said Fia. "Under those circumstances, I think any one of us would have hesitated before stopping to rescue the boy."

"You are kind to say that, Fia," said Bengarr. A look passed between the two that Flaskamper immediately recognized. He looked over at Lorq to see if he had caught it too. The giant smiled back and winked. He *had* noticed.

"She's right, Bengarr," said the elf. "I came within a cat's whisker – pardon the expression – of leaving him behind myself. Besides let's face it, we're only praising my kindness because we wound up getting away. If we'd been caught... well, luckily we weren't, that's all. Er... Ronti, have you heard anything I've said this past halfmark?"

Alrontin had been studying the map they brought back. He looked up at the mention of his name.

"What?" he said. "Of course I've been listening. You did well, Skamper. I'm very proud of you; father would be too, though he would wonder, no doubt, how you came to acquire such excellent thieving skills."

"No doubt he would," Flaskamper replied, touched by his brother's praise, "and by the time we get home, I will hopefully have thought of some way to explain that to him."

"How does the journey ahead look, Alrontin?" Fia asked.

The elf's expression sobered.

"The route is plain enough," he answered, "though somewhat lacking in detail. There is clearly another way across Harrow Yawn besides the Bridge of Skulls. That is as we had hoped. However the map does not say what sort of structure it is. It may be no more than a tree that has fallen across this narrow part of the chasm behind Hattiar Mountain," Alrontin indicated the spot on the map, "or it may be a fully constructed bridge. Let us hope not, for such a conspicuous structure would almost certainly be guarded."

"Not necessarily," Kachia said. Her comment surprised them, for she had spoken scarcely a word since the day they left Nogirraal.

"Why do you say that, Kachia?" Lorq asked.

"Between the castle and the crossing lie many miles of haunted forest," she answered. "Even if they do know of the bridge, they may have concluded that no one would dare hazard such a lengthy journey through Gloomsveldt."

“I’ve heard tales of the haunted forest, of course,” said Alrontin, “but I always assumed them to be mere folktales – the sort that children tell to frighten one another.”

“I would not be so certain,” said Kachia, but did not elaborate.

“The lands east of Harrow Yawn are shrouded in mystery,” said Bengarr. “I remember well the wagons that used to come regularly from Moribar to Ulgiarraah to buy goods. The black-robed men and women conducted their business quickly, and could never be drawn into conversation. They simply purchased what they needed and then left. None would ever pull back their cowls, which led some to speculate that they were not actually human at all. I would not go so far as to suggest that. Nevertheless it has long been rumored that dark and menacing creatures inhabit those lands – creatures from times long past that dwell deep in the mountain caves and shun the daylight.”

“What about merchants, traders?” Flaskamper asked. “Surely some have ventured there to ply their wares. I’ve known many a merchant who would gladly visit the depths of The Underworld if they thought there was a sovereign to be made there.”

“Aye,” Bengarr agreed, “and I can assure you that there is avarice aplenty in Ulgiarraah. And yet, in all the time I spent there, I knew of no one who had ever dared to undertake the journey. In fact, I never even heard the idea discussed. It was as though the very notion were unthinkable.”

“What about Gloomsveldt itself?” Fia asked. “What are the stories told locally – in Ulgiarraah and Nogirraal?”

“I heard little mention of the haunted wood while in Ulgiarraah,” Bengarr answered, “but the tales told in Nogirraal are of a spirit clan known as the Caladjhari, who inhabit the depths of Gloomsveldt. It is said that they were once friendly and benevolent towards the other races of Firma. Though they never left their forest home, they would treat visitors to the woods kindly, and even help lost travelers to find their way out again. This all changed, however, when one of the first Kings of Moribar, intent on expanding his empire, hacked and burned a great swath of the forest in order to settle the land. The Caladjhari became enraged. They could do nothing physically to stop the king, but everyone who tried to settle the land was incessantly plagued by nightmares and horrible visions. Eventually the land was abandoned, and the forest reclaimed it once again, but the angry spirits were never appeased, and continue to this day to haunt those who dare trespass in their realm – tormenting them until they are driven completely mad. This is the legend among my pride and has been for many generations. As with all legends, however, one must treat it with a certain degree of skepticism.”

“Very true,” said Flaskamper, “but on the other hand, I’ve seen enough strange and creepy shite in my travels to learn not to discount

anything, no matter how bizarre it might seem. I've found that there's almost always some amount of truth to those old myths."

"I certainly agree with you there, sweetie," said Fia.

They all ate their fill of Lorq's stew, and shortly thereafter went off to bed. Fia took the first watch, which passed without incident. Two marks later, Lorq came out to relieve her. Fia gave the giant a goodnight kiss on the forehead and trudged wearily back to her tent. It was pitch black when she entered, but she didn't have the energy to find her elf candle. As she finished shedding her clothes, though, a strange feeling stole over her. Something wasn't right. She could almost swear that –

She was not alone!

As calmly as she could, she reached over and drew her dagger slowly and quietly from its sheath on her belt, then felt around for the elf candle. When her hand finally closed around it, she held it up in front of her, shielding her eyes so that the glare would not impair her vision, and then whispered the magic word to light it.

Ignictum!

The candle immediately came to life, not burning at one end like a normal candle. Instead, the entire wax cylinder began to glow brightly. Fia raised her dagger, ready to strike at any attacker. A few tiks later, she lowered it again, smiling and shaking her head in amusement, though her heart continued pounding for a different reason.

"What are you doing here?" she asked the firecat, who was lounging comfortably on her bedroll in feline form, licking his paw. "My heart jumped clear into my throat."

Fia placed the candle into its small bronze holder. It was only then that she realized that, except for her pendant, she was completely naked. She grabbed for her clothes, but the cat clamped one paw firmly down on top of the pile, then began to slide his lean, muscular body toward her, a deep rumble coming from his throat. Fia held up her hands to keep him at bay, but he was far too powerful for her to stop. A moment later, she was on the ground, pinned beneath his two massive forepaws. Slowly, the firecat lowered himself down fully on top of her, and as she ran her hands along the fur covering his back, Fia felt him transform, becoming smooth and soft – the flesh of a man once again.

"Bengarr, we can't do this," she whispered, "not now."

"There is only now, Fia," Bengarr growled, and began fervently kissing her neck.

Fia felt his passion growing, and realized that in another few moments there would be no stopping this. As this thought raced through her mind, however, another followed rapidly on its heels.

I don't want it to stop.

No. She wanted this – as much as he did – perhaps even more. The attraction had been simmering since they first laid eyes on one another. Tomorrow night they would be in Gloomsveldt. Tensions would be high, and only the Gods knew what would happen to them there. No, Bengarr was right. If this was to be at all, now *was* the time for it.

They made love far into the night. At some point, the light from the elf candle flickered and died out. Neither of them noticed. Finally, when they were both worn out, they laid in one another's arms, basking in the peaceful afterglow.

"What are you thinking about?" Fia asked in a whisper.

Bengarr didn't answer immediately, and for a moment, she thought he had drifted off to sleep, but at last he stirred, wrapping his arms even more tightly around her.

"Thinking about?" he repeated. "Nothing of any great consequence. I am merely reveling in the guilty pleasures of this night with you."

"Guilty?" Fia asked. "Why guilty?"

The Nogirraalan sighed.

"It will only sound silly to you," he said. "It is rather silly, at least, it seems so to me now – after you and I..."

His voice trailed off.

"Come on," Fia prodded. "Now you've got me curious. Why a guilty pleasure?"

"All right. Well you see," Bengarr explained, "among my kind, mating is largely a matter of procreation. The Sire mates with whom he chooses, and then decides who among the rest of the pride will mate with whom. It is all done according to a plan, to optimize the bloodlines. We couple in our animal form, when the females come into season, and when we are told to by The Sire."

"Not very romantic," Fia observed.

"Not in the least," said Bengarr. "In fact," he laughed. "In fact, mating in human form at all is considered – well...rather indecent actually."

"Indecent?" Fia exclaimed, then laughed as well.

"I told you that you would find it silly," Bengarr said. "But it is the way of the pride. I am one of the few Nogirraalans who has actually experienced human coupling – that is – lovemaking. It happened when I went to spend my away years in Ulgiarrah. Most of us stay clear of sex entirely, and those few who try it rarely get over their cultural distaste for it."

"But it was different for you, I gather?" Fia guessed.

"Oh yes," said the firecat. "I mean, it happened purely by chance. I was out with some friends and we all got rather full of ale. Anyhow, someone made me a bet that I couldn't persuade one of the tavern girls, a pretty thing named Mizzie, to bed me. Well, I'm easily goaded after a few pints, so I took the bet. I intended to call it off as soon as it

was clear that I had won the bet. But then, when she said yes and we were alone in her room, I didn't want to hurt her feelings. And then she began to kiss me and – and before long I realized that I was enjoying what we were doing.”

“But afterwards you felt guilty?” Fia surmised.

“Yes,” said Bengarr, “terribly guilty. To say nothing of the jibes I got from the other firecats. I had to go to great lengths to convince them that I had only gone through with it to avoid hurting Mazzie's feelings, and that I didn't enjoy a single minmark of it. In fact, I almost managed to convince myself, but then... I went back to see her again – just to talk to her, or so I told myself. You can guess what happened, of course.”

“Another dip in the pond?” Fia asked.

“Yes,” he said, “which led to another, and another. It got so that I was spending more time in Mazzie's bed than in my own. Amazingly, I managed to keep the affair a secret from the others the entire time I was in Ulgiarra. I told Mazzie it was because my father would not approve of our relationship. I knew she would not understand that, to my people, what we were doing together was repulsive.”

“And so?” Fia asked. “What finally happened with you and Mazzie?”

“When it was my time to return to Nogirraal, I simply took the coward's way out and left” he replied, “I did not even visit her to say goodbye. The irony is that all that guilt I felt about what we had done was nothing compared to my guilt over leaving in that way. I'll always wish I had had the chance to make amends for that.”

“Why can't you?” Fia asked. “Is she no longer in Ulgiarra?”

“No,” Bengarr answered quietly. “She is dead. The red fever took her just over three years ago.”

“I'm sorry, Bengarr,” said Fia. “I'm sorry I stirred up these memories.”

“It is I who should apologize,” he said, “for talking about another woman after making love to you. You have every right to throw me out on my ear.”

“Oh don't worry,” Fia reassured him. “I'm not the jealous type.”

“I'm glad of that,” said Bengarr, “because lying here with you is what makes it all right. You see, I had thought that I should never again know the joys of lovemaking, and that my only recollection of it would forever be tainted by the way things ended with Mazzie. But now...now you have given me a new memory of it, Fia – something I can carry with me when I ascend to my position as Sire, and must behave thereafter in the manner prescribed by our customs and traditions.”

“Perhaps you could change some of those customs and traditions,” Fia suggested.

Bengarr leaned down and kissed her, and she ran her hands through his long hair, still dampened with sweat.

“Old customs die hard,” he said wearily, “and I am hardly a revolutionary. Still, with this night left to shine in my memory, perhaps I *will* find the resolve to try teaching my pride a new way – and a better way I think.”

“I’m sure that you’ll be a great Sire,” Fia assured him. Bengarr kissed her, then took her amulet in his hand.

“I never see you without this,” he said. “It must mean a great deal to you.”

Fia suddenly felt guilty herself, as though she had somehow deceived him. At the same time, she could not bring herself to tell him the truth about her glamour pendant. This night had been perfect so far, and she wanted nothing to spoil it.

“It does,” she replied. “I never take it off. In a way, it’s as much a part of me as...well, any other part of me.”

“In that case,” said the firecat, and bent his head down and kissed the amulet, “I wish to leave no part of you unattended.”

Fia laughed, and the two of them snuggled together under the blankets. Exhausted, they fell asleep for several marks; arms and legs woven together like a reed basket. Then just as the first fine threads of light were creeping in to announce the new day’s arrival, they awoke and made love again, enjoying one last blissful crescendo before emerging to face whatever fresh hazards the new dawn might choose to propel their way.

* * *

Later that morning the party headed southeast, following the map. They steered well to the east of Ulgiarra, not wanting to attract the attention of any mounted patrols. By early afternoon, they had passed the city and come to an expanse of hard, rocky ground just behind the eastern face of Hattiar Mountain. Here they turned due east, riding directly toward Harrow Yawn, the great chasm that split the land of Firma from the Northern Hills all the way down to the southern seacoast. According to the map, the crossing point was just ahead, although the scale of this particular map seemed wildly inconsistent. Hopefully it would not be too far off the mark. Time was growing too short for them to spend another night on this side of the chasm.

No one knew how old Harrow Yawn actually was, or how it had come into being. The stories were nearly as numerous and varied as the storytellers themselves. Some said the rift was created by Gods of old to contain the hordes of foul creatures who lived in and around the Wormspine Mountain range. Others claimed it was caused by a mighty earthquake, which had also caused the first eruption of the volcano at Hreechkree. Whichever story one chose to believe, however,

most of the denizens of Firma who lived to the west of the mighty gorge all tended to believe, rightly or not, that those things to the west of it (with the possible exception of Ulgiarra) were relatively good, while those to the east were unmistakably evil.

Despite its great expanse, Harrow Yawn was actually quite difficult to spot until one was practically at its edge. The reason for this was that even though there were mountain ranges to the east, the north and the south of it, the land immediately on either side of the gorge was actually quite flat, with only a slight upward incline as one approached the edge. So even though the party was in a terrible hurry to reach the Yawn, they nevertheless proceeded slowly and with great caution.

Fortunately, they had help from above, in the form of a Bronze Dragon. Just over a mark after they had turned east, Groog returned from his scouting mission with some wonderful news. Not only were they less than a halfmark from the edge of Harrow Yawn, but the crossing point was actually straight ahead, exactly where the map had depicted it. Groog accepted everyone's thanks before reluctantly revealing the not-so-wonderful news.

"There's one problem," the dragon said – or rather imparted – into their minds.

"I just knew it was too good to be true," said Alrontin. "All right, Groog, what's the problem?"

"Ahem, well the problem," Groog explained, "is the crossing itself. You see, it's not exactly a bridge, in the ordinary sense of the word."

"In exactly what sense of the word *is* it a bridge, Groog?" Fia asked.

"Well, in the sense that it does, indeed, *bridge* the chasm," Groog replied. "No doubt about that. The problem is, well it's somewhat hard to put into words. Let me try and put the image directly into your minds. Just all try and concentrate on picturing the bridge. I shall attempt to accomplish the rest."

Each member of the party concentrated, trying to see Groog's image of the bridge. For a short time, nothing happened. Then, one by one, fuzzy images began to form. They all focused on trying to clear up the picture, and Flaskamper was the first to succeed, much to his dismay.

"Ohhhh Goddess noooo!" he exclaimed.

"What?" Alrontin demanded. "What are you seeing?"

At that moment though, his own image cleared, and he saw the problem for himself. Soon all the rest of them could see it as well. It was indeed a bridge – an old, possibly even ancient, rope bridge. From the image they were seeing, it was also clear that many of the footboards that made up the base of the bridge had fallen away, leaving large, open gaps. As to the rope latticework itself, what had once been a tight, well-constructed network of thick, strong cords now sagged heavily. Many sections looked as though they had begun to

unravel. Other places looked rotted. The company all shared a collective groan as they examined the dismal display inside their heads.

“What are we going to do, Ronti?” Flaskamper asked miserably. “Great Goddess, we knew that we might have to leave our horses and wagon behind, but this looks hopeless for *us* as well.”

“Calm down, little brother,” Alrontin said gently. “Let’s wait until we get there. Maybe things won’t be so bad as they... as they look.”

The elf captain did his best to reassure his brother, but he, too, was discouraged by the picture he had seen. In addition to that, he had noticed that his need for battleroot these past few days seemed to be growing stronger, and more frequent. When they’d started, he had been fairly certain he’d brought enough to last the journey, but at the rate the pain – and the craving – was now recurring, he was no longer so sure. Absently, his hand reached down to pat the small leather satchel he now carried over his shoulder. The sudden, sometimes violent return of his symptoms meant that keeping it tucked in the bottom of his pack was no longer practical. He kept it close to him always now, a fact that both comforted him and also troubled him deeply.

When they reached Harrow Yawn, and the dilapidated bridge, it was clear that the mental picture the dragon had given them was depressingly accurate. Not only that, but the opposite side of the great canyon was completely enshrouded by a heavy fog, so they had no way of knowing whether or not the other end of the bridge was even secure.

“Well, at least this end still seems safe enough,” said Alrontin, checking the bracework and knots. “Groog, can you fly over and check the anchors on the other end?”

“Gladly, Captain,” Groog replied and promptly flew off, disappearing into the dense mist. A few minmarks later, he returned.

“You’ll be relieved to know that the bridge is secure on both ends,” said the dragon.

“Thank you, Groog,” said Alrontin. “That’s something at least, though I can’t say it gives me a great deal of confidence, given the state of the rest of the structure. Now that we know that we can bring neither the horses nor the wagon any further, we all need to fill our packs with as much as we can safely carry.”

“I’ve been thinking,” said Flaskamper as they filled up their packs from their baggage in back of the wagon. “We have some good strong elf rope here. Maybe we can fashion some kind of safety line to secure each of us as we cross.”

“Good idea, Flash,” said Alrontin. “No point in fretting about the state of the bridge. It’s our only way across and we have to make the best of it.”

Flaskamper dug a large coil of elven rope, thin but incredibly strong, from one of the sacks; Alrontin uncoiled and examined it, trying to estimate the length by counting arm spans.

"What do you think, Groog?" he asked. "Do we have enough to make it all the way across?"

"I'd say so," Groog replied.

"All right then," said Alrontin. "Now, how shall we use it?"

"I think the best way would be to span the gorge with it," Fia suggested. "If we tie each end off at opposite sides of the gorge, we can hold on to it as we cross."

"That sounds logical to me," said Alrontin. "Does everyone agree?"

The idea was unanimously approved.

"Now the challenge," said Alrontin. "Groog clearly does not have the necessary dexterity to fly over and tie off the other end. Am I right, Groog?"

"I'm afraid so, Captain," Groog replied. "My limbs are simply not designed for such a task."

"Well then," Alrontin said, wrapping the end of the rope around his waist, "the job goes to me then. Lorq, be a good fellow and tie the other end of this off to that big tree over there would you?"

"Wait Ronti," said Flaskamper, "why should you be the one who has to go? I think we should draw straws or something."

"No Flash," Alrontin replied. "I'm the leader of this mission, remember? I could never ask someone else to take the risk while I stood and watched. You know you wouldn't either."

The younger elf sighed.

"You're right," he admitted, "just please be careful."

"I plan to be extremely careful," said Alrontin, smiling. "You just keep an eye on the knot, in case that poor excuse for a bridge decides to collapse out from under me."

The others watched with great concern as Alrontin approached the rickety bridge. The end seemed well secured, and the first ten feet or so were in reasonably good shape, so the elf made good progress at first, though the old rope structure did groan loudly in protest at having to bear weight again after so much time.

Alrontin crept meticulously along, testing each step carefully before putting his weight down on it. After a few minmarks, he reached the first large expanse of missing boards. Here he was forced to cling to the network of ropes that formed the side of the bridge, inching his way slowly and carefully along. To his dismay, he began to tremble and sweat profusely – another manifestation of his growing addiction. He realized now that stress greatly aggravated his symptoms, not a pleasant thing to find out given the situation they were heading into. Rivulets of perspiration poured down his face, stinging his eyes. He reached up to wipe them, and one of the ropes under his feet abruptly snapped. The elf suddenly found himself

dangling precariously by one arm. As he thrashed about trying to get a grip on something with his other hand, the small leather bag slipped off his shoulder. He tried desperately to catch it, but the strap eluded his grasp, and he could only watch in horror as the precious satchel containing all of his remaining battleroot plunged into the gaping maw of Harrow Yawn. Eventually, his flailing hand found a stable hold and he managed to pull himself back up into a safe, stable position, but this was little comfort to him. It was as though that leather bag had held every bit of his confidence and courage. Without it, he was terrified. Not of being out in the middle of an ancient, rotting bridge, no *that* was a mere trifle compared to what was going to happen to him – to his body... his mind. He was not naïve. He knew what withdrawal from battleroot could do to a person. Great Goddess, how could he have been so careless? How was he ever going to get through this mission at all, let alone lead the others?

“Are you all right Alrontin?” he heard Fia call. He swallowed the fear and panic as best he could and looked back toward her.

“Yes, fine here, Fia,” he answered, trying his best to smile.

“What was in the bag?” she asked. “Nothing too important I hope.”
If you only knew, he thought.

“No, nothing,” he said aloud. “Just some dried venison.”

Alrontin forced himself to concentrate on the task at hand. What was done was done, and there was work to be accomplished. The lives of his friends, his family, perhaps of everyone in Firma were at stake. He had to soldier on, no matter what happened or how he felt. He continued carefully along, trying his best not to cause any further damage for those coming behind him to deal with. Soon he had entered the dense bank of fog on the opposite side of the gorge. Visibility was poor, but he could just make out the dark gray forms of the trees ahead. At last, he reached the other side. Though it felt good to plant his feet on solid ground once more, his hands continued to tremble and fear continued to grip his heart. He easily located a stout tree and tied the rope to it with a secure set of knots. Then he shouted back at the others and gave the rope several sharp tugs to let them know that it was safe – well, relatively safe – to come across. After that, the elf sat down heavily in the thick, damp grass – and wept.

On the other side of Harrow Yawn, Flaskamper heard his brother’s call. He couldn’t make out the words, but then he felt the tugs on the rope.

“He’s made it!” he exclaimed. “All right, I’m going next.”

“Be careful, Flash,” Lorq cautioned.

“Don’t worry about me, big fellow,” Flaskamper assured the giant. “I’ll be fine.”

With the elven rope stretched taut across the gorge, getting across the old bridge was much easier, and Flaskamper soon joined his brother on the other side. Alrontin had recovered himself when he

arrived, and was keeping a watchful eye on the rope to make certain the knots held fast.

Fia was next to cross. At first, it seemed as though she would have little trouble. But then, just over halfway across, one of the old ropes on which she was standing snapped. She grabbed for the elf rope, but missed, plunging straight down into nothingness. At the last possible moment, her hands closed around a section of rope that was dangling loosely from the base structure of the bridge. Bengarr's heart leapt to his throat as he watched her hanging precariously in midair. Without pausing to think, he immediately raced after her out onto the bridge. Groog flew over to tell Alrontin and Flaskamper what had happened.

"Take care, Bengarr," Kachia cautioned, but her brother was not listening. He had almost reached Fia when the boards beneath his feet snapped, and he too fell straight through. Fortunately, he was close enough to one side to get a firm grip on the latticework, and so was able to save himself. He quickly climbed back up and continued, this time with a bit more caution. Groog emerged from the fog and hovered over them, frantic, but unable to help.

Fia's heavy pack was making it extremely difficult for her to maintain a grip on the rope. It had been less than a minmark, but already her hands were screaming in pain. Not only that, they were beginning to sweat, which would soon make the rope too slick for her to hang on. Even as she chided herself not to panic, she was enormously relieved when Bengarr stuck his head out over the side of the bridge.

"Hang on," he called to her. "I'm going to get you."

"Hurry, Bengarr," she said with undisguised fear in her voice. "I can't hold on much longer."

Bengarr took a moment to assess the situation, then lowered himself feet first over the side. He gripped the bridge tightly with both hands.

"Fia, can you get closer so that I can reach you with my feet?"

"I think so," Fia replied and began to maneuver herself as best she could. When she got nearer, he wrapped his legs tightly around her and locked his ankles together. Fia held her breath and let go of the rope, wrapping her strong arms tightly around each of his legs.

"Can you climb up my body?" the firecat asked.

"I don't know that I've got the strength," she responded.

Bengarr was trying to decide whether or not he could pull both of them up when he saw a shadow pass in front of him. It was Kachia.

"Don't worry," she said. "I shall help her."

"Well done, sister," said Bengarr. "I only hope that the bridge will continue to hold us all."

Kachia positioned herself right over Bengarr's head, then reached over the side of the bridge and hooked her elbows under both of Fia's arms.

“I have you now,” she told Fia. “I will support you while you climb.”

As Fia began to climb up, Kachia inched herself backwards. Fia had little strength left, so progress was slow. At last, however, she reached a point where Kachia could get a firm grip on her breeches and haul her the rest of the way up. Bengarr then pulled himself up as well, and the three of them lay there in a heap, panting with exhaustion.

“Is everyone all right?” Lorq called to them.

“We’re all fine, dear,” Fia called back, “but I’m going to be awfully happy once we’re all safely on the other side – haunted forest or not.”

After a brief rest, they continued on, one at a time. Kachia went first, followed by Fia and finally Bengarr. Fia briefly explained the rescue to the worried Elf Brothers.

“Lorq will be right along,” she said afterwards. “We finished setting the horses loose. He thinks they’ll have no trouble finding their way back to the good grazing land we passed a day or so ago. He’s planning to bring across as much of the remaining supplies as he can carry. Groog is going to fly along with him to keep him company.”

“I hope he doesn’t try to carry too much,” said Flaskamper. “I don’t think that bridge is going to take much more.”

Considering the trouble the three of them had had, the elf’s comments worried them all. In this fog, the stakes holding the bridge in place were barely visible, but they could see nothing at all beyond the edge of the cliff. Still they were able to tell when Lorq began his crossing, for the tightly stretched length of elven rope suddenly dipped, stretching and creaking under the giant’s enormous weight. A minmark later, they heard the cracking of wood and a shout. They all held their breath as the rope quivered and groaned. It seemed like marks before the familiar red-haired figure loomed out of the mist, accompanied by the hovering bronze dragon. There was a collective sigh of relief when Lorq finally stepped once again onto solid ground.

“Thank the Goddess,” said Alrontin. “We heard you cry out and thought that the whole bridge had given way on you, my friend.”

“It almost did,” said Lorq. “A whole section of wood planks broke free midway across. If I hadn’t had both arms over the guide rope, I would be at the bottom of the gorge now. We’re all lucky you elves make such good rope.”

Everyone laughed with relief, and Flaskamper slapped Lorq on the back. Before long though, they got back to business, redistributing what things Lorq had managed to salvage from the wagon amongst them. Then they set off into the forest. Thick as the fog was, enough daylight crept through to show them where they were going – for a few feet at least. They estimated only about three marks until sundown, and they wanted to make as much progress as they could before being forced to camp for the night.

They were already on day nine of their trek; only three days remained before the rise of the new moon. Based on Alrontin's examination of the map, their chances of making it in time, though possible, were slim. Though he knew his brother was well aware of this, as were the others, none of them spoke of it. They simply forged on as quickly as they could through the thick, blue-gray forest. Their hopes were that they would make good time, and that all the tales of the ghostly occurrences in Gloomsveldt would turn out to be no more than the stuff of legends. Their expectations, however, were considerably more grim.

Chapter 25

Gloomsveldt

Flaskamper was the first victim. It began in the middle of the night, waking the whole camp as he lay, still sleeping, screaming into the pitch-black night. In a panic, Alrontin called out '*ignictum*' to ignite his elf candle. Light filled the tent as the candle in the corner began to glow, and Alrontin saw his brother, tossing wildly about under his blankets and screaming in terror. He scrambled over and grabbed him by the shoulders.

"Flash!" he shouted. "Flash, wake up! It's all right. You're having a nightmare."

But it was no ordinary nightmare, and Flaskamper would not wake easily. It was as though he were in a kind of trance. He continued to fight against Alrontin for nearly a minmark before his eyes finally opened. For several tiks, he just stared sightlessly at his brother. Finally recognition dawned, and he ceased his struggling.

"Ronti," said Flaskamper, bewildered, "what happened?"

The tent flap flew up; Fia and Bengarr poked their heads in. Alrontin could see that Lorq and the others were outside as well.

"What is it?" asked Fia. "Is everything all right?"

"We heard a terrible clamor," said Bengarr.

"Everything is fine now," Alrontin replied. "It's all right, Skamper. You were having a nightmare, that's all."

Go tell the others that things are fine here, Bengarr," Fia said quietly, "then go back to bed. I'll be there in a tik."

Bengarr nodded his understanding. He squeezed her shoulder affectionately and disappeared. Fia crawled into the tent and sat down

next to Flaskamper. She pulled the blanket up around his bare shoulders and hugged him tightly. Alrontin smiled at her and took hold of his brother's hand. It was cold as ice.

"What was it, dear?" she asked gently. "What frightened you so?"

"It was Rokey," said Flaskamper, his eyes filling with tears. "They had him chained up in a dungeon; they were doing... horrible things to him...and he was crying out in pain and – and calling out to me. I was standing right there, but I couldn't move... I couldn't help him. All I could do was stand there and watch – and scream..."

Flaskamper broke down and wept.

"It was a nightmare, dear," Fia whispered, "only a nightmare. Remember what Bengarr said about the spirits who live here? They torment trespassers with nightmares and visions."

"Visions," Flaskamper repeated, absently. "Of what, I wonder – things made up to scare us...or things that are true?"

None of them slept well the rest of that night. Even those who were not troubled by nightmares slept fitfully and awoke at the break of dawn harried and fatigued. Dawn, in fact, did not really break at all. The forest merely changed gradually from utter blackness back to the same dreary blue-gray as the day before. If anything, the mist was even more dense. Those who went off even a short way to relieve themselves found that they had to yell back and forth to the others in order to find their way back to camp. Fortunately, Alrontin's compass still appeared to be in good working order, so at least they knew which direction to head off in. They made poor time though, for they had to continuously stop long enough to find one another in the fog again, even though they were never more than a few paces apart.

A few marks into their day's journey, the voices began. They started out as mere whispers – so soft that one could easily have mistaken them for the wind blowing the fallen leaves about – except there was no wind. As the afternoon wore on, though, the unintelligible whispers began to grow more distinct – and more menacing.

"Remember," Alrontin's voice reminded them all, "they cannot hurt us. They can only trick us – play games with our minds."

"That's right," Flaskamper said loudly, wondering why his brother sounded so far away. "Don't let them get to you."

He could still hear the footfalls of the others, but they sounded more distant than before. He hurried ahead to catch up, but found that this only made things worse. A few moments ago he had been able to see and hear the others, if not perfectly, at least enough to follow. Now suddenly the mist was so thick that he could scarcely see his own hand in front of his face. He squinted his eyes, straining to peer through the dizzying swirls, but could see nothing but the skeleton-like shapes of the trees that surrounded him. The sounds of

footfalls from a moment ago were gone now, replaced by an eerie and unnatural silence.

“Ronti!” he cried out. “Lorq! Fia!”

“Here we are Flash.” Fia’s voice came, muted, from behind him. How could that be? She had been in front of him before. He started toward the voice, and then stopped.

Was this a trick?

Flaskamper decided that it must be. They could not possibly have circled around behind him. The spirits were trying to separate them...and they were succeeding. Frustrated, he turned back and continued on his original path. A few feet later, he heard a groan coming from somewhere just ahead.

“Who’s there?” he asked.

“Flash – ”

He instantly recognized his brother’s voice – but was it real?

Oh bugger it, he thought. He was heading that way anyhow. He may as well investigate it.

He followed the groans and, a minmark or so later, practically fell over Alrontin, who was lying on the ground, obviously in terrible pain.

“Ronti what is it?” Flaskamper asked, kneeling next to his brother. “Are you wounded? Who did this to you?”

Alrontin grabbed his brother’s hand and squeezed it hard. He started to speak, but then clutched his stomach in agony. Flaskamper felt his brother’s forehead – it was cold and clammy. The spasm passed and Alrontin once again tried to speak.

“I did it... to myself, Skamper,” he said. “Started taking... battleroot... before we left. Didn’t want... to let you down. But... lost it...crossing... Harrow Yawn. Now... I think... I’m dying. Forgive me... little... brother.”

Alrontin was overtaken by another intense spasm of pain. Flaskamper tried desperately to think – not to panic.

“You’re not going to die, big brother,” he said, unfastening the straps to release his brother’s pack. “Goddess, Ronti, why didn’t you tell me? Never mind. That’s not important.”

Flaskamper held fast to his brother’s hand while he tried desperately to think of some way to ease his suffering. After a few moments, an idea came to him. He took off his own pack and dug into it, producing his supply of rembis leaves.

“Look Ronti,” he said, trying to keep his voice calm and reassuring, “I don’t know all that much about battleroot, but I think rembis does the same kind of thing; granted it’s much less powerful, but maybe if you chew a whole bunch of it, it might help to relieve your symptoms...at least somewhat. Let’s give it a try, shall we?”

Alrontin nodded. The spasms seemed to have passed for the moment, but he was now shivering uncontrollably. Flaskamper began feeding him rembis leaves, letting him drink from his water skin to

wash them down. He gave him twice the normal amount and waited a bit. When he saw no appreciable results, he gave him another double dose. A few minmarks later, his brother's shivering stopped, and his skin began to feel warm again. He looked up at Flaskamper, his eyes full of hurt and shame.

"I'm sorry, Flash," he whispered. "I'm so sorry."

Flaskamper held up his brother's hand and kissed it.

"There's nothing to apologize to me for, Ronti," he said. "I know you did it for me. I just wish you hadn't felt the need to go to such an extreme – to put yourself into such danger."

"But now I've jeopardized the entire mission," Alrontin said. "If Rokey should die because of me..."

"That's not going to happen," Flaskamper insisted. "I've got plenty of rembis, enough to keep you going until we can get you home to a healer. Just lean on me if you need to, and we'll all get through this."

"The others –" Alrontin began.

"The others don't need to know," said Flaskamper. "This is just between the two of us, right?"

Alrontin smiled weakly.

"Flaskamper, I don't tell you nearly enough how much you mean to me," he said.

"Now, now," said Flaskamper, "let's not get all gushy. Just for the record, though, I feel the same way. Now come on – let's see if you can stand up."

* * *

Fia, too, had become isolated from the rest of the group. She wandered aimlessly, calling out to her friends – but the only answer she received was the malicious, high-pitched laughter of the Caladjhari. She had no idea what time of day it was or how long she had been drifting around this way. It was as though she had entered a dream world.

She grew tired at last, and decided to sit down for a few moments beneath one of the trees. She unstrapped her pack and placed it on the ground in front of her, and then sat down for a brief rest. Soon however, fatigue from her fitful sleep the previous night began to overtake her and she nodded off. Some time later she was awakened by – by what? How long had she been asleep? The mist around her was so thick that it seemed like a blanket around her. She could scarcely see even the nearby trees. She yawned and rubbed her back, which was sore from the odd position in which she had slept. Then, as she reached for her pack, a figure suddenly loomed out of the fog only a foot or two in front of her. She started violently and jumped back, reaching for her sword. Then the figure took another step, and Fia's eyes widened in shock and alarm.

“You’re not real,” she whispered. “You’re just an illusion – a trick of this vile forest.”

“No Fia,” Stamford replied. “Not a trick – a ghost. A restless spirit. We walk here, in this wood, searching our souls to try and find the peace we need to finally rest. The Caladjhari are our friends. They gladly share their forest with us, for they know we can do them no harm.”

Fia’s pulse was racing. It must be a trick – it *must*. Yet he was so real, her long-dead love, standing before her now in the same clothes in which he had died. The bandages around his bare torso were red and running with blood that fell, drop by precious drop, to the dry, dusty ground at his feet. His voice was also the same – rich and dark – a voice that would live forever in her memory. Except for the pale shimmer of blue light that surrounded him, he looked just as real as could be. But no – this was Gloomsveldt, the forest where spirits relentlessly tortured their unwelcome visitors until they went mad. At least, that was the legend. On the other hand, was the possibility of a forest filled with roaming, restless ghosts any less plausible? Then another thought occurred to her.

“Why is your spirit restless Stamford?” Fia asked. “I thought that you were at peace when you died. You said that you had done what you needed to do in order to put your soul to rest.”

“So I thought too,” he said, “and yet here I am. I have no explanation for it. I only know that I have been here since my death, wondering what more I could have done to atone for my transgressions. Each day since I have wandered here, reliving the miseries I wrought upon others. Then you arrive, and I begin to question whether it has some bearing on my presence here. I am filled with hope at first; then I see you – in the arms of another – and I know that it is simply more punishment for me to endure. To see that you did not truly love me at all...”

“That isn’t true,” Fia said, tears springing into her eyes. “I loved you then just as I love you now. Nothing can change that.”

“Yet you give yourself so freely to another, without a doubt in your mind; without a thought for me.”

Fia felt a stab of pain at this remark, but then she paused, and eyed the ghost suspiciously.

“No,” she said softly. “No, you’re not Stamford. You’re not even the ghost of Stamford. The man I love would never say such a thing. He would understand. He would wish me every happiness, though I have had little since his death. You are not Stam. You are a pitiful impersonator, stealing thoughts from my mind to use against me.”

“Harlot!” the image of Stamford shouted. “You couldn’t wait to get me in the ground so that you could throw your legs open for others!”

“The more you speak,” she countered, “the more you betray yourself. Go away and leave me. You can’t hurt me.”

“Can’t we?” said the spirit, and abruptly disappeared. The air was then filled with a cacophony of hideous shrieks, so loud that Fia had to hold her ears to try and drown them out. It did little good though. The horrible din continued until she fell to her knees, dizzy and sick to her stomach. Just at that moment though, she looked up and saw Groog suddenly emerge from the fog. He swept down and landed, then abruptly began to transform, becoming enormous and frightening, like the dragons of legend. Fire shot from his great open maw in a huge, billowing stream, just missing the nearby trees. Fia thought she heard a new quality in the shrieking now – one of terror. Then Groog’s voice rang out in her mind, not kind and gentle as she had always heard it before, but much deeper this time, resonating with power and menace.

“Caladjhari!” he called out. “I command you to cease this at once and be gone, or else I shall burn your forest to the ground around you!”

The dragon let loose another burst of flame toward the trees and the noise abruptly stopped. Groog looked down at Fia, who stared back up at him in awe.

“Fear not,” he said, his voice resuming its normal timbre in her head. “The Caladjhari are not the only masters of illusion, you know. It’s a good thing they fled instead of calling my bluff, because my fire is no more real than my intimidating size. In another tik, he shrank back to his original form. Fia gaped at him in astonishment for a few moments, then burst out laughing and threw her arms around the little dragon, hugging him fiercely. Groog chuckled.

“We must go now and find the others,” he said. “I fear my charade will not keep them at bay for long.”

Fia agreed. She let go of Groog and struggled back into her pack. Groog took flight and hovered just above her head.

“Which way?” she asked him. “I’m afraid I’m all turned around.”

“Follow me,” said the dragon. “I believe I spied Lorq in this direction just before I heard the shrieking start. Hopefully I’ll be able to spot him again. It’s easier to see down into this mist from above, so perhaps I can steer you all together again before the spirits decide to regroup.”

With Fia following closely behind, Groog flew off into the thick, persistent fog.

* * *

Kachia had been lost for more than a mark now, wandering alone in the mist-shrouded woods. She had briefly transformed into her firecat self in order to try and get the scent of her companions, but all she could detect was a confusion of indistinct odors. She could not remain in feline form without the risk of losing her clothes and her

pack, so she became human again, retrieved her things and continued on. Unlike the others, she was not plagued by visions, but strange voices filled her head, incessantly haranguing her.

*You envy your brother, but you can never be like him.
You lack your brother's courage, his strength, his charm.
What have you ever accomplished? Nothing. You are
only a female.*

On and on they went, berating her; laughing at her - until she was all but certain her head would explode. She tried to plug her ears, but the voices were not coming from outside; they were coming from inside - right inside her head. There was nothing she could do to stop them. At last, too tired to walk on anymore, she sunk down against a tree and began to sob. It was no use. These creatures meant to torture her until she finally bashed her own head in just to make them stop. It was far worse than physical punishment. That she could handle to most any degree. Once she had been severely gored by the horn of a plains bison during a hunting foray. She still had the round indentation to remind her of the wound and the long period of recovery thereafter. She had thought at the time that no pain could ever be worse than that. But now she would gladly welcome such tangible, physical suffering over this - this emotional torment.

Finally, just as Kachia had begun to contemplate shoving a sharp stick into her ear in order to end the ordeal, she heard a cry somewhere just out of sight. She sprang to her feet, fully alert. Was it real, or another trick by these horrid creatures? She had just begun to wonder whether she had imagined it when it came again, closer this time. It sounded real enough, at least, as far as she could determine.

"Hello!" she called out. For a moment there was silence. Even the voices seemed to have paused.

"Who's there?" came an answer at last.

"It's Kachia," she answered. "Who are you?"

"Kachia, it's Lorq." Kachia breathed a sigh of relief. The giant. Another of her group. Perhaps in the company of another she would be able to bear this incessant taunting. She took up her pack and slipped it on over her shoulders.

"Keep talking, Lorq" she called. "I'm going to come and find you."

As soon as she said this, Lorq's voice suddenly began to come at her from every direction at once. The Caladjhari were not about to make it so easy for them.

"Damn these bastards!" she cried, dropping her pack and pulling off her clothing. Lorq was not far off. She should be able to find him in her feline form and then sniff out her belongings again.

"Stand where you are, Lorq!" she yelled, "and don't listen to anything else I might say until I find you."

Naked, she changed form again and sniffed the air. Now she could detect the giant's smell clearly. Apparently the spirits were not able to fool the keen senses of a firecat at so short a distance. She let out a defiant roar at the voices still crowding her head, and then set off following the scent trail. Soon she spotted Lorq's huge silhouette ahead in the fog. He was facing the other way, and so did not see her approaching. When she got within a foot or two, she roared again, nearly jumping him out of his skin. He spun around, brandishing his iron-tipped quarterstaff, but lowered it as soon as he realized who it was.

"You scared the daylights out of me," he said. "I thought you were something looking to eat me."

Kachia snorted. Lorq took that to be laughter.

"Where are your clothes and your pack?" he asked her. She turned back the way she had come. After a few paces, she turned back to Lorq, waiting for him to follow.

"All right; I understand," he said. "Lead the way. Just don't get too far ahead."

They proceeded along slowly, the firecat turning frequently to make certain the giant had not lost sight of her, until they reached the spot where her pack and clothing lay. Then Kachia resumed her human form. Though her nakedness did not embarrass her in the slightest, Lorq reddened and turned away while she dressed. As soon as she had finished, they began discussing what was happening, and what to do next.

"Are you seeing things too?" Lorq asked her. "I've been seeing terrible things. My wife and little son. Terrible things."

Lorq did not elaborate on the terrible things, but Kachia could well imagine.

"I see nothing," she said, "but I hear them, in my head."

"We have to find the others," said Lorq. "Did you smell anyone else while you were a firecat?"

"Yours was the only scent I detected," she told him. "Somehow this fog is able to confound my senses. Normally, I can pick up a scent from a great distance away in my feline form. Here it seems to be only a few hundred paces."

"Well then, we can keep doing what I was doing, which was walking a kind of square," said Lorq. "It's not so easy in the woods with all the trees to go around, but it will keep us from going over the same ground over and over. We just walk off ten paces, then turn right and walk ten more, turn and walk ten more...then the fourth time, we add an extra pace and repeat the pattern. That way we'll cover an area that keeps getting wider. We're bound to run into someone eventually, assuming they are all wandering just like we are."

This sounded like a logical plan to Kachia. Though the voices had begun again, they had less of an effect on her now that she had company. They chose a direction at random and began walking. They hadn't done more than three repetitions when Groog swooped down on them from above. Before they could even greet the Bronze Dragon, Fia stepped out of the mist as well. After hugs and a brief discussion, they decided to continue walking in Lorq's pattern, with Groog flying just overhead. In this way, they soon found Bengarr as well. The five thought for certain that soon they would all be together again. Their optimism was short-lived, however, for though they walked and walked for well over a mark, they found no sign of Flaskamper or Alrontin, whose compass was their only means of escaping the vast haunted forest of Gloomsveldt.

Chapter 26

Beacons of Hope

Having found each other, Flaskamper and Alrontin also began walking together in a pattern, hoping to run across the others, but they had no success. Flaskamper was glad to see that his brother was looking better. He wondered, though, how long the rembis leaves would continue to alleviate the battleroot symptoms. It was true that they had packed an ample supply for all ordinary needs, but Alrontin's need was far from ordinary.

As the day wore on, the blue-gray glow of the forest began to dim. The sun was setting. Normally one of them would begin to set up camp while the other gathered wood, but with fog this thick, there was every reason to believe that the two of them, once separated, might never find each other again. So they went to gather the firewood together, picking up as much as they both could carry. Even this generally mundane chore was difficult, for the mist swirled and wove like hungry housecats around their ankles, making the wood seem extremely difficult to find. At last, though, they had found enough to get a small fire started. There was no way to look for a clearing, so they simply picked a spot where the trees seemed the thinnest and set the wood down, along with the rest of their things. Flaskamper made a fire pit by clearing a small circular area of debris, and then surrounding it with rocks. Then he took out his fire kit. Only then, when he tried to get the fire to light, did he discover yet another of the sinister qualities this dense fog possessed. No matter how he tried, he could not get the small pile of sticks, evergreen needles and tinder to

catch fire. Sparks would land only to be immediately snuffed out again. After a quartermark or more, Flaskamper finally gave up in disgust.

“Ronti,” he said, “This is crazy. It’s as if the fog won’t *let* me light the fire.” He would have felt silly even saying it had circumstances not been as they were.

Alrontin left off pitching the tent and came over. Flaskamper showed him the problem.

“It’s probably just the dampness,” said Alrontin. “I don’t think the mist has a malevolent will of its own.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Flaskamper replied. “In either case, we’ve got no fire.”

“Well, it’s getting dark,” his brother observed. “We’d better call a lumen orb for now. It won’t keep us warm, but at least we’ll be able to see what we’re doing.”

He stood and chanted the spell to summon the magic orb. The little light spirit blazed into existence just as expected, but then an amazing thing happened. The air suddenly filled with sharp, high-pitched shrieks and the dense fog shrank back several paces all around them.

“What the –” Alrontin began.

Flaskamper leapt excitedly to his feet.

“Is it the orb, Ronti?” he asked. “Are they afraid of the orb? Maybe we’ve accidentally found a weapon we can use against them! I’m going to call up another and see what happens.”

Flaskamper chanted the incantation, and a second lumen orb appeared, white and shining. The forest around them shrieked again and the mist crept back still further.

“Woo-hoo! Take that, you bullies!” Flaskamper yelled, and then turned to his brother.

“Ronti, I have an idea,” he said, his green eyes shining in the radiance of the orbs. “If we summon enough lumen spirits, it might cast enough light and cut through the fog so that the others can find us again.”

“Sounds good if it works,” said Alrontin. “Can a person beckon more than one lumen orb? I’m not all that well-versed in magic.”

“*You’re* not well-versed?” Flaskamper replied glibly. “Compared to me you’re a High Mage. I haven’t got a clue whether or not you can have more than one at a time. Well. I guess there’s a way to find out...”

Flaskamper repeated the spell. For a few tiks, nothing happened, and the brothers worried that their experiment was doomed. But just as they were about to call the plan a failure, a third lumen orb appeared over their heads. Flaskamper let out a whoop.

“Now you do another,” he told his brother. The two kept summoning lumen orbs until the entire section of the forest in which

they stood was shining with bright, white light. The fog had shrunk back beyond their field of vision and the shrieking had become progressively more distant. They stopped at ten orbs, five apiece, afraid that making it any brighter might mean being spotted by potential watchers from Moribar.

"The others are sure to see this and find us, right?" hoped Alrontin. "I just pray that everyone is all right."

In fact, it was only about another halfmark before Lorq, Fia and the others, shielding their eyes from the orbs' brightness, stepped into the little clearing in which the brothers had set up their tent.

"Well done, boys," said Fia, hugging them both. "We could see your lights right through the mist."

"It seems to cut right through," said Lorq.

"It does," said Flaskamper. "It seems the Caladjhari are afraid of the lumen orbs. Or it may be that the brightness actually harms them. Either way, as long as we keep the orbs alight, they keep their distance and the fog recedes with them."

"Thanks be to Rhal," Kachia murmured to her God. "The infernal voices in my head have stopped too."

"It's good to have everyone back," said Alrontin, "but now we must face some unpleasant facts. The Caladjhari have had us wandering aimlessly for many marks. Thanks to my compass, we know which direction we need to proceed in, but we still don't really know how far we have to go before we reach the end of this cursed forest. In the morning, Groog can fly above the trees and try to determine our position, but until then I suggest that we do not stop to make camp after all. We can take short rests throughout the night as need be. Is everyone in agreement?"

The vote to continue through the night was unanimous. Flaskamper and Alrontin packed up their tent and the party lost no more time, setting off for the northeast. They moved as quickly as they could, stopping only for brief, intermittent rest periods. The light from the lumen orbs, which floated a short distance above the two brothers' heads, helped to keep their energy levels high for much of the night, but then, nearly seven marks into their forced march, they began to tire. Alrontin was the first to show signs of needing rest: his sweating and trembling resumed. Flaskamper, who had been keeping a close watch on his brother, noticed immediately. He came up beside Alrontin and whispered to him.

"Are you all right, Ronti?" Flaskamper asked. "You look like you're fading. Do you need some more rembis leaves?"

Alrontin shook his head.

"Not just yet," he replied. "But I am growing weary, and I suspect the others are as well. Perhaps we should break for a slightly longer rest. It can't be long until dawn. We can send Groog up then to give us our position."

“I think that’s probably a good idea,” Flaskamper agreed. “We won’t be able to both sleep at once, or else the lumen spirits will all disappear. It’s all right though. I don’t need to sleep. I doubt I could anyway.”

They halted in a wide clearing and broke out their bedrolls. In spite of Flaskamper’s insistence that he did not need to sleep, Alrontin ordered him to lie down and rest. Within five minmarks, Alrontin chuckled as five of the light spirits vanished, leaving only his five burning. Flaskamper was asleep. Though exhausted, Alrontin was not sleepy. He sat on a large rock on the far edge of the clearing, close enough to the others so the light would keep the Caladjhari away, but not so close as it would disturb the others as they slept. Lorq had offered to stay up with him, as had Bengarr, but Alrontin had insisted that they sleep. If he began to feel sleepy, he told them, he would awaken his brother to take over the watch. They could not afford to linger there for very long in any case, certainly not for more than two or three marks. Before that, the sun would rise, and Groog would be able to estimate how much longer their journey through Gloomsveldt would be. Not long, he hoped. The rembis leaves were doing an adequate job of keeping the physical symptoms of his battleroot withdrawal at bay, but the insistent, addictive need was still there, in his head, like an unrelenting itch that he could not quite reach to scratch. Chewing rembis did nothing to quell that itch. If he did not receive some kind of treatment from a healer soon, he was quite certain that he would go mad.

As if stimulated by the mere thought of it, the itch became suddenly stronger, so much so that he could not sit still. He stood and began to pace the perimeter of the clearing, trying to think of other things to keep his mind from the cravings. At one point, he spied a small stream running through the wood just ahead and left the clearing to go and sit by it. It was close enough for the lumen orbs to continue providing his friends with the light they needed for protection, and he had always found the sound of running water soothing. He hoped that perhaps it would ease his suffering a bit. He sat down in a small bed of evergreen needles and leaned against a fallen tree trunk, listening to the gurgling stream. It did indeed make him feel a little better, though it was by no means a cure. Still, he was able to relax somewhat – enough so that he did not even hear the figure creeping up behind him. A hand slid silently around him, and closed firmly over the front of his breeches. Alrontin started violently. He jumped up, reflexively drawing his sword, only to find himself face to face with Kachia, smiling roguishly at him. It took a moment to dawn on him that the Nogirraalan was completely naked.

“That is not the weapon I had hoped you would produce,” Kachia said with a sly smile. Alrontin reddened and replaced his sword in its sheath as she approached him.

“Kachia –” he was at a loss for words. Not as comfortable and easy with women as his brother – which he had always found ironic since Flaskamper had no romantic interest in women at all – Alrontin was beyond tongue-tied.

“You are very tense, Elf Brother,” Kachia purred, her proximity backing Alrontin against a tree. “I have a cure for that.”

Kachia's hand returned to where it had been a moment before, and when Alrontin opened his mouth to protest, she kissed him deeply. The elf breathed shortly and swiftly through his nostrils as he took firm hold of her hand and removed it from the front of his breeches, where it had already begun to produce her desired result.

“Kachia, we can't do this,” he said. “I can't do this. I'm... happily...m-m-married. He had turned his head away from her lips to speak, and now she was kissing his neck – the very spot that always drove him wild. Alrontin moaned involuntarily. Kachia was pressed tightly against him now, stirring his desire even more.

“We have... no such tradition... in Nogirraal,” Kachia purred between kisses. Her other hand snaked around him and grabbed firmly ahold of his backside. Alrontin reflexively thrust himself forward, which only made things worse.

What are you doing? His conscience cried frantically. *Why aren't you pulling away?*

A moment later, he knew why. He realized to his dismay that the intense, maddening cravings that had been torturing him all day and night had disappeared. He was not only fiercely aroused – he was free of the symptoms of battleroot withdrawal. If... no, when he stopped Kachia, he felt sure that the unbearable yearnings would immediately resume.

Oh great Secta! his mind cried out to his Goddess. *Why are you punishing me this way?*

He had let go of Kachia's other hand. Now it slid under his tunic, and her long nails raked, teasing gently over his bare stomach. The elf gasped and his entire body shuddered with pleasure.

“Kachia,” he whispered weakly, “I understood... that firecats... don't mate... in human form.”

“Most do not,” she whispered back, “but my brother does. He speaks quite enthusiastically of the experience, so I thought I might give it a try.”

Something between a whimper and a moan escaped from Alrontin's throat. He knew that he could not let this go on, and yet... and yet it felt so good to be free of the battleroot – free of that maddening, excruciating itch... His hands reached out to push her away. Instead they found her breasts – full and voluptuous – and lingered there.

The cravings will return, his conscience informed him sharply. As soon as you've finished with her, they will return. Then you will not only have those to bear, but also the guilt of having betrayed Mellynda.

This last thought brought Alrontin back to himself. He let go of Kachia's bosom and took her by the shoulders, gently forcing her to back away a step.

"Kachia," he said breathlessly, "I can *not* do this. I don't know if you can understand, but marriage is like an oath. One swears to be faithful; to – *mate* with only one person. It would bring great dishonor upon me if I broke it, however much I might be tempted... and believe me, I am *sorely* tempted – more than you could possibly know."

Alrontin saw the hurt on her face for a few short tiks before she recovered herself. He felt terrible about it, but not nearly as awful as he would have felt had he gone through with it.

"I cannot pretend to understand a custom such as – *marriage*," Kachia said, panting hard, still holding him close, "but I understand an oath well enough. I shall leave you in peace, Elf Brother."

She turned and walked silently away. Alrontin sighed heavily as he watched her beautiful naked form depart. Not even a minmark later, the cravings returned with such force that Alrontin nearly screamed aloud. He made his way unsteadily back to his spot by the stream and sat down heavily. Try as he might though, he could not recapture the serenity he had felt before. He sat with his knees drawn up, rocking back and forth slowly until he saw the sun begin to peek up through the trees. He then got up to wake Groog and the others. Now, thank the Goddess, they could move on again and he would have something to occupy his mind besides his insatiable desire for battleroot. Since he now knew that, for a time at least, a dalliance with Kachia would take his cravings away, the rest of this journey was going to be all the more torturous.

As the group packed up their bedrolls, Groog flew up over the treetops to determine their position. Flaskamper finished securing his pack and quietly offered more rembis leaves to his brother. Alrontin chewed them eagerly, for his physical withdrawal had now returned to the point where he could no longer conceal the sweating and trembling. The leaves began to help immediately, though once again, they did nothing to help the mental cravings – the unrelenting itch.

Groog returned with bittersweet news.

"I estimate that if we travel throughout the day and night with only short rest stops," he announced, "we could make it to the edge of the forest sometime during the day tomorrow. Of course that's only an estimate, so we ought to make all possible haste."

"That's going to be cutting it awfully close," said Alrontin. "Tomorrow night is the new moon. Still, we're lucky to be as far along as we are, considering the obstacles we've had."

“What does the map say about getting into Castle Moribar itself?” Fia asked.

“The secret entrance shown on this map seems to connect to some kind of cave system,” Alrontin replied. “Let’s hope that it isn’t too hard to find.”

Once again, the party pressed on. Alrontin noticed that Kachia seemed morose and withdrawn, even more so than usual. He felt badly, but also greatly relieved not to have succumbed to her. His clear conscience helped him to bear the terrible discomfort he felt. He hoped he would have the opportunity to find some better way to apologize to her.

The lumen orbs continued to do their job too, driving the Caladjhari and their confounding mist back away from them, though Flaskamper pointed out to his brother that it looked as though the pool of light surrounding them was slowly beginning to shrink.

“That could mean that the spirits are getting accustomed to the light,” Alrontin said, trudging along beside him. “We can call more lumen spirits if we must, but each one we call requires energy to maintain it, so I recommend reserving that option until it becomes absolutely necessary. With a bit of luck, we’ll be out of this forest before the Caladjhari are able to reach us again.”

They moved on through the dense forest of Gloomsveldt. Even filtered by the trees, it was a pleasure to have occasional patches of sunlight on their faces, and the party made good time throughout that day. After sunset, however, their pace slowed. Although the lumen orbs made their surroundings just as bright as day, the long continuous trek with little rest was beginning to take its toll on them all. Only the two Nogirraalans seemed relatively unaffected by the grueling pace.

Flaskamper was becoming worried, for his brother was requiring more and more rembis leaves to sustain him. It was as though a beast were growing inside him, one that required ever more frequent feedings. He was now beginning to worry that he would not have enough of the precious leaves to last until he could get Alrontin into the care of a healer. It was a frustrating situation and one that he certainly did not need on top of everything else. Still, he could not blame his brother for having done it. Foolish though it was, Flaskamper could easily imagine himself doing the same thing.

Another thing that worried them all was the fact that the fog was, indeed, creeping closer. Finally, the brothers decided to call more lumen orbs to drive it back again. They each called one additional light spirit, making a total of twelve. However, although the light was now nearly intolerably bright for the members of the group, the fog did not retreat. The spirits were clearly becoming inured to the bright lights. If they didn’t reach the end of the forest soon the Caladjhari, along with the nearly impenetrable mist, would once again be upon

them. Flaskamper and Alrontin dismissed the additional pair of lumen orbs in order to save some of their remaining energy and the group pushed on with as much haste as they could manage.

As mark after mark passed, the mist continued to gradually, steadily, encroach on their safety zone. Soon the pool of light was barely large enough to contain them all. What was worse, the voices were starting again – no insidious whispers this time, but loud shrieks of rage. The Caladjhari had been thwarted, kept at bay for many marks, and now they sought revenge. The members tried covering their ears, only to realize what Kachia already knew – that the noise was coming not from outside, but from within their own heads, which were soon pounding from the growing din. To make matters worse, the fog had now begun to creep into their last small sanctuary of light. Kachia fell to the ground, unable to go on any longer. Bengarr and Alrontin lifted her up and helped her continue. Flaskamper felt something wet on the side of his face and reached up to see what it was. His fingers came back red; one of his ears had begun to bleed. The spirits of Gloomsveldt were determined that he and his fellow intruders were not going to leave the forest alive – and it looked as though they might get their way.

Within a halfmark they were all stumbling blindly along, scarcely able to even think. All they could do was persistently will their legs to move forward. The mist swirled supernaturally thick and heavy around them once more. Blood flowed freely from their ears and noses as the unrelenting cacophony from the Caladjhari continued. At one point, Groog came crashing to the ground, no longer able to remain aloft. Without stopping, Lorq scooped up the little bronze dragon and tucked him under his arm. Though Flaskamper kept moving forward, he knew that none of them could withstand this punishment for much longer. Tears mingled with the blood on his face as he thought of Rokey – of that last terrible day when they parted.

Please Great Goddess, he prayed, let me see him again in The Underworld. Let me tell him... how sorry I am... how much I love him.

As they started down a steep incline, Flaskamper's foot suddenly struck something – a rock or tree root sticking out of the ground. He pitched forward, trying desperately to maintain his balance, but it was hopeless. He tumbled helplessly, rolling several times, until he finally came to a stop a few ticks later, face down on the ground. As he lay there wondering if he would ever get up again, it gradually dawned on him that the clamor in his head had abruptly ceased and the fog no longer circled menacingly around him. He rolled over onto his back, still breathing heavily with exhaustion. When his eyes came into focus again though, he was surprised to find himself staring up at heavy, gray clouds. Dense raindrops pelted his face, washing the blood and tears away. He stood up slowly and looked around, his eyes wide with shock and disbelief. He was no longer in the forest. He had rolled clear

out of the woods and into a meadow full of tall, thick grass. Now the others also began to emerge, looking around them in confusion. Flaskamper stepped forward to meet them just as his brother stepped out. He too looked around in a daze, unable to fully comprehend what was happening. As the truth dawned on Flaskamper, he let out a whoop of joy, forgetting for a moment how dangerously close they were to the territory of their enemies.

"Ronti!" he cried. "We made it! The forest didn't beat us after all!"

Alrontin stared at his brother blankly for a moment, and then, as he began to comprehend, a huge smile broke across his face. The two brothers hugged fiercely as the others gathered around them.

"You're the one who got me here, brother," Flaskamper whispered, his voice thick with emotion. "I could never have done it without you."

Alrontin held his brother tightly. He knew that this was untrue, that his little brother had proved a finer leader than he would ever have imagined before. Still, his kind words felt good and he greatly appreciated them.

"I hate to interrupt the celebration, well-deserved as it is," Groog told them, "but we are presently in a dangerously exposed area, easily visible from above. I suggest we seek cover immediately."

Flaskamper looked up and saw that the Bronze Dragon was already flying around again, just above their heads. The elf laughed.

"The voice of reason as always, Groog," he replied. "Very well, where to? You and Lorq are the only ones with enough height to see over this meadow grass, so only you can steer us in the right direction. First of all, is everyone all right?"

Stunned with relief, everyone shook themselves awake and checked at the same time to make sure there were no serious injuries among them. There were lingering headaches and a few bruises, but no one had suffered any permanent damage. Only Kachia, Flaskamper noticed, seemed quiet and somewhat withdrawn. Of course, Kachia had never been one to talk or express her feelings very much, so the elf dismissed her reticence as normal. Once satisfied that no one required immediate medicinal help, Flaskamper gave Groog and Lorq leave to lead everyone to safety.

The pair brought them further to the northeast, toward a small hilly area that was thick with tall shrubs and several widely spaced clusters of trees. This area not only gave them shelter from any spies who might be circling above, but it also took them above the tall meadow grass so that they could all get a better idea of their surroundings. From here, they consulted the map and determined that the hills in which they were now hidden were actually the beginnings of the southeastern edge of the Wormspine mountain range. As far as they were able to tell, they were quite near a place on the map that was marked with a small red X, right beside which was a notation.

“*Gleaming Caverns*,” Flaskamper read. “Hmm, sounds like a friendly enough place.”

“That’s precisely what worries me,” Alrontin replied. “I suggest we begin our hunt for the entrance immediately. It’s hard to see the position of the sun with this cloud-cover, but I would hazard a guess that it’s still early morning. That means we might still have time to reach Castle Moribar before the sun goes down, provided we can find that entrance quickly. Flash, why don’t you and I each take half the team and search both sides of this hill.”

“Are you sure we should split up the group, Ronti?” his brother asked. “I mean, I know it’s quicker, but after what we went through in the forest –”

“I know, I know,” Alrontin said, “but we can’t afford to all stick together if we are to rescue Rokey in time. You keep your team within earshot and I’ll do the same with mine. When one of us finds the entrance, you or I will give the ‘Screech Owl’ call.”

“I know you’re right,” Flaskamper agreed, “but I still don’t like it.”

As the two groups headed their separate ways, Flaskamper quietly slipped his brother another handful of rembis leaves.

“Just in case this takes longer than we anticipate,” he said with a weak smile.

Alrontin clutched the bundle, and then clasped his brother by the arm.

“Keep believing, Flash,” he stated firmly.

Flaskamper sighed deeply.

“I’m trying, Ronti,” he answered. “I’m really trying.”

“Good,” said Alrontin. “We haven’t come through all this just to fail.”

Alrontin turned and went off to join the others on his team. Flaskamper did the same, wishing as he did so that he could share his brother’s confidence. With so far yet to go, and only a few marks before the rising of the new moon, Flaskamper was not feeling at all good about their chances. Deep in the pit of his stomach, he feared that Rokey was doomed.

Chapter 27

Eyes in the Dark

Flaskamper stood straight up and cupped his hand to his ear. Had that really been a screech owl he had just heard? It had only been just over a mark since they had split up and begun their search, so it seemed unlikely. Perhaps it was just the rain and wind he was hearing. After their long, torturous journey through the forest of Gloomsveldt, he still was not fully prepared to believe his ears. A moment later, though, Lorq came crashing through the dense undergrowth, with Kachia close behind him. Before they could even greet each other, Groog swooped in from the other direction.

“Did you hear it Flash?” asked Lorq. “Did you hear the owl?”

“I heard it,” Flaskamper responded. “I just wasn’t sure if it was real or if I was going crazy. Could they possibly have found the Gleaming Caverns so quickly?”

“Why not?” said the dragon. “I should say that we are due for a spot of good fortune.”

“How right you are, Groog,” said Flaskamper. “Come on then; let’s go find the others.”

The four of them found Alrontin and the others on the opposite side of the hill. This side was much steeper, and large boulders were interspersed with more of the same dense brush. Flaskamper looked about as he approached, but could see no obvious cave entrance.

“What’s happening, Ronti?” he asked. “Didn’t you call? We all thought we heard you.”

“I did, little brother,” Alrontin replied. “We’ve found the entrance.”

“All right, you’ve stumped me,” said Flaskamper, looking around again. “Where is it?”

Alrontin knelt down and motioned for his brother to do the same. When he had done so, the elder elf reached out and pulled aside the large bush in front of them and directed Flaskamper’s attention to a small gap between the two large stones that rested behind it. Flaskamper looked at his brother skeptically.

“That’s it?” he asked. “That’s the entrance to the caverns?”

Alrontin nodded.

“But how can that be?” his brother inquired. “Why it’s hardly big enough for a squirrel to get through!”

“I suspect that that is because these two rocks slid down the hillside at some point long ago, covering the entrance,” Alrontin explained. “It is rather a good sign, actually, because it means that, even if the current inhabitants of the castle know about the caves, they are unlikely to expect anyone else to know about them, let alone access them.”

“Good point,” said Flaskamper. “Come to think of it, how in blazes did you ever find it?”

“With a bit of help from the Goddess, I suspect,” Alrontin replied. “I sat down here to knock a pebble out of my boot. When I did so, I heard the sound of rushing water. There are no streams or rivers hereabouts, and it isn’t raining hard enough to account for the noise. So I followed my ears and...”

He gestured to the hidden entrance.

“Well, as Stamford used to say to me, ‘bless your pointy little ears!’” said Flaskamper, clasping his brother’s neck. “Now it seems the trick is going to be getting in.”

“Not a trick so much as a struggle,” Alrontin said. “We need to move these boulders out of the way. It’s a good thing we have a giant in our midst.” He looked up at Lorq, who grinned back at him. “Still, I suspect it will take all of us working together to clear the entrance.”

“It’s a shame we don’t have the rope anymore,” said Fia. “It would have made the job much easier I think.”

“Undoubtedly,” Alrontin replied, “but it can’t be helped now. We’ll just have to do the best we can without it.”

It took some considerable doing, not only because of the weight of the rocks, but because together they were perfectly balanced over the hole, each keeping the other from falling in and essentially sealing the entrance. In addition, the rain made gripping the stones exceedingly difficult. Finally, however, the team devised a means by which Lorq could move one of the boulders while the rest of the group kept the other one from falling. After a few tics (which seemed like marks to those straining to hold the huge rock in place), Lorq was able put his own weight beneath the second stone and heave it, too, away from the cave entrance. When the job was finished, they were left with a

roughly circular hole in the ground. Not a large hole, but sizable enough for even Lorq to get through. Flaskamper lay down on the ground and stuck his head down into the hole. His brother quickly knelt behind him and grabbed onto his ankles so that he wouldn't fall in.

"Can you see anything, Flaskamper?" Bengarr asked. A moment later, Flaskamper pulled his head out and sat up.

"There's a dim light coming from someplace in there," he said. "I don't know what's producing it. It's not enough for me to be able to make out the room, though. I suggest we send Groog in first with an elf candle. With him hovering just inside the entrance, I should be able to see better. What do you say Groog?"

"I am always happy to be of service," Groog answered.

Alrontin produced and ignited the elf candle. So as not to interfere with the dragon's night vision, Flaskamper pulled one of the thin leather laces from the top of his pack and tied the candle to one of his legs. Groog flew into the hole and Flaskamper stuck his head back in. Now he could see at least in the vicinity of the glowing candle. It was obvious that this cavern was very large, for they could see only the wall nearest them. In all other directions, the candlelight disappeared into inky blackness.

"Hover down a bit lower if you would, Groog," Flaskamper said, "and try and get a bit closer to this near wall."

Groog did as instructed, and Flaskamper let out a cry.

"What is it?" Alrontin asked.

"An old iron ladder," Flaskamper called back to him. "It seems pretty well-preserved and it's anchored solidly into the rock. Let's dig out the other elf candles. I don't know about you, Ronti, but I don't think I've got the energy to sustain more lumen orbs yet. Besides, we may only need them for this first chamber. I'm all but certain that there's light down there somewhere."

"We'll have to be very careful," Alrontin said as he and the others rummaged through their packs for the candles. "Lights may mean people...or worse."

"Right you are, brother mine," said Flaskamper. "We'll move on tiptoe until we know what's down there. All right Groog, into the depths of The Underworld we go."

"I wish you had not put it quite that way," Groog lamented.

While the dragon continued to hover down in the hole, Flaskamper turned around and began to lower himself in. His feet soon came into contact with the ladder.

"Well here goes," said the elf. "I'll wait at the bottom of the ladder and send Groog up to let you know I made it. Then you can follow me one at a time. I don't think we want to risk more than that on this old ladder. Lorq -"

"I know. I go last," said the giant.

“Exactly,” said Flaskamper, as he started down, “and think to yourself, *I’m as light as a feather.*”

Flaskamper and Groog disappeared into the darkness for what seemed an awfully long time. However, since Groog would have returned immediately had Flaskamper fallen, they assumed that no news, in this case, was good news. Finally Groog returned with the message that Flaskamper had reached bottom and was awaiting them. Alrontin and the others began to climb down one by one, each time waiting for the dragon to return before the next person stepped off into oblivion. Despite its obvious age, the ladder held firmly in place, even under Lorq’s considerable weight, so before long they were all together again at the bottom of the shaft – ankle deep in water, but safe for the moment.

“I tried to have a quick look around down here while I was waiting for all of you,” said Flaskamper, but I didn’t have much luck. As you see, even with all of our candles, you can hardly see anything at all. I think that’s because we’re in a small, narrow tunnel. I can feel walls on every side but one – the one where that faint light is coming from. I suspect this tunnel was created ages ago to link up with the caves, which we’ll find by heading toward the source of that light.”

“I suggest we put the candles out,” said Alrontin. “The black stone walls absorb most of the light anyway. All they’ll do is reduce our night vision and alert anyone who might be watching this tunnel to our presence. Bengarr, Kachia – you have the sharpest ears of all of us, even in human form. Keep them open for anything we might need to know about – especially anything that might be lurking ahead in the darkness.”

They extinguished and put away the candles, then felt their way carefully along the tunnel, stepping cautiously in case there might be some object in their path. The passageway rose gradually, and soon they were no longer slogging through water. Each step brought the faint light closer and closer, until they could make out the rough arch of the entrance to the next chamber. They could see nothing beyond it except more of the same black stone lit by an eerie greenish light. Finally, they reached the end of the tunnel and saw that beyond it was a narrow ledge. On the right hand side, a roughly hewn set of stone stairs led downward. They could glean no more without sticking their heads around the corner.

“Groog,” Alrontin whispered, “you’ve got the smallest head, which means you’re the least likely to be noticed by anyone who might be watching. I nominate you to take the first peek.

“Very well, Prince Alrontin,” the dragon said, a trifle nervously. “I shall endeavor to remain as unobtrusive as possible.”

Groog hovered up near the top of the tunnel and carefully poked his head out around the corner. For a moment, they heard nothing.

“Well?” asked Flaskamper. “What do you see?”

"Oh my," was Groog's only reply.

"*Oh my, what?*" Flaskamper said impatiently. "*Oh my, what a big cave or Oh my, here comes a squad of angry trolls?*"

"It's just beautiful," said the dragon, clearly awestruck.

As he was closest to the entrance, Flaskamper decided to risk a peek of his own. What he saw made his jaw drop in astonishment. After making sure there were no enemies about, he stepped cautiously out onto the ledge and beckoned the others. One by one, the others joined him and gaped in silent wonder.

The black stone steps led down to a massive cavern that was lit up by thousands of clusters of glowing crystals that festooned every inch of the chamber's high walls and ceiling. The brilliant glittering stones radiated every color imaginable – yellows, reds, blues and purples. The majority of them by far, however, shone a dazzling emerald green. Flaskamper started down the wide stone stairs and went over to examine the nearest wall more closely. Soon the others joined him.

"I wonder what makes them glow," Fia said, reaching out to touch the smooth, cool surface of one pretty blue crystal. She could feel it humming slightly beneath her hand.

"Beats me," said Flaskamper, "but it's definitely one of the most gorgeous places I've ever seen. I think it's even prettier than Glimmermere!"

"Remember my friends," Bengarr cautioned, "though the cavern is indeed striking, it is also near Moribar and therefore likely to be dangerous."

"Bengarr is right," said Alrontin. "Let's not let ourselves be dazzled into carelessness."

Besides the way they had come in, there was only one other way out of the chamber, through a small passageway that was also lit, though not so brightly, by the strange, beautiful crystals. After examining the immense cavern for several minmarks, the group quietly started down the passage. Alrontin led the way, with Flaskamper following closely behind him. Because the roof of the passage was quite low, Lorq was forced to bend nearly double in order to squeeze through. He fervently hoped that nothing attacked them there, for he would be quite unable to defend himself in this awkward position.

The narrow corridor led into another, smaller version of the previous crystal-encrusted cavern. Here though, they were faced with a choice, for on the other side of this chamber was not one, but three passages to choose from. Unlike the previous one, however, these were completely dark.

"Bengarr, Kachia," said Alrontin, "I think the time has come for us to utilize your firecat senses again, though I'm not entirely certain what to ask you to sniff for."

“Let us change form, Kachia” said Bengarr, “and see what scents are in the air.”

In anticipation of having to change form quickly, the Nogirraalans had removed all of their clothing except for their cloaks and stuffed all of it into their packs. Now they shed the cloaks as well, handing them off to Flaskamper, and assumed their feline forms. They split up, each choosing a corridor and making a short foray down into the darkness. Then the pair came back and headed down the third one together. In a minmark, both firecats came back and, after conferring for a moment, ventured once more into the passage that Kachia had previously examined alone. The others waited patiently and a short while later, the two siblings returned and assumed human form again.

“The first passage I examined was dead,” said Bengarr, retrieving his cloak and pulling it back over his head. “By that I mean that there was no scent of any living thing, at least within the range of my senses. We also agree that the one we initially examined together was the same way. The remaining passageway, however, is different.”

“Different in what way?” Fia asked.

“Different in that there is life in that direction,” Kachia explained.

“Life in abundance,” Bengarr added. “In fact, there is so much life in that direction that even our sensitive noses were unable to distinguish one form from another. So although we *can* say with some certainty that that is the direction in which we should likely proceed, we can *not* predict what dangers might lay ahead.”

“Oh well, can’t have everything.” Flaskamper said glibly. “Besides, there’s a certain exhilaration that comes with charging blindly into mortal danger. Right Fia?”

“You and Stamford always seemed to think so,” Fia said, smiling at him affectionately.

Fia’s nostalgia for their late friend so soon after his own musing tugged at Flaskamper’s heartstrings, but it also strengthened his resolve. He had lost his two best friends – Stamford and Brandelynn – because of the Order of the Bone. They were *not* going to get Rokey too.

“Let’s go,” Flaskamper said. “There’s no more time to lose.”

Drawing his sword, he took the lead, stepping into the dark passageway that Bengarr and Kachia had chosen. The others followed close behind. As the party felt their way along, they gradually began to notice a distinctly unpleasant odor in the air – one that grew progressively stronger as they progressed.

“What is that stench?” Flaskamper whispered. “Can anyone place it? I can’t.”

“Nor could we,” Bengarr responded softly. “Though it was one of the many that Kachia and I detected in our feline forms, we do not recognize it either.”

"It has to be some kind of animal," Flaskamper whispered. "I wonder if... wait a tik."

The walls on either side of them disappeared. It seemed as though they had stepped out of the narrow corridor into another spacious chamber, this one completely black and devoid of the beautiful glowing crystals.

"Someone light a candle," Flaskamper whispered. "We have to get a look at where we're going."

Fia ignited her candle. When her eyes had adjusted to the light, she held it aloft trying to get a better view and abruptly cried out in alarm.

There were creatures – scores of them – clinging to the ceiling.

Even in the near total darkness, it was obvious that they were not bats, for they were wingless and appeared vaguely human in form. At the sound of Fia's cry, dozens of pairs of eyes – large glowing spheres of white – flew open as the creatures came awake and began crawling slowly down the walls.

"Goblins," Fia whispered fearfully. "I used to read stories about them when I was a child."

"Goblins are supposed to have died out centuries ago," Groog observed.

"Someone apparently forgot to give this bunch the news," said Flaskamper.

"Flash, can you summon an orb yet?" Alrontin asked nervously as he drew his sword. "I don't think I have enough energy yet with – well with things being as they are."

"I'm pretty drained myself," Flaskamper replied, "but I'll give it a shot."

Flaskamper cleared his throat and called out the incantation.

*Al an te fatch
To miney duros
Al fieras mor
Nya pos na toros."*

The goblins screeched as the lumen orb blazed into existence over Flaskamper's head. A few tiks later though, the light began to fade, and the creatures resumed their advance.

"Shitel!" Flaskamper cried. "That's the best I can do, Ronti. At least it's enough for us to see them with. I just hope it lasts."

As he said this, the first of the goblins reached the floor of the cavern, and Flaskamper got his first good look at the creatures by the dim light of the lumen orb. They were indeed somewhat human in appearance, short and thin as reeds. They had huge luminous eyes, no visible ears and only two narrow slits where he would have expected their noses to be. The elf would have dismissed them as a

minor threat except for two things: their long, razor-sharp claws and their equally menacing-looking fangs.

As though in response to some inaudible command, the goblins charged. Bengarr and Kachia transformed, leaping out of their cloaks and into the path of the oncoming horde. Flaskamper raised his sword as three of the creatures rushed at him. He chopped the first one neatly in half, and then skewered the second. Unfortunately, this gave the third attacker time to rake a deep scratch across the back of the elf's hand before he was able to dispatch it. He barely had time to catch his breath, however, before another group was upon him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that his brother was also hacking and slashing madly, trying to stem the deadly onslaught. Killing them individually was no great challenge; it was the sheer number of them that posed the greatest threat. For every one of the attackers that Flaskamper felled, it seemed as though two more sprang up to take its place. Soon he was becoming exhausted.

During one series of swipes, he spun around to get a look at how the others were faring and was appalled by what he saw. Fia was still holding her own, but the creatures had clearly gotten through to her on numerous occasions, for her face and arms were all scratched and bloody. He also saw that her leggings had been slashed open in several places. Behind her, Lorq was bashing heads in left and right with his iron-tipped staff. He too, however, had suffered numerous wounds.

One of the goblins leapt onto Flaskamper's back. He cried out in pain as he felt its claws slice through his tunic and cut deeply into his shoulder. He spun around, trying to dislodge the creature, but it held on fast. He decapitated another, but as it fell dead, the one beside it grabbed him around the leg and sunk its fangs into his thigh. Now the creature on his back was reaching around, trying to slash his throat. Flaskamper was forced to hold his sword in one hand while using the other to try and foil its attempts. A third creature wrapped thin little arms around his waist, its claws reaching beneath his tunic and raking across the soft skin of his abdomen. With few options left, the elf threw himself onto his back, landing heavily on two of the creatures that had hold of him. They screeched in pain, but did not let go, and now others jumped on him, preventing him from getting up again. Sharp teeth bit into his wrist, forcing him to drop his sword. He was helpless now. The goblins were winning.

All at once, an astonishing sight met Flaskamper's eyes. A huge dragon swooped out of the air, spewing long jets of white-hot flame from its mouth. The creatures swarming over Flaskamper shrieked in terror and scattered. He sat up just in time to see the dragon, whom he assumed *must* be Groog, circling around to the rest of the company, terrorizing their attackers into fleeing and giving the group a desperately needed reprieve. In a few tiks, the chamber was free of

goblins. Flaskamper struggled to his feet and watched in awe as the mighty, fire-breathing dragon shrank back to his former size. He then joined Fia, Lorq and Alrontin in praising the little dragon for his courage and quick thinking.

"I apologize for not trying it sooner," said Groog, "but I received a nasty knock on the head by one of those creatures. I managed to remain aloft, but it took several minmarks for my mind to clear enough to form the illusion."

"No need to apologize, dear," said Fia. "You saved our lives."

It was then, however, that they realized that the two firecats were not with them. Though the lumen orb still glowed dimly, its light only penetrated the darkness for a few feet. Flaskamper began to methodically pick his way among the scores of dead goblins, the light spirit following dutifully along just above his head. The others kept a sharp eye out as well. At last, the light fell upon two familiar figures. Bengarr sat in human form on the corpse-littered cavern floor, weeping and cradling the head of his sister in his lap. Kachia, still a feline, lay silent and still. Behind him, the elf heard the others gasp.

"No," he heard Fia say quietly.

Even in this faint light, however, the truth was apparent. The firecat's chest was not moving. Kachia was dead. The goblins' savage claws had found her vulnerable underbelly and opened a large, deep wound there. She could not possibly have survived such an injury for more than a few minmarks. Shocked, tears stinging his eyes, Flaskamper knelt at Bengarr's side and placed a hand on his friend's back, though he could find no words to offer him. Fia went to her lover's other side, laying her cheek on his shoulder as she ran her hand gently over Kachia's soft fur. As the others gathered around, Bengarr threw back his head and roared. It startled them all, for they had assumed that Nogirraalans could only roar while in their feline forms. Still, this raw, savage display of sorrow and grief expressed their feelings more eloquently than any eulogy might have done.

They remained, frozen in place, for what must have been a quartermark of more. Once again, it was Groog's calm, though audibly shaken, voice in their heads that drove them back into action, reminding them that the goblins would no doubt return soon. Fia helped the stricken Bengarr to retrieve his cloak and pack. Lorq offered to carry Kachia's body, but Bengarr shook his head.

"You are kind to offer, my friend," he rasped, "but it is not necessary. Her spirit dwells with our God Rhal now. In Nogirraal, we would simply leave her to feed the carrion birds and the small scavengers of the plains. We have no special reverence for the corpses of our dead. I shall leave her body here, but her spirit will watch over me always."

Kachia's pack held no personal possessions of any significance. Nogirraalans did not collect material things, Bengarr told them. They

removed a few items that they felt they might need, but opted to leave her pack behind, so as not to hamper anyone. Shocked and saddened as he was by Kachia's horrific slaying, Flaskamper could not help but notice that Alrontin seemed almost as deeply affected as Bengarr at her death. Since his brother was no stranger to warfare, he wondered at this, deciding finally that it must be the influence of the battleroot.

They were now ready to depart, yet still they lingered, until the menacing hiss of the goblins reached their ears once again. Only then did the crestfallen companions, minus one, reluctantly move on.

There were no surprises awaiting them in the few chambers that followed, only more of the lovely glowing crystals. But their beauty this time was lost on the companions. They could now associate them only with pain and loss and grief. After passing silently through several more illuminated caverns, they came upon another – one that was completely dark. Flaskamper predicted that more goblins might well be lurking there – and he was correct. This time, though, they were ready for them. Both brothers were able to conjure lumen orbs this time, and though their light was still quite dim, they nevertheless gave the group a temporary advantage. While the goblins' eyes were adjusting to the light, Groog transformed again and flew straight at them. The goblins panicked and fled without inflicting so much as a scratch.

From then on, they employed the same strategy at each dark chamber they came upon. It seemed, however, that the goblins were becoming accustomed to both the light and the dragon, which, for all its size and bluster, seemed never to cause them any actual harm. Two chambers later, the goblins did not retreat. Groog's illusion had little effect and the company was forced to stand and fight. The goblin horde seemed endless, and soon threatened to overwhelm them again. But the six remaining friends had also lost their fear. It had been replaced by white-hot fury and a thirst for vengeance. This time they did not tire. This time, like warriors, they battled on, ferociously chopping and thrashing their way through the onslaught, ignoring the many deep cuts and raw, painful scratches. They measured time only by the gore that mounted, thick and sticky, all around them. At last, Flaskamper brought down his sword, cleaving one slaving beast in half, and turned to take on another – but no other came. He spun again, sending droplets of blood and sweat spinning off into the darkness. His eyes darted frantically around, still blazing with wild rage. He felt a hand on his shoulder and swung his sword around. Had Fia not parried, he would have cut her head off.

"It's alright, Flash," she told him. "It's over, for now anyway."

The sound of her voice snapped him out of his trance. He threw his arms around her and she returned his embrace. As they hugged, he looked around over her shoulder, accounting for the rest of his friends. They were all there – torn and bloody – but alive. A sob of

relief escaped from his throat and at the same moment, he felt his knees give way. Fia held him up until he regained his footing, though she scarcely had the strength to stand herself.

The group took only a few minmarks to recover, tearing strips from their spare clothing to bandage some of their wounds. The worst of them belonged to Alrintin, who had a long, dangerously deep gash on his abdomen. Fia wrapped it as tightly as she could, struggling once more with the memory of Stamford, whose mortal wound had been in nearly the exact same place. She prayed that the outcome in this case would be different. When they had done all that they could for one another, the company continued on, desperately hoping that this had been the goblins' final stand, for none of them had a drop of fight left in them.

Fortunately, they came next to a small cavern that looked different from the others. It was obvious it had been carved and shaped by intentional design rather than by natural erosion. There were no goblins here, and at the other end, instead of an open archway, they found a door made up of heavy iron bars. Beyond this they could see a long, torch-lit corridor. To their great relief, no one else was in sight.

"It looks like we've reached Castle Moribar," Flaskamper said, trying the door. It held fast. He stooped to look for the lock.

"Can you open it Flash?" Fia asked.

The elf shook his head.

"I don't know what's holding it closed," he said. "I don't see any kind of lock at all. In fact, if I didn't see the hinges on the other side, I wouldn't think it opened at all."

"What about the hinges?" Alrintin asked, his voice heavy with pain. "Any way we can get the door off by removing them?"

Flaskamper took a few moments to examine the door hinges.

"No way," he said. "They don't have removable pins. They've clearly been designed to keep people – or whatever – out."

Alrintin sighed deeply and closed his eyes. Flaskamper regarded his brother with deep concern. Kachia's brutal death seemed to have hit him unusually hard, the battleroot cravings no doubt still taking a serious toll on him. Now he had suffered a serious wound – one that could easily kill him if it was not soon attended to. Even bolstered by the rembis leaves, it was plain that he was not in a fit state to continue. But how could they rest now? There was no time if they hoped to reach Rokey before nightfall. He had no idea what time of day it was, but he suspected that by now there was very little daylight left outside. And how were they going to get past this damned door?

As though reading his mind, Lorq suddenly spoke up.

"I think I can bend these, Flash," he said, examining the bars, "at least enough for all of *you*."

Flaskamper's eyes lit up with hope and a smile crept slowly over his face.

“Lorq that’s fantastic!” he exclaimed. “You never let me down, big fellow.”

The next moment though, his smile faded as he took in the rest of what Lorq had said.

“You mean – ” he said. “You mean you’d have to stay behind?”

Lorq nodded.

“There’s no way I’ll be able to bend them wide enough for me to fit through,” the giant said. “It’s all right though, Flash. Don’t worry about me. I’ll go back out the other way and meet up with you somehow.”

“Back through those goblin caves?” Flaskamper cried, struggling to keep his composure. “Back through Gloomsveldt and – and over that rickety bridge? By yourself? That would be suicide. NO! I’m not going to lose you too, Lorq.”

“But Flash,” the giant said gently. “There’s no other way.”

Lorq turned resolutely to the iron door and set to work on the bars. Flaskamper turned away, his eyes brimming with tears. How could this be happening? Kachia was dead, his brother gravely injured, and now this. It wasn’t fair. How could he possibly choose between Rokey’s life and Lorq’s? How could he ever face Kyzee again, or little Broq? How could he live with himself? He wracked his brain for a third option – some other way to proceed. But Lorq was right – there *were* no other options. Without a moment’s hesitation, his friend had offered to sacrifice his own life so that Rokey’s could be saved. Now Flaskamper had to make a decision – the most terrible decision he had ever faced in his life.

Chapter 28

Black Robes and Bones

It wasn't until Lorq had nearly finished his work that the beginnings of a plan began to form in Flaskamper's mind – a plan that, if successful, might provide a solution to their present dilemma. As the others watched the giant struggle to bend the iron bars, Flaskamper took Alrontin aside to explain his idea to him. Alrontin was incensed to learn that the plan involved leaving him behind.

“That’s ridiculous, Flash,” Alrontin protested weakly. “I’m not hurt that badly. Besides, I’m supposed to be the leader of this mission.”

Flaskamper listened patiently to his brother’s protest, but then shook his head.

“It’s not a question of your leadership or your capability, Ronti,” his brother explained. “I just don’t want to leave Lorq here alone. Though we all desperately need a rest, you’re the one that needs it the most and you know it. We’re down to just a small handful of rembis leaves. If you rest now instead of pushing yourself just for the sake of pride, they will hopefully be enough to sustain you until we can get you to a healer.”

Alrontin leaned wearily against the cavern wall, scowling. A moment later though, he chuckled, clutching his side in pain.

“You’re right, little brother,” he admitted. “It is my pride that hurts more than anything else. I appreciate your telling me first – giving me the chance to salvage a little dignity.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Flaskamper scolded him. “You have plenty of dignity. You’re the strongest, bravest person I know. I would have given up a long time ago if I’d had as much shite to struggle with as you have. And as far as I’m concerned, you’re still very much in charge of this expedition. I’m just suggesting it would be more practical for me to take over this little piece of it, that’s all.”

“Hah, and father thinks *I’m* the diplomat,” Alrontin said. “Alright I yield. Let’s go fill the others in on the plan. There are still one or two details we need to flesh out.”

Alrontin clapped his brother on the shoulder and the both of them went to rejoin the rest of the group. They were just in time to watch Bengarr squeeze through the widened opening that Lorq had created.

“Well done, Lorq!” Flaskamper exclaimed, beaming at his friend. He then remembered where they were and chided himself to keep his voice down.

Lorq, who was sweating profusely from the exertion, smiled back proudly.

“Bengarr is the biggest one of us except for me,” said the giant, “So you all should be able to fit through without any trouble. And don’t worry about me, Flash. I’ll be alright by myself.”

“Well if anyone could survive here alone, you could, Lorq,” Flaskamper said, “but my brother and I have come up with a plan. If it works, we may still all be able to get out of here together – if we get out of here at all, that is.”

The moment the words left his mouth, he remembered Kachia and inwardly kicked himself.

“Shite,” he cursed. “I’m sorry Bengarr. I didn’t mean to sound so glib and insensitive. It’s just the way I talk when I’m getting ready for a battle. Please forgive me.”

“There is nothing to forgive you for, Elf Brother,” said the Nogirraalan. “I know that you meant no disrespect.”

“Tell us your plan, Flash,” Fia said, hoping to distract the elf from his discomfort. Flaskamper gave her a tight-lipped smile of gratitude.

“All right, here’s the idea,” he said. “Alrontin will stay behind here with you, Lorq. That way there will be two of you here in case the goblins decide to attack again. The rest of us will go and search, not only for Rokey, but also for a key or a spell or something to open this door. As soon as we find it, we’ll send Groog back to let you out. The rest of us will continue the hunt for Rokey, assuming we haven’t found him already by then. Once we do rescue him, we’ll all meet up again and together we’ll work on finding our way out of here. Any questions?”

Everyone’s hands went up at once.

“All right, all right,” said Flaskamper. “I know it’s crazy. But it’s only slightly crazier than the plan that brought us here in the first place. Nevertheless, we’ve made it this far. We’re about to sneak into

Castle Moribar right under the noses of the Order of the Bone. Now the hitch, as I see it, is finding each other and then finding our way safely out.”

“And have you answers to these challenges, Elf Brother?” asked Bengarr, a hint of skepticism in his voice.

“Well, not exactly,” Flaskamper admitted. “No matter how I look at it, there remains the chance that we won’t succeed in finding one another again once we’ve found Rokey. Of course, if we find and rescue him relatively quickly, we could all return here to open the door – if we find a way to open the door that is.”

“There are lots of *ifs* in this scheme, Flash,” Fia commented fretfully.

“I know, Fia,” he replied, “and believe me, I wish we had more time to come up with a better one. But it must be getting dark by now. If we don’t act soon, we’re going to be too late. Look, I say we focus on getting the means to unlock this door with all possible haste. We then send Groog back to let Lorq and Alrontin in, and they follow him back to the spot where he left us. At the same time, once the three of us rescue Rokey, we’ll try, if at all possible, to head back the way we came and meet up with the three of you. Then we’ll all make our way out of the castle and head for the main bridge that crosses Harrow Yawn. Based on the plans we made back in Elfwood, father should have sent a Guard brigade out days ago to meet us, as well as to distract the soldiers guarding the bridge. Provided they met with no trouble, they ought to have arrived by now. Look everyone, I know there are a dozen ways for this all to go to shite, but what other options do we really have?”

“Very few,” said Alrontin. “As far as I can see, your plan is the only one that has any hope of saving Rokey *and* getting all of us out of here alive. You’ve done well, Flash. Now, if someone has a better idea – out with it. Otherwise, you’d better get moving before it’s too late.”

No one had anything further to suggest, so they removed their packs and began to squeeze – one by one – through the slightly widened opening that Lorq had created between two of the bars. Afterwards, Alrontin and Lorq passed their packs through to them. Before they left, Alrontin reached through the bars and clasped Flaskamper round the back of the neck.

“If time grows too short,” he commanded, “the four of you find Rokey and get out of here. There’s no great honor in pointless sacrifice.”

“It won’t come to that, Ronti,” said Flaskamper. “I’m not even going to consider the possibility.”

“A good commander must consider all possibilities,” said Alrontin.

“Then it’s a good thing that you’re the commander and not me,” Flaskamper replied with a smile. “Rest while we’re gone, brother.”

You'll need all the strength you can muster when it comes time to get out of this place. We all will."

The four of them turned and proceeded down the long hallway. As they walked, a more careful inspection revealed that what they had taken for torches were actually hunks of orange glowing crystal, obviously harvested from the caverns. The stones had been carefully placed to fit into the iron sconces mounted at regular intervals along the walls. Even at close range, they still greatly resembled torches, except for the rather disconcerting fact that they did not flicker. It gave those passing through the corridor the odd impression that time itself had somehow been frozen.

At the end of the passageway was a sharp right hand turn leading into a kind of alcove. Here they found stairs leading upwards. The stairway itself was not lit, but they could see more light at the top. Flaskamper took the lead as they cautiously and quietly mounted the stone steps. Soon he was able to peer over the landing and see that the way ahead was clear. He turned and signaled silently to the others that no one was there, and they picked up their pace a bit. On this floor was another series of corridors and rooms. Here it wasn't long before the group heard voices approaching and they quickly ducked through the nearest door to hide. It turned out to be someone's living quarters, but fortunately it was unoccupied at the moment. They listened at the door as the voices passed by then faded away again.

"I think we're going to need a more practical strategy, dear," Fia suggested to Flaskamper. "There are probably hundreds of people occupying this castle. It's not going to be long before we're spotted by someone."

"You're right," Flaskamper agreed. "We need to blend in." He looked around, then crossed the room and threw open a large wardrobe. Inside hung two heavy black robes. He took them out and tossed one to Bengarr, then began to pull the other over his head. Bengarr followed his lead, donning the black robe over his cloak. They both pulled the hoods up over their heads – Flaskamper to cover his ears, Bengarr to hide his bright orange hair. Their packs bulged conspicuously under their robes and they decided that at this point it would be better to abandon them rather than risk being discovered. They tucked the three packs into the closet, and then began to discuss how they were going to hide Fia and Groog.

"My guess is this whole section of the castle is sleeping quarters," Flaskamper said. "We should be able to find you a robe easily enough, Fia." He turned to Groog. "That leaves the question of what to do about you, Groog?"

The dragon sighed.

"Does your robe have a pocket?" he asked.

Flaskamper felt the robe and discovered pockets on either side. He nodded affirmatively.

“Very well,” Groog said reluctantly. “We dragons actually have another form. We rarely assume it because...well, frankly, we consider it rather undignified. However, as this is an emergency....”

Groog changed abruptly, shrinking down to his other form – an adorable little winged lizard. Flaskamper successfully resisted the urge to chuckle, but nevertheless failed to keep the amusement from showing on his face.

“You see now why we do not care much for this form,” the dragon said trying to maintain his decorum. “It is not one which engenders a great deal of respect. In any case, let us not continue to stand about here. Put me in your pocket and let us get on with things.”

Flaskamper scooped up this new little Groog and placed him carefully in the pocket of the borrowed robe. Then he went to the door and peered out. Finding the hallway clear, they moved quickly out and down to the next door. As Flaskamper had suspected, this, too, was someone’s quarters. They found another black robe for Fia and she quickly slipped it on. It obviously had been made for someone taller than her, and the hem dragged heavily on the ground. Fia fixed this by hiking up the extra material and tucking it into her belt. It wasn’t comfortable, but it worked.

Now, confident that their appearance would not cause immediate alarm, they stepped back into the hallway and began to search for Rokey in earnest. They felt certain that a castle such as Moribar must have dungeons, and this seemed like the logical place to start. Before they could locate them, however, they happened upon a short hallway leading to a single door. Outside this door stood two hulking troll guards, who glared at them with their cold, black eyes, but did not otherwise react to their presence. The three of them strode casually past and, once out of sight, quickly huddled together.

“What about that room?” Flaskamper asked. “Something very important is clearly inside. Could Rokey be in there?”

Before either Bengarr or Fia could reply, Groog’s voice piped up in their heads.

“I do not think so,” said the dragon. “Rokey is, I believe you told me, part sidhe. That means that he possesses a magical aura. As it happens, dragons are able to detect such auras, provided they are very close by. I believe that at this distance, were your husband in that room, I would surely be able to sense him, and I do not.”

“Well done, Groog.” Flaskamper said, impressed by the little dragon’s seemingly endless talents. “We’ll have to keep searching for the dungeons, then. That skill of yours will no doubt be very useful if they turn out to be extensive. I’d still like to know what’s in that room. If it’s important enough for the Order to guard like that, it might be something of use to us.”

There was no time for further speculation, however, so the companions moved on. Before long it became abundantly clear just

how lucky they had been to find disguises when they did, for the corridors were indeed heavily trafficked. Fortunately, everyone seemed much too busy to pay any of them any attention. There seemed to be a sense of excitement in the air – one that worried Flaskamper greatly. His worry turned to near panic when they came to a hallway with a small round window and saw that the sun had already set. Time was running out. They continued hunting frantically for a corridor or stair that might lead to a dungeon. Finally their efforts were rewarded. They discovered a large iron door, behind which a stone stairway spiraled downward.

“This looks promising,” Flaskamper said softly, sniffing the air. “Smells promising too – like every dungeon I’ve ever been in.”

“There will no doubt be guards below,” said Bengarr. “How shall we handle them?”

Flaskamper forced himself to stop and think for a moment.

“All right,” he said. “First we’ll try to bluff our way. Leave that to me. If that fails, we use force. Hopefully there aren’t too many of them down there.”

They descended the stairs with as much purpose and confidence as they could muster. At the bottom of the stairs was an iron gate manned by a single sleepy-looking human guard sitting on a bench. He stood respectfully as they approached.

“What can I do for you, brothers?” he asked.

“We’ve come for the prisoner,” Flaskamper declared officiously, his stomach flip-flopping nervously. “The one to be used in tonight’s ceremony. We have been ordered to fetch him immediately.”

The guard eyed them strangely. For a moment, Flaskamper feared that the guard would know nothing – that perhaps they were in entirely the wrong place. Finally the man shook his head.

“You fellers is all flummoxed up tonight, ain’t ye?” he asked with a hint of amusement. “Why t’weren’t fifteen minmarks ago that two o’ yer mates came and collected ‘im. I don’t know who send ye, but ye’d better go an’ tell ‘im that the lad is already up in the Ritual Room. I know cuz I ‘eard the two what fetched ‘im say that’s where –”

Flaskamper was upon him in a heartbeat, his dagger beneath the man’s throat.

“Where is this Ritual Room?” the elf asked, his voice low and threatening. The guard swallowed hard, but said nothing. Flaskamper began to press the blade home. It bit into the guard’s throat, and blood began to ooze out through the newly opened wound. The man’s eyes widened in pain and fright.

“Up the stairs and to the right,” he croaked. “There’s another wide stair there leading up to the second level. The Ritual Room is there – right in the heart of the castle.”

Flaskamper stepped back. Before the man could move, Bengarr clouted him over the head and he fell to the floor with a groan. The

firecat reached down and retrieved a huge ring of keys from the unconscious guard.

"Do you suppose the key we seek could be on this ring, Elf Brother?" Bengarr asked.

"We'd better hope so," the elf answered, "because there's no time to search for any more. Groog we need you now." He reached in and retrieved the little dragon from his pocket.

"I am ready Prince Flaskamper," Groog said, transforming back to his familiar size and shape. Flaskamper handed him the ring of keys.

"Go back and see if one of these will open the gate and free Lorq and Alrontin," said Flaskamper. "Can you get there without being seen?"

"It will not be so easy without a pocket in which to hide," Groog replied dryly, "but the ceilings here are high and dark. If I clutch the keys tightly enough, I should be able to fly quietly above the torchlight without drawing any attention."

"Tell them about the guarded room," Flaskamper instructed. "I think whatever is in there is worth taking, and Lorq and Alrontin should be able to handle a couple of trolls. Tell them to grab whatever it is and then the three of you get out of here – any way you can. Don't wait for us. If we make it, we'll see you again soon."

"I shall deliver the message, Your Highness," Groog promised.

"Alright then, let's go!" Flaskamper cried. "We may be too late already!"

The three of them turned and sprinted back up the winding stair and into the corridor. The dragon followed close behind them, clutching the ring of keys. At the top of the stairs, Groog quickly wished them well, then flew up into the shadows near the ceiling and turned back in the direction from which they had originally come, pressing the ring of keys tightly against his body.

As the guard had not specified *which* right turn they were to take, it took the others several frustrating minmarks to find the wide staircase he had talked about. The entire castle had gone deathly quiet and not a single robed figure could be seen anywhere. Finally they found the stairs and started up, only to meet a black-robed brother hurrying down. Flaskamper tensed, but the man did not even stop.

"Hurry brothers!" he called out to them. "We should all be in the Cathedral by now. Remember what the High Lord said – all of our energies will be needed to aid in the ascension!"

"We'll be right along!" Flaskamper replied. The brother disappeared around the corner, and the three resumed their climb. At the top of the stairs, they paused, uncertain which way to proceed. Then they became aware of the sound of chanting coming from off to the left.

"That has to be coming from the Ritual Room," Fia said.

The others agreed and they hurried off in the direction of the voices. As they grew closer, they were able to hear the actual words – a frenetic litany – repeated over and over.

*“Cyure ato nuedas
Cyure ato nuedas
Cyure ato nuedas”*

At last the trio reached a set of huge wooden doors, behind which the chants clearly resonated. Flaskamper twisted the handles, but they were locked tight. He swore and threw his shoulder into the doors, but they were solid and barely shuddered at the impact.

“Damn it!” Flaskamper cried, his voice nearly hysterical. “We’ve got to get in there!” He threw himself wildly at the door again, wishing desperately that he had kept the ring of keys.

“There has to be another way in,” said Fia. “A room of this size is bound to have more than one entrance.”

“You’re right,” said Flaskamper breathlessly. “Come on.”

They sped down the hall and around the corner. At the very end of the next corridor, they found a single small door. Flaskamper pressed his ear to it.

“This is it,” he said excitedly. “This is the other way in.”

He tried the door handle. To his intense relief, this one turned. He pushed the door open just enough to peer into the room. The chamber was either much smaller than he had envisioned, or else it seemed to look that way by the sheer scale of the object at its center – a massive gray stone ossuary, inside of which lay the largest skeleton Flaskamper had ever seen. Alive, it would clearly have towered over anyone the elf had ever encountered before. Even Lorq would have appeared puny next to the colossal figure. Black-robed brothers, standing two rows deep, surrounded the stone sarcophagus. At the far corner, at the end where the skull was, stood a man wearing a hideous black mask. Next to him, at the head of the ossuary, another robed and hooded figure stood holding –

Flaskamper gasped. In front of the hooded man stood Rokey – naked and obviously drugged, for his head rolled listlessly about, and the hooded man had to steady him to keep him from falling down. What the elf saw next caused his heart to leap into his throat. In the man’s right hand was a small obsidian dagger. As Flaskamper watched in terror, the knife slowly rose toward Rokey’s throat.

A scream tore from Flaskamper. Drawing his weapons from beneath his robe, he kicked the door open and charged into the room. Bengarr followed his lead without question. Fia paused for only the few tiks it took to cast off her oversized robe, which she knew would hinder her in battle, before rushing in behind them. When the hooded man saw them, he pointed toward the intruders with his knife and

shouted. For Flaskamper, things then began to move in slow motion as the man brought the blade up to Rokey's throat once more, determined to carry out the sacrifice. Without even a conscious thought, the elf hurled his dagger across the room with blinding speed. It found its target a tik later, burying itself to the hilt in the hooded man's chest before he was able to complete his bloody ritual. Both he and Rokey fell backwards out of sight – and then the Order of the Bone was upon the three companions. From beneath their robes, the brothers drew their swords and charged at the rescuers. Bengarr transformed and leapt from his clothing, and the three companions stood side-by-side braced for the onslaught.

Though still exhausted, the sight of Rokey still alive filled Flaskamper with newfound energy and resolve. He parried a sword blow from the first assailant and shoved him backward with all his might, causing his foe to lose his footing and fall back, striking his head against the stone coffin. Without a pause, the elf drove his sword into the stomach of the next man, and used him to knock down a third. He was determined to reach Rokey before anyone else could harm him. Behind him he heard an abbreviated scream as Bengarr tore the throat from one of the attackers.

“Fia!” Flaskamper yelled out. “Where are you?”

“Covering your back!” she called in reply. “Go on and get Rokey!”

These were exactly the words he wanted to hear. He swung his sword, severing a black-sleeved arm, and then dodged aside as another brother's blade tried to cleave his head in two. It missed, but did manage to slice off a substantial chunk of his right ear, and he felt the instant rush of hot blood down the side of his neck. He ignored the pain and fought on, hacking his way along until, at last, he reached the other end of the ossuary. There he broke through the crowd of impassioned defenders, only to stop dead in his tracks once more – his eyes widening in horror.

The first man – the one wearing the gruesome black mask – had taken up the obsidian knife. He now stood, one arm wrapped tightly around the barely conscious Rokey, the other pressing the small blade firmly against the young man's throat. Flaskamper's hand went instinctively beneath his robe, to the scabbard on his belt, but it was empty. He had already used his dagger to fell the hooded man. There was nothing he could do to stop this one from slitting his husband's throat, right in front of his eyes. Behind him, Bengarr's battle roar and the clashing of swords faded, until it all seemed miles away. For Flaskamper, the only people left in the world right now were himself and Rokey – and this masked man who held both of their lives in his hands.

Chapter 29

The Bridge of Skulls

Commander Cinnador, acting leader of the Elf Guard, stood on a low hill approximately a quarter mile from The Bridge of Skulls, the largest – in fact (as far as he knew) – the only means of crossing the huge natural chasm known as Harrow Yawn. It was called the Bridge of Skulls because it actually *was* adorned with skulls – four of them, impaled on tall spikes – one on each of the four corners of the bridge. They looked human, though they could have been elf or even perhaps one of the other now-vanished races that had roamed the land of Firma back in days of old. Without their flesh to distinguish them, it was impossible to tell. Though the commander’s vision was sharper than that of any human, he would still not have been able to see the goings-on at the bridge in any detail were it not for the spell cast by the wizened old elf standing immediately to his right. Cinnador had initially been opposed to allowing High Mage Ellispon to come along on this mission. He was too old, the commander had argued, and far too important to risk on this type of undertaking. But King Angorath had insisted that Ellispon accompany them. Now as the commander’s magically enhanced vision swept over the company of trolls and ogres guarding the bridge, he found himself thanking his beloved monarch for having overruled him.

Cinnador did not anticipate going into battle. Nevertheless, he was dressed for it. Resplendent in gleaming armor, the beauty of its ancient design gave every motion, every glimpse of him the image of

power and grace. His broadsword and short blade were of forged, tempered steel and his shield, mail and gauntlets were fashioned from glimmeryl – a lightweight, magically enhanced metal which shone like burnished silver when seen from one angle, yet took on a pale, lavender hue when glimpsed from another. The mail was cleverly shaped into a fish-scale design that allowed freedom of movement combined with a nearly impenetrable covering for his body. His helmet bore an inconspicuous insignia of his rank, draped with more mail to protect his neck, below which sat an elegant gorget and breastplate. Every surface was adorned with runes and an ingenious design of fretwork that was both beautiful and practical for deflecting the blows of an enemy. His look was handsome, despite the many-times broken nose and livid scar that swept his face from forehead to jaw line.

He had nearly lost that eye, which now surveyed the elite thousand-member Elf Guard regiment that stood only a few yards to his rear. They consisted of foot soldiers, cavalry, and archers, all equipped in the same glimmeryl armor and mail, every piece of which had been brilliantly polished with an aim to both dazzle and confound the enemy, the unearthly, blinding *gleam* of them giving them their name: *The Silver Sentinels*.

Ironically, these magnificent armaments of warfare had not been crafted by elves, but by the Yokai, a race of small, mountain-dwelling folk who had little use for war, but whose forges and foundries had once been famous throughout the land of Firma. The Yokai had not often sided in conflicts, but *had* always enjoyed a special relationship with the elves, to the extent that they reserved their highly coveted glimmeryl for use solely on elf armor. This practice made them several powerful enemies, who had taken their revenge during the tumultuous period of The Great Wars, attacking and wiping out all traces of the Yokai civilization. Since that time, more than a millennium ago, nearly all examples of Yokai metalwork had vanished from Firma – all, that is, except for the magnificent glimmeryl masterpieces belonging to the elves. These had been carefully preserved and handed down from one generation to the next. In this way, the elves continued to pay homage to their lost friends, helping to keep the memory of the peaceful Yokai people alive.

The purpose of the mission that Cinnador now led was not to wage war, but to provide a distraction to aid the small rescue party, led by King Angorath's two sons, that had set out for Moribar some days earlier. The rescue party's task was to retrieve Prince Flaskamper's husband – the powerful and mysterious sorcerer named Roke. However, there was no telling how Moribar would respond to the sight of an army, however small, at their doorstep. Therefore, it only made sense to be prepared for any contingency. Along with his fully outfitted regiment, Cinnador had also brought along all the supplemental personnel and equipment that one would normally

bring if one were planning a battle campaign – including medical wagons, healers, messengers, blacksmiths and farriers. Though he hoped they would not be needed, Commander Cinnador had been determined *not* to be caught unprepared.

“We are being watched.”

Cinnador turned to his left and regarded the person who had spoken. Though he himself was quite tall, the woman who stood there towered over him. The commander had never considered himself insecure, but having to look up at her as a child would look up at an adult made him feel somewhat awkward. The fact that she was also stunningly beautiful only made the situation worse. The Saebrilite named Kyzee, astride an enormous gray mare, had overtaken them only three days before. She carried a letter from King Angorath informing Cinnador that she was the wife of the giant, Lorq, who had accompanied Prince Alrontin and Prince Flaskamper on the rescue mission, and that she should be extended every courtesy. Cinnador had initially been happy to comply, so long as she stayed out of his way. Since that time, though, the elf had learned that Kyzee had, until recently, been Captain of the late King Hobar’s Personal Guard in Duncileer. News of that monarch’s murder had served to remind him yet again of the dangerous times in which they were all now living, and the knowledge that Kyzee was his equal in rank had changed his attitude towards her considerably. Though he still considered her a civilian, he was far more willing to include her in the details of their day-to-day operations.

Commander Cinnador followed her pointing finger skyward and saw a large black bird circling overhead.

“Hardly surprising,” he remarked. “In fact I would have been far more shocked were we *not* being observed. Hopefully the news of our approach will cause precisely the diversion we intended.”

“How close do you plan to get to the bridge?” Kyzee asked.

“That all depends on how they respond to our presence,” Cinnador replied. “Once they’ve had a chance to get a good look at us, I shall send a small deputation to deliver a message demanding the release of their captive. I assume that they will respond by professing ignorance, after which I shall bring the regiment close enough to stare into the beady little eyes of those troll guards on the bridge. From that point, we shall have to take things as they come. Tonight is the night of the new moon and sundown is already approaching. We have no idea if the princes’ rescue party has even reached Moribar, let alone been able to accomplish their mission. All we can really do is posture – and hope.”

Kyzee could sense the commander’s frustration – frustration that she herself shared. It was never an easy position, though certainly not uncommon, for soldiers to find themselves in – watching and waiting, hoping that all was going according to plan, but not knowing. Like

Cinnador, Kyzee longed to be able to help in some more tangible way. Still, being here with the legendary Silver Sentinels was better than the alternative – staying behind in Elfwood. When they had reached the forest kingdom a week before, she and Broq had been warmly received by King Angorath, who filled her in on all that had transpired since she had last heard from Lorq. Her first instinct as a warrior (and a wife) had been to leave Broq in the care of the elves and to ride immediately out to try and catch up with Lorq and the rescue party, but the king assured her that they had far too great a start for her to be able to catch them. Her next notion was to try and catch the elf regiment on their way to Moribar. However, she knew that her horse, Tressa, needed rest after having pulled a wagon halfway across Firma, and Kyzee needed to take the time to properly arrange for her son's care. So she compromised, resting both her body and her mare overnight. During that time she was treated as an honored guest by the king. She knew from her experience with King Hobar that monarchs had a tendency to hold themselves apart from others. With the Elf King's wife now gone, she could well imagine how deeply it troubled him having both of his sons in such danger.

That evening, Angorath summoned his sonsmate Mellynda to the palace and introduced the two mothers. His suggestion was that Alrontin's wife take charge of little Broq while Kyzee was away and Mellynda was more than happy to agree. Though Kyzee had never met Mellynda before, her kindness and quiet confidence made Kyzee feel considerably better about leaving her precious little cabbage in the company of complete strangers. Still, she promised herself to steer clear of any direct conflict so as not to invite the risk of leaving her son orphaned.

The way was now clear for her to ride out the next day in pursuit of the Elf Guard contingent. Rested and given her fill of the special rembis-enriched feed normally reserved for the cavalry, Tressa had all but flown over the landscape, and Kyzee had overtaken the regiment only two days later. The company Commander, Cinnador, had at first been distant, though polite enough. Later, however, after learning that Kyzee herself had been Captain of the Guard in Duncileer, the elf commander had warmed to her considerably. While he still insisted that she spend the bulk of her time in the rear echelons, he kept her informed of the details of their progress. Today, when they at last came in sight of the Bridge of Skulls, he had invited her to join him up in front. It was no more than a courtesy really, but Kyzee had been extremely grateful to him for having included her. At least up in front, she could feel as though she were actually participating instead of merely sitting back with the support wagons, worrying about her husband and friends.

After another quartermark had elapsed, Cinnador sent a rider to the bridge bearing their formal demand that the prisoner, Rokey, be

released. The three of them watched as the messenger was escorted by one of the troll guards to Moribar Castle. A halfmark passed with no result. Then another. The sun was now just beginning to dip into the horizon behind them. Soon it would be dark.

“Well they certainly are taking their sweet time to answer,” High Mage Ellispon complained irritably.

“They’re stalling,” Cinnador replied. “I’m afraid they’ve called our bluff. I’m going to order the regiment to advance. Perhaps that will goad them into some sort of action. The sacrifice is to take place tonight, so we must act immediately if our presence here is to be of any help at all.

As he turned to shout an order to Lieutenant Reisyl, his second in command, Kyzee suddenly gasped and grabbed him by the arm. The commander turned back to see what had alarmed her. For a moment he froze, shocked by what he saw.

Galloping towards them was a chestnut mare – the same horse that had earlier borne their official messenger. Only now the elf was no longer astride the animal, but was being dragged by his legs on the ground behind it – a bloody stump where his head had been. Before the mare had even reached them, the woods on the far side of the Bridge of Skulls suddenly exploded with a huge commotion. Hundreds of armed trolls flooded from the trees and began to spill across the bridge. Behind them were equal numbers of ogres – huge, snarling beasts covered with matted brown hair and wielding spiked wooden clubs. Cinnador immediately recovered himself and called his company to arms. Then he ordered Kyzee to escort Ellispon back to the rear.

Kyzee reluctantly complied. She *had*, after all, promised herself that she would retreat at the first sign of trouble – for Broq’s sake. Still she hesitated. She was a match for any troll or ogre. Perhaps her presence might make the difference between victory and defeat.

That’s your ego talking, Kyzee. You made a promise, and you’ve never broken a promise to anyone, not even yourself.

She sighed and continued on with High Mage Ellispon toward the rear of the regiment. There the two parted. Ellispon went to see if there was anything he could do to help the healers. Kyzee saddled up Tressa and began to ride slowly westward, toward a small cluster of hills from which she planned to observe the battle. But her conscience nagged at her, as did her instincts as a warrior. She knew that, from a parent’s perspective, retreating to safety was the best thing to do for her young son.

Is it? a voice inside her asked skeptically. *What about the larger issue – the battle against the Order of the Bone? Was that not a worthwhile cause for all of them to fight for, herself included?*

Kyzee reigned in Tressa and sat watching the last arc of the shimmering orange sun sink below the horizon. Behind her came the

first shouts – the first clashes of steel on steel behind her – and she knew at that moment what she had to do, despite the risks it entailed.

“Great Goddess, watch over my son,” she whispered, bringing Tressa around to face Moribar once again. Then, screaming out the battle cry of a Saebrilite warrior, Kyzee drew her sword, charging at full gallop into the bloody melee. As she bore down on a trio of slaving ogres, her thoughts strayed briefly to the rescue party, and she wondered where Lorq and her friends were at that moment. Had they even managed to make it to Moribar? For now, all she could do was hope... and fight.

* * *

Soon after the first members of the attack force from Moribar began thundering over the heavy wooden Bridge of Skulls toward the Silver Sentinels, Flaskamper sank to his knees on the cold stone floor of the *Ritual Room* in the heart of Moribar Castle. It was not a deliberate act, but rather an unconscious response to his feeling of utter helplessness. In front of him stood the love of his life, drugged to a stupor, his head rolled back listlessly, exposing his beautiful, pale throat. Just behind Rokey, in fact holding him up, was a man dressed in the familiar black robes of the Order of the Bone. Unlike any of the other members Flaskamper had ever seen, however, a hideous mask of twisted black leather covered this man's face. The elf did not know the significance of the mask, but he certainly knew the significance of the small obsidian knife the man now pressed against Rokey's neck. He meant to slit his husband's throat – to sacrifice him in order to bring about the resurrection of their God. It was the one thing for which the Order of the Bone had been working relentlessly for centuries, and Flaskamper was utterly powerless to stop it. He had hurled his own dagger earlier, preventing the other robed man from carrying out the sacrifice. Now he had no weapon left to use. He was too far away for either his sword or his fists to be of any use. He had made it all this way only to watch his love die right before his eyes. Had he stopped to think about his next action, he never would have done it, because it surely could do no good whatsoever. But he did not stop; he did not think. He only sank to his knees, tears spilling from his eyes, and began to beg.

“Please, please don't. Please don't take him from me.” The words came tumbling from Flaskamper's lips, which had now gone as numb as the rest of his body. He could neither think nor feel anything. He could only plead, over and over, for Rokey's life – staring into the dark eyes behind that gruesome mask.

For a minmark or more they stood, frozen, staring at one another. Behind Flaskamper, the sounds of battle had ceased. Bengarr and Fia had killed seven more members of the black clad brotherhood. The

rest had retreated, at least temporarily. Now Fia and the firecat stood watching, equally powerless, for neither had a weapon that could be thrown, and they were even further from the man than Flaskamper was.

As Flaskamper continued to cry and plead with him, the man's hand began to tremble. Blood started trickling slowly down Rokey's pale neck as the knife cut into his skin. Certain that the man was about to finish the job, Flaskamper squeezed his eyes tightly shut. He sent out a silent appeal to his Goddess Secta to receive his love into her arms and then awaited the terrible gurgling sound of the knife being drawn across Rokey's throat.

Instead, though, he heard a different sound – the sound of something clattering to the floor. When Flaskamper opened his eyes again, he could scarcely believe what he saw. It was the obsidian knife that now lay on the floor and the masked man was gently wiping the blood from Rokey's neck. Afterwards, he reached up and peeled the horrible mask from his face. Flaskamper gasped, for behind it was a face that, allowing for age, bore an astonishing resemblance to Rokey. The man now regarded Flaskamper, and cast him a weary smile.

“No, I won't take him from you,” he said. He then looked at Rokey, steadying him with one hand while he ran the other through the young man's hair – hair that was as black as midnight, just like the man's own. It was in that brief moment in time that the truth dawned on Flaskamper – these two men were somehow related. But in the next tik, the spell was broken. The man looked sharply about, over at Fia and Bengarr (who had resumed his human form once more) then back at Flaskamper, still kneeling on the stone floor.

“Get up, boy,” he commanded sharply, “and take charge of him. More men will be here soon, more than the three of you can handle. Rokey will not wake up for some time.”

Flaskamper sprang up and came to take Rokey. High Lord Hughn thought for a moment, then quickly stripped off his black robe, under which he wore only a thin pair of dark brown cotton breeches and a white muslin tunic. Thus attired, the resemblance between him and Rokey was even more striking. He began to dress his nephew in the robe. Flaskamper helped him. Across the room, Fia and Bengarr took the hint and retrieved their own “borrowed” costumes and put them back on.

“I can do nothing more to help you,” Hughn told Flaskamper, “except to advise you to make for the north side exit. It will be guarded, but perhaps not so heavily as the main entrance. It is also the direction of the Infirmary, so you *may* just be able to bluff your way past anyone you encounter by claiming you are taking a wounded brother” he indicated Rokey “for medical attention. I was informed just before the ceremony began that an enemy army was approaching the bridge. I presume that has something to do with you. I gave orders to

my captain to keep them at bay until the ceremony could be completed. Knowing him as I do, I'm quite certain that you'll find a full-scale battle has begun out there. I cannot – I *will* not intercede. By freeing my – by freeing Rokey, I have already betrayed my God and jeopardized everything that I believe in. Now it is up to you to make the most of this slim chance that I have given you.”

Flaskamper slipped an arm around Rokey and began to steer him toward the exit. Fia stepped forward and took him on the other side. Flaskamper stopped for a tik and turned back toward the man.

“I don't know why you did this, sir” said the elf, “but I'm grateful to you.”

The man smiled sadly once more.

“He will tell you why,” he said, indicating Rokey, “assuming that you both make it out of here alive. Now go.”

As the companions turned away, the man called out to Flaskamper one last time.

“Love one another,” he said, “and cherish what time remains.”

Hughn watched as the four of them made their way quickly out the doorway, then leaned wearily on the edge of the stone ossuary. A few moments later, the silence was broken by a voice behind him – weak, yet brimming with anger.

“Traitor!”

Startled, Hughn turned around. On the floor behind him lay his High Priest, Dreghor. He was lying in a pool of his own blood, the elf's dagger still buried in his chest. It was obvious that there was nothing that could be done for him. He could not possibly live much longer.

“You have betrayed us,” Dreghor rasped. “You have destroyed our chance to raise Our Most High Lord, Cyure, to his full ascendancy. The others will flay your flesh from your bones for this, Hughn. I wish only that I could live to witness it.”

The Priest coughed, and blood began to trickle from the corner of his mouth. Hughn felt sorry for the man. He had never particularly liked Dreghor, but still, to see him dying like this...

Dying. Ah well. No point in prolonging the inevitable. Why not give old Dreghor his last wish?

“Ruined our chance, Dreghor?” said Hughn, trying his best to give his voice a light, conversational tone. “Certainly not. I have always been a loyal servant of Cyure and I remain one even now.”

The High Lord stooped to retrieve the obsidian blade from the floor.

“Our chance is not ruined – only delayed – perhaps by a year, perhaps by somewhat more. True, there is now the chance that Rokey will somehow discover the secret of his power one day and attempt to use it against Our God. I regret that possibility, but I do not regret what I did. Even as a servant of Cyure, I still have a soul, Dreghor. Were you in my place, staring into that elf-boy's lost, desperate eyes, you might well have done the same thing.”

The High Priest spat contemptuously.

“Hmm, well perhaps not,” said Hugh. “Be that as it may, I had to follow my own conscience. Besides, as I said, our time frame has only been altered by the slightest of degrees.”

Dreggor’s breathing was becoming labored, and Hugh could sense that the man had only a short time left to live.

Enough dawdling, he scolded himself. Get on with it.

High Lord Hugh sighed deeply.

“Wake up, Dreggor!” he said, nudging the High Priest with his foot. “Don’t die just yet. You must hang on long enough to see this. Under the circumstances, it really is the very least I can do.”

* * *

Castle Moribar was crawling with armed brothers and troll guards. Dressed in their black robes, the four companions were able to get past them, but as they approached the vicinity of the north side door, they overheard a guard gruffly inform one insistent brother that no one was allowed to leave the premises until every square inch of the castle – as well as every man and woman in it – had been thoroughly searched and inspected. Flaskamper peeked around the corner and saw that even this side door was being watched by half a dozen heavily armed trolls. He knew that the main entrance would be even worse, and all the windows that they came across were heavily barred. They were trapped. Not only that, but the fact that Flaskamper and Fia had to nearly carry Rokey was beginning to draw strange looks from passersby. It was only a matter of time before the guards discovered their identity. They had to find a place to hide – quickly.

They ducked down a deserted corridor, trying every door. Many of the doors were locked. Others led to rooms that offered no good opportunities for concealment. Finally they came upon a door that led down a long narrow flight of wooden steps.

“We may as well give this a try,” said Flaskamper. “It might just back us into a corner, but I don’t see any other options at this point.”

Fia and Bengarr agreed and headed down the stairs as quickly and quietly as they could. Flaskamper hoisted Rokey over his shoulder and followed. At the foot of the stairs they discovered a series of chambers, dimly lit by more of the strange crystal torches. There were at least a dozen interconnected rooms, all filled with hundreds of sacks, boxes and barrels. It seemed they had stumbled on the castle’s storage cellars.

“Well we couldn’t have asked for a better place to hide,” Flaskamper whispered to his friends, “although they’re bound to search down here sooner or later.”

“Let’s hope it’s later,” said Fia, “and let’s hope that by then we’ve managed to come up with a plan.”

They chose a room in the center, with numerous places to hide, as well as multiple exits. Flaskamper snatched one of the glowing stones from its scone and the four of them hunkered down behind a massive pile of grain-filled sacks. Only now did Flaskamper have a chance to really examine Rokey's condition. He eased him gently onto the floor and held the crystal close to his face, checking his eyes and his breathing. Rokey was conscious, even moaning softly, but was clearly unaware of his surroundings. His eyes would not focus. Instead they just stared blankly ahead, sometimes rolling back into his head. Flaskamper sat down and took him in his arms, cradling his beloved husband's head gently against his chest. He hadn't meant to weep again, but he could not stop himself. It seemed that they just endlessly kept jumping from one desperate situation to the next.

Would Rokey wake up before they were discovered? He wondered. Would he even have the chance to beg his husband for forgiveness before they were captured, tortured, killed?

As he clung to Rokey, he felt Fia's arms encircling him.

"We're going to make it, Flash," she assured him gently. "It seems hopeless now, I know. But we've been in "hopeless" predicaments before, remember? Somehow, some way, we've always found a way to beat the odds. Why... just look how much we've already accomplished. Could you even have dared to imagine that we would get this far when we began this journey? I know I couldn't have. We've overcome a mountain of impossible obstacles already, dear. Is there any reason to believe that we can't overcome this one too?"

"No," Flaskamper sniffed.

"Alright then," she said. "Let's try to use what time we have to rest and bring Rokey around. The four of us together will come up with something."

"Thanks Fia," said Flaskamper. "I could never have done this without you."

"Of course you could have," she said, "but it's sweet of you to say that."

She kissed him on the forehead and left him alone with Rokey, sliding over to join Bengarr, who was resting a short distance away.

"How are they?" the Nogirraalan asked, enveloping her in his arms. "Are they going to be alright?"

"I think so," said Fia. "Flaskamper is understandably near the end of his tether, but I'm certain that will change once Rokey wakes up. I don't believe there is anything that can stop the two of them once they're together again. I just hope that our luck holds out that long."

No sooner had Fia spoken those words than Bengarr sat bolt upright, his head cocked sideways.

"Bengarr, what - "

The Nogirraalan held his finger silently to his lips, a look of alarm on his face. Though he was now in human form, his more sensitive

feline ears had detected something that Fia's had not – the distinctive creaking of footsteps on the old wooden stairs.

Chapter 30

Heavy Burdens

Alrontin slept. At Lorq's insistence, the prince had finally stretched out on the cave floor to try and catch some much-needed rest. He had warned the giant that the lumen orb hovering over his shoulder would go out if he fell asleep, but Lorq had assured him that he would be fine with the elf candles and the torchlight that spilled in through the bent iron bars. Though they heard the sounds of goblins hissing and milling about in the dark chamber from which they had come, the creatures seemed loath to enter this man-made section of the caverns – either that or they were simply afraid of winding up in the same state that so many of their goblin fellows had after their last attack on the trespassers. Lorq didn't care what was keeping them out, so long as they stayed out.

As his friend slept, Lorq thought about his wife and son. He had absolute faith in Kyzee's ability to take care of both herself and little Broq, and to get to the bottom of Princess Yisa's kidnapping. Still he could not entirely stop himself from worrying. After all, was it not a husband's job to worry about his family? Kyzee would scold him though, and tell him that he should be worrying about how he and the others were going to get out of his current predicament and back to her and Broq. Well, he had done all he could for now. He had made it possible for Flaskamper and the others to get into the castle to rescue Rokey. Now all he could do was wait, conserve his strength and do what little he could to help Prince Alrontin.

That was the thing that actually worried Lorq the most at the moment, for Flaskamper's elder brother was not looking well at all. Though he was asleep, he was sweating profusely and his face and limbs were twitching and trembling uncontrollably. Lorq wondered whether or not there might have been some kind of poison in the teeth and claws of the goblins, though he himself felt no ill effects other than the pain of the wounds themselves. Could one of the creatures that had so severely wounded Alrontin have been diseased? If so, whatever the disease was had hit the prince very quickly. In any case, it was clear that they needed to get him to a healer as quickly as possible. He hoped that Flaskamper and the others were successful in their mission and would return soon.

It wasn't more than a halfmark later that the giant heard an unidentifiable flapping, clanking noise in the corridor behind him. He quickly hid himself from view and waited. A few moments later, he laughed with relief as Groog poked his head in through the bars.

"How have things been with you two?" the dragon asked.

"Well, the goblins have been keeping their distance," Lorq replied, his face growing serious again, "but I'm worried about Alrontin."

"Is he ill?" Groog asked, the concern evident in his voice.

"No," the giant said. "He's just sleeping, but he looks terrible."

"Well, hopefully I'll soon have you through this gate and out of there," Groog said, holding out the ring of keys for Lorq to see. "That is, if one of these keys will open this door. I'm afraid we may have to wake the prince for help. I do not possess the necessary dexterity to sort through and try them, and you are obviously too large to fit through – hence our present difficulty."

"I know," Lorq said sadly. "I'm sorry."

"I did not mean to imply that you were in any way at fault, Lorq," Groog said. "Remember, it was you who made it possible for the four of us to enter the castle in the first place. Without your size and strength, we would have stood no chance at all of rescuing Rokey."

The giant smiled gratefully at Groog.

"How are they doing?" he asked the dragon. "Did you manage to find Rokey?"

"At the point that I left the others," Groog replied, "they had not yet located him. They *had*, however, learned where he had been taken. By now they may even have reached him. My instructions from Prince Flaskamper were to come back and see if I could free the two of you and then for us to find and abscond with whatever is in the guarded room just off this far right corridor. He feels strongly that, whatever is in that room, it would be well worth our efforts to try and obtain it. He was also most clear that we are not to spend time trying to locate them afterwards. Given the number of brothers, guards and other unfriendly entities roaming the halls, it really is the most sensible course of action."

"That may be true," said Lorq, "but I don't know how Alrontin is going to feel about it."

Lorq had some difficulty waking him, but once the Prince finally did come around, he was immediately on his feet and eager to proceed, despite the obvious pain he was in. He scowled when he heard Groog's report and instructions.

"We'll see about that," said the Prince. "First let's get out of here and investigate that guarded room. I must admit, I'm intrigued."

He squeezed through the opening in the bars and summoned a lumen orb for more light. There was no keyhole visible anywhere. Alrontin suspected that it had been hidden by a concealment spell. It was only by running his fingers carefully over the stone wall that he at last discovered the small hole. From that point, it was simply a matter of trying each of the dozens of odd keys to find which, if any, would unlock the iron door. Several frustrating minmarks passed, during which they all began to fear that the right key might not be on this ring at all. At last, though, a small, nondescript black key turned in the lock, and the iron door swung outward. All three companions heaved a great sigh of relief, after which Lorq and Alrontin gathered their packs and prepared to depart. The companions decided to close and lock the iron door again to make it appear as normal as possible. Lorq offered to try and bend the bars back to their original position, but Alrontin shook his head.

"Knowing the effort and length of time it took for you to bend them in the first place," he said, "I would sooner you conserve your strength for any potential conflicts that may lie ahead. I anticipate that our escape from here will be no simple matter. An elf, a giant and a dragon are likely to be somewhat conspicuous – even in a huge castle such as this."

"I share your belief, Prince Alrontin," said Groog. "But I've been pondering the matter a bit, and I think I have a plan that will at least help us to blend in – at least a little."

As the dragon led them quietly down the hall with the crystal torches, into the alcove and up the stone stairs, he revealed what he and the others had learned the first time down this passageway.

"The rooms along this corridor are sleeping quarters," Groog explained. "I suggest we duck into one and find you a disguise, Prince Alrontin, as your brother and the others did previously."

"Is that likely to help much?" Alrontin asked skeptically. "I mean, people are still likely to look askance at me walking down the hall with a giant and a dragon, right?"

"Your point is well taken," said Groog, as they ducked into one of the unoccupied rooms. "However, *I* have a method of concealing myself from view, so it is just possible that the sight of a black-robed member of the Order, accompanied only by a giant, may not rouse the

same level of suspicion. I admit that it is still a gamble, but I can come up with no better plan under these circumstances.”

“Nor can I,” said Alrontin, “unless Lorq has an ability to turn invisible that he has not yet shared with us.”

He looked at Lorq, who shook his head with a rueful smile.

“I thought not,” said Alrontin, gingerly pulling on the black robe he had just taken from the wardrobe closet over his sore, battered body. “In that case, just try and look as menacing as possible. By the way, Groog, what did the others do about this?”

Alrontin indicated the bulge resulting from the pack on his back. Groog explained that Flaskamper and the others had reluctantly chosen to abandon their packs in order to better blend in. Alrontin decided that, for the time being, he would hang onto his despite the way it looked.

“All right, Groog,” he said, “now what is this method of concealment that you – ”

“Before he could finish his sentence, Groog had shrunk down once more to his tiny form. The prince laughed and Lorq smiled broadly.

“Yes, yes I know,” the dragon said curtly, “both very cute and very amusing. Now if you would be so kind as to hold the pocket of your robe open, Prince Alrontin.”

Alrontin found and held the pocket open wide. Groog flew in, and then peered out over the top.

“Very well,” he said. “Now we had better come up with some plan before we begin making our way to the guarded room. There is no convenient place to conceal ourselves nearby so we had best be prepared for action when we get there.”

“The way you’ve described the situation, Groog” said Alrontin, “I can see no way to either sneak around or distract the two guards. I think the only way to go is to use the direct approach. How well-traveled is that part of the castle?”

“We encountered no one else in that particular area,” Groog replied.

“Good,” said the prince. “Hopefully the key to that door is also on our ring, but there’s always the chance we’ll have to attack it with brute force. All right, everyone ready?”

They left the safety of the sleeping quarters and began walking down the corridor with as much confidence as they could muster. Thanks to the dragon’s impeccable sense of direction, they were able to take the shortest possible route to the guarded room, passing only a few other people on their way there. The robed man and the glowering giant received one or two furtive glances, but Alrontin suspected that no one would think it unusual enough to report. It was his experience that in a society where most people were accustomed to doing as they were told and keeping their mouths shut, it would take a considerably odd or disruptive occurrence to goad someone into

speaking up. As long as they continued to look confident and self-assured, the prince was fairly certain that their anonymity would be sustained, at least among those with little or no authority. The risk was in meeting up with someone of higher rank or status who would have no compunction about asking them their business. All the trio could do was move along swiftly and hope that such an encounter did not occur.

“Stop here,” Groog instructed. “Around this next corner is the hallway leading to the room we want.” Despite the tense situation, Lorq could not help but find it comical that the dragon’s silent instructions were coming to them in hushed tones. His amusement lay in the fact that only those to whom the dragon chose to speak (or rather to think) could hear his voice, so even if the dragon were to scream his tiny head off, no one except Alrontin and himself would know that he had spoken at all.

“All right you two,” Alrontin said, his own voice muted out of necessity rather than affectation, “let’s get this done quickly and efficiently as possible. Lorq, you have the keys?”

“Right here,” said Lorq, holding up the ring.

“Good,” Alrontin replied. “Well, here goes.”

Groog ducked down out of sight in the pocket of the prince’s borrowed robe and Alrontin put the cowl up over his head to hide his pointed ears. Then he and Lorq each took a deep breath and boldly rounded the corner. The two trolls on guard duty stiffened at their approach, but neither reached for their weapons. So far, so good.

“Stand aside!” Alrontin commanded. “We have official business in this room. You...give me the key.”

Lorq feigned confusion.

“I don’t know which key it is, uh, My Lord,” he stammered.

“Must I do everything myself,” Alrontin lamented. “Give me those. Now, all of you, get out of my way!”

Alrontin took the keys from Lorq and began to try them – one by one – in the door lock. The two guards looked at each other in surprise, clearly uncertain how to respond. Finally one shrugged his shoulders and the two of them backed away. As Alrontin continued to hunt for the key, Lorq quietly positioned himself behind the two trolls. Luck remained on the side of the would-be burglars: the correct key clicked open the lock in just under a minmark. As the heavy wooden door swung silently inward, Alrontin turned and nodded at Lorq. In the blink of an eye, the giant took hold of the two trolls’ heads and brought them together with a resounding crack. Despite the fact that they were both wearing helmets, the two fell like a pair of stones. Lorq grabbed them by their tunics and dragged them into the dark room behind Alrontin. The prince gently pushed the door shut and summoned a lumen orb. The light spirit promptly materialized, though its rather dim glow made it clear that Prince Alrontin’s magical

energy was once again on the wane. This was hardly a surprise to his two companions, given his weakened physical state, but they also began to wonder now if there wasn't something more afflicting the prince than just his battle wounds.

The room was bare, except for a large rectangular wooden table and half a dozen chairs. On top of the table sat a midsized metal chest, its lid latched down and secured by a heavy iron lock. When Alrontin examined the lock to try and determine if one of their keys would fit it, he was surprised to discover that it had no keyhole at all.

"What kind of bloody lock is this?" he asked of no one in particular.

"My guess would be a magical one," said Groog. "It is probably opened by a particular incantation."

"Damn!" the prince exclaimed. "Can we force it, do you think?"

"I would advise against it," said the dragon. "You might inadvertently trigger a counter spell. Better I should think to try and take the entire box intact."

Alrontin bent down and attempted to lift the box, but it was far too heavy. He stepped back and invited Lorq to give it a go. With considerable difficulty, the giant managed to pick the box up and place it on his shoulder.

"I don't know how long I'll be able to carry it," said Lorq. "It's heavier than I would have imagined anything this size could be."

"No doubt another of the box's magical properties," Groog opined. "I would not be surprised if it does not grow progressively more burdensome the farther we attempt to take it."

"Great," Alrontin replied. "Well, do the best you can, Lorq. You're the only one who stands any chance of getting the thing out of Moribar. Hopefully Commander Cinnador brought a team of mages along with him. It wasn't something we discussed, but I know how thorough he likes to be. With any luck, they can break the spell before we have to transport the box back to Elfwood."

If Cinnador is even there, he thought. If we can even make it out of here alive.

Alrontin chided himself for such negative thinking. Not only was such an attitude bad for him, it was one good way to get them all killed. Fatigue was sinking in, though – a heavy, bone-weariness that affected not only his body, but also his thoughts and emotions. The deep wound to his belly was extremely painful. In addition, the pull of the battleroot craving was growing stronger – ever stronger – tempered less and less by the rembis leaves, which were now nearly gone anyway. All these things combined to produce a sense of deep despair and hopelessness, a feeling that was completely out of character for the normally optimistic prince. He was trying his best to hide from his two companions the anguish he felt, but the simple fact was that he had ceased to believe he would ever see Elfwood again. Nonetheless,

he *did* still hope to lead his companions out of Moribar and deliver them to the safety of Cinnador's Elf Guard regiment. He also trusted that if it were even remotely possible, his brother would succeed in doing the same. After that, he could let go, and join the Goddess Secta in her kingdom beyond the moon. Oh, how he would welcome that release! While the thought of leaving his wife and children behind pained him greatly, he could not help but long for an end to this pain and torment. Soon – soon, but not yet. There was work still to be done – others whose lives depended on him. Somewhere, he must find the courage to endure – for just a little longer.

"All right," he told the others, his calm voice belying his true feelings, "let's go find a way out of here."

As they were about to open the door, however, they heard footsteps coming down the hallway beyond. They had not thought to lock the door behind them, but it was too late now.

"Lorq, the door," Alrontin ordered. Lorq grabbed the latch and leaned his body against the door.

"Where are the trolls who are supposed to be on guard here?" came a male voice from the other side of the door. A moment later, a hand tested the latch, but Lorq held it fast.

"I don't know," said another man. "Damned ugly beasts. Not a one of them smart enough to buckle his own boots."

"Still, they usually at least stay where they're put," said the first man. "Keep watch while I fetch the captain of the watch."

Just then they heard more footsteps rushing frantically towards them.

"Brothers!" a third man cried. "We are under attack! An army is approaching the Bridge of Skulls!"

"Under attack? By whom? Who told you this?"

"I overheard Frachis telling High Lord Hughhn when he was on his way to the Ritual Room," The man explained. "I was just heading to the cathedral myself, but Frachis ordered me to pass the word along to anyone I encountered. Anyone not participating in the ceremony is to report to the Sergeant at Arms for assignments immediately."

"Well, I suppose that explains the absence of the door guards," said the first man. "We'd best get on to the Sergeant at Arms."

The men hurried back down the corridor. Behind the door, the three companions breathed a sigh of relief.

"Under attack," said Alrontin. "That means Cinnador has arrived. If we hurry, we may be able to get out in the confusion."

"The main entrance likely faces southeast, toward the Bridge of Skulls," Groog explained. "However, that is also the entrance that will be most closely guarded. I suggest we attempt to follow the perimeter of the castle and look for a way out that is less heavily traversed."

After checking to see that the corridor was clear, Alrontin dismissed the lumen orb and the trio quickly exited the room, locking

the door behind them to keep the troll guards from sounding the alarm as soon as they awoke. They found few others about and assumed that by now everyone had gone either to the cathedral or to the Armsman for an assignment. The two or three people they passed were in far too much of a hurry to take any notice of Alrontin and Lorq.

The plan to follow the castle's perimeter to find an exit proved considerably more difficult than they had imagined. The structure of Castle Moribar was more like a labyrinth than any ordinary building, rife with blind corridors and passageways that doubled back on one another. Alrontin knew from experience that fortifications were often designed this way to confuse an invading enemy, but never before had the prince encountered a building plan of such complexity. Despite Groog's uncanny sense of direction, the three lost their way repeatedly and were frequently forced to retrace their steps in order to get back on track again. For nearly a halfmark, by Alrontin's estimation, they searched for a way out, only to be continually frustrated in their attempts. Then, without warning, squads of troll guards began to appear throughout the halls. One passed loudly through an adjacent passageway and the companions narrowly missed running headlong into a second. When they heard yet another approaching them from behind, they were forced to quickly take cover in a small storage room to avoid being caught. Unfortunately, instead of marching past the room, the troll squadron came to a halt only a few feet from their hiding place. A moment later, another group joined them.

"Our orders are to fan out and cover every corridor," one troll barked. "Three other units are sweeping the castle from top to bottom."

"Do we have a description of the intruders?" asked another.

"Only that there are three of them, dressed in the black robes of the Order," the first replied. "We are to stop everyone we encounter, regardless of dress or rank, and demand today's watchword. Anyone unable to give it is to be detained. Anyone offering resistance is to be executed."

Alrontin listened, his heart sinking, as the second troll gave the rest of the guards their orders, splitting them into pairs and assigning them each a particular corridor. There was no escape for them now. They had missed their chance at freedom.

"They can't be looking for us," Lorq whispered, "can they?"

"No," Alrontin replied softly. "If the guards we locked up had raised the alarm already, they would only be looking for two of us. I'm certain that neither guard saw Groog hiding in my pocket. Besides, if it were us they are looking for, they certainly would have passed the word along that one of the intruders is a giant. It must be Flaskamper, Fia and Bengarr that they're looking for. I suppose it's a good sign – they haven't been caught yet."

"But only three," said Lorq. "That means they don't have Rokey with them, either."

"True, at least not as far as the guards know," Alrontin answered, "but I know from experience how garbled information can become as it's passed down through the ranks, so I wouldn't put too much stock in what we've heard."

"What are we going to do now?" Lorq asked.

"I'm afraid I have no brilliant ideas at the moment," whispered the prince. "What about you, Groog?"

"I wish I could tell you that I've thought of some way out of this predicament," the dragon replied, "but at the moment, I am as confounded as the two of you."

Alrontin sighed.

"Well then," he told them, "I guess we should hunker down for the time being, wait and hope that some other opportunity arises before someone decides to search this room."

Lorq agreed with his two friends that this really was their only option. That being the case, he saw no point in worrying them with the fact that, just as Groog had predicted, the metal box resting on his shoulder was growing continuously heavier. Unfortunately, it was not only distance that made the box's weight increase – but also time. All feeling had disappeared from the giant's arm, and he realized that it was far too late to set the box down gently or quietly. If they didn't get out of there soon, it would eventually crush his shoulder and go crashing to the floor, giving them away to their enemies. There was nothing Lorq could do about it though, except to try and keep his mind off the mounting pain, and hope that an opportunity for escape would arrive soon.

Chapter 31

Thoughts Entwined

“**W**hat in the world is she *doing* down here?” Fia whispered. Bengarr shook his head, puzzled. “She cannot be more than fourteen or fifteen,” he murmured.

They had crept around to the edge of the stack of grain bags behind which they had all, including the still unconscious Rokey, been hiding. Now they watched in perplexed silence as a young girl descended the creaky staircase. She was a pretty thing, with large soulful eyes and a cap on her head that barely contained a spillage of curly blonde hair. She wore a long, dark green dress of heavy homespun cotton. It had obviously seen better days, for the hem was ragged and the fabric had nearly worn through at the elbows. The girl wandered around aimlessly for a few moments, then turned in the direction of the grain sacks... and curtsied!

Had she seen them? For a moment, Fia and Bengarr tensed, ready to spring out and take the girl captive should she try to leave. But then she began to hum a little tune and, a tik later, started to dance. Fia smiled at Bengarr. The Nogirraalan continued to stare at the girl, a bemused look on his face. The girl danced closer to where the four of them were hidden, but she was clearly quite unaware of their presence. That is, until –

No doubt it was the dust being disturbed by the girl’s dance that caused it. Before he could catch himself, Bengarr sneezed loudly. The girl froze in mid-twirl, a look of terror spreading over her face. Fia sighed and slowly stood up from behind the sacks of grain.

"It's all right," she said gently to the girl. "We mean you no harm."

The girl did not move, but her eyes widened a bit more as she stared at Fia.

"Who's we?" the girl asked.

Fia motioned to Bengarr, who also stood. The girl gasped. The cowl of Bengarr's robe was pulled back, revealing his hair, long and wild, and an even more fiery red than Fia's.

"Don't worry," Fia said, smiling and putting her hand on his arm. "He's not nearly as fierce as he looks."

This of course was a complete and utter falsehood – Bengarr was every bit as fierce as he looked – but the lie produced the desired effect; the girl's shoulders seemed to relax ever so slightly, though she was still obviously frightened.

"You're the reason they're all scrambling around up there like madmen," the girl said matter-of-factly.

"I suppose we are," said Fia, not wanting to give the girl any more information than she had to.

"They'll look down here eventually, you know," she said. "They're combing the whole castle from top to bottom. It's only a matter of time before they catch you."

Fia and Bengarr exchanged a glance.

"Just how much time would that be, do you think?" Fia inquired.

The girl shrugged.

"There's an awful lot of them up there," she said, "but the castle is huge – and very confusing. I still get lost all the time. Might be a mark or more before they get down this far, though I wouldn't want to say for sure."

Fia hazarded a step forward.

"My name is Fia," she said. "This is Bengarr. What's your name?"

"Sedrine," said the girl. She had not moved when Fia stepped forward, but she still looked poised to run at any moment.

"That's a lovely name," said Fia, "but not one I recognize. Is your family from this area?"

Fia hoped that the small talk would relax the girl and take her mind off fleeing. The last thing they wanted was a loud struggle – or worse – an injured young girl.

"We came from Felltree," Sedrine replied. "Not too far from here."

"You came with your parents?" Fia guessed. Sedrine nodded.

"Father and mother both joined the Order after – after my brother died," she said, pain showing momentarily in her wide eyes.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Sedrine" Fia said with genuine sympathy. "How did it happen?"

Sedrine hesitated. For a moment, Fia was afraid that she had pushed too hard, but then the girl shut her eyes tightly, clearly trying not to cry, and heaved a ragged sigh. There was no fear left now, only sadness. Fia's uncanny charm had worked its magic again.

“He was poaching,” Sedrine said softly. “At least, that’s what the gamekeeper said. I suppose he probably was. Sometimes that was the only way we could eat, and besides, there’s hundreds of partridges in Lord Vargen’s fields. He would never have missed a few. But the gamekeeper didn’t care about that. He just shot Delly with his crossbow, just like he was a dog.”

A tear spilled down the girl’s cheek, and she sniffed.

“How *awful*,” said Fia. “It must have broken your parents’ hearts.”

“They couldn’t accept it,” Sedrine said. “They just kept getting more and more angry – and bitter. They wanted someone punished for Delly’s death, but of course, no one ever was.”

Behind her, Fia heard Bengarr softly clear his throat, a quiet reminder that valuable time was slipping away. Without looking back, Fia nodded to indicate that she had heard him. Although she knew they needed to formulate a plan, and soon, she felt certain that it would be well worth the time and effort if they could somehow get Sedrine on their side instead of having to bind and gag her – or worse.

“The Order came to your aid?” Fia asked.

Sedrine nodded.

“One of the men who father knew was gerent of the Felltree chapter,” she explained. “He used to come over in the evenings and talk about the Order – about their goal to bring justice to all Firma, not just those who could afford it. It was just the sort of thing that father and mother needed to hear at the time.”

“And what about you?” Fia asked. She had worked her way gradually across the room and sat down on a large trunk. Bengarr shook his head and sat down on the floor, keeping his eyes and ears open for any further activity at the top of the stairs.

“I wasn’t so sure,” Sedrine admitted, taking a seat next to Fia. “I mean, he was always very nice to me – to all of us – but something about it all just seemed weird to me. Then when my parents decided not only to join the Order, but to come here to work in Moribar, I just about died. I didn’t want to come here, to give up my friends and everything, but they wouldn’t even discuss it. I think they really just wanted to get away from Felltree, to start life over again. It wasn’t as though we had anything there to leave behind. Still – ”

“How long ago did you and your parents come here?” Fia inquired.

“Only about six months ago,” Sedrine answered. “Though sometimes it seems like longer. I mean, it’s nice enough I suppose. I’ve made some friends, and father and mother were both given work right away, and the place where we’re living is much nicer than the depressing shack we lived in before. Even though we’re sharing with several other families, we’ve got more space to ourselves than we ever had in Felltree.”

As Sedrine chattered on, Fia wondered whether this girl had had anyone at all to talk to in these past six months. Her guess was no. It

was almost as if the poor thing kept talking in order to keep herself from thinking too much, or perhaps it was just to keep her fears at bay.

“So what is it that still bothers you?” Fia asked.

Sedrine suddenly looked nervous, glancing first at Fia, then over at Bengarr. It was only then that Fia remembered that they were still wearing their borrowed black robes. She hesitated, uncertain whether it would be better to tell the girl the truth or allow her to go on believing that they were members of the Order. Finally she decided to stick with the truth, a strategy that had always served her well in the past.

“It’s all right,” she told Sedrine. “We’re not really members of the Order. We, uh, we sort of borrowed these robes – to help us get around undetected.”

Sedrine gazed at Fia with something akin to awe.

“You mean – you’re spies?” she asked. Her eyes widened, but it wasn’t fear Fia detected now. It was more like – admiration. Fia decided to make the most of it.

“Well,” she said in a conspiratorial tone, “we’re not spies exactly, but we are here on an important mission. I can’t go into the details, but I *can* tell you that there are certain things that the Order is striving to achieve – goals that aren’t quite so noble as ensuring justice for all of Firma. It is our job to prevent them from accomplishing those goals.”

“I knew it! I knew there was something rotten going on here,” said the girl. “I mean, everyone has been just as nice as can be, but – I don’t know. I can’t really explain it. Do you ever just have vague, unsettling ‘feelings’ sometimes? You don’t have any reason for them, but you just feel them?”

Fia nodded.

“Well it’s been that way for me ever since I got here,” Sedrine explained. “Everything has been wonderful, perfect even. There’s absolutely nothing I can complain about – and yet, I just know there’s something not right about this place. Hah! Try explaining that one to your parents.”

Sedrine started as Flaskamper came around the corner. He took in the scene in front of him and shot Fia a puzzled look.

“It’s all right,” she said to both of them. “Sedrine, this is Flaskamper. He’s with us. How is Rokey, dear? Any sign that he’s coming round?”

The elf shook his head sadly.

“I’m kicking myself for having left our packs behind without salvaging the medicine bag,” he said. “There were some dried Fendrim stalks in it that might have done the trick. I’m so stupid sometimes.”

“Do not blame yourself, Elf Brother,” said Bengarr. “It is often hard to think clearly in times of stress.”

"I – I don't know exactly what it is you're looking for," Sedrine said bashfully, "but there's a whole big section of dried plants and flowers just a couple of chambers back. Maybe – maybe you can find what you need there."

Flaskamper's eyes brightened hopefully.

"I don't know who you are, girl," he said, "but I think I love you." He favored her with his most engaging smile. "Do you suppose you could show me where it is?"

Clearly charmed by the handsome elf, the girl smiled back and slid down off the chest.

"Sure, it's this way," she told him, gesturing toward the chambers beyond.

As the two headed off, Bengarr went to Fia and placed his hands affectionately on her shoulders.

"I was beginning to wonder if you had lost your mind," said the Nogirraalan. "Forgive me for not trusting your instincts."

"There's nothing to forgive," said Fia, smiling up at him. "I had no idea she was going to be of any use to us. I just hoped to avoid having to harm her."

"You have an amazing way with people," he told her. "I should have known, after the way you captivated me."

Fia laughed.

"I seem to remember plenty of mutual *captivating* going on," she assured him, and then stood up. "Come on, let's go check on Rokey."

Rokey was still unconscious. Fia and Bengarr sat down beside him and waited. A short while later, Flaskamper and Sedrine returned. In his hands, the elf carried some bandages, a jar of something and several long, green stalks.

"Fendrim," he said, holding up his bounty. "They give off a powerful smell when broken and inhaling the fumes can counteract certain drugs – even some spells of confusion. Hopefully it will reverse whatever it was they gave Rokey."

Flaskamper handed all the other supplies to Fia, and then knelt down next to Rokey, running his fingers tenderly through his black hair.

"You'd better all stand back," he warned. "This is strong stuff."

Bengarr and Fia got up and went to stand with Sedrine a few paces away.

"Who is that?" Sedrine whispered to Fia.

"That's Rokey," Fia said, "Flaskamper's husband."

"Husband?" she said, trying to hide her disappointment. "You mean he's a –"

"I'm afraid so, dear," Fia said with a smile. "Don't feel too bad, though. Women are always falling in love with him."

"Did you?" the girl asked.

"No," Fia replied, laughing. "Flaskamper has always been more of a younger brother for me. But I certainly can see what women see in him – men too, for that matter. He's a natural charmer."

"He certainly is," Sedrine said with a sigh.

Flaskamper snapped two of the Fendrim stalks in half and a pungent smell immediately filled the room. He gently picked up Rokey's head and held the stalks under his nose. For a moment, nothing happened. Then, to everyone's great relief, Rokey began to cough violently. Flaskamper helped Rokey sit up, patting him gently on the back and occasionally giving him a whiff of the Fendrim stalks.

"It's all right," Flaskamper said. "You're alright. Just keep taking deep breaths."

Rokey was dazed – his eyes unable to focus. The whole room seemed to be spinning, and it was all he could do to keep from throwing up. Slowly, though, the world around him began to clear. He rubbed his watery eyes, then turned his head and saw –

"Flash?" *Was he awake? Was this real?*

"I'm here, *chatka*," the elf said, then froze. He didn't know how to even begin saying all the things he needed to say. How would Rokey react to him now?

He wasn't given long to worry though, for Rokey threw his arms around him immediately. Flaskamper returned the embrace and the two began sobbing in one another's arms. They held on so tightly that it looked to the others as though they might break each other's ribs.

"I love you, Flash," Rokey whispered. "I love you so much. Can you ever forgive me for all those terrible things I did?"

"You?" Flaskamper replied. "You didn't do anything, *chatka*. It was all my fault."

"I did," Rokey insisted. "I acted like a complete idiot. I was too stupid and selfish to see how unhappy you were – even though you kept trying to tell me."

"I was the selfish one," Flaskamper argued. "I was jealous of how powerful and important you were. I should have been proud of you – of the work you were doing."

It was uncertain just how long the two might have gone on, oblivious to everything and everyone around them, had Fia not stepped over and tapped them gently on the shoulders.

"Fia!" Rokey exclaimed, taking hold of her hand. "I didn't know you were here too." He paused to take in his surroundings for the first time. "Come to think of it...where is here? I remember eating dinner in my cell, then lying down because I felt funny. Then next thing I remember is choking on that strong smell...and then waking here with Flash. What's happened? Where are we?"

"We are still in Castle Moribar," Fia answered, "and I'm afraid we're also still in something of a mess."

Fia beckoned Bengarr and Sedrine over and introduced them to Rokey. Afterwards, with Flaskamper's help, she hurriedly explained about the rescue mission, the events in the Ritual Room, and how they had come to wind up in the storage cellars.

"He's my uncle," said Rokey, responding to Flaskamper's observation about the strong resemblance between him and the man in the mask. Abruptly, Rokey shut his eyes and tears began to trickle down his face again. "He's dead."

"No, *chatka*," said Flaskamper. "He was alive and well when we left him. Why would you think that?"

"I don't know how to explain it," said Rokey, "but I can feel him, or rather, his absence. I didn't even realize he was there, but now that he's gone I... just know."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," said Fia. "He came so close to taking you from us, but he obviously cared for you, or he would not have done what he did."

"All I know is that I have you back because of him," said Flaskamper, "and I'll always be in his debt for that. Now it's our job to find a way out of here."

"I think I might have a way," said Rokey, "that is, if my skills are up to it, and if there's enough time."

Rokey told them about No-When, and how he was certain that the Order had used the same method to abduct him that he had been trying to learn and master these past several months.

"That's incredible!" Flaskamper exclaimed. "Do you think you can do it, under pressure like this I mean?"

"I won't know until I try," said Rokey. "But I hope so. It seems to be our only chance of escape."

"I sure hope Ronti and Lorq and Groog made it out of here before this whole place exploded with guards," said the elf.

"Who is Groog?" Rokey asked.

"Groog is a Bronze Dragon," Flaskamper explained. "The skull of this God of theirs, the Order of the Bone's I mean, had been in the keeping of the dragons for centuries. When the Order stole it, they came to the elves for help. Turns out he's been far more help to us than we've been to him. Why, if it weren't for Groog's ability to read minds, or whatever it is he does to communicate, we might have wound up being a snack for Bengarr and his pride."

"Bengarr and his – pride?" Rokey asked in confusion.

"Yes, he's a firecat," Flaskamper explained, "a shapeshifter. All the Nogirraalans are. His sister Kachia was with us too, but she was killed by the goblins in the Gleaming Caverns."

Rokey shook his head and took a deep breath.

"When this is all over," he said, "I'm going to need you to explain this all to me bit by bit."

"I will," said Flaskamper. "I know it must be an awful lot for you to take in so suddenly."

Rokey looked up at Bengarr.

"I'm sorry for your loss, sir," he said. "I shall never be able to make up for your sister's death but, provided we do escape, I shall always be in your debt, as well as hers."

"Kachia died bravely," Bengarr replied. "She will be honored and remembered by my people. No debt exists, either to me or to her. We did what we did for the good of Firma. As you continue to serve our land, so you shall repay us all."

"I appreciate your sacrifices nonetheless," said Rokey, "and I *shall* continue to serve Firma to the best of my ability so long as I live. Now if I could only think..."

Suddenly Rokey's eyes grew wide as an idea struck him.

"Flash, you said that the dragon communicates without speaking... using just his thoughts?" Rokey asked.

Flaskamper nodded.

"It's a little freakish until you get used to it," said the elf, "but it certainly does come in handy at times. Why?"

"Because that's another one of the things I've been practicing in my sessions with Ellispon," Rokey replied. "There's a creature in No-When, called a thryzpik, who communicates in that same way. I've been working on boosting the mental signal so that we can communicate over longer distances. Provided this fellow, Groog, hasn't got some sort of mental wall up, it might be possible for me to communicate with him...to find out whether they're free or still trapped in the castle. I just need to focus my attention. Hopefully whatever they drugged me with won't interfere too much with my concentration."

"Is there any way I can help?" Flaskamper asked.

"There might be," said Rokey. "I'm still feeling pretty weak. If you sit here with me and hold onto my hands, I may be able to borrow your magical energy to help me out – at least until I'm able to tap into the nearest magical articulation."

"As usual, I have no idea what you just said," said Flaskamper, smiling, "but I'm more than happy to hold hands with you anytime, *chatka*."

Rokey smiled back at his love. It made him feel so good, being called *chatka*. He had been all but certain that he would never hear that word again. The others backed away to give them room. Rokey took hold of Flaskamper's hands and began to concentrate.

"Flash, try to form a picture of Groog in your mind," Rokey instructed, "and concentrate on his name. That might help me to open a pathway, if it's at all possible that is."

"All right," said Flaskamper, "Got it."

Groog.

Rokey cast his thoughts out over the ether, focusing all the attention he could muster. To his surprise, he soon began to see a faint outline of an image – clearly a dragon – though much smaller than he would have imagined. Was he getting this image from Flaskamper’s mind? Was that possible? Rather than question it, he took the image into his own mind and applied the dragon’s name to it, sending out the signal again – over and over – like the beat of a heart.

Groog. Groog...

* * *

...Groog. Groog.

It took some time for Groog to notice the weak message, for he was concentrating intensely on coming up with some means of escaping the storage room in which he and his two companions had been trapped for nearly a mark now. When he did finally realize that it was not his heartbeat he was listening to, but his name, he at first feared that it was some kind of enemy trick – some means by which they were attempting to locate them. But no, that couldn’t be it. No one except the rescue party and the Elf King knew he was there. Even his own weyr did not know of his exact whereabouts. He had not sent them a message because security at Hreechkree had already been so badly compromised; he had not wanted to risk tipping their hand to anyone about the rescue plans. No, it had to be someone friendly.

Groog closed his eyes and focused on the incoming message. It was only his name, repeated over and over again. In theory, this was not something that humans could do, nor elves either. Only dragons and a few other highly magical creatures could purposefully send out non-verbal communications. And yet there it was. The dragon decided to try taking it to the next step – opening up a direct communication with whoever it was. This was risky, and left the dragon’s own mind vulnerable to attack, but given the predicament they were currently in, he felt it well worth the risk. He took a deep breath and opened his mind.

“Hello? Who’s there?” Groog projected.

Receiving no reply (except more repetition of his name), he turned up the energy level and tried again.

“Hello! Who’s there?”

This time the dragon clearly detected great excitement on the other end. The pathway, though weak, was now open.

“I am Rokey,” came the response. *“Are you the dragon called Groog?”*

“Yes Rokey, it is I,” Groog projected excitedly. *“Are you all right? Are Flaskamper and the others with you?”*

"Yes, *we are all here, and all well, for the moment at least,*" came Rokey's reply. "*Were you and Lorq and Alrontin able to get out of the castle?*"

"*Sadly no,*" Groog replied. "*We are trapped in a small storage room on the main floor of the castle. There are guards everywhere. I'm afraid the situation is presently quite grim for us.*"

The signal went quiet for a few tiks, then Groog could feel Rokey's mind pick it up again.

"*Sedrine says that there's only one such room on the main floor,*" Rokey said, "*and it's quite near the door leading to where we are.*"

Rokey projected the precise route from the storage closet to the cellars.

"*Sedrine? Who is Sedrine?*" Groog asked. "*More importantly, have the rest of you come up with some way of escaping the castle?*"

There was another pause.

"*Fia assures me that Sedrine is a friend,*" Rokey told Groog a moment later. "*As to our way out, I'll be working on that shortly. Once I start on that process though, I won't be able to communicate with you at the same time.*"

Rokey shot the dragon a brief mental picture of the doorway he planned to open. Groog thought the whole notion impossible, and yet ten minmarks ago, he would have sworn that communication with a human in this fashion was also impossible. Besides, it was their only option as far as he could see.

"*All right,*" Groog said, "*I shall tell the others and we'll make a run for it when the time comes, but how will we know when that time is?*"

"*Once the doorway is stable,*" Rokey responded, "*I'll send you a loud whistle. That will take far less energy than words. As soon as you hear that whistle – run for the cellars. I'll keep the door open for as long as I possibly can, but the amount of energy required to sustain it is enormous, so I don't know precisely how long that will be.*"

"*Very well, young man,*" said Groog. "*Good luck to you. I shall be honored by the opportunity to greet you in person.*"

"*The honor will be entirely mine, sir,*" said Rokey. "*Farewell until then.*"

Groog bid Rokey farewell and then alerted Alrontin and Lorq to the conversation that had just taken place. For Alrontin, it was as though a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Unfortunately for Lorq, the weight on *his* shoulder was real. Nevertheless, he felt a renewed sense of energy upon hearing the good news.

"Now all we have to do is pray that Rokey can get that doorway open before the guards find us," said Alrontin, "or them."

It still seemed like long odds to the prince. They were still trapped in Castle Moribar, separated and surrounded by the enemy. He was still badly wounded and ravaged by battleroot withdrawal. Yet now, as

Alrontin set his mind to the challenges their immediate future held, he now saw something that not been there before – the faintest glimmer of hope.

Chapter 32

Flight to Freedom

Rokey wanted the kiss to go on forever, but time was short. Reluctantly, he pulled back from Flaskamper, laughing when the elf just stood there, eyes closed, puckering his lips over and over for more. Flaskamper opened his eyes and laughed too, but then grew serious.

“I’ll never let you go again, *chatka*,” he said. “I never want to feel that unbearable emptiness again.”

“You won’t have to,” said Rokey, then reached out and took Flaskamper’s hand. “Come on now – let’s get out of here and go home.

The two had gone off around a corner, just to grab a few tiks alone. Now they rejoined the rest of their companions.

“All right,” Rokey said. “Let’s give this a try.”

“Is there anything we can do to help you, Rokey?” Fia asked.

“Unfortunately not,” Rokey replied. “I’ll be tapping Flash’s magical energy again to help get me started. After that, though, it’s pretty much up to me. I suggest that the rest of you help Alrontin, Lorq and Groog in whatever way you can as they arrive. I’ll let you know when I send them the signal.”

“Have you any estimate of how long this “doorway” will remain open?” asked Bengarr.

“Once again, I’m afraid the answer is no,” Rokey answered. “In the workroom in Elfwood, I was able to keep it open for several minmarks. That, however, was under optimal conditions and not while people were trying to pass through it. In our present circumstances, there’s simply no way to tell. I’ll hold it as long as I can, of course, but needless to say, there’ll be no time to waste.”

“All right,” said Fia, “as soon as Rokey gives Groog the signal, the three of us will head for the top of the stairs to see if we can spot them. Hopefully we can take the guards by surprise and make it easier for them.”

“What about me?” asked Sedrine. “How can I help?”

Fia pondered a moment, trying to think of some way to include the girl.

“Actually you can,” she told her. “That is, if you’re able to yell loudly.”

“Can I *yell*?” the girl said, smiling. “Oh yes, that’s one thing I can certainly do.”

“Good,” said Fia. “Rokey, you let Sedrine know if you feel like you’re about to lose the doorway. Sedrine, as soon as you get that word from Rokey, you’re to come to the foot of the stairs immediately and yell for us just as loudly as you can. Got it?”

Sedrine nodded, happy to be part of the team.

“All right,” Rokey instructed. “Everyone but Flash, move back a few steps. Flash, when I let go of your hand, you go join the others all right? Here we go.”

Rokey closed his eyes and summoned his magical energy. Soon he felt the familiar surge of power. He was still feeling very weak, though, so he reached out farther, down through his own hand and into Flaskamper’s, calling once again on his husband’s energy. The surge grew stronger – not as strong as he had hoped, but enough to do the trick, he thought. Now he sent out a probe – a mental signal – trying to find the closest articulation to tap. To his surprise, he came upon one almost instantly. It was larger than the one below Elfwood, and considerably more powerful. He would have to be cautious while handling such a massive storehouse of raw magical energy.

In his mind, he pictured himself and Flash standing next to a large, golden obelisk – one that pulsed and hummed with power. This was his image of the articulation. Cautiously, he placed his hand on the glowing monolith and willed himself to open up – to receive the power of the articulation. A moment later, it came flooding in like a gigantic waterfall. Rokey barely managed to let go of Flaskamper’s hand in time to keep him from being killed by the massive jolt of energy.

As it was, the elf felt as though he had been struck by lightning. The instant that Rokey let go of his hand, he flew across the room, landing hard on the stone floor, unable to get his breath. Fia and

Bengarr rushed to help him up, and the three of them watched in fascinated horror as Rokey's entire body began to hum and crackle with energy. High Mage Ellispon and a few of the other members of the High Council had witnessed this before, but it was a new and frightening sight for Rokey's husband and friends.

Within the boundaries of his own spell scenario, Rokey continued to absorb raw energy from the obelisk until he felt it fill what he had come to think of as the boundaries of his own containment shell. One of these days, he would discover a means of breaking through it and freeing his true self. For now, though, the objective was to store up as much energy as he could hold within that shell, and then use it to fashion his door to No-When. He continued to absorb power until he could tolerate no more; then he let go of the obelisk and set to work weaving the rest of the spell.

Flaskamper and the others watched the process with undisguised awe. They had no idea what Rokey was actually doing, but it was certainly impressive. His lips and hands were moving, but no sound was coming from his mouth. Now and then, a glowing ball of energy would form in his hands, only to vanish a few moments later. After awhile, they noticed that what looked like a small black circle had appeared just in front of Rokey. As more time passed, the circle grew larger and larger, until Flaskamper estimated it to be about three feet across. At this point, it began to change, stretching and bending until it became rectangular in shape. A few minutes more passed, and Rokey continued to manipulate the object until it finally became a perfectly recognizable door – complete with hinges and latch. The only thing unusual about it at all, in fact, was that it happened to be floating in midair.

For Rokey, the creation of the door had been the easy part, that is, if any of this could be described as easy. Now came the most difficult phase – bringing No-When to the other side of the door. He closed his eyes and began to concentrate on No-When – that vast empty abyss where time and space seemed to follow different rules. He pictured the thryzpik, Zhee Saal, one of the many creatures who inhabited No-When. He also tried to look beyond, to their desired exit point. In his brief discussion with Flash and the others, they had determined that anywhere on the western side of the Bridge of Skulls would be advantageous. As Rokey had never actually been in this region of Firma, however, he had to rely on Bengarr's description of the bridge and the surrounding countryside for his own mental picture. This made things considerably more complicated, but as he did not feel confident enough in his abilities to try and navigate the abyss all the way back to Elfwood, he decided that it would have to suffice. Besides, any destination beyond the walls of Castle Moribar would be an improvement over their present situation.

When he was confident that the doorway and No-When were properly aligned, Rokey opened his eyes. Before him was the door, just as he had envisioned it. He stepped forward, turned the latch and pushed it open. Behind it was utter blackness, just as he had expected. The spell had been successful. Already, though, he could feel the weight of it bearing down on him. If he let his concentration waver, the entire spell structure would collapse. Even if he didn't, it would not be long before the pressure of keeping the doorway viable became more than he could bear. They had to move quickly.

"All right everyone," Rokey called out. "I'm going to signal the others right... now."

Flaskamper, Fia and Bengarr ran toward the stairs to assist their companions while Sedrine remained behind, ready to yell if necessary. Utilizing the one small strand of magical energy that he had left free for this purpose, Rokey sent a loud, clear whistle out to Groog. Having accomplished this one final task, he turned his full attention back to maintaining the doorway and hoped that everyone got back before it collapsed.

* * *

Groog heard the whistle clearly.

"There's the signal," he told his two companions, flying out of the pocket of Alrontin's robe. "Make ready, my friends. Remember, we have only a short distance to go."

Gathering all his strength, Alrontin opened the storage room door and strolled out, followed closely by Lorq, who was using the last of his own physical resources in order to support the heavy metal box still resting on his shoulder. The guards had been disbursed throughout the castle, and there were none in this corridor now, but they could see two of them in front of the next passageway – the very one they needed to take in order to reach the door to the cellars. Holding his head up stiffly, the elf and the giant marched straight toward the two troll guards.

"Halt!" one guard called, holding up his hand. "You must give us today's watchword in order to pass."

"Wormspine!" Alrontin called back, clearly not intending to stop. The two guards drew their swords and stepped together, blocking the corridor.

"That is incorrect brother," said the guard. "I'm afraid we must detain you."

Alrontin and Lorq suddenly stepped apart. At that same moment, the guards looked up in horror as a huge dragon swooped down at them, spewing jets of fire. The panicked guards dove aside just in time to avoid the creature's deadly talons. Groog pulled up at the last moment, and Alrontin and Lorq hurried past down the hall. Behind

them they heard the guards calling out for reinforcements. By the time they reached the next turn, six more guards were upon them. Alrontin drew his sword. Groog circled, ready to swoop down again. Though Lorq carried his staff in one hand, there was little he could do without dropping the chest. Since Flaskamper had thought it important enough to go to the trouble of taking, he would only do that if the situation became a matter of life or death. Unfortunately though, such a situation already appeared imminent. They needed to fight the four trolls who were blocking their path, while at the same time defending themselves from another four behind them. Groog dove at the ones in the rear, who hit the ground just as Alrontin engaged one of the guards preventing their advance. Planting his feet firmly in order to maintain his balance, Lorq swung his iron-tipped staff at another one. It connected, and the troll fell with a grunt, toppling the one next to him. The giant turned and saw six more guards running down an adjacent passageway. It was no use. He would have to drop the chest if they were to stand any chance of reaching their goal.

Just at that moment, though, they saw Flaskamper, Fia and Bengarr coming around the corner, sprinting toward them. Lorq decided he could hold on to the box for a little longer. A few tiks later, the three newcomers arrived and laid into the guards, cutting down two immediately, then engaging two more that had come around from the rear.

“Go!” Flaskamper told Alrontin. “We’ll hold them.”

Alrontin wasn’t about to argue. He simply didn’t have the strength. He turned and ran as fast as he could, with Lorq following closely. Groog remained behind to help fend off their assailants. One of the guards broke away from the fray and pursued the prince and the giant down the hall. Lorq heard him coming though and caught him with a blow to the head as he pursued them around the corner. Flaskamper had left the door to the cellars open, and the two of them hurried down the stairs. The old wooden steps groaned in protest under the weight of Lorq and his burden, but they held, and soon they were crossing the vast storage cavern toward Rokey and a young girl that neither of them recognized.

“Don’t stop!” Rokey commanded, pointing the way, his voice sounding hollow and distant. “Keep going right through the doorway and wait there for the rest of us.”

Alrontin and Lorq disappeared through the magical doorway, while up on the next level, Flaskamper and Fia were steadily fighting their way down the hall. Bengarr did not have sufficient space to fight in his feline form. Instead, he took up a sword from one of the fallen guards and, though he knew nothing about swordsmanship, did his best to defend himself and the others.

“Groog, go now!” Flaskamper yelled to the dragon. Groog swooped down and blew fire over the melee one more time, then flew down the

stairs, where he hovered at the bottom, ready to help slow their pursuers in case they should be following too closely. Bengarr passed him a few moments later. In another minmark, the last of their group came hurtling down. The remaining guards did not follow. They knew that there was no exit from these storage rooms, so they had decided to hang back and await reinforcements. When it became apparent that no one was coming immediately after them, Groog shrank back to his smaller size and hurried to join the others.

All of the companions had entered the doorway except Rokey and Fia. Fia sent Groog on ahead, and then took a brief moment to say good-bye to Sedrine.

“But I *want* to go with you,” Sedrine protested. “I don’t want to stay here. I hate this place.”

“I know you do,” said Fia, “but it just wouldn’t be right to take you away from your parents. Imagine how they would feel, losing first your brother, and then you.”

Sedrine hung her head.

“I suppose you’re right,” she admitted sadly.

“If I thought your life were in danger, I would never allow you to remain,” said Fia. “As things stand though, I just can’t bring myself to separate you from your parents. When the guards arrive, just tell them the truth about what happened, leaving out the help you gave to us, of course. I don’t believe they’ll harm you. In fact... Rokey, is there some way we can render Sedrine unconscious without hurting her?”

“Yes,” Rokey replied, “but only if you promise to say good-bye now and go through that door.”

“Sorry,” Fia said sheepishly. “Going now. Good-bye, dear. We’ll meet again, I’m certain of it.”

“I hope so,” Sedrine said, hugging Fia tightly.

Fia returned the embrace, and then hurried past Rokey and through the doorway. When she was gone, Rokey slowly turned his attention to Sedrine, careful not to allow his gateway spell to falter.

“Thank you for everything,” he told her. “This will only put you to sleep for a mark or so. It won’t harm you.”

“I understand,” said Sedrine. “Good luck – to all of you.”

Rokey slowly spoke one of the sleeping spells he had learned and directed its energy toward Sedrine. A few tiks later, the girl slumped to the floor, unconscious. Although Rokey, too, felt guilty about leaving her here in Moribar, he had to agree with Fia that it was best that she remain with her parents for the time being. Suddenly he felt an energy surge travel up his arm. The gateway was beginning to collapse. It no longer looked like a door; now it was nothing more than a rapidly shrinking hole. Rokey dove, disappearing through the hole just a tik before it collapsed into a puff of acrid smoke. When the squadron of guards arrived a few minmarks later, they found only an unconscious young girl and two broken stalks of Fendrim.

* * *

Rokey was completely exhausted from the doorway spell, but he knew that it was up to him to navigate No-When – to lead his brave rescuers to safety. His first action was to summon a lumen orb. The little spirit arrived immediately, and to everyone's surprise, not only could they see the actual form of the little winged creature here in No-When, it also blazed much more brightly.

"It's because they don't actually cross over from No-When to Firma when summoned," Rokey explained. "All that actually comes through is a portion of the light that they give off. That was one of my first discoveries here."

"How many times have you actually been here?" Flaskamper asked, watching in fascination as the little lumen darted back and forth around his husband's head.

"Only two other times," Rokey replied, "not counting my first accidental visit. Of course, the visits weren't very long, and I'm afraid this will be my first attempt to navigate to a different exit point. We hadn't tried that yet because of the danger."

"What danger is that?" Fia asked.

Rokey told them briefly about his first visit to No-When, about the voice, the visions it had shown him, and the threats it had made.

"Sounds like he's just a big bully to me," said Flaskamper.

"Yes, he's definitely that," said Rokey. "The problem is, he also has power here – power to pick people up and whisk them away to wherever and whenever he wants. That's why I want us to get to our destination and get out of here as soon as possible."

"Well then," said Flaskamper, "let's get at it. What do we do next?"

Rokey sighed.

"That's where the challenge comes in," he said. "Since I've never done this before, I'm going to have to kind of make this up as we go. My previous trips consisted of my going out a certain distance, then finding my way back again. I'm going to try and use the same method to get us where we want to go this time, but I'm going to need some help. I'm going to try and cast a directional spell to lead us to our exit point. Bengarr, have you actually seen the Bridge of Skulls?"

"Yes," Bengarr replied. "Several long-range hunting trips have taken me close to the bridge."

"Good," said Rokey. "I want you to concentrate on it – imagine it clearly in your mind. Alrontin, I want you to see the Elf Regiment in your mind – the commander's face, the uniforms they wear, as many details as you can. Flash, you do the same, all right? I'm going to see if I can't use these images to help me hone in on our exit point. It's not going to be as precise as it would be if I had all the visual

information from my own memories, but it'll have to do under the circumstances. All right now, here we go."

Rokey closed his eyes and tapped the powerful articulation once more, letting the raw energy surge into his body. Once he had taken enough in, he began to weave a new spell scenario. This time, however, instead of using his own mental imagery, he tried substituting the images formed in the minds of his companions. He couldn't see the images himself, only a few vague outlines, but that didn't matter. It was only important for the spell itself to see them. For this scenario, he pictured a red line on the ground, leading to a bright orange archway. If everything worked properly, the archway would lead to an exit point back on Firma that was somewhere near to their desired destination. When he had finished, Rokey opened his eyes, stretched his hands out toward the blackness in front of him, and released the spell. The group watched, fascinated, as the air around them began to crackle with energy. A few ticks later, a bright red line appeared on the ground at their feet.

"So far, so good," said Rokey. "Now we just have to follow this line to the archway."

"How far is that?" Flaskamper asked.

"I have no idea," Rokey admitted, "It shouldn't be too far off, but time and distance don't work the same in No-When, so I hesitate to offer a guess."

The seven set off, following the bright red line that stretched out in front of them. Rokey had no difficulty with the unreal surroundings, but it took the rest of them some time to grow accustomed to the fact that, though No-When appeared to be only a vast expanse of black nothingness, it was actually full of twists and turns. The line would seem to disappear completely at times, only to suddenly pop up again heading in a completely different direction.

Rokey paid only minimal attention to the path. His mind was focused on the atmosphere around them. He knew that it was only a matter of time before the mysterious entity became aware of their presence here, and he was determined to be ready should his nemesis suddenly come after them. Nevertheless, he smiled lovingly at Flaskamper when the elf reached over and took his hand. Rokey could only imagine what he and the others had gone through in order to reach him in time to prevent his being sacrificed by the Order of the Bone. Bengarr's own sister, someone he had never even met, had lost her life trying to rescue him. Alrontin was badly wounded; in fact, all of the rescuers had been wounded to varying degrees – by what, he wondered? But this was not the right time to ask. He had to keep his mind on their surroundings, and on the spell he had cast. Though it was not nearly as draining as creating the first doorway had been, it still required a certain amount of concentration to maintain the spell's integrity.

At last, they spotted the large, orange archway off in the distance. Soon they would discover just how well the scenario Rokey had concocted had actually worked. There was still no hint of his disembodied enemy. In a strange way, he found this disturbing. What had become of it, Rokey wondered? On all of his previous forays into No-When, he had been accosted by the voice. It had never come as close to him as it had on that first encounter, but it had always made a point of taunting and threatening him. But not on this trip. Why was that?

Don't be an idiot, Rokey chided himself. Just be thankful and forget about it.

He sighed and tried to turn his attention to the arch, but he couldn't shake the feeling that his tormentor's conspicuous absence would, at some point, prove significant.

As they drew closer to the arch, they could see that it led out to a wooded area. It was dark, and there was nothing in sight that would indicate exactly where on Firma it was. All they could do was step through and hope for the best.

"Why is it that it seems to take so much less of your energy to create a doorway from No-When to Firma than it does the other way around, *chatka*?" Flaskamper asked.

"I honestly don't know," Rokey answered. "High Mage Ellispon has some complicated theory about it, but I was never much good at mathematics. I do know that for the creatures that dwell here, crossing over to Firma is nearly impossible. The closest they can come without a magical doorway like this is the type of partial crossover that the lumen spirits accomplish. That's probably a good thing though, otherwise all of Firma might be overrun with demons by now."

"Is this where all spirits and demons live as well?" Groog asked.

"Well, all we've really been able to determine so far," Rokey replied, "is that spirits and demons all use No-When as a travel medium, just as we're doing. As to where they originate, we haven't even begun to investigate that yet. Some of the mage scholars theorize that there may be many other worlds besides ours that are accessible through No-When. Some of their ideas seem pretty crazy to me. On the other hand, I would have thought the idea of No-When was crazy before that day when I accidentally found myself tumbling through it."

It was snowing when they stepped through the archway back into Firma. It was also quite dark, for Rokey had dismissed the lumen orb, not quite daring to bring the spirit all the way through with them. As soon as the gate vanished, he summoned it again. Its twinkle seemed quite dim now compared to its unfettered luminescence in No-When. It was more than sufficient, however, because something else off in the distance was also casting light – a great deal of it.

"There is a battle going on in that direction," said Groog, gesturing toward the source of the light. "I can feel... death."

“That light will be the elves’ lumen orbs then,” said Flaskamper, hugging Rokey tightly. “You did it, *chatka*. You got us just where we wanted to go.”

“We’ll see,” Rokey said simply, returning the embrace.

His caution was well placed, for when they reached the edge of the woods and peered out, they met with an unhappy sight, for although they could clearly see the battle raging between the elves and the forces of Moribar, it was also equally clear that they were still on the wrong side of the bridge. To reach Cinnador and the elf regiment, they were going to have to make their way through Moribar’s ranks, which consisted of hundreds of heavily armed troll guards and club-wielding ogres.

“Ballocks!” Flaskamper exclaimed miserably. “Just once, why can’t things work out in our favor?”

“Do not despair, Elf Brother,” Bengarr said reassuringly. “We have accomplished everything we set out to do thus far, have we not? So too shall we manage this next hurdle.”

“Perhaps,” Flaskamper replied, “but at what further cost? You know, more than all of us, how dearly we have already paid for this undertaking, Bengarr.”

“Your point is well taken, Flaskamper,” said the somber Nogirraalan, “but there is little worth having that comes without cost. Kachia knew, as did we all, that death was a possibility, even a likely outcome of this mission. The fact that the rest of us are still alive after all we have experienced is, I would assert, astonishing.”

Rokey said nothing during this exchange. He had no idea what his rescuers had gone through in order to reach him, so he felt ill qualified to contribute to the conversation. Instead, he wandered off a few paces, turning his thoughts toward finding a way past their enemies. Stealth seemed impossible, and to charge into battle in their exhausted condition would be suicidal. That left little in the way of options. However, as Rokey stood weighing and discarding various crazy ideas, a gift from the Gods arrived.

Actually, it was a covered wagon that arrived, drawn by a decrepit-looking old gelding and filled with at least half a dozen black-robed brothers. Pulling the vehicle off to the side of the road, the brothers all jumped from the wagon and crossed the bridge to join the battle – their swords flashing in the light of the lumen orbs. But Rokey wasn’t watching the brothers. He had his eyes fixed on the wagon.

“*Chatka?*”

Rokey started. He had not heard Flaskamper come up beside him.

“What’s on your mind?” asked the elf. “An idea?”

“Maybe,” said Rokey. “It would be pushing my last speck of luck and energy even to try it, but if it works...”

“Under the circumstances,” Flaskamper observed, “I’d say that even a slim chance is better than anything else we have.”

“Alright then,” said Rokey. “Call the others over here and I’ll tell you my plan.”

* * *

Cinnador had pulled back in order to survey the battle. So far, things were not looking good for them. The fighting had been fierce; he estimated that approximately two fifths of his regiment had been killed or wounded already, and although they had taken down an equal number of enemy fighters, more and more kept arriving – albeit in dribs and drabs – to take their place. As the elves had no such reinforcements, it was just a matter of time before their numbers were depleted to the point where the enemy could overwhelm them. Unless Prince Alrontin and Prince Flaskamper appeared soon, he would have no choice but to put their contingency plan into effect, which was to destroy the Bridge of Skulls in order to prevent any further enemy troops from reaching them. Unfortunately, this would also likely cut off the rescue party’s only escape route, so Cinnador was determined not to authorize this measure until he was certain that either the party had reached the eastern side of Harrow Yawn or, Goddess forbid, that they had failed and would not be returning at all.

Not wanting to dwell on this possibility, he turned his attention once more to the scene in front of him. By the light of hundreds of lumen orbs, he could see the Saebrilite in the distance, still astride her enormous gray mare. The animal had been wounded on its rear flank, but it showed no sign of being hampered by this injury. Kyzee herself was covered with blood and gore. Cinnador could not tell from this distance whether any of the blood was her own, but she, too, was soldiering on without any visible signs of impairment. The commander had no idea why she had changed her mind about fighting, but he was grateful to have her. Reluctantly, he had to admit that she did as much damage alone as did any ten of his own soldiers, a fact that greatly impressed the battle-hardened veteran.

As Cinnador continued to survey the scene, High Mage Ellispon suddenly came riding hastily up behind him.

“Dammit Ellispon!” Cinnador barked, “What are you doing up here?”

The old elf pointed off into the distance.

“Look to the bridge, Commander” he said. “Something is happening.”

Cinnador centered his magically enhanced vision on the Bridge of Skulls. At first, he noticed nothing unusual – only that a new group of black-robed fighters had joined the enemy lines. He swept his gaze further back, to the middle of the bridge. It was much darker back there. Still, nothing strange seemed to – wait – something odd *was* happening. A group of ogres had just fallen to the ground for no

apparent reason. Now, to their right, two trolls suddenly leapt to the side, as though diving out of the path of...something. Cinnador continued to watch in fascination as groups of soldiers and ogres all along the bridge were either mowed down by or dove to avoid – avoid what though?

“What in blazes is it?” he asked Ellispon.

“Well, I can’t be certain, of course,” the High Mage replied with a chuckle, “but my guess would be – YES! LOOK THERE!”

The commander saw it too. Just for a tik, the image of a horse-drawn, covered wagon flashed into view, before vanishing from sight once again.

“Is it our rescue team, Ellispon?” Cinnador asked, scarcely daring to hope.

“Without question,” the elf mage confirmed. “Not only that, but Rokey is with them.”

“You saw him?”

“No,” said Ellispon, “but he is the only one of them with the skills necessary to cast that concealment spell, though he obviously is still having trouble maintaining it. Concentrate, Rokey, concentrate!”

“They know something is in their midst,” Cinnador remarked, following the zigzag pattern of the invisible wagon, “but they can’t determine the path it is on. Very wise strategy, so long as both the spell and the wagon hold up. Is there anything that can be done to assist them?”

“I’m afraid nothing comes to mind,” Ellispon answered.

In that case, ready the other mages,” Cinnador commanded. “Prepare to destroy that bridge the moment they make it safely across.”

“Right away, Commander,” Ellispon answered, and hurriedly rode off.

Cinnador continued to follow the chaos unfolding along the bridge, a satisfied smile spreading over his face.

“Well done,” he quietly told the rescue team. “Now just keep moving. You’re almost here.”

* * *

“We’re almost there!” Flaskamper yelled, echoing Cinnador’s thoughts. He tugged hard on the left side of the horse’s reins, steering the animal and the wagon sharply to the left. Two ogres pricked up their ears at the clamor of the approaching vehicle, but were too slow and stupid to react. Flaskamper swerved back to the right again, and the horse just missed them. The wagon, however, did not. The two were struck broadside and knocked, snarling and whimpering, into the massive gorge. Flaskamper let out a whoop.

“Take that, you nasty buggers!” he called.

"Flash," said Fia, who was sitting next to him in the front of the wagon, hanging on with white knuckles, "as much as I like to see you enjoying yourself, it might be wise avoid giving our enemies anything to aim at."

"You're right, Fia," Flaskamper replied, chastened. "I'm sorry. I was just blowing off a little steam."

He swerved sharply again to avoid another large group of trolls. They swung their swords and star maces blindly at the wagon, but all missed. This time, Flaskamper resisted the urge to taunt them.

"We've got a big clear stretch coming up," he said. "I'm going to see what this old fellow can do."

The elf whipped up the reins and the old horse opened up to a respectable gallop.

"Wa-hoo!" Flaskamper called, forgetting himself again. "He's got some spunk left in him after all. I'm going to take him back to Elfwood with me and give him a nice home to retire in."

They continued on at full gallop across the Bridge of Skulls. As they approached the far end, though, they were met with a frightening sight.

"Shite!" said Flaskamper. "Archers! Everybody get down," he yelled to his companions in back of the wagon. "Fia, get in the back!"

"Flash – "

"Now!"

Fia jumped into the rear of the wagon just as a volley of arrows came hissing through the air. Flaskamper shifted to one side only a tik before one of them struck the very spot he had left. His newly adopted horse was not so lucky. Two of the arrows struck the unfortunate animal, one in the right rear quarters; the other in the left shoulder. The horse screamed in pain, but after balking for a moment, continued on at nearly the same pace. Flaskamper sent a silent plea to his Goddess, Secta, to spare his new friend, and the rest of them as well. Apparently she was listening, for as the enemy archers prepared to fire another volley at the sound of the approaching wagon, they themselves were cut down by a hail of arrows fired by the elf archers behind them. By this time, word of their approach had also gotten to the elves fighting in the front of the line, giving them a much-needed boost of encouragement. As Flaskamper drove the horse and wagon past the still-twitching remains of the troll archers and off the other end of the bridge, he found all of his fellow elf guards busy keeping the rest of the enemy at bay. With no one to impede them, they wound their way through the melee toward the safety of the elf lines.

* * *

Cinnador heard the wagon approach and slow to a stop only a short distance from him.

“It’s alright now, *chatka*,” he heard Flaskamper’s voice call. “We’re safe.”

A moment later, a covered wagon suddenly appeared, drawn by a pitiful-looking horse with two arrow shafts protruding from its body. Flaskamper saluted Commander Cinnador.

Well met, Prince Flaskamper,” said the commander. “How fares your party?”

“Sir, Prince Alrontin is seriously injured, and requires the immediate attention of a healer,” Flaskamper replied. “With your permission...”

Cinnador gestured for them to proceed, and Flaskamper drove the wagon on toward the rear echelons. A few tiks later, a young soldier rode up to him in a great hurry.

“Sir,” he said excitedly, “word from the line is that another huge company of trolls is marching quick-time toward the bridge.”

“Thank you, soldier,” said Cinnador. “Please take that message to High Mage Ellispon and tell him our team is safely across the bridge. Tell him to proceed immediately.”

Cinnador told him where to find Ellispon and the young soldier rode off to deliver his message.

Don’t disappoint me, Ellispon, Cinnador thought, or we’re all going to be in serious jeopardy.

Barely a minmark later, he caught sight of them – an entire regiment of heavily armed trolls bearing down, rapidly, on the bridge. Above even the chaos and clamor of battle, he could hear the sound of their heavy, synchronous marching, and for the first time since the battle had begun, Commander Cinnador began to feel nervous.

Fortunately, the feeling did not last long. As the first rows of troll soldiers stepped onto the bridge, the entire structure exploded into flames that shot high into the darkened sky. Though the Bridge of Skulls was supported on each corner by large, stone pylons, the entire center structure was made of heavy planks of wood tightly woven with some type of strong rope or, more probably, sinew. Though it was treated with a special substance to resist flame, the massive heat generated by the mage fire foiled all such efforts. Before long, the whole bridge was ablaze, as well as scores of trolls and ogres. Minmarks later, the sinews holding the entire structure together began to snap loudly and the entire inferno soon plummeted headlong into Harrow Yawn. Realizing that they were now trapped on the wrong side of the gorge, many of the remaining enemy fighters simply turned and fled into the surrounding woodlands. Those who stayed to fight were no match for the revitalized elves, who now smelled victory in the acrid, smoky air.

When the fighting was over, Kyzee cleaned and sheathed her sword, and then went looking for Lorq. She found him in one of the large healers' tents, where he was being treated for several deep, angry scratches on his face and arms. Lorq was suitably astonished to see her there, and after greeting her with a kiss, was immediately worried about Broq. Kyzee assured him that their son was in the capable care of Alrontin's wife back in Elfwood, and briefly explained what had happened in Duncileer. Lorq took the news with his usual calm.

"We'll have to make new plans, that's all," he said. "Don't worry, dear. Everything will turn out fine."

"How did your mission go?" she asked him. "You seem to have gotten the worst of something or other. Did everyone fare as badly as you?"

"Worse," said Lorq, his face growing somber. "One of our people, Kachia, was killed in the goblin caves, and Prince Alrontin is badly wounded."

As the healer finished cleaning and bandaging her husband's wounds, Kyzee took a towel and wiped some of the blood and gore from her legs and body. Meanwhile, Lorq gave her a brief account of their travels, as well as the companions who had joined them and the many battles they had fought to rescue Rokey.

"I was afraid that chest was going to break my shoulder," he told her, rubbing a large bruise where the box had rested. "If I hadn't been able to load it onto that wagon when I did, I'm sure it would have."

"It's a good thing you were there," she said proudly. "No one else could have borne such an intolerably heavy load as far as you did."

The healer had finished up her work. Lorq thanked her and stood up, putting his shirt back on.

"Let's go and find Flash," he said. "I want to find out how Alrontin is doing. Something besides his goblin wound is making him ill. He went unconscious in the wagon on our way across the bridge. I don't know what it is, but he's very sick, and I'm worried that, whatever is wrong, it might be too late for even the healers' skill to pull him through."

Kyzee took hold of her husband's arm, and the two went off to try and locate their friends.

Chapter 33

New Beginnings

They found the rest of the rescue party in another tent – one of a group of them that had been set up to house and care for the seriously wounded. Alrontin lay on a cot, delirious and clearly in great pain. A healer was cleaning the large wound on his abdomen, which was still open, actively oozing and inflamed.

“Is he going to pull through, Landron?” Flaskamper asked.

The healer looked up into Flaskamper’s worried eyes.

“I honestly don’t know, Your Highness,” said Landron. “The wound itself is deep and infected, and was inflicted by a creature about which we know virtually nothing. Normally we would treat this with, among other things, battleroot, in order to boost the patient’s ability to heal himself. Of course under the circumstances that you described to me, we cannot do that, and although your idea to administer high doses of rembis to your brother was undoubtedly what kept him alive and functioning up to this point, I’m afraid it means *that* alternative is now closed to us as well. So, we have no way left to either alleviate the intense physical and mental withdrawal symptoms or to boost his strength to help him heal. It truly is a dire situation. I’m afraid there’s little more we can do for him.”

Flaskamper fought tears away, his arms seeking Rokey for support. Alrntin moaned and began thrashing violently. Landron called another healer to help try and restrain him.

"The seizures are the result of the withdrawal from battleroot," Landron explained. "If only we had a way to calm these convulsions, I believe his prognosis would be considerably more favorable."

"Of course!" Kyzee exclaimed suddenly.

"What is it, dear?" Lorq asked.

Kyzee began rummaging around in her pockets, and finally found what she had been looking for. She produced a small blue bottle and held it out to show the others.

"Battista gave me this potion just before I left Duncileer. I had forgotten all about it. Her spirit guides told her that I would have need of it. Assuming it works, it does the very thing you described – it puts a person into a deep sleep for an extended period and also acts as a curative."

"A potion?" Landron said, frowning his bushy eyebrows. "From whom, another healer?"

"Battista is a friend of mine, Landron," said Flaskamper, "a sorceress. I trust her completely."

The healer scowled in disapproval, but accepted the bottle from Kyzee's outstretched hand.

"If that is your wish, Your Highness," said Landron, "but I trust I shall not be held responsible should this... crude *concoction* produce unforeseen results?"

"I hereby absolve you of all responsibility," Flaskamper replied testily, "Now please give my brother the potion."

While the other healer steadied the prince, Landron opened his mouth and poured the contents of the bottle down his throat. Alrntin coughed and choked at first, but then, within a minmark, he became quiet and still. Landron watched the prince's chest rise and fall for a few moments, then checked the pulse in his wrist.

"Well, I must say," he admitted reluctantly, "the potion seems to have done what we had hoped for. *If* it lasts, it should be a tremendous aid to his recovery."

"I'm confident it will do exactly what Battista said it would," Flaskamper said, smiling. "Thank you, Kyzee."

"No thanks are necessary," said the Saebrilite, "except to Battista, of course. I'm only glad that I remembered even having it."

"How long do you think it will take for the effects of his battleroot addiction to fade?" Fia asked the healer.

At that, Landron shook his head.

"It depends a great deal on how much he was taking before his supply was cut off. It might be a week, perhaps two before the worst of the effects fade. Residual cravings may continue for weeks, even

months afterwards, but I expect by then we can alleviate those with rembis.”

“And the wound?” Bengarr inquired.

“With the addiction in check, the wound will heal much more quickly, provided the infection has not spread throughout the body, and I have no reason, at this point, to suspect that it has. I believe that we should see marked improvement of the wound inside of a week as well.”

Landron finished bandaging Alrontin’s abdomen, then pulled the blanket up around the prince and stood.

“Alright,” he said with a tight smile, “Now, with all due deference and respect to all of you – get out. Prince Alrontin needs rest and quiet now.”

The rest of them exited the tent and went in search of Cinnador to see what else needed to be done. They caught up with him at the edge of the battlefield, giving instructions to the crew whose unpleasant task it would be to bury those who had died there. He motioned them to wait while he finished briefing the young and rather sick-looking lieutenant in charge of the grim mission, and then joined the seven companions.

“With all due respect, Cinnador,” said Flaskamper, “you look like day-old shite. You really ought to get some rest.”

“I shall assume that that insubordinate remark is coming from the Crown Prince, and not a Guard Commander who, as you well know, I outrank,” Cinnador growled, but then a fleeting smile touched his lips. “I can’t rest just yet. There’s no telling how much time burning down that bridge has bought us. We need to pull out of here and make for Elfwood as quickly as we can.”

“What can we do to help, Commander Cinnador?” Kyzee asked.

“You can lay claim to a few tents and get some sleep!” he barked. “You think I look tired?” he said to Flaskamper. “You should take a look in a mirror. I don’t know what kind of ordeal you’ve been through, though I shall be eager to hear it at the proper time, but it’s obvious that you’re all dead on your feet. I plan to have the first wave of troops ready to depart for Elfwood at first light, and I want you all to be ready to go with them. So get some rest now. That’s an order.”

Though they all felt guilty for doing it, the group followed Cinnador’s orders and asked a young soldier to point out a place where they could sleep. The young elf directed them to a row of empty tents just behind the medical compound, and the companions headed toward them, beginning now to realize just how exhausted they truly were. Within minmarks of hitting their respective cots (even Groog settled onto one), every one of them was fast asleep.

The next morning, the companions ate a hasty breakfast ration, and then prepared to depart for Elfwood. The first contingent consisted of a squadron of soldiers, High Mage Ellispon, the other two

magicians and several healers escorting wagons that carried the most seriously wounded. Their journey was mercifully uneventful, and they all had ample time to reflect on the events of those past two weeks. In fact, things may have been a bit too quiet, for the emotions that accompanied these reflections were often powerful and unnerving. They *had* accomplished their mission. Rokey was out of danger, at least, for the time being. They had paid a heavy price for their victory, though, and at times the muddled blend of joy and grief they felt was nearly overwhelming.

This was especially true for Bengarr and Fia. While open displays of grief were not a part of Nogirraalan culture, Bengarr nevertheless felt the loss of his sister deeply. Fia was there to comfort him. However, as the days of their journey passed by, another potent realization began to sink in – the one telling them that their time together was nearly at an end. Long before the two were ready, the somber procession reached the outskirts of Nogirraal, where they were met by a pair of curious firecat scouts. Bengarr changed into his feline form and met with them, giving them a brief report to take back to The Sire and promising to deliver the entire account in person the following day. After the two scouts left, he rejoined Fia. The day was sunny and unseasonably warm for late winter, so the couple decided to take a walk together. This would be their last day and night together. In the morning, Fia would continue on with the others to Elfwood, while Bengarr would turn south, toward Nogirraal. For a long time, they walked together in silence, hand in hand. Finally, Bengarr spoke.

“It was not my intention to get so... attached to you,” he said. “My thought initially was that our attraction to one another was primarily a physical one – a means of lightening the burdens of the mission we had undertaken. It never crossed my mind that when the time came for us to part, it would be so... so difficult. I want you to know that, if my responsibilities were not so clear, or if it were in any way possible for a human to live comfortably in Nogirraal...”

“I know,” said Fia. “I feel the same way, dearest. But things are as they are. I would never ask you to renounce your duty to your kingdom, just as I know that my place is not there with you. Saying goodbye will be painful for me too. Still, I wouldn’t trade this time we’ve had together for anything.”

“Nor would I,” Bengarr answered softly. “I will cherish it always.”

Fia stopped abruptly and turned to face Bengarr.

“There’s something I haven’t told you,” she said. “I know it’s late now, too late to have any meaning, perhaps, but I feel that the least I owe you is honesty.”

Fia reached up to unhook her pendant, to show him her true appearance, but Bengarr put his hand up and stopped her.

“There is no need,” he told her. “I already know.”

“You know?” she asked, confused. “You mean, someone told you?” Bengarr shook his head.

“No,” he explained. “The morning after our first night together, the clasp of your pendant came unhooked and, when I awoke, I saw you in your true form. It took me a few moments to understand about the pendant’s magic. Once I realized what had happened, though, I put it back around your neck. I said nothing, because I did not want you to be embarrassed by the fact that I knew.”

“And it didn’t bother you?” she asked. “The fact that I was keeping this secret from you didn’t anger you?”

“Anger me? Of course not!” said Bengarr. “I am a shape shifter, Fia. The notion of having two forms is quite natural. I must admit, though, that as the days passed, I began to hope that, at some point, you would grow to trust me enough to share your secret of your own volition. I am touched that you have done so at last.”

“I should have done it sooner,” she said, her eyes brimming with unexpected tears.

“No,” he said, cupping her cheek gently. “Our attentions were focused elsewhere before. You have shared this with me now because now was the proper moment. I now leave with the knowledge that you do, indeed, trust me with your deepest secret. It makes our bond that much stronger, and parting that much more difficult, but my memories of you will be even sweeter for it.”

That night they made love once more, and then slept, wrapped tightly in each other’s arms. The next morning, Fia chose to remain in their tent while Bengarr said goodbye to the rest of his companions. He asked Flaskamper to give the cloak he was wearing to Fia, and then the Nogirraalan changed once more into his feline form and bounded off southward. His friends all waved to him, their hearts heavy, until the firecat finally disappeared into the tall grass.

“I feel so guilty,” Rokey said to Flaskamper, “like there’s something more that I should do for him – for his people – after what they sacrificed for me. But I just don’t know what it would be.”

“You pledged to Bengarr back in Moribar that you would continue to serve Firma,” Flaskamper replied. “That’s what you can do. It’s all he expects of you. The people – or I guess I should say – the firecats of Nogirraal have simple needs. The preservation of their way of life is what means the most to them. By fighting to defend Firma, you’re helping to defend that way of life. Nothing else you could offer them would mean as much as that.”

“You’re right, I know,” said Rokey. “It’s just so hard to take in the fact that a total stranger gave her life for me. I mean, as difficult and painful as it was when I woke up and learned that Stamford had – had died... I don’t want this to come out the wrong way but... it made more sense to me. He was someone I had gotten to know – a friend. But this woman, Kachia... we never even met... and yet she was

willing to die for me. For some reason, I just can't seem to wrap my mind around that."

"That's because, in some sense, you still see yourself as just 'Rokey The Orphan Boy' who just happened to get swept up in these extraordinary events," Flaskamper surmised. "Others see you differently though, *chatka*. To others, you're more than just an ordinary person. You've become a symbol of all that is good here on Firma – of all the things that are worth fighting to hold on to."

"Gods, Flash," said Rokey, shaking his head. "I *had* come to accept the fact that I had some kind of, I don't know, *destiny* I guess. It's just that the significance of it never really hit me until now, when I look back on Kachia's death. Now that I begin to understand what it all truly means, I'm not sure I can bear the weight of it."

"You can, Rokey" Flaskamper assured him. "I believe in you. We all do, and you won't be alone. I'll always be with you – that is – if that's what you want."

Rokey slipped his arms around Flaskamper and kissed him lovingly.

"Believe me, my love," Rokey said, his voice hoarse with emotion, "there's nothing that I want more. My world was so empty without you. Nothing had any meaning for me at all – not even my own life."

* * *

From across the compound, Lorq smiled as he watched his two friends kiss. It was gratifying to see the two of them together again. He glanced over at his wife, who was helping him to break down their tent.

"Have you thought at all about where you'd like us to go, Zee?" he asked.

Kyzee shook her head.

"To be honest," she said, "I've been trying to avoid thinking about it. I know so little about Firma outside of Duncileer and my homeland that I feel ill-equipped to evaluate our options."

"I was thinking that we might go to Moorhead," Lorq said. "I once worked for the Regent's Menagerie Keeper there. I'm sure he'll remember me. That's one advantage to being a giant. You always leave an impression. I'm sure the militia there would be happy to have someone with your background, Zee."

"The problem is – well... I'm not entirely certain that I *want* to resume my military career," said Kyzee.

"But I thought you loved the military," Lorq said, surprised.

"I loved guarding King Hobar," she admitted. "As to the military itself... I'm good at it, but frankly, pumpkin, I'm afraid that my love for it died with the king. Now when I contemplate returning, all that I feel is something akin to dread."

“Well that’s all right, honey,” said Lorq encouragingly. “You can do whatever you want. That’s another advantage of being our size. There’s never a shortage of work. Of course, a lot of it tends to involve lifting very heavy things.”

Kyzee laughed.

“It’s good to hear you laugh again,” Lorq said.

Kyzee realized then that this *was* the first time she had laughed since they had left the battlefield at the Bridge of Skulls. The carnage wrought by the bloody melee hadn’t affected her immediately, but ever since they had left for Elwood, her sleep had been troubled. Of course, that could easily be attributed to worries about her future and that of her family, but inside she knew that there was more to it than that. Her dreams now were awash with blood and the screams of the dying. Though she was certain these haunting images would fade in time, she had also recognized that the idea of putting on a uniform again and strapping on a sword – things that had once been second nature to her – now filled her with revulsion and alarm. She had done her part; she had shed the blood of Firma’s enemies by the bucketful. From now on, though, it would be up to others to shed that blood. She would serve her land in other ways.

“Zee, are you all right?” Lorq asked. “You look like you’re a thousand miles away.”

“I’m fine, pumpkin,” she said, smiling warmly at her beloved husband. “I was just woolgathering. I can’t wait until we get back to Elfwood – to Broq.”

“I miss him too,” said Lorq. “I think we should stay a little while in Elfwood – at least for a week or two. That will give us some quiet time to spend with our friends, and to make some plans.”

“Sounds good to me,” she replied. “Goddess knows I could use a little peace and quiet.”

In truth, she was desperate for it.

* * *

Thanks to early warnings by vigilant elf scouts, the first wave of returning soldiers was greeted with jubilation by the proud citizens of Elfwood. King Angorath himself personally rode out to greet his younger son who, at the insistence of the squadron commander, led the company into the kingdom. After a formal greeting ceremony, the king rode up close to Flaskamper and quietly inquired about the outcome of their mission. It was obvious to him that Rokey had been rescued, as he was there riding just behind Flaskamper, but he had also noted the absence of his elder son, and that had worried him deeply. Flaskamper quickly explained that Alrontin was unconscious in one of the wagons and under the effect of a healing spell, but that he would hopefully wake up feeling much better in a few days. He did

not mention the battleroot addiction to their father, deciding that it would be Alrontin's decision whether or not to he wanted to share that information.

Later that afternoon, Flaskamper, along with Rokey, Lorq, Kyzee, Fia and Groog sat in Angorath's private study. The squadron commander had already furnished the king with the early casualty reports. Now it was the rescue party's turn. After the companions had given him a detailed briefing, King Angorath shared with them some troubling news of his own.

"Yesterday I received word that Duncileer has withdrawn its ambassadors from Tanohar," he announced gravely. "I also learned from an Aridian envoy that troops from both kingdoms are already beginning to amass in the disputed territories. It looks as though war between Duncileer and Tanohar is inevitable."

"Fools!" Kyzee exclaimed. "They're playing right into the Order's hands."

"Indeed," Angorath replied, "though I believe the situation is even more grave than that. It seems that Duncileer has a new chancellor – a man named Elgray. I assume, Captain Kyzee, that you are familiar with him.

Kyzee swore colorfully.

"My apologies, Your Majesty," she said. "Yes, I am quite familiar with King Hobar's sniveling coward of a cousin. There are other good, brave men in Duncileer who will oppose him, but if that snake has wheedled his way to becoming Chancellor, it means that the Order of the Bone already has a major foothold in the kingdom."

"And what of Tanohar?" the king asked her. "Have you any information regarding the Order's influence in that kingdom?"

Kyzee shook her head.

"Not anything of substance, Majesty," she replied. "We knew King Edvar to be both stubborn and crafty, but as to the extent to which he is influenced by anyone, including the Order, our intelligence was always vague at best. One thing I *do* know is that Edvar sent King Hobar a message shortly before Princess Yisa was kidnapped. I did not see the message itself, but the king informed me that it proposed some sort of peace initiative."

"What was Hobar's reaction to this message?" Angorath inquired.

"I don't know what his actual response was, I'm afraid," she answered, "but I do know that it came as a surprise to him, and knowing King Hobar as I do – or rather *did*, I believe that he would have done almost anything in order to ensure peace between their two kingdoms. He often said that when one is forced to go to war, one has already lost. I used to think him naïve. I do not think so anymore."

"Hobar was a fine man," said King Angorath, "as well as a fine ruler. However, his loss not only grieves me personally; it also creates significant political troubles for my own kingdom. With King Hobar on

the throne of Duncileer, it would have been a simple matter to remain diplomatically neutral while offering what support we could to his kingdom behind the scenes. Now with Elgray in such a powerful position and little useful information regarding King Edvar's allegiances, I shall have no choice but to keep Elfwood completely detached from both sides."

"What's wrong with that?" asked Flaskamper. "I thought we elves were famous for our neutrality."

"We are famous for our *perceived* neutrality," the king corrected him. "In reality, there has not been a conflict in recent history in which we were not very much involved, at least diplomatically. In that way, we were always able to keep ourselves well informed. The problem with staying completely out of a conflict is that we have no idea whose arrows might ultimately wind up pointing at our own kingdom. Therefore, we must waste valuable time and treasure defending all of our borders, rather than focusing only on those that pose a substantial threat. That is never a good position for a monarch, or a nation, to be in."

When their meeting was over, King Angorath dismissed the others courteously, but asked Flaskamper and Rokey to remain behind.

"I thought you should hear this from me rather than from court gossip," he said. "I'm sorry son, but the guards found Brandelynn dead in her cell several nights ago. It appeared that she had committed suicide, but on my order, a thorough investigation is being conducted. I deeply regret having to spoil your arrival with such sorrowful news."

Flaskamper's eyes filled with unbidden tears. Rokey slid his arm supportively around his husband's waist.

"It's all right, father," Flaskamper said thickly. "I appreciate you telling me yourself."

"There are some who are calling for her to be tried posthumously for treason," said Angorath. "I was inclined to rule against such an action. However, I wanted to wait and hear from the two of you before I made my final decision."

"Please don't do it, father," Flaskamper begged. "As hard as it will be, I want to try and remember her as the friend she once was. A show trial would only make that much harder."

"I agree, Your Majesty," said Rokey. "What good purpose could it possibly serve? Let's let her family hold onto what dignity they can."

"I was fairly certain that you would feel this way," said the king, smiling warmly at them. "Vengeance is not in either of your natures. We shall let the matter drop."

"Thank you father," Flaskamper said gratefully.

King Angorath placed a hand on the shoulder of both his son and sonsmate.

"I cannot begin to express how pleased I am to see the two of you back here again," he told them, "safe, sound... and together."

The two grinned back at the king.

"You can rest assured, Your Highness," Rokey told him, "It's a sight you are going to be seeing for a long time to come."

* * *

The box was opened in the meeting room of the High Council. It had taken nearly a week to disarm the many spells and enchantments that had secured it. Now, for the first time, they would learn what it was that the Order of the Bone had gone to such great lengths to protect. High Mage Ellispon had been granted the honor of being the one to open the chest. Rokey stood just behind him, with Flaskamper at his side. Convincing the Council to allow Flaskamper to attend had been extremely difficult. Rokey had finally been forced to threaten them with his immediate resignation before the High Mages had finally relented. He had also taken that opportunity to make it clear to them that all future oaths of secrecy he took would *specifically exclude* his husband. He wasn't about to allow that kind of trouble to spring up again.

Everyone held their breath as Ellispon unhooked the clasp and flipped the lid open. Inside was a treasure far beyond anything they could possibly have hoped for – three parchment scrolls. Even the first cursory examination revealed that they were extremely old. Ellispon carefully picked up the one on top and examined it. He was thrilled to find that the parchment was still supple. With the others in the room looking on over his shoulder, he carefully unrolled it and examined the crowded writing.

"Can you read what it says, Ellispon?" High Mage Laomiel asked.

Ellispon shook his head.

"No," he said. "The language is not familiar to me, though some of the letters appear similar to those on another document in our possession – one that has been dated back to a time before the First Kings. It is possible that these scrolls are written in an even older version of that dialect."

"Great Goddess!" Laomiel exclaimed. "If that's the case..."

"If that is the case," Ellispon said, continuing the thought, "it would mean that, thanks to Prince Flaskamper's keen instincts, we now have the oldest known documents in all of Firma in our possession. The challenge now will be to decipher them."

"These have to be the scrolls that High Lord Hughn told me about," said Rokey. "I'm certain he told me the truth about what he believed they contained, but I wonder just how much the story was altered by those who preceded him. It seems terribly convenient to me that the tale so neatly justifies all of their actions. I think we should make translating these our scholars' highest priority. I also recommend that we send a messenger hawk to Brother Ely at the Noble

Contemplative,” Rokey suggested. “I’m sure that he and the rest of the Brotherhood would be delighted at the opportunity to contribute to such an historic endeavor.”

“But why should we share this discovery with anyone?” Laomiel protested.

“Because, High Mage Laomiel, the Brotherhood may be in possession of other documents that can help us to shed light on these scrolls,” Rokey replied. “They may even have some other means of deciphering them. I know that your own elf scholars could do it alone in time, sir, but that may take years – decades even. Can we afford to wait that long needlessly? It’s only intuition, but I have the feeling that these documents will yield vital information to us – information that will help us to better understand not only the Order of the Bone but also, perhaps, the source of my hidden power. I may be mistaken, of course, but if not, then surely the sooner we have that information, the better it will be for all of Firma. That *has* to outweigh any advantage we would gain by keeping the scrolls to ourselves.”

In the end, the Council agreed with Rokey, and a messenger hawk was sent to the Brotherhood of the Noble Contemplative, where he had spent the bulk of his childhood. A reply arrived almost immediately from his old friend Ely, who was now Special Assistant to the Abbott. It informed them that a group of scholars would be sent immediately to offer whatever assistance they could with the ancient scrolls. This pleased Flaskamper immensely, for he had always argued that Elfwood was too closed and secretive.

Another week passed. Rokey, Flaskamper, and their family and friends did the best they could to relax, and put the terrible events of the past few weeks behind them. Alrontin woke from his potion-induced sleep feeling sore and fatigued, but otherwise well. His need for battleroot had greatly diminished, although he would probably continue to feel residual cravings for months to come. Flaskamper was the first person he asked to see – alone.

“Does father know?” he asked, a pained look on his face.

Flaskamper shook his head.

“That wasn’t my decision to make, Ronti,” he said.

Alrontin smiled.

“Sometimes I wonder which of us is the elder,” he said wearily.

“You are,” said Flaskamper, clasping his brother’s hand. “I could never have succeeded without you leading the way – keeping me from mucking it all up. You’re the main reason I have Rokey back with me again, alive and well. I don’t know how I’ll ever be able to repay you for that.”

“You can start by resigning from the Guard,” said Alrontin, “and finding something to do that you really enjoy.”

Flaskamper grinned broadly.

“Well, if it means that much to you, Captain,” he said, saluting crisply. “Consider it done.”

Alrontin chuckled, and then grew more serious.

“What about Rokey?” he asked. “Are you going to tell him about your various... uh, indulgences in Oraque?”

“No,” said Flaskamper. “A very wise man counseled me to keep it to myself and suffer the guilt alone. I’ve decided to follow his advice.”

“Great Goddess” said Alrontin. “Does this mean that you’re actually going to start listening to me once in a while?”

Flaskamper felt his brother’s forehead.

“Ooooh, you’d better get some rest now, Ronti,” he said with mock sobriety. “You’re obviously feverish.”

* * *

Groog returned to his home in Hreechkree that same afternoon, promising to return for a visit as soon as possible. A few days later, Lorq, Kyzee and Broq, along with Fia, all set out for the city of Moorhead. Lorq had sent a messenger hawk to the city’s regent inquiring about the possibility of employment for Fia and himself. Kyzee had asked that he leave her name out of the letter. She was still uncertain about what she wanted to do and decided that now might be a good time to take some additional time to be with Broq. Their son was growing so fast. He had changed even over the few days during which she’d been gone. If she did not take the time now to be more fully involved in his life, Kyzee was certain that, one day, she would look back and regret having missed this precious opportunity.

While awaiting a reply, Lorq had busied himself in the stables, helping the animal healers to treat the wounded horses, including the hero that had pulled their wagon to safety – the old horse that Flaskamper had dubbed Rumpus. The ones that the rescue party had freed at the old bridge had also found their way home. Though they were thin and thoroughly exhausted, a little care and grain soon restored them to good health.

Soon enough, a reply came back from the Regent of Moorhead, telling Lorq that the present Keeper of the Menagerie was looking to retire and urging him to come at once. As for Fia, the Regent remembered her well, and assured Lorq that entertainers with her skills were always in high demand.

It was difficult for Rokey and Flaskamper to say goodbye to them again, especially as it meant that Lorq and Kyzee would now be living much farther away than before. Still, they were glad that their friends would be well away from the impending war. In fact, they both rather envied them that.

As the couple waved to the departing coach, they could not help but laugh at the sight of Broq’s plump little-boy hand, which pumped

furiously up and down at them until the wagon was out of sight – he was not a baby anymore. When they turned back into the forest, Flaskamper took Rokey’s hand.

“What do you think about children, *chatka?*” he asked nonchalantly.

“I sometimes think they’re more trouble than they’re worth,” Rokey replied, but then noticed the look of disappointment on his husband’s face.

“On the other hand,” he went on, “Alrontin and Mellynda seem quite happy with Jontrin and Liesyll. So do Lorq and Kyzee and Broq. Maybe there’s something to be said for being parents after all.”

He glanced over again, and was pleased to see that Flaskamper’s smile had returned.

So that’s *what’s been on your mind*, Rokey thought to himself. Were they ready for such a thing, though, he wondered? Was it even right to bring a child into the world in the midst of such turmoil? There were now many orphans in Elfwood – innocent victims of the battle who needed loving homes...

With a sigh, Rokey thought, these were things they would need to discuss together. One of the things that they had promised one another was that they *would* discuss *everything* from now on. There would be no more secrets between the two of them – ever – as long as they lived.

Epilogue

Rokey cried out sharply in the night. His sweaty hands gripped the sheets tightly as his eyes rolled back in his head, his entire body arching stiffly in uncontrollable spasms. At last, he collapsed back onto the bed, breathing heavily – his heart pounding loudly in his chest.

A few tiks later, the soft, white comforter that covered him began to stir. Rokey looked down just as Flaskamper’s head popped into view. The elf looked up at him, a devilish grin spreading across his face. Then he kissed Rokey on the stomach and crawled up to cuddle in next to him. Rokey wrapped his arms lovingly around his husband and sighed.

“How did I ever imagine I could live without you?” said Rokey, nuzzling his neck. “And I’m not just talking about the sex part – the unbelievably *amazing* sex part – I mean all of you. How could I have ever been so blind?”

“I’ve asked myself the same question a thousand times since we returned, *chatka*,” Flaskamper replied. “At first I tried to blame it all on Brandelynn, but then I had to face the fact that she only took advantage of a situation that we were already in. The only answer I could finally come up with is that, as time passes, it gets easier and easier to take the person you love for granted – to stop seeing each of those thousand little things that they do to make your life special. Instead you start to focus on the few little things that bother you, and

you inflate them out of all proportion. Then, next thing you know, you're thinking about those glorious days of the past, forgetting that most of that glory is all in your head. I think that's how it was for me. I'd find myself thinking of the fun times I used to have with Stamford, leaving out the part about how sad and lonely I felt for so much of that time."

"Do you suppose we'll ever get to that point again?" Rokey asked.

"Well, never say never I guess," said Flaskamper, "but if I ever start to feel that way again, I'll just look back on the moment when your Uncle was holding that knife to your throat. I'm pretty sure that'll always remind me exactly how I feel about you, and how lucky I am that even *he* cared for you enough not to go through with it. No matter what else he might have done in his life, I'll always honor his memory for giving you back to me again."

"I so wish I had been awake," Rokey said sadly, "so I could have at least said goodbye to him."

"Rokey, I know you feel certain that he's dead, but don't you think there might be just the odd chance that your intuition is wrong about this?"

Rokey shook his head.

"I know," he said, "it's hard to understand how I can be so sure but –"

Without warning, Rokey's head abruptly exploded with pain. He screamed and sat up clutching his hands to his ears.

"Rokey?" Flaskamper said in a frightened panic. "*Chatka*, what is it?"

But Rokey couldn't hear him. All he could hear was a massive, earsplitting shriek – a shriek unlike anything he'd ever heard before. Blood began to flow from his nose, staining the white silky fabric of the comforter with bright drops of red. Flaskamper fetched a cloth and held it under Rokey's nose, trying to staunch the flow of blood, asking again and again what it was that was happening. For Rokey, though, there was only the noise; the incredible, unceasing din that he felt certain would turn his brain to jelly at any moment. He felt Flaskamper's arms around him and reached out to grab hold of him. He tried to speak but no sound would come out except screams of pain, echoing the screams that were reverberating inside his head. At that moment, he thought for certain he was about to die.

But then, just as he was beginning to pass out from the sheer agony of it, the screaming abruptly stopped, leaving behind only a loud ringing in his ears which, though annoying, was at least bearable. Rokey grasped the cloth that Flaskamper was holding and blew the blood from his nose.

"Rokey are you all right?" he heard his husband saying.

"Yes," he answered. "Yes, my love... At least – I think I am."

“What in the world happened?” Flaskamper asked. “Should I go and fetch a healer for you?”

“No,” said Rokey. “No, I’ll be fine. Really. It was –”

Just then another sound came, not a loud, terrifying shriek this time, but rather a voice – a strong, clear voice – one that Rokey had heard before. It was the voice from No-When – the same one that had taunted him during all of his previous visits. He had not known whose voice it was then, but now it all suddenly became clear. It was the voice of Cyure, the living God, worshipped for centuries by the Order of the Bone. No longer trapped in No-When – where he must have been imprisoned for thousands of years – he was now back in Firma once again.

Now Rokey was certain of how his uncle had died. Only the blood of a scion could have brought the “God” Cyure back to life so quickly, and there had only been two scions left, at least as far as Hughn and the Order had been able to determine. What was it Flaskamper said his uncle had called out to them on their way out of the Ritual Room?

“Love one another,” he had said, *“and cherish what time remains.”*

He had given him and Flash his benediction, but High Lord Hughn had not fully betrayed the Order of the Bone after all. His uncle had spilled his own life’s blood over the God’s collected, assembled bones to complete the ritual. Clearly, Rokey would have been the better donor, for his powers had been brought to the surface once more thanks to his sidhe mother. However, by sparing his nephew and sacrificing himself, High Lord Hughn had not foiled the Order’s plans; he had merely slowed them down. The battle for Firma wasn’t over at all. In fact, it had only just begun, for what Rokey had heard, the sounds that had nearly killed him, must have been some sort of massive surge of magical energy generated by the God’s rebirth. Then, in its wake, the message had come through, a simple two-word declaration, broadcast by Cyure to all those in Firma who were sensitive enough to hear it:

“I LIVE!”

Rokey's saga will continue in

Book Three of
The Chronicles of Firma:

Numen's Trust

Coming soon!

Questions? Feedback?

You can reach the author via his webpage:
<http://www.patnelsonchilds.com>

Okay, for those of you about to burst wondering what happens next with Rokey & Flaskamper, here's an entire chapter of book three, the final installment of The Chronicles of Firma, entitled

Numen's Trust

ENJOY!

- Pat Nelson Childs

Prologue Two

High Lord Pendril knelt, trembling, before the enormous granite throne. He was terrified, for he had unpleasant news to deliver, and he knew how the throne's occupant often dealt with people who failed to please him. The evidence was outside in the main courtyard, visible to all – a large cluster of wooden posts driven deep into the ground. From these hung the maimed bodies of those who had angered, failed or in some other way offended... *Him* – their risen God, Cyure.

“Stop groveling and stand up, Pendril,” Cyure commanded. The deity's voice alone was enough to scare the wits out of most people. It had an unnaturally deep resonance and a coarse, rasping quality that made one's skin crawl. It always reminded Pendril of the grave.

“What news do you bring me?” Cyure asked.

“My Lord,” Pendril said, timidly rising to face the mighty colossus, “it-it-it... pains me to bring you... n-n-news of a... d-d-disappointing nature.”

Cyure's red eyes glowed menacingly.

“I’m certain it does, Pendril,” said Cyure, “considering the price that others have paid for such... disappointments.”

Pendril’s eyes grew wide with fear as he pictured the mangled bodies dangling from the posts outside.

“P-P-Please, My Lord,” Pendril begged, “I only impart to you what the necromancers tell me. It is *they* who have failed you. They are still unable to open a pathway through No-When to the northern kingdoms. They say it has to do with the fact that there are no... *articulations* that far to the north and that... forgive me My Lord... that your power is not yet sufficient to allow our Demon allies to construct a gateway so far from any articulation. These are their words, Lord, not mine. I know nothing of articulations or gateways. I only deliver this news because they are too cowardly to deliver it themselves. I b-b-beg of you... do not to penalize *me* for *their* failures.”

As Cyure silently pondered this news, Pendril took the opportunity to furtively scrutinize his master. The deity had changed considerably in the seven years since Pendril had assumed the office of High Lord. He had been hastily sworn-in to replace the traitor, Hughn, who had made the unthinkable decision to release the powerful Scion called Rokey, using his own blood to awaken the God instead. As a result, it had taken several weeks for Cyure’s body to fully reconstitute. Then, when at last he awoke, he was completely devoid of strength. In fact, it was a week before Cyure could even speak and nearly a month before he had the strength to sit up. At that time, he looked like a statue, his flesh cold and as gray as the stone ossuary from which he finally arose. Now, Pendril noted, he looked human again, except for his twelve foot tall stature and glowing, red eyes.

Cyure’s power was slowly returning as well. Though nowhere near its peak yet, it had gradually built up over these past seven years to the point where no sorcerer or necromancer could hope to defeat him in battle. Had he done nothing and simply waited, his power would no doubt be much greater by now, but Cyure had been impatient to begin the conquest of Firma, as had his followers. As a result, Cyure was expending much of his precious energy augmenting the powers of his minions and weaving an astonishing array of potent spells to foment his invasion plans.

One of these spells was the Endless Night, a pall that hid the sun behind a dense cover of black clouds, plunging all of Firma into perpetual darkness. This provided the armies of Moribar with a great advantage, for much of Cyure’s army was comprised of creatures, such as goblins and dire wolves, who had heretofore dwelt either underground or deep within the dark hearts of Firma’s forests. At first, Cyure had used this pall only sparingly, but just under a year ago, he had launched a full-scale invasion of all the kingdoms of Firma, and had brought the darkness on to stay. This was not an impulsive move. Preparations had begun the year before, storing large

quantities of grain and constructing large wooden buildings in which food could be grown using mage light. When Pendril had once plucked up the courage to ask his lord whether this was not too much energy for him to be expending so soon after his resurrection, Cyure had answered that there would be plenty of time for him to gain full strength once the conquest was complete. Pendril had wondered if this wasn't a potentially dangerous mistake, considering that The Scion, Rokey, was still at large. He did not, however, share this thought with Cyure. Nothing angered his master more quickly than the mention of Rokey's name.

Finally, the deity came out of his reverie and, to the High Lord's astonishment, smiled down at him. For some reason, Pendril found his master's smile even more terrifying than his usual scowl.

"Fear not, Pendril," Cyure told him. "I do not blame you. I do not even blame my necromancers. Though I would have been pleased had they succeeded, I dwelt long enough in No-When to realize that even *it* has limitations. For the present, we shall work on consolidating our power in the lower kingdoms. When the time is right, we will move in and deal with those to the north."

"You are most generous, My Lord," said Pendril, bowing low.

"I am not a monster, Pendril," said Cyure. "All I ask for is the best effort one can give."

Pendril wondered if any of those hanging from the posts would agree with that, but he remained silent.

"What of the Noble Contemplative?" Cyure inquired. "How are we faring there?"

Now it was Pendril who smiled, happy to finally be able to deliver some good news.

"Our armies have the entire complex surrounded," he replied. "We have not yet succeeded in breaking the magical shield they have placed around themselves, but our necromancers there are working on a new spell to bring it down. They should be releasing it any time now."

"Excellent news," said Cyure. "The Brotherhood has been a thorn in my side for too long already. It is time they were eliminated once and for all. Besides, there is every chance that – *he* – is there. As I cannot detect his presence anywhere else, it is logical to surmise that he is hiding within their protective shield. I want them all dead except him, do you hear, Pendril? In no way is he to be harmed. He is to be trussed up like a goose and brought back to Moribar immediately. Has that been made clear to everyone there?"

"Yes, Lord," Pendril replied. "They all know to look for the sorcerer with the golden eyes, and that they are not to harm him under any circumstances."

"Good," Cyure said, satisfied. "Once The Scion has been returned to me – once I have added his power to my own – there will be nothing

left to stand in my way. I can crush the last vestiges of resistance and rule Firma unopposed. It is then, Pendril, that the real fun will begin.”

Cyure smiled down at him again, and the High Lord felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. He couldn't imagine what a god's notion of fun might be, particularly this god. Many of Cyure's followers still expected Firma to become a worldly paradise under his benevolent rule, as was promised. Pendril had once believed this too. He had once been full of all those same hopes and ideals. But now, having spent considerable time in the proximity of his “benevolent” lord, he was now all but certain that many of the faithful, especially the more idealistic human disciples, were in for quite a rude awakening. Soon enough, he thought, their only hope was likely to be that they would continue to stay in their deity's good graces – and off of those posts outside.

“You may go now, Pendril,” Cyure said, waving his hand dismissively. “I shall want a progress report later today.”

High Lord Pendril bowed and quietly left the room. Cyure reached over and pulled the bell cord that hung next to his throne. A moment later, he heard the familiar shuffle of feet behind him, along with a heavy, labored wheezing.

“Wine,” Cyure commanded.

The creature shuffled off, returning shortly with a goblet of wine. Cyure accepted it and took a long drink, regarding the creature who now stood waiting for his next command. This had been a man once – and a very powerful man, at that. What remained now was little more than a shell, an animated corpse, still breathing, but only out of habit. The wheezing noise was caused by air rushing in and out through the deep, ragged gash in its throat – a self-inflicted wound made years ago, so that his life's blood could bring his beloved deity back to life. But by choosing to sacrifice his own life rather than that of his more powerful nephew, the man had considerably hampered the Order of the Bone's plans and incurred the wrath of the very god he had died to awaken. As soon as he had amassed enough power, Cyure had immediately ordered his corpse exhumed from its grave. He had then summoned the dead man's spirit from the peaceful realm of The Underworld and imprisoned it back inside the rotting body. For Hugh, former High Lord of the Order and uncle of The Scion, Rokey, the six and a half years since then had been an unending ordeal of agony and torment. For others, this cruel and grisly punishment had served as a warning – a clear message that if one dared betray the Order of the Bone, not even death could protect you from its vengeance.

Cyure continued to study the dead man closely. He had ceased to be angry with Hugh some time ago. If he were not such an effective deterrent to those who might otherwise consider defecting, he would long ago have freed his spirit from its fetid incarceration. After all, the

man *had* cut his own throat for him. Now was simply not the right time, though.

"You may go," he told the corpse.

Hughn turned and shuffled slowly back out again. Cyure got up from his throne and walked to the window, his own gait nearly as slow as that of his dead servant. Though he had regained tremendous power since his resurrection seven years earlier, much of it was being used to bolster his army of necromancers. Elemental spells, such as the one that was currently keeping Firma in perpetual darkness, also cost him vast quantities of magical energy. As a result, Cyure often did feel drained and weak, though he would never admit such a thing to the likes of Pendril. No ordinary mortal on Firma posed any threat to him, but there was still one individual who did. So long as Rokey remained loose in the land, Cyure remained vulnerable. Of course, the simpler option would be to have him killed on sight, but it was far preferable to have Rokey captured and returned to Moribar, where Cyure could siphon the young man's vast untapped stores of power to add to his own. This option would not only rid him of his enemy once and for all, it would also supply him with enough power to fully restore his godhead. Indeed, without the infusion of Rokey's energy, his complete restoration could take decades, even centuries. He was not willing to wait that long. Closing his eyes, Cyure began to concentrate on his nemesis, trying to hone in on the young man's magical aura. Though he detected nothing, he was not concerned. His armies were nearly everywhere now. It was only a matter of time.

Time.

Was his enemy making the most of it, Cyure wondered, this precious time for which his uncle has paid so dearly?

"I sincerely hope so, young Rokey," Cyure whispered to the perpetual night, "for that time has nearly come to an end."