THE GAUNTLET THROWN

Revised Edition
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CHAPTER ONE
THE FALARAN

Brydon sat up with a gasp. He peered into the darkness, senses straining for any hint of movement or sound. He strove to calm his apprehension as he listened to the chirp of crickets and the buzz of insects around his guttering fire, but something had awakened him. He slipped from his makeshift bed as quietly as possible and reached for his nearby sword, buckling it around his hips as he stood up.

He picked up his bow and pondered his makeshift bed for a moment. He set his bow down long enough to stuff the empty blankets with spare clothing pilfered from his pack, forming the general outline of a sleeping figure. Then he took up his bow again and slung the quiver of arrows over his shoulder. He eased into the trees and waited, watchful.

After long minutes, Brydon’s initial tension faded into impatience. The night seemed perfectly normal. He suppressed a sigh and leaned back against the nearest tree trunk. His fingers loosened around the leather grip of his longbow and his thumb idly brushed the line in a tuneless rhythm, silenced by his palm before its twang could vibrate through the still air. The tip of the arrow drooped, fletching caught loosely between his fingers. The red and brown feathers appeared gray in the darkness.

"Where are you?" he muttered after the minutes had dragged into something closer to an hour. The chill had seeped into his bones. Winter was not long past, and it was plenty cold enough to numb his extremities. He flexed his stiff fingers and half-hoped his premonition was wrong. Perhaps there was no one there, and he could continue his journey without senseless bloodshed—possibly his own. If Redolians lurked in the darkness, they would not hesitate to kill him, a lone Falaran. Brydon’s business and his route were hardly secret. He hoped they were relatively few in number, although he was confident of his skill. He could probably take on four, possibly five.

A breeze drifted by and ruffled his hair, carrying the scent of pine, forest mulch, and wood smoke from the dying flicker of his campfire. His eyes went to his makeshift bed and then back to the forest; the area was thick with shadows. He wished briefly for moonlight as the breeze sprang up again, more insistently. As if the wind had been a signal, four of the shadows came to life. Steel glinted in the starlight as the figures
crossed the clearing and leaped upon the blankets. Brydon felt a flash of satisfaction even as he scowled. *Bastards without honor,* he thought, *trying to kill me in my sleep.*

He pulled the string taut as the first dagger stabbed into his bedding. The arrow hissed before it plunged into the man’s throat. Brydon smoothly nocked another arrow. The second man halted his knife in mid-swing and turned toward him. The second shaft drove into the man’s chest. Simmering anger drove the chill from Brydon’s blood. He held no hatred for his attackers, but their cowardly behavior had earned them no mercy. The third man was faster. He threw a dagger as Brydon tugged another arrow from his quiver. The dagger whizzed by Brydon’s ear and caromed into the trees as Brydon’s arrow pierced the assassin’s chest. He fell with a loud cry.

The fourth man stood his ground, peering into the trees where Brydon stood. He had not leapt forward with the same enthusiasm of the others. Brydon wondered why he had hung back when the others had attacked. Perhaps he had no liking for the job? Brydon stayed his hand and relaxed his hold on the bowstring. The would-be killer raised his sword and the blade reflected the orange glow from the fire as it moved.

"Well, Falaran," the man snarled, "what are you waiting for? Are you hoping I’ll run?"

He stepped forward and Brydon drew back on the string. The firelight caught the man’s features for a moment and the sight deflated Brydon’s growing anger in a rush of astonishment.

"Kellyn?" he breathed. It was impossible! Kellyn was two years dead. Brydon had lit the torch at his funeral. He shut his eyes for an instant and then banished the image as he released the arrow. The man lurched at the impact and crumpled into the dust.

Brydon walked into the circle of fallen men and kicked the sword away from his final assailant. The man did not stir. Brydon unsheathed a dagger and knelt to press his fingers against the man’s neck; his pulse beat strongly. Brydon tipped the man’s head to the side and nodded in satisfaction. The arrow had grazed a nasty furrow in his scalp just above his left ear, but he would not die from such a small wound.

Up close he bore little resemblance to Kellyn. It had obviously been an odd trick of the light. Still, the incident left Brydon uneasy. Kellyn had been his best friend. Was it an omen that had caused him spare the man’s life, or simply a strange coincidence? He pondered the wisdom of allowing the man to live, but he was no cold-blooded murderer. He had killed to defend himself and felt some remorse for lying in wait for them in the darkness. It seemed dishonorable, even though he would have stood no chance against them in honest combat.

The other three were dead. Brydon had expected an attack since leaving his escort three days ago, but he had hoped to avoid it. His attackers were definitely Redolian; their appearance confirmed it, and their hostility came as no surprise—Falara had been at war with them for decades.

Brydon removed the man’s hidden weapons (four daggers) before stoking the fire and heating some water. He dragged the man to the nearest tree and tied him securely, using strips cut from his damaged and bloodstained cloak, and then he washed and bandaged the arrow wound. The laceration still bled, but not enough for concern.
When the task was completed, Brydon turned his attention to the fallen men. He grimaced and dragged the first corpse into the trees before returning for the others. His first arrow had been true, piercing the man’s heart, but Brydon took no satisfaction from his marksmanship. Killing a man was a far cry from loosing arrows at targets or hunting game. These men would never go home to their loved ones. Brydon spared a moment of sorrow for the unknown Redolians. What a useless waste.

Once he had dealt with the bodies, he returned to camp and knelt briefly before the fire. He said a quick prayer of thanks that his body was not cooling in the earth, and then he wrapped himself in his cloak. He spared one final look at the unconscious man before allowing sleep to claim him.

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Brydon roused early to the sound of loud cursing. He blinked for long moments at his unfamiliar surroundings, and then sat up and stared at the bound man, who was fully conscious. And angry.

"You Falaran cur!" The man strained at the ropes that held him. "Why not kill me like the others? Do you plan to torture me? I would sooner die than beg a Falaran for mercy!"

Brydon rubbed the night’s fog from his eyes and peered more closely at the tied man. He looked to be Brydon’s age, or not far from it. His black hair was long and pulled back into an intricate braid after the manner of his people, although Brydon had been forced to loosen it somewhat during his ministrations. Several strands had come undone and threatened to cover eyes that were green and showed all the warmth of winter ice.

He got to his feet, raked a hand through his own unruly blond hair, and stretched the kinks out of his muscles. He had only been away from home for a few days, but already he was tired of sleeping on the ground. It was going to be a long journey.

Brydon turned his attention to the man. "I suppose you hail from Redol?" he asked.

The man’s face flamed. "You’ll get nothing from me, except a length of steel in your gut!" The would-be assassin’s voice was surprisingly level even as it rang with suppressed rage.

"I will take that as a yea." Brydon looked more closely at the man. "So, is your animosity directed at me specifically, or was the attack prompted by general feelings of spite toward all Falarans?"

"Every Falaran deserves to die!"

"I see." Brydon felt some relief. If every Redolian raider knew his mission, he was doomed to failure before he even began. "Then it is because I am Falaran. Why do your people insist on this warlike behavior? Falara has not invaded Redol for more than a century. Our countries could exist in peace if Redol stopped raiding our borders."

"Your borders? That’s typical Falaran arrogance! The land west of the Stonepeaks should belong to us, as it did before you stole it! You talk of raiding, but we are only trying to reclaim our rightful lands. Since you people never listen to reason, maybe killing a future Falaran king will draw some attention."
Brydon frowned and revised his opinion. Apparently, they had known of Brydon’s mission. He had expected an attack, but he had not anticipated a political agenda. Brydon generally thought of Redolians as uneducated barbarians, lying in wait for unsuspecting travelers like common bandits. "Why court trouble? If you kill every Falaran you see and continue raiding our borders, you will only give the current king a reason to invade."

"I don’t think we have much to fear from that quarter. It is said that your king is not far from his deathbed."

Brydon grimaced, but looked away from the surprisingly lucid gaze. He said no more and stoked the fire in order to break his fast, ignoring the renewed sounds of indignation coming from his prisoner. Brydon had no fear of the bonds giving way. If anything, the Redolian had only tightened the knots with his struggles.

"Are your ropes tight enough?" Brydon asked. His chuckles set off a round of expletives from his unwilling guest, who insulted every facet of Brydon’s birth and upbringing. Brydon ignored the angry man and performed his morning rituals before frying some duck eggs he had carefully packed along. He added his meager supply of spiced ham.

"Would you like to break fast?" Brydon asked, affecting a companionable mien. Although tired, he felt rather cheerful, largely due to the fact that he had survived the previous night’s confrontation.

"Go to Sheol."

"I made some for you, anyway."

He took the pan over to the assassin and held a forkful of food to his lips. The cold green gaze did not waver and the man’s mouth compressed tightly.

"It is not poisoned. If I wanted to kill you I would have done so already."

The glare grew more frigid. "Fine."

Brydon spooned the meal to the Redolian’s lips and he ate with evident reluctance, likely only suffering to eat in order to conserve his strength in hopes of escape.

"What is your name?" Brydon asked as he sat back on his haunches and devoured what was left in the pan.

The man rolled his eyes and looked away.

Brydon shrugged. "Suit yourself. Since I need to call you something, I think I will go with Failed Killer. Or how about Weaponless? Or Bested-by-a-Falaran. That one has a nice ring to it, don’t you think, although it is a bit long."

The Redolian looked apoplectic. "My name is Toryn."

"Toryn. I suppose it will do. I would that we had met under more pleasant circumstances. I am Brydon Redwing, although you probably know that. Or did you just stumble upon me and hope I was the man you sought?"

"I know you are a damned Falaran on a quest!" the Redolian snapped. "And if I have another opportunity, you’ll not live to finish it!"
"I will bear that in mind." The previous night’s attack had apparently been meant for him alone and was not part of some deeper plot, but Brydon would like to know if there were others nearby seeking his blood. He had no idea how to pry such information from his angry captive.

Brydon cleaned the pan with a handful of gravel and rinsed it in the nearby stream before he repacked his belongings. He had divested Toryn and his dead comrades of useful items, including seven daggers, two short swords, a hand axe, one soft leather cloak, and small personal effects that mostly consisting of beaded jewelry and braided leather. Brydon tossed the weapons into a pile, but stowed the cloak and personal items in his pack. He slung the pack upon his back and picked up Toryn’s sword. The metal was wet with dew. Bits of dried grass, dirt, and pine needles clung to it until he knocked the flat of the blade against his boot heel. He used the sword to cut the bonds around Toryn’s legs, as well as those holding him to the tree, but left Toryn’s hands bound behind his back. The sword had a fine edge and excellent balance, though it appeared well-used. Brydon swished it approvingly.

Toryn climbed to his feet and eyed Brydon balefully. They were almost of a height, though Toryn was slightly taller.

Brydon used the sword to gesture to the trail that skirted his campsite. It meandered back to the road.

"After you," Brydon said.

Toryn seemed about to move, but then paused. He looked decidedly uncomfortable. Brydon wondered what he would do if Toryn refused to walk. Brydon’s code of honor would not allow him to cold-bloodedly kill the Redolian, nor would it be humane to leave him tied to a tree and hope he could free himself.

"One question, if you will," Toryn requested, almost politely. Brydon nodded, sensing Toryn’s difficulty in swallowing his pride. "I would know what you have done with my fallen comrades."

Brydon’s brows lifted in surprise, although it was a valid request. He said, "It is rumored that Redolians put their dead into the ground." Toryn nodded. "I laid them in a ditch and covered them with dirt and rocks. I am lacking the means to dig graves, at the moment. Their bodies should be safe enough from wolves. I said what words I could to speed their spirits on their journey. And I marked the spot, should you care to return to it one day."

Toryn stared at the ground. His voice was barely audible. "I… thank you. I had feared you too much a heathen to properly care for the dead, especially Redolian dead. May their souls find swift passage to Adona."

Brydon stared and countered his shock with a question. "What do you know of Adona? You who leap out of the darkness with knives? Does your god teach you to murder?"

Toryn flushed and then glared at Brydon. "I would have killed you more honorably, Falaran though you are, but Galyn and Veed were in charge of this mission, and my elders."

"They were not your elders by much," Brydon said, for none of the men had looked older than five and twenty.
"No, and they were cowards, as well, or they would have followed my suggestion and ambushed you yesterday while you drank from the stream."

"That sounds honorable."

"It’s more than a Falaran deserves."

"Walk," Brydon commanded.

Toryn lifted his chin and started down the trail, obviously too proud to ask where Brydon was taking him, or why.

In truth, Brydon had no answer to either question.

CHAPTER TWO

THE REDOLIAN

Toryn trudged beside his Falaran captor as they trod the road through the forest. It was a broad path blanketed with grass and pine needles. Despite Toryn’s current humiliating situation, shackled and prodded along by a damned Falaran, he was happy to be alive after the fiasco of the previous night. It could very well have been him lying dead in a ditch on this fine spring day. Apparently Redwing felt the same, for he whistled tunelessly as they walked.

Toryn’s sword was tied to Redwing’s pack and his eyes were drawn to it time and again. His fingers itched to grip it once more, and teach the Falaran the folly of keeping him alive. As near as Toryn could determine, were traveling near the southern border of Falara. The road would soon leave Redwing’s homeland and cross into the mountainous northern edge of Terris.

They stopped at noonday for a brief rest and Toryn suffered the Falaran to stuff a piece of dried lamb into his mouth and wash it down with water from his water skin, although the gamey taste of lamb made Toryn shudder. He studied his captor while they rested. The Falaran was young, but seemed quite fit. There were no signs of decadent living that Toryn had expected to see. A long sword was scabbarded to his waist; its hilt glittered with gold. Toryn would have liked to see the blade. Admittedly, the Falaran could use a bow, but Toryn wondered if he had any skill with a sword. The elegant beauty of the ruby-encrusted hilt did not speak of hard usage.

Redwing wore a gilt-edged dagger that matched the sword and Toryn thought both would be worthy prizes for him to show off once he returned home. The Falaran wore typical Falaran clothing: leather breeches and supple black boots, and a shirt of wool in a simple buff color. Over the shirt he wore a brown leather vest lined in sheepskin. Stitched onto the right breast of the vest was an intricate design that Toryn tried to examine whenever Redwing’s attention wandered. It was some sort of Falaran clan-symbol, Toryn supposed, and resembled a fighting falcon set on a red shield. Toryn’s interest was also captured by the signet ring Redwing wore upon his left hand. Toryn could not make out the design, but it flashed ruby and gold when the sunlight caught it. Falaran jewelry was prized in Redol.
Despite Toryn’s disdain, he watched Redwing with grudging approval. The Falaran moved quietly and deliberately. He was no novice traveler. His camp had been well-laid in a rocky bowl, ringed with brush to catch on clothing and rustle upon intrusion. Toryn and his companions had had a difficult time sneaking up to the campsite, crawling inch by inch on their bellies and sliding carefully through small gaps in the undergrowth. Despite their care, Redwing had known of their coming, even though he should have been asleep. They must have made enough noise to alert him.

Redwing took no chances with Toryn as they traveled, staying far enough behind to avoid surprise attacks on Toryn’s part, yet not so far that Toryn could have fled without Redwing feathering him with an arrow. The Falaran seemed to prefer to keep the bow in his hand rather than carrying it over his shoulder as they walked.

"Why are you taking me along?" Toryn asked when his curiosity got the better of his pride. He tried to wipe water droplets from his chin with his shoulders, since Redwing had not untied his hands when it was time to drink. Instead he sat far too close as he tipped the water skin gently into Toryn’s parched mouth. Toryn hated to converse with the enemy, but unease about his potential fate prompted him to pry what he could out of the Falaran.

"Would you rather be dead like your friends?" Redwing asked. "How long before others of your tribe come searching for you and your cohorts?"

"Why? Do you plan to keep me hostage?" Toryn asked, unable to fathom the Falaran’s motives.

Redwing snorted. "Certainly not. Not even if you would bring a ransom." Toryn kept his features perfectly blank, neither affirming nor denying the statement while the blue eyes studied him. Redwing shrugged and continued, "I haven’t the time to trade threats and offers with your people, even if they were inclined to let me live after slaying three of your companions."

Toryn shook his head in confusion. "Why not just kill me, then?" He did not want to die, as Redwing had intimated, but he was curious about the Falaran’s intentions. It simply made no sense to keep Toryn alive.

Redwing smiled. "Contrary to popular Redolian belief, not all Falarans are bloodthirsty killers."

Toryn was dubious, but kept silent. He was glad enough to be alive after what had happened to his accomplices. He had not known them well, so their deaths caused him no great pain, but he did not like to see his countrymen slain, no matter their incompetence. Then again, he could also be considered incompetent. He had not been able to kill a lone man with the aid of three others. His brother would be mortified. Perhaps he would get another chance at Redwing and could return to Redol in pride. He perused the Falaran speculatively, a gaze that Redwing did not overlook. He checked the bonds and Toryn felt some satisfaction that a mere glance could provoke a reaction.

The day turned out to be pleasantly warm. Without prompting, Redwing occasionally paused to loosen Toryn’s bonds and allowed him to relieve himself, although he kept a dagger pressed into the small of Toryn’s back during the maneuver. Toryn held back the need to fight his way free. Sooner or later, the Falaran would become lax. He hoped.
Toryn considered himself to be a man of some patience, but after listening to Redwing’s tuneless whistling for another hour, his bruised eardrums persuaded him to speak. "May I request some other form of torture?" he asked, stopping suddenly. "Pluck out my fingernails, perhaps? Blind me? Practice your archery on me?"

"What are you talking about?" Redwing seemed startled by the outburst. He studied Toryn as if assessing his condition. Toryn stood tall, determined not to show any sign of weakness, even though his head pounded with every step and he could feel blood trickling from beneath the bandage to mingle with the sweat of his brow.

"Your whistling is worse than the howling of a sick cat," Toryn said.

"I’m glad you like it." Redwing grinned. "Please keep walking." They continued on and he whistled louder and more tunelessly than before. Toryn finally groaned. Redwing’s attempt at annoyance had been amplified by Toryn’s headache.

"Enough. I will talk. What do you want to know?"

"I was not trying to force you into speaking."

"I'll talk. Anything to silence your accursed whistling."

"Well, if you feel so strongly about it ..."

"I do."

"Very well," Redwing said. "Tell me about yourself."

"My name is Toryn. I am from Redol and I plan to kill you. Let’s talk about you, now."

"I already know what you think about me."

"Perhaps I will change my mind," Toryn offered and then chuckled at the absurd thought. "More likely you will milk me for information to plan your escape and retaliation."

Toryn nodded contemplatively. "That, too."

"Is there anything else we can discuss? Or shall I just whistle?"

Toryn thought quickly. "You seemed surprised at my mention of Adona. Is it possible we have similar beliefs?" He had pondered the question as they walked.

"Most Falarans worship Adona," Redwing said, sounding nonplused. "Although the more remote villages still pay homage to the pagan gods of earth and moon, sun and sky. The Brotherhood of the Path built a chapel in Eaglecrest five summers ago. They set up several monasteries in Falara and began teaching. I was trained by the Order of Might."

"Trained? Trained in what?"

"Archery," Brydon replied with a grin. Toryn rolled his eyes, but he had to acknowledge that one. "Sword and hand-fighting. Lance skill."

"I didn’t know the Church taught the military arts. At home the monks teach only the words of Adona and perform ceremonies on holy days, as well as marriages, birth and death rites, of course, and blessings. And there are roaming healers."
"Redol has only accepted the Order of Knowledge and the Order of Healing," Redwing explained. "The Order of Might consists of knight-priests—trained warriors who fight for justice and honor in the service of Adona. They are the preferred guardsmen for royalty or the nobility and answer to their secular overlords, though their first loyalty is to the Church. Knight-priests in Eaglecrest guard the royal family and keep order in the city."

Toryn snorted. He doubted Redol would ever allow a militant order of priests to get a foothold there, though if they were truly loyal, perhaps they could be used to fight against Falara.

"The Order of Might never fights amongst itself," Redwing said as if reading Toryn’s mind. "If Redol established a Brotherhood, they would never go up against the Brotherhood of the Lance, in Falara."

"What good are they, then?"

Redwing laughed. "They maintain the laws. They fight bandits, guard prisoners, escort travelers through hostile areas... And they are priests, as well, so they perform the holy offices like your wandering monks. Do you know about bards? The Bardic Order is somewhat less devout than the others. They seek Adona’s blessing through music and song. Bards roam the world, exchanging lodging for song and stories."

"I have seen a bard!" Toryn exclaimed. "He came to our winter encampment and spent the evening playing pipes and singing. Afterward, he wanted to hear some of our music. Several of the girls sang and we all danced to the old tunes. It was a great time! He wrote many strange symbols on paper while he was with us."

Brydon nodded. "Writing music, no doubt. Bards always seek new material. I wouldn’t be surprised if that same bard is now singing Redolian songs in the south."

"What do you mean ‘writing music’—how can music be written?"

"Each sound has a special symbol. Anyone can read it once they understand the symbols."

"Can you read it?"

"Some," Redwing admitted. "Though I can only play the lute and not very good."

Toryn frowned, mentally scoffing. Read music, indeed!

Redwing went on. "The Brotherhood of the Book taught me how to read common writing as well as music. The bishop taught me mathematics. I was blessed by the bishop’s own hand before starting this journey."

"We cannot possibly have similar beliefs," Toryn said, bewildered and somewhat horrified at the thought.

"Redol seems like Falara in its younger days, before the Church began to flourish. I confess I expected Redol to have more strange pagan beliefs, like Akarska. I thought your people worshipped some sort of bull god."

Toryn shrugged. "Some do, but the Terrin Church is gaining converts. My tribe observes the old ceremonies during breeding and calving seasons, but we also celebrate the newer holy days, like those in midsummer and midwinter. My people do not gather together
often, so we enjoy the feasts. But a few remain who actually believe we were descended
from Re, the bull-god."

"So you accept the concept of the Creator and the knowledge that all mankind is of one
spirit?"

Toryn snorted. "That is for the monks to debate. I don’t sit around and wonder where my
ancestors came from when I’m snaring a rabbit or stalking Falarans."

"You are not even curious? What if your people and mine have the same ancestry? You
and I could be related, somewhere far back in the mists of time."

"I refuse to believe that!"

"Even so," Redwing said. The idea seemed to intrigue him and he stopped whistling for
the remainder of the afternoon. Toryn contemplated it also, though he tried not to. It was
an abhorrent thought.

When they stopped for the evening, Redwing bound Toryn to a tree, took his bow, and
announced that he was going to find some meat. Toryn did not care. His head throbbed
and every step for the last hour had sent dreadful pounding up into his skull until he
thought it would split. He fidgeted with his bonds for a moment or two after Redwing
disappeared and prayed, despite himself, that the Falaran returned. Being abandoned for
wild animal fodder was not a pleasant prospect.

In due time, Redwing returned carrying two fat rabbits, which he skinned and dressed.
Toryn was asleep shortly after the process began and the rabbits were fully cooked before
he awoke. He stirred as Redwing pulled the roasted meat from the flames. Firelight
glinted off the man’s golden hair. Toryn’s stomach growled.

"Aren’t you afraid other Redolians will spot your fire and come for you?" he asked,
though he knew the chance of it was slim.

"No. No one is near for at least two leagues," the Falaran replied and blew on the meat to
cool it.

"How would you know that?" Toryn thought it a very strange comment.

Brydon smiled. "I have very good eyesight."

Hilarious, Toryn thought. Redwing shoved some hot meat into Toryn’s mouth, probably
to prevent further questions.

"I feel like a pet cur." Toryn swore after he swallowed a large bite that had burned his
tongue and the roof of his mouth.

"Would you rather feel like a cur, or a corpse?" Redwing asked.

Toryn entertained a brief fantasy of throttling the bastard. After they had both eaten their
fill, Redwing leaned back against a tree. They listened to the sounds of the night in
silence. Under different circumstances, it might have been a very pleasant evening.

"What do you plan to do with me?"

Redwing’s face tipped toward him. "If I set you free, what would you do?"
"Go home," Toryn lied. He quelled the rush of excitement Redwing’s words had brought; odd were the Falaran was simply making conversation.

"Were you sent by someone to kill me, or did you take it upon yourselves? I know that Redol has no single leader. Was it your chief who ordered it? Or do you have a council of chiefs?"

Toryn looked away. His clan-chief had not initiated the assassination attempt. In fact, the plan to waylay the Falaran had been cooked up on the spur of the moment and acted upon without much forethought. Toryn had been visiting a neighboring village when news had come of a Falaran with a quest. His companions had been insulting Tory’s manhood for nearly the entire day, so he had boldly suggested that they go and kill the questor. After much drinking—and despite the scoffing of their elders—or perhaps because of it—the four of them had set off to make a name for themselves. It had been something of a competitive lark until Redwing had turned the game deadly serious.

Toryn shifted uncomfortably. "I would rather not say."

"Would your people follow me all the way to Silver?"

"You’re going to Silver?" Toryn could not mask his surprise. It was a very long distance.

"Perhaps." Redwing shrugged. "Would they?"

"Of course not! No one would travel that far. We would wait until you returned, and hope that you did not."

"Good." Redwing pushed himself to his feet and tucked the leather cloak around Toryn. He spread out a makeshift bed for himself, curled up, and was asleep before Toryn could ask him anything more.

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The next day dawned cloudy and cold. They broke their fast with leftover meat, some crumbling oatcakes, and dried apple slices. Toryn eyed the clouds balefully and hoped it wouldn’t rain.

"So much for spring," he grumbled, and shivered as the Falaran untied him from the tree. Redwing shook out the cloak, draped it over Toryn’s shoulders, and then fastened it at his neck.

"You don’t prepare very well for travel," Redwing commented. Toryn wore only black leather breeches, boots, and a rough shirt with a thin leather vest. He had carried nothing but his sword and the daggers Redwing had confiscated.

"Our intention was to kill you and return," Toryn grumbled. "Not to take an extended journey. Where are we, anyway?"

"Approaching the pass near the Akarskan border."

"So we’re still in Falara? Best stay on the road and not wander into Akarska," Toryn advised. "They’ll kill you faster than a Redolian."

Redwing shouldered his pack and Toryn preceded him down the needle-strewn hillside. Their boots hardly made a sound on the dew-wet ground.
"Perhaps not. We have had quests to Akarska in the past. And they supply horses to the Brotherhood of the Lance, in Eaglecrest," Brydon said.

"They supply horses?" Toryn was incredulous. Akarskans and their horses were seldom parted. It was a historical fact.

"Yes. In the late 100s, Falara bargained with Akarska in a bid to claim more land," Brydon explained.

"Imagine that."

"Eventually the talks disintegrated and it might have led to war. Akarska’s leaders appealed to the Terrin Church in Kaneelis. Akarska agreed to supply horses to the Order of Might so that knight-priests could be mounted. In return, it is written that no one associated with the Church may violate Akarska’s borders. They can build no temples, no monasteries, not even an order of healers, although I do not know what Akarskans do when they get ill. The treaty has held for the past hundred years, though there are still far more knight-priests than horses. The steeds that Akarska so generously parts with are always gelded so the church can do no breeding. Akarska makes certain of that."

Toryn snorted. Akarskans were horse-hoarding fools. What harm would it do to allow the equine population to increase outside of Akarska’s borders? It would probably cut down on the incidences of horse-theft in Akarska. He wondered if the Akarskans worshipped horses; they had their own beliefs that few outsiders knew anything about.

"’No one knows the mind of a woman, or an Akarskan,’" Redwing said, repeating an old quote.

Toryn smiled and finished, "’And Akarskan women are doubly mysterious.’ Isn’t the pass dangerous this time of year?"

Redwing nodded. "We will have to pray there are no avalanches or flash floods. Still, better to chance nature than gamble on Akarska’s goodwill, eh?"

Toryn was skeptical, but said nothing. He suspected Redwing feared at least one Redolian ambush awaited him along the road through Terris, should he survive the pass crossing. If plans for an ambush existed, Toryn knew nothing about them.

Much later, as Redwing pushed an overhanging branch out of Toryn’s way so he could duck beneath it, Toryn asked, "Are you ever going to free my hands?"

"I had no idea the ropes were bothering you," Redwing said dryly. "You should have said something."

"You’d enjoy watching me beg, wouldn’t you, Falaran?" Toryn gritted.

"If you have a yearning to do so, feel free. It would be a tale worth retelling."

"You’ll see the sun fall from the sky first."

Redwing chuckled but halted to check Toryn’s bonds. His breath caught and his pale eyes shot to Toryn’s. Toryn looked away, knowing the flesh of his wrists was nearly worn away, and in some places oozed blood. The makeshift rope had rubbed his flesh mercilessly. Redwing swore and severed the bonds with his dagger. Toryn nearly screamed as the scraps fell away. He brought his arms around to the front, wincing at his
cramping muscles. Attempting to move stiffened tendons after a day and a half of inactivity was neither easy, nor pleasant.

Redwing bade him sit down and uncorked a water skin. Before Toryn could react, Redwing poured water over the raw wounds. Toryn bit back a shriek, clenching his teeth until he thought they would crack. The cool liquid felt like salt upon his torn flesh. Redwing washed Toryn’s wrists clean and then cut strips from one of his shirts to use as bandages.

"I did not know the bonds were so tight. You should have told me they were cutting you."

Toryn’s eyes flew open. He studied Redwing carefully as the man tended to his wrists. What manner of man was he, to regret minor wounds on a man who had tried to kill him? Was it a ruse? He searched Redwing’s face, but the Falaran’s clear gaze reflected only sincerity. For the first time Toryn considered him as a fellow man, and not simply as an enemy. The Falarans had chosen Redwing as their future king. Was there some unknown quality that would cause men to follow him, perhaps even to lay down their lives for him? Toryn wondered what Redwing did in his homeland. Was he a leader of men?

"Never mind," Toryn said brusquely and looked away, unable to meet Redwing’s stare any longer. "They will heal."

Redwing nodded. "Let me look at your head."

Against Toryn’s protests, Redwing removed that bandage, as well, and cleaned the wound before he pronounced it uninfected and healthy-looking. He handed Toryn a comb and allowed him to tend to his hair, for which he was grateful. Redwing watched with obvious curiosity as Toryn carefully wove an intricate braid. His hair was entwined with bright green leather cored adorned with jet and pale green stones. Toryn did not bother to explain the significance of either braids or decorations. They had a familial import.

"Can you travel?"

"Of course," Toryn replied, somewhat annoyed that his enemy was now acting like a nursemaid. Toryn walked, leading still, although he noticed with some amusement that Redwing kept a closer grip on his weapons. Toryn flexed his arms to work the stiffness free. Even if he could somehow get his sword back from Redwing, he knew he’d be lucky if he could use it.

As they traveled, the terrain grew rockier, forcing them to climb more frequently. The road lost its level plane and became boulder-strewn and rugged. Pot-sized holes pitted the surface and water drainage had created deep runnels that necessitated careful treading.

"Who maintains this road?" Toryn asked after he stumbled over an exposed root and skinned his left knee. A wagon would have had an impossible time following the path.

"Falara tends it on this side of the pass," Redwing replied between pants of exertion. "And Terris maintains the southern portion. Once the danger of snow slides have passed, work crews will be sent out. The church keeps the road open to facilitate communication between the orders."

Toryn grunted, losing interest and paying more attention to his footsteps.
The air grew thinner and they stopped to rest frequently, sweating in spite of the cool day. By sundown, Toryn was exhausted. Redwing had feathered two quail when they had surprised a covey next to the road. When they ate that night Toryn was allowed to feed himself, for which he was grateful. He hoped never to take such small freedoms for granted again. The birds were small but delicious, and eaten with a slab of hard white cheese and flat bread baked with herbs and nuts. They devoured the meal in silence.

"What do Redolians swear upon?" Redwing asked as he tossed his gnawed bone into the fire. Sparks shot up toward the night sky. "What is an oath you would never break?"

"For me, personally? I suppose I would swear upon Adona." Toryn shrugged as he concentrated on the last of his meat. It was tasty, but it needed something. Herbs. Rosemary, perhaps. And ale would be nice to wash it down, or something a bit stronger. Like that firewater the Amblyn tribe brewed in the winter. "Or upon the sword of my father. Why do you ask?"

"Very well, if you swear by Adona, and on the sword of your father, that you will not try to escape, nor try to harm, nor kill me, then I will not bind you tonight," Redwing declared.

Toryn’s head snapped up, all thought of herbs and firewater dissipating. He wondered if Redwing had lost his mind. "Why would you do that?"

Redwing’s brow wrinkled and he shrugged. "I have no wish to kill you. Even though you tried to slay me, you were acting for the good of your country, as you see it. I hope to convince you that should I fulfill my quest and become the next king of Falara, I have no designs on Redol, except perhaps to make peace between us. There has been bloodshed and hostility for far too long." He held up a hand to forestall Toryn’s comment. "I know that two days has not been long enough to persuade you of my sincerity, but perhaps you have some doubt that all Falarans are your enemies. I cannot keep you with me indefinitely, but I would rather you did not return to Redol just yet."

"Why not?"

"It will take me a week to get far enough into Terris to avoid pursuit. On the chance that you still want to kill me, I would rather not cumber myself with the possibility of you following me with reinforcements."

"What if I swore to Adona that I would not tell anyone where you are going?" Toryn asked dryly.

"One promise at a time, please." Redwing raised a hand.

"I could have escaped any time today," Toryn said. "There were numerous opportunities."

"Were there? You have seen my skill with a bow."

The statement was valid, even though Toryn was loathe to admit it. He had been ready to make a run for it several times, but Redwing’s longbow was always in hand and Toryn had never seen such accuracy as Redwing possessed. To slay three men with three arrows in the dead of night… such a deed could not be attributed to luck.

Even so, Redwing’s suggestion seemed insane—to gamble that Toryn would act in a civilized manner. What was honor between enemies? Toryn would like nothing more
than to cut the Falaran’s throat and make for home, yet Redwing’s simple conviction of Toryn’s faith struck home. If Toryn swore by Adona and then betrayed his oath, would he be putting his soul in jeopardy? Where would be the glory in the kill if he swore falsely and attacked the Falaran in his sleep?

"I suppose I have little choice," Toryn said finally. "I swear to Adona that I will not try to escape tonight, nor try to kill you, even though you are a dirty sheepherding Falaran who deserves to die."

Redwing’s lips twitched in a half-smile. "That will have to do." He pulled out his sword and knelt before it with left his hand on the hilt. He clasped his right hand over his heart and bowed his head.

"You do that every morning and night," Toryn commented. "Why?"

"I am giving thanks. Would you like to hear the words?"

Toryn nodded and Redwing spoke aloud. "Adona, giver of life and breath, fire and water, thanks be to you for watching over me this day. Protect me as I sleep so that I may dedicate myself to your service on the morrow." He smirked. "And guide Toryn to follow the path of honor, in your name. So be it."

Toryn made no comment and Redwing prepared himself for bed. Toryn knew Redwing would sleep little that night, most likely regretting his generous decision. As for Toryn, he had no intention of going anywhere. It would be a long, cold journey back to his family in Redol and Morgyn was sure to have a frothing fit of rage once Toryn reported what they had done. The longer he put off that little confrontation, the better. Toryn would remain with the crazy Falaran for a while longer. He frowned as he pondered Redwing’s earlier words. Could he be sincere? Would he really seek to bring peace between Falara and Redol? Was such a thing even possible after so long, after so much bloodshed and anger? Toryn doubted it, but something in Redwing’s eyes made him want to believe it was possible.

CHAPTER THREE

THE PASS

Brydon awoke tired and foul-tempered the next morning. He and Toryn did not speak. Brydon assumed Toryn was berating himself for not having stolen away in the night, even though he would not have been successful. Every time Toryn had so much as twitched, Brydon had snapped awake, gripping his dagger-hilt in a sweat-soaked fist. What had seemed a noble gesture at the time had turned into a nightmare of taut nerves and sleeplessness.

After a quick meal and some hot tea, they took to the road and climbed, reaching areas where patches of snow gathered in the shadows as if cowering from the sunlight. Water trickled across the road and ice rimmed the edges of the rivulets. The sky remained cloudless and though the sun’s warmth was welcome, Brydon considered it a mixed blessing since it would also cause snow to melt from the higher peaks. The mountains to their right were high, jagged, and nearly impassible, cutting Redol off completely from the road that edged its southern border.
The trees thinned and the grass all but disappeared, giving way to sturdy evergreen shrubs dotted with wildflowers. The ground sloped away on their left and eventually became a steep, snow-covered cliff.

The sun was high when the road disappeared. A waterfall cascaded from the mountainside. The impromptu river had eaten away at the road and created a yawning, steep-sided chasm fully twenty feet across and thirty deep.

Brydon swore as he examined the canyon. Toryn said nothing; he merely watched Brydon through expressionless green eyes. Brydon could practically hear Toryn’s amused thoughts: Well, that’s it, then. Backtrack and take your chances with Akarska. I’ll just make my way back to Redol where I can gather reinforcements and hunt you down, now that I know the direction you’re headed.

Brydon set his jaw and studied the problem. The nearest tree on the other side of the gap was close enough to hit with a rope, but Brydon had no grappling hook. He could tie the rope to an arrow and sink it into the tree, but he doubted that even the most firmly embedded arrow would hold the weight of a man. He examined the cliff face carefully and at last nodded to Toryn.

"I think we can cross if we climb up there." He pointed to a spot a short distance up the hillside. "It’s narrow there and we can jump across using those two boulders. It looks like a fairly easy leap. And the descent on the other side does not look too difficult." The cliff wall was steep, but not sheer, and littered with large boulders and shrubs.

Toryn shook his head. "I am not risking my life because an idiot Falaran wants to cross a stream. If you want to try it, go ahead. You might not fall." He gestured to the place where the water plunged out from the broken roadway and crashed onto the jagged boulders below. "But if you do, it will save me the trouble of killing you."

Brydon grinned. "Actually, you get to go first. If you don’t make it, I will admit it was foolish, turn around, and seek an alternate route."

Toryn’s face flamed. Brydon felt slightly guilty, but rationalized that if it was Adona’s will that Toryn fall, it would take one problem out of his hands. After all, he could not escort the damned Redolian all the way to—

A particularly vile curse from Toryn severed his train of thought. The Redolian stalked to the cliff face and from there scrambled to the top of the nearest boulder. He climbed the first eight feet with the agility of a cat and Brydon watched in amazement. After a moment of thought, Brydon took a dagger from his pack and balanced it to throw, just in case Toryn decided to start lobbing rocks down on his head. Toryn paused once and looked down as if considering that very thing. A tense moment followed, during which Brydon wondered whether he could dodge a missile and then send the knife toward the Redolian. He had less than perfect aim with a dagger. Then again, if he could dodge out of reach, it would take but a moment to string his bow...

Toryn must have come to the same conclusion. He turned and continued climbing until he reached the point where the water surged between two large boulders. A short gap spanned them.
Brydon put away his knife and started to climb. He was not about to let Toryn cross safely while he followed at his leisure. He would be like a bug clinging to the wall while Toryn happily threw stone after stone at him.

Brydon climbed—no easy feat with a full backpack, a bow, quiver, and two swords strapped to his body. He paused to watch as Toryn tested the boulder and then hopped easily across the gap, using every available handhold for additional stability. Toryn started down the other side and Brydon hoisted himself to the top of the large boulder on his side of the stream. It did not seem nearly as large now that he stood upon it. He paused a moment to catch his breath and spared a glance at Toryn. The Redolian clung to the opposite wall, not moving. Was he taking a breather?

Brydon watched Toryn for a moment or two longer, and then gripped an overhanging bush and stood at the edge of the gap. He looked down at the swiftly flowing water and the space between suddenly seemed like an infinitely huge breach. Still, Toryn had made it look easy.

Brydon took a deep breath and leaped across, grabbing at handholds for only a moment before he looked for the safest way down. As he stepped down onto a lichen-encrusted rock, he felt it shift slightly. Brydon’s heart jumped immediately to his throat and he froze, wondering if he had imagined the movement. Rather than hesitate to see if it happened again, he launched himself downward, gripping each outcropping of rock so tightly he drew blood from his fingertips. The climb down was not as steep, although one portion was deadly. What had looked like a section of flat ground was actually loose rock and shale, which yanked Brydon’s feet out from under him. He knew why Toryn had been clinging to the wall.

Brydon crossed slowly, gripping the same handholds Toryn must have used, and set his feet down gently, as though he trod on eggshells. During the nerve-wracking exercise, he tried not to wonder at Toryn’s position. One prod from a long stick and Brydon would plummet into the raging cataract.

Brydon finally reached a solid outcropping of rock. His arms ached from the exertion. He threw himself upon the stone gratefully and muttered a brief prayer of thanks. After a moment, he climbed to the top and peered over the edge. Toryn sat on a boulder beneath him; he looked up at Brydon wearily.

"I came down here to get something to throw at you, but I was too tired to climb back up."

Brydon nodded, understanding. His arms trembled and his fingers were slick with blood; Toryn’s were likely the same. Brydon levered himself over the outcropping and dropped down next to Toryn, grateful for the patch of snow that somewhat cushioned his landing.

Toryn immediately rose and picked his way back to the road. Brydon followed. The descent was much simpler than the climb had been, as the boulders were widely spaced to create more accessible passage.

When they reached the road, Brydon said, "Well, that wasn’t so bad."

Toryn glared at him.
While they examined their damaged fingers, a horrendous, loud scraping sound startled them. The grating screech turned into a rumble, followed by a thunderous crack, and the sound of something very large plummeting down the chasm.

Brydon hurried back to the ravine with Toryn on his heels. They stood well back from the edge and stared at the empty space where the largest boulder had rested. It had broken free and taken a huge portion of the cliff wall with it. Where the crossable gap had been was now a breach of twelve feet or more.

"It seems we’re not going back that way," Toryn said with an edge to his voice. "You had better hope there is nothing even more unpleasant ahead."

"Let’s get moving," Brydon said.

Toryn turned and stalked down the icy road without another word.

Two hours later, they stood at the edge of a snowy field that stretched out of sight. The road was completely covered by drifts of snow, though its path could be traced by following the slope of the hillside. Brydon sensed Toryn’s intense scrutiny, but he thankfully made no comment.

"I do not have the equipment for us to spend the night in a snow bank. It will be cold enough sleeping here, even with a fire. We will start across at first light and hope to reach the end of it before nightfall." Brydon kept his concern to himself. He knew Toryn was likely worrying, as well, about the depth of the snow, the potential pitfalls concealed, the possibility of frostbite, and the chance of losing the road altogether.

They scoured the roadside for as much wood as possible and stacked their findings in a semi-sheltered alcove that would reflect the fire’s light and heat. Brydon blew on his fingers before he kindled the fire. Already, it was cold. Thank Adona there was no wind or they would likely freeze to death.

When the fire blazed, Brydon dug in his pack and handed Toryn a thick wool shirt. When Toryn made no move to take it, Brydon snapped, "I will not watch you freeze while I have the means to keep you alive. Put it on."

Toryn snatched the shirt and obediently pulled it over his head before he huddled again under the leather cloak. Brydon wrapped himself in his own warm cloak. The sun would not set for at least an hour, but they ate for lack of anything better to do. The dried boar meat was salty and tough.

"Will you renew your promise of last night?" Brydon asked.

Toryn grimaced as he tore off a bit of the meat. "Where would I go?" he snapped.

"You will not try to kill me in my sleep?"

"I won’t need to. Because we are both going to die, out there, tomorrow." He flung out a hand to indicate the snowfield, though it lay around the bend from their contrived shelter.

"I think you are overreacting," Brydon said.

"We have no equipment for crossing miles of snowdrifts," Toryn said. "And neither of us is properly dressed. I don’t relish frostbite."
"I have crossed this pass before," Brydon assured him. "The summit is not far. We should be free of the snow by tomorrow evening."

Toryn chewed his meat in silence and then ignored Brydon by curling up as if to sleep. Brydon built up the fire and scrounged even more wood in hopes that the heat would last most of the night. Though he was tired, he prodded at the fire long into the night before dropping off to sleep.

Brydon woke well before dawn, feeling cold and stiff. The embers of the fire still glowed, so he added more wood and blew the coals into flame. Toryn huddled under the cloak like a curled-up kitten. Brydon walked to the snow bank and filled a pot with snow. The brief exercise got his blood flowing a bit and he hurried back to the fire to melt the snow and boil the water for hot tea.

Toryn sat with hands stretched over the flames. Brydon did not bother to ask how he was feeling, especially after he met Toryn’s sour glare. Instead, he brewed some peppermint tea and made it extra strong. He possessed only one cup, so he let Toryn drink first. The Redolian held the metal cup in both hands to warm them. His breath fogged the air and mingled with the steam from the tea.

Brydon’s morning prayer was heartfelt. "Adona, giver of life and breath, fire and water, I give thanks for your protection and ask your guidance on this day. Grant us strength and wisdom, and provide us safe passage if it be your will. I pledge myself to your service. So be it."

Runoff from the previous day’s warmth had frozen on the ground. Brydon had no doubt there would be a thin sheet of ice covering the snowfield, which would make for even more difficult walking. He wanted to get moving, so he cut up the last of his cheese and gave half to Toryn along with a handful of dried berries and a piece of cold meat.

After gulping a steaming cupful of tea, he tossed the dregs and returned everything to his pack before tugging the cumbersome thing onto his back. His load was more awkward with the addition of his quiver of arrows. Normally worn upon his back, he had modified the quiver to ride just behind his right hip, strapped to his waist like a sword belt. His sword rested upon his left hip, as usual, which left Toryn’s sword to be awkwardly carried. He had finally wedged it into the pack, scabbard and all, with the point sticking upward. Though it put the load somewhat off-balance, it was easier to carry than to have the weight of two swords dragging about his hips. He thought about chucking it, but assumed Toryn would lose all control and strangle him to death if he tried.

Brydon’s bow remained clutched in his hand. It made a decent walking stick and, in addition, he could easily string it if danger threatened. He staggered slightly as he shifted his shoulders to distribute the weight.

"Would you like me to carry something?" Toryn offered. "My sword, perhaps?"

"I can manage."

Before they left the campsite, Brydon rubbed a finger across a piece of charred wood and smeared a stripe of soot beneath each of his eyes.

"Do it," Brydon advised. "The sun will be out today and this will prevent snow-blindness." Toryn, skeptical or not, followed suit and they started off.
The sky was barely tinted by dawn when they took their first crunching steps onto the snow. It was crusted with ice, as expected. The snow was deep in many places where the wind had piled it against the cliff and they moved slowly in those areas. Brydon had no compunction about letting Toryn break the trail. Even with that assistance, his legs burned with exertion.

They paused to rest often. Brydon knew that a man could starve for air in the higher altitudes. Luckily, they had no difficulty sticking to the road. The cliff that bordered it had become an even steeper grade. Snow piled high at the base of it and stacked upon the road, but the far edge was not as deep with it, scoured nearly clean in places by the wind.

They trudged until midday. Brydon wondered time and again why he had not thought to bring gloves as he transferred the bow stave from hand to hand, and warmed the free hand beneath his cloak. Toryn had both hands tucked beneath his armpits to keep them out of the icy air. The sun glared off the snow, but did little to warm them. Thankfully, the wind was still.

An ominous rumbling sound from above brought them both to a halt. Toryn looked at Brydon with something akin to panic in his eyes. The roar grew louder and Brydon cast about frantically for shelter, knowing it was too late. He heard Toryn swear and then the avalanche was upon them.

The next few moments were an endless white blur. He was swept along as though with the tide of a raging river, tumbled and tossed. The bow stave ripped from his hand and his pack felt like it would tear from his back. He opened his mouth to cry out and snow rushed in, suffocating him.

The ride seemed to last forever, but at last he stopped moving. He coughed snow from his mouth and spat partially melted ice crystals. His arms were free and he wiped the snow from his eyes, smacking his wrist into a nearby tree trunk with the movement. A bit more to the left and his skull might have been crushed against the tree. The rest of him was buried in a solid white drift. He was surrounded by pines, which must have slowed the dramatic rush of the snow slide, although the grade was also less steep.

A quick scan of the area disclosed no sign of Toryn.

Cold seeped into his bones from the powdery snow and Brydon set about digging himself free of the white mass, although he could barely move due to the twisted angle of his pack. As soon as he got the edge of his cloak free, he used it to partially protect his stiff hands from the snow as he struggled to liberate his legs.

At last he shakily climbed free of the hole and looked around. The hillside was a broad expanse of churned snow that led back to the road an untold distance above. Brydon’s rattled thoughts finally spared a moment to wonder at Toryn’s welfare. Once again, he scanned the snow around him, alert for any sign of the Redolian.

Brydon shrugged off the cumbersome pack and scrambled up the hillside, eyes roving from side to side across the torn landscape. He pushed through the snow for long minutes and spotted the wooden tip of his bow stave protruding from the whiteness. He jerked it free and found it miraculously unbroken. A sick feeling washed over him as he realized Toryn was likely trapped beneath the snow somewhere along the path of the avalanche.
Brydon clutched his bow in both hands and forced himself not to panic. Running across
the face of the hillside bellowing Toryn’s name would do neither of them any good. For a
mere instant, he thought about leaving the Redolian buried, but an unbidden image of
Toryn suffocating, entombed in snow, caused him to shudder. It was no way for anyone
to die.

He took a long, steadying breath and let it out slowly. "Concentrate," he muttered. "He’s
got to be here somewhere."

With eyes half-lidded Brydon began to walk, zigzagging across the hillside in a pattern
that would have looked drunken to an observer. At last he halted and shoved his bow
stave into the snow. Three-quarters of the shaft disappeared into the whiteness and then
he could push it no further. Brydon left it as a marker and hurried back to his pack to
remove his cooking pot. He rushed back to the spot and began to dig. As he burrowed, he
muttered an intermittent prayer. The exertion kept him relatively warm as he scraped and
tossed snow in a frenzied manner. Relief almost overwhelmed him when he uncovered a
patch of the dark gray wool Toryn wore. The sight energized him and he dug tirelessly
until he could scrape the snow from Toryn’s face, which was tinted a sickly shade of
blue. Using every bit of strength he possessed, Brydon dug deeper and then dragged the
limp Redolian out of his would-be grave.

Dropping to his knees next to Toryn, Brydon breathed his own air into Toryn’s mouth,
using several deep breaths and pinching Toryn’s nose to keep the air from escaping. He
had been taught the technique years before and had once watched a healer revive a
drowned child using the same method.

After what seemed an eternity, Toryn drew a raspy breath and Brydon murmured a quick
prayer of relief. He unbuckled the leather cloak from around Toryn’s neck. They needed
to escape the snow as quickly as possible and build a heat source.

Brydon wedged the bow stave into his sword belt and then grasped the edges of the
leather cloak. It made a fine sled and he towed Toryn’s unconscious form down to where
his pack lay. Brydon shoved everything that he had dislodged back into place and retied
the straps. It was not until then that he noticed Toryn’s sword was gone, lost in the
tumbling ride down the mountainside. Brydon scanned for it for briefly, and then gave up
and set the pack atop Toryn’s legs. It was easier to pull both Toryn and the pack together.
He started through the trees, dragging his burden behind him.

It was slow going. Brydon’s numb hands kept slipping from the cloak and he paused
frequently to breathe into his cupped palms in an attempt to warm his fingers. The trees
grew more numerous as they descended and thick outcroppings of brush appeared,
although the snow remained deep. Eventually Brydon came to a steep drop-off
surrounded by tall pines and large rocks. The descent was nearly double a man’s height
and he was not certain how to get Toryn down the incline. Brydon could simply slide
down the snowy bank, but Toryn would not be able to stop himself from hitting the
boulders below.

After a fruitless search for an easier way down, Brydon finally pulled his rope out of the
pack. He wrapped Toryn in the cloak, shroud like, and tied it off with the rope. Toryn
stirred when he felt his arms being bound to his sides.
"What...?" he rasped.

"Lie still," Brydon ordered. "You’ll be warm and dry soon. I hope."

Toryn’s eyes fluttered shut, though whether he had heard Brydon at all was debatable.

After he passed the rope around a tree, Brydon lowered Toryn down the embankment. He sent the pack down after Toryn and tossed his bow stave after. Brydon looked for the gentlest incline and pushed himself off, sliding down the hill on his back and feeling none of the exhilaration such a feat had brought him as a child; he was simply too tired. A jutting stone bruised his thigh but he reached the bottom in a cloud of powdery snow. He slapped at the caked-on whiteness on his backside and looked around. A possible shelter had been hidden by the overhang.

He scrambled over a few snow-topped boulders until he stood before the jagged cleft of rock. It looked as if a huge slab of stone had broken free from the mountain and come to rest against the hillside, leaving a gap that was a natural lean-to. Brydon shouldered his way inside. The narrow opening hid a surprisingly large interior, hollowed out by runoff from above. A steady stream of water poured down the rock wall to collect in a small pool before it trickled out of the shelter via a similar, much more impassable, opening opposite of where Brydon had entered. The space was large enough—barely—for two men to sit. Brydon returned to Toryn and levered him into the shelter with some effort. He made a hollow on the pebbled floor near the pool, gathered some wood, and quickly built a fire. His watertight bag of oil-soaked fire-starters proved their worth by igniting the damp wood.

Brydon steeled himself and pulled off Toryn’s icy, damp clothing. Toryn roused and tried to push him away.

"You’ll freeze unless you put some dry clothes on," Brydon snapped.

Toryn blinked at him for a moment and seemed to regain his senses. He awkwardly undressed and then wrapped himself in the wool cloak and huddled close to the fire, shivering.

Brydon took off his own clothing and winced when his ice-cold hands touched the few remaining warm parts of his body. He donned a clean pair of breeches—his only other pair, actually. When he’d packed he had not expected to get soaked in an avalanche and subsequent trek down a mountainside. He put on a dry wool shirt and thanked Adona that he had brought along a couple of spares. He wedged sticks into cracks in the walls and hung their wet clothing up to dry before he sat down and pressed his bare feet and stiff hands close to the flames. He knew he would have to go back out soon and replenish their wood supply—the two dead branches he had dragged close to the entrance would not last long. He just hoped his feet would warm up a bit first. From the position of the sun, he judged the time to be about an hour before dusk.

He looked at Toryn. "I should have known you would wake up as soon as I built a fire."

Toryn did not take his gaze from the crackling flames. "I think I was awake a few times," he said. "I remember the sky and treetops moving above me. I thought I was dead." He looked at Brydon, finally. "I think I was dead. I was buried in snow. I couldn’t move and
then... I couldn’t breathe." He looked away and coughed, as though the memory brought back a reflexive response. "You pulled me out, didn’t you? How did you find me?"

"I probed the snow with my bow stave until it hit something solid," Brydon replied semi-truthfully. "Luckily, it was you."

There was a long silence and then Toryn said, "I suppose you saved my life." Brydon nodded, but said nothing. He knew it was a bitter pill for the Redolian to swallow. Toryn grimaced. "Of course, it was your fault I was buried by the avalanche in the first place."

He looked at Brydon hotly, as though daring him to contradict.

Brydon smirked at him. "But if you had not decided to go Falaran-hunting, you would not have been forced to accompany me and," he stressed the word as Toryn began to interrupt, "if Eryka had not chosen me for this quest I would not have met you at all. And if my father had not been such a fine sword-smith we would not have lived near enough to the palace that the girl would even know of me; and if not for my mother, my father would never have taken up a hammer in order to better himself. So I suppose we can lay the blame for this entire predicament on my poor mother’s shoulders."

Toryn listened in stony silence and then growled, "I assume that is your flowery Falaran way of suggesting I take responsibility for my own fate?"

Brydon shrugged, but he had to smile. He had thought of all Redolians as barbaric heathens living in grass huts and sitting around bonfires worshipping strange gods, discussing nothing but ways in which to torment Falarans. He was surprised at Toryn. Not only was he intelligent, but he was also a man of honor, as evidenced by his adherence to the vow he had made. The only barbaric thing about him seemed to be his braided hair.

Toryn glared. "As much as it pains me to suggest it... in fairness to you for dragging my carcass out of a snow bank, regardless of how it got there..." Toryn buried his face in the blanket for a moment. He cursed a few times and the wool muffled his choice oaths. Finally, he raised his head even though he did not look directly at Brydon. "Since I owe you my life, I will no longer try to kill you. I will not track you down, nor will I aid others in doing so. You are free to continue your journey with no hindrance from me. I will, of course, hope that you fall prey to wild beasts, brigands, falling rocks, lightning, or anything else that might slay you through no fault of mine."

"Thank you," Brydon said. He could hardly slight Toryn’s bitterness, under the circumstances.

"As I have no further designs upon you, will you allow me to return to Redol?"

Brydon shrugged. "Yes, but not until we have traveled a bit farther." Toryn’s emerald eyes jerked to his and Brydon grinned wryly. "You may have vowed not to kill me, but all you need to do is go back to Redol and casually mention that the pass is uncrossable. Your countrymen will know immediately which way I have gone. I need no other bloodthirsty Redolians dogging my trail."

"How do you know they are not lying in wait for you already?"

"I was hoping you would grow to like me enough to warn me of any such arrangements," Brydon offered.
"Not bloody likely!" Toryn huffed and Brydon had to laugh. His fingers and toes were beginning to thaw, bringing on the unwelcome burning sensation of renewed circulation. He placed some more wood on the fire and wished he could warm his backside at the same time as his front.

Toryn looked terrible and Brydon was certain he did not look much better. The soot under Toryn’s eyes had smudged across his face on one side and partially washed off on the other. His braid had loosened and one strand of long, black hair had come free and hung listlessly beside his cheek. The bandage Brydon had wrapped around his head the previous day was long gone. A raw spot, dotted with blood, marred the side of Toryn’s chin, evidence of contact with ice or possibly a sharp stone.

"How do you feel?" Brydon asked.

"Better than I would expect after riding an avalanche and being buried alive," Toryn admitted. "Nothing is broken. I don’t think I’ll ever warm up, though."

Brydon nodded in agreement. He tugged his wet boots back on and went to gather more wood. When he returned, Toryn was asleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE CAVE

Toryn slept fitfully, waking whenever Redwing stacked more wood on the fire. The small space warmed rather nicely. The fire reflected off the close walls and the smoke wafted up and out through the open sides. Toryn gradually began to feel almost warm again, though he was forced to rotate like a fowl on a spit in order to heat first one side and then the other. Once, he was jolted awake by the memory of immobility, of being surrounded by overwhelming blue-whiteness, of his air supply diminishing... He sat up and gasped great lungfuls of air while Redwing watched him through half-lidded eyes and pretended to sleep. Damn the Falaran.

Toryn got up and staggered to the entrance to relieve himself; his bare feet crunched on the sandy grit. The night was clear and cold and the stars blazed across the sky in endless profusion. Toryn looked briefly for the silver of the waxing crescent moon, but it must have been behind his field of vision. He shivered at the sight of the snow, more than ready to welcome spring, having seen enough snow to last him a lifetime. The cold whiteness was largely gone from the grassy plains of Redol, thank Adona. Toryn was not a cold-weather person. He much preferred the bright, hot days of summer.

Toryn sighed and returned to the fire, then tossed a few sparse branches onto the flickering flames. He had a feeling it would be a while before he would again see the fields of his homeland, since Redwing seemed intent upon dragging him into Akarska. Not that Toryn could fault him for that, he admitted to himself. If Toryn returned to Redol with the tale of the slaying of Toryn’s companions, a band of bloodthirsty Redolians would indeed hie after the Falaran like wolves on a hot scent. Toryn glanced at his boots, tempted to bolt, but he also knew if he set one foot into the snow outside, Redwing would most likely train a sharp arrow on him before he took three steps. He had no doubt the Falaran was watching him. He tested his theory.
"If you’re going to pretend to sleep, you need to draw in a breath and hold it a moment before letting it out," he suggested.

Redwing huffed and huddled deeper into his cloak. "Thinking of running?" he asked.

"Yes, but I don’t see my sword," Toryn replied. "I suppose you are sleeping on it?"

Redwing’s features went still in the firelight. Toryn did not know him well enough to discern what that meant.

"Try to get some sleep," Redwing said after a moment. "I want to get an early start so we can be free of this snow as soon as possible."

Toryn had no cause to argue that, so he shrugged and complied.

Later, the smell of roasting meat awakened him. Toryn sat up, famished. Redwing had tossed the last of the sausages into the pan and covered them with a bit of water. He offered Toryn a pouch filled with dried fruits—raisins, apple slices, cranberries, and prunes. Toryn ate a handful and wished for the smoked fish that was back with his belongings in the camp he and his unfortunate companions had shared. Tuna, halibut, trout and oysters were Redolian staples.

They ate without benefit of conversation and then put on their still-damp clothing. Toryn discovered a few new aches and pains while doing so, a purpling bruise on his forearm and a strained muscle on his left side that made him wince when he raised his arm.

He noticed a massive discoloration on Redwing’s ribs before the Falaran pulled on the shirt he had worn the previous day. Toryn tugged on the wool sweater. It was soggy and cold, but after a moment the insulating power of the fabric began to warm him. Now, if only it didn’t smell like a wet sheep... Toryn grimaced when he tugged on his leather trousers, despising the feel of cold, damp leather. Redwing’s expression was much the same when he donned his own buckskins.

Redwing carefully restowed his pack as he did every morning. Toryn doused the fire. When all was ready, Redwing strapped on his sword, hefted the pack and tied it on before gripping his bow stave.

Toryn’s eyes narrowed. "Where is my sword?" he asked in what he felt was a very rational tone, but the Falaran winced.

"It was lost in the slide," Redwing admitted. "I looked for it, but it was more urgent that I get you to shelter."

Toryn pictured the Falaran happily tugging out Toryn’s sword and flinging it into the huge bank of snow. He clamped his jaws shut against a shout of rage.

"I did look for it," Redwing protested.

With effort, Toryn reined in his temper, acknowledging that the bastard could have left the sword back in the grave with Toryn’s companions. Adona alone knew why Redwing had dragged it along in the first place, knowing it would be constant temptation for Toryn to get his hands on it. He shook his head with a disgusted sigh. Damn. He had used that sword for years. It would not be easily replaced.
"I suggest we get moving," Toryn gritted emphatically. "The sooner we get to where you will feel safe, the sooner I can be rid of you and go home."

Redwing nodded agreement and the two of them left their evening’s sanctuary and tramped off into the snowy forest.

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The snow lessened as they descended and it finally disappeared completely by early afternoon. They followed the course of a large stream and Brydon welcomed the return of warmer temperatures. They surprised a forest chicken in late morning and Toryn stunned it with a well-aimed stone and then killed it with a quick twist of its neck.

They camped early that evening. Brydon was ready to drop from exhaustion. His head had begun to pound in early afternoon, an aftereffect of the strain combined with lack of decent sleep. The weight of his pack did not help and he began to mentally filter through his supplies, wondering if he could leave anything behind to lighten the load. Even though he felt guilty about the loss of Toryn’s sword, he did not miss its weight.

He would have given all the gold in his possession for a horse.

Toryn plucked the bird clean of feathers while Brydon unloaded items from his pack. Down floated through the air and clung to Toryn’s hair and clothing. A few feathery bits adorned Brydon, also. They seemed attracted to his wool shirt.

"Dagger," Toryn said and held out his hand expectantly. Brydon looked at him sharply, having no intention of giving a bladed weapon to Toryn, vow or no vow. Instead, he fished into a concealed pocket of the pack and pulled out a sharp, but very short, knife. He tossed it to Toryn, who removed it from the leather sheath and looked at the single-edged blade. He snorted, but made no comment as he gutted the bird and sliced the meat into thin strips. Brydon watched, and then gathered some nearby wood for the fire.

Toryn got to his feet and roamed through the undergrowth a short distance away. Brydon’s eyes tracked him, but then he shrugged and decided they were far enough from Redol that Toryn could probably return to his homeland if he chose. Brydon would not fuss if he disappeared.

Toryn returned with a handful of plants, which he began to shred and sprinkle atop the meat. Brydon watched uneasily for a moment and then pushed his way through the concealing underbrush to the small stream they had followed most of the day. A rippling pool lay beneath an overhanging tree, inviting a bath. Brydon felt filthy from days of walking and sleeping on the ground. After he verified that he could still glimpse Toryn through the foliage, he stripped off his clothing and planted his sword upon the bank before he waded in, gasping at the cold of the glacier-fed stream.

Brydon quickly washed in the icy water and wished for the soap that he had forgotten to bring on his journey (possibly the only thing he had neglected to add to his stuffed pack). He scrubbed as well as he could and washed his hair, feeling refreshed, if somewhat numb from the cold. As he splashed water on his chest, he glanced up and realized that he could no longer see Toryn. It also occurred to him that he had left his bow in camp. The thought of his own arrows protruding from his body did nothing for his composure, so he
exited the frigid water and yanked his clothes back on. Brydon kept his sword in hand and approached the camp stealthily. Toryn was gone!

Brydon snatched up his bow—which oddly enough was still where he had left it—and then paused as Toryn ambled back into the clearing and knelt by the fire. His hands were full of more leafy vegetation. Brydon expelled his breath in relief and dropped his bow. Toryn looked at him curiously.

"Fall in the creek?" he asked.

"No, I got in of my own accord."

Toryn snorted. "I knew Falarans were crazy."

"Don't Redolians bathe?" Brydon asked.

"Occasionally, but we're smart enough to heat the water first."

Brydon refrained from comment as Toryn handed him a stick with a piece of steaming meat on it. Brydon looked at it hesitantly, wondering what sort of poisonous herbs Toryn had used to season it. Toryn snatched it back as if mortally offended. He took a large bite and returned it.

Brydon watched as Toryn chewed for a few moments, to see if he would go into convulsions or foam at the mouth. When he did not and merely tore at his own meat in greedy satisfaction, Brydon reluctantly bit into his. He looked at Toryn in bewilderment.

"What did you do to this?" he asked.

Toryn's head rose suspiciously. "What do you mean?"

"It's delicious!"

"Oh. I was tired of your cooking."

"I can see why, if you are used to this," Brydon admitted truthfully. It was amazing to think there were savory plants growing all around them. Brydon normally relied only upon supplies packed for the journey, although he did know of a few edible plants best consumed only when starvation threatened.

While he ate, Brydon wondered if Toryn had picked up his bow earlier. It would have been a simple matter to follow Brydon to the stream and fill him with arrows while he bathed. Brydon chewed thoughtfully and wondered why Toryn had not tried to kill him. The vow Toryn had made was known only to the two of them, and Adona.

Toryn cooked more meat in Brydon’s pot and tossed in mushrooms to make a rich sauce. Brydon ate in appreciative silence, after which he examined Toryn’s wrists. He wished he had more knowledge of the healing arts. Many plants aided mending, but he didn’t know which ones.

"You should wash them in the water," Brydon suggested. Toryn agreed and Brydon bandaged them again after the wounds were scrubbed and clean.

When they readied themselves for sleep, neither of them mentioned their unspoken truce.
The next day, they awoke to heavy clouds. Rain began to spit down on them intermittently as they resumed their southward trek. In late afternoon, the sky opened and water deluged them. They ran for the cover of a small rock ledge and huddled beneath it. Their breath frosted in the air that had grown steadily colder as the day progressed.

"Are we in Akarska?" Toryn asked.

"Yes, but I’ve been trying to skirt the mountains as closely as possible. If we avoid the lowlands, we should reduce our chances of encountering any Akarskans."

"Good. I would rather avoid them all."

"Why? Did you steal a horse?" Brydon kidded. There was no reply. "You stole a horse?"

"Of course not." Toryn snorted. "Do you think I want to die?"

Brydon concealed his relief, though he looked closely at the Redolian for a moment.

"Probably. You attacked me, did you not?" He laughed.

"Careful, Falaran," Toryn warned. "You have to sleep, sometime."

"I think I will tie you up tonight," Brydon said, but Toryn only snorted. Brydon was sure he had had enough of being tied up to last him a lifetime. The wind changed and blew cold rain into their faces.

Brydon stood. "We need better shelter." Brydon started off and Toryn trailed after him. They were drenched within minutes. Brydon left the trail and cut across the rocky terrain, pushing through brambles and crossing rocky patches.

"Why did we leave the easy path to fight through this?" Toryn asked after a springy branch whacked him upon the shoulder.

"To find that," Brydon replied and pointed. Partway up the rocky hillside, nearly covered by undergrowth, loomed a cave opening.

"How did you know it was there?" Toryn asked.

"I saw it from below," Brydon replied and headed toward it. He tugged off his sodden pack as he shouldered his way through the wet brush that covered the hillside.

"How could you see it from below?" Toryn demanded. "I didn’t see it from below. I can hardly see it now!"

Brydon ignored him and Toryn helped him tear at the foliage covering the entrance until they had broken enough to fight their way inside. The cleft in the rock was a welcome respite from the pounding rain and they paused beneath the overhang. Brydon fumbled in his pack until he produced one of his fire starting rags, which he wrapped around a length of wood. He struck flint and tinder and soon had a flame going, until a gust of wind billowed in and nearly extinguished his makeshift torch.

"Let’s follow it back some. Perhaps it will be large enough for us to build a fire," Brydon said and pushed his way into the darkness with torch held high. The passage they followed turned once to the right and once left, and then widened into a large cavern. Brydon halted abruptly, catching his breath.

"What is this place?" Toryn asked in a hushed voice.
Brydon had no answer. He felt an odd sensation, as though they had just stepped into an unreal place. He walked through the large, empty cavern to the huge column that had caught his immediate gaze. White marble gleamed as the torchlight touched its surface. The column was huge, fully twelve feet in diameter and adorned with a base of carved white marble. It looked completely out of place in the rough stone cavern, as if some madman had transported it from a grand palace. The top of the column disappeared into the ceiling.

"What do you suppose was its purpose?" Toryn asked in a hushed tone as Brydon walked forward to examine the thing.

"I don’t know. Perhaps there was a building here at one time? A temple of some sort?"

Toryn joined him as he bent to look at the carvings. Brydon blew away the thick covering of dust and was surprised to see small figures carved in exquisite detail. They were mostly forest scenes—tiny deer stepping out from behind pine trees, squirrels cavorting amongst stone flowers, a long-haired girl in the top of a tree opening her hands to a flock of birds. Each feather and leaf seemed to have been painstakingly created. Around the edge a single thread wove in and out of itself in a dizzying pattern that Brydon gave up following. A thick layer of dust covered everything and a bundle of fur and twigs was packed into one corner near the base; some forest creature had been using it as a nest.

"Have you ever seen anything like this?" Brydon asked.

Toryn shook his head, teeth chattering. "Never. Can we save the examination until after we are dry?"

Brydon nodded and tugged at the nest. The dry twigs and animal fur made excellent tinder. He pulled the dry branches from the top of his pack. Brydon had been picking up dead wood for the past hour, despite Toryn asking if it was some form of Falaran insanity. His cloak had kept the wood dry from the rain, and now he did not have to go out and fight the rain looking for firewood. He looked pointedly at Toryn, who actually smiled.

"Good idea," he admitted.

The fire started quickly. Toryn shivered and huddled closer to the crackling flames. Luckily, there must have been enough gaps in the ceiling for the smoke to escape. Brydon tossed Toryn some dry clothing before he stripped off his own wet garments and dried himself with a shirt. Toryn followed suit and they spread their damp clothing on the floor to dry.

Toryn looked around the cavern. "So, what do you think it was?" he asked as Brydon returned to the pillar.

"This design... it is familiar," Brydon said and wondered where he had seen its like. It hovered just out of reach of his memory. In Eaglecrest? He pictured the castle at Eaglecrest with its myriad hallways and chambers, but could recall no match for the strange design. "Where did the marble come from? All the marble in Eaglecrest came overland from Kaneelis, by wagon. It’s very heavy and this column is enormous. I don’t recall even legends speaking of a palace or temple in Akarska."
Toryn shrugged, apparently having already tossed it into his memory as an unsolvable mystery. He lay back to watch the fire while Brydon searched the cavern more thoroughly.

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Toryn observed him for a while. There was something odd about him... something indefinable. He looked like an average person, with blond hair, greenish eyes, and handsome features, but he had a quality that Toryn was unable to pinpoint. Redwing wandered around the cavern like an excited child, far removed from the serious warrior Toryn had seen previously. Brydon Redwing was an enigma.

The rain pounded a rhythmic staccato that was audible even inside the cave, although muted. Toryn yawned widely as Redwing found nothing else of interest and returned to sit beside him.

"Tell me about your quest," Toryn said after a moment as he tried to stay awake.

"What is there to tell? I am looking for something. I have two years to find it and return to Falara. If you know who I am, you must know that already." Redwing prodded at the burning sticks with a sturdy twig.

"I know only that you are a Falaran on a quest. What are you looking for?" Toryn prompted.

Redwing smiled. "Forgive me if I do not tell you."

Toryn grimaced, but he understood. If it were Toryn’s quest, he would certainly never tell his purpose to a Falaran. Toryn yawned again and his jawbones cracked slightly.

"Why do Falarans go on these quests, anyway? They aren’t common, are they?"

"No, not common at all. A prince of royal blood must go on a quest when he comes of age. In the absence of a male heir, the chosen suitor of the royal princess must do it in order to prove his worthiness to assume the throne," Redwing replied. He poked at the fire and sparks leaped upward before falling back as colorless ash.

"Then it’s true that you will be the next king of Falara?" Toryn asked. He rolled onto his back to look at Redwing, who nodded solemnly.

"It is true. As long as I complete the quest in the allotted time."

"But you are not the royal prince, correct?"

"The king had no sons," Brydon affirmed. "Only a daughter. She turned sixteen not two weeks ago and chose me as the questor." Toryn’s interest sharpened, homing in on a subject he had an intense interest in—women.

"Princess? Tell me about her. Why did she choose you?"

Redwing’s gaze grew distant. "I am not certain. I have known her since we were children and I never suspected her of being overly fond of me. She used to order me around like a scullery boy. I was surprised when she chose me."

"No one knows the mind of a woman," Toryn reminded him sagely.
"That is a solid fact," Redwing agreed with a smile. He leaned back against the wall of the cave and stretched his legs out. "She chose the quest and I don’t think she realizes how difficult it will be."

"She chose the quest? A woman? You are surely doomed. What does she want? An Akarskan horse? A diamond bracelet from a Silveran prince?"

Redwing shook his head and replied evasively, "Something even rarer. Women always choose our quests. If the king has a son, his mother, the queen, chooses. If there are no sons, the princess selects a suitor and sends him on a quest for her. All of our quests are women’s whims, whether simple tasks or impossible assignments."

"That sounds like a dangerous way to run a government," Toryn avowed.

"It can be. One former princess sent a poor fellow to bring her the claws of a snow leopard. Apparently, she hated him for some insult and thought it suitable revenge."

"What happened?" Toryn asked, mortified.

Redwing shrugged. "He never returned. Luckily for her, or she would have had him as a husband forever after."

"He most likely walked south and kept going," Toryn said.

Redwing did not smile. "That would be treason," he said tightly.

Toryn snorted. "Better a live traitor than a pile of bones in a snow leopard’s den," he rationalized.

Redwing seemed dumbfounded at the thought. "Have you no honor? It would be better to die than live as a coward and be exiled from Falara all the days of your life!"

Toryn suppressed a sneer. Falaran concepts of honor bordered on ridiculous. In Redol it was honorable to steal into an enemy’s camp and take his daughters. It was honorable to raid Falara and steal a herd of sheep and anything else one might find. It was honorable to kill Falarans who sought to become the next Falaran king. Toryn decided not to mention those things. Redwing would not understand.

"What happens if you complete the quest, but it takes longer than the allotted two years?" he asked instead.

"The day after my deadline, another will be chosen and sent off. If I return after that, no dishonor will come to me, though I will have technically failed. I would go back to my old life."

"And if you get back in time, you will marry this princess?" At Redwing’s nod, he continued, "Is she beautiful?"

Redwing contemplated, as though he had never considered the question before. "I suppose. I never really thought about it."

Toryn found that thought somewhat ludicrous. It was the first thing he noticed about women, even childhood friends who grew up into mysterious, tantalizing creatures. "What is she like?" he prodded, "Is she interesting?"
Redwing shrugged. "In a scary sort of way. Eryka loves to get her way. In all things. She is always thinking of ways to get what she wants, which makes me wonder exactly why she sent me on this quest. I wonder about it often."

"It sounds to me as though you’re not looking forward to everlasting life with this woman," Toryn remarked. "You don’t love her, do you?"

"Of course I love her! She’s the princess."

"But do you love her as a potential wife?"

Redwing floundered, obviously uncomfortable. "Well, not yet. But I am sure I will once we are married."

Toryn clucked his tongue sympathetically. "Poor naive boy. You know very little about women, I see. Can you refuse to go on this quest?"

"Refuse a royal decree?!" Redwing raised his head so quickly he nearly snapped his neck. He looked as though the thought had never occurred to him. It probably hadn’t. "One does not have to accept the quest, but it would be viewed as cowardice."

"Forgive me for asking," Toryn said dryly. "Falarans are more foolish than I had thought. You let women pick your rulers and send them on Adona-forsaken quests... What happens if she chooses a weakling?"

Redwing, looking offended, seemed reluctant to reply, but he finally did. "Then she usually rules through them."

"I see," Toryn said, as if that explained everything. Redwing stared at him, obviously unsure if the comment was meant as a slur upon him or not. "And what happens then?"

Redwing grinned wickedly. "We invade Redol."

Toryn lobbed a wet shirt at him. "Do you plan to invade Redol when you become king?"

"If I become king," Redwing corrected. He pulled the wet cloth from his head and hurled it back at Toryn. "Why would I want to invade Redol? There is nothing there but grass, cows, and heathens."

"No, not heathens, remember? We worship the same god," Toryn said before his face was filled with wet shirt. He tugged it off and balled it up.

"Indeed," Redwing admitted and eyed the shirt in Toryn’s hands warily. "Grass, cows, and fellow believers."

Toryn wasn’t sure how to reply to that. "Very well, here is my advice: Get this object, carry it around with you for a couple of years, view the world, and return home after your time is up." Toryn lobbed the shirt. "Or would that be too ‘dishonorable’ for you?"

Redwing did not avoid the wet material as it slapped him in the face again. He pulled it away and threw it by the fire. "Intentionally forfeit the throne?" He sounded aghast.

"Who would ever know?" Toryn asked mildly.

"I would," Redwing replied in a voice like iron.
Toryn smiled and shrugged. Redwing fell silent after that, apparently lost in thought. The darkness outside deepened, so Toryn sat up and rooted through the pack for their dinner, the final bits of Brydon’s dried meat.

After they ate, Toryn banked the fire and went soundly to sleep. He looked forward to waking up the next morning without being covered in dew.

CHAPTER FIVE
THE AKARSKAN

They left the cave the next day under clear skies, the rain having spent itself the night before. Redwing vowed to return to the place someday, but Toryn could not understand his fascination with the cavern. It was just an old ruin of some sort. What did it matter who built it, or why?

Later that morning, Redwing feathered a grouse and they both licked their lips in anticipation of a hot dinner, while Toryn tried not to be impressed with the Falaran’s skill. As they traversed southward, they argued politics.

"I am serious about ending the constant fighting between our nations," Redwing said that night as they finished devouring the bird and tossed the bones into the fire.

"You are trying to keep me from sending a group of my kinsmen after you?" Toryn asked.

"What would prove to you that I would make a good king?"

"You could only prove that by actually becoming king and fulfilling your idiotic notions," Toryn said with a snort.

"Then give me the chance to do so," Redwing replied softly. His persuasive gaze fixed directly on Toryn.

"You have nothing to fear from me," Toryn snapped, nonplused. "You saved my life and I’m not so dishonorable that I will easily forget that debt. Say ‘farewell’ and I’ll be on my way home. You can do as you please. It’s likely you will never see me again."

"I want you to come with me."

Toryn stared, unable to believe his ears. "What? Come with you? On your quest? Why?"

"Just as far as the Waryn Highway," Redwing said, "It isn’t far—a few weeks, by my reckoning."

"But why?" Toryn asked again, nearly dumbfounded at the request.

"I have been thinking about what I will do when I am king. In order to bring about peace with Redol, I will need someone who can speak to your people on my behalf. Why would they listen to me? To them, I will be just another Falaran, and someone who cannot be trusted. If I can convince you of my sincerity, then perhaps you can help me to convince them," Redwing stated, fairly glowing with the excitement of his ideals.

"Together, we can work to bring about peace."

Toryn wondered if the Falaran had taken a hit to the head during their walk.
"Aren’t you thinking a bit far ahead? You haven’t even completed your quest. And even if you do succeed, and I join you, no one in Redol will listen to me," Toryn protested, trying to dash Redwing’s insane dreams before they could take root in his own mind. "I’m no one! I’m a second son and—" He broke off quickly.

Redwing jumped on the statement. "You’re a chief’s son, aren’t you?" At Toryn’s glare, Redwing smiled and tossed his head back. "I knew it! This is better than I had hoped! Can’t you see, Toryn? You can speak to your own family, first. If they believe, your father could—"

"My father is dead," Toryn broke in, silencing Redwing instantly. Before he could recover, Toryn continued, "And my brother Morgyn could not be convinced, not even by me, not even if I believed in your sincerity, which I don’t. I think you are trying to lull me into making a fool out of myself when I return home." He snorted. "Imagine! Me telling my brother that the next king of Falara will be a ‘good’ king and that he wants us all to lay down our arms and embrace as brothers, Falarans and Redolians, all." The last was said mockingly and Redwing scowled.

"Is it not a worthy ambition?" he asked tightly.

Toryn ran a hand through the hair tumbling over his brow as he tried to find the right words. He sighed. "It is worthy," he finally admitted. "It is just not possible."

Redwing smiled again and looked at Toryn with such confidence that he was somewhat shaken. "It is possible. I intend to make it happen." He stood suddenly and drew his sword. The jewels in the hilt sparkled in the firelight. Redwing planted the point of it into the ground and knelt on one knee solemnly. His hands grasped the hilt.

"When I am king of Falara," he vowed, staring into Toryn’s eyes, "I will bring peace between our nations, no matter the cost." He bowed his head for a moment and then stood. "Now, will you come with me that I might convince you of my sincerity?"

"No." Toryn breathed. "You are mad."

Redwing tilted the sword back and forth to catch Toryn’s attention.

"My father’s sword," he said, reminding Toryn of their conversation the night Redwing had freed him. With that, he sheathed the blade and walked into the darkness, leaving Toryn to mull over his words. He glanced briefly at Redwing’s bow lying a few feet away, but he knew the man was most likely standing at the camp’s edge, watching him. Toryn cursed and tossed a stone angrily into the fire. Sparks flew up with a hiss. What had possessed Toryn to try and kill the damned Falaran in the first place? He had known it was a foolish idea when it was proposed. Toryn did not hold a true grudge against any Falarans. He had never lost a family member, or even a tribe member, to the never-ending war. Toryn’s tribal lands lay far from the Falaran border. And obviously the Falarans were not going to choose an untrained fool for their next king. Redwing had said princess had chosen him, but she had to have advisors of some sort, nudging her toward the right candidate. Maybe Redwing would make a good king.

Toryn lay back and looked at the stars, wondering what he should do. He thought about going home. It had been more than a month since he’d seen his brother and sister. They were probably wondering what had happened to him, as he was only supposed to have
been gone a couple of weeks to visit a neighboring tribe, and carry messages from Morgyn to the other chief. He grimaced. If he returned home now with the news that not only had his companions been killed, but that he had been captured, spared, and then rescued by the intended victim… Morgyn would be speechless with rage. Toryn would be lucky to escape exile, or worse.

The thought of traveling onward with Redwing was tantalizing. Toryn had never been out of Redol in his life, though he had traveled to the Falaran border once in order to view the stone forts and armored patrols, resplendent in their glittering armor. Toryn figured the fabled Waryn Highway would be something to see. It had been built by an ambitious, and very rich, trader named Waryn who had tried to bring civilization to Akarska in the form of free trade. Waryn had made it as far as the southern border of Akarska before the residents had demanded he stop, so it was there that he had built his Trading House and constructed his highway in order to bring all manner of goods to the Akarskan heathens, with limited success. Although the Akarskans seemed to have little actual need of outside goods, they had begun to crave the fine leather from the Corolis Islands and gold and jewels from Silver. In return, they traded finished leather goods, clothing and strange artworks—everything but horses. Waryn had died years back, but the Trading House remained. It would be something, to see the famed place and perhaps buy a trinket for his sister. It also wouldn’t hurt to keep an eye on the Falaran to determine what kind of character he really had. If his apparent goodwill toward Redolians turned out to be a sham, surely Toryn would know it by associating with him for a month. If Redwing proved false, Toryn could kill him with no regrets.

The soft sound of footfalls told of Redwing’s return. He looked down at Toryn. "Well?"

"I’ll go with you as far as the Waryn Highway if you give me back my daggers," Toryn stated.

Redwing shook his head. "If I had tried to kill you, would you give me a weapon?"

Toryn sat up angrily and Redwing held up a hand. "I have determined to prove my honor to you. You can also prove yours to me. I will give you a weapon as soon as I am certain you will not try and put it between my ribs at the first opportunity. You have thought about it, I know."

Toryn relaxed and grinned. "Mostly when you are whistling," he admitted. Unwittingly, his respect for Redwing eased up a notch. Toryn would have thought him a fool if he had handed him a blade so easily. He watched as Redwing banked the fire and curled into his cloak. Experimentally, Toryn got to his feet. He had taken only single step toward the pack when Redwing’s eyes flicked open, pinning him where he stood. Toryn smiled.

"Just relieving myself," he said and strode toward a nearby bush. It wasn’t the first time he’d tried to rise while Redwing slept. The Falaran seemed to sleep with one eye open, awakening at the slightest sound or movement. Toryn chuckled to himself. No doubt he would be sleeping even more lightly now that Toryn had declared him half-mad. Toryn returned to his blanket and settled in. It would prove an interesting journey to the Waryn Highway.

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They descended from the mountains over the next few days, not willing to contend with the capricious weather in the higher altitudes. They spoke no further of Brydon’s ambition, nor of Toryn’s semi-captive status. Toryn no longer seemed quite so resentful, even though he still asked for a weapon each day and Brydon continued to refuse, albeit he was impressed with Toryn’s persistence.

"Any hope that we’re in Terris and not Akarska?" Toryn asked near mid-morning while he contemplated a scratch on his hand. He poked at it and winced, though the blood had likely dried some time ago.

"Quit prodding it or it won’t heal," Brydon warned. "You are getting dirt in it." Toryn threw him an absent glance of irritation. Brydon continued, "We are definitely in Akarska, but I have been trying to stay close to the Terran border."

"Yes, you are in Akarska, trespassers, and you can stop where you are, or die."

A large chestnut horse exited the trees. Its rider held a large bow with a wicked-looking arrow trained on Brydon’s chest. He and Toryn froze.

"Do you have horses?" she demanded.

"No," Brydon stated. For the first time, he was glad of the fact.

The girl dismounted by tossing one leg over the horse’s neck and dropping to the ground. Her appearance was that of a forest sprite, albeit a deadly one, as the bow did not waver for an instant. Her straight, pale blond hair did not quite brush her shoulders. She had fair skin under the brown cap that shaded her face.

"Who are you and what do you want here?" she asked.

"I am Brydon Redwing, of Falara, and this is Toryn of Redol. We want nothing in Akarska; we are merely passing through."

"This is not a pass-through. The road goes through Terris," she stated.

"We were traveling upon the road, but an avalanche forced us into abandoning it."

She frowned and then asked, "Have you seen any riders?"

"We have not seen anyone at all for the past week."

"I am searching for a stolen horse. A black stallion, one of the finest in Akarska. He has one white stocking and a seven-pointed star on his head."

Brydon shook his head. Toryn studied the sky as though he found the entire conversation tedious. He sighed. "You Akarskans are always looking for this stolen horse or that stolen horse. Why do you not keep better track of them?"

The girl’s face flamed and the bowstring tautened. Brydon looked at Toryn in incredulity. Toryn had been the one citing the dangers of Akarska and its residents and now he provoked one?

"Hold!" Brydon said quickly and stepped in front of Toryn, hoping she wouldn’t feather him on principle. "Are you a Hunter?"

The girl lowered the bow marginally, although she continued to glare at Toryn. "No, I am a Border Guard, but the Hunters have been unable to locate the stallion. It was taken
nearly two months ago. We have reason to believe it was a filthy Redolian who took it." She glared at Toryn and then cocked a brow. "I thought Falarans and Redolians were mortal enemies."

"Generally, yes. We are simply traveling together to the Waryn Highway," Brydon said. "Why is he not armed?" she asked.

Brydon coughed and shot a glance at Toryn. "Toryn is my prisoner, of sorts." Toryn glared daggers at him.

The girl smiled for the first time, looking more elfin than ever. She stood a full head shorter than either he or Toryn, although her authoritative attitude made her seem taller, somehow. "Why not kill him?" she questioned, obviously taken with the idea.

"I have not chosen to," Brydon replied. "Are you going to let us pass?"

Her fingers drummed upon her bowstave absently while she considered his question. She was a trim girl, lean and healthy-looking. She wore pale buckskin breeches that clung to her legs and a loose shirt the color of dark leaves. A brown cape was clasped about her neck and over that rested a quiver of arrows. Upon her hip was coiled a shiny black leather whip. From the looks of the whip it was not there for adornment.

"Why did you have to come to Akarska now?" she snapped at last. "I need to find the wretch who stole my horse." She sighed. "Still, it is my duty to escort you and ensure that you do no damage, nor stray into places where you have no business. For your own protection, I must guide you if I cannot persuade you to turn around."

"Not more duty," Toryn said and groaned. "I am sick to death of that word after listening to it fall from the Falaran’s lips every day. It’s bad enough that I am forced to accompany him. Must we have a wench tagging along, as well?"

The bow rose immediately. "Release your claim on him, Falaran, and I will slay him," she vowed. "Know that I would much rather pursue the thieves of my stallion than lead strangers where they have no business."

"I do not so release it. Put away your bow and travel with us, if you must." Brydon was sorely tempted to throttle Toryn himself after his odd behavior. Brydon shot him a silencing glare.

"A wench," Toryn swore, uncowed by the gaze.

"Are you trying to get us killed?" Brydon demanded in a low voice that brooked no argument.

The girl jammed her arrow back into the quiver and vaulted easily onto her steed. "Have you a name?" Brydon asked.

"Alyn," she said curtly. "Lead and I will follow, but know that foreigners are not welcome on Akarskan soil. I will feather you with no regrets if you make the slightest trouble."

By the hopeful tone in her voice, she wanted them to make trouble. Brydon nodded and they started off once more, followed by Alyn on her chestnut horse.
They walked for a number of hours. Brydon and Torkyn conversed about myriad things, avoiding the subjects of Falara and Redol by mutual agreement. Brydon watched Alyn covertly. She rode as if she had been born on the back of a horse. It was possible, he reflected. No one had ever seen an Akarskan without a horse, and there were myths that horses lived inside their houses with them.

"Can you not walk any faster?" Alyn demanded.
"We only have two legs, not four, milady," Brydon said.
"Perhaps milady would like to climb down here and walk with us lowly ones?" Torkyn suggested.
"I will not." She sniffed.
"Probably forgotten how," Torkyn murmured to Brydon, loud enough for Alyn to overhear. Torkyn seemed to enjoy baiting the girl, a practice Brydon thought extremely unwise.
"If he is your prisoner, why isn’t he tied?" she demanded.
"Why aren’t you tied, Torkyn?" Brydon asked, using his sword to push aside small branches that leaned into the path.
"But I am tied, milady," Torkyn said.
"By what bonds?" she asked.
"By bonds no female would understand," Torkyn replied.
Brydon closed his eyes for a moment, wondering if she would spur her horse over the top of Torkyn, but she apparently had more control than Brydon feared. "You are probably too stupid to think of a way to escape," she snapped.
Brydon laughed. "You may have to watch yourself with her, Torkyn."
"Oh? Well, what kind of a woman wears pants, anyway?" Torkyn asked scornfully.
"I am no simpering female, bound by skirts and yowling children," she replied, apparently warming to the conversation as she ducked her head to go under a branch. "I am free to come and go as I please, and most likely more of a woman than you’ll ever have!"
"Is that a challenge?" Torkyn asked, green eyes lighting eagerly.
"Take it as you will. It is nothing to me." She cantered by them, almost knocking Torkyn down, and took the lead for a while.
They later approached a stream that babbled over stones as it wandered across their path. Brydon halted and took off his pack. Alyn shrugged and dismounted; her horse cropped the thick shore grass while she washed her face and hands in the water.
"Do we have anything to eat?" Torkyn asked as he sank down on the bank and pulled off his boots. He wriggled his toes in the water and Brydon watched him enviously, tempted
to join him. The day had grown warm, but they needed food. They had depleted everything but a handful of raisins.

"No," Brydon replied, and then turned to Alyn. "Is it lawful to hunt?"

She nodded and picked up her bow. "I will go."

"Try not to waste too many arrows," Toryn called as he tugged his pant legs higher and dunked his feet deeper into the water. She threw him a glare, mounted, and galloped off. Both men watched her go.

"She’s not a bad-looking girl," Brydon commented.

"Yes, and I suppose we will have a scant dinner tonight," Toryn complained and sighed. He started to unplait his hair. "Aren’t you supposed to be married soon?"

"I’m not married, yet," Brydon said, looking at the tufts of white cloud in the sky.

"Well, I am amazed!" Toryn said. He removed one of the leather thongs from his hair and set it aside. His black hair was wavy from the braid and hung down to the middle of his back. He undid a second braid. "It is not very honorable, you know, to think impure thoughts about women when you are practically engaged. You need not concern yourself with the Akarskan, though. She wants me. She just doesn’t know it, yet."

"You do have an oversized ego, don’t you?" Brydon asked. He rearranged his pack just in case Alyn brought back some meat. Not that he had any doubts about her hunting skill, but Toryn was right—she was a woman.

"Me? Certainly not. I am as humble as a holy man. But you should know, Falaran, women find me irresistible," Toryn said. He splashed water with his feet.

"Good luck to you with this one," Brydon replied with a laugh.

"What do you mean by that?"

"She doesn’t seem exactly warm to your advances."

"That’s just a game. You’ll see."

"I’m certain I will."

A short time later, a scream echoed through the forest and brought them both to their feet. Brydon grabbed his bow and he caught Toryn’s grimace when his hand grasped the empty air where his sword-hilt should have been.

"This way!" Brydon yelled.

Toryn followed and they crashed through the underbrush.

"Alyn!" Brydon called.

"Here!" The cry was faint, but audible. Brydon headed straight for the sound. Toryn tripped, but Brydon grabbed his arm and kept him moving until he regained his balance. He yanked his arm out of Brydon’s grasp, and they burst on the scene a moment later.
A huge, red-colored wildcat had cornered Alyn in some rocks. She seemed to have wedged herself in, but the animal clawed into the opening with one massive, talon-tipped paw. Brydon gaped for a moment—the creature was nearly the size of a small horse. Toryn shouted to attract the beast’s attention. The lion turned to snarl at them and they saw one of Alyn’s arrows imbedded in the cat’s huge neck.

"Come away from there, beast!" Toryn yelled. He picked up a rock and lobbed it. It bounced off the lion’s snout. It turned baleful yellow eyes on Toryn with a terrible yowl, and then it quit Alyn and dove for them, lightning-quick. Brydon put two solid arrows into it as Toryn bolted. A third arrow bounced off the cat’s thick skull, where it left a bloody furrow. The cat roared and rushed at Toryn. A huge paw flashed down.

Toryn bellowed and dove away, scrabbling to escape. Brydon loosed another arrow and then yanked the sword from his scabbard.

"Toryn!" he yelled and threw the blade hilt-first. Amazingly, Toryn snatched the blade in midair, whirled, and slashed. A mass of claws narrowly missed his head when he ducked away.

Brydon furiously put arrows into the cat’s head and neck, but the creature was too quick—most of them missed as the creature moved to avoid Toryn’s sword thrusts. Toryn leaped back to avoid another swipe of claws and slammed—hard—into a tree. He staggered aside, obviously dazed.

Arrows spent, Brydon threw down his bow and leaped for the lion, pulling his dagger from its sheath. The wounded cat dove for Toryn, but Brydon was on it first. He gripped the thick fur around its neck and drove the dagger deep. The cat was a huge mass of solid muscle and flexible sinew, twisting wildly to dislodge him. Brydon felt his grip slide.

The beast reared back and gave a terrible roar. An immense paw reached up and ripped Brydon off. He slammed into the ground with brutal force and lay still, stunned. He waited for the crush of claws and teeth. The lion roared once more, with Brydon’s dagger buried in its skull, and then crashed to the ground next to him.

Brydon let blackness lap over him in relief.

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He groaned and sat up groggily to see Toryn standing over him. Sunlight glinted off the blade of the sword that Brydon’s father had forged. Toryn had a strange look in his eyes. Brydon froze, the dazed mist dissipating, and looked from Toryn to the sword and back again.

"Tempting, is it not?" he asked softly.

Toryn nodded once, curtly, and swayed a bit before he sat down hard. Toryn’s shirt was torn, and blood stained his leather pants. Brydon got up and moved to Toryn’s side, ignoring the throbbing in his head and the ache in his shoulder.

"I am... all right," Toryn said weakly and waved him away. "Where is Alyn?"

Brydon reluctantly left Toryn and searched the rocks, to find Alyn wedged a small cleft. Blood covered part of her face, but she stared up at him with an annoyed expression. "My boot is caught," she said. "I can’t get free."
Brydon gaped at her. It was difficult to concentrate. He was tempted to leave her there rather than deliberate a way to get her out. The cleft was far too narrow for him to climb down and assist her, and she could not reach her own ankle.

"Can you slide your foot out of the boot?" he asked finally.

"Don’t you think I already tried that?" she snapped. Brydon’s urge to leave her strengthened.

"Well?" Toryn called. "Is she dead?"

"No, she’s stuck in the rocks," Brydon replied.

Alyn groaned as Toryn’s guffaw reached them. "Too many meat pies and pastries?" Toryn asked.

Alyn shouted several loud slurs about Toryn and his parentage and then she wrenched at her leg. Rage must have lent her strength, for she was suddenly free and clambered out of the hole like an angry badger.

Brydon grinned and followed as she limped toward Toryn. He did not wait around to hear their argument, instead he returned to the stream to retrieve their supplies. He wondered where Alyn’s horse had gone, but his head was pounding, so he did not worry too much about it.

When Brydon returned, he shredded his only linen shirt with his dagger—after retrieving it from the lion’s skull. Brydon gave Toryn a large wad of the cloth to use as a compress. Toryn held it against his bloody side. He lay with his head pillowed on his cloak.

Brydon bent to examine the injury and Toryn weakly slapped his hands away. "No... Falaran," he muttered.

"This Falaran is going to help you whether you like it or not, you stubborn Redolian idiot. Now lie back and shut up, or I will club you unconscious."

Toryn sighed and closed his eyes. Brydon cut open Toryn’s shirt and grimaced. The wound was bad—four jagged gashes in the soft flesh of his waist. Brydon poured water into the bleeding wound and bound the remainder of his linen shirt tightly around Toryn’s ribs. Toryn made no sound, though he sucked in a sharp breath when the water touched the wound. Brydon wished he knew anything at all about the healer’s art. Alyn had blanched when she’d viewed the wound; obviously she would be no help at all.

Against Alyn’s protests, Brydon turned to her next and examined her head wound. The injury was not as deep as he had assumed, though she had a swollen knot on her forehead and blood was caked in her hair. She washed it as well as she was able and Brydon bound her head with strips from his cloak.

"I think you’ll be fine. The wound does not look that deep. You’ll have a nasty bruise, though."

She nodded. "I need to find my horse. He threw me and bolted when the lion attacked." She wandered in a circle, seeking the tracks of the horse, and then disappeared into the undergrowth.
When she had gone, Brydon took off his clawed and bloody shirt and tossed it aside. He could neither reach nor see the wound on his back, but it burned with an unholy flame and he felt blood trickling down his back. He poured the remaining water over the wound and washed it as well as he could, gritting his teeth at the pain. He retrieved his bloody shirt and cut it into ribbons, then wrapped his injury as well as he could.

He looked at Toryn wryly. "Perhaps we should not have come to Akarska," he said.

Toryn opened his eyes and blinked at him. "I told you so," Toryn said. "Where’s the wench?"

"Looking for her horse. I think she was glad of the excuse—the sight of blood seems to disturb her."

"Maybe she won’t come back."

"She will. She seems pretty tenacious and she views us as part of her duty."

Toryn groaned. "Don’t mention that word. I feel sick enough." With that, he shut his eyes and soon his breathing became deep and regular.

Brydon would have loved to collapse and sleep, but he knew the lion meat would spoil unless he dressed it right away. They needed food and it would be senseless to waste the cat, though he expected the meat to taste awful. There was no guessing how long Alyn would be gone. He sat down and began the arduous task of skinning the feline, letting his mind drift as he worked. He was halfway finished when Alyn’s horse entered the clearing, followed by three others. Brydon chuckled and got to his feet. The animals shied away from the lion scent as Brydon approached them, but they calmed to his gentle words and snorted softly. Brydon removed the bridle and saddle from Alyn’s horse and turned him loose after slapping him companionably on the neck. He examined the other three, pleased to note that they were all fine animals. The four horses wandered off a short distance and began to graze, though they kept a somewhat wary eye on the lion pelt as Brydon worked.

When Brydon finished his task, he went back and washed himself in the stream and then put on his leather vest. It was lined with thick sheepskin and buffered his wound somewhat. His back ached and his shoulder had bled continuously while he worked. He felt the sticky wetness ooze down his back and soak his makeshift bandage. He wished Alyn would return so she could bandage it properly for him.

He built a small fire and sank down to rest. The sun was low on the horizon and Brydon felt he could easily lie down and sleep for a week.

Toryn moaned and opened his eyes.

"Hungry?" Brydon asked.

"Starved," Toryn said and sat up. He winced and moved himself slowly backward to rest against a tree for support.

"What did you use for a bandage?" he asked and touched the cloth on his ribs.

"My best shirt. No more injuries for you. I am nearly out of clothes. Are you cold?"

"No. Is Alyn still gone?"
Brydon walked to the lion’s carcass and cut off some large steaks, nodding at Toryn’s question. Toryn eased over to the fire and helped spit the meat on sticks before holding his over the flame. His glance let Brydon know he wished he could season the meat. Both of them were too weary and sore to get up and search for herbs.

"Alyn isn’t here, but her stallion came back."

Toryn laughed. "Can we take it and run?"

"And be caught in Akarska with a stolen horse? You must be more wounded than you look."

They had scarcely begun to eat when Alyn returned.

"I can’t find him anywhere," she said by way of greeting.

Brydon pointed a thumb toward the horses.

Alyn stared. "How did you find him?"

"He came back on his own."

"That’s impossible! I’ve barely had him three weeks; he doesn’t know me well enough to return to me. He would have gone home, or to the nearest barn."

Brydon shrugged. Alyn’s expression remained puzzled, but she accepted a skewer from Brydon and nibbled on the tough lion meat, wrinkling her nose at the taste.

"Maybe he thinks you’re his mother," Toryn commented.

She glared at him, but her gaze softened as she viewed the bandage around his waist.

"Are you sorely wounded?"

"I’ll live."

"I stumbled upon the lion when I was following the tracks of a pine buck. I must have startled the cat. It charged me and I loosed an arrow that did little damage. The bow is not my best weapon, and my whip—" she lifted the length of leather Brydon had seen coiled at her hip, "—is not much use against a lion."

After they had eaten, Brydon fed the horses with handfuls of grain from Alyn’s pack. When he returned, Alyn was asleep and Toryn’s head nodded.

"Get some sleep, Toryn," he suggested. "I’ll keep watch after I put the carcass up in a tree so nothing comes for it."

"Let me help," Toryn offered and tried to get up.

"Sit!" Brydon barked. "If you make your wound worse I’ll have to leave you here alone in Akarska."

Toryn sat, grumbling.

Brydon took some ropes from his pack and hauled the lion up into a tree, far enough off the ground to be safe from small predators. He collapsed then, as his back flamed in agony. When he could breathe without wheezing, he stood up and staggered over to his pack, unconscious before he lay down next to it.
CHAPTER SIX
THE HEALER

Brydon awoke a short time after dawn. Toryn and Alyn were asleep, so he started a fire, feeling stiff and sore after yesterday’s activities. He could hardly move his right arm, and even a tentative flex of his hand sent spasms of pain up into his shoulder.

The others roused at the smell of breakfast cooking, and Brydon checked their wounds and ignored their snarls to leave them alone. Alyn was a bit dizzy, but pronounced herself fit to ride and Brydon believed her. It would take a bigger injury than a bruised head and some scratches to keep an Akarskan out of the saddle. She got up and worked the stiffness out of her neck and then headed into the forest. Toryn chewed at the tough meat.

"This is disgusting," he said, "but surprisingly better than lamb."

"Where did the other three horses come from?" Alyn asked in a not-quite-accusing tone when she returned.

"They came with yours," Brydon replied.

"That makes no sense at all, unless they are unclaimed and this is their territory. Maybe Fireling followed them, but why would they come here? This whole area stinks of lion and blood. If they were wild, they would avoid it and us as well."

"Even you?" Brydon joked.

"Of course," she replied seriously. "Perhaps they are not unclaimed, even though I checked for ownership markings. I could not find a clan sign or trader symbol. They must be wild, and yet they allowed me to walk right up to them. They were not at all frightened."

"Perhaps you smelled so much like a horse that they mistook you for one," Toryn offered.

Alyn threw him a glare. "If that were the case, then your foul scent would surely have driven them far from here!"

"Eat, Alyn," Brydon suggested as Toryn made mock wounded gestures. "You can puzzle on it later."

After Brydon reorganized his pack, he turned to see Toryn on his feet, kicking dirt over the fire while he kept an arm held tightly to his side. Alyn had Fireling in the clearing and was stroking his coat with a soft cloth.

"What are you doing?" Brydon asked.

"I know you need to get moving, so let’s go," Toryn said. "I’m ready to be away from here."

"No. You can’t walk, or you’ll tear your wound open."

"It’s my wound," Toryn replied. His black hair hung over his forehead and nearly hid his green eyes.

"Yes, and I’ll not have you blaming me all of your days for making it worse."
"How about if I blame you for causing it in the first place?"
"Don’t you already?"
"Naturally."
"How very Redolian of you."
"I am Redolian!"
"Will you two stop it?" Alyn snapped. "I am trying to think."

"Let there be complete silence in the forest for this miraculous act!" Toryn boomed.

Alyn kicked some rocks at him and he winced when one bounced off his calf. "Since these horses are unmarked, I see no reason why I can’t claim them. I’ll make it official when we reach the next settlement, but until then, they don’t belong to anyone. Can you two ride?"

Brydon nodded and was surprised when Toryn did, also. Alyn stared hard at Toryn and then smirked. "We shall see."

Alyn brought one of the horses into the clearing, tugging him by the mane. He followed docilely, an action that put a baffled expression on her face. She took Fireling’s halter from her saddle and buckled it on the grey steed, which accepted the binding without protest.

Brydon concentrated on the scene while Alyn took a turn or two of the lead rope around her fist. She sprang onto the horse while her other hand gripped the long mane securely. Clearly, she expected furious bucking and twisting, but the horse merely shivered once and turned his grey head to look at the burden on his back.

"I do not understand this," Alyn muttered. The horse obediently walked forward a few paces and stopped. Alyn rode him around in circles for a short time, and then dismounted, grumbling to herself.

The next horse was a fine black stallion with a white blaze down his face. Alyn predicted trouble with that one, but the performance was the same as with the young grey stud. She tried the bay mare next and the docile behavior was repeated.

"These horses must have eaten some poison-plant," Alyn declared. "No wild animal is this tame. They act like they belong in a matron’s stable. Someone must own them."

"Who cares?" Toryn shrugged. "Which one do you want, Falaran?"

"The black, of course."

"Naturally. It’s a fine-looking animal, but I suppose you’ll make a scene if I take it, so I suppose I’ll have the mare."

"Thank you." Brydon grinned though he knew Toryn had refused the stallion because of his injury. Fighting a spirited horse with torn ribs would be no picnic. Brydon felt the same about his shoulder wound, but the black horse drew him. He would have wanted the stallion if every bone in his body were broken.

Alyn rigged up a makeshift halter for Fireling from her whip. Brydon was fascinated and had her painstakingly recreate the knots and loops, but in the end he could not get the
hang of it and Alyn gave up tutoring him with an exasperated sigh. She put her leather halter on the mare for Toryn. Fireling’s bridle was fitted for the black stallion, in case the horse decided to revert to a more typical "wild horse" behavior.

Alyn also placed her saddle on the black and then assisted Brydon to mount. He sat for a moment and accustomed himself to the feel of the animal. He had been trained in horsemanship, but horses were scarce in Falara, as elsewhere, and it had been a long while since he had ridden. Walking the horse wasn’t difficult, except for Alyn shouting constant instructions.

"Sit up straight! Put your heels down and hang on with your knees, not your hands! I said your knees, not your toes. Now trot!"

He eased the horse into a jolting gait that almost caused him to bite his tongue in half. Alyn screamed at him like a laundress yelling at a scullery boy

"What are you doing? Grip with your legs! You are bouncing like a sack of grain!"

Brydon clung with his legs, but that seemed to make the jolting worse. He did not recall riding being quite so difficult when taught by the group of knight-priests in Eaglecrest. Perhaps the virtues of patience and a civil tongue made a difference.

"Now slow him down! Pull on the reins! Slowly! Not up to your chin! Keep your hand down on his withers!"

"His what?" Brydon called and hauled back on the reins. He tried to remember to hang on with his legs while attempting to remain upright.

"His withers! Just keep your hand down by your—" She broke off suddenly. Brydon figured it out and flushed.

The stallion slowed to a nice easy trot that hardly jolted at all. Brydon’s long-unused leg muscles remembered their training and the horse told him when he overbalanced or leaned the wrong way. It swiveled an ear back on occasion.

"Okay. Your turn, Toryn."

Brydon dismounted, feeling as though he had been beaten with a tree. The claw wounds on his shoulder had reopened and he felt blood soaking into the sheepskin of his vest once more. He leaned against the stallion for a moment and wondered how much blood he had left to spare. He knew he should have Alyn or Toryn look at the wound, but the thought of ripping the sheepskin away from the dried portion of the wound made him vaguely ill. He’d soak it in the stream when he had a chance.

Toryn mounted with the aid of a large boulder, stepping from it to the mare’s back before settling himself comfortably. He rode the horse with an expertise that Brydon envied and even Alyn had few comments. She looked disappointed.

"Good," Brydon said. "We’ll leave in the morning. That will give us time to cut up the rest of this meat and get things packed." And give us more time to rest, he added to himself.

Toryn spent the remainder of the day asleep and Brydon sliced up and packed the leftover lion with Alyn’s help. Neither of them felt overly talkative, so they spent the day in
companionable silence. When his wound began to bother him, Brydon asked Alyn to help him tend it.

She washed it with strips of cloth while Brydon knelt by the stream.

"This looks bad," she said as he recited several rote prayers to keep from crying out. The cool water felt like acid.

"Do you know anything that might help heal it?" he asked hopefully.

"No. I don’t even have hoof salve in my bag. I expected to stop in Yama’s village, until I met you two. I suppose we could make a side journey and see if they can provide us some supplies."

Brydon was dubious about the efficacy of "hoof salve" and preferred to take his chances than go out of his way and chance the healing practices of unknown Akarskans. "I am sure it will be fine. I would rather not take up any more of your time than necessary." He scrubbed the blood from his vest and put it back on, feeling less pained once the sting had subsided.

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Morning dawned clear and cool and they packed their gear for Alyn to fasten to the horses. Much of the lion meat they had strapped to the young grey stud, who snorted nervously at the scent, but did nothing except roll his eyes and prance a bit.

Alyn moaned again. "It’s unnatural, I tell you. There is not a horse alive who willingly pack lion meat unless they have been very well trained. These did not shy once, not even Fireling, and I know he is not well trained. What is wrong with them?"

"Will you stop whimpering and get moving?" Toryn growled.

Alyn sneered at him, but made no reply as the three of them mounted and resumed their southward bearing. Toryn’s wound opened a couple of times, but they kept it clean with water from the skins and rinsed the bandages before rewrapping them. Brydon planned to treat his own injury again when they stopped for the evening, enlisting Alyn’s help. He would rather not let Toryn know he was wounded, just to be safe.

Alyn sprawled out and fell asleep shortly after eating, so instead Brydon wandered away and took a quick bath in the stream they camped near. He sponged his wounds as best he could while craning his head to peer unsuccessfully at his back. The water was too cold and shallow to swim in, so he settled for wading in and splashing until he was wet enough to peel the vest from his blood-crusted back. He washed his vest thoroughly and put it back on, foregoing a shirt. Wool would have been too rough and painful against the cuts.

"Are you bathing again?" Toryn yelled from where he had been finishing off his meal. They could not see each other through the thick bushes full of yellow flowers.

"You should try it!" Brydon returned. "It might cause Alyn to think more favorably of you."

"She already likes me. Splashing in a cold pond will make no difference."
Brydon laughed. "If you say so."

On the third day after they had left the clearing, Toryn seemed much stronger. Brydon felt nauseous and contributed it to the thought of eating lion meat again. They were all heartily sick of it and though they had cooked the majority of the meat, they would soon have to dump the rest or risk being poisoned by spoilage.

Brydon was awakened on the fourth morning by Alyn nudging him in the ribs with her toe, none too gently. "Come on, Falaran. The sun is up. Are you going to sleep the whole day away?" Brydon’s head felt foggy. He wanted to sleep the day away. The black stallion, which he had named Darkling in mockery of Alyn’s steed, nuzzled his forehead.

"I’m up!" he snapped. He waved the horse away and heaved himself up before staggering to the stream for a drink. He could not bring himself to eat anything at all—the thought of food made him queasy. By mid-afternoon, he felt lightheaded.

"Such hot day," he said. "Is it always so warm here?"

"Perhaps, to a Falaran," Alyn said and shrugged.

"It’s finally a comfortable temperature and you start complaining?" Toryn looked at Brydon. "You must have ice water for blood."

"I wish I did. Maybe I would feel cooler."

Brydon watched the trees go by as they rode. The forest seemed to grow indistinct. Brydon barely noticed when the others pulled ahead and Darkling turned his head to look back at him. The foliage began to melt into a lovely mixture of blue and green that Brydon found that strangely fascinating. Each time he turned his head quickly, the colors blurred and raced together. He shook his head to enhance the vision and nearly toppled from the horse.

Brydon wrapped his arms around Darkling’s neck and buried his face in the thick black mane. The near accident struck him as funny and he chuckled as he tried to right himself. Toryn and Alyn had both ridden back and now gaped at him.

"What are you doing?" Alyn demanded. "Have you been chewing on larec weed?"

Brydon broke into a round of chuckles that nearly caused him to slide off the stallion again.

"I think his brain has been baked. I wonder if he has wine stashed in that pack of his." Toryn snorted. "If so, he’d better stop hoarding it to himself."

They rode on and Brydon straightened and followed. Occasional bursts of laughter shook his shoulders.

"It is damned hot here!"

There was not a drop of sweat on him.

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It was nearly dusk when Toryn thought he heard Redwing call his name. He turned in annoyance to see the reins drop from Redwing’s fingers. They trailed in the dust until the
stallion’s hoof came down on one, snipping the horse’s head down and halting him instantly.

Toryn watched as Brydon tried to dismount, but his feet crumpled under him and he sagged into the dirt. Toryn was off the mare in an instant and ran back to Redwing’s still form. Alyn wheeled her horse about.

"What’s wrong with him?" she asked. "Is he drunk?"

"I don’t know. He’s unconscious!" Toryn felt Redwing’s forehead. "No wonder he was complaining about the heat. He’s burning with fever!"

Alyn swore, but dismounted and quickly built a fire. It was not the best place to stop, as they were surrounded by thick undergrowth and large boulders with no water in sight, but there was no help for it.

Toryn dragged Redwing to the fire and then bathed his forehead with water from his water skin. He stripped off Redwing’s vest while there was still light enough to see by and tossed it aside without glancing at it. Alyn gasped loudly.

Toryn followed her gaze to find her staring at the blood-soaked leather vest. The sheepskin was almost completely dark with dried blood. Toryn paled and turned Redwing over carefully.

Four long, deep scratches curved grotesquely over Redwing’s right shoulder blade. The wound stretched from the top of his neck down to the base of his ribcage in a large curve. The cuts were dark and ugly and Toryn knew instinctively that they were infected. The gashes were partially covered by shreds of Redwing’s shirt, and those were caked to the wound by dried blood, and worse.

"Curse me for seven kinds of a fool! I saw the cat take him off! Why did I not realize—?" Toryn swore bitterly. Stupid, stubborn Falaran! Was he so afraid to show any weakness that he would rather die than ask for help? Toryn ran to get Redwing’s pack and dug out a pan with which to boil water. While it heated, he bathed Redwing’s hot skin with a cloth dipped in cool water. He would send Alyn to find more water if they ran out.

"Do you know anything about healing?" he asked Alyn, who shook her head.

"Nothing beyond a strained tendon."

"Is there a village nearby? Or an outpost of the Terrin Church with real healers?"

Alyn shook her head again. "We are leagues from a village and the Terrin Church is not allowed in Akarska. Not even the healing branch."

Toryn stared at her. "What do your people do about illness?"

"The chief Horsemistress of each clan has healing skills. For serious injuries—well, my uncle once took his son to Kaneelis to visit the Temple of Healing. The boy used to fall down, thrash, and foam at the mouth."

"What happened to him?"

"They gave the boy herbs to take daily to prevent the falling sickness and told my uncle where they grow so that he could find more," Alyn explained.
"In other words, for serious healing the patient has to leave Akarska, or die," Toryn said. Alyn colored, but bit her lip slightly and nodded. Toryn charitably said nothing further. He bathed Redwing’s wound with hot water and cleaned it thoroughly. Large bits of flesh peeled away and Toryn felt his stomach heave. He closed his eyes for a moment until the nausea passed, and thanked Adona that Redwing was unconscious. The infection was an ugly dull yellow and Toryn had no idea what to do about it except scrub until it bled freely again. Redwing’s fever was just as baffling, but Toryn laid cloth after cloth of cool water on Redwing’s head and neck until his shoulders were almost cracking from the strain. Alyn sat across the fire from him and watched. The meal she had prepared sat near the fire, uneaten.

"Are you not deadly enemies?" she asked finally.

"Yes," Toryn replied. He did not pause as he wrung out the water and soaked up more from the water skin.

"Then why not let him die?" she asked.

Toryn stared at her coldly. The question angered him, even though he knew it was logical enough. Alyn held his gaze for a long time. Toryn looked back at the face of his enemy. Redwing’s hair was matted from the water, not from sweat. Toryn knew a fever could be deadly and he wished that he knew what to do to ease it. He and his family had always been vibrantly healthy. He knew nothing of wounds, fever, or illness.

"I don’t know," Toryn replied quietly and laid the cloth again on Redwing’s hot forehead. "Do we have any more water?"

"I’ll see if I can find some," Alyn said softly and slipped into the darkness.

Two hours later, Alyn had fallen asleep and Toryn’s hands, now prune-like from the water, continued their endless movement. It was fully dark and the fire had burned down to a tiny flame, but Toryn did not pause in his efforts to put more wood on the embers.

"Gauntlet," Redwing muttered and Toryn started for a moment, thinking he was awake, until he realized Redwing was delirious.

"Princess... the quest," Redwing mumbled. His eyes snapped open. "Assassins!"

"Redwing?" Toryn asked uneasily, but the Falaran was not seeing him. His eyes focused on a point beyond Toryn’s head.

"Redolians..." He trailed off again. Toryn wrung out the cloth.

"Toryn! The lion! Look out!" Redwing yelled and thrashed. Alyn started awake, grabbing for her whip. "Toryn!"

"He’s out of his head," Toryn explained. Alyn nodded and relaxed. Redwing calmed and lay still. After a time, he asked very clearly, "Where is Ven-Kerrick?" The words jolted into Toryn. Ven-Kerrick? Redwing was after the Gauntlet of Ven-Kerrick? That was his quest? Toryn nearly laughed out loud at the sheer lunacy of the idea. He rocked back on his heels and considered Redwing’s words. What else could it be? Ven-Kerrick had no resources, no rugs or tapestries, no leather goods, no jewelry or decorative urns. They were famous for nothing but the gauntlet. Even in Redol, they had heard of the Gauntlet
of Ven-Kerrick. It was magical. An actual magical item wielded by King Kerrick in the War of the South to destroy the forces of Shaitan. It was a fool’s errand to think the Kerricks would ever part with such an object, even temporarily. It was practically holy. Redwing sighed and was silent. Toryn massaged his own eyes momentarily in weariness. When he opened them again, a woman, hooded and dressed in pale blue robes, stood at the edge of the wood. She looked more like a vision than reality. Toryn got to his feet unsteadily, his joints popping.

"Who are you?" he whispered. He thought he might be infected with whatever had taken Redwing’s mind.

"Is he injured?" she asked in a melodious voice as she came forward. For a moment, Toryn thought she was a spirit. He rubbed a hand across his tired eyes and blinked at her. She seemed solid enough.

"That depends on whether or not you mean us harm," he said. He glanced over and knew that Alyn was also awake. One hand rested on her ever-present whip while she feigned sleep.

The woman laughed and it was like a silvery tinkle of coins in a crystal jar. "I wish harm to no man," she said. "I am Verana, of the Order of the Rose. I am a healer."

Toryn almost fainted with relief at her words, strange though it was to meet a healer in a place where there were no healers, and especially when one was most desperately needed. She came forward, knelt, and examined Redwing carefully. She immediately slung off her large pack and rifled through it. She drew out several pouches of dried herbs, leaves, powders, and a wooden cup. Pale gloves covered her slender hands, but they did not hinder her movements.

Toryn threw more wood on the fire, building it up to allow her more light.

"Please hold him down," she requested politely, "This will hurt."

Toryn immediately held Redwing’s legs and Alyn got up at his signal to grip Redwing’s arms. The healer pulled a handful of grayish powder out of a bag and dumped it on the wound. Redwing thrashed mightily, but did not awaken. Alyn was flung off with a yelp and then Redwing’s convulsions ceased.

"What will that do?" Toryn asked, shaken, as he released Redwing’s legs. Verana turned to him and threw back the hood of her robe. He gasped, for she was unlike any woman he had ever seen. Her skin was very dark, nearly black, and her hair was mass of tight black curls, tamed in the front by two long braids. Her eyes were large and doe-like and she had a beauty that was almost ethereal.

"The powder will kill the infection," she said, bringing Toryn’s attention back to the question he had asked. "Now we must deal with his fever. It is good that you bathed his head. It kept the fever from damaging his brain."

She crushed some dried leaves in a cup and added some small pink flower petals before soaking the mixture in hot water. When it was a pungent tea, she strained out the leaves and petals and attached a strange tube-like contraption to the cup. Toryn held Redwing upright while she slid the tube down his throat and poured the drink into him skillfully.
Toryn gagged slightly in reflex, but Redwing did not stir. Verana took clean bandages from her pack and wrapped his wound tightly.

"There." She sighed as she tied it off tightly with the aid of Toryn’s finger. "That is all I can do for him. Now, let me look at your wound."

"I don't have any wounds," Toryn protested. He did not want any part of the excruciating grey powder.

"Shirt off."

Toryn muttered ungraciously, but tugged his shirt off. Verana watched him with one eyebrow raised and he silenced himself.

She did not use the grey powder; instead she crushed a handful of dark green leaves moistened with water. After mixing it into a sort of sticky paste, she spread it over Toryn’s torn ribs and tied it in place with a bandage. The salve was soothingly cool and Toryn was surprised to feel his pain slowly ebb.

"What brings you here right when we need you, anyway? Are you an angel?"

Verana smiled and she actually looked angelic. She seemed ageless to Toryn. Her face was unlined but for small crinkles at the corners of her eyes. "I am a healer, not an angel," she said. "You have never seen an Ebon woman before, have you?"

Toryn shook his head, somewhat embarrassed to have been caught staring.

"We are not so rare in the south. As to your question, I was on my way back to Kaneelis from Falara. The way is easier through Akarska than Terris, although they do not like travelers passing through. I spent the winter in Eaglecrest training the healers there on some new techniques."

"Did you know Redwing there? He is on some foolish quest to become king."

Verana smiled. "No foolish quest, surely, when a kingship is on the line. He looks familiar to me, although I have never met him. I witnessed the ceremony that sent him off. There was a grand parade in Eaglecrest and many feasts." She patted her stomach. "Northern folk do love their feasts. I feel I've gained a stone or more in the past few months."

Toryn wondered where she had put the stone, since she looked perfectly fit to him.

"I left two days behind him, but strayed from the road early on to enter Akarska. I hope to meet a friend at the Waryn Trading Inn. I expected the Sir Brydon to be far ahead of me."

Sir Brydon? "We were delayed by an avalanche on the pass."

"'We?' Have you traveled far with him, then?" she asked.

"Not willingly, at first. I tried to kill him." Toryn shrugged. "I’m Redolian, you know."

Verana raised a brow, but made no judgment, for which Toryn was grateful. She said, "My camp is not far from here. I was just about to sleep when I felt… I’m not sure. Something. I was drawn here as though someone were calling for help."

Toryn wasn’t sure how to respond. "You’re traveling alone? Isn’t that dangerous?"
"Not many people will harm a healer. Even bandits and raiders tend to respect the Order. And I have been trained in defense, when necessary." She pulled a large, sheathed dagger from a hidden pocket of her robes. "Although I far prefer to heal injury than cause it."

"You are next, Horsemistress," Verana said, turning to Alyn, who looked at her with an expression bordering on insolence.

"There is nothing wrong with me," Alyn snapped.

"Nonsense," Verana said. Her melodious voice had a remarkable amount of steel in it when she wished. "A head wound is the most dangerous of all. Come here."

Alyn reluctantly obeyed. Toryn touched his own head where Redwing’s arrow had cut a furrow, but it had been well treated and was nothing more than a healing scar, covered by his thick black hair.

The healer examined Alyn’s head, pronounced it fracture-free and gave her a cup of tea for lingering pain. It must have been a potent herb that she used in the tea, for Alyn went to sleep almost immediately.

"She is going to be all right, isn’t she?" Toryn asked. He had grown rather fond of arguing with the blond wench. Verana gave him a tired smile.

"Akarskans are a strong people. It will take more than a knock on the head to stop one like her. Is it permitted for me to know your names? I know Sir Brydon’s. Redwing, is it not?"

Toryn flushed. "Sorry. I am Toryn, son of Taryn, brother of Morgyn, Clan-Chieftain. He is Brydon Redwing. The girl is Alyn. That is all I know of her."

"How is it that you travel with Sir Brydon, Toryn of Redol? After you tried to kill him?"

"He spared my life," Toryn replied. "I suppose I’m staying with him to find out why."

"Why you tried to kill him, or why he spared you?"

"Perhaps a bit of both," Toryn admitted. "Where did you come from? Originally, I mean?" he asked. He found himself wondering what color her eyes were. It was impossible to tell in the darkness and the meager light from the fire and the quarter moon.

"I was born in Kaneelis and spent much of my life there."

"In Terris?" Toryn asked. "I’m still not sure how you knew we were in trouble."

Verana’s perfect smile beamed out again. "Neither am I. But I never underestimate the power of Adona."

With that she got up and pulled a blanket out of her pack. She spread it on the ground over a thick patch of grass. In minutes, she was asleep. Toryn put a hand out to touch Redwing’s forehead, somewhat shaken by the thought that he was a pawn in one of Adona’s plans. He suddenly felt sure that Brydon Redwing was meant for something remarkable. Something even larger than bringing peace to Falara and Redol. Maybe it was Toryn’s task to help him achieve it.
Redwing’s skin was drenched with sweat. The fever had broken. Toryn mercilessly took a blanket from Alyn and covered Redwing to prevent him from catching a chill. If the Akarskan wench got cold, she knew where Toryn slept.

CHAPTER SEVEN
AKARSKA

Toryn slept late the next morning, for one of the few times in his life, and he felt much better for the rest. He looked around as he got to his feet. Redwing was actually conscious; he sat alongside a tree with his good shoulder against the bark and his injured one wrapped in Verana’s clean white bandages. Verana sat near him, talking. She was rather enchanting in the daylight. Her blue robes set off the color of her skin, and her hair was an untamed mass of black curls that tumbled to just below her shoulders. On either side of her face, twisted silver wire fastened four long braids into place. Toryn wondered if the plaits had some significance, like his own clan-braid.

Verana noticed his perusal and she smiled. Her eyes were a soft amber color.

Toryn walked over and was pleased to see Redwing’s green eyes focus on his own before he smiled ruefully.

"It looks like I owe you my life this time," Redwing said.

Toryn threw an accusing glare at Verana. Damn her. If he’d wanted the Falaran to know he had sat up with him all night, he would have told him. "Not me, Falaran. The healer saved you. I was ready to bury you and ride back to Redol." Redwing’s smile did not fade and Toryn knew he did not believe his bluff for a moment.

"Thank you, Toryn," Redwing said solemnly.

Toryn had nothing to say to that, so he muttered something about the stream and stalked off. Alyn was nowhere in sight and he wondered vaguely where the wench had gone. He felt the need to insult someone.

He found her a moment later when he reached the stream; the sight brought him up short. Alyn was in the water up to her waist, completely naked. Her hair was straight and wet, darkened from the water. Her skin glistened as she splashed water over herself in unconscious abandon.

Toryn’s breath caught in his throat as small rivulets ran down her breasts and ribs and into the pool. She was one of the loveliest things he’d ever seen in his life. His loins tightened as she splashed water over her face and then shook her head, sending droplets flying from her hair to sparkle in the air like crystals. Toryn swallowed hard, trying to rein in his libido and keep himself from wading into the pool after her. She would most likely kill him if he did so.

She must have felt Toryn’s burning gaze upon her, for her head snapped up and their eyes met for a brief, timeless instant.

The moment was broken when Alyn shrieked in rage, transforming from a bathing beauty into a vengeful water spirit. Rocks and water flew at him, along with a plethora of
screamed invectives, so he beat a hasty retreat with the image of her wet, naked form burned into his memory. He sighed shakily as he slowed to a walk and wiped the water droplets from his face. It was proving to be an interesting day.

"I forgot to mention that Alyn was at the stream," Verana said apologetically when Toryn returned to the fire.

"I discovered that," Toryn said blandly, straining to keep the grin from his face and barely succeeding. "Do I smell food? I'm starved."

Verana gestured to the fire where a covered pot and a kettle lay. Toryn looked at Redwing, who had fallen asleep again.

"How is he, truly?" he asked Verana quietly.

"The powder has drawn out the poison, but he needs to rest so that his body can heal the wounds."

Toryn agreed. "He is the one with the schedule to keep. I have nothing better to do and Alyn ... who knows?"

"Schedule?" she asked. "Do you refer to his quest?"

"Yes. And don't ask me what it is. He hasn't told me." But, Toryn reflected, I have a dreadful suspicion. He looked at Redwing and wondered if he was really after the Gauntlet of Ven-Kerrick. He looked at Verana. "Wait, if you were in Eaglecrest, don't you know what it is?"

"No one knows the details of the quest except the princess and her chosen."

Toryn shook off the puzzle, knowing it was a waste of time to ponder possibilities and worry about the future. He poured himself a cupful of whatever the kettle held. It turned out to be a curious golden liquid, almost the color of apple wine.

"What is this?" he asked, fearing it was some sort of rubbing liniment.

"Herbal tea," Verana replied. "Not very potent, but tasty. It will cure minor headaches and give you some energy."

Alyn stalked back from the stream just as Toryn took a drink and he later had no recollection as to its taste. She marched straight to the packs and picked up her bow, making a show of examining the bowstring as she strung it. Toryn watched her uneasily. Redwing moaned and Verana hurried over to check on him. Toryn glanced over at Redwing, but he did not awaken.

When Toryn looked back at Alyn, he jumped so violently that he spilled some of his tea into the fire. It hissed. Alyn's bow was drawn, the arrow nocked and aimed straight at Toryn. He swallowed through a suddenly dry throat.

A smile curved her lips and a wet finger of hair slipped down over one blue eye. The scenario froze for a moment with only the crackle of the fire and the sounds of Verana tending to Redwing breaking the silence.

"Keep this close to mind," Alyn purred as a trickle of sweat found its way down Toryn's brow. He remembered all the times she had begged Redwing to kill Toryn and have done. She snapped the bow away just as Verana turned around.
"Did you say something?" Verana asked.

"I was just giving Toryn something to think about," Alyn replied.

Toryn got up unsteadily and went into the forest. Some days, horses were better company than women. In fact, the only time women were good company was at night. When they were silenced by sleep, after they had performed their most useful function. He chuckled to himself and went to curry the bay mare.

Two days later, Toryn was bored out of his mind. Redwing was pale, but getting stronger. Verana showed him exercises to keep his sword arm supple and yet not tear open his wound. He would have to forego use of his bow for a time.

Toryn stayed away from Alyn, as she seemed to have an uncommon fondness for fingering her whip whenever he was close to her. He had spent most of the previous day sharpening the daggers that he’d recovered from Redwing’s pack. Toryn had charitably put a nice edge on Redwing's sword. Alyn spent much of her time crooning to the horses, currying them, and braiding their manes and tails, sometimes with flowers and weeds, sometimes without.

Verana noticed him watching Alyn and commented, "She is very comely."

Toryn snorted. "Yes, but I would have to sprout large pointy ears, hooves, and a tail before she will pay me any attention." He made sure Redwing was out of hearing before he admitted it.

"Oh, I think she notices you."

Toryn perked up. "Really?"

"Yes. Her eyes follow you whenever you leave. And she was looking at you quite speculatively last evening as you slept," Verana admitted. Toryn could only hope Alyn was not speculating to unman him as he slumbered.

Verana had decided to accompany them to the Waryn Highway and from there she would go on to Kaneelis with Redwing. Of course, Alyn would be taking the horses back and leaving them once they reached that point. Toryn would return to Redol. Alyn graciously allowed Verana to ride the colt that she’d named Thistle. As they rode, Toryn asked Redwing, "Isn’t it odd that three horses should be here just when we need them?"

Redwing nodded. "Not nearly as strange as Verana being so close, just when we needed a healer."

Toryn heartily agreed.

They rode for two weeks, traveling slowly for Redwing’s sake. He healed rapidly, thanks to Verana’s ministrations. The mountains on their right were jagged peaks, gracefully shouldering a white mantle of snow. Crossing them into Terris would be impossible.

Alyn’s demeanor had not improved. Toryn had hoped to entice her into his bed by now, but each time he tried to be pleasant to her, she would glare at him and flay him with an insult, forcing him to respond in kind. She was a maddening wench.
The days had grown longer and the mornings warmer, until it was almost bearable to
climb out from beneath the blankets at daybreak without the accompaniment of shivering
and stamping of feet. They traveled at a leisurely pace and even Redwing seemed
unconcerned that a month and more had passed, even though he still had a long way to
travel.

Akarska was thickly forested with rich soil. The trees were largely pine and fir,
interspersed with large stands of oak and birch. Alyn admitted that Akarskans farmed the
land in certain areas, especially in the more populated regions of central and eastern
Akarska. Cattle abounded and grew almost wild. It was a self-sufficient country and the
most common occupation, it seemed, was that of messenger. There was not an Akarskan
born who did not long to see what was over the next rise and there were always ready
volunteers to carry a message to the next village. It had grown into an industry and news
spread more quickly in Akarska than it did anywhere else in the world, or so Alyn
informed them smugly. Toryn wanted to know how she knew that for a certainty, since
she had not actually been anywhere else in the world, but she ignored him.

They met a few wandering Akarskans, mostly messengers, who left them alone after
silently listening to Alyn’s accounting of their business. They were a brooding and
suspicious people.

"So," Toryn asked Alyn one day, "how does one go about claiming an unclaimed horse?"
She turned icy blue eyes on him. "Why?"

"I am just making conversation," he protested innocently, which wasn’t the easiest feat.
"Make it with someone else," she snapped.

He grinned lasciviously and she blushed, sliding her eyes away as he refrained from the
obvious retort. He smiled at the minor victory.

"It is quite simple," she said at last, apparently realizing he was not going to go away.
"You cannot claim an unmarked horse because you are an outlander."

"What do you mean, unmarked?" he questioned, ignoring the rest of her scathing
comment.

She sighed. "All of our horses are marked with an owner’s symbol, as well as the clan-
sign."

"How are they marked?"

She looked at him for a long moment and then must have decided it would do no
permanent harm for him to know. She turned and rooted about in her saddle pack,
trusting Fireling to guide himself. After a time, she came up with a tiny piece of metal
and handed it to Toryn.

He examined it. It was about the size of a gold coin, but it was steel, in the outline of a
leaf crossed by a coiled snake, or perhaps, more likely, a whip.

"That attaches to a small rod, which we then heat in a fire. When it is the right
temperature, we brand the horse high on its neck." She reached forward and flipped back
a section of Fireling’s mane near his ears. Toryn leaned forward and saw the faint outline
of the symbol she held, next to another that looked like a small circle crossed by a straight line. "They are all marked as yearlings, and again if they are traded to another clan. The old mark, there, belonged to the man that originally owned Fireling."

Toryn was amazed. "Doesn’t it hurt them?" he asked. "I can’t believe you Akarskan horse-lovers would torture a horse that way."

Alyn glared at him, a look he received at least a dozen times a day. "Of course it does not hurt them! We have a special salve that deadens the area. Then we cover their eyes and muzzles so they do not shy away from the smoke. It only takes a moment."

"Where do you get the little irons?"

"They are made by our craftsmen when we come of age. Every personal mark is different," she explained. Toryn looked at it again and handed it back to her. He pondered while she put everything back into her pack and then he smiled and went to check on Redwing.

The Falaran looked much better and flexed his arms as he rode.

"What happens when we reach the border of Akarska and Alyn takes the horses? Where do you plan to go from there?" Toryn asked.

"South."

"Across the Abyss?"

Redwing nodded and said, "When I reach the Abyss, you will be free to go back to Redol. You are free to go now, for that matter. I am surprised you did not leave when I was unconscious."

Toryn pretended not to have heard him. That was a question he had trouble answering in his own mind.

"How will you cross the Abyss? The chasm is the only thing that has kept Penkangum from overrunning Terris all these years, right, Verana?" He twisted to look at her, proud of the fact that he knew quite a lot about the southern kingdoms. His brother, Morgyn, as clan-chief, was practically obsessed with learning about the world. He had commandeered scrolls and maps from every Redolian village and forced Toryn to study them so that he would have someone with whom to discuss politics.

"Indeed," Verana replied.

"I will have to go to Kaneelis, unless anyone knows of a way across the Abyss."

Verana shook her head. "There are rumors of a crossing from Akarska to Tar-Tan. The Tar-Tanians use it to steal horses, but no outsiders know the route."

"Where will you go from Kaneelis?" Toryn prodded. Redwing smiled at him but did not reply. Toryn grinned slyly. He wouldn’t bring up Ven-Kerrick just yet. He decided to ride with Alyn again, since he had thought up a few more choice insults to use on her.

In the next few days, the mountains grew shorter and a few trails were found that led into Terris. Verana informed them that many of the paths led to small villages in the
swampland or on the eastern border of Terris. If they took such a route, they would have to flounder through the swamps on little-used or nonexistent trails until they reached a town; and there were few of those in Terris. Redwing had no desire to deal with the swamps at all, so it was by unspoken agreement that they continued south, intending to reach the only decent road across Terris—the Waryn Highway. Waryn had cut a road through the swamps and long stretches of it was made from logs lashed together. The track was well used by merchants. Akarskans, though unwilling to part with horses, traded woodcarvings, jewelry, and leather goods. Toryn wondered briefly how Falara had become so wealthy despite their isolation. Redol cut Falara off from the western sea while Akarska and the high mountain ranges kept it isolated from the south. To the east of Falara was nothing but the volcanic wastes of Canaar. He would have to ask Redwing one day. Falara was a taboo subject to Morgyn, even with his great love of politics and history.

The Terrin city of Kaneelis was the center of trade for the entire world. Due south of Akarska was Tar-Tan, separated by the mile-deep canyon known as the Abyss. Tar-Tanians were an unscrupulous people, liking nothing better than to steal horses and women. Stealing horses was enough to put them on the Akarskan death-list for all time and Toryn figured they stole the women since they had nothing else to lose. Tar-Tanians kept slaves.

He looked over at Alyn. It was not hard to imagine her wrapping her whip around a Tar-Tanian’s neck and watching as he writhed in agony. On the other hand, he found it even easier to imagine her without any clothing, climbing sensuously out of a stream and beckoning to him, with her eyes aqua liquid and a welcoming smile on her full red lips. He smiled dreamily.

His smile froze as she turned her head to glare at him as though sensing his thoughts. The prior vision returned, except this time he was the victim of the slowly tightening whip. His smile and his desire faded rapidly and he sighed at its departure. She returned her gaze to the path and Toryn turned his mind reluctantly to something else.

They camped near the shore of a large pond inhabited with flocks of wild ducks and geese. Toryn, nearly salivating in anticipation, hurried off to find some eggs, and possibly snare a duckling or two. Alyn snorted as she passed him astride Fireling. He watched as she wheeled the stallion and began to gallop the horse around the pond. In the blink of an eye, she and the chestnut stallion were running full out, racing the wind. Toryn watched enviously for a moment, recalling moments of such freedom at home on the plains, and then returned to his search. Verana had informed them that they would reach the Waryn Trading Company in two days. He hoped they could purchase some real food there, such a fresh bread, butter, cheese, and pastries. He was utterly sick of trail food.

In less than an hour, Toryn had found a pile of large eggs. He packed them back to camp in his shirt while keeping a wary eye out for Alyn, in case she lay in wait to trip him. He did not relish the thought of raw eggs coating his chest after a well-placed shove.

He had just placed them all on the ground near the fire when he saw Redwing leap to his feet and stare into the distance with a look of intense concentration. Toryn felt a prickle of unease. Verana looked at Redwing with a worried expression.
"Adona!" Redwing cried suddenly. "It’s Alyn! She’s in danger!" He snatched up the bridle and sprinted for Darkling.

"Where?" Toryn demanded, feeling that he had missed something.

"Come on!" Redwing yelled. "Bring everything!"

Verana tossed items into the packs quickly. Toryn kicked the fire, scattering the coals, and then ran to the mare. Redwing had already mounted and raced away by the time Toryn and Verana grabbed everything they could and hurried after him. Toryn wondered where in Sheol Redwing was going, but the Falaran did not pause.

"This way!" he called. Toryn swore and kicked the mare after him, half-convinced that Redwing had developed a case of insanity. He and Verana trailed at a steady gallop for another quarter hour, batting branches and leaves out of their paths and plunging through thickets of spiny brush.

Redwing halted in a small clearing and dismounted. Toryn slid from Fang to pick up a piece of green cloth that lay upon the ground. It was a torn scrap, hinting of violence. Toryn looked at Redwing, whose expression was grim; the cloth was from Alyn’s shirt. Redwing studied the ground and walked into the trees on the other side of the clearing. He said, "She got one, at least."

Toryn hurried over to view the man who lay in the bushes with a coil of deadly leather wrapped around his neck. Alyn’s whip. His eyes bulged out sickeningly, Toryn’s daydream come to life.

"Penk, by his clothing," Verana said. Toryn clenched his teeth. The Penks were not above selling women as slaves; Tar-Tan was their primary buyer. An Akarskan female would be quite a prize, especially with the red horse she rode.

"I thought only Tar-Tan raided Akarska for horses."

"Some people are unscrupulous when there is profit to be made," Verana replied.

"Where would they go from here?" Toryn asked. He dared not ask how Redwing had known where the attack had taken place. He wasn’t certain he wanted to know.

Redwing went back to Darkling and mounted. "This way," he said and started off.

It grew dark and though the moon rose huge and full. Toryn wondered how Redwing could possibly know where they were going. They climbed steadily, following a narrow, rocky trail. The horses’ nostrils flared as they drank air in heavy gusts; they were tiring. They stopped climbing eventually and begun to descend. Toryn figured that they had just crossed into Terris. The terrain was rockier and the undergrowth was thicker, but the trail they followed was relatively clear of overhangs and debris.

Redwing halted when they reached a wide, grassy area. "We need to rest the horses."

Toryn tried to tamp down his frustration and failed. "How do you even know where we are going?"

Redwing ran a hand through his golden hair, which shone faintly in the starlight. "If we catch up to them tonight, they might run for it. On exhausted horses, we won’t have a chance of catching them. We will halt here."
"Surely they will try to get revenge on her for their dead comrade?" Toryn insisted.

Redwing shook his head as he dismounted and gave Darkling a single handful of water from his water skin. "I don’t think so. Right now, they are trying to get as far from Akarska as possible. She will be fine until they are far enough away to feel safe." Toryn wanted to protest, but Verana laid a hand on his arm.

"He is right, Toryn. I am sure she is fine for now. Rest a while."

Toryn wanted to curse, but refrained for Verana’s sake, and instead stomped over to his mare and talked to her angrily. She listened while nibbling on a bush and flicking her tail occasionally. They let the horses rest for an agonizing half hour. Verana prepared them a quick meal, which they ate just as quickly, and then they continued on.

They rode at a moderate pace for the rest of the night, crossing large stretches of brush-entangled forest and steep, rocky hillsides. Toryn began to wonder if Redwing was leading them into some strange Falaran trap, or (more likely) had no idea where they were going.

It was just past dawn when Redwing called a halt. "They are very close. From here, we should travel on foot. The ground is too rocky to move quietly on horseback and we don’t want them to hear us coming."

"How do you know they are close by?" Toryn demanded, sick of Redwing’s mysterious behavior and cryptic comments. "How have you been tracking them all night?"

"Do you want an explanation, or do you want to save Alyn?" Redwing asked.

"Both!" Toryn snapped, but Redwing was already moving.

"Verana, stay with the horses and try to keep them quiet. Toryn and I will take a look around and try to come up with a plan after we see what we’re dealing with."

Verana nodded. Redwing strung his bow and handed his sword to Toryn. "Too bad Alyn’s bow was strapped to Fireling."

"I’m not very good with a bow, anyway," Toryn admitted, giving Redwing’s sword a test swipe. It had excellent balance.

They crept across the hillside. Rocky or not, the area was lush with vegetation and they had a difficult time being quiet. Toryn smelled smoke as they topped a rise and observed a small village set down amongst tall deciduous trees. They crouched quickly to remain unseen.

"Village" was perhaps too large a word to describe the place. It consisted of three wood-and-bough huts and four or five lean-tos made of makeshift material. The only solid-looking constructs were a large log corral and a wooden building built into the rocky base of the mountain.

"Fireling!" Toryn whispered, pointing. Alyn’s stallion was in the corral with several other horses. "I thought you were leading us on a goose chase."

"I am shocked at your lack of faith," Redwing said dryly as he studied the encampment intently. There was little sign of life other than the horses. Occasionally, a man would
step out of one hut or lean-to and travel to another. Some ragged-looking women came out and began to cook at a fire in a cleared area between the huts.

"Let’s get closer," Redwing suggested. "It looks like most of the residents are sleeping late."

Toryn followed as Redwing slipped slowly off the crest of the hill and into the trees. They were perhaps a hundred yards from the corral when Redwing tripped. About to chide him for clumsiness, Toryn yelped as a net plunged down upon them. Thorns tore into his skin—they were affixed to the webbing. He swore roundly as he struggled to free himself from the trap, earning several gouges and scratches. Redwing also fought to throw it off, but his efforts hindered Toryn’s—the damned thing was heavy, weighted down with stones.

"Nice going, Falaran," Toryn said. A sudden wave of dizziness overcame him. Before he could fully register the sensation, he was unconscious.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DAVIN

Brydon stirred at the touch of coolness on his forehead. He opened his eyes slowly and Verana’s dark face swam into view. He sat up, feeling dizzy. His weapons were gone and he noticed with dismay that his ring had also been taken.

"Verana—what?"

"Sorry, Brydon. They must have sent out a party after you were captured. I was surrounded."

"Why am I so dizzy?"

"You’ve been unconscious. I assume you were drugged."

Brydon examined his arms and saw a number of deep scratches. "The net—it was imbedded with darts. They must have been tipped with something."

He looked around. They were in a partial wooden structure, the back wall of which was open to a stone cave. The floor was dirt with a small fire pit in the center that looked like it had not been used in a long while. The room smelled musty, like an underground cellar. Light spilled from meager cracks between the boards in the walls, illuminating the room enough to see. Toryn lay next to Brydon, still unconscious. A furtive movement in one dark corner of the cave caught Brydon’s eye.

"Alyn?" he asked and wondered why she was back in the dark. Verana shook her head.

"No," she corrected. "I would not go back there. He growls."

"He?" Brydon asked.

"Yes. It is a man. Quite strange. I fear for his sanity."

Brydon stood up shakily. When he felt steady, he brushed ineffectively at the dust that covered him. The cave-room was thick with it. "How long have we been here? Have you seen Alyn?"
Verana shook her head and sneezed, catching some of the dust Brydon slapped into the air. "A few hours. There is no sign of Alyn. I was going to ask the man in the corner, but he is not amenable to discourse. Or perhaps he cannot speak."

Brydon walked over and yanked at the door with expected results. It was locked, and too solid to batter down. He peered between the door and the frame and saw little but trees; it was still daylight, probably late afternoon. There were no sounds coming from outside except the warbling of carefree birds. Brydon shut his eyes and leaned his head against the door. He had a headache and there was an atrocious metallic aftertaste in his mouth.

He opened his eyes and turned around. Verana pressed the wet cloth against Toryn's forehead and the dark-haired Redolian snapped awake. He leaped to his feet instantly, eyes darting.

"Where is Alyn?" he asked.

"Not here." Brydon sighed.

"Not here in this place, or not anywhere around us?" Toryn demanded and looked at Brydon with a penetrating stare.

Brydon held his gaze for a long moment before replying. He supposed some explanation was in order for dragging them on what must have seemed an insane ride. The difficulty lay in explaining something he did not fully understand himself.

"Not anywhere around. They must have taken her somewhere else." Or killed her, but he did not say those words aloud.

Toryn seemed on the verge of asking another question, but movement from the man in the corner caught his eye. Brydon sighed in relief at the momentary reprieve. Toryn approached the skittish man in the shadows. As Verana had warned, the stranger growled loudly.

"Yes, and grrr to you, as well," Toryn snapped. "Was Alyn here? Pretty blond Akarskan girl? Vicious temper?"

Silence from the man. Toryn grabbed his shirtfront and hauled him forward. "Tell me before I tear your bloody head off!" he yelled. Verana stepped toward them, but Toryn's hands fell away. The man's silver hair glinted in the meager light. "Forgive me, old man," Toryn muttered. He turned away and shot Brydon a look of frustration.

"Falaran, I do not—"

"I am not an old man."

They all looked at the bearded fellow as he shuffled forward. His hair was bright silver, hanging free and unkempt to a length past his shoulders. A rough silver beard covered his chin, but his physique spoke of a man in his prime. He wore black pants smeared with dust and a once-white shirt that was torn, stained, and filthy. Scuffed black boots shod his feet. He smelled unpleasant.

"Your friend was here for an hour, tied and gagged. When they threw you in here they took her out." His voice surprised Brydon. He had expected rough, uneducated speech from the man, but his voice was clipped with a slight accent that Brydon couldn't place.
"Do you know where they took her?" Toryn asked.

"They do not confide in me, for some reason," the man said.

"Do you know who they are?" Brydon asked. "We assumed slavers or horse runners when Alyn and her horse were taken."

The question earned a shrug. "Petty thieves, for the most part. Most of them are Terrin swamp people, but the leader is a nasty Penk who thinks he’s some sort of warlord. They watch the Akarskan border for stray horses or lone travelers to prey upon."

"What is your name?" Verana asked.

"Davin."

Verana introduced herself and the others politely and asked the man if he was injured or ill. He had a large purplish bruise around one eye that looked recent.

"What ails me can never be healed," Davin said and retreated abruptly back to his dark corner.

Toryn looked after him and made a gesture denoting lunacy. "Get us out of here, Falaran."

Brydon wished he had any clue as to how to do just that.

They spent the next hour making plans.

"When he opens the door, you take this pot and throw it at him," Toryn suggested. "Then I will leap on him and beat his head against the door."

Davin spoke up from the shadows in his dry voice. "First of all, it is doubtful that they will open the door. They like to slide the food underneath. Second, they carry swords with which to beat the pot aside, and third, they never open the door singly. If you do manage, by some miracle, to knock the first one out, the second will simply run you through."

"Thank you for your optimism," Toryn said.

"I'm just telling you how it is."

"If only they had not taken our weapons," Toryn muttered. "When do they feed us, anyway? Are they not curious about where we came from?"

"I doubt it. They are not a curious lot. My guess is once they figure out what to do about the woman, they will kill you two."

"Verana? What do you mean?" Brydon asked.

Davin shrugged. "They were pretty upset to discover she was a healer. If she had been an ordinary woman they would have taken her with the Akarskan and sold her. Some of the more cowardly ones are worried about what Adona will do to them if they try to sell a healer. They also think she may have some special powers that could harm them. Apparently they are superstitious of Ebons. Of course, it also makes them afraid to kill her, but some of the bolder ones want to sell her off to some pagan Tar-Tanian chieftain she will not be able to escape."
"How long have you been here?"
Davin shrugged. "Nearly a month."
"Why are they keeping you alive?" he asked. "Are they afraid of you, also?"
"They think I’m a wolf."
"A wolf?" Verana inquired. "Do you have lycanthropy? There are herbs which will cure that, though they must be taken regularly."
"I do not have lycanthropy," Davin spat.
"Are you a wolf?" Toryn asked.
"Do I look like a wolf?" Davin snapped peevishly.
"Well, sort of. You are rather hairy and wolves are grey, sometimes, especially up north —"
"That’s enough, Toryn," Brydon said. His headache had returned and he wished Toryn would not find it necessary to bait everyone they met.
"How are we going to get out of here?" Toryn demanded.
The door burst open suddenly to reveal a large, bearded man. He seemed weaponless, but two smaller men behind him were armed, one with a sword and the other with a double crossbow. The large man’s beard was matted and dirty and several of his teeth were missing. He had a large paunch under filthy clothing, but Brydon did not think much of it was fat. He looked like a slovenly old peasant, but his eyes gleamed with a nasty intelligence as he gazed at them. Brydon looked for, and saw, his own signet ring adorning the man’s finger. His lips thinned on an upsurge of rage.
"I see the Falaran has awakened. Odd company you keep, Redolian." The big man snorted and turned his eyes to Verana. "What is a tasty Ebon wench like you doing with these nothings?"

Verana glared at him, but made no reply.
The man chuckled. "I’m giving you a chance to state your business before I kill you," he said.
"We are looking for our friend," Brydon admitted.
"And who might that be?"
"An Akarskan girl with a chestnut stallion."
"What makes you think she’s here? It’s illegal to take horses from Akarska, you know?"
"We saw her stallion in your corral," Brydon replied dryly.
The man gave up his pretense of innocence with a shrug. "No matter. I would have killed you even if you hadn’t seen the horse." He looked at Verana again. "Except you, sweet. I have better things planned for you."
He walked forward and grabbed Verana by the wrist. A menacing motion from the crossbowman halted Brydon’s instinctive leap forward as the man dragged her outside.
"Kill them," the leader called as his footsteps retreated. "The wolf, too. I’m tired of him eating our food. If he was a shape-shifter, he would have escaped by now."

Verana looked back over her shoulder and caught Brydon's eye. The expression on her face nearly caused him to throw all caution to the wind and take rash action. Toryn's hand upon his arm halted him. Brydon glanced at him and wondered if he had some sort of plan.

The bowman stepped through the doorway and lifted the crossbow. "Who should we do first? Any volunteers?" His gap-toothed smile was amiable, but there was no friendliness in his eyes, only a grim excitement.

The man with the sword mimicked his expression with a nasty-looking smile as he pushed past the crossbowman to enter the space. "No one ever volunteers, idiot. Kill the wolf first. Just in case. 'Ey, get back here, wolf-boy! Let's see you change! Planning to tear my throat out with your teeth?" He guffawed. Davin had moved back into the shadows, barely visible in the gloom.

Nudged by Toryn, Brydon took a shuffling step sideways. The swordsman's attention flashed away from Davin and he raised the blade threateningly. "And don't you move, either!"

Brydon stopped moving, hands open and ready as he cast about for something to use as a weapon. Toryn gave him a minute nod when their eyes met. Brydon took a deep breath, somehow steadied to know that he and Toryn were of the same mind; they would not stand idly by and be murdered like frogs in a bucket.

"Come out here where we can see you properly!" the sword-wielder yelled to Davin.

"Never mind. I got 'im," the crossbowman said and loosed a bolt. Instead of a cry of pain, Brydon heard the sound of metal ping against solid rock.

The swordsman swore. "You missed!"

The crossbowman swung the weapon toward Toryn, who had taken a step and hunched into an aggressive stance.

Before the man could take aim, Davin hurtled from the shadows, lightning-quick, and slammed into him, knocking him back against the edge of the open door. His head cracked against the portal with a loud thud and the crossbow dropped into the dust as the man fell. The swordsman leaped forward and stabbed at Davin, who ducked to avoid the slash. The swordsman thrust again, but missed as the heavy pot Brydon had snatched up and thrown caught him directly on the forehead. Davin scrambled out of the way.

Toryn dove at the crossbowman and dealt him a solid blow to the jaw with his left fist, which caused the fellow's head to bounce off the door again. The man collapsed in the dirt and lay still as Toryn snatched up the crossbow. The swordsman turned on Toryn as he struggled to work the crossbow mechanism; his fingers were clumsy upon the weapon. Brydon jumped for the swordsman as the man roared and swung his blade in a deadly arc. Toryn raised the crossbow defensively—like a sword—and watched in dismay as the steel sliced cleanly through the wooden limb and rendering the weapon useless. The swordsman laughed, but his glee was short-lived as both Brydon and Davin bore him to the ground.
The sword tip dug into the dirt and Toryn jumped on the flat of the blade with both feet, holding it to the ground and effectively pinning the man to the earth by his sword hand. He yowled and thrashed, trying to free himself and dislodge his assailants, until Davin grabbed him by the hair and began to pound his head against the ground. Toryn bashed the broken end of the crossbow against the man’s head, effectively helping him into unconsciousness. Davin glared at Toryn, apparently not appreciating his intrusion and spoiling his plan to beat the man to a bloody pulp. Brydon pushed away from the fallen man with a sigh of relief.

"Thank Adona," Brydon said and turned him over, searching for additional weapons. Toryn snatched up the sword and knocked the dust from the blade before swishing it around experimentally. A small dagger was located inside the man’s boot and Brydon grimaced, thinking it pitifully small for a weapon.

"Let’s go get Verana," he said. He turned to thank Davin for his help, but the silver-haired man was already gone.

Once outside, they headed for the nearest hut. Toryn took the lead, as he was better armed than Brydon.

"Do you think you could manage to leave me a decent weapon next time?" Brydon complained, annoyed by the loss of the crossbow.

"Would you rather I had let him skewer me?"

"You could have jumped back," Brydon complained.

"Would you like me to analyze your performance?"

"I suppose not."

The first hut was empty of everything but a few blankets and the remains of a meal on a dirty plate. They checked carefully for signs of life before moving on to the next hut. The women were still gathered around the cook fire and they watched with dull expressions as Brydon and Toryn approached. None of them made any move warn the men. Brydon was appalled at the apathy they portrayed, but apparently they held no love for those who kept them in servitude. From the look of them, they were little better than slaves.

Inside the second hut a man slept, and he slept even harder after Toryn whacked him on the head with the flat of the sword. Brydon divested the unconscious man of his sword and dagger, and then joined Toryn at the door. They looked out, but before they could dash to the next hut, they heard a scream, quickly silenced, and then a yell of pain and a feral growl. Brydon ran toward the sounds with Toryn on his heels.

Jerking open the door of the last hut, they saw Verana huddled on a cot near the door, watching with wide eyes as a large, silvery wolf attacked the huge man on the floor. The man screamed and tried to throw off the wolf, but the animal had a solid grip on his throat.

Before Brydon could react, it was too late. The man was dead with a grimace of surprise locked on his features. The wolf locked eyes with Brydon for an instant and then shot between them and out the door.
Brydon turned to look at Verana. She took Toryn’s proffered hand and nodded shakily. For the first time, she did not look like a fresh flower. Her blue robes were in a heap on the floor and the tan tunic she wore had a large tear on one shoulder. Her hair was disheveled and a red spot shone on her lower lip, which was beginning to swell. Whether the brute had kissed or hit her was uncertain. She took a steadying breath.

"I am unharmed. The filthy cretin tore my dress, but then the wolf came in and attacked him. It was very strange."

Running footsteps approached the hut and Toryn spun toward the door. Brydon knelt and twisted his signet ring from the dead man’s hand before returning it to its rightful place on his own. He looked for his sword, but it was nowhere in sight, although his dagger lay near the bed, still in its sheath. He took it and strapped it on.

"It looks like all his friends are on their way. We should get out of here," Toryn said.

"Is there a back way out?" Brydon asked, looking around.

"Huts are not usually equipped with multiple doors," Toryn said dryly. "This is not a Falaran palace."

"So we fight?"

Toryn grinned. "Good plan." He jumped out the door and his sword flashed fire as he ran the first astonished bandit through. Brydon joined him and they stood together as the angry brigands ran at them.

Brydon heard an arrow whiz—too close for comfort—by his ear and he whirled to confront his attacker, only to see the archer topple to the ground as Davin appeared behind him to bash him over the head with a large rock. Brydon let out a breath and absently saw Davin pick up the bow and sling the quiver over his shoulder. Brydon turned to rejoin the fray.

Toryn held his own against the bandits, three of which had already fallen at his feet. Four remained and two of them came at Brydon. He ducked a sword blow and slashed at one attacker. The other dropped to the ground when a large stone bounced off his skull with an impressive crack. Toryn hacked another with a gleeful cry and the final man broke form and fled.

Brydon grinned at Toryn in admiration as Davin joined them. Verana exited the hut, dressed once more in her robes and looking as calm as ever.

"I will get the horses," she said and started off. Toryn pillaged the bodies for weaponry. Davin started to join him, but stopped and looked beyond Brydon’s shoulder. Brydon turned to see a group of women approaching. One of them walked more boldly than the others—a large, gray-haired woman who stopped in front of Brydon. She spat on one of the bodies as she passed it.

"You have won the day," she said to the Falaran. "Do you mean to claim us as spoils?"

Brydon was taken aback, looking from her to the other sorry-looking women who were huddled together near one of the huts.

"Adona, no. In fact, I am sorry for the deaths of your menfolk—"
She cut him off with a rude sneer. "Menfolk? Those filth were not men! They were our captors. We were stolen from our villages in brutal raids and forced to serve these bastards until we died of abuse or starvation. You have done us a service by killing them all. Are we then free to return to our homes?"

"More than free," Brydon said. "I would escort you myself were we not pressed for time and the need to find our friend. Perhaps, Davin—" Brydon turned to the silver-haired man, who shrank back in distaste, probably guessing what Brydon was about to suggest. The woman cut him off.

"We need no help from any man," she snarled. "I will guide them safely. You go see to the Akarskan girl. She was in far more dangerous company when she left here than when she arrived. The scum who captured her were no match for those who took her and departed. They have your horses, also."

"Can you describe them?" Toryn asked.

The woman nodded. "Aye. There was a red-haired pair, male and female, alike enough to be siblings. She had a hard, cold look about her and dressed like a man. They were attired as Penks but they did not have a Penk manner. Another was a dark-haired man, quiet, who did the woman’s bidding without question. At least two other men were with them, but I did not get a good look at them. They looked like hired swords. Do you need provisions?"

Brydon looked around dubiously, doubtful if the women would even be able to scrounge enough foodstuffs and clothing to see them on their journeys home. Brydon shook his head. The woman smiled grimly.

"Well, Falaran, you have the thanks of Bentra of Dorrigal, which is a village in northern Terris. Should you ever find yourself there my house and my table will be welcome to you. And you two as well." She included Toryn and Davin with a nod.

"May Adona bless you and keep you, Bentra. Safe journey," Brydon intoned solemnly. Bentra accepted his mantra with an eloquent nod and then turned to gather her charges. Brydon looked at Davin, who shrugged.

They made their way to Verana, who held the reins of four of the bandits’ horses. Davin handed Brydon the bow and quiver before mounting.

"Can you use this? It does me little good."

"Want a sword?" asked Toryn, who carried three of them, apparently trying to determine which of them had the better balance.

Davin shook his head. "Only a dagger, if you have one."

Toryn tossed him a dagger, selected a sword from his bunch and dropped the other two on the ground. Brydon held out his hand expectantly.

"What?" Toryn asked.

"That one is my sword," Brydon said.

"I found it. It’s mine."
"I was born with it. It's mine," Brydon explained calmly and hoped that Toryn would not bring up the loss of his own sword in the avalanche.

"That must have been painful for your mother."

"You stared at it enough times while we traveled. You know it's mine; now hand it over."

"I seem to remember someone leaving my sword in a snow bank."

"You prefer I had fetched the sword rather than you?"

Toryn snorted. "Idiot Falaran. Why get so attached to a blade? What happens if you lose your sword? Do you go around weeping until you find it? Redolians are much smarter. We simply get another one."

"Good to know. You can use this one," Brydon said and gave Toryn the worn blade he'd been using. Toryn handed over Brydon's sword without another word. Brydon sheathed the weapon with relief—he wasn't sure what he would have done if Toryn had insisted upon keeping the blade.

"You owe me one, Falaran," Toryn warned and mounted a sorrel stallion. Brydon grabbed the reins of a bay mare and vaulted aboard.

"Let's just find Alyn."

CHAPTER NINE
THE SEARCH

Brydon took the lead as they rode east; it was the most likely direction for the bandits to have taken Alyn.

Davin speculated aloud as they rode. "They will not go anywhere near, Akarska and there is no way to cross the Abyss into Penkangum. They will have to take the ferry in Kaneelis or board a ship bound for Silver. Redolians do not buy slaves, as far as I know..." Davin looked at Toryn for confirmation and the Redolian goggled at him.

"Are you kidding? Our women would kill us!"

Davin nodded. "So they would not go north. The only place for them now is the coast. From there, they can take her by ship to Silver, the Corolis Islands, or G’Neel Across the Sea."

"We will just have to catch them before they get that far," Toryn said grimly and Brydon agreed. If Alyn had not been escorting them to the Waryn Highway, she never would have been captured. Brydon felt responsible for her, but it did not prevent him from feeling relieved that they also traveled in the direction he needed to go. He was not entirely sure what choice he would make if the direction had been otherwise. He would like to think that rescuing an innocent girl—well, maybe not that innocent, but a girl—took priority over his quest.

They rode until they reached the reedy banks of a sluggish river a few hours later. It flowed east, so they followed it, sticking to its southern bank. By that time they had descended quite a lot and the ground had become less firm, especially near the river. The
foliage increased and Brydon occasionally had to get down and hack a path with his
csword. They dismounted often to lead the horses through thickets of trees whose branches
hung too low to ride beneath.

"Welcome to Terris," Verana said as Toryn sank nearly up to his boot-tops in mud when
he stepped into a deceptive-looking puddle.

"Thanks," he said dryly, pulling his foot out and looking at his once-black boots, now
covered in a brown sludge. "The land of a hundred-thousand mud holes."

"We’ve been lucky so far," Verana stated. "It hasn’t rained. Yet."

"That’s comforting," Brydon said and Toryn gave him a dismal smile.

It was fully dark when they finally stopped for the night. They camped near the river on a
small rise that had to be cleared of brush, but at least the ground was dry.

Verana and Toryn prepared a meal while Davin and Brydon tended to the horses. While
they ate, Verana insisted on fixing up the scratches and bruises that Toryn and Brydon
had received in the village. They all spoke little, nearly overcome with exhaustion.

Toryn stood watch as the others lay down for a much-needed rest, claiming he was too
wound up to sleep. An hour or two later, Brydon awoke. He tossed and turned for a few
minutes and finally resigned himself to the fact that he would not easily get back to sleep,
so he decided to rise and relieve Toryn. The darkness was almost absolute; the fire was a
bare ember and the full moon was mostly hidden by the thick branches and gathering
clouds. He walked over and laid a hand on Toryn’s shoulder.

"Time for some rest," he said. Toryn sighed wearily and nodded, but did not rise from the
log on which he sat. Brydon sat down beside him and looked into the depths of the forest.

"How did you know where Alyn was?" Toryn asked after a moment, "When she was first
kidnapped?"

Brydon did not have to ask what he meant. He pondered his reply, knowing Toryn would
not be put off by partial truths or evasion. That suspicion was confirmed when Toryn
went on, "Don’t tell me you knew the village was there, either. You could not have
known."

Brydon had to admit the truth of it. "I’m not sure. I just know, sometimes, when people
are around. Like when you tried to kill me. I knew you and your friends were there and
what you were planning before you ever got close enough to attack."

"So that’s how you did it!" Toryn exclaimed. "I always wondered why you were not
sleeping that night. What about Alyn? Why didn’t you know the men were there before
they took her?"

"I was not paying attention until after she was taken," Brydon explained. "I have to at
least be thinking about it before it works. When you and the others came for me I was
half-expecting an attack, so I was alert for it and it was easy to sense your presence. After
Alyn was taken, I mentally... I don’t know, searched for them. I concentrated on Alyn
and impressions came to me—not thoughts, exactly, but feelings and images. She was
afraid and angry with the men who had taken her. I sort of kept a mental hold on her presence and could determine what direction they had gone. I could also sense the men who had taken her, but only in a vague way—like man-forms with no essence. I think I need to actually meet someone in order to clarify an image of them."

"How long have you had this ability?" Toryn asked, obviously fascinated. Brydon found it something of a relief to finally be able to confess his aptitude. He had never told anyone about his odd talent, not even his mother, who would not have loved him an iota less for it. Not even his best friend, although Brydon had known little of his abilities while Kellyn had been alive.

"I first noticed it when I was a lad," Brydon said. "I had broken the leather on my father’s favorite scabbard while pretending I was a knight-priest. I was terrified that he would come home and discover it before I could fix it. I was rather frantic until the realization came to me—quite clearly—that he was in a neighbor’s barn some two leagues away. I found a similar piece of leather and managed to replace the broken strap. I worked without panic because I knew where he was. I had finished long before he came home and my casual questioning that evening revealed that he had, indeed, been at the neighbor’s all afternoon."

"Did he notice the strap?"

Brydon grinned. "A week later. He could not recall if he had replaced it himself, so I was never questioned. The deception ate at me, however, and I later confessed."

Toryn clapped a hand to his forehead. "Why am I not surprised?"

"I sensed things sporadically throughout the next few years—strangers approaching, a bright flash of pain from my mother when she burned her hand on a hot kettle, the impression of contentment coming from the cattle while they munched their hay. The feelings came to me when I concentrated on them, or sometimes when I was near to sleep."

"Do you know where Alyn is right now?" Toryn asked.

Brydon shook his head and sighed. "There seems to be a range to this ability. They moved Alyn while we were unconscious. I don’t know where to look for her. I am trying, though, scanning in all directions. If we ever get near enough to them, I should know it. I just hope we are traveling in the right direction."

"How will you know it is Alyn and not some other woman?"

Brydon refused to get into that. He was not sure himself. "I just do," he said evasively. Knowing Toryn would pry, he asked, "Why are you so eager to find her, anyway? I thought you two did not get along."

Toryn cleared his throat. "She is a comrade, of a sort. I do not like to leave comrades in trouble."

Brydon grinned. "I thought you might be falling in love with her."

Toryn snorted. "With an Akarskan? She would sooner cut my throat than kiss me."

"Probably. I’m sure you get that reaction from a lot of women."
"Watch it, Falaran."

"You should get some sleep. You’ll need all your wits to stay dry when we start again."

"That is an unfortunate fact," Toryn said and wrinkled his nose. He got up and crossed to Brydon’s vacated bed where he covered himself and lay still.

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Toryn felt groggy when they continued on at some ridiculous hour before dawn. Redwing decided the river had to be crossed and Verana agreed, so they forded it on the horses. Toryn hissed and muttered at the coldness of the water as it climbed up over his thighs to his waist. The horses began to swim, forcing them to dismount and swim also, which gave Toryn the opportunity to remember how much he hated water. He plucked at his sodden clothes once they made it across and looked around. The alternative side of the river did not seem much different than the original side. They mounted and continued on. Their clothing was just about dry when it began to rain.

"This is just great," Toryn snarled.

Verana smiled. "Now this," she stated, "is Terris."

"How do your people stand it?" he asked.

She held up a corner of her pale blue robe. Droplets of water that touched it did not soak in, but ran down in clear streams. "Waterproof."

The observation did not improve Toryn’s mood. "Wonderful. I don’t suppose you have any more of those lying around?"

"Sorry."

Toryn pulled at the green shirt Redwing had given him long ago. It was drenched. Redwing did not seem to fare much better, even though his leather vest shed some water. His wool cloak probably soaked up more rain than it discarded. Davin looked worse than any of them in his once-white shirt and faded brown trousers. Thank Adona the weather was warm or they all would have suffered from exposure.

"We need to find a town or a village," Redwing said, riding close to Toryn and Verana. "Soon we will all be wearing rags. Are there any settlements hereabouts?"

"I don’t know. I usually do not wander far from the merchant trail. There are villages scattered about, but unless we discover a road, we may never find them," Verana answered.

The rain continued as they trudged on under the partial shelter of large trees. The land grew more difficult to traverse and their progress slowed. The terrain went from slightly boggy to true swampland. Verana took the lead, as she was more familiar the mechanics of swamp-crossing. She led them from one slightly dry hillock to another and seldom did any of the horses sink more than knee deep in the mud and water.
Toryn’s horse shied at a water bird and plunged sideways, dropping almost instantly into a deceptive puddle of brackish water that was deeper than Toryn’s saddle. The mare thrashed wildly, terrified. Toryn dismounted and swam through the sludge to more solid land. Once on his feet, he grabbed the horse’s reins and helped the shivering mare out of the pond. He cursed quietly and dumped water out of his boots before he mounted again. He glared at Redwing, but the Falaran merely grinned and said nothing.

They rode for another day and the rain continued, sometimes a misty drizzle, at other times a raging downpour that brought moldering branches down in their path and made the ground twice as treacherous. The horses became more surefooted as they traversed the slippery ground and the travelers became surlier, a side effect of the constant rain and gloom. Toryn found Redwing to be a major irritant and the two of them bickered almost constantly. Their newfound camaraderie rapidly disintegrated with their tempers and Toryn grew more and more annoyed with every move Redwing made.

"You know, if you had not dragged me all the way from Redol, you stupid Falaran, I would be warm and dry in front of my brother’s fire," Toryn complained.

"No, your bones would have been lying next to my old fire, picked clean by wolves. It was only my misguided sense of pity that let you live in the first place."

"Pity? Your misguided sense of insanity, you mean! Any normal enemy would have killed me and have done. But no, apparently Falarans drag their enemies across country, through avalanches and places infested with crazed horse-lovers, only to torture them with constant rain and mud and muck. Some pity!"

"You prefer I had killed you?" Redwing gritted dangerously.

"It would be better than putting up with your louse-infested company for this long!" Toryn snapped.

"Then put up with it no longer!" Redwing yelled. He launched himself at Toryn, who grabbed for his horse’s mane, but it was too late. Redwing’s weight knocked them both to the ground. Toryn shoved him off, but not before Redwing's fist connected with the side of his jaw. Toryn got to his feet and aimed a kick squarely at Redwing’s smirking face, but the Falaran blocked it with a hastily raised forearm. He grabbed at Toryn’s boot, but it was covered in muck and slipped out of his fingers. The motion overbalanced Toryn and his other foot skid out from under him. He sat down hard in the mud and Redwing was suddenly atop him, with his fingers clawing for Toryn’s throat. Toryn twisted his legs in Redwing’s and flung him off, sparing a moment of thanks for the hours he’d spent wrestling with his brother.

He crawled to his feet again and Redwing did the same, but before they could inflict any more damage, Davin grabbed each of them by the nape of the neck and shook them. He was stronger than he looked, Toryn noted.

"Let go of me!" Toryn yelled. He kicked at Redwing once more and connected with the Falaran’s knee. "I’ll kill you for sure this time!"

"Try it, you whimpering Redolian twit!" Redwing snarled, clawing the air in front of Toryn’s face.
Verana dismounted. "I should have known this would happen. Hold onto them for a moment, would you, Davin?"

Toryn calmed his rage and stood stock still until Davin loosened his grip, and then he launched himself at Redwing. He inflicted a solid punch to Redwing’s midsection, but the Falaran dealt him a solid kick to the upper thigh at the same time. Davin separated them again, but not before Toryn grabbed a satisfying hunk of Redwing’s blond hair. He laughed and dangled the strands in the air while Redwing cursed every facet of Toryn’s upbringing. Toryn taunted him until Verana and Davin forced some horrendous concoction of herbs and water down his throat. He watched gleefully as Redwing received the same treatment, hoping the Falaran would choke on it.

After a moment, the anger began to clear from his mind and he stared at Redwing, uncertain why he had felt such a smoldering need to kill. Redwing looked as stunned and sick as Toryn felt.

"Swamp fever," Verana explained. "It will pass now."

"I think I prefer the disease to the cure," Toryn choked, gulping water from his water skin to force the taste out of his mouth.

He and Redwing did not speak for the rest of the day. The matter was dropped completely and thereafter, whenever they began to argue Verana would bring out her herbs and both of them would lose all taste for confrontation.

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They camped by a pool that seemed fairly clean and leech-free. Verana had warned them of leeches, so they had yet to experience the revolting things. Brydon washed the mud from his body and glanced at Toryn, who did the same. An awkward silence surrounded them. Brydon was mortified at his earlier behavior. He had actually tried to hurt Toryn.

"Ah... Toryn," Brydon began finally.

"Forget it, Falaran," Toryn cut in. "I know you apologize."

Brydon tried to disguise his relief. "I was going to say I accept your apology," he said. Rather than return a scathing comeback, Toryn looked at him with a surprised expression for a moment and then laughed. The tension melted away and Brydon grinned.

Verana cooked a stew from local plants and some sort of animal that Davin had caught. Davin had also utilized the pool and his dagger to scrape off his matted beard and mustache. Brydon noted with surprise that he could not have seen more than thirty summers, although his silver hair glowed in the firelight.

"So, Davin," Toryn asked while they waited for the stew to boil, "What do you do when you’re not imprisoned in a Terrin cave?"

"Survive." Davin shrugged.

"And how do you do that? Where are you from?"
"Penkangum. I survive by staying as far from people as I can."
"What about us? Are we not people?" Toryn prodded.
"I suppose. But you are not like the others. Not yet, anyway."
"What do you mean, ‘not yet’?"
"Forget it," Davin snapped. "You ask more questions than a toddler!"

Brydon smiled, knowing Toryn would have pressed the issue, but Verana called him to help her season the food. He went, muttering about crazed wolf-men and browbeating women. Brydon carefully scraped the day’s mud from his boots. He watched Davin covertly and observed the look of despair on his face, quickly masked as the silver-haired man leaned back against a tree and shut his eyes. There was something strange about him that Brydon could not quite put his finger on. For a moment, Brydon extended his senses and then drew back, chagrined. It would not be ethical to intentionally eavesdrop on Davin’s feelings. Brydon sighed. The rain had stopped, for once, but the sky was still overcast and he figured the respite would not last long.

He half-closed his eyes and ceased his motion. His mind touched on the horses instead of Davin. They munched contentedly on marsh grass. Brydon's borrowed horse acknowledged his presence halfheartedly and then ignored him. Brydon sent his thoughts outward. It seemed that his awareness was sharper at night, perhaps because there were fewer distractions.

He felt no sense of danger, although he found a number of predators hunting; they stayed far from the humans’ encampment. He extended his mind as far as he could and opened it fully to his senses. He felt awesomely alive whenever he gave in to his ability, as the awarenesses of hundreds of creatures touched his mind. He felt the quiet hunger of a jungle cat, the annoyance of a wet tree-dweller, the contentment of a warm squirrel, and even the rapid thoughts of a striped parrot as it called to its mate. Brydon's abilities seemed to increase the more he called upon them.

He was just about to withdraw back into himself when he touched something familiar.

Brydon sprang to his feet with a cry. The boot and scraping twig dropped, forgotten, and the others looked at him in surprise. Before they could question him, he raced into the jungle, running as fast as he could while dodging underbrush and fallen logs. He heard someone running after him, probably Toryn.

They ran for long minutes and Brydon’s bare feet were a hindrance that he barely noticed. He charged on. His mind was far away and forced his body onward.

"Redwing!" Toryn yelled. "Damn it, Brydon!"

Brydon halted as suddenly as he had started. He stood stock-still, chest heaving.
Toryn halted beside him, panting. "What is it?" he asked quietly. "Is it Alyn?"
Brydon barely heard him. He strained his abilities to their limits. The silence drew on endlessly, until Brydon felt Toryn reach up to shake his shoulder. Beads of sweat dotted his forehead.
"Brydon," Toryn said again and gripped his shoulders gently. Brydon’s eyes slowly focused on Toryn’s face.

"Is it Alyn?" Toryn demanded. "Where is she?"

Brydon shook his head. "It’s the horses. Darkling and Fireling. We have to hurry! I’m losing them." With that, he turned and started back toward the encampment. They had not gone ten steps before Brydon’s bay mare galloped out of the darkness in response to his silent call. Toryn jumped in surprise but Brydon merely stepped toward the horse, twisted a hand in her mane, and vaulted aboard.

"You will have to get everyone mounted and follow me, Toryn," Brydon said, still half in a daze. "If I don’t go now, I’ll lose Darkling."

Toryn yelled as Brydon galloped by him. "Redwing—Brydon, wait! You can’t get through the swamp without Verana! You don’t know where you are going!"

But Brydon was gone.

**CHAPTER TEN**

**Pursuit**

Toryn completed his cursing fit as he ran back to camp and threw his gear and Redwing’s together. He bellowed orders at the other two and they were off and chasing Redwing within minutes. Toryn ignored Verana’s questions while he scanned the ground for Redwing’s trail. It was not difficult to follow in the light of the moon through the clouds, especially on the wet ground where hoof prints showed clearly.

Even so, they were forced to move slowly to keep the path in sight and Toryn chafed at the delay. They rode for an hour and the rain began to pour. Toryn nearly howled in frustration as the falling rain slowly obliterated the tracks. Soon the trail was completely gone.

Toryn halted and ground his teeth. He shook the water out of his eyes.

"Why did Brydon leave, Toryn?" Verana asked for the second time.

"He went to find Alyn."

"Alone? Why? Did you two fight again?" She exchanged a glance with Davin, who had thankfully asked no questions at all.

"No!" he snapped. "He may know where she is."

"How?"

"I don’t know and I can’t explain it," he said in frustration, wishing she would just be silent. Before she could ask anything more, Toryn used all of his mental facilities to fling out a silent cry.

Falaran, if you can hear my thoughts, listen now! Where are you?
He waited and felt... something. It was not a thought or a feeling, merely a slight sensation, but then there was a sense of presence and a definite direction. It was Redwing calling him—in his mind? Awe overwhelmed Toryn’s surprise.

He turned his mount instantly and charged off.

"Toryn!" Verana cried.

"This way!"

Shortly after dawn, Toryn led them at last to Redwing. He was encamped in a small, dry, hollow and had prepared food for them. Toryn dismounted from his horse and went to confront the man. He flung the Falaran's boots at him and Redwing caught them with a sheepish grin as he wiggled his bare toes.

"I won’t ask how you did that," Toryn said flatly. "Not now, anyway. But whatever you did, it worked. Did you find Alyn?"

Redwing shook his head. He looked tired, but none the worse for wear. "No, but I have a strong sense of Darkling's presence. He is only a few miles away. Alyn could be unconscious."

"Or somewhere else entirely. Or dead," Toryn offered bluntly with a trace of bitterness.

"If either is the case, then those who took the horses will know her fate. We will find her, Toryn. Trust me."

Toryn nodded wearily and sighed. He refused food and went to lie down. He was too tired to eat and Redwing was a wretched cook, anyway. He had most likely prepared some horrific swamp creature as a meal, since he had bolted without supplies.

"How did Toryn find you?" he heard Verana ask.

"I was calling him," Redwing replied.

"But how?" Verana protested. "I heard nothing."

"You may not have been listening the right way," Redwing said cryptically and yawned. Davin chuckled and Toryn cracked open an eye to look at him. Redwing and Verana both looked at the silver-haired man, but Davin ignored them as he ate.

Verana, seeming irritated, stalked over and stretched out by Toryn. She was asleep in moments. Toryn envied her. Now that he was prone, he found that sleep eluded him.

"What now, Brydon?" Davin asked. "Do we just stay here and rest?"

"No." Redwing yawned again. "We have to go scout their camp. They haven’t moved for an hour, but that’s not to say they won’t." Redwing dropped his head down on his chest. "I plan to find out how many there are." His eyes closed. "In a moment"

Redwing’s breathing became slow and regular and Davin stood. He kicked some dirt on the small fire and walked into the jungle. Toryn watched Redwing sleep for a moment longer and then drifted off himself.

~~ O ~~
The spotted cat moved silently through the undergrowth and fastidiously avoided pools of muddy water. It walked, nose twitching, until it caught a scent that it recognized. It froze, tail moving slightly in agitation. Its sharp ears caught the sound of human voices.

"...is she going to learn how to cook? She’s female, isn’t she?"

"I’m not sure, sometimes."

"Stuff it, Snip."

"Anytime, girly. Just beckon and I’ll come running."

"Prepare for a long wait."

"Leave Sellaris alone," a different man said. "She fights better than all of you put together."

"She warms your bed better than all of us together, too." The one called Snip guffawed. There were sounds indicating a brief scuffle, an exclamation of pain, and then someone else growled, "Say one more word about my sister and I’ll cut your throat out!"

"Back off, Lavan," the female said. "I can take care of myself."

The scents separated themselves. There were four men and one woman at the fire. The cat padded away and walked slowly around the encampment until it discovered two more man-scents. There were two people on the outskirts, one male and one female.

The cat stalked closer and then took to the trees. It was a simple matter for it to walk along a branch and gaze down at the scene below. A dark-haired man finished tying up an unconscious woman as one of the other men came into view.

"Still asleep, eh? Sure she isn’t faking it?"

"I don’t think so, Reed. I’m getting worried. She’s been out an awfully long time."

"Don’t be spineless, Garyn. If she dies we will have that much less baggage. And she is Akarskan, remember?"

The brown-haired one sighed. "I remember."

The callous one had black hair and icy blue eyes. The cat lay down silently on the branch and watched the men. It considered jumping down on one of them for sport but decided against it.

The people eventually clustered around the fire and roasted some kind of meat. Content that there were only six of them plus the unconscious girl, the spotted cat melted back into the jungle and disappeared.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

REED
Toryn started awake as something pebble-sized bounced off his chest. He blinked for a moment and then looked over at Redwing suspiciously. Redwing was conversing with Davin earnestly. Toryn switched his gaze to Verana; she was still asleep.

Having no one to blame for his wakefulness, Toryn climbed grumpily to his feet.

"What goes on?" he asked Redwing.

"We are going to get Alyn back."

"She is here?"

"I believe so."

Toryn strapped on his sword. "What are we waiting for?" he demanded.

"You." Redwing grinned.

Toryn, Davin and Redwing checked their weapons and proceeded into the jungle after awakening Verana. She assured them that she would stay with the horses. The rain started again, a fine mist that did not hinder them, but it made Toryn even more irritable.

"Do we have a plan, or are we just going to go in there and start slashing away?" Toryn asked. "How many of them are there?"

"Five men and a woman. We will go and fetch our horses first. The thieves will likely be watching the horses closely, expecting them to give warning of our approach."

"And won’t they?" Toryn asked. "Give warning?"

"No. They won’t." Redwing winked at him and grinned.

"Oh. Then what?"

Redwing shushed him. "We’re getting close."

They walked around the bandits’ camp until they approached it from the west, behind the picketed horses. Darkling, Fireling, Fang, and Thistle stood within the group of horses, perhaps a dozen in all. None of the steeds reacted to their presence; they merely continued to munch contentedly on their grain, though Darkling swiveled an ear at them as if in greeting. Toryn looked suspiciously at Redwing and was rewarded to see the look of concentration on the Falaran’s face. So, he was doing something to the horses. Toryn vowed to have another talk with Redwing when this was all over. He wanted to know exactly what Redwing could do with his strange abilities. Obviously, he could do far more than just utilize his ‘odd feeling’ to track people and animals.

They moved closer to the horses, but stayed within the concealing undergrowth. Redwing indicated Alyn’s position to Toryn, who nodded and crept off.

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Brydon gave Toryn some time and then released the picket rope that held the horses tied in place. He sprang onto Darkling’s back while Davin mounted Alyn’s red stallion. Pulling out his sword, Brydon screamed an impromptu war cry and urged the horse forward. He and Davin galloped headlong through the clearing toward the surprised bandits. The outlaws were quick, however, and dove for cover, snatching weapons as they went. Brydon slashed at a man as he raced by and was rewarded by a strangled scream. He saw another man fall with Davin’s dagger buried in his forehead.

The two of them fled into the trees and the bandits’ horses trailed behind them, bumping into the shouting men and scattering the fire and assorted supplies. Once in the trees, Brydon and Davin separated and the loose horses fled.

Brydon halted Darkling when he judged them safely away from the bandit camp. He reached down to pat the stallion’s neck and the horse tossed his head, ready to run again. Brydon calmed him with a mental touch and dismounted after sheathing his sword. The group of thieves had scattered, but now they would be hunting their attackers. The trees were thick and brush provided plenty of cover, which would be beneficial to both sides, unfortunately. Brydon walked a few paces from Darkling and unslung his bow. He sent his mind outward on a quest for Toryn, but instead encountered another presence approaching. Before he could draw his senses back, he received an impression of astonishment. The newcomer had felt his mental touch! Brydon felt an inkling of anger and then satisfaction—neither emotion was his own. He returned to himself with a feeling akin to horror when he discovered the mind of the newcomer had followed him.

//What have we here?// an angry voice demanded inside Brydon’s head. He nearly dropped his bow from the unexpected pain of the intrusion. //A fledgling. Here to rescue the Akarskan girl, I presume? How gallant.//

Brydon cried out as the stranger forced himself into deeper levels of Brydon’s mind. In panic, Brydon mentally shoved the newcomer’s presence away as if with an invisible hand. Incredibly, it worked. The presence departed and Brydon immediately closed his mind off, withdrawing behind a protective mental wall. He could feel the stranger trying to penetrate his defense, searching for a weakness like a rat seeking a hole in a wall. The probe was uncomfortable, but not unbearable, and Brydon began to relax when the man failed to gain entrance.

"You learn quickly," the stranger called aloud and Brydon swung the bow toward the sound, working hard to maintain his mental shield. He tried to judge the man’s character from his voice—it had been deep and confident, hinting of arrogance. Brydon fished an arrow from his quiver and was suddenly grateful that his skill with the bow took little concentration, for the mental probe did not relent. There was no sign of the man, though Brydon scanned into the trees warily. He eased himself away from Darkling and into some concealing brush.

"I do not appreciate you scattering my horses," the man continued, drawing nearer but remaining out of Brydon’s sight. "It took Sellaris quite some time to gather them."

Brydon did not reply. The man seemed to have no doubt of Brydon’s whereabouts, but Brydon hoped he was unaware of the bow which slowly began to draw back the string. Hopefully, the stranger’s initial mental invasion had gleaned only surface information.
"I am going to cut you to pieces, you know," the man went on, "And then I will dissect your mind bit by bit and find out everything about you. When I am finished, you will be begging me to kill you; if you are still sane enough to speak, that is." The man was close now and Brydon caught a glimpse of him as he moved through the trees.

The stranger laughed. "If I choose, perhaps I will pay a little visit to the all people you care for. Your wife? Sister? Mother? How much do you know about your ability, I wonder? Do you know what it feels like to make them beg for rape?"

Brydon’s control nearly slipped as horror nearly blinded him. His mental shield wavered and the man bored in, eager for an opening. At the same moment, however, he stepped from concealment and Brydon let the arrow fly.

The man’s mental assault ceased abruptly. Brydon felt a sense of surprise, almost like an afterimage. Incredibly the stranger flung himself aside and the arrow missed him by a hairsbreadth. Brydon caught a glimpse of dark hair and clothing as the man moved.

Brydon stared for a moment, shocked at the man’s agility. He steeled his mind again and readied another arrow. The stranger got to his feet and glared at him with no trace of amusement. Brydon studied him carefully and wondered where the man hailed from. It was impossible to tell from his clothing—the nondescript umber tunic could have come from anywhere and there were no adornments visible. The man’s black cape looked expensive, as did the highly polished black boots. He wore a white shirt open at the throat and a red sash around his waist. He was tall and slender, black-haired and mustashed, of indiscriminate age, although he seemed mature. His hair was cut shorter than Brydon’s, but his mustache was thick and seemed carefully trimmed. He carried a broadsword naked in his fist and the black sheath at his hip was undecorated. No other weapons were visible, but Brydon knew the man’s most potent weapon was not made of steel. Even as the thought came to him, the stranger lashed out with another mental assault. Brydon reeled from the force of it, but the mental wall he had erected succeeded in keeping the stranger at bay. For the moment. However, the man strode forward once again, apparently intent on combating Brydon with steel, as well.

Brydon clenched his teeth and sent another arrow flying toward the man, who snarled and batted the missile aside with the sword. Steel rang as the arrow caromed away. Brydon notched another arrow and released it only to watch in perplexed amazement as the man sidestepped. The arrow whizzed harmlessly past. How could anyone move so quickly?

"Who are you?" Brydon demanded. He dropped his bow and unsheathed his sword as the man closed the distance.

"My name is Reed," the stranger admitted. With that, he leaped forward and their swords clashed.

Brydon countered three testing blows before Reed spun, lightning-fast, and slashed at his right hamstring. Brydon twisted wildly and barely deflected the unexpected attack. He threw himself backward to avoid Reed’s follow-up, a strike that nearly took his head off—Reed’s blade missed his face by a whisker. At the same instant, the man tore through Brydon’s mental defenses—the sword battle had left him unable to maintain his conceptual wall.
Brydon screamed as Reed bore in. He tried desperately to fend off the mental assault while he deflected another sword-thrust. His arms moved more by instinct than by conscious volition as waves of pain drove into his skull. Reed drew back his sword for another strike and Brydon was only dimly aware of the danger to his body as Reed inexorably broke through each of his hastily-erected mental barriers.

Reed cried out and the mental attack ceased so quickly that Brydon reeled and sank to one knee. Reed leaped back to confront a new menace—Toryn. Brydon’s relief when he saw Toryn was nearly palpable. He struggled to regain his feet—and his mental balance—through a blinding headache. Toryn circled Reed, subtly putting himself between Brydon and his foe. Reed faced Toryn and Brydon saw blood on the man’s shoulder where Toryn had nicked him. Brydon wondered why Toryn had not skewered him, then realized Toryn had probably tried, but Reed’s agility had allowed him to avoid a fatal blow.

"You seemed to need some help, Falaran," Toryn commented and took the attack to Reed, forcing him back with a wild flashing movement of his blade. Reed countered the blows smoothly and Brydon saw his dark eyes narrow. He knew, suddenly, that Reed was going to assault Toryn’s mind. Brydon sent his own senses racing toward Reed. As expected, Reed’s smooth mental wall was partially down and his thoughts were questing in the direction of Toryn. Brydon felt a moment of satisfaction. Reed had left him an opening, apparently thinking Brydon posed no threat. Brydon sent a wave of anger into Reed’s mind, envisioning it as a battering ram.

Brydon smiled in grim satisfaction when Reed cried out and snapped his mental shields back into place. He held them tightly while Toryn used the momentary distraction to his advantage; he pressed forward with a series of thrusts and slashes that Reed scrambled to counter. A blow caused Reed to wrench himself backward in order to avoid disembowelment. Brydon was suddenly glad he had never fought Toryn with a sword—he was magnificent.

It was Brydon’s turn to hammer away at Reed’s mental defenses. He sought relentlessly for a weakness, not daring to let up for an instant, lest Reed lay waste to Toryn’s unprotected mind. Toryn’s continuous attack made it impossible for Reed to lash a mental attack at Brydon—it seemed to be taking all of his skill to fend off Toryn’s blows. Reed ducked a cut that looked close enough to shave a bit of hair from his head. Toryn chortled gleefully.

"The next one takes an ear!" Toryn predicted and aimed a jab at Reed’s throat that was nearly fatal—deflected by a narrow margin by Reed’s uplifted sword. Reed had to be tiring, but Brydon sensed more rage than fear radiating through his still-tight mental shield.

Reed suddenly launched himself into the air in a backward somersault worthy of the most accomplished acrobat. He landed on his feet some ten feet from Toryn, who had stared at the maneuver with something akin to admiration. Apparently, Reed was not as tired as he seemed, even though he panted heavily, as did both Toryn and Brydon.

Toryn took a step forward. Brydon could see a grin twist the Redolian’s features as he moved to renew the attack, but Toryn paused when Reed reached into the open neck of
his tunic. Brydon expected Reed to draw a throwing dagger, but the bandit’s hand revealed a large, red crystalline stone that dangled from a chain around his neck. It was too large for a ruby. Brydon half-expected another mental attack during Reed’s brief respite and was not disappointed. Brydon clenched his teeth against an outcry as Reed mentally struck at him again.

Brydon held Reed at bay after a moment’s struggle and then the offensive ceased as suddenly as it had begun. Toryn circled Reed once more and then halted with a startled oath when Reed’s crystal began to glow with an unholy red light. Brydon quickly sent his thoughts back toward Reed even though he wondered if he could protect either himself or Toryn from whatever the man planned. Toryn raced forward with a loud yell.

"I will not forget you two," Reed snarled and then seemed to grow insubstantial, ghostlike. Brydon’s mind encountered a sense of Reed’s presence just as Toryn’s sword cut through his intangible form with no resistance. Then Reed was gone, both mentally and physically. Brydon cast his mind in all directions, bewildered.

Toryn spun about wearing the same expression. "Where did he go?"

"He’s gone! Completely gone," Brydon said with amazement. "I can’t sense him anywhere around!"

"How could he just vanish? Was he a phantom? Or a demon?"

Brydon shook his head. "I don't know, but nothing supernatural, I think. He was far too real. When you cut him, he bled."

Toryn looked relieved at Brydon’s words. "That’s true! What was that red stone?"

"I don’t know. Maybe it aided his escape." Brydon wondered if Reed’s strange abilities had contributed to his disappearance.

"Damn!" Toryn said suddenly. "I should retrieve Alyn. I left her in the woods."

"I will meet you back at camp," Brydon said and sheathed his sword. "I need to recover my arrows."

"Try not to get into any more fights without me," Toryn suggested with a grin.

"Count on it."

Toryn trotted away. Brydon picked up his bow and gathered the arrows he had launched at Reed. One of them was difficult to find—he finally located it tangled in the branches of a bush. Brydon fished it out, replaced it in his quiver, and then cast his mind out carefully. He did not trust that Reed was truly gone.

His mind encountered Toryn and Alyn before he sensed two more presences approaching. One of them was a woman. Brydon plucked an arrow from his quiver and notched it to his bow. He stood back and waited, holding his breath until she came into view. She saw him and tried to duck away—too late. The arrow sliced through her leather shirtsleeve and into the tree behind her, pinning her there. She looked at him with a surprisingly calm expression. She had red hair, he noted, and held a sword. He did not think he’d injured her, especially when she reached up and tried to pull the arrow out with her free hand. A man was close behind her, also ginger-haired. He was faster than
the woman and hurled himself to the ground when he saw the arrow aimed at him, but to no avail. Brydon simply waited until he was down and pinned him to the ground with feathered shafts.

He switched his attention back to the woman as she snapped off the end of the shaft and drew her clothing away from it. She left the broken end embedded in the tree. Brydon cursed silently; arrows were precious.

"I would not move if I were you," Brydon suggested as she poised herself to flee. "Drop the sword."

She looked down at the man who struggled to free himself from Brydon’s arrows. "Are you injured, Lavan?" she asked. Brydon was entranced by her voice—it was as deep and smooth as fine wine.

"No," the fallen man replied in a voice filled with rage. "But I cannot move."

She looked back at Brydon, who stepped closer, arrow held steady. She tossed her sword away. "If you had injured my brother I would have been forced to fight you," she stated. The man on the ground sighed disgustedly. "Stop defending me, Sellaris. I can fight my own battles."

"You can’t fight your way out of a spider’s web, Lavan."

The man loosed a few choice words.

"Have you met Reed?" the woman asked of Brydon, whose jaw tightened. "I see you have," she said with a humorless smile. "Yet, you live! You must be skilled. Where is he?"

"Maybe I killed him," Brydon suggested. Sellaris laughed and the bell-like tones sent a strange thrill down his spine. Lavan snorted and thrashed. Brydon knew it would not take long for the man to free himself. He sent a quick mental call to Toryn and wondered what to do with his prisoners.

"I will have to tie you up," he told the woman. She shrugged and he sensed her waiting for the proper moment to attack him. He cast about for something with which to bind her and was slightly mortified to spy only one possible item.

"Ah… lacking a rope, it appears I’ll need the laces from your shirt."

Her eyes—grey, he saw—flashed and then darkened to almost black. He had finally sparked some real emotion in her. After a tense moment, she reached up and began unthreading the laces. Brydon reflected that it would have been a very interesting moment if her brother were not ten feet away, thrashing and cursing. Brydon should have sent a blunt arrow against the man’s skull and knocked him out. He could still do so, he supposed, but he didn’t want the woman to misconstrue his actions.

She finished and held the lacing out to him. The movement caused her unlaced blouse to gape open and reveal much of a cream-colored breast. A very nice looking cream-colored breast, Brydon noticed as he clamped his jaw shut to keep it from dropping.

She smiled slightly, an almost seductive smile, and Brydon knew she planned to attack him the instant he got close enough to take the laces from her hand. There was no need to
read her mind—he could see it in her eyes. He was saved from indecision by Toryn’s approach.

"Did you call me?" Toryn asked before he stopped short and whistled appreciatively. "Now I know why you stayed! Am I interrupting something?" He leered.

"Tie her up, Toryn."

"My pleasure!"

Toryn tied Sellaris. Despite his lusty demeanor, his hands did not wander. She did not try to fend him off and kept a wary eye on Brydon’s arrow. Toryn bound her hands behind her back and cut the excess leather with his dagger before handing it to Brydon.

"I’ll take care of the man. You may want to fasten her shirt together with this. She will thank you for it later," Toryn murmured with a smirk and walked over to the cursing Lavan.

"We don’t have any rope to tie him with," Brydon said.

"I’ll manage," Toryn called. Brydon put the arrow back in his quiver and slung the bow over his shoulder. He walked to Sellaris, who watched as Toryn knelt over her brother.

Brydon cleared his throat. "I think we should tie your… ah, this… back together." Her shirt had fallen even farther open since her hands were tied behind her. Brydon tried to keep his eyes on her face.

Her grey eyes flashed back to his, expressionless. She was stunningly beautiful, he noticed. Her skin was a flawless golden tone and her dark red hair flowed down her back and over her shoulders in thick curls. Her lips were full and her face was like a marble statue of an angel. Except, of course, for the slate-colored eyes that glared icy murder at him.

He took her silence for assent and threaded one end of the lace through a hole, an action that forced him to look down at his task. It was then that he noticed her pendant. She wore an emerald green stone, about the size of his thumb, hanging from a golden chain. It was teardrop shaped, too large to be an emerald. Crystal, he supposed, like Reed’s. He looked at her penetratingly, but knew it wasn’t the time for a mental probe. He did not dare let his guard down, in case she had the same abilities as Reed. His hand brushed her breast as he tugged at the cloth. He felt heat rise in his face and dropped his eyes back to his task. It was a moment before he noticed the pale pink flush creeping from her chest up into her cheeks.

He pulled the shirt closed hurriedly and threaded the other side before tying a clumsy knot to hold the two parts together. He backed away quickly, trembling slightly, and cursed himself for acting like some half-schooled squire. Sellaris watched him through half-lidded eyes.

Brydon smiled brightly. "There," he said. He looked over at Toryn, who tossed aside a rather large rock. Brydon noticed Lavan was lying quite still.
"Who needs ropes?" Toryn asked and began to pull arrows away from the unconscious man.

CHAPTER TWELVE
SELLARIS

Brydon followed Toryn back to where Alyn was leaning against a tree. She was awake, but seemed groggy. Brydon called to Fireling mentally and a moment later Alyn’s horse trotted up, followed by Darkling. Fireling whickered and nuzzled Alyn’s hair in a friendly greeting. She reached up a weak hand and touched his chestnut neck. Toryn lifted Alyn and set her atop the horse, testament to her weakened state. She did not even protest. Brydon helped Toryn sling Lavan’s limp form over Darkling’s back. Sellaris followed without comment as Toryn led the way back to the bandit’s encampment. Brydon trailed behind Sellaris. He could tell she was furious by the movement of her hips and the set of her shoulders.

The camp was a shambles from the horses' charge—cooking items were scattered and a makeshift tent had been knocked from its pegs. Verana sat near a roaring fire and tended a dark-haired stranger whose hands were tied behind his back. Large bloody scratches covered his bare arms and chest. He looked up as they approached. "Sellaris!" he exclaimed. "Are you hurt?"

"No, Garyn," she said in a dry tone with barely a glance at him. Brydon cocked a brow at the exchange. The man was obviously worried for her, but her voice seemed laced with contempt.

"Are there any others?" Brydon asked of Davin, who shook his head.

"Where is Reed?" Garyn asked.

"Gone," Sellaris replied.

"He left us? The bastard! What about Flord and Snip?"

"Both dead," she said shortly and threw an unfathomable look at Brydon. Davin dragged her brother from the horse and set him on the ground before locating some rope and tying him securely. Several packs lay near the fire; Davin must have collected the bandits’ belongings. Toryn helped Alyn dismount and then guided her over to sit near Verana.

"How is she?" Toryn asked.

"I have not even looked at her yet, Toryn. Perhaps you could heat some water for me? You might make some food, also. She is probably hungry." Alyn seemed oblivious to their conversation; she stared into the flames and said nothing. For once Toryn made no protest, but went to do as Verana asked. Brydon sent the horses away with a mental nudge.

"You, sit," Brydon ordered Sellaris. Without waiting to see if she complied, Brydon joined Toryn at the fire and watched him toss a variety of ingredients into a large cooking pot.

"Walk with me for a moment, Toryn."
"Now? I’m cooking."

"I need to tell you something."

Toryn sighed and set the pot near the fire. "You’re not planning to confess your undying love, are you?"

Brydon punched him in the shoulder, nearly knocking Toryn over. He rubbed his shoulder and snickered, but got to his feet. Brydon caught Davin’s eye and threw a pointed glance at Sellaris. Davin nodded affirmative—he would keep an eye on her.

Brydon and Toryn walked a short distance into the forest. The dry ground was a pleasant change from the interminable swamp they had left behind. Brydon put his hand on the smooth white trunk of a tree and picked at parchment-like bits of bark. He was not sure where to begin.

"She’s wearing a crystal," Toryn said as if sensing Brydon’s difficulty. "Why hasn’t she disappeared?"

"Maybe she can’t. Toryn, there is something I need to tell you."

"About your strange ability to track people and animals by thinking about them?"

Brydon nodded. "Today I discovered there might be much more to it than that." He explained his encounter with Reed in detail. Toryn listened with a fascinated expression.

"You mean he actually spoke words in your mind?" Toryn asked. "Can you do that?"

"I don’t know," Brydon admitted. "When I called you earlier you came, as though I had called you aloud."

"I thought you had called me. Were you speaking in my head?" Toryn was silent for a moment and he kicked at a root near his foot. Dust puffed into the air and settle on his boot. "Do you think you could you extract information from people, the way Reed tried with you? Can you hear my thoughts?"

Brydon studied him closely. "I would not have thought so, before. I thought my abilities were limited to sensing presences and sometimes knowing what people were feeling. Now, I think... maybe. Do you want me to try?"

Toryn backed away and his green eyes widened. "I don’t think so," he said.

Brydon held out a hand to stay him. "I would never use it without your consent."

Toryn took a deep breath, looking relieved. He picked up a stick and tossed it into the woods, obviously trying to look undisturbed. Brydon had to admit the thought of someone invading his mind would be unsettling. Sheol, it had been unsettling having Reed digging about in there. Toryn said, "Try it on the girl."

"What would be the difference if I tried to read her mind without her consent?" Brydon asked, exasperated.

Toryn looked stymied for only a moment. "So, ask her."

Brydon rubbed his temples with his fingers and shot Toryn a rueful look. Toryn grinned guilelessly and made a shooing motion with his hands.
Brydon returned to camp and knelt by Sellaris. She had dug up a blanket from somewhere and sat upon it cross-legged with her hands braced behind her. She looked bored, but that was probably an affectation.

"Do you know where Reed is now?" he asked her.

She shook her head and her grey eyes revealed nothing.

"Does he... disappear like this often?"

"What do you mean?" she asked guilelessly.

Brydon did not believe for an instant that she was innocent of Reed’s abilities, although his certainty was based on nothing more than a feeling.

"He disappeared like a ghost before we could finish him off," Brydon said. "He wore a stone similar to yours." He pointed to the green pendant she wore. She looked at him and waited. Brydon frowned. He glanced at Toryn, who had returned to his cooking and Toryn gave him an encouraging nod.

Brydon despised the idea of invading anyone’s mind like an honorless spy, but it seemed unlikely that the three prisoners would willingly offer information. It would be unwise to reveal his own abilities by asking permission, yet it was imperative that he determine whether or not Reed would appear as suddenly as he had gone.

He turned his attention back to Sellaris. He relaxed and tentatively extended his senses—only to encounter a smooth wall. He probed lightly and searched for a weakness. Sellaris gasped and her grey eyes widened as she stared at him. She sat up and her hands clenched into fists atop her thighs.

"You—!" she breathed.

"You felt that?"

She nodded.

"Sorry," he said, ashamed that he had been discovered. "I was trying to be subtle. Do you want to talk to me now, or shall I try to break through your barriers?"

She glared. "Do your worst," she challenged.

Brydon groaned inwardly. He would never force her. It would be like... like rape. Instead, he looked at Lavan. Even if her brother had the same power as Sellaris, perhaps it would not be functional while he was unconscious.

There was no barrier and Brydon felt himself slip easily into Lavan’s mind. Nothing came to him at first and then he found himself barraged with images: a village; a brown cat; four people around a campfire; a very young Sellaris; walking through a forest; a mug of ale and seven empty glasses on a table; Reed standing near a grey horse; a strange woman; an empty plain; slamming a fist into a tree trunk—Brydon yanked his mind back before he drowned in Lavan’s memories. How was he to make sense of it?

Sellaris lashed a foot out and kicked Brydon in the shin, nearly knocking him out of his crouch. He caught his balance and looked at her sharply. Her hair was in disarray and her grey eyes shone fiercely. Brydon found himself simply staring at her for a moment, nearly mesmerized by her beauty. He almost did not hear her words.
"Stop it!" she demanded in a hushed voice. "He has no defense against one such as you! Do you find it honorable to invade the minds of the helpless? What kind of knight-priest are you? Or do you only wear the adornment in pretense?" She jerked her chin toward the falcon symbol on his vest. He drew in a breath at her observation and his gaze shot to Toryn, but the Redolian was conversing intently with Verana and had not overheard. Brydon was not quite ready to divulge his status to Toryn, mostly to avoid a tirade of epic proportion. He doubted Toryn would be pleased that Brydon had kept the information from him.

His eyes narrowed as he turned back to Sellaris and replied in an equally low tone. "I will not have my honor questioned by a common thief. I am a knight-priest and by my vows I am required to use whatever means I deem necessary to protect those under my care. Alyn was under my protection when she was kidnapped. You obviously planned to sell her to the highest bidder. As criminals captured by an ordained knight-priest, you are required by law to give me all possible information to aid in the capture of the escaped members of your band. I am authorized to use whatever means necessary to extract that information." Brydon paused for a moment as he tried to rein in his anger. Sellaris watched him expressionlessly, though her eyes were ice-cold. He continued in an even tone, "One way or the other, I will have what I seek. Now, shall we do this the easy way, or should I heat some irons and get the information the old-fashioned way?"

Her eyes showed surprise for a moment, quickly masked. "Torture? You are bluffing. You would not have the stomach for it."

Brydon smiled humorlessly in acknowledgement. "Perhaps I would not." He jerked a thumb toward Toryn. "But he would."

She looked at Toryn, carving meat with a vengeance in preparation for their meal. Toryn caught her gaze and fixed her with one of his merciless glares, involuntarily playing right into Brydon’s hands. Her white teeth touched her bottom lip for a moment—Brydon wondered if she was even aware of the nervous habit. He found it fascinating.

Her gaze returned to Brydon and he snapped his eyes back to hers with a slight flush. "I will tell you what you want to know," she said. "Upon your word that you will do no more prying into our minds."

"Agreed," Brydon said readily and concealed his relief. He had no desire to delve back into Lavan’s mind, or hers if the result was such chaos. "Upon my honor. Now, how did Reed disappear?"

"I don’t know," Sellaris replied. "I am not privy to his secrets."

"Then you cannot also vanish?"

"Would I still be here if I could?"

"Possibly," Brydon said with a grin. "I do not pretend to know the mind of a woman."

"No," she said and sneered. He felt a flare of satisfaction at annoying her and wondered if Toryn was contaminating him. "I cannot also vanish."

"Will Reed return?"
Sellaris smiled a trifle maliciously and moved out of her cross-legged position to recline slightly. Brydon tried not to watch her long legs unfold and failed. "Maybe. It depends on how badly he wants what you have taken from him."

Wonderful, thought Brydon. He could picture Reed popping up during the night and killing them all in their sleep. He sighed. He must keep his guard up at all times and his mind open for Reed’s presence.

"What does Reed want with Alyn and the Akarskan horses? Is he a simple bandit, or something more?"

"I don’t know where he’s from." She was silent for a long while, as if choosing what to tell him. "What are you planning to do with us?"

"That depends. I need to know if Reed will be a threat to us. Will he try to recover Alyn or rescue you? If you tell me the truth I will set you, your brother, and your companion free." The promise was somewhat self-serving—he had no desire to drag them to the nearest authorities, which could be days away.

Sellaris gaze moved to Garyn and Brydon studied him. Garyn’s somewhat plain features were open and pleasant; he did not have the look of a seasoned warrior. He seemed more like the young men Brydon had encountered in taverns in Falara, playing dice and telling tall tales about the fish they had caught and the women they had toyed with. He looked too friendly and naïve to be a villain. Then again, Sellaris did not exactly look evil.

Brydon’s gaze skimmed once more over her lithe form, her slender waist and slim, leather-bound legs. She did not notice, seemingly lost in thought, but Brydon’s throat felt suddenly dry. Her grey eyes met his and he wondered how she had become involved with Reed.

"Very well," she said, a bit breathlessly. "I will tell you all I know of Reed. If it is not enough for you, will you still set us free?"

"I give you my word as a Falaran, as long as you intend us no harm and go your own way. I swear it by my king."

She nodded, apparently satisfied. Brydon stretched out next to her, not quite touching the blanket. A twig dug into his backside and he removed it before tossing it at Toryn’s head. It pinged off the black hair and earned a venomous look from the Redolian. Sellaris began to speak, so Brydon ignored Toryn’s pantomimed threats.

"Lavan and I met Reed in Bodor, our homeland. Our father is a minor noble there. We have three elder stepbrothers who stand to inherit everything. They always hated us, so Lavan and I decided to seek our own fortunes in Silver. Garyn accompanied us, since he has been our companion since childhood. We were traveling to Silver when we met Reed in a tavern. Flord, one of the men you killed today, was with him.

"We were drinking at a table when Reed came to us. He said that he had overheard us speaking and mentioned that he had a job if we were willing to work for him. I was annoyed at his eavesdropping, but Lavan invited him to sit down and talk to us." She paused for a moment and then continued, "He said that he needed a couple of men, or women, to help him move a herd of horses from Penkangum to the southern border of Bodor. It was an odd request, but we assumed that he worked for some rich nobleman
who wanted horses. I asked him if the horses were legal, and he said that all of the
Akarskan horses were marked and had been legally sold. He just needed help to transport
them."

She sighed. "It turned out he lied. The horses were not marked and we ended up fighting
Akarskan hunters all the way to Bodor. We were nearly killed, but Reed paid us well
enough that it seemed worth the trouble. It was even exciting. We turned the horses over
to a strange hooded man in southern Bodor. Reed said his client wanted more horses and
had given him enough gold to bargain with the Tar-Tanians. We went to Tar-Tan and
bought more horses, delivering them again to Bodor. It was easier that time, without
Akarskan hunters hounding us. Tar-Tanians will sometimes part with stolen horses for a
price.

"We picked up Snip in Penkangum on our way to Terris to collect more horses. I don’t
know who Reed works for, but I’m sure he is in it for the money like the rest of us. My
guess is that someone is tired of all the horses being in Akarska and wants to start a little
breeding farm of their own."

Brydon nodded; it made sense. Horses were so scarce outside of Akarska that they
commanded a huge price. He picked up a sharp-edged rock and drew aimlessly on the
ground with it. "How many horses have you moved down there?"

"We have been at it for over a year. I would guess close to two dozen. Maybe more. It’s
hard to move more than three or four at a time without attracting attention."

"Two dozen? And still they want more? I’m surprised Akarskans haven’t come after you
in force."

"Many of them were legitimately purchased in Akarska; perhaps half of them. It was only
recently that Reed started getting them from raiders here in Terris. He sent us up here
when he received word of a planned raid."

"Did he hire the raiders to steal the horses from Akarska?"

Sellaris shrugged. "It's possible. I don’t inquire too closely into his affairs. It’s enough
that we are paid regularly and well."

"What about the girl? Why did he take Alyn?"

"It wasn’t Reed's idea. Snip wanted to make some extra income on the side by selling her
in Tar-Tan. Reed didn’t care." She was silent for a moment and Brydon suspected she
was not telling him everything. He wished he had not promised so quickly to refrain from
using his powers; he might have been able to tell if she lied.

"You sound like you condone this."

"I don’t condemn it," she stated. "If Akarskans doted less on their damned horses and
more on their people, they would not have to worry about being captured and sold."

"Alyn was in Akarska when she was captured!"

"Then she should have been more careful," Sellaris said coldly. "The vile raiders took
her. If Snip had not bought her from them, they would have sold her to someone else and
she would probably be in much worse condition, if you know what I mean."
"Alyn would have been sold to the highest bidder?" Toryn asked, having approached silently. His voice was deceptively mild but Brydon could tell he was furious by the tightness of his jaw and the set of his shoulders. He looked like he wanted to throttle Sellaris. She nodded. Toryn snarled and stalked into the forest where the horses were grazing. Brydon assumed he would get no further information from Sellaris, so he tossed aside the rock he had been drawing with and followed him.

"Slavers!" Toryn exclaimed when they were out of hearing of the others. "You don't believe her, do you? For all we know, she could have been with the raiding party when they took Alyn."

"It is possible. Such raids happen all the time, Toryn. You know Tar-Tanians hate Akarskans. Remember when you had no desire to enter Akarska? It is not exactly a friendly place. They have enemies everywhere."

Toryn flushed. "That doesn’t make it right."

"Of course not. I just do not want you to do anything rash. I told Sellaris that she and her companions could go free. I don’t think they will cause any harm without Reed. He seems to be the controlling force behind their operations." If Sellaris had been truthful.

Toryn sighed, but nodded. "We don’t have the manpower to keep them all prisoner. What would we do with them? I doubt there are any knight-priest holdings in this swamp."

"No. Kaneelis has the nearest outpost." Brydon thought back to the story Sellaris had told him. They normally worked alone, she had said, so why had Reed accompanied them this time?

"We could kill them all," Toryn mused, rousing Brydon from his thoughts. Toryn laughed before Brydon could speak. "I knew you would make that horrified expression! I was only joking, stupid Falaran."

"Very funny."

Lavan was awake when Brydon returned to the camp. The family resemblance was evident—both he and Sellaris were uncommonly attractive, and shared the same deep red hair. However, Lavan's forehead was deeply lined with a perpetual scowl and his lips were thin and set in an unattractive sneer. Sellaris was bent over him, holding his head in her hands. Someone had obviously untied her. That someone was Davin, who leaned against a tree and watched her closely with a dagger held casually in his hand.

"Are you all right?" Sellaris asked her brother.

Lavan nodded and she stroked his red hair away from his forehead. "No thanks to that black-haired devil," he croaked.

"Is Reed going to come back for you?" Brydon demanded of Lavan, unmoved by the display of familial affection.

"Reed?" Garyn put in and snorted. "That is highly doubtful."

Brydon looked at the brown-haired young man. "Where did he go?"

Garyn shrugged and winced at the movement. His large scratches were bandaged tightly. "Who knows? The last time he disappeared we were in Tar-Tan; we didn’t see him again
until we'd gone to Kaneelis. Sometimes we won’t see him for months at a time. He has other interests."

Sellaris nodded. "It took us nearly a month to locate him last time. The bastard left us in the middle of a tribal war. It took some fast-talking by Flord to get us out of there with our skins intact. Reed owed us money, too."

"He betrayed you?" Davin asked.

"Let’s just say he knows how to save his own skin," Sellaris replied dryly.

"You said he sent you here to get the horses and that you usually worked without him. Why was he with you this time?"

"He did not join us until we acquired the Akarskan girl and the stallions. I think he wanted to see them. We seldom find horses of that quality and we had two of them," Garyn said. "He has also surprised us before, appearing at will."

"Why do you stay with such a reprehensible character?" Verana asked mildly as she began to dish Toryn’s stew onto an assortment of dishes.

"He pays very well."

"Some things should never be bought," Toryn said with finality, returning to camp. Lavan glared at him and Sellaris shrugged, but Brydon thought that Garyn looked a bit guilty. Perhaps there was hope for that one, anyway.

"What happened to you?" Sellaris asked Garyn.

"I was attacked by a jungle cat," Garyn admitted and accepted a bowl from Verana with a nod of thanks. "I’m lucky it didn’t kill me. I’m not sure why it didn’t. I think that silver-haired fellow drove it away." Brydon thought it strange that a wild cat would be hunting during their battle, but he turned his attention to Sellaris, promising himself another talk with her. He still had unanswered questions.

"Whether Reed returns or not, we are not going anywhere until Alyn recovers enough to be moved," he stated. He realized he had hardly bothered to check on Alyn, so he walked quickly to crouch at her side. She lay on a thick pile of blankets and seemed to be dozing. She smiled at him in dreamy bemusement and Brydon realized Verana had likely dosed her with some sort of medicinal tea. He glanced at Verana, who nodded. Brydon patted Alyn’s shoulder and left her to rest.

It began to drizzle, so Brydon and Toryn stretched a blanket from two trees and propped it up with branches to shelter Alyn and Verana. The others were left to their own devices, although they were all given blankets or cloaks to warm themselves. Brydon did not bother to tie Sellaris, since he and Toryn intended to take turns watching their prisoners. Night seemed to fall rapidly.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

TEPTATION

Brydon was seated on a fallen log with his back against a tree, on watch, when he saw Sellaris stir from sleep. He watched her pale hand splay over the blankets for a moment,
and then he dragged his attention back to a casual survey of the slumbering encampment. He knew there was no danger, but with Reed an unknown factor it paid to be alert. His gaze returned to Sellaris, who sat up and then got to her feet and glanced around. Looking for me, he suspected. She had been untied for the past couple of days, after she had given her word that she would neither leave nor aid the others in escape. They had decided to stay for a few days in order to give Alyn a chance to recover from her concussion or whatever ailed her.

Sellaris crouched and prodded at the fire, but he knew her eyes scanned the trees, searching for any sign of movement that would give away his presence. Brydon stayed where he was, out of the rain under a large leafy tree. He turned his attention to the horses that were mostly huddled together. Darkling, instead of sleeping, followed Taryn’s mare around and around a tree at a very slow pace, as if herding her. Brydon knew when Fang tired of it she would lash out at him with a hoof and that would be the end of the herding.

It did not take Sellaris long to find him. She sat down next to him, but said nothing for a long while. He refrained from looking at her and kept his attention on the horses. He had already memorized every plane of her face and every curve of her body even though he wished he had not. During the past days of waiting there had been little to do but watch her.

"This country is depressing," Sellaris said finally. "Rain, rain, rain."

"I thought it rained often in Bodor," Brydon said quietly.

"Yes, but it isn’t a dark, cold rain like this. Usually, the sun is still out. It is not swampy and muddy, either. The trees grow so tall and thick in some areas that the rain hardly reaches the ground. It is warm in Bodor. Not like here. I hate the cold."

Brydon was silent. She would not do well in Falara, where snow blanketed the ground much of the year. She looked at him once, but he did not meet her eyes. His head rested against the trunk of the tree. From the corner of his eye he saw her teeth worry her lower lip for a moment.

Before she could speak, Brydon asked, "What do you know about Reed’s powers?"

"Do you see me only as a fount of information?"

"No," he replied and forced his gaze away from her lips. He did not elaborate and she sighed.

"We did not discover Reed’s abilities for a long while. In fact, it was not until we displeased him that we discovered how powerful he was. A particularly fine mare sickened and died while we were moving her to Bodor. There was nothing we could do for the horse—what does anyone outside of Akarska know of horse illnesses?" She spoke bitterly, as though still plagued by the incident.

"When we met up with Reed, he was furious. The next thing we knew, Garyn and Lavan were writhing on the ground, clutching their heads in pain while Reed watched them intently. I did not know what he was doing to them, but I grabbed my dagger and slashed at him. He deflected the blow and earned himself a gash on the forearm, but then he was in my mind." She went silent and a pained expression crossed her face. Brydon could
only imagine what the experience had been like. His lips thinned at the memory of Reed doing the same to him.

"I fought back," she went on, "of course. My efforts were nothing to Reed, but it seemed to impress him that I had even limited power. He halted the attack. Shortly thereafter, he sent GARYN AND LAVAN on a mission, but took me with him to Silver. He said he required my help. In reality, we spent three weeks in a villa in one of the principalities of Silver while he tried to teach me about my powers. He refused to tell me where they came from, although I think he knows. He seemed frustrated that my abilities are not like his—I cannot do even half the things he can." She reached into her shirt and pulled out the green crystal. It looked like a black shard in the darkness.

"He gave this to me. It augments my skill somehow—it helps me to focus and maintain my mental shield—defense from people like you." She smiled shortly. "It also protects me from intrusion by Reed, though I'm certain that was not his original intent." She tucked the crystal back inside her blouse.

"Reed has the ability to converse mentally with anyone, unless they have the power to block him, and I have not found many people with that talent. He can also will himself elsewhere—he calls it 'stepping'—but I am not sure if more than mere willpower is required for that. He seems to need his crystal to 'step', or perhaps the stone simply makes it easier for him. That is all I know of his abilities, but he can most likely do things he has never shown me. I am merely a convenience to him—he does not trust me."

Brydon wondered about her relationship with Reed—were they lovers? It seemed likely, even though the idea made him cringe. Her information had given him little insight into Reed’s powers and motivations, and in turn gave him no information about his own abilities. Sellars had not elaborated on her powers and he wondered whether his talents compared more with hers or Reed’s. He would have to search for answers—Reed had attained knowledge from somewhere and Brydon was determined to discover it as well.

Sellars turned to him. "What is Falara like?" she asked.

He wondered briefly what she really wanted. She was not at all the type to make small talk. He stared up at the treetops and allowed his gaze to unfocus as he remembered.

"It is cold, usually," he said at last. "Falara has high mountains, deep snow, clear water, and tall trees. The air is clean and pure and makes your lungs ache in the winter. There is a mountain near Eaglecrest called Phantom Peak. Most of the time it is invisible, hidden by clouds. Superstitious folk say it’s not even real, that it is a place of magic that appears in response to portents. Many times you can see only the top of it, floating above a blanket of clouds, even on the clearest day. It’s breathtaking. Falara is a beautiful place."

"And the women? Are they beautiful also?" Her voice was bland.

"Of course. There are lovely women everywhere. One has but to look."

"And do you? Look for lovely women?" she whispered huskily. She leaned toward him and his eyes swung to hers. A mistake. Her dark red hair was tangled, the curls in disarray, but it only added to her wild beauty. Her grey eyes were shadowy slashes in the darkness and her lips were full, slightly parted as she awaited his response.
Brydon could not answer. He was overcome with the desire to kiss her and gave in to it with a soft groan, bending down to touch his lips to hers. Her arms went around his neck and she returned his kiss with a passion that quickened his blood and sent his pulse racing. When he broke away, a long while later, he looked at her and saw the brightness of the hidden stars shining in her eyes. Droplets of rain, still falling, glistened in her hair. She did not turn away.

"I am drawn to you," she said in a breathy voice. "I don’t know why, but you are beautiful and perfect and I want you."

Brydon could not breathe for a moment and wished her words had not placed a weight upon his heart. He wanted to believe she lied, that she sat with him for some sinister purpose of her own, but he could read the truth in her eyes. "You know this cannot be."

"Anything can be, if we make it so," she insisted and pulled him into another kiss.

Brydon knew he should leave her immediately and the reasons clamored in his mind: his quest, the princess, the kingdom; but they were swept away by the fierce surge of desire that overcame him. His hands caressed her slim form while hers curled in his hair and slid over his shoulders.

He felt her bare skin beneath the soft leather of her shirt and she gasped at the feel of his cold hand on her warm flesh, but she did not pull away.

"Brydon," she murmured. She trailed kisses across his neck until her breath was hot in his ear.

"What sorcery is this?" Brydon asked as her hands slipped under his shirt, tracking fire across his back.

"No sorcery," Sellaris breathed, "Just desire."

Brydon captured her lips again and surrendered to it.

"Was she trying to escape, Brydon?" Toryn’s amused voice asked.

Brydon snatched away from her as if burned and looked at Toryn, who leaned against a tree some distance away, smiling a smirk that Brydon had suddenly come to hate. Sellaris turned away from them both, panting.

"What do you want?" Brydon asked, a bit more harshly than he intended.

"It's my turn to take watch, remember?" Toryn said mildly.

Brydon turned to ask Sellaris to return to camp, but she had disappeared into the trees.

"Thanks, Toryn," Brydon snapped, still flushed.

"I was just thinking of your poor princess up in Falara, pining away for your return. You are not giving up the quest, are you?"

The taunt was akin to cold water. Brydon drew himself up as the heat on his cheeks began to cool. "Of course not," he snapped.

Toryn shrugged. "Just wondering." He grinned, obviously pleased to have caught Brydon doing something less than noble.
Brydon growled and stalked back to camp. Once there, he saw that Sellaris had returned to her brother’s side and feigned sleep. He sighed and dropped to his own blankets. He pulled his vest over his head as protection from the rain. Once there, guilt overcame him like a smothering hood. How could he have almost…? When he thought of what was at stake he shuddered. He could not let something as base as lust come between him and his honor. He wondered if Toryn had been sent to him by Adona to prevent him from abandoning his quest in a moment of weakness. Sellaris was beautiful and desirable, but she was also mercenary and self-serving. He thanked Adona for his renewed clarity of thought and pledged to thank Toryn on the morrow.

Rain dripped from his vest down the back of his neck and he shifted in his blankets to try and get more comfortable. Sellaris was right, he reflected, it was a miserable country.

Before he woke the next morning, Brydon had a strange dream. In the dream, he was some sort of beast, a wolf perhaps, or a hunting cat. He stalked through the dew-wet undergrowth, picking up the faint scents of a jungle buck. Excitement tingled through him as the scent grew stronger and he knew he was getting close. The thought of tearing his fangs into the buck’s thick neck made his mouth water. He could almost taste the hot blood.

He froze when his ears picked up a noise and then he crept forward silently and peered through the foliage. A large buck stood a few feet away, carelessly nibbling on a bush and swatting its short tail at the swamp bugs out in the early morning’s light. It had a dusky brown-green coat with darker mottling as camouflage. Useless, he thought with satisfaction. The buck’s horns were straight, spiraling up from the skull. A young buck, then. Perfect.

Brydon crouched and his tail twitched softly. The buck, as if sensing danger, lifted its head in alarm. Brydon sprang. The buck leaped, but too late. His claws fastened into the animal’s flesh and an instant later his teeth found its neck. There was a dreadful ripping and blood gushed over Brydon’s teeth and tongue. The buck leaped high into the air and came down in a crumpled heap. Brydon held on until he was certain it was dead. Then he carefully detached his teeth and sat back on his haunches. He felt a sudden lurching sensation, so unexpected that he started awake violently, but his mind caught something in the fleeting instant before total consciousness.

"Davin?" he burst out as he sat up.

Those awake looked at him questioningly.

"He is on watch," Verana said as she wrapped Garyn’s scratch-wounds with herb-soaked bandages. The brown-haired man was shirtless and sat patiently beneath her ministrations. Garyn seemed healthy and strong, other than his wounds. He was shorter and more muscular than Toryn, but his features looked open and honest. Brydon had not formed a firm opinion about him. Sellaris was talking to Lavan, who looked happy as a rabid wolf, as usual. It was hard to believe they were even related. Lavan’s mouth was set in a perpetual snarl and the hard glare made the handsome planes of his face look harsh and cruel. He reminded Brydon of the spoiled sons of arrogant nobles he had encountered as a boy, the type that felt the world owed them a boon for merely existing.
Sellaris locked gazes with Brydon and she flushed slightly before she turned back to Lavan. Did she regret the previous night, Brydon wondered? Had it even been real, or had she just been toying with him? He shrugged off his thoughts irritably and remembered his resolution to have nothing further to do with her.

He got up and mentally searched for Davin. Once located, Brydon went into the forest. Surprisingly, it was not raining.

Davin looked up when Brydon approached. He was bent over the body of a buck, the same buck Brydon had seen in his dream. Davin efficiently gutted it with his dagger.

"You killed it with a knife?" Brydon asked casually.

Davin was silent for a moment and then shrugged. "No. A jungle cat killed it. The beast fled when I approached. Possibly the same one that attacked Garyn yesterday."

Brydon nodded thoughtfully. "We should take it back to camp before the cat returns."

Davin’s smile seemed forced. "Yes, I suppose you’re right."

Brydon helped the silver-haired man drag the animal through the undergrowth and wondered if he had accidentally projected his mind into that of the cat’s and next into Davin’s. But somehow, he knew it had not happened that way.

Toryn was ecstatic to see the buck and immediately set about preparing venison for the cook pot, excitedly rifling through Verana’s supplies. Alyn opened her eyes for a few moments, drank some of Verana’s tea, and went back to sleep. The Akarskan girl had done little but sleep during the past few days. When she was awake she seemed groggy and uncertain. Verana told them her behavior was the result of her head wound and should be temporary.

"How long do you intend to keep us tied?" Lavan demanded when Brydon approached. "I thought you agreed to free us."

"I agreed," Brydon replied. "I did not say when." He was surprised that Sellaris had kept her word and not released Garyn and her brother. They were most likely amazed, as well.

"Then when? What are you waiting for?"

"I am waiting," Brydon said, "to see if Reed returns for you."

"He won’t," Garyn protested. "We have already told you."

Brydon ignored the complaint. He was not in a generous frame of mind, even though he knew that wrestling with his conscience over Sellaris had caused his black mood.

"Where will you go from here, Brydon?" Verana asked when he returned to the fire with his fletching supplies. During their days of relative inactivity, Brydon had worked to maintain his supplies, mending clothing and honing his weapons. "Will you return Alyn to her own people before you continue your journey?"

Brydon shook his head. "I expect Toryn will escort Alyn back to Akarska. I will continue on to Kaneelis with you. Toryn can return to Redol once Alyn is safely home."
The Redolian glared at him, knife stilling over the roots he held. "No," Toryn said flatly. "I am not going back to Adona-forsaken Akarska for any reason. Besides, I said I would stay with you."

Brydon blinked at him. He had expected Toryn to accompany him only as far as the Waryn Highway, a place they would no longer reach on their current path. "I release you from your vow."

"You cannot."

Brydon scowled, wondering what game Toryn played now. He had been trying to escape Brydon’s company for days on end and now that he was free, he chose to stay. It was baffling.

Before Brydon could respond, Verana made an exasperated sound. "Alyn cannot return to Akarska by herself in her current condition! If you refuse to return her to her people, then I suggest you all accompany me to Kaneelis where she can be healed properly in the Temple. Kaneelis would be an ideal place to release Sellaris, Garyn, and Lavan, or even turn them over to the authorities, as you choose. I am certain they will find it preferable to leaving them here in the swamp without horses." Her amber eyes sparkled. After days in the mud and muck, Verana still looked as fresh as a spring flower. Her pale blue robes were clean but for the mud-spattered hem. Her black hair was neatly braided and bedecked with beads and garlands of flowery vines whose colors contrasted brightly with her skin.

"You would leave us without horses?" Lavan exclaimed, apparently eavesdropping on their conversation. Brydon wondered again that the obnoxious man was kin to Sellaris. Aside from their coloring, they seemed little alike. It was odd that Sellaris had some of Reed’s abilities while her brother had none. Brydon had asked her about it.

"I don’t know why," she had replied tersely. Brydon’s eyes had narrowed; he sensed a lie. Perhaps the mystique surrounding her contributed to his attraction. He glared at her brother now.

"I think you have been mounted so long you have forgotten that most people walk," Verana said sharply. "The horses are not legally yours, or has it slipped your mind that they were stolen?"

Lavan flushed angrily and looked away.

"Is it agreed, then? We go to Kaneelis?" Brydon asked. "Davin, you have accompanied us this far. Will you join us?"

There was a wild, hunted look on Davin’s face for a moment, and then it was gone as he nodded. "If you will have me," he said.

"Then it is settled. We go to Kaneelis and decide further from there."

While the others prepared to break camp, Brydon thought it wise to search the dead bandits’ belongings and take anything that might be useful. Sellaris had already claimed her items and those of her brother and Garyn. Davin and Brydon had given everything else a cursory search, taking the blankets, some clothing, and cooking utensils, but most of the remainder had been left untouched. It had disturbed Brydon to sort through the
possessions of the dead men, but now it was either take what they had left or leave it behind.

Earlier, Toryn and Davin had dragged the bodies of the two men to a quick-mud area and let the earth suck them down. Brydon felt chagrined that they had not burned the bodies as was proper, but he supposed they had not really deserved a suitable funeral for what they had done to Alyn. Apparently, she had tried to escape and the one called Snip had hit her on the head—a bit too hard—which had resulted in prolonged unconsciousness and her present befuddled state.

They had tossed the packs into an out-of-the-way area, so Brydon beckoned Sellaris over to assist him. "Which are Reed’s belongings?" he asked.

Sellaris gestured vaguely. Brydon walked to where a small leather knapsack had been haphazardly tossed near a tree. Brydon picked it up and dumped the contents as he knelt down to examine them. There was no clothing. It seemed Reed had not planned to remain long with Sellaris and the others. Brydon found a golden dagger in a tooled-leather sheath that looked more ornamental than useful. The hilt was encrusted with rubies. Brydon set it aside and sorted through the miscellanea, searching for some clue as to Reed’s personality. Where had the man come from? The remains of a large piece of cheese and some stale bread were wrapped in oiled leather. Near that was a length of thin, coiled rawhide, perhaps surplus in case of broken straps and emergency repairs. A small flask of brandy was concealed by an ornate, oiled leather case. Inside the case were several small packets of what looked like herbs and powders. Medicines? The remaining items were odds and ends such as a metal cup and measuring spoon.

Sellaris knelt and went through the belongings of Flord and Snip. She set aside a few items and waited for him to finish.

"Do you need any of this?" he asked, gesturing to Reed’s belongings.

She shook her head. "If Reed wanted any of it, he should not have left it. I have no intention of returning it to him."

"Then you don’t mind if I take this?" He held up the dagger.

She looked at it with narrowed eyes. "I’ve never seen it before."

Brydon thought it made sense to conceal a jeweled dagger when you consorted with thieves, but he said nothing. About to attach the dagger to his belt, he reconsidered. It would make a fine gift for Toryn, who had been ogling Brydon’s matching sword and dagger during their journey. He glanced over at Toryn, who was immersed in an argument with Davin over the proper way to stow cooking items. Brydon stuffed the dagger deep into his pack so he could surprise Toryn with it later.

He picked up the flask and the case with the herb packets, assuming Verana or Toryn would likely be able to use them. The rest of the items he shoved back into the pack to give to Davin, who had nothing of his own. Davin had traded his filthy rags for some of the clothing that had belonged to the dead men, but it was scarcely an improvement. Reed’s leather pack, at least, was in good condition.
Sellaris stood and gave Brydon a secretive smile, making his eyes narrow suspiciously and wonder what she was up to. He would have to watch her—not that it was a difficult chore.

Alyn was semi-conscious, awake enough to stay mounted, although Brydon doubted anyone but a native Akarskan could manage such a feat. They loaded the gear onto the horses and moved out after tying Lavan’s and Garyn's wrists to the saddles of their horses. None of them trusted the two men enough to have them walking—or riding—free. Someone was always on watch to see that Sellaris made no attempt to liberate them, especially at night while the others slept. Brydon had managed to capture most of the bandit’s steeds and had allowed Sellaris and the others to pick the ones they claimed as their own. The rest he roped together in a string and divided surplus equipment atop their saddles. Alyn would be able to return all of the horses to Akarska once she recovered. Brydon patted Darkling’s neck, saddened to know that the stallion would be included. The black horse did not legally belong to him, after all. He hoped briefly that they did not meet any Akarskan hunters between here and Kaneelis. It would be difficult to explain the possession of so many horses and a single, injured Akarskan girl.

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Toryn was heartily glad to be traveling once more, even though they did not cover much ground on the first day. Between Alyn and Garyn’s injuries, Verana continually insisted they stop and rest, as well as maintain a sedate pace. During a midday break Toryn watched Redwing set the remains of his meal aside and kneel down to speak with Alyn. Toryn frowned. The Akarskan girl was awake and talking, but she did not seem to have a firm grip on reality. It was disconcerting. And irritating. Toryn made a show of cleaning a spot from his boot in order to make his eavesdropping less obvious.

"Hello, Alyn," Redwing said. She looked at him and Toryn knew her blue eyes were open, but not piercing as they normally were. Looking at Alyn was almost like looking into a child’s face.

"Hello, Brydon. Why are we traveling through a swamp? Are we in Terris? It’s much nicer in Akarska. Can’t we go back?"

Redwing shook his head. "We need to go to Kaneelis. Someone is there who wants to meet you."


"I’m sure you will. Verana will tell you. They want to examine your injuries and make sure you are healing properly."

She scowled. "Of course I’m healing properly. Verana keeps forcing me to drink horrible liquids and Toryn treats me as if I’m breakable. And where did all these other people come from?"
Redwing raised his gaze to Toryn suddenly with a pained expression. They had explained it to her a number of times already. Toryn shrugged and Redwing looked helplessly at Verana.

"Where is Davin?" Alyn asked suddenly and Toryn’s jaw tightened. He was baffled by Alyn’s strange attachment to Davin. She wanted the silver-haired man beside her at all times and seemed to trust him over everyone else. Davin seemed the most bewildered of all. He appeared nonplused and tongue-tied when she wanted him near, but his silence did not disturb her. She seemed content that he was nearby and she did not ask for conversation. Davin had made a habit of sitting near her so that she could look at him for reassurance now and again.

Davin’s behavior when he was not with Alyn was also a puzzle. He often disappeared into the forest—seeking solitude? He slept at the edge of camp, far from the beds of the others, as if fearing contamination from some disease.

"Why does she always call for him?" Toryn had demanded of Verana earlier in frustration.

"I’m not certain. He must have cared for her when she was a prisoner in the cave. She remembers it, somehow, and clings to him, possibly because he was the only one there when she needed help." Toryn had felt guilty enough without hearing those words.

"Davin will be back soon, Alyn," Verana said now in a soothing tone. "Why not help Toryn feed the horses? You know he never does it right."

Alyn stood up, almost her old self with her next words. "That’s right, he never does, does he? Sometimes I wonder what he carries around in that head of his, for it is nothing that is used for thinking."

She gave Toryn a glare and marched off toward the picket line holding the horses nearby.

"Will she ever be as she was?" Brydon asked.

Verana nodded. "She is getting more lucid every day. What she really needs is rest—a lot of it—and preferably indoors. Thankfully we should be in Kaneelis soon. It will be impossible to miss the city if we continue west. Even if we reach the coast, all we need to do is follow it south."

"Good. Lavan is getting tiresome."

Toryn nearly barked a laugh; that was an understatement. Sellaris’s brother had taken up the habit of singing rowdy and disgusting songs and only the threat of a clout on the head from Toryn was enough to silence him, even then only for a while. The balance of the time he spent calling curses down upon their heads. When he saw that Sellaris and Garyn were not joining him in his threats, he included them in the diatribe. Earlier that day the redheaded idiot had made a run for it, setting heels to his mount and galloping into the trees. Toryn had given immediate chase, filled with glee at the opportunity to do something other than ride at a snail’s pace.

He had returned a short time later leading Lavan’s mount with the unconscious man slumped over the saddle. Toryn had looked warningly at Garyn, who had only shrugged. Sellaris had sighed and dropped back to nurse her brother. She had made no attempt to
follow him in his escape and Toryn wondered what kind of brother would leave his sister to fend for herself.
He sighed and got up to help Alyn with the horses. Maybe if he tormented her enough her normal behavior would return.

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Brydon felt Sellaris watching him, as usual. There was a question in her eyes and an invitation that he could not accept. He almost wished she would try to free her brother instead of watching him. He could have dealt more easily with that.

He took out the flask and pouches he had been carrying around since they’d left the bandit camp and handed them to Verana.
"Here. I found these among Reed’s possessions. I forgot about them until now. What do you make of these packets?"

Verana took the items and examined them. Brydon already knew the brandy was fine stuff, as he had tasted it for the purpose of identification. She opened the first packet and shook out a bit of the leafy substance onto a flat stone. She added a sprinkle of the herbs to a cup of hot water she’d been preparing for tea, using the tip of her dagger to add the herbs.
"Why do you do that?" he asked, curious as to her elaborate actions.
"Some things are deadly poison, even to touch," she replied. When the herbs had steeped long enough, she picked up the cup and smelled it, paused for a moment, and then touched her tongue to it.

Instantly she spat, dumped the contents into the fire, and quickly dug into her pouches. She found a small red leaf and put it into her mouth before chewing and swallowing it with a grimace of distaste.
"What was it?" Brydon asked.
"Poison," she replied. "It has to be ingested to work, but I do not like to take chances. The leaf I ate will counter any ill effects."

Brydon protested, but she insisted on testing the other substances in the same way. What she found was disconcerting, but not unexpected. Four of the packets were poisonous substances in varying degrees of deadliness, and the remaining three were drugs whose main purpose was to knock the victim out. The only differences in the knockout drugs were apparently the nastiness of the side effects.
"A nice fellow, our Reed," Brydon stated when she had finished. She marked them all carefully and stashed them away with the rest of her medicines.
"Indeed. I begin to believe there is more to the mysterious Reed than our other ‘friends’ suspect," Verana replied.
Brydon looked at Sellaris, who had made up her bed for the night. She glanced at him curiously. She always seemed to know when his eyes were upon her. "If we encounter him again, we will know more of what to expect."

"Hopefully, we will not encounter him again," Verana answered and Brydon agreed wholeheartedly. He stood up and found Sellaris at his shoulder.

"May I speak with you, Brydon?" she asked. He felt a strange sense of danger when he looked into her mysterious eyes and his throat went dry. He dreaded a confrontation with her, even though he had sensed she was not finished with him.

"All right," he said and hoped it would be.

They walked into the jungle, skirting moss-covered logs and ducking the wet fronds of leafy bushes. He watched her hips sway as she walked in front of him and forced himself to look at something else. When they were far away from camp, she turned.

"You do not like me very much, do you?" she asked bluntly.

He floundered, caught off-guard by the question. "It is not a matter of like or dislike," he protested.

"Why have you been avoiding me?" she continued. "Do you find me unattractive? Tell me yes and I will stay away from you."

Panic thudded through Brydon's pulse and he fought to remain calm. "Of... of course I find you attractive. You are beautiful, which I am sure you well know. I just cannot... be with you."

"You want me, don't you?"

"Yes," he snapped. "But I have other obligations, other responsibilities."

Her grey eyes turned smoky and she actually laughed. "I am not asking for an obligation," she said flatly. "Do you think I want to spend the rest of my life tied down?"

Before he could protest, she went on, "I know how Falarans think. You like to keep your women trapped in your houses to bear your brats and cook your meals. That life is not for me. I am not asking for a commitment."

Brydon was astounded at her vehemence. "I did not—" he began.

She cut him off. "Or do you believe that you, a noble Falaran, are too good to waste your time on me?"

Brydon glared at that. "As wise as you seem to think you are, you obviously know very little about men and especially about me."

She leaned forward seductively and whispered, "Do you want me to show you what I know about men?"

Brydon nearly gnashed his teeth and then reached out to snatch her to him. He kissed her roughly and was not surprised when she responded. Her arms slid around him and she kissed him bruisingly, crushing her lips against his. Her fingernails cut into his back and he felt his own hands twist roughly into her hair. Their actions spoke more of war, not love, as if the desire they had tried to ignore had grown into rage.
He flung her away as suddenly as he had gripped her and stood watching her through half-lidded eyes, panting. She spun away, walked a couple of shaky steps, and then whirled around to glare at him. Her breath was uneven, as was his. She put a hand to her mouth and touched blood on her lip. They watched each other for a moment, not moving, and then Sellaris smiled. After a moment, it turned into a throaty laugh.

"You really do want me, eh, Falaran?"

Brydon closed his eyes; fists clenched, and threw his head back in frustration. "Yes," he ground out. "I'm sorry I hurt you, but I cannot have you."

She walked slowly over to stand in front of him again. The look in her eyes was surprisingly tender. She reached up to touch his cheek and he clenched his jaw tightly.

"I've hurt you worse," she said. "But I am the one to say if you can or cannot have me."

"You do not understand." He sighed and opened his eyes again to look upon her and fought the need to take her into his arms. He restrained himself from even touching an errant curl that had strayed down to lay near her half-open blouse. She had replaced some of the laces, but seemed to take delight in tormenting him by leaving it partially open at the top. "I am a Falaran, as you know. I am also a Falaran on a quest."

It took a moment for the clouds of incomprehension to clear from her eyes, but they did at last and she gasped, taking a shocked step backward.

"You? You will be the next Falaran king?"

He nodded. "If I succeed."

She was silent for a long time. Part of him died to see understanding dawn in her eyes and the shutters that dropped down over them to conceal her emotions. "And what is your precious quest?" she asked finally.

"I have told no one," he said, but she turned away, barely listening to him, seemingly lost in her thoughts. She turned back and gazed at him through narrowed eyes.

"So you are saving yourself for your princess?" she asked bitingly.

He flushed. Put that way, it sounded foolish. "I merely think it unwise to—" He stopped abruptly.

"To what?" she prodded, grey eyes dangerous.

He turned away and spat it out. "It would be unwise to fall in love with another when I must marry someone else." She was silent for a long time and he glanced at her again. Her eyes were wide.

"You think you would fall in love with me?" she asked quietly, with no trace of the amusement he had expected.

Brydon could not tell her he believed he already had. "I think it would be far too easy to fall in love with you," he replied. "And far too difficult for my future."

"What if it were meant to be?" she asked in a soft voice.

"How could it? You already stated that you could never live with me and ‘raise my brats.’ And I could not roam the countryside stealing horses."
She flushed. "I would not expect you to. Besides, it might be easier to live with a Falaran if he were king," she said pertly before she turned and disappeared into the undergrowth.

Brydon sat down on a mossy log and thought dismal thoughts for a long time.

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Toryn was tired. He was tired of traveling, he was tired of listening to the obnoxious ranting of Lavan, he was tired of Alyn being someone else, and he was tired of her clinging to Davin like he was her pet mongrel. She had only insulted Toryn four times since they had rescued her from the horse thieves and once she had even apologized. It was all because of that stupid Falaran. Redwing had been so busy acting like their leader that he had barely even spoken to Toryn, except to tell him to feed the horses, or gather the wood, or cook their meals. Toryn had a good mind to take his rotten mare and ride straight back to Redol. The mare, as if sensing his thoughts, looked up from where she ate dried grass and ambled over to the tree he lay against. She nuzzled his face for a moment and then sneezed wet grass bits all over him.

He flailed his hands at her and wiped his face with his arms while glaring at her. "Thank you so very much," he snapped. She swished her tail at him and went back to her grazing. He sighed. Stupid horse.

And then there was Sellaris. That wench had an acute lust for Redwing. Toryn wondered if Redwing would give up the quest after all, and for a mere wench! How could he? Toryn had to admit, if only to himself, that the very idea of the quest was enticing, especially if Redwing sought the Gauntlet of Ven-Kerrick.

He stood up, deciding it was high time to find Redwing. He needed to talk some sense into the man. Near the fire Lavan had finally shut up, probably because Verana had given him a strong cup of tea that had a sprinkle of one of Reed’s powders in it. For a healer, she could be extremely mercenary. Lavan was unconscious, which was the only state in which anyone could tolerate him. Garyn performed odd exercises with his bound arms.

"What are you doing?" Toryn asked when he did not spy Redwing. Toryn hoped he was not out doing something stupid with the redheaded wench. Garyn looked at him.

"If my arms are ever untied, I would like to have some use of them," Garyn explained. Toryn remembered when his arms had been tied back when Redwing had first captured him. It was not a pleasant memory.

"What would you do if I cut you loose?" Toryn asked, mirroring a question once asked of him.

"I doubt I could even pick up a sword, much less use it, so I do not think I would do much of anything."

"Would you try to escape?"
Garyn snorted. "Of course not. Sellaris was right. We are heading for Kaneelis and I, for one, feel safer traveling through this bloody swamp with a group this size. Even though," he added, "I would feel even safer with a sword in my hand."

"You don’t seem like a bad sort," Toryn said. "What are you doing with these others?"

Garyn turned slightly red and glanced quickly at Sellaris, who had returned to camp and tried to rouse Lavan for some reason that Toryn could not pretend to know. He looked from her to Garyn and comprehension dawned. Garyn was in love with her.

"I should warn you. She’s after Redwing," Toryn said somewhat maliciously in a low voice. Garyn glanced at him with a startled expression. "I caught them myself a few days ago. I don’t think their embrace was one of dislike."

Garyn switched his gaze back to Sellaris and a look of melancholy passed over his face. "She has never really seen me," he admitted, half to himself. "I have loved her since we were children, but she has not once looked at me as a potential lover." Toryn nodded in satisfaction. He reached down with his dagger and cut the bonds. If Garyn had made a declaration of anger or vengeance, Toryn would have had no qualms leaving him tied up. Garyn looked at him in surprise.

"Just don’t do anything stupid," Toryn warned. Garyn nodded and moved his arms apart, wincing at the action. Toryn knew he would be lucky to pick up a sword, even if the others were careless enough to leave one lying around. He moved off to find Redwing or Davin and then stopped, thinking it a bad idea to leave Verana and Alyn alone with both Sellaris and Garyn freed. Garyn he trusted marginally, Sellaris never.

He waited impatiently until Davin returned with two dead, ugly swamp rabbits. How he hunted with only a dagger was beyond Toryn’s ken, but it did not really matter as long as he was successful.

"Alyn wants you," Toryn said somewhat roughly as he neared the silver-haired man. Davin’s gaze flashed to Alyn and the look of puzzlement on his face was not feigned. It was plain he did not understand Alyn any better than the rest of them. "Have you seen Redwing?"

The silver-haired man shook his head. "Not since he went off with that woman," Davin replied.

"I’m going to look for him. Keep an eye on our little prisoners, especially that one." He gestured to "that woman", who threw him a look of pure dislike before she returned to the fruitless task of trying to wake her brother.

Davin nodded and Toryn went into the jungle to locate the Falaran.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

KANEELIS

Toryn’s search for Redwing led him in a large circle around the camp. If he had only waited with the horses a bit longer, he probably would have seen Redwing mount Darkling and ride off. He cursed and caught Fang, who was not at all happy at the idea of
being ridden. He allowed her a few cursory bucks and then followed Redwing’s faint trail. It led west and Toryn rode on, glad that it was not raining. He was sick of rain and tired of not being able to see where they were going because of the ever-present trees. It rained often in Redol, but usually in spectacular downpours that quickly spent themselves. Not like the ever-present misty dampness of Terris. Redol was mostly rolling hills and highlands and one could see for miles by climbing to the top of a hill. He was surprised at how strongly he missed his homeland.

It took him nearly twenty minutes to catch up to Redwing. His mare swung her ears forward and Toryn rested his hand on his sword, just in case an enemy approached instead of Redwing.

//Brydon?// he called with his mind. It had worked once before, when he had gotten an impression of direction. He was shocked this time when it worked even better.

//Toryn?// an odd voice in his head answered. It was definitely Redwing and Toryn shoved down a moment of panic when he realized that the voice was inside his head.

//How are you doing this?// Toryn asked. He wanted to find out about Redwing’s strange power once and for all. //Can you hear me?//

//Come ahead.// There came a sense of direction.

Toryn rode on and caught sight of Redwing. The Falaran knelt near the black stallion with his sword planted in the ground and both hands clasped about the hilt as if praying. Knowing Redwing, he probably was. Hopefully he prayed for the strength to resist the redhead temptress, Sellaris. Toryn reined in beside him and dismounted.

"What are you doing way out here?" Toryn asked aloud and hoped that Redwing was not still lurking in his head.

"I needed to get away and clear my mind. Besides, it was fruitful. Come and see." Redwing dropped Darkling’s reins and strode through the foliage. Toryn swore mildly as he tied Fang securely to a tree—she would not stay put unless she was tied.

He hurried after Redwing. After a few minutes the ground become firmer and the trees thinned. Toryn almost ran into the Falaran when he stopped.

"Look." Redwing gestured. Toryn passed him and walked ahead. The trees ended abruptly in sand, which stretched away for a goodly length and terminated at the water’s edge. The water extended forever, sparkling in the afternoon sun, and rushed at them in white-capped waves.

"The sea!" Toryn yelled excitedly. "We’ve reached the sea!" He exuberantly ran out and kicked up the sand, suddenly so happy to be free of the cloying trees that he could hardly contain himself. He breathed deeply of the salty air, amazed that he hadn’t noticed the scent before. He yelped and cavorted and ran all the way to the water’s edge while Redwing trailed him more slowly.

Toryn kicked off his boots in a childlike manner and let the surf splash over his bare feet. It was marvelously cold.
"The sea, Falaran! The wonderful sea!" He laughed when Redwing was near enough to hear him, but Redwing's gaze was focused far out on the water. Toryn followed his stare and saw, barely visible, a tiny sail on the horizon.

"A ship!" Toryn yelled. "Wahoo! A ship!"

"If we can see a ship from here," Redwing said, "Kaneelis cannot be far."

Toryn sobered, recalling his reason for seeking out Redwing. "What happens when we get there?" he asked.

Redwing looked at him and his eyes were colored like the sea. "We dump our unwanted passengers and continue on the quest, of course," Redwing replied. "Will you stay with Alyn or come with me?"

Toryn snorted to cover his relief. "Leave the chance at real adventure for a female? I think not."

Redwing laughed. "How could I even think such a thing?"

"I don’t know," Toryn said pointedly. "How could you?"

"It was a brief moment of weakness," Redwing replied. "I know what I have to do. You should know that for a Falaran duty always comes first." He sounded almost bitter. For a moment, Toryn could see the depth of his emotion where Sellaris was concerned. He was glad they would be leaving her far behind; she would have been nothing but trouble.

"Good." Toryn clapped Redwing on the shoulder and then grabbed him and dragged him into the surf. Redwing yelped and struggled, but he was off-balance and fell to his hands and knees just as the wave rolled in. He came up spluttering, completely drenched. Toryn laughed in delight until Redwing's hand caught him around the ankle and toppled him into the water. He gulped water, unable to keep from laughing. They both crawled out of the sea and sat on the wet sand looking at the sky. They stared up at the clouds moving high overhead, floating slowly inland where they would dump more rain on the waterlogged swamps of Terris.

"Where do we go after Kaneelis?" Toryn asked.


"And from there to Ven-Kerrick?" Toryn ventured slyly.

Redwing sat up. "How did you know that?"


Redwing looked thoughtful. "Yet, you still intend to accompany me?"

Toryn laughed. "Of course. I can’t wait to see how you plan to get the most prized possession in the entire South away from Ven-Kerrick."

"Well, I thought of—"

"No! Don’t tell me!" Toryn yelled. "I want to find out when it happens. I want to be there for every minute of swordplay and torture."

"I was not counting on either swordplay or torture," Redwing said dryly.
"I didn’t think so. But I can always hope, right?"

Redwing punched him on the shoulder and Toryn laughed. He sobered after a moment.

"You are getting better at your..." Toryn said and tapped a forefinger against his own forehead.

Redwing nodded. "You could hear words when I called you this time, right?"

"Clearly," Toryn admitted. "I knew where you were, too, suddenly. I just... knew."

"This ability could come in handy. If I fell down a hole, you would be able to find me."

"Unless I was the one that pushed you in there." Toryn laughed.

"I wonder if I can mindspeak to anyone else?" Redwing mused. "I have never tried it with anyone but you. My attempt to read Lavan’s mind did not go very well. It was like tapping into his memories—everything that had ever happened to him in one barrage. I could make little sense of it. There must be some way I can learn to use this ability—other than just blundering around in peoples' minds. Reed must have learned from someone."

"When your quest is over, maybe we can track down Reed and get some answers," Toryn suggested, refusing to accept the possibility that Redwing would become the next Falaran king.

"I think I would prefer to have the answers before I encounter Reed again."

Toryn nodded. "He would probably be no help, anyway. And we’ll most likely have to kill him."

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Brydon tried to quell his excitement as they followed the coastline into Kaneelis the next day. The sound of the surf accompanied them as they skirted the beach, riding in the scrubby grass to save the horses the effort of walking through sand. The weather was surprisingly pleasant with no rain drenching them, for once. They reached a small rise that overlooked Kaneelis near midday. The city was the center of trade for most of the known world. The Terrin king resided there, along with most everyone else in Terris, since not many residents chose to live in the swamps. According to Verana, the only Terrins that dwelled outside the city were herb and moss gatherers, alligator hunters, and those that lived in scatterings of coastal fishing villages. It was generally accepted that the Church had begun in Silver, but the center of control had moved very early to the already-bustling city of Kaneelis. Since Kaneelis was the center of religion for the civilized world, the ruling faction in Terris was the church. The king was more of a figurehead than a leader, a concept that Brydon could not quite accept. In his opinion, the king should hold a strong leadership position and control secular affairs, as they did in Falara. Even so, he looked upon the city with anticipation.

"It is so much bigger than Eaglercrost," he said to Toryn. "And much livelier!" Toryn nodded, though his expression bordered on apprehension. Redol had no cities, or even
large villages, and Toryn probably had never seen such a gathering of humanity before. People swarmed everywhere. Before they even reached the gates of the city, they met Terrin fur-traders, Corolian leather workers, Falaran merchants, Akarskan messengers and even a few Redolians bearing salted fish or driving herds of cattle. They saw peddlers of cloth, weapons, leather, jewels, grains, fruit, and rare items heading out of Kaneelis toward the other countries, traveling alone or in short caravans. Brydon had met traveling merchants in the past and listened to their tales of the great cities, but he had not been able to properly envision what now greeted his eyes. The buildings themselves were dizzyingly tall. The marble spires of at least four temples jutted from the center of the city. Even the lowly wooden structures seemed to rise three to four stories.

Their group joined the mass of people entering the gates. Still-bound Lavan earned only cursory glances, though his furious expression invited more than one look. The company itself, however, did draw some attention. It was rare enough to see mounted travelers, but rarer still to see such an odd collection as they made. Redolian, Falaran, Akarskan, Penk. Brydon thought the girls alone would have drawn attention. Davin had drawn on a hooded cloak but Sellaris seemed to enjoy the glances and whispers. Verana ignored it all in her calm way.

They were stopped briefly at the gates by a burly guard dressed in bronze and green armor. An elaborate shield symbol on his uniform declared his membership in the Order of Might. He wore a serviceable sword and held an elaborate bronze-tipped spear that looked more decorative than useful. Brydon wondered who he guarded the city from and thought the position might be less one of necessity and more of tradition.

"State your business in Kaneelis," the man said in a practiced tone, but he watched them all curiously.

"I am a disciple of the Temple of Healing," Verana said. "I am returning there with my guests." She handed him a small scroll that he unfurled and glanced over.

"This lot?" the guard asked dubiously. Brydon had tossed his vest over Lavan’s bound hands and the red-haired man was silent, for once, evidently not wishing to be taken to the guard post for questioning.

"Adona sees all men alike, my lord," Verana said primly.

The guard cleared his throat and nodded. "Proceed," he said gruffly after returning her papers.

They wound through the busy streets and threaded through milling persons hawking goods of all kinds. Dull oxen pulled carts laden with produce; children shrieked as they played tag underfoot; peddlers carried huge crates full of squawking chickens; and travelers of every shape and size clogged the roadways. At long last, Verana led them to an inn and they gratefully dismounted and left their horses with a street urchin for safekeeping. Inside, they sat at a long table and ordered a hot meal and spiced warm wine, eager for food not prepared by trailside. Lavan was untied and he immediately stalked upstairs to escape their group. Garyn sat down next to Toryn. Sellaris had parked herself next to Brydon and her thigh rested, not uncomfortably, against his while they ate. Brydon felt his face warm with a heat exacerbated by the heavily spiced stew. He knew it was time to put his shameful longings to rest.
"This is where we must part company," he said and scraped the last of the meat from his dish with the wooden spoon. He did not meet her gaze. "We are keeping your horses and they will be given to Alyn to be returned to Akarska. The three of you are free to go, as I promised."

Sellaris was silent until Brydon looked at her. Her eyes were fathomless pools of misty grey.

"You have nothing more to say to me?" she asked softly enough that the others would not overhear. She looked as beautiful as ever with her red hair braided into a long strand that fell over one shoulder. She wore a white blouse half-hidden under a dark green vest. Her green stone was lost beneath it, but Brydon knew she wore it. He wondered how deeply it linked her to Reed.

"What would you have me say?" he asked quietly. Toryn looked at him curiously, as did Garyn, but they returned to their meals without comment. Brydon’s hand clenched convulsively around the stem of his goblet.

She shrugged and looked at him intently. "You may try to forget me, Brydon Redwing," she murmured. "But you will not. A day shall not go by that you do not think of me and wonder what might have been."

Brydon strove to look away, but could not.

"Are you a prophetess, to make such a claim?" he asked, trying to make light of the situation without success. She shook her head and he was shocked to see unshed tears sparkling in her eyes.

"I only know it will be that way for me," she replied and got to her feet. She mounted the stairs to join Lavan and Brydon thought bitterly that she was probably right. Toryn’s gaze followed Sellaris and his quick glance at Brydon revealed immense satisfaction at finally being rid of the girl and her disagreeable brother. Brydon suddenly wanted nothing more than to find himself a bottle of something deadly strong and lose himself in it. He rose.

"Let’s get out of here," he said to the others.

They left Sellaris, Garyn, and Lavan at the inn and Verana led Brydon and the others to the Temple of Healing. It was a magnificent building of white marble and polished brass. Its beauty startled Brydon, to whom buildings were no rarity. Before the building sat a massive circular fountain. Water spilled from a huge bronze goblet into the pool with a continuous soft splash. Twined around the goblet were vines that sprouted huge roses and leaves that had been beautifully enameled to look real. The marble surrounding the fountain and the dozen steps leading to the temple doors were palest pink with veins of grey and white. Four huge columns of white marble flanked the open double-doors, twined with green vines. Some of the plants were in bloom and clusters of yellow and white flowers trailed down from the beams overhead as they passed beneath the lintel.

Verana said, "This temple is not nearly as large or elaborate as the Temple of Might in the center of town."

Brydon nodded. He would be going there later. The sanctuary of the Temple of Healing was unusual. Instead of the expected marble or polished wood, the floor was covered in a multitude of rugs stitched together to form one massive carpet that covered nearly the
entire floor. Atop the carpet were dozens of assorted couches and piles of pillows. Patrons lay about the room, perched upon couches, pillows, or the floor. A number of men and women dressed in the bright yellow robes of healers attended them, guiding them in prayer or meditation. The yellow robes differed only by the colors of the sashes around their waists: red, white, or green, depending on their Order.

"What color do you normally wear?" Toryn asked Verana, who was still dressed in her light blue traveling clothes.

"Yellow robe, red sash," Verana replied. "The Order of the Rose is the only one that allows women."

She led them around the central sanctuary to a door at the rear, where they entered a large foyer lined alternately with red marble pillars and white benches. Tapestries hung from the walls and both healers and patients walked about or sat on benches, talking quietly or reading. Light streamed in through huge windows that stretched from floor to ceiling at various places throughout the room.

Several corridors branched off from the foyer and Verana led them down one of them.

"These are the guest quarters," she said when they reached a long hallway of doors. She assigned each of them a tiny room and then took Alyn off to the healing sector. Brydon’s room was clean and brightly colored. Two candles in wall sconces had been lit for him. The room was furnished with a bed and washtub. He set his pack down and looked into the mirror before wrinkling his nose in distaste. His face was stubbly and scratched from shaving with a dagger and no mirror. His hair was a wild mess. He suddenly wondered at Sellaris’ sanity, if she was attracted to him. He grabbed up his pack again and opened the door next to his without knocking.

"Toryn, we are going to market. Bring your things."

Toryn grumbled, but got up off his bed and followed. "Wouldn’t you rather stay here than go back into that milling herd?"

"The city? Don’t you like it?"

"I don’t see how anyone can live here. The noise alone is unbearable."

"You get used to it," Brydon said even though he wasn’t sure. Eaglecrest barely qualified as a city next to Kaneelis. It seemed like a sleepy village in comparison. Davin declined to go with them. The silver-haired man seemed restless, almost—trapped was the word that came to mind.

"Davin? If the healers make you uncomfortable, you need not stay here. I am sure there are many inns nearby."

"No," Davin snapped, turning away from them. His fists were clenched. "I will stay," he said in a calmer voice. Brydon, not knowing what else he could say, nodded and left him alone.

He and Toryn joined the milling crowd. They left the polished, manicured area of the Temple of Healing and entered the boisterous, loud area of the merchant sector. Open stalls, small shops, lone vendors and wandering peddlers all yelled and waved merchandise, vying for attention. The odors were overwhelming: freshly baked bread,
fruit over-ripening in the sun, broiled lamb and beef on wooden skewers, sugared fruits, pastries, ale and wine, exotic perfumes, oils and powders, spices, and unwashed animals. Overlying them all was the clean, salty scent of the sea.

Toryn had little in the way of money—one gold coin, three silver, and some scattered coppers, but Brydon produced a sizable purse filled with gold. It had been a parting gift from his princess and other well-wishers. Brydon purchased new clothing for them both—ignoring Toryn’s protests—and then hurried to the public baths. Inside they soaked in the steaming water, sighing in contentment. Toryn even refrained from making derogatory comments about bathing. Their hair was trimmed and their beards shaved off by young boys dressed in blue uniforms who worked with silent competence. They walked out feeling like new men—and looking it.

Back in the streets, they succumbed to a few of the merchants, buying necessary items. Brydon acquired a new pair of boots, some nicely crafted arrows, and more clothes to make up for the ones that had been destroyed in their adventures. He also purchased a bottle of potent liquor that promised hours of forgetfulness.

Toryn haggled for nearly an hour to buy a gorgeous silver-hilted sword with a grip of deep green jade carved into the shape of intertwined dragons. After watching the display, Brydon remarked, "A Redolian can use just any old sword, eh, Toryn?"

Toryn threw him a disdainful look. "This is more than a sword." He sniffed as he waved it around and narrowly missed a passerby. "This is an investment. I can sell it in Redol for twice this price. Besides, you’re buying it, since you are responsible for the loss of mine."

Brydon smiled and dutifully handed over the coins. He would pay triple the price to keep Toryn from mentioning his old sword ever again, lost in the snow-covered wilderness of northern Akarska.

The purchase of a soft leather cloak and a new scabbard for the sword did away with Toryn’s finances. He did not seem concerned. They walked around like tourists for a time, gazing at the King’s Palace and the Royal Gardens. They rapidly became lost in a hedge maze and spent an eternity hunting for an exit.

"Some hunter you make," Brydon said and snorted, "You can’t even find your way out of a garden."

Toryn turned another random corner. "You’re no better," he growled. "Besides, you brought us in here." They reached another dead end and Brydon shoved Toryn into the hedge. Toryn came out with a branch and went after him with it, but stopped short as his gaze went beyond Brydon’s shoulder. Wary of a trap, Brydon cautiously turned his head and saw three unsavory-looking men blocking the path. He was as surprised as Toryn to see ominous strangers—he had not expected danger in a civilized park, so he had not used his mental abilities at all.

"Well," one sneered, "if we don’t have a fancy Falaran here."

"And a Redolian," said another. He sported a gold earring. "How sweet. You two meet here often?" Without waiting for a reply, they lunged. Brydon sidestepped the first one and ducked a dagger swipe as he tugged out his sword. Toryn flung his branch into the
face of another and then kicked the first attacker into one of his companions. The greasy-haired man turned quickly, but Brydon parried the dagger blow with his sword. The second man recovered from the branch to the face and charged at Toryn, only to be spitted on the blade Toryn had drawn like lightning. The third man hung back and then threw his dagger at Toryn’s head, but the sword flashed up and sent the dagger spinning away with a metallic chime.

Brydon found his sword to be a bit too bulky in close quarters as the earringed man ducked under his thrust and stabbed viciously at his ribs. Brydon twisted away and brought the hilt of his sword down hard, but the man was quick and spun away; the hilt barely missed his head.

Toryn leaped over the body of his fallen opponent and met the third man just as the brigand tugged out his sword. Their blades met with a clash and Brydon knew just from the sound that the man against Toryn did not have a chance. He almost felt sorry for the fellow as Toryn’s gleeful howling confirmed his suspicion. The man fighting Brydon feinted to the right and then rushed by him. Brydon turned quickly, fearing a stab in the back, but the man raced past Toryn just as his last companion fell to Toryn’s sword.

The Redolian jerked his blade free with a yell and ran after the fleeing man. Brydon, not really surprised, took off after them. He caught up with a disgusted Toryn a few minutes later.

"Fast little scum." Toryn swore.

"He’s not worth your vengeance," Brydon said calmly as he tried to catch his breath. Toryn looked at him through amused green eyes.

"Vengeance, nothing. I was trying to follow him out of here."

They escaped the maze sometime before dusk by asking a small boy for help. Toryn swore the urchin to silence with one of Brydon’s copper coins and they made their way back to the Temple.

"What do you suppose they wanted?" Brydon asked.

Toryn shrugged. "Probably just thieves. We look like fair marks; everyone in this city assumes people from the north are bumpkins."

Brydon nodded and fondled the gold hilt of his blade. "Where did you learn to use your sword? I’ve never seen anyone so skilled. I meant to mention it before, when you fought Reed. He nearly had me before you came along."

Toryn looked at him, surprised. "A compliment? From a Falaran? Amazing!" He grinned. "I learned from my older brother. He’s far better than I am. I guess he learned from Father."

"You don’t know?"

Toryn shook his head. "No. My father died when I was young."

"My father was a blacksmith. An armorer. He made this sword." Brydon unsheathed the blade.

"It has perfect balance," Toryn admitted with admiration. "Why do you prefer the bow?"
"My best friend’s father was a bowyer. I spent most of my time at their cottage. My father wanted me to follow in his footsteps, not only in metalworking, but also in the priesthood. He was a Knight of the Lance. I did join the Brotherhood, but the talent for metal is simply not in me. My true ability lies with the bow."

"Your best friend?" Toryn asked. "Why did he not accompany you on this quest?"

"He would have," Brydon smiled sadly. "But he died in a hunting accident two years ago."

"I’m sorry." Toryn grimaced. "Hunting?"

"He hunted a boar even though a spear was not his chosen weapon. He should not have tried it, but he always thought he could do anything."

Brydon was silent for a time after that, reflecting, and Toryn was quiet. Their footsteps echoed off the stone walls.

"Are you really going after the Gauntlet of Ven-Kerrick?" Toryn asked as they made their way through a quiet residential area.

Brydon sighed. "Yes. Do you think it’s an impossible quest?"

"That depends on how much the Kerricks want to keep it."

"I won’t need it forever. I only need to take it back to Falara to show to the Princess. From there, it can go straight back to Ven-Kerrick."

"What happens if you don’t finish the quest?"

"If I’m not back in two years, the princess chooses another man. If I return with the gauntlet too late, I’ll be considered unworthy for the kingship and resume my previous life in no disgrace. I’ll even be given a noble title for succeeding."

"And if you return without the gauntlet?" Toryn asked.

"I resume my old life as before. But I would be privately considered a failure."

"What does your princess want with it?"

Brydon grinned and then laughed. "My place is not to ask why, Tory, my friend. Mine is to quest and bring back."

"Sort of like a hound?" Toryn asked.

"I suppose," Brydon replied with a growl and shoved him at a nearby fountain. Toryn narrowly missed tumbling in and splashed water at Brydon, who took off running. They raced all the way back to the Temple of Healing. Inside, they were treated to a fine meal and the healers provided entertainment by singing and playing instruments long into the night. When the diversions were done, they retired to their rooms and slept like fallen logs.

True to her word, Sellaris haunted Brydon’s dreams.

Brydon woke early the next morning, feeling restless and slightly hung over. He had consumed half his bottle of fermented something with dinner—from the taste in his mouth he suspected it was rat dung—in an effort to drown Sellaris from his mind. He had
not succeeded. He sorted through his belongings in hopes of finding something to remove the foul taste on his tongue. A dagger tumbled out of his pack onto the floor and he stared at it in surprise, only then remembering he had taken it from Reed’s abandoned belongings with the intention of giving it to Toryn.

He picked up the dagger with a smile. Toryn had a fine sword and now he would have the ruby-encrusted dagger, as well. Brydon dressed and shaved, glad to have clean clothing and a mirror to shave by. He strapped the decorative dagger to his belt, but left his own hanging from the bedpost with his sword. It would look rather odd to be armed while he walked around in the Temple of Healing. Truth to tell, he felt better without his weapons—he seldom wore them at home and they were cumbersome.

He belted his surcoat over the dagger to conceal it completely—the better to surprise Toryn. He checked the Redolian’s room and found it empty. After questioning an underling, he exited the main doors at the back and found himself in a courtyard that was also a well-cultivated flower garden. Flowers bloomed in every imaginable color. Brydon walked among them, admiring the blooms and smelling their heady fragrances. The path leading through the garden was made of crushed shells. He sat on a bench near the fountain and Verana found him there. Her dark skin looked even more so against the bright yellow robes she wore. She looked very official with her red sash of office and her hair bound back in a bright yellow swatch of cloth.

"Good morning. How is Alyn?" he asked.

"Much improved," she answered. "The rest did her good and they have many medicines here. It will be some time before she fully recovers, but it looks as though she will be well."

"Excellent." Brydon smiled. "I can move on knowing she is in good hands."

"You are leaving already?"

"The quest will not wait for me and time is passing quickly," he replied.

She nodded. "Promise you will keep me informed of your progress. I feel I have lent a hand to your destiny and would like to know how it turns out."

He grinned. "I promise to send you a note from every messenger-post I happen upon."

Her features became serious. "Do not hesitate to send for me if trouble should befall you. I have many friends in the Church—in all parts of the world." She smiled again as her good humor returned. "Although Toryn is a stout guardian."

Brydon returned her smile. "He is becoming a good friend."

She patted his hand. "Do not leave without saying goodbye."

"I would not think of it. I must go to the Temple of Might this morning. I have news from Falara to deliver."

"I will see you when you return, then." She rose and strolled away, her robes a golden contrast to the garden greenery.
Brydon sat for a moment before leaving to find Toryn. He assumed the Redolian was with Alyn, so he walked around hoping to find someone who knew where to find her, since he had forgotten to ask Verana.

He passed a room with an open door and a frantic healer called to him. She was holding down a thrashing man whose leg was twisted at an unnatural angle. Brydon hurried inside.

"What do you need?" he asked, at a loss.

"I need you to cut his leggings off so I can see the extent of the damage. Argis was assisting me, but he has gone for potions." Brydon quickly fished the jeweled dagger from beneath his surcoat and cut the man’s pant leg from ankle to hip. At first touch of the dagger, the man fainted. The healer straightened and pushed her hair from her brow with a sigh.

"His leg is broken. I cannot imagine how he got here by himself. He is strong-willed. Thank you for your help." She turned to him, smiling, and her eyes fell on the dagger he still held. Her mouth rounded in an O and she screamed loudly, startling Brydon. Before he could move, she pushed by him and fled the room.

He looked at the dagger, expecting to see a large hairy spider on it, but it looked the same as before. The gold nugget-style hilt was crusted with crimson gems. A slightly curved blade, single edged. He shrugged and turned, just in time to see Verana and the babbling healer enter the room with a hoard of others. The girl pointed at him and uttered something he could not quite make out.

Verana looked at the dagger and then up at Brydon. "Where did you get that?" she asked in a strange voice.

"Get what?" he asked, puzzled.

"The knife."

"I picked it up out of Reed’s belongings and forgot about it. I planned to give it to Toryn. Why?"

Verana breathed a sigh of relief and turned to the others. "It is all right," she said. "Tend to this man and I will have a talk with my friend. Come out to the courtyard with me, Brydon. This bears discussing."

She went out and Brydon followed. The healers parted before him as though he had suddenly sprouted fangs and claws. "Is there a problem?"

She looked at him and then down at the dagger still in his hand. When they reached the bench, she sat down and motioned for him to sit. "That is a Parmittan sacrificial dagger. It is used in blood sacrifice to slice open a victim and offer their still-beating heart to Shaitan. I think Sellaris’ friend Reed is a bit more dangerous than we gave him credit for."

The dagger suddenly felt heavier in Brydon’s hand. The gems seemed to wink at him with an evil light and he placed it quickly on the bench beside him.

"You think Reed was a priest of Shaitan?" he asked, disgusted.
"I don’t know of anyone else who carries such a thing," she said. "Perhaps he stole the dagger or came across it by trade. But from the manner of his disappearance, I do not think so."

Brydon stood up, agitated. "Which brings up the question of why he is gathering horses in Bodor." Neither of them had to mention that Bodor was separated from Parmitta only by a range of mountains.

"If a Bodorii noble is collaborating with the Parmittans..." Verana began.

Brydon snorted. "What could they do?" he asked. "Kerrick’s line and the Gauntlet are still in Ven-Kerrick." Unless, Brydon realized, his quest succeeded, in which case the Gauntlet would be on its way to Falara. That could be disastrous if Parmitta plotted a war.

"Still," Brydon continued, "If they plan anything on a major scale, they will need more than the mere two dozen horses that Sellaris and her band acquired."

"Unless she lied," Verana replied. "But I do not see what Shaitan’s minions would want with horses. The last time they attacked, they had more than enough power with foot soldiers alone. If not for Kerrick and the Gauntlet, they likely would have defeated the southern kingdoms."

Brydon shook his head. "It is too confusing to worry about. We will have to wait and see what happens, I suppose. Perhaps someone from the Order of Might can track down Reed. I will mention it when I go to the Temple."

Verana nodded. "It would not be remiss to bring this to the attention of the bishops. May I keep the dagger?"

Brydon handed it to her gladly. She looked at it with distaste for a moment and then tucked it away and departed. Brydon thought about the Great War in which the countless hordes had come from Parmitta and devastated the southern kingdoms. Things had been going very badly for them until Kerrick had turned up with the Gauntlet of Power. Singlehandedly, he had turned the tide of the war and driven the minions of Shaitan back into the southern climes of Parmitta, beyond the Ven-Horn Mountains.

In gratitude, the four kingdoms—Silver, Bodor, Tar-Tan, and Penkangum—had given up a portion of their lands and built a magnificent castle, calling it Ven-Kerrick. They had lauded Kerrick as the protector of the kingdoms and largely forgotten him over the ensuing years of peace. Now Brydon intended to ride into Ven-Kerrick and see if he could borrow that gauntlet for a short time. Thinking about it now, it seemed like a fool’s mission. Not for the first time he wondered what Princess Eryka was about. He had argued heartily with her when he’d first learned of the quest, but she had been adamant.

Brydon sighed and went to search for Toryn again, after a quick stop in his room to change his clothes. He wondered if he would find Toryn before the day ended. He had better results after making inquiries and finally located his friend five streets down, in a tavern, clutching two wenches and telling them tall tales. Brydon pried Toryn’s grip away from the girls and made him take a walk.

"About time you got up. I thought you would sleep the day away."
Brydon ignored that. "Did you see Alyn this morning?" he asked as they departed the tavern.

Toryn glared. "Yes. She threw a glass at me. I think she is feeling better."

Brydon laughed.

Toryn asked, "What are you wearing? You look like a snowman."

Brydon was bedecked in a pure white surcoat, white under-tunic, white breeches, and a short white cloak. He wore black boots and a black belt. A black design was embroidered diagonally upon his left breast and Toryn stared at it for a moment, furrowing his brow.

"Where have I seen that before?" Toryn asked. "Don’t you usually wear your falcon insignia? What happened? Did you change family lines?"

"I decided to dress appropriately for our trip to the temple," Brydon replied.

"Are you planning to be sacrificed as a virgin?"

Brydon threw him a quelling look, but by then they had reached the Temple of Might. The building was spectacular. Grey-veined marble steps led up to the entrance where four huge pillars lined the front, carved into the likenesses of women with swords. The statues gazed out over the city as if protecting it from the power of Shaitan. Brydon found the image incongruous for a moment, considering that women were not allowed into the Order of Might. Toryn whistled softly.

They joined many other townspeople walking up the steps and into the coolness of the building. The main sanctuary was huge, able to hold thousands of people easily, and was lined with dark green marble pillars. The ceiling had several open slats filled with glass, displaying the clear blue sky in all its glory. Walls of windows looked out on magnificent gardens filled with all the flowers they had seen at the Temple of Healing and many more besides. Exotic birds flew in and about the trees in the gardens, showing off their stunning colors.

The temple was full of light and color. The pulpit sat in front of a massive fountain that shot water twenty feet into the air and caught the light from the ceiling, sending rainbows around the room. Behind the fountain were marble steps where a choir would stand. Sunken areas at both sides allowed musicians to play. Many sat there already, strumming on their instruments.

High upon the wall, a balcony was bolstered by the pillars and encircled the room. The ceiling soared another twenty feet beyond that.

There was no service at the moment and people meandered about, talking quietly, or seated themselves at the fountain’s edge. Many prayed while others sat quietly and listened to the musicians.

Brydon’s eyes skimmed the assortment of people until he caught sight of a particular uniform. He strode purposefully forward with Toryn at his heels. Brydon halted before the man, whose dress was similar to his own, except the man’s clothing was forest green and the design on his chest was that of a bronze shield. The man supervised a small boy who carefully scraped wax from a golden candlestick that rose easily to a man’s height. From the boy’s downcast expression, it was clear that the boy was being disciplined.
"Father Deacon?" Brydon asked the man respectfully. Cold blue eyes turned to view them. He took note of Brydon’s attire and then swung his gaze to Toryn. His eyes widened for a moment at the sight of Toryn’s braids, but his features betrayed no other hint of his thoughts.

"Yes?" he asked without inflection.

"I am Brydon Redwing, of Falara. I have missives from Bishop Paryn for Bishop Nilyn. Could you direct me to his assistant or secretary?"

The man’s long nose twitched for a moment, almost like a rabbit’s. He said nothing for such a long time that Brydon began to think he hadn't heard Brydon speak.

"I can take them, Father," the young boy piped up in a hopeful voice.

"You can remain where you are until your task is completed," the deacon snapped without looking at the lad, who sighed and resumed his scraping. "Come with me," the man continued, speaking to Brydon, and marched promptly off the dais and into a wide, arched corridor. Brydon looked at Toryn, who made a blatant gesture that alluded to idiocy and Brydon barely suppressed a smile. The boy giggled.

They walked through the long corridor, which was lined on either side by small rooms with curtained doorways. Each room was carpeted and contained a kneeling bench and a small wood-topped dais that held an offering plate and a number of candles. The outer rooms had large high windows to let in sunlight. Several of the curtains were drawn, giving privacy to those praying within. The corridor they walked was laid with a wide strip of patterned Bodorii carpet to muffle the footsteps of passersby.

The deacon led them to an iron-barred gate and took a heavy chain from beneath his robes. A key was attached to the chain and he used it to unlock the gate.

"Walk this way," he said. The corridor was rather plain, showing only a blank wall on the right and several numbered doorways on the left. Their footsteps rang on the polished oak floor. Before the corridor ended, they halted at an ironbound wooden door, this one guarded by another green-clad man who stood at rigid attention.

"These men are here for Secretary Ulwyn," their escort stated in a brusque manner. The guard rapped on the door and a panel instantly slid open to reveal two eyes behind a wire grill.

"Messengers for Secretary Ulwyn," the guard said and the panel snapped shut. After an interminable moment, the door swung open and they beheld a nearly identical guardsman within the doorway. Brydon looked from one to the other and deduced they were twins.

"The Secretary will see you. Please follow me," the second guard said. Brydon gladly entered the doorway, relieved to be free of their unfriendly escort, who sniffed and marched off. The first twin shut the door behind them, presumably to resume his post in the corridor.

A short walk down another hallway—this carpeted in rich burgundy—brought them to another wooden door; this one open. Their attendant rapped on the doorframe before he entered the room. Brydon paused with Toryn on his heels. The room was small and seemed in some disarray. A large desk dominated the room, accompanied by a number of
comfortable-looking chairs. Shelves covered the entire wall space, stuffed with every manner of books, scrolls, and loose parchment. Books were stacked haphazardly on the desk as well as the floor, and upon one of the chairs.

A bespectacled face peered at them from behind one of the book towers on the desk and a smile greeted them.

"Come in! Come in!" the old man cried. He waved to them as he got to his feet. The top of his head reached only as high as Brydon’s chin. His hair was nearly gone and what slight wisps remained clung to his round head above his ears, white as goose down. His face was pleasant, but Brydon refused to be swayed by appearances—a sword lay sheathed upon the desk and a large dagger was visible at the man’s side. The little man could not be an incompetent fighter to have risen in the ranks to become the Bishop’s secretary. As if affirming Brydon’s assessment, the guard who had let them in smiled and went out, leaving the old fellow alone with two young, armed men.

"Greetings, Knight Commander," Brydon said warmly, noting the man’s rank insignia upon the bronze shield that his green robes. "I am Brydon Redwing and this is my companion, Toryn of Redol. I bring news from Bishop Paryn of Eaglecrest to Bishop Nilyn."

Secretary Ulwyn waved them each to a seat. "No bad tidings, I dare say?" he asked and seated himself behind the desk once more.

"No, sir," Brydon assured him. He rummaged in his pouch for the oilskin bag he had carried all the way from Falara. Toryn carefully removed a stack of books from the nearest chair and set them on the floor before he sat down.

Brydon handed Secretary Ulwyn the packet and sat in another chair—this one surprisingly free of books and scrolls. The secretary shook out the missives and broke the seal on the first one. He read it quickly and his bushy eyebrows rose now and again.

"Quarterly report," Ulwyn muttered. "Late, as usual." He set it aside and winked at Brydon. "I suppose the Brotherhood of the Lance has a good excuse, being so far from us, eh?" Brydon nodded agreeably and the old man opened the second missive. Ulwyn muttered as he read it.

"... a handful of knightings... request more supplies, yes, yes, as always... Sir Dorwyn taken ill... hmmmm... trouble with Redol..." The secretary paused at that and looked owlishly at Toryn for a moment. The Redolian smiled broadly, looking like a black-haired angel. Ulwyn turned his gaze to Brydon, but forbore asking questions. He returned his attention to the document. "... hmmmm... Princess Eryka... chosen a suitor—" Ulwyn’s eyes widened. He stared at Brydon and then grinned hugely. "Why, congratulations, my boy!" he cried. "On a quest! Nice to see the little minx has a head on her shoulders, to choose one of the Brotherhood."

"Thank you, sir," Brydon replied and flushed slightly.

The old man chuckled and returned to the document. "... hmm, and what has she sent you after, eh? Some girlish bauble...?" Ulwyn’s face drained of all color and he shot to his feet. "The Gauntlet of Ven-Kerrick?" Ulwyn bellowed. "Is the girl mad?" He stared at Brydon, whose jaw worked a couple of times, but no sound emerged. Running footsteps
approached and the guardsman burst into the room, sword drawn. Secretary Ulwyn looked at him for a moment and then waved him away apologetically.

"Sorry, my boy. Shocking news, is all. Didn’t mean to cause a ruckus."

The guard sheathed his sword, nodded, and headed back to his post. Toryn sank back into the chair and let go of his own sword hilt. Ulwyn sat down and picked up the parchment once more.


Toryn turned curious green eyes to Brydon, who shrugged.

"She is young, my lord," he tried to explain. "And unlikely to travel outside of Falara in her lifetime. I think she just wants to see something magical."

Ulwyn snorted. "Magical, indeed. Damned thing kills anyone that touches it." The secretary clamped his mouth shut, as if he had spoken too much. He read the rest of the letter and rolled it up carefully. He tapped it thoughtfully against his chin as he contemplated Brydon.

"How do you plan to get it away from the Kerricks, my boy?"

"Ask them, of course," Brydon admitted. He forestalled Ulwyn’s bark of laughter and continued, "They can send a royal escort to keep it safe. Surely the Kerricks would be willing to give Falara a brief glimpse of the holy object in the name of international goodwill?"

Secretary Ulwyn’s amused expression turned thoughtful. "Very diplomatic of you. You might succeed, after all. Do you want an escort to guide you to Ven-Kerrick?"

"No, sir." Brydon shook his head. "I do not wish to take anyone from more important duties, especially when my quest is of a secular nature."

The secretary chortled in delight. "A fine tongue you have, young one. I shall wish Adona’s blessing on your endeavor. Will you celebrate evening services with us?"

"Of course." Brydon nodded. Ulwyn smiled at Toryn.

"Your Redolian friend is free to join us." His eyes sparkled as he went on. "I hope you will give me the tale of your companionship one day."

"One day," Brydon promised. "As time permits."

Ulwyn sighed deeply as if mourning the passage of time and Brydon rose. Toryn stood with him.

"By your leave, Knight Commander," Brydon said and touched stiffened fingers over his insignia in salute. The secretary rose and returned the gesture.

"Until this evening, Brother Brydon," Ulwyn responded and gave Toryn a friendly nod. They went out and Brydon caught Toryn looking at him intently, but he made no comment. They traversed the hallway and were allowed egress by the same pleasant guardsman. The second twin guided them to the iron gate and allowed them through. It was not until they had crossed the sanctuary and exited the building that Toryn spoke.
"You are one of them," Toryn said. "It never occurred to me before, when you said you had been ‘trained by the knight-priests.’ They don’t train outsiders, do they? You are a knight-priest."

Brydon smiled. "Order of Might, Brotherhood of the Lance, Eaglecrest Chapter," he confirmed, gesturing to the lance embroidered upon his breast.

Toryn glared at him. "I tried to kill you!" he snapped. "You could not have mentioned it? Does Verana know? Of course she knows! You two probably made some secret holy sign to each other and vowed to keep me in the dark!" Toryn stalked down the marble steps. Brydon followed, surprised at his censure. Toryn turned on him. "Are there any other little secrets you are keeping from me?" Toryn asked. "Is there anything else strange about you that I should know, Brother Brydon?"

Brydon pondered for a long moment while Toryn waited impatiently, outwardly fuming. Finally, Brydon shook his head. "No, not that I can think of."

"Nothing at all?" Toryn prodded.

"No, that should be everything."

Toryn nodded curtly and they began to walk back to the Temple of Healing. After a long silence, Toryn asked quietly, "Why didn't you ever tell me?"

Brydon shrugged. "There was not much opportunity upon our first meeting."

Toryn glared at him and Brydon chuckled. He sobered before he continued. "After that, it did not seem to be a consideration. I have set aside my religious duties for the duration of the quest and there has been no need for me to don the mantle, except when I said the final blessing over the bodies of your companions." Brydon dispelled the gloom of that image by smiling again. "And I did not think you felt any great need to confess your sins."

Toryn snorted. "You should have told me at once. I would never have tried to kill a priest."

"You mean you would have gone merrily back to Redol and spared my life after that first attempt?"

"Yes!" Toryn admitted vehemently.

"Then I’m glad I said nothing or you wouldn’t be here now."

Toryn seemed to consider that for a moment. "I suppose you’re right."

Verana and Davin joined them that evening for a private dinner in one of the smaller rooms of the Temple of Healing.

"The journey will not be the same without you, Verana," Brydon told her sadly. She smiled and saluted him with her wineglass.

"I have fulfilled my task. Now I must return to my regular duties. But I believe we will meet again one day."

"A premonition?" Brydon asked.
She smiled. "No. More of a hope. Still, you will likely pass through Kaneelis on your way back to Falara. You must promise to stop here."

"I promise. Will you come with us, Davin?" Brydon asked.

Davin looked surprised. "You want me along?"

"Of course. Anyone who can hunt like you is welcome. Besides, I need someone to keep me from killing Toryn once he starts to annoy me." Brydon laughed. Toryn kicked him.

"Can you leave Alyn?" Toryn asked a bit snidely. Davin still spent several hours a day with Alyn. The silver-haired man flushed and looked at Verana.

"I believe it will be better for her if you go, although you may not understand why right now," she said quietly.

His face grew dark. "I understand perfectly," he snapped. Verana made to protest, but he looked at Brydon. "I will come."

Brydon shied his mind away from the sudden image of the cat in the forest and turned to Toryn. "What about the horses? Did you ask Alyn if it was permissible for us to take them with us? It will be much faster than traveling afoot."

Toryn studied his fork with great interest. "She said it would be fine," he said. "Of course, she is not exactly in her right mind..."

"If you think it’s not a good idea, we will leave them here and walk."

"No. If we run into any Akarskans, you can talk them into letting us keep them. Besides, Alyn told me the horses are unmarked. Nobody’s property. No Akarskan’s property."

Brydon sighed. "I hope they see it that way."

"Don’t worry." Toryn grinned. Brydon looked dubious, but dropped it.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

TARGO

Redwing took his sweet time preparing for the journey, so it was not until nearly mid-afternoon that they left the Temple and headed for the docks. It seemed silly to leave so late, but Davin explained that they would spend the night in Targo, which looked to be a journey of perhaps thirty minutes, considering it sat just across the river and up the steep cliff from Kaneelis.

They bid goodbye to a tearful Verana and stopped in to see Alyn before leaving. She rested in a small room whose floor to ceiling windows looking out on a huge expanse of green grass. She smiled languidly at them from the cushioned couch.

“This place is excellent. The baths are amazing – I spent the entire morning there. After that I was massaged with fragrant oils and then had a meal with foods I’ve never seen before.” Alyn laughed, a sound that made Toryn blink at her in surprise. He could not remember her ever laughing in sheer delight. “I may never leave.”

“I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself. We’re leaving Kaneelis today,” Toryn blurted.
Her eyes narrowed. “You are coming back, aren’t you?”

“Well... yes, of course.” Toryn was confused by the question, uncertain what she meant by it.

“Excellent. I will stay here until you return.”

Toryn looked at Redwing helplessly, but he only grinned and leaned over Alyn. “Enjoy your stay and be well.” He stepped forward and kissed her on the forehead. She looked at Toryn and arched a brow, but he merely bowed in her direction and followed Redwing out.

“I think she wanted you to kiss her,” Redwing commented.

Toryn snorted. “If I kissed her, she would want more and more and we would never get out of here. Better I don’t tempt her while she’s healing.” Toryn was somewhat surprised that Davin did not enter Alyn’s room, but instead lurked in the hallway waiting for them. Perhaps he had already said his goodbyes to her.

The three of them collected their horses and made their way through the city. As they neared the docks they watched the ships come in from the Corolis Islands, G’Neel Across the Sea, and Silver. Sails billowed and fluttering flags proclaimed the origins of the vessels. They even saw a ship from Redol. Toryn watched it longingly for a moment and thought about sending a message home. He met Redwing’s fathomless eyes and grinned. It would be difficult to explain to Morgyn that he now traveled with the same Falaran he had set out to kill.

They continued through the city until they reached the bay, where the sea met the large river that flowed from the Abyss. Toryn’s eyes followed the river’s path into the huge chasm that cut the continent in half. The canyon was a formidable barrier. At the river’s bank they hired a ferry to take them across to the Penkangum shore, which was not much more than a small spit of sand at the base of the towering cliffs with a couple of makeshift docks jutting out. Several small stone buildings were clustered near the cliff bottom. Davin explained that those were the homes of the ferrymen and tax collectors.

A long climb up a steep cliff path led to the top of the Penkangum plateau. Even with the horses to ease the journey it was nearly dusk when they finally reached the summit. Penkangum looked to be a bleak land populated with low brown hills and thick, spiny shrubs. Targo was a squat, sprawling city perched atop the cliff. Toryn thought it looked down upon the graceful jewel that was Kaneelis like a ravenous vulture. The heavy iron gates that led into the city looked more symbolic than functional, as the Targans were already aware of all who traveled up the cliff. By the look of the gates, they had rusted open long ago. Redwing muttered under his breath about lax security. The city entrance was not even guarded.

“Unfortunately, there is no way to bypass the city,” Davin said. “They built the walls to the edge of the cliffs in order to force travelers to enter Targo. You could travel into the Abyss, of course, but no one has discovered a way to scale the steep sides. To the south, the cliffs run all the way to the port city of Tanoo, which is just as bad as Targo. Worse, actually; once you’re in the city, there is no way to avoid the market sector.” The hooves of the horses clipped noisily as they rode along the street of broken cobblestones. “They planned the city that way.”
They rounded a corner and were suddenly converged upon by what appeared to be a howling mob. Fang reared and Toryn fought the reins, but the crowd was undaunted. They surged forward shouting and waving arms full of goods, though two of them went down beneath the mare’s hooves. Redwing doubtless would have stopped to help the downed people, but Davin shouted at them to keep moving. The cacophony swelled around them.

“Stuffed quail! Bodorii silk! Leather vests! Spiced oranges! Gold medallions! Silveran tea! Velvet lined boots!” It went on and on until it was a jumble of sound. Toryn was afraid the crowd would pull them from their horses. He paused when an intricately decorated tunic caught his eye. Without glancing back, Davin yelled, “Don’t stop! And don’t buy anything!” His words brought an angry murmur from the crowd and the barrage lessened for a moment and then increased tenfold as they entered the marketplace. Toryn had never seen such a chaotic mass of humanity in his life. He felt decidedly claustrophobic and Redwing had a similarly panicked expression.

The sheer volume of goods being peddled was mind-boggling. It seemed that anything which could be bought, sold, or traded had been brought to this village at the edge of nowhere, largely to supply the trade-dependent city of Kaneelis. Toryn and his companions fought their way through the multitude, an act that seemed to take an eternity. Once they left the central square, the clamor receded and most of the merchants left them. They rode down twisted side streets until they reached a nondescript tavern. The sign above the door was weather-beaten into illegibility.

When they dismounted, the few tenacious peddlers who had followed them waved assorted goods under their noses.

“Go away!” Davin snarled in the most authoritative tone Toryn had ever heard from him. The merchants grumbled, cursed, or made rude gestures, but they slouched away.

Toryn stared at Davin. “Is this city always like this?” he asked.

“Penkangum is always like this,” Davin replied. “Penks live by trade.”

Davin shouldered his way into the tavern and chose a table near the door. Toryn looked around warily. The place was nearly deserted—a welcome change after the marketplace. The exception was a small crowd of urchins that rushed over and thrust various trinkets at them. It seemed every single resident of the city had something to sell.

“Buy or trade, kind sirs?” they asked and jostled each other with grubby brown elbows. Davin waved them away, except for one that he gripped by the wrist.

“Our horses,” he ordered and held up a silver coin. “Watch them and you will have this.” The youth’s eyes lit up greedily and he pattered outside.

“Would anyone steal them?” Toryn asked worriedly.

“Unlikely, this far from Tar-Tan. They would be easily spotted and Akarskan hunters watch this city very closely, just in case someone manages to snatch a horse out of Akarska. Better to be safe, though.”

A barmaid finally wandered over to them, seeming bored until she caught sight of their silver-haired companion.
“Davin!” She gasped and stared at him as though seeing a phantom.

“Lena,” Davin said in an even tone.

“We thought you were dead,” she said breathlessly and clutched the wooden tray in her hands so tightly her knuckles turned white.

“I am certain you did,” Davin replied mildly with a bitter smile. “But what is easily sold might not be so easily disposed of.”

Lena paled and looked as though she might bolt. She shot a glance toward the door behind the bar and her tongue moistened her lower lip for an instant.

“By all means, rush off and tell Whitey that I’m here. I did not come for revenge—I came for a meal.” She gave him a doubtful look, but hurried away.

“Do you feel as though we missed something?” Toryn asked Redwing mildly. Redwing looked at Davin penetratingly and the silver-haired man actually shifted under the gaze.

“I’m sorry,” Davin said. “I had meant to avoid this place, but I could not seem to stop myself. I trusted that bastard Whitey and he betrayed me. I want him to know that he’d better watch his back, because he’s going to turn around one day and I will be there.”

Redwing sighed. “Why do I have the feeling my life has just acquired another complication?”

Toryn laughed. “You thought this Quest of yours would be a placid little trip.” He chuckled.

Redwing groaned and rubbed his temples. “I would settle for an hour of placid at this point.” The curtain across the doorway flew aside and a giant of a man stepped through. Whitey, obviously. His name was likely due to the thick white hair that framed his face and trailed halfway down his back. He strode to their table with the frightened barmaid trailing behind him. The man loomed over their table.

Toryn frowned and Redwing stared up at him with something like apprehension. Whitey was a mountain. His stained leather shirt was stretched over muscles that looked hard as granite. His arms were the size of beer casks and he flexed them as he neared. His stomach was board-flat and Toryn wondered if the man lifted oxen for pleasure.

“You want him to know you are behind him?” Toryn choked quietly. “Are you mad?”

Davin looked perfectly calm as Whitey leaned on the tabletop with his huge hands. The wood creaked alarmingly.

“Davin,” he said pleasantly in a deep voice. “I had not thought to see you again.”

“No doubt,” Davin replied dryly.

Whitey grinned and showed perfectly white teeth. “I always knew you were resourceful,” he said.

“Try not to forget it.”

“What brings you here, Davin?” Whitey asked as his smile disappeared.
Davin leaned back in his chair and spread his arms in a gesture of innocence. “Why, food, of course! I assume you still make the best mussel stew in Targo?”

Whitey straightened. He looked at Davin closely, as if trying to determine his intent. “In the whole Concurrence. You aren’t here to cause trouble?”

Davin snorted. “Let the past fall where it lies, I always say.” He grinned.

Whitey’s gaze sharpened. “I thought you followed the ‘eye for an eye’ philosophy.”

“I’ve mellowed,” Davin said with a disarming smile. Whitey studied him for a moment and then shrugged and grinned. He turned to Lena.

“Bring chowder and wine. Corolis wine,” he ordered. He hooked a nearby stool with one foot and dragged it over before seating himself. He rested his elbows on the table and then turned his attention to Redwing.

“Questing, Falaran?” he asked. Redwing shrugged noncommittally. Whitey smiled a secretive grin and said no more to him. His gaze went to Toryn.

“You’re no Falaran.”

“That is quite an observation,” Toryn said dryly, liking man no better than Redwing did. Whitey smirked, either missing or ignoring the sarcasm.

“It pays to be observant.” Davin snorted. The girl returned with a wooden pail full of stew and three bowls. She ladled the chunky mixture into the dishes and Toryn looked on approvingly. The creamy chowder was stuffed with shrimp, clams, mussels in their shells, and several varieties of fish. Lena brought loaves of hard bread and poured goblets of wine before disappearing into the back room. Whitey said nothing and allowed them to sample the food in silence.

Toryn tasted it carefully and then looked at him with reluctant admiration. “It is good,” he said grudgingly. Redwing admitted it was exquisite, which Toryn thought was somewhat excessive.

Whitey accepted the compliments with grace. The wine was delicious.

The white-haired man watched them eat for a time and then looked at Davin. “You’re wanted in Paragor,” he said absently.

Davin glared at him. “You should know. You won’t find me an easy mark if you try to sell me out again.”

Whitey sat back with an expression of surprise. “Davin! You wound me! Last time was only a jest! I knew you would escape.” Davin stared at him and his strange violet-grey eyes turned nearly red.

“A jest?” he repeated quietly. Whitey slid his stool back, seeming almost nervous. Toryn watched curiously and wondered what the huge man feared in Davin.

“Well, perhaps I was a bit upset at you that night after you won the tenth game of Talons. And drunk! Was I drunk? I hardly remember what I did to you that night. In fact, I went to find you and bring you back, but they had taken you from the city. Ask Lena!”

“That sounds like a poorly-rehearsed tale, Whitey,” Davin growled. “I trusted you.”
Whitey stood up and kicked the stool back to where it had been standing. “Damn it, Davin. I apologize! Is that what you want?” Whitey swore loudly. Davin stood up and leaned close to the man even though he stood a full head and a half shorter.

“No, Whitey, that is not what I want. What I want is tax free exit from this city, for three horses and the three of us. You owe me,” Davin said in a low, cold voice. Whitey sucked in a breath and his brows drew down.

“Tax exemption?” he hissed and glanced around furtively as if he feared to be overheard. There were only three other patrons; a young couple with clasped hands who murmured dreamily to one another and a grizzled old man that snored drunkenly next to his empty glass of ale. “For three? And for horses? Are you insane?”

“If I do not have it by tomorrow, I am taking my revenge out of your bloody hide and selling the remains to Tar-Tan,” Davin continued. Whitey’s face reddened and for a moment Toryn thought he would strike Davin with one of his clenched ham-sized fists. Beside him, Redwing tensed.

“Do it, Brydon,” Toryn goaded in a whisper. “You can take him!” Redwing threw him a quelling look.

“It will take time!” Whitey protested.

“I have faith in you,” Davin said confidently and clapped the big man on the shoulder. Whitey swore again. “I should not have sold you,” he muttered. “I should have killed you.”

“You can’t,” Davin replied and shrugged. “I’m worth too much. We will take the Rose Room. Don’t bother to try anything; we sleep in shifts.”

“You ask for too much, Davin, but I will get what you want. In return you will never show your damned face in here again.” Whitey spun on a heel and stalked out. Davin sat down and resumed his meal.

“Tax exemption?” Toryn asked.

Davin looked around quickly, mimicking Whitey's nervous movement. “Not so loud,” he warned. “Those words are enough to get you arrested here. Penkangum has no industry, no agriculture, and no resources. Basically, it’s a scrubby scar on the land and damned lucky to be a part of the Concurrence. Penkangum exists by trade alone. Trade and taxes.

“If we try to leave Targo, they’ll search us and tax everything we possess. First, there is the import tax for bringing anything tradable into Penkangum. That includes clothing, weapons, utensils—nearly everything we own. The tax on horses is almost half their value with an additional amount tacked on as ‘hazard tax’ in case the horses turn out to be stolen and are deported by Akarskan hunters. We would have to sell one just to pay the tax on the other two. You both would face another tax for being foreigners. The only way to avoid it is to remain in the city for five days, which naturally would cost more than the tax. Finally, we would have to pay the gate tax and the road tax, which were originally used to finance the city gate and road repair. It made so much extra income for the city that they decided to keep it even though the gate was paid for long ago and the roads are now maintained by Ven-Kerrick. Taxes are Penkangum’s life blood.”
“I have never heard anything like it,” Toryn said with a whistle. “We have no taxes at all in Redol. Who rules this city?”

“The Council of Merchants in Paragor. Locally, the Merchant’s Guild. They control the City Council.”

“Merchants?”

“Penkangum has no king. If you have enough money, you can buy your way on to the Council of Merchants. The Council then selects a member to sit on the Concurrence Advisory Council in Ven-Kerrick. The Paragor Council decides who sells what and which taxes are to be levied. They send a representative to each city and town, with a well-paid band of mercenaries, to make certain the laws are enforced. The representatives, called Constables but known more collectively as Council Dogs, then choose a City Council and decide what additional taxes they can impose. In some places, they charge you for drinking water.”

“It’s beginning to look like we aren’t going to make it out of Penkangum with a single coin,” Toryn said gloomily. “Can’t we slip out of the city?”

Redwing nodded. “From the look of the city gate, that should not be too difficult.”

Davin shook his head with a wry grin. “That is what they want people to think. The Sea Gate has been left in disrepair because it’s not needed. There is only one way to leave from there—down the cliff to the ferries. Before you board a ferry, your taxes are due. That is why the tax collectors live on the beach.

“The Eastern Gate is a different story. It has high stone walls topped with broken glass, two guard towers, iron-bound gates, portcullis, double shifts of guards, and tax collectors. It’s almost impossible to sneak out and if they do catch you, it’s instant dungeon time and confiscation of all of your possessions. Tax evasion is a serious crime here. Similar to treason, elsewhere.”

“Then how do we get out?” Redwing asked.

Davin lowered his voice even more. “Bribery. Normally, we would have to bribe a City Councilman, or someone else who could get us the proper documentation. The right papers will grant us tax-exemption and get us through the gates hassle-free. Whitey will get them for us.” The last portion of his statement was made with iron in his voice.

Toryn looked at Brydon with a gaze that clearly questioned their reliance upon a somewhat unstable Davin and the hulking Whitey. Redwing shrugged, silently implying that they had little choice. They finished their meal and Davin led them up a dark staircase to a small but comfortable room. It was obviously designated the “Rose Room” due to the large tapestry of a red rose that hung from one wall, somewhat faded with age.

“Who gets the bed?” Toryn asked. “I’m too tired to fight anyone for it.”

“I will take the first watch,” Davin offered. “I really don’t trust that bastard Whitey.”

“You can have the bed, Toryn,” Redwing acceded.

Toryn grinned. “I knew you would say that.” He hopped onto the bed and kicked off his boots, but left his clothing on; ready for trouble if it came. He placed his unsheathed
sword on the bed and rested his hand on the hilt. “I’ll take the second watch,” he mumbled around a yawn.

“I’m taking the horses around the corner to a place where they’ll be safe,” Davin said. Toryn was not sure he should go alone, but Davin slipped out before he could suggest otherwise. Redwing rolled out his bedding while Toryn studied the room. There were no windows, which ruled out the possibility of assassins entering by that route.

“This is a strange place, eh Toryn?” Redwing asked.

Toryn shut his eyes, thinking it unnecessary to reply.

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Toryn snored softly and Brydon smiled. He had never known anyone who could fall asleep so quickly and yet be wide-awake the instant his eyes opened. He stretched out on his blankets and waited for Davin to return.

The silence was immense and his eyelids drooped tiredly. Brydon tried to think of his princess back in Falara, but Eryka’s face was lost to him. He remembered curling blond hair but he was uncertain even of her eye color. It mortified him to discover that the merest thought of Sellaris conjured clearer images. Burnished copper curls that fell over creamy shoulders. Smoldering grey eyes and soft lips parted wantonly. He remembered the curve of her neck as she tipped her head back and the line of her throat as she moaned...

He cursed to himself and shook the memory away.

“Forgive me, Eryka,” he muttered, feeling treasonous. His turmoil dissipated an instant later as he realized Davin had been absent too long. He got to his feet and paced for a moment, wondering if he should go look for him.

“What’s wrong?” Toryn asked.

“Davin should have been back by now.”

Toryn sat up and tugged his boots on. “When I agreed to come with you, I expected a nice, quiet journey,” Toryn grumbled. “What have I gotten? Lions. A viperous Akarskan wench. An insane Penk who thinks he’s a werewolf. Captured by thieves. A battle with thieves. A battle with more thieves. A man who disappears into thin air before I can slice him in two. A Falaran who can read my mind. Swamps, mud, rain, bugs, and fever. A city full of howling madmen and tax collectors. Now this. I can’t wait to see what happens next. Did you plan all this?”

“If you are finished whining, I suggest we go find Davin,” Brydon said mildly.

Toryn grinned nastily, but the door opened before he could comment. Davin staggered through the portal and Brydon saw with horror that his face was half-covered with blood. His white shirt was splattered with it.

“What happened?” Toryn cried as they ushered him to the bed. Brydon quickly poured water into the basin and soaked a cloth.
“The wound isn’t deep,” Davin protested as he washed the blood from his face. “They got lucky. Two cutthroats for hire—good ones. I really didn’t think Whitey would go this far.”

Blood flowed from a deep gash on Davin’s temple and Brydon pressed the cloth to it tightly. Toryn dug in his pack and handed Brydon a jar of gray powder. He set some bandages aside.

“Thank Adona Verana gave us this powder. I didn't think we would need it so soon.”

Brydon plastered some grey powder over the wound and Davin’s face went white.

“Sorry. I forgot to tell you it stings,” Brydon said, which was a major understatement. Davin glared at him. “Well, it stopped the bleeding.” He bandaged the wound tightly and then looked at Davin’s bloody shirt.

“The rest of the blood isn’t mine.” Davin took off his stained clothing and threw it into the corner, wrinkling nose as the acrid smell permeated the room. He lay back on the bed, visibly weakened from blood loss.

“Whitey won’t try anything else, tonight,” Davin said tiredly. “He will be too busy getting our papers and wondering what I’m going to do to him for this second betrayal.”

He yawned and fell asleep, leaving Brydon and Toryn to stare questioningly at one another. Toryn shrugged and took Brydon’s blankets, leaving him to guard the door.

“I knew I’d lose the bed,” Toryn said.

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The rest of the night passed uneventfully. Toryn let Davin and Redwing sleep. He hadn’t slept well, expecting hired assassins to burst through the door at any moment. Davin awakened shortly after dawn and Toryn checked the dressing on his head before applying a different poultice and re-bandaging it. When the task was finished, Toryn nudged Redwing in the ribs with a toe.

The Falaran sat up, rubbing his side. He threw Toryn an irritated look. “There are gentler ways to wake someone up, you know,” he protested grumpily.

“Forget it. I’m not kissing you.”

Redwing stared at him and Toryn chuckled at his own wit. Even Davin smiled.

“I know you always wanted to,” Redwing responded, too late for it to be an effective comeback.

Toryn threw a vest at him. “Let’s get moving. I’m starved.”

They stowed their gear and tromped down to the main room, which was more crowded than it had been the night before. They located seats and a woman brought them warm pastries and a selection of hot drinks. Toryn and Davin eagerly gulped cups of hot Bodorii coffee. Toryn had not had coffee since leaving Redol. He was surprised when Redwing shuddered at the bitter taste and drank sugared tea instead.
“Coffee is damned hard to find in Redol,” Toryn said. “When the ship comes in, the tribes gather.”

Davin nodded. “It is highly sought. One of Penkangum’s primary trade items. I have missed it. Remind me to purchase some before we leave, although I shudder to pay Targan prices.”

They had finished eating and were enjoying their beverages when Lena appeared and murmured something to Davin. He gestured to the others and they followed her into the back room. The doorway led into a large kitchen where a cook hovered over several large pots. A boy busily scrubbed dishes.

Lena handed Davin a sealed leather packet and gestured to the back door. Davin took the pouch and went out, followed by Toryn. Redwing trailed behind. They entered a small alley and walked past several closed doors. Davin opened the packet and shook out the contents—three round pebbles. Toryn looked at him curiously, but Davin did not explain.

“Come on,” he said and tossed the rocks aside. He led them through a maze of streets and alleyways until Toryn was thoroughly confused. He was uncomfortable enough in this city without being lost in it. At last Davin stopped at a doorway and knocked. The portal opened silently.

“The Three Stone Inn,” Davin explained as they entered. The room was small and dark, lit only by a single candle. A man lurked in the shadows.

“Your name?” he demanded.

“Davin of the Lavender Hills.” Another packet was handed to Davin before the man rose and departed. Davin tucked it into his shirt. He crossed the room and opened another door that led to the common room of the inn. It was deserted, so they passed through and exited onto the main street before walking a short distance to a small tavern. They entered and found a table near a window.

Toryn ordered ale while Davin opened the package. He withdrew a thick stack of parchment and examined it closely. The others sipped their drinks and remained silent. Davin scrutinized each word and finally stacked the papers together and placed them back in the oilskin pouch.

“They seem to be in order,” he said. The door opened and Whitey strode in. After chatting amiably with some patrons, he walked over to their table. His eyes widened when he viewed the bandage on Davin’s head.

“Why, Davin—?” he began.

“Don’t bother, Whitey. You’ve already written yourself a secure place on my list of people never to trust. I would rather not move you to the list of people to destroy. For Lena’s sake.”

Whitey puffed himself up with indignation, an action that impressively swelled his muscular chest beneath his tight leathers.

“Surely, you don’t think that I—?” he huffed.

Davin held up a hand. “Never mind. Did you bring our horses?”
Whitey nodded somewhat sulkily. “They’re out front.”

“We’ll be on our way. Thank you for your help. I hope things go well for you.” Davin stood.

Whitey cleared his throat for a moment. “Davin,” he said. “You will not—?”

“Seek revenge? No. Out of respect for the friendship we once had. I wish that it had never gone wrong.”

Whitey studied him closely for a moment and seemed to search for words. His expression grew bleak, but finally he nodded and turned away. Davin’s jaw tightened. Toryn wondered what had happened to cause such a rift between them. He looked at Redwing for a moment. There was such a tenuous cord binding him to the Falaran. He valued Redwing’s friendship, but knew the enmity between their countries would always be between them. It was a sobering thought.

Davin followed Whitey outside and took up the reins of his horse. Whitey grinned at Redwing as he took up Darkling’s reins. “Good luck on your quest, Falaran,” Whitey said.

Without another word or even a hand raised in farewell, the three of them left Whitey and rode toward the city gates. The day was warm for late spring, bordering on hot. The sky was clear and blue and people were jammed into the streets, buying and selling.

“That was too easy,” Davin commented as they pushed their way through the crowd.

“Easy? You were nearly killed,” Redwing replied.

“I’m not sure Whitey will settle for ‘nearly’,” Davin said.

It took them a half-hour to reach the East Gate and Toryn marveled at the difference between it and the Sea Gate. Davin had been right. Twin towers of stone rose high into the air, spreading arms of brick that encircled the city. Four guards sweltered before the gates and more were visible in the towers above. A veritable battalion of soldiers and tax collectors worked both sides of the portal, searching incoming and outgoing parties while ignoring blustering protests and hysterical cries.

They made their way steadily toward the gates. Davin shot one glance at Redwing, his only sign of nervousness. As they drew closer to the exit a tax collector noticed their approach and motioned to them.

“Davin!” The cry rang out over the noise of the crowd and Davin drew rein. Lena fought her way through the mob. At last, she reached Davin and tore open one of the packs on his saddle. She withdrew a small leather packet. Davin looked at it suspiciously and she nodded.

“Danaan seeds,” she murmured, softly enough that Toryn barely caught the words. “Contraband. Whitey—I don’t know what he is doing! He’s changed so much. I could not let him do this.”

“The papers—?” Davin asked.

“The papers are good,” she assured him. “Word would be out on the street if he gave you false documents. He would be out of business in a week.”
Davin nodded. Lena put her hand on his knee and looked at him earnestly.

“For what it’s worth, Davin,” she said, “I am sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” Davin replied. “Never let him force you to believe otherwise.” He touched her hand for an instant and then nudged his horse toward the tax collector, who by now gesticulated angrily at them. Lena’s hand hung in the air for a moment as though in an arrested farewell as she looked after him. Then she turned and faded into the crowd.

Davin handed the packet of papers to the tax collector. The man stared at him through beady eyes while scratching a beaked nose. He perused each paper so thoroughly that Toryn began to think he analyzed the composition of the ink. His brows drew down over his eyes and his gaze switched from the parchment to Davin suspiciously.

“Council couriers, eh?” he asked finally, drawing the words out as though tasting each letter. Davin nodded. The man stared at Toryn and his brows went up and down and couple of times. He scanned the papers again before glaring at Davin.

“This man is a Redolian,” he hissed slowly, gritting the last word through clenched teeth.

“Yes,” Davin replied calmly. “He has been granted residency by the High Merchant Banaal and given courier status, as clearly stated on page four, paragraph two.”

The tax man stared at him and then flip-flip-flipped through the papers. He read again with agonizing slowness. A trickle of sweat found its way down Toryn’s spine and he fought the urge to itch. Redwing shifted in his saddle. The horses cocked hind hooves and dozed.

At last the man muttered something unintelligible and scrawled his signature on several of the papers. Davin relaxed almost imperceptibly and Toryn suppressed a sigh of relief. The papers did not release them from the mandatory search of their belongings, however, and it appeared that Lena had truly protected them. The medicines Verana had given them were carefully examined even though the rest of their belongings attracted no more than casual interest. The searchers were thorough, however. The process took nearly an hour and Toryn was mentally exhausted when they were finally allowed through the gates and rode into the uninviting countryside of Penkangum.

A crowd camped outside the gate and a long line of merchants awaited search by the tax collectors prior to entering the city. The line stretched an incredible distance. Frantic merchants fanned cartloads of fruit to keep it from rotting while others walked up and down the line, trying to hawk their wares.

Davin looked at the crowd sympathetically. “Sometimes, it takes a week to get in,” he said. “Paragor is even worse and it has three gates.”

They picked up their pace and put Targo behind them. They rode toward Paragor and Ven-Kerrick beyond.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN
PENKANGUM
“What happened to cause such enmity between you and Whitey?” Toryn asked Davin that evening. Redwing rolled his eyes. Toryn sneered. He knew Redwing was just as curious; he was simply too polite to ask. Davin looked remarkably unperturbed by the question. He lay on his blankets with his silver hair spread out over his saddle, which he used as a pillow. Redwing fed the horses a few feet from Davin.

“It’s a long story.”

“We have time,” Toryn prodded. He poked at the pork ribs grilling over the fire as he dribbled ale over the meat. The coals hissed. They had purchased the ribs from a traveling merchant on the road. Davin had told them that finding food would not be difficult in Penkangum, provided they could pay. He had not lied;

Toryn had been ecstatic to find coffee, meat, bread, cheese, fresh Bodorii fruit, spices, and wine, all in exchange for a substantial amount of Redwing’s coin. If not for Redwing, Toryn would have been forced to live off the land. Davin as well, from the look of him. Luckily, Redwing spent his coin generously and without complaint.

“I presume you’re not going to feed us unless I tell you?” Davin asked.

Toryn looked at him as innocently as he could manage. “Davin, you wound me. Of course, I’ll feed you... sometime tonight.”

Redwing grinned and began brushing Darkling with smooth, even strokes.

“It’s not a very interesting tale.”

“Don’t worry. It will be better than the Falaran’s stories.”

Redwing snorted and tossed the brush into his pack. He lifted one of Darkling’s hooves and scraped it free of dirt and stones with the point of his dagger.

“Feel free to clean Fang’s hooves when you’re done,” Toryn called companionably, earning an absent glare.

“Very well,” Davin said with a sigh, probably realizing Toryn was not about to drop the issue. “I met Whitey when I first came to Targo... perhaps five years ago. He worked in a tavern and barely eked out a living. I managed to get a job running errands for the tax collectors. Whitey wanted a roommate to help pay for the single-room dwelling he rented. The situation was perfect for us both—he worked nights and I worked days. We seldom saw one another.

“Then he started getting involved in illegal activities—disposing of smuggled goods, procurement, and some forgery. He thought I might be of use to him and asked if I wanted a part of it. I needed the money, so I joined him and we developed quite a business over the next few years. Falsifying papers alone is a moneymaking endeavor in Targo. I kept myself mostly to surveillance. I was good at being invisible and overhearing conversations: what shipments were coming in; how the Council planned on stockpiling certain goods; what items were scarce because of crop failure or shipping difficulties.”

Davin looked at Toryn. “You can’t tell from his commonplace tavern, but Whitey is extremely wealthy. Once he amasses a large enough fortune, he plans to buy some property in Bodor and retire. I was supposed to go with him and help him run the place, whatever it turned out to be.” He paused and accepted the cup of hot coffee Toryn handed
to him and took a long sip. “I was taken in by the idea of having something. It sounded too good to be true, but Whitey was sincere—in the beginning. We were partners for nearly four years. Business was excellent and we became fast friends.” His expression darkened. “Until Lena came into the picture.”

Toryn gulped at his own coffee and nodded wisely. Trust a woman to screw up a really good thing. “She was young when I found her—barely sixteen. She was working as a dishwasher in a hostel that I happened to be eavesdropping in. I had worked my way through the kitchen to the owner’s office, trying to locate some information that I had been unable to overhear. I was nearly discovered when the owner barged in, towing Lena behind him. He started groping her with his greasy hands and promised her a promotion to cook or barmaid if she would... well, it happens everywhere, I suppose, but she was very young and obviously terrified. She refused, crying and pushing him away. He became angry and threatened to fire her and keep her from ever working again in Targo. He could have done it, too—he had many contacts.

“Lena was hysterical and tried to scream when he tore her clothing. He slapped her hard enough to draw blood. That was when I hit the bastard with a chunk of wood I’d grabbed from the fireplace. As luck would have it, the blow killed him. Lena was dazed and sat on the floor staring at me like I was an apparition. I managed to position his fat body to look like he’d slipped and bashed his head on a corner of the table. Somehow, I got her out without being seen. Whitey had already purchased his tavern by then, so I took her there. Lena stayed with us and worked very hard for the next few months—in gratitude at first, and later out of friendship.”

Davin sipped at his cup and grimaced.

“She was a wonderful girl. Whitey became quite taken with her. She loved us both in a brotherly fashion, and seemed to take great joy in mothering us. I’m not sure exactly when it happened, but Whitey started to become jealous of the time I spent with her. He would not allow us a moment alone, even though both of us protested his foolishness. She wanted neither of us as a lover, but he refused to see that. He began to believe that I was the only obstacle between himself and Lena’s love.

“One night, several months ago, we were drinking and gaming. He lost too many throws and drank too much dark ale. He cursed bitterly and vowed revenge upon me. He reviled our friendship, calling me ‘freak’ and worse names. Foolishly, I had underestimated the strength of his jealousy. I woke up in the bandit’s camp where you found me, weak from continuous drugging. Whitey had slipped a potion into my drink and sold me that very evening. And that, as they say, concludes the tale.”

Toryn smiled in satisfaction. “Much better than Redwing’s tales. He could take a lesson in storytelling from you.”

“It’s unfortunate that the most painful tales make the best listening,” Redwing said.

“Well, it’s told. Now, where is my dinner?”

The weather was clear and warm as they rode out onto the rocky plains of Penkangum. When they left the region of cool sea breezes behind, they entered an area of scrub
bushes and thin desert-type trees. The strong winds from the coast seemed to carry the rain-bearing clouds right over Penkangum.

Davin said it rained often in Silver, Ven-Kerrick, and Bodor, but Penkangum was nearly a desert. They shed their cloaks after the first hour, though the temperature was mild. The sun’s rays were almost brutal after traveling through Terris’s wetlands. Toryn shuddered at the memory. The road from the coast inland was fairly well-traveled and they met many traders who stopped and tried to sell them goods, or acquire them, but Redwing did not pause, leading them onward until they reached the village of Barren in late afternoon.

They stopped at a tavern and tied the horses outside where they could keep an eye on them while they went inside for a brief rest and a meal. They had just sat down when peddlers surrounded them, showing off merchandise or fingering their belongings in an effort to trade. Toryn and Redwing were overwhelmed by the rude behavior, but Davin just got to his feet and batted them away.

“Begone!” he yelled. “If we want something, we will go to the marketplace and if we no longer want something, we will have an auction!”

The traders grumbled and cursed, but left. Even in such a small village the marketplace was a riot, selling everything from Akarskan snakes to Parmittan devil-control amulets. As they rode through, dozens of people called out offers for the horses, but they pushed on and finally broke into a gallop to escape the clinging village. After that, Redwing vowed to stay away from the populated areas of Penkangum. Toryn heartily agreed and they skirted small towns for the next five days. On the sixth day, they reached the banks of the Korooga River that led to the royal city of Kaangana. They elected to bypass that place especially.

They avoided Kaangana and followed the river and the road south toward Silver, reaching Lake Paragor the following day. They crossed the river, giving the city of Paragor a wide berth, and camped that night in a small hollow, sheltered from the ever present wind by a thick wall of sturdy brush, far enough from the lake to be mostly safe from blood-drinking insects.

That night they stumbled across the traders. Or, more accurately, the traders stumbled across them. Five men came into the encampment, surprising even Redwing. Toryn looked at him quizzically.

“I expected them to continue on,” Redwing whispered. Davin disappeared into the undergrowth like a shadow.

“Greetings!” one called. “What have you to trade?”

“A hot meal,” Toryn answered. “What have you?”

“Any number of things,” the man said, swinging down from his dusty bay horse. The other four men were afoot and just as dusty as the horse. They all carried packs and a large bulky bundle was tied to the saddle.
The man tethered his horse to a tree at the edge of camp and the steed gave no sign that Darkling, Fang, and Davin’s horse were out in the darkness. Toryn knew Redwing was working his magic again. He was damned useful at times.

The trader came to the fire and crouched down, studying them. He had sandy-colored hair that was shoulder-length and none too clean. His clothes were worn and travel-stained and a scar trailed from his left ear to the corner of his puffy lips.

“Name’s Lenk,” he said. The other four men moved in and set their packs down. “What’ll you trade for a hot meal?”

“I am Brydon. This is Toryn. What have you got?”

That was all the Penks needed to hear. They tore into their packs, withdrawing silks, knives, jewelry, spices, carved artifacts and scrolls of verse. Redwing admitted that it was all very nice, but they had little use for any of it.

Lenk studied him for a while and then whistled sharply. “Toad! Bring in the real merchandise!”

A squat man came out of the darkness, looking definitely toad-like. He towed a girl with him and shoved her down beside the fire. She sprawled where she was and her honey-colored hair fell over her face.

“Of course, it’ll cost more than a meal for her, boys,” Lenk said and guffawed. “But for the right price, she’s yours.” He reached out and grabbed the girl’s hair, pulling it back until she sat unnaturally straight. Her eyes were closed and she wore a simple leather dress that looked to have been cut short with a dull blade. Toryn could see that she was very beautiful, though not particularly Toryn’s type. She wasn’t blonde, for one thing.

“We picked her up in Silver,” Lenk went on. “She don’t have a name and the best thing about her is—” he paused and gazed at them dramatically, “she don’t talk.”

“Why not?” Toryn asked, fearing that perhaps her tongue had been cut out. Lenk shrugged.

“Don’t know. Hasn’t said a word since we first seen her. She don’t complain at all, though.” He laughed at his joke and his men joined him.

“What are you asking for her?”

Lenk released her hair and her head dropped again, although she remained sitting on her heels.

“Well. She ain’t cheap. I had her checked out in Vorg by a healer, and she’s a genu-wine virgin. My men and I haven’t touched her on this whole journey. You can see how hard that would be! I almost broke Sten’s jaw the other day trying to get him away from her.” He glared at one of the men.

Toryn was relieved that the girl had not had to deal with that horror. Yet.

“That raises her value, I agree,” Redwing said mildly. “But what are you asking?”

Lenk sat back. “Two hundred gold.”
Toryn laughed aloud. “No female is worth that. You can buy a horse from an Akarskan for two hundred gold!” he said with a sneer.

“This filly will be more fun to ride than any horse,” Lenk said crudely and reached out to caress the girl’s cheek. She jerked away from him and tossed her hair over her shoulder. It fell like a curtain in front of her face, as if to block her view of Lenk. In the same movement, she looked straight at Redwing. Toryn watched as the Falaran stared at her. Oh no! Was it to be the Sellaris situation all over again? Did Redwing fall in love with every woman he saw? Well, except Alyn. Toryn grinned at the thought of the blonde Akarskan. He really missed sparring with the little hellcat.

Redwing was getting that honorable look again, the one that said he would fight overwhelming odds to save the girl.

“Here we go again,” Toryn muttered. Aloud, he said, “Granted, but she looks untamed to me. I’ll give you twenty-five for her.”

“Twenty-five? She’s worth two hundred and fifty any day of the week! Look at her face!” He tugged her hair again and turned her face to the fire. She was, indeed, beautiful, but what were they going to do with her? Hopefully, they could drop her off in the next town. She would definitely have no trouble finding some peasant to marry her.

Toryn was silent.

“One seventy-five,” Lenk relented with a pragmatic sigh.

“Would you care for some food while we speak?” Redwing offered.

The men accepted and soon all present were roasting buck steaks on spits and sword tips.

“What good will she be?” Toryn asked. “She looks soft to me. I’ll bet she can’t even cook.”

Lenk sneered. “You don’t need food on a hot summer night.”

“She’ll be more trouble than she’s worth,” Toryn insisted. “Fifty gold.”

“Fifty! That’s an insult!” Lenk yelled. “In Tar-Tan, I could make three hundred off her easily!”

Toryn shrugged. “So feed her all the way to Tar-Tan. Be sure to say hello to the four hundred other girls for sale there, also.”

Lenk sighed dramatically. “You are right. There are women everywhere. But none as fine as this. Stand up, Butterfly, and show him your legs.” The girl’s jaw tightened, but she stood up obediently. She was slender, almost too thin, Toryn noted, but finely built. Her legs were firm, as were her arms, and her breasts were held high. She stood straight. She was as lovely as a wild doe and seemed almost to be one, trapped among wolves.

“One-fifty,” Lenk said. “A bargain, and too good to be true.”

Redwing looked at her through hooded eyes. Luckily, he seemed content to let Toryn do the talking. Knowing Redwing, he would have paid the two hundred without haggling.

“She’s too thin. Do you not feed her?”
Lenk shoved her down again, angered. “She’s the best you’ll find for five hundred miles!” he roared.

“Not if I’m heading for Tar-Tan. I can pick up an Akarskan wench there for twenty gold and she will be able to cook. She will also be a softer bed than this underfed child.”

Lenk growled. Toryn knew his words were true, for Lenk pondered mightily. He suspected the trader weighed the cost of transporting the girl against the profit he might make elsewhere. There was also the possibility that she might escape, as well as the plain fact that a Penk could not stand to see a customer get away.

“One hundred gold and no less,” he said.

“Ninety and the meal,” Toryn said.

“Done!” Lenk spat, slapping his palm down on the ground.

Toryn looked pointedly at Redwing.

//Do you have ninety gold pieces, Toryn?// Redwing asked silently with a hint of amusement.

//Are you trying to say you weren’t planning to buy her and save her from a fate worse than death? Do you want me to give her back?//

//Never mind.// Redwing withdrew and immediately reached into his pouch for the coins. Toryn knew he had plenty of gold. His Falaran princess had obviously not wanted the quest to fail for lack of funds and had sufficiently supplied him. Toryn doubted that she’d had a purchase like this in mind, however. He grinned. Redwing’s quest was getting interesting.

Lenk received the coins and Toryn took the tether that bound the girl’s hands together. He led her immediately into the undergrowth and Lenk laughed heartily.

“Couldn’t wait long, could he?”

The girl cast a fearful, backward glance at Redwing, probably sensing he would have been her last hope under other circumstances.

“Don’t worry,” Toryn said quietly, hoping to forestall any hysterical struggles, “I have no intention of touching you.”

Davin was with the horses, already mounted. Toryn levered the girl onto Darkling’s saddle. As far as he was concerned, she was Redwing’s problem now. She looked around, likely thinking about spurring the horse forward to escape, so Toryn held the reins and glared at her warningly. They waited a few minutes for Redwing to make some excuse to their guests and join them. Redwing hurried out of the trees.

“We should get as far away from here as we can,” Toryn said. “I don’t trust them as far as the nearest bush.”

“I agree,” Redwing replied, taking the reins. He swung up behind the girl. “Let’s move.”

“You should have mentioned that collecting women would be part of this trip,” Toryn said. “I would have joined you in Falara.”

They rode until dawn’s faint light touched the sky.
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

SHEVYN

They made camp as the sun rose and Brydon gently set the girl atop his hastily made bed and covered her with a light blanket. She did not awaken, but tossed restlessly. He took the leather thong from her arm and tossed it aside, wishing Verana was still with them as he viewed the damage the bonds had done to her wrists.

Davin looked at her intently. “You should have killed them,” he said to Brydon.

“What?” Brydon stared at him, but Toryn, with a roll of his eyes, collapsed on his blankets and ignored them.

“Slavers should be exterminated,” Davin said vehemently.

Brydon hadn’t much of an opinion on the slavery issue. Falara had no dealings with slaves. Even the lowliest of men in Falara were free. “The important thing is that we got her away from them.”

Davin’s wild look calmed a bit. “They should still be punished.”

“Vengeance belongs to Adona. If you try to kill every slaver you see, you’ll have the entire country of Tar-Tan after you and half of Penkangum.”

“Half of Penkangum already is,” Davin muttered, so low that Brydon wondered if he’d heard the comment correctly, but the mad look left Davin’s face and he went off toward the horses to stand guard.

Brydon studied the girl as she slept. Hopefully, they could determine who she was and return her to her family. He hoped she had someone to take care of her. She looked far too soft to fend for herself. He tried once more to probe her mind, an action he had attempted several times since her appearance. Once again, the effort was fruitless—his mental exploration met only a smooth wall, hard and impenetrable as glass, even in her sleep. Brydon had a sudden, uneasy feeling that this girl was an omen of disaster.

He stretched out next to her and fell into a troubled sleep.

Brydon awoke when he felt the girl beside him leap away as if pinched. He sat up to see her staring at him wildly. Toryn was awake, leaning against a scrubby tree on the other side of the camp, watching her. She looked from one of them to the other, crouched and ready to flee. She opened her mouth as if wanting to speak, but no sound issued forth.

“Wait!” Brydon said and flung out a hand. He could tell she was about to run. She took one quick step and paused, looking frantic.

“We won’t hurt you,” he said. Her gaze turned scornful and she tossed her head. Her eyes, Brydon noticed, were very blue. In the morning light, she was even more beautiful. Her features were as delicate as porcelain, like one of the angelic statues they had seen in the Temple of Healing.

“It’s true,” he said reassuringly. “We only purchased you to save you from the slavers.”
“Do you think we want to drag a female along with us?” Toryn sneered, his voice too cynical to disguise a lie. “We are in a hurry.”

Her fear seemed to ebb away at his words, evidenced by the narrowing of her eyes. She straightened into the stately pose she had adopted the night before and she scanned their campsite carefully.

Brydon took note that it was early afternoon; they had slept the morning away.

“Are you hungry?” Brydon asked as he got to his feet. The girl looked at him and nodded curtly. He poured some of the soup Toryn had made into a bowl for her. She took it reluctantly and knelt down to eat, watching them the while.

“Where is Davin?” Brydon asked.

Toryn tested the edge and feel of his sword. He gestured with it. “He went out to do some scouting. Why? Can’t you find him?” he asked.

“I didn’t try,” Brydon replied with a rueful grin. Toryn seemed to think he spent every waking moment using his mental powers. He closed his eyes and it wasn’t long before he discovered Davin’s presence. He seemed unworried, so Brydon withdrew. He glanced at the girl, who ignored them both and finished her meal. “Shall we press on this afternoon?”

Toryn sheathed his sword with an elaborate flourish and nodded.

“How is the soup?” he asked the girl.

She looked at him and nodded her head grudgingly.

“Toryn is vain about his cooking,” Brydon explained with a grin.

Darkling approached Brydon at his summons and was quickly saddled. The girl walked over as he finished and stroked the stallion’s neck. Admiration gleamed in her eyes and the horse nuzzled her shoulder, happy with the attention.

“This is Darkling,” Brydon said. “I am Brydon Redwing, he is Toryn of Redol, and Davin is the silver-haired fellow you saw last night.”

She looked over at Toryn, who tried to saddle Fang while avoiding the mare’s sharp teeth.

“Do you have a name?” he asked. She looked at him and Brydon could almost hear her say, “Of course I have a name, dolt.” Though he could not reach her mind, her face was very expressive. She nodded.

“I don’t suppose there is any way you can tell us what it is?”

She thought for a moment and then shook her head.

“I guess we’ll just have to call you Butterfly,” he said with a straight face. Her glare could have sizzled raw meat and it took all of his ability to keep from laughing. She stalked over to a bush and broke off a branch. When she came back she kicked a smooth patch into the dirt with one foot. As he watched her golden legs move, Brydon was thankful that her skirt was so short. Unfortunately, he would have to remedy that. So much female flesh on display was damned distracting.
She crouched down and wrote in the dust with the stick. When she finished, she
straightened and threw the branch at his feet.

“Shevyn?” he asked after studying the word. “No surname? And where are you from?”

Her face clouded and Brydon saw a flash of intense emotion in her eyes before she shook
her head and turned away. Brydon’s unease from the night before returned.

Toryn finished his bout with Fang and won, though he rubbed a spot on his shoulder
where she had bitten him. Davin joined them a moment later.

“I found a road,” he said. “I think it’s the highway to Ven-Kerrick, since it leads in the
right direction. We can follow it or try to find a way across the lake.”

“The Penks would ask our firstborn sons in exchange for crossing the lake.”

“Follow the road,” Toryn said.

Brydon nodded and turned to Shevyn. “Milady?” he asked and made a low stirrup with
his hands by linking his fingers together. She put her foot into his hands and allowed him
to lift her high enough to swing into Darkling’s saddle.

He pulled himself up behind her, trying in vain to stop thinking about her legs. He forced
his mind elsewhere and found himself envisioning Sellaris, which was no better. He
swore silently and kicked Darkling into a canter. He made a solemn vow to stop
collecting women.

The land was dry, and populated with mainly with scrub-brush and lizards. The wind was
nonexistent and the sun baked down on them. It was still nearly a month until summer,
but already Penkangum was warmer than Falara at harvest time. Brydon wondered if the
snow had even melted on the pass back home. He had seen two full moons since leaving
Eaglecrest and another was due in a handful of days. He wondered how much longer they
would have to ride to reach Ven-Kerrick.

They followed the road for a time, but when it swung north, toward Tar-Tan, they left it.
They traveled far enough from the lake to avoid the occasional bogs that surrounded it.
After riding for a few hours, they stumbled across a large stream that gurgled its way
happily toward the lake. They had not covered much distance, but it looked an excellent
place to camp for the night.

Toryn launched himself from Fang’s back into the water, and then had to run after the
mare when the reins slipped out of his hands. Davin hurried off to help him. Brydon
swung down and allowed Darkling to drink his fill while he helped Shevyn dismount.
She walked upstream into clearer water and drank, cupping the water in her hand and
lifting it to her mouth. When she finished drinking she splashed water on her face and
neck. Brydon walked down the bank a short distance and then called to Shevyn.

She joined him and he gestured to the pool, sheltered and shaded by a large sycamore tree
whose leaves floated on the gentle eddies. She looked at him uncertainly.
“You can bathe if you like. I have some clothing you can wear if you want to change.” She looked at the pool and bit her lower lip, apparently weighing the decision. At last she nodded.

Brydon smiled and went to fetch the turquoise tunic he had purchased in Kaneelis. He had intended to wear it when he reached Ven-Kerrick. It was elaborately embroidered with gold thread on the shoulders and sides. It came to mid-thigh on him, so it would likely reach almost to Shevyn’s knees, but it could be belted and would be relatively modest. More so than what she currently wore, at any rate.

He took it to her with a small cake of soap and set them on the bank. He saluted and went back to Darkling, who eagerly munched on the thick grass that bordered the shore of the stream.

Brydon refilled his water skins and hung them back on his saddle. He removed and scrubbed his shirt before hanging it on a bush to dry. He debated making a fire, although he doubted any of them were hungry, thanks to the heat. It made him lethargic and lazy; he wanted nothing more than to stretch out and take a long nap.

With that thought in mind, he spread his blankets and lay down under a tree near the bank. After a moment, he took off his boots and rolled up his trouser legs to dangle his feet in the water. It felt deliciously cool.

He was nearly asleep when he heard a man’s yelp of surprise, and then a bellow. Brydon sat bolt upright and ran to where he had left Shevyn. Not surprisingly, Toryn was there, dodging the rocks Shevyn lobbed at him from the stream. Her dress was clutched to her chest and she stood waist deep in the water. Her hair hung in wet strands about her face, which was flushed in anger.

“Hey! Stop that! How was I supposed to know you were there?! Ow!” This last came as a well-aimed rock bounced off his forearm. “You crazy woman! I’m going!”

Brydon retreated stealthily and hastily in the direction from which he had come, before he could become the next target. He heard Toryn stumbling after him. Brydon sat down on the bank, overcome with laughter at the memory of Toryn dodging wet stones. By the time Toryn reached him, he was doubled over on his side.

Toryn huffed himself up. “What, might I ask, is so hilarious?” he demanded.

Brydon tried to speak several times, but finally pointed a finger at Toryn. The object of his mirth growled. “I should have known you’d be there, peeking,” he snapped.

Brydon sat up and wiped the tears from his eyes. “What were you doing there, oh Mighty Loser of Horses?” he asked. He tried not to laugh, but could not completely contain his chuckles.

“I was coming back here.” Toryn sniffed. “If you had any compassion, you would ‘magic’ Fang back here so I wouldn’t have to chase her all over the country.”

Brydon smirked. “I thought you wanted to catch her yourself.”

“Well, thinking was never your best ability.” Toryn sprawled beside him and stared thoughtfully into the water. A wicked grin curved his lips after a moment. “She was a very interesting sight to stumble upon,” he admitted.

“Fetching Fang for me.”

Brydon looked up as Shevyn approached. The turquoise tunic hung on her frame, not concealing much, considering she had belted it tightly with her own leather belt. She was barefoot, carrying her dress and Brydon’s soap.

She hung the wet dress next to Brydon’s shirt and dropped the soap into Toryn’s lap. He looked up at her in surprise. She smiled sweetly and gestured at the water before pointing at him. She held her nose.


She shrugged and looked innocently upward.

Toryn got to his feet. “Women,” he spat. “Even when they can’t talk, they still manage to nag.” He did, however, head for the pool that Shevyn had vacated.

Brydon chuckled again and Shevyn looked at him. Her honeyed hair was beginning to dry in the oppressive heat. She smiled and Brydon felt as if the sun had just come out after a long winter. She had an ethereal beauty, more delicate and sculpted than Sellaris’ sensual looks. She turned away and he looked at the water again, once more confused. He considered becoming a hermit and staying away from women, forever.

She sat down a few feet from him and pulled her fingers through her hair. Brydon got up and dug through his pack before returning and handing her his comb. She smiled again and mouthed thanks.

Davin trotted up on his horse with the obstinate Fang in tow. Brydon watched as he splashed across the stream. “This one can run,” he said and gave Brydon the reins of the mare.

“As long as she’s running from Toryn.” Brydon grinned.

Davin laughed, a shocking sound coming from him, and swung down from his mount. He looked around, obviously seeking Toryn.

“He’s probably splashing water on his hair,” Brydon said and went to check for himself.

Toryn, much to his surprise, was fully immersed in the pool and soaping himself merrily. His unbound hair was wet, and lay plastered against his skull.

“This feels pretty good, Bry.” He grinned. “You should try it, sometime.”

“Yeah, the first time is always the best.” Brydon laughed.

Toryn climbed out after rinsing and dried himself with his shirt. He tugged on a clean one and threw the damp one toward the water.

“There’s something really odd about Shevyn,” Brydon said after a moment.

“You finally noticed she doesn’t talk?”

“Very funny. No, I can’t ‘read’ her.”

“What do you mean?” Toryn asked.
“Well, you know if I try hard enough, I can pretty much tell what you are thinking and I
definitely know what you’re feeling,” Brydon explained. “But—”

“Really?” Toryn looked up. “What am I thinking now?”

Brydon concentrated for a moment. “You are thinking of Shevyn in the pool.”

“That was too easy,” Toryn decided. “Try this one.”

Brydon shut his eyes. “You are picturing yourself on a black horse that looks like... no, it
is Darkling. You are riding through a city and women are coming out of every house to
throw flowers in your path and press kisses on your boots—” His eyes snapped open and
he laughed. “Oh, please!”

Toryn looked shocked. “Can you do that any time?” he asked.

“Only if I’m trying, and it helps that you were concentrating on sending it to me,” Brydon
explained.

“And you were ‘trying’ with Shevyn?”

Brydon nodded. “Trying hard. I came up with nothing, only the barest of surface
emotions. It’s like she has a black curtain over her mind. Sellaris was able to shield her
thoughts from me, but it was nothing like this—I could still pick up some of her emotions
and I felt she was consciously maintaining her mental wall. Shevyn’s is as solid as rock
even when she’s asleep.”

“Perhaps it has something to do with her not speaking.”

“I think so.” Brydon nodded. “In any case, it’s very strange. Don’t look at me like that,
Toryn, I will not pry into your mind unless you ask me to.”

“You’d better not, or I will make myself think of dung heaps all day.”

“I thought you already did!” Brydon guffawed. Toryn made a rude gesture. Brydon
unbuckled his sword belt and dove into the pool. He kept his trousers on, electing to let
them dry while they rode. He figured if they were wet they might keep him cool for a
time. He scrubbed the shirt Toryn had tossed into the water, as well as his own, before
wringing them out.

Toryn was fully dressed when Brydon emerged. They collected their wet garments and
returned to the others. Shevyn handed Brydon the comb. Toryn grabbed for it and the two
men raced around camp for long minutes, until Toryn shoved Brydon into the water and
grabbed the comb when he fell.

Brydon sat in the stream and splashed water at Toryn until he danced out of range,
laughing and taunting Brydon while he combed his black hair into shape. Brydon called
him rude names as he climbed out of the stream, but he secretly enjoyed Toryn’s playful
antics. It had been a long time since Brydon had silly foolish games for sheer enjoyment.

Brydon thought about collapsing on his blankets and resting, but when he watched Davin
leave the camp he decided to try his luck with the same idea in mind—fresh meat. Game
had been sparse thus far. With both he and Davin hunting, the odds of them locating
dinner increased.
Brydon took his bow and arrows and cheated a little by seeking mentally for some game. His senses picked up Davin immediately and he kept a portion of his mind fixed on the silver-haired Penk while he sought for animals. Brydon caught the impression of a four-legged herbivore and headed that way. He crept through the brush as silently as possible and finally caught sight of the animal as it chewed on a bush. It was a brown desert goat.

He drew back an arrow, scarcely breathing, and prepared to loose it. An instant before he did so, he felt a singing exultation from Davin, far away, and knew the man had made a kill. Rather than waste meat, Brydon decided to let the goat be. He pulled his senses away from Davin and reflected on how easy it was to attune his mind to Davin’s presence. He wondered why.

Brydon released the arrow and it flew true, clipping the goat’s beard neatly in half and startling the animal half out of its wits. It jumped a full three feet in surprise and bolted into the brush. Brydon laughed. Toryn would never believe that shot. He retrieved his arrow and replaced it in the quiver before returning to camp.

Toryn awakened everyone the next morning by singing Redolian military songs very loudly. Brydon sat up, agitated, and looked at Shevyn. He said, “If Adona would grant me one thing, I would wish that you could speak and Toryn could not. I think my life would be much more pleasant.”

“Do you think so?” Toryn asked. “Did you not see her yesterday? If she could talk, we’d all be getting an earful.”

Shevyn smiled sweetly and Toryn looked at Brydon pointedly.

Brydon grinned and shook his head. He looked at Davin, who poured a cup of tea and sipped it. “How much farther to Ven-Kerrick?”

Before Davin could respond, Shevyn shot to her feet with a look of horror crossing her features. She was obviously terrified. Brydon frowned and wished he could probe her thoughts.

“What’s the matter?” Brydon asked, “You don’t want to go to Ven-Kerrick?”

She shook her head wildly.

“Why not? Did someone in Ven-Kerrick sell you to the Penks?”

She shook her head again and tears started to spill down her cheeks. Brydon got up and went to her. “Then what is it?” he asked. He hoped she could give them some sign of what she feared.

She tried to speak, tried so hard that Brydon felt his own jaw muscles strain with her as she attempted to force the sounds out, but she finally just bolted. Brydon went after her and was surprised at how fast she fled. He caught her only when she stumbled to a halt before a bramble thicket, trapped. He held her arm for only an instant before she collapsed against him, sobbing painfully.

She wept until she could hardly breathe and Brydon began to fear she would choke. He stroked her hair and murmured quietly until her gasping sobs tapered off to more normal weeping and then to quiet sniffs. He tipped her tear-streaked face up and looked at her critically. She was a mess. Her eyes were red and swollen and her lower lip trembled. Her
hair was wet in places and stuck to her face, but Brydon found her quite lovely for all that. He tipped his head down and kissed her softly, intending it to be a gentle, brotherly kiss.

She did not respond and he found that her eyes were alarmingly vacant now that she had calmed. “It’s going to be fine, Shevyn,” he said. “I will not allow anything to happen to you.”

He felt a surge of protectiveness and held her tightly as he guided her back to camp. When she was seated before the fire, sipping listlessly at a cup of tea, an idea formed in his mind. He quickly cut a small branch for her and then smoothed a patch of dirt for her to write on. He wished he had parchment and ink, but ink bottles had a nasty tendency of breaking during travel. The only thing they possessed suitable for writing on were their passage papers from Targo, but defacing them would make them useless.

Shevyn eagerly took the stick and scratched in the dirt. The words were hard to make out. “Do not go to Ven-Kerrick?” Brydon asked and she nodded. “Why?”

Evil is there, she wrote.

“What sort of evil?” Brydon asked.

Shevyn bit her and scratched more letters. Don’t know. Can’t remember.

Brydon looked at her dubiously. Her comments were not helpful.

“Have you been there recently?” Brydon asked. She nodded. “How long ago?”

Consternation crossed her features. She shook her head and shrugged, then wrote, One month, I think.

Brydon studied her for a moment, uncertain how to respond. If anything were amiss in Ven-Kerrick, they would certainly have heard of it by now. News traveled quickly in the Concurrence and even more so in Penkangum, where information was a commodity. He could not afford to ignore her warning, but he had no choice but to continue.

“I will take your advice to heart,” Brydon said, “But I must go there.” Shevyn shook her head angrily and threw down the stick. “Do you want to remain here?” Shevyn shrugged her shoulders, as if it did not matter. Brydon sighed in bafflement. He decided they would go ahead as planned and stay on their guard.

They departed for Ven-Kerrick a short time later and Shevyn made no protest. Brydon worried about her for that reason. She seemed almost to be a wooden doll, sitting in front of him and staring straight ahead. It was as if she were resigned to her fate and it made him very uneasy.

They finally reached the line of cultivated trees that marked the border of Ven-Kerrick. They could see the castle in the distance amid the fields of grain and fruit. Davin mentioned that the crops were more for show than a source of food. Ven-Kerrick was supported by tribute paid by the Four Kingdoms of the Concurrence—Silver, Bodor, Tar-Tan and Penkangum. The trees, Brydon noticed as they neared, were in bad shape. The leaves were turning brown even though it was still spring. Brydon assumed the trees had been planted and were not, at present, being watered adequately. A closer examination
disclosed that the trees were apparently hand-watered, as evidenced by basin-like hollows around their bases. The basins were desiccated.

Toryn dismounted and dug down into the soil. It was dry. “They should take better care of these,” he commented. Brydon nodded uneasily.

They rode across the grain fields and saw that the crops, at least, were well tended. They saw a few farmers and Brydon stopped to converse with them. The party drew curious glances, but that was all.

“Greetings,” Brydon said cheerfully as they approached one man.

“Your lordship,” the man said, leaning on his planting tool and studying them warily.

“Who usually waters those trees?” Brydon asked.

The farmer shrugged. “That job belongs to the king’s men. Haven’t been about lately. Good for us. They don’t trample our grain, like you’re doin’.”

Brydon took the hint and they retreated to a less cultivated area, a small path that led through the fields toward the castle. Even though the edifice seemed close, it took another day to reach the village—a walled town that sprawled in semi-circular fashion around the castle proper. They approached the high wooden gates at mid-morning. The village itself was not large, which surprised Brydon considering the place was the hub of the Concurrence. The wooden walls were formed of tall, sturdy poles lashed upright with sharp points to discourage entry. It looked marginally defensible, but no doubt the citizens would flee to the castle at the first sign of danger. Black garbed soldiers stared at them curiously when they entered the village, but the gates were open and they were not stopped or questioned. The town was quiet, almost subdued, and Brydon’s party rode through without stopping.

Ven-Kerrick itself was an imposing citadel of stone that lurked behind high walls of white granite. It stood on a prominent hilltop, surrounded by a steep palisade and a water-filled moat. The gatekeeper at the outermost stone wall seemed particularly attentive and even provided a detachment of black-clad soldiers to accompany them to the castle.

Brydon felt a moment of disquiet as the six men fell into step around them. Toryn shot Brydon a worried glance.

They rode under the raised portcullis and up the inclining road. The horses’ hooves rang as they crossed the drawbridge and Brydon stared as they walked between massive towers into the outer courtyard. It bustled with activity, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Brydon knew it took a lot of effort to keep a castle running smoothly.

Their party passed through the wide outer courtyard and crossed a second drawbridge. They reined in before another iron portcullis; this one was closed with solid wooden gates shut tight behind the barrier. Several men in black Ven-Kerrick livery peered over the parapet at them.

“I request an audience with the king!” Brydon called. “My name is Brydon Redwing, Knight-Priest of the Lance in Falara. These are my companions. My purpose here is peaceful and honorable!”

“The king is not available!” one yelled back.
“Then my companions and I request lodging until the time when he can grant me
audience. My business can wait, but not forever.”

The guards had a conversation amongst themselves. Shevyn had begun to tremble. The
men concluded their discourse and finally the portcullis rattled and creaked its way
upward. When it had risen, the heavy gates grated open and the company urged their
mounts forward. The horses’ hoof beats clopped loudly in the still air, but they could hear
sounds of life coming from beyond the walls.

Shevyn moaned softly as they passed under the portcullis and buried her face in Brydon’s
shoulder. She tightened her grip on his tunic and he began to feel apprehensive, as though
they had just walked into the jaws of death. The feeling increased a moment later when
they entered the inner courtyard and were ringed by men in black and grey armor,
holding weapons. Crossbows, for the most part.

“We will escort you inside,” one said, not altogether pleasantly. One man held Darkling’s
bridle and Brydon, seeing that they had no choice in the matter, swung down from his
steed and lifted Shevyn down. She clung to him, eyes filled with fear as her teeth worried
her lower lip.

The behavior of the men did not seem out of place to Brydon. Ven-Kerrick was the center
of defense for the entire Concurrence. It would behoove them to be wary of strangers,
especially those that requested an audience with the king. Strangers would be treated
much the same in Eaglecrest, he reasoned.

Still, something bothered him—something other than Shevyn’s inexplicable behavior.
After a moment, he pinpointed it. There were no knight-priests! The realization stunned
him for a moment. The Brotherhood of the Gauntlet was renowned for their fighting
skills. Knight-priests should have been manning the walls. None of the men he saw wore
Church insignia.

Brydon had donned his white surcoat with the black lance insignia. Over that, he had
thrown the red cloak bearing his coat of arms, but the sign of his order took precedence.
He could see no evidence of the gauntlet sigil upon any of the black outfits that
surrounded them. Perhaps they had all gathered somewhere for a ceremony, although it
was no holy day as far as Brydon could recall. He gazed about nervously.

Toryn and Davin followed suit and they watched as their horses were taken away to the
stables near the southern wall. The inner courtyard was cobbled in flagstones of black
and white, an impressive touch. The castle itself was unremarkable, rectangular but for
two rounded towers overlooking the western countryside and a round annex that was
connected to the northern wall of the castle at the second-story level. People traveled to
and fro in the inner courtyard: servants carried buckets and baskets; a fellow readied an
oxen-drawn cart for a well-dressed lady; and black-liveried men practiced at arms
beneath the annex passageway. Brydon’s group received only cursory notice amid the
general activity.

They approached the keep and Brydon saw that it was no showy palace—it had been
built for defense. The front steps were wooden, easily burned or cut up and carried away
in times of war, and they led to a huge doorway high up on the wall. As they passed
through the entrance, he noticed the dual foot-thick stone doors could be moved to seal
the entranceway. He wondered if the doors were shut nightly, or if they trusted the outer and inner walls and gates as a first defense in case of attack.

Once inside the castle, the dismal military facade ended abruptly. The floor of the entryway was white marble veined with silver. Two graceful marble staircases curved upward on each side of the room, mirroring each other, and terminating at the edge of a balcony that overlooked the entry. A delicate crystal chandelier was suspended from the high ceiling by thick chains, and a large multicolored tapestry draped over the balcony before them, fully twenty feet square. It was magnificent—the Kerrick coat of arms. A silver Gauntlet adorned a black background, clenched in a fist and sparkling with jewels of blue, red and green. Silver bordered the edge of the tapestry, crenellated like a castle wall.

Brydon could feel the power and the majesty of the gauntlet merely by gazing at the tapestry. They had a moment to study it as one of their escorts strode beneath the tapestry to knock upon two massive black doors. Helmeted, halberd-wielding guards stood at each side of the doors.

Toryn stared at the room as though overawed by its grandeur, though Brydon suspected his true purpose was to analyze the room for a quick escape. Brydon extended his senses toward the Redolian and detected Toryn’s reservations about the entire place, especially their escorts’ twitchy sword-hands and shifting eyes. The only exits besides the staircases seemed to be two archways that led to dark passageways on either side of the room, not especially promising.

//Toryn,// Brydon sent, //I want to stay in touch with you. Something is not right here.//

He received Toryn’s assent and kept a light contact with his mind.

The man returned a short time later. He requested that they remove their weapons and they reluctantly did so. Toryn gave Brydon a dubious look.

//I have a bad feeling about this,// Toryn confided.

//I thought you were the one looking forward to swordplay and torture,// Brydon joked, though his own uncertainty drained much of the intended humor from the comment.

//I take it all back,// Toryn assured him. As Brydon handed his sword into the grip of a guard, he asked, “Are we prisoners? Or does His Majesty treat all guests this way?”

“We must take precautions such as this with the king. After all, he is the Overking of the Concurrence,” the guard replied. “Besides, it has not yet been determined that you are guests.”

The guard looked closely at Shevyn, who stared at him with something akin to deep hatred. He looked away quickly and seemed discomfited. Brydon felt he had missed something important and wished, not for the first time, that Shevyn could speak.

The guards swung open the doors.

The king stood in front of his throne with his back to them and hands clasped behind him, as if studying his seat. His robe of state was deep sable and trailed down the steps to the floor of the Great Hall. He wore no crown. The company approached, somewhat
nervously, and Brydon eyed the black-clad men that lined the room. They all held halberds and stared stiffly forward. Archers were visible in the upper gallery.

His party reached the space before the throne and Brydon released Shevyn and knelt respectfully. They waited quietly.

“Your Majesty,” Brydon said after a moment. Shevyn, beside him, did not kneel, and her fingers dug into his shoulder almost painfully. Toryn and Davin remained standing. The king of Ven-Kerrick finally turned around and his cloak flashed a bright lining of silver. He smiled widely at them.

“I thought we would meet again, my Falaran friend, although I never dreamed that you would walk meekly into my lair. How appropriate that you kneel before me.” He laughed and Brydon felt a terrible horror steal over him as he stared into the man’s glittering eyes. It was Reed.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN
VEN-KERRICK

Brydon shot to his feet. "This cannot be!" he burst out.

Reed ignored his outcry and switched his gaze, dark and glittering, to Toryn. "And you, swordsman. I had hoped to meet you again. This time I will cut your heart out."

Toryn sneered. "As long as you have your army to help you," he said and gestured to the men-at-arms.

"Indeed," Reed promised. He stared at Davin for a long, silent moment, stroking his mustache with forefinger and thumb, but he said nothing to the silver-haired Penk. He looked lastly at Shevyn.

"I do appreciate you bringing my little Shevyn back to me. I feared that I would never see her again. How did you find her?"

Shevyn pressed closer to Brydon with her eyes firmly fixed on the ground, as if willing it to open up and swallow her. Brydon put an arm around her shoulders and glared at Reed, holding her protectively.

"How sweet." Reed smiled. "Did she talk you into coming here to kill me?"

"I need no persuasion for that," Brydon snapped. "If you are truly the King of Ven-Kerrick, why were you in Terris dealing with bandits and stolen horses?"

"That is not your concern," Reed said in a bored tone. He stepped back and sprawled casually on the throne as if wearied by their conversation. He gestured at his guards.

"Take them out of here until I decide what to do with them." He paused and his eyes narrowed. "Except the Penk. He stays here."

"You don’t even know why we’re here!" Brydon protested, horrified to have his quest come to this. For him to die here with his quest unfulfilled—it was almost beyond imagining. In his wildest dreams, he had never envisioned the King of Ven-Kerrick to be a dishonorable cur such as Reed.
"You are here to take the gauntlet, are you not?" Reed asked. Brydon was startled. No one but Toryn knew what he was after, and he doubted Reed had been able to pull the information from his mind during their brief encounter in the forest of Terris.

"It’s a pity that you traveled all the way from Falara for no reason at all." Reed sighed dramatically. "The gauntlet is already gone." With that, he waved a hand and the guards dragged them out of the room, leaving only Davin to stand before him.

"I knew this would be interesting," Toryn commented unnecessarily.

They were hauled down two long corridors and descended a dark, winding stair to the dungeon. Shevyn clung to Brydon as long as she could, but she was dragged bodily from his side and they were tossed into separate cells.

"I also knew we would end up here," Toryn added.

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Toryn gazed unhappily at his new quarters. The cell was dismal and dank, as some universal code of dungeons stated it should be. It was about six paces deep and four across. Three of the walls were windowless stone and the fourth consisted of iron bars that stretched from floor to ceiling with a gate built into the center. A patch of filthy straw moldered on the floor, looking old enough for the castle to have been built around it. Toryn decided against sitting on it, ever, and stood as near to the bars as possible. The close confinement made him decidedly uncomfortable.

The cells were situated side by side so prisoners could not see each other. He peered through the iron and dimly saw more cells across the way, but nothing else of interest except the metal-clad door at the end of the room that led to freedom.

Rather than give in to his growing sense of tension, he tried to figure out why Reed had been in Terris. And what was his interest in Davin? Then there was his cryptic last remark. Where was the Gauntlet? Redwing would not be pleased about that. Not that it would matter unless they got out of here.

//Brydon?// he called out mentally.

//Yes?//

Toryn jumped a bit, even though he’d expected the response. He wondered if he’d ever get used to the Falaran’s abilities. //Do you know anything about this?//

//No.// Redwing admitted. //I never expected this. The King of Ven-Kerrick was supposed to be noble and good.//

//It looks like Kerrick’s offspring decided not to follow in his footsteps.//

//Apparently not.// Redwing sighed, an odd sensation when experienced through their mental link.

"Hail, newcomers," a deep voice called from the darkness. "What did you do to annoy Reed?"
Toryn peered through the bars, but saw nothing.

"We encountered Reed some time back," Brydon explained. "It seems he held a grudge."

"That is Reed’s way."

"What was your crime?" Redwing asked.

"I walked unaware into the lion’s den. I am Jace the Wanderer, Knight-priest of the Shield. Reed has no tolerance for knight-priests."

"Then he has a twofold reason to keep me here," Redwing said dryly. "I am Brydon Redwing, Knight-priest of the Lance."

"A Falaran! You are far from home!"

"The distance seems to be growing with every passing moment," Redwing said. He spent some time regaling the stranger with news from Falara and Toryn spent the time half-listening while examining the lock on his gate for weaknesses. None were found.

The rattle of a key in the door caught Toryn's attention.

The iron door swung open to admit a man bearing a large tray. He was dressed in rough clothing and a hood covered much of his face. The guardian at the door held a torch over the man’s head, ostensibly to light the way.

"I hates it down here," the newcomer whined and made no effort to enter the darkness of their cellblock. "Can’t ye feeds ‘em?"

"Get in there," the guard snarled and shoved the fellow with a hand to the back. The man staggered inside and nearly lost the tray as well as his balance. He set up a loud wailing and the guard slammed the door, leaving him alone with the prisoners. The man’s whimpering silenced immediately and he set the tray upon the ground. He hurried from Toryn’s sight and a moment later cried softly, "Shevyn! Oh, my dearest Shevyn."

Toryn pressed his face against the bars curiously and heard the man speak in a lower tone; he could not make out any words. A short time later, the man rose. Toryn could see his profile as he stopped in front of Brydon’s cell.

"You brought her here!" the man hissed. His brutal accent had disappeared. "How could you do that?"

"Kerryn," Jace interrupted in a dry voice, "You may dispense blame later. For now, can you concentrate on getting us out of here?"

"Sir Jace!" the man gasped. "I did not know you had been imprisoned."

"It seems Reed’s explanation of my sudden disappearance was accepted by all."

"Not all, but we feared you were dead."

"I most likely will be unless I can escape from here."

"I do not know how to accomplish it—our numbers now are too few."

"Find our friend Davin," Redwing said urgently.

"Why should I listen to you?" Kerryn demanded.
"Kerryn!" Jace snapped in a voice that crackled with authority. "He is a knight-priest. How was he to know that Ven-Kerrick had fallen?"

Kerryn shook his head. Toryn could barely make out his features in the dim light, but he seemed young.

"We dare not make it known," Kerryn murmured miserably.

"Exactly. We are the only ones who can stop Reed and we can accomplish nothing from inside these cells. Listen to Sir Brydon."

Kerryn glared, but nodded.

"Find Davin," Redwing said again. "He is the silver-haired man who rode in with us. I do not pretend to know Reed’s purpose, but he most likely seeks to bargain with Davin. Find him and tell him where we are. I know he can help us."

"What can one man do against Reed’s guards?"

"More than you can imagine," Redwing replied.

The guard outside flung the door open suddenly and Kerryn crouched instantly.

"Haven’t you distributed that food, yet?" the guard demanded.

"What if they grabs me?" Kerryn whined hysterically. The guard cursed and strode forward. He seized Kerryn with a meaty fist and flung him toward the door. Kerryn stumbled and fell, then picked himself up and ran, wailing pitifully. The guard roughly shoved their food trays beneath the cells doors. The meal consisted of rock-hard crusts of bread, a thin gruel in small wooden bowls, and a few slivers of dried apples—probably a delicacy for prison fare. The guard departed in the same manner he had entered.

Toryn did not touch the meal, but he could hear Jace’s teeth as he gnawed at the bread. He wondered how long the knight-priest had been imprisoned.

//Toryn, I’m going to try to contact Davin,// Redwing sent.

//Won’t that terrify him?//

//Possibly. But what choice do we have?//

//Do you think he can help us?//

//I know he can help us, the question is whether or not he will.//

//Good luck.//

Redwing’s presence disappeared and Toryn waited, tapping a knuckle on the bars impatiently. He was considering gnawing on one of the bread crusts when Redwing’s mental voice returned.

//That was rather fruitless.//

//You couldn’t find him?// Toryn asked.

//I found him, but he shut me out. I did not know he could do that. I know this sounds strange, but I think he can change his shape at will.// Redwing related an incident in Terris when he’d felt Davin become a different creature.
Then he really is a werewolf?// Toryn asked in amazement.

Of sorts, unless I am mistaken.//

Amazing! It would explain the attack on Garyn during our fight with Reed. Remember, he was clawed by some animal? I always wondered how that happened. Do you suppose Reed knows about Davin’s ability?//

Either that or Davin has been in league with Reed from the beginning.//

On that somber note, they sat back to wait.

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Davin watched the others until they were escorted out and then he turned to Reed, who watched him without expression. Davin said nothing. At last, Reed got to his feet.

"Accompany me, if you will," he said and strode out. Davin shrugged and followed, puzzled at the man’s tone. He wasn’t treating Davin with the same condescension he had shown the others. The two of them passed through the entry hall and mounted the marble steps. Two of the black-clad men made as if to follow but Reed waved them away. On the second level, they turned right and walked through an open door into a massive library. Davin was shocked to see two large glass windows, one on each outer wall. The early afternoon sunlight streamed through the southernmost window, falling on the floor in a pattern of squares. Reed followed his gaze.

"One of the Kerricks was appalled at the glass. I believe it was Terryd, the Warrior-King. He ordered the bars installed. It rather ruined the aesthetics, but most warriors do not appreciate beauty anyway." Each window had been covered with horizontal and vertical iron bars. Reed laughed shortly. "The bars do keep the melancholy from leaping to their deaths after reading a particularly tragic poem."

Davin was not amused. "What do you want?" he asked.

"You are definitely a Penk," Reed said with a sigh. "Capable of sustaining only one thought at a time."

Davin waited. Reed sighed and walked to a mahogany table set near one wall.

"Brandy?" he asked and lifted a crystal decanter. Davin shook his head. Reed poured a splash of the liquid and downed it in a single gulp, then replenished the glass and raised it slightly in salute to the painting that hung on the wall above him. Davin looked at the portrait for the first time. It was an image of a young king with a golden crown set atop his long, curly locks that blew in the wind. He held a strange, pale sword clasped in a fist that was covered by a silvery, jeweled gauntlet. The painting was magnificently done and very old. Davin thought there was something fey about the image of the slender king—the eyes, perhaps.

"Kerrick, himself," Reed supplied, confirming Davin’s suspicion. "They say he died in a fall. A rock-slide. His body was never recovered." Reed laughed shortly. "I say he staged
it all and disappeared to escape the duties of kingship. They are more tedious than I had imagined."

Davin still said nothing and Reed turned.

"I know what you are, Davin. You have Vai blood in you. Quite a lot of it, I would imagine, and power that most men can only dream of." Davin schooled his features into impassivity and Reed strode forward. "You are well-known in parts of Penkangum. There is a high price on your head. They say you killed several people with magic." Reed stopped a handbreadth away. "How did you do it, Davin?" His eyes were bright as copper coins, fixed eagerly on Davin’s face. He went on in a hushed voice. "Did you turn into a wolf and tear their throats out? Was it exciting to smell their fear, to feel it in the air? Did they beg for mercy? Was the blood hot on your lips, salty and pulsing? How did it taste, Davin; did you drink their life’s blood while they watched you through dying eyes?"

Davin’s face contorted and he shoved Reed away, hard. Reed spun and went down, though he caught himself on one hand and knee. The brandy glass hit the floor and rolled; liquid seeped into the fine carpet. Reed looked at the growing stain as he regained his feet, and then he turned his amused gaze to Davin, who struggled to contain his rage.

"Ah, you are squeamish! An unusual quality in a Vai. I fear you have spent too much time with the Falaran and his misguided ideals. Life is a vicious mistress. She rewards only those who take what they want from her. By whatever means they possess."

"Am I here for a reason or do you merely enjoy hearing yourself speak?" Davin asked.

Reed picked up the glass and returned it to the table. "I see you do not have a speculative nature. That is good. I grow tired of those who rant and rave about my sins. But enough of that. I need you to help me, Davin." Davin’s jaw tightened, but Reed continued, "I need you to teach me the ways of your power. I must learn how to change my shape as you do."

Davin stared at him for a moment and then burst into laughter that he quickly stifled. "You do not know what you are talking about," he said with a sneer.

"I know precisely," Reed retorted. "My father was a full Vai—his blood flows strong in my veins. I can already distance-shift. You and your companions were witness to that. I know how to turn men’s minds inside out. I have been taught many things."

"Then go back to your teacher and ask him to show you," Davin said. The statement obviously touched a nerve.

"He will not." Reed hissed in frustration. His eyes narrowed as he realized what he had disclosed and he picked up the brandy glass once more to hurl it into the huge fireplace. The shattered glass seemed to calm him as he took a steadying breath. "It matters not. I do not need him any longer. I have fulfilled our bargain." He turned to Davin. "And I have you to teach me, now."

Davin shrugged. "I can teach you nothing and would not even if I knew how. You are vile. I can no longer pity myself now that you have shown me the depths to which a human can sink."
Reed’s eyes glittered and he smiled maliciously. "I do not recall asking for your knowledge. It would be foolish to beg for something I can take." With that, Davin felt as though his head had been seized in a huge, invisible hand. It gripped him while something else bored into his mind and sucked at his memories like some horrid, unseen leech. Davin cried out and flailed at the air with his hands. In panic, he nearly changed shape, but realized at the last moment that it was exactly what Reed wanted.

He forced himself to concentrate on Reed’s presence in his mind. Davin allowed rage to flood his senses and he sent it back to Reed at full force, using a mental strength he had not known he possessed. It was almost like beating at a fly—one moment Reed was in Davin’s mind, clawing and scratching for information—the next he staggered, trying to keep Davin out. Unable to penetrate Reed's hastily-erected mental shield, Davin instead grasped Reed’s presence in a large mental fist and shook it like a dog shakes a rag doll. Reed crashed into the table with a shriek and knocked several decanters and glasses to the floor. They landed in a tinkling wet mass and Reed clung to the wood. Davin released him and took great care in crafting his own impenetrable mental wall, something he had not done since he was a child. It was almost comforting to know he had not forgotten how, especially when Reed recovered with a snarl and turned on him, lashing out in a full-force attack.

Davin deflected it with a minimum of effort and Reed gasped, staring at him with eyes wide and full of rage.

"Perhaps you should find someone else to train you," Davin suggested.

Reed pulled out his sword with a fluid motion. His face was red and mottled. At that moment, several black-clad men appeared at the door with weapons held ready.

"My lord?" one questioned.

Reed, after a long, tense moment, recovered himself and sheathed his sword.

"Take this man away," Reed said slowly. "Take him to the north antechamber. I want two men with him at all times. Do not take your eyes off of him for a moment. Are you all wearing your medallions?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Keep them on. This man is very dangerous," he said and added, "and worth a great deal of money in Penkangum."

The men, six in all, ringed Davin. Before they could escort him out, a servant appeared in the doorway.

"My Lord King," he announced, "The Bodorii delegation has arrived."

Reed swore mildly. "Put them in the Great Hall. I will be down shortly."

He glared at Davin and departed, leaving him with his escorts. Davin was manhandled down the hall and into a windowless room with a single entrance. Two of the men accompanied him inside. The room was furnished with a table and several chairs. Tapestries adorned the walls—scenes of Ven-Kerrick’s history, Davin assumed. He calmly seated himself in a chair and watched the two men watching him.
After a moment, he sent out a tentative mental probe, amazed at how difficult it was. He had honed some of his abilities to a high level of skill while others had rusted away. What he encountered made him draw back, amused and grudgingly impressed by Reed’s knowledge. The guards were wearing medallions that blocked mental abilities. Davin could not access their minds in any fashion. He wondered who had taught Reed the secret of the medallions’ creation—they were not easy to forge, nor were the ingredients common. Platinum was used in quantity. The men likely had no clue as to the value of the medallions they wore, or they would have smuggled them out and pawned them for gold.

Davin waited a quarter of an hour before he got to his feet and casually examined the tapestries. They were large weavings, stretching from floor to ceiling. Davin doubted there were any concealed doors in the small room, but he lifted a tapestry and stepped behind it, causing an immediate uproar from his guards. Before they could properly react, he shifted.

The familiar exhilaration filled him as parts of him melted away and others compacted and changed. It took only an instant and then he raced on mouse feet around the perimeter of the room, avoiding the guards as they searched the tapestries frantically. He flattened his furred body and slipped easily under the closed door. Once in the corridor, he paused for a moment, blurred into an unobtrusive orange cat, and bounded down the stairs. He lurked outside the Great Hall, trying to determine where Brydon and the others had been taken.

A cat-hating guard aimed a booted foot at him, so he dodged it and scurried toward the kitchens. Catching a particular scent, he paused and then sidled down two long corridors until he reached a staircase that spiraled into both upper and lower levels of the castles. He chose the descending stairway and eventually entered a damp, rough-hewn cavern. An excess of unpleasant odors in the air made Davin sneeze and he quickly changed back into the less-fastidious rodent. He crawled unseen past the feet of a sentry and inched beneath an ironbound door. Perfect. The dungeon. He crept past several cells until he found Brydon Redwing. Davin squeaked in relief as the blond man raised his head and then uncoiled from his cross-legged position. Brydon seized the bars eagerly.

"Davin," Brydon breathed, "Is it you?"

Davin leaped back in surprise and nearly shifted back in reflex. How could Brydon possibly know? Davin retreated and scurried under the door once more and then scampered back to the guard. He shifted into his usual human form in the blink of an eye and threw an arm across the man’s neck in a stranglehold. The guard thrashed and tore at Davin’s arm, but he simply squeezed tighter until the gaoler went limp.

Davin plucked the keys from the man’s belt, unlocked the door, and dragged the unconscious man into an empty cell. Brydon grinned as Davin unlocked the iron gate to his cell.

"We have to hurry," Davin said. "By now, Reed knows I’m gone. Keep your mental shields tight, if you have them."

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Brydon helped Davin release the others and then divested the guard of his cheap sword and dagger. Jace the Wanderer was the only other man in their block of cells, thankfully, because Brydon did not want to think about other prisoners bellowing for release.

Toryn took the sword Brydon offered without question, although he raised a brow. Brydon shook his head, although he was not sure how to explain their escape even to Toryn.

Shevyn threw her arms around Jace’s neck and then did the same to Brydon. He smiled at her and caught Toryn’s sardonic grin before he introduced himself to Jace.

Jace was a tall man, taller than any of them, with thick, dark brown hair and a broad grin. He wore gleaming black leather armor. Under the polished breastplate, a white shirt flowed out into sleeves gathered at the wrists with a practical cuff. A long, dark cloak was attached to rings on the breastplate. He looked impressive and was obviously a knight-priest of the Shield, evidenced by the bronze shield symbol prominently displayed on his breastplate.

"My thanks, brother," Jace said. "I know this castle well. Let us depart this place."

Brydon nodded and they headed down the dank corridor, dimly lit by small torches hung in wall brackets. They reached another door and Jace grasped the handle, but Davin hissed at them to stop.

"Two guards stand beyond the door," Davin whispered. Jace pushed a hand through his dark hair and studied Davin for a moment, obviously wondering how the Penk had slipped by the two guards on his way into the dungeon. "Armor?"

Davin motioned at Jace’s breastplate.

"Leather?" he asked. Davin nodded. "Helms?"

"No."

Jace smiled. "We may have a chance."

The violent cry of a great hunting cat split the silence of the corridor and Brydon grinned at Toryn in admiration. He wondered how Toryn could mimic the sound so perfectly. The door burst open and both rushed in, holding spears and swords ready. Jace and Brydon brought two still-smoldering torches down upon their heads. One of them was faster, or perhaps better trained, and he narrowly avoided the bludgeon. The torch swished by him and he rolled into Davin. Both went down.

Jace’s victim stayed down. The second man scrambled up, avoiding Davin’s quick grasp, only to meet Toryn’s torch. It caught him across the jaw and snapped him around to fall on Davin again. Davin climbed out from under him, muttering. Toryn already had the man’s sword in his hand, testing it for balance against the other. Jace picked up another and Brydon took the weapon Toryn decided was the lesser blade. Shevyn hefted a spear and Brydon took one of those, also.
Thus armed, they slipped out and found themselves in a similar corridor. More tunnels branched off and a stone stairway curved up and out of sight. They took the curving stairs and met no one on the way.

At the next floor, the stairs continued upward, most likely to the tower’s lookout post and possibly the roof. A long corridor led into the darkness and the sounds of shouting and the clatter of many booted feet greeted them, likely from guards sent by Reed to prevent Davin from rescuing them. Shevyn tugged at Brydon’s arm and pointed upward. They scrambled quickly up the stairs and paused again on the next landing.

"How do we get out of here?" Brydon hissed.

"How do we get our weapons back?" Toryn asked. Brydon nearly laughed. Trust Toryn to be worried about his jade-hilted sword.

"Follow Shevyn," Jace said. "She will know where your weapons are. Davin, will you come with me?"

"Where are you going?" Brydon asked, alarmed.

"To have a little talk with Reed." Jace smiled and stroked his sword.

"I’m coming with you," Brydon decided. Jace nodded. "I thought you might want to."

"Toryn?" Brydon asked.

"Shevyn and I will fetch our belongings and meet you... where?"

Shevyn mimed mounting and riding, then pawed and snorted like a horse.

"The stables."

"Good," Jace said, "We’ll meet you in the stables. If we are not there in half an hour leave without us, however you may. Toryn, take care of Shevyn. If anything happens to her, it could be disaster for us all."

Toryn nodded absently and the two of them slipped down the corridor. The other three took the stairs leading upward. Brydon hoped it would not be the last time he looked upon Toryn or Shevyn.

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Toryn trailed Shevyn, who seemed to know exactly where she was going. She ducked into an empty sitting room and continued on into a bedchamber. From there, she slid into an alcove. Toryn paused, but she reached out from the darkness and pulled him in after her. He followed her through the wall and a stone panel slid shut behind them. Who was she, to know the secret places of this castle? Another panel opened into an antechamber, this one occupied. They held still and silent and peered through the cracked opening as a woman puttered about the room, searching for something.
"Ah, there it is," she said and then snatched up a fan upon the seat of a nearby chair. She exited through a doorway. Shevyn pulled Toryn out of the concealed passage and crossed the room to a second door. The room they entered was unoccupied and opened into another corridor. They followed to another door and Shevyn opened it carefully before heaving a quiet sigh. Toryn smiled in satisfaction. The room was filled with weapons and armor. He could see by a single glance that it was no ordinary soldiers’ armor—this room was for display and safekeeping. Plate armor covered in etching stood in a place of honor. Several others were plated in gold and silver; nearby chain mail was polished to a glossy silver hue. Shields and standards proclaimed victories in battle, some of them scarred and torn. Swords were mounted upon the walls, each of them unique and beautiful. Toryn’s jade-hilted sword and Redwing’s family blade had been tossed upon a table, as if awaiting sorting.

Toryn lifted his sword and tossed the guard’s plain blade on the table in its stead. He strapped on Redwing’s sword and dagger and then buckled his own sword belt on as well, though he kept his blade in hand. Shevyn walked over to a very thin sword with an etched blade and a strange, pale-colored hilt. After sheathing it and buckling it on, she moved to grasp the hilt of another. This one was a broadsword that she could barely lift. She dragged it over to Toryn and he noticed it had a very plain silver hilt with a well-worn ebony grip.

"Jace’s?" he guessed. Shevyn nodded.

He took it and felt much better with three swords than he had with one, even though it was a burden. He swung Jace’s scabbarded blade over his shoulder and looked around the room; he saw a few things of value he was tempted to take, but he restrained himself for lack of time, not to mention the expectation of Redwing’s disapproving glare.

Footsteps sounded in the hallway and Shevyn flew by Toryn in a panic, but he grabbed her and pulled her behind a large open case that displayed polished horse armor. The footsteps continued past and they stood, staring at each other wildly for a moment.

"It is time we got out of here," he said and they headed for the door. Suddenly Toryn felt a strange sensation in his mind and knew instinctively that it was not Brydon. Inspiration seized him and rather than fight the intrusion, he cleared his mind and then concentrated on dice.

Now, he thought, if I throw them with a toss of my wrist just so, I should get seven every time. If I toss them with a backhand flick, I should get doubles. I need to win that money back so I can go find that wench in town again…. Come on, lucky four. The presence moved on, hopefully convinced that Toryn was a common soldier. He blew out his breath in relief. Shevyn tugged at him, her expression alarmed.

"Reed is looking for us," he explained. She bit her lip with a worried expression. They continued to the door and exited, but a moment later Toryn dashed back in and grabbed up Brydon’s bow and quiver.

"He would kill me if I left these!" Toryn whispered to Shevyn. They returned the way they had and then hurried down a wide corridor until a guard surprised them.

"Who are you and what are you doing here?" he demanded, obviously the bullying type.
Toryn’s sword spun and flashed as he turned and struck the man’s chain mail with a crunching sound. The guard grunted and staggered back. Toryn followed through with a stabbing thrust that cut through the thin links and pierced the guard’s overlarge gut.

The man tried to scream, but Shevyn was behind him and sliced her thin blade into the man’s unprotected neck. He was dead before the floor caught him. Toryn gaped at her for a moment—he would never have suspected her of ruthlessness. He shook off his surprise and they dragged the man quickly into the nearest room—the library?—before his blood could leave an obvious trail.

Toryn glanced around nervously and Shevyn unbuckled the man’s armor. He watched in puzzlement for a moment and then quickly assisted her. Shortly, Toryn was outfitted in the fine black leather of Ven-Kerrick, missing only the chain mail. The breastplate was too large for him, as was the rest of it, but the black cloak covered the flaws in the armor and disclosed no bloodstains. Shevyn carried Brydon’s bow and quiver. Jace’s sword was still slung over Toryn’s shoulder so only the hilt peeked above the collar of the cloak. He left Brydon’s sword and dagger buckled around his waist. His own sword he kept in hand. They departed the library and Shevyn marched behind him.

They walked openly down the marble steps to the entry hall, which was remarkably free of sentries, as those were probably rushing around the castle hunting them. They continued on, but before they entered the kitchens, Shevyn urged him to sheathe his sword. She moved in close to him and snuggled her head against his chest before pulling her hair down over her face. Toryn was rather surprised, feeling her softness and her arm around his waist, but she gestured him forward imperiously and then he understood.

He put his arm around her shoulder and pushed into the kitchen. Servants scurried to and fro preparing the midday meal, ordered about by a burly matron wielding a ladle. Toryn spotted the open doorway at the rear of the long room.

Two guardsmen could be seen beyond the door. Toryn pulled Shevyn toward a sturdy table upon which rested several loaves of steaming bread. He reached for one greedily and found his hand blocked by the ladle. He looked into the steely eyes of the matron.

"No soldiers in my kitchen!" she barked. Toryn gave the woman his most charming smile.

"I was hoping to share some of your magnificent cooking with my lady," he said glibly.

The woman took in Shevyn’s shabby appearance and snorted. "Lady, is she? Troll, you mean! I’ll have none of the likes of you in here, either! Bad enough to have that bastard’s thieving soldiers tramping through here taking food and abusing my folk without dragging harlots in, as well!"

The two guards near the door peered into the room, but the matron ranted on, "Be off with you! If I was a younger woman—" Her tirade halted suddenly as Shevyn reached out and laid a small hand on her arm. Shevyn raised her head and stared at the woman imploringly. The matron sucked in a breath, a prodigious feat that increased her already enormous bust-size.
"Adona save us all," Toryn heard the woman breathe and then she turned her steely gaze on the soldiers at the door.

"And you!" she bellowed loudly, "Are you lurking about for food, also? I'll teach you to befoul my kitchen with your stinking presence!" She picked up a nearby iron pot and hurled it at the men. It bounced unerringly off the helm of one with a loud gong that set the man reeling for a moment.

"Hey now!" the other cried. "Stop that, you crazy wench!" Another pot whizzed by his head and he ducked back. The woman brandished a large skillet and looked at Toryn, who threw up his arm.

"Nay!" he shouted. "Keep your mealy bread! We're going!" He and Shevyn ducked and ran for the door. The skillet clanged off the floor behind them. They hurried past the first soldier, who ignored them. His eyes were set on the kitchen mistress with deadly intent. The second soldier was in the doorway and they pushed past him, followed by the sound of shattering glass.

"Hey!" the second one called as they reached the black and white cobblestones of the inner courtyard, "We are all supposed to be watching for the escaped prisoners!"

"I’m off duty!" Toryn yelled back without turning or breaking stride. "You watch for them!" He glanced back over his shoulder in time to see a pewter mug bounce off the man’s shoulder. The soldier cursed and entered the kitchen, following his angry partner.

Shevyn slowed and then led Toryn at an unhurried pace across the courtyard. The few people about gave them a cursory glance and a wide berth. They made it to the stables unremarked-upon and Toryn sent the stable boy on a fictitious errand before he and Shevyn climbed quickly into the loft. Amazed that they had made it out unscathed, Toryn watched the castle anxiously for any sign of Redwing or the others.

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Brydon followed Jace’s confident steps and wondered what in Adona’s name they planned to do when they found Reed. They reached the third story and tromped down a corridor until they could see large, ornate double doors guarded by a single sentry.

"I thought we were going back to the Great Hall," Brydon whispered.

"We are." Jace smiled. "Can you think of any safe way to get past that guard?"

Brydon could not. They studied the problem for a moment and Brydon itched to have his bow. Just one arrow... But there was no help for it. He turned to Davin.

"I know what you can do, Davin," he said softly. "I’ve found you to be a valuable comrade in the past and that has not changed. If anything, you have become even more so. I will never treat you as anything other than my friend. Believe me when I say I do not think your powers are evil. I think they are a gift."

Davin’s strange grey-violet eyes searched Brydon’s intently and he looked at Jace, who seemed pleased at their conversation.
"You are Vai? You come from a noble people, Davin," Jace said. "I know nothing of your past, but if you fear your abilities, I beseech you to set your doubts aside and help us in any way you are able."

Davin sighed, but gave no other sign their words had reached him. Then he shimmered and disappeared, but where he had stood hovered a butterfly in marvelous hues of silver and violet. It flitted around the corner toward the guard, who continued to stare straight ahead, not noticing the butterfly when it landed on his shoulder. It paused, wings opening and closing slowly.

"How does he do that?" Brydon murmured. "Can he become anything he wants?" He felt fair to bursting with more questions he wanted to ask Jace, who seemed to know what Davin was, but now was not the time.

"I’ve never seen anything like that," Jace replied in an awed tone as the butterfly turned into a huge python whose coils wrapped around the guard’s neck.

The man dropped his spear and clutched at his throat, whirling about in panic. The tightening coils prevented him from crying out and Jace was there to catch the spear before it clattered to the ground. Brydon grabbed the guard and eased his limp form to the floor as the python released him and shimmered back into Davin.

"Marvelous!" Brydon exclaimed softly. He smiled and grasped Davin’s shoulder. Davin seemed a bit dazed and gave Brydon an uncertain look. Jace had already eased open the door and Brydon, after taking the guard’s sword, joined him. They entered a large sitting room, richly furnished and carpeted. Davin waited at the outer doors and Brydon followed Jace into a lavish bedchamber, tastefully furnished with dark wood and smoky grey and black highlights. A tapestry matching the one in the entry hung upon the wall. The room was obviously the king’s chamber.

Just as Brydon realized it, Reed entered the room from a different door. He froze upon spotting them and then dropped the coronet he held and reached for his sword.

Jace reacted first, moving across the room and diving into Reed. They both fell to the floor and rolled to their feet like cats, facing each other. Brydon watched as the two black-clad men circled each other. A delighted smile appeared on Jace’s face as Reed drew his weapon.

"How nice of the demon Vai to release you with the others," Reed snarled.

"Adona is on my side, Reed old fellow." Jace laughed. "What can you claim?"

Reed also laughed, harshly. "My lord and all his minions are at my right hand," he said.

"Your lord?"

"I am certain you know him."

"Indeed, I do," Jace goaded. "Are you afraid to say his name?"

Reed sneered in return and Jace stepped in with a blinding series of cuts that Reed countered, if not with ease, then with no difficulty. Brydon remembered how talented Reed was and stepped back, raising his borrowed sword, but he changed his mind. He hefted the spear he still carried and walked calmly to one corner of the room. He watched
the battle intently; amazed at the way Jace laughed and taunted Reed, all while parrying and twisting out of the way of Reed’s deadly blade. Brydon felt the smooth wood of the spear and waited. At the proper moment, he let fly and the missile sailed swift and true. It caught in the thick folds of Reed’s cloak where it gathered at the shoulder and dragged him backward to the floor.

Before he could disentangle himself from the spear and climb to his feet, Jace was on him, sword tip pressed against his throat.

"Greetings from my kingdom to yours." Jace grinned.

"Watch him, Jace," Brydon warned. "He likes to disappear."

Jace clucked his tongue. "I insist you stay," he said. "If I even think you are going to try and fade out, I will press this blade downward. Who knows? You might even make it before I cut through your throat."

Reed’s eyes spat flame, but he did not move.

"Where is the gauntlet?" Jace asked.

"Where you will never find it," Reed replied in a malicious tone.

"You might be surprised," Jace said and pressed the tip a bit deeper into Reed’s throat.

"I know you, weakling servant of Adona," Reed said, his voice rough through the pressure. "You will not torture me. It is against your precious laws."

Jace smiled coldly. "Perhaps it is. I suppose I can always take you to Shevyn and leave you to her tender mercies. I am sure she will be lenient with you." Reed paled, but the impasse did not last. Jace screamed and recoiled as if hit by a giant’s hand. His sword slipped away. Brydon stared in horror, realizing Reed had attacked Jace with a mental assault. Brydon had expected Jace to have some defense against Reed’s abilities. Reed knocked Jace’s sword aside and shot to his feet, slicing at the knight-priest with his own blade. The sword glanced off of Jace’s breastplate and Reed bolted for the door.

Brydon hurried to Jace, who had collapsed at the foot of the bed, clutching his head.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

Jace stood up with Brydon’s assistance and leaned against him weakly. "That... hurt," Jace rasped. "I did not think he would use his confounded powers with a sword at his throat."

"Can you walk?" Brydon asked and glanced at the door. Jace nodded. Brydon helped him to his feet and they entered the sitting room. The double-doors to the corridor stood wide open. They heard shouts and booted feet running their way. A quick glance down the corridor showed a large contingent of soldiers approaching.

"Where did Davin go?" Brydon asked, surprised that Reed had not encountered Davin on his way out. Jace grabbed him and pulled him back into the room. He slammed the door and shoved a chest of drawers in front of it.

"Pile more things up there," he ordered and ran back into the bedchamber. Brydon wondered why they were locking themselves in, but he dragged a large dressing table over and pushed it over to lean on the other, shattering a porcelain pitcher and bowl in the
process. As he pushed a heavy trunk in front of that he noticed Jace in the bedchamber behind one of the huge wall tapestries; only his black-booted feet showed as he hurried along the wall.

"What are you doing?" he called, looking around the room as he strained to push the heavy trunk across the thick carpet toward the door. There were no windows or other exits from the room. Shouts sounded from the corridor and heavy thumping sounded on the door.

"I am looking for... ah!" Jace called. Brydon shoved the trunk into place and turned. "Come here! Hurry!" Jace cried. Brydon ran to the dark space between the tapestries and the stone wall. He fumbled along until he reached Jace’s side. It was pitch-dark beneath the thick coverings.

"What are you doing?" Brydon hissed again. The banging sounds on the door became louder. Jace grabbed his arm and pulled.

"This way." He tugged Brydon through the wall and into utter blackness. Brydon stumbled as the ground dropped away from him. Jace caught him and pressed him against the wall. "Stairs," Jace said unnecessarily. "It’s a secret passage. I knew there would be one in the royal bedchamber. The Kerricks were no fools."

"Where does it go?" Brydon whispered as Jace slid the stone door shut quietly and blocked out the sounds of the splintering door in the other room.

"That I don’t know, but we will soon find out," Jace replied merrily. The steps curved down and down and finally ended. "I had hoped this would branch off and give us a few more options."

Before Brydon could reply, Jace swung open the stone portal and stepped through. They found themselves behind another tapestry or curtain, which they followed nervously to the end.

They found themselves in the Great Hall behind the throne. Jace breathed a sigh of relief. The room was empty.

"Reed did us a favor when he called the guards away, but it will not be long before he figures out where we have gone and sends them back. Let us get out while we can."

Out in entry hall, guards ran hither and yon, so they ducked into a corridor beneath the stairs and hurried into a darker alcove. They slipped into the shadows when a group of soldiers rushed by, heading for the Great Hall. Brydon knew their situation would only grow more desperate as news of their escape became known. They left the safety of the alcove and passed another when a hand reached out and snagged Brydon inside. Jace hissed and his sword arced, but a blade parried it and a voice whispered, "Jace! It’s me, Kerryn!"

Jace lowered the sword and Brydon relaxed.

"Is Shevyn safe?" Kerryn asked.

"We don’t know," Brydon replied. "She is with Toryn."
"He will turn her over to Reed!" Kerryn snapped. "Is that why you brought her back here?"

"Kerryn," Jace snapped, "Brydon has nothing to gain by giving her up to Reed. In fact, you are the one who will benefit most should anything befall her."

Kerryn sucked in a breath. "How dare you? I was ever loyal to her father and now to her!"

"Then, calm yourself. We are concerned only with her safety."

"We are taking Shevyn out of here," Brydon added. "Do you want to come with us?"

Kerryn shook his head after a long pause. "I must trust Jace to protect her. I will be of more use here, watching to see what Reed will do next. Many of us are still loyal and pray for his downfall."

"Good. If you discover anything useful, send word to Baron Jilyan in Bodor. We will try to be in contact with him." Jace paused and then asked, "Where are the Knight-Priests of the Gauntlet?"

"Koryn sent them away—months ago—to join Queen Ieron in Bodor. There have been border skirmishes with Parmitta and she requested assistance."

Jace blanched. "He sent them all? Is the danger real, or was it part of Reed’s scheme?"

"He sent every man of them. Either the threat is real or they have met with a serious mishap. The Gauntlet Knights have been gone nearly four months and I have heard no word from them or the Queen."

"And what of the Gauntlet? Where is it?"

Kerryn raised his blade involuntarily. Jace snarled. "We have no wish to steal it, fool! Reed told us himself that is it gone. Do you want his servants to put it to use?"

Kerryn lowered the blade. "No. It is a puzzle, why he sent away something so powerful. I had hoped he would try to wear the thing, but he obviously never touched it."

"What would have happened?" Brydon asked.

"He would have been killed instantly. No man can touch it, unless he is a direct descendent of Kerrick."

"The Gauntlet?" Jace prodded. "We must be gone from here, or Shevyn’s life will be forfeit."

"Of course. Take these—they will disguise you." Kerryn handed them two bundles of cloth—black uniforms and something else. "The smaller package is for Shevyn. From what I have overheard, the gauntlet has been sent to Silver."

"Silver?" Jace was surprised. "Why there?"

Kerryn shrugged. "I do not know. Reed does not confide in his underlings, especially those who hold loyalty to Ven-Kerrick. All I know is that it was sent by caravan to Silver."
"All right," Jace said. "Now, how do we get out of here?"
"I will help you," Kerryn said.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

SILVER

With Kerryn’s assistance, Brydon and Jace donned black clothing, cloaks, and helms before walking with relative safety through the main doors and into the courtyard. Jace pulled his cloak forward enough to cover his breastplate and disguise the red trim. They made it to the stables without being accosted and located Shevyn and Toryn concealed in a large tack room.

"Shevyn!" Kerryn exclaimed. He rushed forward and enfolded her in an embrace. She clutched him with a happy sob.

"No time for that," Jace said. "As you can see, she is safe, though not for long if we—"

Jace suddenly grabbed his temples with a loud cry and fell to his knees. Brydon recognized the signs. Reed! Brydon cast his mind out to Jace in order to help, somehow, but Jace began to speak. His voice was hoarse, as if he forced the words out with effort. After a shocked moment, Brydon realized he was praying.

"I claim victory for Your name’s sake. I put on the armor of Adona. I put on the girdle of truth. I put on the breastplate of righteousness. I put on the gauntlets of peace…” Jace’s voice grew stronger and the strain in his face relaxed somewhat. "…I take up the shield of love. I put on the helm of salvation. I grasp the sword of spiritual victory. In Your name’s sake I defeat the minions of Shaitan!" The last word rang in the small room and Jace got shakily to his feet. He looked at Brydon triumphantly. "Apparently, Reed has an aversion to the Holy Word. He was trying to discover our location. Kerryn, tell us how to get out of here before he tries again."

"There is no easy way," Kerryn protested. "The gates are shut and guarded. The only way is for me to go up to the tower and open them myself so that you may ride through to safety."

Brydon rolled his eyes at the idiotic selflessness of the man. Toryn did not quite manage to subdue his guffaw.

"You would get yourself chopped within minutes and we would be cut down with arrows on our way out," Jace said. "No, there has to be an easier way..."

Shevyn cleared her throat. They turned to see her leaning against a door that had appeared in the flat wall.

Jace laughed. "I should have known. This castle is rife with secret passages."

"How did you know of this one?" Brydon asked her even though he expected no answer and received none. "Where does it lead? Beyond the outer walls?"

Shevyn nodded.

"Excellent. Let’s get out of here," Toryn said adamantly.
Kerryn stood watch near the doors as they collected their horses and led them through the tack room and into the dark passage beyond. Toryn gave Jace the reins of a tall chestnut stallion that almost looked like Fireling, but without white markings.

"Shevyn got him for you," Toryn explained. "As well as this." He handed Jace a broadsword with an ebony grip.

"Marvelous girl." Jace smiled. "This is my own blade and Archangel, my stallion. She remembered." He took the horse and led him after Shevyn.

"Wait!" Brydon exclaimed softly. "What about Davin?" He noticed that Toryn had brought Davin’s sorrel gelding. He was mortified that he had completely forgotten about Davin in the excitement.

"Do not worry about him. He will probably annoy them long enough for us to escape. It will be difficult for them to catch a panther, or a wolf, or a gypsy moth," Jace said. Brydon nodded, appeased. Kerryn looked at them in puzzlement.

"What do you mean by that?"

The sound of booted feet came to them with a jangling of mail and Kerryn gave them a parting salute. "I will mislead them," he said. "Hurry."

Brydon needed no further prompting. He and Toryn towed Fang, Darkling, and Davin’s horse into the secret doorway and closed it shut behind them, trusting Kerryn to conceal the opening from the other side.

The passage was dark, but Shevyn carried a torch and the dim light made Jace and the horses appear as dark silhouettes. The corridor was barely wide enough for the horses and they snorted fearfully, not at all liking the trapped feeling. Neither did Toryn, as his dark muttering revealed. They followed the passage in a long, roundabout, downward path and Brydon noticed several other branches that led off from the tunnel they traveled. He wondered how much of a maze they had entered and hoped Shevyn knew where to take them.

After a dark eternity, they slowed and then stopped.

"What’s happening?" Toryn asked.

"Jace?" Brydon called. "Why have we stopped?"

"I have no idea," Jace replied helpfully and Brydon relayed the statement to Toryn, who muttered almost inaudibly. They heard another grating sound and then they were traveling on again, having entered another concealed passage that branched off from the main one.

"Close the door behind you, Toryn," Brydon suggested.

"How am I supposed to get around the horses?" Toryn asked.

"Squeeze by. I think there is room enough here."

He heard Toryn grunt and swear as he tried to get past his obstinate mare, and then a yelp and the muffled whopping of a fist on horseflesh. And then more swearing.

"What is taking so long?" Brydon asked.
"Stupid, flea-bitten, lop-eared mare stepped on my foot!"

Brydon grinned and continued down the passage. Time was a lost concept in the winding tunnels and he soon grew too tired to be tense. At long last, they reached a cavern too large to believe at first. It was dimly lit by sunlight that showed through cracks in the ceiling.

"What is this place? It looks like a hollowed out mountain," Toryn whispered in an awed tone. "You could fit an army in this cavern!" Shevyn was already at the farthest wall, tugging on what was probably another door. Brydon went to help her.

"That is probably what Kerrick had in mind," Jace said and checked his saddle. "He could bring horses and men through the tunnels one at a time and gather them here. When he had a large enough force, he could let them out to attack the enemy from the rear."

"Until the enemy followed them back in here."

Jace shook his head. "If a force entered here, they would be forced through the tunnels one by one. They would be easily picked off that way. Not to mention the likelihood of them getting lost in the warrens."

"If Reed is the king of Ven-Kerrick, then surely he knows about this passage! Won’t he be waiting outside with a garrison?"

Jace smiled wearily and shook his head. "He will not be waiting."

"How do you know?"

Brydon and Shevyn had succeeded in opening a large portal, letting in the bright sunlight of afternoon. Brydon turned to hear Jace’s response to Toryn’s question.

"He is not waiting outside because he is not the king of Ven-Kerrick," Jace clarified as he mounted his stallion. He rode through the stone gate at a trot, leaving Brydon to stare after him in amazement. The others filed out and Brydon dragged the gates closed again. From the outside, the opening resembled nothing more than the rock face of a cliff embankment. The castle was nowhere to be seen.

"It is beyond that rise," Jace explained. "This place is well-concealed."

"If Reed isn’t the king, then who is? And who is Reed?" Brydon asked as he double-checked the stone doorway. It looked absolutely natural—a chunk of rock with a crack running down the side. As he mounted he judged the time to be mid-afternoon. It was difficult to believe that a few hours ago he had ridden hopefully into Ven-Kerrick, relishing the end of his quest. Now it seemed his quest had started anew.

"That is a subject I am not at liberty to discuss," Jace said. "There is too much at stake right now."

Brydon exchanged a glance with Toryn.

"So where do we go now?" Toryn asked.

"My quest remains the same," Brydon replied. "I have to find the gauntlet." The knowledge that Reed was not the king of Ven-Kerrick had lightened his spirits considerably. If he found the gauntlet now, there would be no one to gainsay him taking it to Falara.
"We do not even know where it is!"

"Of course we do. It’s in Silver," Brydon said.

Toryn heaved a long-suffering sigh. "What are we waiting for, then? Let us get to Silver."

As they rode, Jace recounted a brief history of the Principality of Silver. Toryn cared little for history, outside of Redol and Falara, but the tale was bizarre. "Silver was originally a large kingdom, but the king of Silver has so many sons that he divided the whole of it up into parts and doled it out to them. The decision has helped avoid many a family squabble, and has started many another. Two or more of the sons are always at war with each other and the battles tend to start over the usual things brothers fight about: border disputes, women, insults, chess games. But these brothers have the power to fight real wars, much to the irritation of the king, who probably laments his decision more and more each day. Still, few of the princes have actually been killed and those that remain usually make up within a few months and became allies again."

There were apparently twelve surviving brothers and the one whose land they approached was possibly the greediest of the lot, as he possessed more wealth than any of the others. They were sprawled around the fire that evening when Davin strolled into camp as if he had just taken a brief jaunt.

"Davin! Well met! How did you escape?" Toryn asked eagerly as he leaped up to grasp his arm. Davin seemed surprised at the touch.

"They were so upset over the disappearance of the girl that they gave up chasing me in order to search for her. Reed surrounded himself with a knot of soldiers, but I managed to keep him from using his powers to seek you out. Once you were away, I went over the wall and came after you. Reed has sent three contingents of soldiers to find you. One went to Penkangum, one to Bodor, and one is directly behind me, heading this way. They've stopped for the night by now. If we depart early, we can outrun them."

"Sorry to have left you, Davin, but it seems Jace was right when he said you are able to fend for yourself."

Davin shrugged. "It's a bit easier to take care of yourself and not have others to worry about. I've had quite a bit of practice looking after myself."

Toryn grinned. "But if not for Brydon, who would you have to insult?"

Brydon bounced a rock off Toryn’s thigh and he yelped before throwing him a glare.

"There is something to companionship," Davin agreed. He took some blankets from his horse, made them into a bed, and went to sleep.

They departed early in order to maintain their lead over Reed’s soldiers, and left the boundary of Ven-Kerrick to enter the Principality of Obelisk. Neither Jace nor Davin knew why it was so named.
Silver was a pretty land with thick forests and rolling hills of green as far as the eye could see. The elevation was higher than Penkangum and it was with relief that they left the bristly desert behind them and entered the cooler woodlands of Silver. They rode for two days, staying away from the main road, and saw few people, but Jace led them by roundabout means to the capital city.

"Behold the city of Kaaza, home of Prince Berikon. He believes he should be the next king of Silver, even though he’s one of the youngest princes," Jace said as they topped a rocky ridge and looked into a long valley containing a high-walled city. "It would be wise to avoid the city altogether, but we need information. If we enter in smaller groups we will be less obvious. We should probably leave the horses concealed outside, but someone might remain with them to prevent theft."

Toryn was silent, having no intention of avoiding the possibility of decent food and drink in order to horse-sit.

"I can maintain a link with Darkling," Brydon suggested. "If someone should discover them, Darkling will alert us. I can also track him if it becomes necessary."

"I can stay with the horses," Davin offered, but Brydon shook his head.

"We all need to wash away Reed’s stench and a hot meal will be welcome."

Jace shrugged and consented. "Kaaza’s baths are exceptional. If the horses alert Brydon, Davin can take wing and get to them before the rest of us. They should be safe for one evening. We will find the path of the gauntlet quicker with four of us asking questions about shipments from Ven-Kerrick."

They built a makeshift corral from deadfalls and brush, though Brydon doubted the horses would stray after he gave them a mental suggestion to hold tight. Toryn and Shevyn entered the city together, posing as a peasant couple. Jace and Brydon followed as couriers from the church, which earned them barely a glance from the city guard. Davin slipped into the city through his own method.

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They went immediately to the city baths, which were not crowded due to the early hour. Jace stopped Shevyn before she entered the women’s side of the bath and pressed a cloth bundle into her hands.

"We will be across the street at the Emerald Inn, should you linger," he said. She nodded and disappeared into the dark interior.

After a wickedly hot bath, Toryn and the others entered the main room of the inn. Jace left them briefly to seek out the local church and ask for information. The others ordered a meal and soon dined on bean soup and a large ham shank, along with cups of chilled wine. As predicted, Shevyn had not finished her bath. Jace appeared as they were finishing the last of the soup.
He sat down and spoke quietly. "I stopped at the Temple of Might. They were unaware that the gauntlet had disappeared and they are sending inquiries to Bodor to determine the whereabouts of the Gauntlet Knights. They know Reed is now king in Ven-Kerrick, although the Concurrence Council has not yet convened to debate the matter. The council meeting is scheduled for later this week, which could work in our favor. I doubt Reed will abandon Ven-Kerrick to chase us this close to a council session. He needs their approval to remain in control." Jace sighed heavily. "This news is not well known, so please keep it to yourselves. The entire royal family died after a long illness, during which time King Koryn made it clear that Reed was to be regent. Reed apparently has documents signed by Koryn’s own hand."

"Reed could have taken his mind and forced him to sign anything!" Brydon protested.

Jace shook his head. "Not so. The Kerricks have always had formidable mental skills. Vai blood runs strong in their veins. It has to be a deeper plot. Something more involved."

"You mentioned that word to Davin—Vai. What does it mean?"

Jace looked surprised. "How can you know nothing of the Vai when you have your own abilities? You saved me from Reed in Ven-Kerrick."

"I don’t know where these powers come from, or even what they are. I thought I was unique, until I met Reed."

Jace rubbed his fingers over his forehead as if wearied. "Someone has been remiss in your history lessons. Many people prefer to ignore the existence of the Vai, but I had expected the Order to be true to the facts, even in far Falara. However, we don’t have the time for that now. As we ride, I will try to make up for your lack of education. Right now we need to find out where the last caravan from Ven-Kerrick is bound. The palace has records of every shipment, but prying such information out of Prince Berikon will be difficult and expensive, if not impossible. Better to try the guards at both gates. Between us, we should have enough coin to loosen some tongues. Brydon, you and Toryn can try the men at the northern gate while Davin and I ask the southern guards. After that we will try the marketplace, if necessary."

Brydon glanced toward the doorway and said, "Toryn might want to stay here. I think he will have his hands full." He gestured and Toryn turned to see Verana and Alyn standing in the doorway.

Toryn leaped to his feet, as did Davin and Jace. Alyn was attired in a fringed leather dress of bright sky blue. Toryn stared at her, shocked to realize he had never before seen her in feminine clothing.

"Hello, Davin," she said as she walked closer. She smiled up at the silver-haired man and grasped his hand. Davin flushed and nodded before he regained his seat. Alyn’s brow furrowed as she looked at him, as if she struggled to remember something. She sighed and then turned to Toryn, whose jaw had clenched slightly while he witnessed the interaction.

"Toryn." She smiled sweetly and beamed at her. Then a fist smacked into his stomach, causing his breath to whoosh out painfully. "You slime-spawned Redolian range rat!" she
hissed. "What do you mean, running away with my horses? Did you think I would not find you?"

Torryn coughed, off-balance for an instant. "Did you leave your brains in Akarska?" he asked hoarsely. "You told me yourself that they were unclaimed."

"It’s still thievery to take any horse from Akarska," she snapped, azure eyes flashing. She was a bit thinner and paler than when they had first met, but other than that she seemed to have returned to normal.

"Even if it was done to save your bloody life?" Torryn demanded.

She flushed at that and looked away, apparently with no ready reply. "I thank you all for that," she said, "but I still want my horses back."

"They are not your horses," Torryn said with a sneer, warming to the old habit of arguing with her.

Her eyes flashed fire and she entered the fray.

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"How did you find us?" Brydon asked Verana as he slipped easily back into the habit of ignoring the quarreling pair.

"Alyn would not be put off once she discovered you had taken her horses. I decided to accompany her as a guide."

"Thank Adona you did not go to Ven-Kerrick," he said. "Your reception would not have been good."

"I thought you had mentioned going to Silver. We were meant to stop in Ven-Kerrick and ask for news, but we encountered some servants fleeing the castle. They told a frightful tale of King Koryn and his sons dead, and the castle overrun with soldiers under the command of a strange magician. I came here straightaway to determine the validity of the tale. We planned to eat first and then attend the baths, so here we are."

She turned her attention to Jace, who had moved to stand before her. She grinned and threw her arms around his neck in an exuberant hug that he heartily returned.

"I see you have met the finest knight-priest ever to walk this land," she said to Brydon.

"You know him?" he asked, surprised.

"Oh, yes. We trained in Kaneelis together long ago, before he went to G’Neel Across the Sea. You have not changed much in five long years, Jace."

"You have only become more beautiful, Verana. When are you going to marry me?"

"When are you going to ask me and mean it? When are you going to stop wandering and settle down?" she countered.

"Ah, Verana." He sighed as he set her aside. "Already you sound like a nagging wife."
She giggled and shook her head with obvious fondness.

Brydon asked, "Trained together? Are you a healer, also?" It was possible, though quite rare, to have training in more than one order. Jace shook his head.

"No. My destiny lies in another direction."

"Yes, destroying the minions of evil," Verana stated.

Jace caressed the hilt of his sword and grinned. "The peaceful life of a healer is not for me, Verana. I joined the Brotherhood of the Shield for a reason."

"Adona has used you in other ways, Jace," Verana said gently and placed a hand on his arm. "You protect the innocent and defenseless. I cannot say as much."

Jace smiled at her and Brydon wondered if they might once have been more than friends.

Shevyn entered the inn, looking lovelier than Brydon could have imagined. Her honey-brown hair had been braided into a coronet upon her head and she wore a white blouse frothed with lace. Her skirt was floor-length in dark blue satin. Brydon had come to appreciate the short skirt she had been wearing, but he had to admit that the dress made her even lovelier. As she came closer, her eyes bored into his and his breath caught in his throat. No longer the captured slave girl; she was gorgeous. Every man in the room gazed at her and likely shared his opinion.

Alyn turned to see what had caught Toryn’s attention and she stiffened. Shevyn approached Brydon and squeezed herself next to him on the bench.

"Alyn, Verana," he said. "This is Shevyn. She joined us not long ago."

Alyn looked at Toryn, who smiled at Shevyn in unabashed admiration. Verana’s brow wrinkled and she threw an odd glance to Jace, who nodded.

"Toryn bought her, actually," Davin added. Brydon grinned as Toryn stared at Davin, horrified, and Alyn’s eyes widened.

"Bought?"

"I can explain…" Toryn said lamely.

"Don’t bother," Alyn snapped. She huffed away from him and sat down next to Davin, who grinned wickedly. Brydon chuckled.

"Hello," Verana said to Shevyn with a warm smile. Shevyn managed a slight smile and a nod, and then looked at Brydon, who ordered food and drink for the newcomers from a passing barmaid.

"If she’s your slave, Toryn, why is Brydon waiting on her hand and foot?" Alyn asked peeviously.

"She’s not a slave," Toryn said as he regained his seat. "We purchased her in order to save her from slavers intent on taking her to Tar Tan."

Alyn blanched. "Whatever. I’ll be leaving as soon as you return my horses. Where are they?"
"You are not taking the horses," Toryn said adamantly. "And we left them in the forest so no one could report our presence back to Reed."

Alyn flung herself to her feet, chest heaving in anger. "Try and stop me!" she growled and spun on a heel. Toryn was after her in an instant. He snatched her arm and spun her back to him, catching her around the waist with his free hand. Their faces were very close as they glared at each other. Davin climbed to his feet and stood watching them intently.

Spectators in the bar cheered as Alyn raised her hand, no doubt to do some damage to Toryn’s handsome face.

"Toryn is right, Alyn," Jace cut in, stopping her hand in mid-swing. She looked at him in irritation.

"I don’t know you," she said. "What are you talking about?"

"I am Jace the Wanderer, Knight-priest of the Shield. You may accompany us if you wish, but we need those horses."

"I care nothing for that!" Her voice was cold as an ice storm. She glared at them all for a moment. Brydon wondered how she intended to make off with the horses with the lot of them determined to stop her. She tore herself out of Toryn’s grasp and stalked upstairs.

Brydon smiled. "You see, Toryn? You’re going to have more than enough to do, trying to convince her to leave us the horses."

Toryn snorted. "We should tie her to the back of Fireling and point him toward Akarska. Even if she comes with us she’ll be nothing but trouble, although she is a fair hand with a whip."

"I wouldn’t mind having her along in case something should happen to one of the horses. She can care for them better than any of us," Brydon said pragmatically. "Besides, do you really want her to leave?"

Toryn flushed and shrugged. "If you want her along, she can come."

"Then I suggest you go outside and stop her from climbing out the window right now," Brydon said. Toryn gaped at him for an instant before he leapt up and ran out the door. He returned shortly, dragging a struggling Alyn who cursed him with words most of them had likely never heard before.

"She’s pretty fast. She was already down and running for the city gate before I got out there." Toryn grinned. "Shall I tie her up?"

"No need," Brydon said. "Let me have a talk with her, in private."

Alyn, when released, angrily followed Brydon back outside.

"He is such a… a…” she began.

"I know, but this isn’t about Toryn. We have a very serious situation here, Alyn, and we could use your help." She was quiet. "The Gauntlet of Ven-Kerrick has disappeared and Reed has taken over the throne. I’m not sure if you remember him, but he is the one who bought the horses from the slavers that captured you. His band has taken large groups of horses to Bodor—and they have been doing it for years."
She digested that and her angry, skeptical expression changed to one of curiosity. "Why Bodor?" she asked.

"We don’t know. The gauntlet and the horse thefts could be related."

"What is this gauntlet? I’ve never heard of it."

Brydon gaped at her. For the first time, she truly seemed to be a foreigner. Everyone had heard of the Gauntlet of Ven-Kerrick!

"It’s the most powerful object in the…"

"Never mind," she said, waving her hand. "Are you telling me the truth about the horses?"

"I’m a knight-priest. I don’t lie."

Her brows rose for a moment. "You are?" She shook her head and then went on, "Since I’ve already traveled this far from home, I might as well look into this horse-stealing. I’ll help you look for this gauntlet if you promise we will track the stolen horses and get them back. I’m also taking the horses you smuggled out of Akarska."

"Fair enough," Brydon said, knowing it was useless to argue with an Akarskan when horses were involved.

"It had better not take forever to find your ‘powerful object’ either!"

"Don’t worry on that score—whatever Reed has planned, I have a bad feeling we might already be too late."

When they returned to the common room, Alyn was thoughtful and subdued. She refused to look at Toryn and sat down and began to eat as though nothing had happened.

"What did you say to her?" Toryn asked.

Brydon shrugged and smiled. "I told her about the stolen horses Reed has been running down to Bodor."

Toryn rolled his eyes. "Of course. Why didn’t I think of that?"

"I’m just more intelligent, I suppose."

"When I get those horses back," Alyn said primly, "I intend to also retrieve the ones that you wrongfully took from Akarska."

"Would you rather we had left you in the clutches of Reed?" Toryn snapped. "I’m sure you would make a fine Tar-Tanian slave. They probably would have to beat you for six or seven weeks to make you behave, but other than that…"

Alyn shot to her feet again. "How dare you speak to me that way!" she shouted. She snatched up the knife that had been provided with her meal and slashed at Toryn, who threw himself backward to avoid the blade and ended up on the floor.

"You little demon!" he growled as he got to his feet. "I’m going to take you upstairs and give you a proper thrashing for that!"

"Try it!" she snarled. She jumped forward and sliced at him again, but he was ready for her. He grabbed her arm and squeezed until the knife clattered to the floor. Then he
hefted her over his shoulder and carried her up the stairs. The rowdier inn patrons cheered as they disappeared.

Davin stood up and left the tavern. Brydon stared after him worriedly. Shevyn gaped at them and Verana gasped. "My goodness! Should we go help her?"

"Ah… I think she can handle Toryn," Brydon replied. He mentally eavesdropped for a moment to be certain, and then flushed and withdrew. "I think they’re done fighting."

"The longer we tarry, the farther the object may get from us," Jace commented.

Brydon sighed and looked to the door where Davin had disappeared. "I’ll take Davin with me and go ask some questions. I don’t think he wants to be here right now." He ignored Shevyn’s questioning look and reflected that it was sometimes nice to be with a woman who could not ask any questions.

He and Davin headed for the northern gate of Kaaza and tried to come up with a plausible story on the way.

"State your business," the guard said in a bored voice when they stopped in front of him.

"I am Brydon Redwing, Knight-Priest of the Lance. I am trying to locate a shipment that recently traveled through here from Ven-Kerrick. Do you remember any such caravan?"

The guard looked at him more closely. "Maybe I do and maybe I don’t," he said. "How important is this news to you?"

"I am trying to locate my cousin, who is a guardsman with the caravan. His father is dying and asks for him," Brydon lied in an attempt to appeal to the guard’s sympathy. The guard rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Pretty important, then. How much is it worth to you?" Brydon shrugged. He could pay the man, but such information should not be hard to come by. Someone in the marketplace or the southern gate was bound to have noticed such a caravan.

"I’ll ask elsewhere," he decided.

When he and Davin were out of earshot of the greedy guardsman, Davin said, "He saw the caravan. It came through here a week ago."

Brydon looked at him sharply and Davin smiled sardonically. "I have taken no priestly vows and the weak-minded are easy to read. It will save us time."

Brydon had no comment. He despised the idea of invading another’s mind without permission, but marveled at Davin’s skill to be able to do so without the man noticing. "How did you do that?" he asked. "When Reed was in my mind, I felt it."

"Those with Vai blood can usually sense an intrusion. Others can feel it, but not know what it is – they merely think they have a strange headache or are coming down with an illness. Our powers are not common knowledge, after all, except in the case of the Kerricks. Most assumed their abilities to be divinely granted by Adona through the gauntlet."

"Who are the Vai?" Brydon asked. "And how could I have Vai blood? My parents never showed any sign of having special abilities."
Davin shrugged. "I only knew two other Vai until I encountered you and Reed. One was my mother. She told me the Vai have always been here. I never knew my father. My mother was a bit… odd. We lived far from the village and people called her a witch. She used her powers often and rarely spoke aloud to me, preferring to communicate mentally. She warned me never to use my abilities near the humans because they would fear me and try to kill me. It took me a long time to learn to speak. She never told me anything of her past, nor ever mentioned the name of my father." He was quiet for a moment.

"The other Vai was a wandering priest. He visited us on occasion and told me about my powers. He taught me how to use them, though he never said where they came from. I don’t think he knew. Strangely, he could not change shape like I can. I’ve never met anyone else with that ability; even Reed wanted me to teach him."

"Is that why you weren’t thrown in the dungeon with the rest of us?" Brydon asked.
Davin nodded.

The shadows lengthened as they returned to the inn. Jace was not in the common room, but Toryn was seated at a table looking morose and drinking from a large goblet of ale. Shevyn sat next to him, sharpening her sword on a whetstone. Brydon and Davin joined them.

"Where’s Alyn?" Brydon asked.
Toryn flushed. "She’s upstairs. She’s a little… well, irritated with me right now."
Brydon was tempted to ask why, but figured Toryn did not want to discuss it, so he just grinned. He glanced at Shevyn. "What’s that about?" he asked Toryn, who shrugged.

"She had a bit too much attention from the rogues in here, so she fetched her blade. They haven’t come around for a while. Did you find anything?"

"The caravan entered Kaaza a week ago."

Jace approached in time to hear the statement. He said, "And it departed that same day, it seems. The guard at the southern gate was not helpful, but a young boy eavesdropping nearby was full of information after I slipped him a few silvers. He was a clever boy. He thought it most odd that a large contingent of Ven-Kerrick soldiers escorted six wagonloads of fruit. Another interesting tidbit is that Prince Berikon sent out a troop of guardsmen earlier today. Rumor has it they are heading for Sar-Tela. They could also be chasing the caravan."

"How did the Ven-Kerrick group get through the city without anyone checking their cargo?" Brydon asked.

"They probably paid their merchant toll plus a bribe," Davin explained. "This isn’t Penkangum, where they initiate mandatory cargo searches to hunt for smuggled items."

Jace nodded. "We should get moving. I want to trail Berikon’s men until we discover for certain where they are heading. We also shouldn’t linger too long in one place. Reed is likely to be searching for us—or at least for Shevyn—and we are not exactly a nondescript group."

Brydon sighed. He had been looking forward to sleeping in a real bed again, but Jace was right. Toryn groaned.
They departed Kaaza in small groups before the gates closed for the night, keeping a close eye out for anyone that might have followed them from the city. After retrieving the horses, they headed south once more.

CHAPTER TWENTY

SAR-TELA

They rode only a short distance from Kaaza before stopping for the night and camping without fire. After they had eaten a cold meal, the girls went to forage for edible roots that Verana claimed grew in the area. Davin accompanied them.

Brydon combed burrs from Darkling’s tail and then turned to the Bodorii knight-priest. "Jace, tell me about Reed."

Toryn, who lounged against a nearby tree, nodded. "Why would Reed send the gauntlet away? If anyone could put such power to use, I’d expect it to be him."

Jace shrugged. "I’m not completely certain, but I have some suspicions. You should know what the stakes are before you get involved. As northerners, this really isn’t your battle. You are not part of the Concurrence."

"It’s already too late for that," Toryn said. "I feel like we’re neck deep and sinking."

With a sense of foreboding, Brydon agreed.

Jace said, "When I rode into Ven-Kerrick I was taken immediately. The information I gleaned from servants who brought my meals was sketchy, at best. Reed had been a well-known occupant of the castle, and had been for nearly a year.

"Koryn was king in Ven-Kerrick up until two months ago when the entire royal family mysteriously died. They told me it was a dreadful sickness, but it would have been more plausible if there had been victims outside the royal family. A couple of council members also perished; not surprisingly, they were loyal to the Kerricks. I’m convinced that Reed murdered King Koryn, Queen Onara, and the two princes, Kayn and Iyn." Jace spoke in a hushed voice and his face was drawn in sadness. "I knew them well. I challenged Reed in a fit of anguish, but he laughed and waved me away as though I were insignificant. I knew it was only a matter of time before he had me killed—he was simply waiting to see if I could be of use.

"It’s not difficult to determine how he seized power. Apparently, King Koryn sent away all the Knight-Priests of the Gauntlet and Reed replaced them with his own handpicked mercenaries. Once the royal family was gone, there were none to gainsay him."

"But the knight-priests will return!" Brydon said.

"To what end? As far as anyone knows, Reed is the rightful regent. Even if they return, they won’t expect danger in Ven-Kerrick. The bishop in Kaaza is sending word to Bodor, Silver, and Kaneelis, but all we have are suspicions of foul play. It’s unlikely the Church will intervene, but at least they will be aware of the situation."

"Unlikely to intervene?" Toryn asked. "I though the church was supposed to right all wrongs and crush all evildoers."
Jace sighed. "The church cannot blatantly intervene in secular affairs. When Koryn sent the Gauntlet Knights away, their obligation to protect him ended. I’m sure they would fight if they returned to find Reed on the throne, but they would do so without the official sanction of the archbishop in Kaneelis."

"But it’s Ven-Kerrick!" Brydon protested.

Jace looked at him with a brief smile. "You are from the north, Brydon. You’ve been regaled with the glorious tales of Kerrick’s bravery, the magic of the gauntlet and the protective power of Ven-Kerrick. It’s different here. The Four Kingdoms resent the power of the Overking. They fight in Council and complain that the need for Ven-Kerrick has passed. Tar-Tan has always been rebellious; they have broken the Concurrence more than once. There has been no real trouble since Eldryd crushed the Regency in Silver in 192, and many Silverans still resent Ven-Kerrick for that interference. The gauntlet has not been used in battle since 156. After a hundred and fifty years of peace, people forget the threat of war. There no longer seems a need for the Overking."

Brydon was shaken by Jace’s assertions. "And now the Kerricks are gone. What difference will it make if the gauntlet is never returned?"

"The male line seems to have ended," Jace admitted. "But some research will have to be done. I vaguely remember a rumor about one of the original Kerrick sons disappearing, although it would be nearly impossible to track down his line after all these years. In any event, it’s not our position to determine the survival of the Concurrence. We must find the gauntlet and let fate decide the rest."

They moved out shortly before dawn and decided to follow the patrol that had departed Kaaza the previous day. The patrol was mounted, which spoke of the importance of their mission, whatever it might be.

"Do you think they are after the gauntlet?" Brydon asked.

"If Prince Berikon found out about the gauntlet, it’s a distinct possibility. He is extremely power-hungry. I’m surprised he’s not already in league with Reed."

"Maybe he is, and Reed neglected to mention the gauntlet."

Jace laughed. "That would not surprise me."

The patrol was large and made no effort to conceal itself, so Jace and Toryn had no trouble tracking it. They also stayed largely to the road. Brydon, of course, knew where they were at all times, but Jace and Toryn were enjoying themselves, so he didn’t bring it up. They stopped for a quick meal at noonday. Obelisk was thickly forested and the trees were welcome shade from the warm sun. The weather had been spectacular since they had left Ven-Kerrick.

When they camped, Brydon judged the patrol far enough out of range to risk a fire. Toryn cooked, as usual, assisted by Shevyn. Alyn curried the horses diligently. She had been impressed by Jace’s stallion, Archangel, and had barely harassed Jace over his ownership. He had politely produced papers for her inspection.
Verana sat close to Jace, dexterously removing the seeds from a cluster of pink berries she had picked earlier; they were apparently a remedy for fever or some such. Davin honed a dagger.

Jace leaned back against a mossy stump, dislodging a spider that scurried toward Verana. She paused in her task and reached down a hand, allowing the thumb-sized creature to climb aboard. Brydon stared in horror, having no liking for spiders. She noticed his gaze and smiled.

"It’s not poisonous," she commented. She transferred the arachnid to her other hand and set it on a nearby branch. It scurried behind a leaf and effectively disappeared.

"I would have squashed it," Toryn said with a grimace.

"It is not necessary to destroy everything that you fear," Verana admonished.

"No," Jace said. "That is Reed’s way."

Toryn snorted. "He must be deathly afraid of us then, because he keeps trying to kill us."

They traveled until nearly noon the next day before Jace announced, "I know where they’re going. There is a river crossing ahead. If we hurry, we can get there first."

They urged their tired mounts on a roundabout course around the patrol to outdistance them. By nightfall, they had reached a river crossing manned by guards of both Prince Berikon and Prince Merator. The guards on the Obelisk side were reluctant to part with any information on the caravan, but Toryn’s suggestion that the Sar-Telan guards would tell them for less money persuaded them—for a minimal fee—to admit that the caravan had passed through. Twelve merchants wearing the black and grey armor of Ven-Kerrick apparently guarded the caravan, which carried a cargo of early red melons, hard to find in Silver at this time of year.

At the next crossroads, a kind villager informed them that the wagons had passed through the town and split up; half of them went toward the City of Roses while the other half took the southern road that led to Vineyard, land of Prince Amerryn.

Jace thanked the informant and growled to himself as they continued on the road to the city. "What if the gauntlet is not in this caravan at all?" Brydon asked. "What if the whole thing is only a decoy?"

Jace ran a frustrated hand through his hair. "This is the only information we have! For all we know, Reed could have sent the damned thing away with a single rider. I only hope that he would not risk it being stolen and protects it with armed guards. If it is with this caravan, it has most likely gone with the southern contingent, as Merator is not the type to be involved in a conspiracy. He is too honest. Amerryn has a streak of mischievousness that I do not entirely trust—he is the youngest of the Silveran princes. West of Sar-Tela is Overlook. The prince there is S'Lor. He has a lust for money, but he stays mostly to himself and does not seem to crave power like some of the others. South could be either Rakyn or Reboryx and I know little about either of them, except that Reboryx tends to be careless. He has lost a lot of land in bad dealings with his brothers." Jace pounded a fist on his saddle. "For all we know, they could be taking it through Silver to Parmitta. But why? Why take it anywhere?"
Verana gasped. "Jace!" she breathed. "I had nearly forgotten until now! Brydon found a Parmittan sacrificial dagger in Reed’s belongings. Reed could be a priest of Shaitan."

Jace halted his horse and thought hard for a moment. After a while, he shook his head.

"If he is a priest, he is keeping his sacrificial activity to a minimum. Either that or he is very good at concealing it. Even if he merely is a minion of Shaitan, it would not explain why he would send the gauntlet to Parmitta. They are all barbarous heathens—they would not know how to tap its secrets."

"Perhaps they want to destroy it. Don’t they hate the gauntlet?"


Brydon shrugged. "I think we have to split up and follow both caravans."

Jace sighed and nodded. "It’s the only way to be sure. I will go west and speak to Merator. I’ve had dealings with him before and it should be a swift matter for me to seek information and hurry to join you if the gauntlet isn’t there."

"What about the girls?" Toryn asked.

"I’m not letting you out of my sight, horse thief," Alyn said. Shevyn kneed her horse over to Brydon and looked at Jace defiantly. Jace shrugged and said, "Davin, Verana, and I will go to the City of Roses. If you happen to find the gauntlet, do nothing until we see you again. We will meet in the Black City in Darkynhold. Go to the Broken Rib Inn. If the caravan moves on, follow it and leave word for us there."

Brydon repeated the name and nodded. "We will see you soon, with luck."

They clasped hands and exchanged farewells. Brydon, Toryn, Shevyn and Alyn turned off the road and headed into the forest and southward, searching for the road that would take them to Vineyard. Brydon was surprised that Shevyn had wanted to accompany him rather than stay with Jace. It was apparent that the Shield Knight knew who she was. Brydon had asked about her and received only a vague response that she was the daughter of someone who had gotten in Reed’s way.

They set out at a rapid pace, hoping to put as much distance between themselves and Berikon’s men as they could, should the prince’s patrol choose the southern path. They left Sar-Tela the next morning and entered Vineyard. The principality was rockier than either Sar-Tela or Obelisk and seemed to possess less wealth in trees and agriculture, but perhaps more in mining. Why it was called Vineyard was a mystery, for they saw none.

"What will we do if we find the gauntlet?" Toryn asked.

"Jace told us to do nothing," Brydon replied.

"Yes, but what will we actually do?" Toryn grinned.

Brydon returned his smile and shrugged. "We’ll take the gauntlet, of course. Why wait for Jace?"

Toryn laughed aloud. "Good, I was afraid all this easy living was making you soft."

Shevyn looked at them and worried at her lower lip for a moment, but said nothing, as expected. Alyn rode far ahead of them, the better to ignore Toryn.
The royal city of Vineyard was called Shimmer and it was built upon a hill, inside of a wall that could have withstood a cataclysm. They rode into the city as mere travelers visiting the city to please their wives. Toryn grabbed Alyn and kissed her lingeringly before caressing her in order to make the story more believable. Alyn’s face was red with rage when he released her, but she smiled sweetly at the guards. Only Brydon saw her finger the whip coiled at her hip. Shevyn looked at him inquiringly and a smile quirked her lips. Brydon flushed unaccountably and saluted the guards before riding through the gates. He did not dare kiss her—he had enough trouble trying to keep Sellaris out of his mind.

They stopped at a tavern and Brydon left the others to visit the marketplace. He hoped to find the remainder of the caravan or ask questions of the merchants there. As he stepped past a dark alleyway, a hand reached out and clamped over his mouth. At the same time a sharp blade poked into his ribs.

"Make a sound or a move, blondie, and my dagger tastes your blood," a harsh voice said quietly. Brydon did not resist as he was pulled into the alley and down some stone steps, into a room dimly lit by a single candle. Heavy curtains on the window kept out the sun’s light and warmth. Brydon was forced into a chair the man had kicked into the center of the room. The dagger moved from his ribs and the hand left his mouth.

"Don’t move a muscle. I’m an expert, and this knife will be in the back of your neck before your fingers reach the hilt of your blade."

"Fine," Brydon said dryly, although a trickle of sweat found its way down his spine.

"What is it you want?"

"Information. Who are you and what are you here for?"

"What do you mean?" Brydon asked.

The man swore. "Don’t play stupid. I was in Kaaza two weeks ago and I saw you and your friends asking questions. What are you looking for? You have moved in haste since then—are you on a spying mission for Berikon?"

"Certainly not."

"Then what is your business in Shimmer?" the man prodded.

"I am not at liberty to say," Brydon replied and then snapped forward as a fist slammed into the back of his head. His ears rang and it was difficult to hear the man’s next words.

"I don’t care whether or not you are ‘at liberty,’" the man growled. "Are you working for Berikon?"

Brydon sat up and blinked the stars out of his vision. "Who are you?"

"No one you need concern yourself with. Answer the question."

"If you are asking on behalf of Prince Amerryn, then I will speak to him, but no one else."

The man pondered for a moment. "I’m not asking for Amerryn," he admitted.

"Then who?" Brydon asked. He wondered if he could mentally hurt the man the way Reed had done. He tentatively reached out with his mind and encountered… nothing. It
was not quite like Shevyn’s blankness, but rather it was as if the man had built a wall that
Brydon could not penetrate, different from the mental shields that both Reed and Sellaris
possessed. Brydon drew back quickly when he recalled his meeting with Reed; he was
not eager for that to happen again.
"You have been riding in haste—on horses, no less—and now half of your party has
disappeared. Where is the silver-haired man?"
"He is elsewhere. What we seek is no concern of yours. It's a personal matter," Brydon
said somewhat desperately as he wondered how to get out of this situation. He wished he
had brought Toryn along.
"A personal matter involving a knight-priest, a Redolian, and an Akarskan girl?
Northerners are rare in Silver and you travel in strange company. Have you been hired as
spies or mercenaries?"
"I have been in Shimmer less than an hour!" Brydon snapped, annoyed by the
questioning. "I know nothing about the politics of Silver and I don’t care!"
"So you say, but you are no merchant."
"I was on my way to the marketplace," Brydon commented sarcastically.
"You deny that you are a spy?"
Brydon glared. "I deny that I am a spy."
"Perhaps we should go see Prince Amerryn and discover what he says about this."
"Fine. I would like to speak to him about you, also." Brydon twisted suddenly to look at
the man. Thankfully, the movement did not seem to surprise him and he did not use the
knife. A hooded mask hid the upper half of his face; only his mouth and chin were
visible. Brydon thought he spied a hint of a dark mustache on the man’s upper lip. He
looked lean and muscular beneath a nondescript brown tunic and a dull green cape. A
leather belt held a sheath for weapons—besides the dagger in his hand, a sword was
strapped to his hip. Brydon’s gaze flicked to his other hip where a deadly-looking
crossbow rested. He looked altogether capable of causing harm.
"What now?" Brydon asked and tensed to reach for his sword.
The man sighed. "Since you will tell me nothing, I fear I must let you go."
"Why don’t I believe you?"
The man held out his hands and smiled. "Fear not. You are of far more use to me alive."
"If you would tell me who you work for, I might be more willing to talk."
"Sorry. I can’t say until I know where your allegiance lies."
Brydon drew himself up. "My allegiance is with my own country and shall be until I
die!"
The man laughed. "I see. A patriot. What is your country?"
"Falara."
The man looked at him in disbelief. "What does a Falaran want in Silver? Don’t you have enough problems with the Redolians? And are you not traveling with one?"

Brydon was impressed. "You seem quite knowledgeable. How is it that you don’t know my business?"

"Is it common knowledge?"

"In the north it is. I’m on a quest."

The man gave no sign that he had heard. After a long moment, he said, "That is, perhaps, too convenient an excuse. It would be a fine cover for a spy. What are you questing for?"

Brydon stood up, sick to death of the strange man and his suspicions. "I do not lie! I also have no intention of telling you what I am after."

"What is your name?" the man asked as he fingered the dagger thoughtfully.

"Brydon Redwing. My quest can be verified by any Falaran."

"It would take months for a message to be sent and returned. Thank you, but no. I shall make my own decisions. You may go."

"You’re letting me walk out of here?"

"Of course. Unless there is a reason why I should not?"

Brydon walked to the door and went out without looking back, even though his back tingled. He half-expected the whir of a knife through the air. It never came, and he continued on to the marketplace, puzzled by the strange encounter. Who was the man? He claimed not to have been sent by Amerryn. He could not have been in league with Reed, either, because Reed knew what Brydon sought. Also, anyone sent by Reed would have either captured or killed him instantly.

Brydon sighed. He missed Jace and his wealth of knowledge about the southern kingdoms. The Bodorii knight-priest might have been able to figure out who the man worked for.

Brydon walked on, oblivious to the crowd. His head ached from the blow the mysterious man had laid upon it. He approached a fruit trader and bought a citrus, and then asked the man if he had seen any melon traders wearing the livery of Ven-Kerrick. The man had barely arrived in Shimmer and knew nothing.

Brydon thanked the merchant and moved on, peeling the violet-colored fruit and picking at the syrupy pulp. He tried in vain to keep the juice from running down onto his sleeves and stopped to toss the rind into a waste cart before washing his hands in the fountain in the center of the square. He questioned a few more people and came up empty until a hand was clasped on his shoulder.

"You are requested to come with us," the man said and Brydon turned to see a soldier dressed in scarlet and white. Two others accompanied him. He wished again that he had brought Toryn along, for no better reason than to even the odds.

"Where are we going?" he asked politely.

"To the palace, to see His Royal Highness, Prince Amerryn."
CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

AMERRYN

Prince Amerryn’s guards marched Brydon through the ornate gates and into the castle. To his surprise, he was led directly to a large bedchamber where a steaming bath had been prepared.

"You will bathe and dress properly. We will return for you in one hour," said of the soldiers before he departed.

Puzzled, Brydon looked at the tub and shrugged. Strange or not, the bath was inviting and it did not take him long to leave his dusty clothing for the hot embrace of the water. He scrubbed himself clean and soaped his hair, reflecting that it needed to be cut. It was beginning to curl around his shoulders. He fingered the fine blond hair on his chin and decided a shave would be nice also. He started when a serving girl entered the room without knocking. She headed for his clothing.

"I wouldn’t touch those," he warned.

"I was ordered to take them," she protested. She gestured to the bed. "Clothing has been provided for you."

He glanced at the bed, then back to the girl. "I will wear those, if necessary, but I have few enough possessions. I should like to keep those."

The girl bit her lip in indecision before she curtsied and hurried out, leaving his clothing.

He grabbed a towel and climbed out of the cooling water. A pair of snowy white breeches lay on the bed. They were stitched with wide scarlet embroidery in a wide pattern. He put them on just in time as the girl returned.

"Would you like a shave?" she asked.

He nodded. "That would be excellent." He smiled. "And perhaps a trim?" He fingered his shoulder-length hair.

She nodded, went out once more, and returned with a bowl of warm water and shaving supplies. After the first touch of the razor to his neck he relaxed, glad that she had not been sent to slit his throat, although it would have been redundant when he could have been killed a dozen times since then. When the task was finished, she sheared his hair to his specifications and looked at him with a more interested expression.

"If there is anything else you desire...?" she asked in a throaty voice.

He shook his head. "No. They will return for me soon," he said. She sighed deeply, but helped him finish dressing without another word.

He donned the scarlet shirt and the billowing sleeves flowed softly as he moved. A white jacket followed; its embroidered sleeves were sliced open to expose the scarlet beneath. Brydon polished his boots as best he could with his old shirt and pulled them on. He buckled on his sword belt, glad that they had left him his weapons, at least.
The girl sighed in approval and the door swung open to admit a different group of soldiers; these were dressed in scarlet livery and draped with white chain mail that looked more decorative than useful. Brydon followed them out.

A short walk led him to the opulent throne room, which was far grander than that of the palace in Falara. Brydon had to admit that the southern kingdoms were excellent at both architecture and decorating, especially in the area of making visitors feel inferior. The place was aglitter with white marble, scarlet tapestries, and patterned mosaics on floors, walls, and even the ceilings. Brydon was presented to Prince Amerryn, who had an unruly thatch of auburn hair and hazel eyes glinting with curiosity. He wore immaculate royal blue robes with a dazzling ermine cloak lined in scarlet silk. His royal coat of arms, crafted upon a gold medallion, clasped his cloak loosely upon his right shoulder. Brydon was extremely glad that he had been forced to dress appropriately. The prince seemed very young, barely of age, but he might have merely had deceptive features.

Two scarlet-clad guardsmen flanked Amerryn’s throne. They looked highly decorative, but for the serviceable halberds they gripped in mailed fists.

"Greetings, traveler. Might I interest you in some wine? Bodorii Burgundy? Tar-Tanian Crystal? An Akarskan white wine? Or perhaps something from the Islands?"

Brydon wondered at the odd question, especially after the unexpectedness of his "invitation" to the palace. He was willing to play along, at least for a while. He was no idiot when it came to wine; having had many lessons thrust upon him by Eryka, the Falaran princess. She had been trying to "improve" him since he was a boy.

"You have, perhaps, a Corona Dragonsong?" he asked.

The prince sat up and a smile played about his lips.

"You know wine?" Amerryn asked.

Brydon shrugged. He wanted nothing more than to know why he had been brought here, but realized the young prince would take any rudeness as insult. "A bit," he admitted.

Amerryn motioned to a servant, who listened as the prince spoke and then trotted away. He returned a moment later with two goblets upon a tray.

"Taste them," the prince urged, "and tell me which one is the Corona Dragonsong."

Brydon looked at the goblets. Both were filled with identical-looking liquid, a deep red translucent color. He lifted one and took a deep breath, inhaling the fragrance of it. Its heady scent was mellow and warmed his lungs pleasantly. He smiled, but made no comment.

He took a small mouthful and let it flow across his tongue, held it for a moment, and then swallowed. It was smooth and very dry, full-bodied and just a bit fruity. It was delicious, and it was not until that moment that he realized how much he missed the taste of excellent food and drink, along with the time to relax and enjoy them. A wave of homesickness washed over him.

He picked up the other goblet and repeated the process, surprised to find them both very similar. A puzzled look crossed his face and he tasted them again. He looked at the prince and found a delighted smile on his face.
Brydon set both goblets down. "They are both Corona Dragonsong," he said. "Two different vintages, but the same wine."

The prince raised a slim brow. "And the vintages?"

Brydon shrugged and grinned. "I am not that well-versed in wines, your Highness. The vintages are a mystery to me."

"I am impressed, anyway. You must be highborn to have tasted Corona Dragonsong. Few men would have realized what I had done. The vintages are from the 74th Year of the Ring and the 73rd Year of the Shield."

Brydon nodded politely.

Amerryn sighed. "Now that the pleasantries are complete, I would like to know who you are and what business you have here in Shimmer."

"I am Brydon Redwing, of Falara. I am on a quest."

"Ah! Then, you are of noble blood!" Amerryn exclaimed.

Brydon shook his head, amused, but taking care not to show it. "Not exactly. Falara only grants the title of royalty once the quest is completed."

Amerryn waved his protest away. "It matters not. Do you seek this item from my brother, Berikon?"

The question was not idle curiosity. Amerryn obviously knew Brydon had been in Kaaza. Was there anyone in Silver who did not know it?

"No," Brydon said. "I do not believe Berikon has it."

"You think that I do?" Amerryn asked.

"No. It was in the possession of a caravan of merchants dressed in the livery of Ven-Kerrick. They were selling melons."

Amerryn looked puzzled. "You are on a quest for melons?"

"No. I believe the merchants are carrying a certain item of value, hidden in their wagons." He admitted it carefully, not willing to disclose the gauntlet’s disappearance.

"What might that be?" Amerryn’s tone was pleasant enough, but his gaze was far too sharp. He could not have retained his principality without an element of shrewdness. Though young, he had to be wise enough to command respect.

"I would rather not say. It could be dangerous if the news got out. Too many people know about it, already." Brydon winced and wished he were more skilled at making up tales. Where was Toryn when he needed him?

"Know about what? I demand to know." "If you knew, you might go after the thing yourself. Frankly, there is enough competition as it is." After that statement, Brydon decided never to take up diplomacy. He might as well have given Amerryn a gilded box and admonished him never to open it; the prince was nearly guaranteed to seek out the gauntlet now.

Amerryn sat back, eyes narrowing dangerously. "Why would I want this item?"
Knowing it was far too late for evasion, Brydon said, "I’m not sure, but I think Berikon is seeking it at this moment. He sent out a contingent of riders from Kaaza before we left there."

Amerryn’s face betrayed no expression. Brydon, questing lightly, could feel excitement jump in his mind. "I see," Amerryn said casually. "And, why does Berikon want it?"

Brydon shook his head. "I don’t know. I desire it only to fulfill my quest, but at the moment the thing is highly sought."

Irritation crossed Amerryn's mind, though not his features. "I could have you tossed into the dungeon and tortured."

Brydon smiled without humor. "And Berikon would have the object with no one to stop him."

"I might be able to stop Berikon anyway," Amerryn said. The eagerness in his mind began to stir Brydon’s emotions. Brydon was not certain of the source of Amerryn's excitement, but he thought it might have something to do with an ongoing feud between the two brothers.

"I cannot not ask you to do that," Brydon said.

"I am offering."

"You don’t even know what the item is."

"That would be helpful, but the fact that Berikon seeks it is enough for me. He is a power-hungry ass and I would like nothing better than to thwart him."

"Berikon probably has a sizable force crossing your borders already."

Amerryn glared and got to his feet. "Crossing my borders? What is it?" he snapped. "What is so important that Berikon would risk war to obtain it?"

Brydon sighed, knowing he had no choice but to reveal the truth. He glanced at the two guardsmen, who had remained impassive during their odd conversation. With a wave of his hand and a few words, Amerryn ordered them a short distance away. Brydon leaned closer. In a voice only the prince could hear, he confided, "The Gauntlet of Ven-Kerrick."

Amerryn’s eyes widened. And then he threw his head back and laughed.

"What a fool he is! The gauntlet! Is he mad? Only a Kerrick can touch the thing, much less use it! What in Sheol does he plan to do with it?" Amerryn resumed pacing, his mind darting along paths too quickly for Brydon to follow. "Oh, I shall have him!"

"Am I free to go?" Brydon asked tentatively, inwardly cringing at Amerryn's haphazard bellowing of the news. He wondered how long the tale of the gauntlet’s theft would remain unknown by the general populace. Amerryn looked at him again, as if surprised to still find him present.

"Continue on your quest, Falaran. I shall have sport with my brother and I thank you for bringing him to my attention. He shall be detained and not even know it. What wonderful luck!"
Brydon, confused, bowed low and hurried out. He received his clothing from a servant in the hallway, and was informed that he could keep the items that he currently wore. He headed for the main doors had nearly exited when was arms grabbed him and dragged into a dark corner. A hand clamped over his mouth. He reflected that this sort of thing happened far too frequently. Just as he was about to jab an elbow sharply into his assailant’s gut, he heard Toryn’s voice in his ear.

"Brydon? Do you need rescuing?"

The hand fell away and Brydon turned to see Toryn grinning at him. His green eyes sparkled with amusement.

"Yes," he said dryly. "I am on my way to the dungeon. I thought I would save them the trouble of dragging me there."

"How was I to know?" Toryn demanded.

Brydon chuckled. "Thank you for coming to save me. I may have needed it, but things went smoothly, oddly enough."

"Well, we should get out of here before Alyn sets fire to the barracks."

"Before she what?"

"I thought we might need a diversion, so I told her to wait for a bit, and then set fire to the barracks."

Brydon could see that Toryn was itching to make a comment about his clothing, so he spoke quickly to forestall it. "How long is a bit? Never mind. Just get out there and stop her! If I don’t show up at the front gate soon, they will start combing the palace for me. Where is Shevyn?"

"With Alyn. It would have taken me half a day and a new set of lungs to get them to stay put while I came to get you. Women." He paused and then added, "Were you auditioning to be the prince’s new concubine? Nice outfit." He dodged Brydon’s fist with a chuckle.

"I’ll meet you at the tavern." Brydon said, laughing in spite of himself. "If you’re not there, I’ll come back to get you."

"I might be inside. Auditioning." Toryn’s chuckles followed him as he went out.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

NYKAR

Brydon made it back to the tavern without being grabbed or accosted, for which he breathed a sigh of relief. Toryn and the others returned a short time later. He greeted them with a smile as they sat at his table.

"So you were going to burn down the barracks for me?" he asked. "I thank you. It might have been necessary."

Shevyn flushed and looked away. Alyn snorted and said, "I thought it was a stupid idea. Toryn came up with it."
"What happened in there?" Toryn asked, ignoring her.

Brydon brought them up to date, including his encounter with the strange man in the mask who had questioned him. They offered theories, but came to no better conclusions than Brydon had regarding the man’s identity.

"Amerryn thinks the object we seek is useless to anyone. For all we know, it could be true. I’d rather not take the chance by letting Berikon get his hands on it." Not to mention that it would be bloody difficult to get the item away from any Silveran prince.

"What do we do now?" Toryn asked. "Where did you get those clothes?"

"We continue as we were. I got the clothes from the prince."

"I hope you plan to change. You look about as inconspicuous as a purple horse."

"Thanks," Brydon said dryly.

"You’re welcome. Anyway, while you were chatting with his highness, I found a man who knows where the caravan is," Toryn went on. "He parted with the information for a minimal fee."

"Six glasses of ale," Alyn said.

"Where is the caravan?"

"On its way south."

"South? What principality is south? Do any of you know?" He was not at all familiar with Silver and found himself missing Jace with his limitless knowledge.

Toryn shook his head. "I never expected to be in Silver, Falaran."

Alyn shrugged, but Shevyn grabbed Brydon’s hand. It was obvious she wanted to say something, but did not quite know how. She pantomimed writing. Brydon asked the tavern keeper for writing materials, which were grudgingly supplied at the cost of a few silver coins. He took them to Shevyn, but instead of writing, she drew a map.

Vineyard quickly took shape, followed by Obelisk, Sar-Tela, and then a few of the other Silveran principalities. She drew a line from Shimmer to indicate places the caravan could be headed.

"Either Darkynhold or Saavyn," Toryn noted. "Which is more likely?"

Shevyn sighed and shook her head.

"South it is." Toryn said. Brydon was forced to pay for a room for the night so that he could divest himself of Amerryn’s clothing gift.

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Toryn reflected that at least the journey so far had not been boring. There had been slavers, dungeons, men with strange powers, venomous Akarskans—he glanced at Alyn—well, it was better than herding cattle in Redol, at any rate. They had been riding for
three days, trying to figure out which way the caravan headed. There was no way to trail it. To the local peasants, all caravans looked the same. Finally, they reached the place where the road forked. Redwing pulled out the map Shevyn had drawn, studied it, and looked at her.

"The Black City is closer than Teel, right?"
She nodded.

"We will go to the Black City in Darkynhold, then. We are supposed to meet Jace there, anyway. Maybe we will get lucky."

Two days later they crossed the border into Darkynhold. They camped that night in a tree-filled valley. The weather was warm with an occasional cool breeze. They had run across a nesting flock of geese that afternoon and it had only taken a few of Redwing’s arrows to provide them with dinner. Toryn had flaunted his skill and roasted them to perfection; there were no leftovers.

The girls fell asleep quickly and Toryn clung to wakefulness by the thin thread of mischievousness. Redwing was too preoccupied to notice and Toryn decided that he had been far too nice to the Falaran of late.

"Brydon?" he asked.

"Hmmm?" Redwing looked at the stars, his mind obviously far away. He was probably dreaming about that annoying witch, Sellaris. Or Shevyn, who constantly made doe eyes at him. It had to be the aura of untouchable goodness about Redwing that drew women to him like bees to honey.

"Have you ever seen a green insect about the size of a gold coin, with hairy white legs and antennae?"

Redwing’s brow creased absently. "Mmmm. Sounds like a Voran leaf bug."

"Are they poisonous?" Toryn asked casually, as if half-asleep.

"Very. They are deadly. Why?" Redwing’s eyes closed.

"No reason, except you have one on your shoulder. It’s eyeing your neck quite hungrily."

"Oh." Redwing’s tone was noncommittal and then his eyes snapped open. He flew into motion, swatting his shoulder with his left hand and leaping into the air while pulling out his dagger. He stood like cornered prey for a moment, eyes wild and searching for the poisonous creature before Toryn’s guffaws caused him to swing around with an icy glare.

"There was no Voran leaf bug, was there, Toryn?"

Toryn shook his head. His chuckles were nearly silent, but threatened to explode his lungs.

"There was nothing at all, was there?" Redwing’s voice was soft, but Toryn was not deceived. He climbed to his feet with a laugh.

"I suppose not!" He ran. Redwing raced after him with a growl. Toryn kept laughing as he raced through the tall deciduous trees. Dead leaves from the previous fall crunched under his feet. Just as Redwing was about to seize him, Toryn spun around, catching him
by surprise. Toryn tugged out his jade-hilted sword and Redwing dove aside, barely avoiding the blade as it flashed in the darkness. Toryn laughed again.

Redwing turned and parried quickly, then attacked. Toryn beat the blows back easily and carried out a lightning swift attack that ended with Redwing whacked on the behind by the flat of Toryn’s blade. Redwing roared and countered with a maneuver that surprised Toryn for a moment, but not long enough for Redwing to slip past his guard. Toryn backed up slowly, keeping Redwing’s sword away with skillful parries. Their blades clashed noisily in the air.

"I hope you’re ready for the real attack," Redwing said, although he panted through his smile.

"Bring it on!" Toryn crowed. The steel turned into two silver blurs, ringing together so quickly that the sound nearly melted into one tune. It continued until both combatants were drenched with sweat. Toryn’s arms ached, but he was not quite sure how to stop. Toryn was still debating when Redwing suddenly leaped backward; his sword flew from his grip with the force of Toryn’s final strike. The blade careened off a tree with a metallic ring and Toryn lowered his sword, looking at Redwing in surprise.

"Did you plan that?" he asked, breathing hard.

Redwing shook his head, panting. "No, but we had to stop somehow. Someone is coming."

"How do you know?" Toryn asked. "I thought you had to be concentrating."

"I was, partly," Redwing said.

"You can fight like that when you’re only partly concentrating?" Toryn asked in amazement. If so, Redwing was far better with a blade than Toryn had thought.

"No, you could easily have had me. I’ve never seen anyone with your skill."

Toryn looked at him suspiciously. "You’re joking, right? I’ve always assumed you to be as good with a sword as you are with a bow. All that knight-priest training and everything."

"Not even close. I might be good with a bow, but with a sword you’re the best I’ve ever seen. Not that your ego needs any fodder, but Reed nearly bested me and you drove him away without half trying." He paused. "They are nearly here. We should get back to camp."

Toryn nodded and they trotted back to the sleeping women.

*****

Brydon woke Alyn and Shevyn easily. They quickly made up their blankets to imitate sleeping bodies and faded into the foliage to await the newcomers. Three men soon came into view, entering the encampment as silently as thieves while two others fanned out. Brydon was uncomfortably reminded of the night he had first met Toryn, but he shook the image out of his mind. He signaled to Alyn and Shevyn to deal with the two men
nearest them and stepped into the clearing just as the lead man prodded the blankets with a sword tip.

"Looking for us?" Brydon asked. He leveled an arrow at the man, who looked up with no surprise.

"We come in relative peace, Falaran," the man said. He had dark hair, made darker by the night, and a mustache covered his upper lip. He held his hands out to his sides in a gesture of submission.

"Peace is not relative and seldom brought in the dead of night," Brydon countered.

"True," the man admitted and motioned to his cohorts to sheathe their weapons and draw back.

"You may call the other two," Brydon said. The man stared hard at him for a moment and then called to his men. It probably saved their lives. Alyn had been in a bloodthirsty mood lately, probably because of Toryn’s constantly irritating presence.

The others approached the light of the small campfire and Toryn also stepped forward. He threw another log on the fire to give them a better view of the men.

"I am here on business," the leader said. He was of medium build and seemed to be the type of man that had been born a soldier. Brydon could see it in the way he moved and in the wary way his dark eyes seemed to miss nothing as they flicked from place to place.

"State it," Brydon ordered.

"We are the Border Guard of Darkynhold. We need to know what brings you here."

Brydon shrugged. "We are searching for a caravan."

"A caravan? Why?"

Before Brydon could reply, Toryn answered, "They have stolen something that belongs to us and we want it back."

"Who are they, these thieves?"

"Men dressed in the livery of Ven-Kerrick," Toryn replied. "Have you seen them?"

"I have not seen anyone from Ven-Kerrick in a long, long while," the man replied. "What have they stolen from you?"

"Would they have passed your guard to reach Darkynhold?" Brydon asked, ignoring the man’s question.

"Not necessarily. We only happened upon you because we saw you earlier today. If we patrolled farther north when they passed, we may have missed them. What were they carrying?"

"Melons."

"The market for melons is better in Saavyn. Darkynhold normally receives produce from Regal or the outer principalities."

Brydon nodded, but did not mention that the men from Ven-Kerrick were probably not interested in selling fruit. But where would they take the gauntlet?
"If you like, we will escort you to the Black City and help you look for this caravan," the man suggested. There was something odd about him that Brydon could not quite place. He shook his head. "No, that will not be necessary, but thank you."

The man shrugged. "As long as there is no bloodshed. Prince Rakyn likes Darkynhold to be kept peaceful and orderly."

"I can appreciate that," Brydon replied. "There will be none, if I can help it."

The man nodded. "Do you mind if we camp here tonight and use your fire?"

Brydon and Toryn looked at each other warily, but it would seem strange to refuse the request.

"Not at all."

"Thank you. Would you happen to have some tea? It has been a long day and tea helps the muscles relax." The man stretched his back in the manner of exhausted men everywhere, and then ran a hand through his brown hair. His grin was lopsided and reminded him somewhat of Toryn’s.

Brydon went to his pack and dug out some of Verana’s favorite spiced tea. He gave it to the guard captain, who immediately sat at the fire and began to heat water in a quickly-produced kettle.

Toryn signaled to Brydon and went to check on the horses and the girls.

"You can bring your other two men in from the dark," the man said without looking up and Brydon smiled.

"They are not as trusting as I am. I think they will stay out there."

"You don’t seem to be that trusting, friend." His gaze was sharp and Brydon was reminded of the knight-priest that had trained him in Eaglecrest. The fellow had been sober and almost devoid of humor—the quintessential soldier. There was something almost familiar about him and Brydon was certain it was because of his mannerisms. Certainly his facial features evoked no recognition.

Brydon shrugged. "These are troubled times. We have encountered bandits before."

"Here?"

Brydon shook his head. "In Penkangum."

"You were in Penkangum?"

Brydon laughed at the question. "How do you think I got here from Falara? Crossed the Abyss?"

The man shrugged and then chuckled. "I had hoped it could be done."

"I will not be the one to try it."

The rest of the men sprawled here and there, chewing on strips of jerked meat and passing around a skin of wine, or possibly just water.
The guard captain handed Brydon a cup of the steaming tea once it had brewed. Brydon accepted it and took a drink. The beverage was stronger than he liked it, but it did taste nice after the long day. He felt exhausted and sore after the mock sword battle with Toryn, who returned at the thought and crouched next to them. He accepted the cup Brydon offered and took a long drink.

"The others?" Brydon asked.

"They have decided to stay with the horses. They do not like strangers," Toryn explained with a direct stare at the guard captain. The man merely nodded and poured more tea. They sat silently and drank for a time; the pungent herbs soothed Brydon's tired muscles.

"I don’t think I have ever tasted tea like this," the man said, motioning to his cup. "Where did you get it?"

"From a friend of mine in Terris," Brydon explained, fighting a yawn. "By the way, what is your name?"

"I am Nykar. And you?"

"I am Brydon Redwing. This is Toryn."

Nykar nodded at Toryn and yawned widely. Brydon did so, as well, and a moment later Toryn followed suit. They all laughed and Brydon stretched out on the ground.

"I need to rest my head for a moment," he murmured. He watched the fire until the flames swam into a red-orange blur and then he recalled nothing more.

*****

Brydon woke with a horrible headache and a jolting sensation that would not stop. He raised his head and opened his eyes to see the scenery bobbing up and down like a ship in a bad storm. He snapped his eyes shut and groaned. Instantly, the motion ceased.

"Greetings, Falaran," Nykar said. Brydon opened his eyes again and saw Darkling’s hooves quite clearly. He realized he had been thrown facedown over his saddle and tied there. He felt his ropes loosen.

"Sorry for the discomfort. I didn’t want you to slide off your horse on our little ride."

"What happened?" Brydon asked. He slipped from Darkling and gripped his pounding head in both hands. His legs threatened to give out on him, so he grabbed at his saddle with one hand. He looked at Nykar through half closed eyes. "Where are we?"

Nykar shrugged. "I had to drug you. Those are feisty womenfolk you have. After you and the other one collapsed, they came tearing out of the bushes like she-cats."

Brydon’s eyes opened and fixed on Nykar. "What did you do to them?" A quick glance around disclosed no one except Nykar.

"Nothing. We disarmed them, even though the blond girl gravely injured three of my men with that whip of hers. Against the five of us, they did not have much of a chance. We tied them up and left them. Your friend should wake up in time to set them free."
"Where are your men?" Brydon asked.
"Back at their post, although they are not technically my men. I can command them when I choose, but I am not one of them."
"You are not a border guard? Then who are you?"
"You don’t recognize me? I had thought better of you." He took a corner of his cloak and draped it over his features.
"The man in the mask!" Brydon exclaimed. No wonder he had seemed familiar! Brydon nearly swore aloud at his stupidity in not realizing it sooner. "Who are you?"
"You will find out soon enough. I’m taking you to the Black City."
Brydon frowned. "What will the border guard do to my companions if Alyn injured several of them?" he asked, worried.
"Nothing."
"Nothing? Why not?"
"Because I ordered them not to. I told you I can command them." There was a note of steel in Nykar’s voice.
"You have that authority?" Brydon asked.
"If I so choose. Now get back on the horse and let’s be off."
"What if I refuse?" Brydon snapped belligerently.
Nykar shrugged. "Then I clout you on the head with the flat of my blade and tie you on again. As you may have noticed, you are unarmed."
Brydon had noticed. He glared at Nykar and mounted Darkling. "What awaits me in the Black City?"
"We are going to speak to someone," Nykar said. He was a nondescript sort of man, the type one would see a thousand times in the city or in the peasant fields. Brown hair, brown eyes, plain face, and no remarkable features.
"You seem determined to locate this alleged caravan from Ven-Kerrick," Nykar said as they traveled. "Why?"
"You seem interested in my interests," Brydon returned dryly. "Why?"
"We seem to be at a stalemate again. Very well, we will ride in silence." Nykar smiled. He ignored Brydon and hummed to himself all the way to the city. Brydon thought of spinning Darkling around and racing back to Toryn and the others, but he was curious to discover just what it was that Nykar wanted. If Brydon escaped, he would likely hunt him down again—Nykar seemed the type who would do it.
They reached the Black City shortly after dark. Brydon mentally urged Toryn to hurry, even though he seemed to be out of range—or still unconscious. Brydon’s curiosity did not extend so far that he would risk losing the others. If he could not reach Toryn mentally, then Toryn would likely be able to track their course without much trouble. He was well-familiar with Darkling’s hoof print pattern.
The Black City appeared to be just that but, of course, it was night when they arrived.

"Why is it called the Black City?" Brydon asked to get Nykar to stop his infernal humming. He seemed to know only two lines of a single song and was content to hum them over and over. The horses’ hooves rang on the cobbled stone of the streets and the gurgle of a swift river could be heard nearby.

"Onyx mines," Nykar said shortly. "Darkynhold has little agriculture, but plenty of gems and precious metals. Enough to hold its own with the other principalities for wealth."

"I don’t understand why the princes of Silver fight," Brydon said. "In Falara there is one king and we all obey him."

"There is only one king in Silver, also, but thirteen rulers and we obey the one that commands us most closely. The brothers fight because that’s what brothers do, especially if they aren’t full brothers."

"They are not full brothers?"

Nykar snorted. "With twelve kids? Well, it’s possible, but not in this case. Naryn, the king, has had a number of wives and a number of mistresses. His first wife had three sons: Keev, Larec, and Merator. She died, and the next year Byoon was born; he was the son of Naryn’s favorite mistress, Shalleel. He married again and his new wife presented him with Rakyn, who rules Darkynhold, and then Shalleel produced S’Lor. The king’s new wife wasn’t about to be outdone by any mistress, so she had two more sons, Reboryx and Eryn. She died after Eryn was born. Too much effort, I suppose, especially since she had to raise her own children in addition to the first three. She was not a particularly strong woman. At any rate, Shalleel was still fertile and had three more boys. The first two are twins, even though they don’t look alike. Yavarrin and Verryn. They don’t get along too well, either. The next one was Berikon. After that, the king married again and three years later the last prince, Amerryn, was born. That is the history of the princes of Silver in a nutshell."

"If Shalleel gave the king so many sons, why didn’t he marry her? He stayed with her for so long..."

Nykar snorted. "He would have, and things probably would have been better off, except that Shalleel was already married. She was a sneaky wench, married to a wealthy merchant who was unaware of her liaisons with the king and was thrilled with all his boys, incorrectly assuming that they were his. When the merchant finally died, Shalleel packed up and moved in with King Naryn, bringing all of her illegitimate children with her. Amerryn’s mother was so outraged that she took Amerryn and moved away to Bodor to live. She eventually died there. When he grew up, Amerryn came back to live with his father. At that time, Naryn finally married his mistress, Shalleel. She turned into a complete shrew shortly thereafter and it’s widely believed that he had her poisoned."

"What? Shalleel is dead?" Brydon was aghast.

"As a coffin nail. Needless to say, there is bad blood in the whole family. The illegitimate sons were made legitimate when Nykar married Shalleel, but some of them might actually be the merchant’s sons. Perhaps all of them. Who knows? Anyway, those who believe they are the true sons of the king are even more enraged than the others about the
whole business. Things started to get out of hand with all of them living in the same city. Naryn finally divided up the kingdom to get the boys out his hair and start them fighting with each other instead of him. Pretty wise man, even if his is a bit old and senile now."

"Your prince is Rakyn, correct? How does he fit into this puzzle? Is he looking for more power or more land?"

Nykar shrugged. "Who knows? Rakyn keeps his own council."

The streets were nearly deserted as they neared the palace wall, but a few citizens and merchants still roamed about. Brydon caught a glimpse of dark red hair and halted Darkling in surprise.

"Sellaris!" he breathed just as the girl disappeared around a far corner. Without thinking, he turned Darkling and raced down the cobbled street. Nykar bellowed for him to halt, but memories of Sellaris had flooded Brydon’s mind, stopping rational thought.

He galloped to the corner and then around, but there was no one in sight. He quested with his mind and found a jumble of personalities; none of them were hers. It was likely she had her thoughts shielded.

Hearing Nykar behind him, Brydon touched heels to Darkling and started off again. He decided he was not all that curious after all about meeting the person Nykar had brought him to see. If he turned out to be a friend of Reed’s, Brydon would not be breathing for long. He raced down one twisted street after another until the sound of pursuit finally faded. He eventually reached the gates of the city, purely by accident, and paused. He slipped off of Darkling and shouldered his saddlebags before sending the horse through the gates with a mental command. The guards shouted in surprise, but Darkling was already past them and galloping down the road before they could organize pursuit.

Brydon watched until Darkling disappeared and then he pulled a hooded cloak from his saddlebags. He donned it and looked for a place to hide. An alleyway beckoned and he followed it until he came to steps leading downward beneath an almost indecipherable sign that read "The Bloody Stump." Obviously one of the better taverns of the area.

Brydon entered and paused for a moment. It had been quite dark outside, but the interior was even darker, lit by only a few small candles.

Conversation was so muted as to be almost nonexistent and Brydon felt many pairs of eyes upon him as he made his way to the bar. He ordered dark ale and carried it to a small table to an inky black area of the tavern. All of the corner tables were taken.

He sipped the stuff slowly, mostly because it tasted both stronger and fouler than anything he had ever consumed before. He kept his cloak pulled closely about him and wished he had his sword. This was not the sort of place to be unarmed. Now that he had escaped Nykar, he pondered his options. He wanted to find Sellaris—if indeed it had been her—and discover her purpose in the Black City. He had expected her to be in Ven-Kerrick with Reed, if anywhere. Then again, she had seemed to be innocent of Reed’s doings there. Brydon hoped it was so.

He sighed and glared morosely at the dark liquid in his goblet. He should probably leave the Black City and find Toryn, lest he and the girls ride unwittingly into the city, where
Nykar would probably snatch them up. He obviously knew Brydon well enough to suspect that he would never leave his friends in the hands of unknown enemies.

Brydon sat for a while longer and studied the people who came and went, giving Nykar a chance to move his search farther away, until a shock of recognition shivered through him. Sellaris’ red headed brother sat at one of the corner tables. He had not imagined her, after all!

Brydon hunched lower in his chair, gratified that he had kept his hood on. Not two tables over, Sellaris’ brother—Lavan, that was his name—was deep in conversation with two other rough-looking men. Brydon wished he were close enough to hear what they were saying. He debated with himself for a moment and reluctantly sent out a tendril of thought, remembering the last time he had tried to read Lavan’s mind. He was conscious this time, however, and his surface thoughts were rather easy to detect. Brydon drew back for a moment in revulsion. Lavan was bargaining with the men over the price of a whore. The excitement of a sexual encounter was the foremost thought in Lavan’s mind. Brydon tried again, pressing past Lavan’s thoughts of the moment to seek knowledge of his presence in the Black City.

...Sellaris can’t snap at me for gambling, Lavan thought clearly. No gamble, this, ha ha! Brydon seized upon his brief thought of Sellaris and tried to steer Lavan’s thoughts in that direction. Lavan must have sensed his presence, however, for surprise registered. Sellaris? he questioned, alarmed and somewhat angry. Brydon pulled out rapidly, sweating. Lavan stood up and stared about suspiciously.

Brydon waited until Lavan relaxed and then he finished his ale and got to his feet. Brydon went outside as nonchalantly as possible and walked down the alley to a well-shaded spot and waited, eyes fixed on the tavern door.

It opened off and on over the next hour to admit and expel various patrons, but at last Lavan exited alone and started toward Brydon, who remained unmoving until he had passed.

Brydon waited until Lavan reached the end of the alley before following as silently as he could. Sellaris’ brother made no effort to conceal himself and Brydon kept him in sight easily as they neared a more middle-class section of town and stopped at a small boarding house. He entered and Brydon waited until a light came on at the rear of the building. He approached the house and peered through the dusty window, where he spotted Sellaris, her brother, and Garyn. Sellaris sat cross-legged on the single bed, brushing her hair, while the men argued about something. He considered tapping into Lavan’s or Garyn’s thoughts, but any clumsiness would alert Sellaris of an intrusion. He did not want them suspicious.

Brydon backed off and walked across the street. There was an alleyway not far from the boarding house, so he slumped against the wall and waited. He would wait until they came out in the morning and follow them. If Sellaris was about on Reed’s business, Brydon intended to discover what it was.

Shrugging off his tiredness, he chewed on a strip of smoked meat and waited for dawn.
Sometime after sunrise, Sellaris left the house, dressed in a deep green gown sparkling with white stones. Brydon had never seen her in a gown, much less such an elegant one. She wore a short cloak of white fur and Brydon would have bet she carried a couple of daggers under her cloak. He followed her to the marketplace, keeping an eye out for the Ven-Kerrick wagons as he did so. Sellaris bought a few small items and some food. Brydon kept her in sight for nearly an hour, stopping every so often to send his mind out in a wide sweep. At last, he found what he sought.

//Toryn?// he asked.
//Brydon! Where are you?//
//In the Black City, but not where Nykar had intended. I escaped.//
//Good,/Toryn sent. //We are near the city gates, concealed. What do you want us to do?//
//Stay there. I’ll stay linked with you. Sellaris is here; I’m following her. Did Darkling find you?//
//Yes, he trotted in last night. We feared you were dead. Shevyn has not slept. I think she was worried about you.//
//Tell her I’m fine. I will let you know if anything happens.// He kept a fragile link with Toryn so he would be able to find him in a hurry. Sellaris went back to the boarding house; there was no sign of the Ven-Kerrick caravan.

After watching the house for a few more minutes, Brydon was glad to see the three residents exit, shouldering packs. Sellaris was dressed again in her dark green leathers with sword and daggers visible on her slim hips. Her hair had been stuffed under a black hunter’s cap and she could have passed for a man except for some very obvious attributes that Brydon remembered all too well.

The three of them walked to a tavern with an attached corral where they caught up three horses that milled amongst the others animals there—oxen, mostly. They saddled the horses and rode toward the southern gate and Brydon swore. For all he knew, his description had been posted at each of the city gates. Thinking quickly, he lifted himself onto the back of a departing wagon filled with sacks of seed. The driver was nodding sleepily and did not seem to notice the wagon creak when Brydon climbed on. He concealed himself under the parcels until the wagon passed, with excruciating slowness, through the gates. Brydon dropped from the wagon once it reached a bend in the road, beyond the sight of the guards.

//Toryn!/ he called. //I’m outside the southern gate.//

Toryn appeared through the trees within minutes, trailed by Shevyn and Alyn.

"I’m so glad to see you," Brydon said with a smile.

"Likewise." Toryn grinned.

"How is everyone?" Brydon asked, scanning them.

"Fine. The bastards had to knock Alyn out because she wouldn’t shut up—"
"They did not!" Alyn snapped. "They forced some of that tea down our throats and tied us up."

"Anyway," Toryn continued, laughing, "here we are."

"We need to follow Sellaris and the others. They are headed south, so maybe they know where the gauntlet is. The caravan wasn’t in the Black City, at any rate. Chances are good that if Sellaris is here, Reed is involved."

"How will we find them? They have a head start and we can’t track them on the road," Alyn protested.

"I can find them," Brydon said with a grin and hoisted himself into the saddle. "Let’s cross this river."

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

REFLECTIONS

The Silver River was barely a river so close to its headwaters, so they forded it easily. Brydon had Lavan’s position fixed in his mind. It was hard to tell whether the three bandits were riding toward Tyvestyn or continuing on to Saavyn. The trio was far ahead of them, only occasionally glimpsed far in the distance when Brydon and the others topped a hill. Toryn decided, on his own, that he would scout and find out what they were up to, a fact Brydon did not discover until Toryn had been gone for a couple of hours the next morning.

//Toryn! What are you doing?// he demanded.

//Scouting. I’m getting closer to the others. They are still camped. I think they are waiting for someone.//

//Well, stay where you are. We will come and meet you. I mean it! Stay there!//

//Don’t worry, I can take on all three of them if I need to.//

Brydon had no doubt Toryn would try. He and the girls cut across country to meet up with him. Toryn had snuggled down at the top of a small rise, watching the encampment in the valley below. Brydon left Darkling on the other side of the rise and climbed up to join him.

"What is happening?" he asked.

Toryn gestured to the west. "They seem to have been waiting for those two men to arrive," he said. Brydon watched as the two men, riding horses, entered the valley from its western end. As they neared, Brydon felt there was something familiar about them. They entered the encampment to be greeted by Sellaris’ brother.

"I know where I have seen those two!" Brydon exclaimed suddenly in a hushed tone. "In the Black City. They were talking to Sellaris’ brother in the tavern. Why do I always forget his name?"

"Laveen? Liven?" Toryn suggested.
"Lavan. That’s it. They were in a sleazy tavern in the Black City. When I got there, they were discussing the price of a wench. I must have missed their prior conversation."

The group below talked for a while, and then dirt was kicked over the fire before they all mounted and left the valley, heading south again. They stayed off the road, a decision that made it much easier for Toryn to trail them.

"Where do you think they are going?" Toryn asked later.

"I don’t know. I only hope they have something to do with the gauntlet," Brydon replied. He continued to cast out with his mind gently, in order confirm his quarry’s location, but he did not dare try to read their minds, nor even track them overtly, since he did not know the extent of Sellaris’ power.

"What is this stupid gauntlet you are always talking about?" Alyn burst out, startling him.

"You have been trailing the thing with us for days now and you have not even thought to ask?" Toryn’s tone was disbelieving. "I always knew Akarskans were stupid. Thank you for confirming it."

Alyn bestowed a glare on him. "I have not asked because I don’t care. I am here to find stolen horses. If I am not mistaken, the horses that Sellaris and those other criminals ride are most definitely stolen."

"You can tell that from this distance?" Toryn asked as though marveling at her prowess. "You must have the keenest eyes of anyone in the world! Tell me, can you see the ocean from here?"

"Yes, it resides in your head, leaving no room for brains."

"Ho ho." Toryn grinned. "You are not after horses at all. I know why you really came with us."

"Why?" Alyn growled.

Toryn smiled widely. "I won’t speak it aloud in order to spare you embarrassment."

"Does it have anything to do with your league-wide ego?" she asked. "If so, you are the one that would be embarrassed."

"It has nothing to do with me."

"It doesn’t?"

"Never mind," Toryn said enigmatically. Brydon shook his head and turned his mind to other things, namely Shevyn, who rode beside him without complaint. He mentally compared her with Sellaris. They were both quite beautiful, albeit in different ways. Sellaris’ dark red hair was wild with curls and her grey eyes were unfathomable. She was wild and unpredictable. Shevyn had hair of soft honey brown, long and mostly straight with just a hint of a wave. Her eyes were clearest blue. She was as calm as Sellaris was wild, but there was something just as mysterious about her.

She looked at him in puzzlement. He smiled and she tipped her lips in a grin. He felt his heart lurch and dragged his eyes away. Wonderful. First Sellaris and now Shevyn. He wanted them both. Not that it mattered while Princess Eryka awaited him in Falara. He would have to try and remember that.
By the time they determined that Sellaris and her party were headed for Tyvestyn, Brydon worried whether or not they had made the right decision. Jace had told them to wait in the Black City. Not only had they not waited, but they had left Darkynhold completely. He wondered where Jace and the others were at that moment.

Tyvestyn was more mountainous and rocky than they had previously encountered in Silver, likely due to its proximity to the Ven-Horn Mountains. Ruby was the ruling city and from what Jace had told them, the highway led straight to it. Brydon chewed his lip, wondering whether they should continue to chase Sellaris, or veer off and go into Saavyn as they had originally planned.

"What do you think, Toryn?" he asked.

"About Alyn?" Toryn inquired. "Well, she has a fine body, but her personality needs a little work. Maybe if she had been born with a bit more intelligence...." Alyn glared at him and Brydon refrained from comment.

"Should we keep following Sellaris’ party, or head into Saavyn?"

"I think this entire ‘find the gauntlet’ thing is a waste of time. Let’s give up the quest, sail off to the Corolis Islands and be treated like kings by the native girls," Toryn suggested.

"Wonderful idea. And when the gauntlet is used by someone for evil and they take over the world, then where shall we go?" Brydon asked.

Toryn scowled. "You Falarans always suck the joy out of everything," he complained.

"It’s a curse," Brydon admitted.

Toryn sighed. "I think should keep following the redheaded wench. You seem to want to do that, anyway." Toryn chuckled.

Brydon smacked him on the leg with a rein. "Fine. We’ll do that."

They rode in silence, watching the clouds building over the large mountains to the southwest.

"Looks like a storm coming," Brydon commented.

"How do you know?" Toryn asked.

"They build like that in Falara, over the mountains."

"Oh. I wouldn’t know. We used to have mountains in Redol, until Falara stole them."

"You are not going to start all that again, are you?"

"Yes, I am. I have not complained about Falaran tyranny in a long while."

"No, it’s been at least an hour," Brydon admitted. Toryn snorted. "What is Redol like, then, if there are no mountains?" Brydon asked before Toryn could start extolling the atrocities of Falara. He had never been to Redol, nor anywhere near it until he had begun his southward journey. His family lived north of the city of Eaglecrest, separated from Redol by two mountain ranges and a large valley.

"Well," Toryn mused, "it’s mostly rolling hills covered with tough sea grass. It’s green almost all year round because of the rain. It rains practically every day, which gets to be
quite annoying, but it's not like the rain in Terris. We raise cattle, since the grass is so plentiful, and the few horses we have seem to like it there. Of course, only the chiefs have horses."

"How many chiefs are there?" Brydon asked. He knew Redol had no king, but the intricacies of its ruling class were a mystery.

"I never counted and it changes often. The chiefs rule the tribes and they gather together to discuss issues a couple of times a year, usually at the festivals. We do not all live together like Falarans. We don’t have cities, or even villages, really. We roam the plains so the cattle will always have enough to eat, and in the winter we take them south, across the Warrior River and into the hills where they are protected from the harsh winter storms. Each clan follows their own leader. My own clan is the... well, that is not for a Falaran to know."

Brydon glared at him, stung. "How can I still be a ‘Falaran’ to you?" he asked angrily. "Have I not proven that I am not your enemy?"

"Perhaps not now," Toryn snapped. "But what happens when you get back to your precious king and your bloody princess? Then what will happen? Will I still be your friend?" Toryn did not wait for a reply, but dug his heels into his mare and galloped up to ride in the lead.

Brydon stared after him in amazement. He had not thought much about returning to Falara. Obtaining the gauntlet had been his only consideration. He realized now that he had better start thinking about it. He had barely brought to mind "his princess" in a long, long while, except in passing. He could not even clearly remember what she looked like. He tried to call her to mind, but her blond hair faded into honey brown. He tried again and received red hair and grey eyes. Shevyn and Sellaris. He sighed. He could remember his mother, her golden hair long and silky as she brushed it out in front of the fireplace, as well as the smell of fresh baked bread that always seemed to permeate their house. His father had been tall and strong, as a smith should be.

Brydon realized that he knew nothing about Toryn, except that he came from Redol, and suddenly he wanted to know more. He wondered what would happen if he returned to Eaglecrest with Toryn and announced to the world that he was his best friend. He had friends in Falara, but no one that would have followed him to Ven-Kerrick and beyond.

//Tory,// he sent.

//Get out of my mind.//

//Why did you come all the way here with me?//

There was a pause and Brydon began to think Toryn would not answer. //I was sent to kill you. I failed. My clan chieftain will be extremely displeased.//

//Why? Surely others have failed before you?//

//Naturally. But the chieftain just happens to be my brother.//

//Yes, I know. That is the only reason?//

//Yes.//
//I don’t believe you.// Brydon sent stubbornly.
//That is your choice.// Toryn was equally stubborn.
//Toryn, you are my best friend.//

Anger surged through the link to assault Brydon. He swayed in his saddle with the force of it. "For how long?" Toryn burst out. "Until you take me back to Falara and hand me over to your king?"

The girls stared at Toryn, shocked at his unexpected outburst.

"I would never do that! You can return to Redol whenever you like. Go now, if you want!"

"I already told you I cannot!" Toryn booted his mare forward.

"That was not a reason!" Brydon yelled. He nudged Darkling to catch up with Toryn. He said nothing, merely rode next to him and waited, glancing at him pointedly now and again.

"I don’t want to go back," Toryn said finally.

"Why not?"

"Because I want to see you fulfill your stupid quest and become the next Falaran king, damn it all! Are you satisfied now?" Toryn shouted. His eyes flashed emerald fire.

"Yes, I am," Brydon said calmly. "What do you want from me, Toryn?"

The anger in Toryn’s eyes dissipated slowly and he looked at the ground. "I don’t know." He sighed. "I’m just not used to liking anyone, especially a Falaran."

"You can pretend I am from somewhere else?"

"Canaar?" Toryn grinned, referring to the land where monsters and devils roamed among the active volcanoes.

"Thanks," Brydon said dryly, but he smiled, relieved that some of the tension between them had dissipated with the jest. "Tell me about your brother. I swear upon my honor, and upon my king, and upon Adona, if you insist, that it will never go any farther than this."

Toryn flushed. "I know. I’m sorry about what I said. I was just thinking about what my people would say if they could see me now—what my brother would say. They would be far from pleased with my choice of companions." He laughed aloud. "A Falaran and an Akarskan. I suppose they would not have anything to say about Shevyn. At least she is quiet."

"Your brother?" Brydon asked, curious.

Toryn looked pained. "Morgyn. He would beat me with a bullwhip, I think, and then send me off to kill you again and get it right this time."

"Are you serious?"

Toryn shrugged. "I don’t know. Morgyn is kind of hard to figure. My father died in a raid on Falara, so Morgyn took over leadership of the clan." Brydon blanched at that, but
Toryn went on. "He takes his responsibilities too seriously sometimes. He has been the chieftain for a long time now and he is not much older than I am. Children grow up fast in Redol and Morgyn had to do it faster than most. I think he worries that he did not raise me right and if I come back and disappoint him this way... well, I just won’t do it."

"He raised you? What about your mother?" Brydon asked. "And don’t you think your brother would rather have you back, even if you failed in your mission, than to think you are dead?"

Toryn’s face hardened. "My mother left us when I was very young. I barely remember her."

"Left you?" Brydon burst out.

Toryn smiled bitterly. "As I said, things are different in Redol. The women are strong, or they are despised. They tend cattle with the men. They know how to stop a charging bull with only a thin strap of braided leather or a staff. They can run across the hills without tiring for the length of a full day. My own sister can nearly best me with a sword."

Brydon was awed. "I can hardly imagine such a thing, except that Alyn seems to be much the same. The women in Falara are soft and pleasant and the most they ever seem to do is bake or sew. You have a sister?" He tried to sound nonchalant, but the interest in his voice was evident.

"Yes, and I will see to it that you never meet her," Toryn warned with a laugh. "Her name is Caryn and she looks just like Morgyn and I. Black hair, green eyes, and she is very tall. We all got our looks from our mother, wherever she may be."

"Well, I feel that you are lucky, anyway. I have no brothers or sisters. Just a dog that was too old to come with me."

"But your parents?" Toryn asked.

"My mother is short and kind of round with golden hair like mine. She bakes bread every day and sells it at market. I eat the rest. Sometimes she makes it with nuts and fruit as a special treat. She sings a lot in the kitchen and seems happy. Father was a weapon-smith and an armorer, as well as a retired knight-priest. He was gone to the palace often, making weapons for the king. He was tall and muscular with thick brown hair and blue eyes. He taught me how to forge a blade, but I never really had the skill." Brydon sighed. "He died four years ago of an illness that swept through the village. My mother almost died, too, of the sickness, and later from grief, but she held on. For me, I think."

"I’m sorry," Toryn said. "It sounds like you had a wonderful family. Peaceful."

Brydon nodded. "Mostly, it was. Except for the time that I climbed the tree near the front of our house and broke three of the branches. It was my father’s prized fruit tree, so I had trouble sitting down for a few days after that. And there was the time that my dog and I were hunting field grouse and trailed one into a pit of a stink-rat. Mother must have used three bars of soap and then she still made us sleep outside for a week." He chuckled at the memory.

Toryn grinned. "That’s not as bad as the time I thought up the brilliant idea of taming bulls for us to ride," he admitted. "I bravely caught one and then proceeded to climb on. I
broke three ribs that day and Morgyn threatened to kill me the next time I went near a bull with anything even resembling a bridle. Once I was supposed to dye his favorite shirt, but I was angry with him for something, so I told my sister that he didn’t want it. She cut it into a short skirt and dyed it blue. I hid in a neighbor’s tent for the next two weeks, but he found me and gave me the chore of cutting and tanning him a new shirt. That was a horrid, rotten job."

Brydon chuckled with him and looked at the sky. The clouds were thick and the wind had picked up. He glanced back to find that they had ridden far ahead of the girls. Alyn seemed to be asleep; only an Akarskan could sleep comfortably on horseback. They slowed to wait for the girls and Brydon cast ahead with his mind to make sure Sellaris and the others were still in range. They were. The sky grew prematurely dark because of the building storm, so they halted.

They made camp in a shelter of large boulders and tall trees. Brydon determined it was safe to build a fire as the wind blew strongly in the opposite direction from Sellaris and the others. They had not taken a chance on hunting that day, so they ate dried meat and a few strange fruits that Alyn had located, washing it down with hot tea.

After the wind nearly started a forest fire when it picked up the sparks and threw them across the camp, they decided to do without the warmth as they chased after the embers and frantically stamped them out. They extinguished the fire and huddled together.

"This is exciting," Toryn said. "Perhaps we should tell tall tales. Shevyn can start."

"You are so entertaining," Alyn snapped.

"I know. Maybe when this quest is over I’ll get an easy job as a storyteller."

"Someone will hire you," Alyn said sweetly. "They always need fools to mock. Or people to muck out the dog kennels."

"No thanks, I would meet too many of your relatives, there," Toryn said. There was a meaty thwack as her fist smacked into his chest. As if on signal, the rain began to fall.

"Now look what you did, evil wench!" Toryn cried.

"I did no such thing! Your Adona is probably trying to drown you to shut you up."

"The girl spews blasphemy!" Toryn shouted in a righteous voice. "Pagan of Akarska!"

"I am no worshipper of Shaitan," Alyn growled. "But the thought of pulling out your heart is tempting at this moment."

Brydon and Shevyn hurried to the shelter of the boulders and held a waterproof cloak over themselves to keep out the rain, but the other two seemed too wrapped up in their argument to care about getting wet. Toryn danced around, pointing at Alyn.

"You heard her! Strike her down!" A fair-sized chunk of wood bounced off his chest. "Hey!" he yelled. It was followed by a handful of mud that left brown splatters all over Toryn’s pale buckskin shirt.

Toryn retaliated by grabbing a handful of the thick stuff and slinging it at Alyn. It caught her squarely on the head, coloring her fine blond hair dark brown. She screamed loudly and increased her mud barrage. Brydon and Shevyn fearfully retreated farther into the
safety of the boulders and watched the developing war. Shevyn looked at him with a puzzled expression.

"It’s been like this since they met," he explained. "Some days I want to tie and gag them both to get some peace."

Toryn won by chasing down Alyn, throwing her to the ground and dumping handfuls of forest mulch into her hair before massaging it in. She screamed for revenge and he shut her up by kissing her quite soundly. He jumped up and raced into the forest, laughing merrily. She spluttered incoherently and threw every object within reach at him, but remained where she was, probably more shaken than she wanted to admit. Shevyn had fallen asleep on Brydon’s shoulder and he smoothed her hair back from her brow, pondering once again the strangeness of her mind that he could not penetrate.

The rain lessened and Alyn tried futilely to comb the mud and mulch out of her hair. Brydon had to smile. She looked like a mud monster. Toryn sauntered back into camp, dripping wet but sparkling clean.

"Where were you?" Alyn demanded.

"Worried about me?"

"Ha! How did you get clean?"

"With water," he said obstinately. She hissed at him and he laughed. "There’s a stream. Right through the trees, that way." He gestured and she stormed off.

"Want me to protect you?" he called after her.

She marched back and picked up her bow and full quiver of arrows. "Not in a thousand years," she said acidly. He shrugged and she left. Brydon watched as Toryn waited a short time and then slipped into the trees after her, to either guard her or spy on her. Knowing Toryn, probably a little of both.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

THE GAUNTLET

Dawn crept over the mountaintops, spreading skirts of cold, gray clouds as she approached. The ground was wet, but at least it no longer rained. Shevyn’s head lay on Brydon’s chest and one arm was thrown over his midsection. When he stirred she murmured a plaintive sound and moved closer. He smiled softly. Lifting his head, he saw that Alyn was asleep not far from them. Toryn’s blankets were empty. Shevyn whimpered and tightened her grip convulsively. Whatever she dreamed, it did not seem to be pleasant. Brydon caressed her shoulder and wished he could peer inside her closed mind. He wondered if he should wake her.

She solved his dilemma by sitting up with a silent scream, eyes wild and breath coming in harsh gasps.

“Are you all right?” he asked, gripping her shoulders tightly. She shook her head, but the wildness slowly faded from her eyes. She looked away and got to her feet.
“Bad dream?” asked Alyn, apparently not asleep after all. Shevyn nodded, but she looked puzzled, as if the dream had receded into a memory she could not quite reach. She met Brydon’s concerned gaze for a moment, but shook her head and went into the forest just as Toryn came out.

“Get up! Get moving!” he called cheerfully. Brydon got to his feet and stretched, unkinking his stiff muscles.

“How can you be so happy on a day like this?” he asked sourly. Toryn looked at the sky and then blinked at Brydon in surprise.

“What are you talking about?” he asked. “Redol is always like this. Overcast, wet, and usually windy enough to knock you over. This feels like home.”

“Sounds lovely,” Brydon said dryly. “It’s often overcast in Falara, but it usually brings snow instead of rain. The only time the wind blows is when it comes down the valley from the north, cold enough to ice your lungs.”

“Sounds wretched,” Toryn said. “Our countries should join forces and invade Akarska. It’s nicer there.”

“I heard that,” Alyn retorted as she threw aside her blankets and rose.

“That’s an excellent idea!” Brydon said with a laugh. “I’ll bring it up in Council when I become king.”

“You’ll have a hard time allying with Redol,” Toryn said, turning sober.

“I could do it with your help.”

“I’m not even a clan chieftain. If Morgyn has kids, I won’t even be in the direct line.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Brydon said confidently. Toryn shook his head and went to saddle his horse. Alyn looked at Brydon.

“Are you really going to be the next Falaran king?” she asked.

“Not if we don’t find the gauntlet.”

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Toryn looked up from the tracks he studied.

“Odd. Another rider joined them here… and then they all turned and headed for that mountain. I thought Ruby was south—which is the direction they traveled, until now. They’ve turned northwest.”

“Suspicious,” Redwing agreed. “We follow?”

Toryn nodded. After following the meandering path with Toryn periodically dismounting to study the tracks, he stated, “The new fellow left them. He went south.”

“How can you tell?”

“Different tracks,” Alyn replied for Toryn, who nodded
“Perhaps he brought a message from Ruby,” he suggested.

“We may be nearing our mark. Let’s keep our eyes open,” Redwing warned. They moved out, staying near the faint trail left by Sellaris and the others. It was still overcast and once again dusk fell early. It was not long before Toryn had to dismount to find the trail. He cursed loudly when a gust of wind blew dirt into his eyes. The trees were thick and provided much of a barrier, but occasionally the wind found an unblocked path and rushed in.

“I’ll lose the track for good before long.”

“Want some help?” Alyn questioned in a teasing tone.

“If you don’t mind,” Toryn replied seriously, much to her obvious amazement. She slid off Fireling and hurried to help him.

Between the two of them, they kept the trail for another half hour before losing it permanently in the darkness. They stopped, but Redwing urged Darkling ahead with a cryptic, “I’ll be right back.”

Toryn and the girls were used to his foibles and only waited patiently for him to return. They heard the unhurried clopping of Darkling’s hoof beats before they saw him.

“I know where they are,” Redwing said. “Let’s go.” To Toryn he sent, //I caught Lavan’s mind; we should be able to find them.//

They followed Redwing’s lead until he called a sudden halt.

“Don’t make a sound!” he whispered. A small entourage passed them by, consisting of one mounted man and six men afoot. It was too dark to see them clearly, but Toryn detected the metallic clinking of armor. The party passed close enough that a single cough from anyone would have betrayed them.

“Looks like more people are joining the party,” Redwing said after the men had gone. “I think we should travel on foot from here. It will be quieter.” They dismounted and went on, following Redwing blindly. Toryn snagged a fist in Redwing’s cloak and Shevyn did the same. Alyn stumbled behind them, likely too proud to seek guidance.

Before long, Toryn caught the light of a campfire blinking through distant trees; they moved onward more slowly and cautiously.

//Toryn. There’s a guard,// Redwing sent and gave him a mental map of the man’s location. Toryn nodded and slipped off into the undergrowth. He pinpointed the guard’s location without difficulty and took him down with a silent approach and a quick blow to the back of the head.

Redwing and the others hurried forward.

“Are there any more sentries?” Toryn asked as he bound and gagged the unconscious man with a length of spare leather from his pouch. Redwing shook his head.

“Then they are careless, whoever they are.”

Toryn and the others crept through the underbrush until they had a fair vantage of the small clearing and fire. On the other side stood a wagon, atop which sat two men dressed in Ven-Kerrick black and grey. The sight caused Toryn to pound Redwing’s arm
excitedly. Sellaris and the others must have been following one of those damned Ven-Kerrick wagons! The driver must have left the highway long ago in favor of a more direct route to this site, for neither he nor Alyn had spotted wagon tracks on the way.

A large bush blocked much of Toryn’s view, so he moved around it, wary of where he set his feet before he put them down. This close, a snapping twig could give them away. Once around the offending shrub, he could clearly see Sellaris, Lavan, and Garyn. Lavan and Garyn crouched at the fire while Sellaris spoke to a man with blondish hair and beard. He was dressed in dark armor and a long cloak. Beside him stood a dark-haired man in the colors of Ven-Kerrick. Toryn strained to hear what they were saying.

“...do you want here, Keev?” Sellaris asked. She was as beautiful and haughty as Toryn remembered. He glanced at Redwing, who watched her avidly.

“This is my principality, young woman,” said the bearded man. “Who are you to question me?”

Toryn remembered the name, then. Keev, one of the Silveran princes.

“Reed sent me to deliver the artifact,” she said.

“The Voor are coming for it,” Prince Keev snapped.

“I am to escort them,” Sellaris stated with finality. “To see that there is no treachery from them, or from you.”

“Reed does not trust me?”

“Reed does not trust anyone and the Dark Master trusts nothing at all,” she replied.

Keev backed down visibly at that and looked around nervously. “At least let me see the thing,” he snapped. “Is that permitted?”

Sellaris shrugged and nodded before jerking her head in the direction of the wagon. The man in the livery of Ven-Kerrick went to the conveyance and took a small chest from the two men guarding it. He carried it toward the fire and set it down.

Brydon held his breath as Sellaris knelt and unlocked the chest after taking the key from the man. She flipped open the lid and gently lifted out the most incredible thing he had ever seen.

The Gauntlet of Ven-Kerrick.

Brydon was not sure what he had expected it to look like, just an ordinary glove, perhaps, but the gauntlet sparkled silver in the firelight, nearly glowing from its metal surface and throwing tiny rays of light into the night from clustered jewels. The thing was large, made to fit hand, wrist, and most of the forearm. It looked huge on Sellaris.

Keev, apparently overawed, reached out to touch it, but Sellaris’ voice halted him.

“Try it,” she goaded.
Keev withdrew his hand. “How is it that you can touch the thing, when no man can?”
“I am not a man.” She shrugged. “It does me no good, anyway. I can wear it, but I cannot wield it.”

So the legends were true. The gauntlet could only be used by one of Kerrick’s kin. Sellaris put away the gauntlet and locked the chest. Brydon let out his breath.

“How does your Dark Master propose to use it, then?” Keev persisted, rubbing his beard.
“Do you want to come with me and ask him yourself?” Sellaris asked in a honeyed voice. Keev snarled. He gestured to his men and mounted his horse.

“If you need anything else,” he said, “I will be in Ruby.” With that, he rode off with his entourage following. Sellaris gestured to the Ven-Kerrick man, who bent down to pick up the chest. Brydon stepped out of the trees and pointed an arrow at the man’s heart.

“I would leave that if I were you,” he said softly. The man looked up and paled. Sellaris whirled; Lavan and Garyn leaped to their feet.

“No one move!” Brydon barked.

Toryn swore, loud enough only for Brydon’s ears, but he echoed it with such a mental barrage that Brydon winced.

//What in the bloody name of the third Redolian chief are you doing? Is there insanity in your family?//
//You’re making me dizzy,// Brydon sent. //Are you going to help me or not?// Cursing followed.

“Brydon. How nice to see you again,” Sellaris said. She began to walk toward him. “I know you won’t hurt me. It’s not in your nature.”

Alyn stepped out of the trees with her whip in hand. “I have no such nature,” she stated. “I will gladly kill every last one of you for what you did to me. And I have come for the horses.”

“I have no qualms about feathering traitors of the Concurrence,” Brydon said loudly in order to give the Ven-Kerrick men something to think about.

“You have no idea what you are getting involved with, Brydon,” Sellaris warned, keeping her eyes on Alyn.

“I’m afraid I do,” Brydon replied. “Only too well.”

Toryn entered the circle of firelight and strolled over to Lavan, kicking at the dagger he had been surreptitiously reaching for.

“Hello, Liven.” He grinned. “Remember me?”

Sellaris’ brother spat. “I shall kill you one day.”

“Which day is that? I must mark it down so I don’t miss it.”

“We are taking the gauntlet now,” Brydon announced.
“We outnumber you,” Sellaris said.

“Oh? You would, but there are more of us in the trees,” Toryn said. “How many, do you suppose? Remember Davin? He has decent aim with a bow.”

The men they had spotted joining Sellaris’ party days ago were to Brydon’s right, almost out of his line of vision. They peered into the forest, as did the two Ven-Kerrick men still near the wagon. As if to confirm their fears, Shevyn walked out of the woods. She carried her sword naked in her fist and did not pause, but walked straight to the chest that contained the gauntlet. Her gaze was fixed on the Ven-Kerrick man who stood tall and unmoving under Brydon’s arrow. She stopped in front of him.

Unaccountably, the man flushed and dropped his eyes, looking almost mortified. Shevyn’s hand flashed out and caught him a ringing blow on the cheek. Instead of taking her hostage or even retaliating, the man only hung his head like a punished child. Shevyn turned her back on him and walked into Brydon’s line of fire, and then she knelt to pick up the chest. The man did not move to stop her, even when she stepped up to Sellaris and tore the chain holding the key from her fingers.

Sellaris glared as Shevyn turned her back on them all and headed for the surrounding forest. She had nearly reached the trees when pandemonium erupted. Half-naked warriors burst from the woods, screaming in a strange, foreign tongue. The words sounded like gibberish, guttural and terrifying, shouted at high volume.

Brydon was stunned motionless for a moment; their limbs were covered in bizarre black designs and their clothing was adorned with multicolored feathers. They seemed like otherworldly creatures.

A spear narrowly missed Brydon, breaking his shocked paralysis. He crouched and loosed an arrow at one painted warrior. He saw Toryn deflect a spear with his sword and knock Lavan upside the head in the same motion.

Brydon heard a scream from Sellaris, but it was Shevyn who caught his attention. She cut down a warrior who appeared in front of her with one brutal stroke and dove past him into the trees, clutching the gauntlet cask to her chest. Four other warriors followed her, still shrieking. They reminded Brydon of baying hounds chasing a hare.

“Shevyn!” he yelled. Without pausing to think, he crashed into the brush after them. From the direction they traveled, Shevyn was obviously trying to reach the horses. Brydon heard shouts to the left and knew some of the newcomers had cut off Shevyn’s access. He saw a flash of movement—a painted man! He changed his course to follow, easily picking up the excitement of the hunt from the man’s mind.

The terrain began to slope upward as Brydon chased them. Shevyn had headed up the mountainside. The trees thinned briefly and Brydon saw her pursuers. One of the men heard him and spun around, wielding a wickedly curved blade that looked razor sharp. The warrior howled and charged, but Brydon raised his bow. Before the warrior had covered half the distance, Brydon had drawn, fitted, and loosed an arrow. The man’s howl ceased abruptly as the arrow entered his throat. He collapsed, dead, at Brydon’s feet. Brydon skirted the body, feeling no emotion.
He hurried on and notched a new arrow automatically; the next man went down with a
shaft in his leg. Brydon passed him and the warrior cut at him when he ran by, but
Brydon leaped out of the way and went on. The other two were farther ahead, gaining on
Shevyn. The thought of their curved blades cutting into her flesh made Brydon push
himself faster. It was steeper going and she had to be tiring.

Rain spattered Brydon as he entered a clearing. Ahead a stretch of gray rock
dangerously covered in loose gravel. Shevyn was halfway across, treading lightly, and
Brydon’s heart was in his throat for a moment.

“Adona, don’t let her slip,” he prayed. A misstep would send her sliding over the abyss
that gaped away beyond the rock. She could not even use her arms for balance with the
cask gripped in her hands.

The first warrior was close behind her and gaining. Brydon quickly loosed an arrow at
him, but the man slipped on the shale and the arrow missed. The warrior miraculously
regained his balance. Brydon hissed and grabbed another arrow. He breathed a sigh of
relief when Shevyn reached the end of the loose shale and plunged into the trees on the
other side.

The final warrior blocked Brydon’s view of Shevyn’s nearest pursuer. He moved more
carefully, holding his hands out for stability and trotting across more slowly than his
companion.

Brydon waited a moment, sighted, and released the arrow. It thudded into the warrior’s
right sandal and his foot skewed sideways. Flailing arms did nothing to stop the resulting
slide. The warrior gained momentum until he skated over the edge of the rock,
screaming, and disappeared. Brydon heard a muffled thud far below. The other warrior
glanced back before leaping into the trees after Shevyn.

Brydon slung the bow over his shoulder and climbed onto the loose gravel. The wind
blew rain into his face, but he ignored it as he hurried on. He slipped once and his right
foot shifted sideways. A muscle pulled in his groin and brought him to his knees. His left
hand clawed desperately as he started to slide and his fingers caught a solid outcropping.
He tore a substantial amount of skin from his fingers, but managed to regain his feet with
his heart pounding in his chest. He crossed the remainder of the dangerous area without
further incident and raced onward as the rain came down in earnest.

Brydon followed the trail of broken branches until he reached a small, flat, treeless
plateau. He stopped short at the sight of the huge warrior holding Shevyn with a curved
blade at her throat. The chest lay on its side near the edge of the cliff.

“Stay back,” the man said with a very thick, guttural accent, as though struggling to form
words.

“Let her go!”

“She make fine sacrifice.” The man grinned and Brydon’s blood went cold. An arrow
was notched in his bow, but it faced downward. To raise the weapon would likely cause
the man to cut her throat. Slowly, ever so slowly, Brydon drew back the string.

“You can have the gauntlet,” he said loudly. “Just let her go!”
“Think maybe I take gaunt-let, take girl,” the man countered. “How you stop me?”

“Like this,” Brydon said. He raised the bow and released the arrow in a single motion, sending a benediction with it. The man’s eyes widened until the arrow destroyed one of them. Shevyn shoved him aside and jumped away as he fell to the ground and convulsed. He was dead.

Brydon ran to Shevyn; she trembled, gasping with exertion. He held her close and she clung to him as he murmured reassuring phrases. Brydon stroked her hair and raised his face to the sky, weak with relief. The rain poured down.

“Well done, Falaran,” came a voice Brydon had hoped never to hear again.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

DEUEL

Brydon turned slowly to see Reed standing at the edge of the cliff, holding the chest that contained the gauntlet. Reed’s gaze was fixed on Shevyn. Brydon’s grip tightened, holding her protectively even as a sinking feeling stole over him.

“You have led me a merry chase, my dear. But I warn you, you shall not escape me a third time.” Reed’s voice was hard and commanding. He wore a white shirt frothed with lace that began to droop quickly in the rain. His burgundy-colored breeches were tucked into gleaming black boots. It was an outfit more suited to lounging in a drawing room than climbing around in wet mountains.

“Where did you come from?” Brydon demanded. He had a suspicion, but it seemed insane. Reed’s eyes returned to him.

“Ven-Kerrick, of course.”

Brydon cursed inwardly. Sellaris must have called him. Damn her! “How did you know to come here?” he asked to verify it. A gust of wind caused Reed to sway slightly and he prudently stepped away from the cliff’s edge.

“My lovely Sellaris, of course,” Reed admitted. “She told me you were here, so I came straightaway to see if you still had my prize.”

“You came from Ven-Kerrick? So quickly? That’s impossible.” Brydon could not seem to stop the words, even though he knew of Reed’s ability. How did he do it? Traveling on horseback, it had taken Brydon and his friends nearly a fortnight to reach this point.

Reed smiled without humor and spoke over the quickening wind. “You are very young to know all that is possible and all that is not,” he said. “It’s a pity you will not live long enough to learn otherwise. Come to me, Shevyn. We must be going now.”

Shevyn gripped Brydon more tightly and shook her head. Her gaze was steady, but Brydon could feel her quaking. He wondered what had happened to the warrior-woman he had seen only minutes before. Why was she so terrified of Reed? Could he penetrate her mental shields where Brydon could not?
“What do you want with her, Reed?” Brydon demanded over the wind as it turned the rain to icy sheets. “You have the gauntlet!”

“Yes, and I will have Shevyn, also. She is to be my bride. Did you think to keep her highness for yourself?” Reed laughed. “Sorry, dear boy, but you do not have the power to hold her.”

“Your bride?” Brydon spat. “Why? She despises you!”

“Trifles,” Reed said, waving a bejeweled hand. “I thought you were smarter than that, Falaran. I cannot legally claim either the throne of Ven-Kerrick or the gauntlet until I marry the only surviving Kerrick—Princess Shevyn, soon to be Queen Shevyn. She escaped me twice, but she will not do so again. I will have her and you will release her now.”

Queen? Shevyn was a Kerrick? Suddenly everything clicked into place. Her familiarity with the castle, her terror of Reed, Kerryn’s odd behavior when he’d helped to rescue them, the secret passages… Adona, she was the last surviving Kerrick!

“I will not,” Brydon said with a sinking feeling. His fingers tightened on Shevyn reflexively, wishing he could reassure her. If only he had taken another arrow from his quiver. If he tried to do so now, Reed would notice for certain. The memory of what Reed had done to him long ago came back with painful clarity. He would rather not provoke a mental battle. He thought about calling Toryn, but knew Toryn had troubles of his own—he was in the thick of battle with the jungle warriors, yet another situation for worry.

“You know you are no match for me. In any way,” Reed said as he carefully set down the gauntlet cask and drew his sword. Brydon moved Shevyn aside gently and gave her his bow. She clung to his wrists, shaking her head wildly, her eyes full of terror. She tugged at him, her grip urging him to run, but Brydon knew he would not get five steps before Reed cut him down. He smiled grimly at her and forced her hands to grasp the bow, silently willing her to use it on Reed should the battle turn ugly, which it most likely would.

He shook off his quiver and placed it near Shevyn’s feet before drawing his blade. Shevyn’s face was wet, although from tears or simply the rain it was hard to know. Reed’s words were true, even though Brydon would never admit it. Only Toryn was a match for Reed with a sword. He wished that Toryn had killed the bastard in Terris.

Reed stepped forward and their blades met with a clang. They were both soaked to the skin and Brydon was grateful for the leather grip on his sword. He and Reed danced carefully, thrusting and riposting while blinking the rain out of their eyes. Reed toyed with him. Brydon knew it; he fought Reed off, not straining, but the effort was not easy, either.

Reed forced him slowly back toward the edge of the cliff. Brydon tried to watch his footing—there were rocks and small hillocks of grass everywhere, slippery and wet. Reed drove in hard and Brydon jumped away from the edge—with an uncomfortable glimpse of the darkness below.

They circled each other warily. Reed stepped in and slashed. Brydon deflected the blow, but earned a painful nick on his upper arm.
Reed laughed aloud. “I think you should have practiced more, Falaran.”

“Where are you sending the gauntlet?”

“Where it will be used instead of admired,” Reed replied with a blinding attack that left Brydon gasping as well as bleeding from two new gashes. It was not until then that he noticed Reed’s stealthy presence in his mind, seeking to gain a foothold.

//Get out of my head// he snarled, beating back blows with arms that were beginning to feel like lead weights.

//I think I will stay.// The force of it Reed's words through Brydon’s mind like a crash of thunder, causing pain that he had never known. Brydon staggered and Reed’s blade cut a long furrow down his side.

“Do not move, Princess,” Reed said as Shevyn stepped forward, raising the bow with an arrow ready. Shevyn froze as though she had encountered a barrier. Brydon, peering through a haze of blinding pain, wondered how Reed had stopped her. He leaped at Reed and grazed his chest with a quick slash before Reed slammed the flat of his blade against Brydon’s skull. Brydon fell to his knees, head ringing—the blow had magnified the agony still piercing his mind. Reed snatched a fistful of Brydon’s hair and pulled him to his feet. Brydon glared at him in despair. He had failed his quest; he had failed everything.

What do you want with the gauntlet, Falaran? Reed asked in Brydon’s mind, even though he tried with all of his might to block him.

“I was sent for it,” he growled. “By Adona!”

Reed drew back in distaste. “You have spirit, I will give you that,” Reed said. He released Brydon, who staggered for a moment in surprise. “Perhaps I should keep you as a sacrifice to Shaitan.” Reed seemed to ponder the idea and Brydon remembered the jeweled dagger with renewed loathing.

“You are sick!” Brydon yelled, revolted. He leaped at Reed and swung his blade with all his might. Reed slashed, using both sword and mind with deadly force. The combined force hit Brydon like a tidal wave. He slammed backward and discovered with horror that there was nothing to break his fall. His last vision as he plunged over the edge of the cliff was of Reed’s satisfied face. Then he felt pain and darkness and nothing more.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX
TRAPPED

When they materialized inside the royal bedchamber in Ven-Kerrick, Shevyn shoved herself out of Reed’s arms. She sprawled ungracefully on the floor, unable to keep her balance from vertigo caused by the teleportation. Reed collapsed in a nearby chair, looking pale and exhausted. Shevyn glared at him through the thick curtain of her hair. Hopefully the exertion of transporting the two of them had been too much for him. Hopefully the strain would kill him.
She looked around and recognized her surroundings with a startled pang. They were in her father’s room. A brief flare of memory came to her of her father standing before the fireplace. Here, when she was small, he would lift Shevyn and toss her high into the air until she was dizzy and laughing. The recollection brought a spasm of pain. Her parents were gone, she knew, even though she had forgotten exactly how. That memory began to surface, sluggishly, and she locked it away once more in a panic. She would not allow herself to feel that loss, not now, not on top of Brydon’s death.

The shock of it returned to her with renewed strength. The scene played again in her mind; Brydon’s fall, Reed’s dark laughter, her own silent scream of denial and her rush to the cliff face. She had seen nothing below but a sheer wall of rock, thick trees, and darkness. No one could have survived such a fall. Shevyn might have thrown herself after him had not Reed snatched her arm and dragged her away from the edge and back down the mountain. He had returned the gauntlet to the redhead bitch and magically transported Shevyn to Ven-Kerrick.

She crawled to the nearby bed and held tightly to the bedpost as she buried her face in the soft covers. Tears streamed silently down her face; she longed to scream out her despair and fury.

"There, there, princess." Reed’s hateful voice came to her. "You should be glad the Falaran is gone. He would have broken your heart, you know. He was promised to another." Shevyn tried to shut out the sound, but Reed went on remorselessly. "It is true. He would have taken the gauntlet and hurried back to his eager princess in Falara. He would never give up the Falaran throne, not even for such a beautiful flower as you. Even were he not Falaran, he was still a knight-priest and they know their duty." Reed laughed and the sound was like a knife cutting across her soul. She clapped her hands over her ears, unwilling to hear more. Perhaps it was true, but now she would never know.

Reed left, a fact she barely noticed. A short time later, a man entered the room to lay a fire. Shevyn was not surprised that she did not recognize him. No doubt he was one of Reed’s loyal soldiers. He stoked the fire without acknowledging her presence and then departed.

When the door closed behind the man, Shevyn shot to her feet and raced to the wall. She yanked back one of the thick tapestries and felt her way to the hidden door, the one that led to the Great Hall. She had played in the secret corridors a thousand times as a child. The door did not give way, so she threw her weight against it, assuming it to be stuck. It did not move and she cringed when her questing fingers found a newly installed latch fastened with a thick lock.

She pounded a fist against the door, giving vent to her frustration. She pushed her way out from under the tapestry to find Reed seated in the chair he had previously vacated. He watched her with a sardonic smile.

"I took the liberty of putting a lock on that door after your Falaran escaped me," Reed said. Shevyn tossed her head and refused to acknowledge him. He gestured to the bed. "I brought you a change of clothes. You must get out of that wet dress before you catch a chill." He chuckled. "We cannot have you ill at our wedding."

Her gaze shot to him, spitting hellfire. He smiled.
"Ah, something touches you at last. Good. I shall leave you to your preparations and return with supper. We will dine together, the first of many such meals." He rose and walked forward, grasping her clenched fist and raising it to his lips. She shoved her arm forward suddenly, ramming her knuckles into his lower lip. He drew back with an oath and twisted her arm sharply, causing a spasm of pain to shoot from wrist to shoulder. She gasped and fought back tears as he gripped her wrist more and more tightly, bruising it, grinding the bones together.

He released her with a sharp movement; she stumbled backward and sat down hard. Her teeth clicked together painfully. She glared up at him and rubbed her wounded wrist.

"Tread lightly, princess. I am only civilized when I choose to be." He spun on a heel and went out. Shevyn stayed where she was for a moment, despairing. There was no way out, she knew. None of the chambers had windows. She shivered, realizing she was cold.

She stood up and snatched the gown from the bed, not surprised to see it was one of her own. The thought of Reed ransacking her chambers gave her a momentary sensation of disgust, but that violation was trivial compared to all else he had done to her. The bastard had much to atone for. As for marrying him—ha! She would put a dagger through her own heart first.

She stepped behind the mahogany dressing screen—in case the demon should return—and peeled off her wet gown. She replaced it with the burgundy velvet. It was rather too formal, but at least it was warm. She laughed silently for a moment without humor. Too formal for imprisonment? She tied off the lacing of the gown—a tasseled golden cord that matched the girdle. She was surprised that the gown laced up the front—most of her dresses laced or fastened in the back and required the help of a maid to don. She supposed Reed knew she would remain in wet clothing for eternity rather than ask for his assistance.

She entered the sitting room and seated herself before a mirrored dressing table. She picked up her mother’s silver hairbrush and began to brush her wet hair. She chose not to think of her mother at all and instead concentrated on each downward stroke of the brush.

Her thoughts turned to her predicament. How could she let Kerryn know she was here? She shut the door and returned to the bedchamber. Her eyes lit upon her father’s desk. A stack of fine parchment rested there and multicolored quills stood waiting for the chance to shed ink upon it. Perhaps she could pass a note to Kerryn through one of the servants. Shevyn quickly drafted a note. She sanded the parchment to dry the ink and shook off the excess before folding it and tucking it into her bodice. She sighed, knowing that her chance of encountering a loyal servant was slim. She wondered if she could pick the lock
on the secret door—or perhaps break it. She gazed about for potential tools. There were no daggers in the room, which seemed odd to her. Reed could not have known he would be bringing her back with him. Perhaps he was so confident in his mental powers that he did not feel the need to keep excess steel about.

She left the bedchamber and entered another adjoining room—her mother’s sewing room. Shevyn gazed around as if seeing the place for the first time. A velvet-covered settee sat against the far wall before a large tapestry of a country meadow. Several chairs graced the room, and tables and oak caskets were scattered throughout. One such chest was open and Shevyn sat down on the chair nearest it. She looked at the colorful yarns within and pensively picked up an aqua scarf—started by her mother, never to be finished. She held the soft wool up to her cheek for a moment, thinking how the color would have matched Brydon’s eyes. Grief threatened to overwhelm her for a moment.

Her sadness was deflected when she caught sight of the knitting needles revealed beneath the scarf. She dropped the wool as she snatched up the thin rods of steel. Perhaps she could pick the lock with them. If not, they were potential weapons.

She stood up, needles in hand, and froze when she heard the sound of the outer doors opening. She quickly tucked the needles down the side of her skirt beneath the girdle, stabbing their sharp points through the thick material. She winced when the point of one scratched the flesh of her leg. She hurriedly crossed the room and stood before the harp where she rested her head against the polished wood and plucked the strings idly.

"Here you are," Reed said from the doorway. "I had feared you fled, after all." She ignored him. "The harp? Do you play?" She turned to him and shook her head, receiving a brief flash of satisfaction at being able to lie to him without even speaking.

He sighed. "Pity. I have brought food. Come and dine with me."

She shrugged and walked past him into the bedchamber. A covered tray sat upon the table. She seated herself quickly, not allowing him the chance to pretend chivalry. He sat across from her and uncovered the tray. Two plates rested thereon, heaped with meats and pasties, bread, cheeses and spreads. He took the two pewter goblets from the tray and filled them with red wine. Shevyn took her plate and began to eat mechanically. Reed sampled a pasty and licked his lips appreciatively.

"Fine cooks you have here in Ven-Kerrick," he commented.

She threw him an acid glare and returned her attention to her plate.

"You look lovely," he said after a moment. "That color suits you."

She gave no heed whatsoever to that remark. If he thought he could charm her after killing her family and Brydon, he was more than a fool—he was mad. She took a sip of the wine, wishing for hot tea. She did not want her wits dulled. Mercifully, he allowed her to finish her meal in silence. She had no appetite, but knew she must maintain her strength in order to escape.

"Tell me about your Falaran," Reed said later. He stood before the fire and leaned on the mantle with one arm. "How did you know to flee to him when you escaped me? Why was he so foolish as to return you to Ven-Kerrick—to confront me here? Did he think his power equal to mine?"
Shevyn closed her eyes, wishing she could shut out the sound of his voice as easily. She did not want to think of Brydon. The loathing she felt for his killer was compounded by his every utterance. Reed turned back to her.

"Does it pain you to speak of him?" he goaded. "Do you think to keep his secrets in loving memory?"

She did not look at him until he stalked forward and yanked her forcibly out of the chair, further bruising her injured wrist. He pulled her into an embrace, crushing her body against his. He released her arm only to caress her face with his left hand. She clenched her jaw, glaring at him. With her freed hand, she fumbled for the knitting needles.

"Your silence distresses me, Shevyn," he said and his caress turned into a snare as he held her chin and lowered his mouth to kiss her lips. She shoved him away and stabbed at him with one of the needles, but he was quick as lightning. Even so, the steel rod cut a nasty furrow beneath his eye, fully three inches long. He touched the bleeding wound for a moment in shock, and then struck like a poisonous snake, striking her hand and sending the makeshift weapon spinning across the room.

"Filthy bitch!" he cried and backhanded her across the cheek in the same motion. The force of it knocked her to the floor, although Reed did not leave her there. He grabbed the shoulder of her dress and dragged her to her feet; the material tore. His hands were suddenly all over her, ripping at her bodice and skirt. She thought he meant to assault her, until she heard him snarl, "Where is the other one?"

He found it and tore it from her, leaving a gaping tear in the needle’s wake. He shoved her away and she stumbled, barely managing to keep her feet. She held her torn dress together and straightened. Reed recovered the first knitting needle and clicked the pair of them together. Blood trickled from his cheek to his chin and dripped onto his white shirt. He glanced down at the growing spot of red.

"I tried to treat you as befits your station," he informed her in a controlled voice. "But if you prefer to behave as a hoyden, so shall it be."

He strode forward and she hurried to put the table between them, but he continued past her and into the next room. A moment later, she heard the outer doors open and close. She sank down into a chair, relieved.

Her respite was short-lived. Reed returned bearing several lengths of rope. She shot to her feet and put the table between them once more. The maneuver did not deter Reed—her merely yanked out a chair and used it to step up onto the table. He leaped down at her and she fled into the sewing room, looking for something to throw at him. The oil lamp was nearest and she rushed for it, but he caught her about the legs and brought her crashing to the floor short of her goal.

She kicked and scratched at him, but he picked her up and carried her back into the bedchamber, seeming oblivious to her struggles. He threw her upon the bed and caught her left arm before she could roll away. He knotted a rope about her wrist and tied it to the bedpost, though he earned a bloody scratch on the forearm from her nails.

Reed cursed and grabbed her free hand, climbing on top of her to fasten her arm to the opposite bedpost. He did not pause, but tied each of her legs as well, barely avoiding a
kick in the chin. When she was spread-eagled and helpless, he sat down next to her. She tugged at her bonds, trying to ignore her growing terror. She should not have attacked him until she was more certain of success. She stared at him coldly. The lower portion of his face was a mask of blood and his shirt was heavily spotted from droplets.

He patted her belly familiarly. "That should hold you for a time, my dear, and hopefully prevent any more nasty surprises. I must attend to my affairs now, but I shall return. Give us a kiss." She turned her head away, but he grasped her chin and forced her to face him. He squeezed her jaw—giving her no chance to bite him—and kissed her lingeringly, letting his tongue caress her lips for a moment. She spat at him when he released her and he smiled at her in a tolerant fashion. He put a hand on her chest and rubbed gently for a moment before letting his hand slide into her torn bodice to caress one of her breasts. She held her breath for a moment, realizing her note to Kerryn was still there, although it had slid down in their struggles and rested along her ribcage a hairsbreadth from Reed’s fingers. He squeezed—not quite painfully—and sighed.

"Perhaps my business will not take long. After all, why should we wait for the wedding to sample the pleasures of marriage?"

He pinched her nipple and she gasped, jerking away from him. He removed his hand and laughed.

"Ah, Shevyn, you tempt me, but duty calls." He got to his feet, checked her bonds once more and went out, leaving her in darkness and despair.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

JOURNEY

Toryn was livid. He had chopped up strangely-clad men until the blade of his sword had sprayed red with every movement and he could scarcely move for fear of tripping over a body, but they had kept coming, finally overwhelming him with sheer numbers. He had no idea why they hadn’t just killed him instead of clubbing him on the head until he was dazed, before disarming him and binding him hand and foot.

Redwing had raced off after Shevyn and the gauntlet. Toryn had not seen him since. He was worried, especially when Reed came down from the mountain dragging a sobbing Shevyn and carrying the cask with the gauntlet. Reed threw Shevyn down next to Toryn and bound her quickly with a length of rope, not bothering to be gentle.

Reed tossed Toryn a satisfied grin and ignored his snarl of rage before speaking to the remaining warriors in guttural grunts and flowery hand gestures. Toryn’s nearly continuous mental screaming to the Falaran had received no response, something Redwing would never allow if he were conscious.

Shevyn looked at him and began to sob, trying vainly to create words. She tried for agonizingly long minutes, until Toryn asked her to please stop. He was afraid she would hurt herself. After that, she simple stared at the ground and wept silently. Toryn’s gut tightened painfully; he feared the worst for Redwing.
Prince Keev returned, apparently having heard the commotion, and hurried back to join the fray, although he was apparently on the side of Reed and the warriors. He did not seem surprised to see Reed and he took an immediate interest in Alyn, who had also been disarmed and bound. Her whip had taken out quite a number of the warriors. She faced them all defiantly, although she looked at Toryn with a worried expression. She was tied too far from him to hear if she spoke.

Reed argued with Keev, who seemed to be making demands. If he still wanted the gauntlet, Reed was hearing none of it, as they stayed far from the wagon. Reed walked a slow circuit of the battlefield, trailed by the prince. They were near enough for Toryn to overhear Reed agree to sell Alyn to him for a handful of jewels. Toryn tried to leap to his feet in rage, but his bonds were well-tied. He watched helplessly as Keev dragged Alyn away with his entourage.

Toryn decided he would have to kill Prince Keev sooner or later.

Probably later, he admitted to himself wryly, tugging on his bound hands. Reed placed the chest with the gauntlet back into the wagon and ordered the warriors—Parmittans, Toryn learned later—to take it and be off. The leader of the warriors made several odd noises while gesturing at Toryn and Shevyn. Reed argued with him for a time, but nodded. Several of the warriors came for Toryn, hoisting him to his feet and dragging him without bothering to loosen his bonds. They loaded him into the back of the wagon with the Gauntlet cask. A few warriors climbed up next to him, fingerling their knives with perhaps a little too much eagerness.

Reed gave some last-minute instructions to Sellaris and Garray, then grabbed Shevyn and faded out of existence. The look in Shevyn’s eyes as she disappeared nearly put Toryn into a killing rage, but he recognized his own helplessness and chafed at his too-tight bonds. He assumed Reed had taken her back to Ven-Kerrick and he could only wonder at her fate.

Lavan woke up shortly thereafter and roared with rage. He ran for Toryn with murder in his eyes and managed to climb up into the wagon and wrap his hands around Toryn’s throat. The Parmittans cheered happily. Things were going dark for Toryn when the Parmittan chief clubbed Lavan, thankfully loosening his hands, and sending him sprawling.

“Mine,” the chief said, a statement that filled Toryn with unease, despite being glad that he could go on living for a while longer.

“For now. I want to be there when he dies,” Lavan snarled. His red hair was mussed and matted with blood. Toryn made a rude noise at him and then the wagon moved out.

Two days later Toryn learned that he was meant for sacrifice, which intensified his need to escape. Unfortunately, he was kept bound and in the wagon at all times. Sellaris fed him by hand and asked him questions about Redwing. He hated that because it made him think of Redwing, and he did not want to do that anymore.

He was terribly afraid that his friend was dead.

They traveled over the Ven-Horn Mountains, a grueling experience at best, a nightmare at worst. Toryn, in the wagon with his hands bound, discovered that crossing a mountain
range in a wagon was possibly the closest torture to being burned alive in Sheol. Each time the wagon moved, he was tossed to one side or the other and almost flew out completely several times.

By the end of the second day, he was bruised from head to toe and the ropes on his wrists were wet with blood. The Parmittans walked, except the brave few that unwisely rode in the wagon. They would only do that until the torture became too much for even their small minds and after that they got down and stayed far away from the wooden torture chamber.

Sellaris, Garyn, Lavan, and the two men they had met in the Black City, (whose names were Yik and Yak, or something like that) rode horses. The two men were twins. It was Toryn’s opinion that the couple who had brought those two into the world had cut their own throats shortly after viewing their children. They were not pleasant-looking men. Toryn amused himself by insulting them whenever they were in range. They paid no attention to him, which frustrated Toryn immensely. He insulted the Parmittans also, but only a few of them could speak his tongue and they just grinned and fingered their knives. All in all, it was wonderful company.

Toryn’s only true release came from taunting Lavan. The redhead would endure Toryn’s slurs for approximately two sentences before his face became as red as his hair and he would shriek at Toryn until Sellaris ordered him to shut up and ride elsewhere.

After one such encounter, Garyn rode up to the wagon and frowned at Toryn. “You should not irritate him like that,” he said.

“Why? If I’m nice to him, will they delay my sacrifice for an hour?” Toryn sneered. Garyn flushed and rode away.

Sellaris took pity on him on the third day of the crossing, after he was knocked unconscious by a particularly hard jolt that sent his head slamming into the side of the wagon. When he came to, he discovered that his legs had been untied. His hands were still bound, but they had been cleaned of blood and dirt and tied in front of him instead of behind his back, giving him limited use. Toryn glared at Sellaris for thanks. She shrugged. He climbed down from the wagon, grateful—despite his hatred—to be allowed to walk rather than ride in the vehicle with the gauntlet.

After months of traveling on horseback, it was hard to adapt to walking again, Toryn discovered. The Parmittan warriors were tireless. They wore short skirt-like wraps around their hips, adorned with many multicolored feathers. Their skin color was surprisingly pale, considering the time they must have spent out of doors. They seemed generally amiable, talking to each other in their sometimes guttural, sometimes musical language, and ignored everyone else. They obeyed their leader without question. Their favorite pastime seemed to be sharpening their curved knives.

Toryn was exhausted after his first day of walking. They were close to the peak, Sellaris informed him, and would probably cross over soon. After that, it would be all downhill.

“All the way to my grave, eh?” Toryn joked with no real humor. Sellaris looked at him with something that resembled pity for a moment. Perhaps her heart was not completely made of stone.
“Are you so certain Brydon will not come to your rescue?” she asked.

Toryn looked at her in irritation. He had never liked her and could not see Redwing’s attraction. She was the type to put herself first and foremost. “Did you not see Redwing go after Shevyn?” he asked.

“The brown-haired girl?” Sellaris shrugged. “So?”

“Reed came back with her. Redwing did not.” She looked puzzled. Toryn rolled his eyes. “Are you simple? Redwing would never have let Reed take her unless he could no longer prevent it.”

“What do you mean?” she murmured, grey eyes going wide. Her red hair shone in the light of the Parmittan’s fires. She was beautiful, but Toryn cared nothing for it.

“Redwing is dead,” he said brutally.

Sellaris shook her head. “No! He cannot be! Reed would not—”

“Reed tried to kill him at their first meeting. What makes you think he would hold back? Do you honestly think Reed would save Redwing for you?” Toryn snapped.

Sellaris climbed to her feet and then turned and walked into the trees. Lavan jumped up and stalked over to Toryn. “What did you say to her?” he yelled.

“Nothing she can’t handle,” Toryn growled. “She’s more of a man than you’ll ever be.”

Lavan’s face flushed and he swung a booted foot at Toryn, who put out his bound hands, grabbed Lavan’s foot and shoved as hard as he could. Lavan flailed his arms and toppled over backwards. He climbed to his feet again, his rage apoplectic. He leaped at Toryn, only to be stopped by a hand that grabbed his shoulder and spun him around. Garyn looked into Lavan’s enraged face calmly.

“You dare—?!” Lavan burst out.

“Just leave him alone,” Garyn said quietly. “He is right. Sellaris can take care of herself.”

“But he said I—!”

“Yes, and you are proving him right, acting like a fool.”

Lavan spluttered incoherently and reached for his sword, but something in Garyn’s calm gaze seemed to halt him. His eyes dropped to the sword hilt where Garyn’s hand rested. Toryn noticed with outrage that Garyn wore his sword with the jade dragon hilt.

Lavan seemed to deflate, but his bitterness still found an outlet. “Fool I may be, but at least I do not follow Sellaris around like a rutting stag. She will never treat you as anything other than a quivering pup!” he goaded. With that, he stalked off in search of his sister. Toryn saw a real pain in Garyn’s eyes before it was squelched.

“It’s a pity that he is right,” he said with a sad smile. He went back to the fire and returned with a large piece of roasted buck the Parmittans had brought down earlier that day.

“Why bother feeding a dead man?” Toryn asked, burying his temporary compassion for Garyn under his own despair. He took the meat and bit into it.
“No one is dead until their breath is gone for good,” Gryn said. “Until that time, hang on to life with all your power.”

“I haven’t given up yet,” Toryn snapped, wondering why Gryn would give him such advice.

“Death does not bother me,” Gryn went on quietly. “But sacrifice? I don’t like it. Shaitan will never be my god.” He uttered the last vehemently.

“Then why are you here?” Toryn asked, not understanding where the conversation led. Gryn looked into the forest where Sellaris had disappeared and then turned to walk away.

“As Lavan said, I am a fool,” he said over his shoulder.

Toryn thought, with a stab of pain, that the man reminded him somewhat of Redwing. He sighed and finished eating even though his appetite had fled.

Sellaris avoided Toryn the next day, which was fine with him. Lavan also stayed far away, riding near Sellaris at the front of the column. Only Gryn spoke to Toryn, bringing him water and answering questions. Toryn hated having no one to talk with. Since meeting Redwing, he’d had someone to argue with and laugh at whenever he needed it. He thought back to his last argument with Redwing. His fears seemed foolish now that the Falaran was gone. What did it matter that Redwing was a Falaran? He had proven his nobility, his courage, and his friendship time and again. Toryn wished now that he’d had a chance to introduce Redwing to his family. He wished...

“Where are we?” he asked Gryn to take his mind away from his friend. He had tried calling Redwing with his thoughts several times, screaming mentally until he was drenched with sweat. There had been no reply. He had expected none, anyway.

“We are in Parmitta,” Gryn replied, even though Toryn suspected that from what he remembered of Jace’s maps.

“What are we going from here?”

Gryn smiled. “Parmitta is the only place to go from here. The continent travels to the sea in all directions.”

Seeing Toryn’s frustrated expression, he explained further. “We just entered the land of the Voor.” He gestured at the warriors and some of them glanced over at the familiar word. “We will probably travel to their village, Voor-ik, on the banks of the Fear River.”

The Fear River. Lovely name. “And where does the gauntlet go?”

Gryn’s face tightened. “I will not be the one to answer that,” he said.

“Who is the Dark Master?” Toryn prodded, recalling Sellaris’s conversation with Prince Keev. Gryn touched heels to his horse and galloped away, leaving Toryn’s questions unanswered and somehow the more ominous for it.

The further they descended out of the mountains, the warmer it became. The forest was taller and thicker. By the time they left the Ven-Horns behind, they were deep in jungle that blocked out most of the sunlight and made day seem like dusk. The place was alive with fauna and Toryn was reminded of Terris, except that the forest floor was mostly dry
instead of covered in ankle-deep muck. The Parmittans were quite at home, as was
evident when they reached the first man-sized bush that contained huge blossoms of
orange-colored flowers. The warriors swarmed around the bush and decimated the
blossoms. They rubbed the flower petals all over their skin. Their antics continued until
the last warrior was coated from head to toe with the juice. It left them looking even more
freakish and exotic with huge orangish streaks on their bodies.

“What are they doing?” Toryn asked, walking around to where Garyn stood. Sellaris
approached the
plant and sniffed at a flower. She made a gagging motion and backed away in disgust.

“I don’t know, but they smell wretched. Perhaps it’s some sort of tribal custom?” Garyn
suggested. The leader of the Parmittans spoke to Sellaris and gestured at the plant, but
she wrinkled her nose and shook her head. The man shrugged and smiled before grunting
to his warriors in their language. They burst out laughing and slapped each other on the
backs. Sellaris looked annoyed, but ordered them to get moving.

Two hours later, they discovered the worth of the blossoms. Toryn batted at the mass of
insects voraciously feasting on his flesh. Noisy, fat, bloodthirsty insects, at that. They had
a painful bite. He waited for one to land so that he could smack it, so intent on the action
that he tripped over a root. The insects seemed to take it as a sign that he was dead, so
they swarmed on him in even greater numbers. Toryn leaped to his feet, shouting and
swatting frantically with his bound hands. He heard loud laughter and looked up to find
the Parmitan warriors laughing at his plight. They were unaffected by the insects, which
swarmed around them, but did not land. Sellaris, Lavan and Garyn were not laughing;
they were as plagued as Toryn.

Sellaris shouted at the tribal leader, who shrugged and sent some of his men into the
jungle. They returned a short time later with an armful of the reeking orange flowers.
Toryn joined the others in snatching the blossoms and smearing the foul-smelling plant
all over himself. Once he adjusted to the smell, the relief from the insects was immense.

In late afternoon, it began to rain, although it could hardly be called rain. Water filtered
down through the thick curtain of foliage, reaching the ground as a fine mist that coated
everything. It continued for hours and turned into true rain when they entered regions less
dense with trees. Toryn felt like he breathed warm water; it was everywhere, cloying.

Instead of driving the insects away, the rain seemed to attract them and they attacked with
renewed frenzy. Unfortunately, the mist also washed away the flower repellent and
before long everyone, including the Parmittans, slapped themselves frequently with yelps
of pain.

Darkness came even earlier with the clouds covering the forest, so they camped and
huddled near the fire. It was horrendously uncomfortable since they were already
sweating, but the smoke from the wet wood drove most of the carnivorous insects away.
Toryn was too hot and tired and bitten to eat, so he rolled himself into the blanket Garyn
had given him, smashed all the bugs that found their way inside, and tried to sleep.

He decided he hated jungles.
The next week crawled by with little change. Every morning brought the bloodsuckers and every afternoon the rain. The jungle seemed never-ending and the only moment of excitement was when Sellaris ran across a snake and, screaming, chopped it into a hundred bloody bits. The Parmittan leader was angry because the snake had apparently been edible before she had demolished it.

Toryn stopped taunting Lavan, too bored to bother. He ignored everyone and withdrew into himself, passing the time with memories of his family. One night when he huddled under his blanket, hiding from the insects, he heard footsteps pass by. He glanced out and to see Sellaris slip into the foliage. When she disappeared he got to his feet. The Parmittan who guarded him had fallen asleep, so it was little trouble for him to follow Sellaris. His guards were often lax and Toryn had frequently contemplated escaping on foot, but he had watched firsthand when the Parmittans had tracked a jungle cat. They were incredible trackers and Toryn would simply be lost in the jungle until they found him.

He walked until he saw Sellaris perched on a moss-covered fallen tree. About to step forward and make his presence known, he halted at the sight of something in her hand. Curious, he stopped and peered at it. The object was a large, tear-shaped crystal that fit in the palm of her hand. Toryn recognized it as the pendant she normally wore around her neck. It was pale green in color and seemed to glow slightly. Sellaris looked at it intently, as if searching for some flaw, but Toryn had the impression that her action meant something else entirely.

She stared at it for a long time without moving. Toryn nearly stepped out of hiding when she said, “No! You did not say you were going to—!” She stopped quickly and seemed to recover herself. “No,” she said again. “He meant nothing. Yes, everything is going according to plan. No trouble.” There was a long silence and then Sellaris covered the crystal with her other hand. Toryn noticed a fine gold chain attached to it as she slipped it over her head and tucked the stone into her blouse. She seemed wearied.

Toryn moved forward and she turned with a start as her hand flew to her sword hilt. Beautiful she might be, but she was a warrior through and through. She stared at him for an instant and then straightened and to let the blade slide back into the scabbard.

“How long have you been there?” she demanded.

“Long enough to find that very interesting,” Toryn said coldly. “Do you often talk to rocks? What is it? Magic?”

She tossed her hair, but her eyes slid away from Toryn’s. The word seemed to make her uneasy. “I don’t know,” she said. “Reed communicates through it.”

Toryn felt jolted. “Reed? But he is weeks behind us, isn't he?”

“More,” Sellaris said quietly. “He is in Ven-Kerrick.” She clasped her hands together in front of her as if cold, or in prayer. Her eyes were far away. She shuddered.

“Did you receive bad news?”

“Brydon is dead.”
Toryn felt as if she had driven a lance into his chest. He gaped at her. “How do you know?”

Sellaris wrapped her arms around herself. “Reed told me. They fought, the two of them, for the gauntlet.” Toryn felt a slice of fear. He knew Redwing was no match for Reed. “Brydon was wounded. Reed lashed out and Brydon went over the cliff.”

Toryn closed his eyes. He had suspected Redwing was dead, but had not fully allowed himself to believe it. They had been through too much together. He kept expecting Redwing to charge out of the trees any day and rescue him. Toryn took a shuddering breath and let the anguish fill him before rage took over. Both emotions warred within him, threatening to crack him in two. A sob from Sellaris shocked him and he snapped his eyes open. Her face was buried in her hands and she wept brokenly. Toryn wanted to cry with her. The misting rain would have concealed it, but the hurt was too great for that. The only hope for uniting Redol and Falara in peace was gone, killed by a madman for a stupid, useless token.

Reed. It was because of Reed. Toryn vowed revenge. The thought made his pain slightly more bearable and he let fury at Reed take over. He looked at Sellaris again. He could not have comforted her if he had wanted to, with his hands bound as they were. He watched her expressionlessly.

“I could have loved him,” she said dully, looking at Toryn through eyes wet with tears. Toryn had nothing to say to that. He turned and walked back to the encampment, his mind no longer sluggish from boredom.

Somehow he would escape, and then Reed would die.

**CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT**

**POODIK**

Toryn and his escorts reached the banks of the Fear River the next day. Sellaris was subdued and stayed away from Toryn. The Parmittans were busy digging canoes out from under concealing branches when Garyn approached Toryn.

“You seem different today. What is it?”

“How long do I have?” Toryn asked bluntly. Garyn opened his mouth, likely to ask what Toryn meant, and then his eyes flicked to the Parmittan leader and back to Toryn.

“We will reach Voor-ik in three days.”

“And that means?”

“That is where the Voor temple to Shaitan is located,” Garyn explained truthfully. “Their place of sacrifice.”

“Three days,” Toryn repeated and tugged at his bonds. Garyn noticed and glanced at the Parmittans again. They argued with Sellaris and Lavan over the gauntlet. Sellaris wanted to keep the wagon and the Parmittans refused to take it across the river. They insisted the oxen that towed the wagon were too short and would drown. They gave no heed to Sellaris’s protests that oxen could swim and the wagon would float. The shouting went
on until the rain began. By then, some of the warriors had caught some fish from the river and cooked them over a smoky fire.

The leader, much to Sellaris’s annoyance, announced that they would make camp. She drew her sword and sliced her way into the jungle, followed by Lavan. Gryn seemed about to speak, but shrugged instead and went to unsaddle his horse. Toryn accepted a piece of fish from the Parmittan that generally treated him better than the others. Toryn had missed the taste of fish.

The Parmittan was a talker and chattered happily to Toryn about all number of interesting things, explaining them in detail and not caring a whit that Toryn did not understand a single word. Toryn didn’t mind. The musical language was sort of soothing and his gestures and antics were amusing. The only word Toryn understood was his own name, which came out as “Toodeen”. The little fellow called himself Poodik, which Toryn had learned the first time Poodik came to speak to him. He had repeated his name ten or fifteen times and pounded on his chest in accompaniment until Toryn got the idea. After that, he had been Toryn’s shadow, albeit a noisy one.

Toryn ate and allowed his mind to wander while Poodik rambled on. He had to find a way to escape, and soon. He hoped to do so after they crossed the river. Perhaps, being so close to home, the Parmittans would not be so eager to backtrack and find him. Perhaps.

He fell asleep with Poodik telling him something indecipherable.

A hand on his shoulder awakened him. He opened his eyes and saw Poodik’s pale face hovering over him. For once the Parmittan was quiet, which should have alerted him.

“Leave me alone, Poodik,” Toryn said and groaned. “It’s still dark and I’m tired.” Poodik clamped a hand over Toryn’s mouth and looked around furtively. Toryn, puzzled, sat up and pushed Poodik’s hand away. Poodik looked at him with an intent expression.

“Gum wid be,” he said carefully. Having never heard Poodik say anything even partially understandable, Toryn was curious enough to get up and follow him. Poodik beckoned him into the jungle by making a windmill with his arm until Toryn thought the bones in his shoulder were going to separate.

They went noiselessly into the darkness, pausing once as the cry of a hunting cat cut through the night. When Poodik judged the beast to be no threat, they hurried on. Toryn began to question the wisdom of following him. When they reached an area where the moonlight sliced through the trees in narrow beams, they stopped. They waited until Toryn could stand it no longer. He opened his mouth to ask what they were doing and then Garyn stepped into a ray of moonlight.

He held up a hand to forestall questions and beckoned Toryn forward. Toryn shrugged and followed, realizing that he could be looking at a golden opportunity to escape. Poodik had led him a goodly distance from the encampment and Garyn could be overpowered. Toryn just needed to make certain there were no other Parmittans watching them from the jungle’s cover.

Poodik was also an unknown. Toryn knew the other Parmittans were powerful warriors and assumed that Poodik would not have been chosen for the mission if he were not just as skilled as the others. Garyn turned and headed for the river. Toryn followed and
Poodik brought up the rear. A canoe floated in the water, tethered to a tree on the bank. Garyn motioned for Toryn to get in, and he did so, curious. He sat down and wondered if it were possible to swim with one’s hands tied together. He hoped he would not have to find out; he had a suspicion several horrifying creatures lurked in the murky water. Garyn and Poodik joined him in the boat and Poodik pushed off. The river carried them for a distance until Toryn could see the grey of clouds and a few patches of dark sky through the canopy of overhanging branches.

“What are we doing?” he finally asked. Poodik apparently took his words as a signal to turn on the sound. He chattered and gestured and dug the oars out of the bottom of the boat. He rowed while he talked. After listening to him chatter for a time, Garyn silenced him with an upraised hand and a few words of Parmittan, or whatever language it was that Poodik spoke.

“Poodik decided he did not want you sacrificed to Shaitan,” Garyn explained. That launched Poodik into a new frenzy. “Shaitan!” he hissed, looking around superstitiously. He made stabbing gestures and things equally gruesome, and then spat over the side, glaring angrily. It was evident that Shaitan had no follower in Poodik.

“And you?” Toryn asked Garyn, who shrugged and smiled bitterly.

“I think it is time I started to live my own life,” he said.

“You are helping me to escape?” He could not quite believe it.

Garyn nodded. “Poodik and I will help you out of the jungle, but then it is up to you.” Garyn took out a dagger and cut Toryn’s bonds. After a moment of hesitation, he handed Toryn the jade-hilted sword.

“I thought you might keep it,” Toryn said, caressing the hilt lightly.

“Are you willing to give it up?” Garyn asked.

“No.”

“I didn’t think so.” He smiled.

Toryn slowly worked on his hands and wrists. They were so stiff and swollen that he could scarcely move them. He reflected wryly that he had not been tied in all his younger years, yet in the past few months had been tied so often that he would bear the scars forever.

“Will they follow us?” he asked after a while. Garyn stared at him without speaking for a long moment, and then reached down beneath his feet. A bundle had been concealed beneath a spotted fur. Garyn pulled the fur aside to reveal a wooden cask. Toryn blanched. Garyn had stolen the gauntlet!

“They’ll follow us.” Toryn groaned. “Can this boat move any faster? Where were they taking that thing, anyway?”

“Sheol. The stronghold of the Dark Master, High Priest of Shaitan.”

“You seem a decent fellow,” Toryn said. “How did you get mixed up with Reed and the rest of his wretched followers?”
“You refer to Sellars?” Garyn smiled without humor. “We grew up together. I think I’ve been in love with her since birth. She, Lavan and I played together as children and Sellars was the undisputed leader. She got us into a lot of trouble as kids. One of my first memories is of her talking me into stealing a blackberry pie from a neighbor. My father tanned my behind for that one, but I never learned.

“When she turned eighteen, I begged her to marry me. We could settle down and be happy forever.” Garyn looked into the slowly eddying water and grimaced. “She laughed and said I was only a child and that she was meant for better things than being a goatherd’s wife. I was young and undaunted. I continued to pursue her until, two years later, she came to me and said, ‘Let’s go to Silver and find our fortunes! Everyone knows the land there is littered with gold and jewels. We will return to Bodor rich, and join the nobility. We will have servants at our beck and call and eat from gold plates.’ I could not tell her that she was all I wanted; she was too excited and I was afraid she would go to Silver without me. In that, I was right.”

He sighed and picked up a leaf that had fallen into the boat. He began to tear it in half down the central vein. “She took control, as always, and Lavan and I followed her to Silver, but it was not as she hoped. The land there is indeed littered with gold, jewels, and silver, but the men who rule Silver keep their fists tightly wrapped around their wealth. Mining is strictly controlled and even streaming for gold requires a permit. We tried that for a while and did quite well, but Sellars was not content. It was too boring a life for her, and hard, so she took us to Penkangum. I do not know what she sought there, but we found nothing. We traveled to Terris and even across the sea to the Islands. Still she was not satisfied, although we stayed there for nearly a year. At that time, she fell in love with a Redolian traveler, from whom she learned to swordfight. I very nearly left her there in my heartbroken rage, but I kept hoping she would tire of the man and send him on his way. I thought it an answer to my prayers when they finally broke it off. He returned to a quiet life in Redol and Sellars still would have nothing to do with settling down. I suppose she did not really love him, or perhaps I just wish it to be so. Perhaps she thinks of him, even now, and intends to go to him one day.” The leaf in Garyn’s hand was a small pile of green bits and he turned his palm downward to scatter them across the water. They swirled and disappeared as Poodik rowed the boat forward.

“We returned to Kaneelis, in Terris, and it was there that we met Reed. He said he needed someone to pick up some horses in Tar-Tan and take them to southern Bodor. He was willing to pay, and well. Sellars was all for it, and so was I. I hoped that once we returned to Bodor, I could persuade Sellars to stay there and finally marry me. Is this boring you?”

“No at all,” Toryn said. “It’s interesting. I take it Sellars was still not ready to become a docile wife?”

Garyn snorted wryly. “Far from it. Tar-Tan is a barbaric country and we had trouble from the moment we entered it. Men wanted to buy Sellars, they wanted to keep the horses, raiders tried to steal the horses once we had them—it was a nightmare and Sellars thrived on it. We delivered the horses, returned to Reed, got our money, and then Sellars requested another job. He gave us another assignment, and another, and another, until we
were taking the horses from the very borders of Akarska. The more dangerous the job, the better Sellaris liked it. We have been running horses for four years now.”

“Four years?” Toryn exclaimed, aghast. “How many horses?”

“Not as many as you might think. Akarskans are remarkably tight-fisted when it comes to their beasts, as you know. Sometimes we had as few as three; once I think we had eight. On one occasion we ran across an Akarskan hunting party. We left the horses and barely escaped with our lives.”

Toryn nodded. Akarskan hunters had a tendency to kill first and ask questions of the corpses.

“Reed sometimes sent men to help us if it was dangerous, especially when we were close to Akarska. It did not take Sellaris long to show them she was the one in control. If they had ideas otherwise, there was always Lavan to watch over her, and me, of course. With the coin Reed has paid us we could have returned to Bodor fairly wealthy. Not enough to be nobles, but enough that we would never have to worry about money again. But adventure calls to Sellaris like a lover. Once she got a taste, she kept going back for more. I don’t think she will ever quit.”

Garyn was silent, obviously thinking of Sellaris. Toryn wondered about Alyn. He hoped she was all right. He thought of Keev trying to seduce her and pictured a hundred objects flying at the prince while a wild-haired Alyn screamed invectives. Yes, she would be fine until he went back to rescue her, if she had not already escaped on her own.

“What are you thinking about?” Garyn asked.

“Alyn. The blond Akarskan girl. She was taken by Keev.”

“Why would that make you smile?”

“I fear for Keev.”

“Akarskan.” Garyn nodded. “I don’t think you need to fret for her. People of the south have not felt Akarskan wrath often, but when they do the story spreads like wildfire. They are greatly feared, especially by those who have a few stolen horses in their stables. I pity Prince Keev if she happens to discover his horses. Will she kill him?” Toryn had not been worried before, but after Garyn’s comment, he was. He knew how crazy Alyn was when it came to horse-theft. She probably would kill Keev, and Silver would be plunged into civil war once the remaining brothers heard there was land up for grabs. Toryn could picture it all with horrific clarity.

“I certainly hope not. What did you do with the horses once you reached Bodor?” he asked to take his mind off the vision.

“We turned them over to Reed or his associates. I know now that his men were Parmittans, although not always the Voor. They are usually from the Zad-Ir tribe, who live on the other side of the South Mountains. They most likely took them over the Ven-Horns. From there it is anyone’s guess, though I would assume they were taken to the Dark Master.” Toryn opened his mouth and Garyn smiled and held up a hand. “Don’t ask. I don’t know anything about him, except that Reed obeys his every whim, and everyone else obeys Reed. I have the feeling that Reed is king in Ven-Kerrick only
because of a plot of the Dark Master’s. Whatever his plans are, they cannot be for the good of anyone but the Dark Master. As far as I know, he owes allegiance only to Shaitan.”

Poodik, unable to stand it any longer, broke his silence with a long monologue, gesturing at the sky,

which had begun to spit rain once more. There was a slight breeze on the river, which actually managed to cool them somewhat, as well as drive away the clouds of bugs.

“Can you understand him?” Toryn asked Garyn.

“A few words. He is talking about the rain and our journey. He says if we follow the river too far, we will be in trouble. There is a veeranga.”

“A what?”

“Waterfall.”

“Oh. Wonderful,” Toryn said with a groan. “Where are we going, anyway?”

“I’m not sure. I plan to follow Poodik. He should know where we want to go.”

“He should know? Haven’t you told him where we want to go?”

“I would if I knew. I have only been here a couple of times, and then only to the village of Voor-ik. Which, by the way, we have to get past tomorrow without being spotted.”

“How are we going to manage that?” Toryn asked, becoming less pleased by the minute.

“Poodik has a plan,” Garyn assured him.

“Poodik.” Toryn sighed, looking at the happily chattering little warrior. “Great.” He curled up in the blanket that Garyn had provided and tried to get some sleep.

When he awoke sunlight filtered down through the overhang. It was quiet except for the slight creak of the boat and the soft splash of the oars. Poodik was asleep, curled in the bottom of the boat in what looked to be a very cramped position. Garyn rowed lazily and he smiled at Toryn. His shirt was on the seat beside him. Toryn raised an eyebrow and Garyn stopped rowing long enough to reach under the seat and toss Toryn some of the orange flowers petals.

“We brought a supply. If they are too dry, soak them in water for a while.” The insects had been awake; Toryn found several bite marks when he took off his own shirt. One little creature busily sucked on his arm and he angrily swatted at it, leaving a large smear of blood in its place. He rubbed on the petals, grimacing at the scent, but it was better than being eaten alive.

“Do you want me to row?” he asked and tossed the flowers aside.

“Wait until Poodik wakes up so we can all trade places,” Garyn suggested. It was not a long wait and Garyn rowed to shore at Poodik’s request. They got out and stretched their legs while Poodik faded into the jungle. When he returned, he held a pole about ten feet long. He also carried a large branch bearing clumps of luscious-looking purple berries, which he handed over to Garyn before sitting down and carving into the tip of the pole with his curved knife.
The berries were delicious, so Toryn and Garyn stuffed themselves. After Poodik had whittled the tip of the pole into a wicked, barbed spear, he set it aside and went back to the canoe. He dug in his pack and came up with two leather loincloths of the type he wore. He presented them to Toryn and Garyn and began another monologue.

“He says they will be cooler,” Garyn translated, but Toryn had already climbed out of his stifling breeches and into the scrap of leather. He rubbed some more of the petals on his legs and looked at Garyn, who was similarly outfitted. They both looked almost native, especially after Poodik snickered and tied some feathers in their hair, after which he snickered some more.

They returned to the boat and Toryn could not decide whether to wear his sword or leave it on the bottom of the boat. He pictured the canoe capsizing and his sword lying on the bottom of the river. He strapped it on, paranoia winning out, and took over the rowing. It felt good to be able to use his muscles again and he needed to get the strength back into his sore arms.

Poodik used his new spear ingeniously. He stood in the boat, poised to throw, and waited until a suitable target swam by. He stabbed down and, without even rocking the boat, drew up a shining silver fish. When he had three fat fish, he cleaned them with his knife, built a small fire in the bottom of the canoe—after wetting the floor and laying down a barrier of thick leaves—and roasted them on his spear. When they were fully cooked, he used the edge of his knife to scrape the burning twigs into the water, and then washed the ashes out with handfuls of river water.

“You’ve done this before,” Toryn commented as he sank his teeth into one of the tasty fish. The three of them devoured their lunch and dropped the bones into the river. Toryn lay back, feeling comfortably full. They took turns rowing until Poodik signaled that they approached the village of Voor-ik. It was easy to recognize because the No River joined the Fear at that point. The current became stronger where the No flowed in to add its power.

As they neared the village, they stopped and Poodik made Garyn smear some tar-like sap in his hair to darken it. Garyn sighed, but did so, covering his brown hair. They floated on and at last reached a set of logs that protruded from the bank into the water, obviously a makeshift dock to which several canoes were already tied. A number of men and women were at the docks or in the water, and they all scrambled out onto the shore when the canoe came into view. The women ran to hide in the foliage while the men hefted spears and shouted. Poodik steered the boat up to the dock and called out. The men quickly put down their weapons and cheered and the women came slowly out from the trees. Their faces were covered in veils made out of green leaves and multicolored feathers. Only their eyes peered out from behind the colorful masks.

“What did he say?” Toryn murmured.

“Something about warriors upriver bringing a sacrifice,” Garyn replied softly. Toryn looked at the joyful crowd with disgust. Poodik hissed at them and Garyn quickly repeated the message to Toryn.

“Do not speak at all, no matter what.”
Toryn nodded just as the canoe bumped against the wooden pilings and Poodik hopped out, speaking jovially while gesturing at hurricane speed. The Voor nodded and looked at Toryn and Garyn solemnly before they grinned and clapped Poodik on the back. Garyn shouldered their gear while Toryn carried the gauntlet-case concealed by its fur wrapping. They were ushered down a well-trodden path to the village where Poodik gave his news to what seemed to be the town council. Toryn and Garyn hung back, trying to stay out of the light, which was not hard under the canopy of thick branches.

No one paid them more than cursory attention except a group of giggling girls that wore leaf and feather veils, a couple of strips of leather, and very little else. The girls spoke amongst themselves and edged closer, all in a group. Toryn smiled at them, which sent them fleeing into the thick trees with shrieks and giggles. Toryn chuckled and glanced at Garyn, who also grinned.

The crowd cheered once more and then hurried off to do whatever it was they had been doing. Poodik returned to Toryn and Garyn and beckoned for them to follow. They reluctantly did so, walking across the hard packed dirt of the village. Voor-ik was made of several dozen small huts built from wood and branches, scattered at random inside a crudely made wall of sharpened stakes. The palisade would be effective in keeping out unwanted jungle animals.

They passed a large hut in the center of the village, in front of which stood an altar made of black marble threaded with green. Upon the stone rested a jeweled dagger and manacles of gold, crusted with gems. Toryn could not repress a shudder as he stared at it. He pictured himself manacled to the stone spread eagled, with his chest bared to the sky and a dagger poised over his heart. Garyn blanched and glanced at Toryn. Perhaps he, like Toryn, wondered if Poodik could really be trusted. Perhaps it was all a trap. The little warrior led them to a small hut built near the wall, next to a tall tree wrapped in yellow-flowered vines. He entered and beckoned them to follow.

The interior was small and rustic, and very dark until Poodik drew aside the animal skins that covered the cutout windows. A fire pit lay in the center of the room and the only furnishings were a pile of skins that made up a pallet bed, a small knee high table, and a crude set of shelves against one wall.

“Poodik says we can speak quietly now,” Garyn murmured as he sat down on the pallet. Toryn preferred to stand by the exit, fingers nervously caressing his sword hilt.

“What did he tell them?”

“He told them you and I had taken a vow of silence until the sacrifice. I suppose it is a common practice.”

“What happens now?”

Garyn posed the question to Poodik in a broken form of Voor and Poodik chattered quietly for a few moments before he went to look out one of the windows.

“We wait until the rain begins,” Garyn told Toryn. “Then we get out.”

It took less than an hour for the drizzle to start, but it seemed like a week to Toryn. He paced impatiently and glanced out at the village now and again. When the rain started, he was pleased to see the men and women flee for their huts as the rain washed off the insect
repellent. Staying indoors was the best way to keep it active and avoid the nauseating reapplication process.

“Let’s go,” Toryn said and Poodik nodded. He had been gathering items and putting them into a leather sack the entire time. He slung it over his shoulder. They went out into the moisture and made their way quietly to the southern gates of the village. They were open, and guarded by a single warrior. Poodik spoke quietly with Garyn and then stepped out to greet the guard. Garyn led Toryn to the other side of the complex, circling around to the rear of the man. Poodik talked loudly to the guard and waved his arms, gesturing comically. The guard laughed and Poodik’s antics became even more outrageous.

Garyn and Toryn slipped behind the preoccupied guard and out the gate, unnoticed. Toryn was thankful the leaves were wet and made no sound under their feet. They entered the jungle and hurried away from the village for long minutes before stopping to catch their breaths. Poodik appeared moments later, grinning happily. He said only one word and started off, so Garyn and Toryn trotted along after him. They did not stop until nearly dusk, when they reached the river. Poodik bade them wait and disappeared upriver, traveling through the thick cover that lined the banks.

Shortly thereafter, a canoe slid silently up to the shore in front of them, startling Toryn nearly out of his wits. Poodik grinned from the canoe and waved. Toryn and Garyn climbed in and Toryn gladly stowed the gauntlet case—just carrying the thing made him nervous. Once again, they floated downstream until they judged themselves safely away, and then rowed in shifts throughout the night.

By dawn, they were far away from Voor-ik.

The remainder of their trip downriver was largely uneventful. They sometimes saw bands of Voor on the shore and to these they merely waved a greeting, holding aloft knife and spear. They were not troubled. When they reached the point where the Green River joined the Fear, Poodik brought the canoe in to the southern bank and climbed out.

“What is it?” Toryn asked. Poodik was already talking and it took Garyn a moment to digest it all.

“The Green River joins this river ahead and it becomes too fast and rough to travel by canoe. Poodik says from here we must walk.”

“Good. I’m tired of sitting on my rear,” Toryn replied. “Although I could better deal with the sitting if we were horseback.” Garyn nodded. Poodik inquired, so Garyn tried to explain Toryn’s comment. Poodik looked thoughtful and then hurried to stash the canoe.

Poodik led them through the jungle and it was much more difficult than the trip to Voor-ik had been. Garyn explained that they had followed an old path, almost a road, that had been cut in ancient times from Ruby to Voor-ik, but here there was no sign of civilization at all. They slipped into untouched wilderness, forced to crawl at times through the thick undergrowth. Poodik pulled out his knife and hacked a path. Toryn and Garyn tugged used their swords to assist, but Toryn was careful not to cut anything larger than small branches. He did not want his favorite sword nicked and dulled.

“What do you have any idea where we are going?” Toryn asked once when they stopped for a rest. He adjusted the leather straps that cut into his shoulders. The gauntlet was not
exactly heavy, but it was awkward, and Toryn had rigged a sling for it in order to carry it like a knapsack. One corner of the wooden case rubbed against his back just above his right buttock. He hitched the burden again, but after a moment, it settled back to press the growing sore spot. Toryn sighed.

“Thalarii, Poodik says,” Garyn replied, catching his breath.

“Thalarii? Where is that?”

“I have no idea.”

Toryn looked at Poodik, who carried on a one-sided conversation with a very large bird perched in a tree. The bird was bright pink and violet with patches of blue. Its tail was fully three feet long. Toryn wished Redwing were with them. Perhaps he could have mentally conversed with the bird to see if it knew what lay ahead. Toryn looked out at the rain, feeling the sorrow he had tried to forget in the past few days. He glanced over at Garyn and saw the same expression of sadness. Mourning Sellaris as I mourn the Falaran, Toryn thought. What a pair we are.

He sighed and swatted a persistent insect while the rain dripped down his face. It promised to be a long trip.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

RAKYN

Shevyn awoke, not gently climbing her way from sleep, but all at once in a heart-pounding rush, as if torn from slumber by a nightmare only to discover the real horror upon waking. She blinked in the dimly lit room and tried to move. Pain shot through her from a variety of places and she remembered that Reed had tied her securely. Her hands were completely numb and the slight movement she had made felt like a heated blade traveling up her arms and into her shoulders. She froze and the pain retreated back into numbness. A figure lay next to her on the bed. Reed. She shuddered and then cringed when the brush of movement awakened him.

He raised his head and sleepily smiled at her. Another woman might have found him handsome, but Shevyn would sooner lie within a nest of vipers.

“Good morning, my dear,” he said. “Did you sleep well? It’s a pity my duties kept me so late. I can hardly wait to introduce you to our marital pleasures. There is not much sense in waiting until the actual wedding, now is there?” His hand reached out to caress her stomach. “If you birthed a child a few weeks early, no one would be the wiser. It happens.” The motion of his hand grew more ardent, moving upward to cup one of her breasts. Shevyn wanted to vomit, but she forced herself to remain still, made easier when every movement she made caused shooting pains in her arms and legs.

Reed pulled back, disappointment evident on his features.

“Is your spirit broken already? I had expected more from you.” Her eyes narrowed in disgust.
The bastard obviously wanted her to fight him every step of the way, therefore it would behoove her to lie still and placid. Too bad she could barely tolerate the touch of his hands. She felt his fingers upon her bare ankle, slowly moving up to her knee. This time she did pull away, unable to stop herself. A new cramp bloomed near her hip. She twisted and opened her mouth to scream, but no sound emerged. Through half-lidded eyes, she watched Reed stare at her, perplexed. He checked her bonds; she was quite sure her hands were blue from lack of circulation.

“If your bonds hurt why do you say nothing?” Reed snarled. He pulled a slender dagger from a sheath that sat on the bedside table. He fingered it thoughtfully for a moment, gazing at her. “I should make you beg me to free you,” he continued and then sneered. “But likely you would rather suffer nobly and will yourself into death. Well, you shall not escape me that easily, princess. I have plans for you.”

He walked around the bed and severed her bonds, drawing blood on one of her wrists. She curled into a fetal position, overcome by the exquisite pain of returning circulation. For a moment, she felt she might pass out and longed for even that momentary escape from Reed.

She dimly heard him across the room as he poured water from the pitcher into a basin. A knock sounded on the outer door and he said, “That will be our morning repast.” She heard him open the intervening doors before admitting the servant, who either handed him a tray or placed it on a nearby table. A moment later the doors closed again. Shevyn watched through the corner of her eye as Reed returned to the bedchamber and placed the covered silver tray upon the table.

Shevyn thought her hands and feet would feel less tormented if they rested in buckets full of bees. She lay as still as possible as every slight movement increased the intensity of the sensation. Reed returned to the basin and she heard the sound of a sharp blade applied to a strop. She closed her eyes as he lathered his chin, praying heartily that he would slip while shaving and cut his own throat.

Such did not occur, however, and by the time he finished Shevyn was able to move her hands once more. The feeling of pins and needles slowly dissipated. Reed shrugged out of his shirt and chose another from the wardrobe. He had placed only one arm into the sleeve when Shevyn bolted.

She sprang from the bed and raced into the antechamber where she wrenched open the doors. As expected, no guards were in evidence. Why post guards when her master was there to watch her? She ran for the staircase, wishing suddenly that she could scream; loud, hysterical screams that would bring the entire castle running. Not that anyone would help her, unless she could find Kerryn.

Her foot had barely touched the first step of the marble staircase when she felt Reed’s hand snag in her hair. Panicked, she twisted away, only realizing her danger at the last instant. She felt a wrenching pain as her hair was torn out by Reed’s grip. She flailed for a moment and snatched at the railing that was just out of reach as she tilted. She heard Reed swear loudly as she fell.

Sharp pain jolted her shoulder as she went end over end down the stairs. Her head cracked sharply upon one marble step and merciful blackness took her from Reed at last.
Reed stalked down the stairs, seething with rage, his eyes fixed on Shevyn’s twisted body at the base of the steps. The bitch had caused him no end of trouble. If she still lived, he was going to kill her. He grinned viciously at the thought. He would take her slender white throat in his hands and squeeze.

He reached her still form and knelt beside her. Blood soaked into the fine carpet beneath her head and he supposed she would bleed to death soon enough. He felt her neck for a pulse and sighed. Naturally, she was still alive. His hand tightened upon her throat until an ear-piercing scream caught him by surprise.

A maid was staring at them in horror, hands pressed to her cheeks. A pile of dropped bedding lay at her feet.

Reed nearly reached out and ripped the girl’s mind in half. Only the approaching sound of booted feet stayed him. He ground his teeth in annoyance, but wisdom began to calm him. He knew most of the castle staff disapproved of his rule, though they had accepted his regency docilely enough. If their precious princess should happen to die under questionable circumstances, it might easily send the quailing fools into revolt, something Reed did not need with the accursed Gauntlet Knights due back from Bodor any day.

No, he would have to pretend to be the frantic bridegroom and nurse the stupid twit back to health. In fact, her injury would give him the perfect excuse to keep her abed, laden with pain-easing drugs, should she happen to awaken. That way, she would be a nice, docile bride for the wedding ceremony. Reed nearly laughed aloud. She would be so disappointed to know that she had played right into his hands.

“Fetch help!” he barked at the girl. “The princess has fallen! Get a healer!” To the men approaching, he ordered, “Take her to her bedchamber. Hurry!”

They rushed to do his bidding and Reed held Shevyn’s hand and crooned to her until she lay safely in her own bed. Reed stood aside and let them tend her, wringing his hands in apparent worry. One of his men approached.

“My lord, I found this upon the stairs,” he said in a low voice.

Reed took the parchment and read Shevyn’s note pleading for help. He crushed it in his fist and carried it to the fireplace to kindle a fire. His man watched in amusement. When the fire burned brightly, Reed turned to the black-clad man.

“Thank you, Rolf. You have been helpful. You will find a substantial bonus in your next pay.”

“Thank you, sir,” Rolf said and departed.

Reed smiled as he watched the note turn to ash and then he turned his attention to the girl on the bed and the frantic people tending to her. He had to admire her cleverness. She would make a fine queen, short though her reign would be.
The first thing that convinced him he was alive was the pain. Waves of it pounded into him and cascaded through every part of his being. His entire body screamed with it. The second thing that convinced him was the face he saw looming over him as soon as he opened his eyes.

“I wondered if you would decide to live,” a voice said. Brydon struggled to focus both his sight and his mind. His vision was blurred, unwilling to focus, and his mind was preoccupied with pain. When he finally succeeded in clearing his vision, he saw a strikingly handsome man with brown eyes and neatly trimmed dark brown hair.

“You are alive, are you not?” the man asked.

Brydon glanced around, very slowly, to take in his surroundings. Even that minute movement introduced a new throbbing to his head. “It... seems that way. Where am I?” Speaking was an effort. The walls and ceiling looked more like a cave than a room, but Brydon lay upon a soft bed. Oil-burning lamps adorned nearby tables that were carved in ornate designs.

“You are under the mountain, not far from where you fell,” the man said. “You are lucky this cave is here. I am not sure you would have survived being carried much farther.” He stood up and walked to a crystal wine decanter on the nearest table. He was dressed in a cream-colored shirt and breeches with a sash and cloak of cerulean blue. The cloak was clasped with a golden chain and a large onyx brooch in the shape of a panther’s head. He poured a goblet of wine and brought it to Brydon.

“Drink slowly,” he ordered. “You were sorely injured and need food to regain your strength, but this will help ignite your appetite.”

Brydon drank, grateful that the pillows kept him slightly elevated. Only a trickle or two spilled down his chin and he handed back the goblet. It was only then that he noticed the bandage wrapped tightly around his ribs and left shoulder. His head was also bandaged, as well as his right leg. His whole body throbbed with pain and his vision swam in and out of focus.

“What happened to me?” he asked.

“You fell from the cliff,” the man said.

"Right,” Brydon said, frowning at the fuzzy memory of his fight with Reed. He recalled nothing at all of his fall from the mountaintop. "I meant after that."

“You must have tried to stop your fall. Your left arm was completely out of its joint. Some of your ribs are broken and your torso is lacerated by a very deep wound. Your leg was impaled by a branch and torn quite badly. Your head was bleeding, so I assume you knocked it on something. Aside from your other cuts and bruises, that is all. Surprising, considering the distance you fell. I think the branches, while causing some damage, helped to slow your descent. We brought you here and, luckily, Nykar is a skilled field surgeon. He put your arm back into the shoulder and tended you.”

“Nykar!” Brydon exclaimed fuzzily. “Then you are...”

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“Yes. I am Rakyn, Prince of Darkynhold and the Black City. Sleep now. I will bring food when you awaken.”

Brydon felt himself unable to protest and sank back into oblivion.

Later he felt the touch of cool hands on his temple and words murmured like rote. Then the hands and the voice withdrew. He was alone. He slept.

When he awakened fully the next time, both Rakyn and Nykar were present. They allowed him no questions, but fed him thick broth rich with meat and greens. Brydon could eat but little, though it was delicious.

“You lost a lot of blood,” Nykar informed him. “The branch tore a goodly chunk from your leg. You need to eat to build your blood strength.”

“You are quite pale,” the prince added. Brydon ate as much as he could stomach and set it aside.

“How long have I been here?”

Nykar looked at the prince before replying. “Thirteen days.”

Brydon sat up in alarm, only to fall back as blackness assailed him. He fought to stay conscious and succeeded, although drenched with sweat and shaking from the effort.

“Thirteen days? What about Shevyn? Toryn? Where is Toryn? And Alyn and the gau—”

Rakyn held up a hand. “Shevyn was taken by Reed, most likely to Ven-Kerrick. Parmittans took your Redolian friend, and the gauntlet as well. The Akarskan girl is in the palace of my brother, Keev.”

“You know about the Gauntlet?”

Rakyn nodded.

“Why didn’t you stop them?” Brydon cried. His head throbbed.

Rakyn shrugged. “I was not here. Nykar witnessed your battle with the Parmittans. If he had made his presence known, he would have been killed or captured like the others. He waited until all had departed and then searched for you. He brought you here, tended your wounds, and made haste to find me. Since then we have improved your accommodations in hopes that you would survive. I have sent my men to discover the fate of your friends. Frankly, I would rather have the gauntlet in Parmitta than in the hands of my brothers.”

“The gauntlet is safe from your brothers, but what of Alyn, the Akarskan girl?”

Rakyn smiled wryly. “Do not fear for her. People here have a superstitious awe of Akarskans and Keev is no different. She will most likely be safe and well.”

“Most likely,” Brydon snarled, far from comforted.

“You wish to save them all single-handedly? You cannot even stand. Go, if you must. If not, you may stay here and learn.”

Brydon was not sure if he liked the prince. He scowled. “Learn what?”

“Learn how to control that talented mind of yours,” Rakyn stated.
Brydon stared. "What do you mean?"

//This is what I mean,// the prince said in his mind.

Brydon stared. "You are Vai."

"Half Vai. There are few of us, but we do exist. Your gift needs to be trained, and soon. When you were in the Black City, I could hear you screaming for your friend Toryn. Everyone within a league and a half could pinpoint your exact location without half trying, if they had the ability. Unfortunately, by the time I sent Nykar for you, you had moved on."

"What do you know of these powers? Who are the Vai?" Brydon asked eagerly.

Rakyn shrugged. "The Vai are a mysterious race. There were more of them at one time, but they were all but exterminated in superstitious battles of the past. The Vai disappeared from history for a long while, but I suspect it was more a matter of them hiding their talent, or ignoring it, in order to avoid persecution. At any rate, yours must be tempered if you are going to meet with Reed again. He is a master." Rakyn’s words were as bland as a bad storyteller’s and Brydon, even in his weakness, sensed the prince had given him a watered-down version of the truth, if not an outright lie.

"Why do you want to help me?" Brydon asked.

"I have a use for you, of course. Like all Silveran princes, I do nothing without a motive. I do not want Reed to have a hand in what is to come. He is clumsy and greedy and it is not in my best interest for him to succeed." His words confused Brydon even more.

"'In what is to come'?"

Rakyn nodded. "You shall be the one to deal with that, also. But first, Reed. If you fail with Reed, then the rest will not matter."

"Can you see the future?" Brydon asked, suspecting he would get no straight answers from Rakyn, who Rakyn, who smiled for the first time.

"No. But I make it my business to know everything that goes on, not only in Darkynhold and Silver, but everywhere. I have contacts that can sometimes see possible futures. I like to cover all potential outcomes."

"You can teach me how to use this gift until I’m strong enough to leave?" Brydon asked.

"I can teach you until you are strong enough to want to learn more. We begin tomorrow. Sleep now."

Despite wanting to ask more questions, Brydon felt his strength slip away and slumber claimed him. He dreamed of Shevyn and Reed, and of Toryn in the hands of the Parmittan warriors, and wondered desperately what he should do.

**CHAPTER THIRTY**

**THALARII**
Toryn looked out onto the grass-covered hillsides feeling like a man who has seen Adona. He burst away from the last vestiges of the clinging jungle and threw himself into the grass, rolling around like an exuberant puppy.

"No more rain!" he moaned happily. "No more buzzing, biting, blood-sucking insects! No slime-covered rotted trees blocking every path and hiding the sun! No slithering predators hiding behind every bush! Just warm sun, clean grass, and rolling hills as far as the eye can see! I am home!"

Garyn took it much more calmly. "This is Thalarri?" he asked Poodik, who nodded, grinning.

"Thalarri," he agreed.

Toryn leaped up and filled his lungs with the heady scent of summer and the smell of the deep grass. "This is a really great place," he said in perfect contentment.

"Is Redol like this?" Garyn asked as Toryn got to his feet. They started walking, moving southward once more.

"Just like this, only colder. There is always a cold wind blowing off the sea, not a nice warm breeze like this. I wonder where the sea is, or if this is just a large valley in the midst of the jungle," he mused and then shrugged. "The grass is softer here, more fragile. In Redol, the grass is very sturdy. Made to withstand winter storms, I suppose."

"Where are we going?" he asked after a time. Poodik, having heard the question from Toryn’s mouth about eight hundred times, obviously recognized it and gestured southward with his spear.

"I know that. South. I don’t want to go south. I need to go north. I have to get back to Silver. I have to find Keev and rescue Alyn. And kill Reed."

"Perhaps Poodik knows a way to skirt the jungle," Garyn suggested.

"Perhaps Poodik is out for a holy day jaunt and brought us along for the ride," Toryn snapped. His initial excitement over the plains had waned. It seemed much hotter without the cooling overhang of jungle foliage. Garyn drank of his water skin frequently until Toryn told him to take it easy. Water might be hard to find among the rolling hills.

The sun was still high when Poodik threw himself bodily against the side of a hill and crawled through the grass to the crest. Toryn watched curiously as he poked his head up through the waving strands, ducked back down and motioned for Toryn and Garyn to join him. They stayed low as they climbed the short rise and peered out over the broad plain that stretched before them.

Garyn was actually speechless at the sight and Toryn almost stood up in surprise.

"I don’t believe it," he said.

"Avani," Poodik said proudly. "Horse."

Horse was right. Toryn had never seen so many horses in his entire life. They streamed across the plain in every color, size and shape, and there were hundreds of them. He and Garyn got to their feet and walked toward the galloping herd in a daze, ignoring Poodik’s protests.
"I'll bet the Akarskans don’t know about this," Toryn said and Garyn shook his head in agreement. The horses galloped away to the east and Poodik pulled at Toryn’s arm. His eyes darted about.

"Thalarri," he said.

"We know this is Thalarri, Poodik," Toryn said. "But where did all the horses come from?"

"They came from here and here they will remain, Voor," a harsh voice said from behind them. "What do you want?"

They turned slowly to see a woman and two men mounted on magnificent steeds. The men held short bows leveled at Toryn and Poodik. A wicked-looking spear in the hand of the girl threatened Garyn with impalement.

"Do you have enmity with the Voor?" Garyn asked and Toryn admired his cool. He felt quite nervous staring down the end of an arrow.

"No," the girl said. "But they have not been known to enter our lands, either."

"We are not Voor," Toryn said.

"You are dressed like Voor," the girl stated matter-of-factly. She was trim and compact with a figure Toryn could learn to love without half-trying. She had raven-black hair caught at the nape of her neck. She was dressed in soft-looking cloth of vibrant turquoise overlaid with strips of dark brown leather. The men were similarly dressed in bright colors and leather; one had the same dark hair and brooding features of the girl. The other had curly red-brown hair and looked as if he wouldn’t have the fortitude to kill a snake if its fangs were attached to his leg.

"If we were dressed like wolves, would that make us wolves?" Toryn asked dryly. The girl looked puzzled and glanced at the black-haired man, who threw her an equally confused look. The other man grinned and said, "Only if you had fangs and tails to match. Where are you from, strangers? And where bound?"

"I am Toryn, from far, very far, to the north of here. This is Garyn of Bodor, and Poodik… well, he is a Voor. We don’t know where we are bound, being quite lost, but hopefully we can find our way back to Silver. Not through the jungle, however."

"Strange places," the man said. "I am Kalyn, the girl is Daryna and the glaring one is her brother, Brighthoof. He has not yet earned his true name."

The black-haired man, who now looked a couple of years younger than Toryn, was apparently not pleased at Kalyn imparting the last piece of information, judging by the look of disgusted annoyance he threw at the man.

"Come," Kalyn said, "you will join us at camp and there we will hear your story."

The girl broke in. "I will decide what we shall do with them, Kalyn," she snapped arrogantly. "My father is the chief, after all. You are merely a guest."

"Of course, Daryna," Kalyn said patiently. "How foolish of me to forget. What shall we do with them?"
"We shall—" She broke off with a scowl. "Do you mock me, Kalyn?" For answer, Kalyn sighed, slung his bow over his shoulder, wheeled his horse and cantered away. The girl looked after him, tight-lipped and glaring, before turning back to the others.

"You will accompany us to camp where my father and I," she emphasized the last words, "Will hear your story and decide what to do with you."

With that, she tossed her head and galloped after Kalyn.


"Move along," Brighthoof commanded.

The three of them obediently followed. Poodik muttered angrily all the way and fastidiously avoided the fresh piles of horse droppings that lay in their path. Toryn assumed his action was not from any desire to stay clean, for all three of them were filthy, covered with the grime of the jungle and the dust of the plains—and streaked with red from the insect-repelling plants. They smelled rank.

"I think Poodik dislikes horses," Garyn commented.

Toryn nodded. They had briefly considered leaving the gauntlet hidden in the grass where it lay, but Toryn knew they would never be able to find it again. If the Thalarii had evil intentions, they would learn of it soon enough, with or without the gauntlet. With it, perhaps they would have a bargaining tool.

It was late afternoon before they reached a large encampment on the banks of what Toryn later discovered was the Thalar River. A hundred pairs of eyes fixed on them as Brighthoof led them between two crude huts constructed of hide, grasses and river reeds. Although there were only two huts, Toryn noticed hides, furs, blankets and saddles scattered randomly across the side of the hill near the river. The tribesmen were interspersed among their belongings, seated on the ground or mounted on horses. The herd they had been trailing was belly deep in the river, drinking, and many had already crossed to the other side, watched casually by a couple of lanky teens mounted on fine horses.

There was silence in the camp and Toryn supposed it was due to the presence of strangers—themselves.

Brighthoof led them to a tall white-haired man with a gray beard. He was dressed in white leather breeches. A cloth of turquoise hung from waist to knees, split to the hip on both sides and richly embroidered at the hem in golden thread. He wore no shirt, only two leather armbands around his upper arms. His face was deeply lined from age and years spent squinting into the sun and wind, but he looked anything but old. In fact, Toryn decided, looking at the man’s great chest and rippling muscles, he wanted to look as good when he was aged. The man watched through expressionless blue eyes as they approached.

Daryna stood beside him, her head held in a haughty pose and her arms crossed like her father. Brighthoof cantered over to the river to water his steed. Kalyn was nowhere in sight.
"Daryna tells me you have traveled a great distance," the man said in a deep voice, regarding them. "What do you seek?"

"We seek nothing on the Plains of the Thalarii," Garyn said. "We wish only to return to Silver, over the Ven-Horn Mountains."

The man showed no surprise. "You travel in the wrong direction."

"We are aware of that. Poodik guided us and we were hoping he could find a way back to Silver without crossing through the jungle. He brought us here."

"He brought you falsely. There is no way to cross the Ven Horns except through the jungle. The jungle is a barrier across the entire land."

Toryn looked at Poodik in annoyance. "Surely he brought us here for a reason. There is no other way? Not even by ship?"

The chief’s gaze upon him sharpened. "Why were you in the jungle at all if you wish to return to the North Lands so badly?"

"I had little choice. I was unconscious and bound, captured by the Voor."

The chief gazed at Poodik, puzzled. Toryn sighed in frustration. He glanced around at the tribe. All were listening avidly and making no pains to conceal the fact.

"I was marked for sacrifice. Poodik helped me to escape, as did Garyn," he explained. "By then, we were deep in the jungle."

The chief nodded his head solemnly and seemed to be deep in thought. "Why did this Voor help you?"

Toryn knew that his reply might put them in danger. What if the Thalarii were worshippers of Shaitan? His hand tightened on the gauntlet case, which he had kept close to hand.

"Poodik does not agree with the teachings of Shaitan," he said.

The chief showed no change in expression. He was silent until Toryn felt he would burst from the strain and then he said, "You may remain with us until I decide what shall be done with you. It is not often we have strangers on the plain."

Daryna gave the chief a sharp look at that, but said nothing as the man turned away and walked into one of the huts. As if it were a signal to her to begin giving orders, she did so.

"You may sit," she said, "at the chief’s fire." This was delivered as though it were the greatest achievement anyone could possibly attain.

Toryn tipped his head. "We are honored." The girl looked at him in surprise. She had likely expected nothing but barbaric manners from them. She led them up the crest of the hill where several skins had been laid out around a fire pit. The skins were covered in rich furs and blankets. Daryna sank down on one and began to build a fire, motioning for the others to be seated.

Toryn sat where he could keep a close eye on the huts. He watched as the tribe broke up, built their own fires, or thundered across the plains in joyful races. They seemed to live
on their horses and many people were combing the sleek coats of their animals or rubbing them down with handfuls of the tall grass.

After a short time, Daryna got up to find some more fuel for the fire and Toryn watched the plains people more openly. He was amazed that they just camped out in the open. In Redol, life was similar, except for the lack of horseflesh. Redolians were a nomadic people, following herds of cattle from one pasture to another, but Redol had been such a country for years and the cattle were driven from one campsite to another. The campsites were built of stone and walled like villages to guard against stampedes and Falarans. Their campsites were permanent and it was much like moving from village to village, whereas this settlement could be picked up and moved anywhere on the plains. It seemed nothing was constant.

Then again, the campsites in Redol had been built largely because of the weather. It was usually cold in Redol and snow-covered much of the year. Even in summer brutal storms were not unknown. On these mild plains, Toryn doubted they saw anything stronger than gentle thunderstorms.

Daryna returned carrying a leather sack full of cattle chips. In a place where wood was scarce, one used what was available. She tossed several of them on the fire and glanced at Toryn, who motioned toward the two buildings.

"What do you use the huts for, if everyone sleeps under the stars?"

Daryna shrugged. "If it rains, we have a dry place to store the extra blankets, but usually we keep them as shelter for the young ones when it is hot, as it was today." As if to confirm her words, a child burst from one of the huts, laughing, and ran to the nearest horse. He had thrown himself at the saddle and was halfway up the horse before his mother caught him and towed him, giggling, back to the hut. Toryn grinned at the sight and Daryna also smiled, the first time he had seen her do so. She was quite pretty when her face softened.

"That is Swiftarrow. If he had made it into the saddle, he would have given us all a merry chase."

"Where did all the horses come from?" Garyn asked. Daryna looked puzzled at the question.

"What do you mean by 'come from'? They have always been here."

The chief came out of the hut and headed for their fire. Toryn was unsure whether or not to stand, and Daryna was no help, so he just sat where he was, feeling uncomfortable. He felt considerably underdressed, wearing only the thin leather breechclout of the Voor when all the tribesmen were clad in leather breeches and fine soft shirts of varying colors. All wore swaths of cloth hanging from their waists, like the chief, in differing colors and with many designs stitched upon them.

It occurred to Toryn that Daryna and Brighthoof both wore the same turquoise color so he assumed it to be familial. As the chief drew near, Kalyn detached himself from a group and join the chief, not speaking. His colors were red-violet, with silver embroidered in the shape of a rearing horse.

The chief nodded to them.
"I am Haaryd," he said. "This is my tribe and I bid you welcome. I have spoken to my wife. It has been decided that you will be taken south to Darii, in order that you may find a ship to take you to Silver. It is a long journey, but there is no other port in Thalarii. It is possible there will be no ship there, for we are not a fisher folk, but that is the best I can offer you."

Toryn thanked him, relieved. Daryna looked a bit annoyed at the news; perhaps she had hoped they would be tied to horses and dragged across the plains until the flesh was ripped from their bodies.

"We accept your gracious offer," he said. If he had known just how great a distance Haaryd spoke of, he would have immediately turned around and crossed the jungle again. As it was, he assumed a journey of a few days and was glad. "I am Toryn of Redol, son of Taryn, brother of Morgyn Clan-chieftain."

"You are from Redol?" the chief asked. Toryn was surprised he had even heard of his homeland. He nodded and Haaryd said, "Then it is truly an honor to host you. You may accompany us to the next campsite. From there you will be taken to Darii by some of my warriors. I will decide who shall go."

The last was said loudly, almost as an announcement. The tribe nodded collectively and they all went about the business of eating or tending their mounts. Toryn found the food delicious, a mixture of plains deer and cattle cooked into a thick stew with tubers and seasoned with fish from the river. There was little talk over the meal and afterward everyone scurried off to do various chores, including Daryna and Brighthoof. Toryn spoke a little of Redol to the chief before the older man caught him yawning and ordered them all to sleep. They curled up gratefully on furs and blankets, but Toryn found it difficult to sleep, surrounded by people he did not know and little trusted. As the camp quieted, however, exhaustion won out and Toryn found himself drifting off. It had been an adventurous day.

Toryn awoke feeling like someone watched him. His mind groggily pictured the Thalarii tribesmen standing over him with red eyes, slavering jaws, and glinting sharp knives. He sat up with a start and half-tugged his sword out. He stared around wildly, heart pounding. Brighthoof, who had been watching him, jumped back and fingered his bow.

Toryn, seeing that the lad was no threat, calmed himself and released his sword. "Sorry." He grinned. "Bad dream."

Brighthoof scowled, obviously irritated that a foreigner had caught him unaware. Toryn looked around more casually. Garyn was still asleep, as was Poodik. The chief slept apart from them, surrounded by crimson-garbed warriors. Two of them were awake and watchful. His guards, Toryn assumed.

Daryna and Kalyn were gone, although it was not yet dawn. "Where is your sister?" he asked Brighthoof.

"Tending the horses."

"I see." Toryn stood up and stretched. "Is it permissible to bathe in the river?"

"Why would it not be?" Brighthoof snapped. Toryn bit back an angry retort and stalked through the sleeping forms of the tribe. The young whelp could use a lesson in manners.
The water was chill, but not ice-cold like the rivers in Redol. He walked far upstream, out of sight of the camp, and waded through thick reeds into the water. He took off the Voor leather and hung it on a reed. After a brief consideration, he unsheathed his sword and put the scabbard with the breechclout. His blade he took with him, figuring a bit of water would not hurt the steel, especially since he planned to clean and oil it as soon as he got out.

He went out until the water was chest deep and drove the sword into the river bottom near his feet. He scrubbed himself vigorously and washed the dust and sweat from his body and hair. He used sand to rid himself of the foul-smelling orange flower residue. He had just finished and tugged his sword from the river bed when he heard a laugh from shore. He looked up to find Daryna holding his breechclout. She was mounted on a dun horse and looked at him mockingly.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I might ask the same of you," she said. "But I won’t because I hear father calling me." With that, she smiled, turned her horse and trotted back through the reeds to the shore, whereupon she galloped away, carrying Toryn’s meager clothing with her.

"Wait!" he yelled, trying to fight his way to shore through the water. He swore roundly as he reached his scabbard. Now what was he to do? Braid some clothing from the reeds?

Before he could decide a course of action, Brighthoof cantered up on a dark chestnut horse.

"Father commanded that I bring you these," he said and tossed down some leather and cloth, making it plain that he would not have done so had he not been so ordered. Toryn sheathed his sword without a word and strode from the river to examine the clothing. It was a fine pair of leather trousers, dyed deep grey, and a cottony shirt of silver-grey. He put them on gladly.

"Grey is not a clan color," Brighthoof said derisively. "It is worn by foreigners."

"It does look good on me, though, does it not?" Toryn said foppishly, admiring himself as he smoothed down the soft shirt. Brighthoof snorted and trotted off.

On his way back to camp, Toryn ran into Garyn, who must have had the same idea as Toryn, for his hair was wet from bathing. He was dressed similarly to Toryn in grey shirt and breeches. He combed his brown hair with a carved bone comb.

"Where did you get that?" Toryn asked.

Garyn grinned and tossed him the comb. "A maiden lent it to me."

"A maiden? When did you have time to meet a maiden? The sun has barely risen."

"She followed me to the river." Garyn shrugged. "Washed my back for me, too."

Toryn stopped tugging at his locks for a moment and stared at Garyn before scoffing. "Right. They were also riding around on blue horses with bird wings this morning."

Garyn shrugged and smiled. "You need not believe me."

Toryn snorted, combing his hair. Still, he wondered.
The chief broke fast with them and then offered them their choice of mounts from the small herd that had been brought back from across the river. Garyn picked out a young sorrel stallion that held his head proudly and looked spirited. Before Toryn could choose, Daryna cantered up, towing a liver-colored stallion that had a dangerous look in his eyes.

"Here, Toryn," she said. "I have brought Bloodsong for you." There was a distinct challenge in her voice and Toryn cocked a brow at her.

Haaryd gave his daughter a warning look. "Bloodsong is not a fair mount, Daryna," the chief said, frowning. "He is our fastest and finest horse, but he has never been tamed. There is a demon in him." He would have gone on, but Toryn took the reins from Daryna. The horse looked more than half-wild but it made Toryn think of Alyn. She would turn grass green with envy at the sight of this beast.

He climbed quickly into the saddle. Before the horse could get his bearings and dump him into the dirt, Toryn howled a Redolian war cry and dug his heels into the horse's sides. It jumped violently and bolted. Through the camp they thundered and tribesmen scattered from their path. Several of them galloped after him in pursuit, probably thinking he needed help. Toryn, far from trying to stop the stallion, urged him to greater speed. He laughed aloud from the sheer joy of moving so quickly; it was like flying. The plains that he loved for their openness became even more treasured. He felt he could race over the sea of grass forever.

Bloodsong seemed to sense his joy and tore along faster, trying to match the wind. Toryn whooped again, his face near the chestnut mane as he leaned down. Bloodsong's mane slapped against his cheeks. He felt like a part of the animal. The pounding hooves drummed a rapid staccato on the earth, the hard muscles stretched and contracted powerfully, and the rushing wind tore the moisture from Toryn's eyes.

Finally, Bloodsong began to slow and Toryn reined him in. He patted the sweat-slick neck and talked warmly to the horse as it pranced and champed the bit, obviously tired but still excited, willing to break into a run again if Toryn desired it. Several tribesfolk cantered up and Toryn grinned at the first one to arrive, a saucy-looking, tawny-haired girl on a bay mare.

"A fine horse," he said and she smiled in return.

"You have ridden before."

"Once or twice," he admitted. The others, whether unhappy or glad to see him unhurt, rode back with him at a leisurely walk. By the time they returned, all signs of the camp, save the flattened grass, were gone. Garyn and Poodik, with Daryna, awaited him on the bank of the Thalar.

Garyn let out a sigh of relief to see him and Daryna asked, "Were you thrown?"

The tawny-haired girl came to Toryn’s defense with a laugh. "You jest? This one rides like a Horseking!"

Daryna reacted as if struck. She threw a dark glare at Toryn, turned the dun horse, and splashed across the river.
"The others have gone ahead. The chief bade us follow if…." Garyn paused and flushed. "I mean when you returned."

"I see everyone had confidence in my riding ability," Toryn said. Garyn grinned and they rode after Daryna. Poodik refused to go near the horses and had almost bolted back to the Voor when it was suggested that he ride one. He apparently had an almost superstitious horror of horses, so when he accompanied them it was on foot, and twenty feet from the nearest steed. He skirted all piles of horse droppings as if they were coiled snakes.

"I wonder why he doesn’t like horses," Toryn commented to Garyn. Far in the distance, they could see the cloud of dust from the herd of horses they trailed.

"All the Voor feel that way, to some degree," Garyn replied. "Had you not noticed?"

Toryn had been so preoccupied with escape, and grief over Brydon’s death, that he had not noticed much of anything about the Voor. Thinking back, he realized it was true. The Voor had all stayed far away from Sellaris, Garyn and Lavan whenever they had been mounted.

"Why is that?"

"I don’t know," Garyn replied. "I think it has something to do with the War of the South. The final battle against the legions of Shaitan was fought on the flatlands of Bodor, and Kerrick’s best weapon—aside from the gauntlet—was a legion of Tar-Tanian warriors mounted on stolen Akarskan horses. The Voor never lost their fear of that day and they do not care for open spaces."

Toryn looked at Poodik, who warily looked from one horse to another and muttered. "The plains do not seem to bother him," he observed.

"Younger generation? He doesn’t worship Shaitan, either."

"If they are so afraid of what defeated them in the war, why do they not fear the Gauntlet?" Toryn asked with a gesture at the cask carrying the object.

Garyn snorted. "That is their greatest terror. They had no idea they were transporting it. Reed is far from stupid."

Toryn was shocked. "How could they not know?"

"When the Dark Master sends for something, the Dark Master gets it. It is not in the interest of the Voor to question what it is, or indeed, even care. They simply obey. They were told to pick up the black box from Reed and transport it."

Toryn could hardly comprehend being so… obedient. Then again, Brydon had been that way with his adherence to duty. He would have blindly obeyed the laws of the king who had sent him on the stupid quest that had gotten him killed. Toryn felt a lance of bitter pain. He had a sudden desire to return the gauntlet to Falara himself and then bring the whole country down with it.

Garyn called him out of his vengeful reverie. "Are you all right? You looked... enraged."

Toryn forced a smile, shaking off the vision. "Just thinking."

"Not with me in mind, I hope."
Toryn shook his head. He had actually come to like Garyn in the past couple of weeks, and Garyn had not really done anything wrong except to follow that she-devil Sellaris around. He could not be held accountable for unrequited love.

"What will you do when we get back to Silver?" Toryn asked to take his mind off of Brydon, who loomed in his memory whenever he thought of Sellaris. Garyn shrugged.

"I don’t know. Maybe I’ll go back to Bodor and do what I was born to do, although I seem to have acquired wanderlust. I am not sure I could settle down and become a farmer anymore. Perhaps I will go to G’Neel Across the Sea. I have never been there and I hear it is largely unexplored.

Toryn nodded. "After I find Alyn, maybe I’ll join you. There is no hurry for me to get back to Redol. My brother is clan-chief and he probably thinks I’m dead." Actually, Toryn had no intention of going to G’Neel Across the Sea. He planned to rescue Alyn and then go to Ven-Kerrick to kill Reed very slowly.

The tawny-haired girl cantered up to them then and smiled at Toryn. "We will be catching up to the others soon," she said. "Will you be staying with us for a while?" Her eyes were cool amber and Toryn noticed, not for the first time, that she was quite pretty.

"That is for the chief to decide," Toryn admitted. "What is your name?"

"Varii." She smiled. "And your names are Toryn and Garyn."

"Word spreads fast," Toryn said, enchanted with her slight accent.

"It’s a small tribe." Varii shrugged. "I think Daryna likes you."

Warning bells went off in Toryn’s head. "What makes you say that?"

"Because she keeps looking back here and glaring at me."

"Watch. She will come over here. She can’t stand not knowing what I’m telling you." Varii giggled loudly and reached out to touch a hand to Toryn’s arm. Bloodsong pranced at the nearness of the mare. Toryn knew how he felt.

"You see?" Varii laughed. "Here she comes! She will send me off somewhere, wait and see."

Daryna rode back to them with a black look on her face. "Varii," she snapped when she neared, "Ride ahead and see if the others have reached the cattle."

Varii threw a sparkling, mirthful glance at Toryn and cantered away. Daryna turned her mount to ride next to Garyn. Toryn said, "I think I will go with Varii." He did not relish the idea of getting involved with a tricky wench like Daryna. He touched heels to Bloodsong, who eagerly bounded off after the bay mare.

The remainder of the tribe followed the large herd at a distance far enough to be free of dust. Everyone Toryn saw was mounted, including small children who rode upon older, gentle mounts. Even babies rode, slung upon their mothers’ backs in leather packs.

Toryn rode up to Chief Haaryd, who rode a dark golden palomino draped in turquoise cloth. Kalyn rode next to him.
"Where do you travel?" Toryn asked.

"We go to trade for cattle," Haaryd replied.

"You already have cattle."

"Indeed we do, but one can never have too many cattle. We get fine bulls and cows from the tribe of Sorii."

"Doesn’t the Sorii tribe feel the same way about cattle?"

Haaryd chuckled. "The Sorii are a different breed of Thalarii. They would trade their last meal for a fast horse. Racing is in their blood. They spend most of their time breeding and perfecting their racing horses. They tend cattle only as a means of obtaining more horses. For that reason, both the cattle and the horses of Sorii tribe are very fine."

"If they are the finest in Thalarii, why do they trade for more?"

Haaryd gave him a shrewd look. "I did not say they were the finest. No matter how fine the steed, every Sorii hungered for that perfect animal, the one that can race the wind and win, the horse whose hooves never touch the ground when he runs, and the mount that can run for a week and not tire." Haaryd’s eyes were far away and glowing.

"You sound as if you wouldn’t mind finding this horse yourself."

"You cannot be Thalarii without wishing to find Avani-tor Shahar," he admitted. Kalyn laughed and agreed.

"This fantasy horse even has a name?" Toryn burst out.

"No fantasy," Haaryd said in a reprimanding tone. "You are from Redol, yet you do not know of Thalar, for whom this country is named? His name should be sung aloud and often in Redol, for that is where Thalar was born." Toryn shook his head, not mentioning that he had never even heard of the country before stumbling upon it. He was stunned to find that a fellow Redolian had not only traveled so far south, but had apparently founded an entire nation.

"It is a long story for a cold night, or for a feast. Perhaps I will tell it tonight at the Sorii fire. Look, we are near to the Sorii."

He gestured toward the horizon where the tops of some scrubby trees poked into the air. As he did so, many men on horses bolted over the rise like lightning, screaming wild cries at the top of their lungs. Toryn’s own war cry leaped to his lips instinctively as his hand reached for his sword, but he choked it back when he noticed that Haaryd reacted to the warriors with nothing more than a slight smile.

"Sorii?" Toryn questioned. Haaryd nodded as the horsemen skewed to a halt in front of them. Toryn noted with no surprise that Daryna was among them.

The leading warrior spoke. "Greetings, Haaryd-chieftain from Sorii-chieftain." He was about Toryn’s age with thick black hair and a fey cast to his face. His eyes were a brilliant blue. "Have you horses?"

"Greetings, Mikyl," Haaryd smiled. "If you have spoken to Daryna, you should know everything about the tribe, and the herd, from the past four months." Daryna tossed her black hair at the slight and Mikyl laughed.
"That is so." He looked at Toryn and Gryn and his eyes took in their grey clothing and then dropped to their swords. Toryn had noticed that few of the Thalar were swords, seeming to prefer bows, spears, and daggers.

Haaryd volunteered no information to Mikyl’s questioning glance, so the youth shrugged. His gaze passed from them to Kalyn, who rode next to Haaryd, and his ice-blue eyes hardened. Kalyn’s face could have been chiseled in stone for all the expression he showed, but his eyes were as cool as Mikyl’s. Toryn had seen two enemy lions look at each other with more friendliness before leaping upon each other to rend and kill. Mikyl looked away first, contemptuously.

"Let us get to the feast!" he shouted, "and then to the racing!"

The rest of the Sorii shouted with him, joined by several of the Haaryd tribe, and then they all turned and galloped away. Daryna, obviously miffed, stayed beside her father rather than ride off with Mikyl.

"You have just seen the youngest in the line of Thalar and his wife, Ilyna. Mikyl is the son of Sorii, the only child, and sole heir to the mighty legend that precedes him," Haaryd said. Toryn thought that explained Daryna’s interest and wondered at the note of disapproval he caught in Haaryd’s voice. Was it merely that he was protective of his daughter, or was there something in particular that the chief did not like about Mikyl?

"Does he have no cousins or uncles?" he asked.

Haaryd shook his head. "Thalar’s line has been an unbroken chain of single-son families. Sorii and Mikyl are the only two left and, no doubt, Mikyl will have a single son, if he ever takes a mate."

Thalar had been Redolian, which meant the blood of Redol flowed in Mikyl’s veins. He could even be distantly related to Toryn, who wrinkled his nose in distaste at the idea. They rode on into the camp of the Sorii and Kalyn said nothing.

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE
TRAINING

It took Brydon several days to find the strength to even stand. He had lost a considerable amount of blood and during the brief periods he forced himself to stand, waves of dizziness would assault him. His right leg was too badly wounded to put weight upon, so he hobbled around pathetically on the other using a strong staff Rakyn had given him.

His left shoulder ached and was so stiff he could barely move it. His ribs were definitely broken, making it painful to eat, breathe, or even move, and his head set up a dreadful pounding to accompany the dizziness whenever he sat upright.

"I feel like I fell off a cliff," he joked to Rakyn one day after the prince asked the usual question of how he felt. Rakyn was pleased that his humor had returned. Brydon neglected to tell him that the sorry jest was camouflage for worry. His friends had need of him and here he was, unable even to walk. He punched the bed in frustration. After a moment, he guiltily gave thanks to Adona that he was still alive and that his sword arm was undamaged, except for a deep gash and some minor bruises.
On the day he could hobble outside to greet the sun, Rakyn began his training.

"Talk to me," Rakyn said in his mind as he sank down on a fallen log next to the prince. "What do you want me to say?"


"Now, turn down the volume and the range. I am right here and you are broadcasting for leagues."

"How do I do that?"

"Concentrate. Picture... picture a rolled up scroll, very narrow, that stretches from your head to mine. Now, focus your thoughts down and send them through the tube."

Brydon imagined the thing, but narrowing a thought was not so simple. He realized that he had just been sending his mental words in Rakyn’s direction, not directly at him. He tried to compress them down, but succeeded only in giving himself a headache.

"Try it another way," Rakyn suggested. "Picture a small object to yourself—and only to yourself. Now, keep a tiny image of the thing and send it through the tube."

Brydon did so, keeping the image small. It was simple.

"A leaf!" Rakyn said in his mind happily. "Magnificent! Keep practicing that until sending images comes naturally and then we will work on words. You also have to learn how to protect yourself. Some thoughts can hurt, especially if they were sent for that purpose."

"I see you have had some experience with that," Rakyn said and Brydon looked at him sharply. Rakyn smiled. "This will also keep people from reading your thoughts when you do not want them to."

"Even you?"

"Even me. Now what you need to do is picture a thick dark wall around your thoughts, keeping out everything."

"Now, let us see if it holds," Rakyn said aloud. He was silent for a moment and then asked, "Did you feel that?"

"Not a thing. Should I have?"

"Perhaps not. Let me try again. Anything?"

Brydon shook his head.

"How about now?" Rakyn stressed the last word and Brydon felt as though something had bounced off the wall around his thoughts, so slight that he had only noticed it because he was concentrating.

"I felt that, sort of. What was it?"

"Amazing," Rakyn said. "Make the wall thinner, like glass maybe, but not fragile."

Brydon pictured glass. Thick glass. Blue glass, like the goblets in the castle in Eaglecrest.
"Can you feel this?" Rakyn asked.
"Am I supposed to?"
"Usually. What is blue?"
"I thought you could not read my thoughts."
"I cannot, at the moment, but something is blue." Rakyn sounded puzzled.
"The glass," Brydon explained. "I made it blue."
"And it is just as strong as the wall. Astounding. Your mental armor is incredible. Truly. Like no one’s I have ever met. See how long you can keep it up."
Brydon shrugged. It was not hard to picture the wall.
"Let us make this more difficult. Keep thinking of the wall and answer this. A prince has five diamonds and two rubies. He trades two diamonds for five sapphires, a ruby for three emeralds, and a sapphire for a ruby. How many gems does he have, and what are they?"
"Is that all you Silveran princes think about? Gold and gems?"
"Of course. Answer the question."
"Twelve. Three diamonds, two rubies, four sapphires, and three emeralds."
"Your wall did not budge. Very good. How did you do both at once?"
"I don’t know. I don’t really even have to think about the wall. I just know it’s there. It’s sort of like putting on clothes. Once they’re on, I don’t have to think about them again until it is time to take them off."
Rakyn sat back, thoughtful. "Can you drop it?" he asked. Brydon’s blue glass wall vanished. Rakyn’s voice was in his head again, immediately. //Good. Put it back and we will try something else.// Brydon replaced the wall and made it green this time.
"Now picture the tube again. Make a hole in your wall big enough for the tube, but nothing else. Can you do that?"
"Sure."
"Now, send an image to me and close the wall again."
Brydon did so and found it a little bit difficult.
"Good," Rakyn said. "A bed, is it? You are tired?"
Brydon nodded and dropped the wall. He was exhausted and allowed the prince to help him back to the cave. His head protested.
"It is tiring, especially at first," Rakyn explained as Brydon sank down on the bed. "But you are very quick and you seem to be more talented than even I was. It is a good sign. Sleep now."
Brydon had neither the effort nor the desire to resist and was soon asleep with the prince watching over him.
Over the next week, Brydon’s strength slowly returned and he learned how to do amazing things. He found out how to retain the wall-shield even in his sleep, how to attack others with a painful thought (he liked to picture a dagger plunging into his foe’s head) and how to send an idea directly to Rakyn without visualizing the tube. He also worked each day on extending his "range". The range was part of what Brydon had always used to determine if intruders were nearby. The way to achieve more range was to send out a smaller quest for knowledge in a single direction. He managed to reach his mind all the way to Ruby, which Rakyn said was some six leagues away. The prince told him his range would get even longer with practice.

Brydon learned how to send healing thoughts to his body each night to speed the healing process. Rakyn said it was working well. On the fourth week after his fall, Rakyn suggested they practice swordplay.

"You have learned how to make a mental shield for your protection. But we need to see if you can hold it in battle. As you know, Reed is a master swordsman, as well as being devilish with his gift. He uses both talents to find any edge he can, and he is merciless."

"Who is Reed? What do you know about him?"

"Only what Nykar has been able to discover. I know he has taken over Ven-Kerrick with trickery, deception, and murder, even though it cannot be proven. I have not been able to locate the Gauntlet Knights. I also have not determined a way to oust Reed without starting a civil war. The Concurrence is in a fragile state. Tar-Tan has never been a willing participant, Bodor prefers to govern itself, and my brothers will seize any strife as a means to further their own ends—they would split the Concurrence to satisfy their greed."

"Are your ambitions any nobler?"

Rakyn smiled. "Perhaps not. But I know there are players in this game that make my brothers’ battles look like petty squabbles. Silver is so divided that any sizable force could crush us. Reed will not be satisfied with Ven-Kerrick. His kind are never finished with conquest."

Rakyn was skilled with the blade in his own right, perhaps better than Reed, although not as good as Torsyn. They danced around; Brydon’s leg had healed enough to allow movement for short periods of time. Sometimes, when Brydon concentrated, Rakyn would send a burst of force with his mind. Brydon’s shield was strong and usually he did not even feel it, but once Rakyn half-blinded him with an attack and he forgot to maintain the shield. A moment was all Rakyn needed and he sent a burst of white-hot force at him; Brydon lost control and reeled to the ground.

"Ah hah!" Rakyn cried, exultant. "That was why you were defeated!"

Brydon got up slowly, holding one hand to his head. Before he could even speak, Rakyn launched into an explanation on how to combat both attacks. That night, they sat outside the cave on velvet-covered chairs, watching the sunlight and sipping cool ale that Rakyn kept far back in the cave. Brydon was amazed at the quantity of goods they had smuggled to the cave from the Black City.

"How long before I can leave?"
"A month," Rakyn replied, running a hand through his dark hair.

"Forget it," Brydon snapped flatly.

Rakyn sighed. "I knew you would say that. A couple of weeks, at the very earliest."

Brydon champed at the bit of impatience, but his leg wound had torn open after the exertions of the day and he knew it would be a disadvantage until it was more fully healed.

"Where is Nykar?" he asked to take his mind off of Shevyn in the clutches of Reed, an image that haunted him day and night and threatened to send him northward, his injuries be damned. He had not seen Nykar since his first awakening.

"He is in the Black City, keeping an eye on things for me. Keeping my regents honest, mostly."

"He is your spy?"

"I suppose you could say that. He is my spy, my guardsman, my royal advisor, my assassin, and my friend. He is the only man I would trust with my life."

Brydon had not realized the two were so close and he suddenly missed Toryn terribly. He felt like half a person without the Redolian beside him.

"Thinking of your friend?"

"I thought you could not read me with my shield up," Brydon said quietly.

"I can read your face. Heartache is not hard to see."

"How will I know if he is even alive?"

"Your range is not yet far enough."

"But yours is."

"Perhaps, but I do not know Toryn."

"Does it make a difference?"

"Of course. You already have a link with him. That is how you can reach him so easily. You would know his mind in a crowd of people. I would not be able to tell him from a hundred Parmittans." Rakyn was thoughtful for a moment. "I do have an idea, however. I have the same sort of link with Nykar. If I need him, I just follow the link, even if I have no idea where he is. It is somewhat like an invisible cord that binds us together. It formed naturally, built of our friendship and trust for one another. Think of Toryn and see if you can detect any sense of direction. Block out everything except an image of Toryn and drop your shield. Do you see or feel anything?"

Brydon, eyes closed, was quiet for a long time, then he said, "I see... no, it is more like a feeling, or sensation, but... it is like a silver chain, going away into blackness."

"That is it! Now, focus all of your abilities on the chain and follow it. Go!"

Brydon sent his mind winging down the silver links until they blurred into a sparkling line. He went on for what seemed forever and then he began to slow. He tried to force
himself onward, but the effort was too great and the distance too far. He had not the power. Furious, he screamed Toryn’s name.

Rakyn’s voice came to him from far, far away.

//Come... back... Brydon.../

He released his hold on the chain and slid backward in a blur, until he snapped into his own mind. He felt instantly weak, as if he had run on foot over two mountain ranges. Rakyn knelt at his feet and his cerulean cloak trailed in the dirt behind him.

"I... should be kneeling, not you... Your Highness," Brydon joked weakly.

"Do not count on it," Rakyn said. "Are you all right?"

Brydon nodded. "What went wrong?"

"Nothing. He is too far away. You overextended yourself. It is similar to lifting a tree. You have to build your strength and work up to it slowly; you cannot simply rush out and heft it. One thing is certain, though."

"What is that?" Brydon said, hiding a yawn. He needed rest.

"Your friend lives. You would know it if he were dead."

"How?"

"The link would be severed. The chain would snap back with enough force to knock you out. You have created a bond between the two of you that cannot be broken except by death." His voice sharpened. "Be aware, though, that through this link, you are vulnerable. Your shield cannot block the link and if your enemies can reach Toryn, they can reach you through him. Remember this."

Brydon nodded, struggling to retain the knowledge as a wave of weariness washed him into oblivion.

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

HAARYD

The Sorii and Haaryd tribes feasted merrily. Haaryd’s warriors presented every horse for sale to the Sorii one by one with great ceremony. There were over a hundred horses, so the process took quite a long time and Toryn committed a Thalarii breach of etiquette by falling asleep midway through the ceremony. The fact that he’d consumed a large quantity of a smooth but potent alcohol had not helped. He woke up half-buried by soft furs with a female body curled next to his. His brows lifted in surprise as her blue eyes opened and a smiled curled her lips.

"Do I know you?" he asked and mentally kicked himself. The way his head pounded, he could have been very active the prior night with no memory of it. Luckily, she was not offended.

"No." She smiled. Her hair was light brown, bordering on blond, and pulled back in a loose braid that was beginning to come undone.
He smiled back uneasily. He still had all of his clothing on, so he hoped nothing too serious had taken place. With his luck they would demand some obscure wedding ritual for simply lying next to a woman. He glanced around; dawn was just touching the sky. The Thalarii warriors were either passed out in drunken stupors, sitting in groups talking quietly, or riding their horses.

"I am Colina," the girl said. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him soundly on the lips. Surprised though he was, he enjoyed the act thoroughly before she pulled away.

"What was that for?" he asked.

She smiled and gestured to Daryna, who stalked away from camp. He had not noticed her nearby. "She deserved it," Colina said. "Always she comes here and flirts with our best warriors, acting as if no man can resist her. When we saw her making calf-eyes at you last night, we drew straws to see which of us got the honor of making her pay. I won."

"Who is we?" Toryn asked. She smiled again and looked over her shoulder. He reluctantly turned and saw a group of giggling tribeswomen clustered near the main tent. They waved happily at Colina.

"You think being seen in my bed would upset her?" he asked and gave the girls a wave which made them squeal happily and race off to their horses.

Colina stood. "Can’t you tell? Daryna wants you, Northman. And she gets very upset when she cannot have what she wants. Even we Sorii know that." With that, she strolled to the edge of camp and whistled until a dark, spotted horse trotted up to her. She mounted with no bridle or saddle, gave him a wave and a dazzling smile and charged away.

Toryn sighed in disappointment. Women! He heard a chuckle and looked over to see Garyn watching him.

"What’s so funny?"

"Nothing." Garyn chortled again as he got up and poked some sticks into the embers of the fire. Toryn could see his shoulders shake as he laughed. He snorted and climbed out of the furs, stretching out the kinks. He felt restless and wanted nothing more than to be on his way north.

Haaryd approached as if reading Toryn’s mind. "Greetings, Toryn. This is as far as we may travel with you, for now we head into our own territory. If you will come with me, I will show you the way to Darii."

Toryn shrugged on his vest against the chill of the morning, took a slab of half-cooked meat out of Garyn’s hand while passing the fire, and followed the chief. He chewed on the steaming haunch.

Bloodsong had been saddled and awaited him with the chief’s horse. When Toryn approached, the stallion stretched out his nose to see if Toryn had brought him any treats and recoiled with a snort as he encountered the meat in Toryn’s hand.
"Sorry." Toryn chuckled and tossed the bone to Haaryd’s dog, which was never far from the chief. The mongrel snapped it up with a wag of his tail. Toryn wiped the grease from his hands and vaulted onto Bloodsong.

They had not ridden far before Mikyl and Daryna joined them. Mikyl looked at Toryn with the same measuring gaze of the previous day and Toryn, likewise, studied him. There was something about the young man that set Toryn’s teeth on edge, apart from the fact that Mikyl was possibly better looking than him. Possibly. By a very small margin. His black hair gleamed and his blue eyes were riveting.

Something more than competitive envy made Toryn dislike, Mikyl, however. After all, Redwing was just as handsome and he didn’t cause Toryn to want to strangle him. Well, not often, at any rate. He felt a twinge at the knowledge that he would never have the urge to throttle Redwing again. He ignored it resolutely and returned his attention to Mikyl.

Perhaps it was the air of unconscious arrogance that Mikyl portrayed. He acted like everyone around him was little more than a servant. Toryn looked at Daryna, who glared at him as though she could sizzle him into ashes with a glance. He raised his brow and flashed her a winning smile. She stuck her nose into the air and ignored him.

Mikyl’s gaze sharpened.

"Good day to you, Mikyl," Haaryd said, apparently not noticing the crosscurrents of tension that suddenly filled the air.

"Good day to you, Haaryd-chieftain." Mikyl smiled, taking his stare from Toryn. "Are you coming to look at the herds?"

"In part," Haaryd said. He turned to Toryn.

"Darii lies in that direction, Toryn. Travel southwest until you come to the River of Grass. Cross it when you can and follow it until it reaches the coast. Darii will be perhaps three leagues south of the river mouth."

"You are leaving us?" Mikyl inquired. His face gave away nothing.

Toryn nodded. "Indeed. Today, if it is permissible."

Mikyl smiled, not bothering to hide his pleasure at the words. Toryn was suddenly glad that his brother had beaten courtesy into him, or else he might have been tempted to backhand the whelp.

"Good traveling," Mikyl said, and then turned back to Haaryd. "I see he is riding Bloodsong. Are you finally going to sell him to us, sly fox? We have wanted his blood in our foals for a long time."

Haaryd was silent for a long moment while he looked off to the horizon. Finally he said, "I am giving Bloodsong to Toryn, since he is the one who tamed him."

Toryn and Mikyl’s looks of astonishment were compounded by Daryna’s shriek of outrage.

"What?" she burst out. "Father, you cannot be serious!"
The old chief sent her a quelling look. "I am quite serious. This young man has far more need of Bloodsong’s speed than either the Haaryd or the Sorii tribe."

"That is absurd!" Daryna snapped, not in the least bit daunted. "He is an outlander. He will probably sell Bloodsong the minute he reaches one of his foul cities!"

Haaryd gave her an enigmatic look and Toryn smirked at her mockingly. The chief turned to Mikyl. "Will you excuse us for a moment?" he requested, "I must speak with my offspring."

Mikyl looked troubled, but he bowed his head and turned his horse about. When he was out of range of their voices, Haaryd looked at his stubborn daughter, who stared at Toryn with thinly veiled contempt.

"Daryna," Haaryd said, "You have been to Darii, have you not?"

She tossed her black-maned head like the horse she rode. "Of course, Father. You took me there yourself."

"Then you will remember the route. I have decided to send you with Toryn and Garyn to be their guide. You will accompany them to Darii at sun’s rising tomorrow."

Daryna gasped. "But Father! You cannot mean that! I will not—!"

"The matter is not open to discussion, Daryna," Haaryd said in a voice that brooked no argument. "You will go and prepare your things."

Daryna was still for a moment and her face mirrored fear and loathing, as well as surprise at her situation. Then she turned her horse and galloped at full speed back to the encampment.

Toryn cleared his throat. "You really need not send her, my lord," he said politely. "Garyn and I have traveled half across the world. We should find Darii with no problem."

Haaryd smiled softly. "That is a very polite way to say you do not want her along, Toryn, but it is not for your sake that I send her. She has become arrogant and vain. Perhaps a journey will take some of that out of her."

Toryn had no idea what to say, but he tried anyway. "My lord, this is a great honor, but..."

Haaryd snorted. "Honor, my enemy’s tripes! It is a curse. I only hope Bloodsong will make up for the inconvenience she will cause you. You can send Daryna back to us when you get to Darii."

Toryn shook his head when he remembered the chief had given him the stallion. The old fox had meant it as payment for putting up with his headstrong daughter, but it was too much. The horse was too fine. "This horse makes up for every inconvenience I have ever felt," he admitted. "I cannot accept him."

"Nonsense. You cannot not accept him," Haaryd countered. "If Bloodsong helps to get you out of a tight spot one day, then I must give him to you. May you ride the path of Shahar."

Toryn felt a curious tightness in his throat. "And you, my friend," he replied to the chief. They smiled in shared comradeship and rode back to the Sorii camp.
As expected, when they rode out the next day, Daryna acted like a viper that had been stomped upon. She rebuffed Garyn’s polite questions with snarled replies that left the sensitive man stunned and silent. Toryn she ignored until they were a couple of hours away from the camp and she could stand the quiet no longer.

"So tell me, foreigner," she said scathingly. "How did you persuade my father to force me to go on this dreadful trip? And to give you Bloodsong as well?"

Toryn looked at her in amusement. "You have it wrong, child," he replied condescendingly. "I would rather have your father’s dog along than you. Perhaps he felt the same way."

Her rage was something to behold. He had thought her angry before. Her face turned bright red and her eyes narrowed to barest slits. Her fists clenched on the reins and her teeth ground together until he thought bits of tooth would fly out. "How dare you speak to me that way!" she finally exploded at high volume. Poodik, who trailed them afoot, jumped, looked at her in surprise, and cautiously trotted around to put Garyn between himself and the enraged girl. Toryn kept his eyes on the path in front of them.

"I dare whatever I want. Now be quiet. You are scaring all the game within a thousand miles and I would like to be able to catch some fresh meat on this trip."

Garyn, barely able to control his laughter, choked suddenly and erupted into a coughing fit. Daryna’s hot gaze swung to him. He managed to stop coughing without killing himself and Daryna turned back to Toryn with her head held high.

"If I must ride in such foul company, I believe I will ride in the lead where the stench will not be so bad," she said and kicked her mount into a canter. When she was a barely visible speck far ahead of them, she slowed to a walk and rode without looking back.

"I think she got you that time." Garyn grinned.

Toryn frowned. "She is worse than Alyn. At least the Akarskan wench didn’t mean all the nasty things she said to me." He was thoughtful for a moment. "At least, I hope she didn’t."

"This should be an interesting journey."

"I could do with a little less interesting. I just want to get on a ship and away from our babysitting duty," Toryn declared. Garyn nodded and they continued on in silence.

The next week was largely uneventful. Daryna at first refused to do any menial chores such as gathering dried cattle dung for the fire, or cooking, or even fetching water from the small springs they camped near. Toryn retaliated by refusing to let her eat until she "had something more to contribute than a bad temper."

Apparently, she was not well skilled as a huntress. After two days of attempting to catch her own dinner, she stalked into camp with two skins full of water and prepared a fire. Toryn allowed her to cook their meal without a word and that ended the first battle. He knew she had fought well with her pride, so he kept his mocking grins to himself.

One night they sat around the campfire absently listening to Poodik chattering away in his native tongue. He had conquered his fear of Daryna and now included her in his
conversations. She had quickly learned not to ask what his babbling meant, for Garyn
often had no idea.

Toryn watched the red embers snap and sparkle and his mind drifted to nothing in
particular. Then, so faint he almost immediately doubted it was there at all, he felt the
tiniest whisper of his name being called in his head.

He sprang to his feet.

//Brydon!/ he screamed in his mind, putting his entire will into it. He sent the thought to
the farthest corners of the earth and raced to the top of the nearest hill, mentally yelling
Brydon’s name until his head throbbed. There was no reply.

He sank to his knees and barely noticed when Garyn sat down beside him and clasped a
gentle hand to his shoulder.

"Brydon," Toryn murmured dully. They sat listening to the wind for a long time and then
Toryn turned his eyes to Garyn. "He really is gone, isn’t he?"

Garyn nodded and Toryn looked away.

"I’ll be fine," he said. Garyn stayed for a moment and then went back to Daryna. Toryn
stayed on the hill all night, staring at the horizon. He did not even notice when Daryna
came and draped a fur-lined cloak across his shoulders. His thoughts were far away.

The next day, things had changed somewhat. Daryna, although she did not exactly speak
to Toryn, did not quite ignore him as avidly as she previously had. She talked to Garyn
frequently and seemed to watch Toryn for any sign of annoyance or jealousy. If so, she
was disappointed.

Toryn was short-tempered with impatience. Garyn asked him about it once when he
complained about how slowly they were traveling.

"I think Brydon’s body is lying at the base of that mountain, unburied. I plan to lay him
to rest properly. Whether in the Redolian fashion or the Falaran way with fire, I haven’t
decided." Perhaps then he would be able to convince himself that Brydon was truly dead.

Garyn heard his words with an expression akin to horror. "I hope this new obsession
doesn’t lead you down the path to madness," he said carefully. Toryn shrugged off his
concern with a ghost of a smile and urged Bloodsong into the ground-swallowing trot that
had become their usual pace.

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE
CRYSTAL

Brydon deflected Rakyn’s blade easily and danced aside to avoid his counterstrike. The
swordplay lessons were becoming easier now that every movement did not induce pain.
Rakyn stepped forward and Brydon rushed him with a complex move. The surprised
prince countered his attack, but he slipped on a stone and went to one knee.

Brydon helped him up with a grin and then brought up a subject that had been puzzling
him. "Do you know that Reed can disappear from one place and end up in another?"
Rakyn nodded and wiped sweat from his brow with a forearm

"How does he do it? Is that something we can do? Or is he unique?"

Rakyn stood and sheathed the sword he had used during their sparring practice. He brushed debris from his cream-colored leather breeches.

"That ability is not unique. But it's not... right, either."

"What do you mean?"

Rakyn pushed a hand through his hair. "Come. It will be easier to show you than try to explain."

Brydon got stiffly to his feet and followed Rakyn back to the cave. He stopped in the main room to drink from the pitcher on the table while Rakyn continued into the other chamber. He returned a moment later carrying a small wooden cask, almost hidden by his hands. He set the thing on the table and seated himself. Brydon noted that the box seemed rather plain to be in the possession of a prince. It was bound in dull metal and there were no gems, carvings, or any other ornamentation. He watched with interest as the prince flipped open the lid to disclose a small, milky, peach-colored crystal about the size of a pecan. It lay on a folded green cloth Rakyn lifted the edges of the cloth as if to avoid touching the crystal.

"What is it?" Brydon felt somewhat awed even though he had seen similar stones hundreds of times. As a child, he had brought quartz home to his mother.

"The palace of Shaitan," Rakyn murmured and Brydon shivered as a chill passed over him. Rakyn’s brown eyes twinkled. "That is only the legend, of course. An old tale says that when Shaitan was first cast down from heaven to earth, he raged at Adona for a long while. When he realized there were people here, he commanded his angels to build him a temple of crystal, raising it to the clouds and filling it with colors, that men might think him Adona and come to worship him. It worked well and he deceived men for many years, until Adona sent his prophet, Jacyn, to raise an army for him. They marched to Sheol, in Parmitta, and blew their trumpets, rotating groups of seven for seven weeks. They kept up a constant sound until the crystal palace shattered into countless bits. Have you never heard that tale?"

"There are many stories of Adona, but that one I have not heard."

Rakyn nodded. "It is popular in Silver. Legend has it that certain crystals are pieces of that palace, scattered across the face of the world. I am almost inclined to believe it."

Brydon raised a brow at that, for Rakyn did not seem a particularly pious or superstitious man. Rakyn leaned back in his chair and looked at Brydon through half-closed eyes.

"Send a thought to the crystal. Any thought."

Brydon shrugged and thought of how prettily colored the crystal was, and then sent it. Instead of bouncing off the inert surface of the stone, as Brydon expected, it sank into the quartz and remained. Brydon recoiled. He could not really sense inanimate objects—they were always like blank surfaces, barely noticed while he quested for living things. But this stone had something akin to a presence. It was not normal.
"It... it..." He could not find words.

"It consumed your thought? Yes, it feeds on mental energy. Feeds until it is full, and then it does what you request of it."

"The tale is true, then," Brydon whispered, horrified and fascinated that a simple stone could possess such a quality. It seemed a perverted imitation of a living thing.

Rakyn shrugged. "It is really almost harmless." He reached out and picked up the stone in his bare fingers. "See? It is cool, as you would expect, does not bite, change shape, or sink into the skin. Nothing would happen if I took a hammer and smashed it into dust. It is as harmless as any rock you would pick up out of a gully, but in the hands of one who knows how to use it, it can be very harmful indeed."

"How? What does it do?" Brydon questioned, relieved, in spite of his assurances, when Rakyn put it down.

"It enhances powers such as ours, and more, sometimes. Try it. Feed it thoughts until it is sated; you will know when, as it will stop taking them. Then picture an object sitting on the table."

Brydon was reluctant, but he studied the crystal and opened his mind, giving it images of riding on a spring day, thinking of the trees, the flowers, and the weather, until his thoughts began to pour around the crystal and past it.

"Good. Now concentrate on the stone and think of an object."

He did so and almost jumped out of his chair when the thing appeared on the table beside the quartz, a solid piece of wood with an iron headpiece.

"A hammer?" Rakyn laughed and picked it up. Brydon broke contact with the crystal, but the hammer remained in Rakyn’s hand for the space of four heartbeats before it faded. "You see what the crystal can do? And that is a small demonstration. It allows one to create a doorway between places that one can reach through—or step through."

"But... it’s impossible!" Brydon blurted. He was aghast at the implications. "It is not natural!"

"Perhaps it is." Rakyn smiled. "Take the crystal to a jeweler, or even an apothecary or alchemist. They will tell you the same thing. It is quartz. Nothing more. But those of us with the gift know better. It enhances our powers and is therefore very, very seductive."

"But?"

"But what?" Rakyn asked with a bland expression.

"There has to be a drawback, or you would be using the thing and teaching me how!"

Rakyn laughed. "Now I know why I decided to bother with you." He looked sourly at the crystal. "I do not trust it. When I first found the crystal, it only required a single thought to feed it. After a time, it took two, then five, and so on. Nothing about the crystal has changed except, apparently, its appetite. You saw how long it took you to charge it."

"You mean it’s alive?" Brydon was horrified anew.
"I don’t know. I do not know anything about its origin, but the fact remains that I do not trust it. I have the feeling that one day it will not be content with my thoughts and will suck the soul from me." He seemed somewhat embarrassed to admit the last and cleared his throat sharply. Brydon was already certain he wanted nothing to do with the Shaitan-spawned crystal.

"Reed uses them for any number of things, including transporting himself from place to place."

Brydon looked at the crystal again, wondering in spite of himself just how such a feat was accomplished.

"Do not!" Rakyn said sharply, snapping Brydon out of his reverie. "I told you it is very seductive."

"Not seductive enough," Brydon replied grimly. "As far as I am concerned, that thing can go back inside a mountain where it belongs."

Rakyn’s dark eyes searched Brydon’s for a long time before he nodded and placed the crystal back into the box. They went back outside and practiced hacking at each other once more, but Brydon thought about the stone for a long time.

The next morning he woke early with the sensation that something was different. He sat up and massaged the wound on his leg. The stitches held strong, even through the previous day's swordplay lesson, and he had to admire Nykar’s skill at doctoring. His leg did ache, however.

He leaned over and lit a candle, curious to have a look at his wound. It was not until his eyes adjusted to the dim light that he noticed Rakyn sleeping on a makeshift pallet on the floor. The prince rolled over fitfully and sat up, brushing his dark brown hair out of his eyes with a quick gesture. He glanced up at Brydon and blinked.

"It cannot possibly be morning," he complained.

"I don’t know. Why are you here? I have seen your bed and know it has to be much more comfortable than this floor."

"Assuredly so, but when one has female guests, the proper thing to do is to give one’s bed to the ladies."

"Guests? Ladies?"

"Will you two shut up and let a body get some bloody sleep?" a gruff voice demanded from Rakyn's side, nearly causing Brydon to leap out of bed in surprise. Before he could move, Nykar’s irritated face appeared over Rakyn's shoulder.

"Nykar!"

"You think?" Nykar growled and dropped his head.

"He has returned with friends," Rakyn explained. "They arrived quite late, so they should rest a while longer. Can you sleep?"

"I’ll try. If not, I will go out and try to hunt some breakfast."
Rakyn’s reply was a yawn and he dropped back down to the blankets. Brydon blew out the candle and did the same. The pain in his leg refused to allow him additional sleep, so he soon left the bed and dressed quietly before limping out to the main chamber to fetch his bow. He glanced over at Rakyn’s bed. Two lumps lay beneath the blanket and a third stretched out next to the bed. Brydon quietly exited. He would learn their identities soon enough.

Even though he had not used it for a few weeks, Brydon’s skill with the bow had not diminished. He went out into the pre-dawn stillness and sighted a spotted buck heading up the mountainside. He trailed it a short distance to be sure of his kill, and then brought it down with one swift arrow. He gave thanks to Adona for both the meat and his skill before gutting the animal and dragging the carcass back to camp. It would be a welcome change from rabbit and mountain turkeys he and Prince Rakyn had been living on.

When he returned to camp the others were awake. Before he could register her presence, a girl was in his arms, crying his name. He hugged her for a moment and then held her at arm’s length.

"Verana!" he exclaimed happily. He hugged her again and looked up to see Jace grinning at him. Davin and Alyn were behind him. He released Verana and clasped Jace’s shoulder, then Davin’s, and embraced Alyn.

"I wasn’t sure if I would ever see you again!" he cried, looking at his three friends. It did not last long before the feeling of loss overwhelmed him. Toryn should be here with them. He shook it off. "What brings you here? Alyn, how did you escape Keev?"

Jace said, "Long stories, all. Nykar recognized Davin in the Black City and brought us here. What happened to you? Nykar told us you were injured, but not how."

Brydon could believe that. He was surprised the taciturn Nykar had bothered to tell them anything at all. He assured them he would give them the whole story over a hot meal.

Rakyn and Nykar cooked the venison while Verana placed exceedingly hot poultices on Brydon’s leg. He endured the pain, barely able to keep from yowling while he told them his story.

"...and that is all I remember until I woke up here. Ouch! Are you trying to burn the flesh from me, Verana? The rest you should know."

"This will pull out the infection, Brydon," Verana said sweetly. "Now sit still and allow me to finish."

Brydon sighed, but knew she had no mercy when healing was involved. "So, Toryn is in Parmitta and Shevyn is in Ven-Kerrick with Reed." He looked at Nykar, who nodded. Jace grimaced. "We were detained in the City of Roses by Prince Merator. We were captured on the way to the city and Davin was drugged. There was a bounty placed on his head and Merator intended to hold Davin until his brother, Berikon, could retrieve him. Prince Merator unwisely kept me and Verana in guarded apartments, but we managed to escape and free Davin. We went immediately to Darkynhold."
After combing the Black City looking for Brydon and the others, the party had been accosted by Nykar, who had recognized Davin as Brydon’s former companion. Nykar had told them of Alyn’s captivity, so they had ridden to Ruby to free her. Jace gave a brief account of Davin’s rescue of Alyn and Brydon was impressed at the tale.

"After that, Nykar led us here, though he was damned mysterious about it," Jace grumbled.

Brydon smiled. "That is Nykar’s way," he replied and paused. "I want to go after Toryn."

He ran a hand through his hair. "But if Reed marries Shevyn—if he has not already done so—he will have a legitimate claim to the throne of Ven-Kerrick." The thought was abhorrent enough without the additional thought of Reed’s vile hands caressing Shevyn. He forced his mind away from it. "I feel responsible for Sheyvn. She would be safe now if I had not taken her to Ven-Kerrick."

Nykar cleared his throat and Brydon looked at him sharply. "There is news from Ven-Kerrick. Shevyn fell—or was pushed—and lay unconscious for several weeks. They say she is recovering, thanks to the attention of the healers. The Concurrence Council met and argued over Reed's regency. He needs to marry her quickly to legitimize his claim to the Gauntlet Throne."

Brydon looked at Davin. "Then I must go to Ven-Kerrick and rescue Shevyn before that happens. Davin, I am begging you to go south. Please find Toryn and help him. I have it on good authority," he said and glanced at Rakyn, "that Toryn is alive, but I cannot take the chance that he will remain so. For all I know, he could be rotting in a Parmittan dungeon, awaiting sacrifice. Will you find him?"

Davin looked uncertain. "You will take on Reed alone?"

"Not alone," Jace corrected. "I am going with him."

Davin, thankfully, did not mention that Reed had previously bested them both, but the thought was clear upon his face.

//Rakyn has taught me a few things during my stay here,// Brydon sent to Davin. //I have a few surprises for Reed, not the least of which is the fact that I am still breathing. Please find Toryn for me. If anything happens to him...// He had no need to go on; the emotion in his sending caused Davin to grimace. Brydon withdrew.

"I will go."

"I'll go with you," Alyn said to Davin. Her tone was challenging, as if daring anyone to naysay her.

Brydon was silent, unable to think of a reason why she shouldn’t. She was far from home and had control of her own destiny. "Thank you," he said.

"When Reed is taken care of, we go after the gauntlet," Jace added.

Brydon groaned. "That, too. I had nearly forgotten the gauntlet."

"If it arrives in Sheol, we may not be allowed to forget it," Jace said grimly.

Brydon’s head snapped up at the mention of Sheol. "Is that not the name of the palace of crystal built by Shaitan?" he asked, recalling Rakyn’s tale.
Jace nodded. "Indeed. It has the same location, too, if one believes the old stories, and I do. The seat of evil; that is where the gauntlet is headed."

Brydon felt as if the world had suddenly been covered in clouds. "Can we stop it in time?" he asked through the chilled silence. To make matters worse, Jace did not reply. He merely got up and walked to the entrance of the cave, where he looked southward as if trying to see through the mountains and the jungle, all the way through the depths of Parmitta to where the gauntlet lay.

They spent the rest of the day filling each other in on the details of their separation. Verana continued to ply Brydon with herbs, poultices, and teas, which made him feel much better. His leg finally stopped aching.

Rakyn took Verana on a tour of the surrounding countryside and Nykar was too grumpy from lack of sleep to be good company—not that he ever was—so Brydon and Jace took a walk to where the horses were kept.

"Darkling, Fang, and Fireling!" Jace exclaimed upon seeing them. "After your tale, I was certain that Keev had taken them."

"So was I." Brydon smiled and gave Darkling a handful of sugar he had brought for the stallion. As the wet tongue slopped across his palm, leaving a sticky slobber trail, he decided that he would not do that again soon.

"Apparently, they ran free until Nykar stumbled upon them and brought them here." That was not the complete truth. Rakyn had sensed them and sent Nykar to bring them in, but Brydon was not willing to divulge Rakyn's secret to Jace. Davin had most likely already sensed Rakyn's power. Brydon wiped his sticky palm on his pants and immediately regretted it, remembering that the clothing belonged to Rakyn. One did not go around messing up the garments of princes.

He looked at Jace. "I should have protected her."

Jace put a hand on Brydon's shoulder. "You did all you could. Your wounds prove that, if nothing else does."

Brydon flexed his left shoulder, still tightly bandaged. It was sore, but not as bad as it had been. "If only she could have said something. Why doesn't she speak? Has she always been silent?"

Jace shook his head. "She used to be quite vivacious and talkative. She was that way when I arrived in Ven-Kerrick."

"But that was scarcely three months ago, was it not?"

"Yes. And then Reed arrived and Shevyn’s family mysteriously died. Since that day, it seems almost as if Shevyn died herself, and was replaced by a vengeful shadow that refuses to utter a word. Perhaps she saw something that horrified her and caused her to lock up the memory. I have heard tales of such a thing happening."

Brydon stroked Darkling’s neck, feeling Shevyn’s pain, and a new resolve to destroy Reed filled him. "Why does he want Ven-Kerrick?"
"Isn’t it obvious? If the Dark Master has the gauntlet and Reed has Ven-Kerrick, they will have a perfectly located base from which to launch an attack. From there, the Dark Master can conquer Penkangum, Tar-Tan, Bodor, and probably Silver, especially if he incites the brothers to fight amongst themselves, which should not be difficult." Brydon was chilled to hear Rakyn’s very words spoken again. "After that, taking the rest of the world will be no problem, using Silver’s fleets to transport his troops. Reed has murdered the only men who could have wielded the power to stand against him—the male Kerricks."

Brydon realized he had never considered the gauntlet actually falling into the wrong hands. He had always confidently assumed he would be able to acquire the thing and take it back to Falara. A foolish assumption, now that the gauntlet grew closer and closer to Sheol each day—perhaps it was already there.

"What can we do to stop it?"

"We will go to Ven-Kerrick and take the castle back for Shevyn. Reed must not rule in Ven-Kerrick."

Brydon nodded solemnly, not much heartened. He did not even ask how they were going to take Ven-Kerrick, alone against Reed and his forces. "Who is the Dark Master?"

Jace shrugged. "I don’t know. An evil man with plans of conquest. It doesn’t matter. He has to be stopped."

"In other words, it’s up to us."

"It’s up to you, Brydon. I think it always has been," Jace said cryptically and strolled away. His black cloak swirled in his wake. Brydon sighed and avoided the nip Darkling threw in his direction, reflecting that he hated it when Jace acted prophetic.

In bed that night, he mentally latched on to the silver chain that led to Toryn and sent his thoughts along it as far as he could. As usual, he was not strong enough to reach him, but he thought, perhaps, he had gone a bit farther than before.

Davin and Alyn departed the next day for Parmitta. Brydon watched them go and tried to shake off his foreboding. He wondered if he would ever see them again.

**CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR**

**DARII**

As they topped out on a rise and finally got a good look at the ocean, Toryn looked upon the small town of Darii with no expression. It did not look like any seaside town he had ever seen. There were no seedy taverns along the waterfront and only three small ships bobbed at the dock.

"It seems to be thriving," Toryn commented to Daryna. She did not, apparently, recognize the sarcasm.

"They support themselves by catching fish to trade for cattle. Once a year, all of the Thalarii gather here for a festival to worship Shahar and honor Thalar. Each tribal chief
boards a ship and travels to the Isle of Tears to pay their respects to Ilyna." She gestured to the hint of an island barely visible across the water from Darii.

"Ilyna?" he questioned, vaguely recalling hearing the name from Haaryd. Thalar was the legendary founder of Thalarii—the Redolian founder of Thalarii, odd as that seemed. "Thalar's wife? Why?"

"She is buried there." Daryna shrugged, but Toryn could sense sadness in her voice. He knew she would not tell him the tale and he was in no mood to drag it out of her. He only nodded and touched his heels to Bloodsong; they galloped down to the small village. The center of town was not a marketplace, but a temple. It was made entirely of shining white marble. A carved representation of Thalar, mounted upon Avani-tor-Shahar, adorned the front steps of the entrance.

Toryn gazed up into the strong face of Thalar, founder of the Thalarii nation. The features of the statue reminded him of Morgyn. He wondered what his brother was doing at that moment and banished the thought before it dragged him into a funk.

"Where do I find the ship captains?" he asked Daryna.

"If they are not aboard their vessels, then they will be in the Shipwrights' Lodge." Her tone was breezily condescending. "It was especially built for them. Many benefits are given to those who choose to work upon the sea. Thalar saw to that, so that there would always be ships to carry us to Ilyna's resting place."

Without another word, Daryna led them through the streets, waving at the handful of townspeople who paused to watch them pass. She rode to an imposing building near the waterfront.

"The Shipwright’s Guild," she announced, dismounting. Toryn and Garyn did the same. Daryna smoothed down her braided hair and walked up the steps. Inside, they entered a large, well-furnished room with a huge fireplace that dominated the space. Two middle-aged men sat upon large pillows in front of the unlit logs. They stared at a low table before them, intent upon a game board. Both looked up as Toryn and his companions entered. Poodik had peered at the building distrustfully and remained outside.

"Greetings, Captain Kor, Captain Loryn," Daryna said politely.

Both men rose. "Daryna, Chief-daughter! How fares Haaryd? What brings you to Darii? The festival is not for two months more." The man who had spoken looked shrewdly at Toryn and Garyn. "You have not come to wed, have you? Which of these is the lucky man?"

Daryna flushed to her toes, a sight Toryn was amused to see. He bit his tongue to resist commenting about the "lucky" part of the man’s statement. She glared at him as if sensing his thoughts.

"No, Kor. I have not come to marry. These men wish passage to Silver and I have come to request this of you, by my father’s command."

Kor’s brows lifted in surprise. "Silver? No one ever goes there! The Silvers come here if they want to trade."
"It is very important," Toryn said.

The other man studied him for a moment and then spoke. "You are not Thalarii."

Daryna looked at him and smiled. "Why do you think we want them out of the country?"
she asked sweetly.

"Are they criminals?" Kor asked, his attitude suddenly less cordial.

"No. Father even gave this one our best stallion." She could not conceal her annoyance at
that, but it had the desired effect.

"Bloodsong? Haaryd gave you Bloodsong?"

Toryn nodded, feeling uncomfortable.

Kor whistled. "If Haaryd is willing to trust you with that horse, the least I can do is take
you to Silver. We will leave on the morning tide."

"Thank you, sir," Toryn said in relief. "What payment—?"

"Do not insult a Thalarii, youngling!" Loryn growled. "We do this for Haaryd as a favor
and do not forget it!"

"What do you mean ‘we’?" Kor demanded. "It’s my ship!"

"Not if I win this game, it isn’t," Loryn retorted.

Kor’s brows drew down. "I haven’t bet the ship, you old birdherder!"

"You will." Loryn snorted. "You will."

As it turned out, Kor bet the ship and lost it, but Loryn graciously allowed him to stay on
board as the first mate. So it was with much grumbling and swearing that Kor admitted
the four of them—and the three horses—on board the next morning. Poodik, after one
terrified look at the ocean, climbed rapidly to the top of the forecastle and stayed there,
looking ready to jump ship and swim for shore at the slightest hint of danger.

Kor looked at him in disgust. "Is he going to stay up there the whole trip?"

"Probably," Toryn replied. The little Voor that had been so fearless in the deadly jungle
was like a fish out of water beyond the borders of his homeland. Toryn did not know why
Poodik continued to travel with them, but they had been unable to persuade him to return
home. It was likely he feared that his countrymen would open his chest for helping them
to escape.

The ship swung about on the swells and headed for the Isle of Tears. Daryna had decided,
much to Toryn’s outraged disgust, to accompany them to Silver "just to make sure they
really left Thalarii". An hour’s worth of arguing had not swayed her.

They were only at sea one day, just past the Isle of Tears, when Toryn found himself on
top of the forecastle with Poodik. He felt gloomy, largely because the sky was overcast
and grey. Poodik chattered, as usual, and made gestures with one hand. His other held the
railing in a death-grip.
Toryn heard his name and looked around for Garyn. The Bodorii man stood with Daryna and Kor by the railing on deck, paying Toryn no mind. None of them looked at him. He shrugged and decided he had imagined it.

//Toryn?// It came again, louder. He scowled and swiveled his head once more before he realized the voice was in his mind.

//Who is this?// he sent in surprise.

//Toryn! I thought I would never reach you!//

//BRYDON?// Toryn launched himself to his feet and shrieked the name both aloud and mentally.

//Yes, I—//

"You’re alive?" Toryn yelled as he threw himself off the forecastle, almost breaking his neck in the process. He flung himself at the railing. //YOU’RE ALIVE!//

Brydon laughed, a warm sound that filled Toryn’s mind and senses. His throat tightened with emotion.

//Yes. Reed tried—and nearly succeeded—in killing me, but not quite,// Brydon returned. //Where are you?//

//I was in Thalarii, but now I’m on a ship. Garyn and Poodik are with me because Garyn finally tired of Sellaris and Poodik helped us to escape and I cannot believe you’re alive!//

Brydon laughed again. //I see we have much to talk about when you get here.//

//Where are you? Are injured?//

//I am better now. Healing. I’m still in Tyvestyn, but we'll be leaving for Ven-Kerrick soon. Reed has Shevyn and I have to get her back. Thank Adona I reached you. Davin went looking for you. I’ll try to contact him next.//

Toryn could not believe his words. //You are still in Tyvestyn? How can that be? You could never send so far!//

//Things have changed. It isn’t easy, though. You are on the water?//

//Yes. Heading for Silver.//

//I will try to contact you again later. Thank Adona you are safe.// Toryn barely caught the last—it was weak.

//And you,// Toryn sent with feeling and then the Falaran’s presence was gone.

Toryn slowly became aware that Garyn and the others stood near him, looking worried. He smiled at them dazedly, almost giddy with joy. He hugged Garyn gleefully and began to laugh, softly at first, and then stronger, until his sides ached unmercifully. He clung to Garyn, laughing and hiccupping while they all stared at him as though he had gone completely insane.
At last, spent of emotion, he sent one last prayer of thanks up to Adona and then staggered down to get some sleep. It was not until he woke at midnight that he realized he had forgotten to ask Brydon about Alyn.

CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

RETURN

Brydon staggered with the aftereffects of sending his mind so far to reach Toryn. He tried to stand and failed, sinking back into the chair. He vaguely wondered how Nykar had gotten the furnishings to the cave—more seemed to appear each day. He shrugged off the wayward thought, gripped by nausea. Rakyn watched him thoughtfully as he fought the effects.

"I did it, Rakyn!" he said when the need to vomit subsided. "Toryn is fine and on his way back here. Where is Thalarrii, anyway?"

"South, somewhere." Rakyn shrugged. "How are you?"

"I could possibly take on a tame kitten right now. Against anything stronger, I believe I would lose."

"It is not easy," Rakyn acknowledged. "What are you going to do now?"

"I think I will sleep for twenty hours and then head for Ven-Kerrick. Are you going to tell me I’m not ready?"

Rakyn shook his head. "You are as ready as I can make you. Are you certain you don’t want to wait for your friend?"

Brydon shook his head. "I got him involved in this in the first place. I don’t want him in any more danger."

Rakyn nodded and glanced at Nykar. "If he is anything like Nykar, he will find danger on his own well enough." Nykar snorted and swigged from his bottle of brandy. Brydon laughed and bid them goodnight.

He slept soundly and awoke to find both Rakyn and Nykar up and waiting for him. Darkling was saddled and stood outside, packed with food and spare clothing. Jace adjusted the saddle on Archangel and Verana smiled down at him from astride Thistle’s back.

"Thank you, Nykar." Brydon knew full well who had made the preparations for him. Nykar coughed and went to throw another log on the fire. "And thank you, Rakyn. For everything. You have done more for me than I can ever repay."

The Silveran prince smiled. "You may be surprised at how well you can repay me, Brydon. I always look out for my own interests in the end."

Brydon was not sure how much of that was truth, but he let it pass. He mounted up and sat looking down at the two men.
"Do not forget about the gauntlet, Brydon. The girl is important, but the gauntlet is even more so. Reed must be stopped, but do not allow yourself to be sidetracked from the ultimate goal."

"Try to keep your butt from being sliced off," Nykar added. Brydon grinned and touched his heels to Darkling. Jace and Verana followed suit. It felt good to be traveling once more, even though it seemed odd to be doing so without Toryn at his side. By the time they stopped for the noon meal, they were near the border of Vineyard. Brydon felt better than he had in a long time. He patted Darkling’s soft neck.

"You are getting fat. Too much soft living, I suppose." Darkling snorted and Brydon smacked him companionably on the neck. "Don’t worry. Your rest period is over. Time to go back to scant grain and hiding from cold rain under scraggly trees, being baked by the sun and scoured by blowing dust. Fun, isn’t it?"

Darkling, as expected, did not reply. Jace and Verana trailed behind, lost in their own conversation. After pausing for a subdued meal, they moved on. Jace’s mood was somber, although he told several amusing stories, likely in an attempt to ease the tension. Brydon could think of little but Shevyn.

He tried to contact Davin that night, to let him know there was no need for him and Alyn to find Toryn. There was no silver chain for him to follow, as there had been with Toryn, but he felt a sense of presence that was almost a trail. He thought he had reached Davin when he was suddenly swatted away like a pesky insect. He tried again for some time and finally gave up, shaking his head in frustration.

"He must be blocking me," Brydon grumbled to Jace. "Perhaps he thinks I am Reed."

He sighed and contacted Toryn, instead. The effort was still immense.

//Where are you now?// Toryn asked. //And where is Alyn?//
//I’m in Vineyard. Alyn is—//
//What? You were supposed to wait for me! You had better not confront Reed on your own!//
//I’ve waited too long, already. Go to the Black City in Darkynhold and ask for Prince Rakyn. Tell him who you are and wait for me there. When this is over, I’ll meet you there.//
//Like Sheol you will!// Toryn raged. //You will wait right there for me so we can kill that bastard together!//
//I have to go, Toryn. This distance tires me. I’ll contact you later.// Brydon cut the connection abruptly. If he survived, he knew there would be hell to pay from Toryn later.

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//BRYDON!// Toryn screamed mentally, but there was no one to yell at. "Stupid, stubborn, bull-headed, idiotic, Falaran fool!" he snarled aloud.
"What?" Daryna stared at him.

"I’m talking about Brydon."

She drew back in surprise. "I thought he was... dead," she said.

Toryn glared at her. "He was. At least, he almost was. He’s not now, but he’s going to be as soon as I get my hands on him. If he’s not already by the time I find him."

Daryna watched him carefully. "He’s alive? How do you know?"

"Go ask Garyn." Toryn waved a hand angrily before stomping off. "Can’t this ship move any faster?" That comment, of course, provoked an argument with Kor. Toryn was more than happy to quarrel.

*****

Crossing Vineyard in order to return to Ven-Kerrick was a necessary evil, and Jace felt it would be faster to simply go through the city of Shimmer rather than take the time and effort to skirt it. It had taken them five days of hard travel after leaving the cavern just to reach the city. Brydon frowned, remembering his last encounter with Prince Amerryn. He doubted passing through would be as easy as Jace expected.

As luck would have it, Brydon's party was quickly surrounded and he was dragged to the palace once more to visit Amerryn. He waved off Jace's offer of assistance and reassured his friends that he would return, while hoping he spoke the truth. The prince lounged indolently on his throne, conversing with a lovely woman and surrounded by ten red-and-white clad guards. Amerryn waved the guards away as Brydon was brought forth and announced.

"Ah, Prince Brydon," Amerryn said happily, leaping to his feet. "How nice to see you again. Did you recover your silly object?" Amerryn was dressed in sparkling white, which set off his auburn hair to perfection. Even his royal cloak was white, clasped with a large ruby brooch.

"No. It escaped me, but I have not given up."

"Why have you returned?"

"I’m on a different quest. I have to save someone."

"Does it involve my brothers?"

"No." Rakyn’s involvement was minimal, at the moment. "What happened with Berikon?"

Amerryn became even more animated. "It was a royal battle! Fool Berikon did not even suspect! My men ambushed his whole squadron!" Amerryn chortled and then sobered. "It did not last very long, though. He turned tail and ran all the way back to his wretched city. Then he had the gall to write to Father and complain about my actions. My actions! Luckily, I managed to intercept the messenger and persuade him to leave the country and forget all about Berikon."
"If I may ask, why was I brought here?" Brydon interrupted.
Amerryn looked up from his musing. "I wanted news, of course. It would be prudent of me to know the whereabouts of that particular item you seek. How did it ‘elude’ you?"
"I was nearly killed by Reed, the 'regent' in Ven-Kerrick."
"Well, that makes sense. If he sent it away, he certainly wouldn’t want you getting your hands on it, now would he?"
"No."
Amerryn looked at him thoughtfully. "Apparently I need to keep my eye on this Reed fellow. I know my father supports his regency, as do many of my brothers. He has approved many trade contracts that the Kerricks would not."
"We believe Reed will incite civil war in Silver."
"There is already civil war in Silver."
"On a larger scale."
Amerryn nodded. "That should not be difficult. There is already too much bad blood between my brothers. I will watch for manipulation, but none of them will listen to me, should I choose to warn them. I am the youngest and have the least influence of all of us. But enough gloomy talk. I insist that you dine with me. It is rare that I have guests that are not plotting to stab a sword into me. Your companions are welcome, of course. I will have them fetched."
Brydon was about to refuse, but Amerryn looked so despondent that he reluctantly accepted the invitation. He reflected that it might very well be their last meal.
"We must be on our way immediately after dinner."
"Of course!" Amerryn chirped.

*****

Toryn climbed out of the sea with his hands on Bloodsong’s reins. The horse snorted water out of his nostrils and tossed his head. Toryn turned to watch Daryna tug her dun horse out of the waves. Garyn and his steed still swam from the ship.
"I still don’t see why you insist upon coming along," Toryn snapped to Daryna as he took one of his boots from Bloodsong’s saddle and pulled it on.
"We’ve been over this," she said calmly. Toryn tried not to notice how her clothing clung to her body and revealed every curve. She had worn leather every day since he had met her, until now. He wondered if she had planned her wardrobe just for the effect and decided it was probable. Most of the time she reminded him of a hungry beast of prey ready to pounce. When she had chosen the pale blouse and knee-length brown skirt, she had likely known exactly what she would look like, coming out of the water in the sodden cloth.
"What if I beg you not to come?"

She shrugged. "Then I will be twice as determined to be a thorn in your side," she said in a grim voice. "I have never been out of Thalarii and this may be my only chance."

"Fine. If we’re attacked by howling demons, do not expect me to save you."

"Toryn!" Garyn burst out, shocked. He had exited the surf in time to catch the last remark. "Ignore him, Daryna. He did not mean it."

"I can take care of myself!" she said.

Garyn’s jaw dropped at the sight of her. The wet material left nothing to the imagination. Toryn glanced at Garyn and laughed aloud. If he wanted the little viper, he was absolutely welcome to her.

A small boat fought the waves and skidded onto the beach. Kor’s face was taut with annoyance. Poodik had absolutely refused to get into the water, forcing Kor to unload the dinghy and row him to shore.

"How are you, Poodik?" Toryn asked as he approached the boat. The question brought a storm of words from the Voor and he gestured with his spear at the ship, the water, Toryn, and everything else in sight. Apparently he was not pleased. "I see."

He turned and looked back at Daryna and Garyn, who had both mounted their horses. "Let’s move inland and make camp. It’s too cold here on the beach." The wind from the water was quite chilly on wet skin.

After bidding farewell to Kor and expressing his gratitude, Toryn joined the others and they rode until they reached a small, grassy basin that provided some shelter from the wind. Toryn left Bloodsong saddled and built a small fire. At Daryna’s curious gaze, he said, "Bloodsong needs to run a bit. I'll take him for a ride before I unsaddle him."

She shrugged and brushed her horse while Garyn unsaddled his. Poodik gathered firewood from nearby dead bushes. Toryn waited until the fire was steady before he returned to Bloodsong and mounted. Garyn looked at him curiously.

"Are you going to hunt?"

Toryn shook his head and fought a wave of guilt. "Garyn, I need you to take Daryna and Poodik to the Black City in Darkynhold. Ask for the prince there—I have forgotten his name—and tell him you are friends of Brydon Redwing. Wait for me there."

"What? Wait a minute—!"

"Where are you going?" Daryna demanded.

"I hate to leave you like this, but my responsibility is to Brydon. He is going to get himself killed and I need to stop him. Remember, go to the Black City." Before Daryna could jump forward and grab his reins, he wheeled Bloodsong and raced out of the basin. He saw Garyn snatch his saddle and run for his horse, but Toryn gave Bloodsong his head. The chestnut stallion had been confined aboard ship for too long and he was eager to run. He stretched his head into the wind and thundered along as if possessed. Toryn put his face near the whipping mane and let the horse run, glorying in the awesome feeling of it.
Bloodsong finally slowed. Lather dripped from the bridle and coated his dark neck where the reins had rubbed. Toryn brought him to a prancing walk and looked back into the darkness. Even if Garyn and the others were able to follow his trail, they would never catch him.

It wasn’t long before Bloodsong was ready to run again, much to Toryn’s amazement. He let him go and continued alternately walking and galloping the horse until dawn’s faint light touched the horizon. He dismounted then and slept, exhausted, while Bloodsong stood over him and waited for him to awaken.

Toryn had no idea that he had crossed half of Silver that night.

**CHAPTER THIRTY SIX**

**APPROACH**

Brydon gazed at the dark bulk of Ven-Kerrick for a long time, trying to memorize the layout. Rakyn’s maps were more familiar than his memory of their rush through the palace during their escape. It was difficult to reconcile the stone walls and towers with the schematics in his mind. His current vantage on a small hillock gave him only sketchy details—they were still too far from the castle to make out any occupants. They had encamped for the night far enough to remain undetected by any patrols sent out, not that anyone would be expecting them.

He turned Darkling and rode back to the others, who waited near their small fire. Brydon had awakened early and ridden Darkling out to judge the distance they had left to travel that morning. It had taken him, Jace and Verana three days of fast riding to reach this point after leaving Prince Amerryn. He figured they had another few hours before they arrived at the castle proper.

"We'll have to enter through the caverns," he said to Jace as he dismounted. "I only hope we can find our way through without Shevyn’s guidance."

Jace smiled and handed him a cup of tea. "That won’t be a problem. On our last journey through the maze, I marked the passages." Brydon stared at him in amazement and Jace shrugged. "You never know when you will need to get into—or out of—a place in a hurry. I used a bit of white rock and left scratches that only I can decipher."

Verana’s bell-like laugh tinkled forth. "Jace, you are a rogue."

They waited until dusk before they approached the rock face with the concealed door. Brydon pulled Darkling to a halt at the sight of a rider coming toward them. He shaded his eyes as best he could. It was a lone figure—a single man from the look of it—so he readied his bow and an arrow. Jace cried out and Brydon nearly dropped the bow in surprise as the liver-colored horse slid to a stop some distance away.

"Brydon!" the rider yelled.

"Toryn?" Brydon called incredulously. Toryn slapped heels to his horse and galloped closer. When he neared, he reached out a hand and Brydon grasped his forearm with a giddy laugh. The two stallions danced around each other, but Brydon could think of
nothing but Toryn and his sardonic grin. He looked the same as ever, except for his strange attire.

"I never thought I would see the day I’d be glad to see a dirty Falaran alive," Toryn said laughed.

Brydon did likewise; grinning so widely he felt his jaw would split. "Leave it to a hardheaded Redolian idiot not to listen to sound advice. I told you to stay put. But... I’m glad to see you. How did you get here? Fly?"

Toryn patted the neck of his horse. "Bloodsong ran most of the way. He’s fast and he does not tire easily. The ship docked in Larec four days ago. How far do you suppose that is? Two hundred miles? A bit less?"

Jace stared at him for a moment and looked at the chestnut stallion that bared his teeth at Darkling. "Try four hundred and fifty," he corrected. "That journey takes days of hard riding."

Toryn gaped at him. "That’s not possible—"

"I’ve been there," Jace insisted.

Brydon nodded. "Rakyn had maps. The distance is at least that."

Toryn seemed to struggled with their words for a moment, but then he shrugged it off. "The maps must be wrong, unless we docked in a different location. Bloodsong is fast, but not that fast."

Brydon looked at the stallion, but decided not to chance touching the horse’s mind this near to Reed. The stallion tossed his head and danced like a normal steed, snorting and posing for Darkling in a pseudo-aggressive stance. It was a beautiful animal, nearly the color of blood, with no white markings to be seen.

Toryn greeted Verana and Jace happily, but did not take time to detail his adventures. "I brought you a gift," he said and with a grin handed Brydon a familiar-looking wooden case.

Brydon unlatched it and stared at the contents in amazement for a moment.

Jace peered over Brydon’s shoulder. "The gauntlet!" he breathed. "Toryn, you are magnificent!"

"I know. But it wasn’t my doing. Thank a Voor with no liking for Shaitan. He saved my life and helped us take the gauntlet."

Brydon stared at the gem-encrusted item and slowly closed the lid. To have the gauntlet in hand after such an arduous struggle... it was almost overwhelming. He could turn and leave right now. He could return home—forget the machinations and problems of the south. He could go back to Falara and claim the throne, let Ven-Kerrick and the Concurrence fall. He winced at the thought of leaving Shevyn in the hands of Reed. How worthy would he be for the throne then? He handed the gauntlet casket to Jace.

"We’d better get moving," he said to Toryn. "I don’t suppose you want to stay here and guard the door?"
Toryn raised a brow without bothering to answer. Brydon nodded, knowing the question had been redundant, and led Darkling over to the rock face. He pressed the stones that opened into the cavern. They filed inside and Brydon closed the door behind them. As he did so, Toryn removed a torch from the wall and lit it. The darkness closed around them and Toryn held the flickering torch high.

"I hope you remember which passage to take? Because I don’t," Toryn offered as he examined several corridors that led from the large chamber.

Jace studied the walls of each opening all and then gestured toward one of the central passages. "This one."

"Are you sure?" Toryn asked.

"Have I ever been wrong?"

Toryn crinkled his brow, but apparently could not recall Jace ever being wrong. They unsaddled the horses and fed them some grain. Brydon gave the horses a barely perceptible mental nudge to keep them from fighting during their absence. He fervently hoped they lived to return, or the horses would be trapped in the cavern until they starved. He argued briefly with Jace at the wisdom of setting them free outside, but decided against it.

They would just have to prevail.

The journey through the twisting caverns did not seem to take as long as it had the first time they had traversed the maze, but at the time fear of Reed’s pursuit had given length to every shadow.

Jace led them to the stables and only gave Toryn one smug grin. Brydon cracked the door and peered inside; the place bustled with activity. Stable boys and servants entered and exited, arms laden with harnesses, yokes, and blankets. Oxen bayed from the stalls. Men shouted at each other and the noises blended with an even louder cacophony beyond the doors.

"We seem to be just in time," Jace commented after joining him at the door to take in the scene beyond.

"For what?"

"I have no idea, but from the look of it, everyone in the kingdom is in attendance."

A sense of foreboding gripped Brydon at the words. "Can we get through?" he asked and closed the door, shutting out the sounds of activity.

"I don’t think so. We are not exactly inconspicuous."

"Should we go back and try a different passage?" Verana asked.

Brydon looked at Jace, who nodded. "We will try a few. If they lead us nowhere, we will come back here and take our chances."

Toryn sighed, obviously less than pleased with the idea of more trekking through caverns, but he said nothing. Brydon frowned and wondered if Toryn had changed during their separation; Brydon had expected grousing and complaints, but Toryn had remained silent for the duration.
Jace led as they backtracked. They bypassed a corridor that veered to the right and took the first left-hand branching. The new passage made several hairpin turns and eventually dead-ended in a small cavern. They searched diligently for possible concealed doorways to no avail. Discouraged, they trooped back to the main passage—marked by Jace with a white chalky stone—and went on. The next leftward passageway terminated in a flight of stairs that curved up into the darkness.

"Excellent," Jace breathed. He put a foot on the lower step, but Brydon’s hand stayed him.

"If this leads to the castle," Toryn asked, "why would Shevyn take us through the stables before?"

Brydon grinned. "If it were your castle, would you tell near-strangers of a secret way to get inside? She took enough of a chance showing us the passage that led to the stables. Also, Shevyn may not know all the secret ways." Brydon paused. "We need a plan. Toryn and I will try to locate Shevyn and bring her back here—wherever ‘here’ is. Jace, you and Verana find Kerryn. He may have plans of his own for disrupting this wedding. Whatever else happens, Reed must not be allowed to remain in Ven-Kerrick. Either we kill him or we capture him and turn him over to Rakyn. He has exercised his will upon these people long enough. And Adona help him if he has harmed Shevyn."

"Shaitan will be his downfall," Verana said solemnly.

"Men are like grass and their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the glory of Adona stands forever," Jace quoted.

"So be it," Brydon and Verana said in unison.

"And blessed be the princes who are wise in the ways of the world," Jace added.

Brydon looked at him curiously. Jace chuckled and rooted in his pack, then pulled out a length of black material.

"Uniforms of Ven-Kerrick," Jace explained. "Provided by Rakyn, of course, the sneaky little—"

"Jace," Verana warned and Jace laughed.

"Prince," he finished. Jace had only two of the uniforms, which consisted of simple black tunics and matching cloaks, embroidered with the silver gauntlet crest of Ven-Kerrick. He gave one to Brydon and one to Toryn, insisting that his own black uniform would pass cursory scrutiny. They did not argue and donned the outfits before ascending the steps.

The stairs ended in a door that swung open with a low grating—a sound that was dissipated by the din of running water. Brydon looked around in amazement as they stepped out of the darkness. They seemed to be in one of the two towers of Ven-Kerrick. The doorway was concealed by the stones of a large staircase which curved up and away.

The sound of water came from a large circular fountain—the only object in the room. Water poured from a haphazard rock sculpture in a continuous loud cascade. It was strange-looking and seemed to be oddly placed, tucked away a lonely corner of the castle.
They shut the concealed door and Brydon had a burst of intuition. "The fountain is here to cover the noise of the door."

Toryn was already at one of the two arched doorways that led from the room. The others joined him. The left-hand passage revealed a long corridor that seemed to continue endlessly, lit by oil lamps in cressets every dozen or so feet. The right-hand corridor was better lit—a large doorway led outdoors; it was open and daylight brightened the corridor. Directly opposite the outer door, another open portal led into the castle. From there came the muted sounds of weapons clashing and men shouting.

Brydon started forward, but Jace pulled him back. "I know where we are," Jace explained quietly. "We are near the barracks. That door leads to the interior practice yard—where the Gauntlet Knights usually spar."

As if to confirm Jace’s words, faint sounds of clapping emanated from the area beyond. Brydon nodded.

"If we explain the situation to the Gauntlet Knights," Verana said excitedly, "they will help us!"

Jace shook his head. "There are no knight-priests here. Reed persuaded the king to send them away long ago. How else could he have managed to murder the royal family with none the wiser? Most likely those are Reed’s men out there."

Before they could decide on a course of action, a burst of giggling startled them. They all turned as the sound became louder and two girls descended the stairs of the fountain tower, breathlessly reaching the bottom with a rustle of taffeta. They were brightly gowned, bedecked in laces and bows, and their young faces were alight with mischief.

They halted when they spied the four interlopers and one clutched the other’s arm fearfully.

"Oh!" she burst out and her round face blushed prettily under a wild mass of blond curls. "We are lost."

The second one giggled and clutched her friend more tightly. She was less fluffy than the first, but her hair was just as curly and just as blond.

Jace stepped forward and smiled at them. "Are you certain you two are not prowling the castle, looking for mischief?"

The thin one burst into laughter and buried her face in her companion’s shoulder.

"Hush, Katryna," the plump one hissed, controlling a giggle. Then she looked saucily at Jace. "No, kind sir. We were merely seeking a way back to the Great Hall. Perhaps these handsome young men would be so good as to escort us?"

The one called Katryna gasped and stared at her friend as if shocked at her boldness. The first tittered, unabashed. She looked at Jace once more. "You are a knight-priest, are you not? Are you with the Gauntlet Knights encamped in the outer ward?"

Jace did not respond to the odd question, so Brydon asked dumbly, "The Gauntlet Knights are here?"
The plump girl looked askance at him. "Unless there is another company of knight-priests who dress in black with a fisted gauntlet blazoned on their cloaks," she replied. "My father was displeased that the Gauntlet Knights are not in charge of the ceremony. It is rumored that Prince Reed is planning to disband them when he is king." She turned large blue eyes on Jace. "Is it true?"

"I do not know, child," Jace responded quietly. "I am a Shield Knight, from Terris."

"Oh." A look of momentary disappointment crossed her features, and then she brightened. "Well, it has been pleasant conversing with you." She nodded to Jace. "Our fathers will be furious with us if these kind gentlemen do not escort us back to the Great Hall forthwith."

"Seela," the thin girl gasped, but the other shook her off and sauntered forward with a shimmer of green satin and attached herself to Toryn’s arm.

"You are going back to the Great Hall to watch the wedding, are you not?" Seela asked Toryn sweetly.

The blood drained from Brydon’s face. "Wedding?" he choked out, unable to stop himself.

The girls looked at him oddly. "The wedding of Queen Shevyn to Prince Reed, of course. How can you not know?"

"He just returned from Penkangum last night," Toryn interjected smoothly. "We did not have a chance to tell him the news."

Katryna, apparently overcoming her shyness during her moment of solitude, rushed forward and clutched at Brydon’s arm.

"Is it not romantic?" she gushed, fluttering golden lashes.

"We would be well pleased to escort such fair ladies," Brydon said into the tense silence, shaking off his daze. He detached himself from the coyly smiling Katryna and handed her off to Toryn.

"I shall be but a moment, milady, while I converse with the good knight," he explained. She nodded and latched onto Toryn’s free arm. The two girls giggled and murmured into Toryn’s ears, an activity he did not seem to mind in the least, judging by his amused smile. Brydon, Jace, and Verana moved away from the others so their conversation would not be overheard.

"Wedding!" Brydon spat. "It seems we arrived just in time."

"He will marry nothing but Shevyn’s lifeless body, if I know her at all," Jace commented dryly.

"We have to find her quickly."

"I will try to get word to the Gauntlet Knights," Verana murmured. "None of you would be allowed through the gates without question, so I will go. Surely, they will let out one lone healer to tend to a sick person in the village. With the crowd, will likely avoid close attention."
Jace nodded. "I will look for Kerryn. I should draw little notice in a castle full of wedding guests, after a minor adjustment." Jace unbuckled his cloak and draped it over his left shoulder before fastening it again with the clasp-chain upon his right shoulder. Thus worn, it left his right arm and hand completely unencumbered, and also covered the shield insignia upon his breastplate.

He grinned. "Now I am but a simple man-at-arms."

"Very simple," Verana agreed with a bright flash of a smile. Jace gave her a quelling look and grasped Brydon’s forearm.

"Go with Adona," Brydon said fervently. Verana laid both her hands upon their clasped arms in silent blessing. Brydon left them and crossed the room to join Toryn and the girls. Jace and Verana departed through the left-hand passage.

Brydon pasted a smile on his face. "They will find their way to the chapel," he said brightly as one of the blond girls left Toryn to fasten her grip upon Brydon’s left arm. "Is your party located in the lower level, or the upper gallery?"

"I think we are to be seated in the lower level, but our fathers were discussing the dullest things in one of the upper antechambers. Katryna and I were terribly bored and slipped away to watch the soldiers pretend to fight. They are giving an exhibition before the ceremony."

"Then your fathers are most likely where you left them. We shall go back the way you came," Brydon decided. He turned and drew his companion past the fountain and they ascended the stone steps.

On the castle’s second level, they made their way past a small gathering of onlookers, most of who leaned on the long stone railing and looked down into the practice arena below. Wagers were called out, betting on this or that combatant. Brydon hoped for the practice sessions to result in many a fatal accident for Reed’s men, the fewer soldiers he would have to deal with later.

The crowd thickened as they approached the antechamber at the eastern end of the viewing deck. Noblemen and women of all types milled about, renewing acquaintances and exchanging gossip. Brydon and Toryn returned the girls to their fathers with a minimum of fuss—the elders admonished the girls for traipsing off alone, thanked Brydon and Toryn, and sent them away with pointed glances that warned them never to approach their noble daughters again.

Brydon barely acknowledged the false gratitude before he turned and entered the long corridor with Toryn hurrying after him. They passed the dining hall and wove through the milling crowd. Before the large doors that opened into the upper portion of the Great Hall, a large flight of stairs climbed to the next level. Brydon was glad to note that the steps were not guarded, though plenty of Reed’s guardsmen were visible—alert sentinels scattered throughout the crowd. Brydon took care to keep his face turned from them, in case any of Reed’s men might recognize them from their previous ignominious visit to Ven-Kerrick.

Brydon dragged Toryn into a small party of nobles as they ascended the stairs. The leader of the group regaled his flock with an elaborate tale of how the marble staircase had been
built and how a Kerrick had arranged to have the marble blocks purchased from the 'heathen Parmittans', though that had been before the Great War, of course.

Halfway up the stairs, Brydon saw Kerryn standing in the crowd below, talking to a tall, hawk-faced man. Kerryn looked despondent and nervous and Brydon longed to signal to him, but there was no time. He would have to trust Jace to find him on his own. When they reached the landing for the third level, and the nobles turned right and made their way to the Grand Balcony, from which vantage one could see below all the way to the first floor entry hall. To the immediate left, a wall paralleled the balcony railing and led to large double-doors, before which stood two competent-looking guardsmen in Reed’s bastardized Ven-Kerrick livery. Brydon spared them the merest glance before he marched down the left-hand corridor.

"Those are Shevyn’s rooms," Brydon explained to Toryn in a murmur, remembering his endless poring over Rakyn’s maps and floor plans. The presence of the guards confirmed it.

"The sentries don’t look to be a problem," Toryn suggested.

"Except that Shevyn’s doors are in full view of the Grand Balcony. I do not think the crowd will stand idly by while we deal with the guards and abduct the queen."

They stopped before the next set of doors and Brydon made certain no attention was directed their way before he opened one and took Toryn inside. They entered a sumptuously decorated sitting room. Brydon spared it barely a glance before crossing the room and entering another portal. A second chamber was also quickly crossed. The third chamber contained a large bed, an oak armoire, and the usual bedchamber furnishings.

Brydon walked directly to the left-hand wall and pulled aside the tapestry. Toryn hurried over to hold it up for him so that some light from the window embrasure fell upon the wall. Brydon probed the stone for a moment with splayed hands until he located a hairline fracture. He pushed hard and a portion of the wall pivoted silently, opening a way into the next room. He grinned at Toryn’s surprised look.

"Rakyn," Brydon explained. "Someday I plan to find out just how he knows so much about this place."

He stepped through cautiously, with one hand on his sword-hilt, and Toryn followed. They found themselves in an empty bedchamber, elegantly furnished in pale oak and decorated with tapestries of burgundy, rose and peach, woven in delicate patterns of Bodorii design. A large unfinished needlework was mounted on a stand near a comfortable chair. It caught Brydon’s attention.

He paused and reached out to touch the stitching. Red roses bloomed around a white horse. The front portion of the horse was nearly finished—the man astride his back was nothing but a shadowy sketch of charcoal. It reminded him of a young girl's dream, never to be finished. The girl who had been Shevyn was gone now, her childhood taken abruptly by the murder of her family and her experiences thereafter. Brydon’s resolve to put an end to Reed’s evil strengthened. He could not give Shevyn back her innocence, but perhaps he could return her birthright and give her back some semblance of a normal life.
He looked to the large door against which Toryn’s ear was pressed. Toryn beckoned and Brydon joined him. He had hoped to find Sheyvn in her quarters preparing for the imminent nuptials. The sound of women's voices led him to believe the assumption had been correct. He murmured brief instructions to Toryn, who nodded and stepped aside. Brydon opened the door and strode through, leaving it partially open behind him. Six pairs of eyes swiveled to him, surprised. The seventh pair stared straight into the mirror set before her. The shocked ladies-in-waiting recovered quickly.

"How did you get into that room?" the eldest demanded—a large woman with a starched dress and greying hair.

"I have been there the entire time, of course, by order of Prince Reed," Brydon said haughtily, though the name grated upon his ears. "The time grows near. Is she ready?"

With the question, he turned his attention to Sheyvn, who sat in front of a dressing table. Her gaze had not changed from its blank stare into her reflection, not even flickering at the sound of his voice. What had they done to her? She looked a vision, dressed in a silk gown of spun silver adorned with sapphires. Her hair had been carefully coiffed and braided with silver beads. A silver crown sat upon her head and flowers of blue and white were tucked artfully around it. A long train of blue silk was fastened around her neck, cloak fashion. She looked a proper queen in every way, except for her dull expression.

"This is highly irregular," the matron said. "This entire wedding is a sham. Drugging the girl on her wedding day because of nerves? It is proper for a girl to be nervous. Now she can hardly function."

Drugged? Thank Adona that was it, Brydon thought. He had been afraid that Reed had penetrated Sheyvn’s mental wall and destroyed her sanity.

A younger woman spoke up, her voice rough. A glance in her direction showed tears staining her cheeks. "She does not love Prince Reed," she murmured. "She cannot say the words, but I can tell. She should not marry him."

One of the other women hissed at her. "Hush! Queens do not marry for love. Her Highness knows her duty. She thinks that Prince Reed can hold the Concurrence together and restore order."

The mention of Reed’s name caused Brydon to remember himself. "Complaints can be addressed to Prince Reed," he said and managed to keep nearly all the sarcasm from his voice. "Leave now." He pointed at the weeping girl. "All but you. You may help me to escort her."

The other women glared and grumbled, but obediently trooped out the double doors. Brydon waited with one hand on his sword-hilt in case the guards outside chose to investigate the mass exodus. The doors slammed and Brydon knelt quickly beside Sheyvn. He took one of her small, cold hands in his.

"Sheyvn," he said urgently. He touched her cheek until her head turned and he could look fully into her eyes. "It’s Brydon. I have come to take you out of here."

At his words, the girl put a hand to her mouth too late to stifle a gasp. She took a tentative step back, but Brydon’s hand flashed out and snatched her wrist.
"Do not," he warned. "You seem to care for Shevyn. Would you see her married to that devil Reed, or will you help me to get her to safety?"

"Who are you?" she asked.

"I am Brydon Redwing, Knight-Priest of the Lance. I am here to see Reed removed and Shevyn restored to her rightful place as queen."

"A knight-priest!" the girl breathed. "Prince Reed has forbidden them to enter these walls. He claims they stole the gauntlet."

Brydon gaped at her, though he should not have been surprised. "That bastard is no more a prince than I am. He, himself, stole the gauntlet right after he murdered the royal family."

"Murdered?" the girl burst out, a trifle too loudly. Brydon shushed her with a quick glance toward the door. She said more softly, "But they were killed by an illness!"

"Rather a strange illness that killed only the king, queen, and royal princes, was it not?"

"And two members of the council," she added dully, tears filling her eyes once more. "Oh, it cannot be true."

"Look at Shevyn," Brydon told her gently. "Does she look like a beaming bride? Or even one resigned to marry out of duty? No, she was drugged because she would never willingly marry Reed. She would rather see him dead than have him gain legitimate control of Ven-Kerrick."

Shevyn’s stare was far away, but she seemed to focus for a brief instant. Her hand slowly rose to touch Brydon’s cheek as softly as a feather. She smiled sadly, as if he were but a dream induced by the potion she had been forced to ingest. Then her hand fell away and her gaze returned to contemplation of a point just off Brydon’s left shoulder. He caught her hand as it fell and pressed an urgent kiss into her palm. The girl stared at him.

"You love her."

The softly spoken words jolted Brydon, but he shook off their import.

"We must hurry," he said, pulling Shevyn gently to her feet. "No doubt Reed will send someone to fetch her soon."

They took her through the secret door and into the next room. It was not until then that Brydon discovered Torny’s absence.

"Damn him!" he swore through the icy feeling clenched about his heart. The girl looked at him in alarm. "My friend," Brydon explained, "has gone after Reed."

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Verana crossed the courtyard with her dark cloak pulled close about her. Ebons were not plentiful even in the south. She approached the postern gate where a pompous-looking black-clad guard halted her. He blocked her way with an elaborately carved staff.
"Where go ye and why?"

She looked at him fully and he gasped before snapping to attention.

"I am Verana, tutor and maid to Lady Chalmyn of Kaaza. I am going to the village for her to see what books I might find for sale."

The man cleared his throat. "'Twould be a better selection in the king’s library."

"Milady prefers to purchase rather than borrow. Besides, it is chaotic in there." She gestured at the castle. "I welcome the chance to escape, if only for a short while."

"Very well," he said. "I'll inform me relief to allow ye back inside if ye don't return by the end of me shift."

Verana beamed at him, fully aware of the power of her white smile. "Thank you, kind sir. May your watch be short and uneventful."

She entered the long corridor that was a small passageway between the great walls and exited in the outer bailey.

The outer ward bustled with activity. News of the wedding had traveled far, even in so short a time, and peddlers of every type had dragged their goods to Ven-Kerrick to take advantage of the crowds. Brightly colored tents had been amassed haphazardly and the sounds of music and laughter grew louder as Verana approached. The crowd consisted mostly of peasants—the nobility had likely entered the castle as the time of the ceremony drew near.

The peasant folk were having a riotous time—eating, drinking, watching jugglers, acrobats, and dancers while peddlers tried to entice them into parting with their precious coppers. Verana ignored their blandishments as she made her way through the throng, at last discovering a mass of grey tents erected in orderly fashion near one of the walls. Milling about the tents were soldiers doing what encamped soldiers did—they napped, sharpened weapons, chatted, or paced.

Verana’s steady approach drew the attention of one of the pacers—a young, dark-haired man with hawklike features. He strode out to meet her, brows lifting slightly in surprise when she came into full view.

"Milady," he greeted her with a curt nod.

"Are you in command, here?" she asked, evidently not the sort of question he expected.

"Yes. I am Knight-Commander Montyr."

"Knight-Commander?" she asked dubiously. "Where is your Marshall, or Seneschal?"

Montyr’s face twisted. "Our Seneschal was killed in Bodor and our Marshall barely escaped with his life." He jerked his head in the direction of one of the larger tents. "He is in there, sorely wounded."

"Has he been tended?"

Montyr’s manner softened somewhat at her worried tone. "Our field surgeon has seen to him."
“May I take a look?” she inquired and shifted her dark cloak enough to reveal the rose insignia on her inner robes. Montyr’s eyes fell to it immediately and he nodded, seeming relieved. He turned and led the way to the tent. Inside, a grey-haired man lay upon a cot. His skin was pale and he breathed shallowly. He muttered unintelligibly and thrashed, knocking one of his blankets partially off. Another man, apparently the field surgeon, tugged the cloth back up. He was short and balding. What little remained of his hair was grey as steel. He turned sharply as Montyr and Verana entered.

“How is he, Jak?” Montyr asked.

“Unchanged,” the surgeon replied. “Still delirious.”

Verana hurried forward and examined the wounded Marshall. The field surgeon bristled instantly.

“Madam!” he snapped, “I will thank you to keep your hands off my patient. Montyr—”

Verana ignored his tirade and asked a question. “Was there kidney damage?” She scrutinized the ragged looking gash in the man’s side, seemingly caused by a sword-blows.

The surgeon’s grey eyebrows waggled in surprise. “Nay. The wound was deep, but not irreparable. The worst was the blow to his head.”

Verana touched the neat stitches that had closed the side injury. “A fine job of stitchery,” she commented with a brief smile. “I will leave you medicines for a poultice which will draw out any poison and help him to heal. May I examine his head wound?” When the field surgeon merely gaped at her, she added, “My name is Verana. Order of the Rose.”

The man’s jaw snapped shut and he sighed—whether in relief or annoyance, Verana could not tell—and nodded. He rolled the Marshall over gently until the base of his bandaged skull was visible. Blood stained the bandage darkly and Verana peeled the cloth away. She cleaned away the clotted blood with a nearby basin of water and inspected the injury. Her hands were soon red with blood.

“There are chips of bone which need to be removed—I think one of them is pressing into his brain. Fetch me operating tools immediately,” she said. The field surgeon hurried away without comment. Verana heated more water in the nearby brazier. Montyr, face pale, began to edge his way from the tent. Verana halted him.

“Knight-Commander, Queen Shevyn has been taken captive and is being forced to marry Reed, the man who murdered her family and took control of Ven-Kerrick. Jace the Wanderer, Knight-priest of the Shield, and a Falaran named Brydon Redwing are inside the castle at this moment, seeking to halt this wicked farce. Another man, Redolian, aids them, but the three of them cannot hope to stand against Reed’s forces, even should they manage to locate Prince Kerryn with whatever allies he has mustered.”

Montyr’s jaw worked wordlessly as Verana’s words penetrated. “The queen—against her will?” he finally choked out. “But Reed is Regent. We all saw the document—it was the king’s will.”

Verana knelt beside the unconscious Marshall. She curbed her impatience and continued, “Reed is in league with Shaitan. He has strange and mysterious powers. In the end, none
of the royal family could stand against him. I am sure King Koryn wrote the document, but he was not likely to have been in his right mind. When her family was murdered, Shevyn fled Ven-Kerrick alone. She was found in Penkangum by Brydon."

The words were coming too fast for Montyr. "She fled? But we were told she had gone to Bodor to visit Queen Ierona. To seek comfort."

"Who told you that?" Verana demanded and he blanched.

"Reed," he replied hoarsely.

Verana nodded. "She escaped him twice, but now he has her. You can well wager that he will kill her when he has no more need of her, and that will be the end of the Kerrick line, the end of the Concurrence, and more. How long do you suppose it will take the Parmittans to learn of the Kerricks’ fate? Who would wield the gauntlet against them?"

"He sent us away," Montyr said in dawning understanding. "He sent every knight-priest in Ven-Kerrick on a fool’s mission to Bodor. He said his own guard could easily protect the castle in our absence." Montyr smacked a fist into his palm. "There was no threat in Bodor—Queen Ierona laughed in our faces. We were ambushed on the return—bandits, it seemed." He looked at Verana. "Reed sent them?" Verana nodded, having little doubt of it.

"When we finally returned to Ven-Kerrick, we were told not to enter the castle. Reed has given us one lame excuse after another for weeks. I was suspicious, but saw no reason to doubt his word." His face paled once more. "When we left for Bodor, the Chancellor remained behind. When we returned, he was dead. An accident."

"No accident," Verana responded and tucked bunches of dried moss around the patient’s skull wound to stop the copious bleeding. "Reed will allow no knight-priests near him for long. If he succeeds in his plan, he will disband the Gauntlet Knights, you can bet on that."

"Not while I live," Montyr vowed. He looked at the prone Marshall for a moment in indecision. "Have you any proof of this matter?" he asked Verana. She sighed and tucked a stray lock of hair away from her face and felt a bloody streak mar her forehead.

"No, Knight Commander," she said softly before her eyes bored into his, "but I do not lie."

He stared at her for a moment and then nodded. "I fear we will have to storm the gates. There could be a bloody battle."

So predicting, he went out, calling loudly for his lesser officers and aides, and passed the incoming field surgeon. Verana turned to her patient, knowing there was no more she could do for Jace and the others. She sent a brief prayer to Adona for the safety of her friends and then turned to her work.

******
Jace was frustrated by his search for Kerryn. He jostled his way through the gathering crowd that filled the upper level of the Great Hall. Forcing his way to the railing, he searched the masses for any trace of Kerryn and came to the conclusion that the lad was elsewhere, hopefully assembling a rebellious force... unless he was in the dungeon.

Reed was nowhere to be seen and Jace prayed the wicked bastard was too busy preparing for the nuptials to waste mental energy searching the castle for intruders. Brydon would likely be safe from such a probe, but the rest of them would not be so lucky.

Jace pushed his way through the nobility again, ignoring their annoyed glares at his jostling, and back to the corridor.

"Now, if I were to organize a rebellion, where would I be?" he asked himself. He sighed and headed downstairs, just another of Reed’s soldiers running an errand, unnoticed by the wedding guests.

*******

Brydon opened the door a crack and peered into the corridor. To the left, there was empty hallway. To the right, a few guests loitered about on the Grand Balcony, but Brydon saw no guards.

"What room lies across the hall?" he asked the handmaiden, unable to remember from Rakyn’s maps.

"A guest chamber," she replied.

"Occupied?"

She nodded. "They all are, for the wedding. But it is likely the guests are now in the Great Hall."

Brydon sighed. "If not, I can take care of them."

The girl blanched, eyes wide. "You would not kill them?"

"Of course not," Brydon snapped. "I am a knight-priest, not one of Reed’s hired butchers."

He had extended his mental shield to cover the girl, fearing that her panic might alert Reed of their presence. The maiden drew a shaky breath and Brydon forced himself to grip her shoulder lightly and smile encouragement, though he was frustrated enough to shake her. She slipped across the hall and into the room. After a moment, she signaled to Brydon, who quickly whisked Shevyn into the chamber.

"It is empty," the girl said when they moved inside.

Brydon placed Shevyn on a cushioned settee in the antechamber furthest from the door. A quick glance inside the room would not reveal her presence.

"Stay with her," he commanded the girl. He brushed a stray curl from Shevyn’s forehead and sighed at her faraway expression. "Try to shake her out of this dazed state, but do not
give her anything but water. There is no telling what wine, or even tea, will do if mixed with whatever drug she was given." The girl nodded solemnly.

"I will return if I am able," he added and hurried out to begin his search for Toryn, though he suspected the Redolian would be rather easy to find.

*****

Brydon’s voice thundered in Toryn’s head.

//Damn it, Toryn! Do not confront him on your own! You can best him with a sword, but his mind is his weapon of choice!//

Toryn tried harder to push Brydon's voice from his mind and managed to quiet his mental chastisement to a dull roar. He did not bother to send a response, knowing Brydon would object to anything Toryn had to say on the subject.

And he did not intend to give Reed enough breathing space to use his bloody mental powers.

At the doors that led into the Great Hall, both soldiers guarding the portal saluted Toryn as he passed, though they eyed him in puzzlement. He saluted back and grinned once past them. It was nice that Brydon’s friend Rakyn had supplied them with uniforms of rank.

Most of the guests were seated and Toryn threaded his way through those that still stood about. He recalled the last time he had been in this room. It had been empty them, but now nearly all of the open space had been filled with crude benches. The thrones had been removed from the dais and taken Adona knew where. In their place stood a large marble altar draped with scarlet cloth. Two massive candlesticks flanked it, topped with spiral candles whose wicks burned brightly.

Behind the altar stood a round-faced man dressed in the robes of a Gauntlet Knight, though Toryn instinctively knew the man was a fake. It was more likely the cretin was a priest of Shaitan and carried a wicked gold dagger somewhere under his false robes.

Toryn threaded his way through the nobles, and then sat down at an empty aisle seat in the third row. A noblewoman with an atrocious amount of rouge on her pudgy white cheeks glared at him, but he ignored her while he sought Reed. A small group of noblemen stood near the officiant, but Reed was not among them. Most likely he intended to make some sort of royal entrance.

The woman next to Toryn tapped his hand sharply with her fan. She had been making snortling noises that Toryn had ignored. He turned an icy stare on her. She quailed for a moment and the red spots on her cheeks looked like blood as she, incredibly, paled even more. Then she remembered herself and sat up straighter, hitching her bulk as she did so.

"That seat is reserved for my husband," she huffed in a nasal, affected tone. Toryn studied her for a long moment while he bit back a dozen comments that would likely cause her to swoon in appalled shock. He imagined the thunderous roar that would result
from her hitting the floor and held his tongue, not wishing to attract the attention of every person in the room.

"I shall be here but a moment," he said carefully, trying to mimic Brydon’s courtliest speech. The brief thought of Brydon caused his mental shouting to begin anew and Toryn winced against the strength of it. He was developing a vicious headache.

The woman huffed haughtily and shifted her weight again, nearly knocking him off the bench. He glared at her, but she pretended not to notice him.

The blare of trumpets almost made him jump out of his skin and he turned with the rest of the crowd to view Reed—who paused in the doorway looking as though he had already been crowned king. The bastard was dressed all in white with silver trim and a silver coronet adorned his dark hair. The red crystal pendant dangled blatantly from a gold chain around his neck. There was a scramble for seats as Reed began his stately walk down the aisle, heading for the dais. His ermine cloak swirled dramatically and the heels of his polished white boots struck an imposing rhythm on the stone floor as he progressed up the central aisle. His wide smile gladdened the throng as his dark eyes drifted over them. Toryn kept his head partially bowed and watched Reed’s approach from the corner of his eye. The evil usurper drew closer, drew abreast of Toryn—and sprawled in an ungainly heap when Toryn’s black-booted foot shot out to trip him.

CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN

CLASH

There was an instant of stunned silence throughout the chamber and Toryn used the moment of surprise to his advantage. He leaped upon Reed, who was hampered in his effort to rise by the heavy ermine cloak. Toryn locked his left arm around Reed’s neck and dragged him forward into the open space before the dais; at the same time he drew his dagger with his right hand and pressed it against Reed’s throat hard enough to draw a thin line of blood. A shout went up and the archers drew their bows in the gallery above.

“Loose a single arrow and he dies!” Toryn shouted. Everyone froze and the music jangled to a discordant halt.

“Very good. Now throw down your weapons. All of them. Bows, daggers, swords. You, too, priest,” he barked, spying movement behind him. A hail of weapons rained down from the gallery above, causing the nobles to shriek and scurry out of the way. Several audience members shouted angrily, unlucky enough to be hit by the falling arsenal. Nice folk, Reed’s soldiers, Toryn noted absently. The officiant scuttled away, hands concealed beneath his robes. When Toryn was satisfied that most of the weapons had been disposed of, he flung Reed away and drew his sword. He tossed the dagger aside and backed toward the dais, leading Reed into the open area before the pedestal, not trusting the wedding guests. Any number of them might be loyal to Reed and would happily join the fray.

“Now verminous dog,” Toryn snarled. “Fight me as a man, if you can.”

Reed seemed only mildly surprised. “The little Redolian pup,” he said with a slight smile. “I expected you to be fully cooked over the fires of Shaitan by now.”
“They found me not to their taste. Shall we begin?”

Reed drew his sword and saluted mockingly. Toryn sneered. They both stepped forward as one and their blades met with a force that almost snapped the blades in two. They measured each other over the next few moves, feinting and thrusting carefully and parrying each other’s attacks easily. Toryn smiled after a flashing attack scored a red gash on Reed’s right thigh. The spreading red stain showed clearly upon the white material. Reed’s eyes spat rage.

“You know, of course, that I am better than you,” Toryn said conversationally.

“I will try to remember that as I skewer your heart,” Reed snarled.

Toryn grinned. He pounced forward, his sword a blur of silver. He beat aside Reed’s defenses easily and only a panicked leap kept Toryn’s blade from impaling him mortally. Reed parried desperately, but Toryn’s sword penetrated his side and then flicked back to lay open one cheek. Reed staggered back as blood poured down his face, spattering red across his shoulder and chest. He clutched his side, rapidly stained with the same crimson. The wound was deep, but it would not kill the bastard. Panting, he circled the man, still grinning like a hunting wolf. Reed was, he had to admit, very good with a blade. But not good enough. He attacked again. Reed roared with anger, fighting for his life.

“This ends now!” Reed bellowed. He gripped the red crystal that dangled from his neck and held it tightly, then spat a curse at Toryn, who pulled his blade back for a deadly thrust. The blow never fell. Toryn howled and clutched at his head. He reeled backward and barely kept a grip on his sword. His balance was gone; he staggered two short steps before the polished tile floor rushed up to meet him.

Toryn rolled over, struggling to lift his sword and block out Reed's mental invasion. His vision was blurred and he could barely see Reed standing over him, staring malevolently with his brow furrowed in concentration. Toryn shrieked in pain and arched his back, clapping both hands to his head, sword and everything else forgotten as pain such as he had never experienced overwhelmed him.

Before he clamped his eyes shut against the agony, he saw Reed smile.

*****

Jace prowled the servants’ quarters, searching for any sign of Kerryn, or any others opposed to Reed's plan. His faith in Kerryn was not misplaced and he finally located the "rebellion", such as it was, when a small band of men swarmed from a doorway and dragged him into a dimly lit room. A dagger pressed into to his throat.

“Kill him—he’s one of Reed’s,” someone said.

“Kerryn,” Jace choked through the pressure of the knife, whose edge was thankfully dull, though a portion of it began to draw blood.

Some of his captors were thrust aside and Kerryn’s suspicious face appeared before him.
“Jace!” he cried and waved the others back sharply. The knife fell away and he sat up, coughing and gasping for air.

Kerryn knelt beside him. “How did you get here?” he asked anxiously. Jace climbed to his feet and evaluated the rag-tag band before him. There were barely twenty men crammed into the servant’s room, most of them poorly armed and unarmored. It was laughable to think that they could take on Reed’s merciless guards.

“By Adona, Kerryn,” Jace said in amazement, “You are either very brave or completely insane.”

Kerryn bristled. “There are more of us serving the wedding guests, waiting to strike. We will not let that murdering bastard marry Shevyn!”

“You are planning to kill him?” Jace asked. Kerryn nodded.

Jace rubbed a temple and queried sardonically, “How?”

Kerryn scowled. “We know Reed has demonic powers. All we can do is take out as many guards as possible while the rest of us rush him.”

Jace shook his head. “Things have changed. Brydon is here. He is going after Shevyn as we speak. Did you plan to use the Gauntlet Knights encamped in the outer bailey?”

Kerryn scowled. “I have tried to reach them for days. Every man I send does not return and there has been no message. I can only assume the knight-priests are ignorant of what is happening.”

“Have you considered it might be easier merely to open the gates and let them in?” Jace questioned.

“How do I know the Knight-Priests are not part of this? It was convenient of them to ride off to Bodor and allow Reed free rein here!”

Jace had not considered that angle, but he pondered it for only an instant before rejecting the idea. He knew some of the Gauntlet Knights well. They would die for the Kerrick line. Nothing Reed would offer them would cause them to betray their duty. Reed’s power would never be enough to subvert the entire battalion of Gauntlet Knights.

Jace smiled grimly. “We must let them in.”

“But what about Reed?” Kerryn protested.

“As long as we have Reed's soldiers to content with, we will fight a losing battle. There are too many of them. We must even the odds. Reed is not likely to panic and flee. Not when he is so close to gaining everything he has worked for.”

The blare of trumpets drowned Kerryn’s reply. His face was ashen. "The time is now—Reed is in the Great Hall.”

“Then let us go. For Ven-Kerrick, and for Shevyn,” Jace said. He quickly laid out his plan, praying that Verana had reached the Gauntlet Knights.
The Knight-Priests of the Gauntlet were mounted and in formation. Reed’s men watched uneasily from the walls as the armed soldiers rode a circuitous path along the wall of the outer bailey. A man dispatched from the gatehouse approached Knight-Commander Montyr, who watched his charges proudly. He felt calmer now that he was back in the saddle, though he knew that his mare could feel the tension all around her. She pranced and jangled the chain upon her bit.

The lackey trotted up nervously, dressed in the livery of Ven-Kerrick, which made Montyr’s blood boil. There was a time—not so long ago—when he had known every servant in and about the castle, by sight, if not by name. He had never seen this man before.

The fellow scratched at a pockmarked nose and coughed, eyeing the mare uneasily. “Sir...” he began.

“Knight-Commander,” Montyr corrected mercilessly.

“Knight-Commander,” the man stuttered and scratched his nose again. “My captain begs to know why the knight-priests are in formation.”

“He begs, does he?” Montyr asked contemplatively. “That is fine. You may trot back and inform him that we are merely conducting a little drill. The horses need exercise and the men have been getting restless.”

The man’s head bobbed as though his neck had come unhinged, and then he quickly bowed and scurried away. Montyr gave him enough time to get back inside the gates and report. Then he led the Gauntlet Knights in a thundering charge, racing for the drawbridge and the inner bailey at a dead gallop. The guards in the towers stared in disbelief at the sight of fourscore Gauntlet Knights pounding toward them. When the shock broke, there was a madcap scramble.

Cries of, “Raise the drawbridge!” mingled with, “Archers! Get some bows up here!” Several men struggled with the drawbridge mechanism while a few others snatched up bows and positioned themselves in front of the machicolations.

The drawbridge creaked upward, too slowly and too late. The leading ranks of horses leaped upon the bridge and their iron-shod hooves rang like steel upon a forge as they surged forward. Their riders caught the few hastily shot arrows upon upraised black shields.

A small band of men tried to pull the heavy gates closed. Those who were not ridden down in the charge were dispatched with a quick swing of sword or mace. No one had thought to drop the portcullis and it became clear to Montyr that Reed had left the walls pitifully undermanned. His overconfidence would be his downfall.

The black-clad knight-priests flooded into the inner bailey. A small contingent dismounted at a signal from Montyr and charged the gatehouse to deal with the men inside. Montyr jerked up his shield almost absently to catch an arrow loosed from a Bowman atop the wall. He halted the mare.
“We must get inside!” he yelled, reflecting that in all his years of training, he had never expected to invade Ven-Kerrick. “Damn it! They trained us to defend this place—not storm it!” He swore again as an arrow thunked into the thick leather pommel of his saddle. One of his men lifted a crossbow and dispatched the archer.

Montyr grinned. “My thanks, Raylyn!” he called, yanking the arrow free of his saddle. “That one nearly unmanned me!”

A few of the men laughed as they spread out to surround the castle, staying out of range of the machicolations—they knew exactly where they were. Unfortunately, the only way into the castle—other than a suicidal single-file run through the barracks entrance—was through the heavy stone doors Montyr now faced. Once Reed sealed off the barracks entry, the castle would be inaccessible and could stave off an army for months.

Montyr sighed. There was no choice. They would have to attempt entry through the barracks and hope Reed had not had time to line up twenty archers with which to massacre them all. He raised his hand to give the order—and stared in disbelief as the main doors began to slide open.

*****

Upon the stairs outside the Great Hall, Brydon slammed into the wall as pain exploded into his mind through the link he shared with Toryn. He had forsaken all attempts at secrecy and had bolted down the stairs, nearly trampling the nobles who now sought to assist him. He was blind for a moment as waves of agony washed over him. He clamped down on Toryn’s link with all of his mental strength, nearly severing the chain in his urgency to shut out the pain.

When his link to Toryn quieted to the barest whisper, he shrugged off the concerned onlookers and pounded down the remaining steps. He feared for Toryn, but he could help neither of them if he allowed Reed access to his own. As he approached the doors to the Great Hall, he saw Jace and Kerryn appear from a side corridor, trailed by a group of armed men.

//I’ll handle Reed,// Brydon sent to Jace in a controlled burst of thought. //You get those doors open for the Gauntlet Knights.//

Jace blinked for a moment; it was the first time Brydon had used mental communication on him. Then he turned to Kerryn. “Signal your men to take out as many of Reed’s guards as possible and then help me get these doors open.”

Kerryn nodded. Brydon had not broken stride as he approached the open doors of the Great Hall. Without a pang of conscience, Brydon put the doormen to sleep with brutally efficient mental shoves and stalked into the room to see Reed standing over Toryn’s writhing form.

“Leave him alone, bastard!” Brydon yelled as he walked steadily down the aisle. Reed jerked his head up and ceased his attack on Toryn, who lay still as death. Reed stared at
him in astonishment for a moment and then backed away a few steps before eyeing him warily.

“I thought I killed you,” he said.

“You thought wrong.” Brydon leveled a full-force mental blast that caught Reed completely unaware. The pretend-regent staggered back with a cry of pain and quickly raised his mental defenses. Before he could fully recover, Brydon was upon him, sword flashing down, barely deflected by Reed’s quickly raised blade. Brydon slashed again, but Reed danced back out of reach.

They circled each other, glaring. Reed panted noticeably. Had he been weakened from his battle with Toryn? Blood marred the white clothing he wore.

“The Redolian is worse than dead, you know,” Reed taunted. “I twisted his mind into ten thousand knots.”

Brydon, in mounting fury, restrained himself from looking at Toryn. Pain oozed through the tight grip Brydon maintained on their link, so he knew Toryn still lived.

“Then your death shall be doubly painful,” Brydon gritted. He leaped forward and attacked with a powerful move Rakyn had taught him. The blazing maneuver took Reed by surprise and left him with a bloodied shoulder. Brydon swore inwardly at Reed's speed; the move should have cloven his collarbone, but his reflexes were superb.

Reed watched Brydon through narrowed eyes as they circled one another again. He seemed to realize that Brydon had learned much since last they had crossed swords.

Darting forward, Reed forced Brydon back with a flashing whirl of his blade, searching for an opening. The action nicked Brydon’s right forearm and Reed smiled. Brydon glared, knowing that although the wound was small, in time the blood would seep down onto his sword hilt and make the grip slippery. He closed with Reed, forcing them into an impasse as both strained to thrust the other away. Reed’s dark eyes glared into Brydon’s and his lips twisted into a grimace. The red crystal glimmered on his breast.

Without stopping to consider his action, Brydon snatched the crystal and ripped it from the chain that held it. He shoved Reed away in the same motion, earning a painful slice on the ribs for his efforts, but the crystal was in his hands.

Reed’s smirked and the crystal began to glow. Brydon, startled, had only a moment to register the effect before a killing mental blast surged from the stone. Though stunned by the strength of it, Brydon deflected most of the impact, gritting his teeth with the effort. He knelt and dropped the crystal onto the floor, and then raised the hilt of his sword.

Reed, seeing what he was about, increased the mental force he poured into the crystal. At the same time, he rushed forward with a shout and lifted his sword for a deadly blow. Brydon’s sword smashed down on the crystal, shattering the red stone into a thousand shards. Reed howled an unholy scream and fell back, clutching his head. The waves of pain barraging Brydon ceased so suddenly he actually staggered and caught himself on the floor with one hand. He climbed to his feet and watched Reed warily; the man shrieked and slashed about wildly with his sword. Had the crystal’s destruction destroyed his sanity?
An arrow hit the floor near Brydon’s feet and gouged the marble before it skittered away. Brydon ignored the threat and a strangled cry told him one of Kerryn’s men had dealt with it. Brydon hoped Reed’s soldiers were more worried about the Gauntlet Knights than their stricken employer.

Reed looked at Brydon and his eyes gleamed feverishly. He charged forward like a madman, not even attempting to defend himself. Surprised, Brydon raised his sword, but Reed’s rush did not slow—he plunged straight onto the blade, impaling himself and wrenching the sword from Brydon’s hand in the process. Foam frothed from his mouth. He did not even seem to notice that he had been mortally wounded as he flailed at Brydon, growling incoherent sentences. He floundered and fell to the ground at Brydon’s feet; but even then his malice was strong and he crawled forward to claw at Brydon’s boots weakly. Brydon’s sword, still imbedded, scraped along the marble with an unpleasant sound. Blood oozed over the hilt and left a red trail on the floor. Brydon backed away, horrified. At last, even that small motion ceased.

Reed glared at Brydon. His eyes cleared for a moment and bloody bubbles burst upon his lips as he choked out a laugh. “The Dark Master will have you,” he said with dreadful clarity. Then his head dropped to the floor and his eyes went flat and lifeless.

For a moment, Brydon felt he had slain something inhuman. He shuddered and looked away; his gaze landed on Toryn. Before he could run to the Redolian, noblemen surrounded him, holding the weapons discarded by Reed’s men.

“You have slain the queen’s betrothed!” one cried. They all seemed uncertain what to do about the fact. Brydon looked at the steel-tipped bolts of death pointed at him and then a voice ripped through the room.

“Hold! The first man who touches him dies!”

There was a collective gasp throughout the room as everyone turned to look at Shevyn, who leaned heavily upon Kerryn’s arm. Her cousin had spoken, but she was the one holding a deadly-looking crossbow. At that instant, metal-shod hooves rang in the foyer and a dozen mounted Gauntlet Knights burst into the Great Hall. There was a massive scramble as the wedding guests strove to get out of the way.

The Knight-Commander reared his mare—a dramatic excess Brydon felt was warranted under the circumstances.

“Your Majesty!” he bellowed at Shevyn, who seemed to be using all her willpower to stand on her feet. She looked pale, but aware. “Shall we secure the castle?”

Shevyn gave him a curt nod and the knight-priests spun their horses and pranced out to hunt down Reed’s remaining soldiers. Jace walked forward to support Shevyn; he removed the crossbow from her hands.

Brydon turned away and knelt beside Toryn. He touched Toryn's throat; his pulse was weak and erratic. Brydon slowly released the tight grip he had on their link. Riotous emotion flooded over him once more—horror, fear, revulsion, nausea, rage. He fought the tide as it threatened to sweep him away and struggled to recall his lessons with Rakyn. He sensed no conscious thought from Toryn, only frantic emotion. He steeled
himself and entered Toryn’s mind, hoping to follow the link to its end point, the very essence of Toryn.

He entered a maelstrom. Normally an ordered, calm place, Toryn’s mind was a chaotic swirl, a fog of alternating darkness and color. Images with no pattern assaulted him—barely glimpsed faces, landscapes, shadows and objects. The thin silver cord was only vaguely visible, stretching into the chaos. Brydon pushed forward, using it to guide him. Abruptly, there was a disorienting shift and he felt a moment of panic. Everything went black for an instant and then the fog was gone.

Brydon looked down, surprised to find himself in corporeal form. His body seemed solid enough—was he a figment of his own mind, or of Toryn’s? He shook off the bewildered thought to take in his surroundings; he stood at the edge of a blood-soaked field. Spears with impaled bodies stretched across the plain to the horizon like a grisly crop. Before he could get his bearings and pull himself out of the vision—to go where?—there was a fog-like swirl and he stood in front of a hide-covered hut, watching helplessly as five rough-garbed soldiers dragged a dark-haired girl from the building. My sister, he thought in anguish and then gasped. No, Toryn’s sister. Brydon struggled forward, but his feet were heavy, as though attached to lead weights. The more frantic he became, the slower he moved. He watched, moving as though through cold molasses, as ropes were bound to his (Toryn's) sister’s hands and feet. The ends of the ropes were tied to the horns of four snorting, pawing cattle, held fast by a number of men and then released. The girl was torn to pieces, screaming in agony.

“Caryn!” Brydon screamed. Oh please no, not her, he thought in anguish, oh Adona, not my sister!

He tried to shake off the image and the nauseating horror, and struggled to retain his sense of self. He didn’t have a sister. It was Toryn’s sister; and it wasn’t real. He had to find Toryn. Fog swirled again before he could hold onto the thought. He saw Alyn hanging from the edge of a high cliff by bloody fingertips. She screamed and Brydon leaped forward, able to move once more. He touched the cliff and found it solid, so he climbed valiantly and tried to reach her, ignoring the rocks that tore at his flesh. Her blue eyes were wide and frantic as he neared—his fingers brushed her arm as she fell. Not real, he reminded himself. It’s not real. Mist swirled again.

Brydon struggled against invisible bonds, trying to reach a burning, twisting man. Morgyn, he knew instinctively. My brother. Toryn’s brother. Brydon felt his sanity start to slip as he realized he was not only with Toryn—he was Toryn. He felt a moment of panic as he realized he could be trapped in this nightmare forever, unless he discovered a way to pull them both out of it. Rakyn had never taught him how to handle anything like this.

Brydon blocked out everything and concentrated solely on Toryn, trying to separate himself from his friend. A lurching sensation wrenched at him and he caught a brief glimpse of Toryn before a billow of black smoke obscured the image. Brydon felt calmer, more centered. He fought his way through the smoke, surprised that it felt completely real. It burned his throat and stung his eyes. He coughed and struggled not to inhale, wondering if it were possible to die of smoke inhalation in someone else’s subconscious mind. Better to operate on the assumption that it was, indeed, possible. Just when his
lungs felt like they would explode, the smoke dissipated and Brydon fell forward, sucking air gratefully.

He looked up and was momentarily stunned when he beheld his own face. A second Brydon flailed in a pit of hot tar, slowly sinking while Toryn stood on the bank, frozen, unable to save him. Toryn yelled hoarsely and Brydon looked away from his own dying image. He forced himself to concentrate on Toryn. It unnerved him to hear his own voice calling for help. He ran forward and grabbed at Toryn, who turned to stare at him through maddened eyes. Toryn gaped, looking from one Brydon to the other.

“This is not real, Toryn!” Brydon yelled and shook him roughly. “Come out of here!”

Toryn turned his gaze to the Brydon in the tar, whose mouth filled with the thick, black substance as he continued to scream until silenced by the tar. Brydon felt a distinct chill, watching the sight.

“But—Brydon!” Toryn protested, gesturing at the dying figure.

“I am Brydon! That one is not real! None of what you have experienced here is real! Do you remember your battle with Reed?” Brydon shouted. Toryn’s eyes, red-rimmed with horror, burned into Brydon’s, but revealed no comprehension. Brydon gnashed his teeth. Though he doubted it would have any effect, he slapped Toryn hard. “Wake up!” he yelled. The Redolian’s head snapped back and then he glared at Brydon with perfect clarity.

Brydon grabbed his shoulders and shook him. “Lead me to the center, Toryn. Show me what Reed did. I need to fix it.” Brydon was instantly enveloped in blackness, unable to see or feel anything at all. He kept both fists clenched tight, instinctively sensing that he still held Toryn in his grasp.

A torch flared. His hands still grasped Toryn’s shoulders; the light was in Toryn's hand.

“I can’t hold it back for long,” Toryn said in a grave tone. “Even now it’s clawing at me. Follow me, and hurry.”

Brydon nodded, sensing that Toryn referred to the nightmarish visions. Toryn took Brydon’s hand and pulled him along. They trod for what seemed like eternity and the blackness seemed to go on forever. Occasionally, things would brush Brydon’s legs or whirl by his head. Though unseen, they made his blood freeze. He wondered if Toryn was simply leading him into another nightmare. Eventually, though, he began to envision brightness, glimpsed through the corners of his eyes and dismissed as illusion. The light increased gradually until he knew it was not his imagination.

Finally, the darkness gave way to a featureless gray plain where patches of light and color would occasionally flash—brief as lightning bolts. Brydon was glad to see that he still held Toryn’s hand and not the flesh of some creature, as he had begun to imagine. Toryn looked exhausted—he was shaking with effort. He halted and said nothing, but gestured upward.

Toryn’s mind was an infinite landscape to Brydon at this perspective. He concentrated for a moment and saw patterns in the grayness, something like a complex net made of light. Sparks of brightness raced along the lines, lightning-quick, like fireflies. Brydon had never envisioned anything like it. Toryn’s mind was laid out like a convoluted map. After
a bit of effort, Brydon found that he could trace the pathways. Toryn gestured again impatiently. Brydon looked closer and discovered the damage Reed had done—there were frayed snarls of light where complete strands should have been. In that area the sparks were not traveling on the netlike lines, but leaping randomly into the grayness and disappearing.

“I can’t fight anymore,” Toryn said. “I’m too tired.” His hand vanished from Brydon’s and in the same instant a black shadow leaped from the gray area and swallowed him. Brydon saw a flash of white fangs and a fetid stench washed over him.

“Toryn!” he yelled but Toryn and the black shape were gone. Brydon shook off his stunned horror and turned his attention to the damaged neural net. There was only one way to help Toryn now. But how was he to fix it?

“Well, I can braid, can’t I?” he muttered. The strange landscape had not changed with Toryn’s disappearance, so he set to work. He carefully reached into the tangled mass of twisted light and marveled at the sensation. Sparks raced up his arms and made his hair stand on end, but it was not uncomfortable. He felt energized and realized he was immersed in the very essence of Toryn—every thought, every action, every word originated here. Feeling humbled and almost reverent, Brydon carefully grasped and separated each gossamer filament. Next he crossed, braided, and wove the individual strands, and prayed that he was making the proper connections and not making matters worse. Every link he made fused back into a smooth, undamaged strand, though he had no way of knowing if it was correct. He had to rely on Toryn’s mind’s ability to heal itself. It seemed an arduous, time-consuming task, but at the end, it looked flawless. When he was finished, he checked carefully to make sure he had not missed any. Reed’s damage had not been confined to one area.

Finally satisfied, he looked around and wondered how he would get out again. He noticed a faint golden cord stretching back into the darkness and assumed it was the lifeline that tied his consciousness to his own body. He turned and followed it until he could see nothing but glaring whiteness. He held up a hand to shield his eyes, but a physical likeness was longer evident. He felt a wrench, as though something had grabbed his forehead and yanked him into the air. He cried out as vertigo assaulted him, but gradually the awareness of his own body returned to him.

His limbs were stiff and cold. He opened his eyes and blinked at the brightness; he still knelt beside Toryn on the marble floor. He slowly focused on Shevyn, who sat next to him with an anxious expression. Brydon was relieved that the effects of the drug seemed to have worn off—her blue eyes were alert and watchful. Pins and needles of returning circulation assaulted Brydon’s limbs and a pair of dark hands helped him recline into a more comfortable position. Verana rubbed his legs skillfully as she questioned him.

“How do you feel?” she asked.

“I think I’m fine. Toryn?”

“There is no change.”

“How long was I… gone?”
“Over two hours,” she replied. “We were afraid to disturb you. Jace told us not to touch you, other than to make certain you were both breathing. What... did you do?”

Brydon shook his head, unable, and too exhausted, to explain. “I’m not sure. Move him to a bed and I’ll try to awaken him as soon as I can think clearly again.”

Jace sat cross-legged near Torny’s feet and Kerryn occupied a nearby bench. His features reflected confusion. A handful of Gauntlet Knights stood behind Shevyn and their expressions were equally disgruntled. Brydon supposed someone had broken the news to them about the gauntlet’s disappearance. He wondered if a contingent of the knight-priests had already been dispatched to find it. The wedding guests were gone—herded back to their rooms until their questions could be answered, no doubt.

Shevyn gestured. One of the larger Gauntlet Knights moved forward and carried Torny out of the room as he would a sleeping child. Brydon struggled to stand and Shevyn held his arm, assisting him. His eyes met hers and she smiled. Brydon smiled back and would have kissed her if not for the presence of the others. The enormity of what they had done suddenly dawned on him. They had defeated Reed! Shevyn draped his arm over her shoulders and forced him to lean on her as they made their way from the room, followed by Jace, Kerryn, and the remaining knight-priests.

Brydon noted that Reed’s body was gone and had little doubt that the Gauntlet Knights had displayed it in some grisly fashion as a lesson to others, though the gesture seemed empty next to the fact the Shevyn’s family was dead.

“What about the priest conducting the ceremony?” Brydon asked.

“Imprisoned, along with the rest of Reed’s men,” Verana replied. “Only two of the Gauntlet Knights were killed in the onslaught. Three of Kerryn’s men are dead and one is wounded. I will tend the others now, if you think Torny will not need my assistance.”

Brydon nodded as the procession made its way up the stairs. “We will soon know,” he replied. Torny was placed in the room next to Shevyn’s. Brydon sank down beside him on the bed. Pulling forth the last of his energy reserves, Brydon mentally nudged Torny into wakefulness. His green eyes opened and blinked for a moment before they settled on Brydon. A weak smile cracked his face.

“I’m glad you came,” he rasped. “It wasn’t very pleasant in there.”

“I noticed,” Brydon replied quietly.

“Do you think you could fix things a little sooner next time?”

“There had better not be a next time.”

Torny closed his eyes and his tongue touched dry lips. Brydon helped him sit up and Verana held water for him to drink.

“Reed?” Torny asked after his thirst had been sated.

“Dead,” Brydon answered. “How do you feel?”

“I feel like a castle was dropped on my head.”

“Rest. You need it.”
“As do you,” Verana said.

Brydon needed no further urging. Without bothering to even remove his boots, he sprawled next to Toryn on the huge bed. He gave Shevyn’s hand a quick squeeze and fell straight to sleep.

CHAPTER THIRTY EIGHT
DUTY

A persistent shaking awakened Brydon several hours later. The room was dark, but a lamp burned on the bedside table with a faint light. Brydon raised his head to see a very alert-looking Toryn pushing at him.

“I’m awake,” Brydon growled.

“Finally. I thought you were dead,” Toryn replied.

“I was,” Brydon responded with a groan. He shook off the last vestiges of a wretched nightmare—no doubt the result of his foray into Toryn’s mind.

“I’m starved,” Toryn went on.

“You woke me because you’re hungry?”

A rustle in one corner of the room drew the attention of both men and Brydon actually rolled off the bed. He reached for the sword-hilt that was… not there—he had left it in the Great Hall. Imbedded in Reed, he recalled with a grimace.

The potential threat materialized into a slip of a girl—the same maid that had helped Brydon guide Shevyn to safety. She grinned pertly as she turned up the lamp.

“Good eventide, gentle sirs,” she said in a soft voice. Her eyes darted to Toryn. Brydon knew he had made another conquest without even trying. Toryn crossed his arms behind his head and appraised her while Brydon sat on the bed and pulled on his boots. Someone—Verana, most likely—had removed them.

“Her Majesty awaits you in the Secondary Council Chamber,” the girl told Brydon, who stood and stamped his boots into place on the carpeted floor.

“Where might that be?” Brydon asked.

“Down one level, turn right, and it will be on the left past the dining hall.” She turned her attention back to Toryn. “Do you desire anything, my lord?”

“Food... first,” Toryn replied with a grin.

Brydon snorted loudly and went out, though he was relieved that Toryn seemed to be suffering no ill effects. He made his way to the “Secondary Council Chamber” where he was greeted by Shevyn, Kerryn, and a dark-haired man Brydon had not met. His attire proclaimed him to be a Gauntlet Knight and he held himself with a proud bearing. Brydon felt himself being judged by the weight of the man’s stare. The man nodded finally and Brydon breathed a sigh of relief. He had often wondered if the Gauntlet Knights held themselves superior to the other Orders.
A roaring fire burned in the huge fireplace and Shevyn placed a goblet of mulled wine into Brydon’s hand.

“Welcome, Sir Brydon,” Kerryn said. “This is Sir Montyr, Knight-Commander of the Gauntlet. He is in command while the Marshall is recovering from an injury.”

Montyr nodded. “An injury which has a good chance of healing, thanks to your healer.”

Brydon dipped his head toward the man in greeting.

Shevyn looked at Brydon questioningly. Kerryn caught the look. “What are your plans, Sir Brydon?” he asked. Brydon wondered how it was that her cousin could apparently read her mind when he could not. Familiarity, he supposed. Kerryn went on, “You are welcome to stay here. We will need cool heads and possibly cold steel to hold what is rightfully Shevyn’s. There are many who are not pleased to suddenly find themselves ruled by a woman. No offense, cousin, but Ven-Kerrick has always been held by men. We all know that the gauntlet is useless now. Thank Adona most do not know of its theft; that is a secret we’ve managed to contain. Thus far, at least.”

Brydon looked at Jace, confused. “But Toryn brought the gauntlet back. He acquired it on his journey through the Ven-Horns. Rather than risk losing it, we left it in the caverns.”

Shevyn put a hand on Brydon’s arm. She looked from him to Jace, whose face held a pained expression. Jace said quietly, “We recovered it from the caverns. It’s a fake.”

“A fake? After the scene we witnessed with Sellaris, Keev and the Parmittans? They were escorting it with a small army!”

“Reed had to have known it would be tracked. Kerryn tried to send a force after it, as did Berikon. It was a decoy. Sellaris and the others likely had no idea it wasn’t real. Reed was willing to sacrifice them all in the event the caravan was waylaid, plus it had the added benefit of exposing his enemies. As soon as we tried to take the Gauntlet, Reed turned up. Apparently he found you to be a thorn in his side. At that point, he decided to rid himself of you.”

Brydon felt sick. “What of the real gauntlet?”

“It was most likely smuggled by a single messenger. Chances are it has been in the hands of the Dark Master for quite some time, if that is where Reed sent it.”

“Has anyone been sent after it?” Brydon asked and moved to stand before the fire. The pleasant evening had acquired a chill. His gaze shifted to Montyr, who swore roundly before looking at Shevyn apologetically.

“Sir Jace and Lady Verana are leaving tomorrow. I would send a contingent of Gauntlet Knights with them, but I cannot. The Concurrence strictly forbids any militant person of the Four-Kingdoms—and Ven-Kerrick, obviously—from entering Parmitta. The agreement was made with the King of Parmitta and even though his line is long-since dead and gone, we cannot break it. Crossing into Parmitta would be considered an act of war and would sever the Concurrence. The fact that the gauntlet has been taken to Parmitta suggests that a new king has begun to reign there. If so, it is even more important that no Gauntlet Knight steps across the Ven-Horns.”

Brydon looked at Montyr. “But Jace is going.”
Montyr smiled shrewdly. “That is our only avenue. The Concurrence states that ‘No militant person employed by, residing in, or swearing fealty to the members of this Accord, including but not limited to, the Knight-Priests established in Ven-Kerrick, whether secular, religious, or of any other nature, shall under any circumstances set foot on the lands south of the Ven-Horn Mountains currently known as Parmitta.’”

Brydon was amazed that he could remember it all, but Montyr gestured to the round table upon which lay several rolls of yellowed parchment. “We have been studying it. However, the Concurrence says nothing about militant persons employed by, residing in, or swearing fealty to the northern countries. Jace, as a Knight-Priest of the Shield, can go where he will. Verana, as non-militant, is exempt.”

“Jace the Wanderer,” Brydon breathed, wondering if Jace was somehow fated because of the name he had chosen.

Kerryn’s next words halted that line of thought. “And you, Sir Brydon. As a Lance Knight, you may cross into Parmitta without affecting the Concurrence, even if you choose to go for the sake of Ven-Kerrick. You do not reside here, you are not employed by us, nor do you swear fealty to this throne.”

Brydon drained his goblet. He looked at Shevyn for a moment, but her features were blank, queen-like. Brydon smiled. “Actually, I have a far more selfish reason to go after the gauntlet,” Brydon said at last. “I am on a quest to bring the gauntlet back to Falara.” He held up a quick hand to still the expected outburst. “Not to claim it, merely as proof that I have fulfilled my quest, as my duty commands. It would be returned to you immediately thereafter. Ven-Kerrick would be hailed in the north for its goodwill and, as you have said, the gauntlet is useless now with the Kerrick males gone.” He glanced apologetically at Shevyn as he said the last and she looked away for a moment.

She moved to the table and picked up a quill, which she dipped into ink. She wrote swiftly, then blew on the parchment for a moment to dry the ink. She handed it to Brydon.

He skimmed it and then read it aloud. “We hereby agree to the terms set forth by Sir Brydon of Falara. If he should find and return the Gauntlet of Ven-Kerrick, it shall be loaned to him to present to his homeland with all due ceremony, after which it shall be returned to Ven-Kerrick.” It was signed Queen Shevyn Kerrick, 315, 45th Year of the Lance. She took the document and held it out to Kerryn and Montyr to endorse as witnesses. Kerryn shrugged and Montyr grumbled, but they both signed. Kerryn handed it back to Brydon, who refused to take the parchment.

“It may get lost where I’m going. I trust you to keep it for me.”

Kerryn tossed it absentely at the table where it fell among the scrolls of the Concurrence.

“When will you depart, Sir Brydon?” Montyr asked.

“As soon as I’m satisfied that Toryn is fully recovered. I doubt that he will allow me to leave here without him.”

Shevyn looked pointedly at Kerryn and then gestured toward the door. Her cousin took the hint. “I believe I shall turn in. It has been an arduous day.”
Montyr agreed. “I will prepare your provisions for the journey, Sir Brydon. Your horses have been brought in from the catacombs. That is a very fine red stallion. It is yours?”

“Toryn’s,” Brydon responded, making a mental note to get that tale from Toryn as soon as possible. Montyr and Kerryn departed and Shevyn picked up a parchment and quill again.

She wrote, I believe you will succeed, but I do not want you to go. Below that, she had written, I thought he had killed you. She looked at him and her blue eyes sparkled with tears. He felt a pang and wondered what she had suffered at the hands of Reed. She could not even speak to help ease the memory. A fierce desire to protect her welled up in him and he stepped forward and folded her in his arms. She held him tightly.

Brydon soothed her, caressing her hair and murmuring to her gently. After a time, she drew back and gazed up at him. She seemed so vulnerable. Brydon leaned down and kissed her soft lips, which trembled beneath his.

He murmured, “I do not know what the future holds for us, Shevyn. For now, the paths of our duties run parallel. But if I should take the gauntlet to Falara in time...”

She nodded curtly and pulled away. She seemed to draw an invisible mantle around herself and become once more the Queen of Ven-Kerrick. He remembered her standing beside a stream, combing her wet hair and her blue eyes flashing fire; the carefree days of easy comradeship were gone forever.

His hands dropped to his sides. Would duty always be a burden to him?

“You will be far too busy here to worry about me, Your Majesty,” he said softly. “I will return with the Gauntlet. For your honor.”

She smiled at him ruefully and he bowed and went out with a heavy heart.

Brydon’s room overlooked the courtyard and he sat on the window seat gazing out at the moonlight. He still shared the room with Toryn, though he had left the large bed to the Redolian, content to sleep on the valet’s bed in the antechamber. A servant had informed him that the room formerly belonged to the crown prince.

The Council had convened earlier that day and Brydon wondered what the outcome had been. Jace and Verana had departed. Jace planned to detour to the Black City and ask if Rakyn had any information on where the gauntlet might have been taken. They planned to meet Brydon and Toryn at the guard post on the banks of Lake Sparkle in Bodor, the final checkpoint before entering Parmitta.

Brydon walked to the bed, intending to turn in for an early start in the morning. He staggered against the bedpost and grasped at it for support as a mental blast brought him to his knees. He could see nothing through the agony but glaring whiteness, and hear nothing but a piercing howl until a voice like stone on stone overshadowed it.

//I have been watching you,// the voice boomed in his head, though he shielded against it with all his might. //Your feeble powers are nothing to me. Know this: I have the item you seek.//

Brydon saw a clear picture of the gauntlet, glittering and cold, before the image was snatched away. He held onto consciousness by a thread.
//I am not pleased that you did away with Reed. He was useful to me. However, all is not lost. I made arrangements in the event of Reed’s failure and my plans shall proceed. You will do well to return to your homeland and forget the Concurrence. Without the gauntlet they are doomed. Heed my words, Falaran, and go away. If you are fortunate, I will not turn my attention to the north for many years to come.// The evil laugh sounded again, so strongly that Brydon thought his skull would burst, and then the presence was gone.

He struggled to stand, using the bedpost for support. A sharp knife of fear pierced his soul and he remembered Reed’s last words with a chill. It could only be the Dark Master. What sort of man could hold such power? Rakyn had said that no one could speak across long distances without having a former connection to the recipient, and Brydon knew he had never encountered the presence before. He sank down on the corner of the bed, stunned by the revelation. His plans would continue. What sort of plans? Conquest, obviously, and he had taken the gauntlet to prevent the Kerricks from using it against him. But was that the only reason? Could the Dark Master put it to use?

Brydon sighed, knowing his Quest had taken on an entirely new dimension. The gauntlet was no longer a trinket to take home and display for his bride to be. It could be the key to survival for them all, except that no Kerrick men were alive to wield it. Even so, the loss of it would demoralize the members of the Concurrence. How long could they keep the knowledge of its theft from the public?

Brydon curled his hands into fists. He was a sworn knight-priest first and foremost. The Falaran throne would have to wait.

//I will find you.// he vowed. //I will find you and the gauntlet and see an end to this.// He sent the thought in a broad range, not knowing if it was received.

He groaned as a more immediate worry occurred to him. Shevyn would likely wish to accompany him and Toryn would be impossible to convince to stay behind. He hated to expose either of them to more danger.

Brydon spent a sleepless night pondering the dilemma until the cold light of morning brought him the promise of a bleak future.

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