

The Darkseer Saga: Book One
Ben Brooks

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Prologue

"You never want to believe that what you're doing--that what you've dedicated your entire life to--was the wrong cause. You never want to think that the whole of your existence has been for nothing, a blight to be remembered solely by those who hated you. You never want to find yourself conspiring against your dearest friends, knowing they are just as wrong as you once were, and that there is nothing you can do to save them from your own fate but pray. Pray that they'll see their mistakes before it's too late. Pray that they won't do the same terrible things you once did. Pray that they never find out it was you who tried to stop them.

"Over the years I have matured much. I have been one of the lucky--or is it more appropriate to say 'unlucky'--few who have seen the tragedy of their own life for what it was. Though I cannot change the past, I can take every possible precaution to protect the future from a terror as grand or grander than anything I ever concocted. I hope the steps I have taken will prevent Ylwyn from succeeding where I have failed.

"I will cease to exist, a victim of a punishment of my own devising, one fitting for the crimes I have committed. One that I hope, in some small way or another, will redeem my wretched existence. One that will save this land I have come to love--its places, its peoples, their beliefs.

"This is difficult thing for me to do, but it will be even harder living with the guilt of my deeds--the past years have more than proven so. It is thus with much remorse, and yet with much hope, that I say farewell to this world. After all this time combating

death's vacuous tendrils, I never thought I would be embracing it, welcoming it.

"It always fascinated me how it took years to build cities and nations, but only days to destroy them. The path of destruction is an easy one to take, but rarely the wisest. I pray that Ylwyn discovers this sooner than I did. I pray that if she ever discovers what I have done, that she can find some way to forgive me.

"Ohn, in your wisdom, protect me from evil. I live in your name, and your name alone."

And with a flick of the wrist, Elhoi Garan's mind vanished into the void.

PART I: The Meeting

"Everyone's life is simple until that one person comes along . . . one person who will change everything."

Chapter One

The cool afternoon breezes cascaded gently through the window. The trees, bedecked in a wide assortment of colors, had started to shed their leaves. Red, brown, yellow, all clinging for their lives to the branches, struggling to stay put in the brisk winds. Despite their efforts, they fell left and right, swirling to the ground where they lay in death. Autumn had arrived.

Moren's Time, the weeklong pre-harvest festival, was less than a week away. Already the wooden stands were being constructed and the paper lanterns strung up down by the main road. Everyone welcomed this chance to sing and dance the days away, feasting on the finest pastries for leagues, partaking of the sweetest wine Kagon had to offer, and conversing by the warm glow of the bonfires with loved ones. Alexander Dreighton Lansing was going to miss this year's festivities.

The Lansing plantation encompassed hundreds of square leagues of farmland, but even at such a majestic size it was a mere grain of sand to the desert that it once had been. The Lansing family had once owned the entire nation of Kagon, but now their share comprised well under a tenth of it. Most of the land had been sold to farmers and families, and some lost to rivals in bloody battles centuries past.

Gerhard Lansing never let his notoriety or wealth come between himself and helping the farmhands, nor did he let his son sit idly at home while everyone else labored. Gerhard was a strong man, a proud man, a shining example of the greatness that the Lansing family had once been, and he wanted Alexander to be no

less. This year, however, Alexander was going to miss out on the work as well as the festivities.

Alexander, Lan to his friends, was sitting on his windowsill watching dark grey clouds roll over the billowing grain fields. He took a deep breath through his nose, savoring the fresh crisp air of his bedroom. He would not be here much longer, as Porthos University beckoned. He wanted to study politics and management, for as his father's heir, the plantation would one day be his.

The thought unnerved him. It was not so much that he would have so many things to manage and attend to when he took over, but rather that for him to inherit the plantation, his father would have to be dead. Lan could not bear to think about living without his father--without any of his family. Oftentimes at night he would lay awake, listening to the crickets chirruping in the night air, thoughts of loved ones dying haunting the dark corners of his mind. He would curl into a ball beneath his sheets and shudder. The only way to drive the fears from his mind was to fall into a deep sleep, and even then, oftentimes they followed him into his dreams.

Lan wanted to tell his best friend Esmond about his fears, but every time he tried, the words stuck in his throat. He was never quite sure why. He trusted Esmond with all of his secrets--all except the ones that kept him awake way into the small hours of dawn.

Esmond had also been accepted to Porthos University. Lan was thankful to have someone going with him who he knew so he wouldn't have to start out alone, but part of him wished Esmond were staying behind. Out here in Kagonese countryside, Esmond's brash behavior and impudent wit rarely led to more than a shouting contest, but in Porthos, largest city in the human lands, people were less likely to react as nicely as they did here. Lan sighed. Perhaps getting out from under his parents would force Esmond to mature a little. Lan had always thought Cel and Salen Boyeui were far too protective of Esmond. They always watched over him wherever he went, and rarely let him go anywhere alone, unless Lan was with him. They were quite different from Lan's own parents, who let him come and go as he pleased, so long as he got all of his work done.

MAKE THIS TRANSITIONIt would be nice to be away from all of the hard work for once. His father usually

consigned him to inventory work--counting bales of wheat, barrels of apples, sacks of herbs--but on some rare occasions Lan had to do fieldwork also. He looked forward to being in some strange new place instead, this year. Lan had never been more than a few leagues away from the plantation, except on a few short trips to visit some of his father's friends or business partners. The university lay nearly a thousand leagues away, in the neighboring nation of Pyran.

Though the thought of moving to the foreign nation excited him, it also made him nervous. Aside from missing his family, he would have to adapt to his new surroundings. *Pyran can't be too bad*, he thought. *After all, the Pyranians are a lot like us. It's not like I'll have to learn another language or anything. It'll be interesting living under a monarch, though.*

A rumble of thunder shook Lan from his seat. He brushed his lengthy brown bangs back from his eyes to get a better look at the sky. *We might not be leaving tonight after all.* The carriage would arrive well past sunset to get the boys, but if the rain was pouring down heavily enough, the carriage-master would have to wait until the following morning to set out. *Won't make much of a difference, leaving a half-day late*, he told himself. *Not with a trip this long.*

A light rapping on his door brought him out of his thoughts. "It's open," he invited, not turning from the window. He heard the door swing open, then the sound of soft footsteps as someone entered the room. ****add heavy breath of mother****

"It seems like just yesterday I was tanning your hide for what you boys did to that poor old cow." His mother, Mara, speaking in that warm motherly tone of hers that always made him smile. He loved the small, plump woman dearly and did not look forward to leaving her.

"Mother," he said. ****add more Lan dialogue here****

He turned to look at her. A tight bun of greying hair sat twisted up on the back of her head. She wore an old blue dress and a striped apron he had given her as a present on her last birthday. The first traces of lines had started to wear their way around the corners of her mouth. She was only thirty-seven, but life on the plantation had taken its toll on her body in years. Things had not always been as peaceful and prosperous for the Lansings as they were now.

Gerhard had been serving in the Kagonese military when he met Mara. After a string of hectic events neither of Lan's parents ever talked about for long, all of them culminating in the death of Gerhard's father, Gerhard had retired from the military, married Mara, and taken over the plantation. They had little money, due to some shady dealings Lan's grandfather had made, and had to sell off the last remaining hornfruit orchards along the south of the plantation, as well as several cattle pastures, livestock included.

With his hard-working personality and excellent charisma, Gerhard had managed to pull the plantation out of the poverty his own father had driven it into, and turn it back into the prospering farmland it had once been.

"I see you've got everything packed," Mara said, looking down at his disheveled canvas bags lying on the floor. She knelt down and reached for one of the larger ones.

"What are you doing?" Lan asked. Mara jerked her head upright, a wistful look in her eyes.

"I'm just double-checking everything for you."

Lan smiled as he walked toward her. "There's no need, mother. I've double-checked it already."

"Well--" she started, unsure of what to say next. "I'm triple-checking it." She turned her attention back to the large bag and reached inside.

Lan laughed. "I've double-checked it *and* triple-checked it. Everything's there. Don't worry yourself so much."

She paused in her rummaging and stared blankly at the planks on the floor. Lan bent over to get a better look at her face. A few tears started to stream**streamed** down her cheeks, following the gentle lines of her face down to her chin.

"Mother, I didn't mean--"

"No," she said, still staring at the floor. **hair hanging down over her eyes, or something** "You're right. You don't need me always hanging over your shoulder and running behind you to make sure you're okay. You're grown now." She slowly stood up and wiped her tears away. "Oh, look at me," she said. "Crying like a little girl." She sighed. "I don't know what's come over me."

Lan walked to her and she held out her arms to draw him near. He patted her gently on the back, trying not to let his emotions overwhelm him as his mother's had done. At least one of them needed to remain strong.

"It's okay," he said. "I'll always need you. You'll never lose me."

"I know, Lan," she said. She squeezed him tightly. "I know." They stood there silently and listened to the breezes flowing through the limbs of the two large oaks in the back yard. When Lan was younger, he and Esmond used to play all sorts of games beneath those trees. The grand oaks had seen every nature of boyhood game, from staves-and-warriors, to hide-and-chase. The oak trees shaded this entire side of the house, a welcome benefit during the hot, humid summers. As long as Lan could remember, the oaks had looked the same. Not even the most powerful storm to ever blow through mid Kagon had so much as bent a single twig out of place on their majestic boughs. **this chunk is just too much information here, it clogs the flow of things right now, let's just concentrate on lan and his mother**As old and stout as the trees were, their age fell short of that of the plantation house which they protected.

The house was not exactly large. Most who had never seen it assumed it was an exquisite, sprawling palace. The Lansings had always been very modest individuals, however, as the meager house showed. They didn't believe in extravagancies, only in living comfortably.

It was a two-story house, with a wrap-around porch where the family enjoyed the long, hot summer days. A yard of green grass that had seen more than its share of staff fighting stretched out several strides from it in all directions with a few large maples scattered about. **merge this in with talk about the trees**A small, well-tended garden of various fruits and vegetables grew out back. It his mother's only project that she considered her own, and she would never let anyone help her with it, and Ohn have mercy on anyone who so much as breathed on it the wrong way. Lan and Esmond had both learned to stay out of Mara's garden quite early in their lives.

move this just down... have her enter the room first, then give this informationAcross the hall from Lan's room was his little sister's room. Anya was four years of age, and had a fire in her hair to match the fire in her personality.

As Lan stood there with his mother, he saw Anya's door open. She skipped out and ran toward him, a wide smile stretched across her face.

"Lan, can I get your room when you go?" His mother looked down at the little redheaded girl.

"Now Anya," she began, "you have your own room, and there's--"

"It's okay, mother," said Lan. He knelt down next to his little sister. "I can't just give up my room, Anya. Where would I sleep when I come home for the summer?"

She frowned, stuck her lower lip out farther than Lan thought anyone should be able to, and began twirling her hair with her fingers. "I'll give it back then, I promise! Please?"

"Well, how about this," he began. "I'll let you have my room, but only if I can have *your* room." Anya thought this proposition over silently for a moment, her hands working fervently in her hair. Slowly she looked up at her mother. Mara solemnly returned her gaze. Lan could tell that his mother wanted to both smile and cry at the same time. He knew exactly how she felt.

"I suppose we could arrange something," she finally said. Anya's face immediately lit up to match the fiery redness of her hair. She clasped her hands into tight little balls and started bouncing.

"I'm gonna start getting ready to move now!" She giggled as she ran back to her room, seemingly making an extra effort to ensure that each and every step announced her joy. Lan shook his head and stood, watching his sister as she started to dig through her things. He smiled, glad to see her so happy. Nothing he could do would ever be too much for her. ~~**blah garbage remove**~~Esmond would be a bit upset to hear Lan had given up his room, however. Anya's small room would not lend itself well to accommodating people on its floor, Esmond's favorite sleeping place.

"Are you sure you don't mind, Lan?" his mother asked.

"Not at all." He walked over toward his window to look up at the sky. "I don't need all this space, and most of my things are going to stay at the university during my holidays anyway." He paused for a moment before continuing. "Besides, she'll be needing a bigger room soon."~~**tell us why, lan!**~~

The sky was rapidly growing darker. A second crash of thunder startled him, accompanied with a breeze that blew his door shut. Mara brushed past and made her way to the window. She gazed up into the darkness for a moment, then closed and fastened the shutters.

"I thought I'd close these before the storm starts. It looks like it's going to be a bad one."

Lan plopped down on his bed and stared lazily around his barren room. The shelf on the far wall where he used to keep his books now held nothing but two old candles in dull, wooden candleholders and a small mirror. A crack ran along the top left corner of the mirror that distorted the face of any who peered into it. ****awk****He had cracked the mirror when he and Esmond had been playing out in the fields one day. Lan was using the mirror as a shield, fending off Esmond's barrage of pebbles. One of the pebbles had been a bit larger than Lan expected, and as soon as he deflected it he heard the distinctive cracking sound that could have only been the glass of the mirror. His mother had been outraged, and the throbbing in the boys' behinds lingered for days afterward. Lan's grandmother had given the mirror to Mara shortly before she died. It was the sole possession Mara had of hers. Lan never thought she could scold him any worse--until the cow incident.

"I wonder where Esmond is?" he asked his reflection. "He should be here by now."

"You know how he is," his mother said. "He's never been on time for anything. Not even for his own birth, if you ask Cel."

Lan watched his broken visage in the mirror. From ****awk****this vantage point, his reflection looked unnerving. The crack ran down his forehead then curved around below his left ear. It twisted the left side of his face into an evil grin--nearly a snarl. He stared intently, drawn into the mirror and the strange look it gave him. Something about the face intrigued him and scared him all at once. The young man in the reflection had an overbearing sense of power and confidence.

He heard his mother's voice, but retained none of the words she said. The mirror entranced him. It enveloped his awareness, and he felt himself being pulled deeply into it. He had seen that face before--the hardened chin, the commanding eyes. He often made it when he had devised a particularly nasty battle tactic in one of his and Esmond's games of Skirmish. Only this time, the face was not his own--the mirror made it for him.

It was the stern face of a man who had lead armies into battle, been in the middle of the fray himself, and come out the sole survivor. It was the warped face of a man on the verge of insanity,

torn between two competing views of what was truly the right thing to do in a desperate situation. It was--

"Lan!" His mother's shout broke the mirror's grasp on him.

"Yes?" he said. He glanced around, disoriented from his gaze into the mirror, trying to find her. She still stood by the closed window.

"I said, I don't think you'll be leaving tonight if that storm breaks any time soon. The carriage will have to stay here overnight for the roads to clear up." She looked at him with concern.

"Oh, yeah." He felt awkward. He wanted to turn back to the mirror but feared to at the same time.

"Are you feeling well, Lan?" Mara asked as she drew near the bed.

"I'm--I'm just fine." He stared down at his bags on the floor to keep his eyes from wandering back to the mirror. He wondered silently why he had never seen his reflection quite like that in all the years the mirror had sat there, cracked.

"I guess I'm just starting to feel a bit homesick already." As he spoke, he heard the front door of the house open. His father must be home early because of the impending weather. "I know it's strange, since I haven't left yet, but--"

"I know how you feel." Mara put her hands on his shoulders. "Everything will be just fine, Lan. I believe in you."

He heard someone rummaging around in the front room where his family spent their evenings after dinner. The majority of the noise came from the direction of the fireplace. After a short pause, footsteps rapidly approached his room.

Though he expected it, he still jumped when his door flew open. It slammed hard against the wall, sending the mirror on the shelf tumbling over toward the floor. Mara shouted and leaped for it but she moved too slowly. The mirror hit the hard wooden floor and shattered into pieces. The shards settled, reflecting back a hundred images of his empty room.

His father stood in the doorway, a mixed look of fear and urgency on his face. A sheathed sword hung from his belt--the same sword that had hung over the fireplace for as long as Lan could remember. A plain military sword, with a flat metal handle and smooth blade. Lan had only seen it unsheathed once, when his father had told him stories of his life as a soldier in the Kagon army.

His father had not wielded the sword since then. Something was terribly wrong.

"Alex!" His father refused to adopt the practice the rest of his family and friends had of calling him Lan. He insisted on using his son's given name. "Mara!" His breath came in labored gasps, and large beads of sweat rolled down his forehead.

"There's a girl out at the road. She was attacked . . . by sarn. I need your help!" Gerhard braced himself on the doorframe and tried to catch his breath as Mara scurried beneath him to pick up the scattered pieces of the mirror. Lan had never seen fear on his father's face until now.

Mara shook herself from her task. "Sarn? *Here?* Are you sure? That's impossible! Why?" She threw her arms about wildly as she spoke.

"There's no time to worry about it. I came to get Alex. I need his help." Lan started wringing his hands. He had never seen sarn before, and from the stories he had heard of their human-eating tendencies, he never wanted to.

"But father--"

"There's no time!" his father shouted, grey eyes wide with fury. "Jon and a couple of his men are out there now trying to fend them off, but I'm afraid they won't last long. These aren't just rogue sarn--they've been well trained. Soldiers, my bet, from one of their blessed Nations."

Lan's heart raced. How could he possibly be of any help to anyone? His father was the veteran soldier, not him. Lan had never fought in his life, except with a few children from school in his younger days, but that did not qualify him to go up against sarn.

Before he could open his mouth to protest again, his father grabbed him by the arm and forcefully dragged him off of the bed. "Come on, boy! No time to waste!"

"Ger, he's--"

"Not now! Get some hot water and a towel ready. The girl's badly hurt, and I refuse to let her die." And with that, he dragged Lan from his room.

As they passed the family room, Lan glanced at the fireplace. His father's sword hung there no longer. The stone shelf looked naked now, with only the two small vases adorning it. Suddenly the reality of the entire situation hit him. The dreaminess faded away, and that scared him. This was really happening.

Gerhard swung the front door open forcefully. It crashed against the side of the house. The top hinge broke loose and scattered across the porch with a high-pitched clang. Lan saw the door swaying awkwardly back and forth, attached only at the bottom, as his father dragged him away from it.

Once down the front steps and out on the small lane to the main road, Gerhard let go of Lan's arm, but momentum and a hint of curiosity kept Lan running alongside his father. He looked around nervously, expecting to see hordes of sarn with human flesh and blood dripping from their mouths, wielding swords covered in gore. Instead, he saw nothing out of the ordinary. The limbs of the large trees lining the lane swayed in the strong winds. He saw no movement out in the grain fields other than the billowing stalks. The lane ahead of them was empty. It seemed like any other day. There were no signs of any sarn attack going on.

A few minutes later, as he thought to himself that this was all some disturbing prank, they reached the stables. Men were scurrying about like ants from under an overturned rock, arming themselves before they took off running down the lane. Several of the men sped past him and his father, armed with an assortment of farming equipment ranging from sickles and scythes, to pitchforks and rakes.

When they reached the end of the lane, the alarm bells sounded. Lan had only ever heard them used for severe weather, never for an attack. He tried to convince himself that the oncoming storm had provoked their sounding and not the sarn.

"Good," huffed his father. "Simon made it to the bell tower. Maybe now we'll get some more help out here."

They turned southward down the main road, which led to Esmond's house. *I wonder where he is in all of this? I hope he didn't get caught up in the middle of it on his way here.* His stomach sank. *Calm down, Lan. Esmond's always late. There's no way he's gotten involved with this.*

"Now," began his father, "hopefully they'll have the sarn pushed back away from her by the time we get there. I'm going to rush in to help them. Once she's clear, while we're still keeping the sarn busy, I need you to grab her and take her back to the house."

"You're crazy! I don't want to get anywhere *near* any sarn!"

"You won't have to. We'll push them back, and then you grab the girl and run. You don't have to fight, Alex. I'll make sure of that."

"But what if she's already dead?"

"She won't be. Trust me. One of the farmhands saw her get shot down with an arrow, but it struck her upper shoulder, nothing fatal. These sarn are hell-bent on getting her, which means we don't want them to. There's no telling what they want with her, but it can't be anything good for us."

They started climbing the only hill that stood on the road between his house and Esmond's house. On a good day, he could see many leagues from atop this hill. He knew that once at the top, just a few more strides away, he would be able to see the skirmish his father talked about.

A sharp pain flashed through his left side, and he slowed down. He wrapped his left arm around his stomach. He was in no shape for this. Why couldn't his father get any of the other men to bring the girl back to the house? Why did he have to put his own son in danger?

"Alex, come on!" his father shouted over his shoulder. "Hurry!"

"But father--"

"There!" his father shouted. Lan knew what his father saw. Adrenaline surged through him and the pain in his side went away. A strong feeling of nausea quickly replaced it. He shivered as the blood drained from his face. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead. His palms grew suddenly clammy and numb. He grabbed the thighs of his pants tightly and came to a complete stop.

He doubled over and swallowed the urge to vomit. He would not go over that hill. Nothing would make him change his mind. He fought back the nausea, trying to regain his composure so he could run back to the house. This was crazy.

"Alex!" Lan jumped at the shout. His father grabbed his arm again and started dragging him toward the crest of the hill.

"No!" Lan shouted. He tried to dig his feet into the ground to stop his father.

"Alex, you have to!"

"Buy why? I can't do this, I just can't!" A million horrific visions flooded through his mind, all of them involving him getting maimed or killed or eaten alive by sarn.

"You're the only one I can trust."

"Trust? Trust with what? Any of your men could do it as easily--"

"She's half mesefu, Alex! The other men might notice that and leave her to die, but I know you won't. I'd do it myself, but my men need my help in battle. None of them are trained for this kind of thing! Now come with me!"

A half-mesefu. He had to see this for himself. Curiosity triumphed over his fear, and he began trudging up the hill as the nausea quickly faded away. His father was right--Lan would not have to fight. When had his father ever let him down? If need be, Lan could pretend it was all one large, life-sized game of Skirmish. His troops would push the enemy troops away from the goal, and he would fly in and seize it before they could swamp him. Yes, just like a game. *Only if I lose this one, I die.*

As soon as he reached the crest of the hill, he saw the fight. It raged on a mere thirty or so strides away. At least twenty men fought against the most bizarre-yet-humanlike creatures he had ever seen. From this distance he could not make out much about them. They stood roughly as tall as the men they fought against. Pale green skin stretched across their square-jawed faces. They wore what appeared to be crude leather armor with some sort of white plates attached to them. Except for one.

One of the sarn had dressed himself in an elaborate steel chest-plate, with a thick fur collar that hid his neck. On his head sat a large helmet with two horns curving upward on both sides and a smaller one sticking up in the center. A sash with several round, white objects attached to it hung across his left shoulder. Their color matched that of the plates the other sarn warriors wore. He stood in the back lines of his men, shouting orders in a strange, guttural language, and waving a crossbow about, taking random shots at farmhands.

Several bodies lay on the ground amidst the fighting. Lan could not determine if they were farmhands or sarn from this distance, but one of the bodies stood out from the rest. A girl lay face down on the ground in a pool of blood a few strides from the other bodies. When he and his father drew a bit closer, Lan saw her back rising and falling with her breath.

The girl attempted to roll away from the fight. A sarn reached to grab her leg, but one of the farmhands thrust a pitchfork

through the sarn's back. The sarn growled in pain, a far more terrifying sound than Lan had ever imagined it would be, and released the girl. He fought with the farmhand's grip to remove the fork from his back, but death caught up with him before he succeeded. The sarn slumped forward, slid off the fork, and fell to the ground. The girl crawled to her knees and stumbled down the road, away from Lan and his father. She quickly vanished behind the chaos of the melee.

"Break off the road, around the fight. Get her and take her to the house. I'll watch you. You're going to be fine, Alex."

Lan ran on beside his father in silence. He had just seen a man--sarn or not--killed before his very eyes. *That could happen to me. Dear Ohn, that could happen to me.*

"I--I--"

"You'll what?"

He hesitated. He did not want to die, yet he was the only man his father trusted to not harm the girl. Once the other men realized she was a half-mesefu, they might let the sarn have her to save their own lives. *She's just as much a person as that sarn. I've got to help her. As crazy as this all seems . . .*

"I'll do my best, father," Lan finished. He turned from the road and ran parallel to it along the side of a grassy hill. Shouts and grunts escaped the fight beside him, but he tried not to look over at the violent scene.

Once the battle was behind him, he glanced back to get a better look at the sarn. He would never forget what he saw for as long as he lived.

The plates on their armor were bones. They looked like the shoulder blades of humans, attached to the leather armor in a scale pattern. The white objects that adorned their leader's sash were human skulls--five to be exact. One of them had a prominent crack over the brow that extended back to an irregularly shaped hole.

The stories were true. They wore the bodies of their victims. He had always thought that tale was only meant to frighten children. Now he knew otherwise. Nausea tried to creep back into him, but he choked it back. He forced himself to look straight ahead again and not at the fight.

A shout louder than any of the others rang out from the battle. It was Gerhard, issuing a battle cry as he plunged into the melee. Lan still did not look back. His stomach twisted and

wrenched about inside him and his vision faded in and out. He stumbled a couple of times, but never quite fell, one foot after the other haphazardly catching the ground beneath him.

He spotted the girl, doubled over in a ditch on his side of the road. A new energy surged through him that drove away the nausea and weakness with a powerful finality. The girl was shaking violently. Blood ran down her back from an arrow wound--the shaft protruded from her body, decorated with reddish-orange feathers.

Thunder roared as Lan sped toward her. He quickly began trying to devise a strategy to get her back to the house. The sarn stood between them and safety. He knew that he could not move fast carrying her, and she obviously could not run.

When he reached her, he finally got a good look. She wore what at one time had been a white tunic, now stained with a disgusting mixture of dirt and blood. Her pants were made of the same fabric as her shirt, but brown instead. A wide black belt held them about her waist, and a large cloth pouch hung from it, bulging at the seams. *She doesn't look any different from any other person I've ever seen.*

The arrow wound looked far worse from here. Crimson blood soaked the arrow shaft as well as her hair. He could not tell its true color--he saw only a muddy red.

He approached her slowly with his palms up and outstretched so she would know he meant her no harm. She turned her head up to see him and shrieked. "It's all right! I'm here to help!" he shouted. She rolled over and sat up. The arrow shaft nearly hit the ground and drove itself in further. "Careful! I'm not trying to hurt you. I want to help you."

Her yelling subsided but the shaking did not. Her blood-drenched hair covered her face. Pale, slender arms, encrusted with mud and grit shook with her body.

"Y . . . you . . ." she began. "Are you from . . . the farm?"

Her voice sounds normal enough. Maybe father was wrong about her.

"Yes. We're here to save you." He took her by the arm and helped her stand. "Please come with me so I can get you some help!"

"I don't . . . have time," she said. "I must . . . go on . . ." She lost her balance and nearly fell over. Lan grabbed her and held her upright.

"You're delusional. You've lost too much blood. If you leave now, the only place you'll go on to is the grave."

She pulled away from him and brushed her hair out of her eyes. She had a small, delicate face. Almond-shaped eyes of some indiscernible color between grey and green glared at him. Thin lips bordered her small mouth. A pointed ear peeked up through her hair. His father had been right.

"Dear Ohn . . ." he said. She looked at him questioningly. "A half-mesefu . . ."

She grunted and started marching away from him, down the road. He watched as she reached behind her with her left arm and forcefully broke the extruding arrow shaft off, leaving the tip inside of her. She tossed the feathered stick to the ground and broke into a run.

"No!" he shouted, starting after her. "That's not what I meant!" She ran awkwardly. Her wounds slowed her down. He caught up to her easily and ran alongside. He looked over at her face and was met with a cold look of determination. He saw a small scar over her left eyebrow that he had not noticed earlier. It left the tiniest bald spot in her eyebrow.

"It was just--I've never seen anyone like you before." She did not show any signs of paying attention to him. "Look, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that half-mesefu thing--"

Without so much as glancing in his direction, she backhanded him with a force that threw him to the ground. How could someone in her condition be so strong? As he fell, another rumble of thunder, the loudest yet, roared through his ears. Large drops of rain began to sting his face. It quickly became difficult to see much farther than ten strides through the thick downpour.

Lan leaped to his feet. The girl had fallen to her hands and knees and was vomiting.

"What are you doing, Alex? Hurry!" Lan looked back through the hazy rain to see his father withdrawing his sword from a sarn. His father's men had the sarn surrounded, but the green-skinned warriors fought on aggressively. He knew his father's men did not have much time left. They had suffered several casualties already--*Dear Ohn, people are dying out there*--and the more time Lan wasted, the more dead there would be. He had to act fast.

He ran up to the girl. She was unconscious. If not for her breathing, he would have thought her dead.

Lan hefted her up over his shoulder without much difficulty. The lightness of her body amazed him. He secured her over his back with one arm around her waist, and started to trudge back toward home.

He quickly made his way past the brawl and soon reached the hill. Thick mud now slid down its steep side, becoming less and less navigable with each drop of rain. He had to exert an extra effort to pull his feet off of the ground, each step accompanied with a sickening sucking sound. He didn't think he could make it up the hill with the girl draped over his back. Her limp unconsciousness made her an awkward burden. He made slow progress up the hill, bent over nearly on all fours.

More men from the farm came charging over the hill toward the fight. They startled him, and the girl started to slide from his grip. He tried to adjust her, but when he turned his feet, they lost their grip in the mud and he fell. He and the girl splashed down into the mud and started to tumble down the hill.

He managed to dig his hand into the cold, slimy mud to stop his sliding before he reached the bottom. The girl was lying face down in the grey sludge. She showed no signs of movement. Lan reached down and turned her over, then started to pick her up again. As he lifted her, he heard his father shout. "No! Son, look out!" Lan jerked his head toward the battle and saw that the leader of the sarn had broken free of the melee. The sarn had his crossbow aimed in Lan's direction.

"No!" Lan screamed. The sarn pulled the trigger. The bolt sped toward him. He had no time to duck or leap out of the way. The bolt was moving too quickly. He closed his eyes. *I can't die*, he told himself. *I can't die. This can't be happening. It's a dream. There's no way this is real. I . . . I . . .*

And then there was a release. A feeling of complete and utter solace, a calm like no other calm he had ever felt, washed over him as all of his anxiety flushed from his body. Lan heard nothing but his own, rhythmic heartbeat.

I should have been hit by now.

He slowly opened his eyes. He saw the sarn leader through the downpour, jaw dropped open, staring at Lan in amazement. He

had let his crossbow arm fall to his side. Lan looked down at his feet. The crossbow bolt lay in the mud a short distance from him. *If I believed in Ohn, I'd thank him for this.*

The sounds of the storm and the battle rushed back into his head with such force that he squinted. He quickly grabbed the girl and tossed her back over his shoulder, then continued his flight back to the house.

The mystery of the crossbow bolt filled his mind. It should have killed him. It had flown directly at his head. He should be lying in the mud taking his last breaths. But then, this was not the first time something strange had ever happened to him. He forced it to the back of his mind--more important things needed his attention at the moment. He ran onward.

"Alex!" his father shouted. "I'm behind you now! Run!"

Lan topped the hill and ran along the road away from the fighting. His father ran behind him and fended off any attackers. Once over the hill, Gerhard motioned for Lan to stop. Blood of human and sarn alike had soaked into his father's clothes, and his sword dripped with the thick red liquid from tip to hilt.

"Take her on to the house. I've got to go back and help my men finish these cretins off. Go! You're safe for now." He patted Lan on his arm then turned around and charged back toward the fight. A low, haunting horn blast sounded from the battle, followed by two more quick bursts. Lan hurried on toward the house. He hoped the girl would still be alive when he got there.

The trip back home was a haze. He noticed nothing but the pounding rain and the weight on his back. He would not have even realized he was at home had he not heard Anya's shouting. He looked up and saw his mother standing in the door of the house, Anya wrapped around her legs. His mother shouted something he could not understand through the sound of the rain in his ears.

He glanced back over his shoulder. He couldn't see anything through the solid wall of rain. He knew that somewhere back there the fight raged on as his father still struggled for the lives of his family and farmhands. Lan ran on up the porch stairs. He motioned his mother and sister out of the way, and continued into the house. His mother snatched up Anya and carried her inside. She slammed and barred the door behind them.

"Bring her in here, Lan. Quickly!" She hurried off into the washroom. Lan followed close behind. "There," his mother said. She pointed to a blanket she had laid on the floor. "Set her down." Lan knelt down and let the girl slide from his back gently to the floor.

"Now what?" he asked his mother. "Go wait out in the front room with your sister while I fix her up." She smiled grimly at him. She tossed him a towel to dry off with, then motioned for him to leave with Anya. Lan nodded silently, took Anya by the hand, and closed the door as he led her out.

"The girl looks bad," said his sister.

"She'll be okay, Anya. Mother's taking good care of her."

"Mother's good at taking care of me when I'm sick!"

"Yes, she is," he said. "Just be quiet for now and let's wait for father to get back." Lan toweled himself dry as best he could. He then led Anya out into the family room. He sat down in the padded chair that had been his favorite for as long as he could remember and took his sister into his lap. He spoke soothingly, trying to reassure himself more than her. "Everything is going to be all right, Anya. Everything is going to be all right."

He leaned back, and after a few moments exhaustion set in and he fell asleep.

Chapter Two

Lan slowly opened his eyes to find himself alone in the front room. Two tall candles flickered above the fireplace, casting a soft amber glow about the room. He heard raindrops pattering softly outside. A glimpse through the only window showed nothing but a dull grey light. How much time had passed since he returned with the girl?

He stood up and peered across into the dining room. Nothing stood there but the plainly-crafted table and chairs, shrouded in shadows. He walked out into the deserted hall.

Nothing stirred in the washroom. All of the towels and bowls his mother had set out had been taken away. All he found in his bedroom were his bags resting on the floor. The glass shards from the mirror were gone.

On the way to the stairs, he glanced into Anya's room. She was curled up on her bed, asleep. Clothes and toys littered her floor from her moving preparations. *At least someone is still here*, he thought.

He slowly walked up the stairs. The hallway was dark, save one pale light coming from the guestroom. He went to the door and looked in. His mother was stretching sheets across the bed against the far wall. He stood there silently and watched her work. He knew this would be one of the last times he would ever see her like this.

She finished tucking in one end of the sheets, gave the bed a good pat, then looked up from her work. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Sure," Lan said. He walked into the room. "I'm still a bit drowsy--" he yawned "--but I'm feeling fine."

"Good." She turned her back toward him and started tucking in the sheets along the side of the bed. "I still can't believe Ger dragged you out in all that. I know he thought you were the only one, but--"

"Only one?" he asked. "There were a lot of men out there. Why did he have to take me?"

"Lan, she's part mesefu."

"I know. He told me, and I could see it in her." He thought about how mysterious the girl had looked. The unnatural color of her eyes haunted him the most. "I don't see why that should make any difference, though."

"You know most people don't care for mesefu--"

"But why? It's pointless. She's not even a full mesefu. If I hadn't known any better, I would have thought she was one of us! She doesn't look at all like a mesefu's supposed to look. None of the sleek clothing, none of--"

"Lan." His mother turned to face him. "I know it's hard to understand. Sometimes I can't even understand it, and I've been around much longer than you. That's just the way it is. The mesefu and humans can barely tolerate each other." Lan sighed. "If only more people saw things the way you did." She smiled again and embraced him closely. "Maybe you'll learn to be a great politician in Porthos and find a way to change things. I know you can do it."

"Thanks." He squeezed her briefly, then let her go back to her sheets. "Where is she?" he asked.

"Your father took her into our room to discuss some things. When she came to her senses, she insisted on leaving alone, but Ger refused. You know him. He said she could stay here in the guestroom tonight and leave with you boys in the morning."

"Leave with us? She was heading for Pyran?"

Mara nodded. "She said she was travelling to her uncle's place in Porthos and her parents were unable to come. I think she said her uncle's name was . . . Keon." She paused both in speech and in action. Lan stood there in silence waiting for her to go on. Seconds passed.

Lan opened his mouth to begin to speak. "So--"

"Dear Ohn," his mother said as she turned from the unfinished bed. She walked hurriedly from the room and down the stairs. "Why didn't I realize it earlier . . ." He noticed that her face had gone pale as she passed him.

What on Kalra was that all about? he wondered. He walked out into the hall and looked down the stairs. He heard his mother in the family room, mumbling to herself. He started to walk toward the stairs when a voice from his parents' room caught his attention.

". . . think you're hiding something." It was his father, speaking in a gruff voice. Lan crept up to the door and put his head against it to better hear what the conversation.

"Not at all," retorted a stern, assured voice. "I have no reason to hide anything. For the last time, I was going to my uncle's house in Porthos. My parents couldn't go because my mother is sick. My father stayed to take care of her. I've made the journey many times alone and nothing's ever happened before. Sure, this time I was unfortunate enough to run upon some vagabond sarn who--"

"There was nothing vagabond about those sarn. They were trained soldiers who managed to kill off several of my men before they fled so abruptly. I don't know why they retreated, but if they're after you, keeping you here is a danger. There's no telling when they'll regroup and come back. I'll let you stay for the night, but--"

"They're *not* after me! I don't know what they wanted or what they were doing. Perhaps they felt like having some sport. That's not unheard of, you know."

"What did you say your uncle's name was again?" asked his father.

"Keon."

"Interesting. Very interesting."

"Why do you say that?" Her voice was faltering.

"I knew a Keon once. He . . ." The words faded into a murmur. Lan could only hear muffled sounds. His father must have moved to the far side of the room. He sat there, anxious to hear how the conversation would turn out. While he could not discern any individual words, he definitely noticed that the only voice he heard was his father's. The girl never got in so much as one word. After a few minutes, the murmuring became clear again as his father moved back near the door.

". . . of who you are, I will let you stay the night. You may eat with us this evening then retire to the room Mara's prepared. Tomorrow morning, you will leave with my son and his friend for Porthos."

"I'll be only too glad to leave," she grunted and stomped toward the door. Lan quickly stepped away and started to walk toward the stairs. He heard the door open then slam shut behind the girl. "*Bist*," she muttered under her breath. "*Oke endosher efu nubushirai kya. Kei endosher ylu nubushirai neidto--*"

The sound of the mesefu language baffled and mystified him. The syllables flowed seamlessly from her mouth. Though he could sense her anger behind the words, they still sounded beautiful. *Pyranian sounds so dull and clunky compared to that.*

He turned around to see her looking at him. She looked eerily beautiful now that she was clean. Her almond-shaped eyes were now a deep brown that verged closely on black. It matched the wispy hair that flowed down the sides of her face and stopped just above her shoulders. Her skin glowed a pale, creamy white. The tips of her ears protruded slightly from beneath her hair, giving away her mixed heritage at a glance. She wore an old grey tunic of his, along with her own tattered brown pants and black belt. The pouch still hung there, still bulging with its contents. A thin leather strap encircled her neck and fell down below the neckline of the tunic. Lan silently wondered what kind of trinket a half-mesefu would wear around her neck, and if it would be as beautiful as all mesefu jewelry was rumored to be.

"What are you looking at?" she demanded as she wrinkled her nose. "Those aren't for you to gawk over!" She folded her arms quickly over her chest.

"That's not what I was . . . I mean, that is . . ."

"Well, what were you doing?"

"Um--nothing--nothing much. Just, uh, just going back down to my room." Her beauty and charm faded as her attitude overshadowed them. Even the memories of her beautiful language started to vanish, a new harshness replacing them.

She grunted unintelligibly and walked into the guestroom. *Awkward fool*, he scolded himself as he walked solemnly down the stairs. *Esmond would have handled that much better. But who was she to accuse me of staring at her chest? I was only looking her over. . .*

A sharp knock rapped on the front door. He raced to answer it, hoping it was his friend. He flung the door open to be confronted by what appeared to be a walking stack of luggage. Three large leather bags, stacked haphazardly on one another, teetered precariously back and forth. Two gangly legs protruded from beneath them. Rainwater dripped off of everything, and the bottom bag had thick grey mud caked all over it.

"Esmond?" asked Lan as he dragged the misshapen heap through the door.

"Damn it, Lan, watch out! I don't want to drop these blessed bags again!" Lan hopped to the side as Esmond stumbled forward. His friend wavered and nearly fell, but Lan grabbed the bags and steadied him.

"Here, let me help you set these things down."

Esmond grunted as he let the bags fall. They hit the wooden floor with a dull thud and splashed water and mud about. "Now that," Esmond started as he stared at the leather bags that held his clothes and belongings, "was a horrible experience." Esmond slumped down to his knees on the floor beside the bags. "I'll never do that again. There had better be someone coming with that carriage to help put these things on it, because I refuse to carry them another second." He shook a fist at the stack of bags. Mud and water oozed from them onto the wooden floor. "I'll leave the infernal things here, by Ohn. Just a bunch of worthless books and underclothes--"

"You carried those by yourself all the way from your house?" Lan interrupted. He didn't care to know any more about the state of Esmond's undergarments.

Esmond puffed a little from exhaustion then looked up at Lan with his bright blue eyes. "Well, no, not really," he said through gasps of air. Water dripped from his hair onto his drenched white shirt. "My mother was helping me for a bit since my father was at home resting from the fight, and then we got into some sort of argument--you know how my mother is--and she got mad and started shouting at me." He sighed and brushed some wet hair away from his face. "As usual, I ignored her, and as usual, she got even madder. Finally, she dropped my other bag and stomped back off toward home, mumbling to herself."

"She'll be back, I'm sure," Lan said. "She'll calm down."

"If you say so," Esmond mumbled. His shoes squeaked loudly on the floor as he stood up. A large puddle had formed at his feet from the water that dripped from his clothes and his thick blond hair. He looked to Lan expectantly. "Could you get me a towel?"

"Sure." Lan looked down at the mud on the floor and his stomach twisted. "If I don't get that mud cleaned up before my mother sees it, I may never make it out of Kagon. I'll be right back."

Lan ran up the stairs as Esmond stood in his puddle, surrounded by his dirty bags.

He walked past the closed guestroom door where the girl was resting. He wondered if he would have a chance to talk to her later. Alone. He wanted to know more about her, about where she was from, and about what his father had said to her. *And, he thought, to try and make up for my pathetic first impression.*

"Lan?" Esmond's voice brought his mind back to the task at hand. Lan hurried on to the end of the hall. He could hear his mother, now in her bedroom, talking to his father, but they were speaking too softly to understand. He opened the closet and grabbed two white cloth towels. *Mother'll kill me if I stain these cleaning up that mud, he thought. But then, she'll kill me if I leave it on the floor, too. I can't win.* He sighed and pushed the closet door closed.

As he turned around, he saw the guestroom door creep open. A gust of cold air sailed through it and swept down the hall. He pulled the towels against his chest with a slight shiver. Harvest season was coming on faster than he would like it to. Slowly, he approached the door and peeked in.

The girl sat on the bed, staring out the window, her dark hair blowing in the wind. She was leaning back, breathing deeply. How she had opened the door and gotten back to the bed in such a relaxed position so quickly eluded him. He stood in the doorway staring at her in the silent breeze. He wanted to say something to her, but had no idea how to begin.

"Yes?" Her voice startled him. She spoke without moving, still gazing out the window.

"Um . . . hello there." A nervous chill ran through him as he spoke. "You--you seem to be feeling better."

***"Yes," she said flatly, not looking back. She did not have as strange an accent as he would have expected, especially after hearing her speaking her native tongue. But then, would the mesefu language be her native tongue? The mesefu tended to look down on mixed races just as much as the humans. Where did she come from?

He stepped into the room, trying to come up with something to say that would not sound awkward. "I'm Lan. Well, not really. My name's Alexander, but everyone calls me Lan. Well, except my father. I don't remember why, because they've done it since before I was born, so--"

"Do you always talk this fast?" She turned to look at him. Her eyebrows were raised and her lips twisted in a questioning manner. "And how could they have called you anything before you were born?"

"Well . . . um . . . that's not what I meant to say. I actually think it was Esmond who--oh, that's not important." He squeezed the towels tightly to his chest as his knees began wobbling. "Sorry I'm acting so strange. It's uh--it's just that I've never seen anyone like you before and I feel really nervous and--"

"You're the one who saved me, aren't you?" Lan saw a flicker of recognition in her eyes.

"Yes. That's me." He felt the warmth of blood rushing into his cheeks as a smile formed on his lips.

"I suppose it is only appropriate that I introduce myself to you. My name is Ria."

"That's a nice name. Is it a common mesefu--"

"I don't care to be interrogated again," she said.

"I'm not trying--" Lan begin.

"I know you're not in here just to introduce yourself. You probably came in to gawk and stare. After all, I'm a *half-breed*." She spat the last word out sarcastically.

"But--" He tried to interrupt her, but she carried on.

"I know you humans hate me. All of you. Even your father, though he denies it."

He stared at her in disbelief, his mouth hanging open trying to form around words that would not come to him. His father would never carry hatred for anyone because of his or her race or heritage, and neither would Lan. He was offended that she would

even suggest such a thing. Just telling her otherwise would not change a thing, however. He knew that the only way to prove her race didn't matter to him was to show it.

"I'm not here to hurt you or question you." Her accusatory looks did not show signs of fading as he continued. "I only came in here to talk to you. I saw you open the door and wondered if you were feeling better or possibly needed anything."

"Needed anything?" she asked. "Like a solid interrogation or a swift shove out the window?"

"No," he retorted. "I was wondering if you needed anything to drink or eat. Perhaps more medicine or clean sheets. Anything I could get you to make you feel better." He paused, letting the towels drop to his side. "I just wanted to meet you, that's all." She was being tough on him, and he did not know how many more of her accusations he could take before he snapped in frustration and started shouting. And that was something he did not need to do. It would only help her prove her point.

"And you expect me to believe that a human would want to try and help me?"

"My mother helped you, didn't she? My father didn't throw you out, did he?"

She started to speak but stopped herself. She stared at him, unsure of how to react. "Still--" she began.

"You'll just have to trust me," Lan said. "You must be used to people mistreating you, what with the way you go around assuming every human's going to hurt you or shrug you off."

A new wave of anger and disbelief swept across her face. "Who do you think you are, trying to tell me what I've experienced--"

"I've heard the stories about how people of mixed race are treated. The mesefu and the humans both deplore them and do whatever it takes to be rid of them. They're looked at as inferior."

"How do you--" she started, but Lan refused to stop.

"Why do you think my father came all the way back to this house to get me to help you as opposed to any of his other farmhands? He could have easily instructed one of them to bring you back, but no. Why?" He paused to see if she had anything else to say. She turned her head away from him. Confident she would not try to interrupt him, he continued.

"Because we're different, that's why. Because we don't care where a person comes from or whether or not their ears have points. All we see are people. We don't see mesefu, human, or anything in-between." Lan started pacing back and forth in front of her. She continued staring at the sheets on the bed as another gust of wind came in the window.

"My father taught me that. He's a good man, a very good man." He stopped to catch his breath. Ria sat motionless. "Why did you accuse me of trying to mistreat you? When did I ever show any signs of that?"

"You . . . you didn't," she uttered. "I apologize. *Saurei wes.*"

"What? Are you trying to confuse me? Or was that some insult I wouldn't understand, because I'm a human?"

"Never mind." She shook her head. "It's just a mesefu apology. I never should have said those things about your father. I know better. I was just angry that he's being so protective."

She talked as if she knew his father. How was that possible, though? His father had never made any mention of knowing any half-mesefu girls in his life. Especially none he would ever be protective of. Perhaps she was mistaken. "Do you know my--"

"What's going on in here?" Lan and Ria both jumped and turned to the door. His mother stood there, a stern look on her face. "What were you shouting about, Lan?"

"Well, I wasn't really shouting--"

A shout from downstairs interrupted him. "Lan! Where on Kalra *are* you? You went up those stairs ages ago! I don't think towels will help me much anymore. I'm pretty much dry. Can't say the same for the floor, though . . ."

"Lan! You didn't tell me Esmond was here! By Ohn, if there's water on my floor--" She stomped into the room, snatched up the towels, and marched down the stairs.

"I have to go, but I want to talk some more." Lan said to Ria.

"I understand." She looked into his eyes. He felt as if her gaze was piercing into his soul. Chills ran through his body. "Again, I apologize."

"It's okay," he said, feeling as if something was probing at his mind. "I'll see you later tonight." He began backing out of the room, suddenly eager to get away from the strange, intrusive feeling

her eyes had given him. He noticed before he looked away that her eyes were now as deep blue as the sky on a clear summer day. They were strangely hypnotic and frightening. As he turned away and began walking down the stairs, he suddenly felt, in the pit of his stomach, that this girl would somehow change his life.

#

"Remind me why I agreed to play this with you again?"

Esmond was sitting across the Skirmish board from Lan on the floor of his empty room.

"Because we're going to test something." Lan began sorting through the pieces, and deciding on what should be substituted for what.

"If you ask me, this is all kind of morbid."

"Not really," Lan said, as he started placing pieces on the board. "I just want to see if they had any chance at all. I don't know everything about what happened today, and I may never, but I just want to see if those sarn thought they had a chance." He pointed at one piece--the piece normally reserved for the Wizard--and looked up to Esmond. "Okay, this is going to be the girl. She's wounded, and can't move unless this piece--" he pointed to a Wizard of another color "--captures her. Then they are assumed to be moving together, but the capturing piece can only move at half speed. To simulate having to carry her and all."

"What does that mean?" Esmond asked.

"What does what mean?" Lan started setting up more pieces. The Pikemen would easily suffice for the farmhands and the sarn.

"This stuff about the sarn. So what if they thought they had a chance?"

"If they thought they had a chance," Lan began, laying out the last sarn pieces--all that remained were pieces representing the sarn leader and his father, "then there has to be some other reason they retreated than being attacked by farmhands. Farmhands they must have planned on, knowing where they were. Something else must have happened to make them flee."

"But what if they didn't have a chance in the first place? What if they didn't know where they were?"

"Then something is very, very wrong about what happened today." He placed a Sergeant down as his father, and an Archer

down as the sarn leader. "Now, this Archer is the sarn leader, and all these Pikemen around him are sarn. The Sergeant is my father, and the Pikemen around *him* are his farmhands. You already know the rest."

Esmond sighed. "I'm going to lose."

"I know," Lan said, "which is why I'm controlling the sarn. If they had a chance, under the conditions as I saw them, then if I win, it means something strange happened to scare them off. Either that, or I'm just a better strategist than their leader, which I highly doubt. If they didn't have a chance, then I'll lose." He smiled at Esmond, but Esmond did not return the gesture.

"I don't see how a stupid game of Skirmish can determine that," Esmond said. "Lots of things happen in life that can't be figured out by a silly strategy game, Lan."

"You're just jealous because I'm undefeated!" Lan smiled again.

"Perhaps." Esmond finally smiled back. "So, who goes first? Are there any other new rules than the rescue rule?"

"You do, and no, there are no other rules."

They set to playing the game, one that Lan never thought he would ever get Esmond to play again. For as long as he could remember, Lan had never lost a game of Skirmish. Not even to his father, who was actually in the military in his youth. The game was used to help plan battle strategies in wars, as well as re-enact old battles to help teach up and coming commanders.

What Lan was not telling Esmond was that he was pretty much sure he knew by now what had made the sarn retreat so hastily after he escaped with the girl. It had something to do with that crossbow bolt dropping at his feet.

Esmond was just about to place the piece representing Lan when Lan cried out, "No, not that way!"

"What are you saying?"

"I didn't go that way. You can't expect to just walk right in there and take her! You'll die! You have to go around!"

"If you tell me every move to make," Esmond scowled, "then of course you'll win. There's no hope for me, is there?"

"Esmond, I'm trying to make this as close to what happened as possible, okay? Look, if you're going to make such a fuss about it, then just go on and I'll play it through on my own. I just thought

it would be fun to get in one more game together before we leave tomorrow."

"Fine, fine." Esmond reluctantly moved the Lan piece to a position alongside the road.

"There, now," Lan said. "My move."

The sarn were mixed in combat with the farmhands. He could not capture them yet, just move close to them. He did, and then he remembered the sarn leader and his crossbow. The Lan piece was not quite in range yet, so he couldn't fire. Had the sarn moved closer to him to get a good shot? He wasn't sure. He had been paying too much attention to the girl. *I'll imagine my father charging in distracted him, and that he only noticed me when I started going up the hill with the girl.*

A few minutes later, a couple of farmhand and sarn pieces lay dead on the board, and Esmond made the capture. "There, I got her! I win! Yes! Finally, I beat you!"

"No, no," Lan corrected, "you didn't. You've got to get back to the edge of the board, remember?"

"Oh, Ohn be damned!"

Mara, passing by the door on her way to the kitchen, called out, "Esmond, watch your mouth!" Esmond shrugged her off, half-smiling, and started moving the Lan piece away from the melee.

"No, half speed, remember? You can't move full speed with that piece while carrying another!"

"Oh, right." Esmond backed the piece up. "I'm doomed, aren't I?" It was now on the edge of the road, about where Lan had been when the sarn leader had shot at him. Only in this game, the sarn leader piece was too far away. Lan had kept him near the back, close to his father's piece. He wanted to see if he could bring down all the farmhands, his father included. It was the only way to ensure victory--total annihilation of the enemy. Leaving just one alive meant there was a chance, however small, that he could lose.

A moment later, he saw his opening, and he went for it. The sarn leader captured his father. "There! The leader is down! The rest should be easy!" Lan clasped his hands together, his mouth cut wide in a devious grin.

"Lan, you just killed your own father . . . and you're excited about it?"

"I did no such thing. I just captured a piece in a game, Esmond. Pay attention to what's reality and what's not, won't you?"

A few moves later Esmond's pieces were all but gone. The Lan piece was nearing the edge of the board, however, and two farmhands still remained. Lan had one of them shot with the sarn leader's crossbow. Two enemy pieces left. A farmhand in an out of the way place, and his own representation, four spaces from the edge of the board. On Esmond's next turn, he very well could win.

The last farmhand doesn't matter, he told himself. There are still plenty of sarn left to tackle him later. I've got to move for the cutoff. Esmond will never expect this.

Lan knew the look was on his face. The same look he had seen forced upon himself in the cracked mirror earlier in the day. He had devised his strategy. He was going to win.

"Charging and flanking," he said, naming the rules he was putting to use as he began wrapping the remaining sarn troops around the Lan piece.

"You're leaving them undefended from the back? With that piece of mine ready to pounce on one of them next turn?"

"Yes," Lan said. "I know I'll lose troops for this, but I won't lose sight of the goal. It's the goal that is important here, because it is for a greater good. Only, playing as the sarn, I have no idea what that is to them. Anyway, as I said, charging and flanking." It meant he got to move double speed, and he even did it with the Archer piece--the sarn leader--even though he knew it meant missing a turn to fire. He had to surround the Lan piece at all costs.

"There, my turn's done."

Esmond looked down at the board in confusion, shaking his head, not understanding why Lan had just left his men open to a rear attack. With a swift blow, Esmond took down three of the sarn troops from behind, leaving only one sarn troop and the sarn leader. This was going to be close, but Lan already saw his victory.

Taking advantage of the gap created by the now-dead sarn, Esmond moved the Lan piece away from the surviving enemies.

"Okay, your move."

This was it. He had to do it this turn or not at all. Esmond would win with his next move. Both sarn had already charged, so killing the farmhand was out of the question. He was too far away.

He would just have to set things up so that the farmhand would be forced into capture, but only after he took the Lan piece.

"Oh, damn it all," Esmond cursed. "You've won, I see it already."

Lan moved the Archer forward one space. "Sarn leader fires on Lan. Lan is dead."

"There, see? You've won."

"Not yet. I've still got to kill that farmhand. If he survives to get the girl after the sarn are dead, then I've done no good. The sarn leader can't shoot next turn, he must reload, and by now he's too close to the farmhand to escape death. So . . ."

Lan moved his sarn soldier piece into a position where the farmhand was stuck. Its only options would be to run away, creating an endless chase that would never be resolved, capture the sarn leader, or capture the sarn soldier. Both of the latter options, however, would result in his own demise the next turn, inevitably, as either one placed him in range of attack from the other. Lan had won.

"There," he said, as if putting the final touches on the move. "Now I've won, unless you want to run around the board all afternoon."

"Hooray," Esmond sighed, staring at the board. "I *should* just run around the board all night to make you mad, but--"

"Boys!" called his mother from the doorway. Lan had not noticed her standing there. How long had she been watching? "Shouldn't you be going to get the last few things of Esmond's? It's getting late, and we'll be eating soon. I don't want you boys out after dark, and the sun'll be setting within the hour. There'll still be plenty of men out there to watch over you and keep you safe. Hurry along, now. There'll be stuff to eat when you get back."

"I'm hungry." Esmond smiled and stood up. "And I need to go get my stuff. Come on!" He brushed his pants straight and started walking out. "I may have lost the battle," he said over his shoulder, "but I'll make an impression on that half-mesefu girl she'll never forget!"

"Esmond!" Mara scolded. "Watch your mouth, I said! Now hurry up. You too, Lan."

"Sure, mother," Lan said, absentmindedly. He was still absorbed in his victory. The sarn had won--he had won. He had

just accomplished what the sarn leader had not. This meant that something had indeed made the sarn unsure that they could prevail. It had to be the crossbow bolt.

Dear Ohn, what did I do?

He followed Esmond out of the house, smiling, but at the same time nervous on the inside. Deep inside, memories started trying to force their way into his mind of a time when other such inexplicable things had happened to him. He had an idea of what exactly he had done, and the thought of it scared him stiff.

It had to be magic. It was the only thing he could think of that would make the sarn retreat. Their kind could not wield magic, and it frightened them into hysterics, so the tales said. The crossbow bolt. He must have stopped it with . . .

Dear Ohn indeed.

Chapter Three

"What? She's also a half-breed?" Lan was telling Esmond more about the battle and the girl as they walked down the road past the battleground. The bodies had all been cleared away in the hours since the attack, and the rains had stopped. It was eerily silent and calm as the two young men walked down the muddy road under a darkening sky.

They were on their way back from Esmond's house with his remaining luggage. Esmond's mother had apologized and he apologized to her. Lan was glad his friend would be leaving his family on a good note.

"Yeah. She's got the thin, slanted eyes and the pointed ears. There's definitely some mesefu in her, no mistaking it." Lan thought about the strange way her eyes changed color, shivering at the memory of her penetrating gaze as he had left the guestroom. "Her eyes are really bizarre. They keep changing color. It makes me feel a bit uneasy."

"I knew it!" Esmond exclaimed. "I knew mesefu had strange powers! Even half-mesefu! She was trying to hypnotize you, Lan. She wanted to make you her slave for the rest of your life!"

"No," Lan laughed. "She's not anything like that. She is beautiful, though. Very beautiful." He thought back to the delicate way her hair had flowed across her shoulders in the wind back at his house. He remembered his first good look at her standing in the hallway, the beautiful sounds of the mesefu language rolling across her tongue--

"You're blushing," Esmond noticed.

"No I'm not," Lan retorted.

"Yes, you are." Esmond smiled and elbowed Lan. "Have you finally met the girl of your dreams? I never thought it possible! Especially after your little fling with--what was that pig-nosed girl's name from school?"

"Elsinda," Lan huffed. "And there was no fling."

"Yes, there was."

"No, there wasn't. In fact, if I remember correctly, it was *you* who had the eyes for Elsinda."

"What?" Esmond said, aghast. "I would never!" His smile gave away his sarcasm.

"Sure you would. How could anyone ever forget that chant that was going around about you two? 'Esmond and Elsinda, back behind the school. Kissing and hugging--'"

"Okay," Esmond spat. "That's quite enough. I heard that chant far more times than is good for *anyone's* mental well-being."

"You see? I was right."

"I know," Esmond said. "But still, there *was* something of an attraction between you two before she set her sights on me."

"Set her sights on you?" Lan let forth a hearty laugh, patting Esmond on the back. "I think your memory is a bit rusty. I remember seeing you oftentimes staring at her."

"Never!" Esmond smiled.

"Whatever," Lan sighed, smiling. He knew he was right and Esmond was just playing the fool.

"You never answered my question," Esmond said.

"What question?"

"About the girl. Ria, I think. Is that her name? You know I'm horrible with names." It was true. It was mainly because of Esmond's failure to remember Lan's name the first few times they met that he had come to be known as Lan and not Alexander.

"Yes, that's her name, and no, she's not the girl of my dreams." Lan swallowed hard, thinking about her more and more with each passing second. Perhaps Esmond had been right about her putting him under some sort of trance. *Get that out of your head, Lan. It's nonsense*, he told himself.

"Oh, that's right," Esmond said. "I forgot--you dream about Biggs' cow." Esmond started laughing. Lan jabbed him in the shoulder lightly and started laughing as well.

"The only dreams I have even remotely related that poor old cow are nightmares of my mother shouting and scolding me after what we did to it." Lan shivered at the memory of his mother's wrath.

"I'll never get over that," Esmond laughed.

"What, over my mother's shouting at me?"

"No, no. Over what happened with the cow."

Lan chuckled. "That *was* pretty funny." He sighed, gazing across the rain-soaked fields of grain at the dark, cloudy horizon. Far off in the distance, thunder began to roll again, announcing the coming of another rainstorm. There were a few farmhands scattered about the fields, going about their daily business. "Do you think it was worth it?" he asked.

"The punishment? Yeah, it was worth it. I've never quite seen a cow like that before." Esmond smiled as he bounced along, deftly dodging mud puddles in the lumpy road.

"I suppose it was too," Lan smiled. Aside from their feet scraping the ground and the low breeze across the fields, it was strangely silent. Though it made many feel uneasy, Lan always loved the silence before a storm. It was very calming to him, very peaceful. He often wondered if that total silence and serenity was what death was like. If so, he supposed it would not be that bad when the time finally came for him to set aside the memories and experiences of his life. Just sit in the void for all eternity, listening to the blissful silence . . .

"So, when we get back, do you think you could introduce me to her?" Esmond asked.

"Who, Biggs' cow?" Lan asked, grinning with sarcasm.

"No, you dolt. The girl. She was upstairs in the guestroom the entire time we were playing Skirmish."

"I won't have to introduce you. My mother or father probably will. She's eating dinner with us tonight."

"Really? That's great!" Esmond clasped his hands together in delight. "I've always wanted to meet a mesefu. Well, a half-mesefu will do too, of course. Maybe she'll do that eerie eye thing to me!"

Lan shook his head in silent disapproval.

"You know I'm only joking, right--"

Something glinting in the few rays of the setting sun's light that broke through the clouds caught Lan's eye. "Hold on," he said, cutting off Esmond. He could see something small and shiny out in the field but could not tell what it was from this distance. It flickered like a signaling mirror from a wayward traveler seeking assistance. He set down the bag he was carrying and started walking hurriedly toward the object through the thick grass, leaving Esmond standing on the muddy road alone.

"Lan, wait! Where are you going?" Lan paid no attention to Esmond as he sprinted through the field. "I thought we had to stay off of Biggs' land now! Come back here!" Lan continued to ignore his friend's shouts. "Lan? Have you gone deaf? Did that girl do something to your head? If you get caught out there again, you'll wish--"

"Hush, Esmond," Lan shouted back, not listening for a response. He was upon the shining thing he had seen from the road, and he was shocked at what he saw. There were two dead sarn here, one of them still wearing his helmet, both lying in a bloody heap with deep slash marks covering their bodies. They had so much skin and meat missing from parts their bodies that the bones peeked out. Looks of terror were frozen on their stiff faces.

His first desire was to run, but something fought it back. He gazed down at the lifeless sarn in shock. He had never been this close to a dead person before. Something about them looked fake, as if they were statues in a festival show. The blood covering their bodies and the surrounding ground looked more like some sort of syrup than what it truly was. *Maybe this is how my father and other soldiers come to deal with death. It's so easy to imagine it's all fake.*

One body was lying across the other. Lan kicked it off and it rolled face down onto the muddy ground with a sickening watery thud, bending back some of the grain stalks. Stuck into its back was a silver-hilted dagger with a large red gem set into the pommel. He grabbed the dagger and pulled it out slowly. It came out easily, although accompanied with a disgusting sloshing sound. There was not even the least amount of resistance. He fought back his nausea again and wiped the dagger off as best he could using some tattered cloth lying with the bodies.

The hilt was cold to the touch. The blade was made of a material he had never seen before in his life. It was black at its thickest, and grew lighter green toward the edges as it thinned out. The sharpest points along the sides and tip were a bright emerald green. He had heard tales of the deep green mesefu mineral before, but this was his first time to ever lay eyes on it. *Renol*, it was called-- a strange, tough mineral that only the mesefu could forge, using their magic. He knew that this dagger could not belong to anyone living or working at the farm. It had to belong to Ria.

He stood there in the cold dusk studying the intricate patterns carved into the silver hilt as clouds flowed overhead and his grey travelling cloak flapped in the wind against his back. Many of the carvings looked as if they could be writing of some sort. He could not be sure, however, as he had never seen any mesefu writing.

Lightning flashed in the southern sky, followed a few seconds later by thunder, breaking the eerily calming silence. He slipped the dagger into a pocket in his robe and ran back to the road.

Esmond was standing there, arms crossed, staring at him as he returned. "What was that all about? You have me more confused than when--"

"Nothing," he interrupted flatly. "Just a few dead bodies hidden in the grain stalks that nobody found. Killed while fleeing the fight, I guess. Come on, we need to be heading back." He glanced up at the sky. "Looks like the rain might start up again soon, and I do *not* want to be caught out here again."

"Rain? Who cares about the rain?" Esmond's eyes lit up. "Let's go see those corpses!"

"Are you crazy? Esmond, they were just corpses. There's nothing much to see."

"Am *I* crazy? You're the one who rejoiced at slaughtering your own father earlier."

"That was *not* my father, it was a game."

"Yes, and those are corpses out there and I want to go see them!"

"Esmond, I--" Lan wanted to get away from the corpses and death as quickly as possible, so he resorted to the one tactic he

knew would triumph over Esmond's grotesque interest. "Mother's rolls will be cold if we don't hurry."

"You've got a point there," Esmond said. "Okay, so we can check out the corpses later. Maybe tonight after dinner!" Lan shook his head. They walked back to the house in silence, Esmond bouncing around puddles, Lan deep in thought about the dagger and Ria's connection to his father. The clouds overhead held their waters for another time.

#

The smell of the steaming hot rolls on the table in front of Lan made his mouth water. His mother walked back and forth from the kitchen carrying plates piled with various delicious-looking foods. Esmond reached to grab one of the gleaming, buttery rolls, but Lan elbowed him.

"Ow!" Esmond jerked his hand back, rubbing his side.

"Wait," Lan said.

"We've never waited before," Esmond complained.

"Just wait."

"What? Is it because of that girl? What's her name . . . Ria? Do you--" Lan jabbed him again.

"What?!" Esmond exclaimed.

Lan motioned toward Gerhard, sitting across from them at the table, head down. His hands were clasped over his head, threaded through his hair. He had not spoken a word since he had come downstairs from his room to the dinner table.

"What about him?" Esmond whispered. "He's not even paying any attention. Are you afraid to let your father know you're attracted to a--"

"Six men," Gerhard said, startling Lan and Esmond. "Six men. I can't believe this. What am I going to do?"

"You're going to stop worrying about it for now," said Mara as she returned to the dining room with a bowl of mixed fruit and a large plate piled with hot, juicy strips of meat. She stopped in front of the table, realizing that there was not enough room on it to set the food. Normally only four people ate at the dining table. Tonight they would be feeding two extras.

"Lan, could you move those candles?" she asked.

"Sure," he replied, standing up to grab the flickering white dinner candles in their ornately carved wooden holders. His

mother had bought them in Dryan one day at the central marketplace. Lan had been amazed she had bought them--they had been the only frivolous purchase she had made in years.

"How are we going to see anything?" Esmond asked, as Lan started carrying the room's only two sources of light to a small side table.

"Ger, light the lantern, will you?" Mara asked her husband.

"All right," he muttered reluctantly, raising his head for the first time and standing up. "Hand me a candle, Alex." Lan handed one of the candles to his father and sat the other one on the smaller table. Gerhard lit the lantern with the candle then stood back, staring at the bright light. "Damn," he cursed. "Not enough oil in there to last much more than a half hour. Here," he said, handing the candle to Lan. "I'll go get some more." He turned and walked from the room to the kitchen, where the lantern oil was stored.

"Your father is upset about losing those six men today," his mother said to him and Esmond. "He feels responsible for their deaths. He's still got that military mentality, I suppose. 'Chain of command means chain of responsibility.'" She sighed as she arranged the food on the table, then she started back toward the kitchen. Gerhard came wandering past her carrying a jar of oil.

"Those men weren't trained in combat. What was I thinking? I never should have called them to come help," he said. "I should have taken those sarn on myself."

"You stop that right now, Gerhard Lansing," Mara scolded. "It's not your fault, and I don't want to hear any more about it. This is the boys' last night here, so let's just put it behind us for now. This should be a happy time for the boys, or at least as happy as we can make it, given the circumstances."

Gerhard brought the lantern down and opened the oil reservoir. "You can't just forget people who died under your command, Mara."

"I'm not asking you to forget, Ger. That's what the memorial service tomorrow afternoon is for. I don't want to talk about this any more, understand?" She stood with her hands on her hips, awaiting his reply.

He filled the lantern silently, closed the reservoir, and hung it back on the hook above the table before saying anything. "All right. I'll keep quiet about it."

"Thank you," she said, dropping her arms to her side.

"Will you take this back into the kitchen on your way?" he asked, holding out the oil jar to her.

"Oh, I suppose," she said, walking back into the kitchen.

"What would anyone around here do without me? Why, if it wasn't for me . . ." Her voice trailed off as she got farther away.

In a way, Lan was regretful at having to miss the memorial service tomorrow. Though he did not feel responsible for anything that happened in the least and did not know any of the men who had died, he felt obligated to attend since he had been involved. He sighed, trying to turn his thoughts away from the more gruesome aspects of the day.

"I wonder what could be taking her so long?" he muttered under his breath. He sat impatiently, wringing his hands into the tablecloth. He had not seen Ria since their first meeting earlier in the day and had been looking forward to seeing her again. He fingered the ornate dagger under his tunic as he thought about her. *I wonder if she'll thank me for bringing this back to her?* he asked himself. *Probably not. She'll just yell at me and accuse me of trying to steal it. I'll probably never find out from her how she knows my father.* He sighed.

"Should we go get her?" Esmond asked, finally breaking the awkward silence pervading the room. "Because I'm getting really hungry staring at these rolls."

"She'll come," Lan said. "When she's ready."

"Maybe she fell asleep," Esmond said. "I'm not going to miss out on your mother's hot rolls because the dinner guest decided to snooze instead."

"She's not sleeping!" cried Anya cheerfully, running into the room. She ran over to Esmond and started giggling. "I saw her on the stairs! I think she's coming to eat with us. *Is she coming to eat with us?*" she asked Lan.

"She's supposed to," he replied quietly, half-irritated.

"She'd better!" Esmond exclaimed. "I've got to meet her. She's a half-breed!"

"Esmond!" scolded Mara, coming back in with one final bowl. "*Watch your mouth!*" She shook her head as she set the bowl down. "If there's one thing that scares me most about you leaving home, it's your mouth running around unchecked in Porthos."

"Yes ma'am." Esmond lowered his head.

"Ahem." Lan and Esmond simultaneously jerked their heads toward the door that led into the family room to see Ria standing there. She still wore the same clothes Lan had seen her in earlier. She walked over to the table and took the empty seat next to Gerhard that was usually reserved for Mara.

"That's--" Lan started.

"That's perfectly fine," said his mother. "Sit wherever you like. You are our guest tonight."

Lan shrugged as Anya walked over to her seat at the end of the table by Ria. "Hello!"

Ria looked down at the redheaded girl. "Hello there," she said, smiling.

Anya stared at her, kicking her legs back and forth while grinning. "I'm glad you're sitting next to me!"

"Anya, don't stare," Lan said.

"It's fine," Ria said. "I don't mind."

Oh, I see, Lan thought. As long as it's a little girl staring at you, it's perfectly fine. But once I take the slightest glance, you look to tear my head off!

Anya tugged at Ria's arm and leaned over to whisper something into her ear. Ria cut her eyes at Lan, smiling playfully. "He does, does he?" she said in a sing-songy voice.

"Anya!" he shouted. He heard Esmond snickering. His father shot him a sharp look of disapproval. Lan looked quickly away from his father back to Ria. He thought he saw the faintest hint of a blush in her cheeks, but it quickly vanished as she slid her chair in closer to the table.

"She's only joking," he said. "Whatever she said. She gets the strangest ideas sometimes. Once, she saw me talking to this stranger out on the main road and--"

"You can go ahead and start grabbing food," Mara said to Ria. "If I were you, I'd go for the rolls first, though. If you don't reach for one now, Esmond will beat you to them and there won't be any left."

"No," Esmond said. "I'll let her go first." He smiled at Ria, but she did not return the smile. She quietly shrugged and reached for the rolls. She grabbed one of them and tossed it on her plate.

Lan watched her in silence. Her hands were small and pale, but he could see definite signs of wear on the palms--they reminded

him of his father's hands, with the tough skin and small calluses. A shiver ran through him as he envisioned those hands holding the dagger he had found. *Surely she's not capable of what I saw out in that field. Surely not.*

"They found two dead sarn out in one of the fields by the road," his father began as he reached for one of the steaks. "They'd been cut to shreds. None of the men knew who'd done it. None of them had even been off the road." He paused, turning to Ria beside him. "You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

She took a bite from her roll and tossed it back down on the plate. She did not say a word.

"I suppose you'll be wanting something to drink with your meal," Mara said. "I'll go get some mugs and a fresh pitcher of water."

"Yes, please," Ria said, concentrating on her plate.

Mara bent over and said in Gerhard's ear, "And you behave yourself while I'm gone, understand?" He sighed, nodding his head. "Good. I'll be right back." She left the room once again.

When Gerhard was sure his wife was out of earshot, he turned to Ria. "Well, do you?"

"Father--" started Lan.

"I want to know," Gerhard interrupted. "Did you kill them? If you did, then keeping you here overnight and sending you off with my son and his friend in the morning is even more dangerous than I first thought." He paused, waiting for her to show some reaction. She sat chewing her roll in silence. "What are you doing with a weapon, anyway? No mesefu carry deadly weapons. Not even half-mesefu."

Lan noticed her wince slightly at the words 'half-mesefu'. "We're trying to eat," Lan said. "Just leave her alone for now, please? You heard mother."

"Fine, but if sarn break in here tonight and slaughter us all--"

"Gerhard Brennan Lansing!" Mara shouted as she entered the room carrying a metal pitcher and a platter holding six wooden mugs. "Your mouth is worse than Esmond's." She slammed the pitcher of water down on the table so hard that a few drops of water shot out of the top, soaking the tablecloth around it. "If you

can't say anything without upsetting someone, I suggest you sit there and eat in silence."

Esmond slumped down in his chair, centering his eyes on his plate. Anya stared on at Ria, smiling, kicking her legs back and forth, oblivious to the tension in the room. Gerhard began quietly eating a piece of meat. Ria finished off her roll and poured herself some water. Lan sat there wondering what to say next. In the end, he did not say anything else at all. Nobody did.

#

"I wish I could go with you tomorrow, but with the fight today I have no choice but to stay behind and take care of business. You understand, don't you?"

Ria was crouched outside Gerhard's room, listening to this conversation with his son. Downstairs, a conversation between the other young man, Esmond, and Gerhard's wife was taking place. She was instructing him on how to watch what he said around people in the big city. Though it sounded as if it would be interesting to listen in on, she was more concerned with what her uncle's friend was telling his son. She silently thought a spell to enhance her hearing and leaned closer to the bedroom door.

"Yes, I understand. Everything will be fine, father."

"I don't know about that. Sending her with you and Esmond might be a mistake. Four of my best men are riding along with the carriage to protect you in case anything should happen. At the first sign of danger, I want you and Esmond to run as fast as you can in the opposite direction."

"Father, don't worry about it. I'm sure nothing is going to happen."

"Alex, your lies' reality lies only in your head. You know what that old proverb means, don't you?"

Ria knew all too well. Many a time she had told herself lies to hope for a reality that deep down inside she knew would never come to pass. She could only imagine that Gerhard's son's silence was a nod.

"I want you to stay away from her, Alex. At all costs."

"How can I do that if we're riding together in the same carriage?"

"After you get to Porthos and she goes to see her uncle, I want you to stay away. Let her go. Put away any feelings you may

think you have for her. I don't care how beautiful you think she is, she's dangerous. Not directly dangerous, as in the kind of person who would kill you, but indirectly dangerous. And sometimes, that's even worse."

"I know what you mean." Lan's voice dropped off. Ria could tell that he was sad at that thought. In a way, it made her sad as well. She was not upset that she could never return any feelings he may or may not have toward her. What bothered her was that her very presence endangered him. She knew it and so did Gerhard.

"If something should happen to you, Alex, I have no idea what I would do. I could never forgive myself for letting you go with her and not being there to protect you myself."

And that was all she needed to hear. She stood up, shedding a silent tear. Why couldn't her life be normal? Why did danger have to always follow her? Damn her father and damn the *kera* he had entrusted her with.

She wiped the tear from her face and walked back into the room she had been given, closing the door behind her. She would leave early tonight, setting out on her own. She knew that Gerhard wanted to protect her by sending her with the carriage and guards in the morning, but she could take care of herself. She could not live knowing that she had put the son of one of her uncle's most trusted friends in danger, should anything happen to him. She would not allow the blame to lie on her hands. She had more than enough to deal with as it was. Tonight she would leave, just past the stroke of midnight.

But there was one problem--she would have to find her dagger before she left. *Or hope it finds me*, she thought. She curled up on the bed to rest for a few hours as the bell tower in the distance struck twenty-one.

#

Lan sat on his windowsill listening to the wind rustling the leaves outside. The clouds had finally parted allowing the full moon to shine down upon the fields. By the farm bell tower, it was shortly after midnight, and though he was to leave early in the morning, he could not sleep. He sat in thought about the day's happenings, casually surveying his room. The one candle on his

desk shed an eerie light around the place, illuminating him like a body afloat on a Merhosian funeral pyre.

Many thoughts swirled around in his mind. Some of them were about leaving home. Some were about the crossbow bolt and the fight. Most, however, were about Ria. He held the dagger in his hands, twirling it around, the ruby glinting mystically in the candlelight. Too many questions. Too many unknowns.

Lan slipped the dagger into one of the large pockets of his bed-robe and lightly stepped down from the window to the floor. He crept slowly across to his door, staring at Esmond the entire time, hoping that his friend, wrapped in a thick blanket on the floor, would not wake up.

His door slid open without the slightest sound. Lan tiptoed down the hallway to the staircase. Each step he ascended was accompanied with what seemed to him to be a deafening squeak, but fortunately nobody was disturbed by it--or so he thought.

At the top of the staircase, he stopped abruptly. He heard something moving. His heart pounded in his ears as he stood there, trying to remain still but shaking nonetheless. Another low thud. It came from the guestroom.

The guestroom door was cracked open slightly, and a faint sliver of moonlight poured out. He peeked in, his heart pounding so hard he thought it would burst. The bed was empty. The sheets were untouched. A breeze came through the open window, rustling the small white curtains. The girl was gone.

Lan slowly pushed the door open, grimacing when it let out a loud squeak. He looked in all the other corners of the room from the doorway, and Ria was nowhere in sight. Just the pale moonlight bouncing off of the bare, polished wood timbers on the floor and walls. *She left, he thought. Through the window. She couldn't stand staying another--*

Suddenly a hand was over his mouth and an arm was wrapped around his waist. He tried to shout, but only a muffled babble came out from around the clenched fingers. He threw himself backward in a frenzy, slamming the person who had him from behind into the doorframe. His assailant let out a sharp grunt and loosened the grip around his waist. He pulled forward forcefully and managed to break free. He pivoted around to look at the person who had attacked him. A shadowy blob moved about in

the doorway. He could not make heads or tails of it. It had to be a sarn, here for Ria. There was no other explanation.

Lan opened his mouth to yell, but before the faintest hint of sound came out, the shadowy figure leapt at him, knocking him back into the bed. It moved faster than any person should be able to. He hit the edge of the bed frame and fell, the force knocking the breath out of him. Desperately he tried to shout for help, but he could not get the much-needed air into his lungs. The shadow was kneeling over him now, and though he could not make out its face, he knew its eyes were on him, searching him. His heart raced, sweat poured from his face. His stomach churned with nervousness. The figure pinned his arms to his side. There was nothing he could do now.

"Don't move," came a whisper. It was his attacker . . . and it sounded like Ria.

"Ria?" he gasped, still trying to get air into his lungs.

His arms were free. The shadow left him, walked over to the door. As it entered the sliver of light from the window, he saw that his attacker had been none other than the half-mesefu girl. She closed the door, turned the key in the lock, and walked back toward him. She was wincing, rubbing her back.

"Oh, Ria," he uttered, frantically. "I had no idea it was you. I didn't mean to disturb your wound again, I just--"

"Trying to sneak up on me, I see," she accused. "I knew it. I knew I was right about you."

He was stunned. "Right? What do you mean?"

"Humans," she spat. "You're all the same. And to think I almost trusted you."

He sat up, discovering new pains in his back that he must have gotten from the fight. He finally managed to take a deep breath and stand. "I wasn't trying to sneak up on you," he whispered sternly. "I was trying to sneak up the stairs so I wouldn't wake anyone. I just wanted to talk to you again, remember?"

"How did you know I would be awake?" she asked, still unconvinced.

"I don't know. I just--felt it."

"Felt what?"

"Felt that you would be awake."

She sighed and walked past him to the bed. "You know," she said, sitting down. "There's something about you that makes me want to believe you, but I have no idea what it is. I never trust humans."

"What do you mean?" he asked, walking over to her. "Why do you want to believe me? And what about my father? You said you trusted him, I think. What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure. Perhaps it's . . ."

"What? Perhaps it's what?"

"Nothing. I don't know." She grunted in annoyance.

He stood there staring at her as she stared at the bed.

Crickets could be heard outside, chirping to one another in what almost sounded musical to his ears. He unconsciously fingered the dagger in his pocket as he sat down on the bed beside her.

"You have it," she said. "That's what I feel. My dagger."

"What?" he asked, realizing he had been touching the dagger. He slowly removed his hand from his pocket, suddenly feeling strange touching the foreign blade.

"My *renol* dagger. Silver handle with a ruby set in the pommel, right? You found it, didn't you?" She looked at him expectantly.

"Well, yes, I--"

"Give it back," she demanded, holding out her hand.

He pulled it from his pocket and held it out to her.

Suddenly he jerked it back. "Wait, how did you know what was in my pocket?"

"I always know my dagger, Lan. It knows me as well."

He looked at her blankly.

"It is magically linked to me. If ever we are separated, it always finds its way back."

Fear raced through him as he quickly held the dagger back out for her to take. Magic had always made him feel a bit uneasy, and was something he had never had much contact with as a human. The *mesefu* were the ones with the great magic abilities. Humans, with their weak magical skills, merely dabbled in it.

"It *was* you who killed those two *sarn*, wasn't it?"

"Yes," she replied. "And I could have taken the rest as well, if not for your father and his men interfering."

"You can't be serious. You were nearly dead when I found you."

"If you choose to believe that, I'm not going to stop you."

"Well," he said as the tone of his voice rose in agitation.

"How could you have saved yourself?"

"I have ways," she replied quietly.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

After a brief pause, she said, "Nothing."

He sighed. "Why won't you tell me anything? You can trust me, Ria."

"Perhaps," she said. She slipped the dagger into the pouch that still hung from her belt.

"I promise," he said. "I won't hurt you." She was shivering. He wanted to place his hands around hers to keep them warm. *She'd kill you*, he told himself. *Only Esmond's lucky enough to get away with anything like that. And foolish enough to try.*

"My father," she began. "My father told me things. Things that could be dangerous in the wrong hands. The sarn who were chasing me know that I know these things. They wanted to get that information from me." She began shaking more, fear adding to the chill. Lan grabbed the folded up blanket his mother had set on the bed and handed it to her. "Thank you," she said, wrapping it around her shoulders. "I've got to get to Porthos as quickly as possible to warn the king. The sarn are rallying."

"Rallying? I thought all the different clans hated each other and were constantly at war?"

"Not anymore. There's a new force behind them now. Ga'ruk is the man they're rallying under. He was the one out there today with all the skulls on his armor. Trophies of the human generals he has brought down. Supposedly one of them is even a mesefu skull, but nobody can prove that. Likely just rumor." Lan thought back to the armored sarn who had shot at him. He thought back to the grotesque hole in one of the skulls hanging on his sash. He thought back to the crossbow bolt, and how it had missed him, and the look on the sarn's face when that had happened. It had been a look of disbelief. Disbelief and fear. Lan shuddered.

"Not even he has enough power to unite the clans, though, however remarkable of a leader he may be. The force that has

united them all is dangerous, and it must be stopped quickly. The other sarn don't know anything about it."

"Wait," Lan uttered. "Do you mean to tell me that their leader was after you himself?"

"He's always been that way. He doesn't trust any of his men with important tasks. He insists on doing them himself."

"You've known him for a while?!" He was stunned.

"He's been after me for years, now." And then the most unexpected thing in Lan's life happened--she leaned down and rested her head on his shoulder. He felt awkward, not knowing what to do. He had never been in a position like this before. Should he put his arm around her? Or should he sit still and let her talk?

"One thing bothers me about today," she said. "Ga'ruk never backs off, especially where humans are concerned. Your entire family should be dead now."

Lan pulled away from her, another shudder of fear coursing through him. She was right. If not for that crossbow bolt incident scaring the sarn leader, they would probably all be dead, for, as the game of Skirmish had proven, the farmhands had stood no chance against the sarn.

"What is it?" she asked, sitting up.

"Nothing," he said, shaking his head. He dare not risk telling her that he had somehow stopped a crossbow bolt from embedding itself in him, scaring the sarn away. It would only lead her to question him more, and he did not need that now. He needed her unwavering trust and attention. He needed to find out just how she knew his father. Besides, there was probably nothing mystical to the crossbow bolt stopping anyway. Perhaps the wind blew it down, or the sarn--Ga'ruk--misjudged the shot. It *was* raining rather heavily. But whatever it was made the sarn *think* that Lan had some kind of powers. Yes, that must be it.

Ria sat there silently, tracing the patterns on the blanket with her fingers. She gazed at the bed blankly. In the distance he heard the bell tower ring once. It was an hour past midnight. He yawned as sleep started pulling on his eyes.

He placed his hand on her back and felt the bandage around her chest through the shirt she wore. As he touched it, a warmth seeped through it onto his hand. "Oh," he started. "I think I

knocked your bandages around in that scuffle. They're seeping a bit. Do you want me to rewrap them?"

She looked up at him silently, her wide eyes gazing into his. After a long moment, she spoke. "Yes," she said. "I would like that." She turned to face away from him and leaned forward, pulling her shirt up just enough for him to get at the bandages. "No peeking," she said, playfully.

The thought had not once crossed his mind. He deftly unclasped the bandage, pulled it back a slight bit, stretched it back across the wound, and clasped it tight. After he pulled his hands away, she sat leaning over, motionless.

Realizing finally that he was not doing anything else, she sat up, pulling her shirt back down. "Through already?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "My mother taught me a bit of what she knows. Not everything, but enough to get by."

She turned back to him, smiling, and leaned her head back on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"For what?" he asked.

"For getting you and your family involved in this. If I had known where I was, I would never have come this way. I was disoriented. I'm afraid I may have put your lives in grave danger."

"What do you mean by that? That you never would have 'come this way'?"

"Nothing," she sighed. Lan stood up and walked over to the window. He gazed out at the dark landscape.

"Look," he started, searching for something comforting to say. "I'm sure everything will be all right," he said. "You're leaving the house tomorrow, so as long as the sarn don't come back tonight, we should be fine."

"Perhaps," she said. "Perhaps." She stood up and walked to him. He stared at her in silence, not sure what he should do. She looked up at him and he saw the dim light from the window twinkle in her eyes. "Hold me," she said. "For luck."

He slowly reached his arms around her, nervous to be doing so. He had never held another woman before, aside from his mother. She reached around his waist and pulled him close. He stood with his arms awkwardly around her, her head resting on his chest. She squeezed him tightly and suddenly his feelings of anxiety

and awkwardness faded. He squeezed back, smiling in the dark. All thoughts of questions to ask her vanished into the recesses of his mind. He felt warm and comfortable. Safe, even. It was at that moment that he knew somehow, someday, he would see her again after tomorrow, despite what his father had told him.

Their embrace lasted nearly an hour.

#

Lan and Esmond were seated side by side, the guards and others seated across from them. As the carriage pulled out onto the main road in the early morning light, Lan scanned the fields futilely, searching for some sign of Ria.

At daybreak, it was discovered that she had left the house during the night. Lan feared that the sarn had gotten her, but none of the guards had heard or seen anything. When he went into the guestroom that morning looking for some clue to her disappearance, it appeared that there were none to be found. However, when he plopped down on the bed in frustration, he discovered the ruby-hilted dagger buried under the pillows. *If ever we are separated, it tends to find a way back*, she had said. Lan knew she had to be alive and well. He also knew that he would be seeing her again. She had left this here for him, so that their paths would cross once more. His feelings the night before had been right.

He slept uneasily in the carriage for a great deal of the near week-long trip, filling the rest of the time with idle conversation with Esmond. They reached the Kagon-Pyran border at night, where the guards woke him and Esmond so that they could present their identification papers. After passing the border, they both went promptly back to sleep.

The majority of the trip was spent crossing the large nation of Pyran, as Porthos lay on its far western side. He no longer felt strange about the concept of being in a foreign nation, especially since this one looked much like his homeland of Dryan. It was mostly covered in sprawling fields and farmland, with small villages along the main road every thirty or forty leagues.

When he awoke as they entered the university's walls, he remembered a dream he had had during his journey. In the dream he had seen himself as many things. One moment, he was sitting by a fire as a young girl ran up to him and jumped into his lap. The next moment, he was the ruler of a great nation, fighting to protect

his stronghold from bloodthirsty armies. Finally, he was in a large wasteland. He could see Ria through a large wall of flames. She was crying, calling for him. He had silently turned and walked away from her into a bright light, but only because there was no other path to follow.

Lan pushed the dream away for now. It was the middle of the night and he was still very tired. All he wanted to do right now was take his stuff inside to whatever room had been arranged for him and go back to sleep. Not even finally being at the university he had striven to enroll at was enough to rouse him from his fatigue. He would worry about seeing what the city and the university had to offer tomorrow.

He slowly stood up and stepped out of the carriage. He stretched until his back popped loudly in the cold night air. Esmond rubbed his eyes as he stepped from the carriage, then yawned.

"We're finally here," Esmond smiled as he patted Lan on the back. They slung their bags over their shoulders and walked into the large, red brick walls of their new home.

The strange dream kept creeping back into Lan's mind. He wondered what, if anything, it could possibly mean.

#

Hidden in the shadows atop the walls of Porthos University, a lone figure sat, staring down into the large courtyard at a carriage that had just arrived from the neighboring nation of Kagon. Two young men stepped out along with a few armored guards.

The shadowed figure looked more intently at the young men until the one known as Alexander Lansing was distinguishable. The shadow atop the wall shuddered for a moment upon seeing his face, then turned and began descending the outside wall. He was safe now, nothing would happen to him from here on, as long as she stayed out of the way.

"There something about you," she said quietly to herself. "I don't know whether to be afraid of it or calmed by it. But I know that I'll be back. I've got to know what it is."

As Ria touched the ground and began walking off into the dark alleys of the huge city, she whispered to herself. "Take care, Lan." And then, she vanished into the darkness.

PART II: The Injustice

"Many wars have been fought, many lives have been lost, and many nations have fallen, merely because one man was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Chapter Four

The bustling city stretched out as far as she could see toward the horizon in all directions. The sea of twisted buildings reached up to the sky, grazing the clouds. Ornate markings decorated them, giving them a rough textured look despite their pristine smoothness. Engraved in the surfaces of the buildings were stories of ages past, of families who had inhabited them. Numerous wide crystal bridges connected the buildings at various levels, each one full of mesefu going about their daily business. Lisen flew over them on her *vel* at dangerous speeds, ducking through tight squeezes between buildings and swerving around other, slower moving mesefu on *vel*.

The *vel* were small, round discs, large enough for only one person to ride, though larger versions existed. They soared through the air, controlled by the minds of the mesefu.

Controlling the *vel* was easy for Lisen. She had been doing it since she was a young child. However, in her state of disarray, she was not concentrating nearly as hard as she should have been, and nearly collided with a mesefu man.

The man dipped downward, his head barely missing Lisen's *vel*. As she sped on past him, she could hear a multitude of curses spewing from his mouth at her. She paid them no attention. Nothing mattered now except getting to the Council meeting. Lisen was a member of the High Council of Altkrea, responsible for the safety and welfare of the mesefu people. Almost every day she helped make important decisions with the other twelve Council

members that shaped the very city in which they lived. And almost every day, Lisen was late.

She raced over league after league of the cityscape, ascending to just above the tops of the buildings. A low layer of clouds brushed her head as she flew toward the Council building. The immense structure extended high into the sky, over twice as tall as any other building in the city. The top of the Council building was almost always hidden from the lower city by the clouds, and the Council meeting chamber that sat on top of the tall spire almost always looked down at the sea of white mist.

Upon reaching the Council building, she changed her trajectory to fly straight up. She rose with a speed that would make most people sick with dizziness. For Lisen, however, such speeds were normal. Being habitually late had tempered her body to the sensations.

Most of her trip upward was uneventful, as usual, as nobody else ever flew these paths. They were reserved only for the Council members, and were very dangerous, as the visibility within the clouds was terrible. When she finally broke out of the clouds, the brightness of the sun nearly knocked her off balance. She squinted and raised her hand to shade her face. On all sides the swirls and ridges of the cloudy landscape stretched away seemingly infinitely. She looked up to see the wiry, spherical crystal Council meeting chamber set against a deep blue sky. The blue was so deep it was easy to mistake for black without a careful look. Faint hints of stars could be seen against the dark backdrop, far more than anyone could ever see from the surface during the daytime.

The Council chamber itself loomed before her like a large, twisted, spherical cage. Enormous braided bars stretched from the main structure upward, encircling the chamber, twisting together at the top. It looked as though vine-like braids had grown from the Council building, ensnaring the crystal ball in their grasp. Twelve *vel* receptacles were built into the walls of the chamber, one for each of the Council members. The thirteenth Council member--the High Lord--ascended through the central spire of the Council building. Lisen sped toward her receptacle, the pit of her stomach churning as she saw three people standing at it awaiting her arrival. She would be reprimanded.

As her *vel* slowly locked into place at the receptacle, High Lord Harishmon approached her, followed closely by Doran and Eruin, two female Council members she was not very fond of.

"You are late," said Harishmon, flatly.

Lisen stumbled as she stepped from her *vel* through the elaborate crystal archway that served as her personal entrance to the Council chamber. She grabbed the side of the archway to keep from falling over. Harishmon stood before her in his exquisite white robes, hands clasped together, staring at her. A wide stole adorned with stitchings of ancient mesefu prayers hung around his neck, the golden embroidering glistening in the sunlight. Though she had grown up with the High Lord and had known him well before he held the rank, his robed presence still commanded deep respect from her. "I am sorry, High Lord," she said, bowing her head.

"The meeting has not yet started, Lisen," said Harishmon. The words came from his mouth in very distinct syllables, each one enunciated to perfection. "There is no need to refer to me by such titles. I had to hold the meeting until your arrival."

"I do not see why we keep her on the Council," said Doran in her stern, dry voice. Her face was as white as the clouds below the chamber, and her lips were thin and bloodless. The only noticeable colors were in her deep blue eyes. The rest of her body was hidden beneath a very plain and straightforward purple robe, except for her hands, which were as white as her face. Upon her head, she wore a large purple headpiece, which extended up and behind her, with a draping veil on either side of her face. She had always been the most elegant mesefu woman Lisen had ever seen. And the most arrogant.

"We keep her on the Council because she is wise and intelligent. She may be young, but the words of the young are often the most important. They should not go unheard. She belongs here," said Harishmon gruffly.

"Only by law, not by competence," Doran huffed.

"That is quite enough, Doran," Harishmon said. "We have more pressing matters to deal with than your bickering." Harishmon looked back to Lisen. "Come. We must get started quickly." He turned and walked from the archway, Doran and Eruin following close behind. Lisen walked up to her Council

podium and stood there as the other three took their places. Harishmon ascended the central platform and began looking everyone over.

Lisen gazed around the large chamber, waiting on him to begin speaking. The sphere within which the chamber sat was tinted, and bathed the chamber in a cool blue light that reminded Lisen of the ocean. The other Council members were behind their own podiums--wide, smooth, unadorned, and each carved from a single piece of *renol*. The floor of the Council chamber was made of grey-flecked marble, polished to a shine. The other Council members stood rigid, some of them knowing what was about to be said and dreading hearing the words from the mouth of the High Lord himself. For until he spoke, there was a chance that the bad news they had been hearing from one another was mere rumor.

"This meeting of the High Council has been called to discuss the tragic event that befell our people late yesterday evening." The platform he stood on slowly rotated around as he spoke, allowing him to see everyone equally as he spoke. "Ol'tue, the only weapon ever constructed by our people intended to take the life of another, has been stolen." Silence pervaded the council room. Lisen's jaw dropped open and her knees grew weak. Although she had already heard this news in whispered tones from several other council members earlier today, it had seemed unreal. Now, however, it all suddenly felt very frighteningly real.

"Lord Eruin was the first to discover its disappearance. For your cooperation in remaining silent about the matter, I am thankful." Harishmon nodded toward Eruin. *She apparently wasn't all that quiet about it*, Lisen thought. *Almost every Council member knows already.*

"However, this brings me to one of the more distressing points of the day. Perhaps even more distressing than what I have told you already. You are all aware that only Council members are allowed into the blade's chamber. It was sealed that way long ago by my ancestor, Gienev, slayer of Ethrakus." Harishmon paused. He looked around slowly, staring at each person present for several intense seconds before moving on to the next.

"Therefore," he continued, "allow me to be direct. There is no point in dancing around the issue." He paused again, his eyes turning down at the corners. "There is a traitor among us, in this

very room." A gasp arose from the Council members as this realization sank in. "All thirteen of us have shown up today, and we are the only thirteen who are allowed access to the blade." The whispering began between the Council members, each wondering whom the guilty one was. "You can understand now why I was so reluctant to call such a meeting."

Lisen's heart began racing as she glanced at random around the room. There was a traitor among them, and she feared that any second now the chamber would erupt in a frenzy of accusations and lies, each person trying to put the blame on someone else.

"How can we possibly deal with this situation?" asked Karinhas, a young Councilman.

"I will appoint an outside committee," said Harishmon, reluctantly. "Their sole purpose will be to investigate the matter."

"Outrageous!" shouted Doran. "You are just as much a suspect as any of us! Why should you be allowed to appoint the committee? Do you have something to hide?" She stepped out from behind her podium and began marching toward Harishmon. "Are you appointing a committee of liars and *dalchi* who will take your side and set one of us up to take the blame?"

"Lord Doran, I will remind you only once to remain behind your podium," Harishmon said. She stood her ground before him, shaking with anger. A low murmur arose over the Council room as other members began talking about the issue in disbelief.

"You know as well as I that the Council will review the committee I select. If you do not like those I choose, then you can dismiss them. I tire of your baseless accusations of conspiracy. They come all too often from you. I believe you need to reassess a great many things." She glared at him, then slowly backed away and resumed her place behind her podium.

"I will not trust any committee you choose, regardless," she said. "I move to appoint my own committee who will work apart from yours to ensure that the real truth is found."

"I do not see why more than one committee is needed, but I also know that to reject your proposal is to label myself as guilty in your eyes. Therefore, if it is not objected to by the greater part of the Council, I second and support Lord Doran's motion to appoint a second committee."

Nobody spoke. Instead they all looked from Harishmon to Doran and back again, as if wondering whom to show allegiance to. This was not the first time Doran had attacked the High Lord, but Lisen was more nervous now than ever before. Nobody had ever hesitated to support Harishmon in such disputes before, except for Doran's lackey, Eruin.

Harishmon stood strong, showing no signs of weakening despite Doran's verbal assault. He watched the Council members and waited. Silence.

"As nobody wishes to speak in objection to Lord Doran's motion, I hereby--"

"I object!" shouted Lisen. She began shaking with nervous anxiety. She had never stood her ground against Doran before, but this time she felt the woman was going too far. "There is no need for this second committee!" Lisen stepped from behind her podium and stomped in Doran's direction. "Unless, of course, *you* have something to hide, Doran."

Doran smiled, shaking her head. "I am sure the Council can see now why I object to such a pompous incompetent youth being among us." She motioned toward Lisen as she spoke to the High Lord. "All she can do is throw my own words back at me. She has nothing to offer of her own."

"And yet," said Harishmon, "I agree with her. There is no need for this second committee, and in proposing it, you are subjecting yourself to the same scrutiny you are subjecting me to." He stared Doran in the eyes. They stood that way for several tense moments. Nobody in the chamber was sure of what to do.

"I understand this," said Doran at last. "But I know I am hiding nothing. I do not know the same about you. Or anyone else here."

"Lord Doran, you act as if the entire Council is composed of thieves, liars, and degenerates, which you know is not the case. Only one of us is, for sure. It is with much regret that I must approve your motion to have a second committee." He turned to Lisen. "You may return to your podium at any time, Lord Lisen. Though I agree with you, one objection is not enough to overturn the motion."

"Yes, High Lord," she said, slowly walking back. She had finally stood her ground to Doran, but to no avail. She had been

shoved back down once again. *Sometimes I wonder why I bother*, Lisen thought. She sighed, resuming her position. *The Council may not be full of corruption, Harishmon, but you're right--there's at least one among us*, she thought, eyeing Doran accusingly.

"You are granted your committee, Lord Doran, but they are subject to the same regulations as any other appointed committee, which means the Council must review them to make sure they are fit for the job."

"Thank you, High Lord," Doran said.

"Do not thank me, Lord Doran. The law requires I grant your request. I have already expressed my feelings on the matter, and I do not do it willingly." He looked over everyone a final time. "The two committees will be brought before the Council for review in two days' time." Harishmon looked down, taking a deep breath. "Unfortunately, this is not all I have to say. There is more, and it is the worst yet."

Lisen swallowed hard. What could possibly be worse than finding out a traitor was on the High Council?

"Nobody would merely steal Ol'tue without some purpose. The most logical purpose I have come up with is going to frighten you, and I urge you not to tell a living soul what I am about to tell you. We must keep chaos from breaking out."

Lisen's heart was now beating faster than ever, and she broke out into a cold sweat. She already knew what Harishmon was going to say. It could be nothing else.

"Just over one thousand years ago, a daemon emerged from the bowels of Kalra. Ethrakus. Everyone knows that story. Everyone knows of the valiant Gienev and the dragons. Everyone knows of the forging of the mighty Ol'tue that Gienev used to bring about the destruction of Ethrakus." He began pacing back and forth as he spoke.

"And everyone remembers the catastrophic destruction Ethrakus brought. Entire nations were devastated. The city of Porthos was reduced to rubble. Most of Altkrea as well." He paused, scratching his chin. "I ask you all today, what would you do if another daemon appeared? Because I have received word that such may be the case."

Gasps erupted from the Council members. A roar of conversation and deliberation arose as everyone awed at the news. Lisen felt the blood drain from her face.

"There is no official confirmation on this," continued Harishmon. "But I have dispatched a small scout party to the south to confirm the news. I hope to hear something within the next few days.

"What would the disappearance of Ol'tue have to do with the appearance of a new daemon?" he asked the Council, rhetorically. "Ol'tue is the only means available to us to handle a threat of such magnitude. With the blade missing and the dragons gone, the daemon would be free to wreak havoc on the world as its predecessor did."

"Are you implying that whoever stole the blade is in league with the daemon?" asked Shiera, the eldest female council member. "That's preposterous! No mesefu would ever work with a daemon."

"Perhaps not, Lord Shiera," said Harishmon. "But whoever stole the blade may not know the real reason for their actions. Perhaps they were promised riches or power. Perhaps they believe their intentions to be for the best, when in fact, behind the scenes they are being manipulated. It has happened before, and it can happen again."

"These truly are grave times, High Lord," said Nemol, another Councilman. "What can we do against such things?"

"Wait," said Harishmon, solemnly. "We shall have our committees ready soon for investigation, as well as official word on the daemon's existence. Our top priority lies in finding Ol'tue, so that if another daemon *has* arisen, it can be dealt with in a swift manner."

"Yes, High Lord. I agree," said Nemol.

"I would now like to dismiss this meeting for two days, when we will hold the committee review. Are there any further issues the Council would like to put forth at this time?" After a few moments of waiting, he continued. "Then I will see you all back here in two days at this same time. Ohn, in your wisdom, protect us from evil. In your name, we go about our lives. This meeting is adjourned."

Council members slowly retreated into their receptacles to head home and brood over everything they had just heard. Lisen stood still behind her podium, watching everyone leave. A glint of sunlight caught her eye and she looked out, seeing the sun starting to set beneath the clouds. Soon it would be night here, easily several hours before the rest of the city below. She slowly turned and walked back through the archway to her disc, wondering what she was going to do if the news about a daemon was true. She was tempted to run away, but she knew that was wrong. No mesefu ever walked away from their own kind. Ever.

"Lisen," came Harishmon's voice. She turned to see him standing before her. "May I speak with you, please?" Lisen knew what he wanted to say. He was going to reprimand her for the way she had acted earlier toward Doran.

"I'm sorry for my actions, High L--Harishmon. I just lost control and--"

"And that is not what I need to speak with you about," he smiled.

"Then what--"

"Lisen, how long have we known each other?" Harishmon asked leaning against the crystal wall of the chamber.

"As far back as I can remember," she said. "Why do you ask?"

"You trust me, am I right?"

"Of course! We grew up together, Harishmon. We used to play together in the halls of the Council living quarters. Our parents were best friends. You know I trust you."

"Yes," he said solemnly. "I was just reassuring myself. Ever since I had to uphold the motion to have both your father and Ria's father removed from the Council, I have felt awkward around you, as if you despised me."

"I do not despise you at all. I despise Doran for tricking my father into confessing his friend had an affair with a human woman. She destroyed my father, the only man who ever loved her." Lisen felt tears coming to her eyes. She turned away from Harishmon and put her forehead on the wall, gazing down at the ornate floor.

"I know it has been hard on you since your mother died and your father was deposed, but please hold together. I need you now more than ever, Lisen."

She sniffed, wiping her face with her hands. "What is it you need me for?"

"I want you on my committee."

"What?" she exclaimed, jerking around to face him. "That's impossible! The Council will never allow that. It's against the laws."

"You and I both know Doran has never once done anything for the welfare of the mesefu. She got emotionally close to your father to expose him for hiding information from the Council about Ria's father. Every other Council member overlooked the fact that Ria was a mixed child. We all knew what had happened, but her father was such a great man that nobody spoke up, except Doran when she found proof. She knew that when your father was removed, she would be next in line due to her 'wonderful' deed of bringing out the truth. She held her secret committee then, so I'm holding one of my own now."

"So you want me to work in secret?"

"Of course," Harishmon said, drawing near Lisen. "I have a lead that I did not tell the Council about. A man in Porthos who goes by the name of Osbick. He's the local retainer to a Lord Roland who rules the northern reaches of Pyran. His name was mentioned to me by outside sources as possibly having some connection to the blade."

"I suppose you want me to go research the matter further?"

"Yes. In a few weeks, there is to be a meeting of the Pyranian parliament in Porthos. We are sending an official to present to them what I presented to the Council today. You will be leading a number of guards who will be working with the Porthos city guards to ensure peace during the processions of noblemen into the Ceren, their capitol building."

"I am to go as a soldier? I was not meant to do such things." Lisen had been trained well in the fighting skills of the mesefu from childhood by one of her father's friends. She had never intended on using those skills, however.

"You are the only Council member I trust, and the only one well-trained enough in the ways of the military to do such a thing."

Lisen looked down at the white marble floor. She took a deep breath as she thought about the possible consequences of

travelling into human nations. She had never been outside Altkrea in her entire life. Most mesefu never left the city.

"I will go," she said, "but only for you. Had anyone else asked me, I would have refused."

"Thank you," Harishmon said. "You can go under your real name. No humans would ever recognize you. In the days before and after the procession, you will be free for the duration of the parliament's meeting to roam about the city and collect information. Parliamentary meetings in Pyran usually last several weeks. I am sure you can find out more about this Osbick during that time."

"I will do my best, Harishmon." She bowed her head as a sign of respect, and stepped onto her *vel*.

"One more thing," Harishmon said.

"What is that?" she asked.

He walked over to stand beside her. "Tell Ria everything."

"What?"

"Ria has been living outside this city for most of her life. If any one of us knows their way around Porthos, it's her. She can help you."

"But Harishmon," she retorted. "If the Council finds out that we are getting help from Ria, a *dalchi*, they will have us both banished without a second thought."

"That is why I told Doran nothing of my lead in Porthos. I do not want her so-called committee following my people around, especially when they are people the Council disapproves of."

"You sound so sure," she said. "Ohn forgive me for what I am about to say, but overconfidence is not an admirable trait."

"With all that has happened within the past ten years, Lisen," he said, putting his hand on her shoulder, "my confidence is the only thing I have left."

She nodded in silent agreement. "I shall see you in two days' time, then?" she asked.

"Yes. After that meeting I will fill you in on the specifics of when you are to leave and what troops you will be in charge of."

"Of course."

"Ohn illumine you, Lisen," he said, patting her on the back.

"Ohn illumine you, Harishmon," she replied, a blank look on her face. Slowly, she backed her *vel* out of the receptacle and descended down into the clouds. She did not notice the other *vel*

and its purple-clad rider that sat in the shadows under her receptacle as she departed.

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As Lisen disappeared into the clouds, two figures hidden under the Council chamber slowly floated out into the light.

"They do not stand a chance."

The purple-cloaked mesefu councilwoman gazed downward into the sea of grey mist. "I agree, Eruin. What we have just heard will bring an end to Harishmon and that annoying girl." Doran clasped her hands together.

"We must act quickly. If we give them too much time--"

"Patience." Her tone was stern, yet calm. "We will let them conduct their business and our committee will watch them secretly, every step of the way. When the time is right, I will present our case to the Council and they will have no choice but to depose Harishmon and elect a new High Lord." Her lips curled into a wicked smile as she turned to face the younger Councilwoman. "They will elect me."

"Don't be overconfident. You do not know that."

"It has already happened once," she said, gruffly. "Need I remind you how I came to be on the Council in the first place?"

"No, I remember well." Eruin gazed off at the horizon, watching the orange sea of clouds below roll slowly eastward as the sun dipped into them behind her. "But if they find out--"

"Nobody will find out." Doran shifted her gaze to the horizon as well. "You will be well rewarded for your help."

"Yes, I understand," Eruin sighed, silently nodding her head. "Once our committee is formed, we cannot dare take an active hand in it. If we are caught collaborating with what should be an outside committee, it would look bad on us and we would lose any favor we have with the Council."

"Do not worry, Eruin. You will have no connections with the committee we select. I will deal with them in my own way."

"Then what shall I do?"

"Wait."

Chapter Five

"I knew this would happen again," said Headmaster Whitlow in his low, stern voice. "Three times in one semester." He sat behind his large oaken desk, his clasped hands resting on the desk's surface. He wore a large, puffed black hat that sat perfectly straight on his head, casting sharp shadows across his aged face. His grey brows were furrowed and wrinkled in anger.

"Ma--" started Lan, trying to get a word in.

"Master Trellin broke his tailbone when he slipped on that patch of soapy water you two poured in front of his living quarters." Whitlow gazed with what Lan considered a rather angry look from beneath the shadows of his hat.

"There was no proof that we did--" began Lan.

"There was no *definite* proof," interrupted the headmaster. "But I knew, however. Yes, I knew it was you two. I never said anything, however. I know how hard it is for some students to adjust, and you are both brilliant young men. This time, however, I can make no such exception."

Lan gulped, brushed back the ever-lengthening brown bangs from his face, and glanced anxiously over at Esmond, as if there was something he could do to save them. *No, Lan. Esmond's only good at getting you into these messes. You're the one who always has to get out of them.*

"Then the nurse." Lan looked back to Whitlow as the headmaster continued. "Poor Nurse Wellingham. The rash from the poisonous plants was very nasty. She is lucky we have such good school physicians here or else her pain could have gone on for

weeks and the hives may have left permanent scars." The headmaster gazed sternly at Lan, staring him straight in the eye. Lan looked guiltily away down at the floor, tapping his hand nervously on the armrest of the high-backed, leather-covered chair in which he sat. "There was no proof that you placed the soapy water, but there was plenty of it pointing to you having poisoned Wellingham."

"She told me I needed to bathe more often," chided Esmond. He displayed no signs of nervousness. He was perfectly calm here in the presence of the highest authority of Porthos University.

Lan began wringing his hands and gazed out the tall window behind the headmaster. The sky was bright and cloudless, green grass filling the inner courtyard as a light breeze jostled the trees planted along the entrance road. He could see the gate that led out into the city, a city that he had lived in for the better half of a year and still had seen none of, other than the few buildings that peeked over the university walls.

It was not that he was prevented from leaving the university, of course. He had had plenty of opportunities to go out into town and explore. He merely never felt any urge to go. Esmond had been outside quite often and had tried to get him to tag along, but he refused. There were too many people out there, and it was too easy to get lost. At least, that was what he told Esmond. In secret, he was afraid of running into Ria again. His father had told him to stay away from her, and he knew he should, but something mysteriously drew his thoughts to her at least once a day. *It couldn't be that dagger, he thought. I don't keep it on me. I keep it in a box under my bed. Surely its magic isn't strong enough to affect me from there!*

He did not mind staying in his room whenever Esmond went out into town. He would study, which was what he did in all of his spare time. He had advanced quickly to the highest rank in his class in his short time here, and was already well on his way to graduating with the highest honors--assuming he could reinforce his willpower and not fall into helping Esmond with his mischievous plots.

"Perhaps she was right," said Whitlow.

"She wanted me to bathe twice a day! That's preposterous! Why, if I bathed twice a day, my a--"

"Master Whitlow," Lan interceded. "We are very sorry about what happened, but we feel our actions were justified. We were very distressed with several of Professor Karin's comments toward the class and felt that we needed to express our discontent. We never--"

"How many times do I have to *tell* you?" Whitlow shot up to his feet, sending his chair crashing into the wall behind him. The glass panes in the window shuddered violently, and for a moment, Lan feared the window would shatter.

"If you ever have any problems with staff members or other students at the university, you come to *me*. This is the third time you two have done this sort of rebellious act and the university staff and I are fed up with it. I will take no more." Whitlow marched around his desk, shaking his hands in disgust at the boys. "Never before have I seen anyone with such disciplinary problems!"

"Master Whitlow," said Lan. "We are very sorry--"

"Sorry?" shouted Whitlow, staring directly at Lan and shrugging his shoulders. "*Sorry!* Sorry will not get Professor Karin's hair back!" Whitlow pounded the desk behind him with his left fist. "Sorry will not get you out of the severe trouble you have fallen into!" He pounded his fist again, his face twisting more and more into a gruesome wrath. "Sorry will do you no good at *all*, young man!"

Lan slumped down in his chair, attempting to sink into the floor and vanish. He was scared to death. There was nothing he knew to do but apologize, but that did not seem to be getting him anywhere. Futilely, he tried again.

"We--we never meant to set Karin's hair on fire . . ." uttered Lan meekly.

"Yeah, but it was an enjoyable side effect," said Esmond, as calm as if he were talking to his mother about the weather.

"Besides, he deserved it. Him and that snobby attitude of his."

Lan noticed the headmaster glaring at Esmond. *Time to save him again*, he thought. *Time to save him like I always have. I feel it coming. Any second now, he's going to say something so outlandish--*

"I swear by Ohn," Esmond continued, "he has his nose stuck so far up in the air that--"

"What Esmond means is that we were extremely upset with Karin's treatment of the class in general," intercepted Lan in an attempt to prevent Esmond from saying anything else that was very inappropriate at the moment.

"No," countered Esmond, "actually I was trying to say that his nose is stuck so far up in the air that it's probably lodged in Ohn's--"

"That is *quite* enough," roared Whitlow, clenching his fists so hard that they were turning white. His breaths were coming very quickly and Lan could tell the headmaster was trying to keep from losing control. Lan and Esmond glanced at each other, wondering what to do next.

Whitlow took a deep breath, straightened his hat which had fallen over during one of his louder outbursts, folded his arms across his chest, and walked back behind his desk. He stood there for a moment, looking down at the desk as he continued taking long, deep breaths. After a few moments, Whitlow sighed loudly, pulled his chair back, and sat down, elbows on the top of the desk and hands clasped. He rested his chin on his hands and sighed one more time.

"I am forced to contact your parents," said Whitlow, his voice a bit shaky as he tried to suppress his wrath. "Salen and Gerhard will not be very pleased at all with you two."

Esmond started to stand. "I'm tired of sitting here listening to you go off on your tirades. Just write your letters and let us go. Anywhere's better than this morbid office any day. Nobody listens around here anyway."

Esmond was right about the description of the office as morbid. The walls were made of stone, with small arrow slits spaced along the walls. The ceiling was nearly four strides high with vaulted arches decorated with gargoyles of all sorts. It had been an altar to some long-forgotten human god or goddess back when Porthos University was the human stronghold in this land many thousands of years ago. That was when the humans had decided they would no longer live as slaves and had rebelled against their mesefu masters. The humans had won, but the mesefu still reigned as the predominant race in power. A pervading animosity still existed between the two races, though not nearly as strong as the

animosity both races shared toward the sarn who had come out of the south ravaging the countryside.

Thoughts of sarn brought Lan's mind back to memories of the past fall, when he had rescued Ria, the mysterious half-mesefu girl.

Ria, he thought, fingering the ruby-hilted dagger he kept in his right-hand robe pocket. *Where could you be now?* And then he realized what he was doing. He was touching the dagger. *But how--when did I put this in my--Dear Ohn, it's more powerful than I thought.* He was suddenly nervous to be around the dagger. He wanted to run back to his room and put it away. He knew nothing of magic, and wanted no part of the mysterious power. As soon as Whitlow let them go, he would put the dagger back in the box and lock it, this time.

Maybe you just picked it up without realizing it, he thought. *You were staring at it earlier today when you were thinking about her.* Though he spent most of his time studying, the breaks he took were always filled with thoughts of the strange girl. He had been wondering for many months what mysterious connection she had with his father and if she was still in town. She had been the first girl he had ever had any sort of connection to, as little as it was, and it filled him with curiosity. And yet, at the same time, his father's words of warning came back to haunt him every time.

Headmaster Whitlow's sharp voice shook him from his musings. "Where do you think you are going, Esmond Boyeui? I do not recall excusing you." Esmond was now standing up, heading for the office door. He looked back at Whitlow over his shoulder. "Sit down, now!" shouted the headmaster. Esmond reluctantly turned back around and sat.

"I do not want you two to think that I have no faith in you. I know that you can still change your ways, but severe measures must be taken nonetheless. I am sorry it has had to come to this, but remember--you brought it upon yourselves." Whitlow took out two sheets of parchment from his drawer and an ornate mesefu pen. Lan had seen other people at the university with similar pens. Their main benefit was that they never ran out of ink. The mesefu's mastery of magic had led them to create such wonderful things, which they gladly exported to the rest of the world, usually for a much higher price than was reasonable.

"I will inform your parents of everything that has happened since you arrived. The good as well as the bad. I will let them decide what measures should be taken, but I warn you now--" Whitlow looked at Lan, then at Esmond, pointing a bony index finger at each of them in turn "--any further acts like this--*anything*--and you will both be expelled from this institution immediately. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," Lan said quietly. This was for real. If Esmond got him drawn into anything else, his life would effectively be over.

"And you?" Whitlow asked, staring at Esmond.

Esmond stared back nonchalantly, as if he was not the least bit bothered by anything going on right now. "I suppose," he said.

"Good, then. You are both excused."

The headmaster began writing the letters. Lan sat and stared at the walls, imagining all sorts of frightening, morbid things his parents would do to him. *They'll kill me*, he thought. They had always wanted the best for him and were thrilled when he and Esmond had gotten accepted to the university. He remembered his mother warning him to stay out of trouble, knowing that Esmond was notorious for dragging him into doing things he didn't really want to do in the first place. More and more, Lan was realizing that Esmond was the source of many, if not most, of his problems. Almost all of the things that the two had gotten into trouble for were Esmond's ideas. Of course, Lan did not have to follow him. *That's my weakness*, he thought. *Not putting my foot down and standing strong when he tries to drag me into his pranks.*

Lan usually didn't want to join Esmond in his mischief, but at the same time, something about it was exotically alluring and Lan found it hard to resist the temptation. Next time would be different. He promised himself that next time he would give in for nothing and Esmond would be on his own.

By the mesefu timepiece on the wall--a blue crystal star-shape with thin, glowing green hands--it was well after noon. They had been in here for nearly an hour. Most of that hour, however, had consisted of Esmond and him in here alone, wondering what the headmaster would do to them when he arrived.

"You have been excused," repeated Whitlow. "Go back to your regular schedule. I will contact you when I have received word back from your parents. It should be no longer than a week."

Lan and Esmond slowly stood up and walked toward the large, oak, double doors that led from the headmaster's office out into the main hall of the university administrative building. As Lan reached out to open the door, he heard Whitlow add, "And stay out of trouble!"

He swallowed hard and opened the door, allowing Esmond to walk out first. He stepped through and carefully closed it behind him, trying to make as little noise as possible to keep from upsetting the headmaster any more.

"Well," Esmond said, smiling, "that wasn't as bad as I thought it would be!" He patted Lan on the back.

"Are you crazy?" Lan jerked away from him. "We could have gotten expelled! We *will* be expelled the next time you--we do anything like that."

"Me? Why did you start to single me out--"

"There you guys are!" interrupted a whining, nasal voice. Lan and Esmond turned in unison to face the hallway leading to the main entrance of the administrative building. The ceiling was almost as high as the headmaster's office, and was vaulted in the same fashion. Where the wall of the hallway touched the outside, shafts of light coming in from arrow slits sliced across the stone floors. Running clumsily down the hallway toward them was Marcus. They both sighed.

"Oh great," muttered Esmond quietly.

"The feeling's mutual," said Lan. "He's the last person I want to put up with right now."

When Marcus finally reached them, he was panting heavily, totally out of breath. He was a short young man, with quite a bit of weight around his midsection. He always kept his hair trimmed very short and thin in a peculiar dome shape. He wore wire-rimmed spectacles--his family must be very wealthy to afford such things--and shiny leather boots. He was known for having a bizarre wardrobe, but today Lan thought he had outdone himself. The plump young man wore a long blue-grey robe with a fluffy white fringe, tied about his waist by a black leather belt. A polished brass buckle with his name engraved on it clasped the belt together. Under the robe he was wearing pants that had been dyed orange and a bright green tunic.

"Dear Ohn," said Esmond to Marcus as the outlandishly-dressed young man tried to catch his breath. "One of the festival freaks escaped and is on the loose." He turned to Lan. "We've got to go warn someone!"

Lan couldn't help himself. Despite the mood he was in after the encounter with Whitlow, he laughed. "I'll get right on it," he said through his laughter. As he turned to walk away, preferably toward his room to be rid of the dagger, Esmond grabbed his shoulder, stopping him.

"You're not leaving me here alone! Festival freaks are dangerous!"

"Ha ha," said Marcus, sarcastically, finally in control of his breathing. "Very funny." Lan and Esmond both turned to look at him.

"Seriously," Esmond said. "Where *did* those silly clothes come from?"

"What?" Marcus started, looking down at himself frantically. "I don't see anything wrong with this. What are you talking about? What clothes?"

Esmond stifled a laugh. "Never mind," he sighed. "What are you in such a big hurry to find us for, anyway? Annoying us in the mornings and the afternoons isn't enough? You've got to come annoy us at lunch time also?"

"No," Marcus said. "I wanted to hear if it was true. Apparently it is, since you just came out of his office."

"If what was true?" Lan asked.

"If you really burned off Karin's hair!"

"Well, that's not what we were trying to do--" Lan started.

"Ah, it's all the same. Karin got mad and we got in trouble for it. It was wonderful!" Esmond was smiling. How could he possibly smile about that?

"Esmond," Lan said. "It was not wonderful. You must have some strange, twisted idea of fun if you enjoyed that office visit."

Esmond's smile faltered for a moment, but one glance at Marcus brought it right back. "Wow," Marcus said. "I wish I could have seen that! Too bad I'm not taking political science anymore. I took it last semester. Passed with honors, too."

"That's amazing," Esmond said. "Now, if you're through researching the daily rumors--which are, apparently, all true--you'll excuse me. I think I am going into town for the rest of the day."

"Can I come with you?" Marcus asked, excitedly.

"No thanks," Esmond said, starting to walk off.

Marcus ran up beside him. Lan followed behind them as they walked toward the entrance of the administrative building. "But you shouldn't go out there by yourself. What if something happened to you? Nobody would know anything!"

"All the better." Esmond took a few more steps then stopped in his tracks. Marcus almost stumbled over when he stopped abruptly, trying to stay beside Esmond. "Besides," Esmond started, "Lan's going with me. I'll be fine."

"What?!" Lan exclaimed. "I am not going out there," he said, pointing toward the general direction of the university gates.

"Sure you are," Esmond said. "You haven't been out of this university since--well, since you got here. It's time to relax. You need it after what happened in there. I'm surprised you didn't tense up so tight that you shrank into a ball and vanished!"

Esmond started walking again, Marcus at his side. Lan stood there in the hallway, wondering what to do. Perhaps he should go out into Porthos with Esmond. His friend was right--he had not left these walls since the day they arrived. And with a city this size, it was silly for him to think that he would run into Ria. Besides, it was not like he would be going against his father's words. He would not be actively looking for her. *But if I happen to run into her by chance, then that's just the way things will be.* He smiled as he ran to catch up with Esmond and Marcus, who were turning to walk out into the open.

They were standing on the steps just outside the administrative building when Lan reached them, Esmond still telling Marcus that he did not want him tagging along.

"I'll go," Lan said.

Esmond stopped his conversation abruptly and looked at Lan--first with disbelief, but it quickly turned into a smile. "See?" he said to Marcus. "I told you he was coming with me."

"But why can't I go too?" Marcus asked. Lan walked on down the stairs and stared at the large gateway straight in front of him, merely several strides down the cobblestone entry-road. A

guard stood on either side with a spear. They were there only to check identification papers of people coming and going, to make sure that everyone was whom they said they were. Lan fished around in his pocket, making sure he had his papers on him. His hand brushed the dagger. *I've got to take this back to my room first*, he reminded himself.

"Hey," he started, talking to Esmond.

"Ready to go?" Esmond asked. "I guess we can't stop Marcus from following us. Maybe he'll scare the pickpockets away." He smiled and playfully punched Marcus in the shoulder. The plump young man rubbed at his shoulder as if it had hurt.

"Oh come on," Esmond said. "I barely touched you."

"But it hurt!" Marcus exclaimed.

"Do you want to tag along with us or not?"

"Yes, but--"

"Then shut up about it and let's go. If you insist on coming along, then at least make yourself as unnoticeable as possible." Esmond started walking down the cobblestone road to the gate. "I understand if you have trouble doing that in *those*." Esmond gestured at Marcus's clothes.

"Esmond, I need to go back to my room first," he said.

"Oh no," Esmond responded, smiling, not stopping in his walk. "If I let you go back to your room first you'll never come out and I'll end up going into town alone with festival freak here. I can't begin to count the number of times you said you'd come with me, but you had to go do something first. You never came back, and I'm not about to fall for it this time."

"But I left my identification papers there!" Lan argued. He could not tell Esmond about the dagger. It was his secret, and nobody needed to know about it but him. It was a lie that he had left his papers in his room--he had felt them along with the dagger in his pocket--but it was the best excuse he could come up with for going back to his room to rid himself of the dagger.

"Good one," Esmond smiled. "I know you have your papers on you." Esmond, still walking, shoved his hand into Lan's pocket and withdrew his identification papers. Lan nearly panicked. *I wonder if he felt the dagger?* "You had them on you when we went to see Whitlow, I remember. You were looking at them when you were in the office before I got there. You put them into

that pocket when I came in. I'm not stupid, Lan. I remember everything." He held out the small folded papers to Lan.

"Fine, you got me," Lan said. "I was just trying to get out of it." Which was a lie. He was trying to get out of taking the dagger with him.

"I knew it! What did I tell you? Now just loosen up and have a good time, okay?"

"Where are we going, anyway?" asked Marcus.

"We're going to go find the festival you escaped from and return you," Esmond said, "and then Lan and I are going to go to a tavern and have a few sweetdrops."

"You're going to go see *her*, aren't you?" Marcus smiled, nudging Esmond with his elbow.

"Um--well--uh--"

"Who?" Lan asked. "Who is '*her*'?"

"You haven't told Lan what you do when you go out?" Marcus turned to Lan. "There's this tavern on the southwest end of town he always goes to so he can stare and gawk at this gangly redheaded girl who usually sits in the back corner by herself. I think she's friends with one of the barmaids there."

"So, Esmond, you've finally found Elsinda?" Lan smiled.

"Funny," Esmond said dryly. "No, I've found the girl of my dreams. She's amazing, really. Short red hair, cute little face. Always wears this fabulous green cloak that makes her hair look like its on fire and her eyes look like the bluest ocean." Esmond stared outward dreamily.

"So what's her name?" Lan asked. Esmond remained silent, gazing out into the city. They were close to the gate now.

"Go ahead, Esmond," said Marcus. "Tell Lan her name." Esmond looked down and started walking faster. "What was that?" asked Marcus. "I don't think I heard you. Oh yeah, that's right! You don't *know* her name!"

"What?" asked Lan, startled. "Why don't you know her name?"

"Because he's afraid to talk to her," Marcus said.

"That's not it!" Esmond retorted, spinning around to face them. "It just hasn't been the right time, that's all. I'm waiting for my moment!"

"Sure you are," said Marcus. "And I'm dressed like a festival freak."

"You are," said both Lan and Esmond in unison.

"Ha ha, guys. Very funny." He shuffled on down the road beside Esmond. Lan caught up and walked alongside him as they approached the gate.

"Well, let's go see what this girl looks like. Maybe I can convince you to actually say something to her." Lan patted Esmond on the back. "Does she work there? Or just sit there."

"Just sits there," Esmond said. "As far as I can tell, that is. Sits there and look magnificent."

"You boys got papers?" One of the guards had stepped toward them from his post beside the gate. Lan could see out into the city now, for the first time ever. The sheer number of people out on that road walking back and forth amazed him. Never before had he seen so many people in one place. Sure, he had been to Dryan, the largest city--and capital--of his homeland, Kagon, but Porthos was many times larger. It was the largest of all human cities and the center of most trade and commerce that could travel by land. All of the sea trade was farther north, in Merhos.

"Yes, we've got papers," Marcus said. Lan and Esmond nodded to show that they, too, had their papers.

"Good," said the guard. "You'll need 'em to get back in. Remember, gate closes at midnight. If you're not back by then, you get to sit outside all night long until sunrise. Have fun!" He smiled, revealing a mouth that was missing several teeth. He wiped some sweat from his forehead and walked back to his post. *It must be hot out here under all of that armor*, Lan thought. He gazed up at the blue sky. A few fluffy clouds floated about, but otherwise it was a perfect day. Neither too hot nor too cold, and just bright enough. He smiled as they walked under the shaded archway in the wall and out onto the main road into Porthos. His world was suddenly getting a lot bigger. And for some reason, despite the uneasy feeling he had about being out here, he liked it.

#

"Won't it take us forever to walk to this place? It's in the southwest corner of town. We're in the northeast corner, and this city is huge." They had walked down the long road leading to the university from the main road and were now standing right in front

of the mass of people Lan had seen from the university gate. Off to the southwest he could see, for the first time, the Ceren, the Pyranian seat of government. It was a large stone pyramid of sorts that appeared to have been cut off halfway up. It was a perfectly flat building, with large sloping walls that showed no steps. They were sleek. He thought he could see marks in them that could be windows, but he could not be sure from such a great distance. It sat on a large hill, which was surrounded at the bottom by various other large stone buildings--likely other government offices. He was amazed at how tall the buildings were to stand out above all the other buildings between him and that hill.

"Don't worry," Esmond said. "There's an inn back near the gate that way--" he pointed toward the east "--that rents carriage rides to anywhere in the city. For a fee, of course. Much faster than walking, though."

"Ah, I see. Lead the way, then." Lan followed Esmond as he walked eastward, toward what must be the city gate. It was a massive archway in the tall stone wall of the city. There were towers built into the wall every so often with some sort of strange gold or brass bowl atop each one along with a flag which he presumed bore the insignia of Pyran.

"What are the big bowls for on top of the towers?" he asked, hoping that either Esmond or Marcus knew the answer.

"They're for warning fires," Marcus said. "Whenever trouble is spotted--major trouble, mind you, like an invading army or something--the first guards to notice light the warning fire in their tower. Then the guards in the other towers see it and light their fires, effectively creating a chain of fire-lighting that stretches all around the city. It serves to let the people and the Ceren know that something ugly is afoot."

"That's an amazing idea," Lan marveled. He glanced back at the Ceren through the throng of people. It appeared higher than any of the other towers, most likely because it sat on a hill. "But can't they see everything from up there?" he asked, pointing at the Ceren.

"Not at night," Marcus said. "The fields out there are pitch black at night, unless there's at least a half moon."

"Oh, okay."

It did not take long for them to reach the inn Esmond spoke of. It was just the second building on the left from the university road. A worn wooden sign hung over the doorway with an image of what Lan knew as a dragon carved into it and painted red.

"Big fans of mythology?" he asked Esmond, pointing at the sign.

"Who, the owners of this place? Nah. Not that I know of, at least. They just like the picture, I suppose." As Esmond led them through the door into the dark insides of the inn, Lan asked him what the name of this place was. "The Dragon and Ale," he said. "And what a fine establishment it is. But not as fine as the place we're going to."

"And why is that?" Lan asked, looking around at the dim, smoky interior. It was virtually empty. There were several tables with chairs on either side of them and a bar straight ahead. The only person Lan could see was a woman in a black, frilly barmaid dress standing behind the bar.

"Because," Esmond said, "this place doesn't have my redheaded girl." He smiled as he approached the bar.

"Well if it isn't Esmond," the barmaid said. She had long, curly black hair tied into a braid behind her head. She smiled as he nodded at her. "I suppose you're wanting to rent a ride to the Bear and Claw, eh?"

"You know me too well, Genna."

"It'll be twenty-five geln. You know the procedure."

"Yeah, one second." Esmond started fishing in his pockets and then turned to Lan and Marcus, a startled look on his face. "Damn!" he cursed. "I left my blessed money in my room!" Then his eyes lit up and he grabbed Marcus by the arm and flung him toward the bar. "Marcus! Make yourself useful, for once. Give this lovely lady twenty-five geln so we can head off to see my dream girl!"

"Esmond, why do I always end up paying for--"

"Just pay her and get on with it. Time's wasting! Besides, you know I'll pay you back, right?"

Marcus blew air through pursed lips at Esmond and began digging in his pockets for money. Esmond just smiled.

"Speaking of this dream girl," Genna said, "have you actually spoken to her yet?"

"Well, no, but uh--"

"But he's going to today," Lan said, stepping forward.

"And who is this handsome fellow?" she asked Esmond.

"He's my best friend, Lan. We came to the university together. I finally managed to drag his sorry hide outside and into the real world for once." Lan jabbed him in the side. "Ow! Will you stop that? You've been doing that for the past ten years or more, and it hurts every time!"

Lan just smiled. "Nobody dragged me anywhere," he said. "I came out here of my own free will. I decided that it was about time I see the city."

"I'll say so," Esmond said. "We've been here almost a full two seasons and this is the first time he's left the university walls."

"But who has a better political science grade?" Lan asked, grinning.

"Sounds like he's got you there," Genna said, taking some money from Marcus's outstretched hand.

"Probably not after this morning," Esmond said. "I don't think Karin will even pass you now, much less let you pass at the top of the class."

Lan sighed as his stomach sank. Esmond was right. Today was the first time his friend's shenanigans had involved one of their professors. Not only were his parents going to kill him, but Professor Karin was likely going to fail him now as well.

"What have you done now, Esmond?" Genna asked him, wide-eyed.

"Nothing to concern yourself about. I'd rather forget it."

"Have it your way." She grinned and slipped the money into one of the pockets on the front of her fluffy dress, then turned toward a door behind the bar. "I'll go tell one of the drivers that you're ready. He'll meet you around front shortly. Have fun!"

"I plan on it," Esmond said as she walked from the room.

"I want my money back when we get home," Marcus said with a stern tone.

"You'll get it back. I promise."

"I've heard that before," Marcus said dryly.

"So have I," Lan said quietly, to himself. "So have I."

"What are we waiting for?" Esmond asked as he walked toward the front door. "To the Bear and Claw! My dream girl awaits!"

Lan sighed and followed Esmond and Marcus out the door. What had he gotten himself into this time?

#

"What's that?" Lan asked pointing at a large white structure atop a hill on their left. It was surrounded by low brick walls and had a tree-lined pathway leading to it from the main road.

"It's the largest Temple of Ohn in the city," Marcus answered. "The tomb of the kings is in there, along with many graves of both noblemen and commoners alike. Every Ohnsday people from all around this area of the city go there to worship."

"What about people in other areas of the city? Are they not religious or something?"

"Of course they are!" Marcus seemed offended at the thought of anyone not being religious. Lan decided to keep his disbelief in Ohn to himself for the time being. "There are more temples than just that one. There are four major ones, and many smaller ones."

"Do they all look like that?" Lan asked. The building was fairly tall with large white columns all around it and a silver eight-pointed star set atop it with a ruby set in the center. It reminded Lan of the dagger he carried in his pocket now, albeit against his own will.

"More or less," Marcus said. "Though they're not all *that* big, of course."

Lan gazed at the building as they rode past it and the throngs of people. It was very noisy out in the city. A million conversations going on at once, horses snorting, wheels clacking against cobblestone, and various other city noises adding to the drone of city life.

The structures closer to the middle of the city were built as more or less one seamless wall. They were all very narrow, around three floors high, and built wall-to-wall, leaving no alleyways in between. They were mostly built out of worn red brick, with a few large wooden supports. They were far different from the buildings in Dryan, and even from those farther from the center of Porthos.

There were few curtains in any of the windows, which surprised Lan a bit--he could see directly into their houses! It was as if the people who lived in them were trying to say that they had nothing to hide, and to prove it, they'd let everyone have a peek. Through some of them he saw fancy furniture and wall-hangings, but others seemed to open into bare-walled, empty rooms. A few of the buildings had balconies on the upper floors, where occasionally people stood or sat, either conversing with friends over food and drink, or gazing indirectly down at the people in the streets.

The carriage they were in was simple in design. It was open-topped with two rows of seats facing one another. Lan and Esmond sat in one and Marcus sat facing them. It had large wooden wheels that nearly reached as high as the side of the carriage itself. The driver sat in front, holding the reins of two grey horses with black dappling.

A few minutes later they were entering a large square with fountains in every corner. To the north, Lan could see the tall government buildings and behind them the Ceren atop its high hill. At this closer distance, he could tell for sure now that the notches he had seen from afar were indeed windows. He even thought for a moment that he saw people walking past some of them.

"This is the city center," Esmond said. "They're getting ready for the festival next month, I believe." He gestured toward the north end of the square where many men were building what appeared to be a stage. "I can't wait until then. It's going to be great! Maybe I'll even bring dream girl with me and we can dance the night away."

"I can't wait either," Marcus said.

"Of course not," said Esmond. "It's probably the same festival you escaped from."

"Ha ha," smirked Marcus. "That wasn't funny."

"Nothing's ever funny to you, Marcus. You need to lighten up sometime."

"I have to agree," Lan said, smiling. Marcus just shrugged. As they crossed the middle of the city center, Lan noticed a tall tower to the south sticking up above the buildings. "What's that tower there?"

"That's where I hope to end up one day," said Marcus.
"After my education at the university, of course. Well, after some of it. That's the Mages' Guild."

"The Mages' Guild? You mean like magic?"

"Yes. That's where many humans go to try to learn the art of magic. Some have it in them and some don't. More often than not, they don't, since magic is so rare in our kind and extremely hard to control for those that do have it."

"How do you know you have it?" Lan asked, curious to know anything he could about magic, for while it frightened him, it also entranced him. He was likely only afraid of it because he knew nothing of it, and there was only one way to solve that problem.

"How could I not?" Marcus seemed too sure of himself. Lan knew what happened to those who were overconfident, and it usually was not nice in the end. "I've felt it for a long time now. And sometimes, strange things happen to me that shouldn't, and there's no other way to explain them."

"What kinds of strange things?" Lan asked.

"Well, the one that comes to mind first happened a few months ago. I was sitting at my desk in my room, writing, when I accidentally knocked my inkwell off. It was falling to the floor and all I could do was panic. It was the last inkwell I had and there was no time to get a new one. The paper I was working on was due the next day. I shouted a curse in desperation and squinted my eyes as I did it. When I didn't hear anything seconds later, I opened them to find my inkwell still on my desk. The strangest thing, though, is that I didn't even *try* to make anything happen. It just . . . did."

Chills ran up and down Lan's spine. That was exactly the kind of thing that happened to him every now and then. He remembered when the sarn, Ga'ruk, had loosed a crossbow bolt directly at his head and somehow he had stopped it. *It must be magic. It must be. I have it! I have magic! I have--*

Before he could think another phrase to himself about his joy of finally discovering exactly what caused those strange events, Esmond chimed in. "That's a load of fish and you know it, Marcus."

"It is not! I swear by Ohn that it really happened!" Marcus started huffing, taking the defensive.

"Okay," Esmond sighed. "We'll see who's right when a bolt of lightning strikes your rump for swearing a lie by Ohn's name." He turned and looked northward at the Ceren as they left the city center. "Likely you just *thought* you knocked it over and got all worked up for nothing."

"Whatever," Marcus grunted. "Just--whatever."

Lan gazed at the Mages' Guild tower with a strange yearning. He wanted to go and find out more, now. It was suddenly no longer a scary thought. He wanted to see if he truly did have the ability to use magic. And if he did, he wanted to learn how to control it. Then, just maybe, he could protect himself from any danger Ria might bring to him and finally be able to search her out and get some answers.

Chapter Six

"This is the place!" Esmond bounced out of the carriage and toward the door of the Bear and Claw. It was an old building, far older than most they had seen on their ride here. Lan counted two floors of windows with shabby, rundown shutters, the hinges coming apart on most of them. The walls were made of long logs that had at one time been painted white, but most had flaked off or turned a dirty grey over the years. The rest of this part of town was equally as dreary, filled mainly with self-standing hovels like this one--a far cry from the wall-to-wall buildings in the city center.

He did not know that when Esmond said the southwest corner of town, he meant the literal far end of the southwest corner of town. The looming city wall stood both to Lan's immediate left and several strides in front of him. The sun was hidden behind the wall, causing the entire area to be draped in a cool, breezeless shade.

Lan, Esmond, Marcus, and the carriage driver were the only people on the street. Sitting next to the doorway of the tavern was an old, thin man with greasy dark grey hair wearing tattered rags for clothes. His sleepy, droopy eyes showed that he had been drinking recently--likely more than he should.

Lan was a bit frightened of being in this desolate, dark area. The only comforting thing about the whole situation was the sound of people talking and singing spilling out from the tavern door. *Why did I let him talk me into this? I can't even begin to imagine what kind of people would be in such a place!* He stepped down from the carriage as Esmond waved him on from the door. Marcus followed.

The sign hanging over the tavern was in remarkably good shape compared to the outside walls of the place--they looked as if they would collapse without a moment's notice. A very silly bear was carved on the sign that looked as if a child had done it. It was rather humorous, with two big round ears and a black nose. A strange oval with several marks through it that Lan assumed was the bear's claw was carved next to the goofy bear itself. Lan smiled, laughing silently as he followed Esmond and Marcus into the tavern.

The inside of the Bear and Claw was completely different from the inside of the Dragon and Ale. For starters, there were *people* in here. They were everywhere, at every table, talking and shouting and cheering and, above all else, drinking. Several barmaids with big brown aprons and white bonnets carried steel trays around from table to table handing out drinks and food. Off to one side was a double swinging door that led into a kitchen. Thin trails of smoke snaked out of it along with more voices, likely those of cooks preparing food for the mass of people in the main room.

There were two people behind the bar pouring drinks, a man and a woman. Both were similarly clad in dark brown pants and white shirts. They had smiles on their faces as they filled mugs and passed them around. Esmond was standing in the middle of the main aisle leading to the bar from the door. He was gazing off into a far corner as Marcus whispered something to him. Esmond shrugged his shoulders and set off toward to bar.

Lan gazed over into the corner Esmond had been staring at, and at first he did not see anything noteworthy. As he was about to follow Esmond up to the bar, a figure wearing a green cloak with the hood pulled up over its head caught his eye. The person had their legs propped up on the table next to a mug. Nobody else sat there. Could that be Esmond's dream girl?

He glanced over to Esmond to see him deep in conversation with the guy behind the bar, Marcus staring over his shoulder. Lan smiled to himself and headed for the table in the back corner. If Esmond was not going to talk to her, then Lan would get her to talk to him.

He worked his way to the back of the tavern, squeezing between chairs and people, several times almost tripping over a foot

or a leg stuck out in the path. People looked at him strangely as he passed, but he assumed it was just because he was a new face around here.

When he reached the table, the cloaked figure turned its head to him, but the sharp shadow cast on the face prevented him from seeing anything. "What do you want?" The voice was definitely feminine. It was soft yet commanding at the same time.

He was at a loss for words. It had all seemed so easy on his way here--just tell her that he had a friend who wanted to talk to her. But now that he was finally standing before whom he presumed was Esmond's dream girl, his mouth was sealed shut.

"Well?" She leaned forward, taking her legs off of the table and replacing them with her elbows. She pulled back her hood revealing her head in the dim lighting of the tavern. Lan could see why Esmond had a crush on her. She was remarkably cute.

She had a very pretty, lightly-freckled face with a short, stubby nose that turned slightly up at the end. Her bright blue eyes caught the light of a nearby lantern and seemed to glow. Her flaming red hair was straight and short, falling only to just above her shoulders. *Like Ria's*, he thought. Several freckles stood out on her face, mostly clustered on her nose and cheeks. Her slender neck disappeared into the neckline of a grey tunic, around which was fastened the forest green cloak she wore.

"Are you just going to stare, or do you have something to say?"

"I, uh--well--" he started.

"Did you escape from that infirmary south of here? The one where they keep all the crazy people who sit around and drool all day and bash their heads into walls?" She leaned back against the wall, not taking her eyes off of him for an instant.

"Well, no, I'm from the university, but--"

"Oh," she said, raising her head in a sort of mocking acknowledgement. "Seems like your parents are wasting their geln on you." She glanced away from him toward the opposite side of the tavern for a moment then returned her gaze to him. "So, do you have anything important to say? If not, I'd prefer you go on about your business. I don't waste time talking to people who just stand around and gawk."

"You didn't exactly seem to be doing much yourself," he said. She pursed her lips and wrinkled her brow, but did not say anything. "Anyway, what I've come to tell you is that I have a friend over there who wants to meet you, only he's too afraid to approach you himself."

"Just what I need," she said, sighing, throwing her head back. "An over-educated dolt with a fancy for me."

"Well, actually--"

"Who is it?" she asked. "Purely curiosity, mind you. Is it someone else from the university?"

"Yes, actually, he is--"

"Does he come in here often?"

"Well, yes, now--"

"Do you mean that *fat* kid?" She opened her mouth wide and let out a loud, choked off laugh. "I wouldn't go near that cow if he was the last remaining man on Kalra! Let the human's die out, for Ohn's sake."

"No," Lan huffed, frustrated. "It's not Marcus. His name is Esmond."

"What did you say?" she asked, suddenly leaning closer to him.

"Esmond," he repeated. Why was she suddenly interested? Had she heard of him before? What all had Esmond *done* while on his trips out here?

"You're friends with *him*?" she asked.

"How do you know Esmond?"

"Well, I don't, really. But Orin does. He's the bartender over there. He's told me I should try talking to this Esmond fellow sometime, but I've never really felt like it. He just doesn't sound like my type."

Esmond's crazy! He's even tried getting the bartender to set him up with this girl!

"What do you mean by that? What, exactly, *is* your kind of guy?"

She glanced off behind him again, twitched her eyes, then jerked her head back up to him. "For starters, he's not you. He's got to be a guy who's willing to take risks, and live an exciting life. None of this dull university stuff."

"Trust me," Lan said. "He's not afraid of getting into trouble. Just today he almost got expelled--got us *both* expelled--for placing firepoppers in a professor's desk. He rigged them to go off when the professor opened it. Caused quite a ruckus and even managed to set the professor's hair on fire in the process."

She put her index finger next to her mouth in thought. "Hmm," she mused. "He sounds pretty stupid. Looks like you should find smarter friends, if you don't mind me saying so."

"Well . . . maybe you should just go meet him. Esmond's a difficult character to describe, but I'll try. He's really funny. Makes me laugh a lot."

"I don't know if I would exactly classify that as a stunning achievement," she said.

"He, uh . . ." How could he convince her to go talk to Esmond? He wanted to help his friend out, but she seemed to be shrugging off every attempt he made to make his friend sound like someone she would want to meet. Maybe she'd like the cow story.

"He once fed a cow soap to see if it'd blow bubbles." *Idiot! That's not going to work! What on Kalra made you want to tell her that?*

"Great, farm boys. Please, refrain from telling me what *else* he may have tried on that poor cow. Are you sure you didn't escape from the crazy house? Your friend too, for that matter?" She took a sip from her mug and glanced once again back behind Lan. He turned around to see who she kept looking at, but could not figure out which, if any, of the multitude of noisy people it was.

"I'm going to head on up to the bar," she said, standing, mug in hand. "I'm still thirsty and I seem to have finished my drink. I suppose I might try talking to your imbecilic friend. It's not often one gets a chance to meet *two* insane freaks in one day."

She walked away toward the bar and Esmond. Lan stood there gazing at the table silently for a moment, wondering if Esmond would hate him eternally for what he had just done. Swallowing hard, he turned and followed her through the throngs of people. She stopped to say a few words to someone sitting at a table, but Lan passed her on by.

He slowly walked up to Esmond who was talking away to the bartender. Marcus saw Lan coming and turned to Esmond, poking him on the shoulder. Esmond just brushed his hand away and continued talking.

Lan sneaked up behind Esmond and tapped him on the back. Esmond turned to Marcus, irritation carved into his features. "I told you, don't bother me right now! See if you can find out where Lan went." Marcus pointed behind Esmond at Lan. He turned slowly around to see him. "Oh, hi there, Lan. So, did you see--"

The redheaded girl came forward, brushing past Lan. Esmond's jaw dropped. Lan smiled uneasily, hoping she would not make Esmond look too much like a fool.

"So this is what a university education cranks out," the girl said. "Seems to me like everyone from that university is an over-privileged, blabbering idiot. I thought you sorry lot were supposed to be among the smartest humans on Kalra. Ha!" She reached out and put her hand under Esmond's chin, pushing his mouth closed.

"That's not true!" Marcus shouted. "I go to the university too!"

The girl, totally unaffected at being accosted by Marcus, smiled at him as she responded. "I believe you have just made my point stronger than I could have ever made it myself, dear." She turned to Esmond and patted him on the cheek. "I'd love to stand here chatting, but I have more important things to do." She nodded at Esmond then walked past his stool and stood against the bar.

Esmond stared at her in awe for a while, then turned to Lan. At first, Lan was afraid Esmond would start yelling at him and calling him stupid for talking to her, but instead, a smile spread across Esmond's face and he broke out into laughter.

"She's great!" he exclaimed. "And she even made fun of Marcus!" He straightened his sleeves up, brushed his hair back with his hands, and turned around to start talking to the girl.

At the start, Esmond's conversation with her did not seem as if it was going to go anywhere, but after a minute he had made her laugh and she put her arm on his shoulder, handing him a mug. *I don't see how he does it!* Lan marveled, feeling a slight bit of jealousy. *I just don't get it!*

"I'm Esmond."

"And I'm Gaelyn," the girl said. She took a drink from her mug and went on talking to Esmond, getting to know him and telling him more about herself.

Lan felt a tug at his shoulder and turned to see Marcus standing there. "Great," Marcus said. "I paid for him to come here and now he's not going to want to leave! I'm feeling uneasy and want to go home, but there's no way I'll convince him to leave now." Marcus huffed. "It doesn't matter, though. If he refuses to leave, then I'm leaving without him! Same goes for you!"

"Funny, Marcus," Lan said. "You wouldn't leave. Come on," he said, grabbing the round fellow's shoulder. "Just stay for a while, okay? This means a lot to him and I don't want it to be ruined. We've still got several hours before nightfall, and many more after that before the university gates are closed. Besides, despite how this place looks, it seems fairly safe."

"It's not the gates closing that I'm so worried about," Marcus started, gulping. "It's the 'Thieves' Guild.'" Marcus pulled Lan away from Esmond and the bar and out into the middle of the main row. "It's rumored," he said, in a low voice, "that the Thieves' Guild is in this part of town, but nobody knows exactly where. Lord Osbick, a retainer here for Lord Roland of the northlands of Pyran, has been fighting the 'Thieves' Guild for some time."

"Who are they?" Lan asked.

"Terrible, horrible people," Marcus said in a near-whisper. "They steal from everyone. They have no morals! I heard their leader slit his mother's throat for a handful of geln!"

"You should really learn not to believe everything you hear," Lan said, but Marcus's face was unwavering. "Besides, why would they bother with us? We obviously don't have anything of value."

"Scuse me," said a large, burly man as he walked toward Lan and Marcus, headed for the bar. He was a very tall man, with a thick brown beard and a head of unruly brown hair. He had dark eyes and spoke with a distinctly Merhosian accent. A dirty white shirt stretched across his chest, covered with a leather vest. His arms were bare, exposing tanned flesh covered in curly black hair. He walked with a certain air about him that made Lan feel uneasy. He was moving so quickly toward Lan and Marcus that they had no time to get out of the way. The man just walked right between them, his large, muscular body forcing them in opposite directions and nearly into tables.

And suddenly Lan felt different. It was as if part of him was missing, but he could not figure out which part it was. There

was an empty feeling in his gut that was slowly spreading through the rest of his body with chilly tendrils. He brushed the sleeves of his robe straight as he stepped back out into the main walkway. Marcus was sitting down on the ground, muttering silently to himself.

Lan reached into his pockets to make sure his identification papers had not fallen out. His feeling of emptiness amplified a thousand-fold, and he immediately realized what was wrong--the dagger was missing.

He looked behind himself, trying to suppress his instant anxiety. The dagger was nowhere to be seen. He knelt down looking under the deserted table he had barely avoided when the burly man shoved his way past, but all he saw were the stained floorboards staring back at him. *Of course it isn't here. You didn't hear anything fall, you dolt. Get off of your knees and--* he stood up, a new awareness washing over him *--get that dagger back from that thief!*

He was not sure how he knew--whether it was the magic in the dagger calling out to him, Marcus's brief mention of the Thieves' Guild, or a possible combination of the two--but he was positive that the burly man had swiped the dagger as he shoved his way past.

Lan stood up, brushing the dust and dirt from his knees back onto the floor from whence it came, and marched toward the bar. The man was seated on the opposite side of Gaelyn from Esmond and seemed to be talking to her while Esmond sat there with a mug in his hand and an energetic, wide smile across his face.

Lan walked right up to the large, bearded man and tapped him on the shoulder. "Excuse *me*, sir," he said, sternly.

"Aye, lad?" said the man in his thick accent. He had a smile on his face and a kind look in his eyes. He did not look like he was the type of person who would steal anything from anyone. Perhaps Lan was mistaking this strange intuition? *No. There is no mistaking it. He has Ria's dagger.*

"I believe you have something of mine," he said.

The man gave a sidelong glance to Gaelyn then stood up from his barstool. "Well now," he began, smiling as wide as ever. "What could I possibly 'ave o' yers? I ne'er seen ye 'fore in me life."

"A dagger," Lan said, not letting the man's sheer overwhelming size back him down. Nothing would stop him from

getting that dagger back. Nothing. It was his link to Ria, and he would not give that up.

"Lan," Esmond interjected as the girl, Gaelyn, turned to watch. "You don't have any dagger. What are you talking about? I'm the one drinking here, not you, so why are you the one acting drunk?"

"See 'ere?" the large man said, gesturing at Esmond. "He says ye don' have no dagger, an' from th' sound o' his voice, 'e seems to know ye fairly well." The man folded his gargantuan arms over his massive chest, but kept smiling.

"Technically, I *don't* have a dagger right now," Lan said, dryly. "*You* have it. And I would appreciate it if you would give it--"

"My money purse!" It was Marcus, finally on his feet and digging frantically through the myriad of pockets in his outlandish robe. "I can't find my money purse!"

"And I would also like for you to return my friend's money," Lan added.

"Lan, where did you ever get a dagger from?" Esmond asked.

"Not now, Esmond," Lan stressed. "Sir, return what you have stolen from me and my friend before I call the guards."

"Took," Gaelyn said, siding up to the large man. Lan noticed that she looked remarkably small standing beside him. She pulled on his shoulder and he leaned over as she whispered something into his ear. Lan stood watching them intently, wondering if the man would admit to having the dagger. After several thoughtful looks passed the man's face as Gaelyn spoke unheard words to him, he stood upright, framed his chin with his fingers while squinting at Lan, then finally spoke.

"I tell ye what," he said, reaching one hand into a pouch tied around his belt. "I'll give yer dagger back, but only since yer th' first one t'catch me in--" he paused, gazing up at the ceiling for a moment "--well, since as long ago as I can remember." He withdrew his hand from the large leather pouch and in it was the silver dagger with the renol blade and the ruby in the pommel that Lan knew so well. The man extended it toward Lan. "My name's Took. Malice Took."

Lan snatched the dagger out of the man's thick hands and thrust it into his own pocket beside his identification papers. Esmond stared at Lan in disbelief at seeing the dagger, then upturned his mug and finished off the rest of whatever beverage Gaelyn had ordered for him.

"Don't let him fool you," Gaelyn said, smiling. "His name isn't Malice. He just tells everyone that because he thinks his real name is too silly. It's really--"

"That'll be enough, Gaelyn," the big man interrupted. "Ye can jus' call me Took," he said to Lan. "An' what can I call ye? Lan?"

"Lan is what most call me, yes," he said, "but I'd prefer you not call me anything. Ever. You're lucky I haven't called the guards down on you. I still might. Where's Marcus's money bag?"

Took smiled and reached back into his leather pouch, withdrew Marcus's money bag, and tossed it at the wide-eyed youth. It smacked into his stomach with a dull clinking sound and fell to the floor. Marcus quickly snatched it up and gripped it so tightly with his hands that his knuckles turned white. He started to say something, but stopped with his mouth half open, turned, and fled from the tavern.

"Marcus!" Lan shouted after him.

"Don't worry about him," Esmond said. "He can't run too far carrying all that weight around. Especially under those crazy festival freak clothes of his." By this time, Marcus was at the tavern door.

"But he hired the carriage! He could--Dear Ohn, he could leave us here!" Lan bolted toward the door of the Bear and Claw, but when he came out into the shady afternoon street, the carriage was already well on its way around the corner. Marcus must have told the driver to hurry. Damn him! Why did that boy always have to panic? He did the only thing he knew to do and chased after the carriage.

This is crazy, he thought as he ran down the shady street. Threatened with expulsion from the university, my friend's fallen for the friend of a thief, and Marcus just deserted us in this slum!

When he turned where the carriage had turned, he found himself out on a major roadway. The southern city gate was mere strides away on his right. Hundreds of people carrying bundles and

riding horses and carriages were moving about, in and out of the gate and all along the road. Lan could not see the carriage he had rode in on with Esmond and Marcus anywhere through the mass of people.

He knew that the university was toward the northeast, so he ran in the direction opposite the gate. As he made his way through the crowds, he heard several people shouting at him, but he paid them no attention. He was determined to catch Marcus. He would not get away with this. Lan was tired of putting up with things like this for today. He would take no more.

When he at last spotted the carriage, he had been running for a hundred strides. It was very far away from him, and getting even farther away by the second. There was no way he could catch it on foot. The only thing he could do now was go back, get Esmond, and get out of here.

Lan trudged back slowly, staring down at the cobblestone road. He kicked around small pebbles as he shuffled onward in frustration. He had not walked far when he ran head on into someone's chest.

"Watch it, boy!" shouted a low, rumbling voice. Lan looked up to see who he had run into. When his eyes landed on the man, he nearly fainted. His knees went weak and he began to stumble backward. The blood in his veins instantly froze as he stared into the face of none other than the sarn leader, Ga'ruk.

"What're you staring at? Never seen a sarn, little boy?" Ga'ruk grunted and walked off. Gone were the skulls, bones, and leather. They had been replaced with gleaming, polished steel plate armor and a rather regal-looking purple sash over one shoulder. He still wore the same helmet and boots, but his appearance was drastically different. He almost looked civil. Lan knew better.

There was a fancy crossbow fashioned out of polished oak hanging at his side, strapped to a thick leather belt beside a bulging pouch. Lan recognized it immediately as the one that had been fired at him. He shivered.

"What's *he* doing here?" Lan asked himself, still reeling from the shock of seeing the man who had tried to take his life last fall. "Sarn roam the city freely without being hounded shouted at? Sure, the humans are still at peace with them, but I never would have expected anything like this!"

Lan remembered Ria telling him how Ga'ruk was after her because of the things she knew. *If he's still looking for her, that means she might be here! I've got to follow him and see what he's up to.* He started walking after Ga'ruk at a distance, hoping the sarn would not turn around and see him following.

Ga'ruk was heading down a dark alley between two tall buildings. Lan backed against the wall of one of the buildings and slid along it, keeping a sharp eye on the sarn in case he should turn around. Ga'ruk was walking swiftly and with a definite purpose. Lan started edging faster down the wall. His shin ran into a crate, pushing it across the ground and making a loud scraping noise. He collapsed, grasping his shin in pain, trying not to make any noise.

Through the slats of the crate, Lan could see Ga'ruk turn around. The sarn began sniffing the air and looking about suspiciously. He could see the sarn's face more clearly now than ever before. His chin jutted out a bit from the rest of his face. The tips of two sharp teeth could be seen barely protruding from his mouth on either side of his jaw. His nose was flat and pushed up on the end. What gave Lan the most chills, however, were the color of Ga'ruk's eyes. They were yellow, with thin, cat-like pupils.

He could hear the sarn's heavy breathing, and then footsteps as Ga'ruk began walking back toward him. *Dear Ohn, he heard me, Lan panicked. He's going to find me, remember me, and finish what he tried to do last fall.*

Lan squeezed himself as tightly against the wall as he could, his arms still wrapped around his injured shin. Ga'ruk was moving slowly toward him, looking all about for the source of the noise. Just before the sarn reached the crate, an obviously drunken man came stumbling out of a pile of rubbish across the alley, nearly scaring Lan out of his mind. Ga'ruk stepped back, eyed the disheveled bum intensely for a moment, then mumbled something unintelligible under his breath and walked away.

Lan let out a heavy sigh of relief as he stood up. The bum swaggered over to him, holding out a flask. He smelled of alcohol and did not look as if he had bathed in months.

"A geln?" he asked in a drunkenly slurred way. "A geln?"

"I'm sorry," Lan said, rubbing his shin one final time. "I don't have any money on me."

"No money?" The bum looked shocked. "No money at all? A good-looking young man like yourself?"

"That's what I said," he replied, starting to walk off after Ga'ruk. "No money."

"Well ain't that a pity," the bum said. "What'll I do with myself now? How can I bring food home to feed the family?"

"Get a job and stop whining about it," Lan said as he walked off.

"Good advice," the bum laughed. "Good advice."

Lan walked to the edge of the buildings and came to an intersection. There were three directions to go, all of them dark and full of a myriad of things in various states of disarray, but none of them with the sarn. He sighed, frustrated that nothing seemed to be working out today. *Esmond gets his girl and I get my stuff stolen and run into Ga'ruk! This is just not fair.*

Before he could turn around to start heading back to the Bear and Claw, the sound of footsteps on cobblestones grabbed his attention and he jerked his head in their direction. He listened to them for a moment, then ran after them, hoping to catch up with Ga'ruk. *It could be anyone in this huge place,* he thought. *How do you know it's him? And how do you know this isn't just some strange trap?*

He came to another intersection and guessed that the most likely place the footsteps would have come from, had they been Ga'ruk's, was to his left. To the right meant back toward the main road, which Ga'ruk crossed earlier. *What are you doing, you dolt?* he asked himself. *What good would it do to find him? There's nothing you could do about it. He nearly killed you once! You're just going to end up getting lost in this maze of buildings and alleyways.*

Lan rushed around another corner to run straight into someone, knocking them to the ground. "Damn!" he shouted. "When will I learn--"

"Bist!" shouted the person on the ground. She stood up, straightening herself. "Kagi!" she shouted at him. She brushed herself off and reached down to pick up a strange green crystal on the ground. She was unmistakably a mesefu.

She grabbed her long, dark hair, tightly braided behind her back, and draped it over her shoulder. She was wearing one of the most remarkable things Lan had ever seen. It appeared to be armor of some sort. There were many flat, smooth green plates that

seemed to be attached to some sort of strange, black, spongy material that stretched and bent with her body. The arms of the suit she wore were made almost entirely of the black stuff, with patterns of tiny green beads woven into it. There were also green plates on the arms, two on either side of her upper arms and forearms. Her hands were bare, their paleness contrasting with the darkness of the material around them. Her legs were similarly clad.

Around her waist hung a thin black strip with several metallic hoops hanging from it. Attached to some of these hoops were bizarre devices, each of them rounded and shiny, and vaguely resembling the green crystal she had picked up from the ground.

Her face reminded him of Ria's, only her features were sharper. Her cheekbones protruded more, and her nose was more squared off than rounded. Her eyes were narrow, almond-shaped. She brought the strange green crystal up to her mouth and spoke into it.

"*Saurei wes*," she said. Lan remembered what that meant. It was an apology. Was she apologizing to him? She did not seem to be looking at him if she was. He then heard another voice. It was too quiet for him to hear any of what it said, but he swore it was coming from the crystal.

"*Minefu avek me hulidkya*." She was most definitely speaking into the crystal, which meant that the voice he heard was most definitely coming from it. He stared at her in awe, wondering what such a thing could be. She cut her eyes at him, wrinkled her brow, grunted, and whipped around, her braid flopping around behind her back. She quietly readjusted it to fall over her shoulder again.

"*Me idto esoin. Me karo Ria truvi kara esoin*." She kicked the wall of one of the buildings next to her. *Did she just say Ria? I wonder if it's the same Ria, or if it's just some word in their language?* "*Kenidtofu teniengen, anoieng wes*." A few more unintelligible words came from the crystal. She sighed one final word, "*Allien*," then shoved the crystal into one of the loops hanging on her belt. It stuck there as if by magic with a quiet clicking sound.

Lan approached her slowly. She turned around to face him, her hair flying off of her shoulder yet again. She reached to grab it, missed, grabbed again, frustrated, and placed it back over her shoulder. Lan almost laughed at the bizarre sight.

"Hello," he said. "About running into you, *sauray wes*."

"That is fine," she said, stepping closer to him. "I do not think--" she stopped, taken aback. A smile spread across her face. "What did you say?"

He repeated himself. "*Sauray wes.*"

"That is what I thought you said. Whoever you learned that from did not do a good job of pronouncing it. You are slurring the last two vowel sounds into one."

"What?" he asked, confused.

"The two final sounds of *saurei*. It is *e* and *i*, not *ay*. Two distinct sounds."

"But why does that matter? If you say them fast enough, they'll just run together--"

"Not if you know how to speak properly," she said, her smile growing wider. "But semantics aside, I thank you for your apology." She started to walk away. "Now, if you will kindly excuse me . . ."

"Wait," he said, walking alongside her. "Did I hear you say Ria?" He heard footsteps again, this time faster, those of a running man.

"Yes," she said, her face lighting up. "Do you know where I could--"

The source of the footsteps came barreling around the corner into Lan, knocking him back against a wall. "Ohn be damned!" he shouted. "I am sick and tired of running into people and having them run into me today!" When he reoriented himself, he saw the bum he had run into a few minutes ago crouching on the ground beside him holding a wooden box in his arms.

"What on Kalra do *you* want? Can't anyone in this city see two inches from their nose?!" He heard shouts in the distance and the sound of metal clanging.

The mesefu woman stood over him, looking surprised. "Are you all right?" she asked, extending a hand. He took it as she helped him stand.

"Yes, I think." His backside was throbbing where he had hit the wall. He rubbed it, looking down at the bum. "Didn't I tell you I don't have any money? Just because I'm a university student doesn't mean my pockets flow with geln. Now go on and leave me alone." The shouts in the distance were getting closer. Lan swore he heard one of the voices shout, "Thief!"

The scraggly bum glanced up at the mesefu, noticing her for the first time. "My gods!" he shouted. "A mesefu!" He threw the box he was carrying toward Lan and ran off. Lan caught the box, nearly fumbling it. It was amazingly heavy. He did not see how that weak man could have run carrying it.

"This has got to be the worst day I have ever had," he said, watching the bum run off down the street. "There's no way it could get *any* worse."

Just then, a large group of armored men came around the corner, swords clanging against the plates on their legs. One of the larger ones stepped forward. "Where did he go?" he asked the men behind him.

"Look!" another shouted. "That boy has it! He must be an accomplice! Grab him!" They started running toward Lan, but the mesefu stepped between him and the men.

"This boy is innocent," she said, holding out her hand, palm facing the men. They slowed, staring at her in confusion.

"How do we know you're not just covering for him?" the man in front asked snidely.

"Because I am Lisen, chief bodyguard to Lord Velenda, who has come on behalf of the mesefu people to present important information to the Pyranian parliament. I would never do such a thing as lie to protect a criminal."

The man stared at her, his eyes wide at first, then broke out into laughter. His men followed. "Right," he laughed. "You can tell that lord of yours that he can shove his information up his pasty arse. We don't want nothing to do with your folk. Now step aside and let us at this thief."

The mesefu, Lisen, stood rigid, glaring at the men Lan assumed were city guards. "Ignorant *kagi*," she said. "Lord Velenda is a woman. More powerful than you could ever hope to be. And as for this innocent university boy you insist is a thief--" she turned to Lan "--I suggest you leave. I will take care of this, as difficult as it may be--they do not seem prone to reason."

Lan was confused and scared. He did not want any part of this, so he took what seemed to be his chance to get away from it all and ran. "Wait!" he heard the mesefu shout, but he ran on. He desperately wanted to get this day over with. He had not been running more than a few steps before he realized just how stupid he

was acting--he was still carrying the box. *You idiot! They're definitely going to think you're guilty now!* And yet he ran on, knowing that to stop now would bring a very unhappy end to the day.

"After him!" he heard the guards shout behind him. "Split up! You three come with me into the streets. The rest head back to the university and wait for him, in case we lose him!"

Lan ran faster, around a corner and out of immediate earshot of the guards. He quickly tossed the box aside onto a large stuffed bag in the alley. Feathers flew from the bag as the box hit it. They formed a white cloud that floated lazily to the ground behind him.

He heard some guards come into the alley he was in, shouting for him to stop. He knew that stopping was not the brightest thing for him to do, since these guards were not the brightest of individuals. He had to get out of this somehow, but the prospect of that happening did not seem very likely.

Chapter Seven

Lan was not sure how long he had run after the guards stopped chasing him. He didn't slow down until he nearly collapsed in the street from fatigue, a sharp cramp clenching his insides together. At first he was afraid to stop, thinking that he would be caught if he did, but he could go no further. There was nothing else to do but wait.

Footsteps approached. He started slowly ambling away from them, expecting the worse. Instead, it was Lisen who came running up to him.

"It is all right," she said, not panting in the least. He thought that a bit strange, as he was doubled over breathing heavily from his exhausting run, and she had apparently followed close behind him and was not even breaking a sweat. "I distracted them. They won't be coming this way any time soon. It is good that you dropped that box. I tried to warn you to leave it before you fled, but--"

"You . . . distracted them?" he asked through labored breaths. "How?"

"A little trick of mine. Nothing very interesting." She walked up to him and placed her hand on his back. "Are you going to be all right?"

"I'll be . . . fine," he huffed. "Just need . . . to catch my breath." She patted him gently as his breathing slowed.

"Do you think you can walk? We need to get away from here as soon as possible. I cannot tell how long they will be fooled."

"Yes, I can walk." What did she mean by 'how long they will be fooled'? What had she done? Was it magic? A tingle ran through him at the thought of magic. She *was* mesefu, after all.

"Where were you going when you ran into me?" she asked him. What should he say? Should he mention anything about Ga'ruk? He decided to keep quiet, at least until he figured out what she was about. She apparently had connections to high up places in authority and he did not want to get himself involved in anything more than he had to. All he wanted to do was find Ria and warn her that Ga'ruk was about.

"I was trying to go get my friend and head back to the university. The guy who paid for our carriage panicked when some thief stole his money purse, so he ran to the carriage and apparently told the driver to speed back to the university as if a daemon were chasing him."

"A thief stole his money purse?" Lisen asked, astounded. "Did he get it back?"

"Yes," Lan replied as they started walking on down the road. "I caught the guy red-handed. Didn't bother to turn him in to anyone, though. I was too busy trying to chase Marcus down, damn him."

"Where is your friend? And where did the thief go? I can have him reported if you point him out to me."

"That's good to know," Lan said. "He's at the Bear and Claw. Some tavern in the far southwest corner of the city."

"I am afraid that will not help me much," Lisen said, frowning. "I do not know my way around this city. I was just talking to my . . . superior, complaining that my guide is nowhere to be found."

"You were actually talking to someone through that crystal thing?" Lan asked, eager to learn more about the mysterious device Lisen had been speaking into.

"Yes," she said. "It is a *reni*. I believe the closest translation into your language would be 'messenger'. It allows us to converse over great distances."

"Amazing," Lan marveled. "How does something like that work?"

"It is all magical," she replied, "and very hard to explain unless you are experienced in such things."

"That wouldn't be me, then," he said, almost regretfully. "I know next to nothing about magic. How does it work?"

"The *reni*, or magic in general?"

"Just magic in general."

Lisen sighed. "That is even more difficult to explain than the *reni*. Perhaps you should look into studying at one of the human institutions that teach magic. I am sure they could do a much better job than me."

"But you're mesefu!" he blurted out. "Magic comes natural to you. Who better to explain it?"

She laughed. "Magic works differently for humans than it does for us. We have mastered its use over the years and are born knowing how to control it. No human has ever managed to attain our level of control, though many have tried. Usually to their own demise."

"Oh," he sighed, frowning as he looked down at the street. "Well, I guess I'm going to be going now. It was nice meeting you, Lisen."

"Very well, then," she said, extending her hand. "I believe this is one of your standard gestures."

He smiled, taking her hand and shaking it. "Yes, it is."

"It was nice meeting you, too . . . I am sorry, I do not believe I know your name." She blushed. Her entire face seemed to glow.

"That's okay," he smiled. "No need to be embarrassed about it. It's been too hectic for normal introductions." He straightened himself, clearing his throat. "I'm Alexander Lansing, but just about everybody calls me Lan."

"It has been nice meeting you, Lan." A group of shouts rang out from somewhere nearby. It was unmistakably the guards. "Come," she said. "Let us move. I shall accompany you to your friend to ensure your safety. If only Ria were here to take me to this place . . ."

"I believe I know enough about the city to get us there," Lan said. "Let's hurry, though. Those guards sound like they're getting closer." He started leading her westward. He planned to walk until they ran into the city wall, then turn south. That seemed to be the easiest way to find the tavern. Lisen followed alongside

him as they walked hurriedly off through the alleys and back roads of Porthos.

"Oh yes," he said as nonchalantly as he could. "You started to ask me something about Ria before that guy ran into me."

"Of course!" she said. "I remember now. I forgot with all the action. You asked me about her, and I was going to ask you if you knew her."

"Well, we met a while back. She was traveling, on her way to this city, and stopped at our house for a night." He saw no reason to bring up any more about the situation than he needed to. No need to get himself involved in more than he could handle.

Lisen was taken aback. "She merely stopped at your house for the night? That does not sound like the Ria I know. I believe we are speaking of two different people."

"Perhaps," Lan sighed. "Perhaps." He desperately wanted to find out where she was. Maybe he should tell the truth about how he met her, because despite what Lisen said, he was convinced that they were the same Ria. A strange feeling tickling the back of his mind assured him of it.

"But, well, what if I told you there was more to it than her just stopping?"

"Like what?"

"She was chased down by sarn and forced to stop. They'd shot her. My parents took her in and helped her."

"Now that," Lisen said, smiling, "sounds more like the Ria I know."

"Is she here, in town?" Lan asked excitedly. His step suddenly gained a bounce.

"I believe so, although I have not been able to find her. She was going to be my guide. Why do you ask?"

"I just wanted to see her again, that's all. I wanted to talk to her about some things."

"I see." Lisen looked a bit worried, but she said no more to Lan about Ria. He wanted to say more, to ask if she would tell Ria he was looking for her if they met, but he could tell that, for some reason, Lisen did not want to discuss the issue further. He let it rest, patting the dagger in his pocket. *With or without her help*, he thought, *I'll still find her sooner or later. I only wish it were sooner.*

#

It did not take them long to reach the Bear and Claw, but to Lan's dismay, Esmond was nowhere to be seen, nor was the girl he had been with, Gaelyn.

"*This* is where you left your friend?" Lisen asked. She looked about the tavern uneasily. The people sitting around looked back at her with mixed looks on their faces ranging from surprise to anger.

"He comes in here often enough without me," Lan said, approaching the bar. The bartender looked up from wiping out a mug with a rather dirty rag.

"Your friend said that if you came back, to tell you he'd meet you back here when he finished some business." The bartender sat the mug down and shoved the rag into his pocket.

"What about that large, bearded Merhosian man who tried to steal my dagger and my friend's money?" Lan asked, a bit shaken at seeing how the dishes were cleaned around this place.

"He left shortly after Esmond did, a few minutes ago."

"Well," Lan started, gruffly, "if he ever comes back, tell him that he had best not let me catch him again or I'll have the guards called down on his hide so harshly that he'll wish he were never born!"

The bartender smiled. "Whatever you say."

"And if you would, please tell my friend when he returns that I'll be waiting for him elsewhere." Lan thought for a second of a good place to wait that was not as far away as the university, some place that he knew how to go to and he would feel safe at. He definitely did not want to wait here by himself, and he would prefer not to walk back alone because he was not exactly sure where the university was, and did not feel like asking directions. He had experienced enough embarrassment and adventure for one day and wanted to avoid any more. He could just imagine people's reactions when a university student asked them where the university was.

After a moment of contemplation, he decided that the Mages' Guild tower would be the easiest place to find since it rose above the other buildings, and surely he would be safe waiting in front of a place like that. "I will be waiting for him in front of the Mages' Guild," he said finally.

"Will do," the bartender smiled. "I'll tell him as soon as I see him."

"Thank you." Lan turned and walked from the Bear and Claw. Lisen followed, looking relieved to be leaving the myriad of unfriendly faces.

"*Obn me ilune*," Lisen said as they stepped out onto the shady street. "I was afraid for a moment that they might try to attack me."

"That's why I don't want to wait for Esmond here by myself," Lan said. "I don't trust anyone in there. Especially after the way they acted when that man tried to steal from us. They didn't even seem to care!"

"I can understand," she said.

The streets had gotten much darker in the time since he had first arrived at the Bear and Claw. The sun had finally fallen well beneath the city wall. Soon, within a few hours, the sky would be completely black. Lan had planned on being back at the university by then, but now he knew he would not make it.

After walking with him to the main road, Lisen stopped. "I am afraid I must be ending our time together. I have other business to which I am obliged. Can you find your way to the Mages' Guild yourself?"

Lan looked northeastward along the road. He could see the parapet around the top of the tower rising above the buildings. He pointed in its general direction, smiling. "I think I'll make it just fine."

Lisen looked at where he was pointing. "I see," she said. "I desperately need to find my guide," she laughed.

"If you do, tell her--" he paused for a moment, trying to come up with a message. "Tell her that I've been looking for her." What was he saying? His father explicitly told him to stay away from her, and yet here he was asking Lisen to pass a message on to her!

"I will do that, Lan. I think she should be happy to hear from you. You seem to be a very nice young man." Lisen held out her hand stiffly and Lan shook it again. "Farewell. Perhaps our paths will cross again someday."

"I hope so," he smiled. He had met a true *mese*fu for the first time in his life, and he was very glad he had. Lisen seemed to be a remarkable person, someone he would enjoy having as a friend, though there were a few peculiarities about her he just could not figure out. Perhaps that was just the way the *mese*fu were. *Too*

bad she's a guard to some mesefu lord, he thought. She won't be around much longer and probably has little free time.

She began walking away. He noticed that some of the people milling about in the street stopped to watch her, marveling at her appearance. Before she got more than a few strides away, she turned back to him, her braid whipping around to rest on her shoulder.

"By the way," she said. "In case you did not hear, the guards sent someone to the university to wait on you. I do not think they got a good enough look at your face for it to matter, but you may want to be careful when you return home. I will speak with my lord tonight and see if there is anything she can do to help clear your name."

"Thank you," he said.

She smiled, then turned and walked away, quickly vanishing into the crowd. Lan turned his sights toward the tall stone tower and set off for it, wondering if he would regret asking Lisen to tell Ria he was wondering about her.

#

The sun had set and the sky was lit in dusky purples and oranges by the time Esmond finally walked up. Lan had been sitting on a rough stone bench outside the Mages' Guild that sat in a wide ring of green grass encircling the tall tower. The tower itself looked very old. It was constructed out of large granite blocks, with glass-plated windows set into its walls. Lan could not tell exactly how tall the tower was, but he counted windows on at least seven different heights. He was amazed that such a structure could be built without falling over. *Maybe that's why they have so much empty space around the tower, he thought, looking out across the green yard. In case this thing decided to fall some day.*

When Esmond first showed up, Lan merely frowned at him, ruffling his brow in silence. Esmond paid Lan's anger no attention and sat down on the bench next to him.

"Sorry about leaving you back there, but I was pretty sure you'd find Marcus and go on home. I told the barkeeper to let you know I'd be back, though, in case--"

"Let's just go," Lan huffed. "I'm tired and I want this day to end. I regret ever letting you talk me into coming out here--"

"Hey!" Esmond retorted. "I didn't talk you into anything!"

"Whatever," Lan shrugged. He was in no mood to argue with Esmond. He just wanted to go home and get this day behind him. "Let's go."

"Why haven't you gone back already?" Esmond asked as Lan stood up. Esmond stood beside him.

"I don't know my way around this place! I almost got lost chasing after Marcus!" Lan threw his arms up in the air in frustration.

"Er, Lan," Esmond began, "You know that main road where the southern gate is? The one we turned off of to get to the Bear and Claw? That's the *only* road we took to get there. You could have just followed it all the way back, through the city center!"

"I didn't know that, and I didn't want to risk it."

"Maybe you should get out and explore some, then," Esmond said, smiling as he elbowed Lan.

"Ouch!" Lan exclaimed, rubbing his sore ribs.

"And now," Esmond said as he began bounding off towards the university, "you know how I feel!"

Lan shrugged and followed along behind him. By the time they reached the university, the sky was black and dotted with stars. The guards at the gate let them back through with no mention of anyone coming to look for a thief. Lan was glad. He could not put up with much more. He walked through the hallways to his room, leaving Esmond to walk to his own. Once there, he did not bother to disrobe--he just fell on his bed and went promptly to sleep.

#

He was lying on a slab--a cold, dry slab. He stared up at the ceiling, but could not focus on it. It seemed to be coming closer, then shooting farther away, constantly moving up and down above him. For a moment he was afraid that it might crush him, but the fear was quickly forgotten when he began hearing voices. He looked all around but could see nobody in the small stone room with him. They sounded as if they were everywhere at once. Suddenly a person stepped out of the wall to his left. It was his father, and he was saying something.

". . . something like that? Allowing yourself to get into such trouble with that boy! All he ever does is get you into fixes like this,

Alex. Don't you see he's using you? Using you as protection, that's all. It's no small wonder that . . ."

His father's figure slowly distorted itself until it changed into a bloody sword, then fell to the ground and dissolved into nothingness. The voices were still talking. Another figure stepped out of the wall, this one his mother.

". . . grounded! Permanently! I never want to hear you even think of going anywhere or doing anything with your friends, because it always ends up like this. Why do you let these things happen? You are so decent and calm around the house! I just don't see how you could ever . . ."

She changed, much as his father had, but not into a sword. Instead, she changed into a smoldering log, then faded out of view. Yet another figure stepped out of the walls, this one from his right side.

". . . so intelligent. So very intelligent, yet you allow things like this to happen to you. With all of your smarts, you could be a very proficient wizard someday, a rarity in our lands. Why do you let your life go to waste by sticking around that troublesome Esmond fellow? If I were you . . ."

The headmaster. It seemed that the opinion of everyone was the same--Esmond was the cause of his misery. A life without Esmond *would* be a better one. But no, he could not. Esmond was his friend. The headmaster transformed into an owl, then sank into the floor.

Then a face he had not seen for seasons appeared over him, glaring down with evil red eyes. She screamed at him. "This is all your fault. I'm dead now because of you, Lan. Dead! If you had stayed with me that night I would still be alive . . ." The face of the girl, Ria, turned first into a radiant cylinder of light, and then a dark marble tombstone with a single mark upon it. The mark was a deep crimson letter 'Z' with a slash through the middle. It was the mark of the Zarrons, a fanatical human cult that worshipped Ohn in the strictest of ways. Before he could get a better look, it vanished.

A hideous skull materialized before Lan's face, twisted into a hideous grin. He could hear it laughing treacherously at him as it floated away, toward the back of the room. Upon touching the back wall, it morphed into Esmond.

"Please, don't hate me. We're best friends, remember? Remember our vow, to stick together no matter what? True, I've gotten you into trouble from time to time, but have I not also always stood up for *you* when others tried to talk you down? Remember the good things and don't leave me! Please wake up, Lan! Don't listen to them at all! Wake up!"

"But they're right, all of them."

"No, don't listen! Wake up, Lan, wake up!"

#

And that he did. Lan shot up in bed, looking around. Esmond was beside him, shaking the bed, repeatedly telling him to wake up in a hurried voice. "All right, already," said Lan. "You can stop, I'm up!"

"Who's right?" asked Esmond.

"Hunh?"

"You said 'they're right'. Who were you talking about?"

"Oh, that? Nothing. Just a weird dream."

"Look, we've got to get out of here!" Esmond was frantic. Lan stretched as he sat up, yawning. "I don't know how long it'll be before they find me!"

"Find you?" Lan was confused. He thought he was hearing things, that his sleep had not worn off yet. "Who?"

"The guards! They're searching the university dormitories!" Esmond ran over to Lan's window and looked out. The dorm rooms at the university were small, each one only housing one student. They came furnished with a bookshelf, a dresser, a desk, a bed, and a small closet to store clothes and other belongings in.

"What guards?" Lan asked. "What are you talking about?"

"The city guards!" Esmond exclaimed, whirling around to face Lan. Lan felt his stomach sink into his feet. The city guards had come for him to take him away. They would arrest him without further question, they would take him off to some dark jail cell somewhere, and they would--

Why was Esmond so worried?

"What are you worried about?" Lan glared at him sternly. "What did you *do* today? Something I should know about?" If the guards were after Esmond, which, from the way he was acting, they were, that was a load of pressure off of Lan's shoulders.

"Well," Esmond began, looking down at the floor to avoid Lan's gaze. "I, uh, you see, that is--"

"Spit it out!" Lan shouted.

"Quiet!" Esmond scolded. "Do you want me to get caught?"

"Esmond, just tell me what you did!"

"All right!" Esmond started pacing back and forth, his arms flailing about nervously. "I sort of stole something today."

"You *what?*!"

"Can't you be quiet?"

"No! What on Kalra did you do something as stupid as *that* for?" Lan stood up and marched over to Esmond. Esmond looked over at him as the color drained from his face, but kept pacing.

"All I wanted to do was impress Gaelyn! She wanted to teach me to pick pockets! I didn't think anyone saw me, but apparently so because they're searching for me now!"

"Dear Ohn!" Lan shouted. "The depths you'll sink to just to impress a girl!"

"It's not like I killed anyone or anything." Esmond stopped pacing and looked at him, his head cocked to the side.

"I should hope not, you fool!" Lan did not care how loud he was being. In a way, he *wanted* someone to catch Esmond for once.

"'Takes a fool to know a fool,' my father always said!" Esmond was resorting to the same tactic he always resorted to when he knew Lan was right and there was nothing he could do about it--childishness.

"He's a fool too. You're all blessed fools! Do you have any intelligence left inside that thick skull of yours or did it all leak out of some rather large hole in your head?"

"Look," Esmond started, ignoring Lan's attacks. "We can fight over whether or not I should have done what I did later. Right now, I need to know what to do! You're good at helping me out in situations like this, so I came to you!"

Lan almost gave in. Hearing Esmond say that he needed help made Lan almost feel sorry for him. But he resisted. This was his chance to keep Esmond from dragging him into trouble again and perhaps even to teach the immature young man a lesson.

"I'm sorry, Esmond," he said, sternly, "but there's nothing I can--"

Footsteps sounded outside in the hallway. Lan stopped talking mid-sentence and shoved Esmond into a dark corner behind the door. *Damn, you idiot! Why are you helping him now? Didn't you just tell yourself not to?* A harsh, rapid knock came. Lan's heart began racing. What if Esmond was wrong? What if they were not here for Esmond, but instead for him?

"Ye--yes?" he uttered.

"City guard under charge of Lord Osbick Louei," said a stern voice. "We've got reason to believe an accomplice to a thief who stole one of Lord Osbick's money chests lives in these dormitories." Lan's heart nearly burst from his chest as the color drained from his face. They *were* here for him. "Are you presentable?"

Esmond stepped out of the corner, his face beaming. "They're not looking for me!" he whispered. "I'm safe!" Lan shoved him back into the corner. "Hey, what the--"

"Yes," Lan called out to the guard. All he had to rely on was hope that the guards could not identify him.

He sat at his desk, waiting for them to come in. Esmond started to say something, but Lan motioned for him to keep quiet and stay where he was.

The door slowly swung open with a loud squeak. Lan had heard the squeaking noise every day for nearly eight months now. He had grown accustomed to it, but now it sounded louder than ever before. He could feel his heart pounding beneath his shirt. He felt sweat beading on his forehead as he began wringing his hands. The guard entered the room and left the door open, hiding Esmond safely between it and the corner.

"Your name is Alexander Lansing, correct?" asked the guard, a brawny man who stood several spans tall and wore dull chain armor. The man wore no helmet, but Lan could not see his face in the darkness. He held a paper out in front of him, reading it by the light streaming in silhouetting him from the hallway.

"Yes sir, that--that's right." Lan had tried to calm his trembling as much as he could, but he still was afraid of the guard recognizing him.

"Sir," the guard called back into the hallway. "Is this the one?" The guard stepped aside as a man with a lantern came shambling into the room. Lan recognized him immediately. It was the bum who had tossed the chest at him. Now, however, he was much better clothed. He wore an ornate green jacket with golden frills, and long brown pants. He had shaved, and his hair had been washed and brushed back. Something was terribly wrong.

"Yes," the bum said, "that's the one."

"You sure?" the guard asked him.

"I couldn't be more sure of anything." The bum smiled, winked at Lan, and walked back out into the hall.

"A lie!" Lan shouted, jumping to his feet. "That man's lying! *He's* the one who stole the money! He ran into me while he was running from the guards and tossed it at me!"

The guard looked at Lan questioningly for a moment then began laughing. "*Him?*" the guard asked through his hearty laughter. "That's hilarious! That's one of the funniest things I've ever heard! Trying to say that Lord Osbick's attendant would steal from him!" The guard laughed a bit more then sighed, shaking his head.

Lord Osbick's attendant? What was going on here? That man was a street bum!

"I know what I saw!" Lan shouted. "Not six hours ago, that man was a street bum who came wandering out from a pile of trash!"

The guard's face grew immediately grim. He stepped toward Lan and grabbed him by his shirt, lifting him from his feet. He pulled Lan's face right up to his. Lan could feel the warm, rank breath from the man's nose as his breathing intensified. He could see the shade of whiskers covering his face in the dim light. He could almost swear the man's eyes were turning red.

"Nobody talks about Lord Osbick or any of his men that way, understand?" Lan silently nodded, wanting to do whatever it took to keep from dying. The guard nodded at him with a grunt and sat him back down.

"Now then," the guard said, reaching behind himself to grab something at his belt. "I'm going to have to bring you in for questioning." He brought his hands back around, holding manacles. Lan nearly fainted.

Suddenly, there was a loud snapping sound, and the guard groaned and fell over in a heap on the floor. Esmond stood behind him with Lan's thick oak staff in his hand. Lan always left his staff beside the door, and Esmond had found it and cracked the unsuspecting man on the head before anything worse could happen. *Anything worse? Look at what he just did!*

Esmond looked up at Lan. "Run! Run like mad! Out the door, then toward the courtyard!" And with that, Esmond took flight from the room, Lan's staff in hand. Lan was stunned. He stood there, shaking frantically, gawking at the unconscious guard on the floor. There was nothing to do now but run. If he stayed, there would be a lot of explaining to do. He had been framed, set up. Esmond had obviously caught on and decided he wanted no part of this. For once, unfortunately, his friend was right. He had to run.

The guard moaned and began sitting up. Lan panicked and kicked him sharply in the head. Without even a whimper, the guard fell back to the cold stone floor.

What have I done now? thought Lan. *I'm really in trouble.* He looked down to the guard that he himself had just kicked into silence. *Well, now I have done something for them to blame on me. But Ohn be damned, I had no choice! Someone framed me!* He grabbed his bag that he carried his books and various belongings in, slung it over his shoulders, and fled the room. He wished he had time to get more things.

Lan saw no trace of Esmond anywhere, but the bum--Lord Osbick's man--and two guards stood to his immediate left. They were disoriented, and the once-bum was barking orders at them. Lan shouted in surprise and kept running, straight down the hallway. Only half of the normal number of lanterns was lit as it was well past time for everyone to be sleeping. He could hear several mumbles and shouts coming from behind him, as well as fast-paced footsteps. The guards were coming for him.

He turned off of his hallway onto the main hall that led from the dormitory. He was running as fast as he could and was nearing Esmond's room when another guard ran into him, knocking both himself and Lan to the ground.

"Fool child, watch where you're going," the guard said, rubbing his head. "Where are you going so fast anyway?"

"Stop him!" shouted one of the guards coming up behind Lan. "He's the thief!"

"Oh dear," sighed Lan. The guard stood up as three more caught up behind him, all of them with swords at the ready.

The first guard spoke. "You are hereby under arrest for the theft of one banker's chest of geln from Lord Osbick Louei of Porthos, retainer to Lord Roland of the northern reaches of Pyran."

A voice came from down the hall. "That bastard kicked me in the head!" It was the guard from Lan's room, holding his hands to his head. He limped slowly toward the group.

"*And* for assault on a city guard, it would seem," added the first guard. "Do you have anything to say in your defense?"

Lan was speechless. He had never had any legal troubles before, and now he was under arrest. None of it was his fault. What should he say? Should he say anything at all? Perhaps he should just remain quiet until he had a chance to speak with the headmaster himself.

"What is the meaning of all this?" shouted an all-too-familiar voice. It was the headmaster. Whitlow had come up from behind him at the hallway junction so quietly that Lan had not noticed the robed man. Standing by his side was another, taller man, wrapped in robes of the darkest black cloth. An odd black hat sat on his head, with three rounded points. A purple veil fell down behind his head, covering his neck. "I never expected you to be capable of this! Stealing from nobility?"

"Sir," began Lan, almost stuttering in fear. "I promise I had nothing to do with any of this. I've been framed!" The man at Whitlow's side blew a gust of air through his nose, grunting in dissatisfaction. He stepped forward.

"Framed indeed," he said in a low, rattling, gravelly voice. He rubbed the grey bristle of a beard on chin, with a sinister snarl on his face. "Just the kind of thing one from the Thieves' Guild would say." Whitlow gasped, bringing his hand to his mouth.

"What is going on?!" Lan shouted, tears welling up in his eyes. Not only had he been framed, he had been accused of being in the Thieves' Guild. All he had wanted to do today was go out for a walk to get away from the university for a while, and suddenly everyone was blaming him for all sorts of things that he did not do—things that he would never even *consider* doing!

"I swear by Ohn's good name that I did not do *anything!*"

"I believe you," Whitlow started, a solemn look washing over his face, "but there *are* witnesses. Lord Osbick's attendant is one of them."

"Witness? *Witness?!*" Lan was furious. "That man who said he recognized me was a street bum! A street bum, I tell you! He was sitting in an alleyway, all drunk, as I was walking by! A few minutes later, he came running by and threw a chest at me--"

"That will be *quite* enough!" the black-robed man interjected. "I will have *nobody* speaking of my men that way, do you hear me, rat? *Nobody!*" Whitlow shot the man a sharp, angry look. Dear Ohh, that was Lord Osbick himself. Things kept getting worse.

Lan dropped to his knees. "Forgive me, Lord Osbick," he said. "I'm afraid I am not from around here and don't know you. I don't mean to speak ill of your attendant, but in all honesty it was he who tossed the chest at me. I had never seen it before then!"

Osbick turned his nose up at Lan and looked to the guards. "Arrest him. Afterward--" he turned to Whitlow "--we will commence another room-to-room search to find that chest. I hope you understand and forgive us our intrusion."

"Of course, Lord Osbick," Whitlow said dryly. "But I must agree with the boy--this is madness!"

"Be careful what you say, old man," began Osbick. "You do not want to--"

"Stop!" a voice shouted from the darkness down the hall. "He's innocent."

"Who's there?" asked the first guard, turning to begin walking toward the voice.

Esmond stepped out of the shadows, holding Lan's staff in his hands, with a pack over his shoulders. "Everything he says is true. I've known Lan all my life, and he would never do such a thing."

"Esmond?" Whitlow marveled. "Do you know something about all of--"

"Perhaps you are the accomplice, boy," Osbick interrupted, stepping toward Esmond. Lan scooted back against the wall, still sitting on the floor. Esmond began marching toward Osbick. He threw Lan's staff down on the ground. The sound of it crashing on

the stone floor echoed loudly through the hallway. Esmond was furious.

"I am not an accomplice to anything. My friend is innocent, and so am I."

"There *was* an accomplice," said the once-bum as he walked up behind Whitlow. "And I believe that's him. I didn't get a good look at him, of course, but I'm pretty sure he's the one."

Esmond stomped his foot and spat on the ground in front of Osbick. The black-clad noble backhanded Esmond, sending him to the ground moaning.

"Lord Osbick!" shouted Whitlow, stepping forward. "That was unnecessary! What do you think you're--"

"Silence, old fool. Someone needs to teach these street rats a lesson."

"Well I don't agree with the way you're trying to teach them." Whitlow knelt by Esmond and cradled his head in his lap. "Are you all right?"

"I'll be fine," Esmond said, rubbing his jaw, "as soon as I kick that bastard's hide out of this university."

"Violence won't solve anything, Esmond. You know that."

Esmond looked up at Whitlow. "Do you believe us?" he asked. Lan looked at Whitlow to meet his gaze. The headmaster looked from Lan to Esmond and back. He smiled.

"Yes," he said. "I believe you. And I will do everything in my power to see that the true criminals are brought to justice."

"It is hard," started Osbick sternly, "to wipe the guilt away when there are witnesses, Master Whitlow."

A part of Lan wanted to listen to the headmaster. A part of him wanted to believe that he could be proven innocent of theft. But another part of him knew, gut-wrenchingly, that it would never happen. For some reason, these men were up to no good and were not about to let him get out of this. He could think of only one thing to do--cause a distraction and get out as fast as he could.

"I am *sicé* of this!" Lan grabbed his staff and swung it around, hitting Osbick in the small of the knees. The lord cried out in pain and surprise as he crumpled to the floor. Chaos erupted through the crowd of guards.

Esmond leaped up, Whitlow backing away. He grabbed one guard's arm and slung him into the guard beside him, knocking

both into the wall. Two of the other guards charged Esmond, the injured one staying behind. Suddenly a door opened in front of them, and they ran straight into it full force, planting them on the ground alongside the other two.

"What's goin' on out here this late?" It was a student who had been awakened by all of the shouting and had decided to see what was going on. *Perfect timing*, thought Lan, as he stood up, smiling.

"Stop them!" shouted Osbick's man to Whitlow. Whitlow shrugged and crossed his arms over his chest. His mouth turned up slightly at the corners.

"Nothing," shouted Esmond to the boy, panting. "Just a wild dream. Stop eating the cafeteria food and get back to bed. You'll wake up in a few hours and everything'll be just fine."

"Hunh? Wha--" The boy was about to begin asking questions when he saw the guards starting to get up off of the floor. The boy looked as if he was about to say something else, but Osbick's loud voice shut him off.

"Grab them!" He stood, turning to Whitlow. "Sound your alarms, old man."

Whitlow silently shook his head, still smiling. "You have the wrong men, Lord Osbick. They're innocent, and I refuse to help in this foolish crusade of yours."

"You old fool," Osbick spat. "Fine. You!" he shouted at one of the guards. "Find the university bell tower and sound the alarms!" The guard went running off as fast as he could. Osbick brushed his robes straight and barked to his other guards, "Capture those two at all costs!"

The startled young man ran back into his room, slamming his door. The guards were now all standing and going for Esmond. He managed to squeeze around them along the opposite wall and run ahead of them.

Osbick turned to Lan, reaching out his hands. Lan swung the staff again, this time hitting the lord in the chest. In one fluid motion, he reversed the swing and slammed Osbick in the back, knocking the wind out of him. *Thank Ohn Esmond and I used to play at staff fighting when we were young!*

Lan looked over at Whitlow. "I think we'd best leave for the moment. I'm sorry I hit him--I wasn't thinking straight. You

understand, right? I swear to you everything Lord Osbick accused us of was false! And try--"

Esmond grabbed his shoulder as he ran by, jerking him away. "C'mon! Do you want to get caught?" He motioned back toward the four oncoming guards. "Let's get out of here, now!" Whitlow silently nodded at Lan, and Lan returned the nod.

The two young men fled down the hall. They were nearly at the main entrance when the alarm bells went off. Suddenly young men and women began flooding the halls as they all left their rooms, fearing a raid or a fire. The alarm bells were reserved for such emergencies, so the people in the crowd were naturally frightened. According to university rules, whenever the bells sounded, everyone was to move out to the front courtyard for further instruction.

"Great, now what?" asked Lan.

"We'll use it to our advantage. Just blend into the crowd. They should all be heading outside anyway, and once we get out there, we can just sneak off toward the wall and hop over."

"Hop over? It's three strides high! Even if we were to scale the top, we'd surely splatter against the cobblestones on the other side! Damn you and your foolish ideas. Why do I always get caught up in them? Is it because--"

"Never mind that. I have a rope. I packed it as soon as I heard the guards were here. Funny thing is, they weren't looking for me at all." He took a meaningful look at Lan. "Anyway, we'll use it to climb down."

"Are you listening to me?"

"Will you stop worrying, Lan, and just try to blend in?"

"Ohn save us."

They merged into the crowd of confused students, who were in all manners of disarray and were conversing anxiously about what could possibly be wrong. They were slowly but surely heading toward the main entrance of the university that led out into the walled courtyard, where Lan and Esmond would break off and attempt to make their escape.

"In the crowd! Guards! They are hiding in there somewhere!" Osbick was shouting at the top of his lungs. This caused even more chaos, as the students thought that there was some sort of imminent danger amongst themselves. As much as

the guards tried to break into the crowd, they were just pushed back out by the ever-pulsating, ever-moving group of people. All the while that the crowd of students was moving to the courtyard, guards were pushed aside and thrown accidentally against walls and floors.

Once outside, the herd of students dispersed into the vast, open courtyard. Esmond and Lan, who had been riding the front fringe of the mass, broke off and began running toward the back wall of the university. Luckily, they made it without being seen.

Esmond pulled a large wad of bed sheets out of his bag. They were knotted together to form a chain.

"What is *that*?" asked Lan.

"It's my rope! I made it myself."

"That won't hold up to anything! We'll never get over this wall with that! And how did you have time to make it?"

"Never mind that. Can't you have some faith in my craftsmanship?"

"I have less faith in that rope than I do in Ohn, and that's saying a *lot*."

"Really? Then what's with all that 'Ohn save us' stuff?"

Esmond smiled at him. "Just look around for guards, okay? Leave the escaping to me. All I've got to do is catch this on one of those trees over there."

It was cooler than usual on this late, windy spring night, and there were no stars in sight through the black clouds. Lan tried to attribute his shaking to the cold weather. He knew deep inside, however, that it was due to the very truths of the events that were taking place. He and Esmond were outlaws now, fugitives. Even if they *were* innocent. If caught, they would be thrown into jail, no questions asked.

The dark part of his memory began tugging at him now, of all times. He thought of the girl, Ria, and how, in light of recent events, even if she were still alive, she'd never be able to find him. The only place she knew to look would be the university or his home, and neither were good places for him to be now. He scowled and tried to force her out of his mind. Now was not the time to be thinking of a girl.

"Gods-damn it!" shouted Esmond, getting Lan's attention. "I can't get this blessed rope to go over the wall. The wind keeps blowing it back this way!"

To delay any longer could lead to their capture. While Lan did not want to partake in such a ludicrous escapade, he had no choice now. To go back was to face harsh punishment. They had to get out of here, and fast.

He spied a couple of loose rocks by the wall and quickly grabbed one and tossed it on the ground near Esmond.

"Give me that!" he snapped, snatching the makeshift rope from Esmond's hands.

"Hey wait, what are you--" Esmond stopped once he realized what Lan was thinking. Lan fidgeted with the rope until he found one of the end-most sheets and fanned it open a bit, laying it on the ground next to the rock. He then rolled the rock over onto it and wrapped the blanket around it, twisting it to keep it held tightly.

"Here," he said to Esmond, pointing at the bundle he had just made. "You're stronger than I am. Pick that up and toss it. The weight of the rock will help it go over."

"Thanks!"

Thanks indeed. If Esmond had not talked him into going out into the city today, none of this--*Stop that, Lan. You went because you wanted to go. And besides, none of this trouble is to blame on either of you. That Osbick was up to something . . .*

There was a tug at his tunic that made him jump. It was only Esmond. "You did it! Your idea worked! It's on the other side and caught in a tree, I think!" He tugged on it several times to assure Lan of its stability. "Follow me after I make it to the top."

"We can't put all our weight on the rope," Lan began lecturing. "It'll probably pull loose. We'll have to brace ourselves against the wall and move quickly."

"Whatever you say, Lan." Esmond smiled briefly then began scaling the wall. He did as Lan had said and moved quickly up the tangled mass of sheets. It seemed to be holding up to his weight just fine, with him bracing himself against the wall. It only slipped once, but he quickly recovered and boosted himself to the top before it could do it again.

"Find them!" It was someone shouting in the front courtyard. "There will be a nice reward for the ones who can bring me those two boys. As for you students, I want you all to stay in your rooms and bar your doors. If you see one of these two, flee immediately, as they are quite dangerous. They've already done enough harm to our guards to prove it. Off with you now."

This was bad. "You can come up now," Esmond said from the top. "I pulled it loose from the tree and I'm going to be climbing down on the other side, so it should definitely hold your weight. I'm a bit heavier than you," Esmond smiled. "Oh, and go on and toss your bag and staff over. There's no way you'll be able to climb with those." And with that, he slipped out of sight behind the wall.

"This is so crazy," mumbled Lan to himself as tossed his stuff over the wall and began climbing. "Completely crazy." Esmond's weight on the other side seemed to help hold Lan up quite well, and this reassurance made him climb faster, pushing any doubt he had in the strength of the rope out of his mind.

He had only been scaling the wall for a few moments when he heard shouting. "Hey! You there! Stop where you are!" A guard. Lan had been caught. He turned to see not one guard, but three, all wielding swords and staring at him from about six strides off. Lan was nearly halfway up the wall, but could never make it to the top before they caught up to him.

"Esmond! Help! The guards are here!" he shouted. It seemed to be of no use, however. There was no response. In a matter of seconds, the guards would reach the rope and, with their combined strength, easily pull it down from the wall, bringing Lan with it. He began screaming 'help' over and over again loudly, as if someone could actually do something.

And then he was flying. He began soaring up toward the top of the wall, and once he reached the top, he sailed even higher into the sky, past the end of the wall. *Perhaps there really is a god or two*, thought Lan as he mysteriously soared upward. Unfortunately, there were no divine powers at work as he found out moments later, when he crashed down onto something on the other side. He stood up, a little disoriented, and saw Esmond lying below him, covered in a mass of bed sheets.

"Could you make just a little more noise?" asked Esmond sarcastically as he got up.

"Wha--what just happened?"

"I heard you yellin' like you were being eaten alive and I thought you must be in trouble, so before the rest of the city woke up to your blood-curdling screams, I braced myself against the wall and pulled on the rope as hard as I could. Everything seems to have worked, but there's no telling how long it'll take them to get around the wall. We'd better get moving!"

"Well, where do we go?" He wished none of this had ever happened. It all seemed very much like a nightmare.

Esmond began picking up his stuff. "I'm not sure. I guess the first thing on our agenda would be to--" A hook clamped to the lip of the wall. "Run. Not much of a plan, but it looks like our best option for now!"

"Where to?" He was frantic, and frustrated. They were on the verge of getting caught, and Esmond had no idea what to do. Lan did not know the city at all.

"Just follow me into the streets."

"Won't we look suspicious?"

"Shut up and run!" Esmond had taken off running before finishing his sentence.

Grudgingly, Lan picked up his bag and staff that Esmond had left, and ran off into the dark streets after his friend.

#

It was getting colder, colder than any springtime night should be. Lan had no idea where he was or where he was headed. All he knew was that he was now a wanted criminal. His grumbling stomach told him he was very hungry, and the strange environment around him told him that he was also very lost. All sense of direction and time had vanished after the wild escape from the university. At first, the guards had followed them; he could hear them behind him in the streets. Now everything was quiet. Too quiet. Esmond had told him that cities of this magnitude were usually bustling even at night. He did not see any bustle anywhere. There was not a soul in the streets through which the two young men ran. From time to time there would be the sound of a cat screeching or a dog howling, but mostly silence. Dead silence. Lan did not like it at all.

"Where are we going?" he asked Esmond.

Esmond stopped walking and turned to face his friend. "Will you hush?" he scolded. "I told you to be quiet. We're not completely safe yet."

"Yes, but the guards can't be heard anymore. Surely they've given up by now. Besides, I think we should sit down and rest a bit. All that commotion back there has worn me out. I was hungry anyway, having missed evening supper. No thanks to your slow, pickpocketing hide."

"Look, if you'll just hold out for a few more minutes, we'll have reached the city market. Maybe we can find something to eat and somewhere to rest." Esmond began walking again, turning down a dark alley.

"Whatever."

"You're sounding more and more like Marcus each day," Esmond snickered. Lan shrugged, then followed suit.

Loud bells suddenly broke the silence of the still, dark night. Lan jumped in surprise and nearly fell over. "The alarm bells!" he hissed at Esmond.

Without slowing or even turning, Esmond responded, "No, you fool, only the city bell-tower, sounding the hour. Look, would you please shut up? How much must I stress that you be quiet?"

Lan continued walking. "If the guards have left us behind, why do we need to be quiet?"

"Thieves' Guild. Now hush, and follow me." Esmond began walking a little faster at that last statement, as if it brought him fear. Lan began sweating nervously. 'Thieves' Guild. He remembered the things Marcus had told him. He silently wondered if the thieves would come looking for Esmond. Perhaps if he had been good at pickpocketing, they would. *I don't think he'd join them, though*, Lan thought. *Esmond would never be part of any group that killed people. Esmond could never kill anyone.*

The bells finished their musical chiming. It was midnight. Lan had been staring down at the cobblestone streets, not paying much attention to where they were going, just following Esmond's feet. He suddenly realized that people were talking, lots of them. He looked up, and to his surprise, there were people everywhere. It was the middle of the night, and this area seemed as busy as any given village marketplace during the day.

Merchants abounded along the sides of the streets, selling all sorts of items. Signs adorning the stalls and wagons were advertising everything from freshly baked bread to sewing supplies. This was crazy. The whole *day* had been crazy. So many people in the streets at midnight!

"Stop that!" The voice came from Esmond. Lan had not noticed in his state of awe that his jaw had dropped open. He promptly closed it and turned to face his friend.

"The city market is this busy at midnight?" he asked.

"Yes. Didn't I tell you there would be people? Just stay right here while I go and buy us something to eat. I'm starving!" Esmond trotted off toward a merchant's wagon filled with fruit of all sorts. Lan stared at him closely, afraid of losing him amongst the myriad of people milling about in the area.

The wagon was amazing in itself. Fruit from all seasons and all parts of the known world adorned its various shelves and drawers. Only the rich could usually afford such produce out of season, but the prices the merchant advertised seemed reasonable. 'One geln per pound', read the sign.

Lan stood to the side as Esmond talked with the merchant, and a few moments later, they were sitting in an alley eating sweetmelons, with some bread on the side.

"So, how much did all of this cost us?" asked Lan, between bites of bread.

"Ten geln."

"What? Ten geln? You only got four melons and a loaf of bread! The sign advertised one geln per--"

"You left out taxes," explained Esmond.

"Tax caused *that* much geln to be added? That's ridiculous! What's the point of even buying anything at all, if you only end up losing half of your money? Just grow your own food! It's not that difficult. I helped around our farm for--"

"Lan, calm down," Esmond began, smiling. "You have a lot to learn about the city. Most people don't have enough room here to grow their own things. All these people live in houses or shops here in town. Since there's no room for farming, all their food must be bought."

"But where do they get money?"

"Jobs pay a lot more here than in the country, Lan. Just give it all time. You'll learn how it all works eventually. You should've come out with me more often." Esmond took another bite out of his green melon to finish it off. He tossed the peel aside.

"C'mon. We need to find a place to stay for the night, if not for a while. Who knows how long we'll be here until things settle down. I guess we can get by on pickpocketing. I know it's wrong, but after tonight I think I *deserve* to get away with a little wrong! There's a lot to be made up for."

"There's no *we* about this. If you think for one moment, Esmond, that I'm going to steal *anything*, you're out of your mind."

"Whatever you say, Lan. Whatever you say." The boys walked off into a dark street, the moon peering from behind the clouds illuminating their backs in a spectral manner.

#

Thieves. New ones. These were two of the university boys from the tavern today. He knew they weren't any of his men. Were they some of Osbick's? *That bastard brings in more 'n more young scraps e'er' day. He's got eyes e'er'where in that damned Shadow. If these two aren't in already, I hope I reach 'em 'fore he does.* He had first heard them when the taller one had gotten all worked up about the taxes.

"That'll be four geln, sir," the merchant said in a crotchety voice, looking up at the big man through a fringe of white hair.

The man turned his attention from the two boys as they vanished down a side street. He reached for his money purse.

"Four, ye say?"

"Yep," the merchant replied impatiently, holding out his hand.

He opened the purse and counted out four of the thick silver coins with the small amber stone in the center. He tossed them into the merchant's outstretched hand where they landed with a dull clinking. The merchant took one of the coins in his other hand and held it up to a streetlight, examining the center.

"It's real, I assure ye." The big man shifted his feet in agitation.

The merchant grunted in agreement and quickly shoved them into his pocket, turning to another customer.

The big man took one more look around the bustling marketplace. Seeing nothing out of the ordinary, he slipped his newly-bought Star of Ohn onto a red strip of leather and tied it around his neck. He whistled quietly to himself as he began walking toward the southwest corner of town.

There was work to be done.

Chapter Eight

The sun rising over the eastern city wall awoke Lan with its warm light. At first he was a bit disoriented, not knowing where he was. It took him a few seconds to remember that they had slept in the streets. The northwestern corner of the Porthos city walls had been their bed for the past two nights, and the hard ground was starting to take its toll on Lan's back.

He slowly stood up as he rubbed his sore back. He gazed around--nobody was about, as usual. This part of the city was sparsely populated, and most of the buildings in this corner were abandoned. Lan had no idea why this was so, but he was thankful because it gave them an inconspicuous place to rest. Only twice had guards ever questioned him or Esmond, and both times they had gotten off by saying that they were waiting for someone. The guards shrugged and walked off with a warning about how dangerous this part of the city could be for two young men on their own.

All Lan had done the day after the escape from Lord Osbick was wander around this area of the city, his head down, staring at the cobblestone streets. He had no idea what to think or do anymore. Was fleeing the university really needed? Could he not have worked things out somehow with Headmaster Whitlow on his side?

Esmond, who had spent the day sneaking around the more populated areas of the city picking up what he called "loose change", was asleep, wedged against the wall. He was supposed to meet Gaelyn yesterday, but when he returned, he had told Lan that

she was nowhere to be found. Esmond was a bit depressed, but tried his best not to show it.

Lan put his hands in the pockets of his worn leather pants. He felt the solid hilt of the magical dagger Ria had left him with. *Ria*, he thought. *I could find Ria. That would give me something to focus on for now. And after I find her? Who knows. I can't just wander the streets aimlessly.* It did sound like a good idea, but there was only one problem--he had no supplies. And to get supplies, he needed money. He sighed, took his hands back out of his pockets, and leaned against the wall.

For now, Esmond's the only source of money I have. As wrong as it may be, I'll have to let him pick up as much geln as possible and then I'll use some of it to get what I need and start looking for Ria. Esmond will understand. In fact, he may even want to come along. And after that? I suppose I should check in at the university, assuming the guards will let me in.

Trumpets sounded in the distance to the north. Lan ran over to the small, narrow staircase built into the side of the wall and climbed it as fast as possible. The view from atop the city walls was amazing. It made him almost feel like a bird, soaring up high, able to see everything at once. The sun shone brightly down on the rooftops of the smaller buildings. He could see the top of the Ceren far off to the southeast, its sloping grey stone walls gleaming in the early morning sun. Off to the north, he could see some small patches of fog rolling away in the light, hiding behind the distant green hills and disappearing into the forest far off to the west. And right outside the northern gates of the city, he could see a line of elaborately built carriages surrounded by armored guards. A procession was about to begin.

He vaguely remembered Esmond mentioning something about this yesterday. The Pyranian parliament was holding their annual meeting today. Esmond had wanted to go to the procession, but why? *Probably just to steal stuff*, Lan thought remorsefully. As reluctant as he was about it, he could not let his best friend miss something he wanted to see. Though through bizarre circumstance, Esmond *had* saved him the other night. Besides, it would be his first, and possibly only, chance to see the leaders of Pyran all in one place. The idea of seeing all those powerful people in once place was very intriguing.

Lan quickly descended the stairs, skipping two or three here and there, nearly falling several times. He sped over to Esmond and started nudging him in the ribs. "Wake up!" he shouted. "That procession you wanted to see is about to start!"

"Sweetmelons," the sleeping Esmond mumbled. "Breasts like big, beautiful, sweetmelons . . ."

Lan could not help but laugh. He nudged Esmond again, harder. "Come on, Esmond. Don't you remember the procession? It's starting right now!"

"Perhaps we could--"

Lan lightly kicked Esmond in the chest, loosing another laugh.

"Ouch!" Esmond jerked up with a start. "Why'd you do that?" He punched Lan in the gut. Lan doubled over, clutching his stomach and groaning. "Don't you know not to disturb me when I'm dreaming? Especially dreams like that." Suddenly his stern attitude faded and a faraway look entered his eyes. "Oh Gaelyn, where were you yesterday?" There was dreaminess in his voice, and he very nearly fell back asleep. As he lay back down, his sleepy gaze fell on the bright blue sky, and suddenly a realization hit him.

"Oh no!" he shouted, leaping to his feet and shrugging off his drowsiness. "It's the day of the procession! We're gonna be late!" He began looking around frantically for his friend. "Lan! Where are you? Get ready, you fool!" Esmond spotted him on the ground, still clutching his stomach. "What are you doing on the ground like that? Get up! We have to hurry!"

Lan struggled to stand upright and turned to Esmond. "If you hadn't hit me in my stomach, I'd be just fine," he choked.

"Ah! Excuses, excuses! Get your lazy hide moving before we miss all the money!" Esmond began running off down the streets toward the central entryway where the procession would be entering, trying to force his wild hair into some semblance of order. Lan sighed again, shrugged, and started following his friend, not exactly sure how to react to the 'money' statement. His back pinched as he ran, and at first it slowed him down. After a short while, the pain subsided somewhat, only to be replaced by a sharp cramping in his side.

They ran through streets at a wild pace, tripping over the occasional passerby and stray animal. Even the merchant stands

were not safe from the boys' run. A few merchants shouted after the boys, but none followed. Finally they broke out of the maze of buildings and into the central entryway road.

The central road was actually a large courtyard that ran from the northern gates of Porthos to the Ceren. Running the length of the courtyard in its center was a broad cobblestone street, the very street the high-ranking noblemen were traveling on. Royal guards with their long purple robes and polished silver armor with golden trim stood at every intersecting street to keep people off of the central roadway. They lined the outside of the entire courtyard and also the road leading to the north gate.

Mixed in with the guards were various minor noblemen. These men were loyal to the greater nobles, who were currently proceeding toward the Ceren down the central road. These minor nobles were here as retainers and assistants to their superiors, but only acting the part of representative. Final decisions on issues could only be made by the highest of the nobles. These were the ones who ruled the larger provinces of the nation of Pyran.

Lan was a bit frightened. What if some of the guards here recognized him? What if Lord Osbick saw them? The old man had to be here--this was a procession of nobility. He silently cursed to himself as he and Esmond snaked their way through the bystanders and up to the line of guards and noblemen. There were royal trumpeters somewhere, along with drummers. They were playing a loud marching theme, the royal anthem of Porthos. It was a slow, gloomy march written in memory of the destruction of the city a thousand years ago by the daemon Ethrakus. Lan had never believed any of that. As far as he was concerned, it was just another fantastic tale, just like the story of Ohn, the Creator.

The procession had not been going on for long--the first carriage in the parade was still quite a way from the opened doors of the Ceren. The carriages Lan could see were some of the most elaborate vehicles he had ever thought imaginable. Many had gold or renol inlays in them, with fancy drapes on the windows, embroidered with intricate patterns and writing. Armed guards walked alongside all of the carriages, each one drawn by teams of two to four horses. They were the most majestic horses he had ever seen, their colors ranging from deep black to white, dappled with grey spots. Not a one of them, however, looked as strong as

any horse from his father's land. These noble horses were well groomed, but not very well worked.

One carriage stood out from the rest, and as it entered the gates of the city, the crowds gasped in awe. There were no horses pulling it, and there were no wheels on it. It was made primarily of renol plates, interspersed with what appeared to be steel. It was very rounded, with no sharp edges that he could see. There were no windows, or at least nothing he recognized as windows. Except for two small, dark holes in the front, he saw no openings in the vehicle whatsoever. It floated a short distance above the ground and moved silently forward. Two figures wearing renol plate armor and carrying long renol lances rode floating discs alongside the strange vehicle. He thought one of them looked like the mesefu woman he had met earlier, Lisen, but he could not be sure as the disc riders wore large, elaborate helmets that rose up behind their heads, coming to rounded points.

I wonder what they're doing at a meeting of the Pyranian parliament? He stared at the vehicle, awed by the magic powers that drove it. Many people in the crowd backed up as the vehicle floated down the road, afraid to be near the foreign magics. The mesefu supposedly had an entire city constructed with such skill and magical talent. Lan shuddered in amazement at the mere thought of seeing hundreds of things like this at once. It was unsettling, in a way. He pried his eyes off of the mesefu vehicle and tried to push the eerie feelings from his mind.

"Lan!" shouted Esmond. "Do you see--"

"Yes," he replied. "I saw it." Lan turned his attention elsewhere, toward the open gates of the Ceren. They were huge, ornately carved iron slabs nearly ten strides high. One of the larger symbols carved into the gates caught his attention--a crowned skull with a broad-bladed dagger threaded through its empty eye-sockets. Its jawbone was missing. *Strange thing to have for a royal emblem*, he thought. It likely had an important history behind it--he was not very knowledgeable in the realm of Pyranian history. He had not yet studied local history in the university. With what happened the other day, he probably would never get the chance.

Lan was trying to stick close to Esmond, but the ever-shifting crowd kept separating them. It reminded him of the crowd

of fearful students from the night of their flight from the university. He would never see that place again . . .

Being lost in thought, he did not notice the horse in his way until he ran right into the side of the dark stallion.

"Away from me, you smelly street trash," came a voice from astride the horse. He knew that voice all too well. Lan meekly looked up to gaze upon a very well dressed and well-aged man in red and black robes. He had a very angular face with deep lines that emphasized his age. His thick white eyebrows were wrinkled into a look of agitation. It was Lord Osbick Louei.

Fortunately for Lan, the old lord had not looked at him, merely scolded him while keeping his eyes fixed on the procession.

"Hey, there you are!" It was Esmond. Osbick turned to look in the approaching young man's direction. Lan wanted to sink into the ground and vanish.

"What do you want, peasant-boy?" Osbick asked as he turned his head.

"I wasn't talking to you, you old--" Esmond had started to speak when his eyes met Osbick's. He cursed and ducked back into the crowd of bystanders.

"Wise," Osbick sneered. "Very wise." Lan started to back away, hoping Osbick would not see him. He did not succeed.

"Stop right there," came the gravelly voice. "I should have known to look at what sort of rubbish was running into my fine stallion." Lan broke to run but the nobleman caught him by the hair with his black-gloved hands. "Go ahead, try to flee. Scream for help, if you like." He jerked Lan's hair. Lan gritted his teeth, trying not to make a sound. To alert the guards was to give up all hope of getting out of this. Osbick would have him arrested immediately for stealing his money. *Assuming he doesn't call them on you anyway*, Lan thought.

"Come on, rat! Walk with me--quietly, if you cherish your life."

Osbick nudged the horse, and it turned around. The nobleman guided Lan by his hair out of the throngs of people and away from the city center. Nobody seemed to notice--they were all caught up in the procession. *Why isn't Osbick calling the guards?*

"You got away from me the other night," Osbick said. "You will not get away from me again. I will teach you a lesson you won't soon forget." He looked down at Lan. "Do you enjoy stealing?" the nobleman asked.

"No!" Lan shouted, frantically. "I've never stolen anything before in my life, and I never would! I tried telling you and everyone else that I was framed, but--ouch!"

The nobleman pulled Lan's hair forcefully as he turned his horse down a deserted alley.

"I didn't do anything! Please, let me go!" Lan tugged at Osbick's hand, trying to loosen his grip, but to no avail. The nobleman was too strong.

"Our search of your room said something quite different," Osbick said. "My money chest was found in your closet. Since everything was there, I am going to let you go. There is no more reason to bring the law into this. You went too far by attacking me last night. I could have you killed for such insolence, but I prefer taking matters into my own hands."

Lan's breathing was coming in quick huffs, and his heart was pounding against the inside of his chest like a blacksmith's hammer on an anvil.

They stopped in the dark alleyway, out of sight from the entryway courtyard. The sounds of the musicians and the crowd could still be heard. Osbick dismounted his horse and tied the reins around an awning support. He threw Lan against the off-white hardclay wall of a building. He landed painfully on his backside, just below a boarded-up window.

"Wha--what are you going to do to me?" Lan asked, his voice shaking from fear. This man was extremely strong to be an aged nobleman. "I thought you were going to let me go!"

"Not before I teach you a valuable lesson." Osbick strode over to where Lan was lying on the ground, his robes billowing in a slight breeze that was rushing down the alley. "You do know that us noblemen have legal authority? Just because they do not allow retainers to rule on major legislation in parliament does not imply that we are powerless. As to the exactness of what I am going to do, let us say that it is something to keep you from ever stealing from me or attacking me with your staff again."

He grabbed Lan's right hand with his free one and let go of his hair. At least one pain was relieved. Osbick put his hand around Lan's and forced it into a fist. He then uncurled Lan's index finger and placed his own wrinkled hand around it.

"There once was a man who ruled by the law of 'a death for a death'. Have you ever heard of him?" Without giving Lan a chance to answer, the nobleman continued. "King Fellic, killed by his own brother thousands of years ago. Nobody liked his laws but an insignificant minority. I tend to admire them, however." The nobleman stood beside Lan, who sat still, his head in too much pain to move. It was throbbing from smacking into the wall.

"By his laws," Osbick said, raising his voice slightly, "all crimes had punishments that removed the criminal's means of ever committing that crime again. The people called his ways barbaric, so when his brother killed him with a dagger through the eyes--"

Lan's mind flashed back to the symbol on the Ceren. *That's where it comes from*, he thought, trying to take his mind as far from the situation he was in as possible.

"--the people gladly allowed him to assume the position of leader. Clorin was the murderer's name. He is the one who set up the pathetic government system we have now with all this voting and legislation rubbish. It slows things down too much, so I try to speed matters up when I get the chance."

Lan managed to look up at the hateful man and realized for the first time that he was not nearly as old as Lan had thought he was. At first glance, Osbick easily looked to be in his late sixties, but on closer inspection, he was in his forties at best. His thin, deeply-lined face and whitening eyebrows had made him look far older than he was. Lan could not see his hair under his fluffy black hat, but he was sure that it was either greying or balding. *How can a man who looks so young in the eyes look so old on the outside?*

He tugged on Lan's index finger, extending Lan's arm. "His punishments were very just, I think. For murder, the criminal would be put to death. For theft . . ."

He bent the index finger sharply upward in a direction it was not supposed to go. There was a loud cracking noise that made Lan cringe. Osbick did not stop bending until the back of Lan's finger was touching the back of his hand.

A stream of pain shot through his finger, his hand, and up his arm. It coursed all throughout the right side of his body and was followed by a shocking wave of numbness and nausea. It was all he could do not to scream. His right index finger was completely broken. It was a pain like none he had ever experienced. It was as if every pain he had felt throughout his past near-eighteen years of life were focused onto his hand and multiplied a thousand-fold. He bit down as hard as he could, screaming through clenched teeth. The booming sound of his voice startled even himself. He realized that he had bitten his tongue. Hard. He tasted the warm blood filling up his mouth. He squeezed his eyes shut even harder and began rocking back and forth. Dizziness overcame him, and his knees gave out from under him. He opened his eyes only to see a hazy darkness. The pit of his stomach was churning and he was sure that any second now he would be vomiting.

"A hand. Of course, in your case, you are young, and so I will have some amount of mercy on you and only take your finger, but only if you promise not to ever steal again. It gets difficult to steal with a broken finger, you will find. Of course, fingers always heal, and then you will just be back to your old ways. Swear to me that you will never steal, and I will spare the rest of your hand."

He could hear Osbick fidgeting with something, but he was blind with pain and could not see what the man was doing. Where was Esmond? What had happened to him? After all the times Lan had saved his hide, where was he when he was needed?

"Well? Do you promise?"

Lan was in too much pain to pay attention to anything in the outside world. Instead of an answer, he coughed out some of the blood that was filling his mouth. It dribbled slowly down his chin.

"Never steal again. Promise it," Osbick nearly shouted, "and I will be merciful." That last phrase had a hint of pleasure in it. The crazed man was actually enjoying this.

"I didn't steal anything," he gurgled through the blood in his mouth. "I promise . . ."

"Defiant to the end. A pity." There was a swish of air, and suddenly some of the pain resided, only to be replaced with a new sensation--something not altogether painful, but not welcome by

far. It felt as if his finger had ceased to exist. The warm liquid that shortly began flowing down his arm told him what had happened--his finger was gone. It had been separated from his hand, and now he was bleeding profusely all over himself and the cobblestone ground. He fell over on his side, cradling his hand under his armpit, not hearing the approaching footsteps as his ears were filled with what blood remained in his body.

"You . . . vile . . . *bastard!*" growled a far away voice. It sounded familiar, but he could not be sure in his state of dizzied disarray.

"There you are, you little fiend." Osbick had turned away from Lan. Everything sounded distant, as if he was listening to the world through a thick wooden wall.

"What have you done?" demanded the familiar voice.

"*What . . . have you . . . done?!*"

"I have served justice, you street trash, and now it is time for you to face the law as well." He heard Osbick stepping away.

Lan's vision started coming back, but everything was blurry. He could see Lord Osbick standing across the alley from him by his horse, and he could see the third person, the owner of the familiar voice, facing the dark robed man.

"You call this justice?" The third figure gestured toward Lan. Lan moaned. The undisclosed person ran over to Lan and knelt beside him. "Are you all right?" he asked. It was Esmond. He had come to help.

As much as he wanted to, Lan could not answer. All that came out of his mouth were indecipherable groans, gurgles, and blood from his tongue.

"You barbarian!" shouted Esmond defiantly. "How could you possibly stoop as low as to do something like *this?*!" Esmond stood and started stomping over to Osbick. Lan's eyes closed again--it was too much of a strain to keep them open.

"Do not make me call the guards," Osbick stammered.

"Go ahead and call them. I'll tell them what you did to my friend."

"You know it will do no good. You remember the other night, do you not? I could have you--" Osbick's words had gotten cut off abruptly by what sounded to Lan like a muffled thud.

"You . . . little . . . rat," the nobleman uttered. "Get . . . down from there . . . right this minute!" The nobleman had recovered his voice on the last three words and had shouted them. "I command you to get down from there immediately!" Lan had ceased to care about everything going on around him. He was nearly delirious from both pain and loss of blood, and right now, all he wanted was to sleep.

He heard a horse whinny and then heard its hooves clapping against the cobblestones. He opened his eyes one more time and saw Esmond galloping away on Osbick's horse, the disheveled nobleman chasing on foot. *This must be . . . some sort of . . . dream . . .*

#

Esmond looked back over his shoulder to see no trace of Osbick. He had lost him. Lan had told him that he had done crazy things before, but this had to be the wildest--stealing a nobleman's horse. He had done it to get the crazy man away from Lan. Esmond planned on riding back by Lan and picking him up as soon as he was sure Lord Osbick was far enough away.

He had followed Osbick and Lan at a distance, planning to save his friend when the time was right. Unfortunately he had not been quick enough.

Esmond had hoped to punch the nobleman hard enough in the stomach that he would not be able to shout, but the nobleman had quickly recovered from the blow. *Odd, thought Esmond, that an old man like him should be able to recover that quickly from a punch like that. His kind usually know nothing about how to brace for a hit.* Osbick had chased after Esmond, shouting for the guards, and it had not taken long before they were hot on Esmond's trail.

Guards were closing in on him when he turned the horse down an alleyway as narrow as two men standing side by side. His knees scraped violently against the walls, but he ignored the pain--he had more important things on his mind now. If the royal guards caught him, it would be either long-term imprisonment or banishment from the nation. They were much harsher than the city guards were.

As he shot out of the alleyway, he noticed guards lined up on either side of him, armed with crossbows. *Uh-oh, he thought. This is bad. How am I going to get out now?* He kicked the horse, urging

it to go faster, but it was already showing signs of fatigue, and his efforts to speed it along only resulted in grunts from the animal. *Blessèd royal animals. Always get special treatment and no exercise. If this was one of my father's horses, I could outrun these guards easily.* The guards were shouting for him to stop, but he refused. He had to go on. He had to save his friend.

He sped on across a larger roadway and sharply turned a corner. Crossbow darts suddenly whizzed past his head. *That was close, he thought. Don't plan on being that lucky every time, Esmond. Take a risk like that again and you'll likely get shot.*

Pedestrians were leaping out of his way left and right as he sped through the streets, shouting warnings to them as he passed them by. He desperately needed to somehow turn back and head for Lan, preferably with quite a bit of distance between him and the guards. In the distance, he could hear the Pyranian anthem playing out as the procession continued, the participants oblivious to the action going on in the back streets.

Esmond heard more shouts for him to halt from behind. He looked back to see the guards gaining on him. They were busy reloading their crossbows and did not present an immediate threat. Esmond had to get out of this side of the city somehow, but the fastest way he knew of was to turn directly around. He had never been through this part of Porthos before and was afraid he was lost. He turned back around from watching the guards to find himself charging directly at another mounted guard in front of him, waving frantically for Esmond to stop. The horse he rode stopped abruptly. Esmond was thrown from the saddle right into the flailing guard. The man fell off of the back of his horse to the ground. Esmond nearly followed him but managed to get a grip on the guard's horse's saddle and pull himself upright. He quickly turned and straightened himself, took up the reigns of this new horse, and turned it around, running away from the guards in pursuit. He could hear the guards' curses at the lone, terrified horse he had left in their way.

He liked the next street as soon as he turned onto it. There was a merchant stand nearby with a roof made of wooden slats held up by poles. This gave Esmond an idea. More guards had closed in behind him from branching streets, and they were no more than a few strides behind him. When he reached the first of the supports,

he forcefully kicked it away. The roof began falling behind him, landing partially on the guards and stopping them in their pursuit. Their muffled groans let him know that they were out of action for now. He sped on down the shady street.

Turning yet another corner, he realized that he had made a bad mistake this time. He broke out of the shaded streets and into the bright morning sunlight. He was now galloping across the central entryway from the opposite side he started out on. Guards were posted everywhere, some of them facing him with drawn crossbows. The procession had just been stopped and people were scattering in every direction, trying not to get caught in the crossfire. The guards began firing, but luckily Esmond did not get hit.

He was preparing to turn the horse and run alongside the central road where the largest concentration of people was, hoping that fear of harming an innocent would make the guards stop firing. Suddenly a crossbow bolt struck the horse in the back left thigh. It reared, squealed like an angry sarn, and crashed into the crowd. Esmond's hands turned white as he gripped the reins, trying to control the horse as best he could.

The people's screams increased in number and volume as they leaped aside, leaving a clear path toward one of the carriages on the road, a part of the procession. The horse reared one final time and fell into the carriage. The carriage shook violently but did not tip over. Esmond was thrown to the ground, but his left arm got tangled in the leather reins and jerked his shoulder violently as he fell. He could hear all sorts of things going on inside the carriage, but he was too disoriented to pay them much attention. The horse stood up and Esmond's arm painfully dislodged itself from the reins about its neck. Esmond leaped to his feet and began running through the crowd on the other side of the street, a crowd that had not yet fallen into as much chaos as the one he had just charged into. He scrambled through the mass of confused people and headed toward the place where he had left Lan. He could hear guards behind him, and was sure that they would catch sight of him soon.

He ducked onto a side street between two tall buildings, trying to rub some feeling back into his numb shoulder.

#

A violent jostling feeling awoke him. Lan looked around to see what was going on, but everything beyond a few spans was a blur. From the feel of things, he was in a cart rolling down a cobblestone street. His eyes wandered down to his chest where he felt a sticky, liquid warmth. His right arm was resting on it, covered with blood. His finger was missing. *So it wasn't just a dream*, he thought, a sour mood overtaking him. What was there to do for it? He knew it would never grow back. People were not built like lizards or plants--they never grew back any appendages they lost. Would he still be able to live just as well without it? Probably not at first. It would make many things more difficult for a while, however. He realized that these were silly things to be thinking about right now. He always did this, however. Whenever he should be panicking frantically, in the utmost of dire situations, he was calm and collected, and usually thinking about things that did not matter. And then, he had a tendency to worry and overreact in situations that were not nearly so serious.

Lan wrapped his hand tighter in the sleeve of his shirt to help slow the bleeding. His vision started coming back and he rolled over and tried to sit up to regain his bearings. Something pushed him back down.

"Git back down, lad. Ye don' want the guards findin' ye." The voice came from a big, burly man with dark brown hair and a thick, curly beard to match. Around his neck, resting haphazardly on his chest, was a trinket on a leather strip. It was a silvery Star of Ohn, the four-pointed symbol of the Creator. It held in its middle a finely polished turquoise gem. The burly man was driving the cart, which was being pulled by a single brown horse with a black mane. The man looked oddly familiar, but Lan could not quite place his face. At least he seemed to want to help.

"Where are you taking me?" His voice croaked out, like a frog in the Se'Ra marsh at night. It burned his throat to speak, as if he had some sickness, or had slept with a breeze blowing across his mouth.

"Somewhere ye'll be safe, my boy. Somewhere ye'll be safe."

Lan sat up again, leaning over so he did not rise much above the wooden walls of the cart. He brushed dried blood from off of his chin with the back of his left hand. His entire right hand

felt weird, as if it were dead weight that someone had just tied to his shoulder and he was doomed to carry it around.

"Safe? Where's th--"

The cart hit a loose stone in the road but shook only slightly. Normally Lan would not have noticed such a thing, but the jolt knocked his hand against the wooden cart walls sending a sharp pain up his arm. He squinted back tears and looked down at it, wrinkling his nose. It had finally stopped bleeding, but if not treated properly, he knew it would get infected, and if that infection spread into his arm, he could very well lose all of it.

A cry rang out through the street behind them. Lan looked up to see Esmond running at full speed with many armored city and royal guards behind him.

"Esmond!" Lan tried to shout, but only a sickly scratching sound came out. Lan cringed back at the pain in his throat.

Hearing this, the burly man glanced over his shoulder. He saw Esmond in the distance and called to the horse pulling the cart. "Whoah there!" The cart rolled to a stop. The man leaned over and spoke quietly into Lan's ear. "We're gonna pick up yer friend. Migh' as well save his hide also."

Lan nodded reluctantly. He had no idea what was going on, but at least this man wanted to rescue them from the guards. That definitely put him closer to being a friend than an enemy.

Esmond shouted, "What are you doing here, Lan? How'd you end up in--"

"Hush, lad!" shouted the burly man back at Esmond. "Jus' git in the cart an' I'll take ye outta this mess."

Esmond picked up his pace. As he leaped up into the cart, the burly man turned around to face forward and jerked the horse into motion.

"What are we going to do now?" asked Esmond, too busy with his mind on the guards to wonder who this strange new man was. "They're right behind us!"

"Don' worry, lad. I can get away from 'em easily enough." Lan finally placed the man's strange accent. He was from Merhos, the nation famous for its shipbuilding. The entire nation was a large swamp with buildings built on wooden supports. The people had made their living building ships and handling overseas trade

routes until the mesefu came along with their much more efficient magic-driven ships.

The man turned a corner and the guards were quick to follow. Lan saw two noticeably large piles of rubbish a short ways down the street, one directly across from the other. As soon as the cart was past them, a net shot up from the ground supported on each end by something hidden in the piles.

"Aye," the burly man said, smiling. "Me men always come through."

"Are we safe?" asked Esmond.

"Ye're both safe wi' me, I swear it. At least fer the time bein'." He turned the cart in a southwesterly direction. The burly man looked back at Lan who had fallen back down on his side in the cart from exhaustion. "Looks as if ye got a mighty bad wound there, me lad. We'll 'ave to let Gaelyn take a look at that as soon as possible."

"Gaelyn?!" asked Esmond.

Lan's head was swimming too much for him to talk. He just lay there with his eyes closed, trying to listen to everything around him. His consciousness was beginning to slip away again as the pain returned.

"She's the one I bring all the injured to, lads. Does a good job o' fixin' 'em up."

Lan heard Esmond climb over the front edge of the cart to sit next to the burly man.

"Osbeck almost got the best of ye two," the man said to Esmond.

And then he remembered. Lan sat up and pulled himself to the front of the cart. He poked his head between Esmond and the burly man. He looked over at the Merhosian and recognized him immediately. It was the man who had tried to get away with stealing Ria's dagger and Marcus's money purse. "Dear, Ohn!" Lan said, in as loud a voice as he could muster. "Of all the people . . ." He slumped back down into the cart, not wanting any part of anything anymore. Esmond could deal with this--Lan no longer had the strength to try. *Away from the guards and into the hands of a thief. Dear Ohn.*

"I remember you!" Esmond said, almost gleefully. "You *know* Osbick? That bastard tried to frame Lan! And look what he did today!" Esmond gestured to Lan in the back.

"Unfortunately, me lad. Unfortunately. I been tryin' to expose him fer years now, but I always lose." The burly man had a distant look in his eyes.

"What'd he do?" Esmond asked.

The man just stared forward in stern silence.

After a few minutes of traveling, the burly man spoke up again. "Well, it would seem that the guards've given up fer now." The man turned the horse down a shaded alley. Assorted clothes hung on lines above their heads, drying in the cool breezes. They blocked much of the sunlight, shrouding the alley in a chill darkness.

"Allow me to introduce meself, lads. Name's Malice Took, though most people prefer somethin' a bit harsher." He laughed a little, and his face brightened up.

"Why did you pull such a crazy stunt like that to save us?"

"I been followin' ye, Lan and Esmond." Lan, in his state of shock, did not find anything odd about hearing his name from the stranger's mouth. Too many more unlikely things had happened recently. "E'er since I o'erheard ye lads in the market a few days ago talkin' about thievin', I been followin' ye. I know all about yer escape from the university an' e'er'thin'."

"You've been following us?" Esmond asked. "But why?"

"I needed to know if ye were workin' with Osbick. I can't have any o' his foul bastards visitin' a tavern o' mine an' makin' out all friendly-like wi' me healer."

"Why does it matter if we work for Osbick or not? You really must have something in for this guy if you have to know everyone who works for him. And what do you mean, Gaelyn's a healer? She seemed more like a thief to me."

"The issue wi' Osbick is a bit more complicated than that. I'll have to explain it to ye both when we get where we're goin' and yer friend has been taken care of. As fer Gaelyn, ye'll find out soon enough."

"So where *are* you taking us, Mister Took?"

"Just 'Took' is fine by me, lad. That's what me people call me."

"Okay, Took. Where are you taking us? And what do you mean by 'your people'?"

"We're headin' toward the entrance to me guild, lad. Me people all live there. They're the ones who saved us back there."

"Guild?" Esmond asked, reluctantly.

"Why the Thieves' Guild, o' course."

"Wha--the Thieves' Guild? *The* Thieves' Guild?"

"Aye. What other thieves' guild would I be referrin' to? There be but one *real* thieves' guild in this city, though there be other shameful imitations!"

After all of the troubles they had run into, Lan never would have expected anything as bad as this. They were sitting in the company of the leader of the notorious Thieves' Guild.

"Oh dear Ohn," sighed Lan, rolling his head around.

"This is great!" exclaimed Esmond. "The leader of the Thieves' Guild! Right under my nose all this time and I never even suspected it!" He turned to Lan, beaming. "How lucky can we get? He's not that bad!"

"Luck?" Lan managed to utter. "You call this luck? Falling into the hands of the leader of the most ruthless gang people in all of Porthos, save Osbick perhaps, is *not* my idea of luck. More like a curse."

"Ye'll git over the shock o' it all soon," said Took. "I'm sure that ye've heard all sorts o' oddball stories 'bout us, and prolly e'en some wilder ones about meself. All false, I assure ye. Rumors spread by Osbick an' his men."

"Lan, this guy's no curse. He saved us!"

"Ugh." Lan doubled over, another wave of nausea slamming into him. This was too much. Lan moaned as his mind spun wildly.

"We've got to get him to Gaelyn soon or he'll have worse problems than a missin' finger, an' could likely die from 'em." At that last word, Took urged the horse into a faster pace, and they sped off down the darkened alleyways.

"So," began Esmond, patting Took on the back, "did you *really* kill your mother for a geln?"

Lan gave up. His best friend was now siding with this criminal. The girl his best friend liked was not only teaching him to steal, but was also a member of the Thieves' Guild. From the

hands of a corrupt retainer into the hands of the most wanted band of people in all of Pyran. Yes, it was all too much. Lan's consciousness gave out as he slid into darkness.

Chapter Nine

Lan awoke to darkness. He could hear and feel the cart's movement, but could see nothing. Had he lost his vision?

"Where--?" he asked weakly.

"Lan?" It was Esmond's voice.

"Ye all right back there, lad?" Lan struggled to look up. Malice Took loomed over him.

"Where are we?" he asked, forcing the thought of who this man really was from his mind.

"We're in the guild now," responded Esmond. "You should've seen the entrance to this place! There was this big section of road that sorta pivoted up, and the cart just rolled right down this ramp that was hidden under it. To think all of this was hidden behind the Bear and Claw all this time and I never knew!"

"Aye," said Took. "We'll be in the guild itself shortly an' gettin' ye off to Gaelyn."

"Why is it so dark in here?" Lan asked.

"We have to keep it dark in 'ere so that when we open the door at night, no strange lights start shinin' about, makin' people suspicious." Lan sat up on his elbows and backed himself against one of the sides of the cart. His hand was numb, but throbbing, and he felt like the entire world was slowly twisting around in circles.

They rolled on for a few more minutes in silence until at last, Took spoke. "Light." Suddenly, on each side of the cart, torches sparked to life. The torchbearers were short men with thick black beards and oily faces. Soot smudged their skin where it

showed from beneath their dark, bulky clothes. Floppy wide-brimmed brown hats sat on their heads. They wore dirty vests full of pockets. As they started walking, various tools hanging from their thick leather belts began clanking against each other in an almost rhythmic fashion. Packs hung from their shoulders, the thick bound reeds of torches peeking from under the flaps. It was obvious from their appearance that they did this job often.

"Welcome back," one of them said in a scraping voice.

"No time fer that, Aron. Run on an' tell Gaelyn I got quite a job fer her. This poor lad lost his finger to Osbick."

"Yes sir," spoke one of the oily men who promptly started running on down the passageway, carrying an ethereal, flickering torch glow with him.

The walls of the passageway were made of hard-packed dirt and had large metal support structures every few strides. Lan knew that above lay the city of Porthos itself. Those support structures had to be holding up a great deal of weight.

"How did you ever manage to build something like this without anyone knowing about it?" Esmond asked.

"Found it, actually," Took answered. "It was an ol' passage they used when they were buildin' the foundation fer the city walls. Most of it was filled in after work was complete, but a few passageways were left open. We jus' had the entryway made--the rest was 'ere to begin with."

"So," began Esmond. "Nobody's ever managed to find you?"

"As far as local authorities go, we haven't been found," spoke the other oily man who had stayed behind to light the way. His voice was deep and gravelly.

"It's not local authorities I be worried about," said Took sternly. "It's that confounded Osbick. I'm sure he knows where we are by now, but it's not his way to strike. All he wants to do is make our operation look as bad as possible an' make our lives miserable."

"He hasn't found us yet, Took," spoke the oily man. "Don't you think that if he found us he'd have his men raid us?"

"Didn't ye hear what I said, Voor? He doesn't want us done in with. We're the scapegoat for his underhanded group. Damned assassins." Took's face twisted in anger as he spat out that last sentence.

Voor walked silently onward alongside the rolling cart. Nobody spoke at all--the only sounds were the smoldering of the torch and the wheels of the cart rattling on the pitted earthen floor. They were descending a ramp that only had a few noticeable turns in its course. When the ground finally leveled out, the best Lan could figure was that they were facing southward. He could hear a dripping sound coming in short bursts every now and then. It sounded as if it came from beyond the dirt walls.

After a few more minutes of traveling, the dirt walls gave way to tan stone walls, thick with stringy, slimy green fungus. The bricks making up the walls were easily a stride high each. In the places not covered by moss, the huge bricks were riddled with pockmarks from years of erosion in the dank, wet atmosphere.

They reached a fork in their path at which Took called for the horse to stop. He dismounted the cart and motioned for Esmond to follow him. Esmond hurried around to Lan and helped him from the cart.

"Go on and take this back to the stables," Took said to Voor.

"Yes sir," he responded.

"You have a stable here?" Esmond asked.

"Aye, lad, we do. It's where that path'll take ye." He pointed off down one of the forking passageways.

"Amazing."

Voor led the horse off into the dimly lit passageway toward the stables.

"How do you have a stable underground?" Esmond asked eagerly.

"We're no longer directly under the city anymore," Took said. "There's holes fer sunlight so it's not dreary fer the horses. They're quite happy down here, actually. We treat 'em better than most."

Lan began suddenly lost his footing and fell flat on the ground. His head hit the stone floor hard, but he felt nothing. The world swam on around him.

"Lan? Are you okay?" Esmond kneeled down beside him and started looking him over.

"C'mon, lad," Took said urgently. "We've got to get him to Gaelyn fast."

"I can't believe she never told me about any of this!"
Esmond said.

They pulled Lan up, one of them on either side, and half carried him down the passageway. He could not see very well anymore from a combination of his dizziness and the darkness that was quickly growing since Voor had headed off with the torch.

Time seemed to have all but stopped. He could hear the muted noise of what sounded like a crowd of people. He heard a door creaking open and suddenly the noise got louder.

Instead of a dark blur, he could now see a bright, multicolored blur, but could not distinguish one thing from the next. He was surrounded on all sides by moving people who were all talking among themselves, but he could not make out any of the words. It all blended together into a formless roar. As he was carried on, deeper into the room, the noise reduced to a deathly silence. Lan could hear his heart beating. He got short of breath and motioned for the others to stop.

"Come, lad. No stopping now!"

His vision came back to find himself in a small, blue-stone hallway lined every few strides with flickering torches. Took was standing in front of him and Esmond beside him. Took had his hand outstretched. Lan grabbed it, and Took began leading him again.

"I'm sorry," Lan began. "I'm just . . . so tired . . ."

"Ye'll have more problems than exhaustion if ye don't git help soon."

They walked hurriedly on down the dim hallway until Took turned and barged into a slightly ajar door to Lan's right. Esmond hurried in right behind them.

The room was small. Most of it was taken up by a table and two wooden chairs. There was a girl seated in one of them with her head resting on her folded hands. She did not look up as they came in. On the walls were racks and shelves of bottles and jars. Each one contained a different color of powder or liquid.

The room was lit by two candles that sat at the center of the table, casting dreary shadows on the floor and walls.

"Gaelyn," said Took. "We have ourselves an emergency 'ere."

The girl at the table snapped her head up as if surprised. "Aron told me you were bringing someone," she said in a warm, soothing voice. *That doesn't sound like the Gaelyn I remember*, Lan thought.

Lan's hand began throbbing violently, sending waves of pain up his arm. His consciousness started washing in and out. He vaguely heard Took telling Gaelyn about the injury. He thought he heard Esmond saying something to Gaelyn, but he could not be sure. Everything was a mess inside his head, a crazed storm with no meaning or form.

Lan's mind was brought back when someone touched his arm. He flinched and looked over to see Gaelyn rolling his sleeve up.

Took's voice came rolling through the fog in his head ". . . if ye don' do somethin' now, he probably won't live to see another week . . ."

Lan looked around the room, but everything was distorted. It all looked so far away. He put his healthy left hand out to steady himself on one of the chairs, but he missed and slipped to the floor. As he rolled over and looked up, he saw three faces wavering above him. They all looked familiar, but he could not place them. He tried to focus his thoughts, but all went black.

#

Lan regained consciousness to find himself lying on the table in Gaelyn's room. She was standing over him, mixing a thick, black paste in a wooden bowl. He blinked a couple of times to try and clear his mind of the fogginess that enveloped it.

He tried to turn his head, but a searing pain shot down his shoulders and upper back. He winced. She placed her hand gently on his head to calm him.

She removed one of her hands from the bowl, checked to make sure it had plenty of the black paste on it, and went to apply some to his hand. Lan jerked his hand up toward his chest, anticipating the pain of her touch.

She looked surprised for a moment but recovered quickly. "Well," she said. "It lives." He tried to say something in response, but all that came out was a painful screech.

He coughed, choking on something. The world was a blur. Time seemed to stand still and fly by all at once. His head was

warm, swimming. The back of his throat tickled as his mouth began watering. He coughed again, forcing the saliva from his mouth.

Gaelyn held a cup full of water out toward him. Seeing it made him realize just how thirsty he was. He had not had anything to eat or drink all day. He pulled himself up slowly and took the cup with his left hand. His hand was very shaky, and he missed his mouth the first time, spilling water down the front of his shirt. Gaelyn made an unintelligible grunt as he tried again, this time successfully. The cool water washed away the scratch at the back of his throat, as well as much of his disorientation. His vision began clearing and the underwater sound in his ears began to fade. The red-haired girl picked up the bowl with the dark paste again.

"Th--thank you," he finally managed to cough out. She looked at him and smiled curtly. It was the kind of smile that made hairs tingle on the backs of people's necks. He smiled weakly back at her to be polite. Her smile quickly faded, however.

"Hold out your hand," she ordered. He did as she asked, assuming she knew what she was doing. "This may sting just a little, but it'll go away fast." As she applied the paste to his hand, he took in a sharp breath. There was a nearly unbearable sting for several seconds that made him momentarily regret letting her touch him. She was right, however--it faded quickly. She began rubbing more of the paste onto the wound where his index finger had once resided, massaging it into his hand. He felt no more pain.

"You'll never get that finger back," she said.

"I believe I can live without it," he said remorsefully. "I just want to hurry up and get out of this place. I'm sick of being accused of being a thief, and hanging around them won't help my case any."

"You shouldn't speak such ways of things you don't understand," she said, massaging his hand.

"It's wrong," he stated flatly. "There's nothing else to say about it."

"Don't forget who is helping you." She squeezed his hand as if to emphasize her point.

He looked at her sternly. "I don't see how you can live with yourself, stealing from people all the time. Do you know how horrible that is? And to try and drag my friend into it with you?"

"Aren't we talkative to have just lost a finger and several barrels of blood!" She looked at him incredulously. "Do you know how horrible it is to go without food for days? Do you know how horrible being a slave to a wealthy family is all because your parents dumped you on someone else's doorstep because they didn't want you? Do you have any idea what life is like when you have nothing, when nobody wants you?" She was shaking, her eyes wide with rage. He saw deep within them, however, incalculable loss and remorse.

Lan's tongue caught in his throat. She slowly started massaging his hand again. "I know," she said quietly, a tear forming in the corner of her right eye. "I know all about that life." She sighed heavily.

She stopped rubbing his hand and rested it on his chest. "Don't move that," she ordered. "I need to get something to wrap it in." He lay there silently as she went over to one of the shelves and took out a large bandage roll. She brought it back over to him and took up his hand. She began wrapping it as she spoke.

"The people who live here in the guild--most of them don't steal. They live here because they have nowhere else to go. Only about a fourth of the people actually steal anything. It's not an unorganized operation either," she said. "Their stealing is very well-planned. They only steal from the corrupt aristocracy, not from the random passer-by on the street."

Lan was again at a loss for words. Was what she said the truth? "But what about all those stories I've heard about stealing from temples and people getting killed in back alleys and such? And what about when Took tried to steal my dagger and Marcus' money?"

"Well," she began, "as for what Took did, we thought you were just rich, snot-nosed university brats. Most of your kind are. I told Took to give you the stuff back, though, because I realized that you--well, at least you and Esmond--seemed different. As for the stories you've heard," she said, "they are all lies spread by Osbick. Every bad thing that happens around this city he blames on the Thieves' Guild."

"Why does he have such a grudge against you? And why did he try to frame me and cut off my finger for crimes I never committed?"

"I take it you've met Osbick already? Then you should know how ruthlessly cruel he is."

"What do you know about him? Why would he do these things?" Lan asked.

"Well," she said, pulling the bandage tight around his hand. "I know he's evil. He cares nothing for anyone but himself, and he's not afraid to push others down. Took knows him from a long time ago somehow. I never managed to figure out their relationship." She produced a knife from within her brown vest and cut the bandage. She tossed the large roll aside and set to work tying it tightly so it would stay on Lan's hand.

"Somewhere back in the past they parted ways. Osbick went on to found a little underground operation called the Shadow-into all sorts of illegal operations from theft to assassination. He managed to weasel his way into the aristocracy using money he made from his business. He eventually ended up as a retainer to Lord Roland, governor of the northern coast of Pyran."

"So Took and Osbick are old enemies?"

Gaelyn stood up to carry the bandage roll back to the shelf. "In a way, yes." She stowed the bandage roll and picked up the bowl with the black paste in it. She placed a lid on it and set it on the shelf under the bandage roll.

"Well, you're free to do as you please. That wound might seep a little, but that's to be expected. The salve I put on there will reduce the pain, but if it gets too bad, come find me and I'll give you something a bit more potent. The bandage shouldn't be replaced or removed for at least three days. After that time, the chance of infection should be relatively low. If your hand starts to bleed after the bandage comes off, hold the wound hard against your chest like this--" she pressed her hand to her chest, her other hand clasped around it "--until it stops." She started to head for the door but turned back. "Oh, I almost forgot to tell you--Took wanted to speak with you. I'll go get him and tell him you're ready. You can come with me, if you feel up to it."

"I'll sit here a bit more, thanks," he said.

"Okay," she smiled as she vanished behind the door.

Lan finally had a chance to realize the position he was in. The Thieves' Guild. He had to get out of here. Damn Esmond if he wanted to join these thieves. Lan was not about to stoop that

low. Whether they all stole or not, how could anyone live off of things that were taken wrongfully from others? He would talk to Took, briefly and politely, and then he would leave.

But where could he go? Roam the streets for the rest of his life and be a fugitive from the law, always in fear of someone recognizing him? Go home to his parents who would surely be mad at him for fleeing the university and not facing authority, as he should have? Sure, eventually he would go home and be with his family once more, but he wanted to wait until everything blew over. And he did not want to do that waiting here, of all places.

All he could hear were the crackling torches burning out in the hallway, casting dancing shadows in the room. He should have followed Gaelyn, but he had been too frazzled by the events of the past few days to think straight. Now he would have to try and find his way to Esmond on his own and explain to his best friend that if he planned on staying here with Gaelyn and stealing, then they would have to separate. Lan knew it was impossible to reason with Esmond--he would do whatever he wanted. It had always been that way. It would not be as if he were throwing their friendship away, though. Esmond could stay here for the rest of his life if he wanted. Lan just wanted no part of it.

He started for the door. Once out, he turned the way Gaelyn had and followed a low rumbling he took to be the crowd from earlier. The blue-stone hallways were dark, but dry, unlike the passageway that had led down into the guild from the surface. After following the narrow hallway toward the noise, he finally emerged into the big cavern that apparently served as the common room.

There was a man playing a fiddle in one corner and people were dancing to the light music. Directly to his left were two men arm wrestling while a crowd watched and cheered. Everywhere he looked there was movement. Two children playing a game of chase ran by him almost knocking him off balance. He cursed to himself, pulled his hand tight against his chest, and moved on. He could hardly hear himself think through the noise.

He started navigating through the noisy crowd, looking for any sign of Esmond. There were huge stone supports everywhere holding the ceiling up. Sitting at the base of one of the supports in a quiet corner sat a woman nursing a young baby. Two other

children, very clean and well kept, sat by her, listening to her tell a story.

This is the Thieves' Guild? These people don't look evil. He mentally kicked himself. Don't go siding with them, fool. You're surrounded by thieves, and you don't want any part of it. You've got to get out of here!

After a few minutes of navigating the noisy crowd, he spotted Esmond. He was sitting at a large table telling the story about the time he and Lan had fed soap to the cow. Gaelyn was sitting beside him with her arm around his shoulders. He was telling everyone it was Lan's idea to feed it the soap to see if it really would blow bubbles. It was the truth, but Esmond was telling it in a way that made Lan sound like a fool. They were all laughing loudly, Gaelyn the loudest.

Lan walked over to the table. Esmond saw him, jumped up, and said, "There he is now!" Lan gave him a sharp, scornful look.

"What?" Esmond shot him a questioning look. Lan did not react. "So, how are you doing? Gaelyn said you weren't feeling too well. Maybe you should go get some rest. We're going to be here a while, so--"

That was the last thing he needed to hear. 'We'. Esmond had taken a fancy to the idea that Lan was going to stay here in this inconceivably horrid place while he ran around with Gaelyn stealing from innocents? Lan was furious. "Why should I go get some rest?" he interrupted flatly. "So you can continue insulting me behind my back?"

"Hold on!" Esmond said defensively. "I was just telling these people a story! If I'd known you'd get so bent out of shape about it I wouldn't have said a word. Have I ever done anything to try and hurt you? What's gotten into you, anyway?"

Esmond was right. Lan could not recall a time Esmond had ever purposefully caused him any harm.

"Just sit down here and join us, Lan," Esmond invited. "Come on and have some fun! You've had a *very* rough day. And tomorrow, I can go with Gaelyn and help us get some more geln. Who knows, if we get enough, maybe you and me can take a trip back to Kagon, see how everyone's doing."

For a brief moment, Lan wanted to sit down and join his friend, but then he realized that this is what he always did--exactly

what Esmond wanted. He always did what Esmond told him to, whether by choice or indirect force, and Esmond never listened to him. He would not give in.

"You have no idea how rough of a day I have had," he replied. "How rough the past few days have been, even. You've had it easy! All you've had to do is rip the sheets off of your bed and run by my side! I'm the one who's been falsely accused of stealing from a nobleman, chased out of the university, and now dragged down here where you dream of becoming a master pickpocket! And now you're acting like I've agreed to *stay* here while you go off stealing!" Lan threw his arms up in the air. "What on Kalra are you thinking?!" He turned abruptly and walked from the table before he got so upset that he said something he would regret.

Esmond's face had not shown the first hint of anything while Lan had been shouting at him. It had remained blank, expressionless, the entire time. As Lan was walking away, the table exploded in laughter. He figured it was likely something at his expense. The table kept up its laughter in bursts, every one making Lan flinch.

He'll learn someday, Lan thought. He glanced back briefly, catching eyes with Gaelyn. She had a strange, twisted smile on her face that made his skin crawl. She looked down as soon as their eyes met, but he could still feel them as he turned and walked away. He shuddered.

Lan walked back down the gloomy halls to the room he had come from. He sat down hard on one of the chairs in the dark, staring at the stone floor, worn smooth from many feet treading across it over the years. He held his chin in his hands, thinking about what to do next. He had to get away from Esmond. He had to get away from the Thieves' Guild. Lan did not want a reputation as a thief. They did not seem like terrible people to him now, but they were still thieves. They stole money and things from innocent people for no reason but their own benefit.

But what about the children? What about the mother nursing her baby? How would these people survive any other way? *Stop that*, he scolded himself. *There are plenty of other ways to make a living. Stealing is only one of them.*

The sound of the door being pushed fully open got his attention. The silhouette of a large man stood there, staring in at him. It was Malice Took.

"Are ye feelin' all right, lad?" the burly man asked.

"If it's my hand you're talking about," he replied, "I feel much better." Lan put his arms down by his side and raised his head.

"I wish I could've done somethin' fer ye back there in the streets, but there was nothin' I could do wi'out callin' attention to me." Took walked in the door and stood by the table. The door being fully open, more light poured in. Lan could now see a bit better. He looked at Took's bearded face. The large man was frowning.

"You saw the whole thing?" Lan asked, pushing thoughts of Esmond and the Thieves' Guild aside. He decided a conversation was what he needed to calm his nerves. Never mind that it was with the leader of the guild himself. Any conversation would do. Besides, something about this man made Lan feel comfortable.

"Aye." Took leaned back against the table. "If I'd stepped forward to say anythin' to Osbick, he might've called the guards on me right then and there. If I were lucky."

"I thought he didn't want to turn you in?"

"He doesn't, but I wouldn't put it past him if he were pushed into a corner."

"Gaelyn mentioned you two have known each other for a long time."

Took sighed. "There's a bit more to it than that, lad. But I'd be willin' to tell ye the entire tale if yer willin' to listen. Ye seem like the type who'd understand."

"What do you mean by that?" Lan asked.

"I saw what just happened in there, lad. How yer friend treated ye. Ye haven't said anythin' about it yet, but I know how ye feel. Yer tired o' him gettin' his way, tired o' gettin' punished fer everythin' he drags ye into. I bet he even tried to drag ye into stealin', even though I know yer the type who'd ne'er do such a thing, an' I hold nothin' against ye fer that."

Lan's eyes lit up. "Thank Ohn *someone* understands!"

"Aye," Took said, nodding. "Though I think ye *were* a bit short wi' him. But I can understand, wi' all ye've been through

today. Now let me tell ye why I understand where ye're comin' from. I come from Merhos, lad. Born there some forty years ago." Took's eyes had a faraway look in them as he reminisced about his past. "I worked in the shipyards there fer a few years in me early twenties 'til the mesefu brought in their own, better shipbuildin' methods. All sorts o' weird magic stuff. I had a best friend, back then. Osbick Louei was his name. We did e'er'thin' together, from school to work." Took leaned forward on his elbows, letting another heavy sigh escape his lips.

"When the shipyards started cuttin' back on their employees, my group was the first to go. 'Twas me an' Osbick, some overweight guy we called Pop, another good friend o' mine Lennas, an' the most muscular gal I've e'er laid eyes on. Went by the name of Meri, I believe." He paused in thought for a moment, then shrugged and went on.

"Aye, 'tis not important. Lennas, Osbick and I started up a loose band o' thieves out o' necessity. We had good intentions. Stealin' only from the corrupt an' redistributin' it all to the ones who'd lost their jobs. E'er'thin' was goin' fine 'til Lennas got himself caught. He started takin' things too far, stealin' livestock and wagons. Got himself banished from Merhos. They started searchin' us out after that, so Osbick and I decided to move the operation to Pyran, here in Porthos."

Lan leaned over and started listening more intently, interested in the story of this man and his past. It seemed in many ways to parallel his own past, especially the last few days.

"We based our operation in an old abandoned buildin'. E'er'thin' went fine fer a few years until one o' the noblemen, a Lord Roland of northern Pyran, started spreadin' rumors about us. Sayin' we assassinated people fer money, among other crazy things. He got the government to crack down on us hard.

"After the rumors spread about the assassinations, we actually got people comin' to us askin' us to kill someone fer 'em. Many o' 'em offered *thousands* o' geln! I couldn't believe it! I gave me men strict orders not to take any such underhanded jobs, regardless o' the price offered . . . but one man did."

Lan looked Took in the eyes. He looked empty, somehow. "Osbick?" Lan asked.

"Aye, lad," Took nodded. "It was he. He'd gone through with the plan 'fore I heard 'bout it. I confronted him 'bout it and we had a very heated argument that nearly ended in violence, 'til I remembered he was me friend an' I couldn't do such a thing to him. Instead of harmin' him, I threw him out o' the guild."

Took sighed and continued his tale.

"Not three weeks after I got rid o' him, the guild was raided by Pyranian national guardsmen and Osbick was suddenly a retainer to ol' Roland. Now I don' know this fer sure, but I'd bet ye all the geln in the world that Osbick turned us in to Roland and that's how he got where he did.

"We managed to move the guild underground here. One o' me men had found this place one night by accident. Osbick was a bit disappointed when he found out we were still active, but he never openly came after us again. It took me many years to realize why--he'd set up his own illegal operation and was usin' us to blame e'er'thin' on. E'er'thin' his operation did, he would claim that the Thieves' Guild in Porthos had done, and the reward fer findin' us increased a hundred-fold. Nobody e'er found us, though. If they did, Osbick would offer them triple the price on our heads fer keepin' quiet. He needs us around to keep his infernal Shadow under wraps."

"What all does this Shadow do?" Lan asked.

"Exactly what his ol' master Roland claimed we did in the first place. E'er'thin' from assassinations to bank robbery. They work out o' greed, whereas we work to survive. And yet we take all the blame." Took banged his fist on the table and knocked one of the candles over. Lan quickly righted it, a few drops of wax dribbling harmlessly onto his bandage.

"That's horrible," Lan said.

"Aye, 'tis, lad. Like I said, I understand what it be like to always take the blame fer e'er bad thing yer friends do."

Lan smiled. He suddenly was feeling a lot better about his situation. But he still had a lot of questions about what he should do. He definitely did not want to stay here, despite how welcoming and understanding Malice Took was. He decided to get burly man's opinion.

"What do you think is the best thing for me to do? I don't want to lose Esmond as a friend, but I don't want to keep going

through this. I just want to get out on my own, for once. Esmond's always been with me in everything, which will make it hard to leave him, but this is a plan of his that I just can't agree with." Lan looked down at the tabletop as he clasped his hands together.

"I suggest ye leave," Took said quietly. "Don' leave angry, but leave all the same. It'll be better in the long run, lad. I promise."

"I don't know," Lan said, starting to wonder if he was sure that he really wanted to do this. "I have no idea what I would do. Leaving sounded like a good idea in my head, but I guess I never really thought it over much until now."

Took stood up and walked over to Lan, putting his hand on the young man's back. "Ye honestly don' know what ye want to do? Or are ye just sayin' ye don't?"

Lan jerked his head up at Took. "Why would I just say something like that? If I knew what I wanted to do, I wouldn't be sitting here toiling over it."

"Sometimes when we're faced wi' somethin' we'd rather not, we just lie to ourselves about it an' hope it'll go away. It ne'er does though, lad."

Lan sighed. Something tugged at the back of his mind. He could not figure out quite what it was. He let his good hand slip under his shirt. He started fondling the ruby hilt of the renol blade Ria had left him with. *If ever we are separated, it always finds its way back.* Those words had amazed him that night in the guestroom of his home. Her dagger was magical. Marcus had told him how he had used magic to keep his ink from spilling. Lan remembered the crossbow bolt, and how it should have killed him. He also remembered the mirror and how it should have been shattered long ago. If that had all been the power of magic, then he wanted to learn how to harness it.

He knew that very few humans possessed the ability to use magic, and the ones that did were mediocre at best. It was the mesefu who were the most skilled in the art. How could he expect to ever learn how to wield such a power? There was no way--

No. He would let nothing stop him. He wanted to study magic. He would at least try. There was no way to know whether or not he could do it until he tried.

"Do you--" he began, a nervous shiver shaking him from his thoughts.

"What is it, lad?" Took positioned himself in front of Lan, staring him straight in the eyes.

"Do you know where I might possibly start learning about . . . magic?"

"Magic, eh? That takes a lot o' talent, lad. Ye sure ye want to try it?" Took twisted his face questionably. Lan sat there in silence, staring at him determinedly. Took sighed, a look of regret coming over him. "I shouldn't have said that, lad. I apologize."

Lan just nodded his acceptance in silence.

"There be a be a place to study magic in this here city. Goes by the name 'Mages' Guild.'" Took shrugged. "Rather silly name, but then," he said, scratching his beard, "so be 'Thieves' Guild.'"

"I know," Lan said. "I waited for Esmond there the other day. Not inside, though. Can you take me there?" Lan asked.

"Aye, lad," Took responded, smiling. "Not only can I take ye there but I can introduce ye to the head o' the guild himself. We met long ago, and he's one o' the few outsiders who knows the true story about the Shadow an' all. He helps me out whene'er he can, though I haven't seen him in a few years."

"Great!" Lan smiled. "When can we leave?" He started for the door, eager to get on his way. Took held out his hand to slow him.

"Not so fast, lad. I'll send some men off to notify Keon that I'm bringin' him a new prospect while ye go off to get yer bag. I think yer friend has it."

Keon. Where had he heard that name before? Was it--

Ria. She had mentioned an uncle named Keon. She was supposedly headed for his house when the sarn attacked her seasons ago. The same name that had made his mother shudder and leave the room when an undisclosed revelation overcame her. Perhaps this was the same man. He made a mental note to find out more information about him when he arrived at the Mages' Guild. At the thought of magic, his adrenaline kicked in again and he got even more excited.

"Yes sir," he said to Took.

"Ah, don' go callin' me that. Makes me feel older than my forty-eight already make me feel. Jus' call me Took."

"And you can call me Lan." Took followed him out of the room after blowing out the candles, shrouding the room in darkness.

#

Lan had finally found the room Gaelyn and Esmond were in after much searching and questioning. It was in the same hallway as the room he was healed in, only at the end of the hall and to the left. The hallway was very narrow with torches set high on the walls everywhere but this far end. The door to this room, which he had found out to be Gaelyn's actual living space, was shielded from the light of the torches, as it was set back from the hallway. Lan stood before the door quietly, afraid to knock, knowing Esmond was in there with Gaelyn. He was afraid his friend would be mad at him for having exploded earlier. Lan had overreacted and wanted to apologize--he did not want to leave with a rift in his friendship. He was not sure he could face Esmond, though.

He stood there for a few minutes, watching the torches burn in the hallway, casting dancing shadows about the cold stone walls. *I wonder who keeps these things lit? They must have an awful lot of torches lying around somewhere.* Finally, Lan took a deep breath and decided to knock on the door.

He stepped up to it and raised his hand to knock, when he heard Gaelyn talking in a low, sorrowful tone. He decided against knocking and leaned closer to the door to hear what was being said.

". . . left me at the doorstep! The housekeeper was nice enough to take me in. I was only six when she died." There was a long pause here. Lan could hear her shivering or shuddering. He could not tell for sure from where he stood listening. "I became a slave for the master of the house after that. I worked from the first greys of early morning until the darkest part of the night when the only things awake were the mice and me. I did everything they wanted. I cooked their meals, washed their clothes. I cleaned and I cried." Her voice started breaking up through the onset of tears.

"When I was late, or didn't do something exactly how they wanted, I was punished. Sometimes the punishment was no food for a few days. Other times it was . . . the whip . . ." More silence here. He could hear something moving around inside, but he

wasn't sure what. Then she started speaking again, her tears subsiding.

"When I turned twelve, I got smart and ran away. I lived on the streets here, begging. I was young and pretty, so I made plenty of money. Well, enough to survive." Another shudder.

"Then came the day I'll never forget. Two of the city guards had been eyeing me all morning. I'd made a fair amount of money earlier that day from some old rich man, so I decided around noon that it was time to leave and go find something to eat and get away from those watchful guards. I went to the market and bought some hornfruit. I remember it so clearly. I bought some dark bread along with it. I found a small, quiet alley just outside the marketplace to sit down and eat. All of the alleys here are dark. It's the tall buildings with all their overhanging roofs." She paused again.

"I was sitting there, eating, when suddenly the two guards who had been eyeing me came walking up. I asked them what they wanted, but they didn't say anything. They just kept coming, evil grins on their faces. I started backing away to leave, when one of them charged at me and grabbed one of my arms. I shrieked as I dropped my bread from my free hand. The guard jerked my arm behind me. I was so scared I squeezed the hornfruit in my hand. It oozed out of its peel and got all over my hand and my back. It was so warm. You remember the strangest details at times like that.

"He slapped his hand over my mouth and backed me against one of the walls. I kept trying to hit him, but each blow only made me hurt more. He just laughed." She was starting to talk faster and faster now with fewer pauses.

"The other guard ran up and grabbed my other hand and gave it to his friend. I remember the feel of his hand on my face, telling me I was 'such a pretty young thing.'"

Lan couldn't believe what he was hearing. She had been--

"He started kissing my cheek. I was terrified. I had no idea what to do. When I tried screaming again, he planted his nasty mouth on mine and forced his tongue in. It was like eating slugs, and the taste was horribly bitter. I bit down on it, hard. I'll never forget the taste of his salty blood in my mouth. He let out a muffled shout and broke away. The guard stumbled back, holding his bleeding mouth. The other guard, surprised, was easy to force

backward. I spat the blood from the guard's tongue onto the ground and started running. My heart was racing--my mouth had a horrible taste in it. I didn't see the man I ran into. He stopped me, tried to calm me. Promised to help me and make things better. Promised that the guards would never hurt me again."

Lan decided that he had heard enough of the story. He was not sure he could take much more. He meekly knocked on the door. He heard her call for him to come in. He pushed the old wooden door open slowly. The room was dark like the rest of this part of the guild. Only one light was in the room, a candle sitting between Esmond and Gaelyn. She was looking up at him with lines of tears streaking down her face. Esmond looked up to him as well, a look of pity in his eyes.

"Lan?" Esmond asked.

"I . . . I need my bag," he said. He could not bring himself to apologize. He tried, but the words would not come to his mouth.

"Sure," Esmond said quietly. He turned to Gaelyn. "Stay here for a minute. I'm gonna go get his bag for him and be right back, okay?" She nodded acceptance and Esmond stood up. Lan backed out of his way and Esmond closed the door once he was through.

"She's pretty shaken," Esmond said as they walked down the hall. "Had a rough past." The young man shook his head in amazement. He looked up at Lan. "Your bag's in the front room." Lan's eyes opened wide, amazed his friend would leave his stuff just lying about with complete strangers.

"Don't worry, though," Esmond said. "I made sure nobody'd mess with it. What do you need it for anyway? Going to bed early?"

"No," Lan said. "I'm going to leave."

"You're what?" Esmond stopped in his tracks. Lan took a few more steps before realizing his friend was no longer walking.

"That's right, Esmond. I'm leaving." The words did not come easily. It was hard telling his best friend that he was leaving him.

"But where are you going? What are you gonna do?"

"Don't worry about it." Lan started walking again. Esmond quickly followed him. "Took's taking care of everything for me."

Esmond was at a loss for words. Lan could see him twisting his face in thought as they walked, words on the tip of his tongue, but no idea which ones to use.

"Look, Lan, I'm sorry about what happened earlier. I was a little tipsy and wasn't thinking straight. I didn't mean what I said. I didn't mean to make everyone think you're foolish."

"It's okay, Esmond, but the time has come for us to lead separate lives. You obviously want to do something with yours that I don't." Lan spoke in a monotone, forcing every word out.

"But . . . you'll come back, right?" Esmond asked him, hopefully. They were nearing the large common area now, and the noise was starting to make hearing more difficult.

"Maybe," Lan said as they walked out into the large room, hoping the sounds of the crowd muffled his reply. "Maybe."

Lan followed Esmond closely through the throngs of people until they arrived at the table Esmond had been sitting at earlier.

"Hey, Sef," he said to a scrawny, angular man sitting at the table. "I need that bag I asked you to hold for me." Without a word, the thin man passed Esmond Lan's bag from under the table. Lan was shocked.

"You left my bag in the care of a complete stranger?" Lan asked angrily.

"It's okay," Esmond said reassuringly. "Sef's just fine. A bit eccentric, but trustworthy."

Lan groaned in disgust as he slung his bag over his shoulder. Where was Took? He wanted to leave as soon as possible. He walked over to an empty table and sat down in silence, Esmond following suit.

They sat there quietly for the longest time. Lan kept staring down at the wooden tabletop. He could feel Esmond's eyes questioning him. He was leaving, and he was not telling Esmond where he was going.

"Is there anything I can do--" Esmond began, but at that moment Took walked up and interrupted him.

"All ready, lad?" he asked Lan.

Lan looked up from the tabletop slowly. "Yes," he said. "I'm ready."

"Wait!" shouted Esmond desperately. Lan and Took turned to him.

"Yes?" asked Lan.

"Lan, in all the years we've known each other, I've gotten you into a lot of trouble, none of which was your fault. I just needed someone to help me out because without you, I would never be able to have gotten away with most of the things I did." He was talking very quickly. He was desperate to change Lan's mind.

"I want to apologize, Lan, and if this is why you're leaving, let me know now. I don't know what I would do without you around! We've been together since . . . forever! Remember all the fun things we've done together? Staff fighting, exploring the wilderness of the farm, all those late night study sessions where we usually ended up just goofing off--have you forgotten all the good things?" Every word Esmond spoke struck Lan harder and harder. Lan held strong, however. He would not stop.

"Goodbye, Esmond." he said, turning from the table.

"Lan!" Esmond shouted after him as he and Took left. "If you're not going to tell me where you're going or when you're coming back, at least tell me that you *are* coming back! I'm your best friend, for Ohn's sake!"

Lan almost did not want to answer. He was not sure. He would go off to learn magic and to find Ria. Whether or not he ever managed to come back was impossible to tell this soon. And yet, something forced words out of his mouth. "I will, Esmond. Someday I will." He did not know what made him say those words, but as he walked on through the crowd with Took, he noticed the dagger under his shirt had gotten warmer.

#

Lan was leaving the Thieves' Guild. He had only been there for a few short hours, but that had been enough for him to decide that it was not the life for him. Things seemed to be moving so quickly these days.

He was going to the Mages' Guild. Perhaps he would be apprenticed to some great wizard and learn lots of useful and powerful magics to help people. This could very well be his path to a better life.

As they left the Guild, Lan felt a pang of regret for not having told Esmond where he was going. He didn't want to go back now, though. If he ever wanted to see Esmond, he knew where to look. Perhaps he would return after he found Ria. But then, it could take years to find her, and who was to say that after all those years Esmond would still be in the Thieves' Guild?

Why did he really want to find her, anyway? He could not place it--there was just some strange, driving force in his mind that wanted to see her again. Part of it, he knew, was likely the dagger. But there were other things, other thoughts. It was true that the dagger may lead him back to her, but would it also toy with his thoughts, his emotions? Was it possible that the dagger was what made him think about her in his sleep? Lan doubted it, but he did not know what all powers the dagger possessed. Those were not the only thoughts he had about her, though. A part of him wanted to find her and embrace her again as they had the night she fled from his house. He wanted to be with her, not only physically, but emotionally, caring for her, watching out for her . . . loving her.

You're crazy, he told himself. *Yes, she's beautiful, but that's no reason to go thinking about things like love.* Regardless of the cause, he missed her terribly and would give anything to have her by his side right now, to tell him that he had done the right thing in leaving his friend behind, to comfort him. To hold him.

He absentmindedly grasped the dagger's hilt beneath his shirt as a wave of pain shot through his hand. The feeling was starting to come back.

It was raining outside, the first rains of the month. He tucked his bandaged hand under his shirt and leaned back against the side of the rickety cart he was in. He shed a few silent tears at the pain of leaving his best friend behind indefinitely. *It's the only way now, Lan*, he tried to convince himself. *Your lives couldn't stay entwined forever. Remember when you both planned to take over your father's estate one day? You even fancied being ruler of Kagon once, as impossible as that could be.* Lan sighed. *It's amazing how quickly things can change.*

Resting his head against one of the sideboards, hearing the raindrops gently tapping on his clothes, Lan fell asleep, dreaming of a day when he could live in peace with Ria, alongside Esmond and Gaelyn, and nobody would ever have to steal, and nobody would

ever have to suffer. Everything and everyone in his dream was perfect.

PART III: The Catalyst

"It is true that magic can level cities with a mere thought, but only love can drive men to level entire nations with their bare hands."

Chapter Ten

"This is impossible!" Lan had been studying magic in the Mages' Guild tower for several weeks, but to no avail. Nothing he had learned during the initiation classes had taught him anything about how to actually use the inherent magical talent everyone kept telling him he had within himself. Very few humans had ever harnessed the ability to wield such powers. Those who did studied either here in Porthos, or at another guild far to the east in southern Kagon. These were the only two magic schools intended to help humans, and they never ran the risk of overcrowding.

There had been times during the past few weeks that Lan had thought his superiors here were wrong. They all claimed he had the ability to use magic, if only he could discipline his mind. Every attempt on his behalf, however, had failed. He had learned that the magic that humans could use was very tightly interwoven with their emotions. Magic altered the emotional state of the user, sometimes drastically. On the other hand, many uses of magic could only be unlocked if the user was already in a certain emotional state. He had grasped these concepts with ease--faster than most, so he had been told. And still he could not harness the power. Only one thing kept him from giving up and admitting defeat. The crossbow bolt last fall.

It should have killed him. He should have died there in the rain, face down in the mud. Ga'ruk's aim had been perfect. And yet, the bolt had fallen at his feet. Lan knew that he had stopped it somehow--several other prior displays of such power convinced him of it.

The first instance was his mother's mirror. When it had broken during the mock fight he and Esmond had, it was completely shattered. Several of the pieces had even fallen from the frame. He had immediately dropped to his knees on the ground, kneeling over the broken mirror, tears welling up in his eyes. He knew his mother would be upset, and he wished more than anything else that the mirror had not been broken. When he had looked at the mirror again as he stood, he realized that it was merely cracked. It was no longer shattered. At first he thought he had been mistaken, that the mirror had not really shattered. A look on the ground told the truth--hundreds of shards of glass lay scattered about from the mirror. Yet it was there in the frame, full, except for the single crack running through it.

His wish had done that. He knew that somehow, his deep feelings of remorse and guilt had something to do with the mirror repairing itself as well as it did. He had tried the same again recently with a small clay pot he bought in the city marketplace. He brought the pot to his room, tossed it on the ground to shatter it, then knelt over it, forcing himself to regret what he had done. The pot had remained in pieces. He had tried this same exercise for a week until he gave up on it. It seemed impossible.

What had he missed? What was he doing wrong? He had copied his actions exactly every time, but it never worked like it had with the mirror. After he gave up on that, he tried lying on his bed and tossing a geln coin up into the air so it would fall back toward him. He would close his eyes and wish it would stop, just like when the sarn had fired upon him, but each time the coin slapped him in the nose. Nothing he did worked. It was starting to frustrate him.

He had come here with the promise of being able to unlock a talent that his superiors here were convinced he had. He had come here to get away from Esmond's new course in life. And now he was holding himself back. His mind did not want to surrender the power to his control, as if it were playing a nasty trick on him.

Lan looked around his room, trying to find something to take his mind off of the frustration that was ever building inside of him. He had counted the embroidered leaves on his blue bed sheets countless times before. Twenty-three exactly. He had stared out of his small, open window at the people below in the street enough to pretty much know several people's daily routines quite

well. He had paced back and forth across his small chamber--four steps length-wise, six steps breadth-wise--until his legs ached. Several times he walked out into the small hallway opposite his door and stared at the torches on the walls until his irritation and anger faded away. He was too upset to do any of those things now. The head mages of the tower were wrong. He had no powers. The mirror and the crossbow bolt had been freak occurrences, no more, no less.

Lan grabbed one of his books in anger, and flung it across the room with a shout of frustration. It slammed into the stone wall and violently exploded into flames, sending a shower of glowing ash across the room. He shielded his eyes with his arm, a sudden fear overcoming him at what had happened. The book lay in smoldering pieces against the wall. Trails of smoke rose from it and were carried out the small window by the afternoon breezes. Someone knocked at his door but he ignored them, staring at the remains of the book.

It was reactionary. He suddenly understood everything. He could not merely sit and try to do things and expect them to happen. They had to come naturally, as if he were reacting to something by instinct. The crossbow bolt had stopped not because he wanted it to, but because his magical reflexes had stopped it. A second knock came at his door, followed by someone shouting his name. He paid it no attention. He was too enthralled with what he had just discovered.

The door flung open and several of his superiors--experienced mages and instructors garbed in robes of deep crimson--rushed in, followed by other students like himself. They all asked if he was all right, but Lan only stood there, staring at the smoldering book, smiling. He could harness the power, and now he knew how.

#

The incident with the book had been reported to the head of the Mages' Guild. Lan had been tested as an intermediate student and passed with little studying. His accelerated learning was noted, and he was apprenticed directly to Keon, the head of the Guild himself.

The old man was extremely intelligent, surpassed by no one Lan had ever met. His knowledge of magic was overwhelming.

Several times Lan had started to ask him if he knew Ria, but could never muster up the words. It made him feel awkward to think about her, and to ask about her might be inappropriate--he was never meant to hear that conversation between his father and the girl.

Keon had been teaching him how to learn to control his ability. Though the human side of magic could only be used in reaction to something, it was possible to train oneself to react to certain circumstances in specific manners. Lan learned that this was vital, as many unfocused wizards could accidentally make their friends explode when they were startled. So far, all he could do to any degree of control was alter the temperature of a small area or light a candle from across the room. Sometimes he could move objects with his mind, but never far and never for long.

Since discovering the Guild's elaborate, well-stocked library, he spent every free moment he had within its walls of high shelves, full of various-sized books containing knowledge on every topic imaginable. He loved reading about magic, philosophy, and even history, but his second love, right under magic, was mathematics.

Lan was sitting in the library one early-spring afternoon reading a book entitled *Teleportation: Myth or Reality?* when a female student approached him.

"Hello, Lan," she said. Lan did not look up, but he knew who she was from her voice--Jariel. She was a rather plain girl with curly brown hair who had kept a constant eye on Lan since his arrival at the Mages' Guild. Sometimes when they would meet in the hallways, she would try to strike up a conversation with him, or wave and smile or wink, but Lan usually brushed her off and went about his way.

"Hi," he said flatly, not looking up from his book. He did not want to be overtly rude, but he did not really want to talk to her either.

"Are you going to the Festival of Dione?" she asked him. He paid her no attention, giving her the response he always gave to anything she had ever asked.

"No," he said, readjusting himself in his chair and turning a page absentmindedly, trying to convince Jariel that he was more interested in this book than he could ever be in her. And still, she persisted.

"Why not?" Jariel asked him, musically. She leaned over with her elbows on the desktop in front of him. He glanced up to see her round face, eyes wide, beaming at him. She had on a deep crimson dress that showed off her features nicely. Lan realized that he was staring down the front of her dress and jerked his attention back to his book as an unnerving warmth washed over his cheeks.

"I'd hate to have to dance alone," she mock-pleaded.

"Please come with me! We'll have a great time, and afterward--"

"No," Lan interrupted. "I don't want to go anywhere right now, Jariel. Would you please leave me alone?"

"Fine," she said, standing up. "But I'll be out there waiting on you if you change your mind!" And with that, she was gone. Lan huffed and went back to reading his book. He had not been reading for more than twenty seconds when he heard someone approaching.

"Jariel--" he started.

"Studying as usual, I see," said Keon, smiling warmly.

"Oh, sorry," Lan said. "I thought you were someone else. Yes, I am." Lan's face grew redder than it had when he had caught himself staring at Jariel's bosom. "I like it here. This place is so full of information. More than I ever thought would be gathered in one place. Even the university didn't have this magnificent of a library!"

"What are you reading about now?" Keon asked in his soft, ever-gentle voice, taking a seat next to Lan at the table.

"Teleportation."

"Ah. Fourth dimensional space, yes?"

"Yes," said Lan, for the first time looking up from his reading. "It seems that the concept behind teleportation isn't as difficult as I first thought."

"To teleport is to gamble with Ohn," said Keon, with a stern look on his face. "The odds are never in your favor when playing against the Creator." *Assuming that Ohn exists*, thought Lan. He had personally never seen the logic in deities. The only surviving deity nowadays was Ohn, the great Creator of all, central to the mesefu religion and now widespread throughout the human peoples. The old human pantheons of gods had died out years ago, but still left their marks on society in the forms of temples and certain figures of speech that grandparents mainly used. "By Rorn's

Hammer and War's Scourge, boy, if you don't get back in this house right this instant . . ." came his grandmother's voice in his head.

Lan was brought back to the moment as Keon continued speaking. "Nobody in their right mind ever attempts teleportation, unless there is a great emergency at hand. Even then, the one who teleports rarely survives. It is a last resort, only to be used when all other routes are impossible." The old man clasped his hands together and placed his elbows on the table. He had a rough-hewn face and heavy eyebrows, which always reminded Lan of a marble bust his father owned which sat upon their mantle back home. It was the bust of a great general who Gerhard had served under in the military. His father claimed the general had saved his life once during a sarn raid. Gerhard had commissioned the bust to be sculpted after inheriting his property and fortune from Lan's grandfather upon his death. Gerhard had wanted a constant reminder of the man who had allowed him to have such a wonderful life.

Keon reminded Lan so much of that bust that it gave him an eerie feeling. From the protruding cheekbones to the stern, confident, grey eyes that, despite their physical appearance, had a certain tenderness beneath them, Keon and the bust were nearly identical. Lan had often wondered if, aside from being related to Ria, Keon had been related to the general his father had served. He had once thought of asking, but was afraid he would look rather silly if he were wrong, so he had kept it to himself.

"See," began Keon, "when one teleports, he is simply opening a pathway in the *in* and *out* directions of the universe. Unfortunately for us three-dimensional beings, we were not designed to naturally move in those directions. To make things worse, we are basically locked in a two-dimensional plane, being the surface of Kalra. It is rather hard to move up and down, though easy to move forward, backward, left, and right.

"If I wanted to travel from here to, let's say, Altkrea, what do you think would be the fastest way there, aside from walking overland?"

Lan thought for a moment before answering, using simple geometry. "Dig a tunnel. The shortest distance between any two points is a straight line, but Kalra is a spherical body. Therefore, by going overland, you travel in a curved line. Were you to construct a

tunnel through the ground itself into the third-dimensional space, however, you could travel along a rather straight line and cut traveling time considerably."

Keon smiled at Lan's response. "Well, then," he said. "Perhaps I needn't explain teleportation to you after all. You could probably explain it to me better than that book does. Care to try?"

He was being asked to explain teleportation, and he had not even finished reading the first half of the book. This was going to be impossible. All he knew so far was that there existed higher dimensions of movement, and each of these was curved into a still higher dimension, resulting in an infinite-dimensional universe. Curved. Everything was curved upon itself. Their seemingly two-dimensional area . . . to move long distances in shorter times, simply cut into the next highest dimension, and . . . and then he understood. He could explain it after all. Clearing his throat and taking a deep breath, Lan set to explaining traveling through extra-dimensional space.

"I have an answer," he spoke, assuredly. "All spaces are curved into a higher dimension. Our two-dimensional surface is in actuality curved into a sphere, our planet. Therefore it follows that our universe is curved in a fourth-dimensional direction creating some sort of interesting hyper-spherical shape. By teleporting, one opens up a passageway through the fourth-dimensional space that has an entrance and an exit, accessible to ourselves, just like when we build the tunnel to make the trip to Altkrea shorter."

"Excellent!" Keon applauded and extended his hand. Lan and the man shook hands vigorously. "So far, you are the only apprentice who has been able to comprehend that topic in a long time. Unfortunately, the mathematics involved in determining the entrance and exit locations of the teleportation tunnels have not been perfected, so there is no telling where one could end up. That is why teleportation is, for the most part, left alone."

Lan closed the book and set it aside on the table, staring at it, deep in thought. It could not be exact? But why not? He had to figure this out somehow. Teleportation seemed too useful for people to not try and master it. He looked up to Keon to find the old man staring at him questioningly.

"What is it, master Keon?" he asked, afraid that he had done something wrong.

The old man rubbed his chin in contemplation, and his eyes locked in on Lan's. "Ever since I first met you, I have thought you looked rather familiar, but I cannot place it. What is your family name?"

Was he hearing this correctly? Keon thought that he looked familiar? Perhaps this *was* the man whom his father once served.

"Well, sir," he began excitedly. "Lan isn't actually my name. Alexander is my name. My family name is Lansing."

Keon's eyes widened and his mouth dropped slightly open. "You are of the Lansings? The Kagon Lansings?"

"The very same," replied Lan.

"Do you know Gerhard Lansing, by chance?" Keon asked, expectantly.

"Of course," said Lan. "He's my father."

Keon sat silently for a moment, studying Lan carefully. "Why yes, you're right. You *do* resemble him quite a bit. That would definitely explain why you look so familiar to my old eyes." The aged man smiled warmly. "Your father was a valiant soldier, always dedicated to his job. I was his commanding officer in the Kagonese military, but I suppose you know all of that already."

"I know a lot . . ." said Lan. "But not all," he added abruptly, hoping to hear more about his father's past as a soldier. Gerhard had never talked openly about his experiences in the military.

"Gerhard Lansing was an exceptional person, Lan, and you should be proud to have him as your father." Keon leaned back in his chair and gazed up at the ceiling, recalling past experiences. "I remember one time, we were patrolling the southern Kagon border. We had a campsite set up on a ridge, and one night, a rogue squadron of sarn raiders attacked us. The sarn despise human and mesefu interference, and they have a tendency to get edgy if there are military patrols nearby.

"When they attacked, I was asleep in my tent. It was your father, Gerhard, who stormed in and woke me up, saving me from certain death at the hands of the sarn. I remember him bursting into my tent yelling 'General Lamac! Wake up, general! We're under attack!' I, having just woken up, had no idea what was going on, and thought he was trying to kill me. He slapped me in the face to get my attention as he dragged me out of the tent. Slapping a

commanding officer in the face is not something the military takes lightly, and, being in the military mindset, I got furious with him.

"I was yelling and shouting at him as he dragged me out of the tent, the entire time oblivious to the sarn raid going on. He spied a sarn crossbow firing at me and dove between the bolt and myself. He took the shot in his shoulder. It would have hit me in the chest if he hadn't moved to protect me. Even though I was furious at him, he still kept his sense of duty and put his life on the line to save me. He lay there, silent, bleeding on the grassy ground as the raiders kept firing." Keon's face started to sink, and a look of depression overcame him.

"He saved my life, that day. I have never been able to thank him enough." The old man smiled warmly. Lan now felt a deeper sense of respect for his father. He had never known any of this.

"I never saw Gerhard after that. He was temporarily dismissed to heal, and by the time he came back into the military, I was out of it."

"He still holds a deep respect for you," Lan said. "He had a bust made of your face from an old sketch he had of you. It's been on our mantle since I can remember. Though, as I recall, he claimed *you* saved *his* life."

"Really?" asked Keon rhetorically. "Amazing." He sat there silent for a while, scratching his chin and looking up at the dark stone ceiling. Lan, thinking back to Ria mentioning an uncle named Keon, started to ask the old man if he knew her. Before he could open his mouth, Keon spoke. "Put aside your books for now. I would like to take you up to the top of the tower and show you something I received recently."

"Well," started Lan, reluctant to leave the library and end their conversation, "I was going to do some reading on pyrotechnics, and--"

"Never mind that. You can learn how to blow things up later, perhaps if there is ever another war."

Lan gave in. He reluctantly dropped the teleportation book and retrieved his robe from the back of his chair.

The trip up the winding stairs seemed to go on forever. It was very hot near the top of the tower, as there were no windows for ventilation. Lan began sweating profusely and pulled on the collar of his tunic to get some air to his skin. When they reached

the top of the stairs, on what would have been the tenth or eleventh floor by Lan's count, Keon unlocked a heavy iron door and led the young apprentice into the room beyond, which was just as basked in sweltering heat as the stairwell.

"This," Keon paused, waving his arms about to blow off the heat, "is the storage room."

The attic room of the tower was filled with strange artifacts and devices, all of obvious magical design. There were shelves lining every wall, each packed full of mystical trinkets. There must have been thousands of them, ranging from the beautiful and exquisite, to the plain and dull.

"It's amazing," Lan said. He picked up one of the artifacts on a shelf to his left, a small pendant shaped like a golden dragon looped in a bow, biting its own tail. The detail was remarkable. Each and every scale looked to be hand-carved from the metal with extreme care and dedication. The eyes were two finely cut rubies, polished to a gleam. He noticed that the room suddenly seemed amazingly comfortable.

"Ah yes," said Keon. "A dragon emblem. A simple device, as are most of the ones here. It allows the wearer to be comfortable in any condition of temperature, be it heat or cold. It won't protect you from injury, mind you, only keep you from feeling the temperature. Were you to wear it and leap into a fire, you would still burn. You would just be able to smile and sing and feel perfectly happy while doing so."

"I guess that could be useful at times," said Lan. "I mainly picked it up because of the craftsmanship, though."

"Feel free to take it." Keon gestured toward the shelf Lan had pulled it from. "Anything over there you may have."

"Are some of these things dangerous? Is that why they're locked up in here?" Lan asked, fastening the pendant to his cloak.

"No," the old man replied, sifting through the contents of a shelf. "None of them are dangerous. Many people here study how to enchant normal items with magic, to produce various effects. The ones they do not want to keep we store here in case we might need them one day for something. It also allows us to show beginners the type of work they will be able to do one day." Keon gestured toward the far end of the room. Several shelves there were

filled up with boxes of parchments. "Those are old documents pertinent to the running of the Guild," explained Keon.

Keon began walking around, scanning various shelves of things. "There's nothing very interesting in here at all, just hundreds of these little things. I brought you up here to show you something else, none of this. It's been around my neck since I received it. I had to bring you up here to show you. No one else can know I have it. No one."

The old man reached under his robe and pulled out something attached to a leather strap around his neck. He lifted it off of his head and held it out for Lan to see. It was breathtaking. It was made of some strange near-transparent green material that Lan had never seen before. It almost looked like *renol*, but the edges were too rough. It was shaped much like the Ceren--a lopped-off pyramid--only it was much flatter. There was writing on it in symbols of no language known to him. It looked as if it was not of this world.

"What is it?" asked Lan, staring at it curiously.

"Something very old, my boy. Very old indeed." Keon stepped toward a window, placing it in the dusty light. "This is what the mesefu call *sukrea*, or 'lesser being'. It is an ancient artifact from the time of Gienev Harishmon. You know your history, correct?"

"Yes, sir," began Lan, recalling the mesefu named Gienev. "Gienev Harishmon was the mesefu ruler who slew Ethrakus, the daemon from long ago. He was the one who wielded the Darksearer blade, designed by Belzor, I think. But I never heard anything about a *sukrea*. What is it?"

Keon turned from the window, stepping out of the beams of the late-afternoon sun.

"The *sukrea* artifact is one part of an even larger artifact. There are two other parts hidden somewhere on Kalra. They were given to the mesefu by the dragons long ago. Over the years, they have exchanged hands many times, and now--"

"Dragons?" interjected Lan. "There were really dragons?" He was beyond excited now. Dragons--creatures he had always been taught were mythical, this man was saying were real. If the words had come from anyone's mouth other than Keon's, Lan would have dismissed it as the ramblings of a fanatic.

"Yes, there were dragons, at least during Gienev's time. An old friend of mine, Felm Askar, has been researching that time period for many years, and he made several remarkable discoveries. He wrote all of these discoveries into a book that he published last month called *Ancient Histories*. Among his discoveries about the world of a thousand years ago, he found that dragons actually fought alongside the mesefu. They left the world after the slaying of Ethrakus, and nobody has seen them since. I am digressing, however. I came to tell you about this, not to tell you stories you can read for yourself in the library." He held the *sukrea* out to Lan, who slowly reached out and touched it. It was biting cold, forcing him to jerk his hand back.

"Yes, not even the dragon emblem can protect you from it's chill. The *sukrea* and its two companion pieces were to be separated at all costs, according to the dragons, for together, they could unlock a sacred weapon of immeasurable power. A weapon powerful enough to destroy all of Kalra, and those of us it is passed on to strive to prevent that from happening. We were given these three 'keys' to protect them from falling into the hands of the power-hungry.

"When the mesefu initially received them, they were distributed throughout the land, secretly given to trustworthy acquaintances of Gienev. Throughout the years, they have been passed down from person to person, each possessor giving it to someone equally as trustworthy as themselves, and for nearly one thousand years, that has worked."

"Does anyone know where the other pieces are?" asked Lan.

"Only a very few people know where either the *altkrea* or the *krea* is. There are not many on Kalra who even know that the three *krea* exist. I could likely count them using only my fingers."

"Is the mesefu capital city of Altkrea named after the artifact of the same name?" asked Lan.

"No," began the old wizard. "*Altkrea* simply means 'greater being', and was what the mesefu called their leader for many years. However, long before Ethrakus came, it slowly became simply the name of the mesefu capital. Its original name eludes me at the moment. Perhaps you should look it up for yourself, if it so interests you, in Askar's book.

"When the keys were given to Gienev, he needed to call them something, as the sounds of the dragons' tongue are not reproducible by any man. He called the largest piece 'the great being', the next smallest 'the being', and the smallest 'the lesser being'--*y altkrea, y krea, and y sukrea.*"

"Oh, I see."

"I trust you, Lan. Know that." Keon stared deep into Lan's eyes, a serious look washing over his aged features. "There is a reason I am showing you this. If anything should happen to me, I want you to carry it. All I ask of you is that you keep it only to yourself and pass it on when you feel the time comes, to one you deem trustworthy. Would you accept the offer?" Keon looked at him expectantly.

An ancient artifact, part of a key to an ultimate power. This would be a tremendous responsibility. What if he gave it to the wrong person? What if he never found the right person? Did any of that truly matter now, however? He was being offered the highest honor that could likely be offered to anyone, if Keon's story was true. He would not turn it down.

"I accept." He spoke the two words flatly, still wondering if he should do it. His mouth had made the decision before his mind--a habit he needed to learn to break.

"I knew you would, Lan. For some reason--" Keon paused, looking back over his shoulder at Lan as he turned away. "-I knew that you would. The son of Gerhard Lansing . . . just like his father."

Keon smiled. He placed the artifact around his neck and hid it under his robes. "Come. We have much training to do if you ever expect to become a true wizard."

"Yes, Master Keon, I know."

Lan followed the old man, but his thoughts were not on magic. Nor were they on the *sukrea* or Ria, either. He was beginning to wonder, as he often did since his arrival here, about Esmond. *He'd love hearing about all of this. Dragons, secret keys to a powerful weapon. Even the story about my father saving Keon. Maybe I should find a copy of this Askar guy's book and take it to Esmond. I wonder how he is doing . . .*

#

It was amazing. Branson, a new recruit, had just used magic. The feeling Esmond got from seeing such a thing was like none he had ever felt before. Magic had always been something of fantasy tales to him--he had never seen any first hand before now. Branson had turned a rock into a pool of watery mud. It was not very impressive as far as concepts went, but to Esmond, the power involved was breathtaking.

"Where'd you learn something like that?" asked Esmond.

"I learned it from my uncle, Alric Wayreth. He was a genius with magic. I lived with him after my parents died, and after his mysterious disappearance, I came here." Branson had an odd accent, perhaps an Aulander. Esmond could not be sure--he had never met anyone from the forested nation.

"Why'd you come *here*, though? The Mages' Guild would've surely taken you with that talent."

"They would not like the type of magic I study. My uncle was a master of it. Necromancy, he called it. Raising the dead. He was teaching me the basics shortly before he vanished."

Esmond was astonished. "Raising the dead? Impossible. That's a load of fish and I don't believe any of it. It's just some spooky tale, used to scare kiddies. Undead and devinants and such. Hah!" But a part of Esmond deep down believed the words Branson spoke. And that part did not know whether to be frightened at such an amazing power or yearn for it.

"Oh," spoke Branson, in an uneasily calm tone. "Then how do you explain the fact that he brought Rudo, my dog, back to life after he had been dead for years?"

"You expect me to believe any word that comes out of your mouth?" Esmond laughed nervously. "You could just as easily have told me that there were really such things as dragons on Kalra."

"There *were* dragons, and I'm telling the truth about necromancy. I swear it!"

"Uh-huh. Sure. You're as addled as they come. I think that magic foolishness is melting your brain. You should stop the sorcery 'til you grow a decent thinker on that neck of yours." He tapped a finger against his left temple then stood up to leave.

"I can prove it. Just you wait and see! My uncle taught me how to raise small animals, but you can go now if you think you'll be too scared!"

"'Raise them' as in breed them, perhaps," Esmond said sarcastically.

"Mock me all you like. I'll prove it to you. Just let me find a dead rat somewhere and--"

"Go ahead. Find yourself a dead rat. Play with it and even eat it if it pleases you. There are only so many things magic can do, and bringing back the dead isn't one of them. Once something is dead, it's gone. You can't give life back to anything."

"I am supposed to listen to a loudmouthed farm boy braggart who has never seen magic before in his entire sheltered country life until this very minute? I think not."

"You're really serious about this, aren't you?" Esmond asked as his facade of disbelief vanished.

"Esmond, where *are* you?" A voice came drifting in from the hallway. He turned to the door to see Gaelyn's head appear. She looked stunning in her long, tight, dark green velvet dress, her hair done up in a bun on the back of her head. It was almost enough to take his mind off of magic and necromancy. He had promised to accompany her to the Festival of Dione. He stared at her as she stood in the doorway.

"You are taking me in *that?*" He looked down at his untucked, disheveled shirt and stained vest and suddenly found himself embarrassed. He moved his arm to cover up one of the more prominent stains. They had come from a bucket of dirty water that he had spilled on himself while in one of his mischievous acts he did not care to recall. She stared back at him and crossed her arms over her chest.

"If you can just be patient enough to wait 'til I'm finished talking with Branson, I'll be fixed up and ready to go before you know it." The words came out with a forced smile. The festival was the farthest thing from his thoughts.

Her lips tightened and she looked as if she were going to say something particularly nasty. "I'll be waiting in my room," was all she said, however, and she then turned on her heels, marching from the room abruptly. Esmond watched as Branson's eyes followed

her out of the room. He gave Esmond a look of approval as she vanished down the hallway.

"Quite a catch," he said. "Ever think of sharing?"

Esmond disregarded the statement. "You really can do it?" he asked, more to himself than to Branson.

"Yes, it can be done." Branson stood up and walked toward the door. "Soon, you'll see," were his last words to Esmond as he exited the room.

Esmond stood there in thought for a few minutes, and a great realization came over him. If one could raise dead, one could never be defeated in battle. It was a simple matter of raising those who died, both his own men and the enemy's. He definitely needed to think more about this subject. After the festival, of course.

He wondered if Lan would be there. The Festival of Dione in Porthos was supposedly a pretty big affair. He had heard that nearly every young person in Porthos showed up. Perhaps he would run into his friend there--they could catch up on the past month. *I hope he's doing well*, thought Esmond as he tucked in his shirt and headed off to his room to find a cleaner vest.

#

"*Alli, menneren Alexander Lansing wes.*" The mesefu words did not come easily to his tongue. Learning to master the magic arts was one thing, but a foreign language was something altogether different. Even though many things in the world went by mesefu names, Lan knew very little of the language. He had always lived on a farm, mainly isolated from civilization. The most contact he had ever had with another tongue was foreign merchants with their strange dialects, but at least they still spoke the same language as he did, even if some of their words were a bit tricky to understand.

He stood up from the desk in the library and stretched his arms and legs, trying to work out all of the sores he had from being seated for such a long period of time. From the window, he saw the pale moon Nalari, near full, and a few stars through gaps in the clouds. A warm early-summer breeze blew in on him as he looked outside into the sky.

Lan had been here all afternoon, studying the language of the mesefu, and all he could say with any confidence was "Hello, my name is Lan" and "I am sorry". He felt that his time had been wasted. He could have better spent that time studying magic, but

Keon had suggested that he learn some of the mesefu language. Besides, if he ever ran into Lisen or any other mesefu, it would be fun to try impressing them with his command of their tongue--something most humans never achieved.

An excited noise was coming from the streets below. Lan looked down from his third-story perch to see lots of smiling and laughing people flocking toward the city center. He could not make out many words from the incomprehensible tangle of shouts and revelry.

"Taking a break, I see." Keon had slipped in on him unnoticed.

"Oh!" Lan, startled, turned around. "Yes, Master Keon. I have been reading over the mesefu language books for many hours now, and felt I needed a rest. It is past study time anyway, and I was thinking of retiring early tonight."

"Really? On the night of the Festival of Dione? I assumed you would have taken one of the apprentice girls to the dance."

"The Festival of Dione? What's that?" Lan vaguely remembered Esmond saying something about a festival once upon a time. Jariel had also mentioned something about it, but he had been too busy trying to ignore her to pay any attention.

Keon seated himself at a desk in the library. It was dark in here, Lan's candle being the only light source.

"The festival is a grand social gathering of the young people of Porthos to welcome the summer. It is always held in the month of Galnos, on the eighteenth day. Just about every young man and woman goes. They all sing and dance the night away, and most businesses are closed the following day to allow everyone to have the whole night to themselves without worry."

"But this is only the fifth month of the year, and summer doesn't start until the sixth. I know! I was raised on a farm--"

"A farm in Kagon, my boy, not in Pyran, and most definitely not in Porthos. We have lots of celebrations around these parts. While you're on the farm, you're working outside with your hands--not shut in some building in the confines of a city. They're very different kinds of work. Cities are far busier, so while the work may not be as strenuous as on a farm, it's far more stressful. City people need more morale boosters like festivals and the like to keep them going."

Lan turned back toward the window. The throngs of people were still streaming through the streets. He did not know anybody in this city other than a handful of people he had spoken with in the tower, a couple of people from the 'Thieves' Guild, and the mesefu woman Lisen. Perhaps it was time to change all of that.

"Well, will you be going?" the old man asked, a smile on his face.

"Yes, I think I will. It's about time I started trying to meet people. But who will I go with? The only person I know here well enough to ask would be Jariel, but she's already gone."

"Don't worry, my boy. Just go and have a good time. Perhaps you will meet someone there. There are a lot of lonely girls out there who would love to have an intelligent young man like you around. Perhaps you will find one tonight. Everyone needs a break from studies, especially one as studious as you. Go on, and have a good time." Keon sat back in a chair and yawned. "Maybe it is I who should turn in early."

Lan was already out the door, however, before Keon uttered those final words, and Keon was asleep before Lan hit the stairs to take him down the tower and out into the city.

Chapter Eleven

The city center was alive with beautiful sounds, brilliant colors, and the smell of fresh pastries. All along the large stage on the north end were baskets of blue flowers, the color often associated with Dione. Young couples in the best of dress whirled about in the dance area to the *Lay of Merbos*. A tall, thin gentleman was singing the song on the stage, accompanied by a string quartet. He looked like the storytellers who often frequented inns and taverns. His clothes were a mix of vibrant reds, greens, and yellows, with puffy sleeves and a large puffy hat upon his head. A long yellow feather stuck out of the hat, lying lazily over on its side.

Various booths were set up all around the outskirts of the city center. Some of them contained artists who offered to paint portraits of the couples for a meager fee. Others sold various goods and trinkets, including everything from necklaces and bracelets to finely woven rugs. A few of the booths were giving out free food and drink, and it was at one of these booths that Esmond sat.

The lady behind the counter of the booth was handing out free sweet rolls and cider, and Esmond was gladly taking his share. He and Gaelyn had only been at the festival for about an hour, and there were still droves of people coming into the city center. Gaelyn was listening intently to the song about the legendary sailor Merhos who conquered a land full of giants, while Esmond shoveled down food.

"And mighty Merbos did cleave into the eye

*of the giant and tore it asunder.
The giant roared, flailed and fell,
with a mighty loud crashing of thunder.*

*The force of the fall sent Merbos tumbling
as the last of the giants went down.
The land shuddered and sank beneath the cold ocean,
and in the flood of incoming water Merbos did drown.*

In the flood that ensued mighty Merbos did drown.

It was an interesting myth put to song, Esmond thought, but it seemed strange to see people dancing to it. He was thankful that Gaelyn had wanted to sit this dance out--Esmond had never danced before in his life. He turned out to be quite good, however. He had only trampled Gaelyn's feet twice. Each time, she had teased him by threatening to leave him and find a more skilled partner.

Esmond hoped to see Lan here, but had found no trace of him yet. With all of these people swarming around, he could be anywhere. He looked for him everywhere he went, paying special attention to the people sitting down on the side of the dancing area. Esmond did not expect to see Lan dancing around with any girls--Lan had never been the type. *Then again, neither have I, until tonight.* Esmond smiled.

Gaelyn turned to him once the storyteller had finished and gotten his well-deserved applause. "Can we stay the whole night, Esmond?"

"Sure, I guess so," came his muffled reply through the muffin in his mouth.

Gaelyn gave him a scolding look. "Don't talk with a mouth full of food. It's disgusting!"

Esmond felt his cheeks flush in embarrassment. He swallowed his food then took a drink of his cider.

"So tell me," Gaelyn said, staring at the enormous plate of food Esmond had before him. "Are you going to keep eating all night long? I'm only asking because if that's your plan, I'll just have to find myself another partner for the next dance. And if he's really good, I just might stay with him for the dance after that." When

she finished, she gave him an arched sideways glance. Esmond looked up at her with a piece of the sweet, gooey roll headed for his mouth. He dropped it as soon as his eyes met hers. A smile started to form on her lips.

"Actually, I had just finished." He pushed the plate away, shaking his head. "I couldn't eat another bite." He got up and extended his hand to Gaelyn. She looked at it in disgust. He looked down and saw that his hands were covered in the sticky frosting from the rolls. "I'll be right back," he laughed, timidly. He turned and ran off in search of a fountain to cleanse his hands in.

He heard music starting up from behind him. "She'd never leave me for a better dancing partner, would she?" he asked himself, kicking a piece of fruit that had been smashed on the ground by many trampling feet. The thought of her possibly dancing with someone else made him a bit uneasy.

When he finally found a fountain after scurrying through all the people, he rinsed his hands off, then sat down on its rim. Why should he be uneasy? He almost felt jealous, and yet he had only known her for a little over a month. Sure, they did a lot together, but they were just friends. "Just friends," he said to the shadows.

His mind started replaying the things they had done in the past month. He thought back to the day after Lan left and how depressed and down he was, and how she tried to cheer him up and comfort him. She had tried singing some horrible song about a talking dog in a terrible Merhosian accent in the common room of the guild, making a fool out of herself just to get him to laugh. He smiled silently now, looking back on it. He remembered the first night they had gone for a long walk through the city streets, the soft pale moonlight illuminating their stroll through the alleys of Porthos. He remembered the way she looked at him at the end of that night, and how they had hugged tightly in the cool air. And he especially remembered the moment their lips had almost touched while sitting in his room one night, talking about their past romantic experiences. So much had happened to him in the last month, it seemed almost as if years had passed.

He slowly stood up and shambled back to the action, his hands shoved deeply into his pockets and his mind lost in thought. When he reached the dancing circle, he looked for Gaelyn among the couples. There were so many people out there, the bright,

dizzying colors of the ladies' dresses whirling at every turn. He looked for the deep green of Gaelyn's in the swirl of colors before him. He stopped in his tracks when he saw her. She was seated by herself at one of the tables, her head bent toward her lap. A few strands of her hair had come loose and were glowing in the light of the torch-poles. *You're so beautiful*, he thought. "I love you." The words came out silently from his mouth.

His heart stopped for a second. He spun around abruptly so she would not see him. *I just said 'I love you'. When did that happen? We're just friends! You can love your friends, though, can't you?* He was trying to reassure himself, and failing miserably. *I love Lan, don't I? Granted, I never said it out loud or ever would, but . . .* He slapped himself across the cheek. *Stop being foolish. You know it's not the same with Lan. You truly love Gaelyn, not like just any friend, and now you should go over there and tell her so.*

But what if she did not feel the same? He did not want anything to damage their friendship. Esmond jerked as he felt someone's hand on his shoulder. He turned to see Gaelyn standing there with her other hand on her slender hip. She was frowning.

"Where have you been? For all the time I've been waiting, I thought that surely you must have fallen into a puddle somewhere and drowned. But no!" She smiled at him, though her voice grew louder. "You've been standing here for at least five minutes. I've been watching you." Had it really been that long? "What took you so long--"

"I love you," Esmond interrupted her softly. Gaelyn's eyes widened and her mouth froze in surprise. Her face showed a strange mixture of emotions all at once. Her eyes looked teary one instant and angry the next. She jerked around so he could not see her face.

"No!" she shouted, not looking back. "This isn't fair! This can't happen!" Her voice became choked with tears. "Why does this have to happen now?" She was holding her fists in two tight balls. She stamped the ground with her foot. Esmond reached out and put his hand on her shoulder, but she shrugged it off and hurried away from him. He left his hand suspended in the air for a moment, then let it sink to his side.

"I--I'm sorry." he said quietly, watching her push through the crowd. *What are you doing?* he asked himself. *Are you just going to*

stand here and let her walk away from you like that? At least go to her and apologize. Tell her that you wish you'd never said it. Esmond's thoughts brought him from his stupor. He caught a glimpse of her dress as she rounded a corner and he set out after her.

When he reached the area he had seen her turn, he looked for her again. She was nowhere to be seen. He kicked the ground with his boot, sending a small cloud of dirt into the air. There were not many people around him now, as most everyone was away dancing. He sat down on an empty crate on the ground and ran his hands through his hair. He blinked away the tears that were forming in his eyes. He pushed his boot through the dirt in front of him, making a little heart. When he realized what he had done, he immediately brushed it away. A shadow approached him, but he did not look up. A little green shoe entered his field of vision. Esmond shut his eyes, not wanting to look up, knowing who was there. Then he felt someone's lips graze his own, and his eyes snapped open. He saw Gaelyn sitting in front of him on the ground, her hand moving to the side of his face. He reached up and pulled it to him.

"I'm sorry," they both said at the same time. Esmond took her by the waist and pulled her onto his lap. She was so light that he could barely feel her there. Her face was dusty and he could see small tracks forming as tears rolled down them. His eyes began welling up with tears as he pulled her close to him.

"I'm so sorry," he said. She shook her head and started to speak, but nothing came out through her sobs. He took her face in his hands and kissed her again. She kissed him back and placed her arms around his neck. He buried his face in her hair and they embraced for several moments in silence. At last, she pulled back and wiped her tears with her sleeve.

"I'm sorry I acted like this," she said. "I don't usually . . ." Esmond put his finger to his lips. She stood up and let go of him. He rose from the crate and took her hand.

"You may have walked away once--" he paused, strengthening his voice "--but I never intend to let it happen again."

"Esmond," she began softly. "I . . . I love you . . ." He pulled her to him once again, as tightly as he could. "How about one more dance?" she asked him, smiling. A happiness was in that smile that made it more radiant than any he had ever seen before.

One final tear made its way down her cheek. He brushed it away and returned the smile.

"I would do anything if I thought it would make you smile like that again." They walked toward the dancing area, arm in arm, oblivious to everyone around them but each other.

#

"Stay away! Heathens, listen to the words of Righteousness! Avoid these barbaric, sinful ways!" Lan stared at the wild man with amusement. Just outside of the city center, this crazed, purple-robed man was pacing back and forth, yelling and shouting about how sinful dances and merrymaking was, and how Ohn would condemn them all to the blackest pits of hell for their revelry. *This fool must be one of those infernal Zarrons.*

The man looked to be rather young, likely not much older than his twenty-seventh year. He had short red hair and dark brown eyes. As he shouted and whirled, his robe swishing around his energetic body, a vein throbbed over his right temple. A young couple passed him, arm in arm, and he began shouting at them as he pointed.

"Ohn will pick you up and gleefully skip your pathetic soul across the great Lake of Fire! Repent now! Repent!" His voice was hysterical. The couple just shook their heads and walked on. "Let go of your lustful feelings! Do not let the Master of the Lake tempt you! Repent!" Lan could not help but laugh at the mention of the Master of the Lake. So few people gave any credit to those old tales that it was a virtually unheard name.

"You laugh at me, boy? You laugh at a follower of Ohn?" The madman was pointing at Lan, the vein on his forehead throbbing more and more violently by the second. Lan decided that walking away would be the best thing to do, and so he did.

He did not walk far, before the man began taunting him. "Cannot face up to a true Righteous man, eh? The little boy feels guilty for his sins and cannot face the Light of Judgement! Ignorant blasphemer!" Lan whipped around to face the crazed man.

"What is your problem with me?" he asked, furrowing his brow.

"You are living in sin!" the Zarron shouted. "You take part in sinful activities!"

"Sinful activities?" Lan asked. "What on Kalra have I done except walk by?"

"You are going to the Festival of Dione! A horrible creation based on the old pagan gods! A vile excuse for revelry and merrymaking that can only lead to lust!"

"Lust? No, I was just going to go see if maybe a friend of mine was there. I'm not much of a danc--"

"A friend!" the Zarron interrupted. "A friend for you to lie with after the dancing and cajoling is through, no doubt! REPENT!" The Zarron's face was twisted grotesquely. He marched toward Lan, finger outstretched. Lan felt his stomach beginning to churn and his knees growing weak, but he was not about to back down to this lunatic.

"I was not about to 'lie' with anyone," he said, his voice faltering. "I never even said if my friend was male or female. By what right do you have to make such ludicrous judgement?" Lan's confidence was building as he spoke. He began to feel a warm rush of energy flow through his body.

"By the Book of Ohn!" the Zarron said, whipping a leather-bound book from within his robe. The Book of Ohn was merely a translation of the original mesefu holy tome, the *Gilanthril*. The Zarrons despised the mesefu and had adopted a new name for their holy book. A copy of the *Gilanthril*, in its original, cryptic mesefu writing footnoted with common human text was one of the only possessions Lan still had from his home. It had been one of the books in his bag the night he had been forced to flee the university.

The memory of that night sent a fire through Lan's veins and he suddenly felt like antagonizing the crazy fool. He felt he deserved it.

"Don't you mean, the *Gilanthril*?" he asked, bracing himself for the firestorm of verbiage he knew was to follow.

"Blasphemy!" shouted the Zarron, flailing his arms about as he looked skyward. "Blasphemy in the highest! Eternal damnation awaits those who would consort with the evil mesefu!"

"There is nothing wrong with the mesefu," Lan huffed. "The problem lies with you and your deranged religion. The mesefu had it first. You just took it upon yourselves to bastardize it and claim it as your own."

"Heresy! You unrighteous fool! The wrath of Ohn Almighty shall destroy you where you stand one day." He got right up in Lan's face and growled, "I bet you would even lie with one of the foul mesefu." He backed away and resumed shouting. "I bet you would lie even with the foulest of the foul--a half-mesefu!"

Lan's fury exploded. He saw red. Every part of his body was on fire with anger. He balled his hands into fists, his arms shaking from the pressure of his fingers crushing themselves into his palms. He held his breath--ignoring this fool was the best way to handle things--and turned away. The man kept taunting and jeering him, but Lan could not discern any of his words through the rush of blood in his ears.

And then there was a release.

Suddenly he was calm, at peace, as if the encounter with the Zarron had never happened. It felt similar to the release that came after using magic--the release that nobody had believed he felt--but nothing had appeared to happen. Emotion-based human magic was supposed to enhance whatever emotion set off the magical effect. For Lan, however he felt an emotional release and was filled with peacefulness after successfully casting spells. People had claimed he was lying to them when he told them what he felt--nobody believed him. He had even told one of the instructors, before being apprenticed to Keon, and the instructor had merely laughed. Since that day, he had told nobody else of this strange phenomenon. Perhaps he should ask Keon about it sometime. If anyone were to know what it could be, he would. For the time being, he supposed it was best to push the entire incident--the strange, peaceful release and his encounter with the Zarron--out of his mind. He was looking for someone. As he wandered toward the city center, he heard the deranged man behind him shouting more wild statements and making more insane accusations. Lan walked headstrong away from him. There were more important matters to attend to.

Lan thought there had been a lot of people at the procession, but there were easily ten times that here tonight in the city center. There were so many people on this road leading into the city center that he was getting shoved and jostled every which way he turned. He spied a crate on the ground a ways off, and decided to maneuver himself over to it and sit down.

There was a minstrel on stage, finishing up a slow love song. The bittersweet melody reminded him of Ria. He grasped the dagger under his shirt, futilely hoping that he might see her here. Nobody he saw even vaguely reminded him of her. *Lie with a half-mesefu indeed*, he jested to the Zarron in his mind. *Where did he come up with such a thing?*

Everyone he could see was dancing with someone else--nothing but couples graced the dance area. He did not see any other single men or women. This was lunacy. He did not need to be here. He should have stayed in the tower and gone to sleep. He even would have avoided that horrible confrontation with the Zarron. There was nothing for him here. He stood up in disappointment and began to walk away.

The minstrel stepped off the stage and was replaced by a string quartet. They began playing a rather fast, catchy gig. All around him couples started whirling about, stamping their feet in time. He thought he caught a glimpse of Jariel's crimson dress flash by, but he could not be sure.

Lan stopped and stood in place. For an instant he thought about throwing all inhibitions away and dancing by himself. His feet had always been leaden slabs, though. He decided against embarrassing himself. He would go back to the tower, go to bed, and get an early start on work in the morning. Perhaps he could make up the time he had already lost by coming out here this night.

What was he doing out here anyway? Did he honestly think that Ria would be out here with all these people? She was a half-mesefu and would not be accepted easily at this festival--would she? Perhaps city people were more tolerant than country people . . .

Lan stood up and began shoving his way through the crowd, trying to make a pathway through all the hot, dancing bodies. As he was nearing the edge of the city center, a voice came to him from the shadows of the street before him. "Leaving so soon?"

The feminine voice sounded familiar. He almost swore it sounded like . . .

"I was hoping to at least have one dance before you left." Lan's mouth dropped as he placed the voice and the figure stepped out of the darkness. It was Ria.

Lan's eyes widened. He had never before seen anyone look so beautiful. She wore a deep crimson dress much like that of Jariel's, with a low cut front ringed with golden embroidery, and a split up the left leg that did not leave much to the imagination. Glittering red slippers adorned her feet, and her dark hair was pulled back behind her head and secured with a red ribbon with gold trim. Her eyes were light blue, offset nicely by the red of her clothing. They sparkled at him as she smiled warmly. Lan recalled what the Zarron had said about lust. *Maybe he was right*, he thought, returning the smile and remembering his reams. *I think she could even drive him to lust!*

"I thought you were dead or didn't want to see me again!" he blurted out. "What happened that night? Where did you go? Why--"

Ria placed a silencing hand on his lips. The feel of her touch almost drove him wild. "I'll tell you later. For this one night, let's just be with each other. Let's forget everything tonight. I'll just be a girl and you'll just be a guy and we'll dance happily with each other until we can't dance anymore." The quartet began a new song, a waltz. Lan had never been touched emotionally by a piece of music before, but in the state he was in, the sound of the beautiful music gave him chills.

"This is so strange," he said. "I was hoping I'd see you tonight. I never thought you'd actually be here, though."

"But I am," she said, smiling. She took his hands in hers. "Come on, let's dance. Don't worry about anything tonight."

"I've never danced *alone* in my whole life, much less with someone else. I'd probably trip all over you and make a complete fool of myself." Lan was shaking. He was excited and nervous at the same time. He was afraid his leaden slabs would ruin everything.

"Don't worry, it's easy. Just follow me, and even if you do make a mistake, I promise not to tell anyone." Ria winked at him as she led him to the dancing area.

The two stepped out into the crowd of dancers. Lan looked directly into Ria's deep eyes, nervous, and they began. It was like magic--his feet knew exactly where to be and he made no mistakes. They whirled around the floor in time to the music, Ria's dress

billowing around her. He lost track of time as they danced. He concentrated only on Ria's beautiful, glowing face the entire time.

When the music ended, he bowed. He was not sure why--it just felt right. Ria blushed. She smiled and led him to a booth that was giving out free cider. She took a cup and handed it to Lan, and then picked up another for herself. Lan took a sip--it was sweet, and very hot. It tasted like the cider his mother made at Moren's Time to keep the chill out. It was delicious.

"So," Ria began. "What do you do now that you have . . . left the university?"

Lan was stunned. "How did you hear about that?"

"Headmaster Whitlow told me. I've been looking for you for several weeks. He told me everything that happened." She put her hand on his shoulder. "I'm very sorry," she said. "He's trying to get something done about it."

"I see," Lan said, relieved that the headmaster was on his side.

"What have you been doing since then, though?" she asked. "I couldn't find any trace of you."

"I'm an apprentice in the Mages' Guild now."

Her eyes got wide. "The Mages' Guild?" She suddenly looked thoughtful. "Oh," she uttered. After a short pause, she spoke again. "Do you know my uncle, Master Keon very well?"

That settled it. The Keon she had spoken of last fall and the Keon to whom Lan was apprenticed were one and the same. All this time he had been so reluctant to bring it up, and she just blurted out the answer he'd been searching for. That also meant that her uncle was once his father's--

"Lan?" she questioned, shaking him from his thoughts.

"Oh--uh, yeah. He's the man I am apprenticed to."

"You must be a pretty fast learner to be apprenticed to Keon so quickly. It's great that you can use magic, though," she said. "Few of your kind can. Just make sure to always do the right thing with it. I know you will."

"Thanks," he smiled. "What about you? What brings you around here? Oh, wait," he said before she could answer. "I forgot that you're 'just a girl' tonight."

Ria finished off her cider and squeezed his arm. "It's okay," she said. "You're just a guy, so it's nothing to concern yourself

with," she smiled. "I'd hate to drag some guy I just met at the Festival of Dione into trouble."

For the first time ever, Lan *wanted* to be dragged into trouble, especially if it meant he could be with her. Though she was smiling and seemingly having a good time, Lan could tell that something was not right. Several facial gestures gave hints at an underlying agitation. She put her hand up to her brow and wiped away a thin sheen of sweat that had accumulated there. He noticed her hand was shaking slightly. Was she scared?

"Is it the sarn again?" He could not help but ask. The thought of her being in trouble provoked him.

"Well, in a way." He could tell that she was reluctant to talk about it. "They still want something from me. More than information this time, I'm afraid. I passed it on to someone else, but I can't let Ga'ruk know that. He must be kept from it at all costs."

"What could the sarn possibly want from you? Did you steal something from them?"

"No, nothing like that. It all goes back to what I told you that night in your room, but we can't discuss such things here. The wrong people might overhear." She glanced over her shoulder. Lan followed her gaze, but did not see anything striking--just more people dancing and milling about.

"Then why'd you come here to this dance? Everyone's here. If you're hiding from someone, this seems like a bad way to go about it."

"Well, this is the best place to hide for now, because there are so many people here it is easy for me to just fade into the crowd. They're looking for a scruffy girl in pants and a vest with unkempt hair, not a clean dancing girl. They'd never expect me to be here.

"I would have stayed at the Mages' Guild," she continued. "My uncle wanted me to--he's always been so over-protective--but it would be too risky if the sarn found me there."

"Wait," he said, amazed. "We were in the same building and never even knew it? Incredible!"

"I didn't have any idea where you went." She gestured at the bandage threaded between his middle finger and thumb on his right hand. The physician at the Mages' Guild had been treating the

wound for him since his arrival there. This was supposedly the last bandage he would ever have to wear over the wound.

"What happened to your hand?" she asked. "You've-- you've lost a finger? I would have asked earlier, but I was--"

"Oh, that," he muttered, kicking the ground. "Yes. I've learned to live with it in the past month, though."

"*Ohn te ilune!* How did it happen?" she asked, brushing his cheek with the back of her hand.

"The nobleman who tried to convince everyone that I was a thief did it. Headmaster Whitlow told you about that, right?"

"Yes," she said.

"Well, he caught Esmond and me at the procession last month and carried me to a back alley and this is what he did." He shook his hand to emphasize his point. "Didn't even call the guards! The sadistic bastard just dragged me off and took my finger. Damn that crazy Lord Osbick!"

She looked very pensive for a moment, not saying what was on her mind. She finally looked up at him and took his wounded hand between her small ones. "I'm sorry," she said. "I really hope Whitlow can help clear your name and expose that old fool." She looked his hand over. "At least it is healing well. Thank Ohn for that."

"Yes, it is," he replied, slowly pulling his hand away and tucking it under his other arm. "So," he started, "what is it you have that the sarn want?"

"I told you," she said, sternly, "I can't tell you here."

"Well, can't you tell me anything about it? I just want to help you."

Ria led him over closer to the stage where a woman was performing, singing a song about a war and how it separated two lovers. She sat down on a bench and Lan sat beside her. Ria glanced around to make sure nobody was listening to them and began speaking. "It will be harder for anyone to hear us this close to the singing." She adjusted herself on the bench and tightened the bow around her hair--it had started coming loose.

"It's something the force rallying the sarn seeks. If it were to get its hands on it, the outcome would be disastrous." She began looking around nervously again, as if she felt someone watching her. "My father once possessed it, and as he died, he gave it to me."

With her head constantly bobbing back and forth, looking over the crowd, she was hard to understand.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Why are you looking around like that?"

"Something isn't right," she said quietly. "Something feels . . . odd." She shook herself, rubbing her arms with her hands as if she were cold. "Maybe this crowd's just making me nervous. I haven't been around this many people at one time in years."

"Would you like to get away for a while? We can walk around the streets and catch up on each other some more."

"Sure," agreed Ria. She took his hand and they stood up. As they were making their way out of the crowded city center and toward the deserted city streets, Lan spied a booth selling various trinkets on leather necklaces. The trinkets were carved out of various stones of all sorts of earthen colors. The one that struck him as the nicest was a simple oval, polished to a shine, with bands of tan and white running across it.

"How much?" Lan asked the merchant, pointing at the necklace.

"They're all eight geln," the merchant said, an older man with a thick grey beard.

"I'll take this one, then," Lan said, fishing in his pocket for some geln. The Mages' Guild had provided him with ten geln a week for various expenses. It was one of their many ways of getting students to stay and endure some of the rigorous classes.

Lan paid the man and placed the necklace around Ria's neck. "I hope you like it," he said. She smiled, turning the stone over in her hand.

"It's beautiful." She kissed him on the cheek and let the stone fall onto her chest. Lan blushed, but he was not sure if it was from her kiss or from staring at her bosom. He quickly diverted his eyes and took her hand, leading her off into the streets.

They had not taken more than three steps when he heard the voice of the Zarron rising above the sound of the crowd. "Oh no," he said, "not this way. Let's go another--"

"Ohn save me from this wretched sight!" the Zarron yelled from down the way, staring in Lan's direction. "I was right about you!" he yelled. "The Righteous are *always* right!"

"You know him?" Ria asked wryly.

"Unfortunately," Lan said. "We met on my way here. He's not very reasonable. He was accusing me of blasphemy and heresy and all sorts of things I can't remember. He even said I was damned for eternity or some such because I took up for the mesefu."

"Did he?" she asked. "These Zarrons will never learn anything until someone teaches them a lesson." She started marching toward him.

"Wait!" Lan called after her, stumbling to catch up. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to have a little talk with this man." She strode up to the Zarron who was shouting various phrases concerning fire and damnation at her.

"I hear you have a problem with mesefu," she said.

"Especially your foul kind," he growled. "The half-mesefu are the vilest of the vile! Look at yourself!" The Zarron held out his hand toward Ria's chest. "Exposing your breasts and legs to ensnare upstanding humans and drag them down with you into hellfire and damnation! Vile wench!"

"My name is Ria," she growled back. "And though my background may be part mesefu, I am just as much a person as yourself . . . although your kind makes me ashamed to admit as much. By what should I call you? 'Fool'?"

"You will call me by my Righteous name, whorish filth, and by none other. I am Brother Kenneth, High Priest of the Zarronian order of Pyran! I am many other things as well, but I can assure you that by the Light of Judgement, I am no fool." He waved his arms about dramatically as he spoke, his purple robes swirling about his body and the vein on his head pulsating more and more strongly. Lan thought it was about to burst open.

"Well," Ria started, "if 'fool' does not apply, then by what other name do I address one who condemns people to eternal torment based on factors they cannot control? Do you think I had any control over who my parents would be? It is not as if I got to choose my own lineage. I could just as soon start a fanatical religion targeted against red-headed idiots in purple robes who spat too much when they talked."

Kenneth was enraged. His nostrils flared and his brow wrinkled. He gripped the edges of his robe tightly, his fists turning white.

"Um, Ria--" Lan began. He did not want to stay here much longer.

Brother Kenneth snarled and charged Ria. Lan moved to get between them to keep the wild man from hurting her, but Ria pushed him aside. Lan noticed that a small crowd had gathered around them watching the spectacle. What would they do now, though, with this insane man attacking Ria?

He watched anxiously. Ria stood strong and stiff as the man came toward her. "I will cleanse the world of your foul kind before the Creator calls me home!" Kenneth shouted. Ria did not flinch. When Kenneth was within a few spans of her he swung his arm out from his robe, a dagger glinting in the dim streetlight.

"No!" Lan shouted, charging toward the Zarron again. With an impossible speed, Ria fell to the ground and swept her left leg around, tripping the man. He pinwheeled his arms, trying to keep his balance, but Ria reached up and shoved him the rest of the way over with the flat of her hand. She stood as he went down in a cloud of purple robes and curses. With a quick chopping motion, she crashed her hand into the back of his neck. He grunted, then fell silent. For a moment, Lan thought that she had killed him, and his stomach leaped into his throat. It settled a bit when he realized that the man's chest was still rising and falling with breath.

Ria looked at the crowd of shocked onlookers. "He'll be fine," she said. "But he won't be bothering anyone for a while. I'd clear away from here, though, because he won't be in the best of moods when he wakes up."

A random guy in the crowd spoke up. "It's about time someone taught one of those fools a lesson!" The rest of the crowd cheered with him and applauded. Ria made a quick bow, then motioned for Lan to come with her.

"Come on," she said, dragging him down the street. "I shouldn't have brought that much attention to myself, but that guy was right--those idiot Zarrons need to learn a few things."

Lan was still stunned at the speed, ease, and calm with which she had handled the situation. "How did you do that?" he asked.

"With a little magic." She smiled uneasily as they hurried on down the street. "All mesefu related to the high council or military families are taught from a young age how to fight without weapons and still win, without killing anyone."

"Amazing," he marveled. They walked down one of the wide streets that led to the Mages' Guild. It was bright with lantern light and not nearly as crowded as the city center. Several closed merchant wagons lined either side of the street against the hardclay buildings, along with various nondescript barrels. Lan slipped his arm around Ria's waist. She did not protest, which brought a warm smile to his lips.

"You must promise me that you will remain silent about everything that I have told you," Ria said. "And about everything I have yet to tell you."

"I promise."

"Good." They were turning down another street when a cry rang out.

"Fire! Fire in the Mages' Guild! The library is in a blaze, and the rest will catch soon! Hurry! Send help!"

Lan panicked. He ignored everything, blocked it out. The Mages' Guild library was burning, and Keon had fallen asleep in there. Lan had to save him. And if Keon was already gone, then he at least had to retrieve the *sukrea*.

"*A, BIST!*" shouted Ria, starting to run toward the tower. Lan followed quickly. Everything was happening too fast.

"No! It can't be! If it's lost after all this work . . ." She trailed off as she charged on down the street.

"What is it? *What?*" he demanded, trying his best to keep up with her breakneck pace while dodging people and various objects in the streets.

"The thing I told you Ga'ruk wanted," she said between gasps of air. "I brought it to Keon for safekeeping."

"Wouldn't he just slip into the tower if he found out about it and take it?" *Maybe that's what he's doing in town!* Lan thought. *He was here last month, following her, and now he's gone and set fire to the Mages' Guild tower!*

"That's why I couldn't stay in--" She stopped in her tracks and gaped at the burning tower they now stood before. "*Ohn me ilune!*" They had reached the Mages' Guild. Huge billows of smoke

rolled off of the tower along with hot orange flames, most from the third floor library.

Lan did not stop running. He was intent on saving whatever he could. He *had* to get the *sukrea*, and hopefully his bag with his books. He had left it in the library, absent-mindedly, as he had rushed off to the festival.

"Lan, wait! You'll die in there!" Ria yelled, but it was no use. There were too many people here trying to quench the fire from outside with pumps and hoses. Lan never heard her over all the commotion.

He immediately realized how useful the dragon emblem was as soon as he entered the tower. Even though there were flames roaring all around him and there should be an unbearable heat, he felt nothing. He was running for the stairs to the library when an overhead support began to fall. He dove forward and landed on his chest at the foot of the stairs as the huge timber crashed to the stone floor behind his feet. *If that thing had hit me . . .*

Lan began running up the stairs, trying not to touch any of the burning walls. He remembered what Keon had said about still getting injured from heat, just not feeling it. What good would it do him to reach Keon, only to find himself nearly burned to death?

As he entered the library, another timber fell behind him, this time bringing most of the ceiling with it. All around him dust and rubble flew through the air in a thick cloud. He was trapped in the library now. There was no way he could move those burning things without setting fire to himself, and even if he could, they were too heavy for him to lift.

He spotted the desk he had been sitting at earlier, but through all the smoke and flames, he could not tell if anyone was still there. Lan ran over to investigate. He tripped over something and fell face first onto the sooty remains of the desk, then rolled off onto the stone floor and landed right next to a lightly-charred corpse that could have been none other than Keon.

"No! Master Keon!" he shouted. He grabbed the body of his old master and shook it in a futile attempt to rouse the man from his eternal sleep. Lan shouted in frustration. He vigorously shook the corpse one final time before shoving it back down to the floor.

The roar of the flames engulfed him as he sat there, hopeless, completely lost in his own thoughts, oblivious to the raging inferno. He felt his time as an apprentice in the Mages' Guild coming rapidly to an end. A bookshelf's supports gave away and it slowly tipped over with a loud creak. Books flew off the shelves, their pages fluttering about. Many caught fire on the way down, crashing to the floor with a shower of glowing ash.

"What am I supposed to do now?!"

#

"Esmond?" Ria asked, running up to the young man she thought she vaguely remembered from so long ago. It was his short blond hair and his distinguished nose that gave him away.

"Do I know you?" he asked with a puzzling look on his face. The girl around his arm in the green dress looked at her questioningly with a hint of jealousy.

"I'm Ria, the one--"

"Oh yeah! I remember you now," Esmond said, smiling. The girl by his side kept her cold look. "How's it--"

"There's no time for that!" she shouted, startling both Esmond and the girl. "Lan's in the Mages' Guild."

"I know he's in the Mages' Guild," started Esmond. "Thought he could keep it a secret, but word spreads fast. I haven't seen him in weeks--"

"You might not ever see him again if you don't hurry!" She shouted at him frantically. This was no time for silly banter. "It's on fire!"

"On fire?" Esmond looked stunned. "Dear Ohn, I hope he got out of there."

"No, you fool! Lan is in the tower *right now!*" Esmond's jaw dropped open and his eyes bulged. "I need help, quickly! Everyone else is too frightened. We've got to hurry!"

Esmond stuttered. "Al--alright, I'm coming. Gaelyn, stay here. I'm going to run and get Took--"

"What be goin' on 'ere?" came the voice of a large, burly man approaching Esmond. "I hear the Mages' Guild is on fire. Is anyone in there?"

"Took!" shouted Esmond, looking slightly relieved. "Lan's in the tower! We've got to get him out!"

"I'll be gods-damned," cursed Took. "Okay, now, ye all listen up. I've got an idea, and if ye listen carefully an' act fast, I think it jus' might work."

Ria listened as this newcomer started explaining his idea to them. If they did not get that *sukrea* out of there and left it for Ga'ruk to find, the daemon just might win.

#

Lan finally found the ancient *sukrea* after painstakingly digging through the heap of Keon's burned clothing. He pulled it free, placing it around his own neck, being careful to hide it under his robes. He heard it searing his flesh, but felt nothing. That was going to leave a scar.

What had caused this fire? Had any of the other people in the tower escaped? Surely they had. He vaguely remembered seeing a group of apprentices standing outside as he ran into the raging firestorm. Luckily most of the people who lived here had probably been at the festival.

Another section of ceiling fell behind him, reminding him that his time was extremely limited. He started searching for the bag with his books, grabbing the teleportation book from the table before it could catch fire. He noticed the edges were already blackened, but did not stop to check the insides. He did not have much time.

His bag was still sitting on the floor under the table, in perfect condition. He sighed with relief--he had been terrified of losing his copy of the *Gilanthril* and the other old books that were his only reminders of home. He randomly grabbed several other books from some of the more intact shelves, not caring exactly what they were. Any of these books in here would be useful. It was unfortunate that he could not save them all.

He needed a way out. Somehow, he had to get past that flaming barrier to the stairs. He ran over to it and kicked at the timbers. They did not show any signs of movement. *They fall so easily, yet I can't make them budge no matter how hard I kick at them. I wish I knew enough magic to do something about this!* Lan turned around and headed for the window. It was only the third floor, no more than a ten-stride fall. He had fallen about that far when he and Esmond were escaping the university. Of course, his fear of heights had not had time to start bothering him as that trip had gone very quickly.

Now, staring out the window with time to actually grasp how high up he was, Lan was wracked with fear.

"Lan! Are you in there?" It was a voice, and it sounded like Esmond's. Lan looked down from the window. Standing below on the cobblestones was Esmond, along with Gaelyn, Took, and Ria. A large blanket was stretched tightly between them, obviously meant for him to jump on.

"Esmond! Thank Ohn you're here!" Lan began climbing into the windowsill, more relieved than he would have ever thought to see his old friend again, despite Esmond's theft-ridden lifestyle.

"Don't thank me yet," Esmond shouted back. "Wait until you reach the ground in one piece."

"Esmond! Don't say things like that," scolded Gaelyn.

"Will ye two hush up an' help pull this thing a bit tighter?" Took was obviously in charge of the situation.

"All right, Lan," shouted Ria. "It should be safe. Throw down your stuff first, though, so you don't fall on it and get hurt, but be quick about it. And don't be afraid to jump. I'll make sure you don't get hurt."

Lan tossed down his bag of books. He watched it fall, hoping it would not get damaged when it hit the blanket. To his relief, it landed very softly, and Ria set down her corner of the blanket to quickly go get it and move it aside. Esmond set down his corner also, going to help her.

"Get back over there!" she shouted at Esmond. "Stay in position. We have to do this fast before this place explodes!"

Esmond leaped back into place. "Explodes!? Why would it--"

"Magically-enhanced artifacts. There are hundreds of them in there, and the destruction of one is like setting off nearly a thousand firepoppers at once. Multiply that over a hundred-fold, and that's what will happen if the attic storage room catches!" Ria had already moved the books back and was stretching out her corner again.

"All right, lad!" shouted up Took. "Ye can jump now!"

Lan tried to move but could not force himself over the edge. The height was too much for him. It was all he could do to keep from passing out. What was that Ria had said about firepoppers? It had sounded so clear when he heard it, yet now he

could not remember more than a single word. The smoke was choking his mind.

"Lan, jump!" Ria was getting extremely anxious. It bothered him to have her yelling at him like that, but he still could not move. He was frozen in fear. What if they were not holding it tight enough to catch his fall? That would be horrible. He would have come up here to gather the key for nothing. Some random person would claim it, if not the sarn, and--

"Lan, hurry up before that place explodes!" Ria was shouting at the top of her lungs, and at times, her words broke up due to her straining her voice. Lan's knees almost gave out as he grew suddenly dizzy. He grabbed onto the window frame for dear life.

Explosion? Why on Kalra would this place explode? Towers did not explode on a regular basis, the last time he checked. And why was everything so Ohn-be-damned blurry? He coughed several times, violently, nearly falling backward out of the window. He looked behind himself and down from the window. There was a large white cloud below him with little people standing around it who looked vaguely like his friends. Were they dolls? He would have to go down there to the cloud and pick them up. Were they moving? Dear Ohn, they were! How amazing! Toys that looked like his friends and moved and talked and--

The world exploded.

From above, he heard an extremely loud thundering noise and the tower began shaking. He grabbed onto the edges of the window with all his might, terrified of falling. He looked up, out the window, to see that the entire top of the tower had completely blown away. Large chunks of rock and wood, mixed with various pieces of other flaming debris, were cascading outward from the top. It was all happening so slowly. There was a large fireball atop the tower now, and it was moving down toward him. The bricks shook more and more violently as the tower began falling apart from the top. The force resonating throughout the walls finally became so great that it threw him from the window. He took a deep breath and started to panic. He was going to die, unless the cloud that seemed almost to be reaching out for him was as soft and cushiony as it looked.

As he fell, he saw the tower collapsing like a house of cards, inward upon itself. The almost unbearably loud grating sounds of stone scraping against stone filled the air, along with immense amounts of dust, wood shards, and rock flakes. Floor after floor began crumbling away in a series of small explosions, bringing the majority of the tower straight down. *I wish Esmond could see this*, Lan marveled. *He always loved wild things like--*

He slammed into something hard, the force throwing the air from his lungs, as the last stones of the tower settled to the ground. Nothing remained of the Guild building but an enormous pile of rubble.

"L--Lan," coughed a voice. "You okay?"

"He doesn't look very good at all," said another. "Of course, in this cloud of dust and smoke, I can't see much of anything!" This voice, too, broke out into a fit of coughing.

"I just hope he got everything he needed." A dark shape was standing over him now, staring into his eyes. It was the last thing he saw through a thick haze as his vision began blacking out.

"C'mon, folks. Let's git him back to the Guild 'fore this cloud chokes us all to death. He needs rest an' lots o' water." Lan felt himself being jostled around.

"This dust," choked the first voice. "Too much of it. We're lucky something didn't fall on us and kill us all! C'mon! Let's go before we all die here!"

It was the last thing Lan heard before he slipped into darkness.

#

"I have found out as much as I can." Lisen spoke into her *reni* to Lord Harishmon. She was standing atop the Ceren, looking out over the city of Porthos.

"What connections does this Osbick have with Ol'tue?" Harishmon asked through the *reni*.

"I do not know anything about the blade yet, but I do know he is working with the sarn. Their leader, in fact--Ga'ruk. I think the rallying of the sarn has something to do with all of this."

"I think you are right. The sarn could never muster up enough peace amongst themselves to unite on their own. Something else has to be behind this, and I fear it may be this

rumored daemon. If I am right, we have got more problems than just a missing sword. Far more."

Lisen walked over to the edge, gazing off at the smoldering ruins of the Mages' Guild tower that had collapsed hours ago.

"A few hours ago," she said into the *reni*, "the Mages' Guild here exploded. The top, at least. Apparently that was enough to shake the foundations loose and it collapsed, straight down."

"Do you think the sarn or this Osbick fellow had anything to do with it?" asked Harishmon.

"I am not sure," she replied, "but there is always a chance. The people are in hysterics. No conclusive reports are in, but apparently there were very few injuries."

"You have several days left before you must return with Lord Velenda," said Harishmon. "Try to find out exactly what happened."

"Yes, Lord Harishmon."

"Has Ria been of any help?"

Lisen sat down on the stone roof, her legs hanging off the side. From here she could see the whole city, and it was peaceful. Seeing all the buildings from this height reminded her of home, which she had missed terribly in the past month. She spent most of her spare time here, on this roof, where she felt most comfortable.

"That brings me to another matter, completely separate but just as critical." She paused, reaching under her shirt to clasp her hand around the artifact that hung around her neck. "I know I should not tell anyone this, but I know you can be trusted. Ria has the *sukrea*."

"What?" said Harishmon, his voice raised in shock.

"She may have passed it on since I saw her last, of course. That was five days ago. She does not know I saw it."

"This is unheard of. In the past thousand years since the dragons gave the three *krea* to our people, they have only been kept by mesefu hands. Never has a *dalchi* held one. Never." There was a pause. "Not to say I do not trust her. Ria is one of the most trustworthy people I know. But still, it is unnerving."

"What is more unnerving," said Lisen, still fingering the object hanging around her neck, "is that I have to leave this city, and soon. You know why."

"Yes. Having two of them that close together is dangerous. You will be leaving soon enough, in a few days. Until then, try to find out as much about this tower incident as you can. After the final procession, however, get back here as soon as possible. We cannot risk having two *krea* that close together for long. Not at a time like this."

"Yes, Lord Harishmon. I will see you in a few days."

"Farewell, Lisen. Ohn illumine you."

"Ohn illumine you, Lord Harishmon."

Lisen tucked the *reni* into a pouch at her side and stood. She pulled the *krea* out from under her shirt and stared at its deep-blue teardrop shape intently. She had always wondered what great power was locked away by the three *krea*. The dragons had never said. They had only told the mesefu that it was a great weapon that could destroy all of Kalra if set loose. Nobody needed that kind of power. Not even in the name of righteousness.

She slid it back under her shirt and turned from the edge of the Ceren's sloped southern wall. She had to leave as soon as the procession was over and get away from this city quickly. *No*, she said. *Not away from the city. Not away from Ria. Away from another krea.*

Chapter Twelve

"Lan, are you awake?"

Lan opened his eyes to a bright, formless blur. He tried to speak, but could muster no sound from his parched throat.

"I don't know what else I can do for him. I've never seen anything like this before. His temperature has remained above fatal long enough to kill him twice over. I can't even begin to understand why he's still alive."

He could hear, but the voices were a bit muffled. Perhaps his ears, as well as his throat and his eyes, were not working quite right.

"This is no normal fever. It goes far beyond my skills."

"I think he's waking up!"

Lan wanted to blink but his eyelids protested. He felt very sore and fatigued, and despite his mind's attempts, his body refused to move. He could not even raise his fingers or close his eyes. *Oh dear*, he thought. *I'm paralyzed! Something must have fallen on me in the library and now I'm paralyzed!* But something tugged at his mind, saying there was more that had happened after he had reached the library. But what? He could remember nothing but crashing timbers and the charred remains of Master Keon.

"There's one thing I can think of that might wake him up. After that, I'll need to go get some rest. I won't be of any use to anyone if I'm half asleep and can barely see straight."

It was a feminine voice. Gaelyn? And the first voice had been a male. Esmond?

"He's very important to me--to everyone."

Ria? Yes, he was sure of it. What was going on? Why could he not move?

"That reminds me, how did you--"

"Get out of my way, everyone!"

"No! What are you doing? The shock of that in the state he's in could kill him!" Ria was shouting at someone. Why was she shouting--

At the first touch of the ice-cold water, Lan screamed and shot straight up, shaking violently. His vision instantly cleared. He could see Esmond and Ria kneeling by him, their clothes slightly wet, and Gaelyn standing over him in a sooty green dress, holding a dripping, wooden bucket in her hands. He was sitting on a large, fluffy white blanket that strangely reminded him of a cloud. They were all staring at him with different odd expressions on their faces. His scream slowly faded as he shivered.

"Get him some blankets, quickly!" Ria shouted. Gaelyn grunted then hurried out of the room. Ria pulled the wet blanket out from under him. Within seconds Gaelyn came running back with thick blankets of various materials in her arms. Ria snatched a few from her and wrapped Lan in the dry blankets, tossing aside the wet one.

Esmond knelt next to him and took his hand, squeezing it. Lan wanted to smile and squeeze back to show some indication of lucidity, but despite all his efforts, his body would not move. He found that his eyes still functioned, however, and he looked about the room. He recognized the dark, stone walls, the shelves with their various bottles and bowls and towels. He was back in the Thieves' Guild--the same room in which Gaelyn had wrapped his hand. He was sitting on the large table in the center of the room. Ria was looking at him with relief, a slight smile on her face. It quickly changed into a frown as she turned to Gaelyn, finger outstretched.

"You could have killed him like that! You had no idea what the cold water would do to him, and you call yourself a *healer*?" Ria shouted the last word, charging Gaelyn. She slammed the other girl back against a wall, holding her there by the throat. Gaelyn grunted. "Do you realize what you could have done!?" Ria's voice was beyond hysterical.

Gaelyn started shouting back, pushing Ria away. "Of course I knew what I was doing! He--" she pointed at Lan "--was obviously in shock. When someone has a high fever, cold water is the best way to bring the fever down sometimes. He could have died if we'd left him like that. I did the best I knew how to do. It's my job to save lives, not stand idly by and let those of us who *think* they know better let everyone die." She stood there breathing heavily, staring Ria down. Ria lowered her head in silence, hiding her face with her hands.

"I'm sorry," she sulked. "I forget where I am sometimes." Esmond moved to Gaelyn and put his arm around her, looking at Ria with a mix of fear and anger.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Gaelyn asked her.

"Nevermind," Ria spat.

Esmond cut in. "We've all had a long night. I think we should just get some rest." He led Gaelyn to the door.

"I'll stay with Lan," Ria said. "I want to make sure he's fine throughout the night." Esmond nodded and went through the door. "I'm sorry," she said to him. He looked back at her and nodded again, then closed the door as he left. Ria looked to Lan, still shivering beneath the blankets.

"You need to rest now." He tried to nod but she stopped him. "Don't try to move just yet. You may end up hurting yourself more. Just sleep. I'll be here with you. You're safe with me."

She pulled the blanket up to his chin and gestured toward the candles on the shelf. Their light died, bathing the room in darkness.

Lan heard her sit down on the floor beside the table. He listened for what seemed like an eternity until her breath slid into the steady monotony of sleep. He lay in silence for a bit longer, futilely grasping at thoughts that flew through his mind about what had happened to him, then fell asleep himself.

#

Her eyes snapped open, but she could not see. The room was completely dark. For a moment, she did not know where she was. A moan came from behind her as Lan's hand fell out of the covers and brushed her shoulder. She tucked it back in. With a thought, she re-lit one of the candles in the room. She sat up on the table and gazed down at Lan in the pale candlelight. His face

was peaceful and a slight smile adorned his lips. She began brushing his face gently with her index finger, running it along his cheeks.

You mean more to me than you can ever know, Lan, she thought as she ran her finger between his nose and his upper lip. *You risked your life to save me without even knowing me, and tonight you risked your life to save something you likely wanted nothing to do with. It's almost as if you read my mind. You are a very remarkable person, and now a very important one. You're part of the legacy now, protecting the krea from those who'd misuse them. It's strange,* she thought. *No human has ever held one until now. It's all my fault. If the council ever found out, they'd hunt me down. Lisen might stop them, though. I'm not sure. I'm not sure about anything anymore. Except . . .* She paused in her thoughts as she began caressing his lips with her finger. *Except you. You even held on to my dagger so we'd meet again.* She reached for his cloak beside the table and found her dagger in one of his pockets. *I knew it would bring us together again,* she thought, smiling as she withdrew it. She tucked it under her shirt and turned back to his sleeping form.

"I would let you keep it," she whispered, "but I'm about to leave and I don't need you following me, whether or not you're aware of it. But don't think you're getting off easy. I'm going to have Headmaster Whitlow arrange something for you, so I'll know where you are and can come back to you when all of this is through." Her smile faded as she thought of leaving him. Then, in the most spontaneous gesture she had ever made, she kissed him. His eyes popped open and she stifled a shriek as she jumped back and down onto the floor. She quickly leaned against one of the table legs and shut her eyes, pretending she was asleep.

Her heart raced as she sat there in silence, waiting for him to ask her what she thought she was doing. *Stupid girl,* she told herself, embarrassed at the prospect of being caught stealing a kiss--especially from someone she had not known for very long. She could hear her quick breathing and tried to slow it. Lan still had not spoken. She listened carefully and heard his breath, coming slowly. Was he still asleep?

"Ria?" he asked. She jumped at the sound.

"Yes?" she replied in the groggiest voice that she could muster, opening her eyes and turning her head up to him.

"Am I going to die?" His voice was weak and pitiful. She took his hand in hers and held it to her cheek.

"No, you're not going to die. Gaelyn . . ." She paused, thinking back to the argument. "Gaelyn took very good care of you." She clasped her hands around his, standing up. Lan rolled his head to look down at her.

"I'm so thirsty," he uttered. *Good*, she thought. *He doesn't know*. She laid his hand on his stomach and went to grab the pitcher of water they had all been drinking from earlier. There were no cups, so she poured the water into her cupped hand and held it to his lips. He drank voraciously. She repeated this several times until he finally motioned for her to stop and sank his head back on the pillow and closed his eyes. She thought he was asleep, until he spoke.

"He's really dead, isn't he?" he asked.

"Yes." Ria frowned. She put her hands up to her face to cover her eyes. The thought of her uncle being dead--her last living relative--pained her more than Lan could ever know.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I can tell you were close to him. Malice Took's probably upset as well."

Lan's eyes suddenly widened as he grabbed for his chest. A gasp escaped his lips, but before he could speak, she explained. "I have it, Lan. Don't worry. I'll return it to you when you're better."

He looked stunned for a moment. "How . . . how do you know about . . ."

"It's the reason I had to see my uncle in the first place. I was in danger and knew I needed to hide it from those who were chasing after me. Keon held it for me. I can't thank you enough for going in and saving this--" she reached down the front of her shirt and withdrew the familiar green object "--because if it had been lost in that explosion, there is no telling who would have gotten their hands on it."

"Wouldn't it have been destroyed with everything else?" asked Lan, trying to sit up.

"No, although I wish it could have. The *keva* are indestructible. A man tried once, to ensure that they would never fall into the wrong hands. Nothing in his power could do it."

"How do you know all of this?" Lan asked.

"I've picked up a lot here and there."

"You know more than most people I know. Even those as well-traveled as you seem to be."

"You'd be surprised. I was born in Altkrea. They have magical wonders there that most people have never even heard of, or could likely begin to imagine." She paused, taking a deep breath. "I'm sorry I left you so quickly last fall, Lan. I did it to ensure your safety. I didn't want you to get hurt." She smiled at him warmly. "I care about you too much." He smiled back. "You saved my life, and I was returning the favor."

"So, you admit it?" he asked, smiling.

"Admit what?"

"That I saved you."

"What?" she asked, taken aback.

"You once said you were in no trouble at all when Ga'ruk attacked you on my father's plantation, that you could have handled everything yourself."

"I--maybe I did," she said, smiling. "I didn't mean it. I couldn't stand the idea that I needed help. It was an insult to my pride--I'm more independent than you'll ever know. Likely more independent than is good for me."

"I followed your carriage all the way into town, then set off to the Mages' Guild. There, I told my uncle of the rallying sarn, and he promised he would inform those in power."

"I then set off for southern Kagon, following several rumors. I got caught up in a very bad situation and realized that the *sukrea* was no longer safe with me--too many of the sarn knew I had it. They would expect me to pass it on to a mesefu--that was the way it had always been. I had to throw them off. My uncle was the only person I knew at the time who was trustworthy enough. After several unfriendly run-ins with Ga'ruk, I managed to get back to Porthos just a few days ago. The strange thing is, it turned out that Ga'ruk was not following me. He was already headed this way. It was I who ran into him. There is something else going on, and I think we're close to figuring it out."

"We'? Who else is there?" Lan asked.

"A friend of mine from Altkrea." She turned away from him so he could not see her face. She felt tears forming under her eyes. Lan leaned out to her, putting his arms around her shoulders and pulling her in to him, but she shrugged him away. "No, I'm all

right. Strength is one of my virtues. I'll need it--if I'm ever weak, I'll fail."

"Fail at what? You don't have to worry about the *sukerea* anymore. What else is there?"

"You'll understand someday," she said. She stood up, stretching her limbs. Lan moved to get up as well, but when he threw back the blankets and saw himself, he immediately sat back down and covered his naked body. His face was glowing red and he smiled nervously. Ria laughed.

"We had to remove your clothes. They were mostly burned, and what was left was stained with ash and soot." He nodded silently. "Lan, there's more I need to say, but it can wait for the meeting."

"The meeting? What meeting?" he asked hastily, still embarrassed.

"Tomorrow, Malice Took is holding a meeting to plan some sort of tax protest at the Ceren. Until then, you should try to get some sleep. You'll feel much better tomorrow if you do." Lan sighed in exhaustion. She tucked the blankets under him and patted him lightly on the chest. His breathing had slowed down and was starting to even out. *I wish I could just crawl in there beside you and lay my head on your chest.* In her mind, she pictured him stroking her hair and telling her that everything would be all right. She forced the picture out of her mind quickly. It was something she could never have. In her life, there was no room for emotion like that--no room for love. She needed to think only of survival, and that did not require loving anybody.

She walked across the room and put out the candle with a thought and a gesture. She heard Lan's even breathing--he was already asleep. She pictured his chest rising and falling in her head. *It's not real,* she reminded herself. *Nothing is real except pain, suffering, and death. Nothing else matters. Get it out of your head, girl. You need to concentrate on what needs to be done now, not what you'd like to do.* She walked from the room and quietly shut the door behind her. Her head was clouded with emotions and fatigue.

Ria walked down the dim hallway to the room Malice was letting her stay in. It was small, but very clean. *Not so much clean as empty,* she told herself. There was only a bed with fresh sheets that were calling to her from the corner. As tired as she was, she did not

want to sleep just yet. She needed to think. She wanted to look up and see the moon--she always looked at the moon when she thought about important things. It was something her father had taught her to do when she was young.

Her father. Her horrible, detestable father. *Damn him! I'm not supposed to be doing any of this. I should be able to live the life I want, but my father had to destroy my life when nature destroyed his.*

No, not nature, she corrected herself. A broken heart.

She walked out of her room, leaving the door open. Within a couple of minutes, she had found her way to the ramp leading outside. Not long after, she found herself standing in the dark streets looking up at the starry night sky. The moon was hanging just above the western wall. Morning would come soon. She breathed in the cool air letting it clear her mind. She strolled around aimlessly, lost in thought, knowing she could find her way back.

As she thought of her father, her job, and Lan, she caught movement in the corner of her eye. She turned and spied a shadowy figure passing her in the night, coming from the direction of the guild entrance. She looked back at the entrance to find it closed. *Mind's just playing tricks on you, she thought as she scuffed the ground with her foot. Just like it's playing tricks on you about Lan. Just like Lan.*

#

Ria was with the thieves. His underground contacts had come through for him and located the girl. Tonight, Osbick would be meeting with his spy in the Thieves' Guild and informing her of the plan. Ria would be his within a few days' time.

They all called him mad for pursuing her, claiming that a leader should send his own men to handle such matters. He had tried twice, and they had failed both times. He had come to the conclusion that if he wanted anything done properly, he would have to do it himself.

Sighing, Ga'ruk Roth'ra, leader of the unified sarn nations, set off down the deserted city streets of northern Porthos in the moonlight, awaiting the rising sun, and another day closer to victory.

#

"Something new has come up, my child." The commanding voice both warmed her and chilled her at once, yet he was her savior, and she was respectful of that.

"Yes, Master Osbick?" she asked, kneeling in obedience.

"There is a new girl among you now." He paused, rubbing his chin. "A half-breed girl. I need her captured, but alive. There is a great reward for us if we succeed."

"I know the one, Master," she said, remembering bitterly her encounter with the half-breed. "But I'm not sure how I can capture her. She is always around a certain someone else, and she has magic."

"The protest you spoke of earlier," he spoke. "That should be the perfect opportunity. We had already planned on the final, ultimate downfall of 'Took. It should not be much more trouble to capture her during the confusion." A pause. "Are your men ready?"

"Yes, Master. They are ready." She paused, contemplating recent developments. "I only ask one thing of you, master. Please do not let Esmond Boyeui get hurt." She reached up to touch Osbick's hand. "Promise that he can stay with me. I've come to love him, and don't want to see any harm come to him."

Osbick was aghast. "You *love* someone? You *dare* put someone before me, the man who saved your life in every way possible?" She burst into tears, holding her head in her hands to muffle her crying. Osbick placed his hand softly on her head in an attempt to soothe her. "I understand that emotions are hard to control, especially when you have been spending so much time away from me recently. I am not angry with you for having made the *mistake* of falling in love. Just try to forget the young man from now on. Our relationship is so much more--" he lifted her face until her eyes met his and gave her a thin-lipped kiss on the cheek "-important."

She stood up and dried her tears, trying to mask her emotions as he had once taught her. "Yes, Master. I understand."

"Then you will do what you can about the half-breed girl?"

"Of course, Master Osbick. Anything for you."

"Well then," he said, motioning for her to leave. "I expect to hear from you after the protest."

"Yes, Master." She bowed, then left the room in silence.

As Gaelyn walked back to the guild, she thought about what was more important to her--the man whom had saved her from death, or the man whom had given her something to live for. By the time she reached the guild, daylight was starting to peek over the city walls. She had made her decision.

#

Osbick sat in quiet contemplation, watching the first glow of morning find its way into the cold stone room. Farrell had finally grown useless. With this new prospect that had opened up in recent months, he no longer needed the Shadow nor a scapegoat for them. The time had come to dispose of Farrell and his band of thieves. Along with his personal servant and spy, the girl he had saved from rape and abuse by the city guards, Farrell's downfall had been planned flawlessly.

Gaelyn had proven to be invaluable to him. He had taken her in, knowing that she would be a worthy spy. He had given her a place to live, clothes to wear, and food to eat. After gaining her trust, he had convinced her to join the 'Thieves' Guild and work as an informant--it was her way of paying him back for having saved her. After Farrell was brought down, though, his relationship with Gaelyn would be cut--he no longer needed her either.

The sarn leader Ga'ruk had shown up at Osbick's door again earlier tonight. He had dealt with the sarn before over hiding some unknown stash. Osbick had no idea what it had been--the Shadow had adopted a "don't ask, don't tell" policy regarding such dealings--but the sarn treated it as if it were the most important thing to him in the world. He was paid well, and was promised much more if the sarn's plans were successful.

This time when Ga'ruk came, the sarn had offered power beyond Osbick's belief and an eternal alliance with the sarn nations if he complied with their wishes. Ga'ruk wanted him to capture the half-breed named Ria, who had supposedly entered the 'Thieves' Guild this very night. According to his spy, Gaelyn, the information was correct. She had served him well one final time.

In just a matter of days, Osbick expected his life to change for the better. He would finally have his revenge against Farrell, and the prospect of being the ruler of the nation of Pyran would at last be within his grasp.

#

Lan sat quietly in the corner, watching the conversation build as Malice Took tried to explain the plan for the protest.

"No, lad. Settle down! There'll be no killin' involved as long as ol' Malice Took is in charge." He had been a little perturbed at Esmond asking about violence. Esmond had not meant he wanted to hurt anyone--he had only wondered if violence would be involved. In the hour they had spent at this table, none of them had accomplished anything.

"I have something to say," interrupted Ria.

"Aye, lass. Speak up," said Took. He had one leg up on a stool and was leaning over it, eyeing her curiously.

"I've been keeping this to myself for long enough. In light of recent events involving the Mages' Guild, and my uncle, I feel it can wait no longer." She stepped forward to the central table everyone was gathered around. "The procession is to be held on the twenty-third of the month, correct?"

"Aye."

"That gives us a few days that we could use to help out the mesefu people--my people. And in helping them, we would very likely be saving the world."

"What be ye on about, lass?"

Ria took a deep breath. Lan could tell she was nervous. What did she have on her mind? Straightening herself as she stood up, she spoke strongly. "The Darksear blade--*Ol'tue*--has been stolen."

The entire crowd at the table started to gasp, but laughed instead. Everyone stared in disbelief at her as she stood there, not letting their laughter bother her. "The rest of your people will find out soon enough, as the mesefu sent an ambassador to inform them during their parliamentary proceedings this past month. There's someone in town who we suspect either has the sword or knows where it is." She turned to Took. "My uncle--your friend, Keon--was helping me until his death. Losing him has hurt me more than anyone can probably ever know, but I've got to push on. I've got to succeed at this. The only thing that stood in our way was a lack of manpower. We were preparing to come and ask you if you would be willing to help us, especially since the suspect is--"

"No," Took stopped her. "We don' have time to be messin' wi' mesefu affairs. They ne'er bothered to help me when me family

was put out o' work in Merhos, an' we have more important matters o' our own right 'ere. Do you know how many families will suffer an' likely lose their homes from these new taxes? They're ludicrous!"

"If we don't find that sword, and soon, it could be the end of everything. And I mean everything. Your taxes and your homes will mean nothing. Perhaps it already is too late, but we have *got* to try." Her eyes began to water, and her lips trembled slightly.

"Keon may have died for this. Would you want your friend's death to have been in vain? We're so close--"

"Bleedin' insanity," Took cut her off. "I don' want to hear another word out o' you 'bout savin' Kalra. I don' know who ye are, but ye're goin' mad. Keon once told me his sister had an affair wi' a mesefu man, an' I don' doubt yer claims o' bein' his niece, but ye're talkin' crazier than those Zarrons with their doom prophecies and such."

"Fine," shouted Ria. "It was wrong of me--of my uncle--to assume his friend would actually care enough about his life and the lives of his people to help retrieve the blade and keep it out of the hands of those who would abuse its powers. But know this--there is a good chance you have just killed yourself, and everyone you care so much about." She marched from the room, silent with anger.

"Infernal lass," Took commented. "I hate to speak ill o' people, but she was talkin' like a loon! It not be like any ol' fool could just walk in an' take the Darksearer! That blade be locked up tighter than a mesefu arse! If someone did manage to steal it, they'd have to be insanely powerful. What good would a group of rogues like us be against somethin' like that, eh?"

"I'd better go check on her," Lan said, bolting for the door. He had felt a strong urge to support Ria, but her announcement had come as such a shock that he had not been able to collect himself in time to speak. He paused to look back at Took as the burly man moaned in frustration.

"This meeting might as well be canceled," he said. "No one cares to participate tonight anyway. Perhaps a good night's rest'll bring ye all to yer senses. Meet back 'ere tomorrow, same time." He got up and began putting away the papers he had brought out to

write on. Esmond and Gaelyn silently stood up and walked past Lan from the room.

#

"I'll just have to continue on my own to get the sword back." Ria paced angrily around Lan's room.

"How did it end up missing? And why must *you* be the one to go after it?" Lan was confused about the great responsibility she seemed to bear. "You're just a girl! What could you possibly have to do with that sword? Why can't you stay here? Or at least, why can't you get help from the mesefu? Why come all the way out here and bother, of all people, the Thieves' Guild?"

She looked down at the floor as she continued walking back and forth. "You could never understand," she whispered, just loud enough for him to hear.

"Of course I can't! You refuse to explain it! Am I just supposed to accept that you will run out of my life again and likely get killed because of some sword that the mesefu legions should be searching for? Does that sound logical? Why don't you talk to me? Maybe if you explained what was going on, I could help--"

"That's just it," she interrupted, glaring at him fiercely. "It has nothing to do with you. I'm not leaving you because of anything you have done. It has to do with me, and a promise I made to my father."

"Your father is dead, Ria," Lan barked. He realized too late that he had let his frustration get the best of him.

"Thank you for reminding me," she said in a hurt, yet sarcastic tone. She sank to her knees, head bowed. Lan knelt down beside her, deeply regretting his words, and pulled her shuddering body close to his own, stroking her hair.

"I'm sorry," he said consolingly. "It's just that . . . I don't want to see you leave again. I want to keep you from ending up dead, like your father. I want whatever it is you are so tied up in to be over with. Listen, I'll help you. We can go to Headmaster Whitlow, surely he knows someone who--"

"I could ignore it all for now, sure," she said in a daze, not paying Lan any attention. "But within a year, everything we know--all of civilization--would be shattered. There is an evil out there that wants to destroy our world, Lan." She looked up to him with a face of desperation.

"What do you mean?" he asked, feeling the onset of fright as his stomach tightened. "All of this because someone stole a sword? What makes it so important? I know it's magical, sure, but one blade? An army of hundreds could easily over . . ." His voice faded as he looked into her eyes. They were dark brown, with swirls of black. He blinked. The swirls vanished, but her eyes were even darker. He was sure of it.

"Do you know what that sword was used for, Lan?" Her voice came out serious and stern, not matching the look upon her face. "Anything powerful enough to destroy a daemon is surely more powerful than any army of men. The daemon killed thousands of people and the Darksearer killed it. In the right hands, that blade is the most powerful weapon on the face of Kalra. Do you still think lightly of it?"

"N--no. I didn't know, I'm sorry." He looked at her warily. She seemed on the verge of a breakdown. She looked very, very tired.

"Good," she said. She was looking toward his eyes, but not at them. It gave him the unsettling feeling that she was looking through him.

"I still don't understand what all of this has to do with you," he said.

"What you do not know can't hurt you," she said, then added, in a whisper, "or me." He almost did not catch those final two words, and doing so made him worry more than ever about her.

Ria started to stand. In a quick movement, Lan reached up and grabbed her shoulder, pulling her off balance. She fell to her knees. He had to know.

"No, Ria," he said sternly. "I need to know what is going on. I need to know who you think knows where the sword is." He paused, took a deep breath. "I need to know what I'm getting myself involved in."

She stared at him with her grey--*weren't they just brown?*--eyes. "Nothing, Lan. You aren't getting yourself involved in anything. If everything goes according to plan, I'll just walk out of your life again in a few days. Soon this will all be behind you." Her lips trembled as she said the words he could tell she did not want to say.

"I don't want that to happen." He put his arms around her. "I lost you once already, and I don't think I want to go through that again." She pulled herself from him, wiping the tears from her eyes and taking a deep breath.

"I know," she said. "I care about you too. But you have to understand--I'm leaving *because* I care. You aren't safe with me. I have to leave. Soon."

"Ria--"

"No, Lan. Don't argue with me. This is hard enough as it is. You understand why I'm leaving, don't you? If I don't, you're in as much danger as I am. Please say you understand."

"I . . . understand," he said reluctantly. "I'll miss you when you go," he uttered.

"I know, Lan. I'll miss you too." She bowed toward him, their foreheads touching. She touched the back of his neck with her hand. They stood like this for a few minutes until finally Lan stepped away from her. Her hands fell to his waist, holding him in place.

He felt the cold *sukrea* rubbing against his chest, irritating the burn it had given him when he had taken it from the fire. What was he supposed to do with it when she left?

"What about the *sukrea*?" he asked.

"When the time comes," she began, "it will be passed on by you to another as equally trustworthy. It will cause you no harm or ill fate as long as you keep it secret. Tell no one of its existence." She smiled at him. "I have faith in you, Lan. I know you can do this." She reluctantly pulled her arms back to her sides and stepped away from him.

He would not let her get away so easily, however. After the protest, he would keep a watchful eye on her and follow wherever she went. Not only had he come to care about her a lot in her absence since their first meeting, but what she claimed she needed to do was dangerous and he felt he could help her. He would be there for her, and never let her get away from him again. Deep down in his heart, though it had not yet blossomed, he felt the first hint of love. He would not let it die off this early.

#

Ga'ruk had been in town for three days now. The procession was tomorrow, and the plans with Osbick had gone

well. Ria would be his at last. All of her running would soon be over, and all of her secrets would be his.

Osbeck's plan was simple. He was going to plant some men of his own among the thieves and turn the protest into a violent revolt. An ensuing chaos would erupt during which Ria would either be captured by Osbeck's men or by the royal guardsmen. If the retainer's men got her first, then it was a simple matter of handing her over to Ga'ruk. If the royal guards got her, all Ga'ruk had to do was wait for her release. Either way, he would know exactly where she was. All he had to do was sit back and watch the procession, then praise Osbeck after he received his 'prize'.

Ga'ruk dozed off, dreaming happily of the events coming with the new dawn. Absolute power was as good as his. Dariakus would be pleased.

#

Lan sat in his room, unable to sleep. Too much was on his mind. Tomorrow was the big day. They had finally gotten everything planned, after only a little arguing.

It was dark in his room. Only two candles were lit in the small stone cubicle. He missed living in the now-ruined tower, being able to look out windows and see the stars above him and the city below. Now he was confined down here underground with everything else above him, recovering from his burns. Luckily he had only gotten the one scar on his chest. The rest of his flesh was very red, however, as if he had stood out under the bright summer sun too long. He was starting to peel in places. Gaelyn had assured him there would be no permanent damage, despite the uncomfortable itching.

He was irritated that he had to stay in this place while he healed. Tomorrow, Gaelyn assured him, he would be well enough to go outdoors. He was assisting them with their protest, but not in a major way. His job was to give a signal, and after that, he was going to go back to the university and see Headmaster Whitlow. Surely something had been worked out by now, and the headmaster would understand his current position with the Mages' Guild having been destroyed. Perhaps he could even see about transferring to the other institution of magic for humans--the tower at Rhienos. But all of that was for after he helped Ria get the Darksear blade back. Of course, that was assuming there were no more bizarre

accidents or twists of fate. They seemed quite commonplace in his life as of recent.

I can't even make my own decisions about my life anymore, he thought. Everything seems to be toying with me like I'm some sort of puppet. If Ohn exists, he must hate me. I care about Ria, but my father warned me away. Ohn only knows why. When she leaves this time, I'll follow. Damn my father's words. She needs help. I'll leave all of my hardships behind, and finally get something that I want, not what the world seems to want me to have.

Lan smiled as he drifted off into sleep.

#

He hates me, thought Esmond. I can see it in his eyes whenever he looks at me. The smiles he gives me are fake. In a way, he has every right to hate me, I suppose. I've always gotten him into trouble, and I dragged him back down here into the Thieves' Guild, the last place he wants to be.

Esmond blew out the candles in his room and sat down on his bed. Gaelyn had gone out for some air and hadn't returned yet. He sighed. *What have I done? I've used him as a crutch my entire life, someone to help me get into and out of trouble. What have I ever done for him? Nothing.*

Esmond slumped to his back and stared up into the darkness. *What am I doing here? Do I really want to do this forever? Do I want to spend my entire life stealing and living underground? No, I don't think I do. I don't know what I want. I wonder . . . what does Gaelyn really want?*

When sleep finally came to him, drying tears were on his cheeks.

#

Only a short while more, thought Ria. Only a short while of hiding here, then I can go on, knowing that one of the krea is in good hands. I only hope that Ga'ruk hasn't found me yet, and that tomorrow's confusion will completely throw him off. He knows I like to hide in large crowds, so he should be at the procession, looking for me. Everyone around me, including Lan, thinks that I'll be involved in the protest, just in case Ga'ruk had any spies following me here. Nobody knows that when tomorrow morning comes, I'll be gone.

But what about Lan? came another voice inside her mind.

What about him? she answered herself. *What does it matter if one person's feelings are hurt if it saves hundreds of thousands of lives? No, not one person's feelings--two. But it still doesn't justify letting all those people die! I can't let emotions tangle me up and prevent me from doing my duty.*

You want to give in, don't you? she tried to tell herself. *You want to put all of this stuff about the daemon and the blade and the sarn behind you and stay here with him. You even want to love him, don't you?*

Of course not, she tried to convince herself. *There's no way I could love someone after such a short time as I've known him. He's just a very trustworthy friend who is going to pass on the krea, and that's all--nothing more.*

You are lying to yourself.

It doesn't matter.

She slung her small bag over her shoulder and sneaked quietly out of the room. She paused in her trek only for a minute, in front of Lan's door. She could hear his heavy breathing as he slept. She pushed ever so slightly on the door, opening it just a crack. He had left his candles burning, and in the candlelight, she could see his peaceful face turned toward her. She silently rubbed the stone on the necklace he had given her. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

I can't, she told herself. *As much as I want to, I can't tell him what I feel. Not now, maybe not ever. The most I can do for him is go to Whitlow and ask about Rhienos. And pray, that when this is all over with, he'll still be there and will still want to see me.*

Ria pulled the door closed and continued on.

An hour later, she was reluctantly on her way to the Ceren to meet with Lisen. Then she would be meeting with the headmaster, and leaving Porthos. She had feelings she never thought she would possess in her lifetime, but despite how painful they were, duty came first. "Besides," she told herself, "the pain lets us know that we're alive."

#

"I'm leaving," she said.

"Leaving?" asked Lisen. "Tonight?"

"Yes." Ria walked over to the edge of the Ceren. Most of the lights in Porthos had been put out, except near the city center.

"Why? Have you found anything else out?"

"No," she said remorsefully as she sat down. "Nobody in the Thieves' Guild wanted to help. They thought I was crazy. All I know is that Osbick had the blade once. He didn't even know it. The sarn who came to take it from him were killed, not far from

here. The sword was never found." She paused, looking up at Lisen. "I'm going after it."

"I would come with you, but I cannot. My position on the council requires me to stay in Altkrea. After tomorrow, I must go back." Lisen sat next to her.

"I understand," Ria said. "I know about duty getting in the way of desire."

There was a light breeze in the night. Lisen looked up at the stars as the wind blew through her hair. The moon was setting on the horizon, over the forests far to the west. It was her last night here, and in a strange way, she did not want to leave. She had grown to enjoy living here, even if it was among humans. There were no large crowds, no sense of overwhelming responsibility as a council member, and no Doran.

Silently, she fingered the *krea* under her shirt as she thought. "Ria," she said. "It is dangerous for us to be here."

"What do you mean?" Ria asked.

"I know you have one of the *krea*."

Ria stood up quickly, looking down at Lisen. "I do not."

"I saw it when I met you here at the first of the month."

Lisen slowly stood to stand beside Ria. "I--I have one too," she said, pulling the blue teardrop out from under her shirt to show Ria. "I know I am not supposed to tell anyone about it, but this is a strange situation I am in. I know you have one, and I have one. That is two of the three. We should not be within a thousand leagues of one another."

"Lisen--" started Ria.

"I am serious. You should go ahead and go, Ria. It is for the best." She patted the younger girl on the back.

"Lisen," began Ria again. "I don't have it anymore. I had to pass it on. Ga'ruk was getting too close."

"Oh," Lisen said. "That is a relief. A minor one, considering the other issues at hand, but a welcome one nonetheless."

Ria started pacing back and forth along the edge of the Ceren. "What are things like back . . . home?"

"The same as usual, except for the missing blade. Doran is still up to something. If you want my opinion, she is the one who took Ol'tue."

"I would agree with that," said Ria, "but only out of spite. I hate that woman. But that's no reason to assume she's a traitor to our people. She was only doing what she thought was . . . right."

"I do not care!" shouted Lisen, startling Ria. "She ripped the council apart. I am surprised I did not get kicked out as well. Sometimes," she said, kicking her foot out over the edge. "I wish I had."

"Don't say that," said Ria. "You don't know what it's like."

"I know enough to know that anything is better than where I am at now. Having to fill my father's position next to Doran. She turned in our fathers on purpose. She knew she would be named to fill in the gap after they were removed. I took my father's place, she took yours." She put her arms on Ria's shoulders, stopping her pacing. "I wish you could be there in your rightful place," she said, staring Ria in the eyes. "I wish you had succeeded your father, not that vile woman."

"I do too, sometimes," Ria said. "Then I'd never know all I know now. I'd never have gotten tangled with the sarn. I'd never have to wonder where I was going to sleep for the night or how I was going to afford food. And I'd never have to wonder about you." She pulled Lisen close, hugging her. "I miss you," she said, tears forming in her eyes.

"I miss you too, Ria. I wish everything was different. I wish I could go with you, or take you back with me."

"I know, but not now." Ria pulled away from her. "There are more important things to do. Perhaps someday I can come back, and we can be carefree and run through the halls of the council building like we did when we were young."

"Perhaps." Lisen stood still, holding back an urge to shrug off her duty and follow Ria anyway. They had been best friends from birth, and it was hard not knowing where she was anymore, or even if she was still alive.

"I should be going now," Ria said. "But I'll see you again." She slipped a *renol* dagger out of her pocket and held it out to Lisen, hilt-first.

"A tracer," whispered Lisen.

"Keep it. And like I said, I'll see you again." Ria smiled as Lisen took the dagger and slid it under her belt. She then turned and started walking to the stairs that led down into the Ceren.

"Ohn illumine you, Ria."

"Ohn illumine you, Lisen."

Lisen watched Ria until her head disappeared beneath the roof of the Ceren. She squeezed the hilt of the dagger tightly, staring back out at the city. She stood there until she saw Ria exit the Ceren and start down the main road leading toward the eastern gate where the university lay. She sighed, released her grip on the dagger, and began heading back to her quarters. Tomorrow was going to be a busy day.

Chapter Thirteen

The sun gleamed off the polished armor of hundreds of guards in the warm spring morning air as trumpets sounded, starting the procession. The guards, bedecked in the frilly armor and crimson cloaks worn for such important events, lined both sides of the main street leading from the Ceren to the city gates in order to prevent anyone from breaking through and causing a disturbance. During the initial procession, some foolish boy had ridden a horse right into a carriage carrying Lord Roland. The boy was never caught.

Lisen was dressed in her full *renol* armor, including the long, sloped helmet that extended back from her head, the sides of it hanging down nearly to her chest. She had her face shield extended, which shrouded her head mostly in darkness. Mesefu soldiers wearing their helmets had always reminded her of strange birds with their heads cocked backward. *Now you look just like one of them*, she realized. It was not a discomfoting realization, however. She felt she blended in better if nobody could see her face--there were still many humans who harbored a deep hatred for her kind, as she had discovered rather unfortunately during her month-long stay in this city. Of course, from looking at her armor they all knew what she was, but having her face shielded by the sharp guard of the helmet still made her feel more secure.

The deep green plates that covered her chest and legs were reflecting away a good deal of the sunlight, but she was beginning to sweat. The salty smell of her body wafted up into the enclosed helmet and she crinkled her nose. She thought a simple spell to

cool herself off, welcoming the relief that it brought from the heat. *Unfortunately*, she thought, looking at the extravagantly-clad royal guards lining the streets in their full plate steel armor and velvet purple robes with gold trim, *they have no such means to cool themselves. How can they stand this heat?*

An angry shout brought her attention to the protestors in the crowd. They were scattered everywhere, and their numbers had been growing in the hour since she had arrived. Many held signs condemning the parliament's actions on passing new tax laws. Tax was something Lisen had never had to worry about. Money did not exist for the mesefu. They had forsaken that hindrance thousands of years ago, realizing that it only bred corruption and held back progress. She knew it upset the people here to have to pay higher taxes, however, and it scared her. It was obvious that not all of the protestors were sober, and trouble could break out at any second. One of the drunken protestors started shouting obscenities at the gates of the Ceren, shaking a large wooden sign at it. On the sign was written "Death to the Parliament." Lisen shivered in fear. These people did not have mesefu upbringing--life held less value for them.

Sliding to her left to fill in a gap in the line of plated soldiers, Lisen nervously watched the procession get underway.

#

Ga'ruk was standing behind a row of minor noblemen, who were in turn standing behind rows of city guardsmen. All throughout the crowd were protestors, most drunken, waving signs about. He had been admiring the Ceren's ornately carved iron doors, which had just swung open, when a mesefu soldier slid in front of him, blocking his view. He noticed that there were several more armored mesefu in the crowd standing around him, *renol* lances in their hands. They must be here on behalf of the mesefu ambassador who had come to the parliament session. What could the mesefu want with the humans? Were they trying to get their help to search for their ancient blade? Ga'ruk laughed. The Darksearer would be his before the humans even had time to begin looking.

He settled down to watch the procession and the chaos destined to follow, raising the eye protector on his helmet to get a clearer view. He felt uncomfortable wearing the armor of humans,

and longed for his bone plates and his skull sash. He could never wear it in this city, though. Too many people knew what sarn leaders wore. A simple sarn could pass through Porthos without the people causing much of a disturbance, but a sarn wearing a clan chieftain sash? He would be shot on sight. The humans had grown tolerant over the years, but not tolerant enough to allow a sarn wearing the bones of their deceased to stroll down their streets.

Ga'ruk smiled, thinking about how the humans considered themselves to be at relative peace with the sarn. Little did they know, all of that was about to change. Soon, he would have everything he needed. Soon the daemon would reign supreme with him, Ga'ruk, at his side.

#

She had left him without saying goodbye--again. Ria had fled the Guild last night and taken all of her things with her. Why had she done that? He understood that she was being followed and was only doing it for his own good, but couldn't she at least have let him know that she was gone? There was no way he could ever follow her now--she had even taken the dagger with her. It had been his only link to her. Without it, he feared that he had lost her forever.

The royal trumpeters announced the beginning of the procession, and shortly thereafter the gates of the Ceren began opening. After their royal fanfare, the trumpeters began playing the Pyranian national anthem at a march tempo. Lan had heard the song several times as he was growing up, but did not remember any of the words. It was rarely sung anymore anyway. It was mainly played for formal gatherings such as this. He did hear, however, a low mumbling coming from all around him that sounded like bystanders attempting to sing along. Their words were lost to him through the noise of the protestors and the general murmur of the non-singing crowd.

It was hot. Lan tugged the neck of his shirt to get a bit of air. Summer was definitely here. He shouldn't have worn his grey traveling robe today. He should have packed it in his bag. He could feel the slickness as he moved his arms from the sweat. Yes, he definitely should have left his cloak off.

Lan looked down the street to Gaelyn and a group of thieves. It was their job to block off the street after the last carriage

in the procession was out of the Ceren's gates. She seemed unnaturally calm today and had not said a word to him. Perhaps she felt the same thing he felt about what they were doing today--fear.

All he wanted to do was give the sign he had agreed to give and head on to the university. At first he had wanted no part in this fiasco until he remembered how grateful he was to the thieves and Took for helping him out--twice. It was a small role to play, and it did not directly bring any harm to anybody. He would be out of here and through with this part of his life shortly after the sun hit high noon.

He glanced across the street from Gaelyn and saw Esmond, standing near the Ceren. He was to relay the message to Lan that the last carriage had left the building while Gaelyn's people made their move. Lan would then signal Took. Took was positioned near the city gates with men of his own who would charge out in front of the first carriage upon Lan's signal. Combined with Gaelyn's men, the noblemen would be surrounded and forced to listen to the people's discontent with the new tax laws, and hopefully convincing them to at least consider what they had done.

The crowds began to boo and jeer as the first carriage rolled out of the Ceren. Lan tried to shake away his nervousness as he waited, brushing beads of sweat from his forehead.

#

Esmond could see the procession beginning now. The trumpets near his ears had deafeningly announced that to him a few moments ago, and had sent a ringing pain through his head. He covered his ears with his hands, trying to keep them from bursting. He reminded himself to be more careful in choosing a place to stand from now on. Shortly after his head stopped vibrating, the iron doors of the Ceren's main gate groaned open, and a squad of six guards began marching out followed by the first carriage. The shouts from the crowds were anything but pleasant.

He looked to see Lan in position down the main street. Lan was standing silently, straining to see over the lines of soldiers and low-ranking noblemen in front of him. He nodded an acknowledgment in Esmond's direction, and Esmond nodded back. He then turned to look through the mass of people in front of him to see if Gaelyn and her men were in their position across the street.

There she stood, talking nonchalantly to a few of them, blending in with the rest of the onlookers.

Something caught his eye before he looked back to the procession. Near Lan he saw the glint of a faceplate being raised. The man to whom the faceplate belonged was wearing some fancy plate armor and had a large broadsword sheathed at his side. His helmet was forged of the same metal as his armor, and had two large horns on either side of it, with a smaller one in the middle. He appeared to be working with the guards--a small group of mesefu soldiers stood directly in front of him.

The man raised his hands over his helmeted face to block the glare from the sun and revealed something Esmond had never before seen in his life--the pale green skin of a sarn.

Worry coursed through Esmond's veins. The incident that occurred back at Lan's home had involved sarn. Was this man after Lan? Perhaps after Ria? Should he bring Lan's attention to the sarn? He knew he was probably overreacting, but one could never be too careful. Esmond started to step forward and signal to get Lan's attention, when suddenly he felt a sharp pain in the small of his back.

"Don't move or I'll kill you where you stand," said a coarse voice. Esmond stiffened like a tree and his stomach began churning.

"Wh--what do you want?" he asked nervously.

"Someone wants to speak with you. Now turn around. Slowly." The last word of the rough voice was accented by a sharp jab of whatever was being held against Esmond's back. He winced, a tear of pain quickly forming in his eye as he turned around. A dirty man with blonde, disheveled hair stood hunkered over before him, holding out a rusty knife. A pouch stuffed with what looked like geln hung by his side.

"Come with me and you won't die here. An old *friend* awaits your company." He ended the sentence with a chuckle, and began tugging at Esmond's arm. Esmond glanced nervously toward Lan. He could no longer see him through the shifting crowd of people. "Don't even think of crying for help, because we know who you are and what you did. We could get the guards down on your worthless hide in a heartbeat, and I don't think you'd like that, would you?"

Who was he talking about? *We know who you are and what you did.* He had never seen this rough character before in his life.

"It won't be necessary to take him anywhere. I am already here." Esmond recognized that voice, and he slowly raised his face to meet the man's who had just spoken. It was the face of the nobleman that had framed Lan, chased them from the university, and had taken Lan's finger. It was Lord Osbick. The man had a new horse this time, a light brown one.

"You," Esmond growled. "You bastard."

"You see, even in a city of this size, nobody is safe. Not even a *street-rat* like yourself. I wanted to be the one to punish you, but Lord Roland, whose carriage you destroyed when you stole my horse, requested that he deal with you personally." Osbick bent down, whispering something in the ear of another ruffian, one Esmond had not seen at first, and the man took off through the crowd, out of Esmond's sight. "Lucky for you," the nobleman said, almost sadistically, "he is only third in line, so the anxiety of the wait should be over with soon. He is most displeased with you. That carriage was expensive, and he had to have a doctor fix his broken arm after the crash. Lord Roland is not fond of pain."

Esmond did not know what he should say. How could he ever get out of a situation like this? He had been caught, and he was sure that the ruffian man had run off to get the guards to come arrest him. He had ruined the plans for the day, and there was no way to warn the others. The protest would fail and the laws would stand no chance of being repealed. Accepting defeat but refusing to go silently, he swallowed his fears and decided to try Osbick's patience. There was nothing left to lose.

"I was wonderin' if you ever found your old horse, Mister Osbick, sir." It was all he could do to keep from laughing. Nervousness made him like that. "Last I heard, he had a pretty nasty fall. Ran almost head on into another horse. Of course, bein' at the head of such a wonderful organization like the Shadow, I'm sure you had the funds to more than--"

"Be quiet, scum, or I'll have you killed right now. I would hate to rob my Lord Roland of his chance to meet with you," Osbick scowled. "The only thing I want to hear from you is your name, so I can take pride in knowing whose life I helped cut short today."

"I don't think I want to tell you," he said. Osbick's breathing got faster and deeper. Esmond just smiled. If death by Osbick or Lord Roland was imminent anyway, why give in and do what they wanted? As long as he never gave up, there was always a chance of escape. Lan had taught him that. Esmond calmly turned around and began walking back toward the edge of the crowd near the soldiers, where he could once again see his friend in the distance, looking his way frantically, fearing he had lost him. He waved to him as the point of the knife touched his back again, this time more forcefully. Though he could not see it, Esmond knew that blood had been drawn.

"Get back over here, boy. My boss ain't finished with you ye--"

Esmond kicked back as hard as he could, right into one of the scruffy man's knees. With a grunt, the man doubled over backward and fell to the ground. Esmond turned toward Lan and--hoping the ensuing chaos would allow him to flee--gave the sign that would trigger the thieves into action.

#

Lan saw Esmond's gesture and looked back at him questioningly. *It's too early! What's he doing?* They were supposed to wait until the last carriage was at Esmond's side, but the procession had only just begun. *Something must be wrong*, he thought, then Esmond vanished from his sight. *Yes, something must be wrong.*

The only problem with giving the sign to Took now was that the two divisions of thieves would not be able to surround anywhere near all of the noblemen's carriages, and there was a good chance that the guards, combined with the nobles' escorts, would surround them, effectively ending their plans. No matter what had happened to Esmond, Lan decided to wait. Perhaps he had only stepped out of view, and besides, it would not be long until the carriages were where they needed them to be--

The trumpeters abruptly stopped. A low murmur arose from the crowd, curious as to what was going on. Lan noticed that the carriages had stopped as well. The third carriage had come to a halt near Esmond's position, and its door was opening. A tall, aged gentleman stepped out, in robes of the finest black cloth, with a large plumed hat, the color of the midnight sky. His arm was wrapped in a sling of what appeared to be red silk; he vaguely

reminded Lan of Lord Osbick. The man turned toward the crowd on Esmond's side of the street and began speaking. "Bring him to me." The man's voice was cold and harsh.

Lan could never have expected what happened next. A scruffy-looking man stepped out of the crowd toward the well-dressed gentleman, with Esmond clutched at his side, and a knife pointed at his back. It was difficult for him to restrain himself from shouting out to his friend. The man holding Esmond stopped about a stride from the nobleman, holding Esmond out toward the regal man by the shoulders. Esmond stood there silently, showing no signs of struggle. Another nobleman stepped out of the crowd clothed the same as the first and riding a brown horse. Lan could not see him too well from his vantage point, but he looked vaguely familiar.

The newcomer spoke. "Here he is, Lord Roland, the one who caused your broken arm and discomfort no more than a month ago. He is the one who knocked your carriage over, and he is the one who stole my horse."

It was Osbick, the head of the Shadow.

He noticed some soldiers coming up around the carriage, adding to the small group that were already there as escorts, and one of them began talking to Roland and Esmond. They were too far off and the rumbling of the crowd was too loud for Lan to make anything out clearly. There was no way their plan could go on flawlessly now, but his friend was in trouble, and the distraction of the thieves flooding into the street just might buy him enough time to escape.

He turned to Gaelyn, but instead of giving the signal, he let his jaw drop. The thieves were no longer in position alongside the road--they were already in the street, and they were not acting like peaceful protesters. They were acting like raving lunatics.

#

What was going on? Just a few moments ago, a man had run out of the crowd on the opposite side of the street and up to Lord Roland's carriage, and the procession had stopped. Roland himself had gotten out of the carriage and began demanding to see someone, and then a roughish man had pushed someone out of the crowd, followed by Lord Roland's retainer, Osbick. Here was her chance to get close to him. She was not about to pass it up.

Perhaps whatever was going on would have something to do with what she needed to know.

Lisen spoke to the human and mesefu guards around her. "Come on, follow me."

"This is no problem for us, girl," said one of the human guards. "They've got it under control."

"You will not speak to me in that way," she said, sternly. "I have been assigned as your superior officer for the time being, mesefu or not, and you will do as I say. Now follow me." She stared the man down, nearly growling. He stared back, an angry squint in his eye.

"Fine. But don't think I'm making a habit out of listening to blessed gats." He spat the last word out.

"Blasphemy," Lisen said. The use of the word 'blessèd' bothered her more than the slang derogatory words. Nobody mocked Ohn to a mesefu. Especially not those who had stolen the mesefu religion and eroded it into a laughable husk of the beautiful thing it truly was. This was not the time for religion, however. She could not miss this chance to get near Osbick.

They stepped out into the street toward Roland's carriage. Nobody was supposed to stop the procession barring a major catastrophe, yet Roland had stopped it to confer with his retainer, Osbick, and a young man. Something was not quite right, and Lisen felt that Osbick was behind it all.

The sly retainer began speaking. "Here he is, Lord Roland . . ." Lisen and her soldiers were nearing the back of Roland's carriage while Osbick, not noticing them, continued his speech.

"You take the back, and you the left," she whispered to them. They did as she had instructed as she took the front side where all the commotion was.

"Are you sure that this is him?" Roland was looking at Osbick. He had no time to answer, however, as Lisen broke in.

"What is going on here, sir? The procession is not to be stopped at all, for security reasons."

"Stay out of this, gat. It is none of your business." Roland returned his attention to his retainer and the boy. Nobody treated her like that. Twice in less than five minutes humans had insulted her, one of them a high-ranking human dignitary! Did even their

nobility not know how to treat others with respect? She would not put up with it any longer.

Lisen was about to demand that the two nobles have more respect for her kind when a new sight caught her attention. Armed men, streaming out into the street in the distance. The protestors had just gotten violent.

#

This was insanity. Somehow Esmond had been caught by Osbick, of all people. Of all the infernal things that could happen today, this was the worst. There went the whole idea of protest, because the procession had stopped its proceeding, and there was no way to surround the troops now. Why did he always get caught up in crazy, moonstruck situations like this? He guessed it was something that came with being leader of the Thieves' Guild.

Took was contemplating something else to do, when--much to his surprise--he spotted his men charging out into the street at Gaelyn's end. Was she moonstruck as well? This was downright gods-damned *awful!*

The thieves were charging toward him from their position far down the street near the Ceren. They were not supposed to be doing that. They were supposed to form a line, not maniacally run-

-

As the first thieves reached the first carriage, they began slicing at the guards standing there. This was not called for at all. This was not part of the plan. Nobody killed under his command. *Nobody.*

The guards along the sides of the street came charging out, but they too were pushed back by his people. *Dear Ohn, don' let 'em truly be me people.* These people were extremely well trained with swords--better trained than he knew any of the thieves in the guild to be.

And then, as they drew ever closer, Took recognized some of them. *Osbick's men. Gods-damned Shadow! E'en got some o' my men helpin' 'em!* It was time for these traitors to receive a good pounding. Calling to his men to follow him, he charged toward the traitors--his enemies--shouting all the way. Charging out in public was not the wisest of things for him to do, but he was tired of his people being given a bad name by the Shadow. It had to end here, even if it meant his exposure and arrest.

#

The thieves had come storming out swinging like madmen and attacking everyone in sight. On top of that, Gaelyn was nowhere to be seen. What had happened to her? Had these people taken her and her men away? Surely these were not the thieves she was supposed to be leading . . . but Lan knew they were. He recognized many of them as people he had seen in the guild during his past few days of recuperation there. Something incredibly odd was going on.

A rain of arrows came flying out of the crowd near the battle, all headed toward the place Esmond was standing. Lan shouted to his friend, trying to warn him. The first few struck the side of the carriage harmlessly, but then a couple hit the driver, who fell off of his seat clutching his bleeding throat, the arrow shaft protruding between his fingers. Archers mounted atop the carriage started firing at the attackers, shouting for the crowds to disperse to avoid harm. Osbick turned to flee as an arrow struck his horse. The beast reared back, throwing him off onto the ground. Esmond broke free of his captor's grip and ran around behind the carriage to safety, out of Lan's sight. Roland opened the door to step back inside, but an arrow found its way into his skull, and he slumped down to the ground in a bloody mess. Osbick crawled back into the crowd and vanished among the panicked people. Lan swore he saw a grin on the man's face.

A scream broke out--a blood-curdling one with an overtone of vengeance in it, and Lan turned to see Took as its source, leading his men out of the crowd on the other side of the street and down toward the melee. What should he do? Turn and run? Stay and fight? He could not do anything battle-worthy and would only end up getting himself killed if he got involved. Besides, all he was bound to do was give the sign, and then he was free of the thieves to go do as he pleased. But could he leave his best friend in a predicament like this?

Lan stepped out into the street to get a better look at the situation. Armed men were falling everywhere as the melee moved slowly in his direction. Everything seemed to be moving in slow motion, as if the air had thickened like tree sap. The street and the spectacle in it took on a surreal air.

A group of mesefu guards were starting to form a ring around the battle, firing strange glowing sparks into the melee from small devices in their hands. Whenever someone was hit by the sparks, they immediately dropped to the ground unconscious. *Magic*, Lan thought. *Weapons made out of magic . . .*

He saw Took deftly swimming through the battle, withdrawing his blade from the chest of one of the traitors. A volley of arrows flew his way, and Lan dropped face-first to the ground, attempting to keep from becoming a casualty. It felt like he fell forever before he hit the ground. One of the mesefu guards raised a hand and the arrows veered toward the ground where they crashed harmlessly in a cloud of splinters. *Esmond in the middle of the fighting, the guild members turning traitor, Gaelyn vanishing, and Osbick grinning at the death of his lord. What on Kalra is going on?*

#

Roland had been killed as her master had hoped. The protest had been horribly sabotaged, and Took had charged out to fight the traitors, revealing himself to the guards for the first time in years. Again, as her master had hoped. Everything was working according to his wishes, and only one part of the plan remained--injuring Took to insure his capture.

Gaelyn was not sure she wanted to do this. Osbick had disregarded her request that Esmond not be hurt, although she had not known that it was Esmond who had stolen her master's horse. Regardless, he was out there among the fighting, and it scared her to death.

Her Father had promised her anything she wanted if she could help pull this operation off successfully. She had told him she wanted freedom, and he had promised it. After injuring Took, she would find Esmond and they would escape, free from the confines of her master's wishes and Took's underground guild. She did not want to hurt Took--he had been nothing but nice to her since he had taken her into the Thieves' Guild. Who did she owe more to, Osbick or Took?

It doesn't matter, she told herself. *This is your doorway to freedom, and you'd be a fool to let it get slammed in your face.*

But isn't there some other way? she asked herself. *Those mesefu weapons . . . surely they'll stop him. But if they don't, I may as well kill myself than suffer Father's wrath . . .*

As she loaded the crossbow, she prayed to Ohn that Esmond would not see her fire this shot. She knew he would never forgive her.

#

It was hot in all the fighting. It always was, as Took could remember it. Battles were always frightening and hot. He had sworn to never again get himself involved in anything like this, but someone somewhere had made a drastic mistake, and they were going to pay. Things were getting bad in the battle, and there seemed to be no way of stopping it short of killing all of the traitors. He did not want that--some of these men likely had wives, or even children. Why did people work for an organization like the Shadow? How could someone live their life knowing that they brought nothing but misery to others, merely for their own benefit?

And then he noticed the mesefu. A ring of *renol*-clad soldiers standing around the melee, firing magical bolts into the chaos. People were dropping left and right. Surely they weren't killing anyone . . .

Took felt a sword chip at his armor--he had gotten careless. He turned to see a guard. He refused to kill the guards. They were just doing their duty, and he was trying to help them fight off the Shadow and the traitors. He tried to speak to the guard. "We're not tryin--"

That was all he could get out before he received another sharp blow, this one in his lower back. People were screaming and falling all around him, and he noticed as he turned to face the person who had just hit him that there was blood running down his arm. His own blood, flowing from a wound in his arm. The man who had struck him was growling at him with an angry stare. One of the Shadow. Took shouted in disgust and thrust his sword deep into the body of his enemy.

"Don' hit the guards, boys!" he shouted, swinging his sword around to strike an oncoming armed soldier with the flat of the blade. It was a technique he had learned as a child, a way to strike a man and stun him without harming him.

All around him was the feel and stench of death. Men were literally being torn to shreds before his very eyes and some even by his own hands. He felt little remorse at the death of the Shadow. Because of them, he was the most wanted man in all of Pyran.

Their sole existence was to undo the good that he had done. They had to pay.

A thought flashed in his mind--he had not seen Gaelyn yet. *Hadn't she been with these people? What's happened to her?*

The battle was moving ever so slowly up the street in the direction of the city gates. Took nearly tripped over the bodies of slain or dying men, both soldiers and thieves and Shadow alike, as he continued fighting for his survival and the survival of the men around him. He realized that if he got caught, he would most likely be killed or banished. Banishment had become more popular these days, since it effectively got rid of unwanted problems without all of the costs of imprisonment or protest over the death penalty. The neighboring nations did not care for it much, however--they did not like having other peoples' problems forced upon them.

After several more minutes of the seemingly endless blood bath, Took came face to face with another armored guard, a female mesefu, judging by the *renol* chestplate. "I mean you no harm!" he shouted over the violent sounds of the raging battle. "I'm on yer side". A sharp pain arced through his back and his vision blurred. He turned, falling, catching a glimpse of Gaelyn. She was standing in the crowd, lowering a crossbow. "No . . ." he uttered as he hit the ground. His own most-trusted had turned against him. He felt more defeated than ever before. "Dear Ohn, not *ye*, lass."

#

More guards were coming in now from other areas of the street, and alarm bells were ringing all around the city. The guards were confused about the situation, and started hacking away at the thieves who were trying to help, not hurt. Lan noticed that Took never once killed a guard. The burly man shouted something to his men about trying to do the same. Lan watched him try to tell a mesefu guard in beautiful green armor and a remarkable sloped helmet that he was trying to help, but as he opened his mouth, a crossbow bolt flew out of the crowd on Lan's side of the street and struck Took in the back. He fell to the ground and did not move.

"No!" shouted Lan, starting to run toward him, but he tripped over something and landed face down on the cobblestone road. He coughed, brushing the dust from his face, and rolled over. Standing over him was a sarn with a broadsword drawn and a familiar helmet on his head.

"I don't suggest you try and run. I know that you have spoken with Ria, and I know who you are, Alexander. If you follow me, we'll go discuss everything she told you." He jabbed lightly at Lan's chest with the sword. "Everything." Lan recognized the sarn. Ga'ruk. He screamed and started to scurry backward. "Not so fast," the sarn growled, reaching for him.

Lan slowly stood up, looking at the ground while trying to devise a plan for escape. A high-pitched squeal broke his conversation. He looked up to see Esmond standing where Ga'ruk had stood moments ago. He looked down to see the green-skinned man lying on the ground holding his hands over his groin, moaning. Lan smiled in relief.

"C'mon!" shouted Esmond, trying to be heard over the crowds of people and the cries of the battle. "He won't stay that way for long. We've gotta go help Took. Someone shot him! I've got to make sure he's all right. Let's go, before greeny here wakes up."

They bolted down the street past the battle to where Took was lying. As they approached, he slowly opened his eyes. "Get me up now, an' let me at her. I'm gonna kill her when I get me hands on that trait'rous li'l body o' hers." Lan helped the big man to his feet.

"What happened?" asked Esmond, looking fearfully back toward the melee that they had passed. More guardsmen were coming in, and the fight was breaking up. Most of the battlers had been subdued by the mesefu stun weapons. Soon the place would be surrounded with guards and they would be brought in for questioning. He only hoped they believed Took when he told them about the situation, that he had only charged to attack the traitors. Deep inside, however, he knew they would never believe him, even if they had known his very thoughts at that moment, for he was one of their most wanted. He was the leader of the Thieves' Guild, and he would be lucky if they did not execute him.

"She . . . she shot me wi' a confounded crossbow!" Took started to break toward the panicked crowd on the side of the street.

"Who?" asked Lan, trying to hold the large man back.
"Who shot you?"

Took shook with angry tears. "Gaelyn."

#

Took had spoken the name clear, yet Esmond was still unsure he had heard it correctly. *There's no way*, he thought. *She couldn't have done it. She wasn't in on any of this traitor business. I know her! She's not like that at all!*

As if she had heard her name spoken by Took, she came running up to them out of the crowd, no crossbow to be seen on her anywhere. "Are you all right? The thieves that were with me didn't want to listen, and they charged anyway. They were--"

"You were in on this and now ye're gonna pay fer it!" Took growled and leaped for Gaelyn. "I HATE TRAITORS!" She screamed and turned to run, but hit an armored mesefu soldier instead.

"Halt!" the soldier commanded in a rather feminine voice, and that she did. Gaelyn stood looking up at the soldier with fear in her eyes, and tears beginning to form. Took had not stopped yet, though, and was about to charge right into her. The mesefu soldier quickly twirled Gaelyn to the side and dropped to the ground, one leg stretched out in front, one leg behind. She planted her hands on the ground and twirled her legs into Took's, dropping him to the ground. She twirled back up onto her knees and stood over Took, securing his hands behind his back with manacles. Esmond had never seen anyone move so fast.

A small squadron of city guards came up and a few minutes later, Lan, Gaelyn, himself, and a few other captured thieves who moments ago had been lying unconscious from the mesefu weapons, were in manacles, hands behind their backs. They had been arrested and were to be brought in for questioning.

They were led away from the fight area with strict orders to remain silent. The battle had finally dissipated, leaving many slain in its wake. The guards took them toward the Ceren, a place Esmond had always wanted to see, but not in this fashion. Several other groups of soldiers were collecting prisoners and leading them in small groups toward the Ceren as well.

The crowds on the side of the street had gathered again, watching the prisoners with horrified looks. Many women and children rushed out into the streets weeping over slain loved ones and shouting curses at the prisoners. Several of the enraged

mourners had to be held back by the soldiers to keep them from hurting any of the prisoners. What on Kalra had he gotten himself into this time? This was well over even his head.

As he was passing into the doors of the large fortress, he thought he spied the sarn that had confronted Lan in the street banging his fists together in anger. There was obviously something more to what had happened today than simple treachery. He had heard the sarn asking Lan about Ria, and the sarn had even known Lan's name.

#

"Lan?" the mesefu guard asked. The voice was feminine, and his heart sank as he recognized it. Lisen.

"Y--yes?" he asked as the face guard on her face mysteriously slid into her helmet in two halves.

"I--I cannot *believe* this!" she stammered. "I thought you were different! I never thought you would get caught up in something like this! What came over you? How long have you been helping these criminals?"

Lan wanted to say something. He wanted to tell her the truth, but he knew she would not listen to him now. Not like this. He just hung his head in shame--in a way he *was* guilty. He had agreed to help them with this foolish protest, even if it was just to give one small signal and then walk away. As much as he wanted to deny it, he was just as tied up in this mess as the rest of them.

And then he saw the *renol* dagger. It had to be Ria's dagger. Lan had only gotten a glance at the dagger that hung from Lisen's belt before she silently moved in front of him, out of sight, but he was sure it was the one Ria had left with him for so long. There could be no mistaking the ruby-hilted *renol* blade for any other. He had to find a way to talk to Lisen again when he got the chance. If she would *give* him a chance.

#

She wasn't here during any of this! That damned half-breed bitch must have fled sometime before the procession this morning. Ga'ruk walked around the ruins of the battle looking for signs or clues. Nothing. She had never been here, and his only link to her was now being led into the Ceren for questioning. The wizard boy, the one who had taken her from him once, had not seemed willing to talk. Ga'ruk

could have gotten the information he needed, however, if that other annoyance had not kicked him in the groin.

He began pounding his fists together in anger, watching the group being led into the fortress. The girl named Gaelyn, Osbick's spy with the Thieves' Guild, had let him down. She had failed to inform Osbick or himself of the girl's disappearance. She would pay dearly for that. Ga'ruk would have his men keep track of Alexander and Gaelyn. He would eventually get the information from the boy then dispose of him to ensure that he did not start any further trouble, and he would personally dispose of Gaelyn for her failure. Afterward, he would track down the half-breed, take what he needed from her, and do away with her as well.

As the gates of the Ceren closed, Ga'ruk silently laughed.

Chapter Fourteen

The stone floor, covered in places with scum and fungus from ages past, did not make a very comfortable seat. There were no windows anywhere in the dungeon walls--the only light was a ghostly glow seeping through the wrought-iron bars from the flickering torches in the hallway. Lan stared vacantly out into the amber light.

Esmond and Took were locked into the first cell on the left from the stairway. Lan was in the one just beyond theirs. Gaelyn had been placed across the hallway from Lan in a cell alone. They had been identified as being Took's chief accomplices. The others who were captured were being held in the city jail, a few blocks from the Ceren.

Lan was staring intently at the torch across the hall. Even with four torches on the walls, it was still considerably dark down here. There was not much noise, aside from Took's heavy breathing and random drops of water that fell from the ceiling. Lan felt it was almost *too* calm in here right now.

He silently fingered the *sukrea*, amazed that they had not recognized it while searching him. *Keon and Ria were right*, he thought. *Very few people must know what these look like, assuming they know of their existence at all.* They had eyed the ancient artifact with curiosity, but Lan had managed to convince them it was merely an old pendant he had been given as a gift. *I didn't really lie*, he mused. Why was he worried about *lying* now? He had been accused of *far* worse.

Fear had not set in yet. The whole situation still seemed unreal, as if it was happening to someone else and he was just an innocent onlooker. The realization of the immense trouble he was in was the farthest thing from his mind now. Everything was, actually. He tried not to think about it, sitting there in the eerie glow of the torches, silently rubbing the *sukrea*.

Took's voice broke the dead silence. "Ye planned all o' this, didn't ye?" His voice came out in a low growl that unnerved Lan. He had never heard the man angry before--from the sound of it, he never wanted to hear it again, and hoped it would fade soon.

Gaelyn seemed oblivious to the world. She had not stirred at all when Took spoke. "I be talkin' to ye, Gaelyn." His voice maintained the dark sound.

"What are you talking about?" She sounded distant, yet Lan could see her just a few steps across the hall, standing behind the bars of her cell with her hands wrapped around them. Her eyes were empty as she stared down at the floor.

"Ye know damned well what I be talkin' 'bout," growled Took. He could hear movement coming from Took's cell. Lan felt his stomach twisting up into a ball. Something bad was about to happen. *Well, it can't be too bad*, he told himself. *There are bars separating them.*

Gaelyn calmly looked in Took's direction, but did not meet his heated gaze. "I didn't do anything." Her voice was light, quiet. Lan had to strain to hear every word. It was almost as if Gaelyn was dead and some airy spirit was talking through her. "I had nothing to do with it," she near-whispered.

Lan wondered at Took's suspicion of Gaelyn and tried to remember where he had seen her during the ruckus earlier, or if he had even seen her at all. The last he could recall was just before the fighting broke out. He had no recollection of her fighting or being anywhere near the skirmish. It did not mean she was not involved, however--Lan had been too preoccupied with other things to pay attention to every detail at the time. He sighed. There was nothing he could say in her defense, whether or not Took was right.

"I saw yer face as ye dropped that crossbow, lassie." Took's voice was angry, but at the same time a hint of sadness could be heard within it. Lan remembered Took saying something about her attacking him, but could he have known for sure? He had been

immersed in battle--there was no way Took could be sure of who had shot him.

"You had a look o' accomplishment on yer face. A smirk o' satisfaction. If I didn't know any better . . ." Took trailed off. For a moment he was quiet, but then his breathing got heavier and faster, and when he spoke, Lan could have sworn it was the voice of the Master of the Lake himself, if he existed. "I always knew there be a spy in the guild. An' now that I think back on it more, Osbick seems to've had the upper hand since about the time I took ye off the streets. Ye're the spy, aren't ye? Ye're workin' with Osbick an' his blessed Shadow! Dear Ohn, Gaelyn, do ye know what ye've done? Countless innocent men an' women have been slaughtered 'cause of that damned man an' his depraved lackeys! Do ye know how many defenseless children were forced out onto the streets because their families were killed off by the Shadow? Did ye not see all those weepin' an' mournin' people in the street after the fight today? I started the Thieves' Guild to help people like that, an' here ye are, sneakin' in helpin' to destroy it! How could ye possibly do that? Ye know the hell some o' the people in the guild go through! How could ye stand to help a man who brings even *more* people to that misery?"

Took was moving again. Lan heard a dull clang as the burly man put his hands around the cell bars. *She worked for Osbick? Dear Ohn, that's terrible! I wonder if Esmond knew . . .* Lan rubbed the place where his finger had once been as he thought bitterly of the man who had cut it off.

"I didn't do anything," came Gaelyn's wraith-like voice.

There was a loud banging sound as Took let out a low-pitched, incoherent growl. The sound came again a second later. It sounded like he was banging against the bars of the cell. *What is going on over there?*

Suddenly Esmond shouted "Dear Ohn! GUARDS!" Lan wondered what was going on. As the sound of metal wrenching hit Lan's ears, he realized what was happening. The bars on the cells, he had noticed, were in need of replacement. They had been old, rusted, and weak. Not weak enough for the average person to break, but for someone of Took's build, the task would be difficult but not impossible.

A bar crashed past Lan's cell, clanging to the ground. He saw Took charging toward Gaelyn. "I don' like liars and traitors. 'Specially those who force others out o' life an' into death!" As that last word came from Took's mouth, Gaelyn shrieked and started to jerk away, but she was not fast enough. Took grabbed one of her hands before she could get it away. She grunted as he jerked her to him. Lan heard her groan as the big man's pull brought her crashing into the bars with a sickening crack. Took reached in and grabbed her other hand and slammed her into the bars again. "Listen to me," he said, low and threateningly. "An' remember this. I cared 'bout ye, Gaelyn, almost like ye were my own daughter. I took ye in an' cared fer ye when I thought nobody else would, an' then ye go an' do this. Ye may not've killed me in the flesh, but ye sure 'ave killed me in the heart." He let her fall to the ground in a heap. She had stopped screaming, and was holding her hands over her head, sobbing. He wiped spittle from his mouth with the back of one of his hairy arms.

Several armed guards came running down the stairs, shouting at Took. "Halt, murdering fiend!" Took stared down at Gaelyn, his chest rising and falling heavily with each breath. The guards shoved him face-first against the wall and manacled his hands behind his back. Took said nothing as they dragged him upstairs. He did not move his legs, but it did not look as if he were trying to resist either--it was as if his entire body had gone limp.

A remaining guard placed Esmond in Lan's cell and took Gaelyn away to be cared for. Before leaving, the guard told the boys that they would be questioned about this event later. Neither young man said a word, both too shocked to react.

#

Gaelyn had been lying on the bed in the medical ward of the Ceren for several hours. The sky outside was turning a pinkish-orange as the afternoon came to a close. She had bandages wrapped around her forehead and chest, and a splint on her left arm. For the first time ever, she regretted what she had done. She had never felt bad about anything since Osbick had taken her in, until now. She had lied to everyone, and she had deceived Esmond, the one she loved. Took was right. People had died because of her--good, innocent people. She had gotten her freedom from

Osbick only to be thrown into this prison of emotional and physical torment. She could not tell which of the two pains was worse.

She did not want anyone knowing she was ever associated with Osbick and the Shadow. It was not as if she had any choice about the matter. Osbick had saved her from those perverse guards and a miserable life on the streets. He had taken her in and given her a good home. *And then he exploited you*, she thought. She clenched her hand to her stomach, trying to subdue the pain of that realization.

He had put her out on the streets as a petty thief to see if the Thieves' Guild would accept her. Malice Took noticed her, a young girl with "nobody to turn to", and had taken her into the Thieves' Guild. Osbick's plan had worked--she had become his spy.

Osbick wanted inside information on the guild so he could better find ways to blame them for what his underground contacts did. That had gone on for several years until today. After meeting with a suspicious sarn on several occasions, Osbick had finally decided he no longer needed the Shadow to back him. He then set to work on a new plan--the death of Lord Roland.

He had wanted Roland out of the way for a long time. Roland had promised Osbick his position should he die, and Osbick had set his sights on getting it from him at all costs. He had planned Roland's death to take place during the first procession, before the lawmaking session, but someone had crashed into Roland's carriage and caused such a disturbance that nothing could be done about it, so he waited. Gaelyn had never guessed that Esmond had been the person who unknowingly stopped Osbick's plan.

Osbick had then changed his plan to take effect during the second procession after the lawmaking session. No longer needing the Shadow meant no longer needing someone to blame their activities on, so Osbick, with Gaelyn, planned Took's downfall as well. It had been hard for her to help plan such a thing.

While with the thieves, Gaelyn had heard of how terrible Osbick was, the man she had come to call Father. She was told daily that his organization and underground contacts were working to destroy the Thieves' Guild, an institution set up to help those people with nowhere else to turn. And then, on the other side of

things were the words that Osbick fed to her about how the 'Thieves' Guild did nothing but undermine authority and evade taxation and the law. Osbick had told her that Malice Took was an evil man, intent on one day destroying the government and taking over for himself. Being young and trustful of Osbick, Gaelyn had believed him. As time passed, though, she began to see flaws in Osbick's person. She started noticing more and more deals he made with rough characters and shadowy figures who came and went by night. But surely Osbick, her adoptive father, could never do any wrong!

Within the past few weeks, she had learned just how much wrong the man could do. And it had not stopped her from helping plan Took's downfall. It had been a tough struggle, but Osbick had told her she would be free to leave the city after they succeeded. He had kept her within these walls since before she could remember. He was also very jealous of her ever caring for anyone else. He claimed it made her weaker. But with the prospect of getting away from Osbick, she would be free to care about anyone she wanted--and that meant Esmond. She had reluctantly helped plan the attack on Took, hoping that a greater good for herself would come from all of this.

And now, because of her selfishness, Osbick was soon to be dubbed lord of the northern coast, while Esmond, Took, and Lan rotted away in jail. It was her fault they were all here. They could be here for years in the dungeons, or banished to Merhos or Kagon. In some ways, she feared banishment more than imprisonment--she had never been outside of these city walls. What would she do? Where would she go?

Her biggest fear, however, was that Esmond would discover the truth about what happened today, assuming he did not already believe Took. She realized now how much she loved him and how much she did not deserve someone as caring as he was. All she had ever wanted was someone to love her. At one time she thought Osbick loved her, but as she grew up she gradually discovered the truth. He did not care for her--he only used her.

And then she had met Esmond. Even though she had not wanted his love, he had given it anyway. She had said many things to make him angry, but he cared for her regardless. Before she was

even aware of it herself, she was returning the feelings. If he discovered that she had been lying to him all this time, though . . .

The best thing she could think to do would be to remain silent and hope this would all blow over, but somewhere, in the recesses of her mind, she knew it never would.

#

Took sat alone in the dining hall with the exception of two guards. They were not eating, but standing at his side in case he tried to move. He had calmed in the hours since the berserk rage had overtaken him, and they had finally unchained him and allowed him to eat.

As he sat eating the near-blackened meat that almost looked like steak, a third guard came into the room, the same mesefu he had tried to talk with during the battle, shortly before Gaelyn had shot him. *She's got more punishment ahead if I got anythin' to say about it*, he thought. Remembering her face when he had grabbed her arms made him wince. *Maybe I were a bit too harsh on her, but gods-damn, I ne'er suspected her o' doin' anythin' like that! I care fer the infernal lass like me own child, but I don' have any idea what to do 'bout this!* The mesefu walked over and sat down across from him.

"Good evening, Farrell Took. My name is Lisen. I believe we met during that skirmish this afternoon. Forgive me for tripping you--I was only thinking of the girl's safety." The mesefu extended her hand in the standard human gesture of greeting. Took ignored it and continued eating. Mesefu were the last people he wanted to deal with today.

"Well," said Lisen, withdrawing her hand. "Nice to formally meet you. I came to talk with you about a few things." The big man sat there in silence, staring into the mesefu's eyes with a look that would have inspired fear in even the mightiest of warriors.

"What?" he growled between bites of meat.

"The girl is alive," said Lisen, "but barely. You nearly killed her. Her left arm is broken and she has several injured ribs. Her face is bruised as well, and her jawbone was knocked out of place. The physician treated her as best he could. He believes she will be better in a few days, and will definitely be well enough recovered to attend the trial tomorrow. Whether or not she will be able to testify, however, has yet to be determined." The soldier took off her sleek dark-green helmet and set it on the table.

"Enough about the girl, however. You seem to be more interested in your food than her. I came to ask you about any dealings you may have had with the man named Osbick." Took grunted and continued to eat.

"I see you are not willing to volunteer information. Well allow me to start things off with a question. Why did you do what you did today, Farrell? You know you are a wanted man, so why show yourself so openly and violently in public, especially at an occasion such as today's? Do you have something against Osbick? I noticed that you did not charge until he showed his face."

Took shot a greasy smile at her. "Attention. I was the middle child, always ignored. I did it all for the attention." He took another bite and chased this one down with a swig of water. He smiled at the mesefu.

"Ah," said Lisen. "I see that you are also skilled in the craft of sarcasm, Farrell." Lisen smiled back at him.

"The name's Malice," he growled through a mouthful of food.

"Yes, well . . ." she trailed off, gazing down at the floor. After a moment, she looked back up him, reclaiming her grasp around the words she wanted to say. "You are very strong, you know. And very intelligent. With a little discipline, you could become a great soldier." Took shot her a sharp, nasty look. "The last thing he wanted to be was a soldier enforcing the ludicrous tax laws of this land. "I saw the way you were fighting out there today, and I must say that you are better than most men I have seen. The way you stunned those men with the flat of your blade--very ethical. We look highly on that. The world will likely need fighters like you soon, unfortunately. Where did you--"

"Go away." This came out muffled, through a mouthful of meat.

"Excuse me? I did not understand--"

"I said go *away*. I don' have to talk wi' ye if I don' want to, so git! Leave me alone to eat. I don' answer to nobody but the judge, an' lest things've changed drastically recently, there isn't no stinkin' gat as part o' our law these days, so I suggest ye git a move on 'fore I git upset again." The guards at his side moved closer, preparing for an outbreak. He was not trying to be mean--he just wanted to be left alone with his thoughts and his food. He had too

many other things running through his head to think about instead answering this crazy mesefu's questions.

"I see you do not take a liking to things of a mesefu nature," spoke Lisen, plain-faced. "Very well, then. If it pleases you, I shall go. But I still think--"

"*Now!*" he yelled. He was tired of this curious mesefu asking him about his life and trying to recruit him into the military.

Lisen stood up, reaching for her helmet. "You do not have to get so worked up." She began walking away, carrying her helmet in her hands. When she reached the door, she turned and spoke. "You know, it is upsetting that they will be jailing you. Keep the soldier idea in the back of your mind for now, however. I am serious when I say that we will need fighting men soon. But to be a soldier, you would have to master self-control. Losing your temper so easily will not be acceptable if you ever have to lead anyone. Do you think you could learn control?"

Took pulled back his right hand with the fork in it. The two guards who were with him noticed this and moved to grab him, but they were too slow--the fork was already soaring through the air toward the mesefu. Lisen did not even flinch. She brought her hand up and the fork stopped in midair and fell to the stone floor.

"I suppose that would be a resounding 'NO'," she said. She pivoted on her heels and walked from the room.

#

Lisen sighed as she walked from the dining hall out into the deep green stone hallway. Small magical glowlamps lit the hallway where the shafts of sunlight from the ceiling did not fall. Standing in the glowing hallway was calming, and Lisen needed to be calmed right now. There was too much to sort out and very little time left in which to do so. To remain away from Altkrea any longer would surely arouse Doran's suspicions.

Farrell Took was a link to Osbick. There was no way she could approach Osbick directly to find out exactly who picked up Ol'tue from him, but she needed to know who they were and where they were headed. It would help her--help the investigation committee--in finding out who would want to kill the men who picked it up.

She had meant what she said to him, about being a good soldier. The clouds of war were rolling in--she felt their darkness

weighing down on her shoulders. It was unfortunate that the humans would have to be involved, however. They saw nothing wrong with bringing about death to their enemies. The display earlier today had made her sick to her stomach several times when she got back to the Ceren. She had never seen anyone killed before, and the memory of the terrible sight made her shudder.

The way Farrell Took had attacked the guards with the flat of his blade was impressive. It was less impressive that he killed the other men, the ones he called traitors, but she reminded herself that he was raised in a violent culture. *It is a wonder the humans have not killed themselves off yet. Sometimes I think they might have been better off as our slaves.*

She stopped in her tracks, amazed at what she had just thought. It was highly immoral and against the mesefu religion to kill or use slave labor. It had been abolished thousands of years ago when the humans had rebelled and won their freedom at the cost of many mesefu lives.

Someone walked across the hallway down from her. She turned to look, but all she saw were trailing black robes disappearing around the corner. She remembered that Osbick had been wearing black robes. On a chance, she started down the hallway toward the intersection.

When she got there, she saw Osbick standing in front of a door, talking to someone inside. He started glancing around, as if making sure nobody was watching. She jerked her head back around the corner and stood still. This could be her chance to get some useful information. She used magic to amplify the volume of Osbick's conversation to her ears.

"When you get a chance," said Osbick, "I want you to kill her. Make it look like a suicide. Make it look like Farrell did it. Either way, I want her dead before she can stand trial. Your life depends on it. I only pray the judge is one of our own."

The girl? He must mean Gaelyn. And one of his own? Did he secretly have men planted everywhere? This was getting worse by the second.

"Yes, yes, master Osbick," replied the man on the other side of the door. "I'll see to it shortly that she never breathes again. Nobody will suspect a thing of us."

"Be sure of it. She knows too much. She could expose the Shadow, and you do not want that, I assure you."

"Yes, master Osbick."

"I expect it to be done within the hour, if at all possible. Remember . . . your life depends on it."

"I understand."

Lisen heard the door shut, then she heard footsteps. Osbick was walking toward the intersection. She stepped away from the wall and turned the corner, facing him, trying her best to look inconspicuous.

She walked past him nervously. He never so much as glanced in her direction. As she approached the door he had been standing in front of, she heard him speak. She jumped, startled.

"You there," he said.

She turned around quickly. "Yes?" she asked him, trying to steady her nervous voice.

"Aren't you the one who brought those soldiers in and helped me escape that horrible predicament today?"

"Yes," she said, more confidently. He wanted to thank her, not interrogate her. "My name is Lisen. I came to help protect our ambassador--"

"I owe you my life," he said, interrupting her. He bowed, holding his black plumed hat on his head, then straightened. "If not for you and your quick thinking, I might be lying alongside Lord Roland. I thank you, deeply."

"You are welcomed," she said, unsure of the human customs of gratitude. "Deeply." She added this and the bowed, not knowing if it was standard or not. The brief look of confusion on his face told her it likely was not.

"How long will you remain with us?" he asked. "The mesefu ambassador has already left. Shouldn't you have gone as well?"

"I am required to go to the trial," she replied.

"Ah yes, of course. I assume you will be leaving afterward?"

Why was he asking her this? Why did he care when she was leaving? Did he know who she was? Was there some possibility he knew she had been digging up information on him? *Even if he did, he could never harm me. I would not give him the chance.*

"Yes," she said.

"Very well, then. I hope you have enjoyed your stay in our city. I assure you, not all processions turn out this way."

"I understand."

"Farewell, then." He started to leave, but stopped. Without turning back to face her, he added, "And from now on, you should address me as Lord Osbick. It is how we do things here in human lands. It is how we show respect for our superiors." He continued walking, and turned out of sight, around the corner.

"And you should address me as Lord Lisen," she muttered under her breath in her native tongue. "And lick my boots. And pray I do not kick your teeth in as you do it." She turned to the door. There was work to be done. That man could not be allowed to kill the girl. She would not allow it. There had been enough death in her life this day.

She knocked on his door. A few seconds later, she heard shuffling noises from the other side, and then the door swung open. A short, scraggly-faced man stood there, looking up at her.

"What do you want?" he asked, impatiently.

"Merely for you to have a good night's sleep," she said. The magic enveloped him quickly, easily. He was asleep within seconds. She grabbed him before he could fall over and dragged him over to the bed. "For several days," she added, a slight smile curling on her lips. "We cannot have you going around killing people like that. This may not save the girl's life, but I will at least be buying her some time."

Lisen pulled the blankets up over the man and walked to the windows. She pulled the shutters closed and fastened them, then walked out the door, closing it behind her. As she walked away, she placed a magical lock on the door that should last for several days, in case he should wake up or someone should come looking for him.

Smiling, she began the walk back to her chambers. She needed to pack her belongings together so she would be ready to leave after the trial. She had a long trip ahead of her.

#

Anxiety. There was so much nervous energy in the room that he could almost see it in the air. The judge was standing before his large stone desk, wrapped in deep crimson robes. He was just finishing the Rite of Judgment, a pre-trial ritual that was performed

by all judges in Pyran to honor the king, the ultimate authority in Pyranian law.

Lan sighed and sat back on the bench. He looked to Esmond beside him. "How long do you think this is going to go on? I don't think I can handle this nervousness much longer."

Esmond spoke without turning to him. "I don't know. It could take hours, minutes . . . I don't care." Esmond was staring blankly at the judge.

"What's wrong? Why don't you care?"

"It doesn't matter," he said, turning to look down at the floor.

"Yes it does," Lan retorted. "It matters a lot. What's wrong with you?"

"It's just that . . . I'm scared." Esmond looked up at him, his eyes wide. Lan could see tears behind them threatening to flush out. "I wish my parents were punishing me for this, not some insensitive, impersonal judge I've never met!"

"I know what you mean," Lan said, putting his hand on his friend's shoulder. He felt Esmond trembling slightly.

"All they'd do is ground me and yell at me a lot. This man--" Esmond pointed toward the judge "--has the power to lock me in *jail!*" His face flashed with pure fright. "I--I spent one night in there, and I never want to do it again. *Never.* The darkness, the cold, the creepiness . . ." Esmond trailed off and buried his head in Lan's shoulder. Lan put his arm around Esmond and began patting his back.

Esmond was on the emotional edge. Lan had never seen him this worked up about anything. This must be weighing on Esmond far more than it weighed on himself. *Why haven't I broken down yet?* Lan thought. *There's not that much difference between us. I didn't personally like staying down there overnight either, but it didn't bother me as much as it seems to be bothering him.*

He looked over Esmond's shoulder and saw Gaelyn sitting quietly, staring straight at him with a faraway look on her face. She had bandages on her face and chest, and deep bruises marked many of the patches of skin left uncovered. He smiled at her, weakly, but she showed no acknowledgment.

Feeling a heaving sob from Esmond, he turned his attention back to his friend. "It's going to be fine, Esmond," he whispered

into his friend's ear. "We'll make it out of this somehow. They have no hard evidence we worked with Took, so we should get off lightly."

Esmond suddenly jerked away and sat up straight, looking away from Lan. "What?" Lan asked him.

"I don't believe you," Esmond replied.

"Huh?"

"The way you're acting. What you just said."

"What was that? About getting off lightly--"

"No," Esmond interrupted, facing Lan. "About them having no evidence we worked with Took. Are you going to sit back and let him take the fall for us just so we don't get caught? That's not right, Lan. He's our friend. He saved us, remember? We can't let him take all the blame. We just can't."

Lan was shocked. He never thought Esmond would have such loyalty to anyone--he certainly had never shown it before. *Or has he? He had a chance to leave me alone that night in the university. He had a chance to let me face Osbick's claims by myself. And yet he stepped out of the shadows to help me.*

He looked at the big man sitting on the bench in front of him. Took had his hands manacled behind his back and two guards sat on either side of him. *You did save me.* Lan thought back to Took getting him into the Mages' Guild. *You gave me a new meaning in life, and gods-damnit I'll stand by you. How could I have ever thought otherwise? I'm such a fool.* He turned to Esmond and nudged him.

"You're right," he said. "I don't know *what* I was thinking."

Esmond smiled at him warmly, tear lines reflecting the light from the tall window at the end of their bench. "I knew you spoke too soon. That's always been your problem."

Lan smiled back. "You're right. And your problem is that you believe the first thing out of my mouth, knowing I didn't think about it."

"I guess so." Esmond extended his hand to Lan. Lan took Esmond's hand and they shook a single time--strongly. It was the sign they had between them, a single shake. Used in times like these to let the other know that they cared. 'I love you' had always sounded too awkward to both of them, but though they never said it, each understood it to be true.

". . . and in Ohn's name, and the name of Our King, we begin these proceedings." The judge finished the Rite and faced the courtroom. Lan shook himself from his thoughts and started looking around the large room with its immeasurably high vaulted ceiling. *It must be that high to help whoever's speaking be heard.* The courtroom had filled up in the past half-hour since they had been brought here, and there were people peeking in through the wall of guards at the main entrance.

"The trial we are about to witness," spoke the judge, "is likely the most important trial those of you here will ever see. In fact, it is likely the most important trial this nation has *ever* seen. I speak of the trial of Farrell 'Malice' Took, originally of the nation of Merhos, and his accomplices who have been identified by their papers to be Alexander Dreighton Lansing of Kagon, Esmond Farren Boyeui, also of Kagon, and Gaelyn Marin of Pyran."

The judge nodded toward each of the named, then continued. "Other witnesses to be called are Lord Osbick Louei, originally from Merhos, now lord of the northern coastal territories of Pyran following the untimely death of Lord Roland Ahric, Ohn illumine his soul, as well as the remaining group of Pyranian soldiers who were present for the incident.

"Another witness who was to be sent back to her home nation is Lisen Oline of Altkrea. She was in charge of one of the squadrons of soldiers involved in the battle, lending her hand as an escort to her ambassador." The judge moved behind his prominent stone desk and took his seat in the large wooden chair that sat behind it. "You have all taken your oaths of truth, I have been informed, so now let us get the proceedings underway."

Lan's stomach sank as nervousness finally sat in. After today, he knew his life would be changed forever. His future lay in the hands of a man he had never met--this judge--and that fact scared him more than any possible punishment that could be given to him. He did not like having someone else in control of his life.

"The first side to testify will be the accused. The first person I would like to call is Farrell Took."

The spectators in the courtroom all gasped. Lan guessed it was because they had all heard mention of him as the leader of the Thieves' Guild and were awed at getting this opportunity to lay their

eyes on him at last. He approached the judge's stand with the guards on either side of him, holding his arms.

"The very first matter I would like to clear up would be your leadership of the group known as the 'Thieves' Guild. Is it true, Farrell Took, that you are not only the leader, but also the founder?"

"Aye," said Took calmly. Another gasp from the courtroom. "I be *one* o' the founders."

The judge was taken aback. "You say you were *one* of the founders? Would you tell us who else was involved?"

"Nothin' could please me more." Took pointed at Osbick. "It were that one there. Osbick."

The courtroom started to gasp then stifled a giggle. Lan looked over to the nobleman who had taken his finger. Osbick stood up, staring Took in the face.

"You lie, street-rat. I'd never seen you before yesterday. I wouldn't have known you from the common trash out there had you not been captured and pointed out to me."

Took's face started turning red, but he did not explode in rage. Instead he began speaking calmly, trying to prove himself. "Osbick Louei, I've known ye since birth. Ye an' I worked in the shipyards in Rotteporte back when the mesefu came in wi' their magic ship buildin' that put us out of a job."

"So that's where he gets his mesefu hatred from," came a voice from behind Lan. He turned back to see Lisen sitting with the group of soldiers named as witnesses. He smiled at her weakly, but she did not meet his gaze. *Is she ignoring me because she thinks I'm guilty, or does she honestly not see me?* He looked to her belt to see if the *renol* dagger was still there. It was, the ruby gleaming back at him. There was no doubting it--the dagger was Ria's.

"Silence," ordered the judge. "Continue your story, Farrell Took."

"Why?" interjected Osbick. "It's merely a lie! He's angry with me for ruining whatever plans he may have had when I discovered that ruffian there--" he pointed at Esmond "--who had tumbled Lord Roland's carriage a month ago."

Esmond stood up quickly. "If you hadn't cut off my friend's finger, I never would have taken your horse in the first place!"

"Sit down until I call on you to testify!" shouted the judge. Esmond stood there silently for a moment, then sat back down. There was now a low murmur coming from the people in the courtroom.

Lan turned to Esmond and whispered. "Don't let him get to you. Acting like that'll only work against you later."

"I know," said Esmond quietly, but angrily. "I just got so angry all of a sudden. If that bastard says anything else to me you're going to have to hold me back."

"Don't worry," smiled Lan. The judge was continuing his questioning of Took as Lan spoke with his friend. "Didn't Took just say he's from Rotteporte?" Esmond nodded. "Wasn't your father a shipbuilder there? I think you told me something like that, once upon a time," he whispered.

"Yeah," said Esmond quietly. "But he never mentioned knowing any of these people."

"You'd be amazed," started Lan, "at how many people our parents could have known and not told us about." Lan thought back to Keon's talk about his father. He would have to tell his father about meeting his former commanding officer the next time they spoke with one another. *If I ever get out of here.*

"Speaking of your plans," continued the judge, "what exactly was it you were doing yesterday? What were these plans of yours and how did you end up fighting in the streets?"

"Me an' me people had planned a protest against the new tax laws ye all passed. It was goin' to be a peaceful protest, 'til Osbick's men ruined everything."

"I object, your honor," started Osbick. "This man is a liar! He is trying to--"

"I did *not* give you permission to speak!" shouted the judge at the nobleman. "Now, Farrell, what men are you referring to? The ones who charged out of the street and into battle with the procession guards? The very same men whose arrows killed Lord Roland?"

"Aye," he said. "The very same. Called the Shadow, they are."

"You are asking me to believe that Lord Osbick would have willingly killed his own superior?"

"I wouldn't put anythin' past that underhanded bastard after what he did to me all those years ago. He knew Roland had no children an' was givin' his position to him when he died. Osbick likely planned the entire thing, along wi' that girl, Gaelyn."

"I *object!*" Osbick cried.

"And I said *silence!*" retorted the judge. "Until I call you up here to testify, you will remain silent or be ejected from this trial and not allowed to speak on this case at all. I currently believe you are innocent, but the violent way you react to his claims is starting to chip away at my confidence."

Osbick silently sat down, brushing out wrinkles in his dark robes.

"You realize, Farrell, that you are under oath, and the penalties for breaking that oath are severe. Since you continue to express that Lord Osbick Louei is involved in underhanded politics and the like, then a full investigation will be initiated after this trial. If you are found to be wrong, I warn you that whatever penalty levied on you today will be doubled."

"Aye," said Took. "I understand."

Lan looked over at Osbick to see his reaction. Instead of a look of defeat, Osbick had a look of success, his mouth twisted into a sinister grin. They were going to investigate him and try to get the truth out of him and yet he acted like this was a welcome thing.

What on Kalra is going on?

#

The trial had finally come to an end. The sun now shone through the windows of the courtroom casting a pale orange glow about the room. Few people had left the courtroom audience throughout the entire day, all of them intent on seeing the final decision that was about to be declared.

Lan and Esmond had testified, as had Lisen and Osbick. The soldiers were never called to testify, nor was Gaelyn, due to her medical condition. Instead, she had been asked to submit a written statement of all she had witnessed, and this had been turned over to the judge. They did not want her to take the stand, for fear that someone might upset her. In the shape she was in, that was not advisable. No more arguments had broken out in the courtroom after the chaos of Took's testimony. Osbick had said nothing about Took since the judge had threatened to not let him testify.

Osbick's testimony had only consisted of finding Esmond, and how it was Esmond who had taken his horse and crashed into Roland's carriage. Esmond had admitted to everything, as had Lan. Osbick had denied cutting off Lan's finger, however, as well as the boys' claims that he had tried to frame Lan. *What a cruel, underhanded bastard. I hope they find out all sorts of horrible things about him and throw him in jail forever,* thought Lan as he sat there, waiting on the judge to return from his chambers with the final verdict.

Lan and Esmond both feared that Took would get a death sentence. He had been wanted for ages, ever since starting the Thieves' Guild. Even though he was not a cruel person, he had given the guards a bad first impression with his rage. He had admitted to everything, but the judge showed no signs of being merciful.

Lan, Esmond, and Gaelyn were all charged with aiding Took, and Esmond was additionally charged with the interruption of the initial procession by overturning Roland's carriage and stealing Osbick's horse. They were most likely going to get prison sentences.

Lan sat calmly next to Esmond. He felt no overbearing anxiety toward the inevitable decision about to be made. He felt no nervousness, fear, or any of the things that Esmond had been feeling throughout the entire trial. The only thing he could muster up a feeling for was Ria. He had to find her, and if he ever got out of this situation that was what he planned on doing.

The low murmur in the courtroom ceased as the judge appeared at his chamber door, a stern look on his face. He resumed his seat, trailing his long robes behind him, and gave the sign to silence the courtroom. Everyone turned to him with the utmost attention. He looked around the room for a few seconds while the tension built, then centered his sights on Took.

"My first ruling," he began in his gruff voice, "is against Farrell 'Malice' Took, infamous founder of the Thieves' Guild of Porthos. The charges brought against him are as follows: organized crime, larceny, organized treason, assault on a commoner, assault on his jailer, and assault on one mesefu, Lisen Oline.

"After much deliberation, I have come to the decision that a life of freedom-under-banishment would be unjust for Farrell Took, as would a quick death. Therefore, it is my decision that this man

shall serve a twenty-year sentence in prison beginning at sunset today to be followed by lifetime banishment from the nation of Pyran. This will give him twenty long years to think about what he has done and reform, so that upon his banishment, he hopefully will not trouble any other nations the way he has plagued ours. Guards, he may be dismissed."

Took grumbled something under his breath as the guards began leading him away. Shouts of disapproval arose from the courtroom claiming that the ruling was unjust. After hearing his testimony, they were demanding a death sentence. As Took passed Lan, he whispered to him, "Good luck to ye, boy." Then he vanished from sight.

"I will have *silence* in here! We are not finished with the proceedings yet." Everyone quickly hushed as he spoke. "The next rulings are against Esmond Farren Boyeui, Alexander Dreighton Lansing, and Gaelyn Marin, all accused accomplices of Farrell Took. Except in the case of Esmond, there is but one charge-- treason. The charge of larceny against Esmond, as well as the charge that he crashed into Lord Roland's carriage cannot be proven in any form and have been dropped. Their sentence is banishment--a banishment that shall free the nation of Pyran from their attempts to disrupt its hard-working government. If they cannot appreciate the people who protect them and give them all they have, then they shall be removed. In three days, after they have been given ample time to prepare themselves for the journey, they shall be taken to the Kagon outpost and released, commencing a punishment lasting twenty years. Their preparation time is to be chaperoned by armed guards at all times, and they will make their bed during this time within the confines of the Ceren. If caught within the borders or northern waters of Pyran before their sentence is up, they shall be imprisoned for an indefinite period of time. Guards, they may be dismissed."

Esmond, Lan, and Gaelyn were escorted out of the courtroom through the wild crowd and into the hall. As they were being led through the crowded public area of the Ceren, Lan thought he spied a familiar face, that of Headmaster Whitlow. He only had time to catch a glance, however, before they were taken around a corner and out of the public area. *He'll never believe I was innocent now. What have I gotten myself into!*

So they were to be banished. When he had heard the word 'banish', he feared they would be shoved out in Au, the nearest nation. Instead he was going home. He would go to his parents and explain everything. He would suffer whatever punishment they had for him, and he would apologize for everything. And then, he would gather supplies and begin his journey for Ria. All his hopes of settling matters with Whitlow and seeing about a possible transfer to Rhienos had just been obliterated.

#

Their holding area was a very plain room with bare walls, but a soft bed. There was only one bed to the three of them, and they decided to take turns sleeping on it during their short stay here. Two guards always stood outside the door. They would not allow Lan, Esmond, and Gaelyn to leave all at once to get what things they needed, fearing an escape attempt. When asked if they were ready to go gather supplies, they stated that they needed nothing but a week's supply of dried food and water. They planned on going into Dryan when they reached Kagon. Gaelyn had silently agreed, having nowhere else to turn.

What remained of the first day once they got to their chamber passed uneventfully. Nobody spoke to anybody else, and the room was silent all throughout the night. Gaelyn slept on the bed the first night, her arms and chest wrapped in bandages to keep them straight.

The second day was more eventful than the first, not counting the trial. It was late afternoon when Esmond was called on to go collect some supplies from a visitor. One of the guards escorted him, leaving Lan and Gaelyn alone in the room.

"What happened the other day, Gaelyn?" asked Lan after Esmond had closed the door behind him. These were the first words spoken amongst the three in the entire time they had been together since deciding on sleeping arrangements.

She was sitting on the huge fur rug on the floor, crossed-legged, elbows on her knees, with her chin resting in the palms of her hands. The orange light of the setting sun combined with the breeze from the window made her hair look like a mystical flame. She was starting to look healthier. The healer had managed to completely heal her jaw and arm this morning--*No doubt by some magical means*, thought Lan--and now she only had a bandage

wrapped around her chest to keep her ribs straight while they finished the final stages of healing. She was facing away from Lan, toward the window. Gaelyn had been sitting like this, quietly, since Lan had woken up this morning.

When she had not responded within a few minutes, Lan tried again. "What happened during the procession?"

She turned her head so that he could see the side of her face through her hair. "I don't know," she said with a tremble in her voice. Lan noticed that she was shaking and her eyes were devoid of emotion.

"Took was right, wasn't he?" he accused. For a second, he thought he saw a spark of something in her eye, but if there was, it faded just as quickly as it had come up.

"You can believe whatever you want." There was no emotion to her voice at all. It was completely blank.

"You've been acting strange ever since Took confronted you."

"He went crazy."

"Yes, but only because you tried to kill him."

No answer.

"You've changed. You don't have any personality now. You've been completely empty these past two days." He paused for a moment, waiting for her to respond. Still nothing. Provoked by her silence, he continued.

"Why did you do all of those things at the procession? Why did you try to make things go wrong and kill Took?"

She paused. It wasn't a long pause, but he caught it plain as day. "I--I don't know. I just--had to. Felt I had to." He saw tears well up in her eyes.

Lan, still calm and emotionless, replied. "But why? What made you feel that?"

"I don't know. I really don't. I have no idea why I actually went through with it." It was obvious she was struggling to keep control.

"You mean you had thought about it before? Killing Took?"

"In a way." A single tear began crawling down the left side of her battered face. "I've ruined his life," she whispered. "I've never felt so terrible about anything."

Esmond's, Lan thought. This was her way of letting him know that yes, she was responsible for all of this and that Took had been right.

"I understand," he said. "I've felt horrible myself, this past month. I hated Esmond for wanting to be a thief. But during the trial there was a moment where I felt like we were best friends again. I hate *myself* now, for letting something come between our friendship. I don't know. I don't really know anything any more." He moved to Gaelyn and sat on the floor in front of her.

"I understand how you feel," she said. "There've been other lovers in my life before, but they all left me because I never found anything in them worth caring about. I've never had any room for emotion. Not until I met Esmond. He found the soft side of me and dragged it out, kicking and screaming . . . and for that, I love him. If he finds out . . ." She paused, then looked up to him. "Will you do me a favor, even after all of the horrible things I've done?" Her voice was wavering as she began crying.

"What?"

"Please don't tell Esmond that I'm the cause of the whole thing. It would only upset him even more, and I think I've caused him enough harm as it is. I want to put all of this behind me now. Will you do that for me, please?"

"Yes, I will."

"Thank you."

"Will you answer one question? I promise, regardless of your answer, never to mention it again."

"What?"

"Did you work for Osbick? For the Shadow? Is that why you tried to kill Took?"

After a long, laborious thought, she responded. "Yes."

She started shaking, sobbing violently. He pulled her to him to comfort her. She had not attacked Took out of spite or hatred. She had likely been promised freedom. She was trying to get away, to be with Esmond. Just like he was trying to get away to be with Ria. He smiled.

Lan held Gaelyn in his arms until she cried herself to sleep.

#

It was well past noon when the visitor came for Lan. Lan stood up and walked to the door to meet the guard who took him

downstairs to the visitation room. It was an open room that looked as if it once doubled as a cafeteria. It was wide, with several rows of benches and tables. The place was quiet, and there were not many people around at all. He recognized his visitor as soon as he laid eyes on him--Headmaster Whitlow.

The old man was frowning at Lan as he approached. The guard motioned for him to sit at a table with the headmaster. For a long while, they only stared at one another, each unsure of what to say. Finally, Whitlow spoke. "I don't understand, and I don't want an explanation." There was a saddened look in his face. "I believe you were innocent of what Lord Osbick accused you of, but this . . ." Whitlow trailed off, either not knowing how to continue, or not wanting to.

Lan looked at him guiltily. The headmaster had thought highly of him, and now his involvement with the Thieves' Guild had shed doubt on his trust. Lan wanted to kick himself. Hard.

"You know what you are going to face out there, don't you?"

"Yes sir, I do."

"What are you planning on doing once you are forced to leave?"

"I haven't thought about it much yet. They are taking us to Kagon, and I suppose that going home would be the best thing to do first."

"That's what I thought you would say." The headmaster frowned. "I don't know how to tell you this, Alexander, but . . . you can't go home."

Had he heard the headmaster correctly? "What? Why not? Are they that mad at me?"

"No, not mad." Whitlow stopped, putting a hand on Lan's shoulder. "They are dead."

Lan's heart stopped. "What?! How can you be sure? That's impossible!"

"The reports came in early this morning of a sarn raid last night in Dryan. They destroyed lots of the city, but mainly targeted the outlying plantations. Your family's plantation was hit the hardest, and--" he swallowed, looking Lan in the eyes "--I'm sorry to say that none of them survived."

His chest suddenly felt hollow. No matter how hard he tried, he could not get enough air. He didn't want to believe it, but somehow, he knew it was true. No more of his mother's sweetmelon pies at Moren's Time. No more helping his father with the bookkeeping on the lands they owned. No more walks through the fields with his father, no more dish-washing with his mother, no more evening meals where he and his sister would constantly fight . . . He would never get to tell his father that he had met the man he admired so much.

Tears began falling and he did nothing to stop them. Everything was unreal. He felt as if this were a terrible dream he would awaken from soon. He threaded his fingers through his hair and pulled on it. The headmaster put his arms around his shoulders as Lan sobbed. They were all gone, Gerhard, Mara, and Anya. All dead at the hands of the sarn. And after getting the headmaster's letters, they were probably all angry and disappointed with him when they left this life. A state of disbelief and dizziness overcame him and he nearly passed out. Whitlow called for some water to be brought.

Lan's world was being shattered at every turn he made. No matter what he tried to do, his life kept falling apart. *Things aren't getting any better. They've just been getting worse and worse. I've lost everything now. My education, my magic training, my family, Ria . . .*

He drank from the mug that was brought to him by a guard, then sat upright, trying to get a grip on himself. He was unsure how long he cried, his mind ravaged and torn apart by the horrific realization that his family was gone, dead, never to be seen again.

"What . . . did they say about . . . your letter?" he uttered through sobs, after what seemed like hours.

"They were upset, but not as upset as you may have thought. Your father wanted you to come home for a while. He thought it would do you some good to be away from Esmond for some time to give you a chance to live your own life. Their land was all left to you, and is currently in the care of the Boyeuis until you come to claim it. I was informed that the deeds to the plantation and the remains of the plantation house were in Dryan at the city council building. You can pick them up at any time."

"Remains? What happened to my house?!"

"It was burned to the ground by the sarn. It is believed that your family died in the fire." Headmaster Whitlow squeezed Lan's arm. "I'm so very sorry, Lan."

If he had been there, he could have stopped it. He had already been through a burning building before, and he could have done it again. He was mad at himself now, for not having been there. He could have . . . could have . . . *What could you have done? If you had gone home and not been chased from the university, you would have been there and died right alongside them all, wouldn't you? You wouldn't have had what little magical training you have now, so just accept the fact that they are gone, and you couldn't have done a thing about it.*

He got out of his seat, calmly brushing Whitlow aside. "There is somewhere you and your friends can go, if you wish, and I have already sent out to let them know you may show up--the tower at Rhienos, in Kagon. They will treat you well, and you can learn a great deal about magic there. I hear you have taken to it well, but your studies were abruptly cut off after the fire in the Mages' Guild here."

Whitlow put his hand on Lan's shoulder. "Good luck, my boy. I am terribly sorry that all has come to this. I hope you can pick up the pieces of your life and find some way to move on. If not for anyone else, do it for yourself."

Headmaster Whitlow smiled, nodded, then stood. He slowly walked out of the door and out of Lan's life. Lan trod up the stairs with the guard behind him. Tears spilled from his eyes. He entered the room, silently. Esmond and Gaelyn were asleep. He was glad--he did not know how to go about explaining what had happened. He did not know if he even could.

He lay down on the floor and stared up at the ceiling for the longest time. Sleep did not come easily. His head was full of imagined screams and shouts of his family as they died at the hands of the sarn, burned to death in their own house. He could not think very clearly right now as the reality of the situation came crashing down on him, but one thing he knew for sure. He would get revenge. The sarn would pay, and his family's death would be avenged. Nobody would suffer at their hands again.

#

The time to depart had come. Lan, Esmond, and Gaelyn were to travel together to the Pyran-Kagon border, escorted by

several guards, and once there, be ejected from the nation for two decades. That amount of time was nearly unfathomable to Lan--he had not even been alive that long. It was early morning, and the fog had rolled in during the night across the plains from the sea far to the north. It was warm, grey, and silent. The only sounds were those of the horses clopping against the gravel of the roadway and the squeaking of the turning wheels.

Their arms were bound behind their backs in manacles, as if the high steel barricade around the cart was not enough to keep them in. There was no ceiling to the cart, but a guard would surely catch them before they had a chance to climb over.

He was still in a state of disbelief about what had happened to his family, and would continue to be in one until he could see for himself. He would get his chance soon enough. *Poor Anya*, he thought as a solitary tear rolled down his face. She had always been his favorite. He loved taking care of her when his parents would go on trips--a joy he would never have again. His family was gone, and the sarn were to blame.

#

Esmond was busy counting the number of bars in the barricade around the cart. So far he had reached forty-two when the cart hit a bump and he lost track of which bar he was on. *Damn! Now I gotta start all over again.* But he did not. Thoughts of the past few days came to him, thoughts of the transformations of Gaelyn and Lan both. *Was there something going on between them? No, surely not. Everything had just been hectic here recently. That's why they were all acting a bit funny, nothing more.*

In those days of confinement in their room, Esmond had not spoken much. The most words he had said at all in the past three days were to Branson when the boy had surprisingly shown up to bring Esmond some of his things he had left behind in the guild. Branson had given him news of current events taking place since the horrible mishap during the procession. The guild had disbanded for the time being. It was very unlikely that they would ever reunite as a group, as their leader had been imprisoned. Branson stated that he was going to go seeking his uncle, Alric, and try to learn more about necromancy from him. Raising dead seemed an awesome power to wield, and Esmond planned on researching it thoroughly at Rhienos. Lan had told him where he

was going, and that Esmond and Gaelyn were welcome to come along.

He was going to be like Lan, now, able to wield magic. *That is, assuming I have the power within me. Surely I do! Lan and I are almost exactly alike! I'm as smart as he is! Surely I can learn to do magic also.* He thought it was going to be great, learning magic alongside his best friend, with Gaelyn by his side. Forever.

#

Gazing over the horizon at the rising sun, Lan thought back on the past year of his life and the choices he had made about where he wanted his life to go. Despite how much he tried to follow through with them, things kept going awry. He could not take two steps in the direction he wanted to go without being shoved four steps back and twirled around until he was dizzy, unsure of the direction he was originally going.

The sky ahead was a bright fiery orange. He gazed into it, deep in thought, and saw many more frightening choices ahead in that burning horizon. He could not wait for the one that would finally be his own, where no one or no thing would come between him and what he wanted.

PART IV: THE SEPARATION

"Many times in a man's life he is told to follow his heart. If all men were to take such advice seriously, the world would be in utter chaos."

Chapter Fifteen

Pain.

Suffering.

Purging.

Absolution.

She watched the muscular man from the shadows. Beads of sweat rolled down his back reflecting the candlelight from the rickety side table. The bed shook violently, slamming the headboard against the wall in rhythm with the man's movements. The diseased, twig-thin whore thrashed about and moaned beneath him in feigned ecstasy as she clawed at him with her cracked, painted nails. White scratch marks welled up on his back, quickly fading to red. The pain did not disturb him. If anything, it fueled his lust.

He held the whore's legs forward as he thrust into her, faster and faster, harder and harder. A whisper of pleasure escaped his lips as he leaned back. His eyes rolled up into his head. The moment was coming.

The woman in the shadows would let him have his pleasure. This soul had only made one grievous error throughout his entire existence. The sexual release would be his final reward, before the retribution. Before the absolution.

The whore underneath him would not be so lucky. She was an evil, filthy creature who did nothing but sow disease and corruption throughout the city. Her death would be quick, free of the final, agonizing Cleansing of sins. Her soul would burn in the Lake of Fire for eternity.

The Eye of the Heavens shifted her weight and gripped the thick leather handle of her whip. The time was drawing near. The Zarrons, despite their injustices, had taught her many things, one of the most useful being how to wield the tool of retribution--the whip.

The muscular man made one final thrust as a shuddering moan escaped from his mouth. He let his hands slowly slide down the whore's legs as he removed himself from her. He backed away from the bed, his breathing slowing. A wide grin revealed more than a few blackened teeth.

The Eye could see the diseased tramp more clearly now than she had in the back alley. Her grey eyes were sunken, enshrouded in darkness. Long brown hair stuck to her gaunt face in clumps, and dirty trails of sweat trickled down her cheeks. Her overripe breasts glistened as they rose up and down with her hurried breaths. The man's dirty hands had left distinct filthy marks all over them. The delicate hairs between her legs had been trimmed, apparently to please her customers, and at any other time would have been full and springy, but now they were pressed tight against her abdomen, drenched in the moistness of sex. She had spectral ankles, and toes that likened more to talons than what they were. Several open sores wept pus from around her mouth. As the Eye had thought, a disease-infested whore, unworthy of the absolution of sins.

The man reached down for his tanned breeches, but the whore interrupted him. "If ye'd like to help top a young lass off, she may be inclined to give kind sir a discount." She grinned through her blistered mouth, pallid cheekbones rising to reveal her skewed teeth. She gently glided her palms over her thighs as she clicked her bony knees together.

"A discount, eh?" the man asked, letting his breeches drop back to the floor. "How much of a discount are we talking about, my fine lady?"

"Fifty percent, at least," she said. "Maybe more, if that tongue o' yours licks as well as it yaps."

"My wife ain't stayed with me for ten years for nothin'!" He leaned back in toward the bed. The whore drew her knees up and spread her legs for him. This had gone too far. It must end now.

With lightning speed, The Eye stepped out of the shadows, her whip already sailing for the whore's leg. It caught her shin with a loud snap of leather on leather, wrapping effortlessly around her bones. The diseased bitch screamed as blood welled up around the tight whip. The Eye yanked on it, pulling the whore off of the bed and onto the cold stone floor beside her filthy blue rag of a dress. The man stood up, his mouth dropped open, eyes wide. The whore was crying.

"Silence, wicked slut!" shouted The Eye as she twisted her whip to loosen it. She backhanded the frail woman with a loud smack, sending a spray of spittle and blood sailing across the room. "Soon enough will you pay for your sins." The Eye shook the handle of the whip at the scrawny woman to emphasize her point. Blood poured from a wound in the whore's lips--a wound caused by The Eye's ceremonial ring.

The man grabbed his breeches and bolted for the door. Without even glancing in his direction, The Eye lashed out at him with her whip and caught him around the neck. She pulled him back over to the bed and shoved him down onto it with her free arm. He tugged futilely at the bloody whip around his neck. His neck was quickly bathed in crimson blood. A deathly paleness was starting to creep across his cheeks. He tried to gasp for air, but when he opened his mouth, he coughed, choked, and spat out blood.

"You do not have to struggle," The Eye told him. "I have come to save you." The man was too busy fighting with the leather cords to listen.

The whore scrambled back against the wall and curled up, cowering before The Eye. "Please," she cried, "don' hurt me! I'll do whatever you want, just don'--"

The Eye thrust her foot into the whore's chest. The twig woman cried out hoarsely in pain as the breath was knocked from her lungs.

"I told you to remain silent!" The Eye shouted. She whipped the stone dagger out from her belt and knelt down in front of the sniveling woman. At that moment the muscular man discovered that if he stopped struggling and moved closer to The Eye, the whip would loosen. She did not let him get very close, however.

He came at her quickly, hands outstretched. The Eye elbowed him in the stomach and slashed across his legs with the stone dagger. He tried to squeeze a shout out through his tightened throat, but instead he emitted a deep gargling sound and fell back against the bed. She tugged on the whip, tightening it more.

The Eye returned her attention to the whore. "You have sown your wicked hatred throughout this town long enough, vile bastion of filth. This entire building is a monument to the Master of the Lake, and all of you bitches are his servants. You'd probably give yourself to him if he asked, wouldn't you? **WOULDN'T YOU!**" Her shout only made the whore cry more. A pool of blood from her welted shin was growing on the floor.

"He probably would not even have to ask, would he? You would just throw yourself on top of him and ride him until your heart gave out! **WOULDN'T YOU!**" Another shout, another increase in the intensity of the sobbing.

"What is your name, whore?"

No answer, only sobs.

"**I ASKED YOU A QUESTION! YOU WILL ANSWER ME!**"

Only sobs.

The Eye stabbed deep into the whore's thigh and dragged the dagger forcefully, feeling more than hearing the ripping flesh and muscle beneath her hand. The whore screamed, gurgling bile in her throat.

The Eye slashed the whore's neck, then drove the dagger straight into it and forced it further and further in until she could feel it scraping against either bone or the stone floor beneath--she did not care which.

"I warned you, slut." The Eye spat on the whore's face. The mucous saliva dribbled down the woman's chin and came to a rest on her bloody, swollen lips. Her body went limp and slumped over, facedown. "Burn in the Lake."

The Eye wrenched her dagger free then stood and turned her attention to the naked man on the bed. He had stopped struggling, but was still alive, lying as calmly on the bed as one in his situation could, half in a daze from lack of air. The Eye, without loosening the whip's grip around his throat, grabbed the leather cord much closer to his neck and slid him farther along the bed

until his head collided with the headboard. Normally the feat would have been difficult, as he was large, but the slick bloody sheets made the sliding easier.

The Eye reached down and grabbed the whore's blue dress. She held it between her knees and ripped off four long strips of it. With two, she bound his wrists to the headboard. She slid her hand out on her whip until she had enough room to walk to the foot of the bed and still keep it securely around the man's neck. She used the other two strips to secure his feet to the bedposts on either side.

He was in position. It was time for the Cleansing.

"You are not as clever as you thought," she said as she stood over his naked body. She placed the tip of a finger on his collarbone, just below the whip. A lot of blood had accumulated there, and she knew he did not have long to live. She let the whip loosen and pulled it free with her other hand. She drew the finger on his collarbone down his chest, making a trail of blood.

"Your wife had me follow you. She was afraid you had been coming to visit this wicked establishment for quite some time. After a mere two nights' research, I discovered that her fears were true." He tried to speak, but no words would come to his mouth. He lolled his head back and forth, his eyes rolling up into his skull. Her finger reached his navel. She drew a crimson circle around it, then continued downward.

"When she heard what I had to say, she was shocked. She did not know what to do. How would she ever explain this to your daughter? That her father would rather have the company of a diseased whore than her own mother? She broke out into tears, and a rage began to build." The Eye's finger came to the man's flaccid member. She slid her finger along it, then brought it up to her nose and sniffed.

"She wanted you dead. She wanted revenge. True, she was blind with rage at the time, but I fed her fire. I convinced her that she truly wanted you out of this mortal existence. Do you know how I did that?" She sniffed her bloody finger again. The sweet and salty aroma of sex filled her nose. It excited her--it always had. She licked her finger, tasting the metallic blood and the tangy fluids. She shuddered in near-orgasmic bliss.

The terrified man shook his head slowly, as if moving it too much or too quickly would tear it free from his body. It was likely not far from the truth.

"I told her that you would be set free of your sins. You would receive a cleansing of the soul. That when you died, you would go on to a better world, and not suffer the eternal torment that the whore you were just slamming yourself into is suffering as we speak."

She grabbed the man's sweaty testicles in her bloody, sex-smelling hand and lightly squeezed. He let out a short, high-pitched squeal. She covered his mouth with her other hand and squeezed a bit harder. His face grew instantly pale and she heard a deep throaty sound from his chest. He was about to vomit. She clasped her hand around his throat tightly, feeling a bone snapping as she did so.

"None of that," she said. "I will not have you dirtying my hands in anything but your own blood." She squeezed his organs tighter and tighter. He clenched his eyes shut as the rest of the color drained from his arms and chest. The throaty roar started again, and she could feel the vomit pressing against the hand clasped around his throat. He thrashed his head about now, not worrying about his wounded neck anymore, trying anything to get her to let go of his throat and allow his stomach to empty itself. She gave one final viselike squeeze then let go of both his bloody neck and his testicles and stepped back.

His mouth flew open and vomit violently spewed from it, covering his face and mixing in with the blood on his neck and chest. He heaved several times, each time losing more and more. After he finished, after he caught what little of his breath he could, he tried to speak.

"Wh . . . why . . . plea . . . stop . . ."

"Your pain will end soon. But first, you must be Cleansed of your sins." She took her dagger from the whore's throat into her left hand. Into her right hand, she gathered up his sex. She slashed at it, trying to cut it off. It took three strikes--he managed to muster up enough of a voice to shout with each one. Tears streaked down his face, making trails in the dirt and vomit on his skin. When they finally ripped free, a fountain of blood gushed from his bare crotch, soaking into the sheets and quickly spreading

outward. The Eye held his limp, blood-drenched sex--testicles and all--up to his eyes.

"Look carefully," she said, shaking it in front of his eyes. She brought it down to his nose. He coughed, a few pieces of undigested food splattering on her wrist. She shoved it against his nose in agitation.

"Smell it!" she shouted. His head merely bobbed and his eyes darted randomly around the room. She shoved it harder against his nose. "SMELL IT!"

A weak sniff came from his nose. The nostrils flared. She was satisfied.

"Do you smell all of that sin? All of that reckless debauchery? DO YOU SMELL ALL OF THAT WICKED SEX?" She held his organs over him, squeezing them as she shouted. Gore dribbled between her fingers onto his forehead.

He nodded as best as he could.

The Eye was pleased. The Cleansing could begin.

She raised the whip and cracked it against his chest. Blood immediately welled up across his midsection.

One lash.

She struck again, this time across his left breast. The nipple was quickly lost in a sea of crimson.

Two lashes.

Again and again her whip cracked.

Three, four.

He winced with each blow, but less and less as they continued. His strength was faltering. His life was fading. She must hurry.

Five, six, seven, eight.

The man's muscles all went limp, but his blood-soaked chest still rose and fell with the slow, unsure breaths he took. His eyes were barely open. She could see him gazing at her through the filth that encrusted his eyelashes.

Nine, ten.

Her work was complete.

The sheets between his legs would never come clean. Streaks of blood adorned most of the walls and even parts of the ceiling. The owners of the wicked establishment would wonder for years what had happened to this poor soul.

His legs were glistening red. Barely any patches of skin could be seen through the coating of blood from his crotch. His chest, too, was a bloody mess, virtually indistinguishable from the sea of crimson sheets upon which he lay.

"Wh . . ." he tried to mutter. She knew the question already.

She leaned in close to him, her lips almost touching his. She could smell the sour bile in the vomit on his face. She could see the dark pores in the skin on his nose, the life fading from his deep green eyes.

"I am The Eye of the Heavens. I am the Arbiter of Justice. I am . . . the Final Absolution." She shoved her lips against his, forced her tongue into his mouth and let it dance around, tasting a swirl of blood and bile. There was no response from the man, no movement.

"You are free."

The Eye drew back and watched him expire. She wiped the salty filth from her mouth with the back of her hand, tucked his organs into a pouch on her belt, and headed for the window through which she had come.

The Eye of the Heavens had saved one more soul. It was time for a bath.

#

There was a folded letter on her dresser. She knew it had not been there before she entered the bathing chamber. She had set her belt and whip there when she returned from delivering proof of her job's completion to the man's wife. Someone had been into her room.

She darted over to the window and pressed her back against the cold wall. All she saw from her second-story room were the dirt-covered, lamp-lit streets of Nail's Point. Nobody wandered them this time of night, as was to be expected. She saw no stars in the sky, nor any sign of the moon. This marked the third overcast night in a row. She had gone too long without seeing the Heavens. She needed to get out of this eternally dreary bay.

The Eye crept over to the door to her bedchamber and slowly slid it open. The wooden hallway was pitch dark, and as empty as the streets outside. The only sound she could hear was that of her own breath. Even the revelry in the common room downstairs had finally come to an end, the participants likely

sprawled across the oaken furniture in various states of drunken unconsciousness.

She pulled the door shut and fastened all three of the locks. She sat on the stool in front of the dresser and picked up the letter. When she opened it, another letter, this one sealed with a plain wax stamp, slipped out and fell to the floor. She picked it up and looked it over carefully without opening it, then put it aside for the time being.

Please forgive my messenger for not wanting to be seen by you, the main letter began. The script was flashy and ornate, written in a hand as fine as that of a king's. He knows enough about who you are to know he does not want you to see him. If he knew everything I do about you, however, it would have taken more power than that of all the Sarn Nations to force him get as close to you as he did. I believe he would rather have died. There were a few before him who did.

I am writing you to charge you with a mission. I know you are more than capable of it--you are the only one I can trust with so important a situation. I only wish I had learned of your existence sooner.

There is a person I was once tracking. I nearly had her a year ago, but she slipped through my grasp. She had friends who were imprisoned, but something more important arose and I was unable to attend to them after their release. I managed to find that which I sought without her help, and assumed that she would be no further bother to me. It has come to my attention that I should not have let her off so easily, as she is about to endanger plans guided by the hand of Ohn himself. I no longer need anything from her--she is but a nuisance now. She should not be allowed to live.

The girl I speak of is a half-mesefu named Ria Sulian.

A half-mesefu. Fate had been kind to her. In all her years and trials as the Eye of the Heavens, she had always wanted to absolve one of those in most need. The half-mesefu were a special case in the eyes of Ohn. The mesefu were pure evil, to be destroyed if at all possible on sight for the ways they twisted the truth to enslave mankind. They made bargains with the Master of the Lake, exchanging their souls for magical talents that were only fit for the Creator and his closest servants. Their filthy kind did not deserve to live.

The child of demonic fornication between a mesefu and a human was a special case, however. Humans, unlike the foul mesefu, were capable of Righteousness, so a mixed child was

therefore half Righteous, half Evil. All half-breeds were worthy of the ultimate absolution. They had no control over the evils of their mesefu parent, but unless absolved, they would be damned eternally to the Lake of Fire upon death, regardless of their actions in life. This half-breed would be freed of her evil half. She would be absolved.

Be warned that she is very dangerous, and a master of magical arts. I have enclosed a letter I intercepted from her to a friend of hers living in Rbienos. After reading it and gleaning as much information as you can, I urge you to send it on to its final destination as quickly as possible, for I do not want anyone to grow too suspicious before you can make your move.

You will be receiving further instruction on where to receive your payment and where to bring proof of her death in the months to come. I know you would likely take on a case of this magnitude for free, but know this--you will be rewarded beyond your fondest hopes and wishes for your success. I know what you secretly want deep down inside, and if you succeed, I believe I can help you out in ways you could never possibly conceive of.

And that was all. No signature, no date, no closing remark. It was at the same time the most mysterious and intriguing letter she had ever received.

The Eye picked up the other letter that had been enclosed. She broke the seal and read it carefully, studying every detail of the text. The half-breed was searching for the Darksear blade? For what purpose? To return it to the vile mesefu to whom it did not even belong? This could not be done. The half-breed also had a friend named Lan, whom The Eye could only assume was a human. She could tell from the text of the letter that this half-breed had feelings for him that ran deeper than mere friendship.

Who was Ga'ruk? The name sounded like a sarn name, one of those disgusting green-skinned cannibalistic plague bearers from the south. If she ran into him, she may kill him off just to rid Kalra of one more of his kind.

She knew what she needed to do. She refolded the half-breed's letter and slid her hand along it, rebuilding the seal. The powers Ohn bestowed her with in her times of need were truly praiseworthy.

She tossed the sealed letter back onto her dresser. It would be delivered in the morning by the fastest courier she could find--it was already several weeks late.

After pulling on her robe and her blood-drop shaped pendant, she knelt at the foot of her bed to begin her nightly prayers to her master, the Creator. She rubbed her pendant as she began silencing her thoughts. The Eye had taken the pendant from the Zarrons when she fled. It was the ceremonial Cleansing pendant that all victims of their barbaric Cleansing ritual wore for the length of the procedure. She wore it as a constant reminder of the wrong that she had suffered, and the wrong that many others had likely suffered at the hands of those fanatics.

Her last thoughts before her prayers began were of the half-breed. *I will find you, Ria Sulian. I will bask in your beauty as the most deserving of absolution above all others. And then your Cleansing will begin.*

Chapter Sixteen

Dawn broke through Lan's window. The warmth of the sunlight on his face slowly roused him from his sleep. Nature had been his alarm clock for well over a year now. It always brought him to his senses in time to get to his studies before the library became overly crowded. He knew that somewhere in Rhienos' great library there had to be some information about the *krea*, and he was determined to find it--despite the fact that his efforts for over a year now had produced nothing.

Lan stood up and stretched. The grey robe on his bedpost lifted up into the air and ethereally floated across the intervening space into his hands. He pulled it on and walked over to the eastward window. The shutters opened wider as he approached. The warm green hills greeted him as they had every morning with their tall stalks of grass, moist with morning dew. To the north, he knew, lay the place he had once called home. A shudder ran through his body at the thought of his family.

When he had arrived in Kagon with Esmond and Gaelyn, he had headed to the ruins of his family's plantation. The sight of the burned household burned itself into his mind in a way that was impossible to forget. The charred remains of the house had been scavenged, but strangely the thought of his few surviving possessions being in the hands of complete strangers did not unsettle him. Material possessions could always be replaced. Lives could not.

They were all gone--his parents, his sister, lost to the sarn. *Curse them*, he thought as he gazed into the morning. *Curse them for*

eternity! Even if it takes my dying breaths, I will see every last one of them dead! Nobody else will ever have to suffer as I have.

A deep, urgent feeling of revenge had grown in him over the past year. It started out a faint scratch in the back of his mind and slowly swelled into a raging din that controlled nearly every aspect of his life. All other hopes and dreams had died off, eaten away by the revenge festering within him. It had taken all of his former self away except the desire to see Ria again, and even that was starting to fade.

Lan had not taken the deeds to the property. Instead he had slipped them into an envelope addressed to the Boyeuis. Neither he nor Esmond had wanted to go visit them, and Lan did not want to have anything to do with the plantation anymore. He could not live with the constant reminder of his family's gruesome deaths, so he had given it over to the people he knew would treat it best.

He turned from the morning warmth to his desk. Scattered piles of vaguely organized papers covered most of its once-shiny surface. Collectively, they contained the solutions to immensely difficult mathematical calculations that he had toiled over for many long nights in a row. They were calculations for determining the exit location of a fourth-dimensional tunnel, accurate to within a few spans. They were his main accomplishment since he had been at Rhienos--one he was exceptionally proud of. He dared not test it, however. At least not yet. It was too risky. He might end up stuck in the middle of the ocean or somewhere even worse. He felt it best to leave alone, for now.

During his year here, he had quickly excelled in learning magic. He was already as advanced as many of the instructors. He could levitate small objects and deflect arrows as well as any of them. The panel in charge of the school was not quite sure what to do with him. Some wanted him to become an instructor himself, others wanted to give him the proper training to send him back to Porthos and be the head of the Mages' Guild, which was being rebuilt. None of them could come to any conclusions, however, as he was too young for either option. So for the past few months, Lan had had no formal lessons to attend to, and spent all of his time in the library, studying in depth on his own, waiting for the panel to come to a decision.

He turned to his chamber door, heading for the library, thinking once again about what had filled most of his thoughts in the past year--the ultimate revenge. *If I could just get at this sacred weapon that's locked away by the three krea, I'm sure I could kill off all of those blessèd sarn. Somewhere, there must be some information about the krea. They could not have been kept so secret as to be absent from all mention in every text ever written. Somewhere in that library . . .*

He had not quite closed his door behind him when Esmond came barreling toward him, nearly knocking him over. His friend stopped a few feet from him, panting heavily.

"What's going on?" asked Lan.

"I've finally found it!" Esmond was ecstatic, more excited than Lan could remembering him being in quite some time. "It exists, and by Ohn, I'm going to master it!"

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Not here." He motioned back toward Lan's room. "In there so we can talk more privately. Can't let anyone overhear this."

Lan reluctantly followed him into his bedroom and bolted the door with a thought. He wandered over to the windowsill. *Please let this be fast, he thought. I need to get to the library soon.*

"Well?" Lan asked.

"Necromancy! Raising the dead!" Esmond's face lit up like a bonfire. "This is *great!* For over a year now, I've been searching for any information I could dredge up on the subject. I was starting to think Branson was lying to me, but it turns out he was telling the truth. There are even necromancers here at Rhienos!"

Something twisted in the pit of Lan's stomach. Raising the dead . . . could it truly be done? Immoral, and far too powerful. When people were dead it was best to leave them dead. He cringed at the thought of someone raising his deceased family and using them to fight a battle.

"Its practice has been disapproved of and is strictly forbidden for all purposes," said Esmond. "All the necromancers in the world were banished to an isolated life in the mountains of Niren. Those who refused to leave were captured and destroyed. After that, necromancy became a dead art on Kalra--no pun intended." But Esmond smiled at his own wry humor anyway.

"But you mentioned people here, in Rhienos, who have this ability. What about them? How did they learn such things if the art

is dead?" asked Lan, looking out the window at the fields. A haunting image of legions of undead troops advancing on the tower filled his mind's vision. "And how is it they haven't been discovered?"

"Well, someone noticed recently that Gaelyn and I had been doing a lot of research in that area, and he finally confronted us. At first I thought he was going to scold us and tell us to leave such things alone, but instead, he invited us to come to a meeting."

"How is Gaelyn doing, by the way?" Lan asked. "I haven't seen her in a while."

"She's doing just fine. She's not so upset about the whole magic thing anymore, in general, but it comes back to her from time to time for a day or so." Esmond sighed. "I think she'll be okay, though. I'm just glad the panel is letting her stay."

"That *was* rather nice of them."

"Have they decided what to do with you yet?"

Now it was Lan's turn to sigh. "No, I'm still waiting. Speaking of waiting, I really need to be getting to the library."

"Oh, okay. This won't take much longer. In the meeting, which was held in one of the underground store rooms, there were a lot of men there of all ages, and even a few women. They didn't really talk about necromancy, but how to organize the cult more effectively."

"The cult?" Lan turned around quickly.

"Yeah, The Cult of the Night. A necromancy cult founded by Lord Alric Wayreth--Branson's uncle. Remember Branson, from the thieves? His uncle vanished a while back to try and revive the art with this cult. I met him last night at the meeting. He's a pretty creepy old guy. He came here to recruit new apprentices into his ranks, to bring back the practice of necromancy for defensive purposes. He wants to send people to Niren to see if the necromancers there will--"

"Raising the dead," Lan interrupted. "You should leave it alone, Esmond. I mean, does this sound like such a good thing? Have you honestly put any thought into what you're doing?" He walked over toward the bed where Esmond sat.

"Of course!" answered Esmond. "Think of it--unlimited troops for armies! If a soldier dies, you can raise him! If an

opponent dies, you can raise them as well! You would never run out of troops. Guaranteed victory!"

"It can't be that easy, Esmond. If anyone was able to wield this power you speak of, battles would degenerate into long, ongoing boredoms that would last for centuries simply because nobody could lose. Would you want that to happen? Infinitely long wars with infinitely long suffering?"

"Not really. The strategy just changes to killing the enemy necromancers. Once they die, the troops who were under their control fall--"

"It's just not right. Once someone is dead, they should be left dead. Would you like to be brought back to life only to fight eternally at someone else's command?"

"It's not the same," Esmond stammered.

"Are you sure?"

After a pause and a defeated gaze down at the floor, Esmond replied, "Not really, no."

"Go do some research. In fact," Lan started, "you can come with me to the library."

Esmond reluctantly stood up. "All right. I'll come with you, but I need to ask you something."

"Yes?"

"Will you come with us?"

"Huh?" Lan nearly stumbled.

"Gaelyn and I are running off with the Night. Would you come with us? It'll be just like those adventures we used to fantasize about as children!"

"Of course not!" Lan said as he whirled to confront Esmond. "I've had enough of your adventures. Do you think I'm insane? I don't want to give up what I have here for some wild necromantic cult. I've finally found a place in the world where I feel like I belong, and I've managed to have a relatively normal and stable life for a year now. I'm not throwing it all into upheaval just to go digging up corpses to play with. It's wrong, gods-damn it!" He took a breath, pushing back his temper and collecting his thoughts. "I think you need to think about your decision a lot more before you go with them. I don't think you really know what you're getting yourself into."

"Fine," said Esmond, gruffly. "If you don't want to go, I understand."

Lan sighed. "Esmond . . ." He trailed off into silence, not sure of where to go. Esmond's stubbornness could never be defeated.

"What?" Esmond huffed.

"Just . . . never mind." Lan started walking off toward the library, his shoulders slumped forward. He heard Esmond following him, but neither of the young men spoke a word to one another the entire trip to the library.

#

"Good evening, Alexander." Master Wulstin, an elderly, round bald man, offered Lan a place to sit. Geol Wulstin was head of Rhienos. He had called Lan in this evening for a meeting about his future. Lan wondered if they had finally, after all this time, come to some conclusion.

"Good evening, Master Wulstin," Lan nodded. "And to you, Masters Berrin and Vissing, Mistresses Lessiter and Flancer." He turned to each in turn, then took his seat in the chair facing their crescent table.

It was a small room, with only two tiny windows that even during the brightest part of the day would have only allowed but a smidgen of sunlight to pierce the shadows inside. It was situated near the top of the tower, kept continually cool and lit by various magical enchantments and artifices.

Behind the crescent table sat the five members of the panel. Each of them had a plaque with their name and position written on it. He had met them all before, however, on several occasions. On the far left sat the elegantly-aged Mistress Dene Lessiter. Her smooth, narrow face seemed hardly older than Lan himself, yet the grey of her long hair and the wisdom within her deep blue eyes betrayed her true age. She was head of the Magical History department of Rhienos. Lan had spent many nights in her office doing research in the past few months. She was a kind woman, always offering her assistance to those in need, even at the latest hours of night.

To her right sat Master Hael Berrin. He was a very quiet middle-aged man, with blond hair and thin, round spectacles. He was in charge of the Emotional Studies department, and seemed to

have the practice of emotion control perfected--nobody ever knew how Master Berrin was feeling, or what he was thinking. His grey eyes were always blank, his movements always sure and steady. It was a bit unnerving the way he acted, but then, as Lan had learned this past year, Master Berrin found *Lan* to be unnerving. His lack of emotional buildup after wielding magic was very unsettling to Master Berrin. It was one of the factors that kept the panel from knowing what would be best for him. They had never seen the likes of it before.

On the other end of the crescent table sat Master Kent Trotter. He was also a middle-aged man, with long brown hair and a thick, round face. He had scars on his cheeks and forehead, and several long ones from obviously painful injuries down his arms. He was a retired general from the Kagonese military, and in charge of the War Magic department at Rhienos. He had been championing for Lan to enter into the military ever since he had discovered Lan's strange ability. Master Trotter argued that someone with Lan's composition after casting spells, combined with his superior strategic mind, would make him the ultimate leader of troops on the battlefield. Lan would not mind entering into the military as a general, as long as it meant he got to fight the sarn.

The last member of the panel, sitting between Master Wulstin and Master Trotter, was Mistress Flancer. She was not the most beautiful woman Lan had ever seen, but she was definitely among the top few. Her golden hair was always in a tight bun on the top of her head, with a long, trailing wisp left free on either side to flutter against her face as she walked. She had high cheekbones that framed her ever-smiling wide mouth. Her brown eyes always sparkled. She was young--far younger than Lan would have thought suited the head of the General Magic department. Several older students claimed that Mistress Flancer had looked the same even twenty years ago, and that even the students before them had said as much. Nobody knew her true age, but it was well over the thirty some-odd years she appeared to have. Rumors abounded that she was older than even Mistress Lessiter, but that she kept her appearance up with magical enchantments and baubles.

"We have convened this evening, Alexander, to inform you of our decision as to what we think is best for you." Master

Wulstin smiled. "Know, however, that you do have a say in the matter, though I believe that you will be very pleased with our conclusion." Master Wulstin leaned forward on his elbows. He looked to his left and right at the other members of the panel. "We shall start with Mistress Lessiter to my right, and continue to Master Trotter, on my far left. Each of us shall explain what we think your strengths and weaknesses are, how you can best prepare for the future, and where you could go from here."

Dear Ohn. It was a Passage ceremony. Every student at Rhienos, once completing a certain level of studies, was brought before the panel to be given this insight into what their instructors thought of their achievements. After which, they were free to go about their lives, with an official decree and inscription on their identification papers proclaiming that they had attended and completed magical studies at Rhienos and were fully competent to participate in any magic-related field. Lan had not expected this at all.

"Wait," Lan said, before Mistress Lessiter could begin. "You mean to Pass me?"

"Why of course, Alexander," Master Wulstin answered. "How would you expect to fill any positions without a formal Passage ceremony? You must have the official decree. You seem a bit apprehensive about the issue. Do you not want to be Passed?"

"Well, that's not it," Lan replied, suddenly nervous before the panel. "I know I've passed all my studies and I've reached a rather advanced level, but I never expected it to come so soon . . ."

"And neither did we, Alexander. That is why the panel has been meeting every day for several months now. And finally the time has come for our decision."

"I understand," Lan nodded. He could not believe his ears--he was being Passed, after only studying for a year! He knew that this day would come--the day he had to decide what to do with the rest of his life--but he never thought it would come upon him so soon. He had barely given any thought to the matter.

Until now, most of his decisions had been made for him by the chaotic events of his life. This was his chance to finally make a choice about where he wanted his life to go, and it terrified him. What if he chose wrongly?

"And so, if we may continue," Master Wulstin began, turning to his right, "Mistress Lessiter, you may begin."

"Very well," she said, the sound of her voice carrying with it the wisdom of her eyes, her years. "Alex," she started, looking at Lan. "You know many of my thoughts already, as we have spent many hours together during your research of the war against Ethrakus. It is obvious to me that a key strength of yours is a passion for the past. However, your weakness is in ignoring the present and the future. I do not mean offense with my statements, merely to explain to you what it is I have seen within you since your arrival. You constantly dwell in the past, giving but a flicker of a thought to what you shall do tomorrow, next month, next year, unless your plans deal with digging even further into the past."

She was right. He *did* constantly dwell in the past. How could he not? It was in the past that his family was massacred by sarn. Could anyone forget something like that? Was she asking him to cast aside his family's death from his mind? Surely not.

"I understand that you have a traumatic past--we all have, some, naturally, more than others. All I ask is that you spend a bit more time thinking about where you are going, and not only where you--and the rest of the world--have been." She nodded, then sat back in her chair.

"Very good," Master Wulstin announced. "Master Berrin, you are next."

"Yes, I see," Master Berrin said in his boring monotone voice as he faced Lan. "Well, Alexander, your strength is your unheard of ability to prevent your emotions from running unchecked after using magic. Your weakness is the same. Unchecked, you could be very dangerous. To best prepare, you would be wise to spend time thinking on the future, and the consequences of any of your decisions. Know that your ability is infinitely dangerous from one perspective, and miraculous from another. That is all."

Short, and to the point. Not so much as a smile, a nod, or any other expression the entire time. *Well, Lan thought, that's Master Berrin. I suppose he's right . . . but dangerous? Why do they think I'm dangerous? Do they fear I'll go around blowing everyone up who angers me? Do they not understand that I know what it feels like to lose someone, and that I would never willfully take anyone away from anyone else?*

"Mistress Flancer," Master Wulstin said, turning to the beautiful lady. "Your thoughts?"

"Alexander, you truly possess a wide range of knowledge about the magical arts. You know something of every subject imaginable, and that is your strength. Unfortunately, your interests are not . . ." she took a breath and looked to the ceiling for a thought. After an instant the words she sought hit her, and she flicked her eyes back to his, locking his gaze. The two trailing wisps of hair swirled around her face, reminding him of the mesefu Lisen's braid. ". . . deep enough in any one subject. You have spread your knowledge thin, so that while it may cover a large area, it knows very little about each." She accentuated each of her points with appropriate hand gestures. "I would suggest you spend more time with me and my professors."

She thought he did not know enough? He knew details about every subject imaginable! Why would she, his favorite instructor, tell him that he did not know enough? He knew all he needed to know--all that would help him survive, help him avenge his family. Why should he study the specifics of so many areas when he could just take the parts he needed from each, leaving the rest for another day?

"And now, Master Trotter." Wulstin nodded at the scarred wizard.

"Ah, yes, Alexander. There's not a question in my mind about what your strength is. It should be obvious to anyone who's ever played you in a game of *Skirmish*. Your strategic abilities go beyond anything I've ever seen, and believe you me, I've seen a lot." Trotter scratched at the bare beginnings of a new beard, then continued. "You're also weak, though. While you may be able to devise a plan to win any battle, you've never had to prove your worth in a real life situation. You don't know what it's like to sit in command and call the shots when real lives are on the line. It is a weakness that I suggest you fix by studying war and combat throughout the ages. Read papers written by real generals, journals written by the soldiers they commanded. Immerse yourself in the lives of those who have lived and died in war. With such learned compassion, you could make the greatest general Kalra's ever seen."

A general. All generals in the Pyranian and Kagonese militaries, as he had learned, were wizards. It was definitely not a

bad idea, but why did Trotter think he had no compassion? Had he not fought in many battles? Had he not been captured one time, nearly shot dead another? He had plenty of compassion for those who fought in battles. He had experience with the wild adrenaline rushes, the fury and chaos. This entire panel was blind to his true inner self, but he was not about to argue. They had been so kind to him throughout the year, and were now trying their best to help him make a decision.

"And so you've heard their comments, Alexander," Wulstin said. "Which means now you get to hear our verdict. After much deliberation, we have decided to Pass you from this institution, and urge you strongly to think about a career . . ." Wulstin paused, sharing a look with the other panel members in turn. They each nodded briskly, and he turned back to Lan. ". . . in the military. It would seem apparent from your experiences and abilities that a career as a general would suit you best. However, we will not force the issue on you. As anyone knows, fighting battles is a risky profession. Thank Ohn there's been relative peace over the past few centuries, aside from a few rogue sarn raids, but that does not demean the position of protecting Kalra's people by leading their militaries to victory."

Lan nodded. He would have to think about this, though. He wasn't exactly sure it was what he wanted. It sounded like a wonderful opportunity full of unique experiences, but did he really want to go through military training? Did he want to run the risk of being responsible for hundreds--maybe thousands--of peoples' lives? As a general, people would live or die by his word. Was he ready for such a responsibility? Would he ever be?

No, he would not. The thought of anyone's death on his hands was unbearable. There was no guarantee that the battles he would fight would be solely against the vile sarn, or that none of the men in his power would die. But then, as long as the sarn were defeated, did it matter if one or two humans or mesefu had to fall along the way? Did not the overall long-term welfare of the populace surpass the welfare of the individual?

It was all too much. Going after the sarn on his own agenda with those he most trusted, who shared a similar goal, was the only way he could do it. Leading men to their likely deaths was not for him. He would listen to the panel's advice, but as soon as

he saw an opportunity to take what he wanted most, he would jump on it, leave Rhienos behind, and set off into the world.

"I understand you need to think about this for a while," Wulstin said. "We will give you all the time you need. You are welcome to stay at Rhienos until you have made a decision. If you ever need any guidance, you know that any one of us would gladly help you." The old man smiled at him. Lan smiled uneasily back. How could he ever tell the panel that he wanted nothing to do with any of their suggestions? How could he let any of them down?

"In the meantime," Wulstin continued, "I would like for you to bring your identification papers to Scribe Michael's chamber to have your inscription written in, and he will also hand you your official Rhienos decree." At the old man's gesture, the panel stood up. "Good luck, Alexander. We know you will make the right decision."

Lan nodded again, for what felt like the thousandth time this evening, and turned to depart. He wished Ria were here to help him. Esmond could not be trusted for good advice--he was planning on running off with an illegal cult of necromancers. And Gaelyn . . . she was not even the slightest bit gifted with magic. The faculty overlooked it, however, for reasons Lan didn't quite understand. She had not taken a single course since she arrived. Instead, she spent time alone, or in the library reading through various old tomes. She was only running away with Esmond to the necromancers to be with him, not because she wanted to practice necromancy.

What should he do? Should he set off on his own to look for Ria? Or perhaps to seek out the *krea*? The power they sealed away would help him defeat the sarn. He had found scant information about them in this library, only vague hints and descriptions about where a *krea*-like artifact may be. He had never heard of the Shadowland, however, nor had he found it in any other book in the library.

Perhaps Ria would know. But he could never risk her finding out what he wanted to do. He knew that her ideals and culture were against someone unleashing the power of the *krea*, and there was no way she could ever understand his need for revenge. She would try to console him, and reason with him, and convince him that killing the sarn was foolish. He knew otherwise, however.

By the time he reached his room, the tower clock was chiming twenty-one, and he had made up his mind. Tomorrow he would pack, and the next day set out to find Ria or another *krea*. His first destination would be Porthos--Ria seemed to have many connections there, and perhaps some of them would know where she was. It should be easy enough to slip past the border without being noticed, and he would worry about how to enter the city gates when the time arrived.

How on Kalra was he ever going to explain to the panel that he was abandoning all of their wishes and striking out on his own? He could definitely never tell them of his desires. They would call him mad and have him locked away. He would have to lie, or sneak out of the tower.

As sleep slowly crept over him as he lay in bed that night, the perfect lie grew in the back of his mind.

#

Lan needed Esmond's help. The sun had barely risen above the horizon when Lan bolted into Esmond's room, frantic and excited.

"You've got to help me do something!" Lan shouted. He braced himself against Esmond's cluttered desk, trying to catch his breath.

"Huh? What?" Esmond was awake, but still lying in bed, letting the sunlight coming through his window burn his drowsiness away.

"It's Master Wulstin. I need to leave."

Esmond slowly pushed himself up against the headboard. "Why does Master Wulstin need to approve your leaving? If you want to go, just tell him so, and take off. Of course, I'd stay for a Passage ceremony, just to have--"

Lan thrust his papers out to Esmond. "They Passed me already. I picked up my papers this morning."

"Amazing!" Esmond's eyes poured over the papers. "Congratulations, Lan! This is a really wonderful accomplishment. I wish I could do something like this." He handed the papers back to Lan. "So what's the problem? If they've Passed you already, then you've got no ties here, and Ohn knows you don't want to leave with me and Gaelyn."

"That's not it, Esmond." Lan sat down on the bed next to Esmond. "They're trying to push me into studying to be a general."

"And you don't want to? You're mad! Do you know how many people qualify to be generals? Almost none! That's a great honor, Lan, and I think you should reconsider throwing it away. But even so, I don't see why you need Wulstin's permission to leave. So what if you turn down their offer? Sure, they may think you're as mad as I do, but they can't stop you from leaving." Esmond looked out at the bright sunlight. "Damn, it's early."

"Esmond . . . I'm afraid they *will* try to stop me."

"What on Kalra put that crazy idea into your head? They'd never!"

"You didn't hear them last night, Esmond. They think I may be dangerous."

Esmond jerked his attention to the dusty beams of sunlight to Lan's face. "Who said that?" A heavy seriousness had suddenly replaced the playful mockery of his voice, and his face drooped into the mature, defender's face that Lan had only seen from Esmond twice in his life.

"Master Berrin," Lan said. Then he added suddenly, "But I think they all feel that way, deep inside."

"Master Berrin is a bastion of emotional nothingness. He's never smiled, frowned, cried, or even shuddered in ecstasy. Though that may be due to his rather bland unattractiveness. Why should you listen to anything he says?"

"*Because* he's a bastion of nothingness. If *that* man is afraid of me and is calling me dangerous, there's no idea what everyone else secretly thinks!"

For once, Esmond was at a loss for words. It was only a brief couple of seconds, if even that long, but it was enough to indicate to Lan that not even his best friend was sure what to do.

"Lan, nobody's afraid of you."

"Perhaps not," Lan said, not believing a word from his own mouth. "But I don't want to risk them knowing I'm leaving, and I surely don't want them following me. That's why I need your--"

"Following you? Risk? Lan, what are you planning on doing?" Esmond rolled out of bed and slipped into a frayed robe. He opened his small wooden wardrobe and began digging through it. "Where are those damned towels," he muttered to himself.

"Leave, of course. I'm going after Ria. I think she can help me."

"Ah, here they are." Esmond turned around, two pink towels in his hands. He saw Lan's questioning look and snapped out a hasty response. "They're Gaelyn's, okay? Don't you think for a minute I like these things!" He thrust the towels behind his back. Lan caught a glimpse of an embroidered flower on them and held back a snicker. "What can Ria help you with, Lan? She runs off too often to be of much help to anyone. I mean, no offense, but if you're thinking--"

"She knows where something is that might be able to help me get the sarn back for what they did to my--"

"By dying?" interrupted Esmond. "No matter what she can help you with, you'll never find the exact same sarn who killed your family, Lan. You've been blinded by revenge. Open your eyes! Every day I've run into you in the past year, you haven't failed to bring up the subject of 'those blessed sarn'. I know it's hard on you, but I've never seen anyone hold such a grudge for over a year! It's unhealthy, Lan. You keep thinking about it and dwelling on it, and that just makes it worse. Besides, look at you--you're losing weight, you've got dark circles under your eyes . . . you don't look so good anymore. I mean, you were never the epitome of attraction like myself . . ." He walked over to Lan, put both his hands on Lan's shoulders, and gazed sternly into his face.

"I know that losing your family was painful--it was painful for me too. Do you think I didn't care at all for your parents or for Anya? I know I'll never be able to understand exactly how you feel, but as your friend I'll advise you as best I can. You've got to move on. I don't mean to sound cruel, but you're--"

"No, you *don't* have any idea how I feel." Lan's tone was cold, cruel. "Those green bastards slaughtered my family, and they will pay." Lan shook, wracked with a sob.

"Gods-damnit, Lan!" Esmond slammed a fist down onto his desk. Various little ink bottles leaped up into the air and tumbled over onto their sides. Several spilled their contents onto the sheets of disarrayed papers as they crashed down. Esmond paid them no mind. "Didn't you hear me? You have no idea which sarn killed your family. I know--you've said more than once that if you could wipe out the entire race, it would ensure their death. At first

I thought you were just making a joke or something, but I'm beginning to think you, Alexander Lansing, the last man on Kalra to dislike someone merely because of their race, are serious about all of this. Do you not see how crazy it is? That's like killing everyone from Merhos just because an unknown shipbuilder slit a little girl's throat."

"All men from Merhos aren't inherently evil." Lan turned his back to Esmond. "I am serious about this, Esmond. Unlike you, I can actually be serious about something for more than ten seconds at a time."

"I'll assume you didn't mean that because you were caught up in a moment of insanity. You're not thinking straight, Lan."

"I am perfectly fine." Lan pivoted on his heels to face his friend once more. "*You* are the one who needs to wake up, Esmond. We're friends, remember? Friends help each other, and I need your help now." Lan walked away. He pushed Esmond aside as he strode past. He stood in the middle of the room facing the door, feeling the morning sun on the back of his neck. Why couldn't Esmond see how much this meant to him?

"I know you need my help, now. Help from that ludicrous idea you have in your head." Esmond walked up behind him. "I am your friend, and as your friend, I have to say that this is a horrible idea, and I have no idea why you're letting it take control of your life! Come with Gaelyn and me to the Night, Lan. I think it would do you some good to get out of this stuffy tower and get some fresh air. You don't even have to practice any necromancy if you don't--"

"You said it yourself just then! You are my friend, and you care about me. Help me with this, please? Together we can pull it off!"

"No, Lan." Esmond turned to his closet door and opened it. He began digging for a shirt.

"Please, Esmond! All you have to do is tell a little lie! What's so hard about that?" He was shouting now, and red in the face. He could not believe that of all the things Esmond had dragged him into in the past, he would not agree to something as simple as this.

"There's nothing hard about it at all, because I'm not going to do it, and that's final." Esmond slammed his closet door and threw on the red shirt he had taken from it.

"I thought we were friends!"

"And that's why I won't help you. Aren't you listening to me, or is everything bouncing off that thick head of yours? I think I'm beginning to see why Master Berrin said what he did." Esmond stepped up to Lan and put his face so close to Lan's that Lan could feel his breath. "*I. AM. YOUR. FRIEND.*" Esmond backed away, jerked the door to his room open and stomped out into the hall, slamming it hard behind him. Another bottle fell over on the desk with clink. It wobbled for a moment then settled. Silence.

"Apparently not anymore," Lan roared in disgust at the closed door, feeling more alone than ever in the empty room.

#

The next day, a letter arrived at Rhienos for Lan from some unknown origin. He opened it hastily, breaking the wax seal while being careful not to damage the paper contained inside the envelope. It was from Ria. She had found him at last. He would not be alone much longer. She would understand, he knew it. She would understand everything.

7th Pyannos, 1079

Dear Lan,

It has taken me a seeming eternity to find the time to write to you. I'm sorry I left in such a hurry the night before everything happened in Porthos. I haven't forgotten you, and I'm looking forward to seeing you very soon. I need your help.

I felt guilty after leaving you in Porthos in the middle of the night and decided to go back. You'd already been jailed by the time I finally got back into the city through the swarms of guards and their endless questions. I couldn't believe what had happened, but I knew it wasn't your fault. Osbick was behind it all. I had been watching him for nearly a month when I ran into you the night of the festival.

My mother once lived in Rhienos, and I knew that you had a special gift for magic, so I went to speak with your headmaster to arrange for you to be accepted there, along with your friends. He eagerly agreed to meet with you. I made him promise not to use my name. I didn't want to make this any more complicated than it already was.

I finally managed to lose Ga'ruk and settled down in the Wastes to rest for a while. After a few months, I ran into him again, moving north with a small squadron of troops. I followed him and discovered that he was on his way to collect Ol'tue--the Darksearer blade. He's managed to track down the current possessor.

You can't say anything about this to anyone! If the wrong people find out, you'll become a target, as will I. This letter was magically sealed so that you'd be the only one able to open it. I am sending it out today via a messenger who should reach you within a week. I desperately need your help in preventing Ga'ruk from getting his hands on the blade. For over a year I've helped track the Darksearer down, working in secret with the High Lord of the mesefu. This is the closest I've ever come to succeeding, and I am not about to back down now.

I'll be staying in Eskar, a small human settlement along the coast, just north of the Ol'Nannen forest. Whatever you do, do not travel through the forest alone. It'd be best if you didn't travel through it at all, if possible. Try to take a ship along the coast. I will be staying at the only inn in the village. It shouldn't be hard to find.

If you haven't arrived within two weeks, I'll assume that you didn't get this letter or are too caught up in your own affairs to come, and I'll take steps on my own to prevent Ga'ruk from getting his hands on that blade. Please hurry, Lan. You can't understand how grateful I would be for your help and your friendship. It has been far too long since we last saw one another.

*Ohn Illumine,
Ria*

Lan noticed the date on the letter. It was dated well over a month ago. It was late--very late. She would be gone by now, following through with whatever plans she had for herself. He had to find her, but how? Perhaps there would be some clue at Eskar.

If I could somehow get my hands on the Darksearer before anyone else, I could use it against the sarn. He paused in thought for a moment, deliberating what he had just conceived. *No, that's crazy. If I had that blade, everyone on Kalra would be hunting me down for it. There must be a better way. Perhaps I could study it, then return it as if I'd found it. I could use the knowledge gained from studying it to forge many more and equip entire legions with similar weapons. Am I experienced enough to be able to figure out how such a powerful magical weapon was constructed?* He could construct replicas of the dragon emblem perfectly, so why shouldn't he be able to do the same with another magical artifact? Surely someone

who had devised a teleportation coordinate calculation method could replicate the Darksearer.

All he needed now was an excuse to leave Rhienos that would keep the panel from following or watching him. They already feared him and called him dangerous, and if they knew what he was planning they would definitely try to stop him. They could never understand the grand plans he had for Kalra.

#

Esmond and Gaelyn were packing their things, preparing to go join Alric Wayreth and the other members of the Night outside the tower where their long trek to the Night's underground lair would begin. He let the fight with Lan slip away as the boyish excitement of a grand adventure began seeping into his mind. It was going to be very interesting, living with so many people who shared his views and practiced necromancy.

Gaelyn did not have much to say about the whole situation. She'd agreed to go without Esmond having to prod her at all. They would have to try to disguise her inability to use magic, but Esmond didn't think that would be too difficult.

Esmond's own abilities had scared him somewhat at first. It had taken the better part of the past year to evoke any magical talent from his body. The first thing he had done was slide a plate across a table without touching it. It had exhausted him for nearly a day. He had slowly been trying to build up his stamina since then, but with little effect. He didn't think he would ever achieve Lan's level of expertise. To some extent, Esmond understood the panel's fear of Lan's abilities--they had come to him so quickly and easily. He was afraid of what could result from the combination of Lan's ease with magic and his mind of revenge. He'd tried asking Gaelyn how he should approach Lan with his concerns, but she was entirely unresponsive on the matter.

Gaelyn had avoided any talk of Lan since their imprisonment last year. He kept wondering if there was something going on that he didn't know about. *Surely not*, he tried to reassure himself. *Besides, we'll be out of here and away from him in a few hours. Then I won't have to worry about that revenge-blinded fool for a while.*

It only took him about an hour to pack--it would not have taken that long if he could have seen by the light of day instead of

the dim candlelight. He put out the candle and they quietly sneaked out into the dark hallway.

"Are you ready?" he whispered to Gaelyn.

"Yes, let's go," she whispered. He gave her a kiss for good luck, and they were off down through the tower, slowly making their way to the bottom, where a new life awaited them.

#

"I've got to leave for a while," Lan said. His calmness surprised himself.

"Where will you be going?" Master Wulstin asked.

"I've got to go check on a friend. I received a letter from her, and apparently she's not doing so well. It will only take a month."

"Is your friend Esmond going along with you?"

"I don't think so, sir. Esmond and I have--"

The stained wooden door to Wulstin's office burst open and one of the female apprentices burst in. Wulstin stood up behind his desk and placed his palms on its surface. He glared at the newcomer.

"There are rules here in Rhienos, Lyra, and one of them is that you knock before entering a Master's office!"

"No time to knock, Master Wulstin! A group of young apprentices have left the tower--"

"I have more important things to tend to, dear Lyra, without keeping track of the exploits of the young--"

--along with many of the Initiates--"

--apprentices and what they do in their spare--"

--and Acolytes--"

--time, so long as they are back for classes--"

--and even Proctor Fallon!"

--so . . ." Master Wulstin immediately grew pale. Lan looked back and forth between Lyra and Wulstin as they stared each other down. After an eerily serious moment of silence, Wulstin cleared his throat and spoke.

"I have no time for such pranks, dear Lyra. Now please leave us to our conversation. Proctor Fallon would never do such a--"

"But he did!" the girl exclaimed. She came further into the room and stopped by Lan's chair. "I wanted to schedule a meeting

with him about emotional harmonics tonight, but he said he was too busy. I got completely stuck in my studies and decided to hunt him down to see if he had even a minute to spare." She spoke so quickly that Lan could barely keep up. "I know it's wrong to enter a Proctor's chambers unannounced and without permission and I know that I'll be reprimanded for it, but I had looked everywhere and nobody knew where he was and he didn't come to his door after ten straight minutes of knocking, so I magicked my way in and he was gone!"

"I don't believe this!" Wulstin said. "Proctor Fallon is not in his room, so you presume that he has fled from Rhienos? What reason would anyone have to flee a magic institution? Your story is making on sense, dear Lyra."

"His belongings were gone as well, Master Wulstin!" For the first time Lan noticed two other apprentice girls on either side of the door peeking in. "I ran to find Jezel and Kira and they said that several of their friends had mysteriously disappeared tonight as well, and--"

"I know what happened," Lan said as he stood up. "Esmond told me this morning, but--" Lan saw his chance to leave without having to further explain anything to Wulstin. "--I didn't believe it. He kept talking about necromancy, and--"

"Necromancy?" Wulstin asked.

"Yes, Master Wulstin," Lyra said. "That's what a few others are saying as well."

"Dear Ohn." Wulstin wiped his brow. "All this time it was right there in front of me and I never saw it. Proctor Fallon and his research, his questions . . ." He turned to Lan. "Do you know where they were going, Lan?"

"I'm not sure, Master. All I know is that he said they were leaving tonight. I assure you, I never thought he was being serious . . ."

Master Wulstin pulled on the fur robe he kept beside his chair. "No need, Lan, I believe you. Come see me first thing in the morning and we will discuss your trip then. For now, I hope you'll understand that I must attend to this matter."

"But of course, Master Wulstin."

"If you want to come help, I will be in the library."

"Yes, Master."

Wulstin all but ran from the room, the three apprentice girls following, telling him all they knew. Lan was free. He hurried to his room to pack. He would stock up on food and supplies from the tower kitchen, then set out northward, toward Ria. Toward destiny.

Chapter Seventeen

It was a warm night, like all nights in mid-summer. They were slowly making their way eastward toward the mountains. Among the jagged slopes of the Groax Mountains lay their destination, a secret place where, according to Wayreth, they would be safe from harm and persecution, able to practice the art of necromancy. He had not learned anything about the art yet, but was looking forward to the experience. Perhaps he would even be one of the members chosen for the expedition to Niren, where the necromancers of long ago were banished.

Tomorrow night they would reach the forest. The horses could never make the trek through the small part of the Ol'Nannen they needed to cross, however. Many of the cult members feared the same for themselves. Strange creatures lived in the extremely dense forest--so dense that it had never been settled. The mesefu claimed reign over it and nobody disputed them--there was nothing there for anyone.

Two races of primitive creatures inhabited the Ol'Nannen Forest that were known about, and neither were very friendly--the ursinians and the armadane.

The ursinians were huge bear-like creatures with immense strength that lived deep within the forest, while the armadane were as big as the ursinians, but were covered in a hard shell, almost like bone. Those who had gone in to study the savage creatures for prolonged periods of time had never returned. Hopefully the Night would not run into any of the creatures, as their travels were taking them only into the borderlands between the forest and the plains,

not into the heart of the forest itself. Rarely had one of the primitive beings been seen on the outskirts. That knowledge almost eased Esmond's nerves.

He could make out Gaelyn ahead of him through the darkness. She had been reclusive and silent since they left the tower. She seemed, in a sense, to be regretting something, but he couldn't tell what. Surely the thoughts he had about her and Lan were untrue. If he ever found out that Lan and Gaelyn had wronged him, they would both deeply regret it.

Esmond approached her. "Gaelyn?"

"Yes?" She turned to him, her face hidden beneath the shadows of her hood.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." She lowered her head beneath her hood. He could see her looking away from him toward the ground.

"You seem upset or depressed or something."

"No, not really. Just tired."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure," she said gruffly, shrugging her shoulders.

"Okay," he said, hesitantly. "If you say so. But I still think that--"

"Gods-damnit, Esmond, I'm all right! Stop bothering me about it!" He smiled, meekly, then fell back, letting her have the lead on him once again.

Well, she sure seems to be acting normal, but there's still something . . . Who knows, maybe it'll all calm down once we get to where we're going, and that will be that.

A cool breeze flowed through his cloak that sent a chill through his body. The small stems of grass rustled in the wind as cloaks of men and women fluttered about their feet. Everyone seemed to take delight in the change in temperature, a welcome treat after the day's searing heat. Esmond walked on in silent contemplation.

It was an hour later when the lights first appeared on the southern horizon, hundreds of flickering points that resembled glow-bugs.

"Do not fear," Wayreth told them. "Let us move quickly, in hopes that we can avoid whoever this may be. By now our absence

has surely been noticed, and we do not want any trouble if they are looking for us."

The old man moved well for his age. Though deep lines were engraved in his features and his hair had long ago lost whatever color it once had, he still seemed young in some ways.

Within a quarter-hour, chanting could be heard coming from the row of lights. The voices were unlike anything Esmond had ever before heard in his life, and the language was doubly as strange. It sounded much like rocks grating together. The only language he could possibly attribute such a guttural sound to was--

"Sarn," said Wayreth. "Wait here," he said, and strode off toward the approaching sarn.

"What are you doing?" asked Esmond. "You'll get killed!"

"No," the master said in a scolding tone. "I recognize their leader. He is an old friend of mine, and he has some explaining to do." Wayreth stepped out among the sarn, calling something that sounded like *garruk*. A sarn voice sounded from within the mass of soldiers and they all stopped, staring at Wayreth.

ADD A PARAGRAPH HERE DESCRIBING THE GROUP OF SARN WHEN YOU FEEL LIKE IT

A sarn dressed more ornately than the others approached Wayreth. He wore unpolished steel armor with fur lining. A purple sash hung over his shoulder, adorned with what appeared to be six human skulls. The sarn wore a large, three-horned helmet that seemed oddly familiar. Esmond swallowed hard. He looked over to Gaelyn. She seemed to have gone completely limp at the sight of the sarn.

"Greetings, Ga'ruk." Wayreth waved at the sarn. "How goes it?"

"Fine." The sarn spat onto the ground. "Why are you moving this early, necromancer?"

"There were spies at Rhienos, and I believe they were watching our activities a bit too closely for my comfort. I needed to leave and take the new recruits to the Gates of Night as quickly as I could. If we are caught, it would be disastrous for us all--even you."

"You assume a larger role for yourself than you really have, old man. It would be a nasty blow to have you captured, sure, but it wouldn't hurt the ultimate plan. I assume you are still willing to cooperate?"

"Yes, Ga'ruk. Of course."

"Well, then," said the sarn. "I will keep you well informed of our status."

"Yes." Wayreth paused for a second. A soft wind picked up in the fields. Esmond stood rigid, glancing from the conversation to Gaelyn and back. She was shaking, and had wrapped her arms around her side. Esmond slid closer to her, put his arm around her shoulder, and squeezed her tightly.

"May I ask why you are marching through the fields of Kagon with nearly a legion of armed warriors?"

"We must make our way north. Anything that stands between us and Altkrea at this time is a threat."

Wayreth raised an eyebrow.

"Altkrea? Already? This will never work, Ga'ruk. Do you truly believe you can do this before they find you? You know they're on your trail. Close."

"I'll be fine. You just uphold your end of the bargain."

"Very well then. We shall be off."

After exchanging what Esmond supposed were parting words in the sarn tongue, the sarn leader signalled for the troops to continue marching.

Wayreth approached the would-be necromancers as the sarn began marching off into the darkness, carrying the ambient glow of the torches with them.

"We will move on now. I will explain as much as I can when we set camp for the night." He started marching eastward. "Hurry now. Those lights will draw unwanted attention."

Esmond and Gaelyn walked on silently. All Esmond could think of over the next few hours was Gaelyn's reaction to seeing the sarn. Had she seen him before? Did she know who he was? Something about the sarn tickled the back of his mind. Perhaps he could get some answers at tonight's camp. It had become apparent to him that he had gotten into something far deeper than just a group of necromancy practitioners, and Wayreth knew far more than he let on.

#

The campfire had been glowing for nearly an hour, and Wayreth had not explained anything yet. Esmond gazed mindlessly into the flames, trying to stay awake long enough to hear Wayreth's

announcement. The old man poked the fire with a stick and started muttering to himself. "Ga'ruk's a fool. He's going to ruin himself. He doesn't know what I know."

"What do you mean?" asked Esmond. He tried to hide his surprise at hearing Wayreth speak with a sip from a cup of water.

"He plans on securing the Darksearer. Unfortunately there is a half-breed spy tailing him as we speak. He is blind. Blinded by arrogance and ambition." Wayreth poked the fire with his walking stick. "He overestimates his own power and underestimates everyone else's. I do hope that he's successful, though."

A gulp of water stuck in Esmond's throat and required a second swallow. "You *want* him to take the blade?"

"Yes. I want him to succeed. He almost had his hands on it once before. He would have succeeded if not for Ria Sulian. That half-breed girl has always been more trouble than she looks. She is not at all what she seems."

Esmond almost asked Wayreth about Ria, but he held back--he did not want to get any more involved in anything than he already was . . . if that were even possible. He was suddenly having second thoughts about his little adventure.

"I don't see how this sarn having the Darksearer will do you--will do *us* any good."

"Because if he possesses it, then our protection will be complete."

"Protection?"

Wayreth, growing either suspicious or tired of all the questions, stood up and began walking toward his sleeping area. "Later, Esmond. For now, I suggest you get some sleep. I shall reveal everything to the Night when we arrive."

Esmond did not like the sound of any of this. He knew enough about Ria to know she was not a bad person. He also remembered the sarn. He was the same one Esmond had saved Lan from at the protest in Porthos. So Ga'ruk was his name.

Esmond walked from the fire, rolled his blankets out on the ground, and wrapped them tightly around himself. He fell asleep trying to make sense out of everything that he had discovered.

#

So close to having been discovered. If Ga'ruk had seen her, he would have torn her head from her shoulders without the

slightest bit of hesitation. She had let him down, and however indirectly it was, she knew he would not be pleased with her. It had been her responsibility to see that Ga'ruk captured Ria--and she had failed him. Everything was ruined now because of her failure. She clenched her jaw tight and fought back a tear of frustration as she dreamt of the life she could have had.

Ria had fled the night before the protest. Gaelyn had searched through every inch of the Guild that morning but there was no trace of her. She shuddered at the memory of the feeling that washed over her when she was led past Ga'ruk into the Ceren that day. His face had been blank and expressionless, but it was his hands that frightened her. He was clenching and unclenching his fists, the large muscles in his arms rippling up and down, silently telling her what they planned to do if he ever ran into her.

She looked over at Esmond to find him sleeping peacefully. She took her hand and brushed a few stray hairs from his face. She wondered what he would do if he ever found out about her treachery. *He'd leave you and never speak to you again, that's what he'd do*, she told herself. *Why, Ohn? What have I done to make you hate me so much? Must everything I touch turn sour? I never had the best of lives, and the first chance I get to make a better one for myself gets ruined! Am I going to lose Esmond, too? I'm sure I will--he's too good for me, right? I don't deserve him, is that how you feel?* She put her face in her hands and cried.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm so sorry." She turned toward Esmond after a moment and put her moist hand over his. "I only wanted us to be together. I didn't know how dangerous coming with you would be. Everything I've done was for you." Her tears flowed with all the pain, the disappointment. She tried hard to think of one good thing that had come of all this. Esmond was all. He was everything to her now. She would not know what to do without him.

She had escaped Ga'ruk's attention this time, but what if they met again? She was at a great risk being around Alric Wayreth. The two knew each other too well. She was starting to regret leaving Rhienos. She had been eager to leave because she never quite fit in, spending most of her days reading quietly in the library or taking quiet strolls around the tower and the surrounding village. At times the only thing that kept her going was knowing that she

would be able to curl up next to Esmond at night. And now she risked losing even that.

She worried that Esmond might sense what was on her mind. He had already noticed that something was bothering her, and she *had* been feeling a bit ill since the morning. She'd had to fight back the urge to vomit several times before dinner, and had been tired all evening. *I'm probably just coming down with a chill*, she told herself. *Jasmin down the hall had been ill. I probably caught whatever she had.* It did not feel like a normal illness, however. It felt different, as if something about her entire body was changing.

Her stomach lurched. Saliva started rushing into her mouth. She bolted upright and rushed away from the campsite. She stumbled and fell to her knees as her stomach convulsed. Gaelyn vomited onto the ground until her sides ached. When she finally stopped retching, she rolled over onto her side and let the cool night breezes blow over her face. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

No, it can't be, she thought. *Not now!* She thought back to when her last cycle had been. *Dear Ohn, no. Nearly two months! What would Esmond say? Would he leave me? Would he help me? Could I do this on my own?*

These thoughts circled the edge of her mind like daemons until exhaustion washed away the last of her consciousness.

Chapter Eighteen

She was being followed. She had first noticed strange happenings when she left the Ol'Nannen forest. At first she thought nothing of the campfires far north of her every night, figuring them for wandering peddlers or random travelers. Once, out of curiosity, she had tried backtracking to see if she could find the campsite of whoever had been there in the night, but she found nothing.

Ria swished the *telo* around in her mug then finished it off in one swallow. The warm Kagonese ale was very refreshing after spending so many days with only water for drink. She left the mug on the table and stood. She slung her bag over her shoulder and was about to turn toward the door when a figure in the dark corner across from her caught her eye. The person's legs were propped up on a stool, and covered in slim, rugged leather boots. Their wearer was definitely feminine.

The woman in the shadows slowly stood. She slipped something into a pouch on her belt and stepped out of the dark corner, staying close to the far wall of the inn. She passed by a window, through the afternoon sunlight. Ria took a long good look at her. She had fairer skin than most mesefu. Her eyes were a desolate, cloudy grey. Two small scars ran down high cheeks alongside her slim nose. One of the scars framed the left side of her small, pallid lips. Her hair and eyebrows were white--not the white of the elderly, but a pure white, unlike anything Ria had ever seen. Her hair was long, done up in braids that she had wrapped across her forehead and held in place with a plain dome-shaped

leather cap in such a way that two frizzy tufts of hair stuck out from under the cap on either side of her head.

A black leather choker encircled her pale throat. She also wore a leather necklace that disappeared beneath a soiled, white button-up shirt. The collar on the shirt was frayed in several places. Over this shirt hung a brown leather vest with two large pockets on either breast, bulging with various trinkets and unknowns. Ria could not be sure what any of the items were, but they all resembled pieces of adventuring gear.

The leather pants that covered her thin legs were as frayed as her boots and vest, held up by a thick red belt with a silver buckle. There was a dark stain down the left leg. Several small pouches stuffed as full as her vest pockets were strung through her belt, as well as a coiled leather whip.

The first thought that crossed Ria's mind was that this woman was a bounty hunter. The white-haired mystery slid some money to the bartender and strode out the door of the inn out into the dusty streets. Ria tried to follow her quickly, but the bounty hunter was nowhere to be seen in the dead streets.

I wonder if that's who's been following me? she asked herself. *Best keep a sharper lookout today in town while I gather supplies.* She sighed. *I wish Lan was here now. An extra pair of eyes would be extremely welcome.*

#

Ria poked at the fire with a stick. She was sitting at her campfire late that night far off the main road. She lay back and gazed up into the cloudy, starless night. *Four nights without the stars. How long can these clouds stay before--*

A whistling sound suddenly broke out over the crinkle of the fire. With lightning speed, Ria bolted to her feet and spun to see the end of a whip flying at her. She reached out and grabbed it. It snapped loudly against her flesh and she grimaced. A bloody welt swelled up around the whip. She took it in both hands, braced herself against the ground, and pulled sharply. The whip's wielder stumbled out of the darkness into the glow of the fire. It was the ghostly-haired bounty hunter.

Ria pulled the woman up close to her. The bounty hunter was nearly a span taller than she was, but that did not intimidate Ria at all. An strange aroma of leather mixed with sweat came off of

the woman, as well as some bitter smell Ria couldn't identify. She wrinkled her nose.

"Who in Ohn's name do you think you are?" Ria demanded.

"I am your savior," uttered the other woman. Ria could almost swear that she was moaning the words.

"I *don't* need saving," she said. "You've been following me, haven't you? Who sent you? What do you want with me? If it's my life, I'm afraid I may have to let you down."

"I was sent to prevent you from interfering with Ohn's divine plan, by whatever means possible. I have only Ohn's best interests in mind. I have come--" she took a step back and looked directly into Ria's eyes "--to absolve you." The woman drew close.

Ria released the woman's whip and backhanded her across the mouth with a loud smack. A trickle of blood appeared as she stumbled backward and jerked her whip away from Ria. Her eyes snapped open and she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

"Do not resist," she said. "It will be easier for both of us that way. I do not want to hurt you, I only want to save you."

"I do *not* need to be saved! I--"

The woman leaped for her. Ria's heart beat once. From one of the pockets in her vest, she whipped a dagger and aimed it at Ria. Ria grabbed the woman's hand with her own left, and with her right she reached out, shoved the leather cap off of her attacker's head, grabbed both of her braids, and pulled them back exposing her neck. She sharply bent the woman's arm and forced the dagger against her own throat. Ria's heart beat again.

"You . . . cannot kill me . . ." the woman uttered, catching her breath. "I am the Eye of the Heavens, servant of Ohn the Almighty, and I have come to save you."

Faster than Ria could react, the woman drove her left knee into Ria's groin, then immediately leaped up and drove her right knee into Ria's stomach. Ria lost her grip on the woman and fell backward. She landed sharply on her back.

"You may have been trained in the mesefu combat arts, Ria Sulian, and you may be able to wield demonic magics given unto you by the Master of the Lake, but in the end, Righteousness always wins. You cannot defeat me."

Ria started to leap to her feet with magically-enhanced speed, but the woman was too fast for her. She kicked her in the

side, and then drove her elbow into her back. Ria winced as tears of pain clouded her vision. This woman was too fast for a human. What on Kalra was she?

The bounty hunter jerked Ria to her knees by her hair and wrapped her whip twice around Ria's neck. She pulled tightly on the whip, squeezing it against Ria's windpipe. She was too weak to stand up and fight, too weak to use her magic to protect herself. It was almost as if something about this woman's very person was draining Ria's energy away--draining her will to fight.

"Stand, you half-bred bitch," the bounty hunter spat, tugging on the handle of the whip. Ria strained against the whip. She was not going to lose. She had come too far to fall to some insane bounty hunter.

"I said STAND!" The woman jerked harder on the whip. Ria thought she was going to pass out, but she fought the urge. She slowly felt strength flowing back into her body. The blow to the stomach had taken her by surprise, but only because she had kept her guard down. Now that she knew more of what this woman was capable of, she knew just how to take her down.

"*STAND!*" With inhuman strength, the bounty hunter managed to pull Ria up completely off of the ground. The woman held Ria in the air, the tips of her feet barely scratching against the ground as she swung from the whip coiled about her neck.

"Straighten your legs to prepare to be Cleansed!" Ria moaned unintelligibly and rolled her eyes around in her head.

The woman released one of her arms from the whip and didn't even wince at holding Ria up with just one hand. She took Ria's left arm and looped a short rope around it from one of her stuffed pockets. Attached to the other end of the rope was a large iron stake. She threw Ria to the ground and straddled her. She then stretched out Ria's arm and drove the stake into the soft ground. She then did the same with the other. Ria made no movement to resist.

"You are a half-breed, in need of salvation," the woman said, looping a third piece of rope around Ria's left leg. "If I do not absolve you, your mesefu half will drag you down to eternal damnation with the Master of the Lake. I forgive all of your wrongdoings toward me--you cannot control what your evil half does. I understand well." She drove the third stake in.

"Know that what I am doing is to help you, not to hurt you, regardless of the pain you may feel. That pain is caused by the mesefu blood that courses through your body. Your parents committed one of the highest sins, and it is a pity that you now have to suffer for their misdeeds. But in a few moments, it will all be over--your evil will be cast aside, and the good in you will be absolved, to meet Ohn in the Heavens."

She looped a fourth and final rope around Ria's other leg. As she was beginning to drive it into the ground, Ria used her last ounces of strength to kick upward and sling the stake into the woman's knee. She shouted in surprise as it hit her with a dull "thunk".

Ria, awash with a newfound surge of adrenaline, ripped her arms and other leg free and stood above the bounty hunter. She brought her fists down on the woman's shoulders--the stakes attached to her wrists slammed against the woman's back.

"Now," Ria said, "you will answer my questions."

She magically bound the woman's knees to the ground. She then pulled the ropes around her hands into a knot around the woman's neck and slipped her wrists free of them. She magically deflected the bounty hunter back onto the ground and drove the stakes into the soil with her mind. The crazed woman was now secured to the earth by her neck. If she pulled up too hard to free herself, she would likely crush her throat.

Ria then used her magic to hold the woman's hands still while she bound them in her own whip. With her hands bound, she could not easily pull the stakes out.

"Who sent you?" Ria asked. The woman answered her with only a snarl. "You can either try to pull yourself out with your neck which will likely kill you, or you can answer my questions and pray I don't kill you myself."

"You . . . can never . . . kill me!" the woman squeezed out through the ropes around her neck. "I am the Eye of the Heavens, and by the will of Ohn I shall absolve you one way or another!"

"Ohn? Absolve me?" Ria loomed over the woman. Her shadow from the fire covered the bounty hunter. "Who sent you?"
No answer.

Ria placed her foot on the woman's chest. "You don't want me to do this. Now who sent you? Was it Ga'ruk?"

"I was sent by a true servant of Ohn Almighty. One who wants you stopped from interfering with Ohn's plans. One who--"

"You *were* sent by Ga'ruk, weren't you?" She stepped back toward the fire, keeping her gaze trained on the restrained woman. "I should kill you where you lie for consorting with him. Do you not understand what will happen when the sarn get--"

"I work for NO sarn!" the bounty hunter spat. "I do only the work of Ohn! I am the Eye of the Heavens! I do not stoop to--"

"I don't care what you think you are, or who you think you're working for. If anyone wants to keep me from 'interrupting' anything, it's Ga'ruk. I won't be the first to admit that you may not even know that's who you're working for. He has his ways of getting what he wants without letting anyone know who he is."

"You lie!"

"Do I?" Ria knelt down next to the woman. "You received an anonymous letter one night, saying something about how a 'half-breed' girl was trying to interfere with Ohn's plans for the Darksearer, that I'm extremely dangerous, that I'm either to be killed or taken alive, depending on his mood when he wrote it, and that if you comply, you'll be rewarded beyond your most fanciful desires. Does any of this sound familiar?"

The bounty hunter cackled. She shook her head side to side, the firelight glinting off of her platinum-white braids. "You use demonic powers to read my mind, half-breed, but your Master has slipped." She paused for another short laugh. "There are no sarn in my thoughts, except, perhaps, thoughts of eliminating their blight on Ohn's world."

"I'm not reading your mind. I'm afraid to even try that one--I doubt very much I would survive the experience."

"Your humor does not amuse me, half-breed."

"I don't intend it to." Ria looked toward the road. A light approached, likely a midnight traveler on his way north to Dryan. She could kill this woman right now and put an end to any threat she may present before the traveler came close enough to see anything. She could silence the woman easily enough if she called out for help, but she could not prevent any onlookers from seeing anything.

And what if the woman told the truth? In all likelihood she knew nothing of Ga'ruk or what he wanted with the blade. She was merely an off-center bounty hunter with a grudge against half-mesefu whom Ga'ruk knew how to manipulate. Did she deserve to die for that?

"I want you to think about all of this," Ria said to her. "I want you to look into who sent you that letter. He will be sending you another one soon--he always does. It will contain information about where to turn in evidence of my death or capture. Find that person. Find out who they really work for. I think you'll be surprised."

"There will be no surprises, half-breed. The one who wants you Cleansed is Ohn himself, and I have been sent to do the work. Whatever mortal is responsible for showing me the way is irrelevant."

"Just remember what I said." Ria turned away from the bound woman and picked up her pack. "Now, there's someone coming down the road. Perhaps they will set you free." She started walking away into the darkness. "Remember what I said."

"I will bathe in your blood, half-breed!" the woman shouted behind her. "YOU WILL REGRET THIS, RIA SULIAN!"

"Only if you make me," Ria said over her shoulder. "And I pray that you realize you don't have to." She continued on into the darkness, heading westward to throw the woman off, then, after she could no longer see the glow of her campfire, turned south to continue her journey. All night as she walked, she could only wonder if she would ever regret leaving the bounty hunter alive.

Chapter Nineteen

How long had it been since he left Rhienos? Two weeks perhaps? Maybe closer to three? It all looked the same to him now, and it was nearly impossible to distinguish day from night under the dense covering of the trees. Lan had entered the Ol'Nannen Forest around a week ago and had lost track of time since then. He had no idea if he was anywhere near the coast. He knew Ria had told him to avoid the forest, but it was the fastest way to get to her, and time was running out. *Assuming it's not already too late*, he told himself.

Not an hour had gone by that he hadn't regretted leaving the tower, at least somewhat. He always managed to convince himself he had done the right thing by thinking of how much the panel feared him, and how much they seemed to want to control him. *You did the right thing, Lan. You wouldn't have been happy there for long, and now you can finally find Ria. She needs your help, and it'll allow you to get one step closer to the Darksearer, while seeking out the other krea.*

He also thought often of Esmond. Had he been too harsh on him? Where was he now? Was he still with the necromancers, or had he given up on that whim of his and found something even more ridiculous to do? Or perhaps he had gained some sense and returned to Rhienos. While Esmond was slow to pick up the magical arts, he could still be quite good at them, and it would be terrible for him to waste his ability, as rare as it was in humans.

Lan bent a branch away from in front of him. The trail he was following was old and worn. It hadn't seen the feet of people in years--even decades, perhaps. So far he had managed to avoid

any contact with the inhabitants said to reside within this dark place.

Hunger had begun to gnaw at his stomach. The small supply of food he had brought with him in his bag--mainly strips of dried meat and hard, dry biscuits from the tower--had run out days ago, and the only water he had came from a small stream that the trail followed. He had managed to find several bushes of sweetberries alongside the water, but eating too many had made him feel sick. He had to get to the other edge of the forest soon--if not, he feared he would die here. *I can't*, he told himself. *There's too much left for me to do.*

Throughout the past few years, his life had taken several unexpected turns. The sarn were the only "turn" he could wrap his fingers around and squeeze the life out of. He would never let anything control his life again. Too long had he lived his life doing what others wanted him to. From now on he would do only what *he* wanted. Destroying the sarn was his first step in showing the world that he was his own master.

Lan yawned. He didn't know how late it was, but it was obviously getting close to time for him to set up camp. Since entering the forest, the days had consisted of the time between waking up and going to sleep, as very little light entered through the thick foliage to give an estimate of the time of day. His campsites consisted of a small magical fire that could not spread, and a sheet he had in his bag that he had taken from his bed at Rhienos.

He was setting up the small campsite, trying to clear out a place for his blanket amidst all of the scrubs, when he heard a clicking sound, something of a mix between a bird chirp and a hammer striking a nail. It was a loud, rhythmic, resonating click. It sounded far away, but that did not bring him any comfort. There had been many sounds in the forest, and many had spooked him in the dark, but this one terrified him beyond any of the others. Unlike those, this one sounded threatening.

Lan dropped his bag and began looking around through the undergrowth, trying to see what strange creature could make a noise like this. All he could make out in the darkness were trees, vines, and dense, scrubby bushes.

He ignited a magical fire. The orange glow cast shadows all around him. It was suddenly deathly silent. Nothing moved but

the shadows and his chest, that rose with each rapid breath he took. He gazed up to see nothing but limbs and leaves and various dead or dying plants tangled amongst them. Perhaps his mind had been playing tricks on him. He started to sit back down, but just as he was starting to bend his knees, he heard it again.

He once again scanned the gloomy forest. The scene created by the flickering light and shadows painfully reminded him of the torches in the dungeon of the Ceren.

Lan grabbed his bag and a dagger he had acquired in Rhienos. He was prepared to run at the slightest hint of danger. Should he call out? Could it be someone else traveling through the dark forest?

"Hello?" he called, intentionally softly, not really wanting his voice to be heard. The clicking continued. He circled the campfire. Leaves and twigs crunched beneath his feet, sometimes loud enough to startle him, but the clicking continued. *This thing is not scared off easily*, he thought.

Then it multiplied.

He heard more clicking noises, coming from different directions, all in front of him. He was outnumbered. Oh dear Ohn what should he do? As if to mock his silent question, a new chorus of clicking arose, these from the opposite direction.

He quickly quenched the fire in an effort to keep whatever was out there from easily finding him. From the sounds of the things, there were too many for him to handle even with magic. He was doubly defenseless in the dark. In case the things could see in the dark, he threw his blanket over himself and lay down flat to hide. *If I just sit here and stay very quiet, they'll go away. Dear Ohn, please, let them just go away.*

And then there was silence. He lay still, breathing quickly, listening to bugs chirping in the night and his heart pounding against his chest. Then all at once the clicking started up again, all around. It began to close in on him, growing louder and louder. He could hear limbs and leaves and bushes crunching as something moved them out of the way or trampled them. Whatever sought him was almost here. The clicking sounds abruptly stopped, but the crunching behind him intensified and came at much quicker intervals now, as if someone was running toward him. As it came

closer and closer, however, it sounded much more like rolling than running.

What on Kalra could--

And then he was struck. Tendrils of pain shot down through his legs and up into his arms as his back near snapped in half. His hands and feet first felt tingly then grew immediately numb. Lan tried his best not to scream. He cringed in pain and clenched his teeth together so hard that he could feel them trying to fuse together. Dear Ohn, something had trampled him.

The first rolling noise faded off into the distance, but it was shortly followed by many more. *There's more of them coming at me. I'm going to die if I stay here!* Refusing to go down without a fight, Lan jumped up, only to fall right back down as a shock wave of pain wracked his body. His back was badly hurt. He lay there, limp, unable to move anything but his numb fingers and toes, and his mouth. As the rolling creatures got closer, he braced himself mentally for another collision. He could not scream. He could not give away his location. He--

He screamed. As the heavy thing rolled over him, he screamed as loud as he had ever screamed before, and the rolling noises abruptly halted.

Multiple cracking noises sounded throughout the darkness, resembling that of breaking bones, and the clicking sounds started once again. Only this time, they sounded more like a language. This went on for a few moments as Lan lay there in excruciating pain, hoping that his back was not broken.

The strange clicking beasts began walking toward him. One reached him and placed something heavy across his chest. Lan winced in pain. He could not see anything. He was blind in the darkness, but apparently these things could see as well as if it were day. He could sense them standing over him, staring at him.

Something made a quick sweeping action across his face, and he felt blood begin flowing from his lips. Lan put all his strength into throwing whatever held him down away from him, but he couldn't budge it. The thing weighed more than a horse, from the feel of it. He needed magic. Magic would free him from this.

He tried focusing his mind for a spell, but the scared, confused nature of his mind made the effect totally random. A

small glowing ball appeared in his hand. It illuminated the wilderness well enough to see by, and almost instantly he regretted it. The thing resting on his chest was the foot of a large, hulking beast. It released a loud, terrified shriek then staggered backward. Lan carefully stood up and took his first good look at the creatures. The fact that he had just cast a spell without any pre-trained stimulus only faintly registered in his mind.

They were huge, stocky beasts, easily twice his width and nearly twice his height. Their faces and stomachs were a sickly grey color. Their backs were covered in dark bony plates that resembled armor. Their faces were a chaos of bony knobs and points. These creatures were definitely armadane, one of the fierce races of beings inhabiting the interior of the Ol'Nannen. The trail must have led closer to the center of the forest than he thought it would.

There were a total of seven beasts standing before him. Two of them curled into balls, making that same crackling sound he had heard earlier, then began rolling toward him very quickly.

Lan waited until the two oncoming armadane were deathly close to him and then leapt out of their path at the last moment. They rolled past him, one hitting a tree and the other stopping to uncurl itself. The tree that had been hit splintered in the middle and began leaning to one side. The armadane who had hit it stood up, regained his bearings, then re-curved himself along with his partner to begin another charge. Lan turned to run, only to see more armadane, eight in all, rolling at him from the opposite direction.

Again, he leapt out of the path of the beasts and they rolled on past him. His back was starting to throb now, punishing him for forgetting it was wounded. His adrenaline would only keep him on his feet so long. The armadane did their reorientation routine then began rolling at him yet again. This was bordering on ludicrous. He leapt out of the way once again, and hurried to where his stuff lay. He quickly shoved his blanket into the bag, slung it on his shoulder, and stepped behind a tree—the same tree that the armadane had damaged earlier.

As the creatures began coming back toward him, Lan thought about casting spell to create a barrier between him and the armadane. Unfortunately, he had spent more time learning spells than actually putting them to practice or ingraining stimuli for them

in his mind, so his speed would not be fast enough to accomplish such a task before getting rolled over. Instead, he gave the damaged tree a violent kick just above the broken point in an attempt to push it over. It did not go as planned, however. The tree snapped in two at the fracture and the trunk swung outward, suspended by its upper branches entangled in the surrounding trees. The hanging tree trunk swung out until it was parallel to the ground then began to swing back at him. Lan ducked as the trunk zoomed overhead then stood up to see the armadane upon him. He boosted himself up onto the stump, then leaped over them as they approached.

His back was now numb--he felt nothing. He knew he was hurt badly, though. The armadane were showing no signs of fatigue at all. *That's how they defeat their foes. Pure endurance. What can I do? I can't run forever, and if I could even manage to climb a tree, they'd just knock me out of it or knock it down. I can't play this game much longer, and if I lose, I die! Maybe if I run deeper into the forest off the trail, the undergrowth will be too narrow for them to get through quickly. It's my only chance.*

After one more successful dodge, he bolted through the forest's undergrowth, using the magical light to illuminate his way. He ducked and sidestepped to avoid branches and shrubs, but a few still slapped him on the face or arms and immediately raised stinging welts. He brushed the pain out of his mind--escape was all that mattered.

For a while, Lan thought his plan was going to work out flawlessly--the armadane were so far behind that he could not hear them anymore, and his face had even stopped bleeding. Shortly, the trail broke out into a large clearing, easily fifty strides across. The hole in the forest canopy revealed the night sky above him, something that he had not seen for a long time. Hundreds of stars shone down on him from the cloudless, moonless heavens.

The magical light revealed many crude wooden structures scattered about the clearing. Drove of armadane begin stepping out of the shacks, awakened by his light and all the noise he had made as he crashed through the woods. He feared that his time on Kalra was drawing to a close, that there was no way out of this alive, when a cry rang out--a distinctly mesefu cry.

The startled creatures all turned to the far end of the small village. After standing still for a moment, they scattered. Lan

stared in awe, fearing that if he moved, he might attract their attention. The armadane paid him no attention as they scurried and rolled off into the forest. Armored mesefu soldiers burst into the clearing, chasing after the beasts. They fired small projectiles at the armadane from unseen devices in their hands. One armadane was struck and crumpled to the ground in a seizure as blue energy played over his plates.

A man stepped into the clearing who wore armor that was slightly different from that of the soldiers. Instead of plain renol plates, his had glowing mesefu writing inscribed around their edges. He carried a short lance in his left hand, and wore a helmet that reminded Lan of Lisen's helmet. The mesefu's face was stern and rigid as he approached Lan. A single strand of dark hair had escaped the helmet and trailed behind him over his left shoulder. This was no ordinary mesefu soldier. This was a commanding officer.

"Lucky, boy," the mesefu said in an odd accent. "You are damned lucky they did not grind you to a pulp."

"They tried, and would've if you hadn't come along. I can't-"

"No time for idle talk. They might regroup and I do not want to be standing here in the open when they do. Come with me if you cherish your life."

Lan was still a bit shaken, but being with armed troops seemed a much safer idea than traveling through this forest alone. "Yes sir," he said, being as polite as possible to the mesefu commander who had saved his life.

"*Soldu! Reven!*" shouted the commander to his troops. The uniformly armored soldiers quickly gathered in the clearing and formed marching ranks. Within seconds after the mesefu had shouted what had apparently been orders, the troops were assembled and marching westward.

Lan followed without question. Although they were traveling slowly through the thick foliage and were not going in the direction he desired to go in, he needed their protection--and their food.

Lan attempted to ask the commander a question, but he shut up as soon as he saw the harsh look on the man's face. "You

do not want the beasts to hear you, *kagi!*" he whispered. Lan silently fell behind the commander in the ranks.

The armor the mesefu soldiers wore was the same as Lisen's. They all carried small round devices on loops on their belts, sculpted to fit snugly in their hands. They were devoid of any markings or any indication of how to use them.

Many of the soldiers, he realized to his amazement, were not walking at all, but hovered just above the ground on strange discs that made no sounds. Short lances like their commander's were strapped to their backs.

Soon, the soldiers who had run off after the armadane regrouped with them. One of the soldiers approached the leader. "*Me karo mes kes husane kara penu.*"

The leader replied, "*Te penu a. Te sokope.*"

"*E, e!*" The soldier looked a bit frightened. He must have done something wrong.

"What's going on?" Lan tried to ask, but the commander continued speaking to the soldier, oblivious to the young man.

"*Susu, pase a.*"

"*E, e!*"

The commander looked content now. He scanned his troops while shouting, "*Mes susu idto! Meidto!*" All the troops turned south and began marching through the forest.

"You were asking?" the commander asked him.

"I was wondering what exactly was happening."

"The armadane have been run off so we are going back to our original path. Southward."

"Oh. I was going north."

"And north you may go, if it pleases you." The man never once turned his attention from the forest in front of him as he spoke. "I have no obligation to protect the *kagi* I find scurrying about the forest. All my orders tell me is to find the sarn or the blade and--"

"Darksearer?" Lan was stunned to hear possible mention of the ancient blade that Ria sought to protect.

"*E, boy. Ol'tue.*" The mesefu marched on in silence for a moment, a rigid look about him. Just before Lan could open his mouth to ask another question, the mesefu spoke. "Do you wish to

journey with us or not? You can continue on northward if you like, but I cannot promise you will make it far."

What should he do now? Should he continue on to the village where Ria said to meet her, or should he stay with these soldiers who were hunting for the blade? If Ria was searching for the blade, then when he found it, it stood to reason that eventually he would find her.

If I stay with these soldiers, I have a better chance of surviving and getting the blade, but they'll want to return it immediately. I need to study it, to learn how to replicate it. But how could he get the blade for himself? There were far too many armed soldiers with this group for him to have any chance at taking the blade. There was also nowhere he could safely take it to study. Wherever he went people would be after him, sarn, mesefu, and human alike, all trying to return it or claim it for their own personal wishes. *First things first*, he said to himself.

Lan looked the mesefu leader in the eyes and gave his response. "Yes, I'll go with you."

"Good. I hate seeing people die from their own ignorance. Well, come along, *kagi*."

"I am not an idiot, sir, so you can stop calling me one." Lan smiled at him as he spoke, enjoying the look of surprise on the commander's face at seeing a human who understood some of the mesefu language. "I tend to prefer Lan."

"Well," said the mesefu. "My name is Reinez. I look forward to having your company on our excursion. Perhaps we can enlighten each other with our knowledge until we reach Kagon."

A sharp sensation flashed through Lan's back as the feeling suddenly returned. His legs fell out from under him and he yelped as he fell over.

"Lan?" Reinez ran over to him to see what had happened. Lan was lying on the ground, squeezing his eyes shut. "What is it?"

"My back . . . armadane . . . couldn't feel . . ."

Reinez shouted out to his men. "*Esukebas has naidto!*" Several men ran over. One of them removed a pack from his belt and began to take out various devices. As the men started looking at his back, Lan lay there trying to fight back the tears of pain, wondering briefly if he would have fared any better by going along with Esmond.

Chapter Twenty

Esmond gazed up toward the vaulted stone ceiling of the chamber. He traced some of the enormous arches up toward their tops with his eyes, but the ceiling was shrouded in darkness, giving the arches the appearance of stretching on to infinity. Black-robed people moved about all around him. Everyone wondered what the major announcement was going to be. Their leader, Alric Wayreth, had unexpectedly summoned them all here for a meeting. Esmond had been in his room reading when the messenger had come by with the announcement. He was told to come quickly and quietly, and that there was very important news to be revealed.

He started walking down the steps of the seating area toward the speaking platform. There were many large, curved steps, forming seats like the ones in coliseums and old theatres. The room sloped downward, and at the bottom was a stage with a stone podium, carved in the fashion of a large, threatening skull.

Gaelyn followed close behind him. For the past few weeks he had managed to hide her inability to wield magic, but it had been difficult. He was not sure how much longer they could keep up the ruse before she was caught.

They took a seat next to Morthas, on the front row. Morthas was an elderly man, but his knowledge was vast and there was a lot he could share. He nodded toward them, but sat in silence and stared at the podium.

"I hope this isn't about me," Gaelyn whispered into Esmond's ear.

"I doubt he'd call everyone together for that. He's a creepy old man, but I doubt he's *evil*." He smiled at her. She was beautiful. Even with most of her form hidden beneath the sea of black robes that had become their standard attire, she glowed. He loved her, and did not know what he would ever do without her. She was an integral part of his life now, forever. On impulse, he leaned over and pecked her on the cheek. Before she could respond, a sudden wave of silence swept over the crowd.

Fallon--who turned out to be the second in charge under Wayreth--stepped up to the podium on the platform. A plain grey stole draped over his shoulders signified his rank in the Night. He was a middle-aged man, previously an instructor at Rhienos. He had a streak of grey hair above his left ear that gave him a very distinguished look. He motioned for everyone to be seated. A quiet murmur emanated from the assembled necromancers as Fallon began to speak.

"Brothers and Sisters," he addressed them. "I have called you all here today by order of Lord Alric Wayreth. He has come to announce an alliance that will secure our safety from those who seek to end our practices. I look forward to such an alliance--we have been wrongly persecuted for too long. It is time the world learns that we are not like the necromancers of Niren. They struggled for power. We struggle for peace."

The volume of the murmur rose. Esmond watched as few stragglers came in the uppermost back door and settled down in the back row as Fallon continued speaking.

"All respects be paid, Lord Wayreth approaches the podium. Power by death." Fallon stepped down from the podium and sat near Esmond. He had always looked up to Fallon--his rigid determination and willingness to do whatever it took to make the Night a respectable institution made him more of an idol in Esmond's eyes than he had been as a professor.

Once he was seated, the dark black curtains behind the podium slowly drew back to reveal the Night's leader. Wayreth stood very rigid. His black robes engulfed all but the lower half of his face. Deep lines embossed his ancient features where they showed. Alric Wayreth was an old man, and a very powerful one.

He slowly approached the stone podium and reached up with bony hands to pull the hood away. His wizened face looked

older today than Esmond remembered it a month ago when they had fled Rhienos. His eyes were watery, red-rimmed. His skin was almost translucent--his cheekbones threatened to break from their fleshy confines at any moment. When he spoke, it was with an air of icy arrogance.

"Good day, Brothers and Sisters of the Night. Power by death." Everyone in the chamber quieted. Wayreth placed his hands up on the podium with a solid thud that echoed through the silence of the vast chamber. He took a deep breath, and began to speak.

"Let me begin by saying how proud I am of you all. Our recruitment from Rhienos was a success, and the beginners are learning at an extraordinary rate. It will not be long before we can reveal ourselves to the outside as a force to help them in their moments of direst need.

"We are persecuted the world over. Necromancers are rare, and in need of protection. Last night, I signed an alliance that will ensure our safety and security as practitioners of necromancy against those who seek to wipe us out. The sarn and their leader, Ga'ruk Roth'ra, will now be providing us with total protection."

Several people in the crowd cried out in alarm.

"Allow me to finish. There is more to be told before you can see the merit of this decision." Esmond was utterly shocked. An alliance with the sarn? Something very bad was in the air. He did not like the sound of this at all. Did this have anything to do with Wayreth's apparent deteriorating health? Esmond glanced over at Fallon. He showed no outward reaction to anything Wayreth said. Did he agree with this madness as well?

"The sarn will be providing us with total protection, and in return we will help them in their mission, assigned to them by an even higher power, to assure that *Ol'tue*, the Darksearer, remains with them."

The crowd's roar increased. "What is the meaning of this?" shouted someone in the stands. "We can't possibly do such a thing!" shouted another.

"Would you rather die?" Wayreth retorted. "The sarn are a breath away from the blade, and with it on their side they could easily destroy us. We must side with them until the time is right." Wayreth strode from behind the podium. "With military protection

from the sarn, we can continue our works here until we are needed by the world." He stepped down from the stage onto the chamber floor and stretched his arms out toward the crowd. "All the sarn wish us to do is accompany them as they take the sword deep into the Wastes, and provide them with necromancers for protection. A small price to pay to secure our freedom to practice as we wish."

Esmond slammed his balled up fists down hard onto the stone bench. Pain flashed up his arms, but the flames in his mind overpowered it. Helping the sarn keep the Darksearer would be a horrible mistake. Either Wayreth was a fool, or he was up to no good. Esmond was fairly sure which, and stood to confront the Lord of the Night.

"Lord Wayreth," he shouted as he stood up on his seat. Wayreth did not hear him over the multitude of perplexed necromancers demanding answers. He tried again, louder. "Lord Wayreth!" Again he could not be heard. He walked toward the Night's leader. Gaelyn tried to pull him back into his seat, but he shrugged her off.

"Yes, my Brother?" Wayreth shouted above the noise.

"This is insanity! Are you trying to get us all killed? Siding with the sarn is no way to guarantee our protection. They slaughtered my best friend's family without mercy, only to rob them of their possessions and then set their house ablaze! They will turn on us! All siding with them will guarantee is having the humans and mesefu banging on our doors. They already hold little respect for our practice. They won't think twice about attacking us. You haven't guaranteed our protection--you've guaranteed our destruction." Someone in the crowd, hearing Esmond, cheered as he finished.

Wayreth's eyes grew large, and his pale face turned blood red. Esmond felt fear wrapping its tendrils around him. Wayreth's presence was very commanding, very frightening.

"Infidel!" Wayreth bellowed at a pitch that stung Esmond's ears. This caught the attention of most of the crowd, and they quieted enough to hear what was being said at the front of the grand chamber.

"No!" shouted Esmond back. "*You* are the infidel, Wayreth." A few gasps came from the crowd as they intently watched the wild display before them. "You make mysterious deals

behind our backs in the black of night without anyone's advice or opinion and expect us to follow them like we're some sort of mindless flock you can herd around at your own fancy? I don't claim to speak for everyone here, but I think your deal is suicide. You're trying to drive the flock over a cliff."

"Sit down!" Wayreth roared.

"I'm no more under your control than the king of Pyran. I refuse to study at any place run by a fool like you. But before I leave, I believe the others deserve to hear why you forfeited their lives against their own wills."

"Do your ears not serve you? I did it to ensure our safety. The sarn would destroy us otherwise!"

"My ears serve me just fine. So are you admitting you forfeited our lives? I heard no denial, and you were fast to respond." Esmond turned to face the necromancers sitting in the chamber. "My Brothers and Sisters," he addressed them. Gaelyn was staring at him, her eyes wide. Fallon sat quietly and made no move to stop him. He seemed almost disinterested in the spectacle. Esmond hoped that was not the case. "I noticed most of you had the same reaction I did. Are there any among you who think that this deal should have been made without our knowledge or input? This is something that affects us *all*." Esmond looked out at the crowd with a demeanor of cocky determination. There was only silence.

A sweat broke out all over his body as he stood in front of the blank faces of the crowd. His determination was not as strong as Fallon's--it was crumbling away now, being replaced by fear and ineptitude. He looked over at Wayreth. A sinister, self-satisfied smile wrapped around his face. He glowered at Esmond.

Esmond felt his knees grow weak and start to shake. He closed his eyes but could still feel the old man's searing gaze upon him. Then, suddenly, from the back of the crowd at the top of the chamber, there came a shout. "No! No deal!"

Esmond's eyes snapped open. A man was standing in the back. Another stood up beside him. "I agree with Esmond and Jal. We should have been notified of any deals before they were made. No deal!" One by one the crowd stood up and began to chant "No deal!" Soon there was nobody left seated. Except for Fallon.

Esmond felt a triumphant rush wash over him. He raised his arms in the air and began chanting with the crowd. He turned to Wayreth with his characteristic cocky smile and shrugged, still chanting. Wayreth's face had gone blank, but in his eyes there was a look of intense hatred, and it was directed at Esmond.

"Lord Wayreth," spoke Fallon, suddenly. He rose from his seat. The crowd stopped chanting but remained standing. He slowly walked over to Esmond and faced the Lord of the Night. "We do not exist to support the side of evil, and that will never change. We study necromancy so that some day we will be able to protect mankind. Helping the sarn keep the Darksearer from its rightful owners is something we cannot do."

"You don't understand," Wayreth said. "We must--"

"Guards!" called Fallon. They slid out of the shadows of the front corners of the chamber, two dark-cloaked men with domed black helmets. The Guards of Night were the Lord's personal bodyguards. By taking orders from Fallon, their true allegiance shone through. "I hereby assume leadership of the Night. Lord Wayreth forfeited his position the instant he made this secret underhanded deal. He is to be locked away in the holding cells for the time being until we can decide what fate is best for him."

"The sarn will--"

"Quiet, Wayreth!" shouted Fallon. "Enough of your nonsense. We will deal with you later." Fallon's voice quieted. "For now, I must calm these people and find out if any of them know more about this. I will come to question you later."

"Infidels!" Wayreth shouted as the guards began chaining his hands. "You cannot do this! You cannot treat the Lord of the Night like this!" Wayreth twisted. A thunderous boom erupted from him that sent the guards stumbling backward. Fallon moved quickly to erect a magical barrier around the old man, preventing any further attempts at magic--a short-lived, but oftentimes useful spell.

"You are no lord, *Wayreth*. You made a grave error, and you have misjudged our reactions. Surely you knew that we weren't all as power hungry as you. Now cooperate, or risk being stricken down where you stand." The guards, having overcome their shock at Wayreth repelling them, looked toward Fallon for confirmation

of the magic barrier. He nodded, and they grabbed Wayreth, unhindered this time.

"You would never!"

"You do not know that for sure, do you, Wayreth?"

Wayreth's face showed fear for the first time that Esmond had ever witnessed. The guards carried him off in silence.

Fallon turned to Esmond and clasped his shoulder. "You did not have to do that, you know. I would have stepped in soon enough."

"I--I'm sorry, Fal--Lord Fallon. I guess I just got a bit carried away. I had to do something, though. Somebody had to speak out against him."

Fallon smiled. "Do not be sorry, Esmond. You did the right thing."

"Thank you--" he paused, forming his mouth around the strange phrase he would now have to live with "--*Lord Fallon.*"

"My pleasure, Esmond. Now please take your seat while I attempt to bring some order to this place."

"Yes, Lord Fallon." Esmond went back to Gaelyn who was shaking terribly. Fallon began addressing the crowd of confused necromancers, but Esmond paid him no attention. He was concerned about Gaelyn.

"Gaelyn? Are you feeling all right? You're starting to scare me."

"Yes," she said. She made a weak attempt to smile. "I'm fine."

"Fine? You don't normally shake like this. Are you sick?" He put his arm around her and pulled her close.

"I don't know. I guess I'm just scared, that's all."

"Scared?" Esmond was a bit surprised. Gaelyn had never been afraid of much. "Of what?" He waited for her answer as she tried to compose herself.

"I was afraid that they were going to arrest you or kill you." Esmond took her hand in his. It was cold as ice. "I'm afraid the sarn will come back and hurt us."

Tears started to flow from her eyes. "Stop thinking like that before you scare yourself to death. Nothing is going to happen. We'll never see the sarn again. They won't come back for a small group like us. And even if they do, we're strong enough to protect

ourselves." He turned her around and made her look into his eyes. "I will never let anything happen to you." He felt her knees buckle and it was all he could do to keep her standing.

"Yes, Esmond, they will." Her eyes pierced into his.

"That's the way they are. Ga'ruk never forgets anything."

"You sound like you know the guy, or something." He said. Her face was strangely discolored, and her cheeks were wet with tears. He brushed some of them away.

"I--I think--I'm going to be--" She bolted away from Esmond and ran out the closest door of the grand chamber. Esmond's heart raced. She had been feeling strange a lot recently, and was often more tired than usual. Something was wrong with her . . . and the way she had spoken about Ga'ruk made him think she knew more about the sarn than she let on.

Esmond stood up slowly, edged his way toward the door Gaelyn had fled through, and quietly snuck out while Fallon was still trying to bring order to the people. He had to find Gaelyn and make sure she was okay, and he had to see what she knew about Ga'ruk. It may help them keep the sarn away, and save their lives.

#

She lay crying in bed, sobbing so loudly that she almost did not hear the light rapping on her door. She had vomited in her bath chamber when she ran back into her room from nervousness and stress. Her secrets were starting to weigh heavily on her health, and she was sure that was not good for her unborn child. She dreaded telling Esmond. She had not started showing yet, but when she did . . .

Gaelyn trudged over to her door and asked who it was, knowing it had to be Esmond coming to check on her. "Yes?" she managed, through sobs.

"Gaelyn? What's wrong? Are you ill? Can I come in?" It was indeed Esmond. He sounded scared or nervous. Or both.

She fell against the door with a thump. "I don't know. I don't feel too well. I have a sick stomach. I really don't think you should come in. It might be contagious."

"I've been around you enough in the past few days that if I'm going to get it, I've already caught it, so it can't hurt. Will you please open the door?"

She did not want to do it. When he came in, he would ask about the sarn and she knew she had to tell him. It would relieve much of the stress to tell him, but she knew that he would be upset. Very upset. He would hate and shun her forever for having hidden the truth from him. *You reap what you sow*, came Took's voice from the back of her mind. She slowly, reluctantly unlocked the door. She did not have time to step away from the wooden door before Esmond had pushed it open and rushed into the room.

She was nearly knocked to the floor as Esmond barged in and asked if she was going to be sick again. She shrugged her shoulders as he helped her steady herself.

"You *really* don't look good, Gaelyn. Should I send for someone?" he asked as he walked her back to her bed.

"No, I'll be fine. I've been sick before, and remember--I'm a healer." She smiled at him weakly.

"Yeah, but you don't have any of your stuff here, and I don't want anything to happen to you." He pulled her close and kissed her on the forehead. "I love you, Gaelyn."

She brushed his cheek gently with the back of her hand.

"Don't say that . . . any more." She fell onto her back in the bed, staring blankly up at the ceiling.

Esmond stepped back. "Don't *you* say that! What is wrong with you? You must be *very* sick! I'm going to go get a healer--"

"No, Esmond. I'll be all right." She grabbed his shirt and pulled him violently toward her. She had to tell him. She felt she could do it now. She knew that if she let him leave, she would talk herself out of it and prolong the suffering. It all had to end here. "I need to tell you something."

"Gaelyn, you really seem ill and I--"

"No!" she shouted, startling him. She began to pace around nervously. "I have to tell you this *now!*" She looked at him with longing eyes. He had to hear this, no matter what the consequences were. He loved her and deserved the truth. She would tell him, and then see if his feelings were still the same. She had a dreadful premonition that they would not be. She sat down next to him.

He ran his hand through her hair in the way she had always loved. "What is it, Gaelyn?" She almost decided against telling him. Almost.

She took a deep breath. "You know a lot about my past, like how I was left on someone's doorstep and became a slave to the house owner. You know how I escaped and came to Porthos. I told you about that day in the alley when the two soldiers attacked me."

"Yeah," he said, leaning close. "And how Took--"

"I never said Took's name," she interrupted. Esmond's eyes flashed with confusion. He reared back slightly. "The person who truly saved me was . . . it was my . . . my father . . . in a way . . . it was Osbick." Esmond's mouth turned down into a frown. "He took me off of the streets, gave me food and shelter. He treated me better than anyone had ever treated me before. After living with him for nearly a year, he sent me off to the Thieves' Guild as a spy. At first he asked me little things, like how my day went, and what I did and found, but it soon grew to include other things, such as the population of the Thieves' Guild, and any plans they had."

"No, Gaelyn," said Esmond, gasping. He held his hand over his mouth. "Dear Ohn, no."

"For years," she continued as tears of guilt rolled down her cheeks, "I passed on information to him about the Guild's activities. If I ever let Osbick down, he would threaten to take me back to the guards and let them have their way with me. He said that he loved me and that I was his little daughter, but if I ever disobeyed him he would disown me. He told me that it would do no good to run away because the guards would follow me." She shook with a violent sob. "Took was right. There was a spy among the thieves. He never suspected it was me." She took a deep breath. Esmond started to speak again, but she continued.

"A sarn, Ga'ruk, came to Osbick one night and made a deal with him to hide a crate for a while, to keep it safe. I have no idea what it was--Osbick didn't either, but eventually Ga'ruk's people came to pick the crate up. Before the end of the parliament session last year, Ga'ruk came to Osbick again." Esmond was in obvious shock.

"No," he uttered quietly, his eyes pleading with her. She cringed at his look but continued her story. Esmond had to know what kind of person he had put his trust, his love, into.

"He was looking for Ria. In their first deal, with the crate, Osbick had been promised power and protection. He decided to

eliminate Lord Roland and take his place. Doing so meant he would no longer need the Shadow, which meant no longer needing the Thieves' Guild to take the fall for them. He wanted me to help capture Ria and make the protest go horribly wrong to lure Took out . . . and then kill him. My reward was freedom. Father--Osbeck said I would be free to live my own life, that I had come of age."

Esmond moved for the first time since she started talking. He stepped back from the bed and stared at her in disbelief. At first, words seemed to fail him. He stared at her, his emotions changing constantly across his face. "Gaelyn . . . I don't understand . . ."

"Esmond," she pleaded. "I did it for you. I wanted to be free to live with you." This only made him angrier.

"What kind of freedom could you have with that hanging over your head? Do you know how many people died in that riot? All that needless violence and destruction could have been avoided! How could you do it?" Gaelyn started to interrupt him, but he silenced her with a wave of his hand.

"No, don't speak. How do I know it won't be another lie? How could you possibly think that this would buy you freedom? You've built yourself a worse cage than Osbeck ever did, out of the bones and blood of the hundreds you caused to be massacred."

She reached a hand out to him, but he jerked back almost violently.

"Don't touch me, and don't even think of speaking to me right now. I can't believe you've lied to me all this time!"

"Esmond--" she began.

"No, I don't need to hear anymore. You've betrayed me. You've taken my trust and destroyed it." His voice wavered on the verge of tears. He stomped over to the door, about to leave.

"Esmond, don't! Please listen!" She stepped toward him. He swung to face her. A violent fire raged in his eyes.

"How do I know this isn't some lie or scheme of yours? How do I know this Ga'ruk person isn't just using you to get the Night to join his cause?" He opened the door and stepped out. She was speechless. There was nothing she could do but beg.

"Please--" she pleaded, desperately. She reached for him one last time, but he pushed her back.

"No," he said harshly. "I don't have time to listen to any more. I've got to go talk to Wayreth. If Ga'ruk wants Ria, then Lan might be involved in this also. I don't want him to get hurt."

"Let me go with you, Esmond. I promise I--"

"Goodbye, Gaelyn." He slammed the door as she collapsed into tears.

#

Esmond stopped at the end of the stone hallway. The glow lamps fitted to the walls bathed the place in a light nearly as bright as day. He looked back at Gaelyn's door. He gritted his teeth and clenched his fists. She shouted something from behind the door but he could not understand it. She then began sobbing loudly. He punched the stone wall hard, shrugged the pain off, and punched it again. Tears started down his cheeks as he slumped to the floor.

He couldn't believe what she had told him. She had been working with Osbick, and had caused the deaths of innocents. How could anyone care for the man who had framed his best friend then cut off his finger? How could she have kept this hidden? *Why* had she kept it hidden?

What could he do now? He had wanted to spend the rest of his life with Gaelyn. He had often dreamed about what their children would be like, and if they would have as many wonderful adventures as he and Gaelyn had experienced. But now his Gaelyn was gone, replaced by a distorted vision of everything he had once held so dear.

He buried his head in his hands as he cried, and stared at the cold grey stone on the floor. Dear Ohn, would he ever be able to forgive her? Was it possible to forgive someone who had done such things? Would forgiving her make him cruel or just? There were no easy answers.

Gaelyn's sobbing died out. He wiped his nose and tears away and regained his composure. He would have to think long and hard about everything. Now, he needed to speak with Wayreth to see if Ria was involved in this in any way so he would know if Lan was in danger. Ga'ruk being involved made everything many times worse. He stood up and sulked off toward the holding cells.

When he arrived at the door leading to the cells, he found Fallon with two of his new bodyguards.

"Fallon--uh . . . Lord Fallon." said Esmond.

"Fallon's fine, Esmond. I do not need so many constant reminders of my rank as Wayreth deemed necessary. Did you need me? I was about to go see what information I could get out of him."

"That's what I came about, actually. I'd like to go with you also, please."

"Whatever for?"

"I just found out about some things involving friend of mine, and I need to see if Wayreth's deal may involve him."

Fallon put one hand on his hips and let the other fall to his side. "You know something about this?"

"Well, in a way. I've known people who've had a run-in with Ga'ruk. He was tracking a certain girl I once met who was a good friend of my *best* friend, and if she's involved in this in any way, then he might be as well. I've got to help them out if at all possible."

Fallon nodded. "Well then, Esmond. Please come along and find out what you know. Friendship is a valuable thing." He motioned for Esmond to follow.

"Yes, I agree."

They opened the door and walked in. The corridor beyond was dark and smelled of mold and dust. Only two glow lamps shone within, which left much of their path shrouded in darkness. There were two cells on either side of the dank corridor and one at the far end. It reminded Esmond of the dungeon in the Ceren. He shuddered as he remembered Took nearly killing Gaelyn, accusing her of trying to kill him. *She did*, he told himself. *Took was right*. He remembered feeling sorry for her, thinking her the victim of Took's rage at the time. He had been wrong.

He shook the thoughts out of his head. He needed to focus on Wayreth right now. If Ria was involved in this and Lan was also, he had to search them out as soon as possible to warn them about the sarn and the Darksearer blade.

"Wayreth!" called out Fallon as they approached the cell the old necromancer had been locked in. "We have come to speak with you."

There was no response. A sickly dripping noise came from the cell at the end of the corridor. Esmond was suddenly afraid to go any further. "Wayreth?" Fallon asked again.

The only reply was the ominous drip. The sound unnerved him. He noticed he was breathing a bit faster than normal. They passed the glow lamps. Esmond looked back to see the light pouring in from the open door around the two guards who stood just outside. Part of him wanted to run for that light as fast as he could. He almost did.

When they reached the cell, they discovered it empty. Esmond's heart nearly leaped out of his chest. Wayreth was gone. "What on Kalra--Wayreth! Where are you! Guards!"

"What happened?" Esmond asked. He frantically scanned the dark cell, expecting something to leap out at him at any second.

Fallon reached for his key and unlocked the cell. "There's no way he could have gotten out of here without someone knowing about it. He would have had to go past the guards, even if he did manage to break out of his cell. I don't like the looks of this."

"Do you think he could've cast something to let him out?"

"Not likely. He had dampening bracers placed on his arms to prevent him from using any magic, and the only way to remove them is either by someone else, or by death." Fallon rolled the bars back and stepped into the cell. "I don't see anything . . ."

"What's that?" asked Esmond. He pointed to a puddle in the floor. The sounds of the guards' footsteps echoed down the corridor from behind him.

With a twist of his fingers, Fallon created a ball of pale light in his hand. He reached down toward the puddle to shed more light on it. It was thick, congealing blood. "Dear Ohn, it's blood!" He looked up above the puddle and shone the light on a disgusting mass of hairy, bloody flesh stuffed on a stone shelf. It contained no discernable body parts but was most definitely from some living creature. "No," he whispered. "No," he repeated, a bit louder. "Dear Ohn, no!" He shouted the last as he turned to the guards behind him.

Esmond gagged. "Is--is that Wayreth?"

"Yes." Fallon walked out of the cell, shaking.

"Wh--what did that to him?"

"He did it to himself."

"What? But why would he--"

"GUARDS!" Fallon's shout startled Esmond. He stumbled and grabbed at the cell bars to steady himself. "Get out of here

now! Esmond, hurry!" Fallon grabbed his hand and bolted from the cell. The guards did not show any sign of turning around, and continued their walk toward him and Fallon. Esmond noticed it was not so much of a walk as a shamble. In fact, they vaguely resembled marionettes, being manipulated by an amateur puppeteer.

"Get out of the way, damn you! Move!" The guards did not change direction. "Damn, it's already started."

"What has?"

Fallon jerked him to a stop. "Stand here and watch Wayreth's cell while I try to dispel them."

"Dispel them? What are you--"

"They're undead. Wayreth's already started. Now keep watch while I deal with them!"

Esmond studied the guards intently. As they passed the glow lamps, he saw their blank faces beneath their dark helmets. Their eyes were glossed over and they did not pick up their feet as they walked. Instead, they slowly dragged their feet behind them, shuffling along with an eerie scraping sound. These men were true undead.

Esmond had not been studying necromancy long and had never seen many undead aside from a few small animals. These were undead humans, and they made him queasy.

He whipped around to turn his gaze away from the monstrosities and came face to face with the most hideous, fear-invoking thing he had ever seen. Wayreth's dark robe hovered before him, and through the hood shone two yellow eyes. Glistening red blood covered the robe and a bony hand that extended from a dark sleeve. It sped toward him, cackling in Wayreth's voice. Esmond screamed.

"FALLON! DEAR OHN, HELP!" Esmond jumped back and fell to the ground, clutching at his chest as if to keep his heart in.

"Esmond, I'm trying to concen--"

"TURN AROUND!"

"Wha--?" Fallon turned around and gasped when he saw the hideous thing. "Wayreth, no! Get out of here, Esmond, now! Send for help! Go get Morthas! He should be in his chamber. Hurry!"

"But won't you--"

"I've dealt with this before. Don't let the guards touch you! They're slow, but deadly. Now run!"

Esmond could not move. He stared ahead at the vile creature, stunned. It opened its mouth and spoke. "You think you can just dispose of me? Leave me here to rot and die?" It was Wayreth's voice, but with a darker tone, one that made it sound as if pure evil personified spoke. "You forgot the spell of the devinant, Brother Fallon." A laugh like a distorted echo bellowed out from the creature.

"The spell of the devinant is forbidden, even to the Lord of the Night. Only those fools in Niren would dare do such a thing!"

"It worked, did it not?" Wayreth--now a devinant, the most powerful form of undead there was--laughed a deep, demonic laugh. "In death, I am stronger than in life!"

"But you have to be dead to become a--" started Esmond, spellbound by what he was seeing.

"I killed myself, fool. It wasn't too hard to break my neck against that stone shelf. All it took was determination and a bit of pain. And now--"

"Esmond!" It was Gaelyn's voice. Esmond jerked around toward the entrance to see one of the undead guards upon him, a sword raised above his head.

Esmond shouted to Fallon then rolled out of the way. Fallon turned around to see the other guard standing over him, grabbed the guard's arms, and threw him down. Esmond ran toward the door where Gaelyn stood. The sounds of Fallon struggling against both the guard and the devinant resonated down the corridor.

"Esmond, hurry! It's right behind you!" Gaelyn was hysterical. Once he was through the door, Gaelyn slammed it behind him.

"No!" he shouted at her. "Open that! Fallon's trapped in there with those guards and that--thing!"

"What are we going to do about--"

She was panicking. There was no time for this.

"Never mind! Just go and get Morthas." Esmond pointed at the staircase to urge her on. Gaelyn stood there staring at him dumbfounded.

"Don't just stare at me!" he shouted, jerking his arm toward the stairs again. "Go get help! Now!"

Gaelyn ran off to the stairs after stealing one more look into Esmond's eyes. He quickly threw the door back open and saw Fallon charging toward him. The two guards lay on the ground in pieces, and the devinant, Wayreth, was right on his tail.

"Out of the way!" screamed Fallon. Esmond leaped to the side as Fallon ran out. Fallon slammed the door and jumped to the side. He braced himself against the wall.

"Against the wall, now! He's casting--"

Before he could finish that phrase, the door blew apart and a huge stream of fire shot out. It crashed into the opposite wall. The stones shuddered and groaned under the force. The flames rolled up the wall and fizzled out at the ceiling. A powdery trail of soot remained on the wall.

"Run! Follow me!" Fallon charged up the stairs back toward the grand chamber. Esmond followed him with no question. As he ran past the door, he peeked into the holding cell corridor. It was empty. Wayreth was not there. Esmond ran faster.

"Fallon!" he called out as they ran. "I didn't see him in the hallway!"

"A devinant can pass through physical objects at will. He could be anywhere by now. We must get Morthas. He's the only one who knows the spell to dispel a devinant."

"Does Wayreth know that?" Esmond asked nervously.

"Yes, which is why we must hurry! If Wayreth gets to him first . . ."

Esmond raced up the stairs, wishing that at any moment he would awaken to discover this was all merely a bad dream.

#

Gaelyn pounded on Morthas' door. "One moment," he called from within. She banged on the door harder until it flung open. Morthas looked up from a stack of ancient necromancy texts as she burst in.

"We don't have a moment!" she shouted.

"What is it, child?" Morthas removed his thick-rimmed spectacles and sat them on the desk.

"Wayreth!" she said. "He's done something. I don't know

what, but Fallon and Esmond are fighting him now and they sent me to get you."

"It can't be a devinant, can it?" Gaelyn did not know how to answer. "Fools! You must take me to them now! If he is truly a devinant, he must be dispelled before he kills us or makes us all his puppets of destruction!"

"This way, hurry!" She ran out the door and down the hall. Morthas followed close behind. Halfway down the stairs that led to the grand chamber, they ran into Fallon and Esmond.

"Morthas!" shouted Fallon. "He knows you're the only one who can dispel him! You've got to act fast!"

"I'm preparing now, Fallon. Give me time," Morthas said, irritably.

"We don't *have* time! He'll be here any moment!"

"I know that!" Morthas shouted. He turned away from the others, concentrating on what he needed to do.

The group all stared at Morthas expectantly, anxiously awaiting him to finish. It was quiet except for their quick breathing. Strangely, the halls were all empty. There would be nobody around to help them if things went wrong.

"Now, I'm ready. I just have to find him. You say he was down in the dungeon last--"

A vaporous tendril shot out of the wall and wrapped itself around Morthas's throat. It squeezed hard, choking the old necromancer.

"No!" Fallon leaped over Esmond and hacked at the tendril with a dagger.

"Stop!" Morthas managed to spit out. "Don't . . . attack it . . ."

Another tendril quickly shot out of the wall and grabbed Fallon's neck. Gaelyn screamed.

"Stop!" shouted Esmond as he lashed out at the tendril that held Morthas. It showed no signs of letting go. He grabbed the dagger out of Fallon's hand and swung at the tendril. A vile scream emanated from the stone wall. The devinant released Morthas and stepped out from the wall. Gaelyn doubled over in pain--the others appeared to have felt it, but not to such a great extent. What had been the cause?

Morthas ran up the stairs to put some distance between himself and Wayreth.

"Do not meddle with me, Esmond," said the devinant's dark voice. "It will do you no good. I will win." The eyes beneath the robe seemed to be smiling, if such a thing was possible. "The more you hurt me, the more you hurt yourselves."

Esmond kicked hard into the devinant's robe and sent him tumbling back into the wall. The tendril that held Fallon released him and disappeared into the wall. "Morthas! Now!" Esmond knelt over Fallon to see that he was still alive. He was breathing, so that was a good sign.

"I will try, but I will not be able to finish until I know exactly where he is!"

"Fallon, are you all right?" Gaelyn asked.

"I think so," he said in a weak voice as he came to. His eyes remained closed. "You must go surround Morthas. Make sure he does not get attacked anymore."

"Yes." Esmond motioned to her. "Come with me. We've got to keep Morthas from getting attacked again!" Esmond ran over to stand by Morthas. Gaelyn followed, shaking in anxiety, nervousness, and disbelief.

Morthas was casting his spell. Esmond and Gaelyn stood on either side of him, between the necromancer and the walls. They could not afford to let him get attacked or killed--it would be the end for them all. They stood in silence as the magic flowed from Morthas. There was no sign of Wayreth anywhere, but they knew he was in the walls, preparing to leap out at them at any minute.

Morthas stopped. He had finished all that he could without knowing where Wayreth was. He silently looked around, trying to discern where the devinant could be. Suddenly, a tendril shot out of the ceiling and grabbed Morthas around the jaw. It clenched his mouth shut and jerked him up into the ceiling. His head cracked against the ceiling and he lost consciousness. The tendril dropped him to the floor.

"We've got to wake him up!" Esmond grabbed Morthas shook him. The old man moaned a few times and then rolled over--quiet.

"Wake up, damn you!" Esmond shouted.

A vaporous tendril snapped around Gaelyn's neck. She screamed. She grabbed it and tried to pull it away, but no matter how hard she struggled, it did not budge. "Come help her, Esmond, or she dies. Her life is in your hands."

Esmond hesitated. "Morthas," Gaelyn choked out. Esmond gritted his teeth.

"Put her down!" he shouted as he leaped at the devinant. Wayreth tried to pull her away, but Esmond grabbed her ankle. "No you don't! Let go of her, you blessed monster!"

A beam of light shot from Wayreth's eyes and slammed into Esmond. He howled in pain and released his hold on Gaelyn. Wayreth threw Gaelyn to the ground. She fell on her elbow and grunted. She started gasping for breath. Esmond reached out beyond his pain and screamed out for Wayreth to stop. Gaelyn tried to scurry away, but the beams of light shot out at her and pinned her against the wall with a searing, paralyzing chill.

She howled an unearthly howl as the very life seemingly drained out of her body. She felt her knees buckle, but she did not fall. The continuous blast had her pinned against the wall. Her entire body shuddered violently. She feared her bones would snap under the force. Her vision blurred with tears.

Gaelyn abruptly collapsed. She rolled to her side and shivered from the cold that had replaced the warmth of her blood. Wayreth had turned his attention from her and stared down Esmond. He was lying on the stairs, looking up at the devinant.

"Enough of this foolishness. You will all serve Dariakus. You will--"

Wayreth's robe disintegrated. The foggy existence of the devinant beneath it began swirling as he screamed in agony. His eyes slowly faded to black as he grew smaller and smaller. A thunderous boom resounded painfully through the hallway and down the stairs. Esmond clasped his hands to his ears to muffle the sound. Once it abated, the only sounds left were the erratic breaths of everyone scattered about the stairway. The devinant was gone.

Morthas rose to his feet. Fallon stood beside him. "Are you sure he is gone now?" he asked Morthas.

"Yes. The devinant is no more. Everything once known as Alric Wayreth is no more and can never be brought back into this existence."

"Good." Fallon sighed. "Let's get these two to a healer quickly. They need immediate attention."

Esmond leaned shakily against the wall with one hand. "Who's . . . Dariakus?"

"Dariakus. Gods be merciful." Morthas staggered back against the wall. "Dariakus is mesefu for *great death*. We must act quickly to find out all we can about these sarn and this higher power. It could be disastrous for all of mankind."

"All of mankind?" asked Gaelyn, weakly.

"Yes. Remember the tales of Ethrakus, the daemon from a thousand years ago? Ethrakus means *big death* in the mesefu language. The names are too closely related to take any chances. I am afraid we may have another daemon on Kalra."

Fallon stared at Morthas in disbelief. "A daemon? Myth and legend, no more real than dragons."

"It has a name," insisted Morthas. "Wayreth called it Dariakus. If that's what I believe it to be, it means the mesefu have already recognized it. The only plausible explanation, however frightening it may be, is that Dariakus is a daemon."

"A daemon," uttered Fallon. "Ohn save us all."

Chapter Twenty-One

No clouds obscured the bright blue sky as far as Lan could see. A gentle breeze cascaded through the grassy fields south of the Ol'Nannen forest. They had been following a southward course for several weeks now. It was nearing the end of the summer. Most of the grass was brownish in color, as were the leaves on the occasional tree. Lan regretted having nothing but his travelling cloak to shield him from the imminent cold.

"So you are a wizard, ne? A rare thing, that is." Lan and Reinez sat on the ground, resting after a long morning of traveling. The tall grasses that surrounded Lan reminded him of the fields around his old home. He scratched his arm as a blade of grass brushed it.

"Of sorts," Lan answered the mesefu's question. "I studied politics while at Porthos University. I didn't begin to look into magic until a friend of mine suggested that I might have the power." He took a sip from the crystal flask the mesefu had given him. It was small, polished smooth. It contained a thick liquid that tasted faintly of sweetmelons. Reinez called it *nula*. The flask never seemed to run out.

Nula was the magical equivalent of water, according to Reinez. It was used by the mesefu to keep the body healthy and rejuvenated. Lan silently wondered if they would let him keep this flask. There were so many magical wonders the mesefu had--he could not begin to imagine what Altkrea must be like. *I'll see it one day, if it's the last thing I do.*

"I went to the Mages' Guild then, and got accepted as an apprentice under the head, Keon. I was in that tower studying under Master Keon for a month. That's about the time it collapsed." He slumped backward onto his hands. More blades of grass brushed across his cheek as he sat back. He blew at them from the side of his mouth to keep them away.

"Where did you go then?" Reinez's dark brown eyes made him feel nervous. Whenever the mesefu looked at him, he felt as if his mind was being probed. Just like the time Ria had stared at him in his room the day they first met.

"After that I transferred to Rhienos." He found it appalling how easily the lies came off his tongue. There was no need to tell this mesefu anything about his involvement with the Thieves' Guild or Ga'ruk or Ria. "After a year at Rhienos, I received a letter from a friend of mine. I was on my way to meet with her when I ran into you."

"Strange of you to think you could safely travel Ol'Nannen alone." Reinez took a sip from his flask and wiped the excess from his lips. "Very few people ever survive an armadane attack. You are lucky you came out more or less unscathed." He stood up and stretched as he scanned the southern horizon over the tall grass.

The mesefu soldiers were scattered around the plain, their heads sticking up above the grasses in several clusters close to Lan and Reinez. Lan's breath caught in his chest as he saw a female mesefu soldier walk by. Female soldiers would never be accepted in human society. He reasoned the mesefu were different because of their innate magical abilities. Physical strengths and weaknesses meant little to them.

"I guess you're right." He took a deep breath and gazed up at the cloudless sky. Two blackbirds passed overhead, squawking at the people in the field.

"Why did you decide to come with us, other than your safety? What of your friend?" Reinez's continued scanning the horizon. He stood tall, rigid. His arms were stiff at his sides, the *nula* flask in his left hand. His neck only turned slightly as he looked about.

"I'm not entirely sure she's still waiting," he answered. "Her letter reached me a month late, so there's a good chance she's already left. I decided it was best for the time being to travel with

you until you reached a town or village." He hoped he'd said enough to satisfy the probing mesefu.

"We won't be stopping at any towns or villages." Reinez turned to look back toward the forest.

"I don't mind following you even so." Lan thought he heard Reinez mutter something to himself. "It was foolish of me to rush through the forest like that. I was just excited about the chance to see her again."

Reinez eyed Lan questioningly for a few seconds. "You love this girl."

"I think so, yes." The speed with which he answered surprised him. Could he truly love someone he had only met with a few times, and had not seen in over a year?

Reinez knelt down. "I know what it is like to be away from your loved ones." He took a drink from his flask. "As far as your coming with us, there is no way to know when we will be finished. We are a scouting party only. There is rumored to be a sarn encampment near the Kagon-Se'Ra border that we have been sent to investigate by High Lord Harishmon."

"They are the ones you believe hold the Darksear?"

"E, and if rumor holds true there will unfortunately be conflict. The sarn have held *Ol'tue* for over a year now. They will not let it go without a fight. I cannot drag you into this, you realize."

"But perhaps I can help," Lan suggested. "I've learned a few things in my time studying magic, and I've been in all too many dire situations."

"We shall see, Lan, but the human nations have been asked to keep their armies away from our operation and allow us to proceed peacefully. We can not have too much interference--the sarn work best in chaotic situations." Reinez reached out to put his hand on Lan's shoulder. He clasped it firmly. "For now, if any problems arise, keep out of trouble unless it is absolutely necessary. When we near Rhienos, you can continue safely on your own."

Lan decided to not push too much. He had several more days to convince the mesefu commander to let him stay with the group. He lay back in the grass and sighed. He needed to stay on Reinez's good side--it would make taking the blade even easier.

Unconsciously, Lan began fingering the *sukrea* concealed beneath his shirt. Something moved in the corner of his eye. He turned to see Reinez eyeing him strangely. Lan realized what he was doing and quickly stopped fondling the ancient artifact.

"What is that?" asked Reinez, staring at his hand beneath his shirt. "What are you holding? A trinket from your love, perhaps?"

"Yes," he said. "A trinket. It reminds me of her." He felt Reinez's eyes digging into him again. It was as if his flesh and bone had vanished to reveal his soul for the world to see.

"A lie," the mesefu said after what seemed like an eternity. "The truth of your tale has been questionable, but I was unable to peer deeply enough into you. This time you have slipped. Now," Reinez said as he towered over Lan, cloaking him in shadow, "what is under your shirt?"

"I can't, really." Lan inched away from the mesefu. "It's . . . personal."

"I do not care how personal it is, I need to see it with my own eyes. If it is merely a trinket from your love, as you claim, then there is nothing to fear. But if it is some weapon, if you are some spy, then I need to know. Now."

Lan was trapped. If he refused to show Reinez what he had, then he would eventually be forced into it. He dare not risk upsetting the mesefu. Better to show him now and hope against all hope that he did not recognize the *sukrea*.

Lan stood up. "You can't tell anyone. Nobody else can see this."

"So it is not a medallion after all, is it?"

"No, it isn't." He reached into his shirt, grabbed the *sukrea*, and pulled them through the neck. Reinez gasped and staggered backward.

"Y--You--" he stuttered. "You hold a *krea*? A *human*?" Reinez ducked down and motioned for Lan to do the same. He lowered his voice. "Where did you get that?"

Lan was shocked. He had remembered Keon telling him that few people knew that they existed. What were the chances this man knew? Lan quickly slipped it back into his shirt.

"How do you know they exist? I thought very few people knew about them," he demanded.

"All mesefu know of the *keza*," he said. "And they are *only* for mesefu. How you managed to get one of them sends my mind running in circles!"

And then, as if some righteous spirit had possessed him to force him to repent for his lies, the truth came flooding out. "Master Keon gave it to me. He showed it to me and told me that if anything ever happened to him that I was to take it. When the tower collapsed, I had to run in there and retrieve it. That's what I was doing in there that night."

"This Keon, he's a human as well, *ne?*"

"Yes, of course."

"Then how--" Reinez stopped abruptly. "I suppose you would not know that." The mesefu scanned around above the grasses, then turned back to Lan. "You must keep this quiet. My troops already feel uneasy with a human, and though I like to think I do not harbor such harsh prejudices, I cannot say I blame them. If they were to know you had these, they would stun you without a second thought and bring you before the mesefu high council for trial. You would never know they were coming for you."

"I do not like this," Reinez continued. Lan shifted uneasily. "A human holding a *keza* spells disaster. I pray that Ohn illumines you and keeps you true, and that when the time comes for you to pass the *keza* on, you do it wisely. Be very careful who sees that. It could mean the difference between life and death for you. For all of Kalra."

"For all of Kalra? Why's that?" The wind picked up across the grassy field. Lan slid his hands into his pockets.

"It would be the end of all we know if someone corrupt got hold of the three *keza*. No one knows exactly what power they seal away, but it is terrible and devastating, according to ancient dictations from the *Gilanthril*."

"What did the *Gilanthril* say, exactly?" Lan asked, yearning for more knowledge of this ultimate power. He wished he had read more than a few snippets here and there.

"I do not have time to recite holy texts for you. Read it yourself. I must go ready the troops to begin moving again, and think of some way to deal with this news." Reinez stood and walked away.

So the *Gilantbril* held the answers to this ultimate power? He would have to find time to read through his copy of the book some day. He would read only the original mesefu text, which meant learning the language to fluency. The effort required would be worth the end result--the end of the sarn, and a better world for everyone.

#

She probably needed help. There was not much chance that she could take out as many sarn as she needed to without assistance. *Ol'tue* lay a mere twenty strides away, and she was powerless to do anything about it.

Ria had finally tracked down the blade. A group of sarn had come from the west with it and was now camped here, awaiting the arrival of Ga'ruk to take it from them and back to the Sarn Nations. Ria was determined to keep that from happening. She refused to let all these years of searching and fleeing for her life to be in vain. All would be lost should the blade fall into the hands of Dariakus.

Dariakus was a daemon, according to Lisen. A daemon had been unleashed on Kalra again. It had happened once before, a thousand years ago. The devastation and death Ethrakus had caused lived on in peoples' minds even today, passed down from generation to generation. The standard calendar was based on the victory of Gienev Harishmon over Ethrakus to remind the people of their victory over the darkness. A great war had been fought then. That was when the dragons had appeared. After they helped the mesefu forge *Ol'tue*, which was used to end Ethrakus' reign of terror, they had given the mesefu the three *keera*, warning that they should be kept separate at all costs. If all three were brought together in the right place, a sacred weapon of mass destruction would be unleashed on Kalra, making the destruction Ethrakus left in his wake look like a meager tavern brawl.

Ria shuddered at the thought. Dariakus must know of this power. He wanted the *keera*. That was why Ga'ruk had chased her down, under orders of the daemon. If that power fell into a daemon's hands

The light faded as the sun set over the western horizon, taking with it the sparse heat of the day. A cold breeze arose in the fields that chilled Ria to the bone.

A small fire sprung to life from the campsite. She crawled out from behind the scrubby bushes to get a better view of the area. She imagined how warm it would feel to sleep next to a fire instead of on the cold, hard ground as she had for countless days now. She pulled her dark coat tight and tucked her hands under her armpits. Ria looked back at the camp and tried to avoid thinking about the fire.

There were only twenty sarn or so, but that was more than she could handle. There were ten tents scattered haphazardly about the flat bottom of the bowl of land they were in. She turned back and looked up at the ridge behind her. Stars had started to appear just above its crest. Ever since her encounter with the crazed bounty hunter, she had made a point to look behind her at least once an hour. Not being able to see beyond the crest worried her. That woman could be out there anywhere. She kept trying to tell herself that she was being paranoid, but it never quite worked. She knew she would regret letting the woman live. But would she feel any better now if she had killed the poor soul? She silently cursed herself and turned back to the campsite.

Only five of the sarn were about, three of them sitting near the fire. Maybe she should strike now. If she worked quietly, she could take these five without alerting the others. She knew there were more sarn coming in the days ahead. Ga'ruk was on his way, and she had no idea how much longer it would be before he arrived. It could be weeks, days, or even mere hours. She might not get another chance at it. With her magic, she knew that five sarn would not be a problem to tackle, but it was still a bit bright and she might be spotted moving in.

She decided to wait a bit longer, until the fire had died down and more of them were sleeping. She eased back down behind the bushes and waited for the moon to rise high in the sky.

#

Ria woke sometime during the night when a sharp wind struck her body. She stretched for a few seconds in the chill air and sat upright. How long had she slept? She could not tell by the sky. Dark clouds had rolled in and blocked the stars. Only the faintest hint of the moon, Nalari, shone through. She realized how dark it was and turned her attention to the campsite. The fire had died down to a faint glow, barely noticeable from her position.

She silently wove a spell around herself to silence her approach. They would never know what hit them.

There were two of them that she could see, both blundering around in the dark as if looking for something. Magically, she enhanced her vision. Everything brightened as if the campfire was still burning. The few remaining embers were now as bright to her as the trace of the sun through the clouds on an overcast day. She could make out the tent where the blade rested in its case. It would be heavily guarded by the sarn. They would be sleeping, most likely, and even if not, she had ways of making herself unseen for brief periods of time. Brief, but long enough to do what had to be done.

She stepped lightly from behind the bushes. The sarn showed no sign of seeing her. She slipped a dagger from her right boot. She wished she had her *renol* blade, but the steel one would have to do for now.

They had to be killed, she decided. She could try holding them with her magic, but it would not last long as she could not focus all of her attention to them. She had to still be able to make herself unseen to get at the blade. If they spotted her, there would be a pursuit--one she did not want and could not handle while carrying *Ol'tue*. Perhaps if she knew how to use its powers, things would be different. She did not want to rely on it, however. She had no other option. These two sarn had to die. She hated the thought of killing again, but reminded herself that it was for a greater good. It was either her or them, and if she died, there was a good chance the rest of Kalra would fall with her.

The glow from the dead fire was not enough for the sarn to see by as they rummaged about. One of them grunted, dropped the sack he was looking through, and walked back to the embers. He poked at the fire to try and get it to light again. She slowly crept up behind him. The other sarn dropped his bag as well and sauntered off into one of the tents as he grumbled something over his shoulder to the one by the fire. This was going to be too easy.

Ria reached around the sarn's head, the dagger in her right hand. With one swift movement, she grabbed his head, pulled it back, and sliced deep into his throat. A muted gurgle escaped his lips as warm blood flowed down his chest and spurting onto Ria's

hands. She pulled him away from the fire and threw him to the ground. He would be dead in moments.

The sound of ruffling tent flaps startled her. She looked to see the other sarn coming out of his tent. He instinctively drew his sword. He was alarmed. His friend was missing. She started to panic, not sure what to do, then decided to hold him with her magic. She concentrated on the sarn and keeping him still. A heartbeat later, he was standing stiffly by his tent, unable to move. She slid up next to him and stared into his eyes. She could feel the warm breath from his nose on her cheeks. With a thought, she sent him tumbling backwards. He rolled out of the campsite in silence-- a silence she induced by magically holding his windpipe as he rolled. He would be no more of a worry to her. Her magical grip on his throat would suffocate him shortly. With those two sarn out of the way, it was time to do what she had come to do.

Ria walked up to the tent where the blade was concealed and slowly pulled back the flap. Only three sarn were in here, each on a separate cot. The chest containing the blade lay on the floor between two of them. This was getting easier by the second. Only three sarn, all asleep.

She could hear their heavy breathing and could see their chests rising and falling in the darkness. Any lesser person would have panicked at such a sight. She was used to it. She had dealt with situations like these more times than she could count. She made herself invisible, dropping the magic that held the sarn's throat she had rolled away. He would be dead by now, or at least unconscious. She would not be able to remain invisible for long-- she must act fast.

She wondered how she was going to get the blade out of the tent. She would have to either pull the chest out or open it here and take the blade. If she opened it here, she risked waking the sarn up with the noise. She could either silence the chest or herself, but not both. Pulling it out of the tent presented a similar predicament. It would make a loud scraping noise as she dragged it along the ground. She would not make as much noise by opening the chest, though. Her mind was made up. It was the easiest way. She moved the silencing magic from herself to the chest and slowly, carefully, crept up to it. It was locked. All of her wisdom and planning had failed her. She had never even thought that it would

be locked. *Careless!* she scolded herself. *It'll take time to unlock this thing.*

Ria cursed herself silently as she dropped the invisibility to begin working on the lock. She stared intently at the lock until she could picture the tumblers inside in her mind. She rolled one of them forward until it clicked into place. Before she could start on the second, a heavy hand grabbed her shoulder. She jumped.

She turned around, dagger swinging. The sarn she had thrown out of the campsite stood before her. His throat was dark and swollen, but he was still alive. Her dagger clinked harmlessly across the bone plates on his armor. If only she had swung higher.

He grinned at her, baring his sharp lower teeth. His breath came in short, steamy gasps. His eyes turned down in an evil glare. He placed his other thick green hand on her other shoulder. Her heart raced. She started to use her magic again but he shoved her out of the tent. She lost her concentration as she crashed into the ground and took in a mouthful of dirt. She spat it out and scurried to get up but he planted his heavy foot on her back and pinned her down. He shouted for help. The other sarn started coming out of their tents, each one armed and ready to fight. Her magic could not help her now. There was nothing she could do against all of them. She had lost--Kalra was lost.

Ria heard the distinct ringing of metal as the sarn standing over her withdrew his sword. She was going to die. Other sarn kept advancing, staring at her, the intruder. The sarn she identified as the leader walked up. He grunted something to the one who held her beneath his foot. He wore a thick fur cap that his green ears stuck out of. A deep scar ran across his face, from the top of his right eye, down across his nose, ending just below his lower lip. He was middle-aged, and from his thick muscles and battle-hardened look, had seen many tribal wars in his time. Thick black hair carpeted his arms. As he outstretched his hand to the sarn standing over her, she saw small scars and calluses. He was giving the sarn that held her a sign. She closed her eyes, awaiting the inevitable swish of the sword that would be the last thing she ever heard.

After a brief conversation between the two sarn, which she could not understand, she heard him sheath the sword. She opened her eyes. He removed his foot from her and pulled her up by her

coat. Another sarn walked up behind her and bound her hands in heavy steel manacles.

Half of her immediately died. Her blood ran cold. These were no ordinary manacles. They were magic dampeners, manacles that blocked the wearer's ability to use magic. The ensnared could not open them either, no matter how hard they tried. They could only be opened magically, or by death. What were sarn, who had no magic at all, doing with such things? How did they plan on opening them? Or did they?

She was violently jerked up to her feet by the sarn who had been standing on her back, and lead toward the back of the campsite. The leader walked alongside her. He began speaking roughly in the human tongue--his accent was thick, but she understood enough to be afraid.

"You think you can take the sword from us with nobody knowing, slant? You crazy. Why you come alone? Your companions should come with you . . . unless they agreed this foolish too."

"I have no companions," she stated bluntly.

"Then you are more foolish than I thought. I think there are more. Chok'thra!" The leader shouted back to one of the sarn following them. He shouted some orders to the sarn in their own guttural tongue then turned back to Ria. "You be locked away until Ga'ruk arrives. I sure he will reward us when we give you to him. He be looking for you a long, long time. I think he will be . . . pleased."

"You know who I am, *ne?*" she asked.

"We were warned you might come. Ga'ruk gave us dampeners for if you did. Now he'll give anything I want for you." He shoved her down forcefully against the hard ground. She heard something crack as a sharp pain shot up her back. One of her ribs had cracked and the pain was unbearable. She futilely tried to soothe the pain with her magic, but there was nothing, as if she had lost her legs and was trying to walk.

"See," he said, "even though sarn have united under Ga'ruk, he favor his own tribe too much. We intended to keep the blade from him until he agree to certain demands." He smiled at Ria, his dark tongue running over his thick lips. "Now we have more to strike a deal with."

"Fool!" she shouted at him. "Ga'ruk and his armies will crush you all. And if he doesn't, the daemon will."

"You the fool here, slant. Daemon story is something Ga'ruk uses to keep power over the Nations. There no truth to it. We Red Claw see through lies."

"How little you know." She spat at his feet. He growled and grabbed her legs. He dragged her to a steel cage on the ground. The bars were thick and the lock was heavy. This had obviously been prepared for her. Whatever these Red Claw sarn were up to, they wanted something from Ga'ruk, and they wanted it badly.

The leader shoved her in. Her back slammed into the bars. She cried out in pain as her cracked rib began to throb. The sarn locked the cage and said something to the man who had caught her. A tear of pain rolled down her cheek.

"You enjoy new home now. There still time before Ga'ruk arrives, even more before you get where you going. If all go according to plan, we be there within few weeks. If not, then there an entire legion of Red Claw waiting over south ridge. They here in case Ga'ruk decide not to agree to our terms. Ga'ruk not always get his way." The sarn smiled smugly.

"You are wrong," said Ria sternly, "about a great many things."

He turned and walked away.

Ria kicked her foot into the bars and winced at the pain in her back. She spat a few mesefu curses at the sarn's back as he walked away.

She slumped against the bars, sliding down until only her head rested against the side of the steel cage. Tears started rolling from her eyes. What could she do now? There was no way she could escape easily. She knew enough about mesefu hand-to-hand unarmed combat to fight her way out of tough situations, but not one this tough. There may be a chance later for her to use her training, but she doubted it. These sarn did not seem as if they would leave her any easy access to an escape route--they needed her too much. At least the dampening bracers were separate, leaving her arms free. If she ever *did* get a chance, she would be able to make the best of it.

She stared up at the watery night sky until sleep enveloped her.

#

It was morning, and they were getting an early start on the day. Lan had slept comfortably for the first time in a long while. He was eager to get moving. According to some scouts that had returned with the dawn, the sarn who reportedly had the Darksearer had been spotted. They were just over a hard day's journey away, so if they traveled at full force, they should reach the encampment by noon tomorrow.

The sarn were camped on the outskirts of a small grove of trees and bushes, almost dead center on the border with the sarn nations. The campsite was nestled in a deep bowl of land, surrounded on all sides by a high ridge. With the camp so close to the Sarn Nations, there could be sarn allies waiting nearby, but it was a risk they had to take. If the blade passed over the border, the chances of getting it back would be slim. There would be no time to call for help. They had to act soon.

Dark clouds in the sky threatened to burst open any second now and drench the mesefu soldiers with dirty rainwater. Lan hated traveling in the rain. Water always got in his boots and made the bottoms of his feet peel. It was quite uncomfortable. He sighed. If it started raining, he would just have to deal with it. His magic was not strong enough to change the weather, and there was no use in worrying about things that could not be changed. No use at all.

#

The sarn encampment lay on the other side of the ridge. It had been just over a day since they had gotten word of the sarn's location, and now they were lying in wait, preparing for an afternoon charge. The rain had not come yet, but the clouds still hung ominously in the skies.

Lan felt uneasy. The cloudy skies and the impending anxiety reminded him of the day he had gone out into the rain to rescue Ria. He wondered what she was thinking now, if she had left Eskar without him. If so, there was a chance he would see her again, and soon. She had mentioned seeking out the blade, and he knew that it was right over the ridge. Perhaps he would even see her this very day.

A mesefu scout approached, a grave look on his face. Lan looked up to Reinez. The mesefu leader was frowning.

"*Kesankan mika wes, o kes sord teni.*" The scout had a very serious look on his face. Lan wondered if it was a requirement to be overly serious in the military. All military men he had ever seen were. Even his father.

"E," replied Reinez, seemingly content. "*Te ban hudo. Abwes a.*"

"E, *Alt Reinez. Amo kes emake teni--tyen emake--o me karo ke Ria wes kara penn.*"

The man had said Ria.

"Are you okay, Lan? You look a bit shaken."

"I--I'm fine. Just a bit of a light head. I think I stood up too fast."

"Bad news. There are not many sarn out there, and they do have *O'tue*, but they have something else. A *dalchi*. The daughter of a former council member. Though he and his family were cast out of Altkrea for his dealings with a human woman, my men still hold allegiance toward him. Tyal was one of the best Lords we ever had, despite what Lord Doran would have everyone think."

Tyal must be Ria's father. She was the daughter of a mesefu Lord? Her father had been a very powerful man. Why had she never told him this? Why had she gone after the Darksearer alone, if there were mesefu who still swore allegiance to her family?

"You should stay here and watch the camp." Reinez's voice had an almost fatherly tone to it, an interesting break from his stern military speak. He leaned in to Lan and whispered, "You have one of the *krea*. We cannot risk the sarn anywhere near it."

"But I want to help you against the sarn!"

"I do not think that you should go with us. I know you are free to do as you wish, but please, before you make any decision, think carefully about what you are doing. You bear a great responsibility." Reinez stared him down, waiting for his words to sink in, then turned and walked off

Yes, Lan thought, *a great responsibility*. Ria was here, and he was going to see her soon, *krea* or no. Sarn had not kept him from her before, and he was not going to let them keep him from her now.

Chapter Twenty-Two

A loud, rapid knocking disturbed Fallon's rest. He threw the blankets off and stood up. The knocking continued. "Who could possibly be disturbing me at this late hour?" he mumbled to himself as he checked the crystal mesefu timepiece on the wall. It was well past midnight. "I am coming," he shouted at the door. "One moment."

He trudged over to the door and opened it slowly. Esmond stood on the other side with a piece of parchment squeezed tightly in his shaking hands. "What is it?" Fallon asked.

Esmond walked hurriedly into the room and shut the door behind him. He thrust the paper at Fallon. Fallon could not believe his eyes. Ga'ruk was moving south to meet another small group of sarn at the southern Kagon border. They had the Darksearer and were waiting to relinquish it to Ga'ruk upon his arrival. Something had to be done.

"The sword must be recovered. Have the mesefu heard of this?" Fallon asked.

"I don't know for sure, but I doubt it." Esmond gestured toward the parchment. "I found it in Wayreth's office while we were searching tonight. You told me to come find you if we found anything important and, well, this is definitely important. There's no telling how long it's been there. I came as quickly as I could."

"We must send someone to inform them that the Darksearer has been found. If this Ga'ruk knows where it is, then he must be stopped at all costs. We have to pray that the sarn who

have it now aren't planning on using it for their own purposes any time soon."

"I will have someone sent to Altkrea as soon as possible, sir." Esmond had taken well to the position of being his assistant. The young man almost always knew immediately the correct thing to do. "What should we personally do about this, if anything?"

Fallon leaned back on his desk and rubbed his chin. Did the necromancers stand a chance against one, possibly two sarn legions? "My first instinct is to leave the matter alone and let the higher powers handle their own affairs. However, if Ga'ruk is involved, then we are involved as well because of Wayreth's deal. If he got his hands on that blade, I assure you we would eventually become one of his targets, and if the threat of a daemon is real . . ."

He stared blankly at the dark crevices in the stone wall. A daemon. Fighting sarn legions may end up being the least of their problems. Regardless, the Darksearer had to be reclaimed. With a daemon on Kalra, it would be needed for its rightful purpose again. "We need to find the Darksearer, Esmond. While a messenger to Altkrea is necessary, we cannot depend on him to arrive before even worse problems may arise. It will be risky, but I doubt we have much choice."

"Yes, I agree. Also, I have friends who might be involved, and I would like the opportunity to protect them if they are in danger."

"I understand. I will take seventeen of our best necromancers to south Kagon along with you and Gaelyn."

"Gaelyn?" Esmond raised an eyebrow. "She's only a beginner. There's not much she can do to help. She doesn't know much about necromancy yet."

"Oh, but she can learn," Fallon interrupted, "just as well as you. Have you ever raised anything, Esmond?"

"Yes, I have. No actual people, of course, but yes, I've raised small rats and things before."

"And how difficult were they to control?"

"Not too difficult. It basically did whatever I commanded it to do. It was kind of creepy seeing something else move around based on my thoughts. I did notice that it was difficult to send it more than one command in a short period of time, as if it were slow to change its mind."

"By that same mental ability, one necromancer can raise an army of several hundred and control them with his will well enough to win. Since this is only a small band of sarn we will be going up against, there won't be much weight on her shoulders anyway. I will help instruct her as we--"

"Gaelyn . . ." Esmond started. He took a deep breath. "Gaelyn can't wield magic."

Fallon squinted his eyes. "She can't?"

"Not at all, sir."

"Then why--"

"Because she loves me, and wanted to be with me above all else." Esmond stared at the floor. "We were going to try to hide it, at least for now, until we could think of something better."

"Do you love her as much?" Fallon asked.

"I . . . I think so." Esmond shook his head. "It's hard to know. I . . . yes. I do."

"Then the decision is up to you. I will understand if you do not want her along because of the danger." Fallon lifted Esmond's chin. A lone tear had rolled down the young man's cheek leaving a shining trail.

"I would like for her to come along." Esmond wiped his cheek.

"And why is that?"

"So that I can protect her. If she's here, and something goes wrong, there'd be nothing I could do. That's why I'd rather have her by my side."

"Well said." Fallon smiled. "I will do my best to protect her as well."

"When do we leave?" Esmond asked.

"At sunset. Today."

"So soon?"

"It is not so soon if you consider what hour it is now." He gestured toward the timepiece on the wall. Esmond looked up at it then looked back at Fallon hastily. "Go back and start packing your things. Make it light, as we will be on foot and must travel quickly. We will all meet outside at sunset. Get as much rest as you can between now and then."

"Yes, Fallon." Esmond nodded and turned toward the door.

"And Esmond," Fallon called after him.

"Yes?"

"If she doesn't want to come . . ."

"I won't." Esmond cracked half a smile. He then slipped outside the door and vanished into the dark hall beyond.

Fallon sighed and looked down at the slip of paper in his hand. Was it possible for them to return from this alive? He knew that some of them--perhaps many of them--could die. He took a deep breath and tapped his quill pen against one of the legal documents, lost in somber thoughts.

"What if the daemon wants the Darksearer?" Esmond's wavering voice startled him back into the present. The young man stood in the doorway, gazing back at him with a vacant stare. "What if he somehow knows what happened to Ethrakus a thousand years ago, and knows that securing the blade would ensure his power and dominance, since the dragons have vanished?"

The question sent a chill up his spine. That was what he had feared all along. "Do not think of things like that, Esmond. If there is truly another daemon, then that is bad enough. If he somehow knows of the past and is trying to acquire the Darksearer, then that makes things far worse, as we have lost any surprise advantage we would have had."

"What if we encounter the daemon?"

"I don't know, Esmond." Fallon ran an unsteady hand through his thick hair. "I truly do not know. We will think of that only when it happens. If there's still a chance that this daemon is only rumor." He knew, however, that it couldn't be. There were too many signs. "Run along and get packed, now," he said. "We've got a long journey ahead."

#

The Eye of the Heavens stepped out of the roadside tavern into the foggy morning air. The chill in the air bit to the bone. The thick air dampened the sound of gravel crunching beneath her feet. She had a long day ahead of her.

She had been freed from the ground by a kind man who asked no questions. He had offered to carry her as far as this tavern. After a seemingly endless night in the decrepit place, she was nearly ready to continue her trek. She wished she had the

money for a horse. The half-breed was on foot and would be much easier to catch. Ohn had given her no such option, however. There must be good cause.

As she turned to set out southward, the tavern door squeaked open and a man in a thick fur coat and cap stepped out. "Are you the Eye?"

Her hand went for her whip. "Who asks?" The man stepped toward her. She tightened her grip on the leather coil that hung at her belt.

"I come on behalf of your present employer. He would like to present you with information on where to bring proof of your success."

"I would know who he is, first." If this man wanted trouble, he had found it. He would not leave alive.

"One who does not want the plans of the Creator disturbed by a half-breed." The man stopped a few spans from her. Perfect range. She could drop him before he had time to shout.

"Would his name be Ga'ruk?"

Silence. They stared each other down for endless seconds. "I work for no--"

Gravel crunched behind her. She whirled around, whip unleashed, prepared to strike. A sarn stood before her in burnished plate mail with a black fur collar. A three-horned helm sat on his head, one of the larger two broken off at the tip.

"I believe you were asking about me, bounty hunter," the sarn said in a threatening, guttural voice. "How goes the hunt?"

"NO!" she shouted. Impossible. There was no way the half-breed had been telling the truth.

"No?" the sarn asked. "You demanded to know who your employer was, and here I am. Whether or not you like the idea is irrelevant." He clenched his fists. "Now, where is Ria?"

"I . . ." Did this sarn truly have Ohn's best interests in mind? Could any sarn ever? "I WORK FOR NO SARN!" She struck at him with her whip. Her arm did not move.

"No you don't!" the man from the tavern shouted behind her. He had lassoed her wrist at the last second. With a sharp tug, he pulled her off her feet. The sarn planted his foot on her chest and pushed down. The pain was excruciating, titillating.

"Tie her up and bring her along," the sarn grunted. "She will be given a chance to see things our way."

She tried to swing at the sarn's leg with her free hand but the other man grabbed her forearm and slipped a loop of rope around it.

"SET ME FREE!" she demanded. "I REFUSE to be held captive by FILTHY SARN SCUM!"

The sarn laughed and knelt down. "Get her legs," he said to the man. The sarn then grabbed her chin and leaned down to her face. "I'm afraid you have no choice in the matter. Get used to it." She twisted her head out of his grip and found his hand with her teeth. She bit down. The sarn jerked his hand away with a surprised shout.

"And I always thought it worked the other way around. We eat you, remember?" He stayed kneeling as the man went to work tying her legs together. Despite her kicks, he managed to keep them straight enough to bind.

"YOU WILL SUFFER FOR THIS! OHN SHALL BOIL YOUR SOULS ON THE LAKE OF FIRE! YOU WILL--" The sarn backhanded her. Her mouth went numb. She tasted blood trickling onto her tongue.

"You will be quiet. If you make another sound before we get back to camp, I'll ensure you never speak again." The sarn flashed his teeth at her. "Human tongue tastes quite good. You should try it sometime."

The sarn stood up and removed his weight from her chest. "Bring her. Follow me."

"But how?"

"Sedate her if you have to, I don't care. Just bring her. Now." The sarn started to walk off.

"What about my reward?" the man asked. "I'd love to take a roll with her. She seems like the feisty type, and I love it when they scream."

She screamed. The sarn nodded toward the man. He slipped a small, thick club from beneath his large coat. "Time to go to sleep, my pretty." A swish, a crack. The void.

#

Wayreth had never sent him the letter after the night of their last meeting. At first Ga'ruk had been extremely angry,

thinking Wayreth had betrayed him, but the new developments in the state of things had changed his priorities drastically. Scouts had found some of his own men with the Darksearer far to the south near the sarn nations' border with Kagon. Ga'ruk had immediately turned toward them. He had been moving north following what he was sure was the Darksearer, and yet here it lay nearly a thousand leagues back in the direction from which he had come. If this was some Red Claw clan doing, he would make them pay dearly.

The Red Claw clan of sarn had been his biggest opposition when he united the clans. It had taken years of deliberation and treaties and even war to get them to submit to the terms of unification. He feared that they had led him astray from the blade on purpose by providing false leads to him.

Were they trying to start another clan war? What did they think they could do with the Darksearer? Earn Dariakus's favor? Not likely. Ga'ruk had been the only one with whom Dariakus consulted, the only one to whom Dariakus gave orders. Ga'ruk, chieftain to the Black Snake clan, was in command of the unified sarn, and he would not take any opposition by some rebellious, self-centered Red Claw scum. He would have them all exterminated if this was their doing, as an example of how unfavorable treason was in the unified nations. Their deaths would be painful and slow.

There were reports that a mesefu legion was between Ga'ruk and the Red Claw, no doubt trying to recover the sword. He knew he had to get them out of the way, but attacking mesefu was suicide. Their weapons of horrific magic would lay waste to his men long before they could set within a league of the mesefu. Although the mesefu never killed in combat, they also never lost. He would be taken prisoner, and then what would happen? Dariakus would lose all trust in him. The unified sarn nations would collapse. That could not happen. The mesefu had to be dealt with, but only magic could fight them and the sarn were without magic. Circling around them was pointless as well--they traveled much faster than he did. All he could do was push his men as hard as he could and hope for the best--and that was never good enough for him.

Regardless of what was to be done about the mesefu, he had to get that sword. It was the key to everything he wanted. Dariakus had promised him great power and wealth--even large

tracts of territory in the human lands--as long as he could get the Darksearer and the *krea*. At least one of those goals was within his grasp now.

Ria had once knew of the *krea*, but by now he was sure not even she knew where they were anymore. She would definitely be trying to interfere with his plans for the Darksearer, which is why he had sent for that crazed bounty hunter. As insane as she was, he knew she was one of the best. Her emotions had gotten the best of her today--she did not like sarn at all. He would keep her prisoner for a while, work on her mind, break her, and send her out again into the world as his personal slave. She would not fail him.

Failure reminded him of Gaelyn, the girl Osbick had convinced to help capture the half-breed. Ria had been right under Gaelyn's fingers, and she had let her escape. If he ever found that redheaded child, she would have answering to do, assuming he remembered not to kill her first. It would be tempting. Ga'ruk loved the taste of young flesh--especially young flesh that he knew would struggle. He enjoyed the fear in their eyes as they realized what he was going to do to them--the adrenaline made them taste all the better.

#

It was the day after they were to have attacked the sarn encampment. Lan lay on the ground, staring up at the morning sky, wondering what they were going to do now. Another scouting mission had been sent out an hour before the planned raid and had discovered an entire legion of sarn waiting on the other side of the southern ridge, prepared to help out the sarn in the encampment should any force try and take the blade. He *thought* it had looked too easy.

A message had been sent out to Altkrea via *reni* requesting that backup forces be sent as fast as possible. They could take weeks to arrive, and Lan was not sure that they had that much time. Even if the sarn remained in this encampment for that amount of time, it did not mean that the mesefu would not be discovered. It was a miracle that Reinez and his company had not been discovered by sarn scouts yet. *Or perhaps we have been discovered*, thought Lan, *and they're just lying in wait for the perfect moment to strike . . .*

#

The tall intricate towers of the city of Altkrea gleamed brightly in the mid-afternoon sun. The bridges and airways of the mesefu capitol were bustling with activity. Lisen stood in her bedchamber nestled high up in the central capitol building, gazing out at the vast city that stretched as far as her eyes could see.

She thought about the missing *Ol'tue*, and how she had gone to Porthos a year ago to gather information about its whereabouts. Following those leads, it had finally been discovered that the blade was with some Red Claw sarn near the southern Kagon border. Reinez Garult and a small legion of mesefu soldiers had been sent to reclaim it, but no word had been heard from them yet. She feared the worst.

For a moment, she wished that she were the one out there leading the troops now. Her taste of life outside Altkrea had been the one of the greatest experiences of her life, and she secretly yearned that the chance would arise for her to go out into the world again.

She sighed, turning away from the window, away from the monotony that was her life on the mesefu high council. Her doortone sounded, its soft music blending in with the busy sounds from the window. She walked over to the door that led into the main hallway and looked through the porthole. Through it, she saw one of the high council's messengers. With a sigh, she opened her door to greet the man. His breath came in labored heaves and sweat poured down his face. He looked as if he had just run a thousand leagues.

"Lord Lisen," the messenger said with a bow. "A meeting of the high council has been called." Of course. What else did these messengers ever do but tell people that Harishmon had called a meeting?

"Thank you," she replied nonchalantly. "When will it be?"

"Now."

Her heart skipped a beat. Meetings were never called this abruptly. There was always at least one day's notice.

"Tell Lord Harishmon that I will be there as soon as possible." She had to change into her council clothing and rush through the traffic on her *vel*. It would be half an hour before she could get there. Surely Harishmon had not meant right this instant. She should have time to do what she needed.

"I'm afraid that won't be fast enough," the messenger said. "The rest of the council is either already there or will be arriving within minutes."

"It's the best I can--"

"Don't worry," said Harishmon as he stepped from around the corner. He wore his council robes walked hurriedly. "You can ride with me."

Her heart skipped another beat. Nobody had ever ridden with the High Lord. He arrived at the center of the council where he could look out and see everyone. It represented his position as High Lord. For anyone else to enter alongside him was on the verge of blasphemy.

"I could never! It's a violation of protocol, and--" she began.

"I am the High Lord," he interrupted. "I will overlook it. This is too important to worry about procedure. Get dressed now. Tyon," he said to the messenger, "you are dismissed." The messenger bowed respectfully, then walked away as Harishmon approached Lisen.

"It's about *Ol'tue*," he said. "Reinez and his troops found it, protected by a legion of sarn. They haven't been discovered as of yet, but need reinforcements immediately."

"It will take days to reach them!" she said. Her shoulders slumped forward in defeat.

"We've got to try. The sarn legion that awaits them is quite large. While our military power has never been questioned or successfully put down before, I do not want to risk letting a small, scarcely-armed group like Reinez's attempt to fight them off. They at least need eraser cannons. We've got to send another legion with cannons and *asbiennume* for them to use. Then they'll definitely stand a chance."

And then she saw it. Her chance to get out of Altkrea again. She would tell Harishmon that he needed to let her go with these reinforcements. She knew it did not suit a member of the mesefu high council to go into battle, but she knew how important this was to the mesefu--to everyone. She wanted to be there to personally make sure everything went well. It would be a tough battle, but she would do her best to get the council to let her go.

"I need to go with them," she said, realizing all too late how childish that had sounded.

"Yes," Harishmon replied flatly. "You will most definitely go with them."

Her heart skipped a third beat. Had she heard that correctly? She had expected some sort of rebuttal, not immediate compliance.

"Hurry, the council meeting is to start as soon as possible."

"Yes," she said. She closed her door and ran off to change. She was going to be traveling with the troops southward. She may even see combat. Her life would possibly be in danger, and Harishmon had not hesitated for even a fraction of a second when she asked if she could go. He said it as if the decision had been made up to him long before now . . .

#

The council chamber was terribly cold. Several of the council members pulled their arms tightly around their bodies to keep what little heat remained within them. High Lord Harishmon stood in his usual place, turning as he spoke to the assembled council. His tone was sharp and as frozen as the room they were gathered in. Lisen knew this was important. Very important. He had to be harsh, and he had to be strict.

"The plan is very simple and straightforward. A legion of reinforcements with eraser cannons and *ashienume* will hover across the sea, around the Ol'Nannen, and land on the northern shore of Kagon, preferably as far away from any human settlement as possible. We can't avoid the humans forever, though. People are going to eventually realize that Altkrea has a sizable force on the move, after seeing Reinez and now the reinforcements we're sending. A panic might break out, but I will take every precaution and inform every major ruler in the human lands of our plans. They will all understand how important this operation is.

"We must keep knowledge of the location of *Ol'tue* to ourselves--there are too many others who would want to get their hands on it and use it for Ohn only knows what evil purposes. The reinforcements will be instructed to tell no one of their mission, and if pressed to give a reason, will say that Altkrea is sending troops to the southern Kagon border to reinforce the human-led border patrols already in place. This agreement will be discussed with the

leaders of Kagon and passed on to their military. It is common knowledge that the sarn clans have united and are building up for a major strike, only nobody knows exactly when."

Harishmon paused for a moment to take a deep breath.

"The reinforcements should reach the sarn encampment within an estimated five days' travel. I understand that this is much faster than is normally possible, but I want the troops to be moving at all times. They are not to stop for rest under any circumstances. They will all be supplied with ample amounts of *nula*." He took another deep breath and gave a sidelong glance at Lisen. Somehow, she knew what he was about to say.

"There is also the matter of safeguarding *Oltue*. After much thought, I have decided that one of you should go along with these reinforcements to insure that the blade is returned safely. Knowing that one of you is the culprit leads me to believe that you may have others working for you. I would hate to send these reinforcements only to discover that they were working for you, whoever you are. That is why I am sending--" he pointed at Lisen "--you."

"Outrageous!" came Doran's typical response. "What if *you* are the one who helped carry *Oltue* away? Just because little progress has been made in the past year on the matter does not mean we have all forgotten." She marched toward Harishmon as she had done before, when he had brought up the issue of an investigating committee. "What if she's on your side?"

"Lord Doran, I advise you to--"

"No!" she shouted. "This has gone on long enough. I have held this in, not knowing how exactly to place it before the council, and not wanting to honestly believe it myself--but I can hold it in no longer." She took a deep breath and thrust an outstretched finger at Harishmon, her purple, sheer robes swirling about her arm. "I have proof that you, High Lord Kaen Harishmon, are the traitor."

The council erupted in chaos.

Even though only twelve were on the council, with Harishmon, the thirteenth, acting as High Lord, Lisen could have sworn she was in a room with hundreds by the sounds they made. Many were shouting out against Doran. Many were shouting in disbelief. The ones that scared her, however, were shouting out against Harishmon. She knew this accusation could not be true.

She had known Harishmon since childhood. He would never do anything like that. He was committed to furthering the safety and security of the mesefu, not to bringing them to their knees! What was this proof Doran had? She had likely fabricated something to get Harishmon ousted and take control of the council herself. Just as she had done to Lisen's and Ria's fathers.

"Doran!" she shouted, storming toward the purple-clad woman. "How *dare* you even think such things! Our High Lord would never--"

"That is enough, Lisen!" shouted Harishmon, his voice a throaty roar as he glared at her. "I will handle this *false* accusation myself." She stopped cold in her tracks as his eyes burned coldly into her soul.

"Let it be known that Lord Lisen Oline also stands accused of this treason," said Doran. More shouts erupted from the council. "She worked on your investigation council covertly, with the help of the *dalchi* Ria." Lisen's heart skipped its fourth beat of the day. She watched hopelessly as all the color in Harishmon's face drained away. They had been caught working with Ria. They had no ground to stand on anymore. Involving the *dalchi* in matters of utmost importance to the mesefu was against every single law the high council abided by. The *dalchi* were the untouchables, and were meant to remain that way.

Eruin strode out, gliding up next to Doran. "It is true," she said. "I witnessed it as well."

"It does not matter who witnessed what at this time," Harishmon shouted. "We have more important business to tend to here, Doran, than your deluded over-ambition to rule this council."

"You cannot turn away from such an accusation," Doran replied. "Regardless of what you decide today, from this day forth you will be looked at with skepticism, and we will reconvene tomorrow to put you on trial. And her. It has been forbidden to involve the humans or the *dalchi* in council matters for well over a thousand years, and you both are directly in violation of that."

"That was ages ago!" Lisen shouted, a new fire burning in her soul. "I say it is time for change! I have been out into the world, Doran. I know the outsiders well, and they are no different than us."

"Of course *you* would say that," Doran sneered. "You, who maintain relations with the *dalchi* Ria on a regular basis. You, whose father withheld treasonous information about another council member. You should have been removed from Altkrea back then. I do not know why this council ever thought you would turn out to be any better than your father."

"Are you that foolish?" Lisen stammered, tears forming in her eyes. "You loved my father, and he loved you. You would put some silly, archaic law before *love*? To think I almost once called you 'mother' disgusts me."

"And to think I once almost called you 'daughter' disgusts *me*." Lisen had never truly thought the woman had loved her father, but she knew that Doran must have once felt something for him--her father would never have allowed just anyone into his living quarters. "Now if you are done reminiscing on your pathetic past, you should begin working on a defense for the trial tomorrow. Although, I doubt there is any that can save you." Doran turned her nose up at Lisen and looked back to Harishmon.

The High Lord wiped angry sweat off of his brow. He glanced hopelessly at Lisen. She stared back at him through a watery haze. "She can't be here tomorrow," he said with a cold finality that chilled Lisen's blood. "She is going with the reinforcements."

"Very well then. I respect your position as the High Lord, for the time being. Though I know you are the traitor, the rest of the council has not yet been convinced. So I request a compromise--I will send one of my most trusted, Eruin, along with her."

Lisen's hopes shattered. She and Harishmon had both highly suspected Doran and Eruin to be the ones who had caused *Ol'tue's* disappearance. Traveling with that woman could lead to no good. But at least she would be away from Altkrea. Away from this madness Doran had stirred up.

"Fine," he said through gritted teeth. "I will not even bother checking for objections in this mess. Both Lisen and Eruin will brief the troops and you will leave within the hour." Eruin sidled up to Lisen as Harishmon turned to look at them.

"Remember what I said. Tell the troops everything, and keep a low profile. They'll be waiting for you at the north dock. I suggest you

get out of here as soon as possible." He paused, concerned eyes looking deep into Lisen's. "I'm counting on you, Lisen."

Lisen nodded slowly, secretly proud of how well Harishmon was handling all of this. She wished she could be as strong.

"I suppose you'll be needing a ride," Eruin said sharply, "since you rode with Lord Harishmon. That alone deserves severe punishment. How *dare* you think you have more authority than the rest of us!"

Lisen started to retort, but realized that fighting back was what Eruin wanted. Quietly, she sauntered off toward the bitter woman's *vel*. It would be crowded and terrible riding with Eruin, but she would manage. There were a lot of things she would have to learn to deal with now. Though she was free from her monotonous life here for a while, she was walking into what could be a deathtrap with one of the people she trusted least. Even worse, she feared that she might never get to return to Altkrea if Doran's fabricated evidence swayed the council. *Dear Ohn, illumine and protect me*, she prayed as she stepped onto the *vel* with Eruin. Eruin said nothing, but turned on her heels sharply and let her shoulders hit Lisen in the chest--hard. It was going to be a long ride.

#

"When do you think they'll be here?" Lan asked Reinez, regarding the reinforcements they had sent out for earlier this morning.

"Perhaps five days, six at most. I hope these sarn do not find us before then."

"How could they not within five days' time, especially with the legion over the ridge that they think are a surprise to us? That legion, if not the encampment over there, is sure to have its own scouts. I would be surprised if they didn't know of us already!"

It was starting to get dark. Only a sliver of the setting sun could be seen over the horizon. Reinez and Lan lay on the top of the hill just above the sarn encampment. They had been mapping the surrounding area and planning for the sarn to attack at any minute. Lan had spied a cage toward the back of the encampment from where he and Reinez lay. It was likely Ria's cage. He saw movement within it from time to time, proving that someone or something was in it, and the mesefu had mentioned something

about Ria earlier. He was this close to seeing her again. A flutter of emotion welled up within him, and he smiled a warm smile, for the first time in weeks.

Reinez looked up from his writings to Lan. "Why the smile, Lan?"

The mesefu startled him, as he was lost in his thoughts. Lan hesitated, looking out over the encampment below as he spoke. "I'm just thinking about home, and how soon I'll be heading back. This situation we're in can't last too much longer . . ."

"Well, if you like, we can send you back now with an escort. That way you will miss what is sure to be a horrific, depressing battle that could escalate into war. It pains me to say this, but people will likely die--good people--and I do not want you to be among their numbers. I am sure you will agree, *ne?*"

"Of course," he said flatly, paying little attention to Reinez. He was not responding to the mesefu--he had just noticed something terrifying in the distance.

"I want you to know I understand." Reinez stood up and looked back toward the mesefu camp. "I will arrange--"

Lan pulled on Reinez's trouser leg. "Look." He pointed with his free hand at the sarn camp.

Reinez gazed out over the plain toward the enemy camp. "What? I do not see anything."

"Exactly. Nothing. No activity, no campfires, nothing. There is nothing going on over there, Reinez. Even the motion in the cage that I noticed stopped about fifteen minutes ago, just before the sun finally descended. I didn't think much of it then, but now . . ."

"You are right. I see nothing moving at all. I do not even see any sarn sitting around. This is bad, Lan. Very bad. We have to warn the others quickly--"

And then they heard the trumpet. It came from the west. Reinez shouted something unintelligible in the mesefu tongue, then grabbed Lan and ran back to the campsite, yelling commands to his men.

"What was that?" asked Lan.

"Their battle trumpet. The sarn like to announce their arrival."

"That seems . . . counterproductive," said Lan.

"You will not be thinking in such large words when you see that legion come marching over the west--"

Another trumpet blast, this one from the east.

"*Ohn mes ilune!* West *and* east. They have us on each side! We must retreat to the north as quickly as possible. If that larger legion of theirs is here . . ." Reinez trailed off and started yelling orders again. The mesefu camp was now teeming with movement. He longed for Reinez's ability to see so clearly in the dark. It was hard for Lan to tell what was going on in the dim light.

"*Mes usarnu fulsodeneil!*" came the cry from the mesefu camp. Something about sarn was all Lan could understand.

"The sarn have attacked the camp! I suggest you get as far away from here as you can, Lan. You must protect the *krea* at all costs." Reinez looked at him one last time then turned toward the sounds of battle. "*MEIDTO!*" Reinez shouted his battle cry and charged toward the oncoming sarn. Lan stood there in dumbfounded disbelief. They were under attack. This was a battle--a true battle, one that may be logged in the journals of history--and it all suddenly seemed very much like a dream to him, as if none of it were real and he would awaken any moment. That moment never came.

Mesefu on discs spread out in both directions, wielding their lances in aggressive stances. Other soldiers charged off on foot, holding the small stun weapons that Lan had seen used against the armadane.

Something unnerved him on a deeper level than the idea of being caught in battle. Most of the battling was happening out of sight, but what he did see was sparse. A few sarn charged here and there at the mesefu but were quickly put down by the stun weapons. What unnerved him was the lack of noise. There was some, of course, but not enough to account for an entire legion of sarn to be encircling them on the east and west. It was too quiet.

Perhaps the large legion had not yet struck and was waiting in ambush. It would make perfect sense if the sarn had known that the mesefu were here. Simply send the large legion around to the north, and if the mesefu backed up, the legion would be waiting on them. He needed to warn someone.

No, he told himself. *They have strategists that know these things, and there are scouts and soldiers, so everything is just fine, and you need to just*

stay far away from the battle like Reinez said. Ending up dead won't do anybody any good.

Then the realization that Ria was likely in the encampment alone now that the sarn had charged hit him, and he bolted down the hill without a second thought for his safety to find out if it was truly her. She had to be here somewhere, if he had understood that scout correctly. Ria awaited him. They would be reunited at last. She would know that he hadn't abandoned her.

About halfway down the slope, he forced himself to a stop that nearly sent him tumbling the rest of the way down. Sounds of battle still rolled over the crest of the hill behind him. What if *ria* was just a mesefu word he was not aware of?

Even if he was right and she *was* here, there could still be sarn down there, guarding her and the blade. They would never take the blade into combat and risk . . .

The Darksearer was down there. The blade he had sought for a long time was in that camp somewhere . . . but it was too big of a risk to take alone. He had one of the *keaa*, and if they truly unlocked as great a power as was claimed, then this was far more important than the Darksearer. He could not risk losing it. The Darksearer would have to wait. Another chance would present itself. And if it didn't, then he at least had one third of the key to an even more powerful weapon.

Lan started running perpendicular to the slope of the hill, going around the sarn encampment below him that lay on the edge of the sparse forest to the south. The camp was situated in a sort of bowl between the hill and the ridge where the forest began. It was this ridge Lan was headed for, and it was this ridge that he hoped the sarn legion was no longer behind. He had to find somewhere safe to rest until this was all over and he could reunite with Reinez and his troops.

The sounds of battle could still be heard, faintly. A bloodcurdling scream rang out, echoing in his ears for what seemed like an eternity. His adrenaline began rushing through him like never before. Nothing compared to it--not the night of the fire in Porthos, the battle at the procession, nor even the escapes from the university or Rhienos. Nothing had ever put this much fear into him. It had to be a dream. *No, not a dream*, he told himself. *A nightmare.*

As he passed the sarn encampment, he looked down at it. Still nothing stirred, not even a loose tent flap in the wind.

There *was* no wind, actually. It was one of those creepy, calm nights, almost peaceful but with a certain sense of danger. The contrast unnerved him. He turned his attention from the camp and back to the tree-lined ridge ahead of him.

Another war-trumpet sounded from far behind him, but he paid it no attention. The sky glowed a deep orange color just above the treetops ahead, as if the forest were on fire. What was going on? He ran faster toward the ridge, eager to see if the forest was in flames, afraid that the sarn had something to do with it. Was this some sort of strange strategy? He could not think of any reason for them to set the wilderness on fire unless it was to prevent someone from advancing, but the mesefu had never planned to advance in this direction, nor was there any reason for them to do so. Something was very wrong here--he felt it in every hair of his body, every bone under his skin.

The sight atop the ridge blew his mind completely out of his body. He was in a state of utter disbelief. The forest before him was not on fire . . . at least not *completely* on fire. He saw a few burning trees through the forest, and there were a few lying on the ground beside flaming or smoldering stumps. Most of what was burning, however, were bodies. There were hundreds of sarn bodies strewn about in various states of ash, all glowing with heat. Several puddles of boiling flesh and blood were scattered about the forest floor. They made horrific hissing and popping noises. The sounds of the trees and the bodies wove together in a cacophonic symphony of death.

There was one group of sarn whose bodies had been melted together, and Lan could not tell where one stopped and the others began. Another group had been reduced to glowing embers of bone, while yet others were intact, but with blackened, charred flesh. Lan doubled over, retching. There was no fear of the larger legion of sarn attacking now--they all lay here wearing various grotesque faces of death. The thing to fear was whatever had done this monstrous act. Lan drunkenly swayed back and forth for a few moments as he fought to regain his composure. He had to get out of here.

Before he could take his first step back, a low rustling-whistling sound came from overhead, above the treetops. He looked up and tried to focus his eyes through the searing heat. All he saw was a huge, dark blob of a silhouette glide gracefully against the darkly orange clouds overhead. *What in Ohn's name is that?* he thought. *A dragon?*

The thing was headed north, toward the battle. He had to warn someone. Anxious to get away from the gruesome sight, Lan ran out of the forest and started back around the campsite. He had not gotten more than halfway when he heard someone shouting his name. He came to an abrupt stop and looked in the direction of the sound. It came from the sarn encampment.

Nothing moved, as it had been for the past half-hour or so--*had it only been that long?*--and he thought his mind was playing games with him so he started to run again. He had no sooner taken three or four steps when he heard it again, this time accompanied by a cry for help. There could be no doubt now that someone, a female someone, was calling his name. He stopped and looked again.

"Lan! Hurry! They've left me alone, and there's not much time left before they come back!" She sounded frantic. He had seen her upset before, but never like this.

"They won't be back for a while yet," he shouted as he spotted the cage she was in gleaming in the light of a stray moonbeam that had found its way through a hole in the clouds above. The clouds that the large silhouette had flown against. "They've started attacking the party I came in with."

"You came in with a party? From where? What's happening?"

"I'll explain everything later. For now, let's concentrate on getting you--" He stood before the cage now, and in the moonlight he could see Ria clearly. She looked drastically different from the girl he remembered. If not for her voice, he would have never known the swollen and misshapen face caked in dried blood and filth. Her shirt was torn across the front nearly revealing her breasts beneath it, and her pants were torn completely up the outside of her right leg. She looked as if she had been beaten nearly to death. He ran up to the cage and put his hands around hers.

"What in Ohn's name *happened* to you?!" he asked.

"Don't worry about that now. You've got to get the key for this damned cage! It's in that tent over there." She pointed at a tent nearest to her small prison. And that is when he noticed the manacles. Two years ago, he would not have thought anything different about them, but now, having been trained somewhat in the art of magic, he sensed something peculiar about them. They made him feel cold.

"What are those?" he asked, gesturing toward them.

"Magic dampeners," she said. "They keep me from being able to use magic." She looked up at him pleadingly, tears filling her eyes. "Please, Lan," she begged. "Hurry!" Her voice was hoarse, and he could barely understand her last words, but he caught their meaning well enough.

He turned to go get the key when she reached through the bars and pulled him as close to her as possible and embraced him as best she could. "I was afraid you weren't coming." She bowed her head then looked up at him. Tears made clean tracks down her dirty cheeks. "Thank you."

He squeezed her hand softly. "Your letter arrived late, which is why I didn't get to you in time." Sarn had done this to her. They had locked her up, beaten her nearly to death, and done Ohn only knew what else to her. They would suffer for this as well. The blade was here somewhere, and--

"Ria," he called back to her quietly. "Before we head out of here, where is the blade?"

"They had a small squadron take it away just before they left me here alone. They could be over a league away from here by now, in any direction. Get me out of here and I'll try to help you track them."

"All right," he muttered as he hurried over to the tent. It was pitch black inside and he could not see anything. He felt around for a few seconds but succeeded only in finding a storage chest with his shin. He cursed the thing and jumped back.

He called out of the tent to Ria. "Do you know where they a--"

The rustling-whistling sound started up again, much louder than before. Ria's scream sent a cold shock wave down his spine that pierced his soul. He leaped out of the tent to see what was the

matter, but all he saw were the deserted tents and Ria, still in her cage, backed in one corner of it screaming at the top of her lungs.

"What is it?"

He got no response. He ran over to her to find out what had frightened her. "Ria," he shouted, fighting to be heard over her screams, "calm down!" He took her arms in his hands through the bars and tried to still her shaking. Her screaming went on unabated.

Afraid that her screams might attract attention, he gently held his hand over her mouth and tried to soothe her. He suddenly realized, over her screaming, that the strange sound he had heard twice now had stopped. After a moment, her screaming also stopped, but she still sobbed and shook hysterically.

She pointed northward, up the hill. Lan turned to look but didn't see anything except grass illuminated by the pale, cloudy moonlight, and several dark lumps he assumed to be sarn.

"What, Ria? I don't see anything."

"It--It just we--went over the hi--hill. Lan, it was . . . it was . . . hu--huge." Lan looked down at Ria. Her face was as pale as the moon that shone down on them through the clouds.

"But wha--"

And at that moment, a loud rippling noise resonated over the hillside and reverberated all throughout the little bowl of land which magnified its volume a hundred-fold. It sounded as if the very air were being ripped asunder. Lan cursed and clasped his hands to his ears as the noise continued. He felt his head might explode from the force of the sound at any moment.

The unbearable noise continued for what seemed an eternity, and when it finally stopped and Lan pulled his hands from his ears, all that he could hear was an incessant ringing. Ria was saying something, he saw her mouth moving, but he heard nothing.

He stood up from where he knelt beside her in her cage and took a few steps toward the hillside. He looked back at her. "What on Kalra could make a sound like that?!" His voice sounded as if it came from deep underwater or through a very thick wall. She obviously could not hear him, either, as she was making wild gestures with her hands. He turned back to look toward the top of the hill and saw soldiers, both sarn and mesefu, running over the

crest as if they were fleeing from the Master of the Lake himself. They were no longer fighting amongst themselves.

The deafening rippling noise started up again. Sarn and mesefu began falling to the ground in groups of two or three. It was the most bizarre thing he had ever seen. It was as if the very life within them vanished abruptly, mysteriously. Their bodies would jerk violently once or twice and then fall lifeless.

As another wave of fleeing soldiers topped the hill, a dark shape rose over it behind them, parts of it gleaming in the shafts of moonlight that escaped the clouds. The deafening sound seemed to emanate from it. Each step it took shook the very ground beneath Lan's feet. *What in Ohn's name . . .*

The clouds shifted so that the full moon shone brightly down on the pitiful scene. Lan was finally able to get a clear look at the mysterious attacker, and what he saw made the very air in his lungs freeze.

It stood as tall as two men. Its body was a slick, silvery color that gleamed beautifully in the light. The thing was built like a man. It had two enormous legs and two very muscular arms. The head of the beast had a twisted visage of a human face, with black voids for eyes and a mouth. The creature had no nose, only two small holes between the eyes and mouth. Two large horns rose out of either side of the silvery head. One of its arms was outstretched toward the crowd of fleeing soldiers. Something flashed from it in rhythm with the rippling sound.

It did not take Lan long to put everything together in his jumbled mind. The way the thing was shaped, the sounds coming from it, and the death that seemed to flow from its hand. "Dear Ohn, it's a daemon! Oh, no, DEAR OHN! I'm DEAD! We're ALL DEAD! It's--"

Tents around him started cracking and breaking. Something whooshed past his left ear as a hole suddenly blew out in the front flap of the tent behind him, followed by several more in the same general location. The daemon was shooting its death weapon in this direction. Lan had to grab Ria and get out of here . . . But the keys were in the dark tent.

He shot off toward it as fast as possible, triggering a small light spell--the one he had used when he was in Ol'Nannen. Ria

was curled into a ball in one corner of the cage, her arms wrapped around her head. He had to get those keys and get her out of here.

Just as he stepped into the tent, the daemon's weapon hit it and holes started popping all out of the side. He fell to the floor as the supports broke clean in half and the entire tent collapsed on top of him. He was going to die.

PART V: THE FALL

"What you fail to see is that good and evil are relative. Does the thief, stealing from the nobility to feed his starving family, see himself as evil?"

Chapter Twenty-Three

Lan had vanished into the tent. The tent had been blown down. The first of the fleeing troops had entered the far end of the campsite just now, and if he didn't hurry, the keys could get lost in the confusion or he could get trampled, or worse . . . the daemon could kill them both.

Ria desperately tried to squeeze through the bars, but she knew it was pointless. She then tried banging her manacles against the sides of the cage in a futile effort to knock them off. *I'm stuck, Ohn illumine me, I'm STUCK! I AM GOING TO DIE HERE!*

"LAN, YOU'VE GOT TO--" A jolt shook her cage as one of the daemon's weapons pounded it. The force sent the cage tumbling over on its side. Ria's back slammed hard onto the bars now beneath her. She moaned and curled up into a ball. Sarn and mesefu soldiers ran past her, their faces drawn into looks of sheer terror. She knew the daemon could not be far behind.

Ria managed to slowly sit up to see the daemon approaching, chasing the soldiers and slaughtering those unfortunate to fall beneath it with its mysterious weapons. She watched in horror as soldiers' chests exploded and their insides burst forth as the bodies that once held them fell lifeless to the ground. She averted her eyes to look for Lan. She could not watch any of the horror.

Lan was nowhere to be seen, but she saw movement under the collapsed tent. She called out to him, but he could never hear her over the screams and the noises from the daemon.

The daemon had entered the campsite now, and would reach her within moments. Soldiers and tents were exploding and collapsing all around her, and every few seconds or so one of the invisible death weapons would hit her cage and tumble it in a random direction. The daemon was passing the tents quickly. Her death was inevitable.

There was still no sign of Lan coming out from under the tent canvas. Several soldiers trampled over the collapsed tent and Ria futilely yelled obscenities at them. *This is it, she thought. It's all over. Ohn knows you tried. Relax, relax, relax. It will make the passing that much easier. Just . . . relax . . .*

Sweat poured from her body and mixed with her wounds. She winced in pain from the salty sting. Tears had run clean down to her chest and the world was a watery blur. She wiped her eyes to see the daemon towering over her. *Dear Ohn, it's huge. How could anyone have ever stood up to one of these? It . . . it's over now, girl. You did your best. Yes, you did--*

A pain erupted in her left shoulder with a force that threw her backward. A gargled squeak came out of her mouth. Blood flowed from a hole in her shoulder in a thick stream. She had been hit by the daemon's weapon . . . and lived.

From nowhere, her cage flew open and Lan was standing over her, the keys in one hand.

"Come on! We have to get out of here NOW!" He grabbed her hurt arm and pulled hard. She jerked back violently in pain. Lan's grip slipped and her arm pulled free from him. He fell backward into an adjacent tent and grabbed onto the support to try and steady himself. The side of his hand exploded in a shower of blood and splinters as one of the daemon's weapons hit it. Lan fell back toward the cage, pulling the support down with him. The entire canvas of the tent fell over the cage and covered them both. Ria couldn't see anything. She heard only screams, the daemon, and her own breathing as she huddled into a corner of the cage to await the inevitable death that was to come.

The daemon's footsteps were loud, heavy things that had gotten drowned out in all the chaotic noise earlier, and by the tone in them, the creature had to be enormously heavy. She realized the footsteps were behind her now--the daemon had passed them by. She stayed frozen for a while until the sound of its footsteps had

faded back into the chaotic noise, then she tried to move the tent canvas.

It was no use. She might as well be trapped in a net deep in the sea. One relief had led to another worry. She was still stuck in the cage, even though it had been unlocked.

An inhuman roar pierced her ears. There was no doubt it bellowed forth from the daemon. Ria managed to climb out of the cage, though still trapped under the canvas. Where was Lan? Was he still alive?

Silence. The screaming, the earth-shattering booming, the daemon's roaring. All had stopped. She wriggled to the edge of the canvas and lifted up the edge. She could see the daemon several strides in front of her, with a line of sarn troops standing before it.

The daemon bellowed again, but this time the bellow made sense. "TRAITORS." The daemon had spoken perfect Pyranian dialect.

A huge beam of light shot out of its arm, so bright that Ria had to shield her eyes. It waved the beam across the entire group of soldiers that stood before it, and when the beam stopped, nothing remained but a large pool of charred bone, boiling flesh, and blood.

Ria managed to keep her reaction under control. She edged herself back under the canvas and kept a close eye on the daemon as it surveyed the campsite from a distance. She hoped and prayed that it did not detect her out here. *Obn illumine me, what happened to Lan?*

#

"Fallon says we're getting close." Gaelyn quietly sidled up next to Esmond.

He kept walking, not saying anything, not knowing what he should say even if he could bring himself to. Fallon was in front of him, and the other necromancers followed behind them--very experienced ones. Two scouts were also with the group, far ahead at the moment.

"He says we should be there in another day. A day and a half at the worst." Esmond kept silent.

"Esmond," she said, her voice heavy with grief. "I'm sorry."

He brushed an invisible strand of hair from his eyes then shoved his hands into the deep pockets of his robe, looking in the

opposite direction. Her betrayal had caused him more misery and suffering than he had ever thought possible.

"Esmond," she started, "you haven't said a word to me since--"

"Not now," he said, devoid of emotion.

"What do you want me to do?" she pleaded.

"Gaelyn--" saying her name out loud made him feel strange. He paused abruptly and tried to get a handle on his feelings. It would be easy for him to yell at her. While she likely deserved it, his heart held him back. He still loved her. "I just need some time alone." He picked up his pace.

Fallon glanced back at him. Esmond nodded. Fallon smiled uneasily then turned back around. Esmond had told him what had happened between him and Gaelyn. Fallon had suggested that Esmond keep his distance for a while and sort things out on his own, peacefully. *Easier said than done*, he thought.

Esmond looked over the plains before him, squinting in the light of the sun. His eyes had become more sensitive to the bright outdoors after being underground with the Night. Trees swept around from behind them to cover the entire southern horizon. They lined the sharp ridge that led down into Se'Ra, a vast marshland. North of him stretched the wide, green plains of Kagon. Somewhere far north of where he stood was the home he had left so many years ago.

He had not returned to visit his parents when they were banished from Pyran. He did not know how he could face his parents after everything that had happened. He felt a pang of regret for having avoided his family, along with an onset of homesickness. *I wonder what they're doing right now?* he wondered. *Probably getting ready for harvest season. Father's in charge of the plantation now. I can understand why Lan signed away the plantation--If I was him, I wouldn't want to stay there either. Father's probably out in the fields working to bring in the crops now. Mother's in the kitchen, making her cinnamon pie--for me.*

Tears welled up in the corners of his eyes. He wiped them away and shook his head. *I miss those pies. I miss everything! Mother, Father . . . and Lan.*

He looked westward toward the Nirenalt Mountains. Somewhere between him and those rocky peaks lay the Darksear,

likely Lan and Ria, and many, many sarn. This was the last way he wanted to see his friend again. What had he gotten himself into?

He glanced at Gaelyn. Catching her eye, he immediately looked back toward the mountains. She ran up to him.

"Listen," Gaelyn began, "I know I've upset you. I know I made a lot of mistakes. Just hear me out and try to find it within yourself to forgive me."

"Why should I forgive a back-stabbing murderer like you?" He stopped dead in his tracks. Had he really just said that?

"I didn't kill anyone! If you would only listen to me--"

"No, Gaelyn," he cut her off. "Maybe you didn't kill anyone, but you're responsible for all those deaths. *All* of them. Look, now's not the time. Just . . . go away. Please." He began walking again, more quickly this time. He had let his anger get the best of him. Telling her to go away may sound harsh to her, and he regretted having to do it, but it was the best way to keep himself from losing control again. He didn't want to say anything he would later regret.

Gaelyn silently nodded and fell back in the line of necromancers, far behind Esmond. He began to cry, silently. Even if he did manage to forgive her someday, things could never be the same. This dark moment from their past would always be lurking around the corner to remind him what terrible betrayal she was capable of. He let the tears flow freely. He didn't bother to wipe them away even when they blurred his vision.

#

This was utterly unexpected. They had been moving speedily across land for nearly a full day now, having spent a day at sea beforehand. One of the mesefu scouts had just returned with news that nobody had planned on--there was an small, well-armed group of sarn just south of them, following their same course. Ga'ruk, leader of the Sarn Nations, had been spied among their numbers, and they held a female human prisoner among their ranks.

"What do we do now, Lord Lisen?" asked one of the female soldiers.

"We will lay low, as far away from them as we can--"

"Am I not also in charge of this mission?" Eruin interrupted, gliding up to Lisen on her *vel*. "Why is it that everyone comes to you first, Lisen, and never to me?"

"Perhaps because they trust me." The past few days had been almost unbearable. Eruin had not missed a single opportunity to try and make Lisen feel inferior or inadequate. As much as Lisen struggled against her, and as much as the troops supported her, not Eruin, she still was on the verge of giving in to the spiteful woman and letting her have complete control over everything. The only thing that kept her from doing so was the suspicion that Eruin had *something* to do with the disappearance of the blade.

"We will continue forward," Eruin said to the soldier. "When we come upon them, we shall attack. A legion that size, led by Ga'ruk himself, is bound to either have *Ol'tue* or at the very best know where it is."

"But Eruin," interjected Lisen, "if they have the blade, they will not go down without a fight, and we should avoid conflict wherever possible. There is also always the chance that the daemon, Dariakus, will show--"

"Stop your childish nonsense," Eruin scolded. "There is no daemon. You should stop eating from Lord Harishmon's hands, Lisen. It is amazing the things you can learn when you think for yourself."

"Whether or not there is a daemon, attacking is not our best option. Despite the rugged relations between the sarn and the humans, attacking the sarn could be looked at as an act of war. While most humans despise the sarn, we cannot expect them to welcome war. They do not look on us very favorably either, remember. We need to wait until we have clearance to attack."

Eruin pinched in her nose and raised an eyebrow. She glanced from Lisen to the female soldier and back several times before speaking. "For once," she forced herself to say, "I must agree with you." She turned to the female soldier. "Inform the rest of the troops to slow their pace. Keep the eraser cannons in front, the cavalry in the middle, and the *vel* in back."

Even when she knows she's been defeated, Lisen thought, she keeps passing out orders to try and save some small scrap of dignity.

The female soldier hopped onto her *vel* and hovered away toward the troops. Lisen reached for her *reni*, but Eruin grabbed her shoulder.

"What need have you of that?" she asked.

"I am going to contact Lord Harishmon," Lisen scowled. "I need to inform him that we could catch the sarn within a few hours' trip. If he gives us the word to attack, then we shall. But only if he gives his word!"

Eruin released her shoulder and backed away. "Fine. Call your petty Lord Harishmon--if he has not been deposed yet."

"He will never be deposed! He is a great, honest man who sticks to his ideals. You could learn a lot from him!" Anger welled up within her at the notion of another person close to her being thrown off of the council. "Nobody else on the council other than you and Doran would even *consider* such a thing! Just because he worked with Ria is not enough to convince them to depose him--they all liked Ria and her father."

"And yet," Eruin said, smiling, "both of them are now gone, deposed by our *righteous* council. The same council that deposed *your* father."

Lisen turned and marched away. She squeezed the *reni* in her hand so hard that she thought it might shatter.

#

Lan was still unconscious. Ria hoped he would awaken soon. There was a bruise on his head--he must have hit something when he fell.

The daemon had left the camp in the night. It hadn't walked away, but flown, with a hissing sound like a flaming arrow soaring through the sky, only larger and faster. The air had shimmered beneath its feet as it flew. It had flown to the south. Toward Se'Ra and the Wastes.

She had removed the canvas at first light and wrapped most of it around Lan to keep him warm. The campsite was in ruin. Smoldering piles of people and rubble were scattered throughout the bowl of land. She had salvaged some supplies from the destruction, but not much was usable. Even the earth was scorched black in many places. The daemon's destruction would mark this land for a long time.

What should she do now? Should she carry on southward to see where the daemon went? Should she return to Eksar and send word to Lisen? Should she strike out after the group of sarn who had fled with *Ol'tue* shortly before the battle had begun last night?

She would wait until Lan awoke. She would ask his opinion on the matter. She didn't know yet why he was here, and that information may very well change her mind as to what she should do.

Ria sat on a lightly-charred sleeping cot and gazed out at the smoky landscape. She had a terrible feeling in the pit of her stomach that all hope was lost.

#

"I do not know how much longer I can have them delay this trial," Lord Harishmon said through the *reni*. "I thought I had convinced the council to wait until your return, but Doran is pushing to have it done now!"

"But that is impossible!" Lisen shouted. "The council cannot vote on a matter of such importance with two of its members away on business!"

"That is what I told them, but Doran almost has them convinced to go ahead anyway. Everyone knows that you will vote in my favor and Eruin will vote with Doran." There was a pause. Lisen stomped the ground. She did not know what to do--did not know what she *could* do. Every option seemed hopeless.

"I do not know why I bother trying to delay it," Harishmon finally said. "We are merely prolonging the agony."

"No!" Lisen shouted defiantly. "Doran can never take over the council! She's the one who stole the blade, I know it! I don't know how to prove it yet, but I will, you'll see!"

"Do you really know that?" he asked, placidly. "What if our assumptions have been wrong from the beginning? What if you are just blaming this on her because of the hatred you have toward her for what she did to your father?"

"I am not wrong," Lisen wavered. She stared westward at the disappearing stars in the hazy dawn. She would not let Doran ruin her life any more. She would somehow prove that the woman had stolen *Ol'tue*, and would oust her from the council--from Altkrea.

"As for the sarn," Harishmon finally said, "stay away from them. Watch, but do not move forward. If they have the blade, the daemon will likely be nearby, and I do not want to put any of you against such a great risk. For now, trail them, try to figure out where they are going. Only use force if they attack you first."

"Yes, Lord Harishmon," she agreed.

"And do *not* follow them across the border of Kagon. I cannot stress that enough. I do not want any of you marching into sarn lands--there is no telling what waits there. I will not have any of my people die under my command."

"Yes, Lord Harishmon."

"Ohn illumine you, Lisen."

"Ohn illumine you, Harishmon. I pray all works out for us."

"As do I."

Lisen squeezed the *reni* as if it were her last hope and she was holding onto it for dear life. *But we will find proof that she stole Ol'tue, Lisen thought, vengefully. And we will present it to the council and they will be forced to take us back and get rid of her. I do not care how long it takes--I will see her fall.*

"What did he advise?" Eruin glided up next to her in the dim light. The sun was just beginning to peek above the trees to the east, melting away small patches of fog that stretched across the low grasslands to the north.

"That we should follow them, watching, but not attacking. To only fight if they attack us first. And to not follow them across the border."

"I suppose that is good advice--for the time being." Eruin nodded mockingly toward her and glided away, back behind the massive eraser cannons to the rest of the troops.

The eraser cannons were awe-inspiring to look at. Lisen had never seen this many--ten, to be exact--in one place before, all lined up in formation. They were large, smooth vehicles, that hovered above the ground in the same way as the *vel*, only not so high. They consisted mainly of a large, *vel*-shaped base upon which sat three overlapping domes--two small ones to either side and one large one in the middle. Protruding from the middle dome was a long barrel, the main weapon of the cannons.

It fired a magical shockwave that would disorient every living thing it hit by wiping the past few seconds of their memories clean. The tactics were to fire the eraser cannons at the enemies, and then, while they were trying to regain their bearings, the cavalry of *asbiennume*--armored, hovering vehicles that soldiers rode in the same fashion the humans rode horses--would charge in with their stun lances drawn, dropping the enemy.

Though Lisen knew the tactics well, she did not want to have to put them to use. Even with such effective weapons, there was still a chance of mesefu getting killed. She thought as Harishmon thought--she did not want any of her kind to die under her command. Death was a terrible finality that all should strive to put off as long as possible. She could not even begin to fathom why certain cultures treated life so frivolously.

Lisen sighed. The sun finally broke above the forest to shed its warming light on the back of her neck. She said a silent prayer that everything would work out for the best, but for the first time ever, she felt that nobody was there to hear it.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The sun was now high in the eastern sky. Lan had awoken nearly an hour ago and was attempting to walk. His hand had not been hurt badly and had already scabbed over. His legs were weak, though, but Ria wasn't sure whether it was a side effect of the daemon's weapon, or if they had gotten injured in the fall.

It was relatively quiet. The sounds of a few birds could be heard in the distance, likely in the forest. "Ria, what's that?" Lan pointed off to the west. Ria turned to look. A lone figure shuffled toward the camp. She knew him immediately as a sarn.

"There's a sarn coming."

"What should we do?" Lan bent over to stretch his legs. He hadn't asked about the mesefu yet. Ria wondered if he had already deduced the answer and was trying not to let his feelings get the best of him.

"Wait here. I'll go deal with him." She drew a dagger from her boot that she had salvaged from the rubble.

"Are you going to kill him?" Lan asked.

Ria took a deep breath. "I'm going to do whatever it takes." She gripped the dagger tight. She would probably have to kill him. There would be no other way. Sarn weren't prone to reason, even after such a catastrophe as last night.

She nodded at Lan. "I'll be back." The swelling from the bump on his head had gone down, but it was still very discolored.

"Are you going to be okay without your magic?" he asked.

She silently cursed the dampeners around her wrists. "I'll be fine," she said, grudgingly. "There's only one sarn." She paused for

a moment. "And besides," she continued, smiling, "if something goes wrong, I know I can count on you."

"Do you want me to help? I can still use magic." To prove his point, he brought a loose tent stake from the ground, through the air, and into his hand with a thought. "Wouldn't it be better if I went along?"

"No," she said. "You need to recuperate some more. You can barely walk right now, and that lump on your head doesn't look good." She sighed. "I've handled worse before. I'll be okay."

"Well, if something *does* go wrong, I'll be right here." He smiled weakly. She nodded and set off.

The sarn was not looking in her direction. She absentmindedly tried to use her magic to silence her footsteps and cursed at herself. She remembered the manacles that made even such a simple feat as that impossible. She knew she had to kill him. If she left him alive, he would inform Ga'ruk of everything. Ga'ruk needed to be kept in the dark as much as possible. Rendering him unconscious would do no good either--he'd eventually awaken. The only course she could take was to kill him. It pained her to have to make such a decision, but not as much as it should have--she had grown accustomed to the feel of death over the years. It was the main reason she had not wanted Lan to come along. She didn't want him to see her as a killer.

The sarn finally saw her. He shouted something unintelligible in his guttural language, and drew a rusty sword. She gripped the dagger tightly in her hand and charged toward him.

As she approached, he reared his sword back to strike. The timing was crucial. Without her magic to help her dodge the oncoming blow, she had to get the timing perfect to avoid being struck by the sarn's sword. When she was within two strides, the sarn began charging her. It was now or never.

She fell and rolled on her side toward him, holding her dagger protectively by her chest. The sarn's sword went barely over her head--she could feel the wind from its swing. She thrust the dagger up into the sarn's stomach. She pushed hard, hearing the squish of the dagger slicing through the sarn's guts. He dropped his sword and reached for her shoulders to push her away. She held strong. She would not withdraw that dagger until he was lying on the ground.

He tried to kick her but fell in the process. She knelt over him with the dagger held firmly in place. He looked up at her pleadingly as the strength drained from his arms. She could see his eyes glazing over--he was in pain, and knew he was going to die. She decided to make his death come faster. Better to be merciful.

She withdrew the dagger from his stomach and in one swift motion slit his throat. She stood up and stared at him for a few seconds as he futilely grasped at his neck. Her eyes watered and she brushed the tears away. It had to be done.

Ria wiped the deep red blood off of the dagger onto a scrap of canvas, and turned back to Lan. He was standing right behind her, arms at his side, staring at her.

"I--I'm sorry, Lan," she uttered. "I had to . . ."

"I know," he said. "It's okay." He walked over to her and put his arm around her shoulders. "He probably deserved it."

"What?" She pulled away from him. "Nobody deserves to die, Lan. Ever."

"Well, he was a sarn," he said, "and had something to do with stealing the Darksearer. There's no telling how many people he's killed. Don't you think that deserves--"

"Stop it!" Her voice faltered as she verged on crying. "A soldier is just a soldier. They're never responsible for the greater workings of things. The leaders are. The soldiers are just their puppets. It's why my people do not believe in killing, even during war. Why take an innocent man's life? That sarn--" she gestured over her shoulder "--did not do anything to hurt anyone. He was just given orders to follow, and was following them."

"He didn't have to follow the orders, though," Lan retorted, his arms crossed over his chest.

"Yes, he did," she replied. "His only choices were to follow orders or die. If you were faced with a fear of death or following questionable orders, which would *you* choose?"

He looked down at the ground and folded his arms together behind him in a defeated stance. "He's still one of the enemy."

"Look." She brushed some dirt from her face. "I know you're mad at the sarn for having imprisoned me, but they only did it because they were ordered to. I have no ill feelings toward them, personally, and they have none toward me. That's what makes killing them--killing anyone--so much harder . . ."

"Ria," he started, "you may forgive them, that's your right. But I . . . I . . ." Lan shook, but his face remained oddly expressionless. Ria waited for him to speak again, but he was silent.

"You what?" He jerked, surprised to be spoken to. She realized that he had been completely absorbed in his thoughts. For a brief second, she thought he might cry, but as she watched, his face hardened and no emotions were visible. She sensed he didn't want to talk.

"Let's go," she said. "I know of a cave just to the west in the forest where we can rest and figure out what to do next."

"How far is it?" he asked.

"Should be no more than a day's walk." She picked up the sack of supplies she'd gathered. "Do you think you can make it?"

"Sure." He took a few steps to test his legs. "I think I can do it."

"Great." She tugged on the sleeve of his grey, disheveled robe. "Let's get out of this mess."

She led him out of the campsite to the west. At the top of the ridge, Lan stopped and gazed back down at the destruction. He stared silently at the rubble. He didn't even blink.

"Lan?" she asked. "Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine," he replied. His tone was even and monotonous. "I'll be just . . . fine."

"Then let's go," she said. "I can't stand being around this any longer."

"Agreed." He turned and followed her away from the destruction.

Something was wrong with him. She could tell that some heavy weight rested on his shoulders. If only he would tell her what it was, and she may be able to do something about it for him.

They trudged westward toward the cavern she had used many times before as a place of refuge. She would treat the wounds on his head and hand there, and hopefully the wounds in his heart.

#

The camp was a desolate wasteland of destruction. Dead bodies lay scattered around among the ruin. Ga'ruk had arrived at the sarn encampment, and something had gone terribly wrong.

His men were searching for the Darksearer blade while he surveyed the surrounding area. It did not take him too long to

come to the conclusion that Dariakus had been here. The numerous holes left from the daemon's death weapons, along with the festering pools of skin and bone, provided more than enough evidence that the daemon had come, and when it had, it had been very angry.

Dariakus must have grown tired of waiting, and had come to investigate, killing the traitorous sarn and taking the blade back to his palace at Gehenisia. There was nothing for his men to do here now.

"You see what happens when you defy the WILL OF OHN, SARN?" The bounty hunter was starting to grate on his nerves. He did not have time to deal with her at present, but needed her too much to mindlessly kill her. He shook his hand at her threateningly.

Ga'ruk gave the signal for regrouping. It was time to return to Gehenisia. If Dariakus had taken the blade, then many plans would have to be made. *And I could eat this pasty, whiny bitch. I'd have to start with her throat, though, or her curses would ruin my appetite.*

#

It was night when the necromancers reached the sarn encampment. It had been abandoned. Nothing living remained. Esmond poked around in piles of rubble and waste, looking for any sign of Lan or Ria. *They're not here*, he thought to himself. *Maybe they were here, but escaped from this carnage. Or maybe . . .* He did not allow himself to think that they had been killed. *They escaped, or never got this far*, he tried to convince himself, but to no avail. He began a frantic search for any indication of his friend lying about. He needed to prove to himself that Lan had never been here.

After hours of searching by torchlight, the necromancers had found no trace of any living people. Whatever had come through here had wiped everything out, and it did not look like there was much chance of anything having escaped.

Could a daemon have caused this? He shuddered with the thought. It was best not to think about such things until the time came when he would be forced to deal with it. For now, the existence of the daemon, Dariakus, was just rumor. *Don't worry about how to cross the river until you get there*, his father had always said.

"What do we do now?" he asked Fallon.

"We continue on. There's a well-worn path to the southwest. It looks like a large group went that way recently, perhaps even today. I suggest we follow that path. There's a chance that whoever made it took the blade from this encampment. Also, if we get into trouble, the Wastes are just south of that forest. We will have plenty of undead forces to arm ourselves with."

Undead. Esmond was not so sure he wanted anything to do with undead anymore. He almost wanted to run screaming from the group. He forced himself to remain calm. "Why is that?" he asked.

"There was a huge war fought there ages ago. Hundreds of thousands of people died in that war, and their bodies were left there, buried by the shifting sands and soil of the Wastes. Finding dead to raise there will be a trivial task."

"You forget," Esmond retorted. "I've never raised anything remotely human before."

"It's not difficult. It requires much concentration to give them orders and even more to change those orders, but in a major battle or fight, their only order should be 'Kill the enemy'. You merely have to direct them as to who the enemy is or isn't, that's all."

"You make it sound so easy."

"I suppose for one of my rank and experience, it is a bit easy." Fallon scanned the horizon. "When we get to the Wastes, I'll show you how."

"That'd be nice," Esmond said. He wasn't sure he meant it. "What about Gaelyn? Will she continue on with us?"

"If she chooses, Esmond. You have to learn to set your differences aside at times. I understand that she hurt you, but that's a personal issue and doesn't involve our higher cause, understand?"

Esmond hung his head low. "That wasn't what I meant," he said. He scratched the dirt with his feet. "I'm just worried about her being defenseless." He looked Fallon in the eyes. The older man had a look of understanding. "I want her to be able to defend herself. I know it's strange that I still care, but--"

"It's not strange at all, Esmond." Fallon squeezed his shoulder. "Being hurt by someone you love is a hard thing to handle. What you've got to consider is first, what their motives for doing it were, and second, if it's worth it to let that come between

whatever you've shared in the past, and whatever you'd like to share in the future."

Esmond had never thought about it that way before. Was what Gaelyn did remotely justifiable? Should he let it end everything they had? Maybe after he slept on it for a night or two he could come to some conclusion. He did not want to lose Gaelyn, but he also feared being hurt by her again.

"Are we going to camp here tonight?" he asked Fallon.

"No. We are going to move southwest a bit--try to get away from this carnage. This place reeks of death."

"Understandable."

The stench of death made Fallon uncomfortable? That sounded odd coming from a necromancer. Esmond shrugged and followed Fallon back to the center of the campsite to reorganize their group. Before they left, he turned back and looked out at the field of bodies. *Ohn, I know we haven't had the best relationship in the world, but please, just this once, answer my prayers. Don't let Lan be out there in that field, Ohn. Gods alive, don't let him be out there.*

#

By the time they reached the cavern in the woods, the sun had sunken below the horizon and the skies had faded to dusky hues of purple and orange. These woods were nothing like the Ol'Nannen forest Lan had traveled. They were sparse, with an open floor and sky.

Ria set to making a fire inside when they arrived. The wide cavern was furnished with several blankets, kindling, a flask of *nula*, and a small sack of dried meat strips. Lan could not believe the amount of supplies here.

"Do you come here often?" he asked.

"Sometimes," she said. She worked with the flint and the kindling to get a spark. "There are several places like this I've set up for when I'm traveling. Not many people welcome half-mesefu. I've got to look out for myself as much as possible."

"Where all do you go?" he asked, eager to finally learn more about her and keep the conversation away from himself.

"A little bit of everywhere." She concentrated her sight on her work. He decided to leave it alone for now--she would tell him more when she was ready.

He walked around the cavern as she worked in silence. The rough hewn, grey stone walls curved around him. The low ceiling nearly brushed his head. He felt like a rabbit in a warren. The walls grew colder by the moment as the light outside faded. He pulled his grey travelling robe tighter around himself to fend off the chill.

Memories of the daemon haunted his mind. It had been more powerful than all of the sarn and mesefu massed together. Such a creature could easily destroy the entirety of civilization. Its motive was obviously something different, or it would merely do so. There must be something holding it back, something it feared. Something that could destroy it . . .

Of course, the Darksearer. It had been forged to kill a daemon a thousand years ago. The daemon must want to secure the blade to prevent it from being used against him. Something that powerful, with legions of sarn under its command, would easily accomplish its goal given enough time. If Lan could somehow manage to follow the daemon's moves, he could intercept the Darksearer. He needed that blade if vengeance was ever to be his.

The task would be nearly impossible, however. Lan would never have any chance of getting the blade away from the daemon once it was found . . . unless he was working for the daemon.

No, he told himself. *That's going too far. Ria will hate me. Esmond will hate me. Everyone will be out to kill me. And yet, it'll work--it'll have to work.* He had to ally himself with the daemon--Dariakus, the name Ria had called it. It would be a ruse, of course. He would work to help Dariakus find the blade, then take it for himself. Yes, the plan was brilliant. Working on the side of the daemon was a small price to pay to achieve his revenge against the sarn. He could be a spy for the humans and mesefu and keep them informed on what the daemon was planning. All that remained was figuring out how to get Dariakus to let him be his ally.

"There," Ria said as the fire finally caught. "Too bad I can't get these manacles off--that would have been a lot easier."

He shoved his hands in his pockets and looked away. "If I knew how, I would. I can try later, if you like."

She removed a cloth and a canteen from the sack she had brought. She poured the water out into a bowl and went to work cleaning herself off. "What's on your mind?"

Everything, he thought. The daemon, the sword, the sarn. His family. Ria would never agree to his plan, and would never let him get away with it. It went against everything she had fought so hard against in the past few years that he had known her. And it was the only way he could make up for what had been done to Anya.

"I'm just thinking about my family," he said. She walked up to him and put her hands on his shoulders.

"Do you want to go back to them?" she asked.

"I do," he said, "but I can't." The painful memories of hearing about their deaths resounded in his mind. The grotesque images he had created from the tale danced before the eyes in his head. He turned away from Ria and leaned against the cold stone of the cavern, staring at the floor.

"Why not?" she asked, leaning against the wall beside him. "What's wrong?"

"They--they're dead." It felt as if a weight had been lifted from him as he said it.

"*Ohn te ilune.*" She covered her open mouth. "Lan, I didn't know. I'm sorry." She pulled him close and wrapped him in her arms. They were warm and comfortable, just as he remembered them being from that night in the guestroom. He was unable to hold back the tears any longer. He shoved his head into her shoulder and bawled.

She patted him on the back as he cried. "I don't know what to say. That's . . . terrible." He dug his hands into her tattered shirt and squeezed her tight.

"They were killed . . . by sarn . . . in a fire . . ." he choked out between sobs. "Mother . . . Father . . . and Anya . . ." Memories of his sister brought forth another loud burst of sobbing. He squeezed Ria tighter, as if letting go of her was to let go of his own life.

She squeezed back. "So that's why you said what you did about that sarn's death earlier today. Lan, that's--"

"You're right," he uttered. "That's exactly why I said it." His sobbing subsided as he pulled back to stare her in the face through his watery eyes. "When I heard my family was killed by a raiding party, a part of me died also. My family had been butchered, burned, and Ohn knows what else." He wiped tears

away as he continued. She stared at him with a look of deep interest and concern. He swore there were tears welling up in her eyes as well.

"Those bastards--" he began to cry again "--took my family from me! My entire family! By Ohn, they'll pay! Every last one of them!" The painful memories and feelings were too much for him. He collapsed to the floor. Ria knelt beside him and covered him with her arms.

"Lan," she started in a motherly tone, "I know you're mad at them. I am too, but you must realize--" she took his head in her hands and pulled his eyes up to meet her own "--just because one small group of sarn did that doesn't mean that all the sarn deserve to pay for it."

"But it's the only way," he pleaded with her. "Can't you see? There's no way to know who the sarn were who killed my family, and only by making them *all* pay can I avenge them!"

"You're just upset, Lan." She stroked his back gently, tracing the bumps of his spine. "I know you're better than that. Dear Ohn, I'm so sorry."

"Why are you being so cold about this?" he demanded. "You'd feel differently if it was your family!"

"Lan, there's a lot of things you don't know about me, and one of them is that something very much like that *did* happen to my family."

He stilled his crying and again wiped the tears from his eyes. He looked up at her to meet her sad grey eyes. "Wh--what do you mean?" he asked.

"My father, Tyal Sulian, was a member of the mesefu high council. Once, when he was away acting as an ambassador to Pyran, he met a human woman, Sara Lamac--Keon's sister. The two fell in love during his stay there, and for the next few years, he kept finding excuses to leave Altkrea so he could go be with her. He told no one of his secret love except his best friend, Keril, another council member.

"My father secretly married this woman in the human custom and had a child by her--me. For my early months, I lived with my mother and Keon in Porthos. Just before my first birthday, she came down with a terrible sickness that took her life. My father was devastated. Though he knew it was risky, there was

no choice but to bring me to Altkrea. The only other relative I had was Keon, and as he was a general in the Kagonese military, he could never watch over a child."

"So that's how you're related to Keon," Lan said. "And my father? Did he know you when you were born?"

"Yes. By that time, your father and Keon were friends. In Altkrea, because my father was such a well-respected member of the council, the other council members, including the High Lord at that time, overlooked my mixed heritage. It was not until I was fourteen years of age that problems arose.

"A new High Lord had been nominated. This new High Lord, Kaen Harishmon, was one of the many who respected my father and made no mention of his relations with my mother. At nearly the same time Lord Harishmon was named High Lord, Keril, whose wife had died when their daughter Lisen was only ten, began courting a mesefu woman by the name of Doran."

Ria sighed. "He loved Doran very much, and it seemed as if she loved him, as well. But that was all a ruse. All she had wanted was a position on the council. She had heard of my father's doings and saw a chance to take his place. So, after getting close to Keril, she dug up evidence of his friend's--my father's--relationship with Sara and brought it to the council's attention.

"Though they had all overlooked it, the laws were still the laws, and as such, they were forced to put my father on trial, as well as Keril, for concealing the evidence. It was a very hard time for the council. Nobody wanted to do this, but they knew the law bound them to it, and that Doran would find some way to let the rest of the mesefu know that their high council had done an injustice if they did not carry through with the trial."

She brushed her hair back and clasped her hands together. "Both my father and Keril were forced from their seats on the council, and thrown out of mesefu society. Lisen, barely twenty years of age at the time, took her father's place. She was determined to see that Doran somehow paid for what she had done. That left an empty seat where my father had once sat. Due to her 'bringing out of the truth', Doran was nominated by some of the shadier council members to fill his place."

"That's terrible!" Lan exclaimed. "How could they nominate her to succeed your father, when they could all see what she had done?"

"Nobody knows," Ria replied. She frowned. "My father was heartbroken, torn between his love for me and everything he had been raised to believe. He didn't know whether to blame my existence for being ousted, or to blame the council. This heartbreak and indecision led to his death. For weeks he ate nothing. I tried to force food down his throat several times but he would push me away. I literally watched him waste away before my very eyes."

She wiped a tear from her cheek. "Many times I would run outside and stay behind the house in Eskar for days just to avoid looking at him. In the end, on his deathbed, he renounced the council. 'I hate them,' he said. 'I hope I've brought you up to be better than that. I wish I could always be there for you, Ria.'

"As he died, he passed the *sukrea* on to me, warning me to keep it safe at all costs. What he didn't tell me was that since our ousting from Altkrea, word had somehow gotten out that he possessed the artifact. Someone was searching for him."

"Ga'ruk," Lan uttered.

"Yes," she said. "My first run in with him was at our house in Eskar. He showed up several days after my father's death. I took my father's *renol* dagger, the very one you kept for so long, and hid out back where I could peer through the window. Ga'ruk looked around the place for a few minutes, cursing my father's lifeless body as he destroyed our possessions in his search for the *sukrea*. When he couldn't find it, he . . . he leaned down over my father's corpse . . . and took a bite out of his face. I screamed and leaped through the window. Ga'ruk was more powerful than I thought. He nearly killed me that day. I gave him a nice long scar down his leg and fled. He's been following me ever since."

She took the damp cloth and started dabbing at Lan's face. "Here, let me clean some of this." Lan leaned in closer to her. "Ga'ruk didn't know if I still had the *sukrea* or if I had passed it on, but he knew that by capturing me, he could eventually get his hands on it. For nearly a year, I lived in hiding, receiving comfort and support from Lisen, who had kept in touch with us after we were thrown out of Altkrea."

"What happened to her father," Lan asked. "Keril?"

"For a while," she started, "he lived with us. That's how Lisen and I managed to stay in touch. Eventually, though, he and my father got into a heated argument. My father had lost the will to live, and life is something the mesefu hold very precious. Keril couldn't believe my father was so willing to give his away. Keril left after that. He hasn't been seen since.

"Lisen never knew I had the *sukerea*. I couldn't bring myself to breach that sacred vow that has been passed down for over a thousand years to keep them secret. Eventually, with his endless bribes and spies, Ga'ruk found my hiding place and I was forced to flee. After running nearly non-stop for days, I collapsed at your father's farm. You know the rest."

Lan sat silently, taking this whole tale in. For the first time, he noticed the faint lines on her face caused by suffering and pain. Yet at the same time they were defiant, as if she were daring someone to pity her because she was truly alive.

"I'm sorry." He reached out to her. "I'm sorry all that had to happen to you."

"I'll be all right," she said. "I still get to meet with Lisen from time to time. I'll manage." She wiped more grime from his face. Her gentle touch reminded Lan of his mother. "She said she met you once, and that you were polite and well mannered, even if you did gawk and stare." Lan smiled as he remembered his one and only meeting with Lisen back in Porthos. "She was right," Ria smiled. "Please stay that way."

"I'll try," he said.

"Good," Ria smiled. She put the cloth and bowl off to the side. "It's good to see you again, Lan." He lost himself in her embrace.

"I love you." The words came out before he had a chance to think. Her ensuing silence terrified him. For what seemed like an eternity, Ria said nothing. His muscles tensed. His heart beat faster. She squeezed him firmly. Though she had not said the words, Lan knew that they hadn't offended her.

A ripple of some strange feeling coursed through Lan's body. He involuntarily gripped her tighter. He could feel her every soft curve through her thin, torn shirt. His whole body relaxed in her touch.

Lan wasn't sure whether it was he or Ria who took the first step, but in the next moment their lips were crushed together so hard he tasted blood on his tongue. He let every emotion drain away. All the fear and guilt and anger melted away in that kiss. His body responded to her touch as on command, and soon they were lying on the cavern floor. His hands covered every inch of her body that until now he had only dreamed about. For a second he wondered what would happen next, but it was soon gone when his lips reached the soft, pale skin of her neck. He knew what would happen, and he welcomed it.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Blood soaked everything. Lan stood before his house, in awe at the carnage around him. Mauled bodies of men and women littered the path that lead to the front door.

Thick flames engulfed his home. Paint peeled back to reveal charred timbers. Plumes of black smoke rolled from the windows. Orange clouds lit the distant fields with an eerie ambience.

His sister's scream pierced the roar of the flames. She was inside that raging inferno. He bolted for the door.

The ceiling collapsed behind him as he burst into the blinding heat. His exit was blocked. There was no turning back. His mother's stiff corpse lay nude on the floor, smeared with blood and dirt. Her hair had been ripped from her scalp, and a large gash ran the length of her stomach. Her pale, lifeless hands covered the wound. Lan screamed.

Another of Anya's screams for help brought him to his senses and he bolted down the hallway toward her room. The searing flames licked at his clothes as he ran, but he felt nothing. He had to save his sister.

He did not find her in her room. Instead he found his father. Three swords pinned Gerhard to the far wall--one through the left side of his chest, one through his right arm, and one through his stomach. The flames had left most of his legs sooty, charred stumps. His head rocked back and forth. A weak arm reached out for Lan. "Help me."

Lan fled across the hall into his own bedroom.

Silence. Security. Serenity.

His room had strangely remained untouched by the fire and death. The quilt his mother had made for him well before he could remember covered the bed, tucked under the feather pillows. The bookshelf by the door held all of his favorite books, as well as his mother's mirror.

Lan looked into the cracked mirror to see his distorted reflection staring back at him. A heartbeat broke the silence. The mirror wobbled. Another heartbeat. The mirror fell.

It crashed to the ground and shattered. Flames spread from it in chaotic lines along the floor and up the walls. The fire raged. The silence had been broken. Lan backed away into the hall. His sister screamed again. She was upstairs.

He made a point to avoid his mother's dead body as he ran for the stairs. The screams came from the guestroom. When he reached the top of the stairs, they collapsed behind him into a pile of flaming rubble. There was no escape.

Lan reached the guestroom door. He tried to open it but it was barred from the inside. He punched it until his knuckles bloodied, but still it stood strong. Anya's screams continued, louder and louder. The flames closed in on him. They threatened to consume him and the rest of the house if he did not move quickly. The ceiling supports creaked and groaned loudly overhead. He could barely breathe in the thick smoke. He had to save her now.

He backed up almost against the opposite wall of the hall and charged the door. He crashed into it with his shoulder and felt it give a little. The pain was nearly unbearable, but he had to try again--he had to save Anya. Lan charged the door once more. It opened just before he made contact and he stumbled into the room.

Anya had been strapped to the bed by her wrists and ankles. Three sarn looked down at her. One held a *renol* dagger. Anya's clothes had been torn to shreds. She had parallel gashes all down her arms starting at her shoulders and going outward to her wrists. Blood seeped from wounds in her face and soaked the once-white bedsheets.

The sarn with the *renol* dagger sliced at her arm. Anya writhed in pain and unleashed an inhuman roar. She strained against her restraints, but the blood only flowed more freely. Lan froze. The sarn reached down to her arm as he cut and ripped off a

loose chunk of flesh. He faced Lan as he put the flesh into his mouth and chewed on it, savoring every instant.

Lan charged him. The sarn backhanded him, sending him sprawling to the floor. The vile creature loomed over him with the bloody *renol* dagger pointed down at Lan. Blood dripped from it and pattered on Lan's lips--Anya's blood. She cried out to him as the other two sarn tore at her with their hands. Lan scrambled to stand up but the sarn kicked him in the ribs and he crumpled over.

The sarn knelt over him and raised the dagger. Lan looked into his eyes. He saw pure hatred. The sarn drove the dagger into Lan's chest.

Lan tried to scream, but could make no sound. First he felt nothing, then a chill washed over every part of his existence. He felt warm blood flowing from the wound that he futilely tried to cover. His arms and legs grew weak, his breathing stopped. He was choking and he couldn't breathe, Dear Ohn, he couldn't breathe.

The room grew darker though the flames burned on. His sight faded to a pinprick as the screams of his sister and the roar of the flames died from his ears. He was surrounded by the void--no sight, no feeling, no sound. Lan was dead. The silence was complete.

#

Lan woke up with labored breaths, drenched in sweat. He couldn't see anything--had it all really been a dream? He started to sit up but brushed against warm flesh. He jerked back. Where was he? Why was he here?

He slowly reached out to the stranger's skin. He touched it, softly, but heard no response. Who was it? He gently slid his hand along it. It was soft, smooth, curved. Now he remembered. It was Ria.

Memories of what they had done flooded his mind. It had felt so good to be needed by someone so deeply. He had lost himself in her touch and his own desires. He had exposed a part of himself to someone he never knew he had in the dim firelight.

Fire. The fire Ria had built had burned out--what time was it? It would have to be near dawn. No light entered the cavern's mouth. He was surrounded in darkness--the void.

He had died in his dream. Just as his family had died. Just as Keon had died. Just as Reinez and all of those mesefu soldiers had died. And just as he was going to die one day. To be banished to the eternal void, where his existence would cease and he would be aware of no more. The final sleep.

"Ria?" He hoped she was awake to comfort him. He slipped his arm around her bare waist under the blankets. His hand cupped her stomach, rising up and down with each breath she took. "Are you awake?" No answer. He squeezed her as tears stung the corners of his eyes. One day, he was going to die, and there was nothing he could do about it. He was terrified.

"Ria?" She moaned quietly, mumbled something unintelligible, and rolled over. He could feel her breath on his chest as she nuzzled her head under his chin in the darkness. He pulled her closer, felt her nakedness tight against his own. Her warmth comforted him, but thoughts of nothingness still nagged at him. One day, his ability to feel comfort would end. He was going to die.

"Ria?" he asked one final time.

"What is it?" she moaned.

"I'm scared," he said. Was she truly awake?

"Oh," she said. No, she had not been awake. He desperately needed to talk to someone--how did she cope with the reality of her own mortality? The mesefu, unlike the fanatical Zarrons, did not believe in any afterlife--was there some secret to remaining sane, even though you knew your existence would come to a close one day like a candle snuffed out before bed?

"Ria," he started, a bit louder. "I need to talk."

"About what?" she mumbled into his chest. She huddled up against him, her arms folded across her breasts, legs curled up in a fetal position.

"About death," he said, a tear escaping from his eye.

"What time is it?" She sounded a bit more awake than a moment ago.

"Near dawn, I think," he said. "I'm scared, Ria."

"What are you scared of?" she asked, unmoving.

"Dying." He shuddered.

"Why's that?" she asked. He was stunned. How could anyone *not* be afraid of death?

"Why are you *not* afraid of dying?" he asked.

"There's no reason to be," she said. "It's nothing that's ever really bothered me. We live, we die--there's nothing we can do about it. That's the way life is."

"But why?" he demanded. She yawned and stretched her arms. "Why is life so unfair?"

"Unfair?" she asked. He could tell that her eyes were open now. He could make out faint shapes now--either his eyes had finally adjusted to the dark cavern, or dawn was about to break outside. "What's unfair about it?"

"We're given this wonderful chance to be aware of the universe, to experience everything, to have fun, to fall in love . . . and then it's ripped away from us forever. It's as if nobody even realizes this. Nobody seems to care about how amazing it is just to be alive!"

"I care." She kissed his cheek. "But it's not really unfair. At least you got a chance to live--what if you had never gotten one?"

"Sometimes," he said, another tear falling, "I wish I *hadn't*."

"Don't say things like that," she scowled.

"It's true," he said. "If I'd never been alive in the first place to know what I was missing, I could never have this overhanging fear of losing it."

"Lan," she started, "you've got a long life ahead of you. Stop worrying about death. You're going to be fine."

"Maybe for another forty years or so," he began, "but then what? I start growing frail, and my heart starts acting up, and eventually even my mind starts to break apart. And then I'll die."

"Yes, you will--and that's a long time from now, so why are you worrying? You'll have time to experience everything."

"That's just it," he said, wiping tears away. "I *won't* have time to experience everything. But I want to! And even if I *could* experience everything, I *still* wouldn't want to die. I'd rather experience it all over again! Even if I was being tortured and my life was miserable, I'd rather live than die."

"You're starting to talk crazy," she said, "and I know you're not."

"I'm being serious." Why did she not understand? "I don't care how hopeless everything seemed or how much pain I was in--"

I'd rather suffer through it than die. While you're alive, there's always a chance for things to change. But when you're dead, you're dead for good. There is no more change."

"Lan." She pulled herself close against him. "Is there something you're not telling me? What made you start thinking about all of this?"

"I . . . had a dream . . ." he uttered. "A dream about my family being butchered . . ."

"Oh, Lan, I'm sorry." She began caressing his face with the back of her hand. Yes, it was getting brighter outside. He could see her form much better in the greyish light.

"No," he said, "that's not all. I died in that dream . . . and I swore it was for real. Everything felt just how I imagined it would feel. I . . . I'm scared."

"Shh." She covered his mouth. "It's okay. It was just a dream." She kissed him lightly. "Everything's going to be fine."

"But if--"

"Lan, you've got to stop dwelling on it. Yes, it's sad and depressing walking around knowing that one day all of this is going to end, but dwelling on it makes it even worse. If you are always depressed, then your life will be miserable. It's best to live a full, exciting life than one so miserable."

"I'd rather live a life where I couldn't die."

"That's impossible."

"No," he said, "it's not. I'll beat death one day. There must be a way."

"You honestly want to live forever?" she asked.

"Yes," he said with stern finality.

"You realize that everyone you know right now would eventually die. Would you want to live in a world without your friends?"

"I'd make new friends," he said, coldly. "But if I found a way to live forever, I'd share it with everyone. Nobody should be deprived of immortality."

"And what would everyone do? It would be chaos."

"We'd find someplace to put them all, eventually. I haven't figured out how to cheat death just yet. We can start planning on what to do with everyone now, so we'll be ready by the time I figure it all out." Somehow, talking to her made everything seem okay.

"I'll keep that in mind." She yawned. "It seems you're feeling better." She rubbed her head against his chest and hugged him tightly.

"Do you want to get dressed and get our supplies packed?" he asked.

"No," she said. "I want to lie here in your arms and sleep some more--" she looked up at him with a warm smile "--if you don't mind."

"Of course. I'd do anything for you." Soon, she was sleeping soundly by his side, her warm breath flowing gently across the sparse hair on his chest. Lan dare not go back to sleep, though. He wanted to cherish every moment of the perfect fall morning. And he did.

#

The Wastes were more desolate than Esmond expected. The hard, cracked earth beneath his feet had never seen the rains. Boulders of sandstone that would dwarf most houses littered the sparse landscape. Large plateaus and mysterious rock formations dominated the southern horizon. He found something about this place strangely beautiful, despite the overpowering dreariness.

It had been just one day since Esmond stood among the carnage of the sarn encampment. They had moved on to the edge of the forest and slept until early dawn, before the sun had time to peek over the mountains. The trip through the small forest along the border had revealed even more destruction. Charred, misshapen corpses of an entire army covered the scorched forest floor. The burnt out husks of uncountable trees wobbled in the breeze, unsure if they could stand just one more gust. Whatever had attacked the sarn camp had found its way into the forest.

The trip through the forest had gone quickly, bringing them out along the Se'Ra border. It was a cold day, colder than any day Esmond could remember in . . . what month was this? They had been traveling for quite some time since leaving their subterranean hideaway. A week, perhaps? He always lost track of time on long journeys. One day just blended into the next until weeks passed him by in a wink. It must be nearing Hannos or thereabouts.

Only two more months until the end of the year--two more months until his birthday. He would be twenty years of age this coming Nanhannos. There'd be no celebration with his parents

once again, though. No celebration with anyone else either. He'd be surprised if anyone even remembered.

"We will practice here," announced Fallon after several hours' journey into the Wastes. The group of necromancers had come to rest between two rather tall plateaus that cut off most of the sun's light. It was dark in the small valley. Esmond started shivering. The cold was nearly unbearable.

"Okay," Esmond managed between chattering teeth.

"There should be many undead here. This was the site of the Larn Ambush. During the Great War, this is where the people of the city of Larn hid their presence from the sarn army that passed through this very spot. They descended upon the sarn in a wild rage as they entered the grounds between the two plateaus. The entire sarn army died that night, killed by a handful of men who fought to keep the land they called home."

"Isn't the Great War the war that destroyed the entire nation of--"

"Salthos," Esmond filled in. Gaelyn had always hated it when he finished her sentences. She'd never let him get away with it without a saucy remark or slap. He turned away and waited for her typical response, but nothing came. He stole a look at her and saw that she had backed away slightly and was staring at the ground. He found himself slightly disappointed, then chided himself for being so.

"You remember the basics of raising dead, don't you, Esmond?" asked Fallon.

"I've raised little things," Esmond said. "I don't know how well I'll be at raising sarn corpses, but I'd gotten the basics down fairly well before leaving." He shifted uneasily. Since his encounter with the devinant Wayreth, Esmond had begun to wonder if he truly wanted to dedicate his life to necromancy.

"Well, do you remember how to divine if there are any corpses in the area for you to animate?"

"I think so. Do you want me to try?"

"If you don't mind."

Esmond concentrated on the magic that would alert him to the presence of bodies for the harvest. Corpses, corpses, corpses, his mind filled with his own perception of them buried deep

beneath the soil. He twisted his right heel, clicked his tongue against his teeth, and the magical spell began.

A warm wave washed over his body, a pleasant relief from the cold around him. At first he welcomed the feeling, but its intensity increased. Soon warm became hot, hot became scalding. A rush of foreign thoughts slammed into his mind like a blacksmith's hammer against an anvil. He strained against the pressure, fought to keep the thoughts at bay. The more he pushed against them, the more his skin boiled and his head throbbed.

And then he gave in. The wall of his mind collapsed and the unfamiliar thoughts flowed freely through him. He *knew*.

Visions more morbid and repulsive than he could have envisioned soaked into his being. He saw rotten corpses, no more than bone, locked in eternal struggle in the absolute darkness of their earthen graves. Soldiers lay frozen in corroding armor, an icy grip on their weapons of destruction. Grotesque, worm-ridden faces wore screams of sheer torment. He heard their whispering voices, chanting against one another in a chaos of wind.

"Esmond," spoke the wind. "Esmond . . . Esmond . . ."

Everything vanished. The daylight sun slammed into his eyes with a force that threw him off his feet. The magic had gone, the only thing that had kept him standing. Without it he couldn't move. He looked around but saw nothing. There was no magic, and without magic there was no vision, no strength. Nothing.

Esmond slowly came to his senses. He became aware that everyone was crowded around him. Their mouths moved but he heard nothing. He studied each of their faces and saw with uncanny clarity their worn emotions. He saw Gaelyn, her large eyes full of unshed tears, death woven into the lines on her face. Not any mortal death, but a death of hope.

With that realization, a rush of sounds fell on him as he was lifted to his feet. He felt hands on his face and suddenly found himself staring into Fallon's eyes. The necromancer was shouting.

". . . wrong? Esmond? Can you hear me?"

"There . . . are bodies . . ."

"Listen to me," Fallon said. "You will be fine. The magic drained you, mentally. Your mental endurance was not prepared for that. I should have checked myself before having you try. You need far more practice before taking this on."

"I . . . know," Esmond replied. "I'm just not . . . used to it. I need to work on . . . endurance . . ." He tried to smile, but could not even summon the energy required for such a simple task. He scanned the crowd of necromancers but one face he did not see.

"Here, rest over there before we get to the actual raising practice. Ga'ruk's legions, if that encampment was any indication, are either all gone or at least dwindled drastically. We have some time to spare. We have not taken a long rest in a while, which is probably why you were drained so easily." He directed Esmond to a rock to sit on. "Let me know when you are feeling up to it. If you don't want to, I'll understand."

"Yes, sir," said Esmond.

"I will be over there working with the others, within eyesight. If you need anything, do not hesitate to let me know." Fallon looked at Esmond for a second then left. Esmond watched as Fallon walked over to Gaelyn and spoke a few words to her. He desperately wanted to catch a glimpse of her face. The visage from his spell haunted him. The only spark of life in her taut, rigid features had come from her eyes. He couldn't shake the feeling of death that face had given him. He tried to look at her again but her back was to him. She seemed to be doing it deliberately.

Esmond gave up. He wanted to go home. He wanted to be done with all of this and safe in his bed, or perhaps on Lan's floor, knowing that in the morning everything would be perfect, just as it once had been.

Could he ever go back? If things did not work out with the Night, would his parents allow him to come home? If not, he was lost. He would have a hard time getting back into Rhienos without a good explanation of why he, along with many other students and faculty, mysteriously disappeared one night. Pyran was also shut off to him. He had nowhere else to go. Nobody else wanted him, except the Night . . . and Gaelyn.

Who would ever want a Merhosian street-bum's child who always got himself into trouble anyway? Damn his life. It was not his fault he had never had much as a young child. It was not his fault his parents were exiled from Merhos for stealing . . .

The Lansings had never known that. Salen and Celena Boyeui had covered their tracks well. They had even had their names changed so they wouldn't attract more attention than they

needed. "Exiled for grand theft" would not have sat well with Gerhard Lansing. He had taken them in thinking they were poor, unfortunate innocents. Little had he known.

Esmond's birth name had been Lane Niuan, son of Lennas and Sandora Niuan. He had taken to calling Alexander Lansing by the short name 'Lan' to keep some memory of his previous self. It seemed silly now, looking back on it. How could a man ever forget his own name?

His father, Lennas, had been a shipbuilder for decades in the northernmost city of Merhos--Rotteporte, a bustling port, center of the sea trade industry. Their trade guilds and ship guilds handled trade all around the known world.

When Esmond was born, it put a strain on the Niuan household. His mother and father could have managed off of his father's wages, but weeks before he was born, the mesefu had come to Rotteporte. They brought with them magnificent sailing vessels that never touched the water and could carry more and move faster than any ship that ever came out of the Rotteporte shipyards. There was much protest to this movement, his father one of the key leaders, but in the end, the protesters lost--the trading guilds saw too much profit in the new ships. The once-famous shipbuilders of Rotteporte about whom many a story and song had been written were no more.

Lennas, a young man by most accounts, was now without work. His wife--Esmond's mother--asked her parents for help. They had been against their dear Sandora marrying a lowly shipbuilder, but she had been in love with him and run off with Lennas. She hoped that they would forgive her and offer some help.

They would not hear of it. They had told her that she deserved everything she had gotten. Sandora was crushed.

Lennas was having equally bad luck getting a job. Everywhere he went, he was greeted by another closed door. One day, someone offered to buy their house, built by Lennas's own hands.

Desperately needing the money, Lennas made the deal, sold the house, and moved the family out into the streets. With the money from the house and the money he made from doing various

chores around the city, they managed to subsist for nearly a year before his father resorted to theft.

Lennas started a local group of thieves, nowhere near as complex and organized as the guild in Porthos, but a sizable group nonetheless. For yet a fourth year with no official work, Lennas managed to make a living by picking off of those unfortunate enough to be caught out alone or unprotected.

It was during the fourth year after Esmond's birth that Lennas Niuan got caught stealing cattle, a grave offense in Merhos, as cattle were extremely expensive and hard to come by in the swampy nation. The entire family was ousted from Merhos. By the end of that cruel fourth year, they were well into the nation of Pyran, looking for work.

It was not until Lennas' fifth year out of work--and Esmond's fifth year of life--that they had come to Dryan, the capital city of Kagon, and stumbled quite literally into Gerhard, Mara, and Alexander Lansing. The family was stepping out of a seamstress's store with a bundle of clothes when Lennas and Sandora walked right into them, knocking Gerhard over, and startling Mara and Alex.

After a little explaining, Lennas--who now went by the name Salen Boyeui--got his apology accepted whole-heartedly. Gerhard realized that this was a very poor man who, like himself, had a child to raise and support. Since he had a position back on his farmstead that needed filling, he brought the Boyeuis back to his land, gave them a place to stay, and gave Esmond's father a job.

Esmond hated himself at this moment. His father had ruined their original family name in Merhos, and he had ruined his new family name in Pyran. Nothing in life ever seemed to go in his favor for long. Not the university, not the 'Thieves' Guild, not Gaelyn, and, after the fight he and Lan had gotten into shortly before he left Rhienos, possibly not even his deepest friendship.

#

"They deserted me, defected from the Nations. They wished to use the blade to gain sway over me. If only I had arrived sooner, my lord, to take matters into my own hands." Ga'ruk and Dariakus were discussing the possible whereabouts of the blade and who was the most likely candidate among the Red Claw to cause the dissent.

"YOU KNOW WHO IS RESPONSIBLE." The daemon's rumbling voice still unnerved Ga'ruk even after all the time they had worked together.

"I have my ideas, nothing definite. I do know where the traitors would be heading."

"TELL ME."

"Merhos."

"WHY SO DEEP INTO HUMAN LANDS?"

"They know that I rule here. Coming south would not be a wise decision. If they could get to Merhos, however, to Rotteporte, it is possible that they could take a ship anywhere. My instinct tells me Phrygimana, our original homeland. They could unite the clans there using the threat of the blade, and within months attempt to overrun us with fleets of warships from the south."

"YOU ARE SURE?" The daemon's vacant black eyes chilled Ga'ruk's green flesh.

"Fairly, my lord. We should send an expedition to Rotteporte."

"SO BE IT. SEND AN EXPEDITION OF YOUR CHOOSING BUT YOU ARE TO REMAIN HERE. IF THE MESEFU LEGIONS WHO FOLLOWED YOU ARE FOOLISH ENOUGH TO COME THIS FAR, I WANT YOU TO LEAD THE DEFENSIVE."

"Yes, my lord. It shall be done."

"WHAT OF THE BOUNTY HUNTER?"

"She is in one of the holding cells for now, my lord. I have a few matters to attend to before I get to her. Rest assured that she will see the truth, or she will die."

"VERY WELL."

Ga'ruk walked out of the daemon's chamber and into the cold stone hallways of the palace. Once, this had been a majestic, sprawling palace built of obsidian and stone from the surrounding mountains. It had served as a stronghold for the sarn during the Great War. Now, much of the obsidian was gone, taken by looters when the palace was deserted. All that remained was the central structure and the cold, grey stone halls with their high vaulted ceilings.

Dariakus had made various modifications to the palace, including subterranean levels and strange, magical lighting. None of

the sarn had taken part in any of the construction--the daemon had done all of it himself.

Ga'ruk wondered what should be done about the necromancers. Wayreth had apparently backed out of the deal. After the expedition team had been assembled and the mesefu legion dealt with, the necromancers would be next.

That was for later, however. For now, he had to concentrate on forming an expedition team and planning a defense, should the mesefu be on their way to lay siege to the palace. He wished he did not have to worry about the mesefu, but the woman on the mesefu high council with whom he was collaborating had not yet been able to secure all she had promised. Lord Harishmon was still High Lord.

The mesefu had no chance of taking Gehenisia, however. They were just a pest--a nuisance to be swatted away. In a way, he hoped they would attack. He had not tasted mesefu flesh in over a decade.

Licking his lips, Ga'ruk entered his chamber and set to his work. The sooner he finished, the sooner he could pay the platinum-haired whiner a visit. *Work before pleasure*, he reminded himself.

#

The abandoned campsite's stench seeped into every iota of Lisen's existence. She could barely breathe--no magic could overpower such a prominent stench of death. The troops, under her and Eruin's command, had scoured the campsite thoroughly, but the blade was nowhere to be found.

"What do we do now?" Lisen did not really want Eruin's input, but to avoid hearing her complain she asked anyway.

"We continue south. It is obvious that a legion of troops marched that way recently."

"That's the Kagon border!" Lisen pointed at the line of tall trees. "Lord Harishmon said we were not to cross it."

"Lord Harishmon has not seen this carnage." Eruin spread her arm about the campsite in an all-encompassing manner.

"Then," Lisen began, grabbing her *reni*, "I will contact him and let him know."

"As you wish," Eruin said, turning her nose up in the air, "but I say we move south. Whoever went that way likely has the blade."

"I want to get Lord Harishmon's official word first." Lisen turned from Eruin. She raised the crystal to her mouth and thought the magic that would contact Harishmon's *reni*.

"Lisen?" came his familiar voice through the crystal.

"Something new has come up," she said.

"What is that?" he asked.

"We are standing in the sarn campsite where Reinez and his troops said they would be." She paused, swallowed hard. "They're all dead."

"Who?" Harishmon asked. "Who's all dead?"

"Everyone." Pangs of sadness wracked her stomach.

"Everyone is dead."

"All of the sarn? All of Reinez's men? Who?"

"*Everyone*," she stressed. "All of both."

"Ohn illumine them!" Harishmon shouted through the *reni*. "What happened?"

"There's no way to tell, but I don't think anything sarn or human did this. Some of these bodies . . ." She trailed off, unable to finish her sentence.

"Ohn illumine us all," Harishmon whispered. "If this was a daemon--"

"No," Lisen stopped him. "Don't say that."

"I wish I didn't have to," he said.

"What do you want us to do about this? *Ol'tue* isn't here, but there are tracks to the southwest. Should we follow them across the Kagon border, or stay here?"

"By all means, stay there," came Harishmon's quick reply. "Do not come back, and do not go forward. You should have enough supplies with you to last several months, if need be."

"I don't understand . . ."

"Lisen . . ." he started, his voice faltering. "Send Eruin back, along with half of the troops."

"What?" she asked, astonished that he would request such a thing. Fewer troops this close to sarn territory with a possible daemon nearby?

"I said, send Eruin back with half of the troops. I want you to stay there until I contact you again, understand?"

"But why--"

"This is an order!" he shouted. Lisen was baffled. More than that, she was angry.

"Kaen Harishmon, what is *wrong* with you?" she demanded. There was no answer, only the sound of his labored breathing. She stood quivering, awaiting her answer.

"That is a name I haven't heard in years," she heard him chuckle softly. "Everyone's been addressing me as Harishmon or High Lord or some combination of the two for so long I thought I'd forgotten my own name. Even my best friends . . . even you."

"But it's your title, now, and--"

"Not for long." She knew what was wrong with him now. "Doran has been holding her trial. The final verdict has yet to come in, but I think we both know what it will be." He paused for a moment, sighing. "I think I had best get used to hearing my name again."

"But Lord Harishmon! You don't know that yet! Have faith in the council, they'll do what's right."

"I lost my faith in this council when this council turned on Tyal and your father."

"But what--"

"Just do as I say and send Eruin and half the troops back to Altkrea, and take no further action until you hear from me. Consider these my last orders to you as High Lord."

"You don't know--"

"Goodbye, Lisen." Silence. He had broken the connection. What would she do if he got deposed and ousted from Altkrea? She would likely get ousted with him, if the council voted to do so. She had faith in them, though, whether or not he did. This time, they would see through Doran and do the right thing. This time, there would be no injustice.

Lisen took a deep breath and set off to find Eruin and give her the orders. The spiteful woman would not be pleased.

#

It was time--Esmond was raising an undead. The spell had come easily to him. It did not seem all that different than when he practiced on small animals. He could feel the mind of the undead

being as it stirred deep within the ground. It moved, attempting to push its way to the surface. The skeleton rose toward him now, and a sense of fear came over him, coupled with morbid curiosity.

The ground started bulging at his feet. The dirt shifted around, as if a large animal was stomping the earth. The bulges came with a rhythmic thumping sound. Without warning, a skull burst through the dirt, caked with mud.

The skeleton rose out of the ground, exposing its rotting, tattered remains to the group of necromancers. It stood a full two strides tall. In its only hand it held a rusty, chinked scimitar. The skeleton's other arm ended in a white bony stump.

"Can you feel its mind?" asked Fallon.

"Ye--yes. It's strange--as if we're one and the same, except I sense he's not quite . . . complete, if that makes any sense."

"Correct. He's not. What you have before you is an undead creature that has no mind of its own. You are in essence creating a mind for it with the necromancy. What you sense as its mind is really a hollow reflection of your own creation."

"How do I give it orders?" The skeleton stared blankly at the plateau wall. Its stiffness and lack of movement gave it a surreal quality.

"Concentrate. Fill your mind with the goal you want it to have, and it will pick that up from you."

"What goal should I give it for now?"

Fallon stepped toward the undead. "Have it attack me."

"What?"

"I will be fine. I can dispel it before it causes any harm. I want you to try calling it off before it reaches me, though, to show you how hard it is to change orders of such a simple-minded being."

"If you say so . . ." Fallon's wishes unnerved him, but he trusted the experienced necromancer to know what he was doing. Concentrating with everything he had, he pictured the sarn skeleton attacking Fallon with reckless abandon, and a little to his surprise, the skeleton turned to face Fallon. Esmond panicked as the mental link slipped away.

"The mental link--it's gone!"

"Don't worry, Esmond. That happens when you give it an order, which is what makes it hard to change that order." The sarn

skeleton sauntered toward Fallon, arms flailing wildly about. The necromancer backed slowly away as the monstrosity approached. "Try to change its orders. See if you can make it stop."

Esmond tried to reach out mentally to the undead, but to no avail. No matter how hard he concentrated, he could not feel the mental link. "It's not working!" he shouted frantically, afraid he was about to be responsible for the imminent harm shambling toward Fallon.

"Remember how you raised him. Focus on the body, recast the spell. Weave the necromancy around his shell again."

Esmond went over the spell in his mind and reached out once again for the undead. He thought for a moment he felt something, but it slipped away when someone near him coughed.

"You have to *concentrate!*" Fallon shouted at him.

Esmond shut his eyes, again concentrating on the spell and attempting to reconnect the mental link with the undead sarn. After what seemed to be hours, he finally contacted the undead's mind, but all commands he sent were ignored.

Fallon was now backed against the plateau wall, and the sarn was closing in on him. Esmond did not have much time. Fallon yelled, "Hurry, Esmond! Concentrate!" Esmond knew that the necromancer could dispel the undead with a wave of his hand, but something about his tone of voice gave him a sliver of doubt.

The skeleton was now within striking distance of Fallon and still not responding to any of Esmond's attempts.

"It's not responding!"

Nothing he did got any response from the undead creature, despite the amount of concentration he put into it. The only way he could concentrate any more would be to . . . Of course--shut off his senses. Esmond summoned the spell that would temporarily remove him of his senses, a mediocre spell he learned back in Rhienos, meant to target an opponent to render all of their senses useless for mere seconds, long enough to stun and disorient them.

The last thing he heard was Fallon shouting and the necromancers making sounds of concern, and then he was plunged into the void. He heard nothing, saw nothing, felt nothing. It was as if he were dead. The only inkling he had that he was not was the feel of the undead's mind connected to his. With all of his mental power, he shouted to the sarn's mind to cease, fall to the ground,

and stop its existence. He continued shouting this in his mind over and over again in the eternity that was his few seconds of senselessness, and when his senses came back to him, he found himself on the ground.

Esmond hurriedly stood and brushed himself off. He desperately looked around for Fallon. The necromancer stood against the plateau wall. He was applauding. A heap of bones lay at Fallon's feet--the remains of the undead sarn. The other necromancers, including Gaelyn, applauded along with Fallon. He had done it--he had dispelled the undead.

Gaelyn ran up to him. She met his eyes for a second and took a breath as if to speak, but let it out in a sigh. She dropped her eyes to the ground and said quietly, "You did well." She turned and walked away.

Esmond felt a sting of disappointment. At that moment what he wanted was for her to run up into his arms and cheer and congratulate him. In his mind he saw her face laughing and spilling over with joy. He saw her as she used to look at him, with love and admiration, and that tiny curl at the corner of her lip that told him at any moment that he may be whipped with a tiny bit of biting sarcasm. She had always soothed her sting with a kiss.

The crowd of congratulations startled him from his thoughts. Reality burst in on him like a dead weight in his stomach. He saw Gaelyn sitting alone, her face completely expressionless. He looked away, upset. *Why can't things be just like they were?* he thought. He wasn't left to his unhappy thoughts for long.

"What are you going to do now?" someone asked.

"Get something to drink," he said. "I think I'm going to die!"

"You did it, Esmond." Fallon patted him on the back. "You actually did it."

"It's likely the *last* thing I'll ever do." Esmond grinned.

"It just takes practice to build your endurance, no different than physical feats. I must apologize, however. I tried to push you too much. You just performed the equivalent of a weak man lifting a gigantic boulder, and I'm afraid you might have hurt yourself."

"What? Hurt myself? How?"

"Now, now," he said calmly. "It's nothing serious, no more than a little muscle strain is. With a bit of rest, you will be okay."

Someone will be here with your water shortly. Just lie here in the shade for now. Everything's going to be just fine."

#

"Lord Dariakus, we have reports of some humans coming close to Gehenisia."

"HOW MANY?"

"Two, my lord."

"TWO?"

"Yes, my lord."

"HAVE THEM KILLED."

"Yes, my lord."

"HAVE YOU GATHERED YOUR EXPEDITION FORCE?"

"They leave at sunset."

"EXCELLENT."

Ga'ruk stood to leave.

"WAIT."

"Yes, Lord Dariakus?"

"IF EITHER OF THESE HUMANS WIELDS MAGIC, BRING THEM TO ME."

"I don't see how their puny human magic could have any use for you. We should kill them and be done with it."

"DO NOT QUESTION ME."

Ga'ruk hesitated. "Yes, my lord. It shall be done." His meeting with the bounty hunter would have to wait a bit longer.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Lan and Ria had been walking southward since midmorning. The sun hung low over the mountains--night would come soon, bringing a brutal cold with it. They had decided to travel this direction to follow the daemon and see where he had gone. The information could prove invaluable.

Long shadows stretched across the land as the sun set. Lan pulled his robe tighter around his body to fend off the chilling winds that arose in the shade. He put his arm around Ria and squeezed her warmly.

The bleak landscape of the Wastes had surrounded them all day. They were walking past a tall plateau now, whose top stretched up to the heavens. It cast an icy shadow across their path that neither of them wanted to remain in long. But when night came, the deathly shadow would be everywhere.

As they walked on alongside the tall plateau, Lan's ears picked up a low rustling sound that at first he mistook for the wind. Then he noticed the rhythm, the stops. Voices.

"Hold on," he whispered to Ria. "I hear voices."

"Are you sure?" she whispered back.

He nodded. "Several of them, whispering to each other."

Lan looked around cautiously. He heard nothing over the frigid breeze that blew across the dusty plains. Nothing out of the ordinary caught his eye. There was nowhere for anyone to be hiding. Perhaps it *had* just been the wind.

"That's strange," he said. "I don't hear it any--"

There was a quick, low whistle, and then Ria shrieked. She grabbed her upper arm quickly. Blood oozed between her fingers as it soaked through her shirt. She had been shot. *Dear Obn, she can't protect herself! Her magic's gone!*

"Run!" he shouted at her as two sarn archers slid down the side of the plateau far ahead of them. Four armored sarn foot soldiers rounded the far end of the plateau. "I'll handle this! I can't let you die!"

"I'm not going to die!" she retorted. "It's just a small gash." She started toward him. "I'm not going to leave you here. You can't protect yourself against all of this!"

One of the archers fired an arrow at Lan. "No!" He instinctively deflected the arrow with a wave of his hand. Ria would not get hurt any more.

The second archer loosed a shot, but Lan deflected that one as well. Ria now stood beside him, dagger drawn. "The archers, now, before the footmen get here!" she shouted.

The arrow came so fast that it was lodged in Ria's thigh before he saw it. It had come from a third archer atop the plateau. She gasped and crumpled to her knees. She could die here--the one remaining person on Kalra that he loved could be ripped away from him. He was already tormented daily by horrific visions of his family's death. He would not let the sarn do it again. If he lost Ria, he lost everything. What good was vengeance with nothing to life for afterward? Ria had to live. He needed a focus, a purpose. These sarn would pay with every drop of their blood.

The sarn drew closer. The muscles in his arms and legs throbbed painfully. His blood froze in his veins. The very air crackled around him. Crimson light bathed his vision. The sarn drew their bows. His mind thrashed about within his skull trying to break free. His hands clenched into white fists. His eyes filled with blood, hatred, fire . . .

And then there was a release.

Tranquil, serene, his mind floated on a sea of golden mist. He felt weightless, tingly. His blood ran warm, his muscles relaxed. All cares, all emotions, flushed away in an instant.

And then came the firestorm.

Flames swept out on both sides of him and reached high into the sky, licking at the heavens. To either side of him the wall

burned onward as far as he could see. ***ADD SOMETHING ABOUT HOW THICK THE WALL IS HERE*** The fire roared with fury and unleashed coils of flame at the three archers. They didn't have time to blink. The coils snapped back into the wall, leaving ashen sculptures of what once breathed. A surging blast of heat shattered the dead sarn and scattered the ashes into the darkness beyond the wall's searing light. The sarn footmen shrieked at the sight. They turned and fled from the spectacle. What on Kalra had he done? He turned to ask Ria if she understood any of this. She stood on the other side of the wall. *Oh dear Ohn, no!*

"Ria!" he shouted over the roar of the flames. Neither of them could approach the unbearable inferno.

"Lan! What did you do?" she shouted back at him. Blood soaked her right pants leg. A dark puddle of mud grew at her foot as the blood mixed with the dry dirt. The arrow shaft still protruded from her thigh. She had one hand clasped around the wound to slow the bleeding.

"I--I don't know! But it worked! The sarn are gone!"

"Take it down!" she shouted at him, her face twisted in pain. "I need help!"

Lan had a horrible revelation--he did not know how to even begin making the wall vanish. He had no idea how he had created it.

"I don't know how!" he shouted.

"Stop concentrating on it!"

"I'm *not* concentrating on it!"

Ria's jaw dropped open for a split second and her eyes widened with disbelief. The look did not stay long--the pain in her leg was too strong to ignore. He wished he could do something for her, but he knew nothing of magical healing.

"You need to go get help!" he shouted at her. "Go back to the sarn campsite! The reinforcements Reinez called for should have arrived by now, and they can help you!"

"But what about you?" She stumbled closer to the raging wall. The sun had set below the horizon, but the dancing orange light from the flaming wall lit the area bright as day.

How would he get around this wall? Or did he need to?

Lan saw his perfect chance to go onward, to side with the daemon, to retrieve the Darksearer. He didn't even have to tell Ria

now. This flaming barrier gave him an excuse to be separated from her for a long time. *Long enough for anything to happen*, he thought.

"I'll find another way around!" he lied. "You go on and get help. Tell the reinforcements what happened. I'll be fine!"

"No!" she shouted. "You'll be killed! *Bist*, we never should have come this far! The sarn legions are nearby!"

"Which is why you've got to hurry!" he shouted back at her. "I can take care of myself!"

"But Lan--"

"I love you, Ria." He took a deep breath. He had to leave, now, before this got even more painful. He would come back, yes. Everything would be fine in the end. It always was.

"No, Lan! You'll die out there! Lan!" Ria collapsed to her knees. Tears streamed down her dusty cheeks, marking trails along her somber face.

"There's nothing else I can do! I don't know how to get rid of this wall--I'll have to find another way around."

"I'll wait for you!" she shouted through her sobs.

"You'll die if you wait much longer!" he shouted. "You've got to get to the troops Reinez called for as soon as possible and have that wound taken care of!"

She said nothing. She knew it was her only option--but she refused to accept it.

"I'll see you again," he said. "I promise." He held his hand up, palm facing her.

She wiped some of her tears away, smudging the dirt on her face, and held out her hand likewise.

Lan wanted nothing more than to stay with her, but fate called elsewhere. He would see her again--he had promised it. After he had paid the sarn back for all the suffering they had caused him, he would live the rest of his life for her. They would never be able to hurt her again.

They silently nodded to each other, then turned to go their separate ways. Though darkness had enshrouded this part of Kalra, the burning horizon behind Lan lit his path--the path to freedom, the path to vengeance, and the path to love.

#

Ga'ruk saw the fiery wall in the distance from atop one of the Wastes's numerous plateaus. Several footmen he sent to stop

the intruders had returned to Gehenisia and reported the incident. The archers had been burned alive, and only one of the humans still came forward--the wall must have separated the other. Ga'ruk could see the faint outline of the approaching figure in the pale orange light. This man had the gift of magic. Nothing else could have caused the violent, raging wall.

He had pondered what to do if one of the approaching humans could wield the power of magic. Lord Dariakus wanted them kept alive if this were the case, but for what reason? The daemon must want a wizard in command. A wizard could easily lead troops into battle--most wizards in human society served as generals. A wizard could also teach Dariakus about magic. No sarn could ever do this. Ga'ruk refused to be undermined. No human would rank as his equal or superior. Dariakus would never know the truth if Ga'ruk killed this man here and now, so long as no report of his magical talents ever reached the daemon's ears.

Ga'ruk slid down the plateau with ease--something he had mastered and trained his men at doing. He drew his sword and charged the man. The approaching figure stopped. Ga'ruk charged onward. He could see the lone silhouette better from down here. He was a young man, with the scraggly beginnings of a beard. He wore typical human clothes and wrapped himself in a thick grey robe. The hood was pulled up tight against his head, likely to fend off the chill. *Best to keep it warm. I'm not partial to cold meals.*

The cloaked figure threw his robe back. He stood strong, almost majestic. His brow turned down angrily. He raised blue, glowing hands.

"You." Ga'ruk envied the cold, emotionless tone of the man's voice. In all the years of his leadership he had never once mastered such a cruel sound. One more reason for this man to die. Ga'ruk swung.

The man shouted unintelligibly through his teeth and unleashed a roll of thunder from his hands. The force threw Ga'ruk's swing wildly off-course. His sword clanged against the ground harmlessly and sent up a small spray of dust. The man reached out for him, but Ga'ruk snatched his wrist.

"Not so fast," he grunted. He dropped his sword and reached for one of the manacles on his belt. The blue glow around the man's hand felt cold to the touch, but his flesh burned beneath.

Ga'ruk brought the manacles around and slapped one around the man's wrist. The blue glow immediately faded. He would not let this human defeat him, magic or no.

"You tried to kill me once," the man grunted. "You won't do any better this time." He swung his free hand, still glowing, at Ga'ruk's face. Ga'ruk ducked and grabbed for his sword. The man kicked it away.

Ga'ruk twisted the man around and grabbed his head. "Time to die," he growled into the human's ear.

The manacle suddenly snapped off of the man's wrist and another thunderous boom shook Ga'ruk's grip from his neck.

"Your hands can't kill me anymore than your crossbow bolts."

Ga'ruk shot the human a questioning glance. He remembered. Though he now wore a beard and had gained a few years, there was no mistaking that face. This man was Alexander Lansing. Ga'ruk remembered the rainy day he had chased Ria down on the Lansing plantation. He remembered firing on the young man who carried the half-breed away from him, and his utter shock when the crossbow bolt had stopped mere spans short of striking Alexander dead. He remembered running into the boy again in Porthos the next year and trying to finish what he had started.

"Alexander Lansing." The man stood rigid, glaring at Ga'ruk. "I never thought I would have the pleasure of seeing you again." Ga'ruk placed his hand over his sword hilt.

"Stranger things have happened, Ga'ruk."

"I see you know my name." Ga'ruk grinned.

"Of course," Alexander said. "You tried to kill me several years ago with a crossbow, and then attacked me in Porthos. I always find out who wrongs me, and I never forget them."

A boy after his own heart.

"Tell me why I shouldn't kill you where you stand. I may consider it."

"I'll kill you where *you* stand." Alexander raised a threatening fist.

Ga'ruk laughed. "I like you, Alexander."

"Call me Lan."

"Very well then, Lan. What of your traveling companion?" Ga'ruk gestured toward the glowing horizon.

"Prior engagement," Lan said.

"A friend of yours?" Ga'ruk started to circle Lan. The young man locked eyes with him.

"Perhaps."

"A half-breed, I'll wager." Ga'ruk flexed his forearms.

"None of your concern."

"She was running, wasn't she?"

Lan said nothing. *I've got you now*, Ga'ruk thought.

"The resilient half-breed bitch was running from someone, wasn't she?"

"I wouldn't know," Lan said. Ga'ruk finished a full circle around the young man. "She doesn't talk much."

Ga'ruk knew he stood little chance against a wizard who could concentrate. He had to play his words carefully to work Lan into a rage. The angrier the better.

"I'd imagine you're right. It's quite difficult to talk with your tongue shoved down some stranger's throat."

Lan paused again. *Good*, Ga'ruk thought. *An emotional tie. This will be easier than I thought.*

"You are just jealous, Ga'ruk." He had not expected that. "Jealous of her, and jealous of me."

"Of you? There's nothing to be jealous of in that pitiful sack of pasty flesh you call a body." Ga'ruk laughed. "And if you mean magic, *real* men fight wars with their hands, their teeth. We have no need of such pathetic skills."

"Pathetic?" Lan pointed toward the orange glow in the distance. "That?"

"Do it again."

Silence. Ga'ruk knew he had the upper hand.

"Teach you that at Rhienos, did they?" Ga'ruk asked.

Lan thought about this for a moment before replying. "You intercepted Ria's letter. That's why it was late."

"You're a fast one." Ga'ruk flashed his teeth at Lan.

"I demand to be led to the daemon."

This was unexpected.

"Dariakus sees no one."

"I've come to make a proposal."

"Why would you seek out that which your kind fears so much?"

"I have seen his power, and I know he will win. By siding with Dariakus at the outset of the chaos that is to come, I can better ensure my survival over those who fight against him. Dariakus is very powerful--it is not a difficult decision for anyone who has seen his destruction to make."

Ga'ruk sheathed his sword. This puny human would not better him. He would take Lan before Dariakus and show the daemon once and for all how weak magic was. He had seen Dariakus's power before--this boy stood no chance.

"*Ch'tuchk'ski kach.*" He gave the order for his men to move.

"Insulting me in your tongue will do you no--"

The sounds of Ga'ruk's four men sliding down the plateau behind Lan startled the young man. He whipped around to face them. Ga'ruk charged. He grabbed the manacles and wrested them onto Lan's wrists as one of the other sarn belted him in the stomach.

"Your magic does you no good against quick and numerous foes, Lan, as Dariakus will see when we bring you in."

"You can't . . . hold me forever . . . and I can learn . . . to be faster . . ." The young man curled into a ball on the ground.

Ga'ruk snapped his fingers. One of the sarn pulled a rolled, burlap sack from his backpack and straightened it out.

"Time to take a trip, *wizard*," Ga'ruk snarled. "And perhaps once Dariakus is through with you, he will let me feast on your flesh. I understand the Lansings are quite a delicacy. Must be in the blood."

Lan howled in rage. A sarn shoved a filthy cloth into his mouth and then stuffed the bag over him. Ga'ruk told his men to tie it tightly and be watchful--he had broken out of one of the manacles, which meant he may be able to break out of both if he tried hard enough.

Ga'ruk turned and started walking away as the sarn followed, Lan slung over one's back. He had plans to make, and a meeting with the crazed bounty hunter he had been meaning to get around to. Today was not his day.

#

There were lights ahead in the forest. Ria saw people moving around. Mesefu soldiers--the reinforcements Reinez had sent for. She stumbled toward them and called out for their

attention. She had been travelling for many hours, gritting her teeth against the pain. Finally, help was within sight.

"Ria!" shouted a familiar voice.

"Lisen! I need help!"

"Dherian, hurry! She's wounded!" Lisen ran over to Ria. She had left the arrow in her leg--without her magic, there would have been no way to stop the bleeding and she would have died in the Wastes.

"What happened?" Lisen asked as Dherian set to work on Ria's leg. Ria glanced at the healer. "Dherian's a friend, loyal to Lord Harishmon, he's safe."

"I got separated from Lan. We were trailing the daemon, trying to find out where its base was, when--"

"Daemon?" Lisen interrupted as the color drained from her face. "Dear Ohn, tell me it isn't true."

"It is," Ria gulped. Dherian pulled the arrow out slowly. He used numbing magic so Ria felt nothing. He quickly placed two pads on either side of the wound and magically stopped the bleeding. He then set to work wrapping the pads tightly around her leg.

"We've got to send someone to go get Lan, though," Ria said. "He promised he'd come back, but I'm afraid he might get captured . . . or worse!"

"Lan?" Lisen rubbed her chin. "The same Lan from Porthos?"

"Yes," Ria huffed. "He needs help!"

"Why are you associating with a criminal?" Lisen asked.

"He's not a criminal! None of that was his fault! I need to help him, Lisen." Lisen looked down at her with concern. "I can't leave him out there to die. I . . . I think I love him." The healer pulled the bandages tight. Ria winced in pain, but made no sound.

"If he's south of Kagon, in the Wastes, there's nothing I can do."

"You've stood up for me and helped me countless times before," Ria began. "What makes this time any different?"

"It's not that I don't want to," Lisen began, "it's that--"

"What is *she* doing here?" demanded Eruin as she glided up on her *vel*. If Ria had felt any stronger, she would have leapt upon the woman and beat her senseless. Eruin was part of the reason her

father was no longer on the council and she had been forced to live her harsh life. "What are *you* doing here?" Ria shouted. Dherian stepped back as a crowd of interested mesefu gathered around the trio. Ria glanced between Lisen and Eruin. "In fact, what are *either* of you doing here? Why is the High Council being sent with the military?"

"Well--" started Lisen.

"That is none of her concern," Eruin snapped, cutting Lisen off. "She is a *dalchi*, and as such needs not know our motives." Eruin cleared her throat and turned back to Ria. "Now, I will ask again. What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to get help," Ria spat.

"And why should we help you?" Eruin folded her arms over her chest.

"Because I was hurt and had no magic."

"No magic? A lie." Eruin's lip curled up into a haughty smile.

"It is no lie!" Ria raised her arms to show Eruin the bracers. "Have you no compassion?"

"Not for a *dalchi*," Eruin said. "I suggest you leave as quickly as possible. Though I must thank you," Eruin smiled, "for giving the council more evidence that you and Lisen have been working together on internal matters."

Lisen whipped around to confront Doran. Her braid snapped loudly against her armor. "I believe it is *you* who is supposed to be leaving. Those were Lord Harishmon's orders, and I suggest you obey them."

"They will be his *last* orders," Eruin barked, "but I will gladly oblige. I cannot stand to be in the company of *dalchi* for long." She harrumphed, spun around, and glided away.

Ria started for the woman. Lisen grabbed her shoulders and tried to shake her back into her senses. "Let it go," she said. "It's not worth it. She's leaving at dawn."

Dherian knelt back down next to Ria and ran his hands over her body to check for more injuries.

"There's nothing else wrong," Ria said to him.

"But still I must check. Losing your temper can set off all sorts of things inside that may have been slightly wounded." He smiled at her through his thin lips.

"And what's all this talk of Lord Harishmon's last orders? What's going on?" she asked Lisen.

Lisen sighed. "Somehow Doran found out that Lord Harishmon secretly sent me to Porthos, and that we were working with you. She had already accused him of being the one to steal *Ol'tue*, and now she's holding a trial in the council in an attempt to oust Lord Harishmon and myself."

"That's insanity!" Ria shouted. "What has happened to the council?"

"Please try to remain calm," Dherian said soothingly. "If you aren't careful, you could upset your wound." Ria heard his words, but let them fall from her ears.

"Lord Harishmon would never do a thing like that! You have to go back and defend yourself, now!"

"I can't," Lisen frowned. "He told me to stay here until I heard from him again."

"But if they oust you both--"

--then we'll continue to do our job," Lisen interrupted. "I think that's his plan, anyway. If the council votes to get rid of us, then he will likely join me here to continue the search for *Ol'tue*."

"What will you do when you find it? Doran won't let you back into Altkrea, especially if she becomes High . . ." She couldn't finish. The idea frightened her too much.

"We will figure that out when the time comes," Lisen said. "For now, all I can do is wait."

"No!" Ria said, her voice almost frantic. "You can help Lan!"

"I . . . I can't, Ria." Lisen knelt next to her, taking her hand. The healer continued his examination. "I wish I could, but Lord Harishmon told me to remain here. I have to do that. I know you care for him, but I'm sorry. There's nothing I can do."

"You love Kaen, don't you?" Ria asked. Lisen turned her head away.

"I--I don't know," she said hastily.

"I've seen it over the years, Lisen. You can be honest with me." She reached out for her friend.

"I've never really thought about it, but--"

"Then I understand," Ria stopped her. "Though it will be much harder on my own, I'll find some way to rescue Lan from the

Wastes. I could never ask you to go against the one you love. I know how painful that is."

Lisen started to say something, but Dherian spoke first. "I don't believe you'll be going anywhere alone."

"I can live with some pain." Ria gestured toward her wounded leg. "And as soon as one of you removes these bracers from me, I'll be able to take care of myself."

"It is not the wound in your leg I am talking about. My magic has detected more complications than just that one."

"Then what--"

"There is a new life growing inside you."

Ria's stomach clenched up into a tight ball. She broke out into a cold sweat. She fell forward and grasped the wet, grassy ground with the palms of her hands. "Dear Ohn," she gasped. "What have I done?"

#

Lan could barely move. He was not sure how long he had been trapped in the darkness of the bag. It smelled of stale sweat and leather. He heard one of the sarn grunt something then cringed as he slammed against the ground.

"Enjoy your new friend, Lan," he heard Ga'ruk say. "I'll be back to speak with *you* later."

"You will not like what I have to say, sarn." Who was that? A female voice, human. He heard a loud clang, then silence. He struggled to get out of the sack.

"Hello?" he called. "Is there someone out there?"

"Let me free you." Her voice was muffled through the thick bag. After a moment the bag came undone and he broke out into the light.

Lan sat in a perfect cube. Every wall looked exactly the same--smooth, polished steel with no discernable doors or seams. He could see as well as on a sunny day, but he saw no lights. The very walls themselves gave off the light.

"This place is pure evil." The woman across from him wore stained leather pants and a vest full of pockets. Her grey eyes looked much older than her taut, lightly-scarred features. Her platinum-white hair stood out above all else. It hung down on either side of her face in two tightly woven braids. Even her eyebrows were bleached-white.

"Thanks," Lan said. She nodded silently. "Where are we?"

"A prison, of sorts," she said. "The door is in that wall."

She pointed at the wall to Lan's left. He didn't see any differences in that wall from the others.

"But where does it open?" he asked.

"Right down the middle."

"But there's no--"

"I know." She stretched her arms. "This place is evil, I said. Ohn will free me from this wretched box soon, and I shall exact divine retribution upon the souls of all who dwell in this vile palace."

"I see," Lan said. *Of all the people I could have ended up with, I get the religious one.* He fingered the bracers on his arms to avoid getting into an argument about religion with the woman. How had he gotten one of them off so easily before? Everything had just snapped into place and it had simply slipped off.

"Wizard!" she screeched when she saw the bracers. She leapt to her feet.

"What?" Lan looked up at her. She glared at him with her cold eyes.

"Wizard! You will be flayed alive! Your magic cannot save you now!" The woman charged him.

"Wait, no!" he shouted, but she ignored him. She snarled and leaped forward. She knocked him to his back. "Get off of me!" She growled and dug her fingernails into his shoulder. He screamed as blood welled up beneath her fingers. He grabbed her hands and tried to fight her off.

"Let go of me!" She showed no signs of relenting. Her face had turned red, and she grinned sadistically. This woman was insane.

"I am the Eye of the Heavens. I am the Arbiter of Justice." He kneed her in the stomach but she rolled with it. Nothing could pry her hands off of him.

"All wizards shall be flayed alive by mandate of Ohn Almighty." She tilted her head back and looked up at the ceiling. "SEE ME NOW, ALMIGHTY OHN, AS I SMITE THIS BLEMISH FROM YOUR CREATION!" She wailed at the steel ceiling, then sank her teeth into his wounded shoulder.

He managed to wrest a hand free and pounded her head until she let go, each strike tugging her teeth painfully at his pierced flesh. Pain burned through his entire shoulder. He had to convince her that he was no wizard. She knew what the bracers were--lying to her about them would do no good. Thoughts didn't come easily to him in the chaos.

"I'm not a wizard!" he managed to shout above her bestial screams and grunts. He twisted and rolled until he lay on top of her, her snarling, snapping face staring up at him.

"YOU LIE, FOUL BEAST! YOU WEAR THE BRACERS, THE BRACERS ONLY USED FOR THE VILE WIZARDS!" With each word, more spit flew from her mouth to his face.

"No!" he shouted. "I'm not a wizard! Ga'ruk was mistaken. I'm--"

"Ga'ruk may be a filthy sarn, but he is NO FOOL! He would never make such a mistake!" She tried to knee him in the groin but missed and struck him hard inside his left thigh. He kned her back in roughly the same place.

"I'm . . ." He saw only one way out of this. It was risky, but it the only one he could think of. "I'm a servant of Ohn."

She immediately stopped struggling. "You lie."

"I don't! I was given my powers to serve His every need on Kalra! At first I thought I was just a lowly wizard, myself, until one day . . . I had a vision."

"As did I!" The anger drained from her face. She smiled at him, her teeth showing. He felt her chest heave against his as she took a deep breath. "Ohn came to me one day, in a vision, and showed me my true mission!"

"Yes!" Lan tried to show as much enthusiasm as she did.

"I was charged with Cleansing all the poor, innocent souls who are tainted by the Master of the Lake. I free them from their Master, into the loving arms of Ohn! What mission were you charged with?"

Lan thought for a moment. What mission indeed?
"Almighty Ohn charged me with . . . protecting those who did his duty here on Kalra."

Her eyes lit up. "You have come to save me? You have come to save the Eye of the Heavens? I knew it! I knew Ohn would not let me suffer in this bastion of filth and evil for long!"

Before Lan could reply she had grabbed his head and pulled his lips against hers. After a brief struggle he managed to push himself away.

"Why did you do that?" he demanded.

"You and I are servants of the same master! At last, a partner! I have waited for you so long!" She started kneading the muscles in his unwounded shoulder. It felt very relaxing, but he couldn't allow her to continue. He brushed her hand aside.

"No, I already have a partner." She froze. *Oh great, what have I done now?* She stared into his eyes for a moment, then broke out into deep laughter.

"Ohn is our partner together," she said. "All servants of Ohn are dedicated to Him. But now, we can be dedicated to each other as well! Come!" She pushed him away and stood up. "Free us from this prison and let us go exact divine retribution upon the sarn plague!"

No, he didn't need to lose her now. He definitely wanted to keep this woman on his side. He didn't know how long she would be here, and if she turned against him before his bracers came off, she could be deadly. Another idea came to him--a tricky one, but if he could convince her of it . . .

"I'm here to help you, yes," he said. "But not to free you from this prison."

"I don't understand." She pulled a bandage from one of her pockets and handed it to him. "Here, wrap this around your wound. I apologize, I did not know."

"I am here to help you . . . work with the sarn and the daemon." Lan took a deep breath.

The Eye laughed. "I know it is customary for lovers to joke among themselves, but you do not have to joke with me for my affections. They are guaranteed by divine presence."

Lovers? Divine presence? What on Kalra . . . Was this worth the trouble? Every time he tried another tactic she threw a new unforeseen twist at him.

"I do not joke, beautiful lady."

In a flash, she had him pushed against a wall, her hand around his throat. Anger burned in her eyes again. "The last person to call me that died, painfully. I WORK FOR NO SARN!"

Lan swallowed hard against her firm grip. "I don't lie. We are lovers, are we not?" Her glaring eyes did not so much as blink. "Have you not heard of the daemon?"

"I know his vile presence is in charge of this palace and those sarn. The Master of the Lake walks the land, and he shall be put to rest before long by the divine hand of Ohn."

"No," Lan argued. "You've got it all backward. The daemon isn't the Master of the Lake, or even one of his servants. The daemon is . . . a creature, a beautiful creature, built from the very essence of Ohn the Almighty."

"IMPOSSIBLE!" Lan coughed against her grip. "OHN WOULD NEVER WORK WITH THE SARN!"

"Wait!" he coughed. "It's true! Have you not . . . ever seen the daemon's . . . powers? I have! He's the most powerful . . . being alive!"

"Why would a daemon work for Ohn?" she asked. Her grip didn't tighten, but didn't loosen either.

"Because . . . he isn't really a daemon." She released his throat and sat back on her heels. Lan coughed and took a few deep breaths. "He's just called a daemon by those who fear him. And those who fear him are the wicked! The ones who secretly do the bidding of the Master of the Lake!"

"But . . ." she trailed off. Lan was winning. Slowly, but surely, he was toying with her twisted, broken mind. "Why would Ohn . . . use sarn?"

"What do the humans fear more than the sarn? Nothing! They are the perfect weapon to use against the wicked humans."

"But not all humans are evil," she said.

"No, but they *are* all corruptible. They're a risk, and Dariakus--the daemon--has been sent here to judge them all. I'm not even sure *he* realizes this yet, but it's all the truth!"

"Give me evidence," she demanded. "Now. Or else my hand will find even more unpleasant places on your body to tighten its grip around."

"The mesefu--" Lan started.

She leaned toward him. "Do not tell me that THEY are true servants of Ohn either. If so, I know you for what you are, spawn of the Lake!"

She thought the mesefu were evil? He knew exactly how to win her over.

He continued. "The mesefu held the Darksear, the only weapon that could destroy a daemon. Dariakus knows this and has been seeking to take it away from the mesefu. He tried, but some rogue sarn who wanted to earn his favor above all others stole it, and nobody knows where it is now."

The Eye said nothing. She looked down at her pale hands, the fingernails encrusted with Lan's blood. Lan remembered the bandage and started wrapping his shoulder. He worked in silence, finishing the job before she spoke again.

"I will think about what you have said." She reached a hand out to him. "If I find you are lying to me, then I shall slay you without listening to another word you have to say. But if you are correct, then I will have many things to think about. Many things indeed."

He reached his hand out and clasped hers. "You will see that I'm quite right," he said. "Together we shall help Dariakus--help Ohn--to set his world back the way he always intended it to be."

She shook his hand.

Lan smiled. One more problem was behind him. An unexpected one, but he had managed to overcome it. How much harder could it be to win the daemon's favor and trust? Could Dariakus be any more difficult than this insane woman?

He did not have long to think. The wall the Eye had pointed out earlier suddenly slit open along the middle with a hiss. Ga'ruk stood on the other side, along with four sarn wielding spears.

"Time to come with me, Lan." Ga'ruk waved at the Eye. "You too, bounty hunter."

"You'd better be right," she said to him as she walked past.

"Oh, I'm quite sure."

"Come on, you two," Ga'ruk growled. "It's time to die."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The hallway stretched before them far into the distance. Thick red marble columns lined it, built halfway into the walls. They reached high up to the domed ceiling, bathed in crimson shadow. Small rubies ringed the top and bottom of each column, giving off a somber red glow. The floor was polished granite--not even the first hint of scratching or blemishes marred its surface. Their footsteps echoed down the corridor as they approached the large doors at the far end.

"You said they were on *our* side." The Eye walked beside him, Ga'ruk and two in front, the rest in back. "Why would they kill us? If you lied to me--"

"It's not a lie." Lan cut her off, but not soon enough. He saw Ga'ruk's head twitch to the side slightly as they walked onward. "They *are* on our side. This is a tight line we walk. They don't know who we are at this point. They think we're the enemy."

"Then let us tell them the truth." She clasped Lan's hand. He tried to pull away. "Foul sarn," she started. Lan's pulse quickened. "I am told by this one that you work with the daemon, an incarnation of Ohn Almighty, to Cleanse the world of corruptness."

Ga'ruk laughed heartily. The mad woman's eyes narrowed. She squeezed Lan's hand tighter. One of the sarn escorts behind them snickered. Lan wanted to silence them all, to keep them from breaking down his ruse, but he knew he would have to face them eventually. He had just expected more time to prepare.

"She doesn't believe you truly serve Ohn the Creator," Lan said. "She believes only what the outside world tells her, that your kind are . . . evil, bent on mindlessly destroying everything you come in contact with. Tell her the truth. Tell her that you work for Ohn, that Dariakus is created from His essence." Her grip on his hand loosened. They walked on steadily. Ga'ruk appeared to be listening intently. "Tell her that, as true divine servants of Ohn Almighty, we will be welcome here, to help Dariakus in his quest to rid the world of corruption."

The sarn beside Ga'ruk sniggered, but Ga'ruk elbowed him. "Well, Alexander, aren't we talkative? Not two hours ago you were trying with every ounce of strength to rip my throat apart."

"I KNEW IT!" The Eye jerked her hand away from his. "You LIED to me, foul wizard! You will burn in--"

"He didn't lie." Ga'ruk's words were lost in her outpouring of rage.

--the lake for eternity, slave to the Master's every beck and call, your blood boiling from your flayed flesh--"

"Bounty hunter." Ga'ruk raised his voice. "He tells the truth." Why was Ga'ruk agreeing with him? Had Lan actually been correct? Were his lies unknowingly the truth? Surely not. There must be more to all of this.

--and pouring out over your charred corpse as you wail in your agony, begging for the torment to cease, begging for the void--
"

Ga'ruk whipped around and snatched one of the Eye's braids. She yelped as he tugged her toward him. "He isn't lying!" The other sarn all stared at Ga'ruk in disbelief. "He tells the truth."

"But--" she started, voice faltering.

"All will be made clear soon enough." Ga'ruk released her hair. "Walk with me, Alexander. You--" he turned to the Eye "--stay back here." The Eye looked down solemnly and clasped her hands behind her back. Lan walked up next to Ga'ruk.

"I don't know what you're up to," Ga'ruk started in a low voice, "and I'm not entirely sure I like it." The sarn's acrid breath was hot against Lan's cheeks. It reeked of decay. Lan didn't ponder on the possible source. "Why are you here, Alexander?"

"I told you, I--"

Ga'ruk laid a hand on his shoulder. "No," he said. "Why are you *really* here? Proving yourself to Dariakus does not require proving yourself to me. You tried to kill me, now you try to help me. What is going on in that mind of yours?"

"Everything." Lan shrugged Ga'ruk's heavy hand away.

"We'll see." Ga'ruk wrung his fists together. The far end of the corridor was quickly coming closer. "Once we get through those doors, we'll all see."

Lan swallowed hard. Dariakus was on the other side, he knew. And when those doors swung open, there was a chance he may die. And even if not then, if he failed to please the daemon, he would surely never see Ria, his beloved, again. He could not fail.

#

It was beginning to grow lighter. The plateaus of the Waste were silhouetted against the moonlight. The pale moon Nalari was waning, and within another week she would be gone altogether. She hung low over the western ridges as the sun just below the eastern horizon threatened to burn away the darkness. Esmond pulled his fur blanket around himself tighter as he gazed into the campfire. Gaelyn sat nearby, staring blankly at the flames as well.

"Esmond?" she asked.

"What?" His words were a hoarse whisper.

"I'm so scared." Her lips started to tremble.

"Me too." He tried to sound stronger than he felt. "You should try to get some sleep. We've got another long day ahead of us." Esmond rolled over, facing the darkness of the Wastes. Before he could close his eyes, Gaelyn spoke.

"What if the daemon comes back?"

"It won't, Gaelyn. Now try to go to sleep. I'm very tired, and we've got a lot more travelling to do."

She sighed and pulled her blanket up over her chest.

Esmond started shivering and turned back around toward the fire, as if merely looking at it would make him warmer. He heard the sound of someone running behind him. He turned back around but couldn't discern anything in the dim light. He jumped up and ran to tell Fallon. He heard Gaelyn call out after him, but he merely waved his hand at her. They could be under attack.

He found Fallon's resting place, but the Lord of the Night was nowhere to be seen. What was going on? He looked back in the direction from which he had heard the running and there stood Fallon, talking to one of the scouts who had been sent out. *Great, Esmond, you dolt. Run in utter horror from one of your own scouts.* He walked over to see what the news was. The scout and his companion who was just now stepping up had urgent looks on their faces.

"*What* was that?" he heard Fallon asking the scout as he approached them.

"A legion of sarn was marching this way from the palace of Gehenisia, but they turned to the north and are heading around us toward Pyran. We also found a very mysterious wall of flame blocking the path. It's enormous, stretching as high as we can see. There seems to be a way around it through a valley in the south."

Wall of flame? Lan had always been fond of flames. Was there a chance he could be here? Who else could release such magic from an emotional outburst? *You're being silly*, Esmond told himself. *You don't know every wizard out there. Any number of them could have done this. And yet, it feels so right . . .*

"We also found this." The scout handed something shiny to Fallon. Esmond peered around Fallon's arm to get a good look at it. It was a dragon emblem. Lan's dragon emblem. Oh dear Ohn what had happened?

"Lan!" shouted Esmond. "It was Lan! I bet you anything! He's alive!"

The scouts and Fallon turned to him. "What?" asked Fallon. "How can you know that?"

"He loved studying destructive spells, and he always liked things like lightning bolts and fireballs. And that dragon emblem!" Esmond pointed at the trinket. "It's his! He had it on him when we saved him from the fire in Porthos! He's probably come to do what we're doing, and he's probably got Ria with him! I don't think Lan's crazy enough to do anything like this alone."

"Are you sure it's him? Your friend from Rhienos?" asked Fallon.

"It's a safe assumption," Esmond replied.

"Would he be willing to help us?"

"Well, there was a bit of tension between us the last time we spoke, but that was months ago when we were all still at Rhienos. I'm sure he's forgotten about that by now. We have to find them!"

"Well," Fallon started, "we're getting awfully close to Gehenisia. It used to be an abandoned fortress, but the scouts think it's now the daemon's stronghold. To go much farther could be suicidal. If your friends went that way, I'm afraid they may already be dead."

"No!" Esmond denied the possibility. "Lan's very skilled with magic! You saw him at Rhienos! And if he's with Ria, they'll definitely be safe. They're probably looking for the Darksearer too, and could be a lot of help to us!"

"Esmond," Fallon began, "I don't know if--"

His speech was interrupted as one of the scouts grabbed his chest and fell to the ground with a gurgling noise. An arrow protruded from the man's back.

"Necromancers! To your defenses! We're under attack!" Necromancers started rising from their places of rest all around. Fallon outstretched his hands. The ground beneath Esmond's feet began shaking. He crouched, defensively, as the hardened soil burst open and three skeletal figures squeezed their way out into the dark night.

"Seek and expose," Fallon instructed them. They sauntered off into the darkness. "Everyone else, shields!" Esmond ran to Gaelyn and raised the simple magical shield he had been taught at Rhienos with a double-snap of his fingers. Other necromancers around the campsite invoked their own shields with their own personal stimuli.

A fire flared up in the distance. It was one of Fallon's undead, immolating itself, revealing a sarn archer on the side of a plateau. Fallon unleashed a bolt of energy in the sarn's direction. The blast hit its target, sending the sarn sprawling down the plateau to writhe about on the ground before falling still. The glowing bolt faded, the undead's bones burned out. Darkness once again.

"There may be more . . ." Fallon flexed his fingers, scanning the darkness. Esmond wondered if he had magically enhanced his vision to better see what was out there. It was cold without a blanket wrapped about him. He rubbed his hands up and down his arms to bring some warmth into them.

"Esmond," Gaelyn started, "are we going to die?"

"Don't be silly," he said.

"I don't want to die--"

"You're not going to, now stop."

"--with so much on my chest."

Another undead flared up in the distance like a candle, revealing another sarn archer. Fallon's magic found its target once again. Darkness.

"What do you mean?" Esmond asked.

"I'm so afraid of losing everything." She threw her arms around him and gripped him tightly. "Please please please don't let anything happen to any of us. Please, promise me we'll be okay, please--"

An arrow struck the ground at Esmond's feet. He shrieked and leapt backward, bringing Gaelyn with him. The last of Fallon's undead burst into flames and another sarn archer fell prey to the magical bolts.

"I don't detect any more," Fallon announced. "Everyone else, quickly, scan for yourselves." Esmond had never been taught the art of scanning for other living beings. It was never perfectly accurate, but with so many other necromancers performing the act as well, they should know very quickly if there were any more sarn out there.

"Nothing, Fallon," said one of the scouts. "Nobody outside this campsite, at least." Everyone stood quietly, gazing out into the darkness.

"They were spies or scouts of some kind," announced Fallon. "It is very likely that there were more than three, but they ran back to report. The sarn know we're here now."

"What are we going to do?" someone asked.

Fallon said nothing as he rubbed his chin, pacing back and forth. He stopped to survey the crowd. The sky started to show the first hints of grey as the sun crept toward the horizon. Fallon stared long and hard at the dead scout's body. His blood slowly seeped out into the soil around him, turning it a sickly black.

"We march onward," he finally said. "They have taken one of our own. We will not let his death have been in vain. Though our numbers are small, our forces can be quite large. We have the power to summon more troops at our command. For every slain

enemy, we gain one more ally. Though we may not take down Gehenisia, especially if the daemon is there, we can reduce their forces drastically before being forced to retreat. Knocking out what we can will be a great help to our allies in the inevitable war to come."

"We stand no chance!" shouted one of the female necromancers. "I say we run while we can!"

"If you want to run, feel free. I won't force any of you to stay," Fallon said, coldly, "but know that by leaving, you are turning your back on your fellow brothers and sisters of the Night. No," he corrected himself. "You are turning your back on the world. This involves more than just us. Without the Darksearar blade, no life on Kalra stands a chance against the daemon. By attacking now and doing what damage we can, we could be saving all life as we know it." Fallon took a deep breath, scanning the necromancers. They all stood rigid, staring him in the eyes.

"We march in an hour," Fallon ordered. He started walking toward his campfire, motioning to Esmond to follow him as he passed. Gaelyn grabbed onto his arm.

"Don't let anything happen to us," she repeated. "We don't have to go, you heard him! Please, Esmond, don't . . ." she trailed off into tears.

Esmond turned and embraced her, her betrayal forgotten. None of that mattered anymore. Betrayal was temporary--it could be forgiven. Death was permanent. He held her close, wishing he had never gotten involved in any of this. She had followed him into necromancy because she had loved him. It was his fault her life was in danger.

"I'm sorry," he said to her, fighting back the tears. "I'm so sorry."

"What do *you* have to be sorry for?" she asked. "I'm the one who--"

Esmond gently placed his fingers over her lips. He stood there for a moment looking deep into her eyes, then pulled her close so she wouldn't see the tears that fell freely from his own.

He prayed to whatever gods may be listening for Gaelyn's safety. Damn necromancy, damn the daemon, and damn this upcoming war. All he wanted to do was go live out the rest of his days, however few they may be, with the one true love of his life.

#

The doors swung open. The Eye of the Heavens unleashed a loud, blood-curdling scream and fell to her knees. Two of the sarn guards grabbed her arms. Ga'ruk stepped across the threshold. And Lan looked up to see the most terrifying thing he had ever lain eyes on.

The room they had entered was as tall as the red hallway outside, but that's where the similarities ended. The floor and walls were made of polished steel squares, several square spans apiece. They reflected the blue lights that spilled through the cracks between the squares. A deathly chill permeated the air, seemingly emanating from Lan's very bones. And on the far wall opposite the doors was the daemon.

Dariakus was encased in the very wall itself. His thick silvery arms were by his side, and his enormous wings stretched out from wall to wall. His blank face stared straight into Lan's soul. Blue lines of energy ran from the ceiling and floor into or behind the daemon--Lan couldn't tell from this angle. From time to time brighter pulses would run their length with a soft buzz.

"SILENCE HER." Lan felt the daemon's voice in his head more than he heard it. After the daemon spoke, he wasn't sure whether Dariakus had spoken out loud or not. Above the daemon's head a word was carved into the wall in ancient mesefu. Lan had no idea what it said.

The Eye fell suddenly silent and dropped flat on the ground, head bowed. "Almighty Ohn, I am yours to command, as you have for decades unending."

"WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS?"

"Tell him, Alexander." Ga'ruk pushed Lan toward the daemon. "Tell him why she's acting like that. Maybe he'll let you live."

Lan took a deep breath. He made a half bow. "Lord . . . Dariakus," he began. "We have come here as . . . your servants. Servants of Ohn in the flesh."

"WHY SHOULD I LET YOU LIVE?"

"I bring with me the power of magic. I wish to join your forces, to help you in your holy crusade against the corruptible."

"GA'RUKE, ALONE."

"Are you sure?" Ga'ruk raised a brow.

"I AM ALWAYS SURE. NOW."

"As you wish." Ga'ruk motioned for the soldiers to follow him from the room. They dragged the Eye with them. The large stone doors swung shut behind them with a cold finality, leaving Lan alone in the cold blue room with the daemon. He shivered.

"WHY DO YOU COME BEFORE ME?" Dariakus turned his head down to stare blankly at Lan.

"To . . . offer my magical skills." Lan swallowed. This could be the end of everything. He wanted to run, he wanted to escape. Dear Ohn he never realized what he was getting into until now. It had all seemed so easy, so harmless as an idea in his head. And now it scared the life out of him.

"WHAT ELSE?"

Lan paused. "What do you mean?"

"EVERYONE HAS PERSONAL MOTIVATION. NO ONE DOES ANYTHING ONLY TO HELP ANOTHER."

"But I was sent by Ohn Almighty to--"

"LIES. THERE IS NO OHN ALMIGHTY. HE COULD NOT HAVE SENT YOU."

Lan braced himself. "I'm terrified of your powers, Dariakus. I want to be on the side that will win the war to come."

"YOU DO NOT KNOW THE OUTCOME OF ANY EVENT UNTIL IT HAS TRANSPIRED. YOUR FEAR AS YOU STATE IT IS FALLACY. WHAT MOTIVATES YOU ALEXANDER?"

Dear Ohn the daemon knew his name. How on Kalra could the daemon know his name? Ga'ruk must have told him . . . it was the only way.

"I told you," he choked. "Fear."

"INERT FEAR DOES NOT DRIVE PEOPLE TO SINGLEHANDEDLY STORM INTO ENEMY TERRITORY IN AN ATTEMPT TO BECOME THEIR ALLY. ACTIVE FEAR IS DIFFERENT, BUT IT WOULD NOT BRING YOU THIS CLOSE TO GEHENISIA ALONE. WHAT MOTIVATES YOU, ALEXANDER?"

Dariakus knew too much. Lan wasn't sure how, but the daemon was too smart for him, knew all the right answers, all the correct responses, and all the ways to get the truth.

"I . . . I seek revenge . . . for my family's death."

"AGAINST?"

"The sarn." Lan tried to steady himself, but his knees threatened to give way any moment.

"YOU SEEK REVENGE AGAINST AN ENTIRE RACE OF PEOPLE? DID ALL OF THEM TAKE PART IN THE SLAUGHTER OF YOUR FAMILY?"

"I know what you're going to say," Lan stammered.

"There's only one way to make sure the sarn who killed my family . . . my sister . . . pay with their lives."

"YOU DARE THINK YOU CAN TAKE DOWN AN ENTIRE CIVILIZATION WITH YOUR BARE HANDS? YOU ARE A FOOL."

"I'm not a fool!" he shouted. "They destroyed my life, my livelihood. I refuse to die until every last one of them has begged me for mercy before I drive the dagger in."

"YOU ARE A FOOL, AND ARE INEFFICIENT. DESTROYING ALL OF THE SARN WOULD BE A FAR GREATER UNDERTAKING THAN FINDING THE SELECT FEW WHO DID YOU WRONG."

"No!" Lan shouted. "There's no trace of them, no clues to who they are. And if one sarn can do it, why can't more? They are foul, corruptible, and must be destroyed."

"ALL BEINGS ARE CORRUPTIBLE. YOU HAVE ONLY TO LOOK AT GA'RUK, THE BOUNTY HUNTER, YOURSELF. WHAT YOU SEE AS CORRUPTION I SEE AS DETERMINATION, STRIVING FOR AN IDEAL, FOR THEIR BENEFIT. THEIR WELL-BEING."

"Well-being and ideals often clash," Lan said. "Where they coincide, there is peace. Where they do not, there is war. I intend to wage war against the Sarn Nations. And not alone--there are many who would join my quest if only I had the power."

"DO YOU SEEK MY POWER? DO YOU THINK I WOULD TURN AGAINST MY FAITHFUL LEGIONS AND LOSE MY SUPPORT?"

"What need have you of support?" Lan asked. "I've seen your powers. I was at that campsite you leveled. You could survive well enough on your own."

"IF I DO NOT NEED SUPPORT, WHY ARE YOU TRYING TO OFFER IT TO ME IN THE FORM OF MAGIC?"

It was all over. He had talked himself into a circle he could never talk himself out of. The daemon knew too much indeed.

"I . . . I want the blade. The Darksearer."

"YOU ARE CAPABLE OF TELLING THE TRUTH. WHY DO YOU WANT THE WEAPON?"

"To study it, to replicate it. I want to arm legions of troops with it to bring down the sarn with their mighty power."

"YOU WISH TO ATTEMPT TO REPLICATE A WEAPON FORGED A THOUSAND YEARS AGO BY DRAGONS? YOU THINK YOU CAN TRULY DISCERN THEIR MAGIC?"

"I will die trying if I have to."

"WHAT OF YOUR COMPANION?"

"She . . . she'll be safe."

"AND IF SHE EVER COMES BETWEEN YOU AND THAT WHICH YOU DESIRE?"

"I'll decide when that moment comes."

The daemon stared at him silently. What was he thinking? Was he going to kill Lan? Was he going to let him go? Or was he going to take on his help? Lan was pretty sure he knew the answer to that question.

"GO."

Lan started. "What?"

"GO." The doors started to swing open. Lan's bracers fell to the floor with a clatter. "GA'RUK." Ga'ruk stepped into the room. Lan glanced back to see the Eye still bowed down on the floor surrounded by the sarn guards. "TAKE HIM TO THE WIZARD CHAMBER."

"He is to stay, my Lord?" Ga'ruk asked.

"HE WILL BE TESTED ON THE FIELD OF BATTLE. THEN I WILL DECIDE."

"As you wish."

The weight of a thousand boulders suddenly lifted itself from Lan's shoulders. He was going to be given a chance to prove himself to the daemon. Dear Ohn he just may be able to pull all of this off after all. He followed Ga'ruk down the hall as the sarn guards dragged the Eye into the daemon's chamber. Though the daemon's intelligence still unnerved him, Lan breathed a bit more easily than he had before.

They walked in silence down maze-like corridors, all hewn from a strange red stone Lan had never seen used anywhere before. After seemingly endless twists and turns, they arrived at a silver door set into the wall. The same strange markings that were above Dariakus's head adorned it. Like the prison cell door, this one slid open as he and Ga'ruk approached.

"I'm sure I'll be back for you later," Ga'ruk said. "Try not to get lost if you get the urge to wander. Not everyone around here is as friendly as I am."

"I'll keep that in mind," Lan said as he stepped into the room. The door slid shut behind him.

The room was about as big as his room back in the university had been, a comfortable four by six stride rectangular shape, and was made of a dark black obsidian stone. There were no windows to give him a view of the outside of the palace. There was a small plaque just inside his room next to the door that glowed in the dim light. He reached out and touched it. The room was suddenly filled with a pale creamy light. He couldn't find the source of it anywhere. He supposed it could be the red ruby-looking thing embedded in the ceiling, but then, would that not make a *red* light?

There was a thick maroon rug covering most of the center of the floor, with a circle in the center divided into two halves. In one half was a symbolic bird and in the other a symbolic skull in profile. There was a desk and a chair, both made of the black stone, and a maroon cushion on the chair. A bed was built into the right wall from the entranceway, adorned with a thick mattress and maroon sheets that also had the bird-skull emblem on them.

There was a closet as well, full of various colored robes, shirts, and pants. Each robe bore the same symbol on the back, embroidered with maroon thread. Lan guessed this was the symbol of Dariakus. Something about it tickled the back of his mind, but he could not quite put it all together.

A maroon curtain beside the closet led to a washroom, complete with a full water basin and a stall. He dipped his hands into the cool water and splashed some on his face. "What have you gotten yourself into now," he sighed.

Lan flung his bag down on the rug and plopped down on the bed, lying back and staring at the odd ruby-like gem in the ceiling. He wondered if perhaps he had acted too soon and had

ended up getting himself in far deeper all at once than he ever planned on doing. *You did the right thing*, he tried to reassure himself. *You're doing this to get rid of the sarn, a plague to the world, and you may even be able to bring Dariakus down if you try. You've gotten wedged in the cracks, now you've just got to give it all and break the floodgates open. You can do this, Lan.*

He turned over on his side and looked down at the floor. Just barely sticking out of his bag was one of his mesefu language books. He remembered that the word on the outside of his door was ancient mesefu writing. He quickly got up, grabbed his book, and headed out into the hall. The door startled him when it opened as he approached it. He looked up and down the wide, column-lined hallway to see if anyone else was milling about as the door closed behind him. All he saw were the blood-red columns stretching seemingly forever in each direction.

Lan opened his book to the list of the mesefu symbols and began looking for the text. The facade of the door was rather plain, with a simple small plate off to one side that contained all sorts of strange markings, the largest of them being the ancient mesefu text. He scanned the list of the letters looking for matches, but came up with nothing.

He sat there in thought, trying to find the ancient characters in a list, when a loud noise resonated down the hallway and startled him. He dropped his book in shock. He looked both ways but could not find the source of the loud thrumming noise. It continued for a few more seconds, then stopped as suddenly as it had started. *It's definitely going to take some time getting used to this place.*

He picked up his book and continued his search. When he finally found the entry for the symbol on the door, his heart leaped into his throat. "Ohn," he marveled. "I'll be gods-damned if this doesn't say 'Ohn'." That was crazy. He had been lying to the crazed bounty hunter about the daemon being Ohn incarnate to keep her from killing him. And yet, here was evidence of what he had thought he'd made up staring him in the face. Did she recognize the word? Was that why she'd screamed so and fallen to the floor in worship? She could read the ancient text?

Why was this here? What connection did Dariakus have with mesefu religion? And why in archaic mesefu? This form of

writing had fallen out of use even well before Ethrakus had set foot on Kalra.

"Studying something?" The voice startled him. It was Ga'ruk, and with him was the bounty hunter. Her face was blank, her eyes stared at the floor, head bowed.

"What are you doing here?" Lan glared.

"I'm bringing you a friend," Ga'ruk said.

"She's staying with *me*?" Lan asked.

"Yes, and I suggest you not get too personal. There aren't any nurseries for a thousand leagues."

"Your wit never ceases to amaze, Ga'ruk."

"Say what you like." Ga'ruk took the bounty hunter by the arm and shoved her toward Lan. She fell limply into his arms as he dropped his book. "Take good care of her. We'll be needing the two of you, at least for human shields."

Ga'ruk turned and walked away, chuckling silently. Lan pulled the pale woman into his room and lay her on the . . . bed. *That bed is barely big enough for one person, much less two. I could sleep on the rug, I suppose . . .*

"So disillusioned . . ." The bounty hunter's moan caught him off guard. She was staring at the ceiling, unblinking, the only sign of life being her chest rising and falling with each slow breath.

"It's going to be okay," he said. He put his hand around her wrist. "I know this . . . must be hard on you. It's actually hard on me, believe it or not."

"Everything I've lived . . . is a lie . . ."

"No," he told her. "That's not true. Just because you never knew the truth doesn't mean anything is your fault. You know, now. It's time to make up for anything you think you've done wrong. Put the past behind you. Let it go."

"Yes . . ." she whispered. She turned and gazed into his eyes. "Let it go." She started to sit up. "Let it all go . . ." She reached up and put her arm around his neck and tried to pull him toward her. He pushed back.

"No," he said. "Not now, please. I'm too . . . disoriented, too overwhelmed by all of this."

"Shh." She lifted a finger and placed it over his lips. "Let it go," she said. "Let . . . it . . . go . . ." She pulled him down again.

He twisted free of her grasp and stood up, immediately pacing the rug.

"How can you think about that at a time like this?" he asked. That wasn't what upset him the most, however. He was afraid that he did, in fact, want to let himself go and get lost in her arms, her touch. It would be almost like Ria, he could imagine her, think of her soft caress, her beautiful small face, her sparkling almond-shaped eyes. But no, he could never do such a thing. It went against his every moral fiber. He could never share such intimacy with anyone but the person he truly loved.

"I need you," the Eye said. She slipped out of her vest and slowly started unbuttoning her dirty shirt. "I need to get lost in you, in your arms, your embrace. I need an escape, wizard. I need you."

Lan backed toward the door. "I told you, not now."

"Why?" she asked. "We have nobody but each other. There is no need to deny ourselves such pleasures anymore. We have finally found that one person meant for us, someone put on Kalra solely to be our mate, our friend, our lover."

"There are a million good reasons not to I can think of right now," he said. He scrambled to figure out what they were. "What if someone came to the door?"

"Tap the panel twice," she said, undoing the last button. He could see her pale flesh beneath from her neck to her waistline. He began to sweat. "It locks the door."

"How do you know that?"

She stood up and slowly walked toward him, the two sides of her shirt billowing behind her, daring to expose the small breasts beneath at any time. He could see small scars now on her chest and stomach. Dear Ohn what was he going to do?

She reached behind him and tapped the panel twice. There was a strange, high-pitched tone followed by a mechanical snap. She reached for his neck with one hand. "Take me, wizard," she said. "Let us consummate our relationship in servitude to Ohn Almighty."

"I really . . . think . . ."

She shot a hand to his crotch and squeezed tightly. He almost screamed. She tugged him back toward the bed with both hands firmly in place. "Take . . . me . . ." She pulled him down onto the bed with her.

Lan disconnected his mind from his body. He would give her what she wanted, he would keep her happy, compliant, trusting. He would distance himself mentally, concentrate on Ria, on vengeance, on Esmond, Porthos, his family, anything. Anything but giving himself to this crazed bounty hunter. He almost succeeded.

#

They stood side by side in the daemon's chamber now, hand in hand. Lan looked to her and she looked back. Their eyes met for only a fleeting moment, but in that moment their hour of passion came flooding back to him. He smiled. She returned the gesture.

Ga'ruk stood in front of them, facing the daemon. He had come for them not long after their passionate encounter had ended. "I HAVE CALLED YOU HERE TO DISCUSS MATTERS OF WAR. A FACTION OF NECROMANCERS HAS ENTERED OUR BORDERS WITH INTENTIONS OF ATTACKING. THEY HAVE BEEN IDENTIFIED AS THOSE WHO SIGNED AN ALLIANCE WITH US. THAT ALLIANCE HAS BEEN BROKEN, THEY HAVE MURDERED THEIR OWN LEADER." Dariakus looked down at Ga'ruk.

"I WANT YOU TO ORGANIZE A LEGION OF THE BEST TROOPS AVAILABLE TO US AND COORDINATE A STRIKE WITHIN TWO HOURS. THEY OBVIOUSLY COME WITH MALICIOUS INTENT AND WILL BE COMPLETELY ELIMINATED." The daemon turned to Lan and the Eye.

"YOU TWO WILL DIRECT HALF OF THE TROOPS. I HAVE HEARD OF YOUR SKILL AT YOUR CULTURE'S STRATEGIC GAMES, ALEXANDER, AND I HAVE SEEN THE FIGHTING SKILLS OF YOUR COMPANION." How did Dariakus know anything about Lan's Skirmish skills? This was getting to be too much. But he couldn't turn back now.

"WHAT DO YOU BEST SUGGEST AS A STRATEGY, GENERAL LANSING?"

Lan was at a loss for words. What could he do? What if the strategy he gave was a terrible one? Games of Skirmish didn't translate *that* directly into real-life combat skills . . . did they?

"We should definitely make a two-pronged attack," he said. "Perhaps . . . yes, that might work. Send the greater portion of the

troops with Ga'ruk, the seasoned general, around to the north of the necromancers. The Eye and myself will wait with a smaller decoy group and meet the necromancers head on. They'll think they've got us outnumbered when Ga'ruk will charge through a valley and catch them in the middle, with no way to run." He paused for a moment. "There *are* plateaus this far south, correct?"

"Yes," Ga'ruk grunted.

"Are there any the necromancers will have to pass between?"

"Yes, just northeast of the palace, but out of eyeshot."

"Good," Lan said. "We don't want them to know exactly how close they are. It could give them more motivation than they already have. Their motivation is our enemy. We must take whatever they have and crush it into the dust."

"YOUR STRATEGY PROVES ITSELF, ALEXANDER."

"Thank you, my Lord." Lan bowed. "We will be able to hold our own with my magic and her skills. However," he took a deep breath, "I'm a bit concerned about leading sarn."

"HOWSO?"

"They may not take to following two humans so readily," he said. The Eye nodded.

"THEY WILL OBEY YOU. THEY HAVE ALREADY BEEN INSTRUCTED TO DO SO, OR DIE PAINFULLY."

"As you wish, my Lord," Lan said.

"As you wish." The Eye bowed.

"ALL IS SET," said Dariakus. "GA'RUK, ASSEMBLE THE LEGION. YOUR PERSONAL TROOPS AT DOCK A, THE HUMANS' AT DOCK C. LEAD THEM TO DOCK C FIRST."

"Understood," said Ga'ruk.

Lan and the Eye nodded to the daemon, then to Ga'ruk, who led them from the room and into the maze of side-halls that sprawled throughout the palace.

#

A few minutes later, Lan and the Eye stood in the large room known as Dock C.

"This resembles no dock I have ever seen," the Eye said.

"It's very large," Lan observed. The room was not so much high as wide. The far walls were almost too far away to see. They

were made of unpolished granite and weren't cracked or seamed anywhere. If the rest of the palace was any indication, there could be a thousand doors in every wall and Lan would never know until they opened.

Lan stood in the pale light from the gems in the black ceiling, reading over pages from the copy of the *Gilanthril* his mother had given him. It was still in very good condition, despite all it had been through. Its thin pages had not begun to show even the first signs of wear. He was reading the original mesefu text and not the human translations. It was difficult for him, but in certain ways, translating had always calmed and soothed him, which was why he was doing it now. Soon, Ga'ruk would arrive and they would begin their march to the necromancers. He would be leading hundreds of sarn into the heat of battle.

Necromancers. Esmond joined that necromancy cult . . . the Night? I wonder if he's with the necromancers that are coming to attack us? Surely not, he tried to reassure himself. *Esmond wouldn't get himself tied up in something like this.*

What would I do if I did come up against him? Would I fight? Would I run? Would I just sit back and let someone else attack him? I . . . I don't know what I would do. Probably try to talk some sense into him and tell him to get out of the battle before he got killed. Would I protect him, though? Yes. I'd make sure he got away safely if he listened to me. As much as we've quarreled in the past, there's no reason to be getting killed over any of it.

Yes, Esmond, one day I'm going to fix everything. I can't do it alone, and I know you'd love to help me study the Darksearer and attempt to make replicas to arm entire armies. Even Ria would help, he thought, rubbing the *krea* beneath the black robe he wore, one of the many from his closet. *I just can't ever let her know what I've done. She would never forgive me.*

Lan sighed and continued reading through the *Gilanthril*.

"Why do you read such heathen filth?" the Eye asked.

"It helps to know one's enemy," he replied. "How did you know what the writing said over Dariakus's head, and on our chamber door?"

"Writing?" She stared at him questioningly.

"The word written above the daemon's head. 'Ohn'. You understood that, right?"

"It doesn't say Ohn," she laughed. "It says *Secula Orum*."

"It says *what?*" Lan had never heard any language that sounded like that before.

"*Secula Orum,*" she repeated.

"What does that mean?"

"I . . . I'm not sure," she said. "I just know that is what it says. Ohn has told me in my mind."

"He speaks to you in your mind?"

"Not really speaks," she clasped a hand around his wrist. "I get feelings from Him."

"I see."

What could she possibly know that she wasn't telling him? He would have to find out. But if she truly didn't know . . .

He turned his attention back to the mesefu holy book to take his mind off of this sudden complexity in his life. "If you remember," he said without looking up, "please let me know."

"You will eventually know all my secrets," she said, caressing his arm. "And I will know all of yours."

Lan shrugged off her second sentence. He read aloud.

"Gal issomake karo te kagie wes kara lonae, ke zhelan. Gal nanomake karo te kagie wes kara lonae, kes sainerai allien o karo gel kes idto kara mila. Sheb gal selomake karo te kagie wes kara lonae o te isses, te y pathos nubumizhela, u y pathos te nubumizhela."

"Hmm," he pondered. "I know that, I think. 'When one man says that you're a fool brush him aside. When two men say that you're a fool, wave them on and watch which way they go. But when a hundred men say you are foolish and you find yourself all alone, then you have lost the road, or the road has lost you.'"

"You cannot trust mesefu wisdom," the Eye said.

"Not always," he sighed. "Not always."

A large doorway across from them opened, letting in the morning sun from outside. Ga'ruk stood on the other side bedecked in his combat armor, hundreds of battle-ready sarn standing behind him in ranks. The time had come. Dear Ohn, the time had come.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

"I can't do this." Lan gazed over the restless *sarn* troops, fearing they would turn on him and the Eye at any second and rip the flesh from their bones.

"You don't have to do anything," Ga'ruk said. "They know their orders. They know who's really in charge." He grinned, flashing his tarnished yellow teeth. "Don't worry, they won't hurt either of you. Not on purpose, at least."

"Do not fear, wizard," the Eye said, putting her hand on Lan's shoulder. "We all serve Almighty Ohn together, seeking to exact vengeance on the sinful and Cleanse the worthy. I am disillusioned no longer. You have shown me the light. They will not harm us."

Ga'ruk gestured at the Eye. "You should have her optimism." He walked up close to Lan and the Eye. "Don't let them know you're scared enough to wet your robe and you may come out of this alive. You're both only here as balance and backup. Don't forget that."

"Balance?" Lan wondered what there could possibly be to mediate in combat.

"You have a lot to learn about life," Ga'ruk said.

"I know what balance is, *sarn*." Lan stressed the last word threateningly. "What do we need to balance?"

"You're a wizard," Ga'ruk said. "They're wizards. You deal with their magicking, we'll deal with their dying."

"And who's to protect me from them?"

Ga'ruk pointed at the Eye. She nodded in acknowledgement.

"Assuming she lives through this," Ga'ruk said.

"I can care for myself," she retorted.

"You've never been in combat. It's not what you greens think it is." Ga'ruk sighed. "Some of us won't be coming back today. Pray to your gods that you're some of the lucky few." He paused a moment. "Though I can't say we'd mourn your loss. I've had a craving for human flesh recently."

"Then take your pick of the necromancers, because we won't be among the casualties today."

Ga'ruk smiled. "You never cease to amaze me, Alexander. We march! They know the location, let them lead." He turned, saluted the troops to be traveling with Lan and the Eye, shouted something in the guttural sarn tongue, then strode off toward his own legion of troops.

"Are you ready?" Lan asked the Eye.

"I am always ready," she replied. "I will keep you safe, my love. Fear not."

Lan cringed in his mind. *My love*. He would never be her love. Whatever he could do to appease her, to keep her on his side, he would give her. But she could never have his mind, his love. He was saving that for the one person who loved him from her heart and not her insane delusions.

"I need a staff," he said suddenly. "None if this is right without a staff." Where had his traveling staff gotten off to? Somewhere in the chaos of the past few months he had lost several important things. His staff was but one of the lesser.

"After our divine victory this morning, I shall find you the greatest staff in all the land." The Eye reached for his hand.

"No." He brushed her aside. "Affection is a sign of weakness in combat. We must stand strong . . . my love." He wanted to keep her away from him, but not to turn her away. Adding the words 'my love' had been easier than he thought it would. That unnerved him.

"Then let us show our affection for one another on the battlefield." She nodded at him and began marching toward the light that led to the outside where the sarn troops were forming ranks to march.

"Yes," he said to himself. "This is it. It all begins right here."

#

The necromancers had been walking for less than an hour in the misty morning. Gehensia lay out of sight to the southwest, less than two hours' march away. By the time the sun reached high noon, Esmond knew that he would likely be enwrapped in a violent battle with sarn legions, undead as his only weapons. The terrifying thought of bloody combat almost made him want to flee. Almost.

Lan's out here somewhere, he told himself. I can't leave him here to die. He's my friend, by Ohn, and I'll do whatever it takes to get him out of here alive.

But what about Gaelyn? Do I want to subject her to this? We could both die out here today, then what good would any of this be? I haven't even asked her what she thinks of all of this. Everything's just been so hectic.

"Gaelyn," he started. "We don't have to do this. We can leave right now--"

"I'm fine," she said. "Everything's going to be fine. You're going to protect me, and they're going to protect us, and we'll find Lan and Ria if she's here, then we'll all go home and forget about all of this."

Esmond cracked a half-smile. "I love you, Gaelyn."

"I love you too, Esmond. I know how much Lan means to you. I want to help you find him." She took his hand in hers. "It's the least I can do to make up for everything I've done."

"You don't have to try," he said. "I'll always love you."

They marched off silently into the slowly dissipating fog, arm in arm.

#

The view of the palace of Gehensia sprawling out behind him took Lan's breath away. He had never seen the outside of the place until now, and he never could have imagined the sheer size of it from within.

Stabbing through the center of the palace to pierce the very sky was a sleek, wide black obelisk whose top was nearly lost in the grey haze of the sky. The sloping top was ringed with bright red lights that shone down on the surrounding ridges, scouring their surfaces and occasionally sweeping over the pass the troops were marching through.

The palace itself was made of the blackest obsidian with traces of white swirls that gave it the appearance of a rare, dark marble. The front of the palace ran along the front of the obelisk and nearly a half league further in either direction, disappearing into the morning mist. Gigantic columns, also made of the obsidian stone, each several hundred strides tall, lined the palace. In the shadows atop the large staircase in front of the obelisk Lan could just make out a tiny pair of doors. He knew those were normal size. The sheer scale of the palace was astounding. Even the large room they had come from--Dock C--looked like a tiny scratch in the side of the palace foundation from here.

On the wall that hung above the staircase was emblazoned the daemon's symbol, glowing brightly, shedding a pale crimson light down onto the stairs below.

"It's amazing," Lan uttered. "It's the most amazing thing I've ever seen. It's so . . . enormous."

"It is only an obelisk." The Eye didn't turn back as she walked onward.

"Only an obelisk? It's huge!"

"It's an obelisk. Come, my love, divine destiny awaits."

Lan took one last long gaze at the palace, trying to take it all in. How could anyone not be amazed by such a wonder? Surely this palace had taken centuries to build . . . how long had Dariakus truly been on Kalra? This was obviously not a recent construction. He took a deep breath. This may be the last time he'd ever get to see such a thing.

I wonder if this is what Altkrea looks like? I've heard it's huge, but could it be any more impressive than this?

He shook his head and continued following the Eye. He would win this battle today. He would survive. The necromancers would be destroyed . . .

Dear Ohn, do I want this on my hands? Do I want to know that I am responsible for the deaths of others? *If you don't do this now, how many others will die at the hands of the daemon or the sarn in the long run? The welfare of a century is more important than the welfare of the moment. Through death, you can bring life.* It was time for his true purpose in life to begin.

#

Gaelyn had not slept much during the previous night. She walked alongside Esmond, southward toward Gehenisia. She was walking into a battle she did not care about. How foolish was she? She had only wanted to join the necromancers to be with Esmond. And now look where that had gotten her!

At least Esmond has forgiven me, she told herself, reaching out to hold Esmond's hand as they walked. He squeezed it tightly. He was just as afraid of what they were walking into as she was.

She felt a tingle in her lower stomach. Their child was there, growing rapidly. There were maybe five or six more months at most before the child would be born. Gaelyn had managed to hide it beneath the necromancer robes that felt so out of place on her skin. She was used to shirts and breeches--the robe seemed too constraining. How could anyone expect to run in one of these?

She felt Esmond was suspicious of what she was hiding, and once they found Lan and escaped from this ordeal, she would tell him everything . . . but should she tell him now? They may not live-

No, she thought. *He's got too much to worry about right now. I'll tell him afterward.*

But what about the child? She couldn't fight carrying a child. She would have to stay in the back lines and flee as soon as things started looking grim. Or perhaps she should flee as soon as the battle began, in all the confusion?

I don't want to leave Esmond, though, she thought. *I can't leave him! He's going to protect me! And not with his child--our child. Dear Ohn, what am I going to do?*

Esmond was gazing silently into the western sky. Though the sun had broken the horizon, a few faint traces of stars could still be seen off to the west. The only constellation she could make out was the seven-starred Dina, ancient human goddess of love. The old human religions were naught but mythologies these days, stored in thick books on dusty shelves in dark libraries.

Dina, goddess of love, she began. *I know you're not real, but all the same I pray to you. I pray for no harm to come to either Esmond or myself and pray that, in case we are separated somehow, we eventually find one another, safely and happily. Thank you.*

Shedding silent tears, Gaelyn continued gazing at the constellation as it faded out in the rising sunlight until it could be seen no more. Time was growing short.

#

What were those two humans waiting on? Ga'ruk had been in position for over a quarter-hour, his scouts had returned with word that the necromancers would soon be entering the pass, and Lan and the bounty hunter were nowhere in sight. *I know my troops, he reassured himself. They'll come, even if those two back down.*

Why did Dariakus keep them around? Was it magic? Dariakus was far more powerful than any magic. But if that were true, why didn't Dariakus personally attend any of these battles? Did he truly fear the blade that much? These necromancers didn't have the blade, Ga'ruk felt sure of that. The daemon always seemed to know more about the situation than anyone could, however. Perhaps there was something about these necromancers Dariakus feared.

But if Dariakus fears anything, why do I pledge my life to him?

Ga'ruk sometimes wondered if he had made the right decision in joining with Dariakus when the daemon had appeared and fought back his enemies for him all those years ago. At the time, the majority of the sarn tribes were at war--Dariakus had wanted them unified, and with his power and Ga'ruk's charisma and leadership, the unification finally became a reality.

Where would he be if not for Dariakus? I submitted to his awesome power because I saw the chance to finally unite my people for a single cause. Dariakus had provided for him when he thought all was lost. The daemon had unified his people against a common threat. He would live to see his plan to fruition. Today was just another small step toward that. He had made the right decision.

#

Lan and the Eye walked at the front of the troops. A scout had reported that the necromancers were just around the next plateau. It was almost time to strike. He had walked slowly toward this moment, knowing that there would be death.

What if Esmond was here? Esmond was a necromancer now. *He's not here, Lan. There are hundreds of necromancers. Even if these are some from the cult Esmond ran off to join, it doesn't mean he's here. You've got far more important things to concentrate on for now.*

"They approach." The Eye pointed toward the far bend of the pass between the two high plateaus. "Ohn shall cleanse their vile presence from Kalra this very day. Prepare yourself, my love. We go to absolve."

With a grunt of self-loathing, Lan closed his eyes and made a silent prayer for everything to go smoothly today. The time had come.

#

They approached the pass in lined formation. Scouts had spied a small legion of sarn around the next plateau. Esmond, Gaelyn, and Fallon were in the front. They had been marching in formation for no more than five minutes when Esmond spied two figures in the distance, rounding a plateau. One was shrouded in pitch black, the other seemed to radiate the white light of the heavens in perfect contrast.

"Fallon!" he said.

"What is it?" Fallon stared staunchly ahead.

"Up there," he explained, pointing toward the plateau.

"I don't see anything."

"There's someone coming around the plateau." Esmond's stomach started to churn. *Birds*, came his mother's voice. *Just breathe deeply and slowly, close your eyes, and try to think of something pleasant.*

He couldn't think of anything pleasant, however, knowing that there were sarn up ahead and two strange figures, the light and the darkness. Soon they would be in battle with the sarn warriors and there would be undead bursting forth from the ground in droves, their putrid stench pervading every bit of the morning air.

"Yes, I see--"

"What?" Esmond looked at Fallon. The man's mouth hung slightly open, halfway around his next word. The sound hit Esmond's ears, a sound that could never be mistaken for anything but what it was--marching. The vibrations from hundreds of feet hitting the ground shook Esmond's legs . . . and they were coming from the direction of the contrasting figures.

"They're here," Fallon breathed.

As Esmond turned to look back at the mysterious approaching figures, he saw one of the most harrowing sights he had ever seen. Behind them stood hundreds of green-skinned

warriors dressed in a wide variety of shiny metals, taut leather, and white plates that looked like bone from this distance. They wielded spears, swords, and a wide array of polearms and clubs. They slowed as they approached. Esmond started to shiver as the blood rushed out of his face. He grabbed his robe and squeezed until his nails dug into his palms. There were easily over two hundred sarn coming around that plateau.

"*Esmond* . . ." Gaelyn uttered.

"Oh dear Ohn," he muttered to himself.

"I don't think even he can help you now," replied Fallon.

"Should we call for a defensive position to be taken?" a necromancer asked.

"Not yet. They seem to be slowing down. I can't tell for sure, but they don't look like they are going to attack. Sarn would never slow down. Just to be safe, send word to the back lines to tighten defense there. I don't trust any of this."

"Yes sir." The necromancer nodded and ran off to the group of necromancers in the back. The sarn had slowed to a near-crawl. The dark and light figures continued onward, and . . .

It was Lan, and a pale, platinum-haired woman he had never seen before. She was definitely not Ria. Esmond had to be mistaken. He closed his eyes tight until he felt tears forming and opened them again. Lan was even more recognizable now.

"Esmond, is that . . . is that Lan?"

"Dear Ohn please don't let it be him. This is a trick, this has to be a trick."

Esmond had to be hallucinating. Lan would never fight on the side of the sarn. He would never end up in a place like this. Sarn never mingled with humans or mesefu. What on Kalra . . .

Fallon stepped forward to speak with the two as they approached. Esmond stepped forward also, trying to get a much better look and convince himself that it was not his friend.

"Esmond, what are you doing?" Gaelyn asked.

"Just stay here. I've got to find out what in Ohn's name he's thinking." Esmond walked on, leaving Gaelyn behind with the other necromancers.

When he got close enough to the dark-robed figure to clearly see details on his face, there could be no mistaking him for anyone other than Lan.

"Greetings, necromancer," came Lan's voice, only it was not Lan's tone. A cold darkness Esmond had never heard before dominated it.

"We have come to offer righteous absolution." The platinum female beside Lan had her hand on a coiled leather whip at her waist.

Not being able to restrain himself, Esmond burst forward. "Lan! What are you doing over there? What's going on?"

Lan did not so much as glance at him. It was as if he had forgotten who Esmond was. The pale woman gripped her whip tighter.

"Esmond--" started Fallon.

"Lan, talk to me! You know who I am. What's happened to you? Who's she?" The woman glared at him. "What are they doing?" He gestured wildly at the sarn behind Lan and the strange woman. Lan kept his eyes fixed on Fallon and did not waver.

"Esmond! To the back ranks *now!*" Fallon pointed angrily back toward the other necromancers. "This is not the time."

"I'm sorry," he mumbled. "It's all my fault, isn't it?" A tear streamed down his cheek. What was Lan doing? Why was he working with the sarn? Was he perhaps working as a spy? Was that why he refused to acknowledge him? It didn't feel right, though. Lan would never do anything like that . . . would he?

I've got to find out, he told himself. He stood silently watching the meeting, trying to devise a plan to get Lan out of this wretched place.

#

The first person he had seen was Esmond. Even before his friend had recognized him, he'd picked him out of the crowd of necromancers. Somehow, he had almost expected him to be here. His emotions were struggling to come to the surface, but he forced them down. For a brief second he wanted to run to his friend and the both of them escape from everything, but he couldn't turn his back on this chance to make everything right.

Once again, he detached his emotions from his body and hid them out of the way. He had work to do. Esmond would come out of this alive. He would see to it.

"Turn back, necromancer." He spoke in as commanding a voice as he could muster.

"We march to Gehenisia," spoke the robed man who stood before him. "You will let us pass." There was a small scar on his scraggly chin, and his thick brown hair fell down to his shoulders. It looked as if it had not been cleaned in weeks. A streak of grey gave him a very distinctive look. The dark robe the man wore was similar to the one Lan wore now, only darker.

"You will not pass," Lan said. "As you can plainly see, we are many, you are few. If you turn back now, you can prevent this bloodshed. You have trespassed. I give you this one chance. Your forces are weak and tired. I leave their fates in your hands."

"We will pass," the necromancer insisted, "or you will die."

Lan looked over the group of about twenty necromancers carefully. They were a mixed lot of men and women, but none of them looked very threatening. Near the front of the group he could see Esmond talking to a red-headed girl with her hood drawn back--Gaelyn.

They're both here--

A trumpet sounded in the distance--Ga'ruk had arrived.

"That is the sound of your death," the Eye said. She gestured behind the necromancers toward the sound. Already the battle cries of sarn could be heard in the distance.

"Yes," the necromancer growled, his eyes aflame. "Your own." He signaled something to the necromancers behind him and they all outstretched their arms. The ground began rumbling, shaking violently. Lan thought he would lose his balance. The Eye stumbled.

The earthen ground of the Wastes erupted into chaos around the necromancers as hundreds of skeletal corpses burst free of their dank graves, wielding weapons they had died holding onto.

Lan shivered at the sight of the undead. He had never in his life seen such horrific parodies of life. They were in various stages of decay, some mere skeletons held together by rotting tendons, others covered in dark blue-grey skin. They walked as if they were marionettes on strings, but there were no strings to be seen. He had grossly underestimated how powerful necromancy could be.

There was nothing else he could do. The sarn behind him were preparing to strike. With a violent mental push he severed his emotional ties altogether and raised his hands into the air.

"ATTACK!" he shouted. The sarn charged toward the necromancers and the legion of lumbering undead that had sprung up around them. The Eye uncoiled her whip and lashed out at an approaching skeleton, cracking it's arm with a hollow snap.

A wave of sarn warriors charged past him and the Eye, screaming and shouting war cries, swinging sword, axe, and flail. Lan braced himself to keep from getting trampled.

"Traitor," accused the necromancer. "Traitor to mankind, traitor to Kalra!"

The sarn clashed with the undead, grunting and snarling. The living necromancers encircled themselves behind the ranks of undead, using them as a buffer against the sarn. Ga'ruk's men were starting to come into view on the opposite side of the undead forces.

Sarn after sarn charged past Lan, some of them glancing at him awkwardly, wondering why he was just standing there. *They're right, you know. You're one of them now, Lan. Time to start acting like it.* He took a deep breath, clearing his mind of all thoughts, and began to unleash his spells of destruction.

#

Gaelyn watched as the ground at Esmond's feet erupted and an undead warrior climbed out into the morning. She backed away, a bit frightened at seeing Esmond raise the creature.

She looked away toward the northeast. A large force of sarn--larger than the ones blocking their southern route--came around it, preparing to attack. They had been surrounded. Hundreds of undead burst from the ground all around and quickly encircled the necromancers to shield them from the coming attack.

They had found Lan--it seemed obvious he didn't want to be saved. Had he been working with the enemy all this time? Had his kindness toward her when she'd confessed her treason been a facade? There was no time to contemplate, and no time to find him and ask. If she did not get out of here fast, she would not only lose her own life, but the life she and Esmond had created.

"Esmond!" she shouted at him over the roar of chaos. "We've got to get out of here!"

"I can't go anywhere!" he replied. "I've got to save Lan! Ohn knows why he's with the blessed sarn, but I've got to talk some sense into him!"

"If we stay here we'll die!" Gaelyn struggled to be heard over the rush of oncoming sarn.

"Not if I have anything to say about it." Esmond pulled his robe tight around himself. "Now, stay close. I'll protect you. I won't let anything happen to you, Gaelyn. I promise."

"Esmond, I . . ." She wiped her hands across her eyes then shook fists at the ground. "I'm with child, Esmond."

His jaw dropped open. His hands fell to his side as he stared at her, gaping. "You . . . you're . . ."

"Yes," she said. The sarn were closing in quickly. The front ranks of undead clashed with the rugged warriors in a clang of swords on swords, metal on bone. "I meant to tell you earlier, but you were so angry, and I didn't know how you'd react!"

"Dear Ohn!" he shouted. He ran up to her, embraced her. He squeezed her tight and planted a warm kiss on her forehead. "This is so amazing!" Gaelyn had never seen such a smile on Esmond's face. It virtually shone through the stubble of beard that had grown around it on their long trip. "We've *got* to get you out of here! Come with me, we're going to find a way out of this mess, and make one if we have to."

"What about Lan?" she asked, panicking.

Esmond said nothing. He grabbed her arm and bolted toward one of the plateaus. The undead he had raised slowly shambled after them.

They streaked through the necromancers and undead locked into combat with the sarn troops. Bones splintered and cracked under sarn axes. Sarn wailed in agony as rusty scimitars dug into their flesh. The smell of death was unbearable. She gagged several times as she ran.

She felt a jolt in her right arm and was forcefully spun around. Her arm was torn free of Esmond's hand. She cried out for him as she fell to the ground, but only half his name came out before the collision knocked the air knocked from her. As she gasped for breath, she felt around her upper arm to see what had happened. She felt a wide gash on her forearm. Something had grazed her and slashed it open. It wasn't bleeding profusely, but just the slightest jar would tear it completely open. She clenched her jaw tightly and cursed under her breath. She had to survive. She had to find Esmond.

Slowly, she rose to a knee. A sarn fell over her back and tried to use her to raise himself. He shoved her forcefully back into the ground, face-first. A large, dry clod of dirt filled her mouth--she spat the salty mess out as quickly as she could. A wet mixture of saliva and grit trickled down her chin. She could no longer feel her right arm. Slowly, painfully, she pulled herself to her feet. She thought it would be the last thing she ever did.

An undead warrior drove its corroding blade between the sarn's shoulders. After writhing in agony, the sarn who had fallen over her slipped out of this world and collapsed limply onto the ground. Almost immediately his corpse rose from its death to begin fighting on the necromancers' side. Arrows and swords came at her from all directions. Sarn broke through the front ranks of undead and passed by her, mistaking her for dead as they charged headstrong into the ranks of necromancers. Hundreds more of the green-skinned warriors were entering the fray by the minute. The necromancers were going to die.

#

Esmond stopped cold in his tracks amidst the confusion of battle. He had lost Gaelyn. He turned around to see what had torn her away from him but he couldn't see her through the battling troops. Esmond took a deep breath and charged into the melee of undead and sarn, brandishing a dagger from beneath his robe to swing at anything that came near him. He ordered his meager undead to protect him at all costs.

To his left, an undead troop slashed across a sarn's stomach, the sarn's entrails spilling out onto the ground in a steaming bloody mess. The sarn squealed and grasped at his intestines as if to put them back in. His knees hit the ground and blood gushed forth from his mouth. With a final grunt, the sarn fell face forward to the ground.

On his right, Esmond saw a group of sarn attacking a single undead. There were three of the green-skinned warriors, but the undead fought back as well as any of them. It blocked two sword swings at once with a dusty round shield and lashed out at one of the third sarn. Before the sarn could strike back, they were assaulted from behind by even more of the decaying warriors. The sarn fell quickly, but before they could hit the ground they jerked

unnaturally, spun around, and righted themselves. Immediately they began attacking other sarn.

This had to be a dream. Esmond froze. Death could come at any moment from any direction. He stood, mouth agape, trying to get a grip on reality.

A loud whir shook him from his stupor. He looked toward the sound and saw a bolt of light shooting through the air, arcing down toward him. Esmond shouted and dove to the ground. The bolt zipped overhead and hit the ground no more than a couple of strides away. A bright flash and boom sent hundreds of bone fragments and with several necromancers and sarn warriors into the air with a shower of dirt, blood, and rock. The world became a silent chaos.

Esmond stared in frozen terror as the rain of bone, blood and dirt descended on him. One of the necromancers flying through the air was missing an arm. It landed at Esmond's side with a sickening slush. He froze, his joints rigid as steel. A warm spray flecked his face. He couldn't contemplate wiping the gore away.

He saw his undead shuffling back and forth aimlessly in the distance through the carnage. Why was it not protecting him as he'd ordered it? He tried giving the order again. He sighed as the undead shuffled off into the wild cloud of battle. Esmond looked toward the last place he'd seen Gaelyn to see more sarn coming in from around the plateau.

"Archers!" shouted Fallon from somewhere in the fray behind Esmond. "Above! Shoot them down! Shoot the archers down!"

Esmond stood and bolted away from the plateau as the necromancers around him loosed balls of lightning and fire at the archers overhead. He spotted a clearing in the melee and ducked into it. Undead and sarn fought in a bloody fray all around him. They could close in on him at any minute. There was no way out of this.

Another blast erupted on his right, throwing him to the ground. He rolled to his side and came face to face with one of the necromancers. She lay still in a small morass of blood and dirt, her neck bent back awkwardly. Esmond bellowed a cry of despair. He drew his legs up close to his chest and squinted his eyes shut,

hoping that when he opened them this would all be gone. When he opened them he saw his undead looking down at him with its small, dark eye sockets and moldy face.

Esmond kicked it in frustration. It staggered backward a few paces then came back. He did not care to expend the energy to destroy it. He only wanted to find Gaelyn and keep her from ending up like the mangled necromancer who lay beside him.

He rose to his feet, dusted himself off, tightened his grip on his dagger, and set off once more into the maddening chorus of clangs and screams.

#

Lan found it far too easy to fire explosive bolts into the crowd, indiscriminately killing undead and necromancers alike. So long as he did not see the people he was killing he could stomach it.

A group of undead charged at him but before he had to magically intervene, the Eye lashed them to bone splinters with a crack of her whip. She circled the fray around him, lashing out at anything that so much as looked in his direction. Her skills were remarkable. Nothing had gotten past her. Yet.

Void. His mind, void. It was the only way to remain sane. Another bolt flew from his hand. He saw only the void--empty, serene. Not even the sound of his magical blast and the ensuing screaming and shouting shook him from the void.

"Archers! Above!" shouted one of the necromancers. Lan looked up to see the sarn archers atop the plateau readying their bows to rain death over the battle. "Shoot them down! Shoot the archers down!"

Bolts of bright light shot out of the crowd toward the plateau's top. As they flew toward their targets, Lan noticed several undead slump over for a moment, but immediately jerk back upright and continue fighting. The necromancers had to release control of the undead to cast their spells.

Several of the bolts slammed into the sarn archers and knocked them over backward. A few of the magical shots missed and flew harmlessly over the archers' heads, while others slammed into the plateau wall and sent a spray of dirt and rock out over the chaos. One of the archers tumbled down the plateau. As he rolled, numerous magical bolts from the necromancers blasted him. He

was a charred husk by the time he hit the shadowed ground at the base of the plateau.

"My love, your left!" The Eye's shout grabbed Lan's attention from the archers. He looked over his right shoulder and spied someone advancing down his flank. He instinctively loosed another magical bolt. It struck the ground with a loud, shuddering explosion that threw another cloud of dust, bone, and blood up into the air. Lan noticed a rogue arm flying off into the carnage and the necromancer it belonged to crashing down into a crowd of skeletal warriors. The gore rolled off his mind. The void. It was his only way to survive.

#

Gaelyn looked about frantically. Nowhere in the chaos could she find Esmond. She watched in terror as a sarn archer tumbled down the plateau wall and was blasted into ashes. *That could be me! I've got to get out of here!*

"Look who's here," a guttural voice said behind her. She turned to see Ga'ruk, the one person she feared the most, standing before her. "I didn't expect to see you again so soon."

A blood-curdling scream erupted from her throat as she turned to run. All she could think about was Esmond and their unborn child. They had to stay safe. She had to survive. Before she could take the first step the sarn had grabbed her wrist. She pulled away nonetheless, wincing as the burning tendons in her arm stretched and contorted. With a violent jerk she slammed violently into the sarn's metal breastplate. Tears immediately poured from her eyes.

"You let me down, bitch," growled Ga'ruk

"Get the *fuck* away from me!" She kicked his shin violently but he didn't even flinch. She screamed, her voice gargling in her throat. She twisted her wrist against his grip and beat on his large green hand with her free one. He stomped forcefully on one of her feet and squeezed her wrist until it snapped. She screamed as her vision blurred and her wrist flared.

"No more of that." He dropped her to the ground and stared down at her, sword drawn. Gaelyn thrust her undamaged foot into his unprotected left knee. she was too fast for him. Ga'ruk grunted and stumbled forward, dropping his sword. She

scrambled to stand but he knocked her legs out from under her and straightened himself.

"You let the half-breed escape. You had all morning that day to tell someone, but no. You'd rather live in fear than confess the truth." Ga'ruk leaned toward her and pointed at a scar on the left side of his face. "*This* is your fault." She tried to crawl back from him but he planted his foot on the leg of her pants. She struggled to pull out of them. "Time to pay for your insolence. I bet your flesh is delicious. I like them young."

Ga'ruk swung his sword down at her and she rolled to attempt to get out of the way. She heard her pants rip apart as she tried to dodge the blow. The sword grazed her wounded arm and the pain spiraled her vision the rest of the way into darkness. She saw nothing, and heard only a muted murmur, as if her head were underwater and people were shouting at her.

Her vision cleared enough to see Ga'ruk raise his sword again before she felt another sharp blow on her leg and everything faded once more. She'd never be able to run with a wounded leg. There was no escape.

She distantly heard Ga'ruk shout, and thought it was followed by quick, heavy footsteps. Her last thought before she drifted away was of her child. *Dione, Dione, why did you let me down?*

#

Esmond saw Fallon and a horde of undead assaulting a group of sarn. Esmond's own undead sauntered along behind him. Another magical blast flew from some unknown direction toward Fallon. The necromancer tried to duck behind a group of undead but the blast was too powerful. It struck the ground right at Fallon's feet and the explosion sent him flying backward in a misty spray of blood and ash. Esmond cried out in distress as he saw Fallon fly into pieces before his eyes and rain across the battlefield. He clenched his stomach and doubled over. Lan had done that. Nobody else on the sarn's side had magic. The entire world was falling apart--he'd lost both of the people he cared about the most. He forced the nausea away and stood, determined to get at least one of them back.

#

Gaelyn came to her senses and shot upright. She was sitting on the ground, surrounded by fallen skeletons, necromancers, and

sarn. Most of the fighting raged on south of her, with scattered pockets all around. Ga'ruk was nowhere to be seen. Something must have happened to him and taken his attention away from her. He probably thought she could not flee far with a hurt leg and arm. She vowed to prove him wrong.

Gaelyn tried to stand but her leg was too weak. A loud blast shook her attention to the battle and she saw another of the explosions that had been coming at random intervals. Large pieces of an ornately embroidered robe that could only be Fallon's flew through the air and fluttered to the ground. She cried out in anguish.

Their leader was dead. Esmond had been torn away from her, lost in the surrounding chaos. The necromancers would eventually retreat or die. Ga'ruk would eventually return for her. She knew that the next time she saw Ga'ruk would be the last.

Desperate to get away from the battle as quickly as possible, she began crawling along the ground, pulling herself with her good arm, leaving a trail of blood as she went. Each time she stretched out her good arm, the tendons in her shoulders pulled on the damaged one and she gritted her teeth to keep from crying out. Both of her legs had gone numb, as had everything from her chest down. Though every little bit she moved hurt more than the worst torture she could imagine, it also took her a little farther away from the chaos.

He could have killed me easily, she thought. He had the perfect chance, and all he did was torment me. He doesn't just want me dead. He wants to watch me suffer first.

The sun broke out from the darkening grasp of a few grey clouds as she inched her way back toward the plateau. It shone down on her and almost immediately she felt its heat burning into her skin. She felt it most in her wounded arm, which--unlike her leg--was refusing to go numb and let her forget the pain. She bit down hard on her tongue to distract her mind from the real pain and trudged slowly onward.

#

Esmond shrieked as a leather coil snapped painfully around his wrist from seemingly nowhere. Blood welled up around the whip immediately. He twisted his wrist free and looked over to see the platinum-haired woman who had accompanied Lan preparing

to strike at him again. He silently cursed himself for coming into this battle so unprepared. There were so many magical studies he should have undertaken before running off to join the necromancers. He could barely protect himself now, especially with Fallon gone.

"My love!" the whip-wielding woman cried out. Esmond twirled around and came eye to eye with Lan.

"Get out of here, gods-damn you!" Lan shouted at him but there was no emotion in his face at all. It was completely blank. "You'll be killed!"

Esmond felt a small wave of hope. Lan recognized him after all.

"Lan! Come with me! This is crazy!"

"There's nothing out there for me, Esmond. We've gone our own separate ways now."

"My love, he's a necromancer, beware!" The platinum-haired woman rushed up to Lan's side, whip at the ready.

"You killed Fallon, Lan! Don't you see what you're doing?"

"What is going on here?" the woman asked.

"Nothing," Lan said, flatly. "Go away, Esmond. Now."

Esmond grabbed for Lan's robe. He had gotten this close to him by pure chance, but he now that he was here, he refused to leave Lan to this insanity. Lan had to come along--by choice, or by force.

"No!" The woman lashed out at Esmond but strangely the whip stopped in mid-strike. Her jaw dropped in disbelief.

"Go." Lan took a deep breath.

"Is this your revenge thinking?" Esmond asked. "I don't see how that got you to fighting alongside sarn, but--"

Lan flicked his wrist out toward Esmond and unleashed a magical bolt. Esmond ducked and heard the sound of a sarn screaming behind him as the bolt exploded. Esmond jerked around and saw the green-skinned soldier fall and roll back into the melee. He secretly thought that Lan had shot the sarn intentionally to save him.

"Lan, let's go! Let go of whatever led you here and come with me. We can get away from all this war, this killing. We can live somewhere else--anywhere else. You'll never even have to see another--"

"Allow me to end his senseless breathing." The woman stepped toward Esmond. Lan stepped forward between her and Esmond, but looked at neither of them. Lan was trying to protect him.

"I know you care, Lan. I'm not blind, I'm not a fool. Come with me, gods-damn it!" Lan silently gazed at the ensuing battle around them.

"You're mad to stay here." Lan didn't look away from the raging chaos. Somewhere in the distance a sarn screamed over the clamor.

"*You* are the mad one! You're so upset over your family's murder and yet you kill senselessly yourself! A lot of these necromancers had families themselves. They left them behind at the Night, assuring them that they would be back after the Darksearer was--"

Lan jerked his head toward Esmond. A glint of fire twinkled behind his eyes now. "So, you *did* come here after the sword. It's not here. Now go!"

"Wha--?"

"I said get *out!* You're not going to die here, Esmond."

"My love, what is--" Before she could finish her question, her mouth froze in mid-sentence. She clasped at her jaw with confused hands, trying to figure out what had gone wrong.

"Go, before Ga'ruk arrives. He won't be as kind." Lan returned his attention to the battle. Another of the blue magical bolts blazed from his outstretched hand into the battle. A loud explosion followed, accompanied by mixed screams.

Ga'ruk. Esmond remembered that name. Ga'ruk had been the sarn Wayreth had spoken to the night they left Rhienos with the necromancers. Ga'ruk was the one with whom Wayreth had made his pact. Ga'ruk was the leader of the sarn.

"You've sided not only with the sarn but with their *leader?* And you want to bring about their downfall?! You're insane, Lan!"

"Insane?" Esmond swore he saw Lan almost smile. "I'm not the one who refuses to flee a battle like this when given an opportunity to run unscathed."

"I've seen more death and destruction today than most people ever see in their lives, and as far as I know, you along with the sarn's top-most in command are *leading* this massacre! That's

what I call insane!" The woman wasn't paying either of them any attention as she marveled at how her mouth had suddenly ceased to move.

"Esmond," Lan started, "I need the Darksearer to bring them down, and siding with Ga'ruk is the easiest way to get it. He has more power under his command right now than--."

"Bring them down with the *Darksearer*? Lan! Wake up!"

"I'm awake, Esmond." Lan suddenly shot out a hand toward Esmond without looking and shoved him backward to the ground.

Esmond started to protest as a sword blade swung overhead. He rolled to his back and cringed, expecting the sarn to strike him dead, but at the last second as the soldier had his sword raised high, Esmond's undead came to the rescue and slashed the sarn's throat. Esmond gulped, took a deep breath, and stood up. His undead had finally lived up to its orders.

"I don't believe you! You side with them, yet you are working against them while leading them! You're a paradox, Lan."

It was as if something inside of Lan had snapped, taking all of the old person he knew to be his friend with him. The look on the young man's face was at the same time blank and evil. Esmond backed up a few steps. His lone undead warrior was once more nowhere in sight.

"One sword can't kill them, Lan, no matter how strong it is." Esmond refused to give in. There had to be hope. Somewhere. "I've got to get you out of here, away from all of this. Maybe then I can talk some sense into--" Esmond was reaching out to grab at Lan, but Lan magically deflected him back onto the ground. Esmond sat there in a cloud of dust, trying to catch his breath.

"Go," said Lan, coldly.

"Not . . . without . . . you," coughed Esmond.

"Esmond, don't--" Lan abruptly jerked forward. His eyes widened and his mouth opened. A low, gurgling sound rolled from his throat. He reached around to his back, face unmoving, and then tried to turn around. He had not turned far when his eyes got even wider and he gurgled once more. The white-haired woman's voice immediately came back to her and she screamed. Esmond heard

the unmistakable sound of a sword burying itself in flesh as Lan jerked once more. He screamed.

Lan fell to his knees. Esmond stared in shock at the sword in Lan's back and the undead soldier holding the weapon-- Esmond's undead. Once, twice, three times the skeleton brought the sword down into Lan's back, each thrust bringing forth a new gush of blood and a new gurgle from Lan. Esmond, awash with tears, leaped to his feet and charged the undead in a fit of rage. He slammed into the skeletal warrior and knocked it backward. It pulled the sword from Lan's back as it stumbled.

Lan lay silent, slowly trying to raise his head. He managed to get his eyes to meet Esmond's and opened his mouth to speak, but all that came out was a waterfall of blood and other vile fluids. His eyes were already glazing over as the undead walked over to Esmond. Esmond ran to his dying friend and lifted him up, cradling Lan's head in his lap. Blood poured from his back, mouth, and even a small wound in his chest where the sword had gone all the way through. He breathed, barely, a ghastly wheezing sound coming with every breath as he tried to get air into his punctured lungs.

"LAN! DEAR OHN NO, LAN!" Esmond screamed, oblivious to the fighting around him. He sensed the presence of the woman but he ignored it. With a deafening roar, he shouted once more, defiantly, "NOOOOO!" He shouted until the breath completely ran out of his lungs. He fell forward and collapsed his head on Lan's chest, looking toward his face, ear down. He heard Lan's heart beating, slower than any normal person's heart should beat. Terror raced through his mind as

bum-BUM bum-BUM

the reality of his best friend's dying came to him. He started shaking Lan, as if he would wake up and everything would be normal. Nothing. Lan's body flopped around weakly . . . lifelessly.

Esmond started shivering, praying to Ohn that this was all *bumm-BUMM . . . bumm-BUMM*

just a dream, a nightmare, and he would awaken from it in a sweat and find himself at home, back in Kagon, with Lan asleep in his floor. Dear Ohn Lan was dying. Esmond started

repenting everything he had ever done that had hurt Lan out loud, shouting toward the

bummm-bummm . . . bummm-bummm

sky, hoping that if Ohn was there, he would hear his prayers. He shouted how sorry he was for every little thing he had ever gotten Lan into trouble for, for the fight in the Thieves' Guild, for the little spat in Rhienos, even how sorry he was for Farmer Biggs' cow. He shouted and repented over and over and over again, tears streaming from his face and his voice breaking up from

bummm . . . bummm

the crying.

As if an answer to his prayers, Lan suddenly looked up, looked Esmond straight in the eyes, and spoke. "Es . . . mond . . . none of this . . . is your . . . fault . . ." Lan's voice faded out for a second as his eyes scanned the skies wildly. He coughed up a bubble of blood and managed to find his voice once more. "If you . . . find her . . . protect--" another cough "--protect Ria . . . and don't . . . tell her about . . . this . . . please . . ." With one final heartbeat, Lan's eyes froze, his mouth dropped open, and his chest stopped rising and falling. Alexander Dreighton Lansing had died. Esmond screamed.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

All was lost. The necromancers' morale was faltering after the death of Fallon. The sarn were starting to overcome the undead more easily, closing in on the necromancers themselves. Esmond could only see three of the dark robed figures through the carnage of the battle and the tears in his eyes. The white-haired woman had disappeared behind a new wave of fighting that had broken out near Esmond. He held Lan's lifeless body in his arms, feeling the warmth seep out of it.

Esmond saw his undead standing nearby, staring eyelessly down at him. With an angry shout, he leaped up, letting Lan fall to the ground, and charged the undead. He tackled it, pushed it down, and pummeled its decaying chest.

"You did this!" he shouted. "This is all your fault!" Esmond pounded the undead again and again. One of the hits jarred the undead enough that it dropped its bloody sword. In a fit of rage, Esmond grabbed the sword and swung it at the undead as it lay on the ground. The sword crashed into the undead's right forearm, chipping away shards of bone and leaving a streak of blood along the skeletal arm--Lan's blood.

Esmond shouted again and drove the sword into the undead's chest. He then pulled it downward and tore ribs away from the undead with a ghastly popping sound. This thing represented all that made him furious now--necromancy and Lan's death. When the sword finally tilted itself out, leaving a gaping hole in the undead's chest, Esmond gave the thing a swift, hard kick to

the skull, and turned back to look at Lan. Lan's body was no longer there, only a smeared pool of blood that left no trail.

He looked around desperately, but all he could see were hundreds of sarn engaged in deathly combat with hundreds of undead, a handful of necromancers trying their best to break away from the fighting and retreat, and uncountable corpses of sarn, undead, and necromancer alike scattered about the bloody battlefield. Lan's body was nowhere to be seen.

Where had it been taken? Had one of the sarn or necromancers done something to it? What if someone had raised him--

A sarn warrior leaped toward Esmond. Esmond tried to back away, but tripped and fell to the ground. The sarn stood over him, eyes ablaze, reaching out to drive his blade into Esmond's stomach. Esmond rolled to the side to avoid the thrusting blade.

The sarn moved to strike again, but Esmond managed to bring the sword he had taken from the undead around to deflect the sarn's blow to the side. The sarn's swing grazed against Esmond's side, but Esmond didn't feel the pain.

He rose to one knee as the sarn regained his stance. The sarn started to come at him again but the green-skinned warrior shrieked in pain and turned to attack an undead that had come from behind. Esmond had to get out of here. It would not matter what had happened to Lan's body if he did not get himself out of here alive. And then he remembered Gaelyn.

He began racing toward the north, leaping over bodies and deftly dodging battling sarn and undead. Several times sarn tried to attack him, but Esmond managed to duck behind other fighters and lose the attackers. He broke away from the fighting to a long, open stretch of land between him and the plateau. Several dead or dying sarn were littered about the field, lying in pools of their own blood, some of them even reaching out to him as if seeking help. Esmond squeezed his eyes shut and forced the sight out of his mind--he could not stand to see such things at a time like this. All he wanted to do was survive. Thank Ohn he had made it out of the melee. But where was Gaelyn? Had she not made it out?

A bloody black lump lay on the ground in the distance. Esmond ran for it. It looked about Gaelyn's size. When he reached it, it turned out to be empty. It lay in a disheveled mess,

stained with moist blood. Esmond dug through the robe until he found what he was searching for--the velvet heart he had bought her long ago in Rhienos. She had pinned it to the inside of her robe. Dear Ohn, this was hers. What had happened to her? Had she been chased away? Had she been . . . killed?

A scream pierced the air. Esmond whipped around to see one of the remaining necromancers slumping over as a sarn withdrew his blade from the necromancer's back. Esmond could only see one necromancer remaining in the crowd of sarn and undead. He had to leave now or never. He shoved the velvet heart into one of the pockets of his robe and started to run.

How would he survive the trip back? It would be a long walk--several weeks--and he had no supplies. He had a waterskin slung around his neck under his robe, but it would only last him a few more days at best. And what to do for food? The few rations of dried meat he had in his traveling pouch would not last long either. He took a deep breath as the realization hit him that he was going to die, regardless, be it this day or a week hence. There was no escaping.

Several strides in front of him was a dead sarn, one of his thick, muscular legs nearly hacked off at the thigh. There was a lot of meat on that leg, and Esmond knew enough magic to start a simple fire to properly cook--

What was he thinking? He could not possibly eat part of another person, regardless of race, could he? Surely there was some other option. He could . . . he could . . . he could not think of anything else. It was either die here in the battle, soon, or attempt to flee with his life intact, regrouping himself for a time when he could search out Gaelyn. Eating the meat of the sarn was a disgusting, revolting thought, but it was the only way. He had to survive.

Gripping the rusted blade he had stolen from the undead and bolstering his nerves and stomach, Esmond marched toward the dead sarn, choking back the bile that rose in his throat.

#

"Lisen, you are to return immediately," ordered the voice of the female mesefu Lisen had been dreading to hear. "Gather the remainder of your troops and bring them back to Altkrea. Once

here, you will be officially deposed of your seat in the high council and escorted from the city to serve a lifetime banishment."

Lisen squeezed the *reni* hard. Lord Harishmon had been forced out of Altkrea, and Doran elected as High Lord of the council. What should she do now? Kaen had told her to wait on him, and not do anything until he arrived, but what of the troops with her? Would they still listen to her--to what was right? Or would they turn against her and leave of their own accord?

"Doran--" Lisen began.

"High Lord Doran," the woman's voice interrupted.

"Yes, High Lord Doran," Lisen corrected herself, a taste of disgust in her mouth. "I was instructed by Lord Harishmon to--"

"Anything that the traitor Kaen Harishmon told you no longer applies. He is gone now, as you will soon be."

Lisen swallowed. Was it really all over? Had everything she and Kaen and Ria had worked together, struggled for, all been for nothing?

"Who are you talking to?" asked Ria. Lisen started at hearing her young friend's voice. In her distress, she had not noticed Ria's approach.

"Who is that?" demanded Doran's voice through the *reni*. Ria's face twisted in disgust. Lisen stared at her blankly, bringing the *reni* up closer to her mouth to reply.

"It was--"

Ria stomped toward Lisen, cutting her off, and snatched the crystal from her hands. Lisen did not have the will to resist.

"It was me," Ria growled into the *reni*.

"Ah, yes," said Doran, patronizingly. "It has been a long while since we have spoken, *dalchi*. Do you have anything civil to say *this* time?"

Lisen grudgingly remembered the time Ria and Doran had gotten into a heated confrontation. It was the day Ria, her father, and Lisen's father had been ousted from Altkrea. Doran was about to get more than she probably wanted to deal with, and the over-righteous woman deserved it.

"By your high and mighty definitions," Ria began, "no. All I *do* have to say is that Lisen will not be listening to any of your orders."

"That is fine with me," Doran said, "as technically she is no longer a member of mesefu society, so I have no hold over her. The rest of the troops, however--"

"The rest of the troops will be staying with Lisen," Ria stated with a finality. "I know where the blade is."

"The mesefu listen to no *dalchi*," Doran said, heatedly. Lisen could imagine the pale skinned woman's face turning red as it often did during heated debates in the council.

"Then perhaps it is time for things to change," Ria said.

"There is no need for me to continue this conversation," Doran said. "Give me back to Lisen. She will send the troops home and then remain there with you, if she likes. It is of no matter to me."

"One moment," Ria said. She did not hand the *remi* back to Lisen, however. Instead she walked to the front of the mesefu troops. They were in various states of disarray, lounging about and resting, awaiting orders. Lisen ran up behind Ria, following her.

"Where are you going?" she whispered.

"To show Doran that she alone does not rule the mesefu," Ria said.

Lisen's heart skipped a beat. Ria had always been very assertive, and her last confrontation with Doran had resulted in the council member coming away with dark bruises that took weeks to heal. What did she have in store now?

"Soldiers!" Ria shouted, getting the attention of the mesefu troops. "I have grave news." A few of the mesefu turned from their activities to look at her and pay attention. Most, however, merely glanced her way then turned back to their work, uninterested in her words. After all, she was a *dalchi*. Why should they listen to her?

"Lord Kaen Harishmon is High Lord no longer." This got everyone's attention. Even the mesefu Lisen knew were the most against Ria's staying with them to recover from her wounds turned to her attentively, eyes wide.

"He was deposed by the high council based on accusations Lord Doran made that he and Lisen worked with me in trying to seek out the Darksearer. Lisen--" Ria gestured toward her "--was deposed as well."

Many gasps arose from the crowd of soldiers as they drew closer to better hear what Ria had to say. Lisen thought she heard some muffled talking coming from the *reni*--likely Doran trying to protest--but she could not be sure.

"Doran wants for you all to return home to Altkrea. It seems she thinks she, an arrogant council member who has never left the city, knows more about where the blade is than I do. I can assure you, this is not the case."

"Why should we listen to you? What can you know that she doesn't?" Several soldiers cried out against her. Lisen edged closer to Ria, standing behind her.

"Because I have been out here--" Ria swept her arms around "--tracking the blade for nearly two years, and have spent longer than that trying to survive in this world. I have experience. I know which way the sarn took the Darksearer. It's on its way north now, likely to Merhos." She turned, pointing to the northwest. "I also know that a very important man is lost in the Wastes, trying to find his way back to me. He is close to the daemon's fortress, which could spell doom for us all. He carries with him . . . hope."

Lisen's heart sank. Though Ria had not said the words, she knew what the man carried. It had to be a *krea*. If this was true, then he had to be gotten out of there as soon as possible. If the daemon were to get the *krea*, then even *Ol'tue* would not be enough to stop it. The weapon they sealed away was said to be the most powerful force in all of creation. If it were to fall into the daemon's hands, all would be lost.

"I may be only half of what you all are," Ria began, "but it does not mean I am any less scared than any of you. I know what grave dangers we face in the coming months, possibly even years, and I'm willing to do something about it. All Doran cares about is getting rid of those who would consort with the humans and myself. What does it matter if I, or any other human, works with the mesefu people help bring back *Ol'tue*? Yes, I know Kaen Harishmon's work with me was kept discreet, but that was because we knew how adamantly Doran adhered to council law. I was the best suited for the task. Would you rather have someone working in your favor based solely on their appearance, or on their qualifications and skills?"

Silence. The crowd of soldiers was enwrapped in her words, and Ria was starting change their minds. For the first time that she could ever remember, Lisen was seeing mesefu who looked half-convinced to change their attitude toward the *dalchi*. Age-old barriers were beginning to crumble. Though the mesefu interacted with the humans before, and Lisen had escorted Lord Selylulia to inform the Pyranian parliament of the blade's disappearance, they were rarely asked to involve themselves deeply in mesefu affairs. An air of superiority still lingered in the minds and hearts of most of mesefu civilization--asking the humans or *dalchi* for help would be a major blow to the collective mesefu ego.

"Doran does not care for the mesefu people. She may proclaim that, but do you not think that if she truly did, she would do whatever was in her power to get the blade back and fend off the daemon?" Ria paused, but not long enough for anyone to answer. "I can help. The blade moves toward Merhos. I propose that the majority of you speed ahead for Rotteporte and scour the shipyards. It is likely that they are trying to get the blade off of this continent. The rest of you should take to the Wastes and search for the young man named Lan."

"What makes this young man so important?" asked a female soldier.

Ria's face turned to stone, her eyes black. Lisen steeled herself--would Ria announce what she feared she would announce? Surely not--if Lisen was right, it could be disastrous for so many people to know where one of the *krea* were. She silently touched her armor where the *altkrea* hung beneath, around her neck. *Two of them so close*, she thought, shivering.

"He has information that is vital to our survival--to the world's survival. Trust me when I say that if Dariakus gets his hands on Lan, then we have lost. A team needs to be sent out into the Wastes as soon as possible to search for him and bring him back safely. I know this seems strange, that our future may rest to some degree on the safety of a human, but we must cast aside our differences and see that the world relies on a certain balance, and all things contribute to that balance--human and mesefu alike." Ria looked across the soldiers, nearly two hundred of them, taking in each of their reactions. Surprisingly, they all looked as if they generally agreed.

"We cannot disobey the High Lord," a soldier said, disrupting the silence. "We will be ousted as well!"

"Then perhaps it is time you decided what is more important to you," Ria said to everyone, not singling out the soldier who had spoken up. "Being a member of a society ruled by a woman more attentive to adhering rigidly to ancient laws and statutes, or being an outcast alongside Lisen and myself who works to save the world from the darkness that is reaching its dark grip around us. You can all go home and be *mese*fu for however many years the daemon gives you, or you can be *people*, fighting alongside the humans for our collective survival."

Ria stood stiff as she finished. Her voice had been strong, commanding. Lisen could not notice that no sound came from the *reni* Ria held by her side. Had Doran left? Had the new High Lord been so outraged that she had broken the connection?

Lisen looked out at the contemplative soldiers. They all seemed a bit skeptical of Ria's speech, but none of them said anything for the longest time. After a few moments, they began talking among themselves, debating on whether or not they could trust Ria. Lisen knew it would not be easy for most of them to give up the lives they had now and become outcasts. The benefits of *mese*fu society were great. If they left it, they would be forced to come to terms and deal with many things. Not the least of which was the concept of economy--the world outside of Altkrea used money, *geln*, to trade for goods and services. Lisen had been in Porthos for a month, and the concept was still bizarre to her.

And then, a miracle happened. A female *mese*fu soldier strode forth and proclaimed, "I am not just a *mese*fu. I am a person." Several more followed her lead, and soon the entire crowd had stepped forward, repeating the chant. Ria held the *reni* up high so that if Doran was still listening, she could hear all of her own people turning against her.

Lisen smiled. There was hope after all.

#

Kaen contacted Lisen later that evening. She told him what had happened, and he had commended the soldiers' actions. He had just landed at the beach along northern Kagon and would be to her camp by the next night. She also told him of the young man, Lan, and that she feared he had a *krea* near the daemon. Kaen had

told her not to send an expedition into the Wastes until he arrived, but to go ahead and send the majority of the forces toward Merhos. With luck, they would overrun the sarn carrying the blade.

Though she had been reluctant to go, Ria had been sent with the troops northward. Lisen wanted to make sure someone she trusted was with the group, in case any of them ended up having more loyalty to Doran than they had first expressed. Lisen had kept the tracer dagger, however, and Ria had made her promise to give it to Lan when he was found. She had told Ria not to fear, that Lan would be brought back from the Wastes safely. Ria had accepted her word and they had embraced briefly, both of them wishing that this could all be over.

Lisen felt that it soon would be. With Kaen coming to help her scout the Wastes and Ria with the other troops, closing in on *Ol'tue*, things seemed to be quickly coming to a close.

In a few more weeks, she told herself, you'll have the krea away from the daemon and the blade back in the hands it belongs to. And then what? What of Doran, or the army of sarn who follow Dariakus?

Perhaps Kaen would take up the blade as his ancestor Gienev Harishmon had done over a thousand years ago and slay the daemon, bringing an end to its terror before it can begin. And after that, perhaps the high council would forgive them their sentence and accept them back into Altkrea.

Lisen strode over to her *vel* to sit and stare at the brilliantly clear night sky. She had never seen this many stars before in her life. The lights of Altkrea usually drowned them out, except during council meetings, but those were held during the day.

She sighed, turning to the sound of a soldier stepping from the sole eraser cannon she had kept here. *Maybe I will not have to see these used after all, she thought. Dear Ohn, I hope not.*

PART VI: THE AFTERMATH

"You say that through death, all things are made clear. I say that is fine, but a bit too late."

Chapter Thirty

"Is there anything else I can help you with, sir?"

"No, not right now, thank you. I believe I can manage from here." The man sat down with a sigh onto the ruffled bed. "How long did it take to rebuild this place?" he asked the apprentice who had shown him to his room.

"Well, after the fire in 1078, very little was left of the original structure, so the entire thing was scrapped and started anew. I think they started in Pyannos of that year and finished around Galnos of the next."

"Just under a year," the man mused to himself.

"Excuse me, sir? I couldn't hear you?" asked the apprentice.

"You don't have to call me 'sir'." The man known as Lane smiled at the apprentice. "I'm only your superior here by one rank. I was just marveling at how fast this tower was rebuilt. It looks exactly as I remember it." He looked over to his third floor window and gazed upon the streets of Porthos below, busy with early morning traffic. "It's almost like it was never destroyed . . ."

"Pardon me for asking, Lane, but you've been here before?" The apprentice stepped toward him with a questioning look.

"Why yes, I have." Lane's face drained a bit of its color as he began remembering that night in his mind. The night of the dance, of the fire and ensuing explosion that had brought the Mages' Guild tower to the ground. The night that he had been reunited with a friend from his past. A friend who was gone . . . forever.

"I was here that night," Lane began. "That night this place burned down, that is. Not inside, of course, but outside. I was . . . trying to save him. He was trapped in the library."

"Who?" asked the apprentice. Lane paid him no attention, continuing his story.

"We barely got him out in time." Lane stifled a low laugh. "He was afraid of heights and didn't want to jump. When the top blew off he fell, but we caught him. We caught him." Lane looked out at the sparse clouds in the sky, a faraway look in his eyes as they began filling with tears.

"I--I'm sorry, Lane," said the apprentice, meekly. "Was he . . ." The young man trailed off, not wanting to ask the inevitable question.

"No, no," spoke Lane in a tone that matched the wistful look in his eyes. "He didn't die that night." A single tear rolled from his right eye, down the curves of his bearded face, then down his neck to disappear beneath his tunic.

"I'm sorry," said the apprentice, understanding the unspoken words.

"It's okay," he said, looking back to the apprentice who was gripping his dark red robe tightly in nervousness, not knowing what to say. "You don't have to be sorry. It's not as if you killed him."

"If you don't mind--" the young man began.

"I did."

"Excuse me?" asked the apprentice.

"Nothing. Yes, you can leave. I'll not be needing anything else now." Lane tried to smile at the young man.

"What did you say? You said something, I know it."

"Did I?" Lane asked, gazing blankly at the floor.

"You said 'I did'."

"Oh. I guess you're right. Don't bother. I'm not thinking straight right now. I'm very tired from my trip, so if you don't mind . . ." Lane looked up to see how the apprentice was acting, but the young man was already gone.

"Watch yourself," Lane said quietly to himself, studying the floor. "It was hard enough getting into the country. Don't go making people suspicious now. You've got a good thing going for you."

It had been hard getting into Pyran, but not as hard as he thought it was. The papers he had stolen from his parents' house were his original birth documents that had his prints on them. Since the prints matched, he was able to have a new identification paper made at the border post. The hardest part about everything was avoiding the city and royal guards in the capital, Porthos. They may recognize him, and if he got caught, not only would he have to explain where the legal papers for Lane Niuan came from, he would also end up getting his family in trouble since the truth would have to come out. How else would someone have two legal sets of identity papers with different names unless they were forged? Of course, people forged papers all the time, but there were several measures that could be taken to prevent papers from being altered.

Esmond had come here because magic was the only thing he knew anymore, and since the 'Thieves' Guild had been disbanded with the arrest of Malice Took, there really was no other place for him to go. He had not originally planned on joining the Mages' Guild, however. All he wanted to do was get away and start another life, and Porthos was the only place he knew well enough to feel confident doing that in. When he got into Porthos and saw that the Mages' Guild had been rebuilt, he had rushed there to see about membership. With his knowledge of necromancy, he was let in quickly because he could help the wizards fight against it. Necromancy was the forbidden magical art, and very few people knew enough about it to combat it. With his experience as an ex-necromancer, he could teach the high-ranked wizards everything he knew about the inner-workings of the necromantic art and the structure of the Night. They were very curious.

He meant so much to them that he came in as an Initiate. He was not allowed any apprentices at that lowly rank, but he was given better accommodations and access to materials. He planned on helping the wizards out as much as possible while studying ancient history--mostly things about Ethrakus. He needed to know as much about daemons as he could find out. Lan had most likely been working for it, for Ohn only knew what reason, as he had been leading sarn, and the sarn were rallied under the daemon.

What was its name again? Dariakus? Something like that. He had to get every bit of information he could get about the first daemon so he could be prepared. He had not broken the news

about the daemon to the Mages' Guild yet, and did not think he should until he knew more. *Of course, if you wait too long, you might be making a grave mistake. Maybe they need to be prepared.*

#

Esmond was walking down the hall of the bottom floor of the tower on his way to meet with the head of the guild for his first time since he had been admitted. He wanted to see if the master could give him the names of some good books to read about the past. He knew of one already, the *Gilanthril*, but he wanted more than just a religious text. He needed more than one source.

Marcus was walking along beside him. His friend had joined the Mages' Guild recently, transferring from the university. Nothing had changed about the young man--from the frilly, outlandish clothing to the pudgy round form, Marcus was the same. Esmond had explained his predicament, and Marcus had understood. He did not dare tell Marcus about Lan, though. All Marcus knew about what had happened to Lan and Esmond since they had been banished from Pyran was that they had gone to Rhienos, and that he and Lan parted ways there. It was not entirely a lie--he was just withholding some of the truth.

Marcus was whistling a waltz that sounded familiar. He recognized it after a moment as the beautiful waltz he had heard at the dance so long ago with Gaelyn by his side.

Dear Ohn, please don't let her be dead as well, he prayed. He had not seen her on his way back. Losing both Lan and Gaelyn had been a blow to him that he was not sure he could ever recover from.

Lan, he thought. Are you truly dead? Esmond remembered looking back to see Lan's body gone. Had he gotten up and walked away? No, you fool, he was dead. Nobody could have lived through something like that. He was dead . . . and you killed him!

He swallowed hard, stopping cold in his tracks.

"What is it, Lane?" asked Marcus, stopping his whistling.

"That tune you were whistling," he began. "What was it?"

"Oh that? Just some waltz I heard a while back. *Reflections* was the name, I believe. Why? You heard it before?"

Esmond swallowed again and replied. "I think so. About a year and a half ago, at the summer dance they had here. The night this place burned to the ground."

"Bad memories?"

"A few. You don't have to stop. I'll be fine."

"You know," Marcus began, "there's something different about you that I've noticed since I've seen you last. You've stopped harassing me. In fact, you've stopped a lot of things. What happened while you were gone?"

"I don't know," Esmond said in a near-whisper. "I guess I've grown up. A lot."

As he looked up to start walking again, the main doorway out into Porthos started opening. The bright light flooded in, hurting his eyes. He squinted and raised his arm to shield his face. A figure was there, silhouetted, walking toward him.

"Dear Ohn," came a familiar voice. "Esmond! I never expected to run into you here!"

His stomach started churning. Someone was about to expose him--a female someone from the sound of it, with a throaty, froggy voice. The silhouetted figure came closer. He glanced over at Marcus to see him looking questioning back up at him.

"Esmond!" She shouted his name one more time as she approached. Esmond picked up his pace toward her. Several people walking through the halls going about their normal routines stopped to look at the strange spectacle.

"Oh Dear Ohn," he sighed. He could see her clearly in the low light from the windows. It was Ria.

She threw her arms around him and coughed onto his shoulder. He could not act like he knew her in front of all of these people. If his cover was blown . . .

Esmond pulled her arms from around him and stepped back from her. Marcus stared on in confusion. "I'm afraid you are mistaken," Esmond said. "My name is Lane Niuan, from--"

"There's no time to play now!" she coughed impatiently, grabbing his grey robe. "You look a bit different in a robe as opposed to your old street clothes, but you're still Esmond." She let go of his robe and doubled over, coughing up mucus onto the floor.

Esmond turned to Marcus. "Hurry! Go fetch someone from the infirmary! Whoever this fever-stricken girl is, she needs help, and fast!"

Marcus stood there, staring at Ria as she spat more of the bloody, slimy stuff onto the floor. Esmond popped him on the back of the head. Hard. "Go on!" Marcus snapped to attention and ran off toward the infirmary crying for help.

Esmond looked to the small group of people who had stopped to watch and waved them on about their business, telling them that all would be taken care of. When he was sure it was relatively safe, he turned back to her. Her coughing had subsided for now, but she was still doubled over. "Ria? Is that you?"

"Of--of course it's me. You know who I am, Es--"

"Hush," he quieted her. "Not that name. Esmond was banished, remember? I'm Lane now. Don't ask, just know I go by that and nobody can know I'm Esmond."

"Okay, Lane," she said, noticeably struggling with the name.

"I can't believe you're here!" He could feel the smile wrapping itself around his face as much as he tried not to. "Dear Ohn, you look really ill. Come on," he said, extending his hand to her. "I need to get you to the infirmary. That cough most definitely isn't good."

"I know that, but that's not why I'm here. I came to contact the new master here. That's what I need to do now. I also want to speak with you, but that can wait. Stay here." She turned from him and started walking down the hallway toward the master's office. "I'll be ri--" She fell over coughing again, and this time Esmond could clearly see blood dripping onto the floor. Something had to be done, and Marcus seemed to be taking his time.

"Help!" he shouted. "Someone come help! We have a sick girl here!" He tried to lift her but her limp form was resisting his grip.

A red-robed apprentice-master came running up from a side room. "What is it?" he asked.

"She needs help, quickly!" shouted Esmond, pointing at Ria. "Help me carry her to the infirmary!"

"Yes sir," said the apprentice-master as he grabbed Ria's legs. She was on the verge of unconsciousness now and was not responding to the guard's touch at all. She showed no signs of protest or acceptance. Esmond rushed over to her and grabbed her under her shoulders.

"Es . . ." he heard her say as they started carrying her towards the stairs to the infirmary. "Do you know . . . anything about . . ."

He could not look down at her, as he was leading the way. "Ria," he spoke in a worried voice. "Just be quiet and try to relax. We're going to get you some help." She moaned and let her head flop around.

They were approaching the corridor that led to the infirmary when she started coughing again. Esmond glanced down and saw bloody mucus streaming from the corners of her mouth and chin. He hoped against all hope that she would be all right. Lan had asked him to take care of her if anything ever happened. Was there something Lan had known about her that Esmond did not?

"Is . . ." she tried talking through her coughs, but had no success. Every time she tried to open her mouth to speak, a cough came out instead, accompanied with some sort of mucus.

"Ria, please just calm down." Esmond was starting to get a bit upset, fearing she would die right here and now. *Dear Ohn, don't let her die. I've got to do what Lan asked me to do. It was the last thing he ever said to me . . .*

They reached the corridor to hear Marcus running with one of the nurses. ". . . right down this way. She was coughing up all sorts of bloody stuff and I didn't know what to do!" Esmond saw them rounding the corner.

The nurse, clad in light grey robes and wearing a star-shaped pendant, the sign of Ohn, quickly motioned for them to lay Ria down on a nearby bench. "Set her down there now so I can have a quick look at her," she spoke in a voice of complete calm. She had a job to do, Esmond knew, and she would not let panic come between her and doing it.

Esmond and the apprentice-master did as she had asked. The nurse, a youthful woman in her mid twenties, Esmond guessed, knelt down over Ria and began feeling the sick girl's chest with her hands. She then bent over and put her left ear flat on Ria, listening to her lungs.

"She has the gasps, from the sound of it. I'll need to get her to the infirmary quickly. Nothing she won't recover from if we act

quickly. You," she pointed at the apprentice-master. "I need you to help me carry her. Quickly now!"

The gasps? Dear Ohn not the gasps! People with that have died choking in their sleep! Please Ohn, not the gasps! Esmond fell back against the wall to give the nurse and the apprentice-master room as they started down the corridor. Marcus was edging his way along the wall around them toward Esmond.

"Lan . . ." Esmond jerked his head in the direction of the voice. It had been Ria. "Do . . . you know anything . . . Lan . . ." She trailed off as they carried her around the corner and out of sight. Esmond slumped to the floor and stared down the hallway to the main entrance at the far end. Marcus was standing over him.

I've been here before, he thought, his surroundings seeming suddenly familiar. *No*, he corrected himself. *Lan's been here before. When you walked out of the shadows that night you fled the university. Lan was standing against the stone wall and slumped down.*

"Was she talking about *our* Lan?" asked Marcus.

"I . . . I don't know." He looked up at Marcus, trying not to let his voice waver at the memory of his friend. What was going on? "She was obviously very sick and feverish. She might have just been confused."

Marcus stared down at him for a minute longer then ran up the stairs.

What does she know about Lan? he asked himself. *She said something about Lan.* He needed to find out. Seconds after Marcus had left, Esmond also stood up and ran down the corridor to the infirmary.

#

A voice.

". . . she all right?"

A familiar voice.

"She should be okay for now. I gave her some medication for the coughing. It took all I could to force it down her throat through her violent bouts. She needs rest now more than anything else."

Another voice, but that one was unfamiliar.

"Is it okay if I have a few words with her?"

"Yes, but don't keep her awake too long."

A long silence.

"Alone, if you don't mind."

"But of course."

A door. Closing.

Footsteps. Someone approaching. She tried to open her eyes.

Blind. At first the light was so bright it was blinding. She squinted for a second until her eyes started to adjust. A face formed out of the blur. Esmond.

"Ria," he said. "Can you hear me?"

She lay there silently. She wanted to reply, but she was afraid to speak--afraid the coughing would start again. She needed to get moving soon. They would be waiting for her in Merhos.

"You don't have to talk if you think you'll get sick again." Something rustled as the mattress she was on tilted. He had sat on the bed next to her.

She nodded.

"You can hear me, right?"

She nodded again.

"Good. I'll try to keep it simple."

Silence.

A sigh.

"It's about . . ."

More silence.

Another sigh.

"It's about Lan."

She sat up, a new energy surging through her at the prospect of hearing any news about Lan.

"What . . . about Lan?" The horribly sour concoction the nurse had forced down her throat had dried it out and made it hard to talk.

"Hush now. I don't want you hurting yourself. The nurse said you needed rest, and you can't get it jumping up like that."

She shook her head. "Lan," she croaked. It was all she could say.

He held out a mug to her lips. She tasted water. Its cool taste refreshed her, but not nearly enough.

"Maybe . . ." He trailed off.

Silence again.

"Maybe I should let you rest for a bit longer. I'll come talk to you later when you're feeling better."

She wanted to say no, but everything clouded over again and she slumped down on her back. Had the nurse not said something about the medication making her drowsy?

The mattress and ruffling again. She was now laying flat. He had stood up.

"I'll leave the water here by the bed." A clack. "If you need anything . . . ever . . . let me know."

Footsteps as he walked away.

"I'll take care of you. Nobody will ever hurt you, I swear it."

A brief silence, and then the door opened and promptly shut. She was alone.

She looked to her right out the small window. The sky had clouded over since her arrival earlier. The sun was nowhere to be seen. She had no idea what time it was or how long she had been here.

She tried to roll over, but the pain was too much. She flinched a bit then gave up and stared back at the clouds. They were moving slowly to the . . . She had no idea which direction was which.

She closed her eyes as warmth overtook her. *I love you, Lan. Wherever you are.*