

The KingSeer Prophecies: Oathbound and Mageborn

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Prologue

In the time of Tremors, when the Age of Wonders was dying and the world of Nordalia was split asunder, the great Knight Sir Farren grew tired of war. It is said today by those who idolize him that he grew tired not of battles and bloodshed, but of the cowardly manner in which the mageborn fought from afar and the dishonorable way they waged their wars, laying waste on land and people alike with their magik. Those who dislike Sir Farren even now say he grew tired of losing to a power he could not have and did not understand. The scholars cannot decide who is right, but all agree that he led his people to a place of safety far to the south and east of any civilized centers of man.

His descendants speak proudly of his desire to lead them to a place where the mageborn could not reach them. Where they could live at peace without fearing that one day they or their children would be mistreated by warring wizards.

It is agreed known that in this wild place at the southeastern edge of the known world he forged a Kingdom with the help of the Knights of Legend. Sir Qualce of the fiery lance. Lady Galina the Dwarf Hunter. Sir Korey the Horse Lord. Every one of the fourteen great Knights of that time. While the rest of Nordalia was being torn asunder, and the Kingdom of Nordal was falling apart, Great King Farren and the Knights of Legend were seeing to the growth of their new kingdom. A kingdom they chose to call Freeland Hold.

Border forts were erected on each of the two land locked sides. Peace emissaries were sent into the Dwarvenforge to the west to parley with the dwarves, for they still ruled much of Freeland Hold during the time of tremors, and to the Kingdom of Corrigar in the north. A great port was constructed on the mouth of the river Preada, and the Templars of Dirge, known then and now as the Order of the Dented Shield, were offered sanctuary away from the wars and wizards.

In the third year of the reign of King Farren, Freeland Hold was graced by the presence of Victoria Kingseer, a wandering prophetess of the goddess Shalitor. King Farren and his Knights feasted her and treated her with all of the honors due to one of the Seeresses of Shalitor. There were jousts in her honor, and Sir Qualce of the Fiery Lance gave up his sleeping chambers that she might have rooms befitting her station.

On Victoria Kingseer's seventh and final night, she prophesied much good news.

“This Kingdom of Freeland Hold shall prosper in the coming years. Peace shall reign

for centuries. Each of the Great Knights shall bear an heir, and the king's bloodline will rule for many generations.”

The Great Knights and the King himself cheered and toasted her, giving thanks to Shalitor for sending the seer to them to bring such good news. But Victoria Kingseer had not finished, and the next words she spoke were directed at the king.

“King upon king shall bring forth heirs. When the last of Farren's issue sits on the throne and begets no son fit to rule, the get of old shall rise up and the king shall be put to the sword. Love will tear the Hold asunder and men will fall like wheat to the scythe because of the mageborn queen. The bonds of the past shall be broken. She shall lay claim to the throne and that which is forbidden shall be undone as the fields are covered with the dead. A king shall sit the throne who is not of Farren's blood.”

After hearing this pronouncement, it is written that the King and The Knights of Legend sat long at council, and that when they emerged The Knights were pronounced the Dukes of Freeland Hold. Each was given lands to ward, and an edict was set forth by the Great King. From that day forth, until the walls of Farren's keep tumbled to the ground, no mageborn would have any right to the throne.

The Kingdom was but ten years old when King Farren's bride, Queen Tillif, bore him their first child. Sir Qualce tested the King's newborn son in the manner it had been done in the north, and pronounced the boy mageborn. It is said that King Farren was beside himself with grief. He ordered his guards to throw the child from the battlements and set Queen Tillif aside by sending her to the Seeresses of Shalitor. He took a new wife and tried anew.

Wise men write that King Farren sired thirty-seven children. They also write that only five were allowed to live past their first day. What remains unwritten, but is still whispered in the halls of the great keep, is that King Farren died completely mad, hurling himself from the battlements where so many of his children had been thrown to their deaths.

Serving wenches and knitting girls claim they still hear the children wailing at the bottom of the wall where they were thrown to their deaths, and the sobs of King Farren as he looked that last time upon the broken bones of his children. In the many centuries since King Farren's rule, the Kings of Freeland Hold have found many inventive ways to rid themselves of their mageborn children. But few have been as cruel as the FirstKing.

Chapter 1

Dugal Celeria, king of Freeland Hold and soon-to-be father, prowled the corridors outside his wife's bedchamber nervously. As he paced back and forth, glancing occasionally at the large double doors behind which his wife and Queen labored, he looked not unlike any other nervous husband waiting for the birth of his first child.

For what seemed to him to be the hundredth time in the past few hours, he sat unceremoniously on one of the stone benches hidden in several of the alcoves that lined the hall leading to his wife's rooms. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees,

and wrung his hands together anxiously, his eyes staring unfocused at the marble floor. His hair was unkempt, the result of nervous fingers running through the dark mass. It was usually tied back with some elaborate clasp but had been pulled from its confinement hours ago and now hung in disarray about his head. His normally brilliant blue cloak hung listlessly from his shoulders, his tunic wrinkled and crumpled by the night's trials.

The shuffling sounds of a servant approaching reached his ears, which Dugal could swear had improved over the course of the night. He raised his head and turned bloodshot eyes toward the servant, who stopped suddenly. The servant opened his mouth to speak, but stopped at the look on the king's face and instead bowed low, turned on his heel and shuffled away as quickly and quietly as possible.

A scream that could only have come from his wife cut through the corridor, echoing through his ears and cutting into his heart. He loved his wife dearly and though he knew the pain was necessary it nearly drove him wild knowing that he could do nothing to save her from this anguish. In one smooth motion he stood and raced to the door, listening intently for the sounds of a child's cry.

For long moments he heard nothing but the pounding of his own heart. He put his hands on the doors and looked upwards, praying fervently that both his wife and child would survive. It was not unheard of for a woman to die in childbirth, and the child along with her, but he had engaged the finest midwives and practitioners to assist her and all he could do now was ask the gods to be kind.

A soft cry interrupted his prayers and he felt his heart stop for the briefest of moments. He swallowed nervously, a look of apprehension on his face. The small cry grew to become an indignant scream. The scream every newborn makes when it is introduced to the world. Tears of joy fell unbidden from the king's face and he uttered a simple thank you to the gods for their gift.

He turned and wiped his eyes with the end of one long sleeve, trying to contain his joy, for he knew this night's waiting was not yet complete. Before he would see his first born child, his advisor and most trusted friend must complete his task. The task of determining whether or not his child, heir to the Throne of Farren, was mageborn.

He hoped the child was not. Since the founding of Freeland Hold it had been forbidden for a mageborn to rule. King Farren, the first King in the age of legends, had foresworn all mageborn relatives, and killed all mageborn children his many wives bore him. For his actions he was known as both The FirstKing and The Blood King. King Farren, like those he brought with him to this fair land, had seen enough of mageborn and their magiks. He had survived the fiery destruction of the beautiful city of Il'Negra, and had led his people here to escape the mage-plagued Triotonic Wars. And the FirstKing wrote the FirstLaw. No mageborn could ever rule. King Dugal would not kill his own child as the FirstKing did. Nor would he lock them in tower rooms until they died, nor attempt to have the magik burned out of them. He would raise this child like he was raised, no matter what. But he could pray to Maidel Le'Meier, goddess of mothers and children, and the other gods too.

King Dugal had been raised to serve and was known throughout Freeland Hold for his fervent dedication to his kingdom as well as its laws. His piety was almost a thing of

legend, and he had prayed almost daily throughout his wife's pregnancy for three things – that his wife survive, that the child be healthy and most importantly, that the child not be mageborn.

The King turned from the door and dropped to his knees to pray one last time, asking the gods to grant him this bounty. He closed his eyes and repeated the mantra over and over, as if the gods would grant him this boon if for no other reason than to quiet his incessant praying. So intent on his prayer was the king that he did not hear the iron door open and close gently behind him.

Fallos Arilon, the King's advisor and closest friend since childhood, walked slowly toward the kneeling king. His hands were folded together in front of him, hidden within the long sleeves of his robes, and unlike his King, his graying blonde hair was tied back neatly. He moved around his friend and stopped, standing quietly in front of him. He took a deep breath and then reached out and placed a hand on the king's shoulder.

Dugal looked up, startled, but did not stand. Fallos found the situation a bit odd as he had not seen the king kneel in front of anyone since the day of Dugal's coronation. Fallos opened his mouth to speak, and closed it at the look of anticipation on the young king's face.

“Fallos?” the King asked hopefully. “Do I have a son?”

Fallos shook his head. “She is beautiful, your Majesty. A crown of dark hair and blue eyes that rival even your finest cloaks. Even now she rests with her mother.”

The king's was only a little disappointed. While he had greatly desired a son as his first born, there was no law in Freeland hold that prevented a female child from taking the throne. He bit his lip as he scanned his advisor's face for the answer his heart yearned for, but he was almost afraid to learn. After a long pause he looked back into the eyes of his oldest friend. Dugal's blue eyes locked with the gray of his advisor's. “And?” he finally managed, his voice barely a whisper.

Fallos dropped his gaze to the floor. “She is mageborn, my lord.”

The king jumped up and grabbed his friend by the shoulders, shaking him almost violently. “You are certain, Fallos?” he asked, his voice raising. “Beyond any doubt?”

Fallos put a hand on each of the king's forearms, gripping them tightly. He looked directly into the king's eyes before he spoke, his voice carrying a tone of finality. “There can be no mistake.”

The king's arm's dropped to his side and he blinked several times as though trying to awaken from a dream. His knees gave slightly and he stumbled towards the bench he had occupied most of the night. He sat heavily, his head drooping and shoulders bent with the weight of this knowledge.

Fallos watched, unable to find words that would console his king. He was older than the king by many years, and had watched him wrestle with many things as he grew to manhood. He knew the king would come to terms with the news in time and nothing

he could say would hasten that process. Instead he waited.

After what seemed like hours the king nodded to himself, then picked up his head and straightened his shoulders. “We are both young, Fallos. We will have other children. Other children who will be allowed to rule.”

Fallos considered his next words carefully. He was more studied in history than the King, and knew that once a woman bore a mageborn child, it was rare for her to produce any children who were not mageborn. “That is possible, your Majesty.” he said slowly. “But-”

“But what, Fallos?” the king exploded. “But what if we do not? Shall I put my dear lady wife aside on a whim? Because she bore me a child who cannot rule this time?” The king stood abruptly and moved to within inches of his advisor and his voice turned cold. “Or would you suggest I act as King Farren? Kill my wife for her failure and an innocent child for having the audacity to be mageborn?”

Fallos shook his head slowly. “No, my Lord.” he denied. “I would not suggest such a thing. I only mean for you to consider the possibility that she may never bear you a child fit to rule.”

The king pulled the edges of his tunic downward, straightening his clothes as he nodded. “I have considered that possibility, Fallos. We will cross that bridge when we come to it.” Dugal reached up and smoothed his tunic, then straightened his cloak. “We must live today, my friend. And right now I have a wife I love dearly and a daughter who requires naming. We need not speak of this issue now.” his last words carried the tone of an order.

Fallos bent his head in respect, acknowledging the King's wishes. “I must pen the announcement of the child's birth. You have a name in mind...?” he prodded.

The King paused only briefly, then answered as if he had long ago made up his mind. “Mira.” he said firmly, before he turned on his heel and headed for the entrance to his wife's chamber.

Fallos watched as the king opened the doors and walked through, hearing the pride and joviality in the monarch's voice but his mind was elsewhere so he heard not the words that accompanied the occasion as the king laid his eyes upon his daughter for the first time.

If she bears him no children to rule... Fallos thought to himself as he began to shuffle down the long hall to his study. He shook his head to clear it of the disastrous thoughts that filled his mind. The gods be gracious and grant him one before it is too late. Mira the Mageborn they will call this one. Please let there be another.

Seventeen years later...

Fallos had always been particularly fond of the King's sitting room. He had met in this room with its brooding walnut walls and the banners of all fifteen duchies hanging on them. The smell of parsimmon that the Queen always had servants place about the room, the bookshelves covering one entire wall, and the broad open windows looking out over Little Gregor's Bay. All of these things said "home" to him far more than the Duchy where he was born. After fifty long years of service to his King, he was not certain that he would even recognize most of the people living in the duchy, but he knew everyone in the king's Castle. He knew them well. Well enough to know that his king had just made the single largest mistake of his entire Royal life. With luck, only a few would die. More likely thousands would die before this was completely settled. Today he strode the halls in the blue tabard with the Golden Horses of the king embroidered on them. And today wise men sought out his counsel. As much as he loved his king – this regal old man wearing wool and silks in the colors of the king, the same colors as Fallos wore, the same colors that flew from pennants all over the kingdom – he was also angry and afraid of what his king had done. With luck and some political maneuvering, hopefully they would still fly over those keeps in a year.

Fallos pushed the errant strands of his long gray hair out of his face where they had escaped the simple leather band he used to tie it back, then buried his face in his hands for a moment, betraying his exasperation with the king. He dropped his hands to the table, clenching them in fists as if they could contain his emotions and keep them from reaching his eyes. Gray eyes that held disbelief and consternation at the moment but were quickly beginning to cloud over with anger.

"I cannot believe you took this action without consulting me first, sire. The future of the Kingdom is of paramount importance and the castellan of the King's castle should be allowed to offer his counsel on matters of inheritance. "

King Dugal, his dark hair peppered with gray, leaned back in his ornate chair at the head of the table and raised a single eyebrow at his elderly advisor. "You are my advisor, Fallos, not my nanny. I need not your permission for any action I take."

"But your Majesty," Fallos began, leaning forward urgently. He stopped abruptly, taking note of the look on the king's face. He decided to try a more friendly, fatherly tone. "Dugal, you should not have taken this course of action. There are those among your Dukes who have whispered for years about this possibility." He sat back abruptly, his pinched face growing serious and his voice harsh. "And none of them have whispered kindly, my Lord."

The king slammed a fist on the table, his eyes flashing with frustration. "She is my only child, Fallos. And she is more than fit to rule despite her blood. " His anger dissolved as quickly as it had appeared, his face schooled into more patient lines. He pointed a finger at his friend, his eyes narrowing. "You counseled me to send her away, to send my only child to that, that, school. I did as you bid and the whole of the kingdom whispered behind my back. Some of them wanted to see my precious daughter dead because of it. Before she returns we will settle the issue. The Ducal Council has been presented with my request to change the law that forbids a

mageborn to rule. There is bickering between the Dukes even now and if she does not come to rule, there may be war before a King can be chosen.”

Now it was Fallos' turn to be angry. He stood and turned quickly, his robes swirling about his aging, thin body. He tried to compose himself before he spoke again. He loves her too much. She is his only child and ever was he over fond of her. Fallos thought to himself. To be fond of her is no crime, but when the Queen could not get with child he should have set her aside. The King knew Mira would not be allowed to rule; knew it would come to this. Yet because she was his only child he could not accept it. He does not even consider my feelings for Mira. I am as much entwined in her life as he, and owe her more than he can imagine. Fallos' face took on a pained look. It was difficult being both friend and advisor to a king, particularly when it required you tell him things he does not wish to hear. He'd done so many times over the course of his tenure as advisor to the king, and often in this very room. The King's study.

This was a place few were invited. Fallos spent much of his time here, speaking with the King, instructing him on different topics and delivering news, usually regarding own kingdom but from neighboring lands also. Some nights the two would retire to this room and sit in the overstuffed chairs near the fireplace, drinking fine wine from elegant stemware and discussing the more mundane aspects of life. Women. Children. Hunting. As the king had grown older they still retired here to talk, but the talk had grown more political. They rarely had time to speak of women and hunting, their lives and minds had been consumed with political tactics and strategy in dealing with the discord sowed by a few unruly Dukes. But in Dugal's youth, they had sealed their friendship in this room and he drew on the strength that came from that bond now, giving him the courage to speak to his king openly and plainly. He took a deep breath and turned to face his king, who was sitting with his elbows on the arms of his chair and his fingers pressed together, as if contemplating a great decision.

“Sire, I convinced you to send Mira to training because she could have become dangerous to both herself and others without the counsel of those who understand these things. She was already beginning to show signs that the magik would control her if she did not learn to temper it. It was the right thing to do. As for the other – you knew, sire, that she could not rule. You knew that on the day she was born and I told you of her birthright.” Fallos raised his chin slightly, as if daring the king to contradict him.

To his surprise, the King returned Fallos' look with one of defiance. “It matters not, Fallos. I will name her my heir and she will succeed me. She is my child and born to ascend the Throne of Farren. And she will. She is more suited to rule than any of those cuckolded Dukes. I will hear no more discussion on the subject. She is as fit as you or I. The fact that her blood courses with magik is irrelevant. She has been raised to rule and rule she will. The Ducal Council will see this in the end and agree. It is the only way.”

“They will not agree, sire.” Fallos argued. “Or do you forget your history?”

When the king did not reply he continued. “King Farren's edict was the result of Victoria Kingseer's prophesies. The Mageborn Queen? The fall of the keep?” he prompted.

To Fallos' surprise the king began to laugh heartily. The king shook his head and looked at Fallos with a patient expression on his face. "Do you really believe those old bard tales, Fallos?"

Fallos was taken slightly aback. He'd never heard of a prophecy of one of Shalitor's seeress' that had not come true. To his knowledge, they were always correct. He nodded, unable to believe that the king would ignore a prophecy. It was one thing to be wary of the mageborn but to ignore the words of a seer? It was incomprehensible to him.

The king smiled at his old friend. "Fallos, dear old Fallos. The stories of Victoria Kingseer are no more than a child's tale. I think you would be hard pressed to find more than a fist of men who believe The FirstKing murdered his children. I certainly do not." He waved his hands in the air, as if dismissing the argument physically. "It is folly to believe such a thing. The tale was likely commissioned by King Farren to insure we were wary of the mageborn. To frighten us. But he lived in a different age, an age of war and destruction. We live in an enlightened age of peace and prosperity. There is no more reason to fear the mageborn than any other today."

Fallos sighed deeply. He knew better than to try and argue with Dugal when he set his mind so firmly. He cleared his throat and moved to stand next to the table. "Mira returns at the end of this week." he told the king, his fingers trailing back and forth across the edge of the table. "Have you spoken with her regarding your decision?"

King Dugal shook his head as he pushed his chair back and stood. He straightened his cloak and smoothed his tunic before he answered. "She will be told after she arrives and before the feast in honor of her return. She will agree. She is a dutiful child." He turned on his heel and left the room, leaving no chance for Fallos to disagree.

Fallos sat down slowly on the edge of his chair, his long fingers now drumming on the table as he thought. He didn't believe the Ducal Council would agree, and he was fairly certain that even if they did, Mira's life would be in danger from some of the more outspoken and ambitious Dukes of the kingdom. Duke Franken, in particular, caused Fallos no small amount of concern. The young man had only recently come to rule EastGuard and there were rumors that he had hurried his poor old father to the grave. He was known to be ruthless. Fallos had been behind the King's decision to turn down Franken's offer for Mira's hand. Both he and the King had high standards where the princess was concerned, and Franken did not even begin to meet those standards.

Fallos leaned back in his chair as he considered the other members of the Ducal Council and their positions on the subject of mageborn ruling. He knew this would lead to war, one way or another. A mere excuse for some, a cause for others. It did not matter. He leaned forward and put his head in his hands, his stomach churning with the realization that no matter what happened over the course of the next few days, the kingdom of Freeland Hold would never be the same again.

Chapter 2

Mira brushed a strand of raven's black hair from her forehead and looked about her with joy. It had been nearly five years since she had seen anything south of the Continental Egress, and though they were not yet in Freeland Hold, she felt as though she were home. Five years. She thought grimly. Five years since the tall, gangly mageborn took me from my father's side at the Egress and cloistered me away with the other mageborn. Mira smiled slightly at the word. She had once vehemently denied that birthright and even cried when they insisted that magik coursed through her veins. Five years of schooling and gentle guidance had removed her fear and loathing of both the word and the magiks they wanted her to use. But not her unease.

For while she could command and control magik now, she did not desire to do so. She understood, likely more than any other in Freeland Hold, why the FirstKing had denied those like her the right to rule.

She could be dangerous.

She shook her head, trying to push away the morose thoughts that filled her mind. Just because she could use magik did not mean she would. And now that she was almost home, no one would ever force her to perform such acts again. She smiled and turned her attention to the Knights who traveled with her. Her father had sent them to escort her home. Neither were very talkative, but they were better than nothing.

“I know I have said this a thousand times, good Sir Harren, but you have grown into a dashing Knight since last I spoke with you.” She spoke more from a need to make conversation than a desire to actually flatter the young man.

But he had indeed grown handsome and it had been long since she had seen a man so, well, manly. The mageborn men who had tutored her were middle aged and hid their forms under their flowing robes. None of them had ever appeared even slightly interested in her, and she had wondered for a time if it been some lack in her that caused their disinterest. Now she knew better. It was the name “mageborn” that they shied from. She shook off her memories and the frown that had appeared on her face and instead focused on Sir Harren. From the scrawny little boy she had known had emerged a tall man with a long, dark mane of hair, broad shoulders, and a serious face that looked as though a sculptor had carved his best likeness of the god Dirge from the finest marble. His pointed goatee was just full enough to be manly, without being unruly. If she had been interested in the muscular, warrior type she would be sorely tempted to win his favors.

He was, as he had been since they had met at the Egress two weeks before, polite but distant. “You have grown also, your highness. The King will be surprised to see you so grown.”

Mira said nothing in response. She wasn't certain how to respond and Sir Harren's

tone of voice did not engender further conversation on the subject. She sighed and turned her attention to the land around her. The mageborn she had spent the last five years with had talked so much with their lectures and inquisitive natures that the young woman realized that she had grown accustomed to the constant flow of conversation about her. She had forgotten how quiet and aloof knights could be, preferring the company of other warriors and rarely desiring lengthy discourse.

Sir Eleric, the other Knight in her honor guard, slowed until they pulled next to him. Sir Harren and Mira both stopped, looking at him expectantly. “We should be in the Kingdom, by now your highness. If not now, then by nightfall surely. If we press on we can rest this evening under Sir Harren's roof.” he said as he pointed toward the horizon.

“That would please me greatly, Sir Eleric. One of you has been awake at my door each eve since we met, I would be pleased to know that one night my rest was not keeping one of you gallant men from yours.” she told them both with a genuine smile.

Sir Harren replied, the subject of their destination warming his heart and loosening his tongue. “Then we had best ride faster, your highness. It is many leagues to my father's domains.” he warned, his voice stern. Suddenly, his face softened and his eyes took on wistful look. “But a pretty ride it is. My father's duchy is not only the most beautiful in all of Freeland Hold, it will be a sight for sore eyes after the Sevich Desert and the muck that is called the Kingdom of Corrigar.”

“Most beautiful readily available mayhap.” quipped Sir Eleric with a smile.

“Don't tell me that you're going to go on about the beauty of the foothills in Dwarfwatch again. I truly could not bear listening to you prattle for another three hours about mud and stone.” Sir Harren retorted smiling.

“They are all beautiful Duchies good Sirs. It is good to be home again, no matter which Duchy I am passing through.” Mira told them both diplomatically. “Although Forrestlan and Doornesbane suffer far too many incursions for my taste. Even Sir Harren's beloved Groveshold is not untouched when the raiders come.” she finished seriously.

Sir Harren's face grew serious, his voice holding an edge of anger. “Every time the blasted Corrigarian Guard decides to chase out their bloody undesirables, they run over the border and my father and his men have to chase them off. I don't know why Forrestlan exists. They seem to pass through this Duchy like the wind, and once they enter GroveHold, they fall upon our smallfolk like a pack of wolves.” he turned his face to the princess. “If there are too many attacks your grace, please mention it to your father. A little pressure on King Kayliffe of Corrigar might lessen the flood.” he told her seriously.

He is truly a man grown. She thought, surprised. No mere boy thinks about a Duchy they'll never inherit or finds a solution that uses more than a sword and a horse to accomplish a task. “I will mention it to him this week good Sir, I promise.” she assured him. “What is it that you would like? Just an emissary to King Kayliffe?”

Sir Harren thought about the question for a long moment, looking far off down the road. Finally he nodded. “That and weapons. And an apprentice smith. Old Bretton Hugearm is getting beyond his years. The smoke has ruined his eyes, and the fire has leathered his skin. But he will not take an apprentice willingly and father coddles him unbearably. An apprentice appointed by the King though... That kind of apprentice he might take on.”

“I would beg many pardons of you both for speaking out of turn, but I must say that your father is making a mistake. A good smithy is worth one hundred good warriors when swords come into play. No matter how good he was when he was young, your lord father should set this man up with a small house and a small fortune. Your lands provide enough work to attract a new smith to replace him outright.” Sir Eleric said.

“No reason for pardons, good sir. And I believe that my father's problem setting Bretton aside is purely one of old age. If a smith that is of an age with him is no longer useful, what about a Duke of that age?” Sir Harren said seriously. “Replacing Bretton will be one of my brother's first acts as Duke when my father retires. If father is still alive, I will speak with my brother about making him an advisor. If father is not alive when Perchen inherits GrovesHold, I will urge my brother to retire the smith.” Sir Harren said.

Sir Eleric suddenly raised a hand. “Quiet. There's smoke ahead.” he told them urgently in a hushed voice.

Sir Harren leaned forward in his saddle and peered ahead to see where the smoke was from. “A campfire, a homestead, or a town?” he speculated.

“Too little for an entire town, it must be a campsite.” Sir Eleric replied, shaking his head. He watched intently for a moment longer, then pointed toward the foothills. “There, to the west, toward the foothills.”

“Are we at war, that you would react to a little smoke this way?” the princess asked them both warily, her voice hushed.

“No, but you cannot be sure that a wayward group of Corrigarian cut-throats isn't wandering around over there. We two have been trusted with the safety of the Princess of the realm. We cannot be too careful.” Sir Eleric told her, his voice tense. He did not speak of the other dangers her father had discussed with him before he and Sir Harren had set out to meet her weeks before. But he knew there was danger to her from more than just brigands, and he now wished he had pressed the king for a larger force to escort his daughter home.

It was then that Mira noticed that both men had dropped gauntlet covered hands to rest lightly on the hilt of their swords. She was a bit taken aback, as she had not considered that there might be trouble on her journey home. Indeed, the last time she had traveled the lands was with her father, and there had been no interruptions all the way from her palace home to the edge of the Continental Egress. But I was with father, and all of the KingsGuard. she reminded herself silently. She drew her cloak around her tighter, shivering at the possibility of running into these cut-throats Sir Eleric had mentioned. She had never had an interest in weapons before, but she suddenly wished she had something with which to defend herself.

But you do. A voice in her head reminded her. You have your magik, dear Mira. With it, you are never truly defenseless. She heard again the lectures of her mentors; heard the one lesson they had tried to instill in her for years, the one they had failed to convince her to accept. She shook her head in denial. I will never use magik in such a way. She told herself. Never. She watched the two knights anxiously, waiting for them to make a decision.

Sir Eleric's horse had begun to dance nervously under him, reacting to the subtle change in the knight's posture. Sir Eleric looked at Sir Harren seriously for a moment, as if measuring him up, then turned his attention back to the west, where the tendrils of smoke he had glimpsed earlier had grown more dense. He tightened his grip on his sword. "There are but two of us, and the princess is unarmed." he told Sir Harren with a nod in Mira's direction. "It would be folly of us to think we could protect her against a large force, we should move on as quickly as possible toward your father's keep."

Sir Harren nodded his agreement immediately. Both had been well trained to assess potentially dangerous situations and make decisions as quickly as possible. In this situation, Sir Harren could see no other course of action to take. Had it not been for Mira, the two knights would have investigated and gladly confronted a force even three or four times their number, but they did not have that luxury. Their need to protect Mira was stronger than their desire to rid the countryside of potential cut-throats. "We can notify my father and have someone sent to investigate as soon as we arrive." he said decisively. "Let us go quickly. Soon it will be dark, a disadvantage that will worsen the situation."

Sir Eleric agreed, then flicked the reins of his mount and kicked his heels into the huge stallions sides. The horse was well trained, and immediately took off at a gallop, clouds of dust rising from the road behind it.

Sir Harren nodded at Mira. "Go quickly now, your highness." Mira swallowed nervously, but nodded and kicked her mount in the sides as well, encouraging him to follow Sir Eleric as fast as possible. She held tightly to the reins as she was jostled back and forth. It had been a long time since she had ridden a horse so hard, but she was determined not to put these fine knights in danger by falling behind or tumbling from her horse's back. Sir Harren waited but a moment, then set his horse to following, bringing up the rear and guarding Mira's back just in case.

As they drew closer to the source of the smoke, Mira's apprehension increased. She watched Sir Eleric's head turn slowly, apparently scanning the horizon. She felt her stomach lurch when she heard the din of metal rattling ahead of her and the sounds of men's voices crying out over the heavy hooves of her horse hitting the road. She ignored her stomach and concentrated on keeping up with Sir Eleric. She glanced back quickly and noted that Sir Harren was only a few yards behind her, his unsheathed sword in one hand and the other gripping his mount's reins tightly as he held his position behind her.

Moments later her fears were realized when several men stepped into the middle of the road, weapons at the ready. She saw Sir Eleric pull back sharply on the reins of his horse. His horse reacted instantly, pulling up short and neighing violently in protest.

“Why do you block our way?” he demanded.

Mira and Sir Harren had closed the distance between themselves and Sir Eleric, and their horses now danced nervously behind him. He did not turn or speak to them, concentrating on the situation evolving in front of him. She barely heard Sir Harren's voice above the rapid pounding of her heart. “Your highness, say nothing. Do nothing. Let Eleric deal with this.” His voice held a tone of command and Mira whispered her assent almost hoarsely.

The three men who stood in the middle of the road were unkempt, as though they had been traveling for some time, but did not appear to be simple, wayward rogues. The men spoke quickly amongst themselves, one making almost violent gestures toward Sir Eleric and Sir Harren. “Good.” Sir Eleric said quietly. “They ought to be wary of us, Corrigarian scum. We are not to be taken lightly though their number be greater than ours.” Mira was not surprised by the knight's words. He was a knight of Dirge. The Dirgian knights were among the most fearless in the world, no doubt the reason her father had sent two of their number to escort her. She turned her attention back to the scene unfolding in front her. Mira's eyes widened as she watched one man reach out and cuff another on the head, then turned to address Sir Eleric.

“We demand a toll for safe passage, Sir knight. Surely you are well enough off to pay a small fee for the lady's safety.” the man called out, smiling gratuitously. When Sir Eleric said nothing in response, his smile turned to a sneer. “Or perhaps the lady would prefer to pay the fee in trade.”

Mira gasped. She was about to reply when Sir Eleric put a cautioning hand behind him, to reassure her and to keep her from responding. “I think not.” the knight said. “She is not interested in men of your ilk and neither are we willing to pay for passage on a road you do not own. Now stand aside before I run you down like the curs you are.”

The man nodded, as though he had anticipated and even hoped for such a response. He raised a hand and motioned to the men still mulling about the campfire. He did not turn his head to see if they responded, he acted as if he knew they would come. That was no real surprise, they were many against only two knights and such a wonderful prize to be had, they would be eager to join the fight.

Sir Harren spoke urgently, his voice low but clear. “I hear horses approaching from the east. They are being ridden hard, Sir Eleric.”

Sir Eleric nodded once without turning his head to indicate he had heard Sir Harren. Mira felt nervousness welling up inside her. There were men in front of them and now, according to Sir Harren, more coming up behind them. She bit her lip as she waited impatiently for Sir Eleric to make a decision.

Finally, Sir Eleric spoke quickly. “Ride abreast of me, Sir Harren. Mira, stay in the middle of the road and a few yards behind. We will clear a path through these brigands. If we must stop to fight, your highness, you must ride on through as hard as you can. Do not stop until you reach the keep. It is perhaps two hours of hard riding, if you push your mount. Do you understand?”

Sir Harren answered by moving his horse to stand aside Sir Eleric's. When Mira did not respond, Sir Eleric prodded her, his voice a violent hiss. "Do you understand, Mira?"

The anger in the knight's voice startled Mira, but she answered him dutifully. "Yes, Sir Eleric. I understand."

Sir Eleric drew his sword and looked to Sir Harren, locking his gaze with the other man's. "May Dirge protect us as we wreak vengeance on his enemies and ours." Sir Harren smiled grimly in return, his sword already locked tightly in his grip. "Let us send these curs to the Gateguarder, that she may deal with them as she will."

With that, the two men spurred their horses forward, ignoring the growing number of men who stood in their path. Mira hesitated only briefly, then urged her mount to follow the knights, trying to keep him moving forward down the center of the road.

Sir Eleric appeared only momentarily confused when the men who had been occupying the center of the road closed their ranks to a single line and moved to stand slightly off the center of the road, blocking it completely. The men who joined them moved quickly to stand on either side the road, stretching out in front of the first men, forming a U-shaped gauntlet that they must ride through. Sir Eleric appeared to realize too late what the men were up to.

She saw Sir Eleric pull back on the reins and slow his mount before they reached the group of men. She breathed a sigh of relief as she heard the sound of a blade whisk through the air, barely missing its intended target – the throat of Sir Eleric's horse. Her relief was short-lived as she realized that she was paying too much attention to Sir Eleric and not enough to her own horse. She saw Sir Harren go down when his horse reeled screaming, then her own horse bucked savagely, squealing in terror. She fought hard to stay on its back, and thought for a second she would be able to stay in her saddle. Then the horse dropped back down on all four feet, and reared again. She felt herself lifted off the saddle and thrown into the air. The wind was knocked out of her, and her head hit the dirt of the road hard. She tried to crawl off to the side of the road and find some cover. She was avoiding the erratic thrashing of her dying horse, and the feet of men avoiding the horse's thrashing all at the same time.

She saw that Sir Harren was on his feet fighting off several of the men. As the fighting swayed around Sir Harren, she got a clear look past him at how Sir Eleric fared. There were several bodies piled up around him, but a line of blood was streaming out of the left elbow of his mail, and his shield was not moving like it should.

She covered her head with her left arm, and reached out with her other arm and grasped the ground, trying to find a grip to pull her toward the side of the road. Her legs were not working like they should, they were moving, but the strength had been knocked out of them. She choked as dirt was suddenly kicked up by the men fighting around her but managed to grip firmly onto a clump of grass and pulled, her feet flailing wildly as they pushed against the ground. She rolled onto her back and she reached the side of the road, gasping for breath. For a long moment she lay there, hearing nothing. But the sound of blades clashing broke through her fear, so she rolled and pushed herself to her knees in one smooth motion.

She suddenly recalled Sir Eleric's words of warning. He wanted me to push on as fast as possible, to leave and get away. She glanced over to the two knights, they were buying her escape with their blood, she could not waste that sacrifice. She nodded to herself, sure of her course of action. She looked furtively around her and found that all the men were engaged in battling the two knights. She jumped up and grabbed her skirts, pulling them up to her knees, then ran down the side of the road, trying to keep her profile low enough not to be noticed. Her legs were still a little weak, but seemed to be returning to normal already. Good. No permanent damage then. She thought.

She heard the sound of horses and new voices behind her, but she ignored them and continued to run. Nothing must slow her or stop her. Her friends – they were friends now if they had only been associates a week ago - were back there dying for her chance to escape. She ignored the scratching branches of the bushes and weeds that seemed to reach out and grab her uncovered legs. She ran toward the trees that stood some yards from the road, and found herself ducking as branches from the young trees slapped against her head and neck, pulling her hat from her head and tangling her hair in a mess. Still she did not slow down.

“Why are you running my pretty?” She heard the yell of a man beside her. She whipped her head around just in time to see him flying through the air before he landed roughly on top of her, knocking her to the ground. She squirmed under his weight and cringed at the heat of his breath on her face. His breath stank of wine. He wrestled both her wrists together in one large hand and slapped her hard with the other. “There now, I'll have no fighting from you. Fight with Engdor when he comes for his turn.” She stopped fighting, surprised. She saw the leering smile on his face as he reached into his boot and drew a slim dagger.

She would never forget what she did next, not as long as she lived. She did exactly as she had been taught to do. She reached out and pulled the mana into her. When she had drawn enough, she looked directly into the man's eyes and said the words. Said the words that released the mana in a fiery blade that cut through the hand holding the dagger. Cut through it like a hot knife through butter, severing it completely. Distantly she watched the hand spin off to her left, the dagger falling free.

The man released her wrists in surprise and agony as he stared in horror at the stump where his hand had been. His horrified gaze turned from the empty space back to her, then he opened his mouth and began to scream in agony and fear.

Mira, appalled at her own actions, nonetheless scrambled out from under the now screaming man and stood staring at the result of her actions. Though she was shocked by what she had done, she was also fascinated. The wound had been cauterized immediately. Her teachers had certainly never told her about that. Of course, they had taught her to use the fiery blade on an opponent's neck, and thus may have felt whether he bled or not wasn't relevant. She shook her head back and forth, as if to deny what she had done, backing away slowly from the man lest he recover and come at her again. She whipped her head up at the sound of a horse's hooves thrashing through the taller grasses, approaching the trees. She turned on her heel and began running once again. She knew that it was too late, but she had to run. She did not make it more than 50 feet with the horse right behind her and gaining. He was too close. She'd never get away without using her power again. She was trying to build

up the nerve to do that again. Then it was too late. She felt someone grasp the back of her tunic and pull. Strong hands grasped her firmly from behind around her waist. Though she hit at them furiously with her fists, the man belonging to those hands lifted her easily and set her on the horse in front of himself.

She grabbed onto the pommel of the saddle to keep her balance as the man pulled the reins and the horse wheeled around to head back toward the scene of the fight. She bowed her head in dismay, and was surprised as she caught a glance of the man's forearms holding the horse's reins. They were scarred in the fashion of a Corrigarian FreeSword. Corrigarian FreeSwords laid deep cuts up their forearms, one for each contract they have taken on. They were amongst the most respected and feared warriors in the world. She had once overheard Old Sir Chendl, Knight Templar of Dirge tell her father that he'd rather face twenty Tasnami warlords than one Corrigarian FreeSword because you could negotiate with Tasnami warlords. The FreeSwords took but one contract at a time, and they were utterly faithful to that contract. This FreeSword appeared to have seven scars on his forearms, making him experienced enough to keep her captive if he wanted.

As they broke through the trees, she was able to see the site of the ambush. The battle must have finished as there were now people laying all about, a few horses wandering aimlessly, and her two Knight protectors were standing talking to men who looked more like brigands than the ambushers had. A man wearing the clothing of the Desert people of Kantor Doorne was busy working on Sir Eleric's elbow, and another man she'd never seen before dressed in leather-and-scales was cutting the throats of those who were too badly wounded to move.

She was confused. Why were the knights still alive if the brigands had reinforcements? Who was the man that held her captive? A good question. she thought. "Who are you, and why did you chase me?" she asked aloud.

"Chase you, Mistress? I did not chase you. I was chasing the dog whose hand you left lying in the bushes, but as long as I was there, I thought perchance your protectors would like the pleasure of your company." he replied in a husky voice.

"You ran me down. Now you return me to my Knights? I ask again good sir, who are you?"

"Kieran Chace, FreeSword of Corrigar, and seeker of truth." he replied. "And who would have the honor of riding in front of the world's most feared FreeSword?"

Though she had been taught since a babe that the truth was the only way to deal with people, she quickly decided that the truth would have to wait until she was safely with her protectors. "Mira. I am the lady Mira, returning home after a long absence. These Knights I met on the road agreed to protect me in my travels since we are headed to the same place." There. She had told the truth and yet told him nothing.

"Ahhh. Mira Mageborn, Princess of the Kingdom, due home this week from training on the Isles of Enlightenment... Or is that Forbidden Isles since we are in Freeland Hold? This one expresses great pleasure in meeting you, your highness. It so happens that I too am headed to the Kings Holdfast. I am looking for a new contract, and it seems that your fair Kingdom has much to offer."

Mira cringed. Every time she didn't tell people the complete truth she got caught by it. Nothing for it now but to let it pass. "I might be that same Mira. And I might wish the pleasure of your company in my trip to Farrenton." she replied.

"Are you offering me contract, your highness? As I said, I am without contract at the moment, and guarding a princess is indeed a contract worthy of one as renowned as I. But it would be expensive, yes, my services do not come cheap your highness, not cheap at all."

Mira's cheeks grow hot with anger. "You read into my meaning. I merely meant that four of us is a less appealing target to brigands than one of you. And your prowess has yet to be proven to me. I am not offering you contract, but you do have my gratitude. Ride with us to my father's castle, and he will make good upon my gratitude."

"Now that is truly a tempting offer, your highness. Travel with you to the place I was headed anyway, and collect a reward for being a responsible person and helping fellow travelers. What is the catch your highness?" he jibed.

"None. I will have the Castellan pay you, and then you are on your way. I have no need of your services, and the royal family pays it's debts." she said tersely. There was no evidence that he was completely friendly, if she could convince him to come for a reward, it might insure that he didn't have any thoughts of making money by kidnapping her.

"I will consider traveling with you mi'lady. Pray let us speak with your knights first." he replied.

Sir Eleric looked up when he heard them approaching, a look of relief on his face as he saw Mira safe and whole. "Your highness, it is so very good to see you unharmed. I saw some men go after you, but was sore pressed." He grimaced as the man working on his arm tried to straighten it.

"You need a real physic for this wound, sir. My skills are not the best, and a roadside is not the best place to treat a wound." the man told him honestly.

Sir Eleric turned to the man. "Thank you for what you have done Virace. You are skilled enough to keep me from bleeding to death before we reach the nearest keep. I cannot ask miracles of a man that stopped to help strangers of his own free will."

Virace tied off the bandage he was putting into place. "Tis kind of you to thank me Sir Knight, but really unnecessary. We could not ride by and allow these vermin to kill two knights who fought as valiantly as the two of you were. The Kingdom would have been a poorer place without men like you in it."

Mira had heard enough. "What happened here, Sir Eleric? I am no soldier, but those men were much more organized than any brigands I have heard of."

Sir Eleric gave her an appraising look. "Truth be told Lady Mira, they are more organized than any I have had the pleasure of dispatching."

“Well then, who are they?” she demanded.

Eleric shook his head in annoyance. “They wear no insignia, their weapons are relatively new but unmarked, their armor much the same. Not even a smith's mark on the swords mi'lady. If they're brigands, they're well-equipped brigands.”

“Have you searched them thoroughly, good Sir?” asked the man who sat behind Mira. As if it was an afterthought, he lifted Mira's by the waist, and set her down roughly.

She turned to face him and got her first look at her rescuer. He was slight of build, with a thin face and a neatly trimmed beard. His shirt was covered by soft leather armor and a sky blue cloak. His boots were some of the finest she had seen in a long time, and not over worn. His long, brown hair was tied back into a pony tail. There was a fire in his ice blue eyes that she had only seen when her sorcerous instructors had been prattling about their favorite spells. The look of someone who not only loved what he did, but lived for it. His forearms had the seven long scars she had seen earlier, and his shirt was designed to leave his forearms bare. Mira found herself intrigued, and chided herself for her thoughts, turning away so he would not see her face.

“I am no body thief, sir.” Eleric replied indignantly. “To whom do I owe thanks for saving my Princess?”

“I am not a knight sir, please do not afford me such a title. You are speaking with Kieran Chace, sworn member of the FreeSword Brotherhood. Fiercest in a band of fierce mercenaries, horse king of the Sevich desert, servant of Kings and Dukes the world over.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Kieran. I am Sir Eleric of the Order of the Dented Shield of Dirge, and this is my brother in the Order, Sir Harren. I cannot express our gratitude enough. Our charge was sore-pressed, and I fear she may have been lost to us without your help.” Sir Eleric said as he bowed low. Sir Harren did the same, but obviously reluctantly.

“I have spoken with Kieran about traveling with us to the capitol, though he has not yet accepted.” Mira said into the silence that stretched after the introductions.

Looking directly at Sir Harren, the Freesword spoke slowly. “I would be honored to join these honorable Knights in your entourage mi'lady. And keeping an outlander like myself in their sight is sure to please these knights.

Sir Harren actually snorted. “Well and good. We agree on at least one point Sellsword, I would fain have you at my side rather than roaming my father's lands with a gaggle of brigands.”

“That gaggle of brigands just saved your life and the life of your charge good Sir. Of course, they would not be traveling with us. I joined them to add some life to the long trip. But it would appear to me that your small group is more likely to find excitement than that gaggle. Let them wander until some Lord takes them as thieves.

Pity really, they're good men if you can get past the stink of them.” The FreeSword replied blandly. “And I am a FreeSword not a sellsword sirrah. There is a significant difference. Once I am hired, my employer need not worry about which side I am on, or how much gold her enemies press upon me. That is why my people are welcomed in your Kingdom, and the likes of them are bait for vultures, waiting for some Duke to catch them.”

Sir Harren nodded once in acquiescence. “Very well. I am misjudging you, and sorely mistreating you with my tongue. It was indeed you and your traveling companions that saved the Princess. We were harshly outnumbered, and would have taken most of them with us. But they were skilled warriors, and did not break. I fear they would have eventually outnumbered us. So you have my humble and heartfelt thanks, and an offer to feast with us this eve at my father's hold.”

The FreeSword actually looked surprised. “Well and good, kind knight. I will happily accompany you that far. It has been days since last I slept under a roof, or had a bath.” he said as he dismounted. “But first, let me practice at being a body thief and see what we might find. One thing about being so honorable, you are forced to guess at the motives in your enemies. Me now, I would rather a few of the living think less of me than misjudge an opponent and end up on a funeral pyre.”

Before Sir Harren could remonstrate the FreeSword again, Sir Eleric broke in. “Do as you will, but do not expect us to assist you or condone what you do.”

“Of course not good Sir. Your honor would not abide pawing through the cloaks of a few dead brigands. I will see to it, and we can then move on.”

With that he stepped over to the bodies lying at the side of the road. There were seven men dead, and two others wounded lightly enough that they could travel. As he started searching through the clothes of the dead men, he looked over at the wounded. “Well, what were you doing at this crossroads? And don't imply you're just brigands. I saw the way you were fighting, brigands are farmers who lost their land, or travelers who ran out of money. You are a skilled fighting unit with a designated leader and coordinated attacks.”

“We was just looking for a little food mi'lord. We been on the run for three weeks, and Trian was tired of eating rabbit.” the man replied.

“Which one is Trian?” the FreeSword asked.

“Why the one over there.” said the wounded man. “The one with the gold cloak pin.”

“Ah. I see.” said the FreeSword as he moved over to the body in question. Flipping through the man's cloak and tunic, the FreeSword cut free a bag that jangled when he hefted it and opened the drawstring. After looking inside he added “and what have we here? A bag of coins? There must be a couple hundred Corrigarian Gold Napulas in this sack. So tell me again how you were starving?”

“We had money sir, most of us did. But we was afraid to near any tavern, and the local farmers won't let you into their barns for any reasonable price. So we was hoping to take food.

“Somehow I doubt that a crew of mercenaries with new weapons and armor couldn't find food to buy. You are lying to me, and I will have the truth. I am not one of these flower-bedecked knights sirrah. I will get answers eventually. You determine how much of you is left for the vultures when I finally have what I need.” Kieran replied with a menacing tone.

Mira was surprised to hear talk like this. The man was no longer a threat, why would anyone threaten him. “See here good sir. I will not have captives threatened or mistreated. It is neither honorable nor useful.”

“I respect both your feelings and your position, my princess. Perhaps your escort should take you around the next bend in the road. There are some parts of a battle that princesses should not be exposed to.” he said with a glint still in his eyes.

Sir Eleric stepped next to her and took her arm. “Yes mi'lady, we have purchased horses from the men that traveled with Kieran and moved your saddle to your new mount. It's a good enough horse, if roughly used the last few weeks.” he said.

Knowing that she should ask about the man that had attacked her, Mira opened her mouth to speak but then felt all the rush that had started when her horse threw her fading. She didn't want to do anything but rest and let her headache fade. That brought her up short. The niggling pain behind her eyes was not from stress, it was the world channeling the mana back through her. Redistributing it through her. Well, she could deal with that, with luck she could even get some sleep this night without dreaming about the one-handed man she'd left in the woods. All things considered, she decided to follow Sir Eleric's lead. She turned towards Kieran. “There was one in the woods, one who...”

“Who died when I caught him chasing you, mi'lady.” Kieran said with a note of finality.

“Yes, who was chasing me.” she replied. “Thank you for taking care of that one for me.”

“It was my pleasure princess. I didn't think the Duke would like that man running about his lands, subjecting people to wild stories about the princess and his kidnapping attempt.” he replied with a tight smile.

He's covering for me in front of the Knights. she thought. “You are too kind Kieran. Thank you for helping me.” she managed, not knowing what else to say. She wasn't sure what these two knights would think, but she knew most people didn't like talk of mage-powers. Right now, she didn't like them very much either.

By the time they turned the corner a short way up the road, the full weakness of her casting was upon her. Most mages used certain herbs to fend off the tiredness, but she belonged to the group that saw that as unnatural. Eventually the herbs became addictive, and even when they weren't, they interfered with normal rest. She felt it was just putting off the inevitable to use the herbs. But right now, she would consider using one of those herbs if she had any with her. She dozed in the saddle, waiting for the FreeSword to return to them, hardly remembering why he was back there.

She awoke with a jolt when Eleric shook her. "Mi'lady, he returns." Sir Eleric said.

"Yes, of course, wake me in the morning..." she muttered as her eyes started to slide closed again. Had Eleric always had roses on the collar of his armor? She didn't remember ever noticing them before.

He shook her again. "Mi'lady. The roads are more dangerous at night, and we know that there is a group of sellswords nearby. Please awaken, we have several hours to ride yet this evening."

She finally came fully awake. "I'm sorry Sir Eleric, the excitement and fresh air have tired me." she lied to him easily.

"Of course, Princess. We will get you to the keep, and you can rest a day or two there before we continue. And I think Harren, Duke of GrovesHold will be more than pleased to provide us with a larger escort the rest of the way to the Castle. Just sit your horse, Lady. I will guide it from mine."

She could hear them talking for the next few hours, but did not understand a word that they said. She realized that she had used much more power than was necessary to take that man's hand off. If there was ever a next time, she should keep better control on taking only what she needed. A simple spell like that one should not have drained her like this.

She roused when they were entering the gates of the keep. Large and imposing, she had forgotten how war-like the keeps were in the northern Duchies. The outer wall stood forty feet tall, and the six watch towers stretched another ten feet beyond that. In this dark, she could not see outside the walls, but her memory showed her a field two-hundred yards out from the walls completely devoid of any kind of cover. All the buildings inside the keep were stone, and the roofs were overlapped red clay sheets. Inside the buildings there was plenty to burn, but it would be difficult for any attacker to get fire inside the keep, let alone inside a building.

She slowly climbed down from her horse at Sir Eleric's urging. It was odd that he was the one grievously injured, and yet he was treating her like a babe. There was nothing wrong with her, and he needed a physic. "I am fine, good Sir. Please see to your wound." she said.

"As you wish, your highness. It does sorely pain me." He handed his reins to a page and headed for a stone building across the courtyard.

"Your highness, please let me escort you to some rooms. My Lord Father and his heir will want to receive you, but I will beg them off based upon the shock you received today. The FreeSword and I will find rooms adjacent to yours, and you can properly greet Duke Rendall Harren on the morrow." he said taking her arm gently.

That was the last thing she remembered clearly for almost an entire day. True to his word, Eleric had convinced the Duke of GrovesHold to provide a more regal escort, and the end of her trip to Farrenton passed as uneventfully as the beginning.

Chapter 3

The mageborn Mira looked into the mirror at the Princess Mira. The long flowing sea-blue gown, the dark hair bound up in a tiara, and the gold horse earrings with Tourmaline eyes. This was not the person she was. For years she had shunned the raiment of court life to fit in with her scholarly companions. I am not this person she thought. And yet tonight, for one last time, I must be.

“Mi'lady looks stunning this evening she does.” said old Lady Ulforth. “Mind you have not forgotten your manners while you were with those people.”

Mira did not like the way that her silks rustled and dragged when she turned to look at her old nursemaid. “Those people are every bit as polite as you and I, Ylonda. And I have forgotten none of the lessons you have taught me.” Mira replied patiently. Of late Lady Ulforth had gotten more rude it seemed. “What did you do while I was away? If I wasn't here to teach, how did you keep your post?” she asked on a whim. It didn't make much sense to keep the woman unless there was a reason.

“You always were a self-centered child. 'Tis not as if you are the only child in the castle. The King had wards, the Castellan and Sir Tillon Fraeth had children. I have kept more than busy, and need never have worried about my knitting needles walking away on their own.” Ylonda replied. “Now that you are back I have turned such instructions over to my apprentices. They are happy because they are certain I have grown feeble of mind in my old age. Children. They always think they could do better. My training was good enough for them, but not good enough for their charges? Bah.”

Mira tried not to smile as she remembered the summer day when she was locked up with Lady Ulforth while the rest of the castle seemed to be out playing. She had summoned up everything she'd taught herself, let the warmth of the outside sun soak into her, and thought hard about the knitting needles walking away. She had thought if they were gone, then knitting lessons would be done, and she could go outside to play.

She had been so young, so naïve about her powers. She didn't understand that each time she opened her soul and allowed the magic of the world to seep in, then directed that magic back out, that the directing would weaken her much like chopping a tree into fireplace logs would, or that the small amount of the world's mana that was lost while she condensed and directed it with her mind would have to be replaced somehow to maintain the balance that the world's supply of mana seemed to seek. She would sleep over long, or have headaches, or her vision would be slightly less perfect while the world used her as a conduit in reverse to replace what she had taken. It was said that truly great magiks would take the caster's soul to replace the amount of mana in the world, and that explained why there were so few truly great works of magic.

She had thought about the needles walking away. It was the only image that she

could conjure as an 8 year old child with no training. She did not understand how literal her thoughts had to be, how precise and controlled her mental image must show what she wanted. So the needles did exactly what she envisioned. In the middle of a pearl, they had disentangled themselves from Lady Ulforth's fingers while she sat there gasping and sputtering. Once free of her now senseless grasp, the needles had walked like a pair of legs. Over the arm of the sitting chair, and across the floor. When they got to the closed door they had nowhere to go, and her concentration broke. They clattered to the floor, still in the room with her. She had failed, but she felt elated. She had figured out how to make the mana do what she wanted. But she was very tired, and Lady Ulforth had been screaming at the top of her lungs. Then her father had come with half of his guard and a not surprised Fallos. That was when her father had finally agreed to send her to training. And a good thing he did. She had learned during her training that eight of ten untrained mageborn die from lack of knowledge. They would try to accomplish too much at once without the discipline required and they would either die instantly or slowly over the next few days while the mana was channeled back through them at a rate they could not control.

“I was young and impetuous then Lady Ulforth, and you are old and impetuous now. Not once have I heard you call me “your highness” though I am still heir to the throne.” she replied.

“No you are not. Get that thought out of your head. You are still young and impetuous from where I stand child. And I will not have you spreading lies. Your father has not taken your birthright from you because he loves you, but we both know he must. You are not fit to rule in Freeland Hold, and you know it.” Lady Ulforth said coldly.

Mira winced at the revulsion in Lady Ulforth's voice, but did not disagree. She still vividly recalled the incident on her journey home. Vividly and with a great deal of guilt. “Exactly what I hope to convince my lord father in the next few days, Lady. I have come to the inescapable conclusion that a mageborn Queen is too much for our fair Kingdom to withstand. Though my heart be in the right place, my kind is best left as advisors without any real power.” she said wistfully.

There was the soft clink of metal on metal from the dark northeast corner of the room. “A wise choice mi'lady.” agreed her old friend Fallos as he stepped out of the shadows.

Mira whirled in the direction of the voice. “You sneak around this castle like it was your private maze, good Sir.” she snapped. “What would you have done if I was undressed when you arrived?”

“Does your grace think her body so perfect that it might arouse a withered old man?” he japed with a smile.

“No Sir, and come to think of it I do not wish to discuss the timing of your arrival. At least you came yourself, rather than send some young lecher. There must be more to your presence here than admiring my gown.” she scoffed while wondering if she could find the door hidden in those shadows and connive a way to block it off. She understood that the Castellan must have secret ways to move about the castle, but she would prefer not to have a door opening into her room.

“I did come for a reason, Mira. I wished to speak with you about dinner this evening. It had been my hope to find you alone, but since you and Lady Ulforth are discussing the topic already, I will join your conversation if the Lady gives her word to keep our faith.”

Lady Ulforth nodded. “No one listens to the rambling of the old maid anyway, you two may speak freely without fear.” She folded her hands together in front of her and stood quietly.

Fallos lifted his chin toward the old lady before turning to face Mira. “Very well then. I bring news and warnings, Mira.” he said. “Things are not as simple now that you are a woman grown as they were for the child that left us. Some Dukes are very afraid of you. Others want to see you on the throne at any cost. You cannot simply barge in to your dinner of welcome, and inform the entire court that you wish to abdicate.”

“What would you have me do, Fallos? My father has kept to the old ways. In the two days I have been at Castellán, he has only sent me an invitation to my reception dinner. How am I to speak with him beforehand?” she asked plaintively, a note of frustration in her voice.

“You cannot. You are a guest in his castle only after dinner, he has made it clear that he will not bend on that tradition. But he has sent me to see to your needs. Give me the word and I will inform him immediately.”

“I will not. My father has lived years in the hopes that he can convince everyone that I should be his heir. I will not send anyone else – even you – to him with the message that I will disobey his wishes in this.” she said firmly.

Fallos' face took on a pained look. “You are not looking at the whole puzzle Mira. There is more to this than your father, the King's, feelings. If you do not speak with him before dinner you may cause us all some discomfort. If you do not speak with him before he announces his intentions to the assembled Dukes, it will be too late. Go to him, or let me carry a message to him, that will allow the two of you to stand united.” he appealed to her sense of duty. Fallos had helped raise Mira, had been the one to convince the King to send her away, had been the one who stood beside her through the long nights of tears she had cried when she had learned of her birthright. He knew, above all else, that she was a dutiful child. She obeyed her father without question and held the needs of Freeland Hold above her own needs. If she could be made to understand that her decisions could affect the entire kingdom, she may ignore tradition.

Mira shook her head and her shoulders slumped slightly. “I cannot. If he keeps to the old ways, I cannot go see him. Until I have guest-right in his home, his guards will not allow me to speak with him even if I tried.” As Fallos opened his mouth to speak she stopped him with a single raised finger, which she waggled in his direction. “And I will not trouble you with running back and forth. In short, if he wishes to be formal with his own daughter, I will follow the old rules too. He will hear my mind at banquet.”

Fallos looked resigned as he took a few steps into the room and sat in a simple chair before he began stroking his beard, his eyes staring unfocused at the floor. Mira recalled that he always stroked his beard when he was nervous. He suddenly looked up and caught her eye. “Then there is something you should know, Mira. The unrest is strong amongst the Dukes who are against you. Your life and your father's life might be in danger if you put off your abdication. I fear they may act rashly if you leave them with doubts. Allow me to place a guard on your door until this is all settled.”

Mira moved briskly across the room, taking the chair across from Fallos' and leaning forward. She reached for his hand and held it between hers. She was shocked by the cold of his hand, and rubbed them gently between hers to warm it. Finally she stopped, and leaned back in her chair. “Fallos, I need to know more about what has become of my father's kingdom. I was attacked on the road traveling home, the High Lord Advisor to my father the King is asking to put guards on my door, and the split over my status is the source of never-ending speculation and conversation. This reminds me more of the kingdom of Trioton than my beloved homeland.”

Fallos' lips lifted into a slight smile, his pride in this girl evident. She was so like her father. So dedicated to the kingdom. It really was a shame that she could not rule. If not for her mageblood... He stopped his train of thought and answered, hoping to convince the young woman to act before dinner. “Some of the older Dukes that your father appointed when he was young have passed on. Their children are different people. Your generation seems more power-hungry and less trustworthy than those they are replacing. They fear you because they fear you'll rule absolutely. They fear your ability to use magic and the power that implies. They fear not being able to manipulate you. Some of the older Dukes want a strong monarch, and feel you are the strongest they could hope to find. Some fear both groups, and are willing to sacrifice anything to keep the peace. None knows for certain what will happen at dinner, but all eyes will be on you.” He stopped for a moment and captured her eyes, staring intently at her and trying to be certain she understood what he was about to say. “You hold the future of the kingdom in the palm of your hand, Mira.”

“Was politics always such a mess, or am I too young to understand? It seems that a simple pronouncement by myself at dinner would solve all of your problems.” she mused thoughtfully.

Fallos stood up and turned to leave. He spoke one last time, hoping to reach her and give her the courage to go to her father. “There has always been an element of risk in politics, but as your father approaches his end time, it is growing. Everyone knows that if you step down a new family will have to take stewardship of the kingdom when your father dies. In short, the vultures are circling, Mira. Soon enough they hope to feed.” He quietly left the way he had come, the hidden door closing without a sound behind him.

Lady Ulforth frowned as she watched Mira rise and begin to pace the room, mumbling beneath her breath to herself.

After longer than Lady Ulforth thought necessary, Mira stopped and pulled herself up. “I will not break the traditions. But I will, at the first opportunity, announce my intention to abdicate.” she decided aloud, pleased with her decision.

Lady Ulforth smiled ruefully. “Of course, child. It is the only decision that could be made. As I have said before, you are not fit to rule. I am surprised the king allowed you to live once he knew the truth. The FirstKing had the right of it.” Lady Ulforth ignored the look of amazement on Mira's face and continued. “He should have set your mother aside when she could bear no normal children. All this unrest could have been avoided. He has no one to blame but himself.”

The smug look on Lady Ulforth's face was quickly replaced by astonishment when Mira reached out and slapped the old woman. The old lady reached a tentative hand and covered the side of her face. The woman took several quick steps back, retreating from the anger of the young woman.

“It is one thing to say that I should not rule. Indeed I agree with you on that. But it is quite another to speak ill of the Queen and question the decisions of the king. That is not your place.” Mira spoke slowly and precisely, her anger tempered only by her upbringing.

The old woman raised her chin defiantly. “I only repeat what others have spoken so often since your birth, child. You will find that I am not the only one who believes that the king made a grave mistake seventeen years ago and that the whole of the kingdom will pay for that now.”

Mira stepped back as if the old woman had physically pushed her. “Get out.” she said in a harsh whisper. “Get out and never return.” she ordered, her voice rising with her anger. “If ever again I see you ... “ Mira left the threat unspoken. She would never have truly harmed the old woman, but she knew that she and those who thought as she did would believe a mageborn capable of anything.

The old woman spun around and headed for the door. She put one hand on the brass knob but stopped short of opening the door. Without turning around she spoke one last time. “You will bring nothing but ruin to this kingdom. The peace will be broken, Mira Mageborn, and the blood that covers our kingdom will be on your head.”

Before Mira could reply she quickly opened the door and left, slamming the solid oak door behind her almost violently.

Mira actually stomped her foot in anger, her face growing red as she held back the torrent of childish retorts that filled her mind. After a few moments she tried to calm herself. She let her hands fall to her sides and closed her eyes, tilting her face upward. Mira inhaled and exhaled slowly, as she had been taught to do during her training. She thought it ironic that the one thing that caused so many problems here, in Freeland Hold, was the one thing that could calm her now. The young woman stood that way, clearing her mind and considering her options for almost an hour. She stopped only when she shivered, breaking her concentration. She turned and looked out her window, realizing that the sun had begun to sink below the horizon. She took a deep breath and faced the door.

It was time for dinner. She found that she could not take a step toward the door. She was about to disobey her father for the first time in her life and she was frightened. Mira inhaled deeply and held her breath. And I will leave the only home I've ever

known. She thought sadly. She could not stay in Freeland Hold once she abdicated. Fallos, and the old woman, were right, she told herself. Mira knew she was the cause of the unrest and in the ensuing politics that would surround her abdication, she could too easily be used for someone else's gains. She would not permit herself to be used against her kingdom in any way. She loved her father dearly, but she was his daughter to the core. Her first responsibility was to the kingdom, even if she could not rule. This was the only way she could serve the kingdom she loved. She would leave and return to that land and people that had accepted her.

A single tear slowly snaked down her cheek and fell to the floor as she took one step, then another, until she'd finally reached the door and passed through it, on her way to dinner. On her way to say goodbye to everything she loved.

She held her head high as she walked sedately through the corridors of the castle she'd roamed all in her childhood. She looked straight ahead and ignored the whispers she heard here and there as she passed. She could not hear the words being bandied about, but she knew instinctually that the whispers were about her father's impending announcement. She refused to be cowed by anyone, including those who might speak out against her or her father's decisions as Lady Ulforth had earlier.

Mira thought of the mageborn who had taught her. They were never embarrassed by their blood and she had never, in all the time she had spent with them, heard a single disparaging word spoken about them. Unlike here, she thought bitterly. Where I have never heard a kind word spoken of a mageborn. I did not choose this birthright.

But it is yours. Mira once again heard the finality of the words and recalled the man who had spoken them. An elderly, soft spoken mageborn whose wisdom Mira had grown to treasure in her time on the Isles. Mira slowed as she neared the dining hall and stopped just before the guards who stood on either side of the great doors. They looked neither right nor left, simply stood staring down the hall, their function more decorative than functional. The real guards, the ones sworn to protect her father, stood in embrasures surrounding the great dining hall, their vigilance surpassed only by their loyalty to her father.

She stared at the gathering of people beyond the doors, heard the laughter, both real and nervous, and resigned herself to her course of action. There can be no turning back now. I must speak before my father and the assembled Ducal council. I must make clear my intentions and spare the kingdom from this divisive issue.

The princess of Freeland Hold took a deep breath and put on her best court smile before nodding to the door man to announce her.

The slight man, dressed in his finest livery for the banquet, bowed in reply. He straightened and turned to face the dining hall. He made a slight gesture to his companion flanking the door. The man put a silver trumpet to his lips and blew the customary tones that announced the presence of a member of the royal family.

The assembled crowd stopped their conversation and turned to face the entrance to the hall, all desiring to catch their first glimpse of the princess in over five years.

“Mira Celeria, daughter of our great king Dugal Celeria, princess of Freeland Hold”

the doorman's voice rang out throughout the great hall, and with his announcement, Mira strode sedately through the door.

She was greeted immediately by Fallos, who bowed a proper court bow and offered her his arm. She inclined her head in response, then laid her hand over his, resting her forearm along his as she had been taught years ago. He led her toward the head table, to her appointed place next to her parents. Dukes and duchesses and other lesser nobles all bowed appropriately as she passed, and she returned their obeisance with a nod of her head and a gracious smile. No matter what they call me behind my back or whisper in the halls, I am still the king's daughter. she thought to herself.

When they reached her father's table, Fallos waited for Mira to remove her hand. Mira did so and thanked him politely for his escort. She looked into her father's eyes and saw the joy at seeing her spread across his face. She curtsied deeply, as was expected, but held her hand up toward him, waiting for him to take it and allow her to rise. He did so quickly and then, surprising even Mira herself, he broke with tradition and hugged his only daughter to his breast.

Mira laid her head on her father's chest, facing away from the crowd that they would not see the tears that threatened to fall at her father's action. I have made the right choice. She told herself over and over, the thought of hurting the father she loved so much almost breaking her heart.

Finally, her father released her and he took each of her hands in his and held them out wide. "Let me get a good look at you, my daughter." he said simply.

She smiled as he looked her over and nodded approvingly. He dropped one hand but kept a tight hold on the other, drawing her to stand at his side. He addressed the assemblage. "My daughter, Mira, returns. And has grown more beautiful than we could have imagined." He paused, and let the crowd murmur their agreement and clap politely.

"Let us feast in her honor, then, people of Freeland Hold. Let us enjoy her company as she lights this great dining hall again with her presence." He sat then and motioned for her to sit as well. Her mother, seated on the right hand of the King, smiled around her father at Mira.

"Mira, my daughter. My heart is glad to see you again. We have missed you." her voice was husky as she spoke, emotion welling up in her. She sat back and took a kerchief from her handmaid and dabbed at her eyes briefly. She turned her attention to the platter of food set before her by a servant, and then smiled at her husband.

"Mira's favorites." she said simply.

He nodded. "Yes, her first meal at home after so long should be special. Especially tonight." he added conspiratorially as he glanced at Fallos sitting next to Mira.

Fallos raised a single eyebrow but said nothing. He was worried, but the wheels were already moving and he could do little to stop them. He merely picked at his food, his appetite long since lost with the possibilities of what might occur this evening.

Mira smiled, and for a short time her apprehension dissipated. She ate, enjoying the food and the company of her family, reveling in the sweet comfort that comes from being home. She was able to ignore Lady Ulforth, unwilling to create a scene with her father over the old woman's presence.

Towards the end of dinner, she started to hear snippets of conversation from around the tables. Several of the Dukes had taken a bit more drink than was necessary and their voices had grown louder than perhaps even they realized.

Duke Harren stood suddenly, and the room quieted. He raised his glass high and looked around him. "A toast!" he cried, and turned to face Mira. "To Mira, our princess, and her return to her proper place by our King's side."

Mira was certain that the toast held a double meaning, and watched the reaction of others carefully. She noted that Duke Ashendown stood almost immediately with his glass raised while Dukes Fairhar and Madden looked apprehensively at each other and did not stand until Duke Franken and Ganglion had stood and raised their glasses as well.

Mira lowered her chin and blushed prettily, as was expected. But her head snapped up when she heard her father push his chair back and stand. "Here here!" he agreed, and drank from his glass. He waited until the others had done the same, then cleared his throat. "We have recently made a decision and believe that now would be a good time to share it with you all." Mira's face showed her confusion and shock as she turned to look at Fallos.

She grew concerned when she saw that Fallos' face was ashen. She reached over and laid a hand on his arm, and he turned to meet her eyes. "He must not. Not yet." she whispered fiercely.

Fallos eyes never left hers. "You must interrupt him. Once he makes the pronouncement he will not take it back. Do it, child, for the good of the kingdom."

She turned about to touch her father's arm and gain his attention. He never looked down, he just patted her hand and then raised his voice.

"We have decided that there is one old law that no longer makes sense in an enlightened age. For centuries we have lived apart from the world, spurning them for the wars that they fought, and the mageborn that they courted..."

"Father." Mira tried to interject, but he ignored her.

"We have chosen to join the rest of the world. Starting on the morrow, the laws that forbid the mageborn from sitting on Our throne will be eliminated. It is time we made this step, we have not even had the counseling of mages. When we are involved in relations with other nations we are at a disadvantage. It is time that we moved forward. If any of you came here with the idea that I would disown my lovely daughter Mira Celeria, please understand that there is more here than a man's love for his daughter. We need a strong throne, and a mage upon the throne would make our neighbors think long and hard before attempting to do us ill. We need the strength that Mira can offer us." He picked up his wine glass. "Back to my original toast! All

Hail Mira, heir to the throne of Freeland Hold!”

Once again, Mira watched the hall, only this time in horror. Once again old Fallos had the right of it. She should have said something sooner. Duke Ashendown in his purple and white mink cloak was again the first to stand and raise his glass. Duke Harren, the father of the Knight Harren that had escorted her from the Egress, in his yellow tunic and green pants stood just after, raising his glass with a smile.

Duke Fairhair in his brown and green uniform looked to Dukes Ganglion and Franken cautiously. To Mira's surprise, dukes Ganglion and Franken stood with only a slight hesitation. Duke Ganglion was decked out dashing in gray tunic and pants, with a black ermine cloak. Duke Franken was almost as beautifully dressed in a red cloak trimmed in white mink fur, and black tunic. The chest of his tunic held the red foxes of his ancestral lands.

Once Dukes Ganglion and Franken had stood, the rest of the assembled dukes followed suit. Some faster than others, but it appeared everyone agreed with the king to some extent. Now it was her turn.

She stood slowly, and saw the light of victory in her father's eyes. I cannot let him down here and now. And poor old Fallos knew that too. That was why he wanted us to talk before this banquet. She raised her glass, buying for time.

“I came home to Freeland Hold with the intention of abdicating my rights to the royal throne. As I grew older I came to realize that this Kingdom would be ill served by a mageborn Queen. But over time I have also learned to control my mageblood. I do not have to use my powers. Since you, my father's sworn men, all seem to support his decision, I cannot now let you down. I accept my father's judgment for you assembled Dukes. When the day comes that my father must step down, you will find an able replacement for him in me. Thank you for your trust.”

Duke Harren shouted “To Princess Mira!” and other Dukes joined him. She felt that all would work out well after all. She drank and lowered herself to her seat. Her mother was smiling at her behind her father's back, and tears were flowing from her eyes.

Mira spent the rest of the evening as though in a fog. She was delighted with the number of dukes and lesser nobles that came to pay their respects to her and congratulate her on her status, but several of them did not appear sincere.

As the evening wore on, she glanced over at Lady Ulforth to ascertain her reaction to the news. Mira's court smile fell as she saw the old woman's face, pinched in anger and sitting tensely in her chair, speaking to no one. While she cared little for the bitter old woman's opinion, she worried about the words she had spoken earlier in Mira's chambers. “You will find that I am not the only one who believes that the king made a grave mistake seventeen years ago and that the whole of the kingdom will pay for that now.” She heard the derision in Lady Ulforth's voice even in her head, and she worried about those who agreed with her. She let her gaze roam the court, wondering if she could pick out those who agreed with the Lady and those who did not.

But the musicians struck up a tune and the King reached for his daughter's hand. “The

first dance should be yours this evening, Mira.” Mira looked up and saw such pride in her father's face that she could not refuse. She smiled, a real smile and not the one she pasted on for court, and placed her hand in her father's. They moved around the tables and set to dancing a slow, waltzing dance that he had first taught her when she was barely old enough to sit at court.

Fallos watched them as they danced, but he, too, was concerned. He had thought that those Dukes who had expressed their vehement opposition to the king's proposal in council would surely have spoken up here. It concerned him, and he sat stroking his beard throughout the dance, his eagle eyes constantly surveying the crowd, his ears alert for any sign of discontent.

But he heard nothing that alerted him to potential problems. It actually appeared as though the entire Ducal council supported the king and were actually relieved that he had named Mira his heir, regardless of her birthright. His long fingers drummed incessantly on the table in front of him throughout the evening, his feelings of apprehension growing as the night wore on.

Mira danced with almost every Duke in attendance, and she found most of them charming. Duke Franken was extremely cordial and even flattering to her. She found herself dancing more than one dance with him and laughing effusively at his jests and anecdotes. She found herself captivated by his eyes, so pale a blue they reminded her of a bright summer sky. He was younger than most of the Dukes, and she found she enjoyed her dances with him.

Fallos had watched Mira closely as she danced with Franken. She had not been told of the young man's offer for her hand, as neither her father nor himself had felt he was worthy of her. As they began their third dance in a row he heard several people speculate that perhaps a marriage was in the young couple's future. Fallos' eyes grew hard and he began to move toward the couple, determined to break the two up before Mira grew too bold.

When Fallos finally tapped Duke Franken on the back, the duke knew he must make a final impression on the young girl without creating a scene. He stopped and took her hand, then bowed and kissed it lightly before handing it to Fallos. “My dear Mira, I have enjoyed your company immensely. But now I fear I must hand you over to someone less captivated by your beauty than I, before the rest of the dukes have our marriage contract sealed and signed here tonight. I look forward to seeing you again, my dear. You are welcome in EastGuard any time you desire.”

He bowed again to her and nodded curtly at Fallos before he walked away and joined a bevy of Dukes chatting amiably near the edge of the room.

Mira stared after him, her face curious. She had never felt so intrigued by a man before. Fallos took her hand and began to dance with her. His movements were stilted by age but nonetheless he was still considered a fine partner. Fallos hissed harshly through the smile pasted on his face. “Stop that. He is not the right man for you.”

Mira was taken aback. Was I that obvious? she thought, blushing at Fallos' implication.

“Yes, you were that obvious. And he is not for you.” he told her gently. “Be wary of that one, child. He is not what he appears to be.”

Mira chided him. “You would say that of any man I met. Like the one I met - “ she stopped abruptly, realizing that the reason the Duke's eyes had so intrigued her was that they so similar to that of the FreeSword who had saved her on her journey home.

“Yes, Mira?” Fallos prodded.

She shook her head. “It is nothing, old friend. You worry too much. I am not interested in Duke Franken. He is just a wonderful dancer. Much better than you.” she teased.

Fallos grunted but said nothing more through the rest of the dance. When it finished, he spoke again. “I think it is time for you to turn in, your highness. It has been an eventful day and no one will think it odd that you are overtired.” his tone brooked no refusal, and Mira nodded.

“Actually, dear Fallos. I am tired. Would you escort me back to my room?”

Fallos smiled slightly. “Yes, child, I will.” He offered his arm to her and she took it familiarly rather than formally as she had before dinner.

Fallos led her to the king, where they said good night. Mira reached out and took her father's hand, squeezing it tightly, wishing for a moment she was a young child again and able to hug her father without concern for proper court behavior. Her mother waited patiently and when Mira stepped to her the older woman pulled her into her arms, whispering good night in her ear.

Mira stepped back and curtsied properly before taking Fallos' arm once again.

She said nothing as he led her through the halls and back to her chamber. He held the door and she walked through, then turned to her old friend. “Fallos, did you know that Lady Ulforth despises me?”

Fallos glanced around the hall furtively and then shoed Mira back from the door, stepping inside and closing the door behind him. Mira looked shocked at his action, but said nothing, assuming he had a good reason for his actions.

“Mira,” he began patiently. “There are many who think as she does. Your father's decision was not unexpected, but not necessarily as well supported as it appears. You must tread more carefully now. I will have Lady Ulforth retired and sent away. She will not bother you again.”

Mira nodded and then tried to stifle the yawn that enveloped her face. Fallos patted her arm gently. “Sleep well, princess Mira. We will talk more in the days to come.”

“That sounds nice, Fallos.” she returned and yawned once again. “Good night, old friend. You will join me for breakfast?” she asked hopefully.

“Yes, dear.” he replied. “Both your parents and I will join you for breakfast now that

you not only have guest-right, but are also heir to the Throne of Farren.”

“Mmmmm...” she replied lazily, her eyelids hanging heavy now. “Thank you Fallos.”

“Good night, dear Mira.” he told her one more time as she sat tiredly on her bed. He turned and left the room, headed for his study and stopping only to send a lady in waiting to assist Mira in undressing.

He reached his study and entered, closing the door heavily behind him. He leaned against the wood door and rubbed his head tiredly. He had expected a completely different reaction from the Ducal Council but to tell the truth, the reactions he had seen concerned him far more than the one he had imagined.

Chapter 4

A man in dented red armor with the black cloak embroidered with a fox-head that signified Franken's duchy entered his commander's tent. Duke Franken noticed that the bottom edge of the man's cloak was soaked in blood. “Sire, the armory and the stables are ours, but we have been unable to force the doors to the Kings Tower. The King's personal guard and the men that came with Duke Harren are defending the door.” he said.

“More's the pity then. Bring up the oil, douse the door, and light it. It is passingly difficult to protect a door that is on fire, and then you should be able to break through.” Franken replied. It would have served his plans well to take the tower without a fight, but it was not required. All he required was the King to live long enough to sign a declaration making him the heir. Outside of that, he didn't need the KingsTower. For that matter, he would have to eliminate Duke Harren of Grovehold now anyway. Far better if he died fighting.

“Take no prisoners but the King and the Princess. All others are traitors.” he added.

“Sire, Duke Harren's eldest son is most likely in there, as are the Queen and all the servants. Did you mean no prisoners?” queried the man in the bloody cloak.

Franken looked mildly at the man, then replied coldly. “You heard me Hillman. No prisoners. All are traitors who resist the new rule of the rightful King. Or would you like to join their number at the gallows?”

“N-No, S-Sire. I have no trek with gallows, Sire.” the man stammered.

“That is well. You have served me well until now, it would be difficult to find a new captain of my personal guard. Crack the tower by sunrise at any cost. We can get new men if necessary, but there is only one King in the Kingdom, and I have a need for him. You are dismissed.” Franken replied with a wave of his hand.

“Yes, Sire. Thank you Sire.” Hillman said as he bowed and backed quickly out of the room.

The robed man who stood quietly in the corner moved into the dim light of the braziers. The red light glowed eerily from the red eyes of the skull sown into his tunic. “Sire, I would not presume to tell you how to take over your Kingdom, but I fear that you are being overly harsh. Perhaps offer the King and his men a chance to surrender peacefully. It would solidify your hold on the Kingdom much more quickly. My god rewards success, not speed Sire.”

“Tasni rewards those who take what they want Immingar – fast or slow it should not matter to him. And I am taking. Once the KingsTower is mine, I will have a new bride, and the King will give me his Kingdom. You have told me yourself that Tasni sees this as my destiny, have you not? Will he not be all the more pleased if I hand him his wish this very night?”

Immingar shifted slightly, he was no warrior, this frail little thing. But he had good advice, and he wielded the power of his god like a sword. “Tasni is patient my King. He knows that in time all of his goals will be achieved. I counsel the patience of Tasni in this thing.”

Franken laughed. “Why counsel patience when it is all but done, priest? This is so simple. I wonder why no one ever thought of it. Their loss, he would take steps to insure that it was never so easy again. It is past time that this Kingdom had a King worthy of her. Just as I have led my Duchy to be the finest in all of Freeland Hold, the Kingdom shall be the finest in all of Nordalia. Men will quail before the armies of my Kingdom. No Immingar, this is neither too harsh nor too hasty. My people need me to lead them to glory.”

“Because the mageborn girl is important Sire. You must not lose her.” Immingar replied calmly.

“I will not lose her. I will lead this Kingdom, and no mageblood or lover of mageblood will keep me from my service.” Franken replied.

“As you say, sire. Be aware that if you lose her your kingdom will pay in blood.” his voice held the tone of a threat, his face serious.

“I already told you that I will not lose her. Hold your silence Priest.”

Mira felt a pair of hands shaking her gently. She lazily opened one eye and gasped in surprise when she saw Fallos' face just scant inches in front of her face. Fallos drew back to avoid Mira as she sat up quickly.

“What is it Fallos?” she asked, her voice sleepy and confused. Fallos looked like he

had been wakened from a deep sleep and had not even taken the time to properly pull his hair back. It hung in loose gray strands about his shoulders.

“We must go, Mira. Now.” he told her quietly, his tone urgent.

Mira was not fully awake, but she could tell that something was frightfully wrong. She blinked her eyes to clear the sleep from them and then she saw Sir Harren standing a few feet behind Fallos, his bloodied sword held ready and his eyes alert. She pulled the blanket to her chin, suddenly aware she was in nothing but her bedclothes, as she exclaimed, “What is he doing in here?”

“Shhhhh!” Fallos hissed.

“And Sir Eleric!” Mira cried out in annoyance as she pointed toward the door where Sir Eleric stood. It was then that Mira noted that he, too, had his sword drawn and appeared to be watching the hall through a small crack in the door. Her mouth fell open and her hand fell to her lap as she turned her attention back to Fallos who, she now noticed, was also fully dressed.

“Fallos?” she began tentatively.

Fallos closed his eyes for a long moment before he caught her eyes and held her gaze. “Listen carefully. Some of the Dukes did not take your father's pronouncement as well as they pretended at dinner. We are under attack, Mira, and we must get you to safety.” He saw her begin to panic and his voice hardened. “Get up, Mira. Now.”

When she did not immediately respond he grabbed the blankets from her hand and tossed them rudely aside. He took her roughly by the hand and pulled her to her feet. He reached to the chair near her bed and picked up a cloak, then wrapped it around her shoulders, drawing the hood up so it partially covered her face.

As Fallos' words began to sink in, Mira realized that if she were in danger, so were her parents. She turned and ran toward the door.

Sir Eleric heard her approach and turned to stop her, grabbing her easily around the waist and hoisting her partially over his shoulder. “Castellan, we need to go as quickly as possible. The fighting is nearing the doors to the Princess' suite, I can hear them beyond the doors.”

Fallos shook his head. “We are not leaving by that route, Sir Eleric. Bring her, and follow me.” He turned and headed for the corner of the room, feeling along the wall for the release that opened the hidden door he had used just last night to speak with Mira regarding her father's plans.

Sir Harren raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. Sir Eleric marched toward Fallos, ignoring Mira's flailing fists against his back. She raised her voice and began to berate them all. “Let me go now! I must find my parents. The gods damn you Fallos! Let me go-” Quicker than she thought the old man could move, his open hand went up into the air and swung down at her. She stopped suddenly when she felt Fallos' hand meet her cheek.

“Mira, I will tell you this only once. If your parents are alive, they will meet us later. My first responsibility is to take you to safety. Others have taken on the responsibility of protecting your mother and father. You will be quiet and do as we say.” He motioned for Sir Eleric to put Mira down and waited for her to gain her balance again. His face softened when he saw the hurt look on her face as she raised a hand to her cheek.

“Mira, child, your father bade me find you and take you from this place. It was his order that you be taken to safety and it is not for either of us to refuse him in this. Now come with us and keep your voice down.”

Mira swallowed the tears that threatened to fall and nodded her head. Fallos turned then and headed for the passageway that would lead them outside the walls of the keep. “We will still need to make our way to the docks, and no doubt the stables will be watched as well as the roads, so have a care. We do not need to be followed as well.” Fallos threw over his shoulder.

He stopped a few feet down the passageway when he heard Sir Harren whisper his name loudly.

“What is it, Sir Harren?” Fallos asked impatiently.

“I dislike this sneaking around, sir.”

Mira heard Fallos sigh. “I dislike it as well, but there is no better way to take the princess to safety.”

When Sir Harren grunted his acquiescence, Fallos turned and began to move down the tunnel again with Sir Harren behind him.

Sir Eleric prodded Mira from behind to follow. She followed Sir Harren blindly, her mind reeling at the thought of what surely must be happening in the rest of the castle.

The retreating group crept silently through the first of the passages, praying for the safety of themselves and the King. The sounds that Mira could hear occasionally were muffled by the thick stone walls, but were unmistakably the sounds of battle.

She was startled when Sir Harren suddenly stopped. Her stomach leapt in her throat as she raise her hands protectively to her chest as if to calm the pounding of her heart. She closed her eyes and turned her head as the light of a torch erupted in the darkness ahead of her. She shielded her eyes and looked ahead, craning her neck to see what was happening.

By the flickering light of the torch she could see that the passageway had widened into a large room strewn with chests and piles of books everywhere. She opened her mouth in surprise but closed it just as quickly, her fear of discovery overriding her curiosity.

The torch was moving again and she picked up her feet, following Sir Harren once again through the twists and turns of the passage. She had tried to occupy her mind by keeping track of where the passage went and what room must be above them. After

Fallos had lit the torch she'd lost her concentration and could not even determine their direction. She noticed, however, that the sounds of fighting that had almost quieted were now growing louder. The noise grew so loud that she could hear the screams and yells of battle and the sounds of heavy objects being pushed and thrown. Her steps slowed as she concentrated on picking out individual voices. She would swear to her dying day that she heard her father's voice that night, and it stopped her in her tracks.

Sir Eleric gently tried to prod her along, but she would not budge. She was certain she'd heard her father's voice. The evening which had thus far felt so unreal suddenly became too real to her. Her eyes filled with tears at the thought of her father being harmed and she shook her head violently.

“No, no no!” she cried out. “No!”

Sir Harren and Fallos rushed back when they heard her cries. Finding her safe, they looked to Sir Eleric with questioning expressions.

Sir Eleric shrugged. “She just stopped and starting crying.”

Fallos took one of her small hands in his and tried to calm her. “Mira, child, you must calm yourself.”

Mira ripped her hand away from Fallos. “No. I do not want this. I must go to my father. This is wrong, Fallos, wrong.” she insisted.

Sir Harren pushed her roughly, pinning her against the wall with a single, armored forearm. Mira shrunk back from the anger in his face and the dagger that had appeared in his free hand that the knight suddenly held at her throat. “Look, your highness, my brother and my king may be above us right now dying to insure your safety. My father and several of the Dukes who supported your father are riding hard for their homes and may not return.” the man growled. “If you desire to die with them so badly I will take your throat now, for I will not let you be used against us by those who oppose your father.”

Mira stared in horror at the knight. Sir Eleric laid a hand on the other knight's forearm and spoke calmly to him. “Come, Sir Harren. She is a child and frightened. She is merely upset.”

“Do you promise to see this through, your highness?” Sir Harren asked harshly without acknowledging Sir Eleric's words.

“Mira,” came Fallos' voice, his tone even but gentle. “We would all prefer to be helping your father, but it is by his command that we are here. He bade me long ago to protect you and more recently told me again that if something were to happen he would hold me responsible for your safety. Sir Harren and Eleric were also so bound and while it is a great honor to protect you they both feel much pain at leaving the side of their king and brothers. Do not dishonor the sacrifice your father and the KingsGuard makes for you this night by disobeying your father and putting yourself in danger.”

A long moment passed before Mira whispered, “I will see this through.” When Sir

Harren let her go she did not move, keeping her back safely against the wall. The knight turned on his heel and walked away, refusing to look back at her. Mira watched him carefully, noticing that although his stance remained rigid, his hands were shaking. She swallowed painfully against the lump in her throat and held her chin up as she walked slowly to her place behind him. Fallos nodded approvingly to himself before he turned and once again began to lead them down the last few passages.

They walked silently for several long minutes before they came to a halt once more. Fallos doused the flame and leaned against the door, listening carefully for any sound beyond the door, fearing that perhaps someone had discovered Mira missing and knew about this exit. He had not told anyone, not even the KingsGuard, about this escape route and hoped that no one else had discovered it.

Mira watched apprehensively as Fallos listened at the door for what seemed like forever. Finally he motioned silently to Sir Harren as he moved back to allow the knight room to pass. Sir Eleric took Mira's elbow and gently guided her to stand behind him. She noticed then that both knights were standing on the balls of their feet, their swords gripped tightly in their gauntlet covered hand.

Sir Harren pushed the door open slowly and peered through it, his eyes alert for anything out of the ordinary. When he was satisfied the way was clear, he stepped forward far enough for the others to follow, but constantly scanned the area around him for danger.

Mira was surprised when she stepped out through the door and realized that they must have traveled the length of the castle courtyard and were now standing outside one of what she had always believed was a gardener's shed in the midst of a large copse of trees that grew outside the castle wall. The trees were still full with leaves and they rustled softly in the wind, masking the sound of her tentative footsteps. The moon was only half full, shedding just enough light that she could see her companions, but not much further.

They all turned to gaze one last time on the castle and Mira was overcome with dread when she saw the flames dancing in the windows and smoke rising from the KingsTower. She closed her eyes against the scene and turned away, determined to focus her mind on fulfilling her father's wishes. The only way she could help him now was to get to safety and perhaps send back help.

Mira saw Fallos motioning urgently to her and she moved closer to him, as did the knights. They put their heads together so they could hear his words.

“We must head toward the docks. The Duke of RoguesHome will take us to Winegarden on one of his warships where Ashendown will take us in, if he has returned safely. They are both loyal to the King and will protect the princess. Before Sir Harren's father left he ordered guards to wait on the ship to insure a safe journey.”

Sir Harren and Sir Eleric nodded and straightened. This plan has been in place for some time. Mira thought to herself.

As though he had read her mind, Fallos told her quickly. “After your father went to

the Ducal Council with his plans we discussed this very possibility, Mira.”

She nodded. “Well then, let us go.” she said simply.

Fallos sighed. “It may not be that easy, child. Whomever is responsible for this attack is likely to have men watching in the event that any of your family were able to escape. We must be careful. We are not safe until we reach the docks. Walk quickly, but do not run. And keep your voice down.” he reminded her with a stern look.

“I will, Fallos. I gave my word to see this through and see it through I shall.” She said quietly.

Sir Harren looked at her then, his face unreadable. He nodded once at her and then turned his attention to the area, trying to determine the best route to take.

One corner of Mira's lips twitched upwards in a half-smile. She was fairly certain she'd been forgiven and that made her glad. She recalled the ambush on her journey home. She'd rather not have Sir Harren angry with her.

Her relief was short-lived as they moved out of the orchard and into the edge of the city. There were bodies even here in the Panderer's walk, the short street that led from the gardener's shack out to Annery Lane. There were bodies wearing the tunic of the town guard and three different Ducal soldiers. Mira picked out the black castle of Rivermouth, the red foxes of EastGuard, and the yellow cattail sygil of Reedswallow. The fighting must have been short, recent, and fierce. No one had stripped the bodies yet and on Annery Lane it was said that everything not inside your body could be stolen in five minutes. As they continued to walk further down the lane an EastGuard soldier lay on the cobblestone road, next to the guard that he killed. His sword was still stuck in the other man but his helm missing and the back of his head crushed and matted with blood. She swallowed back the bile that the sights and smells evoked, and tried to concentrate on walking. Then she saw the first of the children. A small boy, no older than nine summers, lay cut nearly in two, next to the body of what she assumed was his mother. The boy still clutched an eating dagger, a smear of blood on its blade. May the Gate Guarder guide you to a peaceful afterlife. She thought. All about her the smallfolk were trying to get out of the city. Mira had never seen such chaos before and as she heard the cries of the people of Farrenten as they called for their families and scrambled to leave she was ashamed. Ashamed that she had never spent time among the smallfolk before she had left for training and had not planned on spending time among them now. They were as frightened as she was and they were paying a terrible price because of her father's decision. Never before had she realized how important the king was to his kingdom. She sucked in her bottom lip to keep from crying out and kept her eyes focused on the road ahead.

Fallos slowed until they all caught up to him. “Do you see that banner hanging near the castle gate? That's Franken's, I'd bet it. Even drooping there, I can tell because the boy has raised his family's banner higher than any other Duke. I'll bet that's a 20 foot pole it's on, we can see it over the wall.”

Fallos pointed at the banner and Mira turned to look, but before she could lay her eyes on the offending piece of cloth the growls of men and clash of metal up the road startled her. Her head whipped around as fast as Fallos' as she caught sight of seven

men bursting from a side street not more than 40 feet ahead of them.

Three of the men were backing into the road as four others, wearing the colors of Duke Franken's personal guard, pressed the three hard with heavy blows. Mira did not recognize any ducal colors on the other three men, who appeared to be wearing mismatched armor hastily strapped over silk underclothes. The one in the center was wearing some form of cloak, and using what looked like the top of a wine tun as a shield.

When Sir Eleric raised his sword and started forward Fallos put a restraining hand on his shoulder. "This is not our fight," he warned. "You do not know those men, and we have a duty to perform. It does none of us any good if you are injured, and much harm might come of it."

The muscles in Eleric's jaw tightened and he spoke through clenched teeth. "You have kept me from killing traitors all night, Fallos. There are four to three, an evening of the odds would harm no one but those who dare treason. We all know those red-fox clad men are at the root of this treachery."

"Look closer my friend," interjected Sir Harren calmly. "It appears that the one in the middle could fight those four on his own. You would be unbalancing the fight, not balancing it. Were I a betting man, I would lay money that those four will be meeting the Gate Guarder this eve." Even as he finished, the man closest to them went down on his knee as a Franken guard's sword buried itself in his side. The man Harren had spoken of threw the end of his cloak into the face of his companion's killer while slipping his blade up between the leg and groin of the his own opponent's armor. The man on one knee was grievously injured, but he took the chance his friend gave him, and thrust his sword up hard into the belly of his opponent's breastplate. Before Franken's man could push the cloak out of his face, he was falling over, his armor clattering noisily as he hit the ground hard. The man Sir Harren spoke of pushed back the hood of his cloak as he pulled his sword out of the now dead man's armor.

Mira suddenly grabbed the sleeve of Fallos' robe. "That's Kieran the FreeSword!" She exclaimed. "You must help him Fallos, he saved my life." she pleaded.

The old man shook his head with what almost appeared to be regret. "I think that we will risk your wrath and wait this one out, your highness. I can understand how he might have saved you. He doesn't fight, he uses every tool at his disposal to win. And we need both of your protectors to keep you safe."

While he was talking, Kieran effortlessly flicked a hole in the neck of a third Franken guard and blood came spraying out. The man stumbled back into the adjoining road, holding his neck. "Well Trem, are you in need of help with this cur? I could kick him for you." Kieran panted to his remaining friend.

Kieran's remaining associate traded a flurry of blows with his opponent, stepping up his attack as if refuting with actions the taunting Kieran was giving him. The other man fell back, but the expected look of fear and concentration did not cross his face. Instead, he seemed to be parrying Trem's blows with ease.

Kieran stood his ground but Mira noticed that his stance was still one of readiness and

his sword was firmly in his hand. His companion parried for several more minutes before he stumbled, his sword arm instinctively flailing out to break his fall. A look of victory appeared on his opponent's face as he lunged forward to finish Kieran's friend off. But the expression changed suddenly as the edge of a sword ripped into the side of his neck. He dropped his sword and tried to cover the wound with his hand as he fell to his knees. Kieran stepped around him and turned to Trem, holding out his hand and shaking his head with a grin on his face.

Mira watched with horror as she saw the man behind Kieran pull a dagger from his belt and raise it up, apparently intending to strike him from behind before he died.

“Kieran, look out!” she cried, her voice ringing out louder than she'd intended.

Kieran reacted instantly. He stepped back and turned on his heel toward the man behind him. He swung out and leveled the edge of the steel directly at the man's neck, cleaving his head from his shoulders.

Mira gasped, covering her mouth with her hands and turning away from the sight of the traitor's head flying through the air. But she could not ignore the terrible sound it made as it hit the cobblestones. She shuddered, trying not to retch. Fallos pulled her to him and stroked her hair, comforting her as if she were a young child.

She kept her face buried in her old friend's cloak, trying to erase the memory of what she had seen, until she heard footsteps approaching. She raised her head to see Kieran standing in front of her.

“Your highness,” he said as he bowed. He caught her eyes as he straightened and then nodded to each of the knights. “Good sirs.”

“Freesword.” Sir Harren acknowledged. “What happened here?”

Kieran turned and watched Trem approach, limping. He turned his attention back to the knights and shrugged. “These men were looking for someone.” He looked pointedly at Mira for a moment before returning his gaze to Fallos. “I must have said something that angered them.”

Fallos looked skeptically at Kieran. “Indeed.”

When Kieran said nothing more, Fallos cleared his throat. “We should continue on.” He took Mira by the elbow and tried to lead her away.

“Wait.” Kieran said quietly, staring at Mira. “I owe this young lady. Her warning was most fortunate for me.”

“You can repay her by getting out of the way.” Fallos told him coldly.

Kieran ignored him and continued to wait for a response from Mira. “I have no contract, your highness. Perhaps you could use an extra sword.”

Fallos pulled Mira behind him. “Her highness does not need your assistance.”

Kieran laughed. He looked at Fallos, amused. "And I suppose that you will protect her, old man?" His face hardened and his voice grew serious. "You know who they were looking for, don't you? There are more of them out here. With only two knights you will not be able to stop them."

Kieran took a step back as the two knights tensed. "No offense, good sirs. I have seen you fight and know you are capable of defending the princess, but if you are distracted by a fight she is easy prey."

The two knights glanced at each other and nodded almost imperceptibly. Sir Eleric spoke evenly to Fallos. "He is right, Fallos. If we are attacked in force on the way to the docks you will both be easy prey. We have fought with this one before, he would be most welcome if we must fight our way out."

Fallos blinked unbelievably. He was suspicious by nature and the appearance of this man seemed too convenient for his tastes. But he also saw the wisdom of their argument. He sighed and closed his eyes for a moment. "Mira, it must be your decision, child."

Mira ducked her head and avoided looking at Kieran. "It would be a wise choice, I think. He is handy with a sword."

Kieran smiled and turned to Trem. "Well, what do you say, Trem. Shall we help escort this young lady to the docks?"

Trem laid a heavy hand on his friend's shoulder, but shook his head. "I have accepted a contract, my friend. I cannot take the time now."

Kieran nodded his understanding, then held his arm out toward the other man. "May your sword remain free."

Trem grasped Kieran's forearm with his hand. "May your sword remain free, my friend." He removed his hand and nodded to Fallos and Mira as he limped around them and headed off.

"Well, then. To the docks." Kieran said, almost cheerfully. "How were you planning to get there? I would not suggest continuing on this route."

Fallos sighed. "It seems as though you have more knowledge of current conditions. Lead on, then."

Kieran smiled. "As you wish."

"Betray us and you will die."

The smile on Kieran's face grew tight. "Of course."

Kieran led them off of Annery Lane and took them twisting and turning through alleys and backyards, but he managed to avoid the fighting that Mira could hear raging throughout the city. An hour later they were standing on the dock near the Duke of Rogueshome's ship.

“Well then, here you are.” Kieran stated.

“Thank you again, Kieran.” Mira said slowly. “What will you do now?”

Kieran shrugged. “There is enough going on that I am certain to find a contract easily.”

Sir Harren looked incredulously at him. “You would take a contract here? You would profit from this horrible chaos in our Kingdom?”

“Is that not what a FreeSword does? Hires his services to those who wish to pay for them?” Kieran asked flippantly.

“But -” Sir Harren began.

“Let him go on his way.” Fallos spoke firmly. “And we shall be on ours.” He turned and began to lead the way across the plank to the ship, but stopped when he heard Mira speak.

“I will hire you.” she told him boldly.

Fallos spun around. “What?” he cried out in dismay.

She turned to face him. “I have seen him twice now fighting. I would not want him hired by our enemies. I would rather have him on our side. And if I have learned well in my studies, once he is bound he will not turn against us.” She turned to face Kieran, her chin jutting out defiantly.

Kieran smiled at her, his eyes starting to show his interest in her. “That is correct, your highness.”

“Then I wish to hire you.” she said with a note of finality. “What is your price?”

Kieran took a moment and looked her over, then turned to Fallos. “You cannot afford my price.” He raised his arm and lifted a single finger, placing it over Mira's lips as she opened them to speak, her eyes blazing with anger. “Right now. We will discuss it later. I suspect you will pay well when we arrive at your destination.”

Sir Harren answered haughtily. “Of course! How dare you treat her highness this way!”

Kieran looked mildly at the knight as he drew his dagger roughly from the sheath strapped to his boot. He noticed that Sir Eleric tensed at his action, but also noted that Mira did not flinch at all. Instead she held his gaze intently, waiting patiently to see what he would do. He held the dagger firmly and drew it down his left arm, cutting it from elbow to wrist, ignoring the blood that ran down the length of his forearm. He wiped the dagger on his breeches and then easily slid it back in its sheath.

Mira nodded her satisfaction, then smiled cockily at him. “You will make two more cuts before this is done, Kieran FreeSword.”

She turned and marched up the plank and onto the ship before he could formulate a reply. "We shall see about that, Mira Mageborn." he growled under his breath. But he followed her onto the ship and through the door that led to the cabins below.

Sir Harren began to follow, but stopped when Fallos outstretched arm appeared in front of him. "Yes, Fallos?"

"Watch him closely. I do not trust hired swords." his voice held the tone of a commander speaking to a conscripted soldier. "And I certainly do not trust him with Mira."

Sir Harren nodded and both turned to look at Sir Eleric, who nodded his assent as well.

"One last thing, Fallos. What was that talk about two more cuts?" Sir Eleric asked.

"It is claimed that when a Corrigarian FreeSword makes a cross slash on each end of his Oath Cut, then he is bound for life. I have never seen or heard anything that would contradict these claims. I also do not trust any hired sword. He will not make those cuts if I have any say in her highness' decision." Fallos replied coldly.

Fallos dropped his arm and the three of them followed Kieran and Mira down to the cabins to settle in for the trip to Winegarden.

Chapter 5

Fallos stood at the rail of the ship as they pulled into port in Winegarden. Even from this distance he could see the bright purple sprigs of grapes against the stark white of the banners of the duchy. The sun was shining brightly already this morning, reflecting off the armor of the Duke's guards lining the dock.

He turned at the sound of Mira's laughter and saw her once again seated on the deck with the freesword standing near her, animatedly telling stories to the girl. Fallos gripped the rail of the ship so tightly his knuckles turned white. The trip had only taken a week, but in that week he had spent most of his time fretting not only over the state of the kingdom but over the closeness of the freesword he did not trust and his charge.

The clatter of men moving about the ship quickly replaced the cry of seabirds as they began to pull into port. Fallos had been impatient, hoping that news of the kingdom's fate had reached Duke Ashendown's ears before they arrived. He desperately needed to know what had happened so he could guide Mira in the coming weeks. Sir Eleric and Sir Harren silently moved to stand next to him, and he greeted them as cordially as he could muster. The three turned their attention to the docks, anxious and fearful of what the future held for them.

When the ship was finally docked and securely tied, several men set the plank in place and crossed over to the dock. The guards remained in place, rigid and stiff.

Sir Eleric looked them over with a practiced eye. "They are bored, trouble has not reached Winegarden."

Fallos nodded. "That is good. But I hunger for news of our king, Sir Eleric. It is he who I am most concerned about at the moment."

One of the knights on the dock moved out of line and stood in front of the plank. "Castellan, the Duke sends his greetings. He sent me to escort you."

"Thank you, sir." Fallos replied. "Come then, sir knights. We shall take what comes as it comes."

He moved swiftly to stand in front of Mira, ignoring Kieran. "Your highness, Duke Ashendown awaits us." His tone told Mira he would brook no delay, so she stood smoothly.

"Kieran will accompany us." she told him.

Fallos narrowed his eyes, quickly judging whether he should allow the statement to pass or not. He decided that right now, it was not worth the argument. "Very well then, but he cannot walk with you. It is unseemly."

Mira's face was crestfallen, but she nodded her understanding. "Of course, Fallos." She took the arm he offered and went with him, casting a quick look of apology at Kieran.

Kieran chuckled under his breath. He knew the old man did not like or trust him, but that did not bother him. He'd dealt with the protective father figure before. Until Mira released him or his year of service was finished, he was bound to her and no one, not Fallos nor his knights would stop him from serving her. He waited for Sir Harren and Sir Eleric to follow Mira and her protector, then followed them up the plank and onto the dock.

The knight who had spoken to Fallos led them to a waiting carriage. Fallos climbed in first, then held his hand out to Mira. Mira took it daintily and climbed up after him. When the knights and Kieran had made their way in, the knight outside closed the door and barked an order to the driver.

Mira watched out the window of the carriage, half in dread and half in excitement. She'd never been to Winegarden before. In fact, she hadn't seen most of the kingdom until she'd returned from training. She knew Fallos was anxious for news, as she was, but whenever she thought about that night in KingsHome the tears would fill her eyes. She'd spent several nights on the ship pacing her small room, wringing her hands and crying. She'd enjoyed Kieran's company at first as a distraction and because she knew it irked Fallos. He'd kept her mind occupied and away from the terrible possibilities that she would soon have to face. She'd become genuinely enamored of Kieran over the past week, however, and was genuinely interested in his company for her own reasons now.

She gasped as the carriage turned onto the main road to the Duke's keep and was joined by two fists of knights of horseback. They flanked the carriage as it moved at a slow but steady pace toward the keep. The knights with her smiled as a patient parent smiles at a child discovering butterflies for the first time. Sir Eleric leaned forward. "It is a custom, your highness, to escort visiting royalty in this manner."

Mira looked over her shoulder at Sir Eleric, a wistful smile on her face, for a moment before she turned her attention back to the street and tried to concentrate on taking in the city, missing the furtive glance that passed between Sir Eleric and Fallos.

Fallos pressed his lips tightly together and concentrated on holding his feelings in check. He was glad that Sir Eleric had not expanded on the custom of escorting royalty, for they both knew that Winegarden traditionally only treated the sitting ruler of the kingdom in such a manner. For the Duke to receive Mira in this fashion could only mean one thing – his king was dead. But these were strange times and until he heard otherwise, he would work on the assumption that Dugal was alive and well and that this presentation was merely a show of support for the newly named heir to the Throne of Farren.

The journey to the gates of the keep was short and the occupants of the carriage were quiet, each lost in their own thoughts. As the carriage approached the gates the flanking knights slowed and formed into two lines. The tall, iron-wrought gates were opened effortlessly by the gate guards, who continued to stand with one hand on the gates as they bowed formally when the carriage passed by them. The cobblestone road continued for several hundred feet before it opened into a circular pattern. A stone statue of Talimaara, goddess of nature, stood in the center surrounded by a large flower garden. Mostly dead now, but the remaining stems still showed some of the color that must have been a sight to see when in full bloom. The ornate double doors that marked the main entrance into the keep were standing open beyond the circular path, one guard standing on either side, straight-backed and staring directly ahead.

Mira had watched out the carriage window, fascinated by the single row of the Duke's guard lining the cobblestone that led to the doors of the keep. The purple of their uniforms was contrasted by the white cloaks that hung down their backs, waving gently from time to time with the gentle breeze that blew from the sea. She tore her gaze away from guards when the door to the carriage opened, and looked to Fallos, waiting for him to direct her. She was unsure of protocol and realized that she was wholly dependent upon her guardian's knowledge of statesmanship. She smiled nervously at him and waited patiently.

Fallos nodded to Sir Eleric and Sir Harren, who made no reply before rising and stepping out of the carriage. They moved to either side of the door and stood as rigid as the guards, their eyes staring directly ahead of them. Fallos turned his attention to Kieran. He was a problem, for protocol did not include freeswords. His head tilted to the side as he considered the man, then made his decision.

"Freesword, you will follow us. Leave at least five steps between yourself and Mira." When Kieran opened his mouth to reply the old man raised his hand and waggled a finger at him. "Do not ignore me, young man. In these things I am the expert, not you. I will not ask you to break your vow to the princess, but you will respect the rules

under which you may carry out that oath. If you cannot do so, tell me now.”

Kieran shook his head and smiled ruefully. “Old man, I have no problem with your rules as long as I am close enough to protect my charge and am not pushed from her presence by anything but her orders. I will fulfill my oath, sir.” His eyes were hard and his face serious. “Nothing will prevent that, most certainly not you.”

“Stop this you two.” Mira admonished them both. “Kieran, I am sure, will do nothing to upset whatever is required of me.” she told Fallos, then turned to Kieran as she continued. “And Fallos will not stop you, either. Now can we get on with this?”

Fallos hung his head, hoping to appear chastised to Mira. He was afraid of what was about to happen if he was right... Nothing can change what must be now. He told himself. He raised his head and composed himself. “Yes, your highness. Let us go. You will take my arm and I will escort you to meet Duke Ashendown. He will bow first, then you should return the courtesy, perhaps even allow him to kiss your hand. Then you may take his arm and he will escort you into the keep, where we will no doubt sit to feast in your honor.” He did not tell her that if things were as he thought that what would occur would be strikingly different. No need to worry her yet.

Mira nodded. “That doesn't sound too complicated, Fallos. Let us go then.” she told him as she lifted her skirts to rise.

Fallos stood. “After me, Mira. I will assist you out of the carriage.” He turned and squeezed around her and stepped down almost spryly for a man of his age. He stopped and turned, extending a hand and waiting for Mira to join him.

Mira flashed a smile at Kieran that was a bit more flirtatious than she had intended and blushed when he raised a single eyebrow in return. She dropped her head enough to ignore his look and moved to the door of the carriage. She reached out and took Fallos' hand, noting that his grasp was much stronger than she would have thought it would be, and stepped down onto the cobblestone.

As her foot touched the ground a fist of trumpeters who must have been positioned behind the guards on either side of the road began to play the King's Entrance. The triples and seemingly impossible range of notes marked the melody as unmistakable. As it rang out, Mira's face broke into a smile. She'd heard the song all of her life at KingsHome and had always loved it. As a child she had danced in the court, her long skirts twirling around her whenever it had been played. Her nurse had taken her aside as she had grown older, explaining that while it was adorable when she had been four and five that at seven and eight she was old enough to understand that it was not a dancing tune, but a respectful herald to the king. She wondered briefly why they played it for her, but immediately dismissed the question as just one more thing she needed to have Fallos explain to her.

Fallos offered Mira his arm and when she took it, he began to walk stately to meet the Duke, who was even now walking respectfully toward them, two of his knights flanking him, their armor gleaming in the midday sun.

Mira went over what Fallos had told her in her head, not wanting to embarrass herself or her father. She was ready to do exactly as she had been bid. The Duke stopped a

swords length away and fell to one knee, his head bowed. A look of confusion filled her face as the knights beside the Duke followed suit. The rustling of cloaks as the guards lining the road followed the Duke's lead caught her attention and she turned her head this way and that trying to understand what was happening. She turned to Fallos for guidance and stared unbelieving as he dropped her arm and took a step back before he, too, dropped to one knee and bowed his head before her.

She turned around and saw Sir Eleric and Sir Harren down on one knee and Kieran, still standing, behind her. He shrugged, having no answer to give her. While he was fairly certain he could piece together the nature of the men's actions, he was in no position to give her advice.

Then she heard the Duke's voice ring out. "We greet thee, your majesty."

The next few moments seemed to move in slow motion for Mira. Her gaze moved abruptly from Kieran to the Duke to Fallos. Her eyes were wide with confusion and she was about to break every protocol she'd ever been taught by demanding an explanation from Fallos when she saw that though his head was bowed, tears were falling from his eyes, dropping slowly like a spring rain on the cobblestone.

She stepped back as if she'd been physically slapped, her mind suddenly comprehending everything. She was unable to breathe and her heart was pounding so hard she could feel it through her chest. Her hands starting shaking and she threw a hand out as she tried to keep herself from falling as her knees started to give. A hand suddenly appeared at her elbow and steadied her, and she looked up gratefully into Kieran's face. "My father is dead." she said flatly, her voice no more than a whisper.

Kieran saw the tears begin and though he was unfamiliar with the customs in this land he was fairly certain that Mira breaking down right here in the courtyard was not one of them. "Pull yourself together, Mira." he whispered fiercely. "Think of what your father would do right now and do it." he ordered, his tone a bit harsher than he intended.

She swallowed hard, taken aback at his tone. She closed her eyes for a moment, reaching for the calm and control she'd been taught to find in order to draw mana for her magik. She opened her eyes and her face was calm, though her blue eyes were stormy with emotion. She nodded and then cleared her throat as she turned to face the Duke. "Please, rise Duke Ashendown." She turned to Fallos. "And you as well, Castellán."

Despite the grave circumstances that had no doubt precipitated this greeting, Fallos smiled wryly to himself before he stood. Perhaps Mira would handle this better than he had expected. As he raised his head he noticed that she was looking at him expectantly, obviously discomforted by the situation and distressed by the realization that her father was well and truly dead.

The Duke, now standing in front of Mira, spoke apologetically. "Your majesty, forgive me for the manner of delivering such tragic news to you. You understand that custom dictated this greeting, not a lack of respect for your father." his voice was almost pleading with her to understand.

Mira looked critically at the Duke, whom she only barely recalled from her childhood. He was older, not Fallos old but older like her father and his stance reminded her of a knight's. Of course. I recall Fallos mentioning that the Duke of Winegarden had been trained as a knight, and many other Dukes as well. It was tradition, brought here with the original Dukes of the kingdom had been the Great Knights of legend who had followed King Farren and founded this land. He was showing his age, with the slight bulge around his middle that came from years of statesmanship. His graying hair was cropped short with a single, long braided queue hanging from the back of his hair. The wrinkles around his eyes were slight, but were the kind that came from laughter and smiles, not brooding. She immediately felt as though she could trust this man, he reminded her of her father in many ways. She nodded slowly. "Of course, sir Duke. I do understand. Could we dispense with the rest of this and just ..." she trailed off, her anguish over her father's death still quite clear on her face.

"Yes, Duke Ashendown. I think it best if we do not stand on ceremony. Her majesty has had quite a shock and it would be proper, under the circumstances, to continue this conversation inside." Fallos interjected quietly.

"Yes, by all means. As her majesty wishes." Duke Ashendown agreed readily as he offered his arm to her. "If I could be so bold, your majesty, and escort you in to my humble home?"

Mira smiled and took the arm he offered. "Thank you, sir Duke." She held her head high, as she knew she should, and walked beside him quietly. She bit her lower lip to keep it from quivering, the only outward indication of her grief. She kept her eyes on the doors ahead of her, focusing on them the few hundred feet across the courtyard to the doors into the Duke's keep.

The trumpets once again sounded, but this time their tone seemed more mellow, as if they, too, were mourning the death of the king. Mira could take no joy in their song now and she knew for the rest of her life that every time she heard the King's Entrance she would feel that peculiar stab in her heart as she remembered her father.

Sir Eleric and Sir Harren marched behind the small group solemnly with Kieran between them. He was considering what had just occurred, but kept his thoughts to himself. He had no intention of breaking his oath, but he had a feeling that his oath to the princess - the Queen, he corrected himself - was going to become much more dangerous a contract than he had originally surmised.

They entered the keep and the Duke led them to his private study rather than to the feasting hall. There would be time enough for that later. It was required by tradition, but tradition had never had to deal with a Queen who hadn't known she was Queen until she'd arrived and the kingdom at war. The Duke had received several missives over the past week and knew the information must be relayed to the Queen and, perhaps more importantly, Fallos. The Duke had been relieved to see the old advisor at Mira's side as he knew she was far from ready for the undertaking that would be required of her to salvage Freeland Hold.

He led Mira to the head of the table and pulled out the chair for her, indicating that she should sit and make herself comfortable. He snapped his finger at a waiting servant, who scurried off, apparently having been instructed earlier on her tasks.

“Please, Sir Eleric, Sir Harren, sit.” The Duke told them, waving a hand at them, then turned to consider Kieran. He narrowed his eyes at the man's dress and then turned an inquiring glance at Fallos, who had seated himself at Mira's right hand as was befitting the Castellan.

“Yes, him too.” Fallos replied reluctantly, then sighed. “Forgive me, I forget my manners. Duke Ashendown of Winegarden, this is Kieran Chace, a Corrigarian Freesword who had the opportunity to serve the queen on her journey home and again when we left KingsHome.”

The Duke politely inclined his head in Kieran's direction. Kieran held back a chuckle and bowed in return before moving around the table to stand near Mira. He leaned against a bookcase behind her and crossed his arms comfortably.

“Please, sit, Kieran.” the Duke encouraged him.

Kieran shook his head and held up a hand. “Thank you, your grace, but no. I prefer to remain standing and at the ready in case her majesty has need of me.”

The Duke's face hardened, but he held his tongue. “As you wish, FreeSword.” he told him almost absently as he seated himself to Mira's left.

The Duke rubbed his hands together nervously and finally cleared his throat. “I suppose it would be best if you read over the missives I have received in the last week, Fallos. May I summarize them for the queen while you look them over?” He pushed a pile of parchment to Fallos who picked them up and nodded even as he began reading.

Mira folded her hands together in front her on the table, her face impassive. “Please, Duke Ashendown. My father?” she asked hoarsely. “My mother?”

The Duke looked at her, his face full of sorrow. “Forgive me, your majesty, for bearing such bad tidings to you.” He reached out with a single, massive hand and covered hers with it, trying to lend her a measure of comfort. “From the reports I have received your father, and mother, were both vilely murdered a week past. On the same night you disappeared from KingsHome. The Ducal Council is in chaos. Duke Franken of EastGuard led the attack. He, like others of the council, was quite dismayed by your father's decision to name you heir. They have declared that they will never accept a mageborn queen and have vowed to raise a new king from among their number.”

He withdrew his hand and stood, walking to the window and gazing out for a while, trying to decide how much of the details of that last night he should share.

“Go on. I need to hear it all.” Mira whispered.

The Duke cleared his throat and returned to stand behind his chair, gripping it with both hands. He avoided looking at her face and went on, his voice devoid of emotion. “By all accounts, Duke Franken's personal guards moved through KingsHome like a swarm of bees, taking out every sentry in the castle before moving on to the king's

suites. By the time the KingsGuard was able to form a response, Franken's men were already in the kings' suite and the duchies that have joined behind him had sent their men in search of those who refused to join his treason. There was fighting in every hall in the castle and in Farrenton itself.”

Mira nodded. “We saw what came of that as we left. It was horrible.” She shuddered. “The children.” she shook her head as if to deny the image of that night from reappearing before her eyes. “The children, the mothers.” she choked as she lowered her face, trying to compose herself. “But go on. My father?”

“Yes, your father.” The Duke looked to Fallos, who had stopped reading the missives and was now listening intently, his face grave. “Your father, by all accounts, fought to the end. He had a knight's training, though you may not have known that. He took up his sword and fought bravely, forcing his attackers out of his suite and into the halls. His personal guard was further down the hall, fighting to reach his side when he called out his last order to them.” He turned and looked at Mira seriously. “To find you and protect you with their last breath.”

Mira let the tears that had welled up fall silently down her face as the Duke continued. “Two of the guards left to do his bidding while the rest stayed. And died trying to save their king, may Dirge feast them well at the Knight's Table for their honor.”

The Duke stepped around his chair and sat down as the servant opened the door and brought in wine and ale, setting it on the table. He waved her out before she could pour the glasses and she scurried out as quickly as possible, retreating from the heavy emotions evident throughout the room.

They all watched the door close, then turned their attention to the Duke once more. He picked up a bottle of wine and poured several glasses, offering them to Mira and Fallos. He lifted one glass and looked at Mira. “My Queen, for your father. We grieve his loss with you.”

Mira and Fallos lifted their glasses slightly and then drank quietly. Fallos watched Mira over the rim of his glass, noting that she downed the entire glass. I must watch her carefully for the next day or two. He told himself as he put his glass down, twirling the stem absently between his fingers and staring at the swallow of wine that remained. He shook his head at the offer of more wine from the Duke, who set the bottle down gently and sat back in his chair.

“I am glad to see you, Ashendown. We feared for you and the others.”

The Duke nodded politely. “We rode a fist of our best horses to death to return.” He turned to Sir Harren, who was looking at him expectantly. “Your father was well when we last saw him, Sir Harren. He was riding hard for GrovesHold, I expect he will arrive home in the next day or two.”

Sir Harren closed his eyes, his face relaxing at the news. “Thank you, your grace.” he said simply.

“What of these other reports, Ashendown? There is more to them than a simple revolt.” Fallos said cryptically.

“Yes, I think perhaps there is.” the Duke replied. “There are reports from those who remain loyal – KingsHome of course, GroveHold, “ he nodded politely to Sir Harren, who sighed in relief. “and RoguesHome – that they have seen Duke Franken accompanied by a priest of Tasni.”

Fallos leaned forward. “You are certain?” he asked carefully.

The Duke nodded. “I am afraid so. And with only four duchies loyal to the queen...” he trailed off.

Fallos sat back and leaned his elbows on the sides of his chair, his hands laced together in front of him as he thought this through. “There are four loyal and the others.... they are all against Mira?”

“No, not all. Rivermouth, Rangeward and Dwarfwatch refuse to side with either Franken or the queen. They wait to see what will happen.”

Fallos dropped his hands to the table in exasperation. “And KingsHome may be loyal, but Franken holds Farrenton and Castle Farren, does he not?”

At the Duke's nod of assent he continued. “Leaving us with only three duchies who will stand behind the King's decision.”

The duke sighed. “I am afraid that is so.”

Sir Harren leaned forward. “Do any know that the queen is here now?”

The Duke winced. “I have no doubt they will have pieced that together by now. She was seen leaving on a RoguesHome warship and that she would be either in RoguesHome or here. It will not take them long to determine her location.”

Mira roughly pushed her chair from the table and stood abruptly. “I am not the queen!” she exploded. She moved briskly around the chair and stood defiantly before them. “I did not want this. Not any of it.” She raced the few steps to Fallos' side and knelt down beside him, putting her hands on the arm of the chair. She looked up at him almost desperately. “Tell them Fallos. Tell them that I wanted to deny this all. Tell them!”

Fallos patted her hands patiently and shook his head at her, feeling pity for this young girl who had been thrust into the middle of chaos. “It matters not what you wanted, Mira. It is too late for that. You were named heir and your father is dead. You are the queen, whether you want to be or not.”

“But.. but.. I am not fit to be queen. I am not.” She stood and turned to Kieran, her voice pleading. “Tell them, Kieran. Tell them I am not!”

“I am your protector, your majesty. I am no judge of your ability to rule. I know of no reason why you would not be fit to be queen.” His last words held a tone of warning. He was familiar enough with Freeland Hold to know that the people here held mageborn in contempt and he recalled Mira's horror at her actions when they met on

her journey home. He also recalled his vow to her to never speak of what she had done. And a Corrigarian Freesword never broke a vow.

Mira let out an explosive breath of frustration and turned back to face the men at the table. “You cannot want a mageborn queen. You cannot!”

“It matters not whether we want one or not, your majesty. Your father, the King, declared you his heir. We are bound by duty and honor to follow his decisions. You are our queen, mageborn or not.” Sir Eleric patiently explained.

Sir Harren nodded his head in agreement. “I care not, Mira, about your birthright. You are queen and I will follow you.”

Mira's face was full of disbelief. “You cannot be serious! Look at what has already befallen the kingdom because of me. My parents are dead, people are dying and the kingdom is in chaos. Because of me. I can abdicate now and stop this all. It does not have to go any further.” She looked to Fallos for confirmation.

Fallos looked down at the table and picked through the missives Ashendown had given him. He pulled one out and held it out to her. “If you read through this, child, you will realize that your father's pronouncement was simply the catalyst for a revolt that was sure to come anyway.” He pushed the parchment at her. “Take it!” he ordered.

She reached out tentatively and took the note, then read it. Her face darkened and as she finished she crumpled the parchment and threw it on the floor. “I don't believe it.” she spat.

Fallos actually laughed dryly. “You were away when Franken asked for your hand in marriage. He has had his eye on the Throne of Farren for years. The guard who heard his words and wrote that note would not lie. Franken means to marry you or kill you. Likely both. You were not here, how could you know of his treachery? Franken's people whisper behind his back about the death of his father. He did not come to rule his duchy without blood on his hands.” He squinted as he looked at her. “He would have found a way to use you if he could. Why do you think Sir Harren spoke so to you as we left?” He let the reminder of Sir Harren's violent reaction in the passageway sink in for a minute. “And if a priest of Tasni has been seen with Franken then he means to take the Throne at any cost.”

“I cannot rule.” Mira replied through clenched teeth, images of a man's severed hand flying through the air replaying in her mind. “It will only make matters worse.”

Fallos slammed his hand on the table. “You refuse to see the truth, don't you Mira? This is not just about you, it is about the entire kingdom being thrown into darkness under someone who consorts with and – Talimaara forbid – even follows that black hearted god of evil!” Mira shrank back from the venom in Fallos' voice. “Regardless of your wishes you will be queen and we will stop Franken and his red-robed conspirators from destroying this kingdom.”

“You are willing to abdicate to save the kingdom so tell me, Mira, why are you not willing to rule in order to save it?” Kieran asked quietly into the silence that followed

Fallos' outburst.

Fallos raised a single eyebrow at Kieran but said nothing. Perhaps the Freesword has some usefulness after all. He waited patiently for Mira to reply.

Mira dropped her head to her chest, defeated. When she raised her eyes to meet Fallos' icy gaze they were full of tears again, her bottom lip quivering. "I don't know, Fallos. I'm afraid."

"As are we all, your majesty." the Duke offered. "As are we all."

Chapter 6

After the initial shock of her father's death, Mira had spent the next week in Winegarden adjusting. The Duchess had made certain she felt at home, hovering over her like a mother hen and insisted on providing her with several maids and ladies' in waiting, as properly befitted a Queen. Then she'd ordered all of her dressmakers to work overtime to provide Mira with a wardrobe that was, while not extensive, suitable for her position. Mira took to the Duchess quickly, crying on her shoulder and treating her as the aunt or older sister she had never been fortunate enough to have.

Today she was again in the feathall with the Duke, Kieran and Fallos looking over the most recent missives. She was deep in thought, her guards standing behind her, when their sudden movements alerted her to a commotion. Mira looked up to see a man standing in the door of the hall. He was a soldier of KingsHome by the look of his armor, and he had recently seen battle. His right arm was wrapped in a bandage, and his cloak was torn in several places. His boiled leather armor was covered in scratches and there was a hole in the left side. His blond hair was a ragged mess sweat-stuck to his head – he must have just removed his helm. He was announced by Duke Ashendown's master of appointments. "Hyrem, Pikeman of KingsHome, messenger from Sir Tirlovy Rothaine." the master proclaimed.

The man stepped quickly down the large dining hall to kneel before the Duke. When he knelt Mira could see the jagged scar, still red and puckered, that ran across the back of his head. She wondered briefly how much fighting this man had seen.

"My Lord. I bring you news from your sworn man Sir Rothaine." he said simply.

"Rise, my good man. Please take a seat. It is clear from your demeanor that you have ridden long and hard while injured to bring me this news. I would have you eat first, and have my healer priest take a look at that arm." the Duke said as he pointed at the ragged, bloody bandage covering his arm.

"I would eat, my Lord. But the healer can wait until we have spoken. Please, my Lord." Hyrem nearly pleaded.

The Duke looked critically at the man for a moment and seeing the urgency on his face, he acquiesced. "As you wish." He signaled a servant with the wave of a hand. "

Bring the man some food and wine.”

Hyrem sat down three chairs away from them. He seemed to be shy and uncomfortable and Mira tried to determine the source of his discomfort. This was a kindly Duke and none of the others should be threatening to him. Perhaps if she offered some polite conversation he would relax a little. “You have seen more than one battle, I would wager. How did you come upon that scar on the back of your head, if you don't mind speaking of it?” she asked.

“T-The King's Castle on... on the Night O' Treachery, my-my Queen.” he replied.

Mira suddenly understood the cause of the man's distress. His Queen. He probably wasn't even certain what was proper, so he had instead reported to the Duke. Mira turned to the Duke. “Perhaps, Duke Ashendown, Fallos and I should retire to review missives and let you speak with this messenger of your sworn man?” she ventured.

The Duke's face hardened and his voice was stony when he replied. “Your Majesty is the utmost in generosity, but I beg you to stay. This message is as much for your ears as mine, and if you do not mind I would gain much from your Castellan's counsel once the news is imparted.”

Mira was confused. She didn't understand why the Duke seemed upset by her offer, but that was something to be worked out later. “If it please you, we will stay and hear this goodman out.”

A servant had appeared with a plate full of food and set it before Hyrem, who tore into the food as soon as it was set down. He acted as though he had not eaten for days, and he quaffed wine at a rate that alarmed Mira. She stole looks at the others and no one seemed too put out by his consumption so she ignored it.

After a few short minutes Hyrem had eaten enough to realize that his Queen and his Knight's protector were waiting for his report, so he set the food aside, nodding his head in thanks. “Fine food my Duke. I thank you for that. Food is scarce enough in battle.”

“Well do I know that. You shall have more before you leave us Hyrem, that is a promise.” The Duke smiled at him.

Hyrem seemed to relax but whether it was from the Duke's attempts or the wine Mira could not be sure. “Sire, I bring word from Sir Rothaine's lands in the south. The Fearless Knight has learned that Duke Franken's armies are coming. It is said by those what would know better than me that he has beaten the armies of KingsHome, and is turning through SeaCliff to attack us. My Count sent me to plead men and weapons, Lord. We are defended enough to fight off SeaCliff alone, but if the armies SeaCliff and EastGuard merge, we do not have the men to stop 'em. The Count asks for all you can give, my Duke.” The words spilled out of him all at once.

The Duke appeared unsurprised by the news. “How goes the defenses, goodman?”

“Well enough. We stopped 'em at the Tower of Fearless, and we stopped 'em at UnderForge. We threw them back from the battlements of Keep Fire, and now we

hold that little bit of Sea Cliff. But our men are tired my Lord. We've been fighting for almost a fortnight. The Count is afraid that the Duke Franken's men will be fresh.”

“You speak well for a common soldier, my man. I get a feel for the nature of the battle. Your Count shall have all he asks, and you will wait here to lead these men and weapons to him. Until then you shall attend my healer and rest. Understood?” the Duke replied in a tone that indicated he would brook no argument on the subject.

“Yes, my Lord. Thank you my Lord.” Hyrem replied sincerely. His cheeks were flushed when he continued to speak. “I was squired for a few months, but my Knight was killed at Farren's Keep. Twas him that taught me how to speak proper and bend the knee. Twas also him that taught me to watch more than my own men. That's why the Fearless Count chose me sir. I was the best to report to you and still not be missed when the fighting started again.” The man looked down at his feet, obviously embarrassed by the honor bestowed upon him by the count.

“Continue to serve your Count as you have today and you will go far, Hyrem. He is a good man, the Fearless Knight, and he likes to keep good men in his service. You may leave. The guards at the door can direct you to my healer-priest, and he will help you find a room for the nonce.” The Duke dismissed him and sat silent as Hyrem reached the guards and stopped for a moment, their conversation animated, before he finally moved off in the direction the guards pointed him in.

The Duke turned to Mira, the smile melting off his face. “My Queen, if you are to rule, you cannot run from every commoner that is afraid to speak to you. You must show them that you care about them, and ask them to do your will. Running and hiding will only increase their fear and discomfort.” he admonished her harshly.

Mira's face was crestfallen and she bowed her head slightly in shame. “I see that there is much I have to learn if I am to do this task my father has burdened me with. I have seen how you handled the man and I will strive to do better.” she said earnestly.

Her response seemed to mollify the Duke, his voice softening as he spoke again, trying to encourage Mira. “You will do fine your majesty. Good advisors take care of the complicated matters, and you will just have to learn to handle people deftly.”

Fallos took his hand from his chin. “Enough time for that if she has a kingdom to rule. For now, I'm concerned that there was no count of numbers in this report. I doubt that they are going to send all of their strength against Winegarden, for then what would stop Grovehold from tramping down through Hollowton to take them in the rear?”

“Simple. Hollowton is with them. If the Duke of Hollowton can hold off Grovehold for several months, much as we've been holding off SeaCliff, they are bound in. They cannot treat with RangeWard for passage because sending enough troops to us would leave Grovehold practically empty. That would be a ripe fruit for Hollowton to pluck, and Duke Harren would not leave his Duchy at the mercy of such as Hollowton. “The Duke scowled, frustration evident on his worn face. “No, I'm afraid that we're on our own unless we can convince Rivermouth or RangeWard to declare for the Queen. Then we would have allies close enough to lend a hand.”

Mira thought about the situation. Rivermouth to the north of Winegarden was known for its ships and foot soldiers. Either one would be welcome in the days to come. RangeWard to the Northeast was known for its heavy cavalry. If they could catch Franken in the field, the cavalry of RangeWard might just finish this war in one mighty battle.

“We need to do something, and soon. We cannot hold against the might of all the Duchies Franken has supporting him. We will be plucked from the vine one Duchy at a time.” Fallos stated seriously.

The Duke threw up his hands. “I am open to suggestions. I have sent emissaries to both of the neighboring undeclared Duchies and am no closer to treating with them than I was before I sent the emissaries. My emissaries sit and wait for audiences with Dukes that are too afraid to show favor. The only blessing is that Franken's envoys sit with them, not gaining the Ducal ears either. My men have taken to calling them the Quisling Dukes.”

“What if we sent an emissary from me?” Mira asked quietly. All heads turned and looked at her as if she had just suggested dancing naked in the courtyard. She put a hand to her chest and declared. “I am the Queen.” At their confusion she tried to explain herself further. “Franken is a Duke. He aspires to Kinghood, but he is still a duke. You,” she looked at Duke Ashendown, “are an equal. Surely these Dukes would not risk offending the Queen by not hearing out her emissaries?”

The Duke shook his head sadly. “Would that it were true, my Queen.” Seeing her look of confusion he decided to be blunt. “Franken's armies are much bigger than yours. He has as much chance of sitting on the Throne of Farren as you do at this time. If they're leaving his emissaries sitting on fat arses, they'll leave yours the same.”

Mira thought about that for a moment. They were so insistent I be queen but in the end it really makes little difference if I am or not. Those who rebel will not accept me. Not even if we win, which will not happen if we cannot convince the undeclared duchies to side with us. They must be drawn in to our cause and if they will not listen to an emissary... She recalled then the words of one of her instructors, one who was so old he was almost crippled. He had continued to teach, though his gnarled hands were often reluctant to cooperate. Some days it took him hours to teach the arcane gestures needed to perform some of the more powerful magiks but he insisted. She had asked him why he continued to teach when it obviously caused him pain. “Why do you not show someone else how to make the gestures and have them show the students? Surely it would be less painful?” The old man had smiled bitterly at her before replying cryptically, “And would the student learn the same lesson?”

She had been confused, but had let the conversation end there. She'd almost forgotten it until now, and now she suddenly understood his meaning. “Then I must needs go myself.” she declared.

“Out of the question.” Fallos snapped.

Mira straightened herself in her chair. “Excuse me, good sir. I thought for a second there that you were commanding your Queen.” she told him haughtily. If they want

me to be queen then I shall be queen, for if they do not respect me, no one will. “If we cannot stand alone and there are two uncommitted duchies on our borders who are not treating with emissaries, then perhaps it is time their Queen speaks to them herself. They are not yet in rebellion, mistreatment of their Queen would not forward their needs.”

Fallos looked frustrated. “It is a good idea my Queen, but it is too risky. There is but one Queen of Freeland Hold. Losing her would end all questions, and the kingdom would sink under the boot of Duke Franken. We cannot risk that. Better to fight unacceptable odds than to lose you.” His eyes were imploring her to understand.

“Very well, I accept your counsel and am grateful as always. We will look for alternatives.” Fallos looked relieved, but his face fell as she continued. “At the end of the week, when none has presented itself, I shall depart.” she finished, lifting her chin with a spark in her eyes daring him to defy her.

Duke Ashendown guffawed, slapping one hand on his thigh in his amusement. When Mira looked askance at him he apologized. “Oh forgive me, your majesty. It is just that Fallos appears to have met his match. Even your father could not talk him down so quickly.” He chuckled one last time before he turned to her Castellan. “Fallos, she has the right of this. If there is no good plan, we must pursue the best of the bad plans available.”

Fallos threw his hands in the air. “You two would talk me into marching for KingsHome with naught but that FreeSword to protect us. Fine and fine. If you are dead set on this course, then I will find a better solution in the next week. I have no intention of risking the Queen in such a manner. Think how much Franken would pay to have her taken, either along the way, or by one of the Dukes she entreats with.”

Mira smiled at the old Castellan and laid a hand on his arm. “This is good. If you find a better plan all the better. I have no wish to traipse across the kingdom drumming up support for myself. I’d much rather come to grips with this burden first, and then learn how to play politics.”

The Duke made to stand. “With your majesty's leave, I will attend to my Duchy and see what support I can find to send to the Fearless Knight.”

She raised her chin slightly, just as she thought her father would have. “Of course. Thank you as always for a fine repast and the generosity of your Duchy.” she replied.

He bowed and walked down the hall to the same door the goodman had used.

Kieran lifted himself off of the column he was leaning against with the grace of a wolf lifting itself upon a rock. “Surely you cannot mean to make this trip Mira. Fallos is right. There is only one of you, and I will die if I cannot protect you. Protecting you from your own folly is difficult.”

Fallos turned upon him, his chair creaking as he spun in it to face the FreeSword. “The matter has been decided, and your counsel is no longer needed. Would that you had spoken before the Queen made her command, but it is done.” He spat.

“Old man, you know little of men or monarchs if you believe that. No matter is settled until action is taken. Until then discussion is healthy. Except in Corrigar. The King does not like discussion once he has spoken. It can be rather un-healthy to discuss the King's decision in Corrigar.” he declared blandly.

“Enough, both of you.” Mira interjected. “We have many months together, this bickering will stop. I am the Queen and this is a command I will not have ignored. If you do not want me traveling to Rivermouth and RangeWard, then you simply must work together to come up with a better plan.”

She smiled winningly at them both and then turned and left the room, leaving the two men staring after her in disbelief.

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Mira lifted her silken napkin and dabbed the goose egg from her chin. Seven days had passed and she had not yet heard any reasonable suggestions. She had seen the lovely wine gardens that this Duchy was known for. She had broken her fast with the Duchess and the Duke's daughters. She had seen all the sights in the town of Bearing, the seat of house Ashendown. But she had heard no good ideas. “It is time we spoke of my trip to RangeWard, Fallos. We have waited, and I have heard ideas, but I have not heard good ideas. Duke Ashendown has summarily refused every proposal brought to his table, and with good reasons.”

“If I may speak, Queen Mira.” Kieran said from behind her.

Mira was momentarily taken aback. Kieran never called her Queen. She was not technically his Queen. Perhaps he and Fallos had worked out their differences during this week. “You may speak Kieran.”

“We have determined that the good Duke will put a stop to any measure that does not guarantee us support of at least one of the Duchies. We have also determined that you are set upon this course of action. So we have chosen a course of action that will be acceptable to both of you.” the FreeSword started.

“Wait. Who is 'we'.” Mira interrupted.

“Why you commanded Fallos and I to work together, my Queen. We have been doing as you ordered. And we have decided that we will travel to RangeWard and Rivermouth.” He saw Mira open her mouth and rushed on to answer the unasked question. “Fallos, myself, and Duke Harren's Castellan will ride together. Add a few Knights, and we are an impressive group. They will not be able to put off both the Queen's Castellan and Duke Ashendown's Castellan. And if they do,” he shrugged roguishly, “the wild and unpredictable FreeSword will become rather irrational. Perhaps he will quarrel with the good Duke's guards outside his audience chamber.”

Duke Ashendown raised an eyebrow at her. He looked like he was actually considering this idea.

Mira was flustered and it took her a moment to find her tongue. “While I am pleased that you two are taking my command to heart, I cannot accept that solution any more

than the suggestion that we send a contingent of troops to support our emissaries'. You propose to take my chief most advisor, my protector, and possibly the only two surviving members of the KingsGuard from me. I am already a Queen with barely a kingdom and now you would take my retinue from me? No." she countered with a shake of her head. "No."

Fallos screwed his face up. "My Queen. You cannot go through with this. Here we have the entire might of Duke Ashendown's Duchy to protect you, and friends all about to offer help and guidance. On the road we would have to worry about every town we passed through, each soldier that looked our way. And that is before we got to RangeWard or Riversmouth. Once there, everyone would be suspect. The food you eat, the bed you sleep in, the page that hands you the reigns of your horse would all be potential sources of danger. Please reconsider."

She thought about all that he had said, and how difficult the trip could be. But there was no other plan that she could see. If the Dukes were unwilling, she needed to go speak with them herself. "I must, Fallos. Without these Dukes, we are lost. And I see no other way to sway them." She waved her hand in the air. "Oh you've all been very nice and not proposed that I offer my hand to one of them, but short of that there is no viable plan other than this one."

"That was not courtesy, my Queen." Kieran stated, his voice sober. "That was simple common sense. You do not offer one of two contenders a crown. The other one would turn on us in an instant. That would not be to your benefit."

Kieran held a smile in check when he saw the wounded look flash across Mira's face. It was only there for a moment, but as he saw it he knew she was disappointed that he had been the one to speak practically.

She shrugged in response. "Just the same Kieran. I must do this." She looked meaningfully at Fallos then, daring him to counter her again.

Fallos looked her over and judged that she would not budge on this point and, if he thought about it long enough, he would agree it was the only feasible course of action. She would be lost if they did nothing and it was her right as Queen. Fallos sighed. As difficult as it would be for her to adjust to being Queen it would twice as hard for him who still thought of her as a child. "Very well, my Queen. I would argue until the grapes fell, but I must put my objections aside. When do we ride?"

"Tonight." she said quickly. There was no sense in waiting, a week had been wasted talking.

"Tonight is too soon, my Queen." argued Duke Ashendown. "Besides, you should not leave at night."

"Very well." She sighed. This was something she'd learned at the Isles of Enlightenment, ask for more than you wanted and you could get what you were after. "Tomorrow noon then. Waiting does not help the matter."

Duke Ashendown looked hurt. "As you say, my Queen. It is too short a time, but I cannot think of a way to stave you off a week as these two have done."

“Well then,” said Fallos. “I have some preparations to make before the morrow. With your leave, your majesty.”

“I too. I must set my maids to packing.” she replied, standing. “I shall accompany you to our suites.” She turned to the others. “Duke, I thank you again for your generosity. Kieran, come.” She turned and left even as the Duke was standing.

They walked in silence back to the suite of rooms the Duke had generously provided for them. They stopped at a door and Fallos bid them a good night. Mira impulsively leaned over and kissed the old man on the cheek. “Thank you Fallos.” she said simply.

Fallos laid a gentle hand on her cheek. “Child, you have had so much to deal with of late and you are handling it so ...” He smiled weakly. “Your father would be proud of you.” Without waiting for a reply he turned and opened the door to his room, then closed it behind him.

“Mira,” Kieran began. “I need a word with you.”

“Yes.” she replied, distractedly.

“Pack lightly, and pack your dresses away. Wear something simple. Simpler even than you wore on your journey home.” he told her earnestly.

“Why?” she asked innocently.

Why indeed? Fallos thought to himself. He had stopped when he heard Kieran speak after he had closed the door. He felt a bit shameful for eavesdropping, but he still did not fully trust the FreeSword when it came to Mira.

Kieran rolled his eyes at her. “Are you really that foolish?” He ignored the look she gave him and continued. “Best not to look like the Queen while we are traveling. The less attention you draw means the less problems we have on the way.”

She nodded her understanding. “That makes sense, Kieran. I will do as you ask.”

He cleared his throat nervously. “There is one other thing, Mira.”

She looked suspiciously at him. “What is that?”

“If it comes to it, you must be willing to take action yourself.”

She gasped and looked away. “No!” she whispered fiercely. “I will not!”

Kieran grabbed her hand and pulled her around to face him. “You may have no other choice. Promise me that if needs be you will do what you must!”

“I can't, Kieran.” she said, her voice flat and her eyes on the floor.

“You can, I have seen you.”

“You promised never to mention that again.” she rebuked him harshly.

“I have not and will not mention it to anyone else. I took that oath when first we met and will not break it.” He said angrily. His voice softened once more. “My contract binds me to you, Mira, but I personally do not want to see you come to harm. I would not have mentioned it to you if I did not worry for your safety. Please, promise you will do whatever you must if it comes to it.”

Mira swallowed hard and lifted her eyes, scanning Kieran's face. She could see genuine concern in his eyes and it touched her. She nodded reluctantly. “I will try, Kieran. That is the best I can offer right now.”

He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it tenderly. “Then I accept that offer for now. Good night, Mira.” He took several steps away from her and then stopped abruptly. “It wasn't just common sense, you know.” he threw over his shoulder with a grin, then continued on his way.

Mira's eyes brightened just a bit and her gaze followed him until he disappeared into his room. When his door closed she sighed and finished the short walk to her door and entered, closing the door behind her.

Fallos had cracked his door when he heard the first door close and watched Mira return to her room. He closed his door and retreated to a large desk, sitting heavily upon the chair. He put his elbows on the desk and rested his head in his hands. The FreeSword's flirting needed to be stopped, and soon. Mira was vulnerable as it was and the loss of her father made her more so. It was not – proper for him to act so. Fallos leaned back in the chair, his hands pressed together and fingers drumming against each other. More bothersome was the rest of the conversation. He wondered what had occurred on Mira's journey home that he was not privy to and what, exactly, the FreeSword had just convinced her to agree to try.

Chapter 7

Kieran waited patiently as Mira said farewell to the Duchess for the third time. He squinted, gauging the position of the sun in the sky and figured they had less than six hours of riding time left. By the time she finishes her farewell's we might as well stay here another night and leave in the morning. he thought caustically.

He was glad when he saw Fallos touch Mira's arm gently. He could not hear the words that passed back and forth between them, but he imagined that the old man was attempting to get her to make ready to leave. The horses had been saddled and the packs loaded almost an hour earlier, but the Duchess had caught Mira on the way out and they had been tearfully exchanging words ever since.

He glanced at Sir Eleric and Sir Harren, already seated on their mounts and waiting patiently for their queen. They were both dressed in leathers and simple brown cloaks and for that Kieran was grateful. He knew they disliked dressing so simply, it was not in a knight's nature to disguise themselves. Kieran had argued that they were not disguising themselves, they were merely not advertising their position to the enemy. And they had seen that a young woman traveling with two fully armored knights would arouse suspicion, especially since it was known that Mira had escaped with at least two of the KingsGuard at her side.

He patted Mira's mount absently as he watched her turn from the Duchess and walk slowly toward him. He knew she was nervous and frightened, and well she should be. This was a dangerous quest for her to undertake, but Kieran understood the need. She had very few choices left. She could leave the kingdom and let it fall under this Duke Franken's rule, she could stay here in Winegarden and let the Kingdom fall just the same, or she could go out and try to rally support for herself and the kingdom, perhaps saving it in the end. She really had no choice.

She approached her waiting mount and looked up at it, apparently resigned to her course. She smiled impishly at him from under the brown hood of her cloak and put her hands on the pommel of the saddle. When he laced his fingers together and held them out to her she placed a booted foot in them and pushed herself up and onto her horse. She sat easily, obviously accustomed to riding. He wondered briefly if she had ridden frequently before she had returned to Freeland Hold, but decided not to ask at the moment. They would have plenty of time for small talk on the road to RangeWard.

When Mira was seated and had taken up the reins loosely he turned and took several steps to his own mount, a big bay gelding. He admired the horse for a moment before placing a foot in the stirrup and gracefully swinging himself into the saddle in a single, fluid movement. He adjusted himself and checked his scabbard before picking up the reins.

“Are you ready, Mira?” he asked.

She nodded. “Let us be on our way then.”

Kieran flashed her a grin and then kicked the side of his mount, spurring it forward quickly into a gallop. Mira followed suit, Fallos and her Knights falling in behind her. Kieran hoped that she appreciated all that those stalwart men had given up for her. He was a FreeSword, he chose a life of travel and homelessness. These men had sworn their lives and their swords to her father, and given up family, home, and happiness when they left his side to protect her.

Kieran looked back to make sure everyone got moving. Fallos rode directly behind Mira, Kieran was somewhat surprised to see such an aged man ride so lithely in the saddle. While Fallos had shown that he was skilled in more than politics, Kieran began to gain some measure of respect for the man. He is no stranger to hardship, that is good. he thought. Fallos appeared to be full of surprises, and he was glad that most of them were good ones.

Kieran guided them to the west gate of the city, slowing as they left the keep's

courtyard, but picking up the pace once again once they were free of the cobblestone streets that marked the city proper. The horses kicked up great plumes of dust as they rode out and for the first time in almost a month Kieran felt somewhat normal.

They rode until it was almost dark, the sun hanging so low in the sky that its light was little more than a sliver across the horizon. Kieran realized that the day had gotten away from him and they were outpacing Fallos and the Knights. “We should stop here my Queen, and allow them to catch up. It does not do to separate this close to nightfall.” he said over his shoulder.

“Certainly Kieran. Must you call my 'my Queen' when we are on the road? First it is a bad habit, you have all four warned me that I am not Mira Celeria. Second, it does not suit you. I hired you for your rakishness and bravado. Next you will be speaking to me in High Nordalian.” she replied impishly.

Kieran smiled back, just as impishly. Clearing his throat, he trilled “Mi'Lady doth truly comprehend mine most precarious position. Would that these meager arms couldst protect thee. Truly wert I a knight of noble mein, mine Lady wouldst declare her namesake to all comers. 'Tis a pity thou art strapped with the pittance that doth be mine humble self.” He grinned, trying hard not to laugh outright.

Mira closed her mouth, and tried to hide her own smile. “That will do, FreeSword. One day you will have to tell me how you came to learn High Nordalian so well that you belong in a Knight of Nordal's armor.” she finally lost her self control and giggled. “Oh Kieran. You are a man of many talents.”

“Aye, my lady. And many you have not yet seen.” He leered at her just as Fallos and the Knights were riding up.

He turned his attention to Fallos before she could formulate a reply. “Sir Fallos! A fine day's ride thus far, don't you think?” he asked.

“Fine if you like riding all day Kieran. I am not as young as I used to be. My saddle sores have grown saddle sores, and my legs feel like the breastbone of a chicken when two children are fighting over it.” Fallos replied, his smile belying his words.

“Might there be a town or inn nearby that we can take our rest in this eve?” Kieran asked. He knew there was, but it did not hurt to allow the old man to decide if Mira should be staying there.

Fallos looked at the sun and to the west. “There is a small town a few more miles up the road. We will be in Winegarden for several more days so I think it safe to stay inside as much as possible before we near the border. What say you, Mira?”

Mira nodded. “That sounds like a fine plan. Hot food and a warm bed would be most welcome now.” She twisted in the saddle, trying to stretch her tired muscles. “It will take a few days to adjust to riding so hard again.” She smiled wearily.

Kieran said nothing. He just nodded and turned his horse west again and headed off, this time at a more leisurely pace. It was still light out when they arrived in the town. They walked their horses past several homes and headed for the largest building.

Light spilled out of its windows and the sounds of laughter wafted toward them.

Kieran rode right up to the inn and dismounted easily, keeping the reins in his hand the entire time. He pulled them over his horses head and tied him securely to the rail in front of the inn next to an old plow horse that some farmer had ridden into town. He helped Mira down, offering her a hand as she jumped down from her mount. As he expected, she staggered a bit on rubbery legs unused to being in the saddle for so long. She fell against him, and he automatically reached around with his free hand to pull her to him and keep her from falling. “None of that my Lady. Take a second to get your legs underneath you.” he said softly into her hair.

Mira blushed, but she did not immediately push herself away from Kieran. He saw her flush underneath the hood of her cloak, and gripped her slightly tighter.

Kieran pulled his hand away and stepped back once she was able to stand on her own. She is young with a wolf watching over her. He immediately corrected himself. No, three wolves. To ignore the knights' would be folly for if Fallos acted as her father then the knights' saw themselves as her over protective brothers.

Fallos approached but said nothing. Kieran heard Mira breathed a sigh of relief. She really is bothered by the banter between Fallos and I. He thought. I will have to take more pains to please the old man. Sir Eleric and Sir Harren joined them, and Kieran led the way through the inn door to secure lodgings for the night.

Mira had obviously never been inside a commoners inn in before. She gazed about with wide eyes, drinking in the scene. Before Kieran could move to intercept her, Fallos grabbed her arm and leaned in close. That old man surprises me still. he thought as he leaned close.

“Compose yourself, Mira. You give yourself away with your gawking. Do not draw attention to yourself. Focus on Kieran, if you must, but get a hold of yourself.” Fallos ordered in a low voice.

Mira turned her eyes to Kieran, obviously trying to ignore the talk coming from the common area. The talk was rough, and common. She stared deep into his eyes, and for the first time in as long as he could remember, Kieran flushed. “You're a wicked one old man, I'll give you that.” he said as he turned angrily towards the bar.

Just as he was about to call the skinny old innkeep over, voices raised in the common room.

“I tell ye if those red-fox bastards did to my home what they did to me cousin's over near Sea Cliff I'd treat 'em just like them foxes that steal me chickens!”

Another voice guffawed and yet another hooted. “Ye ain't got the balls, Arnod! Them red-foxes are mean. Did ye hear what they did up in Carenton?”

The voices quieted and Kieran could no longer hear the conversation, but recalling Annery Lane in KingsHome, he knew pretty much what had happened. Those bloody bastards were killing mothers and children. Kieran could not tolerate murder. Men died in battles every day, but a washerwoman and her small boy were no threat to

armed men. He would be pleased if his relationship with Mira gave him the chance to meet this Duke Franken. The Duke didn't have to order the deaths, he only had to set the example. If the head of the horse is dead, it's all dead.

He turned towards the others, still brooding. He motioned to Fallos and led them down a short hall. At the end of the hall, he looked to either side, indicating two doors. "That's all they have. We must make do with two rooms." He tossed a key to Sir Eleric, who caught it easily and gave the other to Fallos. "I'd suggest you stay with the lady and I can bunk with the others." He began to walk back down the hall when Sir Harren stopped him.

"Where do you go now, FreeSword?"

Kieran looked over his shoulder. "Gossip in times of war is most informative, and this seems to be a chatty lot of townfolk. I may learn much of what we may face by sharing a pint with the locals."

Sir Harren nodded. "I would join you, then."

Kieran turned to face him, giving him a measuring glance. "Can you control yourself? Can you ignore insults? Can you promise not to betray the lady?"

Sir Harren's face went red with outrage. "Of course I can, how dare -"

Kieran smiled and shook his head. "Are you sure? Your reaction tells me perhaps not."

Sir Harren sputtered for a moment and then chuckled. "I see your point. Yes, I believe I can. I have spent a few eves in taverns in my time. I have even seen a few brawls if truth be told." he said grinning.

"Good then. A second set of ears would not be unwelcome." Kieran grinned back.

"And just in case, I can watch your back." added the Knight.

Kieran slapped the man on the shoulder. "Come then, Harren. Let us go wet our appetites with ale and gossip. And guard each other's backs from these villainous villagers." The two men walked off almost jauntily down the hall, leaving Sir Eleric and Fallos staring after them.

Fallos saw movement out of the corner of his eye. Mira was trying to politely stifle a huge yawn.

"I am truly sorry my lady. I should be paying attention to my duties, and not gaping after those two. Let me get the door for you my lady." he said as he opened the door and ushered her in. He turned to Sir Eleric before following her into the room. "Keep a watch 'til the others return."

Eleric nodded and opened the other door. Fallos saw that he entered his room, but left the door cracked open. These men are trained better than I had thought he reminded himself He knows to listen for any commotion that might occur. I will rest better this

evening, if not well.

Fallos closed the door quietly behind him, and went about helping Mira with her boots and cloak. “Into bed you go my lady. It has been a long day for all of us.” He said as he lifted the covers. She sank into the straw-stuffed mattress like it was her bed in KingsHome.

“Thank you Fallos. For everything. You are too kind for words, and I will repay your loyalty if ever I can...” she broke off yawning.

He smiled at her yawn as he drew the rough blanket up to her neck. He walked over to the chair next to the bed and sat heavily. He really was tired. Hopefully this trip would soon be behind them. He sat there in the wooden chair next to the bed watching her breathe until she had fallen asleep, then he moved the chair near the door and settled back in it for the night. Until they were safely back in Winegarden he would not rest well.

Mira awoke the next morning rested but stiff. She sat up and stretched then looked for Fallos. A soft smile appeared on her face when she saw him. He was sleeping, though Mira was not sure how he managed to keep his chair balanced on two legs and leaning against the door all night. She threw off the blanket and padded softly to his side. Looking at him sitting there sleeping, she felt a strong urge to protect him. That's silly, he and the others are protecting me she thought. One day though, this kind old man will sit in a longhall at the edge of the DwarvenForge mountains, his retirement being restful and all things paid for by the crown. She shook her head. Those were thoughts for another day. She shook his arm slightly to wake him.

Fallos came awake with a start, throwing his arms out as he leaned forward in his chair. The shifting of his weight caused the chair to fall forward onto all four legs, and he was up and out of it at the same instant. He looked around, dazed, and appeared mildly annoyed when he saw Mira trying to stifle a giggle.

He stood and straightened his rumpled clothes, ignoring her for several minutes by pretending to straighten his tunic and smooth his trousers. Finally he turned towards her. “Hmmmph. You best fix yourself up and make ready to leave. We have a long day ahead of us.” He fixed a hard look on the young woman and said nothing more until she turned and picked up her boots before she sat down and pulled them on, still stifling a giggle.

They met with Kieran and the knights in the common room and Mira noted with some delight that they had take the liberty of obtaining a breakfast meal. She wasn't familiar with most of the food, but her stomach was making such noises that she ignored that and ate with relish. She was surprised to find that the fair was actually quite good, though plain. She wasn't certain what she had expected, but she was pleased to find that she would not starve on the trip.

They were well on their way within an hour, but they took a more leisurely pace this morning, not wanting to wear their mounts too thin. Mira was glad, as it gave her a chance for conversation and to examine the land that was her kingdom. All the times she had ridden with her father and mother to this Duchy or that Holding to feast with a Duke or a Count or a famed Knight, and she had never realized how beautiful the

land outside the window of their carriage was.

They spent the next several days in the same routine. Finding a small town near evening, Kieran and Sir Harren spending several hours with the local townsfolk, and relaying what they heard the next day to the others. For the most part, the war had not yet effected most of the countryside. The lands they passed through talked of young men going out to join the fight, and of how it was getting harder to get some of the luxuries like Eagle's Eggs from SeaCliff. As they had expected, borders near SeaCliff and EastGuard were taking the brunt of the battles, and the rumors of what Duke Franken was doing grew more wild as time went on. As they neared the border with RangeWard they encountered more and more traffic on the road. The traffic seemed to irritate Fallos because it slowed them down and seemed to annoy Kieran because of the potential danger to her.

Mira, on the other hand, watched the refugees headed inland with growing despair. The closer they were to the border the worse off the people passing by fared. They seemed to come in waves, some of them with rags tied about their bare feet and their possessions piled upon their backs as they struggled to flee the war. Most looked afraid, even on a road packed with people. Some looked like they had given up hope, and the war had barely started. I have much to learn. Mira thought. These are my people, and they run from soldiers and battles. They do not run to a Queen or a just cause. In many ways Kings and Queens should be as ashamed of themselves as people think I should be about my birthright. We with our politics have done to these people what Farren came here to avoid.

They were on the fifth day of their journey when they came across a woman huddled at the side of the road, keening and crying loudly. Mira's heart broke she saw the reason for the woman's sorrow – a small bundle lying beside her, a tiny, lifeless hand poking out from the ragged blanket.

She stopped her horse and jumped off, ignoring the calls of Kieran and Fallos. There were not so many people on the road here that they could not protect her. She ran to the woman's side, kneeling down to hug her close. The woman stiffened, then began a long wail of sorrow. Mira just stood there, letting the woman cry on her shoulder for several long minutes.

Kieran had dismounted as soon as he saw Mira jump off her horse. He slid down smoothly and landed on the ground with his sword already loosened in it's scabbard. He would have drawn it, but that would only draw attention to Mira, attention she did not need. He raced to stand over her, but did nothing, his eyes alert and scanning from the woman to the refugees on the road. Finally the woman stopped crying and sniffled, wiping her nose and eyes on the edge of her tattered cloak. Mira sat back on her heels and waited, giving the woman time to compose herself.

Kieran relaxed slightly and held out a hand, palm down to Fallos and the knights, who took his signal to mean that all was okay. They relaxed visibly and Fallos dismounted slowly, then joined Kieran and Mira.

Mira looked at the woman and waited patiently. Finally the other woman raised her dirt crusted face and looked at her. "Thank ye miss. No one shows much kindness these days."

Mira could think of nothing to reply, so she simply nodded. “Would you like us to help you ... uh ... “ she looked lamely at Fallos, begging him to help her.

He stepped up and addressed the woman as though she were at court. “Dear lady, would you like us to lay your child to rest properly?”

The woman looked up at him, the tears again falling down her face. She nodded, her lips tight, the bottom one trembling slightly. Fallos turned to Sir Eleric and Sir Harren and waved them to approach. When they reached him they took one look at the woman and the dead child and moved out into the field a bit, scanning the ground. Soon they began to pick up the largest stones they could find, obviously intending to build a cairn for the small casualty.

Before long they had buried the body and the woman stood staring at it, her eyes glazed with tears but her face stony.

Mira fixed a compassionate gaze on the woman and asked her gently, “What happened?”

The woman's lower lip began to quiver and she drew in a ragged breath. “We lived in Harrowston, near the border with SeaCliff. Alls a sudden theres men all over. Red-wolf men and our men. All fightin' in the streets. The Red-wolf men kilt almost every man in town afore the Duke's men got there. Lost me husband to 'em, I did.” She wiped her nose across the sleeve of her shirt and sighed. “I tried to take me other son and the wee one here and leave.” She jerked her head toward the north east. “Me sister lives up near Meril, far from SeaCliff and those red-wolf men. They took me boy afore I could get away.”

“They didn't...” Mira trailed off, her voice hesitant.

“Bah, no. They didn't kill 'em, they took 'em away. Said they'd teach 'em to be a proper man.” The woman turned her head and spit on the ground. “They don be knowin' what a real man is like.”

“I'm so sorry. I wish there was something I could do to help you.”

The woman narrowed her eyes, judging Mira's intent. Deciding she was sincere, she took the young woman's hand in her own. “There's nothin' more ye can be doin' fer me, young lady. Nothin'. I'll get myself up to me sister's and go on. It's all we poor folk can do in times like these.”

Mira turned to Fallos, holding out her hand. “A piece or two for her, Fallos? Please?”

Fallos nodded and dug into his purse, producing two gold coins and folding them into Mira's outstretched hand. He didn't want to give up their meager supply but he understood that Mira needed to feel as though she were doing something to help, and giving a few pieces of gold to a woman who had suffered so much would not hurt.

Mira clutched the gold pieces in her hand and turned back to the woman, opening the battered woman's hand and folding them into her palm. “It is not much, but perhaps it

will help you get to where you are going.”

The woman smiled a crooked grin and her face softened. “Thank ye kindly miss.” She shook her head. “Not many willin' to be so nice these days, not many at all.” She stood and Mira quickly stood with her. The movement jostled Mira's cloak and the hood fell away from her face. The woman looked intently at her, fixing her scrutinizing gaze on Mira's blue eyes.

“Ye better keep yourself covered up, young miss.”

“Why would that be, ma'am?” Fallos asked sharply.

The woman faced him. “The red-wolf men carried off two of the girls in Harrowston fer lookin' like her. Black hair, blue eyes. Young. Somethin' about her looking like that mageborn brat of the king's.”

Fallos put a warning hand on Mira's back, hiding the movement from the old woman. Kieran tensed at the words, his hand dropping to the hilt of sword.

“You are serious, aren't you?” Fallos asked.

The old woman nodded. “Yes sir I am. In fact, I hear tell that the red-wolf men will pay good gold if ye tell 'em about a girl lookin' like her.” The woman turned and began to shuffle off in the direction Mira and the others had come from, but stopped suddenly and retraced her steps, stopping in back of Fallos and leaning in close. “But I'll tell ye somethin' else I'd not tell jus' anyone but ye seem good folk to me. After seein' what them red-wolf bastards done in Harrowston and hearin' some of the stories along my way, I'd almost rather be seein' that mageborn bitch on the throne than that Duke of theirs. He's a bad 'un.” The woman stomped her foot to emphasis her point before turning away once again and shuffling off to the east. “No sir, Ylgrid won't be tellin' no one about the lady. And ye better not be showin' her about neither.”

Sir Eleric and Sir Harren watched her leave, not taking their eyes from her until she disappeared from sight. They turned then and joined the others, who'd gathered together near Kieran's horse and were trying to formulate some sort of plan.

“We have but one, mayhap two, days left in Winegarden before we cross into RangeWard. There may be scattered groups of Franken's or Alemonger's men from SeaCliff wandering about, hoping to find Mira. We must avoid the towns from now on and stay away from large groups. If what that woman said is true, there are many in this rabble who would gladly turn in Mira just for the gold. Franken has seen to that.” Sir Eleric said, his voice grave.

Fallos nodded. “I see no other course of action. We cannot change the color of her eyes or hair and the cloak is but little protection from prying eyes.”

The knights began plotting their course, with Fallos interjecting opinions here and there. Mira had avoided looking at anyone through the discussion, her mind on the woman's words. She felt Kieran's intense gaze on her and squirmed under the scrutiny. Finally she lifted her head and caught his eyes. He raised an eyebrow. “Could you?” he asked quietly to avoid being heard by the other men.

Mira shook her head violently and turned from him, crossing her arms across her chest. No, I cannot! she told herself. But she knew she could. It was a simple thing, one of the things she'd learned early in her training – the use of magiks to alter her appearance. She could make her hair lighter or a completely different color as easily as she could change her eyes to brown or green or gray. It would not even drain her much, as it was not a very powerful magik. She stomped her foot. “No.” she whispered to herself.

She jumped when she heard Kieran's whispered reply in her ear. “You could.”

She whirled around to see his back already turned, his attention on his horse. She walked away angrily toward her own mount, ignoring him and refusing to speak of the possibility. I will not. she told herself. And that is that.

They carefully avoided towns for the next day, but the traffic on the road grew heavier as more refugees struggled to leave the border towns for the relative safety in the middle of Winegarden. They slept another night under the stars in a clearing of trees off to one side of the road, the campfire making it almost a cozy setting. The knights took turns standing guard, and more often than not Kieran sat with them. He would sleep a few hours then rise and join whichever knight was up, then return to sleep another few hours. A few times their talking had awakened Mira, and she had lain still for a while, listening to Kieran's voice. It intrigued her, and the things she heard from him sparked her interest even more. He was well traveled, this FreeSword. Corrigar, the Kingdom of Amorice on the other side of the DwarvenForge, even across the Continental Egress into Old Nordalia.

They were almost to the border of RangeWard when they saw a group of men a scant half mile ahead of them, riding in and out among the refugees. Kieran slowed, his eyes narrowing as he tried to discern what the men were doing. Every so often two or three of them would surround someone, hooting and shouting and then just as suddenly they would ride away, regrouping to perform the ritual again. He heard Sir Harren's sharp intake of breath next to him and he stopped his horse and turned to face him. “What?”

“The men on horseback are Franken's.” he hissed.

“Are you sure?” Kieran asked, turning his eyes back to the men. He could see that several of the men wore black with red, but that was not in and of itself a condemnation. Then again, thought Kieran, possible danger is simply danger that has been identified early enough to defeat. Franken's or sell-swords, they are up to no good.

“How many do you count?”

Sir Harren nodded as he counted. “Eight, at least. Maybe two fists.”

Kieran shook his head. “We cannot. That is at least two to one... I don't like the odds.” He turned and motioned for Fallos to join them. “We are fairly certain those are Franken's men ahead there. We count more than two to one in a fight. It does not look good.” he told Fallos soberly.

Fallos glanced at Mira, whose face had gone pale white. The corners of his mouth turned into a frown as he considered the possibilities. "We could turn back."

Sir Eleric had joined them and he shook his head. "No. They will see the action as odd and race to catch us. The same will happen if we try to force our way through." He put a hand on Fallos' shoulder. "There is no way to avoid the fight that will come. Best arm yourself, and the Queen." he said as he jerked his head in Mira's direction.

Mira sat unbelieving. She didn't want to fight those men. She didn't want to fight anyone if she could avoid it. She was so close to RangeWard now, couldn't they have made the last day in peace? She shuddered as she recalled her journey home and the fight that had occurred. She looked up and saw the men in red coming closer and looked at her companions. She didn't want any of her friends to die here, or anywhere, for her. You can just do it. Better that than what you did the last time. she argued with herself. She took a deep breath, deciding. She looked up at the sky. "Father, forgive me." She whispered, then closed her eyes and began to quiet herself so that she could pull the mana necessary.

It took less than a minute for her to complete the words and when she was finished, she took a ragged breath. She was afraid of what Fallos and the knights would think, but she couldn't see any other way out of this but to fight or use magik. At least no one will get hurt this way. She tried to convince herself one more time before she pulled her horse close to the group.

"I have solved the problem, gentlemen." she said quietly.

Kieran nodded his understanding and agreement as the others turned their attention to her, not understanding. "What do you mean, Mira?" Fallos asked.

She reached up and took a hold of the corners of her hood. "Just that... I... look." she commanded as she pulled the hood down, her flowing mane of now blonde hair spilling out onto her shoulders. Her gray eyes looked out at them over rounded, soft cheekbones. That was the hardest part. She'd never had a pointed chin or rounded cheekbones, seeing and feeling them was always difficult for her.

"My lady. This is not done." said Fallos, stricken.

"Fallos, I respect your wisdom, but if she had not done that, we'd all be dead in half a glass, and she'd be the Duchess Franken within a week. Probably dead in two." Kieran said pointedly.

Fallos pulled his eyes from her. "Forgive me my lady, if I do not look upon you for a while." he said.

Sir Eleric seemed to shudder. "I dislike it, but I dislike it less than fighting unwinnable odds. We are not here to be valiant warriors unto death, we are here to bind the Duke of RangeWard to our cause. We are not out of danger yet. Keep your hands near your swords. A pretty maid is still a maid to be taken in some armies."

Sir Harren was staring at her hard. “Can you do that whenever you want?” he asked.

“It is so. While I would grow weary with too much of this, I could have ridden the whole way looking thus.” Mira replied.

“So you could have pretended to be my sister, or my mother, and I would never know. That unnerves me lady.” he replied.

“Not so, good Sir.” she put enough emphasis on the sir to make certain he knew she was speaking to him formally, Queen to Knight. “I could pretend to be someone else for a short time, but not knowing your mother or sister, what should I say to you? I would not know how to be them, only to look like them. And even that would take some time studying them. It is said in that place where I trained that this trick has never fooled a family.”

“Just the same my lady, I think I shall be a bit more careful around the ladies.” he replied as he turned towards the oncoming men and put his hand on the hilt of his weapon.

A cocky looking man with a floppy red hat and a black goatee hailed them “You there. You are going the wrong way! Do you not see that the sea of pitiful grape eaters is headed towards the center of the Duchy?”

Kieran made a show of leaning back in his saddle and appraising the man. “We did notice that the tide was rising against us. Would you and your friends have aught to do with this unseasonable tide?” he asked in a voice that hardly sounded like Kieran. To Mira's ears it sounded much like the man speaking to them.

“Only if they run from my prowess, 'Sword. I noticed they are not running from you.” the man replied. The other riders had reached them by this point – nine in all, all armed, but none wearing much armor or any insignia. They laughed at the man's taunt.

“On the contrary, oh master of the floppy hat! They run to get past me quickly such that I not notice them! You on the other hand, they seem to be trying to catch!” Kieran shot back.

The man's friends laughed loudly, one of them telling the others that he was running from the peasants. The man in the floppy hat sniffed. “Let them chase us. We have lost a fortune in this sea of miserable rats, and the more of them I look at, the sooner I am to find it.” He turned his horse and rode on. The others followed, still laughing and jesting about the peasants chasing them.

Behind her, Mira heard Fallos let out an explosive breath. Kieran was sitting up, and buckling his sword back into his scabbard.

“Fine bit of work there FreeSword!” Sir Harren crowed. “My father always said that a good bluff was less painful than a good fight any day. I never believed you could do that until now!”

“Your father bluffed and blustered his way into half of his Duchy, and the Duke of

Forestlan still remembers that it used to be his.” said Fallos.

“Come now Fallos.” Eleric interjected. “Don't be gruff on him. Kieran did do a fine job, and we're through that mess.”

Fallos sucked his cheeks, looking out across the people straggling down the road. “Yes we are, but we are not yet out of the midden heap.” He turned to look at Mira. “Lady, I surprise myself when I say this. Until we reach Duke Rangeward's castle, please stay just as you are. It might be the best protection you have.”

Chapter 8

The small group continued on for the rest of the day, saying little. Polite remarks about the countryside were exchanged, but for the most part Mira and her companions spent the rest of the day's ride on their own personal thoughts.

The landscape changed slowly, the trees thinning and eventually giving way to wide expanses of plains. RangeWard was a duchy of horsemen and cavalry. The vast plains of the ducal lands lent itself to a more nomadic society than the rest of Freeland Hold, with many small tribes roaming the plains, concentrating on catching the wild horses that ran free and training them for sale later in one of the cities built to support trade of such kind. The tribes were loyal to the RangeWarder, though it seemed an unlikely alliance. He offered them the protection of the duchy in return for a tax that was paid both in horses and gold. In the fall a great contest was held among the tribes to find the best horseman of all and it was he who was sent to the RangeWarder as a Master of the Cavalry. These men trained the Duke's cavalry on both the basics of horsemanship and, if they showed promise, taught them to ride as though they were one with their horse. The duchy of RangeWard was renowned throughout the southern kingdoms for its cavalry and the uncanny ability of even the squires to ride like the nomads of Kantor Doorne.

The road they traveled was used by traders and it was rare to see the horsemen, though Mira privately hoped they might catch a glimpse of them. She'd heard stories of them and had seen them ride once at a festival given for the occasion of the king's birthday in KingsHome.

Kieran noticed the wistful look on Mira's face as he turned to check on the others. He slowed until she caught up to him. “You are hoping to see the horsemen, aren't you?”

“Um hmmm...” she replied distractedly, not taking her eyes from the horizon.

Kieran chuckled. “It is unlikely you'll see them, though if we did we might stay with

them. They cook a prairie chicken so tasty you'd think you were at court.”

Mira turned and looked at his face, trying to determine if he were simply teasing or telling the truth. “How do you know, FreeSword?” she asked, skeptically.

“I've spent some time here and there, mi'lady.” he said grinning.

She raised an eyebrow at him. “Indeed, you have. You never did explain where you learned to speak High Nordalian. It is spoken rarely outside the Court of Nordal. The only place I know of in the southern continent where it is heard often is the Theocracy of Passrock, and they are little more than an extension of the Court in the south.” she scoffed. “Was it there, perhaps?”

“It is also heard in the Duchy of Radael.” he said offhandedly.

“That is a nice way of avoiding my question, Kieran.” she teased him.

He looked away and stared at the open field for a while before he shrugged and held out his arm, pointing at one of his oath marks. “A Radaelian noble.” he said simply.

“So it was in Radael...” she trailed off, hoping he would say more.

He turned his attention back to the road and answered, his voice tight. “Be careful, your majesty. Fallos might think you are interested in me as more than a contract if you keep up these little conversations.” He kicked his horse and rode up to put some distance between them.

Mira's face was a mass of confusion. What did I say? She went back over their short conversation in her head until they stopped for the day, trying to determine what she had said that had upset the FreeSword. She helped with setting up camp, though the knights tried to insist she need not perform such menial tasks. “And you, Sir Eleric. Is it customary for a knight such as you to perform such menial tasks yourself? Or you Sir Harren?” she prodded, her voice a bit more harsh than she intended.

They looked askance at each other but said nothing. “I thought not. While we are traveling, would it not look odd to anyone who chanced to see us if I did not help?” she asked. When neither replied she asked, her voice rising a bit in frustration. “Would it not?”

“Yes, your majesty.” Sir Harren finally replied, his voice quiet.

“Then it is settled. Until we reach the Duke's estates I will help you.” she huffed and turned away, her feet kicking up dust as she walked to her horse and made a show of digging through her pack.

“You should not take out your frustration on them, Mira.” Kieran's voice was low behind her.

She whirled to face him. “Would you stop doing that?” she exclaimed.

He reached a hand over her shoulder and rested it on her horse, looking down at her.

“My apologies for being so brusque earlier.” he sighed. “I do not wish to discuss past contracts. If you learned anything in your training I’m sure you were taught that our discretion and loyalty are legendary.”

She kept her eyes on his face and saw nothing but a slight flash of pain in his eyes that disappeared so quickly she couldn't be sure she'd actually seen it. “I am sorry, Kieran. I did not mean to upset you.”

He dropped his hand from the horse to her shoulder, picking up a length of her hair and twining it between his fingers. He smiled down at her. “I think I like you better with dark hair.” He dropped her hair and let his finger trail down her arm, then turned and walked away jauntily, whistling under his breath.

Mira bowed her head, her hair falling to cover the smile that broke across her face. For some reason she didn't quite understand yet it was important to her that Kieran was not angry with her. She turned and rummaged through her pack again for a moment, then returned to the fire to sit with the others.

Fallos had watched the exchange surreptitiously and he was not at all pleased. He hadn't heard what had been passed between the two, but he had seen the occasional looks that flew back and forth between them and seen Kieran take any opportunity he could to touch her. He decided it was time to talk to him before things got out of hand. He cleared his throat. “FreeSword, would you speak privately with me for a moment?” He stood and waited for Kieran to rise from his seat.

Kieran smiled wryly, he knew what the old man wanted. He was surprised it had taken him this long to speak up. “Certainly, Fallos.” he said easily. He pushed himself up and stepped back over the log he'd been sitting on and followed Fallos away from the fire.

Fallos stopped when he was far enough way that he was certain they would not be overheard. He turned and waited for Kieran to catch up and stop.

Kieran stopped and leaned against a tree, crossing his ankles and folding his arms across his chest. “Well, old man. Have your say.”

Fallos' face grew hard. “I am not to be trifled with, FreeSword. You will stop these games with Mira. She is not for you.”

“And you are certain of this, are you? Are you perhaps mageborn as well? Able to see the future? Or are you a Templar also, able to ask your god, perhaps?”

Fallos drew back a hand as if to strike the FreeSword, surprising Kieran. Fallos shook his head and smiled ruefully. “You are not worth the effort, sell-sword.” he spat. “I don't like you and I certainly don't trust you. You are here only at Mira's behest and as soon as I can be rid of you, I will.”

Kieran leaned in close, so close Fallos could feel the man's breath on his face, and pointed a finger in his chest. “I fulfill my contracts, old man. And if Mira chooses more, then it is her choice. Not yours.”

Fallos drew himself up and swatted the FreeSword's hand away. "She is none of your affair, Kieran Chace. Fulfill your oath and then leave her alone. Both Mira and her kingdom need more than a wandering sellsword has to offer."

Kieran threw his head back and laughed. "Oh, that's precious. Until her father died she wasn't good enough to rule because of her blood and now that she's all you have she's too good for a FreeSword." His eyes narrowed and he spoke his next words through clenched teeth. "You're right. She is the queen and she will make her own decisions. As I think she's already proven to you, old man. She's almost a woman grown and I think it's time you learned to respect her decisions. Especially regarding who she might entreat into her bed."

Fallos stammered at the words, but recovered quickly, his voice becoming cold. "You are correct, she will ultimately make her own decisions. But you will not be her choice. She holds duty foremost in her mind and would not dream of insulting her nobles so. Stop teasing her, FreeSword." he spat. "You are distracting her from her task and that is likely to get her killed." Fallos pushed past him and began to walk determinedly back to the fire. Kieran pushed himself away from the tree and grabbed the old man's arm roughly.

"You are going to get her killed, old man." he snarled.

At the look of surprise on Fallos' face, Kieran let Fallos' arm fall and poked an accusing finger in the old man's chest. "You kept telling her she wasn't fit to rule. All her life you've told her that and now you suddenly accept her because she's all you have. She isn't a fool nor is she stupid. She doesn't believe she can, or should rule, any more than you wanted her to a month ago. You're going to get her killed because she doesn't believe in herself or what she's doing."

Fallos slapped Kieran's finger away but said nothing. Kieran could see the turmoil in the man's eyes and knew he'd gotten through to him when he saw Fallos' shoulders slump slightly.

"You are right, FreeSword." Fallos admitted grudgingly. "We all told her she wasn't fit to rule and now we expect her to do so. I will not speak in such a manner again. She needs confidence, as you say, and we must give it to her before we go too far."

"I did not mean to be so harsh, Fallos. Despite what you think I care about her as well."

"Have a care for how deeply you become involved, FreeSword. It could end your career if you aren't cautious." Fallos told him blandly before he returned to fire, leaving Kieran to stare after the old man, confused by the almost friendly warning.

When Kieran returned, Fallos ignored him, then spent the rest of the evening staring thoughtfully into the fire. Mira had watched the conversation from the fire, but decided not to ask about it when she saw the looks on both the men's faces. She turned her attention the rest of the evening to the knights, trying futilely to ignore the almost palpable tension between the two other men. Kieran caught the glances she threw at both of them and wished he could explain what had occurred, but did not wish to risk what he thought was a truce between himself and Fallos by going off alone with her. Finally she excused herself and climbed into her blankets, trying to

ignore the butterflies that rose in her stomach every time she recalled Kieran's hand on her shoulder.

In the morning they pressed on, and continued to travel at as urgent a pace as possible without causing harm to their mounts. They passed through several small villages where it appeared that life was still fairly normal. Mira relaxed as the distance grew between them and the border with Winegarden, but began to tense again when Fallos informed her that they were nearly to the Rangewarder's Keep. She was already a bit taxed with the burden of keeping her disguise in place, though she had not had a headache in the evening for the last two days. That surprised her, because the first night her head had pounded so much it had kept her from resting well, though she was exhausted by both the effort and the riding.

She spent the morning considering this, reviewing lectures from her training. Her teachers had let them toy with simple magik one day for several hours, knowing full well that by the end of the day they would be exhausted and likely experience pain. The day after, the groggy students had listened as their instructors explained two simple facts of magik. The first was to never overextend themselves and the second was that the only way to withstand the effect they were experiencing was to gradually work themselves up to it. That's it! Mira cried triumphantly to herself. By using this small magik every day I am building up my strength. She smiled smugly, thinking herself quite clever for reasoning her situation out.

She was still smiling smugly when Fallos rode up next to her sometime later.

He noticed the look and asked her about it. "You appear quite pleased with yourself, your majesty. Would you care to share?"

Mira's smile melted off her face. She wanted to share her newfound understanding but knew that Fallos would not understand. "No, Fallos. I do not think you would approve." she told him almost sadly.

He thought about that for a moment and recalled Kieran's words last night. "Perhaps not, Mira. But I would still like to hear what has made you so happy." he told her.

A huge smile appeared on her face at his words and she quickly explained what she had discovered. "You see then? Using magik can leave you defenseless if you do not use it often. It is like riding a horse. If you do not ride every day or two days you will be stiff and sore the next time you try." she finished.

Fallos nodded seriously. "I understand." he sighed. "I find it difficult to discuss this with you, Mira. But I am trying to understand." he stopped and looked at her fondly. "and accept. Your father tried to convince me that it did not matter and while I am certain he did so because you were his only child and he favored you so, he may have had something of the truth. This trick you play with your hair and your eyes, for example, does not seem to be something so bad that our FirstKing would have forbid mageborn to rule." He sighed. "I have not seen magik worked very much in my life, Mira. But if this is the type of thing that is done with it I may have to reconsider my position on mageborn." He nodded congenially at her and then slowed his horse, taking up a position behind her once again.

Mira was torn. She was glad that Fallos had heard her out but he had reminded her of that day on their journey home. The day when she had used magik to hurt another human being. She shook off the memory and half-turned in the saddle. "How much further, Fallos?" she asked.

Fallos glanced ahead of her and then up at the sun. "A few hours, child, and we will be within sight of the city gates."

"It will be good to sleep in a bed again, I can tell you that!" she called out. "If I don't get a bath soon I fear I shall smell like my horse forever!"

The men laughed at her words and continued the banter between themselves, joking and teasing each other about needing baths as well.

Finally they could see the walls of the city surrounding the Rangewarder's keep in the distance. They slowed and urged their horses off the road, then dismounted and stood together, gathering their strength before entering what could be a potentially dangerous situation.

"We do not know that they are still friendly to both Franken and the Queen. We must be wary." Kieran stated.

Fallos nodded. As much as he did not like Mira's attraction to him or his brash nature, the man had the uncanny ability to see potential danger. "Agreed. We should not rush in assuming we will be welcomed. But in any case, Mira, you must be yourself for this. As much as it pains me to place you in possible danger, you must be recognized and you must not do this in front of others. They would not understand."

Mira nodded and then closed her eyes, letting go of the mana she'd been using to uphold the magik. She heard one of the knights gasp as her coloring returned and she looked, once again, like Mira Celeria, Queen of Freeland Hold. She opened her eyes and was slightly annoyed by the gaping looks of the knights. She noticed that Kieran was not staring rudely, but instead appeared to be appraising her. She held her chin up and waited until he had finished, smiling slightly when he nodded just once in her direction. "Well then," she said brightly, "I am myself again. Now, what is it you wish me to do until we are certain of our safety?"

Sir Eleric's face took on an expression of intense concentration for a moment before he spoke. "I think it best if Sir Harren and I ride in front of the Queen, Fallos you next to her as her Castellan, and you, Kieran, behind her." At the dark look that crossed Kieran's face he spoke again quickly. "No offense intended, Kieran. I would have you close to her and guarding her back. You are able to move more quickly than we, as we will need to be fully armored if we are to present the Queen to the Duke."

Kieran's face schooled into more pleasant lines at the explanation. "I understand completely, Eleric. No offense taken, good sir."

Eleric bowed in return and turned to Sir Harren. "Come Harren, let us dress ourselves properly." Mira watched as they each pulled a heavy pack from their horses and disappeared to dress themselves.

Fallos looked to Mira. “Well, child, what about you?”

Mira's expression showed her confusion. “What about me? I look like me again, don't I?”

Kieran laughed. “I think the old man is trying to say that you ought to change as well. You're a mess and,” he paused as he dropped his eyes to her feet and then let them travel up to meet her eyes, “you don't look much like a Queen right now.”

“Of course. I should change as well.” she said, trying to ignore Kieran's eyes. She pulled a pack from her horse and tucked it under her arm. She looked around and her face fell.

“What's wrong, Mira?” Kieran asked, his eyes now laughing at her discomfort.

She swallowed nervously. “Fallos, I can't change out here! There's ... nothing!”

Fallos smiled patiently. “Behind the horse, my dear. I'll keep watch.” He fixed his gaze on Kieran. “No one will bother you.”

Kieran put his hands out, palms turned up as if to say, “I certainly won't.”

Fallos' gaze turned stony and he crossed his arms impatiently.

Kieran ducked his head. “All right, already, old man.” he turned away from where Fallos indicated Mira should change. “Is this better?” he asked.

“Yes.” Fallos said, in a tone that told Kieran he'd be serious.

They waited patiently until Mira called out. “I'm finished, but I can't button this dress by myself.”

Kieran closed his eyes and held his place, knowing that if he took one step Fallos would cuff him. He listened to Fallos mumbling, then cursing, then calling out his name.

The FreeSword smiled to himself before he turned and immediately wiped the smile off his face, becoming intensely serious. “What do you need, old man?”

Fallos appeared from around the rear of the horse and walked up to him. “You will assist Mira and button the last few buttons on the back of her dress but you will do it quickly. I mean it. I can't see them well enough and these hands,” he held them out in front of him, “are too stiff to deal with such tiny things. “

“Why not ask one of the knights, Fallos?” he asked, loud enough for Mira to hear him.

“They will take long enough with their armor and they will not be able to do this with gauntlets covering their hands!” Fallos said, his frustration evident. “Now assist the Queen.” As Kieran started to move past him Fallos wrapped a hand around his arm and stopped him. “And be quick about it.” Fallos whispered but the threat rang loud

and clear in Kieran's ears.

“Yes, old man. Quick I will be.” Kieran told him, then pulled away roughly from Fallos' grip and walked around the horse to stand in front of Mira.

She was holding her hair up with one hand and was clearly embarrassed, her cheeks flushed and her eyes downcast. “The buttons are on the back of my dress, good Sir.” she said formally.

“Of course they are.” he said innocently. He walked around her and stopped behind her, fastening the last three buttons on the back of her dress before slipping a hand on her neck and tracing a path across to her chin, guiding her face upwards with the tips of his fingers. “Much better.” he said quietly.

“What's that?” she said hoarsely, not taking her eyes from his face.

“Your hair, of course, mi'lady.” he responded absently. He heard Fallos clear his throat and immediately stepped away from Mira. He turned on his heel and walked away from her quickly, hoping she was young and innocent enough to not notice his definite liking of her choice in clothing.

He gave Fallos a hard look as he passed him and stopped near his horse, his back to the other man. “Isn't that dress a bit low cut for a girl her age?” he growled.

Mira laughed. Kieran turned and saw that she had followed him and was standing next to Fallos. “For a girl my age? Perhaps. For a Queen? No.” she said, delighted that he had had been affected by her choice, which she had chosen at least partially because she had hoped to evoke such a reaction from him. “Besides, it is the only one that bears the standard of the King. Or Queen.” she told him.

He looked closer at it and noticed that the dress was indeed a deep blue with a single wide stripe of white bearing embroidered golden horses running down the center of her bodice. “Queen or not, it's too low.” Kieran said forcefully, then walked off to see if the knights needed assistance.

It took Eleric and Harren a while to fully dress themselves. Mira's eyes misted as she saw them dressed once again as the KingsGuard but shook her sorrow away by concentrating on the task at hand. They traveled on, and reached the city gates just before dusk.

The gates were not closed but the portcullis was down and the knights could see at least two city guards marching back and forth before the gate on the inside. Kieran scanned the walls and noted that the towers that stuck above the walls every forty feet or so were well manned with what appeared to be archers and pike men marched continuously back and forth on the walls.

The walls appeared to be sturdy but, Kieran noted, they did not appear to have seen fighting recently. That was good, because it meant it was likely that the Duke was still biding his time.

Sir Eleric walked his horse toward the gate until he was a few yards away and then

stopped. He dismounted, motioning for the others to stay mounted in case they needed to flee quickly. He marched up to the gate and waited.

Mira watched as the two guards inside the city walked up to the gate and stopped a sword's length back from the portcullis. She was tense and her horse must have noticed because his front feet danced nervously back and forth beneath her as she waited to see what would happen.

She saw Eleric pointing in her direction, and saw one of the guards move up to the gate and peer through it at her. The guard at the gate nodded back at the other guard, who nodded at Eleric. Eleric bowed and walked back to his horse. After mounting he turned to the others. "It is safe. The city stands neutral in the fight and will allow the Queen entrance as well as a small escort."

Fallos let out the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. He nodded and then reached over to pat Mira's hand. "It will be all right then, my dear. At least for now. The rest is up to you."

"That's the part I'm worried about." Mira said under her breath, but urged her horse forward into the city.

Four city guards in the light green of the Duke's colors appeared on spectacular black stallions who actually pranced in a way that Kieran had only ever seen horses in Kantor Doorne prance. He turned his attention back to the guards, scrutinizing their every move. One moved to lead the knights, one drew in behind them and the other two flanked Fallos and Mira. He watched the one next to Mira carefully, ready to spring forward if the man made any untoward moves in her direction.

He needn't have worried, as the guards did exactly as they were told, not even sparing a glance at Mira, and escorted the Queen to the doors of the Ducal keep. The banners of the Duchy, bearing a prancing blue unicorn on a field of light green, hung from the windows on either side of the large doors that marked the entrance to the keep. The guards each pulled on one side of the double doors, opening them wide and bowing as much as one could in that position.

The guard flanking Mira dismounted and offered her his hand. "Mi'lady," he said formally. Fallos ignored the slight to her status and nodded at her questioning glance. She put her hand in his and allowed him to help her dismount. Kieran, seeing the man's action, dismounted smoothly and moved to stand an arm's length behind her, still not trusting anyone around her.

The guard ignored him and offered Mira his arm. She laid her arm on top of his, her hand resting on top of his, and let him escort her inside. The others dismounted and followed them into the keep.

The guard led them through the expansive entrance hall and down a corridor toward what Mira assumed was the Ducal court. The Duke, of course, was not necessarily holding court at the moment, but as in KingsHome court was a place where courtiers and petitioners could sit while they waited, partaking of conversation and even sometimes entertainment to keep them occupied.

She was pleased with herself when they stopped before a large doorway that, when opened by the doorman, opened into an expansive room that she was almost positive was the court. The guard turned to Mira and half bowed. "Mi'lady, if you will wait here for the Duke he would be most pleased."

Mira removed her arm from his and inclined her chin in his direction. "Of course, good sir. Please inform the Duke that I am most appreciative of his generosity and look forward to meeting with him."

The man nodded and left, the doorman closing the door behind him.

Mira knew how to deal with this situation and immediately began to scan the room for one of the comfortable divans she knew should be scattered about for the comfort of those waiting on the Duke's ear. She found one and began to walk toward it when a man suddenly stood across the room and began to walk rapidly toward her. He was comely, with long black hair loose about his shoulders, and a body toned the way only swordfighting can tone a body. He wore a silver pendant holding his cloak at the throat, and had fine silver chains entwined in his hair.

Kieran's hand dropped to his side and he picked up his pace until he was two steps behind Mira's right arm. When he saw the red fox on the man's cloak his heart began pounding and without a second thought he moved to place himself directly beside Mira, his hand now gripping the hilt of his sword.

Mira stopped when she saw the Eastguard colors on the man as well, her lips tightening. Kieran could hear her breathing increase and the color rising in her cheeks. "Say nothing you will regret." he warned her quietly, not sure what she was thinking but recalling what she had done to the man who had attacked her knew that she would be heartsick if she repeated the scene.

She said nothing, her eyes fixed intently on the traitor. On one of the men responsible for her father's death. She fought the urge to draw mana, to use her magik to strike back at the men who had ruined her life and thrown her world into chaos. "No, Mira. You would regret it." Kieran's words snapped her back to reality.

She exhaled slowly and fixed the man with a look of pure contempt before she turned on her heel and walked in the other direction. Kieran was torn between following Mira and standing his ground. He chose the latter and was not disappointed when the man slowed his approach and finally stopped just out of Kieran's reach.

"Her highness seems a bit perturbed this evening. Is something amiss?" he asked almost casually.

"Her majesty," Kieran said evenly, emphasizing her title, "does not enjoy keeping company with traitors."

The man sniffed and looked aside as though he was bored with their conversation. "I have no idea what you are talking about, sell-sword. I swear fealty to a man who can wear the crown. Some choose to support a woman who cannot."

"Of course you don't know what I'm talking about." Kieran replied slowly. "The

pawns never do, do they?"

The man ignored him and began to walk past Kieran to leave, but Kieran's hand snaked out and grabbed his arm, pulling him close and stopping him in his tracks.

The man dropped his gaze to Kieran's hand on his arm, then let it slowly move up to Kieran's face. "You are obviously a mongrel trailing behind her highness for scraps without the benefit of manners, so let me give you a word of warning, FreeSword. Never touch me again."

Kieran's smile was strained, his blue eyes flashing dangerously. "Let me give you a word of warning since you are obviously a man of meager intelligence and the product of faulty breeding. If you harm the Queen in any way I will hunt you down and feed you to the desert birds of Kantor Doorne piece by piece."

The man forcibly tore his arm away from Kieran and left the room. Though he did not look back, his rapid steps betrayed his air of confidence. Kieran nodded, satisfied with the exchange. He knew it wouldn't stop the man but at least he'd given the buffoon something to consider. He turned and walked to join Mira, who was pacing in a corner of the room. He sat on a divan, crossing his legs and relaxing against its padded back. "Who was he?" he asked of no one in particular.

Fallos made a face. "Count Gerad of Saltwood. A first cousin of Franken. It does not surprise me to see that Franken chose him to treat with Duke Highstep. When they were children they were nearly inseparable."

Kieran nodded but said nothing, choosing instead to focus on Mira, who was still pacing back and forth, her fists clenching and unclenching as she mumbled angrily under her breath.

After a while she finally calmed and sat down tiredly next to Kieran, laying her head against his outstretched arm. She closed her eyes and sighed ruefully.

"You would have regretted it." he told her again, looking down at her fatigued face.

Without opening her eyes she replied, "This time, I think perhaps not."

It was late when a servant entered the room looking for King Dugal's daughter. "Lady Mira." the servant half-bowed. "The Duke sends his apologies and wishes to provide you with rooms for the evening. He has instructed me to invite you to break your fast with him in private."

Normally Kieran would not have said anything, but the encounter with Count Gerad had his ire up. For royalty, these people were rude. "Tell the Duke that her majesty would be pleased to break her fast with him. In her rooms." He snapped.

Fallos and Mira were both staring at him, but the servant just nodded and turned to Mira. "Very good then, Duke Highstep is an early riser. Would false dawn be too early for the servants to begin bringing food, princess?"

Kieran was starting to feel a little foolish for jumping in like that. It didn't help their

cause any. But nobles of any country should know that they wait on the Queen, not the other way around. His experience told him that these nobles knew that full well, and were afraid of a good fight more than anything. Good for them he was not going to be their King. He would teach this Duke a thing or two if he was. Or maybe just replace him with Sir Eleric. The man at least knew his manners and his place.

Mira slowly turned from staring at him. “False dawn would be fine, castellan. I am weary from travel and in need of a bath. Please show us to our rooms.” She said.

“This way then. The Duke has set you in the royal apartments.” The man replied.

Kieran wondered about that. If he really was the castellan, he may have changed their sleeping arrangements to the apartments kept for royal visits because she was forceful. Or more correctly because he had been forceful.

They wearily followed the castellan and said their goodnights, grateful for at least one good nights rest before meeting with the Duke. They would need their wits about them if they were to treat with this man whom had handled them roughly today. And they didn't just want to break their fast with him, they needed to convince him to support his Queen against an enemy that outnumbered them two to one.

Chapter 9

Duke Franken sat alone in the quiet of his reading room. It was a fine room, actually. He would enjoy moving his new wife and his household here when this war was done. The air came in the window and brushed across his face. It smelled of the sea and death. His men had cleared the bodies and washed down the streets long weeks ago, but it had been dry and hot. His city needed a good rain to clear the taint from the air. It had been a long and difficult battle to wrest control of the city from the city guard. Some fool FreeSword had sent up the alarm early, and his plans had gone awry. He had paid the captain of the guard well to put up a token resistance and then tell the troops to lay down their arms for the sake of the city. By the time the fool captain had come out of hiding to earn his pay, there was fighting all over the city.

His men had taken the castle in less than three hours, but come the dawn all of the town walls were held by the guard, the gates were sealed, and some of the large manses near the center of town were barricaded as if they were small forts.

He had found the captain of the guard – Serdrin was his name – drunk in a brothel around mid morning. He had barely controlled his rage then, and ordered his guards to sober the man up, letting them know that forcefully was preferred. His thought at

the time was that the man needed to at least look like he'd been through a fight before he beseeched his men to surrender.

Near midday, Serdrin was able to walk again. He limped somewhat, but that was all for the better. He had taken the sniveling fool around to each stronghold of the guard, and made him earn his pay.

The man had told each group of soldiers that the city was surrendered. That they should come out and bend the knee to him. To a man they refused, most of them rudely. It was then that he learned what sort of leader he had bought. These men did not respect their leader, and did not follow him. It was possible that they knew Mira had escaped, but even so, they would have listened to a strong leader.

So now he had to deal with the man. He was growing weary of dealing with people. This city was to be his one day, but so far it had proved to be full of weaklings and rats. Seventeen men were hung from the castle walls on the first day. Since then forty more had joined them. It had been a long fortnight, and it was not done yet. While his armies were mired down by rogue Duchies in the field, he was stuck here. He needed Farrenton for what it signified, so he could not leave it in the hands of another...

He controlled his wandering thoughts when he heard voices at the door. Time to deal with another detail, one that had waited until more important matters were dealt with.

Etringa opened the door and said "Captain Serdrin to see you Sire."

"Please Sir Etringa, bring him in." Franken told his guard.

The door opened the rest of the way, and the two entered. For the first time in days, Franken nearly laughed when he saw them together. Etringa was well-kempt, with new black armor and a fine red velvet cloak. All of his personal guard had taken to wearing that uniform and calling themselves the KingsGuard. That arrangement was fine with him. To convince people you were King, you needed the trappings of a King. He had knighted them all himself, hoping that being surrounded by knights would make people think more correctly of him. Serdrin was bedraggled, wearing the tattered remains of his purple city guard cloak and soiled tan breeches. His hair was tangled and greasy – he looked as if he'd spent the last two weeks in a dungeon. Perhaps that was because he had.

"Please, sit Captain Serdrin. Let me pour you a drink." he said reaching for the decanter and glass he had set out on the table. "I am sorry that you sat in the dungeons for so long. I was so busy taking the city that I forgot about you."

"It is okay, uhm... Sire. I ate rats when I could catch them, and I was fed four or five times." Serdrin replied.

More like 10 or 14 times you fool. Do you think I do not know how many times the prisoners I order to the dungeons are fed? Thought Franken. "I can but apologize for my error and ask your forgiveness." he said out loud. Turning to his Knight he said. "Sir Etringa, please have someone bring the good captain a meal." Etringa nodded and turned to talk to someone outside the door.

“Sire, I must ask what it is you will do now. You have taken the city, the guards are either dead or yours, surely you cannot benefit by keeping an experienced man like myself in the dungeons.” Serdrin said.

“You promised me the city unscathed if I could take the castle. I gave you three thousand KingsWeight in gold to turn the city guard over to me intact. Three thousand KingsWeight in gold would keep my inherited lands for thirty years. You could buy a title with three thousand KingsWeight. And yet you turned up the next day with no soldiers, wine-sunk, and with only fourteen hundred KingsWeight on you. Where did the rest of my money go?” Franken asked as Sir Etringa turned back into the room and closed the door.

“Sire. You paid me that money to turn the city guard over to you after the fighting started in the castle. There was not time. I tried, but there was fighting everywhere. All of the men I spoke to said 'look over there! There is still fighting over there!' I tried and tried again, but somehow the word spread before your man gave me the word.” Serdrin replied fearfully.

“I paid for a city guard that could defend a city. Instead I got a city guard that was defending a city. So well that not one in five are able to walk, and most of those will die before bending knee to me. I have to man the walls with my own troops and sellswords. You did not earn that money, and I will need it to pay those sellswords.” Franken replied coldly.

“I... I can find it for you surely, my King.” Serdrin said. “Most of it anyway. Some of it is gone Sire. But I could work that off for you Sire. As a guard Captain. I am experienced at leading the guards Sire.”

And I will come home one day to find you three thousand coins richer and my guards turned cloak? I think not. “Finding me the money will be sufficient. I have a different position in mind for you. We can speak about it as soon as you have shown I can trust you by returning my coin.” Franken said aloud.

“It's being held for me at the Half Pence Moneychanger, Sire.” Serdrin said quickly. “Well, all but what I spent that night, Sire. Perhaps one hundred gold pieces of it is gone. But once I am ensconced in this new position you have for me, I can pay it back.” Serdrin said, sounding more self-assured.

“Well and good. I have a need to show the city guard what happens to those who cross me. I think you are just the man for the job.” Franken said casually.

“How could I do that, Sire? Execute a few traitors in the Godsquare for you?” Serdrin asked.

“No, by being executed in the Godsquare.” Franken said, watching the grubby little weasel's face fall. “More specifically, by hanging in the Godsquare in a cage until your bones are bleached white. I hear that men go crazy when they're in the cages. I've had them pulled out of storage and freshened up, just for men like you.” he finished.

“Sire! You cannot mean that! I did my best! I did my best and more! I told you where the money was, and I offered to be your man!” Serdrin babbled.

“My man until someone else paid you? Or just until you had drunk and wenched away the fortune I paid you? You will be my man. Your new position is Royal Cage Sitter.” He turned to his Knight “Take him back to the dungeons, Sir Knight. Not too roughly – nothing that would shorten the wonderful example he will set for all the others. I really have grown tired of hanging men on the castle walls. They stink. And have that meal sent to him down there. I do not wish to listen to his pleas of how he's changed, and he'd never turn on me.” That's why I still smell death. They have hung bodies upwind of me. I shall have to have them moved to one of the other sides of the castle wall.

Sir Etringa grabbed the guard captain by the arm and jerked him to his feet in one smooth motion. “Sire!” shouted serdrin “I shall be your fool! I shall clean the midden heaps! That would be a better fate to show them than the cages! I would live for years, shoveling dung in front of them! Please Sire! The midden heaps are a good idea...” His voice trailed off as the door closed, accompanied by the sounds of a scuffle outside his door. It really was a good idea thought the King, but I need a more immediate lesson. I shall have to keep that one in mind if I should catch Sir Eleric or Sir Harren.

He walked to the window and looked out over the capital city. It was not much to behold. He had been forced to give Sir Umtler permission to burn out the last two groups of resistance. One of the fires had gotten out of hand and half of the Street of Trades was now gone. It was a pity, some of the best tradesmen in all of Freeland Hold had shops in those streets, but there was nothing more he could do about it. At least they had stopped the fires before they got to the warehouses. The ignorant peasants were still in rebellion – they would strike one of his guardposts, or riders at night, and then disappear, all of them, when he sent troops out to deal with them. It was unlikely that the crops would be harvested this year unless he sent soldiers to do it. Even then the damnable peasants would probably burn their fields before letting his men gather the harvest. He needed all of the food in those warehouses that Sir Julien was even now taking a count of.

There was a light tap at his door. There is not enough time to rule this Nordal-banished city. He thought as the door cracked open again.

Sir Etringa stuck his head in the door again. “Count Gerad of Saltwood is returned from entreating with the RangeWarder Sire. He wishes to see you immediately.”

As well he might. He wishes to be the one to tell me he does not have a Treaty for me to consider. Thought the King. “Send him in Sir Etringa, the morning was half wasted on that traitor anyway.” He said a little more loudly than he needed.

The Knight held the door wide, and the Count stepped into the King's reading room and knelt.

Count Gerad was young and built well. The tight tunic stretched over his bulging shoulders, and the silver chains he had hung in his raven-dark hair made it look as if

he was going to festival. Perhaps that was how people dressed for the King. Franken's father had always made him dress up. Since their childhood, Gerad had always been there with him. Gerad had fostered with the Frankens because he and the Duke's oldest son were of an age. They had done everything together, and it was good to have the man back in Farrenton.

“Rise Gerad. You look rested. When did you return to Farrenton?” He asked, gesturing to the same chair that had seated Serdrin.

The Count stood and moved to the chair indicated. “Late last evening, Sire. I checked with Sir Genitor, and he said you had retired. After 5 days of hard riding, I was grateful and took to my bed.” He replied.

Oldest friends are the truest. One of these fawning sheep that he had picked up here in Farrenton as advisors would have lied. “You are the one person that I expected to slip with the 'Yes Sire, No Sire' lines, and yet you have taken to them like I have been King all of my life. Let it lie Gerad. When we are alone you may speak as you always have. It is your counsel I value, not your ability to mouth a title. Here, have some wine. Since you would have woken me last night for good news, I believe I will have some too. Amorician Red. Not a bad vintage, but I still prefer the reds from Winegarden.”

The Count smiled. “I race back here like someone stuck an arrow in my rear, and you still read the truth before I've had the misfortune to have to tell you. I do not bear good news. Yet I do not bear all bad news either. The RangeWarder is a sly one, I'll give him that.” He poured them both a cup of wine from the decanter.

“Duke HighStep was ever the slippery one, but usually he can see the writing on the wall. I will not believe that he would commit RangeWard to the side of a mageborn.”

“No, he did stop short of that. And he did set the rules by which his allegiance can be won. He told the wench that she could recruit from the RangeWard, and that if she showed that she was capable of taking the crown by winning a true battle he would swear to her. Then he sent that weaselly Prolgen to me to say that if she lost that battle, he would bend the knee to you. I told Prolgen to send the RangeWarder our thanks, and then suggested that if we ended up on opposite sides, I would not mind having a go at Prolgen myself. He left in a rush, telling me I'd never see the blade that killed me if I tried to harm him.” He grinned. “I believe that of him. I think that's what he really does for the RangeWarder, is take care of those bothersome people that refuse to fall in line.”

The King laughed. “Aye, I think you are right. And I'd like to have the little weasel working for me, except I'd never eat or sleep knowing that he was in one of my towers with some potion or powder...” The King's face lit in surprise. “Wait!” He yelled as he slapped his hand on the table so hard that wine sloshed over the side of the cups. “Did you say he told the wench?”

“That he did my King. In person. I tried everything I could think of to abduct her before the RangeWarder banished me. She's well guarded, by two of the KingsGuard and some FreeSword I've never seen before, but will know the next time I see him. Oh, and old Fallos is with them too.”

“Can we send troops to catch her on the road? A quick trip into Winegarden and back out with my bride?” Asked Franken.

Gared pursed his lips in thought. “I think not Franken. They were off the day I was, I'm sure of it. If we rode hard they would have seven or eight days head start on us. In that time they could be back to the Duke of Winegarden's Keep in Bearing. No, this time she surprised me, but next time I will know where she is going before she does.”

“I hope so. We need that woman. I can call myself King and I can sit upon the throne, but married to her I am King, and no Duke could argue the point. Start a watch for potential suitors too. Do not allow her to marry anyone. If you think a betrothal is imminent, let us dispatch with the suitor.” Franken said.

“As you wish. I do not have people in Winegarden, but I will see about getting some. It appears your future wife will be spending a lot of time there.”

“Do you know how many men she was able to rouse to her cause in RangeWard? With the Duke's quiet support I would bet some declared for her.” Franken asked.

Gared sighed. “We must speak of this FreeSword. He is a problem I hadn't counted upon. The Knights surprised me by being with her, and all of them by being in Rangeward, but if the FreeSword has sworn a contract with her, she will have an army in a month.”

“He is doing her recruiting? Then he must be sworn to someone. I wouldn't guess that a girl of seventeen summers would hire one of those rogues unless it was Fallos' idea. And I can't see him trusting a FreeSword. To him FreeSword and sellsword are the same word, even though the FreeSword Brotherhood has proven they can be trusted, sometimes even more than your friends.”

“Never the less, he is recruiting for her, and he swayed a good many of the WhipVine clan to her cause. She's got at least 250 heavy cavalry, maybe more. Add that to the foot and bow that Winegarden can field, and we've got a small problem. If she wins her first battle, there will be 10,000 screaming wanderers of the range facing us. That would be a large problem. I also think he might be the first of those suitors you talked about. The old man clearly doesn't like it, but the FreeSword has her confidence. What better way to end a FreeSword career than marrying a beautiful woman and settling down in a palace?”

“There you are dead wrong Gared. She may dally with him, and fancy herself in love with him, but Fallos and the KingsGuard won't allow him to get too close. They know why Queens get married, and they're not going to let her throw away a political tool over her heart. But if he concerns you and pleases her, by all means, let us remove him from the equation. It would be nice to get Fallos too, we both know that he was Dugal's brains and he's probably hers too. But use your best judgment.”

“Why do you let me run off and do whatever I like? Sometimes I feel as if you're giving me enough rope to hang myself.” Gared asked cocking his head.

“Because I am. Now don't make both our lives miserable by actually doing it. You have been my friend and brother since I was young. You were key in helping me take over my inheritance, and you introduced me to the Priest who has given me such sound advice. You are above suspicion unless you earn it. Everyone else I suspect unless they prove I don't need to. I am sorely short of friends these days, please do not abuse my trust.” Franken said flatly.

“I Never considered it. I just wanted to know how much I could get away with before one of those cages they were rolling into the Godsquare this morning became my home.” Gared said with a grin. “Tell me, do you wonder if ever you will relax and enjoy yourself again?” he asked suddenly.

“No. I know I will not. I have taken on the responsibility of rulership, and I will wear it until the day I die. You will, however. Help me win this war and you shall be Gared, Duke of Winegarden. That should give you enough incomes and wenches to keep you happy into old age.” The King smiled.

“Then I had best get to it my King! I have a life to live, and ballrooms to build! I must to war!” Gared laughed, sobering quickly. “I will be here until the end my King. Winegarden is the richest Duchy in Freeland Hold. Save it for someone less committed to our cause. Before this is done there are likely to be several open Duchies for you to dispose of, and perhaps one of them will catch my eye. I like EastGuard well enough, and I have a blood claim to it.”

“You truly are a fine man. Had I not already Knighted you, I would do so again.”

“Thank you Sire. But there is one more uncomfortable item we should speak of before I go, and it may take us into the afternoon. Shall I have your guard order lunch for us here?”

“If this is that important, then yes. We must be finished before mid afternoon though. I have to hold court at some point today, if for no other reason than to learn which two merchants are squabbling over my guard's money.” the King replied.

“Very well, let me tell Sir Etringa to bring up a meal. Light, I presume?” the Count asked.

“Yes indeed. You know me well. Some fruits, perhaps some sweetmeats. And that cheese you like so well. Have him bring a bottle of wine too. I feel I will need it.”

Count Gared stepped to the door and put his head outside. I wonder what occurred between him and this SellSword. The King mused. He has not been so hateful since that harper kissed his girl. The harper had been fine looking, dressed as if he was going to court, with long curly blonde hair tied back. All the girls had been silly over him. One night while playing for Farren's father, the harper had snuck a kiss from that girl... Paranna was her name. Gared had been seething. It took several jugs of ale and a lot of talking to calm his friend down. Little good it did the harper. A week after he left Keep Farren, they had found his body on the seashore. It appeared he had fallen off the cliff, but Franken had always wondered...

“Well, that's done.” Gared said as he returned to his seat. “Now on to this business.”

Gared actually looked concerned. "I have heard from our pets in Doornesbane." he said slowly.

"And it is not good news, or you would have come right out and said it. Well, out with it man, let us not spend the day playing cat and mouse." Franken snapped.

"Very well. The Duke is rather upset with your plans to wed, I hear. He intends to send an emissary with his written complaint. Our pets tell me that he believes you have broken the treaty." Gared replied.

"By Tasni's fiery skull!" Franken swore "I am not in the habit of asking permission to bed a wench."

"It is true that he is reacting more strongly than I had hoped, but we were vague about the powers of the Ducal Council when we recruited him. The Duke of ReedSwallow may feel much the same." Gared pointed out.

"You are right, but I have no intention of allowing them to grow the powers of the Ducal Council before I am even truly crowned. They need to be reminded that I will be their King."

"That is my thought also your highness. And the reason I felt we would need all afternoon to discuss this issue. It must be dealt with firmly but carefully. In one thing the Duke is correct. We cannot afford to lose him." Gared replied.

"Then we will not be here all afternoon my friend. The solution is simple. These Dukes are used to following the direction of their King as sheep follow shepherds. The root of the problem is that they do not yet see me as King. That is easily solved. I shall be coronated in two weeks. Invite them all to travel here in witness. Meanwhile, they need a lesson. When this emissary arrives, extract as much information from him about the Duke and his troops. When you have heard all that you are likely to find useful, cut his head off. Have it sealed in dill-weed, and send it back to the Duke." Franken replied.

"Sire, while that is a good idea for most Dukes, most of the time, at this time I must advise against it. We cannot afford to lose any of our allies, and the Duke may take such a missive amiss."

"Again you are wrong. Brendon Herring is the weak son of the Duke Herring of old. Since Brendon ascended to the Dukedom, Doornesbane has done nothing but complain to the King about incursions from our Northern neighbors. He will crumble like the head that we send back to him. With any luck, he will send a childhood friend or trusted retainer." Franken said as he reached for his wine cup.

"If my King is certain, it will be as he commands." Count Gerad said formally.

"That is one of the things that I like about you Gerad. You will argue honestly with me, but when I have made up my mind, you act. I could not ask for more loyalty." Franken smiled as he set down the empty wine cup. "Now, let us talk of better things, and eat our lunch in peace."

“As you wish, my King.” Count Gerad replied stiffly.

He still sounded as if he didn't like the idea, but Franken knew he would understand when Duke Herring of Doornesbane bent the knee. Some things only the great mind of a King could understand clearly.

Chapter 10

Mira pulled her blue woolen cloak more tightly about her shoulders, trying not to shiver. The air had grown colder in the past few weeks as the fall winds began to push away the warm summer air. She knew that Winegarden, like her home of KingsHome, seemed to move straight from summer to winter because both were situated on the Sea of Ramaal. The sea seemed to bear the cold winds of winter faster and though she'd spent her childhood in Freeland Hold she realized that it was the one thing she hadn't missed while she'd been away. Though most of the northern continent was much colder, she'd been on the Isle of Enlightenment and for some reason winter was definitely more mild there. She'd almost forgotten how cold it could get near the sea.

She glanced over her back and the wind blew her long dark hair into her face. She lifted a gloved hand and pushed it aside, trying to judge how long it would take for her army to reach her. She smiled grimly, seeing the sea of men stretched out behind her. Between the men who had come from KingsHome when they'd heard she was still alive and safe in Winegarden, Kieran had managed to convince almost the entire WhipVine clan from RangeWard to join her and they rode now behind her, the hooves of their horses sounding almost like the thunder of an early spring storm. Duke Ashendown had offered her several hundred of his bowmen which brought her numbers to over 1,000 men. Kieran and the knights were pleased with the number and had begun formulating battle plans before they had even left Bearing.

She wondered again absently if it had been a good idea to make it so known that they were headed into Seacliff to push the battle into enemy lands. She understood the need for the Duke of RangeWard to know when she had won a battle, but she wasn't sure she understood why it was necessary to force a confrontation when she was certain Franken would force one eventually anyway.

“Tell me again why this is necessary, Sir Eleric.” she called out to the knight riding beside her.

Eleric smiled patiently. “Your majesty, we will fare better in battle if we fight on the ground of our choosing. And we must insure a victory, to seal the Duke of RangeWard's allegiance.”

She nodded as though she understood why choosing a piece of ground would help them win, but did not ask Sir Eleric to explain. She frowned, certain that if she had been a male child that he father would have had instructors teach her these things.

Fallos pointed to the northeast. “There is a rather large valley a few leagues from here. There is a hill on the north end of the valley that is protected on the east by a high cliff and would give us the advantage with Ashendown's bowmen.”

Sir Harren nodded excitedly. “Yes, I agree. The bowmen on the cliffs, the foot soldiers to charge, the cavalry to flank them.”

Kieran disagreed. “No, not to charge. To hold the hill. The foot soldiers should not venture further than half way down. There is a great advantage when one has the high ground.” He paused for a moment. “The enemy must fight not only us, but the hill.” he quipped.

Mira was surprised when Fallos actually smiled at Kieran. “You have read Albiron Xavier Contraband's treatise on war, FreeSword?”

Kieran flashed a brilliant smile in his direction as they began to move ahead in the direction Fallos had pointed. “Are you surprised I can read, old man?”

Fallos shook his head. “No, but I am surprised that you would have read it. It's fairly old and while it's fascinating reading in terms of history, very few apply the First Knight's tactics on the battlefield these days.”

Kieran snorted, his contempt for anyone foolish enough to ignore one of the most brilliant strategists in history evident. “Those who do not take advantage of every resource in battle are fools. But let us be glad of such foolishness and hope that Franken has not read it as well.”

“I doubt he has, FreeSword. It is not a common book to find in Freeland Hold.” Sir Eleric said somberly. “He speaks of magik as a tool as well and that is something we find unacceptable.” He smiled feebly at Mira. “With exceptions, of course.”

“There are no exceptions on the battlefield, good Sir Eleric. I am well aware that there is no place for magik in Freeland hold.” Mira's voice was edged with bitterness.

“I did not mean-”

She waved him to silence. “It is no insult to me, Sir Eleric. I was raised here as well and hold the same view of magik as you. Some days it is difficult even to smile, for I know what I am, and it does not sit well with what I have been taught.”

Kieran looked away impatiently, rolling his eyes as a parent is wont to do when a child makes a ridiculous statement. Mira noticed the look, as she kept track of Kieran's whereabouts constantly and had spent long hours as they traveled simply staring at him, wishing she had more time with him privately. “You do not agree, Kieran?” she asked almost defiantly.

“As I said, those who do not take advantage of every resource in battle are fools.”

Sir Harren sputtered. “You cannot mean that! If you are so well read, you know of our history, of why no mageborn can rule, of why magik is forbidden.”

Kieran shot a look in his direction. “Really? If no mageborn can rule than why do you call Mira your Queen?” He turned and looked at Sir Eleric, whose face clearly showed he agreed with Sir Harren. “And why do you? And you, Fallos,” he called. “Why did you allow her to continue disguising herself with magik.”

When no one replied Kieran shook his head. “Do you know, Sir Eleric, that the constant companions of the Knights of Tide's Watch in Passrock, to the north, are wielders of magik? Even in battle?” He saw Eleric shudder at the thought.

“It is wrong.” Eleric replied hoarsely.

“Sir Eleric. You mentioned the battle of Hingley to me. When you and your sworn brothers stormed the keep of Count Quensy? You told me of your grievous wounds suffered taking the gate. An arrow in the shoulder, burned and blistered skin on face and hands from boiling oil poured upon you as you chopped down the outer gate, an ax wound to the leg when one of your soldiers slipped with the ax because he too was splattered with oil. And yet you fought again the next day you said. Wounded so grievously, you took up arms when the might of your armies was there to fight for you. And I saw your naked body outside of Duke Ashendown's capital. Where are the scars, Sir Knight?” Kieran pressed.

“It is true that I was healed in a night of mortal wounds, but that is not magik.” the knight replied haughtily. “That is a gift from Dirge, administered by his High Priest.”

“And the Nordalian Knights would say it is a gift of Nordal and the battle mages of Custos Antiquum would say they are gifted with magik from Nindel, god of magik.” Kieran countered.

“The people, Kieran, would not understand. They would reject Mira's rule for use her of magik. Most reject her rule simply because she can wield magik. Even if she never uses it, they will still fear it. If she uses it, they will rebel. Not just Dukes and their bannermen, but the people.” Fallos called back over his shoulder.

“The people have seen magik all their lives.” Kieran scoffed. “There are hedge wizards all across the land, Fallos. They perform tricks and entertain the people and no one is afraid of them.”

“I am not a hedge wizard, Kieran.” Mira told him, her voice hard. “I am capable of far worse than any hedge wizard and am not bound by a vow to my god like the knights. If Sir Eleric does harm he can be stripped and Dirge would not favor him any more. You cannot take away magik so easily.”

Sir Eleric nodded. “Her majesty has the right of it. She is not bound by any vow or oath and no order maintains her kind's integrity.”

“Enough of this!” Fallos ordered. “I understand that you have seen a great many things, FreeSword, but this is Freeland Hold and we have lived for a thousand years without magik and we will live for another thousand without. Stop trying to push this most detestable idea upon us. It is one thing to accept Mira as Queen provided she does not do harm with her magik. It is quite another to suggest that we destroy our beliefs simply to win in battle. It was the breaking of the FirstLaw that drove us to this in the first place.”

“I am simply-” Kieran began.

“Enough, FreeSword.” Fallos warned. “Your oath is to protect Mira, not fill her head with this nonsense.”

Mira nudged her mount toward Kieran until she was close enough to reach out and put a hand gently on his shoulder. “Not now, Kieran. We have too much to consider and it will only make things worse.” she pleaded.

Kieran smiled at her attempt to soothe him. “For you, Mira, I will let it lie.”

She returned his smile and urged her mount back to her place next to Sir Eleric.

“For now.” he whispered to himself, then spurred his horse forward to ride next to Fallos in silence.

Half an hour later, they came into sight of the hill and cliff that would form the base of their defense. The hill stretched half the width of the valley at one end, and it ended flat up against the cliff. There was only one reasonable avenue of attack, that was down the valley floor, with the cliff right above you all the way. Kieran pointed and spoke conversationally. “See the way the trees cover the top of that rise, then thicken going down the back side? It will shield us from mounted assault to the rear, but we will have to put guards in those woods.”

“Agreed again, FreeSword.” Fallos replied slowly, then pulled back on the reins of his horse to stop him. “I will try to explain this for you in practical terms, and then I will take up your conversation about the ground we are to defend.” Fallos turned to Kieran, a thoughtful look on his face. “If you could gain an advantage in battle, would you burn your soldiers' homes?”

Kieran looked confused, but he answered quickly. “Never. No single battle is worth demoralizing your troops.”

“Exactly. You do not put a thousand men into the field that have been told their whole life how dishonorable it is to use mageborn in battle, and then use a mageborn on their side. Such an action be akin to burning their homes, I would think”

Kieran considered his words for a long moment. “I think I understand, Fallos. It is just that wars are fought in the north with mageborn in the armies. The most powerful mages tend to cancel each other out, and hedge-wizards merely help the footsoldiers. It is rare that a mageborn alone wins a battle, but you would be a fool not to include one. I must remember that your enemy cannot field a mage any more than we can. He would lose his troops too.”

“Exactly! So we do not consider it.” Fallos beamed. “Now, about those woods, I agree that we should post men to ward against infiltration, but must have them at our back. The real question is what to do about yon village? It is far enough off to leave us clear sight of our enemies, yet close enough to harbor them before the battle.” he observed.

“Simple. Offer weal to those who support you and woe to those who support your foes.”

“Quoting Albiron Contraband again, FreeSword?”

Kieran shrugged. “Ashendown is sworn to the Queen and this is near enough his land we are no more than ten miles into Seacliff. We should clear the village before Franken's forces arrive, and then let them rest a night in the village. It does not harm us – it is not yet so cold that a night under the stars will injure our troops. My only real concern is if Franken's men choose to burn it. We will have to help the villagers rebuild. Without shelter they would not survive the winter.”

“Exactly as I see it. We will make a man worthy of Knighthood out of you yet, if not one of Dirge's fighting brothers.”

Kieran made a face. “Bah on the Holy Knights of Dirge. I like all of them that I know well enough, but their code is too pure for a boy who grew up poor and found The FreeSword Brotherhood as his only escape. As for being a Knight of the realm, I would not accept such an offer. I have a responsibility to the Queen that does not tolerate interference from rules that were made to keep Knight's pure. I must be willing and able to do what is necessary to fulfill my contract honorably.”

“Just so. Which is why I am against your flirtations with my Queen.” At the startled look on Kieran's face, he continued to explain. “You are an intelligent man, flush with knowledge of the world. Would you be more or less effective guarding her were she your wife?”

“You are pointed today, old man. Agreed and agreed. I cannot take her to wife while under contract. I cannot dishonor her under contract and I would not even if I could. And I cannot be a Knight under contract. Are we through?” he asked with a hint of bitterness. “Can we plan our defense of this little hillside now? A strong enough defense that when Franken throws the might of Seacliff against us we can stand?”

“Quite through. I needed to know that your honor applied to the Queen. You will hear no more from me unless I perceive you walking the edge of your contract. A little innocent flirting has taken her mind from some of the more weighty matters we are faced with and has done no lasting harm.” Fallos told him seriously. “Now let us entreat with Sir Eleric and Sir Harren. For they are Holy warriors of Dirge and as such are trained in tactics and combat as we are not.”

“Their counsel is welcome, but do not be too certain they are more learned in the arts of warfare than a FreeSword.”

Fallos motioned the Knights and the Queen over. Kieran noticed that the Queen still looked upset but he planned to heed all of Fallos' advice. Even the parts he did not like.

“We must plan a defense that can win, without knowing the size of the enemy.” Fallos stated flatly. “That is no mean task. Let us camp upon the hill, to better envisage our situation. In the comfort of a tent we can meet with the RangeWard captains this evening to plan for all-around defense.”

They turned to face the raised land. Even in the west, where the foothills of the Dwarvenforge sprang up from the plains of Freeland hold, this little rise of ground

would not qualify as a hill. But it was a rise, and Kieran had ideas on how to make it even tougher for Franken's troops to mount it. If only they had the time. They had no spies, and he hadn't yet suggested they find some. He was certain Fallos would become prickly over the idea. But without them, this battle could easily become a disaster. If Franken deduced that they would wait on this hill for his armies to come, they could be faced with the entire weight of many duchies. A hundred thousand men could swarm over this hill and with only one man to defend for every ten attackers, they could never hold.

It was therefore necessary to attract attention quickly. But if Franken could move a large number of troops up before their army was prepared, it could also go poorly. A mage would help us set up a defense in hours, not days. Kieran quickly quashed the thought. What good to wish for the one thing you couldn't have?

The camp went up quickly, but noisily. The RangeWard volunteers were self-organized, but loud of mouth and braggarts. Kieran was surprised when Sir Eleric joined in with their jesting, even took a drink of ale from one of their captains. When they were reasonably alone, he asked the Knight about his actions.

“Tomorrow, or tomorrow's tomorrow, these men will die. Not all of them, Dirge defend us, but many of them. It is the nature of war. Dirge in his wisdom sees this fact as truth, and does not bind us as some other Orders are bound. We are bid to enjoy the pleasure of our troops on their own terms before battle, and lead them fearlessly into battle when the celebrations are done. The Dirgian stronghold Intercess, in the west of Hillguard appears to be a collection of drunken sots for days before battle, but I have never fought with a finer force than the Lancers of Intercess. In the battle of Lost Mound, thirty seven Lancers stood against more than 200 heavy foot, surrounded and without food and few enough horses for two days before we could relieve them. Their first reaction upon rescue was to praise Dirge, and ask if we'd left any of Count Praeden the Rebel's men for them to hunt down.” he grinned. “I am an honorable man, but not a man pure enough to join an Order like the Knights of Nordal, or Tide's Watch, where it is all 'thees' and 'thous' and anything other than defending the weak is blasphemy. I like my ale before a fight, I like my wenches after a fight, and I don't mind gambling occasionally.”

“I'm liking your Order more than I ever thought to. Just half an hour ago I was telling Fallos your Order was too stuffy for me. I misjudged your Order and perhaps your god. I apologize.”

“No need for apology FreeSword.” The Knight's grin slackened. “I like you well enough, but still have no use for your bloody 'Brotherhood'. They are a gaggle of good warriors with no mission or goal in life. Their day-to-day concerns are for contracts, not the needs of the people or the betterment of their own Kingdom. They did not even fight when Grendelak usurped the throne of Corrigar.”

“No, we did not. We had no love of usurpers, but we had no love of the King either. So we decided to let the gods of war – your own Dirge, Tasni the Defiler, and Nordal the Just decide the issue. Since Grendelak Mishtar has assumed the throne, there has been peace and prosperity. The only unsettling thing about the man is that he has made it illegal – under pain of death – to wear the colors of Tasni in Corrigar.”

Sir Eleric's face broke into a huge smile. "Now that I can agree with. The Defiler is not a welcome sight to me and mine. I would love to trade blows with his bloody Knight of Fallen Timbers. The man has a reputation, but I think a few blows would adjust his ego."

"For the record, I have no love of the Defiler either. Having served in Radeal, with a count whose lands bordered the city-state of Tasnami, I found the worship of Tasni to be... distasteful." Kieran swallowed hard.

"Knights of Dirge are required to read first hand accounts of the practices of Tasni worship, such that we might defend all from his wrath. Trust me, I understand your feelings. But enough of this gloomy talk." Eleric slapped a friendly hand on Kieran's shoulder. "Come, let us find the Queen, and see when dinner will be served."

Dinner was simple fare, but fresh from the small farming village nearby, and a welcome relief from the plain fare that Duke Ashendown had sent with them. They had sent one of the RangeWard soldiers to warn the people away, and the village elders had pleaded with the man to move the camp away from their town. When he staunchly refused to listen to such talk, they had offered him some of their winter store, claiming they could not take it all with them, and better to feed the army that had warned them than the one they did not know. The village was small, Kieran estimated not more than twenty five or thirty adults with nearly as many children. But they had helped to load three wagon loads with food for the army. Another three wagons were loaded down for the trip to another village about twelve miles away. Kieran thought that the food should buy them entrance into the village, and with luck they would defeat a large enough contingent of SeaCliff's army that the battles would move beyond them.

Kieran looked up from one of the hillside's new stakes when the man came riding into camp, his horse lathered. Kieran recognized him immediately. It was Plengur, one of the scouts they had sent out. As he rode up the twisting trail they had left between the rows of stakes and pits, Kieran looked him over quickly. He looked worn out. Not injured, but it was obvious that he and the horse had ridden hard.

"Pack these tighter. We don't want a rain to drop the stakes into the pits." he told the sergeant. "I'm going to go see what news that rider brings." He turned and headed up the hill, snaking around the defenses.

He already knew what news the rider brought, the questions he wanted answers to were simply 'how many' and 'when'. They had been given almost two weeks to prepare. More than enough time to make the hillside look like a porcupine. They had cleared the few trees from the front of the hill, then harvested further back in the forest for more. In the end, the hill was as defensible as they were going to make it without building a fort. Fallos had positioned Sir Alden's horse in the clearing created by cutting trees for stakes. Nearly eight hundred heavy horse waited in that clearing for word of the attack. When the battle was fully joined, and the enemy sure that they outnumbered the defenders, Sir Alden of the Free Range Horse, as they now called themselves, would come riding around and take the enemy in the flank. Assuming the enemy had no scouts close enough to see the clearing.

The cliffs had been scouted and defenses prepared there also. There were twelve way

points along the top of the cliff made of small lean-to shelters containing arrows and sleeping arrangements for guards. The three easy paths up the hillside were guarded, and the one game trail they had found had been blocked off. Two hundred of Duke Ashendown's bowmen slept up there at night so that they would not be taken by surprise.

All is as ready as it can be, time to find out if it was enough. he thought as he ducked into the common tent, nodding at the guard.

“Kieran, there you are.” called Sir Eleric. “This man brings news from the scouts down near Gold Trench. We wanted you here to hear the news.”

Kieran looked around as his eyes adjusted to the gloom, and his hands adjusted to the warmth. Sir Alden was here, wearing the Queensbadge his men had made for him when he was elected general of the RangeWard host. He thought it odd that the soldiers chose the leaders. The only reason he hadn't forced Fallos and Mira to interfere was because they had chosen a trained and blooded battle commander. Sir Alden was husky, with inset eyes that were always circled in black. His gray-streaked black hair spoke of his age, but Kieran had seen him in practice. He won many a fight against three men, unhorsing at least one of them each time. Dunban Ilth, Captain of Duke Ashendown's archers was with him. Dunban was a tall thin man, with a large mustache. He said very little, but he could hit a target at nearly three hundred yards and his men followed his orders without question. Sir Eleric and Sir Harren both looked excited and relieved. That was to be expected. Such men did not sit waiting for the battle to come to them. They charged out and found a battle that needed fighting. This last fortnight had been horrible for Eleric, he knew. Had it not been for the work on fortifications that needed to be done, the man might have spent the week wine-sunk. Fallos looked cool as always, but smiled as he nodded at Kieran in welcome. Mira, on the other hand, looked horrible. While they all stayed busy making certain that they were prepared, she had spent her time attempting to stay distracted. She went out once a day, traveling to each camp so that the men could see the Queen they were fighting for, but the rest of the day she sat here waiting for the battle that would decide her future. And it showed in the deep-etched lines around her eyes. If Kieran was to choose who looked better, her or the sweat-soaked, dust covered scout that had just ridden in, he'd have to say the scout appeared to fare better because he would recover with a meal and a good night's rest.

“Well, I am here.” he said grimly. “Let us not delay the news, we cannot delay the battle.”

“Well said.” said Fallos. “Plengur, if your thirst is sated, would you begin?”

“Yes sir.” Plengur nodded and looked to the Queen. “Came upon us last night they did, my Queen. As soon as we had a count I was riding back here to report. The Duke Franken's personal banner waves amongst the others, my Queen. Along with the Duke Teldon's, and about ten Count's banners too. We counted near four thousand men, but only about three hundred horse, counting the Knights, the Duke, and Counts. Their scouts will be here by nightfall and, if they push, the main part of their force will be too.” he finished.

“Four thousand. That's more than I had hoped.” said Sir Eleric quietly.

“Yes, but less than he could have gathered if he'd taken the time.” Kieran replied.

“It is the number we must fight. With a small contingent of horse, the odds are not so pessimistic. We have all of the available high ground, we are dug in, and our heavy horse should be able to break any infantry attack they can mount.” Fallos said.

Kieran made a face. “True, but we're going to take heavy losses. I hate to send men to their deaths.”

“That is not a problem. You will not be. The Queen is asking them to hold this valley, not you. They will fight because they choose to, not because you ordered it.” Fallos said coldly.

Kieran really didn't have an official place with the armies. They had welcomed his counsel because he knew what he was talking about, but Fallos was right. He would be just one more sword, one more shield tomorrow. “That is not what I meant Fallos. I helped choose this place, and I designed the hill defenses. Franken's army will break itself on those defenses, I'm almost sure of it. But they are not enough to keep this host intact. I feel responsible to these men in that I have helped decide on a defense that will not shield them any better.”

“We have all done what we could. Talk of regrets is ill-fitting before the battle. We have set the stage, let us roll the dice.” Fallos told him pragmatically.

All of a sudden, Sir Eleric and Sir Harren spoke together in a droning voice.

“We go forth as you have bidden.
We go forth to be your sword.
We go forth to fight your battles.
Please strengthen us with your word.”

The room was silent for a moment, and Kieran realized that this must be some form of Dirgian prayer. If that's what it takes to win, so be it.

Fallos broke the silence. “May Dirge lower his shield over us in our time of peril. Now, let us plan in truth. Dunban, make certain your men are guarding all of the passes up the west face of the cliff. I would attempt to take that high ground in the night if I were their commander.” he turned to Plengur. “Did you see who was acting as battle commander? Was it the Duke?”

“We didn't see any battles, sir. But it looked like the Duke was letting a tall man in black plate-of-mail take the lead. He was the one that had the King's banner with him. There's another one with him, a bald one who dresses like a Priest of Tasni, but we don't know for sure.”

Kieran heard Sir Harren's sudden intake of breath. If they had a Priest of the Defiler with them, the battle would be that much more exacting. Tasnian priests were notoriously viscous, even to their own people, but they could rouse an army's blood lust to a fever pitch.

“If he enters the field of battle, he is mine.” Sir Eleric said, his tone indicating that he hear no arguments on the subject.

“Wait and see. For now we must finish our preparations.” Fallos replied. “A dead man is a dead no matter the hand that levels the death blow.’ Kieran, are your shield walls completed?”

“Yes. They are to be moved up this afternoon.” They weren't really his, but he did not correct the old man. He hadn't thought of the idea, he'd seen the Company of the River Fox use them to defend a hill in Corrigar. The idea was simple. If your archers were well enough protected, they did not need their shields. The shields could be tied to a framework so that they presented a slanted wall for the archers to hide behind when not firing. Enemy archers would have no targets except when they stood up to launch a volley. The forty or so archers staying on the hill would have three of them, each sixteen feet long to conceal themselves behind.

Fallos nodded and turned back to Dunban. “Do you have coals and torches for fire arrows? If they try to use wagons as shields, I want you to burn them.”

Dunban nodded. “Yes. We have discussed this and I have all in readiness. Do not worry for me and mine. Worry about those of you protecting the Queen.”

“Between you and Sir Alden, it is my hope that we will not have to do much but watch and pass battle signals.”

If it comes to armed combat on the hill proper, we are in trouble. Kieran mused. Twenty of Sir Alden's men had volunteered to give up their prized horses and act as bodyguard for the Queen, and there were the four of them, but if Franken's army gained the top of the hill, the cavalry and the archers would be practically useless.

He interrupted Fallos with his concern. “If the hill is breached, the cavalry will not be able to navigate the pit-and-stakes, and the archers dare not fire on the hill for fear of harming the Queen. Captain Dunban, if Duke Teldon makes the top of the hill, we will fight our way with the Queen to the archer's shields. When we are near them, we will sound three blasts on the warhorn. If you hear three blasts, turn your archers on the hill. Shoot everything you can see.” he said earnestly. “Sir Alden, if you hear the three blasts, you will regroup and attempt to force them back away from the hole in our defenses. That should stem the tide so that Alden's archers can clear us a path off the hill.”

“Everything FreeSword? And if one of my men sees the Queen?” he asked incredulously.

“If the battle goes so poorly that the Queen is forced out of the safety of the shield wall, we are lost anyway. If you shoot everything on the hilltop, perhaps she will live long enough for us to save her life. I would not even have her here, but since she is, we will have to take that risk.” he replied flatly.

Fallos was looking at him appraisingly. “What is it?” he snapped irritably. He noticed then that Dunban and Sir Alden were looking to Fallos and realized that he had been giving orders. Well, they could learn to deal with that. When it came to his

employer's safety, he would give orders and their pecking order be damned.

“Do as he says.” said Fallos slowly. “It is not something we care to think about, but he is right. If the enemy gets in amongst the first stakes and our archers cannot stop them, there will be trouble. I would that we had a hundred solid foot soldiers to go with this army.”

“As long as we are dealing with the issue of the Queen's safety, someone find her some armor. Chain, I think. I would prefer plate-of-mail, but if we have to move fast it would present a problem.” Kieran added.

“Agreed.” declared Fallos. “Sir Alden, if you would see to that? At least one of your men must have an extra suit small enough to fit her majesty.”

Alden nodded.

“That is it then.” Fallos continued. “Remember, one blast of the horn for archers to begin firing, two for the horse to ride them down and break their advance,” he hesitated just a little. “and three for the archers to turn their fire on this hilltop. Gentlemen, please see to your troops. Tomorrow will be a long day, so stop whatever they're doing this afternoon, and let them rest. With your leave, my Queen?”

The request seemed to draw Mira back from some distant place. “Of course, Castellan. But there is one more thing.” She stood and turned to face him. “You, I name general of my armies. You are already so in fact, so this is no more than my acknowledgment and personal thanks for your efforts. And Kieran, “ she turned to face the rest of the men. “I name Captain of my personal guard until the KingsGuard can be rebuilt. My personal safety is his responsibility. Again, I do little more than recognize what is already true. You are all brave men, please stay alive tomorrow, your Queen needs you.”

The men stood and each bowed as he left the tent. Kieran was not surprised by her decisions, but wondered if Eleric and Harren would ever take direct commands from him. When all but he and Fallos had left, he bowed deeply. “My Queen is too kind. I shall see to the defenses of this hill.” He left, torn by his new position. He was elated by her action because it forced the others to recognize him as her primary protection but he was also deeply troubled. There was great potential for trouble by naming him instead of one of her knights and he wasn't certain that in the end it would turn out to be the best decision for himself or Mira.

Plengur met him outside the tent and accompanied him as he examined the defenses yet again. Since the man was no longer needed as a scout, he had taken a position as a Queen's guard, asking Kieran only hours after he rode into camp if he could join them. Kieran had not been in the mind to turn anyone away, so here they were, watching their enemy set up his camp at the other end of the valley. Duke Franken's banner flew over the town, with Duke Teldon's, and the banner's of more than twenty counties spread out around the town in circles. The ones closer to the town had already erected tents, but the ones on the outside were only just arriving. The sun was going down, and fires were twinkling to life across the valley. Four thousand men took up a lot of space to camp, and would take a great deal of exertion, and men, to kill.

“Are you certain you saw all of the troops?” Kieran asked the man once again.

“That's all of the troops we saw all right, Captain. Not many of the followers or supply wagons though. Those will have to go all night to get here before the battle.”

“Go and get as close as you safely can, and try to find out what they're doing. I want to know if anything odd happens. Even if I am sleep, wake me immediately. Do you understand?” Kieran asked. He did not like the way this host had forced marched to get to the valley today. They must have some sort of plan, and since most of this army was from SeaCliff, they knew the land at least as well as he did.

“As the Capt'n wishes.” Plengur said as he turned to go.

The Capt'n wishes you would call him Kieran, and that we were not about to face an army four times our size. That is what the Capt'n wishes. Kieran thought caustically. Knowing that the morrow would be a long day, he headed for his bed to get what sleep he could.

It was several hours later when a light touch on Kieran's arm jerked him awake. He had slept, but not well. His dreams had been full of horrible images, like the cliff face falling on them in the battle.

Plengur looked pleased with himself. “The Captain wanted to be awaked if anything odd should be happening over at the SeaCliff camps.”

Kieran sat up and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. “That I did. What have you to report?”

“The priest has started a bonfire in the center of town. There's a woman tied up, and all the soldiers but a few sentries are headed towards the fire.”

“Do you have any idea what the priest is about?” asked Kieran with a sinking feeling that he already knew what the priest was about.

“None. I came back, soon as I knew what was happening.”

“Good enough. How close to them can you get me?”

“Close enough that you'll know the priest if you ever see him again. There's an old barn outside of town that has a fine loft. From there the fire lights the priest's face well enough to see.”

“This I need to see for myself. It could be trouble. Lead on.” Kieran stood and motioned for Plengur to guide the way.

“No doubt it's trouble, Captain. Just don't know what kind of trouble yet.” Plengur replied.

The two men crept out through the center of the valley, crouching down lower as they approached the enemy host. Plengur led him to the west, where he could see firelight

reflecting off of something large, probably the barn the man had mentioned. The shape took form as they got closer to it. It was a wreck. The only reason that Kieran could imagine it was still standing was the protection the hills and cliff provided from the wind. Plengur lead him, near-blind, to a ladder that went up into the creaky old loft. At the end of the loft was a hole where the hay door had once been, and it was to this hole that Plengur crawled. “The ones by the fire can't see us in the dark up here, but a lucky sentry might get a sight, so be careful Captain.” he whispered.

Kieran lay and looked at the fire. On the far side of it, a bald man with a goatee wearing flowing red and black robes was walking back and forth, stopping to talk with this soldier or that. Not to all of them, but as they pushed around the fire, Kieran noticed that he only would speak to specific ones and ignored the others.

Kieran could see a red-haired woman – not really a woman, just a girl younger than Mira – tied to a wagon completely naked behind the priest. A guard in the same red and black of the priest stood very close to her with a whip in his hand, watching her intently. Kieran could not be certain at this distance, but it did not look like the whip had been used on her pale skin yet.

After about ten minutes, most of the host was there. It staggered Kieran to see so many of his enemies in one place. They would not all fit upon the hill he was going to defend against them. They seemed to be everywhere, and he despaired of ever stopping them with Mira's small army.

The priest's booming voice snapped his mind away from his worries. It was unnatural to hear a man so clearly at this distance, he must be a hundred yards away. Plengur had been wrong. He would never recognize this man. All he could see was that the man was bald, wore a beard and was of medium height. Kieran noticed that a knight in black plate-of-mail armor now stood next to the priest.

“Men of the good King Franken” boomed the priest. “You have heard how this girl attempted to kill our battle general. You have heard how she used tricks and poisons to work her way ever closer to him. Now hear the rest.” Kieran had an odd feeling that the priest's voice was coming from inside his head, not outside it.

“This mageborn,” the word held all of the scorn of the ages in it. “did ensorcel the good knight's squire, in her attempt to get closer to our general. Squire Plinden of Thirdwatch has killed himself with his grief. That lays a fourth death at her feet. I have asked Tasni for guidance! I have asked what we should do! He has told me 'Take a lesson from this mageborn.' And so we shall. This wench is what others would have you bend the knee to. She consorts with demons, and used sorcery and poisons to stop us. Is this what you would have for a Queen?” the man's voice became nearly unbearably loud at that end.

The soldiers erupted. Their screams of “No!” and “Burn her!” were loud enough to carry to Kieran's hiding place in the loft, but very faintly.

The priest held up both hands, and the crowd quickly quieted. “I have a better use for a mageborn traitor than to burn her!” he boomed again. With that he turned to the woman tied to the wagon. “Do you deny that you are mageborn? That you were trained in the very place that Mira mageborn was trained? That you used powerful

spells and nefarious poisons to kill four men, and would have killed this fine Knight also?”

The woman did not answer, or if she did, Kieran could not hear her. He held his breath. Say something. Break the mood he's got them in or you're dead! He thought at her.

Finally, the priest turned back to the soldiers. “She does not deny it. But we will give her one last chance. I will attempt to punish her. I have told you before that Tasni will not take the innocent. Thus, if he saves her, then she has done nothing wrong.”

No one in the crowd around the priest moved, though some of the men further back craned their necks in their attempts to view firsthand the punishment that would be dealt to the woman. Kieran tried to shut the image of a Tasnian temple he had helped destroy years ago out of his head. The bodies of children, some mere babes, had been lying in a pit behind the altar. Sure he will not take the innocent. Mayhap you meant 'will not take anything but the innocent'?

And then the actions of the priest as the host had gathered suddenly made sense to Kieran. The ones the priest had picked out and spoken to early began to shout. Others took it up, and soon Kieran could make out the word. Tasni. It chilled him to the bone to hear them chant it over and over, the name growing louder as more men took up the simple mantra.

The priest waited until the chant had been picked up by most of the soldiers, and then turned to the wagon. “Oh Tasni!” His voice boomed clearly over the chanting. “Lord of the Dead! Stay my hand in what ever manner pleases you if this mageborn is innocent! If she is not, please take her as sacrifice! With your blessing, tomorrow we shall send you her Queen!” As the chanting broke up and was replaced by ragged cheering, Kieran felt bile in the back of his throat. He wanted to leave, he'd seen this part of a Tasnian ceremony before, but he forced himself to stay. To force himself to remember what this beast would do if he got his hands on Mira. Not that he would. Kieran would force her to use her magic to destroy the entire army before he'd allow her to be taken by this creature of the Defiler.

The priest retrieved a long curved dagger from his left sleeve. He slowly pushed it into the girl's stomach. Kieran could hear her screams over the soldiers cheers from here. The priest was in the way, so he couldn't see where the dagger entered her stomach but he didn't need to. It was on the lower left. And the cut would ever-so-slowly be extended straight up to the rib cage. And then across under the ribs, and back down to the lower right. The priest would be very careful to not harm any vital organs. Then the flap thus created would be peeled down, and her intestines would be allowed to fall out around her feet. If she was lucky, she would pass out by then. If not, he would start a cut down the center of her chest, straight down the breastbone, and then begin peeling the flesh off of her rib cage. Only if the soldiers cried for mercy would he actually kill her. Otherwise, he would leave her there to die slowly, her entire front open to the world.

Kieran gagged, and nearly vomited. “Let us go, scout. We have seen enough.” he whispered louder than he had intended.

“More than enough, I think.” The scout whispered hoarsely. “My wife has red hair and a slim body...” he sniffled. “That could have been my daughter if I had one.”

“That will be your Queen if we do not get back and recheck our defenses again.” Kieran whispered back, his voice tight.

The man may have nodded, it was too dark in the barn to tell. But he led the way back to the ladder and out.

And tomorrow, those men will be fighting all the fiercer because they believed this nonsense. Winning was no longer so important to Kieran. He just hoped that their defenses were enough to keep Mira alive.

Chapter 11

“They will come soon.” Sir Eleric observed. “And it will be bloody. More for them than for us though.”

“Indeed it will.” replied Fallos calmly as he surveyed Duke Teldon's battle lines. “I only hope we can settle this in a single day. That is a lot of men to kill in one day, and we will be tired come the morrow.”

“It will be one day, with a priest of Tasni amongst them.” Kieran told them. “Tasnians do not know patience once the battle is joined. Just like a spider, they will spin webs for years, but once you are caught in the web, they pounce.”

Sir Harren lifted the visor on his armor. “Aye! And all the better for us. Pity that the spider does not yet know what he has caught!”

They all laughed, but it was forced. Mira didn't join them, she just looked across the valley. “It is not so many my Queen. They fight the hill, they fight us, and they fight archers on the cliffs.” Kieran reassured her.

“And they fight Dirge. Sir Eleric added.

“Aye. And the Dented Shield will protect us this day. Dirge would not allow Franken to take the throne with a Tasnian priest at his side.” added Sir Harren solemnly.

That seemed odd to Kieran. How could they know what Dirge would and would not do. In his experience, the gods, when they bothered to intervene, were fickle at best. He had ridden to battle in the Kingdom of Radeal with fifteen screaming Nordalian Knights in the army with him. They fought bravely, seeming to be everywhere that there was a weakness in the lines at once. Kieran had come home alive, not one of the knights had. He and the Count that his contract was to protect were the only leaders of that small army to survive. The Count paid homage to Nordal like most Radealians did – because it was expected, not because the man believed. If Nordal took a hand in that battle, it was to protect the only two people who did not fight in his name.

He dragged his thoughts back to the matter at hand. “How many did Dunban lose

last night?"

"Only one." Fallos replied. "They weren't really expecting to have to take the cliff. They sent a scouting party up to see how well it was manned. Captain Dunban's men threw the bodies off the cliff towards their camps so they would have their answer. Fifteen of Duke Teldon's men went up the back side, all are dead, pierced by arrows before they could get their swords into action. One of Dunban's men lost his footing in the dark and fell from the cliff."

"Fifteen to one? We should be so lucky today." Kieran replied.

"Look, they're moving!" Mira cried.

"And so it begins." Fallos said grimly. "Kieran, get that hornsmen over here. I want Sir Alden to cut this first wave down before they get within bow shot."

Kieran turned and nodded to his scout. The man loped off towards the common tent.

"Nindel misguide their feet and Dirge shield us." Mira muttered. Kieran wondered how these Knights of Dirge the Protector would learn to follow a Queen who followed both Dirge and Nindel, god of mageborn and tricksters.

"I will take all the help I can get." said Fallos, as if answering Kieran's thoughts.

"They're almost halfway across..." Kieran started.

"I want them out of bowshot from their camp too. No sense sending Alden into firing range." Fallos interrupted staring intently onto the field.

About half of Franken's army was advancing, formed up into five even squares, each with two mounted men in front of them. Kieran noticed that they gave the cliff face as wide a berth as the valley allowed, but two of the units were still within bowshot of the cliff. The other half was formed up, but not moving to join the battle. That is a lot of reserves. thought Kieran. Hopefully he'll need them.

"This is a feint." announced Sir Harren. "Neither Franken's banner nor Duke Teldon's banner is amongst the troops. We are being attacked by Counts' men."

"Of a certainty." Fallos replied without turning around. "It is to test our defenses. I want them to grow cautious, hence the desire to have Sir Alden destroy them before they get anywhere near the hill. Another minute and you can have the hornsmen blow for the horse, Kieran."

Kieran forced himself to count to sixty slowly, using the 'one FreeSword, two FreeSwords' count that he had been taught when he first joined the Brotherhood. "Now, Fallos?" he asked.

"Yes, now should be about perfect. Have him blow horse, then wait a few seconds and have him blow archers. The archers on the cliffs above them should get off a couple of flights before the horse descend upon them. With any luck, the archers will force them behind their shields and they won't notice Sir Alden until they feel his

horse's hooves rattling their helms. I never thought much of Count Gerhard of Perril Keep. That is him leading them with his standard-bearer, some hedge-knight. But those are not his troops, I think.”

Kieran nodded at the young man designated as the hornsman. “Two for the horse.” he said. The boy lifted the horn to his mouth and let out two long, low blasts. Kieran couldn't hear anything and the horse would not be in sight for a minute or more, but he could picture four hundred men in riding plate lowering lances and moving their destriers out at a canter.

He waited to make sure that the next blast didn't sound like a third, causing a rain of arrows to come down upon them. Then after more than half a minute said “One for archers.” And the hornsman blew one more long low note.

This part he could watch. He dismissed the hornsman with a wave and turned to see how Dunban's archers fared. The sky above the cliff filled with arrows that arched up, and then curved and ended up coming straight down. Kieran had been in a formation that was hit by archers from above, and did not envy the men in the formation closest to the cliff.

The formation staggered. Then it resumed its slow pace, but there were bodies on the ground. Another flight of arrows went up, and arched down to rain death amongst them. Kieran noticed a single arrow fly straight from the cliff towards the men on the ground. As it streaked across the sky, he decided that it must be from Dunbar or one of his Lieutenants. Most archers wouldn't risk a direct shot at that distance against a moving target.

The arrow hit one of the mounted men in front of the unit somewhere near where the neck joined the chest. Kieran held his breath, and watched as Count Gerhard slowly slumped in his saddle, then started to slide to the side. His standard-bearer seated the standard, and grabbed for the Count just in time to keep him from falling off his horse. The square fell apart then. First one man threw down his weapon and ran, then another followed, and finally the whole square, leaderless, turned and ran. Too bad more didn't throw down their weapons. Those must be green recruits. Kieran thought.

A ragged cheer wafted down from the cliff top.

“Argghh. You win again. You shall have to wait for your forty gold though.” Sir Harren said to Sir Eleric with a smile. “How could you know that they'd break, or that there were so many green men amongst them. By the time they are back to Duke Teldon's lines, only half of them will be able to fight and still possess the weapons to do so.”

“I knew they would break if their commander died – most troops do. So I offered Captain Dunbar a ten gold bet that he couldn't make that shot – and told him to keep it fair he could try as many times as he needed. Then I asked the scouts to assess the troops, and they figured one in five was unblooded, maybe as many as one in three.” he grinned widely. “And so, I formulated our little bet. The commander will die, and they will not make it back with more than three in four of their force armed and unwounded. Looking at how easy that shot seemed to have been for him, I should

have offered Dunban double that for the next unit's commander.”

“Your impulsive gambling has paid off, Sir Eleric. Without engaging our horse, one in five men in this first wave is out of the fight. Now if the archers can break up the second unit, the horse should be able to turn three times their number of foot.” Sir Fallos said.

At that, the horsemen came roaring into view. The archers started to rain arrows down on the the second unit, while the horsemen bore down on the one furthest from the cliff. Suddenly Kieran realized something horrible. “Fallos, there are not as many horsemen as there should be. Where are the rest of them?.” he asked worriedly. They had eight hundred horse, and there were only about three or four hundred coming across the field.

“I don't know. That is only about half of them. What is Sir Alden up to?” Fallos replied, irritated.

“I think I know.” Sir Harren muttered. “Look at Teldon's lines. His horse are gathering. With roughly even odds, he's looking to challenge our horse here and now. Sir Alden appears to be drawing him out.”

Kieran noted that the second unit had broken and run under the weight of the arrows raining down on them, leaving their commander to decide if he would continue with just his standard bearer, or turn and run also. He chose to run.

He pulled his attention to Duke Teldon's lines, and there they were. Coming out from behind the town at a full gallop were all of the horse that the Duke could muster. Some 300 horsemen ranging from sell-swords to knights in riding armor. The Duke's banner and Franken's were among the swirl of cloth that rippled with them as they rode.

“Alden better have those men close by. He cannot win this without them, and most of the fighting will be out of the range of the archers on the cliff.” Kieran noted.

Sir Alden's horse turned just before smashing into the outermost unit of Teldon's infantry and streamed past them heading towards the banner of Duke Teldon.

“No. He will be within bowshot of their lines soon, and trapped between the soldiers coming here and their camp!” shouted Kieran.

As if he commanded it, four high-pitched horn blasts came from the other camp. The three remaining commanders turned and trotted to the back of their units. At shouted commands, the soldiers turned and headed back, spreading out as they marched and attempting to close off Alden's route back to them.

Kieran's attention was pulled to the cliff when an archer pitched forward, falling end over end, his bow falling after him.

“Your majesty! There's fighting on the cliff!” shouted the hornsman.

“She can see that you dolt.” Fallos said angrily.

And there was. The archers were turning around to ward off whatever was behind them. Many were falling with arrows in them, but many more were shooting at something Kieran could not see from the ground.

“It was no test. He knew what our defenses were, and he moved to eliminate our only strengths. So what if he loses two men to our one on that cliff? All he need do is take it and the battle is all but done.” Kieran said bitterly. “That fool Alden has ridden half our horse into a trap, and the other half are missing. Franken's general has lost a few raw recruits and we may lose our lives.”

They watched the ongoing struggle helplessly. The archers were not done – they could still see many fighting at the edge of the cliff – but neither were they going to be available if needed.

Alden crashed into the Duke's horse mercilessly. Kieran had ridden into battle before, but this was more like taking the entire battle to the enemy on horseback. At this distance they heard the crash of the two mounted groups as they came together.

“If Alden stays in amongst them, Teldon's archers will not fire at them. No commander will order his troops to shoot at their Duke.” Fallos noted.

“If he stays in amongst them, the infantry will be there in a few minutes and this war is finished.” replied Kieran. He had no doubt that if they lost today, even if they escaped, they would not get a second chance. He cursed himself for a fool. He should have thought of the attack on the cliff. It was such an obvious idea that he would have tried it. Send a few hundred good men up there. If none of them came back, then the archers were weakened, if they took the cliff, the battle was won.

Two long, high blasts came from the other side of the field. “Now that we're defenseless, here they come.” Sir Eleric declared, shutting the visor on his helm with an audible click.

They were. Three entire units, almost four hundred men in each, were marching slowly towards them while the rest were turning to close the circle forming around Sir Alden. “Now we defend your Queen.” Kieran said quietly. They were going to die here. He could hope that terrain and skill could win a battle of four-to-one odds, but there was no hope for less than a hundred men against twelve hundred. Unless they fled. “Mira. I will ask you this once because I do not see any other way to fulfill my contract. Let us run. All of us. We can take to horse, and the Duke's horse will be too weary to catch us.” he said.

“Never.” grumbled Sir Eleric. “You run, FreeSword. I see my priest in the third unit from the cliff, coming to learn about Dirge. I intend to be here when he arrives to give him that lesson.”

“Nor I.” said Sir Harren simply. “I too am a Knight of Dirge. I will gladly fall here if I can reach a Count or two first. These soldiers are surely not all evil, but their leaders must be stopped.”

“I am too old to continue running FreeSword.” added Fallos. “You take the Queen to

safety. Amorice, I think. We will slow them down.”

Kieran knew, as did these men, that Mira would not leave them here to die in her stead. “Then I invoke that promise, Mira.”

Fallos looked at him sharply. “And just what promise is that, Kieran?”

“She promised me that if it came to this, she would do whatever was necessary to protect herself. Unless she wishes to order you all off the field, I want her to fulfill that promise.” Kieran replied.

“Then you take her over the Dwarvenforge to Amorice. If she survives this battle by magik, there are none in this kingdom that will want her here.” Fallos looked at him coldly.

“Stop arguing about me and look!” demanded Mira, exasperated with them all. “There's something going on at the back of their formation.”

Sure enough, the unit closest to the cliff was faltering. Their commander was shouting and waving his sword. The men were turning and... The rest of Sir Alden's cavalry burst through them like they were nothing more than paper dolls. Men were diving for cover in an open valley, horses were trampling men under their hooves. Some horses were going down, but more were staying up. And the unit was in tatters. Kieran imagined he could hear their screams from here. A big Rangewarder burst through the rank of men closest to them, charged ahead, and attacked the Count at the front of the unit. The fight lasted only seconds. Where the Count's blows fell, the Rangewarder was not. On the fourth swing, the Count overextended. The Rangewarder spurred his horse forward, and cleaved the Count's head off. As the Count's head was spinning through the air, his standard bearer shoved the lance that bore the standard into the rangewarder's horse's throat, right where the barding curved to meet the horse's head. Horse and rider went down in a spray of blood, the horse flailing his hooves. The horse blocked their view of the rangewarder, but they did not see him get up as the standard bearer turned and rode back toward the remainder of his unit.

Kieran turned to his guards. “We may see dawn yet. Quickly, get the archers out from behind one of those shield-walls, and haul it up here. Then when Teldon's men get here – and some of them will, I'm certain of it – we will not have to fight through them to get to a shield wall. Remind the archers to hide if they hear three blasts of the horn. Their brothers on the cliff, if any live, might shoot them otherwise.” The elected leader of the guard nodded and they headed down the slope.

Kieran turned back to see that the standard bearer had little impact on the battle his unit was in. They were fleeing from the field, and the rangewarders were already forming up to charge the second unit. The units were not yet halfway across the field.

“The Duke's banner has fallen!” Fallos shouted. “Sir Alden is winning!”

“Not by enough to help us in this life, old man.” Kieran replied. “Those troops will be here soon, and he will not be able to help us once they get past the stakes. A few hundred more swords does not help if they are unmounted.”

Fallos said nothing, just continued to watch the battle evolve.

The rangewarders by the cliff were formed up again, some hundred or hundred and fifty of them still ahorse. They charged straight for the next unit.

“I will give them this. When they finally got here, they fought like devils.” Sir Eleric said admiringly.

“Aye.” Kieran agreed. “And hopefully we will be able to take some of them home to the Rangewarder.”

They crashed into the second unit, and this time they were close enough that Kieran could hear the screams and the crash. This unit was not taken from behind though. They could not hope to win against a third of their number on armored horses, but prepared, they could make a stand. And they did. These were not new recruits, that was clear. They stood their ground as the horses plowed into them, the first two rows letting themselves be run over, and then slashing up at the unprotected bellies of the horses while their friends in the third and fourth rows fought the men riding the horses.

While it earned Kieran's respect, it did them little good. They took more of the rangewarders with them, but in the end they broke too. Their Count was down before the first footsoldier had fallen. A rangewarder had ridden him down as he attempted to flee to safety behind his men.

And the remaining unit just kept coming, slowly marching towards the hill. The priest at the lead with the standard bearer and whatever Count was their commander.

Kieran shouted down the hill. “Archers! Prepare for battle!” He did not think they needed to be told that soon four hundred men would be on top of them, but he wanted them to know that they were not alone facing this horde.

“Do not kill the priest of Tasni. He is mine.” shouted Sir Eleric.

“Dead is dead, man.” Kieran said, exasperated. “Mayhap if an archer drops that vile creature the others will grow brains and run.”

“No archer. I want those men to see the power of Dirge strike down that Tasnian snake. I want them to think twice about their souls.” Eleric rumbled.

“As you wish. But remember that your duty is here.” Kieran replied.

“No FreeSword, your duty is here. My duty rides towards us with a bald head. You protect the Queen from physical harm, I will protect her from spiritual harm. May Dirge lend me his shield.” Eleric said, never taking his eyes off the approaching soldiers.

Kieran heard the archer Captain call out, “Well boys, that's close enough. Let's see if they like feathers.”

As one the archers pulled arrows from the ground in front of them, knocked them and drew back. “Steady now.” Their captain said. “Ready... Loose!” And 40 arrows flew into the air, arcing slowly down onto the advancing unit. Men dropped, but others got their small shields up in time. Kieran could see that this unit had leather jerkins, shields, and short swords. The second row, and one row towards the back had spears.

The priest turned and shouted, then turned back and kicked his horse. The whole unit, suddenly looking more like a mob, gave a wild scream and ran forward.

“Take your time men, start picking targets.” said the captain from WineGarden. “We’ve got two maybe three more shots before they’re too close. Ready... Loose!”

Most of the front line went down, but they were spreading out. There was no longer a formation, just a ragged mob rushing at them.

Eleric drew his sword with a metallic hiss. Harren and Kieran followed suit. Fallos drew both of his – short curved swords like the Desert Riders of Kantor Doorne used. Kieran had never seen them outside their scabbards before, but they shined in the light like they were not real metal. Triotonian blades? he thought. He had never seen a Trioton-wrought blade south of the Continental Egress, let alone ones made in the fashion of a people who devoutly refused to go north of the Egress. Yes indeed, he would have to ask Fallos about those blades if they both survived.

“Ready... Loose!” he heard the captain say again. And again a large number of arrows found their mark. These men were not even trying to protect themselves. Their protection was speed. If they got close quickly, the archers would be useless. At this distance surely they could tell that the hilltop was nearly empty of soldiers.

Triotonian blades? he thought again. Forged in the kingdom of Trioton before the first Triotonic War, they were lighter and sharper than most blades, and nearly indestructible. But the secret to making them had been lost between the first and second Triotonic Wars. Some said mageborn helped to make them...

“Ready... Loose!” once again the arrows arced across the sky. The enemy was so close nearly all of them found their mark. And it was not enough. A hundred or so were killed by arrows, but nearly three hundred were still coming. And they were nearly at the first row of stakes. Kieran looked to the rear, and saw Sir Alden's banner waving amongst the infantry that had tried to trap him. Dirge guard your shields, and Kunard's forge burn in your hearts. He thought. They might make it out, but they would be no help to him. He looked up to the cliff. The archers were facing back his way. One of them waved at him. Good enough. We may all die, but they're all dying too.

The priest and his two companions were at the first row of stakes and had dismounted. Their soldiers were not far behind them. “Come, priest. This time it is you entering my lair.” muttered Eleric in a fevered voice. Kieran glanced at him, and the man seemed to be glowing. The sunlight reflecting off his helm seemed unnatural, almost like the helm was amplifying it. He noticed Kieran's look.

“I go to do my duty now FreeSword. See that you do yours.” He growled as he

strode down the hill, Sir Harren following behind him.

“May Dirge guard your shield.” Kieran called out.

“Dirge is my shield.” Eleric responded without slowing.

The Groveshold captain's voice rang out over the din. “One more time then it's swords! Ready... Loose!” Another forty arrows found another group of men. It still was not enough.

They came screaming. Some of them screaming phrases, but most were just screaming. They hit the stakes in teams. One would go around each side of the pit, and the two would push one stake forward over it. A third would catch the stake as it fell, and seat it so that it was a bridge over the pit. The archers should have been farther back. We could be having a time of it right now. Kieran thought.

He turned to the old man. “Good luck Fallos. Dirge protect you.”

“And may whomever you pray to be with you also. Now get her out of here.”

“No.” Mira said. “You are all fighting and dying for me. I will live or die with you. Concentrate on fighting, and I will concentrate on staying alive.” She looked meaningfully at Kieran.

“Good enough.” Kieran told her. He turned to Fallos. “I do not favor any of the gods sir. I pray to each in his own time. Right now I feel Dirgian. Shall we help the archers hold the wall?”

“I shall. You are contracted to the Queen. Do not forget it so easily.” Fallos strode off. “And Dirge be your shield, if that's how you feel today.”

The soldiers hit the shield wall and swarmed around it. There were enough of them that Kieran couldn't see a single archer. And they were coming for Mira. “Guard! Form up around the Queen. Let no one through. This is why we live! Protect her!” he yelled as he braced for the onslaught.

And then they were on him, and all sense left him except the enemies to his front, and the square of men around his love. His contract. He corrected himself. Not love.

A man swung a short sword at him, and he dodged left. Another man bumped the first, upsetting his balance in mid swing, and Kieran took the first one's sword hand clean off. Warm blood washed across Kieran's face as the man went down screaming and flailing his arm. Lucky that blood missed my eyes or I'd be dead. Less bloody deaths for the rest of them then. he thought as he parried a stroke from the second man.

A third man appeared, and then a fourth. He fought hard, but stood no chance alone against four. He was pushed back until his back came in range of the square. The men in his Queen's guard adjusted to take him in, one stepping back to guard the Queen in case any soldiers broke through. He barely noticed. He did notice that he only had one opponent again for the time being. A sandy-haired man not much more

than a boy. But nearly as good with that short sword as Kieran was with his castle sword. Kieran had a reach on him, but the boy knew he couldn't use it in a formation. So he chopped and hacked, looking to cut Kieran anywhere that would slow him down. He got a shot through to Kieran's left leg, and pain blossomed. It did not feel mortal, but it hurt. Kieran became enraged, and launched a frenzied flurry of swings that took him briefly out of the square. He battered the boy's short sword down, then swung around past his shield and caught his throat. There was a gurgled scream and the boy went down.

Kieran quickly stepped back into the square. They were surrounded. This was going to go poorly. He hoped Sir Eleric and Sir Harren were faring better.

This man was an older man, with the look of a hired sword about him. Definitely not military, he was unkempt and had no uniform. Behind him a spearman was trying to get his spear around and into play. Oh no, I cannot allow that. He can reach right into the square and strike at Mira. Kieran thought. He shouted to the man next to him "I'm leaving the square! Hold my spot!" Without waiting for an answer he sprang forward. His wounded leg nearly buckled when he put his weight on it Bloody damn he thought. A wild swipe from a third man caught his left arm as he threw himself into his opponent's shield, knocking his opponent and the spearman reeling back away from the square. Without trying to regain his balance he twisted and brought his sword up to fend off the follow-up stroke that he knew his assailant would send his way. He was satisfied when he felt the shiver of another sword contacting his go up his arm, and he deflected the blow with a flick of his wrist. Then he drove in under the man's shield to take him in the thigh. Not very honorable, but effective. He thought. And I am a dead man. I'm twice wounded and nearly surrounded by enemies. I have to take that spearman with me or Mira is dead. He did not allow himself to consider the chance that other spearmen still lived.

Regaining his balance, he saw that the square was attempting to move towards him. No. Stand your ground. he thought, but his throat was too dry to shout to them. There were growing gaps in the square. He didn't know how many, but some of his guards were down. He hacked savagely at the sell-sword, knocking his sword aside and cutting through the leather protecting his sword arm in one swing. The man's sword fell from his grip, and Kieran pushed him as hard as he could into the spear wielder. Then he climbed over the sell-sword, using him as a shield until he could get close enough to the man with the spear. He struck wildly at the spearman's throat. The sell-sword was struggling, trying to get Kieran off of him, and a wild swing was his only choice. Kieran hit the spearman's cheek, and the left side of his enemy's face nearly exploded. Swords started to lick at him from three sides. Tangled with the sell-sword, he could not fight back. He felt a rib break as someone smashed his armor into it. Someone, probably the sell-sword, was trying to wrench his helmet off. He felt another pain in his wounded leg as he tried to disentangle himself from the sell-sword.

Suddenly they were breaking. They stopped trying to kill him and instead were trying to get away. He could not hope to survive this. He felt boots and knees as men moved all around him, jostling him and tearing at his open wounds. He realized he was unarmed, though he couldn't recall how or when he'd lost his sword. He managed to reach down and pull his dagger from his belt and stuck the fool who continued to wrench at his helmet in the stomach. As the man's hands went to his belly, he looked

unbelievably at Kieran. “You should have left well enough alone when I wounded you.” Kieran rasped as he twisted the dagger.

The man fell into him and grabbed his shoulders. Kieran could not keep his feet any longer, and the man's weight pulled him to the ground. He hit the ground hard, pain exploding from his wounds. He tried to raise his head to see if Mira still lived but the world went black before he could find her.

“He revives, your majesty.” said a distant voice. Kieran hurt. He hurt like he had been in a battle and lost. As the words sunk in he came fully awake with a start. If the man had said 'your majesty', then either Duke Franken had suddenly appeared on the battlefield, or they had won. He opened his eyes to see two beautiful blue eyes staring back at him, framed by lovely raven-black hair. The eyes showed deep concern, and more. They seemed to echo what he felt. “I was worried about you Kieran.” she said softly, tears welling up in her eyes.

“W-Water.” he rasped in response. Someone handed her a flask.

“I'm sorry, open your mouth.” she told him. He did, and sweet, cool water poured in. He managed to swallow it without choking, but just barely.

“Mira. What happened?” he asked her.

“I didn't see it at all, but they say that Dirge truly was Eleric's shield. He glowed and flowed across the battlefield chasing the priest and his knight. Eventually he caught them. When he killed the priest there was a large thunderclap, and they started to turn. I heard that part.” she explained. Her face grew stern. “You are a fool Kieran Chace. A bloody cow-brained fool. What decent protector jumps into a crowd of twenty armed men, kills three, and then allows himself to be beaten down?” she finished haughtily.

“I saw a spearman. Spears can reach beyond a square, and we were too few. If I died, at least it would have saved you.” he replied, but the reason sounded lame to even him now.

“You nearly were dead. Two cuts to your left leg, a broken rib, and a broken left arm. I hope it was worth it.”

“It kept you alive until Sir Eleric could do his duty. That is all it needed to do. I am grateful there was not more. Those are all minor injuries if they do not fester.” he replied as nonchalantly as possible.

“They will not fester.” Sir Eleric said as he strode up. “I have been saving one last bit of Dirge's grace. I believe he wanted you to see his power too, but you were indisposed, so he allowed me to hold onto this bit until you were awake.” He laid his hands on Kieran's leg. “Careful now, don't move.”

Kieran felt a queer warm feeling in his leg. It seeped out from Eleric's hands and into his flesh. Then his cuts started itching. He held perfectly still. He did not know what Eleric was about, but he had heard stories, and wounds only itched if they were infected or healing. He did not smell infection, and did not feel a fever.

Then Eleric, looking somehow diminished, placed his hands over Kieran's ribs on the right side of his body. The same warm feeling ebbed out from Eleric's hands, and Kieran felt a stab of pain as something inside shifted. Finally, a weary looking Eleric placed his hands upon Kieran's arm, just below the elbow. Again the warmth spread from the hand's touch, and again there was a stab of pain as something ground together. And then the pain was gone.

Eleric swayed, and Mira caught his arm. "It has been a very long day for you Sir Knight. Pray take to your bed and rest."

Eleric looked down at Kieran. "Well, FreeSword, do you still think so little of my Order?" he asked weakly.

"I – I do not know what to say, sir. That was truly miraculous. I am healed as if I were not even wounded. I have heard stories, but never seen firsthand... How did you do that?"

"I did nothing, FreeSword. That was Dirge using my hands. He used me to heal you. Without faithful, the gods are nothing. With us, they are more powerful than you can imagine. Think on that." He staggered over to a pile of cloaks with the silver mace of SeaCliff sewn onto them, and collapsed. Within minutes he was snoring.

Kieran needed time to think. He needed to consider Eleric but more importantly, he needed to consider his actions. He'd never done something so rash and unthinking before in a battle and needed to sort out the reason. Or at least come to grips with what he believed was the reason. He looked tiredly at Mira. "Though I am pleased that you are well, I, too, am tired. Tell me that Sir Harren and Fallos are okay, before I rest."

"Sir Harren took a cut to the thigh capturing the general of the army after Sir Eleric dispatched the priest, Fallos was stabbed three times, but all the injuries were minor. They were both healed as you were. I did not know Eleric planned to do the same for you. Most of both armies see him as a hero, like in the stories. They have rallied around him, and nearly all of the survivors now swear fealty to me." she replied quietly.

She looked sad, and Kieran was certain there was something she wasn't telling him. But right now he needed to be alone with his thoughts. He could not believe that they had been victorious, but more importantly at the moment, he could not believe that he really was falling in love with this woman. But nothing else seemed to explain his irrational behavior or the way he felt when he saw she was alive. "Thank you. I will be up in a few hours, thanks to him, and will begin helping set things straight." he said.

"Rest well, my hero." she said warmly, then reached out and laid a hand gently on his for a moment before she rose and went in search of Fallos. Kieran looked away and winced. He didn't feel like a hero, he felt like a piebald fool.

Chapter 12

When Kieran finally rose he went off in search of Mira. He had seen that something was troubling her, but he wasn't certain what. It was no surprise that she had gone off alone. He was not surprised, but he was concerned. Though they had won the battle it was hardly safe for the Queen to wander off unescorted. The fighting had been over for less than a day and he couldn't be certain there were no stragglers left lurking about. He walked through the camp nonchalantly, his casual walk belying the seriousness of his search. As he was making his last circle of the camp on its outer edge he spotted her and veered off in her direction.

She was sitting well into the woods with her legs crossed under her and her chin resting on a closed fist, her elbow balanced on her leg. Her other hand was preoccupied with picking listlessly at a few blades of grass that had somehow managed to grow in the shade of the thick canopy. Her hair was pulled back and in a bun like an old maid. Kieran circled around the nearest tree and crept up behind her silently and then stood, watching her. She sits like a child who has recently been chastised and has run off to pout alone. he thought. He watched for some time before he stepped around the side of the tree and leaned his back against its trunk, crossing one ankle over the other. "Were you picking the grass for dinner or has it annoyed you in some way?" he asked lightly.

Mira sighed and stopped picking at the grass, but did not answer. She placed her hand in her lap and instead fidgeted with her dress.

"You are still bothered by the fighting."

"Not the fighting." she replied earnestly. "The dying."

Kieran was a bit surprised that he had figured out what was bothering her so quickly. "They do go hand in hand, Mira."

She slowly lifted angry eyes to look up at him. "You have no feelings, Kieran." she told him icily.

Kieran was taken aback by her response. If she only knew. Kieran had spent most of the time he was resting in deep thought. He had acted irrationally on the field of battle and he knew why, but he was not prepared to admit that to her right now. He was barely able to admit it to himself. He closed his eyes wearily and crouched down next to her, balancing on his heels. "Mira, I have many feelings. I care not for death without meaning. But there was meaning in every man's death yesterday. They died for their kingdom and their Queen."

"They died because of their Queen." she scoffed, leaning back against the tree and crossing her arms in front of her chest.

"No, they did not. They died for you, not because of you. There is a difference. You did not force them to fight for you, every man of them chose to risk his life. For their Queen."

She turned her face away from Kieran. "What other choice did they have? To bend knee to Franken?" She turned her head to face him again. "That's not much of a

choice. A murdering traitor or a mageborn girl.”

“Look, Mira, men will continue to die until either you or Franken is dead. That is the way of war. Do you really think these men want to live under Franken's rule? I think you have listened too much to the talk of your retinue. You have been poisoned by Fallos and those knights into believing that you are worse than that lying, murdering bastard. These men,” he said as he pointed at the camp, “would rather die under the rule of a mageborn than allow that red-wolf traitor to sit on the throne and rule their lives. I have seen his kind before, his reign would be short and bloody.” He tried to push the memory of the priest killing that poor innocent girl from his mind. He had made Plengur swear to not reveal what they had seen, had even threatened to kill the man if he did. Plengur's only task the day after the battle was to make sure the girl's body was buried, so that Mira would never see it. At her words he was doubly glad he had done taken these precautions. She would not have dealt with that knowledge well.

“But so many died, Kieran. So many...” she said tearfully.

He knelt down and pulled her into his arms. She began to cry harder and Kieran realized that this was what she needed. She pounded her fists on his chest and railed against the gods for what had happened to her father, her kingdom and her people. When she stopped sobbing he took the edge of his cloak and wiped the tears from her cheeks. “And that, my dear Queen, is exactly why they will fight, and die, for you. Because you care for them. You mourn each of their deaths, though you did not know most of them, were not friendly with any of the dead. You worry more about the kingdom and its future than you do your own safety. This is not about your blood, Mira. It is about theirs and who they would rather spill it for. ”

Mira lifted her red-rimmed eyes and searched Kieran's face for a long moment. She was convinced he was speaking sincerely but she had to know if he did so to soothe her guilt or because he believed it. “Do you really believe that?”

He looked down at her seriously. “It is the only truth that matters on the battlefield, Mira. Entire wars are won and lost based upon the purity of leaders.”

She thought about that for a while and finally nodded, apparently accepting the innate nature of men and their loyalties.

“Would you?”

His smile faltered. “Would I what?”

“Die for me?” she asked seriously.

“I tried to do that yesterday, but Eleric had other plans for me.” he said jokingly.

“That's not what I mean.” she said harshly. “If you had not taken the contract, would you? Despite the fact that I am mageborn?”

He thought seriously about her question. “If this were my kingdom, I would.” he finally told her.

“The lesser of two evils?” she asked, a hint of teasing in her voice.

He chuckled, glad that she was starting to return to normal. “No, that's not it at all.”

“Then what is it?” she asked, sitting up on her knees and placing her hands on her hips.

Kieran sat, stretching his legs out and leaning his back against the tree. “Well...” he began, lacing his fingers together behind his head and smiled dreamily. “By all accounts, you're more beautiful than Franken and I can't resist a beautiful woman.”

She laughed and playfully slapped his arm, but seemed satisfied with his reply. She turned around and sat next to him, lying her head on his chest once again. When he let one arm fall around her shoulder she reached up and took his hand in hers. “Thank you.” she said simply.

He leaned over and kissed the top of her head. “Glad to be of service, your Majesty.”

Stretching, he placed his hands back behind his head. “Sometimes it is still a bit much to take in.” he said contentedly.

“What is a bit much to take in?” she asked scooting to sit up next to him.

“The King of Corrigar keeps his castle in my home city of Corrigan. We are the center of all trade and industry for all of the Kingdom. When I was a small child, I grew up in those streets, and where there is trade and industry, there are street urchins. We used to sit and watch the city guards saunter by in their leather armor, with short swords at their sides, and we would dream about being like them. And then being like them was not enough. We were going to be castle guards, and actually wear chain link, wielding longswords or halberds. But children eventually grow to learn about the wide world. And in the end, when I went to find the Brotherhood, I had decided I would be a hero, like in songs. I would ride a big horse, and swing a sword in defense of my Lord or Lady...” he trailed off, bemused.

“That is very sweet, Kieran, but what have your childhood dreams to do with now?” she asked confused.

“Don't you see Mira? I am living them. Tomorrow we will take the remnants of our army off to the next battle, and I will wear my armor, and sit high upon my horse, and ride close to you – for you are the Lady I am sworn to protect. I have lived each day of my life from the first to today, but sometimes I just cannot fathom how I came to be here, next to you, in your service.”

She leaned her head back into his chest and said, “Because here is where you were needed Kieran Chace of the FreeSword Brotherhood. And here you will stay.”

Kieran reached down to gently cup her chin, tilted her head back and gazed into her eyes. He would have kissed her then, if she had asked. Instead, he heard the sound of an armored man approaching, the color of his cloak marked him as a Knight of Dirge - either Sir Eleric or Sir Harren. They disentangled themselves from each other and stood up to greet the knight. Mira took a step closer to Kieran, then reached out

impulsively and grabbed his hand, pulling it behind her. Kieran shot her a surprised look, but did not pull his hand away.

“Sir Eleric.” Kieran said as the knight neared them. “We were just about to return.”

Sir Eleric stopped a few feet away. Upon seeing Mira's red rimmed eyes his expression hardened and he examined her critically. He kept his eyes on her as he spoke. “Your majesty, we need to make plans. We have reports that the rest of SeaCliff is barely defended. Fallos believes we should continue on rather than return to Bearing. And we need to deal with the prisoners.”

“What of RafsKeep?” Mira asked. “Are they not loyal to Franken and would they not send men?”

Sir Eleric shook his head. “RafsKeep cannot attack us and protect her borders. Many of her men are in KingsHome. A messenger brought word that Franken is not being well received there at all.”

Kieran smiled slowly. “And now that RangeWard will declare for the Queen, Hollowton must concern itself with both RangeWard and GrovesHold. Brilliant!”

“Well then, shall we return and discuss this further with Sir Harren and Fallos?” Sir Eleric suggested, his voice making it sound almost as an order.

“Of course, let us go.” Mira replied. She took a step forward and let go of Kieran's hand at the same time, ignoring the disapproval in Eleric's face as she walked off.

As Kieran started to follow her, Sir Eleric held his arm out to stop him.

Kieran regarded him inquisitively, but said nothing.

“I hope for your sake, Captain, that those tears were because of the battle.” Eleric stated threateningly.

Kieran judged by the man's expression and tone of voice that this was not a time to joke with his friend. “It was. She has never had men die for her.” he replied soberly.

Eleric dropped his arm to his side. “Good. I like you, Kieran. I would not like to be forced to kill you.” he paused and caught Kieran's eyes, his face serious. “But I would.”

Kieran was not at all surprised. “I believe you would, my friend.” he responded as they began to walk back toward the camp.

“Actually, since I will not be killing you this afternoon, there is something I would speak with you about.” Sir Eleric offered lightly.

“Please Sir Eleric. Battle brethren need not ask to discuss difficult topics. How can I help you.” Kieran replied, sensing the serious tenor behind the man's lighthearted comment.

“I am a Holy Warrior of Dirge. Some would call me a Paladin, others a Holy Knight, still others a Templar. But what I am is not wrapped in those titles. It is in my heart. I serve Dirge with my sword because it is the tool he has given me. I have hunted down priests of Tasni in three different countries, and even slain a priest of Am'Ethaan once.” Eleric made a face. “But I ramble. My point is that – well – when a Holy warrior of Dirge sees someone who is like of heart, and good in their spirit, it is incumbent upon us to offer them the chance to wield Dirge's shield.” Sir Eleric swallowed. “I know you are such a person. Please do not feel as if I am pushing something upon you. I would never do that. I am but bound to offer Dirge's shield to you, the rest is in your hands...”

Kieran interrupted him. “Eleric, I am having trouble following what you are saying. Please, spit it out Sir knight”.

“After the battle, Dirge stayed with me for hours” Sir Eleric said in a rush. “He has never done that before. And since healing you drained the last of my sense of Dirge from me, it must have been for you that he allowed me to feel his presence that long. I presume that he was sending a message – either to you or to me. So I bring to your attention that the Order of the Dented Shield does not exclude FreeSwords from it's service. And I give you this.” he pressed a small object into Kieran's hand. They had made it to the common tent, and were paused outside the door. Kieran looked down, and there was a silver shield with a scaled design on it. One side of the shield was crumpled, as if, had it been real, it had taken a blow from a large hammer or mace.

“Isn't this your personal symbol of Dirge?” Kieran asked incredulously.

“It is one of them – my favorite – but it is also the one I held when Dirge was healing your wounds through me. I think he might have meant for you to have it.” the look in Eleric's eyes would not allow Kieran to hand the pendant back.

“All I ask of you is to think on what I have told you. If you wish, either Sir Harren or I will gladly speak with you of Dirge, and why we chose his service.”

With that, Eleric pulled back the flap and ushered Kieran in first. He ducked his head to avoid hitting the top of the door and Eleric let the flap fall closed behind them. As Kieran raised his head he found Fallos staring at him, a mixture of loathing and disappointment on his face.

He was quite certain Fallos' anger had to do with Mira's appearance. He probably thinks as Eleric did at first, or he's still upset about the promise I forced Mira to make. He tried to ignore the old man as he moved to stand just behind Mira on her left but he could feel the man's eyes boring into his him. I'm going to have to talk with him soon or we'll never get another thing accomplished.

Mira was seated and for the first time in weeks her voice was confident.

“Sir Eleric has informed me that you think we should continue on and secure SeaCliff, Castellán. Is that correct?”

“Yes, your majesty. It is.” Fallos replied as he stood stiffly. Mira noticed that he stayed near the table in the center of the room, one hand lending him support as he

addressed the assembled men. She examined him critically and was taken aback when she realized just how old he really was. This is too hard on him. He is old and should not be out leading armies at his age let alone fighting on the battlefield.

“Most of Alemonger's men were either with this force fighting at his side or are currently fighting for control of KingsHome. With the Duke our prisoner, we should be able to secure the rest of the duchy with few losses and possibly force Franken to move out of KingsHome. A bird was sent to RangeWard early this morning, and should arrive early on the morrow. Once the RangeWarder declares his fealty to the Queen, Hollowton will be forced to deal with both GrovesHold and RangeWard, leaving WineGarden to deal with DoornesBane and EastGuard. Franken took a good number of his men with him from EastGuard to reinforce KingsHome so WineGarden will not have too much trouble keeping those whom remain at bay until we can send help.”

Fallos sat as he finished speaking and Mira, now more aware of her Castellan's age, noted that he appeared to be out of breath. She cast a concerned glance in his direction, but he dismissed her concern with a slight wave of his hand.

“And what of the prisoners? The Duke and the knight?” Mira asked.

Sir Alden responded with a bow. “Your majesty, that is, of course, up to you. In addition to the Duke and the knight we have captured thirty or so foot soldiers. That is not counting the twenty fists of soldiers that swore fealty to you on the battlefield.”

Kieran was confused. “A hundred men changed allegiance on the battlefield?” he asked incredulously. “And you accepted their pledge?” he felt like he stood in a room full of fools.

Sir Harren spoke first. “They saw Sir Eleric smite down the priest. He was a fine sight to see, his shield even took a dent from the priest, just like Dirge in the stories. While I was finishing off the Count that escorted the priest, they swore to Eleric.”

“And I was not myself. I was truly the tool of Dirge Al'Langtrue. I accepted their oaths, and ordered them to form up so we could come to your aid.” Sir Eleric finished.

Fallos took up from there. “Once he accepted their oath, there was nothing honor would allow us to do. So they are a separate unit, and they will lead all future assaults. Mayhap with time they will be trustworthy.” He finished.

“I want to look on these men so that I know them on sight. If one of them comes anywhere near Mira, even by accident, I will kill him. The QueensGuard will be ordered to do the same.” he said coldly.

“That is good enough, FreeSword. I did my duty, you are doing yours.” Sir Eleric replied.

Mira looked thoughtful, then turned her attention to Sir Eleric and Sir Harren. “What does the law require me to do with these prisoners?” she asked, returning their attention to the issue at hand.

Fallos nodded appreciatively at her question. The best way for her to endear herself to nobility and commoners alike was to simply follow the law.

“My Queen,” Sir Eleric began with a curt bow, “the law requires that the traitors be offered the chance to swear fealty to you. If they chose not to, the common soldiers may be allowed to return to their homes.”

“What of the Duke and the Knight?”

“They will either bend their knee to you or die.”

Mira frowned, appearing less than pleased with the choices. Kieran saw Fallos' forehead furrow with concern as Mira appeared to be considering some other course of action. Kieran bent over and whispered quickly in Mira's ear, then straightened. Mira nodded once and then cleared her throat. “Very well then. It shall be as the law requires.” A murmur of agreement and satisfaction with the Queen's decision rippled softly through the tent and Kieran saw Fallos' expression relax. “And where does this happen?”

Sir Eleric responded immediately. “The Duke and the Knight should be done in sight of all of the men, prisoners and our faithful fighters both. Only after they have been dealt with should you deal with the footsoldiers.”

A slow smile crept over Mira's face as she began to understand. “The footsoldiers may be more willing to swear if an example is made of the Duke and the Knight, whom you do not expect to bend knee.”

Sir Eleric bowed grandly. “Her majesty is most perceptive.”

“Very well then, let us take up this distasteful task so that we may more fully plan our next move.” she said, standing.

Sir Eleric looked to Sir Harren and jerked his head toward the door, indicating he wanted the other knight to accompany him. “Your majesty, we will assemble the men and bring out Duke Teldon and the Knight.” he bowed quickly and left, Sir Harren at his heels.

The other leaders also bowed quickly and left to assist in assembling their men, leaving Fallos and Kieran alone with the Queen.

“Once again, your majesty, you have made the right decision. Your father would be proud of you.” Fallos' voice was also full of quiet pride and Mira smiled fondly at the old man.

“You should thank Kieran for that.” she said blandly. “I was not inclined to let the footsoldiers leave unsworn, but the good Captain explained why it was necessary.”

“The good Captain is full of surprises of late.” Fallos replied caustically.

Mira sighed and rose from her chair. “The two of you are going to be together for

quite some time so I suggest you work out whatever is between you and stop this petty squabbling.” She sounded more like a Queen making a command than she had the last time she had said as much to them. Both men watched her as she calmly left the tent.

“If you would learn to accept the way of things here we might be able to do just that.” Fallos spat.

“If you would leave me to perform my duties without interference we might be able to do just that.” Kieran shot back.

Fallos stood and straightened himself. “And does that duty include seducing the Queen?” he asked through clenched teeth.

Kieran put his hands out wide. “Whoa, old man. I have done no such thing.”

Fallos banged a fist upon the table. “Then explain her appearance when she arrived here. And explain her actions after the battle. She was kneeling on the ground and hovering over you like some lovesick tavern wench!”

Kieran crossed his arms over his chest. “Her appearance this afternoon was nothing. She was coming to terms with the death of men sworn to her cause and it was difficult for her. As for the other, I was obviously in no condition to even recall most of her actions.”

“I told you not to pursue her, FreeSword.” Fallos warned.

“You can control her actions and her decisions, Fallos. You cannot control her feelings.” He looked meaningful at the Castellan. “Nor mine.”

“You would break your contract because of your feelings?” Fallos asked incredulously.

Kieran let his hands fall to his side, one resting comfortably on the hilt of his sword as he crossed the distance between himself and Fallos in a few short strides. He stood face to face with the old man, his blue eyes icy and his face hard. “I have never broken a contract and do not intend to break this one. My feelings will not interfere with my duties. Are you questioning my oath, old man?”

Fallos examined Kieran's face intently. “No, FreeSword. I do not doubt you will honor your contract. But I fear that your feelings may interfere with your ability to think clearly. Especially in battle.” he replied pointedly.

Kieran swallowed hard and his shoulders slumped a bit. “I have thought long and hard about that already.” Kieran replied, distress apparent in his voice at the memory. The FreeSword straightened his shoulders then and looked at Fallos with determined eyes. “I was overzealous in my duties. What I did had to be done, but I did not have to sacrifice myself to achieve the same end. It will not happen again. If anything, admitting my feelings only makes me more determined than ever to keep her safe.”

Fallos looked deeply into the FreeSword's eyes. He'd always been a good judge of

character, that was one of the reasons Mira's father had often acted often on nothing more than Fallos' word. He saw that Kieran felt deeply for Mira already but the determination to keep her safe seemed to overshadow the intense emotions he saw swirling around in those icy blue eyes. Fallos would not be able to keep them apart any more than he had been able to convince Mira's father that naming her heir would cause the war they were now fighting. Kieran was at least as stubborn as she was, and as with her father Fallos knew that Mira would not be swayed by logic or threat. The best he could do was to insure that Kieran kept his duty to protect her first in his mind. Mira was his Queen, but Fallos felt an almost fatherly affection for the girl as well. It was that that made the old man's decision for him now, and not the other.

Kieran never flinched under the man's fierce scrutiny. He waited patiently for the Fallos to make a decision, knowing that Mira's earlier words held the truth. They would both have to work together for quite some time and, if Kieran had his way, for much longer than this war would take. When Fallos finally nodded and dropped his gaze, Kieran let out the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. He was surprised to discover that Fallos' approval meant a great deal to him. At the same time he was a bit discomforted to find himself being drawn so deeply into this situation. What had started out as just another interesting contract was quickly becoming something he hadn't counted on and he hoped he could deal with his rapidly changing emotions without affecting his ability to fulfill his contract. He'd told Fallos he could and he intended to do his best, but for the first time in life his confidence in himself was wavering and he was unsure of how to deal with it.

“Fulfill your contract first, FreeSword. Then we will speak of other arrangements.” Fallos said simply. “But there is one point I will not give on.”

Kieran nodded. “Magik.”

“Yes, magik. You cannot encourage her to use her birthright. It will be difficult enough for many to accept her as Queen, and magik would destroy any chance of a peaceful reign for her. If you care for her as deeply as I sense, you will not force her to do something she – nay, the entire kingdom - will later regret.”

Kieran did not believe that these people would despise her for using magik, but he realized he could not change the old man's view on the subject. It was a point he would have to acquiesce. “I will not encourage her again, Fallos.” Fallos turned to leave but stopped when he felt Kieran's hand on his arm. “But if there is no other recourse, if she will die if she does not, then I will stand with her if she chooses to do so.”

“If she must do so to save her life then so be it. But should that come to pass, I charge with you insuring that she leaves Freeland Hold and never returns.”

Kieran nodded. “I swear.”

“That is not enough.” Fallos replied.

Kieran was confused. “What do you mean? Since when is my word not enough?”

“Since we are talking about the life of someone very dear to me. I require the only

thing stronger than your word.” Fallos replied evenly.

Kieran followed the man's gaze to his arm. “That would make this the last contract I ever took. You cannot mean to bind me to her for life.” he replied weakly. In truth, he was not certain that it would be a bad thing to tie his life to hers. If he made the two cross-cuts on his contract scar, he would be honor-bound to spend the rest of his life protecting hers, to die before she did, or if that was not possible, to die avenging her death. He had never considered a life contract before, they were too final. And yet he stood here trying to decide if that wasn't what he wanted.

Fallos continued to stare into his eyes. “Every man must settle down FreeSword. Even you.”

Kieran took a deep breath and pulled a dagger from his boot. He held it out and quite deliberately made a single cross cut on the oath cut that represented his contract to Mira. As the blood ran in rivulets down his arm and dropped on the floor he moved to make the second cut, but Fallos' hand on his arm stopped him. Fallos covered Kieran's hand with his and then drew it across the unmarked end of the oath cut, digging more deeply than necessary and causing Kieran to wince slightly. When Fallos finished Kieran tried to pull his hand back, but could not. He was surprised at the strength of the old man's grip. Fallos smiled tightly, then pulled Kieran's hand over to him, and forced the bloodied dagger across the open palm of Fallos' left hand, making a jagged cut from his index finger down to his wrist, his blood mingling with Kieran's.

Fallos let go of the dagger, giving control back to the FreeSword, ignoring the confused look on Kieran's face. “My vow to you, FreeSword. If you let her come to harm and still live, it will be your blood that stains the ground.”

Fallos turned on his heel and left the tent, leaving Kieran to stare unbelievably after the old man. After a few moments he shook his head to clear it and wiped his dagger across his breeches to clean the blood. He dug into his belt pouch and pulled out a piece of cloth, wiping at the blood on his forearm. He flinched as the rough cloth caught the ragged edge of the cut Fallos had forced so deep. He dabbed at it carefully, but could not easily stop the bleeding. He bound the cloth around the cut instead, and decided to keep his arm under the edge of his cloak for the time being. He wasn't certain how he would explain the cuts to Mira yet and knew that now was not the right time. When he finished, he straightened himself and then followed the old man outside, sensing that something of great import had just passed between himself and Fallos, but not completely understanding what it was. He was oath-bound to Mira for life, but there was also something between he and Fallos that was not there before. The man trusted him with Mira's life. Perhaps for the first time since they had met Kieran believed that.

Sir Alden nodded to him as he stepped outside and shielded his eyes from the bright sun. It should not be both cold and this bright. he thought as the two men walked down the hill to where the others were already assembled. Eleric and Harren were standing firmly on either side of the knight, while the rest of the QueensGuard stood in a square around other prisoners. The Duke, he noticed, stood alone. His hands were free and Kieran was momentarily frightened by his closeness to the Queen. These people seemed to believe that their enemy had honor, something that Kieran thought was foolishness. But a quick perusal of Duke Teldon's person showed no obvious

weapons and the traitor's face clearly showed his defeat.

He moved to stand beside Mira and as soon as he was in place Fallos stepped forward and stood to face the Duke.

“Duke Teldon Alemonger, formerly Lord of SeaCliff, you are hereby charged with high treason. You have conspired with traitors to kill Her Majesty Mira Celeria, the rightful queen of Freeland Hold. You have brought your armies to this field of battle at great risk to their souls. No god loves traitors. You will swear fealty to her majesty here and now, or you will be punished for your heinous crime.” Fallos voice rang out across the assembled men.

Kieran was not surprised when the man sneered contemptuously at Fallos' proclamation. “I will never bend knee to her. It is you who are the traitor and you will pay for supporting this mageborn.” The Duke turned his head and spit on the ground. “Never.”

“Then you will die.” Fallos told him coldly. He raised his voice once again. “The Duke has refused to swear fealty. He is guilty of high treason and will be executed immediately.”

The Duke suddenly lunged forward and a slim dagger appeared in his hand from the sleeve of his tunic. He pushed Fallos out of the way, and the old man stumbled and fell, not expecting the action. Sir Eleric started to take a step forward but stopped when he saw that Kieran was already standing in front of the queen, his sword tip at the Duke's throat.

“Drop it.” Kieran's voice growled menacingly.

When Alemonger made no move to drop his weapon Kieran pushed the tip of his sword against the man's throat, a thin line of blood came welling out around the tip of Kieran's sword.

The Duke winced and slowly uncurled his fingers from the hilt of the dagger, letting it clatter to the ground. Kieran slowly slid the tip of his sword upward along the man's skin, forcing the Duke to raise his head and stand up straight. Kieran did not move once the Duke stood upright, but kept the tip of his sword pointed directly at the man's throat.

The Duke regarded him with a look of utter contempt, then turned his disdain on the queen. “You will die, Mira Mageborn. Screaming in agony on the altar just like that red-headed mageborn bitch. King Franken will see to that!”

Kieran's eyes darkened. This fool didn't even know that the poor girl probably wasn't mageborn. He had tried so hard to keep this news from her, and now she would have it. And it might well destroy her. In one fluid motion he pulled back his arm and drove his sword rapidly through the man's throat and pulled it back out. The fool had the gall to look surprised as he sank to his knees, holding his throat and gurgling. Kieran bent over and checked the man for a pulse before he wiped his sword casually on the fine Ducal tunic. He stood and took several steps back, returning to his place at Mira's side.

Mira was horrified, not just at the brutality of Kieran's actions but at the words the Duke had spoken before he died. What red-headed mageborn? What altar? Her stomach was churning at the implication of the man's words. She looked desperately at Kieran who shook his head once at her, his eyes pleading with her to ignore the man and continue with the proceedings. She caught a glimpse of his left arm, covered in a bloodied cloth but ignored it, the turmoil of the moment overcoming her curiosity. She slowly turned and fixed her gaze upon the knight, trying to look as regal as possible. "And you, knight. Are you as foolish as your master?" she asked, her voice wavering slightly.

The knight, his eyes shooting daggers at her, replied venomously. "That one was not my master. I was general of this army. He was but a tool for me to use in King Franken's name. I will not give my oath to you. Not now. Not ever." Mira watched as Sir Eleric and Sir Harren responded by forcing the knight roughly to his knees between them.

"I would have your name, sir knight." she said. Something wasn't right here. The Duke with the largest number of soldiers took command of an army, unless one of the KingsGuard was present. And all of the KingsGuard but Eleric and Harren were dead, if rumors were true.

"I am Sir Etringa of the KingsGuard, wench. Sworn to a true king, and beyond harm from the likes of you." he replied acidly.

She noticed that both her Knights stiffened at his words, wrenching his arms a little tighter. "The only survivors of the KingsGuard hold your arms, Sir Etringa. But since you say you are of the KingsGuard, I will ask you this: Which god gave you holy power to protect the King?" By tradition, all members of the KingsGuard must be holy warriors before they were Knighted by the King. It helped the people believe that the King was protected by the gods.

"King Franken has decided that divided loyalties are not in the best interests of the Kingdom. I am proud to say that I am a King's man, and only a King's man." He replied almost haughtily.

She considered this, thought of asking more questions, and then simply nodded in Fallos' direction.

"The knight chooses not to swear fealty to her Majesty. He has sullied the name of the famed KingsGuard. He chooses death." Fallos cried out so that all could hear. Sir Alden stepped forward then and unsheathed his sword. He raised it slowly above his head, holding it tightly with both hands. "May the Gate Guarder lose your soul." he swore loudly, his voice laden with hatred. He brought the sword down quickly across the knight's neck, cleaving his head from his shoulders in a single blow. The cheer that went up from the assembled men was deafening.

Mira turned away as blood sprayed across the QueensGuard and the knight's head rolled across the dirt. Eleric and Harren unceremoniously dropped the body, still twitching slightly, to the ground and stepped back. Fallos turned to the captive foot soldiers, noting that many of them were shaking, their eyes wide with fear. When the

cheering of their own troops had quieted he raised his voice once more. "You have all been misled by these traitors. You may swear fealty to the queen now or return to your homes, never to lift up sword and shield against your Queen again."

For a long moment none of the men moved. A few looked hesitantly around them and then pushed their way past the others, moving to within a few swords lengths of the queen where they dropped to one knee and bowed their heads. A few moments later more joined them until finally all but a fist were kneeling in front of her.

Mira nodded at Fallos, who addressed the kneeling men. "Swear!" he commanded.

Their voices began hesitantly, but became stronger as they recited the traditional oath of fealty given by a soldier. "We swear our blood and our lives to the true and rightful Queen of Freeland Hold, Her Majesty Mira Celeria. May she reign long and prosper."

As the men ended their oath the entire assemblage of men who had fought so valiantly for her yesterday dropped to one knee and raise their swords in the air. "Long live the queen!" they cried over and over, finally dissolving into a mass of cheers.

Mira's eyes were glassy with unshed tears. For the first time she actually felt like the Queen. She turned to Kieran. "Give me your sword." she hissed.

Kieran looked startled but handed her his sword, hilt first. She took it in one hand and almost dropped it. It was much heavier than she had expected, so she reached around and grabbed it with both hands and stood, raising the sword high over her head. "For Freeland Hold!" she cried out in return, and the men responded with another round of cheers even louder than the last. Mira nodded, satisfied, before she let the weight of the sword pull it to the ground. Kieran reached over and took it from her, sheathing it as he watched her walk back into the tent, her back straight and her walk proud. "QueensGuard, take the rest of this rabble out and send them on their way." he called. A thought came to his mind and he quickly signaled for Sir Harren, who trotted over to join him. "Take the Duke's head and put it in a sack, then send one of the men who refused to swear fealty to her majesty off to KingsHome with it." Sir Harren nodded in agreement and stooped to hack the head off of the body of traitorous Duke. When he was done with his grisly task, he headed off toward the now nervous group of unsworn men. Kieran turned and headed for the tent.

Mira was pacing the tent, her hands shaking. She'd managed to keep herself together outside but now that she was away from the troops she could no longer hold back her fear. When the last of her leaders entered the tent she stopped pacing and faced them. "What in the name of Dirge was the Duke referring to?" she asked plaintively. "What altar, what woman? What is going on?"

Most of the men exchanged looks of confusion and shrugged. Fallos looked surprised as well. "I do not know what that was about your majesty, perhaps it was designed to frighten you into giving up?" the old man suggested.

Kieran cleared his throat nervously and all eyes focused on him. "I know what he was talking about."

"Well?" she said impatiently. "Explain!"

Kieran looked at her, his face showing his unwillingness to follow her command. “Are you certain you want to hear this?”

“Yes!”

Kieran reluctantly described the scene he and Plengur had witnessed the night before the battle. When he finished, Mira reached out behind her to steady herself and sat heavily on her chair. “They sacrificed her for being mageborn?” she asked, her voice quiet and full of disbelief.

“I do not believe that she was, Mira. It was an excuse to rile the men in the hopes that they would fight more fiercely. It worked. If the scouts were right, those men did not fight like one in four of them was unblooded.”

Her eyes were unfocused and she wrung her hands nervously in her lap. When she finally spoke again, her voice was no more than a whisper. “The place where I was trained, it is full of mageborn. They ran from a neighboring kingdom where they were destroyed, one by one, for their birthright.” She swallowed hard. “They were sacrificed on altars as well. Even the children. Their blood condemned them without even the facade of a trial.” She looked up at the men who stood quietly watching her, determination slowly replacing the pain in her eyes. She slammed a fist into her hand and stood. “I will not allow that to happen here. I swear on my father's memory that I will not stop until Franken is dead. He is the cause of this enmity and I will destroy him if it is the last thing I do. Better one of your Dukes rule Freeland Hold than some Tasnian boot-licker.”

The resoluteness in her voice both surprised and pleased the men around her. Sir Eleric's voice was earnest when he spoke. “We stand behind you, my Queen. Though we may not approve of magik on the battlefield, we cannot abide the worship of the Defiler and the murder of innocents no matter what blood courses through their veins. No matter the cost we will stand beside you, to the end.”

The other men murmured their agreement and Mira breathed a sigh of relief. “Then let us get on with it, gentlemen. We have a duchy to reclaim and after that, a kingdom.” The men moved to the large table and sat, the air filling with their voices as they planned their next attack.

They planned into the night until they were finally satisfied they had come up with the best plan to take back SeaCliff and drive the invaders either into the sea or back into KingsHome. The men stood stiffly, one by one, and bid the queen a good night. Fallos was the last leave and he nodded curtly to Kieran before he left.

Kieran was not quite ready to be alone with Mira so he, too, tried to take his leave of her.

“Captain, I would speak with you.” she said firmly, stopping him in his tracks. Fallos heard the command outside and quickly snuck around the perimeter of the tent, feeling a bit like a disobedient child listening at the keyhole of his parents' door but he had to know what would pass between these two. He moved into the darkness on the other side of the tent and put his ear near the canvas, listening intently. He would have

had Kieran killed if he posed a threat to Mira before. Now that she appeared to have accepted the right of her rule he was even more determined to insure that nothing interfered with her ability to reclaim her kingdom and sit on the Throne of Farren. He had a promise to keep. A promise to his king.

“As you wish.” Kieran replied casually, his voice belying his nervousness.

“Hold out your arm.”

When he held out his right arm she slapped it away. “Your other arm, Kieran.” she said, exasperation evident in her voice.

He grimaced and held the other arm out to her. She took a step toward him and examined his forearm for a moment before meeting his eyes with a penetrating gaze. “I thought perhaps I was imagining things when I saw this earlier. How does it happen that there are cross-cuts on my contract line?”

Kieran shrugged helplessly. Her gaze was unyielding and his anxiety increased ten-fold as he waited for her to say something more.

Suddenly her lips broke into a beaming smile and Kieran was amazed at how it lit up her face. She reached up and took his head between her hands, pulling his face down to meet hers and kissing him quickly, but soundly.

When she released him she turned on her heel and walked toward the door. “I told you in KingsHome that you would make two more cuts before this was finished, FreeSword.” she threw over her shoulder teasingly before she lifted the flap and left him standing alone in the middle of the tent.

Kieran was stunned and could do nothing but stare slack-jawed after her for several minutes. He still felt her lips pressed against his, and still smelled her scent. Finally he threw back his head and chuckled, and after a moment the chuckle turned into a whoop of delight, surprising even himself. He quieted quickly and looked around surreptitiously even though he was alone, then straightened his clothing and walked out of the tent, a broad smile on his face.

Fallos, still standing in the shadows behind the tent, released his breath in a sigh of relief. He stood up to leave, and almost doubled over as a sharp pain shot down his arm. He stopped and spent a few moments slowly inhaling and exhaling until the pain subsided. He knew then soon The Gate Guarder would come to take him into Dirge's Hall, leaving this world behind, but he felt more comfortable knowing that the FreeSword was now bound to Mira for life. Her words told him she had obviously been pleased with the decision. It was one less thing for him to worry about and one less problem he had to deal with before he died.

He walked slowly back to his tent to consider the march ahead of them and how best to deal with the few remaining issues he needed to clear up before he died. Not the least of which was who would take his place at Mira's side.

Chapter 13

The men were calling it “The Battle of Mira's Mound”, and someone with an ear was composing a song about it. She had heard it on the road since the battle, but when she had asked her Captains to put a stop to such nonsense, Fallos had explained to her that she couldn't stop it, and shouldn't want to. In point of fact, she felt the men were

overconfident. They called the whole thing “Dirge's War” because of Sir Eleric's glory on the field, and felt that with Dirge on their side, they could not lose. Even her Knights joined in the celebrations to Dirge, and she was certain that she had heard Eleric singing that song about the battle to Ashendown's archers one night. Some of the men under Sir Alden had told her it was the greatest victory in the history of the Kingdom.

She did not understand how men who had planned effectively when the odds were distinctly against them could grow so flippant when things got worse. There were folls if they did not see how much worse things were. They had won the battle, of that there was no doubt. The Duke and one of Franken's personal guard were dead, more than a hundred men had pledged to her rather than return to lands controlled by Franken, and SeaCliff would fall to her within the week at the pace they were moving. But they had taken the field on that bright fall day with over 1000 seasoned troops. They had left two of every three of those men in shallow graves at the battleground. The top of the hill the men called “Mira's Mound” was dotted with spears standing straight up from the graves of her faithful soldiers. Perhaps the name was fitting after all, they had died for and because of her. What was left of her original army was being split up and used as a core to give strength and confidence to all of the new faces in their midst.

To make up for their losses, they were taking turncoats, reformed traitors, and bright-eyed farm boys. Fallos assured her that this was the way of war. That every person you saw while your army was marching was either coming to join you or coming to kill you. Everyone else got out of the way. But Captain Dunban reported that he lost a man or two a day to injuries that wouldn't happen if his men were trained soldiers. Sir Alden had looked over the collection of sell-swords and farmboys with riding horses he was in charge of, and asked if he could keep the survivors of that first battle intact, and “that lot can muck the stables – if we ever have any.” Under Fallos' guidance she had convinced Sir Alden that he could train even these men to ride in formation.

The next week was a whirlwind of activity and Mira found herself more than once confused, frightened and elated by her army's push to the capitol city of SeaCliff. The troops fought with a ferocity of a pack of wolves protecting their young and Mira heard her name called out as a battle cry several times but more often than not she heard the rallying cry of “Freeland Hold” rise from the men, carrying on the wind across the battlefields. Battlefields that had once been small towns, or apple orchards, or wheat fields. Now most of them were nothing but churned, freezing piles of mud and char. Franken's troops – not the troops of SeaCliff, but Franken's troops from EastGuard who wore the red fox on black – burned each place that they lost. It was planned and deliberate, and it made Mira very angry.

The skirmishes they had engaged in at first were generally vicious and short. A small group of enemy troops would suddenly appear, nipping at the flanks of her army, only to be beaten down with few losses to her men. As they crossed the duchy, however, her ranks actually grew as men came out of otherwise deserted villages to meet them and pledge their service to her. Most of them either knew families that had lost someone to the war or had themselves lost someone to the war still others had heard that the retreating army was burning the cities and keeps of their duchy. All of them had seen what might become of their land if Franken remained on the throne and none

of the ones who joined her liked what they'd seen.

While Kieran had scoffed at the idea of choosing her as the lesser of two evils, she noticed that many of the people of Sea Cliff did not dismiss the idea so readily. After considering their choices, it seemed that many of them threw in with the mageborn rather than the man who rumors whispered consorted with Tasnian priests. Mira tried to push that from her mind, determined that eventually they would see that she could be a good queen no matter that magik coursed through her veins. She greeted them all and welcomed them to her army, then let one of the sergeants take them in hand.

What she wasn't aware of was that Kieran had ordered that any new men joining them be watched carefully. And none of them were allowed near the queen once they'd dropped to the knee and sworn to follow her. He wasn't taking any chances with her life. A spy in the army he would tolerate because there was no reasonable way to stop them with the thousands of new men they were taking in. But he could keep them from getting close enough to the Queen to kidnap or kill Mira.

They were camped just a day and a half's march from the capitol of SeaCliff when a group of men appeared on the horizon riding hard and bearing a pure white standard. Kieran rose from his place near the fire and the rest of the QueensGuard, seeing his hand drop to the hilt of his sword, rose without a word, moving to stand protectively around the queen. Kieran looked toward Sir Eleric and Sir Harren and then jerked his head in the direction of the riders. The two knights turned and moved quickly toward their horses, then mounted and rode off to meet their visitors.

Mira watched the activity with interest, but had grown accustomed to the QueensGuard's over protective nature. She would learn what the commotion was about soon enough and no amount of impatience would change that so she returned to her conversation with Fallos. Once she had shown that she accepted her father's decision and had put all her energy into her role as queen, her Castellan had decided to fill the gaps in her education as quickly as possible.

Before long Eleric and Harren approached, the riders between them looking travel worn and dusty. Mira looked up and studied the man intently. Seeing the emblem of a gray tower on the men's red tunic she mused out loud. "Doornesbane?"

Fallos nodded, his brow furrowing. "Duke Herring threw in with Franken. If rumors be true, he even bent the knee to him and called him King. I cannot imagine what this is about."

Mira stood and brushed out her skirt. "Well then, we should find out, should we not?" She straightened her shoulders, held her chin high and moved slowly toward the riders. Kieran joined her as she passed, a step behind but to her side. The rest of the QueensGuard followed him, as did the leaders of the various groups of men in her army.

Mira slowed and stopped when she saw the barely perceptible nod of Sir Eleric's head. The young man at the head of the riders dismounted and almost raced to stand in front of Mira, but found himself facing Kieran instead. "That's far enough." he growled menacingly.

The man dropped to one knee, his hands held out wide and his shoulders shaking slightly. Kieran looked him over quickly and then stepped back.

“I am Braedon.” He raised his eyes and looked tentatively at Mira. “His grace, Duke Brendon Herring of DoornesBane, sends his greetings and offers fealty to her majesty, Mira Celeria.” He dropped his head again and waited, his shoulders shaking a bit less than they had before.

Mira and Fallos exchanged a surprised glance. “And why does the traitor Herring suddenly wish to change his allegiance?” Mira asked, her voice cold.

Braedon nervously looked up again. “Duke Franken has betrayed him, your majesty.”

Mira looked at the man skeptically. “Give me one good reason why I should believe this offer, Braedon.”

Kieran tensed as the man stood and straightened his tunic, then looked directly into the queen's eyes. “Because he has sent his heir and only son to you, my Queen.”

Fallos squinted as he took a better look at the young man. “He has the same sandy hair as Duke Herring, and the same weak chin of all the Herrings I have ever known.” he observed quietly. He stepped forward and raised his voice. “Show me your right hand, Braedon.”

The man did as Fallos commanded and Fallos grabbed his hand, turning it over and examining the ring the man wore. Fallos dropped his hand and turned to Mira. “I have not seen Herring's son for some time, but he has the look of a Herring about him and the ring does bear the family's crest.”

Mira's gaze softened a bit as she looked at the man, trying to discern his real intent. “Your father wishes to offer his fealty. Does he also offer his assistance in removing Franken from KingsHome?”

Braedon nodded. “Yes, my queen. He does. There is much that he has bid me speak with you about.”

She pointed to the ground at her feet. “I am not your queen yet.”

Braedon looked confused. “Your majesty?”

“She is not your queen until you swear fealty to her.” Kieran growled. “Either do so or return home.”

Braedon nodded. “Ah...” he replied, understanding. He dropped to one knee before her and recited the oath of fealty required of all nobles in Freeland Hold since the founding of the kingdom. Never once did his eyes leave Mira's.

When he had finished, Mira motioned for him to stand and when she spoke Braedor appeared surprised at the change in her tone of voice. She sounded friendly and even glad to see him. “Well, then Braedor. Join us at the fire and we shall hear more of what has been happening in the rest of Freeland Hold while we find you something to

eat. You will need to return to your father, no doubt?"

"Yes, my queen. He expected me to return as soon as I found you and swore DoornesBane to you. He desires greatly to turn his troops to EastGuard but awaits your command." the young man followed her gratefully to the fire and sat across from her. He took the plate of food offered to him and began to eat, obviously enjoying hot food for the first time in over a week.

"Fallos, what do you think?" Mira asked.

"I think this is a most fortuitous turn of events and I- " he paused as a fit of coughing took hold of him. Fallos saw Mira rise out of the corner of his eye and waved her back down. She sat, but watched him intently until the fit had passed.

Mira offered Fallos her glass and he took it gratefully. "My thanks, your majesty." he said hoarsely, then tipped it back and wet his dry throat, then handed the glass back to Mira. "As I was saying, I think that if Duke Herring were to tackle the problem of EastGuard and assist with containing Reedswallow that it would either keep Franken in KingsHome or draw him out. Either result would be all to the good."

Dunban Ilth spoke up. "With WineGarden against him and SeaCliff all but ours, if DoornesBane can take EastGuard then Franken will not be able to resupply by ship. He'll have to make a move. " The others nodded their heads in agreement, excited by the possibility of catching Franken's largest force outside city walls.

Braedor looked up from his plate. "I do not think Duke Franken will leave KingsHome, Castellan." The men quieted instantly, now hanging on Braedon's every word.

"Why is that?"

"He is heavily entrenched, with a good number of his own men and almost all of Duke Raffson's men with him. There is still open fighting throughout KingsHome." he paused and looked at the queen almost admiringly. "The people there still fight for you, your majesty. He cannot leave by sea because he fears the ships of RoguesHome may be lying in wait for him." He returned his attention to Fallos. "And he does not intend to rule from EastGuard, he intends to sit on the Throne of Farren with the queen at his side no matter the cost. It was that which caused the rift between Duke Franken and my father."

Mira shuddered. Every time she recalled that last night in KingsHome she felt violently ill. I actually found Franken intriguing and had entertained thoughts of... she shook her head to clear it. It matters not. I would use magik before I would bed him. She felt Kieran's hand on her shoulder and was grateful once again for his nearness. The smartest thing I have done was to make him Captain of the QueensGuard.

"Go on Braedon," Mira said "tell us what you mean."

"Well your majesty, Duke Franken decided that he would be King, and that he would marry you. My lord father had reservations about you sitting the throne, but those

were nothing compared to how he felt about Duke Franken becoming King. He sent an emissary, my uncle Trisdan, to protest the Duke's posturing without consulting DoornesBane. The Duke returned my uncle's head in a sack, with a demand for more troops.”

Mira looked thoughtful. “And your father chose to ally with a mageborn, even after going this far to keep me from the throne?”

“It was not so much that he didn't want you on the throne, your highness. He wanted a strong leader who could help him fortify against the slavers that raid out of Ismack Doorne. He felt that you would not be strong enough to send him help – but I saw the hill, and I heard 'The Battle of Mira's Mound' during my ride. When I go home I will surely be able to soothe any remaining doubts my father has.”

Fallos cocked an eyebrow at her, and fought down a grin. Fine Fallos, you were right. I can't stop it and shouldn't want to. Mira thought.

Sir Alden laughed. “Do not worry about the Duke marrying our Queen, Braedon. Our queen here has her eye on someone else, and I'll wager he won't let Franken get close enough to her to say 'your highness'.” The others joined in the laughter. Braedon looked around confused, but also laughed as he caught sight of the red stain creeping up Kieran's neck.

The men laughed and talked for a while before they returned to the business at hand. A few hours later they found a place for Braedon to sleep and in the morning, he headed off, riding hard toward his father's duchy to deliver the good news to his father. DoornesBane would move against EastGuard, cutting off the last of Duke Franken's supplies and then turn to Reedswallow, hopefully forcing the rogue Duke to action.

#

Duke Franken kicked the man prostrated before him hard, breaking his nose and causing blood to spray all over the floor. “Get out.” he snarled, then turned his back and walked to the window, staring angrily out over the courtyard of the KingsTower.

The door opened and he heard it close behind him. “What is it now?” he asked tersely.

Count Gerad raised an eyebrow when he saw the fresh blood on the floor. “Bad news, my king?”

Franken waved his hand in the direction of the table. Gerad looked to the table and saw a burlap sack sitting on a pile of papers. He peered inside, and drew back quickly from the stench. “One of ours, I take it?”

Franken turned around and walked to a chair near the fire, avoiding the table. “SeaCliff.” he said moodily, resting his chin on his fist and staring off into the fire.

Gerad said nothing. He found two glasses and filled them with wine, then went to join Franken. He handed Franken a glass, who took it without a word, then sat down in a chair on the other side of the fireplace and sipped his wine, waiting for Franken to say

something more.

Finally Franken tipped back the glass and drained it, then threw it angrily at the fire. Shards of glass flew back as it hit the stone wall and shattered. Franken leaned back in his chair.

“Do you feel better now, my king?” Gerad asked politely.

Franken leaned forward in his chair, his blue eyes flashing menacingly. “They have moved against SeaCliff. They won their first battle and RangeWard has declared for them. Now RangeWard will move against Hollowton and I can spare no men to assist. SeaCliff is likely to fall next and then they will be on my doorstep.”

Gerad simply nodded, sipping more of his wine. Franken slammed a fist on the arm of his chair. “Why do you say nothing, Gerad? Have you no advice or counsel to give? If not, perhaps you ought to leave.”

Gerad rested his arm on the arm of the chair, swirling the wine in his glass absently. “You need to take care of Dugal's daughter, my king. With her at your side all this becomes moot.”

Franken thought over his friend's words. “You are right, Gerad. But from what I've just heard from that sniveling rat who brought back Alemonger's head she is more attached to this FreeSword than you led me to believe.”

Gerad shrugged. “So get rid of him.”

Franken rolled his eyes. “Of course I need to get rid of him, but without destroying her army, which I cannot seem to accomplish at the moment, how can I get rid of him?”

Gerad raised his glass to his lips and took a long drink. “I have heard that it is easy to join her army. And I have a man who would not only be able to join her army without suspicion, but who would be able to kill the FreeSword and bring your intended bride back to you.”

A slow smile crept across Franken's face. “You are a true friend, Gerad. Loyal and devious.” Franken stood and walked to the table, grabbing a new glass and filling it with wine. He drank it all down, but this time he did so with relish. “I should like to meet this talented man.”

Gerad stood. “Of course, my king. I contracted him right before we laid siege to the castle as one of my personal guards. He is waiting outside. Shall I call him in?”

Franken laughed. “Of course, Gerad. Bring him in. I want to meet the man who will bring me my wife and deliver the rest of the kingdom to me.”

Gerad turned and walked to the door, opening it slightly. “The king wishes to speak with you, Trem. Join us.”

#

Mira sat on her horse outside the gates to Alemonger's keep. Her army had managed to take the city without much resistance but the keep had been a different matter. It had taken them two days just to get inside the walls and another four days to finally overtake the last of the duke's men. Most of the duke's family had been inside the keep, and Mira had already decided that Alemonger's wife and children should be spared. She simply would not condone the killing of women and children no matter who they had wed or who their sire may be.

She waited almost impatiently for Sir Eleric and Sir Harren to give the signal that all was clear so they could go inside. Though the fighting had been fierce at times, she still longingly looked forward to some of the comforts only a Ducal keep could offer. Hot water was one of them. A soft bed was another.

Finally, when she thought she could wait no more the signal came. She kicked the sides of her horse into a canter and rode through the gates with the QueensGuard close behind her. She stopped near the doors to the keep and waited patiently. Kieran dismounted easily, then moved to stand next to her, holding a hand up to assist her from her horse. She didn't need the help, but she took any opportunity at all to be close to Kieran and this was one of the few opportunities she had. She placed a hand firmly on his shoulder as he reached up and swung her down, his hands firmly encircling her waist.

She smiled up at him, letting her hand drop to his forearm and then traced the oath cut that marked him as hers before she turned and marched regally into the keep.

Kieran did not immediately follow her. He needed a moment to catch his breath and clear his mind. He was fairly certain that Mira had no idea what those little touches of hers did to him, but he wouldn't be surprised if she did. He could hear Plengur snicker a bit behind him and he almost wished the man wasn't so aware of his feelings for Mira. Ever since they'd snuck out and shared the sight of that Tasnian priest he and Plengur had become better and better friends and Kieran had often confided in the man, even going so far as to ask for his advice. Plengur was a common man, but he was a good man and had been married for a long time. His advice where women was concerned had so far been fairly accurate, so Kieran was grateful most of the time for his company. Other times, he was not so grateful, like now. He shot his friend a hard look and Plengur almost choked trying to contain his laughter. Kieran counted to ten before he felt able to follow Mira without making a fool of himself.

They spent almost a week in Seagate, sending out dispatches and allowing others to catch up with them. Mira dealt firmly and quickly with the Ducal family. She had not wanted to give the duchy to the Duke's eldest son, but Fallos had taken her aside and reminded her that every Duke alive could still trace his ancestry back to the Knights of Legend and that breaking that tradition would not be a good way to endear herself to the nobility of Freeland Hold. She'd changed her mind with reservations and took the boy's oath of allegiance in the great hall of the keep. The boy was not more than fifteen, but that was old enough that he required no regent. He was also smart enough to understand what had happened and had decided that to save his family he would bend knee to the mageborn queen no matter what his mother thought. His mother, distraught by her husband's death and, as she saw it, her son's betrayal, threw herself from a window in her bedchamber that very night.

The week passed somewhat uneventfully and they spent most of their time collecting information from the missives and trying to plan their next move. Mira wanted to march right through the KingsHome, but the others were less inclined.

“GrovesHold has pushed into Reedswallow with some help from RangeWard but they are still being pressed by Forestlan to the north. Duke Harren does not believe they can withstand Forestlan and take Reedswallow without help.” Fallos declared.

“Hollowton is pressing against RangeWard and the Rangewarder is unwilling to commit more men to take Hollowton unless they can contain Reedswallow.” Sir Eleric added.

“SeaCliff can be held with few men. The Duke, “Sir Alden nodded politely at the young noble, “can certainly hold with every other duchy around it engaged otherwise.”

The young duke nodded his agreement. “I will send the word out that all men who can stand are to hold SeaCliff but no more. We have lost three of every four men at this point and could not possibly do more.”

Mira smiled at the boy. “Of course, Duke Alemonger. That is all we can, and will, ask from you right now. Hold your borders as best you can and allow no EastGuard ships to put into your ports.”

The boy smiled and bowed his head. “Of course, your majesty.”

The smile left her face when she turned her attention back to the other men. “Are you saying, then, that we must first aid GrovesHold and RangeWard before we can turn our attention to KingsHome?”

The men all smiled and nodded nervously. They'd come to know the queen well in the past few months and could hear she did not like their plan.

She sighed. “Someone explain why we cannot simply take KingsHome back from Franken. Without him, the alliance will fall and that will be that.”

Fallos looked at her almost wearily. “My queen, we cannot take KingsHome without the aid of at least GrovesHold or RangeWard. We have not the numbers right now. Once we commit to taking back KingsHome we must be sure of victory, for if we are defeated there is a chance of those not yet committed to turning against us.”

The men talked for a while longer, committed to moving north to aid GrovesHold and RangeWard in their fight against Hollowton, then finally left, leaving Mira alone with her knights and the QueensGuard.

Mira rose and walked silently to a window facing south. She put a hand lightly against the window and stared out, as though she could see her home from this distance. “We are so close, now. So close.” she said longingly.

“My queen, we will take KingsHome. But it must be a decisive victory or there will

be very little left to take back.” Sir Harren told her simply.

She turned and faced them, swallowing back the pain she felt at not being able to return home yet. “I understand, Sir Harren. As always, I am grateful for your wise counsel.”

Sir Eleric stood. “He was our king, your majesty. We were his guard. We are as anxious as you to return and put things aright. This is the right course to take.”

The rest of the QueensGuard stood and left the room, closing the door behind them and leaving Mira alone with her thoughts.

They left two days later, headed north. Mira's mood was solemn and she kept looking over her shoulder as they put more miles between them and KingsHome. Stragglers were still joining them as they marched across SeaCliff join up with the men of RangeWard. Mira continued as she had done before they'd taken SeaCliff and took each of their oaths personally. Kieran always stood next to her, afraid that one of them would turn out to be an assassin just waiting for his chance to kill the queen.

Three days after they'd left SeaGate a group of twenty or so men had dragged themselves in and presented themselves to the queen. One of the men had just begun when Kieran suddenly sprung from his place behind Mira and grabbed the kneeling man by the shoulders, shaking him roughly. Sir Harren and Eleric moved to assist Kieran while the remaining QueensGuard formed a square around the queen. Mira craned her head to try and see what was happening but the men around her were just too tall for her to see past them. She listened instead and grew irritated when the sound of laughter reached her ears.

Kieran turned to the men forming the square. “All is well.” The men nodded and moved back to their normal positions, watching Kieran intently and wondering what had just happened. Kieran had one arm draped across the man's shoulders as though they had known each other all their lives. He smiled widely until he caught the look on Mira's face. He pulled his arm away from the man and stood straight, his eyes still laughing.

Mira put her hands on her hips. “Would you please explain what just happened here, Captain?”

The man next to Kieran looked at him and tried to cover his laughter. “Captain?” he asked incredulously. “Oh my. This will be good!”

The hard look Kieran gave him stopped his laughter. “Your majesty, might you recall my associate Trem?”

Mira squinted as she looked at him and suddenly she recognized him. “You were Kieran's companion in KingsHome. The one who did so poorly fighting.” she exclaimed.

Trem looked hurt. “Your majesty, I beg to differ. It was not I who did so poorly fighting, but Kieran. If he had done his part I would not have been left to fight off not one, but two, of those thugs.”

“What happened to your contract?” Fallos asked in an even voice.

“Oh, that.” Trem looked at Kieran and shrugged. “You know what happens in wars, old friend. People die, contracts end. Sad things. Let us not go into it, I would rather not upset the queen.”

Kieran eyed his friend strangely. “So why aren't you looking for another contact then?”

“Oh, I will eventually.” Trem replied. “I heard stories about you in KingsHome and you sounded as though you were having so much fun that I thought I'd try and catch up with you first.”

Kieran smiled at his friend. “You wouldn't believe me if I told you.”

“You see?” Trem slapped his friend on the back. “That's what I'm talking about. Contracts can get so boring I thought I'd try some of this soldiering stuff for a while and see how it turns out. You never know, I might change careers!”

Kieran turned to Mira. “You've seen him fight. He's at least as good as I am. It would be a waste to put him with the foot soldiers. I think he'd be a fine addition to the QueensGuard.”

Trem raised an eyebrow and bowed respectfully in Mira's direction. “Your majesty, it would be an honor to serve you.”

Mira was unsure but she saw the almost pleading look in Kieran's eyes. She smiled slowly and nodded her head. “Of course. Welcome, Trem.” she said. “The Captain can get you situated and we can talk more later.”

Kieran slapped his friend on the shoulder. “Come on then, Trem. Let's get you dressed and fed.” The two walked off, talking animatedly and laughing as they went.

Fallos stood and walked over to Mira. “Watch that one closely, child.”

Mira turned her face to Fallos. He rarely called her child but when he did, she paid special attention as he only seemed to slip when he was very concerned. “Why?”

“Something is not right with him. He is being evasive and I do not like it one bit. Kieran will not see it, he has known the man too long. But I see it and I do not trust him.”

Mira nodded slowly. “He did not finish his oath.”

“And he did not say that his contract was finished.” He stopped her with a look when she started to disagree. “He did not say it. Not once. He alluded to the fact, but he did not say it. A Corriganian FreeSword, my child, is honor bound to their oaths. And I have never heard of a one that broke his contract. Ever.”

Mira nodded and turned to look at the backs of Kieran and Trem as they disappeared

toward the QueensGuard's tents. "I see your point, Fallos."

"Good, your majesty. Let us keep this to ourselves for now. We don't want to arouse his suspicion and force something. But do not trust him and right now, I would be wary of Kieran as well."

"Kieran would not-" she began heatedly.

Fallos held out his hand. "I did not say he would. But his judgment may be clouded where Trem is concerned and he may pass our suspicion on to Trem. On your life, Mira, keep this to yourself."

Mira swallowed hard but nodded her assent. "Yes, Fallos. I will do as you ask."

"Good. I will attend to this myself and we will talk again soon." Mira watched, her eyes filled with concern as Fallos walked off and began to consider his options. His instinct told him the man was lying, but he couldn't very well alienate Kieran by accusing him in public. He needed to figure out how to expose the man and soon, before he could do whatever he had come here to accomplish.

Chapter 14

The next week of travel was relatively quiet for Mira and her army. They worked their way northwest, through the farmland of northern SeaCliff and into the dry plains of RangeWard. The few skirmishes they were drawn into were short, and for the most part did not slow the army down at all. Small groups of soldiers would break off and deal with the attackers, catching up with the main body within an hour or two. None of the attacks were organized, but rather appeared to be stragglers headed home taking one last chance to stop the queen's advance.

Mira spent most of the time in conversation with Fallos or Kieran and occasionally Sir Eleric and Sir Harren. She spoke extensively with Fallos about diplomacy and what should be done once they had achieved victory. Mira never voiced her concern that they might not win, for the QueensGuard would hear no words to the contrary and Fallos seemed content to assume that victory was a foregone conclusion. Kieran was sympathetic when she expressed her fears, but she noted that he, too, seemed willing to accept the inevitable victory of their forces.

When Kieran was not spending time talking to Mira he spent time with Trem. The two men, Mira noted, spoke animatedly and Mira watched them with more than a little concern. She had not mentioned the words that had passed between Fallos and herself when Trem had first appeared, though she had bitten her tongue more than once to keep from expressing Fallos' suspicions. As the week wore on, she wondered if perhaps Fallos was simply imagining things, for Trem seemed more interested in Kieran than he did her. He rarely said anything to her and when he did it was deferential and respectful, as it should be.

She mentioned her observations to Fallos but he remained convinced that Trem was a threat to her in some fashion.

“What if you're wrong, Fallos?”

Fallos sighed. “If I'm wrong, I will praise Dirge. But I think I am not. That man is a danger to you, I just don't know how.”

“Just like a mageborn is a threat?”

Fallos face took on a pained expression. “That's different, my queen.”

“How?” she asked defiantly. “People don't trust me because I'm mageborn and you don't trust Trem because he's a FreeSword. You didn't trust Kieran in the beginning either, because of that same fact.”

Fallos sighed deprecatingly. “It is not just that he is a FreeSword Mira. I learned to trust Kieran eventually your majesty, but this one is different. Kieran at least took contract with you. Enough said, your majesty, I have given you my counsel. It is up to you to decide if and when we act upon it.”

Mira nodded and turned her attention to the grassland around them, realizing that she'd hurt Fallos in some way. She wasn't sure how to smooth it over so she turned the conversation to their travel.

“How far until we reach RangeWard's main force? I am sick to death of these grasslands. There is nothing but rolling hills here – up one side, down the other. And when you get to the top of the next hill, the fall winds wait to whip through your cloak like it was threadbare. Ever since we crossed the river Erishon the hills have been our ceaseless companion.”

Fallos peered ahead and seemed to be calculating. “Another two days, my queen, if the reports are correct. They may have moved in the time it's taken us to travel across SeaCliff, but the latest reports suggest they are within two days ride.”

Mira appeared thoughtful and turned her attention back to the road. There were no real mountains in the plains of RangeWard, but some of the hills were quite high and she still hoped, as she had on their first journey through this duchy, to see the horsemen encamped in one of the valleys. She watched carefully over the next day, but her eyes found nothing more interesting than the grass waving steadily in the wind.

The next day they'd made good progress and Fallos estimated they were but a few hours from the main body of the rangewarders. After a quick midday meal they rode steadily, picking up their pace just enough to insure that they would meet up with their allies before sundown. Mira rode, as usual, at the head of the army with the QueensGuard ranging out behind her and Fallos at her side. The main body kept less than a stone's throw behind and ranged out behind them for almost half a mile. Mira and Fallos had almost crested the top of a fairly large hill when a group of men appeared over the top of the hill and came bearing down on them.

The entire complement of the QueensGuard dismounted hastily and formed a square around Mira and Fallos, the swish of swords leaving scabbards was loud as they faced

outward, their eyes alert. Fallos quietly drew his curved blades, but sat calmly on his mount, fully expecting the other men to take care of the problem in short order.

The attackers had charged straight for the head of the moving army, and had just engaged the QueensGuard when another group of men crested the hill in front of them. They stopped short of the group, some cutting across their path and pulling up hard to surround the square while the majority of the attackers went straight on to attack the main body of Mira's army. Mira watched nervously, wondering why men from the main body had not ridden forward to meet the marauders. She craned her neck and looked back and found that they, had been attacked from the sides, and were pinned in place. She bit her lip and looked nervously at Fallos.

Fallos looked quickly over his shoulder and saw that the attackers had managed to surround the QueensGuard's square, cutting them off from the main body of her army. "At least there is no place to hide archers." he muttered angrily. Then he raised his voice. "We are cut off, QueensGuard. Do not falter now."

Mira saw Kieran's shoulders tense at Fallos' call followed by a curt nod that acknowledged their situation. Her horse began to dance nervously under her as she tightened her knees with anxiety, ready to make a run for it, if necessary. Suddenly Fallos reached out and grabbed her reins, pulling her mount closer to his. "Stay close, my queen." he said sharply.

Mira swallowed hard and nodded once. Looking around she could see Sir Eleric viciously fighting off two attackers at once as Sir Harren tried force back his attacker. Plegrun was on one knee, fending off an attacker. He managed to throw up his shield in time to ward off a forceful blow aimed straight down at his head, but Mira could see from the blood that pooled around him on the ground that he was wounded badly. She looked over her shoulder and gasped as she saw one of the QueensGuard lying on the ground, his lifeless eyes staring up at the endless sky. His cloak was stained red in his lower chest, but otherwise he looked unharmed. She turned her attention forward again. Sir Harren had defeated his attacker and she saw him slide over to cover the space left by the downed guard. Sir Eleric had also taken out one of his attackers, but was being hard pressed by the second.

Mira began to worry. She could still hear the shouts of men from the main body and the sound of metal clashing from behind her seemed to indicate that they were still engaged. She heard Fallos' sharp intake of breath and turned quickly. She followed his angry gaze to Kieran and her heart stopped when she saw he was lying on the ground, his shield held up in the air to protect his head as he jabbed wildly at his attacker. She sat forward in her saddle and felt a restraining grasp on her arm. She threw an angry glance at Fallos, who shook his head furiously at her, and then she sat back, her hands grasping the reins of her horse so tightly her knuckles began to turn white.

She watched helplessly as Trem, fighting beside Kieran, swung wildly at his attacker, apparently trying to fend the man off to assist Kieran. Her horror increased as she saw his wide swing miss and arc right around, the tip of his sword slicing deeply into Kieran's shield arm. Kieran grimaced and dropped the shield, his eyes wild as he tried to scramble out of his attacker's reach.

Mira forced herself to calm as she reached for mana, ready to draw it in if it appeared that Kieran's attacker would overcome him. Something moved out of the corner of her eye. Mira's jaw dropped as she saw Fallos spring forward, his arms held wide. Before Kieran's attacker knew what had happened, Fallos had crossed his curved blades together, catching the head of the attacker in between them and slicing it through like a scythe shears through wheat. Mira could see the surprise on Kieran's face at Fallos' action, his brow furrowed like a farmer's field.

Kieran's surprise lasted only a moment before he turned his attention to the man fighting with Trem. He managed to get up on one knee and thrust his sword up under the man's shield, and into his loins, stopping the man long enough for Trem to finish him off with a slice across his neck.

Mira, mindless of the danger, jumped down off her horse and ran to Kieran just as he dropped to his knees, clutching his sword arm. Her QueensGuard closed around her and she was relieved by their protection. Kieran shook her off and stood shakily, his eyes clouded with pain and fury.

Mira looked around when she heard the whoops of men in the distance. The enemy had broken, seeing most of their comrades stricken down like wheat during the harvest season, and her troops were chasing them down. She stood still, staying next to Kieran, not wanting to leave his side. Fallos dispassionately wiped the blood on his curved blades on the man he had killed and then sheathed them before stalking back to his mount. He still looked angry.

Trem, bent over and breathing heavily, looked up at Kieran. "My apologies, old man. I tried to pull back...". The excuse sounded lame to Mira's ears. She had seen Trem strike Kieran a viscous blow, even if it was while attempting to save him.

Kieran gingerly touched his arm, wincing at the action, then smiled wryly. "Not the first time, Trem, nor the last time I'd wager."

Trem stood upright and examined Kieran's arm closely. "It'll need stitching."

Kieran rolled his eyes. "Just what I need, more scars. Good thing I won't be taking any more contracts. It'll keep me from fighting for a spell too, I'll wager."

Sir Eleric moved to Kieran's side and examined him carefully, pushing Trem out of the way and ignoring the incredulous look on the other man's face at his action. When he finished his inspection, the knight gave Kieran a questioning look. "I can heal this, if you wish."

Kieran shook his head. "See to the others first, Sir Knight. If you have healing left for me after that, then your god's gifts would be most welcome."

Eleric nodded curtly before he turned and walked briskly toward the main body of the army where a group of men were collecting the wounded. He stopped to help Sir Harren with Plengur, whose leg had been so grievously injured that the man could not walk.

Mira looked up at Kieran. "You should have let him heal it." she chastised quietly.

Kieran made a gesture toward the other men. "Some of them, I am sure, are worse off than I am. This needs to be cleaned and stitched. I will be fine. I would not keep vital healing from brave men such as Plengur when all I have is a scratch."

"At least let me help you." she said, her voice was even and somehow she made the offer sound like a command.

"Come along then. I imagine you are good with a needle and thread, woman." he replied teasingly.

She blushed, but said nothing in reply as she wrapped her arm about his sword arm and let him lead her back to where Sir Eleric was tending to the other wounded.

Fallos sat upright on his horse, his arms crossed over the pommel of his saddle and his gaze hard as he watched Trem. The rest of the QueensGuard had followed the Queen, Trem trailing behind. As Trem walked past Fallos the old man said quietly. "You are treading on dangerous ground, FreeSword."

Trem stopped and looked up, startled. His eyes narrowed. "What do you mean, old man?"

"You tripped Kieran and then overextended your swing on purpose, knowing you would miss and hit him instead. It was very skillfully done, but it was not good enough to go unnoticed." Fallos said icily.

Trem shook his head and laughed hollowly. "You are seeing things, old man. In the heat of battle things happen. You heard Kieran, this is not the first time he's been wounded by a friend." He looked appraisingly at the old man. "From the way you wield those blades I'd think you'd have seen such things before."

"I have, but never have I seen a sword-mate trip a man without taking a wound." Fallos' answer was cold. He knew what he had seen and he knew that had he not interfered it was likely that Kieran would not have survived the fight.

Trem shook his head again and tried to resume his trek toward the wounded, but Fallos edged his horse between Trem and the QueensGuard. Trem looked up again, his face impatient. "What now?"

"I know not why you came but mayhap you ought to consider leaving before someone gets hurt."

"You're delusional old man. I came here to see Kieran. He's an old friend."

"I warn you FreeSword, if you harm Mira I will kill you myself."

Trem looked Fallos straight in the face. "I do not have any plans to harm the queen."

Fallos was slightly taken aback by the honesty he saw in the man's face. "Planned or not, if you harm her in any way, you will not live to explain why." Then he wheeled his horse and rode back to survey the damage the attack had done to Mira's army.

Trem's eyebrow's rose in surprise at the old man's words. But after a moment he shrugged and walked off to join the others around the Queen.

“Stop flinching like a baby, Kieran.” Mira admonished as she pulled his arm back out into the sunlight. “I need to see what I am doing or it will not be sewn evenly.”

Kieran sighed exasperatedly and looked up at the sound of Trem's laughter. “This isn't funny.”

Trem leaned over and took a closer look at the wound. “Oh yes it is, my friend. Remember the last time it was I who took a friendly wound and had to be stitched up?”

Kieran smiled at the memory. “The two fat counts who were fighting over that fat duchess?”

Trem nodded and chuckled. “And after they traded blows and stopped fighting at the sight of my blood, then they found out she didn't want either one?”

Kieran chuckled again and almost choked on his laughter trying to stop when Mira turned an exasperated face on him again.

He managed to stay silent and sit still until finally she finished and stood, dusting off her skirts. “There Captain, you'll be good as new in a few days.”

Kieran glanced at the wound, now closed with even, tight stitches. “Very nice, your majesty. I have some shirts that need mending, should I bring them to you later?” he said with a straight face.

“I think her majesty has other things to concern herself with, Captain.” Fallos' voice suddenly interrupted from above.

Mira whirled and looked up at Fallos, still astride his horse. She blushed at the hard look on the Castellan's face. She cleared her throat. “How do we stand, Castellan?”

“Ten mortally wounded or dead, including one of the QueensGuard, and another thirty who will be unfit for battle for several weeks.”

Kieran stood quickly, his face pensive. “Plengur?”

“He will not be fit to stand duty for a month or more. His leg is ...” Fallos trailed off, his eyes fixed on the horizon.

Kieran followed his gaze and swore under his breath as he caught sight of what had captivated Fallos' attention. Great plumes of dust were rising over the hill and after a moment of watching in silence the sound of thundering hooves reached his ears.

“QueensGuard!” Kieran barked even as he drew his sword. He moved to stand in front of Mira and only vaguely heard the sound of the remaining heavily armored QueensGuard as he concentrated on the mass of riders cresting the hill. His arm was

tender and would not bear a shield, but he could still fight if need be.

The riders pulled up suddenly, their horses neighing loudly in protest at the harsh bite of their bridles on the tender corners of their mouths. Kieran could hear raised voices barking commands but could not make out words over the sound of the horses.

A single man, dressed entirely in leather armor with a steel helm, separated from the others and urged his horse slowly forward while removing his helmet. Fallos stared at him hard, then suddenly smiled.

“It is fine,” he called out. “The man who approaches is Vetin Highstep, the second son of the Duke of RangeWard.”

Mira heard a collective sigh of relief from the QueensGuard join with hers and was not amazed to find that she had been holding her breath. “My horse, Sir Eleric?” she said formally.

Eleric snapped his fingers and she heard the sound of a man's feet padding quickly towards them, the peculiar rhythm of a horse's hooves accompanying him. Sir Eleric took the reins as the man approached and dismissed him casually before leading the horse to Mira's side and assisting her to mount. Fallos maneuvered his mount next to hers, and they slowly rode out to meet the Duke's son, the QueensGuard marching formally behind them.

As they approached, the young man dismounted easily and bent down to rest on one knee, his head bowed. Mira stopped and greeted him. “I greet you, Vetin Highstep.”

Vetin stood and smiled wryly. “Her majesty is most kind to greet me so as it appears we pushed the enemy straight into her path.”

Mira laughed in delight and Kieran's heart leapt at the sound. He hadn't heard her laugh like that in quite some time and he was instantly jealous that this man had been able to bring forth such a sound without even trying.

“As you can see, we managed to deal with them regardless. Perhaps we ought to thank you for sending us a diversion to break up the monotony of our journey?”

Vetin smiled broadly, his white teeth showing dramatically against his tanned face. He bowed with a flourish. “It is my pleasure to provide her majesty with such entertainment. But failing to bear our standard is unpardonable. Your soldiers stand about with swords drawn even now. I deeply apologize my Queen. This rabble was the last of Hollowton's invading army, and we were sorely pressed to keep up with them. We are but an hour's ride from my father's encampment, may I escort her majesty to meet with him?”

Mira caught the almost imperceptible nod Fallos gave her. “I would be delighted.” she replied. She waited until Vetin had mounted his horse again, gazing appreciatively at his big, black gelding, then rode off slowly with him.

Fallos followed, the rest of the QueensGuard mounting quickly and moving into position behind him.

Kieran kicked the sides of his horse and moved up next to Fallos, his eyes shooting daggers at Vetin's back.

Fallos glanced at him as he rode up and, upon seeing the look on his face, began laughing.

“What do you find so amusing, old man?” Kieran asked tersely.

“You, FreeSword. You are nearly green.”

“Is it that obvious?” he asked, embarrassed.

Fallos nodded. “As obvious as a bar maid's overtures.”

Kieran flicked his reins contemptuously. “She didn't have to be so ... “

“Friendly?” Fallos finished for him, still trying to stifle his laughter.

“Yes.” he replied angrily.

“Yes, she did. Captain.”

Kieran's head turned slowly toward Fallos, his blue eyes showing his confusion.

“You'd better get used to it.” the old man warned. At the pained look in Kieran's eyes his tone softened. “She must eventually ... “ Fallos averted his eyes and was finally able to finish his thought. “marry.”

Kieran nodded, his mouth a tight line. He had never before considered that Mira might be forced to marry. He assumed that she felt the same way he did, but she'd never said as much. Fallos instinctively knew the source of the crestfallen look on the man's face and reached over, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“FreeSword,” he began, hesitatingly. “Kieran, there is no law that would force her to marry one not of her choosing. But her choice must be of nobility. Surely it is no different in Corrigar.”

Kieran took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. “No, it is not any different at home. It does not matter. I am bound to her for life now and nothing can change that.”

“And that issue becomes much more imperative in the aftermath of war. You have seen the peasant's burnt villages, you have navigated sea of human refugees. She will have to make an alliance that will offer her people peace and stability. Such an alliance might just require her betrothal. And it would be duty that bound her hand, just as it is your duty that has bound you to her.”

Fallos pulled his hand away and turned his attention back to the road. The two men rode the rest of the way to the Duke's camp in silence, each lost in their own thoughts.

Mira was amazed when they finally crested that last hill and spied the Rangewarder

camp. It was massive, and it did much to explain why she had not seen any tribes on the plains. It appeared that the citizens of RangeWard treated war different than their brethren from the other duchies. Stretched across the valley below her was an entire city. There were brightly colored wagons with crowds surrounding them, an open space with benches in it that looked like some kind of temple, tents set up with children running and screaming between them, and then there was the army. Arrayed on the side of the camp closest to Hollowton, the horse lines alone took up more space than the rest of the camp. She saw men riding out in front of the encampment, hanging off the side of their horses and chasing some kind of round thing. It looked like a game, but if it was, they played a dangerous game. While she watched, she saw a man knocked off of his horse and trampled. He jumped up quickly, but could not remount his horse, and led it away by the reins as the others resumed their antics.

The Duke of RangeWard greeted them warmly and, without hesitation, bent his knee and pledged his fealty to the queen. Mira solemnly accepted his pledge and then took his arm as he led her to the common tent where they were joined by Fallos and the QueensGuard. They talked and discussed tactics over a plain, but hot meal. Mira was tired and picked listlessly at her food, nodding and smiling politely when appropriate. Finally she stood slowly, stopping the flow of conversation. "If you don't mind, I think I'd like to retire for the evening." she smiled tiredly. "You have been a most gracious host, but it has been a most harrowing day."

Everyone stood, bowing with a chorus of "Of course your majesty" filling the air around her. Mira turned to Kieran. "Captain, would you be so kind as to escort me to the tent the Duke has provided?"

Kieran nodded curtly in response. "Of course, your majesty." He held out his arm and ignored the inquisitive look Mira threw at him as she took his arm and let him lead her out. "This way."

Mira was silent until she and Kieran reached the tent one of the Duke's guards had shown Kieran earlier. He nodded to Wass, the man on guard this evening as the man came to attention. Kieran leaned forward and opened the tent, holding the flap open for her. "Your majesty." he said coolly.

The hurt look on her face almost broke his resolve, but he kept his face impassive. He'd decided on the journey here that she would have to come to him before he would become any more involved. She straightened her shoulders and marched into the tent, then turned to face him.

"Was there something else, your majesty?"

She stomped a foot in frustration, her blue eyes flashing. "Just what has gotten into you, Kieran Chace?"

"What do you mean, my Queen?"

"That!" she hissed. "You've been avoiding me all day and when you do deign to speak to me you're so formal I can hardly stand it."

"Perhaps you would prefer the company of Vetin, my queen?" he said in a venomous

tone.

“What?”

“You appeared quite taken with the Duke's son earlier today, I thought perhaps her majesty preferred his company to mine.” Though he tried to keep his voice even, Mira could detect the hurt in his voice.

She laughed softly, taking a step toward him. “You're jealous.” she said with a note of amazement in her voice.

All of Kieran's resolve left and he suddenly swept forward into the tent, grabbing her arm and pulling her around to face him. “Do I have a reason to be?” he asked dangerously.

“No, Kieran, you don't. How could you be jealous of someone I do not even know? Someone I could not possibly be in love with? I have no interest in Vetin, my heart has already been lost to another.”

She watched as his reaction played out in his icy blue eyes. Finally, they lit up in understanding.

“Are you saying what I think you're saying?”

“Do I have to spell it out for you?”

His shoulder's straightened for a moment, but he recalled Fallos' words and his shoulder's slumped again in defeat. “It matters not. I am no noble and not suitable for a Queen.”

She laughed mirthfully. “Obviously I am not the only one receiving Fallos' instruction. I will speak to him, Kieran. I am certain there is a way to deal with the situation.”

He reached out and grabbed her, lifting her feet off the ground as he spun her around in the tent and laughed joyfully.

“Put me down, Kieran. You'll tear your wound.”

He stopped, but did not release her. Instead he bent down and kissed her thoroughly, leaving no doubt her mind how he felt about her. Finally he pulled away and when he spoke, his voice was hoarse. “It is late, Mira. I should see the guards and insure the watch is set before I turn in and you should get some rest. It is likely to be a hard few days. We will be passing into Hollowton late tomorrow and the Duke indicates we will be hard pressed once there.”

She nodded, afraid to speak. She was still breathless from his unexpected kiss and wasn't sure she would make sense if she spoke.

Kieran turned and started to leave, but stopped at the door, throwing a cocky glance over his shoulder at her. “It might be that you will be making some oath cuts of your

own in the near future.” He ducked and quickly left, not waiting for her response.

Mira blinked twice and her eyes widened as she unraveled the meaning behind his words. Claspng her hands together, she twirled around gleefully before collapsing on the cot and stared at the ceiling, recalling every moment of Kieran's kiss over and over in her mind before she finally rolled over and slept, a smile of contentment on her face.

As Kieran had promised, the next day was difficult. The land changed radically as they moved into Hollowton, with trees and larger bushes appearing almost out of nowhere. The terrain here was still much different from WineGarden, but the only discernible difference tactically was that the land was still dry enough to cause the lower lying vegetation to be quite thin. It made it more difficult for men to hide in the trees, as they could easily be discovered by the glint of the sun off their metal armor and helmets.

There were no blatant attacks upon them as they entered Hollowton, but they'd gone no more than a few leagues before the periodic harassment of archers and rapid, deadly attacks by the Duke of Hollowton's men began to winnow away at their flanks.

Mira rode in between the Duke and Fallos. Duke Highstep casually dismissed the attacks as a childish tactic intended to frighten them into believing a much larger force awaited them at the keep in Redstone, the city in which Farringer, Duke of Hollowton, was currently firmly entrenched. The QueensGuard took up positions alongside the trio, bearing large tower shields which they held up to form a sort of canopy that prevented the enemy's arrows from harming the queen and her companions.

“The real fight will be in Redstone, your majesty.” Duke Highstep said with a trace of concern in his voice. “We have twice been forced to withdraw, but I believe we can take it with the addition of your troops.”

“What is the problem with taking Redstone Duke Highstep?” Fallos asked quickly.

The Duke's face grew grim. “Well, Castellan, the walls are too high to breach even with ladders. Eighty feet is the measure we've taken – and eighty foot ladders are too weak to support a man in armor. The men have to fight through storms of arrows. When the enemy runs out of arrows they throw rocks. I've had a few of my men brained senseless by those damn rocks.” The Duke's voice was full of frustration.

Dunbar Ilth spoke up from behind them. “I've got the finest archers in the Forgotten Kingdom with me, your grace. We'll take care of the men on the walls, don't you worry about that!”

“Hmmmph.” the Duke replied, slightly offended by the implication that his horse archers were less than Dunbar's WineGarden crew. “We'll see. But that's not the only issue to deal with. Farringer has a company of seasoned knights under him. The second time we managed to push through the arrows and rocks, we no sooner got to the gates than they burst open and he sent them out after us.” The Duke twisted around and looked at Sir Eleric appraisingly. “They charged out screaming and calling on Dirge to help them. But they needed little help from Dirge.”

“Mayhap I can speak with any Dirgian Knights we might encounter. Any assistance that is not rendered to Her Majesty forwards Franken's cause. If they are made aware that Franken's cause benefits the Master of Night, mayhap they will ride out and join us.” Sir Eleric said plainly.

“The problem, your grace, is that your men are used to fighting on the open plains. There are none who can withstand them in their element. During Count Gheninder's rebellion in WineGarden, I saw a small contingent of your men defeat a heavy foot unit four times their number. I was with the King's army at Hundred Woods. I was certain that none of them would survive, but after their second pass, the foot broke and ran. The problem is that Redstone is not the environment your men are trained to fight in, it is a city surrounded by miles of forest. There is no disgrace to you or your men that Farringer has held. With us to assist I am certain we will drive them out. Your men will be invaluable in collecting those who attempt to flee.” Fallos told the duke deprecatingly.

The Duke looked thoughtful for a moment, then laughed heartily. “It is as you say, Castellan. And mayhap you did not know, but I lead that suicidal charge at Hundred Woods. We were certain that we rode to our deaths, but they had to be kept from reinforcing the keep.” he turned to Mira and looked at her fondly. “I hope you realize, your majesty, what wise counsel you have chosen.”

Mira smiled politely. “There was never any question of my choice. Fallos has always proved himself to be loyal and wiser than most. He is my most valuable asset.”

Fallos bowed politely in his saddle, accepting the compliment and they continued to discuss Redstone and what tactics would best drive Farringer and his men out of the ancient stone keep.

Late in the day they entered the outer edges of the Langtrue Forest. The forest was primeval and the trees had grown undisturbed for centuries. The sounds of birds and animals rustling in the underbrush filled the air, and the arrows that had harassed them throughout the day just stopped.

Mira looked around her, confused, as Fallos informed Kieran that the shields were no longer necessary. “Why not? How do you know this, Fallos?”

“We have entered the forest, your majesty. This forest is the only place east of the Dwarvenforge that elves still call their own.”

“I did not know that.” Mira looked pensive for a moment. “But what has that to do with the archers stopping their attacks?”

“The Duke of Hollowton respects the ages old treaty between his ancestors and the elves. The woods are almost inviolate. No man brings an army into them to fight or hide, and none defiles them by waging war in its midst, even though only a small piece of the forest reaches this far into Hollowton. We have not seen elves in this piece of woods for centuries.”

“I see. How far will we travel before we are out of the forest?”

“We will camp within the forest tonight, and we will leave its protection sometime late tomorrow afternoon.” Duke Highstep explained. At Mira's look of confusion he explained. “There are places along the edge of the forest which are set aside for travelers such as ourselves. We will be safe, the elves will not bother us if we do not bother them.”

Mira nodded distractedly, acutely feeling her lack of education regarding her own kingdom. She would have to remedy that, and quickly. She knew much about the political status of each duchy, who ruled and what their major exports were, but of things like this she had no knowledge. She wondered briefly if there were similar treaties between the dwarves and HillGuard, one of the duchies that lay directly along the Dwarvenforge. She made a note to ask Fallos about it when they had time to talk leisurely of such matters.

As Duke Highstep had promised, they came upon a good sized clearing in the trees an hour before sundown. The Duke turned to Mira. “We should stop here for the evening, my queen. We will not find another spot this large along this road. Even with this large a space, most of the men will be forced to sleep in the road.”

Mira nodded. “Let us set up camp then. An early night will do the men some good before we reach Redstone.”

The Duke bowed his head. “For such a young queen, you are most wise, your majesty.”

Fallos barked an order behind them and the men began going about the business of setting up camp for the night. A detail of men came forward from the RangeWarders troops and quite quickly set up the common tent, so that the Dukes and the queen would be able to sit and discuss the next day's travel and plans for their attack.

It was fairly early in the evening when the sun set, and those in the common tent moved outside, preferring the campfire and stars outside to the chill in the air that seemed to seep through the canvas sides of the tent. Mira moved out the door, and the QueensGuard suppressed their pleasure at moving outside while following her. They stood back from the fire in a leisurely circle, laughing and joking quietly amongst themselves. Kieran stood a little apart so that he was positioned behind Mira, who had taken a seat near the fire on a large rock. She was surprised when she'd seen the rocks around the fire pit earlier, but as she leaned forward and let the warmth of the fire chase the chill of the night air away, she was grateful for the foresight of others.

She listened quietly to the banter of the men around the fire, not really hearing what they said but taking comfort in the ebb and flow of conversation. It took several moments for her to realize that the conversation had stopped as she heard Duke Highstep swear under his breath. She stood quickly and followed the men's entranced gazes toward the edge of the woods.

There were four tall, thin women standing at the edge of the trees, just at the edge of the firelight. One of them stepped forward from the others, and stood looking at her expectantly. She realized that it was not a woman after all, but a man with long, light brown hair and a fine-boned face. So fine and pale that it looked like fine porcelain.

And the face looked as cold as porcelain too.

After a few moments, she could bear the silent stare of the man no longer. “You clearly know whom I am, may I have the pleasure of your name?” she asked formally.

“This one is called Ephriam by humans.” he said in a lilting voice that reminded her of a small boy singing. “This one comes representing the Elves of Langtrue, faithful followers of Talimaara, mother of all. And this one would speak alone with the great queen.”

“Not alone elf, if such you are.” Kieran said before she could answer. She shot him a heated glance, and turned to the Duke and Fallos. “Well, is it safe to step a short distance away with him?” she asked.

“I do not advise it my Queen. It is said that when dealing with elves, three feet is the same as three miles. That they can move you through their forests without walking.” the Rangewarder replied earnestly.

“Nonsense, your majesty. They are followers of Talimaara, a friend of Dirge and his faithful.” Fallos said with a tone of contempt in his voice. “In the past they have been friends of our Kingdom. These stories have only spread since they withdrew from our presence because Galignan the Mad tried to hunt them down for being mageborn when he purged the kingdom with the Great Mage Hunt. Truth be told, if they wish to speak with you, then nothing we can do will stop them while we are in this forest. Tread carefully – the Sheel-Tel, as they call themselves, are haughty – but go alone to speak with Ephriam. We will await you here.” he finished.

“I stand corrected, your majesty. My warning was indeed based upon the stories my nursemaid told me as a child.” Duke Highstep replied gruffly.

“Kieran. You and the QueensGuard will await me here. All of you.” she said firmly, looking straight at the elf as she spoke.

She saw Kieran stiffen in the corner of her eye, and his voice was cold as he said “As you wish, your majesty.”

She stood and stepped around the stones to walk towards the elf named Ephriam, studying him as she went. His armor was made of a fine silver chain, but she had not once heard it make the noise that armor normally does. Around his neck he wore an equally fine golden chain that held Talimaara's symbol of wheat crossed with a strung bow. She could not tell what the symbol of Talimaara itself was made of, but it was beautiful. His face was longer than a man's, and his hair was more fine. But his eyes were the oddest thing about him. If not for his eyes, she may have passed him on the street without too much notice. They reminded her of dark brown cats eyes, and they were cold.

When she was close to him, he bowed in the manner of a Duke to his Queen. She lifted her chin in recognition. Her heart was beating rapidly, and she feared that it was given away by the flush she felt creeping up her neck.

“This Queen is a wise one.” he said in his sing-song voice. “The 'Tel of Langtrue Forest have long awaited the arrival of a wise Queen in the Kingdom of Freeland Hold. The 'Tel of Langtrue would aid one Queen who shares our blood against an abomination that would destroy that Queen and the 'Tel.”

“When you said alone, I had thought we would step further away from the fire.” she said.

“Step away from the fire this one and this Queen have done. Behind you sits evidence of this one's meaning. The one who leads your personal guards is of good heart, but is perhaps overzealous in respect to one Queen's person.”

She turned around to look at the fire, and none of the men moved. Not those around the fire, not her QueensGuard, not a single man she could see. Nor were there the normal sounds of a large encampment, though the fire still crackled merrily. She turned back to Ephriam “You are very powerful. How could you have done this?”

“When one Queen enters Forest Langtrue, like all others that enter Forest Langtrue, one Queen and one Queen's army are more susceptible to Talimaara's wishes. Humans do not often accept the wishes of Talimaara the Mother, but in Forest Langtrue, they have not the willpower to deny her. Assurances are offered from this one that they are unharmed.”

She took him at his word, because she decided that she had no choice. “You said that you were willing to help me. I do wish to be Queen, but if you are aware of Duke Franken, then you are aware that I am not yet Queen, and may never be. What type of help would you offer?”

“Talimaara has asked the 'Tel to give up the long wakefulness, and leave the forest to follow one Queen and protect her. Sixteen proud 'Tel have given up wakefulness and immortality to answer the call of the goddess. This troupe of sixteen would travel with one Queen in her quest. Of unbelievable assistance can the children of Talimaara be, even without the protection of the forest. When one is Queen, this one will give up the long wakefulness and travel to her, to show all of her Kingdom that the 'Tel are with this Queen, that the 'Tel have returned to their lives with one Queen. And this one, in the short time that life is allowed without the forest, will train one Queen in the true ways of her blood. This one will show one Queen how magic can be controlled and used for the good of all.”

She was not certain what help sixteen men would be amongst her thousands, but she was certain that an elven advisor would benefit her. They were said to live forever, and to be wiser than even Pyulin the Wise, the first Dirgian Knight to swear as a KingsGuard had been. And though it sickened her, she was intrigued by the prospect of learning more about her magik.

“Are you saying that there is Elven – Sheel Tel – blood in my veins?”

“Indeed it must be so. Guash Tar – humans as they call themselves – are not magical by nature. Only those with the blood of the 'Tel can feel the goddess and use her power. In some the connection to the goddess is infinitesimal, and they hear voices or see things that are not there. Those ones die. In others, the blood runs so strong that

they can feel the goddess even in the cities of men. One Queen is of the second sort, and the goddess would protect her.”

She was confused. There were no tales that she knew of involving elves and humans mating. “I do not know that I am ready to accept such wise counsel, but I will think on it. And I would be glad to have the protection of the 'Tel, and would gladly take the counsel of one as wise as you.”

“One Queen is wise. These three will stay with one Queen, and others will come before daylight. Until the forest is long behind you, these will not sleep or eat. Once the forest has passed beyond the sight of one Queen's army will they behave as humans in these respects.” he said, turning slightly. “Let this one introduce the three that will watch one Queen tonight. First is one that is called Felharrinlas. Fel will be commander of Queen's 'Tel guard. Second is Plinsiniuloul. Plin will be second to Fel. The last of three is known as Unlellarous. Unlell is one who would keep Talimaara in the hearts of the sixteen who will sleep.”

She nodded to each elf in turn, committing the short versions of their names to memory. Fel had dark brown hair and almond colored eyes. He looked like she had always imagined elves except that he too looked cold and distant. Plin looked like a man she had once met from the Kingdom of Trioton – long blonde hair, nearly white, and dark brown eyes. Of the three, Ulell was the easiest on the eyes, and she felt it would be easiest to grow comfortable with him. He had long brown hair, bright blue almond shaped eyes, and an easygoing smile. Of the four elves, only his eyes seemed to hold understanding that she was afraid.

“These ones will guard one Queen's sleep, and this one will retrieve the rest of the sixteen who will sleep. This one is highly pleased to have met one Queen and will be waiting to hear word of one Queen's victory over Tasni and his followers.”

With that they were gone. She didn't see them move, they just were not there any more. When she looked hard, she could see the three in the trees, watching her. The normal noises of her army's camp suddenly came back behind her. The three Ephriam had pledged to her stood watching her patiently. She turned to walk back, and found Kieran standing right behind her.

“Her majesty appears safe.” he said coldly, his eyes looking past her to the three figures standing off in the woods.

“Her majesty is more safe than a few moments ago.” she replied just as unkindly. “If you should see 'Tel – Elves – in the woods, please contain yourself and your men. They have pledged themselves to our cause and I would not alienate them.”

“Then her majesty is blessed. Only in the Kingdom of Amorice, where the royal family is part elven, do the elves openly support a crown.”

“Now both of the southernmost kingdoms of Nordalia have that honor – assuming we win this war.”

“Come back to the fire my Queen, and listen as your sworn men plan your victory.”

As she began to follow Kieran back to the fire, the three Tel followed her wordlessly, the expressions on their faces were severe and their eyes were filled with centuries of distrust of men. Kieran held up his hand and she stopped, sighing with exasperation. “What now, Captain?”

He jerked his head toward the elves. “Why do these three follow you?”

“They will accompany me from now on, and the others will join us tomorrow.”

“Others?”

“Yes, others. The 'Tel have pledged to me and to show their intentions are true they have sent these three to stand guard. The others will assist our army.”

Kieran said nothing, but he did not move again either.

“Is there something else, Captain?” Mira asked icily.

“No your majesty, there is not.” Kieran replied, his tone clearly indicating that he did not like the closeness of the elves or the implication that he could not protect her without their help. He turned on his heel and led them back to the fire.

Except for Fallos, the men around the fire were startled by the elves who appeared. The Castellan merely bowed respectfully in their direction and then turned his attention back to the task at hand. A look of interest crossed the three 'Tels face at Fallos' action and after a few murmured words between them, they all inclined their heads in response. They said nothing more, but stood at the edge of the forest for the rest of the evening, watching and listening to the first men they had had the occasion to closely watch in centuries.

After Kieran had explained their presence and the other's initial shock wore off, the men continued to discuss their plans, all the while surreptitiously casting curious glances at the elves.

Mira sat again near the fire, but she did not hear a word of planning, and if anyone asked her a question she was not aware. She could feel the forest. And it knew who she was. Now that Ephriam, if that was his elven name, had pointed it out to her, she could feel it in the rock she was sitting on. She could feel the tree limbs stretching high above the road shying away from the heat of the fire. And she could feel a soothing feeling of completeness. Here she would not have to draw the mana from the world around her. Here it was always with her. She suspected that without knowing, this feeling was what had made her feel so at peace and distracted earlier in the evening.

The next day, she would not even remember going to bed. But she did remember vivid dreams of a beautiful woman bearing a sheaf of wheat in her left hand and a bow in her right. Occasionally the woman would set down the sheaf and shoot a single piece of wheat high into the air, the seeds falling from the wheat to populate the land.

Chapter 15

When they awoke the next morning and stepped outside they were greeted by the presence of the sixteen 'Tel Kieran had mentioned the night before, standing quietly near the dead campfire. As a group they bowed politely to Mira and all but Ephriam moved back from the campfire.

“One Queen, this one has brought the sixteen who will sleep. They will assist in any means one queen desires.” He spoke directly to Mira in his sing-song voice, ignoring the others.

Fallos leaned down and spoke quietly in Mira's ear. “They would be a welcome addition to the QueensGuard. They all carry bows and their ability in that respect is legendary.”

Mira nodded. “They will be most welcome to assist the QueensGuard. I am told that their ability with a bow is beyond compare.”

Ephriam smiled at her words, the first smile Mira had seen from the somewhat withdrawn 'Tel. “One Queen is wise, the sixteen who will sleep are indeed more capable with a bow than any Guash-Tar could hope to be.”

The face of Dunban, captain of the archers, took on an injured expression. “Forgive me, your majesty, but they are as yet untried and my archers have thus far proven to be more than adequate.”

Ephriam smiled like a parent indulging an over-eager child. “One Queen will permit

one to demonstrate?"

Mira thought for a moment. She welcomed the support of the elves but could not risk insulting the men who had thus far fought for her. A demonstration might serve to put them all at ease. "Very well, Ephriam. I will permit such a demonstration."

Ephriam bowed politely. "One is wise. Pray, tell one your name, human." he commanded as turned to face Dunban.

Dunban straightened his shoulders. "I am Dunban Ilth, captain of her majesty's archers."

"Dunban Ilth, please choose your best archer and one will choose from among the sixteen who will sleep to match him."

Dunban looked pensive, a hand stroking his chin as he considered which archer to choose. Finally he snapped his fingers and called out, "Ansul, to me!"

A wiry young man with long sandy hair and dark eyes trotted up to Dunban. "Yes, Captain?"

"Do you feel up to a little contest?"

The young man grinned, flexing his fingers. "Yes, sir."

Dunban patted him on the back. "Ansul here is the best of my archers, Lord ... " he trailed off, not knowing how to address the 'Tel.

"Ephriam. One is known as Ephriam among your kind." the elf replied simply before turning and casually pointing at one of the elves ranged out behind him. "Alinterrel, one requests that you take up this challenge."

The elf Ephriam had indicated nodded once and silently moved forward, a long bow in his hand. "The road, one thinks, would be best." He turned and gestured to Dunban. "Captain of the human archers, would you join one to appease your need for proof?"

Dunban nodded and joined the elf, standing off on the side of the road near Ephriam.

The group moved to stand beside the road, watching intently. Ephriam took a small pouch from one of the others and then proceeded to move out into the road some fifty yards from where Ansul and Alinterrel now stood, eyeing each other competitively.

"One will throw an apple into the air. The human may try first, then Alinterrel. One will continue to increase the distance until one misses. Is this acceptable, my queen?"

Mira nodded and gestured with her hand to begin.

Ephriam looked to the two standing in the road, who each nodded, indicating their readiness. He threw the first apple high into the air and Ansul fluidly raised his bow and shot it down. When his turn came, Alinterrel shot his down also. Ephriam and Dunban moved another fifty yards down the road.

This continued until finally Ephriam was almost three hundred yards away. Ansul was sweating now, the concentration necessary to pick out the small target weighing heavily upon him. Alinterrel, on the other hand, stood easily, his face impassive but his eyes showing that he delighted in showing how impressive a 'Tel's skills with a bow could be compared to a human.

Dunban Ilth groaned when Ansul missed the next apple. Ansul's shoulders slumped and he shook his head, berating himself under his breath. Alinterrel ignored him and waited for Ephriam to toss the apple into the air. The others saw Ephriam toss the apple and tried to follow its path. Alinterrel smoothly drew his bow up and in a quick, fluid motion released an arrow. Dunban held his breath, tracing the flight of the arrow until it met with the apple, splitting it into several pieces.

Dunban shook his head and looked up at Ephriam. "I am suitably impressed, Lord Ephriam."

"One is glad to have proven the worth of those who will sleep."

Dunban joined Ephriam as they walked back to meet the others. "How far, Lord Ephriam, could Alinterrel have continued?"

"One believes the distance would be another two hundred of your yards before Alinterrel would have begun to falter. With a larger target, he would have been able to increase that distance to almost a thousand yards."

Dunban whistled under his breath, shaking his head. "Unbelievable."

At the angry look from Ephriam, Dunban put his hands wide. "A human expression Lord Ephriam. I do believe you speak the truth, I am simply amazed at the thought."

Ephriam's eyes softened somewhat at the explanation. "One is pleased to hear you express such words, Lord Dunban."

"Perhaps Lord Ephriam, your elves might be willing to instruct us on how to improve our abilities?" he asked hopefully.

"Perhaps one could convince others to provide such instruction. It is doubtful a human archer could ever rival the 'Tel, but there may be room for improvement. One will discuss it with the ones who will sleep."

When they reached the others, Dunban bowed to the Queen. "Alinterrel has proven that these elves are more capable with a bow than we could ever hope to be. They deserve the honor of serving as her majesty's personal archers."

Mira let out a sigh of relief. "Excellent. Shall we break camp and continue on then? We have quite a distance to travel today and I would like to get as close to Redstone as possible before we break for the night."

At her words, the men moved quickly and soon they were underway.

They traveled unmolested for the rest of the day. As the forest gave way to the less dense woods often found in Hollowton they found themselves once again cresting the hills and valleys of the duchy. Mira thought it had been appropriately named, for the landscape was dotted with hollows, valleys and cresting hills.

As they crested the last hill, Mira could see the flickering light of hundreds of torches littering the bottom of the valley. She looked straight across and could see torches high above the ground, illuminating pieces of what she assumed was Redstone. The brightest lights were nearly a mile away.

Fallos moved up next to her and sat gazing at the lights. “The slow decline of this particular hill into the valley gives them excellent line of sight. They see everything that comes into the hollow, regardless of the direction.”

Mira chewed pensively on her lower lip. “This will not be easy, will it Fallos?”

He shook his head sadly. “No, my queen. It will not. But it must be done. Redstone can hold for years in a siege. We cannot allow it to become a place of refuge for those who stand against you. It must be taken, at any cost. It is even more important than KingsHome, in the end.”

“Well then, we ought to make camp and get some rest. It looks like the next few days will be trying.” Her voice was hollow as she tried to detach her emotions from the knowledge that many of the men that ranged out behind her would, again, be asked to die for her. She turned her horse away from the view of the city below and moved off to where Duke Highstep's men were already preparing the campsite.

They discussed their plan of attack one last time over the evening meal. The elven archers would hang back with the Queen, but would initiate the attack by picking off the men on the walls, and would continue to keep any who replaced them busy by firing at them while the others forced their way into the city. Sir Eleric had requested to lead a contingent of knights into the city once the gates had been opened. Mira had not wanted to give permission, but she relented when he pointed out that the archers and most of the QueensGuard would remain behind to protect her. After she had given her agreement he and Sir Harren had taken off like children to gather the other knights and discuss strategy.

“If we can get inside the city, we can take it and the keep.” Duke Highstep stated confidently. “Getting in has been the problem all along.”

“I don't want her majesty inside the city walls until the keep has been taken.” Kieran put forward. “It would be dangerous for her to be in the path of any who manage to escape the keep and archers in the towers would easily be able to reach her.”

“One Queen should not be afraid of arrows. One queen can easily shield herself from such things.” Unlell's voice indicated his confusion at the implication that the queen would be in danger from mere archers.

Fallos' eyes narrowed and his voice was edged when he spoke. “Her majesty will do no such thing. Such things are forbidden by our laws.”

Unlell looked surprised and turned to Mira. “Is it truly so, one queen? One had thought that the choice of one queen to rule would have indicated a change in the law?”

Mira looked uncomfortable, but her voice was strong as she replied, knowing how most of the others felt about magik. “It is so, Lord Unlell. The law exists and must be upheld.”

Unlell stood, then, and angrily announced, “One thinks men are foolish. If one queen has the ability to protect herself one believes she ought to do so.”

Fallos stood and bowed politely. “Lord Unlell, we respect the counsel of one so wise but do not agree. Magik cannot be wielded by our queen without destroying the kingdom. We are not as controlled as the 'Tel and though her majesty might use magik to protect herself at first, the path to destruction is easily walked.”

“Then you are more foolish than we had anticipated.”

“Stop it!” Mira's voice stopped the men's argument immediately and all eyes turned to her, waiting for her to speak.

She looked directly at Unlell, her eyes glinting hard. “I will not use magik. I will not break the law.” She saw Fallos attempt to hide a victorious smirk and she turned her icy gaze on him. “And I will not be left behind like a child.” She was satisfied when she saw the smile slip off Fallos' face.

“Your majesty, it is-” he began but Mira raised her hand and silenced him.

“I will hear nothing more of this. I will not be left behind and I will not use magik on the battlefield. Is that understood?”

A chorus of quiet “Yes, your majesty” broke out. Mira nodded her satisfaction and turned away from the fire, walking just beyond the light. She stopped and turned to face the city below, staring moodily up at the stars.

A hand on her shoulder startled her and she whirled around to find Kieran standing behind her. A movement further behind him caught her eye and she recognized the graceful motion of one of the three elves assigned to watch over her. She ignored him, trusting that he would remain close enough to thwart any possible danger but far enough that he would not overhear her words.

“Is something bothering you, your majesty?” Kieran asked politely.

“Would you stop with the 'your majesty' Kieran?” she asked, her voice plaintive.

“As you wish.”

She sighed in exasperation and turned away from him. Her shoulders slumped with the realization that she was truly alone.

Kieran watched her back intently, his emotions warring within him. He was angry at

her for treating him as little more than a servant, but not so angry that he could allow her to remain so upset. He sighed, wondering if he would ever get used to being in love with this woman. He took a step forward and wrapped his arms around her. She leaned back into his embrace, reaching up with one hand and holding onto his forearm possessively.

An hour later Kieran escorted Mira to her tent and then left to find his own bed. In the time they'd stood together overlooking the city, neither had spoken a single word but both felt closer than they had and slept soundly through the night for the first time in days.

The morning dawned bright and with the promise of a clear sky. The men moved around quietly, their voices little more than whispers as they prepared themselves to attack castle Redstone.

The elven archers not set to guard Mira led the way, their feet falling silently on the ground as they crept to put themselves into position. The army itself waited just behind the crest of the hill out of sight, not wanting to be seen until they were ready to show their might.

Fallos rode beside Mira, as usual, and Kieran behind her. Sir Eleric and Sir Harren were missing, having taken up their place with the knights and Plengur still traveled with the rest of the wounded. The three elves who had been sent as Mira's guard took up their places, their soft elven voices lilting back and forth and they talked at length in a language Kieran could not comprehend, then quieted. They looked to Unlell, riding next to Kieran, who nodded.

“What are you about, Lord Unlell?” Kieran asked as he caught the exchange.

“One queen must be protected, and if she will not do so herself then it is we who must do so.” he replied cryptically.

Kieran watched the three elves speak in unison, their fingers moving slightly in strange patterns. In a moment they finished, and were quiet, their attention turned to their duty.

Kieran had an idea what the elf had meant, but decided not to press him. If he guessed correctly the elves were just trying to protect the queen and that was something he would not argue against.

He watched as a flight of arrows were shot from the elvish bows on the hillside, and was not disappointed when every one apparently hit their targets. He heard a soft cheer rise from the forward scouts who could see eight men on the walls of Redstone suddenly fall, some of their bodies tumbling to the ground outside the keep.

A horn blew somewhere from within the keep, and at the sound Fallos called out, “It is time. Send them in!”

The men began running down the hill, the knights on horseback flanking them. The lead group of men, survivors of the first fight in SeaCliff, charged down the hill, heading straight for the city gates. As they ran the elven archers continued to rain

flights of arrows down on men who appeared on the walls. Kieran noted with satisfaction that none of the enemy were able to even raise their bows to fire down upon their men, the elves saw to it that they were felled too quickly for them to attack.

As the last of the men raced past the queen, she gently squeezed her knees against the sides of her horse, encouraging him to start forward. Her entourage did not gallop in as the knights had, but rather adopted a more leisurely pace that would have them arriving after the gates had been opened and their army had entered the city.

The men who reached the gates battered at them with clubs. They did little damage however, and a few were felled by archers inside the gates who shot at them as they stood exposed. Suddenly the enemy opened the gates and Mira's men stood shocked for a moment. The thunder of hooves fast approaching them, however, spurred them to dive out of the way as the Duke's knights came charging at them.

At the sight of the knights, Sir Eleric lead his knights to meet them. Kieran could see that by the time they clashed, Sir Eleric was glowing as they said the knight had done on the fight for Mira's mound. He smiled, believing that Sir Eleric and his knights would win that battle and turned his attention to the troops of men who were steadily entering the city through the now open gates.

By the time they had almost reached the gates, the knights had been dispatched, many of them yielding the moment they saw the glow upon Sir Eleric. Most of the fighting had moved to the streets within the city, the gate standing open and unguarded after the Knights left. The least wounded of her men were carrying the more seriously wounded and dragging their dead behind, returning to their campsite atop the hill where the healers and other wounded had remained. Mira saw Sir Eleric, his bloody sword held high, race through the gates screaming praises to Dirge as he went. She threw a broad smile at Kieran before she turned her attention back to the city.

They slowed as they passed under the gate, mindful of possible attacks while within the city. The fighting had moved off through the streets and toward the entrance to the inner keep. As they passed on street they saw two fists of men stop suddenly as they caught sight of Sir Eleric. "It's the Spirit of Dirge himself!" one of them cried, and the entire group threw down their swords and surrendered, their hands shaking in fear. Sir Eleric looked a bit surprised, but he called to the other knights and several led the group of men toward the city gates, intending on taking them outside the city where they could cause no problems until the battle ended.

Kieran laughed at the sight. He'd seen such things before in a long campaign. One or two men would gain a reputation such that no one was willing to stand before him, even if that man was outnumbered.

Mira and her group continued toward the keep, the streets rapidly becoming devoid of fighting. They had just passed one of the last streets before the road opened up onto the long cobblestone avenue that led to the keep when a man suddenly appeared from around the corner of a building and let an arrow fly at the queen. Kieran surged forward to put himself between Mira and the arrow. He gauged the distance and bile rose in his throat as he realized he would not make it in time. "Mira!" he cried out, hoping she could somehow get out of its path.

Mira turned and her eyes widened in fear as she saw the arrow. She started to bed over, intending to slide off her mount when the arrow suddenly stopped in midair, as though it had hit a wall, bounced back, and dropped to the ground.

Before the man could nock another arrow the three elves with Mira fired their bows. A fraction of a second later the man's eyes widened in surprise as he fell backward, three arrows sticking out of his chest. Fallos turned angrily to Mira. "Your majesty, I had thought we agreed that you would not do such things!"

Mira turned to look at him and the amazement on her face drained the anger from Fallos. "You did not do this, my queen, did you?" he said as he turned his gaze on the elf behind him.

She shook her head, still numb. She sat quietly for a moment and realized she could feel something odd in the air around her. She had noticed it before, but had dismissed it as pre-battle jitters. She turned in the saddle and looked at Unlell, her look questioning.

The elf looked mildly at Fallos. "As one told the Captain of one queen's guard earlier, if one queen will not protect herself, it is one's duty to do so."

Fallos face hardened. "Now is not the time for a discussion on this matter. But we will discuss it – at length – later." He turned and gestured to the others to continue on, but his mind was racing. He was truly angry with the elf for his actions, but at the same time he had to admit that whatever magik they had wrought had been useful. Much like the magik Mira used to change her appearance. He shook away the thoughts. Time enough to consider this later and it cannot be changed now.

The Duke, looking shaken, pulled his horse up next to Fallos. "What in Nordalia just happened, Fallos? Was that ... magik?" he asked, shuddering.

Fallos shook his head. "It was the will of the Goddess, your grace. Not unlike the power of Dirge that Sir Eleric wields." he lied blandly.

The Duke exhaled in relief. "Oh, that is something else then. I had thought for a moment..."

Fallos cut him off. "Do not dwell on it, your grace. The elves are merely protecting their queen the best way they know how and that will certainly require calling on the goddess. I am certain they meant no harm and that they felt we would understand their intentions."

The others looked more comfortable at Fallos' explanation. They continued on the few hundred feet to the courtyard. Kieran kicked his horse and moved in front of Mira. He rode ahead, his eyes narrowed as he surveyed the area with an experienced eye. As he reached the courtyard he slowed, surveying the carnage that littered the front of the keep.

Bodies, both enemy and ally alike, littered the courtyard. The doors to the keep stood open and the sounds of open battle rang out. Kieran held his hand up and stopped, the others pulling up to meet him and stopping as well.

“The battle rages on inside, as we expected.” Kieran looked up at the sky, calculating how much time they had before the sun dipped below the horizon. “We need to find out how it goes. Trem,” he called, “let’s check it out.”

Trem pulled up beside him, a lopsided grin on his face. “This is more like it, old friend.”

Kieran glanced sideways at his friend. “We’re just going to find out how the battle fares.”

“Of course. But if we happen to become engaged...”

Kieran grinned. “We would be forced to defend ourselves, of course.”

Trem reached out and slapped his friend on the back. “Well, let us go then.”

Fallos watched them dismount and walk off into the keep. “I dislike this much.” he muttered to himself.

It was almost an hour before the two men reappeared, laughing jovially.

As they approached, Mira anxiously looked Kieran over from head to toe. She sighed with relief when he appeared to be uninjured.

“Well, how goes the fight, Captain?” the Duke called out.

Kieran smiled wryly. “It is all but over. Between the men who keep surrendering to Eleric and the eagerness of our own men, we’ll have the keep secured before nightfall.”

They waited patiently and eventually the shouts and sounds of swords clashing lessened and, finally, stopped entirely. They had just decided it was safe to enter when Sir Eleric appeared in the door and motioned for them to join him. They dismounted and walked up to meet him.

Eleric bowed stiffly. “My queen, the Duke of Hollowton and his family await your pleasure in the ducal court.”

Mira nodded and started to step forward when she noted the pain in Eleric’s eyes. “Sir Eleric, are you injured?”

Sir Eleric bowed his head. “No, your majesty.” He paused and took in a long, shuddering breath. “It is Sir Harren, my queen. He sits at Dirge’s table now.”

Mira reached out a hand and laid in on the knight’s arm. “How?” she asked hoarsely.

“Taking the duke, my queen. He was fighting as well as he has ever done. One of the duke’s men tossed a flask of oil at the floor near his feet. Sir Harren lost his footing and fell to one knee. The duke...” he looked up and met Mira’s eyes. “The duke ran him through without a second thought.”

Mira swallowed against the anguish that surged through her. The great knight straightened himself at the sight of the tears that welled up in her eyes. "My queen, the duke awaits."

Mira nodded thankfully at the man, the reminder of the duke and his family pushing aside her grief for the moment. "Of course, let us not keep him waiting."

The solemn procession walked sedately toward the court, collecting their thoughts as they moved through the halls. There were bodies lying along the halls and Mira averted her eyes, keeping her gaze focused on the door at the end of the corridor. When they reached it, the two knights Eleric had left behind opened them formally and stood aside to let them pass. Mira walked in ahead of the others, her chin held high. She marched straight to the end of the great hall and up the three steps that led to the dais every ducal keep had in its court room. She walked up to the ornate chair set aside for the king or queen, should they choose to visit and turned in front of it. She looked around and caught the gaze of the duke, who sat on a chair near the dais, surrounded by several knights. She held his eyes while she very deliberately sat herself in the chair, suppressing the smile she felt when she saw the man grimace at her action.

Kieran was not certain what he should do so he shrugged and mounted the steps, taking his place behind the chair in which Mira sat. Fallos nodded at his action and Kieran breathed a small sigh of relief that he had acted as expected. Sir Eleric approached the dais and knelt down on one knee. "Your majesty, I present you with this traitor, Pendleton Farringer, the former Duke of Hollowton."

The man actually sputtered when he heard the knight address her. "She is not the queen!" he finally managed to spit.

Mira laughed hollowly, then sat forward in her chair. "Oh yes, Farringer, I am. By law and by right I am your queen. You have engaged yourself in high treason with your actions. Your title is forfeit." She looked around and spotted the man's wife and children hovering in a circle near the wall. "Your family I will spare. You," she swung her gaze back to rest on his face, "I will not."

The man visibly paled at her proclamation. "You would not dare!"

She raised a single eyebrow and sat back in the chair. "Yes, I would." she said with a note of finality. "Sir Eleric, have him executed in the city square. Inform the populace that I will address them tomorrow and accept their pledges. And find the rest of the nobles in this place and have them brought here. They will swear tonight or forfeit their titles and lives as well."

Sir Eleric bowed and motioned for the knights to bring the Duke and follow him to the city square. When they left, she looked thoughtfully at the traitor's family. She motioned for them to approach, and they did so hesitantly, fear in their eyes.

"What are your intentions, Duchess?"

The Duchess, her eyes red-rimmed from crying, dropped into a low curtsy and held it

while she recited the oath of fealty. When she finished she stayed in place, her head bowed, waiting for the queen to accept her pledge.

Mira looked at Fallos, who nodded. "I accept your pledge, your grace."

The woman straightened and smiled with relief. "Thank you, your majesty. You will, of course, accept the humble lodgings of this keep for as long as you require. My servants are yours, my queen."

"Most generous of you, your grace. We will, of course, speak on the morrow."

"As her majesty wishes." the Duchess replied and bowed as she backed away, pulling her sobbing children with her.

The next few hours was a blur of minor nobles who appeared and recited their oaths. After they had finished, the men sat and they discussed the day's victory and what move they should make next. It had grown late and Mira felt the excitement of the day wearing thin and exhaustion set in. Finally she stood. "Gentlemen, it is late. We can continue this on the morrow. Good night."

She walked out, Kieran and the elves following her, a contingent of the QueensGuard trailing behind. Fallos bid everyone a good night and followed her. He caught up to her quickly, as she suddenly realized she had no idea where to go. She looked around helplessly and was visibly relieved when Fallos appeared. Fallos led her to a door that opened onto a long corridor, doors leading to rooms and suites of rooms along its length. The elves quickly spoke amongst themselves and Unlell finally spoke. "One queen, we will stand guard here. It is unlikely one queen will be in danger, but one believes in caution at all times."

Mira smiled at Unlell. "Thank you, Unlell. For everything." The emphasis she put on everything left no doubt to the others that she also referred to their protection earlier in the day.

Unlell bowed. "One hopes one queen will learn to distinguish between that which is destructive and that which is not."

The expression on Fallos' face told Mira her old friend was put off by the exchange, but it was late and she let it lie. Fallos led the queen down the corridor to the last door on the right side of the hall. When Kieran saw Fallos stop at the door, he directed the contingent of QueensGuard to take up quarters in two of the rooms half-way between Fallos and the entrance to the wing. "I'll be back shortly, we'll get the roster straightened out then." The men nodded and entered the rooms while Kieran began to walk toward Fallos.

Fallos opened the door to Mira's room it widely. Kieran walked past Mira and entered the room, scrutinizing it carefully. When he was satisfied it was safe he walked back into the hall and nodded at Fallos.

Fallos turned to Mira. "Good night, child. Soon we will return you to KingsHome, where you belong."

Mira impulsively kissed Fallos on the cheek. "Thank you, Fallos." She watched as Fallos went to the door across the hall from her room and opened the door. Then she turned and began to walk into her room.

Kieran caught her by the arm as she walked by him. "Good night, Mira." he said quietly.

Mira turned her face up at him, smiling dreamily. "Good night, Kieran."

As he looked down at her he lost his resolve to restrain himself. He reached down and took her face between his hands and kissed her, not caring if Fallos still stood watching or not. When she began to twine her arms around his neck he came to his senses and pulled away.

He cleared his throat quietly. "Now is not the right time for that, love." he whispered. "Good night, Mira." he said in a normal tone.

Mira watched him walk away curiously. Her stomach felt as though a thousand butterflies had taken to flight inside it and her cheeks were flushed. She saw Fallos looking at her sternly from his door across the hall.

"Do you need something, Fallos?" she asked innocently.

He scowled at her attitude. "Have a care, Mira. Though his heart may be noble, his birth is not."

Mira had no reply and watched as he closed the door. She slammed hers and fled angrily to the bed, throwing herself on it and banging her fists into the pillows. When her frustration at Fallos' words had spent itself, she lay back, her chest heaving. Everything she wanted seemed forbidden by the simple circumstances of birth. She was not fit to be queen because of her blood. And now she could not have Kieran because of his. She had planned on speaking to Fallos about the latter but from his tone she knew it was hopeless. She grabbed a pillow and hugged it to her, silent tears running down her cheeks.

They spent the next few days doing all sorts of mundane and not so mundane tasks. Mira accepted the pledges of almost the entire city, those who disagreed left and headed west, hoping to find refuge in one of the remaining neutral duchies. Duke Highsteps men had a grand time chasing down the remaining troops that had hidden themselves within the city. Over the course of two days they chased down three separate groups, each making a break from the city in an attempt to head south and cast their lots with Duke Franken, refusing to submit to the rule of a mageborn.

Other time was spent planning their next move. They had sent messengers out to inform the duchies friendly to the queen that she had, for the most part, taken Hollowton much as she had SeaCliff. The Duke and Fallos were adamant that they remain in Redstone until the remainder of the duchy had been subjugated and they heard back from their allies.

While a large contingent of troops stayed on in Redstone, the rest forayed into the countryside to put down any remaining rebels. While they waited, Fallos spent a great

deal of time instructing the queen on the finer points of diplomacy as well as educating her on the various duchies, that she might better understand each one and be able to deal with them when they managed to take back KingsHome.

Mira spent time with Kieran, as well. As the Captain of her guard he was never far away and she took advantage of this by taking walks in the gardens alone. Well, alone in that no one else but Kieran accompanied her. She stole a kiss here and there and they talked a great deal. Some nights they sat outside on one of the great stone benches in the garden holding hands and staring up at the stars silently.

She was determined to speak with Fallos regarding Kieran but she still recalled his words vividly. He was not noble by birth and she could not conceive of a way to get around that law. But Fallos always seemed to turn in early or was preoccupied in discussions with the Duke. So she put it off, simply enjoying the time she was able to spend with Kieran.

Several weeks had passed when messengers began to trickle in. Once Mira's army had turned the attention of Hollowton from GrovesHold, Duke Harren had been able to concentrate on Reedswallow. With the aid of DoornesBane, they had forced the duke to surrender. WineGarden had easily taken EastGuard, the troops there had surrendered without much of a fight. The rumors of the iron fist of Franken in his duchy were apparently quite true and the men there had no intention of supporting him if an alternative was available. The Dukes who had sworn to the queen were on the way to RangeWard, having determined it was the most central place for them to meet before continuing on to KingsHome. A quick note from Duke Harren indicated that he brought with him the traitorous duke of Reedswallow and the duke's heir, who had decided that fealty to the queen was a more desirable outcome than the headman's ax. The anticipation in the air grew as the days wore on, knowing that once their army had returned they, too, could move to meet in RangeWard and then together they would march on KingsHome.

Mira's army began to return piece by piece. Finally, they had all arrived and plans were set to begin the march to RangeWard the next day. The Duchess ordered a feast to be prepared to send the men on their way. She had explained to the queen at length that while she was uncomfortable with the thought of magik, she was nonetheless impressed with Mira and felt that perhaps a mageborn queen would not be so bad. "After all," the Duchess had whispered conspiratorially, "it is undoubtedly men, mageborn and not, who are prone to violence and destruction, not the women."

They feasted that night as they had not feasted in months. Mira realized, with some surprise, that it had not been as long as it felt. She was so far removed from the young girl that had come home to her father that she wondered if even her mother would recognize her.

The Duchess had managed to locate the ducal musicians and set them about playing for the evening. Mira danced with most of the nobility and Fallos, of course, but she would always remember the one dance she had managed to get with Kieran. The nobles had been a bit shocked when she called him out to dance with her, but Sir Eleric had smoothed things over, calling the dance a reward for the man's excellent service to the queen.

Now she was pacing in her room, recalling the way his icy blue eyes had stayed glued to hers the entire time. Finally, she could stand it no more. She had to speak with Fallos before the situation with Kieran drove her insane.

She opened her door and marched across the hall, rapping lightly on the door to Fallos' room. He opened it a few moments later and, despite the surprised look on his face, bid her to enter. She was so wrapped up in what she would say to Fallos that she didn't notice Trem standing outside his door down the hall.

“Well, what is it, Mira?” Fallos asked as he sat wearily in a chair.

Mira paced about the room, her hands laced together behind her back and her skirts flying about her when she turned. Finally she stopped and nervously licked her lips. “It's about Kieran.”

Fallos smiled patiently. “I thought it might be.”

“Don't you smile like that at me, Fallos.” she scolded him while wagging a finger in his direction. “You know exactly what the problem is and you also know how to fix it.”

Fallos looked critically at his queen. She may be a queen, but she's still a young girl in love with the wrong kind of man. He sighed. “Your husband must be a noble, child. That is all there is to it.”

“That's a stupid law!” she cried petulantly.

Fallos arched an eyebrow.

“What?” she asked with a pout.

“I am waiting for you to stomp your feet and throw yourself on the bed as you did when you were young.” he teased.

“Oh, you. Stop it.” she said, suddenly tired. “What can I do?”

Fallos sighed. “You are too much like your father. Stubborn and relentless. Fine. If you must marry this man you must find a way to bestow nobility on him.”

Her eyes lit up at the thought of so many duchies with no duke.

Fallos saw the light and immediately put it out. “You cannot do so by giving him one of the duchies you have taken. The Dukes' lines must continue unbroken. For centuries they have all been able to trace their lines back to the Knights of Legend. Do not destroy that, it would be your undoing.” he warned.

She frowned and began pacing again. “There is nothing left to do then.” she said sadly.

Fallos stood and walked to her side, putting a hand gently on her shoulder. “You will find a way. You are very much like your father and he was always able to find a way

to get what he wanted.”

“If I can't marry Kieran then I will not marry.”

“King Franken will be devastated to hear that, your highness.”

Mira whirled at the voice and her eyes went wide at seeing Trem lounging indolently against the closed door.

Fallos' eyes narrowed as he pushed Mira behind him. “I warned you, FreeSword. Get out before you get hurt.”

Trem laughed. “I think perhaps you have lost your mind, old man. Your swords are on the other side of the room and if you try to reach them...” he flipped a dagger from his sleeve and tossed it in the air, catching it easily with his other hand, a satisfied expression on his face. “But if you'd like to try, I do need the practice.”

“Fallos told me you were up to no good.” Mira interjected “What do you want?”

“You, of course. And Kieran. But if I take you from here he'll follow and it will be easier to take care of him when he isn't surrounded by elves and guards.”

“If you're going to kill me, kill me here.” she raised her chin defiantly in his direction.

She was chilled by Trem's laughter. “I have no plans to kill you, your highness. Nor harm a single hair on your head. The killing is for Kieran, not you.”

Fallos saw the confusion on her face. “Franken.” he hissed. “He desires to wed you to seal his claim to the Throne of Farren.”

“Very good, old man.” Trem conceded.

“I would rather die.” Mira declared through clenched teeth.

Trem shrugged. “You have no choice, your highness. I will not break my contract by allowing anyone to harm you.” He tilted his head as he gazed at her. “In fact, I'll be just as good a protector as Kieran was.”

“You are not even half the man that Kieran is.” she retorted hotly.

“Yes, well, we can't all be Kieran Chace, can we?” he said coldly, his eyes narrowing. “Of course, I don't see him here protecting you, so he really isn't much of a man now, is he?”

Mira took a step forward, her fists clenched in rage. Trem smiled and beckoned to her. “Yes, come here so that we might leave, your highness.”

She stopped in her tracks unsure of what to do. She knew that most everyone else was still feasting. She and Fallos had retired early and she had given leave to the QueensGuard to enjoy themselves this last evening. The elves had reluctantly returned to the edge of the woods a week ago, their discomfort at spending so much time inside

evident on their delicate faces. She had assured them she would be fine in the city with the QueensGuard and they had agreed that it was unlikely an enemy would reach her here.

Trem took a step forward. "Now, your highness, you will come with me and the old man can sit quietly in a corner." He took another step forward. "Believe me old man, I'd prefer to kill you but that is not a part of my contract and I just don't have the time right now."

He took one more step forward and Mira saw Fallos move out of the corner of her eye. He started to dash past her and she saw Trem pull back his arm to throw the dagger, a lurid grin of delight on his face. "No, Fallos!" she cried out, and threw herself in front of him.

She felt the dagger pierce her shoulder and she cried out in pain, clutching her shoulder as she fell to the floor. Her momentum threw her toward the wall. The last thing she remembered was the feel of her head hitting the stone and the cry of Fallos at the sickening thud the impact made.

Fallos turned on Trem, his eyes blazing and a growl coming from his lips. He raced toward the man and tackled him. The two rolled around on the floor and Trem was genuinely surprised by the strength in the old man. He twisted an arm around and reached for another dagger, concealing it from the old man's vision.

Fallos finally gained control and set himself atop Trem, straddling the man and pinning the FreeSword's arms with his knees. He wrapped his hands around Trem's throat, tightening his grip and noting with grim satisfaction that the FreeSword's eyes were bulging. He shook the man, trying to kill him as quickly as possible so that he could help Mira.

They both heard Kieran's call from down the hall and the momentary distraction caused Fallos to shift slightly. Trem took advantage of the movement and pulled his arm from under Fallos knee. Reaching up quickly he drove his dagger through the old man's chest without hesitation.

Fallos reacted instantly, pulling his hands away and reaching for the dagger. Trem threw the man off of him and watched dispassionately as Fallos lay on the floor bleeding to death. He noted with experience that he had missed the heart, but hit a lung. It might take him a while, but he would die nonetheless.

Trem took several long strides and placed himself behind the door, drawing one more dagger from his boot. He waited for Kieran, trying to control his breath. He was still gasping and it wouldn't do for Kieran to hear him lying in wait. He heard Kieran's tentative call outside the door, and smiled grimly. He heard the rasp of a sword being drawn and readied himself, knowing he would get only one good shot at Kieran. If he did not do this right the first time he'd be forced to fight his friend and then the outcome was not assured.

Kieran opened the door and stopped in the doorway. His heart fell as he caught sight of Mira lying motionless near the wall, blood splattered in her hair. He gripped his sword tighter as he caught sight of Fallos, lying in a pool of blood. Every sense

became instantly heightened and he listened carefully for anything that might give him a clue as to what had taken place.

A moment passed and he heard nothing. Cursing softly he stepped into the room.

He heard the slight creak of the door hinge as it moved toward him and when he would recall the night in the future he would be certain it saved his life. He quickly leapt ahead, trying to turn his shield arm to door and was rewarded when a dagger tore into his upper arm. He staggered back but quickly regained his balance, placing his feet firmly on the ground and brandishing his sword menacingly.

His mouth dropped when he recognized his attacker. "Trem?" he asked incredulously.

Trem shrugged as he pulled his sword. "Contract." was all he said.

Kieran nodded, understanding. "Mira?"

"No, Kieran. You."

Trem's announcement had the desired effect. The tip of Kieran's sword dipped slightly toward the floor and Trem raced forward, his swing already in motion. Kieran stepped back and raised his sword, stopping the edge of Trem's sword from cutting him open from hip to hip.

The fight was brief, as Trem had known it would be. Kieran had always been better in a fight than he and his friend had the advantage of rage. Trem's few swings were easily deflected while Kieran's easily hit their mark. A few well placed slashes and Trem was on his knees.

Kieran looked down at his old friend, his icy blue eyes caught between hatred and friendship. Finally they settled into understanding. "Better to die than fail, Trem."

Trem smiled weakly. "Better to die than fail, Kieran."

Kieran drew back and cleaved the man's head from his shoulders. He set down his sword, trembling, and raced to Mira. He saw the rise and fall of her chest and he breathed a small sigh of relief. He heard a slight cry from behind him and turned. Fallos was still alive. He stood and moved to his side, bending down to examine the old man.

Tears filled Kieran's eyes as he recognized the mortality of the wound. "I am sorry Fallos. So sorry. This is my fault."

Fallos, grimaced with every breath he drew, tried to speak. "No." he gasped. "Swords."

Kieran's face scrunched up in confusion. "Swords?"

"Mine. Get them." he managed, wheezing.

Kieran raced to the desk and picked up the scabbards, still attached to a belt. He raced

back and knelt again at Fallos' side.

Fallos looked at them, then looked into Kieran's eyes. "Yours."

"Fallos, I can't take - "

"Yours." Fallos insisted. The old man grabbed blindly for Kieran's hand. When he found it he patted it. "Mira."

Kieran swallowed and bit back his tears. "She breathes still, Fallos."

Fallos weakly nodded. "Yours."

"I understand, you want me to keep your swords."

Fallos shook his head and closed his eyes with the effort. "Mira. Yours." he managed.

Kieran held his breath. "Do you mean she can marry me?"

Fallos smiled one last time. "Mira knows how."

"May Dirge greet you warmly and feast you well this night, Fallos." Kieran said as the man gasped for breath. He saw Fallos smile stronger at his words before the old man exhaled one last time. Kieran patted the old man's hand. "Rest well, Fallos."

"Mira!" he exclaimed. He rose and ran to her side, setting Fallos' swords next to him and turning her gently on her back. He sucked in his breath when he saw the dagger protruding from her shoulder. He examined her quickly, pushing her hair gently away from her face to see where the blood had come from. He let out a small sigh of relief when he realized that the blood had come from the dagger and not her head. He reached out and took a hold of the dagger. "Forgive me, love, but I must remove this before you awaken and feel the pain a hundred times over."

He put a hand on her shoulder and counted under his breath. "One ... two ... three." He pulled the dagger out as quickly as possible without tearing more skin. His hand drew back with the force of his pull but suddenly he stopped moving. His stomach turned as he felt the cold edge of steel against his neck. He waited, sick at heart, to hear Trem laugh behind him. What kind of magiks did Trem have protecting him? No one could survive a beheading. He thought for sure he'd killed the man, but apparently he'd failed again.

When the man behind him spoke he was chilled to the bone. He recognized the voice but it was not Trem's. No, this was far worse than little old Trem.

Chapter 16

“Drop the knife, Kieran.” Sir Eleric said firmly.

The edge in Eleric's voice was sharper than the knight's sword. Kieran did as Eleric commanded, turning slightly towards Eleric as he did so. “Surely you cannot believe _”

“We are friends, and I will not believe it, but this is duty. Stand up slowly and step toward the door.” Eleric cut him off.

Kieran stood slowly and moved towards the door. “She is bleeding badly with the knife out. She must have help. Can you heal her?”

“I can and will. But not before I am certain that you are safely secured. Again, this is duty. I presume you have checked the other two?”

He's good at this. Kieran thought. The Knight was staying close enough that Kieran would be caught if he tried to run, but just out of reach if Kieran should spin and

attempt to attack him. “They are dead. Fallos gave me his swords as his last wish.”
Among other things that we can discuss later. he thought wryly.

“Close and bar the door.”

“Close and bar it?” Kieran asked incredulously. “Don't we want the guards to enter?”

“Do it!” Eleric's voice was terse. “I do not know for certain whom is a guard and whom is not. Since Fallos did not attempt to kill the Queen, that leaves you, your sworn 'brother', or both. I cannot trust the QueensGuard at this time since at least one of them is a turncloak – you or Trem. And I cannot trust my newly acquired knights – though they are my sworn brothers – because they did not come to the Queen straightaway and the elves have gone to the forest. So we bar the door, I insure that you cannot interfere, and then I see to the Queen. While we talk she bleeds.” Eleric warned.

Kieran quickly closed the door, picking up the wooden bar and sliding it into it's holders. He hadn't noticed that the bar here was only wood. Most keeps used an iron bar for the door to the royal apartments. That was odd.

He turned back to Sir Eleric. “What now, holy warrior? Shall I throw myself upon my sword to give you leave to save the Queen?”

“Would you? If I demanded it of you?” Eleric mused but then shook his head. “No, it is not necessary.” He jerked his head in the direction of a nearby chair. “Sit in the chair there, and leave Fallos' sword belt at your feet.”

Kieran did as he was told, moving deliberately as not to push Eleric to action but as quickly as possible.

“I am glad you are being good about this. I really do not know what else to do. Would that Sir Harren was still by my side.” Eleric explained as he detached the scabbards from the belt, and used it to tie Kieran's arms behind him.

He went to Trem's body and started cutting strips from the brown cloak the man had worn. “Just something light for your feet, I need only hear you trying to get up since I will be in the same room with you.”

Kieran suddenly realized that this must have looked very bad to Eleric. He had been pulling a dagger from her chest, and there were two bodies in the room. Still it rankled him that Eleric made her wait all this time for healing. “Get on with it and save her you purloined fool. If you take long enough she'll bleed to death and I will have to die for it.” he grumbled.

“Then sit quietly, and allow Dirge to save her. For the Kingdom, and for the love you bear her, do not break my concentration.” Sir Eleric barked as he turned toward Mira.

Kieran watched the Knight intently. Each time Eleric had healed through the grace of his god, Kieran had been elsewhere, or preoccupied with his own wounds. That the man would save her was not at issue. How he went about it intrigued Kieran to no

end.

Sir Eleric pulled a golden symbol of Dirge from his tunic. For all Kieran could tell it was twin to the one that Eleric had given him after the battle for Mira's Mound. He then went to the fireplace to fetch some ashes. He spread the ashes around Mira's wound and then knelt down next to her, his stern face now appearing peaceful.

“Dirge Lawmaker, champion of the Langtrue Forest, protector of the weak and the helpless, bring your protection to this child, this queen, this woman. In her time of need she did shun the ways of magik to protect her kingdom from strife, and in so doing did come to harm without the ability to protect herself. I plead that you show your mercy and allow us to keep her here so that her vision of a kingdom ruled in your name, without the influence of Tasni Nightwalker can be realized.” Eleric intoned while holding his symbol in both hands. “I am your willing servant Dirge Al'Langtrue. Come through me to aid this helpless one.”

And then he started to glow. There was a warmth to that glow so strong that Kieran could feel it on his face. But it was a steady, comfortable warmth, much different than the warmth that a campfire would make. And the room filled with the golden light streaming from Sir Eleric. The knight laid his hands upon Mira's bloody shoulder and something about his look changed. Later, Kieran would not be able to put his finger on what was different, but he could tell that Sir Eleric at that time had been more than a simple Knight. More than a holy warrior. A part of Sir Eleric was Dirge himself.

Kieran was startled when Sir Eleric spoke again, for the voice was not the knight's. His skin prickled as the being whom was Sir Eleric addressed Mira. “Child who is not mine, and yet protects mine. Flesh of thine be healed by me. Stay in this world that you may keep my many helpless children here with you.” He moved his hands from her shoulder, and through the rip in her nightclothes Kieran could see no wounds. The Knight's hands went to Mira's head, cradling it gently. “Mind of a mage, wisdom of a scholar, and joy of life that is abundant. These things you shall have again, this I promise. Use it wisely to protect my people, all of it. All of you.” It – for Kieran no longer considered this thing to be Eleric – intoned as it massaged her head.

She moaned and her eyes started to open. “Not yet, little Queen.” the being intoned while touching her eyes. She smiled and her head lolled in its hands.

The being set Mira's head delicately on the ground, then stood and turned toward Kieran. Its eyes were blood red and they held him like an smithy's tongs hold a sword in the flames. “And you, Kieran Oathbound. Your word is as strong as your sword. Perhaps stronger. Rest easy for this one.” he said as he kicked Trem's headless body. Even now, Healpherd, whom you call the “Gate Guarder”, guides him to the afterlife he chose.”

Kieran did not know which god Trem had followed, but he was not able to ask, so he waited for Dirge to finish speaking to him with Eleric's mouth.

“Where will you go when your time comes, Kieran Oathbound? Both Sir Harren and Sir Eleric have spoken with you about my service, and all that you admired in Fallos came from his belief in my teachings. I would welcome you. Oathbound to me, you would be a great servitor in the battle against my hateful brothers. When Am'Ethaan

DarkElf sends the howling for the elves of Langtrue, you and Sir Eleric could lead an army to stop them. When followers of Tasni plotted against your Queen, you would be there at her side to save her. When Mulch Deathblood's priests attempt to bring famine and plague to the kingdom, you would be there to heal my people." Dirge sighed as if he really were just the man whose body he was in. "But you are Oathbound. And you are not yet prepared to break that oath. I cannot offer you that which you wish. All oaths must take second place to an oath to me, or you may not become one of my holy warriors. When you are ready, I would welcome you to my followers. But now I must go, before I tax the good Sir Eleric overmuch. Health to you, Kieran Chace. Guard her well." He turned and walked to Fallos' bed. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he put his head into his hands. Sir Eleric slumped, and then fell lightly backwards onto the bed.

Kieran's arms were starting to cramp behind him. He thought he could slip loose from the belt his hands were tied with, but decided to bear the pain. He had given his word to Sir Eleric. To this man whom had been host to a god so recently. And what of Dirge's words for him? To be a holy warrior, a member of the Dented Shields, that would be the culmination of his childhood dreams. Spending time with Eleric and brave Sir Harren had shown him that followers of Dirge were not all about duty and their deity. But to forsake his life-cuts to join them? He could never do that. All that he was, all that was worth anything about Kieran Chace was bound in his oaths. He was a sworn member of the FreeSword Brotherhood, and his oath-cuts showed that he was worthy. Not like so many men he knew that were false while swearing fealty. He never swore fealty, but with the blood and scars of his oath-cuts he made a promise more lasting, more worthy of trust. Giving that up left him no different than all of those he despised. An empty husk of a man that had no purpose or reason to live.

Eleric groaned and sat up slowly, rubbing his eyes. "How long?" he asked.

Kieran was happy to note that those eyes were back to their normal brown color. "Not more than a quarter glass, Sir Knight." he said. "Though being tied here and fearing for both of you, it seemed like hours."

"Did – did you witness it all? He has never been with me before. I remember it as if it was a dream, and I feel as sore as the day after I first started battle-training." he said in a tone filled with wonder.

"I did see it all, and you are truly blessed, Eleric. The feeling was overwhelming. None who witnessed it would doubt that you are the foremost Knight of the Dented Shield."

Eleric stood and shook his head. "Being the vessel of a deity is nothing." he muttered as he stumbled over and began to fumble at Kieran's bindings. "Being spoken to directly by my god makes you above suspicion, and perhaps more blessed than I."

Kieran rubbed his wrists as Eleric knelt to untie his ankles. "I do hope that you understand my reasons to tie you up." Eleric said, a note of apology in his voice.

"You are sworn to protect the Queen. In your position I would have killed the person

kneeling by the Queen, and never concerned myself with his innocence.”

“Had it not been you, I would have done the same. The sight of Fallos' body lying there... What happened here?”

“I heard a struggle. When I came out of my room Trem was not guarding the door. He had been just a few minutes before. So I shouted down the hall for help, and knocked on the door. When no one answered, I pushed it open.” He felt bile rising in his throat, and swallowed hard. “Fallos was on the floor by the door with a lung-wound in his chest. Then I saw Mira. I knew that she was wounded, but from the door could not tell how badly. I stopped and forced myself to listen – whomever had done this was still here, or they would not both still be breathing. When I heard nothing untoward, I stepped through the doorway to scan the room. The door creaked, and I realized that the attacker was probably there. I spun to confront him, and... It was Trem. My shock and anger nearly killed me. He had the opening to kill me, but he never was quick to take a killing opening. He explained to me that all of this was to get to me. Someone – I think Duke Franken – had hired him to kill me. He was offered a bonus if he brought Mira back to his employer, so he used her as bait to get me into the room. Had I been more suspicious of him, Fallos would yet live.” he swallowed again “It is too late for that though. After I took Trem's head, I checked on Fallos. He had a lung wound. He managed a few words before he died. After I had failed him so horribly, he gave me his swords. Can you think why he would do such a thing?”

“Because you love Mira, and while your vows are different, you are much like any follower of Dirge. He loved Mira, and Dirge had no more faithful servant than Fallos Arilon. He, too, stayed away from training with my Order. He could not reconcile service to Dirge with service to the king. He learned to trust you, and then he learned to love you. I am certain there is more he would have offered you if he had the breath in him. He feasts with Dirge this night, and that is the best reward he could hope for.”

“It will be long before I know any kind of peace. I have failed my Queen, I nearly failed my oath, and I have failed Fallos most of all.” He nearly choked on the despair he felt rising within him, but he swallowed it back and forced himself back to the story. “That was about when you came in. I went to Mira and checked her wounds. I decided that the shoulder wound was the worst of it, but that she had not lost enough blood to pass out. I pulled the knife from her shoulder, and then you entered. I thank you for coming to my call. She might have died.”

“You failed no one but yourself. You trusted a friend. If your friends were Dirgian, or Talimaaran, or Nordalian, that would have been a good choice. But to choose friends with no deity to bind them together... Well, these things happen. The Queen will live, and Fallos was dying anyway.” At the surprised look on Kieran's face he continued. “He would not allow me to heal him. He told me that the glory of Dirge's hall was too far off for him already, that he did not want it prolonged. Your mistake worked for his glory. He was allowed to die like a warrior, rather than forced to live the last days of his life in a sick-bed. He is probably grateful to you.”

Mira moaned. Kieran rose and headed toward her. “Thank you my friend. I wish that your words could soothe my conscience, but at least they give me something to think on.”

Sir Eleric moved toward the door. He stopped and looked appraisingly at his friend. "I think you have much to think on, Kieran Oathbound," he said, his eyes suddenly glassy with the memory of his deity's words. "I think we will all have much to think on." Kieran heard the turmoil in the man's voice and knew he must be thinking of Dirge's words to Mira. The deity had practically ordered her to use magik. "I will leave her in your care and find the rest of the QueensGuard. Then I must find my bed. It is not meant for a man to hold a god in his body, I think."

Kieran leaned down next to Mira. She opened her eyes and smiled at him. That smile lit the room for him as much as Dirge's light had. "Are you well, my Queen?" he asked.

"I am ... well. I dreamt that Dirge himself came to talk with me, that he healed me and then spoke with you." she said dreamily.

Kieran smiled. "That was no dream, my love. He was here, in Sir Eleric's body. I am not a follower of Dirge but I am still positive it was him. He loves you much, and believes that all you suffer is saving the weak and the helpless much pain and suffering."

"I know. I heard him." Memory crossed her face like a searing pain. "Fallos?"

"Gone. There was nothing I could do for him and he was dead before Sir Eleric arrived. I am so sorry, I should have done more. I should not have trusted Trem. I failed Fallos, and I've failed you. Please forgive me." he sobbed, fighting back tears.

Mira reached over and grasped his hand, holding it tightly. "He knew that Trem was up to no good. He knew and he dealt with it his way rather than risk chasing you away. He warned me, and had told Trem at some point that he would kill the man if he harmed me." she said sitting up. "He told Fallos that he wasn't here to kill me, but rather that he was going to take me to Franken."

"That is exactly the thing that I was supposed to be protecting you from. Fallos himself told me that Franken would go to any length to have you at hand for a wedding."

There was a cough at the door. Kieran turned to see Plengur and three other QueensGuard standing there. "Captain, Sir Eleric ordered us here to attend the Queen. What happened here, sir?"

"What happened does not matter. Your Queen is safe, Trem has died a traitor's death, and Fallos fought and died like the warrior he has always been. You will take the bodies from here. Prepare Fallos for a funeral pyre. We will send him to Dirge in the manner he would have wished. You will send Trem's head to KingsHome with the next man that refuses to bend the knee to the Queen. Dispose of the body. We will discuss our failure and what it means to our Queen on the morrow. Tonight a new guard will need to be placed upon the door. One of our original number, and not you – " he said at the look on Plengur's face, "your wounds are not healed enough yet."

He could tell by the look on Plengur's face that the man knew better than to ask

questions. “Yes sir.” was all he said. They filed into the room and began carrying out the two bodies.

Kieran ignored them and turned back to Mira, who stared at the body of Fallos, her shoulders shaking with silent sobs. He moved to sit beside her, letting her lean into the crook of his arm. He winced as he put pressure on his shield arm, recalling all of a sudden that he was wounded. He ignored it, deciding that if he hadn't remembered until now it could not have been that bad. He listened to Mira quietly cry and gave in to his own feelings, tears running silently down his cheeks. He'd failed her, and Fallos and Eleric and ... everyone. Even Dirge, though his words were not unkind, seemed to find fault with his choices.

A hand shook his shoulder gently and he looked up slowly, trying to choke back the growing sense of failure that gnawed at him.

“Captain, we are finished. Fallos' body lies in state in the court and the other has been dumped with the enemy. All but his head, which awaits a messenger. Is there anything else you need?” Plengur's voice was quiet and deferential.

Kieran shook his head. “No, that is all. Make sure one of the others stands guard at the Queen's door and another at the end of the hall. You are to take to your bed and rest. We will need you now more than ever.”

Plengur nodded and started to leave, but Kieran's voice stopped him. “Plengur, see if you can find someone to seek out the elves. Tell them what has happened and that they are sorely needed.”

“Yes, Captain.” Plengur replied before he left, closing the door behind him.

“Come my Queen,” he said “we should leave and let the servants clean the room. It is not meet for you to be here while the blood is washed from the floor.”

She may have said something, but it was muffled by his tunic and her sobs. Kieran ushered Mira back to her room, and sat with her on the bed while she cried. His mind full of thoughts concerning this evenings events.

Kieran sighed, and looked down at Mira, who had fallen asleep even as she cried. He reached up and tenderly wiped the tears from her cheeks. He laid his head back and closed his eyes. He knew he should not stay here with her, but at the same time he could not bring himself to disturb her by leaving. Damn tradition and proprietary this night. He thought tiredly to himself as he hugged the queen closer and slipped into an uneasy sleep.

It was still dark when he felt someone tugging on the front of his shirt and heard a voice whispering his name. His eyes shot open and he lifted his head quickly, trying to shake the sleep from his head.

“Kieran!” Mira was whispering fiercely. “Wake up.”

“I'm awake.” he mumbled tiredly. He shook his head to clear it and looked down at her. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes. No. I don't know.”

Kieran reluctantly disentangled himself from the queen and rose, fumbling around until he found a candle and managed to light it. He closed his eyes against the bright flame, slowly opening them until they adjusted to the light. He set the candle on the desk near the bed and then looked around. Seeing the sitting chair, he grabbed it and carried it over, setting it next to the bed before he sat wearily.

Mira sat up when Kieran had left her side, pulling the blankets around her to ward off the early morning chill. Somewhere deep down she knew she should be offended that she was in her nightclothes, but could not bring herself to worry about that now. She tucked her legs under her and then sat watching Kieran intently. She put her hands in her lap and wrung them nervously, waiting for him to return. When he did she was only mildly disappointed that he did not rejoin her on the bed.

Kieran reached out and took her hands in his, holding them tightly as though he never intended to let them go. She looked up at him, her eyes still cloudy with the painful memory of Fallos' death. “Do I remember last night correctly? Did Dirge really say what I think he said?”

Kieran nodded. “He did. And a great many other things, as well.” He tore his gaze from her face and stared listlessly at her hands.

“I could have saved him, Kieran. I could have stopped Trem and none of this would have happened!” she wailed softly.

Kieran patted her hand almost absently. “You could not bring yourself to break your word any more than I can break mine.” he replied hoarsely. “You gave your word to the others that you would not use magik. You were right to keep your word.”

She wrenched her hands away from him, clenching them both tightly. “No, I was wrong. What good is integrity when it allows unnecessary death? What good is my honor when it serves evil instead of good?” She shook her head, her voice gaining strength with her anger. “My pride is not worth Fallos' death. Nor yours if it came to that.”

Kieran raised his head to meet her eyes and saw that they were blazing with fury and determination now. “If you break your word, how can you be trusted to keep it in the future?”

“I should never have given my word in the first place, and breaking it later to save Fallos could easily have been forgiven. Better to damage my pride than to let a good man die.”

“But Mira, if you break an oath no one will trust you.”

Mira's gaze softened as she saw in Kieran's stormy blue eyes that he was struggling with this not for her, but for himself. She considered the truth of his words and acquiesced. “Then I should have never made such an oath in the first place, or I should have asked to be released from it.”

She saw understanding dawn in his eyes as he realized she had just given him the answer to all of his problems. Well, almost all of them. He thought.

“You are brilliant, Mira. Brilliant!” he exclaimed, leaning forward to kiss her soundly. He stood and actually did a little jig at his discovery. He looked over at Mira and saw her watching him with a peculiar look on her face. He sobered as he realized that she might have taken his sudden excitement the wrong way. He cleared his throat and returned to his chair.

“Fallos.” Mira said quietly. “What happened?”

“I honestly can not tell you, Mira. He was mortally wounded when I arrived. What little he did say was confusing.”

“What did he say, Kieran? Please, tell me.” she pleaded.

“He spoke very little. He took a lung wound and breathing, let alone talking, was difficult for him. He gave me his swords. Forced me to take them. Then he gave me -“

“Yes?”

He cleared his throat and averted his eyes. “He gave me you, Mira.”

Mira laughed tightly. “He did, did he?”

Kieran was hurt by her reaction. “I thought you, that is you led me to believe that... Damn it, Mira, I thought you-”

“Loved you?” she finished for him.

He nodded. “Yes. I thought you loved me.”

She smiled patiently. “I do, Kieran, but Fallos cannot give what is not his.”

Kieran's face fell. “He said you knew how to make it right.”

“I do, but it is not as easy as it sounds. You must be made nobility or it cannot be done. And in order to be nobility you will have to swear fealty.”

“And that cannot be because I would have to break my oath.” he said, dejectedly.

“Kieran, you're a fool. I had thought you smarter than that.” she chastised lightly.

When he still looked confused she cleared her throat. “Kieran Chace, I release you from your obligation. You may stay, or go, as you choose.”

Kieran looked as though she'd slapped him. “You can't be serious? You can't do that!”

She gave him an arched look. “And why not?”

“You can't just wave your hand and make my oath disappear!” he held out the forearm covered in oath cuts. “You can't change this, Mira.”

“I just did. You are released from your oath, Kieran.” her voice held a commanding edge to it.

He dropped his head and buried it in his hands. “You don't understand. I can never face the BrotherHood again if you insist on this.”

She set her jaw and when she spoke again her voice was icy. “Had you planned on returning to them? Am I merely a diversion for you?”

Kieran's head snapped up. “No!” he denied. “Mira, I love you. But you cannot do-”

“I already did.” her voice became less harsh when she went on. “Kieran, what you do next is up to you. You are free to decide for yourself what course you will take. I know what course I hope you will choose, but I will not tell you or direct you. You must make that choice.”

Kieran sighed, knowing she was right. She could release him from his oath. It had been done before, but only when a FreeSword was unable to perform his duties or had failed to live up to the contract bearer's standards. He wrestled with himself, suddenly able to consider what Dirge had said to him the night before. But he'd lived his entire life on pride, and it was not an easy thing to discard so easily. He looked up, his eyes cloudy with indecision. “What about you, Mira, what is your course now?”

“I am going to take back KingsHome and restore my kingdom.” She said without a trace of doubt. It was the first time he'd heard her speak with so much determination and confidence in her voice. “Even if it means using magik.”

“One is glad to hear the words of one queen.” Kieran and Mira both whirled to face the door at the voice. They saw one of the elves that had joined the QueensGuard standing in the doorway.

Mira's expression was resolute. “I am glad to see you again, friend elf.”

The elf bowed politely. “The sixteen who sleep are saddened at the loss of the one called Fallos. That one understood our ways and was wise in the ways of men. Our failure is keenly felt for not preventing this danger to one queen. The sixteen who sleep will stay with one queen from now on. The stone halls of the Guash Tar will become home for the sixteen. It is nothing to suffer in face of the sadness sixteen feel at learning none were here to protect one queen.”

“Perhaps it was necessary. A traitor was exposed and it has kindled a fire in my heart that will only be quenched by drinking at my own table in KingsHome. I had desired to do so before, but it did not drive me as it does now.”

The elf smiled. “One called Ephriam said one queen was wise for so one so young. One sees what that one meant now. One will be stand guard outside now and let the humans sleep. One thinks there are still matters to discuss, one will insure one queen and one man are not disturbed.” He bowed again and left the room, quietly closing the

door behind him.

Kieran looked at Mira as though seeing her for the first time. He was proud of her for throwing off the chains that prevented her from doing what was necessary. As he stared at her, his decision finally made. He chuckled, finding it difficult to believe that this young girl had taught him about honoring his responsibilities.

“Are you laughing at me, Kieran?”

“No, my love, I am laughing at myself. I have been a fool and only now accepted that fact.”

She swallowed nervously and looked at him with anxious eyes. “You will stay with me, then?”

“Am I still the captain of your guard?” he asked lightly.

“For now.” she replied. At his look of surprise she laughed. “I have other plans for you, Kieran Chace.” She sobered before she spoke again. “I find myself without a General for my army.”

Kieran knelt before her and looked up at her pensive face. “My queen, whatever you would have me do, I accept. Not because of oath cuts, not because I must, but because I love you.”

Mira smiled in return. “The first thing you must do is leave.”

Kieran stood and looked shocked. “What do you mean?”

“The room, Kieran. Leave the room. I need to dress and prepare for today. No doubt we will be delayed for Fallos' funeral.” Kieran heard her breath catch slightly as she said the words, but she continued steadily on. “And then we must fill his position and make haste to meet the others in RangeWard. KingsHome awaits under the boot of a murderer. The sooner we arrive, the sooner we can remove that traitorous dog from my throne.”

“I do not think it would hurt if I stayed. Don't you need a helping hand?” he grinned roguishly.

Mira blushed and averted her eyes. “No Kieran. There are some lines even you cannot cross. Go.”

“If you are certain, your majesty.” he said teasingly as he backed toward the door. “I have quite nimble fingers. Excellent for working with buttons.”

Mira pointed to the door. “Go, Kieran. Now.” she ordered.

She watched Kieran leave and close the door, then blushed again as she heard his laugh in the hall. She sighed and collected her thoughts. There had been no time to mourn her parents and she couldn't allow time to grieve for Fallos just yet. Mira was terribly upset by his death, but set aside those feelings for another day. Right now her

entire being was focused on one task – getting to KingsHome and taking back her throne.

Chapter 17

As Kieran made his way to the planning rooms that they had created by clearing out one of the guest suites near the Queen's chambers, he reflected upon the vagary of life.

Two days ago, Fallos was the obstacle in his way, and a hard man to please. Today he walked alone toward the planning rooms wondering how they would finish the war without the old man. His funeral pyre had been magnificent and Sir Eleric had delivered an eloquent eulogy, but Kieran had left the funeral deeply troubled. Fallos had spent his days wandering around and speaking with all the leaders and from his short conversations had come the core of every successful battle plan they had executed.

Now they would have to make do without him. Kieran was unsure how well it would go, and hoped that Sir Eleric was more up to filling Fallos' role than he felt.

When he came to the door to the planning rooms he saw that it stood open. A muted buzz of conversation and warm candlelight spilled out into the hall. After a moment's hesitation to glance at the QueensGuard standing at the door, he walked inside.

“Ah, Kieran.” Sir Eleric looked up as he entered, then turned to address Mira. “That would be all of us, your majesty.”

At Mira's nod, the others took their seats around the u-shaped table that the servants had cobbled together for them.

Sir Eleric was still dressed in his formal garb from the funeral. A white cloak with gold trim, embroidered with the dented shield of his order hung from his shoulders. The soft gray leggings were visible under the sky blue tunic that was belted with a chain of bantam silver shields. “Sir Eleric.” Kieran said, raising his chin in recognition. “That was a fine send off for Fallos. It will do much for the troops.”

“Thank you. It was the best we could do in the middle of a war. He lived and died for his duty and for Dirge, I felt he deserved the best and can only hope that Fallos would have approved.”

“Gentlemen, if you please. Fallos would not wish us to sit around discussing his

funeral until we have moved his bones to KingsHome.” Mira interrupted stiffly, her mouth a tight line.

It pains her. Kieran thought to himself.

“Of course, your majesty.” Sir Eleric replied, exchanging a furtive glance with Kieran that indicated he, too, understood the reason behind her brusque tone.

“Well, then. Let us start by reviewing our troops.” she said with a curt nod in Sir Alden's direction.

Sir Alden stood. “Now that the rest of the RangeWard horse is with us your majesty, I am pleased to say that we number five thousand heavy horse. Some three thousand of those battle-worthy, the rest being injured or too green. The Duke has graciously allowed me to continue to sit on your battle planning sessions as his representative, and I have the authority to commit his troops as you see fit.”

Mira stared intently at the man for a moment. “Sir Alden, do you trust your Duke's judgment on the battlefield? I do not ask you to commit treason, merely ask you to state whether or not you feel he should be the one leading the troops of RangeWard.”

Kieran held his breath. This was dangerous ground to ask the man to walk on. If his liege lord wasn't worthy, who was?

Sir Alden swallowed nervously. “No disrespect intended your majesty, but you are not the one I would choose to general the kingdom's armies. Not with so many worthy veterans about.” He stopped and swallowed hard again, then reached for his glass of wine and took a sip before continuing. “But since you ask, no. The Rangewarder runs our Duchy very well and I would fight and die for him on that point alone. He has a sense of basic battlefield strategy, but he is ... predictable. I believe that is why he allowed me to continue coming to these meetings, your majesty.”

“Thank you for your honesty Sir Alden. I have no intention of naming myself general of the armies of Freeland Hold. I can be the Queen and I can convince the troops to fight for me, but I cannot tell them how to fight or where on the battlefield they're needed. As for your Duke, your assessment matches the one Fallos had given me and which Kieran has reiterated. We are glad to have you still with us.”

“You are too kind, your majesty.” he bowed slightly.

“You may not thank me for long. I intend to end this war so we can all go home and see to the needs of our people. I have decided that should it take a few more lives to end it quickly then we will spend those lives, as much as it grieves me. If we are to plan for a final assault on KingsHome, how many of your men could sit a saddle and do more than die in a battle?”

“If pressed I could offer you something short of four thousand mounted warriors your majesty. The number that we lost in a battle would be higher, but they would fight well.”

“Good enough, Sir. Thank you. Does anyone else have questions for Sir Alden?” Mira glanced around the table quickly. When no one replied she continued on. “No? Good.” She turned to Dunban Ilth. “Captain Dunban. How fare the archers?”

Sir Alden took his seat while Dunban stood. Kieran found it almost amusing that the Captain still felt nervous addressing the Queen. His left hand unconsciously fiddled with one end of his drooping mustache as he spoke.

“Your majesty, we have one thousand foot archers, and nearly five hundred foot crossbowmen. That includes the men from other units too wounded to fight, but well enough to shoot a bow. Some of them are not nearly ready for battle, but if you put them where they cannot hit our troops, they will scare an enemy if nothing else.” He turned slightly towards Sir Alden “Horse archers are – I believe – counted in the RangeWard numbers.” At Sir Alden's nod he continued, “My lord will bring as many more archers with him to RangeWard, along with his heavy foot and light cavalry.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Mira looked to Sir Eleric. “Sir Knight. Do you have an understanding of the state of our foot?”

As Dunban Ilth quickly sat down, Sir Eleric stood to his full height. “I do your majesty. Counting all of the troops that have sworn to you, we have seven thousand foot suitable for battle. As with all of our troops, if we are forced to field them all without more training, we will loose many more than I would like. But they would fight.”

“How many of them are ready to fight now?”

“Six thousand, give or take, your majesty. Of the other thousand, we have near four hundred walking wounded, and somewhat over five hundred farmers and herdsmen that lack even basic training.” he replied.

“Good enough, Sir Eleric. Thank you.”

“Now I have some things to say, and then we should take this information and use it to plan a march from RangeWard to KingsHome.” She announced as she stood slowly. She walked around her chair and turned to face the men.

“It still burdens me, losing Fallos. I know it burdens all of you also. As I stated to Sir Alden, it is not my intention to run this army. I have too many skilled commanders here to even consider it. That should ease your burden somewhat.” She glanced around the table but no one moved even a finger.

She took a deep breath. “Bearing that in mind, here are my commands. First, we need a new general of the armies. I have considered each of you as well as each of my loyal Dukes. I thought about your skills and your experiences, and have put a great deal of thought into what we will need in the coming days. I have decided that Kieran would be the best commander of our forces for the coming battles.” She stopped to gauge their reactions. She saw several arched looks and a few frowns, particularly from the nobility. “Let me explain my thoughts. He has spent more time planning with Fallos than any of you, so he knows what Fallos thought and what Fallos might have been planning for our march into KingsHome. He is known to the troops –

though not always well thought of – and he knows them. Like Sir Eleric, he is capable of sitting at a fire with a small group of men and getting to know them. Like Sir Alden, his prowess commands their respect, even the respect of those that do not like him for his past. And he has the experience that we require. He has moved with large armies and helped to plan their battle strategies.”

Sir Eleric smiled over at Kieran with a twinkle in his eye. Kieran nodded in return, but did not smile. Mira's proclamation was bittersweet. He thought this was what she would decide and while he was pleased that she should think so highly of his abilities, he also dreaded the men's reaction to her decision. The man to fill Fallos' position should be sworn to the Queen publicly, should be trusted by all and should have shown his ferocity on the battlefield to the troops. Eleric would have been a much better choice. But he knew she trusted him and that was important, too. He sighed, knowing he would just have to do his best and publicly confront those that saw only Kieran the FreeSword.

“That leaves the position of Captain of the QueensGuard,” Mira continued, “which again I thought on long and hard. The Captain of my guard must be trusted by all of you, myself and the elves. Kieran managed to keep all of us from his throat, but barely. In the end, Sir Eleric nearly killed him. Kieran tells me that if the roles had been reversed, he would have killed Sir Eleric in the same situation.” She stopped and took a sip of wine.

Sir Alden raised an eyebrow at Kieran, but Kieran did his best to ignore it.

“When we return to KingsHome, I will want the KingsGuard reconstituted. They show honor for the crown, and give aspiring Templars of all Orders something to attempt to earn. The people take heart knowing that faithful of many Orders are willing to serve the crown. With that in mind, I appoint Sir Eleric to head the QueensGuard. When we are quit with this war and we settle back in to Farren's Keep, he will choose a replacement and will commence rebuilding the KingsGuard in the manner it has always stood, ten Holy Warriors of any and all Orders that are willing. May he find us the finest Warriors in the land, and I will Knight each of them upon his recommendation.”

“Are there any here who wish to discuss these appointments?” she asked in a tone that warned them all that there should not be.

“Good, then I am finished. I turn planning over to you and listen in only to offer suggestions.” She sat back down and took a sip of her wine, looking at Kieran over the rim of her goblet.

Kieran stood, not prepared for this at all. Did he start by reviewing their trip to RangeWard? They all knew what they had to do. Did he start planning the battles in KingsHome? They didn't even know where they would enter the Duchy yet.

He felt the eyes of the others upon and knew he needed to say something. He considered what Fallos would do now and what he had seen other commanders do in the past, and began.

“Since the size of our army has grown immensely in the last few months – we have

more archers today than we had troops at Mira's Mound – I want you all to be more aware of sanitation. Remind your commanders to keep the jacks well away from drinking water, and well away from all soldier's sleeping arrangements.”

They all nodded. Kieran's confidence rose as he realized that these faithful men of Mira's, some of whom had called him a “fancy sellsword”, were going to listen to him. His courage up, he continued. “Sir Alden will devise a screen for our march to RangeWard. This land is beaten, but not yet settled. Let us not face unnecessary losses by growing lax on the march.” He took a sip of his wine and noticed that Captain Dunban was looking at him expectantly. “Dunban, would you put one hundred of your best archers at the front of the foot, and use the remainder as a rear guard? If there is still a sizable force allied to Franken in this Duchy I am not sure where they're hiding, but they would likely hit us from the rear.” Dunban nodded and Kieran turned to Mira. “Your majesty, Sir Eleric is otherwise disposed and I cannot take on the added responsibility. Whom should take command of your foot?”

Mira looked confused. “Who has been commanding them thus far, general?” she asked.

He cringed at the general, but tried to ignore it. It was going to take a while to get used to that. “Fallos had a few men he trusted and would take our plans out to them himself. None of them are men I would sit on this council and the fact that Fallos never brought any of them here tells me he felt the same.”

“General? Your majesty?” Sir Eleric spoke up. When they both nodded at him he stood and spoke. “I have been considering that very point. One of the Knights that joined us after SeaCliff fell would be worthy of that command. He stayed with his Duke out of loyalty, and fought honorably, but yielded quickly when told of Franken and the Tasnian priest. He has been brave on the battlefield and a defender of the Queen oft since that day.”

“What is this Knight's name, Sir Eleric? I assume he is Dirgian as well as a knight?” the Queen asked.

“He is, your majesty. He swore his blade to Dirge while you were ... away.” Eleric finished weakly, realizing that bringing up time time she had spent honing her mage skills in a foreign land was likely to discomfort her. He quickly continued. “He passed the Inquisition one year before you returned, and rode with the Duke of SeaCliff until he yielded to Sir Harren at SeaGate. It was he who planned the defense of the inner keep at SeaGate your majesty. His name is Sir Kusim of HardKeep.”

Sir Alden spoke up. “Sir Kusim... I remember him. Unhorsed outside of this city – did you see him, Kieran? He was the one who faced the Knights without a horse, and then talked them into yielding after they saw Eleric, the glow of Dirge about him, ride through the gates.”

“I do remember him. A single stone tower on his shield, with lightning hitting it?” Kieran considered the man he remembered and decided that if he was the one Eleric spoke of that he just might work out. The knight was confident and intelligent, but not overbearing.

“That is the one.” Sir Eleric acknowledged. “He told me afterward that he couldn't see killing three misguided Knights of Dirge and their mounts if he could help them understand what the Duke Franken really stood for. He didn't even smile when he said it, he just assumed that he would win a fight with three of them, and him on foot.” There was an appreciative chuckle throughout the room.

Kieran felt Mira's eyes on him, and understood that she was waiting for him to help her decide. He looked at Sir Eleric. “If he is Dirgian, and you trust him, then I would accept him should the Queen appoint him to lead her foot.”

“Let us break for lunch, and bring Sir Kusim back with you. I will name him here, and he can start learning how we work together today.” Mira said standing.

They all stood quickly and bowed. She swept out of the room, and Kieran stared after her. She was more like a Queen every day. He hoped they would not let her down.

Kieran was just finishing lunch with Plengur in the small dining hall when Eleric found him. The man looked positively nervous. It was not a state he had seen the knight in very often and Kieran immediately tensed.

“Wash the last of that down, straighten your clothes and come on!” Eleric said quickly. “There is a group of Nordalian Knights at the gate demanding to see the Queen.”

“Nordalians? What in Nindel's bag of tricks are they doing here?” he asked straightening his clothes after he stood.

“I don't know, but the Elves have drawn themselves up as an honor guard for the Queen, and she is asking for her General and all of her captains to attend her in court.” Eleric replied over his shoulder heading out the other door.

“The general is needed by the Queen, but the QueensGuard can finish lunch?” Plengur muttered, his tone injured.

Kieran grimaced. He was no longer their commander so he offered the man some sympathy. “Perhaps the Queen is afraid that too many guards would make the wrong impression.” he said as he grabbed his gloves off the table and left. It probably wouldn't do any good, but Plengur might accept that excuse as the reason the Queen had not asked for her guard.

He strode through the stone-gray walls of the keep and wished they had a better place to receive these Knights from the legendary Court of Nordal. You also wish Fallos were here to deal with this. He chastised himself, deciding that the Ducal Court would have to do for now. He turned at the doors and nearly stopped dead. Sixteen elves, looking more like soldiers than he had ever seen them, were lined up eight on each side of the door facing toward each other. Eleric was already here and though he was slightly winded, he looked impressive standing at their base, between them and the Queen facing the door.

“Come on then FreeSword, get out of the way or you'll spoil the Nordalian's fun.”

Eleric said anxiously.

Kieran entered, nodding his head to Fel, the leader of the elves. Kieran was stirred with how impressive these creatures could look when they so chose. Each wore the green and tan colors of their goddess and held a slim sword point down on the stone floor. It looked to Kieran as though Fel's sword actually pierced the floor, but he knew that wasn't possible. When Fel nodded back politely he hurried past them to stand by the Queen, her Duchess, and her Captains.

“Nordalians do not become involved in southern wars, my Queen.” the Duchess of Hollowton was saying, a note of warning in her voice, as he walked up.

Kieran had been considering that same fact since Sir Eleric had announced the Nordalians presence. “My Queen, may I speak?” he asked formally.

“Of course, general, please do.” Mira replied.

“There is one time that the Nordalians, or rather a small group of the Order of Justice, the Knights of Nordal, did become involved in a war. Once it was clear that Grendelak Mishtar would win the throne of Corrigar, a contingent of Knights was sent from the Court of Nordal to determine if he was fit to be King. After they met him they sided with him and those ten knights fought the war at Grendelak's side. Perhaps these men come to perform a similar duty?”

She pursed her lips. “It could be. There are only ten of them. And they do carry the scales upon their shields.”

“That would bode well for us, your majesty. The people of Corrigar did not fall in behind King Grendelak until he was backed by the Knights of Justice. They even found a blood line for him that showed he had a right to the throne.”

“That would be a boon. But I have heard, from yourself and from our Dirgians, that Nordalians are... prickly.” Mira replied, wrinkling her nose. She was comfortable with Dirgian knights, but they were less formal than their Nordalian cousins. Much less formal.

“That they are.” Kieran agreed. “They stand on ceremony and honor exclusively, your majesty. Treat them as if they are your most trusted ally, and never once imply their honor is in question.” He wished he had more advice to offer her and was certain that either Fallos or Sir Eleric would have had more and better advice to give if they were standing here next to her. But Fallos was gone and Eleric was at the front of the room with the QueensGuard.

Sir Alden came to the doors and then stood at attention. “Your Majesty! I bring a group of Knights of Justice seeking audience with you.” he announced loudly.

“Nordalians are known for their pursuit of justice. Show them in, good Sir.” she replied just as loudly.

Sir Alden stepped to the side, allowing two files of five men each to march into the room. Though Kieran had seen Knights of Justice before, these men were a sight to

behold. Each wore a sky blue cloak clasped with golden cloak pins in the shape of scales. On the left breast of each cloak were the scales of Nordal with a sword laid through them. Their cloaks were trimmed with white fur and their boots were also tooled with the scales of Nordal. Only their hair and eyes set these men apart from one another. Each carried himself with the same confidence that Sir Eleric did, and together the effect was much stronger than Eleric could manage alone.

They stopped in front of Sir Eleric. One man looked straight at him and bowed formally. Kieran wondered if he were the leader of this group. The man spoke, the high cant Nordalians were so fond of rolling smoothly off his tongue. “Sir Eleric of the Order of the Dented Shield. Thine glory hath been writ large upon the scales of Nordal. Prithee 'tis an honor to meet you Sire. I am Sir Staphius the Just, humble Dispenser of Nordal's Justice.”

The man was gray and beginning to go bald. His frame was that of a warrior, but his blue eyes were sharp and clearly held knowledge that Kieran wondered about. His face was square and, despite his apparent age he appeared to be exceptionally fit. His clothing was very nearly immaculate. When he bowed, Kieran saw a different symbol sewn in red thread on his tunic. It appeared to be a single-sided scale. He wondered what that meant, as he had never seen such a sigil before.

Eleric bowed just as deeply and replied, “Sir Staphius the Just. The Knight who held Il'Negra. Thine glories precede thee good Sir. It is I who am honored to meet thee. With twenty such as yourself I could win this war in the name of Dirge, Nordal and Talimaara, who gives us sustenance.”

“'Tis testament enough to both thee and thine Queen that the faithful of Talimaara stand as honor guard. Truly thou must be worthy as the bards sing it.” Sir Staphius replied looking into Eleric's eyes.

“They are not here for me, good Sir. They serve my Queen and suffer my humble leadership at her behest. It is good that they have a worthy leader who needs not much direction, for I am not fit to command the Children of Talimaara.”

The man almost smiled. “Truly 'tis a revelation. Thou art humble as the songs sing also. Prithee good Sir, present mine humble being to thine Queen, that we might speak sooner.”

“If it is your will, Sir.” Kieran was glad he did not have to sit through much more of that fawning, and he truly felt sorry for Sir Eleric. This evening looked like it would be long for his friend the knight.

Eleric turned to face Mira. “Your majesty, I present to you Sir Staphius of the Court of Nordal. Thrice hero, thrice wounded, and never broken in the War of Deception these ten years past.”

The man bowed deeply, in a manner that maintained his self-respect, but left no doubt about who was the better in this meeting. He bowed low, but kept his eyes on Mira, sweeping his left arm out wider than normal, carrying his cloak with it. Kieran was impressed by that bow, and tried to commit it to memory.

“Queen Mira. I Present mine self as the humble representative of Queen Darya Contraband of the Court of Nordal, and as servant of the Order of Justice. From afar hath good Queen Darya followed thine battles and admired thine armies. She hath spoken, even to one so humble as I, about the fairness thou hast shown thine enemies, and the justice dispensed in thine name. She bids me call you 'sister', and offers mine own humble self and mine brethren to thine service until thy throne hast been reclaimed.” When he finished speaking he straightened, his eyes still focused on the queen.

“Sir Staphius. Mine Chiefmost Knight, and the Captain of mine personal guard doth sing your praises.” Kieran tried not to smile when he heard Mira slip slightly into the high cant that Nordalians habitually spoke. It was contagious and while he could form the phrases nearly without thought, he rarely did. “You and your men are welcome additions to mine councils and armies. Since you were unexpected, I have no positions prepared for you, but I assure you that there is a place for you among us, and the advice of a warrior of such renown will not go unheeded. For the time being, the followers of Nordal amongst my armies have been long without guidance. Perhaps you could see to them today and we could speak on the road tomorrow of more permanent duties?”

“Indeed, your majesty. Long didst we ride such that we might meet thee here. 'Twould do us good to eat and rest before taking to the road with thee.”

She looked to Sir Eleric. “Sir Eleric, please settle these fine Knights into rooms near the QueensGuard and see that they are provided with food and anything else they need. Then please join us in the planning room once you have seen to their needs.”

“It would be my honor to escort these fine Knights, your majesty.” Sir Eleric replied. He turned back around and led the Knights of Justice out the double doors.

“Elves, Dirgians, and Nordalians.” Kieran mused. “If her majesty only had Dwarves this would sound like one of the legends.” he observed blithely.

“If her majesty had a place for these Knights that befitted their stations she might keep them from turning on her. Meet us in the planning room in half a glass and bring ideas about how to keep these men happy, but out of our way.” she replied tightly. With that she turned on her heel and left the room, leaving Kieran to worry about what to do with these new men who he was certain would not be pleased with the command of a small company of foot soldiers.

Kieran watched the door to the planning room from an alcove down the hall. He was leaning against the wall, ankles crossed and arms folded across his chest. Anyone who passed would have mistaken his stance as mere lounging, but in truth he was still considering the problem of where to place the Nordalians. He kept an eye on who filed into the planning room, anxiously waiting until he'd seen every one else enter. He waited a moment longer before he sighed and uncrossed his ankles, then began to leisurely walk toward the door. He wasn't certain his plan would appease the Nordalians or Mira. And if he was honest, he wasn't certain whose reaction he feared more.

He passed through the door and nodded congenially at the men standing behind their chairs, waiting for the queen. He moved to stand behind his, his mind still racing as he tried to come up with alternatives. He was a swordsman, not a strategist, and he found all of this politicking to be counterproductive. With a sigh, he resigned himself to the task at hand.

Finally Mira swept into the room, her chin held high. Her face was schooled in regal lines but Kieran could see the anxiety flickering in those deep blue eyes. He watched her out of the corner of his eye as she moved around to the head of the table.

“Gentlemen.” she said cordially before she sat.

The men bowed politely and sat.

“Sir Eleric, you have brought Sir Kusim with you, I presume?”

Sir Eleric stood. “Yes, your majesty. Sir Kusim, please present yourself to the queen.”

Sir Kusim, who had been standing near the door, took two steps forward and knelt down on one knee. “Your majesty.” he said respectfully.

“Sir Kusim of HardKeep, Sir Eleric and Sir Alden, along with the general, have indicated that they believe you both capable and willing to lead my foot soldiers. As I respect their opinions on such matters, I charge you with taking command of my foot soldiers. Are you willing to accept this duty for your queen?”

Sir Kusim raised his eyes to meet hers and without hesitation replied, “Yes, your majesty, I accept this charge. For you and for Dirge I will strive to be worthy of this noble position.”

Mira smiled at him. “I am certain you will lead the men to the glory of Dirge and Freeland Hold, Sir Kusim.” she said graciously. “Please, rise and join us as we plan our final march to reclaim KingsHome.”

Sir Kusim stood and found a chair. Kieran was impressed with the man's words and his self-assuredness. He wasn't certain where his own had fled to lately, but he needed to restore it to insure that he did not lead Mira's army into a disaster. Ever since Mira had released him from his vow and he had cause to compare himself to Fallos, Sir Eleric or someone like this Sir Kusim, he felt like a first-year sword. Unsure and untried. They are so certain that Dirge will ... his thought suddenly trailed off as he realized what the men he respected had in common. Dirge. He would definitely have to give more thought to the words Dirge and Sir Eleric had spoken to him in the past.

“General, what are your plans for the Nordalians?” Mira's question interrupted his thoughts.

Kieran stood slowly. “Your majesty, I have given this much thought.”

“And?” she prodded impatiently.

“I believe that Sir Staphius and his knights would best serve us in two ways. The first

is to assist in keeping up the morale of the men, especially the followers of Nordal. I would like half of the knights to be assigned to assisting Sir Kusim. They will be invaluable in assisting with the foot soldiers and the value of their experience can not be understated.” Kieran paused and look around the table. He saw several of the men nodding their heads in agreement. He glanced quickly in Sir Eleric's direction and saw the slight but satisfied smile on his face. “The remaining five, including Sir Staphius, should be assigned to the QueensGuard. We are down in number and I can think of no better replacements than the Nordalians. Sir Staphius' legendary prowess as well as his experience on the battlefield will be most welcome should we need it to protect her majesty.”

Kieran sat and looked expectantly at Mira. Her face was expressionless as she spoke. “Does anyone disagree or take issue with this?”

“It is an excellent plan, your majesty.” Sir Eleric offered. “Especially in light of the Tasnians Franken has employed thus far. If there are more, there are no better men to have on hand. Unless it is a Templar of the Dented Shield, of course.”

A smattering of appreciative laughter broke out, and even Mira managed a real smile at Sir Eleric's statement.

“Then that is settled. Now on to more serious concerns. We must leave in the morning and we must reach RangeWard as soon as possible. But from there, where do we go?” She put out a hand to stop anyone from answering. “I know we go to KingsHome. But what is the best route? And once we have arrived, what will we do then?”

They planned well into the night, determining the best route from the city of Trails End in RangeWard to Farrenton in KingsHome. Everything from how to provision the army, how many horses and wagons would be needed to when looting would be allowed and not allowed was debated and decided upon. They discussed the best way to make use of Duke Salamar of RoguesHome's navy as well as how many troops would have to be left in Hollowton, SeaCliff, and Raffe'sKeep to insure that they were not taken by surprise from behind. They rose wearily in the early morning, their plans firmly in their minds, and those that could rested for the time remaining before they would need to rise and begin moving their army back to RangeWard.

They had estimated the night before that RangeWard would host one of the largest armies ever to march in Freeland Hold. Over twenty thousand men would be gathered in one place from Winegarden, Groveshold, RangeWard, and even a few from DoornesBane.

Yet they had all expressed concern that it might not be enough. Everywhere that Franken's troops stood, either they stopped their march and fought it out, or they left troops behind to deal with the strong points. In the end, they opted for rooting out every Count that had sworn to Franken, and leaving troops to deal with isolated bands of soldiers. When they finally reached Castle Farren, where all of them believed the real battle would occur, they might well have left half of this army behind as casualties or siege troops. Always between them and the Dwarvenforge were neutral Duchies or ones aligned with Franken.

They also held an impressive fleet, but it too was overstretched. Twenty of Dduke

Salamar's best ships were stationed in the waters around Farren's Keep. Blockading Farrenton had so far met with meager success. Some three ships a week managed to make it through the blockade and put in at the piers where the city's defenses could protect them.

Despite all that stood against them, they had formulated what they thought was a successful plan. From the city of Trails End they would follow the river Terone as it curved around, making the border of SeaCliff, until they entered the edge of RaffeKeep where the Terone met the Opined River. From there they would march through RaffeKeep, only stopping to fight if there was a Duke or a Count present, leaving men to deal with garrisons.

They all agreed that where RaffeKeep met KingsHome, the real battles would begin. They also all agreed that no potential enemy would be left behind them in the Queen's own Duchy. They would stop and fight each group of soldiers they found along the way. Groveshold and RangeWard would send food and young men to follow the army and help anyone whose home or crops were destroyed to rebuild so that they could survive the winter.

In Farrenton, all would be held as traitors until the truth could be discovered. Farren's Keep, they had decided, was a separate matter. Soldiers at Farren's Keep who did not lay down their arms at the command of their Queen would suffer the same fate as the Lords and Ladies they swore to. They had argued this point heavily, but Kieran and Sir Eleric convinced the Queen that mercy should be the exception instead of the rule when you find yourself in the viper's den.

The week-long trip to RangeWard flew by Kieran in a haze of semi-awareness. There was always one more thing for the General of the Army to do. He slept little and worked late into the night, after riding all day. Some days he tried to sleep in his saddle so that he would have more energy to complete his work when they camped, but he never felt rested when they stopped for the night. He spent those days sitting on his horse staring sulkily at the rolling plains of eastern RangeWard, anticipating their arrival at the RangeWarder's keep.

Most of the troops that they were to meet in Trail's End were waiting for them when their scouts reported the city ahead, so he gave the rear guard a full day's rest, rotated them into the order of march, and they were off again.

When they had finally arrived at Trails End he had been rewarded with two short nights of sleeping in a real bed high in the RangeWarder's keep before the entire army was assembled. But those two days were not without interruptions. Last minute plans, redistribution of troops, settling arguments between this petty Count and that Captain from some other County. The interruptions took up most of those three days.

They had also dealt swiftly with the traitorous duke of ReedsWallow. The man had been petulant and defiant and not even the urgings from his second son could convince him to change his mind. His eldest son stood firmly beside him, steadfast in his desire to die beside his father. That had been a surprise. The missives they had received had made note that Duke Fairhair's son would swear fealty, but they had not mentioned which son. Mira was reluctant to pass sentence on the oldest boy, but after hearing the venom in his voice as he denied her right to rule publicly she hardened her

heart and ordered him dealt with swiftly. The new Duke of Reedswallow, Tarel Fairhair, watched the proceedings with a resigned expression on his face. Afterward he'd spoken with Duke Highstep privately and then left to return home.

They'd also broken the news of Sir Harren's death in Hollowton to his father, Duke Harren of GrovesHold. He'd listened to Sir Eleric's tale stoically, nodding only occasionally through the recitation. When Eleric finally fell silent, he'd clapped a reassuring hand on the knight's shoulder briefly before leaving the room without saying a word. Mira had learned later that he'd spent that same night in prayer to Dirge and when he emerged in the morning he'd been ready to leave with them, desiring vengeance for his sons and his kingdom. Mira had been confused until Sir Eleric had taken her aside and told her of how Sir Harren's eldest son had died defending GrovesHold when the unrest had first broken out. It had taken everything to convince the man to return home. He refuted every argument they offered and finally Mira had spoken up. She recalled Fallos' words on the lineage of the duchies and the need to keep them intact. She could not afford Duke Harren to fall in battle before he could produce a new heir to follow him.

“Duke Harren, you will return home. Without an heir we cannot afford to lose you.”

The Duke had stiffened at the reminder and bowed stiffly. “As you wish, your majesty.”

Mira sighed. “Duke Harren, you will not be without other duties. I need someone here to assist the new dukes in making proper decisions. Someone who is loyal and wise. I charge you with taking them under your tutelage and insuring that none of them are influenced by the wrong sort. Some of them are quite young and have had ”, a look of profound sadness crossed her face briefly as she recalled the young Duke of SeaCliff's mother, “more tragedy than necessary of late. They lack leadership of your caliber.”

Duke Harren's face softened. “I understand, your majesty. Rest assured I will insure that what you have fought to reclaim will remain yours.” His acquiescence had brought one of the few smiles that graced her face in the time she spent in TrailsEnd.

She'd been like a cornered raccoon those last few days before the final campaign started, weaving this way and that, snarling and looking for a way out. Now that she had taken the burden of the crown upon her head, she wanted to get the war over with as soon as possible. It was all Kieran could do to keep from snapping at her when she asked for the fourth time when they would be ready to leave.

Again he worked in a sleep-deprived haze for the week-long march to the meeting place of the Terone and Opined rivers. He issued orders automatically, inspected the troops dully, and slept little. These men were placing their life in his hands, and he just felt like there was not enough time each day to devote to them and the battle plans that would keep them alive.

Finally, today, he was here. Not rested, and not nearly ready, but looking over the Opined river into Raffe'sKeep. Here the end would begin. Only one army would disperse from KingsHome in good order. He was confident that it would be theirs, but still felt uneasy at the little planning he did.

“Were I a soothsayer, I would predict that someone is worried” Sir Eleric smiled as he rode up next to Kieran's horse and broke into his reveries.

“And were I the kind that pandered to soothsayers, I would call you a good one.” He tried to smile back, but even that seemed to fail him.

“What is it that bothers you, Kieran?” Eleric asked with real concern.

“We are not ready.” He sighed heavily. “Dirge knows I have tried to make certain all was well planned and we would have the forces necessary at any given battle to win it, but it feels undone still, and I am out of time.”

“We have planned more than some would like, and more than enough to win against the lot Franken is likely to have serving him after all of this summer saw his armies crushed. Now it is time to trust that Dirge will shield us. With his guidance, and fair weather from the elf-goddess, we will be victorious. Do not brood so, in battle there are some things you cannot control.”

“Of course you are right, my friend. But each one of those men that falls is... a little piece of me. A man I should have saved. Oh, I know some will surely die, but how many? Will the gods choose wisely, or am I doing nothing more than taking good, decent men to die?”

“You are telling them how best to keep alive. You will position them so that they have the right amount of force at the right time in the right place on the battlefield. In that sense you will do fine. Their commanders bear responsibility beyond that. And Dirge has blessed you in some way that I'm not certain of. You will do your part, let the commanders do theirs.”

“Perhaps it is my failure to trust in Dirge, but standing here today without enough sleep and looking at a long campaign, my thoughts are gloomy. Many of the turncloaks will die, but so will many good men in the next few weeks or months.”

“Then my friend, you will have to trust more in Dirge, and do all you can to make it a short campaign. Find a way and lead us, your captains will do the rest.” Sir Eleric heeled his horse and spun away.

Kieran shook his head to clear it after Eleric left. It seemed to him that two of Sir Eleric's words were echoing in his ears. “Trust. Dirge.” Over and over he heard the whispered words mingled with Sir Eleric's commanding tones. Kieran absently fingered the symbol of Dirge he kept in his breast pocket. Eleric had given it to him after their first battle, after the knight had spoken to him of Dirge's service. He pulled the pendant out and looked at it intently, as though it held all the answers to his questions. After a moment he sighed and started to put it back in his pocket, but suddenly changed his mind. He pulled the chain it hung on over his neck and tucked it under his tunic. He was surprised when the echoes in his ears stopped, but he decided it was the result of too little sleep and too much anxiety. He still recalled with vivid clarity the words Dirge had spoken to him through Sir Eleric the night Fallos had died. But he wasn't quite ready for that yet. Hearing his name called, he turned and spurred his horse to rejoin the others, turning his thoughts back to the campaign.

Kieran rode the rest of the day in silence, contemplating how to win a war quickly that had already swept through the kingdom like a wildfire.

Chapter 18

Kieran managed to lead them through most of RafsKeep without encountering any significant opposition. While many were pleased with this, Kieran was concerned. His experience had taught him that if they encountered little resistance marching through a duchy it was only because the resistance had grouped together and holed up somewhere else, lying in wait for the opportunity to attack in a larger force. Or worse, they had disbanded and taken to the forests and fields as brigands.

Mid-afternoon, little more than a week into their march, they caught sight of a tall tower on the horizon. None of the men recognized it, though they debated its purpose heavily. They were still marching along the Opined River, and some thought it might have been built to watch for incursions from the west. Sir Eleric had agreed, as he recalled that some centuries ago RafsKeep and HillGuard had fought on their border lands over some slight to the Duchess of RafsKeep that no one today could recall.

They agreed that the tower would provide them with an excellent place to survey the land and perhaps spot any force that might be moving against them. It appeared to be only a mile or so out of their way, and the queen might enjoy an evening of sleeping indoors.

They approached the small village surrounding the tower cautiously, near dusk. While they had seen no enemy in the area, they had seen no one else, either. Kieran was immediately suspicious of any town, but this town – with a tower to protect it and apparently deserted – felt ominous to him. He held up his hand and called for the procession to halt.

“Let us bring the archers up a bit closer. Duke Highstep, would you send two fists of men forward to see if this village is indeed as deserted as it looks.”

A runner sped off to inform Captain Dunban of the need to move his archers forward while Duke Highstep cantered off to select his men. The others sat and waited patiently, their eyes struggling to see anything other than the dusty dirt road and poorly thatched roofs of the homes.

The archers moved up and around Kieran, arrows nocked and bows held ready. When Duke Highstep returned with his men, Kieran pointed in the direction of the huts. “Have them take a look, but carefully. There is something wrong with this that I cannot put my finger on.”

The two fists of men crept toward the town. As they came to the first home a bevy of river birds suddenly took flight from behind the houses nearest the tower. Kieran realized that they had seen no sign of animals recently. No sounds, no prints, nothing. They had seen and heard the river birds every time their course had taken them near to the water, except this time. And suddenly, the ones he did see were frightened by something.

“Trap!” he yelled urgently, drawing his sword just as a horde of men appeared from somewhere near the tower, screaming curses at the queen loudly and defiantly.

The QueensGuard immediately formed their square around Mira while the archers Kieran had called up began to sight on the men. Several loosed arrows but shook their heads in frustration. Finally one called out. “General, we can't see the enemy. We risk shooting our own men!”

Kieran's brow furrowed. “Call up some more men, from what I could see in that gloom, there are enough men coming to cause us concern!” he called out. “Archers return.” he ordered, his voice angry at fighting in the near dark.

Fel, in his sing song elven voice, called out to him. “General, one will take care of this.”

Kieran was confused, but let the elves move up, their bows in hand. Each nocked an arrow and raised their bow, concentrating for the merest of moments before loosing their shafts. A moment later they could hear men crying out. Kieran cringed, hoping it was the enemy that cried out, but assuming that Fel knew what he was doing, and not wanting to insult the elf by asking for an explanation.

A moment later the elves retreated as men in tattered red tunics and black, greasy leather coverings came barreling toward them. They could hear the sound of blades clashing in the distance and assumed the men they had sent forward were still engaged.

Mira heard the rasp of swords being drawn all around her as the QueensGuard prepared to protect her should the men Kieran had called for not arrive in time. She squinted into the rapidly darkening evening trying to pick out the enemy, all the while despairing for the men fighting almost blind.

Suddenly, Mira heard Sir Staphius' voice booming, carrying over even the sounds of fighting. “Holy Nordal, warrior of justice, pray thee send us light that we might serve justice true by teaching such men who doth prey upon us in the dark of night like cowards to fight justly and truly.”

All at once the old knight was glowing fiercely, casting a soft, yellow light that encompassed a wide area. While the circle did not extend into town, it exposed the enemy that had driven forward to attack them and gave the QueensGuard a chance to respond.

More of Duke Highstep's men arrived, and they cheered as they ran, seeing the light from the old knight. They charged in and engaged the men who had threatened their queen quickly. Once faced with light nearly as bright as a torch, the enemy was not so fearsome as they had seemed, and the Duke's men dispatched them quickly.

When the last enemy fell, Sir Eleric cried out, “Come, Sir Staphius, let us lead these men to assist their brothers, that they, too, might know the truth of Dirge and Nordal.”

The two knights rode off together with the rest of the men who had come forward to fight racing behind them, their swords waving in the air and battle cries on their lips.

Kieran sighed with relief. He'd made the right choice, both tonight and in having Sir Staphius join the QueensGuard. He was certain they would have been able to fend off the attack in time, but he was glad that they had been able to do so without losing a single man. At least as far as he knew.

He waited impatiently, cursing under his breath and chafing at the title of "general" that kept him back from the fight. Finally he heard a raucous cheer in the distance and the pounding of hooves approaching. He looked over to Mira and saw her shoulders slump in relief as well. He was about to move to her side as the two knights pulled up, but the body slumped between their horses gave him pause. A body wearing black leather with a red cloak, hanging limp, suspended between the two horses by the arms.

"Good Sirs. What would this be?" He asked.

"'Tis a fell attacker, brought low by the light of Nordal and the Shield of Dirge. Whilst this rogue didst attempt to kill me, Sir Eleric didst use his shield in a manner that Dirge wouldst be most proud of. 'Tis a pity that his helm went flying at the blow, 'twas a pretty piece of work." Sir Staphius replied.

Finally he would get some answers. This rabble was not enough to stop them, so what manner of trap was this? And where were the blasted troops that should have been here? He urged his mount forward and stopped in front of the two knights. He dismounted as he growled "Drop him."

The knights unceremoniously dropped the man, who fell the few feet to the ground. The man tried to stand, but found himself facing the point of Kieran's sword.

"Stand slowly." Kieran ordered curtly.

The man looked at him contemptuously through narrowed eyes but did as he was told. Suddenly his eyes widened as he looked past Kieran and saw Mira astride her horse near the edge of the QueensGuard. The man spat violently at her then sneered. "You mageborn whelp, they'll git ye in the end ye know."

Kieran tried to control his surprise when Sir Staphius leaned over and delivered a stunning blow to the back of the man's head. "Keep a civil tongue about thee, cur, when thou dost speak to her majesty." the knight said blithely.

The man went down on one knee from the force of the blow. As he regained his feet, he cast an angry glance at Sir Staphius, but said nothing.

"Where is your lord?" Kieran asked.

The man tightened his lips and stared past Kieran.

"Answer the question, traitor, before I lose my patience with you." Sir Eleric barked.

"He ain't here no more. He left, nigh unto a week ago. Took off with his black knight and a few men and headed south."

“So why did you attack us?” Kieran's voice was cold.

“To get at that mageborn bitch, that's why!” the man snapped.

This time it was Sir Eleric who leaned down and cuffed the man in the back of the head, knocking him down. “Mind your manners, dog.”

Kieran threw an arched look at Sir Eleric, who gave him a wry smile and then shook his head.

“Are there any others lurking in town?” he asked the man, still lying on the ground. He waited a moment, and when the man did not answer he asked again. “Are there more of you left in town?”

The man laid still on the ground. Kieran took a step forward and poked at the man with his sword. Still he did not move. “Gods, Eleric. I think you killed him with that last blow.” He knelt down and roughly turned the man over. His eyes were glassy and there was blood running out of his ears. Kieran stood wearily and looked at Sir Eleric, who shrugged and gave him a sheepish grin.

Kieran turned, shaking his head. “Let's get some torches lit and move in. But let's be cautious about it. Just in case.”

It took almost a full glass before the small details Kieran sent out to search the tower and homes in the village returned and declared it safe. The Dukes and Mira found that the tower was well furnished, which gave credence to the claims of the man Sir Eleric had inadvertently killed during questioning. They ate a hot meal and relaxed afterward in a large sitting area, relaxing a bit for the first time in a week.

As it grew late, Mira excused herself and soon after Kieran stretched and yawned as well. Sir Eleric grinned at him, knowing he was not nearly as tired as he pretended and knowing as well that Mira was not yet asleep. He knew they met often in the evening when they could and did not begrudge either of them these short times together.

Mira had taken the room of whatever lordling had been occupying the tower previously and was thoroughly enjoying the feel of rugs between her toes. Kieran entered and closed the door, leaning against it comfortably with a smile on his face as he watched her spreading her toes and wiggling them over the embroidered face of some long-forgotten Duke. When she had had enough she flopped on the bed and beckoned for him to join her.

He crossed the room and sat next to her. “My Queen has grown much. There was a time when that ruffian's words would have upset her terribly.”

“Your Queen has no other choice. Ruffians like that would be the Dukes and Counts if I let Franken have the kingdom. I cannot allow that or my father's shade will haunt me. I no more want to be Queen than you want to be general, but I must offer these people some hope, and no other hope came along. Now I want vengeance too. I have lost too much to be the girl I was.” She giggled deliberately. “Besides – I now have

my mighty general staying back with me to protect me.”

They talked for hours about nothing and everything. Kieran heard the hornsman blow Dark-O-Night – also known as the Time of Tasni, and decided it was past time for him to seek his bed.

“If your highness will excuse me” he said, making the bow he had seen Sir Staphius use, “we march early on the morrow and I must seek my bed...”

There was a soft thump outside the door, the sound of something hitting it softly. All thought left Kieran's head, and all the dread he'd felt outside this city came crashing back. Drawing his sword he turned to Mira. “Get on the other side of the bed.”

He watched long enough to be certain she was doing as he bid, then padded lightly to the door. He put his ear to the door, but the only sound he could hear was his heart pounding in his ears. Slowly he reached out and lifted the latch. When it had cleared the top of the lock, he pulled the door open with all of his might, swinging around it and stepping into the doorway with his sword in front of him.

The QueensGuard that all called “Jugs” for his ability to consume whole jugs of wine without ill effect lay on the floor just outside the door. It had been his outflung arm that tapped the door, perhaps as a last warning from a man who knew he was dead. And there was no doubt that he was dead, the growing puddle of blood on the floor near his head marked that clearly enough.

Kieran looked around anxiously for any sign of the murderer. Whomever it was, their target was not likely to be the jovial Jugs. He just happened to be the QueensGuard on duty this evening. The murderer was surely after Mira. Once he was sure the murderer wasn't standing close by, he stepped into the hall to check Jugs. As Kieran had observed from the doorway, he was dead or as close as made no difference.

He stood and turned for the door to the Queen's chambers. “QueensGuard! Arise and protect your Queen!” he yelled at the top of his lungs, then ducked back into the room. He placed himself in front of the door, prepared to hold off any number of attackers until the QueensGuard aroused.

There was a soft swishing sound behind him and only instinct saved Kieran's life. He threw himself forward, and twisted around while falling. The sword took him in the right leg, near the hip. Mira screamed, and he grunted, trying to land such that he could defend himself but there was no one there. He had been sword-cut before, and he was certain that this cut was from a sword. But there was no sword or sword-wielder there. His leg was burning horribly where it was cut, and he tried to scoot backwards with his left leg and left hand, keeping his right hand free to fight if necessary, and favoring his right leg. The sound came again, and he lifted his sword to fend it off. He was rewarded with the ring of metal meeting metal, and the feel of his sword being knocked to the side. But the blow didn't land, and he realized that he could fight this thing – whatever it was. He quit scooting back and sat as still as possible, trying to hear the oncoming sword over Mira's sobbing and his blood pounding in his ears. Once again the sound came, low and to his right. He swung his sword wildly to deflect the blow. The instant he felt the force rebounding off his sword, he shoved forward as hard as he could in the general direction the blow came

from. He thought there was a haziness to the room right there. Again he was rewarded, this time by a gasp and resistance to his sword. He pulled it out quickly and returned to his original position, ready to fend off a strike. After a few long moments that seemed like hours, he began to wonder if he had killed his attacker. But then the swishing sound came to his ears again, this time from behind him.

In a panic, Kieran threw himself backwards to lay down, hoping the sword would pass over him. He didn't even have time to consider a counterstroke. The feel of the sword touching his unarmored chest sent a shiver through his entire body. There was a rending sound and what felt like little bits of fiery metal went ripping through his face. He forgot all about defense as he felt the aching pain in his chest and knew that he was dead. Someone was screaming horribly, but he was the one dying. He tried to decide if it was Mira, but couldn't be certain. If he was going to die, so be it, but he had to make certain she was safe. He forced his numb fingers to fumble for his sword-hilt, and dragged himself to one knee. He could see a definite distortion in the hallway now. The scratches and pits in the granite wall weren't as clear. "Kieran! He is protected by magic!" Mira screamed. I noticed he thought wryly as he moved towards the distortion warily. His right leg would not support his weight, and his chest ached with each breath. His face was dripping blood into his eyes, making it difficult for him to see, but he pulled himself towards the distortion relentlessly. It was moving, but only a little. Like it was trying to hide from him. You should have just given me the death stroke fool he thought as he panted and pulled his way to the door. One more foot and I will bury this sword in your craven stomach – or where ever it lands.

"Holy Dirge!" came a shout from the hallway to his left. "Shield us with your light that we might see thine enemies!" Suddenly the entire hallway was lit with a pale blue glow. There he was, a man or what was left of one. His sword arm was gone to the elbow. There was nothing but a black, burnt mess where his forearm should have begun. His face was a bloody mess, much like Kieran thought his own would look had he a glass to see it in. At the sight of this wounded cur, laying on the floor holding the stump of his arm, all the rage left Kieran and he slumped to the ground exhausted. Eleric was shouting something, but he could not tell what. Then there was a hand brushing hair from his face, but he no longer cared. He just wanted to sleep but the burning in his leg where the sword had first entered wouldn't stop and the spots where his face had been hit by whatever cut it so badly kept dripping across his nose. He tried to follow the voices talking over him, the hushed whispers and the anguished cries, but they were like listening to that sword over the pounding of his ears - hard to hear and harder to place. Eventually he gave in and sank into a restless slumber.

He awoke to the sun shining in his window. Was that a nightmare? he wondered. He did not remember leaving Mira's rooms last night, and his leg was feeling sore right where it was stabbed. It could not have been a dream. He brought his right hand up to his face and gingerly felt the skin. To his surprise it was solid, even firm, under his fingers. Next he traced his fingers under the blanket to feel for the chest wound that he knew was there. He was amazed that he could even breathe. My life must be due to Sir Eleric he thought. He knew there was no other way that a man who took a sword through the chest would live out the night. His fingers found his chest to be tender, like it was bruised, but no more scarred than it had been the day before. Finally, he trailed his right hand down to his hip. There was a scar there. Big and

ugly by the feel of it, but no sign of cut or scab. Definitely Sir Eleric. He hoped it would heal normally.

He turned his head to look around the room, and Mira stirred from the chair she was sitting in.

“You're awake!” she said excitedly. “Kieran, I thought we had lost you. That explosion, and the blood on your face. You looked dead laying there.”

“What explosion?” he asked, confused.

“When the fool tried to cut your chest! Don't you remember? You threw yourself backwards, and his Tasni-ensorcelled sword touched your Dirge-blessed medallion! Sir Eleric said he'd heard of such miracles but never hoped to witness one. And then, after pieces of his sword had slashed your face and your chest, with a grievous wound to your leg, you started crawling after him. You were so very brave.”

“Not brave. Very afraid. Afraid that the one commitment I had left in my life – your safety – would not be fulfilled. Afraid that my death would allow yours if I didn't move. You are okay, I trust?”

“Yes. You hurt him badly with that blind stab you took, and then his sword blew up, and most of it hit him. Sir Eleric was there by the time you got to the door. He sings your praises as if he were a bard. He says that Dirge must truly love you to offer you that kind of protection...”

Eleric stepped through the door just in time to hear Mira's last words, looking as if he had just awoken. “And it is true. You and I must speak when you are more yourself Kieran. This is twice that Dirge has healed you, once he saved you, and once he's spoken to you. I will not be put off any longer. Even a slow warrior such as myself can tell when there is work to be done.”

Eleric moved into the room to allow Sir Staphius, who had been trailing behind him, enter. Staphius nodded politely in his direction, but said nothing.

“We will talk, Eleric. But you are right that it should wait. I have a commitment to my Queen, and a commitment to Dirge would conflict with that. I cannot do the one if I am bound by the other.”

Eleric made a face. “I feel that I am strengthened by Dirge's favor Kieran, not weakened by it.”

“Though it be wrong, I would feel weakened.”

Sir Staphius finally spoke. His face was beet red at Kieran's words, as though Kieran had insulted him in some way. “Then thou art a fool. 'Tis a sorry man whom trusts himself more than a god. Prithee, how wouldst thou heal thine lady Queen an she doth need it? All men hath arms, but the favor of thine god? Truly is that a tool more powerful than all man's arms.”

Kieran looked incredulously at Sir Staphius as his words sunk in. Could he swear to

Dirge and still swear to Mira? The idea of being sworn to more than one at a time baffled him, but the knight's words rang true in his ears. He shook his head incredulously at the thought.

Sir Staphius saw Kieran shake his head and interpreted it as a denial of his words.

Kieran turned back to Sir Eleric. "Perhaps you and Sir Staphius are right. But for now I can think only of mutton and wine. Is it you I owe thanks to for my healing?"

Eleric sighed and threw his hands up in frustration. "You are truly blind Kieran. Place your thanks where they belong, not with the tool that was used to heal you. You should know by now that I do not perform the healing, but rather watch it done with my own hands."

"Then you shall have to show me how to thank Dirge. Until then, thank you. Can I get up and walk about?"

"It would not hurt if you are careful. The cut made by that sword will be slow to heal even with Dirge's help. Just be grateful it was not more powerfully enchanted."

"Have you tracked where he came from? Questioned him about whom he serves?" Kieran asked as he slowly sat up and swung his legs off the side of the bed.

Sir Eleric snorted. "I do not need him to tell me with words who he served. That much was obvious. He was a Tasnian priest."

Kieran put his feet on the floor and gingerly tried to stand. He grimaced at the pain in his hip and leaned back against the bed. "Not his god, Eleric. Which lordling did he serve?"

"Tasnian priests in other lands do not serve men, it is the other way around even though the lordling may not have realized it." At the irritated look on Kieran's face Eleric sighed. "He is dead, Kieran. He bled to death on the floor while we saw to you. Her majesty did not desire to attend another funeral so soon."

"And where did he come from?" Before Eleric could answer Kieran shot, "And don't tell me Tasnami."

Eleric laughed. "All right, Kieran. Enough lecturing. Sir Staphius and I believe we can retrace his steps, with Nordal's permission, of course."

"Nordal's? Not Dirge's?" Mira asked, confused.

Sir Eleric nodded. "There are some things I have not yet learned, my queen. Sir Staphius has more experience with this sort of thing and has assured me he can trace the priest's steps."

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Kieran asked as he put weight on his feet again. He found that he could withstand the pain in his hip as long as he didn't think about it overmuch. "Let's find out where he came from and if there are any more like him lurking about. We have a war to fight, you know, and we're wasting time talking

about it.”

“Kieran,” Mira began, looking concerned, “you should rest more. There will be plenty of time for this...”

“No.” he interrupted her flatly. “There is no time. I need to know that he was alone, I need to know that there's not a secret entrance, I need to know that you're safe. After that I can rest.”

“There are others of us here FreeSword.” Eleric snapped. “Perhaps you should take the time to heal and trust in your friends.”

“I do trust in my friends. But I will not rest until I have found this out for myself.” He looked to Sir Staphius. “Are you ready?”

“Thou art truly a stubborn one. No wonder The Dented Shield hath claimed thee.” Sir Staphius said as he headed for the door. “Come along then. If you wish to trace their trail we should move along. It will weaken as time goes on.”

Kieran glared at the man's back as he hobbled along behind him.

“If you don't mind, Sir Staphius.” Eleric said from behind him. “Tell me how to start this.”

“'Tis simple, once the trick hath been learned. Prolonged contact with Tasni doth corrupt the soul. The corruption doth leave a stench that Nordal – or Dirge canst allow thee to detect. 'Tis but learning to listen to thine deity, good Sir. 'Tis similar to allowing Dirge to fill thee with light, only the light is directed outward. 'Tis not visible light, and yet when it doth touch the trail...” While he was talking, they had reached the door to Mira's room. He grasped his golden scales of Nordal, closed his eyes, and when he opened them, Kieran could see a single set of glowing footsteps leading down the hall and ending in a large splotch across from the door.

“That was marvelous.” Eleric said, clutching his golden shield. “Dirge has blessed me with this sight also!”

Kieran chose not to tell Eleric that he could see it too. He glanced back at Mira, but she looked bored and raised an eyebrow at him.

They followed the glowing footsteps to the next turn in the rough-hewn hall. The footsteps disappeared into the wall, ½ of a footstep actually sticking out of the wall. “There must be a release here somewhere.” Sir Staphius mumbled, feeling the section of wall.

Eleric joined him, feeling the stones in the corner.

“Ahh. I found something. Step back, I don't know what this might do.” Eleric said.

They crowded back in the hallway, and Eleric pushed on one of the stones where the two walls joined. The section of wall slid back away from them, and then sideways

into the wall.

It was dark in the passage, but they could clearly see the glowing footsteps as they went about 10 feet into the passage and turned right, disappearing around a turn.

“Well. That bodes ill. Not only invisible, but also hidden. Let us see what we have found.” Sir Eleric said as he stepped into the passage.

The steps went around the corner, and down three flights of stairs. “This will take us deeper than ground level” Eleric said. “That too bodes ill.”

“’Twould please me to find naught but an empty wine cellar,” Sir Staphius agreed, “but ’twould surprise me, forsooth.”

At the foot of the stairs was a small room that opened onto a dark larger one. They followed the glowing footsteps across the smaller room and into the larger. It was about the size of the lowest floor of the keep, but it was all one room, not divided like the keep was. At the far end of the room the glowing steps disappeared. Kieran could see nothing but the footsteps and a vague glow coming from about two feet off the ground.

“Shield of Dirge!” hissed Sir Eleric.

“Nordal give thine light to this foul hole, that all might be seen and judged in thy name!” Sir Staphius nearly shouted.

A glow came from the Nordalian knight, not the strong blue light that he had seen on the battlefield, but a pale, flickering light that barely lit one end of the room.

“Dirge help me lend aid to my brother.” Sir Eleric said in an eery tone.

He too lit, and between the two Knights, the room was dimly lit. Kieran wished it had not been. At the far end of the room was a low basalt slab, and lying on it was the body of a child no more than four. The child had been eviscerated, his intestines spread around the body in the shape of a skull, and it's eyelids were sunken and bloody. Kieran was certain that there were no eyes under those lids.

Mira gasped behind him, it sounded like she was choking back a sob.

Eleric stepped forward quickly, and held his golden shield above the altar. “Dirge guard this child from further harm. Ask the Gate Guarder to guide her to your safety, and protect us as we destroy this vile altar in your name.”

Both knights seemed to be glowing brighter, and both seemed to relax a small amount also. “Mine Queen. It is neither meet, nor safe for thee here. I humbly suggest that thee retreat up yon stairs for the nonce.” His tone was not as furtive as his words.

Kieran heard Mira head for the stairs, but did not turn from the grizzly sight at the other end of the room. He slipped a hand into his shirt and felt the silver shield of Dirge that Sir Eleric had given him. “Well, what does it mean, and how do we make certain that it doesn't get used like that again?”

“It was used to make the priest invisible. For some of their most horrible powers, Tasnians offer their god the lifeblood of an innocent. First we remove the body to a less hostile environment, then wash it and give it the funeral it deserves. That is the only way to insure that Tasni's touch cannot taint this child and raise it from the grave. Once the body is gone, we wash the altar with the water of Dirge and Nordal, pray to both over it, and finally, we smash it.”

“Tis truly the best way, Nordal grant me the strength. 'Tis not so simple as Sir Eleric says, Kieran. 'Twill keep us here for two days, and then must he and I rest for another. Tasni doth not lightly allow his altars to be defiled.” Sir Staphius added, his grim voice conveying the danger inherent in their task.

“Take the queen and send another to remove the child. We will remain here until the task is complete.” Eleric said firmly.

“Eleric, we cannot keep the army sitting for two days. They need to move forward. We are losing more than time. The longer we wait, the longer the enemy has to prepare for us.” Kieran replied in a torn voice. As general he knew that waiting would cost them dearly but something else within him cried out to stay and see the altar destroyed.

Sir Staphius glanced at Eleric. “Thou dost know the danger. Twould be best for the Queen and the others to leave in case this dost go awry.”

“We will join you as soon as we have destroyed this abomination. The queen's safety is your responsibility until we meet again. Dirge will guide you, if you but have the courage to ask for his wisdom.” Eleric replied without moving his gaze from the altar.

Kieran nodded, though he knew neither man could see him. “Dirge be with you, Eleric. And Nordal you, Sir Staphius.” Then he limped back to where Mira stood in the hall and escorted her back to the hidden doorway near Mira's room. They were met by two of the QueensGuard and Kieran immediately sent them both to see to the body below. He took Mira's hand and led her down to the main hall to inform the others of what had been discovered and of the decision to move forward as planned.

Chapter 19

Mira watched Kieran out of the corner of her eye, trying not to grin as he shifted yet again on his horse. She'd been watching him surreptitiously for the past three days and wondering how he managed to ride when it so obviously pained him. Duke Highstep had tried to convince him to stay with Eleric and Staphius, telling him sternly that the extra few days of rest would give his injured hip time to heal more completely, but Kieran had set his jaw and refused. After a heated debate on the subject, Kieran and turned and limped off, leaving the Duke shaking his head at their stubborn general. But the next day when they rode, Kieran was there by her side.

Mira was certain, as she watched Kieran grimace again, that her general had wished more than once in the past few days that he had stayed behind. His limp had been less noticeable this morning and Mira hoped he would be able to fight should they encounter a larger force than that in the town where Sir Eleric and Sir Staphius had stayed. As she thought of the two knights she chewed on her lower lip distractedly, wondering if the two men had been successful in their task. When the rest of the Nordalian and Dirgian knights had learned of their grisly discovery it had taken Kieran a full glass to convince them to continue on with the army rather than stay with the two knights. It was the first time Mira had seen the two groups of knights in complete agreement and while she was concerned by the discovery in the tower she had been pleased to see that the incident had brought the two groups closer together. And pleased that Kieran had been able to convince them that the army could not continue without them. Most of the army was Dirgian, and the desire to stay would have spread through the army like wildfire had their two fists of Dirgian Knights stayed behind.

As the sun continued to drop lower on the horizon, Mira's thoughts turned to KingsHome. If Kieran's estimates were right, they would be nearing the border of KingsHome and RafsKeep sometime tomorrow. Kieran as well as Duke Highstep, watched the terrain with growing concern as they neared their objective without meeting resistance. They had expected attacks, if not large scale then small, flash attacks designed to slow them as they marched toward KingsHome, and eventually Farrenton, the seat of the kingdom. But no resistance had formed since the incident at the tower. Both men were constantly on edge and Mira saw them often ride together, their arms waving animatedly in all directions as they discussed their route and the possible reason for their thus far safe passage.

Kieran and Duke HighStep turned and rode back toward her, breaking her out of the thoughts called up by the boring ride across the rolling plains.

“On the morrow my queen,” Kieran said as they approached, “we slow down somewhat to insure that we do not rush headlong into a trap. We estimate that Franken has near as many men in KingsHome as we have with us, and we do not believe they are all gathered at Farrenton.”

Mira made a face. “At the rate we are currently traveling, general, we will not need to take Castle Farren, it will have crumbled before we arrive.”

“Your majesty!” Duke Highstep exclaimed. “That was ill said. We have many men, moving on foot, and supplies traveling behind. We are stretched half way across RaffsKeep as it is. Slowing will only allow us to consolidate our strength for the inevitable battles to come.”

“No Duke, what is ill-said is that we should slow our approach to free my people from Duke Franken. Did you, or did you not, hear the tale of the altar and what lay upon it? Do you doubt that while we take a leisurely walk across this Duchy, that he is doing more of that? You did not see that child on the altar. You did not feel that sickening feeling.”

“I did.” Kieran said coldly. “You know I did. The Duke and I have decided that we need to slow in order to pull our army back together. Rushing into a battle while spread out as we are now will gain us nothing but the burial of good men.”

“Better good men who have chosen to be soldiers than innocent civilians, general. Much better.”

Kieran's face grew red, and his jaw muscles twitched. “If your majesty has an issue with my leadership of her armies, she is free to choose a more suitable leader from amongst those who would do her bidding regardless of the results.” He jerked the reins of his horse and rode away before she could answer.

Mira was very angry, but she tried to think it through. “Are you certain that this is necessary Duke? I am inexperienced in warfare, but it seems that the bulk of our best troops are together within an hours march of the front of the column.” she forced herself to ask.

“Majesty, that is the point of our weakness. We hoped to catch them spread out, so we put the best troops, the most experienced, the most trustworthy, to the front. Our rear holds a mismatched collection of men that we are not certain of. Should Franken's army come out of HillGuard, or cut behind us through SeaCliff, our lines back there could be destroyed, and all of our supplies taken.” He smiled. “The general's reaction is partially fueled by the fact that I have kept him from slowing our march for two days already. He obviously didn't discuss this with you until I agreed.”

“I dislike this. It is not my wish to slow even more than we are. I feel as if I could watch the trees grow while riding by already. There is no other way?”

“It is not the only way, my Queen. We could continue as we are. We could even speed up somewhat. But we are courting disaster if we do. It is prudent to regroup before the tough battles to come. If it makes it any easier for your majesty, the

Dirgian knights have been demanding that Kieran talk to you about this for days.”

“I will heed your wishes, and apologize to Kieran. But know that I do not like to do so.”

“You are going to be a wise Queen. Never take advice without understanding. But perhaps you should be less harsh when questioning?”

“Perhaps I will be more open to such advice at another time, Duke. For now, please leave me.” she replied coldly.

They made slow progress the rest of the day. When they finally pulled up and stopped for the evening they were still almost half a day from KingsHome. Mira was seething as she sat near the fire, her small fists clenching and unclenching with impatience. She only half listened to the conversation between the men and their plans for their entry into her home duchy and did not notice when the voices trailed off into silence.

“Your majesty?”

Mira ignored Kieran, poking the toe of her boot viciously at a small stone near her seat.

“Mira!” Mira could hear the annoyance in his voice and with a small sigh she lifted her head and acknowledged him.

“Why don't we take a short walk, my queen.” he suggested as he held out his hand to her, hoping that a short time away from the others would soothe her irritation.

She took his hand and followed him. They stopped on the edge of the firelight, far enough for a bit of privacy but not out of sight of the QueensGuard.

She tried to pull her hand away but Kieran's held it fast. She opened her mouth to chastise him but he managed to speak first.

“Mira, I know you want to reach KingsHome as fast as possible but without preparation you may not be able to take it. Your attitude is affecting the others and that will only get more of us killed. Dirge knows we don't want to bury more men than we need to.”

Mira looked surprised at the tone in Kieran's voice. He sounded more like Fallos every day. She looked him over for a long moment, saying nothing. Her critical examination unnerved Kieran, and he shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. She had noticed that since the episode in her room in the tower a few days ago that he wore the pendant Sir Eleric had given him openly and that despite his crankiness from his injury his tone, when he spoke, had grown more confident. She was glad, for she knew he had been uncomfortable with his appointment to general of her army. Finally she looked off toward KingsHome, a far-away expression on her face.

“I just want this over, Kieran. I want Franken off my throne and to put this kingdom back in one piece.”

Kieran reached out and gently pulled her face back to meet his. “I know, Mira, but we must be cautious. We have encountered almost no resistance. That can only mean that they have pulled back and will have a greater force with which to attack once we reach KingsHome. If we are not careful ...” his voice trailed off but Mira knew his thoughts.

She took one hesitant step toward him, then another, finally leaning into his arm and resting her head on his chest. He reached up and stroked the back of her head and she was again reminded of Fallos and his comforting embrace. Except that Kieran's was much less fatherly – and much more comforting. “Is your wound healing, Kieran? Will you be ready to face what lies ahead?”

“It does not matter if I am ready or not, Mira. All that matters is that the army is ready.” he replied stiffly, avoiding her first question. “And they are ready.”

She took a step back and looked up into his face, her expression serious. “But will you be?”

Kieran looked away. “I don't have any choice, Mira. I will do whatever I must.”

“If you were to ...” she shook her head angrily, unwilling to finish the thought. “I cannot stand the thought of you not by my side, Kieran. And if you are not fully healed ...” She paused, a painful look crossing her face as she recalled Lady Ulforth's words that last night in KingsHome. You will bring nothing but ruin to this kingdom. The peace will be broken, Mira Mageborn, and the blood that covers our kingdom will be on your head. She closed her eyes against the memory, clenching her fists tightly as if she could drive the guilt away so easily. “So many have already died. Many more will die in the next few days. I do not want one of them to be you.” She looked up at him again, tears welling in her eyes at the thought.

Kieran pulled her against him and folded his arms around her. “Dirge knows I don't want that either!” he chuckled a bit, trying to erase her morbid thoughts, but then his voice grew serious. “I promise, my queen, I will be with you when you take back your throne. Even if I have to crawl on my hands and knees.”

She sniffled. “Now that would be a sight. The general of my army crawling on the floor like a child.”

“Indeed! Sir Eleric would never let me hear the end of that.” he said lightly.

Mira smiled, reaching up and wiping at the tears in her eyes to clear them. “Well then, general, we'll have to make sure you aren't put in that position, won't we?”

“Definitely.”

She sighed and looked back over the horizon. “I didn't want any of this Kieran. None of it. How did we come to this, then, that the prophecies of an ancient seeress would come true? It was folly to ignore her. My father should have listened. And believed.”

Kieran looked thoughtful for a moment. “I had always believed that we made our own destinies, Mira. Strong men usually do hold such beliefs.” He reached down and took

Sir Eleric's pendant in one hand and held it up before her. "But of late I have begun to think it is only because we do not agree with what the fates have decreed must be."

She looked at the pendant of Dirge lying in his palm and reached up, placing her hand over his and covering the silver device. At the contact she was startled by the sudden sound of a voice whispering and she jerked her hand away. She looked down at her hand and rubbed her palm furiously, trying to erase the feel of the cool metal on her hand. The lingering echoes of that voice still rang in her ears as she looked up at Kieran, her eyes wide with astonishment.

A similar look on Kieran's face told her that he'd heard the voice as well, but before she could speak a voice cried out, cutting across the darkness and pushing away the last of the echoes.

"Rider!" They both turned suddenly as the cry rang out across the camp. They looked at each other curiously before Kieran took her hand and quickly led her back to the fire.

"Your grace?" Kieran looked at Duke Highstep questioningly.

"A lone rider has been sighted to the north," the Duke replied. "The guards have been sent to meet him."

"Eleric?" Mira whispered hopefully.

The Duke flashed a concerned glance at Kieran, but said nothing. They waited impatiently for the guards to return with the rider, all hoping that perhaps the rider was a messenger from one of the other duchies rather than only one of the two knights.

As the rider approached with the guards, Kieran suddenly snapped his fingers at a nearby guard, whispering something in his ear when he arrived. The man nodded and ran off.

A few moments later Mira could see Sir Eleric approaching slowly, his face grim. She turned at the sound of armor clanking in the darkness to see the arrival of the Nordalians who had stayed with the army, who were looking at Sir Eleric. At the sight of him alone Mira could see the looks on their faces tighten.

Eleric dismounted and handed the reins of his horse to one of the guards. He walked solemnly toward the fire and stopped near Mira, bending down on one knee. "My queen," he began, his voice hoarse. "It is done."

Mira reached down and put a hand on Eleric's shoulder. "Eleric, sit." She turned to a guard. "Bring him food and something warm to drink." She backed up and sat across the fire from Eleric. "Sir Staphius?" she asked quietly.

Eleric looked up and past Mira, to the ring of Nordalian's who stood behind the queen, waiting for news of their comrade. "I have never seen such courage in all my life. Nordal must be truly honored by Sir Staphius." Sir Eleric said.

The Nordalians straightened even more than usual, their faces sober.

“What happened, Eleric?” Kieran prodded. “Tell us.”

Eleric took the mug and plate of food offered by the guard who approached and nodded politely at the man. He set the plate of food on the ground in front of him and took a long drink from the mug. He turned the mug idly in his hands and cleared his throat. “We prayed for that first day, and prepared the altar according to both Dirge and Nordal's instructions. Though we did not rest at all Sir Staphius did not appear to tire. He chanted long into the evening, praying with all his might.” He paused and took another long drink from his mug, then set it down and stood, looking up into the night sky.

The crackling of the fire seemed to be louder than normal in the silence. No one spoke; all were hanging on the knight's every word.

“The next day we continued. The holy water of Dirge and Nordal was poured over the altar. It ... steamed and the hiss sounded as though Tasni himself was calling out.” Mira shivered at the thought. “We prayed harder, joining our voices in a common prayer to destroy that place of evil. The altar began to glow and the very rocks began to shake in anger as Dirge and Nordal lent us their strength and wisdom.” He stopped and looked respectfully at the Nordalians. “Truly, Sir Staphius was a remarkable sight. As the tower itself began to shake he raised his sword and cried out to Nordal. I swear on my honor that Sir Staphius... grew... at that moment. He towered over the altar and was infused with the power of Nordal, shining in the darkness of that dank place like a beacon of justice. I continued to pray and Dirge offered his strength to help his brother overcome the evil of the dark one. Sir Staphius called out and ordered Tasni to begone and never return to that place. Then he brought his sword down across the altar with a mighty blow.”

Sir Eleric looked to Mira and she could see the awe and respect in his face. When he continued his voice was no more than a whisper and everyone leaned forward to hear his words.

“He cracked the altar from top to bottom. Flame rose from the altar where his blessed sword cut through the wicked stone. I raised my voice to Dirge and once again sprinkled his blessed water on the pieces of the altar. More steam rose from the pieces and a raspy voice came from the very depths of the altar.” Mira saw Eleric actually shudder at the memory. His voice rose again. “The voice laughed and told us we could not stop it. Sir Staphius raised his hands and called out to Nordal one last time, his voice strong and confident. Then he brought down his gauntlet covered fists, one on each of the halves of the altar. His simple hands smashed the two parts of that vile edifice into tiny pieces. The dust that rose was so heavy it choked us and the sound was deafening. So mighty was the blow that I was thrown back into to hall that led to the chamber. And then the tower began to shake again. I called for Sir Staphius but still he stood, his lips praising Nordal even as the ceiling of that foul place collapsed upon him.” Sir Eleric sat once again and stared at the Nordalians, whose faces wore expressions of awe and profound respect. “I managed to dig his body out from the rubble. Even in death he wore a satisfied smile. I buried him next to the tower, his sword stands to mark his resting place.”

Mira let out a small cry, her hands going to her mouth. “Poor Sir Staphius!”

“Nay, gentle queen.” One of the Nordalians spoke from behind her. “Sir Staphius surely dines at the Knight's Table with Nordal himself. He is not poor, but rich beyond mine humble self's imagining. Truly was he the best of knights and Nordal's faithful servant to the end. His deeds shall be sung through the ages,” he looked at Sir Eleric, “and thine as well, noble son of Dirge.”

A figure detached itself from the darkness at the edge of the fire. It resolved itself into Unlell, the elf-priest. “One feels this is true, worthy follower of Justice. The Mother has gifted this one with knowledge that Sir Staphius' body is feeding the land, and his soul was lead to Nordal's hall by the Mother's sister – the Gate Guarder.” With that he turned and walked back into the darkness.

The other Nordalians thanked Sir Eleric for bringing the tale before they marched off sedately, their postures indicating the pride in their brother and satisfaction with the manner of his death. The others remained silent for a time, before the quiet murmur of conversation once again began to flow across the fire. Before it grew too late, everyone excused themselves and headed off to find rest, knowing that tomorrow they would be passing into KingsHome, each wondering what they might encounter along the way.

It was early afternoon the next day when they could see in the distance the first small town inside of the duchy of KingsHome. Like most of the towns they had come across, there was no one in evidence when they came close. Though Mira was certain that she would not choose to stay in the path of a marching army, it still bothered her. Her generals, Kieran and Fallos before him, had executed three of their own soldiers publicly to discourage rape and looting. She knew that her scouts brought back trusting souls, and even that Fallos had mentioned contact with people in cities controlled by Franken, but it did not make her feel better when they entered a town and found it completely empty. She was never certain in her heart that they were only hiding somewhere, always afraid that they had been put to the sword by Franken's retreating army.

“Perhaps my Queen would like to take her lunch in a building?” Duke Highstep, riding in his customary position to her left, suggested.

She smiled appreciatively at him. In the past few months the pleasant old man had taken her under his wing. She thought of him almost as a favored uncle at this point and genuinely enjoyed his company. He'd taken Fallos place at her left, while Kieran continued to ride on her right. “It would not displease me, since we are moving slowly anyway.”

“I would send troops in first.” Kieran said firmly. “I will not forget the last place we stayed.”

“As you wish, General.” she replied formally. She'd taken to making sure she referred to Kieran by his title publicly so others understood her position on his place. While none had argued with her about his appointment, when it came to Kieran she was not willing to take chances.

He rode off to gather a scouting party and Sir Eleric filled the spot Kieran had left next to her.

“I never properly thanked you for what you did in that tower, Sir Knight. I gave you a Queen's gratitude, but never told you how happy I am that you survived, or how grateful I am for that service.” she said looking at the town.

“My Queen is too kind.” he replied. “I did little, Sir Staphius is the hero. And truth be told, I did my part for Dirge and for the people of that village. Their lives would never have been the same with that altar present.”

“And for the people I wanted to thank you. They cannot do so themselves, and most would not understand if I explained it to them. But I can understand what you risked for them, and it makes you great in my eyes.”

“I know that you do not always trust in the wisdom of some of your father's choices, Queen Mira. Believe me when I say that he chose well to want you to sit the throne. The blood that flows in your veins is not as important as the heart that sits in your breast. If you put the small folk first in all things, you will be a just and fair Queen. I am honored to serve you.”

Kieran rejoined them before Mira could manage a reply. “I have sent a small force of Rangewarders forward to check the town, and the elves are shadowing them in that forest to the west of town. It should only be a few moments, half glass at most.”

“It bothers me that still we find no sign of the enemy but empty campsites and rutted trails.” Duke Highstep observed.

“The power left in that tower was strong.” Sir Eleric replied “To manage that kind of power in a land protected by Dirge, the Tasnian priest must have control of Franken, or someone very close to Franken. Such a construction could not have been managed without the knowledge of someone able to order soldiers to cooperate. It is not the dark one's way to fight as honorable men would. They will come at us when we are least prepared, or they will hole themselves up in a few key castles, and force us to expend our forces upon the walls while they call on Tasni – or worse – to help them.”

Mira shuddered. “Then we shall have to accept the help of Dirge and Nordan, to combat that evil. And we shall have to count upon the bravery of our men to combat the castles. I do not wish to siege anything that can be taken quickly.”

Kieran looked ill at the mention of a siege. “Nor does anyone in this army of fools more than I. Were it up to me, I would starve them out anywhere possible, and save the fighting for the places it was necessary. But some wish to go home, some wish to die gloriously in battle, some wish to end this war at all costs. I seem to be the only one marching with you that wants to save the lives of men whom have served you honorably.”

Sir Eleric smiled and raised a hand. “You know that they wish to live through this war, but you also know that all of those reasons are valid. Now that there are no more Dirgians fighting for Franken, I would rather die fighting for the rightful Queen than die an old man telling tales of the great campaign when I was young. Dirge honors

the bold on the battlefield, I feel I should give him the opportunity. Besides, sieges are not without their own dangers.”

A rider from RangeWard approached, cutting off their conversation. “General. The town is clear as we can check for. Give us a hundred foot, and we could check the entire town.”

“No.” Mira said flatly. “Checking the entire town would slow the march. We’d end up camped here, and I burn to find Franken.”

“That is well enough, Trel. Thank you.” Kieran told him. “This way then, my Queen.” he said to Mira.

They rode toward the small town. Even full it could not have held more than three hundred inhabitants. Mira decided that it probably existed for the caravan trade headed to Farrenton. Kieran and Eleric took the lead by habit, Mira and the Duke following with the QueensGuard fanning out behind them.

At the edge of town, Mira could see that it was old, but well kept up. She knew that much of her Duchy was like this small town - well used, but in good repair. This town would be much like any of the ones she had visited in her childhood, except that it was deserted. There were one and two story homes along the road, and a large clearing in the center of town. Around the clearing stood a temple to Dirge – abandoned like everything else - a closed smithy, probably empty of hammers and anvil, and an inn with a crown on the sign. The fourth side of the clearing held a simple building that she surmised would be the town hall if this town was like most others she had known.

“We can eat within the Inn my Queen. I will leave payment for anything we use not of our stores.” Duke Highstep offered politely.

“Very well.” She raised her voice, “Kieran. Please check the stables and the inn.”

Kieran and Eleric dismounted and tied their horses to the hitching rail in front of the inn, then made their way inside.

Once they were out of sight, Duke Highstep dismounted and helped Mira to do the same. The QueensGuard were spreading out around the clearing, pretending to be relaxing, but Mira could see an order to their casual movements that told her they were being cautious.

“My Queen, we should be well into KingsHome by now. I do hope that it helps you to sleep, knowing that the end is near. The Dukes who have sided with Franken will stop putting up resistance once he is dead.” He smiled at her in a fatherly manner.

“I will sleep better when he is dead. Not before. But thank you for the kindness. I wish that it would be so easy to stop Tasni and those whom follow him.”

“It is impossible to stop the followers of the dark one, but they can be forced to stay out of our Kingdom, my-”

“Archer in the town hall!” Eleric's sudden shout cut him off.

The men of her QueensGuard, following Eleric's pointed finger, charged at the door to the building she had believed was the town hall. She saw the Duke also turn to look, scanning the second floor of the building. She started to take a step forward to see the building clearer but stopped as she saw Eleric running toward her and Kieran limping along behind him, running as fast as he could.

The Duke suddenly grabbed her arms and spun around so that his back was between her and the building. He began urgently pushing her back behind the horses. Mira desperately tried to keep her feet beneath her as he forced her back. She reached out and grabbed at his forearms to keep herself upright but he straightened suddenly and gasped before he staggered forward, pushing her back even further. She lost her balance as he pushed her the last few feet behind her horse and fell roughly to the ground just as he dropped to his knees and pitched face forward into the dirt.

She pushed herself to her knees and screamed when she saw the thick crossbow bolt protruding from his lower back. “Duke Highstep!” She rose and started to run for help but Eleric was already there. He grabbed her arms and pulled her close to him, shielding her between himself and her horse.

“We will see to him soon enough, my queen. For now you must stay here.” He looked over his shoulder, scanning the other buildings intently. “There's more on the roof of the temple!” he shouted, too close to her ear. She realized he was holding her much the same way the Duke had been and that he meant to protect her in the same way the Duke had. She could not allow Eleric to be shot for her, too. But then he relaxed and let her loose. She stepped to the side and looked out. The men on the roof were launching arrows across the square at a window on the second floor of the town hall. One of them was waving a banner that showed golden horses on a field of blue. Her royal colors. Where did they get that? she wondered distractedly.

The archers stopped shooting just as Kieran limped up, gasping for breath and holding his hip. He looked at her carefully and once he was satisfied she was unhurt he knelt down next to Duke Highstep. Mira took a few careful steps forward and cautiously poked her head around the front of her horse toward the town hall, just in time to see a body wearing a red and black cloak being thrown out of the second story window. She shuddered until she saw a glimpse of gray on the breast. Franken's sworn men wore red and black with the gray fox-head on the breast, Tasnian faithful just wore red and black. For the first time she realized that they both wore red and black. Convenient for her soldiers, but coincidence?

“Eleric! Come here quickly!” Kieran rasped. “There is something wrong with the Duke!”

Mira followed Eleric to Kieran's side, where he had the Duke rolled up so his face was not in the dirt. Mira's heart sank at the sight of the Duke. His face was ashen, and his lips were blue. His breath rattled in his chest like a child's toy.

“The bolt is out, it barely scraped his skin through the armor.” Kieran said grimly, meeting Eleric's gaze.

“Let me try to heal him.” Eleric leaned forward. As he reached to touch the Duke, the large man's body went into massive convulsions. His legs flicked up, catching Kieran square on his bad hip. Kieran fell backward with a grunt, landing roughly in the dust. Eleric grabbed the Duke's arms and tried to hold him down. “QueensGuard! To me!” Mira shouted as she backed quickly out of Eleric's way.

Men came running from all over the square, helping Eleric subdue the Duke and trying to keep the frenetic man from hurting himself or someone else. One of the men stuck a dagger sheath into the Duke's mouth to keep him from biting his tongue. Mira watched in horror as his body twisted and jerked wildly before subsiding. The Duke stiffened for a moment, then jerked one last time and lay still.

“Get him off me.” Eleric grunted from underneath the Duke. He had slipped beneath the Duke hoping to hold him in one place while the others grabbed his arms and legs.

Four of the men lifted the Duke gently from him. Mira looked at him mournfully, her lower lip trembling. He looked dead to her, his body hanging loose from the hands of her QueensGuard and his head lolling about like a puppet's.

“I am sorry, my Queen,” Eleric said as he rose. “It was poison.”

He had looked dead, but she did not believe it. She bit her lip and tried not to cry as she looked down at the swollen face of her Duke. Another man taken from her by treachery. Another man she had called a friend and trusted.

Sir Eleric looked sharply at Kieran. “General, are you hit?” he asked in a voice full of concern. Mira's heart stopped at the question. She closed her eyes and held her breath as she waited to hear Kieran's reply.

“No,” Kieran said with a scowl from his seat on the ground. “He kicked my hip when the seizure struck him. He was rather adamant that I not travel with this injury. Now he's made it hurt such that I do not wish to rise. Are you certain that he's... dead?”

Eleric nodded his head sadly. “Quite certain. I have seen cocomaat before, it is a favorite poison of the followers of the dark one. From beneath him, I could hear his muscles pull so hard they were breaking his neck, a primary sign that someone has had cocomaat poisoning. One's heart can only survive a small amount of that poison before it stops. In far Larkan it is said they make a pleasant drink from a moderate form of it, but here it is normally only seen in the hands of Tasnians.”

Mira had let out a sigh of relief at Kieran's words but her face darkened at Eleric's pronouncement. I should have allowed them to search the town more thoroughly. This is my fault as much as Franken's. She blinked unbelievably as she realized that she was acting as horribly as Franken. It appeared that he would sacrifice anything and anyone to sit on the throne and now she was doing the same. Never take advice without understanding. She heard Duke Highstep's words echo in her head and realized that his counsel was just as applicable to making a decision. She swallowed hard against the guilt that threatened to engulf her and resolved to put the safety of her men ahead of her own impatience henceforth.

Kieran struggled to his feet. “We move. Now. I am sorry your majesty, but I would

rather face the entire army of Franken on the plains with aught but the QueensGuard than spend one more minute in a position where a lone assassin can end your reign before you sit your throne even once. If you wish, you may eat in the saddle, or we can stop well out of town, but we cannot protect you here.” Mira looked around and saw that the QueensGuard was nervously eyeing the town around them and were crowding her. She could tell that they shared Kieran's feelings.

She looked at the Duke again and realized that she would be deprived of the chance to grieve once again. And once again by an agent of Franken. She shared the guilt for Duke Highstep's death but Franken had begun this with his ambition. He would pay for the man's death. That, and much more. She turned to her horse and mounted, waiting for Kieran.

Her QueensGuard gently lifted Duke Highstep to his mount, and laid him over it, tying him firmly in place.

They mounted up and waited for Kieran also. Mira watched Kieran wobbled towards his horse, still tied to the hitching rail. He looked worse, and he nearly fell before he stopped and turned around. “What are you fools waiting for?” he bellowed, his face contorted in frustration and pain. “Get the Queen out of this trap now!”

Sir Eleric dismounted and waved at them in dismissal as he walked over to Kieran's side and helped him walk. Mira wanted to stay, to argue, but she was afraid she would do nothing but slow their exit from the town even more and she could not justify her actions when weighed against the potential danger. So when the QueensGuard looked to her, she nodded and let them lead her back out of town the way they had come. She looked over her shoulder continuously, watching for Kieran and Sir Eleric and praying that there were no more enemies hidden in the town.

She sighed with relief when Sir Eleric and Kieran rejoined them a half a glass later. Sir Eleric had the body of the slain murderer strapped across the back of his horse and looked unharmed. Mira's face fell at the sight of Kieran. His face was pale and there were blood stains on his leggings.

“We stop here for the night. Please inform your commands.” Mira said to her captains. He needed to rest and to get that bleeding under control.

“No need your majesty.” Sir Eleric said quickly. “Kieran's wounds are healed. Just give us a few moments to figure out whom this scoundrel really was, and we can be on our way.”

“Are you certain, Sir Eleric? I would not risk his life. Too many other's depend upon his. If we must stop ...” she asked uncertainly.

Sir Eleric glanced at Kieran and nodded as they both dismounted. “I am certain, my Queen.”

The two men unloaded the body from the horse and began stripping it, looking closely at each item they removed.

“There it is.” Sir Eleric muttered.

Kieran leaned back, grasping the shield of Dirge hanging about his neck, muttering. "Dirge Shield us."

Mira leaned over and tried to see what the men had found. Sir Eleric pulled his dagger from his belt and used it to lift a small chain from the neck of the body. Kieran lifted the body so Eleric could slide the chain over the head of the body. Eleric dumped the chain and the small symbol on it onto the dirt next to them.

It was a skull with ruby red eyes. Mira shivered as she looked at it. It looked as though the eyes were glowing and she felt as if it was staring at her. She tore her eyes away and focused on Kieran instead, resisting the urge to gaze at the symbol again.

Eleric lifted his symbol of Dirge and looked at Kieran. "I will need help, brother. Can you assist me or should I call upon one of the others?"

"I can help, if you can guide me. I am not as trusting as you, and they are all new to us." Kieran swallowed hard enough that Mira could see it from her seat.

"Very well. Hold your symbol and touch my shoulder. Think of providing me with your strength, and the strength of Dirge. If you should grow weak or faint, let go of me immediately. Too much can kill you." Mira almost choked at Sir Eleric's words. She watched intently as he turned to the symbol and pulled his own silver, holy symbol from around his neck. He dangled the dented shield close to the skull lying on the ground. The skull glowed a fiery red that emanated from the eyes while the shield glowed a faint blue. "It is not too strong, this should not tax either of us too much."

He began mumbling, asking Dirge for the power to banish the evil influence in the skull amulet. Kieran's eyes were closed and he seemed to be deep in thought. The glow of Sir Eleric's amulet began to grow, while the intensity of the eyes in the skull seemed to get deeper.

"Holy Dirge! Destroy this, the tool of thine enemy!" Sir Eleric suddenly shouted. At the same time he lowered the medallion down to touch the symbol of Tasni. There was a resounding clap, and a flash of light. Eleric swayed, and Kieran jumped backward, sitting down forcibly for the second time today. The skull symbol was a molten pile of silver, with no sign of the ruby eyes.

"Well, it may have been weak now, but it started out strong. That one has been waiting for us quite a few days I would say." Sir Eleric said thoughtfully.

"How can you tell all of that? I felt the amount of strength it took from you and can tell that it wasn't much compared to what you could have done without my help, but how can you tell that it was once strong?"

"The way it was destroyed. Had it been one of the ones that a man made on his own, and just blessed by a Tasnian priest, it would have succumbed to the power of Dirge without such pyrotechnics. That one was built by a priest and given to him, long enough ago that there was not much left in it, but it was still linked to Tasni. The priest that made that will know that this murderer failed." He finished soberly.

Kieran shook his head. "Well. I have much to learn it seems."

"You do." Sir Eleric said seriously. When Kieran looked at him, the expression on the other man's face clearly showing how he felt about such a daunting task he smiled at his friend. "But you learn quickly."

Kieran snorted. "Hopefully it will be quickly enough." He looked at the body distastefully. "Do you think we need to finish the search?"

"No. I was afraid he might be a priest. Had he been, there would have been more to that medallion. We can leave him, or burn him, as you wish." Eleric shrugged, leaving the decision up to Kieran.

Kieran glanced quickly at Mira, his desire to move her away from the body and the town clear to Eleric. "I wish to be gone from here. Leave him, but let us post a guard around the body so none get too close marching past."

Mira regarded Kieran intently, her blue eyes still full of concern at his appearance. While he was still very pale, there was no fresh blood visible on his leggings. While it could be true that his wounds were better she needed to know for certain. "Did Sir Eleric heal you then, Kieran?"

Kieran exchanged a look with Eleric, who was wearing a slightly bemused expression on his face. "Close enough to that, your majesty." He cleared his throat. "I will not be as unfit for our battles as you feared, at least. I should find a guard for... that and get the army moving again." he replied nonchalantly as he mounted his horse and rode away.

Mira stared after him, her mouth agape and her face clearly showing her confusion at Kieran's words. As Eleric mounted up to follow, she called out to him. "Sir Eleric. Attend me please." Her tone made it a command.

He wheeled his horse to her side, not looking at her. "You needed something my Queen?" he asked stiffly.

"What was that all about?"

"The amulet was enchanted by a Tasnian priest your highness. It did not seem fit to leave it behind us where some traveler or one of the townsfolk might find it..."

"That is not what I was talking about, and you know it." she broke in acidly. "How was Kieran healed and why did you call him 'brother'? I've only heard you say that to sworn members of your Order."

"What has passed was between Dirge and Kieran." he held up a hand to silence her when she opened her mouth to speak. "I do not know all of it, but I know enough to believe that it is a good thing for Kieran. And unless I miss my guess, it is a good thing for the Kingdom as well."

"But he is Dirgian? Please Eleric, I am confused." she pleaded.

“My queen should be more observant of those around her. While he did not admit it until Duke Highstep died, Kieran has been a follower of Dirge for some time now. Now he is... something more. Beyond that, you will have to speak with him, but I ask you to be gentle. This is new to him also, your majesty.” He turned and rode back toward the place that Duke Highstep's sword stuck up above the ground.

Mira didn't ask Kieran. She rode the rest of the day in silence, wondering what was moving in Kieran, and whether he would choose to share it with her.

Chapter 20

Mira sat on her horse trying to stifle a yawn. In the week since they had entered KingsHome she had slept little. They had seen stiffening resistance, but still nothing that caused them any real concern. Kieran lived in a constant state of fear that Franken's armies would hit them from the side or the rear. Sir Eleric had taken a detachment of QueensGuard – all Elves and Nordalians – on patrols to the front and sides of the army. Her QueensGuard acted like she was in danger at all times, grouping close to her and constantly searching areas before allowing her to dismount for so much as lunch.

And she couldn't sleep. There were double guards on her tent at night, and Kieran was so wrapped up in defenses and guards at night that he didn't have time to speak with her. With Sir Harren, Fallos, and Duke Highstep all gone, she felt more alone than she had since she had first left for training on the Isles of Enlightenment. She tossed and turned every night, her guilt over Duke Highstep's death still gnawing at her and her curiosity at Kieran's sudden affinity to Dirge keeping her awake.

By day they moved at a crawl. Mira was certain it would take weeks to reach Farrenton, but last night the scouts had reported that Farrenton was within two day's march. She'd been both elated and frightened by the report. They had gathered around the fire for breakfast and planned as best they could. The scouts reported that Farrenton was full of troops, which had caused both Kieran and Eleric to relax. Even now they were marching forward, ready for the army that the scouts reported had moved out of Farrenton to meet them. The scouts had been pulled back to within an hour of the main formation, and the troops were again positioned so that the best units were at the front. Kieran had insisted that they now ride further to the rear, and she could no longer see anything but the long line of her troops stretching out in front and around her.

“It will be too late today.” she said speculatively.

“If it is too late to engage them today, then we will have a night to rest the troops. I wish that Franken would give us that opportunity.” Kieran replied. “He will not. Or if he does we will have to worry about infiltrators in the night.”

“So it is best if we do not meet them today?”

Kieran smiled at her question. He'd noticed her change in attitude regarding their speed ever since Duke Highstep had died and had been pleased. He was sorry that the Duke had had to die before she realized how dangerous this war was becoming, but

her increased concern for the lives of the men was encouraging. “Yes, Mira. If we push the troops to get there, then we will line them up and ask them to fight when they are exhausted. More of them will die, and no benefit for it. Franken will still be inside Farrenton, and we will still be outside.”

“Worse, we will have less troops to root him out.” Eleric added.

“I am not in a hurry to see men die.” she said seriously. “I just do not want this to drag through the winter. Now that we're here, I want to finish what Franken started. ”

“All too soon the surgeons and the priests will be busy, my Queen. Enjoy this last bit of peace while it lasts.” Eleric said quietly.

“I do, my friend. And I thank the gods that we have this time to plan better, but I am still impatient to finish this. The sooner it is over, the less men will have to die.”

Kieran growled as he pointed toward the front of the column, “I think you are about to get your wish, your majesty.”

Mira looked intently in the direction Kieran indicated and saw that their scouts were reporting back in to Sir Alden.

They waited patiently while Sir Alden took the scouts' report and rode back to meet them. His face was grim. “It will be today after all. They have lined up outside a small town about a league ahead. From all my scouts report, this will be quick and ugly. It is not the best of Franken's troops, but rather a rabble of farmers and freeriders. Not more than one thousand in all, led by sell-swords from the looks of it. Only their commander wears Franken's colors, though his banner is carried by each unit.”

Mira had heard enough over the last few days to draw some conclusions of her own. “Why? That makes no sense at all. If he is going to mount a defense, here and now is good, at the castle is better. Sending recruits and freeriders will not stop us here. What does he hope to accomplish by throwing away the lives of so many of his own men?”

“He wishes to slow our approach to Farrenton your majesty. That town can be formidable to attack if the defender has time to properly prepare. It is likely that the last of his troops arrived in Farrenton just ahead of us and he wishes to array them to the best effect.” Eleric replied.

Sir Alden blew out a breath. “It had been our hope to catch him while his troops were still outside your highness. Now we will have to siege him or pay in blood for the town.”

“There is nothing for it but to continue.” Kieran said harshly. “If we are to take the town, let us start by putting this rabble down. I want as few survivors creeping away towards Farrenton as possible, is that understood? Any man is to be allowed to yield, and any that run are to be followed as far as is safe – say one league. Every man we stop here is one less manning the walls later. Alden, hit them in the flank while the infantry hits them dead on. Let's not use the archers except to stop any archers they

may have.”

Sir Eleric and Sir Alden both nodded their heads and turned to deliver his instructions – Alden to his riders, and Eleric to the foot and archers. Kieran had no doubt they would be victorious this day, but he wondered what Duke Franken was thinking.

“Will we stop for the day then?” Mira's question drew him out of his thoughts.

“Yes, in that Franken is correct. Unless we are very lucky, or those troops are very inexperienced, by the time we fight them and gather our wounded, there will not be time to continue. Besides, even men who march forward and are far enough back in the battle order that they only stand around will find themselves tired without reason.”

“Should I have the QueensGuard set a camp here then? Two leagues is quite a distance, but perhaps I can help the surgeons get ready.” she replied thoughtfully.

“No.” At the quizzical expression on her face he explained. “It is too far, Mira. I do not trust Franken, and have no desire to return victorious only to find that a fast group of horse took you from our rear. We will set camp right next to the battle lines – if there is a hill, we will stay there, where we can watch the battle.”

The line started moving again but Kieran was unsure if that was a good thing. “If we could go around this trap, I would. I am reasonably certain there is more than meets the eye here. I should have asked Alden if all of his scouts returned.”

“You still could. We will be riding for a bit, one of the QueensGuard could make it to him, ask, and return before the battle is joined.”

Kieran looked surprised that she had to remind him of something so simple. “You are right, of course.” He turned in his saddle. “Plengur, a moment please?” he asked his friend, the scout.

Plengur rode up next to them. “General, how may I serve?” he asked formally. The corner's of Mira's lips pulled up in amusement. Plengur was always formal in front of the Queen. She'd heard him speaking to the other QueensGuard in friendly, joking tones but when he was aware of her presence, his tone became as formal as Sir Eleric.

“Ride forward to Sir Alden and tell him I wish to know if any of his scouts have gone missing. I dislike the simplicity of this battle so close to our goal.”

Plengur knuckled his forehead in salute and rode off towards the RangeWard units. They rode in silence until he returned a few minutes later.

“No General, all scouts have reported back. And if I might add, you have injured Sir Alden by asking.” Plengur said with the hint of a smile.

Kieran smiled wryly. “Of course. Thank you, please return to your duties.” He waited until Plengur had returned to his position before he nudged his horse closer to Mira's. He pointed off in the distance at what appeared to be a small hill. “We'll stop there. It looks high enough to see over the battle but will keep you far enough from the fight.”

Kieran watched her nod and saw the sudden apprehension on her face. “Change your mind so soon, my queen?”

“No.” she shook her head then looked up at him, mock anger on her face. “I think your concern is contagious.”

Kieran chuckled at her response. “If it is, then I am glad. Better you be wary than overconfident, Mira.”

She sighed and turned her attention back to the hill he had pointed out. He reached over and took her hand, holding it tightly in his and riding next to her until they reached the top of the low hill.

Kieran dropped her hand and pushed his mount forward a few feet to look down over the battlefield. Much as the scouts had reported, Franken's army was little more than a ragtag collection of soldiers. Some of the units even had mismatched colors. He could see here and there the colors of every Duchy that had thrown in with Franken – even Doornesbane. But the only banners that flew were Franken's red-and-black.

About one hundred yards across the hayfield from them were arrayed the foot of Mira's army. More precisely, the best of the foot. More than two thousand battle hardened troops, with heavy foot in the center, and lighter, more mobile units farther out. Duke Ashendown's rangers – scouts of the very best caliber – flanked both ends. Though infantry, those scouts were some of the more mobile units he possessed. If given the chance, they would flank Franken's army to wreak havoc in the rear, cutting off any chance of retreat the enemy might have.

On the other side of the field he could see Sir Alden's horse forming up. If the infantry arrayed against Franken's general did not scare him, the five hundred heavy horse equipping for a charge should make an impression. Before a single drop of blood had been spilled, Kieran could see a route in the making. There would be nothing left of this pitiful 'army' by the end of the day. But they would be stopped for the day and Franken would know exactly where they were. He wished there was some other way to neutralize this force.

He sighed and resigned himself to what must be done. There was no apparent alternative, and Franken's army would not allow him the time necessary to find one. So he signaled the advance to the hornsman. Two long blasts wavered across the battlefield. Now it was up to his men. Eleric was down there with the heavy foot. He insisted on being in the fighting, claiming that Dirge did not abide his knights watching a fight. Kieran had stiffened a bit at his words but he had no good reason to keep him from it and so he had slapped him on the back and sent him off.

The lines of the infantry started moving forward and the horse swung out around the far side of Franken's lines. A small group of horse came from Franken's rear to meet them, but before they clashed it was clear the ragtag group would hardly slow Sir Alden's men.

A group of men moving in the rear of the enemy lines – twenty or so of them on foot – caught Kieran's eye. They looked to be busy doing something, but Kieran could not tell what from this distance.

The enemy's foot stood it's ground as his army descended upon them, but not by much. He could sense from the wavering and shifting of their lines that when the first one broke and ran, many would follow him. He hoped the lines would break soon, as it mean less death on both sides.

Then the trap that he had spent days fretting over was sprung. One of the men in the back of the enemies lines, the group he'd been watching just moments earlier, raised his arms high. A second later the ground underneath the center of Sir Alden's horse lifted, as if the man was physically lifting it above his head, only it was more like an explosion. Kieran flinched as rocks, dirt, men and horses were thrown in every direction. The men not directly in the blast were still fighting for control of their horses when the enemy's horse descended upon them.

A second man, facing the two groups of infantry about to converge, raised his arms in the same manner, and the center of the line – somewhere near where Kieran thought Eleric should be – exploded in much the same manner. Forty or more men just disappeared, and many more were down. Kieran could see some of the men writhing on the ground and he heard their screams over the sound of the horses hooves and the ringing of metal on metal, but far too many men were still, their bodies moving only when trampled by friend and foe alike as the battle was fully joined.

“Fel! To me!” Kieran shouted even while Mira was still crying out in horror.

The elf appeared at his shoulder. “Stop those men. Shoot them, now.” Kieran ordered, pointing in the direction of the men near the back of the lines.

“One wishes that one could, but it is a limitation of one's weapon. That is too far for this poor tool to reach.” the elf replied sadly. “Perhaps Unlell can be of more help to one Queen's armies.”

Kieran did not wait to hear more. “Unlell! To me!” he bellowed again. Kieran could now hear the crashing sounds of the enemy's foot taking the advantage echoing up the hill to him. When Unlell appeared he asked “Can you stop those men in the rear? They're wizards or priests or something.”

“One can but try, general. Allow one room to work please.” was the simple reply.

Kieran moved off to the side, motioning for Mira to come with him. Sir Alden's horse was winning the battle against their opponents, but the number of men and horses they left behind was appalling. The infantry had closed the gap created by the explosion in their midst, but they were now spread thin in the center, exactly where Franken's infantry was massing.

Kieran was desperately trying to find Sir Eleric in the mass of men fighting below when Unlell interrupted him. “One cannot stop that which runs.”

Kieran focused his attention on the spot where he had seen the men standing just minutes before. Sure enough, the group that had been at the back of the lines had mounted and was now riding hard toward Farrenton. He looked quickly to Sir Alden's men and saw that they were winning but even if they had been aware of the

men they would never win free in time to stop them. He swore and pounded a fist on his leg before he focused again on the main battle. His troops had held in the center somehow and the ends of their line were now wrapping around the enemy. The battle would be won as they had anticipated, but it had cost them mightily. It was even possible that Eleric or Sir Alden was amongst the dead and wounded.

“One feels that we have wasted strength without need.” said Unlell as he considered the battlefield.

“You are not alone in that, sir priest. But Nordal's scales shift against me if I could have found a way around it.” Kieran replied angrily.

“One feels that stopping followers of Tasni Deathstalker becomes more important than fighting armies of petty Duke.”

“You are right Unlell, but how do we fight them unless they show their faces? They were too far away for even your archers to reach and you did not have time to begin fighting back until they were leaving. We could try to keep a group of horse ready to break for them, but we saw what they can do to horse.” Kieran threw up his hands in frustration. He could fight an army but this, this was something very different.

“Of course. The general is correct. One wonders if Sir Eleric, more familiar with human gods, would have more ideas.” Unlell's tone seemed to be condescending, though Kieran could not be sure if it was directed at the lack of Kieran's knowledge or at human gods.

“I will certainly ask him.” Kieran replied stonily, then stared back over the battlefield, his jaw set in anger over both the situation and his inability to come up with a workable solution.

The battle raged for another glass but ended much as they had anticipated. Few of the enemy had been able to retreat and though more had fought to the death than they had expected, the losses to their own troops were small once the explosions stopped. Once he felt secure in their victory, Kieran allowed Mira to head toward the surgeon's tents. She quickly left the hill, grateful to be of help and to be away from the sight of so much death. Kieran watched her leave, sending the elves with her just in case, then stayed on the hill watching to the very end.

An hour after the killing had ended, as Kieran was reviewing the status of the troops just coming forward from the rear, a shout came from outside his tent. “General! Sir Eleric approaches.” He stood, offered the captains he was speaking with his apologies, and quickly dismissed them. As soon as they were gone he stepped outside. Sir Eleric was there, still sitting on his horse and obviously weary.

“Sir Eleric! I am happy to see you! When that... thing happened right about where you were in the lines, I feared for you.” Kieran said taking the reins.

“I felt it coming, and did what I could to help those around me. Never fear for me when the power is of Tasni. It would take a direct assault by the likes of them to kill me. But there is much we must talk about.” Eleric said soberly as he dismounted.

“How bad was it down there?”

“Bad and worse. We took severe casualties in the heavy infantry, more than forty fists of them will not fight at Farrenton. Still, it could have been worse. I heard that Sir Alden lost nearly as many because there were none of my order, or of the Knights of Justice with him. As it was, we lost Sir Gunefel the Rapier. He was shielding another when they overran him. I counted more than two fists of dead enemies around him, but his throat was slit. I told the men that we could burn the bodies on the morrow, but to bring Sir Genefel up for a faithful's burial.” Eleric sighed. “I should have known. We talked and talked about how easy it had been. I should have seen deceit and expected this kind of treachery.” Kieran looked carefully at his friend and saw his own guilt mirrored in the knight's eyes.

“There will be time later to speak of what we should have expected. For now let us find you some food and wait for Sir Alden. I have word that he escaped unscathed.”

“Very well. May I see to the other knights? I do not know if we lost any others.”

“Yes, but be quick about it if you can. Sir Alden should be here in half a glass.” Kieran told him.

As Eleric started to walk towards the encampment Kieran called out, “Did I say how glad I was to see you whole?” Eleric raised a hand in acknowledgment as he continued walking.

They had no chance to speak until much later. They ate and saw to the wounded, then watched as Sir Eleric mournfully lit two pyres, one for each of the dead Dirgian Knights. The flames rose high into the night, dancing eerily in the dark sky. No one spoke as they reflected upon the grievous losses they had incurred to win this small battle. The crackling of wood as it burned sounded louder than usual to Kieran as it drowned out even the constant liturgy that flowed from Sir Eleric, the members of his Order, and the Nordalians.

When they had finished the commanders walked slowly toward the central tent. Once they were all settled, Mira began simply. “I have been engaged with the surgeons all evening. Could we please start by reviewing the casualties?”

Kieran was impressed with her ability to ease into a topic that could be acrimonious. He nodded at Sir Eleric, who had taken unofficial leadership of the foot.

“It was worse than we may have hoped, your majesty.” Eleric started as he stood. “In all, we lost two knights. Both gave good accountings of themselves, but it is a sore loss for our army. We lost two captains, one in the foul blast caused by the Tasnian priests, one in the fighting afterward. Of the fine men who stood in the face of that foul summoning, one hundred and eighty seven of them lie dead on the battlefield, forty two of them are with the surgeons. There are another twenty that might be battle ready, but have taken wounds that warrant a visit to the surgeons.”

Mira nodded to him and turned to Sir Alden. “Sir Alden?”

Sir Alden stood as Eleric seated himself. “We fared as badly. By Dirge's holy shield,

I would have gladly died on that field if those Tasnian boot-lickers had died with me!" Mira heard the murmured agreement of every other man there. "Of the five hundred that rode with me, nearly two hundred are dead – most from that summoning – the rest were taken by surprise by the enemy horse right after. We lost almost as many horses. There are twenty two men who will never fight again, but we will have to send home lame, unable to help with the herds. May Dirge's dented shield smash those Tasni buggerrers."

Mira nodded again, trying to keep her emotions under control. "Is there anything we can do to keep them from repeating this?"

Kieran took the lead. "It seemed that Unlell felt Sir Eleric would have some ideas. I know that as long as they stay out of the range of even elven bows, and run when they get into danger, we will be hard pressed to stop them. Eleric?"

"If I know it is coming, I can stop their attacks. With the help of my brothers and the Nordalian knights, we could protect all of the troops. But without knowing where or when they will strike, I fear putting our faith in that defense."

There was a light scratching at the tent door, and Unlell poked his head in. "If one might intrude upon plans made, one might help some small amount."

Mira looked to him. "Of course, Unlell. You are as welcome here as any of my captains." She motioned for him to enter. "Kieran said you had some thoughts on the subject. We were just discussing how to stop he Tasnians from repeating today's evil."

Unlell moved into the tent a few steps, then stopped. He nodded politely at the assembled men before he spoke. "One believes that priests of Tasni are weak by nature. One believes those strong in faith – even in the faith of young human gods – can defeat those who are weak."

"After today, I would do anything to keep them from doing that to those who are faithful again." Sir Alden mused thoughtfully. "Or maybe accept some things I would not normally." He cast a speculative glance at Mira.

Kieran's eyes lit as he saw a chance to convince these men that the prejudices of the past belonged in the past. He was trying to decide what to say when Unlell spoke.

"One Queen, given freedom to use strengths, with her guardians of Dirge and Nordal, and protectors of Talimaara around her, could stop evil ones. It has been seen." he bowed respectfully in Mira's direction.

Kieran watched the reactions to Unlell's pronouncement carefully. Sir Alden's face had gone quite red, while Sir Eleric looked thoughtful. The others were a mixture of hopefulness and, at the same, time, revulsion.

"Your majesty..." Sir Alden began, his hands shaking, "if... if you had not sworn to never use that which flows in your blood... could you have stopped them? At least from leaving?" He moved to stand before her and dropped to one knee, his voice pleading. "Please my Queen, I... I wish to know."

Mira looked around, her eyes darting from man to man like a trapped animal. She knew the answer, but she was afraid to answer Sir Alden. She let her gaze fall on Kieran, who nodded slowly at her. She bit her lower lip and closed her eyes for a long moment before she opened them and looking directly into Sir Alden's face. "Yes, Sir Alden, I believe I could have... I am not certain, but after the first... When I saw your men get hit... I could see them, I knew what the priests were doing. I could not have saved your men, sir, but I could have saved the infantry. I knew what to do, and could have done it."

The men fell silent at her admission. Mira could hear them breathing and she wished someone would say something, anything, to break the unbearable silence. She briefly wondered if this was how her father had felt when he'd been informed of her birthright so many years ago. She looked desperately at Kieran, who only smiled encouragingly in return. She could not return the smile. She was afraid. Afraid that the men who sat with her tonight would somehow see her differently after hearing her words. Afraid they might see her as no better than the priests or worse, afraid they might ask her to use her own magik to stop them. She dropped her head and concentrated on her hands, clasped tightly together in her lap.

Dunban finally spoke, breaking the silence. "My Queen. You have shown over these last months that you are a fair Queen, and you have shown that you keep your word. I am a religious man, as are most of my men, but I fear I must say that I would see you use your... birthright before I would see that done to good men again."

Sir Eleric cleared his throat. "It is not a religious issue. It is a myth created by the seeress Victoria Fullmouth, early in the reign of King Farren. Kieran, Mira, and I myself are witness to the fact that Dirge has no objection to Mira's mageblood. I know that this news is new to most of you, but it is truth. We were made aware of Dirge's feelings at the tower on the border, after Kieran killed the priest of Tasni."

Sir Alden jumped up and took a step forward toward Mira, his fists clenched tightly and his eyes bulging. "You knew that Dirge would allow it and still you stood and watched? Why?" He shouted as he towered over her.

Mira's head snapped up at his shout, her eyes glassy with the unshed tears of guilt that had been welling but now flashing with anger. Before she could reply Kieran jumped up, his chair rattling to the floor behind him. He took three long strides and stood beside Mira. "Sit down, Sir Alden." His voice was low and carried an unspoken threat. "You know exactly why she did nothing." He looked around the table at the rest of the men, his arm sweeping the room and pointing accusingly at them. "You all know why she did nothing. Had any of you seen her throwing magik off of that hilltop, you and all of your men would have believed her a liar at best, and at worst would have left the field. She gave her word, and she kept it. Exactly as a Queen should."

Sir Alden shrank back from the venom in Kieran's voice. "But she could have-"

Kieran took a step forward and stood toe to toe with the man. "No, she couldn't have. She gave her word. "

Sir Alden seemed to struggle with himself for a moment. Finally, he took a step back

and knelt before Mira. “My humblest apologies, your majesty. Having survived that horror, I allowed my emotions to get the best of me.” He rose and returned to his chair, sitting slowly. “You were right to keep your word. The law must be upheld.”

At the mention of the law Kieran threw up his hands in exasperation. “Why?”

Sir Kusim looked sharply at Kieran. “It is the law, of course. Magik cannot be wielded in such a way. It is ... wrong.”

Kieran gave the man an arched look. “And how could protecting men be wrong? Especially against such evil.”

“It is magik. Magik is wrong.” Sir Alden replied haughtily.

“But what a priest or Sir Eleric does is not?”

“Of course not, that is different.” Alden replied. “What the priests do does not ... harm...” the man trailed off, his tone confused as he began to realize what he was saying.

Kieran snapped his fingers and pointed at the man. “Exactly. It is not the magik, but the wielder.” He looked around at the men, trying to convince them, his voice entreating them to understand. “The priests today used their gifts to do great evil. Our priests and knights, use their gifts for good. Why should it be any different for magik? Unless any of you think Mira would be so inclined as to use magik to do great evil?”

Mira held her breath until she heard a chorus of “No, of course not.” coming from around the table.

“Then if Dirge has no objection, why should you?” Kieran said contemptuously as he walked back to where his chair lie on the ground. He picked it up and deliberately set it down, then sat and crossed his arms. He looked around expectantly, waiting for someone else to speak.

Sir Alden cleared his throat and spoke tentatively. “If it is I and my men, then I would say that after today there is no reason to keep your vow. We would release you from it if that would mean you could stop them from doing that again, or do to them what they do to us.”

“Aye,” Dunban added. “And I can say the same for Winegarden's forces. Not just my archers, but all of them. If we must face such horror, and it does not go against Dirge's word, we would have you do what you might.”

“I am less at ease speaking for my troops.” said Sir Kusim “I am Dirgian and take my guidance from Eleric, but my troops are not of one faith. I would speak with them and explain the situation before granting anything in their name, your majesty.”

Mira swallowed nervously and nodded at him. It was what she expected from a man who led the footsoldiers of many different duchies.

“One who is as nothing next to the Mother of All does as that goddess wishes. That

goddess wishes that this one protect one Queen while she uses her power to protect those who best love her. The Sheel Tel have never held to the beliefs of your people. The Mother makes all, and makes none without a purpose. One Queen should use that which the goddess has given.” Unlell added.

“Just so doth mine faithful few feel.” Sir Palteron of Iron Cliff finally joined in. “In far Nordalia, and all other kingdoms, Knights of Justice doth fight side-by-side with mageborn against evil. ’Twould not displease us to do so now.”

Mira looked around the room. She saw the expectant looks on each of their faces. What had repulsed them hours earlier now appeared to be an acceptable choice. “What of the prophecy?” she asked simply.

Eleric smiled patiently. “My queen, it is already come to pass. The seeress spoke of a mageborn queen tearing the kingdom apart. Has that not already happened?”

When Mira nodded, he continued. “Victoria Kingseer did not prophecy what would occur afterward. And she did not say that magik would be the cause of war, just a mageborn queen.”

Mira's face appeared pensive for a moment, and her lips moved silently as though she were repeating the prophecies she had heard all her life. Suddenly her eyes widened. “You are right. She did not.”

Eleric bowed his head. “She did not, your majesty. But I, and Kieran, heard Dirge's words most clearly. He does not disapprove.”

Mira nodded. “Very well, worthy captains. Since it does not displease Dirge and if it does not displease you, then I shall do what I may when next we meet Tasnians.” As the men murmured their agreement she held up a hand and they grew silent. “I am uneasy about this.” She paused as once again saw the severed hand of the man who had attacked her on her journey to KingsHome fly through the air and the look of horror on his face. She shook off the memory. “Sir Kusim, I await your talks with your men, please send word out yet this evening so that I know if I can act should the need occur on the morrow.”

Kieran spoke up once again. “We are grateful, your majesty. We know that you find using your powers to harm others – any others – is distasteful to you. We are honored that you love your simple soldiers so.” The others murmured their agreement.

“We are finished then. Until the scouts return, we cannot adequately plan for the morrow, and we all need rest. In the morning we will burn the dead so that we do not ruin this town's water supply. Sir Kusim, would you see that men are detached to gather wood and stack the bodies?” Mira finished.

“Yes, majesty.” Sir Kusim said as he stood. He bowed respectfully before he left.

The others followed him out until all but Kieran and Sir Eleric had left. Sir Eleric stood. “Your majesty, with your permission I would take another group out and scout.”

“Please no, Sir Eleric. These last weeks have been hard. I would have you close now that we finally engage the enemy, unless you think the current scouts are inappropriate?”

“No, your majesty, it is my need I was hoping to fill, not any lack on the part of the scouts.”

“Then I must ask you to stay close, with the QueensGuard, to protect me and lend me your strength.”

“Very well majesty.” said Sir Eleric as he bowed and started to leave.

“Eleric.” Mira said to his back.

He turned at the door. “Yes, my queen?”

“Thank you. I have lost so many close to me, you are all of my father's faithful servants I have left. I cannot risk losing you too.” She smiled fondly at him, pleading with him to understand.

He did not return the smile and when he spoke, his voice was stiff. “I understand, Majesty. And my duty is here with the QueensGuard. You should not have to remind me.” He turned and stepped out the door.

Kieran stayed and talked with her for an hour or so before he too sought his bed.

The next morning dawned clear and cold. Kieran was just finishing a breakfast eaten amongst his captains when Sir Kusim came stomping up.

“It is not right, Kieran. They are gone.” He huffed angrily.

“Wait, Sir Kusim. Slow down. What is gone?”

“The bodies.” Sir Kusim threw up his hands. “Four hundred and more bodies lie on the field last night. In the light of the morn, they are gone. My men went out to burn them as the Queen requested. They were no longer there. We gathered a meager one hundred bodies. I saw hundreds of dead on that field yesterday! Did the others rise up on their own and walk away?”

Sir Eleric looked agitated. “They may have. I fear that the bodies were harvested, and I fear that was the real point of yesterday's battle.” He slammed a fist into his leg. “Dirge's Sacred Shield, I have failed my Queen again!”

“Slow down, Eleric.” Kieran insisted. “Tell me what you mean by 'harvested'.”

“Tasnian priests, if there are enough of them, and enough willing hands – hands that know they do the work of the dark one – can gather bodies and make them walk again. I have heard of it, but never thought to see it. If nothing else, I would not have thought there would be that many priests of Tasni involved with Franken.”

“Nordal's justice prevent.” Sir Palteron exclaimed. “Mine feeble mind didst not

consider that. I have seen such on the field of battle before. In the kingdom of Radeal, which lies next to the home of Tasnian priests. The dead walking again is an unnerving thing, even for a Knight of Justice.”

“Make them walk again? You mean healing, like a member of your order, or a priest of Dirge can do?” Kieran looked confused. He was trying to understand but neither of the knights were making sense to him.

“No,” Eleric replied earnestly. “I mean make the dead walk. I mean taking the body after the soul has left it and infusing it with the power of Tasni. I mean make fighters that have to be cut up because they cannot be killed or wounded. It takes the sacrifice of children, and many men to gather and sort the dead, but it can be done.”

Kieran shuddered. “And these... bodies can fight like they lived?”

“Worse. They will utterly obey the commands of the priests. If they are told 'protect yourselves while working your way to Mira Celeria and kill her', they will do so with a single-mindedness that mere men cannot match.”

Kieran swallowed hard. “Since the bodies are gone, let us assume that they will show up on the field of battle somewhere. Is there anything we can do to stop them?”

“Yes, but it will take all of the Dented Shield and all of the Knights of Justice to do so. We can return the bodies to the rest they would have had if I had forced the issue last night.”

“It is not your fault Eleric, and you need to stop blaming yourself. I am the general of the armies, and I chose to let the men rest for the night after yesterday's horrors. I wish we had at least collected our own dead though. It will unnerve some of our men to face their friends.”

“We must needs speak with the other members of our humble Orders.” Sir Palteron said.

“Aye. And prepare them for what they will face. Perhaps one of the other Knights of Justice has dealt with them directly.” Eleric added.

“Go then. Please let me know if you think of any other ways to deal with such abominations. We could use your holy warriors amongst the soldiers.” Kieran said wearily. “And let's get ready to move. If you are right there is no sense giving them more time than necessary to prepare this grizzly welcome.”

Chapter 21

It took them less than an hour to burn the bodies that had not been stolen away in the night and to get the army underway. Kieran, Sir Kusim, and Eleric rode with Mira as they discussed the best way to deal with dead warriors they might encounter.

“Are you certain there is no other possibility?” Kieran asked.

“When dealing with the Dark One, there is no certainty.” Sir Eleric replied, a sour look on his face. “But I have considered each possibility I know of, and have asked Dirge for guidance. I feel in my soul that we will see them on the field of battle.”

“Then we follow the plan laid down earlier, and hope that it is enough.” Mira said.

“We will charge them and put them down, your majesty. We have reviewed the technique, and all of the Holy Warriors in your army are familiar with it. As you say, I hope it will be enough.” Eleric replied.

“Unlell will stay back with us in case any of them do get through, and come for the Queen.” Kieran added.

“No matter what Franken's battle plans are, we can count upon seeing them in the front of his armies. At least we are prepared for them. There is not much more we can do.” Eleric finished.

“We should be able to see Farrenton soon, your majesty.” Plengur called from just ahead of them.

“I do not know if I am grateful or afraid of that.” Mira murmured.

Kieran moved his horse closer and offered her his hand. She took it, taking comfort in the simple strength of his grip.

Sir Alden rode up, his armor shining in the morning sun and the expression on his face showing irritation. “Well, we have found the missing bodies. My scouts just reported that there is a sizable force in front of Farrenton, standing stock-still, with mismatched armor and colors – some of them ours.”

“Well, at least I was right about that much.” Eleric said grimly. “I should gather the Holy Warriors, and prepare to deal with this abomination.”

Kieran looked long at his friend, then nodded. “Be careful, good Sir. We need you and all of your Order.”

“And you be careful too, general. I remind you: I go to do my job, see that you do yours.” He smiled, then turned to Mira. “With your permission, my Queen?”

“Go with my blessing, and with my well-wishes, Sir Eleric. Come back to us so that you may join in the final battles.” she said gravely.

He raised a fist in salute to her, his knuckles touching his forehead, before he turned his horse and rode back toward the Nordalian Knights riding behind them.

“If the scouts have seen the city and it's defenses, we should begin looking for a place to observe the battle from.” Kieran observed.

Mira smiled. “No need. I grew up here, remember? There is a hill about two

hundred yards from the walls. My father always talked about digging it up to keep an enemy from placing siege engines on it. There's an old shrine to Dirge there, I think that's why he never did."

"And a holy shrine should make it harder for creatures of Tasni to reach you, should things go against us." Kieran pondered out loud. "Please direct us to it, your majesty."

Mira pointed to the southeast, and the QueensGuard turned with them as they broke off from the main column of the army. They rode through a copse of trees that came out on the side of a low hill with a wide, but old trail leading up to a small building at the top. They followed the trail up the hill, stopping when they reached the building. It was old, but well maintained. The main door was wooden with a weathered steel replica of Dirge's shield nailed to it. There were no windows in evidence, and the door was locked from the outside.

"It is a good thing we did not come here to thank Dirge for his assistance." Kieran said wryly. "Let us see what kind of view we have."

They rode to the other side of the hilltop, looking over the flat space before them.

"Talimaara's brazen breasts!" Kieran swore. "You did not tell me that we would be close enough to the town walls to see the archers. Pray that they do not have archers of the quality of Fel."

Kieran knew that the elves were staying with the Queen for today's battle, but it still surprised him when a lilting voice answered. "Even with such archers could they not land an arrow upon this hill, honored general. They are too far for poor 'Tel weapons to do damage. Even great Fel would have to be halfway down this hill for arrows to be harmful."

"Thank you, Unlell. That makes me more at ease. Do your powerful 'Tel eyes detect any siege weapons on the walls that might reach the Queen?"

The elf shielded his eyes from the sun as he scanned the walls. "One sees none in sight, friend of Dirge."

"Thank you then Unlell." Kieran said as he turned his attention to the troops massed in front of the gate. They were approximately half way between the top of the hill and the castle, not really in any formation. They stood stiff as stones and wore the colors of every Duchy that had been involved in the fighting thus far. The sight was eerie to Kieran who was used to the random scratching, shifting, coughing, mumbling, and laughing that came from the nerves that struck before a battle. These men did not move, except a slight sway when the wind gusted by them. He shuddered as he recalled Sir Eleric's warning about the single-minded focus with which such creatures could perform a task.

"They are frightening, Kieran." Mira murmured, her voice low. Kieran could hear that she was unnerved by their presence.

"That they are, my Queen. I certainly hope that Eleric and his Knights know how to

dispose of them. They make me pause from up here, I could not imagine being blade-to-blade with a man who was already dead.”

“You know that I could finish them now, before Sir Eleric rides forth.”

“If you knew that, why did you not suggest it before now?”

“It would nearly knock me out, I would be too tired to sit my horse. And I knew you would not agree. But now, looking at them...” She shivered. “You could ride with me before you, or tie me to my saddle.” She ventured a smile that did not make it to her eyes.

“No. The men rely upon your strength. Now is not the time to appear weak.”

“That is why I did not mention it. I knew that even if I could convince you, Eleric would resist. He lives to bring knowledge of Dirge to the people, and the sword of Dirge to those who would follow Tasni. It would be too much to ask him to allow me to do what he sees as uniquely Templar work.”

Kieran reached out and touched her raven hair. “You are as wise as you are beautiful.”

“We have been on the trail for months, I have not slept inside since that tower, and I have not bathed in two days. Do not tell me I am beautiful when you cannot possibly think so.” she said levelly. “At least you have had time for a change of clothing.” she said casually. She'd noticed something different about Kieran since just after Duke Highstep had died, but until he'd reached out and touched her she hadn't been able to pinpoint what it was. Now she realized how subtle the difference was – he was wearing full sleeves. His clothing had always left his forearms bare; his oath cuts clearly visible. But of late his oath cuts hidden behind the cloth of his full sleeves.

He smiled at her reply. He could see that she was pleased by his words, even if she did not believe him. “You neglected to mend my shirts, my queen. I had to ask Eleric for something less ragged to wear. The men have a hard enough time taking orders from me as it is without me looking like I've just been in a brawl.” He looked back over the field. Sir Alden had placed the majority of their horse right at the foot of the hill, ready to sweep around behind the enemy if the gates opened. The infantry was lining up across from Franken's dead soldiers while Eleric and the other Knights were riding back and forth behind the front lines. The Knights seemed to be impatient to begin.

“It will not be long now. Eleric appears to be waiting for the infantry to get aligned.” he said.

“It will not be long getting started. I hope it is not long ending.” Mira replied.

“There!” he said pointing to the spot where the infantry was making room for the Knights to ride through their lines. “Dirge guide you, Eleric.”

Mira echoed Kieran's words as she watched, her entire being focused on the knights and their task.

The knights spread out as soon as they were clear of the infantry, evenly spacing themselves along the group of dead soldiers. Once they were in position, Eleric raised his sword and lowered it. The knights slowly rode straight at the enemy, maintaining their spacing and keeping an even line. They looked impressive with their shields strapped across their backs, each bearing either the symbol of Dirge or Nordal and their horses in barding as they marched straight into the halls of the dead. Kieran thought it a shame that the dead could not appreciate the magnificence that was the knights as they rode forward, determined to destroy the work of the dark one.

When they were within two wagons of the enemy, Eleric raised his sword again. The sound of the Holy Warriors' cries echoed across the battlefield. They wheeled as one, and as their horses stepped closer and closer to the group of dead each knight raised his holy symbol high in his shield hand. Twenty seven symbols of Dirge and Nordal were raised to the sky and a blue glow started to spread between the knights.

A flight of fifty or more arrows arched high from the walls of Farrenton. "No!" Kieran roared as the arrows arced down to land amongst the knights and the dead. The dead were not affected, but the knights were not so lucky.

Kieran watched in dread as he saw Eleric take an arrow in his left arm. Another knight's horse shied too close to the dead men and a spear shot out, impaling the knight in the stomach. A third knight fell from his horse, an arrow jutting out of his helm.

"Fel! Get your archers down there and stop those men on the wall!" Kieran shouted. The elves were moving past him before he had finished speaking as though they had anticipated his command.

Led by Eleric, the remaining knights ignored the arrows and continued to chant. The blue light emanating from the knights coalesced into a wall that pushed into the ranks of the dead. Every dead man touched by it fell to the ground as if the blows that had killed them had struck them again.

Another flight of arrows sailed over the walls, striking living and dead both. Kieran cringed at the sight, but this flight of arrows had less effect than the first. One knight took an arrow in the chest but it appeared that his mail coat had kept it from doing any real damage.

This time, the enemy arrows did not go unanswered. Unlike the flights that came from the town, the arrows that rose from the foot of the hill flew nearly straight. Kieran saw two of the archers on the walls fall, tumbling down the wall, and thought that several more had fallen inside. If nothing else, that would keep the archer's heads down and make it harder for them to hit the knights.

The glow that the knights had created was about half way through the assembled dead when the main gates to Farrenton crashed open, two men running out to push them wide. From inside those gates came a group of horsemen, ten in all. They all flew different banners, but the rider that drew Kieran's eye was the one in the lead. The banner was Franken's, but the shield bore three trees upon it, all chopped down, the trunks lying in a row. Kieran drew in a breath sharply. The Knight of Fallen Timbers.

This was the knight that Eleric had wished to best, but Eleric was wounded and didn't even know the man was there.

The knights continued to spur their horses forward, pushing their blue aura into the last of the living dead. The mounted men coming from the gate rode straight for the knights. A small flight of arrows shot out from the foot of the hill, flying true and landing amongst the mounted men. The Knight of Fallen Timbers' horse took an arrow through its barding and slowed, but did not stop. Several of the armored warriors behind him went down, a testament to the accuracy of Fel's archers.

The last of the dead fell back to the ground where they belonged, and the glow of the Knights diminished. Kieran waved to the hornsmen, and a long low blast sounded out. But the infantry had been watching the fight and were already moving ahead, needing no prodding to move them forward.

As the last of the riders from Farrenton cleared the gate, two arrows shot out from Fel's archers and the two men who had pushed the gates open fell. You are truly a worthy ally Fel. Kieran thought. A contingent of Sir Alden's horse charged forth from the base of the hill, sweeping wide around the enemy riders, heading for the gates where entry to the city stood waiting to be taken, or closed.

At the same time, Sir Eleric heard the approach of the riders and saw who was leading them. He let his symbol of Dirge fall to his chest and drew his shield from his back. The Knight of Fallen Timbers' horse stumbled to a stop and stood stock still. The Knight waved the men with him on as he dismounted roughly. Once he was off his horse it sank to its knees. The knight snarled as he walked toward Sir Eleric.

The rest of the riders and the Knights clashed in amongst the dead bodies. Horses slipped and stumbled, their riders fighting each other and struggling to stay mounted. Another group of horsemen charged out from the base of the hill to assist the Knights, led by Sir Alden himself.

Sir Eleric winced as he finished strapping on his shield and then made his way through the bodies and fighters, clearing the line. Once clear of the battle, he rode hard to within twenty feet of the unhorsed Knight of Fallen Timbers and dismounted. He walked forward deliberately, his eyes never leaving the face of the other Knight. The men stood facing each other silently for a long moment while the battle raged about them. The riders fought behind Sir Eleric and Sir Alden's men pushed hard at the men near the gate behind the Knight of Fallen Timbers. The two men exchanged a few words before the Knight of Fallen Timbers kissed something hanging about his neck and then blew on his sword. Kieran's jaw dropped as he saw the sword burst into flames and the knight took up a fighting stance. Sir Eleric adjusted the shield on his wounded arm and stepped forward, his sword gripped tightly in his hand.

Shouts from near the gate drew Kieran's gaze away from the two knights. Sir Alden's men had taken the gate and it remained open. They were fending off a sally of footmen who appeared from inside the gates, trying to push them back far enough to pull the gates closed. Kieran saw that though his men were fighting fiercely, they were being pushed back. He needed to get word to the infantry to get someone through that gate and quickly. He caught sight of Sir Kusim riding back to the infantry, the mounted men that had surged out behind the Knight of Fallen Timbers

either dead or unhorsed behind him. “Plengur! You and Unlell are in charge. I must speak with Sir Kusim.” he called without thinking as he picked up the reins of his horse in one hand and kicked him in the sides. The battle was raging below him and everything was a blur. He was vaguely aware that the general should not ride into the middle of a battle, but there were only a few pockets of intense fighting at the moment. He rode down the hill at a trot, his eyes taking in everything.

When he was close enough that he thought he could be heard, he hailed Sir Kusim. “Get a group of men and let us help the horsemen at the gates!”

“Aye, general!” Sir Kusim called out. He waved his men forward and Kieran joined him at the lead, looking around him and trying to catch sight of Eleric once more. They were just passing the bodies of the living dead when Kieran finally spotted him again. His friend was sorely pressed. The Knight of Fallen Timbers was striking the Dirgian's shield hard, apparently aware of Eleric's wound to that arm. Bile rose in the back of Kieran's throat as he saw Eleric drop to one knee and raise his shield up over his head to stop the dark knight's flaming sword from splitting his head like a melon. Eleric's sword lay useless on the ground beneath the man's hand as he braced himself using his uninjured arm against the heavy blows that rained down on his shield and threatened to drive him completely to the ground.

The troops veered to the right, heading straight for the gates but Kieran suddenly split off, unable to go with them. He leaned forward in his saddle as he drew his sword and headed straight for Eleric and the Knight. He knew Eleric would be angry should he stop the fight by interfering, but he could not sit by and let his friend die at the hands of Tasni's dark knight.

As he drew closer he could see a red glow around the Knight of Fallen Timbers, emanating from the Knight's pendant that hung about his neck. He could also see a glow around Eleric, though it was faint. The blue light of Sir Eleric seemed to give way wherever it was touched by the red glow of the other knight and was growing fainter with each blow.

Kieran saw Eleric's wounded arm finally give and he gripped his sword tighter as his friend's shield clattered to the ground. Kieran could hear Eleric praying to Dirge louder than he'd ever heard the knight pray before. The Knight of Fallen Timbers raised his flaming sword high as he stood over Eleric and leered at the knight kneeling on the ground before him, readying a death blow. Kieran could watch no more. He spurred his horse forward, yelling at the top of his lungs. “Mighty Dirge who shields us all! Guard this, your most devout Knight with my arm!” The Knight of Fallen Timbers jerked his head around at his cry and turned to face him as he approached. The man tried to stop the downward movement of his sword in time to fend off the blow that Kieran was aiming at him from horseback.

The knight managed to adjust the swing of his flaming sword and brought it up to protect his neck, where he instinctively knew Kieran's first blow would be directed. He would block the blow and then allow Kieran's sword to slide up its length, pulling Kieran off balance and possibly unhorsing him. But Kieran was using no finesse in his attack. His blow was not an attempt to fight the man. He struck as though he were chopping wood from horseback with no thought to strategy or how his enemy would react. A strange blue glow filled Kieran's field of vision as he brought his blade down

to meet the flaming sword of the Knight just inches in front of his opponent's face. As if watching from afar he saw the flaming sword explode. His sword arm felt the resistance, then felt the stronger resistance of his sword sinking into the chainmail coif around the man's neck. The shrill screams of his horse seemed to echo in his ears and he was suddenly aware that there was blood everywhere. He felt his horse's front legs buckle and he threw himself clear as it went down, acting more on instinct than any conscious decision of his own. He hit the ground hard, intending to roll, but he landed face down, the hard ground knocking the wind out of him. He managed to turn himself over and lay staring at the sky, trying to catch his breath.

A face suddenly appeared and he was relieved to see Sir Eleric standing over him. The Knight reached out his sword hand to help Kieran up. Kieran clasped his friend's hand and rose. He caught the look of awe on his friend's face out of the corner of his eye as he looked around for his sword. He saw it almost immediately, laying next to the nearly beheaded Knight of Fallen Timbers. He pulled his eyes off the corpse, ignoring the smoke rising from its neck and examined his weapon. Kieran stared at it curiously. He couldn't recall feeling that dead feeling that comes from a sword when it is not whole and hits something.

Kieran shook his head to clear it. "How stands the battle?" he asked Eleric.

"I have been paying no more attention than you, brother! Thank you."

"Do not thank me. You would have done the same for me, I am sure of it. I was actually afraid you would be angered." Kieran looked to the gate. There was fierce fighting going on just inside of it, but the infantry had gotten there in time to back up Sir Alden's horsemen. The rest of Sir Alden's horse were riding down the few survivors of the sally from the gates. The archers on the walls were not attacking, Fel's archers must have taught them the value of keeping their heads down.

"Come. We are not supposed to be down here, beating upon the enemy with our swords. The Queen will be wroth with both of us." Kieran said turning towards the hill.

"She may well be, but that one needed to die." Eleric replied as they began walking. "There was nothing left of the man in that body. I thought we would fight honorably to the death, but it was as if he was already dead. It was more like chopping at a tree with a sword than fighting a renowned Knight. He did not tire, and he felt – hungry for life, like I have heard that the walking dead do. He was draining me. I felt my contact with Dirge lessening. Until your shout. I felt you there." He paused for a moment, looking soberly at his friend. "I felt Dirge. I thought it might not be over. Then I tried to stand, but there was not time. You swept past me, and when your swords hit – there was a crackling sound, and he started to scream, but that was cut short..."

"He hungered for your power." Kieran interrupted as they started up the hill. "I don't know how, but he was draining you. When I called out to Dirge, he..." Kieran fumbled for the right word. "answered. I felt that all would be well, and that you would be shielded. I felt an immense... pressure... I think, in my chest and head. And when my sword touched his flaming one, Dirge gave him exactly what he wanted. All of the pressure, all of the contented and safe feelings rushed out of my

hand and down my blade. Then my horse started screaming and things became rushed. My next clear memory is of you helping me up.”

As Kieran finished they crested the top of the hill to find Mira staring at them.

“We are back, my queen.” Eleric said mustering a lopsided grin.

“And we're whole – or mostly so anyway.” Kieran's face mirrored his friend's.

“I do not find any humor in the general of my army and the captain of my QueensGuard wading into a field of battle that is already won to risk their lives against a single man. What would I have done for the rest of this war if both of you had died?” She tried to sound angry, but Kieran could tell she was relieved that they were safe.

Eleric dropped to one knee. “We beg your forgiveness, Queen Mira. That knight was a vile creature of Tasni, and we could not allow him to escape.”

“Rise, Sir Eleric.” Mira said with a sigh. “I am not truly angry, but I was afraid for both of you. Please promise you will not do something like that again.” she pleaded softly. At Eleric's nod she turned to face Kieran, her voice hard. “And you, general. Do not join the battle without my leave. The captains have grown to rely upon you.” Her expression softened as she added, “As have I.”

Eleric stood. “It is a great day in the eyes of Dirge, my Queen. Thank you for forgiving us this one transgression.”

Kieran began to speak but found himself trying to stifle a yawn.

“Sit, Kieran. Allowing the power of Dirge to flow through you will drain you more than a full day's fighting. And strong was the power you wielded in Dirge's name.”

“I cannot, though I would gratefully sink into even a bedroll. I am general of the armies, and now is when they need a general most.” Kieran replied, touching the pendant that hung about his neck thoughtfully.

One of the Winegarden rangers came running around the side of the shrine. “Your majesty! An army approaches from the Dwarvenforge! Almost all foot, but there are many of them.”

Kieran and Eleric eyed each other. “HillGuard.” Eleric said flatly.

“We have the troops in reserve to stop them, but not to win the field.” Kieran said. “Go back to your rangers, inform your Captain that we require you to form a screen to slow them. I will get Sir Kusim to detail men to come reinforce you.”

The ranger knuckled his head and left at a run.

“Plengur. Please gather Sir Kusim back from the city gates. Quickly.” Kieran said, his tone urgent.

“Yes, general.” he replied as he hurried down the hill.

“Some men ran out the gates to close it after you left. Fel and his archers held them back until Sir Kusim could get there.” Mira observed nervously.

Kieran looked back down to the gates. The battle still raged there, but he was heartened to see that Sir Kusim had managed to push the defenders back and that Franken's banner was no longer flying over the gate, meaning that his men were now in control of the gate tower.

“It goes well, your majesty. But if the men coming from HillGuard mean to join this fight, we might need to retreat for the day.” Eleric said seriously.

“Even then, Franken waited too long to present a defense. We will win this war because he wanted his troops close to him. Another duchy's army will simply delay the end, but it will end here.” Kieran stated firmly.

“Thank you. I can see that myself now. Only through tricks and treachery can he hope to stop enough of our troops from surviving to over-run the castle.” she said confidently.

Sir Kusim rode up. “You needed something, general?”

“Yes. HillGuard has chosen to leave the hill forts and join the battle. I have sent the Winegarden rangers out to slow them, but they will need help. Quickly assemble a unit of infantry, appoint a commander and send them off towards HillGuard. Choose someone you trust, as they will be out of touch with us for a while. Once they're off, come back here and let's discuss this mess.”

“Yes, general.” he turned and left.

“They're breaking at the gates.” Eleric observed. “Our men are pursuing, but not far.”

Kieran nodded as he saw that the men fighting to take the gate back from Sir Kusim's soldiers were melting away. The exhausted infantry was moving to secure an area around the gate, but not too far inside the city itself. “Sir Kusim has trained some fine captains. Were I there myself, I would have ordered much the same. Those men are too tired to pursue into the city.” Kieran remarked.

“Aye. And too few. I have helped plan the defense of that city, and it can be a death trap. There are places for troops to hide all about the city, and the city wall is hollow, allowing troops to move from tower to tower. Add to that a few archers on the castle walls, and invaders need some kind of edge or overwhelming power to even get to the castle. Let us hope that Franken's planners are not as thorough.”

“There are other ways in than through the gates of the keep.” Mira said with a conspiratorial look in Eleric's direction.

Eleric's eyes widened as he took her meaning, but then he shook his head. “We'd still have to get there, and that's nearly impossible without subduing the entire town first,

your majesty. Better a quick strike straight to the castle gates, leaving the bulk of the army to fight in the town if necessary.”

“Your majesty!” The same ranger they had sent to gather the others came across the hilltop. “The Duke Leston of Hillguard wishes to entreat with you!”

Kieran and Eleric exchanged looks once again. “I recommend it, your majesty. It could be that he has brought his army to be in on the winning side before it is over. I would not trust him, but I would rather have him fighting for us than against us.” Kieran said.

“Bring him here, good ranger.” Mira ordered.

He knuckled his forehead and made his way back across the hill.

Sir Kusim returned a moment later. “I sent the troops the new Duke of Hollowton gave us to reinforce the gate. I do not truly trust them, but we are using all of the trustworthy troops already. I trust those from Hollowton more than those from SeaCliff at least.”

“They will do fine, Sir Kusim. The RangeWarders are backing them, and I doubt that the Winegarden infantry will go far from that gate they won so dearly unless we order it.” Mira told him.

“You are right, your majesty.” he said with a slight note of surprise in his voice at her understanding of the situation. He turned to Eleric. “How are you Sir? I saw an arrow hit you in that first volley from the wall.”

Kieran suddenly remembered the arrow that hit Eleric's shield arm. The man had been so covered with blood that he hadn't remembered it after the fight with the Knight of Fallen Timbers.

“It will be sore for days,” Eleric grimaced, “and I'll need to have this removed, but the battle is pressing...” He held up his left arm and they could see the stub of an arrow deeply lodged midway up his forearm, blood crusted around it.

“You left it in?” Kieran asked incredulously.

Eleric shrugged. “What more could I do? It is barbed, and the Knight of the Timbers was not going to allow me time to go visit the surgeons. So I cut it off, and moved on.”

“Go to the surgeons. Now. We might have need of you later, and now is a time for negotiations and consolidation around the gatehouse. Go.” Mira ordered.

Eleric turned and started to walk down the hill, appearing as tired as Kieran felt.

Mira watched as a group of mounted men flying a banner of black and gold approached across the top of the hill from the direction of Hillguard. Her QueensGuard was around her in a flash, hands on sword hilts and faces grim.

A man wearing a surcoat of black with a bright yellow anvil embroidered upon it dismounted from the middle of the group. “Your majesty, I come to offer my army to your cause.”

Kieran snorted. “Once a war is won, it is a simple thing to ride up and offer support.”

“Silence, general,” Mira commanded. “The Duke has come to offer his support. Would you turn him away?”

“No, your majesty. I would rather have an army as my ally than at my back.”

“Then I will accept this man's allegiance, and he will join in our battle plans.” Mira said with a note of authority.

Kieran did his best not to smile at her. She was all Queen right now and that was just what this wayward Duke needed. “As you command, my Queen.” he turned to the Duke. “Sir Duke, the Queen will take your vow now.” He said without the slightest trace of a smile.

“Yes. I can... I... understand, general...?”

“Kieran Chace, General of the Queens armies.” he replied curtly.

From behind him he heard Eleric's voice. “And a greater friend of Dirge than some who are sworn to him.” Kieran briefly wondered if Eleric had even gotten to the surgeons or if he'd run the entire way once they'd removed what was left of the shaft.

“Yes, general Kieran. I would be happy to swear to the Queen, if she has promised as I have heard...” the man's voice trailed off nervously.

Eleric stepped up to stand beside Kieran and cut in before Mira could reply, his voice resolute. “Dirge and her armies have relieved her of that oath. She will use her powers to counter the power of Tasni that is wielded in Franken's armies. And we are grateful for that.”

“Sir... Eleric is it? You have grown since last I was in Farrenton.” The Duke raised his chin in Eleric's direction. “Is that wise? We teeter on the brink of evil as it is.”

“Duke. In my experience you are an honorable man. Know that Dirge has indicated his agreement, and that Franken has not only raised the dead against us, but sent assassins with living skull pendants and assassins that walk unseen from hidden sacrificial altars against us. The Queen has graciously agreed to use her powers to help counter evil sendings, not to fight the war.” Eleric said flatly. “The Dukes of Grovehold, Winegarden, Rafskeep, RoguesHome, and DoornesBane – along with the new regent of SeaCliff and the Elves of Langtrue – all accept this with open minds and hearts. Could you do less?”

“No, Sir Eleric, I could not. Though this news is unsettling I will take your word as a Templar of the Dented Shield that she is worthy to sit upon the throne.” The Duke turned back to Mira and went down on one knee.

“You may begin, Duke Leston.” Mira said plainly.

“I, Duke Leston Dwarflover, protector of the western borders of the realm, and Banner Majoris of HillGuard do pledge my support and allegiance to my one and only sovereign, Queen Mira Celeria. All that I possess and can marshal shall be given over to her cause, all that I can give, including my blood and my heirs is hers to command. All that I own is hers by right, to dispense with for the good of the realm. I will henceforth guard her and guide her, protecting her from all threats in the physical realm and beyond.”

Mira stood taller. “I, Mira Celeria, Queen of Freeland Hold, accept your pledge of loyalty and pledge to return that loyalty with trust. Thine lands were granted in perpetuum by the great King Farren, I will not remove those lands without due cause. Your people I will protect as mine own, bringing the might of the entire Kingdom down upon any who would defy, deride, or denounce thee. I will trust you to be the sole source of Queen's justice in your Duchy, and will collect taxes for me as my regent in your lands.”

“May the Queen reign long and well over me and mine.”

“Arise, my Duke. I am grateful that you are with us.”

He stood. Kieran looked at him critically. Six months ago this man was plotting to kill her but now he was her loyal servant because he said an oath? If he were a Dirgian Knight, perhaps. Since he did not appear to be a Dirgian, Kieran decided he would bear watching.

“Tell us Duke Leston, how many men did you bring with you from HillGuard.” he asked.

“Somewhat under two thousand infantry, and two fists of Dirgian Knights from the hill forts.”

“Combat ready?”

“Well enough. They could use a day's rest, but it looks like we all could. There are a lot of bodies on the field to still be fighting.”

“That is because most of them were walking dead this morning. Thanks to the Dirgians and Nordalians, they are no longer walking. Some of them were our own until they were lost in battle yesterday. We will all be a lot more tired before the day is done. We cannot hold the gate through the night safely, not with the things that Franken's preists have been unleashing upon us. So we take the town today. Please bring your army forward Duke, I have a task for them.”

Kieran was tired, but this day's fighting was not done. He watched the Duke until the man mounted up and left with his escort.

“I dislike that one. He shows up when the war is all but over, and then wants to sit out the day? I have a task for him alright. He will march straight into the town, and take the town square.” He said grimly.

“We can take the town walls too. They are hollow, and all the towers are connected by them. From the gatehouse we should be able to break through a wall and get inside. From there, we can fight tower to tower.” Sir Eleric replied.

“That is an excellent plan, my friend. We can put Sir Kusim's freshest troops to that, while Duke Late and his men take the town center.”

“You will have to work with that man for many years to come Kieran, you should attempt to control your distaste.” Mira chided.

“If he dies honorably today, then I will not have to deal with him for years. Hence the reason that he will lead the assault in your name.” Kieran replied.

“Kieran, he is a Duke, not a captain. Your idea is impossible.”

“Sir Kusim, please begin the assault through the walls.” Kieran said to his captain.

“Aye sir, that assignment will please me.” Sir Kusim smiled as he left.

“Now. Why can he not lead the assault in your name?” Kieran asked after Sir Kusim was gone.

“Because Dukes do not lead assaults, they lead armies.”

“There are no exceptions? Say to give a Duke a chance to prove his loyalty?”

“None. His loyalty was proven with his oath, and that is all. His men can take the town center if it is important to take, but he will not be ordered to participate.”

Kieran sighed. “As you wish, my Queen. Though I feel it is a mistake. I will do as you bid.”

It was over two hours later before the army of Hillguard was arrayed in front of the open gates to Farrenton. Over half of Sir Kusim's rangers and heavy infantry were already fighting in the walls by then, and two towers were in their hands, with a third undecided.

“Take them straight in, and head for the city center. There is a large stone tower there, do you recall it?” Kieran asked Sir Emmuel, Duke Leston's captain.

Sir Emmuel had been to Farrenton more often than Kieran, so he was not surprised when the man nodded. “It would give us a fine command of much of the center of town.”

“That was exactly my thought.” Kieran grinned. “With the tower and the walls in our hands, we can sweep the city. The sooner you take the tower, the sooner we can end this day – and hopefully this war.”

“Then you shall have it, general.” He saluted smartly, and turned to bark out orders.

Kieran hoped that he had the chance to get to know this man. He seemed sturdy, and had a quick mind.

“Come Kieran, let us find some food. There is nothing more that we can do until the town is taken, and the day is stretching long.” Mira said.

Kieran wanted to watch the battle, but knew that it would soon be hidden behind the walls. “A fine idea, my Queen.” he replied.

They were finished with dinner and were discussing ways to breach the castle walls when Sir Kusim and Sir Emmuel came to them together. They both knelt before their Queen.

“Rise, good Sirs. You have news?” Mira asked anxiously.

Sir Kusim spoke for them. “The city is yours, majesty. Our troops are clearing out the last of the resistance. The castle holds firm, and any who venture too close to it's walls is rewarded with a flight of arrows, but the Elves are everywhere on the city walls, making certain that Franken's archers keep their heads down. I myself wondered if there were indeed only sixteen of them.”

“General,” Sir Emmuel added. “I had thought that your assignment was to make us pay for our tardiness in joining your cause. I am glad to see that you had strategy in mind. Once the tower fell to us, resistance ceased in the city proper. Some citizens even helped us find the bolt-holes of soldiers around town.”

Kieran merely nodded, afraid to open his mouth, and feeling rather ashamed.

“Put patrols in the city, but get most of the men some food and rest. Tomorrow, good sirs, we will visit Franken in his lair.” Mira stepped in graciously, relieving Kieran of the need to respond. She looked past the men as they walked back down the hill, gazing over the walls at the KingsTower for a long moment. She turned and smiled at Kieran, but the smile did not reach her eyes. They were dark and stormy, and Kieran could see all the rage and frustration she'd been holding in since the last time she'd laid eyes on the KingsTower lying just beneath their surface. He looked back over the city, his gaze coming to rest on the tower, wondering if Franken had any idea of what he was about to face.

Chapter 22

As evening settled over Farrenton campfires were lit, the light from the flickering flames casting eerie shadows in the darkness. The smoke rose in wispy columns all across the encampment outside the city walls, making the men who walked those walls appear to shimmer in and out of focus.

She stood in front of her tent, her hands clasped behind her back, her eyes distant. Kieran's approach went unnoticed, and he stood silently next to her, waiting for her to acknowledge him.

He waited for a while, and when she did not appear to see him he leaned forward and

tried to catch her eye. Her eyes were unfocused and he was fairly certain she was not seeing anything but was instead lost somewhere in her thoughts. He wondered what she saw as she looked out over her home so intently. Finally he cleared his throat loudly to catch her attention.

Mira started at the sound and jerked her head around in his direction. She exhaled as she recognized him and smiled as she shook her head at herself. “How long have you been standing there watching me?” she asked with a note of chagrin in her voice.

“Hours.” he teased. At her look of consternation he chuckled. “Not so long. But I could have stood watching you for hours.” He laughed again as he saw a blush creep into her cheeks. “What were you thinking?” he asked, as much to take her mind off his words as to take his off of her. He recalled very vividly his conversations with Fallos regarding her honor. And his.

“What happened the day Duke Highstep died, friend of Dirge?” she shot back lightly, the emphasis on her last words told Kieran she'd been paying attention to the little exchanges between himself, Unlell and Eleric.

Kieran looked down at his feet, kicking idly at the dirt as he considered her question and what to tell her. “I haven't said anything because I wasn't sure you'd understand.” he mumbled without looking up at her.

“Kieran, why would you think that?” she asked plaintively.

Kieran shrugged. He raised his head and stared out at the city for a moment before he locked his eyes on her face. “Because I still feel as though I have betrayed you.” She shook her head forcefully and opened her mouth to disagree but Kieran laid a single finger across her lips and stopped her. “I understand what Sir Staphius tried to tell me at the tower – about not being able to really protect you without Dirge's help. I understand that Sir Eleric has never understood, though he has felt the same thing. When you reminded him of his duty to the QueensGuard he felt it, but does not recognize it. Besides, neither of them had to break one oath to take another.”

“I released you from that oath, you did not break it!” she exclaimed, not understanding.

He put his hands on her shoulders and turned her to face him. “Mira, I did not release myself. I did not realize that until I made the choice and gave my oath to Dirge. A FreeSword's vow is not only to his contract, but to himself. That is why they would rather die than break their vows. Like Trem. He preferred to die rather than break his word. I would not have taken his head if it had not been so.” He dropped his hands and turned back to face the city. “Though I felt in the depths of my soul the rightness of my oath to Dirge my pride cried out against it. It's why I started covering my oath cuts. I am no longer a FreeSword. Then I left you on the hill to do what Dirge would have me do, and left you alone.” He shook his head sadly. “How can I protect you if I am compelled to leave your side?”

She laughed lightly. “Oh, Kieran. Protecting me does not mean you must stay at my side at all times. If that dark knight had been free to do as he pleased was it not possible he would have sought me out? From what I could see from the hill it looked

as though you may not have defeated him without Dirge riding with you. Protecting me means you do what must be done, even if it takes you from my side, no matter how much I dislike the idea.”

His brow furrowed at her words and he shook his head. She sighed in exasperation. “Your oath to Dirge is no different than the one you made to the Corriganian FreeSwords. They were a part of you. You would not break an oath because of your dedication to your brotherhood. You abided by their rules, their beliefs and the unspoken bond that was between you all. Speaking an oath aloud makes it no more or less binding than those you do not speak at all. The vows you make with your heart, Kieran, are the ones that truly matter. Any man may mouth the words, but it is in their hearts that the truth of such words lie.”

At her words his face relaxed and a smile crept across his features. “I had not thought of it that way, my queen.”

“Apparently not.” she said with an arched look.

He nodded his head, finally at peace and comfortable with his decisions. “Then, my queen, I gave my oath to Dirge the day Duke Highstep died. I gave my soul to him and my life to you.”

She smiled impishly as she looked up at him. “I find it interesting that members of the KingsGuard are not only required to be Templars, but are traditionally knighted upon acceptance.”

A look of confusion crossed his face before it settled into surprise, his eyes pleading with her to confirm what he believed she was saying.

“Yes, Kieran.” she said slowly. “While Templars are Holy Warriors and not necessarily nobility, knights are, regardless of their birth.”

The broad grin that settled on Kieran's face told Mira he not only understood, but was pleased at the thought. He reached down and took her hand in his, raising it to his face and gently kissing it. He raised his face to hers, still smiling, then kissed her on the cheek. He brushed his lips across her face until they rested near her ear.

“You have no idea how much that information pleases me.” he whispered hoarsely. Then he stood and bowed respectfully. “Your majesty.” he added with a sly grin before he turned and walked away.

Mira smiled and hugged herself, allowing a moment of almost childish delight before she collected her thoughts and looked out one last time at KingsTower. She sighed, the joy she'd felt moments earlier melting away as she thought of Duke Franken inside the highest tower of the royal castle, sitting on her father's throne. Her eyes narrowed and lips pursed as she recalled his face from the feast that last night in KingsHome. Her fists clenched as she committed every feature she could recall to memory. She suddenly understood Eleric's determination to fight the Knight of Fallen Timbers, because she intended to deal with the murdering Duke with her own two hands. She turned and walked back into her tent, planning her revenge until she grew too tired to keep her eyes open, her hands still clenched into tight fists even as she fell

asleep.

She was awakened by the shouts just before dawn. She sat up quickly, shivering in the cold as she pulled on her clothes. She grabbed a cloak and threw it over her shoulders before she raced from the tent. She almost ran into Plengur, who had been racing to wake her. Mira could tell he was obviously upset because when he spoke he forgot to be formal. “Your majesty, the general said to get ye and bring ye to him. Now.” he said breathlessly.

She followed him as he raced off toward the city, and almost stopped when he passed through the city gates. “Plengur!” she cried.

He skidded to a halt and looked over his shoulder. “They are in the city, near the tower my Queen.” He waited for her to catch up to him and then walked as quickly as possible, keeping at her side as they walked toward the stone tower in the city center.

Mira tried to catch her first glimpse of the walls of the castle in the dawning light, but her attention was drawn by Kieran as he trotted up to meet her.

“General, what in the name of the gods is going on?” she asked, her voice wavering slightly with concern.

“Mira,” he began, his voice low, “there are two priests on the castle wall. They're doing .. something that's scaring the men. They're falling back, slowly. A few have tried to hold their ground but the priests... “ he paused and drew in a deep breath. “The priests cut them down from afar.”

Mira gasped, then looked to the castle walls. As the sun finally peeked over the horizon she could see the priests Kieran had mentioned, their faces hidden in the deep cowls of their black and red robes. She scowled, then looked around her quickly. “Get me up in that tower.” she hissed.

Kieran stared at her as though she'd asked him to strip. She reached out and grabbed his hand. “Now, General.” she insisted, nearly jerking him off his feet as she began to march toward the tower.

Kieran recovered quickly and caught up to her. “QueensGuard, to the tower!” he bellowed as he took the lead, heading for the stone door that led to the stairs inside the tower.

He pushed open the door and ushered Mira in, pointing to the stairs even as he called out orders to the QueensGuard outside. They took up positions around the tower, their eyes alert and hands on the hilts of their swords.

Mira quickly clambered up the stairs and stopped at the top, looking around to get her bearings. She found a small balcony that faced the castle walls and smiled grimly to herself as she walked deliberately toward it. She stopped just before she could be seen and closed her eyes.

Kieran watched her, wondering why she had stopped. He saw her hands begin to move and heard her muttering words and phrases he did not understand. Finally she stopped, giving him a satisfied nod. “Do not worry about the archers, it is taken care

of.”

Kieran looked surprised, but he understood. She'd used her magik to protect herself from the arrows, much as the elves had done in Hollowton. Still he drew his sword and moved out onto the balcony behind her.

She surveyed the castle wall, trying to decide how best to deal with the priests. One appeared to be chanting incessantly, his arms waving this way and that. The other stared downward, watching for any who might try to approach the castle walls. Mira looked down in time to see one of HillGuard's foot take a few steps forward and she flinched when a bolt of light appeared from the wall and struck him down. She closed her eyes against the sight of the man writhing on the ground where he'd fallen and tried to block out the sound of his screams of pain.

She knew what she had to do and she had agreed to do it, but now that the time was here for her to act she had second thoughts. She felt Kieran's reassuring hand on her shoulder and she took a deep breath. If she did not act, they would not be able to take the castle. And if they could not take the castle, all the deaths would have been for nothing. She nodded and once again Kieran heard her chanting. She finished and he backed away as she took two steps forward and pointed at the chanting priest. “Leave my people alone, priest of darkness!” she yelled. Her voice rang out over the city and a thousand eyes sought its source. They turned their faces upward, murmuring as they saw their queen in the tower. They watched as she suddenly reached forward and made a grabbing motion, then pulled her arm back toward herself.

A sudden scream from the castle wall drew their attention and they turned in time to see the priest that had been chanting all morning tumbling off the wall into the city. They cheered as they heard the resounding thud of the man's body as it hit the ground below.

“These are not your people, mageborn witch.” the other priest called out. “King Franken will deal with these traitors soon enough.”

Mira's face darkened at his words. “Watch him, Mira, he is doing something.” she heard Kieran hiss from behind her.

She said a few words and wove her hands in the air fanatically. Kieran wondered what she was doing until he looked out and saw the priest hanging in the air, almost twenty feet above the wall. She made a series of motions with her hands and the man flailed as he drifted over the castle wall and then suddenly dropped like a stone to the ground. Mira looked intently at the KingsTower, raising her voice and using her magik to insure that the men inside the castle walls could hear her, perhaps even loud enough that Franken himself would hear. “Go back to your master, dogs, and tell the Duke that the Queen is here to take back what is rightfully hers. Tell him the might of the kingdom of stands at the castle gates and by Dirge they will cleanse this place of his foulness.”

The men in the city below began stamping their feet and cheering, their voices joining together as they cried out. “Long live the queen!”

Mira's shoulders slumped and she stumbled backward. Kieran caught her, holding her

about the waist and supporting her in case she fell. "You need rest." he said lamely, not knowing what else to say.

Mira nodded. "Yes. That was ... tiring and I haven't done anything like that before and I think I may have drawn too ..." she trailed off and Kieran felt her go limp in his arms. He gently set her down, then crouched next to her. He swore for a moment, wondering what to do next. He stood and quickly moved to the balcony, scanning the crowd for Eleric. When he caught sight of the Templar he called out. "Eleric, join us please." He waited until he saw Sir Eleric wave in response before he returned to Mira's side. He brushed the hair out of her face and sat, watching her pensively until Eleric appeared at the top of the stairs.

Eleric's face fell and his eyes blazed as he caught sight of Mira lying on the floor. He rushed to her side and looked intently at Kieran. "Was she hit by that priest?" he asked.

"No. She just .. collapsed. She said something about drawing and that she hadn't ever done anything like that before then she just fell." Kieran said, frustration and concern evident in his voice.

Eleric nodded wisely, but looked as confused as Kieran. "I could try and heal her, but I don't know that it would help. She isn't really hurt she's just .. tired. Like we are when Dirge uses us." He looked up at Kieran speculatively. "You try, use your pendant and try." he urged his friend. When Kieran hesitated Eleric became agitated. "She cannot lie here while we battle and you cannot stay with her. The Gate Guarder take these foul Tasnians! This is the worst possible time for this."

Kieran swallowed nervously but reached up and took his pendant, for even he thought of it as his now and not Sir Eleric's, in his hands. On impulse he reached down and took one of Mira's hands, covering it and the pendant with his own. He closed his eyes, not really knowing what to do, and began to pray, calling on Dirge to guide him and help Mira.

After a few minutes he felt a comforting hand on his shoulder and heard Mira mumbling. He opened his eyes and found her staring at him, her expression awed and her eyes bright.

He cleared his throat self-consciously and looked to Eleric who clapped him on the shoulder and nodded respectfully. "Well done, brother." the knight replied.

"Well done indeed." Mira echoed. Kieran rose and helped her to stand.

"Well gentlemen. It appears we have a castle in need of our attention. Let us see if we can take back what is ours." She swept past them and headed down the stairs, leaving Eleric and Kieran staring after her as though they were seeing her for the first time. "The men." Kieran suddenly said, then rushed after her. Sir Eleric, catching his meaning swore under his breath and followed him just as quickly.

Kieran raced down the stairs and pushed his hand against the door just as Mira was about to open it. "Wait, Mira." he said firmly.

She looked up at him, confused. “Why?”

Sir Eleric was right behind Kieran and he answered before Kieran could reply. “We just want to be sure that the men dealt with your actions as we had hoped.”

They both saw a wave of anxiety and fear wash across her face, but it was instantly replaced by confidence. “They seemed most appreciative earlier.”

“Yes, my Queen, but we just want to make certain.”

“Kieran, do you agree with Eleric?” Mira asked.

Kieran nodded. “Yes, your majesty. I do.”

She backed away from the door, her arms wide. “I yield to your concern then, General. Sir Knight. Lead on.”

Eleric opened the door and stood in the doorway. Kieran could see the men crowding around the tower just out of the reach of the QueensGuard. He walked out and moved to the side, taking a position just to the side of the door. Kieran offered Mira his arm and she took it. Though she felt much less tired than she had she still felt a bit unsteady at times. Kieran escorted her to the door and felt her tense at the sight of so many of the men waiting for her. She raised her chin and stepped out the door, dogged in her belief that the men would accept her even after the display of magik. Kieran dropped his hand to the hilt of his sword, his eyes constantly scanning the men for any odd movement.

He almost drew his sword when he heard the rustling of boots and swords, but he stopped as he realized that the sound was not of men rushing forward, but of men kneeling before their queen. Every man he could see had dropped to one knee, their heads bowed in homage to their queen. Mira's eyes misted. The men had all sworn fealty, but they had never before voluntarily paid this kind of respect to her before. She straightened her shoulders and let Kieran lead her back out of the city to her tent.

“Take the keep, Kieran. Take it today.” she said fiercely, then she fled into the sanctuary of her tent, where she finally allowed those tears of joy to fall unbidden in private.

A quarter glass later she was on her knees in front of the small cache of clothing she had carried with her since they'd left WineGarden. She only briefly considered the fact that the only belongings that were truly hers now were so minimal she could carry them with her. For the most part she'd dressed sensibly as they traveled but today she needed more. She dug through the small pile of dresses until she found the one she wanted. She held it up and shook it out, then carried it to the cot she'd called her bed for months and laid it down, trying to smooth out the wrinkles. She changed and then ran a brush through her hair, wishing not for the first time in days that she had access to a bath. She rummaged through her pack and pulled out a small object. She sat on the edge of her cot, turning it over in her hands and staring at it intently.

Fallos had given it to her in WineGarden, after they had been told of her father's death. Fallos had told her many times that her father had considered and planned for

the possibility that the Ducal council might rebel against his decision but until Fallos had handed her her father's ring she had not realized just how serious the king had been. The ring had been handed down from monarch to monarch for centuries and was almost as old as the kingdom itself. She'd kept it hidden away, unwilling to wear it because doing so would force her to confront the grief that she had kept locked away. She swallowed hard and slipped the ring slowly onto her middle finger. Her father had worn it on his smallest finger and had often laughed at how small a man the king who'd had it made must have been. It was loose on her finger, but did not slide off. The last thing she reached for was Sir Harren's cloak. Sir Eleric had carried it with him to RangeWard and tried to present it to Duke Harren. Duke Harren had looked at it then taken Mira aside and asked her to keep it with her. It was the only item, aside from the dress made in Winegarden, that bore the king's standard. Her standard now. The embroidered, golden horses stood in stark contrast to the blue of the cloth, which when laid across her shoulders only made her deep blue eyes more stunning.

She finished securing the cloak and straightened her shoulders. She took a deep breath and looked around. If things went well, she would not return here. If things did not go well, it was likely she would not return here either. Finally she resigned herself to whatever fate awaited her and walked outside.

Half of the QueensGuard immediately formed around her. She nodded to them politely before she asked, "How stands the battle?"

One of the men bowed quickly before he answered. "Your majesty, the last news we had was that the gates to the keep had been breached and our men had moved inside the walls."

"How long ago was that?"

"Half a glass or so, my queen."

She nodded. "Where is the general?"

"Near the center of town, majesty."

"Take me there." she ordered.

The man bowed again and they marched off toward the center of the city. She noticed that as she passed, men would bow respectfully even if they were in a hurry. She responded to every one she could, her determination to end this war and finish Duke Franken growing with every man they passed. The sounds of battle from inside the castle walls grew louder as they neared the tower in the center of town. She saw Kieran and Sir Alden talking, Kieran's arms moving animatedly and Sir Alden nodding enthusiastically. As they approached, Kieran saw her and waved her over.

Sir Alden bowed low at her approach. "Your majesty." he said.

"Sir Alden." she replied simply. "How goes it? The QueensGuard have not had news in over half a glass."

“We are fighting across the courtyard even now, my queen. It is ... difficult. The Duke has been planning for this for months and has planned his defenses well. We are gaining ground, but we are taking heavy losses.”

Mira's face blanched at the emphasis Sir Alden had laid on the word 'heavy'. “How heavy, Sir Alden?”

“Heavy, majesty. Almost a quarter of the foot and several fist of the horse, who have joined the foot rather than risk the loss of their mounts by fighting in such close quarters.”

“General, can we take the keep?” Mira asked Kieran bluntly.

Kieran coughed and looked toward the castle. He shook his head. “Right now I am not certain, my queen. We will take the men in the courtyard, but I do not know what he holds in reserve within the keep itself. If we knew how many more, we may be able to plan more effectively.”

“What if you could find out?” she asked mysteriously.

“Then I could assure you a victory, my queen.”

Mira smiled smugly. “I know a way into the castle, General. But if you go, I go with you.”

“Absolutely not!” Kieran exploded. “Are you out of your mind?”

Mira folded her arms across her chest. “No, I'm the queen. And right now I'm the only person available who knows how to get into that castle aside from going through the front door.”

“Who else knows?” Kieran demanded.

Mira raised an eyebrow at him but did not answer.

“Gods, Mira! Who else knows?” He threw up his hands in frustration when she would not answer and paced angrily, running his hands through his hair and mumbling to himself. Finally he stopped and looked to Sir Alden. “Well, what do you think, Sir Alden?”

Alden looked from Kieran to Mira and back, shaking his head. “I dislike it, but we need to know. “ He turned to Mira and knelt before her. “My Queen, you cannot go with him into the keep. We are too close to victory to risk you. Please, reconsider and just show the General how we can enter.” he begged.

“Franken is mine.” she said, her eyes blazing and her tone brooking no argument. “I want your word now on that. Franken is mine to deal with.”

Kieran groaned. “Mira-”

She turned on him, cutting him off. “Franken is mine, Kieran.” she practically

growled. "Do not deny me that. It is my right."

"General, it is a small thing she asks in return for what might bring a quick end to this. Do as she asks." Sir Alden said plainly.

Kieran locked eyes with Mira, his icy blue eyes fading to gray with his anger. "He is yours, my queen. But only after all else is secured."

She opened her mouth to argue but he cut her off with a look. "Agreed, General."

"Now, how can we enter?"

She shook her head. "I will not tell you here in the open. I will show you and any men who will go with you but I do not want this to be common knowledge."

Kieran looked thoughtful for a moment. "Agreed. Better not to spread around a possible breach in the defenses for the future. How many men could enter?"

"A fist at most. Single file." she said simply.

Kieran nodded and snapped his fingers in the direction of the QueensGuard. "Plengur!"

Plengur ran up, knuckling his forehead in a salute. "Yes, General!"

"You and I and Sir Eleric are going to find out what's going on inside the castle. Find Sir Eleric."

Plengur's face broke out in a wide grin. "Aye, General." he said happily before he ran off in the direction of the city gates.

Sir Alden laid a restraining hand on Kieran's arm. "Just the three of you? Is that wise General?"

"Plengur is an excellent scout and I do not wish to risk detection by taking too many men. I need to see myself what surprises Franken has in store for us. You and Sir Kusim and the Duke of HillGuard are doing a fine job. You'll likely have the courtyard cleared by the time we return."

"Sir Eleric will not approve of you going, General." Mira said earnestly.

"If I am to see to your protection for the rest of your life, majesty, then I must know everything and now is as good a time as any to start. Especially since I cannot plan without knowing what forces lie in wait for us and I am not needed here at the moment. Besides, do you wish to entrust your secret to just anyone? If I am right, Sir Eleric should already know where we are going." he said smugly, having just put the pieces of the puzzle together. He had suddenly recalled the appearance of Mira and her protectors their last night in KingsHome outside the walls of the castle. Sir Eleric would know exactly what entrance she spoke of and would be just as able to lead them as she would be.

Mira frowned, but could not refute his words.

Plengur returned with Sir Eleric and looked expectantly at Kieran.

“Sir Alden, see to the battle and do not fall back. We will take the keep yet today if all goes well.”

Mira watched the three men head off in the direction of Annery Lane. She was frustrated by Kieran's deciphering of her puzzle and by being left behind. She briefly considered following them but a quick glance at the QueensGuard told her she'd never get there without an armed escort. She stood stiffly, her eyes and thoughts focused wholly on the KingsTower.

Not long after the three men had left Sir Alden almost shyly approached her. “My queen, why don't we move further up that you might be able to see more of the battle. It might lift your spirits to see how far we've come.”

Mira nodded courteously. “Yes, Sir Alden. That would indeed lift my spirits.”

She took the arm he offered and they walked toward the open castle gates, her QueensGuard falling in behind them. They exchanged small talk politely but Mira's responses grew shorter as they approached the walls, her heart pounding louder with each step that took her closer to her home.

She fell silent as they reached the gates and she placed her first foot on the grounds of Castle Farren. A hand flew to her chest and her breath caught as she laid her eyes on her home for the first time in almost a year. The sounds of battle fell away and a flood of memories rushed through her mind, each one more vivid than the last until finally all that was left was her father's face, smiling down at her as she danced with him at the feast that fateful night.

“Your majesty!” Sir Alden's urgent voice broke through her reverie.

She shook her head to clear it. “Yes, Sir Alden. What is it?”

“We should not stand here in the gates. If you would like, we can join some of your elf friends on the wall.”

She nodded absently. “Yes, of course.”

He led her to the doorway that opened into the hollow walls of the castle, then up a set of steep stairs that took them to the top of the walls. She nodded politely to Fel and Unlell, who held their bows ready and watched the inner keep intently. Finally she looked down on the courtyard and let the sounds of the battle still raging below fill her ears.

The groundskeeper would have become ill at the sight of his immaculately kept grounds smeared in blood and dug up by the feet of a thousand soldiers fighting for their lives. Mira's eyes were full of sadness as she saw the destruction and the number of men, both hers and Franken's, lying dead or dying across the courtyard. Some of them were still writhing in pain, others crying out and still others lay still, their dead

or nearly dead eyes staring up at the sky, seeing nothing.

She swallowed hard. The price of her throne was littered across this courtyard and would be counted in barrels. She turned to Sir Alden. "Have any surrendered?"

Sir Alden shook his head. "None, your majesty. These are Franken's sworn men and Kieran believes they will fight to the death."

"Such a waste." she said pitifully as she watched yet another man fall. There were pitched battles everywhere. A fist of men here, a fist there. She could see that they were, as Kieran had told her, winning. The number of men in black and red was rapidly dwindling and Mira saw no more coming from the still closed doors to the keep.

An arrow whizzed by her ear and she was suddenly thrown to the stone floor of the wall as Sir Alden covered her. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Fel pull back on the string of his bow and let an arrow fly in one fluid motion. She scrambled out from under Sir Alden in time to see a man falling from a window high in the KingsTower. "Amazing, Fel." she said, her voice shaking.

"One queen is too kind." Fel said in his sing song voice.

Sir Alden stood and brushed off his tunic. "Perhaps, but I would agree. Your aim is excellent, Fel."

Fel nodded his head politely and turned his attention back to watching the tower, waiting for another fool to shoot in their direction and give away his location.

Mira looked intently at the KingsTower. She would swear she could see someone standing in the window of what would have been her father's study. She shivered, feeling the eyes of whoever stood there focused on her. Suddenly she saw a body fly through the window, shards of glass exploding everywhere. She gasped, seeing the colors of her QueensGuard on the man's body. She watched, unable to pull her eyes off the body, until it landed on the ground below the tower and bounced like one of the rag dolls she had dropped from the walls in her childhood. She turned away, a hand covering her mouth in horror. It was not the death that bothered her, she had seen violence worse than this and expected to see more before they were through. It was that she knew the body could only have belonged to one of two men. At the thought that it might have been Kieran she began to shake uncontrollably.

Sir Alden reached over and hesitantly touched her arm. "Your majesty? Are you all right?"

"Please have someone retrieve the body. I must know..." she whispered hoarsely. When Sir Alden did not move she grabbed his arm and shook it. "I must know, Sir Alden. Please!" she begged.

Sir Alden nodded and looked down over the wall to where her QueensGuard stood waiting. "QueensGuard!" he called. "Her majesty wishes to have the body that was thrown out of the window retrieved."

Two of the men nodded and began to weave their way through the battles, intent on fulfilling the queen's wishes.

Mira paced the wall, wringing her hands, while they waited. Finally a shout came from below and she raced down the stairs and out the door to where the guard had laid the body, in the center of the other QueensGuard. She walked stiffly toward it, afraid to look. Afraid she would see Kieran's face looking back up at her. The QueensGuard stepped aside as she approached. She cried out in both relief and anguish as she saw Plengur's broken body. She dropped to her knees and slapped away the hands of the QueensGuard that reached out to help her. She raised a hand to her lips and then reached out, her hand shaking, and laid it gently on the dead man's cheek. "Rest well, Plengur." she said softly. Several of the QueensGuard turned their heads, their own eyes tearing at the sight of their queen on her knees next to one of their own.

She rose and wiped the tears from her eyes, then turned to Sir Alden, her eyes suddenly dark and full of determination. "I am going inside now, Sir Alden. Please see to the fight and see if you can get inside sometime soon." She began to walk off toward the city but stopped when she felt Sir Alden's hand on her arm. She looked slowly down at his hand and then raised her eyes to meet his, her glare stony.

"Take your hand off me, sir."

Sir Alden snatched his hand back. "Please, your majesty. You cannot go in. This," his hand gestured toward Plengur's dead body, "should show you that the man is still guarded and dangerous! We cannot risk you, my queen."

"I am going now, Sir Alden. See to your duty." she told him angrily.

Sir Alden dropped to his knees. "Please, your majesty. Please do not do this. We can send others..."

She rounded on him then. "No! Enough have died in my stead already." She let her gaze fall on each of the QueensGuard in turn. "I cannot stay here while Kieran and Sir Eleric could be fighting for their lives right now. I can stop this." She turned to Sir Alden one last time. "I can and I will." she said with a bit less anger in her voice.

"One queen." came Unlell's voice from behind her. "One has a suggestion if one queen insists on pursuing her course."

"Yes, Unlell?"

"One queen can hide herself if she wishes."

She looked quizzically at the elf for a moment before she understood. "Of course!" she said excitedly. "Of course. Thank you Unlell."

The elf bowed slightly. "One has seen one queen sitting on the throne but one does not desire to test the gods in this."

Mira closed her eyes and concentrated briefly. She drew in mana and felt it coursing through her veins, filling her with a sudden burst of energy. She quickly spoke a

series of short words and fell silent. A moment later she heard the gasps of her QueensGuard and saw their faces full of amazement.

“Your majesty?” Sir Alden's voice was a whisper. “Your majesty?”

Mira chuckled, startling him. “I am still here, Sir Alden. As you can see, or not see as the case may be, no one will see me unless I wish them to.”

“Amazing.” Sir Alden replied. Mira heard the sentiment echoed throughout the QueensGuard. “I had always been taught that magik was .. evil. That is was always harmful. Dangerous. I have seen twice today that this is not always the case. What a wonder. I still dislike this, but I believe you may have a chance.”

“One is glad to see some of the Tar remembering that the arrow that kills, but the archer determines why.” Unlell said blithely.

“I will return shortly. I promise.” Mira told them all. “Until then, try to fight through to the gates and get inside the castle.”

“Yes, your majesty.” Sir Alden replied, bowing in the direction of her voice. “Be careful, your majesty. We do not wish to lose you.”

For the first time she could recall she heard sincerity in Sir Alden's voice. “I will, Sir Alden. And thank you.”

She picked up her skirts and began to move as quickly as she could toward the gardener's shack at the end of Annery Lane. She only hoped that she would be able to find Kieran and Eleric, and that they would both still be alive when she reached them.

Chapter 23

Mira crept down the dark tunnel, pushing aside the memories that arose. She closed her ears against the screams she heard echoing in her mind and concentrated on trying to remember how far they had followed the tunnel and what she would do once she reached her room.

She also sifted through her store of knowledge of magik, trying to recall how long she could maintain this unseen state and what, if anything, might cause her to become seen again. She knew that if she needed to use her magik that she could not hold herself unseen. Just as a soldier could not fight with both a bow and a sword at the same time, she could not wield magik for more than one purpose at a time.

Mira reached the small store room full of chests and boxes that she recalled as being so odd on her first trip down this tunnel. She swallowed nervously, knowing that she was close now.

A few moments later she crept on the tips of her toes the last few feet to the panel that she thought led to her old bedchambers. Mira put her ear against it and listened intently, trying to slow her breathing and hear over the sound of her own heart pounding in her chest. After several minutes of hearing nothing she reached up along the side of panel, trying to determine how to get it open.

After fumbling around in the dark for long moments she finally felt a latch of some kind along one side of the door. Mira smiled grimly and pushed the latch up, wincing when the click it made sounded loud enough to alert everyone to her presence. She pulled the door open slightly and peered around the edge. The room was dark, and quiet. In fact, it looked exactly as she had left it.

Mira opened the door the rest of the way and stepped inside, pulling the panel closed behind her. If she did not make it out, better that this secret was not discovered and used against her army. She ignored the desperate urge to climb into her bed and cover herself with the thick, woolen coverlet she'd always taken refuge under. Mira was no longer a child, she was the queen. And somewhere in the keep Kieran and Sir Eleric might need her.

Mira walked deliberately across the room and listened again at the door that opened into the hall. It occurred to her that no one could see her anyway, but she didn't want someone surprised by a door suddenly opening on its own. Hearing nothing from the hall she opened the door just wide enough to slip through.

Standing in the hall, Mira could hear shouts coming from somewhere nearby. The hall ended in another door, and opened onto another corridor that led to the throne room. That, she thought grimly, is where Franken is likely to be. She shook her head and told herself to concentrate on Kieran and Eleric first. Mira walked quickly to the door, repeating her ritual of listening first, then opening the door.

Mira could hear the sounds of scuffling feet and metal ringing against metal from somewhere in the hall, but she could not pinpoint where it came from. She frowned and quickly decided that she'd come this far, she'd best get on with it. She took a deep breath and opened the door just a crack, looking out quickly both ways before she slid through the smallest opening possible.

Once in the hall Mira realized she needn't have worried about someone noticing her movements. The shouts she heard earlier were more distant now and she wondered distractedly if Sir Alden had managed to breach the doors.

She peered down the corridor again, trying to choose a direction. She wanted Franken

badly, but she had to know where Kieran and Eleric had gone. She looked around desperately, trying to decide when the glint of a piece of metal on the floor caught her eye a few steps toward the throne room. She walked over to it, curious.

As she bent down she stifled the cry that rose in her throat. She reached down and picked up the object, cradling it gently in her hand. She swallowed back the tears that threatened to engulf her as she stared unbelievably at the small, shield shaped pendant she'd last seen around Kieran's neck. She took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. Biting back her grief she let her anger grow until she was certain she would explode. She recited the names of everyone Franken had taken from her in her mind. Her father. Her mother. Fallos. Sir Harren. Plengur. Kieran. She gripped the pendant tightly in her clenched fist and fought back tears. If Kieran was dead, she feared what she might do, feared she might not keep Franken alive long enough to put on trial.

Mira tucked the pendant safely into her boot and began to walk slowly but deliberately toward the large, wooden double doors to the throne room. As she walked she reached for the calm she needed and drew in enough mana to do what she had to do. As she neared the doors she spoke a single word and gestured slightly toward the door. Mira did not flinch, nor slow her march as the doors to the throne room blew themselves inward, breaking apart violently, the countless pieces of the once sturdy doors falling like rain across the throne room.

She stopped in the doorway, her eyes so dark they looked more black than blue, and stared icily at the man lounging indolently on her father's throne.

"Mira, my dear," Franken called out, "do come in. I've been expecting you. I am pleased that you are alone."

"Get off my throne, dog." she said through clenched teeth. "Or I will remove you myself."

"I don't think so, Mira dear." he replied as he gestured grandly toward window.

Mira glanced in the direction he indicated. She managed to keep the emotion from her face when she saw both Eleric and Kieran bound and lying in a heap, two men in Franken's livery standing over them with swords drawn.

"You killed them and you expect that to frighten me?" she laughed hollowly. "It does not, it merely guarantees your death."

"Ah..." Franken said, leaning forward to address her. "But they are not dead. Merely incapacitated for the time being."

"Prove it. Your word means nothing to me, traitor."

Franken stood. "I'm offended, your highness. I did not break the law." He reached down beside the throne and picked up a sack. He reached inside and shook his head. "But he did." he snarled as he pulled her father's preserved head from the sack.

Mira tried not to react but she could not keep from gagging as the bile rose in the back of her throat at the sight of her dead father's head in Franken's hands. The Duke

laughed at her reaction and casually tossed the king's head in the air, catching it again by the hair. "Wake them up." he called to the men standing over Kieran and Eleric.

Mira watched, trying to regain control as Franken's men kicked at Kieran and Eleric. They groaned and squirmed around for a few moments, finally managing to sit. As the two men looked around the room and saw Mira standing in the doorway alone, they strained at their bonds. One of Franken's men casually laid his sword along Kieran's neck. Kieran stopped struggling and stared at Franken, hatred smoldering in his eyes. "If you harm her..." he began.

Without turning, Franken replied casually, "You're in no position to make threats, FreeSword." Waving at Mira he added, "Nor are you, your highness."

"What do you hope to gain by this display, traitor?" Mira asked, seething.

"I would like to leave. Now, if you don't mind too terribly. And I think that I'll be taking your two friends with me to make sure you don't get ideas about stopping me." Franken said brusquely.

"No." Mira replied.

"No?" Franken looked taken aback by her response. "Then perhaps we can decorate the walls with two more of these." He snarled as he tossed her father's head in her direction.

Mira kept her eyes off her father's head as it rolled toward her, focusing instead on Franken. He was not close enough to the other men for her to act. If she did something to Franken, his guards might kill Kieran and Eleric before she could respond and if she did something to the men holding Kieran and Eleric, Franken might be able to get to her or worse, escape. Without knowing what other resources he had available, she could not even be certain what else might happen. She needed him dead to end this war, allowing him to escape was not an option. Knowing that, she needed to at least get Kieran and Eleric up on their feet, that they might have a fighting chance when she made her move.

Mira let her shoulders slump. "You win, Franken." she said in a defeated voice. "You may go."

Franken narrowed his eyes and tried to judge her intentions. He smiled as he saw the tears falling silently down her cheeks. "Well, at least your mageborn blood hasn't completely destroyed that keen intellect your father always spoke so highly of."

"Will you at least free them once you are safely away?"

"But of course, your highness. You brand me a traitor, but I am an honorable man."

Mira suddenly knew what she must do. Franken was essentially a coward and all he wanted right now was to get away with his head intact. His cowardice would be his downfall.

"Would you release one of them now, as a sign of good faith?" she simpered.

Franken frowned as he considered her request, then shrugged. She held her breath. Her plan required that he believed he had the upper hand and could afford to be generous. "Certainly." He turned to his men. "Release the knight." he said offhandedly. "Unless you have more of an interest in the FreeSword." he said with a sneer of contempt.

Mira bit her lip. She did not want Franken to know just how much Kieran meant to her as he would no doubt use it against her. "No, it matters not. As long as you release one to show you are serious about leaving and about releasing the other. You will have to leave the kingdom, you know. There is no place in Freeland Hold that you would be safe."

He nodded and waved at his men to release the knight. Mira watched as the man standing above Eleric lifted him to his feet. The guard pushed Eleric rudely forward and casually cut through the ropes binding his hands. Eleric flexed his armored hands and stretched his arms.

Eleric took a step forward then turned slowly and looked at Kieran. The second guard pushed the edge of his sword against Kieran's throat, drawing a few drops of blood. Eleric put his hands out and took a step back. "Dirge guide you, my brother."

Kieran did not move, painfully aware of the steel at his throat but his eyes clearly communicated with Eleric, who nodded his understanding in return.

Mira watched as Eleric turned and walked slowly toward her. Franken still stood near the throne, but he was wary of the knight and his eyes stayed focused on him, ignoring Mira. Things were going well. She smiled wryly and began to speak under her breath, focusing all that she could on this one act. The blood was rushing in her ears as her heart started beating even faster. Mira drew in the mana she needed, then drew just a bit more to be sure. Kieran's life would be decided the instant she released the magik, she could not afford to draw too little.

She waited until Eleric was almost half way across the room. "Get Franken!" she barked at the knight as she raised a hand and swiped it sideways in front of her, pointing at the men standing over Kieran, releasing the mana she had drawn. A wave of fire swept through the air, stretching from the height of the guard's chests up well above their heads.

When Mira shouted, Eleric moved out of instinct and training, reaching Franken in just a few long strides and tackling him from the side. He heard the screeching of men in mortal terror behind him but concentrated on keeping the duke firmly beneath him. When the man refused to yield, Eleric raised a single, gauntlet covered fist and struck the back of his head. He grunted in satisfaction as the man's body went limp.

Mira stared in horror as the guards were engulfed in flames. The guard that had released Eleric dropped dead before the flames had passed him. The man standing closest to Kieran dropped his sword, screaming, and began to jump around, trying to put out the fire that threatened to consume him. Mira wanted to turn away from the horrible fate she'd inflicted on the man, but he fell and knocked Kieran over, the flames from his cloak spreading over her beloved. She rushed forward, lifting her

dress and kicking at the man, pushing him off of Kieran and then beating frantically at the flames rising from Kieran's clothing with her cloak. She saw his charred skin as his burnt clothing fell away and she recoiled from what she had done to him and to his guards. Then Eleric was there, gently urging her to move aside so he could help his friend.

Eleric laid his hands on Kieran's chest and shook his head. He raised his head and stared out the window, his voice rising in a beautiful prayer to Dirge. Mira watched through her tears, and saw the burns on Kieran's body disappear, as though they had never existed. She sunk to the floor, her shoulders shaking with something between tears and laughter. Finally Eleric sat back, exhausted, a satisfied smile on his face.

Kieran sat up awkwardly and looked down at what was left of his clothing. He looked up at Eleric, a lopsided grin on his face. "I know they needed washing but don't you think this was a bit drastic?"

Eleric slapped his friend on the shoulder and chuckled before he stood and cut the rope binding Kieran's hands. Kieran stood and quietly thanked his friend, then took two steps forward and kneeled beside Mira, taking her in his arms and holding her close.

Mira reached up and put her arms around his neck and held him tightly, still sobbing as she buried her face against his chest. He reached up and stroked her hair, leaning over to whisper in her ear and trying to calm her.

Eleric retrieved the swords from the dead guards, then moved across the room, taking a length of rope and tying Franken securely. He pulled the man into a sitting position, ignoring the traitor's groans of protest.

"Kieran," Eleric called out reluctantly. "We should leave as soon as we can. We do not know who holds the keep yet and I would not risk the Queen's life any more than she has already done."

Kieran held out a hand, one finger up in the air, in response. He took Mira's head between his hands and kissed her forehead. "Mira, love, we need to leave now. Pull yourself together, my queen."

Mira sniffed and wiped at her eyes with the edge of her cloak. Kieran stood and held his hand out to her, helping her to stand. At the sight of his burnt clothing she smiled and took her cloak from her shoulders, handing it to him. "The next time you report to me, General, you should consider dressing properly." she teased through her tears. "Oh yes, and if you are to serve me, you should keep this about your neck." she added, handing him the pendant she had found in the hall.

Kieran fastened the cloak around his neck, then took the Shield of Dirge from her and slid it over his head. Mira was staring at him, and when he finished placing the medallion in the center of his chest, he leaned down to kiss her quickly one more time. He led her toward the door, but stopped at the sight of the decapitated head on the floor. He looked to Mira, who whispered hoarsely, "My father."

Kieran nodded and looked around for something to put the grisly item in. Mira

nodded toward the throne, and Kieran jogged over, finding the sack Franken had discarded. Eleric handed Kieran one of the swords, then pulled Franken to his feet and forced him to walk ahead of him toward the door. "Make one move toward my Queen, traitorous dog, and I will take your head. Perhaps I will drop this sword and use my bare hands." he threatened.

Franken slowly nodded his understanding once, then stared straight ahead as Eleric forced him forward.

Kieran returned and picked up the head reverently, placing it gently in the sack. He closed the sack and held it tightly in one hand. He reached out with his free hand and took Mira's hand in it, following Eleric.

"I assume you know the way out, brother?" Kieran asked lightly.

"You are kidding, General, right?" Eleric laughed and headed toward the blasted remains of the throne room doors.

They crept out of the keep as uneventfully as Mira had entered, the entire force apparently engaged fighting off their army. Once clear of the gardener's shed on Annery Lane, they headed straight for the tower in the town square, expecting to find one of the Captains there. The QueensGuard looked surprised when they saw her, but still snapped to attention. "Who is in command here?" she called out.

"Captain Dunban is, your majesty." Rathin said.

"Tell him to attend me."

He raised a fist in salute as he turned to the tower door.

Eleric spoke up. "Take this man from me, and kill him if he looks like he will do anything other than breathe."

"No. I want him alive to stand trial under the eyes of Dirge and my people." Mira interrupted. She was satisfied when Franken cringed at that.

"Your majesty! We are glad to see you well!" Dunban said coming out of the tower. He knelt before her, sparing a glowering glance at Franken.

"Rise, captain Dunban. Would you do the honor of leading this traitor to the keep for us, with a rope around his neck? I think his men would like to know that they are guarding an empty throne room. We have been busy this day, and are sorely tired."

Dunban stood smiling. "It would be a high honor for me your majesty." He turned back to the tower to get some rope.

"Aren't they supposed to wait until the Queen dismisses them?" she muttered.

"They are, my Queen. But Dunban was a common soldier when this campaign started, having little experience with royalty. Add to that the honor that you show by trusting him with this duty, and you're lucky he didn't use his belt." Kieran said

nearly laughing.

Dunban returned with a length of rope. “Well traitor, let us show your men that you are captured. The fewer that die today the better.” he said as he tied the rope around Franken's neck and checked the knot to make sure it would slip tight if his charge tried to run. “Remember that my Queen wants you alive, but I will suffer her wrath before I will let you loose on the kingdom again.” he added coldly.

The walk to the castle gates went quickly. Kieran was still holding Mira's hand, and would not believe it was all really over until Franken's men actually surrendered. Eleric held his symbol of Dirge like it truly was a shield, and mumbled thanks to his god the whole way.

When her captains saw the procession coming down the road, they turned to meet them. Sir Alden, Sir Kusim and Fel were having an animated discussion at the gates to the castle when they got there. Past them, Mira could still see fighting around the door to the main keep.

Both knights knelt low and Fel tilted his chin up to her. “Your majesty!” Sir Kusim said brusquely, “they are still fighting, but I no longer believe they have the forces inside to withstand us. It has been a while since an archer appeared on the walls, and the warriors retreated to the doorway so that a few of them can hold us off while the others rest.”

Mira inclined her chin at Fel, while saying, “Stand my worthy Knights and see what gift we have brought you. Dunban – no, Sir Dunban, Knighted by the Queen this day – will take him forth and show him to the defenders. The day is already ours.”

They stood, looking from Franken the traitor to Dunban the new member of the Knighthood. Slowly Sir Alden's face grew into a smile. “That is a worthy trophy indeed my queen. Please, Sir Dunban, proceed as the queen commands.”

As Dunban turned to urge Franken out into the courtyard, Eleric said, “You are a fine warrior, and will make an excellent Knight, Sir Dunban. But the KingsGuard must be reconstituted. I would speak with you about Dirge when this is done.”

Dunban nodded, a look of awe on his face. “Leave the man be and let him enjoy the honor of being a Knight before you try and make a Templar of him.” Kieran laughed at Eleric.

Dunban walked slowly out into the castle courtyard, dragging Franken along behind him. When he was within easy sight of the gate, he stopped and shouted. Few paid him any heed, so he tried again, louder. Again, no one listened.

Mira did not want one wound opened that did not have to be. She gathered the mana from around herself and used it to make her voice heard. She hoped it was loud enough to be heard in all of Farrenton, but the castle was the only place with active fighting, so she was happy if she just made it that far. “Defenders of the traitor Franken! Look out into the courtyard of the castle, and see that you are finished. Surrender now, I would not have your blood shed unnecessarily.”

A cheer went up from the walls above her. It sounded like half of her army was manning the castle wall instead of fighting at the inner keep.

The men at the gate lowered their swords at the sight of Franken on the end of Dunban's leash. Her soldiers were quick to disarm them and move them out into the courtyard. A group of men came through the gate behind her to take them in charge.

Mira finally looked at ease. "Sir Alden, please assist Sir Dunban in securing this dog below until we have time to deal with them properly. Sir Kusim, would you be so kind as to remove Franken's banner from every corner of my home and raise the king's banner high."

"No, your majesty." Sir Kusim said soberly.

She took a step back as if Sir Kusim had slapped her. "What do you mean, no?" she asked incredulously as Kieran took a menacing step forward.

Sir Kusim smiled, a twinkle in his eye. "I will not raise the king's banner, your majesty. But I will gladly raise the queen's banner."

Mira tried to suppress her laughter, but could not. She laughed merrily and smiled at the knight. "Then raise the queen's banner, Sir Kusim, and then gather your brothers and inform the army we have taken back what is rightfully ours."

After Sir Kusim had saluted and left, Kieran jerked his head in the direction of Sir Dunban and Sir Alden, leading Franken into the keep. "And how do we deal with that one?" he asked Mira.

"He has consorted with Tasni. He has slain innocents. He has killed men with the power of Tasni. He killed, or ordered the killing, of the King. Though for that last I would like to kill him myself, the people must see that he faced justice. If you can convene a conclave of Templars, Sir Eleric, I would like to turn him over for a public Dirgian trial." she said.

"I can, your majesty, but you must know that I would rather strike him down where he stands. Guilt or innocence is not in question here, I saw him in open rebellion myself."

"Then you will be the prosecutor. I want no man who harbors ill feelings towards me to have this one to look to as a martyr. His trial will assume he is innocent, the judges will be as impartial as is possible, and you will prove his guilt. Find the Tasnian altars that we both know were built somewhere in this town, and you will have enough evidence."

"Eleric," Kieran interjected, "I would sit on that council. I despise the man, but have not yet seen anything that directly links him to the Tasnian priests. It could have been someone else acting in his stead."

Eleric stifled a laugh. "Kieran, you do not know all of our ways yet. Only sworn members of the Order of the Dented Shield may sit on a trial council. Though you are more qualified than some of them, I would think."

Kieran looked confused. “You were there when I swore my sword to Dirge, and you have seen me since. Why am I not qualified?”

Understanding dawned in Eleric's eyes. “I am sorry I was laughing Kieran, I thought you knew. You are not a member of the Order. You are chosen by Dirge, of that there is no question, but there is more to being a member of the order...”

“I had thought... I mean, I had felt... When Dirge spoke to me, and then you called me brother, I had just assumed...” he trailed off, exchanging a worried look with Mira.

Eleric saw the exchange and smiled. “Never fear, brother. You are a brother, you just have not sworn on the Shield of Dirge yet. Normally we choose the Templars of the future, and Dirge is content with that. But sometimes he takes a personal hand in the selection of Templars. Not often, maybe once every three hundred years, but it is not unknown. When Dirge makes his will known as clearly as he did with you, we accept his judgment, but want to train the chosen so that they understand the rules we have placed upon ourselves, and how we interact with each other.”

“Then if I am a Templar, why can I not sit on the trial?”

“Because this is one of the things you should be trained for. Think of it as the human side of being a Templar of Dirge. There is also much about calling upon Dirge and his power that you do not know. I will speak with the High Lord Protor, but first I would ask you. May I be your Templar-Trainer?”

“I would be honored, Sir Eleric. I do not understand yet, but as long as the church will recognize my commitment to Dirge...”

“We will, I promise you that. You are beloved of Dirge like no other I know of. Even Sir Nillen the Kingslayer, who put an end to the reign of the Mad King was not blessed with a personal visit from Dirge.”

“Then I am well content to sit out the trial. I trust the Templars to do what is right.”

They were quiet for a few moments before Kieran's voice hesitantly broke the silence, looking furtively at Mira once more. “Eleric, how long does such training take?”

“Kieran, my friend, it takes years to become a Templar.” he said with mock sorrow, understanding the reason he asked. At the crestfallen look on his friend's face Eleric reached out and clapped his friend on the shoulder, shaking his head in amusement. “You need not be a Templar to be knighted, General. Only service in the KingsGuard requires such training.” The knight cast a sly, sideways glance at his queen. “Though I do not think it would be right for you to serve in the KingsGuard.”

Kieran's face grew angry at Eleric's words, until he saw the blush creeping up Mira's neck and saw the laughter in his friend's eyes. He laughed nervously. “That would be something, wouldn't it, brother?”

“Would you two stop it?” Mira broke in, trying to sound offended by their subtle

hints. “I have not even sat once on my throne and already you're – you have already decided that ... “ she trailed off as the two men began to chuckle at her discomfort.

She stomped her foot in frustration and the two men tried to contain their laughter. Kieran bowed graciously, in the manner of Sir Staphius. “My queen, our most humble apologies.”

Eleric mimicked Kieran's actions. “Would my queen like to sit her throne now?” the knight asked, his voice more serious than it had been.

Mira shook her head, not ready to face that particular duty yet. “No, I think not. Not until the Dukes have gathered and are on hand for the coronation.” She paused, realizing that there was one other ceremony necessary before she could take her throne. “And a proper funeral has been conducted for my father.” She dropped her eyes meaningfully to the sack Kieran still held in his hand.

Kieran looked down at his hand, realizing he still carried the King's head. He held it up in front of him, swallowing hard. “Sir Eleric. As the last living member of the KingsGuard I think it is your right to see to the preparation of such a ceremony?”

Sir Eleric's eyes misted as he realized what the sack held. He dropped to one knee and held his hands out in front of him, his head bowed. Kieran gently laid the sack in Eleric's hands. Eleric held it reverently, then spoke quietly to it, as though the king would hear his words even in death, his voice was thick with emotion. “My king. Forgive your humble servant for taking breath when you draw none. I have done as you commanded, but my heart is surely rent with the pain of your loss. The whole of the kingdom mourns you, my king.”

He stood slowly, still cradling the sack in his hands. He looked to Mira, his face still clearly showing the depth of his emotions. “I will make arrangements for both ceremonies, your majesty. First for your father, then for you. We cannot deal with Franken until you sit the throne. Only the King, or Queen, has the authority to dispense final justice for treason, if the council of Templars finds him guilty.”

Mira simply nodded, unable to speak, as she watched Sir Eleric head toward the castle.

Evening settled once again over Farrenton. Mira looked out over the castle's courtyard through the broken panes of glass in her father's study. The men of her army were just finishing removing the last of the bodies that had so liberally littered the courtyard earlier in the day and the flames from the funeral pyres rose high into the night.

Eleric had taken the King's head to the small temple of Dirge inside the castle and set two members of the QueensGuard on the doors. He had explained to Mira that they were merely ceremonial, but would remain on guard until the funeral could be properly carried out. Kieran had ordered messengers to be sent to every duchy, with orders for each Duke to meet in KingsHome as quickly as possible. There were still one or two duchies aligned with Franken, but Eleric had assured her that once they were told of Franken's capture and the support of almost every other duchy in the kingdom that they would surely be moved to support her as well.

The QueensGuard had swept through the castle, removing bodies and seeking out any of Franken's men that might be still lurking in its halls. They had found none, but they had found her mother's body in her parent's suite. Eleric reported they had discovered it, and that she rested with the King in the temple, but he had not told her of its condition, apparently not wanting to upset her. Mira knew she would hear all the grisly details at the trial so she accepted Eleric's minimal report without question.

She sighed and turned away from the window. It was growing late, and by consent of all the captains they were to feast this night in the great hall. Mira had asked that the men be allowed to feast as well in the courtyard, with food being prepared and carried out to them, along with as many tuns from the castle stores as the men could drink in a night. Her captains had agreed with her decision, though they had convinced her to limit the drink somewhat to insure the men did not become overly enthusiastic in their celebration.

Though the court musicians had fled along with most of the servants the night Franken had taken the keep, many had remained in Farrenton and began to return as word of their victory spread across the city. They would have music and food and wine with which to celebrate. If it was not the finest food or music that had graced the hall, no one would notice for it would certainly be the best they had tasted and heard in many months.

Mira walked alone through the halls and toward her rooms. The dress she wore was coated with dust, and the ends of the long skirts were frayed from the day's activities. She sorely needed a change of clothing, though she wondered briefly how she would manage to dress without assistance, as all of the clothing in her rooms were of a make that she could not button them without a helping hand.

As she turned down the hall to her room she saw Kieran leaning up against the wall near the door to her room. She was stunned by his appearance. Gone were the charred breeches and tunic he'd been wearing earlier, replaced by proper court attire in the colors of the Queen. His long hair was tied back in a queue and hung, still damp, half way down his back. Fallos swords were once again hanging at his hips and she noticed that he'd taken the time to shave, his face as smooth as it had been the first time she'd seen him.

As she approached, he pushed himself off the wall and stood waiting for her. At the admiring look in her eyes he blushed. He held his hands out wide and smiled wryly. "Eleric took me to his rooms and .. well, he thought this would be more appropriate."

Mira laughed. "Oh yes, much more appropriate. And quite fetching, I might add."

He blushed and opened the door to her room. "Your majesty." he said, bowing and gesturing with his hand toward her room.

After she entered the room he put his hand on the handle of the door, intending to close it after her. "I will wait outside, my queen." he said.

She turned and looked at him anxiously, biting her lower lip. "I will need... that is I would appreciate... "

Kieran grinned at her discomfort. “You will need help with your buttons, Mira?”

“Yes.” she said, blushing.

Kieran laughed. “I am experienced in that task, if you recall. Call when you are ready.” he said as he closed the door, still laughing.

She saw the dress she'd worn that last night in the keep and immediately went to her closets, finding something that carried less painful memories. A dark blue, she decided, with the crest of her house on the bodice. She carefully combed her hair and swept it up, securing it with a jewel-encrusted comb her mother had given her. She rummaged through her jewelry and selected a set of earrings her father had given her, large white pearls from the Sea of Ramaal offset with the dark blue gems mined in the Dwarvenforge, whose name she could never remember. She clasped the matching necklace around her neck and glanced in the mirror, satisfied with her appearance.

Finally she called out to Kieran, who opened the door and walked in jauntily. The witty remark he had prepared died on his tongue as he saw her standing in the middle of the room. Mira suddenly realized that he'd never seen her attired in anything other than clothes suited to travel. He looked appreciatively up and down her length, his blue eyes smoldering. She deliberately turned her back to him. “The buttons, General?” she reminded him impishly.

Kieran nodded dumbly and moved to stand behind her. He fumbled with the buttons, his fingers refusing to obey him. “Your fingers seem less nimble today, sir. You fumble with them more than old Fallos.” she teased in a low voice.

He cleared his throat, still dumbstruck by her appearance. He finally managed to finish the last of the buttons and took a step back, not trusting himself to stand so close to her without touching her.

She turned and caught his eye. Kieran saw every raw emotion he felt himself mirrored on her face. He closed his eyes and turned his face upward. “Dirge, give me strength.” he groaned.

Mira laughed then, breaking the spell. Kieran shook his head and offered her his arm, which she took formally. “You told me once that you are a dangerous woman, Mira Mageborn. I did not believe you then. I do now, though not for the reasons you claimed.” he growled, still struggling to control his emotions. “But I love you. Dirge help me, but I do.”

“You are a dangerous man yourself, Kieran Oathbound. Dirge help me, but I love you as well.”

He smiled but did not reply, escorting her through the corridors and to the hall where they feasted long and celebrated well into the night.

Chapter 24

The next week flew by in a whirlwind. The servants that had returned worked

feverishly to restore the castle to its once glorious state. A contingent of foot and horse remained behind in the city to assist in restoration and to keep the peace, while the rest were allowed to stay or return home, as was their wont. Many stayed, though the majority of them immediately began the long journey home to find their families and return to a normal life.

The Dukes began to arrive one by one the following week. Mira greeted those who had already sworn to her warmly, and those that had not she refused to see until the Ducal Council was to meet. Kieran prowled the corridors of the keep restlessly until Eleric finally took him aside and set him in the library with a pile of scrolls and a stack of books describing the Templars, the Order of Dirge and the history of Freeland Hold. Kieran had looked at the imposing pile and then turned an imploring look at his friend. Eleric shook his head and told him plainly, "You need to start somewhere, brother, and this is the best place to begin." Kieran had sighed, but picked up a book and started reading. And once he'd begun, he practically lived in the library, devouring scroll after scroll and book after book. It kept him occupied and kept his mind off of Mira, who seemed to be occupied every second of the day with one Duke or another, or focused on dealing with the pile of petitions and grievances that had grown immensely since Franken had taken the keep.

It was nearly a month later when the last of the Dukes arrived. The Council of Templars had been fully assembled over a week before that, but was forced to wait to begin their trial until every duchy was represented. The original duchies that had supported Mira had discussed the timing of her coronation. All involved had come to the conclusion that it would best be done after the trial, but before sentence was passed, rather than before the trial. They wanted no lingering doubts in the minds of the dukes and the people as to whether or not Mira was fit to rule.

The surviving Knights of Justice who had joined them stayed and immediately accepted Eleric's offer to join the reconstituted KingsGuard. Their studies of law and justice made them excellent advisors, as well, and it was decided that they would be invaluable in assisting in the matter of Mira's status, which the dukes who had remained loyal to Franken still questioned.

They met in the chambers of the Ducal council and immediately began to debate the issue. Mira sat silent, the patient lines of her face belying the underlying nervousness that churned in her stomach.

"The FirstLaw of thine Kingdom doth state that no mageborn shall rule." Sir Elinous began," but thine king didst alter that law before his death."

"Yet the ThirdLaw of thine Kingdom doth state that neither the FirstLaw nor SecondLaw, the prohibition regarding the use of magik in battle, may be altered without the consent of thine Ducal Council." The Nordalian finished, reading from a scroll.

Duke Ashendown of WineGarden stood and addressed the rest of the council. "My lords, consent of the council has always been determined by a simple majority. It seems to me that the majority of us have already given our tacit consent to the changing of both the first and the second law." He raised a hand in response to the quiet murmurs that broke out around the table. "But I also believe that it is in the best

interest of the Kingdom that in this situation we have the support of every duchy.” He sat amidst the nodding and quiet chorus of “Agreed” that rose from the table.

Sir Elinous raised an eyebrow. “Thou needs record this decision for the record, my Lords. Each of thee in turn must agree or dissent.” He waited for each man to voice their assent, then nodded to his companion, who sat furiously scribing the results.

“Now that thine assent is given to the conditions of changing the FirstLaw and SecondLaw, each of thine voices must be heard on the subject. If thou dost agree to the late King's decision to change the FirstLaw and the decision on the field of battle to change the SecondLaw, please state so now.”

Kieran watched nervously as every duchy but EastGuard and Forestlan gave its assent.

Sir Elinous looked inquisitively at the two Dukes who had declined to agree. “Wouldst thou enlighten the others on your decision, sirs?”

The Duke of EastGuard, formerly Count Gerad of SaltWood, stood, straightening his doublet. “My lords, while I am as wroth with my cousin Franken as any, and will gladly see him pay for his association with Tasnian priests, I cannot in good conscience agree to a change in the laws. The first two laws were laid down to protect us from the deceit and corruption of those who wield magik. Look at her! How are we to be certain that she has not charmed us in some way, twisted our will and forced us to obey her wishes?”

Kieran took a single step forward at the man's words but stopped when the Duke suddenly hissed, “See my Lords!” Gerad pointed at him furiously. “At her side is a Corrigarian FreeSword. A man who kills for money.” The Duke snorted and threw up his hands. “We all know that Corrigar has long eyed our ports with envy. Would this not be the perfect time to take us as she has long desired?”

Mira's brows furrowed at the speculative expressions that appeared on several of the duke's faces at his words. Gerad stood straight, his voice becoming solicitous as he continued. “It is not secret that the Queen of Corrigar is mageborn as well. What better allegiance could they hope for than a mageborn queen in Freeland Hold, and a loyal subject of Corrigar at our ruler's side?” he asked slyly. “I do not wish to divide our great kingdom, my lords.” he continued sincerely. “I only wish to protect it from the vile machinations of those who seek to destroy us. From without and from within.”

He sat, a self satisfied smile on his face. The Duke of Forrestlan stood, his eyes showing some regret at his decision, but his jaw firm in his resolve. “I am not convinced that her highness is a danger, or in allegiance with Corrigar, but as my duchy has felt the incursion of Corrigarians for centuries I must agree that even the slightest impression of such holds me from giving my assent. I must concur with my lord Gerad. We cannot be certain we are not under some influence of magik and that this FreeSword's presence is not a danger.”

Eleric finally stepped forward, his eyes flashing dangerously and his voice hard. “This man is my brother. He has forsaken his Corrigarian brotherhood and given his sword

to Dirge. His life he has pledged to Queen Mira. If any doubt him, they also doubt me.”

Sir Elinous stepped forward. “The Order of Justice doth stand with our Dirgian brothers on this most vile of accusations. None who didst witness his battle with the heinous Knight of Fallen Timbers couldst mistake his loyalties. He is truly blessed of Dirge, loyal to his Dirgian brothers and most faithful in his pledge to our Queen.”

Gerad shook his head. “So on nothing more than your word we are to accept that this foreigner is not a risk?”

Sir Palteron, standing near the door stepped forward. “Dost thou question the very honor of mine Order? Dost thou imply that Sir Elinous speaks falsely?” Mira saw the Nordalian's hand fall to the hilt of his sword and saw the Duke of Forrestlan shrink back from the menacing tone of the knight's voice.

The Duke of Forrestlan spoke quickly. “My Lord, I withdraw my objection to the Corrigarian. The honor and truthfulness of the Order of Justice is renowned even in the farthest corners of all Nordalia. If Sir Elinous vouches for the man, as does Sir Eleric, I have no doubts as to where the FreeSword's loyalties lie.”

“Thou hast not answered my question, Duke Gerad.” Sir Palteron asked again, his voice tight. “Dost thou question the very honor of mine order? And that of Sir Eleric, whom I have witnessed, with mine own feeble eyes, as being the vessel of his lord Dirge many a time?”

Gerad swallowed nervously and shook his head. “No, sir knight. I do not doubt your word or the word of any other Templar. If they vouch for this man then I have no recourse but to accept their opinion of him. But that does not solve the issue of magik, which is of greater import to the kingdom than this one foreign sellsword.”

Mira saw that many of the dukes were again looking at her questioningly. She sighed. She'd thought when they reclaimed KingsHome that all would be well. She could not give up what her father had died to give her, nor could she so easily ignore the trail of men and blood that had led her to her throne. She stood slowly, and took a deep breath.

“Gentlemen. There is no easy way to convince you that I have not used magik to manipulate you. I can, and do, give you my word that I have not. Had I done so, Duke Gerad would not have been able to speak as he has. But I see by your faces that my word will not be enough. I have only one question for you all, if I were not mageborn would any of you find fault in my rule?”

Each man in turn easily responded with a simple “No.” Though Gerad's was slow to come.

Mira closed her eyes and nodded once. “You are all aware of the tales of Kings attempting to burn the magik out of their mageborn children. It can and has been done. The elves who have graciously attended me since our journey through Hollowton can accomplish such a task. Are there any who would doubt their sincerity?”

The men cast respectful glances at the three elves who stood quietly in the back of the room. Few of the dukes had spoken with any of them, though they had all seen them, the Queen's constant shadows.

Again the men all replied with a resounding no. Though their contact with the elves had been almost non-existent in their lifetimes, they all knew the tales, and respected their elven neighbors. All the tales told that they were as honorable as the Nordalians and Dirgian knights.

“Unlell, would you do this for me?” Mira asked, turning to face him.

Unlell stepped forward, inclining his chin at her. “One feels it needful to remind one queen that such a thing may lead to one queen's death. Or worse.”

The silence that fell over the room was deafening. Mira smiled wryly. “I know, Unlell. I have seen such failure before.” She shuddered at the memory. “But I see no other way to prove myself to my people. If these, my Dukes, do not have faith in me, how can the common people? And if I do not survive, at least these men will be united in their desire for peace and no more blood will be shed.”

Unlell looked at her, and then for the first time in his life bowed low to a Tar, a sign of his deep respect. “One queen risks much to save the blood of those unworthy to spill it in her name. But if one queen wishes, one will do as she asks.”

“No!” Kieran cried fiercely. He stood and turned to the assembled men. “You cannot possibly ask this of her! She has lost more than all of you combined already!” He fell to his knees at her feet. “My queen, please. Do not do this.” His eyes were full of despair and pleading. “Please, Mira.” he whispered hoarsely.

Mira smiled gently at him. “General, how can you ask me not to risk my life when so many others have already given theirs to secure it? I would rather risk this a thousand times than let one more man spill his blood in my name.”

The room was filled with the rustling of cloaks as every knight in the room knelt, their heads bowed at her words. The Duke of Forrestlan stood slowly, ignoring the daggers flying from Duke Gerad's eyes in his direction, and walked toward the queen. He stopped next to where Kieran still knelt at her feet and dropped to one knee. “I, Duke Stevanor Grayleaf protector of the northern borders of the realm, and Banner Majoris of Forrestlan, do pledge my support and allegiance to my one and only sovereign, Queen Mira Celeria. All that I possess and can marshal shall be given over to her cause, all that I can give, including my blood and my heirs is hers to command. All that I own is hers by right, to dispense with for the good of the realm. I will henceforth guard her and guide her, protecting her from all threats in the physical realm and beyond.”

Mira smiled through a haze of tears. “I, Mira Celeria, Queen of Freeland Hold, accept your pledge of loyalty and pledge to return that loyalty with trust. Thine lands were granted in perpetuum by the great King Farren, I will not remove those lands without due cause. Your people I will protect as mine own, bringing the might of the entire Kingdom down upon any who would defy, deride, or denounce thee. I will trust you

to be the sole source of Queen's justice in your Duchy, and will collect taxes for me as my regent in your lands.”

“May the Queen reign long and well over me and mine.”

The remaining dukes who had not yet sworn to Mira stood. One by one the last of the dukes swore their fealty to her, until Duke Gerad stood alone.

Vetin Highstep, Duke of RangeWard looked calmly at Duke Gerad. “While the queen is off risking her very life to spare the blood of your duchy, perhaps you could enlighten the rest of us as to how your meeting with my father went. You recall the one where you claimed to be an emissary from King Franken, don't you Count Gerad?”

Kieran, still kneeling at Mira's feet, turned an awe-filled look toward the young duke of RangeWard. Memory of his brief meeting with Count Gerad flooded back to him.

Gerad stood, shaking his head. “I don't recall saying any such thing, Duke Highstep. I was there as an emissary from my cousin, yes, but I don't recall calling him my King.”

Kieran stood, his hands going to his swords. “I swear fealty to a man who can wear the crown”, he mimicked the words the man had spat in his face in RangeWard back to him. “Do you perhaps recall those words, Duke Gerad?”

Gerad backed away from the table, waving his hands as though he could stop the man from advancing with his feeble gestures. “He forced me. He ... I had no choice!” he called out in a shaking voice.

Sir Elinous stood and drew his sword. “Thine own law clearly states that any noble who doth swear fealty to one who is not by law the rightful ruler hath committed high treason.”

Sir Eleric stood and turned to Mira. “Shall we arrest him, your majesty? With his own words he has admitted to his treasonous acts.”

Mira nodded. “By all means, Sir Eleric. Arrest him. His cousin will no doubt appreciate his company.”

The QueensGuard moved forward and took Duke Gerad from the room, whimpering and proclaiming his innocence the entire time. The only answer he got was from a member of the QueensGuard, “You do know that there is only one punishment for treason, don't you Count?”

Mira sighed, then turned to Unlell. “Well Unlell, shall we continue?”

“Your majesty!” Duke Highstep cried. “I think we would prefer that you not take this risk. I am convinced of your dedication to the kingdom. You are willing to risk all – including your life and your sanity – for the sake of your people. There is no more eloquent statement of loyalty to peace and prosperity than the one you have just made. I believe I speak for us all when I say there is no need for you to go through with this. Pray let us not disrupt this kingdom again – without you there is no known rightful

heir. There might even be succession wars.”

The remaining duke's nodded their heads in agreement. “We are all of the same mind, my queen.” Duke Ashendown spoke up. “We do not wish to risk you and trust the wise counsel of the knights and the elves in this matter. We do not believe you would use your magik for ill, no matter the cost. ”

Unlell pursed his lips thoughtfully. “One sees that even the Tar can learn to distinguish between the wielder and the weapon after all, one queen. It is well. We Sheel-Tel are sworn to support the mageborn queen. Nothing was mentioned of a queen with no mageblood left.”

Mira was near tears. “Do you agree with this, Duke Stevanor? It seems you are the only one here who had grave reservations.”

“I do, my Queen. You moved me to swear fealty after I stood opposed to you. Either you have bewitched me, which the Knights would surely know, or you are meant to be our Queen. I have no wish for further bloodshed. Please do not do this thing in my name.”

“I thank you all. It is a part of me, much as Dirge is a part of the Templars of the Dented Shield. I am not certain I would have survived, even with the support of the powerful Sheel-Tel. If you do not mind, I would like to end this council. I must find a relative of Franken that was not tainted by his rebellion to sit in EastGuard for us.”

They all got up to leave. “Queen Mira.” The young Duke Highstep tried to sound officious, but his voice cracked.

“Yes Duke Highstep?” She noticed that he had captured the other Dukes attention, and they were slowing their exit.

“My father foresaw such a problem. He and Fallos worked upon it when first you visited our fair duchy. His scribes – my scribes, I mean - have prepared a list of all known relatives that were raised outside EastGuard. Most of the Ducal families are related to EastGuard. I will have the scrolls delivered to you, but you could appoint the brother, sister, son, or mother of most of the people in this room without breaking the line.”

“I thank you. And I thank your father. He was a fine and thoughtful man. I will consider the list when it is delivered. Meanwhile, my Dukes, the trial will be on the morrow. I wish to finish this business.”

They turned and left at that, grouping into twos and threes, discussing Duke Highstep's revelation. The neighboring Dukes would of course put forward cases if they found that their relatives were on the list. It did not hurt to be related to your neighbors in times of trouble.

The rest of the day went by quickly for Mira. There were requests for help from outlying towns that had been ravaged by the war, people who were burned or driven out of their homes needing shelter, far too many people with friendly advice, and preparations for the trial. Before she knew it, she was wrapped in her comforter,

dozing and thinking about the morrow.

The trial began directly after breakfast. By her order it was held in the plains outside the city so that as many people as possible could be there. The QueensGuard was everywhere, trying to insure that she was safe at this event. But all had gone off well, and she was sitting in a hastily constructed reviewing stand, just above the Knights of Dirge. The Knights of Justice had a similar stand across the way, and there was a makeshift jail of tied timbers sitting in the middle of a clearing that Duke Ashendown's men were keeping between the two. There were people everywhere, forming a circle by filling the space between the reviewing stand she was in and the one for the Nordalians. Kieran had told her earlier that there were even peddlers in the crowd. The people seemed to think of this like a fair. She did not share their sentiments.

Finally Sir Elinous rode his warhorse to the center of the circle, and raised his hands. People began to quiet in the crowds, the stillness spreading back from those in the front who could see.

“We are come here today to bring judgment upon two whom hath been accused of Treason.” There was a murmuring in the crowd. Mira doubted that most of the common people knew Count Gerad of SaltWood had been arrested. “One of these two is accused of far more than mere Treason, including consorting with the dark one's priests, and inviting followers of Am'Ethaan Elf-killer into our lands.” There was an appreciative hissing and booing from the crowd. A few rotten vegetables flew at the makeshift jail, but the members of the QueensGuard that had been assigned to guard it placed themselves between the crowd and the wooden jail. “May Nordal's scales balance fully today, and repay some of the loss that this fair land has suffered. May Nordal surge in his brother's Templars hearts, that they may see justice done. People of Farrenton, Dukes of Freeland Hold, I present to you Sir Eleric of the KingsGuard to present the charges.”

Sir Eleric rode up and saluted Sir Elinous. It was not until she saw Eleric mounted that Mira realized they were mounted so that more of the crowd could see them. She looked to the edges of the crowds, and there were men stationed at regular intervals in front of the crowd, probably relaying what was said. Sir Eleric bowed in her direction, she waved back before she realized he was bowing to the jurors below her.

“Bring forth Franken, formerly Duke of EastGuard, that he may hear the accusations against him.” Eleric said loudly.

Two of the QueensGuard entered the cage and brought Franken out. To Mira's surprise he did not struggle, but walked with his head upright. When he was standing in front of the reviewing stand, one of the guards said “Kneel before the conclave of Dirge!” When he did not kneel, the other hit the back of his knees with the flat of his sword, and they buckled. The other guard kept a grip on Franken so that he did not flop over on his face. Finally Eleric continued.

“Franken Masterstone, formerly Duke of EastGuard. I will read each of the accusations made against you, and you will acknowledge them with 'aye' for the ones you freely admit to, 'nay' for ones you deny, and 'aye with exception' for ones which you admit to, but think there is something the conclave should consider. Do you

understand?"

Mira heard Franken say "yes", and one of the QueensGuard bellowed "He says 'yes'!"

Eleric waited again for the statements to spread through the crowd, then continued. "In the first part, you are accused of High Treason."

There was a moment of confusion between Franken and the guards, and then one of the guards bellowed. "Franken of EastGuard would like a more detailed explanation. There is some treason he might admit to, and some he would challenge."

"In specifics, you are accused of leading a rebellion against the rightful King of Freeland Hold, and causing or actually carrying out his death."

More loudly than before, Franken said "Aye."

One of the QueensGuard echoed him with a bellow.

Sir Elinous rode out to Sir Eleric and they conferred for a moment. He then rode to in front of the reviewing stand that the conclave of Dirgian Templars was seated in. "Worthy judges of Dirge. Free admission to high treason doth condemn this one to death. Thine wise Queen Aquella the Codifier in the one hundred thirtieth year of this kingdom didst include in the laws that death was the only punishment for treason."

Franken said again loudly. "I demand, as is the right of accused nobility, trial by combat." The guard echoed him again, louder.

Sir Elinous waited for the excited murmuring of the crowd to settle down. "Thine wise Queen Aquella didst foresee such choices. 'Twas the same year that she didst write that those who hath engaged in armed rebellion hath already pursued trial by combat, and didst not deserve a second chance."

Franken slumped, the guard holding him having to adjust his footing to keep him upright. Mira chose to speak, though she was not part of this deliberation. "Sir Elinous, I would have the people hear all of the charges against this man while the wise Templars consider your reading of the laws laid down by the Codifier."

Sir Elinous saluted her and rode back towards the reviewing stand where the other Nordalians sat, while the guard shouted, "The Queen would like all charges read aloud before the Templars make their decision."

Sir Eleric started again. "In the second part you are accused of consorting with priests of Tasni the destroyer and Am'Ethaan Elf-killer. This association is estimated to have resulted in the deaths of over one thousand good men and women of this kingdom."

Mira held her breath while there was a quiet exchange between Franken and his guards, then one stood, "He says 'Aye, with exception.'" She let out her breath slowly. He was doing more to settle this kingdom as a prisoner than he had as a contender for the throne.

Sir Eleric moved on "In the fourth part, you are accused of sending assassins to kill

the rightful heir to the throne, while taking her place upon that throne without the consent of the Ducal Council.”

Once again Franken looked to have his life back. “Nay. Mira Celeria was never heir to the throne.” The guard shouted, “He says 'Nay'”. A murmur swept through the crowd that had known him as king.

“Very well, Templars of Dirge. How have you ruled on the point brought up by Sir Elinous?” Eleric asked.

Sir Alden stood. “Since the man has admitted his guilt to treason against his King, it is unlikely that this conclave would give him fair hearing on the other charges. He who breaks the most sacred vow to his liege is capable of anything. But since he freely admits to this heinous crime, and there is but one punishment, we rule that his trial is over. Return him to the dungeon to await the Queen's justice.”

They dragged Franken, now fighting furiously, back to the wooden jail. As he was being pushed into the cage, Count Gerad was being escorted out. Franken kicked at Gerad, screaming at the top of his lungs “You and your priests! It did not have to be this way cousin! You are my undoing!” Mira noticed the Templars on the level below her shift in interest at this outcry. True to his duties, once Franken was in the cage, and the door closed, the guard faced the crowd and bellowed, “He says his cousin was in league with evil priests.” The crowd started shouting. Mira was not surprised that they were angry. What the Nordalians had found in the dungeons was unspeakable. When they counted the bodies and parts of bodies on the three large altars, their estimate to her had been over two hundred innocents – many of them children of this crowd – had died on the altars of those priests.

Eleric waited patiently for people to settle down. Once the push against the guards at the edge of the crowd had settled, people quieted quickly. Gerad was already on his knees in front of the reviewing stand. “Gerad of SaltWood, formerly Count of SaltWood and briefly Duke of EastGuard. I will read each of the accusations made against you, and you will acknowledge them with 'aye' for the ones you freely admit to, 'nay' for ones you deny, and 'aye with exception' for ones which you admit to, but think there is something the conclave should consider. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” he said. One of his guards shouted, “He says he understands.”

“You are accused of High Treason. Of breaking your oath to the realm to swear fealty to a false King.”

“Aye with exception.” Gared replied. The guard of course echoed him.

“It has been brought to our attention that you are also accused of consorting with agents of the Dark One and possibly the Elf-Killer.”

“Nay.” Gared replied.

“Then let us present what is known of the first accusation. You will be given a chance to present your side of the story to the Templars.” He rode his horse up to the reviewing stand, stopping about ten feet out. “Gared of SaltWood did present himself

to the Duke of RangeWard as the representative of King Franken. This report he has previously denied. The current Duke of RangeWard, son and heir to the one I just mentioned, has stood on his accusation, and states that there were many in the Duke's court that day who heard the same. Kieran Chace, General of the Queen's Armies had a conversation with Gerad in RangeWard in which he said much the same thing. Gerad has stated previously that he was a representative of Franken in RangeWard, but under a different capacity. Let us here the accused's exception.”

Gared looked up at the Templars. “Worthy Sirs. I was sent to RangeWard by Franken to represent him. It was my intention to garner support for the view that a mageborn could not be Queen. After all, it went against the laws of our kingdom. While I was there, I learned that Franken did not trust me, and...”

He was interrupted by a fury of shouts and screams from the makeshift jail. In the end, the guards were forced to enter the jail and subdue Franken to make him quiet.

Gared continued “and he had placed a spy in my party. Fearing for my life, I did present myself as the representative of a King. As a count, I did not care what he called himself, but I could not offer counsel to my cousin if he did not trust me or I was dead.”

Sir Alden leaned over and had a quick discussion with the Templar next to him. “Yesterday you denied having represented yourself in such a manner. How do you account for this new tale being different?”

“I was afraid yesterday, too. Some in that room, like the sellsword, would have seen me dead.”

“And do you think that there is an excuse for treason? You could have asked the Duke for asylum, joining the side of the Queen.”

“But she was mageborn. I have known Franken all of my life, grew up with him. I would rather have seen him on the throne than a mageborn – at least his claim could be legitimized.”

The Templars huddled together for a few moments, then Sir Alden spoke again. “Your own words and your own weakness have condemned you. Fearing for one's life is no excuse to treason. Fearing for the lives of those in your County might have been. There were laws and tools in place to handle disputes between Dukes and the crown. Franken chose to destroy those laws and the Council that enforced them. Your assistance to him helped him cause unbelievable suffering. For that you must die. But we would hear more of this second accusation. If it is true, no Templar of any faith will attend your funeral, none will call the Gate Guarder to see you to the Hall of the Dented Shield.”

Gared stiffened. “Franken and I first found out about the Church of the Night in EastGuard. They were interested in us, and we were but children. I knew he was coming more and more under their sway, but did not know how bad it was until he killed his father. Then the priests took over completely. They...”

Someone crashed into Mira's back, knocking her from the throne. She heard Kieran

screaming above her, and heard what sounded like hundreds of chanting voices. Then she heard her people screaming. Kieran kissed the back of her head and muttered “stay down”, then got off of her. Her right arm hurt like it was broken, and she was very confused. “What is going on Kieran?”

“It seems that Tasni wasn't interested in having us hear this tale. Count Gared of SaltWood is a smoking pile, one of his guards is down too. There are over one hundred knights down there attempting to subdue the person – probably a priest – that launched fire up from the ground under Gerad's feet. When I saw him raise his hands, and the black and red under his robes, I thought he was aiming for you. I hope I didn't hurt you.”

“No, I'll be fine. But what about the people. Are they getting out of the way?”

He poked his head above the bench they hid behind. “Yes, and unless I miss my guess, there will be much less concern about your mageblood amongst the common folk. Now they have to worry about the likes of that in their midst.”

“Somehow I'm not relieved.”

“You should be. These knights will not stop until they have cleansed this city, but the people will still be more concerned about the boogeyman that might be next door than about what the Queen has done with her magik.”

The priest fought to the death, though they couldn't see anything but a circle of Nordalian and Dirgian Templars. Later they said that his medallion was a real one, made in the temple at Tasnor, the capitol city of Tasnami, center of the worshippers of Tasni. It had nearly killed the High Lord Protor when he destroyed it.

No one was certain how, but in the confusion Franken's throat was slit. By the time he was discovered it was too late to do anything for him.

Epilogue

Kieran Chace, king of Freeland Hold, Knight-Templar of Dirge, and soon-to-be father, prowled the corridors outside his wife's bedchamber nervously. As he paced back and forth, glancing occasionally at the large double doors behind which his wife and Queen labored, he looked not unlike any other nervous husband waiting for the birth of his first child.

For what seemed to him to be the hundredth time in the past few hours, he sat unceremoniously on one of the stone benches hidden in several of the alcoves that lined the hall leading to his wife's rooms. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and wrung his hands together anxiously, his eyes staring unfocused at the marble floor. His hair was unkempt, the result of nervous fingers running through the dark mass. It was usually tied back with an elaborate symbol of Dirge but had been pulled from its confinement hours ago and now hung in disarray about his head. His normally brilliant blue cloak hung listlessly from his shoulders, his tunic wrinkled and crumpled by the night's trials.

The shuffling sounds of a servant approaching reached his ears, which Kieran could

swear had improved over the course of the night. He raised his head and turned bloodshot eyes toward the servant, who stopped suddenly. The servant opened his mouth to speak, but stopped at the look on the king's face and instead bowed low, turned on his heel and shuffled away as quickly and quietly as possible.

A scream that could only have come from his wife cut through the corridor, echoing through his ears and cutting into his heart. He loved his wife dearly and though he knew the pain was necessary it nearly drove him wild knowing that he could do nothing to save her from this anguish. In one smooth motion he stood and raced to the door, listening intently for the sounds of a child's cry.

For long moments he heard nothing but the pounding of his own heart. He put his hands on the doors and looked upwards, praying fervently that both his wife and child would survive. It was not unheard of for a woman to die in childbirth, and the child along with her, but he had engaged the finest midwives and practitioners to assist her and all he could do now was ask the Dirge and Talimaara to be kind.

A soft cry interrupted his prayers and he felt his heart stop for the briefest of moments. He swallowed nervously, a look of apprehension on his face. The small cry grew to become an indignant scream. The scream every newborn makes when it is introduced to the world. Tears of joy fell unbidden from the king's face and he uttered a simple thank you to the gods for their gift.

He turned and wiped his eyes with the end of one long sleeve, trying to contain his joy, for he knew this night's waiting was not yet complete. Before he would see his first born child, his advisor and most trusted friend must complete his task.

King Kieran had been a commoner once, and was known throughout Freeland Hold for his fervent dedication to his kingdom as well as its laws. His piety was almost a thing of legend, and he had prayed almost daily throughout his wife's pregnancy for three things – that his wife survive, that the child be healthy and more importantly, that the child have a long and happy life.

The King turned from the door and dropped to his knees to pray one last time, asking the gods to grant him this bounty. He closed his eyes and repeated the mantra over and over, as if the gods would grant him this boon if for no other reason than to quiet his incessant praying. So intent on his prayer was the king that he did not hear the iron door open and close gently behind him.

Sir Eleric, the King's advisor and closest friend since before he was king, walked slowly toward the kneeling man. His hands were folded together in front of him, hidden within the long sleeves of his robes, and unlike his King, his blonde hair was tied back neatly. He moved around his friend and stopped, standing quietly in front of Kieran. He took a deep breath and then reached out and placed a hand on the king's shoulder.

Kieran looked up, startled, but did not stand. He could tell that Eleric found the situation a bit odd since the king knelt before no man. Eleric opened his mouth to speak, and closed it at the look of anticipation on the young king's face.

“Eleric?” the King asked hopefully. “Do I have a son?”

Eleric shook his head. “She is beautiful, your Majesty. A crown of dark hair and blue eyes that rival even her mother's. Even now they rest together.”

The king was only a little disappointed. While he had greatly desired a son as his first born, there was no law in Freeland Hold that prevented a female child from taking the throne.

“Sire. There is one more thing that is traditionally done when an heir is born...” Eleric started.

“That tradition died the day my wife sat the throne, my friend.” Kieran said rising. “It is no longer important to the Kingdom, and we will know one way or the other in good time.”

Eleric bent his head in respect, acknowledging the King's wishes. “I must pen the announcement of the child's birth. You have a name in mind...?” he prodded.

The King paused only briefly, then answered as if he had long ago made up his mind. “Lysandra.” he said firmly, before he turned on his heel and headed for the entrance to his wife's chamber.

Eleric watched as the king opened the doors and walked through, hearing the pride and joviality in the monarch's voice but his mind was elsewhere so he heard not the words that accompanied the occasion as the king laid his eyes upon his daughter for the first time.

“My Queen! You have borne an heir. And she is as beautiful as you.” he said happily. “May I hold her?”

“You may, my King. I had dreamt of this day since before we were wed. Today I have given you a child. But I admit I am more tired than I would be if I spent the day practicing my arts. Could you see to the nursemaids and the baby?”

“Of course my love.” he said, lifting the child gently. It was more difficult than he had expected, lifting a baby. It was all limp, and every part he didn't keep a hand under slipped. He finally got it cradled in his arms, causing the nurse nearby to relax, at least a little.

He looked down into the face of his first child. She was beautiful, even though her face was wrinkled like an old lady's. Her eyes were not open, but he remembered Eleric's description of them, and imagined them in this face, with the little shock of black hair above them. He looked long at the child and mused over the frailty of human-kind. “It is good that you were not here for the first part of this story, Lysandra. But let me tell you of the end...”

He remembered the day, several weeks after the castle was taken, when Sir Elinous had come to him diffidently. “Sir Kieran, we have found something in the dungeons that might interest you.” the knight had handed over a scroll in an ornate tube. Kieran opened it, pulled out the scroll, and started reading. “Tis the original transcript of Victoria Fullmouth's prophecies, Sir. Look to the end.” Sir Elinous had said.

Kieran had scanned to the end...

He brought his attention back to the present. “The end of the story is that you, and your descendants will rule wise and long. I know that, because it is the end of a prophecy that has otherwise come true. A lot has happened because that piece of the prophecy was forgotten. No one knew that Victoria Fullmouth ended her prophecy with 'the rightful heir will fight the spawn of evil so that her children and their children for generations to come can rule wisely.' Live, grow, and rule wisely, my Lysandra.” He handed the child to her nurse, kissed his sleeping wife, and went to find Eleric. Right at that moment he felt like reminiscing with his friend over a glass of wine in that stuffy old study his wife disliked so much.