

The Assassin Turning

THE KINGSEER PROPHECIES



DONALD AND LORI MACVITTIE

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For everyone who cried, “Tell us more about these FreeSwords!” after reading *Oathbound* and *Mageborn*, and the *Scorpions*, who have inspired more dramatic tales than we can count, now you know the rest of the story.

Prologue

In the time of Tremors, when the Age of Wonders was dying and the world of Nordalia was split asunder, the King of Nordalia sent word to the Duchy of Corrigar to send its sons to him to assist in fighting its enemies. Corrigar instead declared its independence, not wishing to see its sons slaughtered for a distant king who had cared little for their duchy until the wars began.

Knights of Nordal within Corrigar's borders were outraged as Duke Renthall Kaare declared himself King. They rode as one to Renthall's keep and demanded that the Duke return with them to face the King's justice. When Renthall would not give them entrance, they lay siege to the keep. For a week they raged against the walls and finally, on the eighth day, breached the walls. The men who were loyal to Renthall refused to swear fealty in the manner of a knight, claiming they were free men and would die for whom they chose rather than at the dictate of some far removed king. Each man in turn pulled a dagger and drew it down their forearm, offering Renthall a blood oath to serve him until the knights were driven from their lands and his position was secured. Renthall accepted their blood and sent them to meet the knights.

The swordsmen met the charge of the knights and fought them back long into the night, though they were outnumbered two to one. When the last knight stood alone in the courtyard Renthall appeared and bade him to return to his king and deliver a message. The knight agreed reluctantly and returned to his king with the message, "Corrigar's swords are free and will be bound by you no more."

It is said that King Renthall then chose five of the surviving men who had given their blood to secure his throne and gave them lands across

Corrigar, naming them Dukes of their lands. Five more asked for the honor of serving as the King's personal guard. The rest became as mercenaries, their purses laden with gold from those who heard the tale of how these blood bound men had held off the knights and desired such prowess to serve themselves.

In the fourth year after Renthall declared himself king he was visited by a prophetess of Shalitor, Victoria Kingseer.

There were great feasts in her honor and the King did commission the court bard to compose a ballad in her name. On Victoria Kingseer's seventh and final night, she prophesied much good news.

"Your lands shall prosper under the care of your issue for many centuries. Trade will flow abundant between your kingdom and the whole of Nordalia, and your people shall be well content."

There was much cheering and toasting, but the Seeress was not finished. She turned to the king and finished her prophesying with dire news.

"When those who are not knights become like knights, rebellion is at hand. Those who serve the night shall desire unrest and a free sword will quench that thirst. The rightful king shall be put to the sword and a killer of men will sit your throne. Much blood will be shed while he sits your throne."

After hearing this pronouncement it is said that the king and his dukes spent much time in counsel and that when the dukes emerged, it was once again with blood on their arms. Each man had made cross cuts on the ends of their oath cuts; one for the king and one for themselves. The King's guard, seeing this, made the same marks, spilling their blood in the court and giving the King their blood oaths once more.

It is written that as King Renthall aged he looked upon his blood bound men with suspicion. It is also written that the King grew quite mad, seeing treason where there was none and suspecting the free swords at every turn. It is whispered even today that King Renthall heard the echoes of the Kingseer's prophecy resounding in his mind and that it was the words of the seeress that drove him to slaughter every man in the King's Court with an oath cut on his arm before he threw himself on his sword to escape the woman's words.

The free swords who came to bury their own had heard of the prophetess' words, and sat long with Renthall's son to devise some way to keep the prophecy at bay. When they departed the King's Court they were known as the Brotherhood with only one unbreakable tenet: they would never swear fealty in the manner of a knight to any king.

Though centuries have passed, the Corrigarian Free Swords still do not swear fealty to their king. They have continued their tradition of blood oaths to those they serve, but no free sword has given their blood to the king since the day of King Renthall's slaughter.

Chapter 1

Grendelak Mishtar, sworn member of the FreeSword brotherhood, bolted awake. His hand was already reaching for the dagger he always kept under his pillow even as he held his breath and concentrated on listening. He forced himself to ignore the sound of his heart pounding in his ears and tried to determine what had awakened him. Minutes passed and still he heard nothing but the snoring of someone in the next room. He relaxed, his hand shaking, and pursed his lips in disgust at his unease. *A dream, a simple, damned dream.* He shook his head sharply, trying to clear the whispering remnants of the dream that remained; the pure, clear voice that had haunted him for days.

Damn that minstrel! He thought as he swung his legs over the edge of the bed and put his feet silently on the floor. Standing, Grendelak quietly moved to the small window where the burgeoning dawn shed just enough light for him to see vague shapes in the distance. The tops of the buildings looking like nothing more than dark shadows in the pre-dawn light as he stared out over the alley.

“Damn you,” he whispered out over the city, as though the wind might carry his words to wherever she might be. She was beautiful, this unnamed minstrel, and she had sung songs and told tales of good men being dragged down by long association with evil, sent to eternal punishment for doing the will of one who was impure, often by working for one who followed Tasni Deathwalker. She had been looking his way the entire time she performed and his recollection had her green eyes boring into him. The beauty of her voice had held him captive even as he despised the subject of her songs. What she sang of was not him. He worked an honorable contract for an honorable man. That he sometimes had to murder was

irrelevant. No matter how vehemently he argued with himself he could not get her or her tales out of his head.

Perhaps she had been as taken with him as she had appeared to be. Grendelak knew he was not the most handsome of men. In fact, many women had shied away from him in the past because of his apparent Doornian blood. His skin was darker than most men outside of Kantor-Doorne, but his shoulder length brown hair and eyes would have made him an anomaly in that nomadic society. He wasn't particularly tall, nor was he too short. He was fairly average as far as he could tell and no one had ever told him any different. He had no recollection of his parents and the Brotherhood didn't question ones heritage, so he'd never thought much about it. Some women found him intriguing and there'd always been enough of them interested in him that Grendelak rarely thought about his appearance unless he was forced. He kept his hair fairly short to keep it from blowing about in his somewhat clean-shaven face. And there was the fact that something about a FreeSword often made women look twice at anyone wearing the Oath cuts of the Brotherhood. *She might have just been interested in a FreeSword and that's where the attention came from.* He told himself for the hundredth time.

Grendelak stood looking out over Peregrine-by-the-Egress, unwilling to return to bed and fall back into his dreams where he might be taunted again by the minstrel's words. He was certain that she hadn't purposefully planted the doubt he had been feeling since he had heard her sing in the Ale Wife, but then again it seemed as though she'd been speaking directly to him. As if she *knew*.

For five years Grendelak had been able to push the doubt away. For five years he'd been able to convince himself that what he'd been doing was right. For five years he'd been loyal to his contracts and had yet to fail in fulfilling a single one.

For five years he'd been killing men for money.

Grendelak grimaced at the way it sounded when he put it like that. Five years, twenty deaths. Their names were not important, but he knew most of their stations. Nobles. Master Traders. Priests. Even a mageborn or two. Though Grendelak's victims spanned many walks of life, all had plotted against his employer's life. Yet all had died leaving families and friends to grieve. All had been good men in one or more ways. The Count of Pottsmount was, by all accounts, a good and just ruler of his county. Yet he had plotted against Grendelak's employer and now his county was ruled by one not so even handed as the old Count. But Grendelak had fulfilled his contract.

At least Tibor had told him that they plotted. More than once Grendelak had wondered whether or not Tibor was telling him the truth. Lately it

seemed Grendelak's conscience was gnawing at him, forcing him to think hard about the life he'd chosen to lead and the man he chose to work for.

He was a Corrigarian FreeSword. Among the finest of all swordsmen in the world, their services did not come cheap. They were fiercely loyal and could be trusted implicitly by those who hired them. No one doubted that once a FreeSword made the oath cut along his forearm that he would complete his contract or die trying. FreeSwords were touchy about the honor of their brotherhood and failure to complete a contract could result in the loss of their association or worse. Grendelak physically shivered at the thought of such a loss. To break with the FreeSwords was the most horrendous thing he could think of happening. They were his brothers, his family—the only family he had other than Tibor. They were the only thing that mattered to him in the whole of Nordalia. His sense of honor would not allow him to even consider failing to complete his contract. He took the words FreeSwords often spoke to one another in parting very seriously, for it was a part of him, heart and soul.

Better to die than fail.

And he had not failed. Not once in five years had he failed Tibor or his oaths. Grendelak considered for a moment the FreeSword that perpetually lived at the Dancing Sword in the capital city of Corrigar and birthplace of the Brotherhood, Corrigan. He sat alone drinking ale long into the night for none would associate with him, The man never spoke, but the haunted look in his eyes told Grendelak, and every other FreeSword that saw him, that he had failed. The man had never held a contract, and never came to FreeSword hall to ask about unassigned work. Grendelak closed his eyes and held his breath. He counted to ten before he slowly let it out; trying to settle the queasy feeling in the pit of his stomach that always arose when he thought of failing a contract.

“Damn you!” he swore loudly this time, clenching his fist and shaking it at the city. Abruptly he turned and began to dress, determined to ignore the echoes of the minstrel's voice that still taunted him.

Fully dressed, he sat on the edge of his bed and stared out the small window until dawn broke, the light of day finally chasing away the last echoes of the song that teased at the edge of his mind.

He gathered his belongings and slammed the door harder than necessary as he left. He had at least two full days to travel before he reached Salena, where he would report back to Tibor and take his leave of the man for the last time. Two days in which to consider his future and, perhaps, his past as well.

Three days later Grendelak stopped his mount, a tall Doornian bred black gelding, in front of the small road that led to Tibor's manse. It had

taken longer than he'd expected mostly because he hadn't truly been in a hurry. The Doornian bred war-horse could easily have taken Grendelak from Peregrine-by-the-Egress to Salena in a day and a half if pushed, but Grendelak had needed time to think.

He'd decided that he would not take another contract with Tibor. That had been easy. After five years of working for the same man Grendelak was more than ready to go home. It was not the killing that had made that decision easy. The unease he felt at the tasks Tibor assigned him had lessened with time. He had no regrets. He'd made his oath cuts and sworn to protect Tibor and as far as he knew that is exactly what he'd done. That he was proactive instead of reactive in the protection of his employer changed nothing. Most Swords killed for their employer during the course of their contracts, it was nothing more than any other Brother had done.

But he had needed the extra time to clear his head. Five years of the same work had grown on him. He'd become accustomed to certain aspects of his life, like having servants and money, and knowing that tomorrow he'd be doing much the same thing as today. He had needed time to steel his will against his own weakness, all the better to stand and tell his friend "Enough. I will not kill for you any more."

It was simply the time away from home, Grendelak told himself, that made him desire to return. He hadn't seen his Brothers in all the time he'd been contracted to Tibor and the rumors flying from Corrigan regarding the king were causing quite a bit of stir even north of the Egress in Old Nordalia.

Grendelak's face took on a scowl as he heard the minstrel's words in the back of his mind. She was singing *to* him, in that beautiful voice, part of the Cyclical of Quellus . . . *Quellus quailed afore Nordal, sweat-soaked with fright, for only the God and he knew, that Quellus had not been right . . .*

"I have done *nothing* wrong," he growled under his breath before kicking the sides of his mount and riding toward the manor house, suddenly eager to be done with Tibor and on his way home.

Grendelak dismounted easily, his dust covered boots making almost no noise as they hit the ground. He tossed the reins to the boy who'd come running from the stables the moment he'd heard Grendelak approach. The boy looked up expectantly, his hand starting to extend for payment, but just as quickly looked away after seeing the dark look on Grendelak's face and instead quickly led the horse to the stables.

Grendelak walked quickly through the manse to the sitting room in which a servant had told him he could find Tibor. The servants here treated Grendelak as an almost invisible member of the household, having grown accustomed to his comings and goings through the years. They ignored him and he, for the most part, ignored them. Having grown up without

such luxuries he'd at first been impressed by them. But the tasks he had undertaken for Tibor had required that he learn to move in such circles and he'd quickly lost his boyish awe of such displays of wealth. He'd learned to act as though he'd always had others to serve him.

He stopped outside the sitting room and knocked sharply on the door, waiting for Tibor to bid him enter. When he heard Tibor's voice call out he entered the well appointed room. The gray-haired man was seated by the fireplace, a ledger book on his lap, and several slips of paper stacked on the reading table next to him. Grendelak found a chair near Tibor and sat down easily. When Tibor gestured at a wine glass Grendelak picked up the glass and let a servant rush forward to fill it.

Grendelak held the glass delicately, swirling it around and letting the Amorician Red breathe while watching Tibor dismiss the servant with a simple flick of his wrist. When the door closed behind the retreating servant Tibor closed the ledger and turned to Grendelak with an expectant look on his face. When Grendelak did not deign to answer, Tibor arched an eyebrow and asked, "Well?"

Grendelak lifted the glass to his lips and drank deeply before replying. That Tibor even doubted him raised his ire a bit. After five years, the man should trust him more. He'd never failed before, why would Tibor be concerned that this time had been any different?

"Count Graydon will no longer be a threat to you and yours," Grendelak finally replied.

Tibor visibly relaxed at Grendelak's words and smiled even as he reached down and untied a small leather pouch from his belt. Grendelak easily caught the bag as Tibor tossed it casually at him. He sat staring at it with an almost horrified look on his face, all his misgivings had come back to him the moment that pouch touched his hand.

"You no longer wish to be paid for your services, Grendelak?" Tibor asked conversationally, his eyes glancing at the other man's face as he sipped his wine.

Grendelak tore his eyes from the bag and looked hard at Tibor. "I am paid to be employed by you, not for the specific services I render during my employment."

Tibor chuckled. "Of course, of course. How could I forget? You've been reminding me of that for five years now. But you have me hold your pay until you return each time, so it feels as if you are being paid by the task."

When Grendelak did not reply, Tibor cleared his throat and sat forward. "Your contract is ended as of yesterday, Grendelak. You are, of course, very valuable to me at this point. It would be difficult to replace someone with . . . your special skills. Would you care to make yet another oath cut for your dear friend, Tibor?"

Grendelak looked away from the man, turning his gaze back to the pouch in his hand. The whispering voice in the back of his head whisked away the thought that if he could do this but one more year he'd have enough gold to return home and not take another contract for at least a few years. He shook his head slowly before he met Tibor's gaze again. "No, Tibor. I desire to go home. It has been long since I stood in FreeSword Hall and suffered the Ceremony of Vowing."

Tibor sighed sadly. "I had thought as much. But I had to try, you understand."

Grendelak nodded wordlessly as he waited for Tibor to continue. After all this time, Grendelak knew the man well enough to know that he had more to say.

"I would ask one more boon of you, if I could."

Grendelak's teeth were clenched together against the voice that grew louder and louder in his mind so he merely grunted his assent.

Tibor looked askance at Grendelak, knowing something was obviously distracting the man. "If you would rather we discuss this later we can, Grendelak. You have ridden long to return to Old Nordalia, and obviously have something on your mind."

"No, let us speak now." Grendelak blurted out as he suddenly stood and moved to stand across the room, facing one of the walls that were covered with shelves and books. "It is only the rumors of problems in Corrigan that distract me. Please, continue on . . . what would you ask of me?"

"Very well, then. There is a man—", he began.

"No."

The surprise on Tibor's face was evident. "No? You haven't even heard what I have to say."

"It involves a man and a threat. I am no longer in your employ, it is not my concern."

Tibor raised a hand to his chest and took on an injured look. "Grendelak. I had thought that after so many years I was more than just a contract to you. I have considered you a friend these long years. I have opened my home to you, treated you like a favored son." Tibor stood and walked to where Grendelak stood and placed a hand on Grendelak's shoulder. "I would surely work to protect *you* with or without a contract."

Grendelak closed his eyes tightly for a moment, willing the voice to silence. Tibor was right. The older man had treated Grendelak like his own son and taught him much of what he needed to know to complete his tasks. Grendelak suddenly felt as he had five years ago when Tibor had given him the very first name that set him down the path of killing men to protect Tibor and Tibor's increasingly dubious honor. At that time, Tibor had cajoled him and reminded him of his oaths.

"I . . . can't," Grendelak said hesitantly, shrugging off Tibor's hand and returning to his chair.

Tibor threw his hands up in the air. "Well, I suppose that perhaps growing up with no family you don't understand the importance of such things. Here in the north we value our family and friends more than paper and money, and we do not let things such as contracts bind us to one another. My friendship with you did not end simply because your contract ended, Grendelak. I am sorry to see that you feel differently." Tibor turned to face the wall, hiding his face from Grendelak. "Go then, Grendelak. We are not likely to meet again, certainly not if Duke Kelling of Amorice has his way!"

Grendelak shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He could hear the fear in Tibor's voice and it pulled at his conscience. While he certainly owed Tibor nothing more according to the terms of his contract, the man had a point. Tibor was more than just a contract. They had grown to be friends. He had grown up under the man's tutelage, and been well paid for it. Tibor had even given him the Doornian mount he now rode as a gift. It *was* just one more time, then he could go home and that damn voice would stop bothering him.

"Tibor, tell me what Duke Kelling is plotting and why."

Tibor walked to the desk and picked up a piece of parchment, waving it dramatically in the air. "It's all in here, Grendelak. Duke Kelling is, right now, on his way to do me in. He claims I am a follower of . . . the Dark One and that he has proof!" Tibor's voice wavered as he let the parchment fall to the floor. "Do you know what they do to followers of *him* in Radael, Grendelak? Do you?"

Grendelak nodded. "I know. I have seen." And he had. Many times. Freedom's Guard, the knights of Radael, needed little provocation, and little proof, to act. They were zealous in their goals of keeping order in Radael and were known to condemn entire families solely on the suspicion that they worked for or forwarded the cause of Tasni Deathwalker. It would not go well for Tibor if this Duke Kelling had even the slightest evidence and it might not matter if it were false or not. "Have you offended the Duke somehow?"

Tibor shook his head vehemently. "Not that I know of. Of course you know how it is for us merchants. Someone feels like they've been slighted, or some Duke realizes that a merchant works hard and gets ahead, and the next thing you know you've been accused of some heinous crime. The trader's guilds cannot protect us from every noble who gets his hackles up because he made a bad deal, though they do try."

Grendelak considered Tibor's words for a long moment before he finally replied, "Yes. I understand. Alright Tibor, this one last task. For our friendship."

Tibor exhaled the breath he'd been holding. "Oh, thank you Grendelak. I knew I could count on you." The older man almost ran to his desk and rummaged through a drawer for a moment. When he held his hand up there was another pouch dangling from it. As Tibor took a step toward Grendelak, Grendelak stood up, backing away from Tibor and holding out his hand as if to ward the older man off.

"Take this."

"No, Tibor. I do not do this for gold. I do this for our friendship."

"I am not giving you this because you have agreed to take care of Duke Kelling for me. I am giving you this as a parting gift. As a token of my deep appreciation for your service these past five years and for keeping this old man company many a long night."

As Tibor saw the reluctance draining away from Grendelak's face he rushed on, "Have I ever paid you in advance before, Grendelak?"

"No, but . . ."

"And I do not owe you any money from our contract. I am paid in full. This is not payment for your task, this is a gift. Take it whether you are successful or not. I was planning on giving it to you regardless of your decision."

Grendelak's eyes fell on the pouch. He expertly eyed its size and estimated the amount of gold within its leather confines. His mind told him that it was as much as he might receive for a year's service; enough to make him comfortable when he finally returned to Corrigan. As he tentatively reached for the bag, Tibor smiled and grabbed the outstretched hand with one of his own and firmly placed the bag in Grendelak's hand.

Tibor laughed then and slapped Grendelak's shoulder before pulling away. "Well then, let me tell you about Duke Kelling that you might know him when you find him. He is traveling now and ought to arrive in Corrigan about the same time you will, assuming you're leaving in the next day or so . . ."

Grendelak pulled up outside the small inn The Brotherhood kept outside of Corrigan. At least it had been outside of Corrigan when last he visited it. He recalled it as a building at a crossroads, many miles from the edge of the city. Now he found it nestled in amongst a throng of other buildings, no longer a quiet retreat. It was tradition that a Brother stop at The Brotherhood Wayside on his way into town so that word could spread that he was back from his contract and open to new ones. He did not know how long this particular tradition had been practiced, but he had been taught that he should stop here.

This time he was stopping for reasons other than just simple tradition. After five years away, and with ugly rumors spreading about the King, he

wanted news before he entered the walls of the inner city. He needed to know what was going on in Corrigan and whether his normal haunts were still safe.

He tied his horse to the rail outside the inn and walked through the front door to the sitting room that functioned as a reception area. There, as always, was a desk with a burly man behind it, and three FreeSwords lounging about playing cards. FreeSwords not on contract were required to spend some of their time in the sitting room at the Wayside to discourage enemies from trying to harm one of the brethren. It was inevitable that a Brother on contract made enemies. Sometimes those enemies, even kings, tried to exact their vengeance on The Brotherhood as a whole. So the FreeSwords stayed on their guard.

Grendelak nodded to one of the men playing cards, the one with the most Oath cuts, while trying to put a name to his face. "Well met, brother. May your contract be too glorious or peaceful, as your desires dictate."

The man returned Grendelak's gesture congenially. "And yours, Grendelak. My desires dictate a contract guiding an old maid to her husband's grave and back each day for the rest of her life."

One of the other men smiled. "Aye, Jannous, and belike yer luck that the maid has enemies that wield poison!" All of them laughed at the remark and the shared joke made Grendelak feel at home. FreeSwords had a way of making each and every contract sound either glamorous and heroic or dull and boring. This is the Brotherhood he joined, not one that crept around, murdering a man's enemies.

"So . . . Jannous, tell me of Corrigan. It has been five long years, and while I don't miss beggar's wharf, I do thirst for news," Grendelak entreated, remembering that he had one more job to do before he was free.

"And I thirst for ale, Grendelak! Perhaps we could slake our thirsts together?" Jannous replied as he stood up, looking expectantly toward the bar.

Suddenly Grendelak remembered this man. Jannous the Besotted they used to call him. His Inductor had used Jannous as an example of the type of FreeSword that Grendelak should not become. Jannous fulfilled his contracts, and sought out new contracts, but the moment his contract was done, the man dove head first into a mug of ale and did not swim out until his coin was gone. He was just the type of person to give Grendelak information: one that wouldn't hesitate to talk, if talk was filling his mug.

"Certainly, my friend. It has been long since we've spoken. I would find out about your Contracts since I left Corrigan. You look hale enough, and your clothes are not threadbare, so there must be some fine tales there!"

Jannous smiled. "That there are Grendelak, that there are. And you? I saw you tie up a Doornian Stallion out front. That's a sign that you have tales to tell also. You did not pick that up for a five-pence, for certain."

Grendelak suddenly realized something he had completely missed in his rush to get home. All of the other FreeSwords that were in town would want to hear of his exploits, but he could not possibly tell tales of shooting knights with his crossbow while they sat at dinner or killing merchants in their sleep. He would have to be very careful how much he said, and how he said it. He had done nothing wrong, but still, it felt . . . unclean compared to most contracts. For now he smiled and nodded. "Aye, I've had a grand adventure or two. Near filled an arm with oath-cuts, and fulfilled them all. If I can't find a tale in all of that, then a poor FreeSword I am!"

Jannous laughed, and the two headed toward the bar. "Have one of the boys get my horse and stable her, and get me a room for the evening!" Grendelak shouted over his shoulder to the innkeeper. The man nodded as Grendelak and Jannous stepped through the doorway into the tavern.

They took a seat at the low bar that covered the left wall and the barman, a retired FreeSword with one arm, looked up. "What can I get for you?" he asked with a snarl. Grendelak took pity on him. The Brotherhood took care of its own if they were harmed in the course of a contract, but it must shame him to have to attend to his Brothers. Pondering, Grendelak decided he would continue to work if it was only an arm he lost. "Amorician Red. Chilled," he told the man.

Jannous raised an eyebrow. "Developed a taste for the rarities, did you? You must have had some enriching adventures to drink Red." He looked to the barman. "Get me my usual, One Arm, and be quick about it," he barked dismissively.

"Yes, I developed a taste for Red while I was in Custos Antiquum two years ago. They drink enough of it there to put the entire Royal Guard on a sickbed." Grendelak observed lightly.

"Not any more. The entire Royal Guard includes half of Corrigan these days. We're about the only force in the entire capital that hasn't been recruited or pressed into service." Jannous' voice grew bitter as he continued. "My brother and his oldest are at the northern border, playing border guard against the bloody Knight-Watchers. If it comes to war, I don't think a shopkeep and his brat are going to stop even one Knight-Watcher and his Crier, let alone an entire army of them."

Grendelak smiled slightly. This conversation was going exactly where he needed it to and he hadn't even needed to prompt the man. "Come now, Jannous. It has been centuries since we saw outright war with Passrock. Their Knights will stay put as long as we do. And the King must know that we have little that could stop the Knights if they chose to invade."

“Just the same,” Jannous paused to wipe his mouth, “I’m drinking less, and trying to send him the money to buy their way out of the army. He’s got a wife and other kids to feed, soldiering just isn’t right for him.”

“Has it gotten so expensive to buy your term of service that a single FreeSword contract can’t pay for it and more?” Grendelak asked incredulously.

“Far and away my friend, far and away. One man I was speaking with spent nearly six hundred gold Trios to buy his way out. I’ve got to send them double that. I’m taking whatever short-term contracts come along, trying to do it quickly.”

Grendelak shot a look of surprise at the other man. Short-term contracts were avoided by most FreeSwords. The Brothers were renowned for their loyalty and expected some level of fidelity from their employers. Short-term contracts usually entailed bloody and dangerous work. While they paid well, short term contracts could end your career and your employer would treat you like any other sell-sword rather than give you the respect a member of the Brotherhood deserved. “I’m certain you’ll save it up quickly that way, just be careful. Short-terms can be deadly, and your brother won’t benefit much from your death.”

“Yes, I know. I’m nearly there though. He could send the boy away, but the boy won’t go without him. Damn sentimental brats. I’d box his ears and remind him that someone has to tend the family, were I Jackous.”

Grendelak considered the situation for a moment. “What are all these soldiers the King is raising doing? It is not as if we’re at war with anyone. Ismaack Doorne is silent as ever and Passrock is as peaceful as ever. Neither of them are a problem unless we invade. Freeland Hold would be the best of our neighbors if we would stop the “Running of the Thieves” each year and just kill the prisoners instead of chase them over the Hold’s borders.”

Jannous looked around and then lowered his voice to nearly a whisper, dropping into the brogue of his home kingdom. “Me? I be thinking we’re to invade one of ’em. The King claims he needs them for protection from “those who disrupt the King’s business”, but I be thinking he has other plans, meself. That’s why I’m in such a hurry to ransom my brother and his brat. Sooner home, longer alive, I say.”

Grendelak arched an eyebrow. “That’s an awful big step for a little country that survives by trading with everyone around them and makes no war-like moves,” he said thoughtfully. “If it were true, it would be the end of us all. What makes you believe such a thing, Jannous? Is your brother in training for war?”

“Naught like that. There have been quite a few delegations. Delegations with fine Knights and famous nobles. The kind of Delegations you send when you’re conducting peace negotiations. From all over. Freeland Hold,

Amorice, Kantor Doorne, even as far away as Radael. None from Passrock, and none from Ismack Doorne though.” Jannous said conspiratorially.

Grendelak’s mind was whirling. Truly Nindel the Trickster smiled on him this day, for he could now turn the conversation to his other point of interest. “It makes sense that Ismack Doorne would not send a delegation of any kind. A more secretive and murderous kingdom I have never seen. I don’t believe they’ve ever sent emissaries to any kingdom, and they turn ours back at the border with a warning about traveling on their lands. But tell me of these other delegations. Who are the nobles? I might know some of their names from my travels.”

Jannous looked meaningfully into his empty mug, then back up a Grendelak.

Grendelak very much wanted him to keep talking. Now was definitely not the time for him to stop, not with the tantalizing bits of information the other man had been tossing out. “Barkeep!” he barked, “Another of whatever my friend Jannous is having, and another Amorician Red for me!”

Jannous smiled. “I thank you, Grendelak. As to the delegations . . . let me think . . .”

The barkeep set down their drinks. “That’s one gold, two silver, Brother,” he said. Grendelak dug the money out of his pouch and wondered why he paid half a gold a glass for wine.

Jannous picked up his mug and drank deeply before setting it down and grinning appreciatively. At Grendelak’s almost impatient look he continued his thoughts. “Oh yes, the Nobles. It was Duke Harren of GrovesHold from Freeland Hold, Count Bannis of Pourmount from Radael, Sihidi Baretoll from Kantor-Doorne, and just yesterday a Duke Kellering of Allston from Amorice arrived. They say he stood at the castle during the retaking of Crosswinds, arm-in-arm with The Scorpions. I for one don’t believe it, The Scorpions don’t tolerate outsiders much better than Ismaack-Doorne.”

“So. I know Count Bannis. I was with him at Stirelling when the Tasnians nearly over-ran it three years ago. It was a hard fight, with many a good man left bloodied on the field. Rumors were that a group of Nordalians with a FreeSword in their midst broke the charge, and that it broke them to do so. I heard from one Nordalian Knight that no one in that unit survived. I have heard of Duke Kellering as well. If I recall correctly, he’s not a very nice man.” Grendelak tried to pry for information.

“Oh no, I hear completely differently. I heard that he champions lost or nearly impossible causes, with the blessing of the King of Amorice, and that he travels the world bringing hope and justice where there is none. He might just as bloody well be a Knight Of Justice what with all the tales

told about him.” Jannous looked at Grendelak closely. “You must be remembering someone else.”

“Yes, I must be,” Grendelak replied, trying to keep the troubled feeling that had arisen with Jannous’ words from showing on his face. He quickly tried to move Jannous off Duke Kellering and onto something else. “I’ve never heard of this Sihid Baretoll. What of him?”

“He’s a tough one. Stood by the king when he was reuniting the tribes of Kantor Doorne. One of the king’s foremost warriors and diplomats.” Jannous shook a finger in Grendelak’s direction. “See what I mean? These men aren’t here on business. They’re warriors, soldiers, and peacemakers. I think the King is getting tacit approval from other Kings to start a war, though only Dirge the Brawler would know why.”

Grendelak smiled at the man’s reference to Dirge, god of alcohol, gambling, and battle lust. “Sounds like you’ve got it right enough, my friend. You are right to be afraid for you brother. Where might I look up these high-and-mighty personages?”

Jannous winked at him. “Going to see if there might be Contracts, are you? Well, these are the men that would value a FreeSword over a mercenary, that’s for sure. They’re staying and the Bed and Bottle, about four blocks down from The Hall of FreeSwords.”

Grendelak stood up to leave, dropping a silver piece on the bar for the one-armed barkeep. “It was fine seeing you again Jannous, and I intend to stay in Corrigan for a while. Perhaps we should get together again at another time. For now, I need to wash up and rest before entering the city.”

Jannous lifted his mug. “And thank you for the ale and the talk, Grendelak. You are truly a Brother. If you take the Ceremony of Vowing again while you are here, I will stand for you.”

Grendelak was taken aback by such a grand offer from someone who hardly knew him. Grendelak’s deeds could reflect upon those who stood for him. Normally Grendelak would reserve that honor for those closest to him, but he had no way of knowing who was here in Corrigan and who wasn’t, so he would be polite. “How very kind of you, Jannous. Thank you truly. I shall consider it when I know whether I will take the Ceremony again.”

“You are more than welcome, and you will take the Ceremony again,” Jannous replied with a note of certainty in his voice. “All of us do now, on as regular a basis as our contracts allow. There are . . . pressures on the Brotherhood right now that make our bond more important than ever. You will be asked about it if you do not ask.”

“Pressures in the form of a King? Or other pressures?” Grendelak asked quietly.

“Both. There are those who see the King as a mad puppet dancing on a hand none of us can see. They would gain some loyalty with us, with the army, with the priests, and then . . . take action. Meanwhile the King is looking for militant groups that are not already conscripted to fend off any bold enough to try and attack him. Our oaths require neutrality. The people live well and our contracts are not hampered, so we retake the Ceremony at least once a year to remind ourselves that none of this is our affair.”

“Hmm . . . I don’t like the situation, but it makes sense that the Brothers would make such a decision. I will of course reconsider my position. Good eve to you, Jannous,” Grendelak said with a nod of his head.

Jannous lifted his mug again in toast. “And good eve to you, Brother.”

Grendelak found his room easily enough and was soon lying in bed. He tossed and turned for a while before he gave up and stared at the ceiling. All night he laid awake, his mind spinning with thoughts of the situation in Corrigan, the Brotherhood, Duke Kellering, opposing factions, and a mad King. All made that much more vexing by the constant backdrop of a beautiful skald’s voice singing the Cyclical of Quellus.

Chapter 2

The next morning Grendelak woke early and set out on the road to the inner city. This was to be his homecoming. Today he would finally walk back into Corrigan not a homeless beggar child, not an unblooded FreeSword, but a man of the world. A man with money in his pouch and a sword at his belt. He was both hesitant and excited. Would any of his friends from his first few months as a FreeSword be in town? Would Beggar's Wharf, his haunt before that fateful day when he tried to steal from a FreeSword, still be a haven for him? Would anyone there even recognize the man that rode a Kantor Doornian warhorse?

He pulled his mind away from his musings and tried to pay attention to the road. It was much busier than he remembered it and buildings had grown up at nearly every corner. Some of the buildings were fine mansions, set back from the road and well cared for. Grendelak knew those were likely the town residences of outlying Dukes and Barons. He'd seen the same type of manses in his travels and they were almost always used by nobles when visiting larger cities. Silentia Ens, with its nobles all living in the capital city of Il'Negra year round, had been the exception. But only a few of these homes were of the quality demanded by nobility; most were poorly constructed and slovenly, as if the growth had occurred in a sudden rush or the people living in them just didn't care.

He rode through one region of the city that clearly housed brothels, completely empty by the light of the morning. Grendelak chuckled at the sight. Apparently the priests of Nordal had won the argument on the subject of brothels and they had been moved out here, so as not to soil the inner city. Grendelak found the argument amusing since it wasn't the

existence of brothels that had so outraged the Nordalians, but that visitors to their temple might have to walk past them.

Finally, he reached the West Gate, one of several gates in the wall surrounding the inner city of Corrigan. The wall that had stood since the second Triotonic War, built to protect the people of Corrigan from marauding armies and raids by brigands. He'd long since entered and exited the city through every gate in the wall, but this gate he knew better than most. He had played under this gate as a homeless waif and here, at least, not much had changed.

Guards wearing the Green and White of Corrigan, the gold trim on their cloaks proving that they were not just any guards but part of the Royal Guardsmen, stood at the gate making each individual wishing to enter state their name and business. Important personages were rushed through with a little exchange of money while all others waited in line. Grendelak had no desire to wait in a line while the day got warmer. This early in spring the mornings were nice, even cool, but soon the sun would rise high enough to make the guards remove their cloaks, and the line to move to the shade of the wall. Just this once, he would be 'important'. He waved to the nearest unoccupied guard.

"Yes sir, how can I help you?" the man asked as he walked up to Grendelak's horse.

"I have important business in the city and cannot be held up in this line, my good man. Is it still customary for donations to the old soldier's home to grant one a speedy entrance?" Grendelak inquired politely.

"It is, fine sir. And we old soldiers would thank you for it greatly," the man replied with a smile.

Grendelak handed the guard five gold Trios. "I am Grendelak Mishtar of the FreeSword Brotherhood, returning from Contract to see my brothers," he stated boldly.

"That is just fine sir, just fine. I'm certain your Brothers have missed you. Please pass through the gate." The guard sketched a bow at Grendelak's horse and waved him through.

The other guards looked up from asking people the mandatory questions and then glanced with envy at the guard waving him through. Grendelak smiled to himself. Guards everywhere could be bought. While anywhere else he would see this fact as a possible mode of entry to a place he didn't belong, in Corrigan he found it to be endearing. Perhaps it was the manner in which the guards here acted, genuinely thankful for the gold. In some cities the guards acted as though it was their right to be bought and some even named their price.

He led his horse through the gate, and entered the throng of the capital. It was more crowded than he remembered, with people crowding

the small space between buildings, and street vendors hawking their wares between the bustling citizens. And there were more guards than he recalled. Every tenth person or so wore the Green and White and many of them sauntered about like they owned the place. Few people rode horses, but that was nothing new. Only soldiers and travelers were allowed to ride their mounts through the city under normal circumstances.

He wended his way through familiar streets to the Hall of FreeSwords. Even now, five years later, the building took his breath away. Five full stories tall, and covering nearly two full acres, and that just The Hall itself. Behind it there were stables, an armory, training grounds, a temple, and several other lesser outbuildings. He stopped and just took a moment to stand and admire the rising columns and soaring Tower of The Watch. This was home to him, and it affected him in a way that most were only affected by gods. He inhaled deeply, enjoying the smell of the city, its slightly tangy air and the scent of manure mixing with the aroma of some rich food cooking somewhere nearby. The sounds of Inductees being put through their paces wafted over the outer wall of The Hall and mixed with the noise of the busy city street. He dropped his horse's rein and stepped on it once to tell his mount to stay, then started up the marble steps leading to The Hall.

And then he saw her. His skald. The woman that had haunted his dreams and jarred his conscience. Standing there on the steps, her green eyes boring into him, looking as though she had been waiting for him.

In that split second, he had time to realize that she was a very beautiful woman. Most of her long blonde curls hung freely with only a few pieces held back by something Grendelak couldn't readily identify. With bright green eyes, she was still young enough to have the beauty of youth, yet her eyes showed how truly old she was. The dress she was wearing showed just enough leg to prove that they were shapely, but not so much as to be assailed as a harridan. Even as he dreaded speaking to her, his steps turned slightly and he went to her side.

"Good day, lady. Don't I know you?" he asked as he looked down at her. He recalled that she had appeared tiny next to most of the men in the inn but thought it was just that—she had been surrounded by men larger than even he. But now, looking down at her, he realized that she was far smaller than he recalled; the top of her head barely reached his chest.

"Of course you do," she snapped. "I recited and sang to you for nearly four hours one night in a little tavern outside of Peregrine-by-the-Egress. And mind that you call a baron's fat wife Lady, you call me Manx. Before you go in there, I would have a word, perhaps even a drink with you." She smiled sweetly and the effect took most of the sting of her words away.

He smiled back, but made it tight and short. "Well then . . . Manx. What ever more could we have to talk about after your glorious

performance? If you wanted my attention, you have it, but for a comely woman like you, there are easier ways.”

“A comely lass is not taken seriously. You sir, need to take me very seriously.” Grendelak was momentarily taken aback by the urgency in her voice. “I have information you need, and I do not have time for games. Come, let me buy you a drink before you delve back into your make-believe world where FreeSwords are free and heroes always win,” she entreated, still smiling and holding his eyes with hers.

“Very well. I do not know what you want, but I will play along,” he replied, offering his arm to her.

She took his arm and he guided her down the steps toward the Brother’s Friend, the favored inn of the brotherhood in Corrigan. Favored because it was across the street from The Hall and therefore close, but also favored because the ale was always priced just a bit lower for Brothers than anywhere else in the city. When he made to move toward the inn she stopped him in his tracks with a quick pull on his arm.

“Not there,” she said crisply. When he turned a questioning look down at her she sighed, as though she were exasperated with him. “You and I both know that five minutes in that flea-infested rat’s nest and the entire Brotherhood would be there plying you with questions and ale. I’m staying at the King’s Biscuit, let us go there.”

He gave her a pointed look. “Very well, but I will have to get my horse. I don’t trust him in this crowd for that long with out even a tie.” She said nothing as they walked toward his mount. While he enjoyed the approving looks from others in the street and didn’t mind being seen with a beautiful woman on his arm, the silence began to gnaw at him. He had plans and this woman had already unknowingly disrupted him for weeks. For her to speak so urgently and then say nothing more annoyed him.

When they reached his mount he finally asked, “Now what would this really be about?”

“You. Your life, your death, and what you chose to do before your death. Man is not a tool, manipulated by the gods. You were given free will by the elder gods so that the younger gods could compete for your faith. You can choose to be a good person, or a bad person. Some few even make those extremes. Most fall somewhere in between. Between you and I, Grendelak Mishtar, where do you fall?” she asked pointedly.

“Okay, I’ve got my horse. Are we riding or walking him to your inn?” he asked in a flat voice.

Her face took on an expression of disbelief. “Astounding. You shrink from so simple a question? You are less man than I had thought. I was

hoping for something more . . . decisive. At least I had convinced myself that you would be.”

Grendelak’s expression grew cold. “Let us clear this up once and for all, Manx. I do not know you. I did not even know your name. And yet here you are, talking in riddles, and sounding like you know all about me—or have made guesses about me. How and why do you know me?” he asked tersely.

“Let us walk,” she responded, not letting go of his arm even as he took the reins of his horse and they began to walk toward the King’s Biscuit. “I can see that you will need to know this if I’m to have any chance at what I am trying to do. I am from Amorice. In Amorice there are many humans—Tar as the elvenfolk call them—that have Elven—or Tel, if you prefer—blood. I am one such. My mother was a Tel who fell in love with a Tar priest of Talimaara, my father. The priests of the Nature goddess often spend years at a time in the forest with the Tel, and I was created while my father was staying with my mother’s family.” She stopped and took a breath. “Because the blood of the Tel runs strong in me, I sometimes have dreams. Dreams that come true. Dreams that foretell the future. Or possible futures, since nothing is certain until it is done. I have had many such dreams about you.” She lifted her face up to look at him appraisingly, gauging his acceptance of her words. She was not surprised that his eyes showed his skepticism but at least he hadn’t begun laughing, that was certainly better than she’d expected.

“Go on. I will not claim to believe you, but I am not yet calling you a lunatic. I have heard of the Tel mating with some humans.” He tried to smile reassuringly.

“Very well. That is better than I had hoped at least.” She started up again. “I have had dreams where you do things . . . things that are not you. Things that make you hate yourself. I have had dreams where you become a fiend because you believe you have gone too far, that you are irredeemable. But I have had other dreams where you are a great man, where you remember what you were when you joined The Brotherhood and come to stand for all of those things again.” She took a deep breath. “After weeks of such dreams, I had to seek you out, had to try to help you. Too many good men fall on evil times, if I can help but one, then I was successful.”

“From Amorice, you say? And I suppose you know nothing of Duke Kelling?” he asked skeptically.

“Of course I know of him, you dolt. He is the reason I came here. He and what might befall him.” She looked around the busy street and chose her next words carefully. “Do not do this thing, Grendelak of the FreeSword Brotherhood. Do not. You are better than this and you know it. He is as

nothing to you, and his work could do wondrous good. You have no proof, and even if you did, what would you have? You would have proof that he was taking information to Salena. He is. But what of the veracity of the news he carries?" she asked earnestly.

"If he is carrying some 'proof' to Salena, then that is all I need to know, Manx. How could I stand by and let him ruin a man I think of as a brother?" he responded quickly.

"If he is the man you think he is, how could a false accusation scare you?" she shot back along with an arched look.

Grendelak looked at her incredulously. "Have you ever been to Radael, Manx?" he asked with a note of exasperation in his voice. "The Knights in Radael are nearly as murderous as those they're 'protecting' the people from. Anyone would fear an accusation in Radael because justice there is swift and inaccurate. Only a fool would not worry."

"You're right there. But what if the accusation he carries is real? What if your 'friend' really *is* involved in something you don't know about? What if that is the truth and you kill a man who is just doing what he thought was right?" Her voice was almost pleading.

Grendelak's voice was hard when he answered. "I will kill a man who is threatening my friend. That will always be true." When she looked at him as though she were about to lecture him he spoke quickly. "What would you have from me? That I go back on my word? That I not protect him? That would be truly wrong."

Manx shook her head emphatically before looking at him sadly. "Not as wrong as killing men who were doing some good in the world, Grendelak. You must have seen by now that there is a chance for great evil in what you do. You must have questioned by now why you do it. And doubt about your friend must have entered your head, or otherwise, why talk to me?"

"True. It is convenient that we have just reached your inn, for I have no wish to drink with you. Good day, *Lady Manx*," he said hotly, shaking off her arm and turning on his heel.

Manx watched him as he guided his horse back into the crowded street. She considered going after him, but realized that it would be a waste of time. He had heard her out, now it was up to him.

Grendelak muttered angrily to himself as he left Manx standing in front of the King's Biscuit. He was angry at her and, if he was honest, angry at himself. *She knows!* A voice in his mind screamed at him. *She not only knows what I've done, but what I plan to do.* He stopped short at the thought, then took a deep breath and continued on his way. He was committed and it hadn't sounded like she was going to run off and tell anyone. He chuckled at the thought of her trying to pass off her "dreams" as a reason

for someone like the Royal Guardsmen to believe her. *She must have followed me. She could not have simply dreamed it.*

He was still grumbling under his breath as he stopped outside The Hall and once again dropped the reins to his horse, stepping on them angrily and stomping up the steps to the Hall's main entrance. *So what if this Duke has proof, Tibor has never wronged me and I owe it to him to protect him. Proof can be contrived.* He argued with himself as he pushed open the door and entered the Great Hall of the Brotherhood.

His busy mind barely registered the great marbled floor and pillars that held the nearly two story ceiling at bay. It rivaled the work in the royal palace in Larodan, if tales were to be believed, and made many a king's throne room look shoddy by comparison. Huge tapestries hung on the walls here, most depicting the battles that King Renthal fought to keep Corrigar free. The most brilliant one showed King Renthal standing in the courtyard of his keep giving his famous message to the lone knight that remained after that first battle, his face determined and sword bloodied with the lifeblood of many Nordalian knights. Grendelak glanced at it automatically and bowed his head in its direction, paying homage as many FreeSwords did to the man who had inadvertently begun their Order.

The sounds of Inductors screaming out commands rang out from the nearby training hall and mixed with the voices and hurried footsteps of many men crossing the Great Hall, making it sound much fuller than it was. Grendelak automatically crossed the Great Hall, nodding perfunctorily at those who greeted him, and headed for the training hall where he knew he would find Inductees and FreeSwords alike exercising their skills. He pushed open one of the brass-bound double doors leading to the training hall and walked through, his mind still filling with arguments against Manx's words and his eyes not truly seeing his surroundings.

He was so involved in his own musings that his mind barely registered the attack until he heard the familiar sound of a blade slicing through the air near his ear. He reacted automatically, bending over to the right to avoid the strike while pulling his sword from its scabbard. His instincts took over immediately and once his own weapon had cleared its sheath he brought it up in an arc, his body following, and swung out to meet the second attack he knew would come.

The harsh sound of metal meeting metal rung out and was like music to his ears. He took the opportunity to right himself and take a step forward and slightly to his left, turning into his attacker rather than backing away from him. As he foot touched the hard floor he pushed off with it, using the momentum to help him swing his weapon out in front of him, across his body, and, if he was correct, slicing right into his opponent's neck.

He was only slightly surprised when his blade once again struck metal, the sound ringing out along with the hearty laughter of a man. Grendelak took a step back and turned his body to face the sound, being careful to keep his blade firmly in hand and pressure against his opponent's weapon.

"Whoa there Grendelak, slow down," a gruff voice told him firmly upon seeing the fury in his face.

The anger drained away and was immediately replaced by surprise as his eyes fell upon a face he knew well. He relaxed his sword arm just enough for the other man to feel the pressure lessen and the next thing he knew the other man had reached out and placed a firm grip on his wrist, pushing a thumb into the side of his wrist just at the right point to make his entire hand go numb. Grendelak felt his grip on his sword give way and watched helplessly as his sword fell to the floor. He looked up at the man, amazed at his trick.

"Felander!" Grendelak cried out in a joyous greeting, a huge grin breaking out on his face. It was quickly replaced by a furrowed brow and serious look as he contemplated the man's last move. "How did you do that?"

The other man laughed heartily as he released his grip on Grendelak's wrist, the sound washing away all of Grendelak's misgivings and replacing them with the first joy he'd felt at being home. "You like my new trick, Grendelak?" he asked as he bent over and picked up Grendelak's sword. "You should never walk through a door with your mind elsewhere." Felander chastised him sternly as he handed Grendelak his sword. "But if you survived through five Contracts," he continued, jerking his head toward the arm that bore Grendelak's Oath Cuts, "I presume you have followed that lesson and that this morning is nothing more than you being preoccupied with your first homecoming since being blooded."

Grendelak wordlessly accepted his sword and sheathed it, unable to believe his luck in seeing his Inductor so quickly after returning home.

"A woman got your tongue, Grendelak?" Felander asked when the younger man had still not spoken. "Or just awed by my obvious superiority with a sword?" Felander puffed out his chest and looked at Grendelak with an expression that was both vain and humorous at the same time. Grendelak looked him over, his mind automatically registering and counting the number of Oath Cuts on his Inductor's arm. It was a ritual every FreeSword went through upon meeting one another and it was as natural to them as swinging a sword. Felander had had eight Cuts when Grendelak had left five years ago and now there were eleven.

Grendelak recovered his composure quickly. He took a step back and bowed a proper court bow in Felander's direction. "I am, as always, awed by your prowess, Felander," he replied with a hint of teasing in his voice.

Felander guffawed as he slapped Grendelak on the shoulder. "Come, Grendelak. You will tell me where you finally learned a proper court bow and where you've been hiding yourself for the past five years. Then we'll arrange for you to take the Ceremony and I, of course, will stand for you again."

Grendelak cringed slightly at his words and felt Felander's grip on his shoulder tighten in response. Felander dropped his voice and leaned in, putting his face next to Grendelak's ear to ensure he'd be heard over the noise in the hall. "I see we have things to discuss, do we not, Grendelak?"

Grendelak dropped his gaze to the floor and nodded, feeling much like the street urchin who Felander had caught stealing many years ago. Felander straightened and cleared his throat. "Well then Grendelak, let us go somewhere where real men may drink and speak while these *girls* try to learn to be FreeSwords."

Grendelak's lips quirked into a smile at that, for it was something that every Inductor called out loudly whenever they were visited by returning blooded Brethren. Grendelak had always been jealous of the Brothers who had interrupted training when he was but an Inductee and had dreamt of the day when *he* would return and be the cause for such a statement. He knew they'd end up at the Brother's Friend and he was glad of it. It was part of the ritual of returning that he'd longed for while he was away and his mood lightened as he began to relax and enjoy the homecoming he had longed for.

They left the Great Hall together and crossed the street to the Brother's Friend as Grendelak expected they would, returning greetings from Brother's as they passed in the street. Grendelak was a bit surprised when Felander stopped short of entering the inn and pulled him aside.

"Before we go in, I must ask you where you stand on the issue of the King's latest edict, Grendelak." Felander's voice was low and Grendelak was momentarily taken aback by the seriousness of the man's tone.

"I would ask what edict that is before I answer, Felander," Grendelak replied cautiously.

Felander looked shocked. "I am surprised you have not heard it as of yet. You stopped at the Wayside, did you not?"

Grendelak nodded emphatically. "Yes, I did, but there were few brothers there and I was anxious to see The Hall."

A slight smile crossed Felander's face. "Of course." He paused for a moment before continuing, "The King has demanded that the Brotherhood swear fealty to him."

Grendelak gasped. "You are joking."

Felander shook his head. "I am not. Just yesterday I spoke with the First Brother and he showed me the demand, written in the King's own hand."

That Felander could read was no surprise. While Grendelak knew that most people who were not nobility could not do so, all FreeSwords were taught to read and write, for some required more than a simple Oath Cut from a FreeSword. Some required a written Contract, signed and sealed by the FreeSword in addition to his blood oath. "Why? Surely he knows we will never do such a thing." No FreeSword had sworn fealty to any king since the time of King Renthal and as a group they vehemently defended their right to remain neutral. "Does this have to do with the conscriptions I have heard about?"

"Not the conscriptions. The assassinations."

"Assassinations?" Grendelak asked past the lump that had suddenly arisen in his throat.

"A few months ago the King's cousin, Count Graydon, was murdered in his own keep. Several months before that, one of his nephews—a mageborn studying in Custos Antiquum—disappeared while out gathering some of those strange plants mageborn are always interested in."

Grendelak's face grew white. He hoped the other man would take it as a reaction to the news and not for what it was—fear. Fear of being discovered. For Grendelak knew exactly what had befallen the king's nephew. He was dead and rotting just on the Triotonic side of the Yanek Forest. "Why would this drive the King to such an edict?" he asked, fearful of the answer he knew would come from Felander's mouth.

"Rumor has it that a FreeSword is behind their deaths." Felander turned his head and spit, as if trying to remove a foul taste from his mouth. "I, of course, do not believe this. We are not assassins, we are FreeSwords." Felander shook his head. "It is my thought that the king is simply using these deaths as a way to force our hand, to make us swear fealty to him because he needs protection. I don't think he knows who killed his cousin or his nephew. I think he listens overmuch to the tales of outsiders. And he does need protection. There are those in Corrigar who are not happy with the king's rule."

Felander's face softened at the look of discomfort on Grendelak's face. "But enough of that, old friend. I do not wish to mar your first homecoming with such dire news, but I must know where you stand before we visit the Brother's Friend. There are those of us who think we should swear fealty and they have been, shall we say, less than welcome at our favorite haunts as of late."

Grendelak schooled his face into a more neutral look. "I am against such a thing, of course. The Brotherhood has ever been free of such bonds and I would not see it destroyed by such a requirement."

Felander smiled at his words. "Excellent. I had thought as much, but needed to be sure. These times are growing dangerous for

FreeSwords in Corrigan, my friend, and I am glad to know we are on the same side.”

‘Well then, what are we waiting for? Let’s go in and begin celebrate your homecoming properly,’ Felander said as he led Grendelak into the Brother’s Friend.

Grendelak smiled broadly as they entered, his hand digging into one of the pouches hanging on his belt for a gold piece and dropping the coin into one of the boxes that stood at either side of the door inside the inn. It was customary for Brothers who had enough coin to give one to the Brotherhood when they visited the Brother’s Friend. The income from such donations was used to help Brother’s in between Contracts and to keep up both the Brother’s Friend and the inn at the Wayside.

Felander led Grendelak to a table in a corner, waving at the barkeep as they sat. Grendelak noted that there were few Brother’s in the common room at this hour. He knew by convention that many would be in The Hall training until late morning and that others would come closer to the mid day meal to check in and see who might have returned. Grendelak was grateful that he’d have a bit of time to chat with his mentor and oldest friend and possibly hear more news about what had been going on of late in Corrigan. It also gave him some time to consider what he would tell others of his Contracts, and how to avoid some of the less agreeable acts he’d been asked to do in the past five years.

The barkeep brought Felander a pint of dwarven ale. He set the mug down in front of the man and easily palmed the three silver pieces Felander had laid out expectantly. Having served the man for years he knew well what Felander would drink. Felander wasn’t the First Brother, but he was close and many, including the barkeep, believed that he would be next when the eldest finally stepped down. The barkeep looked questioningly at Grendelak, who quickly decided he’d stick with something a bit more common to FreeSwords to avoid more questions about where he’d picked up such expensive tastes. “A strong mead, if you would,” he directed the barkeep, before turning his attention to Felander.

Felander waited until the barkeep had returned and exchanged Grendelak’s drink for the bits of copper Grendelak had placed on the table. Felander lifted his mug and waited for Grendelak to do the same.

“May your sword remain free, my friend,” the older man said reverently.

“May your sword remain free,” Grendelak echoed in reply and then drank deeply before setting down the mug with a satisfied sigh.

“So what other news, Felander? I have heard there are conscriptions of shopkeepers and children, and that some impressive delegations from our neighbors have recently arrived. That is hardly the Corrigan I remember,” Grendelak began conversationally.

Felander snorted in disgust. “Yes, there are more nobles in Corrigan today than in the whole of Corrigan a year ago. Kantor Doorne, Amorice, Freeland Hold. Something is about and I’m not sure which rumors are to be believed. The Duke from Amorice didn’t intend on staying, he’s just passing through on one of his little quests, which makes the listing of who is here and who isn’t that much more intriguing. What’s truly disturbing is that I heard that the mage Delcidnar arrived late last night. Didn’t even stop at an inn, just went straight to the palace and stayed there half the night. Heard he left straight-away, didn’t even stop to check in on his household.”

“That is strange, my friend. I’ve heard that lately where one of The Scorpions visits, trouble usually follows. That happened in Radael, oh, about two years ago now. Lord Redeemer came storming in to the Duke’s keep in Pasia Lativas and after he left the monks that live there formed up and marched out. I heard they pushed back a small force of Tasnians that had crossed the border and were encroaching on the Duchy of Gal Atomy. But it was a bloody fight and caused quite a bit of stir with Tasnami, who claimed its force was simply ‘lost’,” Grendelak replied, glad he could speak of something of his travels without giving away his secrets.

“Exactly my point. Where one of them appears, trouble is sure to follow.” Felander toyed with his mug, not drinking much. He looked back up at Grendelak, his watery blue eyes appraising the other man’s expression and posture. “You’ve grown up, Grendelak. That is good.” He leaned back and crossed his arms. “So you’ve been in the north, in Old Nordalia, eh?”

Grendelak shifted uncomfortably. “For the most part, yes.”

“Alingor just returned from the north, oh, four or five months ago. Took a contract with some noble in Silentia Ens. Said the whole kingdom is touched,” Felander leaned across the table and finished in a whisper, “and not by the gods you’d want to be touched by, either!”

“He’s right, my friend. The entire kingdom is a mess. King’s writ doesn’t run much further than the capital and there are certain . . . unsavory types who control much of the land.”

“Hmmp. Sounds like one of the Scorpions visited there as well!” Felander laughed heartily at his own joke.

“One did,” Grendelak told him quietly.

Felander choked off his laugh. “You’re serious.”

“Dead serious, my friend.”

“Then perhaps there is more to Delcidnar’s visit than just rumor and jest.”

“Perhaps. You know the man who called himself king of Silentia Ens is dead, don’t you? That the Court gave it over to one of their own?”

"I had heard that, but didn't believe it." Felendar said thoughtfully and then sighed loudly. "I think perhaps your homecoming has come at a poor time, Grendelak. I fear Corrigan is about to fall onto hard times."

Grendelak grunted his assent, but said nothing.

"You are planning on taking the Ceremony, are you not? I was not joking, I will stand for you," the older man said solemnly.

Grendelak nodded gravely. "I had not made a decision on that but now I see that it should be done, for the sake of the Brotherhood. I will take the Ceremony and would be glad to have you stand for me."

"Excellent! You can take it this afternoon and then accompany us to the palace."

"What?" Grendelak exclaimed, "Why?"

"Shhhh . . ." Felander looked around furtively. "Lower your voice," he commanded.

Grendelak flinched but obeyed his friend, his voice much quieter when he spoke again. "Who is going to the palace and why?"

"The First Brother has decided to respond to the King's edict immediately and has asked that the First Fist accompany him. Each of us is expected to bring a Brother, one whom we trust, just in case."

Grendelak paled at the implication. "You would trust me so soon after my return? You have not seen me in five years, old friend. Is there not someone who is better suited to accompany you?"

Felander shook his head. "Grendelak, if I cannot trust one whom I Inducted, whom I practically raised myself, who can I trust?" He gestured at Grendelak's Oath Cuts as he continued, "Besides, you have five Oath Cuts and here you are, hale and hearty. They tell me everything I need to know. I can trust you. You are a man of honor and a blooded Brother."

Grendelak looked down at his own arm, hiding the pained look on his face at Felander's words. Felander could not know how those cuts had been earned and Grendelak certainly couldn't tell him now. He *wanted* to be the man Felander thought he was, wanted the older man's approval, but he was becoming hard pressed to ignore the shame that continued to grow when he considered how he'd spent his last few years. He'd never dealt with the family of any of the men he'd killed and now it looked like he was going to have to face a man who had lost not one, but at least two of his family members to Grendelak's skills. He thought of Duke Kelling and his promise to Tibor and groaned inwardly. If Felander was right, the man was not here to play in Corrigan's political games and would be leaving soon. Leaving for Salena. Grendelak wondered how he would deal with the Duke *and* help his brother in arms at the same time. But he had no good reason to deny his friend without exposing the truth of what he had become. He looked up pensively at Felander's face, an inquisitive look on

his face as the other man waited patiently for Grendelak's response. *It is only this afternoon. I can deal with the Duke tomorrow. Even if he leaves tonight he won't get far.*

"I will go with you, Felander. For the Brotherhood."

Felander let out the breath he'd been holding. "That is music to my ears, my friend." He stood and looked toward the door, then back at Grendelak. "Well?" he asked, "Are you coming or are you going to be late for your own Ceremony?"

Grendelak simply stood in response and nodded. His friend's words about music had brought that minstrel's voice back, singing the Cyclical of Quellan again, and Grendelak was afraid if he opened his mouth it would be Manx's words that came out, not his. He followed Felander back to The Hall without speaking, trying to stop that damn song from driving him completely mad.

Chapter 3

The armorer dropped the measure rope from Grendelak's waist. "Ten knots around the waist!" he shouted. A scrawny little boy with a tablet and parchment painstakingly wrote the number down. The armorer was a huge man, not a brother, but he had worked for the Brotherhood as long as Grendelak had been around. He was bald, overweight, dirty, and the best armorsmith in all of Corrigan. His personality was gruff, but his mind was quick, and the Brotherhood paid him well to stay on with them.

"Lift your arm," he grumbled, "I can't measure it hanging about like that."

Grendelak lifted his arm. "So how many years have you been with the brotherhood now, Hyallin?"

"More years than you been alive, boy. And I'm not 'with the brotherhood'. You are. I just work for 'em."

"Grendelak, all the arrangements are set." Felander called out, bursting into the armorer's measuring room. Noticing the armorer he asked, "Well, is there a suit that can be made to fit by mid day?"

"You Brothers are the worst sons of dead Tasnians I've ever seen, but I think I can cobble one together that'll make your friend here look like the crown prince. Though it set me back weeks," the armorer complained.

"How can it set you back weeks? Merely undo this afternoon whatever it is you do this morning, my good man! By tomorrow your apprentices will be back on track!" Felander replied brightly.

"Have you ever worked with armorer's apprentices, Felander? They will be all a-thither because I disrupted them, and put a piece of *their* work together with the work of a rival apprentice. Aye. I'll loose weeks, and have to crack a few heads to get back to normal. But that is the headache I accept, working for an ungodly 'Brotherhood'."

“Not ungodly, and I will thank you not to malign us so.” Grendelak slipped back into the conversation. “We merely give each deity his or her due, as befits us. If you wanted a godly bunch, go work for the Templars of Dirge, then you could pound out all of the dents in their fine armor when they get falling down drunk in it.”

“Uhhhmm . . . Grendelak? Speaking of ungodly and godly,” Felander interrupted, “I’ve found a priestess for the ceremony.”

“That’s fine, Felander. Whichever one you’ve found will do. The priest is there to attest to the truth of our words, not to give us atonement,” Grendelak replied flippantly.

“I still think you should know, Brother. The only priest or priestess available was of The Gate Guarder.”

“I have no issue with Healtherd Erishon or her priests. Only when I die and she guides me to my eternal rest will I worry about offending her.”

Felander’s brows furrowed, obviously confused by Grendelak’s lack of concern. “Then I will tell you the rest, since you obviously don’t take the import. It is the time of year when her followers believe she is bound to Tasni. We try not to use them during that time, for they are a morose crowd.”

“Morose is okay, as long as they don’t take up worship of the Dark One, I do not care either way. How could she guide people to their just rewards if she did not know both light and darkness? It is an aspect of her I respect as much as the other, though I would not attend services during this time.” Grendelak tried to grin, but felt a queasiness in his stomach.

The armorer stood up from measuring Grendelak’s legs. “You are done. It matters not which deity you choose, they all bless the FreeSwords. Even Tasni DeathWalker.” He turned and walked out, shouting, “Armor will be ready in two turns of the glass!”

Grendelak looked at Felander with an exasperated expression. “I understand he’s the best, but do we really have to give him such freedoms? Tasni DeathWalker? Never would he bless our undertaking!”

Felander laughed. “I thought you said you had no preference, Grendelak?”

Grendelak’s expression grew serious. “I do not, for the most part, have a preference. But what a Tasnian priest considers ‘worship’ I consider murder. Anyone who has entered a Tasnian temple should feel the same.”

Felander laughed again. “My friend, there is worse. There is much worse. I met a priest of Shalitor once named Solkar Raklos who told me the most horrifying tales about what the Snake Priestesses did with their victims. Cutting scales out of the living flesh and melding them to the priestess’ bodies, that kind of thing. I have no love of Tasni or his priests, but remember that there are more like him out there. But enough of

such talk. Let us get you ready for the ceremony. You need a bath, and a brother's robe, and a beard trim!"

Two hours later, Grendelak was standing outside the Chamber of Blood, so named in honor of the blood the original FreeSwords had shed to make Corrigar free. He was wearing a simple white tunic over a suit of blue-enameled armor, the image of a sword that signified his Brotherhood graven on the half-gauntlets and embroidered on the tunic. His hair was oiled into ringlets, and his sword rode in a new sheath. He could tell he was already sweating through the padding under his armor, and by this evening's end he would smell worse than he did after riding for days.

He would have paced in nervousness and impatience, but did not want to sweat more than he already was, and this armor was heavier than he was used to.

There was a fanfare of trumpets from within the Chamber of Blood, and the doors slid open. Once again Grendelak was awed by the splendor of this chamber. The high vaulted ceilings were covered with murals depicting the battle for Castle Panralgon in the heart of Corrigan. The chamber was kept empty. There was nothing in the room save the dais where brothers swore their fealty to the FreeSword Brotherhood and their brothers. Felander stepped to Grendelak's left, drew his sword, and the two started down the long blue carpet leading to the raised dais at the far end of the room. Grendelak knew that one Brother carrying the sword for you was not enough, but he had not the time to hunt down others that shared a mutual trust with him, so one would have to do.

Grendelak kept his eyes to the front, not caring to see how many of the Brotherhood were here to see him retake his vows to them. From what he could see, there were more Brothers present than were here when first he performed this ceremony. It must indeed have become an important part of daily life.

At the far end of the room, the Benefactor stepped out onto the dais from a door to the left. He was resplendent in red FreeSword Leathers—boiled leather armor with the sleeves removed to show the oath cuts—and white calfskin boots. Grendelak did not recognize him, but he was a handsome young man, and the two Oath Cuts he bore were long and straight. That meant he was sure of himself, if nothing else. Though some thought that long and straight Oath Cuts were an indication of a noble and honorable personality, Grendelak did not necessarily believe that. Long and straight Oath Cuts could be made by a man who was afraid to admit that making an Oath Cut was painful.

From the right side of the dais the priestess of Healfherd entered the room wearing sackcloth and wielding the long bone that signified that Healfherd was in those dark months of the year she stayed with Tasni. The

priestess was attractive, but had gone out of her way to look like the walking dead. Her hair was a mess and charcoal was smudged about her face and eyes. She turned toward the advancing men and stared straight ahead, looking at no one.

When Grendelak and Felander stopped just short of the dais the priestess dropped her bone to the floor. She began muttering to her goddess and Grendelak felt a shiver run down his spine as the sound. The priestess was staring right at him while she mumbled under her breath. Grendelak felt trapped between the eyes of the Brothers boring into his back and the gaze of this priestess. He tried to ignore them both by concentrating on the voice of the priestess. He strained to make out her quiet words but nothing she said was clear to him. Finally, she fell silent and raised her arm, pointing it directly at his chest before she spoke. “Do you, FreeSword, swear to state clearly and plainly your vows and what they mean to you?”

Grendelak swallowed hard. His throat had suddenly closed up. All the fears he’d had when he was first asked about taking the Ceremony came rushing to the surface. He felt as if this was all a lie, like his presence here was a façade, defaming everything that had been important to him. He held a secret from his Brothers, one that would make them kill him if they knew. He had murdered those people. For money. He fought back the bile that rose in his throat at the thought. He swallowed again and in as clear a voice as he could muster answered the question. “That I will, priestess.”

Suddenly the fear that had threatened to overwhelm him dissipated. What he did on contract was not the business of the Brotherhood, only his loyalty was owed to them. The priestess stared hard at him and for a moment Grendelak feared she had seen the hesitation in his eyes. When she nodded once he let out the breath he hadn’t been aware he’d been holding.

At the priestess’ nod the Benefactor stepped to the front of the dais. “Join me here brother, for you have given the Oath and will give it again. For a blooded Brother there is no obeisance, only obedience.”

Grendelak took the three steps up the dais alone. This part of the Ceremony was new to him as he had only been through it as a new Brother, and new Brothers were not allowed on the dais. He stood before the Benefactor, looking into the man’s deep blue eyes. He was only a bit startled when the man whispered under his breath, “I am Kieran Chace, and it is an honor to be your Benefactor, Grendelak.”

Grendelak pursed his lips and whispered a reply, “And it is an honor to have you as my Benefactor, Brother Kieran.”

Kieran took a slight step to Grendelak’s right and looked out over the assemblage. “Who here bears the sword for this man?”

Felander answered Kieran's query, his voice echoing throughout the hall with the surety of his words. "I, Felander Whent, his Inductor and friend am proud to bear the sword for him. I would use the sword to protect him. I would fall on the sword to honor his contract. I would sheath the sword to gain him a contract."

Kieran nodded and then called out again, "And who stands for this man who will help to carry our message to our King this day?"

A roar of voices behind Grendelak cried out in unison, "The Brotherhood!"

Grendelak was surprised at the strength of the reply and at that point realized there might be something to those long straight cuts on the arms of this young Brother. The sound of more than two hundred FreeSwords standing for him was a balm to his conscience. These were his family; these were the ones he was willing to die for. He was not lost to them as he had feared, but was very much one of them.

As the noise quieted down, Kieran again moved to stand before Grendelak. "Do you, Grendelak Mishtar, swear your fealty only to the Brotherhood and those whom you take contract with, never bowing knee in the manner of a Knight to a King?"

Grendelak looked Kieran directly in the eye and in a voice that rang throughout the chamber replied, "I, Grendelak Mishtar will never bow as a Knight to a King. I will never wield my sword for a Kingdom that has not paid for it. I will be loyal to my contracts but faithful to my Brotherhood. A man may pay for my services, but the FreeSwords hold my heart. Now and until I die."

Kieran briefly looked at him with an almost reverent expression, obviously moved by his strong words, before he continued his questioning. "And would you die protecting the people of Corrigar, if it did not violate your contract to do so?"

Again Grendelak's voice was clear and strong. "I would sow the land with my very blood and the blood of the enemies of Corrigar, killing as many as possible before I am done, if it did not violate my Contract."

"And do you hold your Oath Cuts to be the personification of the FreeSword Brotherhood?"

Grendelak caught and held Kieran's eyes. "My Oath Cuts are my soul's bond to my brothers. Violation of a Contract would rip my soul and tear it asunder. With my Oaths and my Oath Cuts I am one with my Brethren. To them, my blade. For them, my blood. With them, my freedom. My Oath Cuts are inviolate and forever shall I prize their meaning."

Kieran simply stared at him, his eyes alight with an understanding that Grendelak had not seen there earlier. Behind him, Grendelak heard a complete silence in the room.

After a long pause, Kieran continued, "Grendelak Mishtar, you are a Sworn Brother of the FreeSword Brotherhood. You have taken the Oaths, you have born many Oath Cuts, you have vowed your life to your brothers. I ask you now, do those Oaths extend to protecting the Brotherhood from the depredations of its enemies? Will you stand before our King and help him understand that we cannot be chained to a Kingdom by oath? Are you one of the foremost Brothers?"

Grendelak was taken aback. This was not part of the Ceremony. It was clearly the influence of current day politics. But it was easier than the rest of the ceremony had been, and he had an answer. Into the silence he stated, "I will stand before our King and give him fealty as a subject, while telling him that my sword and yours are for hire, but not for commandeering. I am not one of the foremost Brothers. There are many better men in the Brotherhood, but I will be the voice of all Brothers, those present and those not when I tell him *we are not yours to command.*"

The room erupted. Brothers were cheering and the room was echoing with the reverberation of their shouts. Kieran, obviously breaking with the ceremony, leaned forward and impulsively hugged Grendelak. The Priestess wailed and swooned as they touched, a brother rushing to offer her his arm.

"The brothers touch!" she screamed, her voice sounding as if she were suddenly in agony. "The brothers who are not! Ware the bond that is forged with a blade! Ware to Kings and ware to paupers! The bond is forged!" Then she collapsed, the Brother standing near her supporting her as he walked her off the dais.

The noise in the room insured that few, if any brothers heard her wail, but Kieran pulled back and looked hard at Grendelak, his expression grave. "Do you know what that was about?" Kieran asked.

"They say that the priestesses of Healfherd eat only enough to live while she is tied to Tasni. Perhaps it was a hunger dream," Grendelak offered with a half smile, trying to convey a confidence he did not feel.

Grendelak was relieved when Kieran half shrugged and replied, "That must be it. I've never heard such rubbish in my life. No wonder we don't use priestesses of Healfherd during *those* months."

The crowd finally settled down, and the two men walked down the carpet. Felander sheathed his sword and followed them out of the building and across to the Brother's Inn, where a shortened version of the required celebration would take place.

Grendelak was just finishing his second mug of Ale from Freeland Hold, slightly dazed by the attention. Everyone wanted to talk with him about the King and recent events, all somehow believed he knew more than he did, and the younger Brothers treated him like he was one of the

scions of the Brotherhood. He was more than ready to be done with this celebration. Everyone wanted to buy him Ale, but he could not drink. Everyone wanted to offer him advice, but he was not even going to speak with the King. Everyone wanted to know how much he knew, but he knew very little. And most unnerving, everyone wanted to know about his Contracts, and he could not speak freely.

Finally Felander pushed his way through the well-wishers, and took Grendelak's arm, steering him out of the building and back toward the Hall of the FreeSwords.

Once they were outside of the Brother's Inn, Felander began speaking. "We will be going to the palace soon. I heard your words in the Ceremony of Vows, but I wanted you to know what you were committing to. We intend to tell the King exactly what you said. That we are for hire, but he is our sovereign, not the owner of The Brotherhood. He is likely to throw every last one of us in the dungeons; our contacts in the Palace tell us that he is very serious about making us swear fealty to him."

"Under the circumstances, that's understandable," Grendelak replied, "but he knows us and our Brotherhood, he's got to know that we cannot bend the knee to him."

"Understandable, but if he understood us, we wouldn't even need to go to the Palace. He'd understand that to swear fealty to him would destroy the Brotherhood."

They walked up the steps and into the large doors of the Hall of FreeSwords in silence. Finally, Grendelak asked, "Do you really think we will be imprisoned for telling him what he should already know?"

Felander nodded gravely. "Yes, I do. The First Brother does not believe so, still believes he can reason with the King, but those of us that keep ears in the Palace think he's not seeing clearly. The King is set on this course, even though he should know that we cannot bow to him."

"But putting the First Brother in the dungeons will not further his ends, how can he get us to bend the knee to him if our leader is in chains?" Grendelak exclaimed.

"For one willing to go to extremes, it is far easier to exact concessions from a man in your control, Grendelak. Surely you see that. I believe our King is one willing to go to those extremes," Felander replied quietly.

Felander led Grendelak into the guard room off of the entryway, where the First Brother and five other men were lounging and discussing the situation.

"Grendelak, meet First Brother Nolphen," Felander said, "First Brother, this is Grendelak, who retook his vows today."

The older man dressed in fine white Brother's robes stood and extended his hand. Grendelak grasped it in the manner of Brothers, at

the elbow. He was surprised by the strength of the hand that clasped his elbow in return. "It is my pleasure First Brother."

First Brother Nolphen smiled at him. "Grendelak, your words were music. They were the right words at the right time. You reminded us all of why we are brothers and not soldiers. You reminded us all that our bond, one to another, cannot stand if we are bound, each to the King." Nolphen sighed. "I want to make certain you know that we are treading into great danger. It is possible that we will all be imprisoned as traitors before the night is done. Are you prepared to risk imprisonment your first few days back in Corrigan, Grendelak?"

Grendelak swallowed hard, hoping his nervousness would be attributed to fear of imprisonment, and said, "Yes First Brother, it will be my honor. We cannot bend the knee to him, and I am willing to risk whatever it takes to show our King that this is true."

Letting go of his arm, the First Brother nodded once. "Then let us go. We were waiting on the two of you."

They entered the carriages that had lined up outside FreeSword Hall and rode to the Palace in silence, each man keeping to his own thoughts. The roads were crowded, but the crowds made way for two of the FreeSword's carriages. The people of the kingdom viewed the FreeSwords as a national treasure and always seemed to do what they could to help them, even opening a path for them in a busy street.

At the palace, they filed out of the carriage and formed up as an honor guard around the First Brother, and set off up the steps. They had only gone up a few steps when three armored men in red and black cloaks opened the bronze double doors and stood to the side. Behind them came four men in flowing black robes with red trim, sweeping out the doors, their shaved heads nearly shining in the late afternoon sun.

"Tasnians!" Felander hissed. "At the palace!"

"Why would an envoy from Tasnami be here?" Grendelak asked quietly.

"I told you that I believed our King was on the edge. Obviously they were invited, or they would not have gotten past the doors," Felander whispered back.

Tasnami, pondered Grendelak, the kingdom that paid homage to Tasni and only Tasni, a place of rumored sacrifices and priest-Kings. A place where the most powerful ruled . . . until someone killed them. "I can't believe the King would treat with them," Grendelak muttered back.

"Use your eyes. Look closely, there is not much mistaking them." Felander hissed back.

Grendelak looked closely. And stopped. He stared at one of the priests in robes, standing stock still, a look of utter disbelief on his face.

“Grendelak! Keep moving!” Felander hissed as the other Brothers came to a stumbling halt.

Grendelak finally found his voice and used it. “Tibor!” he shouted, still not believing it was really his ex-employer. The man he stared at turned his head toward the voice, and smiled slowly. Grendelak’s heart sank. It *was* Tibor. Here in Corrigan, wearing a Tasnian priest’s robe, with Tasnian priests.

“Grendelak! Move NOW!” Felander hissed again, and Grendelak found his feet. As they passed the Tasnians, Tibor winked at Grendelak.

“What was that all about?” Felander asked as they entered the doorway.

“That was my Contract these last five years. His face and head are shaved, and I’ve never seen him in any robe, let alone a Tasnian one, but it was him,” Grendelak replied, his voice shaking with incredulity.

“That bodes ill, Grendelak. Very ill. Better you not have drawn attention to yourself if this is true. Once the Tasnians get hold of you, it is very difficult to get out of their grasp.” The First Brother interjected solemnly. “They will continue to use you until you are dead or of no more use to them.”

Grendelak clenched his fists nervously. Was it possible that Tibor had told the King who killed his relatives? Or worse, had Tibor really been threatened by those he had Grendelak kill? *What if your ‘friend’ really is involved in something you don’t know about?* He suddenly heard Manx’s words again. *She knew. She knew more than she said and she was right about Tibor. I killed men for you; to protect you!* His mind screamed at Tibor. *A damn Tasnian and a liar to boot!*

“I didn’t know,” he whispered, his eyes clearly showing the betrayal he felt.

“I would be surprised if you had known,” the First Brother reassured him. “There are few who do and they are generally blessed with the god sight to see it. We are not such as those.”

Grendelak nodded lamely, but he could not shake the intense feeling of shame that had worked its way to the surface. “Five years, First Brother. Five long years! How can I—”

The First Brother interrupted him with a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Brother, there are those who have been unaware of being entwined in Tasnian plots for much longer than that. Tis no shame of yours that you were taken in by one such as he. Do not despair, we do not think less of you.”

Grendelak looked gratefully at Nolphen and nodded once, but kept his dark thoughts to himself. The First Brother did not, could not, know what things Tibor had directed Grendelak to do in those five years. *He would think much less of me then, I am sure!*

“Come, we must not keep the king waiting. We tread on dangerous ground here as it is and making him wait will only compound his frustration with us.” Nolphen commanded.

He steeled his will against the trepidation that had taken hold of him and picked up his feet to move forward, following behind Felander in the square. His mind barely registered the splendor of the castle, its gleaming halls and many tributes to kings of Corrigar long past darkened by the shadows of doubt in his mind.

Too soon they halted in front of the massive doors to the court. Grendelak looked up, his eyes taking in the emblazoned crest of Corrigar that seemed to span the entire width of both doors and stretched almost the full twenty feet to the tops of the doors. It was impressive, to say the least, though he’d seen similar decoration in the keep that Freedom’s Guard in Radael called home. The two Royal Guardsmen that stood guard outside the king’s court turned and pushed on the great doors. The sound from the colossal doors opening resounded through the marble halls and made Grendelak’s stomach lurch.

Once the doors had opened the guardsmen stood in front of them, holding them open for the FreeSword contingent to pass. One of them called out loudly, his voice echoing across the court, “First Brother Nolphen of the FreeSword Brotherhood and his retinue approach, your Majesty!”

The FreeSwords marched forward, their eyes all looking straight ahead toward the king. Grendelak took the opportunity to look closely at his King. Remelus I was heavy-set, with a bald pate and a bulging belly. His purple overshirt was stretched to capacity, and his white pants were soiled with some kind of juice. The crown looked almost ridiculous perched above those chubby cheeks. Grendelak realized, perhaps for the first time, that Remelus was just a man. Nolphen, at the head of the group, stopped short of the steps that led to the dais where the king sat comfortably on his throne watching them with a suspicious look. The others stopped as well and kept their eyes forward until the sound of the doors crashing back together as they closed startled them all. Grendelak saw Felander’s head swing around and eyes narrow angrily at the sound of footsteps near the back of the court. He turned to see what upset his Brother, his hand automatically going to the hilt of his sword as he took in the sight of a ten-squad of the Royal Guardsmen moving quickly to block the doors.

Nolphen glanced over his shoulder. “I expected as much,” he whispered quietly out of the side of his mouth as he turned his attention back to the king.

“Unhand your swords me boys.” Felander whispered “Hundreds of years of tradition would not have allowed us to keep our swords in the

King's presence unless he was certain that he could take them from us any time he chose."

The king looked at the men, his head askance, as though appraising them before he clasped his hands together in front of him, resting them on his portly stomach. The king let his gaze fall over all the men before settling a challenging look on the First Brother. "Brother Nolphen, have you come to swear fealty as we have commanded?"

Nolphen steadily returned the gaze before he bowed his head politely. "Sire," he said evenly.

Remelus sat forward. "We take it your answer is no, FreeSword?"

"Since the time of King Renthall no FreeSword has bent the knee to any king of Corrigar. To do so would break the Brotherhood. You have always asked for our loyalty as subjects and that you have. My sword and the swords of the Brotherhood are yours for hire, not for commandeering. Our blades shall remain free as long as we draw breath, Sire. We will not now, nor ever, bend the knee to you or any other king." Nolphen declared in a firm and unyielding voice. "We will live free or die."

The king snorted and tossed his head at Nolphen's words. "You don't seem to understand the situation here, *Brother*. We are not pleased with word of one of your *swords* running around Nordalia murdering our family. You and your brothers have broken the trust that kept your swords free."

King Remelus' last words were slow and deliberate and were obviously contrived to exact a response from the FreeSwords. It did. Each one lifted a gauntlet covered hand and again laid it gently on the hilt of their swords. The king raised an eyebrow and pursed his lips in satisfaction at the men's reaction.

"Well?" the king asked blithely. "What have you to say about this? Which one of you murdering bastards killed my cousin and likely my nephew as well?"

Grendelak sighed in relief. Either Tibor hadn't told the king everything, then, or he had told him just enough to force a confrontation and manipulate Remelus. At least the King did not appear to have a clear description. Grendelak wasn't certain why Tibor was involved, he was just glad the lying Tasnian hadn't told the king everything.

"We are not assassins, Sire. We are Contracted most often for protection and if we are forced to kill to protect our charge we will, but we are not in the business of killing men for money." Nolphen responded hotly. "As a whole we reject this accusation. An it please his Majesty we would suggest he take with more care the words of those who walk in the shadow of the Dark One."

The king laughed brusquely. "You are so certain it was the Tasnians who brought this to light?"

“Who else would speak such untruths but those who follow the Father of Lies, Sire?”

“They have no reason to lie, FreeSword. One of their own was also vilely murdered by one of your “free” swords.” The king’s disdain for the Brotherhood was evident by the way he almost spat out the word ‘free’.

“They lie.” Nolphen refuted flatly.

“So you wish to protect him, that is it, isn’t it?” Remelus speculated with a sly grin on his face. “So be it. You are the leader of your ‘Brotherhood’, Nolphen. In the end, all contracts are seen by you, and all monies from said contracts pass to your coffers. Either you give me the name of the Sword who killed my cousin or we will assume you are taking responsibility for his actions and we will charge you with his murder.”

Grendelak heard the sharp intake of breath all around him from his Brothers. The only possible outcome of such a charge was death.

Nolphen was nodding sadly. “Sire, you will obviously assume what you will. My Brothers are not murderers and no matter what you do to me, they will not bend the knee to you.”

“Not even to save you, First Brother?” the king asked mysteriously.

The outrage boiled up in Grendelak. Outrage at himself, outrage at the King for such arbitrary ‘justice’. “Not even to save him,” he blurted out. “Sire,” he added lamely when the king fixed him with an angry look, ignoring the others who nodded their head in assent with Grendelak’s words.

“I would have the name of one who is so rash to speak out to the king when not spoken to first,” the king demanded.

“Grendelak, Sire,” he responded hesitantly, wondering fearfully if perhaps Tibor had given a name to go with his tales.

“Well Grendelak, you say you would not bend the knee to save your First Brother? What kind of loyalty is that?”

“The Brotherhood does not lie in one man’s blade, Sire. You cannot break our bonds so easily. If the First Brother must die, we will mourn, but we will not be broken. Another will rise to his place.”

King Remelus sat back and crossed his arms. “And do you all feel this way?”

Grendelak watched as every Brother spoke out in turn, “Yes, Sire!”

The king raised an arm and gestured briefly. The sound of heavy footfalls approaching told Grendelak the Royal Guardsmen had been summoned and he was not surprised when the White and Green clad men surrounded them moments later.

“First Brother Nolphen of the FreeSword Brotherhood, we charge you with the death of our cousin, Count Graydon,” the king said clearly as he stood and pointed in Nolphen’s direction. At the gesture two Royal

Guardsmen moved to stand in front of the Brother, one of them extending a hand toward him, wordlessly asking for his sword.

When Nolphen made no move to comply, Grendelak heard the distinctive rasp of swords being drawn. A moment later the gruff command from one of the Guardsmen to back away from Nolphen came.

Not a single Brother moved until the guard who had spoken laid his blade along Nolphen's neck. "Now!" the man demanded.

Again, not a man moved until finally Nolphen spoke. "Move, Brothers. It does no good to extend the King's wrath to all of you."

The men backed off reluctantly at Nolphen's command but Grendelak found his feet would not obey him. "My blade, my blood, my oath," he said, his voice choked with emotion and guilt.

"Go, Grendelak," Nolphen told him with a note of pride in his voice. "This is not the time to fulfill that oath. The Brotherhood will need you, live free to fulfill that oath."

Felander reached out and grabbed Grendelak's arm and Grendelak reluctantly let the other man pull him away from Nolphen. As Grendelak backed away from the First Brother the Royal Guardsmen moved to stand in a line between the FreeSwords and their leader.

"Well, Nolphen, do you have anything to say that might convince us you are not responsible for our cousin's death? Such as swearing fealty might do?" King Remelus asked imperiously, gesturing at the guardsmen once again.

Nolphen glared balefully at the king, as two of the guards placed a hand on either of his shoulders and forced him to his knees. "I have sworn on my honor as a Brother and your loyal subject that neither I nor any of the Brothers are responsible for this deed. That is all you will get, *Sire*, nothing more and nothing less."

The king made a show of sighing grandly. "Then we declare you guilty of the murder of our cousin. We see no reason to drag this out; do you have any last words before we exact payment for such a heinous crime?"

Nolphen took a deep breath, staring straight forward and spoke with a steady voice. "May your sword remain free, Brothers."

The king's face grew red with anger when Nolphen addressed the Brothers and ignored his question; his expression turned to one of absolute hatred as every brother replied in unison, "Better to die than fail, Brother."

King Remelus growled then, his lip curling into a sneer, "You shall have death then for you shall not have freedom." He turned to the guardsmen, "Carry out your duty."

The guardsman that appeared to be in charge looked at Nolphen and smirked. There had long been a rivalry between the two groups, ever since the Brotherhood had declared they'd not swear fealty to the king,

and this particular guardsman seemed to be enjoying the fix the Brothers had gotten themselves into. The Royal Guardsmen were sworn to the service of the king and felt that the Brotherhood was dangerous to the kingdom. They believed that the Brotherhood's refusal to bend the knee to the king proved they were an un-trustable, miserable lot of men who hadn't the moral fiber to be proper Royal Guardsman.

Grendelak watched, horrified, as the guardsman drew back his sword. He focused his eyes on Nolphen and noticed that the First Brother's eyes were on the guardsman even as his lips moved silently in prayer to whatever god he followed. As the guardsman thrust his sword through Nolphen's chest Grendelak reached around to grab the hilt of his sword and started forward. His gaze was fixed on Nolphen as the other man squeezed his eyes shut against the pain even as Grendelak saw the tip of the sword come bursting through Nolphen's back. Grendelak growled and began to draw his sword but stopped as two of the other guardsmen stepped between him and Nolphen, blocking his way with their swords.

The court erupted with angry shouts and cries but Grendelak heard none of it clearly. His knees almost gave way as Nolphen fell, the guilt that had been growing since this terrible night began finally overwhelming him. *This is my fault. If I hadn't been taken in by Tibor, if I'd not done his bidding all these years, the Brotherhood would not be paying in blood.* Grendelak began shaking, his face now as white as a maiden's gown.

"Enough!" the king bellowed over the conundrum, and in a few moments the court had grown silent. The FreeSwords stood, their eyes filled with a mixture of grief and anger, watching helplessly as the First Brother slowly bled to death.

Remelus turned a determined face toward the Brothers. "Having learned that the FreeSword Brotherhood is responsible for the death of our cousin and is quite possibly responsible for our nephew's disappearance, we declare the Brotherhood to be forfeit of its right to continue without a show of loyalty to us. I find it foolish of my forebears to allow you such liberty all of these years. You are my subjects, and now you are shown to be traitorous subjects. Therefore, let it be known throughout the kingdom that any FreeSword who will not swear fealty is guilty of conspiring against the royal family and will be charged with high treason."

The king smiled slowly at the expression of disbelief on the Brothers' faces. "We expect this declaration will be posted by sunrise. We suggest you return and inform your Brothers as soon as possible." The king turned to the guardsman and jerked his head at the now lifeless body of the First Brother. "Hang that from the West Gate along with the notice of forfeiture," he said, returning his gaze to Grendelak as he continued, "That will make certain all those Brothers coming in from the Crossroads understand that we are serious."

“You will never have our fealty. Our swords are our own to command. Since the time of Victoria Kingseer, we have remained free and free we shall be,” Grendelak spat. Every FreeSword knew the name of the Kingseer and knew the story of their founding well. It was part of what drove them as a whole to hold so intensely to their oaths against swearing fealty to the king.

“*The rightful king shall be put to the sword and a killer of men will sit your throne,*” the king blithely quoted. “Victoria Kingseer always spoke truly, but I tell you now, “, the king’s voice was suddenly filled with scorn, “in case your treason was a plot to fulfill her prophesy by ending my family and my reign, never will one of you murdering bastards sit on this throne. Even if I have to have every last one of you charged with treason and executed. You *will* swear fealty or you will die.”

“We will not break our oaths!” Grendelak cried out angrily as the king turned to leave.

King Remelus turned slowly to face him, his obvious pleasure in Grendelak’s words evident by the bright smile on his face. “I never truly expected that *you* would. But some will, favoring their heads over an oath. The rest of you would not be loyal anyway.” he said with a smirk before he strode off, disappearing into one of the embrasures that lined the walls behind his throne.

Chapter 4

An hour later, the Brothers who had traveled to Court walked into the Brother's Friend only to be mobbed by a throng of Brothers who had been impatiently waiting their return. The questions and calls jumbled together into a cacophony that made Grendelak's head throb. He reached up and rubbed his temples, trying to ease the pain and wishing for just a moment of quiet to collect his thoughts.

His wish was granted a few moments later and he opened his eyes in surprise to see Felander holding his hand up, motioning for the Brothers to sit. Grendelak watched his friend lean over and speak quietly to one of the other Brothers, who strode over to the inn's door and deliberately locked it, the sound echoing throughout the now quiet common room.

"Brothers, we bring grave news this night," Felander began mournfully, his eyes bright with unshed tears. "First Brother Nolphen is dead."

Murmurs and cries of "How could this be?" erupted all around Grendelak, whose own eyes were full of grief, his lips a white line of anger.

Felander nudged Grendelak, then leaned over and whispered in his ear. "Tell them, Grendelak. They were inspired by your oaths this afternoon, they have taken to you. Inspire them again. We are in for a hard fight and they will need a strong voice to encourage them lest they falter."

Grendelak's mouth dropped open at Felander's words. He was not the man to inspire courage in his Brothers, not when he had let the First Brother die without speaking the truth! He was a coward, a murderer, a fool. He did not deserve the title of Brother. He gave a slight shake of his head as a response and Felander's expression turned pleading. "Without leadership they respect, we are doomed. In our Brotherhood, people

come in and people leave every day on contract, only a display of respect as recent as your Ceremony will stay with them. You are the one, my friend.”

Grendelak’s shoulder’s dropped in defeat. He was going to be forced to play the role whether he felt qualified or not. The only way out was to explain why he was not the right man and he could not do that. Not now. Grendelak looked around for a table. Finding one, he stepped onto a chair and then onto the table, looking down and around at all his brothers.

“The king wishes us to know that unless we swear fealty to him he will have us all charged with treason and executed. He is having a notice of forfeiture posted tomorrow at the West Gate, along with the body of the First Brother,” Grendelak said flatly.

“But what of Brother Nolphen?” a voice called out. “Why was he killed? How?”

A chorus of “Yes, how?” and “Why?” rang out. Grendelak waited for the noise to die down before he took a deep breath and tried to explain what had happened.

“The king has been told by Tasnians that a FreeSword has murdered the king’s cousin and his nephew. The king no longer trusts the Brotherhood and will only allow it to remain whole if we bend the knee to him . . .” He paused to allow the muttering to settle down.

“Brother Nolphen swore that this was false, but the king refused to believe him and accused him of hiding the identity of the one who was responsible. Because of this, the king declared Brother Nolphen responsible, charged him for the death of the king’s cousin, found him guilty and had one of the Royal Guardsman run him through in the middle of court. He . . .” Grendelak’s voice faltered at the end, the intense feelings of guilt and grief pushing again to the surface and choking his attempts to continue.

His words were met with stunned silence and disbelief. Men were shaking their heads, others were staring into their mugs, and others reached out and comforted another with a simple hand on a shoulder. Grendelak stood on the table watching his Brothers, his family, deal with the blow they had just been struck. It was not just the death of a friend and leader, they had all dealt with death before, it was the demand of the king and the knowledge that their Brotherhood might not survive. Like Grendelak, the Brotherhood was their family, their friends, their most trusted brothers-in-arms. And it had just been threatened. There was no reasonable a way out—to swear fealty was to be destroyed through words, to not swear fealty was to be destroyed through death.

Grendelak choked back his own feelings and tried to reassure his Brothers. “You sit there as though we are already nothing more than a memory,” he chided as he pointed at one particularly forlorn young

Brother. He raised his hand and swung his finger across the room, "You all feel the loss of Brother Nolphen, you all fear this will end the Brotherhood . . ." He paused as many men nodded angrily. He nodded back. "I fear that as well. I fear the loss of you all, my Brothers, for whom else could I trust as I trust you? Who else would stand for me but you? Who else would I *want* to stand for me but you?" He ignored the calls of "No one!" and continued on, suddenly feeling as if he had to speak out or burst from the desire to keep the Brotherhood whole. "Since the time of the Kingseer our swords have been free and they shall remain that way til the end of time. No man commands our blades but the ones *we* decide are worthy to have such power. Any man that must take our sword through threats is not worthy of us!" Grendelak stopped for a moment, looking over the crowd of Brother's carefully. He saw them nodding in agreement and some began pounding on the table with their mugs.

Grendelak looked nervously to Felander, who nodded his encouragement. Grendelak swallowed hard, then reached over and drew his sword, holding it into the air and shaking it. "This is my sword, and it shall remain mine. It will not be commandeered by a king who consorts with Tasnian priests. This Brotherhood is all I have left in this world and I would not see it destroyed while there is breath in my body and blood in my veins. I remade my Oaths this afternoon." A cheer went up from the crowd at the reminder, not as strong as it had been in the Chamber of Blood, but encouraging nonetheless. "And I intend to keep them. We will not . . .", he slammed the hilt of his sword into the palm of his empty hand, "will not, I say, swear fealty in the manner of a knight."

Now the men were standing and somewhere in a corner a chant of "Our swords remain free" began softly but grew quickly. Grendelak was elated by the response and soon the chant grew to a roar and finally to cheering and cries of their dedication to each other and their determination to change the king's mind. Grendelak glanced at Felander, who gestured for Grendelak to join him.

Grendelak jumped gracefully from the table and went to stand by Felander, who smiled broadly and forced a mug of ale into Grendelak's hand. He slapped Grendelak on the back and took a deep swig of his own drink. "Well done, Grendelak, well done. I'm not sure how, but that minstrel was right."

Grendelak choked on a mouthful of ale and bent over to spit it out. He came up coughing and sputtering while Felander whacked his back repeatedly and laughed. He stopped laughing and held up his hands as if to ward his friend off when he saw the deadly serious look on the younger man's face.

"What minstrel?" Grendelak demanded.

“Calm down, Brother.”

“What minstrel!”

“A pretty young thing oh, about this high,” Felander held his hand parallel with the floor at about Grendelak’s chest, “long yellow hair, nice looking leg . . .” Felander winked and nudged Grendelak with his elbow.

“When?”

Felander stopped smiling and regarded Grendelak carefully. “You’re really upset by this, aren’t you?”

“Just tell me when and what she said,” Grendelak replied. His voice was neutral but his eyes were wild. What had she told him? Why? What in Tasni’s Cold Hall was going on with this skald and why did she insist on interfering in his life?

“This afternoon, while the armorer was measuring you up. She stopped me outside the Great Hall and well, I thought perhaps she was interested in a little afternoon break, if you know what I mean. She is a comely looking thing, for a half breed.”

“For a what?” Grendelak asked, his heart was pounding so hard and fast he thought it might be heard on the other side of Corrigar.

“A half breed,” Felander repeated. He rolled his eyes when Grendelak still looked confused. “You’ve been all over and you’ve never seen a half bred elf before?”

Grendelak shook his head. “You are sure?”

Felander nodded. “She had her hair pulled up on one side and the point on the ear that showed pretty much gave it away. Though I much preferred keeping my eyes on other things if you know what I mean.”

Grendelak felt a shiver run up and down his spine at his friend’s words. *She wasn’t lying about that, I wonder if the rest was true as well. Ah, I am cursed by Nindel the Trickster!* He thought despairingly. *What else does she know?*

Grendelak cleared his throat nervously. “So what did she say to you? Obviously you didn’t get an afternoon break because you weren’t gone that long, or maybe you’re just getting older and don’t need as long.” Grendelak tried to make his tone light.

The older man pretended offense. “I still need that long. She was a strange one, wasn’t interested in me, just wanted to talk about you. Said that when it came time, you should be the one to talk. Said something about a dream and that it was important that you do the talking. She was pretty serious about convincing me, didn’t even mind when I snuck a look down her dress. Usually they cuff you for that.” He winked knowingly.

Grendelak tried to ignore the sudden rush of jealousy he felt. After all, he had dismissed her out of hand just that morning. But something inside Grendelak felt as though she belonged to him and him alone. “A

dream? And you listened to her? Why?” Grendelak was suddenly frightened that her claims regarding true dreams were real as well.

“An old wives tale to be sure, but they say elves sometimes dream true. Some half bred elves too. When she told me I figured well, if the situation arises, I’ll push Grendelak. After all, I’ve no love of speaking in public and then you did so well during your Ceremony . . .” Felander shrugged helplessly, a sheepish grin on his face.

Grendelak nodded distractedly, his mind spinning. He had to find that minstrel and speak with her again. He had to know what she knew and why she was here—and more than just that rabid talk about helping him or whatever babble she had thrown at him this morning. There was more to this and he intended to discover what that was. And they needed to plan, because if the Brothers thought the king could be convinced by any means other than violence, they were wrong. He’d seen that in the king’s eyes and knew they were in for a hard time.

Felander leaned over and waved a hand in front of Grendelak’s face, trying to catch his attention. “Brother, what is going on?”

Grendelak waved him off. “Nothing, Brother, that I care to talk about now, but we will—eventually,” he assured his friend at the injured look on his face at his words. “Right now I have something I need to do and then we need to speak more on how the Brotherhood is going to deal with the king, because I have a feeling it’s going to get worse before it gets better.”

Felander nodded and smiled grimly. “I agree, Brother. And we need a new First Brother.”

Grendelak patted him on the back as he walked out, but said nothing. Words were meaningless when you were agreeing that you might soon be dead.

Grendelak had walked the streets for hours, his mind turning the current situation over and over in his mind. But even as he walked, his mind lost in thought, his eyes automatically picked out the roofline, making mental notes of the best routes to get to this inn or that inn and winking occasionally at the urchins he knew were hiding in one alley or another. He’d already mapped out a route from the Brother’s Friend to the Bed and Bottle, where he knew Duke Kellering was lodged and had noted the timing and routes of the city guard in the area.

When he realized what he was doing he had stopped, stunned. Was murder so ingrained in his being that he now planned it automatically? He couldn’t believe he was still considering killing this man after he’d seen Tibor in those Nordal-cursed robes that marked him as a priest of Tasni Deathwalker. He backtracked until he reached the King’s Biscuit,

joining a full, but not overflowing, common room. He looked for, and found, an open table in a corner out of habit.

He ignored the overtures of the serving wench and handed her a gold Trios, muttering only the directive, "Ale", before turning his attention to the table in front of him. He stared at it even when she returned, sliding the mug across the table to him in her hurry to find a more sociable patron to ply with her wiles. Grendelak stared disconsolately at the mug, pushing it around with his fingers for the better part of a glass, reconsidering his life.

He'd thought it bad enough when he'd only had to worry about what the Brothers might think if they knew what he'd been doing these past five years. But now? Now Grendelak was responsible for another murder, the murder of a Brother. It was his actions the First Brother had been executed for and his wrongs that had led to this. His poor judgment had driven the Brotherhood into forfeiture of its right to stand free after centuries of honorable existence. No matter how hard he tried to convince himself that he'd done nothing wrong by fulfilling his Oath to Tibor, no matter how hard he told himself that if he had but known he was committing murder and not merely protecting his charge, he could not convince himself that he was right.

He dropped deeper into despair the more he considered it. He could not return to the Brotherhood. If they discovered his secret, they would kill him. And well he would deserve it. *Perhaps I ought to tell them and get it over with. Then I would not be an Oathbreaker, merely an assassin.* He snorted contemptuously at his own description. *I should kill myself. I cannot dig myself from this hole and cannot possibly do any good. Everything I touch is brought to ruin. Better to die than fail.*

And therein lay the problem. He had failed. Failed to judge correctly, failed to act when called, and failed his Oaths to be an honorable Brother. He stared dejectedly at the ale in his mug, hoping for some accident to befall him before he had to truly make a decision.

Manx stood behind Grendelak, staring at his hunched shoulders for almost half a glass. She shook her head at his posture that, to her, indicated he was on the verge of complete despair. She knew how to read people and knew that something had happened this night in the palace, but wasn't certain what. She only knew that Grendelak was important to what had begun here and that if he gave up the entire kingdom might end up in the hands of those who believed the Dark One should have dominion over everyone and everything. The King was already listening to Tasnian whispers. She could not let that happen. That Grendelak was the Assassin she had been searching for these past few years she knew with a certainty that few ever experienced, but how he would accomplish what must be done only Shalitor, the goddess of prophecy, knew.

She felt some remorse at misleading him with her talk of dreams. She did have some, that was true, but much of what she told him had not come from her dreams, it had come from elsewhere. But if he were unwilling to believe elven dreams, would he believe an ancient Tale that some few could use to manipulate the future?

Finally she could stand his attitude no more. If he was at the crossroads she believed him to be at then he would need her to choose the right path. She moved silently around him, letting her cloak brush up against his arm, then continued past him. A few steps beyond him she turned and glanced invitingly back over her shoulder at him. She was not disappointed when she saw his eyes travel up from her cloak to her face and saw the recognition in his eyes. Manx stopped for a moment and stared at him, raising an eyebrow before she turned and weaved her way through the tables and patrons in the common room, headed for the stairs that led to the inn's accommodations.

She did not turn again, confident that Grendelak would follow. As she reached the landing of the first flight of stairs she smiled at the sound of footfalls behind her. She stepped off the landing and headed down the hallway, stopping at the door to her room and quickly unlocking it before stepping inside. She stood on the other side of the door, the key in her hand poised near the lock, wondering if she should determine how desperate he was to see her. She had fed information to his friend this afternoon in the hope that it would pique his interest enough to return. But how much did it pique that interest? That was a worthy question.

Manx opted against locking the door. She had already decided after his reaction this morning that she would not go to him, he would have to come to her. But she had the impression from watching him that if barriers were placed in the way he just might walk away. And she needed to talk to him to achieve her goals as much as he needed to talk to her to stay alive. She backed away from the door and leaned against the wall, waiting for Grendelak.

She smiled as she heard his footsteps outside her door and waited patiently for him to make his decision. Being half elven she had the benefit of a longer life than a Tar and had parlayed that into a patience that almost matched that of her mother's Tel kin. Almost. Unfortunately the number of mixed Tel-Tar offspring was not nearly as great as some believed, and Manx had found that children of both races were equally disparaging of those children with a mixed heritage. She had grown up rather frustrated and, as a result, had a fairly quick temper that she no longer even tried to control.

She listened to his shuffling steps outside as he stopped, moved to leave, returned and walked off down the hall. After more than ten minutes

of listening she moved to the door and opened it to find Grendelak standing with his eyes downcast, a pensive look on his face.

She put her hands on her hips and exhaled loudly. “Well, I’ve been waiting for some time, are you coming in or are you going to shuffle around the hall like a lovesick farm boy?”

She almost regretted the outburst when he raised his eyes to meet hers and she saw the depth of the pain and doubt in them. She reached out and took his hand, leading him inside and setting him on the divan near the window. She sat by his feet, keeping his hand in hers and sat with him, waiting.

Grendelak wasn’t sure why he’d followed her. She’d been nothing but trouble for him thus far and though he wanted to know more, he wasn’t sure it would help him at this point. He stared down at the slender fingers intertwined with his rough, calloused one and wondered why she had done that. He took his free hand and felt the back of her hand, wondering why he’d never noticed how soft a woman’s hands were before. He’d been orphaned so early he didn’t recall what women were for other than bedding and the only true father figure he’d had, Felander, had never disabused him of that notion. He wondered briefly if perhaps she was inviting him into her bed or trying to comfort him.

“Why are you doing this to me?” he finally croaked, his voice breaking.

“Because I must. Because you are the one that must do what must be done. Because you are the one I was looking for.”

“Why? I’ve decided not to bother with Duke Kellering. You did what you had to do, now can’t you go away?” For some reason Grendelak had suddenly decided that Manx was the source of his troubles. Everything had been going wrong since that night in the Ale Wife and it all circled back around to her. If she left, perhaps things would right themselves.

“What happened this evening?” she asked quietly.

Grendelak disentangled his hand from hers and stood abruptly, stepping over her and pacing about the room.

“Grendelak? What took place this evening at the palace?” Manx pushed a bit harder. When he just shook his head and continued pacing she stood and moved to block his path. “Tell me, now, Grendelak. What happened?”

Grendelak grabbed her shoulders and held her angrily. “He killed Nolphen,” he growled through clenched teeth. “He had him run through after we refused to swear fealty.”

“For no other reason than that?” Manx asked, surprised.

“Nolphen was charged with the murder of Count Graydon.” Grendelak said angrily. His hands tightened around her shoulders. “He was executed for the death of the man *I* killed. And I did NOTHING!” Grendelak’s voice had risen to a scream and he shoved Manx away roughly, wincing

slightly when he saw her fall to the floor. He rolled his eyes, expecting her to wail and cry as women were wont to do when treated roughly.

To his surprise she sat there, her skirt in disarray and showing much too much leg for a proper lady, mumbling to herself. He watched in amazement as she got up, brushed her hair away from her face and moved the desk where she began shuffling through scrolls and parchments. She chose one and began reading to herself, her tiny face scrunching up as she concentrated on the strange writing in front of her.

“Was he the . . . First Brother? Is that the right title for the head of the FreeSwords?” she suddenly asked.

“Yes,” Grendelak answered, confused at her actions.

“That’s what that line means!” she exclaimed, and then bent over the desk with the parchment, picked up a quill, and began writing something on the paper.

“What line? What in the name of Am’Ethaan are you blathering about, woman?” he asked, exasperated with this woman who acted like no woman he’d ever met before.

“*The Innocent First shall die without complaint,*” Manx read from the parchment and then held it up so he could see. “Right there,” she pointed, “it’s written in plain elven, don’t you know how to read?”

He gave her a withering look. “Not elven, I don’t. Not many do,” he added defensively.

She rolled her eyes. “And you call yourself educated. Hmmp!”

“What does it mean?”

“It means, Grendelak, that your First Brother, Nolphen was it?” she glanced at him for confirmation. At his nod she continued. “It means Nolphen was *The Innocent First* and that soon this situation will escalate into a war.”

“Do you write down your ‘dreams’ then?” Grendelak asked, still confused.

Manx shook her head and laughed. “Me? No, I am no Seeress,” she said as she gestured grandly at the parchments. “These are pieces of The Tale . . . A very old collection of prophecies.” She saw his brow furrow at her words and she tried to explain. “The Tale is all the dreams and visions of the Seeresses. Those who are touched by Shalitor, goddess of prophecy.” When he still look confused she sighed. “Like Victoria Kingseer,” she offered.

“Ahhhh . . . now I understand.”

“I thought you might,” she grumbled. “Everyone knows *her* name but do they know the names of the hundreds of other Seeress? No. They have been forgotten and all that remains is the words they spoke, written down and, hopefully, written down correctly. Victoria Kingseer was driven by

Shalitor, no doubt about that, to prophecy the way she did but her prophecies are so confused and unclear that she made it harder than fighting off a fist of orcs with nothing but a stick to find the truth of what she *really* said.”

“*When those who are not knights become like knights, rebellion is at hand. They shall desire unrest and a free sword will quench that thirst. The rightful king shall be put to the sword and a killer of men will sit your throne.*” Grendelak quoted; proud he could still recall the words he’d been taught as an Inductee.

Manx was obviously not impressed. “See what I mean? It isn’t *They* it’s *Those who serve the night*. By Lordston’s sitar I swear that Tasnian priests followed the Kingseer around and changed every last one of her prophecies to remove any reference to themselves.”

“But that’s just a warning, right?” Grendelak asked carefully.

“Oh, I wish that’s the way it worked,” she shook her head ruefully. “No, Grendelak, it’s all going to happen. The Brotherhood will swear fealty, one way or another. It’s really quite interesting to see the lengths people will go to try to avoid a prophecy. What I find really annoying is those who go looking for one and then, when they don’t like the answer they find, they try to avoid it, not realizing that just because they dodged fate doesn’t mean the prophecy didn’t come true.”

“I don’t understand. You told me this morning that we are not the playthings of the gods, that we have freewill?”

“You do. But let’s say that you are ‘*a killer of men*’.”

“I have neither the desire nor the background to ‘*sit the throne*,’” he protested.

She held her finger up to silence him. “Let’s just pretend, shall we?” When he nodded she went on. “Very well. Let’s say you are this killer of men Victoria Kingseer spoke of—you realize, of course, that her name is really Victoria Fullmouth, not Kingseer, right?” When he nodded in agreement she took a breath and began again. “Good, not everyone is aware of that. It shows someone tried to give you a solid education. Anyway, let’s say you decide right now to run. You leave Corrigar and never return. You can’t sit on the throne then, can you? No, so you would think that because you aren’t there that none of Fullmouth’s prophecy will come to pass, right?”

“That isn’t true?”

“Of course not,” Manx replied impatiently as she threw her hands in the air. “It’s not true because her words only describe the person that will sit on the throne. Many others have killed men, you know, not just you. Almost every man in the army or the FreeSwords qualifies, and many others besides. No matter what, Grendelak, someone who has killed other men will sit on the throne. Someone who may not have the best interests of

Corrigar at heart. Someone who might be one of the Dark One's pawns." Manx looked at him seriously. "'Do you understand how it works now?'"

Grendelak's squinted as he tried to parse her words. She spoke so damn erratically it was hard to catch everything the first time. Grendelak was quick, or so he'd always been told, and his eyes widened in amazement as he finally unraveled the meaning in what she said.

"Good," she said smugly, "then you understand the problem with the Tale. It goes on, whether we want it to or not. Even though you can choose your own fate, it does not change the Tale. And have no doubts, the Tale includes Fullmouth's prophecies even if no one has them all in one place yet. That's why the Tale never mentions any names. Because it isn't telling us specifically *who*, it's just telling us about something that will happen. The king of Corrigar is going to die and *someone* is going to take his place. Who that someone might be is somewhat up to chance, we only know they will fit the description. We can try to manipulate things so that they come out the way we want, if we're aware of it in the first place, but many times we don't realize a prophecy was fulfilled until *after* it's already happened. Lord Redeemer has often said, '*The Tale does not own us, it only owns the world.*'"

"What are you?" Grendelak asked, looking her over carefully.

Manx tossed back her hair and struck a charming pose. "I'm a minstrel, Grendelak. At least that's how I pay my way."

"Yes, but what else are you? I've never met a minstrel who carried around dusty scrolls and cracked parchment and worried about prophecies before."

"That, my friend, is something you don't need to know right now. Just trust me. That's all I ask."

Grendelak snorted. "Trust you, why?"

"Have I been wrong thus far?" she countered, her face thrust into the air arrogantly.

"No, but—"

"Then trust me. I won't lead you wrong. I promise."

Grendelak sighed. "I suppose I have little choice. You haven't left me alone since the Ale Wife and I suspect you'll hound me if I don't."

"A truer observation was not made in The Tale, Grendelak." She strolled over and sat on the divan, and patting the seat next to her. "Come, sit down and tell me why you paid a full gold for that slop they call ale and then sat staring at it without touching a drop for almost a glass."

Grendelak's face fell. He'd managed to push the pain of his actions away while listening to Manx's sweet voice instruct him on this "Tale". He shook his head and turned, heading for the door.

"Grendelak, please. If I am to help you then I must know everything," she implored.

Grendelak stopped abruptly, and his shoulders tensed. He turned and walked to the divan, then sat next to her, his head resting in his hands. When she reached up and began running her fingers through his still oiled ringlets he broke.

In all his life he could not remember ever crying and yet, here he was, sobbing like a small child who'd lost his favorite toy. Manx said nothing, just leaned her head against his shoulder and moved her hand from his head to his other shoulder and let him cry himself out.

When he finished, he angrily wiped at the tears, embarrassed by his reaction. He turned his head away from her and told her everything that had occurred, including Tibor.

Manx listened intently, taking in everything but saying nothing. When he had completed his tale and still she had said nothing, Grendelak grew upset.

"Well? Do you have nothing to say?"

"I am not a priest, to give you atonement for what you have done, Grendelak. But if it makes you feel any better you have been played and played well."

"What?"

"Don't you see? Someone, *They who serve the night* most likely, wants unrest in Corrigar. *And a free sword will quench their thirst.* You, Grendelak, are that FreeSword."

"But—"

"No, Grendelak. I am certain I am right. You are that FreeSword. By using you to kill members of the Corrigarian royal family and then whispering of a conspiracy by FreeSwords to the king the Tasnians have sown discontent and unrest. They have twisted Fullmouth's words to obtain what they desire—a hold on your king, a way to slowly gain control of Corrigar and, I suspect, the FreeSwords." She nodded her head slowly. "Yes, that is what they want. Once they have helped the king secure the fealty of the FreeSwords they will continue to help him in rooting out those who are a 'threat' to the king. Anyone who would resist their presence in Corrigar will be charged and executed, most likely by FreeSwords. It is the same game used by one of them already, to manipulate you. Tasnians are sly and subtle but once they discover a tactic that works they will abuse it until it is found out. But this one is more serious. It is not your honor that will be broken, but the royal family. Played to its logical conclusion, this song ends with a Tasnian on the throne."

"But I killed men for money." Grendelak whispered despondently.

"Yes, and for that you should feel remorse. But do not let it stop you from choosing a different path *now*. That is what I tried to tell you this morning. Your path is your own, you need not travel the one others have

forced you onto. If all you tell me is true, you can wallow in remorse for past actions, or save your Brotherhood, and with the Brotherhood, save the entire Kingdom. Choose, Grendelak, but choose wisely. Fullmouth's prophecy is not complete," Manx hinted with a gleam in her eye.

Grendelak stood and turned to face her. "You can't mean . . ."

Manx returned his look of horror with a bright smile. "Oh yes, Grendelak, I do. I mean to see you on the throne of Corrigar."

Chapter 5

Grendelak stood at the back of the huge Chamber of Blood, trying to stay in the shadows and unnoticed. He had come back and taken a room at the Brother's Friend last night, and fearing that he would not sleep, lay down to get what rest he could. He had slept through the night, which was just as well because he really wasn't interested in interacting directly with his Brothers. Felander had stopped by his room first thing in the morning and told him that election of a new First Brother was to occur. While he was out last night, Felander had harangued the more prominent brothers to hold an election before making any further plans. Grendelak had agreed in principle, but turned cold when Felander suggested he be the new First Brother. Having been away since his induction, he hardly knew anything about running the Brotherhood, and having been doing what he knew he was doing all that time, he did not believe he was worthy to stand for First Brother.

So now he stood in the shadows, watching his Brothers shout and scramble, several attempting to make their claim heard over the general noise. He would raise his sword to salute his choice, but otherwise he would not participate. He wanted nothing to draw attention to him because he knew Felander was right—his recent, impassioned speech would be remembered, and attention could get him elected to a post he neither wanted nor deserved.

So far he saw few worthy of his sword. He wondered if this would have been easier in the old days when the swords were raised to the winner of a vast melee. They would all just be spectators to the fight, raising their swords to the final winner.

But that practice had fallen out of fashion with the FreeSwords a century or more ago. The Brothers realized that harming each other in the ring not only resulted in occasional deaths, but also created deep-rooted hatreds that were difficult to overcome.

Finally, seven FreeSwords stood on the dais, having garnered enough immediate support to stand for election. Three of them were unknown to Grendelak. His benefactor from yesterday—Kieran Chace—was one of the four he did know, but Kieran was too young yet. He clearly had less knowledge of how to run the Brotherhood than Grendelak. The other three were fellow inductees from his time training, and all three of them had a mere two Oath Cuts. Two Oath Cuts? Where were the experienced men? The FreeSwords needed a man with experience in combat, a man like Felander who had spent time with the First Brother, learning from him. But the King's actions had probably insured that only men of strong convictions—those who would swear fealty or those who would go to war—would stand for First Brother. And experienced men weren't generally the kind to be pre-decided. So it went. Well, whomever it was, Grendelak could do naught but advise him, given the chance.

The men each gave their speeches, each promising to fight for free swords or promising to kneel themselves to the King and thereby save the Brotherhood from kneeling, or cautioning that the only course was to offer vows to the King. Grendelak noticed that none of them garnered much support; there wasn't a lot of cheering or jeering. Men were afraid and the mood was somber. They were searching for the leader that would keep their lives from ending or their freedom from becoming chained. Grendelak listened to those he had trained with closely, hoping for some indication that there was yet hope. Tresset, the first of those two to speak, was a wiry man and, he recalled, quite short of stature even for a FreeSword. But he was fast, Grendelak had seen him fight. He was also temperamental and very sure of himself, something that was generally considered both a good and bad trait for a FreeSword. He counseled outright war with the King, claiming that the FreeSwords would be hunted as long as he sat the throne. Anywhere else in the capital—even in this room in times past—such talk would get you killed. But they were gathered to replace a leader that was killed by the King for crimes he did not commit. And Tresset wasn't the first to speak of war, just the most forceful.

The other man he recalled from his training days was Donnel. Patient, willing to wait for the right moment to make a move, Donnel was deadly in his persistence. Grendelak hadn't had much experience with him in the past, but he remembered being told as an Inductee that if he was matched with Donnel he should take his time, for Donnel counted on wearing down opponents and then seizing their mistakes as opportunity to strike.

Grendelak wondered if that was why the man counseled swearing fealty—to gain time to work the Brotherhood out of the situation they were in.

Grendelak was disappointed. Neither plan did what must be done—guaranteed the Brotherhood’s safety. Tomorrow soldiers would surround this building. Either you sallied up and fought them—dying in the process—or you swore fealty to a king—your Oaths dying in the process. No, Grendelak’s man would try both—negotiations and fighting when necessary, and also take steps to protect the FreeSwords from annihilation. The man proposing such a plan had not yet spoken. Finally, they came to the last man—one Backu that Grendelak remembered as opinionated and quick-tempered. He was another that Grendelak remembered from his training, and Grendelak expected no more from Backu than from the others he had heard thus far. But he listened; hoping to hear something that indicated the man had an open mind and would search for solutions that did not end the FreeSwords within the week.

Backu nodded to Felander, then wet his lips nervously and began. “I stand before you in the place of another man. None of us here on the dais are worthy or ready to lead the Brotherhood in such a trying time. There are a few who could, most of them not here and not able to present their claims. But there is one who is here, and is too humble to stand before you, staking the claim that most of us know would be strong enough. One who has faced down the King and led us out of our despair, forced us to think when we would have stood in shock after Brother Nolphen was vilely murdered by a King who used him as a pawn in a game we care not to play.” He paused as a murmuring swept across the chamber. A few Brothers nearby chanced glances in Grendelak’s direction.

Grendelak froze with fear. The man couldn’t be talking about him, could he? Murderer, assassin, man who loathed himself more than his enemies. They could not be considering actually forcing him to lead them in this time of need . . .

His thoughts were interrupted when Backu continued. “There is a contingent of us who would speak for the one who is too humble to speak for himself. A large contingent. Though it break with our age old tradition of representing yourself, I stand here in the shoes of Grendelak Mishtar, recently returned from Old Nordalia, who told the King that we would never bow, who would have stood and died with Nolphen had the First Brother and Felander not forced him to step away because we, the FreeSwords, needed him. One who has more Oath Cuts in five years than I, and the word is remained true to each one of them. A sword raised in my direction is raised not for me, but for Grendelak. And if enough of you raise swords for Grendelak, I have been told that he will accept the position of First Brother.

Grendelak felt a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach as none of the other six brothers standing complained about this break with tradition. He was not a newly Oathed inductee, the result of this sham was obvious. Not knowing the truth, and looking for anyone capable of leading them out of this situation, they would nearly to a man raise their swords for the very man who had been instrumental in causing the death of the First Brother.

Felander climbed the dais. "Very well, since we have no First Brother to oversee this proceeding, I will count the blades. Please understand that I have a personal preference that should be obvious to all. If the count of blades is anywhere near close, I will invite those who stand to recount. Any objections?"

The room was silent except the shuffling of men situating themselves to have room to draw their swords.

"Excellent. I will start on this end closest to me." He placed his hand on Backu's shoulder. "Those who would follow Grendelak Mishtar and his shadow-sword Backu?"

Grendelak shuddered as the sound of over a thousand blades leaving their scabbards and rising into the air hissed across the large chamber.

"Is there any man on the dais who would consider the question unanswered? Need we continue, my Brothers?" Felander asked, looking across the line of men.

All of the men on the dais except Kieran Chace slid their swords from their scabbards and raised them. Several dozen men about the room—apparently supporters of those on the dais—raised their swords also.

"You stand at issue, Kieran Chace?" Felander inquired loud enough to be heard across the chamber.

"I am young, Felander, but I am no fool. What Grendelak would do with the Brotherhood would break it. I have heard of his words with the King, he would fight our very King and the King's men as if they were enemies. We will become as an army under his leadership, and he will lead that army to ruin. Better to seek compromise with the King than rise in rebellion against him after all of these years," Kieran responded, a note of resignation in his voice.

"Very well, you have had your say. Do you dispute the results of the vote?" Felander countered blandly.

Kieran's face clouded. "No, I do not. But I take contract in the North today, for I cannot stand to fight against my sovereign King. I warn you, brothers, do not war upon your ruler. Find an alternate solution or we will be doomed." With that, he left the dais, walking to the doors and out without once looking back. Twenty or so men followed him out.

Felander fixed his gaze directly on Grendelak, meeting his friend's eyes across the raised swords. "What say you brother? Will you stand as our

First Brother in this time of need?" Many heads turned toward Grendelak, and swords were put away rapidly.

Grendelak pushed himself off of the wall. Now was the time to tell the truth. Now was the time to let them kill him and present his head to the King. But deep down, he knew that would no longer solve the problem. He knew that the King was using the deaths as an excuse, and with his head on a pike would just seek a new excuse. To save the FreeSwords, he had to continue being a dishonorable oath breaker. He swallowed hard, and then in as firm a voice as he could muster he said "I will, if it is the Brotherhood's wish."

Men cheered as a path to the dais was cleared, and Grendelak tread up to the dais. Once the words had come out of his mouth, his mind and body had both started working. He knew he needed to decide what they would do, and decide it quickly. And he knew that they would do whatever he decided. There would be details to work out that he had no way of knowing how to plan, but others could worry about that. For now he needed to start them in action.

When he reached the dais, he climbed up the three steps and shook the hand of each candidate. He selected one who favored outright war, and one who favored negotiations, and asked them to stay with him. Then he turned to the assembled brothers.

"My Brothers. We are in very trying times, with an angry King and no allies at hand. There are those who would ally with us, but to do so would guarantee civil war. I have no desire to see civil war in Corrigar, and I certainly have no desire to see the FreeSwords start it. But we will defend ourselves. We must, or we must disband. Those are our options in the face of the current orders of the King." He paused to wet his lips. There was complete silence in the Chamber of Blood.

"To that end, these three men," he gestured at Felander and the two men he had asked to stay on the dais with him, "one favoring war, one favoring negotiated truce, and one who sat long in counsel with the Brother Nolphen will be my advisors. I want to consider everything before committing us to any actions, and these three will help me do so. But the very first thing that we must do is make certain that we are not the victims of a mass arrest. We, Brothers, are moving the order out of the city. And we're moving it today. Take only your personal belongings and whatever Felander asks you to carry. Each man should draw food from the kitchens for two weeks. We shouldn't need it, but we must be certain. Four wagons with the core wealth of the Brotherhood will be loaded, and we as a group will act as caravan guards for the wagons. We leave today."

The outburst that began as murmuring exploded into shouts and yells throughout the chamber. This was apparently totally unexpected.

Grendelak raised his hands for silence and eventually received it. “Brothers, if we stay in Corrigan, the King is going to send his guard to arrest us. Each of us that does not swear fealty will be given to the headsman. We *must* leave today. And we must take our wealth with us. We are fighting men, used to travel, it should not be difficult to leave before sundown. We will go to the Wayside first. Where we will go from there I do not yet know, we will have to consider our options but at least we will have time to consider them. Remember to take tents—there is not enough space at the Wayside for us all, and we do not know where we head from there.” Grendelak stood silent again while the Brothers again began to raise their voices, and at the moment he expected it to grow too loud for him to be heard he barked, “Move! We are leaving today!”

Men began moving toward the large doors immediately. Felander pulled on his sleeve lightly. Grendelak turned to his friend and raised an eyebrow. “Yes, Brother?”

“We cannot take everything of value in a few hours. We’ll be lucky to get the brothers out in a few hours. And the Hall of the FreeSwords would be undefended if we did,” Felander cautioned.

“Then send them out in groups. But get them out of the city today. To stay here, where the King can send men after us at his leisure is to invite outright war in the streets of the capital,” Grendelak replied calmly.

“You’re more wise than I am. I would have sent emissaries. But I was an emissary last time, and it didn’t go all that well.”

“Exactly. And he’s already made the proclamation and is still angry. That means we’re in for a visit if we stay within his reach while his anger simmers. Better to lose all of our wealth than our lives or our Oath.” Grendelak observed.

“It will be as the First Brother orders,” Felander said with a quick nod of his head.

Grendelak suddenly realized that he should get used to being called “First Brother”, at least for the time being. How cruel the gods were to place this burden upon his shoulders. He turned and walked down the steps and slowly out of the nearly empty Chamber of Blood, wondering what he should do next.

His feet took him out through the front doors, into the street. There, waiting outside, was the skald. She was in a stunning split dress. Nothing he would suggest riding in, but one that definitely showed off her legs. He smiled ruefully. Somehow he had known she would be here. He waved to her and headed her way.

“Well, are you the First Brother yet, or must another die?” she asked pointedly.

"I would have let another take the position, but my brothers had something else in mind."

"A good thing they did. Whoever was raised to First Brother was likely doomed to a fate worse than Nolphen was. You, or one like you, must be the First Brother sooner or later, Grendelak. I had hoped it would be you, and sooner. The less deaths in this the better," she said cryptically.

"Well, it was me. I am not at all distraught to inform you that I and all of the FreeSwords leave town this day. That would make this goodbye, Manx the Skald."

Manx smiled patiently and shook her head, amused. "Grendelak, have you not discovered yet that I will not—I believe I cannot—let you leave me? You are going to be in the middle of politics that involve sword and tongue both. You are going to be at the center of a cyclone that will sweep you and all of the FreeSwords away without someone at your side to advise you. That someone is me. I am coming with you. My horse is packed, and I assure you that I will not hold you up."

"And if I say no?" he countered bluntly.

"Then I follow you until you accept my counsel or kill me," she told him honestly.

Grendelak's face darkened at her words. "I do not kill for no reason."

"I know that, Grendelak. You should remind *yourself* of that more often. The events around you are not all your doing, you were a pawn in an evil political game. Put the past in the past and lead these men. I tell you again, you can lead them or you can watch their blood flow in the streets, which is up to you."

"Very well. You keep telling me I'm really a gentleman that got trapped by vile priests, so I'll let you stay. Someone around me should know the truth and still be able to look in my eyes," he replied, his tone resigned.

"An it please you," she curtsied, bowing her head slightly to hide the knowing smile on her face.

"It pleases me little, half-breed. If I have no choice in this either, then I will make the best of it." He turned and headed back inside, calling for Felander. He was only slightly surprised to find Manx walking along behind him.

He found Felander standing just inside the door, speaking to a group of nearly one hundred men who had tied white armbands on their sleeves. Grendelak paused for a moment to listen.

"Each of you must lead your men out by a different route, and remember that you were chosen for your actual battle experience. Do not get into a position where you have to fight if you can avoid it. Now go to your men and get them moving." The crowd broke up.

“What was that all about, Felander?” Grendelak asked.

“Those are the men I selected to lead each group. They will exit the city in groups of twenty, with each taking a separate route. Since we have no ranks, I had the men in charge tie strips of white cloth around their arms so that the men with them knew who was leading. We should get everyone out but those of us who are staying with the wagons. I have picked twenty of the best to ride with the wagons, and two of the seasoned caravaners to hide inside the wagons, just in case. The wagons are around back, and are nearly loaded. The priests are having fits about the icons though.” Felander explained at length.

“No problem there. Tell the priests that they and their icons stay. That is simple, Felander. They are not Brothers, they should not be threatened by any soldiers that come here looking for us,” Grendelak told him.

“Some of the brothers will not like going without the priests,” Felander observed.

“If we permanently move, we can send for those friendly to us. Until then remind the men that a priest traveling with us would be a target just as we are.”

“Very well. You go with Backu’s group. You will of course lead it.”

“I go with whichever group is the last out. I presume that will be the wagons.” Grendelak replied evenly in a tone that said he would brook no argument on the subject.

Felander blanched. “That would not be wise. The First Brother and all of our treasure might be too much temptation for the King or any number of cut-throat brigands.”

“The brigands will be tempted no matter what, and I will risk the King’s wrath. I must see that everyone else makes it out, it is one of the few things about being First Brother I understand well.”

“As you would have it, First Brother.” Felander responded shortly.

“I’m noticing that you only call me First Brother when you disagree with me, Felander.”

“Yes, First Brother, that is true.” Felander replied before he turned to go.

“Felander? Thank you for not making that more difficult,” Grendelak told his friend gratefully.

The older man turned around with a crooked grin on his face. “You always were a danger-hunter Grendelak. I had reserved you a place with the wagons already, but I had to try.” Felander waved and walked away.

Felander sat at the front of the wagons, impatiently waiting for everyone else. Manx was next to Grendelak, mounted in the same dress she had worn earlier, somehow making it seem as if the dress was made for riding.

Twenty other men were mounted or in the process of mounting, and two men were already seated on the bench of each wagon.

“Mount up and let us be gone!” Felander shouted.

“What of the others?” Manx asked from Grendelak’s right.

“They are all gone or on their way. Two groups out each of the gates, most should be far and away by now, as we should be. If I judge the King correctly, he will have soldiers here before breakfast if he discovers we’re leaving in large numbers,” Grendelak replied gravely.

“I think you judge correctly. He must destroy the bond between FreeSword and King completely before this is over. Now would be a good time for that, I think.”

Once everyone was mounted, Felander moved forward, thrusting one hand in the air and pointing toward the Gate. It was just after dinner time so the streets were nearly empty. The night revelers were not yet out, and the daytime merchants were home already. The makeshift caravan moved relatively slowly, and Grendelak found himself worrying about things he could not control.

Grendelak turned to Manx, attempting to occupy his mind. “So in this tale of yours, will the person who decides to fulfill it, will that be the one?”

“There is no way to be certain. What if two people know about it and try to fulfill it? What if no one knows about it, but ten people want to be the one on the throne in the end?” she replied in a hushed voice so as not to be overheard.

“Ah. So you are betting that it will be me, when I do not even aspire to leading my own Brothers, but it could be almost any man in Corrigan. Or outside of Corrigan for that matter,” he said thoughtfully.

Manx nodded reluctantly. “Well, yes. But I have done some research, and believe that you are the one that would give Corrigan what it needs. Stability. Others would do it, some better, some worse, but you would be the best of many choices. So I will try to convince you that to protect your Brothers you must do this thing.”

Grendelak laughed at the earnest tone of her voice. “Try all you like, this is not for me. A free sword, a signed contract. These things are for me. A throne and the money-counter’s tallies? I am no more suited to them than I am suited to being a scullery boy.”

“Scullery boy is not that far from street urchin, if you consider it carefully.”

“You are a vexing wench with a mouth that speaks too much,” he said sharply.

Manx straightened in her saddle. “And you are an ugly lummock that is too buried in self-pity to see the right way to deal with a situation. Still, we must deal with what we have,” she shot back tartly, fixing him with a self-satisfied look on her face.

He was just beginning to form a retort when a familiar voice echoed across the street. "See Captain? Did I not tell you they would sneak away like thieves?"

Another voice, one that he did not recognize, shouted down the street "Close the gates! Do not let any of the FreeSwords through!"

Grendelak turned to find the source of the voices. In the mouth of a small alley sat four men on horse, three of them in the Green and Gold cloaks of the King's guard, one in the black robes with red trim of a Tasnian priest. The familiarity of the voice sank solidly home as Grendelak looked directly into the eyes of Tibor. The old familiarity was there in those bright blue eyes, but it was mingled with contempt and amusement.

Grendelak pulled his emotions into control fiercely. There was no time now for personal revenge. "FreeSwords! To the gates! Do not let them close!" He spurred his horse forward, rushing with his men toward the gate. He was somewhat surprised to find Manx riding along next to him. He turned to tell her to go back, when he saw she was holding a long, thin blade. Somewhere between a castle sword and a rapier, he had no idea where it came from, but she held it like she knew how to use it. He decided to talk with her later about that.

Felander and the Brothers at the front of the caravan reached the gates before Grendelak could catch up to them. "Fight them only if you must, but keep these gates open!" He yelled as he entered the fray. There were more guards on the gate than normal, meaning they had indeed been prepared for just such an occasion. Not for the FreeSwords, Grendelak knew in a flash of insight, but for him. A guard captain and a priest of Tasni here, at this gate? Not likely they were that thick at every gate. He slashed down at the first man he came to in the King's colors, but the guards who were closing the gates had already stopped trying and were defending themselves.

"Wagons! Through the gates!" Grendelak bellowed, trying to be heard over the sound of fighting even as a guard swept up at him with a hand and a half sword. He parried the strike, and was surprised when Manx's long rapier-like sword entered the gap between the guard's helm and chain shirt, sliding easily into his chest. Seeing the man was no longer a threat, Grendelak wheeled his horse around to guard the backs of the wagons.

As he galloped up to the wagons, he saw two guardsmen stagger back from the them, both with crossbow bolts quivering in their chests. Either this captain was a fool, or he did not believe Tibor's warning that they would be coming this way. There were only the two guards to hit the wagons from behind. "Go! And don't stop!" he yelled at the wagon drivers. He turned to find Manx still shadowing him closely. "Stay with them, get

them out the gate,” he shouted over the screams of dying men and scared horses. He did not wait for a response, but turned his horse toward the alley mouth and kicked its sides. He pulled up just out of sword range of the Captain. “Remember Captain,” he said loudly, “we did not start this fight. We will not start any fights. But we will defend ourselves. This fight was started by taking counsel from a Tasnian priest. And when I come back to kill him . . .” He pointed the tip of his sword at Tibor, “You should not be with him, for I will kill any who attempt to defend him.” Again without waiting for a response, he spun his horse and galloped after the wagons and Manx. Going through the gate, he saw eight or nine guards and two FreeSwords down. None of them were moving. He kicked his horse’s sides and rode harder to get past the sight, not slowing down until they were all well beyond the gate and on their way to the Wayside.

Grendelak stood and put his hands on his hips, twisting his back this way and that, trying to erase the weariness that seemed to seep into every muscle in his back. After two hours the men were finally settled outside the Wayside to his satisfaction. There had been little grumbling as most of the men had silently agreed that those in charge should stay inside so they might more easily confer on their next move while the others pitched tents and started fires here and there, drawing lots for watches. Grendelak was pleased with the way they handled the division of tasks amongst themselves. The more experienced Brothers taking charge and instructing the younger without complaint.

Finally Grendelak felt comfortable enough to head for the inn, wondering where Felander and Manx had run off to. He hadn’t seen Felander since the ambush at the gates and Manx had surprised him by leaving his side once they’d arrived at the Wayside. He’d watched her heft her pack over her shoulder and head inside shortly after they’d arrived.

Grendelak swung open the doors and sauntered past the Brothers lounging in the sitting room. He grunted a greeting as he walked past them, heading for the common room to see if he could find Felander or Manx. The common room was full of Brothers, most of them sitting at tables or on benches and a few on the floor. Most were talking quietly to one another but Grendelak noticed that quite a few kept glancing furtively toward a corner of the room. Grendelak craned his head to try and find the source of their surreptitious looks.

His face took on a look of surprise as he found it. Manx was sitting in the corner, the buttons of her riding shirt half undone and her sleeves pushed up over her elbows. Grendelak could see the glint of metal in the firelight coming from under that shirt and noticed that she had her head bowed as if she were concentrating on something in her lap. Grendelak

moved through the room toward her but pulled up short as he saw what certainly must have been the source of the men's interest. Across Manx's knees was the blade she'd been using earlier. In one of her hands was a whetstone that she obviously knew how to use, moving expertly up and down one edge of the blade.

Grendelak cleared his throat, trying to get her attention. Her head flew up at the sound. As she recognized the source, the challenging expression on her face softened a bit. She stood, taking the hilt of her blade in one hand and holding it straight out, laying her face on the hilt and looking straight down the blade. Grendelak watched her curiously as she tipped the blade slightly to one side, her brows furrowing as she critically examined the length of the blade.

"Well then, that's taken care of," she said lightly as she returned her blade to its scabbard and sat back down, returning the whetstone to a pouch on her pack. "Nicked the side a bit on that chain the guard was wearing," she explained in response to Grendelak's questioning gaze.

Grendelak nodded distractedly. "Could I speak with you? Outside?" he asked anxiously.

Manx threw an arched look his way as she stood and belted on her sword, adjusting it so it rested comfortably at her hip. "Certainly," she said evenly, guessing she knew what was bothering him. She'd seen the looks some of the men had given her and she knew what they were thinking. They were thinking the same thing that many men thought the world over. A woman had no place in battle. "Shall we?" she asked crisply, her tone clearly telling Grendelak that the discussion was not going to be a pleasant one.

Grendelak gestured for her to lead and began to follow her out of the room. As they passed a group of men leaning indolently against one of the walls they heard a voice mutter disparagingly under his breath "I bet she thinks she knows how to use that."

Grendelak watched in astonishment as Manx whirled toward the voice, a dagger suddenly appearing in her hand. He watched in disbelief as her eyes narrowed and the dagger flew from her fingertips, whipping through the air and lodging itself in the wall not more than three fingers width from the man's neck.

Manx watched dispassionately as the man glanced down his nose before turning wide eyes in her direction. Grendelak shook his head in stunned silence as she waltzed over to man, stretched past his shoulder and easily pulled the dagger from the wall. Her other hand reached up and patted the man on the cheek as she smiled winningly at him. "Next time I won't be aiming for the wall," she told him, her eyes glinting dangerously, though she still smiled. The man nodded slowly, but only visibly relaxed once Manx

had returned to Grendelak's side. "Shall we?" she asked again, her voice tight through the smile she kept pasted on her face.

Grendelak opened his mouth to speak, but shut it quickly. He led the way, his steps quick, with Manx trailing almost sedately behind him. When they'd moved outside, away from the inn a short distance, Grendelak stopped and turned. "Manx, you really can't be doing that!"

"Doing what?" she asked, her smile turning cold. "Protecting myself?"

"Women are not . . ." Grendelak started, but stopped at the stormy look on Manx's face. "In Corrigar it is unusual for a woman to carry a weapon, let alone fight with it," he finally sputtered.

Manx threw back her head and laughed delightfully. "Really? I could not have guessed that by the reaction of some of your Brothers," she retorted as she jerked her head toward the inn. "But really, Grendelak, do you think I'd be traveling around the world by myself with no way to protect myself? Do you think me so daft?"

Grendelak looked taken aback by her response. He clearly hadn't considered that she'd been traveling alone, even though he knew she had gotten from Peregrine-by-the-Egress to Corrigar somehow. "I hadn't considered that," he told her honestly.

"Perhaps you should have, Grendelak," she told him reproachfully. "Surely in your travels in Old Nordalia you have seen plenty of women who fight and some, I dare say, that lead. You have been in Radael and probably further north?" she waited for his confirming nod. "Then you have seen Nordalians and must know that there are even women knights there. It is not unheard of for a woman to be able to defend herself."

Grendelak nodded. "But that is different. You are," he paused as he looked her up and down, "so dainty! The women I have seen fight are rough and more like men than women. They are certainly not so . . ." his voice trailed off, unable to voice his thoughts.

Manx snorted in a most decidedly unladylike manner. "You have obviously never run into Lady Arial, then. She would most certainly never be mistaken for a man, yet she heads an entire Order of Nordalian Knights. No one questions *her* right to charge into battle. Or Queen Darya Contraband? She routinely leads men into combat and no one thinks her pretty face makes her unfit to wield a sword."

Grendelak shook his head. "I have not seen these women, so I cannot say. And even so, it may be different in the north but the truth is that we are in Corrigar and it is not expected that women wield a sword or ride into melee. It is just not done!"

"And how am I to help you if I cannot be close to you? How am I to advise you when I must sit in the inn and play at needlepoint like some forlorn court flower!" she exclaimed, her hands clenching into fists. "I am

more than fit to ride by your side and will continue to do so. I am not so dainty that I cannot hold my own in a fight. Besides, I have . . . other resources available to me that will most certainly come in handy in the near future.”

“But—”

“No, Grendelak,” she cut him off rudely, shoving a finger into his chest. “I will be by your side and any who take issue with that will be quickly taught that I am not someone to be trifled with.”

Grendelak spread his arms wide in a show of defeat. “I apologize. I only meant to protect you from the harassment you will surely take from the brothers over this. I am not comfortable with it and do not agree with you, but it is your life you put in danger. I will not gainsay your right to do so.”

Manx smirked. “I believe the harassment will be quite a bit less after tonight.”

Grendelak laughed, the first real one in days, surprising even himself. “I believe you are right. You are full of surprises, Manx. Too outspoken for a woman to be sure, but for some reason I think I will keep you around.”

Manx crooked a finger at him and Grendelak hesitantly bent his head down close to her face. “As if you had a choice in the matter,” she whispered arrogantly into his ear, then spun on her heel and walked back toward the inn.

Grendelak turned and followed her inside, but when she turned upstairs to go to her room, he turned to the common room. “Felander, group commanders, please join me in the Brother’s hall,” he shouted across the room in what he hoped was a commanding voice. When he saw that men with white bands of cloth on their arm were moving, he nodded to himself and stepped out of the room. He made his way back to the sitting room and turned left into the large all-purpose room known as the Brother’s Hall. It was normally used for services to various deities and for recreational games, depending upon the time of year and day of week. Grendelak noticed that it was still set up for a large card game, with three square tables shoved end to end. That was as well. He took a seat at the head of the table farthest from the door.

They filed in as a mob. There would only be room around the table for a few of them, but all of them would fit into the room at least. Or he hoped they would. The room was as wide as two horses nose-to-tail, and easily four horses long. Felander came in early enough to take a seat to his left. His other two advisors—Tresset and Donnel—sat on his right. Grendelak sighed. He was glad to have both of them, and their wisdom, but he wished he knew more about them.

He watched the rest of the room fill until there was no room to walk around the tables. When he decided that no one else would fit in the room, Grendelak shouted, "How many still outside?"

Felander muttered, "Thirty or so" just loud enough for those around the head of the table to hear. After some shuffling and muttering a voice called back "Twenty seven, First Brother."

Treset smirked and cocked an eye at Felander. Grendelak wondered how the man knew, and what Treset was thinking.

"We're full up, so listen well," Grendelak said loudly. "We need to plan from here. When elected First Brother, I knew I needed to get you all safely out of Corrigan. We are out of Corrigan. Now we need a way to appease the King without swearing fealty, and more importantly we need to decide where to go from here. The Wayside would be one of my first targets if I was King and I really wanted to arrest the FreeSwords."

One of the group commanders—an old, grizzled campaigner named Frenle—nodded at Grendelak. "Me and Hurten were talkin' about that on the way here, First Brother. There's a wood 'bout three days northwest o' here named Seneschal Wood. Rumor be that the wood be haunted. Hurten and one o' his employers holed up there for nigh on a month, with none th' wiser. I can get us there if yer willin'."

"This wood could hold fifteen hundred or two thousand men for more than a few days?" Grendelak asked.

"Yes sir. Could hold more than that if you used the caves in the hillside on the west side o' the woods," Frenle replied.

Grendelak pondered the man's words for a moment. Three days from Wayside, four from Corrigan proper, six for a troop of enough men to route them out of a wood. Closer than he wanted to be to the King, but better than camping in a field behind the Wayside.

"Any other ideas? We're in danger, so now is the time to speak," he said.

When no one answered he nodded once. "You're the man, Frenle. We leave tomorrow morning—two glasses after sunup, and your group takes the lead. Hurten is in your group?" At the man's nod he continued. "Good then, lead us to these woods, and we'll at least have a place to 'hole up' while we decide what is next. I don't believe in stretching this type of meeting out. You all know what you need to do, so if no one has anything else . . . ?"

Felander stood. "There is one thing, First Brother," he said loudly. Grendelak noticed that there was a sudden press at the door and more people were shoving their way in.

"What is it, Felander?" he asked.

“We had this made for you, since you weren’t wearing one of the white armbands,” Felander said as he pulled out a piece of pure white linen with a sword embroidered on it. “We have never had a true badge of office, but like you said, people should be able to see who’s in charge when in the field.”

Grendelak took it, and the men cheered. “Thank you, thank you all. I am not worthy of these gifts and this praise.”

Felander grinned. “Did I not tell you? Humble to the depths of his soul.”

They all laughed, and Grendelak tried to keep his shaking hands from betraying his true emotions as they filed out of the Brother’s Hall.

Chapter 6

They set out on time the next day, four wagons, nearly two thousand men, and one woman. The men's spirit seemed up, considering that all of the old and stable things about their Brotherhood were being left behind them. Grendelak was pensive and tended to be short with anyone who tried to talk with him. He had slept poorly the night before, the armband he now wore burning guilt into his dreams. It was one thing to look into the Skald's eyes and believe her when she said it was not his fault, but a completely different thing to convince his conscience that he had done nothing wrong.

But those days were already starting to fade. It seemed so long ago that he was a lone man, out on contracts, living light. In some ways he missed those days. Had he been doing anything that was not against his Brotherhood and all that he believed in, he would look back on them fondly. But right now it seemed that it was all a thin veil over sweltering evil, and that he should have seen through the veil to the Tasnian priest that had pretended to be his friend.

He had tried to ride up front and talk with Frenkle about the route, but the confusion caused by having him up there barking at people, and Frenkle trying to give orders to his men was too much, and finally he dropped back to the wagons and his own command. Since then, the day had gone uneventfully, and Grendelak was in a mood that he wished it wouldn't. If the King sent soldiers after him, then he could do something immediate and perhaps alleviate some of his tension. It would be temporary, but it would ease his nerves while it lasted.

"You are quiet and moody this morning. Were you touched by Lordston last night?" Manx asked in the polite way that followers of Lordston enquired if you had unsettling dreams.

“No, I was touched by Lordston’s Skald, who screeched in my head about my duty, and my Brothers, and how I was the one until I woke up retching and was forced to rinse my mouth with wine,” he snapped.

“I do not screech, and if ever I choose to hound you about duty, Grendelak Mishtar of the FreeSword Brotherhood, you will be crying like an urchin who has lost his only copper inside of a quarter glass,” she replied curtly.

“You do hound me about duty. I can do this or watch them die. What if whomever else they would have chosen would have found a way out of this thing? What if they could have appeased the King? I think you are playing a game, and I think you are touched by Lordston while waking.”

“I? Mad?” Her cheeks had tiny red dots in the center of them, and she dropped her voice to a harsh whisper only with great difficulty. “Very well, Grendelak, if you wish it to be this way, I *will* tell you about duty. You must do this because you owe it to them. You know you owe it to them, I know you owe it to them, and since they don’t know because you haven’t told them, you must repay that debt!” She took a breath. “You wanted me to talk about duty, well now I have! Do you still think I was too hard on you before?” she finished in a rush, her face gone flush from trying to scream at him and keep her voice down all at the same time.

Grendelak looked at her in silence, considering her words. Neither spoke for quite some time; she because she knew if she opened her mouth it would come out in a scream and he because the honesty of her words had forced him to think hard about himself and his situation. When he finally spoke again his voice held a note of apology. “You are right. And I was not. Though I disliked all that you said, my real anger was that I knew what you just said. I knew I owed them, and knew there might be better ways to pay back that debt than accept being First Brother. And still I wear this arm band. And because I wear it, I must find a way out of this mess without killing my King or destroying my order. If I can. If I cannot, then you will have your way. But for now, give me peace.” He turned his horse and trotted away as the Group leaders passed back the shouted “Pause for Lunch!” And the caravan came to a halt.

It was late in the afternoon on the third day since they’d left the Wayside when they finally came to the wood Frenkle had spoken of. The trees were thick and large, with undergrowth at the edges of the forest blocking the view inside. Many of the men looked at it suspiciously, as if they expected to be suddenly attacked by creatures from childhood stories.

Grendelak rode to the front and led his brothers into the wood. As they rode into the trees he could see why it made a good place to hide out. At the back side of the wood a hill rose up, blocking easy access from the West side. On the North the wood was cut by a river wide enough to

block the passage of men if an army was on this side trying to keep them from crossing. That left two sides to defend, and enough wood to hide all of the two-thousand-odd men in, making it less obvious that they were here.

He considered the fact that he should split the FreeSwords up and send them to different parts of the Kingdom. But that would end the organization as readily as swearing fealty, for those groups would act independently, and without the Hall of FreeSwords in Corrigan as a central location, they would eventually cease to be FreeSwords at all. So Seneschal Wood was home, at least for now.

He twitched the reins of his horse and set off to find Frendle. Manx trotted her white horse over from the other side of the wagons. "Very nice woods. Old, clean, not much human interference. If you're nice to them, they should offer you protection and sustenance," she said flatly. It was clear from her tone that she was still upset about the disagreement they had two days before. Grendelak was surprised, since he had forgotten the matter already.

"What do you mean? And why are you still upset?" he asked both questions in a rush.

"I mean do not let your men cut down the trees, and make certain that jacks are built for each five men instead of the two hundred—"

"Twenty five," he interrupted.

"Fine then, instead of the twenty five men you normally dig one for. These woods—all woods—are alive. Do not kill them, and it might just keep you alive," she finished.

"Wonderful. A follower of Lordston talking like one of the Holy Mothers of the nature goddess," he said scornfully.

"No, and your brain is more dull than a training blade. I am half elven. I can feel them. They are there. The trees stretch to the sun and wish for more rain, the squirrels look for the nuts they buried in spring, the quail eat, trying to grow before fall . . . and a million more beings, all together. You had best heed my advice on this, Grendelak Mishtar, or you will regret it. Of that I am certain." She spurred her horse and turned toward the back of the column.

Felander raised an eyebrow at him as he dismounted. "I only heard the end of that, but it sounds like someone is in trouble," he said in an amused tone.

"Yes, but I'm not certain how that happened," Grendelak replied, shaking his head in confusion. "I've not even kissed her cheek, and she treats me like a wife of two fist years."

Felander laughed heartily, slapping his friend on the back. "Sounds like she's staked a claim then, Grendelak. Better be careful, it's extremely difficult to wind your way out of traps laid by a female."

Grendelak was horrified. "You can't be serious!"

Felander sighed, shaking his graying head. "My boy, have you not paid attention to the finer things in life these past five years?"

Grendelak's shoulders tensed at the mention of the past. "I've been . . . busy," he explained lamely.

"Once a woman makes up her mind there is nothing you can do but run, my friend. Nothing to do but run." The older man made a face full of mock terror before he laughed again and led Grendelak off toward the location Frenle had staked out for the First Brother near the center of the clearing.

Dusk came early in the clearing; the abundance of trees surrounding the Brotherhood's chosen camp standing high enough to block the waning daylight. Campfires had sprung up an hour ago, the men who hadn't drawn a watch order trying to put together something resembling a hot meal even as some finished pitching tents. Grendelak had been uncomfortable with allowing someone else to pitch his tent let alone cook his meal, but in the end Felander's jokes had won. The man may have been a good twenty years older than Grendelak, but his actions and words often said he still thought he was a young man.

Grendelak sat near Felander next to the fire, thinking, until Felander began singing some ribald song he'd learned in the south. Grendelak grinned, remembering the tune from his early days with Felander. The song grew worse with each verse, and Felander soon began to accompany the words with rude gestures. Finally Grendelak's shoulders shook with laughter, some of the anxiety of the past few days draining away as he watched his friend.

A moment later Grendelak's eyes widened and he gestured wildly at Felander, trying to stop the man from continuing. Felander continued, oblivious to Grendelak's sudden desire for silence until he heard a voice in his ear singing along with him. Felander suddenly flailed, trying to keep his balance on the log upon which he sat after being shocked to hear Manx join in his lascivious song.

Manx laughed merrily and pointed at the red stain creeping up Felander's neck. "Felander, I would have thought that *you* would not be so easily embarrassed. After all, you did tell me how worldly and experienced you were just yesterday," she smiled winningly and gave the older man a teasing look.

Felander cleared his throat. "Now, Manx, I was just answering your questions," he said cautiously.

"Such a *worldly* man should be accustomed to women who sing such songs," she threw back.

Felander winked at her. “Those types of women are a different story. I expect to find them teaching *me* such things.”

Grendelak watched the exchange, his face darkening as he saw the easy way the two of them got along. Without saying a word he stood and stalked off.

Manx watched as he was met by Donnel and Tresset, the latter speaking expressively, his hands constantly moving, and the former merely nodding his head occasionally. The three disappeared inside Grendelak’s tent, the glow from the lantern abruptly disappearing as they closed the flap behind them.

Felander nudged Manx, his eyes glancing toward the tent before meeting her gaze.

Manx shook her head. “No, not yet. He still needs time.”

“And space,” she added in response to Felander’s questioning look.

“We cannot hole up here forever, FirstBrother,” Tresset pressed, looking to Donnel for agreement and receiving a grunt of assent.

Grendelak leaned back on the cot in his tent and ran a hand through his hair with a great deal of frustration. Tresset and Donnel agreed on only one thing—that the Brotherhood could not stay in the woods forever—and yet neither had a plan for how to deal with the king.

“I realize that, but we must think through our options before we decide what to do. We hold the future of the Brotherhood in our hands and we must make certain that what we do is right for *all* Brothers.” Grendelak looked from Donnel to Tresset as he emphasized that one word. He waited until they bobbed their heads in agreement before speaking again. “Good. Now, we need to weigh our options. Donnel here thinks we ought to swear to give us time to consider our plans, but if we do that we cannot go back. If we did, no one would ever trust a FreeSword on Contract again. Tresset,” he looked to the smaller man, whose nose was twitching with excitement at Grendelak’s initial words, “thinks we ought to fight back with all we have.”

Grendelak groaned inwardly as he saw Tresset suddenly begin wringing his hands. He held up his hand to stifle the flow of words that would surely follow. In the conversations he’d had with the man over the past few days Grendelak had become familiar with most of Tresset’s mannerisms, including this one. “I think there is something in between the two that will work, but I haven’t been able to put my finger on it.”

Donnel nodded appreciatively at his words. then said slowly, “I think that anything that includes us rising against the king will be met with resistance by a large number of Brothers.”

Grendelak snapped his fingers and suddenly sat forward, leaning conspiratorially toward Donnel. "What if we are not rising against the king?"

Tresset glared at Grendelak, a flicker of annoyance crossing his face. It disappeared when Grendelak turned to him, "But not swearing to him, either?"

Tresset crossed his arms, a skeptical look on his face, "Go on, First Brother."

Grendelak stood, placing an arm around each of the men and drawing them closer together. "What if we were to expose the king's duplicity?"

Tresset and Donnel exchanged a glance behind Grendelak's head. Tresset shrugged. "How would that help?"

"The nobles of Corrigar have no love for Tasnian priests, neither do the people. If they all learned of the king's love for them . . ."

Tresset's eyes lit up. "The nobles might move against the king."

Grendelak nodded excitedly. "A dangerous proposition, moving against your king . . ."

"And when nobles are in danger, they turn to—" Donnel began.

"Us," all three of the men chorused.

"Yes, us," Grendelak repeated, almost happily. "If we are contracted to the nobles, we can protect ourselves and our charges within the laws of the kingdom. And if we are contracted, we are oath bound. No matter what we are asked to do." *No one knows that better than I*, Grendelak thought distractedly.

Donnel's eyes narrowed. "It is a fine line you walk, First Brother. I am not certain I like it."

Grendelak smiled tolerantly. "Donnel, the Brothers who are not contracted to nobles can either take Contract elsewhere or stay here. But certainly taking Contract with one of the nobles is not anything new to you. It has been done before, quite often, though only infrequently in internal squabbles. In the end, it does not matter. If Remelus is occupied with the *nobles* uprising, he cannot expend his energy on us."

Grendelak stepped back, placing his arms across his chest and watching both of the men closely as they considered his plan. Grendelak wasn't certain why he hadn't thought of such a plan before this, it was obvious once it had come to him. A noble uprising against the king would likely result in a new king; every civil war in Corrigar had ended that way thus far. The people of Corrigar were intensely loyal to their king, and expected the same in return. If they discovered the king's reliance on Tasnians they would, as a people, turn against their monarch.

The only problem Grendelak could see was *how* to expose King Remelus' collusion. He was fairly certain his word would not be worth even a copper in Corrigar right now, given the King's declaration regarding the FreeSwords. They needed someone impartial. Someone who wasn't

Corrigarian. Someone who was trusted and believed as one who told the truth.

Grendelak turned his attention back to Donnel and Tresset, who were conferring with their heads together like children. Grendelak politely ignored them and tried not to listen to their harshly whispered words. When the two men shook hands and turned toward him, he tried to relax his stance and appear unconcerned about their decision.

“Though I would prefer to avoid a war of any kind—” Donnel began.

“And I would prefer outright revolution rather than trust *nobles*—” Tresset spat the last word out, his loathing of nobility evident. Grendelak wondered briefly where such venom had originated, but dismissed the thought as irrelevant.

“You have decided my plan has the most likely chance of success?” Grendelak pressed.

Both men bobbed their heads in agreement. “It is as good a compromise as we are likely to find,” Donnel said unhurriedly. “And it is least likely to break the Brotherhood.”

Tresset nodded eagerly. “Yes, least likely to break the Brotherhood and the end result is the same, someone other than King Remelus on the throne.”

Grendelak shivered at the man’s last words, recalling Manx’s declaration several days ago. He forcefully pushed the skald’s words out of his mind. “Fine then. Let us assemble the group leaders and we can explain the plan and get some ideas of how to go about exposing King Remelus’ close cooperation with Tasnians.”

Grendelak watched the two leave his tent, their heads already bent together in discussion, but did not follow. He sat heavily on his cot and hung his head, overwhelmed with the path the discussion had taken and the ease with which he spoke of treason.

For that is what they spoke of, treason. Certainly not open and mutinous, but treason nonetheless. If they were successful, Corrigar would be plunged into civil war. On his order. It was a heavy burden he accepted to bear, and while Grendelak felt the weight bearing down upon his shoulders, he found that making such a decision came easily. When he thought about it a bit more, he discovered he didn’t mind making such decisions.

He stood and squared his shoulders, then left his tent and headed for the fire where Felander and Manx, who seemed to have become his mentor’s shadow these past few days, were already eagerly listening to Donnel and Tresset.

Grendelak rubbed his eyes, teary from the smoke of the fire around which they had been sitting for several hours. Upon hearing not the second

or third, but at least fourth cry of “What if we’re wrong?!” he stood abruptly, placing his hands on his hips and glaring angrily around the fire.

His action had the desired effect. Conversations trailed off and all eyes turned to him. When all sound ceased but for the crackling of the wood as it burned, Grendelak sighed.

“Brothers, we are not wrong,” he began. He motioned toward Felander and at least two of the Brothers who had been present in the court when Nolphen was killed. “These men also saw the Tasnians, coming and going freely from Remelus’ court. Are you challenging our words?” Grendelak’s voice growled dangerously.

He watched as men emphatically gestured their reply with their heads or hands.

Felander placed a hand lightly on Grendelak’s shoulder. “I think what the First Brother is trying to say,” he glanced cautiously at Grendelak, “is that if you are not comfortable with our plans to expose King Remelus then you are free to take Contract elsewhere or even stay here.”

One man stood up and cleared his throat nervously. “It’s not that we don’t believe that Tasnians were in the Court, we just aren’t certain that it proves the King is in cahoots with ’em. That’s all.”

Grendelak ignored the tightening of Felander’s grip on his shoulder and swung his head around to meet the man’s eyes. The man who had spoken tried to return Grendelak’s icy stare but quickly retreated and sat down again amongst his brothers. Grendelak opened his mouth to speak, but was cut off by Manx, who had suddenly appeared out of the shadows and stepped into the firelight.

His mind barely registered the men’s reaction to her sudden appearance. Once he’d approached the fire she’d backed away, apparently content to stand quietly at the edge of the firelight and listen. Or so he’d thought. Grendelak had seen women wearing breeches before, certainly. But he’d never seen a pair of breeches that looked like they were made for a woman before. They clung to her hips, assuring everyone who saw her that she was definitely female. Grendelak’s practiced eye told him the white shirt under her obviously well made chain mail shirt was cut for someone who knew how to use a sword. She’d taken the time to pull the curls of her hair away from her face and had tied it back with a thin leather thong. Hanging from the thong were small pieces of metal that glinted in the firelight, but that Gendelak could not readily identify. The sword Grendelak had seen her use several days before rested comfortably at her hip. He noticed an addition, however, that he’d not seen on her person before. A well oiled sitar hung across her back, its jeweled case throwing tiny sparks of color in the night.

In one smooth movement Manx pulled the sitar from its case and gently fingered its strings, letting the notes hang in the air and drift over the men until they'd grown completely silent.

"Corrigarian FreeSwords!" she called out, "listen well. Any who think that Tasnians in a King's court means they are not there by invitation shall surely think twice at the tale I will tell."

The men sat, mesmerized, as she told them of Tasnians in her homeland of Amorice. Of Crosswind's Isle and its loss for thousands of years as a result of one king eons ago who thought a Tasnian emissary harmless. For an hour her voice rose and fell, the strings of her sitar accompanying the tale in just the right places to make the men sit forward and hold their breath in suspense and shudder and make warding signs at the description of Tasni Deathwalker.

"They lost the entire isle to Tasni-bred orcs. For thousands of years Crosswind's Isle lay under the dominion of the Dark One. Would you have Corrigar slowly slip into the same fate? For it is not the Deathwalker's way to move quickly. It could be years or even decades before the kingdom realizes who truly rules the throne. Would you risk your children's lives? Or their children?" she finally finished on a plaintive note, her eyes beseeching them all to make what she considered the right decision.

"They got it back, di'nt they?" a voice called out tentatively.

Manx nodded slowly. "They did, but only because The Scorpions risked their lives to do so."

"Mebbe we ought to ask *them* to deal with the king!" a voice called out in a stage whisper.

Manx laughed harshly and then pointed directly at the man who had spoken, surprising him. "You think you can convince the most famous company of heroes in the world to help you dethrone a king?" She shook her head in denial. "No, good man, the Scorpions are not about to show up and fix this one for us. They have worries far greater than ours."

Felander stepped forward and leaned down to whisper in her ear. "But I heard Delcidnar the mage visited the king himself, not more a tenday ago."

Manx lowered her voice with great effort. "He did. But only to warn the king he was sowing his field with the wrong crops. I did not say they were not interested in such happenings, only that it is not their place to remove kings from their thrones."

Felander spread his arms wide in defeat. "Then we are on our own."

"As you have been since this started, Felander." Raising her voice she addressed the assemblage one last time. "FreeSwords, your fate is your own. The kingdom is as much yours as it is the nobles and the commoners. You must decide how best to serve that kingdom but remember well that

someone will kill King Remelus and another will sit the throne of Corrigar. Whether that man lives in darkness or in light may be up to you.” Manx was silent for a moment before she turned and made her way back to her tent, brushing past Grendelak without meeting his eyes.

Grendelak stared at Manx’s retreating back for a moment, then looked to the men, then back to Manx, torn between wanting to go after her and speak with her and needing to make decisions along with the men. Sighing, he stepped forward, having decided that his current duty was more important than dealing with Manx.

“Well Brothers? Do we expose King Remelus?”

Two hundred swords slipped out of their scabbards and gleamed in the firelight as they were held aloft in support for exposing the king.

Grendelak and Felander exchanged resigned looks. It was not much, but the plan did not call for all the Brothers to agree. It only called for enough to play a part in urging the nobles to do what must be done.

Grendelak glanced around at the rest of the men. Some were nervous while others wore expressions of disbelief on their faces.

“Those who wish to give a hand, we will be leaving in the morning. We do not want to bring anyone’s anger down on our Brothers.” Grendelak ordered, only slightly surprised that he suddenly knew exactly what they should do. “Those who wish to stay here are welcome to do so, but treat this area as hostile. Do not,” he paused as he looked over his Brothers with an unyielding expression on his face, “return to the Wayside. To do so will only get you arrested and likely killed.”

A chorus of “Yes, First Brother!” rose from the men.

“Those of you who wish to help, stay. The rest of you, go get some rest,” he barked.

Felander stood near Grendelak watching most of the men head toward their tents. The couple hundred who had expressed a desire to help edged closer to the fire, most exchanging words amongst themselves.

“How did she know what Delcidnar the mage did at the palace?” Felander asked Grendelak in a quiet voice.

Grendelak glanced over his shoulder in the direction of the skald’s tent. “I don’t know, Felander, but I’m going to find out.”

Felander half grinned. “I’d like to see that conversation.”

Grendelak grinned widely. “I’ll bet you would.” The smile drained away from his face and was replaced by a suspicious expression. “But then you and she have been spending enough time together that she calls you by name, and names you friend. Perhaps I ought to let you discuss it with her.”

Felander’s face took on an expression of mock innocence. “Who, me?”

“Yes, you.” Grendelak nearly growled.

Felander put out his hands as if to fend the younger man off. ‘Whoa there, Grendelak. If you’re staking a claim then say so. Otherwise, it’s open season on skalds as far as I’m concerned. You afraid of a little competition?’

Grendelak’s face darkened and he suddenly realized his hands were clenched tightly into fists. He forcibly relaxed his stance and flexed his fingers. “No, I’m not, Felander. She’s all yours as far as I’m concerned.”

Felander smirked. “Of course, First Brother, whatever you say.”

“You don’t agree or you wouldn’t be calling me First Brother again.”

“I’m just saying that from where I stand, things appear a bit differently. Now go talk to your skald about that mage and I’ll organize this gaggle and see what kind of political resources we have among us. We may get lucky and have a Duke’s bastard or two in the bunch.” Felander walked away, clapping his hands together loudly to get the attention of the men.

Grendelak watched Felander for a moment, then turned on his heel and marched toward Manx’s tent. The tent flap was closed and he could hear her singing inside. He couldn’t make out all the words, but recognized the tune as one he’d heard in Freeland Hold. He reached for the flap, then pulled his hand away as though it had just been burned. He shook his head, berating himself silently, then reached up and pulled open the flap, stepping inside as he began to speak. “Manx, there are some things I want to discuss with . . .” he trailed off, his train of thought completely lost as he realized she was only half dressed. She still had on the breeches she’d been wearing when she spoke and the same white shirt, but she was sitting on her bedroll cross-legged with only half the buttons of her shirt fastened. Those buttons that were not secured left very little to his imagination.

Manx looked up, her hands still on the buttons of her shirt, and gave him a look of amusement. Seeing the look of shock on the man’s face she stood and put her hands on her hips, cocking an eyebrow in his direction. “Perhaps you’d care to help with my buttons?”

She laughed when he turned his back to her and mumbled what sounded like an apology. She noticed that even though his posture said he was embarrassed he did not blush. She fastened a few more buttons, drawing up her knees to her chest and folding her arms across the tops of her knees. “Well, you obviously wanted something . . .” she prompted.

Grendelak exploded as he turned to face her. “You can’t go about a camp of thousands of men like that!” he pointed at her chest. “Do you have any idea what kind of invitation that is?”

“Really? An invitation? Is that what it was?” she asked innocently. Her face grew hard. “I thought I was dressing myself in private in a camp full of men who are polite enough to ask before entering a woman’s tent.”

"I . . . that is . . . I mean . . ." Grendelak stammered, caught by the truth of her words.

"That's what I thought," Manx returned smugly. "Now, if you are finished staring and stammering like an unblooded Dirgian, perhaps you can ask of me what you came here to ask."

Grendelak exhaled slowly, trying to regain his composure. She was right, he was yelling for no reason, but after hearing Felander's interest he wondered if she had encouraged it. And for some reason the thought drove him to distraction. He took a deep breath and then sat down on the ground facing her.

"Tell me about the visit of Delcidnar the mage to King Remelus? How did you know what he told the king?"

Manx's smile left her eyes. "Is that really important?"

"Yes, damn you, it is. If we're making decisions based on information you're feeding us then we must have some idea of where you get that information. How the hell did you know that?" Grendelak demanded.

Manx looked at him critically, trying to decide how much to tell him. Finally she sighed deeply. "You remember I told you I have other resources?"

Grendelak nodded once.

Manx pursed her lips together in thought. "It's probably easier if I just show you."

Grendelak watched as she stood and walked to her pack, then rummaged through it only to pull out a pouch.

She turned to face him. "Now hold out your hand."

"Why?"

"Just do as I say. You wanted to know how I knew, I'm going to show you. Now hold out your hand," she commanded in a voice that brooked no disobedience.

Grendelak held out his hand and watched carefully as Manx reached into the pouch. When her hand appeared again she had her thumb and forefinger pinched together as though she were holding something between them, yet Grendelak could see nothing.

Manx reached out her hand until it was over Grendelak's outstretched arm and then sprinkled something onto his arm and said something he could not understand. He recognized the language as resembling elven and his limited knowledge of the language did not extend to the words she had used. He watched as tiny speckles drifted toward his arm and settled there before disappearing. Grendelak's eyes widened as he realized it wasn't just the dusty substance that had disappeared, but his arm.

Manx tightened the leather thong that held the pouch closed and tied it to her belt before folding her arms across her chest.

Grendelak looked to her, then to his arm, then back to her, his mouth hanging open.

“Well, are you going to say something or sit there like some village idiot?” she prodded.

“You can make yourself disappear?” he asked, astounded.

“Surely you have heard of such things, Grendelak,” she chided. “You are not so unworldly as not to have heard of such magik. I would have thought in your line of work you would have considered the use of such things.”

Grendelak’s voice grew cold. “I did not and I would thank you to stop reminding me of my past.”

“Why? It is the truth, is it not?”

He stood swiftly and towered over her, his stance rigid and voice hard. He barely noticed that she stood firm, not taking even a single step back, but he did notice that he could feel his arm, but still not see it.

“That may be, skald, but I am tired of you haranguing me about it. It is over and done.”

“Is it? Or will you fall back into that life once this is over? Or perhaps you’ll find that the best way to solve your problems is to eliminate them.”

Grendelak grabbed her arm and pulled her close to him, his eyes boring down into hers from above. “I am finished with that. It was wrong for me to let myself be led to such things but I am quit with it now. It would be best if you would just leave it alone. I will pay my debt, I will right my wrongs. Now leave . . . it . . . BE!” His last words came out with a snarl and were loud enough to be heard outside the tent.

“You admit you were wrong?” she asked softly.

“Yes. I was wrong. I WAS WRONG!” he yelled, more loudly than before.

Manx winced at the sound, but a smile appeared on her face. “Now you are finally ready,” she told him happily.

Grendelak released her arm as though it suddenly burned. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“You’ve never before admitted you were wrong, Grendelak. Always you had some excuse why it wasn’t wrong for you to do what you did. Always you let the responsibility lie on Tibor’s shoulders. This is the first time you’ve accepted that you had a choice and that you made the wrong one.”

Grendelak looked at her strangely for a moment. “So?”

‘It’s important, Grendelak Mishtar of the FreeSword Brotherhood. It means you are finally ready to truly lead.’

Grendelak shook his head. “You are an odd one, half breed. I thought I was already leading.”

“Not in your heart Grendelak. You were leading because you were forced to lead. Now you begin to lead because you *want* to.”

For a long while they were both silent. Finally Grendelak cleared his throat. “So you know what the mage Delcidnar said because you used this magik dust?” he asked hesitantly, looking pointedly at his arm, which had finally appeared while they sat in silence.

Manx simply nodded, not mentioning the fact that he had changed the subject. *Best not to push him too far too fast*, she thought to herself.

“All right. We have around two hundred swords. We need to find a place to start, a Duke who would back us, who is sure to be appalled to discover Remelus is in league with Tasnians.”

“This is your kingdom, Grendelak, not mine,” she said with a toss of her head. “Where should we start?”

When Grendelak shrugged helplessly, she laid a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Let me guess, orphans aren’t taught much about peerage in the kingdom, are they?”

Grendelak shook his head, his eyes focused on his boots. “No, they aren’t.”

“Lucky for you all that skalds are. Heraldry and history are as much a part of our training as is story and song. I would say from my experience that . . . Duke Shorehold, Troma Shorehold, to be exact, would be a fine place to start. As luck would have it, these woods are but a day or two ride from his keep.”

“Is there anything you don’t know about, skald?” Grendelak asked, marveling at her vast store of knowledge.

“Oh yes, there is at least one thing.” Manx assured him.

“What’s that?”

She caught his eyes and held them for a moment. “The future,” she whispered. “I dream some things, I know much of the Tale, but I don’t *know* the future. We can try to direct things the way we want them to go, but in the end . . . well, in the words of the priests of Ramne Al’Langtrue, guardian of time and all that is necessary, what must be will be.”

“Does that bother you?” he asked, concerned by the look on her face.

“It scares the hell out of me, Grendelak. Scares the hell out of me,” she admitted.

Chapter 7

“No, no, no. Kellstor is west of here and Larik Ruama is the Duke of Kellstor. Let me go over this one more time for you,” Manx said with a note of exasperation. She’d been going over the ducal hierarchy and lands since the small group had left the Seneschal woods and headed for the ducal keep in ShoreHold yet it seemed that Grendelak would never get them straight in time to make the proper impression on Duke ShoreHold. She watched Grendelak’s lips tighten but noticed he did not so much as make a sound. Early on he’d been gruff with her when she’d pointed out his mistakes, but now that they were within a day’s ride of the ducal keep he was much more determined to commit the information to memory.

“Alright then, Larik Ruama is Duke of Kellstor. Kellstor is west of ShoreHold and is primarily farm land. North of Kellstor is Dinat, where Venari Selb is Duchess and it, too, is primarily agricultural. North of ShoreHold, bordering the Theocracy of Passrock, is Duchy Bredene. Trade accounts for most of the ducal income and Couvin Elde, a shrewd old man with no heirs, is duke. Duchy Pasthan is south-west of Kellstor, bordering on the Dwarvenforge Mountains. Teraldan Forehold, who some say has more than a bit of dwarven in his blood, is Duke and controls the mining operations that keep the duchy flowing in gold. Duchy Goodrow is east of Pasthan, and Duke Baellane has close ties to Pasthan because most of its income comes from the weapons and armor it turns out. And of course you know Corrigan, where King Remelus I holds court,” Manx paused to take a breath. She’d been repeating the same information so long now she was positive she could recite the list in her sleep.

Grendelak’s brows furrowed and his lips moved silently as he repeated the litany to himself. “I think I have it now, but I don’t see that this

information will help much. It doesn't tell me anything about the men who rule these places, nor whether they will support the king once they hear of his treachery."

Felander pulled his horse along side Manx and leaned forward, his arms crossed over the pommel of his saddle "How do your lessons go, First Brother?" he asked innocently.

Grendelak grunted at his friend. "They go fine, Felander. But tell me, what do you know of any of these dukes? Aside from what their duchies produce and their names?" he asked with a frustrated glance toward Manx.

Felander leaned back and laughed. "Ahhh . . . you want gossip, do you? Alright, I'll give you what I've heard recently. "Venari Selb. Ahhh . . . a comely wench in her time, but now not half as interesting as her daughter, Falleana. Now *there's* the kind of girl you want to fill with dwarven ale and . . ." he stopped, blushing at the sound of Manx clearing her throat. "Anyway, Venari has no husband, he was killed during a raid coming from Kantor-Doorne some years back. She's hired a few FreeSwords in her time, but only ones who follow Dirge. If she believes the king is in cahoots with Tasnians, you can bet she'll be on our side."

"What of ShoreHold? We will arrive tomorrow and I know nothing thus far but that the Duke's name is Troma and that the duchy deals in fish and ocean shipping," Grendelak resisted the urge to frown at the smug look on Manx's face.

"Troma's hired FreeSwords before as well, but he's not nearly as picky as Venari. He's got a son, not too bright but not so dumb you'd consider throwing him in a sack and dumping him in the Fjord of Corrigar. His wife died birthing the son, oh, going on twenty five years ago now. Never remarried, but he does tend to always have a woman on his arm. Good looking, I hear. Anyway, he's lent men and arms to Venari and to Larik Ruama in Kellstor to fight off raids from those damn nomads in Kantor-Doorne."

Grendelak looked thoughtful for a moment. "That doesn't help much."

Felander held his left arm out and pointed at the scars. "You see these Oath Cuts? I didn't get these hanging out in sitting rooms across Corrigar."

"Troma has ties to Amorice," Manx threw out offhandedly.

"How interesting . . ." Grendelak said sardonically. "Let me guess, Duke Kelling?"

"Very good, Grendelak. Now you're getting the hang of it."

Grendelak jerked back on the reins of his horse, stopping suddenly. Manx and Felander pulled up short and turned their mounts until they were facing him.

"Just how well do you know Duke Shorehold?" Grendelak's face was full of suspicion. Not for the first time he felt as though he was being led

around by the nose, with this skald pulling on the lead rope. *She probably planted this idea in my head and I didn't even realize it!*

"I know many people, Grendelak. I am well traveled and am often asked to play for dukes in many kingdoms."

"And have you played for him?" Grendelak demanded, his voice rising.

Manx's voice was ice cold when she replied. "I fail to see where that is important."

"Because you have been leading me around like a calf to slaughter and this is just one more thing that makes me believe you know a lot more than you are telling me! Now answer the question, half breed!" Grendelak yelled, loud enough that Felander winced and the two FreeSwords accompanying them turned their heads politely as they backed away.

Manx met his glare with a stony gaze. "I know the Duke well enough to know that he does not curry favor with Tasnians. His family also has the strongest claim to the throne after Remelus, so it is important to gain his approval before we make further plans. And if you expect a civil answer in the future you'll not use that term to address me again."

Grendelak threw his hands up in frustration, dropping the reins of his horse. "Why couldn't you just tell me that in the first place?" Grendelak dropped a hand to his head, running his fingers through his hair angrily.

Manx nudged the side of her mount with her knees and urged it forward until she was knee to knee with Grendelak. "You didn't ask me, you asked Felander," she said evenly. Then she wheeled her mount around and began to trot sedately down the road, not even looking back to see if Grendelak and Felander were following.

Grendelak kicked his mount and trotted up to Felander, who was waiting patiently with a huge grin on his face. "What's so funny, Felander?"

The older man pointed to his graying hair. "See this? Not from women. There's a reason for that."

Grendelak shook his head and exhaled loudly, letting go of some of the tension that had crept into his shoulders and made them as tight as a fat lady's corset strings. "I'm beginning to understand that reason, Felander. I really am."

Felander glanced over his shoulder and then motioned to the two men behind to catch up. Both men galloped to catch up with Manx where they settled back into Grendelak's lessons as though nothing had occurred until finally they stopped and made camp for the night.

Grendelak was startled awake by the feeling that something was amiss. The hair on the back of his neck and arms was standing straight. He turned over, trying to get his hand closer to the dagger under his bedroll. Lying silently for a moment, he held his breath while he concentrated on listening.

There! His mind screamed. He could hear a slight hiss, as if a slight breeze had just rustled through dry leaves. He inched his fingers forward until he felt them touch the hilt of his dagger, then pulled the bone handle toward his palm until he knew by feel he could wrap his hand around it and swing out in one movement.

He was just about ready to sneak out of his tent when he heard shouts, one of the voices obviously female. *Manx!* He leapt up swiftly cut through the tent wall in one smooth motion and was already stepping through before he'd even pulled the dagger out of the cut canvas.

The ringing of metal against metal assaulted his ears. *Why didn't I hear that when I was in the tent?* He shook off his bewilderment and let his eyes fall across the camp, trying to pick out friend from foe. He forced himself to let his eyes adjust to the darkness, even though every muscle in his body screamed at him to join in the fray. He could hear Felander shouting to the others interspersed with the snarls and jeers of whoever was attacking them.

As his eyes finally adjusted to the minimal light coming from the half hidden moon he began to pick out figures about the clearing they'd chosen to camp in for the evening. Felander was fending off two men, both of whom were armored while Grendelak knew Felander was likely not. Five more armored men surrounded the two Brothers who'd accompanied them. Grendelak struggled to recall their names and felt guilty when he failed. His frantic gaze searched the clearing, finally finding Manx. She was fighting with both hands, the long slender sword he'd seen her use in Corrigan in one and a dagger in the other.

He quickly debated whom to help, Manx or the Brothers, but the sight of one of the Brothers falling made up his mind. He ran to where the remaining Brother fought back fiercely, finally dropping one of his opponents and turning to another. Grendelak drew back his sword as he approached and did not even slow as he swung out at one of the men, trying to take him across the neck, his growl of anger growing to a shout as he felt his blade ring out, hitting the man's armor and ripping through it.

The next few minutes were hard for Grendelak to remember. He managed to put down his foe and the next one fairly quickly, but the third one was not so easy. The other Brother was sorely pressed dealing with his own opponent and Grendelak found his attention straying from his own fight to the Brother then on to Manx, who was holding her own but appeared to be taking more than she was dishing out. Grendelak tried to focus on his own foe, this man was quicker than the others had been. The leering, scarred face told Grendelak the man had seen many combats.

Grendelak swung and tried to contact the man's wrist. He overextended, shifting too much weight forward and paid for it when his enemy's blade

flicked out and sliced a path along his forehead. Had the man been paying more attention, that cut would have been deadly. Grendelak turned awkwardly on his forward leg and threw the other out, planting it firmly behind him as he twisted his body and brought his blade to bear. He kept his sword upward and across his body, trying to block any blows that might come at him while he desperately wiped at the blood flowing from his forehead into his eye.

The man fighting him gave him no reprieve and finally Grendelak forcefully closed the eye that the blood was flowing into and pushed forward, parrying blow after blow while watching for an opening. Out of the corner of his good eye he saw the other Brother drop to one knee. Grendelak grimaced, but saw a blur cross his field of vision that could only have been Felander. Believing wholeheartedly in his friend and mentor's abilities he returned his full attention to his adversary once again.

He's good. Grendelak cursed under his breath. *If I can't find an opening soon this is going to drag on much longer than I'd like.* He winced as he felt a blade slice open his leg. *Damn! That one hurts.*

His opponent began circling him and laughing. "What's wrong, *Brother?*" The man spat the word as though it was a curse. "Better to die than fail, isn't that what you curs say?"

Grendelak growled in response, but took the opportunity to glance at the man's clothing, trying to figure out who they were. When he finally saw the Green and White of the Royal Guardsmen he spat at the ground. "Better to die than become like *you,*" he spat angrily.

The two men continued to slowly circle each other and Grendelak realized the other man, armored more heavily than he and carrying a much heavier sword, must be trying to give himself time to rest. There was no other reason he would stop pressing his attack when the fight appeared all but won. One corner of Grendelak's mouth turned up in a victorious sneer as he suddenly changed direction and thrust forward with his sword, aiming for his enemy's throat.

The Royal Guardsman was surprised by the action but recognized the attack too late. He managed to twist his sword roughly but could not pull up in time to deter Grendelak's thrust. Grendelak used his momentum to shove his blade through the man's throat until he was pressed up against the guardsman, most of his blade extending out behind the man's neck.

Grendelak met his surprised look. "I'd send a message back to the king but I don't think you'll be able to take it," he said dispassionately as the life drained out of the man's eyes.

Grendelak pulled the sword out and ignored the body as it collapsed to the ground. He glanced quickly to where the Brother had been fighting and saw Felander bent over, a long bandage flying to and fro as his friend

tried to stop the other's wounds from bleeding. He tore his eyes from Felander and sought out Manx, finding her still fighting her opponent, though the guardsman's White tunic was stained in several places by blood. *His or hers?* He thought frantically before he picked up his feet and moved to help her.

He was almost to her when he saw her duck under her adversary's blade and jab upward with the dagger in her left hand. He was only somewhat surprised when it hit its mark, slipping into the joint where breastplate meets backplate in the man's armor. The man staggered back and Manx let go of the dagger, leaving it embedded in the man's side.

Manx picked up a booted foot and kicked the man hard in the knee. Grendelak was surprised to see the man fall to his knees, coughing and spitting up blood. He watched as Manx picked up a booted foot and kicked her opponent in the chest, knocking him over backwards, then stepped back and waited with her sword still waving slightly in her hand.

A moment later the world exploded in flame. Grendelak tried to stand against it but it drove him to one knee. He threw up an arm to cover his eyes. He opened his mouth to scream but stopped when he realized the flame had disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. He choked back the bile that rose at the smell of charred flesh and looked for Manx. He was surprised to see her stalking toward the other side of camp, a determined look on her face.

"Manx!" he called out, pushing himself up.

He was dismayed when she neither acknowledged him nor stopped. "Felander!" he shouted, looking back over his shoulder, "something else is going on." Grendelak ran to catch up with Manx and stopped short when he saw why she'd been moving so forcefully.

Two more guardsmen stood near the edge of the clearing. *I should have known, the King always sends them out in a tensquad and I only counted eight back there,* he berated himself. But it wasn't the two guardsmen that bothered him; it was the red and black robed priest with a deep cowl that stood behind them that made his stomach leap up into his throat.

"A Tasnian!" he hissed to Manx without looking at her.

"Yes," she returned calmly. "Who did you think tried to burn us alive, a guardsman?"

"How can you stand there so calmly then?!" he asked incredulously.

"Because there is little else to do at the moment, Grendelak," she said in an even voice.

"Well, well. We meet at last, Assassin," the priest called out cheerfully.

Grendelak clenched his teeth, tensing at the insult and gripping the hilt of his sword so tightly his knuckles turned white. Manx laid a restraining hand on his sword arm.

“No, do not take his bait, Grendelak,” Manx warned under her breath. “He is protected by his two guards, and warded against my magiks. We should let this go for now.”

“Yes Grendelak, let this go,” the priest said as if she were talking out loud. “We wouldn’t want to kill The Assassin, would we?”

Grendelak wasn’t positive, but he could swear the man’s eyes glowed red underneath his cowl. “I am not this Assassin that you and the skald seek. I am a man driven by your vile type and his circumstance to protect his Brotherhood. Nothing more. And I will kill you if you threaten us again,” Grendelak gritted between his teeth.

The hood turned toward Manx. “You didn’t convince him? That is amusing. He believes he has free will? Oh, Manx K’Hndreel, you should join forces with us. This is entertaining. Even I wouldn’t have thought to try that.”

Manx’s face turned red. “I do not lie and deceive as your type does. I have told him the truth and he is adjusting.” She paused as if to say more, and then began chanting and weaving her hands through the air.

Grendelak stood as if turned to stone, unable to even take a breath as events unfolded around him. The two guards stepped aside from the priest a step as he reached into his robes at the neck, pulling out a silver skull on a chain. The eyes glowed a deep red. “So, you would challenge me? Then we shall duel,” he said, the cowl still pointed at Manx. He too started waving his hands through the air, but his gesticulations were focused on the skull he held in his left hand. A low, throaty, nearly animal chanting rang out from under the hood. He finished gesturing before Manx did, and there was the sound of movement behind Grendelak. Taking the risk of exposing himself to the guards, Grendelak took a single step backward and then turned to see what the sound was. He recoiled from the sight of the dead men that they had just finished killing stirring from the ground. The wounds that killed them were gaping and oozing and Grendelak tried to not retch at the sight.

“Felander! Look out! The dead walk again!” Grendelak screamed as he watched the dead men begin to encircle his friend.

When he saw Felander rise from his crouch next to the Brother he had been attending he turned back to face the priest, prepared to kill him here and now. Grendelak was just in time to see Manx make a swooping motion with her hand. The ground beneath his feet began to tremble, and he saw the priest’s guards stagger back another step.

“Grendelak, get away!” Manx yelled as she turned to run. Grendelak threw himself after her even as the ground bucked up into his feet, propelling him forward into the air. He tried to hit the ground and roll, but he had never been thrown through the air like that and was taken off

guard. His left shoulder struck first and his momentum pushed him along until he slid into a large rock. The force of the impact knocked the breath out of him. He flipped his body over the rock, barely saving himself from a broken neck by shoving up with his arms. There were clods of dirt landing all about him, and one of the guard's swords clattered to the ground not a fist of feet from his face.

He lay there dazed for a moment, attempting to catch his breath. He could hear no sounds of fighting, so he had to get up fast. It was unlikely that Felander had already defeated the eight recently dead guardsmen single-handedly in those few moments, so they must be coming for him and Manx next. He twisted his head to try and locate where Manx had run to. He found her not more than a few fist of feet from where they had been standing, but she was on the ground. She was sitting up slowly, her hair full of twigs and leaves, a huge grin plastered across her face. To Grendelak she looked nothing less than mad.

"Are you all right, Grendelak?" she asked as she got shakily to her feet.

"No thanks to you. What in the world was that, and why didn't you warn me?" he asked as he too tried to sit up.

"That was a new variant of an old spell I thought I'd try. I couldn't warn you or he would have realized he had no protection against it," she replied, still beaming.

"The walking dead . . ." Grendelak suddenly burst out, wincing as he pushed himself up off the rock. "We must help Felander," he said urgently as he searched in the moonlight for his sword.

"They walk no more." He threw a startled glance her way, as if she had just brayed like a mule. "I forced him to leave rather quickly, and they did not have their own life-force yet—they were still dependent upon him to feed them life, and I forced him to abandon them," she continued nonchalantly as she picked a few twigs from her hair. "They will sing with Lordston this night. If we bury them correctly and quickly anyway."

Giving up on finding his sword in the moonlight, Grendelak bent and picked up the one he had seen land near him before the world had turned upside down. Thinking for a second, he said "No, I really would like to know what you did."

"Aye, and so would I," Felander demanded as he hobbled into view using his sword as a make shift cane. "They were closing on me, and I could not fight them all, and then they just fell back to the ground, most of them clutching the worst wounds they bore as if they were newly given."

Manx made her way to Grendelak, eyeing him critically even as she tried to explain what had happened. "He made the dead to walk, only the most powerful priests of Tasni can do that, and they need to have a sacrificial

altar and days to prepare. That one must be one of the few who are “Chosen of Tasni”. Professional assassins, they are the real power behind the throne in Tasnami. They can call upon their god to commit horrible crimes without all of the preparation and ceremony required by normal priests.”

She made a face. “We need to talk about why the Tasnians would send one of the Chosen here. Anyway, to answer your question, I learned a little incantation not too many years ago from a nice Tel in Freeland Hold by the name of Unlell. This spell allows you to dig ditches, foundation holes, and wells very quickly. In a day a person powerfully versed in magik could dig the foundation for a castle, assuming the ground wasn’t too rocky. I had been going over the incantation in my head, and for months have believed that if you blocked the power—if you held the spell back for just as long as you possibly could—that it would erupt, all the digging happening at once as you released all of the power at once. The result would be nearly explosive.” She shook her head smiling, as if she was surprised by the successful result.

“He was so well warded that my magiks would have bounced off of him. My balls of fire would have parted around him, leaving him safe in the center, my enchanted songs would have fallen on his ears as if he were deaf, nothing would have worked. Since we could not attack him through his guards with even numbers, and we could not fight his vile magiks with ours granted by Talimaara, Mother of All, I decided to attack him with the ground. Most Tasnian priests and all Tasnian Chosen are obsessed with cleanliness. Some say it comes from their god, others say it comes from fear of disease that could cause them to meet their god early. I just assumed that if I tried that spell and it worked at all well, that he would flee back to his masters and have to admit failure, or more likely lie about it and say he was successful.”

Manx reached up, trying to push a lock of Grendelak’s hair out of the way so she could see the gash in his forehead. He swatted her hand away, annoyed and frustrated with the way she seemed to avoid giving out any real information. “What is a Tasnian Chosen, and why was he here for us?” Grendelak asked her baldly.

Manx took a step back, glancing at Felander. He had managed to hobble up next to Grendelak and both stood staring at her expectantly. She wasn’t certain how much to tell them. Experience told her most people weren’t ready to deal with the practices of a standard Tasnian priest. Human sacrifice and self-inflicted pain were common methods for Tasnians in their worship of the Dark One but Chosen of any deity were more zealous than most and their ways could be frightening. If King Remelus was being advised by Chosen that could only mean that he was more ensnared by the plots of the Tasnians than even she had guessed. She fretted that learning

more might demoralize Grendelak. She chewed on her lip while she considered what to tell them.

“Manx, Ciran is dead and Aerdon is not likely to live without a priest and the good grace of Healtherd. We have a right to know what we’re up against,” Felander broke the silence that stretched out uncomfortably.

“All of it, skald, leave nothing out this time,” Grendelak added forcefully even as he stored away the Brother’s names, glad to finally have them once again but still ashamed he hadn’t been able to recall them earlier.

Manx took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “All right, then. You shall have it all. A Chosen is a member of the innermost circle of Tasnian priests, initiated in the blood of others and required to kill for their Priest-King on command. No Chosen ever fails because one who does is quickly killed. They are fearless most of the time, but fight amongst themselves to attain favor. For that one, being shipped this far from his homeland of Tasnami must be like a death sentence, for surely others will work their evil plans while he is away. For them, the higher up the priestly hierarchy you are the less people have power over you, and who serves Tasni DeathWalker except for power? Why here, why us? You, Grendelak. I have told you that there are those who attempt to manipulate The Tale of the Deadlands. They have already manipulated you masterfully, they will wish to continue to do so until their goals are met. A direct attack can only mean that there is a more sinister motive behind their actions. Perhaps to spur you to action before you are ready? I honestly do not know,” she admitted.

Neither man said a word at her explanation. “That’s all I know right now, truly. There is more to this than simply forcing the Brotherhood to swear fealty to the king. That is clearly just one path they are trying to force us down to achieve their goals, of that I am certain. They will try to bend you to their will in other ways as well, for failure means certain death for them,” she warned.

Felander glanced around suspiciously. “We can discuss this more later, but now we should bury these bodies and leave. I have no desire to sleep again this night.” Felander said.

“And bury them quickly. I do not know how far the priest went, but assume that it was not far.” Manx replied.

“I have a shovel in my gear,” Grendelak said gruffly.

Manx walked quietly next to Felander as they walked back to their horses where both men retrieved shovels from their gear. No one spoke as Grendelak and Felander began to dig one large grave for the bodies of the guardsman and a single place for Ciran. Manx busied herself by collecting rocks to build a cairn for Ciran.

It was more than a glass before Grendelak stuck his shovel in the ground and looked up at Manx, who had finished her rock collecting and was seated on the ground watching them. "Why can't you just dig this out with your magik?" he asked petulantly.

Manx was taken aback. "If I could, I would. I am no mage like Delcidnar. I can do a little here or there, but it is not something I focus all my attention on."

Grendelak grunted. "I think we're about finished. Felander?"

Felander nodded, wiping the sweat from his brow. "Yes, this ought to do. Let's get them in and covered and out of here before that priest returns," Felander replied before climbing deftly out of the hole they'd dug. He turned and extended a hand to Grendelak, who took it gratefully. Grendelak tried not to wince as his wounded leg scraped along the side of the grave. He'd been able to ignore the pain from his leg and his forehead earlier, the excitement of combat and a strong survival instinct always muted the pain of wounds taken in melee. Now that the situation was calming he felt every ache and pain acutely.

Grendelak felt the shaking in Felander's arm and gave him a critical look. He could see the lines of pain around Felander's eyes and recalled that his friend had been using his sword as a crutch earlier. "Your leg okay, Felander?"

Felander shrugged. "As good as it has been lately. Must have pulled something earlier when you left me to fight off three of those guards by myself," he said jokingly, though Grendelak noticed the humor did not reach his friend's eyes.

They dragged the guardsmen's bodies into the grave and covered them roughly. They took more care with Ciran's body, laying him out straight and taking care that his weapons were with him. They reluctantly covered the body with dirt and a layer of the rocks Manx had collected.

Manx stood silent as the two men drew their swords, pointing them at the grave for a moment and then raising them to touch their foreheads in a salute to their fallen Brother.

"Better to die than fail, Ciran. May your blood drive us to succeed," Grendelak said.

"May your sword remain free in the afterlife, Brother," Felander finished.

"All things return to the Mother," Manx said quietly, "May the GateGuarder guide you truly to your rest."

"Aerdon, how is he?" Grendelak asked Felander as they returned to the small circle of tents.

"Not well," Felander said with a sigh. "I don't think we can move him."

Grendelak glanced around the clearing and wrinkled his nose at the smell of death around them. "We can't stay here." He turned to Manx. "How much longer before we reach ShoreHold?"

"A few hours at most. Will he live that long?"

"If we travel more slowly, perhaps," Felander answered hesitantly.

"As much as I dislike it, we must. It is nearing dawn and to stay here is to invite disaster," Grendelak replied.

"Unfortunately, I agree, but I am loathe to put Aerdon at risk."

"Can't you . . ." Grendelak began, looking hopefully at Manx.

Manx shook her head. "I told you once before, Grendelak, I am no priest. I cannot heal nor help you seek atonement."

"But I thought elves could . . ." Grendelak trailed off at the heated look that crossed Manx's face.

"As you so often enjoy rudely pointing out, Grendelak Mishtar, I am only half elven." She turned and stalked off, packing up her gear and methodically stowing it on her horse. She was angry, but not so much at Grendelak and Felander as she was with herself. She had underestimated the Tasnian influence in Corrigar and their desire to get their hands on Grendelak. It had gotten one man killed, perhaps two. More importantly, it had almost gotten Grendelak killed or worse. *If they get their hands on him before he accepts who he is . . .* she thought worriedly. She would not make the same mistake again.

Chapter 8

The few hours to Duke ShoreHold's keep turned into all day. They'd improvised a litter and Manx rode with Aerdon behind her mount while Felander led her horse by its reins. No one spoke much, except to ask periodically how Aerdon was faring. Manx tried to keep the man's growing fever down, draining her wineskin of water throughout the day as she fed it to Aerdon in between his fits of thrashing about, obviously suffering from fever-dreams.

The sun was low in the sky when they came through the small village that lay outside Troma ShoreHold's demesne. There were few people about and those that were in the streets only glanced their way, hurrying to get out of the street and avoid the small group. Manx rolled her eyes at their reaction, but knew they must be a grisly sight. None of them had taken the time to clean up and, lacking a nearby stream or even a stagnant pond, would not have been able to find enough water to do so if they'd wanted to. Drying blood stained all their clothing and the gash in Grendelak's forehead had left blood caked down the side of his face and clumped in his hair. Felander had been limping not only because he had pulled a tendon in his leg, but because one of the guardsman had opened a long gash along the length of his calf. They were all covered with dirt and mud from digging graves. Manx knew she was covered with blood as well, and the twigs and leaves that bound up in her hair combined with her elven ears must have made some of the villagers more than wary of them.

They ignored those who scurried away as best they could and headed for the walls of the keep, distinctly outlined on the horizon by the setting of the sun. They slowed as they approached the guardhouse and stopped when a voice called out, "Ho there, stop now!"

Manx disentangled herself from the blankets covering Aerdon and smoothed her clothing as best she could. As she passed Grendelak she waved him back, then she briskly marched up to guard who stood on the other side of a portcullis, his sword drawn and eyes wary.

Grendelak watched Manx carefully, not completely trusting that the Duke would not have heard of the King's declaration and worried that he might decide to comply with the requirement that all FreeSword's be arrested and brought back to swear fealty.

He could not hear the conversation, and he exchanged a worried look with Felander when they heard a single word from Manx, her voice raised to a shout and edged with annoyance. "Now!"

Grendelak watched her turn on her heel and head toward them. She snatched the reins of her mount from Felander and muttered under her breath in a language Grendelak couldn't understand. She began to lead her horse slowly toward the gate. Grendelak heard the creaking of the portcullis as the guards began to raise it, apparently offering them entry.

The men urged their mounts forward slowly, following Manx through the gate and up the cobblestone road toward the manor house. The sudden sound of a bell pealing out startled them slightly. A moment after the bell tolled torches flared to life ahead of them at the front of the house and they could see a door open, light spilling out into the growing darkness. A single figure stood silhouetted in the doorway for a split second, then disappeared quickly back into the house. Muted shouts wafted on the slight breeze back to them, and Grendelak tensed, taking one hand from the reins of his mount and letting it rest lightly on the hilt of his sword.

They halted near the front doors, one of which still remained open. Felander and Grendelak dismounted wearily and moved to unhitch the makeshift litter from Manx's mount. Once it was removed they each moved to an end and lifted it gently between them, waiting for Manx's cue to decide what to do next.

Manx grabbed a saddlebag from her mount and gestured at them to follow her as she made her way up the steps to the front door. Grendelak was a bit taken aback when she simply marched through the door as though this was her own home and led them down a short hall to a room. She flung open the door and pointed inside. "Take Aerdon in there, I'll be right back." Then she turned back down the hall and disappeared.

Grendelak shrugged at Felander's questioning look. They pulled the litter into the room and together lifted Aerdon up onto the bed. They moved to stand at the back of the room, their arms folded across their chests imposingly.

A servant flew into the room, her eyes darting to the two men only briefly before she began stripping the blood soaked clothing off Aerdon.

A second woman scurried in carrying a pitcher of water and rags and began helping the first to clean up their friend.

“Get yerselves going out of here,” the first woman commanded in a tone that brooked no disobedience. “Now. You ken wait there in the hall,” she told them without turning her attention from the man in the bed.

Felander walked toward the door and jerked his head at Grendelak, indicating he should follow. Grendelak reluctantly followed, his head spinning from how quickly things were moving and how confusing it all was.

The two stepped out into the hall and stood waiting. They could hear voices coming from near where they had entered the house. Grendelak grew more and more impatient, then finally began to walk quietly back toward the entryway. Felander followed, his ears perking up as they came into the entryway and the voices suddenly became much clearer.

Grendelak stopped and held his breath. Manx and someone, he assumed the Duke, were having some kind of conversation in a room just beyond the entryway. There was no real door, just an archway that led to what looked like a sitting room to Grendelak. It was somewhat dark, but he could see the flickering of some kind of light coming from a source beyond his field of vision. Manx was pacing back and forth, her hands waving this way and that as she spoke in rapid, stuttering sentences.

“Troma, he’s the one, I assure you. Have I ever led you wrong before?”

A deep voice, full of timbre came from elsewhere in the room. “It’s not that I don’t believe *you* believe he’s the one, Manx, but I need to be certain, surely you understand that.”

Manx threw up her hands. “I don’t know what other proof I can give you that I haven’t already given you.” Her voice took on an impatient edge. “You Tar are so stubborn sometimes!”

The voice laughed. “Yes, we are. We don’t have your long lives to take time and experiment with things.”

“And I don’t have time to convince you when one of the Night Walker’s Chosen has taken such an interest in him.”

The laughing suddenly choked off. “You are sure?”

“Sure enough, Troma, that I tried what Lord Redeemer said couldn’t be done.”

“And?” the voice queried.

“Well since I’m standing here it obviously worked. Now enough of this. He is the one. I’d stake my life on it.” Manx said with a tone of finality.

“Well enough then, Manx. It’s good to see you too,” the voice took on a more friendly tone. “Now, what else can I do for your injured friend?”

“A priest, if you can find one, would do him—and the other men—a wealth of good,” Manx said, her voice finally losing its edge.

“I don’t know that I have a priest that can help right now, but the wounded one is welcome to stay and we’ll have one of the acolytes from the temple in town patch up your friends as best we can. Will that suffice?”

“It will have to, won’t it?” Manx replied grudgingly.

The voice sighed loudly. “Some days I don’t know why I let you order me around, skald.”

“Because you, like everyone else, can’t resist my charms,” Manx’s voice was suddenly filled with sweetness. “Now, would you like to meet them or shall I leave them hovering over poor Aerdon in his bed?”

“By all means, whatever you desire, my dear.”

Manx turned and began to walk toward the entryway. Grendelak could clearly see the change in her stride when she realized he and Felander were in the entryway and probably had been for a good part of her conversation. She kept her face impassive as she came through the archway.

Grendelak took his eyes from Manx and turned his attention to the man who came striding out behind her. He was taller than Grendelak, but not by much, with a neatly trimmed beard and short brown hair. A long, thin, braided queue of it was hanging over his shoulder. His clothing was immaculate, but not nearly as decadent as a courtier. His build was that of a man who was trained to fight and stood with his shoulders squared. Grendelak evaluated him quickly, as he might a man he was about to fight against, and decided that the air of confidence the man exuded was not sheer hubris, but built on experience.

Grendelak met the man’s stare evenly, not flinching back from the critical gaze. When he felt the man had seen enough he bowed his head politely, as Tibor had taught him to do. “Duke ShoreHold, I presume?” he asked respectfully.

Troma inclined his head in response and stretched out a hand. “First Brother Grendelak Mishtar, I presume?”

Grendelak took the offered hand and grasped it firmly, noting Troma did the same. When the other man released his grip he gestured toward Felander. “This is Felander of the Brotherhood, my oldest friend and mentor.”

Felander dipped his head politely. “Well met, my Lord Duke.”

Troma nodded once, but kept his gaze on Grendelak. Finally he raised an eyebrow and glanced in Manx’s direction. “I see what you mean,” he said mysteriously.

Manx curtsied prettily in response, a smug look on her face. Grendelak wondered if she had any idea how ridiculous she looked, curtsying in a bloodied dress with a head of hair full of twigs.

“Well,” Troma began, clapping his hands together in front him, “we have not broken our fast yet this evening so let me have the servants set

three more places. Manx can show you where to clean up. The bell will ring for dinner in about a glass, so take your time.”

Grendelak watched him leave in silence. When he was certain the Duke was well and truly gone he reached over and grabbed Manx by the arm, pulling her close. “What the hell was that all about?”

Manx reached up and pried his fingers from her arm one by one, then stepped back and gave him a hard look. “I don’t think now is the time to discuss it.”

“I think it is,” Grendelak growled. “I’m tired of being led around by the nose, missing a whole hell of a lot of information that you obviously have.”

“If I may,” Felander interjected, “why don’t we continue this while we clean up. I don’t think a Duke would appreciate us coming to his table caked with mud and blood, and the entryway isn’t the place for such a conversation.”

“Of course,” Manx agreed and then began to walk off down another hall.

Grendelak began to stalk off after her, but stopped when Felander grabbed his arm. “You need to be more careful with her, First Brother.”

Grendelak looked surprised. “What do you mean?”

Felander rolled his eyes. “What *have* you been doing the past five years? I’m certain you’ve been around women at some point in that time.”

“Yes, so?”

“So you can’t be so harsh with them, that’s all.” He jerked his head in the direction Manx had disappeared. “If she can help us—and I’m not certain about that right now, especially with all this strange talk she keeps throwing around—then you’re going to have to learn to deal with her. And that doesn’t mean grabbing her arm and pulling her around.”

Grendelak’s face grew hot. He had been rough with her, but he was frustrated and she seemed to be the source of it all lately. “I see what you mean,” he said forlornly. “But she’s so damn . . .” He broke off with a growl, raising his fist and shaking it in the direction of the hall Manx had gone down.

Felander laughed. “Yes she is. But then again, Grendelak, so are you.”

Grendelak laughed and shook his head. “I suppose you are right. I am.”

“Exactly. Now let’s go get cleaned up and find out what all that talk was about. Something is going on here and I think we need to know what it is,” Felander said before he bowed and gestured grandly toward the hall. “After you, First Brother,” he said with a smile.

Grendelak just laughed again and headed down the hallway, hoping Manx was waiting for them somewhere nearby.

They managed to find Manx at the end of the hall. She wordlessly directed them each to a room, where servants had already filled tubs with steaming water, then stepped into a room and closed the door.

Grendelak emerged clean, if not sore from fighting and riding. He put on the best clothes he could find in his pack, then stepped back out into the hall and knocked on the door he'd seen Manx enter earlier. Felander stepped out of his room just as Manx called out for him to enter. Grendelak opened the door and stepped through, waiting for Felander to enter before closing the door and leaned back against it, determined to hear Manx's explanation before they went to dinner.

Manx emerged from a side room and Grendelak was awed by the change. Her hair was free of debris and the smudges of dirt and blood had been wiped from her face. She was wearing that same green dress he'd seen her wearing in Corrigan and he was once again struck by how beautiful she really was.

"Well," she said distractedly, still placing those metal symbols he'd seen days before into her hair, "you had some questions, I believe."

Grendelak cleared his throat. "Yes. What exactly was that conversation you had earlier with the Duke all about?"

"Oh that," she said dismissively. "Nothing, really. He's been looking for his bastard son and I told him I found you."

Grendelak's mouth dropped open and Felander emitted a low whistle. "You what? Are you completely mad, skald?"

She walked closer to them but stopped several feet away, her hands on her hips and a smug look on her face. "I told the Duke—"

Grendelak waved his arms as he interrupted. "I *know* what you told him, what I want to know is *why* you would tell him something so ludicrous!"

Manx actually snorted in a most unladylike fashion. "Because it's the truth, Grendelak."

"How the hell would you know?" he exploded, pushing himself off the door and pacing around the room. "I was a child when my mother died and as far as I know I've lived in Corrigan all my life." He pointed at Felander. "Tell her, Felander. That's where you found me, that's where I'd always been."

Felander held his hands out helplessly. "I did find him in Corrigan, and as far as I know he'd never been outside the city . . ."

"Are you both daft? Every noble in every kingdom keeps a house in the king's city. They stay there when summoned to Court or social events, many even leave some of their heirs there to ensure the house can never be completely wiped out by a single attack. Your mother was a minor noblewoman, House Kannengrove I believe, of the Elde duchy. I won't bore you with the sordid details, but unwed noblewomen, even ones as minor as your mother, are not something most families enjoy dealing with. In some kingdoms the progeny of such affairs is summarily killed. You're lucky you were conceived in Corrigan. They shipped your mother off to

one of Troma's homes in the country until you were born, then Troma paid off a servant woman who'd recently given birth to take you on." She stopped at the dazed look on Grendelak's face. "Are you all right, Grendelak? You wanted me to be truthful with you."

Grendelak staggered back and then found a chair to sit in. He put his head in his hands. "I don't believe you," he said in a strained voice.

"You think I am making this up?"

Grendelak nodded his head without moving it from his hands.

Manx walked over and grabbed one of his hands, trying to pull him to his feet. "Come with me," she ordered.

Grendelak stood reluctantly, but did not pull away from her. He let her lead him and Felander down the hall and across the entryway to another wing. She stepped into a room that was obviously Troma's study and went to the desk. She dropped Grendelak's hand and picked up two small paintings in elaborately worked silver frames. She held them out toward him. "Your half-brother, Haddon, and your mother, Lady Drina."

Grendelak forced himself to look at the paintings. Felander leaned over and squinted as he looked from the picture of Haddon to Grendelak, then at the woman and back to Grendelak. Haddon looked the spitting image of his father and Grendelak could have passed for an older version of the young man in the painting.

Felander stepped back and crossed his arms. "Either that's one hell of a coincidence or the skald is telling the truth."

Grendelak looked at Felander as though he'd just asked to kiss Grendelak and then grabbed the picture of Haddon. He examined it critically, then grabbed the other painting from Manx and searched the room frantically for a mirror. He found one near the window, and hurried over to it. He held up both pictures next to the mirror and then looked at himself as though seeing himself for the first time.

No one spoke for several minutes. Grendelak finally dropped his hands to his sides, his shoulders hunched in defeat. "I believe you."

"If Manx says it is so, you should," a voice came from the other side of the room. Grendelak whirled around to see Duke Troma standing in the doorway. The man's face was grim.

Grendelak opened his mouth to speak but the tightness in his throat prevented him from saying a word. He held the paintings out and looked from them to Manx to Troma, his eyes begging one of them to tell him it was all a lie.

Troma looked to Manx, who merely nodded encouragingly. Troma walked to where Grendelak was standing and took the paintings from him, setting them back on the desk. "Let us eat. We can discuss this later

or during dinner. For now I think Grendelak needs a bit of time to think and he can do that while we eat as easily as he can here.”

Grendelak picked up his feet and followed Troma out of the room. Felander waited for Manx and offered her his arm, only slightly surprised when she took it.

“You’re surely stirring things up here, aren’t you, skald?” Felander murmured quietly in her ear.

Manx smiled and gave the man a peck on the cheek. “You’re the one who said something about finding a Duke’s bastard. Turns out you didn’t have far to look.”

They sat down to dinner in the duke’s private dining hall. The larger hall was reserved for balls and parties or, when necessary, ducal meetings. The large hall could seat almost a hundred while Troma’s private hall sat only a cozy twenty or so. A single large fireplace gave off enough heat to keep the room warm and the light from it and the dozen sconces strategically placed around the room gave it a cheerful glow. Servants scurried to and from the kitchen through the almost camouflaged door in the corner, bringing out meats and breads and wine.

Troma kept the conversation somewhat light through most of the meal and Grendelak was thankful for the time to think. His mind was spinning. Since he’d returned to Corrigan he’d been elevated to First Brother, witnessed a murder, been attacked by Tasnians and discovered he was a ducal bastard. He really wasn’t ready for all this. He found that the wine flowed freely in Troma’s hall and he took advantage of it, hoping the drink would soothe his worries and relax him enough to think.

He ate with relish, as they all did, having the first hot meal they’d seen in days. When the last of the trenchers had been cleared and only the wine remained they moved from the table to the chairs placed near the fireplace for just such occasions. Grendelak stared at the fire, drinking his wine, and listened to the conversation flow around him.

“Are you certain there were Tasnians at Court?” Troma asked again, incredulous.

Manx nodded. “Not just at court, Troma, standing next to the king, of all things. I was as shocked as a first-night bar maid!”

“And the Chosen you spoke of, you are certain?” Troma queried, leaning forward.

Manx sighed. “He made the dead to walk without the required sacrifice.” She stood and walked to the fireplace, watching the flames for a moment before she turned and looked at Troma. “He was Chosen or I am not . . . Lordston’s.”

Grendelak’s ears had perked up at the pause in her statement. He wasn’t certain what she had been about to say but he was certain it wasn’t

what had come out. He wondered what other secrets she was hiding. *She has so many, it could be anything*, he thought viciously.

Troma leaned back in his chair and rested his elbows on its arms. He pressed his fingertips together several times before he turned his attention to Felander. "And you say the King has declared the Brotherhood forfeit and that all are to be arrested?"

"And charged with treason if they will not swear," Grendelak interjected tonelessly.

Troma gave Grendelak an arched look. "That in and of itself makes me believe Manx's tale. But it may not be enough for the rest of the ducal rulers. They may require, and you'll pardon me for this, Manx," he gave Manx an apologetic look, "a noble to swear to seeing them at Court and at the King's side."

Manx bowed her head politely, accepting the slight. She wasn't overly bothered by such requirements. She knew how kingdoms worked and what would be taken on faith and what required more substantial proof. Troma was only covering his proverbial behind by wanting a noble to swear. A noble in good standing was considered honorable beyond reproach; his oath taken to be the absolute truth. No one could blame the other ducal rulers if they acted upon information sworn to by one of their own standing. But a skald? They were not noble, though they were often treated as equals, and the fact that they embellished tales as a means of entertainment left their own veracity somewhat in question and certainly not something to be used as the basis for a civil war.

"I would suggest speaking to Duke Kelling of Amorice. Gregos will likely be more than willing to give you what you require and it just so happens he was leaving Corrigan for Radael not more than a few days ago. If we rode out we may be able to catch him on the North Road," Manx suggested.

Grendelak threw a sharp look at Manx, who returned it with an impassive face.

"What of the FreeSwords, Grendelak? What do they do now?"

Grendelak caught the slight shake of Felander's head as he began to answer the Duke. "They have left Corrigan for the time being. They will not bend the knee to the king and his attempts to force us to do so by murdering First Brother Nolphen in the middle of Court for crimes he did not commit have earned him our highest contempt."

Felander nodded his head in agreement, raising his glass. "Aye, it is as the First Brother says. We will not swear fealty. But we do not wish to fight against our own King, either. We simply want to be left to our own as it has always been."

Now it was Grendelak's turn to raise his glass at Felander's words. "Aye, Brother, so shall it be. We will all die with our swords free."

They both drank deeply of their wine. Grendelak peered over the rim of glass at Manx and caught the arched look she exchanged with Troma.

Troma stood and walked to the fireplace, standing close to Manx. He leaned down and whispered something in her ear. She looked up at him and shrugged, then whispered something back in his ear. Troma winked at her and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek before he straightened himself and cleared his throat.

Grendelak had watched the exchange with a growing feeling of anger. *How dare he!* He thought angrily. *She's half his age and she's my skald!* He stopped in surprise at his own thoughts. Most of the time he wanted to wring her neck, where did this feeling of ownership come from? He looked reproachfully at his wine glass. *That must be it. The wine. I've drunk too much after losing blood and it's made me witless. It will clear in the morning.*

"How serious are you about keeping the Brotherhood from bending the knee without being destroyed, Grendelak?"

Grendelak stood at the question, his stance rigid and his fingers suddenly clenched tightly around his glass, as though he'd just been insulted. "Any FreeSword would prefer death over breaking of his Oaths, sir. And I am, above everything else, a FreeSword."

Troma held out his hands as if to ward Grendelak off. "I'm not asking you to break your Oaths, Grendelak. I'm about to ask you," he gestured toward Felander, "and your friend if you would take Contract with me."

Grendelak looked taken aback and, for the first time he could recall, so did Manx. Grendelak grinned inwardly at the look of surprise on her face, feeling as though he'd finally gotten one over on her, even though he really hadn't had a thing to do with it.

"If you don't mind me asking, Duke ShoreHold, why now?" Felander asked.

Troma laughed a bit. "Because I know how you 'Swords are and if you won't fight against the king as Manx mentioned earlier but you can't support the king because of his declaration . . ."

"It is as we hoped, Felander. If the nobles are to rise against the king for his treachery they will need us, and they can only have us through Contract, which is why Troma offers now," Grendelak said, his head slightly buzzing with the effects of the wine.

"You will move against Remelus?" Felander asked hopefully.

Troma lifted a finger to his lips angrily. "Do you realize what you've just said? Why don't you climb the roof and scream it through the town or better yet, write a letter declaring it! The King can have us all charged with treason for such talk so bite your tongue," he hissed furiously. "If you can bring a sworn writ with Duke Kellering's personal seal on it that without a doubt proves that Tasnians have been at the King's side, *in Court*, then we

will inform the ducal council and convene a session here to discuss what action we should take,” he said in a more normal tone to Felander. He turned to face Grendelak. “If things move that far I should like to Contract you both, but at the very least you.”

A puzzled look crossed Grendelak’s face. “Why?”

Troma gave him a lopsided grin. “You have much to learn, haven’t you, Grendelak. A man likes to keep his sons near him when it comes to war. Just in case.”

Grendelak merely looked at Troma, the shock of hearing someone call him son stealing his voice. He nodded and then returned to his chair. He noticed that Troma was still looking at him expectantly. “We will consider the Contract as we would any other,” he said in a flat voice.

Troma nodded in return before he turned the conversation back to a subject less filled with tension. Grendelak ignored the conversation, staring dully into his glass, his thoughts filled with the king, the Brotherhood, his newly discovered father and, much to his chagrin, Manx.

It was late when the conversation finally died down and both Troma and Manx excused themselves. Felander and Grendelak sat quietly for a time, both still lost in their own musings.

After a time Grendelak looked up to find Felander staring at him, a concerned look on his face. “You think we should take the Contract, First Brother?”

Grendelak closed his eyes and sat back in his chair, trying to relax his shoulders and relieve the tension that had built up over the past few hours. “Yes, I do, Felander.”

Felander nodded, as though he had expected the response. “You’ve had an interesting day, Grendelak.”

Grendelak opened his eyes wearily, his brown eyes bloodshot. “Yes,” he said simply, then stood and walked to the fireplace, staring into the dying embers. *Interesting isn’t how I’d put it, he thought to himself. A father who suddenly appears out of no where, a skald who will most certainly drive me insane, an entire Brotherhood that depends on me . . . His fingers tightened around his glass. And a secret I can never absolve myself of.*

Grendelak spun around suddenly at the touch on his shoulder. Felander had come up behind him while he thought. “What’s on your mind, urchin?”

Grendelak smiled wryly at the question. Felander had always known when something was bothering him, even before Grendelak had come to trust Felander. For months he’d refused to tell Felander even his name, believing the older man would use it against him somehow. Felander had been patient and instead had taken to calling him urchin, eventually drawing him out and teaching him trust. Even after Felander had learned

his name he'd still called Grendelak urchin whenever the other man knew he was reluctant to speak.

Grendelak sighed and bowed his head. "Everything, Felander. The Brotherhood, the responsibility, the king, Troma, . . ." he raised his head and glanced at the door that Manx had left through earlier, "Manx."

"The skald I understand, women are hard to deal with and that one is more woman than I think I'd want to try to deal with," Felander said with a smile.

Grendelak shook his head. "It's not just that, Felander, it's what she says. Do you believe in all that prophecy talk?"

Felander was quiet for a moment, and when he spoke again his voice was serious. "I've seen a lot of things in my life, Grendelak, and though I haven't personally seen any prophecies come true, there's always a first time. The Brotherhood, as you know, puts quite a bit of stock in the Kingseer Prophecies."

"But you don't really believe it, do you?" Grendelak asked plaintively.

Felander's answer wasn't comforting to Grendelak at all. "I think that people who believe in prophecies often make them come true."

Chapter 9

They left in the morning, just after dawn. Without Aerdon to slow them down, the small group made good time, reaching the North Road before mid morning. No one seemed interested in chatting, so they rode in silence to the sound of their mount's hooves beating on the road.

They stopped a few miles later to water their horses and give them a short rest before they continued their search for Duke Kelling. Grendelak found a spot to sit on a rock beneath the canopy of a tree. He crossed one ankle over the other and tried to relax, watching as Felander and Manx rummaged through their packs for something to eat. He kept his eyes on Manx as she pulled out a piece of dried meat and a round fruit she must have gotten from Troma's kitchens. Felander pulled out a similar fare and the two of them meandered over to sit nearby.

"Which way?" Felander mumbled through a mouth full of fruit.

Grendelak looked to Manx. "Well, this was your idea, which way, skald?"

Manx looked north, squinting her eyes, and then looked south. She really had no idea which way to go, but believed that fate would lead them in the right direction. She stood and walked a few feet away and looked around the clearing. *There it is . . .* she thought as her eyes fell upon the remains of a campfire. She wandered over to it and put her hand out over it, then lowered it until she could feel a semblance of heat remaining in the ash. She strode back to the men and announced, "North. Definitely. They are not too far ahead of us."

Grendelak's jaw dropped. "Was that some kind of . . . magik?" he asked suspiciously.

Manx laughed. "No, Grendelak. Though it would shame my teachers to tell you the truth. The remains of a campfire are nearby and still hold

some of the heat from the morning's fire. Someone stayed here this morning."

"But you don't know that it was Kellering, do you?" Felander asked, looking north with a worried expression on his face.

"No, but it *feels* right," she said firmly.

Felander shrugged, "You've been right thus far, Manx."

Grendelak grunted. "I suppose we have little choice," he added grudgingly.

"They're ahead of us, I'm certain of it. Just a couple glass ahead, if we push our horses. A Duke and his retinue travel much more slowly than we can," she said brightly.

Grendelak rose, wincing as he put too much weight on his injured leg. "Well then, we best be going. Don't want to keep the Duke waiting, do we?"

"Is your leg all right, Grendelak?" Manx asked, concerned at the flash of pain she'd seen cross his face.

Grendelak nodded and waved his hand diffidently. "It's much better than it could be. That salve the acolytes put on it really did the trick. It's just sore, nothing to worry about."

"If you're sure . . ."

"I'm sure, now let's go find the Duke before we have to track him into Kantor-Doorne."

Two turns of the glass dragged by and still they had seen no sight of the Duke and his retinue. They spoke very little, each knowing they were growing irritated at the thought of tracking the Duke into the next day. They were just cresting a hill when the sound of battle reached their ears. Felander and Grendelak exchanged glances and then both men drew their weapons, urging their horses forward just a bit faster. Manx followed their lead, drawing a dagger and urging her mount to keep up to the others.

As they reached the apex of the hill they could see the colors of the Royal Guardsmen intermingled with men wearing mostly blue and black. Off to the side of the road stood a man draped in black and red robes, his bald head shining in the mid day sun.

Manx spurred her horse to a full gallop. "Those are Duke Kellering's colors!" Manx shouted as she passed the men. Grendelak and Felander kicked the sides of their mounts and charged forward. Felander headed straight for the fray, discerning as he charged which men in blue and black appeared to be more in need of assistance than the others.

Grendelak's mind was spinning. He stared hard at the robed man. He knew that man. He knew that face. "Tibor!" he growled as he finally recognized the priest. He pulled harshly on the reins of his horse, forcing

it to turn sharply to the left and toward the priest. He watched as Tibor waved his arms in the air frantically and then pointed at him. A moment later Grendelak felt . . . something, but it was gone as quickly as it appeared. He shook his head and continued to bear down on the priest, raising his sword out and preparing to strike Tibor as he passed by him.

He swung with a growl and was surprised when his blade was thrown aside. Grendelak spun his mount around and dismounted before his horse had even come to a full stop. He grimaced as a wave of pain emanating from his leg washed over him. Ignoring the throbbing in his leg, knowing it would only grow worse, he advanced on Tibor, seeing for the first time the flail that had appeared in the priest's hand and must surely have blocked the blow from his own blade.

Grendelak dropped into a fighting stance and cautiously watched Tibor, hatred burning in his eyes. "You have manipulated me for the last time, *friend*," he spat at his old employer.

Tibor laughed harshly. "You are a fool, Grendelak Mishtar. I suppose that I should never have expected one of you FreeSwords to keep to their oaths."

Grendelak's face grew red with anger. "I have kept my oaths, Tibor. It is you who have abused them," he gritted between clenched teeth.

"You promised to take care of Duke Kelling, and yet here he is, on his way to Salena," Tibor clucked, shaking his head. "I had thought you were more honorable than that, but I see now you can't be trusted."

Grendelak's low growl rose to a scream of denial as he swung out at Tibor. "It won't work, Tibor. Not this time!"

"Well, well . . . the Assassin has grown up, hasn't he?" Tibor sneered as he danced away from the tip of Grendelak's blade.

Grendelak ignored the man's jibes, knowing Tibor was trying to goad him into losing control. He concentrated instead on simply killing the man who had betrayed him. Neither spoke again as Grendelak exploded into a flurry of attacks, one finally landing on Tibor's shoulder and cutting deeply. Tibor cried out as he dropped his flail, one hand groping for the wound and trying to staunch the flow of blood.

Grendelak stalked the man until he stumbled slightly, giving Grendelak time to grab for the man's injured arm and twist it behind the priest's back. Grendelak dropped his sword and drew forth his dagger. The one he had used to kill other men. The one Tibor had convinced him to use to commit murder. He ignored Tibor's screams as he reached around the priest's neck, laying the dagger's edge along the man's neck.

Tibor's screams died away immediately. Grendelak leaned his chin on Tibor's shoulder, his breath souging across the man's cheek. "It's over, Tibor, and now you get what you deserve."

“Do it, Assassin!” Tibor hissed. “If you dare. Be what you were destined to be, *a killer of men*. No matter what you do you will never wipe the stain of so much innocent blood from your hands. Never.”

Grendelak’s eyes narrowed at the man’s speech and his hand trembled, nicking the priest’s neck and drawing blood. “You may be right. It’s too bad you won’t be alive to find out, isn’t it?” he told Tibor almost conversationally, then ripped the dagger across the man’s throat and pushed him forward with a knee. Grendelak watched dispassionately as the man slid to the ground, his hands futilely grabbing at the gaping wound on his neck. He stood staring as Tibor’s life blood flowed out of him and into the ground, fascinated. As the blood flowed out of Tibor it seemed as though some of the guilt he felt for having killed for this man was washing away with it.

“Grendelak!”

Manx’s cry snapped him out of his reverie. He spun around and, seeing his friends still fighting, picked up his sword and went to help them, sheathing his dagger as he ran.

He wasn’t sure where to start. One of the duke’s men was down, his empty stare telling Grendelak he was gone. Five men in the Duke’s colors remained, and there were six Royal Guardsman standing. Two of the enemy were down, one obviously dead and the other rolling on the ground screaming. Felander put another one down even as Grendelak surveyed the general melee, and one of the Duke’s men expertly slashed through the knee of another guard, who fell to the ground screaming.

He grew concerned when he could not see Manx. *Always a tensquad!* He reminded himself, trying to stay calm. He counted quickly again. *Eight down here, Tibor, where are the other two?* He tried to calm himself. “Manx!” he cried out, “Felander, where is she?”

He waited impatiently while Felander fended off another blow from a guardsman. “I don’t know!” Felander called out between swings, “There were two of ’em on her earlier!”

Grendelak’s throat constricted at his friend’s words. As two more guards fell to the Duke’s men, Grendelak decided they had the situation under control. He looked around frantically, calling out for the skald.

He finally heard a voice call out his name faintly behind him. He spun around and saw movement in the trees just off the road. He sprinted toward the movement, ignoring the complaints from his leg. He dove through the trees, mindless of what might be waiting in them.

He pulled up short a moment later as he saw the White and Green of the guardsmen in front of him. The guardsman, hearing Grendelak’s approach, spun around with a sword in hand. Grendelak kept half an eye on him while he tried to look beyond, searching for Manx. “Manx?” he

called out hopefully, brandishing his sword threateningly in front of him. He grew worried when he received no reply. He could see a struggle going on behind the guard in front of him and heard a sickening thud that sounded suspiciously like a body falling to the ground.

“When we’re done with her *Brother*, you can have her back,” the second guard called out as he moved to stand next to the first.

Grendelak’s lip curled up into a sneer. “You’ll have to kill me first.”

“Oh, you want to play?” The guards exchanged pleased looks as they both drew their swords and held them menacingly in front of them. “Come on then, perhaps we’ll have two of you traitors to return to the King.”

Grendelak charged them both, barreling into the first and tossing him backwards while swinging out at the second. The man he swung at easily brought his sword to bear and blocked Grendelak’s blow. He swung back hard, the blow solidly striking Grendelak’s blade, the vibrations from the blow causing Grendelak’s hand to shake. A moment later Grendelak felt a blow glance off his shoulder. He bent back to avoid taking the first guard’s blade across his throat and took the opportunity to take several steps back, trying to position himself so that both the guards were in front of him.

Now this is a fair fight, he thought sarcastically as he methodically blocked blows from one guard and then the next. He spent the next several minutes simply defending himself, looking desperately for an opening.

Grendelak gave his head a quick shake, trying to knock the beads of sweat from his forehead before they fell into his eyes. He had to dispatch at least one of these guards and soon. His could feel the heaviness in his arms that experience told him was fatigue and knew that soon any blow he managed to land would be ineffectual. Grendelak saw the guard on his right plunge forward and instinct told him that the man would be overextended at the end of his thrust.

Grendelak ignored the second guard, concentrating on dealing with one at a time even though he knew it might cost him in the end. He dropped to one knee, reaching with his left hand for the dagger he kept in the side of his boot. The guard’s sword swished harmlessly over his head, the man’s momentum forcing his swing to continue until his now exposed left side was merely a few feet from Grendelak’s face.

Grendelak sprung from his kneeling position, the foot long blade he gripped tightly in his left hand coming up and slipping easily behind the man’s breastplate and up into his lung. Grendelak let go of the hilt of the blade and was about to step to his right to avoid being crushed under the guard when he fell, but the boot he suddenly felt in the back of his left knee sent a sharp pain through his leg, causing him to stumble and drop his own sword.

A moment later Grendelak was lying on the ground, groping about with one hand for his sword while the remaining guard stalked him. Grendelak maintained an almost fetal position as he used his feet to push himself away from the remaining guard. Finally his fingers felt the hilt of a weapon. Not caring if it was his or not he closed his hand around it, dragging it along with him as he continued to scramble this way and that, never taking his eyes from the guard who pursued him.

He knew the guard would close on him and a minute later Grendelak stopped trying to crawl away as the other man drew close enough to strike out at him.

“Well,” Grendelak snarled, “if you’re going to, do it.” Grendelak had come close to death many times, but most of them were in the midst of a fight, with his feet firmly under him. He was unused to being trapped like a rabbit and found he did not enjoy the feeling one bit.

“Let go of your weapon and sit up slowly,” the guard commanded as he gestured slightly with the tip of his blade toward the sword Grendelak still gripped tightly in his right hand.

Grendelak was confused. *If you’re going to kill a man you don’t make him drop his weapon or sit up.* He thought to himself as he released his grip on his weapon and slowly pushed himself to a sitting position.

“Hands out,” the other man barked, pushing the tip of his sword forward into Grendelak’s leg.

Raising his arms, palms up, Grendelak looked critically at the guard, his eyes narrowing at a movement behind him. For a moment he thought perhaps the other guard had arisen despite his wounds, but then he saw a flash of blond hair and realized it must be Manx. *What in the name of Healtherd is she doing? She must be trying to get to Felander for help. Good, at least he can bury me correctly. She needs time, I must give her time to get away.* He knew he had to keep the man’s attention as long as possible. He gave the guard a brash look. “Now what, you Tasnian boot licker?”

Grendelak was pleased with the dark look that crossed the man’s face. “I ought to kill you here instead of take you to the king,” the guard threatened.

“*You’re* going to take *me* to the king?” Grendelak taunted the man in an incredulous tone. “Oh, I should like to know how you’re going to accomplish that. Who’s going to help you?” Grendelak continued to jeer at him, ignoring the other man’s growing irritation. His only thought was to give Manx enough time to clear the woods before he made a move. He couldn’t be taken back to the king and he certainly wasn’t going to die without a fight. But he didn’t want to push the man until he was certain Manx was safe.

“Lay back down and turn over,” the guard ordered through clenched teeth. “And keep your arms out to the side. No funny business or I will take your dead body back with me.”

“No,” Grendelak replied calmly. He knew if he presented his back to the man that he was lost. He could not give the guard that kind of advantage.

The guard looked surprised and confused. “What do you mean no? Turn over.”

“No means no,” Grendelak returned, “You know, as in I won’t do what you say?”

The guard sneered. “You idiot!” he spat as he drew back his sword.

Grendelak’s calm face suddenly took on a look of horror and surprise. The guard smiled as he saw the change, attributing it to Grendelak’s naiveté; as if Grendelak really hadn’t expected the guard to strike him.

But Grendelak wasn’t even seeing the guard. He was horrified by the sudden appearance of the tiny skald behind the guard, a long dagger in one of her hands. For a brief moment Grendelak reconsidered his religion. He’d never been particularly religious, but it seemed to him that only the god’s intervention could rectify the situation Manx was about to throw them into.

Manx kept her eyes focused on the guard’s back, zeroing in on where she hoped to plant her blade. She was angry at having been overpowered by these guards and almost dragged back to Corrigan, but she was even angrier that this one had Grendelak lying on the ground and appeared ready to strike him down. She gripped the hilt of her dagger with both hands and drew it back, then used all her strength to drive it into the spot she’d chosen on the back of the man’s tabard. She knew he was likely wearing armor, but the dagger was finely made and enchanted by the elves, making it more likely to strike its intended target even if that target was encased in plate of mail armor.

She was pleased when she felt the dagger slide easily into the man’s back, but cringed as a stream of bright red blood suddenly spurted out of the hole and splattered across her face. She backed away quickly, pulling the dagger out while trying, and failing, to keep a grip on its now slick, blood covered hilt. She took another step back as her dagger fell to the ground.

Grendelak saw the suddenly surprised look on the guard’s face and took the opportunity to push himself away as the tip of the man’s sword dropped. He glanced at the ground and, spotting the weapon he’d dropped earlier, swept it up even as he pushed himself to a crouched position, waiting to see what the guard would do next.

The remaining Royal Guardsman’s hand began shaking, his grip on his sword lost as he fell to his knees. Grendelak could see Manx, covered in blood, standing behind the man as he dropped to all fours and began coughing up blood. The man looked up between heavens and glared at Grendelak. “The king will have your heads yet, *Brother.*” He gurgled.

“I think not,” Manx said even as the man collapsed to the ground.

Grendelak stood and walked toward Manx, who was still staring angrily at the dying guard. “Are you okay?” he asked.

She turned her face up to look at him and Grendelak immediately felt a wave of anger wash over him. The imprint of a large fist was clearly evident along her chin, already showing the purple and black of a deep bruise. It was clear enough that he could see the ring that the man who had hit her had been wearing, its imprint still visible on the skald’s delicate chin. Mixed with the twigs and leaves in her disarrayed hair and the blood splattered across the front of her clothing and face she looked a frightful mess. “Is any of that blood yours?”

Manx shook her head. “Just a scratch or two,” she said dismissively. “Nothing to worry about. Really. And you?”

“I’m fine,” he replied as he sheathed his sword. “We ought to get back to the others . . .”

“Not yet,” she countered before turning away from him and bending down next to the nearly dead guard. She began rummaging through the man’s pouches and pockets, ignoring the intermittent groans that came from the man.

“What are you doing?” Grendelak asked impatiently.

“Searching for clues . . .” she replied distractedly even as she tore off a small pouch that jingled when she shook it. She continued to rummage through the man’s clothing while she mumbled something Grendelak could not clearly hear under her breath. Grendelak waited impatiently, his eyes roaming the small clearing as though he expected another attack at any moment.

Finally he heard an “Aha!” and he turned his attention back to Manx. She was holding a rather tattered piece of parchment. After a moment of reading she reached down and grabbed the man’s hand, pulling a ring off his finger and depositing it into one of the many pouches that hung off her belt. “This might be something important,” she said somewhat optimistically after she’d stood and slid the parchment under her shirt. “Now we can go,” she said, tying the pouch to her own belt before she reached down and grabbed her dagger. She looked at it and made a face of disgust, then reached down and wiped the blood from its blade on the back of the now dead guard’s cloak.

“Well?” she asked with a note of impatience.

Grendelak shook his head. He was never going to understand women. “By all means, let’s return, but be wary—they were still fighting when I left to find you.”

Manx dropped a hand to the pommel of her sword, “Of course.”

They exited the clearing a few moments later and looked to where they'd last seen the Duke and their friends fighting off the Royal Guardsmen. Grendelak was not surprised to see that the fighting was obviously over. Four men in the Duke's blue and black were standing with Felander, the ground littered with the bodies of men in Green and White.

"First Brother!" Manx and Grendelak heard Felander call out, obviously happy to see them both as he trotted over to meet them.

They slowed as they came within twenty yards of the Duke's men and waited for Felander to join them. Felander quickly appraised them both and, finding them both unhurt enough to chat, quickly informed them that he'd already spoken to the Duke about their request and was pleased to report that Kellering would gladly sign a document stating he'd seen Tasnian's not only in Court but that it appeared the king had solicited advice from them as well.

Grendelak smiled. "Excellent. Which one is the Duke?" Grendelak asked out of the corner of his mouth as they walked back to the others.

"The tall one with the short black hair and the gold trim on his tabard," Manx interjected, her words coming out less clear than normal as the side of her face with the angry bruise on began to swell.

"You need to have that looked at, Manx," Felander told her.

"Nonsense," she retorted quickly, "the swelling will go down soon and the bruise, well, it will fade with time."

"If you say so . . ." Felander replied, unconvinced.

They stopped short of the Duke, the men bowing slightly in greeting. "Well met, Duke Kellering, I am First Brother Grendelak of the Corrigarian FreeSwords," Grendelak offered.

"Well met, First Brother," Duke Kellering replied in a bounding voice, "Thank Talimaara you appeared when you did. I thank thee for your assistance."

Grendelak bobbed his head, "Twas our pleasure, my Lord Duke," he replied guiltily, unable to shake the thought that just weeks ago he had sworn to kill the man.

"Your friend, Felander was it?" He waited until Felander nodded, "told me of your quest. I wilt gladly aid you in thine attempt to rid Corrigar of the Deathwalker's influence."

"Our thanks, Duke Kellering, for your assistance in this matter," Grendelak said evenly.

"No, First Brother, it is little enough after you braved your own life to dispatch the priest Tibor and hast saved me a trip to Radael. That one hast been the cause of many deaths lo these past years," the Duke replied solemnly.

Grendelak cringed inwardly with guilt. *He* was the cause of so many deaths these past years.

“Tasnians art manipulators, First Brother,” the Duke began, “which is why your task is so important and so fraught with danger. They wilt not like you putting a stop to what they have taken so long to build . . .” he said ominously.

“I understand, my Lord Duke,” Grendelak said determinedly, “but I can do nothing less than try for the sake of the Brotherhood.”

“Felander told me as much, First Brother, and though I am loathe to help start a civil war, I canst see no other recourse to save thy kingdom from the darkness these followers of the Night wouldst cover this land in.”

“Thank you,” Grendelak replied simply.

Duke Kelling turned his attention to Manx. “Lady Manx, I thank thee. Your timely warning wast well received.”

Manx inclined her head in the Duke’s direction. “Your thanks are welcome but not necessary, Gregos Kelling of Amorice. I do The Great Skald’s work,” she replied as clearly as possible, her irritation at her inability to speak clearly evident on her face.

“Of course,” Duke Kelling offered simply. “While I would love to stay and chat, needs must I return these brave souls to Amorice. I no longer need to finish my road to Radael, but I wouldst like to return home and give these men a proper burial before I find a new quest to take on. My thanks again,” he said as he reached out, a sealed piece of parchment in his hand, “and here is what your Duke Shorehold requires.”

Grendelak took the parchment almost reverently; the knowledge of what the words contained within might do to his beloved Corrigar weighing heavily on his heart. “Thank you,” he said quietly. “Fare thee well, Duke Kelling of Amorice.”

“Talimaara guide thee, First Brother Grendelak.” The Duke turned and clapped three times, the sound alerting his men and sending them to readying their horses for travel.

The three friends said little as they tracked down their mounts. Grendelak carefully placed the parchment inside his tunic, patting the outside carefully once it had been tucked safely away.

They rode hard the rest of the day, pleased to finally see the looming gates of Duke Shorehold’s manse at dusk. They slowed their pace a bit, and Grendelak noticed that Manx was lagging behind them. When he thought about it, she’d been uncharacteristically quiet since the scene in the clearing and had been riding slower and slower throughout the journey back to the keep. He slowed until he was riding next to her. He looked her up and down but could see nothing out of the ordinary but the dried blood and bruise on her face. Her face looked tired, her

eyelids drooping as though she was having a hard time staying awake. “Manx?”

“Yessss,” she slurred, not even looking at him.

“What is it? Something is wrong, now answer me, damn you!” Grendelak ordered, his voice tainted with concern.

“Dunno . . .” she replied somewhat indistinctly, her slight frame now wobbling in the saddle.

“Felander!” Grendelak called out, trying to keep his voice from carrying his sudden fear. “Hold up, we have a problem.”

Felander turned his mount abruptly and stopped. He looked back just in time to see Manx topple from her saddle, dropping roughly to the ground.

Grendelak dismounted in one smooth motion and raced around her mount, slapping him roughly on the flank and shooing him away from Manx’s unmoving form. Felander did the same, sprinting the few yards between him and Grendelak, quickly kneeling beside Manx just moments after Grendelak.

Grendelak laid his head on her chest and prayed to every god he could think of as he listened frantically. He sighed with relief when he could hear her heart beating and felt the rise and fall of her chest as she breathed deeply, as though she were merely sleeping soundly. He looked up and met Felander’s confused expression, knowing it mirrored his own.

Felander rocked back on his heels. “What happened?”

Grendelak shrugged helplessly. “I don’t know. She’s been quiet since we left the Duke and slow, but I thought perhaps it was only fatigue.”

“Perhaps that is all it is, Brother?”

“Perhaps. I’ve been that tired before, just never actually fell off my horse in a dead sleep.”

“Let’s take her up to Troma’s, I don’t have a clue what else to do.”

Grendelak pushed himself up and mounted his horse, holding out his arms in a gesture that clearly told Felander he wished to carry the skald back to the manor house. Felander grinned despite the situation as he picked Manx up and handed her body to his friend, then headed back to his own mount, snatching the reins of Manx’s horse on the way.

They rode slowly the rest of the way to the house, ignoring the bells that pealed announcing their return and making their way up to the front doors. Troma himself stood in the doorway, anxiously awaiting their arrival. As they pulled up in front of him Troma’s face grew dark at the sight.

“What in the name of Talimaara happened here?” he demanded, reaching up with open arms toward Manx and taking her body from Grendelak as though she weighed next to nothing. He looked her over, his eyes narrowing as he waited for an explanation.

Grendelak dismounted wearily, tossing the reins of his horse over the saddle and undoing the surcingle that held his pack to his horse. "I don't know, sir, she collapsed about two leagues from the manse. Slurring her words like a drunken tavern wench and seeming tired as a new married maid."

Troma turned without another word and carried Manx into the house. Felander shrugged as he met Grendelak's eyes and both men quickly followed. Troma took Manx to the room she'd been in the night before and laid her on the bed, calling for a servant and ordering rags and warm water as soon as they appeared.

Grendelak moved to stand next to Troma, who sat on the edge of the bed next to Manx, holding her hand and patting it lightly.

"Well?" Troma asked expectantly as he took notice of the other men.

"We found the Duke, but he was besieged by Royal Guardsmen and a Tasnian priest," Grendelak began.

"Another Chosen?" the Duke interrupted, his voice thick with concern as he glanced at Manx, his expression full of worry.

Grendelak shook his head. "I don't know, sir. I don't think so but I wouldn't know one if I met one. Sometime during the fight two of the guards managed to overpower her and drag her off into the woods. I found her, but from the looks of her chin one of them hit her pretty hard. I killed one of the guards and then . . ."

"And then what?"

"She killed the other one while he was preparing to kill me," Grendelak finished sheepishly.

Felander's laughter at the admission cut off suddenly at the look Grendelak fixed on his old friend.

"That still does not explain this," Troma said impatiently.

"Perhaps she is just exhausted?" Felander offered.

Troma was quiet for a moment as he stared at Manx. "Perhaps," he finally acquiesced, nodding his head. "Let her sleep and we will check on her in the morning," he said before he rose from the bed and snapped his fingers at the nervous servants. "You two, try to clean her up a bit and stay with her every moment. Watch her carefully, and have me notified if something changes."

Troma looked to Felander and Grendelak, "Come along then," he ordered congenially as he left the room and headed down the hall.

The men followed him back to the sitting room in which they'd watched Manx while she spoke privately with the Duke the night before. Once inside they could see it was well appointed, but not fine like a courtier's. The furniture was sturdy and comfortable, covered in some kind of animal hide, the colors rich and dark. It was very obviously a man's room, decorated

with an eye toward what interested men. The walls held few sconces and those that did appeared not to have been lit recently. A large, worn chair sat next to the fireplace and beside it sat a small table on which a pipe and leather bag sat casually, probably filled with smoking weed Grendelak decided. A few glasses, some of which held varying amounts of colors of wine, were standing here and there on tables about the room, chairs similar to the one near the fireplace scattered about near the tables.

Troma sat on the chair near the fireplace and gestured to the room in general. "Please, sit. I would like to hear more of your encounter with the Duke," he said as he crossed his legs and reached for his pipe.

They explained what had happened while Troma silently puffed on his pipe, nodding occasionally and raising an eyebrow once or twice. "So you have the Duke's statement?"

Grendelak nodded and reached into his tunic, carefully pulling out the parchment. He stood and walked over to Troma, who sat with his hand out, waiting.

Troma took the parchment and examined it, then looked up at Grendelak and arched an eyebrow. "Still sealed?"

Grendelak looked confused. "Of course, sir. It must remain so until the Duke's gather together else we risk doubt."

Troma smiled widely. "Very good, I wasn't sure you would figure that out and so I'd fretted over that all day, having forgotten to mention it. You have obviously spent some time with nobility to know their suspicious nature so well."

A look of guilt and self-loathing passed across Grendelak's face. "Yes, sir, I have."

Troma narrowed his eyes. "But you'd rather not discuss it, if I am judging correctly."

"Yes sir, I'd rather not."

"When you are ready, Grendelak, when you are ready."

Grendelak merely nodded his head and returned to his chair. He was quite certain he'd never be ready to speak of his time with Tibor and now that the man was dead, he had absolutely no reason to reveal his secret past. His lips tightened into a determined line. No, if he had any choice in the matter he'd never speak of it again.

Chapter 10

Grendelak slept fitfully for a few hours, tossing and turning and worrying about both Manx and what he had just begun by handing that parchment to Duke Troma. He finally gave up trying to sleep and, after dressing himself, quietly made his way across the hall to Manx's room. He shoosed out the servants, telling them he'd keep an eye on her, then pulled up a chair and sat next to her, watching her sleep.

He knew that the messengers the duke had sent out were long gone, having left hours before Grendelak had retired for the night. The duke had spent most of the night drafting the letter inviting the others to Shorehold, trying to be cryptic while conveying urgency. Grendelak and Felander had eaten alone, the Duke had wanted to finish the letters and send out the messengers as soon as possible. Trying to keep his mind occupied, he began to mentally recite the names of the dukes and their duchies again, hearing Manx's impatient voice correcting him when he made a mistake.

It was nearly dawn when he gave up that line of thought and turned his attention back to the skald again. She still hadn't stirred and Grendelak began to grow concerned that something other than fatigue was plaguing her. He reached out and pulled her chin toward him, squinting in the faint light as he examined the mark from the ring that was still visible on her face. *The ring, the ring . . . now why does that sound important?* Grendelak wracked his mind, trying to grab a hold of the thought that flitted just out of reach. He knew there was something about a ring. He looked back to her face and suddenly his eyes widened. He jumped up and ran into the hall grabbing a torch from one of the sconces before running back into the room. He held the torch carefully

in one hand while he bent over Manx and looked at the mark the ring had left in better light.

“Healfherd lose my soul!” he swore suddenly, then began digging through the pouches hanging from the belt Manx usually wore that one of the servants must have taken off and laid across the end of the bed. He found the ring he’d seen her pull off the dead guard in the clearing and held it up to the flickering light of the torch.

After a moment of examining the ring he put his nose close to the small point in the middle of the black stone on its face and inhaled deeply. He closed his eyes as he tried to identify the scent. His eyes suddenly snapped open as he recognized it. He spun on his heel and almost collided with Felander outside the door.

“Whoa there, Grendelak. What’s the hurry?”

“The ring, Felander, the ring. It was the ring that did it!” Grendelak sputtered excitedly.

“The ring did what, Grendelak? Slow down, what is going on?”

Grendelak held up the ring with one hand and the torch with another. “Look at the ring, see the point in the middle of it?”

Felander squinted. “Yes . . .”

“It matches a mark on Manx’s chin, where the ring left its imprint.”

“Grendelak,” Felander said as he stepped back, “I know this is difficult, but do you think you could explain *why* that is so important?”

Grendelak swallowed nervously. “The point is a small needle, the stone is hollow. Inside is poison. I’d bet my life on it.”

Felander raised an eyebrow. “You would, would you?”

“Yes,” Grendelak continued, annoyed at the expression of disbelief on his friend’s face. “Trust me, it’s poison. Pheasant’s Eye, unless I’m wrong. The mark on Manx’s chin and the impression of the ring match. She took the ring from one of the guards, the one who must have hit her in the face.”

“Alright,” Felander said slowly. “And if it is this Eye thing you mention, what does that mean?”

“It’s what’s making her sleep, though such a small dose shouldn’t make her sleep that long, unless it effects elves differently than humans. She could be out for days. I don’t know, it could kill her for all I know.”

Felander nodded soberly. “Alright, do you know how to fix it?”

Grendelak looked pensive for a moment. “A priest, of course, but we could also mix something up that might work if we can find the right ingredients.”

“And you know what those are, right?” When Grendelak nodded Felander went on. “Alright then. Tell me what you need and I’ll go find it, but I think you ought not to say a word to the Duke about this. I don’t

know how in the name of Dirge you know these things but I think the Duke might find it a bit . . . unsettling.”

Grendelak took a step back as though he'd been physically slapped. “I never thought—I mean I just wanted to help Manx and—I,” he stopped and looked at Felander, his eyes full of fear and guilt.

Felander reached out and put a hand on the side of Grendelak's head and pulled him close, as he had done when Grendelak was but a child. “We can discuss it later, just keep it to yourself for now.”

Grendelak nodded dumbly, the shame in the pit of his stomach spreading, grabbing a hold of his intestines and tying them in knots.

Grendelak paced the small room as he waited for Felander to return with the items he'd specified. He was fairly certain the mixture would work, but he'd never heard of such things being used on anyone other than a full blooded human.

Finally Felander returned and Grendelak took the leaves and powders to the dressing table and mixed them carefully, crushing them and adding water periodically. In the end, he brought a milky liquid to Manx's side.

“You'll have to help me,” he told Felander seriously. “Pour this down her throat while I force her to swallow it.”

Felander nodded and took the cup Grendelak held forth. “Just tell me when.”

Grendelak took a deep breath. “Alright, go ahead.”

A few moments later the cup was empty. Most of the liquid had made it into Manx but some of it was still dribbling down her neck where it had spilled as she coughed and sputtered while the two men forced her to swallow the concoction.

Felander grabbed one of the rags the servants had left behind and cleaned the substance off Manx's neck and face, then stepped back and crossed his arms. “How long?”

Grendelak stayed seated on the bed, holding Manx's hand and watching her intently. “I don't know for her. Usually less than half a glass.”

“And you know this how?” Felander asked a few moments later. At Grendelak's pained look Felander uncrossed his arms and took a seat in the chair next to the bed, leaning forward and looking seriously at his friend. “Now, Grendelak. No more secrets.”

Grendelak swallowed hard and in a stuttering voice began telling Felander his terrible secrets. It took him nearly half a glass to spit it all out, his eyes haunted by the words he heard coming out of his own mouth. By the time he finished, though, he found he felt much better, as though by telling his friend about his Contracts for the past five years that he'd somehow purged some of the guilt.

Felander said nothing. He leaned back in the chair and looked thoughtfully at Grendelak. When he remained silent for several more minutes Grendelak finally exploded.

“Well? Say something, Felander! Don’t just stare at me with that look of yours. I feel like I’m fifteen again and you just caught me breaking curfew!”

The corner of Felander’s mouth quirked up into a grin momentarily then disappeared. “I think you were had, my friend. Had and used hard. Is this why I keep hearing the name Assassin thrown around by the skald and some of the priests we meet?”

Grendelak nodded glumly.

“Well, there’s naught to be done about it now. You can’t change the past, at least none of us can no matter what the skald’s tales say about wishes and fantastical things like that. It’s done, you’ve taken care of Tibor and all you can do is go on. You may find that some of the things you’ve learned, like this poison stuff here,” he jerked his thumb at Manx’s still unmoving form, “might come in handy.”

Grendelak looked at Felander suspiciously. “You mean you don’t think any less of me?”

“Oh, I do, Grendelak.” As Grendelak’s face fell and Felander rushed on. “But I think you can redeem yourself if you continue down this path. I *know* you, better than anyone else does and I know if you mean to right the wrong you’ve done you will. You’ve already started, just don’t fall off the path.”

Grendelak nodded. It was not unlike the advice Manx had given him. Perhaps she was right after all. The thought of Manx turned Grendelak’s attention once again to the bed. He picked up her hand and held it, marveling again at how slender her fingers were compared to his own. He wondered briefly why he was so worried about her when most of the time he’d like to strangle her. *Maybe it’s because she’s pushing me to undo all the wrong by doing something right?* Suddenly he realized he very much needed her approval. For some reason he couldn’t fathom he had to know that she was pleased with him and his actions. He sighed loudly. “You just couldn’t leave well enough alone could you, skald? You had to start singing that damn song in Radael, didn’t you?”

“Which song did she sing for you, Grendelak?”

Grendelak dropped Manx’s hand and whirled at the intrusion. He was startled to see Duke Troma standing in the doorway and realized that Felander had left. He must have spent more time than he thought just sitting next to Manx. He stood abruptly. “Something about Quellan and Nordal . . . sir.”

The Duke nodded knowingly as he walked to stand by the side of the bed, looking down on Manx critically. “Yes, I know the one. It’s one of her least favorites, actually. She must have had a reason for singing that one else she wouldn’t have, least ways not without being paid very well.”

Grendelak looked away abashedly, understanding exactly why she had sung it. He could still hear the refrain echoing in his mind and now, with a bit of distance, understood its meaning and why it had bothered him so much for weeks afterward.

Troma glanced out of the corner of his eye at Grendelak. “Has she moved at all?”

Grendelak shook his head.

“Has anyone tried to wake her?”

Grendelak’s face brightened at the thought. “No, sir, they haven’t.”

“Very well then, try.”

“Me, Sir?”

“Yes, Grendelak, you. I’m not in the habit of waking young women from their beds at my age,” he laughed at his own joke.

Grendelak laughed nervously, but reclaimed his place on the bed next to Manx. He reached out and carefully shook her by the shoulders. “Manx,” he called, “oh Manx, wake up . . .” he cajoled.

When she didn’t respond he felt Troma tap him on the shoulder. “Try slapping her face—but gently,” the older man warned.

Grendelak nodded and swallowed hard, then reached out and slapped the skald lightly on the face.

“Pat it gently, Grendelak. If she doesn’t respond, try harder,” Troma ordered.

Grendelak did as he was told and when Manx didn’t respond his patting became more insistent. Suddenly Manx’s hand snaked up and struck Grendelak across the face with a resounding slap. Her eyes flew open and as she recognized Grendelak her lips formed into a surprised “oh”.

Grendelak jumped off the bed, his hand covering his cheek, and his neck red with embarrassment. “Good morning to you, too, skald,” he said sarcastically.

Manx squinted and shook her head. She winced as she yawned, then gingerly felt her chin, finding it still swollen. “Oh damn, it’s as black and blue as Kellering’s Colors, isn’t it?”

Troma laughed. “Yes, my dear, it is. But you’ll get over it. You won’t be performing for a while anyway. You’ll be waiting for the ducal gathering and you certainly aren’t required to entertain us while you wait.”

Manx tried to shake her head and deny his words, but she stopped and raised a hand to her head. “I feel like a Dilornian wildbeast ran over my head, stopped, turned around and ran it over again,” she lamented.

“Eat, Manx,” Grendelak told her, “you’ll feel better after some food, especially some meat and broth.”

Troma clapped his hands together. “Yes, of course, how mindless of me to forget. I’ll have a servant bring it up right away.” He bent over and kissed Manx’s forehead. “You had us worried,” he said as he straightened. “I’m glad to see you awake.”

Grendelak watched him leave and then began to follow him, stopping when he heard Manx call out his name.

“It was poison, wasn’t it?” she asked matter-of-factly.

Grendelak looked at her, stunned. “Yes, it was. But how did you know?”

“I know a lot of things, Grendelak, I keep telling you that. That’s what Bards do, amass knowledge, sing songs, tell stories . . .,” she said tiredly and closed her eyes.

“Spread prophecies,” he added somewhat caustically.

She smiled that smug smile she seemed fond of gifting him with, but did not open her eyes. “No, Grendelak. Those we make come true.”

Manx recovered quickly and, they discovered, so did Aerdon. Grendelak and Felander spent almost an entire day with the man a week after they’d arrived and the next day Aerdon had left, promising to return after he’d delivered the First Brother’s messages to the rest of the Brotherhood.

As the days passed, the three anxiously awaited the arrival of the rest of the Dukes of the Kingdom. Grendelak spent a good amount of time with Troma and Felander, discussing strategy and politics, Manx shadowing them and interjecting now and again. Aerdon spent the time traveling back and forth between Troma’s estates and the hidden clearing where the Brotherhood still camped. It took nearly two weeks after Troma had sent his messengers out for all the Dukes to arrive but finally the last one, Duke Pasthall, arrived and the house was bustling with activity as the servants tried to feed the gathering and prepare for the meeting scheduled for the morning.

Grendelak wandered the gardens that night, unable to relax. He’d been preparing for the meeting for days and now that they were on the cusp of the meeting, his nerves were on edge.

Manx regarded him silently from her perch on one of the stone benches Troma had placed liberally around the gardens. The Duke had imported some of the flowers from Dilorn far to the north, and they’d actually grown quite beautiful, their colors mixing well with those of the indigenous plants. Cobblestone paths meandered through the gardens, with most of them meeting the main path at one or two junctures; only a few paths led to secluded places where one could sit alone and think.

Grendelak didn't appear to be enjoying the landscaping, Manx noted. He was pacing more than he was walking, and he kept looking up at the sky and shaking his head, running his fingers through his hair and periodically kicking listlessly at some of the cobblestones that had come loose.

Manx watched Grendelak until he finally sat on a bench, staring straight ahead. Manx alighted on the path and strolled up to where he sat as though she hadn't been spying on him for most of the evening. She sat down beside him and stared up at his face, watching him watch . . . nothing.

She reached over and lifted his arm, startling him enough to cause him to look down at her. As he held his arm up she scooted closer to him and leaned her head in the crook of his arm.

Grendelak was startled and confused. He let his arm fall around Manx's shoulder but said nothing, deciding that perhaps if kept his mouth closed so would she. They sat quietly together for a while and then Manx started singing softly.

Grendelak stiffened, expecting to hear that damn song about Quellan. But as he listened, it was not. It wasn't even in a language he could understand. He relaxed then, just listening to her voice rise and fall, staring out at the night. When she finished she disentangled herself from his arm and straightened. She looked at him curiously and then leaned over and kissed him before she disappeared in the direction of the manor house.

As she passed Troma's sitting room a few minutes later she heard him call her name. She poked her head inside to see him standing near one of the windows that looked out over the gardens.

"Getting attached to him, are we?" he asked lightly.

Manx turned a shade of red somewhere between maroon and pink. "Perhaps I find the notion of calling you father after all these years amusing," she said teasingly, tossing her head.

"Be careful, my dear," Troma warned seriously, "we're likely all in for rough times ahead."

"Exactly my thought, Troma, which is why you should consider enjoying the quiet moments while you can. You never know when another one will come along," she returned smartly, blowing him a kiss before she continued on her way.

Troma shook his head and chuckled, but the next time one of the serving girls passed by the door he watched her with a bit more interest than he had in the past.

Grendelak sat back in his chair in Troma's dining hall and folded his arms across his chest. They'd gathered in the morning here to break their fast and, he had hoped, discuss the parchment he'd brought back from

Duke Kellering. But thus far they'd done nothing but eat and gossip, one of the things he noted that nobles did often and with great relish.

He took a moment to look around the room, once again counting the nobles present and fixing their names in his memory one last time. He and Manx had gone over them as each of the dukes had arrived, so he was fairly certain he'd recall them all correctly but since he had the time, he figured one last time wouldn't hurt. He'd lived by that rule for so long that the practice of being prepared was ingrained into his personality.

Felander leaned over and whispered behind his hand, "A louder bunch of peacocks I've not seen in some time, Brother."

Grendelak's lips quirked up into a smile. "Indeed, Brother, not even in the Court."

"Where is Troma?"

"He had to retrieve the parchment. Hadn't wanted to spill on it while we ate, I suppose."

The noise died down suddenly as the doors to the dining hall closed with a resounding echo that filled the hall. Troma moved gracefully to the head of the table and stood behind his chair, perusing the men and women seated around the table as though he were a commander evaluating his men. Grendelak was struck by the seriousness in the man's watery brown eyes this morning and by the neatly trimmed beard on Troma's face. The first night they'd encountered Troma he'd been clean shaven and had remained that way until recently, when suddenly the older man had stopped shaving. Grendelak himself favored a clean shaven face unlike Felander, who often appeared with a goatee and, on occasion, a full beard. Grendelak wondered if there was some significance to Troma's recent change in appearance and made a mental note to ask him about it when things were less hectic.

"Gentlemen, Ladies," Troma began, his voice clear and commanding, "I thank you all for your hasty travels that most certainly interrupted important business in your own duchies but I am certain after you read this," he paused as he held up the still sealed parchment and waved it slightly, "that you will agree the interruption well spent here with me."

A slight rumble of murmured voices went up at Troma's words and the man held up a hand and gestured for quiet.

"Please, let us move on quickly as to make the most of our time. Most of you have likely heard rumors of the king's declaration against the FreeSwords. We are fortunate to have the First Brother and two of his advisors here with us this morning," Troma gestured at Grendelak, who stood hesitatingly. "First Brother Grendelak Mishtar of the FreeSword Brotherhood, his advisors Felander and Aerdon," Troma pointed to each in turn.

Grendelak returned the polite nods and murmured greetings that came from around the table before he sat once again.

“And of course, many of you know the skald,” Troma gestured toward Grendelak once again and heads swung his way, looking past him to where Aerdon and Manx stood against the wall. Manx gave the assemblage a quick half-bow and returned the greetings of a few of the dukes whom knew her better than the others.

“Now, on to business,” Troma stated soberly. “Take this, examine it and pass it along, would you Kellstor?” he said as he handed the parchment to the man on his left. Duke Kellstor took the parchment in his hands, which Grendelak immediately noticed were somewhat calloused, his ash gray eyes narrowing as he examined the seal carefully.

After the parchment had made its way around the table, Troma crooked a finger at Manx. Grendelak watched her move as she made her way to the head of the table, the green dress he recalled from Corrigan still making a bold statement. The metal sigils in her hair tinkled, ringing out over the nearly silent room.

“I now ask each of you to verify, on your word as a noble and the head of your House, that the seal on this parchment has not been broken.”

Troma looked to Kellstor again, who answered with a simple, “I, Larik Reading Broga Ruama of House Ruama of the Kelling hold of Corrigan do so swear.”

“I, Teraldan Rhiad Garvyn Forehold of House Forehold of the Pasthan Hold of Corrigan do so swear,” the man seated next to Kellstor stated in an unwavering voice. Grendelak listened somewhat distractedly as each of those seated around the table offered their oath, including himself.

Finally, Troma gave his oath and then turned to Manx. “Manx, please affirm that the seal on the parchment is that of Duke Gregos Kelling of Amorice.”

“I, Manxellien Evania K’hndreel of the Woods of Roblamar of Amorice, do swear on my life and honor as a Skald that the seal on this parchment belongs to Gregos Kelling of House Kelling of the Duchy of Allton of the Combined Provinces of Amorice.”

“Are there any who dispute the seal’s veracity?” Troma’s voice boomed across the hall. After waiting long enough for any to voice their doubts, he nodded. “Very well then. For years we have seen the rule of Corrigan degrade under the disaffected hand of Remelus. But in times past that disaffection has been limited to the palace and the kingdom has remained prosperous. Yet not a month past Remelus ordered the First Brother Nolphen executed and carried out that order *in court*,” Troma paused to let that last fact sink in. “He then ordered the FreeSwords forfeit and

issued a decree requiring them to submit and bend the knee or be arrested on the grounds of treason and summarily executed.”

“Is this not a problem for the FreeSwords then, and not us?” Duke Baellane of Goodrow interrupted, his dark, hooded eyes fixed firmly on Grendelak.

Grendelak watched as a few others nodded in agreement with Duke Goodrow’s statement. He returned their looks with an impassive face, hoping that once Troma got around to reading that parchment from Kelling the mood would shift.

“That particular problem is indeed the FreeSword’s issue, but the cause of such an order is ours,” Troma said seriously.

“Well, what is the cause Shorehold? Speak it. Your hospitality is warm and welcome, but your message was full of urgency. Let us get on with it,” Venari Selb, Duchess of Dinat snapped. Grendelak recalled Felander’s description of her on their journey to Shorehold and decided his friend had been right. He could see the beauty that once was the Duchess behind the lines in her face and the well-coiffed graying hair that framed her heart-shaped face.

Troma looked around the room and nodded once. “Fine, I will be blunt. Remelus is not only allowing the presence of Tasnians in his Court but he is actively consorting with them.”

The room exploded with exclamations of surprise and disbelief. Troma said nothing nor did he attempt to stop the outburst. He simply held the sealed parchment in the air and waited for the others to calm.

When they did not immediately calm, Manx took things into her own hands. She began to recite in a clear voice that carried over most of the deeper male voices in the room.

“When those who are not knights become like knights, rebellion is at hand. Those who serve the night shall desire unrest and a free sword will quench that thirst. The rightful king shall be put to the sword and a killer of men will sit your throne. Much blood will be shed while he sits your throne.”

By the time she finished the room was silent. “Read the parchment, Troma,” she ordered, still holding the attention of most of the room. “Read it now.”

Troma broke the seal and unrolled the parchment, holding it out before him. He cleared his throat and began to read.

“I, Gregos Criswell Trelitian Kelling of House Kelling of the Allton Duchy of the Combined Provinces of Amorice do swear and affirm in the name of my house and my goddess Talimaara, that I have personally seen King Bornak et Remelus I of the Duchy of Corrigan allow into his presence Tasnian priests and, in his court in Corrigan, has been seen to take advice from said Tasnian priests. This I do swear on my life, my

name and my faith in the Goddess this 5th day of Readying in the Year of the Flight 4294.”

Someone in the room whistled, breaking the silence that had fallen over the dining hall. Grendelak understood why. The man had sworn by his goddess. *A god oath.* Not many would do that unless they were absolutely certain they were right. Most of these rulers knew Kellering if not personally then by reputation, and they knew he was always on some sort of quest and acted more like a knight than some knights who bore the standards of an Order. If Kellering swore by his goddess that he had seen these things, then he had seen these things.

“I don’t see what all the uproar is about. So the king is getting advice from Tasnians, what of it?” the Duke of Pasthall tossed out casually. “It is his prerogative to seek advice from whomever he wishes, he is the ruling monarch.”

Duke Goodrow nodded in agreement and sat back in his chair, folding his arms across his chest as if defying the others to disagree with him.

Couvin Elde, oldest of the ducal families and Duke of Bredene stood haltingly. He looked down his hooked nose around the table with watery green eyes. He shook his head sorrowfully. “It has come to this then, that the King courts disaster and dissent with his decisions. I can abide much, but not Tasnians nor the Elf-Killer’s advice in our kingdom. I have seen what such *advice* does to the land,” he spat the word *advice* as though it left a foul taste in his mouth. He pointed toward the north. “Have you not heard what has happened to the north? What such advice and puppet rulership brings?”

“Silentia Ens has ever been a place of chaos, since it fell in the First Triotonic War,” Duke Goodrow said dismissively with a wave of his hand. “Advice or not, that kingdom is nothing more than a den of vipers. This is Corrigar, we are not subject to such problems and King Remelus has done a fine job of ensuring that the kingdom is ordered. Just look at his Royal Guardsmen.”

Grendelak’s fist tightened at the mention of the Royal Guardsman, his teeth clenched tightly against the outburst that lay on the tip of his tongue.

“Yes, just look at them,” Manx suddenly spoke, tossing the ring she’d taken from one of them onto the table. “Look at them indeed!” she hissed, tossing the crumpled parchment Grendelak remembered her taking from the same guard. “Carrying poison and obeying the commands of a Tasnian priest instead of the king.”

Venari picked up the parchment and read it, a single eyebrow arching as she finished and laid it back on the table. “If it’s true, it is a dire state of affairs, Pasthall.”

Pasthall snatched up the parchment and looked at it cursorily, then tossed it back on the table as though it were meaningless. “No seal, no sign. Just a name. What of it? You would speak against the king on the word of a *skald*?”

“She speaks the truth. She took the parchment and the ring from a Royal Guardsman. A Guardsman who was part of a tensquad led by a Tasnian priest whose purpose it was to kill Duke Kelling before he made it to Radael with proof of the priest’s ill-done works,” Grendelak growled through his clenched teeth.

“Another trusted source,” Pasthall laughed as he rolled his eyes. “You have a grudge against the King, FreeSword, of course you would believe anything that made your position stronger.”

Grendelak stood abruptly at the insult, knocking his chair over backwards in his haste. He locked his gaze with Pasthall and slowly laid a hand on the hilt of his sword. “You would question my word, Sir?”

Pasthall’s eyes narrowed, “I would question the word of any man who spoke out against our king without solid, trustable evidence.”

Felander stood and placed a restraining hand on Grendelak’s sword arm, but Grendelak shook it off. “I think, Pasthall, that you fail to understand what you are saying. You are accusing the First Brother of lying for personal gain. You dishonor me and my Brothers with your words.”

Pasthall looked mildly at Troma. “I am surprised by you, Shorehold. You allow such men to sit at your table, honoring them beyond their station, and then allow them to insult their betters. If he does not hold his tongue I will have it removed.” Pasthall said casually, as though he had such orders carried out on a regular basis.

“You will do no such thing while he has guest-right in my home,” Troma warned.

“Then let him not leave your home, Shorehold,” Pasthall returned flatly before he pushed his chair away from the table and stood, ignoring the gasps of surprise coming from several of his peers around the table at his words. He straightened his tunic and idly picked a piece of lint from the shoulder of his doublet. “I am finished with this conversation and with this nearly treasonous talk against our fine king.” He turned and fixed Grendelak with an icy stare. “And given the recent declaration by King Remelus, I would not expect to find ‘Swords on your lands again. They are to be arrested and returned to Corrigan and any on *my* lands will be treated as the criminals they are, according to the King’s *Law*.”

Troma threw a hand out and pointed at Grendelak. “No, FirstBrother, do not break the peace of this room,” he barked, seeing several inches of glinting metal suddenly exposed above Grendelak’s scabbard. He turned

and addressed the table. "Any who wish to leave now are, of course, free to do so."

Pasthall strode toward the door, his head held high and Goodrow followed him, an almost apologetic look on his face. Pasthall stopped, his hand on the handle of the door and looked over his shoulder at Troma. "I am surprised you are so easily taken in, Shorehold. I came through Corrigan on my way here and the *FirstBrother* is in Corrigan, along with several hundred FreeSwords who have properly sworn fealty to His Majesty. I question any man who calls himself the head of his Order when he is clearly lying."

Before anyone could answer him he opened the door and strode through it with Goodrow on his heels, not looking to see how his words were taken by those he left behind.

"Aifric!" Felander hissed under his breath, saying the name as though it were a curse. "It must be Aifric Yarghent."

Every head turned toward Felander, including Grendelak. "Aifric?" Grendelak queried.

Felander nodded and then bowed his head at the others around the table. "My pardon, Lords, Lady, but there has been some amount of . . . dissent . . . among the Brotherhood since the King's decree. There are some of us who feel that bending the knee to Remelus to save the FreeSwords is an acceptable situation. After First Brother Nolphen was . . . murdered . . . we were in need of a new leader. Aifric was one of the more outspoken on the side of swearing fealty. He was most disappointed when Grendelak was elected First Brother and took the more acceptable stance to keep the Brotherhood as it has always been, free of an oath to the King," Felander explained at length. He turned apologetic eyes toward Grendelak. "I am sorry, First Brother, to bring this up here. I had thought Aifric and those who agreed with him would have simply stayed where we left them. Apparently, I misjudged the man."

Grendelak nodded, his lips a thin, white line of anger. "It is not your fault, Felander. It is those who do not see what such an oath would do to our beloved Order." He sat down, closed his eyes and exhaled slowly. When he opened his eyes and turned them toward Troma the Duke was startled by the depth of hatred that glittered in their depths.

Troma cleared his throat as he looked around the table. "Well, shall we continue?"

They continued to discuss the possibilities until daylight was waning. Between meals and wine they finally agreed on several points. First, that the Brotherhood was welcome on any of their lands, welcome to take Contract with the nobility seated around the table. Second, that open rebellion was not something any of them wished to involve Corrigan in at

the moment. They all agreed to begin cleansing their own lands of any Royal Guardsman and, of course, Tasnians, as well as each sending a contingent of their own armies to the capital along with a message for the King that the nobles would not tolerate Tasnian influence in their kingdom.

Grendelak was not surprised by the decision that Troma lead them. Manx had told him before they'd first arrived that Troma's house had the strongest claim to the throne so it did not surprise him when the others deferred to his leadership. He looked up after the decision and saw Manx watching Troma sadly. Grendelak was suddenly struck with understanding. His mouth fell open as he realized what that knowledge meant. *Troma has the strongest claim to the throne. Troma claims me as his bastard son. Manx means to put me on the throne . . .* He looked in horror at the skald, realizing that if events were to follow the path Manx believed they would, Troma would die.

Grendelak's ears rung and he suddenly felt light-headed. The conversation continued around him but he could no longer make out any of the words. His mind was reeling with the sudden understanding that the skald wasn't kidding.

What really made his stomach turn was the realization that he was beginning to believe her.

Chapter 11

Manx sat curled up in a chair in Troma's sitting room, listlessly tracing her finger up and down the arm's length while staring into the embers that remained from last night's fire. She heard the footsteps approaching but did not look away. She heard the sigh of relief as someone sat down in another chair followed by the crinkling of the leather as it was pushed into place by the weight of the body.

"Couvin Elde sends his regards, my dear," Troma's voice was low as it broke the silence.

"So it begins," Manx whispered fatefully, not bothering to look up.

She heard Troma change position in his chair. "You are bothered by something. Speak."

Finally Manx looked up. "That Chosen is coming for Grendelak," she said fitfully, "and there is naught I can do to convince him to be on his guard."

Troma nodded knowingly. "Such is the price you pay for seeing such things. He hasn't come to believe you yet, has he?"

Manx shook her head violently. "No, he hasn't. Though I am not certain why. He's seen enough thus far to change any man's views but still he resists. I fear what might happen if they take hold of him before he believes in himself . . ."

"Have you told him—"

"Of course I have!" Manx interrupted, her voice rising with her frustration. "I've told him the truth, which he claims he wanted, but he acts like a follower of Ramne Al'Langtrue, as if he has not one whit to say about his own future. He does not truly believe he has the will to do as he wishes and that damn Chosen did not help with his taunting. It would not

be difficult for the Tasnians to turn Grendelak to their way of thinking and then no matter who wins the throne Corrigar is lost.”

Troma drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair thoughtfully. “I am not certain I can help with this one, Manx. He has to realize he *can* make his own future and that is not something most people can adjust to knowing. It is much easier to sit back and pretend the gods or fate—anyone else, really—is in control.”

“It’s more than that. He just doesn’t seem to understand how serious it is that a Chosen is out there looking for him. He doesn’t seem to realize that a Chosen isn’t just some random priest, but a priest of such zealousness that they’ve been chosen by their deity for some special task. Like this one. If a Chosen of the Deathwalker is stalking him it can only be because the Dark One himself has an interest in him and that is a very dangerous position to be in.”

Manx uncurled herself and stood. “And now I must finish packing. If he’s going to go back to the Brotherhood, I’m going with him.”

“You’re all welcome to stay, you know,” Troma told her.

Manx nodded. “I know, and we will again, but he needs to see his Brothers and explain the situation to them and I must stay with him. I can’t have him running off to Corrigan just yet.”

They managed to travel to back to Seneschal Woods without being accosted. It was mid afternoon when they turned off the road and began to pick their way through the trees to the clearing where they hoped to find the Brotherhood still camped. Aerdon took the lead, his sword in hand and eyes wary—just in case. All four of them had remained uneasy the entire journey back to the woods, remembering clearly what had happened on their way to Shorehold in the first place.

The sentry called out before they reached the clearing and both Grendelak and Felander had nodded their heads approvingly. After they were recognized, Manx had been surprised by the number of men who had stepped out of the underbrush all around them. The Brotherhood was well prepared.

Men crowded around them even as they dismounted, questions flying faster than Kantor-Doornian warhorses. Grendelak ignored them until he reached the center campfire. He held up a hand and waited for the noise to subside, then raised his voice and addressed the assembled men.

“Brothers,” he began soberly. “It is good to see you again, to be with those who understand what it is we stand for and are loyal to our oaths. The Duke of Shorehold, along with many of the other nobles, have opened up their lands to us. We are free to take Contract with any of them but Psthall and Goodrow, who have sided with the king on this issue.”

Grendelak stopped and let the whispers grow into shouts of derision and anger at the two noble houses that stood against them. He let them grumble for several minutes before he again held up his hand to silence them.

“The nobles are sending forces to the King to encourage him to expel the Tasnian influences in the capital and to reverse his decree against us,” Grendelak paused to allow an impromptu cheer at his words. “But I have ill tidings as well. We have been attacked not once, but twice but Royal Guardsman on our journey. Both times we fought Tasnian priests as well, and it seems that this will continue unless the nobles can convince the king to rid our beloved Corrigar of this evil influence.”

Grendelak paused, taking the mug Felander held out to him and drinking deeply from it. He handed it back to his friend, who nodded encouragingly. Grendelak swallowed hard, not relishing speaking the words he knew he must speak next.

“We have been betrayed, my Brothers!” he cried out, his voice carrying over the voices that had begun murmuring while he drank.

The voices died down immediately and the silence was deafening. The leaves rustling in the slight breeze and the shuffling of feet were all that could be heard throughout the encampment.

“Yes, betrayed. One of our own has left this camp and returned to Corrigan and sworn fealty to Remelus. One of our own has split us asunder, breaking our most sacred of vows and making us out to be renegades in our own land,” Grendelak’s voice rose louder and grew more heated as the anger that had been growing since Duke Pasthall made his snide comment in Troma’s hall days ago. “They have done what Victoria Kingseer warned us not to do!” he roared over the growing cacophony that was the Brotherhood.

They drowned him out with their cries and shouts of anger. The sound of a thousand swords leaving their sheaths rang in Grendelak’s ears. He tore his sword from its place in his scabbard and held it aloft, the mid afternoon sun bouncing off his blade and reflecting back from the swords of his Brothers, blinding him and making his eyes water.

A call began somewhere in the back of the crowd and was taken up until every man there sang it as though it was a hymn. The sound of their voices rose up until Grendelak was certain even the gods could hear them; could hear the determination and steadfastness of their beliefs.

“We will live free or die!”

Grendelak turned to Felander and saw the bittersweet pleasure on his face at the chanting. They both knew that it was likely most of them would die if it came to war. Grendelak hoped they could avoid war but his instincts

told him they would not. He knew Troma would do his best to dissuade the King from his current course, but believed in his heart that the King was too far gone to listen to reason. He turned and headed for the command tent, gesturing to the men who had acted as captains on the journey from Corrigan to join him.

Felander and Aerdon followed him wordlessly, while Manx trailed behind them, her eyes glassy with the foresight of the elves and a tight smile on her face. The raising of the swords had triggered the memory of a dream, only they hadn't been raised to the FirstBrother in that dream, they'd been raised to a King. *But which king?* She thought as she ducked into the tent. *Remelus or another?*

She shook off the remnants of that dream as the men crowded into the tent. Grendelak was already giving orders here and there and she needed to pay attention to what he was doing. She nodded approvingly when she heard him explain the situation more fully and encourage the Brothers to spread themselves amongst the nobles.

Grendelak and Felander told them of the attacks upon them and Duke Kellering; of dead men walking and of the meeting with Troma and the nobles. The Brothers looked shocked at the description of the Chosen priest and of Manx's dealings with him. Several of them snuck sidelong glances at her but instead of the leering looks they would normally have given a woman these expressions carried more than a hint of respect. They spoke well into the night before they took to their own beds, all wondering when, if ever, they would be able to return home.

It was late in the evening two days later when the last Brother had left Grendelak's tent and went to seek out his own fire. They had been waiting for any word that might come from Corrigan before they would form up into smaller groups and head toward the friendly nobles' demesnes. Still they'd heard nothing. They passed the time by discussing tactics and strategy and trying to formulate a plan for dealing with the traitor who now called himself FirstBrother in Corrigan. Manx had left the tent hours earlier and Grendelak suddenly felt a desire to find her. He stood wearily, ignoring the muscles that had tightened up after being forced to stay in one position so long yet another night.

He stretched and pushed aside the tent flap, scanning the clearing for a sight of the skald. When he did not immediately see her he wondered if she'd returned to her own tent. Grendelak grinned at the Brotherhood's attachment to the tiny skald. The story of her actions at the Wayside had spread throughout the ranks and been embellished to the point of disbelief and ever since then most of the Brothers had been treating her as they would their own sister. For her part, Manx had performed for them when

she could, singing and telling them tales and generally giving them what relief from the situation she could. She treated them as though they were kings and gifted them with tales he knew were often reserved only for nobility for he'd heard them at Tibor's and in courts around the world.

He found her tent, not a stone's throw from his own and was about to call out for her when he caught sight of her walking near the tree-line alone. He turned and leisurely headed toward her, intending to ask her to share some of her knowledge of Troma with him.

He stopped abruptly when he saw her suddenly whirl and crouch down, facing the trees. When she suddenly jumped up, drew a weapon and ran into the woods he forced himself to pick up his feet and run. He drew his sword as he ran, his breath coming in gasps as he tried to catch up to her. He heard shouts behind him and knew that he'd be followed momentarily, which was good because he didn't want to cry out and alert whoever, or whatever, Manx had suddenly gone after.

Grendelak swore as he felt the branches from the underbrush grab at his breeches, their thorns poking through and gouging into his leg. He brought his left arm up and tried to shield his eyes from the tree branches and felt the sting of smaller ones as they snapped back at him when he passed.

Several hundred yards into the woods he could hear the sounds of metal against metal ringing out. His heart racing, he pumped his legs harder as he sped toward the sound. Just ahead he could see a break in the trees. The flash of color as cloaks flew this way and that assaulted his vision. He came to the edge of the clearing and was about to push his way through when he saw a flash of steel out of the corner of his eye. He stopped abruptly and looked down at the end of a sword barring his path. Tracing the length of the sword he raised his eyes to find himself trapped by several men in Green and White, three to his right and two to his left.

He gripped his sword more tightly, his expression grim. He knew he would be followed by at least some of his Brothers, but would they arrive in time? Grendelak cursed himself for being so stupid as to run blindly into a potentially dangerous situation. He knew he could take two, maybe even three of them on himself but five? Even Felander would not have been so brash. He let the tip of his sword fall to the ground, but held the grip lightly in his hand. His captors relaxed at the action and turned half an eye to the fight in the clearing. Grendelak, knowing any action he might perform now would be futile, did the same.

Manx was, to Grendelak's surprise, holding her own against the priest that had taunted him in the clearing when Ciran had been killed. Grendelak winced as the man brought his morning star to bear, its large head bearing down on Manx. *The head of that star is as big as hers!* He watched as she

slipped to the side, easily avoiding the blow. But his longer reach kept her slender sword from slipping past his shield. Grendelak could see splinters flying as her sword raked across its wooden face. She danced away from him, and Grendelak could hear her taunting him, obviously trying to enrage him so that he might make a mistake she could take advantage of.

“You are slow, Tahure, slow!” she called out, sneering as she dropped to a crouch and waved her weapon menacingly in front of her.

“Perhaps we ought to play a different game, Manx K’hndreel,” Tahure rejoined almost pleasantly, reaching with his free hand into his robe and withdrawing a slender metal looking object. “One that isn’t so barbaric,” he finished, tossing his morning star behind him.

Manx began to back away cautiously, her eyes glued to the metal rod in the priest’s hand. Tahure began laughing, holding the rod in Manx’s direction. Grendelak wasn’t sure what it was or what it meant, he’d never seen anything like it before, but Manx certainly appeared impressed and, he thought, a bit frightened of it so it couldn’t be good.

The sounds of branches breaking and men shouting suddenly broke through the trees. The guards near Grendelak swung their heads around and swore at the sight of nearly two dozen FreeSwords crashing through the forest. Grendelak took the opportunity to scramble back away while he called out, “Manx! Run!”

Manx turned and ran as Tahure’s head swung around at the sound of Grendelak’s cry. She dove behind a fairly large log that would not have covered Grendelak but hid the tiny skald well. Tahure roared in anger and spoke harshly to the guards before he turned and disappeared on the other side of the clearing.

Grendelak let the Brothers rush past him, chasing the guards across the clearing. As they disappeared into the trees Grendelak looked around for Manx.

“Manx!” he called, trying to find her form in the moonlight.

Manx popped her head up above the log and looked around, her gaze easily finding Grendelak. She stood and stepped easily over the log, her mouth moving silently in a string of curses. She was glad to find Grendelak unharmed, but what had he been doing there in the first place? And why had he allowed Tahure to escape so easily?

“Grendelak Mishtar, what are you doing here?”

Grendelak was taken aback by the anger in her voice. “I saw you run into the woods with a weapon drawn. I thought you might need help.”

Manx opened her mouth to yell at him, but closed it quickly at the wounded expression on his face. She drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Thank you,” she said with more than a touch of difficulty.

Grendelak's eyes went wide with surprise. "You're . . . welcome?" he said on a questioning note, as though he wasn't certain it was the proper response.

Manx turned and looked over her shoulder at the sound of breaking branches and hooting calls coming back toward them. "We should return, I am certain your Brothers chased them off by now."

Grendelak nodded as they began walking back toward their camp. "They know we're here, we'll have to abandon these woods at first light."

One of the Brothers caught up with them quickly. "First Brother, we were unable to catch up with them. They must have had horses hiding in the trees . . ."

Grendelak gave the man a wry grin. "Don't worry, I'm fairly certain we'll get another chance. And soon."

The man smiled and ran off toward camp, his unbounded enthusiasm evident in his stride.

"He feels he has done something, and anything is better than waiting," Manx said sagely.

Grendelak grunted in response and said nothing more until they reached the main fire near his own tent. His relief at finding Manx safe had dissipated and was quickly replaced by anger at her rash actions. He put two fingers to his lips and whistled for his captains. When he was fairly certain the last of them had come running to stand near the fire he raised his voice. "We leave at first light." He turned and fixed a hard look at Manx. "You," he said pointing his finger at her, "come to my tent, now." Then he turned and marched to his tent, holding the flap open and looking at her expectantly.

Manx narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips. *How dare he speak to me like one of his Brothers! I ought to . . .* She felt rather than saw the looks the men around the fire were giving her. *They are waiting to see if I follow his command or not.* She fixed a smile on her face, her teeth clenched together tightly as she tried to keep her tongue from betraying her true feelings as she walked right under his arm into the tent.

Grendelak stepped inside and lowered the flap, giving Manx a look that reminded her of a father about to scold his maiden daughter for allowing a less than chaste kiss from an over eager young man.

"You wanted to talk to me, I presume?" she asked, her voice honey sweet but her eyes hard as steel.

"I did. I had thought with you as well traveled as you say you are that you would know better than to go running off into the middle of the woods—IN THE DARK—and almost get yourself killed."

"I am more than capable of taking care of myself, Grendelak Mishtar. And I resent you ordering me around as though I am one of your precious

Brothers!” Manx slammed a fist into the palm of her hand. “And another thing, good Sir, I did not ask for your protection nor do I expect to be treated like an innocent maiden when you think I am not acting properly.”

“You put yourself in danger for no reason. An entire camp,” he threw his arms wide, “of seasoned men at your disposal and *you* run off into the woods like an unblooded Sword.”

“What?!” Manx’s voice rose as her cheeks grew red. She put her hands on her hips and glared at Grendelak. “No reason? Of anyone here *I* understand how dangerous that priest truly is and I am the only one capable of dealing with him. It was *you* who put yourself in danger needlessly by running after me and almost getting yourself captured and dragged back to Lordston only knows where!”

“Me?” Grendelak asked incredulously. “Me? I was just fine until I saw how you reacted to that rod thing. You were frightened of it, admit it!” he yelled.

“I was not!” Manx shouted back, the lie slipping easily past her lips. “I was only worried about what would happen if they managed to get their Tasni-stained hands on *you*.” With great effort Manx lowered her voice. “Replacing one corrupted king with another isn’t something I plan on doing!” she hissed.

Grendelak’s voice dropped to an angry whisper. “I wish you would stop planning on replacing the king in the first place.”

“And I wish you would stop trying to get yourself killed,” Manx said hoarsely. Grendelak was surprised to see tears in her eyes. “You don’t understand, Grendelak,” she said in a pleading voice, her expression softening. “The Tasnians will not rest until any opposition to their plans is gone and you, you are at the center of their plans. Either they kill you and find someone they can corrupt and place on the throne or they corrupt you. Your beloved Brotherhood will never survive unless you accept this role fate wishes to lay at your feet. It has already begun with the traitor, don’t you see? *Those who are not knights have become like knights*. I just wish Lordston would grace me with the right words to convince you that this is the only path that will save both Corrigar and the Brotherhood.”

Grendelak’s expression turned to one of weariness. “No, Manx, it is you who don’t understand.”

Manx’s eyes widened slightly but she said nothing.

He shook his head, a resigned expression on his face. “If that should come to pass then I will need you more than I do now. Running off and getting yourself killed is about the worst thing you could do.”

Manx wrung her hands together for a few moments, the first sign of nervousness Grendelak could recall seeing from the skald. She’d always put a confident face forward and this new posture took Grendelak a bit by surprise. “You believe me then, Grendelak?” she asked carefully.

Grendelak pursed his lips together thoughtfully, considering his next words. "Let us just say that I am willing to fulfill my oaths to my Brothers. I will do whatever is necessary to ensure their survival."

Manx nodded her head understandingly. "That is all I can ask for now, it seems."

Grendelak laughed cynically. "Oh you can ask for more, my dear, and I'm fairly certain you will. But that's all you're going to get right now."

"Are you through then? I need to pack," she asked, a hint of annoyance lacing her voice.

Grendelak replied by bowing and gesturing toward the tent door, saying nothing until Manx swept past him and left. He straightened and stared at the wavering piece of cloth covering the opening, wondering why he let her do that to him. After a few moments he shook his head and began his own preparations to leave.

"Certainly, my Lord Duke, you can understand the king's desire to keep better control on the FreeSwords. It is not as if he is trying to commandeer them, he simply wishes to ensure they are loyal to him. And as for the matter of the Tasnians, surely even you can see that it is in Corrigar's best interests to stay more neutral in this matter. The king wishes to make decisions based on as much knowledge as possible and does not take lightly his responsibility to the truth."

Troma listened to the king's courtier with only passing interest. He'd heard this same speech at least once a day since the man had arrived from Corrigan. Lamorat Varelf was his name, and he'd come soon after Troma's own contingent of men had arrived in Corrigan and, Troma assumed, delivered his message to the king. The king wished to avert open war, but would not consider reversing his decision regarding the FreeSwords. He'd apparently also taken offense to his nobles expressing their discontent with the king's decision to allow Tasnian advisors at court, for Lamorat had been quite insistent that the nobles were verging on treason with their demands and that the King was not to be questioned.

Lamorat had tried direct orders the first few days and had only recently turned to trying to convince Troma that the King's position was correct. Troma was not the only one in the household to notice that Lamorat's tactics had changed about the same time Grendelak had returned with a hundred FreeSwords at his back, all of whom had been ready to make an Oath Cut before they'd even had a chance to dismount.

Troma swiveled his head around at the sudden, sharp rap on the door. "Enter," he called out.

Grendelak, who'd taken to sitting with Troma through Lamorat's speeches since he'd returned, watched with only a passing interest as a

man dressed in dusty riding clothes hurried in and bowed respectfully. "My Lord Duke, a message from the Duchess of Dinat," he said quickly, holding out a neatly folded parchment.

Troma stood and came around the end of his desk and took the parchment from the man with one hand while digging in his pocket for a gold piece with the other. He handed the gold to the man, who backed away bobbing his head and muttering thank you, and then sat on the edge of his desk examining the seal on the message.

Grendelak looked out the window and tried to find something of interest to occupy his mind. He disliked Troma's office not because it was uncomfortable, but because it had been the room in which he learned that Troma was his father. For some reason knowing that the small painting of his mother was on Troma's desk bothered him. *My mother*, he thought wistfully. He'd wondered when he was younger what it would be like to have a mother, but had given up such fantasies when he'd met Felander. None of them had involved unmarried nobility.

Grendelak heard Troma unfold the parchment and glanced over to see him reading the message. He turned his attention to Lamorat, giving the man a look that plainly indicated what he thought of the courtier. Lamorat returned Grendelak's stare with a false smile pasted on his face.

Out of the corner of his eye Grendelak saw Troma's face darken. He watched as Troma stood, parchment still held tightly in his hand. Troma looked up at Lamorat, his brown eyes glittering dangerously, then walked over to where Grendelak sat and handed him the parchment. Troma stood back and folded his arms across his chest imposingly while Grendelak read the letter.

When Grendelak finished he raised his head and met Troma's eyes. *Murdered* Grendelak mouthed, to which Troma merely nodded abruptly.

"I think, Lamorat, that it is time for you to leave my home. Your guest-right has been overstayed," Troma told the fop firmly.

"But my Lord, we have reached no conclusion here, surely you do not wish me to return to the king without an understanding between us," the man entreated.

"An understanding?" Troma exclaimed incredulously. "You want an understanding?" he repeated, his eyes narrowing. Troma walked toward Lamorat, stopping an arm's length away. "You can return to the king and tell him that murder at his word is no different than murder by his hand."

Lamorat gasped and shook his head. "Surely my Lord Duke you are joking. You don't truly mean to send such a message to your liege Lord?"

"I most certainly do, you sniveling rat. Now take the message back to the king. You will not return any time soon if you value your worthless life."

Lamorat straightened and looked down his nose at Troma as if he suddenly remembered that he was the one with the king's ear. "As you wish, Lord Troma," he said almost regretfully before he walked across the room and left, slamming the door behind him.

Grendelak leapt out of the chair, still holding onto the parchment. "You realize you just declared war, don't you?"

Troma nodded slowly. "I do. But Venari wouldn't lie and the circumstances surrounding Kellstor's death she details are far too suspicious to be coincidence. Larik was in fine health, for him to die in the night with no cause tells me he was murdered just as plainly as it tells you the same. And for it to happen just a few nights after a courtier from the King left his home . . ."

"The king wishes to restore complete control and he will stop at nothing to achieve it," Grendelak said firmly.

"Exactly," Troma replied, sighing. "It means war, of course, there is nothing left to do but take the throne from him. He has shown he cares not for Corrigar with his actions and that he is willing to commit assassination to achieve his goals. That is the way of Tasnians, not Corrigarians."

Grendelak swallowed against the rising bile in his throat at Troma's words. *So it begins*, he thought to himself. He reached down to his belt and retrieved a dagger, then held his left arm out, still holding the parchment. Troma watched him soberly as he firmly drew the dagger down his arm, spilling drops of blood on the floor.

"It is all I have to give, Troma," Grendelak told the older man earnestly.

Troma laid a hand on Grendelak's shoulder. "It is more than you realize, son," Troma told him seriously before he took the parchment from Grendelak's hand and silently left the room. Grendelak stood staring after him, surprised by the easy way in which Troma had used the familial term with him and, to his own surprise, the ease with which Grendelak accepted it.

The next few days went by in a blur of activity. To a man, the hundred FreeSwords who had returned with Grendelak all took Contract with Troma in a single, emotional show of loyalty to the Brotherhood and Corrigar. Troma sent runners with messages to the remaining nobles who had been against the King's consort of Tasnians in the first place, as well as messengers to call in his army.

Grendelak marveled at the easy way Troma commanded not only his own men as they arrived, but the Swords as well. The two groups were wary of each other at first, but after Troma delivered an impassioned speech to them both they suddenly became as one mind and the officers in Troma's army quickly began working with the men who had been appointed leadership in the Swords to formulate battle plans.

Grendelak appointed Aerdon as his go-between, desiring to keep Felander close at his side. His old mentor's advice was dear to him, and Grendelak knew he would need the older man's experience if they were to win out against the king's armies and, unfortunately, his own Brothers.

No one had forgotten Aifric and the 'Swords who had already given in to the king's demands. For if there was war, they would surely be ordered to fight against the nobles. It seemed to bother Troma more than it did Felander or Grendelak, who lived and breathed the Brotherhood's tenets as naturally as a fish breathes in the water. They'd come against their own before and it was never personal, merely a contract. Neither spoke of it now, for this time it *would* be different. It was personal this time.

Grendelak was quiet during most of the planning. He was accustomed to planning the death of a single man, not the movement of entire armies, and he felt acutely out of place in Troma's hall as they pored over maps and laid out the most likely positions where battles might occur. Manx sat quietly nearby, watching them all intently but paying little attention to the planning. He found that somewhat odd, since the skald seemed to know something about everything. When he questioned her about it late one night she offhandedly replied that she wasn't a tactician.

"But what about magiks?" he queried sincerely. Having seen her use such things once had given even him ideas about how they might be used in larger battles.

"I am only one, Grendelak. To be truly useful you'd need many more mageborn and then you risk a catastrophe the likes of which caused the Sevich Desert," she said soberly. "I will do what I can when I can, but we cannot count on such things for victory. That will be up to you and the other men."

"But you can do some things . . ." he countered somewhat lamely.

Manx nodded her head. "I can ward you, and will, have no doubts about that, but I cannot stop an entire army. Not even Delcidnar could do that on his own."

Grendelak nodded wisely, as though he understood, but truthfully he did not. Like most people, he considered the use of magik to be the ultimate weapon, if the stories were to be believed, and he wasn't certain why it couldn't be used more effectively to put an end to this whole ordeal. But Manx had not lied to him, at least not lied outright, since this had begun and he couldn't believe she'd start now.

The night before they were to depart was full of tension. Troma's son, Haddon, had returned earlier in the day leading a contingent of Troma's knights, and he and Grendelak had eyed each other warily. Troma took the two of them with Manx to his study and closed the door, explaining quickly to Haddon Grendelak's lineage. Haddon was, to Grendelak's

studied eye, nearly as impressive as he thought he was. He had Troma's good looks, though his build was slighter than his father's, and Grendelak could even see some of himself in the young man's earnest face. Haddon was eager to please his father, that was obvious, but he was also somewhat displeased with his half-brother's sudden appearance and, from his voice, less than impressed with the FreeSwords in general.

Grendelak took the young man at face value. He acted like a knight, at least all the knights Grendelak had known, and seemed to be as loyal as a FreeSword. But he had a way of looking down his nose at everyone that made Grendelak feel like he needed to bathe. Troma left them alone, and Haddon immediately took charge of the conversation.

"Lady Manx," he said politely with a curt bow in her direction. "Brother," he said flatly, addressing Grendelak. "My father seems to believe in your loyalty, though I am not convinced by your so-called Oath cuts."

Grendelak tensed at the insult, but managed to hold his tongue.

"I am loyal to my father second only to Dirge himself," Haddon continued, fixing a hard look on Grendelak. "And I will allow no one to harm him."

Grendelak took the threat in stride, smiling tightly at his brother. "Then we are of one mind, for I have no intention of allowing harm to come to *our* father either," Grendelak stressed the word intentionally to irk Haddon. For some reason the young man rubbed him the wrong way already.

"A bastard unclaimed is a bastard the same," Haddon quipped, his chin raised arrogantly in Grendelak's direction.

Grendelak looked mildly at the young man. "Look, Haddon, I don't give a damn about all this right now. We have a war to fight and Troma to keep safe. I don't care if you like me or not, but for the next year I'm sworn to the Duke and there is nothing you can do about it. I will not break my oaths for you or anyone else. If you get in my way . . ." Grendelak let the threat hang in the air.

"Just be certain you do not break those oaths, FreeSword. I would not hesitate to remind you of them," Haddon said bluntly, letting his hand rest lightly on his sword hilt. He turned to Manx again and inclined his head. "Lady Manx," he said politely before he spun on his heel and left the room.

"What the hell was that?" Grendelak exploded after the door had closed.

"That, my dear Grendelak, was your brother," Manx said pertly.

"I know that," Grendelak returned, rolling his eyes.

"Perhaps you meant his demeanor towards you?"

"Exactly."

Manx smiled and moved to stand in front of Grendelak. "He just doesn't know you like I do, Grendelak Mishtar of the FreeSword Brotherhood,"

she said smiling up at him. Grendelak looked down at her and was surprised when she reached up and put her hands on his shoulders and pulled herself up on the tips of her toes so that she could give him a kiss on the cheek.

She turned and began to sashay toward the door when Grendelak grabbed her from behind and turned her around to face him. "You are a frustrating woman, skald," he growled before he gave her what he considered to be a proper kiss.

He left her standing in the middle of the room as he walked off briskly, suddenly embarrassed by his actions and wondering what in the world had come over him.

Chapter 12

Five hundred men rode out the next morning at Troma's order. They left fifty or so men behind to keep order behind them and headed for the south road that led to Corrigan. A score of FreeSwords acted as scouts, pushing up to a mile ahead of the main body and sending runners back and forth, carrying orders and reports between them.

Grendelak rode next to Troma, on his left, with Felander to one side and Manx behind them. Troma's mount was almost as fine as Grendelak's own Doornian stallion, which Troma commented on shortly after they'd left. He'd even suggested breeding the big black with one of the mares he'd purchased in Freeland Hold, hoping to cross-breed the two into an even more impressive offspring.

Grendelak found the conversation a pleasant diversion. No one spoke much about the forthcoming battles they knew would occur, or about the fact that they were about to throw the kingdom in civil war. It would do no good to say the words, for the regret lay just under the surface of all of their plans.

Haddon said little, riding to his father's right. He threw sidelong glances at Grendelak once in a while but otherwise his contributions to the conversation were occasional grunts of agreement with Troma. Grendelak ignored him, while Felander simply raised an eyebrow at the exchanges.

As the army came to Seneschal Woods, Grendelak pointed out where they'd seen the priest of Tasni that last night with the Brotherhood. He did not mention that this is where they'd hid the Brotherhood, but many of the Brothers sent wary glances in the direction of the clearing. Troma called a halt early that day, declaring that they needed to be more cautious from this point forward. They spent some time formulating new watch

orders and tactics for the coming days, certain that they would soon encounter the king's troops.

They were not disappointed the next day when a messenger came breathlessly riding toward them, carrying word that a column had been spotted just a few miles to the south. The Green and White of the Royal Guardsmen as well as many sleeveless armored men intermingled in the column. Felander and Grendelak exchanged knowing glances with the messenger. Sleeveless armor meant FreeSwords. Their traitorous Brothers.

Troma began barking orders and the men began to arrange themselves accordingly. The FreeSwords, almost all on horseback, began to range to the sides of the road, picking their way carefully through the woods. The main column would move forward on the road, flanked by Haddon's contingent of mounted knights. Troma, Grendelak and Felander would direct them near the front of the foot soldiers.

As they began to move forward, Manx called out for the three men to stop. They did so, albeit somewhat impatiently. "Line up, the three of you, now," she ordered crisply, digging in one of her pouches.

Each urged their horses into a line so that they sat abreast of each other. Manx finally found what she was looking for and held it up in her hands, chanting words that Grendelak couldn't understand. When she finished they could see a sudden spark of light from her hands. She closed her eyes and blew the powdery substance in her hands toward the three men. Grendelak felt a kind of tingling all over and he shivered as it landed on him. Manx nodded her head curtly, indicating she was through with them.

Felander held his arms out and stared at them as though he was surprised they were his. "What did you do, Manx?" he asked, turning them over and looking for something to be different.

Manx laughed, delighted with Felander's reaction. "Oh, Felander! You won't see anything different but trust me, you are. No arrow will pierce you for some time. As long as it is not enchanted, that is."

Troma bowed his head. "Thank you, Manx, that was truly thoughtful of you."

Grendelak nodded his head appreciatively. "Indeed, very clever."

Felander still looked doubtful. "Are you sure?"

Manx urged her mount closer and looked at him thoughtfully. "Would you like me to find an archer and try it out?"

Felander recoiled in mock horror, waving his hands in front of him. "No thank you, skald. I'll trust you just the same."

Manx smiled smugly, "I thought you might."

The men turned their mounts and galloped to return to their places in the column, Manx riding tightly behind Grendelak. They had already

had a rather heated discussion about her and her place during the battles, and he'd only given in when Troma had finally told him to let her do as she pleased. Felander had reluctantly acquiesced after Manx had pointed out that she'd been fine thus far and neither man could refute her claim. Grendelak still felt uncomfortable allowing her to be so involved in the fighting, but could not come up with a valid reason for her to stay behind.

Half a glass later they could clearly see the dust being kicked up in the distance by the advancing column. Manx turned her mount and headed for the main column of foot soldiers. She came along side them and, raising her voice, surprised Grendelak by singing one of the oldest battle songs in Corrigarian history. Grendelak found himself singing along under his breath even as the foot soldiers picked up the tune and increased their pace, suddenly seeming more eager to do battle. Their voices grew louder the closer they came to the advancing column, their song drowning out most of the sounds of the enemy's march.

When the enemy came into sight, the men were almost in a frenzy, their faces resolute and eyes ablaze with battle lust. Manx peeled off again, heading back to her place near Grendelak, her voice still calling out the tune and encouraging the men to continue the song.

A moment later the men rushed forward, engaging the approaching Green and White guardsmen with relish. Troma smiled and leaned over to Grendelak, shouting to be heard over the din of battle. "And that, Grendelak, is one of the reasons we let the skald stay so close."

Grendelak nodded his head. "I see that now, Sir. Though I would not have believed it. I feel like rushing in there myself!"

"Curb your enthusiasm, we need you here, not in the middle of that mess," he warned as he gestured toward the already clashing armies. Even as they watched, Troma's foot soldiers were pushing the Green and White guardsmen back. Haddon's knights were guarding the line, making certain none came through, fending attacks off with relative ease.

Troma's eyes narrowed and his face grew pinched as he regarded the melee. "This is not right," he said distractedly, trying to put a finger on what was wrong.

Felander pointed out over the road. "There," he hissed, "see that? The Swords are hanging back and so are a lot of men in Green and White."

Grendelak squinted as he looked to where Felander was pointing. "You're right," he called out, "and the men down here aren't fighting like guardsmen, they're fighting more like conscripts."

Troma suddenly slapped his knee. "That's it, gods damn them all!" he called out. "Whoever is leading this rabble is trying to wear us out with conscripts first, then send in the real fighters. But they want us to think

we're fighting the real thing so we'll waste resources up front and be too worn out later on."

"Brilliant," Felander said, "We need to pull back and draw them in."

"No," Grendelak disagreed, "We need to push the Brothers and Haddon's knights to the flanks. Come around them and engage them now, rather than later."

Troma looked approvingly at Grendelak. "Good, very good," he said before he waved at a runner waiting nearby. He relayed the plan to the messenger and sent him off to Haddon and the Swords.

Grendelak's shoulders were tense as he watched the fighting continue. He desperately wanted to be in the fight, rather than watching them from further back. He was not used to sitting idly by and waiting like this and he found he didn't particularly care for the feeling.

Troma noticed his growing unease. "You'll grow used to it in time, Grendelak."

Grendelak shook his head. "I truly hope not, sir."

A sudden cry to the south drew their attention. A flash of light and the clap of thunder made them visibly wince and upset the horses. Grendelak reached over and absently patted the neck of his mount even as he watched a plume of smoke rise from the trees to his left. He heard the screams of men and the smell of burnt flesh wafted back to them on the breeze.

Manx swore somewhere behind them as she tried to control her mount, who rolled its eyes and pawed at the ground as the smoke began to wash over them.

A similar explosion could be heard a moment later coming from the right side of the battle. They involuntarily ducked, their stomachs clenching with the realization that the screams were likely coming from the Swords who had been scouting forward in those trees.

They watched, horrified, as men in Green and White as well as Brothers came stumbling out of the woods, many still aflame and others holding various parts of their charred bodies and screaming in pain.

Felander swore. "They hit their own men!" he cried unbelievably.

"They have a Tasnian with them," Troma said tonelessly. "Only a Tasnian would be so calculating as to kill his own allies to get at his enemy."

Their own foot soldiers were backing away, their desire to be near the woods decreasing with the number of burning men who ran out of them. The men fighting them slowly backed away and parted and a host of fresh reserves came pouring through the opening. Troma's own men began to fall back more quickly, their energy waning as fatigue began to set in. Haddon's knights made to move toward the faltering men, but they were

rushed by the traitorous FreeSwords and became embroiled in their own battle without getting near enough to assist the foot soldiers.

Troma critically examined the battle and shook his head. "We can't win this one, we need more men. We should have waited for Venari and Couvin. Damn it all!" he chastised himself. "Fall back!" he cried, "Fall back now!"

He turned and looked at Grendelak and Felander. "Seneschal Woods. Fall back to the woods. There's a clearing there, big enough to hold us all. We'll fall back and regroup there. Understand?"

Grendelak and Felander nodded, preparing to shadow Troma as he pulled back himself. They heard the hornsman sound out retreat and a moment later saw the men begin to fall back slowly. They knew the knights would be the last to retreat, if they did at all, and that they would cover Troma and the rest of the army for as long as they could hold out.

The retreat was long and painful. White and Green garbed guardsman dogged their steps as they tried, in small groups, to fall back to the woods. Grendelak felt more and more sickened by the carnage left behind, by the fallen Brothers whose bodies he could not retrieve, by the smell of death that seemed to permeate his very skin.

It was a glass or two before dawn before Grendelak's small group reached the woods. They stumbled in the dark, battle sore and weary from the retreat, pushing through the woods as they made their way to the clearing. Those who had managed to arrive first had taken charge and set out guards, watching nervously for guardsmen and FreeSwords alike. Troma was challenged by a sentry, a fact for which he was grateful and said as much after the hasty apology the man offered. Another man came forward and led the small group to the largest tent that could be found before they brought fresh water and rags to use on their various scratches and wounds.

Grendelak sat tiredly on the damp ground near the fire, the embers still glowing brightly in the dark of the early morning. He watched, fascinated, as an ember broke loose and floated upward into the sky. He knew he should move, clean up, or do something lest he be even sorer when he awoke, but he could not motivate himself to move. He was dejected by the defeat and angered that he had not been able to do a damn thing for his Brothers.

I might as well have killed them myself, he thought caustically, taking on the burden of guilt for each of their deaths. *If it wasn't for my poor choices, none of this would be happening. I should go to the king and admit my guilt, perhaps then he'd leave off.* He managed to pull himself out of his reverie when Troma pushed himself to his feet and cleared his throat. Grendelak stood reluctantly and waited for Troma to speak. The Duke gestured impatiently at one of the men standing near the fire.

The man hurried over, bobbing his head politely. "Yes, my Lord Duke."

“Have you seen any sign of my son, Haddon?” he asked impatiently.

The man shook his head. “No, my Lord Duke. Nary a sign of him or his knights.”

Troma sighed. “Have the watch inform me the minute they catch sight of him, understood?”

The man nodded enthusiastically. “Yes my Lord Duke. Immediately.” Then he turned and ran off toward the sentries, to inform them of the duke’s order as well.

Troma turned to his companions. “We should sleep, but I fear I can’t just yet. What went wrong down there?”

Felander knelt down and picked up a stick, slapping it negligently against his palm. “Stir up the fire, would you Manx?” After she’d kindled up the fire Felander went down on one knee and began drawing out the battlefield in the dirt. After a moment both Troma and Grendelak knelt down into a crouch and watched. Once Felander had finished, he pointed at the woods nearby the site and marked off the hill the enemy had hidden behind. “Our scouts didn’t get this far, because they stopped when they saw the smoke from the column.” He pointed to the woods with the stick, tapping at the ground at the places that indicated where the explosions had occurred. “The mageborn or priests, whichever they were, were hiding in the woods. We never saw them, nor did our scouts know to look for them. They demoralized the men, even as eager as they were after Manx’s little pre-battle encouragement.”

“They had reserves, we didn’t. They dressed up conscripts like Royal Guardsmen and lured us into hitting them hard right up front. They wore us down and then sent in the real Guardsmen to clean up. We didn’t have enough men to fight two waves, even with Haddon’s knights,” Troma added, his voice still angry at the deception.

Grendelak looked to the lightening sky, his eyes seeking out the edge of the clearing to the south. “They will find us here, and finding us here, they will slaughter us if we do not bulk up the main force,” he said with a note of certainty in his voice.

“We need conscripts, or the combined armies of the others,” Felander said knowingly.

Troma shook his head. “No conscripts. We don’t have time to train them and the gods know how quickly men can turn when conscripted into service. It’s one thing if we were being invaded by another kingdom but a civil war that’s mainly amongst nobility? Never. It would never work,” he said in a tone that brooked no discussion on the subject. “We need to get in touch with Duchess Kellstor. Larik had a wife, Carolane. We need to make certain she is with us as Larik was and to encourage their son, Lyfing, I think his name is, to muster his own troops.”

“Get moving, you traitorous bastard!” A cry from near the edge of the woods interrupted the conversation. Troma looked up and squinted, trying to recognize the figure making its way toward them. Suddenly he brightened. “Haddon!” he called out, relieved to see his son.

Haddon nodded as he approached. “Father,” he greeted Troma almost impersonally. “I brought you a gift,” he said, sneering at the Green and White garbed prisoner he pushed before him. “One of their officers who thought a knight of Dirge was no match for his paltry skills.”

Troma slapped his son on the back almost jovially. “Well done, Haddon, well done.” Troma looked over the man, who was fairly black and blue, the white of his tabard streaked with blood, though whether it was his or another man’s Troma couldn’t tell.

“Your name,” Troma barked.

The officer looked up at him balefully and spit at him. Haddon’s arm snaked out and cuffed the man alongside his ear. “Answer him, dog, or I’ll have your head right here.”

The man coughed as he tried to right himself from Haddon’s blow. “Piotr,” he said reluctantly.

“Well, Piotr. How many more of you are there?” Troma asked almost pleasantly.

“More than you ruffians can handle, to be sure,” Piotr shot back haughtily.

Manx stood staring at him, a curious look on her face. She let Troma question the man for a few more minutes without receiving any substantial answers before she cleared her throat.

“Yes?” Troma glanced over his shoulder at her.

“Let me try a little trick I learned a while back from a friend,” she said mysteriously. Troma shrugged and backed away from the man, holding his hands out toward him. Manx moved toward the man, stopping a few feet from him. She knelt down and rested on her knees, staring at him intently.

Grendelak watched closely, wondering what she was up to now. He noticed that her hands were folded in her lap and that she seemed to be rubbing a stone of some kind. Back and forth she rubbed and turned the stone while staring intently at Piotr. Piotr tried to avoid her stare for a while, but soon found himself returning the look, his eyes wide and frightened. Finally Manx rocked back on her heels and laughed. “You weak minded fool, you couldn’t stop me if you tried,” she said derisively, then pushed herself to her feet, the strange stone Grendelak found so interesting immediately finding its way back into one of Manx’s pouches.

“There are at least two more columns of that size a day’s ride behind them. Each column has at least one Tasnian priest with them and is almost

a thousand men strong, including the FreeSwords who've sworn to the king," she told Troma.

Piotr looked as though he'd been kicked hard, but he recovered quickly, swearing at Manx. "You half bred whore, it's all lies!"

Manx smiled smugly when this time it was Grendelak who reached out a fist and connected with the man's jaw, knocking him to the ground. "Mind your tongue around the lady," he growled angrily, ignoring the fact that the man's tongue was lolling out of his mouth like a dog trying to cool down during Weedmonth.

Manx turned her attention back to Troma. "They have orders from the King to kill any FreeSword who has not sworn, and to bring back, alive if possible, any noble caught standing against the Royal Guardsmen."

Troma put a thankful hand on Manx's arm. "Thank you, Manx. As always, you have proven to be more valuable than you can imagine." He turned to Felander and Grendelak. "We must not let them past these woods. We must hold until we can be reinforced by Dinat and Kellstor," he said forcefully.

"Haddon," he began, turning to his son, "how many knights remain?"

Haddon's face was clouded with sorrow for a moment. "We lost nearly half our number, father. They feast with Dirge this night, having so honored him with their deaths in glorious battle," he said, his voice full of pride.

Troma nodded knowingly. "You may do what is required of you with this man," he said, kicking at Piotr's body. "We no longer need him and he is a traitor to his kingdom as far as I am concerned. Then I wish you to take charge of fortifying this wood. You and your men are best suited to build our defenses here."

Haddon nodded. "As you wish, Father," he said briskly, then reached down and grabbed Piotr by the neck and dragged the unconscious man away from the fire.

Grendelak watched him go with a mixture of relief and envy. Relief that he would not have to spend time with the man when he so obviously disliked Grendelak and envy at Haddon's comfort with his station and choices in life. The young man was obviously satisfied with his choices and had few regrets. The confidence Haddon exuded was a part of being a knight, that much Grendelak knew from conversations he'd had with other knights in the past, but part of it was simply that Haddon knew his place in this world. Grendelak could only dream of holding such knowledge and being near someone who did only drove the blade of that particular knife deeper into Grendelak's soul.

By the time dawn broke, Troma had organized the men and sent out runners to discover the disposition of the other nobles' troops. He

yawned and stretched at the fire, then excused himself to find a place to catch a few hours rest. Felander looked curiously at Manx. He'd been trying to figure out what she had done to poor Piotr earlier and finally decided to ask.

"Manx, what did you do to Piotr?" he asked cautiously.

Manx fixed an innocent look on her face. "I read his mind, of course."

Felander bolted straight upright at that, as did Grendelak. "You did what?" they cried out in unison.

"I read his mind, it's a simple thing, really, once you get the hang of it," she said nonchalantly.

Grendelak shivered, wondering if she'd ever done that to him.

"No, Grendelak, I haven't," she assured him and then laughed, delighted at the horrified expression that enveloped his face. "The question was written all over your face," she chided him. "I'm not very experienced in the art so I stumble around a lot, so to speak. You would know if I were trying, trust me."

"I wouldn't be too worried about it Grendelak, it's so empty in there that she'd get bored right quick and leave anyway," Felander said with a straight face, then ducked as a stone came flying toward his head.

They all laughed at that together; the first time any of them could recall doing so since they'd left Corrigan. Then they lay back on the ground and rested near the fire, knowing they were not likely to have the chance to relax again in the next few days.

They awoke to the sounds of men shouting. Disoriented for a moment, Grendelak had already drawn his weapon before he realized the shouts were not full of the urgency one would expect if the camp had been under attack. Sheathing his sword, he rubbed his eyes tiredly and wondered when he'd fallen asleep.

Felander was nearby, moving slowly as he stretched his still healing leg and squinting against the sun that was already blazing against the clear morning sky. Grendelak's gaze sought out and found Manx, curled up near the fire still sleeping. Grendelak sighed, knowing she needed to rise, but was unwilling to wake her while she was obviously resting peacefully. After a moment or two of watching her, he resigned himself to being yelled at and moved to her side, shaking her by the shoulder and hoping she wouldn't reach out and cuff him when she awoke.

She mumbled something Grendelak couldn't make out right before her eyes snapped open. Grendelak looked into those bright green eyes and saw abject fear, immediately putting him on his guard. "Manx?" he questioned hesitantly.

Manx closed her eyes tightly and then reopened them slowly. She sighed with relief upon seeing Grendelak's face in front of her.

"Manx, is everything alright?" Grendelak tried again.

Manx nodded quickly. "Yes, fine," she said dismissively, rising to her feet and brushing off her clothing. She ignored Grendelak's continued gaze by picking bits of leaves and grass from her breeches and methodically checking each of the many pouches hanging from her belt.

Grendelak glanced at Felander, who merely shrugged as if to say, "I wouldn't". Grendelak decided to drop it and instead turned his attention to the camp, looking to see what had been done thus far and determining what still needed to be done.

Haddon had been busy, obviously. Regular guards were posted around the edge of the clearing and Grendelak was willing to bet that sentries lined the woods from the clearing to the road. He wondered briefly if Haddon had sent men a ways to the north and south for early warning. *I'll have to ask him about that, I suppose.* The men who'd managed to fall back to the clearing were engaged in most of the typical duties one would expect in a war camp. Cleaning weapons, cooking, fixing broken straps on armor and watching the woods nervously.

"Good morning!" a voice called out from behind. Grendelak turned to see Troma approaching the fire, his demeanor more hearty and positive than it had been earlier in the morning.

Troma did not wait for a return greeting. "A runner just came in not half a glass ago with the news that an entire corps of Kellstor's men is on its way to assist," he said happily.

"But you only sent that message out yesterday, my Lord Duke," Felander said.

Troma nodded. "That I did, Felander. According to the messenger, the Lady Carolane had already discussed the situation with her son and they'd decided to send their men to me while they settle Duke Kellstor's affairs."

"Excellent. How many?" Grendelak asked, trying to count the men they still had in the woods in his head.

Troma looked up at the sky, his lips moving as he mentally counted. "Well over five hundred, maybe a few score more than that," he replied.

"We've got, what, perhaps half that here now, counting Haddon's knights?"

Troma nodded soberly. "I know it isn't nearly enough to counter the King's men, but we'll be better off when they arrive than we are now and we best thank the gods for that much."

"When will they arrive?" Felander asked, his mind already trying to fit the fresh men into the clearing and into their tactics.

“Mid-afternoon or so it sounds like.”

Grendelak nodded distractedly, chewing on his bottom lip as he considered the clearing. He wondered briefly if there was another path, another road to the clearing, especially after recalling the way the Tasnian priest had run off through the woods—away from the road—after they’d scared him off. He pointed toward where they’d been attacked. “Is there another road in that direction, Sir?”

Troma’s gaze followed Grendelak’s arm to the far side of the clearing. His face scrunched up like a child about to scream as he considered the question. “I think there may be, Grendelak,” he raised a hand to his face and began to stroke his beard, which was rapidly growing unkempt. “Yes, now that I think of it there is a road that starts quite a ways north of here and goes around the woods. Meets up about a days ride from Corrigan with the North Road.”

Grendelak grinned broadly. “Sir, I’d send that runner back out and tell Kellstor’s army to come by way of this other road. We can send a patrol out to where it comes by the woods and bring them in the back way. The King’s men will not suspect we have been reinforced and, if we’re lucky, that will cause them some trouble.”

Troma looked pleased with his words. “Good thinking, Grendelak, take care of that, will you?”

Grendelak looked surprised. “Uh, certainly, Sir,” he answered somewhat hesitatingly.

Troma laughed at Grendelak’s sudden discomfort. “I would have thought, FirstBrother, that you’d be a bit more accustomed to leadership.”

A red stain began creeping up Grendelak’s neck. “I have not had many opportunities to lead, my Lord Duke,” he said simply.

“The first rule, Grendelak, is to always act like you know what you’re doing. Now go. Give the order and see that it’s carried out,” Troma told him firmly.

Grendelak nodded his head once before he turned and marched off to do as Troma ordered.

Troma shook his head as he watched Grendelak’s retreating back. He looked at Felander. “Is he always that easily ruffled?”

Felander chuckled. “Oh yes, my Lord Duke. Especially around Manx,” Felander said, winking in Manx’s direction.

Troma raised an eyebrow as he looked over at Manx. “Is that so, my dear?”

Manx made a face in his direction. “I suppose it may be, *father*,” she said teasingly.

Troma laughed and returned his attention to Felander. “I would suspect an attack before Kellstor’s men arrive. They’ll want to finish us off as soon

as possible, if they're smart," he lowered his voice, "and they can, unless we're very careful today. Make certain the men do not waste their energy. Less frontal assault, more defense and care toward conserving energy."

Felander nodded wisely. "I'll speak with Haddon and Aerdon, we'll set the men straight, my Lord Duke."

Troma leaned over. "If you think you can convince Manx to leave, I would advise it," he said out of the corner of his mouth.

"I will do no such thing, Troma!" Manx called out heatedly.

Troma rolled his eyes in Felander's direction as he straightened. "Damn elven ears. Can't put anything past her. Consider it, Manx, for me?" he asked the skald.

Manx put a finger to her chin as though she were giving serious thought to the issue. A moment later she pulled it away. "There, I've considered it. No."

"Manx, please think of—"

"No, Troma. You wouldn't ask Felander to leave the field, would you? Then don't ask me," she said with a tone of warning in her voice.

Troma threw up his hands in defeat. "And people wonder why I haven't remarried," he said only half jokingly as he turned and walked away.

Manx looked at Felander expectantly, who schooled his face into serious lines. "Don't look at me, Manx. I haven't considered even marrying for the first time."

Manx smiled at that and shook her head before they went off in search of Grendelak.

They managed to finish most of their preparations before the cry went up that they were under attack. A steady stream of men came through the woods trying to reach the clearing. Haddon's defenses around the perimeter stalled them as they tried to pick their way through the trees and a few well placed archers held the attackers at bay for nearly half a glass.

But eventually the men were reduced to fighting hand to hand inside the clearing. Grendelak, Felander, Troma and Manx watched, weapons in hand, near the center of the clearing, their hopes dwindling away with each of their men that fell. Their men were doing serious damage to the enemy, but it wasn't enough to stop them entirely, just enough to slow down the inevitable. Troma finally looked to the sky for a moment and then shook his head sadly. "Early afternoon," he began, "it will be some time yet before reinforcements arrive."

Grendelak nodded in agreement, his expression grave. He looked down on the freshest of his Oath Cuts, the one he'd given to Troma, and smiled grimly in Felander's direction. "Better to die than fail," he said lightly.

“Better to die than fail,” Felander responded evenly, gripping his weapon more tightly.

The two moved so that Grendelak was nearly in front of Troma and Felander flanked him to his rear. They waited expectantly as the circle around them opened up, until finally there were enough holes in their defenses that the enemy could easily come through.

Grendelak tensed as the enemy closed, then waded into them as they came within reach.

The White and Green guardsmen were obviously surprised by the ferocity of Grendelak and Felander’s resistance. Grendelak smirked at their amazement. Two FreeSwords fighting for their lives was difficult enough, but two ‘Swords fighting in protection of their Oaths and their Contract? They could, and would, battle to the last breath and, in most cases, take a significant number of their foe with them.

Grendelak dealt with two and sometimes three men at a time, the sword in his right hand moving in flowing strokes while the dagger in his left hand snuck out and bit into his opponent often enough to cause mistakes and allow the sword to follow through. A not insignificant number of men fell to his blade, but he was not escaping unscathed. Each man left a number of cuts and wounds that would soon start to slow him down. Grendelak knew that if he started to feel the pain he’d soon give in to the wounds. He fought back the rising sense of despair by considering Troma and Manx and what would happen to them if he fell. His dark thoughts had the desired effect, for his body responded with practiced ease, exploded into a flurry of strokes that were no longer designed to fight an adversary, but to maim or kill with a single blow.

It wasn’t enough. Soon enough he felt the bite of a blade near his knee and a moment later he was on the ground, fighting desperately to keep his balance while fending off a guardsman’s blows. He thought he heard the sound of a familiar battle cry in the distance, but the roaring sound in his ears made it difficult to be sure. He feebly blocked yet another blow and knew he wouldn’t be able to stop the next one. His grip on the hilt of his sword was almost nonexistent. As his opponent’s sword swept inside his guard, it knocked his weapon from his hand and embedded itself in his arm. He brought up his dagger to defend himself, and the next blow came. It landed on his wrist, which was too slow with fatigue to twist the dagger in time. He felt his fingers loosen on his dagger as they grew numb from the blow and knew he’d lost his last weapon.

Grendelak looked up, his eyes clouded with pain, and watched with detached fascination as his foe drew back his sword and prepared to strike one last time. He saw the reflection of the sun on the blade as it began its

downward motion toward his exposed neck. He tried to lift his arm to block it, but couldn't make it obey. He tried to recall the right prayer to say but his thoughts were a jumbled mess.

His thoughts were interrupted as he heard the unexpected ringing of metal on metal scant inches from his face. As he fell back, he tried to see what had happened, but could only make out the flashing of blades as they contacted over his bleeding body. He slipped to the ground in a crumpled heap, feeling nothing but contentedness, pleased that he'd not failed his Contract. *Better to die than fail*, he thought one last time before the world went dark.

Chapter 13

Manx was swearing. In elven, in common, in languages Troma had never heard before. She stood over Grendelak's body as though she were fighting the Dark One himself for it. Felander was bleeding from cuts all over his body, but somehow managed to remain standing, fighting off one man and then the next, his blades constantly in motion.

Manx had heard the battle cry from the other side of the clearing and knew that Kellstor's men were almost to them. She'd watched Grendelak fall and after that all rational thought left her mind. She'd stepped up into his place and began lashing out at any who came near, her voice raised in anger at the guardsmen, the king and even the gods. She gave as good as she got, but she was no warrior to stand toe to toe with seasoned fighting men for long and she knew that. But still she stood and fought, determined that if the gods meant for her to die here than she would do so and do so well.

She struggled to maintain her place over Grendelak's body and did not hear the approach of Kellstor's men. When someone grabbed her around the waist and pulled her away from Grendelak's body she kicked and screamed like a small child torn from its mother. A voice shouted at her but she ignored it, her desire to protect Grendelak and frustration with being stopped from doing so driving her past the point of coherent thought. Finally she felt a sharp blow and thankfully dropped into darkness.

When enough of Kellstor's men had arrived to drive back the circle of enemies around Troma and Felander, Felander moved to Grendelak's body and picked it up, retreating quickly toward the back of the clearing where a larger contingent of Kellstor's men had managed to secure part of the area. He laid him down near Manx and then sought out Troma

once more. Seeing Troma nearby talking to what appeared to be one of Kellstor's captains, Felander walked over to stand near him, his face covered in dirt and blood and tears.

Troma nodded to him and then pointed to the other side of the clearing. "Haddon's knights are finally getting things under control with the help of Kellstor's men," he said flatly.

Felander looked across the clearing. Troma was right. Kellstor's men had driven the enemy out of the middle of the clearing and back toward the woods where Haddon's knights had finally turned and were ripping through the enemy as they tried to run toward the woods. Many were escaping, true, but once Kellstor's men had arrived, fresh and ready to do battle, they'd rushed in like Doornian dervishes, the name of their murdered Duke on their lips. They'd pushed the enemy back and squeezed them between themselves and what remained of Haddon's knights until as many as possible were dead, the rest driven off into the woods.

In less than a glass the clearing was once again secured and Felander finally let his shoulders slump with the release of tension, letting the fatigue of battle creep across his body. He limped in the direction of Grendelak's body, the tip of his sword dragging on the ground in his exhaustion. He dropped to one knee near his friend's broken body and leaned on the guard of his sword for support, his eyes filling with tears as he looked over Grendelak.

Someone had bandaged Grendelak's wounds as best they could, but the bandages were already soaked with blood. Felander expertly looked over Grendelak's face and, taking note of the ashen gray color, shook his head sadly. He'd seen men in the same condition both live and die, though most of them tended to die without proper care, something Felander was certain they wouldn't be finding out here.

Felander looked around, knowing he should assist Aerdon and the remaining Brothers in attending to their own dead, but he just could not bring himself to leave Grendelak. Not until he knew whether the First Brother would live or die. He wondered briefly where Manx had run off to. He'd expected to find her near Grendelak but as he looked around he could not locate her anywhere. He sat, watching his friend breathe shallowly until the sun began to set. He might have sat longer, but a commotion nearby finally drew his attention and he turned tired eyes to its source.

Manx was marching toward where he sat, her face resolute. She was still splattered with blood and her blond tresses were tangled and in complete disarray. Combined with the unyielding expression on her face she looked downright formidable. Men were moving out of her way even

though she said not a word. As she drew closer, he realized it was not so much her appearance that caused the men to move so quickly but because of the being that walked at her side.

The slender graceful being was scant inches taller than Manx, but walked with the same fluid grace he'd noticed in Manx's steps. It was dressed completely in hues of dark greens and browns with the same elongated, pointed ears that Manx seemed to hide whenever she could. Its eyes were larger than Manx's, with delicate eyebrows arching above them.

An elf, Felander thought, bemused, and pushed himself to his feet, trying to brush the debris from his breeches and shirt. He ran his fingers through his hair and watched as the two drew closer.

Manx nodded at him politely as she approached, but said nothing to him. The elf ignored him completely which was not unexpected to Felander. He'd heard enough stories to know that elves rarely deigned to acknowledge humans unless there was good reason. He was finally able to discern that the elf was female.

Manx stopped near Grendelak and pointed at his inert form and then began speaking rapidly to the elf beside her. The sing-song language captivated Felander and for the first time he felt a spark of interest in learning how to speak it. The elf shook her head and pointed repeatedly at Grendelak, her voice rising and falling as it clashed with Manx's obviously more forceful use of the language.

Finally Manx reached down to her belt and took one of the pouches off. She handed it to the elf with a look that plainly said she did not desire to give up its contents. The elf took the pouch and peered inside, then tied it to her belt and gestured toward Grendelak's body. Felander wondered what was inside that pouch, resolving to ask Manx about the contents later.

Sighing with relief, Manx moved to one side of Grendelak while the elf moved to the other. They both knelt next to him and joined hands over Grendelak's chest. The elf began to speak again and as the words came pouring out the two lowered their intertwined hands until they were resting on Grendelak's chest.

Felander watched, fascinated, as the elf's voice grew louder and took on a pleading quality. For a while it seemed this strange ritual was doing nothing but then a soft, pulsing light appeared under the elf's hand and began to spread downward across Grendelak's torso.

The elf nodded to Manx, who took one hand and placed it firmly on Grendelak's shoulder and the other on his upper thigh. The elf did the same, then spoke rapidly to Manx, instructing her to be as forceful as necessary. Manx swallowed hard, but nodded her understanding. As the light of the Goddess spread throughout Grendelak's body it began to heal

the worst of his wounds. But nothing is ever free, and his body would feel every one of those wounds as they closed, the pain perhaps even worse than when they were received. Manx had never seen a man this sorely wounded be healed by the touch of Talimaara, so she could only imagine how painful this might be to Grendelak. When Oriennell told her Grendelak might die from the shock, Manx had told the elf that he would die without *Her* help anyway, so it really made no difference.

As she felt Grendelak's body begin to convulse beneath her hands, she wondered if perhaps it *did* make a difference. If Oriennell hadn't tried, Grendelak might have died peacefully. If he died from the elf's ministrations, such a death would obviously be quite painful.

Felander glanced at the gathering crowd, who pushed in as close as they dared while trying to see what was happening. Those who could gasped as they saw the soft glowing light emanating from the elf's hands slowly permeate Grendelak's body and then shied away from the spasms that began only moments later.

Manx and Oriennell strained to keep Grendelak from thrashing around overly much, but two slight elves had little chance of controlling a much larger man whose body was honed for battle and in great pain.

"Felander, help us!" Manx ordered.

Felander rushed forward and knelt next to Grendelak's head, placing his hands over theirs where they rested on Grendelak's shoulder. Oriennell wrinkled her nose as she felt the press of Felander's hand on her own. Felander only peripherally noticed the reaction and did not care what the elf thought. An hour ago he had thought he'd be burying his old friend before the sun set; now it appeared he had a chance to live because of the elf. She could spit on him for all he cared, as long as Grendelak lived.

For the next few minutes Grendelak's body continued to spasm, but the spasms grew less violent with time. The groans of pain, however, grew louder until finally Grendelak roared and then lay still.

Felander froze with fear. He looked to Manx, then to the elf, then back to Grendelak, waiting for one of them to say something.

"Well?" he demanded.

Manx looked up at him calmly. "You could move your hands now, Felander."

Felander drew back his hands as though they'd been touching a fire. He rubbed them together, apologizing. "I am sorry, I'm just . . . you know, I'm . . ." he sputtered. "Well, is he okay or not?"

Manx said something that sounded like a question to Oriennell, who splayed her hands across Grendelak's chest and then felt his head. She said something back to Manx, who smiled and bowed her head slowly before they both stood and brushed themselves off.

“Oriennell says he will be fine, Felander,” Manx said.

Felander exhaled the breath he’d been holding. He turned to Oriennell and bowed low to her. “My thanks, lady elf. My undying thanks,” he said emotionally.

Oriennell looked at Manx, who gave her a cautioning glance. The elf turned her attention back to Felander. “One accepts another’s thanks, but no thanks is necessary. The Mother protects all, even Tar, who fight against her enemies.”

Felander looked surprised that the elf had deigned to speak in his own language. From what he’d heard of elves they were haughty and rarely lowered themselves to conversing with humans. “If the Brotherhood can ever assist you, lady elf, it will be my pleasure,” he said formally.

“A swift conclusion to this conflict that upsets the very trees would be enough for this One. Please, we do not use Elf, we are the Sheel-Tel, Children of Talimaara,” Oriennell said shortly, then turned back to Manx and spoke rapidly in elven.

Manx bobbed her head. “Of course,” she murmured. “Felander,” she directed, “look after Grendelak. I will return shortly.” Then she and Oriennell walked off, disappearing into the woods to the west.

Felander turned to the crowd that had gathered. “Alright, show’s over. Back to work, now!” he ordered.

Felander heard muttering interspersed with whispers of delight at having seen an elf at work, a first for most of them he was certain, but they dispersed fairly quickly. Felander returned to Grendelak’s side, waiting. Nearly half a glass passed by Felander’s reckoning before the younger man’s eyes opened.

Grendekak looked around warily before he pushed himself up to rest on his elbows. He twisted his shoulders a bit and, feeling no pain, stretched out his legs. He looked quizzically at Felander.

Felander held a hand out and waited for Grendelak to reach up and take hold of it.

Grendelak let Felander help him up before he jumped on him. “What the hell happened? The last thing I remember was six feet of steel headed for my neck.”

Felander smiled and then proceeded to describe what had happened after he’d fallen.

“You’re kidding, she did that?” Grendelak said incredulously as he shook his head. “That gods-forsaken woman is going to get herself killed.”

“I was not the one lying on my deathbed only a glass ago, Grendelak Mishtar,” a voice chimed in from behind them.

Grendelak whirled around, startled. “Nice to see you too, Manx.”

Manx walked up to him and stuck a finger in his chest, her face pinched and serious. “You listen to me, Grendelak, if you ever do something like that again I’ll give you such a lecture your ears will turn red.”

Grendelak stared at her, amazed at the reproachful expression on her face. He immediately became defensive. It wasn’t as if he’d *tried* to get himself killed, he’d only been doing what he’d sworn to do and, truth be told, what *she* wanted him to do. Manx, on the other hand, had made the choice, putting her life in danger for no reason. “Me?” he exclaimed as he pointed to himself. He shook his head and then pointed angrily back at Manx. “I wasn’t the—” he stopped as he felt Felander’s hand on his shoulder. “What?” he snapped, annoyed at the interruption.

“I wouldn’t, my friend,” Felander cautioned.

Grendelak glanced over his shoulder at his friend. “But I wasn’t the one who—” Grendelak tried to explain.

Felander’s eyes were serious as he cautioned the young man. “I wouldn’t, First Brother.”

Grendelak looked from Felander to Manx, then back to Felander. “I suppose you’re right, Felander,” he said resignedly. He turned back to Manx and decided to change the subject. “Could you explain how it is I feel better than I did before we started fighting?”

“Orielliana Falrenteling of the Sheel-Tel healed you.”

Grendelak made a choking noise in his throat at the simple but accurate explanation. “And she did that how?” he asked, glancing at Felander, who nodded approvingly at his choice of responses.

Manx smiled knowingly. She was well aware of the effect of her answers on Grendelak and indeed found these little games amusing. “She is an elf. A *true* elf, not like me. She can do these things.”

Grendelak took a deep breath and exhaled, trying to contain his exasperation. “And why did she do that? The Sheel-Tel do not get involved in the affairs of men.”

“Now you’re getting the hang of it,” Felander muttered under his breath.

Manx shot a warning look at Felander, who raised his head quickly and pretended to examine the sky. “She did it because I asked her to, Grendelak, and I was willing to pay the price. These woods are large and any large woods are likely to have a few elves in them. I sought them out and asked for help. You were nearly dead.”

“What was the price?” Felander interrupted, wondering if it had had something to do with the pouch Manx had given over to Oriell.

Manx blanched at being reminded at what she had given up to heal Grendelak. “A stone.”

Felander and Grendelak looked confused. “She healed him for a stone?” Felander asked, confused.

Manx poked at the dirt with a booted toe. “Not just any stone, a smooth stone of pure alabaster from the Foxhair Mountains in Old Nordalia,” she said quietly.

When neither man said anything she continued. “Mageborn draw magik from the world around them. We call what we draw *mana*. For some magiks the mana drawn from the world in general is enough but for others it is necessary to use things from the world to direct more specific types of mana.”

“The stone is the one you used when you were reading Piotr’s mind,” Felander said, the memory of her turning the stone over and over in her hands coming back to him.

Manx nodded. “Yes, that stone. Scholars have learned through the ages that smooth stones of alabaster from the Foxhairs are perfect for that use. By channeling the mana through the stone, it directs the mana in just the right way. I am no expert in these things,” she admitted reluctantly, “so I do not know why this is, just that for specific types of magik there are specific things we must have. That stone, feathers from specific birds, gems, that type of thing. The stone from the Foxhairs is not very common south of the Continental Egress, so Oriennell was particularly interested in it.”

“Without it you will not be able to read minds, will you?” Grendelak asked, finally understanding.

“Most likely not, Grendelak,” she said evasively, not willing to explain that she could still attempt it, but was not likely to succeed unless she knew the person very well.

“That was a high price you paid, then,” Felander said gravely.

“Thank you,” Grendelak told her sincerely. Any doubt of whether the skald was committed to him was gone. Not only had she stood and fought to protect him, but she’d given up something of great value to see him healed. Now if he could only be certain *why* she was committed to him. After all, it was one thing to sacrifice so great a treasure for someone for whom you truly cared, it was quite another if he were just a means to an end for her. He knew she wanted to see him on the throne and fulfill that damn prophecy she was so concerned with, but Grendelak wondered if there might be something more there. *You mean you hope there is more.* He corrected himself.

“And you promise not to do that again?” Manx prompted.

“I don’t even know what I did!” Grendelak exclaimed defensively.

Manx crooked a finger at him and though he feared he’d regret it, Grendelak lowered his head near hers. She reached up and laid the palm of her hand on his cheek, then drew her fingers slowly down to his chin.

She raised her eyes from his chin to meet his confused brown eyes. “You almost got yourself killed, Grendelak, and that is something with which I would not be pleased at all,” she said thickly.

Grendelak’s brows furrowed. Of course she wouldn’t be pleased, but was it because she cared about him or the prophecy? He’d seen her toy with Troma and even Felander, so he was wary of basing his decision on her actions. He needed to hear it from her own lips before he’d believe. “Don’t worry, Manx. Though I detest the thought of what you hope to do to me I am not about to die just to avoid it.”

Manx’s green eyes went wide and a look of disappointment flashed across her tiny face before her expression hardened. Grendelak almost immediately regretted his decision. “That is good to hear, Grendelak Mishtar of the FreeSword Brotherhood. All of my efforts have not been for naught then,” she said in a tight voice before she turned and briskly walked away, her back stiff.

Grendelak straightened, a confused look on his face. “I don’t understand her, Felander.”

“Is she female?” his friend asked jokingly. “Then no man will ever understand her. All you can do is play her game, my friend. As long as you don’t expect to win, you’ll do just fine.”

Grendelak sighed. “I suppose you are right, my friend.” He eyed the older man critically. “You look like you took quite a beating. Time to get you fixed up. We don’t want you missing the next fight. I’m sure it will come soon enough.”

They continued to skirmish for weeks, each side whittling down the other until it became apparent that neither could win decisively. The combined army of Kellstor and Shorehold was constantly pushed back. First to the west, then to the north east, then back to the northwest again. It seemed to Grendelak that the enemy was driving them purposefully toward a specific point, but neither he, Troma, the new Duke of Kellstor, Lyfing, nor even Haddon could find a reason why. They pored over their maps and argued for hours, but there was nothing special in the direction they’d been pushed. Finally, when Troma was ready to scream with the uselessness of it all, they crossed with the armies of Dinat and Bredene as they were about to be pushed into the Duchy of Kellstor. Invigorated by the influx of fresh troops, they sat around the fire contriving a plan to finally attack the enemy rather than simply defend against its assaults.

Felander and Grendelak spent much of the evening with the Brothers who had accompanied the Dukes and Duchess, speaking of what had occurred thus far and discussing where it might go. Grendelak had reminded them that Brothers sworn to their cause wore white armbands

and that all others were to be treated as enemies. He'd cringed inwardly as he'd explained it to the others, wishing not for the first time that the Brotherhood had not split over this issue.

Grendelak looked across the fire at Manx. He, Troma, Felander and Manx had remained at the fire after the others had taken to their tents. They'd been discussing their plans one last time and speculating on their next move. Some of the nobles wanted to push toward Corrigan and others wished to fight the King's men on their own ground. The four had been able to see the benefits and drawbacks to both sides and had come no closer to finding the correct answer.

They'd grown quiet a time ago and had been simply sitting, each lost in their own thoughts. Grendelak pensively watched Manx as she listlessly poked a dead branch in the edge of the fire, her eyes unfocused. He and Manx had been civil to each other since their argument at Seneschal Woods, but nothing more. Every conversation they had bristled with tension so palpable he was certain everyone around could feel it. But Grendelak wasn't certain what to do about the situation. Should he apologize? Should he tell her why he'd said what he had? Or should he wait for her to break the unspoken truce?

Grendelak had finally gone to Troma to ask his advice, but the older man had only shaken his head and said that sometimes there was no right answer.

"But you know her," Grendelak had argued. "Certainly you have an idea what I should do, Sir!"

"I have never desired to court her, son, and that is really what you're saying whether you realize it or not. Everyone around you can see it, lad, so stop lying to yourself and figure out how to make it right."

Grendelak had been so shocked by the statement that he'd ended the conversation right there and gone off to think alone. He'd decided Troma was right, but that didn't help him make a decision. He'd never courted a woman before; the women he was used to dealing with either required money or a lecherous wink and nothing more.

So for the past week he'd been trying to broach the subject with Manx and it seemed he could not find the right words at the right time.

Felander nudged him as he stood and stretched, then bid everyone a good night. Grendelak watched him go, holding his breath that Manx would stay after Troma left. Grendelak turned beseeching eyes on Troma, who smiled his understanding and quickly bid them both good night.

Felander waited until Troma caught up with him. "Do you think they'll ever figure it out, my Lord Duke?"

Troma chuckled, "If Grendelak is anything like me he will, but it might take a significant length of tree trunk to convince him."

Grendelak glanced over at Manx again, trying to get up the courage to say something to break to silence. He swallowed nervously and then cleared his throat. Manx started at the sound, but did not look up.

"I wanted to offer my . . . apologies, Manx," Grendelak began, stumbling over the words.

Manx heard him, but continued to stare at the fire. If Grendelak wanted her absolution for being so dense he was going to have to work for it as far as she was concerned.

"I wasn't trying to imply that you only cared about me because you want to see the prophecy come true," Grendelak rushed to spit out the words as though they burned his lips. "I just . . . it seems that sometimes . . . you just confuse the hell out of me, that's all!" he finally managed.

Manx laughed softly at his words. Grendelak heard the tinkling of metal against metal, the sigils in her hair banging against one another as she shook her head from side to side. "Oh, Grendelak Mishtar, you have no idea how frustrating it is to deal with you. You want absolution, you want forgiveness, but you can't give it to yourself. You want to do whatever is necessary to save your precious Brotherhood and though you agreed that being King might be required you still have not accepted that your goals and mine are the same in the end."

Grendelak shoulders slumped at her words. This was not going the way he had hoped it would. "I said I would do whatever it takes to save the Brotherhood," he answered. "I'm not sure what more you want from me," he admitted.

Manx turned tired, green eyes toward him. "Your unqualified belief. And trust, Grendelak, trust. I am not trying to drive you to fulfill some goal I have. I am not trying to put you on the throne to meet some end I desire. This is not a game we are playing and it is larger than me, larger than the Brotherhood and larger than Corrigar itself. The King of Tasnami is directed by the Dark One himself. If he has sent a Chosen out to stop you, it is because the DeathWalker desires it, but not because of you," Manx stood then and threw her stick into the fire. "No, not just to stop you, but because there is something greater than that going on. Because he wishes to bend Corrigar to his will. Because through Corrigar he will have a foothold in the south that he has never had and from there, it is only a matter of time before he bends others to his will."

Grendelak was surprised by the passion in Manx's voice and at the wider view she held of the situation. "I believe you believe in this, Manx, but I find it difficult to believe that I am the only one who can stop this from happening. Admit it, this is all very far-fetched, like some tale a Skald would tell," he returned.

Manx threw up her hands in defeat. "I don't believe that's it. If Sir Mil'Amber himself came riding in and told you the same story you wouldn't listen to him either because he's a knight of Nordal and therefore naturally biased against Tasnians. If K'letharin Rochmael told you these things you'd ignore her because as the High Priestess of Talimaara *and* an elf she is obviously working for the good of elves. You wouldn't believe anyone because *you don't want to believe*," Manx refuted his words hotly, the last words of her speech coming out slowly and distinctly.

"What exactly did you expect, Manx? You drive me nearly insane with that song in Peregrine-on-the-Egress, you turn up in Corrigan and haunt me about Kelling," Grendelak stood, moving to stand closer to her. He put his hands on his hips and looked down at her. "Then you start talking about prophecies and gods and about making this bastard street orphan the King of Corrigan. You must certainly realize how ridiculous it all sounds!"

Manx narrowed her eyes. "I do not find any of this ridiculous, Grendelak Mishtar, First Brother of the Corriganian FreeSwords. I have seen far too many 'ridiculous' things in my lifetime to consider any of this," she swept her hands wide, "ridiculous."

Grendelak sighed. "Look, I believe in *you*," he said calmly, surprised at his ability to hold his temper through all this. "But I didn't plan on discussing this with you right now. I just wanted to apologize and say that . . . I wanted to tell you . . ." he hesitated at the expectant look on her face. He ducked his head like a small boy as he raced to get the words out. "I've grown very fond of you."

"Is that what all this about?"

Grendelak nodded and began pushing a stone around with his toe, focusing on it to keep from looking at her.

"Why do you think I was so harsh with you after you were so hurt? Do you really think I'd give up one of my prized possessions for just anyone?"

"I was worried that you were only upset because I might have ruined your plans, that's why I said what I did. I was trying to find out if you cared about me or just this Tale of yours," Grendelak answered lamely, still refusing to look directly at her.

Manx moved closer to him and turned her face up at him. When he averted his eyes she reached up and pulled his chin around so that he had to meet her gaze. "I think you ought to leave such manipulation to me. It doesn't suit you at all," she admonished gently. "Besides, I didn't fall in love with you for your subtlety."

"What did you say?" Grendelak's voice cracked, his face showing his astonishment at the words.

"I said you ought to leave such manipulation to me," Manx replied with a sly grin.

Grendelak rolled his eyes, “No, the last part, wench, did you mean that?” He could feel his heart thudding in his chest as he anticipated her answer.

“Have I ever lied to you, Grendelak?”

“No, not that I know of . . .”

“Then I think you have your answer.”

Grendelak suddenly stumbled as he backed away from the fire. He let out an explosive breath as he hit the ground. He crawled back a few feet and sat near the log he’d occupied earlier, leaning back against it for support and sat there, stunned.

“Grendelak? What’s wrong?” Manx asked urgently, her eyes darting nervously around the fire as she rushed to his side.

Grendelak grabbed one of her hands and pulled her clumsily to sit next to him. “Nothing. I just . . . I’ve never . . . I mean, Felander, but . . .”

Manx put a finger to his lips. “I think I understand. We’ll just sit here a while and let you get used to it, shall we?”

Grendelak nodded somewhat dumbly as Manx moved closer to him and laid her head on his chest. They sat that way for some time, Manx eventually falling asleep while Grendelak sat and stared at the fire.

Finally Grendelak’s mind registered what had really taken place and he smiled broadly. He looked down at Manx sleeping next to him and put his arm protectively around her. He bent over carefully and kissed the top of her blond head before he leaned back and closed his eyes.

Felander reached over and shook Grendelak’s arm. “First Brother!”

Grendelak’s eyes popped open at the urgency in Felander’s voice. “What is it, Felander?”

“They’ve come.”

“Then it is time to see whether or not our plans were the right ones,” Grendelak replied gravely. He shook Manx gently. “Manx, it is time.”

“So I heard,” she mumbled from beneath the tangle of her hair. She forced herself upright and then stood, pushing her hair away from her face. “Well, standing here won’t get the men moving. Let’s get this over with.”

Grendelak stood, then bent over and kissed Manx soundly before he turned and walked off with Felander, their voices barking out orders without breaking their strides.

Manx followed, watching them both but concentrating on Grendelak. Later that morning she smiled wryly when she reached the conclusion that the resolution of their conflict and revelation of the night before had instilled in Grendelak a sense of confidence and purpose. He moved more confidently than he had in the past and his voice held a tone of authority that hadn’t been there before.

Troma noticed it as well and mentioned it to her as they began to march toward where they planned to meet the incoming army of the king.

“He seems changed, almost overnight,” Troma commented thoughtfully.

Manx merely smiled and hummed a little tune. Troma laughed heartily at her reaction. “All right, no more questions. I see what finally unlocked his confidence and I must say I am glad to see it.”

They marched for an hour before they came to the place of their choosing. They’d discussed it several times and came to the conclusion that the hill’s crest on the border of the duchies of Kellstor and Shorehold was the best tactical location for them to meet an approaching army. The hill stretched for miles, giving them the advantage of height. Already a contingent of men was setting up several siege engines to use on the first wave of attacks while the archers sought out the best positions on the side of the hill.

Troma licked his finger and held it up, then nodded. “We have the wind with us, my friends,” he called out happily. “The gods smile upon this fine day.”

The other nobles agreed from the backs of their mounts. They had all agreed to stay mounted, just in case it became necessary for them to leave the field quickly. All hoped that the plan to whittle away the enemy’s numbers before they could even approach the hill would work, but they were taking no chances.

From their vantage point on the apex of the hill they could see the approaching army and hear the pounding of their men and horses as they approached. Another half a glass had passed before the first of the enemy came around a bend in the road and out of the shadow of the trees. Grendelak ordered the bulk of their force to stay behind the crest of the hill, out of sight. They needed surprise as much as any other advantage, as they figured they were outnumbered at least two to one according to the scout’s reports.

Manx squinted as she tried to pick out the banners flying in the ranks below them. The king’s banner was there, of course, and the Green and White with the crossed swords that represented the Royal Guardsmen as well. *The Green and Gold with a single sword piercing a crown, that must be the new FreeSwords token*, she thought. The belief was confirmed when she saw Grendelak and Felander pointing toward the banner and heard them echo her thoughts.

Finally the order was given and Manx could hear the grating sounds of the catapults being readied and the call of commands echoing back and forth along the hill. A few minutes later and she was able to follow the

path of the enormous stones that came flying from behind the hill over their heads, landing in the midst of the oncoming army.

After the first few hits the sounds of battle became as loud as ever, and Manx had to concentrate to hear the orders being given by Troma and Grendelak and occasionally one of the other nobles. The army rushing at them, thinned by the catapults, tried to make it up the hill where the nobles so obviously sat on horseback. Half way up the hill the archers took over, picking off the enemy with alarming accuracy.

But eventually some made it through, and Grendelak gave the signal that directed half of their own men to come over the crest of the hill and charge the enemy. They came over the zenith with swords held high and shouts of anger on their lips.

Grendelak watched with a grin of satisfaction that their plans had worked, for it was obvious after an hour of fighting that they would win this battle despite the odds against them. The other nobles agreed, laughing jovially and congratulating one another.

A few turns of the glass later what was left of the enemy retreated and they began to reorganize for the march back to their camp. They were almost ready to leave when they saw a horse careening up the hill wildly, clouds of dust rising up behind it.

The group on the hill watched helplessly as the horse screamed loudly, blowing foam and shaking its head as though all the demons of hell were chasing it. The sound of a crossbow loosing a quarrel came from somewhere near and the horse suddenly reared. A moment later it collapsed, making a thunderous sound as its body collapsed to the ground not more than thirty yards from where the group of nobles sat atop the hill.

Felander quickly dismounted and ran to the horse. Just as he was about to stop he took off again, racing to a few yards behind the horse before he stopped and knelt down. They saw him shake his head sadly, then watched as he tore something white from near the ground and began to jog back to their position.

Felander went to where Troma sat on his mount and held out a rolled up piece of parchment.

Troma leaned over and reluctantly took the parchment from Felander. He looked at it carefully and then unrolled it, holding each of the ends to keep it from rolling back on itself. "It's in elven, I think," Troma called out in a confused voice. "But it is signed in common, 'Tahure'." He handed the parchment to Felander and jerked his head in Manx's direction.

Manx took the parchment wordlessly. Her blood ran cold and the color drained from her face as she read the words on the parchment. She was fairly certain no one else here spoke elven, but she did and she was fairly certain that Tahure knew that as well. She dropped the parchment

and then moved her mount a few steps forward, gesturing for silence as she stopped. Once the others had quieted she cocked her head and stared glassy-eyed out over the valley below.

Grendelak was confused, but that confusion turned to worry when he saw Manx's left hand clench so hard her knuckles turned white. He forced his mount toward hers until he was sitting knee to knee with her. He stared out over the valley, trying to see whatever had caught her eye. Seeing nothing, his dismay grew.

"Manx, what is it?" he asked urgently.

"I can hear their song."

When she offered no more explanation, he demanded, "Who can you hear?" His unease was growing stronger by the second. He'd never seen her so obviously distraught before and he could only imagine what could cause such a reaction in the skald.

"Tasnians," she said tonelessly, still staring straight ahead. "The King must have enlisted their aid and," she finally turned to face him, her green eyes filled with dread, "Tahure is coming for you."

Chapter 14

“Regroup!” Troma cried out, wheeling his mount and trotting to where Grendelak and Manx still sat staring out over the valley.

“How many?” Troma demanded, his brows furrowing as he tried to catch sight of the approaching army. When Manx did not immediately reply he reached out and grabbed her arm, shaking it like a dog worrying a bone. “How many?” he asked again, this time more urgent than the last.

Manx shook her head, “I don’t know. All I know is that the marching song is Tasnian and that Tahure is not likely to lead anyone out unless he’s certain he has the advantage.”

Troma blanched at her response. “Damn the King for this,” Troma swore as he slammed a fist into his leg in anger.

“It is too late to curse the King, we must prepare and prepare quickly,” Grendelak insisted, trying to hide the despair he felt welling up inside him at Manx’s words.

Troma nodded, then turned his mount and trotted back to the rest of the nobles, where he began barking orders to the captains of their combined armies.

In less than half a glass orders had been carried and Grendelak could see a host of their own men scattered along the hill in various groups. The catapults had been pushed to the sound of men grunting and groaning as they strained with the weight of the siege engines so that they faced the proper direction. Scouts had been sent forward to ascertain the size of the oncoming army but had not yet returned. Grendelak wondered if they would return at all; it was possible they’d already been caught by either the Tasnians or by stragglers left from the King’s own Green and White clad army.

It was not even another half turn of the glass when they could finally hear the army approaching. The stomping of boots on the hard packed road and the voices of many men rose up to greet them. The echoes of their song drifted up and rang in their ears, its forceful beat and haunting tones sending shivers down Grendelak's spine. He knew his face showed his surprise when the front ranks of the army crested a hill further down the road and he caught his first glimpse of their newest enemy.

A sea of black and red stretched across the road and beyond. Grendelak closed his eyes for a long moment before he opened them back up and stared disbelievingly at the line of men coming toward them. More and more men marched over the crest of that hill, and he wondered if it would ever stop. He could hear Felander swear under his breath and knew his friend was thinking the same thing he was. There was no way they could win out over this army. He heard Troma speak a prayer to his goddess aloud and briefly considered doing the same, but couldn't decide what god to call upon.

The army stopped suddenly, sending up plumes of dust into the air with the abruptness of the halt. A single robed man, flanked by two armored men, rode slowly forward and stopped a hundred yards in front of the army.

"Grendelak, Haddon, to me," Troma barked as he began to move forward slowly.

Grendelak jerked his head at the call, confused. He looked back to the man waiting casually on the field and realized that they wanted to parley before they fought. For what reason, Grendelak could not discern, but it seemed that Troma wanted to find out. He kicked the sides of his horse and rode up to Troma's side and then down the hill to the Tasnians waiting below.

Grendelak followed Troma's lead, stopping a few horse lengths from the Tasnians. The robed man smiled at the sight of him and bowed slightly in his direction. "Well met once again, Assassin."

Grendelak ignored Troma as his head swung around to look at him at the greeting. "Tahure, I presume. It is good to know a man's name before you kill him."

Tahure threw his head back and laughed coldly. "Yes, it most certainly is . . . Grendelak Mishtar." He gave Grendelak a hard look before turning to face Troma. "Duke Shorehold, I hereby demand in the name of King Remelus I of Corrigar that you surrender yourself and your . . . *army* . . . to me."

Now it was Troma's turn to laugh. "I think not, priest. Either surrender now or prepare to be destroyed by those truly faithful to Corrigar."

Tahure smiled slowly, a pleased smile. "Then you wish to do battle, even though you are weakened and well outnumbered. So be it. Do not let it be said I did not give you a chance to surrender."

"We wish for you and your . . . *kind* . . . to leave Corrigar," Troma returned.

"Alas," Tahure sighed dramatically, "your king sees things differently and it is his wish we follow now." His expression hardened suddenly. "Begone then, and take your paltry knight of dented heads with you."

Haddon started forward at that, stopping only when Troma held his hand up. Haddon's face was red and his eyes were bulging at the insult. "You will soon learn the measure of a Dirgian, Tasnian cur," he finally managed to spit out.

Tahure looked mildly at Haddon. "I'm certain of that." He turned his gaze again to Grendelak. "Do tell Manx I look forward to seeing her," he said conversationally before he abruptly wheeled his mount and headed back to his army.

Troma said nothing as the two Tasnian knights who'd come forward with Tahure turned their backs arrogantly on the group and followed the priest.

"Alright, sons," he began in a resigned voice, "we've played the required game, now it's time to return and see this through."

Haddon and Grendelak glanced at one another, surprised by the fury they saw mirrored in each other's faces and that their anger was not directed at one another. Grendelak returned the quick nod of the head Haddon gave him, understanding from experience that hatred of a common enemy will turn even the most heated rivals into the best of friends.

"No, no, no!" Grendelak screamed to be heard over the din of battle. "Signal that group there," he pointed furiously to a small group of men several hundred yards in front of them, "to push hard to the left. Move them to the left or they are all dead men."

Manx watched as the man Grendelak had been directing nodded his head and ran off toward the hornsmen. A moment later she heard the distinctive notes of Troma's hornsmen ring out over the field. She raised a hand and brushed her hair away from her face, then used it to shield her eyes as she watched to see if the men had heard the call.

She was pleased when she saw the men try to follow Grendelak's instructions, but even she, as untrained in combat tactics as she was, knew that in the end it would do not good. There were simply too many Tasnians for even their combined armies to fight. Their lines had not lasted long and had actually devolved into smaller groups fighting minor battles across the countryside. Their catapults had done little good against the Tasnians, at least not that anyone could tell. They'd hit their marks, to be sure, but

in the end there were simply too many men wearing black and red to fill the holes in the lines created by Troma's siege engines.

Manx's brows furrowed as she scanned the field looking for Tahure. Her horse blew its breath out nervously, the sound of swords striking against one another and men screaming disturbing its sensitive ears. She absently patted the neck of her horse, trying to calm it, as she sought out the Tasnian priest.

Grendelak let out an explosive breath, his irritation at their situation growing with every one of their own men he could see fall. Even Haddon's knights were hard pressed to stay abreast their mounts as they charged into that expansive sea of black and red clothed enemies. He watched and directed as he could, riding back and forth between Troma and the rest of the nobles, but he knew it was only a matter of time before they were forced to retreat. And he knew that retreat would not be orderly. He'd already suggested that the nobles leave the field now, while they still could, and to his amazement none had agreed.

Grendelak looked over to see Manx pensively watching the field, her hands gripping the reins of her mount tightly. He wished he could convince her to leave before things degraded into chaos as well but if the nobles were stubborn about staying, Manx was immovable.

He looked up and took note of the sun's position, now hanging low in the sky. Soon enough it would be dark and, if all went well, the Tasnians would begin to fall back just as their own men would fall back for the evening. Grendelak grimaced as he turned his attention back to the field and saw yet another man fall and silently wished the sun would hurry along and sink below the horizon.

Soon enough the sky began darkening and Grendelak moved to locate Troma. After doing so he rode to where the Duke sat amongst the other nobles with a defeated expression on his face. Troma nodded almost congenially as Grendelak rode up to meet him.

"Sir, it is growing dark. Do you think—" Grendelak began.

"I should hope they would follow convention, FirstBrother," Troma interrupted sharply, his face pinched and tired. "But the gods only know if they will. Tasnians are known for exploiting any weakness—on the field or off."

Grendelak looked away for a moment. "Then I will signal them to fall back only if the Tasnians do so."

Troma pointed at Manx, who still sat atop the hill in plain sight staring out over the field. "And get her out of plain sight, for Talimaara's sake! What does she think she's doing?" Troma barked angrily.

Grendelak quickly glanced over his shoulder at Manx and then back at Troma. The Duke's face was lined with worry and Grendelak could see

the tension in the set of Troma's jaw. He was certain Troma's outburst regarding Manx was nothing more than overreaction—Troma's attempt to control something on the field when everything else seemed out of his control. Grendelak nodded, knowing that pointing out that Manx had been sitting atop the hill most of the day would do no good. Troma did not want logic at the moment, he wanted control.

Grendelak wheeled his mount and cantered to where Manx sat overlooking the field. "Troma wants you to hide yourself better, Manx," he said abruptly, not knowing how else to frame the Duke's command.

Manx turned to meet his eyes and fixed him with an arched look. "I do not care what Troma wants, I want to stay here."

Grendelak turned his gaze to the battle field, noting that some of the Tasnians near the rear were beginning to pull back. Returning his attention to Manx, he sighed tiredly. "Look, the Tasnians are starting their retreat for the evening. Troma feels out of control and needs something to go his way yet today. Just fall back for the evening. It will make Troma feel better."

Manx's delicate eyebrows raised in unison at the near pleading in Grendelak's voice. "He begins to lead as he should," she whispered with a note of surprise in her voice. She half-bowed in her saddle. "I will fall back to Troma's position, then, Grendelak Mishtar," she said with a bit of amusement.

Grendelak pursed his lips as he tried to understand why Manx had acquiesced so easily. She lightly kicked the sides of her mount and smiled as she rode past him, making her way toward Troma and the nobles.

Grendelak finally shrugged and turned his eyes back to the field, where more Tasnians were obviously trying to fall back as darkness crept across the field. Grendelak nodded, finally satisfied that they really were going to honor the old tradition, and turned his horse in the direction of the bugler.

Troma's army was subdued as it went about its task of preparing for the long night ahead. Fires were lit and watches assigned. Grendelak and Felander stood with Haddon and Troma as they listened to reports from men who'd been further down the hill and fought amidst the Tasnians.

Grendelak glanced away from time to time, trying to keep his eye on Manx. He still wasn't comfortable with the way she had given in earlier and wondered what she had planned that had made her acquiesce so quickly. He caught sight of her blonde hair weaving in and out of the men who sat waiting for attention from the healers. He wondered what she was doing but decided that he was satisfied as long as she was occupied within the confines of the camp.

For another glass he listened to the reports and, by the end, had come to the conclusion that there was no way they could win out over the Tasnians

without losing most of their men. He said as much to Troma after they'd retired to a more private spot to discuss tactics and was disheartened by the Duke's response.

"I agree, but there is nothing to be done for it. We will simply have to push the men harder. We have started this, we must finish it for good or ill," the older man said firmly.

He tiredly ran a hand through his hair and glanced over at the nobles, who sat at a nearby campfire and surrounded by guards. He jerked his thumb in their direction. "They will leave at first light and hopefully we will meet them back at Shorehold." When Grendelak looked confused by the statement Troma's expression hardened. "There must be someone left to negotiate with the king," he explained in a resigned tone.

Things were relatively quiet until mid-evening. Manx sat with Grendelak and Felander around the central campfire, her head resting comfortably on Grendelak's arm while she distractedly listened to the talk flowing between the nobles. She sat up slowly and turned her face slightly, trying to focus her attention on the sounds she heard coming from the direction of the valley where the Tasnians were camped below them. Her brows furrowed as she concentrated and when she finally understood the noise she was hearing she jumped to her feet and began to walk briskly toward the apex of the hill.

Grendelak's head swung around at her movement. "Manx?" he called out tentatively, wondering what had gotten into the skald at this hour. He turned a confused look at Troma, hoping the older man would have a clue, but the Duke merely shrugged and stood, indicating they should follow her.

The men pushed themselves to their feet and began to wind their way through the camp to the outer edge on the hill. As they moved through the camp they realized that most of the men were missing. As they approached the top of the hill they saw that the men had moved from the camp to the hill and were lined up along its length and staring down at the valley below.

Manx pushed her way through the men, most of whom did not even glance down at the distraction but simply moved aside without taking their eyes from the sight below. She stopped abruptly as her eyes caught sight of the blazing fire down below and the makeshift altar the Tasnians had constructed in front of it.

She could now clearly make out the deep chant coming from the men below, carried on the still night air easily to their ears. She cringed at the words and was momentarily heartened that the men surrounding her would not understand them. She heard someone approach her from behind but did not turn to see who it was because at the same time she saw

a figure approach the altar, the light of the massive fire below reflecting off of his balding head.

Manx involuntarily started forward, her hand already firmly gripping the hilt of her sword. Grendelak reached out and grabbed her arms, easily pulling her back against him. She thought briefly of trying to break free but even she realized she wouldn't make it down the hill. She let go of her sword and moved to stand next to him, her arm snaking out around his waist as she pressed herself as close to his body as possible.

They watched, transfixed, as Tahure raised his voice and began to speak above the deep throated chants.

"Oh great Tasni Deathwalker," he cried out, his voice carrying clearly to those assembled on the hill. "You have led us to great victory already this day and for that, we thank you!"

He paused to let his men cheer for a moment and then silenced them with a wave of his hand. "We give you the souls of your enemies that they should cry out and tell your enemies of your greatness, that they might surrender to your rule as all should rightly do!"

Tahure turned and watched a group of men herd a set of captives forward, some being dragged along as they struggled against their captors. Grendelak growled as he caught a flash of white on the arms of several of the men. He realized that the men being prodded forward were both FreeSwords and men from their own army. He felt Manx's grip around his waist tighten and knew she recognized them as well.

Tahure waved his hand and the men the Tasnians had just led forward were forced to their knees. Tahure walked imperiously among them, stopping near one of the captured FreeSwords. The priest turned his face toward the hill and though Grendelak knew the man could not see him, at least he hoped the man could not see him, it appeared as though the priest was looking straight at him. Tahure smiled and pointed at the captured FreeSword. "Bring him," his voice boomed through the still night as he turned and marched to behind the makeshift altar.

Manx felt Grendelak tense as two men grabbed hold of the FreeSword's arms and, after pulling him to his feet, forced him toward the altar. The FreeSword, seeing the altar, began to struggle even harder and nearly broke free. One of the men holding him raised a fist and landed a blow on the struggling man's chin, dazing him enough to be easily dragged forward. The Tasnians easily bent the man backward across the altar, binding his arms and legs down on either side so that he could not move either way.

Grendelak could hear the rumblings beginning amongst the men assembled on the hill with him. They'd finally realized just what Tahure had in mind and they did not like it one bit. He could hear his remaining

Brothers begin to sing the words the Brotherhood often sang at the death of a Brother and raised his voice to join them.

Manx nodded encouragingly at the sound and watched as the FreeSword on the altar, who had recovered from the blow to his chin and had begun to struggle against his bonds, stopped his movements and lay impassive as the song reached his ears. Tahure grinned malevolently as he ripped the FreeSword's shirt away from his body. He raised a curved dagger above his head with both hands and then lifted his face to the black night sky.

Manx instinctively knew the priest was praying but was glad she could not hear his words over the FreeSwords' song. She wanted to look away when a sudden cry of "Tasni" could be heard over the noise and saw the glint of the dagger as Tahure brought it down and sliced across the FreeSword's exposed abdomen.

She heard the sounds of men retching from behind her as the priest reached into the man's open cavity and pulled out a length of intestines, tossing them casually to the side. She could hear the whispered cries to various gods and choking sounds as some of the men realized exactly what kind of monstrosity they were fighting. Manx mentally counted the number of men still kneeling amongst Tahure's guards down below and realized the priest meant to sacrifice them all this very night, one per glass.

She had heard that such rites had been performed in other battles in other times and that they were often effective not only to rally the Tasnians but to dishearten the enemy. She disentangled herself from Grendelak's side and glanced at the men assembled around them. She saw that Tahure's ritual was having the desired effect. The men were sickened by the sight and frightened by the possibility that they might be captured in battle and bent across one of Tasni's altars.

But she also saw something else lurking behind their fright; something she found mirrored in Grendelak's eyes. Anger. The corner of her lip quirked upward in just a hint of a smile with the knowledge that their anger would drive them further than Troma could ever have hoped and harder than they would have driven themselves before tonight. *Perhaps Tahure has made his first mistake*, she thought to herself, *may it not be his last* she added as she turned at the feel of a hand grasping hers tightly. She looked up into Grendelak's face and blinked in surprise at the expression on his face.

Grendelak was no longer angry, he was beyond that and had moved into a cold, calculating state driven solely by the need for vengeance. He had watched Tahure murder one of his Brothers and consign him to Tasni Deathwalker. He had sworn to himself and any god who cared listen that

he would kill that priest—with his bare hands if necessary. *It isn't just because it was a Brother, he told himself, it was the way he did it. So casually, so meticulously, so coldly and with not a small amount of pleasure taken in his task.* Grendelak tightened his grip on Manx's hand, yet kept his eyes focused on Tahure. *I am going to kill you, priest, as casually and coldly as you have killed my Brother,* he swore fiercely.

The Tasnian priest completed his ritual and moved to stand in front of the altar. The light from the fire was behind him and it cast his face in an eerie glow. He looked to the sky again and began chanting, his deep voice echoing dark words through the night.

Manx strained to hear Tahure and shook her head almost violently when she could not understand him. The language was unfamiliar and even though she had some knowledge of the arcane she had almost no knowledge of divine magik. That was the realm of priests and was not something she, as a skald, had ever felt a need to learn or understand. She knew enough to know that while mageborn drew mana from the world around them that priests received their power directly from their deities. She felt Grendelak take a step forward and tugged at his hand to try and keep him from moving further forward, but he shook her off and took several more steps toward Tahure, until he was standing several feet in front of the line of men on the hill. Manx looked frantically at his back and then to Tahure. She wasn't certain what Tahure was about to do but she could guess it would not be pleasant.

Tahure finally stopped chanting and lowered his face until it appeared he was staring directly at Grendelak. Grendelak's lips curled into a snarl. He raised his voice and called out to the priest, "You will pay for that death, Tahure. That and all the others you have caused this day."

The priest appeared to ignore him and instead began raising his hand until it was level with his chest. Tahure pointed a finger in Grendelak's direction and abruptly spat out a single, unintelligible word.

Grendelak saw the bolt of light appear near the priest's outstretched hand but it did not immediately register that it was directed at him. Manx was moving before he could react and he could hear her voice crying out loudly, directing the men to drop to the ground. He heard the sound of men throwing themselves into the dirt; the groans of pain as they hit the ground and each other, but he would not join them. "I will not show weakness before my enemies," he gritted between clenched teeth as he braced himself for the impact of the bolt against his body.

He would have stood there and taken whatever pain the bolt inflicted upon him if not for Manx. He saw her out of the corner of his eye and realized she was about to throw herself in front of him, into the bolt itself. His eyes grew wide with fear as he realized she was not running *at* him, but

in front of him, and it only took him a fraction of a heartbeat to make his decision.

He dove at her, his larger frame crashing into her slender body and knocking her to the ground beneath him. He heard the breath being knocked out of her as she bounced on the hard dirt but ignored the pain he knew he must be causing her and instead covered her with his body. He heard the air crackling above him and closed his eyes tightly against the blinding light that streaked over their heads. He hoped that the men had heeded Manx's cry and that none had been harmed by the priest's powerful magik.

He waited a moment and then pushed himself off of Manx to a seated position before he tried to catch his breath. He hadn't realized he was breathing so hard but now that the excitement had literally passed them over he could feel his heart thudding as though someone were beating on his chest from the inside. He wet his lips and tasted salt. He suddenly realized he was sweating as though he had just spent an hour sparring with Felander. He reached up and pulled the sleeve of his shirt across his brow.

He looked down and saw Manx was still lying face down on the ground. His heart pounded even faster as he reached down and gently turned her over. He exhaled in relief when she groaned and began to gently probe her ribs with a hand.

Grendelak started at the feel of a hand on his shoulder. He turned his face up and saw Felander staring at him with deep concern. The older man looked at him expectantly and closed his eyes in relief when Grendelak merely nodded to indicate he was unharmed. "Is she alright?" Felander asked as he crouched down beside the two, one elbow resting almost negligently across his knee.

"I think so," Grendelak answered. *I hope so*, he thought at the same time. "Manx, I'm sorry I crashed into you like that but what in the name of Dirge were you thinking?"

Manx pushed herself upright, wincing. She stretched a bit to the left and then to the right. Finally satisfied that she'd suffered no lasting damage she turned an exasperated face to her friends. "I am just fine, thank you, even with such a great lummox as you landing on top of me. Is anyone hurt?" she asked as she turned her sight to the line of men behind them, searching for anything out of place.

"None, thanks to your warning," Felander answered. "Some are a bit singed, but no one is seriously injured."

Manx took the outstretched hand offered to her by Grendelak and let him pull her to her feet. She glanced over her shoulder and quickly noted that Tahure had gone back to taunting the rest of the captive men. *Lordston*,

send them a quick and easy death at the least, she prayed silently. She watched Troma approach, his gait clearly showing his age and the heavy mantle of responsibility he wore.

“The nobles are leaving now. Two hundred men with them, two hundred every glass after that until the field is empty,” Troma said dejectedly, a horrified look still lingering in his eyes.

Grendelak merely nodded. “It is well. We cannot fight that,” he agreed as he jerked his thumb over his shoulder toward the Tasnian camp. “Not right now.”

Troma’s face clouded over for a moment, his eyes glinting with anger, before the look was gone and Grendelak could not be sure he’d seen Troma’s obvious dissent regarding the decision. “They will not fight that ever, Grendelak,” he said with a tone of finality. “Not ever.”

Grendelak wanted to disagree, but at the moment knew it would do no good to argue. They could discuss options once they’d safely returned to Shorehold.

If we return safely, he thought caustically to himself as he glanced back one final time at the Tasnian camp before following the others back to the main encampment to assist with their ordered retreat.

Chapter 15

“Too slow, First Brother!” Felander called out almost gleefully as the flat of his blade slapped against Grendelak’s thigh for the second time in less than a minute.

Grendelak growled in response, his face a mask of frustration and anger, before he launched into a flurry of strokes against his friend. Felander parried again and again, backing up against the anger in Grendelak’s strokes. The sound of blade meeting blade rang out across the courtyard and had drawn quite a crowd of Brothers since the two men had begun fighting. Grendelak was certain men were betting on the outcome at this point. He did not object to that, for most of the Brothers were Dirgian and gambling of any kind was considered a form of worship of Dirge. What bothered him was that he was certain they were betting against him.

No wonder about that, he thought angrily, I’m fighting like an unblooded Brother. He backed a step away from Felander and began circling him, having not found an opening in his last attack. He shook his head slightly, trying to clear the thoughts that plagued him and prevented him from concentrating on the fight. Ever since they’d fled from the Tasnian army he’d been unable to think of anything else. Only this morning Troma had issued the decision that they would entreat the king for a truce, at the behest of the remaining nobles. This practice was merely a diversion, an attempt to keep from thinking about the decision and of their flight from the battlefield. That they fought with unbound blades was not unusual as the Brotherhood encouraged such practice believing that to play at swords with rattan or wood was not as effective, as the weight and balance of such practice swords were not the same and therefore did not effectively teach a man to wield a sword correctly.

Grendelak forced his mind to his opponent, watching Felander now through narrowed eyes, his brown orbs locking onto Felander's face as he tried to predict which way the older man would move next.

One corner of Felander's mouth quirked up into a half grin as he saw the change come over Grendelak's face. Finally he judged that Grendelak was actually involved in the fight rather than simply going through the motions. He purposely glanced to the left as he brought his sword to bear on Grendelak's right, a grin of victory on his face.

Grendelak's eyes lit up as he recognized the feint. He grinned as he reached out with his left hand and grabbed at the other's man elbow, turning into Felander even as he reversed the grip on his own sword and brought it around to bear across his body. He pushed against Felander's elbow and used the momentum to finish his turn until he was again facing his old friend, both hands on the hilt of his sword and the blade held fast against Felander's throat.

The look of surprise on Felander's face was quickly replaced with one of satisfaction and pride, the look of a teacher whose pupil has finally bested him. "I yield, FirstBrother," he said grudgingly, the tone of his voice not at all giving away his true emotions.

Grendelak smiled and nodded as he stepped away from Felander, bringing his sword to his side.

The sounds of coins clanging together as they changed hands rang out across the courtyard and the sound of a few men laughing heartily told Grendelak that at least some of the Brothers had bet on him winning.

The sound of thundering hooves came from near the stables and every head turned to watch as seven armored men on horseback raced toward the gates. A lone pennant fluttered in the wind, secured to the lance of one of the men. None of the Brothers needed to see the bearing on that pennant to know the knight in the lead was Haddon and that the group was headed to Corrigan to treat with the King.

The sound of laughing died away as the men of the Brotherhood watched until the group passed through the gates and disappeared down the road. Grendelak could hear the grumbling and muttering coming from the men as they dispersed and left the courtyard in groups of twos and threes, heading for the makeshift barracks Troma had ordered set up for the Brothers who'd sworn to stay with him.

"It eats at you, doesn't it, that Troma has decided to treat with the King rather than fight?" Felander remarked.

Grendelak looked at the ground and kicked at a stone lying near one of his feet before he looked up and met Felander's gaze. "Of course it does. We ran, Felander, ran like dogs from the field. The dishonor in that clings to me like a fine coating of grease."

"You kept your oath, First Brother, and that is all that is expected. That honor overshadows the rest. The dishonor is not yours, but Troma's," Felander reminded him carefully.

Grendelak looked his friend full in the face, searching to see earnest belief in those words. Finding it, he smiled and slapped a hand to his friend's shoulder. "Of course, Felander. It's easy to forget some days, this isn't your typical contract, you know."

Felander shrugged easily. "No different than any other, if you ask me, except that we have a goal that goes beyond fulfilling our contracts here," his face hardened as he returned Grendelak's gaze. "Remember your first oath, to the Brotherhood, First Brother."

Grendelak's face clouded. "I remember," he growled. "Well do I remember, Felander, and never will I forget it."

The sound of singing caught both men's ears and they turned toward its source. Grendelak shielded his eyes against the sun as he looked back toward the keep and caught a glimpse of Manx standing in the window, the sound of her voice carrying out over the courtyard. He concentrated on the words, but quickly realized they were in a language he did not know. He stared at her so long it took him a moment to realize that Felander was chuckling at him.

"Go on, then, you moon faced dog," his friend told him laughingly. "You haven't spent much time with her since we returned and as long as you have time, you ought to do so rather than stand out here staring at her like a love-struck courtier!"

Grendelak reddened, but looked gratefully at his friend. "I just . . . I mean," he stumbled over the words, looking back and forth between the Brothers in the yard and Manx.

Felander reached out and pushed his friend toward the manor house. "You've spent more than enough time with the Brothers to remind them who you are and that your loyalty still lies with them. Go, before she tires of you and turns her eye toward me," Felander teased with a wink.

Grendelak threw a harsh look at Felander, causing the older man to burst out laughing at his friend's jealousy, before he turned and strode purposefully into the house, seeking out the tiny, yellow-haired skald who'd become, much to his surprise, quite important to him.

By the time Grendelak arrived at the door to Manx's room, she'd stopped singing and had ensconced herself on the huge bed, propped up against the feather pillows with a book in her hand. Grendelak stopped in the doorway, taken aback by the scene. She appeared very much like a child snuggled in her parent's bed. The long sword hanging in its scabbard on the chair next to the bed and the finely linked mail of chain that lay draped over the back of that chair were the only indications that the skald was not the child she appeared to be.

Manx did not even look up as Grendelak entered the room. He looked around briefly and headed toward an overstuffed chair placed near the fireplace. He sat down, then stretched out his long legs and crossed his arms behind his head.

The corner of Manx's mouth twitched as she tried not to smile at Grendelak's apparent nonchalant attitude. She knew he wasn't nearly as at ease as he was trying to appear, but she was willing to let him play his little game.

They were both silent, waiting to see who would break first. Grendelak squirmed a bit, then finally drew in his legs and straightened in his chair, one arm lying along the arm of the chair, his fingers drumming on its carved, oaken endcap.

Manx finally looked up and let her gaze fall on Grendelak. She was surprised to find her heart quicken at the sight of him. She'd thought she was beyond such childish reactions, but apparently, such things were not confined to youth. Grendelak glanced sidelong at her and, seeing her green eyes upon him, caught her gaze and held it.

"What was that song you were singing earlier? The one in some language I still don't understand?" he asked casually, unnerved by the expression on her face.

"Twas a song of undying love, written by a skald long ago when the world was still but one kingdom, ruled by The Contraband," she replied slowly.

"Hmmp," Grendelak replied. "And what did it say?"

Manx uncurled her feet and moved to the side of the bed, swinging her legs over its side and letting them dangle there. She reached up and pushed her hair back from her face and looked seriously at Grendelak, then closed her eyes and began to recite as she translated the old elven song into the high cant of the Court.

"Whence I didst bespeak of mine love, twas not mine feeble voice that didst proclaim mine heart wast meant for thee, nay, twas mine soul that didst call out to thine from across the ages, where it hast lain in the shadows e'er awaiting thy light to cast it forth from its prison of darkness."

Grendelak was glad she had her eyes closed and could not see his reaction. Though she appeared to be simply reciting the words, another performance, she spoke the words as though she *meant* them, and meant to say them to him. His breath caught for a moment and his chest suddenly felt tight. She opened her eyes and let her gaze fall on his face and as he saw the slight smile that appeared momentarily on her face he knew she'd seen something of his reaction. He felt foolish so he shook his head to clear it, and was surprised to find that strange feeling in the pit of his stomach was still there.

“Did you ensorcell me with your words, skald?” he accused, trying to sound angry.

Manx shook her head without taking her eyes from his face. “No, Grendelak Mishtar, I did not. At least, not on purpose. Words sometimes have a power all their own, you know. Like the Tale, some songs are so powerful that they can change entire kingdoms—or perhaps just one man . . . Those are the ones that live on, such as that one.”

Manx saw him blanch at the mention of the Tale. She sighed resignedly, knowing that some had to be dragged kicking and screaming into the Tale while others dove in head first without even knowing what they were doing. She’d thought Grendelak would have accepted this by now but apparently he was still fighting the idea. “You are upset with Troma’s decision, aren’t you?”

Grendelak tensed at the mention of Troma and his recent decision. He stood and began pacing the room. “Yes,” he threw over his shoulder. “Aren’t you?”

“Seven deaths in seven days, his anger then be set ablaze.” Manx replied in answer, her voice carrying none of the regret she felt at knowing the knights’ fate.

“What the—” Grendelak stopped pacing and speaking abruptly, his mind replaying the scene earlier in the courtyard of Haddon leading his knights out to treat with the king. He whirled suddenly to face her. “Haddon led six knights out earlier . . .” he choked off abruptly. “You can’t mean—”

“I don’t mean anything, Grendelak. The *Tale* means—” Manx began, but stopped at the tortured look on Grendelak’s face. She waggled a finger in his direction. “You can refuse to accept it all you want, Grendelak. But when every last one of those knights comes back dead and Troma calls to march out, you mark my words, Assassin,” she marched forward until she was standing less than a foot away from him, her voice cold and furious, “the Tale does not lie. Not about Haddon, not about Troma and, “she poked him in the chest with each final word, “not about you.”

“What about Troma?” Grendelak grabbed onto his father’s name like a drowning man holds to a rope.

Manx shook her head and tried to back away, her face suddenly pale. “Nothing you need to know, Grendelak, not now.”

Grendelak stepped forward and grabbed her by the shoulders, shaking her with an intensity that was born of desperation and fear. “What does it say, Manx?” he screamed.

Manx looked up at him and swallowed nervously, her mind racing to decide whether to tell him now or later. The crazed look in his eye made her decision. “He won’t live to see the end of the season,” she said dejectedly.

Grendelak stumbled back as though Manx had kicked him in the chest. He reached out and laid a hand on the wall for support, his head hanging as he tried to refute her words. When he finally raised his head Manx felt a momentary stab of regret at how forthright she'd been with her speech, for the confusion and pain on his face was nearly more than she could stand.

"How can you say such things and stand there like it's nothing more than words?" he asked hoarsely. "You're talking about lives damn it all, Manx, not just some words in a book somewhere!"

Manx stared at Grendelak, her expression unreadable. "Because there is more at stake than just Troma, Haddon and his knights, much more." The last words came out in little more than a whisper.

"Damn you, skald, and what if this Tale you hold so sacred says I must die?" Grendelak growled.

"All things die, Grendelak, and eventually return to the Mother," she told him stoically, knowing full well the pieces of the Tale she knew of said no such thing, but unwilling to give ground on this for fear that he might use it later to avoid what he must do.

"Of all the cold hearted, unfeeling—" Grendelak stalked toward her but stopped when Manx suddenly rounded on him, her face finally showing some emotion.

"Do you think I care not for Haddon, whom I have known since he was a child? Do you really think I care nothing for Troma, who has cared for me and treated me as well as any other?" her words were little more than a harsh hissing sound at this point, anger at her own helplessness driving her to lash out at Grendelak's accusations. Accusations she'd made to herself a million times over the course of the past few months.

When Grendelak simply stared at her, her anger lost its force. "Do you really think I care nothing for you, Grendelak Mishtar of the Freesword Brotherhood?" she asked desperately.

Grendelak looked at her as though he was truly seeing her for the first time. "I don't know, Manxellien Evania K'hndreel," he replied flatly, "for all I know all this talk of love and caring for me is nothing more than a ruse to manipulate me into doing what you want me to do." He ignored the vehement shaking of her head as she tried to deny his words. "No, I'll not listen to another word. You sat in the same room as I did and listened to Troma and the others make this plan. You said nothing when they decided to send Haddon and those knights. Nothing! And you said nothing about it leading to Haddon's . . . my brother's . . ." Manx cringed at the force of his words and the anger they carried. "As far as I'm concerned, Skald, you are as guilty as the King if they die."

Grendelak spun on his heel and left the room hurriedly, anxious to be alone and not willing to look back to see how his words had been taken.

Manx stood in the middle of the room staring after him, at a complete loss for words. She clenched her jaw and turned to look out the window, fighting the tears she could feel welling up in her eyes. When she finally felt as though she'd regained control she walked stiffly to the chair where Grendelak had sat and climbed into it. She pulled her feet under her and stared into the fire, wondering why she'd ever agreed to find the Assassin and why she'd had to get so damned attached to him.

Certainly she could have said something to Troma, or to Grendelak, earlier. Perhaps she could have changed Troma's mind, perhaps he would have sent someone else. Perhaps he would not have changed his mind. The uncertainty ate at her, the possibility that she'd sat by and done nothing and actually caused Haddon's death made her cringe.

"He's right, though," Manx whispered to herself, "I do believe the Tale is sacred. Haddon has not even arrived in Corrigan yet and I have him dead and buried because it fits the Tale. But not even the Tale is that specific. If it was not him, it would have been another. Prophecy must be fulfilled; the Tale must come to completion or else we have no hope of avoiding what might be."

She wrapped herself tightly in that belief, like a freezing man in the midst of a blizzard would a woolen blanket, staring blankly at the fire until she fell asleep in the chair.

Felander had watched for nearly a week as Manx and Grendelak carefully avoided each other. He'd listened to Grendelak grunt his responses to questions and seen the listless manner in which Manx moved through the manse. It was obvious to him, as well as everyone else in the house, that they'd had some sort of falling out, but neither would talk about it. He'd tried, Healfherd knows he'd tried, but he'd been brushed off brusquely by both, and Grendelak's refusal had been accentuated with a threatening gesture.

Dinner time grew more painful as the week drew out, the uncharacteristic silence from the skald making everyone uneasy. Felander exchanged a glance with Troma, who shrugged helplessly and tried to carry on a conversation with Venari Selb. Felander grew frustrated and finally left the table in disgust, not caring whether he had just offended someone.

Troma looked around the table, his expression hardening as it fell upon Manx and then Grendelak. He pushed himself away from the table and stood, muttering apologies to the other nobles seated at the table. He stepped toward the door and then stopped, turning to the table.

"Manx, Grendelak, join me in my study," he said briskly, the words carrying the weight of a command that both understood was not to be ignored.

The two left the table, hastily issuing half-hearted apologies and grudgingly followed Troma down the hall to his study. As they passed into the room Troma turned and closed the double doors behind them. He turned, his back to the doors, and folded his arms across his chest. "Sit!" he barked.

Manx and Grendelak quickly sat in chairs on either side of the fireplace. Manx perched on the edge of her seat while Grendelak dropped indigently in his, a sour look on his face.

Troma unfolded his arms and threw them up wide as he stalked toward the two. "What in the name of Talimaara is going on between you two? You've got everyone in this house walking on egg shells, even the servants. I want it out—now!" Troma's voice was low and steady, but his frustration shone clearly on his face as he looked back and forth between Manx and Grendelak.

Manx and Grendelak exchanged a heated look, but neither spoke. Troma shook his head and rolled his eyes, then pointed at Grendelak. "Son, speak your mind," he ordered.

Grendelak looked up at Troma, still surprised to hear the word 'son' come out of anyone's mouth when directed at him. He swallowed nervously against the sudden feelings of betrayal and hurt that had kept him from even speaking to Manx for the past week and then began to speak.

"It's that damn Tale she's always talking about. I don't like being manipulated and I certainly don't believe that our destinies were foretold a thousand years ago by some crazy priestess scratching on thousand year old parchment. But she does and some of the things . . ." he trailed off, looking nervously at Manx and then back to Troma. "Some of the things she could have . . ." Grendelak broke off again and looked down at the floor, not knowing how to tell Troma what Manx had told him without hurting the older man.

"I think I understand, Grendelak," Troma said thoughtfully. The Duke turned his attention to Manx, his eyes narrowing. "The Tale had some things to say that Grendelak didn't like, is that it?"

Manx raised an eyebrow. "The Tale says things no one likes at times, Troma," she replied archly.

"It isn't just that," Grendelak interrupted as a he stood swiftly and walked to the fireplace. "She loves that Tale more than . . ." he clenched his jaw as he made a fist and slammed it against the marble mantle of the fireplace, "I don't know how far she'd go to make certain her beloved Tale happened the way she thinks it should."

"Whoa there, Grendelak," Troma waved his hands back and forth as if to ward off his words. "You aren't really upset about what the Tale says, this is about you and Manx, and about whether or not she cares for you as Grendelak or as whatever piece of the Tale might have claimed you, am I

right?” Troma asked with the insight of a man who has had women seek his company for his title and power rather than himself.

Grendelak snuck a hurt look over his shoulder at Manx before he looked at Troma. “Yes, sir,” he said glumly.

Troma let his gaze fall on the skald, noting that her expression was fairly neutral, but her eyes were not. In fact, if he had to guess he would say she was quite upset by the incident and, for the first time he could recall, not at all sure what to say or do. “The eyes, Grendelak, are the mirrors of the soul,” Troma said seriously, “you know that. When you fight, what do you watch? The other man’s eyes, because they will also show you their true intent. It is the same with women, you know . . .”

Grendelak let that sink in for a moment, then turned and looked hard at Manx. He saw what Troma had no doubt seen, but still shook his head. “I don’t know, sir,” he said reluctantly, “I just need some time . . .”

Troma clapped him on the back. “Take it then, but stop shooting daggers at her every time you see her and let go of some of that anger. Direct the anger where it belongs, at the King,” the Duke ordered, “now go—spend some time thinking about that and cooling off. The next time I see you I expect you to be civil to everyone, including Manx.”

Grendelak nodded and mumbled, “Yes, sir,” as he hurriedly crossed the room and opened the doors. He turned and took one more look at Manx before he slipped out the doors, closing them behind him.

Troma turned then, his expression more severe than it had been. “And you? What the hell do you think you’re doing to the boy?”

Manx stood angrily. “Me?”

“Yes, you,” Troma interrupted, gesturing angrily in her direction as he walked to the chair Grendelak had been occupying and sat down tiredly in its depths. “I know you, Manx, and I know when you get an idea in your head it’s nearly impossible to dislodge,” he held a hand up to stop her when she began to protest. “No, I am not saying that you’re wrong to do so. But it might be a bit much for him to take. You’ve been driving him since you got here and, if I understand it, before then as well. Give him some room to breathe, Manx. If he’s a part to play in the Tale then let him adjust to that. Guide him, don’t push him headlong into it,” Troma finished with an exasperated sigh.

Manx looked at her old friend thoughtfully. “You may have a point, Troma,” she conceded. She walked to the chair he sat in and knelt down beside it, laying a hand on his forearm. She looked up into his face and studied it for a moment, knowledge of *what might be* filling her with not a small amount of sorrow for the older man. “You have always been a good friend, Troma. Now, more than ever. May the gods grant you peace,” she said seriously.

Troma looked down at her, noting the seriousness and sudden sadness in her eyes. He reached over and laid a hand over hers. "Yes," he began, nodding slowly, "may the gods grant us all peace, Manx." He stood leisurely, taking her hand and helping her to stand next to him. He reached down and embraced her for a moment, then stepped away and straightened his clothing. "Tis a heavy burden you bear, some times, isn't it?" Troma asked distractedly.

"It is my part to play, Troma, I can do no less than any other whose life is entwined in the Tale," she returned flatly.

"You are sure?" he asked quietly.

"As sure as anyone is about anything in the Tale."

Troma nodded acceptingly. "Well then, it must be time to follow your advice and find me a serving wench," he said with a crooked smile.

Manx smiled, but the smile didn't reach her eyes any more than Troma's smile reached his.

The first knight was returned the next day by king's courier, his severed head in a plain burlap sack. The news raced through the manse and a melancholy attitude enveloped the entire house. Each day another courier, each day another sack, each day another dead knight. For six days servants answered the door with anticipatory dread of receiving the courier, and for six days one of them was forced to accept the grisly message.

Manx and Grendelak had called an informal truce, at least, and the tension between them seemed to recede further with every knight's head that was delivered to the manse. They had all been ensconced in meetings as the week progressed, each death driving them closer to the decision they knew must eventually be made if the end of the week brought what they believed would be the end of discussions with the King. Grendelak was not surprised that vows had already been made and oaths taken to support Troma as King should it come to outright war and they should succeed for Manx had long ago taught him the order of succession and family ties between the nobles and the King and he knew that Troma's family was next in line to ascend.

Nor was he surprised when the nobles reiterated their desire to keep the old oaths between the King and the Brotherhood, keeping them free from oaths of fealty to the crown in return for their unavowed devotion to the kingdom in times of need.

The seventh day Troma stood staring out the front window of the house at the distance, his eyes unfocused as he watched the sun rise above the horizon. He knew, without being told, what this day would bring. His eyes were sunken and a pallor hung over his face as he waited for the courier to bring his final message. This one, Troma was certain, would

carry a message as well. The Duke had steeled himself to receive this one himself, even though he knew it would break his heart to do so.

For all the preparations, for all the talk they had done over the past week, for all it appeared that Troma had accepted that the last courier would bring news of his son's death, he dealt with it poorly.

When the courier came riding up the road in the king's colors Troma had tensed and walked stiffly to the doors, throwing them open wide and standing firm in the doorway as he awaited the courier's approach.

The man was polite, but his words were tinged with derision for Troma and the other "traitors" as the King put it. He handed the Duke a sealed parchment that obviously contained more than just a letter from the king and then waited for the other man to open the delivery.

Troma looked at the parchment in his hands with reluctance. He had been expecting another burlap bag and here he had nothing more than a parchment. He looked over his shoulder to see Manx, Grendelak and the nobles gathered in the foyer behind him, waiting for his pronouncement.

Troma broke the seal and unfolded the parchment, his hands shaking as he reached to retrieve the objects held inside. He gingerly picked up the small crest of his house still surrounded by pieces of torn wool. A second symbol, this one with Dirge's Dented Shield on it, splattered with blood, lay under the crest. Troma gripped both in his hand as he held up the parchment and read it out loud for all to hear.

From his Majesty, King Remelus of Corrigar to the Traitor Troma,

By now you have received the heads of all your son's men. We have decided not to send your son back to you, for he serves as an example to all traitorous nobles who wage war against us. You may join him on the walls of Corrigan where it hangs near the west gate when you surrender yourself to us.

If you submit to our judgment, we will generously agree not to execute the rest of the Traitors, knowing that it is you that have harangued them into this treason, as long as they will swear fealty to us this Fest week.

You have until the beginning of Fest week to submit yourself to our will, else we will loose our armies upon your lands and take what is ours by right.

Remelus I

King of Corrigar

Duke of Corrigan

The courier stood patiently, as though awaiting a reply. Troma turned his angry eyes on him and snarled at the little man. "Get thee out of my sight, snake. Tell the King the only judgment we will submit to is that of the gods of Corrigar, not his Tasnian tainted rule!"

The courier stood staring at Troma as the Duke turned on his heel and marched back into the house. He shook his head in mock sadness as he watched Manx step forward to close the doors. "You, someone has a message for you as well," the man spoke quickly. When Manx stopped closing the doors he hurried on. "The Bear will Fall, his line is ended," he quipped with a look of superiority on his face, obviously oblivious to the meaning behind his recitation.

Manx returned the look with one of contempt, "Tell Tahure the Assassin *will* Turn and nothing he can do will change that," she said confidently before she slammed the doors shut, not waiting to see the look of confusion and surprise on the courier's face.

Seeing the look on Grendelak's face at her words as she turned away from the door, she wished she was as confident in that fact as she had sounded.

Chapter 16

“We move out in two days,” was all Troma had said as he walked into the house after receiving the courier’s message. He’d disappeared into his study for most of the day, expecting that Grendelak and the other nobles would deal with the organization required to get the armies ready to march in the allotted time.

The night before they left Troma gathered everyone in the courtyard to say the words that would have laid Haddon to rest if they’d had his body. A Dirgian priest had conducted the rite and said all the proper words. Troma remained rigid with a blank expression on his face until Manx stood next to him and raised her voice to sing for Haddon.

Troma had asked her to do so and left the choice of what to sing up to her, for she’d known Haddon from childhood as well. She’d known exactly what to sing—the only song that had comforted him as a young boy, even though he hadn’t known until much later what the words meant and even then he’d interpreted them in his own way, as a knight’s vow between himself and Dirge.

So she’d stood and sung the elven words of the song *The Contraband* had commissioned ages ago for his wife, her voice carrying through the clear night. And though she sang for Haddon, her eyes never left Grendelak’s face. More than one of the knights assembled went down on one knee half way through the dirge and Troma’s eyes were glassy with unshed tears as he listened to the haunting melody ring out across the courtyard.

It didn’t help that Manx put more of herself into that one song than any other she’d sung before and everyone who heard her felt it. This was more than just a memorial to a knight, she meant what she sang and felt the words more deeply than any she’d ever sung before.

By the time she was finished *she* had tears rolling down her cheeks and that was something she'd never experienced. She saw Grendelak's expression soften as she sang and watched as the look in his eyes shifted from anger to understanding.

The moon had risen fully by the time they'd finished and the gathering had dispersed, the soldiers and Brothers headed off to finish preparations to march in the morning and to find their beds, hopefully to enjoy one last night of sleep in comfort.

Felander watched with satisfaction as Grendelak strode forward and offered his arm to Manx, who took it without hesitation. He nodded to himself as they walked back into the house behind Troma. It appeared the gap between them had been bridged and to Felander, it was not a moment too soon, for Grendelak would need his entire mind focused on the coming fight if he were to lead the Brothers effectively. Felander turned and walked toward the barracks, humming happily to himself as he went to oversee the final preparations.

They marched out the next day under the Duke's banner. The other nobles, having decided to throw their lots in with Troma, chose not to fly their own to show their support of Troma as their King should they win through. They rode with him, near the rear of the army at Troma's order, so that should they encounter Tasnians again they would be in less danger than meeting them head on.

Troma drove them mercilessly toward Corrigan itself. They'd all decided that the only way to wrest back control of their kingdom was to directly assault the king. If Remelus stayed on the throne, there was no way they could win. They had to remove him completely if they were to throw the Tasnians out of Corrigan and return the kingdom to a state of peace.

They were not worried about treason any longer, for Remelus had made it clear what he thought of them for their actions. As well to be hung for a sheep as for a lamb, and better to accost the source of evil directly rather than involve more of the kingdom's people. Soldiers were able to defend themselves, commoners were not. Troma needed the support of the commoners as much as he needed the nobles, so avoiding open war that might harm more people was the best way to keep the people on his side.

"He's letting us get near Corrigan, there's no other explanation for this lack of resistance," Felander commented days into their march. They had traveled unaccosted thus far and it was not sitting well with the more experienced Brothers who'd been involved in wars before.

Grendelak grunted his assent. "He wants to pull us in, wants to fight within the city if possible, for he controls it completely. We must not

completely enter the city—they'll block the gates and if we need to retreat, we won't be able to," he finally replied.

Felander looked over his shoulder at Troma and jerked a thumb in his direction. "Trouble is that the closer we get to Corrigan without any fighting the angrier Troma gets. He's spoiling for a fight, he wants vengeance and he's not getting it. He might rush the city if we aren't careful and that will only get a whole lot of men killed, especially if they've got priests and archers on the walls."

Grendelak looked thoughtful, his mind recalling the walls of Corrigan. "We can scale the walls, but we've no siege engines and very few archers ourselves."

They rode in silence for a while before Grendelak suddenly snapped his fingers. "Flank them."

Felander looked confused at his words. "Flank them? They're in a walled city!"

Grendelak nodded. "Send half the men around to the east gate and half to the west gate. Make Remelus split his forces across the city. I remember listening to Kieran talk about an assault on a city in Kantor-Doorne somewhere . . . they flanked the gates, made it difficult for the commanders inside because they were used to dealing with only one army at a time. Give them two and they have problems coordinating. It also means we have men outside if we do break through—just in case they try to seal us in. Give the order that the second group is not to enter the city unless they hear the hornsman call the charge."

Felander looked thoughtful for a moment. "That might work, First Brother. That just might work."

"It better work, Felander," Grendelak said seriously, "or we're going to lose most of our men before we ever get near Remelus, let alone set foot in Corrigan."

The men discussed the plan with Troma as they camped that night. Troma nodded at the suggestion and told Grendelak to issue the orders as he saw fit. Felander and Grendelak exchanged a worried look, but Grendelak moved off to explain the plan of attack to the sub-commanders before Troma changed his mind.

By the time he returned, Troma and Felander had decided to send out scouts, as they were only a few days from Corrigan and the fact that they'd met no resistance bothered Troma. Grendelak grinned wryly, for while his father was obviously angry and driving the men with a need for revenge, he still hadn't lost his ability to see clearly.

"Send scouts to the four winds, Troma, just in case they decide to come up behind us or flank us on the road," Grendelak suggested in between bites of the meat they'd roasted on the fire to eat while they

discussed their plans. "They've done that before, I'd hate to be caught between Tasnians and the city gates."

Troma nodded appreciatively at the suggestion. "Good idea, let's not let the bastards catch us at the jakes, I'd hate to have to have to ride the rest of the way to Corrigan with a bolt wound in my arse!"

The men laughed at the image that evoked; a genuine laugh and not the light chuckles offered a commander for the sake of being polite.

When Grendelak considered their plans later he would kick himself for not worrying more about assassins and worrying too much about attacks from patrols. Considering his history, he should have known they'd try such a thing, especially since he'd done the same at least once before to key commanders of an invading army.

They'd set up camp the next night, only two days march from Corrigan. The scouts were sent out further after they'd returned and reported nothing was amiss. Troma was convinced an army lay in wait for them somewhere outside the city and he was damned if he was going to be caught between them.

It was after mid night when Grendelak crawled into his tent and laid down to catch a few hours of sleep, his mind still turning their plans over and over in his mind. He rolled over, his breath steaming slightly in the chill damp air of early morning. He reflexively pulled his woolen blanket up under his chin and lay still, exhaling slowly and trying to calm his mind. Finally his mind cleared and he began to drift off to sleep.

His mind registered the soft ripping sound near his head but it wasn't quite enough to wake him. The warm, souging breath of the assassin on his cheek, however, was more than enough to jar his mind completely and force his entire being to attention. He groaned purposefully and repositioned himself so that his hand slipped under the rolled up blanket he used as a pillow, then slowed his breathing again and waited.

He nearly smiled when he heard his would be assailant breathe again softly. *So*, he thought to himself, pleased with the obvious mistake. *You aren't as good as you think you are if you can't recognize that I'm as tense as a maiden on her wedding night under this blanket.*

He waited patiently, for patience was something he had learned long ago was necessary to his very survival and success, and was rewarded when he heard the soft shuffle of leather boots on the dirt ground beneath him. Grendelak inhaled slowly, taking note of the smell of oiled leather and trying to gauge where his attacker was from the scent. He'd only get one chance to stop the man, and if he failed . . . Grendelak pushed the thought from his mind. *At least they came after me, and not . . .* He forced the thought from his mind. If there was one, there might be more and he was suddenly

frightened for Troma and Manx. *Concentrate!* his mind screamed. *Or you're a dead man.*

He waited until he was certain his attacker was bending over him, and was about to make his move when he felt the cold edge of a dagger bite into his neck. He was about to scream and move when he realized the dagger was not slicing through his neck, his assailant was just holding it there. His eyes popped open and his assailant leered at him. "Tahure says a dead Assassin cannot do anything, much less Turn," he hissed.

Grendelak knew the man's arm had tensed and was ready to rip the dagger across his throat when he felt the slight pressure from the weapon on his neck. In one smooth motion he pulled his own weapon from under the blanket and shoved it upward where he guessed the man's gullet would be. He pushed hard as he felt the resistance of leather and was pleased by the familiar feeling of soft flesh splitting apart. He felt the tearing of the flesh on his neck and tried not to tense further as he jammed his own dagger further into his opponent and felt the warm rush of blood flow over his hand as a ripped a hole in the man's gut.

The dagger at his neck stopped moving and Grendelak reached up with his other hand and grunted with effort as he pushed the would be assassin to the side before he rolled in the other direction, leaping to a crouch with his hands held defensively before him.

He looked around frantically, and saw his assailant vainly attempting to crawl across the tent to the opening he'd sliced in the coarse fabric. "Oh no, you don't," Grendelak snarled as he reached down with one hand and grabbed an ankle and then began dragging the man out of the tent. Grendelak reached up and pushed aside the flap of the tent, oblivious to the smearing of blood he left on it. As he stepped outside, Grendelak bellowed, "Guard!"

At his cry he saw torches flare across the camp and saw lights moving hurriedly, weaving in and out around the tents toward him. Grendelak dragged the man toward the central fire, its still glowing embers giving off just enough light for Grendelak to see that his hand was covered in blood.

He ignored the slight flow of blood making its way down his neck and across his bare chest. As soon as a guard appeared he dropped his attacker's ankle, ignoring the man's soft groans of pain, and barked, "Watch him!"

The guard looked in surprise from him to the man on the ground, but had no time to question Grendelak because he'd already ran off in the direction of Manx's tent. "Manx!" he called out frantically as neared her tent. "Troma!" his cry became more insistent when neither replied. He ripped aside her tent flap and called out once last time, "Manx, answer me!"

"Grendelak?" he heard her sleepy voice reply. "What's going on?"

Grendelak turned at the sound of footsteps coming up behind him and yelled at the guard who came trotting up to him. "Troma! Make sure the Duke is well." He spun his head back around and a feeling of dizziness made him blink rapidly as he tried to clear his head. The sudden buzzing in his ears forced him to think and in a flash of insight he realized there might have been something unpleasant on the tip of that dagger. He stumbled back away from Manx's tent, suddenly aware of the ragged wound in his throat. His hand reached up to staunch the slow flow of blood even as Manx appeared in the door of the tent, her blanket wrapped around her against the chill morning air.

"Grendelak!" she cried as she straightened and saw his blood covered figure staggering away from her tent. She watched helplessly as he tried to make his way back toward the fire. She ran to catch up to him, losing her hold on her woolen blanket and letting it fall to the ground as she reached for him when he went down on one knee, still trying to crawl toward the central fire pit.

Felander suddenly appeared at his elbow, exchanging a frightened glance with Manx before he reached down and took a hold of his friend and helped him to his feet. Between them they managed to maneuver him to the fire, where they sat him down quickly. Felander began barking orders at guards—one to stoke the fire, another to gather water and yet another to find a priest—even as Troma came running into the small clearing around the fire pit.

Grendelak gestured futilely toward his attacker, trying to form words that wouldn't come. He desperately needed to see the dagger, but for some reason couldn't make his mouth work. Manx watched his mouth moving and followed his gaze to the near dead man lying near the fire.

"What the hell does he want?" Felander asked helplessly as Manx got to her feet and began to run toward the man.

"I know what he needs," she threw over her shoulder as she crouched beside the dying attacker and rummaged through his clothes. "Damn it all, it's not here!"

She stood and ran to Grendelak's tent, and sighed with relief when she saw the bloody dagger lying on top of his rumpled blanket. She picked it up carefully and ran back toward the fire. She knelt next to Grendelak and showed him the dagger. "Is it, Grendelak? Is it?!" she asked urgently. She watched as his head lolled around and he tried to focus on the dagger.

Concentrate, or you're a dead man! His mind screamed for the second time that night. He managed to focus briefly on the tip of the dagger, but looked away in disgust as the end was too covered in blood for him to tell whether it had been poisoned or not. By this time he knew the truth, the dagger would have only confirmed what he already felt coursing through

his veins. "Pouch," he managed to say after a few hectic moments of trying to speak. "Pouch!" he slurred out more insistently.

Troma stood helplessly as he watched his remaining son lie bleeding and obviously dying on the ground next to the fire. Guards were running up with water and another called out that the priest was on his way. The fire had been stoked and now burned bright enough that all could see the gaping wound on Grendelak's neck and the ashen color of his face.

"A belt pouch, on the assassin," Manx called out, not willing to leave Grendelak's side a second time. She pointed angrily at the man on the ground. "Someone grab his pouches and bring them here, *now!*" she ordered.

Troma hurried to kneel next to Manx, a worried look on his face. He put a reassuring hand on Grendelak's shoulder and then looked in Manx's direction. "Will he live?"

Manx looked at Troma and noticed Felander staring at her expectantly. "Not if that priest doesn't hurry up!"

"Here's the pouches, ma'am!" a guard tentatively held out two pouches he'd taken from the now dead assassin. Manx gestured with her head in Felander's direction, who took the pouches and opened one quickly.

"What am I looking for Manx?"

"Pouch," Grendelak managed to slur around his tongue. He was fairly certain he knew what it was now that his tongue felt as though it was three sizes too big for his mouth. He also knew that knowing didn't help one whit. He had an antidote, but he couldn't tell them because he could hardly speak and the priest seemed to be taking his sweet time arriving.

"Look for a vial of brown or almost black oil," Manx directed Felander quickly. "Be careful!" she warned as he reached a hand in, "some things in there might kill you just by coming in contact with your bare hand!"

Troma stared at Manx with more than a little apprehension. "How do you—" he shook his head at the sharp look she gave him. "Never mind, just fix the boy, do you hear me?"

"I'm trying, Troma, believe me, I am trying!" Manx snapped. "Where is that damned priest?" she called out in anger.

She felt Grendelak's hand roughly grab her shoulder and sensed blood dripping down her arm. She ignored the sensation and turned her attention back to Grendelak. "Grendelak, don't you give up yet . . . the priest is on his way," she ordered as she saw his eyes start to roll up into his head.

"Troma, talk to him!" she said as she looked up at Felander. "Did you find it?"

Felander started to shake his head but stopped as he hooted for joy. He pulled a small vial out of one of the pouches and handed it to Manx.

She scrutinized it closely before she lifted it carefully to her nose. She sniffed almost delicately at the cork in the vial, and blanched at the smell.

She turned a horrified expression toward Grendelak. "Bloodrot."

Grendelak tried to nod his head in agreement, but as he expected, he did not have the strength to lift his head. The poison would continue to sap his strength until his body could do nothing more than try to keep his own heart beating, and then even that would become too much for it to handle. He knew what the antidote was, but he couldn't form the words now. He stared at Manx, wishing he could say something, tell her he was sorry before he died in such an ignoble manner, but he knew he was running out of time. He might have laughed at the irony if his mind was clearer. He could only hope the priest arrived in time.

Manx suddenly stared off into the distance, her lips moving but saying nothing.

Felander was confused. Grendelak lay at her feet dying, and she was staring off into space muttering. He was about to point out to Manx that Grendelak needed her attention when she spoke rapidly to him. "Felander, find me some Entriste, quickly!"

Felander looked at her as if she'd just ask for a glass of Amorician Red wine in the middle of the desert. "What?"

"Small, green ivy. Lies close to the earth. Quickly!" she yelled as he stood and took a torch from the nearby guard before Felander dove into the underbrush near their tents in search of what Manx wanted.

Grendelak tried to look grateful at her words, but instead his eyes rolled up into his head and his eyelids fell closed. No matter how hard he tried he couldn't open them back up. He could hear Troma and Manx coaxing him but no matter how hard he wanted to obey he just didn't have the strength. He heard the sound of footsteps and the rustling of robes nearby, and tried to determine whether the priest had arrived or a guard or Felander returned. Time slowed to a crawl as he began to find it difficult to breathe and began concentrating on inhaling and exhaling as slowly as he could.

A blue-and white-robed man walked up casually, and stood looking down at Grendelak. "Don't just stand there, Dirgian, save him!" Manx said hotly, noticing that Grendelak's chest now rose and fell in an erratic pattern.

The priest looked mildly at him. "It would help if I knew what was wrong with him, other than the gaping hole in his throat. There is not enough blood there for it to be killing him."

"Poison. Bloodrot. You've got about two minutes before he can't breathe and another minute after that before he gives up completely. So whatever you're going to do, do it quickly!" Manx said crisply.

The blue and white robed priest ignored Manx's order and looked toward Troma. "My Lord Duke Shorehold? It is your wish that I should save this man?"

Troma's expression hardened. "Yes it is my wish that you should save my *son*, now get to it!"

The man half bowed, eliciting an exasperated sigh from Manx.

The priest held out his holy symbol—a silver wrought disk with the image of a dented shield on its front—and held it in both hands over Grendelak's now inert form. He began to chant in resounding tones, his voice climbing up and down as he called upon Dirge to lend his aid in restoring the health of the Duke's son.

Felander came bounding out of the underbrush with a clump of small green ivy in his hand, a triumphant look on his face. He stopped abruptly when he saw the priest chanting over Grendelak and his face fell. He looked to Manx, who gestured with her head for him to approach.

Felander knelt next to Troma, who now held Grendelak's head in his lap. He reached out and handed the ivy to Manx, who shook her head as she examined it quickly with a practiced eye and set it down next to her knee. She reached out and took Grendelak's hand and began to pray silently to her own god, begging him in the name of the Tale to do what Dirge might not, given Grendelak's colorful past.

She let out the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding when a blue aura became visible around the priest. She heard the audible gasps of several of the guards and the appreciative grunt of Felander as the aura seemed to stretch and grow until it encompassed both the priest and Grendelak, and then melted away from the priest until only Grendelak was bathed in that deific blue light.

She watched, still praying, until she saw Grendelak heave in response, his lungs sucking in as much air as possible before letting it out and taking several more great gulps of air before his breathing eased into something more normal. The light slowly subsided as they sat there for quite some time watching Grendelak breathe.

Troma looked up gratefully at the priest and lowered his head reverently in the other man's direction. The priest bowed respectfully in response before he turned and sought out his tent once more.

After what seemed like hours Grendelak finally opened his eyes and found himself looking into Troma's relieved face.

"Sir?" he questioned hoarsely.

Troma patted Grendelak on the shoulder. "Son, don't you ever scare us like that again, do you hear me?" he intoned in the manner of a father chastising a young boy for doing something ridiculously dangerous.

"I don't plan on it, Sir," Grendelak replied solemnly.

They helped Grendelak to a seated position, and rearranged themselves nearby in more comfortable positions. Grendelak gratefully took the mug of cider someone pushed into his hands and hoped it might warm his insides as well as the fire was warming the rest of his nearly naked body.

Manx reached down and picked up the sprig of leaves Felander had gathered. Felander jerked his head at them and asked, “Those wouldn’t have helped?”

Manx laughed. “Only if he had a stomach ache,” she gestured with the leaves. “This is Ironroot Ivy, good for hangovers and queasy gullets.”

Felander reached out for them. “Well then, I may try that because right now my gut is as queasy as it’s ever been!” he jested.

Grendelak smiled wanly, trying to laugh but not finding much humorous about almost being assassinated in his own tent. He saw the body of the assassin and narrowed his eyes as he looked at it. “Is he dead?”

Felander glanced over at the body. “Oh yes, quite. You apparently ripped quite a length of his guts out before you staggered around the camp yelling for Manx and scaring us to death.”

Grendelak smiled, but when he spoke his voice was serious. “Double the guard, Felander. Now.”

When Felander walked off double the guard, Grendelak looked meaningfully at the guards, who took one look at the expression on his face and backed out of ear shot. When he was certain they could not hear him he turned to Manx. “Tahure sent him.” he said quietly.

Troma leaned forward. “The Chosen priest, Manx?”

Manx nodded her head angrily. “That one needs taking care of, and soon, I think.”

“Yes, he does,” Grendelak said, his eyes glittering dangerously in the firelight.

Manx shivered, then realized she was sitting around the fire in nothing more than a dressing gown, her discarded blanket lying somewhere back near her tent. She stood and began to pick her way carefully back to her tent, but stopped when she heard Grendelak call out her name.

“Fennel would have worked as well as Entriste . . .”

“We didn’t have a week to wait, Grendelak,” she replied seriously, knowing that any antidote made from Fennel required at least a week of preparation.

“When I said pouch I meant *my* pouch, Manx.”

Manx started in surprise. “Do you always keep prepared Fennel in your belpouch?”

“Doesn’t everyone?” Grendelak threw out teasingly, chuckling at the thought, as both knew that generally speaking only assassins carried—or needed—such things.

“No, Grendelak, but that you would still carry such things tells me you will Turn after all,” she whispered victoriously to herself as she sought out her blanket and then her own tent, stopping only to tuck the small vial of Bloodrot into her own pouch, then sleeping peacefully for the first time in weeks.

After she was safely in her tent, Grendelak turned to Troma. “Sir, ward yourself and Manx more carefully until we reach Corrigan. I don’t think this is the last we will see of such attempts.”

“You’re certain about that, First Brother?”

Grendelak nodded. “If Manx is right, they’ll try for me again—and probably you as well.”

Troma raised an eyebrow. “Is that so?”

“Yes, so she says.”

“You believe her?” the older man asked as he leaned toward the fire and raised his palms to try and take the chill from his fingers. He directed his attention to the fire and only glanced sideways at Grendelak as he mentioned, “It seemed a week or more ago you two were fighting because of such things.”

Grendelak shrugged as he stared at the fire. “She believes it, and maybe she’s right. I still think we make our own fate, but perhaps it’s not a bad idea to know what the gods might *think* is our fates. Might help us avoid some bad spots in the future.”

Troma grinned. “So what I’m hearing is that we’ll need to be paying someone’s bride fee if we ever fix this mess we’re in?”

Grendelak’s head swiveled around, a look of horror on his face. “I—I didn’t, that is, it’s not that I don’t,” he swallowed nervously, “I mean—”

Troma threw his head back and laughed heartily, loud enough that the guards that earlier moved out of earshot turned their heads at the sound. “I’m just teasing, son. Though the thought of a grand child or two does sound appealing at my age . . .” he trailed off thoughtfully, but then grew serious. “Truly, you ought to consider such things. Eventually you’ll need to settle down and I can think of no better match for you than Manx. You are to be my heir just as soon as possible, and when this is done, I hope to retire.”

Grendelak’s brow furrowed as he thought on Troma’s words. *Settle down?* He wasn’t that old yet. Still, the older man’s words led him to wonder what he would do once this was over. Could he go back to taking contracts? Would Troma really make his only living heir a bastard son? Did the man really have a choice? He tried to envision Manx and children and . . . To his surprise, the image actually appealed to him. He smiled involuntarily at the thought, but quickly wiped the smile from his face when he realized Troma was grinning broadly.

The older man waggled a finger in his direction. "Such thoughts are what keep men alive in dire straits, my boy. The thought of hearth and home and love. Remember that, my boy, no matter what the situation, the image of the woman who loves you enough to bear your children can keep you alive," Troma told him wistfully.

"Even if she isn't your wife?" Grendelak asked bitingly.

Troma's expression sharpened at the bitterness in Grendelak's voice. "Yes, Grendelak. Even if she isn't your wife." He turned and looked back into the fire. "Sometimes, even more so when she isn't your wife," Troma's voice held a longing there that Grendelak wanted to know more about, but the pained look on Troma's face held his tongue. There was no question in Grendelak's mind that Troma had cared for his mother, despite his later marriage to another woman.

"Is my mother . . ." Grendelak broached the subject anyway, suddenly needing to know whether or not his mother lived.

Troma shook his head before it hung down as if he were ashamed to tell the story. "She went riding one morning not long after you were born, after the serving wench took you to Corrigan. She was angry. Angry at me, angry at her parents, angry at the world . . ." he paused as his voice cracked at the memory. "She liked to race, feisty she was, and she liked to jump fences. It was impressive to watch, usually. I went after her, to try to talk to her and she led me on quite the chase." He stopped and smiled at the memory. "Until she missed the fence because she looked back to see how far behind her I was," the smile fell from his face and was replaced with an expression of deeply held guilt. "Her neck broke when the horse stumbled on the top rail of the fence and she was thrown into it," he finished quickly, wiping angrily at his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Sir," Grendelak began.

"Sorry? Sorry for what, son?" Troma exclaimed. "I'm the one that ought to be apologizing to you. I was young and foolish. I should have taken you in like the others took in their bastards, or married your mother before you were born, but I was too prideful in my youth. I should have married Drina in the first place, and to hell with what Remelus' father thought!"

"Remelus' father?" Grendelak was confused.

"Surely you know that nobles can only marry with the consent of the King. Remelus, the current King Remelus' father, refused my request to marry Drina. Never said why, just said no," Troma replied bitterly.

Grendelak glanced over his shoulder into the darkness in the direction of Manx's tent and then looked back at Troma. "I'll bet that there's been Tasnian influence in Corrigan a lot longer than you think there has and that perhaps Remelus' father had someone whispering in his ear about you and Lady Drina . . ."

Troma looked at Grendelak oddly. "I suppose this has something to do with things Manx has told you, doesn't it?"

Grendelak nodded uncomfortably, suddenly aware that there were things Manx told him that she told no one else. For some reason that made him feel better.

"Nothing specific, but yes sir. Think about it logically. They want me dead now because they weren't able to keep me out of your life, but it sounds like they certainly tried."

Troma nodded slowly, then more emphatically as he considered Grendelak's words. "I think, son, you may have a point. By the gods, you may be right."

They sat in silence for a time before Troma finally spoke again.

"Now the question I must have an answer to is, why?"

Grendelak didn't answer, for he was fairly certain he knew why and he didn't like the answer one bit. Especially when the only reasonable answer forced him to admit that Manx was right.

Chapter 17

Troma Shorehold's army continued its slow but steady march toward the city of Corrigan. A few hours out of the city they came upon the Wayside and Troma wisely decided to call a halt, even though there were several hours of daylight left. Grendelak agreed with the decision, as did Felander, who'd mentioned that it would be best not to arrive at the city gates at dusk and that many of the Brothers might wish to stop at the Wayside and see how the rest of the Brotherhood fared.

Grendelak was fairly certain how the rest of the Brotherhood fared. *Not well.* One look at the Wayside and he could tell it was going badly. No smoke rose from the main hall, no shouts or sounds of blade clashing with blade could be heard at all. He glanced over his shoulder to see the Brothers that rode with Troma clustering together, their fingers pointing at the Wayside and angry hushed tones coming from the group. He wheeled his Doornian black around and trotted to near his Brothers, who fell silent at his approach.

He looked to the Wayside, then back to his men. "I do not think we will find a warm welcome here, Brothers, if we find any welcome at all," he called out.

He saw many of the men nod their heads vigorously while others in the back of the group craned their head to try and see what would bring forth such words from the First Brother. "Form a patrol, one fist of men and a captain, to check things out. If it is quiet, we will stay here this eve. If not . . ." he trailed off, his meaning clear to those around him as he dropped his hand to rest comfortably on the pommel of his sword. "Those who go are not to engage anyone. Return here the moment you find a hostile welcome."

One of the captains took charge immediately and began calling out the names of five men, who eagerly stepped forward and fell into a square. Grendelak watched them march out toward the Wayside somewhat apprehensively. He didn't expect anything untoward, but then he didn't *not* expect anything untoward either.

The men disappeared into the main door of the hall and those left gathered outside held their breath. Grendelak turned at the sound of horse hooves approaching, and was not surprised to see Troma and the other nobles ride up to him, giving him an inquisitive look.

"First Brother," Troma inclined his chin in greeting and waited for Grendelak to nod in response. "How do you find the Wayside?"

Grendelak glanced toward the building and then returned his attention to Troma, noting the expectant expressions on the nobles' faces. His horse suddenly danced nervously and he patted its neck gently, trying to calm it. "Thus far, all seems well, but we won't know until—"

His words were cut off by the sound of an explosion. He ducked involuntarily even as he tightened his grip on his mount's reins, hoping to keep it from bolting. He jerked his head toward the Wayside and his stomach lurched as he saw a huge ball of fire rise up from the Wayside into the sky.

Three men lurched forward from the line of Brothers and stopped reluctantly when Grendelak held out a hand to hold them back. He narrowed his eyes, trying to judge whether the explosions were over or not, then waved the men to continue. The men said nothing, but sprinted forward toward the Wayside and into the doors, shielding their eyes from the flames that were already enveloping the entire building in their search for their Brothers.

"What in the name of Dirge was that?" Duke Elde called out, his voice shaky and full of fear.

Felander had ridden up at the sound of the explosion and arrived in time to hear the question. He turned a hard look in Elde's direction. "That, my Lord Duke, was a signal," he said gravely.

"A signal for whom, Sir Felander," Duchess Venari Selb inquired crisply.

Felander looked at Grendelak, who returned the concern in Felander's eyes with resignation. "The city knows we are here, Duchess, as do the Tasnians and our turn coat Brothers," Felander responded flatly.

"And anyone else who might have been watching for such a signal," Grendelak added bleakly.

"We have been found out, Troma, we cannot go on . . . they will be prepared, waiting for us. It is little more than a trap now!" Selb exclaimed.

Troma turned in his saddle and fixed Selb with an angry look. "We knew that was a possibility when first we marched, Venari. They knew we were coming when they sent their assassin after the First Brother. We will

continue on, and we will depose Remelus,” he said evenly through clenched teeth.

Venari opened her mouth to argue and then closed it at the look on Troma’s face. She looked to Duke Elde for support, but he merely shrugged his shoulders. “No one said it would be easy, Venari,” he answered blandly. “Fighting rarely is. Fighting Tasnians never is.”

They fell silent as the shouts of men reached their ears and all eyes turned toward the Wayside to see two of the men whom had raced forward after the explosion come staggering out of the building with a third hanging between them, his weight supported by the two still able to walk.

Grendelak and Felander, almost as one, dismounted easily and moved quickly toward the men, taking the unconscious man from the other two Brothers and giving them room to breathe. The two bent over in a fit of coughing, their faces covered in soot and their clothes still reeking of smoke.

“The others?” Grendelak called to the two coughing men without taking his attention from the captain they’d retrieved from the building.

The men shook their heads in unison. “We couldn’t find enough pieces of them to put together, First Brother,” one of them said angrily.

Felander raised an eyebrow at the words. “It was both a trap *and* a signal, urchin,” he said quietly so that only Grendelak would hear him.

Grendelak nodded once to indicate he’d heard his old friend. “They underestimate us, thinking we would blindly walk into the Wayside, that is something we can use against them,” he returned under his breath.

Felander smiled grimly before he raised his voice and called for the priest. Grendelak patted Felander on the back and walked briskly back to his mount, grabbing its reins and looking toward the other side of the road. He pointed to a clearing he could see not far from the edge of the trees, some hundred feet or so off the road. “The clearing, I do not think it wise to stay any closer to the Wayside than that.”

Troma glanced in the direction Grendelak indicated and then nodded curtly. “I agree. The clearing. Give the order, First Brother, and put the guard on notice,” the older man ordered before he gathered the other nobles and began to trot off in the direction of the clearing.

Two hours later fires flared around the clearing and the sound of men talking quietly throughout the camp flowed over the nobles heads where they sat near the central camp fire. Manx sat near Troma, her head nodding periodically in response to the words flowing around her, but her attention was focused on Grendelak, who stood at the edge of the clearing with his back to the fire.

Manx leaned over to whisper to Felander, who sat next to her drinking a mug of hot cider, holding his hands around the outside, trying to glean what warmth he could from it. “Is he alright?”

Felander shrugged noncommittally. "I think so, but the explosion at the Wayside eats at him, the death of the Brothers eats at him," Felander chuckled for a moment. "Everything eats at the urchin, as if he's the only inn in town."

Manx playfully slapped at Felander's arm for his choice of words. "You're terrible. Here we sit on the eve of battle and you're making silly jokes," she tried to make her voice serious but her eyes were laughing at him.

Felander leaned back and looked at her, somewhat astonished at her lack of understanding. "Surely you've seen this attitude before, my dear?" When she shook her head he continued to explain. "We make jokes because then we don't have to face the reality, that tomorrow we may die and we'll never be able to say these things. So we say them before the battle, just in case."

Manx nodded sagely at that. "That makes some amount of sense, Felander."

Felander snorted. "Not really, but it sounds good, doesn't it?"

Manx nodded distractedly as she watched Grendelak's hands clench convulsively. "I must know what thoughts run through his mind . . ." she whispered to herself.

Felander's brows furrowed as he watched her reach down, palms out, and close her eyes. He saw her lips moving, but could not understand the words she muttered under her breath. He watched, suddenly very interested as her eyes opened. She was staring in Grendelak's direction, but her eyes were glassy, like she really wasn't seeing him. He watched with fascination as her eyes went wide for a moment before she blinked in surprise and then fell backward off the log she'd been sitting on, landing on her backside, a string of words that made even his ears turn red streaming from her lips.

He turned and bent down to help her up, and when he straightened he was startled by Grendelak standing over them, hands on his hips and a furious expression on his face.

Manx looked up at him hesitantly.

"Don't ever do that again, skald," Grendelak said in short, clipped words, his jaw clenched and lips barely moving.

Manx bowed her head submissively, but said nothing as Grendelak turned on his heel and found a seat on a log across the fire from them and then turned his attention to Troma.

"What the devil was that about?" Felander asked Manx.

Manx chewed on her lip nervously for a moment. "I tried to read his thoughts," she admitted sheepishly.

"Are you crazy?" Felander exclaimed.

“Shhhh!” Manx’s hands waved in front of his face. “I know, but I had to try,” she replied, then glanced over at Grendelak.

“I thought you couldn’t do that anymore, Skald?” he hissed.

“I can, it’s just harder. Much harder. But believe me, I won’t do it again,” she said earnestly, suddenly shivering.

“Why? What did you hear?” Felander asked, suddenly curious as to what had passed between the two of them.

Manx’s face grew pale and her voice lowered to a whisper. “Tahure. Ever is the Chosen priest on his mind now,” she told Felander, “and what he plans to do to him . . .” Manx swallowed hard, trying to keep her dinner where it belonged against the memory, “The Assassin is quite skilled, apparently.”

Felander nodded, not wanting to consider what Grendelak might be thinking about doing to the priest. He had his own plans in the event he met up with the man first, and while they weren’t as inventive as the ones it sounded like Grendelak had come up, they weren’t very nice either. “What surprised you so? That didn’t happen the last time you listened into someone’s thoughts,” he prodded.

Manx’s expression went blank. “He cut me off,” she said, her tone indicating she hadn’t expected that. “He just . . . knew and he pushed me out,” she said, obviously impressed.

“That isn’t normal?”

“No, it isn’t,” she said. “Normally only someone well trained to recognize such an intrusion can do that, I wouldn’t have thought he’d know or be able to do anything about it.”

“It’s just as well, I think, skald,” Felander told her after a long moment, “I imagine some of his thoughts have been about you and that they aren’t the kind that should be repeated in polite company, if you know what I mean,” he nudged her with his elbow and winked at her, the corners of his mouth quirking up into a smug grin.

Manx gasped and turned several shades of pink and then red before she shook her head. “You are terrible, Felander, really terrible.”

“I know,” he said as he pushed himself to his feet and made an exaggerated bow in her direction. “That is why you love me so.”

Manx watched, smiling, as he walked off into the camp, whistling. The smile fell away from her face as she turned and met Grendelak’s icy glare. She grimaced, not needing magik of any kind to tell her what he was thinking at that moment.

Manx was dreaming, or at least she hoped she was dreaming. She could smell the mold growing on the dank, dungeon walls and shivered as the damp cold air crept into her bones. She looked around and cringed

as her gaze fell on the obsidian altar on the other side of the room. She saw the open doorway to her right and heard sounds in the distance, but saw no one else nearby. She tried to run for the door, but realized she was chained to the wall, unable to move more than a few feet.

She tried to calm herself, closing her eyes and purposefully controlling her breathing, until she heard footsteps and the rattling of chains outside the open doorway. Her eyes flew open and focused on the door as Tahure strode through the doorway and made his way toward her. A second and third man followed, a heavily chained man hanging between them. Tahure waved impatiently at the altar and the two priests dragged the man between them over to it and then laid him across the altar, belly up. As the man's head fell toward Manx she cried out, recognizing him at last.

"Grendelak!" she called as she struggled against the chains that held her fast.

Grendelak began to arouse, his head rolling back and forth. Before he was fully awake, the two priests that had followed Tahure into the room finished securing the chains from his hands and feet to the four corners of the altar. He fought against the chains, but they were so taut he could not move them even the tiniest bit. He turned his head toward Tahure and growled as he saw Manx behind the priest. Tahure began laughing, and kept laughing as he pulled the long, curved ceremonial dagger that all Tasnian priests carried and turned slowly toward the altar.

As suddenly as she had become aware of being in the dungeon Manx realized she was no longer there. The sound of Tahure's laughter echoed in her head. Finally she was able to awaken, and she shook her head to try and clear it. Tahure's laughter lingered for a short moment longer, then disappeared. Manx stood up and tossed a cloak over her shoulders before she left her tent. She slipped nearly silently through the camp until she reached the tree line and then she skirted around the sentries and headed into the woods.

She did not go far, perhaps fifty yards beyond the sentry's line, but far enough that she could believe she was completely alone in the woods. She sank to her knees and buried her face in her hands. She was fairly certain that was not a True dream, but only because of the laughter that had followed her out of the dream and into the waking world. Tahure had sent that dream, she was almost certain. "It is not True," she gritted, pounding a fist into the ground beside her. "It is not True!" she called louder, as if she could force it to be that way if she only said it loud enough. "It is not True!" she screamed, finally giving in to her fears and sobbing as though the world was about to end.

Grendelak had seen her leave and watched her expertly skirt the sentries, simultaneously proud of her and angry at the sentries. Then he'd

alerted a sentry, followed her and waited, watching to see what she was up to. He hadn't expected this. He wasn't sure what he expected, but he knew it was not this. He was still angry at her for trying to invade his thoughts earlier in the evening, but the sight of her tiny frame shaking with sobs on the ground tore at him until he finally came out of the shadows and knelt down beside her.

He was surprised when she turned into his shoulder rather than away, and he absently patted her back as though she were a child in need of comfort. Finally her sobs subsided and she lifted her head to meet his gaze, her eyes, red-rimmed and swollen, still carried the fear she'd felt since she'd awoken from her nightmare. "I am frightened, Grendelak, truly frightened," she managed hoarsely.

He reached up and pushed her hair away from her face, concerned now that something was definitely wrong. "Of what? What drove you out here?" he asked, tensing as he suddenly realized that there could be someone out here.

"A dream," she forced the words out, aware that it sounded childish but hoping he might understand.

Grendelak nodded, laying a hand gently on her shoulder. "You kept saying 'it is not true'," he said slowly, "what did that mean?"

Manx sniffled. "Remember I told you once about True dreams? Sometimes, some people have especially vivid dreams—dreams in which they can smell and taste and hear everything . . ." Grendelak waited while she gulped air for a moment, her frame still shaking slightly, "they are always remembered and some of them, *some* of them, are True dreams. Dreams of foretelling," she managed to finish.

"Are these dreams always true?"

She shook her head. "No, only a small number of them are true. But some people dream True more than others. Especially those of elven heritage," her last words were so quiet Grendelak had to lean down to hear them.

"What did you dream, Manx?" he asked, finding himself suddenly shivering along with her.

"Tahure. An altar . . ." she met his gaze once more and Grendelak was taken aback by the terror in her eyes. "You—" she began to go on but found herself unable to say the words. Tears welled up in her eyes and began streaming down her face.

Grendelak said nothing, simply moved into a crouch and then picked her up in his arms, carrying her back toward the sentry line and into camp. He took her not to her own tent, but his. *Rumors be damned*, he thought angrily to himself, *she can't be alone like this*. He set her down carefully on the rough mat covered with a thick, wool blanket he'd planned to sleep

on and then sat beside her, holding her hand and stroking her back until she fell asleep.

He sat, watching her sleep for a while, his mind finally registering two things. The first was that Manx wasn't nearly as in control of everything as she pretended to be and the second was that she truly did love him. He smiled at the latter and, taking a cue from the former, spoke to her sleeping form, "Don't fret, little skald, nothing is going to take me away from you now that I have you," he said confidently before he lay down beside her and closed his eyes, trying to get a few hours of sleep before he'd have to awaken and prepare for the assault on Corrigan.

He rose shortly before dawn and made his way to the central fire, yawning. Felander nodded at him and handed him a mug of hot cider, which the younger man gratefully took.

Felander eyed the morning sky critically. "Smells like rain, First Brother," he said with a note of pleasure.

Grendelak nodded, greeting Duke Troma as he approached the two men. "Yes, Felander, I think rain is right on target."

Troma looked pleased by the news as well, inhaling deeply and then exhaling, as though the smell of rain energized him.

Grendelak was confused when Felander suddenly cocked an eyebrow at him, his eyes darting from Grendelak's tent back his friend. Troma caught the look that passed between the two and glanced over his shoulder in time to see Manx emerging from Grendelak's tent, padding quietly back to her own tent. He turned a quizzical expression at Grendelak, folding his arms across his chest and tapping his foot impatiently as he waited for an explanation.

Grendelak shrugged, not wanting to discuss what had occurred last night. Troma reached over and patted his son on the shoulder. "I wouldn't have suggested such a thing before a fight, but to each man his own. Myself, I prefer a nice quiet walk the night before a siege."

Felander choked off his laugh when Grendelak gave him a withering look. "Sorry, First Brother," he apologized, "Just remembering something Manx and I were talking about last night."

"Alright," Troma clapped his hands together, "let's make our final plans and move out. Corrigan isn't going anywhere, but we most certainly are," his low voice rumbled with sudden seriousness.

All traces of humor left both the FreeSwords at his words. They walked to the pavilion they'd set up as a meeting place, and Grendelak moved to the table set in the middle and rummaged around for a map. Finding the map he sought, he picked it up and set it down, then began to reiterate their plan, pointing at one spot and then another to accentuate specific pieces of the plan.

One third of the army, led by Felander, was to begin marching at dawn, out and around the city to the east gate. Early in the afternoon the rest of the army, led by Troma and Grendelak, would begin marching toward the city's west gate. At the change of guard they hoped still occurred to mark the beginning of the evening, Felander's leg of the army would attack. If their timing was accurate, half a glass later Troma would arrive at the west gate and, if they were lucky, would be able to take the gate and march their men to the Brotherhood's quarter within the city. If they made it into the quarter the hornsman would sound the call and Felander's army would break off their attack and retreat back to the Wayside and joining Troma's army that night.

"Felandar is ready to leave," Manx told Grendelak, her face showing only a bit of the strain of last night. Grendelak grunted and strode off, Manx trailing behind him.

Felandar threw a cocky grin as he saw Grendelak approach, and then gave Manx one of his exaggerated bows. "My lady," he drawled formally.

Manx smiled and then nearly threw herself into his arms. "Be well, Felander, and good luck," she said earnestly.

"Keep the urchin safe, skald," Felander whispered in her ear before he let her go.

Grendelak nodded at Felander, then reached out and laid his right hand on Felander's shoulder. "Live free or die, Brother."

Felandar laid his right hand on Grendelak's shoulder. "Better to die than fail, Brother," he repeatedly steadily.

They locked gazes for a moment before Felander turned and purposefully strode toward his horse, mounting it easily, not looking back even once as he rode toward the head of the army and then began to lead them down the road to Corrigan.

Manx and Grendelak watched the army march out for almost half a glass before they turned wordlessly and walked back to the main encampment that they might prepare to leave themselves.

By mid day Troma was pacing and snarling like a caged wolf hound. Grendelak watched as Manx approached him and laid a hand on his arm to get his attention. The older man spun around to face her and Grendelak could see even at a distance that his father's face held nothing but impatience. Grendelak was about to turn around when he heard Troma's voice rise. His eyes widened as he saw Manx shrink back from the Duke as he slapped his hand hard against his thigh and then pointed in the direction of Corrigan. He saw Manx hold out her hands and bow stiffly. Grendelak wondered what was going on when she did not straighten nor move away. Finally he saw Troma throw up his hands in frustration and gestured for her to stand. Once she'd straightened he saw Troma shake

his head and then embrace her, which she returned in what appeared to be a fierce manner. Troma held her for a few moments, then leaned down and kissed her on the cheek before he disentangled himself from her embrace and walked away.

As she turned to leave Grendelak quickly gestured for her to join him. He was pleased when she agreed, and he spent a moment just enjoying the sway of her hips as she neared him. He was actually smiling by the time she arrived, which caused Manx to tilt her head to the side and stare at him as though she was seeing him for the first time.

“What makes you smile, today of all days, Grendelak Mishtar?” she asked quizzically.

“You,” he said lightly. “Now what was that with Troma all about?”

Manx glanced over her shoulder in the direction Troma had walked off in and then made a face. “I tried to convince him to stay behind, that he didn’t need to lead the army today,” she said moodily.

Grendelak’s expression changed from curiosity to astonishment. *Why would she do that? It might break her precious Tale . . .* “Why would you—”

She cut him off. “Because knowing what is likely to happen and liking it are two different things, Grendelak,” she replied sharply. “If the Tale is true then there was no way I was going to stop him, but I had to *try*.”

Grendelak leaned over and laid a hand on her cheek, noting the sudden desperation in her voice. “It’s not your fault, you know.”

She laughed hollowly. “You don’t know that either.”

He straightened and put his hands on his hips. “How in the name of Healfherd could it be your fault?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know, but today, for some reason, I feel that if I hadn’t come along in the first place *none* of this would have happened.”

Now it was Grendelak’s turn to laugh. “You weren’t the one who forced the king’s hand, *we* did that. You weren’t the one who killed Haddon, the King did that. And you weren’t the one who sent Tahure after me,” his expression hardened.

“But if I’d told Troma about Haddon he’d have—”

“Sent another knight,” Grendelak finished the sentence for her. “And he’d be dead now too. Didn’t you tell me that any single name in the Tale could be more than one person? Would it have made a difference if it hadn’t been Haddon?”

“I don’t know,” she answered hesitantly, chewing on her bottom lip as she thought about it.

Grendelak shook his head, then grasped her shoulders with his hands and held her firmly. “It wouldn’t. This was going to happen eventually one way or another. The only difference this way is that Troma is not only angry, he’s hurt, too.”

Manx seized on his faith, finding it ironic that for the first time since they'd met *he* was the one with the unerring belief that things were as they should be. "If you say so," she agreed grudgingly, wondering why she was suddenly losing heart in seeing this piece of the Tale through.

"Maybe because you've finally figured out that they aren't just pieces in a puzzle", she heard a voice whisper in her head, *"Perhaps because the first time you said you loved Grendelak you didn't really mean it but now, now you do, and that scares you because there are pieces of this Tale that aren't written yet . . ."*

"If you say so, Grendelak," she said again, leaning into him and holding on to him for what could be the last time. It occurred to her that perhaps that voice had been right. Instead of taking comfort from it, however, she found it only made things that much harder.

They marched out less than an hour later, Troma nearly frothing at the mouth as they left. Manx rode near Troma and Grendelak, her mailed shirt making almost no noise beneath her leather jerkin. She let her hand fall to the hilt of her longsword and smiled at how much better it made her feel to have it hanging at her side again. She felt more in control than she had been in some time, which was strange because she wasn't the type to go looking for a fight, though she wasn't afraid to fight if she had to.

As she'd done before on the march to meet the King's army, she sang. But this time she rode up and down the ranks as she led the men in more ribald marching tunes, knowing they needed to keep their spirits up. She could see in many of their faces the memory of Tahure and his altar and she tried to move their minds from him to Troma.

When the men were singing on their own she urged her mount forward to join Grendelak and Troma once more. She could hear Troma whistling along and saw Grendelak's lips moving as he silently sang along. She rode up next to him, leaning over and poking him in the ribs with her elbow before darting away on her horse.

Grendelak swung his horse around to catch her, a broad grin on his face. As they crested the last hill before the city, the grin was replaced by horror. He drew back on the reins of his mount and held up a hand to bring the army behind him to a halt. He and Troma moved forward slowly and stared, unbelievably, at the sight below them.

Felander's army hadn't made it past the west gate. That any of the men still lived and fought before the closed gates of the city of Corrigan astounded Grendelak and, if his expression was any indication, Troma as well.

"We must relieve them, sir!" Grendelak called out. "They've been fighting for hours most likely and if we don't . . ."

Troma nodded. "Do it. Now. And if you think of a new plan, let me know!"

Grendelak called for the hornsman and a moment later the horn's high pitched tones were calling out over the battlefield. Grendelak moved his horse into position and drew his sword, lifting it above his head and holding it there steadily for what seemed to be forever before he lowered it and then kicked the sides of his mount urgently.

Manx followed, drawing her weapon as they rode down the hill, the hooves of Grendelak's big Doornian war horse kicking up dust that made the task all the more difficult. She persevered, ignoring the stinging in her eyes, determined to stay near him just in case.

As they neared the field she tried to find Felander. Between the dust from Grendelak's mount the mass of men moving out toward their flanks and the constant movement of men fighting for their lives near the city gates she couldn't have picked him out if he had been wearing bright red, which she knew he was not. None of the army wore bright red, or any other shade of red, green or white for that matter. They'd all been dressed in browns and blacks and the archers had been given the go ahead to fire away at anything with the colors of the King or Tasnami on them.

Their front lines crashed into the line of green and white on the field and Manx gave up all hope of finding Felander or staying with Grendelak. She turned her attention to fighting off the men who reached up with their broad edged swords and tried to knock her off her horse. She smiled grimly as she swung at one and cut him across the chest, then reversed direction and caught another one in the forearm. Her horse needed almost no rein, he knew what to do and where to go and if he faltered she could indicate with her knees which way he should go. They'd been companions for quite some time and she trusted her mount as well as she trusted any person she knew.

Grendelak felt the same way about his Doornian war horse, though they hadn't been together as long the horse had been well trained for war and seemed almost to revel in it. The big black pawed at enemies with his huge hooves, knocking them down, while Grendelak swung at one and then another, his face a mask of hatred.

After two passes through the field Grendelak rode the short distance back to Troma and turned to face the battle. Grendelak scanned the field for Manx and saw her, her blond hair flying out behind her as she nearly stood in the saddle trying to force her way through a group of men. Grendelak tensed and leaned forward. He felt a restraining hand on his arm and looked back to see Troma shake his head slowly. "Don't do it, son. She'll be fine and if you treat her as though she's not capable . . ." he trailed off ominously.

Grendelak snorted. "I've seen the result of that already, sir." He relaxed just a bit and his eyes kept her in his sight until he saw her break free and

begin to ride around the opposite side of the battle. He exhaled audibly when he saw her barrel around the flank of the battle, but sat forward again as he saw a man in green and white on a horse break away from the main body and begin to give chase. He drew his sword and exchanged a nervous look with Troma, who nudged his horse forward until it was nose to nose with Grendelak's mount.

Manx was a hundred yards away when she saw the lone figure standing behind the two men, but within bowshot of them. She stood in up in her stirrups and began waving frantically with one hand, trying to force their attention to the man behind them.

Grendelak narrowed his eyes and tried to pick out what Manx was yelling. He looked past her and saw the man on the horse lift a crossbow in her direction. Troma slapped him on the arm, "Go!" he yelled, having seen the same thing. Grendelak looked over at him gratefully, then slapped the reins of his horse and screamed, "Now, Sellamet!"

Manx was shaking her head and closing fast as Grendelak came barreling around her, headed for the man behind her. She leaned forward further, trying to urge more speed out of her mount. She saw the figure behind Troma raise a bow and pull back on the string and she was certain he had an arrow nocked by the way he stood. She gauged the distance between herself and the man and knew she could not reach him in time. She forced her mount to the left, hoping to at least get between the arrow and Troma.

Grendelak had just taken the man who'd been chasing Manx off his horse with an expertly placed stroke from his sword and had wheeled around to return when he saw what Manx had been trying to show him. He kicked Sellamet's sides and drove him hard to return, but his stomach roiled as he knew he could not reach them before the man loosed his arrow. Grendelak knew with the same certainty he had known regarding the men he'd killed on Contract that one of them was going to die.

He watched, horrified, as the figure behind Troma let an arrow fly. His mind registered everything as though it was moving slower than it truly was. Manx stood on the back of her horse and launched herself at Troma as the arrow flew toward his back. Troma looked over his shoulder and saw the man just as Manx barreled into him, knocking him from his horse at the same time the arrow struck home.

Grendelak tried to move faster as he saw the two figures fall from the horse and tumble to the ground, their bodies bouncing hard as Manx's momentum propelled them into the hard dirt. Grendelak managed to arrive just a few seconds later and dismounted while Sellamet was still moving, the horse's hooves digging into the dirt as it tried to stop.

He ran to the motionless figures lying on the ground, his heart pounding so hard he thought it might break out of his chest. His hands were shaking as he saw blood splattered over both bodies. He gently rolled Manx off of Troma, frantically checking to see if she was hit anywhere.

“Grendelak,” he heard Troma’s voice, interspersed with coughing, and he turned to look at his father, still cradling Manx in his arms.

“Yes, Troma?” he said, shifting so he could see the older man.

His eyes widened and a shocked expression appeared on his face as he saw the arrow sticking through Troma’s belly. He laid Manx gently on the ground and moved to kneel at Troma’s side, carefully examining the wound. He stopped when he realized it was mortal, and when he raised his eyes to meet Troma’s he knew the older man knew it as well.

Chapter 18

“Manx?” the Duke croaked in a pain filled voice.

Grendelak glanced at her, noting the even rise and fall of her chest. “She’ll be fine, my lord Duke,” he said confidently even as Manx groaned and tried to rise.

Troma tried to nod, but winced at the pain brought on by the movement.

“Don’t move, sir, we’ll get the priest,” Grendelak assured him.

Troma started to shake his head, but stopped with a grimace of pain. “No,” he ordered weakly, “it is too late. Manx?”

Manx knelt beside him, laying a slender hand on his arm. “I am here, Troma,” she said, her voice full of regret.

“Get the nobles, they must hear what I must say, and I must say it quickly,” he told her, his eyes glassy.

Manx bowed her head for a moment and exchanged a worried look with Grendelak before she stood and raced toward her mount. In a moment she was riding hard toward the morass of men, in search of Duchess Dinat and Duke Bredene.

“Son, listen to me,” Troma’s hand reached up and clawed at Grendelak’s arm. “My biggest regret is that I did not marry whom I wished, do not let someone else decide what path you will take in life.”

“I am no noble to worry about this, father,” Grendelak said the last word slowly, trying it out on his lips and finding it easier to say than he thought he would.

Troma smiled weakly, “But you will be, Grendelak, for I have no other heir and you, you are all I have left,” he broke off with a groan as a wave of pain wracked his body. “Bastard or not, you will be Duke,” he finally said firmly.

"I cannot do that. I must avenge your death, Troma," Grendelak stated firmly, "If that means my death, so be it. I took Oath with you and will fulfill it, honor demands it."

The Duke closed his eyes and sighed heavily. "I made you take Oath to keep you near me. I release you."

Grendelak looked astonished. "You—you can't do that!"

Felander's voice behind him startled Grendelak. "Yes, yes he can, First Brother," Felander interrupted, his voice grave.

"Please, do not," Grendelak was as near to begging as he'd ever come in his life. Not even on the streets of Corrigan had he begged, not even when his life had been threatened. But this, this was different. This was his honor, his blood oath. It was a shame to be released! "The dishonor . . ." he looked up at Felander, his face haunted by the thought.

Felander looked away from his friend, not willing to see the look on his face when he responded, "Yes, there is that."

"That's enough of that!" another voice interrupted from behind, clearly belonging to Venari Selb.

She and Couvin Elde pushed past Felander and came to stand next to Troma, their faces angry. Venari knelt, shaking her head. "Troma, you need a priest!" she berated the dying man.

"No, Venari, I do not," he replied wearily. "I need to speak my last to you and Couvin and let the Gate Guarder send me where she will."

Couvin looked over Troma shrewdly and nodded. "He's right, Venari, he hasn't got much time. Let him say his words and then we can decide what to do."

Troma looked thankfully at Duke Bredene. "Thank you, Couvin," he replied as he looked at Grendelak and spoke as steadily as his dying body would allow. "I name you, Grendelak Mishtar of the Freesword Brotherhood, my heir," he paused as he gasped for breath. "I declare in the sight of these noble witnesses that you are of my line, though I would not sully your mother's name by speaking it aloud."

The other two nobles glanced at Grendelak, but showed no sign of surprise. Whether that meant they had known or that they were simply well versed in hiding their emotions Grendelak did not know or care.

"Are you certain, Troma?" Venari looked skeptically at the dying man. "This is your wish?"

Troma tried to nod, his face twisted with pain. "Yes," his voice cracked as he spoke, "and it is my wish you follow him as you have me. To the end."

Both nobles nodded slowly, then stood and bowed with more respect for the dying man than Grendelak had seen them do in the past, even when they'd declared they'd follow Troma as king should they win their fight against Remelus. "As you say, it will be," both said nearly in unison.

Venari stepped back and turned sad eyes toward Manx. "We will take our leave now, that you and the," she paused and let her eyes fall on Grendelak, "Ducal heir might say what needs be said," she said generously.

Manx bowed politely but said nothing. She watched as both nobles walked off and, when they were out of earshot, she fell upon her knees next to Troma and gathered up his hands in her own. "Troma, forgive me," she begged.

Troma slowly turned to look at her, first with confusion in his eyes and then with dawning understanding. He met her anxious eyes steadily. "There is nothing to forgive, Manx. All is as it should be, isn't it?" he said in a strained voice. "Haddon will be avenged, I will be avenged. My beloved Corrigar . . . ?"

Manx swallowed hard and nodded. "It will be freed, Troma. He will do what he must," she said hoarsely.

Troma weakly smiled. "Be well, Manx, and care for him," he ordered, his breathing labored again.

Manx smiled and squeezed the Duke's hands one last time before she rose from her knees and moved away.

Grendelak, still kneeling next to Troma, looked bewildered as he stared at Manx. Things were moving too fast, again, and he wasn't certain he could handle it a second time.

Troma took a long, beleaguered breath and Grendelak's head swung back to his father. "Father?" he asked, using the patronymic again and finding it came easier than it had at first.

Troma looked gratefully at Grendelak. "Son," he whispered as his last breath left his body.

Grendelak knelt there for a moment longer before he nodded his head. He stood and turned on his heel, then began walking back toward the battle. He stopped near Felander and laid a shaking hand on the man's shoulder. "First Brother," Grendelak said flatly, "the battle awaits us."

A grimace flashed across Felander's face as Grendelak began walking again. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Manx began to follow Grendelak, her steps hurried. He reached out and grabbed her elbow to stop her.

"Not now, Manx," Felander told her firmly.

Manx looked up at Felander, her eyes wide with surprise. "What?" she asked impatiently as she shook loose from his grip.

Felander shook his head vehemently, gesturing to Troma's body. "Not. Now," he said slowly, enunciating each word to make sure his point was clear.

"But he needs—"

"He needs to be alone, skald," Felander cut her off rudely. He sighed as he saw the hurt expression on her face. His hands fell to his hips as he looked down on her and tried to moderate his tone a bit so as not to hurt

her feelings. “He has just lost everything and gained something he doesn’t know he wants, he needs some time to sort things out.”

Sudden understanding edged out the hurt on Manx’s face. “He gave the Brotherhood to you,” she whispered, not believing she could be right.

“Dishonored, made a noble, what else could he do?”

“Dishonored?” Manx looked taken aback, “How? I see no dishonor in what took place . . .”

Now it was Felander’s turn to look surprised. His eyes narrowed as he tried to discern whether she was playing at ignorance or truly didn’t understand. He finally decided it was the latter. “He was released from a Contract,” Felander told her gently, “that is a dishonor to the Brotherhood. It is disaster for a FreeSword, it is many, many times a disaster for the First Brother.”

Manx made a face and Felander returned it with a grim expression on his face. “Manx, you obviously don’t understand the Brotherhood,” he began impatiently.

“No, Felander,” she said, planting her hands on her hips. “No, I don’t.” She reached up and planted a finger on his chest. “I haven’t understood since the first time I laid eyes on him and he was doing . . . *things*,” she spat distastefully, “that no man should do, all in the name of your precious honor. Well your honor be damned, Felander, if that’s what it brings.”

“For some of us,” he said, jerking his head in the direction Grendelak had headed earlier, “our honor is all we have. We have no families, no loyalties other than those that bind us to one another. Without our honor we have nothing,” he held his hands wide, imploring her to understand.

Manx narrowed her eyes as she considered his words. “You sound like a Nordalian sometimes, Felander, with all your talk of honor. The only thing you’re missing is their high Cant.”

Felander’s face grew grim. “You aren’t listening, Manx. Honor is all that’s mattered to Grendelak for most of his life. He just lost some of that. The Brotherhood was his family. He just lost that. He’s just lost everything he ever cared about, skald, and that is something that you can’t smooth over with a song or some pretty words.”

Manx’s expression hardened as Felander’s voice rose with his frustration. She stared at him, her green eyes suddenly seeing another side of Felander, a side she hadn’t seen before. When she finally spoke, her voice was cold. “No, Felander, I do understand. But it was necessary. He cannot do what he must do next with his honor intact anyway. Better it be shattered piece by piece than all at once.”

“You’ll kill him, Manx. Maybe not physically, but you’ll kill him yet,” Felander said with an astonished tone, not willing to believe she’d be that cruel.

“No, Felander, *I* won’t. But if he cares more about his honor than what he must do then someone will, and I don’t plan to allow that to happen,” she said angrily, then turned away and went in search of her mount.

Felander stood staring at her as she mounted her horse and rode off toward the battle, his face full of concern for not only Grendelak, but Manx as well.

“If she’s not careful he’ll kill *her*,” he muttered before he set about to deal with Troma’s body before he rejoined his Brothers on the battlefield.

Manx sat watching the fight nervously, noticing that Grendelak’s renewed anger seemed to permeate the entire field and drove the men closer and closer to the city gates. Felander was at his side everywhere he fought and it seemed to her that the two fought as well together as they did alone.

Even she could see that given another hour Grendelak could take the city gate. The white and green guardsmen were pulling back bit by bit and every yard they lost made Troma’s army fight that much harder. She chewed nervously on her lower lip, wondering what would stop them this time.

Perhaps you are wrong this time, she thought caustically, and answered herself with a most unladylike snort. “Not I,” she mumbled to herself, “the Tale. And it is never wrong, merely misinterpreted.”

When she heard the laughter she wished, not for the first time, that the Tale had been wrong. The sound of that voice echoed across the battlefield and crawled beneath her skin like a Doornian bed mite.

“Tahure,” she hissed, recognizing it immediately. She frantically sought out the Chosen Priest of Tasni but could not locate him until his voice boomed out unnaturally loud across the field.

“Assassin!”

The sound of battle died off quickly at the sound, every head raising and looking up at the walls of Corrigan in search of its source. Manx finally caught sight of Tahure, standing in a crenellation on the parapet above the main gatehouse of the city gate. He was pointing at Grendelak and Manx’s stomach lurched at the sight. She kicked her mount and raced toward Grendelak’s position, focusing on him and Felander and ignoring the priest.

Grendelak saw Tahure’s attention turn as the priest changed position and began to move his hands around in strange patterns. Grendelak glanced over his shoulder. As he saw Manx riding hard toward him he realized what had drawn the priest’s attention.

“Manx!” he shouted, not knowing if she could even hear him. When she did not slow he looked around frantically for his mount. “My horse,

damn it, Felander!" he spouted nearly incoherently in his fear for Manx. "My horse!"

Felander looked around helplessly, for Grendelak hadn't been mounted since Troma had died earlier in the day. "It's too late, Grendelak, you'll never reach her in time."

Grendelak looked at Felander as though his friend had just kicked him. He drew back a fist to punch his friend but stopped when he heard Tahure's voice shout a single word. Grendelak turned in time to see Manx's horse suddenly crumple to the ground and watched as the tiny skald was thrown to the ground. He took a step forward but stopped in surprise when she rolled, came to her feet and ended up standing, her sword in her hand.

"You'll have to do better than that, *priest*," he heard her voice as it carried over the field, full of contempt.

"She's as crazy as a Dirgian!" Grendelak yelled incredulously.

Felander only nodded back, his jaw set firmly.

Tahure's hands began moving again but this time when Grendelak looked in Manx's direction he saw that she, too, was moving her hands in odd patterns. "Dirge shield us," he groaned, "move the men, Felander, MOVE THE MEN!"

Felander stood, stunned for a moment, before he bellowed out the order for the army to fall back. They'd just begun moving when a ball of fire appeared just off the city gates and streaked downward across the field. Grendelak cringed as he saw men fall to the ground, writhing and screaming in pain, their bodies on fire. He noticed that Tahure did not seem to care whether the Guardsmen were caught in that fiery death or not. His sight was honed in on Manx.

Manx shouted moments before the ball of fire exploded just a few yards in front of her. She threw up her hands as if to ward it off and Grendelak was surprised to see the flames veer around her, dividing and passing her by as if there was a solid wall around her.

As the flames passed Manx and died out she slowly brought her arms away from her face. "Not quite good enough, Tahure!" she cried triumphantly.

Grendelak watched as the men retreated around him and felt a pull on his arm.

"Grendelak, let's go now . . ." Felander urged.

Grendelak turned and found himself looking at a horse. Felander pushed the reins at Grendelak even as he started to right himself atop his own mount. He pointed toward Manx. "We'll grab her on the way by, but we need to leave *now*. That priest is starting to wave his arms again!"

Grendelak nodded, mounting quickly and heading in Manx's direction.

Manx was only slightly irritated when she saw Grendelak and Felander barreling toward her. She tensed as she saw Grendelak lean off the side of his horse and realized he meant to pick her up as he rode by.

Grendelak grabbed the tiny skald around her waist and threw her into the saddle in front of him, barely pausing as they rushed by the broken body of her mount, heading back to the campsite.

Within a few hours of dusk Troma's army, now Grendelak's, had managed to pull back and were somber and subdued at the news of Troma's death. Couvin and Venari had spoken alone, their heads together, and then come to Grendelak with the decision to light a funeral pyre for the dead man regardless of what military protocol might have to say on the subject. Grendelak had acquiesced without an argument, still stunned by the day's events and not really believing what had transpired.

He'd seen men die before. Had them die at the end of his sword on the battle field, at the end of his dagger as he'd ripped out their throats while they lay in their beds, had his friends die in his arms, but he'd never had *family* die before. His mind whirled at the implications of that word and what it meant, then stopped to wonder if it meant anything to him.

I never had one before, none but the Brotherhood, he mused, so why would the death of a man who called himself my father but never was one bother me so much?

He looked up at the sound of Felander's voice as the new First Brother issued some order to a Brother and heard the man's reply of "Yes, First Brother!" before he ran off to comply. Grendelak winced at the sound and realized that while Troma's death bothered him, the loss of the Brotherhood bothered him a great deal more. His brow furrowed as he looked down at the ground and absently pushed a stone around with his toe. *I now have nothing, nothing but a title I never aspired to nor asked for. He looked up and caught sight of Venari and Couvin speaking quietly with the priest nearby. And these two will follow me blindly because Troma wished it. He shook his head at the thought. At least the Brotherhood ensures a man is worthy first before they follow where he leads, these nobles care only about whose blood flows my veins, not whether I am worthy to follow.*

"Grendelak?" Felander's voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Yes?"

"The Duke and Duchess wish to speak with you."

His tone told Grendelak something was wrong. "About what?" he said, looking at Felander and raising an eyebrow.

Felander returned his arched look with one of his own. "About giving up."

Grendelak's face clouded over and he opened his mouth to say something, but then closed it. He nodded curtly at his friend before walking briskly to the fire where Couvin Elde and Venari Selb awaited him. He

noticed only peripherally that Manx stood to the side, a worried look on her face.

“You wished to speak with me?”

Couvin nodded. “Yes, Duke Shorehold, we do,” he made certain to emphasize Grendelak’s title, making Grendelak more than a bit uncomfortable.

Venari stood, clasping her hands in front of her. “We agreed to follow Duke Shorehold and that hasn’t changed. We agreed to follow him,” she paused at the dark look on Grendelak’s face, “you, that is, as king if we won through. But we did not expect this.”

Grendelak threw up his hands. “Expect what? Death?”

Couvin shook his head. “No, Grendelak, we did not expect the priest. Did you see what he did to our men? To his own men? We cannot and will not fight against that openly.”

“We must, for Troma’s sake,” Grendelak replied, his tone even.

“You have been a FreeSword too long, I think,” Venari chastised him. “If you were but a FreeSword I could understand your view but you are Duke, now, and you must think of more than yourself. These men should not have to face that . . .”

“And if the priest is dead?” Grendelak asked through clenched teeth.

Venari’s expression grew regretful. “Not then, either,” she put up a hand to stop Grendelak as he opened his mouth to speak, “The king will only find another pet priest and we will be in the same situation. As long as the king lives, Grendelak, we will not fight. It is for the good of the people, something you need to start considering if you are to be a Duke worthy of the name ShoreHold.”

Grendelak was seething with anger. He raised a fist and opened his mouth and was again interrupted. This time by a new voice.

“And if the king were dead?” Manx asked in an almost sing song voice.

Silence fell at her words. To suggest such a thing was unheard of but she had just blurted out the words as if they did not mean high treason. Every head turned to stare at her as though she’d grown a second head.

When no one replied she sauntered toward the fire until she was standing between Grendelak and the two nobles. “Isn’t that the end of this war, anyway? If we won the city, what would you do with King Remelus?” she asked lightly.

Grendelak suddenly understood what Manx planned to suggest. He stared, horrified, as he waited for her to blurt it out for all to hear.

“While Remelus lives there will be nothing but heartache for Corrigar,” she warned.

Venari and Couvin exchanged worried glances. When Couvin nodded Venari finally spoke. “If King Remelus and his pet priest were dead we

would of course support the appointment of Duke Shorehold to King as we have agreed to do and take back Corrigan. But we are not suggesting what we think you may have been suggesting,” she added lamely.

“How long will you wait?” Manx queried the two nobles.

At their confused expressions she sighed. “How long would you wait here, with the men, for such a situation to arise,” she clarified, avoiding the use of words like ‘dead’ and ‘king’ in the same sentence.

Couvin shrugged. “A few days could be spared, but it hardly seems worth it unless someone is planning on things they ought not be planning.” His eyes narrowed as he spoke, as if he were trying to peer into Manx’s soul.

“Then wait here a few days and let us see if the Tale is true,” Manx told them calmly. She watched their expressions change at the mention of the Tale and saw them begin nodding to themselves. *It is likely they have no idea what I’m talking about but they know the import of the Tale and if they believe the king is destined to die in it, they will at least wait,* she thought smugly.

Manx avoided looking at Grendelak. She was certain he was ready to burst at the seams and that surely he must have figured out what she was going to suggest he do. But right now, right here, was not the time or the place for such a discussion. That was better left until they could speak in private.

“Yes, of course. The Tale,” Venari said with an air of one who knows a secret. “We will, of course, wait three days, but no more.” Manx watched as Couvin nodded his assent.

Manx bowed low to both of them. “Your wisdom in this is ever an inspiration to us all,” she said politely, as though they had come up with the idea in the first place. Manx straightened and began to wander off, stopping only when she heard Grendelak call her name.

“Yes, my lord Duke?” she answered sweetly.

He gave her a withering look before he replied, “Walk with me.”

She bowed. “Yes, my lord Duke,” she replied before they walked off toward the edge of the clearing together.

When Grendelak felt certain he was beyond the ear shot of the sentries he stopped abruptly and grabbed Manx by the arm, spinning her around to face him. “Are you crazy?” he hissed angrily.

Manx smiled. “Yes, and no.” The smile left her face. “You know it must be done and you know it is you that must do it. *A killer of men will sit the throne . . .*” she said quietly.

Grendelak gripped her arm tighter, not realizing he was twisting it as he spoke. “I know what you think I must do and I tell you I will not do such a thing.”

Manx leaned to the side as her arm twisted up and around. “Grendelak,” she pleaded, “you’re hurting me!”

Grendelak dropped her arm as though it were a fire brand. He watched sullenly as Manx rubbed at her shoulder where he'd gripped it too tightly. He ran his hands through his hair in a frustrated gesture as he stalked around in a circle, mumbling to himself.

Manx watched patiently, managing to tap her foot only periodically rather than the constant tapping her impatience generally showed itself through.

Finally Grendelak stopped pacing and mumbling and faced her. Manx was surprised by the resoluteness on his face and the ice in his words. "No."

"No?" she exclaimed, dismayed at his response.

"That's right, Manx, N-O no!" Grendelak accentuated the letters with a finger he poked forcefully in her direction.

"But you must, if you don't . . ." Manx cried desolately.

"If I don't, then what? Someone else does?" He paused and watched her nod and felt a twinge at the anguish he could see in her wide, green eyes. "Better them than me. I've lost enough honor for one lifetime and I'll not lose one shred more to this Tale of yours."

"Lordston's sitar!" she cried, "You sound like Sir Mil'Amber!" She threw her hands up and made a face, her voice suddenly mimicking someone else. "I'll not tarnish my honor for such a thing!" She shook her head then, and turned her face to the sky, trying to keep from screaming in her frustration.

"No."

Manx swore under her breath one last time before she schooled her face into patient lines and made herself calm down. Yelling at him wouldn't change his mind, neither would reminding him yet again of how silly his dedication to his honor was. She needed to change his mind by giving him a reason he could relate to.

Finally she fixed him with a pointed look. "So you wish the Brotherhood to remain in bondage to Remelus?" she asked pertly, then waved her hand carelessly. "If that is your wish. I'm certain Brother Nolphen would be proud of that decision, wouldn't he?"

She heard Grendelak growl at the mention of the First Brother who had died in his stead, but she was beyond caring. She needed to convince him and convince him now or else all was lost. Including Grendelak.

"You know as well as I do that I do not want the Brotherhood to fall under the King's heel!" he yelled.

"Neither do I, Brother." A voice from behind startled him and he whirled around, sword in hand, to face the source.

"Felander?" Grendelak exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

"I came looking for you. When you disappeared with Manx I worried you might be . . . angry with her," Felander replied, smiling lamely in Manx's direction.

"Well, we can go now," Grendelak said, waving a dismissing hand at Manx and began to walk back toward the camp site. "We're through."

"Do you want to explain to Felander, the *First Brother*, that you are unwilling to do what is necessary to free your Brothers from the rule of the King? Or that you will turn from this field and run away from Corrigar forever, leaving the people under the ministrations of the Priests of Tasni?" Manx began sweetly but her last words were hard as ice. "Or shall I?"

Grendelak froze in his tracks. Felander looked at him quizzically. "You could free the Brotherhood, Grendelak?"

Grendelak nodded, but did not look at the older man.

"And you won't?" Felander pressed.

Grendelak shook his head like a child being scolding for refusing to obey his father.

"Why not?"

Grendelak finally raised his head and looked at Felander. "I can't," he nearly wailed.

Felander looked at Manx, who returned his gaze with a cool expression. Felander rolled his eyes and laid a hand on Grendelak's shoulder. "What is it you would have to do?"

Grendelak looked briefly at Manx and then back at Felander. "Kill the king."

A look of understanding came over Felander's face at the words. He looked at Manx, then back to Grendelak, then back to Manx, nodding the entire time. "I understand," he said simply. "So why won't you do it?"

Grendelak looked surprised at the question, but he straightened as he answered. "Because it's murder and it's wrong. I have enough blood on my hands to last a lifetime," he said flatly, shaking his head. "I'll not add another. Not again!"

Felander looked thoughtful for a moment. "Remember when you told me how to make that drink that took the poison out of Manx?"

Grendelak nodded, confused at the reference. "Yes, but what does that have to do with this?"

"You said then that you thought maybe some of the things you'd learned and done might be useful in some way."

"Yes, I did, and you said you weren't so sure," Grendelak replied.

Felander smiled. "Yes, I did. But now I think maybe I was wrong."

Grendelak looked astounded. "You've both gone madder than a Nordalian Knight in a mud puddle!"

Manx smiled and walked toward where the two men stood, taking each of their hands in one of hers. "No, Felander realizes that the end result of this war is the same thing as what I've asked you to do now," she said gently. "Either way, Remelus is dead. Whether it is during a battle or not, he is still dead and, one hopes, at your hands."

"Look Grendelak, I'm not condoning what you did and I still don't know that I believe in all this Tale business, but I do think the gods have plans for some people. People like you and the Scorpions and all the great heroes," Felander said earnestly. "If the only way to get to this moment and free the Brotherhood was for you to learn those things before, maybe that was part of Healfherd's plan for you. Stranger things have happened."

Grendelak's shoulders slumped in defeat. "If you're both going to be against me I can't win this one."

"We aren't against you, Grendelak, we're with you," Manx said encouragingly. "What must be sought, but if hoarded will cost? What must be earned, but if stolen is lost? What must be sacrificed to even a score? To be blessed with abundance, or left wanting for more?"

Grendelak looked at her strangely, shaking his head. "Is that more of the Tale, Manx?" he asked, tiredly.

"No, Grendelak Mishtar, Duke of Shorehold," she laughed, "It is something my Lord Redeemer said once to a Nordalian Knight whom was too worried about her honor and not worried enough about how to accomplish tasks she needed to do."

Felander grunted at her words. "Interesting, especially that first part 'if hoarded will cost'," he said thoughtfully. "I never thought of it that way before, but this is one time when worrying about honor could be costly for a whole lot of people . . ." He shook his head. "It's not for the Brotherhood, of that I am certain, but in some cases I can understand how Honor might get in the way of what needs to be done."

Manx rolled her eyes. "It is for the Brotherhood as well Felander."

"How so?"

"Which is more important to you Felander, your honor at completing a contract or your honor while completing a contract?" she asked archly.

Felander and Grendelak exchanged looks filled with doubt. "The Contract," Felander finally answered firmly.

"Fine. You both took Contract with Troma. He's dead. What's next?" she tried to lead them to the logical conclusion of their own beliefs.

"We avenge his death or die . . . trying," Grendelak answered automatically.

Felander shook his head and laughed. "I see your point, Manx. The only way Grendelak or I can salvage our honor is to kill the man who killed him. The priest and the King who ordered it."

Manx grinned broadly and bowed, but said nothing.

Grendelak breathed in deeply, then looked to both of his friends. "I still don't know if I can do it."

"To save the Brotherhood?" Manx asked.

Felander looked at him hopefully. "To complete your Oath?"

Grendelak sighed. He still wasn't comfortable with the idea of returning to his old ways, but he realized the other two were right. Remelus would not stop using Tasnians and would continue to drag the whole of Corrigan straight to hell with him. Remelus would not free the Brotherhood. The only answer was the king's death. That could come through war or through the swift, silent death of an assassin. As the nobles had refused the first, the only answer was the second. And no one else was as qualified as he to take on that role.

"Alright then. For the Brotherhood and my Oath, I will kill the king. And the priest."

After Felander and Manx nodded he gestured toward camp. "Shall we return, then?"

Felander slapped him on the back and then led the way.

When Manx did not move Grendelak looked at her curiously. "Coming, Manx?"

"I'll be along in a moment," she said evenly. "Go ahead, I'll catch up."

Grendelak's eyes narrowed. "Are you certain?"

At Manx's nod he turned and strode off.

Manx sank to the ground, her hands on her knees as she tried to breathe evenly. At Grendelak's words Manx had suddenly felt cold, as though she'd been dipped in ice, and her breath had been stolen away by the image that had appeared in her head.

She closed her eyes and tried to force the image from her mind. The image of the dungeon and the altar somewhere below the palace in Corrigan.

After a few moments the image faded and she was finally able to rise. She brushed the leaves and dirt off her knees before she hurried off to catch up with Grendelak and Felander.

The three were silent the short walk back to camp and by the time they arrived there was very little activity near the main camp fire. The three sat, exchanging small talk with others who came and went until finally they were left alone with only the crackling of the fire interrupting their individual thoughts.

Felander stood and headed for the Duke's planning tent, with Grendelak and Manx not far behind, carrying a firebrand to light the torches. Grendelak and Felander sat while Manx lit a single torch and then pulled a chair between the two men. She sat, curling her feet under her.

Felander and Manx watched Grendelak as he drummed his fingers on the table while he thought. Finally he stopped. "First I need to get into the city. That isn't a problem," he tossed a lopsided grin at Felander, who returned it with a shake of his head.

"Agreed, the urchin here could sneak in and out of that city with his eyes closed," Felander said with what Manx thought was a note of pride.

Grendelak bit down on his lower lip. "I need to get into the palace . . . that's a bit harder," he stared at the ceiling for a few moments. "Felander, doesn't the Brotherhood have a map of the palace?"

Felander nodded, a single eyebrow rising. "Yes, it does. An old one, but much should be the same."

Grendelak nodded. "Alright then," he said as he pushed his chair back from the table and stretched out his long length. He laced his fingers together behind his head and leaned back in the chair. A moment later he sat forward. "Healfherd lose my soul!" he swore.

"What is it now, Grendelak?" Manx asked carefully.

"I don't have . . . what I need. I got rid of that when I . . ." he paused and glanced sideways at Felander. "I don't have it," he said lamely, hoping they'd understand without him having to spell it out.

Manx laughed, nearly a giggle, as she reached out and patted Grendelak on the knee.

Grendelak threw an annoyed look at her. "It isn't funny, skald."

"Oh no," Manx shook her head, "It isn't that at all Grendelak," she told him as she reached into her belt pouch and produced a small vial. She held it out to Grendelak. "I believe this is what you need, isn't it?"

Grendelak looked at the vial, confused, before he took it from her carefully. He stared at her for a moment until she nodded once, then pulled the stopper from the vial and waved it near his nose. He made a face as he inhaled the scent and looked away as he replaced the stopper and tucked the vial into his own belt pouch. "Nice, Manx. Fitting, as well, I think," he said with the first real smile on his face she'd seen in days.

Felander leaned forward. "Would you mind letting me in on the secret?"

Manx laughed lightly. "It's the Bloodrot, Felander. The same poison Tahure sent with the assassin to try to kill Grendelak."

Felander grinned broadly. "Well, I'd say that's more than fitting, Grendelak. More than fitting."

Grendelak grinned wryly as he resumed a more relaxed position. He needed to think and plan, and do so quickly. He hated to rush this, as he knew the danger of doing so, but he didn't have a choice. He had three days to kill the king and, if he was lucky, the priest.

“Alright, now I need to get into the palace and find a place to hole up and wait for that Tasnian puppet in a Corrigarian crown . . . that might be more difficult,” he said at length.

“No it won’t,” Manx said.

“Why is that?” Grendelak asked without taking his eyes from the ceiling of the tent.

“Because I know how to find him and I’m going with you.”

Chapter 19

“No,” Grendelak and Felander both spoke at the same time.

Manx looked from one to the other, then sat back and folded her arms across her chest. “Yes, I am,” she said resolutely, her tiny brow wrinkling as she returned their rigid looks.

Grendelak shook his head vehemently. “No, Manx. I work alone,” he said darkly.

“Manx, listen to him,” Felander insisted. “Please.”

Manx shook her head. “I cannot abdicate my tasks any more than Grendelak.”

Grendelak turned his head in her direction. “What the hell does that mean?”

“Exactly what it sounds like, Grendelak Mishtar. Duke of Shorehold. *The Assassin*,” she said. “I have my task as well and I cannot leave it undone any more than you can.”

“What task, skald?” Grendelak sat forward and shifted in his seat, looking expectantly at her.

“*The Skald shall meet the Death Priest in the darkness below*,” Manx quoted, her quiet voice shaking slightly as she lowered her head to her chest, trying to force the image of the dream from just a few nights before from her mind yet again.

Felander turned a concerned expression in Grendelak’s direction. Grendelak reached out and took Manx’s hand, running a finger back and forth across the back of her hand while he collected his thoughts.

“Manx?”

“Yes?”

“There’s more, isn’t there?”

“No.” Grendelak barely heard the whispered reply. He raised his gaze to Felander and saw him shrug.

“If you don’t go?”

When Manx gave no reply he reached out and lifted her chin with his finger. “If you don’t go?” he pressed.

“Then he’ll kill you before you can take the throne,” she finally managed sput.

Grendelak grunted softly. “Then you go, Manx, but I will be very put out if you don’t return with me. And you don’t want to anger the future King of Corrigar, do you?” he teased, trying to lift her spirits. He wasn’t even certain *he* could pull this off with so little time and as much as he hated to admit it, he could use any help he could get.

Manx smiled wanly. “I’ve done that enough of late, thank you.”

Grendelak patted the back of her hand gently and then ran his hand through his hair, yawning. “It’s late, I can’t plan like this . . . I need to think.”

Felander nodded. “When will you leave?”

“In a few hours. I need the cover of darkness to slip by the sentries. I’m not as small as I used to be,” he smiled ironically, suddenly remembering Felander’s words of gods and plans and destinies.

“Get some sleep, both of you, and I’ll wake you in a few hours then,” Felander offered.

“Are you sure?” Grendelak asked. “You need sleep as well . . .”

Felander snorted. “I can sleep later today, assuming the Guardsmen don’t come looking for us. You, however, can’t. So go—off with you both.”

Grendelak and Manx stood and silently left the tent, their hands still clasped together. Felander followed them out of the tent and then watched them duck into Grendelak’s tent together. He turned his face toward the sky. “Dirge shield them, Healtherd guide them. They need all the help they can get.”

Grendelak pointed to a small, dark hole in the side of the wall. “There, you see that? That’s the way in. It’ll bring us out near the Brother’s district.”

Manx squinted in the pre-dawn light, nodding as she picked out the culvert Grendelak had told her about. Her half-elven eyes dealt better with the darkness than did Grendelak’s, but not nearly as well as her full blooded cousins.

Grendelak looked at her seriously. “Are you still certain you want to go in? You can stay here and wait for me . . .” he offered.

Manx smiled at him. “Sweet, but yes. I must, as you must,” she told him.

Grendelak leaned over and kissed her. “Alright then, let’s go.”

Manx reached up and laid a hand across his cheek, letting it lay there for a moment before she readied herself.

They crawled nearly the entire distance to the culvert before they noticed anything odd. They could hear the clanking of armor together as the guard high above approached their location. The clanking stopped and so did they, neither one breathing for a long moment. When the sound of the guard moving on caught their ears they smiled at one another and crept forward the rest of the way.

Manx pushed herself up against the wall and sat back, watching as Grendelak felt around the culvert for the gate latch he knew was hiding somewhere. It had been years, so he didn't recall exactly where it was, but within a few moments he smiled as his sensitive fingers touched the latch. He worked it expertly for a moment and even though he knew Manx couldn't see his face clearly he winked at her as it fell open.

He slowly pulled the culvert out, avoiding scraping it against the brick of the wall for fear someone might hear them. When the gate lay flat on the ground in front of the culvert he gestured for Manx to go through. Once she'd entered he backed into the culvert and then replaced the grate as easily as he'd removed it.

As he backed into the city he glanced up to check if Manx had done as he'd instructed and was pleased to see her standing flat against the wall. He nodded to her as he looked left and right down the alley before he grabbed her hand and led her through the lesser known parts of the Brother's Quarter toward the Brother's Hall where they hoped to find the map of the palace.

They walked sedately, as if merely out for a stroll, through the alley ways. Grendelak's body was tense, every muscle trained on hearing and, if possible, feeling when someone might be near who posed a threat. Manx appeared to be simply out for a walk but her keen eyes were watching upwards for anything out of the ordinary.

It was early in the morning, just before dawn, but already the sounds of people moving around inside some of the buildings began to reach their ears. Occasionally a dark figure would move past an alley, walking briskly in one direction or the other, but none appeared to be out of the ordinary for a city in the early morning. Still, both Manx and Grendelak kept their senses alert, ready for anything and anticipating the worst.

Grendelak slowed and Manx, sensing the change of pace, matched his gait.

"We need to hit the street and then cross to the hall before it grows much lighter. Pull that cowl further over your face. Your hair sticks out like the sun." he said under his breath.

Manx nodded in response, but did not speak as she reached up and pulled the cowl of her robe past her cheeks. She followed his movements as he headed down an alley toward the Brothers' Walk.

Grendelak tried to hide his surprise at the state of the street but Manx heard his sharp intake of breath and felt the abrupt interruption in his stride. He recovered quickly and turned down the street, heading for the Hall he could now see down the street. Manx looked around as inconspicuously as possible.

She was stunned by the dirt and debris that littered the street. Corrigan had always been an ordered place with clean streets and pride in its appearance. Some of the buildings had seen fighting—intense fighting if the debris was any indication—and chunks of brick and mortar still lay strewn about the cobblestone walkways that lined the street. A few buildings were boarded up with roughly cut planks of wood criss-crossed over the doors and crudely lettered signs saying “closed” or “gone” on them.

As the light of day began to creep over the walls her keen eyes could discern that some of the parchments tacked to doors had an official look to them, as though they had been condemned by the King personally.

Grendelak mumbled something Manx could not pick out but she was sure it was a curse of some kind by his tone. She let him lead her down the street and was only mildly surprised when he stopped in front of the Brother's Friend. He pushed the door open and entered, his eyes scanning the room quickly. He dropped Manx's hand and had to fight not to reach for the donation box that should have been, but wasn't, near the door. He quickly appraised the few men who sat in the common room and decided they were neither friend nor foe. He straightened and walked toward the barkeep, hoping that the old barkeep was still there.

The corner of one edge of his mouth flitted upwards briefly before being replaced by a flat line that showed no emotion when he saw the old barkeep. Grendelak watched something that almost appeared to be recognition flicker across the other man's face and saw that it was quickly replaced by a vague representation of interest in a customer.

“You there,” the man called, “are you in need of a room?”

“Yes, I am,” Grendelak replied as he headed toward the barkeep. “How much?”

“One silver,” the barkeep answered. “Assuming you're only staying for a few hours.” The barkeep peered around Grendelak at Manx and leered in her direction.

Manx, hearing the chuckles and jeers of the few men who were already drinking so early in the day, looked down at her feet as though she were embarrassed by the comments. “Oh come now, sir, he's my *brother*,” she said emphatically.

The barkeep looked suspiciously at Grendelak, who returned his look with a barely perceptible nod. "I've got one bigger room," the barkeep went on, leaning his elbow on the bar and pretending to talk behind his hand to Grendelak, "It's in the back, near the stable, and the sound doesn't carry as much."

Grendelak quirked an eyebrow at the man and stroked his somewhat scruffy chin thoughtfully. "Yes, that would be a good idea. Just in case, if you know what I mean," he joked lewdly.

The barkeep slapped his hand on the bar and laughed out loud, then disappeared into a small room behind the bar for a moment before returning with a key. He waited for Grendelak to drop one silver and then another before he held out the key. Grendelak reached out and took it from him.

The barkeep grunted and came around the end of the bar and began to walk down the hall. He looked over his shoulder and saw that Grendelak was just staring at him. "Well, are ye comin' or not? Yer little time is a-wastin' you know."

Grendelak started at the question, then nodded and picked up his feet. He followed the barkeep down several hallways, Manx trailing behind. Finally the man stopped at a door. "Here ye go . . ." he said, looking nervously back down the hallway. "*Brother,*" he added in a whisper.

Grendelak bowed his head and then unlocked the door, letting it swing open. His eyes quickly scanned the room, instinctively seeking anything that might appear out of place. His eyes narrowed as he caught sight of a fairly expensive piece of statuary sitting on a well-made wooden stand that tapered to the floor into a nearly two foot square base. He looked from it to the barkeep.

The barkeep nodded and made a downward motion while he spoke "Yes, it's very nice, isn't it? This is one of our finer rooms, after all."

"Of course," Grendelak said with a smile. "That will be all, then. Unless you'd like to watch?"

The barkeep blushed red and waved his hands in front of him as he began to back away from room. "No, no, that's all right. I'll just hear about the exploits later," he said with a grin before he turned and walked briskly down the hall, whistling.

Grendelak ushered Manx into the room and closed the door. Manx pulled the cowl back from her face and let it fall into a pile on her back. "What was—"

"Shhhhhhhh . . ." Grendelak raised a finger to his lips and stopped her question. He pointed emphatically to the statuary, then walked over to it and picked up the bust of King Renthal, setting it gently on the bed. He returned and picked up the base, surprised to discover it was fairly light and easy to move.

Manx watched him curiously at first, but as he moved the base and she could clearly see the marks on the floor beneath it that indicated a trap door she began smiling. She tapped Grendelak on the arm and when he looked up at her to see what she wanted, she pointed at the trap door and then in the direction of the Brother's Hall.

Grendelak nodded seriously, then returned to his work. He found the latch fairly easily and pulled up on it, lifting the door to reveal a black, damp space. He gestured at Manx, who peered down the hole and, seeing the slender metal rungs along the side, began to climb down below.

Twenty feet later she stepped off the last rung into the darkness. She moved a few steps away from the ladder to give Grendelak room and then peered down the corridor, letting her eyes adjust slowly to the darkness. She saw nothing, which was good, for her half-elven vision could easily see the difference between heat and cold in complete darkness and any one that might discover them would have been seen as they came into the range of her dark vision. But she saw nothing as she patiently waited for Grendelak to descend.

She saw his silhouette against the slight light coming from above and noted that he did not carry a light source, even though she knew he would be completely blind in the corridor.

"You know this path, Grendelak?" she whispered, concerned.

"No," Grendelak replied honestly, "but they are much as all hidden pathways are, direct and rarely full of surprises."

Manx heard the tone of confidence in his voice and decided to leave well enough alone. She could keep watch ahead and if he was right, she was worrying for nothing anyway.

Grendelak gracefully slipped by Manx, one hand lightly brushing against the wall. Manx watched his form pass her and begin to slowly traverse the path in the direction of the Brother's Hall. She followed several feet behind, neither of them making a sound as they trod lightly upon the hard-packed dirt floor.

After several hundred feet Grendelak stopped and looked up. The corridor ended abruptly and a set of metal rungs, much like the ones leading down into the passage from the Brother's Friend, led upwards to a squared, wooden door. He tilted his head to listen, and was only mildly surprised to hear the occasional sound of a heeled boot making contact with a hard floor above.

He leaned against the wall and put a hand to his chin, thinking. Manx, looked up at the door and then quietly began to climb the rungs. Grendelak straightened and nearly called out in surprise, but bit down on his lip to keep his voice from carrying upwards and alerting whomever was above to their presence.

Manx stopped near the top of the ladder and put her ear to the wooden door. She held herself motionless for several minutes before she relaxed and began to climb back down the ladder. When her feet again touched the dirt floor she reached up and grabbed Grendelak's shoulder, pulling him down so she could whisper into his ear.

"Guardsmen," she hissed.

Grendelak laid his face along her cheek. "I know," he whispered back into her ear, trying to ignore the feel of her hair as it tickled at his nose, "heeled boots are not often worn by Brothers."

If Grendelak could have seen in the dark he would have seen the first sign of true admiration on Manx's face.

"From the sounds of it, we would come up in an alcove just off the Great Hall," he whispered, his mind racing to place the sounds he'd heard. "The boots echoed from the other direction, and off marble. Only the Great Hall has marble floor and there is a hall that extends off of it."

This time Manx could not contain herself. She pecked him on the cheek. "You are a wonder, Grendelak Mishtar, a wonder."

Grendelak shrugged, embarrassed by her kind words. He listened again, waiting for the sound of booted heels, and then waited a few more minutes while the echoes faded away. "Time to go," he breathed as he reached out and began to climb the ladder.

Manx followed, though not as closely as she had through the passageway. Grendelak stopped short of the top, raising one hand to fumble around in the dark for a latch. He spent long minutes and finally gave up in frustration. Either there was none or he was losing his touch. He muttered a prayer under his breath, ignoring the incredulous, *When did you start praying?* that flashed through his mind at the action before he gently pushed up on the door. He felt it give easily and slowly exhaled.

He counted to three, then smoothly lifted the door from its place, setting it aside as quietly as possible on the floor. He pulled himself up until he was sitting on the edge, his legs dangling into the hole and scanned the area. When he saw nothing he used his arms to push himself into a crouch and then reached a hand toward Manx.

"Hurry!" he hissed.

He closed his hand around hers when he felt the contact and yanked hard, nearly throwing the tiny skald over his shoulder and into the wall of the alcove. She righted herself and gave him an accusing look but he ignored her, carefully replacing the door instead and then straightening as he hastily marked the route to the First Brother's rooms in his mind. Felander had told him that he would find the maps he needed there and it had been Felander who had casually mentioned the passageway that linked the Brother's Friend with the Hall. The older man had not thus far

led him astray, he would continue to trust him and run on blind faith if necessary.

Grendelak tried not to let his mind wander and consider that insight overmuch. He'd only ever counted on himself before and to blindly trust another, even Felander, was not something he was familiar with doing.

They walked quietly down the back hall toward the First Brother's suite of rooms, their eyes and ears alert for anything out of the ordinary. Grendelak wasn't certain what he'd find, but he anticipated the probability of finding someone calling themselves First Brother in the bedchamber. His fingers clenched into a fist at that but he smiled inwardly at the thought that he might be able to pay a traitor to the Brotherhood back for his disloyalty.

For Manx's sake he hoped that the presence of Guardsmen in the building meant that no FreeSword, disloyal or otherwise, was in the Brother's Hall.

Footsteps down the hall caused Grendelak's shoulders to tense. He kept his head lowered and his shoulders slightly hunched, hoping it would be taken for a submissive posture rather than the attack ready position it was. His eyes peered out from below the hair that hung in his eyes and thanked his luck that he hadn't given in to his urge to have it cut off days ago. He'd always been clean and neat and his recent inability to properly shave or run a comb through his hair had been bothering him.

Manx followed his lead and pulled the hood of her cloak down over her hair again, hoping Grendelak would at least warn her if she needed to defend herself. She swallowed against the nervousness that rose as the footsteps came closer. She finally saw the booted feet of a Guardsman approach and slow slightly. She slowly moved her hand to rest on the hilt of her sword.

A voice from somewhere behind them called out and the Guardsman near them barked a gruff reply before he quickened his pace and moved on. Manx heard Grendelak's audible sigh of relief as the man left and had to double her stride to keep up with him as he hurried down the hall and the ducked into a smaller corridor leading off to the side.

His soft soled boots made nearly no sound on the wooden floor of this corridor and Manx endeavored to repeat his steps so she would not give them away. She grimaced when she heard a board creak as her foot touched it and saw Grendelak flinch at the sound. He did not stop moving, but instead shortened his stride so that she would not have to double hers to keep up. He knew the fewer steps she took the less likely she was to give them away.

Finally Grendelak sidled up to a door near the end of the hall and laid his ear gently on its wooden face. He looked down at Manx after a few moments and smiled.

“Empty,” he mouthed before reaching down and gently pushing at the latch on the door. He was only mildly surprised to find it unlocked, for if no Brothers were using the Hall the room was likely unused as well.

He pulled the door open and peered inside, satisfied it was empty when he saw no sign of light from the torches resting unused in their sconces on the wall. He slipped inside and held the door while Manx snuck under his arm and into the room.

He carefully closed the door and then waited while Manx lit one of the torches and held it aloft so that he could look for their prize. Manx watched nervously as Grendelak carefully rifled through the desk, muttering to himself. When he did not locate the map he continued to search the rest of the room.

After quite some time Grendelak sat down at the desk and rested his head in his hands, his lips moving constantly as what Manx could only assume was a litany of curses.

“Healfherd lose my soul,” his whispered curse suddenly broke the silence as he dropped his hands to the desk and gingerly smoothed out a piece of parchment.

Manx cringed at the curse but moved to stand behind his shoulder and peered down at the parchment. “Lordston lose my lyre!” she swore.

The map Grendelak had been looking for lay before him. Unfortunately it was completely unusable. Someone had taken a quill and made marks across it and spilled ink in several places. Hastily scratched across the top was a message: *Not that easy, Assassin.*

“Damn,” Grendelak whispered angrily.

Manx gave him a look that said *I told you so*, but she said nothing.

Grendelak shook his head. “Fine, you were right about needing to come,” he said reluctantly. “Are you happy now?”

“I’ll not be happy until we’re finished with this deed and long gone from the city,” she returned flatly. “Until you’re returned and sitting on the throne where you belong.”

Grendelak smiled grimly. “Be careful what you wish for, Manx.”

A sound in the hall reminded them of where they were and Manx quickly doused the light. They waited, tense and quiet, until the sounds disappeared back down the hall. Manx reached out and took Grendelak’s hand, leading him slowly toward the door. At the door she took his hand and placed it gently on the latch, then took up her position behind him.

“They know we’re here,” he murmured.

Manx laid a hand on his shoulder in reply, but said nothing. They had both known the possibility existed that their enemies would know they were coming before they’d even left the encampment. They also knew it was possible that soldiers or worse were lying in wait for them at this very

moment. But staying in this room was not an option any more than returning to Shorehold had been an option.

Grendelak laid an ear to the door for a moment and when he was satisfied no one was standing on the other side he carefully lifted the latch. He pushed the door open and slipped into the hall, not looking to see if Manx followed. He stepped lightly down the corridor and sidled up to the wall as they approached the corridor.

Manx saw him stiffen before she heard the sound of booted heels against the marble floor. She saw him glance over his shoulder and saw his jaw clench. She peered back and noticed that she had left the door ajar. Not open, but not completely closed, either.

She was about to reach for her sword when Grendelak suddenly turned and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close to him. He leaned down and began to kiss at her face, whispering in her ear, "You're a skald, perform."

She heard the Guardsmen stop and make a few rude comments, laughing and jeering as the two continued to embrace rather passionately in the hall. After a few moments the men moved on and when their footsteps faded Manx pushed at Grendelak's chest.

"I realize that was probably necessary, Grendelak Mishtar, but do not presume to do that again," she whispered fiercely, her green eyes smoldering from their contact.

Grendelak's lips pursed into a grin at her words. He raised an eyebrow before he turned and headed out into the hall.

Manx followed him, shaking her head almost angrily, ignoring the voice in her head that questioned the reason for her anger. *You're angry because he was acting.*

No he wasn't! she argued, *That was not acting.* Her lips were still tingling. *But if it was?*

They were approaching the Great Hall and Manx forced her mind to concentrate on getting back to the Brother's Friend. She could worry about whether Grendelak had been acting or not later. She cursed her luck that she should fall in love with this man. Before Grendelak they were all just names in the Tale, stories to be told, songs to be sung. Now it was all too real and she wasn't certain she could do whatever must be done to see the Tale fulfilled. *No wonder Redeemer never married,* she thought caustically.

Grendelak slowed and then stopped near the alcove. He carefully moved the trap door to the side and gestured hurriedly for Manx to descend first. She clambered down the ladder and moved back a few feet, waiting for Grendelak. She heard a shout from above and Grendelak growl in response. The muted sound of booted feet rushing across the hall was joined a moment later by the dull ring of metal against metal.

Manx nimbly rushed back up the ladder, not caring about the noise she made. She emerged from the hole in the floor to find a Guardsman leering at her, his gloved fist swooping down and grabbing her by the scruff of the neck. He lifted her easily, hefting her into the air and holding her there while he took her sword from its scabbard. When he'd disarmed her he set her down roughly on the floor in front of him and grinned broadly, as though he'd won a prize.

Grendelak fought the urge to race to her side. He forced his attention to his opponent, swinging harder and faster instead. *The only way to help her is to finish this one—and the other one—off quickly.*

Manx, angry and full of fear for Grendelak, smiled back brashly as she reached over her shoulder and pulled her mandolin off her back. She watched as the man's grin faded when he saw the instrument clear her shoulder and realized the tiny skald was not trying to remove it, but rather swing it at him.

It caught the guard full in the chin and Manx watched dispassionately as his eyes glazed over and he slumped to the ground, unconscious. She reached down and retrieved her sword before turning to check on Grendelak.

Grendelak was not hard pressed by the guard opposing him and a few moments later his adversary fell to the ground, groaning as he held a useless arm, its tendons cut through by Grendelak's blade.

Grendelak bent down and pulled a thin dagger from his boot and then moved to the guard's side. Without hesitation he reached out and slid the edge of the blade across the man's throat before he moved to do the same to the unconscious man lying near Manx.

"What are you doing?" Manx cried, dismayed at his actions. It was one thing to kill a man in a fair fight but quite another to murder them callously when they could not defend themselves.

"Cleaning up the trail that would otherwise lead straight to the Brother's Friend and the death of innocent men," he said evenly, not liking the accusation in her tone.

Manx looked away with a grimace as he slit the second man's throat. Grendelak's explanation made sense, but she was still uncomfortable with the action.

Grendelak was quiet as he gestured toward the alcove once again. Manx gladly scrambled down the ladder and heaved a sigh of relief when this time Grendelak managed to descend and close the trap door behind them.

They crept along in silence, Grendelak still smarting from Manx's words. *She wants me to kill the king in cold blood but shirks from the loss of two Guardsmen in much the same manner?* He scowled as he considered her contradictory words.

When they reached the ladder leading back into the Brother's Friend Grendelak nimbly climbed up and carefully lifted the trap door just high enough he could see, his sharp eyes scanning the room quickly. Satisfied that the room remained undisturbed he pushed open the door and climbed out, stopping only briefly to turn and offer a hand to Manx as she followed behind him.

Manx recoiled from the blood stained hand Grendelak offered, but recovered quickly and took it firmly in her own. When she was standing in the room Grendelak set about the task of returning the room to its former state, making sure to place everything back in its proper place.

Manx paced the room while Grendelak worked, arguing with herself about her reaction to Grendelak's murder of the guards. *He's right, it was necessary to protect the innkeep here.* Though she wanted to deny it, she could not. If the guards had been left alive they could have shown the others the trap door, found the tunnel and ended up here. *But it was wrong! They were defenseless!*

"The king will be defenseless as well, skald."

Manx started at the sound of Grendelak's words. She turned and stared at him curiously, for his words sounded as though they had been in reply to her unspoken argument. She shook her head, knowing he could not read her thoughts.

"Yes, I know, Grendelak Mishtar," she said flatly, "but that is different."

"How so?"

"Because it is in the Tale," she retorted. "Because that which is in the Tale is deemed necessary by the gods and therefore acceptable. That which is not . . . is not."

Grendelak smirked at her reply. "If the gods don't like that I'm protecting a man's life to help us do what the Tale wants us to do, then they can just—"

Manx crossed the distance between them as he spoke and laid a finger across his lips to stop him before he cursed them both. "Don't you dare, Grendelak!" she ordered tersely. "Don't you even think it."

Grendelak leaned back and folded his arms across his chest. "Fine, Manx, I won't. But you will agree to let me do this my way or you can return to the army."

"But—"

"No, Manx, my way or you leave," he said again, this time more firmly. "I'll not have you interfering with what needs to be done if you find it distasteful. This whole situation leaves a bad taste in my mouth, to be honest, and I don't need your condemnation for one thing here or there along the way. Besides, you'd do the same if your precious Tale were in jeopardy."

Manx lowered her eyes and looked at the floor as she considered his words. Would she do the same if a piece of the Tale were in jeopardy of turning the wrong way? *Yes, you would and you know it. You have before and you will again. He just values different things and does what he must to protect them, as you do what you value.* She looked up and met his eyes.

“I will not interfere. You do what you must as I do what I must,” she said evenly.

He nodded his head once as he relaxed his stance. “I’m glad that’s settled then. Now, I have no map, so you’re going to have to help me figure out where to go once we get into the palace. We do this tonight, while the king sleeps.” His hand unconsciously reached down and grasped the pouch where he had placed the Bloodrot Manx had given him, the feel of the small vial reassuring and revolting him at the same time.

Manx rummaged around in the desk for a moment and then nearly slammed one of the small drawers closed. “Don’t you people use parchment that there might be some here?” she exclaimed.

Grendelak snorted. “No, that’s not what this room was for, skald,” he said as he glanced sideways at the bed.

Manx reddened as she understood the implication. “Indeed!” she said with a reproachful tone. She rummaged in one of the larger pouches she carried and came out with a scroll. She unrolled it and looked it over, then sighed as she turned it over before smoothing it out and placing it on the top of the desk.

Grendelak moved to stand beside her, leaning over her shoulder and watching as she began to draw out the interior of the palace as best she recalled using a small piece of charcoal.

As she felt his breath brushing against her face she hesitated, turning her face to look up into his. She smiled briefly before returning to her drawing, pointing out the rooms and halls of the king of Corrigar as she went.

As they planned their evening, the gravity of the situation bore into them and they both grew serious. When Manx pointed out the stairs leading down under the palace she nearly choked on the words. Grendelak reached out and gently pulled her hair away from her neck, then laid his hand on her shoulder in a reassuring gesture. She finished drawing and took a deep breath, pointing to another hall that led into a room encircled by smaller rooms. “That’s likely where Tahure will be, in the end,” she said somewhat shakily. “Tasnians like dark places for their temples. It comes from years of having to hide their vile practices in almost every kingdom.”

Grendelak reached out and turned her until she was facing him and encircled her in his arms, leaning his chin down on the top of her head.

He reached up and stroked her hair, breathing in the scent of her. “In the end, then, I will be there too,” he told her loyally.

Manx said nothing. Instead she wrapped her arms around him and held him tightly. Grendelak’s words did not comfort her as images from her dream of that room flashed through her mind. He thought she feared for herself, but that was as far from the truth as a Kantor-Doornian village was from the ocean.

“That’s exactly what I’m afraid of,” she whispered to herself.

Chapter 20

By mid day both Grendelak and Manx felt the need for food. They left the room and wandered back to the common room, choosing a table in the corner and sitting such that Grendelak could see the entire room without being obvious.

The innkeep eventually brought them a hot meal along with two glasses of Amorician Red. Grendelak reveled in the wine, glad he could drop the pretense of hiding his acquired taste for such fine things. Manx heard footsteps near the door and saw Grendelak tense. The smile left her face as she concentrated on listening to the voices across the room, but could catch only a few words here and there.

Grendelak reached one hand across the table and gestured with his fingers for Manx to give her hand to him. He grasped her fingers tightly even as he left his right hand resting comfortably on the hilt of his sword. He leaned in and encouraged her to do the same. "Play the game, skald," he said gruffly, his eyes focused on the men in Green and White entering the room.

Manx leaned in coyly and assumed a lovesick posture, her ears still alert for anything out of the ordinary.

"Attention all you dogs," one of the men in Green and White suddenly called out. "Two Guardsmen have been murdered in the Hall across the street. We will now question each of you and you will answer truthfully. Do not make us beat the answers out of you."

Grendelak noted that the innkeep trailed behind the two Guardsmen nervously, his eyes full of fear that he might be implicated in the death of the Guardsmen. Grendelak dropped his eyes to Manx's face and began acting as though he was interested in nothing other than her.

By the time the Guardsmen approached the couple she was giggling like a nervous maid and staring at Grendelak with admiration. He was chuckling and murmuring to her, ignoring the men's approach. The two continued to exchange single words with one another, acting as though they weren't even aware of the men standing near their table.

Finally one of the Guardsmen muttered something to the other and then laughed harshly. He cleared his throat. "Here now, we need to speak to the two of you," he ordered.

Manx looked up, her cheeks flush and her green eyes wide. "Whatever about, good sir?" she asked innocently.

"It's not a crime in Corrigan to bed a pretty maid these days, is it?" Grendelak asked crudely, a broad grin on his face.

The guard's mouth quirked up into a grin as he shook his head. "No, it's not—unless she's charging too much!" He elbowed the guard next to him who nodded his head in agreement. "But we aren't here about that. Where have you been this morning?"

Manx reddened and looked away. "In one of the back rooms," Grendelak answered proudly, gesturing with his head in the direction of the back of the inn. "Just came out a while ago to eat."

The guard narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "Anyone else who can back you up on that?"

Grendelak craned his neck and caught sight of one of the men who had been in the inn when he and Manx had arrived. He disentangled his hand from Manx's and pointed in his direction. "He was here when we came in this morning," Grendelak replied nonchalantly.

The guard turned his head and looked in the direction Grendelak pointed. "You there!" he barked, waiting for the man to look in his direction and point a finger at his own chest. "Yes, you. Did you see these two come in this morning? And did they leave at any time other than to eat a while ago?"

The man stood and looked briefly at Grendelak. "Oh yeah, I remember them. She said she was his *sister*," he laughed lewdly. "They went into a room and just came out a while ago."

The guard nodded his head and indicated with his hand that the man should sit before turning his attention back to the couple. "Alright then, I'm sure you two had nothing to do with what happened. But if you hear of anything that's important, you be sure to find a Guardsman and tell him straight away, understand?"

Both replied with a serious "Yes, sir, of course sir" and watched as the Guardsmen continued on their way.

When they were out of earshot Manx leaned in again. "That was close," she whispered, "They know something is going on, the palace will be well guarded tonight. And your fingernails still have blood under them."

“Yes,” Grendelak mused looking at the back of his hands, “It will be dangerous. But that’s never stopped me before, it won’t stop me now.”

He ignored the look Manx gave him at the mention of his previous work. *If it wasn’t for the fact that I killed men for the last five years, dearest Skald, we wouldn’t be here right now, would we?* He stood abruptly and held out his hand. “Shall we?”

Manx stood and took his hand demurely and allowed him to lead her to the back room once again, ignoring the remarks that fell on her sensitive ears from some of the men in the common room.

Grendelak closed and locked the door behind them and then walked to the small chest of drawers near the window. He took every pouch and weapon from his person, surprising even Manx when he drew a slim dagger from a well hidden spot along the inside of his thigh.

Manx climbed up on the bed, curling her legs under her as she watched, fascinated by the intense look of concentration on his face as he stripped off his armor and shirt and then rummaged through a pack he’d carried along and came out with a different shirt and rolled up soft leather armor. She was confused by his actions until he put the armor on laced it, realizing that it, like his newly chosen shirt, had no sleeves and that his oath cuts were clearly visible. That he intended to act as a Brother one last time, to fulfill his oath and avenge Troma’s death, was obvious even to her. She watched as he then replaced the articles he’d removed earlier one by one, mumbling to himself as he did so.

Grendelak caught Manx leaning forward as he replaced the last dagger along his thigh. He looked up at her almost sheepishly and then gestured with his head for her to come closer.

Manx climbed off the bed and came to stand in front of him. He waited for her to lean over and then let her watch as he slowly slid the last dagger into the sheath hidden in his leather breeches. She murmured her approval as she straightened and looked up into Grendelak’s face.

She was struck by how handsome he was and wondered briefly why she hadn’t noticed before. He hadn’t shaved in days, but it did not detract from his looks and in fact she thought it made him even more handsome. She reached up and laid a hand along his cheek and felt his larger hand gently cover hers.

He looked down and met her eyes, his mind recalling the first time he’d seen her and called her his own. He watched a flicker of pain cross her eyes and suddenly she pulled away from him.

“Manx?”

She shook her head slightly but said nothing for a long moment. Grendelak reached out and laid a hand on her shoulder, but snatched it back as though he’d been burned when she shuddered at his touch.

“I should have listened, by the Great Skald, I should have listened to him!”

“To who, Manx?” Grendelak was confused and suddenly felt helpless, something he was unaccustomed to and with which he decided right then he did not want to become familiar.

Manx whirled around to face him and he was surprised to see that her eyes were glassy. “To one who knows better, Grendelak Mishtar. One who told me that becoming involved would only cause me great pain and I did not ward my own feelings and now,” she threw her hands up in frustration. “Now I know what is right to do, but I fear it will be too hard.”

When Grendelak merely stared at her, his mouth hanging open, she rushed on. “Grendelak, Grendelak,” she started with a laugh full of irony, “We must go tonight because it is the only way to do what must be done, to set things aright, but the Tale does not promise that things will turn out the way we wish, my Lord Duke, and it is that uncertainty that causes me fear now. Though I have watched others live and die and have twisted lives myself so that the Tale might turn down the right path, I have never loved before and it is making things . . . difficult,” she said at length.

“You will do the right thing, Manx, you have so far,” Grendelak reassured her, not so certain himself but realizing he needed to say something encouraging.

“Why does it have to be so hard?” she asked forlornly.

Grendelak grinned wryly at her cry. “Manx, if the right choice was the easy choice, don’t you think that everyone would make the right choices and there would be no wrong in the world?”

Manx stared at him as though he’d just asked her to bray like a donkey instead of spouted wisdom worthy of an old priest. She smiled through unshed tears at him. “So you would teach *me* wisdom then, FreeSword?”

Grendelak shrugged. “Obviously someone needs to.”

She laughed dryly and wiped at her eyes. “You may be right, Grendelak Mishtar. This one time you may be right.”

“I need to ask a few questions of you, Skald. I can’t carry the map so I need to memorize how to find the king that I may . . .” Grendelak shifted uncomfortably. “You know,” he finished lamely after a long silence.

Manx nodded solemnly. “Yes, I know,” she said as she moved to grab the piece of parchment on which she had sketched out the palace from memory.

Grendelak followed her to the desk where she laid out the parchment and smoothed it before she began pointing out the halls and rooms of the palace again. Her forehead wrinkled as she stopped periodically, tapping the end of the quill against chin she held ready in case she’d forgotten something and staring off into the distance, as though she could see the palace in front of her.

“That is what I recall. There are a few things I am unsure of and we both know, of course, that there are passages with which I am unfamiliar, having never been down them,” she pointed to a large room on her crude map. “This is the Great Hall,” she traced a path between it and the rooms she’d marked as the King’s chambers. “There will undoubtedly be some hidden passage between here and here, there always are in the palace of a king, but I do not know where nor how to traverse them.”

Grendelak nodded, pointing to a spot on the map near the back of where the throne would sit in the Great Hall. “Often it is here, that the King may leave quickly if something goes awry in the Great Hall,” he said authoritatively before he moved his finger to another section of the map. “Sometimes here, so that guards may appear at a moment’s notice.” He folded his arms across his chest. “Sometimes both, if the King is particularly worried about such things or has made many enemies.”

Manx paused a moment. When Grendelak said no more she continued, reaching out to indicate two fairly distant points on the map. “These two doors lead to the dungeon,” she said flatly. “I have no map of the dungeon and know only which doors lead there.”

Grendelak leaned over again and studied the map carefully, his finger tracing paths here and there, pausing to again ask Manx the purpose of each room. Some she recalled, but others she could not. Finally Grendelak pointed to three distinct rooms that Manx clearly recalled were indoor jacks. He took the quill from her hand and drew a straight line across the map of the palace and stopped at the edge of the parchment. “That’s where we’re going in,” he said finally.

Manx traced the path with her eyes and then faced the wall and stared at it, as though she could see through it straight to the palace. She turned slightly to the west, where Grendelak had just pointed, her brow wrinkled as she tried to recall what lay just outside the palace wall in that direction.

Finally Grendelak chuckled and leaned over to whisper in her ear. “The sewers, Manx, the sewers.”

She whirled to face him, forcing him to take a rapid step away from her. “You are teasing me, aren’t you?” she asked with a tone of incredulity.

Grendelak snorted. “No, Skald, I am not. Did you expect me to march through the front doors and announce myself?”

Manx looked stunned for a moment and sighed ruefully. “I suppose I hadn’t considered that. But really, Grendelak, the sewers?” she wrinkled her nose. “Isn’t there another way?”

He shook his head. “Not for us, there isn’t. Every castle ever built lines up their waterclosets along one or two lines because it’s cheaper and easier to build that way. It’s the only certain way to get in and the only one they won’t likely be watching because if you’re right, they know

we're coming and who'd believe that I'd drag a beautiful woman through the sewers?"

He watched her blanch at his words and tried to explain. "Manx, I could find another way in, but it could take days. And we don't have days. It's the sewers or nothing."

Manx threw up her hands in defeat. "I guess it will be the sewer then, but I don't relish the thought of it and I hope we can leave by a more traditional means," she said hopefully.

Grendelak laughed regretfully. "If we do this right, I'm afraid it's going to be the same route home, Skald," he grew unexpectedly serious. "And if we don't, we won't be leaving anyway, so it really won't matter."

Manx swallowed past the lump in her throat at his words, not needing any time at all to decide that the idea of traversing the sewer wasn't so bad after all.

They continued to go over the map for most of the afternoon. Finally Grendelak straightened and stretched. "Alright, Manx, that's enough." He stepped to the window and glanced out, trying to gauge the position of the sun. He turned back to face her. "We've got at least a glass before the sun sets, and another one after that before it is dark enough that we can make our way to the palace." He gestured toward the bed. "You get some rest while I make some plans and I'll wake you a bit later. Then we'll have a bite to eat and I'll let you know what I come up with."

At first Manx looked as though she were about to argue, but at the expression on Grendelak's face she must have decided against it. He knew she was quite tired after their early morning march to the city and hadn't had a chance to sleep in a bed for weeks. She dutifully climbed onto the bed and curled up. Grendelak watched her for nearly a quarter glass before her eyes finally closed completely and he was certain she was no longer awake.

He sat back in a chair near the bed, his elbows resting on the arms and his fingers pressed together while he considered the task ahead. It wasn't just killing the king that worried him. In fact, he was fairly certain that would be an easy thing to do. It was the priest, Tahure, that turned his stomach in knots. When he recalled Manx's insistence that she come along to deal with the priest he tensed and looked over at her sleeping form. His eyes narrowed at the thought of what Tahure might do to her, making his decision that much easier.

He sat quietly until the room started to darken before he stood and padded quietly across the room, snatching up his pack in one hand and his boots in another. He stopped by the bed and stared down at the skald, then bent over and kissed the top of her blonde head. "I'm sorry, but I can't let you risk your life just to make your silly Tale come true. If it's

meant to be, Manx, it will be—whether you are there to make it happen or not,” he whispered.

He straightened and left the room, carefully barring it from the outside with the length of wood he knew was craftily hidden within the door jamb just in case someone discovered the tunnel that led from the Brother’s Hall to the inn. *That will keep her inside until I return. Safe and sound*, he thought, pleased with himself. *And angry as hell*, he added, wincing at the thought. *At least she’ll be alive to be angry with me. And that’s what is important. Even if she awakens and manages to get out, she’ll spend hours trying to find a sewer grate to get inside and by then I’ll either be finished or dead.* He knew he had no intention of entering through the sewers when he’d told her they would. The smell alone would alert anyone inside the palace to his presence. He felt a slight twinge again at misleading her, but pushed the guilt aside. This was his task and he wasn’t about to let her get herself killed. Besides, he’d only worry about her if he knew she was in the palace and distractions like that were what got a man killed.

He slipped down the hall toward the common room, stopping at the last intersection and giving a high pitched, but very short, whistle that any member of the Brotherhood would recognize. He hoped the innkeep would hear him and not some traitorous Brother, but he’d gladly deal with the latter if it came to that. Grendelak grinned and dropped his hand to the hilt of his sword, clenching it tightly at thought.

A moment later he heard footsteps and pulled back into the hall. He watched the silhouette of the innkeep against the far wall as the man walked down the hall, whistling a little tune of his own and acting as though he were just checking on the state of the corridor.

The innkeep showed no surprise when he turned down the corridor and saw Grendelak leaning against the inner wall. The man walked twenty more feet down the hall before he stopped and waited for Grendelak to join him.

“That is dangerous, you know,” the innkeep growled under his breath at the sight of Grendelak’s sleeveless armor and bared Oath cuts. “They watch for just such things.”

Grendelak smiled tightly. “Let them,” he stated grimly. “Keep an eye on my room. I wouldn’t want my *sister* to follow where I go this eve, she is the jealous type.”

The innkeep nodded. “Of course, good sir,” the other man returned. “Why don’t I take you out the kitchen door just to make sure she can’t question anyone else about seeing you leave,” he suggested slyly.

Grendelak bowed his head and indicated with a sweeping gesture that the innkeep should lead on. The innkeep led him back down the hall and through a small door near the end of the hall. Once he opened

it, Grendelak could see that it led to the kitchen. The innkeep held it open, waiting for Grendlak to pass through.

“How long do you wish your room kept then sir?” the innkeep asked.

Grendelak stopped halfway through the door. “Mid morning, innkeep. If I am held up you can have my *sister* pay you,” he said gravely.

The innkeep nodded curtly before he scurried back down the hall to the common room, leaving Grendelak to fend for himself and find his way through the kitchen. He hoisted his pack securely over one shoulder and strode through the room, smiling at a cook and pinching a serving wench jovially, as though he had not a care in the world. His eyes found the door to the alley easily and he waved jauntily as he slipped out the door and into the streets of Corrigan.

The alley behind the Brother’s Friend was clear, as he had expected it would be after dark. He still stuck to the shadows as he moved down to the alley to the third building from the inn. He took his silk climbing rope out of his pack and attached a grappling hook to the end.

Up and over the wall of the building he went, quickly rolling up his rope as he lay scanning the roof. Seeing nothing untoward on the roof, he crept across it to the far wall, which provided two foot of protection for him to hide behind.

He waited a few seconds for his heart to slow down. It had always kicked up right before he finished a contract, and this night would be the end of all contracts for him—one way or another. Once his heart had slowed, he pulled his crossbow from his back, took a bolt from the quiver at his belt, and took the small vial Manx had given him out of a pouch at his belt.

He set the vial on top of his pack and then pushed the tip of the quarrel through the thin cork that covered its mouth. While letting the tip of the quarrel sit in the vial, he pulled himself up to peer over the low wall of the roof and out over the city of Corrigan.

As he had expected, there were still some lights in buildings and homes across the city but many more buildings were dark. The palace itself was fairly well lit and he could see dots of light high in the sky that could only be the towers of the wall that surrounded the palace. He glanced around and traced a path from this building to the next and the one after that. He knew how to get to the wall from here safely, but could not be certain that the tree he remembered on the east side of the palace still stood.

He smiled at the memory of the challenge young boys made often to one another to see which one of them could get from this very building to the tree and shinny down its trunk to stand in the courtyard of the palace. The guards would try to hide their smiles as they grabbed the young boy by the scruff of the neck and dragged him through the gatehouse before unceremoniously dumping him on the street outside, but Grendelak clearly

recalled that many of them could not hide their smiles—as if they knew of the game and had played it themselves in their youth.

He lowered himself back out of sight, held the vial with one hand and extracted the quarrel from it with the other. Carefully Grendelak pulled back his crossbow and lowered the bolt into it. He picked up the vial and slid it back into his pouch before he pushed himself to a crouch and began making his way across the rooftop.

Grendelak kept his eyes and ears alert, watching for any sign that he'd been sighted. He didn't want to use the bolt too early, but if he had to silence someone that might prevent him from reaching the palace, he would. He chuckled as he reached the edge of the roof and realized that the next roof was not nearly as far away as the recollections of a small boy made it seem. The few feet to the next roof had seemed like a gulf as wide as the Continental Egress in his youth but now, now those few feet were no more a problem than stepping over a puddle in the road.

He moved from rooftop to rooftop easily, pausing now and again to lie against a slate roof and sink into the darkness while groups of two or three passed by on the street below.

It took several turns of the glass, but he finally came within sight of the tree and he sighed with relief when he saw that while it wasn't nearly as large as his memory recalled, it was tall and, he judged, strong enough to bear his weight as a man. He laid out flat on the roof and propped himself up on his arms to survey the palace and, more importantly, the watch.

After watching for half a glass he rolled over onto his back and breathed in deeply, trying to calm the anxiety he suddenly felt well up in his gut. The last half mile of his trek across the rooftops had been treacherous, with more and more people on the streets and more lights the closer he came to the palace. His shoulders were hard as a rock at the moment and that was a death sentence for someone in this line of work. He needed to be loose, able to react instantaneously, not stiff and moving like an Amorician plow horse.

He closed his eyes and cleared his mind, forcing his breathing to a slow, regular pattern. Once he felt the tension flow out of his muscles he rolled back onto his stomach and let his eyes roam across the palace walls. His mind returned to the task at hand and instantly began to dissect the movement of guards, the pattern of flickering lights as they moved from one window to the next within the palace itself, and the sound of voices coming from beyond the palace. *Likely the stable boys amusing themselves*, he thought and immediately dismissed them.

He watched the guard meet in the middle of the wall and turn. He sat up and dug through his pack for his silk rope and slung it over his shoulder. He slung his crossbow from a leather thong on his belt and moved into a

crouch. He knew he had a quarter turn of the glass before the guards would return and he had to be down the tree and pressed against that wall before then.

He mumbled a prayer to Healfherd to keep him hidden and to T'Ador for fleetness of feet before he moved to the edge of the building. He looked across the five foot expanse between him and the nearest branch and realized that with his weight if he jumped and grabbed it, it would creak and rustle enough to attract attention.

He took a deep breath and laid flat against the roof so that he could see the men on the wall while he waited for them to meet and turn again. His eyes narrowed in the dark and his mind recalled that the outer wall of the keep was craggy, not marble smooth like so many others built in the last century. He smiled wryly and flexed his fingers. A moment later his face fell.

He couldn't make it in time. Thirty feet, quarter of a glass. It wasn't enough time. He'd have to hang on the side of the wall while the guard turned and then finish his ascent. Grendelak chewed on his bottom lip as he considered his chances.

Finally he decided that it was either that or march in through the front gate and since that wasn't really an option, he didn't have a choice. He crawled on his belly to the backside of the house and, after determining there was no one nearby, tied a grappling hook to the rope and affixed it to the roof.

He shimmied down quickly and then cursed himself for his decision. He couldn't retrieve the rope without making noise. He looked around anxiously and finally hid as much of the rope as possible behind some kind of flowering plant and prayed his luck would hold and no one would notice.

He slipped into the shadows and eased himself toward the wall. He hoped he'd been counting time correctly as he began to pick his way upward toward the top of the wall. Five feet from the top he was about ready to stop when he reached up to gain a handhold and felt the rock crumble in his hand. The sharp edge cut along his hand and he bit down on his lip to keep from swearing.

Grendelak could hear the sound of the guard approaching and he forced his breath to slow. Hanging by one hand, hugging the wall, bleeding, he prayed like he'd never prayed before. He asked just about every god he could think of for help, minus the ones he wasn't really willing to accept help from, and decided right there that if he made it over this wall alive that he was going to start paying more attention to the gods.

A guard called out, "Name thyself!" and another voice immediately returned, "I am the night walker, Remelus' man!" Grendelak smiled at

the sound, understanding that the man's reply had been the watchword for the evening. His spirits began to climb a bit as he began to believe he might yet make it out of the palace alive.

He heard the guards begin to march off again and he waited as long as possible before he threw his hand upward, groping for a hold. He found one and then another and finally pulled himself up over the parapet. He looked left, then right, then immediately went to peer over the inside of the wall.

He saw no guards below and knew he had limited time to get off the wall so he lowered himself gently over the inside wall, feeling for a foothold. His stomach fell as he realized there was none.

The inside wall was smooth.

Grendelak closed his eyes for a long dreadful moment before he remembered the tree. He frantically looked to the tree and decided he could reach it before the guard returned, but he would be in plain sight for at least one meeting of the guard.

Better that than sure death standing here on the wall! He berated himself for his sudden fear and inaction. A year ago he would have automatically gone for the tree without any of this hesitation. *A year ago I would have known the inside wall was smooth, would have bribed the guards to ignore me and would have come in through the back door!* He argued with himself as he began to make his way toward the tree. Two merlons down and he could reach the tree with ease. He stopped short of the last merlon and climbed into the crenellation first, then to the top of the merlon. He reached out and grabbed the tree lightly, trying to climb into it gently.

He began to shinny down the branch to the trunk, stopping only to hold himself perfectly still, hanging under the branch by his hands and knees, while the guard again met and turned. As they left he returned to his task and within minutes had reached the trunk. He clambered down to the ground and immediately moved to sit in the shadow of the wall while he considered the bailey before him.

He realized the hardest part was over. *No, the second hardest*, he reminded himself. *Getting out will be the hardest. It always is.* He stood and peered across the bailey, trying to pick out the kitchen, his mind overlaying Manx's map with what he saw now. Grendelak reached down and pulled his crossbow free from his belt and slipped into the darkness toward the palace.

Chapter 21

Checking his belt for the tenth or twelfth time, Grendelak stood very still next to the door that led into the kitchens. He knew he was in the right place, and he knew that he could bluff his way in past the kitchen help if there were no guards inside, but if there was a guard, there could be trouble. He needed more information and he needed it soon. The longer he waited the more likely it became that someone would notice he didn't belong in the palace and dispatch the guard.

The door began to creak open and Grendelak stiffened. The hand that pushed the door open was small and wrinkled, likely a pot-boy. Slowly, Grendelak pulled his dagger from the sheath on his belt and waited until the young boy belonging to those hands stepped through the doorway and was clear of it. Just as the boy was turning his head Grendelak's way, he deftly wrapped a hand around the small mouth, jerked the child off of his feet and out of the doorway, and pushed the door closed with his foot.

Holding the dagger in front of the boy's surprised face, he whispered, "One shout out of you and I'll leave your nose for the guards to find, understood?" It came out more harshly than he'd intended, and the boy's eyes grew large with fear. The child tried to nod around Grendelak's hand. "Good, now I'm going to take my hand away, and ask you some questions. Try to run or shout for help and all the guards will find is your body with my dagger in it." He let the dagger drop slowly; the boy's eyes following it downward until it poked into the small chest just a little and the boy winced. Grendelak eased his hand away a little bit, keeping it close in case the boy should want to make noise.

“Very good. I just need a little information, and before you know it you’ll be chasing girls and evil knights about the palace again, understood?” he asked.

“Yes,” the boy answered quietly.

“Then we can get on just fine. You never catch a snake by beating its tail.” He chanced one of the ‘truths’ the street urchins traded regularly.

The boy looked positively relieved at his words. “And you never want to catch one by meeting its head,” he completed, trying to turn toward Grendelak.

“No, my boy,” Grendelak muttered as he kept the boy from turning. “It’s best for us both if you don’t know me.” *And easier for me to do what I must* he finished silently.

Grendelak swallowed hard, relaxing his grip on the boy even more as he felt the muscles under the hand he kept resting on the boy’s shoulder relax. “How many guards are there in the kitchen, my little urchin?”

“None. They used to keep some in there, but they’re all out hunting the FreeSwords now,” the boy replied.

“How long have you worked here?”

“Enough to know that I don’t like guards.” Grendelak felt the slight shrug of the boy’s shoulders as he replied. “I hope the FreeSwords kill ’em all,” the boy said conversationally.

Grendelak’s gaze dropped briefly to his bare arms and his scars. Well, there were FreeSwords who had sworn to the King here also. “Do you often see FreeSwords about the kitchens?” he asked, trying to keep his tone casual.

“Not like you,” the boy replied matter-of-factly. Grendelak barely contained his surprise that the boy had been observant enough to take note of his Oath cuts. “They’re all quiet and even the cook bosses them about. The guards call ’em whipped curs, and they act like it too.”

“Thank you. Trust me when I say there is nothing personal in this, but I cannot have you running about,” Grendelak said slowly as he clamped his hand back over the boy’s mouth. As he raised his dagger high over his head he felt the boy begin to struggle. He could not allow the boy to distract him; if it was not done just right it could be painful.

He swung the dagger down hard, but not too hard, smacking the hilt into the back of the boy’s head. There was a sickening thud and the boy went limp. “I’m sorry, little urchin,” Grendelak muttered as he pulled off his cloak and wrapped the boy in it, covering him completely and laying him a few feet from the door.

Grendelak looked toward the door the boy had come through. Now it was time to roll the dice. He hunched his shoulders, slouched a bit, and forced his normally bold gaze down toward the ground. He pulled the

door open and did his best to saunter into the kitchens, looking as though he were trying to avoid work. There were two women, a girl about the age of the boy he had left outside, and two other boys. One of the women laughed when he entered.

“Ere now! Aren’t all of y’ sleeveless buffoons suppost t’ be wi’ the Duke?” she asked in a reproachful tone, and Grendelak’s mind conjured up the memory of similar scoldings from his youth, a wooden spoon in the woman’s hand shaking at him in time with her words.

“Yes, I was hurt in the last battle, and was not able to go, mistress.” There was a general giggle.

“Eye! I’m no Mistress! I’m th’ cook!” The woman exclaimed with indignation.

“Of course, lady cook,” he replied as he scuffled toward the door, his eyes still downcast.

“That’s better, tis. Scurry off an’ find yer betters boy, afore I put ye’ on th’ pots,” she scoffed.

He resisted the urge to fix her face in his mind, and scuttled out the door that looked to head deeper into the palace. As soon as he was clear of the kitchen, he started looking for a way to get near the throne room, where there was likely to be less traffic this time of the day.

Grendelak found what he was looking for by hunching his shoulders and wandering the halls. He had been prowling the halls for nearly an hour and was worried that one of the servants would start talking about “that FreeSword skulking around in the halls . . .” when he saw a servant come out of a narrow hallway wearing a tabard with gold embossing around the Green-and-White symbol of the King. Grendelak turned away and walked slowly from sight, his ears focused on the sounds of the servant walking down the hall. As soon as the sound of the servant’s footsteps faded away, he turned back and headed for the hallway from which the servant had appeared.

He turned down the narrow hallway, his eyes alert for any tell-tale sign of the more secret passages that he knew were around the throne room and the King’s private chambers. Guards, too, he watched for, for they must certainly be stationed along the hallway, likely behind doors that melted into the very walls and formed embrasures in the throne room. From the length of hall and the double wide ornate doors in the larger corridor from which he’d come, he was fairly certain that the throne room was to his right. He inwardly cursed himself for not paying more attention to the layout of the palace the night he’d come with the Brotherhood, the night the First Brother had been murdered before his eyes.

Grendelak shook his head, pushing away the pain of that night and trying to leave only the recollection of the long walk to the dais where the

King had been sitting. He mentally calculated the distance and then counted the steps as he crept down the hall. When he finally judged that he'd gone far enough he began a more thorough search of the walls, focusing on the wall away from the throne room. A few moments of running his sensitive fingers across the wall yielded the discovery of a slight indentation running in a straight line between the floor and a point on the wall higher than Grendelak could reach.

Grendelak grinned wryly, knowing he'd found the door. He bit his lower lip as he concentrated on following the indentation with his eyes up and . . . He squinted as he tried to make out the indentation that marked the upper edge of the door. To the right, it went, and he followed it across and then back down. He reached out to the wall and laid his palm against it at waist height, then began to slowly move his fingers up the wall in a line running parallel with the groove. A few inches above the spot where he'd begun his fingers detected a slight change in the texture of the wall and Grendelak tried to contain his sudden excitement. He moved his finger past the slight dip in the wall and pushed, not at all surprised to discover that the depression was a secret mechanism for opening the door to another hallway. He'd seen many such mechanisms, though none that operated so quiet a door.

He took a deep breath and slipped inside the corridor, correctly assuming that the door would close behind him momentarily. Grendelak knew the king was down this corridor somewhere, but he also knew the man would not likely be alone. He stopped moving at the thought, suddenly uncertain. Every man he'd killed in past had been accomplished according to a very detailed, well laid out plan. One he'd spent weeks, sometimes even months, refining. To simply march into the king's suite and try to kill him was . . . madness. Grendelak turned and fixed his gaze on the door behind him, the door that led to safety, to the hall and beyond to the walls of the palace. He swiveled his head slowly and faced the long, low lit corridor that led to what could only be certain death.

"This is insane," he whispered, still staring down the hallway. "Healfherd guide my feet," he prayed, surprising himself as the words left his mouth without a thought. To his surprise, he suddenly *felt* more confident, though the lingering echo of a female's laughter in his ears did nothing to settle his unease at having called upon a god for help. He'd prayed in the past, but his heart had never been in it before. He'd called on them with as much sincerity as a drunk man tells a bar maid he loves her. But now, he surprised even himself when he realized he'd meant what he just said.

He picked up one foot and set it down quietly, then the next, until he was finally walking down the hall. He tried to keep his eyes moving, tried to listen for the voices he knew he should hear, but for some reason his

eyes kept straying to a door farther down the hallway on the right. He found himself moving nearly automatically toward it, until he stood outside it. Grendelak cocked his head and stared at the door, not really understanding why he felt drawn to it.

His thoughts suddenly drifted to the Brotherhood, to Felander and Manx, to his father, and then back to the king. In his mind's eye he saw Tahure standing next to him in the throne room, a leering grin on his face as Brother Nolphen's blood stained the floor beneath his dying body. Grendelak's resolve returned and he automatically reached for the mechanism he knew would open the door. His finger stopped before it could push the mechanism and he drew it back as though it might burn his finger.

He stared at the mechanism, all his previous doubts returning in a rush. *I was not an assassin before, he told himself, but now . . . there is no other word to describe what I am about to do. I have lost my family, the Brotherhood . . . and now I go to lose the last shreds of honor that cling to me like bits of meat from fat man's chin.*

Grendelak's brows furrowed as he considered his task. *I won't do it, he thought fiercely, I won't lose what little I have left just to satisfy some Tale . . . I can't, I won't . . .*

He started to back away from the door when the song he'd first heard Manx sing for him started echoing in his head. Over the song he heard his father's dying words . . . "*Haddon will be avenged, I will be avenged. My beloved Corrigar . . . ?*"

And suddenly his steadfastness returned and he knew it would not leave him again. Again he heard the soft laughter of a woman in his ears and he knew, *knew*, with the certainty of a FreeSword that his Brothers would stand behind him that the laughing voice was Healfherd. "*Goddess of loyal friends and thieves,*" he prayed silently, this time doing so without reservation and with some measure of belief, "*if this is truly my fate, then guide my steps. If tonight I meet you, then guide my soul where it rightfully belongs.*"

Grendelak felt a light touch on his mind, as though someone were trying to comfort him. For the briefest of moments he felt as though he were the center of the world; as if he were the most important man in all creation. Then the feeling left him and the laughing and the singing stopped and his mind was suddenly clear again. He reached up and touched the mechanism that would open the door and stood back as it gently slid open.

Grendelak reached down and touched the crossbow with the bolt he'd prepared earlier, caressing the hilt and reassuring himself that it was still at his side. He smiled grimly, recalling the Bloodrot Manx had hidden away after the King had sent his assassins after Gendelak, and of the irony

that the King would die by the same poison he planned to have used on Grendelak.

Grendelak took a deep breath and let it out slowly to calm his nerves as he stepped quietly into the room.

Manx stood in the middle of the room in the Brother's Friend, hands on hips and fuming. She looked futilely for something, *anything*, breakable that she could throw against the wall but found nothing suitable. At long last she berated herself for wasting time throwing a fit and began to pace the confines of the small room.

Grendelak had locked her in, barred the door from outside it seemed, but that wasn't a problem. She looked toward the window and knew that she was small enough to slip through it. She pursed her lips as she considered where she would go once she got out of the room. She grimaced as she realized she had no idea what time it was nor how long Grendelak had been gone.

"*Well, there's naught for it, I suppose,*" she told herself pragmatically. "*He's going to need my help before the end and I absolutely must be there or . . .*" She swallowed hard against the sudden bile that rose in her throat at the thought. She shook her head and berated herself for her thinking negatively and strode to the window.

She began cursing in several languages when she discovered the window was made of a solid pane of glass-steel. Hard enough she couldn't break and with no way to open it, she was well and truly trapped. "*He knew that when he chose this room!*" she fumed. "Stop it," she told herself aloud. "Stop it and think. How do you get out of a locked room?"

She stared at the ceiling and a moment later began chuckling. *The ceiling, of course. It's naught but wood plank and then straw above.* She moved to the bed and stood on it, her eyes scanning back and forth as she sought the wooden pegs that should be holding the planks in place. She smiled, finding them, and then concentrated on them, her eyes narrowing as she focused in on the pegs. They'd have been put in wet, and when they'd dried, they'd have expanded to fill the hole and push out against the wood, holding the plank tightly in place. Manx stared at one for a long moment and then whispered a single elven word, "Mahere!"

The peg responded by shrinking and within a few seconds it dropped neatly to the floor and rolled away. She hated to waste her time and what little magik she could use getting out of this room, but she really had no choice. When she'd shrunk enough pegs that the board was loose she reached up and pulled it from its place, leaving a space nearly a foot wide for her to climb through.

She shook her head, then jumped up and grabbed the edge of the board, pulling her feet up between her hands and pushing her legs up and over the edge until she was nearly sitting on the plank. She flipped herself over onto her belly in one smooth move and then backed up until she could pull her head through the opening. She stood and found that even she needed to duck up here, and put her arms above her head, feeling for the roof. She felt the thatch and sighed with a measure of relief, for if the roof had been slate or wood she believed she would have screamed with frustration.

She punched hard at the roof until her fist broke through and felt the cool night air. Manx used both her hands to pull at the thatch until she could fit through the opening and then pulled herself up onto the roof. Sliding down the roof, she sat on the edge and mumbled a prayer under her breath before she jumped to the alley below.

After dusting herself off she pulled the cowl of her cloak up over her head so that it shadowed her face and strode down the alley and into the street outside the inn, swaying her hips back and forth as though she were the most satisfied elf in the whole of Nordalia.

She stopped briefly outside to look around, noting the darkness and the torches moving back and forth somewhere in the distance. She'd been to Corrigan enough times to know how to reach the palace, but she'd never taken anything other than a direct route. Tonight she needed to be a bit more cautious.

She chewed on her lower lip as she walked in the direction of the palace, her mind working on a way that would get her into the palace without arousing suspicion. As she entered the district that contained the palace she smiled to herself and walked with a slight spring in her step for a moment, pleased with her plan but knowing it was the last bit of magik she could use lest she be caught unawares by Tahure.

Manx slipped into an alley and slid her pack from her shoulder, letting it slide gently to the ground. She rummaged around in it for a moment before she pulled out a silver-backed mirror. Taking a deep breath, she held it up and stared into it, then began chanting softly in the language of the elves.

Anyone watching would have seen little more than a shimmering cloud form around the skald, but would have been surprised when the woman who emerged from that cloud looked nothing like the elf that had entered the alley moments before. Manx walked quickly toward the palace but as she neared the guard-house at the main gate she slowed, pushing her cloak back to reveal a silky white shoulder and swaying her hips as she approached.

Manx was nervously counting the minutes in her head as two of the guards moved out from either side of the gate and waited for her, knowing that if she took too long with the guards that the image surrounding her

would fade, leaving only a small elven skald and arousing the suspicion of the guards. The nodding heads of the guards told her they appreciated the image she'd conjured, and she silently prayed to Lordston, god of skalds, to let her pull this one off.

"Hold!" one of the guards called out as he held up his hand, palm out.

Manx sashayed toward him until she nearly bumped into his hand, setting a pretty pout upon her face. "And what part of me would you like to hold, handsome?" she asked in a teasing voice.

She heard the whistles and growls of more guards waiting at their posts, clearly watching her and not the surrounding area, and winked in their direction, which merely drew more catcalls. Manx wished they'd hurry, for her ability to hold the image wouldn't last much longer.

The guard who'd stopped her leered at her. "What's yer business in the palace, ma'am?"

Manx licked her lips slowly and smiled. "Well, I'm sure I don't have to spell that out to a man like you, now do I?"

The guard reddened and cleared his throat. "No, ma'am, but I'll need to . . . ummm . . . search you before I let you in. King's orders, even for . . ." he struggled with what to call her, "you." He finally finished lamely, a sheepish grin on his face.

Manx held her arms out wide and put an alluring look on her face. "You go right ahead and . . . search me," she said invitingly, trying to keep the revulsion from her voice. "And if you do a good job, maybe I'll stop by on my way out just for you."

The man swallowed hard and felt one arm and then another, then patted her on the behind. "You're just fine," he said nervously, "You can go right in."

Manx slowly took a step forward and stopped even with the man, turning her head to look at him. "You did a good job, soldier," she said promisingly before she began walking through the gate and toward the palace.

She waited until she was certain she couldn't be seen by the guards at the gate and then dropped the illusion, heaving a sigh of relief. She rubbed at her arms where the guard had touched her, as though he'd left a film of grease on them. She shuddered, hoping she never had to pull a stunt like that again; it was just too horrid for her to think about.

She looked up at the stars and noted the darkness of the sky, figuring it to be just past mid night. Worried about how long Grendelak had been on his own, she looked around and determined where the servants' entrance might be, then made a bee line for the door.

Grendelak looked around the dimly lit sitting room, his ears alert for any sound that might indicate the whereabouts of the king. He slid into

the shadow of a door at the sound of a voice and flattened himself against the wall. The door opened and he could hear the voice of a man coldly ordering someone to find him a decent glass of wine and the mewling of an effeminate voice repeating “yes, your majesty” and growing in strength with each passing second. Grendelak held his breath as the door opened and a thin man backed out, a tray held awkwardly in front of him as he kept his body bowed while trying to get out of the room. Grendelak quirked an eyebrow at the broken glass on the tray and the scent of blood assaulted his heightened senses.

The man with the tray kept bowing and backing up until the door closed, then stood abruptly and scurried out the room, not even sparing a glance in Grendelak’s direction. As the outer door opened and closed, Grendelak released the breath he’d been holding. He waited a few more minutes, then a few more to be sure no one else was about, then moved toward the door.

He noted that the door was of the swinging kind, probably so the servants could bow all the way out. Remelus was just the kind of a man that would enjoy forcing such behavior upon his servants. Grendelak smiled, pulling the crossbow with the poison bolt. He readied the crossbow and took another deep breath before he kicked the door open and moved to stand just inside the room, his eyes immediately scanning for the king.

The king was lying on his side in his bed, a platter of grapes and other fruits Grendelak did not recognize sitting on the table near his head. The king had something in his hand and his mouth hung open as though Grendelak had interrupted him in mid-bite.

The king’s eyes narrowed as he took in the Oath cuts on Grendelak’s bare forearm. He fixed angry eyes on Grendelak. “You,” he hissed. “You won’t leave this room alive.”

Grendelak smiled sardonically but said nothing. He raised the crossbow and took aim, ignoring the king’s sudden surprise and the screams that began coming from his mouth. Grendelak held his breath and fired the crossbow, watching with satisfaction as the bolt struck home, right into the king’s belly.

The king stopped yelling in mid-scream, and looked in astonishment at the quarrel sticking in his gut. He looked down at it as if he’d never seen such a thing before and then began working his mouth as though he were trying to say something.

Grendelak hefted the crossbow and rested it on his shoulder as he walked casually to the side of the king’s bed, looking down on him dispassionately.

“That, Remelus the *last*, is for Brother Nolphen,” he reached down and took hold of the quarrel and pushed it further into the man’s gut.

“ . . . and for the Brotherhood, and for Corrigan,” he continued the recitation of his litany of names, pushing the quarrel further into the king with each name he spoke threw clenched teeth. “. . . and for Haddon . . . and for my father, Duke Troma.”

The king futilely tried to shake his head, but the poison was beginning to sap his strength. Grendelak saw his face pale and observed the panic in eyes. His grip on the quarrel loosened and finally Grendelak snatched his hand away from the king. He realized that while this had certainly been ironic, that it was also far too slow and that for some reason he couldn't articulate he simply couldn't stand here and watch the man slowly die.

He felt the king's gaze fixed on him as he drew a dagger from its sheath inside his boot. Grendelak was certain the rasp of the steel against its sheath could be heard throughout the palace for the sound echoed in his ears louder than a herd of Kantor-Doornian wildbeasts. He raised the dagger and laid it across the king's throat, trying to ignore the abject fear in the man's eyes. “It's quicker this way, less painful,” he explained lamely, trying to make the man understand that even though he was here to kill him that he couldn't let him die such a long, drawn out painful death.

He closed his eyes as he pulled the dagger quickly across the king's throat and turned away from the spray of blood he knew would erupt as he cut the man's jugular. Grendelak stumbled back several feet and heard the dagger clatter to the floor as it slipped from his hand as the magnitude of what he'd just done hit him. He opened his eyes to see the king's blood flowing over the bed and onto the floor. He saw the light in the man's eyes flare one last time in desperation before they went out forever. Grendelak began retching; losing the contents of his stomach and mixing his own stench with the smells of the nearly dead man, causing him to retch even more violently.

Grendelak staggered out of the room, one arm held across his stomach as he doubled over with the pain of his heaving. His leg slammed into a chair in the sitting room and he nearly fell, but managed to reach out with a hand and grab the arm, guiding himself into a sitting position while he finished retching, his head between his knees.

He finally sat up and leaned back, still breathing heavily, trying to collect himself. He'd never before reacted like this to killing a man. *You've never watched their eyes before, either.* A voice replied in his head. He started at the thought, because it was true. He killed from a distance, from behind, but never in front of his victims. He'd never seen the light of life fade from a man's eyes nor seen the expressions that cross a man's face as he realizes he is lost. And he'd never killed a man without being bound by his Oaths to do so.

His face felt wet and he reached up a hand and realized there were tears on his face. He furiously wiped at his eyes and shook himself to clear

his mind. He had to find the priest, and he had to find him soon, before the priest found him.

His head swung up and he froze as he heard voices outside in the corridor. His stomach churned and he was certain he would have retched again if he'd had anything left to lose when he realized that one of the voices belonged to Manx.

Manx had easily managed to navigate through the servants' quarters and into the main hall. No one paid much attention to women in a keep, especially a tiny woman who walked the halls purposefully in the middle of the night and could pass for a child if need be.

Manx headed for the king's suite of rooms, hoping to catch Grendelak there. She hadn't told Grendelak all the secrets of the palace, because she'd planned on being with him to show him. She'd slipped into the narrow corridor and had almost reached the door she knew would take her into the king's rooms when a laughing voice stopped her in her tracks.

She swallowed hard, recognizing the voice instantly. She turned slowly and straightened, facing the Chosen Priest she'd been hoping to avoid. But even as she'd hoped they could circumvent him, she'd known in her heart that she couldn't keep away from this meeting any more than Grendelak could avoid killing the king.

"Tahure," she spat, loud enough for her voice to be heard in the thick walled corridor.

"Manx," he called out conversationally, "Where is your Assassin?"

"Not here, Tahure. I left him behind."

Tahure laughed, throwing his head back in delight. "Oh, Manx," he said, shaking his head. "You are a terrible liar when you aren't trying. We both know he's here, it was his task to kill the king and yours to meet with me. We know how to read the Tale as well, you know."

Manx bit her lower lip nervously, truly frightened for the first time in her life. She didn't know whether Grendelak had managed to kill the king or not, or even if he'd made it this far.

"Manx?" she heard a familiar, incredulous voice call out quietly from behind the door to the king's suite.

She breathed a sigh of relief, not acknowledging the query from Grendelak. Just knowing he was alive and that he'd probably already killed the king restored her resolve.

"Yes, Tahure, it is my task to deal with you," she said with more confidence than she felt.

Tahure smiled gleefully and bowed effusively in her direction. "As you wish, my dear," he said, the smile falling from his face and a sneer appearing in its place. "It will be my pleasure to bind you to the altar

myself,” he continued, “right after you watch your dear Assassin beg for his life.”

Manx shuddered inwardly at Tahure’s all too accurate description of her dream but shook it off as best she could. The priest would do whatever he could to sap her strength, including building her fear to the point where it paralyzed her. She shook her head slowly, determined not to allow the memory of that dream stop her from dealing with this man that had plagued her for far too long. She drew her sword from its scabbard, the sound echoing through the corridor.

“Then come, priest, and meet your vile master sooner rather than later,” she snarled, praying that Grendelak stayed behind the door.

Chapter 22

Grendelak rushed to get his feet under himself the instant he heard weapons clashing out in the hall. He felt rather weak after leaving his stomach on the floor, but Manx was about to pay for his treason and that just didn't sit right with him.

Reaching out, he grabbed the edge of the desk and used it as leverage to pull himself to his feet. His staggered a bit and his head swam, taking him more than a few seconds to get his bearings. Pulling his sword from its scabbard, he lurched clumsily toward the door to the main hall.

One of the other doors in the room opened and two figures stepped through, speaking in hushed tones. Grendelak froze.

“. . . seems agitated, your worship, perhaps you can calm him,” came the first voice.

“Of course I can, Father Tasni can soothe agitation with ease,” the other replied.

Grendelak agonized over the decision for a split-second before he groaned and made the only choice he could. He dove at the black-and-red robed man just entering the room, shoving the King's servant that had bowed out earlier out of his way. He jabbed hard with his sword, feeling the tip cut through robes and flesh and then twisted and pulled his sword out. The smell of fresh blood filled the room and there was a hiss of pain from the robed man.

Grendelak stepped back, resting on the balls of his feet. “Draw a weapon or die without one, vile priest of death. I care not either way, but you *will* die in this room.”

The priest made a show of pulling a knobby mace up from the loop that held it on his belt. “Father Tasni seeks your vows, boy,” he said calmly, raising his mace as if he was unhurt.

Grendelak heard the eerie sound of chanting out in the hall coming from a male voice. He gritted his teeth, having committed himself to his course and decided that the only way to help Manx was to try to end this quickly. He jumped toward the priest, aiming the tip of his sword at the man's already wounded stomach. The priest turned, stepping in toward Grendelak, and swung his heavy mace at Grendelak's left kneecap. Grendelak shuffled back quickly and swung down at the arm, feeling satisfaction as he bit the soft flesh below the elbow.

The priest didn't even appear to flinch, turning his blow downward and stepping forward again. Grendelak tried to dodge, but then realized the desk was behind him. The mace bounced off of his thigh, and he grimaced with the ringing pain that followed the blow. Grendelak grabbed the edge of the desk behind him with his off hand to keep his footing and raised his sword to fend off the next blow the priest was already readying.

Manx waited patiently for the priest to come to her, which he did as he drew a scimitar made of some black metal, carrying it as though he knew exactly where to put it to the best use.

"You could join us, Manx. We are many, and strong. We will own Corrigar, and soon other kingdoms. You could be one of us, spreading the faith . . ."

"Save it, Tahure. A lifetime of servitude for the promise of power in the afterlife? Power you can't guarantee? I think I'll follow my own gods, thank you." She waved her elven blade for emphasis.

"As you wish," he sneered, launching into a whirling attack that knocked her blade to the side and nicked the tip of her ear. Manx staggered back, setting her blade in front of her again.

"Are you still so certain?" His tone was menacing as he pointed his scimitar in her direction. "It is not too late to welcome Father Tasni."

"I am certain," Manx replied firmly. Quietly she murmured, "Lentallen Allenia", and her blade began to glow with a soft white light. She met his eyes steadily. "My gods are not absent, Tahure."

The priest stepped back, raising an eyebrow. "Oh. I wasn't aware that this was to be a test of magik, little Skald." He took several more steps away from her and began chanting.

Manx charged, her glowing sword held high, a traditional Nordalian battle cry flying from her lips. Tahure shouted something she could not understand and put a hand out in front of his body, palm facing toward her. Her body started moving more and more slowly and though she fought it with all of her might each step seemed to take even longer, until finally, right before his outstretched hand, her entire body stopped moving. Only her breathing told her he had not ripped her soul from her body.

“Ahhhhh. I thought this might be a new trick for you,” the priest said conversationally, stepping next to her and plucking the sword from her hand. He stepped in front of her and looked her full in the face. “I assure you that it is temporary, but we find it useful when placing people upon Father Tasni’s altar. I was saving that for your Assassin, but since you chose a magical battle, I had no choice, really.” He dropped her sword to the floor and Manx inwardly winced at the sound it made as it clattered against the marble. Tahure sheathed his scimitar carefully, then hefted her from the waist and headed off down the hall.

Manx tried with all of her might to fight, to resist in any way, but her body would not respond to her. Finally, tears of frustration welled up in her eyes and blurred the walls as he took her down a flight of stone stairs to a room with chains on two walls. Manx couldn’t turn her head to verify that an altar to Father Tasni was on the third, but she was filled with dread at the certain knowledge that it was. Tahure unceremoniously dropped her on the floor and chained her to one wall dispassionately. He looked down at her and smiled almost pleasantly. “Now, little skald, I go to find the Assassin, because you see, there are many ways that an Assassin can turn. Given the right impetus one might even choose to turn to Father Tasni.” He left her there and disappeared up the steps even as her limbs slowly started reacting to her commands.

Grendelak managed to block the next blow the priest tried to land, and the next, but the speed and force of the man’s blows prevented him from moving away from the desk, effectively pinning him between his opponent and the desk.

He saw movement out of the corner of his eye and tried not to let it distract him but it reminded him that the King’s servant was still in the room somewhere. He wondered briefly whether the man would be more or less likely to attack him if he knew the King was dead and then pushed the thought aside. He had to deal with the priest now or he was going to be in serious trouble.

The robed man was giving him no quarter whatsoever, and Grendelak spent the next few seconds simply fending off blows. Seeing no alternative, Grendelak knew he’d have to give the priest an opportunity to land one of those blows if he was going to manage to get away from the desk. He ducked a blow that would have caught him squarely in the head and threw himself into a roll, coming to stand with his back to the priest. He immediately started to turn back to face the priest and braced himself as he caught the flash of the metal head of his opponent’s weapon as he turned.

The priest’s mace connected solidly and he bit his lip against the pain that radiated down his arm as the crushing head of the weapon smashed

into his shoulder. He managed to hold onto his weapon despite the numbness that began to creep down his arm and he forced himself to finish his turn while he moved the weapon into his other hand.

Grendelak moved away from the priest, forcing the robed man to chase him across the room toward the door to the main hallway. Grendelak simply defended himself, hoping for an opening but not finding one. By the time he got to the door he'd noticed that the time between the priest's blows was growing longer. Grendelak half smiled, feeling as though perhaps the tide was about to turn. The priest's weapon was heavy, and even a well-trained soldier had difficulties wielding a mace in a litany of constant swings for too long a time.

Grendelak feigned tiredness and pain, though he knew it was not all an act. He still couldn't feel all the fingers on his sword hand and his shoulder screamed with a burning ache from the blow the priest had landed. But he faked a slight stumble and saw the look of victory that flared in the priest's eyes. Grendelak twitched his right shoulder, making certain it worked despite the fact that he couldn't feel it, and made a movement that appeared as though he were reaching for a cramp in his leg.

The priest raised his mace as Grendelak reached for his leg, a cry of victory on his lips. Grendelak reached down as fast as he could and pulled his sole remaining dagger from its hiding place in his boot. The cry was abruptly cut off as Grendelak moved with the speed of a Dilornian water snake and shoved the dagger into the man's heart with all his might.

The priest looked confused as the dagger entered his chest. He looked down at the dagger and then dropped the mace as he reached for the dagger's hilt with both hands, trying to pull it out. Grendelak took a step away from the priest, then lifted a booted heel and kicked the man's hands, driving the dagger deeper into the priest's already dying body. As the man fell to his knees, Grendelak looked down at him impassively, meeting the man's eyes with cool detachment.

Grendelak's head flew up at the sound of a strangled cry. He saw the King's servant backing away from him, his hands covering his mouth and his eyes wide.

"Go!" Grendelak hissed, "Get out before you end up like this one."

The man nodded once, then turned and ran from the room.

"Manx!" Grendelak breathed, suddenly remembering the fight outside in the hallway. He turned and kicked the door open and ran out into the hallway without a second thought, right into the waiting arms of Tahure.

Tahure was surprised by the sight of Grendelak emerging from the doorway, but recovered quickly, grabbing the man by the shoulders, his

strong fingers biting into the FreeSword's flesh. Grendelak flinched as a sharp pain ran down his injured arm.

The priest turned and pushed Grendelak hard, forcing him to flail to keep his balance as he stumbled backward down the hall. He felt strong arms encircle his own and instinctively fought against them.

Tahure walked slowly to stand in front of Grendelak and watched him struggle against his captors for a moment before he reached out and took the other man's chin in his hand, forcing him to meet his eyes.

"Assassin, so good of you to come," Tahure said pleasantly.

Grendelak spit in the man's face, eliciting a reprisal in the form of a sharp blow to the head from one of the men holding him. His head rocked side to side and his vision blurred for a moment before he was able to see clearly again.

"Shall we try that again, FreeSword?" the priest asked scathingly.

Grendelak said nothing, his lips tightening into a firm white line. He stared at Tahure, hatred burning in his eyes.

Tahure stepped back from Grendelak and looked him up and down, as though appraising him. "You look a little worse for the wear, Assassin. We shall have to remedy that before we sacrifice you. We can't send Father Tasni a weak sacrifice."

"That explains why *you* won't be sacrificed then," Grendelak retorted haughtily. He tried to look past Tahure for Manx, but could see no sign of her. He wondered if perhaps he'd only imagined her voice in the hall. He hoped he had, for if Tahure was here and she was not . . . he swallowed hard at the thought.

Tahure smiled wickedly at him. "No, Assassin, your little skald is not here," he taunted Grendelak. Ignoring the growl that came from the FreeSword at his words he continued. "Would you like to join her? You see, it is nearing time for the morning sacrifice and I would dearly like you to join us."

"If you hurt her I'll—"

"You'll what?" Tahure interrupted, laughing out loud at Grendelak. "You'll kill me? Not likely in your condition, nor in the condition you'll be in once we get you downstairs where you belong."

"What is it you want, Tahure?" Grendelak snarled.

"Ahhh . . . you like to get right to the point, don't you?"

When Grendelak did not respond Tahure shrugged. "You, Assassin."

"You want me in her place on the altar? Fine. Just let her go," Grendelak replied, deciding he deserved as much after what he'd done with his life.

Tahure laughed again, almost merrily. "No, Assassin. Not on the altar, in front of it," the priest told him, emphasizing the last few words.

Grendelak's eyes widened in surprise. "You want me to join you?"

“Of course,” Tahure responded. “I want you to join us and to set you on the throne, just as your little skald does, but at least I’ll be honest about why. I’ll bet she hasn’t been, has she?”

Grendelak relaxed slightly and Tahure nodded slightly at the reaction. “She hasn’t told you who she is, kept her true name from you, and I’ll wager she hasn’t mentioned certain *friends* she keeps who would manipulate you once you were on that throne for their own purposes.”

Grendelak shook his head. “She wouldn’t, she serves the Tale—that’s it,” he whispered, not wanting to believe a word Tahure said but knowing most of what he’d said was true.

“She’s just a simple skald of Lordston, is that the story this time?” Tahure clucked as he shook his head. “Grendelak, Grendelak, Grendelak . . .” he began. “What a trusting fool you’ve been.”

Grendelak’s mind was racing. She *hadn’t* told him her true name, but he’d heard it at the meeting of the Dukes at Troma’s estates. She hadn’t spoken of herself very much at all, now that he thought of it. He fought the sudden despair that welled up inside him at the thought that she’d been using him all along, just as he’d suspected.

“She said she loved me,” he whispered to himself.

Tahure shook his head sadly, then reached out and put a hand on Grendelak’s shoulder. “Grendelak, that is the oldest trick in the book. She is a lovely creature, is she not? One of the loveliest I’ve seen. Beguiling, entreating. It is part of her allure, is it not, that she keeps such secrets about her. But like the flower that only opens to trap the fly, she uses her secrets to lure you in. She will destroy you, in the end, she and her *friends*.”

Grendelak’s face fell. *Healfherd, tell me it is not so. Tell me she has not lied to me, that she truly loves me and I will believe you.* He waited a moment but heard no response, had not expected one. He closed his eyes for one long moment, praying one last time. *Please, Healfherd.*

As he had earlier, he felt a light touch on his mind and it cleared, as though the priest’s words had created a fog around his thoughts and muddled them. Suddenly he could see Tahure’s plan, see what the man was trying to do. The rhythm of his words, the tone of his voice. Everything had been to try and turn him to the priest’s own purpose.

Grendelak took a deep breath, then looked up and met Tahure’s expectant eyes. “No.”

Tahure looked surprised, but covered it quickly. “No?”

“No,” Grendelak replied again, this time more firmly. “You are a vile thing, Tahure, and I will have none of you or your bloody altars.”

Tahure’s expression hardened. “You will, Assassin. You will when I bind you to the altar and offer you to Father Tasni myself.” The priest’s robes furled angrily around him as he turned abruptly and began to head down

the hall. He raised an arm and gestured for the men to follow him. "Chain him and bring him!" he called out, his voice angry.

Grendelak began to struggle as the men tried to chain him. A moment later he fell limply to the ground as one of them slammed the hilt of a sword into the back of his head. They chained him easily and dragged him between them down the hall and toward the dungeon.

This time Manx knew she was not dreaming. She could smell the mold growing on the dank, dungeon walls and shivered as the damp cold air crept into her bones. She looked around and cringed as her gaze fell on the obsidian altar on the other side of the room, the altar she knew would be there when she'd been brought down earlier by Tahure. She saw the open doorway to her right and heard sounds in the distance, but saw no one else nearby. She tried to lower her hands, but the heavy chains kept them from moving too far, kept her from reaching the pouches on her belt, kept her from using what magik she had left to free herself. While many of the things she did needed only her concentration and will, those were more parlor tricks than anything else. Something of a magnitude that would free her would require a focus for the *mana* she drew and she couldn't reach anything at the moment.

She tried to calm herself, closing her eyes and purposefully controlling her breathing, until she heard footsteps and the rattling of chains outside the open doorway. Her eyes flew open and focused on the door as Tahure strode through the doorway and made his way toward her. A second and third man followed, a heavily chained man hanging between them. Tahure waved impatiently at the altar and the two priests dragged the man between them over to it and then laid him across the altar, belly up.

Manx's blood ran cold at the sight. She knew the man was Grendelak without needing to see his face, without needing to ask. She shivered, and heard Tahure laugh in response.

"It is almost sunrise, little Skald," he told her maliciously, knowing she would understand that the first Tasnian sacrifice of the day was always performed at sunrise. He crouched next to her and reached out, tracing a path along her chin and up her cheek. She shivered involuntarily, but kept her eyes locked firmly on his, not willing to show any weakness.

Tahure stood abruptly and smiled. "We'll see if you keep such courage about you when we give the Assassin to Father Tasni," he said before he turned and moved to the altar.

Manx began to worry that perhaps all was lost after all, but then she realized that all was not right. In her dream, she had been chained by the feet, not her hands. In her dream, Tahure had gone to sacrifice Grendelak immediately after entering the room, he hadn't waited for sunrise.

A tiny blossom of hope bloomed in her heart that they might yet live. She couldn't see how, but she knew she had to trust the Tale and the Tale said Grendelak would sit on the throne of Corrigar. She knew the Tale needed some help now and again, and that sometimes they missed an important line and that one line could change everything. *It wasn't a True dream*, she thought, relieved. *It was just Tahure trying to lure me here.* Her face fell as she realized she'd fallen for his trap and now Grendelak might die because of her mistake. "*None of that, now, skald,*" a voice told her, "*concentrate on the piece you're missing.*"

Her musings were interrupted by a groan from the direction of the altar. The priest had already cut away Grendelak's shirt and bared his chest. Manx swallowed hard against the fear that filled her as she saw that he was bound too tightly to the altar to really move anything other than his head. She saw him turn his head about the room, saw him take in the room, saw the despair that filled those brown eyes as he finally fixed his gaze on her.

"Manx?" he called out hoarsely.

"I'm here, Grendelak," she called back, trying to keep her voice from wavering.

She winced as a gauntlet covered hand reached out and slammed into Grendelak's head, then grabbed his chin and tipped his head back just a bit. She knew a moment of panic when she saw Tahure lean over him with a vial and pour it down his throat, then expertly laid a hand over his mouth and pinched his nose closed with his thumb and forefinger. She could see Grendelak trying not to swallow, his back arching with the effort as far as his bonds would allow, but knew that he would not be able to stave off the inevitable.

"Just a little something to strengthen you and ease those wounds, Assassin," Tahure's voice was calm as he placed the empty vial into a pouch at his side. "I told you, Father Tasni likes a healthy, strong sacrifice."

Manx closed her eyes and concentrated on what she was missing, trying to ignore the priest as he pulled a set of fine robes from a peg on the wall she hadn't noticed before. "*What am I missing?! Think, Manx, before it is too late,*" she scolded herself.

She heard the beginning of a chant from the other side of the room and knew Tahure was beginning his ritual sacrifice; knew that in a few more minutes even the priest of a good god wouldn't be able to help Grendelak.

Her keen elven hearing picked up the soft sound of a footfall on the stone stairs. She strained with the effort of listening for the sound again and ignoring the priest's voice as it rose and fell with the Tasnian Rite of Sacrifice. When she heard it a second time she nearly yelped with joy. "*The First will be Last and the Last will be First,*" she thought excitedly. "*Felander!*"

Manx chanced a look at the altar and saw Tahure moving to pick up the twisted, serrated ceremonial dagger of a Tasnian high priest. She looked from the doorway to the priest and back again, willing Felander to hurry. She considered calling out to him, but didn't want to lose the element of surprise.

The priest was still chanting, the dagger held high over Grendelak's chest and Manx could see the FreeSword staring resolutely at it, as though he would not be cowed by it or the priest, even so close to death. Manx took a deep breath and began singing the song she'd sung the first time she'd seen Grendelak. She sang as much to convey some measure of strength of will to Grendelak as she did to cover the sound of Felander's movements in the hall.

She knew she couldn't be certain it *was* Felander, but the line they'd all missed in the Tale because it was far too cryptic made sense now and that was all she had at the moment. She believed it was Felander because to believe anything else meant certain death, or worse, for both of them.

Tahure raised his voice louder as she began singing, and Manx matched him for volume. She knew she likely wouldn't distract him from the Sacrifice, but if she kept his eyes from the hallway . . .

Her song almost faltered when Tahure's voice finally reached a last somber note and he held it, slightly changing the grip on the dagger he held in his hands. His eyes glanced over at Manx, a triumphant expression on his face, then back at Grendelak's chest as he readied his strike.

Manx saw the dagger begin its downward descent and knew a moment of dread unlike any she'd ever known before. She kept her eyes on Grendelak, refusing to look for Felander, trusting in the Tale, and prayed with all her might.

The dagger continued its path toward Grendelak's chest, but just before it would have struck something forcibly struck Tahure's hand and pushed it aside. The dagger clattered to the floor as it fell from the priest's hands. Manx's head swung to the doorway and she nearly yelped for joy when she saw Felander standing in the doorway, crossbow in one hand and sword in the other.

Tahure raised his hand and looked angrily at the quarrel sticking out of it, then reached out with his uninjured hand and deliberately pulled the bolt from his flesh, his mouth twisted into a grimace as he did so.

The priest sneered and pointed in Felander's direction. "You will die, FreeSword. Here on this altar. Many times before I give your tortured soul to Father Tasni."

Felander shifted his weight slightly, dropping the crossbow and pulling a second sword from the scabbard that hung on his right hip. He held both ready. "I think not, priest," he responded to the threat

with all the confidence and arrogance of the First Brother of the FreeSword Brotherhood.

Tahure gestured with his head toward Felander and the two men that had held Grendelak moved from around the altar and stalked toward Felander. Felander held his ground, saying nothing, until they were nearly on top of him.

“Now, Brothers!” Felander growled, and Manx was surprised to see three FreeSwords appear from around the corner, swords drawn. The three FreeSwords flowed around Felander and converged on the two men who approached, and within minutes both were lying on the ground, bloodied and dying of their wounds.

The three Brothers stepped back and stood just behind Felander, swords ready and grim looks on their faces.

Felander raised an eyebrow at Tahure. “Now that it seems the odds have been evened up, priest, I have a debt to you—one that I must fulfill for my Order and for my own honor. One I would very much like to repay.”

Tahure growled as he moved around the end of the altar, drawing that black-steeled scimitar as he moved. As he came around the front of the altar he jabbed the scimitar quickly into Grendelak’s side, eliciting a hiss of pain from the helpless man as the priest pulled the scimitar out with a slight twisting motion.

Tahure grinned lopsidedly, noting the dark look on Felander’s face at his action. Tahure bowed slightly. “Now the odds have evened up, FreeSword. If I cannot have your Assassin-King, neither can you.”

Tahure moved away from the altar and out into the room as Felander moved to meet him. Manx saw two of the Brothers who’d come with Felander rush to the altar and start searching for a way to release Grendelak’s chains while the third moved around the men fighting to her side.

Manx ignored them all, her eyes glued firmly on Grendelak. She took in the blood oozing from the wound Tahure had made and saw his flesh paling before her eyes. The men were pulling the chains from his wrists and ankles, but Grendelak wasn’t moving. Her bottom lip trembled as she realized that Grendelak might not make it out of this room alive after all.

The clash of steel on steel rang out across the small room and drew Manx’s attention as the priest and Felander danced around one another. Felander was smaller, more balanced on his feet but the priest was strong and swung that evil-wrought blade more handily than he appeared capable of doing. Manx winced as Tahure’s blade caught Felander in the upper arm and heard the hiss of that blade as it burned his bare flesh.

Felander appeared not to notice, the stony expression on his face not appearing to register the wound as he concentrated on finding an

opening through which he could strike at the priest. Felander wielded those two blades like an extension of himself, Manx thought as she watched him, unable to tear her eyes from the two men fighting for their lives. Tahure's blade cut a thin line again across Felander's arm but this time Felander leaned into the blow and struck out at Tahure with the sword in his off-hand, connecting solidly with the priest's upper left thigh.

Felander quirked an eyebrow at Tahure as his blade came back to him tainted with the priest's blood. Tahure tried to shrug off the blow but Felander could see the man slightly favoring the leg and began to maneuver to take advantage of the injury. He purposefully led Tahure to use that leg, striking out low at his left side as often as possible, forcing him to put weight on the leg as he leaned forward and down to deflect Felander's blows.

Manx noticed that the Brothers had freed Grendelak, but realized that he still wasn't moving. The men stood, transfixed by the fight between Tahure and Felander and finally, frustrated, Manx screamed at the one who had come to her. "Unchain me you fool!"

He looked surprised at her shout and bent next to her while he examined the lock. Manx tried to concentrate on Felander and his fight with Tahure, but her gaze kept drifting back to Grendelak's ashen body lying on the altar. "Hurry it up, Brother," she hissed, her fear for Grendelak putting an angry edge on her voice.

Manx's attention was drawn again to the fight as Tahure suddenly laughed malevolently, having landed a solid blow to Felander's left shoulder that caused him to drop the weapon in that hand. Felander shifted his stance slightly to protect the shoulder and continued to try to force Tahure to put more weight on his left leg.

Manx felt the chains release her hands and she half crawled along the floor in her hurry to try and reach the altar. She pushed herself to her feet and ran in a crouch behind Tahure, trying to slip past him but a hand snaked out and grabbed her wrist. The priest pulled hard and Manx nearly lost her footing as she found herself standing in front of the priest, facing Felander.

The blow Felander had readied faltered. He pulled back and forced his swing to miss both the priest and Manx, then stepped back and held his sword ready, his stony gaze locked on Tahure's face as he tried to read the man's intentions.

Tahure placed the edge of his scimitar at her neck and looked mildly at Felander. He drew the blade a fraction of an inch along her neck and Felander fumed at the thin line of blood that appeared in its wake. The end of his weapon shook as he tried to control his rage.

Tahure shook his head slowly. "I don't think so, Brother," he said evenly. "Unless you don't particularly care for the little skald."

Felander's eyes narrowed. "What do you want?"

"I already have what I want, FreeSword, and now I think I'll be leaving."

Manx made as though to break free and winced as the edge of his scimitar cut into her skin. Tahure tightened his grip and growled in her ear, "Don't make me kill you here, Manx."

Manx kept her eyes glued to Felander's face and when the other man finally caught her gaze she glanced downward and then back up at his face. Felander surreptitiously followed her gaze and then returned his attention to Tahure.

"You aren't leaving here alive, Tahure, so you'd best either let her go or kill her now," Felander told him flatly. "No one, not even her, gets in the way of my Oaths."

Tahure looked slightly taken aback, but then shrugged. "As you wish," he replied simply.

As soon as Manx felt the pressure of the weapon at her neck increase she slammed the dagger she'd pulled during her little struggle with Tahure into his left thigh. Tahure released his grip in surprise and Manx crouched and finished her run to the altar as Felander surged forward and buried the end of his sword in the priest's belly.

Tahure staggered back at the blow, releasing the sword from his gut and spent the next few minutes fending off Felander's rapid swings while trying not to double over with pain. Felander pushed the man back until he was nearly against the wall. Tahure realized he couldn't win the fight and finally dropped his scimitar, letting it clatter to the ground, and raised his hands wide in a gesture of surrender. "I yield," he cried out hoarsely.

Felander ignored Tahure's surrender and ran his sword through the priest's right lung, shoving the long sword all the way through his body, grabbing Tahure's shoulder with his other hand and pulling him closer until they were face to face.

Felander leaned forward and laid his face on Tahure's cheek and growled into the man's ear. "For Troma and for the Brotherhood." Then he abruptly pulled the sword out and in one fluid motion spun around, leveling his blade so that as he turned it met with Tahure's neck, cutting a deep line across his throat and spraying the priest's blood across the room until the man fell forward to the floor and it began to pool beneath him, turning the floor as red as his priestly robes.

Felander dropped to one knee, breathing heavily. He was immediately surrounded by the Brothers who'd been nervously watching the fight but Felander waved them off and after catching his breath stood wearily and joined Manx near the altar.

“Go watch the corridor, quickly!” Felander called over his shoulder, then turned back to the altar without seeing if the men obeyed. He gently laid a hand on Manx’s shoulder and leaned over. “Is he—”, he barely whispered, his eyes misting at the sight of his friend’s pale body.

Manx shook her head. “Not yet,” she managed hoarsely, “but he will be if we don’t get him out of here.”

Felander glanced toward the hallway with the steps leading above and then set his jaw. “There’s open fighting in the streets, Manx, and in the palace by now as well . . .” he said uncertainly.

Manx’s head flew up at his words, confusion on her face.

Felander spoke brusquely before she could say anything. “It would take too long to explain right now, suffice it to say help has arrived. But that isn’t going to make it any easier to get out of here, especially not with the Duke here unable to walk.”

“I can walk, First Brother,” Grendelak suddenly croaked from atop the altar. “Just get me off this damned altar and give me a sword.”

Chapter 23

Manx moved out of the way, tears blurring her vision as Felander helped his friend to his feet. She could see that Grendelak wouldn't make it far without rest or divine intervention, and neither seemed likely in the time he had left. Felander barked orders at her and she obeyed, ripping up the dead priest's cloak and using it to tightly bind the wound in Grendelak's side.

"There's men coming, First Brother," one of the Brothers called from the stairs, and Felander nodded to acknowledge that he'd heard the warning.

"We must leave now, urchin," he said urgently.

Grendelak nodded. "Then let us go and end this," he said grimly, walking clumsily toward the stairs.

Felander followed closely, ready to catch him if need be while Manx darted in front of Grendelak, her eyes wide and ready for whatever lay beyond the doors at the head of the stairs.

As they reached the door they could hear the muted sounds of fighting beyond, heard the dulled clash of swords and cries of men as they fought openly in the palace, just as Felander had predicted. Manx followed the Brother that led them, the other two having chosen to bring up the rear and watch Felander's back. The man ahead of her muttered something under his breath as his hand touched the door and then pushed it open.

The melee in the hall was a mess, with sleeveless armored men battling against the Green and White cloaked men of the Kings guard. The small group pushed forward, keeping to the wall and trying to avoid becoming caught up in the morass as they made their way toward the main doors to the palace.

They'd almost made it when the huge double doors suddenly burst open and sunlight streamed into the great hall at the entrance to the palace. The sound of men rushing in through the doors echoed throughout the hall and the battles around them seemed to slow as everyone turned to see whether it was friend or foe who approached. Grendelak squinted against the light, and held his sword in front of him, swaying slightly with the lightheadedness caused by the loss of so much blood. Felander stepped up to stand beside him, a grim look on his face and sword gripped tightly in his fist. Two of the Brothers flanked the pair while the third moved to stand directly behind Felander.

Grendelak looked to Manx, to say something to her before he died in this damned hell hole, and was caught off guard by the expression on her face. She was staring straight ahead, her eyes glassy, head cocked at an angle as though she were straining to hear some distant sound.

Suddenly she smiled and took a few steps forward, moving to stand in front of Grendelak, her sword dangling from the end of her hand as though she were merely holding it for show.

Felander stared incredulously at her for a moment. "Manx? What in the name of Healfherd are you doing?"

She threw a smile over her shoulder. "As you said, Felander, help has arrived."

A moment later Grendelak saw the most beautiful sight in the world; four fists of Nordalian knights marched into the palace, their swords held at the ready. His knees almost buckled with the relief that washed over his weakened body and he glanced gratefully at Felander when the man reached over and steadied him.

The two knights who led the contingent barked out orders, directing the knights to secure the palace and then talked quietly to a hulking Freesword who gestured at Grendelak. They turned and walked confidently toward Grendelak's group.

Felander exchanged an arched look with Grendelak at the realization that one of the knights was a woman, and a comely one at that. The other knight wore a helm with a visor, but removed it as the two drew closer. As he did, Grendelak's jaw dropped, recognizing the man from tales and songs he'd heard. *But that means . . .* he thought to himself, amazed as he stared at the woman and realized he recognized her too.

The two knights stopped a sword's length away and both bowed politely in Grendelak's direction. "Your majesty," the man began politely, but loudly. "I am Sir Mil'Amber of the Nordalian Knights and mine knights art at thy disposal." At the knight's pronouncement much of the nearby fighting stopped immediately. Whispers of ". . . called Grendelak 'Your Majesty' . . ." spread through the hall.

Grendelak was at a loss for words, so he closed his mouth and merely nodded in assent. He turned his attention to the woman, who dropped her chin in his direction before she spoke. “Sire,” she said briskly, “High Protor Brightband of the Knights of Justice. Mine knights stand ready to assist thee as well. Mine Queen, Darya Contraband of the Court of Nordal, sends to thee word of Her Majesty’s support of thy quest to dispose of that vermin which hath infested thy beloved kingdom. She doth extend Her most generous hand to those who wouldst vie for peace and order in these southern lands.”

Grendelak nodded again and cleared his throat, about to step forward and speak when suddenly the world began spinning. He began to shake everywhere—his hands, his legs, his neck. He tried to reach out for Felander but realized he missed when his hand simply whisked through the air and caught no purchase. He saw Manx rush toward him and felt Felander grab him and try to hold him upright, but his knees would no longer support his weight. His eyes sought Manx as his sight grew dimmer and dimmer, and before his body crumpled to the floor he knew nothing but darkness.

Manx threw a harsh glance in the direction of the knights, and a moment later Felander saw the Lady Arial call out over her shoulder, “Kestra, they art in need of thee” before she moved to stand closer to Felander, letting the knights behind her pass as Sir Mil’Amber ordered them into the fray in the hall. Where they passed, what little fighting remained was quickly finished.

Felander watched with growing amazement as a blue and gold robed elven woman, reserved and austere even in her walk, glided past the knights and knelt smoothly at Grendelak’s side. She eyed him critically. “What seems to be the problem?”

Manx nearly growled with frustration. Nordalians, in her opinion, never felt a sense of urgency, even in the middle of a battle or in the face of death. They simply took their time no matter what and it drove Manx nearly mad to deal with them. “The Dark One’s priest stuck his evil-wrought blade into him and he’s lost two skins of blood. Or isn’t that obvious, priestess, by the fact that he’s as white as the streamers that hang in Knights’ Rest during a Fest?”

Felander laid a hand on Manx’s shoulder. “Manx, they’re just trying to be helpful,” he said soothingly, moving his hand to her elbow and helping her to her feet. Manx resisted at first, determined to stay by Grendelak’s side, but when she looked up and met the pain in Felander’s hooded eyes she stood and took his hand in hers. “Alright,” she whispered in Kestra’s direction “Just do *something* already!”

Kestra took the silver wrought pendant from around her neck, clearly displaying the Scales that signified she was a follower of Nordal, and held

it reverently between her hands, her mouth working silently as she prayed for her deity's blessing. A soft blue light appeared around the pendant after a few moments and began to slowly encompass the priestess. When her entire being was bathed in blue she reached out and laid one hand on Grendelak's chest and another on his head.

Felander could hear the priestess chanting softly under her breath, the words repeated over and over though he could not understand them any more than he'd understood the elven Manx used periodically. He silently offered his own prayer to Dirge and Healtherd, then noted that Manx was holding the gold sitar she wore around her neck in a death grip, her eyes closed and chin tilted toward the ceiling and the First Brother was certain she was praying as well.

The soft blue light began to seep into Grendelak from the Nordalian priestess, at first slowly but then faster as it seemed to burst out from her hands. As the last traces of Nordal's power flowed from the priestess into Grendelak the light flared a brilliant white, causing Felander to look away lest he be blinded, and then disappeared.

Kestra sat back on her knees and sighed, then pushed herself to her feet and dusted off her robes. "He will be fine and the Scales will be Balanced," she said as she turned and brushed past the two knights.

Mil'Amber and Arial exchanged a quick glance with Manx and then straightened. "I would suggest that you take him to the King's chambers, if he is indeed this Duke Shorehold we have been told of by the Corrigarian nobles, whilst we take care of the rest of the palace," Sir Mil'Amber spoke congenially in Felander's direction.

Felander bowed his head, "Of course, sir Knight, we will take the Duke to the King's suite."

"I don't think that's a good idea, First Brother," Grendelak's voice crackled from the floor. He grunted as he pushed himself to a sitting position and let his head settle before he moved to stand, one hand holding his head.

"Why not? It is appropriate for one who would be king," Felander said with a slight smirk.

"Because I left . . ." Grendelak stopped abruptly, glancing sideways at the two knights. "That is the king's body . . ." he tried again but stopped again as he saw the arched look on both knight's faces. "Healtherd lose my soul," he swore finally. "I left Remelus' dead body in there . . . it's probably quite a mess."

Lady Arial snorted in a most unladylike fashion at his words. "The Assassin King," she said somewhat derisively.

Mil'Amber smiled patiently at her. "Come, my Lady, let us finish our task that we may see a new king crowned in Corrigar and peace come to

these lands once again. Tis not ours to pass Judgment, only to see that He is able to do so.”

Arial bowed her head politely in Mil’Amber’s direction. “Indeed, my Lord Mil’Amber, thou art wise as always.”

The two knights bowed respectfully in Grendelak’s direction and with a “By your leave” marched briskly down the hall to rejoin their knights.

Grendelak watched them leave, his eyes narrowing slightly as he took in the quagmire in the hall. Though the fighting had finished the remnants of the fight were clearly evidenced by the blood and death they left behind to stain the marble floors of the great hall. They all stood in silence, somewhat overwhelmed by the day’s events, until finally Manx broke their reveries.

“The king’s suite may be unusable at the moment, but the throne room will be empty. Let us retire there for a time and Felander can tell us what in the name of Lordston happened out there.”

Grendelak turned to meet his friend’s eyes. “Yes, Felander, I’d really like to hear the story of how you came to be where you were needed and why it is that Nordalians are suddenly marching all over the city.”

Felander grinned lopsidedly. “Just lucky, I guess,” he said flippantly, and Manx was heartened to hear some of the teasing come back to Felander’s voice. He turned to the Brothers who still flanked him. “Find the nobles and bring them to the palace as soon as it’s safe. We’ll be fine here with the knights as long as the Duke here is able to keep his legs under him.”

The Brothers looked askance at Grendelak, who rolled his eyes sarcastically and nodded, then responded in unison, “Yes, First Brother” before they nearly ran out of the palace through the open doors.

The three friends shook their heads and chuckled as they walked off toward the throne room.

Grendelak walked the long distance from the doors to the dais on which the throne of Corrigar sat with trepidation. The last time he’d traversed this room had ended in death; death of First Brother Nolphen. The memory of that night seemed both far away and close, like a nightmare that is too real and stays with you even in the light of day.

They stopped at the edge of the dais, and both Felander and Manx turned to stare at him expectantly. He refused to look at either of them and instead stared at the throne that sat no more than a few feet from him. All he had to do was pick up his feet and step up on the dais and he’d be nearly there. Grendelak picked up a foot tentatively, but immediately set it back down. He wasn’t sure he *wanted* to be the king of Corrigar.

He felt Felander’s hand land gently on his shoulder. “Urchin, you don’t have to, of course, but the Brotherhood would be better served by you on

that chair,” he jerked his thumb in the direction of the throne, “than anyone else. You understand them.”

Grendelak turned pain filled eyes on his friend at the mention of the Brotherhood. “I can’t go back, can I?” he asked hoarsely, the loss still eating him keenly.

The older man shook his head. “You knew that on the battlefield, *your grace*,” he replied, emphasizing the title. “The only way to help the Brotherhood now is to sit on that chair and ensure that nothing like this ever happens again,” Felander told him firmly.

Grendelak nodded his head slowly at first, then more assertively. He straightened and set his sights clearly on the throne. “*If I’m going to do it then I might as well get it over with*,” he thought grimly. He picked up one foot and set it on the dais, then stepped up and took two steps toward the throne. He took a deep breath and held it briefly, then let it out. In one smooth motion he turned and sat himself on the throne of Corrigar, his hands tightly gripping the arms of the throne as though he were holding on for his life.

As he sat Manx dropped to one knee before him and Felander bowed his head respectfully. Grendelak grinned and sat back, relaxing for the first time in days. “None of that, then, from you two at least,” he said jovially. “Come, Felander, tell us how you came to be where we needed you,” he said earnestly, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees.

Felander grinned broadly as he settled himself on the edge of the dais and waited for Manx to do the same. “Well, on the afternoon of the day you left, four fists of Nordalians came marching down the road. I tell you we were as surprised as a Triotionian whore being paid a gold for her services, especially when we saw who was leading them,” he said with a laugh.

Grendelak and Manx both nodded appreciatively, understanding the rumors that always seemed to surround the arrival of one of the Scorpions on the scene, as it usually meant something world-shaking was on the horizon.

“They talked to the nobles and explained that Queen Darya had sent them out to support their cause, having heard tales,” Felander hesitated, narrowing his eyes as he glanced suspiciously at Manx. When the expression on her face did not change he shrugged and continued, “having heard tales of Tasnian priests and treason in Corrigar.”

“But as she has done in the past,” Grendelak interrupted, “she waited until she was at least somewhat certain we could win.” Grendelak had spent time in the north and heard the tales of similar situations in Silentia Ens and even the Duchy of Radael and it was always the same—Queen Darya did not move unless she was certain she was not only supporting the right cause, but the winning one as well.

Felander nodded. "Exactly. Well, the knights riled up the men and the support of the Court of Nordal fired up the nobles so we marched on the city. Without the priest on the wall we managed to push past the walls right about mid night. We didn't want to halt and the knights were certainly not ready to stop, so we pushed through the city and on to the palace. Took us quite a while, though . . ." Felander shook his head at the memory. "The king must have had most of his men inside the city because they fought us like those crazy desert Doornian knights. Ever fought with them, Grendelak?" Felander asked, curious as he realized that since Grendelak had returned they hadn't had a chance to really talk about their time apart.

Grendelak nodded. "Once," he said respectfully, shaking his head. "Unbelievable, they are. I've never seen anyone fight with two weapons like that," he gestured at Felander with his head, "except you."

Felander laughed slyly. "Where do you think I learned it from, urchin?"

Grendelak raised an eyebrow at his friend. "Indeed! But we will have time to reminisce later, go on with your story."

"Well," Felander began, clearing his throat, "we made it to the palace walls just before dawn and at first it was real quiet. Then suddenly all hell broke loose and we started hearing cries about the king being dead and traitors in the palace itself . . . We fought through to the doors and then started fighting all over the place."

Manx eyed Felander critically. "That does not, Felander, explain how you came to be in the dungeon in time to save Grendelak from becoming Tahure's morning sacrifice."

Felander shrugged. "I just happened to be one of the first ones in," he stopped as Grendelak snorted and gave him a hard look. "I just *happened* to be one of the first in and saw the priest heading down the stairs with someone I knew in tow. So I grabbed a few Brothers and followed him. I got lucky, I guess."

"*The First will be Last and the Last will be First,*" Manx said into the silence that followed.

Both heads swiveled to face her. "What in the name of Healfherd does *that* mean?"

Manx gave them both superior looks. "The First is Felander, as in First Brother. He was Last into the room and will, undoubtedly, remain First Brother, no?"

"You never said anything about that before we started this!" Grendelak exclaimed, leaning forward and wagging a finger in her direction. "And what about the dream, Manx? I thought you were supposed to deal with the Priest. That's what you said, I remember that!"

Manx looked away abashedly. "Remember that I told you, Grendelak Mishtar, King of Corrigar, that *some* dreams are True. I also told you that it's

difficult to tell the difference between one that is True and one that is Sent, as in Sent by someone who wants to lure you into their trap,” she said angrily, still disgusted at herself for being so deceived. She rushed to finish. “But I was supposed to meet the priest, and I did. I said nothing about overcoming the priest or fighting him . . . just that I would meet Tahure in the darkness below . . . which I did, though it cover me with shame to think of it. I didn’t think of the line about the First until I was chained to the wall and I heard footsteps on the stairwell. The line was obscure and we’ve never managed to find another reference to it, anywhere, so I didn’t think it was that important,” she bowed her head sheepishly. “I guess I was wrong about that.”

Felander leaned over and patted her on the knee. “I’m glad you were, skald, and it doesn’t matter much at this point anyway. We’re all safe and sound and the kingdom will be purged of this evil and the Brotherhood set back to right, is that not correct, *your majesty?*” Felander turned his attention to Grendelak, unable to keep the teasing tone from his voice.

Grendelak shook his head and chuckled. “Yes, *First Brother*, it most certainly is.”

The celebration of the coronation of Grendelak Mishtar, King of Corrigar, was as impressive as possible after the destruction and war that had swept the kingdom. The fading blood stains on the marble of the great hall were all that was left as evidence within the palace, though there was still plenty to be done in the kingdom in general before the people would forget the marching of armies through the land.

Grendelak sat comfortably at the head of the table at the banquet following his coronation, Felander at his right hand and Manx at his left. Two days ago they’d gathered the remains of the Brotherhood together in the hall and raised their swords for Felander, making him First Brother in truth as well as name. Grendelak raised his goblet in response to something the Duke of Bredene said and replied with a “Here, here” before drinking down his wine. He glanced over the rim of the silver goblet and sought out Manx, who’d disappeared from the table nearly half a glass earlier and still hadn’t returned.

He found her in a corner speaking animatedly to the Lady Arial and Lord Mil’Amber, who’d stayed in Corrigan for the coronation at the behest of the Queen of the Court of Nordal. He saw her glance in his direction and saw a harried expression cross her face before she turned back to the two knights and bowed respectfully before picking up the ends of her skirt and hurrying back to the table as the two knights turned and left through one of the doors hidden in the embrasure in which they’d been speaking to Manx.

She curtsied in an over-exaggerated fashion to Grendelak before she sat down, a self-satisfied expression on her face.

Grendelak kept a smile pasted on his face as he spoke, his lips barely moving. "And what was that all about, skald?"

Manx smoothed her skirts and toyed with the goblet in front of her, making him wait as long as she thought possible before she replied.

"I found a scroll hidden in the crypts. One of the Kingseer's scrolls, the one with the *full* prophecy on it," she said saucily.

"And?" Grendelak prompted her from between his clenched teeth, the smile still pasted on his face as he nodded to acknowledge someone else at the table.

Manx bowed her head slowly, then pushed her chair out and stood. She stepped back a few feet and waited until the room quieted at her action.

"All here know the words of Victoria Kingseer, who Saw this day in Ages past," she paused as many nodded their heads and spoke their assent to her statement.

"Evil sought to turn this King and has worked against the good of Corrigar for many years, even to the point of twisting the words of the great Kingseer," she continued, her voice moderating up and down as necessary as though she were performing. Grendelak noted the lilting tones of her voice and was as mesmerized as the rest of those who sat with their eyes glued to the tiny skald.

"When those who are not knights become like knights, rebellion is at hand. Those who serve the night shall desire unrest and a free sword will quench that thirst. The rightful king shall be put to the sword and a killer of men will sit your throne. Much blood will be shed while he sits your throne," she recited formally, and then smiled brightly at Grendelak. "His Majesty will forgive the formal recitation of such a dire prophecy when he hears what was hidden from us all."

An expectant hush fell over the room as everyone waited for Manx to finish. Manx looked expectantly at Grendelak, who finally gestured at her, "By all means, skald, finish the Tale," he said somewhat gruffly, not enjoying the ill-sounding prophecy at all and not certain why Manx felt it necessary to repeat such a thing today of all days.

"There was more to the prophecy, the copy we have is incomplete. It actually reads 'Much blood will be shed while he sits your throne . . . *if the sheep are not shorn and the basalt torn down. Corrigar will flourish under his sons*'," she finished slowly, emphasizing what had been lost from the original prophecies so long ago that it had been forgotten they ever existed.

"But who are these 'sheep to be shorn', skald?" someone called out from the end of the table.

“And what about the basalt? What does *that* mean?” someone else cried out, and a general rumbling broke out across the room, everyone trying to decipher what the rest of the prophecy meant.

Grendelak stood and raised his arms and the room quieted. “Well, Lady Manx, can you explain these things to us?” he asked ominously as he turned to face her.

She bowed. “Of course, Grendelak Mishtar, King of Corrigar and Duke of Shorehold. The sheep are those who blindly followed Remelus,” she said confidently. “And as any good shepherd knows, the sheep who try to lead the flock astray must be put in line,” she looked pointedly at the Duke of Pasthall and then at the Duke of Goodrow, both of whom had supported the king and allowed the blackhearted priests of Tasni to have their way with the people of their lands.

Grendelak turned at the sound of chairs scraping on the floor as the two men stood and began to back away from the table. His eyes narrowed and he barked at the guards, “Seize them both! See that they are confined in the dungeon until we can look further into what they’ve been doing while the rest of us have been dying for our beloved Corrigar,” he called out firmly, his mind recalling their words at the meeting in Troma’s demesne so many months ago.

Grendelak turned back to Manx. “And the basalt, Manx?” he prompted, though he was fairly certain he knew exactly what that particular reference meant.

“The black altars of the Dark One, of course. They must be sought out and destroyed—carefully,” she added with a note of warning in her voice.

A murmuring of general consensus rippled across the room and only quieted when Felander stood and cleared his throat.

Grendelak turned to face his friend, his eyes wary at the bemused expression on Felander’s face. “Yes, First Brother? You wish to say something?”

Felander bowed effusively. “I will see to the removal of these vile items, Sire. With the help of the Nordalians, we will guard, they will destroy. It is a contract I take for the Brotherhood, that our home might be secure.”

Grendelak nodded “That suits me well, First Brother.” Grendelak said formally.

“Thank you, sire,” Felander replied as he drew a dagger and laid an oath cut on his arm. After wrapping a silken napkin around his arm he looked up smiling. “As a loyal Counselor to your Highness, I would hear more, your majesty, about these sons of yours . . .” he trailed off, a broad grin on his face, obviously enjoying the thought of Grendelak and children.

Grendelak’s face flushed as the room broke out in cheers and the sound of fists pounding on the table in agreement filled the hall. He

exchanged a fleeting glance with Manx, who looked away teasingly and stared at the floor. He realized he hadn't really considered marriage or children and was startled at the realization that as king it was his responsibility to sire heirs to ensure the kingdom's continued stability. Kingdoms left with no heir often fell to chaos in the ensuing fight for ascension to the throne and he'd heard enough tales of Silentia Ens and its troubles because of just such situations that he couldn't imagine leaving Corrigar in such a state after all he'd given up to bring her back to where she belonged.

The king of Corrigar took two steps toward Manx and dropped to one knee. The room quieted and for a brief moment all that could be heard was the rustling of clothing as everyone craned their necks or half stood in their seats to see the King. Grendelak reached up and took Manx's hand in his, recalling the first time he'd held her hand and marveled at how small it was. He took a deep breath and looked up into her eyes, praying that she wouldn't embarrass him in front of his entire court.

"That answer, my dearest friend, can only be answered by the woman who I would take as my Queen," his voice rang out over the hall, wavering only slightly with the fear he felt that she might tell him no.

Manx looked up across the hall and saw the expectant expressions on the assemblage as they waited to hear her reply, and let her gaze come to rest on Felander, who nodded slightly in encouragement. She pulled her hand away from Grendelak and took his face between her hands, meeting his eyes and nodding quickly before she leaned over and kissed him.

Grendelak was at first stunned, but then realized that she'd just agreed to marry him. He grabbed her waist and stood in one smooth motion, hugging her to him and kissing her again. He set her down and took her hand, turning to face the rest of the room. "Then I give you the future Queen of Corrigar, and mother of these sons that will bring prosperity to our land," he exclaimed happily.

Felander laughed and lifted his goblet in their direction. "To the King," he cried out, "and the Queen," he continued, gesturing with his goblet at Manx, "and to the sons they will give out beloved Corrigar!"

Cries of "Here, here!" and "Huzzah!" rang out over the hall as everyone drank to the newfound future of Corrigar.

Epilogue

Manx K'Hndreel Mishtar, Queen of Corrigan, bolted awake. Her hand was already reaching for the dagger she always kept under her pillow even as she held her breath and concentrated on listening. She forced herself to ignore the sound of her heart pounding in her ears and tried to determine what had awakened her. Minutes passed and still she heard nothing but the steady breathing of her husband. She relaxed, her hand shaking, and pursed her lips in disgust at her unease. *A dream, a simple, dream.* She shook her head sharply, trying to clear the whispering remnants of the dream that remained; the tainted, raspy voice that had haunted her for days.

To Tasni with the Tale and its dire warnings! She thought as she swung her legs over the edge of the bed and put her feet silently on the floor. Standing, Manx quietly moved to the small window where the burgeoning dawn shed just enough light for her to see vague shapes in the distance. The tops of the buildings looking like nothing more than dark shadows in the pre-dawn light as she stared out over the city of Corrigan.

She lowered herself carefully into a chair near the window and began toying with the ring on her right hand, twisting it back and forth as she stared out the window, lost in thought.

Grendelak had been awakened by her sudden movement, but hadn't let his wife know. As he heard her sit heavily in the chair he rolled over and sat up, swinging his legs off the side of the bed. He watched, but said nothing, as her eyes took on that glassy look they often did when she seemed to be lost in thought.

Manx felt her awareness of the rest of Nordalia grow even as her awareness of the King's bedchamber shrank. Finally she felt the touch of other minds.

"The end of an Age comes more quickly than you think," a voice warned in Manx's head.

"I can see the Signs as well as any, thank you very much," she retorted mentally. *"Yet it will not come so soon that I will not bear him sons, I think."*

"Tis true, no man knows the time, but it will not be before your children sit on many thrones," a high-pitched sing-song voice chimed in.

"Sometimes, Adocso, I find your unerring knowledge of what the future holds to be more than I care to hear," Manx replied sourly.

"Indeed!" came the reply, followed by a brusque, audible sniff of indignation.

A laugh echoed through Manx's mind. *"Don't let him get to you, Manx, you'll learn to deal with him eventually, perhaps you'll even grow fond of him in time."*

"I doubt that, Redeemer," Manx replied firmly. *"In any case, I thought you all ought to know that the last group of the FreeSwords who swore to Remelus has been rounded up. Grendelak is having them escorted to the northern border of Freeland Hold."*

"Do you think you could convince him to dump them in the Sevich Desert instead? King Dugal of Freeland Hold is quite irritated already with the number of scoundrels that are chased over his border by the Corrigarian Guard during the Running of the Thieves," a wavering, thin voice interrupted.

"Yes, Delcidnar, I will try. Is there anything else? I feel like a Nordalian turkey stuffed for Honorifics and I'm dreadfully tired," Manx thought, yawning.

"No, not right now. Just keep your eyes open, as always, and study, Skald. This wasn't the only prophecy of the Kingseer's we'll need to deal with and I have a feeling other situations will arise that will bear watching."

"As you wish, Adocso," Manx agreed, letting herself return to the here and now. Shaking her head she mumbled under her breath, *"I don't know why he calls it 'watching' when he knows full well it's more like interfering."*

"What is more like interfering, skald?"

Manx jumped at Grendelak's voice, startled to discover he was awake. She turned her face toward his voice and smiled at the sight of him sitting on the edge of the bed. *"Nothing important, Grendelak."*

She watched his face darken at her words as he leaned forward. *"I think it's time you and I had a little chat, wife,"* he said, emphasizing the word to remind her who she was.

Grendelak noticed her still fidgeting with the ring on her finger, the one on her right hand, and was suddenly struck by images of all the times she'd looked glassy eyed, as though listening to some far off voice and of how many times she'd been fidgeting with that ring and realized the actions seemed to coincide with one another. And suddenly he recalled who wore fine platinum rings.

Manx followed his gaze to her hand and realized he was staring at her ring. “Grendelak?” she asked tentatively. “What is it?”

“You know them, don’t you?” he asked in a hushed voice, as though ‘they’ could hear him. His face had a look of terror that even being tied to a Tasnian altar did not compare with.

“Know who, husband?”

Grendelak stood, pacing and counting on his fingers as he muttered under his breath. “Delcidnar the mage, Redeemer the DragonLord, Darya Contraband, Aklin La’Range, Sir Mil’Amber Baltruscade, K’Letharin Rochmael, Garilous . . .” he chanted in a sing-song voice as if trying to repeat a childhood song.

Manx’s laughter tinkled over his head. “Sylvane,” she finished before taking up the litany of names. “Lady Arial Brightband, Tiadore, Kestra, Lord Adocso Cotarre and . . .”

“Nooooo . . .” Grendelak interrupted her, his head shaking furiously. “I would have remembered that. Recognized the name . . .”

Manx laughed delightfully. “and Manx K’Hndreel. Grendelak Mishtar, King of Corrigar, my dear husband. You didn’t even believe in the Tale when I met you, why would you remember or believe an old skald’s tale about some nearly mythical group that sees to the Tale and counsels the kings of the world?”

Grendelak sat heavily in a chair, his mind racing. He thought back to that night in the palace, the night when the Nordalians had come. He saw the looks flash between the knights and Manx but had thought it just her being prickly. He thought of the night of his coronation, and how she’d been conversing with the knights before they’d left and how Sir Mil’Amber had put a hand familiarly on her shoulder and smiled at her as though they were long lost friends parting. He considered her words before they’d even gotten to Corrigan, how she spoke of the DragonLord and Delcidnar the mage as though she’d spent time with them.

He raised his eyes and met her steady gaze, her eyes now hooded and obviously hiding something. “I didn’t . . . but I . . . I thought you were just like so many others . . . Named for one of them.”

Manx sighed. “No, Grendelak, I am not just named for one of them. I *am* one of them and have been for quite some time. Longer than you would believe if I told you.”

“You never told me!” he exploded.

“You never asked!” she yelled back, then composed herself, trying to keep from turning this into a screaming match. “You didn’t ask, Grendelak, and I never lied about it.”

“Never lied?” he asked incredulously, throwing up his hands. He narrowed his eyes and pointed at her. “You told me you were a skald!”

"I am a skald, Grendelak. That is what I do. A skald with a particular knack for the Tale and some small amount of skill with a sword. That I am one of *them* as well changes nothing. We each have tasks to perform to keep things moving through the Tale properly and you were my task. You have been my task for a very long time now."

His face was completely blank, schooled into lines of calmness. "Was it your task to fall in love with me, too?" he spat.

Manx stared at him, incredulous. "No, Grendelak, it was not. Of all the tasks I have been asked to do, falling in love has never been one of them and it certainly wasn't planned," she said, her voice shaking as it rose in volume. "And my task certainly would have been easier if I hadn't!"

Grendelak shook his head again. "I just don't know Manx, this changes—"

Manx stood clumsily, her belly sticking out in front of her and throwing off her normally graceful movements. "Nothing, Grendelak. Absolutely nothing. This," she said heatedly, laying a hand on her stomach, "is your son and your heir. And you will have more, as the Tale foretold. I am your wife because I chose to be so of my own accord, though I will suffer more than you can imagine in the end for it. The only Figure in this room that was absolutely necessary for The Tale was you, Grendelak Mishtar. You and your heirs. Who bore them matters not, only that they are yours."

Grendelak shrank back from the anger in her face, at the hurt in those huge green elven eyes. He forced himself to think about what she'd said rather than just react to having learned something he wasn't sure he wanted to know. Did it matter? Truthfully? No. He just felt so . . . betrayed for some reason, as though this one secret had opened a floodgate and he worried about the next she might reveal.

"Is there . . . more?" he asked, tentatively.

"Other than that I will likely live to see our grandchildren's grandchildren, while you will not? No, Grendelak. There is no more than what I have told you."

He swallowed at that open declaration. "Are you certain that is all?"

Manx sighed deeply. "I swear by Lordston's sitar that there is no more to this than what I have told you. I hold no secrets from you, Grendelak Mishtar, King of Corrigar."

Grendelak bowed his head, nodding as he lowered it. That was enough for him, for though he was still not bound as tightly to Healfherd as others may be tied to their own gods, he understood the power of such an oath.

"All right, Manx. I believe you. I'm . . . sorry I got upset, but what will you do as I grow old?" he said hesitantly, watching for face for her reaction to his apology.

Manx grimaced slightly, but composed herself quickly. "It is fine, Grendelak. I will stay by your side and be your wife, just as I would normally. It is quite a shock, I am certain, to learn this and I don't blame you for being up—" she inhaled sharply, "—set," she finished, breathing heavily. "Oh my," she said, laying a hand on her stomach and reaching her hand out behind her as she sought her chair.

Grendelak was at her side in a moment, holding her elbow and helping her sit in the chair. "What is it?" he asked, his mind conjuring up demons and all manner of strange creatures he'd heard of in the stories involving *them*.

She waved off his concern. "Your son wishes to join the conversation, Grendelak," she said from between clenched teeth.

Grendelak was frozen for a moment, forgetting everything else. "What do I do?" he asked, suddenly frazzled beyond words.

"Get the midwife," she directed him between grimaces of pain. "And be quick about it!"

Hours later Manx lay in their bed, exhausted but pleased. Grendelak sat fidgeting with the ring on her finger while sitting on the edge of their bed. He looked at it and saw nothing special, and wondered how it was that he'd never noticed it before. While many children were named after great heroes, none of them actually wore a platinum ring that was not easily noticeable, as the stories said *they* did.

"You never noticed it before because I don't generally draw attention to it, husband," she said wearily, closing her eyes. "And a small magik on it protects us by making it difficult to remember if you do see it."

Grendelak grunted a reply and laid a hand on her head, pushing a few errant strands of hair away from her face. "Kayliffe," he said quietly.

"What's that, Grendelak?" she asked without opening her eyes.

"His name, Manx. Kayliffe," he said more firmly, trying it out again. "Do you approve?"

"Kayliffe Mishtar," she said in a tired voice. "I like it just fine, husband."

He looked at her, a quizzical expression on his face. She opened her eyes and returned his gaze, then smiled. "What is on your mind now?"

"Do you know . . . that is, I mean, can you see . . ." he looked questioningly toward the child sleeping peacefully in his bassinet.

She shook her head slowly. "No, King of Corrigar, I cannot," she said. "There are many pieces of the Tale I do not know, after all it is huge—over seven hundred volumes and just as many scrolls—and there are so many paths through it that it would take a lifetime—my lifetime—to hunt down the fate of one small child, if even he is mentioned in all its words."

Grendelak let out a sigh of relief. “For some reason, that makes me feel better. Knowing he can choose his own fate, that is.”

Manx smiled patiently at his reply. “Haven’t you figured it out by now, Grendelak? The Tale tells us what will be, if only the right choices are made at the right time. It does not force you, it does not move you. It only guides our way to see what is good and lets us make the final decision on which path to travel. It rewards us, if only we are true to ourselves.”

“Hmmp,” he replied, considering her words and looking around at his surroundings finally he let his gaze fall on his wife. “I guess it does at that, doesn’t it?”

She looked over at their sleeping son and then back at him. “Yes, Grendelak, it most certainly does.”