

THE GREAT HOLDING

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THE KINGSEER PROPHECIES

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THE GREAT HOLDING

After the time of Tremors and the end of the Age of Wonders, when the world of Nordalia had calmed from the wars and destruction that had besieged it for centuries, a woman sat calmly staring out the open window of a modest farm house in a small village in the Kingdom of Dilorn.

A slight wind pushed the gauzy window coverings into the room and cooled the old woman's wrinkled skin. She laid her hands on the shawl that lay in her lap, the bony fingers of one hand gently caressing the tattered strands of thread that hung where golden tassels had once been, shining against the brilliant purple of the shawl that was now so bereft of color it could be called nothing but grey. She lifted and shook the shawl gently, then wrapped it tightly around herself, her fingers still idly caressing it as it settled upon her frail shoulders.

Her gentle strokes belied its current state. The corners of her lips turned up into a smile that all but reached her sightless eyes as she recalled its nearly royal beauty when it had been gifted to her by the great King.

She ignored the sound of her daughter and her daughter's daughters as they moved around the house, her mind wandering back and forth through time – remembering. She rocked slowly in her chair for hours as her memories surfaced and then floated away as though they were lost feathers in the wind.

Her rocking stopped when she saw the once familiar slight haze of purple at the edge of her sight. She wondered if it were just a memory, a recollection of what once was. There had been no Seeresses for many years, no need for them since the Tale had been told. She sat back sighing as she waited for the haze to clear.

The haze grew until her entire sight was tinged purple and she knew, knew as well as any other who had Seen True, that she was going to See one last time before she died. She was to be granted one last gift from her goddess before she left this world to disentangle the web of words that was the Tale.

"Darina!" she called out, her voice cracking after not being used in so many days. With extreme effort she held back the last of the haze across her vision, knowing without needing to be told that after she had Seen this one last time she would die. She heard her daughter's rushed footsteps across the floor and felt Darina kneel at her side.

"Yes, mother?" her daughter asked, concern lacing her voice.

"No matter what I say next, you must listen," the old woman said with difficulty, her breath now coming in gasps, "and heed it."

"Yes, mother," her daughter replied dutifully, her eyes wide.

The old woman could hear the fear in her daughter's voice, but she pushed it away. She welcomed the rush of the Sight as her vision left her and she Saw one last time.

"Ware those who walk on no legs and speak with two tongues, for they shall try to harness the Sight of the KingSeer. Hide her Name and guard her Sight for she shall See more often and more True than any before her."

The old woman smiled as the words left her mouth, her eyes still closed and a look of contentment on her face as she slowly exhaled her last breath.

Darina tried to not to cry as she stood and stared unbelievably at the shawl on the old woman's shoulders. She'd never seen it on the woman's shoulders before, always it had lain in her lap, held as gently by the old woman as a new mother holds her newborn child. Darina was certain that it had never had even a hint of color in it before, but now

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she could see that it was a brilliant purple, the tassels a bright gold. She reached hesitatingly to touch it, but snatched her hand back as the color began draining from the shawl. A moment later nothing was left of the magnificence that she had been certain had been there. Nothing but an old, grey shawl hanging listlessly around the old woman's body.

Darina shuddered and then left the room to tell the others that her mother, Victoria Kingseer, was dead.

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Chapter 1

Diallana sat at her family's kitchen table cutting onion greens for her birthingday dinner. Her mother was at the sink, washing the blood off a fresh leg of mutton that her father had traveled all the way to New Ralistan to purchase. She knew that cutting onions always made her cry, but she could not seem to blink the blurriness from her eyes, and it seemed to be getting worse.

"Your sixteenth birthingday is an important day, dear," her mother said conversationally. "In our family it is even more important than in most."

Diallana pushed a strand of sandy brown hair from her thin face and glanced across the table at her aunt Pancreana, who winked at her with a smile. Everyone in her family wore lavender ribbons for Diallana's birthingday, but Aunt Pancreana seemed to wear hers like the small bits of ribbon given to soldiers who had survived the Doornian wars. It was in the same place on her tunic, and it was neatly tied exactly like those soldiers wore them. Her aunt had been a soldier once, Diallana was certain of it. Though she kept them covered, Diallana had seen the scars on her arms and her legs, and could tell from the way she walked when they were alone that her aunt was used to having a weight on her hip.

"In our family, on your sixteenth birthingday, the Great Seeress sends you a gift, child. Yours should be coming soon. Welcome it, for it reminds us why all of the women in our family have a shade of purple for our birthingday color..."

Her mother's voice was getting further and further away as the blurriness in her eyes seemed to tinge purple, and Diallana drifted into that purple haze, her awareness of the present falling away. Through the haze she saw her little brother outside, sneaking up behind Gellie, their old swaybacked plow horse. He liked to sneak up behind her and tweak her tail, then jump up and down and yell when she turned around. It was an old game that he just never seemed to grow out of, but this time it was different. He snuck up and gave her tail a yank, hard enough to pull hair out of the poor horse's tail, but this time she didn't turn. This time Gellie kicked out with both hind feet and knocked her brother through the air. As he hit the ground, Diallana could see a red stain seeping across his tunic.

The world spun, and Diallana snapped back to the present.

"... is truly wondrous that she has chosen our family, and that is why we see so strenuously to your education, and to..." her mother stopped speaking at her aunt's rapid chopping motion.

"Dear? Did you See something?" her mother asked. The emphasis on See was strange, and Diallana didn't know what to make of it, but that didn't matter right now.

"Mother! Brittain just got kicked by Gellie! He's out there bleeding to death!" she nearly screamed.

Her mother and her aunt exchanged glances. Her aunt stood. "My time is here. I go to get my gear," she said simply as she left the room.

"Now, now dear, that hasn't happened yet, and now that you've Seen it, we can make certain it doesn't happen." Her mother was all smiles, which only made Diallana more confused.

"Mother! I just saw it happen! We've got to help him!" she started to stand, but her mother turned and shot an arm out to hold her back. She stared at her mother's hand on her arm in surprise. Her mother moved faster than she would have believed possible.

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“Think about this for a moment, Dia. Think hard about it. Can you see outside from this seat at the table?” her mother asked forcefully, leaning down by Diallana’s face.

Diallana blinked when she recognized that she could not. Then she realized she could not have seen what she did. But she saw it, and she knew she had. It was burned into her mind as if she had been standing there. “No, but I know what I saw, mother!” she said, frustrated.

Her mother smiled again, as if she knew what reaction would be the most infuriating at this moment. “Yes, you do know what you Saw, and yes, it was a True Seeing.”

Hearing the words “True Seeing” spoken in context made Diallana suddenly understand why “See” and “Saw” sounded different when her mother and Aunt spoke them.

“You mean I just had a Vision? A True Seeing?” she asked incredulously.

Her mother smiled patiently at her. “Yes. Go outside and look for yourself, now that you’ve calmed down. Your brother and the horse aren’t even here. I sent them to New Ralistan for your birthingday pastries,” her mother said, straightening and taking her arm off of Diallana. “But then come back inside, there is much we must discuss before your father and brother return.”

Diallana nearly ran outside and around the side of the house to the front of the barn where she had seen Gellie and Brittain. Neither was there, and the barn doors were closed. She looked about the ground for signs of Brittain hitting the mud, but found nothing to indicate her brother had been kicked here.

Diallana heard the soft sound of armor clanking very close and turned in surprise. Her aunt Pancreana was striding toward her, wearing white enameled armor with a purple cloak billowing behind her. Pancreana’s raven-dark hair was loose and billowed like the cloak. She was smiling at Diallana as she approached and her left hand was resting easily on the hilt of her castle sword, the very type of sword Diallana had imagined her wearing.

“It is said that it is difficult to believe the first time. It will get easier, and harder, for you,” Pancreana said wisely as she drew close.

“You are beautiful! I always knew you were a warrior of some kind, but what is that symbol on your breast? The bent mace is The Great Seeress’, but what of the purple cloak?” Diallana asked in a rush, the memory of Gellie and her brother suddenly forgotten.

“That is the symbol of my Order, Diallana. I am a Knight of Antiquum, Protector of Seeresses,” her aunt replied with a smile.

“A protector of... Oh. Then why have you never dressed like that before now?”

“There was no reason for me to dress this way before today, Dia,” her aunt replied.

“Why today? And why just after my... Have you been waiting for me to have my first vision?” Diallana asked, more than a little confused.

“Yes, Dia. I am the Protector that has been assigned to see to your safety. The Tower of Seeresses knows of you through your family, and I was sent to keep you safe until you were old enough to come to the Tower for testing. Which you now are. Today I pass from Knight-Guardian to Knight-Protector, and may wear my armor and wield my weapons again.” She paused, watching Diallana’s face carefully. “Come, let us go inside and speak of these things with your mother.

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Diallana hustled to follow her aunt's brisk pace, and the words she had spoken didn't sink in until they were nearly back to the house. "You were sent? Does that mean you're not really my aunt?"

"Let's just get inside now, child. We can discuss all of this with your mother," her aunt replied tersely.

They went inside and her aunt closed the door and barred it. Diallana was a little discomfited by the action, but moved to the table to sit down. Her mother came down the hall. "Well, I see that you two have been talking already," she said brightly. Diallana looked at her mother incredulously. She was so frustrated and confused that she was ready to scream.

Diallana took a deep breath and then let it out explosively. "Mother, this is not normal, so you can stop sounding so cheery. In the last few minutes I have discovered that I am to be a Seeress, that you knew and kept it from me, and that my aunt is a really a Knight-Protector from Id'Elan. Next I'll discover there's an altar to Tasni in the fruit cellar!"

Her mother's hand stretched out and slapped across her face so hard that Diallana's head spun sideways. Diallana put her hand to her face, crying out.

"That will be enough of that talk, child. Seeress or no, you will not invoke Tasni Deathwalker in my house," her mother said firmly. Her mother paused and took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "Now, no one in this house pays homage to any of the dark gods other than what everyone does out of necessity. You know that we are followers of Shalitor, The Great Seeress. At least the women are. Most of the men in the family follow Dirge of the Dented Shield in the hopes that he will guard us from troubles. You are to be a Seeress, which means you are above the outbursts of a little girl. Are you ready to discuss this now?"

"Yes," Diallana said sulkily, picking idly at a piece of lint that had fallen off her mother's apron onto her dress.

Her mother nodded. "Good, then sit down and let's talk." She motioned at the table, and aunt Pancreana pulled out a chair for Diallana to sit.

Her mother sat next to her. "Your aunt Pancreana is not your real aunt, and you are not a normal girl. Nor was I. Each woman of our family, on the day she becomes a woman, is sent a Seeing by The Great Seeress. And another on her wedding day, and another on the day after each of her children are born. You have had your first. But our visions not free. Once in each Age, a woman is born amongst us who can see the rise and fall of Kings. The first was Victoria KingSeer, who was our distant ancestor, but there have been many others since then. The end of the Doornian Wars was the end of an Age, child. Should your daughter be this Age's KingSeer – or any True Seer - you will have to give her up on her sixteenth birthingday or shortly thereafter. You cannot say that you will give her up 'eventually', and you cannot tell them no. You must let the Knight-Protectors take her to the Tower of the Seeresses in Id'Elan. She will See the Kings come and go, and it is not your place to interfere with what The Great Seeress has given her."

At sixteen, Diallana couldn't really imagine having children, let alone sixteen year old children, so she simply nodded. The edge of her vision must not have cleared because the purple tinge was still there, just at the edge of her vision, distracting her.

Aunt Pancreana picked up the conversation. "I am not your aunt by blood, Dia. That is certain. I am from Freeland Hold originally, and none of yours live that far south.

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But I have been assigned to you since your birth. I have been here since you were two months old, and I will be at your side until one of us dies. I am more aunt than any blood aunt would be, and I would be honored if you would continue to call me that.”

Diallana blinked, the haze starting to encroach on her vision again. Thinking of Pancreana in her armor, striding across the yard in front of the barn, Diallana realized that she could never think of this woman as her aunt again. All of the tales she had been taught about Knights and honor and virtue were embodied there when her aunt Pancreana had walked up. “I cannot, I’m sorry,” she said, rubbing her eyes. “You are so fine a Knight, and you are,” she paused and shrugged, not able to find the words to describe what she felt, “different in your armor.” She rubbed harder, the blurriness getting worse.

Pancreana’s voice sounded both strained and elated. “Dia, is there something wrong?”

Her mother leaned close. “Is there something wrong with your eye? You’re rubbing it like...”

The world went completely blank. Diallana drifted away from the present, going somewhere else. Things went gray and then came back into focus. She and her family were sitting around the dining table, Pancreana standing by the door in her armor. Suddenly, the back door came crashing in, and her family just sat there. She tried to move, but couldn’t. She just sat there watching as a woman with curly brown hair, pointed ears, and a snake body from where her waist should be on down came slithering into the room. Behind the woman, several men with small shield-shaped scars on their faces stepped into the room. The Snake woman’s mouth opened to reveal jagged, twisted teeth. “Now we have you Foreteller! I have been looking for you. Come with me and your family can be left in peace. Resist and I will kill them all. It has been foreseen that you will be mine, you must decide if your family dies to make this true.” Diallana screamed, and the world went blissfully black.

She woke up in her bed, tired and sweaty, but at least her vision was clear. Her mother and aunt were there, speaking quietly over her. Her mother turned to her when she moved. “She’s awake,” her mother said quietly.

Pancreana had a small purple book and a quill pen out. “What did you see, Dia. Tell me exactly,” she said in a businesslike manner.

“We were all at dinner, you were standing by the door, in your armor. The back door was kicked in, and a woman with no legs,” Diallana’s brow furrowed at the memory. “How did she kick in the door?” she paused again, shaking her head. “A woman with no legs, and a snake body where her legs should be came in, followed by men with little scars all over them. She told me if I,” she swallowed hard, her stomach clenching with fear at the woman’s words. “She told me if I helped her that she wouldn’t kill you all, but if I didn’t help her she would kill you all. I don’t even know what she wanted me to help with,” she stopped as Pancreana cut her off.

“Were the scars all shield shaped?” Pancreana asked.

“Yes. Little shield shapes. All over them,” Diallana replied, nodding her head.

She finished writing in a rush, and closed the book. “We leave today,” she said to Diallana’s mother.

Diallana’s mother raised an eyebrow. “You are certain?”

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“It was True. So soon after her first, that guarantees that she is a farseer, it may even mean that she is the KingSeer. If there are followers of the Snake Goddess after her, she cannot stay here,” Pancreana responded firmly.

Her mother looked upset. “This is all so sudden. I had expected that this soon after the start of an Age, that she was not likely to be a farseer...” she trailed off, looking down.

“This soon after the start of the Age, they are needed more. More are found in the first decade than in the entire rest of the Age,” Pancreana said implacably.

“Then I will pack her a bag. You will wait until Herendert returns from New Ralistan?” her mother asked, moving toward Diallana’s wardrobe.

“No. And you should leave too. That was a True Seeing. They are coming, and you know what followers of Filous do to those who do not cooperate,” Pancreana said ominously.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to talk Herendert into leaving his farm, and if he does not go, I do not go,” her mother said while packing a small bag with clothing. “I’ll have a hard enough time explaining the two of you leaving without awaiting his return.”

“Tell him the truth. He has been married to you for two decades, and if the followers of the Snake Goddess know about Diallana, all the reasons you were staying hidden are gone. Victoria KingSeer saw that you should remain hidden from evil, but evil has found you. Tell him, and get away from here. Tonight,” Pancreana said with a note of finality.

“I will try.” She turned to Diallana. “Get out of bed and take this. You need to get moving if you are leaving tonight.”

She had heard the conversation, and knew that pleading to stay and see her father and brother would do no good. She got up. “Mother, I’m scared,” she said plaintively.

Her mother reached out and laid a hand on Diallana’s head, then kissed her gently on the forehead. “I am too, Dia. Stay with Pancreana and she will protect you. Whatever happens do not return here. We will come to visit you in Id’Elan if we can.” Her mother was nearly crying.

They were nearly ready to go. Food and clothes were packed in saddle bags and Diallana settled in a warm cloak when her mother bustled into the kitchen carrying a small faded bundle. “This is the KingSeer’s shawl, given to her by King Albiron II. You must take it with you, for it has rested on the shoulders of each KingSeer since it was made, and either you are the KingSeer, or your descendant will be, Dia.” Her mother held out the faded purple shawl as though it were the crown of a king.

Diallana didn’t know what to say. She had never been allowed to touch “Gram’s Shawl”, now she was being told to take it as her own. She reached out and took the shawl gingerly, tears finally welling up in her eyes. “Thank you mother,” she said through the blur of tears.

Her mother sobbed once and pulled Diallana into her arms. “Take care of yourself, child. The Tower is a wondrous place, and Id’Elan is more mystical than any other city in all of Nordalia. Enjoy your time there.”

Pancreana interrupted their hug. “It is time to go. I have no plans to run off with followers of Filous tight on our heels. And if you keep this up I too will cry.” Her voice sounded harsh, but her face was motionless.

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Pancreana took Diallana's arm and led her out to the horses. "We ride north. Unless we have reason to believe otherwise, let us ride as if we are not yet being followed. It does no good wearing horses out running from an imaginary pursuit."

Diallana was confused. "North? But Id'Elan is East. Why North?"

"Because followers of the Snake Goddess are just as devious and twisted as their deity. They may well be watching to the east. We will ride north around the waters and then head southeast to Id'Elan," Pancreana replied. "Besides, it is a prettier ride around the lake in the fall." She tried to smile, but Diallana felt that it was forced.

"We're in real trouble, aren't we?" she asked.

"Only if they catch us child. Followers of Filous are the most vile beings in all Nordalia, driven only by power and bloodlust to advance their deity, but they are not difficult to outguess. They sometimes can be rather obvious," Pancreana replied, shrugging.

They mounted and rode up the old North Road in silence, Diallana taking in the mansions and towers of the outlying nobles early in the day, and fighting to stay awake toward sunset. It had been a long and trying day, and she was just about to give up and ask Pancreana to stop for the night right there when the Knight pointed. "There. The Binness Inn, named after the mythical giant bird," she said.

Diallana looked, but all she saw was a building with a stable next to it. After riding all day, that building looked like a mansion to her. "Good, I am both tired and sore," she said plaintively.

Pancreana sat up straighter in her saddle. "There will be many long days ahead of us, Dia. But we will get to Id'Elan," she said with a conviction that left Diallana believing they would.

They slept the night at the inn. Diallana was too tired to pay much attention to the cost or how friendly Pancreana was with the innkeeper. She awoke in the morning stiff from the previous day's riding, but otherwise feeling well. After washing up she made her way down to the common room, where she was surprised to find Pancreana sitting and laughing lightly with an armored man wearing the symbol of the Knights of Justice and the innkeeper.

"Ahhh, Diallana, may I present Sir Plantine, the Abjudicar, and Brother Felloss, the innkeeper and faithful of Dirge of the Dented Shield," Pancreana said, standing.

"Tis truly a pleasure to meet thee, milady Diallana," Sir Plantine said formally as he stood and bowed at the waist in her direction.

"An honor to have you in my humble establishment," said the innkeeper. "May I get you something to break your fast?"

She curtsied clumsily toward the knight, "The pleasure is mine, Sir Knight. I have never met a Knight of Justice before." Turning to the innkeeper she added, "Whatever you have on the fire will do fine, brother." It was taking all of her willpower not to ask Pancreana what was happening here. An inn owned by one of the famed "Fist of Dirge"? An Abjudicar just happening to be at that same inn? She doubted that this was all coincidence.

"Thy Knight-Protector has advised mine humble self of thy predicament. It would please this Knight if milady wouldst consent to traveling in twain for the nonce?" Sir Plantine said.

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Diallana had to think for a second to unravel the meaning of the Nordalian's High Cant, and then raised an eyebrow at Pancreana. At Pancreana's nod she turned back to the Nordalian. "It would please me if you would add your worthy sword to my Knight Protector's for as long as our paths lie in the same direction, Sir Knight," she said as formally as she could.

"Thou art well trained, Lady Diallana. Twill be an honor amongst Knights to lend mine strength to thy cause." He bowed and turned to go up the stairs.

As soon as he was out of sight, Diallana moved closer to Pancreana. "Did you come here on purpose? A Knight-Protector and a Dirgian Monk? At one inn?" she hissed.

"Yes, as a matter of fact I did, Dia. Our good King Maxius doesn't like Knights of Antiquum much and does not allow us to maintain outposts in his Kingdom. But he is less restrictive with other Orders of Knights and priests and monks, so we have a network of friends throughout Dilorn that allow us to call upon them in times of need. So I did," the Knight-Protector replied.

"You sound as if King Maxius were a bad king. He's the only thing that kept us alive during the Doornian Wars," Diallana spat.

"At least with King Kayliffe, we knew that he was utterly corrupt, and acted as if he was always out to get us. Since Maxius took the throne my Order has been nearly banned from the Kingdom and some rather vile little cults have been granted the right to build temples in Ralistan. No, King Maxius killed or allowed the death of the rightful King, and then saved Dilorn from destruction by compromising with evil. That does not make him a good King, it makes him a bad one that has not failed yet," Pancreana said flatly.

"That is not the way you taught me to think!" Diallana nearly shouted. "You told me he was a good King!"

"And what did you expect me to tell a twelve year old girl while they were 'securing the kingdom'? Things that she might repeat and get us both killed? No, I told you exactly what you needed to hear to survive the Doornian Wars and Maxius Bowtower's rise to power, nothing more. Now you are a woman who should know when to keep her voice down and her opinions to herself and can withstand the truth. King Maxius is a fraud," Pancreana said hotly.

Diallana took the hint and lowered her voice. "So this Knight is coming with us?" she asked flatly.

"And the Brother too. I cannot imagine anyone I'd rather have at my back if it comes to a fight than a Fist of Dirge and an Abjudicar," Pancreana replied evenly. "Before this is done you will be glad we have them, I am certain."

Diallana did not like the sound of that. "Are we being followed?"

"I don't know yet, the Brother will circle back while we move on, just to check. I suspect if we are not yet it is only because they ran into problems with your father," Pancreana responded.

"You don't really think they'll kill my family," Diallana asked, knowing for certain that they would, and probably were planning on it, just from the one vision she had seen.

"We both know that they will. Unless your family is wise enough to move on before the Scarred Men get there," Pancreana replied, looking straight into her eyes.

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And Diallana knew it too. “Do they always come true? The Visions?” she whispered, trying to keep her voice from shaking.

“No, but it takes active interference to stop them. It is the Great Seeress’ warning to us that things will not go well. It is up to us to interpret and change them. Sometimes they’re easy, like with your family. Sometimes they’re so difficult that we don’t know what a Seeing means until years later, when it comes true. They all include what we call ‘Figures’, a person that the Seeress knows by an odd name. Lord Redeemer in the last Age was almost always Seen as *The Dragon Lord*, no matter whom the Seeress was. The image of him took many forms, but always the Seeress would simply call him *The Dragon Lord*. “

“That’s why whenever I think of the woman who was half snake I think of *The Priestess of Pain*?” Diallana asked hesitantly.

Pancreana looked at her steadily. “Yes Dia, that would be why. In the future, please tell me these name associations. They are the only tie between the different Visions that all Seeresses can See. They are what take the Visions and turn them into The Tale. By cross-referencing all of them, we can tell what is likely to happen. In each age, the KingSeer can see not only the rise and fall of Kings, but can tell us how the names are related. For example, in the last Age, the great mage Delcidnar was Seen as both *Eye Stealer* and *The Wandering Mage*. Nothing tied the two together except one vision by the KingSeer that put them together in one room. So it is important that you tell me these things.”

Diallana felt somewhat over-awed. “You truly believe I am the KingSeer of this Age.” She sat heavily, not wanting to hear the older woman’s answer.

“I truly believe you are a farseer, that you can See beyond your family. That makes you a rarity. If you are the KingSeer, which I think you might be, then you are a treasure to be protected at any price,” Pancreana answered truthfully.

“And what if I’m not?” Diallana asked, hoping she was not.

“Then you are a farseer and need to be at The Tower with the other farseers anyway. That is my task for the moment, to get you there safely. After that, we will see. Perhaps I will get to stay with you, perhaps we will have to go our separate ways,” Pancreana told her.

Diallana had just about reached her breaking point. She needed something to stay unchanged, and Pancreana had been what she had chosen. While the Knight clearly wasn’t her aunt, at least her reassuring presence was unchanged. Now she was talking about leaving Diallana in Id’Elan. After riding a wave of emotions, Diallana settled into seething anger. She knew it was wrong, but she couldn’t help it. “Fine then. I’ll get my things and we can leave. Sooner started, sooner finished, right?” Without waiting for a response, she spun on her heel and left the room.

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Chapter 2

They had ridden in near silence for two days. Diallana continued to sulk and Pancreana alternated between riding in silence and chatting quietly with the Brother and the Abjudicar. The Abjudicar's horse was a marvel, and Diallana had spent most of the two days admiring the animal. The Brother's horse was just the opposite - old and worn, but with a speed that proved that looks were deceiving. Brother Felloss spent most of his time apart from them as they traveled, circling back to view the trail behind them and then returning for meals. He seemed to always show up just in time for meals.

The countryside was beautiful, and Diallana spent time admiring it when she could not admire the Abjudicar's horse. Thick, forested trees would crowd as close as five feet to the Old North Road, and then a whole section would be cleared and farms would appear. These farm towns were not so far apart, but the forest in between made them seem like separate kingdoms to Diallana.

Midway through the third day Brother Felloss came riding back at a gallop, and the two knights went to speak with him away from Diallana. When they were finished talking, Pancreana turned about and came riding back toward Diallana while the Brother and Abjudicar rode off down the road going the direction the Brother had come from.

"We need to make better time. Brother Felloss believes we're being followed. Sir Plantine is going to try to intercept them and attempt to discern whether they pursue us or not, and try to slow them if they are." Pancreana kicked her horse into a trot.

Diallana kicked her own horse into a trot and rode up next to Pancreana. "What do you think? Are they following us?"

"I think if they are that I hope your mother took my advice and got out of the house," Pancreana said with a frown.

Diallana didn't want to think about that, so she thought upon the actions of the Knights of Justice in the tales that skalds sang when they came to New Ralistan. "Sir Plantine will stop them if they are following us, I am certain," she said finally, not being able to equate even this fine Knight with the heroes of legend like Sir Mil'Amber Baltruscade, who had stopped an entire army by himself in the ballad Circle of the Scorpion.

"Do not equate an actual Knight to one from the tales, Dia," Pancreana warned. "He can slow them, but trying to stop them would probably only result in his death. He is a fine Knight, and I'm honored to know him, but the Brother said there were nearly five fists of men in the group behind us. Any man against twenty is likely to end up dead if he is foolish enough to take them on." Diallana was surprised to see Pancreana looked truly concerned.

"You sound as if you expect him to attack them by himself," Diallana said.

"If they are followers of Filous, then I expect him to do just that, and I expect him to die," Pancreana said resignedly. "I am sworn to do anything, be it illegal, immoral, or deadly to protect you. It is the nature of my Order that the safety of Seeresses comes before our very lives." Pancreana glanced over her shoulder, as if she were looking for the Abjudicar. "Knights of Justice live by a different code, it is their goal to see all Nordalia live under just and fair rules. If he suspects that they are out to get you, he will charge them because he must do what he can to insure justice. They call it 'balancing the scales', and a Knight of Justice will go into a suicidal charge if they believe the cause is just."

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Diallana nodded wisely, as though she understood, even though she did not. She'd been taught about kings and kingdoms and about heraldry, but not about the beliefs behind the symbols. "What about Brother Felloss?" she prompted, now curious about his beliefs.

Pancreana shook her head sadly. "It is unfortunate that Brother Felloss will follow him unto death, for The Fist of Dirge believes the only good death is one in battle, and what more glorious battle than helping a companion fight followers of Filous?" Pancreana sighed. "If they are not back by nightfall, we can assume that is exactly what they plan to do, and if they show up tomorrow we can count ourselves lucky."

They rode the rest of the day in silence. Diallana had been angry when Pancreana invited these two fine men along, but they had both been extremely nice to her during their days together, and she had no wish for either to come to harm. That night as she went to sleep, she watched Pancreana pace the edge of the firelight, apparently straining her eyes for sight of the two men.

Pancreana woke her before the sun rose. "It's time to go. They did not return, and we have to assume that the Filians are riding hard to catch us," she said with a note of urgency.

"How far away from Custos Antiquum are we?" Diallana asked, yawning.

"Too far. We have not yet left Dilorn, and must travel through a good portion of Trioton before we reach the edge of Custos Antiquum," Pancreana admitted.

"Then how far to Id'Elan?" Diallana asked as she hurriedly rolled up her sleeping blankets.

"Custos Antiquum is a small kingdom with the capital at the center. We will reach Id'Elan within a day of crossing the border. But first we have to get to that border alive," Pancreana said flatly. "I suspect they are going to make that difficult."

They rode hard for two more days, riding from predawn until after dark, pushing their horses and Diallana's saddle sores as far as they safely could. The second night after the Knight and Brother had left them there was a noise outside their fire's glow, but though they sat in fear waiting for an attack, none came. In the morning Pancreana went out to see if she could tell what had caused the noise, and came back white and shaking.

"Get on your horse, leave your things," she said bluntly.

"What did you-"

"Do as I say!" Pancreana shouted, vaulting onto her horse.

Diallana was scared, but followed her aunt's instructions. After they had ridden for a half hour or more, Pancreana seemed to relax somewhat, but did not slow their pace at all. "I found Sir Plantine and Brother Felloss. They are toying with us, much as could be expected of a snake," Pancreana finally said, blanching.

"They carried their bodies along just to scare us?" Diallana asked, horrified.

"I wish it were that simple. They tied them to the back of something, probably one of their mounts, and dragged them to just outside our camp. By the looks of the blood neither one was dead when they started out," Pancreana replied.

Diallana shuddered at the thought of being dragged to death behind a horse. "They could have attacked us in our sleep then?" she asked, suddenly realizing how close she might have come to death last night.

"Yes, they could have." Pancreana paused, eyeing Diallana critically and trying to judge how that admission affected the girl. Pancreana could see the fright in the girl's

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eyes, but noted that she kept her face as impassive as possible at the news. “For the first two nights I used a Wizard’s Bark Tea to keep from sleeping, but one’s body can only take so much abuse, and last night I didn’t dare. They must be certain of success if they didn’t attack us then. My fear now is that they’re ahead of us, waiting for us.”

“How could they get ahead of us so fast?” Diallana asked.

“That is easy, if you do not care about your horses you can abuse them for several days of hard riding before they start going lame. My fear is how they captured a Knight of Justice alive.”

“What makes you fear that?” Diallana asked.

“Before the Doornian Wars, remember I went on vacation? I went to Silentia Ens, then on to Passrock. I watched Lady Arial of Keep Davaya fight off a tensquad alone. Two fists of men against one Knight of Justice, and she left them in a broken pile behind her like they were so much chaff she needed to separate from the wheat. Her blade spun like a scythe, and the bodies fell like sheaves of wheat,” Pancreana smiled grimly at the memory, shaking her head as though she still didn’t believe what she had seen. “Afterward, she told me she would gladly die in a Just cause, and that she trained her Knights to never be taken alive.”

Diallana thought that Pancreana looked slightly afraid, and anything that scared Pancreana scared Diallana, so she urged her horse a little faster.

Pancreana matched her pace and continued speaking slowly. “Dirgians are worse. The most horrible thing for them is to die in captivity, unable to fight. There are stories from the Doornian Wars about an entire group of the Fist of Dirge attacking their captors unarmed, trying to get themselves killed. Anything that could take both of those men alive is more than a match for the two of us. Me with my sword and you with nothing,” Pancreana’s voice trailed off. She cleared her throat and looked seriously at Diallana. “If it comes to that, use your eating dagger. It is not much, but a knife will cut flesh and it might make the difference between life and death.”

“What about the Bowtower Guard? Can’t we call on them?” Diallana asked, becoming more afraid with each new revelation from Pancreana.

“Not and expect help. I already told you, King Maxius is no friend of the Knights of Antiquum, and his royal guardsmen know it. They might arrest us, but all that would do is put us in one place for the followers of Filous to come find us. No, we will not involve the Bowtower guard. We will ride hard for the North Tower and the border. Once we’re in Trioton we will find the nearest guardian or Hammer Guardian and request an escort to Custos Antiquum.”

Diallana didn’t know what to say to that. She had been taught by both her aunt and her mother that King Maxius was a good king, but since leaving home, Pancreana had acted as if he was a scoundrel that couldn’t be trusted. She’d have to take Pancreana’s word for it, she had no arguments to make.

It was midway through the next day when the attack came. Four expertly placed arrows hit their horses, and the rearing animals threw them to the dirt before either Diallana or Pancreana knew what was happening. Pancreana scrambled to her feet and rushed over to Diallana. “Get up!” she screamed, pulling on Diallana’s arm. “They’re here, get up and run!”

Diallana pulled herself to her feet as fast as she could, and followed the Knight off the road and into the bushes. The screams of both horses followed her and nearly masked

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the sounds of pursuit breaking through the bushes behind them. Diallana looked back over her shoulder, and one of the men from her dream was running behind them, pushing through the woods panting, his bald head covered with little shield shaped scars.

Nearly breathless from the fall and ensuing run, Diallana burst out, "There's one behind us!"

Pancreana looked over her shoulder and suddenly stopped. "Get behind me, Dia," she growled while drawing her sword. Diallana did as she was told, trying to stop her limbs from shaking.

"Come on then, you want this girl, come take her, you snake-loving piece of cow dung," Pancreana sneered.

The man pulled a mace and moved toward her slowly. "I will get much honor with the priestess for taking this girl from your dead body," he said with a heavy Kantor Doornian accent.

"Oh... a sand counting snake-lover," Pancreana nearly crooned. "I lost some family to Doornians during the wars, don't mind taking some of that blood back."

As an answer the man dove at her, swinging his mace hard. Pancreana stepped lightly to the side and cut down on the man's arm. He made a noise that was nearly a scream as his weapon fell to the earth, blood spurting from the gash across his forearm. Pancreana moved like lightning as he staggered back, running right up to him and cutting half way through his neck in a single overhead blow. As the body fell to the ground she turned to Diallana "Now we run again," she said and took off into the woods without looking behind her. Diallana followed, because she wasn't staying here with a dead body.

They ran for more than an hour until finally Pancreana called a halt. "We can't go on like this forever, we need to hole up. That briar patch is the best cover I've seen since we started this run, so unless you See things differently, we're going to hide in there," she panted.

Diallana hadn't *Seen* anything, so she just shook her head, too winded to make unnecessary words.

Pancreana led them deep into the briar patch, and motioned for Diallana to keep low. They sat there trying to listen and control their breathing. Diallana noted with annoyance that of all the times in the last few days, it was now that her vision was blurring again.

Not too long after they had settled in, about ten feet apart, the jingling sound of armor made of chain and the raspy voices of men talking became clear. Footsteps moved near the briar patch.

The footsteps were close and Diallana wished she could see clearly, but the blurring didn't recede and purple tinged everything that she looked at. This time the visions danced before her eyes while the world continued behind them. Those were the worst visions. Pancreana had explained that most Seeresses Saw this way, and that was the reason for their blindfolds. Without the blindfolds the women tried to see both the world and the visions and after a time many would go mad. Diallana understood why. She preferred the ones that blurred her vision out completely.

The bushes to her left moved. Diallana tensed, knowing it had to be very close to Pancreana, nearly on top of her. A detached, slithering voice that she immediately

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identified with The Priestess of Pain said, "If I were a blind woman and a Knight, where would I hide? Hmmm..."

She felt Pancreana spring up out of the bushes next to her and heard the sword rasp out of her scabbard. There was no talking, only a grunt, followed by a gasp, and finally a scream. The scream of a Snake in pain.

Suddenly she heard the sound of running feet all around her. They were off a bit, but not far, and there must be twenty or more of them.

"Diallana RUN!" Pancreana screamed and Diallana heard the sound of metal on metal coming from where she thought Pancreana must be. She turned the other way to run, crawled out of the briar patch, and stopped. She could not bear to do this again. Twice she had run while others died. Twice she had shamefully not even looked on while they died for her. Not a third, not Pancreana. She turned around, rubbing her eyes, and they were thankfully almost clear of the purple haze. Pancreana stood over the Priestess of Pain. Diallana had never seen her face, but was certain that was her. Her throat was cut wide, and her eyes stared at nothing. Three men faced Pancreana with scimitars and a fourth hung back with a crossbow.

Diallana fumbled in her pack for her eating knife. She was finished running. If she died, the visions stopped. If she died, people stopped dying for her. If she died, she could be with her family. So she would die, but not before cutting one of these bastards that had killed her family, not before letting Pancreana know that she was not alone.

Diallana ran up next to Pancreana and dove toward the man on her right. She stuck the dagger into his leg as far as she could, and above his scream of pain she heard Pancreana's agonized cry, "NO! I told you to RUN! Do not make my death be in vain!" She hesitated, unsure why her companion would sound so angry, and the man whose leg now sheathed her knife grabbed her by the hair. "Got you, you little witch!" he yelled.

She had seen people fight, no one alive today could possibly claim that they hadn't after the Doornian Wars, but she had never seen a fight like this. Pancreana screamed like she had gone mad and threw herself into the man. Her sword arced in from behind and nearly cut his head off. He fell over backward, his hand still holding Diallana's hair in a death-tight grip. He dragged Diallana to the ground with him, his body spasming and the tell-tale smells of death permeating his body. Pancreana stood over them. "Come on! Who is next to die? Who wants to meet your goddess knowing that you failed in her bidding? Come on then!" The Knight was screaming like a lunatic.

Diallana pulled her knife from the dead man's leg, and started sawing through her hair as fast as she could.

Two men closed on Pancreana, while the one with the crossbow stood back loading it. Pancreana cut the first one across his chest, clean through his leather armor, and he fell back sobbing. "That's one! He will be feasted upon by your Serpent Mistress this night!" she screamed, turning to the other.

He thrust his scimitar at her, and just nicked her cheek. She buried her sword nearly to the hilt in his chest. From where she stood Diallana could not tell for sure, but she was certain the sword was sticking a hand or more out the man's back. But more were coming, a dozen or so more, and Diallana was sure that even Pancreana couldn't fend that many men off by herself.

She could not get through her hair fast enough, and the last man standing was pointing his crossbow at Pancreana. Diallana did the only thing she could think of, she

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threw her eating knife at him. Somehow, perhaps with the help of Dirge himself, the knife made for eating and not throwing flew true. It pierced his neck, and he jerked. The bolt flew out of his crossbow and hit another man in the belly. The man that was hit by the crossbow bolt started screaming and writhing, falling to the ground an instant after the man with the crossbow.

But more men had arrived and they grabbed her from behind. Three more were heading for Pancreana, who was struggling to get her sword out of the man's chest. The men that grabbed Diallana held her fast, laughing while they tried to make her watch the fight. She refused to close her eyes and look away, she refused to call out and distract Pancreana. She sat where they held her and watched Pancreana cut down four men before their accumulated blows finally dropped her to her knees, her sword sliding from her hand.

Pancreana raised her bloodied face to look at the men around her. "May Shalitor See you living in eternal torment, watching as all you love is cut down just as you cut down all that this girl loves-" Her words were cut off by a scimitar that took her head clean off her shoulders. The men who had killed her immediately fell to arguing about who got her armor and weapons, but Diallana, numb with grief, ignored them and the men who tied her hands behind her back.

And then the Priestess of Pain was there. She had seen the Priestess of Pain dead, and this person looked different, but just by sight Diallana could tell that this was her. Diallana was confused, but the symbol hanging about the woman's neck, a snake resting on a pile of gold, was unmistakable. This was indeed the Priestess of Pain.

"You led me on a merry chase, farseer," the Priestess hissed. She seemed uncomfortable with her body, as though her legs were useless appendages she did not know for certain how to use. "And I suppose I must thank you. You gave me the opportunity to send a Dirgian Monk and a Nordalian Knight to my goddess. It is not often that I have cause to do such things these days, so busy am I on the goddess' work."

For the first time since her birthingday Diallana hoped for the vision. No vision could be as bad as being bound and held like this, having to face the real thing.

The Priestess looked her up and down, nodding her head appreciatively. "We have waited long for you, Seeress. We have been combing the countryside all about Ralistan, looking for any sign that you had come of age. You are the key to the future, and since I now hold the key, I shall be Queen of all Nordalia. It is funny that once I understood who you would be, it was obvious that we should have known all along."

Diallana knew it would not work, but tried lying anyway. "I am but a girl, lost on her way to The Court. Please don't harm me."

The Priestess snorted. "Harm you? Never. I shall put you up in the finest rooms my mansion holds, I shall ply you with sweetmeats and wine, I shall assign servants to obey your every whim. You are the one thing that cannot be replaced. You are more precious to me than anything but the goddess. All I ask is that you allow your visions to come, and we will write them down just as Pancreana would have. The only difference is that you'll live in luxury instead of probity, and it will be me or mine writing down your words."

"I shant See again. No matter what you do or say, I shall not See for you," Diallana replied, trying to put on a brave face.

"We shall see. I think that you will. In due course of time..."

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The world spun and Diallana felt her eyes go blessedly blank. The purple covered her vision completely, and suddenly she was standing in a rather ornate throne room with blue and gold bunting hanging everywhere. The back of the room was completely dark. The throne was made of a set of golden scales, the Throne being the left side, and the right bearing a sword, a shield, and a bent mace. There was a very handsome man, clearly a knight or a noble, walking up to the throne. She could not see his face, but she knew that he was handsome, and that his name was The Empty Throne. A beautiful woman sat in the throne-room, floating upon a shield and playing a harp. Her face was masked in a flow of shining hair, but she was obviously pregnant, and her name was Shield Singer. An old elf stood with her, his beard and flopping hat covering his features, but his name was First Chosen, that she knew. And next to him was The Unking, his head turned away from her. His Green and Blue cloak was beautiful, as she was certain he himself was.

The Empty Throne mounted the dais and reached out. As his hand touched the golden throne, snakes appeared everywhere, led by the Priestess of Pain, only her elven ears visible through the snakes that made up her hair. The snakes slithered up and bit The Empty Throne. He pulled his hand back screaming, and fell over. Diallana did not know if he was alive or dead, and her feet would not take her across the room to him. The snakes entwined the Shield Singer, and she screamed at them in a language Diallana did not understand. They bit her over and over, then they pulled the child from her womb, and The Priestess of Pain snatched up the child and ate it.

As the child died, Diallana's vision cleared and the vision ended. Diallana came back to the present. She was still bound, and the Priestess of Pain was now standing there picking at leaves in her hair, preening herself.

"Just like that. You have already Seen something important to me, and your talk while in a Vision is unheard of. For that, I think you can ride unbound," The Priestess of Pain said.

"Where are you taking me?" Diallana asked as a large man cut the ropes off of her hands.

"To the place where we keep Seeresses in grandeur and luxury, where you will live in the most grandeur of them all."

"Why do you treat me so? You have killed many to get me, probably even my own family. Why suddenly be so nice rather than kill me?"

"If the Knights of Antiquum ever get too close, I will regret having to kill you." Diallana shivered as the Priestess looked like she meant it. "You are too important to let the Knights have you. Until then, we will deal. I will provide for you, and you will See for me. But tell me, do you know your real family name?"

Diallana was scared, but knew what to say. "Of course, it is Grintel."

"No, that's the name your grandmother took because your real family name was getting onerous over the years. Your real family name is KingSeer. You, my dear, are the descendent of Victoria KingSeer, and one day, you will See me as Queen of Greater Nordalia."

Diallana wasn't certain how this woman knew who she was, but if she could help it, she would **never** See this murderous woman as Queen of anything.

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Chapter 3

Maylin walked down the steps of the Tower of the Seeress stiffly, one hand clenching reflexively while the other held the letter that had summoned him. This wasn't the first time he'd been called to the Tower but it was the first time he'd stood before the High Protector and the High Seeress at the same time.

His jaw set, he kept his eyes forward as he moved through the streets automatically, his mind not even registering the people that flowed through the streets. Even the calls of street merchants hawking their wares did not reach his ears. He was too focused on the words he'd heard within the Tower.

The KingSeer has been taken.

Maylin had been a Knight of Antiquim for long enough to know what the loss of the KingSeer meant. In the past few years he and his friends had been responsible for finding and returning many Seeresses who had been hidden away by someone who, according to the High Seeress, sought to steal the Tale and keep it hidden from the world.

Maylin moved automatically to avoid the small children that darted around him, laughing as though they had not a care in the world. Maylin's resolve deepened at the thought of them growing up in a world full of kings who had not the benefit of the Tale to guide them. He bowed his head respectfully as he passed the temple of Shalitor, the Great Seeress herself, and silently mouthed a prayer to the goddess he'd dedicated his life to.

He turned down a side street and lengthened his strides as he came to the inn where he'd been relaxing with his friends when the missive from the Tower had been delivered. He'd thought it was perhaps some special thanks for returning Seeresses. He shook his head slightly at his own naïveté. As soon as he'd seen the High Protector of his order and the High Seeress, their heads together and voices hushed, he'd known something was wrong.

He pushed open the door to the inn and strode across the common room, searching out the innkeep. The innkeep looked at him expectantly. "Yes?"

"A private room, now," he growled, turning to signal the small group that sat laughing jovially at a table at the far end of the common room.

The innkeep bobbed his head and gestured for Maylin to follow him. Maylin turned on his heel and marched behind him as the man led him to a small, private dining room. Maylin walked to the far side of the room and turned to face the door, watching his companions as they entered, still laughing and joking amongst themselves.

Francis was first, his sandals scuffing along the floor and his brown robes rustling as he walked. With his hair trimmed neatly and the sandy brown goatee on his face most people thought he looked a lot like the warrior-priest god he professed to serve, Dirge. Maylin found the fact that the man appeared to march everywhere amusing and even though the man was smiling Maylin could tell that Francis was as tense as a maiden on her wedding night. The man was always tense and usually angry. So often angry, in fact, that they'd taken to calling him Francis the Angry as a joke. But Maylin knew Francis would stand beside him in a fight, had done so in the past and would do so again, and he trusted the Dirgian as well as he trusted any other.

As Francis settled himself in a chair Maylin turned his attention to Torlyn, who had walked in right behind Francis and was even now perched on the arm of a chair as she spoke animatedly to the Dirgian. She was so damned small, Maylin thought, that he often wondered how it was that she could heft the hand and a half sword she kept

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strapped across her back let alone the long sword belted at her hip. Her long length of black curls was held back by a simple strip of leather, but the metal sigils that hung here and there in her hair rang out merrily as her head turned this way and that with her words. The mandolin slung low across her back marked her profession as clearly as the blue and white leather tabard marked her allegiance to Dirge. She had learned to fight while traveling the continent, singing for Kings and Queens. Maylin heard her voice rise and fall with her words, her Doornian-like accent making it only slightly difficult to understand her.

Maylin nodded to himself, knowing that she, like Francis, would stand by him in his time of need. The knight of Shalitor turned his attention to the door as the last of his companions came gliding through it, making only the slightest of noise as she entered the room. *Denloa*, Maylin thought as his eyes fell on the elf. *She is the least outspoken of them all, but that bow she carries is not for show.* He thought of the many times he'd been amazed by the graceful elven archer, how many times the woman had taken a shot that had been clearly impossible and managed to pull it off. She was clearly Talimaara's by the symbol that hung around her neck as well as the green and tan hues of her clothing, which was unsurprising. Most elves called Talimaara mother and followed the nature goddess' ways. Even those who chose to give their hearts to Dirge and Nordal often gave their thanks to the goddess for good weather and well sowed crops without guilt.

As *Denloa* sat at the table Maylin nodded at the innkeep, who scurried out of the room and closed the door behind him. At the sound of the heavy wooden doors closing the discussion died between the companions as they all turned to look at Maylin.

Torlyn turned appraising blue eyes upon him, her brow furrowing as she saw the intense expression on his face. "Maylin, what is it?"

Maylin took a deep breath and held it for a moment, then pulled out a chair and sat heavily upon it, exhaling loudly. He wasn't certain where to start and as a rule he wasn't a delicate speaking man, so he simply spit it out. "The KingSeer has been taken."

Torlyn and Francis exchanged surprised looks and then returned their attention to Maylin. "*The KingSeer?*" Francis asked, his normally angry voice expressing rare incredulity.

At Maylin's nod, *Denloa* raised her normally quiet voice. "Another Seeress?" she asked, not recognizing the name or the implication of such an occurrence.

Maylin's face grew angry. "Not just *a* Seeress, *Denloa*, *the* Seeress. The KingSeer, the most important Seeress of any Age."

Denloa paused, her face thoughtful, before she spoke again. "I understand the role of the Seeresses. They See the Tale, and it is through the Tale that those who are able to unravel its prophecies can guide the world through the Age and avoid the end of the world, what you humans call *Tasni-Gorak*. But what is the importance of this KingSeer?"

"She is the KingSeer," Maylin gritted slowly through his teeth, his jaw clenched tightly. "She is the most important of them all, she is the key."

Denloa turned to Torlyn and Francis. "Perhaps one of you could be a bit more verbose in your explanation? Maylin's explanations always seem to leave out all the important little details," she said mildly.

Maylin closed his mouth and said nothing. *Denloa* was right, he rarely explained things as well as the skald, but that didn't bother him in the least. He was a knight of

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Antiquum, a protector of the voices of Shalitor. He didn't need eloquent words to do what he was born to do, protect the Seeresses and kill anyone who got in the way. His mace did his talking for him; words beyond those needed to calm a Seeress were useless in accomplishing his tasks as far as he was concerned.

Torlyn smiled, but the smile did not reach her eyes, the gravity of the situation washing away the pleasant expression she usually held on her face. "The KingSeer is a descendant of Victoria KingSeer, her line of daughters touched in every Age by Shalitor. She is the key to understanding the Tale, and she is the only one who Sees the rise and fall of kings. Victoria KingSeer saw the fall of the Court of Nordal, the rise of the Assassin as king of Corrigar, and that the Mageborn Queen would sit on the throne of Freeland Hold. There is but one KingSeer in an Age. If she dies, we must live without her contribution, trying to stave off Tasni-Gorak without her guidance. That has only happened in one Age that the Knights of Antiquum have recorded and the results were nearly disastrous. We call it 'The Second Triotonic War'," she said at length.

Maylin nodded, relaxing a bit at her explanation. "She must be found. She cannot die and we cannot allow what she Sees to be hidden like has been done with so many others," he tried to impart the importance of finding her to his friends, but felt rather ineffective after Torlyn's explanation.

Denloa nodded at both explanations. "So just as with the Seeresses we have been finding thus far, someone wishes to keep the Tale from us so that they can guide the world to whatever end they choose and we cannot stop them as easily."

Francis pounded his fist on the table, his face a mask of anger. "By Dirge, we cannot allow that!" He turned his face and met Maylin's eyes. "We are going to find her, aren't we? That is what your summons this morning was about, wasn't it?" At Maylin's curt nod he slapped a hand against his thigh, the sound echoing through the room. "By Dirge, what are we waiting for?" he exclaimed, pushing his chair back from the table and standing abruptly.

Maylin held up a hand. "We must ready for travel first, my friend. We go to Ralistan, to the home of the KingSeer to see what clues we might find."

"Ralistan?" Denloa said thoughtfully. "The heart of Dilorn. I find it difficult to believe that a young girl could be taken in Ralistan with the Bowtower Guard on duty."

Torlyn bobbed her head in agreement even as Francis sat back down in his chair, looking a tad grumpy at being delayed. "That does sound unlike King Sir Maxius' famous guard, they're quite," she made a face, "thorough, from what I've heard." She slid from her perch on the side of the chair and sat down, leaning forward and resting her elbows on the table. "Why don't you tell us everything, Maylin, that we might better know what we're getting ourselves into?"

Maylin grunted his assent and looked up at the ceiling while he collected his thoughts. He ignored the sound of Francis drumming his fingers impatiently on the table and instead concentrated on what the High Protector had told him earlier that day. He waited until the drumming became more insistent, until finally his ears could pick up the sound of Francis muttering under his breath. The expression on Maylin's face never changed, but he grinned inwardly. Many people thought Maylin slow, but truthfully he just had a very different sense of humor than most and making Francis wait until the priest was nearly ready to explode was something he found quite amusing.

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“Two months ago the Tower of the Seeress received a missive from a knight named Pancreana. The knight was assigned to guard the eldest daughter in the KingSeer’s family, Diallana by name, until she came of age, which she did about two and half months ago,” Maylin began, finally lowering his gaze to look at his friends. He noted that all three of them were watching him closely, hanging on his every word. He shifted uncomfortably at the realization, hating the sensation of being the center of attention. He looked away again, hoping that the feeling would pass, before he continued. “The letter came from a small Unbroken Seal post housed by the Binness Inn. The knight notified the tower that the KingSeer girl was at the very least a farseer and may be the KingSeer for this age.”

Francis’ face scrunched up. “What’s a farseer? I haven’t heard that one before.”

Maylin looked at Torlyn, who stifled a chuckle at the unspoken plea for help. She sat back in her chair. “A farseer is what we would normally call a Seeress,” she said simply.

Francis blew out an explosive breath and threw his hands up in the air. “Then why not just call them Seeresses?”

Torlyn shook her head, laughing. “Just because one can See does not make than a farseer, a Seeress, such as the ones we’ve been finding and that the Tower protects. Many can See, but they can See only what might effect their own families. A farseer Sees outside her family. We call them just Seeresses because it is not necessary to protect those who cannot See outside their family, because it is likely they are not Seeing parts of the Tale,” the skald explained.

“Alright, so this knight wrote that the girl was a farseer and maybe the KingSeer. How would she know that she was the KingSeer?” Denloa interjected.

“If she Sees the rise and fall of kings, she is the KingSeer. Only one in an Age Sees with the Vision of the kings,” Maylin spouted automatically. He returned Torlyn’s smile shyly, as if he were embarrassed to share his rather thorough knowledge of Seeresses with them.

“We all suspected you had an education in these things, Maylin,” she teased him. “Most Knights of Antiquum do.”

Maylin shrugged. “I remember what I was told, it just doesn’t always come out of my mouth the way it went in my ears.”

“Well? What else did the letter say?” Francis urged the other man to continue his tale.

“The letter said a Knight of Justice and a Brother of the Fist of Dirge were traveling with them on their way out of Ralistan,” Maylin continued. “They should have arrived three weeks ago if they were going to. The Tower gave them some extra time because Pancreana wrote something of snakes in the grass and that is part of the reason they think she may be the KingSeer.”

Denloa tapped her slender fingers on her chin at his words. “Indeed, snakes in the grass? More followers of Filous, I would say.”

Francis and Torlyn made faces at her words, but neither would disagree with them. Nearly every group of Seeresses they’d rescued in the past year had been abducted by followers of Dilineal Filous, the Snake Goddess. They were hard to track and harder to nail down than any others, as worship of the vile goddess was outlawed in most kingdoms because of the barbarous rites performed by her followers in her name.

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“I don’t see why being abducted by those snakes would make her the KingSeer,” Torlyn wondered aloud. “Most of the Seeresses we’ve rescued have been taken by her followers, why would this be any different?”

Maylin jerked his head in Francis’ direction. “You’ve seen your Brothers fight, and the Knights of Justice fight,” he waited for Francis’ affirmation before continuing. “How many would it take to kill two of them?”

Francis looked thoughtful for a moment. “Three, maybe four fists,” he said, his eyes widening at his own response. “With the Knight of Antiquum, five fists or more.”

Maylin nodded. “Exactly. We haven’t seen five fists of snake followers altogether guarding the two score of Seeresses we’ve rescued. Why send that many after one girl, unless you have a piece of the Tale that tells you she’s the one?”

Torlyn shook her head angrily. “This is a fine mess we’ve got Maylin. If they’ve got enough of the Tale to know she’s the KingSeer then – “

Maylin interrupted. “Then they know we’re coming for them.”

Francis let out a long, low whistle and glanced over at Denloa. “I hope your fingers are ready, Denloa, because I think we’re going to need them.”

Denloa flexed her long, thin fingers slowly in front of her, a slow grin appearing on her face. “They’re ready alright. Snakes make for good target practice.”

Maylin pushed his chair out and stood. “Well, we won’t get to Ralistan by sitting here.”

Francis hopped up and skirted around Torlyn, glancing back at Denloa when he reached the door. “Come on then, elf, let’s get moving and get going.”

Denloa stood, rolling her eyes at Maylin before she turned and followed the priest as he marched back into the common room. Torlyn stood, shaking her head at Francis’ enthusiasm, and began to follow the others out the door but stopped at the feel of Maylin’s hand on her arm.

She turned and looked up at him. “Yes, Maylin?”

“I thought you should know something else, Torlyn,” he said, glancing at the platinum ring on her finger before he returned his gaze to meet hers.

“What?” she asked slowly, her face sobering immediately.

He lowered his voice to a whisper. “Diallana had The Shawl with her.”

Torlyn’s eyes widened and a hand flew to her mouth. “Are you sure?”

Maylin nodded and Torlyn closed her eyes for a long moment. “Then we must make certain we get it back, mustn’t we? And as much of the Tale as we can find,” she said brusquely before she turned and marched out of the room.

Maylin stood staring at her, wondering if she really understood the implication of The Shawl *and* the KingSeer being in the hands of those who might twist the Tale to their own vile purposes. He considered what he’d been taught many years ago as a novitiate to the Knights of Antiquum on the subject, racking his brain to dredge up every minute detail.

The Shawl had been given to Victoria KingSeer by King Albiron Contraband II, the king of the Court of Nordal at the time. It was purported to have a magical nature, though none had ever confirmed the rumor as The Shawl was ever only seen on the shoulders of the KingSeer since it was gifted to her, more than five centuries ago.

Maylin shook his head as he began to walk toward his own room to stow his gear for the trip. What he recalled thus far wasn’t enough to make it important even though he

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knew it was nearly as important as the KingSeer herself. *Think, Maylin, think!* he commanded himself, trying to force the memory to return. *What did they say about the magical nature of the Shawl. That must be why it's important – because it's either true or the snakes think it's true.* He tried to envision his instructor lecturing his class on the subject as he walked through the door to his room. He shook his head, frustrated, when he couldn't concentrate hard enough to recall the information.

He sat on the edge of the bed and put his head in his hands, closing his eyes and clearing his mind of everything but his instructors. Finally he could see the image of the graying, frail mageborn that had lectured them on the history of the Shawl many years ago. He squinted, as though he were truly trying to see the man, and then focused on what the man had been saying.

"...though not even the Keepers of the Sealed have been able to confirm such tales. The Shawl is allegedly gray with a lighter gray fringe. Unless..."

"Unless it is on the shoulders of the KingSeer!" Maylin finished the sentence, his mind racing as he recalled that the normally gray shawl allegedly became as colorful as the day it was gifted to the KingSeer when placed on the shoulders of the current Age's KingSeer. His eyes popped open as he remembered the rest of the stories about The Shawl. "And it turns away blades as if it was a suit of mail armor and gives the KingSeer control over when she Sees, as well as the ability to recall what she has Seen at will."

He sighed heavily, pleased that he'd recalled the information. He, like most of the other novitiates at the time, hadn't known they would need such knowledge. After all, ten years ago who would have believed they would live through the end of one Age and the beginning of another? The KingSeer for the Age of the Scorpion had long since passed from this world and into the next, her soul undoubtedly escorted by the Gate Guarder herself into The Great Seeress' realm, and no one had expected that a new Age would come so quickly. Even when it had, no one would have guessed that the KingSeer would be stolen, let alone the hundreds of other Seeresses taken by those vile snakes.

So he hadn't committed the knowledge to rote as well as he should have, for now he sat in this room preparing to leave for Ralistan to seek out the KingSeer herself and such facts might be of assistance in his quest. Maylin stood and began to stow his gear, shoving things hastily into his pack and saddlebags without thought. He was a bit awed by the confidence the High Protector had in him, for the task of seeking out the KingSeer was something that any Knight of Antiquum would have gladly accepted. He wondered briefly why he, of all the knights in the world, would be chosen.

He froze and his face fell as he realized that the best reason he would have been chosen was because it had been Seen. He had rescued a few score of Seeresses, that was true, but so had many other knights. He certainly hadn't rescued enough to be worthy of such an honor of his own volition, so it must be the case that it was Seen.

Maylin swallowed past the realization that he might be named in the Tale. He was a bit curious as to what name he might have been given if his presumption was correct, but it was a bit overwhelming to think he might be important enough to be a Figure in the Tale. He briefly considered his choice of companions, and knew that they, too, were likely named in the Tale. His face hardened as he understood that if it they were, that would only make their tasks that much more difficult, for the snakes would be looking for them all the harder.

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He pitched the last piece of gear into his pack and tossed it over his shoulder, stopping only to affix his mace to the belt around his hips and heft his saddlebags over his arm on the way out the door. He brushed away the gnawing feeling in his gut at the thought of being named in the Tale and headed for the stables. It didn't really matter why he'd been chosen, he had a job to do and he would either find and return the KingSeer to Id'Elan, or die trying.

The four friends left Id'Elan that afternoon, spending much of the day discussing how they would get past the border guards when they reached Dilorn. Maylin had reminded them of King Sir Maxius' intense dislike of Knights of Antiquum, or anyone from Custos-Antiquum for that matter, and the four had begun coming up with plans ever since.

Maylin gritted his teeth yet again. He was not one for sneaking about, but when Torlyn had come up with this idea, none could deny that it was better than any of the dozens of other ideas they had discarded.

He rode on the seat of a coach, a voluminous cloak covering all but his boots. He scowled at his boots, those long, thin coachman's boots. They were too long, nearly to his knees, too pretty, and too soft to fight well in, and they made him look like a coachman. He had refused to give up his mace, but it was easily hidden under the cloak.

Torlyn was inside the coach with Denloa and Francis. Francis was singing the silly glories of Dirge, dressed like a dandy. That was the only consolation that Maylin got out of this, the priest looked more like a ringman in a traveling miracle show than a proper follower of Dirge.

They were traveling as Torlyn Baltruscade, famed skald, going to the court at Ralistan with her retainers. Denloa was her elven hand-maiden, Francis was her spiritual guide, and Maylin was ... well, her coachman.

They'd been stopped at the border, as expected. Torlyn and Denloa waited in the coach while Maylin and Francis had let themselves be led into the gate-tower that marked the border of the two kingdoms.

"And what is your lady's business in Dilorn?" the gate guard asked for the third time.

Francis screwed up his face in an attempt to cover the seething anger that Maylin knew was there. "For the third time, my good man! She is traveling to fair Ralistan to petition to perform for the King! Her elven advisor says that good King Sir Maxius is the fairest of all the kings, and she seeks to be his court skald!"

The guard looked at him blandly. "Right. Sign here, giving the names of all in your party, then you may return to your wagon and enter our fair kingdom." The man slid over a parchment but no quill.

After half an hour of this, Maylin could stand no more. He coughed to get Francis' attention, and when the priest looked over he made a dropping motion with his hand. Francis glared at him and he shrugged as if to say *seems like a good idea to me*.

Francis dug in the pouch on his belt and came out with two silver Contras, the silver coin used throughout the north, and set the coins on the counter. "Forgive me, my good man! I forgot myself looking at how military your men are! This is for the soldier's wives, as we know that no soldier is paid what he's worth, and they have to eat." He winked at the guard.

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The guard smiled for the first time since Francis and Maylin had entered the small room at the base of the gate-tower between Custos-Antiquum and Dilorn. "Very good then, sir. Oh me, I forgot to give you the quill! Here you are then." He deftly picked up the coins and placed a quill and ink on the counter.

Francis neatly wrote each of their names on the parchment, set the quill down and said, "Is that it, sergeant?"

"Yes, yes sir it is." The guard smiled again, already turning away from them.

Francis turned to Maylin. "Let us go then, footman," he said loudly.

Maylin stiffly followed the priest out of the tower and past the gate guards. As soon as they were out of easy hearing of the guards, Francis turned on him.

"You knew all along he wanted a bribe, and yet you let me muddle along like a faithful of Nordal trying to buy a drink at an inn," Francis hissed at him.

Maylin just smiled. "It was a fun game for a while, but I grew tired of it. And I am not a footman, I am a coachman."

Francis leered at him. "I'm the mouthpiece of our lady Torlyn. That means if I call you the Man Who Picks Up Our Horse's Droppings, guess what you are?"

"I'm the man who accidentally killed a priest, most likely," Maylin replied sharply as he climbed up onto the wagon's front seat and picked up the reins to the horses.

Francis laughed out loud as he grabbed the door to the coach with one hand and began to pull himself up. Hanging from the door he leaned out so that Maylin could hear him. "That, or the man accidentally killed by a priest," he shot back before he climbed into the coach and resettled himself next to Torlyn and Denloa.

They rode unmolested through the gate.

Torlyn leaned back on the coach seat and smiled slightly. "That worked for the border, but we can't use that excuse to get into Ralistan."

Denloa nodded thoughtfully. "Don't want to perform for King Sir Maxius, Torlyn?"

Torlyn made a face. "It's not that I don't want to, Denloa, it's that we don't have the time and quite frankly, I don't have anything prepared that King Sir Maxius would find appropriate," she replied soberly.

"True," Denloa replied. "Well, we don't even know where we're going in Ralistan yet, do we?"

Francis leaned his face to the small window near the front of the coach. "Maylin!" he called out, raising his voice to be heard over the din of the horses. "Where in Ralistan do we need to go once we get there?"

Maylin glanced down at the voice. "A farmhouse in the Intollen district," he called out.

Francis turned back to face the women. "*That* helps," he said, rolling his eyes.

Torlyn reached to the floor and picked up her pack, setting it between her legs as she rummaged through it. After a few moments she pulled a piece of vellum from its depths and sat back, setting her pack back on the floor and unrolling the vellum carefully before laying it across her lap.

Denloa and Francis leaned in and she traced her finger across a map of Ralistan, her finger stopping occasionally as she pointed out specific landmarks. "Here's the east gate, that's where we'll enter. Here's the palace," her finger stopped on a point nearly in

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the center of the city. “This is the Sentennal district and,” she picked up her finger and let it fall on the north east corner of the map, “this is the Intollen district.”

Denloa looked closer at the map, then raised her head and glanced at Francis. “Ask Maylin *where* in the Intollen district we need to go. It looks like it’s an outlying district and it’s huge,” she said, reaching out and tracing a path around a large area on the map that appeared to be the entire district.

Francis again leaned back and turned his face up in Maylin’s direction. “Do you think you could narrow our destination down just a bit more than that, Maylin?” he called out. “Do you know which farmhouse we’re looking for?”

Maylin shook his head. “No, Francis, I don’t. It’s a farmhouse. Family name is Grintel, if the High Protector is right,” he yelled down at the priest.

Francis looked back at Denloa, cocking an eyebrow. “Sounds like we’re going to have to ask,” he said mildly, his hand reaching for the spear propped against the corner of the coach.

Torlyn shook her head and laughed. “And that, Francis, is why I do most of the talking.”

A wounded expression appeared on Francis’ face. “Whatever do you mean?” he asked.

Denloa chuckled. “Most people find it difficult to speak with a spear in their gullet, angry man,” she teased. “And we’re after information right now, not blood.”

A red stain crept up Francis’ neck at her words. “Hmmmph,” he said, obviously annoyed. “I’ll remember that the next time someone tries to take off your head with six feet of steel, elf. Wouldn’t want to impair their ability to speak or anything.”

“The time for fighting will come soon enough, Francis, of that I am certain.” Torlyn tried to soothe her friend’s feelings.

Francis’ expression hardened at her statement. “I’m sure it will,” he said evenly. “I’m sure it will.”

They rode uneventfully for days across Dilorn. The King’s Road that led to Ralistan was well kept and the small group crossed paths at least once a day with a contingent of the Bowtower Guard patrolling the road as they moved across the kingdom. Maylin chafed at the pace they had to set by traveling in a coach, figuring they’d had to double the time it would normally take to travel across Dilorn because of it. But even he had to agree that traveling unmolested across the kingdom was better than stopping twice a day for interrogations by the Bowtower Guard. They’d only been stopped three times, and then only for a few moments until they’d explained they were traveling to visit family in Ralistan. The coach and their dress convinced the guard as much as their simple tale and they were allowed to continue on without lengthy interruptions.

Groups traveling by horse alone and armed as though to protect themselves, on the other hand, appeared to be delayed regularly and questioned more thoroughly by the guards patrolling the road. Most days the guards just waved the coach on through because they were occupied with some other group of travelers who looked more like they were ready to cause trouble than a simple coach crawling along the road.

The journey that normally would have taken them ten or eleven days took twenty, and Maylin grumbled the whole time, stomping about their little camp at night and staring off to the west toward Ralistan with an impatient look on his face. The others had pacified him slightly by agreeing that once they’d reached the farmhouse they’d ditch the

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coach and return to traveling by horseback, but Maylin feared that they were taking too much time and giving the KingSeer's captors too much of a lead.

Torlyn had finally put an end to his grumping by pointing out that the snakes would get an even bigger lead if they were to be detained by the Bowtower Guard for any length of time. Maylin knew she was right so he stopped complaining, aloud anyway, and kept his impatient thoughts to himself.

#

"Grintel? Yes, they live in that farmhouse over that way," the man standing in the door of a rather impressive manse pointed across the road and to the north. Maylin glanced over his shoulder in the direction the man pointed, squinting as he tried to make out the buildings in the distance. This was the third house they'd stopped at as they tried to find out which farmhouse the KingSeer had lived in and each time they were directed further to the north of the city.

"My thanks, good sir," Maylin replied flatly, turning on his heel and returning to the coach where his friends sat watching impatiently.

"Well?" Francis asked anxiously.

"To the north, across the road," Maylin replied sourly as he climbed up onto the coach and picked up the reins, twitching them angrily to get the horses moving once again.

"If we don't find the farmhouse soon Maylin is going to explode," Denloa warned, gesturing with her head in Maylin's direction.

Torlyn nodded. "And so will Francis."

They felt the coach come to a sudden halt and Torlyn and Denloa had to reach out and brace themselves against the sides of the coach to keep from falling forward into the other seat and Francis. Francis winced as his head banged into the side of the coach at the sudden stop. He held a hand to the back of his head and muttered a steady string of curses that included Maylin's name and something about his ability to properly handle a coach.

Torlyn quirked an eyebrow in his direction, but said nothing as she and Denloa peered out the window to see why Maylin had suddenly stopped.

Francis angrily pushed himself past the two women, opening the door and stepping down out of the coach. He looked up and saw the farmhouse and realized that Maylin had simply been caught off guard by the sight of a simple farmstead standing in the midst of what they'd determined was one of the most prosperous districts in Ralistan.

A few farm animals ran unattended across the yard which was already beginning to look unkempt. Maylin ignored them as he marched across the yard, his steps measured and his shoulders squared. He stopped as he neared the farmhouse and turned his head away from the door, looking over his shoulder at his friends. "Well?" he called out. "Are you coming or not?"

Torlyn and Denloa looked at each other and shrugged, then followed Francis as he began to cross the yard. When they'd nearly reached Maylin the knight turned and finished making his way across the final few steps to the front door of the farmhouse. Maylin reached up and knocked on the door, then took a step back and waited. When no one answered he stepped forward and rapped more sharply on the door.

Long moments passed and still they stood outside the house. Francis' eyes narrowed as he looked past the house to the barn and noticed a gate on the fence

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swinging freely in the wind. As he watched, a lamb ran out from behind the house and through the fence, disappearing somewhere behind the barn.

“Maylin,” he said flatly, gritting his teeth as he returned his attention to the front of the farmhouse. “Open the door.”

Maylin whirled at the command, his mouth open as though he was ready to refuse, but the look on Francis’ face changed his mind. He nodded curtly before he reached out and put his hand out to open the door.

“Wait!” Denloa hissed.

Maylin turned impatiently and threw a withering look at the elf. “What is it now?”

Denloa narrowed her eyes, pointing at the uppermost hinge of the door. “Up there, on the hinge.”

All three heads turned to look up at the door, trying to see what Denloa was so upset about. Francis squinted, but shook his head after a moment. Maylin was similarly unable to see anything wrong and looked at Denloa as though she’d grown a second head.

Denloa sighed, exasperated. “Torlyn, do *you* see it? Thin, metal...right near the bottom of the hinge.”

Torlyn cocked her head as she stared at the hinge and finally smiled. “Yes, Denloa, I see it, but I have no idea what it might do.”

“I do,” Denloa replied flatly. “And I wouldn’t open the door if I were you,” she said with a tone of warning.

Maylin raised his hands and backed away from the door. “By all means, Denloa, if you know what to do, do it. Otherwise I’m going through it.”

Denloa stepped forward and reached up toward the small sliver of metal she’d seen glinting near the hinge. She was tall for an elf, and easily managed to reach her slender fingers up to the hinge. She jiggled the metal sliver slightly, frowning as she concentrated on trying to determine what it was meant to do solely by the feel of the thing. Finally she smiled, her face brightening as she grabbed the sliver between two fingers and pulled sharply on it, dislodging it from its place near the bottom of the hinge.

She stepped back, holding the sliver up to the light. “Be careful when you go through the door, Maylin. There is likely some sort of blade set to swing out or fall on you and while I think removing this ought to stop it...” her voice trailed off as she fixed her gaze on the knight. “I can’t be sure and I’d really rather not have to carry your head around in a sack all the way back to Id’Elan,” she joked, patting one of the pouches at her side.

Maylin tried to return the smile but failed. Francis reached out and laid a hand on his shoulder. “No worries, my friend. I’ll avenge you if Denloa was wrong.”

Maylin shook the hand off and ignored Francis’ nervous laugh. He reached out and opened the door, pushing it open gently before he snatched his hand back as though the handle burned him physically.

As the door swung open all four friends turned their heads and tried to control the sudden urge to retch as the smell of death wafted out over them.

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Chapter 4

The smell wafting through the door was unmistakable. Something had died in this house, and it had been at least days since it died. Maylin assumed that it was the KingSeer or her family that had died. Now all that remained was the grisly task of discovering whose body was inside.

Maylin closed his eyes for a long moment as he swallowed against the bile rising in his throat. He took a deep breath through his mouth, trying not to inhale the scent of rotting flesh, as he stepped carefully over the threshold.

Francis followed, his brow furrowed with anger and jaw set rigidly against the grisly sight he knew must be inside. Denloa covered her mouth with her hand, her green eyes wide as she stepped lightly behind Francis. A moment later Torlyn followed, her mouth tightly closed and expression grim.

Maylin walked to the center of the room and stopped, staring down at the ghastly sight that greeted him. Torlyn slipped to the window and opened it, trying to let fresh air into the house in the hopes that it might carry the horrifying smell with it. She turned and joined the others standing in the middle of what was once a living room but could no longer be called anything of the sort.

The furniture had been pushed to one side of the room and two bodies, a man and a boy, had been spiked to the wooden floor. The spiking was crude but effective. A spear had been shoved through each wrist, turned sideways to slide between the bones, and iron spikes hammered through their ankles pinned their legs to the floor. Both bodies had been stripped naked, and many small shield-shaped pieces had been cut out of their bodies, leaving very little skin intact.

Maylin stared down at the bodies, his hands clenched in fists of rage. He had no words to describe his feelings at finding such a thing, but he knew what he would do about it.

Francis ran a hand through his hair and then shifted his weight to one hip as he let his hand fall to his waist, coming to rest on the mace he kept hanging from his belt. "Some one will pay for this, by Dirge!" he muttered.

Torlyn looked down at the bodies, her eyes filling with anger at the sight, but realized that it could be worse. "We should be glad the art of live-skinning has been lost to them over the centuries. There are stories of finding men and women whose entire skin had been peeled off them, left to die of infection instead of the relatively quick death today's more crude methods provide."

Francis gave Torlyn a hard look. "And is that supposed to make us feel better, Torlyn?" His voice shook as he spoke. "By Dirge, I don't care that it could be worse, *no one* should suffer like this, skald!" The priest's voice rose as he spoke, the last few words coming out with a scream. "Look at them! That boy is barely old enough to lift a sword, and someone *tortured him*."

Torlyn winced and looked away for a moment before she returned Francis' glare. "I agree, Francis, I simply meant to explain that it could, and might be, worse. We need to be prepared for just how vile these people can be."

"I understand that, Torlyn, but still..." Francis trailed off, his eyes darting back to the bodies on the floor and quickly returning to the woman next to him. He shuddered visibly. "It really doesn't matter, does it, that it could be worse. For them, it was a horrible death that lasted too long. Dead is dead, and sacrificed is sacrificed."

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Denloa looked around appraisingly and cleared her throat. "Someone kept this house," she said, trying to keep her eyes off the grisly sight on the floor. "And not a man and his son."

Maylin grunted, tearing his eyes from the bodies. "They are not here if that was true," he said, looking around. "These bodies weren't left here by a housewife."

Denloa walked toward the only interior door in the room and put her hand on the knob. "The rest of the house is likely through here," she said tonelessly.

Maylin stepped away from the bodies and walked to stand behind her. "Let's check, then. I can't imagine anything could be worse than this."

Torlyn and Francis followed the two through the room into what appeared to be the kitchen. It also had curtains drawn over the windows, but the light from the living room illuminated enough for them to see that there was a woman laid out on the kitchen table, quite dead.

Torlyn moved wordlessly to the window and opened the curtain, which shed just enough light into the room that they could see an even more gruesome sight than the one in the living room. The woman was not staked or bound to the table in any way, she was just laying there. Her face was contorted into a look of utter terror, though there were only four marks on her body. Two fang marks were clearly visible on each wrist, directly over the arteries. Her entire body was white, as if there was no blood left in it.

Francis met Torlyn's eyes as she turned to see the sight, and the priest briefly felt a pang of regret at speaking so harshly to his friend earlier when he saw the tears gather in her eyes at the sight. Torlyn swallowed hard and pointed to a hallway on the other side of the room. "I'll check the rest of the house," she said hoarsely as she picked her way out of the room.

"This sits heavy with her," Francis said to Maylin.

"What do you think, the rest of us are at Feastweek?" Maylin snapped back.

"No, but you should be aware that she is hurt, deeply. She does not solve her problems like you and I. She will be distracted for a while," Francis said.

Maylin nodded, then knelt next to the table, one hand on the woman's head and the other on her hand, his lips moving in what Francis assumed was a silent prayer to Shalitor. He and Denloa stood quietly as the knight stayed on his knees for several minutes, then stood and laid his hand gently over the woman's eyes. He stepped back just as Torlyn re-entered the room, an open book held in her hand and a haunted expression on her face.

"There is a girl's bedroom in the back, but no bodies of women other than this," she said as she pointed at the table. "And she is too old to own a diary talking about some noble coming to take her away from chores, I think."

Maylin nodded. "The KingSeer."

"The KingSeer," Torlyn agreed, laying the book down on the counter and flipping it open to the last page. She pointed to the writing on the page. "But this was not written by a young woman, it was written by her mother, though the gods only know why she chose to leave such clues behind her."

"Read it, Torlyn," Denloa said quietly into the silence that followed.

Torlyn looked down and placed her hands on the book, holding it open. Then she began to read, her voice breaking with the words.

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“The Great Seeress guide my daughter safely to Id’Elan. Victoria KingSeer Saw Truly to warn us to ward her, but we will not leave even though Dia has Seen our death. May The KingSeer’s gift keep her warm on her travels.”

Torlyn heard Maylin’s sharp intake of breath at the last sentence. She met his eyes and shook her head once.

“What is that about Victoria KingSeer and warding her?” Denloa asked, moving to Torlyn’s side and reading over her shoulder.

Torlyn laid a finger on her chin and stared at the ceiling for a moment before she shook her head. “I honestly don’t know. I’ve never read anything about such a Seeing by Victoria KingSeer,” she said, her face showing her puzzlement at her lack of knowledge.

Denloa looked around the kitchen and began to walk off down the hall where Torlyn had disappeared earlier. “Let me see if perhaps her mother had other things written down,” she threw over her shoulder as she left the room.

Maylin raised his eyes to the ceiling, his mind racing. “We must return to Id’Elan. The High Protector must know of this, and read that diary in case he might glean something more from it than we are able,” he finally said at length.

His friends nodded their heads in agreement and then moved to help Francis take the bodies out and give them a proper burial.

They found a place under a silver-star tree in the backyard and spent the next few hours digging proper Shalitorian graves. Finally they laid the bodies to rest and covered them with dirt while Maylin prayed and Torlyn sang a mournful funeral dirge.

Francis glanced back toward the house at the sound of a door slamming, his expression hardening until he saw Denloa walking toward them with a scroll held gently in her hands.

Denloa held the scroll out to Torlyn. “I think, skald, that this is something you’ll want to look at.”

Torlyn took it and carefully unrolled it. “This is very old vellum, yet it feels as if new.” She bent her head to read, the others watching as she read it silently, her head moving as she followed the words across the scroll.

When she finished she shook her head and began to read aloud.

“Ware those who walk on no legs and speak with two tongues, for they shall try to harness the Sight of the KingSeer. Hide her Name and guard her Sight for she shall See more often and more True than any before her,” Torlyn paused. “It is signed by a woman whose name I do not recognize and dated nearly five centuries ago.”

Francis emitted a low whistle. “How in the name of Dirge did they keep it so long?”

Denloa reached into the pouch at her side and produced a tube that appeared to be made of some kind of bone. She handed it to Francis. Francis examined it, sliding his hands along the sides and around the ends. One end was completely solid while the other had a small eye from which a cap hung made out of the same material. His eyes suddenly widened. “This is made from the horn of a dragon!”

“Are you sure, Francis?” Torlyn asked.

Francis nodded as he handed the tube to Maylin. “I’d bet money on it.”

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Maylin snorted. “You’d bet money on just about anything, you’re a Dirgian,” he said flatly as he took the tube and looked at it closely. After a few moments he handed the tube to Torlyn. “He’s right, it’s definitely dragon.”

Torlyn took the tube and knelt down, laying it on the ground. She carefully re-rolled the scroll and gently slid it into the tube before capping it off. She raised an eyebrow as she straightened and gently tucked the tube into a pouch at her side. “That would explain why it’s kept so well, then. It takes quite a force to destroy something made from the horn of a dragon, and anything stored in it is supposed to be protected as well.”

“There is no question then,” Maylin said angrily. “They have the KingSeer.”

“What makes you say that, aside from what we saw inside?” Torlyn asked, interested in how he came to the conclusion. She didn’t disagree, but wanted to know why the Knight thought so as well.

“Ware those who walk on no legs and speak with two tongues,” Maylin said. “Obviously snakes, and in prophecy, snakes are those who follow Dilenial Filous.” He jerked his head in the direction of the farmhouse. “That,” he spat, “is the work of Filous and none other.”

“And?” Torlyn prompted.

“And the note the mother left said Victoria KingSeer Saw truly, so *she* believed the girl was the KingSeer. Since all the women in the family have the Sight to some degree, she would have been able to tell such a thing, or at least guess that it was true.”

Francis nodded. “Very good then. We know the snakes are after the KingSeer, but we don’t know for certain that they *have* her. She may have escaped,” he said hopefully.

Maylin shook his head fiercely. “No, Francis, she did not. Between this and the letter from the knight Pancreana, there is no way she could have escaped. Had she gotten past them, Pancreana should have delivered her to The Tower of the Seeress before we left. She was not there. The snakes have her, though what they will do with her I can only guess.” His face darkened at the thought of the KingSeer in the hands of those who did things like what had been done inside the farmhouse.

Torlyn gave him an arched look. “They will not harm her unless they have no other option.”

“What makes you say that?” Denloa asked.

“The scroll, Denloa. *They shall try to harness the Sight of the KingSeer,*” she repeated, already having committed the words to memory. “They won’t harm her as long as they think she will See for them. What they’ve been doing with the Seeresses we have rescued thus far, they will do with her. Try to get her to See and then steal the Tale from us.”

Maylin nodded in agreement. “She’s right. As long as they think she will See for them, they will not harm her. But they might if we are not careful.”

“And we’ll have to be extra careful, because they probably know we’re coming,” Francis interjected.

Maylin looked sharply at him. “Yes, they will,” he said. “One way or another,” he added under his breath, giving Torlyn a hard look.

Torlyn sighed. “Tell them the rest, Maylin. They should know just how bad it really is.”

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Denloa gave Torlyn a reprimanding look and then focused her attention on Maylin.

Maylin blew out an explosive breath. "They have the Shawl of the KingSeer as well."

Francis threw his hands up in the air and exploded. "Well that's just great, isn't it? Why didn't you mention this sooner? Do you have any idea what this means?" he cried angrily, but then quelled his outburst, a puzzled look on his face. "Wait, what's this Shawl and why is it important?"

Denloa chuckled at his reaction and subsequent question. Francis was always exploding with anger about everything, even when he wasn't sure why he was so angry. If it sounded bad the priest would fly into a rage and then later ask why he had done so. For Denloa, such reactions were simply indicative of the problems inherent with the short life of a Tar. She rarely became that upset at anything, the natural patience of the Tel as much a part of her as the bow she carried strapped to her back.

Francis predictably gave Denloa a withering look before he turned his eyes to the knight.

"The Shawl has been handed down through the family and has always been worn by the KingSeer. It gives her the ability to control, in some fashion, when she Sees," Maylin began.

"Wait," Denloa interrupted. "I thought Seeresses couldn't control the Sight and that's part of the reason they wear blindfolds."

Maylin shook his head. "Yes and no, Denloa," he replied slowly. He sighed. "Let me explain some things about Seeresses and then perhaps you will understand why the Shawl is so important," he began, clearing his throat before he continued. "First, only very rarely can a Seeress See anything that affects her directly. That is why it seems so easy for our enemies to catch them, and why they need the protection of the Knights of Antiquum. Occasionally a powerful Seeress will be granted one or two Seeings that are relevant to them. Only the KingSeer consistently Sees things that are happening around her, and that is because she is one of The Figures in the Tale." He stopped and glanced at his friends, waiting to see if they'd absorbed the information.

The others nodded their heads but said nothing, waiting patiently for Maylin to continue.

"Next, Seeresses aren't really blind, it's actually worse than that. They see like you and I, but superimposed over that vision is a vision every bit as real, in which the Sight occurs. It is this, combined with fighting The Sight that drives many Seers mad. If a Knight of Antiquum, or another knowledgeable person finds them soon enough, they can be taught not to fight the visions, and convinced to wear the blindfold. The blindfold allows them to concentrate on the Sight rather than on the world around them, thus keeping them from going completely mad, though it still happens occasionally, much as we try to help them."

"The Shawl, Maylin? How does it fit in to all this," Francis prodded impatiently.

Maylin took a deep breath. "The Shawl allows the KingSeer to control when she Sees, which is important if she is to stay sane enough to speak of what she Sees. But more than that, any faithful of the Great Seeress can See if the Shawl is placed upon their shoulders."

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Francis whistled at his words. "So if the KingSeer won't See for them..." he trailed off, his eyes wide as he glanced around at his friends.

"They'll find someone else to wear the Shawl," Maylin finished.

"It won't be as effective," Torlyn interrupted. "But we don't know for certain if the Shawl could impart the ability to See as the KingSeer does. No one's ever tried before, mostly because it's never been an issue before."

"So what you're saying is that if the KingSeer doesn't cooperate they might kill her after all and try to replace her," Denloa said thoughtfully.

Maylin nodded, a mixture of fear and anger on his normally stoic face. "And it probably will not work. They thought of that at the beginning of the Triotonic Age. Losing the KingSeer would be disastrous."

Denloa looked up at the darkening sky. "We need to find a place to stay for the night." She glanced at the farmhouse. "And I'm not particularly thrilled about the idea of staying here."

Torlyn agreed. "Neither am I. Let's head back into Ralistan. We can stay at an inn tonight and then leave for Id'Elan in the morning," she paused as she looked questioningly at Maylin. "I presume you still want to return to speak with the High Protector?"

Maylin nodded firmly.

"Alright then, let's close up the house and move on. We don't need the Bowtower Guard digging into this and asking questions, it might slow us down."

They closed the windows and doors once again before they climbed back onto the coach and headed into the city proper.

Two hours later they sat at a table in the common room of the King's Inn, heads together as they considered how best to return to Id'Elan.

"I still say we ditch the coach as agreed," Francis said quietly. "We can make better time by horseback and I dare say the border guard won't refuse to allow a Knight of Antiquum back into Custos-Antiquum."

Denloa pursed her lips as she considered the suggestion. "Yes, as long as Maylin keeps himself covered whilst we travel through Dilorn," she said, looking pointedly in the knight's direction.

Maylin gripped the handle of the mug in front of him tightly. "I will do this, for the KingSeer," he said, gritting his teeth.

Torlyn reached out and laid a hand on his arm. "Maylin, I know this is difficult for you, but it's the only way to make certain you can help the KingSeer. You'll do her no good if you're in a cell somewhere in Dilorn."

"Or lying dead on the plains between here and Id'Elan because you mixed it up with the Bowtower Guard," Francis muttered.

Torlyn threw a cross look at Francis. "Or that," she admitted grudgingly.

Maylin rubbed his forehead irritably, but sighed resignedly. "Alright, whatever it takes to find her, I am willing to do. I am no Nordalian Knight to refuse to hide myself when it is necessary. We are the Knights of Antiquum, we live to protect the Seeresses, no matter the cost. The Great Seeress guide us all," he said, his voice dropping to a whisper with the almost casual prayer to his goddess.

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Torlyn's hand flew to her eye, circling it briefly in a sign of respect at the request Maylin made to Shalitor. "We are all bound to protect this Seeress, I think. Whatever the cost," she said soberly.

The others nodded their heads in agreement as they lifted their mugs and drank deeply, knowing they might not have another chance again for such comforts in the coming days.

The corner of Maylin's mouth twitched toward a smile.

"What is it, Maylin?" Denloa asked curiously.

"It has occurred to me that you – each of you – might very well be Figures in the Tale. I almost certainly am, and if you are destined to help rescue the KingSeer, then you are almost certainly Figures also. I was thinking about what you might be called." His mouth finally broke into a full smile.

"And just what might that be?" Torlyn asked archly.

"Francis would be *Angry Man*," Maylin said. Torlyn laughed out loud, and Francis smiled in spite of himself.

"Denloa would be *The Displaced Tel*," the knight continued. Francis laughed harshly, then quickly choked it off.

"That wasn't funny, Maylin," he said.

"I didn't say they were all funny, Francis," Maylin replied blandly. "Torlyn," he started laughing, "Torlyn could be Seen as *The Kin Seer*." He finally completely broke down laughing. Denloa and Torlyn joined him.

Francis' brow furrowed. "I don't get it."

Torlyn turned to him. "I am Kin, as you know, and I can tell other Kin when I see them. I am a *Kin Seer*... Oh never mind." She threw her arms up.

Maylin and Denloa started laughing even harder.

"I'll see you all in the morning, you're starting to make me angry," Francis said, standing.

"Angry Man, that is," Torlyn giggled. The others started laughing anew as Francis stomped out of the room.

Francis was up early the next morning, still attempting to figure out what was so funny about a Gypsy – Kin as they called themselves – being called the Kin Seer. By the time the others were up and ready to leave, he had checked the horses, packed their shared gear, and was pacing outside the barn.

"You should eat something, Francis," Torlyn said as she walked up.

"I ate before sun up, I thanked Dirge for your company just after sunup, I saddled the horses and loaded the gear while you were eating. Is it finally time to go?" he responded.

"Why the hurry? Id'Elan will not be going anywhere, I assure you."

"If we are going to do this, then we should do it. How Maylin can take his time when his precious KingSeer is probably a captive of those who worship a snake I will never understand. If he is a knight vowed to protect them, then he should act like it," Francis spat.

"An hour this morning won't harm us either way, and we're not likely to be able to relax until we arrive in Id'Elan. Don't rush into a trip that will be hard," Torlyn said, laying a hand on his shoulder.

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Francis visibly relaxed. “I suppose you’re right, I just can’t help but think of that poor girl...”

Torlyn interrupted him. “We will do all we can, as fast as we can, Francis. Dirge shield her until we arrive.”

They set off less than an hour later, Maylin robed in a long grey cloak to cover his armor.

After a few hours, Maylin pulled up his horse. “I can almost feel her. She’s in danger,” he said, turning his head north.

“I thought I was overstrung,” Francis muttered. “You can not feel her, and if you don’t keep that horse moving we’ll never find her,” he said louder.

Maylin glared at him, but twitched his reins and rode on.

“That was ill said,” Denloa told Francis, pulling up next to him.

“He’s worse than a Little One trying to be a Knight,” Francis replied blandly. “Someone must tell him the truth, why not me?”

Denloa only sighed, and rode on ahead of him. She watched Maylin surreptitiously for over an hour, noting the way he stared at the trail ahead with his jaw set and occasionally turned his eyes to the north, a haunted expression on his face. She looked back over her shoulder at Torlyn and caught her eye, gesturing for the other woman to join her. She waited until Torlyn had caught up to her and then leaned over in the saddle, nodding her head in Maylin’s direction.

“What if he *can* feel her?” Denloa asked, curious. “It is not strange sounding to me, who can feel the very trees of the Goddess’ forests, and he cannot be simply imagining something that would cause him to act in such a fashion.”

Torlyn looked at her curiously, then rode silently next to her for a time while she watched Maylin. She looked back over her shoulder at Francis, who had a sour look on his face, as though he’d just eaten something that hadn’t agreed with him, then nodded at Denloa. “You may be right. Let me see if he can explain what it is he feels – without Francis within earshot,” she said, looking meaningfully in the elven woman’s direction.

Denloa nodded as Torlyn flicked the reins of her horse and quickly caught up with Maylin.

As Torlyn approached Maylin glanced in her direction, giving her a warning look. Torlyn ignored it and pulled up beside him.

“You said you can feel her, Maylin,” Torlyn began cautiously. “What does it feel like?”

Maylin eyed her critically, trying to determine whether she was serious or not. He hadn’t been pleased by Francis’ reaction to his words and he wasn’t in the mood to become the butt of more jokes for the rest of the trip to Id’Elan. He saw the seriousness of her expression and true interest in her blue eyes and decided she really wanted to know. He lifted one hand from the reins and jabbed a finger in his stomach. “It’s like a queasiness here, but it’s more than that...” he said hesitatingly. “I feel like something or someone is pulling my eyes to the north, like I’ve been spelled or something.”

Torlyn bit her lower lip as she considered his words. Her eyes narrowed as she eyed him warily. “The queasiness, is it like you’ve eaten tainted meat or like the feeling you have before you rush into battle.”

Maylin’s face scrunched up as he concentrated on trying to decipher the feeling. He nodded. “It’s like the queasiness before battle, but worse – like when we charged in to

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fight that snake priestess and there were Seeresses behind her, and we knew they would be dead if we didn't win through to them quickly," he finally said.

Torlyn nodded. "And the pull to the north, can you control it?"

"Yes," Maylin admitted. "I can *not* look that way if I choose, but I really, really want to."

"When did this start?"

"When we left Ralistan and headed east toward Id'Elan."

Torlyn pulled her horse up short, and Maylin stopped, surprised. "What are you –"

"Just wait," Torlyn interrupted, waiting for Denloa and Francis to catch up to them.

"Now what?" Francis asked, annoyance evident in his voice.

"Maylin," Torlyn directed. "Ride north, in the direction you feel compelled to ride."

"Are you sure?" Maylin asked nervously.

Torlyn nodded. "Yes, just do not go far. Head that direction and mind how you feel while you do. Then turned your horse and come straight back," she said, folding her arms across her chest and relaxing slightly in her saddle.

Denloa smiled knowingly and nodded. "It is a good idea, Maylin," she encouraged. "We need to know the truth of this now."

Maylin shrugged and clucked to his horse, who picked up his feet and began moving to the north. The others watched as Maylin rode a quarter of league from the road before he wheeled his horse around and cantered back to where they waited.

"Well?" Denloa asked expectantly.

Maylin shook his head. "The queasiness left as soon as I headed north. The pull was still there, but the queasiness had gone. As soon as I turned around it came back."

"You believe him?" Francis asked incredulously.

Denloa looked mildly in Francis' direction. "You, who should know better, *priest*, do not?"

Francis looked at her, confused. "What does being a faithful priest of Dirge have to do with Maylin's upset stomach?"

"Have you never laid a compulsion on anyone, or heard of such being done?" Denloa asked.

"But I wouldn't –" Francis stopped abruptly, seeing Denloa's glance upward. "Ahhh... I see. Tis not I or another priest that has laid such a compulsion on him, but Shalitor herself."

Torlyn's hand flew to her eye, circling it. "I think so, Francis, else why would the queasy stomach clear up when he heads in the direction he feels compelled to travel and return when he heads away from it?"

Denloa nodded and laughed. "He's been chained to the KingSeer, by the gods!"

Maylin growled and nearly stood straight up in his saddle, his eyes fixed firmly to the north. "We are not going back to Id'Elan," he said, gritting his teeth.

"Maylin!" Francis called out. "We must return to Id'Elan first."

"No!" Maylin roared, his eyes nearly crazed with the thought of going any direction other than north.

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Torlyn held up her hand. "Then we will go north now, rather than later," she said firmly.

"But--"

"No, Francis, we would have had to turn north eventually anyway, and there must be something to Maylin feeling the way he does. What is the difference if we head north now or later?" she asked.

Francis' face darkened. "Now means we travel through Dilorn. Later means we are safe within the borders of Custos-Antiquum."

Denloa shook her head. "Then we travel through Dilorn. I am not one to ignore the gods when they speak, and it seems obvious the Goddess of Prophecy is moving Maylin to act as he is."

Francis' threw his hands up in the air. "Alright, whatever Maylin wants. This is his task, not ours," he said explosively.

The Dirgian priest nearly cringed when Maylin turned glassy eyes toward him and smiled tightly. "On that, my friend, I would not bet," he said tonelessly before he twitched the reins of his horse and kicked its sides, sending it bolting northward.

Chapter 5

After some experimentation they discovered that Maylin could head slightly northwest without the queasiness returning, so they headed that direction in the hopes that they could intersect the North Tower Road somewhere north of the KingSeer's home and pick up her trail.

That evening when they stopped, Maylin was able to function normally, but after the camp was set and the meal finished, he took to standing at the edge of the firelight, his gaze fixed to the north.

Torlyn walked over to him in the gathering darkness. "What do you feel, Knight Protector?" she asked.

"I feel her to the North," he said without turning his head, his voice little more than a whisper. "We gained on her today, I think, but still I feel as though we should be on the road. As if she is in mortal danger each moment that we delay."

Torlyn nodded, even though Maylin was still focused on watching the horizon to the north. "Now you know why they chose you. You were chosen by Shalitor, not the High Seeress. I, a simple skald, am in the presence of greatness," she said seriously.

He finally tore his gaze from the horizon and looked at her as though she had brayed like a mule. "Being chosen by my goddess would be a great honor, but I am not great. Save your song-writing for when I've actually taken her from the grasp of that snake follower, and sent the serpent to meet her goddess."

"You do not count your deeds well, Knight Protector. You have led us as we freed many Seeresses, you have helped reform your Order and set an example for others to follow when the Order was on the verge of falling apart. You have been summoned to the Tower of the Seeresses, when most knights never receive that honor, and you were chosen because of these things and many more. You personally have sent many followers of Filous to their graves in the protection of Seeresses," she stopped and eyed him critically. "No, I stand in the presence of greatness, and there is nothing you can do to stop me from writing, short of sending me away."

"Send you away?" Maylin's voice was suddenly tinged with panic. "That thought causes me to get a queasy stomach again. Please do not say things like that," he entreated.

She smiled in the quickly gathering darkness, but knowing he couldn't see it she let it slip into her voice. "I would not leave you unless you convinced me that my presence would harm the KingSeer." The smile left her face as she continued, her voice as solemn as her next words. "This I agreed to do with you, and I will not leave your side until it is done."

A voice behind her added, "Dirge will that it end successfully."

Her smile returned. "I daresay that all of us are with you in this one, Sir Knight."

"No matter how bad it gets or how truly mad you act, we are here with you, we do not desert our friends. Even the ones with a strange feeling in their belly," Francis added. "Besides, I have a bet on our chances of success with another Knight Protector."

A fourth voice joined the conversation. "Talimaara would not have sent me with you unless it was to do something. This must be it. May she grant us trees and shade, and grant those we follow mud and storm."

"Thank you all, but now get your *grambuled* behinds into your bedrolls. We leave at first light." Maylin said harshly, though in truth he was grateful for his friends'

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support. "I am taking first watch, and any that would gainsay my right can fight me for it."

"Good night then," Denloa said quickly, ducking as she turned and headed back to the fire.

"Right, I don't feel like hurting you tonight anyway, I ate too much," Francis grumbled as he turned and stomped off to find his bed.

Torlyn laid a hand on Maylin's shoulder again. "Good night, my friend. Wake me in a few hours. Do not stay up all night, we need your strength," she warned, letting her smile creep into her voice, taking the sting out of the words. She turned before Maylin could reply and sought the bedroll she'd laid out earlier near the fire.

Maylin paced the camp, trying not to look north throughout his watch. When he finally woke Torlyn and took to his bed he found himself lying on his side, facing north, but was surprised that he was actually tired.

They met the North Tower Road two days later, and Maylin's mood grew even more somber as they decided to follow his compulsion and headed north. They rode on, pushing their horses to the edge of safety. They slept only briefly each night, and were up well before the sun each morning. The end of fall was quickly approaching, but the colors in the trees and the feel of cooler winds was lost on the knight, so intent was he on the trail they were following. Torlyn tried to approach him several times, but he seemed distracted and irascible, so she had given up and fallen back with the others.

On the second day after turning onto the Old North Road, Maylin suddenly pulled up on the reins of his horse and drew his sword, his eyes intent on the road ahead. Torlyn pulled up abruptly and swerved to avoid hitting him even as the others fought to keep their mounts under control.

"Followers of Filous ahead, I can feel them," Maylin hissed.

"Then we've found the KingSeer?" Denloa asked, pulling out her bow.

"No. They are here, she is further north," Maylin said, scanning the trees.

"About time. That means we can fight them and not worry about them killing a Seeress for a change." The anticipation of a fight clearly showed in the suddenly brightening face of the priest.

"Stay close to me, keep your weapons down, we'll just spring the trap. Denloa, you know what to do if there are archers," Maylin said as he glanced back at the elf.

Denloa finished stringing her bow and smiled in response. Maylin had no idea how she could string or shoot a longbow from horseback, but she had saved his life more than once doing so and he did not need to know *how* she accomplished such a thing, just that she would, and could, if it was required.

"Francis, you get the right, I get the left," he said tersely, turning his head to meet Francis' eyes and flinching at the anticipation on the priest's face.

He tore his eyes from Francis and let his gaze fall on Torlyn. "Torlyn, watch our backs and come to the aid of anyone that needs it. Try to get one alive if you can."

At her nod he took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Okay then, let's go hunt some snakes. I should warn you Torlyn, if there is only one of them, you won't be keeping one alive."

"Make that two," Francis said flatly.

Maylin nodded quickly and kicked his horse's sides. Only then did it occur to him to wonder that his friends seemed to believe his gut instinct that there was someone

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ahead. He shook off the sudden insecurity that threatened to grip him and tried to concentrate on what he *knew* was ahead. *The feeling was just there*, he told himself, *I didn't invent it*.

He rode slowly, trying to give his horse a rest before charging into battle. He fought the urge to hurry by watching the trees for any sign of ambush. The others matched his pace, Francis riding at his side and the women alert behind him. He knew without looking that they were ready for just about anything, so he kept his eyes on the trees.

After riding for just about a quarter-glass, Francis suddenly inhaled sharply. Maylin glanced surreptitiously at the priest, and Francis lowered his left hand to the side of his horse closest to Maylin, holding up three fingers before he pointed toward the right side of the road.

Maylin peered around the head of Francis' horse and saw just the tiniest bit of orange cloth about fifty feet ahead of them. He scanned his side of the road, but still saw no sign of an enemy. Making a snap decision he yelled out, "Francis and I right, you two watch the left!" Then he spurred his horse into a full charge.

Francis called out, "Dirge shield us!" as he kicked his horse and raced after Maylin, pulling his spear.

Maylin pulled his mace out from under his cloak where he had held it tight with his arm, and raised it over his head, its silver head glittering in the sun. By the time he was ready, Francis already had his spear lowered, a grim expression on his face.

Three heavily scarred men jumped up from the bushes near the side of the road and headed for the woods, bare swords in their hands. Two arrows flew past the knight's head from the other side of the road. Maylin gritted his teeth and ignored the arrows, counting on Denloa to stop them, focusing his attention instead on one of the running men. He urged his mount forward and quickly caught up with the man. As he rode up behind the running figure, he swung his mace in an arc, landing it right at the base of the man's skull. The vibrations from the blow ran all the way up his arm, but he was satisfied that the man would not be getting back up from where he had fallen.

Francis was chasing the other two men and Maylin wheeled his horse about to help his friend, ducking to the right as he heard yet another arrow buzz by his left ear. Just as one of the men was about to hit the thick underbrush of the forest, Francis hefted his spear and threw it with all of his might, grunting loudly with the effort. Even while the spear was still in the air, Francis was moving. He launched himself from the back of his horse through the air, landing on the man closest to him. Maylin cringed as Francis missed his target, hit the ground, and rolled. As the priest jumped to his feet, his opponent turned on him and lunged with a scimitar straight at Francis' unprotected belly. Maylin tried to urge his horse to move faster, tried to get there as quickly as he could, but things suddenly seemed to slow down.

From the other side of the road Maylin heard Torlyn's heavily accented voice yell out "STOP!" and realized that everything living around him obeyed her command, even his mount. His horse was frozen in mid gallop, he was pitched forward in his saddle. Francis was scrambling backward and the scimitar was just beginning to pierce the priest's thick robes. Maylin tried fiercely to move again, but all he could do was sit there.

Torlyn appeared in his peripheral vision, running deftly through the scrub, and plucked the scimitar from the scarred man's hands. Maylin found that even if his neck

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could not move, his eyes could. He rolled them toward the woods and saw the blue-and-white tail banner of Francis' spear standing straight up in the air above a motionless body. He mentally counted the men, breathing a sigh of relief as he realized that that took care of all three men on this side of the road.

Torlyn braced herself and pushed the scarred man over before she drew her sword and sat upon him. Then she muttered something and made a shooing motion with her right hand. Suddenly Maylin's horse was moving again, but he was off balance and on a collision-course with his friends. The knight tried to right himself but slid sideways in his saddle, causing his horse to rear and throwing him to the ground in a heap. He laid there dazed for a moment, trying to get his breath and make certain nothing was broken.

Maylin's horse blew out its nose explosively as its front feet landed hard on the ground. It stepped forward and reared again, its eyes bulging in fright. Francis' eyes widened as he realized the horse would likely land on one of them if they didn't move or the animal wasn't calmed. He recognized that the latter was nearly impossible, and he quickly backed away from the horse, his eyes straying to Torlyn and the man she sat upon.

"Torlyn, roll right!" he screamed, his face glued to the horse as he tensed, preparing to rush forward and push her out of the way if necessary.

Francis winced as the horse's front feet landed hard and it reared forward again. He opened his mouth to yell again but saw that Torlyn must have heard his first warning and had already thrown herself off the man she had been sitting on and onto the ground. As the horse's feet again flew downward its hooves flailed in the air where Torlyn's head had been just a moment ago. Francis turned his face slightly away from the scene even as Torlyn began rolling to the right, frantically trying to avoid the horse's hooves as they rained down upon the man lying in its path.

Francis ran forward and grabbed Torlyn's hand, dragging her safely away from the angry horse. He pulled her to her feet and pushed her behind him as they both watched the horse rear again and again, a ton of fury exploding through its hooves as it crushed the man on the ground into something barely recognizable as human.

Out of the corner of his eye Francis caught sight of something moving in the distance in Maylin's direction, where the knight was standing still, his attention focused on his horse. He turned toward it and saw yet another man standing near the edge of the road with a bow in his hands. "Maylin, behind you!" Francis roared before he began running toward his friend.

Torlyn turned and saw the man draw back his bow and began to follow Francis, but stopped abruptly when she saw the man stiffen, an arrow protruding through the front of his neck, its fletchings still clearly visible behind his head.

Francis changed direction and ran toward the man even as he pitched forward, the bow in his hand falling useless to the ground. Torlyn looked up at the road and a moment later Denloa stepped into sight, her bow held almost casually as she pulled another arrow from the quiver at her back and held it loosely across the neck of the bow, her eyes still scanning the distance for any other dangers.

Maylin raced forward and calmed his mount, grabbing the reins tightly in his hand as he turned it to move back toward the road. He saw Francis kick the would-be assassin's bow out of reach and watched as his friend bent down and checked the man for any signs of life.

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Francis looked up in Denloa's direction a fraction of a second later, grinning broadly. "Nice shot, Denloa!" he called out.

Denloa bowed her head in response but did not reply, her face still grim as watched for any others who might be hiding in the woods. Francis reached down and picked up the arrow the man had had nocked and looked at it curiously, noticing some kind of substance coating the head. He raised it and sniffed the tip, grimacing at the smell and repositioning his hands so that he held it more gingerly. He stood and glanced at Torlyn and Maylin, jerking his head in Denloa's direction, before he joined the archer on the road.

Torlyn scooped up her sword, trying to ignore the pulpy mess on the ground that had been a man, and moved toward the road. When Maylin arrived Francis held up the arrow for all to see.

"The fletching is black and gold, Filous' colors alright," Francis said angrily, turning the arrow so that the tip was up and the others could clearly see the brown, oily substance covering the head. "Smells like cocomaat," he said grimly.

Torlyn looked pensive. "One's heart can only survive a small amount of that poison before it stops. I'd expect to see it in the hands of Tasnians, not followers of Filous," she said distractedly before she stepped away and walked toward the dead archer.

The others watched as she picked up the man's head by his hair and reached down near his neck. Her eyes narrowed as she stretched her free hand down to his neck, grasped something and pulled roughly before she straightened. She returned quickly, the ends of a leather thong dangling from her closed fist. She stopped at Francis' side and opened her fist to reveal a small disk lying in her palm. Francis peered at it and then nodded.

"Filous," he spat as he pointed at the image of a snake sitting atop a pile of coins clearly visible on the small metal disk. He threw his hands up. "Great, just great," he said furiously. "Fileans running around with Tasnian poison. Who else is arrayed against us? Am'Ethonians?"

Denloa shivered at the mention of followers of Am'Ethaan. More commonly referred to as *Elf Killer*, his priests took special delight in killing elves beloved of Talimaara. Torlyn made warding signs at the mention of the vile deity and shook her head. "They do not want us to find the KingSeer, and if they know we are coming," her face was serious as she looked to each of them, "then they will take whatever measures are necessary to stop us, including consorting with all manner of vile beings."

Maylin nodded, his mouth a tight, white line of anger. "Denloa, thank you. As always, you and your bow are lifesavers."

The others nodded as well, murmuring their agreement with the knight's assessment. Denloa bowed her head. "No need for thanks, it is what I do. Some days it is not enough, some days it is all we need."

Maylin looked around and shook his head. "Let's see if these men carry anything that might give us an idea where they came from," he began. "And then let's get them off the road and into the brush so that if someone comes looking for them, they aren't found."

Francis looked down at Torlyn's hand again, his brow furrowing. "Torlyn, doesn't it bother you to pick that up and hold it?"

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Torlyn closed her fist and laughed. "I am Kin, Francis. Before I came to know Dirge as I do now I followed all the gods, good and bad, as is the wont of the Kin. Such things do not bother me at all."

Francis gave her a hard look. "Yet you make warding signs at the mention of the Elf Killer and circle your eye at the mention of Shalitor," he chuckled and pointed at her as she did exactly that at the words. "See what I mean?"

"Respect for all the gods is something I was raised to give, Francis," she said deliberately, trying to explain the beliefs instilled in her in her youth. "Whether I agree with what they wish their followers to do or not, they are not without power and it would be foolish to treat them as if they were powerless. I do not think Dirge minds as long as he is foremost in my heart and first on my lips when we charge into battle."

"I doubt that respect goes both ways, if you know what I mean," Francis returned with a note of warning in his voice. "Be careful of such things," he said ominously, pointing at the symbol in her hand. "For I have heard they are not always so harmless to one who is not bound to follow her."

Torlyn nodded as she turned and threw the symbol into the tall grasses. "I, too, have heard such things Francis, but this man was no priest to have such power. Do not worry about me," she said, patting him on the shoulder, "worry about what we must do."

Francis grunted in response as she walked off to help Denloa rifle through the various pockets and pouches of the dead men before they dragged them all into the nearby woods.

They moved down the road another half-glass before they found a clearing and stopped to discuss the attack and what they'd discovered. They all sat wearily on logs and on the ground except for Maylin, who refused to sit while fully armored. No one could blame him, for the armor covered nearly his entire body and while he moved as fluidly while in it as some did without, sitting in such heavy attire could be problematic if he needed to react quickly.

Denloa cleared her throat. "The only thing I found, aside from a few vials of cocomaat and a large bag of coin, was this," she said, holding up a worn piece of parchment in one hand and what appeared to be a rather heavy bag in the other.

Francis took the bag and peered inside. He emitted a low whistle before he reached inside and pulled out a handful of gold Trios. He nodded as he let the coins slip through his fingers back into the bag. "Must be at least three hundred Trios in here," he said, hefting the bag expertly. "Someone paid these men well."

"What is on the parchment, Denloa," Maylin growled, the delay making him irritable.

Denloa looked hesitatingly at the knight. "You won't like what it implies, Maylin," she warned.

"Just read it!" he demanded, his eyes slipping to the north even as he tried to pay attention to his friends.

Denloa shrugged. "It's not so much something that can be read like a book as something you look at Maylin. It's a map, crude, but a map."

"So why wouldn't I like that, elf?" the knight asked sharply.

Torlyn leaned over and glanced at the map, pointing at a piece of it before she looked up at Maylin. "It's Salena, Maylin. With a symbol of a snake over one of the buildings."

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Maylin scoffed at her and tore the map from Denloa's hands, walking a few steps away as he glared at the map. He turned it on its side, then on another side before he finally returned and tossed the map negligently in Denloa's direction. "How can you tell, Torlyn?" he argued. "It doesn't look like Salena to *me*."

Francis reached over and picked the map up from where it had fallen to the ground. His eyes fell on the same configuration of buildings Torlyn had pointed to earlier and he nodded his agreement with the skald's assessment. "It is Salena, Maylin."

Maylin exploded. "How can you be so sure?" he screamed, his frustration evident.

Francis pointed angrily at one of the buildings. "Because that's the *grambulled* Palace of the East, you dolt!" The priest's voice was irate. "Look at it! That's the Palace of the East, and that is a building with a snake on it. What do you think this is, Maylin? It's a map of where they're taking her!" he ordered, jabbing a finger at the drawing of a large building and then several smaller ones. "Look at it, Maylin!"

Maylin glanced at the map and waved a hand dismissively at it. "You can't know that just from a crude drawing of some buildings, priest. It could be anything, and she is to the north," he said flatly.

Francis nearly crumpled the map as his hand clenched into a fist. "I have spent years in Salena, Maylin," he said slowly. "in the palace." Francis pushed the map at Torlyn and moved to stand in front of the knight. "And well you know it. I instructed the Archduke's heir and Torlyn's son there for many years and was involved in planning their protection. Which means I know the layout of every building surrounding the Palace of the East, and that is the Palace of the East in Salena," he said, his voice rising to a scream with his last few insistent words.

Maylin looked to the north, every fiber of his being telling him they should be headed in that direction, then back at his friend, who seemed to be saying they should go another way. "What of it?" he whispered.

"We need to go to Salena, Maylin," Torlyn interjected, nodding her head at Denloa's support as the elf silently agreed with a curt nod of her head. "There is a reason they were headed this direction and carry an admittedly crude map of Salena. Something of import is there and it may even be the KingSeer. Even if it is not, we need information, and any building marked with a snake is likely to have information. What if they have laid a trap for us to the north? What if they move the KingSeer?"

"She. Is. North," Maylin gritted through his teeth.

Francis shook his head and stomped off to stand further away from the knight, controlling his urge to physically knock some sense into his friend.

Torlyn rolled her eyes at Francis' action and stood smoothly, brushing leaves and dirt from her blue and white leather tunic and trying to give both men a few moments to cool off. When she spoke again she moderated her voice to try and soothe both her friends' anger. "I don't doubt you, Maylin," she said, waving off Francis as he opened his mouth to protest. "And I agree with Francis," she continued, ignoring the priest's victorious smirk at her last words. "I think we need to follow the map and see what is in Salena that is so important that men would be sent with only a crude map and Tasnian poison, as it might help us understand what we're up against and perhaps even lead us directly to the KingSeer. I am certain you would lead us there eventually," she tried to pacify the fury she saw growing on Maylin's face. "But we might be running straight into

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a trap for all we know, and you will not do the KingSeer any good by getting yourself killed.”

Maylin turned angry eyes at his friends. “Do you all agree that we should go to Salena first?”

Denloa nodded slowly, though she looked as though it pained her to agree. Francis nodded firmly once, folding his arms across his chest to emphasize the inflexibility of his belief, a triumphant expression on his face.

Maylin looked to the north, his eyes locked on the horizon as he considered their options. After long moments he bowed his head and kicked at a rock with his toe, sending it skittering through the tall grass. He shook his head, but when he spoke it was to agree with the decision. “Alright, Salena it is,” his voice was quiet and were he not in his full armor, his shoulders would have slumped in defeat as he spoke.

Denloa looked to the west as she stood, her eyes narrowing. “We have hours of daylight left, I suggest we ride now. The more distance we put between ourselves and Dilorn, the better.”

The others agreed and moved silently to their horses, except for Maylin, who turned to stare again to the north. His friends waited patiently until he finally turned abruptly on his heel and returned to his horse. He said nothing more as they rode off to the east, toward Salena. His entire being was concentrated on ignoring the queasiness in his gut at their new direction and fighting the urge to wheel his horse and ride as fast as he could to the north.

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Chapter 6

They rode hard for the capital of the Archduchy of Radael, half a continent away. Maylin was even more distracted than he had been, and Torlyn grew more and more concerned about him as they put more distance between them and Ralistan.

After nearly a week of travel they finally came to the heavily guarded border between Dilorn and Custos Antiquum. Maylin rode through the autumnal beauty as if in a daze, rarely looking about him, and when his head did lift from the road ahead it was almost always to gaze north.

The guards at the Dilornian side of the crossing were well-kept, something that was rare this far from the capital in any kingdom. Torlyn did not like King Bowtower, but she had to give him credit for the control he seemed to exert over his army.

The guards nodded to them as they trotted up. “Not taking anything of trade value out of the Kingdom are you?” one asked casually. This was a routine stop, really just a formality since they were mounted on horses. It would have been a major affair with the coach, and a half-day nightmare with a transport wagon.

“What’s it to you?” Maylin snarled back at him.

There was a shocked silence and the guard’s hand moved to the hilt of his sword as he glanced at his companion. “It’s all of my business, and I’ll thank you to get off of that horse,” he replied gruffly.

Torlyn rode forward. “Please, he has had some bad news about a friend, and we are going to see that she is safe. Forgive him this one rudeness, her disposition weighs heavily upon him,” she gave him her most dazzling smile, knowing that most men found it difficult to resist her charms, but worrying about the impact on the men as she had been on the road for nearly two weeks.

“He’s a rude one, I’ll give you that,” the guard replied. “A woman you say?”

“Yes, the center of his world, the dawn of his day, ripped from him for no apparent reason. He is devastated, and wants nothing more than to find her and protect her...” Torlyn trailed off, wiping a tear from her eye.

The guard looked to his compatriot, letting his hand slide from his sword. “We’ll let it go. Our job isn’t to interfere in a man’s romance, it’s to protect the border and collect taxes.” He smiled up at Torlyn. “You’re not taking anything valuable other than your looks out of Dilorn are you?”

She actually managed to raise a blush for him. “No sir we’re not. Just our horses and gear to see us through to Il’Negra.”

“Very well then, carry on. I advise your friend keep his mouth shut when he gets to the other guardpost. Those Knights of Antiquum aren’t as forgiving as we are. Or as much fun,” he teased as he winked at her.

She laughed throatily. “That I can believe good sir. That I can truly believe.” She motioned her friends through the gate and down the short stretch of road toward the massive wall that formed the border with Custos Antiquum. It rose forty feet or more into the air and was equipped with siege weapons – great catapults and trebuchets sat on the top of the wall, their crews standing along the wall.

Maylin stopped within sight of the wall and slowly removed the long grey cloak he had been wearing throughout Dilorn.

Torlyn watched him, marveling once again at his armor. Bearing the symbol of the Knights of Antiquum on its breast-plate and enameled white everywhere else, it was

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the finest armor she had ever seen. He wore it like a second skin, hardly seeming to notice it was there. The white enamel with a brilliant purple mace emblazoned upon the front stood out on a battlefield like no other armor, and it never seemed to bear the nicks and dings that it surely took in combat.

Not for the first time, Torlyn wondered about that armor and where Maylin had found it. He said clearly that it was not his, and yet he carried himself so well in it that it surely must have been made for him. But he didn't lie unless the fate of a Seeress might be in the balance so Torlyn had to believe his words.

Finally, Maylin pulled a purple cloak with silver trim out of a saddlebag and settled it upon his shoulders. A golden cloak-pin depicting a blindfolded woman fastened the cloak about his neck. He ran a hand through his short, light brown hair, and looked to them. "Well, let's get this over with," he said

As they approached the border with Custos Antiquum, a cry went up from the wall. Men began to gather in the gate that allowed passage along the road.

"They recognize Sir Maylin, and come to do him honor," Francis said.

"As well they should," Denloa said politely.

"They are fools and children, believing in a fairy-tale that the High-Seeress and the High Knight-Protector chose to encourage to give them hope in the face of our troubled times," Maylin scoffed.

"They are soldiers in need of an icon, and after years of wars and Seeresses going missing, I cannot blame them," Torlyn said. "And I cannot think of a better icon to give them than a knight in armor that can be seen from afar and who has faced these demons himself and ridden away whole. Do not discount them Maylin, one of them may save your life one day."

"I am not a person to be put in front of a crowd, Lady Torlyn. I am a Knight-Protector. It will go hard on me, protecting Seeresses from harm, when those very people that might harm them know how to name me also," he said.

"They are your countrymen, and they need you as much today as they need their king. Smile and wave to them, that is all they require," Torlyn chided him.

By the time they arrived at the wall, there were several dozen soldiers at the gate, most of them clearly experienced soldiers if their visible scars were anything to judge by. A man wearing the silver mace pin of a captain of the guard stepped forward and all became quiet. Instead of the long-winded and self-centered speech that Torlyn expected, he quietly laid his hands upon his knees, palms out in the traditional salute of the Knights of Antiquum. With a whisper, word spread and others in the crowd emulated the captain.

Maylin looked down at the captain, appearing to evaluate the thin, black-haired man. For a moment Torlyn thought he would denigrate the poor man for using the salute one Knight offers another, a salute that showed empty hands and no desire to fill them.

Slowly, Maylin laid his hands upon his knees, palms up, and bowed his head slightly. "I am on urgent business of the High Seeress, Captain. May my party pass?" he asked.

"You may pass, Sir Knight, and if there is aught you or your retinue need, speak the word and it shall be yours," the Captain replied.

"There is nothing we are in need of, unless you can point us at the nearest snake follower," Maylin replied seriously.

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A chuckle ran through the crowd. “None of those left alive around here, Sir Knight.” The captain smiled as another chuckle ran through the crowd, and slowly they parted to make room for the group to ride by.

They rode through the gate, and Maylin waved back at the soldiers as the group cantered down the road. There was a distant cheer in response to his wave.

“Well, that was the quickest I have ever made it across that border in my lifetime,” Torlyn said with a smile.

“Only because they believe in something that is untruth,” Maylin responded.

Torlyn shook her head and sighed. “There is much in you that you do not see, Maylin. If you were taken from your Order, placed in an army, and given a soldier’s keep, you would still not be a soldier. Even then you would rise, and become an officer, perhaps even a Knight of the Realm. But never would you be just a soldier, it is not in you, and even if you could, being just a soldier would kill you slowly.”

“You talk too much,” Maylin snapped. Francis began laughing.

They rode for two more days before coming to the Red Rooster Inn an hour or so before dusk. “We should stop and stay here,” Torlyn suggested.

“That does seem like a good idea, we have need of baths,” Denloa agreed.

“Here, there, whatever,” Maylin said grumpily.

“Let’s, I could use some ale and some company,” Francis chimed in.

They pulled up and tied their horses to the rail hanging off the porch. “I hope they have some decent food,” Denloa said.

“You don’t like my cooking?” Francis asked with a snort.

“Human soldiers that are starving would *like* your cooking, but please do not ask me to do so, I dislike lying. It serves well enough on the road, but if we’re stopped, I want a meal,” Denloa replied flatly.

Maylin seemed to come out of his daze for a moment. “She’s right, Francis. I can only eat burnt, over-salted venison so many times in a row.”

“Well I’m going to find out,” Torlyn said as she stepped onto the porch of the inn.

“Good idea,” Denloa said following her.

Torlyn pushed the door open and entered a relatively dark room with fresh hay strewn about the floor and tables standing here and there in the otherwise empty room. A man was coming down the stairs at the back of the room, and Torlyn took a second to look him over. You could tell a lot about an inn by a look at the innkeeper. This one was strong, but slightly overweight. He wore a clean apron over a tunic of tan and light pantaloons. Light clothes were good, it meant the man kept a clean inn. His broad face was not clean-shaven, but had been shaved within a few days, meaning he probably kept things up.

“Hello!” he called in a loud voice. “What can I get for you?”

“Rooms, baths, and food,” Torlyn said.

“And ale!” Francis shouted from the doorway.

“It’ll cost you, and I’d see the mint of your coin before I say how much,” the man said.

“That is not a problem,” Torlyn said pulling out a couple of Dilornian silver pieces. “Does this spend?”

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“It all spends lass, the question is how much do I charge you!” He laughed at his own joke as he eyed the coin. “One thing to say about old Bowtower, his silver is pure. I’ll take two silver each for a bath, a meal, and a room.”

“And ale,” Francis replied instantly.

“No, my boy, I don’t include ale with rooms. Some people drink far too much for that.”

“Aye, and he’s one of them,” Maylin said, entering the room with his saddlebags over his shoulder.

“Sir Maylin!” The innkeeper shouted, his bass voice rumbling.

“Yes, and I’d appreciate it if you just called me Maylin and treated me like any other man,” the Knight replied.

“Well, is the deal good enough for you to stay here, Sir Mayl... Maylin?”

“What deal is that?”

“Two silver for a room a bath and a meal,” the innkeeper responded.

“Good enough. How much for ale?” Maylin asked, cutting off Francis before he could remind the man yet again about his desire for ale.

“A copper for the cheap, three copper for the fine,” the man replied.

“Done. Francis, pay the man for our rooms,” Maylin ordered.

Francis grumbled as he dug out a few coins and handed them to the innkeeper.

As Francis counted out the coins the innkeeper introduced himself. “I’m Bergent, by the by. That’s fine, my good man. This way to your rooms.” He led them upstairs and took them down the hall. “Women here, men across the hall,” he said as he handed a key to Francis and turned to open a door. “Meals are announced by the smell and the clattering of plates, but if you’re hungry at another time, come on down to the kitchen and my wife will help you.”

They took turns going out back to the washhouse, and met back in the inn’s common room to eat their meal. The innkeeper brought them turkey and some stew that smelled of onions. The ale was fine, and they were glad to pay the three coppers for it. Torlyn was glad her first impression was right, clean rooms, clean utensils, and good food. While they would have taken less, they needed this night of relaxation.

“I still feel her. She’s behind us and north. We’re headed the wrong way,” Maylin suddenly said moodily.

“And we don’t have enough information. Please Maylin, we know this is hard for you, but we cannot go to rescue her blind,” Torlyn nearly pleaded.

“I know, but every time we relax, it gets stronger. I can still control it, but one day it might not be so easy,” he told her, his face showing the strain of trying to ignore the feelings that drove him.

“On that day, we will do what we must,” Denloa promised.

“I don’t know how many more days that will be,” Maylin muttered sullenly.

The door to the common room opened and they all turned their heads. A man in his middle years came in and looked about the room. “Innkeep!” he yelled into the room with barely a glance at the group where they were seated. He took two steps into the room “Innkeep!” he yelled again.

The door to the kitchen swung open and Bergent entered the room. He looked the man up and down, and then asked, “What can I do for you?”

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Torlyn caught the tone of his voice and looked to the man again. A dark cloak covered mail of chain, and what looked like a dragon-hilted sword poked out of the cloak. The face was scarred, but not horribly like a tithed follower of Filous would be, and his hair was wild, like he had not bothered to wash or comb it in a month. His stance was belligerent, and his eyes echoed that attitude.

“Ale and a room,” the man said shortly, flipping a golden coin at the innkeeper.

Bergent snatched the coin out of the air. “For how many?”

“Ten. And we’ll need a place to put our wagon and stable our horses.”

“Then you’ll need more than this, rich as it is,” Bergen told him flatly.

“Then you’ll have it. Do you have five rooms open?”

“Yes, only two are filled by these fine guests,” Bergent motioned at Maylin and his friends. Torlyn stiffened as the man’s attention focused upon them, his stare lingering on Torlyn’s dress-clad body. “Definitely fine company for a caravanner to stay with,” he said with a leer.

Torlyn felt Maylin’s hand on her knee, and looked down demurely rather than shoot a retort at this impertinent man.

He nodded to them curtly and turned to head back out the door.

“His sword is Filean, as is he,” Maylin said quietly.

“Are you certain? It looked like a dragon to me,” Torlyn responded, her voice just above a whisper.

“Positive, I can feel it. Could feel it the moment he walked in the door. Only the feel made me look close at his sword. That’s a snake’s head,” Maylin said tightly.

“Then we kill him,” Francis replied simply, tipping up his ale to drain it.

“No, we do not. We see who his nine friends are, *then* we kill him,” Denloa said.

Torlyn made a face. “Ten to three is a little steep, even for us. I propose we find out all we can from them, and only kill them if doing so might lead us to the KingSeer.”

“Agreed,” Maylin said without hesitation.

Francis looked astounded. “You are the same knight that has killed every Filean we have come across in the last six months, right? You’re the same knight that charged twelve of them thinking you were alone and we were all occupied or captured?”

“I am the knight-protector charged with seeing to the safety of the KingSeer. Anything that distracts me from that duty forwards the Filean’s plans, and that is something none of us want,” Maylin replied firmly. “Do I want to kill them all? Yes. They sacrifice innocents to their foul deity, they terrorize peasants, and overthrow kings. I want them all dead. But right now, there is something more important we must do.”

Francis relaxed and took Maylin’s mug from in front of him, lifting it to drink. “I’m sorry my friend. I’ll control myself as long as we get some benefit, but if they appear to be about to interfere with us, I will fight them whether the rest of you join me or not.”

“If they interfere, then we must remove them,” Maylin said, taking his mug back and draining it. “Now, let us see whom he brings to the inn this late in the evening.”

The door opened and ten figures entered. Nine of them wore long robes with the hoods up, their heads not visible under the cowls of the robes. The tenth was the man who had paid for the rooms. He stepped forward and shouted. “Well! What are you standing there for, innkeep? Our rooms!”

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As Bergent ushered them up the stairs, Maylin kept cold eyes fixed on one particular robed form. Halfway up the steps the figure seemed to sense his attention and stopped, turning a cowled head toward them. Under the cowl, Torlyn was certain she saw female features.

“Snake Priestess,” he spat, as though it left a bad taste in his mouth. “And unless I am not a Knight of Shalitor, a powerful one,” Maylin said as soon as they were up the steps.

“Now we kill them?” Francis asked without much hope in his voice.

“Perhaps, but the feeling in my gut is different. It does not pull me north any more, it pulls southeast, and I feel it is relatively close,” Maylin said.

Francis closed his eyes for a moment, envisioning the layout of the inn and its surrounding buildings. “Close and southeast is the stables.”

“Indeed it is,” Maylin replied with a glint in his eye. “Who wants to check them out?”

Maylin looked around the table, taking in the quick nods from Denloa and Torlyn and the broadening grin on the face of the priest. He leaned in and spoke quietly. “Alright then, let’s give them just a bit of time to settle in, then we’ll take a look at what’s in the stables.”

Half a glass passed and when none of the group that had entered came back down the stairs Maylin waved at Bergent. The man smiled and waved as he tossed the towel in his hands over his shoulder and walked quickly to the table. “What can I do for you Maylin?”

Maylin kept his eyes on the table. “Do you have a door out through the kitchen?”

The man narrowed his eyes and glanced over his shoulder at the stairs. “Yes,” he admitted quietly.

The corner of Maylin’s mouth quirked up in a grin as he caught Francis’ eyes. He nodded. “Do you mind if we take a look?”

The innkeep hesitated, a nervous look on his face. “Maylin, you know I trust – “

A low growl from Maylin’s throat stopped him and he nodded uneasily. “No, not at all. Follow me,” he acquiesced before he turned and hurried toward the kitchen door, not waiting to see if Maylin and his friends followed him.

He pushed open the door and held it with one hand while he gestured anxiously to Maylin with the other. “Come on, then, hurry.”

Maylin stood and moved as quietly as possible across the room, his ears picking up the quiet scraping of three other chairs as his friends moved to follow him. He turned slightly to move past Bergent and into the kitchen, his eyes rapidly scanning the room as he entered. He smiled at the sight of a door on the east side of the room and immediately moved toward it.

The door behind him closed as his companions entered the room, keeping a few paces behind him.

Bergent pointed at the door Maylin was already nearing and whispered loudly, “That one, there.”

Maylin threw a grateful look over his shoulder at Bergent. “Thank you,” he said simply before he put his hand on the door knob and turned it. “I’d consider calling the abjudicar, if you have one,” he advised as he pulled the door open and stepped through into the night.

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Maylin heard the rasping of swords being drawn behind him and knew his friends anticipated trouble. He pulled his mace from the belt at his waist and looked grimly toward the stables. The pull he felt in his gut was stronger than it had been inside and he suddenly feared his ability to not simply charge in and deal with whatever lay within the walls of the stable.

He stopped near the door to the stables and waited for his friends. He smiled grimly at Francis as the priest stepped up and stood against the wall next to the door, and glanced over to see both Denloa and Torlyn reposition their hands on the hilts of their swords. He knew Denloa preferred the bow, and that her keen elven sight would allow her to target an enemy even in the dark, but also knew she would not chance misfiring and hitting her companions through a single door in the dark.

“Torlyn, try not to stop all of us this time,” Maylin whispered with only a hint of humor in his voice. He saw her nod, a sheepish grin on her face, and then caught Francis’ eyes. “Ready?” he mouthed at the other man, taking a deep breath as Francis nodded once, his eyes alight with anticipation at the possibility of a good fight.

Maylin pushed the door open and stepped through, heedless of the potential danger.

The stables were dark and Maylin was frustrated by his inability to see anything. He could *feel* something pulling him toward the wagons, but he couldn’t see a thing. He lifted a hand, waving Denloa forward as he hissed her name into the darkness. He heard her approach and felt her tense as she stepped into the darkness.

Denloa let her eyes adjust to the darkness and then let them slip into her innate elven sight. She could see Maylin’s form near her standing out clearly against the darkness, a kernel of glowing heat against the cold of the night air. She let her eyes scan the stables, ignoring the figures that were obviously equine. She shook her head after a few scans of building. “I must move up, I can’t see everything,” she murmured before she took a few steps forward.

Maylin stiffened as he heard the sharp intake of breath from where Denloa should be standing. He tensed as she stepped back next to him. “Three, at least, under the wagons. Maybe more,” she said softly.

Maylin reached through the door and tapped Francis on the shoulder. As the priest stepped through the door, Maylin peered over his shoulder at Torlyn. Maylin raised a hand above his shoulder and formed his fingers into a circle, then pointed at the skald. He turned his head and gripped his mace more tightly while he waited for Torlyn.

Torlyn reached into a pouch on her belt and withdrew a small stone, holding it in the palm of her hand. She began to chant under her breath. A few seconds after she began she threw the stone forward into the stable, calling out in a loud voice, “Casala’nee!”

The stable was suddenly lit with a soft glow that emanated from where the stone had fallen. The sounds of men scrambling out from under the wagon and the drawing of swords from scabbards cut through the sound of the horses neighing in response to the sudden light. Maylin and Francis rushed forward to stand in the middle of the building, watching as not three, but six, men stood and arrayed themselves in front of a wagon, swords raised.

Maylin took a cautious step forward, then another and another. The men gripped their swords more tightly, their faces grim. Maylin shook his head and growled, his voice growing until it was a roar, and then charged at the men. Francis grinned broadly and

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followed, his spear suddenly lifting in his hands and pointing toward one of the men near the wagon.

As Maylin and Francis crashed into the men in front of the wagon Denloa stepped up to where Maylin had been standing and sheathed her sword. She reached over her shoulder and pulled her bow out, keeping one eye on the fight even as she strung her bow without so much as a thought. She nocked an arrow and raised the bow up, sighting along the arrow as she moved the bow left and right, looking for a clear shot.

Maylin's eyes were nearly crazed as he struggled to control his urge to go to the wagon and instead fought the three men who had him nearly surrounded. He raised a gauntleted arm and fended off a poorly aimed strike from one man on his left even as he slammed his mace into the side of the man directly in front of him. He winced as the third man managed to land a blow across his back, his armor protecting him from the sword's bite but still causing a tingling feeling to run up and down his spine.

He reversed the direction of his mace and brought it back across his body, bearing down on the man in front of him, catching him in his upper thigh. The sharp, metal blades protruding from the head of his mace tore a large chunk of flesh from his opponent's unprotected leg. Maylin turned to deal with the enemy on his left as the man in front of him dropped his sword and grabbed at the open flesh, collapsing to the ground in a screaming heap.

Francis jabbed with his spear directly at one of his opponents, parrying with his unarmored left arm and roaring with delight as he felt the sting of the flat of a man's blade slap at his upper arm. The priest shoved hard as he felt the tip of his spear cut through flesh like a dagger through well-cooked mutton and released his grip at the surprised look on his opponent's face. He clenched his right hand into a fist and gritted his teeth as he turned slightly toward the man on his left and swung out at the man's face.

Francis' fist connected solidly with the man's chin. The man's eyes rolled up into his head, but he managed to finish his swing, leaving the tip of his sword embedded in Francis' left calf. Francis bent down to remove the sword even as his opponent fell to the ground, ignoring the fact that he'd just opened himself up to the third man he'd been facing.

Denloa's eyes narrowed as she saw Francis' third opponent ready a blow at the priest's unprotected back. She sighted in on the man's sword hand and pulled back on her bow string even as she screamed at Francis. "Francis, to your right!"

Maylin heard the cry as well and knew Denloa would not have called out unless his friend was in serious trouble. He lifted a booted foot and slammed it into the knee of his opponent, knocking the man off balance, as he swung out to his right, his eyes leading his swing and hoping that Shalitor would guide his weapon.

Francis let himself fall to the ground at Denloa's cry, catching the glint of metal coming from his left, where Maylin had been fighting. Denloa whispered, "Talimaara guide thee," as she let her arrow fly.

Denloa's arrow slammed into the enemy's sword hand, causing him to drop the weapon and scream in pain. A fraction of a second later Maylin's mace slammed into the man's chest, knocking him into the wagon and away from Francis.

The last of the guards that had been fighting Maylin began to slink away from the scene, sliding his body along the wagon and heading for a rear door in the stables as all eyes were riveted on Francis' situation. Maylin caught the movement and straightened,

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his eyes narrowing as he swung out clumsily toward the man trying to escape. He snarled as his mace whooshed through the air in front of the man. The man turned his back to Maylin and began to run toward the back door.

“Torlyn! One out the door!” Maylin yelled over his shoulder, knowing he had to help Francis deal with the men here by the wagon that were injured, but far from helpless.

Maylin kept his attention focused on the man who’d been about to strike at Francis, ignoring the man behind him. Denloa nocked another arrow and trained it on the man behind Maylin. “I wouldn’t if I were you,” she called out a warning to the man.

The guard snarled something unintelligible in Denloa’s direction and pulled back his sword, obviously intending to run Maylin through from behind. Denloa shook her head sadly and moved her bow a fraction of an inch to the right before she let the arrow fly. Denloa would kill if necessary, but like most faithful of Talimaara she despised unnecessary death. She preferred that men just surrender rather than die, but if it came to their lives or her friends’ lives, she would do what was necessary even though she regretted the waste of life.

Maylin heard the arrow whiz past his back and heard the impact with flesh. He didn’t need to look to know that Denloa’s aim had been true, though he would have been surprised to see that her arrow had taken the man through the upper arm, the force of it knocking him against the wagon and effectively pinning the man against the structure.

Maylin grabbed Francis’ elbow and jerked the other man to his feet. Francis muttered, “Thanks,” without taking his eyes from the man who’d try to kill him. “Pull that out, will you Maylin?” he growled, pointing at the sword in his leg, but keeping his gaze locked on the man in front of him who appeared to be trying to push himself into the wagon through the outside as he tried to keep himself away from the angry priest.

Maylin grinned wryly as he reached down and grasped the hilt of the sword protruding from Francis’ leg and jerked it back away from Francis. “You’re going to need that looked at, Francis,” he said roughly as his eyes took in the blood pouring out from the wound down Francis’ leg.

Francis’ lip curled up into a sneer. “As soon as I deal with this one, I will,” the priest said, raising his fists in front of him and taking a step toward the man cowering against the wagon.

The man suddenly ripped the arrow free and dropped to his knees, putting his arms out wide. “I surrender, I surrender!” he yelled, closing his eyes tightly and turning his face away from Francis’ furious gaze.

Francis hesitated, then let his fists fall to his sides, still clenched tightly. “*Grambuled* cowards!” he growled before he began to back away, limping.

Maylin looked to the wagon, then back at the man kneeling in front of him, then back to the wagon. The feeling in his gut was stronger than ever and he knew, *he knew*, that there were Seeresses in that wagon. He raised his mace, his eyes wild, and ignored Denloa’s sudden cry, “No, Maylin, don’t!” as he slammed his mace into the man’s head, crushing it beyond recognition.

Maylin stepped over the bloody mess and around the end of the wagon, reaching up with a shaking hand for the leather straps that held the canvas together. He jerked on them violently, then grabbed one edge of the canvas and threw it aside.

He nearly lost his mind at the sight of the six blindfolded women tied to the sides of the wagon, their arms and legs raw where the ropes held them. They were all gagged,

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and Maylin growled when a frightened whimpering came from them at the sound of someone entering the wagon. He stepped inside the wagon and knelt down near the first one, his hands working furiously to remove her bonds.

Denloa was muttering as she tied off a length of cloth around Francis' injured leg, stopping the bleeding and hoping it was enough to keep the man from bleeding to death. Francis waved a hand urgently at her ministrations. "Hurry up, Denloa," he said impatiently.

"I'm finished, but you better be careful on that for a while, Francis," the elf warned as he straightened, testing his leg. "It's the best I can do right now – you'll have to deal with it yourself later."

Francis ignored her as he limped toward the wagon, peering around the corner where Maylin had disappeared. "I'll be the son of a -" he began, stopping abruptly at the hard look Maylin threw at him.

"How about you get up here and help me?" Maylin demanded.

Francis pulled himself up into the wagon and began to help, but a moment later he raced to the end of the wagon and looked around it at the sound of Torlyn's voice calling out to them.

"We're not finished here!" the skald cried out as she ran into the stables. Francis' eyes widened at the disheveled look of the skald. The woman rarely had a hair out of place, but she stood in the middle of the stables with her hair disarrayed and clothing hanging askew. Francis threw a look back at Maylin as he climbed down out of the wagon.

"What happened?" he called out as his eyes scanned the fallen men near the wagon for his spear. Seeing it still piercing the first man he'd fought he moved to the dead man and grasped the weapon, grunting as he pulled it out of the man's chest.

"The one that got away," Torlyn called out breathlessly. "He made it to the inn..." she trailed off, her eyes flying back to the stable door even as she began to back away from it.

"Talimaara help us," Denloa said quietly, pulling another arrow from the quiver at her back and backing up toward the wagon.

"Maylin!" Francis yelled, keeping his eyes trained on the door Torlyn had just come through. "We're going to have company!"

"I will not leave the Seeresses!" Maylin's voice was muffled through the canvas of the wagon, but the others could hear the determination in his voice.

Torlyn shook her head. "This is not going to be fun," she said tonelessly, drawing her sword.

Francis moved to stand in front of the two women, his spear held lightly in his hands. "That all depends on your definition of fun," he said lightly, a lopsided grin on his face.

His eyes showed he was less sure of his words a moment later when a cowed figure stepped through the door, followed closely by the rest of the group from the inn.

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Chapter 7

“Well, well, well,” a raspy voice echoed out across the stables from underneath the cowl. “What have we here?”

Francis gripped his spear more tightly. “Your end,” he spat confidently.

The hooded figure reached up and pushed the cowl away from her face as she laughed dryly at Francis’ words. She shook her head as she let her hands drop to the pin securing her robes near her shoulder and removed it, flinging it aside and allowing the robe to fall from her shoulders, revealing the black and gold robes of a priestess of Delineal Filous underneath. She rubbed her hands together gleefully as she let her gaze fall on each of the three companions.

“Yesssss,” she hissed. “Where is the Armor Bearer? I do hope he hasn’t fallen just yet. I have plans for him.”

Francis tried to keep his face from showing his confusion but failed. The robed woman laughed, delighted at his reaction. “Oh come now, you can’t mean to tell me that you haven’t heard *that* Name yet,” she threw out.

“It really doesn’t matter now, does it?” Francis returned arrogantly. “You’ll die here no matter what name you want to call us by.”

The sound of clanking from inside the wagon drew the woman’s eyes, which widened with understanding. “Ahhhh...” she said, nodding her head. “Of course. The Armor Bearer can do aught but free those who Sssssee. Good, then I shall take care of him and deny you your prize all at once!”

The woman reached under her robes and withdrew a round, metal disk. She held it reverently between her hands in front of her and began chanting.

Francis moved to charge but stopped at Torlyn’s hissed command. “Wait!”

He glanced over his shoulder at the woman and saw that she had begun chanting as well, her lilting voice making the guttural sounds of her native tongue sound almost pleasant. Francis swallowed hard, hoping that whatever Torlyn was doing would stop whatever the snake priestess was doing.

Torlyn finished first, suddenly thrusting a hand in front of her, palm facing outward, and cried out, “STOP!”

Francis could see that all but the man who had ordered the rooms in the inn and the snake priestess appeared to be held in place. He closed his eyes for a long moment and braced himself to deal with whatever the snake priestess was about to do.

The woman, whose skin glowed lightly green in the light that still shone from the stone Torlyn had thrown, stopped chanting and she, too, held out her hands, palms facing outward toward the wagon. She spat out a single word, “Ssssenasst!” and a dozen small balls of flame flew from her hands toward the wagon.

Francis realized too late that the woman was not targeting them, but the wagon. He swore under his breath as he hefted his spear and threw it at the woman, praying it would not miss its mark.

But as the spear was leaving his fingers the balls of flame impacted with the wagon and the resulting explosion jarred him enough to send the spear veering off course. The building was suddenly alight with flames and the terrified screams of women coming from within the wagon echoed through the air.

The snake priestess laughed malevolently even as she reached down and pulled a mace from her belt, the spikes on its head glinting in the light of the flaming wagon.

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“Come then, *Angry Man*, and meet your end,” she entreated, the corner of her lip turning up into a sneer.

Francis pulled his own mace from his belt and moved toward her, his jaw set and eyes full of resolve.

Torlyn took a few quick steps forward and joined Francis, her sword held ready and eyes focused on the robed woman. She saw the man who had insulted her in the inn step around the priestess, as if to protect her, and her nose flared angrily at the sight.

“I’ll deal with *him*,” she growled at Francis, “you deal with the priestess.”

“Sounds good to me,” Francis gritted through clenched teeth. “Enjoy your worship of Dirge, for I know I will!”

Torlyn drew back her sword and charged, a Dirgian war cry flying from her lips. Francis raised his mace and stepped around the man to swing at the priestess, the name of Dirge ringing out from his mouth in a cross between a prayer and a battle cry.

Denloa looked to the fight before her and then back at the burning wagon. She hesitated, knowing her friends would need help fighting the priestess but realizing that Maylin would not leave the wagon until all the Seeresses were freed. While the knight was normally fairly battle savvy and willing to retreat when necessary, when Seeresses were involved Denloa was certain that all Knights of Antiquum lost the ability to think clearly. They would do, indeed had done, incredibly brave – and stupid – things to save even a single Seeress. Their dedication to the protection of these women was unbelievable and Denloa knew that Maylin would die rather than allow any one of them to be lost. Maylin was the key to finding the Kingseer, and that was, above all, more important than any one of them. They were replaceable, Maylin was not. She sighed and ran to the back of the wagon, shielding herself from the flames with an arm as she stepped lithely inside and began to help Maylin free the remaining women.

Torlyn swung out angrily at the man in front of her, feeling the vibrations from the impact of her sword on his all the way to her shoulder. She crouched slightly more as she drew back, holding her sword across her body to block his attack.

The man leered at her, his sword snaking out and trying to catch her in the knee. “I’ll not mar that pretty face, little one,” he teased evilly, “at least not until much later.”

“Cala dog!” Torlyn spat, her eyes flashing with anger as she blocked the blow and turned so that her side was facing the man. She swung out at his legs, trying to knock him off balance but was frustrated when he easily turned the blow aside and stepped forward with his momentum until he was towering over her. He grabbed her sword arm and tightened his grip, trying to force her to drop her weapon.

Torlyn clenched her teeth, kicking out with her foot and snaking the toe of her boot behind the man’s knee, jerking forward with her leg as hard as she could. The man released his grip on her arm and flailed about as he tried to right himself. Torlyn stabbed at him while he was distracted, grinning broadly as her sword slid into his upper arm.

The man jerked away from the skald, the expression on his face darkening as he recovered his balance. “You’ll pay for that, Dirgian whore,” he snarled as he began to swing at her more violently than he had been before.

Francis and the priestess continued to exchange blows, each one expertly blocking the other. The resounding echo of the solidly made weapons rang out over the din of battle in the stables. Francis backed away, breathing heavily from the exertion of wielding the weapon, noting that the priestess was also tiring from swinging her own

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heavy mace. He smiled inwardly, knowing that he could likely keep swinging longer than she could. He heard a sharp gasp from Torlyn and glanced quickly to his friend, his face darkening as he realized that while he could keep fighting for a time that Torlyn was tiring already if the bloodied spots he saw on her body were any indication.

The priestess laughed as she caught sight of Francis glancing at Torlyn. ‘Yesssss, *Angry Man*,’ she sneered, ‘you might live but that one will be a treat for Norgill in the morning.’

Francis filed away the name she used for future contemplation and gripped his mace more tightly. ‘I doubt that, snake,’ he said confidently as he circled the woman, limping slightly on his wounded leg as he tried to find an opening. ‘She is more able than you think.’

The priestess grinned malevolently as she saw Torlyn go down on one knee, her sword held up to fend off her opponent. ‘I think the *Song of Dirge* has sung her last,’ she taunted, satisfaction filling her eyes as Francis’ eyes moved to check on Torlyn. The priestess swung out with her mace and connected with the Francis’ leg, a victorious expression on her face as she saw the blood begin to seep through the bandage on his leg.

Francis grimaced as he felt the blow and knew she’d caused his leg to start bleeding again. He scolding himself for not paying attention to the priestess and refocused his eyes on the woman in front of him.

‘Torlyn, Dirge’s *Dented Shield!*’ he screamed, his eyes not leaving his opponent to see if she understood the reference.

Torlyn’s eyes widened at Francis’ call. She shifted her weight slightly and put one hand on the ground, her fingertips splayed out for balance. She fended off one, then another blow with her sword, letting each one come closer and closer to driving her sword out of the way. Finally she let Norgill’s weapon drive her sword away from her body, causing him to lean slightly forward. She pushed off with her hand and the leg underneath her, driving her head forward and up into Norgill’s chin.

Norgill’s head flew back and he staggered from the blow. Torlyn took advantage of his temporarily stunned state and thrust at him, driving her sword into his side. She winced as she realized she’d only pierced through the fatty layer of skin and had missed anything vital. Norgill stepped back and turned, letting the blade slide out of his body. He reached down and covered the wound with a hand. ‘I’ll finish this another time,’ he spat as he turned and ran from the building, disappearing in the darkness.

Francis grimaced inwardly as he caught the sight of Norgill racing from the building out of the corner of his eye but did not take his focus from the priestess.

‘Seems you’re all alone now, priestess,’ Francis taunted the woman, shaking his mace in her direction. ‘And I owe you,’ he said fiercely before he swung at her head with his weapon.

He smiled as she tried to block the blow, which he hadn’t expected to land. It distracted her just enough that he was able to push off with his good leg and kick at her with his left. His foot connected solidly with her chest and she flew back away from him, her arms flailing as she tried to keep her feet.

Francis gritted his teeth against the sharp pain that ran up and down his injured leg as he landed on that foot, his arm already bringing his mace around in a near circle as he pushed off with his left leg and swung at the now exposed head of the priestess. His momentum pushed him forward, nearly launching him into the air, his mace blocking out

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the woman's surprised expression as the weapon landed solidly in the middle of her face. Francis heard the sound of cartilage breaking and closed his eyes against the spray of blood. He crashed into the woman, knocking her to the ground. He landed atop her, the impact knocking the wind from his lungs.

Torlyn stared unbelievably at Francis as he landed on the priestess and then lay still. She'd thought Knights of Antiquum were crazy but this, this went beyond crazy. She raced to his side, grunting with the effort of turning his body and pushing it off the dead priestess.

She could see he wasn't breathing and his eyes were bulging as he fought for air. "Francis!" she screamed. "Breathe, you dolt, breathe!"

Francis gasped several times before he was finally able to draw in a breath. His body shuddered with the rush of fresh oxygen and he closed his eyes as he spent several moments just enjoying the simple act of breathing.

He opened his eyes and met Torlyn's gaze, an anxious expression on her face. "Is she dead?"

Torlyn chuckled as she stood and extended a hand to her friend. "Very much so, my friend."

Francis grunted as he let Torlyn help him stand. The smile on his face melted as he saw the flames still shooting from the wagon. "Maylin!" he said urgently as he began to limp toward the wagon.

Four blindfolded women huddled near the wagon, their faces stained with tears and their mouths moving silently with either prayers or curses, Francis could not tell which. He tried to hurry, ignoring the pain that shot through his leg every time he put weight on the injured limb. "Torlyn, get them away from the wagon!" he cried out, his eyes catching sight of the burning frame through the smoke.

Torlyn raced past him, urgently herding the women away from the wagon, her eyes nervously watching the frame and trying to judge how much time they had before it collapsed. She looked up and nearly swore as she saw that the roof of the stables was on fire as well, and that it, too, looked ready to fall in at any moment. She glanced over and caught sight of the rear door and shoved the Seeresses toward it. "Francis, it's all coming down – we've got to get Maylin out of there!" she yelled over her shoulder just before she disappeared through the door.

Francis was three steps away from the wagon when a woman came flying out of the back. He reached out and tried to stop her from falling, realizing it was a Seeress. He righted her, muttering reassurances to the woman that she was safe under his breath even as Denloa suddenly jumped through the back of the wagon, landing lightly on the ground.

Denloa glanced at Francis and the Seeress. "Get her out of here! There's only one more," she commanded, her head turning back to the wagon. "Maylin, you've got to hurry! The wagon is going to collapse!"

"Go then!" Maylin roared, his voice carrying over the sound of the fire and timbers cracking. "I'll not leave this one here to die!"

Francis glanced at the Seeress he held and ducked as a timber from the ceiling of the stable broke off and came crashing to the ground next to the wagon, tearing at the canvas as it flew by.

Denloa turned her soot stained face toward Francis. "I'll get him, you go now!" she yelled as she made her way back into the burning wagon. Francis shook his head and

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muttered a few choice words as he led the Seeress back toward the main door and outside.

He found Torlyn standing nearby with the huddled Seeresses and made his way toward her. He gently handed the woman he'd ushered out to the other Seeresses, who made clucking noises and reached out to embrace her. Francis exchanged a worried look with Torlyn, then both turned nervous eyes on the burning stable. They held their breath as another timber broke from the roof and they heard it crash against wood somewhere inside the building. Francis went down on one knee and grasped a silver disk bearing a dented shield on its face between his hands, his mouth moving as he prayed to Dirge to help his friends get out before it was too late.

Another timber crashed down from the top of the stable, then another and another. Torlyn closed her eyes, trying to force away the feeling of dread that had gripped her at the sight. A moment later the entire roof of the stable began to fall and Torlyn let out a cry.

She was about to rush forward and try to find her friends when she heard coughing and crying coming from somewhere near the building. Silhouetted against the smoke by the fire raging behind them were three figures, stumbling their way toward them through the darkness. Torlyn rushed forward and met them as they appeared from the smoke.

Maylin put an arm around the skald gratefully and leaned on her, choking and coughing violently as they reached the group that stood watching the fire. Denloa led the last Seeress to her sisters and then stepped away, bending over and heaving as she breathed in great gulps of fresh air. Torlyn guided Maylin to the ground, kneeling next to him as he sat heavily trying to breathe.

Francis stood and limped to his friends, shaking his head at the sight of their soot covered bodies. "Looks like you two need another bath," he joked, a note of relief in his voice.

Maylin looked up at him angrily, but the sight of the Seeresses huddled safely behind his friend softened the expression on his face. He smiled wryly. "I guess we do, don't we?"

"What about the rest of the snakes?" Maylin asked, his brow furrowing.

Torlyn opened her mouth to answer but stopped when the ceiling of the stable completely collapsed. She winced and looked sheepishly at Maylin. "As I magicked them to stop and stay put, I'd say they aren't going to be a problem now."

Maylin nodded, his eyes narrowing at the sight of the stables burning. "Better they died in that than I get my hands on them," he said with a touch of irony in his voice.

"What in the name of Shalitor did you do to my –" Bergent's voice called out as he approached, and stopped abruptly as he saw Maylin sitting on the ground. His brow furrowed. "Sir Maylin!" he exclaimed, forgetting Maylin's admonition to not call him sir. "Is everything all right?"

Maylin nodded. "Yes, Bergent, it is," he said gravely. "My apologies for the stables, but when you let a snake into your home you have to expect that they will stir up trouble."

Bergent threw up his hands and turned to stare at the flames and smoke rising from his stables. "I—" he began angrily, turning back to scold Maylin. Whatever he had

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been about to say was lost as he gazed for the first time on the Seeresses crowded together. "Are those..." he whispered, his eyes wide with amazement.

Maylin nodded, pushing himself up off the ground. "Yes, Bergent, they are," he said simply.

Bergent bowed his head respectfully at Maylin and then raised his voice. "Boys! Get some water and put out this fire!" he ordered, not waiting to see if the stable hands followed his directions, then lowered his voice as he looked at Maylin. "I will have baths and hot food and cider for them shortly," he said reverently, "and for you and yours as well."

Maylin nodded wearily. "I thank you, Bergent, and the High Seeress will thank you as well once she hears of your kindness."

Bergent nodded and smiled before he turned and nearly ran back toward the inn, shouting orders as he ran.

One of the Seeresses suddenly appeared at Maylin's arm, grasping his elbow lightly. "Armor Bearer, we thank you for your timely arrival!" she said gratefully.

Maylin looked embarrassed as he bowed his head. "I live to protect you, Seeress, and could do naught else once I knew you were inside."

The rest of the Seeresses crowded around Maylin, all murmuring their thanks. Maylin reached up and scratched his head, sighing. "Let's go inside and get you all baths and hot food," he suggested, leading them toward the inn.

The others followed the crowd as Maylin led them inside, shaking their heads at the Seeresses and finding Maylin's discomfort at their attention amusing.

Torlyn glanced down at Francis' leg as the priest limped after Maylin. "Francis, you need to do something about that and soon. Bergent may have forgiven us for burning down his stables but he won't likely be as forgiving if you bleed all over his common room."

"I can bind it again for you, Francis," Denloa offered, trying to wipe the soot from her hands on her breeches.

Francis shook his head, wincing. "I'll take care of it," he grumbled, stopping abruptly. He again held the symbol of Dirge in his hands, but his face was more peaceful this time as he spoke the words of a prayer to his god.

Torlyn bowed her head respectfully at the words, not wanting to offend Dirge by appearing less than pious. She lifted her eyes toward Francis, waiting to see if Dirge was pleased by his actions or not. As she and Denloa watched, the priest was suddenly bathed in a soft blue light. As Francis' words grew in volume, so the light grew in intensity until finally it flared a brilliant blue and disappeared with a flash.

They heard Francis' heavy sigh, but noticed that when he began to head toward the inn that he managed to do so without a limp. The two women smiled and hurried to catch up with Francis, who reached out and laid an arm over the shoulder of each of his two friends, smiling as they made their way inside. "Dirge is apparently pleased with our actions," he said.

They settled themselves at a table near Maylin, who was still surrounded by three of the Seeresses. At Francis' questioning look, Maylin quickly explained that the other three had been escorted to a room for a hot bath.

Bergent rushed over with tankards in hand but stopped abruptly at the sight of Francis standing in his common room, uninjured. His eyes grew wide with amazement.

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“How did you, that is, I saw the blood...” he trailed off, pointing at Francis’ leg. “Did you ...” he stopped and wiggled his fingers in the air.

Francis laughed and shook his head. “No, my friend, that kind of magik,” he paused and wiggled his fingers in the air, “is the specialty of that one,” he said, pointing at Torlyn. “I’m a priest of Dirge, my good man. I don’t command *mana*, I beseech Dirge to act *through* me.”

At his confused gaze Torlyn laughed. “Bergent, a mageborn draws *mana* from the world around them and focuses it to do something specific with all those strange hand movements. Sometimes we use special items to do something more specific, like a roc feather to make someone fly or a little bit of bat guano to create fire or even a bit of dirt from the ground to call forth a dust devil,” she explained patiently. “The more unnatural the magik is, the more unusual, and often expensive, the focus must be. A priest like Francis here uses a different kind of magik, we call it *divine magik* even though it is not really magik in the way you’re thinking, it’s more like Dirge uses Francis as his focus and grants him the ability to perform what most people would call miracles, like healing his wounds or smiting his enemies from a distance.”

Bergent nodded wisely at the explanation as the three sat down and leaned back in their chairs. He set the tankards of ale he’d been carrying on the table, beaming. “On the house, my friends,” he said anxiously, his eyes shining at the thought of being known as the inn where these particular heroes had stayed after rescuing Seeresses from the clutches of snakes.

Torlyn smiled knowingly at Bergent. “They will know, Bergent,” she said with a gleam in her eye, ignoring the glare coming from Maylin’s face as he realized what she was going to do. “As well as they know the Tale of the Ten, they will know of this place.”

Bergent grinned broadly, nodding and smiling as he clasped his hands together. “You are too kind, Lady Torlyn, too kind. But I thank you.”

Torlyn nearly blushed and looked away. “It is the least we can do after burning down your stable.”

“Must you?” Maylin asked harshly, lifting a tankard to his lips and nearly draining it in one swift gulp. He set the tankard back down on the table and gripped it tightly between his hands.

Torlyn laughed. “It is what I do, Maylin,” she chided him and then stood smoothly from her chair, opening her arms wide. “I am Torlyn Vselia Anelda Dramez Baltruscade, and I give you the tale of the Knight of a Thousand Seeresses, Sir Maylin Silvon,” she proclaimed loudly, bowing as Francis and Denloa smirked and clapped their hands politely.

Maylin snorted. “A thousand??” he scoffed, leaning back and folding his arms across his chest. “Isn’t that a bit much even for one who tells such tall tales as you?”

Torlyn laid a hand on her chest and threw an innocent look at Maylin. She opened her mouth to speak but was interrupted by the strong, clear voice of one of the women seated near Maylin.

“*The Armor Bearer shall be Seen and seen by the one who speaks truest,*” she said before sighing heavily and leaning upon one of the other Seeresses for support.

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Maylin leaned over and rifled through Torlyn's pack, coming up with a purple book and a quill. He opened it up and began furiously writing down what the woman had said, his face scrunching up as he tried to recall exactly what the woman had said.

"The Armor Bearer shall be seen and..." he repeated, stopping as he tapped the quill on the parchment in front of him. "Shall be seen and ..." he shook his head. "Gods! What did she say?" he entreated his friends, his eyes desperate.

"Shall be Seen and seen by the one who speaks truest," Torlyn repeated, emphasizing the first *Seen* and not the second. She watched as Maylin mouthed the words while he wrote them down, then read them back to himself, a satisfied look on his face.

"Have you got it?" Torlyn asked, her eyes watching the Seeresses warily.

Maylin nodded, breathing a sigh of relief. "Yes, I have it," he said, closing the book and rolling his shoulders.

"Good. Can't have those pieces of the Tale getting lost, now, can we *Armor Bearer*," Francis interjected.

Maylin's lip curled up at his words. "Thanks a lot. I'm sure you have a name too, *Angry Man*," he threw back at the priest.

Francis' face grew white at his words.

"What?" Maylin asked, tensing again and looking around frantically. "What's wrong?"

"Angry Man," he whispered. "That's what the priestess in the stable called me," he said, his expression frightened. He turned to Torlyn, who returned his look with a shake of her head. "No, Francis, don't even try –"

"Song of Dirge," he repeated tonelessly. "She called you *Song of Dirge*."

They all turned to look at Denloa, who held up her hands as if to ward off Francis. "Oh no, Francis, not me. You leave me out this," she warned.

Francis looked confused. "She didn't say anything about you, Denloa," he said, turning his eyes to the ceiling as he tried to recall the words of the snake priestess. He shook his head. "Nothing."

Denloa breathed a sigh of relief. "Well, that's something, at least."

"The *Broken Bow*," a voice chimed in from near Maylin's elbow, at first hesitant, but then more insistent. "Yes, you are *The Broken Bow*, I am certain of it."

Maylin turned a horrified face to the woman who sat next to him. "What in the name of Shalitor does that mean?"

The woman looked frightened at the tone in Maylin's voice. "I—" she began, "I don't know," she said sadly. "I just know that when I look at her I can *See* her and she is *The Broken Bow*."

"These Names aren't always easy to understand," Torlyn interjected, trying to assuage the fear she saw rising on her friends' faces. "It could just mean that her bow will break, or that she'll break and arm or a leg, or something simple like that like."

Maylin seemed to relax at the skald's words. "That's right. Some Names sound like one thing but really mean another, I remember being warned about trying to interpret what the Seeresses tell us without having access to more of the Tale."

"That's right, Maylin," Torlyn continued. "That's one of the reason having the *KingSeer* and the Tale is so important. Without them it is difficult to interpret what the farseers tell us."

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Francis still looked unconvinced, his wrinkled brow clearly showing his disbelief. “It still sounds like a bad omen, if you ask me,” he grumped.

Maylin looked to Torlyn nervously. “Think of another one, one that had more than one meaning, Torlyn. Prove it to them,” he urged, his eyes showing his doubt needed to be assuaged as much as Francis and Denloa.

Torlyn looked pensive for a moment. “In the last cycle of the Tale, *One who IS, but is NOT* referred to Kestra Contraband. At first it was thought that the reference meant that she would become like the walking dead, one who is alive, but is not alive. Later it was finally determined that the Name really referred to her family name. She’d never used it, for some reason, and most people even today don’t realize she was a member of the Contraband family. The original interpretation left quite a few people nervous, because they really believed she would become like the walking dead.”

The others looked thoughtful at that, and Francis shook his head. “So it could mean anything, including that Denloa may not live,” he said crossly. “Considering what we’re about to do, I still think it’s a bad sign.”

“Not necessarily!” Torlyn said, slapping her hand on the table. “Look, there was a line in the last Tale that simply said *From the Death of The Mage, the Birth of the Reader*. Lord Adocso was Seen as both *The Mage* and *The Reader*. He didn’t actually die, the line just referred to the time when he would turn from concentrating on magik to understanding the Tale. Being *The Broken Bow* doesn’t mean death, or even that Denloa will be seriously injured. Without a context to interpret the Name in, we *just can’t know*.”

Denloa laughed nervously and waved her hand dismissively at the looks of concern on her friend’s faces. “Look, we knew what we were getting into when we agreed to help Maylin. Some strange name that we don’t even know the meaning of isn’t going to change that, is it?” she looked around questioningly at her friends. When they all nodded she continued on. “Good, now we should probably try to figure out where this little caravan was going and whether it has anything to do with the Kingseer,” she said firmly, putting the words of the Seeress out of her mind. If she was destined to be broken in some way or die, then so be it. Unlike the Tar, the Tel lived much longer lives. Denloa was over a century old herself and she knew that the short lives of the Tar tended to drive them to worry more over death than would one of her own kind. Besides, she was not one to argue with the gods, even ones that weren’t her own.

Torlyn returned to her chair and drummed her fingers on the table. “There won’t be enough left of the stables to find anything that might have told us where they were headed,” she lamented.

Denloa nodded, leaning her chair back and balancing it on two legs. “You’re right, there,” she said, staring across the table at the wall as she thought. Suddenly she let her chair fall back onto all four legs, snapping her fingers. “Their rooms!” she said brightly, pushing her chair out and standing. “They left so abruptly that they might have left something behind that would tell us where they were going, and what they were doing.”

Torlyn stood, nodding her head. “I’ll go with you,” she offered.

Denloa nodded and began to make her way up the stairs, Torlyn following closely behind her.

Francis drained his tankard and lifted it into the air, signaling for another. He set down the tankard and wiped the back of his hand across his face, then stared at Maylin

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for a moment. “You almost waited too long, my friend,” the priest said conversationally. “We nearly had to scrape what was left of you off the charred planks of that wagon.”

Maylin shrugged. “From what I heard you nearly waited too long to finish off the priestess.”

Francis nodded congenially as Bergent set another tankard in front of him and took the empty one away, smiling as he moved about his work.

“Tell me, Francis, how is it that you manage to win every time, despite nearly getting yourself killed each time you do it,” Maylin asked, drinking more slowly from his tankard and staring at his friend over the rim.

Francis’ face grew serious. “You have to wait until the right moment...”

“Aye,” Maylin agreed, raising an eyebrow.

“And you have to not care whether you live or die,” he finished stoically, nodding his head in understanding.

“Aye,” Maylin said again, his face showing no emotion whatsoever.

Francis nodded, smiling wryly. “I see what you mean. We aren’t that different, are we?”

Maylin laughed out loud and shook his head. “In your dreams, perhaps, priest,” he taunted.

Francis shook his head, refusing to take the bait this time. “You can say what you want, Maylin, but I know you.”

Maylin sneered at him, but said nothing. He watched wordlessly as the three Seeresses who had left earlier returned, beckoning for the three remaining to follow them to the rooms Bergent had set aside. The three women stood and went to join the others, one stopping to lay a hand gently on Maylin’s shoulder. “Thank you, sir knight,” she said simply before she left to follow the others upstairs.

The men sat in silence, each lost in their own thoughts, until Denloa and Torlyn appeared on the stairs, talking animatedly to one another.

The women approached the table and sat. Denloa laid a piece of parchment on the table and reached across the table, grabbing Francis’ tankard from him and draining it before he could say a word. Francis glanced crossly at the elf, but his attention was focused on the parchment. He reached out and picked it up, his eyebrows rising as he read the few words on its face.

When he didn’t speak, Maylin reached out and tore the parchment from his friend’s hand. His brow furrowed as he read the words in front of him. “Master-Trader Marganel?” he exclaimed, frustrated as he turned the parchment over and scrutinized it for more than the simple words. “Master-Trader Marganel?” he scoffed, tossing the parchment back onto the table. “What kind of *grambuled* information is that?”

“Bergent!” Torlyn called sweetly, giving Maylin an arched look while she waited for the inn keeper to rush to their table.

“Yes, Lady Torlyn?” the man asked eagerly.

“Where do you get your ale from?” she asked.

A look of confusion crossed his face momentarily at the strange question. “Salena, usually. My proctor there gets a good deal on ale coming from the south,” he replied.

Torlyn nodded. “And what is the name of the trader your proctor deals with?” she prompted.

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“Trader Marganel, I believe,” he answered at length. “Why?”

Torlyn gifted him with a brilliant smile. “Just interested, really. Thank you, Bergent, you have been extraordinarily helpful.”

The man blushed at her smile, his face softening. “You’re welcome, my Lady,” he said as he turned and left once again.

Torlyn, Francis and Denloa all stared at Maylin, who stared back at them sullenly. “What?” he finally barked.

“Do you still think we’re headed in the wrong direction?” Francis asked haughtily.

Maylin turned his head to the north and stared at the walls for a long moment. When he turned his face back to his friends his eyes were glassy. He nodded once and then swallowed hard. “Yes,” he whispered fiercely, idly pushing his mug back and forth in front of him on the table.

Francis shook his head, an amazed expression on his face. Finally he leaned across the table, putting his face close to Maylin’s. “You are the most *grambuled* stubborn man I’ve ever met,” he said angrily. He straightened, his face hardening. “We are going to Salena, Maylin,” he pointed at the parchment. “That and the map say so,” he said curtly.

Denloa watched Maylin’s face closely, seeing the myriad expressions that crossed his face. First anger, then sorrow, then resignation. The knight closed his eyes and sighed. “I know, but that doesn’t make it any easier,” he said wearily.

Torlyn stifled a yawn. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but my body is crying out for a bed,” she said tiredly.

Denloa nodded slowly. “As is mine,” she agreed.

Maylin shook his head. “I’ll take the first watch then,” he said tonelessly. “I don’t think I could sleep right now anyway.”

Francis stood, slapping his friend on the shoulder. “Wake me for the next watch then, and don’t forget this time,” he joked.

Maylin said nothing as friends headed up the stairs quietly and disappeared. He stood his watch, forcing his mind to focus on Salena, trying to quiet the cries that echoed in his mind to ride north.

Chapter 8

They bought horses for the Seeresses from a local farmer the next day and continued on their path. Maylin felt so urgent a need to get this trip to Salena behind him that he didn't even try to take them to the Tower of Seeresses where they would be well protected. They slowed the group somewhat, but he had no idea what else to do. They were passing within a week's journey of the Tower, but he was not taking two weeks out to go there and return.

On the third day of their journey, a warrior woman wearing a tattered purple cloak rode toward them on the trail. She had medium-length, graying blonde hair and rode as if she was lost, hunched in her saddle and not paying much attention to the road ahead.

Maylin felt the feeling in his stomach *shift* again. Now he felt pulled to this woman, and a nagging thought at the back of his mind told him that he should recognize her. As they rode closer he examined her face, and though it looked much older than he had last seen it, he did recognize her. She was Odithea, once the foremost Protector of Antiquum in all of the land, she had stood over him while he first recited the names of the High Seeresses in the Grand Hall of Protectors. She had taken his Oath to his Order, and she had said that he "had the potential to be the finest Knight in all of Nordalia". And then, two years later, she had announced to the Order that she had failed them, that she had abused her position, and that she had been responsible for the death of a Knight-Protector and that she had, through that same series of actions, possibly endangered dozens of Seeresses with her actions. Many in the Order, including his mentor Sir Shanuit, believed that as the High Protector Odithea had taken all of the ills of the Order onto her own shoulders, that she was not so culpable as she believed, but then she had announced her final act as High-Protector. She was to be stripped – all of her associations with the Order removed from her, her head shorn, and turned out of the Order for her misdeeds, and that her name, and the name of the Knight she had caused the death of, Alessa Redwolf, were to be stricken from the records of the Knights of Antiquum. That act had saved a nearly destroyed Order. Knights had rallied, stopped infighting, and created a unified front when the Doornian Wars came. Many believed her act had saved them. If she was guilty, it warranted Maylin's respect. If Sir Shanuit had been right and she was not as guilty as she believed, it warranted Maylin's honor. He held up his hand to stop.

"Lady Odithea," he said loudly.

The woman looked up slowly, a resigned expression on her face. When she saw Maylin her resignation turned to shame. "Sir Knight?" she replied flatly.

Maylin looked at her for a moment, "I have an idea what you have been through, how you must feel. I tell you that from where I sit, alive and with no less than six Seeresses in tow, there is no shame in what you have done, or none that was not washed away by your final declaration as High Protector," Maylin said.

Torlyn gasped behind him as Odithea sat up straighter in her saddle.

"I did what I could," she responded.

"It was enough. We are an Order recognized again by our brethren after years of getting less respect than an Am'Ethaanian dog," he replied.

"That was the work of others, but still am I heartened by your faith," she replied.

Suddenly Maylin knew what he had to do. He was not certain why, but he knew what. "Lady Odithea, I have six Seeresses," he said solemnly, "who require a protector

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to get to the Tower of the Seeress. I cannot take them at this time, and I move closer to danger with each league I travel.” He paused and swallowed as he saw tears begin to roll down her cheeks. “If I wrote you a note of introduction, would you be so kind as to escort them to the Tower for me?” he finished.

“That would not be possible, Sir Knight. As you know, a High Protector has declared me anathema to both the Order and the Tower,” she choked through the growing stream of tears.

He smiled. “I know nothing of the sort. That High-Protector had her name stricken from all of our records. That includes any declarations of anathema. My instructor Sir Shanuit himself struck her name from the declaration of anathema.” He stopped to let her wipe an arm across her eyes. “These Seeresses are in danger. More danger with me, but danger just the same. Did you remove our Order from yourself with those declarations, or did you remove yourself from my Order? Which is it? Are you still a Knight-Protector at heart, or have you lost your heart?” He stopped, realizing he may well have crossed the line.

But she glared at him, and sat up straight. “I removed myself from the Order for my crimes, but I have never stopped acting as a Knight-Protector, though that title is not allowed me any more,” she said slowly and deliberately. A slow burning fire lit her eyes.

“Good. Then as a Knight-Protector I order you to take these Seeresses to the Tower where they can be protected. I charge you with their safety from the moment they are in your care to the moment you turn them over to High Protector Heliapt. Let none harm them, write their Seeings in your book that you may turn them over...” He stopped. “You don’t have a book, do you?”

“I am not allowed the purple book of the Knights,” she replied.

“That is simply solved, you will take mine. And my cloak. And a note that my fine worded friend here,” he waved behind himself at Torlyn, “will craft for us and I will sign. You are working as my representative until you deliver them, and you will carry yourself as such. My cloak will mark you as a follower of Shalitor, my book will allow you to identify your mission to the High Protector, and my note will explain to the High Protector what I am doing, and that you are to be honored for your deeds.”

“You do me too much honor,” she replied softly.

“No, too much honor only if you were not worthy. With the power of The Great Seeress behind me, I am positive that this is just the right amount of honor. It is up to the High Protector to decide if you deserve more.”

“When do you want me to leave, Sir Maylin?” The tears were streaking down her cheeks again.

“As soon as Lady Torlyn can get the note written, we have not much time,” he said formally, then added, “and thank you Lady Odithea. I am aware of how difficult riding up to the Tower with Seeresses in tow will be for you, but this truly is necessary.”

She wiped the tears away. “As soon as they are safely delivered, I will come to you, Sir Maylin. I am in your debt, and would swear my sword to you and The Great Seeress.”

“We will be in Salena for a time, after that I do not know, but will leave word at the Palace of the East of our destination. Come only if nothing more important comes up.” He did not feel that it was necessary to point out to her that Seeresses came first.

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Torlyn quickly wrote out the note, and they said their goodbyes to the Seeresses. The Seeresses told Maylin that he had done a good thing, and that Odithea looked like *The Once Fallen Knight* from the Tale, and perhaps he had saved her from oblivion.

As they waved to the departing group, Maylin said, "Okay, let's ride." And turned for his horse.

Torlyn headed for her horse too. "You are a great man, Maylin. Most Knight Protectors would have spit upon her and ridden on, even with Seeresses in tow."

"I do not always speak for my Order, skald. Sometimes I speak for myself, and sometimes I speak for The Great Seeress," he said, pulling himself up onto his saddle.

"And that you have the wherewithal to know when to speak for each says that you are a great man," she replied.

"She is a good woman, Dirge shield her," Francis added simply.

"And Talimaara show her the shortest path," Denloa finished.

They rode the rest of the cool late autumn day in silence.

Francis was tired of riding, he was tired of the cold, he was tired of the incessant sameness of it all. It had been nearly a week since they left the Seeresses with Odithea, since then they had ridden the breadth of Custos Antiquum and into the Archduchy of Radael. By his estimate, they were only a few hours away from Salena, the capital of the archduchy. And it could not be soon enough for him. Maylin had grown surly to the point that not only did no one talk to him, no one talked around him. Francis fell back to Denloa's side.

"We'll be there yet today," he said quietly so as not to anger Maylin.

"I cannot believe this is Radael," she replied looking around. "The wars must have been very hard on them."

"The capital is better, though the area immediately surrounding it is still pretty bad. It wasn't the wars, it was the Tasnian occupation afterward. When they had to retreat back to Tasnami, they destroyed everything they could not carry with them." He made a face. "I advised Archduke Martin when he first took the throne, and there were so many things demanding his attention that it will be years before the kingdom could be considered prosperous. Nearly all of the fighting-aged men, and many of the women, were killed in the wars, many of the children were sacrificed on Tasnian altars, and many entire villages were destroyed both during the wars and during the retreat."

"It shows," Denloa said. "There doesn't even appear to be a militia here in the countryside. I've been watching for days, and farmers with farm tools seem to be the primary defensive guard."

"That is it exactly," he replied.

Torlyn dropped back by them. "And far too many of those are Cala," she said viciously.

"When the Doornian army fell apart here, there was a shortage of men," Frances said simply. "The Tasnians, and Archduke Martin after them, decided that Doornian men who had something here to fight for were better than no men at all. To that end they were granted land and allowed to marry. They are slowly becoming a part of the Archduchy, and their presence is changing the Archduchy."

"They are Cala. Martin should have driven them all out of the kingdom and invited farmers from other kingdoms to move here," Torlyn spat.

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“They were here, and unlikely to leave. He did what he had to, which thus far in Archduke Martin’s reign has been his bane. He cannot do what he wants to, and must do what he can. One day he may be a great ruler, but first he has to keep the Archduchy alive.”

They rode the rest of the day and late in the afternoon came within sight of the walls of Salena. The walls looked solid enough from a distance, and flew huge green and blue pennants above the walls.

Ignoring Maylin’s bad mood, Francis sighed loudly. “That is truly a beautiful sight! I am ready for a bath, an ale, and a feather-tic bed!”

Not unexpectedly, Maylin growled. “Don’t get too comfortable. In and out. We get what you are after and we return to Dilorn.”

“Just give us one night to sleep in real beds, Maylin, and you can command us through Tasnami into Tasnor itself,” Torlyn breathed.

They rode in silence up to the gates, stopping for the men in dun colored pantaloons and tunics of grey with the crest of Radael on the left breast. The guard outside the gates glanced at them, then whipped his head up in surprise. “Brother Francis! Welcome back to Salena!” he nearly shouted with joy.

“Vang! How fares life in the Dunn Watch?” Francis replied with a smile.

“Well enough, but I’m a touch poorer since you quit bringing the wealth of a Royal Advisor to the tables at the Broken Table.” The man smiled.

“Well, I’m back now, but I don’t have the job of a royal advisor any more,” Francis replied. “Speaking of which, what do the rumors have to say of our Archduke?”

“That he is well enough, that he’s trying to deal with the treaty that lets Tasnians run free in his kingdom whether he likes it or not, and that he misses his foremost advisor. I will of course have to report your presence to the Palace of the East,” Vang replied.

“We can do one better,” Francis replied, “Take me to the Palace. Now.”

“No,” Maylin said flatly. “If you want to visit, fine. Go lay about the palace and ignore the needs of the world after I am on my way back to Dilorn.”

“Perhaps another time, Sir,” Vang said, glancing balefully at Maylin.

“Perhaps after this current task is done,” Francis said nearly matching Vang’s look.

“Very good, Brother. May your stay in Salena be enjoyable,” Vang replied waving them through.

After they had passed through the gate, Maylin turned to Francis. “Well, you lived here, where’s a good inn to stay at that will offer us information without drawing too much attention?”

“The Salicorn Inn is as good as any, and there are people there who, umm, know things about Salena and the archduchy,” Francis replied.

“No, that one is out,” Torlyn objected. “They know me there. It was nice enough that I performed there once. I do not believe they will have forgotten that particular performance.” She smiled dreamily.

“The Soft Feathers Inn then,” Francis replied. “It’s a good inn, if they do pinch you for too much coin, at least they keep some members of the underground to hand.”

“Weren’t you the Archduke’s advisor? How could you know about this and not report it to the Archduke?” Denloa asked.

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“I was the Archduke’s foremost advisor precisely because I knew where to find information. He is of the belief that there will always be an underground, I was his tool to control them and insure they were a help, not a hindrance to the Archduchy.” Francis smiled.

“Then we stay there. Dig up your contacts and start looking for information on this trader Marganel as soon as we’re settled. We need to know if his house is the same one as the building marked on the map,” Maylin said.

Francis led them to a nicer part of town, and stopped outside a two story building with a pile of feathers around a pair of T’Ador’s boots on a sign outside. Two boys ran up to take their reins. “Welcome to the Soft Feathers, good sirs and ladies,” one of them said brightly. “Finest inn to be found in Radael. The innkeeper inside will take your money and provide you with whatever you need,” he continued as they dismounted.

“Thank you, my good boy,” Francis responded just as cheerily. “Here’s a Dilornian copper for your troubles. See that they’re brushed and well fed, they’ve been ridden hard for days.”

“Thank you sir! We will do that,” the boy replied.

“And you, little one,” Torlyn smiled at the other boy. “You should help him.” She pulled a copper piece out of her pouch and tossed it to the boy.

They stepped up to the door on the front of the inn. There were feathers engraved in the wood of the door to make it appear as if someone had plastered the door with them before varnishing the solid oak a dark black.

Maylin pushed through the door and stepped into the room. It was nothing like the Red Rooster Inn had been. Windows lined the south side of the building, letting light spill in. The wooden floor was clean, no hay spread about to soak up the spilling, and the back wall had a platform against it that appeared to be a place for performers. There were three young women wearing aprons in the room, wiping tables and wiping out mugs, and six people sitting at tables talking quietly. A door in the back of the room looked to lead off to the kitchens, and a stair along the right-hand wall led up to what he assumed to be rooms.

A thin man with a large mustache stepped toward them. “You seek a room?” he asked in slightly accented speech.

Maylin heard Torlyn suck in her breath, and hoped that she was smart enough to keep her prejudice to herself. As far as he was concerned there was little difference between her accent and the innkeeper’s, so he did not understand the animosity she felt toward the Doornians.

“Two rooms, meals, and care for our horses. Two days, then we’ll decide if it was good enough to stay longer,” Maylin replied.

“It is good enough, good sir, good enough. I will take you to your rooms now, if it is that you are wanting to go now?”

“Now is good. And we’ll want to eat soon too,” Maylin responded.

“And tell Flat Foot that someone is here that wishes to speak with him,” Francis added.

The innkeeper looked at him for a long moment. “It is that I will inform him. This way to your rooms.” And he headed up the steps.

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Less than an hour later they were back down in the common room, roast pheasant and potato stew sitting about the table, ale and Amorician Red Wine in glasses near to hand.

“So, who is Flat Foot?” Torlyn asked Francis when the food was mostly consumed.

“An old friend that plays on both sides of the fence. He insures that the Archduke’s limits are known amongst certain people so that they can work without forcing the Archduke to apprehend them, and he insures that a certain percentage of that work makes its way to the Archduke’s coffers. If there is anyone who can help us, he has the contacts. This isn’t his usual place to stay though, so it may take a day or so for word to reach him,” Francis replied.

“So you actually choose to associate with known criminals, and to advise the Archduke on them? There are more problems with the Archduchy than I thought,” Maylin said flatly.

Francis made a face. “You weren’t here just after the Tasnian retreat, Maylin. Every day it was a challenge for Martin to stay alive. Those who least respect the law had the largest number of people capable of fighting. When Flat Foot and I first set this system up, the robber barons of Salena could very well have taken over the kingdom without too much resistance. The Grand Army of Radael consisted of four squads of old men or Doornians that could not be trusted to do much more than run away from a fight. We had to do a lot just to keep Martin on the throne, there wasn’t much time for caring about the niceties. Now it benefits the kingdom to keep the arrangement. The Archduchess doesn’t know it, but most of her work with the orphans left by the wars is funded by this arrangement, as are many other things that taxes are not enough to cover.”

“So it’s okay to associate with criminals if it suits your needs. I’m more than disappointed in you Francis, I’m disgusted,” Maylin said flatly.

“And if the same arrangement was made to get Seeresses out of the hands of trouble in Salena, Maylin? Would you be so touchy then?” Torlyn said.

“That is not condoned by the government,” Maylin shot back.

“No, but Francis did not say Archduke Martin knew where the money came from, only that it came into the coffers,” Torlyn said.

“Archduke Martin knew, but that is irrelevant,” Francis said. “The point is that he had no choice but to pursue this route. So he took it. Much as you would to protect Seeresses.”

Maylin snorted, but looked thoughtful as they lapsed into silence.

The innkeeper stepped over to the table with a handful of mugs. They were the only ones being served by the innkeeper himself, all the other tables were being waited on by the young women in aprons.

As he set the mugs on the table, the innkeeper leaned over close to Francis. “Flat Foot will be here shortly, he wants you to meet him in one of my private rooms.” He straightened. “That will be two silver, sir,” he said louder.

Francis pulled coins out of his pouch and said loudly, “Here are three silver, good innkeep. Do you have a private room for my friends and I?”

“That I do, good sir. Right this way.” He turned toward the hall at the back of the room.

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In the hallway there were two men leaning on the walls, pretending to be relaxing there waiting for something, but both had more than one weapon on their person, and were clearly not just relaxing. One nodded to Francis.

The innkeeper opened a door in the hallway midway between the two men, showing a dark room with a table and chairs visible in the gloom. He went into the room and lit the large candles about the walls. "I will bring your drinks, and Flat Foot will be here soon."

Francis pulled out a chair and looked about the room. "Nice room, must cost a lot more than a silver for regular customers," he observed blandly.

The others took chairs around the table. "What can we hope to learn from your friend, Francis?"

Francis smiled broadly, "Everything from what color smallclothes the Archduke is wearing this day to where this merchant lives and how many guards he keeps at his warehouses."

The innkeeper entered the room carrying mugs. "Flat Foot has arrived," he said. His men will be here in a moment, he will be right behind them. Do not reach for your weapons, and try not to irritate him too much in my inn, please?"

Maylin flipped a gold Trios at the man. "Thank you," he said simply.

The innkeeper caught the coin, nodded, and left the room.

Two men in mail of chain with swords on their hips entered a moment later. Both looked battle-hardened, and Torlyn got to wondering about Francis' tales of no soldier-aged citizens as the place seemed to be teeming with them.

"Flat Foot sends his regards. What do you want to see him for?" one of them asked flatly.

"I'm an old friend that is in need of information, and I have the ability to pay," Francis replied.

"You can get information at the market, and Flat Foot has no friends," the man replied.

"I am possibly the only friend he has in the world, and he'll be glad to see me," Francis snapped back. "Now be a good man and let him know that his brother is here."

The man looked at him long and hard. "You don't look like him," he said.

Francis' face went red. "Idiot, do you go by your real name? His brother is the only name he needs to hear. Tell him."

The man nodded once and turned to step out of the room.

The other man stood impassively, watching them.

"Your friend seems a little paranoid, Francis," Torlyn said.

"More than a little. He had all the mice killed in his home for fear that the Tasnians had learned how to listen to conversations through them," he said smiling. "But he's a good man."

Maylin snorted again, and took a drink.

The door opened again, and a heavy-set man dressed in fine velvet and silks the colors of Radael. With him was the original guard and two more. They all wore the symbol of Radael on their cloaks.

Francis smiled at him and turned to his friends as soon as the door closed.

"Friends, please meet the High Lord Mayor of Salena, Zephrahem Palade."

Maylin looked coldly at the man. "He can help us?" he said incredulously.

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Zephrahem turned on Maylin. “If you ask nicely, and have money, and I can actually find the information, then yes. If you are rude, or I don’t trust you, or you ask too much, then no.”

Francis stood. “Zephrahem, it is so good to see you again. Life in Radael appears to be treating you well, even if you aren’t the King.” He smiled.

“As well as can be expected. I collect the Archduke’s taxes, I skim a little, but not so much that he can afford to replace me, and I make certain that things stay peaceful in my city. Through various means.” He smiled back.

“The information is simple, if I were still the Archduke’s advisor, I wouldn’t even have to bother you, but we’re in a bit of a hurry, and don’t want this to be an official visit,” Francis said.

The mayor pulled out a chair and sat down. “Very well, tell me what you need to know. If it is really so simple, then I will not charge you.”

“I want to know all that you can tell me about the trader Marganel, and all that you know about any followers of Filous that may be in the area,” Francis replied.

Zephrahem raised an eyebrow. “Followers of Filous would not last long if I knew of them. That passes beyond what the Archduke would tolerate, and it passes way beyond what I would tolerate. I must allow Tasnians to walk the streets of my city, I do not have to allow Fileans, and I will not. You know better than to ask that,” he replied.

“The two are not unrelated my friend or I would not have asked,” Francis said.

“The trader...actually, the Archduke has named him Master Trader, lives on an estate in the northeast corner of town. He is responsible for more than half the taxable income in the city proper, and his trade network spans the north. He is a model of what we would like more traders to act like,” Zephrahem told them.

“It is possible that this trader is in league with Fileans, and that he has helped to kidnap Seeresses. If so, we will be forced to deal with him,” Francis responded.

“That will not go over well at the palace. The Exchequer is very happy with the trading that Marganel does,” Zephrahem replied soberly.

Maylin slapped his palm down on the table. “This is not about money, and if he is supporting the followers of Filous, he is funding them too. If he is implicated, I cannot guarantee that he will even live. And you can worry about what to do after we’re done.”

Zephrahem turned to him. “I understand your feelings, I am merely planning on what the ramifications will be, and how to dampen them. Of course he must die if he is dealing with the Snake Priestesses.”

Maylin nodded once. “I do not like you or the compromises you and Francis both make in the name of order, but on that point we are agreed.”

“Is there anything else? As you may have guessed, I am a rather busy man,” Zephrahem responded.

Torlyn sat forward. “Floor plans, guards, and trade records that you may have access to.”

“And warning to the Dunn Watch that we are operating in the city and are not to be interfered with,” Denloa added.

“I do not have trade records, but the rest I will get for you. Give me a day, by this time tomorrow I will have all that you have requested,” Zephrahem replied.

Francis stood. “Good enough then, we thank you for your help.”

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Zephrahem stood too. “It was good to see you again Francis. When will you be back to advise the Archduke?”

“I’m afraid I won’t be, my old friend. That position worked for a while, but Dirge has called me to do other things with my time. We of the Fist of Dirge do not sit around counting coins and offering advice well. We need to be doing something,” Francis replied.

“That is a loss to the entire Archduchy, but we must each do what we are called to do,” Zephrahem waved to his guards and they all headed for the door.

“Mayor?” Maylin called. When the man looked back he said, “These patsies would not have protected you if The Great Seeress had decreed you a follower of Filous.”

“Good thing that you didn’t think I was then, isn’t it,” Zephrahem replied as he turned and stepped out the door.

“Do you threaten everyone, or only the people trying to help you?” Denloa asked.

“Everyone, he thinks the only answer to every problem is at the end of a sword,” Torlyn responded. “I’m going to bed,” she announced as she stood and left the room.

The others headed off to bed also, Francis staying to blow out the candles before stepping out into the empty hallway and heading to the stairs.

Chapter 9

Torlyn and Maylin made their way back to the inn toward the end of the next day. They did not have much information, but they were hopeful that Zephrahem had brought them some or that Denloa and Francis had discovered more during the day. They had set out to find information, with Maylin and Torlyn scouting the back side of the house and traveling Market Street, while Denloa and Francis watched the front of the building and checked on traffic in and out of the building.

Torlyn had started out the day trying to engage in small talk, but Maylin quickly ended that with grunts and sighs instead of engaging in conversation. So Torlyn had focused on the task at hand, nearly as much as it appeared Maylin was. The compound of Master Trader Marganel was vast and walled all the way out to the street. They had found no rear entrance, and had not discovered anything resembling sewer entrances in the area. Thinking that this would not be easy if the trader was indeed implicated, they had set off to the market to see if they could determine what local trading Marganel was involved in, and whether there was any talk of this vast trade network Zephrahem had mentioned.

At the market, the urchins had approached them, asking if they needed directions, asking if they needed carry boys, their eyes begging them to need *something*. For the first time in many days Maylin smiled. He handed out copper Talis to the children, admonishing each one that he was a knight, and he would come hunt down anyone who dared to take a coin from a weaker child. He gave out so many coins that he had to ask Torlyn for hers, and still there were not enough. Finally, a brother and sister stepped up, both wearing rags. Maylin had asked her for more copper, and Torlyn had said she was out of copper. He had dug in his pouch, and solemnly placed a silver Contra in each of their hands. The children had run off, smiling and laughing.

They had wandered market street and collected as much information as they could, which was not much. Basically, Marganel owned the trade in this city. He did not stop others from trading, but he was involved in nearly everything. Only the smiths conducted business without his competition as far as they could tell. Finally they had turned away, and headed back to the Soft Feathers to see if anyone else's day had been more productive.

As they walked up the road toward the inn, Torlyn decided that now was the time to ask the question that had been bothering her. "Maylin... I am not complaining, I would have done as much, but a Knight who is so serious about his duties, one who is short with most people, and seems to care for naught but The Great Seeress and those she has touched... Twice now I have seen you perform acts of unwarranted kindness. Once with Odithea, who surely did not deserve the honor you gave her, and again today with the children. A silver each can feed those children for a month in a city this size. Why did you choose to do it, when I have seen you walk past the crippled?"

"Those are two different things, skald. I shall give you two different answers. Odithea took my vows and declared me a Knight. She gave up everything she loved to save her Order, and because of that sacrifice I was able to live through the Doornian Wars. When the armies came to the borders of Custos Antiquum, my Order was there along with the army and the Defenders of Antiquum. We stopped Dilornians, Tasnians, and Doornians at the border, protecting The Tower of the Seeresses from ruin. Because she was brave enough to do what she did. When Shalitor guided me toward her, I knew why. True or not, her admissions and Knight Redwolf's death caused us to be united, and

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in that unity we saved the kingdom and the Seeresses. She earned the right to escort Seeresses to Id'Elan. Were I High Protector, I would reinstate her as a Knight," he told her at length.

"And the children?" she prompted.

"You probably do not know this, but my mother was a follower of Maidel. A midwife with a mean temper, she served the goddess of women and children her entire life. I learned something from her, something I really couldn't learn from my Order. I learned that no matter what you are doing, no matter how important your task, it means nothing if the next generation falls to ruin. I ate with children like that many times in my childhood. My mother would remind me that we had plenty by comparison, and would bring one home every few days for a meal and a bath. They did not ask for this, they did not put themselves in poor situations. And they will live in the next generation. A kind act from a Knight might just keep them from becoming criminals, or might provide them with a beacon to guide them back when they realize they have become a criminal. If but one of them stays on this side of the shadows, then it was worth the cost, for surely Tasni Deathwalker and Filous the Serpent recruit from amongst them." He lapsed into silence.

"I too have a weakness for the children, though mine is not as far sighted as yours. I find them enjoyable and adorable, and can not stand thinking of one of them going hungry at night," she replied.

"That too," he replied, smiling as he stepped up on the porch of the inn and opened the door for her.

Torlyn entered the inn, and the innkeeper motioned her back to the private dining room. Maylin followed her across the common room, noting the number of people, how they were armed, and possible routes of escape with a glance.

Torlyn entered the private room first, and smiled at Francis and Denloa. "And how was your day?"

Denloa was seated sipping a glass of Amorician Red, Francis was pacing the room. "He's been about to explode all day," Denloa said blandly.

"Where have you been?" Francis exploded as soon as Maylin shut the door.

"Checking out his trade agreements, where were we supposed to be?" Maylin replied.

"He thinks that you should have known we found something, and returned before lunch," Denloa said. "Though lunch *was* good, you would have liked it."

"We could have been in there and back out by now! What do you think this is, a vacation?" Francis snarled.

"Control yourself, Francis. We're in this together, remember? We came back at the appointed time, and while we found out little other than that he owns this town, it was not a totally unproductive day," Maylin said with a twitch of his lips.

"You're the one that wants to be done with this, Knight. He's as dirty as a pig farmer, and we've lost a day taking care of him," Francis said.

"Enough, Francis. It's done now, tell us what you know so that we can work out a plan," Torlyn said.

"He's already completed several plans and decided against each of them," Denloa inserted.

"You're not helping any," Torlyn told her.

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“You haven’t been stuck with him like this for five hours,” Denloa responded, rolling her large green eyes.

“Silence, all of you,” Maylin said. “Let’s have it, Francis.”

“Very well, Marganel is dealing with the snakes, or so it appears. There are caravans that come and go regularly, the occupants hooded much like those we ran into at the Red Rooster. The goods he buys and sells are mostly mundane things, but he also has an ‘art collection’ that includes tapestries from fallen temples to Filous, curious golden statues of snakes, and some black and gold cloth... many bolts of black and gold cloth.” He stopped by a chair and took a drink from the mug there.

“Marganel himself has not been heard from in many months. Instead two proctors do his business for him, both within the city and without. There are even some whispers that he is held captive by snakes and his entire trading empire is built by them and for them,” Francis finished.

“Why would a rumor like that exist?” Torlyn asked.

“Two years ago he had no trade empire. He had very little of anything, even property. He was wiped out by the Doornian Wars, and with no help from the Archduke, he was scraping along by selling the family heirlooms. Then he made a wise investment in Amorician Red, followed by some more wise investments. Each of his caravans got through, while others on the same trails did not. In the end, he returned his wealth to the levels he had inherited from his father, and finally surpassed those levels. Throughout, he has been accepting certain caravans at his private compound, and guards that have left his service say that they always have heavy-robed and deeply cowed people in them. Amazingly, the Dunn watch rarely, if ever searches his caravans on the way into town, and sometimes they wave them through without signing in.”

They were silent for a moment, all taking in the implications of attacking the guarded mansion of a man with enough money to control the loyalty of portions of the Dunn Watch.

“What of your friend, Francis?” Maylin asked. “Did he deliver what we asked for?”

Francis bent over behind the table and dug in a bag. “Yes, he got us all that we asked for, and more. He marked the blueprints with the location and size of the guards, he noted guard rotation times, and he marked the most likely places in the house that Seeresses could be kept.” Francis laid several rolled up parchments on the table. “And he asked us to be very careful that we were positive before we go assaulting one of his foremost citizens. I asked him to look me in the face and tell me there were any doubts, and he did. He wasn’t there to see the caravan at the Red Rooster, so he doesn’t think cowls prove a thing.”

“Sounds as if your Archduke should either remove his Lord Mayor from his post for stupidity or kill him for a traitor,” Torlyn observed as she unrolled the parchments.

“You judge him too harshly, Torlyn, he hasn’t seen what we have. I told him to let me know of any other place that robed and cowed people were entering,” Francis said.

Maylin looked at the topmost parchment. “What is this?” he asked.

“The tax records for our friend Marganel, not much here of interest, except that he pays more for ‘antiquities and art objects’ as time goes on,” Francis said as he pulled the top parchment off to show the map on the second parchment.

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“This is more like it,” Maylin said.

“Yes, the places marked in red are guards, one dot for each that is normally there,” Francis replied.

“Some mayor, he counts private guards?” Torlyn observed.

“He is quite the different mayor. I would argue he is just what this city needs right now,” Francis replied.

“I doubt that he is what any city needs,” Denloa said. “He’s letting snakes in and out against the express order of the Archduke and against his own decrees. The Great Seeress knows what else he allows.”

“Six on the front gate, and two more at the door to the manse? That’s a lot of guards to fight through before the alarm sounds. You don’t defend a trader’s house like that,” Maylin said.

“No you don’t, and you don’t keep guards garrisoned in the house, but a guard who’s out of work tells me that this trader keeps twelve in total sleeping on the premises. And a trader who used to be a friend of the family told us that things have changed at the Marganel house, that there are whole sections of the house that are off limits now. In all, it’s pretty compelling, by Dirge’s Dented Shield,” Francis replied.

“Since we’re agreed that there is enough evidence, the question becomes how do we get in?” Denloa said.

“Twelve guards, eight awake at any time,” Torlyn began, drumming her fingers on the table. “Six on the gate,” she began. “Those are the ones we have to worry about first. We need to either bypass them or silence them so they aren’t able to raise the alarm.”

Francis nodded then pointed down at the map, tracing a path from the wall to the house with his finger. “That’s quite the distance between the wall and the house,” he said shaking his head. “And armor boy over here isn’t going to be sneaking anywhere,” he added, jerking his thumb at Maylin.

Maylin looked perturbed by the statement, but said nothing.

“I could probably get two, maybe three of them, to abandon their post at the gate,” Torlyn said confidently. “But the rest...” she trailed off, shrugging her shoulders.

“I could take out two with arrows, but three would be a problem. I’m fast, but before that third arrow landed someone would scream,” Denloa offered.

Francis chewed on his lower lip for a moment. “That would still leave one or two at the front gate, with the possibility that the two at the door of the manse *might* see something and raise the alarm, meaning we’d have another fist or more to deal with before we even get to the house,” he complained.

Maylin leaned back in his chair, folding his arms behind his head and staring across the room at nothing while he considered the situation. Finally he shook his head. “If we do this during the day we have the cover of people on the street.” He pulled his hands from behind his head, gesturing at Torlyn before he set them on the table, his hands clasped together. “If we do it at night we have the cover of darkness, but less noise to hide what we do.”

His eyes narrowed as he considered Torlyn and Denloa. “Can you two handle the six guards? Denloa with her bow and Torlyn with her...” he trailed off, raising an eyebrow at the skald. “Whatever she has to distract them?”

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The two women nodded almost immediately. “Yes, but if we have to fight them it will be noticeable,” Denloa warned.

Maylin waved a hand dismissively. “That’s okay, if we do this right the guards by the house will be taken care of at the same time and none will be the wiser inside,” he said, glancing over at Francis.

Francis pursed his lips as he considered Maylin’s words, then began to nod slowly, a smile creeping across his face. “That might just work, Maylin,” he said, still nodding. “Yes, that might be the best way to handle the guards *outside*.”

“What about the guards *inside*?” Torlyn reminded them.

Maylin reached out and turned the map of the house to face him, moving his finger around until it finally stopped on the only build on the estates with doors large enough to house wagons. “We’ll go in this way,” he tapped his finger on the spot on the map for emphasis. “The guards will be expecting us to come in through the front door since we’ve taken the trouble to deal with them first. We’ll skirt the front door and come in where the wagons are unloaded,” he said, a tight smile on his face. “Where they bring the Seeresses into the house.”

Francis nodded appreciatively at the plan. “Good idea, we’re likely to be closer to where the Seeresses are, if there are any, if we go in the same way they go in.”

“We’ll need to do this at the end of the day tomorrow, that means another day of sitting,” Torlyn warned, watching Maylin’s face closely for his reaction.

“No, that means a day of preparation,” Maylin returned with a grimace. “We’re going to need it if we’re going to pull this off.”

Torlyn smiled. “An evening of preparation, you mean,” she said, standing and posing prettily. “I need to make certain the guards are interested tomorrow, which means a little work this evening.”

Francis raised an eyebrow at her. “You aren’t going to – “ he choked on the rest of words, his face going red.

Torlyn threw back her head and laughed at the priest. “Of course not, but they have to think I might,” she said, turning on her heel and heading to her room.

Maylin half-grinned at her retreating back. “I don’t know how Sir Lankarien can stand being married to her,” he said. “I’d never sleep knowing the kind of woman she is.”

“She’s as loyal as any other Dirgian, Maylin,” Francis said seriously. “That’s how the First Guardian sleeps knowing the kind of woman he’s married to.”

“The Kin are all like that from what I’ve heard. Very, ah,” Denloa paused, searching for the right word. “Expressive, but I wouldn’t touch one uninvited if I were you.”

Maylin nodded as he threw a glance toward the door where Torlyn had disappeared. “I’ve seen her angry, I can imagine how one would react,” he said, shuddering at the thought. “I like my eyes in their sockets, thank you.”

Torlyn floated back into the room in a more revealing dress than even Francis cared to see. He wasn’t a prude, but he didn’t easily deal with women and the Kin’s habit of expressing themselves was more than most well-mannered gentlemen were used to seeing.

Torlyn walked over to her friends, ignoring the catcalls and whistles that echoed from the common room behind her. She laid a hand on Denloa’s shoulder. “You should

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come with me and find the best spot for you and your bow,” she said, patting Denloa’s shoulder. “And it won’t hurt to have you along just in case the guards overreact.”

Francis nodded. “Good idea, especially dressed like that,” he grumbled, trying to keep his eyes off his friend.

“You wanted me to distract them, Francis, I will distract them,” Torlyn shot back.

Denloa stood and checked the pouches at her waist, feeling for the sword at her hip. She’d left her bow in her room and didn’t think she’d need it tonight, nor did she want to use it tonight in the dark. While she could see better than her Tar friends in the dark she didn’t think it would be wise to start a fight tonight without the benefit of Maylin and Francis at their backs.

Maylin looked Torlyn over, his eyes narrowing. “Weapons?”

Torlyn lifted a leg and set it on the chair, then pulled back the flimsy pieces of her dress until Maylin could see the daggers hidden along her inner thigh.

“Satisfied?” Torlyn asked, setting her leg back on the floor and smoothing her dress primly.

Maylin nodded. “I’d be more satisfied if you could hide your sword under that dress, but the daggers will have to do.”

“Come on, Denloa,” Torlyn said, turning to leave. “We have some work to do.”

Maylin and Francis watched the two women leave and then left the private room when the innkeep shooed them out. They headed for the common room and took up an open table, keeping several free tables around them. Then they hunched over the table, both staring at the map.

“We’re going to have to go over the walls, you know,” Francis finally said. “Here,” he pointed to one spot on the map and then another, “and here.”

Maylin peered at the map and nodded. “I realize that, Francis,” he said petulantly.

Francis took his hands away from the map and raised them slightly in front of him. “Just reminding you. It’s not going to be easy to do that in your armor.”

Maylin grunted. “Easier than you think,” he said firmly. “Just because you don’t need a rope doesn’t mean other people can’t use one to get over obstacles.”

Francis gave his friend an arched look. “A rope? How quaint!”

Maylin glared at Francis until the priest felt uncomfortable under that icy gaze. He looked across the room, trying to avoid Maylin’s eyes. His eyes narrowed as he caught the sight of someone paying far too much attention to the two of them than was warranted. He cleared his throat. “Uh, Maylin,” he said under his breath. “Someone thinks we’re pretty interesting.”

Maylin forced his eyes to fall to the map, lifting a finger and pointing at it randomly. “Where and who?” he asked quietly.

Francis sat back and made a show of shaking of his head, then leaned forward over the map. He set two fingers on it, “Us,” he said, pausing for a moment. “Him,” he finished, moving his finger across the map in the direction of the young man he’d seen eyeing them.

“Only one,” Maylin muttered.

“Only one that I can tell, but he looks battle-ready, my friend,” Francis said with the air of someone who routinely evaluated men merely by their looks.

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Maylin grunted, his hand clenching into a fist. "I don't want to leave without Torlyn and Denloa," he said in a low voice. "But I don't know that I want to discuss this anymore until we're sure we know who he is."

Francis nodded, gathering the maps together and rolling them neatly before stowing them in the pack he'd carried them in. He sat back and glanced in the direction of the young man, unease welling in his gut as he saw that the man was still watching them.

An hour later Torlyn and Denloa came through the door of the inn and Francis' stomach lurched as the man who'd been watching him and Maylin stood and moved around the table he'd been sitting at and toward the two women.

"Maylin!" Francis hissed.

"I see him," Maylin replied curtly, his hand dropping to the mace at his belt.

Francis half stood when he saw the man grab Torlyn's elbow and lean over, putting his face near her ear. He saw Denloa relax when Torlyn turned to her and spoke rapidly, pointing toward Maylin and Francis.

Maylin reached out and pulled Francis by his arm back to a sitting position. "Sit!" he admonished his friend. "Wait," he ordered as Denloa walked quickly to their table.

"Who is he?" Francis demanded before Denloa had even seated herself.

Denloa shook her head. "I don't know, but Torlyn doesn't seem to be worried, she sent me over here. Just wait, we'll see what happens shortly, I'm sure."

They watched for nearly half a glass while the two talked animatedly in the corner. Finally they both stood and the young man leaned over and kissed Torlyn on the cheek before he strode out, throwing a final angry glance at Maylin and Francis.

Torlyn returned to the table smiling and seated herself as though nothing had happened.

Francis waited, then finally blew out an exasperated breath. "Well?" he demanded.

Torlyn smiled at Francis, her face showing her disappointment in the man. "You did not even recognize my son, Francis?" she clucked as she shook her head. "I am disappointed in you."

Maylin breathed a sigh of relief, glaring at Francis. "You got me all worried about Torlyn's son? You trained the boy, by Shalitor you didn't even recognize him?" he grumbled, shaking his head. "What's next, Francis? Will you worry us all over a cook, perhaps? Afraid she might hit you over the head with her spoon?"

Denloa smiled as Francis grimaced. "He's grown up since I last saw him," he explained. "And it's dark in that corner," he tried again. He continued making excuses until the disbelieving looks on his friends' faces made him give up. "I give up. No, I didn't recognize him. There. Are you happy?" he growled.

Torlyn nodded. "Yes, as a matter of fact, I am," she said brightly. "Raphaelon will be pleased to hear that you ignored him because your eyesight is failing in your old age and not because you slighted him on purpose."

Francis rolled his eyes. "Fine, be that way. The boy's too young to be hanging out in taverns anyway, I hope you scolded him for that!"

"You're getting paranoid, Francis," Torlyn scoffed. "Next you'll be seeing snake priestesses in every wench in the inn."

Francis' eyes widened slightly. "In Salena? You're right I'm paranoid. This place is as bad as Il'Negra used to be."

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Maylin leaned forward. "What did you find?" he asked, changing the subject before Francis became even angrier and more creative with his excuses.

"There is an alley across the road from the gate to the house. Not directly across, about thirty feet north," Denloa said. "It will be a longer shot, but it will keep me mostly out of sight as long as Torlyn can keep them occupied."

Torlyn rolled her eyes, looking injured at the elf's statement. "If?" she asked indignantly. "They couldn't take their eyes off me tonight, and that was in the dark!"

Denloa nodded and smiled patiently. "She's right, they were nearly ready to abandon their posts as it was. If she can do that again and draw them out, I can take two of them and maybe a third."

Torlyn snorted. "If, indeed," she muttered.

Francis looked at Torlyn appraisingly. "You can't go in there unarmed, Torlyn. The daggers are good, but not good enough."

Torlyn nodded her head. "I know, I've been considering that."

"And?" Maylin prompted.

Torlyn sighed. "Though I hate to do it, I *can* make my sword and pouches unseen."

"Why do you hate to do it? That solves the problem," Francis asked, confused.

"Because if I do that I won't be able to stop anyone, or put them to sleep, or ... " she trailed off.

Maylin stared up at the ceiling at her words, as if he were calculating the odds. Finally he shrugged. "Better you have your weapons than you be able to use magik on the guards inside. It doesn't always work, you know," he reminded her.

Torlyn's face fell. "I know," she whispered forlornly, recalling a not so recent time when it hadn't worked and how they'd nearly lost Francis and Denloa because of her failure.

Denloa reached out and laid a hand on Torlyn's arm. "It wasn't your fault, Torlyn," she said diplomatically. "We shouldn't have counted on it, you've told us it doesn't always work."

"Besides, we all got out alive," Francis added brightly.

Torlyn looked gratefully at Denloa and Francis. "Thank you. I'd rather have it, just in case, but Maylin is right this time. I need my sword more than I need the magik so I'll do what I must."

Maylin nodded. "Good," he said. "Now, once you dispatch the guards you'll need to get into the house. You're going to have to cross the yard, in the open," he warned.

The women nodded. "Let's hope the other guards are sleeping, and that there aren't any archers inside."

"Exactly. Once we get inside we need to find ..." he trailed off, confusion on his face. "What *are* we looking for, anyway?" he demanded, sitting back and folding his arms across his chest.

"Seeresses," Torlyn began.

"Obviously," Maylin said harshly.

Torlyn ignored him and continued. "Information, primarily. Information on where they may have taken the Kingseer. Information as to where this little operation is controlled from. Obviously this is well coordinated. We've found caravans and farmhouses across Radael and Custos-Antiquum, all hiding Seeresses and guarded by

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Fileans and Tasnians and Am'Ethonians. This isn't some random thing occurring, this is staged and staged well. There must be some kind of central location from which someone is running this show and we need to find out where it is. Perhaps more importantly, we need to verify the reason... We know they are trying to control access to the Tale, this might be our chance to find out why."

Maylin growled. "They're holding her North of Ralistan, and they want to bring about Tasni-Gorak, the end of the world, by controlling the Tale."

Francis threw up his hands. "Probably! But we need to know what kind of force we're dealing with, Maylin, before we go charging into Ralistan and get ourselves killed."

Maylin's eyes were hooded and his face hardened at Francis' outburst.

"Maylin, he's right and you know it. We wouldn't have expected a trader's manse to be so well guarded, can you imagine what kind of force awaits us where they're holding the Kingseer?" Denloa said gently.

Maylin's shoulders visibly relaxed at her words. "I know you're right, I know you're all right about this, but it doesn't make it any easier knowing where she is when I can't do anything about it," he said dejectedly.

"Remember something, Maylin," Torlyn began slowly. "This isn't just about the Kingseer, this is about the Sight of the Kingseer and who has control over the Tale. If we fail, the Tale will likely be lost to the world and without it, we are at a serious disadvantage. We can't take chances with her or what she Sees."

"Someone else could –" Maylin began.

"No!" Torlyn hissed, pointing at Maylin. "You are the Kingseer's knight. For whatever reason, by whatever power, you have been chosen for this task. If you do not live to save her then no one else will take your place."

Maylin shrunk back at the force of the skald's words. She'd always been calm when she spoke to him of such things in the past but now her words were as heated as if they'd come from Francis' mouth.

"Some Figures in the Tale cannot be replaced," she said more docilely, catching his gaze and holding it. "Like the Kingseer and her Knight."

"You can't know that," Maylin said in a strangled voice.

"No, I can't," Torlyn admitted. "But I'd rather not take that chance when the future may depend on us to succeed."

Maylin looked around the table at his friends and nodded. "Alright. No more complaints. We find the information we need to insure we succeed."

Francis slapped his friend on the shoulder encouragingly. "That's the spirit, old man," he said brightly. "Besides, a good fight will help you clear your mind. It always does the trick for me!"

"But if we don't find what we need, we head back to Ralistan anyway," Maylin added, his expression inviting no disagreement on the subject.

The others exchanged fleeting glances, but all nodded slowly.

"Good," Maylin said. "Then let's finish planning this thing and get some sleep. We've got a big day ahead of us tomorrow."

They finished making their plans but sat and talked about lighter things for a glass more before heading for their beds. Francis took note of several other people in the inn who stayed far longer than he thought they should, but after misidentifying Torlyn's son

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earlier in the evening he said nothing. As he headed up the stairs he tried to ignore the feeling that they were being watched, telling himself he was simply as paranoid as Torlyn believed.

It was nearly dusk the next day when the small group approached the street on which Trader Marganel's manse resided. They all exchanged a few last minute words before Maylin continued down the street seeking his place along the west wall that surrounded the house. The group counted to three before sending Francis on his way. The priest whistled merrily as he walked past the gatehouse, not looking at all in the direction of the house. As he turned north to find his place along the east wall Denloa laid a hand on Torlyn's shoulder. "Talimaara guide you," she said earnestly.

Torlyn smiled as she raised her hand, her slender fingers forming into a shape that approximated a bow. "Talimaara guide you and your bow," she replied before laying a hand gently on the other woman's shoulder. "Go!" she hissed, keeping her eyes trained on the guards at the gatehouse.

Denloa turned onto the street, walking close to the buildings and tried to melt into the shadows. Torlyn watched, holding her breath, glancing occasionally in the direction Denloa had headed. She counted to herself until she was sure that Denloa had had enough time to duck into the alley and string her bow. Seeing no change in the stance of the guards, she took a deep breath and looked to the sky. "Dirge send me courage and Nindel grant me luck," she murmured as she stepped out into the street and began to walk down toward the front gate of the mansion slowly.

She kept her eyes forward and only occasionally glanced out of the corner of her eye at the guardpost. First one guard, then another turned their faces her way. She saw one poke another and point in her direction and smiled. Things were working just the way they planned. She looked over and threw a teasing look at the men. One of them crooked a finger in her direction and she feigned surprise and looked away briefly. She heard the raucous laughter coming from the gatehouse and glanced back in their direction in time to see one of the guards push another toward her. The man stumbled a bit and threw an angry look over his shoulder at his compatriots before he righted himself and began to swagger toward Torlyn.

Torlyn took a deep breath and began to sashay in the man's direction. She hoped she'd given Francis and Maylin enough time to climb the walls, but she couldn't be certain at this point. She had the attention of four of the six guards that should be at the gate, hopefully she could draw the other two before it was too late.

She stopped ten long paces in front of the gatehouse, waiting with an enticing expression on her face for the guard to join her. She shifted her weight onto her left hip and rested her hand there, near the hilt of her sword. She glanced down, making certain the weapon was still hidden to normal sight, then returned her attention to the man who stopped in front of her.

"Hello there," she greeted him with dazzling smile. "Aren't you a strapping example of a man?" she teased, laying a finger on his shoulder and letting it trail down his arm.

She saw the man's neck redden and grinned inwardly. She had this one, she just needed to convince the others to abandon their posts as well. She peered around the man and winked at another guard. "Why don't you ask your friends to join us?" she entreated, smiling up at him winningly.

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The man nodded dumbly, his face clearly showing his disbelief at his luck. He turned and gestured at the other guards, two of whom chose to join him.

Torlyn swallowed nervously as she saw that only half the guards were leaving. One remained behind, watching them, but she still saw no sight of the other two that should be there according to Zephrahem's information. She briefly considered that Zephrahem might have lied, or been misled, but quickly shook off the fear knowing it was far too late to worry about such things. They had already committed themselves to this plan, they would have to see it through now.

Torlyn gifted the men with looks of admiration, commenting on everything from their builds to the way they held themselves. She smiled and blushed at their rejoinders, and tried not to flinch when one of them laid a hand on her arm. She kept a smile pasted on her face as she waited anxiously to hear Maylin or Francis call out the signal to move.

The man who had his hand on her upper arm let it slide down off her elbow. He sidled closer to her and began to reach out as if he were going to put his arm around her waist when he suddenly stopped, the expression on his face hardening.

"Here now," he said roughly. "What's this?" he asked as he reached out and tried to grab at her waist again, fumbling as he realized there was something blocking his way. His eyes widened as his hands closed about the hilt of a sword. Torlyn saw the change in his expression as his eyes narrowed and he tried to take a step back, his hand still gripping her sword.

Torlyn kept her eyes glued on the man even as she swore under her breath. She balled her hand into a fist and swung up at the man's chin, praying she hit the first time. She felt the impact and the resistance running up her arm, heard the resounding crack of the man's jaw breaking as she slammed her fist into his chin. The sound of an arrow whizzing by her head and embedding itself into the chest of one of the three men who surrounded her told her Denloa had seen her strike.

Torlyn realized at that moment that they were in trouble, but knew there was no turning back.

The man Torlyn hit stumbled back from the blow, but managed to maintain his grip on her sword. He jerked on the hilt, forcing Torlyn to stagger forward as he clumsily unsheathed her weapon. As it cleared the sheath, the weapon became visible. She put her hands up trying to right herself, but she slammed into the third guard's chest before she could regain control, and he grabbed her outstretched arms. She saw the fourth guard turn and yell something back into the gatehouse before he rushed toward her, but he jerked suddenly as an arrow slammed into his shoulder.

She tried to push herself off the guard in front of her but the man easily held each of her wrists in his hands, his larger hands gripping her tightly. She tried to kick out at the man's knees but at less than five feet tall she didn't have the reach of the much taller man. She finally leaned forward and bit one of his hands, causing him to jerk it away and release one hand. As soon as the hand was free, she reached down and pulled one of the hidden daggers from under her skirt. Torlyn struck out wildly with the dagger at the man's belly, trying to shove it into his intestines.

The man she'd hit in the face recovered enough from the blow to reach in and grab her arm before her dagger struck home, twisting the blade and pushing it away from the other guard. She felt the tendons in her arm give way and gasped as the man twisted it

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completely around and shoved the dagger into her side. Though she let go as quickly as possible, the man's hand was about hers, and he pushed the knife hard. Through the immense pain, she thought quickly. She let herself go limp, hoping that perhaps they would assume she was dead, and leave her lying in the street.

Denloa shook her head angrily as she saw Torlyn fall, letting another arrow fly and quickly nocking another. She smiled grimly as the man who'd forced Torlyn's dagger back at her began spasming when her arrow cut cleanly through his windpipe, then fell to the ground unmoving. She sighted down the shaft of the next arrow at the remaining man as he turned and began to run back to the gatehouse, dragging Torlyn behind him by the wrist even as the other woman squirmed and kicked, vainly trying to free herself from the man's grasp.

She held her breath as she let the arrow fly, but grimaced as it glanced off his left shoulder. Experience told her she couldn't nock and aim another before he reached the cover of the gatehouse, so she lifted the bow over her head and settled it across her back, the string stretching across the front of her body holding it place. She drew her sword and gritted her teeth as she charged across the street, her eyes scanning constantly for arrows or bolts. She scooped up Torlyn's sword as she passed, hoping that the other woman would be able to use it once Denloa could get it to her.

Francis had already dropped to the ground inside the wall and was crouched against it, waiting for Torlyn and Denloa to come through the gate. He and Maylin had chosen to come over the walls near the back of the house to hide their presence from the guards on the front door. He could hear a commotion near the gatehouse and he groaned, hoping that it was just the men's reaction to Torlyn.

He waited a moment, then another moment before he made his decision. He dashed across the distance separating the walls and the house, flattening himself against the manse before he began creeping along its length, trying to get to the corner so he could see what was going on at the gate.

Maylin was half way up the wall on his rope when he heard the commotion at the gate. He agonized for a second before dropping back to the ground, grunting with the impact. Drawing his mace from his belt, he ran back around to the front of the house in time to see Denloa scooping up a sword from the street and charging toward the gatehouse.

Maylin's mind was racing even as he ran. If Denloa was grabbing a sword, it was likely Torlyn's, which meant the skald was unarmed. If Torlyn was unarmed, it meant something had gone wrong. He pumped his legs harder, his face darkening as he caught sight of fresh blood on the street in front of the gatehouse. He turned toward the gatehouse without slowing down and roared as he saw Denloa fighting off not one, but three guards on her own. He charged forward, his mace held high as he tried to draw their attention from Denloa.

Francis heard Maylin's roar and his stomach clenched with fear. Something was wrong if Maylin was yelling out. He peeked around the corner of the house and felt his stomach fall at the sight of his friends fighting near the gatehouse. He glanced back at the front doors and saw not two, but four guards begin stomping off toward the gatehouse. Francis swallowed hard and then shouted, "In Dirge's Name!", as he sprang forward to intercept the guards.

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Maylin and Denloa both saw the flash of blue and white robes streaking across the courtyard inside and knew that Francis was trapped in there with the rest of the guards. They swung harder, knowing they couldn't retreat now, not with Francis on the other side of the wall and Torlyn nowhere to be seen. Denloa mentally counted the guards she had seen. "At least four on Francis!" she called out as she parried a blow aimed for her sword arm.

Maylin growled in response as he swung out and hit one of the two guards who had turned to fight him in the arm with his mace and tried to ignore the reverberations that ran up and down his left arm as he blocked a blow from the second with the vambrace protecting his lower arm. His arm would bruise, horribly, but at least it was intact. He gritted his teeth and kicked out at the man in front him, connecting with the man's chest and knocking him back a few steps, giving Maylin time to aim a blow at the second guard.

Maylin raised his mace above his head and swung down in an arc. As the guard thrust his sword up and across his body to block the blow, Maylin stepped back with his right foot and brought his left hand around to grab the handle of his mace. He spun on his left heel and let the mace continue its downward arc. As it neared the level of the guard's head, Maylin began to pull on the mace as he finished the turn. With extreme effort he leveled the mace's course and brought it bear left to right, slamming it into the side of the guard's head with a resounding thud and causing the man's face to cave in from the force of the impact. The man crumpled to the ground as if he had no bones.

Maylin let his left hand slide from the mace and dug in his heels to keep from spinning around any further. He managed to keep his feet under him, and stood facing his remaining opponent, a leering grin on his face. "Come on, then," he snarled. "It's your turn, snake lover."

Denloa continued to try and dance around her opponent. Darting in with her sword here and there but unable to do more than scratch the man. The guard, unfortunately, was having better luck and Denloa was beginning to tire from the loss of blood. She was limping already from a long gash in her left leg and could feel the tingling in her left arm from a deeper cut she'd just taken.

She began to worry that they might not make it past the gatehouse as she fended off a rain of blows from her opponent. She saw the guard grin malevolently and wanted nothing more than to wipe that grin from his face, preferably with her sword. After fending off another flurry of blows she realized he was getting overconfident. She hadn't touched him in the last several exchanges and he knew she was tiring. She tried to concentrate on defense as she purposefully limped more and let his blows get closer and closer while she watched for an opportunity to strike a final blow.

The guard drew back and prepared to strike straight into her belly, and she knew that he would lean in close as he thrust his blade forward, trying to close those last few inches from sword tip to her belly. As he pushed his weapon toward her she suddenly grabbed her own sword with her left hand and winced in pain as she brought it up and knocked the guard's blow aside. She pulled her eating dagger from her belt with her right hand and leaned in to slash it quickly across the man's unprotected neck. She smiled grimly as the man dropped his sword and reached up with both hands to try to cover the gaping wound in his neck. Denloa sheathed the dagger and ignored him as he fell to his knees, confident he would be dead in a matter of moments.

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Her eyes narrowed as she caught sight of Francis' blue and white robes surrounded by guards at least thirty yards from the gate. She sheathed her sword and jerked her bow off of her back, moving away from where Maylin still fought their last opponent and nocking an arrow as quickly as she could. She sighted along it, trying to stop her left arm from shaking with the tension of holding the bow ready. She prayed silently and let the arrow fly, immediately nocking and firing again, not waiting to see whether the first had struck true.

Francis threw his spear as he started running, screaming out, "Dirge guide you to my enemies!" Even as the spear arced toward the men he drew his mace, continuing his run toward the four men. They turned at his first shout, and scrambled as his spear left his hand, but he had anticipated their scrambling. The spear struck clear through one guard's chest as if thrown by a man with inhuman strength.

He was upon them as fast as he could run, swinging his mace at the first man he came to. The man was ready for him though, and jumped to the side, arching his body away from Francis to avoid the blow. As the weight of Francis' mace pulled the swing around to his side, the guard slashed down hard at Francis' arm. The blow landed on Francis' right arm, and while he was able to angle his arm down to make it glancing, he could feel the blade scrape along the bones of his forearm, and his mace flew from his fingers, bouncing on the ground.

The other two guards were upon Francis in an instant. One swept at his head from the left with a sword, the other at his leg from the right. He flipped backward, landing on his feet as the weapons swept through empty air. But the guard he had originally attacked was stalking him. The man took a wide swipe at Francis from the side, knowing that any contact with the unarmored man's body would be the beginning of the end. Francis spun toward the man and clapped his hands together, pinning the flat of the blade between his hands, stopping the blade mere inches from his side. He tried to twist the blade out of the guard's hands, but was taken by surprise when the man stepped toward him and slugged him with his left hand. Francis felt the bones in his nose break as the mailed fist landed soundly. He let go of the blade and jumped back, his reaction nothing but sheer reflex. The blade swept through the space Francis would have been standing in had his training not forced him to jump.

Francis' face was bloodied and his broken nose leaked blood onto his lip, but still he smiled, calling out to Dirge and mentally preparing himself to die gloriously in battle in the name of his warrior god. Disarmed, he now fought like legends said Dirge had fought when he walked Nordalia, with his fists and his feet and his head. He punched out at one guard even as he kicked out at another, a flurry of blows landing on one and then another. He realized he wasn't likely to survive, but he was going to take a couple of these vile men with him even if it meant he had to strangle them with his robes.

Seeing an opening, he jumped into the air and kicked out at one of the guards, ignoring the sharp pain in several of his toes as they slammed into the man's nose from below. The stunned look on the man's face told Francis he'd managed to break his opponent's nose and forced the cartilage up into his brain. "Dirge have mercy on you, for I will not!" he screamed as he turned to deal with the coward he had first attacked, the one who had been striking at him from behind since nearly losing his sword to Francis. He punched at the man with one fist, then another, then squared his jaw as he ducked low to avoid a blow. Francis pushed himself up and forward, wrapping a hand around the

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man's throat and pushing with his thumb at the bottom of the man's windpipe. He grimaced as a sword struck his side from behind, and then another bit into his left leg, but he did not release the man until he felt the satisfying feel of the man's windpipe crushing beneath his grip. He fell to one knee, then rolled to the side and righted himself on his right knee, one hand holding his side as he tried to breathe and determine what to do next.

He ducked as an arrow slammed into one of the two remaining men, its head protruding from the guard's upper arm. A second arrow caught the man behind the knee, forcing him to join Francis on the ground. Francis did not waste a second. As soon as the second guard turned to look at the archer, he dove forward on top of the guard on the ground. He grabbed the man's helmet with both hands and jerked as hard as he could, and the man spasmed as his neck broke. As Francis looked up, the second guard ducked and Francis saw an arrow fly by his head. Francis winced as the guard grinned and stalked toward him, sword in hand. Francis tried to stand, but discovered his right leg could bear no weight. He stayed on one knee, breathing heavily and stared challengingly at the guard bearing down on him.

Denloa had watched the scene unfold and cursed herself for missing anything vital on both the guards. She nocked one more arrow and let it fly, nodding once when she saw it slam into the back of the guard's head. As he pitched forward and fell to the ground her heart leapt up into her stomach. Francis was still down on one knee and didn't appear to be preparing to do anything as the remaining guard stalked him with weapon in hand.

She glanced at her bow but shook her head, tossing it down and pulling her dagger from its sheath again as she ran toward Francis.

The last guard turned to Francis. "Your friend dropped her bow. I think I'll have my way with her before killing her," he said almost conversationally as he squared his feet and stepped toward Francis. "Hold still, and this will be quick. Flinch, and it will be messy."

The guard stepped forward and swung wide, aiming at Francis' neck as he knelt there in the dirt. In that split second, Francis almost decided to sit there and die, but something inside him would not allow it. As the sword came near his neck, Francis stuck out his left arm, reached past the blade, grabbed the guard's arm and pulled. The man was braced for the contact, but not for the pull. As his sword cut into the left side of Francis' neck he was propelled toward the kneeling priest. Francis ignored the pain and numbness in his right hand, stiffened his fingers straight out, and smashed his rigid fingers into the man's windpipe. The combined force of the man moving toward him and Francis' hand shoving forward made his fingers rip through skin, and he felt at least one of his fingers break. The guard was jerking, his sword forgotten as he tried to breath through the mess that had been his windpipe. His full weight fell on Francis, and both toppled to the ground.

Maylin's opponent took his time once he realized that Denloa was busy elsewhere. He circled the knight and tested him for weaknesses or signs of fatigue. Maylin realized that the man's sword was much faster than his mace, particularly at the end of a blow, where the weight of the mace head would make him pause as he stopped the mace and brought it back around. That meant either a furious series of attacks, where Maylin bowled the man down, or a defensive fight until he could break a limb. He didn't have time for a defensive fight, and the man knew how to use his weapon, making it less

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likely that Maylin could get past his guard to break something before wielding the mace tired him.

Knowing it would tire him early in the fight, but seeing no alternative, Maylin launched a series of heavy blows at the man, forcing the man onto the defensive, keeping him jumping back from Maylin's heavy mace. He swung overhand first, leaning into the man, and was gratified when the man jumped back. Maylin took the power of the downward swing and used it to spin up and out in an arc, causing the guard to jump back again. But Maylin could see him calculating, and the next blow would likely be the one when the man kept his head and darted in with his sword for a quick cut while Maylin was changing the mace's direction. He swung anyway, watching the man's eyes to see where in the arc the blow might land and counter it.

The guard looked to the outside of Maylin's arc, so Maylin cut the arc short by hefting with all of his might and turning the mace to a sideways blow. The man's eyes snapped to the center, he stepped back, and jabbed right where Maylin's arm was. The sword bounced off of Maylin's vambrace, and Maylin lowered the angle of his mace to impact with the man's forward knee. The guard stepped back, and deftly dodged Maylin's blow. He was smiling, and seemed to be gaining confidence. Maylin knew that there was good reason for that confidence. His ploy was to take the man out quickly, and each blow was another drain on his strength, more than usual because he was putting deadly force behind each blow, keeping the man on the defensive.

The guard waited until Maylin was raising his mace up over his head, then stepped in close and shoved his sword at Maylin's unprotected neck. Maylin could not stop the flow of his mace and move at the same time, he was stuck and the guard had him, he was certain of it.

Torlyn came running out of the gatehouse with a scream, and hit the man from behind. He couldn't see most of her, but her arm came from behind the man and knocked his sword arm down just enough to make the blow bounce off of Maylin's armor. Even as the man was turning on her, another slim hand with an ornate dagger in it came up from behind him and slashed across his throat. She danced back as the twitching man sprayed blood across the front of Maylin's white armor and fell to the ground. As the body hit the ground she looked mildly at Maylin. "You kill them, not play with them, Knight."

He wasn't certain if he was furious with her or owed her his life, but he would think about that later. He nodded once. "Inside. Is that bad?" he added, noting the stain of blood on her dress as he stepped over the body.

"I have had worse, and none of us is unmarked, I fear," she said following him, stopping abruptly to pick up her sword from where Denloa had dropped it earlier. She hefted it, satisfied that it had not been harmed at all, and then slipped it into its scabbard before she rushed to catch up with Maylin.

"Denloa is over there, where is Francis?" he asked, pointing in the direction of the front door.

"I do not know, I was busy stopping the bleeding and killing guards," she replied with a touch of irritation. "But there is blue and white on the ground where Denloa is kneeling."

They moved over to Denloa as fast as they could, keeping an eye out for other guards. Denloa nodded at them in greeting and shook her head in disbelief as she gestured at Francis. "Dirge truly favors this priest. He lives when he has no right to. His

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neck will scar, and his nose is broken, but otherwise his wounds are minor, and mostly healed.”

“Dirge continue to Shield him!” Torlyn exclaimed.

“The Great Seeress See it so,” Maylin added reverently.

Francis forced himself to his feet. Torlyn was surprised to see both his left leg and right arm bandaged, but he moved well enough. He stepped to his mace and hefted it.

“Dirge allow me to fight that well again one day, but Dirge shield us that I need not today,” he said, a half-grin lighting his face.

Maylin turned toward the building, his expression pained as he looked at the front door. “They’re in there. Many of them. And they’re in danger,” he said gravely.

“Good,” Torlyn replied, “otherwise this might be wasted. We should move.”

Denloa scanned the windows of the second floor of the house, nodding in agreement. “Yes, they know we’re here and now that we are, we have no place else to go but in.”

Maylin didn’t need any more encouragement than that. He turned and walked toward the door without stopping to check if his friends were behind him. Francis stopped and grabbed his spear, settling it in the harness across his back once again, and then followed Maylin, with Denloa and Torlyn close behind.

The knight hesitated as he put his hand on the handle of the door, taking a deep breath and glancing over his shoulder at his friends. “Are you ready?”

They all nodded, for though they knew they were not, there was nothing they could do to be more prepared than they already were. They watched as Maylin opened the door and stepped cautiously through, his mace slipping from his belt and into his hand before he’d crossed the threshold.

The foyer inside was large and spanned the height of the building. Two staircases, one at each end of the foyer, curved around and met in the middle of the room on the next floor. In the center of the arcing stairwells was a scaled model of a green-hued dragon, its head leaning out over the foyer and a chandelier of candles held delicately in its mouth. Rich tapestries hung on both sides of the entry way, most depicting scenes from Radael’s history.

The four looked around and Francis emitted a low whistle. “That,” he began, gesturing toward the dragon, “was expensive. I may have to go into the trade business.”

“We aren’t here to appraise Marganel’s treasures,” Maylin said scathingly. “Let’s go.”

Francis exchanged an arched look with Denloa as Maylin began to stalk down a hall to the left of the entryway.

Torlyn shrugged and slipped around the two, trying to stay close to Maylin.

“I agree, it certainly is impressive and probably is expensive, but Maylin’s right,” Denloa said diplomatically. “We need to do what we came to do first and *then* we can figure out how to get that thing out of here.”

Francis grinned and slapped Denloa on the back, shaking his head as he moved to follow Maylin and Torlyn down the hall. Denloa was close behind the priest, though she threw one last glance at the dragon, sizing it up, before she returned her attention to the task at hand.

The four companions crept down the hallway, Maylin’s feelings leading the way. When he turned left down a side corridor they followed without question. After they’d

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passed a few doors, Torlyn tapped Maylin on the back. When the knight stopped and gave her an angry look she raised her hands wide and took a step back. "I'm just thinking that we only took care of ten guards outside, that leaves at least two in the house awake and..." she said apprehensively.

Maylin's brow furrowed at her words as he tried to understand why the skald had stopped him to tell him this. "So?" he finally asked. "Two guards are nothing."

Denloa rolled her eyes. "When is the last time we rescued Seeresses and didn't find a snake priest or two with them?"

Maylin smiled grimly, raising his mace and shaking it. "Never," he replied brusquely as he turned and continued making his way down the hall.

They turned once more this time to the right and began to make their way down the hall, noting that Maylin was moving a bit faster. Suddenly he stopped and held up his hand. The others stopped behind him, crowding closer as they tried to peer around one another to see what had caused Maylin to stop moving.

The sounds of whimpering, frightened women could just barely be heard in the distance. As they stood listening the cries grew louder and they all tensed, readying themselves for whatever might appear.

Thirty feet ahead a man appeared from the left. He backed into the corridor, his attention clearly on whoever was making all the noise. He lifted a hand, his voice clearly showing his agitation as he growled down the hallway he'd come from. "Come on, wenches, hurry it up!"

A low growl came from the back of Maylin's throat as the first "wench" appeared, wearing robes and a blindfold. He sprang forward, sprinting down the hall and closing the distance between himself and the man in a matter of seconds. Maylin swung out and caught the man by surprise, crushing his head between the wall and the head of his mace.

Torlyn winced as she saw blood and brains splatter across the face of the Seeress. As she drew closer she realized that there was more than one as they all suddenly pushed forward and tried to grab at Maylin.

Denloa and Francis started to walk toward the two when Denloa abruptly wheeled around to face back the way they had come, her sword swinging up to meet a blade close to her neck. At her movement, Francis whirled in surprise and immediately ducked the blow that would have severed his head had it struck.

"We've got company!" Francis called out as he gritted his teeth and exploded into a flurry of blows at his opponent, forcing him back down the hall.

Torlyn looked back at Francis and Denloa, then looked down the hall and tried to count the Seeresses. "There are at least two fists of Seeresses in this hall, Maylin," she said excitedly.

Maylin nodded his head. "Seeresses of Shalitor, to me!" he called out, pushing each Seeress who came around the corner further down the hall and behind him. Before they could all reach him, the ones near the back began screaming in agony and fear.

"What's going on?" Maylin demanded, gripping the handle of his mace more tightly.

Torlyn gasped as she caught sight of a man near the back of the line of Seeresses and the flash of a blade as it rose and fell. "Dirge shield us," she muttered before she met

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Maylin's furious face. "He's killing them, Maylin!" she cried out, seeing blood splatter the walls as the blade rose and fell again.

"Stay with them!" Maylin called out to Torlyn as he pushed down the hall, winding through the Seeresses and trying to reach the man who was killing the voices of his Goddess. As he tried to make his way down the hallway, he pushed Seeresses behind him, trying to force them to move faster down the hall toward Torlyn.

Torlyn herded the Seeresses around the corner as fast as she could, trying to keep one eye on Francis and Denloa, who were holding their own against the two men who fought them, and Maylin, whose head she could see weaving in and out further down the hall.

A sound behind Torlyn startled her, and she whirled in time to see a familiar, leering face down the side hall. She saw him move his hands in a strange pattern and her stomach clenched as she realized what he was doing. She turned to the Seeresses huddled in the hall and screamed at them, "Get down!" before she began bodily forcing them to crouch on the floor.

A ball of fire shot down the hallway and Torlyn flattened against the wall and closed her eyes, turning her head to try and avoid singeing her face. The ball shot past her and exploded right behind Francis and Denloa, the backblast catching several of the Seeresses who had been pushed further down the hall.

Torlyn pushed herself off the wall and turned to face the man she was certain was the same snake priest that she'd fought in the stables in Custos-Antiquum. "Maylin!" she called out anxiously, keeping her eyes on the priest as she backed away to try and help some of the Seeresses whose robes were flaming. "We could use your help if you don't mind!"

Torlyn grabbed the ends of her dress and began beating at the robes of the Seeresses who were on fire, trying to keep one eye on the snake priest. When the man began waving his hands again she looked down the hall for Denloa and Francis. "Do you two mind hurrying it up before these poor women are burned to a crisp?!"

"It's not like I'm down here dancing, Torlyn!" Francis yelled angrily, punctuating his frustration with a blow to his opponent's leg. His face grew red and he set his jaw as he began to swing more furiously at the guard facing him, accentuating every blow with an angry word. "I. Am. Done. With. YOU!" His angry strikes drove the guard back, who scrambled to keep his footing in the face of the priest's angry attack. Francis' last word came out as a scream, his mace smashing into the surprised face of his opponent, his body flying away from Francis and crashing into the guard fighting Denloa.

As Denloa's opponent stumbled with the impact, his sword arm flew upward, leaving his side unprotected. Denloa smiled grimly as she thrust her blade forward into the man's side, skewering him neatly. She pulled back on the sword and it slid from the man's body smoothly, leaving a steady flow of blood pouring out onto the floor. Denloa ignored the guard as he dropped to his knees, futilely grabbing at the hole in his side.

Denloa and Francis turned and ran down the hall to help Torlyn, beating at the flames on the robes of the Seeresses just as the snake priest down the hall stopped waving his arms in the air and pointed again down the hall.

Torlyn caught the action out of the corner of her eye and warned her friends. "Get them down!" she screamed as she covered the body of a Seeress with her own and pushed her to the floor.

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Francis and Denloa both did the same, grabbing at other Seeresses as they fell, trying to pull them to the floor with them. The ball of flame exploded closer to them this time, and it was all the three could do to roll on the floor and try to put out the flames that engulfed their own clothing. Francis slapped furiously at his head, wincing at the feel of air as it hit his charred scalp and the flames burned his fingers. His face hardened as he pulled his hand away from his head and looked down to see clumps of hair lying at his feet. He hefted his mace and began to stalk down the hall toward the snake priest, his jaw set and his eyes flashing with indignation.

“Where is Maylin?” Denloa called as she began to herd the Seeresses further down the hall.

“Around the corner,” Torlyn replied, shoving a Seeress in Denloa’s direction. “Someone was killing Seeresses and Sir Knight Who Will Save Every Seeress He Sees went to stop him.”

Denloa smiled a half-grin at Torlyn’s description of Maylin, but kept the Seeresses moving down the hall, trying not to let their cries and abject terror get to her.

Maylin had long since finished off the man who’d killed at least three Seeresses that he could tell. Killing him had been easy for the enraged Knight. He’d been about to turn and help guide the Seeresses forward into the next hall and outside to safety when he saw a man further down the hall shove a Seeress back into a side room and close the door. In the brief moments the door had been open Maylin had heard the frightened cries of more than one woman and he knew, *knew*, that there were more Seeresses in that room than just the one he’d seen. He’d stalked off down the hall and engaged the man who’d closed the door and then tried to run.

The man hadn’t been a seasoned fighter and he’d fallen to the ground whimpering like a child after Maylin had crushed his kneecap with his mace. Maylin had kicked the man out of the way of the door and ignored him, his focus on the Seeresses he could hear mewling behind the door like frightened kittens.

But the door was locked and even Maylin’s strength seemed unable to penetrate the door. It was metal, which Maylin thought odd, and seemed to be firmly set into the door jamb in a way that made it nearly impossible for the knight to simply bash it down. He scanned the frame for hinges, thinking to simply pull the pins and take the door down, but the hinges must have been on the inside for there was none on the outside.

Frustrated, he beat on the door with a gauntlet covered hand and roared, his inability to reach the Seeresses behind the door driving him nearly insane.

Denloa heard the sound and her keen sight picked out Maylin beating on the door down the hall. She glanced at Francis, who was still stalking the snake priest as the man backed away down the other hall and Torlyn, who was still trying to collect the Seeresses and get them to safety. “I’m going after Maylin!” she called out over her shoulder as she ran down the hall to help the knight.

“Torlyn, get those women to the front door, now!” Francis growled over his shoulder, not looking back to see if the woman obeyed.

Torlyn shook her head and began leading the Seeresses back down the path they’d come, toward the door, hurrying them along as fast as she could so that she could return and help her friends with whatever else they might find.

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Denloa stopped near Maylin and tapped him on the shoulder, ducking as the knight turned and swung at her head without even stopping to see who was there. “Maylin!” Denloa yelled fiercely. “It’s me, Denloa!”

Maylin stopped abruptly at the sound of his friend’s voice, the crazed look in his eyes dissipating quickly. Breathing heavily he pointed at the door and barked, “Open the door!”

Denloa stepped to the front of the door as the Knight moved to give her room and muttered to herself as she examined the lock on the door. She glanced down at the man lying there trying to push himself away down the hall. “He came out of this room?” she asked.

“Hurry it up, Denloa,” Maylin growled.

“Answer me, Maylin,” she said flatly without moving her head.

“Yes, now *get that door open!*” he replied.

Denloa bent down over the man on the floor. “The keys. Now,” she said.

He pulled a pouch off his belt and threw it down the hall, pushing himself the other way as fast as he could.

Denloa ran and grabbed the pouch off the floor, pulling out a ring of keys. She knelt by the door, trying one after the other.

Maylin threw up a hand and began to pace behind her, his eyes glued to the door as Denloa worked as fast as possible. “I can’t hear them, Denloa, something’s wrong!” he cried a few moments later, stopping behind her and staring at the door, one hand gripping the handle of his mace tightly.

Denloa ignored him and concentrated on unlocking the door. She knew that hurrying might make her skip a key, and didn’t want to skip the right key. She twisted her wrist slightly on the twelfth key and it turned. She moved to the side.

“It’s open,” she told the knight, who reached out and grabbed the handle of the door before she’d even finished her words.

Maylin depressed the latch and pushed on the door, bringing his mace to bear as the door swung open silently. He took one step forward and then dropped to his knees as the sight of robed, blindfolded women lying about the room, clearly dead, greeted him.

“They’re all dead,” Maylin said tonelessly. “We’re too late.”

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Chapter 11

Francis continued to stalk the snake priest as he backed away from the obviously enraged Dirgian. Thirty feet down the hall the man suddenly hiked up his robes and turned, running down yet another corridor. Francis hesitated, not knowing whether he should follow him or wait for his friends. He glanced over his shoulder and saw nothing, meaning Torlyn had managed to get the Seeresses out of the hall and should be returning shortly. Maylin and Denloa, however, were nowhere to be seen.

He marked the distance the snake priest had run and the direction he'd disappeared in his mind, then turned and ran back down the hall. He glanced to the right and saw Denloa standing in the hall and Maylin on his knees next to her, his head bowed. He ran their direction and skidded to a stop behind the knight.

Francis' face fell as he saw the reason for Maylin's bowed head. "Healfherd lose my soul," he swore under his breath, letting his mace fall to his side.

He reached out and put a hand on Maylin's shoulder. "Maylin, there's nothing you can do for them now, they rest with the Great Seeress."

When Maylin didn't acknowledge him he sighed. "Maylin, there's a snake priest down the hall and I'm fairly certain he's responsible for this. You can't help them, but you can avenge their deaths," the priest cajoled his friend.

Denloa nodded. "Come, Maylin, let us teach this priest the meaning of pain," Denloa said evenly.

Maylin stood and turned his face to each of his friends. Francis tried not to flinch at the stormy expression on Maylin's face. "Let us go, then," Maylin gritted through clenched teeth, hefting his mace.

Francis threw a pointed glance at Denloa but said nothing. He began jogging down the hall and led the others to the hallway where the priest had disappeared.

Maylin glanced back down the hall in the direction they'd first come from. "Where is Torlyn?" he asked flatly.

"She led the Seeresses out to the entrance, she'll be back shortly," Francis answered quickly.

Maylin grunted his acknowledgement and then gestured with his mace in the other direction. "Find me this snake priest," he demanded.

Francis gestured with his head toward the hall the man had disappeared down earlier. "Down there," he said eagerly.

Maylin walked in the direction Francis had indicated, his eyes scanning the hall for the snake priest. As they neared the end of the hall they could hear shouting coming from behind a set of brass bound double doors. Denloa flattened herself against the wall, pressing her ear against it and concentrating on the voices within the room. The two men stopped and waited as patiently as possible, but after their evening thus far it wasn't very patiently at all. After a few minutes Denloa pushed herself off the wall and glared at them both with disgust.

"Well?" Maylin asked imperiously.

Denloa gave him a withering look. "Oh there's someone in there, at least three someones. But what they are talking about?" she paused and shook her head. "I don't know, I couldn't hear them clearly over the sound of you two breathing and shuffling around like a couple of Americian plow horses."

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Francis looked offended by her statement. “Me?” he asked innocently. “Are you sure it wasn’t Mister Metal Head over here?”

“Enough!” Maylin snarled, in no mood for even companionable banter. “Whoever is in there is at least an accomplice to the kidnapping of those Seeresses and I aim to deal with them now. Any objections?”

Denloa and Francis exchanged worried looks, but both shook their heads. “Let’s go then, Maylin, but be on your guard lest that snake priest take you by surprise,” Francis warned even as he hefted his mace and the anticipation of battle brought a light to his eyes.

“On three, then,” Maylin said, turning to the doors. “One, two, three!”

Maylin kicked open the doors and began to stride across the threshold before they were even fully open, his entire body tense with rage. Francis and Denloa flanked him a few steps behind, weapons held at the ready and determined expressions on their faces.

“That’s far enough, Armor Bearer,” a voice hissed.

Maylin hesitated slightly but continued moving toward the man who had spoken.

The man shook his gaunt head and raised a silver metal rod in Maylin’s direction, spitting out a single word. A bolt of lightning shot from the tip of the rod and slammed into Maylin, knocking him off his feet and slamming him into the floor nearly ten feet from where it had hit him. Francis and Denloa stopped abruptly, their angry stares boring into the robed man.

Maylin shook his head to clear it before he pushed himself up on one knee and then to a standing position. He walked forward slowly, his eyes glued on the snake priest who stood on the other side of the room. He nodded imperceptibly in Francis’ direction to indicate he was fine and at the action Francis returned his attention to the snake priest.

Denloa took her bow from her back and glanced around the room quickly, her eyes widening as she took in the shelves lining the left and right walls, filled with purple books and scrolls. Her eyes narrowed as they fell upon the two men flanking the snake priest, each holding a lit torch and standing close enough to the shelves to light the scrolls and books on fire if necessary.

“Lordston lose my lyre.”

Denloa’s head swung around at the whispered curse that came from behind Maylin. Her eyes caught sight of Torlyn, her mouth hanging agape at the sight of the books and scrolls.

Torlyn caught Denloa’s eyes. “The Tale,” she choked, unable to believe how much of the Tale had been hidden under all their noses for so long.

“Yes,” the robed man said arrogantly. “The Tale.”

“Norgill,” Torlyn spat as she moved further into the room. She stopped as he held a hand up.

“If you wish it to survive you will stop right there,” Norgill warned.

Torlyn stopped in mid-stride. Maylin, however, took another step forward.

“Stop right there, Armor Bearer, or I will tell my men to torch all these little purple books you seem to care so much for,” Norgill said firmly.

Maylin stopped, the corner of his mouth curling up into a sneer. “You think I care more for these books than I do the Seeresses you killed? You think wrong, snake.”

“You cannot win, it has been Seen,” Norgill taunted.

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Maylin threw back his head and laughed hollowly. "I doubt that," he countered. "More likely you're willing to say anything to stay alive," he said, slapping his mace into the palm of his free hand for emphasis.

Norgill slapped the metal rod in a similar fashion, leering at the knight. "Then come and meet your paltry Goddess of lies, knight."

Maylin growled and charged toward Norgill, who raised the metal rod and aimed it at Maylin again. Before he could speak, Denloa whipped up her bow and sighted quickly, muttering a prayer under her breath that her arrow would fly straight.

As Norgill opened his mouth the arrow struck his hand, knocking the rod to the ground. Maylin grinned as he saw the rod clatter to the floor and pumped his legs harder to reach the man before he could draw a weapon.

Francis charged forward at the man to Norgill's right, a twisted smile on his face. Torlyn drew her sword and started forward toward the man on the left just as Norgill's voice screamed out, "Burn it! Burn it all!"

The men holding the torches leaned over and held their torches to the scrolls nearest to them. As the scrolls started burning and smoke began filling the room the men tossed the torches at the shelves and drew their weapons, ready for Torlyn and Francis to approach.

"Denloa, the Tale!" Torlyn yelled as she raced forward, praying that Denloa could save at least some of the scrolls or books in the room.

Maylin skidded to a halt and nearly bent over backwards to keep from being hit by the sword that appeared in Norgill's hand, the blade swinging around and nearly catching the knight in the chin. Maylin took a step back and planted his foot under him to right himself, bringing his mace around and readying himself for Norgill's next strike.

Norgill gave Maylin an arched look as he swung out across his body at the knight, trying to catch him in the arm. Maylin easily danced aside and swung out in return, trying to catch the snake priest under the arm. The man stepped back and turned his body at the last moment, the blow flying harmlessly through the air.

Maylin grew more confused as Norgill continued to strike at him, but didn't appear to be trying to seriously injure him. Maylin connected with the priest's left arm but instead of the grimace of pain he expected to see cross the man's face he was greeted with a victorious smile. Out of the corner of his eye Maylin saw the end of Norgill's weapon come rushing at his side. His face fell as he caught the reflection of the flames in the length of the blade and realized that the reflection was bouncing off a brown, oily substance. *Poison!* his mind screamed even as he jerked his body backwards, stumbling as he tried to get out of the path of the sword.

The blade whisked harmlessly over Maylin's head but before the knight could straighten Norgill reversed his swing, bringing the blade back at Maylin again. Maylin was forced to twist further, nearly falling over as he tried to avoid being hit by the poisoned blade. Norgill again reversed his swing and Maylin's stomach clenched as he realized the man's tactic was to drive him to the ground where he would be an easy target. He gritted his teeth, knowing that he had to right himself and get out from under the pendulous swings of the priest before he fell over backward and left himself open to his opponent.

Francis swung his mace out at the man he had charged, hitting the man hard in the leg and grinning broadly as he felt little resistance. The man swung back almost feebly,

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looking as though he was unused to handling the sword in his hand. Francis felt a twinge of guilt at the man's ineptitude, not relishing the thought of beating a man in combat that was obviously his inferior. Dirgians enjoyed a fair fight and would gladly die in one for the glory of Dirge, but to best an obviously unequal foe took most of the joy out of such a fight. Francis tried to ignore the guilt, knowing that more was at stake here than just his honor, that the fate of the KingSeer may well rest on whether he and his friends lived or died in this room. A glance to his left told him that while this man may be less than his equal, the priest and the man Torlyn was fighting were well-versed in such things and that a quick finish to his own opponent would free him to help his friends.

He swung out again, easily striking the man's other leg and causing his opponent's face to twist into a grimace of pain. As Francis watched the man's eyes grow crazed with fear, his own eyes widened with recognition. *I saw him in the inn last night! He was watching us, listening to us!* Francis gripped the handle of his mace more fiercely at the realization that he had been right, someone *had* been eavesdropping on their conversation. *That would explain the guards, why they weren't all where Zephrahem said they'd be!* He was relieved to know that his old friend hadn't sold him out or been wrong, and his confidence in his instincts returned with the knowledge that he wasn't simply paranoid as Torlyn had tried to tell him.

Francis raised his mace high above his head and swung down abruptly as his foe overextended himself in an attempt to skewer Francis through the leg with his sword. Francis felt his mace contact the man's shoulder, heard the cracking of bone and heard the scream of pain as the head of his weapon crushed his opponent's shoulder, leaving the man's arm hanging useless at his side. Francis planted his right foot and then pushed off with his left, kicking out and upward with his foot and aiming for the man's face. He saw the look of surprise come over his opponent's face at the move. Francis grimaced as his foot caught the edge of the man's chin instead of his nose, driving his head backward abruptly. A fraction of a second later he heard the distinctive sound of the man's neck snapping from the force of the blow and Francis' smile returned. *One down, two to go!*

Denloa held her bow hesitantly, looking for a clean shot that would not endanger her friends if it went awry. She shook her head in disgust as she realized she could not let an arrow fly without potentially harming one of her friends if she missed. She slipped the bow over her head and instead ran to the shelves and began pulling out book after book, stomping on the flames with her boots to put out the flaming pieces of the Tale. Those that were not yet alight with fire she tossed further behind her, forming a pile that quickly grew as she worked.

Torlyn was crouched down, her sword held in both hands and eyes glued to her opponent. The man held a curved sword that was shorter than hers, but he had the advantage of reach, being well over a foot taller than her. She saw the curved blade swing in from the right and tried to shift her weight back but was not quick enough. The flat of the blade hit her leg with a resounding smack that echoed in her ears. She winced and thrust forward with her own sword, nicking the man's elbow but not able to follow through without stepping into the man's reach. She pulled back and winced again when the flat of her opponent's blade connected with her other leg. She dropped a hand from the hilt of her sword to her leg where he'd slapped at it, rubbing it furiously to try and take the sting out of the strike.

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Her face grew hard as she realized the man meant to play with her, not finding her to be a worthy opponent. She eyed the man critically, taking in his broad shoulders and the bulging muscles in his neck and knew he was right to assume he had a measure more experience standing toe-to-toe with warriors like Maylin. She was pleased, knowing he was wrong, however, to think she was not capable because of her size or gender. She smiled as she recalled something her husband had taught her, a tactic they taught Knights when dealing with an opponent who had a greater reach if you had a sword long enough to complete the maneuver.

She let the man slap at her again, trying to ignore the red welt it raised on her arm. As he drew back she stepped toward the man and at the same time pivoted on her left foot, turning her back to the man. She reversed the hold on her sword and thrust behind her, still smiling grimly as she felt the resistance of flesh and heard him grunt in pain. She pulled abruptly on the sword and this time pivoted on her right foot, reversing the hold on her sword again and swinging out across her body and into the man's sword arm. She was pleased when she connected solidly with the man's outer arm, slicing into it and startling him enough to drop his weapon.

She finished her turn and stopped, once again facing her opponent but this time with a triumphant smile on her face. The man stared at her, confused for a moment, before his eyes narrowed. He quickly drew a dagger from a sheath on his hip and held it menacingly before her. "Nice trick," he spat, obviously angry at being disarmed. "I thought you meant to play but since you'd rather die, so be it."

Torlyn glanced in the direction of Maylin and Francis, dismayed to see Maylin stumbling back away from Norgill but heartened to notice that Francis' opponent lay on the ground. She knew Francis would not assist Maylin unless it were absolutely necessary, they'd all learned early on that one did not interfere in Maylin's battles unless he were about to fall, and even then he could be surly about accepting help.

"Francis!" Torlyn yelled as her foe began swiping the dagger back and forth in front of her face, stabbing at her occasionally and forcing her to concentrate on avoiding the short blade rather than on landing her own blows. She parried several blows before one snuck in past her defenses and caught her cheek, slicing a thin line across it even as she twisted away from the blow. Her face darkened and her eyes clouded. "That was a mistake," she growled, her accent thickening with her anger. She screamed something in Doornian and swung out at the man furiously, her blade slicing through his inner arm and arcing down to catch him in the leg, right below the knee. Instead of pulling back on the sword at the impact she bore down, slicing further into the flesh until she felt the blade scrape against bone. She twisted the blade and forced it downward, cutting a path back out of the man's leg and leaving a chunk of his flesh lying on the floor beneath him.

The man screamed in pain and doubled over to grab at the hole in his leg, trying to stem the blood that poured from the wound. The blood pooled around his feet and as the man staggered with the pain he slipped on the blood and fell to the floor screaming in agony.

Francis had come running up to help her but stopped abruptly at the ferociousness of the skald's last attack. He smiled appreciatively at Torlyn's strike. "Dirge was pleased by that, I think, Torlyn," he said approvingly.

Torlyn turned to Francis, raising a hand to her cheek and wiping angrily at the blood trickling down the side of her face. "Help Maylin," she ordered as she turned and

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ran toward the opposite side of the room and began pulling scrolls and books from the shelves nearly as fast as Denloa.

Francis quirked an eyebrow but said nothing as he turned to regard Maylin, who was still carefully dancing around Norgill's sword and doing little else but defend himself.

"What is your problem, Maylin?" Francis yelled.

"Poison!" Maylin gritted as he twisted to the side to avoid another strike from Norgill's blade.

Francis rolled his eyes and grabbed his symbol of the Dented Shield, grasping it firmly in his hands. He began to chant, his words calling on Dirge to cleanse the man's sword of its poison and free Maylin from his fear of being struck with the blade. As Francis finished chanting he pointed at the snake priest's blade and a brilliant flash of light nearly blinded him. He could hear Maylin cursing at the interruption and Francis shrugged. If Maylin wanted to fight without fear of poison he'd have to deal with being blinded for a moment. Francis knew of no other way to cleanse the blade and while he could have waited and just flushed the poison if it had entered Maylin's body, Francis had no way of knowing what kind of poison the snake priest was using and to wait could mean Maylin's death.

"Now kill the *grambuled* snake, Maylin!" Francis yelled, positioning himself to help Maylin if need be but staying out of the fight unless his aid was necessary.

Maylin set his jaw and swung at Norgill, his mace forcing the man to retreat lest he be hit by the angry blow. Maylin didn't even waste a glance at the sword, trusting that the flash of light meant Francis had done what was necessary to cleanse the blade. Norgill swung out and caught Maylin in the upper arm and Maylin felt it bounce off his rebrace and catch under the couter that protected his elbow as the blade slid down his arm. Norgill grunted and jerked his sword back, bending the couter slightly as he freed his weapon.

Maylin smiled grimly as the Norgill's momentum caused him to turn slightly, partially exposing his back to the knight. Maylin stepped forward with his left foot and swung his mace up and down, intending to catch the man at the back of the neck. Norgill caught the movement out of the corner of his eye and swung clumsily, but with enough force to turn Maylin's blow aside.

Maylin let the man's sword force his mace down and away, turning with the impact and leveling his mace as he turned in a full circle, slamming the head of his mace into the other side of Norgill's unprotected head. Maylin grunted satisfactorily as the snake priest crumpled into a heap at the knight's feet.

"Nice," Francis said, admiring the move. "Took too long, but nice."

Maylin threw an annoyed look at Francis, but said nothing as he breathed heavily from the exertion of the fight. He was annoyed not because Francis was wrong, but because he was right. It had taken far too long to finish the snake priest and Maylin could feel the dampness of the gambeson under his armor from his sweat.

Maylin looked up and saw Torlyn and Denloa beating at the flames on the shelves with cloaks and coughed slightly as he noticed the smoky air for the first time. He looked around the room and caught sight of a window. He straightened and strode over to it, fumbling with the mechanism for a moment before he opened it, letting fresh air into the room.

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He turned and leaned against the wall near the window, folding his arms across his chest as he scanned the room for the first time. The room was virtually empty except for the piles of scrolls and books that now littered the floor and a couple of fairly nice chairs that sat in the corners near the door. He glanced to his right and did a double take as he noticed a narrow door, virtually hidden next to the shelves. He drew his mace from his belt and jerked his head toward the door. "Francis!" he hissed as he began to move toward the door.

Francis acknowledged Maylin's call by hefting his own mace and stepping lightly toward the door. Maylin hesitated for a brief moment, wondering if perhaps he should have Denloa use her knowledge of tricks to check out the door for any traps that might be lying in wait, but then shrugged indifferently. He reached out and grabbed the handle, depressing the latch and pushing the door open.

The door swung open onto what was obviously a small office. A desk near the far wall, its face littered with parchments and books. Two chairs sat facing the desk, and well used torches rested in sconces on the walls. A narrow window on the right wall let enough light to see in by day, but the darkening sky indicated it was well past dusk. Francis brushed past Maylin and grabbed a torch from one of the sconces, then left the room and returned a moment later, the torch blazing. Francis went to each torch and lit it until the room was glowing with enough light to read by and then replaced the torch he'd taken in its sconce.

Maylin walked to the desk and flipped through a few parchments, then groaned as he realized how long it would take him to get through it all. He walked purposefully back to the door and poked his head into the outer room. "Torlyn! Denloa!" he barked. "Come help us, please."

He returned to the desk and sat at the chair behind it, leafing through a few parchments and discarding them on the floor, finding nothing of interest. He looked up as Torlyn and Denloa entered the small room, gesturing widely at the desk. "We need to see if any of this holds anything of interest to us," he said as he stood and came around the front of the desk. "I need to deal with the Seeresses, you three find whatever you can and meet me back at the inn."

"Are you sure that's wise, Maylin?" Torlyn asked. "Going alone, that is."

Maylin grunted. "It doesn't really matter, does it? They are my responsibility. I will take them to the temple of Shalitor where they will be protected until they can be returned to Id'Elan."

The two women nodded and stepped forward even as Maylin strode from the room. Each picked up large piles of parchment before settling themselves in the chairs near the desk. Francis sighed and walked to the desk, picking up a pile for himself and then moving to lean against a wall, leafing through the parchments one by one and tossing them to the ground as he found nothing but records of trade shipments and tallies of coin exchanged.

It seemed like hours before Denloa finally exclaimed, "I think I found something!"

Torlyn and Francis wearily looked up from their piles. "What is it?" Torlyn prompted.

Denloa lifted the parchment she'd just read and cleared her throat, reading aloud for her friends.

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Mistress Grentilla!
The skin molt of the great goddess fall your way, filled with coin and blessings!
I do hope you are well, and you have considered the proposal that I placed before you. It would be a joyous union.

The will of the goddess is fulfilled in Salena, as best it can be. The Shield will be a Duchess, the Forge is broken, the Tracker lies buried, and the Limiting Sorcerer has been Limited. We are finishing our business here, awaiting only that package you mentioned. We are using local forces to screen the area, and keeping all staff on-site until we have assisted in delivery of the package. At that time we will move our remaining collection to your location. I have invited certain Masked people and several Pin Men to attend me on our return, they should be an asset at The Great Holding.

I look forward to reuniting with you and The Priestess. Particularly with you. It has been far too long.

May you ride on her tail throughout life,

Norgill,

High Priest of Salena

“The Great Holding?” Francis said angrily in the silence that followed. “What in the name of Dirge is the Great Holding?”

Torlyn stood, tapping her finger against her chin as she paced back and forth, lost in thought. “*In darkness larger than a cave, there they are and there they slave,*” she finally said.

Francis threw up his hands. “And what does *that* mean?” he demanded.

Torlyn shook her head. “It’s something a Seeress said to Raphaelon a few months ago. He and his friends happened across a Seeress north of Salena and escorted her to Id’Elan. From what Raphaelon said, she was the only one to escape a farmhouse further northwest of Salena. He asked her where the others were and she answered him with that line.”

Denloa looked thoughtful for a moment. “The Great Holding is the place she spoke of,” she said with a sudden flash of insight. “Just like the caravan we intercepted in Custos-Antiquum full of Seeresses, Norgill was waiting for another one before he took the Tale and the Seeresses to this Great Holding to join the others.”

Francis snapped his fingers suddenly. “That’s why we’ve suddenly been running into so many Seeresses all over the north. They’re all heading for the same place.”

Torlyn nodded her head. “Yes, that must be it. Now we just need to find some clue telling us where this Great Holding is located,” she said as she moved to the desk and began digging through drawers, pulling out rolled scrolls and laying them on the desk.

All three began furiously reading through more parchments and scrolls, spending several hours trying to find a clue. Finally they finished with the last parchment and still had no clue as to where the Great Holding was situated.

Francis mumbled under his breath before he blew out an explosive breath. “Well? Now what?” he spat.

Denloa stood and gracefully slid around the desk, kneeling in front of the drawers. She pulled each one out slowly and expertly eyed the front of the drawer.

“What are you doing, Denloa?” Francis asked, his curiosity overriding his impatience.

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Denloa smiled as she pulled out the second drawer and eyed its front. She pulled the drawer all the way out and began moving her sensitive fingers along the edges of the drawer's bottom. Near the back her fingers stopped moving as she felt a slight indentation in the bottom. She slipped a slender finger between the edge of the wood and pulled gently, revealing a few pieces of parchment lying comfortably under the wood panel. "I'm finding the information we need, I should think," she said brightly.

She flexed her fingers and carefully lifted the parchments from the drawer and laid them on the desk. Francis looked at her curiously. "How'd you know there was a hiding place there?"

Denloa laughed. "At first I didn't. The drawer wasn't nearly as deep inside as it was outside. It's pretty obvious there was something there."

Francis snorted. "Obvious to *you*, perhaps. I suppose that's why we keep you around, isn't it?" he teased.

Denloa rolled her eyes. "I'll remember that the next time you need a well placed arrow to save your skin."

Torlyn ignored them as she reached out and picked up the two parchments Denloa had laid on the desk. She eyed both critically, her face falling as she realized what she was looking at.

"What is it, Torlyn?" Francis asked, seeing the expression on her face.

Torlyn shook her head. "You aren't going to believe this, but Maylin is going to kill us."

"What else is new these days?" Denloa asked sarcastically.

Torlyn looked at her and handed her the parchments. "No, he's *really* going to kill us this time."

Francis peered over Denloa's shoulder as she read the first parchment, obviously another letter. "*The one who sees monarchy has not yet spoken upon your mission, and presumably will not,*" Francis intoned, groaning as he realized who 'the one who sees monarchy' must be.

"Oh, it gets better, Francis," the skald warned. "Denloa, show him the second parchment."

Denloa obeyed, lifting the letter and uncovering what was obviously a map. Francis stepped back as he recognized the area the map represented and ran a hand through what was left of his hair, grimacing as his hand came away with yet another clump of singed hair. "Dirge shield us," he cried.

Torlyn sighed and shook her head. "We've got to tell him sooner or later that he was right."

Francis made a face at her words. "Yes, but exactly how do explain to him that he was right when he told us the KingSeer was north of Ralistan, and that we've just spent nearly two months gallivanting across three kingdoms to prove he was right?"

"I don't know Francis, but while you're figuring that out you can figure out what this symbol means," she replied, pointing to a small drawing of a snake with wings entwined on an ornate dagger.

Francis peered at the sigil, trying to put his finger on where he'd seen it before. He suddenly whirled and left the room. Denloa and Torlyn exchanged a confused glance as they heard the sound of fabric tearing from the other room. Just as they were about to

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go after Francis he returned, holding a small bit of green fabric. He thrust the fabric in their faces. “Whatever it is, it’s somehow tied to the snake goddess,” he said.

The women looked at the fabric, seeing the same sigil drawn on the parchment stitched out colorfully on the face of the fabric. Torlyn’s eyes narrowed as she tried to parse out the symbol. “You took this from Norgill’s robes?”

At Francis’ nod she took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “The black wings are tipped in red, obviously signifying the Elf Killer,” she began. She laid a finger on the snake. “The snake is no doubt a reference to Filous,” she said distastefully. She slid the tip of her finger down the dagger. “The dagger...” she trailed off, wracking her brain to try and recall who, or what, used a dagger as their sigil. She suddenly pulled the fabric closer, and then pointed at a spot along the edge of the dagger. “Does that look like blood to you?”

She waited while Denloa and Francis both peered closer at the symbol and each nodded affirmatively.

“Kotar,” she said, holding a finger up and waving it slightly back and forth. “God of assassins,” she said firmly.

“If followers of those three have bound together...” Denloa began, shuddering at the thought.

Francis whistled as he shook his head. “And if they know we’re coming for them...”

Torlyn finished both their thoughts for them. “We’re in for a world of hurt, my friends.”

Francis’ face hardened. “There’s naught for it, I suppose. We still have to go there, and who lies in wait for us doesn’t change that. Let’s get the Tale picked up and take it to the temple. They can take it to Id’Elan along with the Seeresses.”

Denloa and Torlyn nodded quietly, knowing he was right and that there wasn’t anything they could do at the moment about the triad that had obviously joined forces to steal the Tale and the Seeresses. They spent the next hour gathering up the Tale in crates they found in a nearby room and trekking back and forth to a wagon they’d found in the stables. It was nearing mid night by the time they finally left the wagon with the Tale at the temple, explaining what was contained within and causing a flurry of excitement for the second time that evening since the priests had already been overjoyed at the train of Seeresses Maylin had returned with earlier.

Maylin looked up at the sound of someone entering the inn and relaxed as he saw his three friends come through the door. He waved them over to the table he’d been sitting at and leaned back in his chair, folding his arms across his chest.

He noticed that none of his friends would meet his eyes, raising alarms in his mind. He waited until they’d all seated themselves, then waited a bit longer while a serving wench brought them each a mug of ale. He watched the furtive glances they exchanged as they drank from their mugs and gritted his teeth with impatience. Finally he could stand it no more.

“Well?” he barked. “What did you find?”

Torlyn threw an angry look at Francis as the priest elbowed her. She cleared her throat as she reached down and laid the parchments and the piece of cloth containing the strange symbol they’d found on the table. “North of Ralistan,” she croaked, raising her eyes to see how the knight reacted but keeping her chin down.

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Maylin gave them all hard looks then turned to examine the map. He snorted and pushed it angrily back at Torlyn before he pushed his chair away from the table and stood. "I told you that before," he said, clenching his teeth. "And I should have just gone north and let you all traipse around the world. Instead I left the KingSeer in the hands of Shalitor only knows what these past few months."

Torlyn looked up at him imploringly. "Maylin, we know you were right, but we have not wasted these months," she said. "What of the Seeresses we have returned?" she said, gesturing toward where the temple of Shalitor was located. "What of the Tale?"

"These things are meaningless without the KingSeer, and *you know that*," he said, punctuating the last few words with a finger in her direction.

Torlyn cringed away from Maylin's heated words. "They are not meaningless, Maylin, just more difficult to understand. The Tale is never meaningless and *you know that*," she returned hotly, spitting out the last few words.

"My life, skald, is meaningless if I do not fulfill my oath to the High Protector, which was to find and return the KingSeer," Maylin countered. "Tomorrow I go to Ralistan. With or without you," he finished as he spun on his heel and strode angrily toward his room.

Francis reached across the table and put a restraining hand on Denloa's arm as she started to stand, obviously intending to follow him. "Don't," he warned, shaking his head. "He needs to be alone for a while."

Denloa sat back down hesitatingly, her eyes glued to Maylin's retreating back. After he'd disappeared up the stairs she sighed and picked up the piece of fabric, idly fingering the symbol stitched on its face.

"We'd better get some sleep then, and be up before he rises," she said tonelessly. "He'll only get himself killed if he goes alone and I already feel guilty enough as it is."

Torlyn and Francis nodded their agreement as they all stood and headed toward their rooms, managing only a few hours of fitful sleep before the dawn broke.

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Chapter 12

"It does not matter how long you leave me under here, I will not give you what you want," a voice mumbled from underneath the heavy layers of wet muslin.

"You're young, but you should have figured out by now, I don't really care what you tell me," the Priestess of Pain replied.

Turning to a thin-faced man with a few scraggly hairs that he probably believed comprised a beard, she continued. "Nublen, do me a favor and cut off both of his little fingers. Slowly," she said, licking her lips with anticipation. "There's no need to rush. I want him to feel it."

The man turned to a table next to him and began selecting tools from an assortment that belonged in a dungeon. But this room looked like only half of a dungeon. This side of the room was bare stone, austere, with implements of torture hanging from the walls, some of them so arcane as to disguise their purpose from any but the most skilled torturer. The other side of the room was carpeted, with several plush chairs and a table containing wine glasses. A woman in homespun robes sat in one of the plush chairs, her face white. Another woman, her dark hair pulled back to display the curious symbol of a winged snake entwining a dagger on her tunic stood over the woman in homespun robes, watching her closely.

"I think that The Ring will be best, Priestess. It clamps onto the finger and stops all blood flow while it slowly cuts through. For as long as it is left attached, the severed finger will not bleed, so there's no chance of him fainting," Nublen said thoughtfully, reaching under the wet muslin blankets.

"You cannot do this! I want to be a soldier one day!" screamed a shrill voice from under the blankets.

The Priestess of Pain made a face. "And you shall my boy. If I let you live. Give me what I want and you will be a great general, maybe even a King," she said with a note of promise. She turned to the woman in the tunic and made a strange hand motion.

The woman nodded and then bent down to speak quietly with the young woman in homespun robes.

"Do you really want to sit here and watch him die, or will you give us what we want of YOU?" she asked, forcing a note of concern into her voice.

"Even if I give you what you want, he is *The Ram*. If you are to carry this plan through to its logical conclusion, you must kill him before he destroys your cult. What does it matter if I am here to see it?" the young woman said, tears streaming down her cheeks at the thought of the young boy dying in front of her eyes. She'd already seen enough death with the Sight, and watching these snakes drag in this poor child earlier and knowing it was because of her only made her more resolute in her decision not to see for them. She turned bloodshot eyes toward the woman, ignoring the purple haze that was her constant companion. "I'll not see one whit more for you no matter what you do to that child, the Great Seeress see him safe."

"Oh no, my dear Diallana," the woman said shaking her head. "There are two possible outcomes here. We can kill him but as you know, another would just take his place. No, we have no desire to kill him... unless you force us to. Agree to share your Sight, and we will mark him as one of ours," she offered. As Dia's brow furrowed at her words the woman explained. "A single scale cut out of a discreet place on his body, and he will live. We will remove his memories of being here, only leaving his memory that he

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agreed to that scale-shaped scar, and his life will go on as normal." The woman reached out and touched Dia's head, picking out and idly twisting a lock of the KingSeer's hair. As Dia clamped her lips together and forced her eyes straight ahead in response the woman pulled more tightly on the lock of her hair, forcing the KingSeer to wince in pain. "We *will* kill him unless you start Seeing True for us again. No more lies. No more hiding the Sight, you must tell us all that you See," she snarled angrily.

Dia tried to block out the sound of the young boy whimpering under the heavy muslin, wondering how terrified the child must be. She knew *she* was terrified and she must be nearly twice his age. She wished Pancreana were here to give her advice, or her mother, or her father, or even Brother Felloss. She shook her head and blinked her eyes rapidly to try to brush away the tears that came again at the thought of those she loved. The boy whimpered again and she looked up to see Nublen standing over him, a grisly grin of anticipation on his face as he turned some apparatus over in his hands.

"So many have died already for me," she whispered plaintively.

The woman bent over and laid her mouth next to the KingSeer's ear, a victorious smile on her face. "No more must die for you if you just share your Sight with us. It is what you were born to do, do not fight it and no one else must die because of you. Certainly not a young boy like that one."

"You will let him live?" Dia asked plaintively, raising her voice and settling her gaze on the Priestess of Pain, the woman she'd despised before she'd even met her.

"I promise," the Priestess hissed.

"Then I will cooperate. All that I See will be yours, just do not kill him," Dia agreed flatly.

The Priestess of Pain looked at her suspiciously before she took a few steps toward the young woman. She raised her eyebrows at her as she folded her arms across her chest. "When you See, I will let you leave. I must have proof you intend to cooperate, else the boy will lose more than just his fingers," the woman told her threateningly.

Dia considered the woman who stood before her. She didn't doubt the woman would carry through on her threat. She'd already seen her callously have a number of Seeresses who refused to cooperate killed in cold blood. She shivered as she recalled the vile woman's apparent joy in the blood that had covered her hands as she slit the throat of one while others watched. They, too, had agreed to See for this woman, to save their own lives. Dia had Seen many things already, and had been fighting for days to keep from Seeing more for them. Between the death she Saw both with and without the Sight she had had enough.

She looked up at the Priestess defiantly. The woman merely looked at her mildly, as if she knew that Dia would eventually give in to her demands, one way or another. Dia looked down and thought about what she had Seen, about how some of those Visions had intertwined with one another and about the dangers that lay within the words she had spoken. She could not remember them all herself, and if she was ever rescued, if the *Tale* was ever rescued, those who use it for good would need her Sight to unravel its complexity. She felt a light touch on her head, as though someone was trying to comfort her and suddenly she was at peace with her decision to See for them.

Dia unclenched her fists and let her hands relax. She took a deep breath and let the purple haze she'd been fighting back for days seep into her vision. The world spun and Diallyana felt her eyes go blessedly blank. She was sitting in a fine Inn, with purple

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bunting about the balcony, and a group of people sitting around a table. The Spear-Wielder, the Armor Bearer and The Broken Bow were amongst those at the table.

They looked up and *saw* her. She was certain of it. In no other vision had the Figures known she was there. "Well then, that makes us involved, wouldn't you say?" The Broken Bow asked.

"Snake Priestesses? Murdering Knights? Taking Seeresses? You bet it does. I will kill each and every one of them," replied the Armor Bearer. Dia was taken with him immediately, his confident voice easing some of the tension she felt in her shoulders, as if he was about to stride through the door right that moment and save her from these snakes. For some reason she felt a connection with him and it seemed that some of his strength flowed back from him into her.

"Such evil I cannot abide. I will bet any of you that more bodies lay at my feet when this work is done than at yours," the Spear Wielder replied grimly.

A woman sitting upon a shield nodded in agreement, and Dia immediately recognized her as the Shield Singer. "We should go soon, that we may do what must be done," she said in a strangely accented voice.

The vision ended, and Diallana came back to the present. She was still sitting in the same chair but the Priestess of Pain was standing over her now, intently listening to her words. She cringed away from the woman, and the Priestess laughed at her reaction as she straightened and began to make her way back toward the boy and Nublen.

"Just like that. So they are coming for us, are they? Good, we will be prepared, and lead them astray. For that, I think you can return to your room," the Priestess of Pain said as she nodded at the woman who had been with Dia since early that morning.

The woman gently led Diallana to the door. She opened it and said, "Thingler! Take the KingSeer back to her rooms, and give her some flavored ice, she has earned it."

A large man with a bushy beard and a shield-shaped scar on his cheek nodded once, smiled, and took Dia's arm.

Dia stopped in the doorway and turned to the other woman. "Grentilla? You promised..."

The woman smiled at her. "Of course, dear, and I always keep my word," she promised as she urged the young woman out and closed the door behind her.

The Priestess of Pain turned toward Grentilla as soon as the door was closed. "Very well done, Grentilla, now for my part..." She lifted the corner of the muslin until the face of a boy not more than eight years old was exposed. "Postas, did you see that nice woman that was in here, begging us to spare your life?" she asked.

A snuffle was his only answer.

"Nublen, are you ready with that tool that cuts off fingers yet?" she asked, never taking her eyes off of Postas' face.

"Yes. Yes, I saw her," the boy rushed out with a snuffle.

"She is going to die tonight, die a horrible death, unless you agree to let us mark you."

The boy looked up at her nervously, his head shaking slightly back and forth.

The Priestess' face hardened. "I am done asking, if you want to murder that lady by not cooperating, that is your choice, but *she* tried to save *you*," the Priestess of Pain spat at him.

"My friend's Uncle Raph told me *never* trust someone like you!" he said defiantly.

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"Raphaelon, you mean?" she queried, watching the boy's face carefully.

A flicker of recognition crossed the boy's face, but he said nothing. The Priestess smiled and raised an eyebrow at Nublen. "Uncle Raph, eh? Small Circles Encompassing Globes indeed."

He nodded. "I'll send out a note tonight. That makes many things more clear."

She turned back to Postas. "I'm certain that Raphaelon Baltruscade meant well, but he is not here. When he is here, and he will be, I assure you that he will give me exactly the same thing I am asking of you. Because he wouldn't murder those innocent ladies over a little scar."

His face scrunched up. "Nuh-Uh! He'd just kill you all!"

"Well you can't. The only thing you can do is save that Seeress' life by agreeing to let me cut you. And if you do not, you will watch her die. And if you do not tomorrow, then you will watch another die. I will make you see what you are doing to these poor women!" she nearly screamed, her patience with the young boy finally gone.

Postas scrunched his eyes as tightly closed as he could, then seemed to relax. Tears streaming down his face he said hoarsely, "Please don't make it hurt too much."

Nublen nearly jumped with joy at the boy's response. He ripped the muslin off the boy, who gasped when the weight came off of his body and then gasped for breath when his lungs realized they could move freely again.

The priestess took a serpentine dagger from the table nearby. While Nublen held the screaming boy down, she cut a small, shield-shaped piece of flesh from the inside of his right thigh.

She hid the flesh away in her robes and quickly bound up the wound. "Have Quinton clean him up, clean up his memories, and dump him in the field behind his house. This day's work was well done," she smiled at Nublen.

Nublen carried the sobbing boy out, Grentilla trailing behind him. As soon as they were gone the Priestess turned to the wall and, finding a hidden latch, opened a small section of the wall to reveal a vault. Inside were a purple book and a crystal ball. "They call you 'The Eye of Shalitor', well, can you see this?" she sneered, as though the ball could hear her.

She unbuckled the belly-plate of her armor, and pressed the piece of flesh to her belly next to seven other small scales. She closed her eyes, an ecstatic expression on her face, as it melded into her skin, turning green as it solidified, and became another shimmering scale, just like the seven around it. "Eight Names. Eight that are mine and not yours!" she exclaimed at the ball, laughing. "And now I know the Secret of Circles. Raphaelon was the key. Now I can stop them." She closed the section of wall and had just stepped away when Nublen re-entered.

"It is done," he said simply.

"Good. I believe we are done here. This... Great Holding... served its purpose admirably, but now it is time to close it down, collect our profits and eliminate our liabilities. Begin making plans. One month from tonight we will begin, five weeks from tonight I want to be on the road to our new home in the south. Only those we've agreed upon will make the trip, the rest you should deal with," she ordered.

"And the newest secrets we learned?" he asked.

"Send a man to kill Raphaelon Baltruscade, and now that I think of it, send one for Maylin of Shalitor too. *That* 'little circle' will have to be eliminated. Every last one of

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them. But make sure they know that Maylin is to be eliminated at any cost. Without Maylin dogging their steps about Seeresses everywhere they go, perhaps the others will lose interest and we can take them in our own time," she said thoughtfully.

"As the mistress wishes," Nublen replied obediently, bowing slightly in her direction. "The Pin Men, or our own people from Kotar?" he asked.

"Oh send the Pin Men. That *is* how they're paying for their copy of the Tale, we may as well get our money's worth out of them. Besides, they're more discreet than the Kotarians are," she said dismissively.

"It will be done this evening, Mistress." He bowed and left. She smiled at the symbol of the winged snake entwined on a dagger on the back of his cloak. They had come a long way, this little group of misfits. Now it was time to commandeer the Tale for her own purposes. She hummed happily to herself and thought the phrase Empress of Pain sounded appealing as she left the room.

Dialanna sat staring out the window in her room on the second floor of the manse in which they'd been ensconced. For some reason the Priestess of Pain had separated her from the others and set her up in a suite of rooms in the house rather than in the small stone rooms that lined the floors below. She laid her hands in her lap and wrung them together, still wondering if her decision to See for these people had been the right one.

She heard the door open and a voice call her name. She cringed, knowing it was the Priestess of Pain. She could almost *feel* the woman when she came near. Dia ignored her, knowing the vile woman would come to her and then she would know what it was she wanted. She heard murmured voices and knew that she had stopped to speak with the woman who was constantly near her, ready to write down anything and everything she said when the Sight came.

Dia kept her eyes on the window, on the freedom outside the manse. They'd arrived in the middle of the night, and for days she'd been kept down below until she'd understood that there was no escape. She wasn't allowed outside at all, so she had to be satisfied with staring out the window and across the road to the trees and fields beyond it. She wasn't sure exactly where she was, though she assumed it wasn't very far from Ralistan considering how many days they'd traveled south after she'd been caught and Pancreana had died. She heard the footsteps behind her and tensed, knowing without looking that the Priestess had entered the room.

The Priestess stopped behind the chair Dia was sitting on. She too looked out the window to the horizon and smiled, reaching out and stroking the hair of the KingSeer in a way that reminded Dia of how she might pet a dog.

Dia cringed, but did not move away, knowing it would do no good. The Priestess had already proven that as long as Dia cooperated with the woman that she wouldn't harm her, and though she doubted the woman would kill her she wasn't absolutely certain of that. She'd seen the woman be sickly sweet one moment and fly into a murderous rage in the next, so Dia tried to be careful around her. While she hadn't harmed Dia yet, she wasn't above pulling her hair or taunting her to get what she wanted.

"They are coming for you, KingSeer," the Priestess hissed, her tone indicating she was actually pleased by the thought.

"You sound as though that pleases you," Dia said evenly. "I would think you'd be more concerned."

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The Priestess laughed harshly. “No, my child, it does not. In fact, I could not ask for a better gift than Maylin of Shalitor’s death.”

Dia grew cold at the mention of Maylin and death in the same sentence. She shivered visibly. “He will not be so easy to kill, Priestess,” Dia said with more confidence than she felt.

“You speak as though you know him,” the Priestess said suspiciously, coming around the chair and standing in her line of vision. “Have you Seen more of him than you have said?”

When Dia didn’t reply the Priestess leaned over and put a hand on each arm of her chair. She leaned in, pressing her face close to Dia’s. “Have you Seen more?”

Dia shied away, shaking her head. “No, I have not,” she admitted. She sucked in a breath and forced herself to look directly at the Priestess. “But he is coming and you can’t stop him,” she said, putting all her childhood dreams of nobles and knights into her image of the Armor Bearer.

The Priestess straightened and laughed at her words. She pointed out the window. “Look there, KingSeer,” she ordered, waiting for Dia to lean forward so that she could see the messengers leaving the gate, whipping their horses as they turned to head south.

At Dia’s inquisitive look the Priestess told her, “Those are messengers, who will alert certain ... *friends* ... of mine that the Armor Bearer approaches. He will not make it this far, I promise you, so you can just forget any silly little dreams of being rescued.”

Dia’s face fell as her eyes followed the men on the horses until they disappeared on the horizon. She sat back in her chair dejectedly, blinking as her vision began to blur. She ignored the Priestess as she hissed at the woman who waited for her to See and let the purple haze cloud her vision until it cleared and she was Seeing again.

A man whose face was hidden in the darkness, but whose cloak was clearly red and black, stood behind a man with crazed eyes and the clothing of a noble house. *The Dark Brother and the Noble Traitor*, Dia recognized them immediately. A handsome young man entered the room, and Dia knew right away he was the Empty Throne. On each hand he led a child, a boy and a girl. The Noble Traitor reached out and tried to grab the boy, a victorious grin on his face.

A woman suddenly appeared, and Dialanna recognized her as *Starry Eyes*. She was as beautiful as the Empty Throne was handsome, and Dia realized suddenly that the children were theirs. The woman reached out and snatched the children away from the Empty Throne, and disappeared. The young man set his jaw and turned, walking away from the *Noble Traitor* and the *Dark Brother* and Dia cringed at the sight of both as they fell, writhing on the floor until they finally stopped, and Dia knew they were both dead.

The Vision faded and Dia was suddenly back in her room with the Priestess standing near her, staring at her intently.

The Priestess smiled and shook her head. “You are a wonder, KingSeer,” she said appreciatively. “Such chaos you See that I need not sow much of my own. The Goddess will be pleased to hear of these children,” she purred as she turned and left the room.

Dia was suddenly horrified and swallowed against the thought of what the Priestess might do with what she had just Seen. She hadn’t considered that before. Just as the Priestess had just sent messengers out to hinder the Armor Bearer, she might be making plans that would alter what Dia had Seen. Her jaw dropped as she finally understood that it wasn’t just what she Saw that the Priestess wanted, it was what the

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Priestess would do about what she Saw. And as long as only the Priestess knew, no one could stop her.

Dia turned and saw the other woman still standing near her, waiting for something to write down. "Get out," she spat, and was satisfied to see the woman obey. Dia moved cautiously to the bed and bent down, reaching between the mattresses. She stopped when she heard a movement and peered out toward the door. When she was sure the woman wasn't returning she felt around until her hand grasped something soft. She tugged and breathed a sigh of relief when her hand came back with a ragged, gray shawl.

She stared at it, her eyes tearing as she recalled her mother shoving her grandmother's shawl at her before she'd left with Pancreana. It was the only thing they'd let her keep, after she'd insisted that she'd not See anything if she couldn't keep it. The Priestess had eyed it critically and examined it, then shrugged and handed it to her, saying if a tattered old shawl would keep her quiet she could keep it.

She quickly pulled her robes off and then slid the shawl over her shoulders, her eyes closing with relief as it returned to its original colors, the luxuriously soft material caressing her bare shoulders. She chastised herself for taking too long, fearing the woman might peek in to see what she was doing, and then slid the homespun robes back over her body, keeping the shawl in place.

She returned to her seat by the window and relaxed, having learned that the shawl gave her control over the Sight. She could hold it back for days if she wore it. She knew she couldn't completely stop Seeing for the Priestess, but she could at least stem the tide. Her eyes misted as she considered the children she'd just Seen, and the young boy the Priestess had threatened earlier. If she could keep them and any others like them from whatever twisted plans the Priestess might come up with then it was well worth the risk she took.

Dia turned her eyes toward the window and watched as patiently as she could for the Armor Bearer, praying that he would arrive safely and, when he did arrive, that he would find her and take her away from this place.

Chapter 13

They were up with the sun and on the road before the sun had barely crested the horizon. Maylin was even more sullen than he had been, and pushed them hard for Ralistan, grumbling at each stop or delay. The weather was getting colder, and sitting ahorse for fourteen hours a day was wearing on all of them.

They had ridden out of Radael in half the time it had taken them just a few weeks earlier to travel from the border to Salena. At the border between Radael and Custos Antiquum Maylin had curtly ordered the guard to let them pass, bordering on rudeness. They had been traveling in Custos Antiquum for two days when Maylin suddenly slowed, looking about and reaching for his mace.

The others came instantly alert. "Maylin, what is it?" Torlyn asked.

"They're not snakes, they're something else," Maylin said tensely, his eyes scanning the woods beside the road. "But they're behind us and they want to stop us. They're related to the followers of Filous somehow, but not quite the same." He continued looking around as he dismounted.

Denloa pulled her bow from its leather case and began stringing it while Francis dug for his own mace, scanning the trees around them.

"How close," Francis asked.

"An hour, maybe two behind us. Only two of them, if I'm guessing right," he replied, still looking around at the woods on both sides of the road.

"Then what under Dirge's Dented Shield are you looking for? I thought you were looking for them," Francis grumbled.

"A place to set the ambush. I'll waste two hours waiting for them, I'll not have them attacking us in the night and slowing us down with serious injuries," Maylin replied.

"An ambush? We are not the kind to attack from hiding like..." Torlyn started to argue.

"We tried this your way!" Maylin cut her short with a snarl. "Now we do it my way. And my way includes eliminating everything that comes between us and the KingSeer before it slows us down. Dismount."

They dismounted with some trepidation while Maylin walked to the side of the road and pointed. "Denloa, in these trees. Far enough back that you can still see the road but they have to charge you to get to you. Francis, you and I, one on each side of the road right here," he pointed at a spot fifty feet ahead of where he told Denloa to enter the woods, "Torlyn, you're the hurt woman, alone on the road, needing help."

"No," Torlyn replied.

"What do you mean no, Torlyn?" he snarled.

"I mean 'no'. You can drive us hard, you can whip us for not listening to you, but you cannot force me to lure men into a trap from which they will never return, just based upon a strange feeling you had. It could be fever-dreams brought on by riding too hard for all we know," Torlyn said.

"It is not my way to hide in the woods and shoot men I do not know," Denloa added.

"Nor is it mine to jump out of the woods and kick their heads in before I *know* that they are intent upon evil," Francis finished angrily.

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“Then what do you propose we do?” Maylin asked, frustrated. “For they will not slow us.”

“We stand here, wait for them, and challenge them when they ride up. Unless they are supernaturally acute, we will hear and see them before they hear or see us, since we’ll be sitting waiting and they’ll be riding hard. Then we question them about their intentions,” Francis responded.

“And when they attack us?” Maylin asked.

“Then we kill them. In the daylight, swords in hand, facing them head-on,” Torlyn said.

“As Dirge intended,” Francis finished.

Maylin looked hard at each one of them, taking in the resolute expressions on their faces. Francis was afraid he would argue more, but finally the Knight let out a breath. “It stops them from interfering, it doesn’t slow us, and it might just make me feel better to picture all of you while I kill them,” he said with a forced smile.

They set their horses off in the woods, and lounged by the side of the road while they waited. They were rewarded by the sound of horse’s hooves within an hour. Hearing them, they stood and moved into position. Torlyn, Francis, and Maylin arrayed themselves across the road with Denloa twenty-five paces back with her bow. Then they waited.

“I hope they at least know how to fight.” Francis quipped.

“Why would you hope that? You’d be outmatched,” Torlyn responded lightly without looking at Francis to see his reaction.

Two cloaked horsemen came around a bend in the trail, no more than fifty paces from them, riding hard. They pulled up short as they saw the group across the road. Maylin raised his hand and impatiently motioned them forward. The two figures conversed for a moment, then drew weapons and kicked their horses into a run.

“They’re going to try to run us down,” Torlyn observed.

“Stand your ground, give Denloa a chance,” Maylin ordered.

As the horses crossed the point about half way between the two groups, the sound of Denloa’s bow rang out behind them. They watched as the arrow arced through the air and came down at the man on the right. It pierced the horse’s chest, and the horse planted its feet in surprise. They watched the rider fight for purchase as his body continued forward at full speed. He was unable to hang on, sliding forward and then sideways off his horse.

The other rider did not slow, and within moments Denloa’s bow *twanged* again. They watched the rider this time, as the horse was bearing down on them fast. The arrow entered the horse’s upper leg, and it jumped at the impact, bucking erratically. The rider was thrown from the horse and landed in the brush at the side of the road with a crash.

“That’s two,” Denloa shouted as she started running toward them.

“Two misses you mean!” Francis shouted back as they began advancing on the man closest to them.

“No, I left them for Maylin. Had I been aiming for the men it would be a miss. I was not,” she called back indignantly.

Torlyn stopped and looked back. “You purposely shot the horses?” she asked.

“Only wounding them lightly. They will be fine, and the men are alive to question... If you get to one before Maylin does.” Denloa said with a smile.

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Torlyn turned back around and sprinted at the man furthest from them.

Maylin pushed his way into the bushes at the side of the trail carefully. He found the rider right where he landed, holding a broken left arm. "Hood back, I would see the face of the man I kill," Maylin said brusquely.

"Woman," a feminine voice replied from under the hood.

"It matters not to me, people who associate with snakes and follow us to do us harm are taking their lives in their own hands, remove the hood," Maylin demanded.

She groaned as she let go of her misshapen arm to push back her hood. A head full of bright red hair spilled out from under the cloak and surrounded a well-rounded light skinned face. The cheeks were red from exertion and pain. "Well, Sir Knight, you have me in your grasp, what now?" she asked loftily.

"Now you tell me why you were following us, and who hired you. Do so and I kill you quickly. Fail to do so and I kill you slowly," Maylin threatened.

Francis put a hand on Maylin's shoulder, hoping to calm him somewhat.

"If I die this day either way, you are not enticing me to tell you anything that resembles the truth," she said.

Maylin started to tense, and Francis pushed him back away from the woman. "I don't think you want to do this, Maylin. She is no longer a threat. We can take her horse, and her arm is clearly broken. To kill her in cold blood would be murder."

"I do want to do this, Francis. But you are right, tonight I would regret it," he pushed past the priest to stand over the woman again.

"I will not harm you unless you give me cause, and I'm certain you know that. Now tell me who hired you and I might leave you with your horse," Maylin said.

"No one hired me, my priest told me to come along. We were coming after you, supposed to kill you in your sleep," she swallowed nervously.

"Who is your priest?" Maylin asked through clenched teeth.

"Magtren Julin," she replied.

"That tells me nothing. To whom does he pray?" Maylin barked.

"The Pin Man," she replied, a bit of fear in her eyes as the words passed her lips.

"The Pin Man?" Maylin asked, confused.

Francis started to mutter. "You mean Segorra, god of murderers and cutthroats," he finally said aloud.

"You are not allowed to call him by name, may his pins pierce your dreams!" she said hotly.

A flicker of recognition crossed Maylin's face and his expression hardened. "I should kill you where you sit. You are more dangerous than an entire troupe of the Ironwall Guard," Maylin said fiercely.

"I am but a simple girl, caught up in a terrible web," she simpered.

Francis stepped forward threateningly, "I will kill you myself if you try that again," he said, disgusted. "We all know better, and I am all that is stopping him from killing you right now. You are an assassin, trained by the priests of Segorra in poisons and murder, not a for-hire assassin, but one who kills for the thrill of it, the worst kind."

"I worship my god as I may," she responded.

Maylin turned on his heel and stomped back toward the road, muttering.

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Francis looked at her mildly. “Don’t move until well after we’re gone. You have a broken arm, and that will slow you enough for us to finish you before you get far,” he said coldly, then turned and followed Maylin.

Torlyn and Denloa were standing by a horse, going through the saddlebags carefully as they approached.

“Where’s the other one?” Maylin asked shortly.

Torlyn looked up from a satchel she was holding open and gestured with her head. “Over there, quite dead,” she replied.

“You had to kill him?”

“No, he took care of that himself. Poison,” she replied going back to the satchel.

Maylin and Francis walked over to the body. It lay in an awkward position, the ground around the body scuffed up as if his death had not been gentle. His lips were blackish purple, and his fingernails were all black underneath. Little blotches showed where blood vessels had burst in his face.

“It must be something to be that afraid of your god,” Francis said, shaking his head disbelievingly.

“But I understand being that devoted,” Maylin responded. “I definitely understand it.”

“I hope he gets what he deserves in the afterlife. Healfherd guide him to his god,” Francis replied.

Their search of the saddlebags on both horses turned up much, but most of it was not very fruitful. They found a book of Segorra, the image of a snake wrapped around a dagger, several small sacks full of gold coins minted in Dilorn, a leather bound log book, and written descriptions of each of them.

The log book included a long list of places, and people listed by some kind of code names, but it definitely tracked the actions of this priest, and showed how deep the network of Segorran priests went. He had contacted fourteen people in the last six months who, if the book was to be believed, were responsible for the assassination of more than three score of people. Sixty lives ended from just this one man in six months, if there were only two hundred of them in the north, the trend was alarming.

“We’ll take it back to Id’Elan when we go,” Maylin said. “We’re not detouring now.”

“Agreed. If the Pin Men are after us, we need to complete this task and remove their reason for chasing us,” Torlyn approved quickly.

No one disagreed, so they mounted up. “What about the other one?” Torlyn asked as they were getting ready to move on.

“She is in the bushes, nursing a broken arm. If we take their horses, I’m sure she won’t be a problem again,” Francis replied.

“She?” Denloa asked.

“Yes,” Maylin said with disgust. “And I should have killed her.”

“Yes, you should have. Luckily it is not too late to resolve that problem,” Torlyn replied.

“Actually, it *is* too late. Killing in the heat of battle is one thing, killing an injured person in cold blood is murder. This is back to where we started our long wait,” Denloa said forcefully. “Leave her, she will do no harm. Kill her and become her.”

“Fine, you may be right, but I will talk with her,” Torlyn responded haughtily.

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She dismounted and headed into the woods. Denloa drew her bow and started restringing it.

“What are you doing?” Francis asked.

“Preparing to deal with a murderer, just in case I have to,” Denloa responded.

Maylin turned on her. “You can’t believe that Torlyn would say she won’t, and then go kill her anyway.”

Denloa looked at him, unruffled. “After decades of associating with mankind, I have learned that the only thing I believe is you are all unpredictable.”

Torlyn came back out of the bushes smiling tightly and mounted her horse. “I am ready, let us go.” She looked at Denloa mildly. “And put that away, I do not break my word.”

Francis looked at her hard. “And what did you talk to her about?” he asked.

Torlyn got an airy look about her. “I told her to change her religion or when we were done I would hunt her down and mar her beauty for life,” she said.

“That’s not much of a threat to a follower of Segorra,” Maylin responded.

“I also told her *how* I would mar her for life,” she said, pleased with herself. “In excruciating detail.”

Francis shook his head. “You are a hard woman, Torlyn.”

Torlyn laughed. “That may be, Francis, but you can bet that she will reconsider her chosen path after what I told her.”

Francis ears perked up at the word ‘bet’, but just as quickly he shrugged. “It would be too hard to know whether the bet was won,” he grumbled to himself as he took the reins of his horse in his hand and flicked them against his mount’s neck.

They rode through the rest of Custos Antiquum unmolested, and after Maylin covered his armor and holy symbol, entered Dilorn with a minimum of fuss.

“That was the easy part,” Torlyn warned. “They will have people waiting for us the rest of the way to Ralistan. There are only two main approaches and they can easily watch those.”

“We will deal with it when it comes,” Maylin replied dismissively. “For now we have to get close enough to worry about it as fast as we can. The KingSeer is waiting.”

“You sound better Maylin,” Denloa observed. “Less like Francis and more like yourself.”

“I am doing what I was supposed to do. Like I should have done long ago,” he replied simply, shrugging. “You would not believe the amount of stress I was under, it took all I had to ignore the urge to come to Ralistan, and here we are in the right kingdom, days away from the KingSeer. I can breathe again, I feel the sun on my face again. I live again. She calls to me more strongly, and the urge is stronger, but not resisting makes all of the difference in the world.”

One side of Francis’ mouth quirked up at his response. “Really? We hadn’t noticed a difference,” he said light-heartedly.

They were riding through a small town called Damside later that day when Maylin called a halt. “We may be just days from Ralistan, but I want to sleep in a bed one night. It feels as if I’ve been in this horse’s saddle for a week,” he said a bit plaintively, shifting slightly in his saddle.

“The way you’re driving us? We almost have been,” Torlyn said.

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“I have spent less time in the forest this last three months than I have on horseback, for an elf that is an achievement,” Denloa added, coming as close to complaining as she ever did.

They arranged for rooms and a hot meal, took turns bathing, and went nearly straight to bed.

The next morning Denloa came down the stairs to find her friends in the common room, sitting around a table.

“Good morning!” Francis said.

“I trust I didn’t wake you when I left the room?” Torlyn added.

“No, I do not actually sleep. I was aware you were moving, but stayed in my trance, assuming you would shake me if anything was wrong,” Denloa told her as she took a chair.

“That’s what I meant, I didn’t disturb your trance,” Torlyn replied.

A barkeeper walked over with four mugs. “Saw you sit down, brought you morning mead too,” he said to Denloa.

He set the mugs on the table and walked away. Torlyn watched him, her eyes narrowing. He was not the same barkeeper that had helped them last night, and he was rigid and formal. He did not move with the bearing of a barkeep. She watched him walk away, his back stiff. “Did you see that?” she asked quietly.

“What?” Denloa asked, reaching for her drink. Torlyn glanced down at the movement. Her eyes widened as she noticed that the edge of Denloa’s mug had a white substance on it.

“Stop!” Torlyn hissed. “Do not drink from these mugs.”

“Why?” Francis asked, his mug half raised to his face.

“Give me yours, Denloa, gently,” she ordered, holding out her hand.

Denloa gave her an odd look, but handed her the mug.

Torlyn critically eyed the mug. There, on the edge, were the remains of a grainy white powder. She raised the mug to her mouth and licked it lightly, wrinkling her nose at the taste. It was bitter and metallic. She sniffed delicately at the liquid inside and smelled nothing.

“They’re poisoned,” she said, setting the mug down carefully.

“You’re certain?” Maylin asked, setting his mug down rapidly and leaning back in his chair.

“Positive. I do not know what kind of poison it is, but they are indeed poisoned,” she replied.

Maylin stood, the others following suit. They marched back to the archway leading to the kitchen. They stopped there and looked around the kitchen.

“Another!” Francis hissed.

“Another what?” Torlyn asked.

“Another of the men that was watching us in Salena, I’m certain of it. I should have done something about them when I saw them there, but I thought I was being paranoid,” he gave the skald a withering look. “That’s twice I’ve recognized men from there.”

“The one in the back? With the apron? He *was* at the inn,” she replied.

“I know, and now he’s going to answer some questions,” he replied grimly, pulling out his mace and stepping into the kitchen.

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The man looked up at the movement and his face took on a fearful look. He turned to run out the back door.

Denloa took off toward the front door of the inn. "I'll cover the front," she said as she left.

Francis broke into a run, Torlyn and Maylin following him. Kitchen help dove out of the way, and the cook started screaming at them. The man ran out the back door, and turned left before the door was closed. Francis barreled out the door, the other two close behind him.

Francis started to turn left to follow the man and stopped abruptly. There, standing to the left outside the door, were three men wearing black cloaks and wielding scimitars in one hand, daggers in the other. The man they'd been chasing ran past them and then stopped, turning to stare at them. The three men took a step forward and motioned for Francis to drop his mace.

"It was kind of you to come to us," one said politely. "Please allow us to take your weapons peacefully and come with us to the stables."

"You know we can not do that," Maylin said, reaching for his mace.

"Then you will die here, but I prefer that you come with us quietly," the man said.

"We would rather die here, thank you, than go into the barn with you to die later," Torlyn replied. "At least here we have weapons."

He nodded, as if he had expected as much, and the other two stepped forward, raising their weapons.

They stepped forward, and Francis cried, "Better to die for Dirge than on an altar!" as he jumped at them, shooting a hand out to strike one in the side of the head. As his hand stretched out to hit the man, the man pushed his sword into Francis' stomach. As he was bracing to push the sword in deep, Francis' hand contacted his head and it snapped back. He staggered back, and his weapon lowered. But Francis was hurt, and held his right side, staggering himself.

Torlyn pulled her sword and charged the man while he was off balance. As she struck wildly across his face and he fell over backward, she heard the clash of Maylin's mace with the other guard's sword.

Then she saw the arrow. It flew straight at the leader's back. She smiled and stayed still until the arrow *thunked* home, right into the back of the man's neck. As he was falling, Torlyn ran around him and *hacked* down at the third man's achilles' tendon. The force behind the blow was more than she'd intended, and his foot came off. As he screamed, Maylin hit him in the chest with his mace. There was a crushing sound, and the man fell down in a pile, silent.

"Thank you," Maylin said.

Surprised, Torlyn smiled at him. "You're welcome, thank you for not being angry."

"He was trying to keep me from the KingSeer. Anything to stop him before he could complete a plan to keep us away," he replied.

Francis looked around, his eyes dark. "Where's the one from the kitchen?" he snarled, trying to bandage his side at the same time he scanned for the man.

Maylin looked around quickly and caught sight of a side door on the stables swinging gently. His eyes narrowed. He jerked his head in the direction of the stables. "Looks like he went in there," he said before he began to stride off toward the building.

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Torlyn followed him, glancing back with a look that told Francis to hurry. Francis grumbled as he finished tying off the bandage around his stomach, wincing as he straightened and stretched the injury. He shook his head, muttering to himself as he tried to catch up with them, wondering why it was always *his* body that took a beating. The fact that Maylin wore armor to protect him, Torlyn was quicker than he and Denloa generally stayed back with her bow didn't seem to be enough of an explanation for him at the moment.

Maylin stopped at the door, which still swung slightly on its hinges. He lifted a finger to his lips briefly as he looked to his friends before he put a hand out and pushed on the door, causing it to swing harder.

He heard the distinctive "click" of a crossbow being fired echo on the morning air. He instinctively ducked, pleased when a bolt shot out the door and over his head, landing harmlessly somewhere behind him. He charged inside, heedless of what might lay in wait for him, wanting to get inside before whoever had fired the crossbow had a chance to reload it.

Torlyn spun from the door and ran around the corner toward the large, double doors that were used to let wagons in and out of the building. She grabbed the handles of both doors and pulled, grunting with the effort of trying to open them by herself. A moment later Denloa was next to her, taking one of the doors and letting Torlyn focus on one herself. The doors pulled open easily with both of them opening them, and Torlyn smiled her thanks at the elf.

Francis charged in behind Maylin and was not surprised to find the stables fairly dark. A moment later the large doors began moving and Francis smiled, realizing why Torlyn had chosen to run to the front of the building. As the doors opened, light spilled into the building, allowing both men to see what they were dealing with.

The man who had run from the kitchen was cowering in a stall, behind a stocky, dark-skinned man whose eyes were so dark they were nearly black. He turned, a smile lighting his face as he recognized Maylin. He let his eyes fall on Francis and his grin grew even broader. He bowed slightly at the intruders, then slid a long curved sword from the scabbard that hung from the surcingle of the tall, obviously Doornian bred stallion in the stall with him.

"It is that you have come to me, rather than me to you. It is good," he said loudly in a thick Doornian accent.

Torlyn heard the voice and the pattern of his speech and growled. She took one step forward into the open door and stopped. "Cala, dog!" she spat in his native tongue, her eyes flashing with hatred as she drew her sword.

The man looked mildly in her direction and then spit casually on the ground. He said something in Doornian that Denloa did not understand but that drove Torlyn nearly mad. The elf reached out and grabbed at Torlyn's elbow as she started forward. Torlyn tried to shake her off, but Denloa tightened her grip, reaching out and grabbing at the other woman with her other hand. Torlyn threw Denloa and angry glance over her shoulder, but finally gave up trying to charge at the Doornian, choosing instead to stand and glare at him murderously.

Maylin glanced toward Torlyn and seeing that Denloa had her under control, turned his attention back to the man. "What is it you want?" he asked through clenched teeth.

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The man smiled, his teeth showing white against the darkness of his skin. “It is that I am here to kill you, of course,” he said almost pleasantly as he drew a second curved sword from the scabbard that hung at his hip. He held both weapons as though they were extensions of his arms, swinging them around casually in a circle as if he were merely testing their weight and balance.

Francis hissed at the show of expertise. “He knows how to use both of them, and well,” he warned Maylin angrily.

The man laughed heartily at Francis’ words. “It is that the dented head one is correct,” he said, ignoring the sneer that appeared on Francis’ face at his description. He spun one of the scimitars in a circle again, leveling it at Maylin as it completed its turn. “It is that you will be resisting?” he asked hopefully.

Seeing Francis tense at the movement he pointed his other weapon at the priest. “Or is it that you will try to resist first, little dented head?” he asked conversationally.

Francis growled in response and began to stride forward, hefting his mace. The man took a few steps out into the middle of the stable and planted his feet, his weapons crossed in front of him as he waited patiently for Francis to approach.

Francis set his jaw against the pain in his side and slowed as he approached the man, who still hadn’t moved even when Francis came within range of his weapons. His eyes were intent on watching the priest and it appeared he intended to wait for Francis to strike first. Francis lowered his head, determined to do just that. He lowered his mace to chest height and swung out at the Doornian, aiming for the man’s left wrist in an attempt to disarm him.

The Doornian saw it coming and unhurriedly swung his blades to the side, each arm bringing them around in an arc and settling them in front of him at an angle that was more able to defend against Francis’ attack.

Francis wasn’t surprised when the Doornian blocked his first blow, nor his second. When the Doornian blocked his third, his fourth and his fifth attacks, Francis backed off and reevaluated his strategy. The Doornian was barely winded. Francis met his opponent’s eyes and caught the smirk that appeared on the other man’s face. Francis’ face darkened and he attacked again, this time feinting with his mace while he pushed off and spun around, level a vicious kick at the man’s arm.

The Doornian was ready for him and easily saw through Francis’ bluff. He leaned back away from the feint and then struck out with his blade, slicing it into Francis’ leg as it came around and forcing the priest off balance. Francis tried, and failed, to regain his footing. He fell forward onto his hands and knees, with his back exposed to the Doornian. His opponent wasted no time lashing out at Francis, one blade catching the priest in his unarmored side and the other striking again at his leg.

Francis’ leg collapsed under him at the second blow to his leg and he fell to the ground, rolling over on his back. Francis’ eyes were clouded with pain but he saw the Doornian smile as he reversed his grip on one of his swords and began to swing down at the prone priest. Francis tried to roll away from the Doornian before the man ended his life by driving a blade through his chest, and managed to get far enough that the man missed his chest and instead drove the end of his blade through Francis’ outer arm, pinning him to the floor.

Francis bit down on his tongue to keep from screaming in pain, trying to instead focus on the Doornian. He tried to push himself away from the Doornian with his left leg,

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but the injury from the earlier confrontation made that difficult. He grimaced as he bore down anyway, ignoring the ripping sensation and the tickling feel of blood running down his leg as the gash on his leg ripped even larger. He stopped almost immediately as he felt the tearing of flesh, realizing the scimitar in his arm kept him from going anywhere.

Breathing heavily, he stopped struggling against the inevitable and glared defiantly back at the Doornian. If he was going to die, so be it. If Dirge felt it was time for Francis to join him for wine and gambling in his Great Hall, then so be it. He kept his face as impassive as possible, considering the circumstances, as the Doornian drew back his sword and stalked toward him.

A moment later he saw a look of surprise on the Doornian's face as two short, stocky glowing bolts of energy blasted into the Doornian's chest, knocking him back several feet and causing his attention to turn elsewhere. He felt a sharp pain in his arm and looked up to see Maylin's face contorted with rage as he pulled the weapon pinning his friend to the floor and tossed it through the air. Francis clamped his mouth shut and tried not to yell out. Maylin reached down and grabbed Francis' good arm and pulled hard, dragging him away from the Doornian as quickly as possible while the man was distracted.

The Doornian glanced down at his chest and then up toward the double doors where Torlyn and Denloa were standing. Denloa had released Torlyn so that she could nock an arrow and ready it, and Torlyn had taken matters into her own hands when she'd seen the man ready himself to kill Francis. She took two steps forward and spat on the ground in the Doornian's direction, then yelled something no one else could understand, but that was obviously an insult by the way Torlyn stuck out her chin arrogantly at the man.

The man sneered and returned her insult with a few harsh words before he started walking toward the two women, ignoring Francis and Maylin. Torlyn began frantically waving her hands in the air again and then pointed at the Doornian. Two more bolts of glowing energy – one from each hand - shot from her fingertips through the air and slammed into the man. He staggered back a few feet, then straightened and kept right on moving toward them.

Denloa had an arrow ready for him. She tilted her head, sighting along the shaft. "Surrender now, or die," she called out evenly.

The man laughed at her words in response and kept walking, swinging his remaining weapon in a pattern in front of him as he advanced on the two women, obviously trying to frighten them.

Denloa shook her head sadly before she released the arrow. Her jaw dropped as the man almost casually flicked the end of his weapon to the side, deflecting the arrow neatly and sending it careening off into one of the stalls on the left side of the barn.

"You'd better draw steel," Torlyn said snarled without taking her eyes from the man.

Denloa nodded as she dropped her bow and drew her sword. She took two steps forward, placing herself next to Torlyn on the woman's left. She swallowed hard as she glanced at Francis' inert form on the ground and then back at the advancing Doornian. The only pleasant thought she had right before the man began swinging at them was that at least Maylin was safe, and even though she and Torlyn were not likely to survive, Maylin might if they could hurt this Doornian murderer enough before he killed them.

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Chapter 14

The Doornian pressed both women hard. Though it was two to one, neither Denloa nor Torlyn were nearly as masterful with their weapons as the Doornian was with his. Torlyn grimaced as the man's blade bit into her arm one second and Denloa's the next, all the while seeming somehow able to deflect both their blows.

With a blindingly fast move, the man's left fist jabbed out and punched Denloa in the face, knocking her back and into the door jamb. Torlyn heard the sickening crack as Denloa's nose broke and blood began pouring down her face, and a second later grimaced at a sound of a solid *thud* as the back of Denloa's head slammed into the frame of the door.

Torlyn chanced a quick glance toward Denloa, her stomach clenching with fear as she saw Denloa's body slide down the door frame and crumple in a heap on the ground. Torlyn gripped her sword tighter and took a deep breath. She began to pray to Dirge to shield her, to strengthen her arm, to appear right then and strike down the Doornian himself. But nothing happened and she knew she was not going to be able to stand against the man. She stopped and straightened, holding her sword straight up in front of her in both hands as she locked her gaze with the Doornian. She saw her own hatred of him reflected in his dark eyes, saw the disgust he felt at her very existence mirror her own of his in his face.

He stopped his swing, recognizing that she had effectively given up and yielded. He held his sword in a similar fashion, then bowed his head slightly, though it obviously bothered him to display any measure of respect for her, and then drew back his scimitar to finish her off.

Torlyn had told herself she would not look away, but as she realized that the flash of metal that had just caught her eye behind the Doornian was Maylin's mace, flying through the air, she winced and turned away. Either the mace was going to slam into the Doornian's skull and crush it or it was going to fly past him and slam into her. Either way, she didn't want to watch.

She waited for the impact of something, either mace or sword. She heard a soft grunt and the sound of metal clattering to the floor and then, silence. She opened one eye cautiously, and saw the Doornian lying on the ground, Maylin's mace embedded firmly in the back of his head, a look of utter surprise frozen on the man's face.

She blew out an explosive breath, heaving her shoulders with relief. She looked up and met Maylin's eyes and saw that they were full of fear. Not the fear of death during battle, but the fear that someone dear to him might die. Torlyn glanced at Denloa, catching sight of her chest rising and falling evenly, then tore her eyes from the elf and started to run toward where Francis had fallen. She knelt down beside him, laying her head on his chest and praying she could hear his heart beating.

She let out the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding when she heard the erratic *thump* of the priest's heart over his labored breathing. She turned and looked toward Maylin, who still stood over the Doornian, clenching and unclenching his fists, his stance rigid and shoulders stiff. Torlyn frantically checked Francis' body, nearly crying out in despair when she found that all his wounds were bound as well as they could be. She rocked back on her heels and bit her lip to keep from bursting into tears, knowing there was nothing else they could do for the priest but wait, and pray. She

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picked up Francis' hand and held it between her own, her lips moving in a constant litany of silent prayer to the warrior god they both called their own.

Some time later she heard the soft clank of armor behind her. She glanced up over her shoulder to see Maylin standing behind her with Denloa leaning on his arm. Maylin raised an eyebrow questioningly at her, and she shook her head slowly before she returned her attention to the priest.

"I don't know what to do," she said in a barely audible voice.

Denloa lowered herself shakily to the ground, her head still spinning from the blow to her face and the impact with the sturdy oak of the building. She sat next to Torlyn and took the skald's free hand in her own, then reached over and laid a hand on Francis. The elf said nothing, not trusting her own voice to stay steady if she tried to speak.

Maylin began to pace back and forth, running a hand through his hair and biting back the roar of frustration he felt growing in the pit of his stomach. They were so close to their goal, to lose Francis now was unimaginable. As much as the priest annoyed him, had annoyed him for years, he'd grown as fond of the angry man as a brother. *Closer than even that*, he corrected himself. They'd been through too much together, cheated death too many times for Maylin to think of the man as anything less than his closest friend in the whole world. While he had been more than willing to give up his own life to save the KingSeer, he hadn't really considered the possibility that he'd have to give up the lives of his dearest friends.

He finally gave up his pacing and moved to sit across from Denloa and Torlyn. He picked up Francis' other hand and held it as tight as he thought he could without doing more harm to the already battered priest. He looked up and saw the fear of losing Francis mirrored in Torlyn's blue eyes, and the same disbelief he felt expressed on Denloa's thin, elven face.

No one said a word. They simply sat there, waiting. Waiting to see if Francis would live, or die. Waiting to see if they would have to go on without him.

At mid day Torlyn made her way back to the inn and returned with fresh water and some cold meat. She handed the meat wordlessly to Maylin and Denloa and then tried to get Francis to swallow some of the water. Denloa shook her head and looked away when most of the water merely trickled down the side of Francis' neck, washing away some of the blood and turning the small pool that formed on the floor next to his body red.

Torlyn went to her horse and dug in her saddlebag, coming back with a few clean rags. She began wetting the ends and busied herself by trying to help Denloa clean the blood from her face, kneeling in front of her and dabbing at her face like a mother cleaning her child. When she finished she swiped at the blood on her own arms and then gave up, returning to her seat beside Denloa and sat staring at Francis, willing him to live.

The sun had already passed its zenith and was lowering itself toward the horizon when Francis suddenly gasped. He gasped once, then again, then finally gulped in a huge breath of air before he began sputtering and coughing, his breathing less labored than it had been in the morning. Denloa smiled slightly and breathed a sigh of relief. Torlyn laid a hand on the priest's chest and raised a bright-eyed face to Maylin as she felt the normal thudding of Francis' heart beneath her palm.

"He needs to waken and heal himself," Torlyn said.

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Maylin pursed his lips thoughtfully at the statement. Finally he nodded. "I agree, he must."

They both looked at Denloa, who stared at the priest with a worried look on her face. She didn't know much about divine magik, but she knew that channeling the power of your deity through you was strenuous, and with the injuries to Francis' body he might not be strong enough to handle it. She shook her head. "I-" she began hesitatingly, "I don't know. I don't know if he can live through what is required. Do you?" she asked as she looked up at Maylin, her eyes imploring him to tell her he could.

Maylin frowned. "I don't know, Denloa," he admitted, "but I know that he's a lot stronger than he looks."

Denloa closed her eyes and finally nodded. "Let's wake him and see if he can, then. He can't lay here forever, eventually the Bowtower guard is going to come by and then..." she trailed off, not needing to explain the possible delays and explanations that would be required if they were caught by the Bowtower guard with a Knight of Antiquum and a nearly dead priest of Dirge in a stable with a dead Doornian assassin.

Torlyn leaned over and tapped Francis gently on the cheek. "Francis," she called, "Oh, Francis, time to wake up."

When he didn't respond Maylin urged Torlyn to slap him harder. "Go on, try. He's used to it, especially from women."

Torlyn looked skeptical, but she tried anyway, reaching out and slapping the priest's face a bit harder than before. "Francis," she ordered, her voice more harsh. "That's enough Francis, stop scaring us and wake up!"

Francis' mouth flew open at the same time his eyes opened. "You Doornian cur! Come here and take what Dirge has to give you!" he croaked. A moment later a sheepish expression settled on his face. "I take it the Doornian is dead?" he managed to ask, his voice cracking.

Torlyn picked up her wineskin while Denloa put her hand under Francis' head and lifted it so he could drink. No one said a word while the priest drank down half the wineskin before he made a motion with his fingers that indicated he'd had enough.

He looked around at his friends, noting the worry in their eyes. "If I'm lying on the ground, and you're all hovering over me, I must be in a pretty bad way, eh?" he asked, the words coming out slowly but clearly.

They all nodded, trying to school their faces into less worried expressions. Francis closed his eyes and tried to take stock of what was wrong. He gave up when he realized that everything hurt. "Torlyn, take my holy symbol and hold it up, please," he said after discovering that his arms would not obey his commands to do so.

Torlyn swallowed and did as he said, holding the silver disk with the symbol of Dirge engraved on it nearly as reverently as the priest would have done himself. She looked to Francis and waited for his next command. "Now pray with me," he said earnestly, catching her eyes and holding her gaze for a moment to be sure she saw the importance of his request.

"I don't know what..." she began hesitantly.

"Just pray silently, I'll take care of the rest," he said, a grimace of pain crossing his face. "Okay?"

Torlyn nodded and closed her eyes as she began mouthing the words of a prayer to Dirge.

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Denloa and Maylin muttered their own prayers to their own gods as Francis began chanting. He stumbled over a few words and had to begin several times, but finally he managed to find a rhythm he could hold. Denloa held her breath as he chanted and let it out when she saw the symbol in Torlyn's hands begin to glow softly. Francis began to raise his voice, chanting louder, and the light seemed to respond by spreading until it nearly encompassed Torlyn.

Torlyn opened her eyes, but kept praying even as her eyes widened with surprise at the glow. Suddenly she lifted a hand and laid it on Francis' chest. The glow pulsed a bright blue and raced down her arm, quickly bathing Francis in its aura. Francis let out a final yell and the light flashed a brilliant blue and disappeared.

Torlyn dropped the holy symbol and sat back on her heels, staring at Francis with a mixture of awe and fright. Francis wiggled his toes and his fingers and then sighed delightfully as he pushed himself to a sitting position. He glanced at Torlyn to thank her and saw the expression on her face and then chuckled. He reached out and patted the back of her hand gently, trying to reassure her that all was well.

She swallowed nervously. "Is that how you feel when you..." she trailed off, her brow furrowing as she tried to explain. "Is that what it feels like to be..."

Francis laughed again. "Yes, Torlyn, that is how I feel every time I ask Dirge to heal your wounds or smite his enemies," he said patiently. "Like I'm one with Dirge," he smiled ruefully, "then I'm as tired and thirsty as if I was lost in the Sevich Desert"

"A voice told me to touch you," she whispered, her face still showing signs of fear mingled with wonder at the memory.

Francis raised an eyebrow, then bowed his head in her direction. "Then you have truly been blessed. If Dirge cared enough for me to make certain you did what you must, then so have I," he said assuredly.

Maylin stood, shaking his head, a smile on his face. He extended a hand toward Francis, who took it and let the knight help him to his feet. Maylin patted his friend on the back. "Good to see you whole again, Francis," he said earnestly.

Francis grinned and shrugged. "The Fist of Dirge is difficult to put down. Kill us outright or we don't tend to die. You stopped him from killing me outright." He smiled at the Knight. "Besides, if you actually do manage to save the KingSeer, I have to collect my winnings in person you know!"

Denloa stood and slapped lightly at Francis' arm, then impulsively hugged the priest. "You're terrible, angry man, but I'm glad you're still with us."

Maylin clapped his hands together and rubbed them back and forth impatiently. "Right then, let's get back on the road. We're only a few days from Ralistan and we need to be far from here when the Bowtower guard next comes through," he said firmly before turning toward the stall where his horse was stabled.

Francis turned to Torlyn, "You and I are going to be very tired by the end of this day. That healing is never easy on the healer or the healed. That is not more true than when one is cut up like I was."

They collected their weapons and quickly made ready to leave, smiling despite the knowledge that their hardest battle was still likely ahead of them.

They arrived at the gates of Ralistan three days later, Maylin's obvious armor hidden once again beneath a large, grey woolen cloak. Torlyn led them through the gates and headed directly for the King's Inn, near the center of the city.

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Once they were bathed and settled in, they met in Torlyn's room to plan.

"We need information," Maylin said. "Since your information gathering trip across the continent was practically useless."

"We did find proof they were here," Torlyn replied.

"That is something I already knew. And we found no information about forces or defenses or anything else. I agreed to the trip, I gritted my teeth and went along, so I am not blaming you, I am merely stating a fact. We know basically where they are, we know that the house they live in was likely a noble's manse originally, but we don't know if a noble is involved. We need more information. And that's why we're in Ralistan proper and not in the Nobles Fields section of Ralistan," Maylin said at length.

"Okay," Denloa said, "that leaves us needing to speak with someone who would know." She turned her body so that it was facing Torlyn, who was leaning against the wall, her arms folded across her chest.

"Now who do *we* know who knows how to find information just about anywhere?" Francis said with a smile, tapping his finger against his chin as though he were trying to think as he, too, turned to face Torlyn.

"Oh no," Torlyn replied, pushing herself off the wall and wagging her finger at both her friends. "I have no idea where to look in Ralistan for information, and Maxius keeps such a tight rein on everything that all the places where I would normally look don't exist!"

Maylin gave a challenging look. "You're saying you can't find out anything, Torlyn?" He stood and began to walk toward her. "Because I hear you saying you can't find information and that means I'll just have to follow this gnawing in my gut," he said, poking his finger into his stomach for emphasis. He came to a stop an arms length from her and stood staring down at her, defying her to change his mind.

Torlyn stared at the floor for a long moment before her shoulders dropped, defeated. She shook her head. "Alright, Maylin, we will find what we need," she said, looking up to meet his eyes.

Maylin nodded once. "Three days, skald. In three days we leave, with or without information."

Francis opened his mouth to object, but Maylin's head jerked around to glare at him. "No, Francis, three days. That is all. Agreed?"

Francis nodded his head and Denloa offered a quiet, "Agreed."

Maylin turned back to Torlyn. "I suggest you start sooner rather than later, Torlyn," he said before he turned on his heel and left the room.

Torlyn sighed and stared at the door after Maylin had gone.

She turned at the sound of Denloa and Francis shuffling their feet. They both looked expectantly at her. "We need to find out where they are, first, then we need to find out about defenses," she said, beginning to pace as she considered how to accomplish their task.

"We know they've been masquerading as traders in Radael and across Custos Antiquum," she began.

"So it's logical to assume they would be doing so here as well?" Denloa offered hopefully.

Torlyn nodded. "Right," she said, warming up to the subject. "They've also been carting in an awful lot of Seeresses..."

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“So they’ve likely been buying up more supplies than is normal for a household in Ralistan,” Francis finished her thought.

“Yes,” Torlyn agreed. “Yes, that’s probably true as well.”

“They probably have also hired more guards than is typical for a trader here, guards who come into town and drink, or at least come looking for women,” Francis added, knowing that guards and soldiers the world over acted in much the same way. The guards he’d dealt with in Salena were no different than the ones he’d handled in Silentia Ens years ago in that respect. They spent their pay on women and wine and ale for the most part, and sometimes dicing. He’d seen men lose a month’s worth of coin on a single dice roll in Salena and others who’d made a fortune in a single night when the luck of Nindel was with them.

“Alright, we know what we’re trying to discover, now *how* do we find this information?” Torlyn muttered as she began pacing back and forth.

“The innkeep might know where supplies would best be purchased by locals,” Denloa offered helpfully.

“And if you take a walk around Ralistan you should be able to find out where the local guards like to drink,” Francis added. “It certainly isn’t here,” he said with a quick shake of his head. “I saw no one whom I’d call a guard type downstairs when we came through. This is a traveler’s inn, to be sure.”

Torlyn nodded thoughtfully at that. She stopped and glanced out the window, noting it was well past dark at this point. “It won’t do any good to look around tonight, we’re all worn from the past few days travel and in need of a good night of rest. Let’s pick this up in the morning. We’ll start with the innkeep and supplies, and go from there.”

Denloa and Francis murmured their agreement as they stood and headed for the door.

“Don’t sleep *too* hard tonight, my friends,” Torlyn warned. Both glanced over their shoulders at her. “Remember that the one who tried to poison us a few days back got away and he might have come this way.”

They both nodded, grim expressions on their faces at the reminder, then left quietly through the door, closing it behind them.

They rested undisturbed the rest of the night and were up before the sun the next morning. As they came down to seek out something hot to break their fast they saw Torlyn already sitting at a table, a pleased look on her face. She waved at them, gesturing for them to join her.

“Maylin,” Torlyn said in a surprised tone. “You look a little uncomfortable without your armor.”

Maylin grunted and pulled out a chair before he sat and snatched a biscuit from Torlyn’s plate, tearing it into angrily. “Francis encouraged me not to wear it today and for once the angry man had a valid point,” he said between mouthfuls.

They quieted as a serving girl approached them with plates of food and set them down casually at the table in front of them. Francis immediately fell to eating as though he hadn’t had a decent meal in weeks. Maylin ate more carefully, questioning Torlyn as he enjoyed the simple, but hot, fare. “You have a plan, Torlyn?”

Torlyn smiled and leaned forward. “The innkeep says there are but two markets for supplies that are used by the local traders. Severenal’s is in the merchant district,

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which is called the *Kinstin District*. It is also, conveniently, where all the temples in the city can be found on a single street,” Torlyn said, shaking her head with a smile. “For all that Maxiis condemned King Kayliffe he has managed to keep some of his strange notions, such as confining all the temples to a single district and street.”

Denloa shrugged, snatching a piece of bacon from Francis’ plate. “Tarsset, capital of Trioton is much the same way. A single street with all the temples located on it. Keeps the fighting to a minimum and the travelers away from the more prosperous districts.”

“We can do a comparative study of city design some other time,” Maylin grumped. “Where is the other merchant?”

“Here in the Sentennal District. Tarren’s, he said it was called,” Torlyn replied, grabbing up a mug and drinking from it.

“And did you happen to find out where the guard’s spend their money?” Francis asked hopefully.

“The Guardhouse, apparently,” she answered. “And a little place called nothing more than ‘Mother’s’,” she finished distastefully.

Francis laughed. “I can guess what they do *there* by the look on your face.”

The expression on Torlyn’s face was smug. “The innkeep said I’d be able to pay my way to the Court and back three times over in a night if I was so inclined,” she said, tossing her head.

Francis’ eyes bulged. “That’s a lot of gold, Torlyn,” he said speculatively.

Torlyn laughed throatily. “I can dance in Tarsset for ten times that amount, Francis, why would I denigrate myself by toying with guards in Ralistan?”

“I’ll remember that the next time we’re in need of a large sum of coin,” Francis promised.

Torlyn sighed. “In any case, I think we should start at Severenal’s and then try Tarren’s.”

“Why?” asked Denloa.

“Because Severenal’s is closer to the Intollen district and therefore closer to the nobles and wealthy merchants of Ralistan,” Torlyn replied offhandedly, as if the conclusion should have been obvious.

“What about Mother’s?” Francis asked eagerly, the thought of dicing and women suddenly lighting the priest’s normally angry face.

“If we must, tonight,” Torlyn said. “But I hope we don’t need to,” she added quickly at the smile that appeared on Francis’ face.

Maylin glanced back at the innkeep, then narrowed his eyes as he looked at Torlyn speculatively. “Nothing is free, Torlyn. What was the price of all this?”

Torlyn frowned. “You won’t like the answer, Maylin.”

Maylin gave her an arched look and leaned back in his chair. “Try me,” he told her.

She shrugged. “I have to perform here.”

“What?” Maylin nearly exploded, his face turning red as he tried to keep from screaming. “Why don’t you just wear a sign around your neck or stand atop the parapets of the palace walls and announce we are here?” he hissed angrily.

“You wanted information,” Torlyn replied coldly. “I am getting it. If it comes with a price, then you’d better be willing to pay it. Anything to save the KingSeer, right Knight of Antiquum?”

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Maylin clenched his fists and glared at the skald. “When?” he gritted through clenched teeth.

Torlyn laughed and leaned across the table. “The next feast week,” she whispered conspiratorially.

Francis nearly choked on the food he’d been chewing at the response as he began to laugh. He slapped a hand against his thigh. “Nice!” he said around a mouthful of food.

Denloa smiled. “Excellent. That’s at least two months out. If we live through this you can perform, if we don’t... well, it won’t matter.”

Maylin’s shoulder’s relaxed visibly and he shook his head. “I swear, if the *grambulled* Fileans don’t kill me you three will!”

“He was much more inclined to have me perform now,” Torlyn said, preening. “But I convinced him that a feast week would be better and that time to prepare and spread the word would bring in more coin.”

“How much more coin?” Denloa prompted at the slight grimace that crossed the skald’s face at her words.

“I had to give him half the house,” she said, blanching. “But since it was for a good cause, I agreed.”

Maylin gave her a look of appreciation, understanding that giving up half the coin any inn took in for a week of her performances was a huge sacrifice. “Thank you,” he said simply.

Torlyn half bowed in her chair in his direction. “For the KingSeer, I’d have given up the whole house,” she told him seriously. Then she winked at the knight. “But I’m glad I didn’t have to. I’m not as lucky at dicing as Francis.”

They finished their meals and then headed out into the city of Ralistan. The King’s Inn stood on the corner of the South Road and South Bowton Street, the street that ran across the south edge of the huge square in which King Maxius’ palace was located. The group began walking east down South Bowton Street, glancing occasionally at the city around them approvingly.

Maxius may not have been a good king in the eyes of many, but he was certainly an ordered king. The city of New Ralistan, as those who survived the Doornian Wars called it, was laid out in an orderly fashion. The streets were cobbled and obviously cleaned daily, for the small group could barely tell that horses regularly traveled the streets. The buildings along the streets were lined up neatly and regularly spaced as though they’d been meticulously laid out by someone who knew exactly how to place them to keep them in line.

The spires on the domes of the palace rose above the walls that surrounded the estates, and Francis noted that they stood higher than the domes and towers of what must be the temples rising above the other buildings as they entered the Kinstin District. He wondered distractedly if Maxius had enacted a law to keep the spires of the temples lower than the palace, like the law he’d heard the Queen of Silentia Ens had enacted in New Il’Negra.

It was mid morning already, and the streets were just beginning to fill with passers by as they made their way toward Tower Street on their way to find Severenal’s. They noticed a few odd glances from some of the shopkeepers as they made their way through the district, but nothing that seemed to indicate suspicion or fear.

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Maylin took note of the number of guards he saw with the symbol of the Bowtower Guard on the back of their cloaks. They seemed to be spaced fairly regularly, as though they had a set route to walk each day and stuck to that route and timing religiously. Every quarter glass they seemed to see another guard, some of whom noted their passing with a congenial nod in their direction.

Maylin acknowledged such greetings with a curt nod of his own, not wanting to appear as though the attention bothered him. As they turned north onto Tower Street, he felt the gnawing in his gut grow. With each step they took north he felt his eyes drawn toward the north west, and his breath began coming in shorter and shorter gasps. Finally he stopped and tried to breathe deeply.

Denloa had been walking quietly next to him, her eyes scanning the rooftops and glancing occasionally at the shops that lined this street. She stopped abruptly as the knight stopped and bent over slightly.

“Maylin?” she asked quietly. “What is it?”

He raised his eyes and met hers and the elf was taken aback by the fierceness in his gaze. “She is near,” he growled.

Torlyn and Francis suddenly noticed that Maylin and Denloa had stopped and hurried back to them. At their approach Denloa glanced at her friends. “He feels her near,” she said simply.

Francis looked around quickly. He grunted as he returned his attention to Maylin. “Can you go on? Because if you can’t you’re going to have to return to the inn. You’ll attract attention from the guard if you stop every few feet and heave like this,” he warned.

With great effort Maylin straightened, setting his jaw against the gnawing ache. “I can go on, but do not expect me to speak much,” he gritted determinedly.

Francis snorted. “Like that’s something new.”

The group walked a little faster, and Francis kept a closer eye on the guards that passed after that. The Bowtower Guard was well known for its decisive and inaccurate arrests. Acting in any way that attracted attention was not a good idea in New Ralistan. As they approached North Bowton Street they could all see a group of buildings on the corner, one of them with a wagon parked outside and men moving back and forth between the wagon and a rather large, windowless building.

“That must be it right there,” Torlyn said, jerking her head in the direction of the wagon, leading them onto North Bowton Street to the front of another building. A sign hanging from the false store front bore a wagon and a barrel, the lettering clearly reading “Severnal’s”. She smiled and headed for the open front door.

The building was large and filled with trade goods stacked neatly on shelves lining the walls. Piles of blankets and barrels were stacked about the place and few tables in the middle of the building held mundane items like cooking pots and jars of pickled meats. A long counter ran nearly the width of the building and behind it Torlyn could see smaller shelves filled with exotic spices and items that were obviously from many different kingdoms. The silks and sheer fabric were clearly from Kantor-Doorne or even as far away as Ismaack-Doorne. The blocks of salt from Salt Cliff, the capital of the island Duchy of Freeland Hold made famous and named for its abundance of salt. Wines from Amorice and even the Court were stacked neatly in crates in front of the counter, and a wide variety of trinkets stood impressively behind the counter on a shelf lined with fur, designed for cushioning the expensive art and jewelry that lay on it.

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Torlyn ignored the two boys who moved about the place, straightening items here and there, exchanging a few items on the floor with items they carried out from a second room. She could see through a single door behind the counter that the second room was filled with boxes and crates and barrels. She wandered up to the counter, flashing a brilliant smile at the man behind the counter.

The man was well dressed, a clean apron covering his clothing. His long hair was oiled and tied back, and the close cropped beard on his face was neatly trimmed. As he stepped forward and leaned on the counter, folding his hands together, Torlyn glanced down at his fingers. They were clean and free of calluses, the nails neatly trimmed. Two of his fingers bore simple gold rings. Torlyn smiled, judging that the man was wealthy, but that he had a love of coin and the finer things in life and would not turn down the opportunity to earn more.

She reached down into a pouch and came up with a platinum coin, rolling it between her fingers back and forth as she leaned on the counter. "Severenal himself, I presume?" she asked sweetly.

The man bowed his head politely. "That I am, Lady...?" he prompted.

"Lady Anelda," she replied, deftly grasping the platinum coin between her thumb and forefinger as she raised her hand toward him.

He took the proffered hand and raised it to his lips. "A pleasure to meet you, Lady Anelda," he said. The expression on his face stayed the same as Torlyn dropped the coin into his hand after he kissed the back of her hand. She noted that he adroitly closed his hand as the coin hit his palm and drew back, straightening. He slid the coin into a pouch at his hip. "Now then, how may I help you and your friends," he asked, glancing at the others as they perused the man's selection of goods. Hearing the man speak they began to move toward the counter, each of them lounging against it as though they merely looking over the goods behind the man.

"I hear there is a merchant north of town who buys more than perhaps his purse should be able," she began mysteriously. A fleeting expression of recognition crossed the man's face and was gone in an instant.

"Perhaps," he began. "But there are many who overextend their purses in the city, Lady Anelda. Competition with Tarset is harsh, and *risk* is required if one is to get ahead," he finished evenly.

"I see you have what appears to be some fine jewelry, worked by the gnomes in the Foxhairs themselves, if I am not mistaken? Silver, is it?" she asked conversationally.

He nodded and smiled tightly, turning at her words and reaching for a solid metal bracelet that lay atop the fur behind him. He held it out to her. "Platinum, my lady," he corrected her. "And inlaid with pink and yellow tourmalines mined only from the Cliffs of Orcshire in the Foxhairs. Very dangerous, mining those gems," he added seriously as she took it and held it up to the light.

"Beautiful," she murmured, slipping it over her wrist and holding her arm out toward him. "What do you think?"

He smiled. "A beautiful trinket for a beautiful woman," he replied graciously.

"How much?" she asked.

"Five hundred *Dilornian* gold," he told her.

She pouted prettily, then reached into her pouch and pulled out a perfect ruby the size of a small rock. She set it on the counter, knowing it was worth nearly twice that

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amount. She sighed. "I've been saving that for something *important*," she said resignedly. "But this is suddenly very important to me," she told him seriously, her eyes glued to the bracelet.

The man picked up the ruby and examined it expertly, giving her an arched look when he realized how much it was worth. "If you're willing to give that up, I suppose I could part with the trinket. I was saving it for Lady *Chastain*," he said, sighing. "But as Lord Chastain's purse is a bit light of late from so many other purchases, I guess I can obtain another trinket for his lady before he is willing to purchase it for her."

Torlyn smiled. "Lady Chastain will no doubt be disappointed. I'd hate for her to find out that I ended up with her trinket."

The man slipped the ruby into his pouch. "No worry about that. She didn't even know Lord Chastain was considering it. Besides, I'm certain the porridge and foodstuffs her Lord has been buying up can't be trading well on the market. Especially since he seems to be doing a lot more buying than selling. After he rebuilt the manse just a few years ago, well, he doesn't have nearly as much left as he should for such trinkets. And the ink and parchment, well," the man waved his hand dismissively. "I've had to raise the price on those just to keep him supplied." The man leaned in and whispered loudly, as though sharing a secret. "I think he's writing his memoirs, though I dare say the life of a merchant isn't something I'd want to be reading."

Torlyn exchanged a triumphant glance with Francis before she turned her attention back to the shopkeep. "I don't blame you, Severenal," she said distastefully. "A trader's memoirs aren't nearly as exciting as, oh, say mine," she teased.

The man licked his lips at her words. "I can only imagine, Lady Anelda, I can only imagine." He cleared his throat. "Will there be anything else? Spices from the south? Wine from Freeland Hold? Silks from the desert kingdoms?"

Torlyn shook her head. "No, I think we have what we need, good sir," she said gratefully. "You have been most helpful and we will certainly come to you first if we need *anything* else."

The man bowed his head. "I thank you, Lady Anelda," he said, "and your friends. If any of you need anything, please let me know."

They left the shop as patiently as possible, trying not to speak of the exchange until they had turned back onto Tower Street.

"Alright, Torlyn," Maylin said grudgingly after they'd parsed out the man's words. "The Chastain estates it is. Now we just need to find out about defenses. Let's hope you can find that as easily. Maybe I'll even forgive you for the delay if you can manage that."

Torlyn grimaced as she considered how they could get their hands on that particular information. A shopkeep was one thing, guards, on the other hand, were a completely different breed of men and Torlyn knew they wouldn't give up information just for a smile from a pretty face. She shuddered, hoping they'd figure out something else before she had to do something she'd regret.

Chapter 15

They wandered the city until mid afternoon and then returned to the King's Inn for a light repast and to discuss their next move. Maylin was quiet, his lips clamped together most of the time as he struggled to ignore the growing ache in his gut. He finally gave up, telling the others they'd have to get the rest of the information without him and the knight retired to his room where he could pace and grumble in private.

Torlyn stared at Francis for a while, noting the uneven look to his hair, half of it stubbled where it was growing back after its loss from the fire. His nose hadn't healed straight after it'd been broken the last time, either, and taken all together with the scar on his neck and the ones on his arms from numerous battles he looked terrible.

"Francis," Torlyn began thoughtfully. "You still look frightful."

Francis glowered at her. "What of it?" he asked, obviously offended.

"That's something we can use. You look hardened, like a man looking for work."

Francis' brow furrowed at her words. His eyes widened as he realized what she was implying. "I see, yes, I may be looking for work. Guard, I think, for a wealthy merchant would suit me well," he said puffing out his chest. "I've done that before, you know. Experienced at it even, I'd say."

Denloa laughed. "You'll need to lose the robes and hide that symbol, Francis, or there's no one who will believe you are anything other than a priest."

Francis gave her a withering look. "At least I *can* pass for a hardened soldier," he grumped.

"At least my nose healed straight," she returned arrogantly, looking down her perfectly straight nose at him. Denloa was never as concerned as Torlyn about her looks, but she wasn't particularly interested in looking as though she'd just been in a bar fight, either.

Torlyn rolled her eyes and interrupted them before they spent the next hour exchanging insults, friendly though they may be. "Mother's, I think," she said, making a face. "It's likely the best option for information. Men's tongues tend to be looser in such a place."

Denloa raised an eyebrow. "Is that experience speaking, Torlyn?"

Torlyn gave her a dangerous look. "No, Denloa, it is not and I'll thank you not to imply such a thing again."

Denloa raised her hands as if to ward the other woman off. "My apologies, Torlyn. I wasn't through being argumentative, I guess."

"Well, get through," Torlyn told her harshly, surprising the other woman. "If Mother's is like I think it is, then we'll not be well served by being argumentative."

Francis reached out and laid a hand on Torlyn's arm, his expression concerned. "You're usually not this tense, Torlyn, what under the Dented Shield is wrong?"

"I don't relish the prospect of dealing with half-drunk, lecherous men," Torlyn hissed.

Francis laughed nervously. "You do it often enough that I'd have thought you were used to it by now."

Torlyn sighed. "In an inn? Certainly. In a place less controlled..." she trailed off, shaking her head. "With Maylin pushing us hard? With the KingSeer's life at stake? I just don't want to get pushed into something I'd regret doing for the rest of my life. No matter how short a life that may be."

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Denloa looked confused. “But I thought the Kin were more...open about that kind of thing than even other humans are. I’ve seen them dance, I’ve seen *you* dance,” she said. “It was definitely meant to enflame the passions, Torlyn.”

“Only because those passions are tied so closely to a joy of living,” Torlyn said, exasperated. “Which is what the dance is really about.”

“But I’ve seen couples leave after the dance...” Denloa prodded.

Torlyn shook her head. “Then you saw them married, Denloa.” At the confused look now on both her friends’ faces she sighed and tried to explain. “If you leave the fire with another and walk off into the dark, you’re married, whether you know it or not. The Kin do not engage in such activities lightly, and neither do I. Lankarien would not appreciate such and he trusts that my loyalty lies with him.”

“But if you had to in order to save the KingSeer?” Francis asked, curious.

Torlyn shook her head and returned his gaze sadly. “I don’t know, Francis. I don’t think so.”

He nodded his head. “I see why you’re so upset, then,” he said wisely. “It is not wise to push men too far, for it can end poorly.”

“Exactly,” Torlyn said, heaving a sigh of relief that he understood. “But we may need to push that hard to get what we need.”

“Well then, we’ll just have to make sure we don’t need to push that hard, won’t we?” Denloa said confidently.

Torlyn smiled tightly at Denloa, grateful for her understanding but obviously not believing it would be that easy.

They retired to their rooms for a few hours sleep before dusk covered the city. They might be out late and wanted to be on their toes the entire time, so a short nap seemed in order. They dressed carefully, not wanting to appear to be more than simple soldiers looking for work, but also not wanting to appear so desperate that no job would be offered. It was a fine line to walk in any kingdom, for wandering soldiers were often looked at with suspicion. After all, if they were worthy, why were they looking for work?

They walked west without conversation down South Bowton Street, toward Mother’s. The small building was not well lit on the outside, but the flickering torch light from inside the common room at the front spilled out through the single double-wide window into the street, illuminating a small path from the street to the front door.

A single man stood guard outside the door, and he merely grunted at them as they approached the door. He stepped aside, satisfied they were not the Bowtower guard, and let them pass. The three were careful not to be too polite nor too rude in their passing as they stepped inside the building.

It was, by anyone’s standards, fairly clean for an establishment that was clearly a cross between a gambling hall and a brothel. Women sat hanging on the arms of men who tossed dice in one corner while men sat lounging around a table drinking mugs of what the three assumed was a strong mead in another corner. A plump woman whose face was overpainted scurried toward them as they looked around.

“What kin Mother do fer ye?” she asked in a raspy voice. She smiled and Francis tried not to flinch away from the smile. The woman had less teeth than he!

“We’re looking fer work and a little fun, eh?” he rumbled, jabbing an elbow at Denloa and laughing harshly, silently urging the women to join his laughter.

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Denloa and Torlyn nodded, both trying to laugh casually. Torlyn reached out and slapped Francis on the shoulder. "That's right, me friend," she agreed, the sound of her own voice adopting the poorly spoken dialect grating on her nerves.

Mother reached out and grabbed one of Torlyn's arms, pulling her away from the others. She stepped back and looked the skald up and down slowly, her nearly toothless grin widening. "I kin certainly find something fer this one!" she said, leering at the skald. She eyed Denloa critically, taking in her delicate elven features. "And this one, too!" The plump woman hooted as she reached out and grabbed Denloa's chin. "This one'll fetch a mighty nice price, asa matter o'fact," she said greedily. "Not many o'her kind around these parts."

Denloa pulled back her chin and eyed the woman angrily, suddenly understanding Torlyn's intense dislike of such things. "Actually, Mother, we were all kinda hopin for jobs as guards. It's what we do," she said steadily, not chancing a look at Torlyn.

Francis leaned forward and put his lips to Mother's ear. "Actually, they ain't much good at the other, just at fightin and such," he whispered loudly, hoping the rest of the room was listening in. "They're more like hellcats than tey are anythin' else. You'd not get much more than a copper fer either o'em," he finished conspiratorially.

Mother's eyes widened as her head reared back, trying to catch Francis' eyes and determine whether he was teasing or telling the truth. She nodded finally, then grabbed his arm and squeezed it. "Well then, ye might want to be talkin' to them over there," she said, pointing toward the men sitting around the table drinking. "They be guards fer some o'the estates in ta noble district and might be lookin' fer more."

She turned to leave, but hesitated, glancing over her shoulder again at Denloa and Torlyn. "Ye sure tey be like hellcats?" she asked, pleading with him to change his story.

Francis shrugged, then pointed at his face, recalling Torlyn's comments about his looks earlier. "Ye want yer customers to look like this?" he asked.

Mother shrank back from the burnt stubble and crooked nose, lifting her hands and waving them in front of her. "No, no, o'course not. Ye be wanting mead at least?" she asked hopefully.

"That'd be good, Mother," he nodded as he led Denloa and Torlyn toward the table full of men.

Francis looked at the table and finding a few empty chairs grabbed one for himself. He sat heavily in the chair and returned the nods that some of the men sent in greeting. He looked up as a young girl, her face painted so heavily it actually detracted from her natural beauty, set a mug in front of him.

"That'll be three coppers, sir," she said politely.

Francis grunted and tossed five coppers on the table, not watching the girl as she reached under his arm and scooped them into her hand. He took a large draught from the mug and smacked his lips. "Ahhhh," he commented, "not bad a'tall."

One of the other men snorted and elbowed his companion. "Not bad fer five coppers, ye mean," he scoffed.

Francis laughed loudly and nodded his head. "Yer right me friend, yer so right. But when ye have very few coppers in yer pouch, ye take what ye kin git."

The other men nodded as though Francis was the wisest man in the world. One of them raised his mug in the priest's direction. "Aye, I been down that road, me friend."

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Francis drank again, glancing to see how Torlyn and Denloa were doing. Torlyn had schooled her face into a fairly neutral expression, but Francis could tell when he met her eyes briefly that she wanted him to hurry. Denloa's expression said she was more comfortable, but her back was stiff. Francis set his mug down on the table and wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve.

"I heard some of ta nobles and merchants might be hiring," Francis said into the silence. "Mebbe I kin fill me purse with more than copper."

"Aye!" a voice responded. "Firten be hiring. Not fer long term, but fer some short term travel to ta north."

"Pays a silver a day, don' he?" another voice added.

"Aye," the first man replied, nodding his head. "A silver a day be mighty good pay!"

The other men chortled at his response, one reaching over and patting him on the back. "He's a skald, me thinks!" one said earnestly. "Makin' rhymes and all dat."

Torlyn bit the inside of her tongue to keep from exploding at the jest. Denloa laughed along with the men, trying to appear as though she enjoyed their company.

"I heard Chastain wert payin' two silver a day!" Francis exclaimed.

"Oh, aye, he is," a new voice piped in. "But he don' need any more men."

"Ye kin always use more men, cantcha?" Denloa finally asked, raising her mug and drinking it down.

"Mosta ta time, yes," the voice replied. "But Chastain, tey already have at least a score out there."

"Aw, Giten, ye can't count," another slapped his hand on the table. "Chastain gots two fist just on the gate and at leasta score inside."

"Dat seems like too many, if'n ye wert askin' me," Denloa said.

"Aye indeed, lass, it is," another replied. "But he hasta have enough fer his wagons and enough fer his young niece."

Denloa snorted. "Whatsa young girl need guards fer?" she asked, elbowing the man next to her.

The man who'd spoken leaned forward on the table. "I heard her mama done sent her to Chastain ta keep her from bein' too familiar with ta boys, if'n ya know what I mean."

One of the other men spoke up. "Dat may be true, dere's a young girl I seen a coupla times in ta window on ta second floor, just astarin' out ta winda as if she's lookin' fer a way to escape ta place."

Francis gave the man a quizzical look. "Is she easy on ta eyes?"

The man nodded. "Aye, she be young and pretty ta be sure," he said.

Francis drained the rest of his mug. "Mebbe I'll have to set her free, then and see fer myself!" he said, leering.

A couple of men snickered at that, but several more glanced surreptitiously at Torlyn and Denloa. "Wit tese two here I'da think ye'd have no need of other women!"

Denloa gave a warning glance at the man next to her when he slid a hand down onto her knee and squeezed. "If'n ye like yer hand, ye'll move it afore I take it off and beat ye with it," she snarled.

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The man looked at her, surprised, but snatched his hand away, laughing nervously. “If’n that one,” he gestured at Torlyn, “is as fierce as tis one, I kin see why ye’d be wantin’ a different one!”

Francis laughed and leaned in. “Aye, tey both are hellish in any situation,” he said laughing. “Tat’s why I keep wit ‘em.”

The men nodded appreciatively, not understanding a man who willingly traveled with women, but understanding a man who appreciated a good sword arm.

Francis sighed dramatically. “I’m guessin’ if Chastain has that many men already tat I’ll just hafta be findin’ other work then.”

The men nodded. “Aye, but a silver in yer pocket tis a far sight better tan none,” one said wisely.

Francis stood. “I best be getting’ ta women back ta the hay,” he said, winking. “And get about findin’ work in ta mornin’.” He looked longingly at the mugs of ale. “Kin’t be spendin’ me last coppers on ale just yet.”

The men closest to him slapped him on the back and nodded. “Come back when ye have more, we kin dice!” one called out as the women came around the table and joined Francis. Francis waved his hand in response to the man’s call and headed for the door.

A few minutes later the three were walking steadily back down South Bowton Street. Denloa blew out an explosive breath. “I can understand why that bothers you, Torlyn,” she said, shuddering visibly. “That was horrible!”

Torlyn nodded, but kept her thoughts to herself. She hadn’t said much because her accent was too thick and she feared she would have said something that gave them away.

“Well,” said Francis, almost cheerfully. “Now we know that there are at least thirty guards at the estates, ten on the gate, and that a young girl appears to be confined upstairs.”

“And all two days before Maylin expected!” Denloa chimed in, pleased with their little foray to Mother’s after all.

“I think we can do one better than that,” Torlyn said thoughtfully.

“What do you mean?” Francis asked as they turned and headed into the King’s Inn.

“Maxius is very ordered, very in control,” she began as they walked through the door.

“So?” Francis asked, starting to become annoyed. “Just spit it out, Torlyn,” he demanded as they walked up the stairs and headed toward Maylin’s room.

“He requires floor plans for all buildings, and Severenal mentioned that Chastain had rebuilt in the past few years – since Maxius took the throne,” she said, stopping in front of Maylin’s door.

Francis hooted. “That means we can get the plans from the city administrator!” He reached up and knocked on the door, stepping back in surprise when it opened as his knuckles hit the wood.

The three exchanged worried glances and then slipped inside the room, Denloa entering last and closing the door behind her.

Francis walked to a chair in the room and sat down heavily. Torlyn followed him and perched on the arm, laying an arm across the back behind Francis’ head. Denloa

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leaned against the door, crossing her ankles and folding her arms across her chest. No one spoke as they watched Maylin pace back and forth like a caged tiger.

After a few minutes of pacing Maylin stopped and stared at Francis and Torlyn. "Well?" he asked.

For a moment Francis felt the urge to make him wait a while longer, but then he caught sight of the crazed look in Maylin's eyes and changed his mind. "The Chastain Estates. Ten men on the gate, at least twenty more inside. The KingSeer is on the second floor."

Maylin opened his mouth to yell at his friends but clamped it shut as the words sunk in. "You found out all that today?" he asked incredulously.

Francis nodded. "We did."

Maylin ran a hand through his lengthening hair, pushing it back away from his face. "So we can leave tomorrow?" he asked hopefully.

Torlyn sat forward on the chair. "Maylin, we have no plan on how to get in, we just got back from finding out about the guards," she said earnestly. "We need more time."

Maylin threw his head back and groaned. "I don't know if I *can* wait."

Denloa uncrossed her ankles and stood, coming to stand next to Maylin and laying a reassuring arm across his shoulders. "Maylin, one more day, instead of two, that's all we're asking. We need one more day to plan and then we'll go get her."

Maylin looked at Denloa gratefully. He sighed heavily. "Alright, one more day."

Francis yawned. "Alright then, I'm off to bed. The mead wasn't that good and I've been up since dawn."

Maylin's head swung around at Francis' words, his eyes full of panic. Torlyn stood and went to his side as Francis stood, leading the knight back to the chair and encouraging him to sit. Maylin sat, his back stiff and hands gripping the arms of the chair as though he were holding on for his life. Torlyn knelt beside him and looked up into his face, worry lining her own face.

Francis turned and looked at Maylin, then at Torlyn. Torlyn nodded. "I'll stay with Maylin, you two go on and get some sleep. I'll meet you in the morning and we'll get those floorplans."

Denloa and Francis nodded. Francis opened the door and stepped out and Denloa followed, but turned at the last moment. "If you need me, call."

Torlyn nodded gratefully as Denloa slipped through the door and closed it behind her. She sat next to Maylin, neither speaking, until she finally grew so tired she laid her head on his arm and closed her eyes.

She awoke with a start to the feel of Maylin shaking her arm. "Torlyn, wake up."

She yawned and stretched, surprised to find herself lying on the floor next to the chair, covered by a rough, woolen blanket. She sat up abruptly, looking around. She saw Maylin kneeling next to her, a half-smile on his face.

"Fine watch you are," he said teasingly. "Fell asleep less than a glass after the others left."

Torlyn shook her head and tried to push the long strands of hair that had come free in her sleep away from her face. "Gave you something to keep you occupied though, didn't I?" she countered. "I need to go, Francis and Denloa are probably waiting for me, eating all the bacon."

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She took the hand Maylin offered and let him pull her to her feet. She straightened her clothing and smiled up at Maylin. "Well, you look fine. Are you feeling well enough to join us?"

"As a matter of fact, I am," he said. "I need to get out of this room before I go mad. Here, outside, it doesn't matter, I still feel her pull," he said softly, glancing to the north. "And at least I'll be doing something to forward getting to her."

Torlyn nodded and then bowed, holding her hand out in the direction of the door. "After you, good sir Knight," she said.

Maylin managed a half smile as he turned and went to the door, holding it open and waiting for Torlyn to slip through under his arm. They walked down the stairs to find Francis and Denloa picking at three plates of food. They looked up and surprise flashed across both their faces at the sight of Maylin joining them.

"Maylin!" Francis called out, gesturing with his hand. "Come on then, before Denloa eats everything in sight!" he entreated as he reached out and grabbed a biscuit from in front of Denloa.

Maylin shook his head as he approached, glad to see his friends in such high spirits. He sat down and picked up a knife, spearing a piece of ham from the plate in front of Francis and tearing off a piece with his teeth.

Torlyn sat and waved at the innkeep, who hurried over. "One more plate, my good man, if you wouldn't mind."

The man bobbed his head. "Of course, mistress," he said before he scurried off to the kitchen.

"Alright, we need to visit the administrator's, and that's just across the street in the palace square," Denloa said, suddenly serious.

"And then we need a plan," Maylin said, chewing hungrily at a chunk of ham dangling on the end of his knife.

"Yes, a plan," Denloa agreed. "More than seven to one odds isn't something I wish to run into unprepared."

"Why can't we petition King Maxius? Ask for some troops? Surely he can't abide kidnapping in his kingdom?" Francis asked.

Torlyn snorted. "He wouldn't lift an eyebrow to help The Knights of Antiquum, my friend," Torlyn told him authoritatively. "His family has a long history of knighthood, and he was brought up on stories of the rebellion. He, like much of Dilorn, blames the mageborn for the destruction and chaos of the wars that led to the creation of Custos Antiquum."

"But surely he would not side with the chaos that is Filous?" Denloa exclaimed, surprised.

Torlyn shook her head. "Not knowingly. But what he doesn't know for certain isn't true as far as he is concerned." She stopped and grabbed a mug. "No, King Sir Maxius must see to believe and we have nothing but tales to give to him."

Maylin grunted his agreement. "Torlyn is right," he said. "And even if we had proof, he wouldn't be likely to help anyway. He doesn't believe in the Tale, if rumors are to be believed, nor in the sanctity of the Seeresses who tell it," he continued, his face growing dark. He lowered his voice. "A knight returned from Ralistan about a year ago. Spoke of his petition to the king for assistance in rescuing a Seeress he had tracked to a small house in this very district. Not only did Maxius not help him, but after the knight

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managed to rescue the Seeress, the Bowtower Guard caught him trying to sneak her out of the city and nearly killed them getting them out of the kingdom. Tossed them across the border like a sack of potatoes and left them for dead.”

Francis was muttering under his breath at the tale Maylin told and Denloa was shaking her head with disbelief.

“But he let some Knights of Justice into the kingdom to escort Seeresses, didn’t he?” Denloa asked. “At least that’s what I heard.”

Torlyn nodded. “He did, but only because Lady Arial asked him to. And he only let a few in, not a full contingent. They’re allowed to escort Seeresses, but that just means the Bowtower Guard won’t bother them. They still won’t actively help.”

They quieted as the innkeep hurried over to them and set a plate in front of Torlyn. He looked at her expectantly and she rolled her eyes and reached into her pouch, retrieving a gold coin and handing it to the man. He smiled at her and bowed, then turned and disappeared again.

“So we can’t ask Maxius because he won’t help. Not even for the KingSeer,” Francis said angrily.

“But we could ask the Dirgians,” Francis offered. “I know there’s a Fist here in Ralistan, though they don’t flaunt it about.”

Maylin shook his head. “No, I’ll not have them in trouble with the Bowtower Guard for assisting us in an assault on a merchant’s estates. We’re on our own, I’m afraid, and seven to one odds is better than I expected, to be truthful.”

Torlyn sighed. “Alright then, we need the floor plans, and we need a plan of attack.”

“Right,” Denloa said, snatching a biscuit from Francis’ plate.

Francis glared at her. “Are you ever going to eat from your *own* plate Denloa?”

Denloa laughed. “For some reason, Francis, the food is more appealing when it’s on your plate.”

They cleared the rest of the plates of food and then left the inn and headed across the street to the palace square in the direction of the administrator’s building. The floor plans were readily available, and for a mere fifty Dilornian gold coins, which Torlyn reluctantly supplied, they returned to the inn with the plans in hand.

They sat for several hours, trying to come up with a plan of attack.

“Ten men on the gate, you’re sure that’s what they said?” Maylin asked for the third time.

Francis nodded and poked at the plans angrily. “Yes, Maylin, that’s what they said. Ten men. That’s the same number as your fingers, unless you keep questioning my veracity.”

Maylin looked mildly at the priest and then stood and stretched. “We can’t go straight in, a frontal assault will only give them time to alert the house guards, and we’ll never get past the front door.”

Denloa looked at the map and pointed to the coachhouse, then slid her finger across the parchment to the back door. “That, I think, is our best option.”

The others leaned in and looked at the two places she had pointed. There were over one hundred feet between the coachhouse and the back door. Francis snorted. “Sure, Denloa, that makes sense. But you forget one thing,” he said.

“What’s that?”

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“How in the name of Dirge are we going to get *into* the coachhouse without being seen?” the priest yelled, throwing up both hands in frustration.

Denloa rolled her eyes and stood, moving to lean against the wall. “I don’t know, Francis, maybe over the wall?” she offered.

Both Francis and Maylin gave her withering looks. “Not after Salena, no. No walls,” Francis told her firmly.

Maylin shook his head emphatically. “No walls,” he said.

Torlyn leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees, rubbing at her temples with the tips of her fingers. “Denloa is right, the path between the coachhouse and the back door is best, but we can’t go over the walls. We need to get into the coachhouse without being seen.”

“Thanks for clarifying, Torlyn, now how about coming up with a way to do that?” Francis spat.

They all sat silent for a time, until Torlyn suddenly snapped her fingers and stood. They all looked at her expectantly, waiting for her to speak.

When she didn’t say anything Francis blew out his breath explosively. “Well?” he prompted.

“What goes into a coachhouse without being heavily examined?” she asked mysteriously.

“Dirge’s Dented Shield, Torlyn, I hate playing guessing games,” Francis warned.

Maylin held a hand out in Francis’ direction, stopping any further outburst. “A wagon, of course,” he said thoughtfully, nodding his head. “Yes, a wagon. Covered wagon, like the ones merchants ship goods in.”

“Exactly!” Torlyn exclaimed, striding toward the door. “And I know where we might find one heading in the right direction,” she said with a smirk.

The others smiled, recalling Severenal’s words the day before. They raced to catch up with the skald as she left the room and began walking down the hall toward the stairs.

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They walked briskly toward Severenal's, excitement mingled with fear building in each of them as they realized they might have discovered a way into the estates that didn't involve climbing over walls or fighting at four to one odds or worse. Maylin's eyes kept drifting north as they moved through the streets, his thoughts flitting between their plan and the KingSeer.

As they entered Severenal's the man came around the counter, his arms out wide and a broad grin on his face. "Ahhh, Lady Anelda, it is so good to see you again!" he exclaimed. "What can I do for you?"

Torlyn looked around at the shop, noting there were several other people looking around besides her and her three companions. She closed with the man and let her arm fall around his waist, as though she were embracing a friend she hadn't seen in years. She laid her lips on his cheek and hissed into his ear. "We need to speak. Alone."

"Ah, it has been too long, my dear," he said loudly. "And I have missed you terribly." He left her side and clapped his hands loudly. "I'm sorry everyone, but I will be closing now so that I may visit with my dear old friend in private," he said with a disappointed tone. He murmured apologies to them as he ushered them out. When the last person had left he closed the door and barred it, then turned to face the small group.

"What can I do for you, Lady Anelda?" he asked seriously.

She glanced around the counter at the door, catching sight of movement beyond. She threw an irritated glance at Severenal before she walked around the counter and pulled the door closed. Then she returned to the counter and gestured for Severenal to join the group near the counter.

He walked briskly and joined them, his hands wringing with anticipation, his eyes straying to the pouch at Torlyn's side.

Torlyn turned to him and smiled. "When are the next wagons due to deliver to Chastain?" she asked bluntly.

Severenal raised an eyebrow, slightly taken aback by the question. "This afternoon," he admitted hesitantly after a long pause. "Why?"

The four exchanged worried glances. Torlyn looked down at the floor, then reached into her pouch and pulled out a gem twice the size of the one she'd given Severenal the day before. She held it between her thumb and forefinger, raising it up until it was level with Severenal's gaze.

Severenal's hand came up, trembling, as he reached for the gem. Torlyn flicked her wrist and the gem disappeared into her hand. "Not so fast, my dear old friend," Torlyn drawled. "Not until we have an understanding."

The man's eyes were focused on Torlyn's hand. He nodded almost dumbly. "Whatever do you wish today? More jewelry?"

Torlyn laughed harshly. "No, Severenal. We want a ride to Chastain's. Discreetly."

The man tore his eyes from her hand and let his gaze settle on her face. "You want what?"

Maylin took two steps toward the man and towered over him, the knight's face dark. "Look, little man. There's a little girl in that house that doesn't belong there. I'm going to get her out and anyone who gets in my way, or refuses to help, is going to learn the meaning of the word pain," he growled.

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Torlyn raised a hand and shook her head. “Maylin, please,” she pleaded.

Maylin took a step back but his stance was still threatening, one hand on his mace and the other on his hip.

“Look, Severenal. You don’t really need to know why. All you need to know is that this,” she opened her fist, revealing the sparkling gem again, “is yours as long as you help us do this.”

Severenal swallowed nervously. “You people are insane. Chastain keeps – “

“At least thirty guards, yes, yes, we know,” Torlyn interrupted, waving a hand dismissively at his objection.

“You don’t look like thieves,” he replied, his eyes narrowing as he glanced at Denloa and Francis.

“We aren’t,” Denloa said firmly.

“Then why?” he asked. “I must know why you would offer me such a gem and risk your lives if not to steal from the man.”

Torlyn sighed. She pointed at Maylin. “That is a Knight of Antiquum, Severenal,” she began slowly, watching his jaw drop as he looked up and down at Maylin. “I know, you’ve probably never seen one this close before.”

He shook his head, his eyes warily watching Maylin as though he expected the man to strike him down where he stood.

“There is a girl in that house, a girl with the Sight of Shalitor,” Torlyn continued. “You have heard of that, haven’t you?”

The man nodded quickly.

“Good,” she said. “Now, if you know that, you know that Knights of Antiquum are bound to protect these girls, and will do anything to save them.”

He nodded, but not as quickly this time. “And what are all of you?”

“Just think of us as his retinue,” Torlyn said quickly, cutting off the smart reply she knew Francis had on his lips.

“I don’t know,” Severenal said, shaking his head. “If King Maxius hears I helped a Knight of Antiquum...”

“Look at me, Severenal!” Torlyn demanded. The man’s head swung around and stared at her for a moment. “Look closely,” she said before she began singing a tale of her own creation, one that was known in just about every kingdom as hers.

As she finished his eyes widened. “You are ...“

She lifted a finger to her lips. “Shhhh... yes, I am,” she said, half bowing. “And you’d hate to find out that no one in any kingdom will trade with you ever again because of something you did, or didn’t do, wouldn’t you?” she said, nodding her head encouragingly.

The shopkeep gasped at her threat. “You wouldn’t!” he hissed.

Francis laughed. “Oh yes, she would, Severenal,” he said with conviction. “With extreme prejudice, she would. You should hear the song about the innkeeper in Radael.”

Severenal looked nervously from one to another until finally his shoulders slumped in defeat. “I have. Let me see the gem,” he said.

Torlyn handed it to him and watched as he held it up to the light, his lips pursed as he considered it. He looked back to her and then back at the gem. Shaking his head, he smiled tightly. “You do know what this is worth, don’t you?” he asked.

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Torlyn nodded. "I do. And what you will allow us to do is worth one hundred times that gem," she told him gravely.

He looked nervously at them. "What is it you want, exactly?"

Denloa stepped forward. "The wagons are covered, yes?"

He nodded and Denloa smiled. "We wish to be hidden on top of them before they ride out," she told him.

The man's eyes widened, but he quickly composed himself. "And no one should know you are there, I take it. Not the drivers, not the stable hands..."

Francis smiled grimly. "Now you've got the hang of it. The less that see us, the less chance we are noticed and the better your chances to remain anonymous in this whole thing."

Severenal closed his eyes and mouthed a silent prayer. "Alright," he agreed as he opened his eyes. "One hour. Come back in one hour with whatever you will take with you and I will put you on top of the wagons myself."

Maylin stepped forward. "If you betray us, I will kill you myself," he warned.

Severenal looked affronted. "Good sir, I don't know what you've heard but once I give my word I keep it!"

"So do I, merchant," he said flatly. "So do I."

Maylin finished buckling the couter on his elbow and slapped it hard, ensuring it was in place. He reached down and picked up his mace and affixed it to his belt, tugging at it to make certain it would stay put until he pulled it. He took a deep breath and then walked to the window, staring north. He felt the pull of the KingSeer and his breath came more rapidly. He knelt next to the window and bowed his head, praying to the Great Seeress for strength of will and guidance in the coming hours.

He stayed on his knees for long moments, offering his Goddess his most solemn oath again, swearing he would find and protect the KingSeer, the most important of her voices, the most precious of all Seeresses, the focus of his life until she was safe in the Tower of the Seeress. Then he asked the Great Seeress to watch over his friends as they went into the den of vipers that was the Great Holding, asked her to speak with their gods to insure that they cared for and protected them. Then he stood and whispered one last request to Healrherd, that she guide his soul truly to Shalitor should he fall this day.

Maylin looked out the window one last time. "I come, KingSeer," he whispered before he turned and headed for the door. He grabbed the dark grey cloak from the back of his chair and threw it around his shoulders, recognizing the need to remain hidden for just a while longer. He stepped out into the hall and waited for his friends to join him.

Francis sat cross-legged on the floor, his eyes closed in meditation. He let his mind wander back to his earliest memories, then walked slowly through them until he had reached this morning. He smiled at the thoughts of all the friends he had known, his eyes misted as he recalled the beauty of Keep Dirghan, home of the Knights of the Dented Shield. He laughed at the sight of his young charges in Radael falling over in surprise as he bested their steel with bare hands and feet, and he breathed contentedly at the service he had given to his god more times than he could count.

Finally he inhaled deeply and held his breath for a moment, then exhaled. He picked up his holy symbol and held it as he prayed to Dirge for the strength to shield his

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friends, for the courage to face death bravely, and the will to do what must be done. Then he stood and slid his bare feet into his sandals and strapped his belt around his waist. He headed for the door, stopping only to take up his spear from where it stood in the corner, and stepped out into the hall, smiling grimly at the sight of Maylin waiting patiently for him.

Denloa hummed as she oiled her bow one last time, then strung it and tested the string before she lifted it over her head and settled it across her back. She settled her sword at her hip and then walked to the window, staring out over the city to the forest beyond, her eyes focusing on the trees in the distance that were most certainly alive with Talimaara's bounty. She inhaled and for the briefest of moments she was certain she could smell the tang of the tar of the pine trees, the sweetness of the wood flowers growing in the shade below the great oaks and silver-star trees. Her thoughts flitted briefly to her home in Amorice, to the great tree in the center of the Woods of Roblamar. She reached out a hand and laid it against the window, certain her fingers could feel the ridges of the bark and her ears hear the voice of the tree, calling to her with joy.

She closed her eyes and prayed to her Goddess, asking Talimaara to give her the strength of the oak to best her enemies, the courage of the bear to defend her friends, and the determination of the beaver to see this task to completion. She smiled, content with her life and satisfied that if she should fall this day that she had served her Goddess and the world as best she could, that she had given all of herself freely and without reservation. She turned from the window and strode confidently toward the door, smiling fondly at Francis and Maylin as she stepped into the hall.

Torlyn checked the pouches at her hip and resettled the sword at her hip one last time. She began to sing softly, her voice moving up and down in the language of the Kin as she began to dance slowly. She smiled as she moved fluidly around the room, her legs kicking out smoothly and twisting around even as her arms flitted around with her song. She danced for the joy of being alive, for the pleasure of being whole, for the world that was alive with all the good gods' blessings.

Finally she slowed and stopped, sinking to her knees. She prayed then to Dirge, to shield her and her companions, for a strong arm to defeat their foes, and the wits to help Maylin save the KingSeer. She prayed for Dirge to appeal to the other good gods, to grant them what aid they might as this small group went forth to take back what had been taken from the world. Then she prayed for Lankarien and her children, that they might find comfort in knowing she died trying to save their futures should she fall this day.

Finally she stood and straightened, then headed for the door. As she stepped out into the hall she smiled wryly at her friends.

"Shall we go then?" Denloa asked lightly.

The others nodded, and followed Maylin as he turned and walked down the stairs.

They spoke rapidly as they walked toward Severenal's, trying to formulate last minute plans.

"We get inside, then we head straight for the KingSeer," Maylin said firmly.

"Then we get her out."

"What about the other Seeresses that may be there?" Denloa asked, concerned that Maylin was focusing too much on just one life.

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“And what of the Tale?” Torlyn added.

Maylin shook his head. “The KingSeer first, then we worry about the rest.”

At the forlorn expressions on his friends’ faces Maylin sighed. “Look, I know what you’re thinking but without the KingSeer the Tale and the Seeresses are meaningless.”

Torlyn cringed as she agreed with him. “He’s right. I dislike it and cannot stand the thought of the Tale being lost or Seeresses dying, but he is right. The KingSeer is the key, we must have her.”

Francis gave his friend a harsh look. “Alright, we do this your way, Maylin. But I’m going back for any Seeresses that may be trapped there, with or without you.”

As they approached the shop they saw Severenal motioning hurriedly to them from near the coach house. They turned abruptly and headed toward him, following him into the coach house through a side door.

“There,” he hissed as he pointed toward four box wagons, all loaded and ready for travel. They looked at each other for a brief moment, then clasped hands with one another before they wordlessly headed toward the wagons. Francis stopped and slid his spear under the one he’d chosen, laying it crosswise along the axles.

They all climbed up the front of the wagons, jumping from the seats onto the top and pulling themselves over the edge. They each reached down and pulled two daggers from their belts, driving them into the top of the wooden box that was the wagon until naught but the hilts protruded from the top.

They each lay as flat as possible but for Maylin, who knelt atop his wagon for a moment while he ripped the grey cloak from his shoulders. He would hide himself no more. He threw it to the side, watching as it fell to the ground along with all his doubts. Then he lay back down, pressing his face to the top of the wagon. He reached out and gripped the daggers tightly with his hands.

They waited impatiently, and finally the sounds of the drivers and stable boys returned. They could hear the mutterings and grumblings of the men, all wondering why they’d been cleared out before heading to the estates. Finally they heard Severenal bark a few orders at them and heard the creaking of the doors as they opened in front of them.

The wagons started moving and they all tried to press themselves tighter against the top of the wagons, praying no one would see them and call out to them, or run to the guard. While the outer walls of the city were well guarded, the inner walls of Ralistan had no towers, and no guards walked those walls, so they weren’t worried about being sighted except from the buildings along the streets.

As they approached the walls of the city they still held their breath, praying that all was still well. The wagons ground to a halt as the guards below approached the lead wagon, a trio of guards speaking animatedly with the driver. A few moments later the wagons lurched forward again, and as they passed under the gate each of the hidden riders breathed a silent prayer to their own gods for getting them this far.

Nearly a glass later the wagons began to slow and they could hear shouts from down below. They heard the creak of doors opening again and a few moments later the wagons started moving.

Maylin’s eyes rolled toward the house, his stomach clenching as he laid his eyes on the KingSeer’s prison for the first time.

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Francis lay on top of the wagon's wooden box and nervously watched the great double doors closing behind his wagon. They hadn't had time to check for guards who might stand watch on the top floors of the mansion, and even if there were none, someone might happen to glance out a window. It would only take a single person to look out upon the wagons arriving with supplies to see them, one on the top of each wagon, holding on to daggers stuck into the top of the wagon. One person, one shout, and twenty or more guards would be upon them.

The doors closed completely, and Francis breathed a sigh of relief. As long as they could stay quiet until the men who were running about, unloading wagons and seeing to the horses cleared out, all would be well. Or at least as well as it could, considering that the four of them were planning on attacking a well-manned mansion from the inside. This was not a good plan, Francis was certain of it. If you assault from the outside, you kill the enemy as you come to them, three or four at a time if you were lucky. When you attack from the inside, the enemy is all around you, able to converge upon you from all directions and trapping you amongst them. But it was the best plan they had. They needed to get inside quietly. They did not want to experience another travesty like the one in Salena where their initial assault resulted in so much noise that the snake-lovers had been warned and had the time to kill a room full of Seeresses before they could make their way inside.

So they would sneak inside, and then fight their way out. Fight their way out with as many Seeresses in tow as they could find. Francis was certain that this was a death trap, but Maylin had been adamant that they get the KingSeer out as soon as possible, and this was the best way they had come up with. If Dirge willed that he die today, then he would die today. But if they had come up with this Nordal accursed plan and he died without setting Maylin's KingSeer free, then he was going to plead with Dirge for the right to return and haunt the survivors, both his friends *and* any snakes that lived.

He laid there, trying to ignore the aches that started in his limbs as they complained about laying still for so long. He was just beginning to think that the stable-boys would never leave when a bell or gong rang outside, and they all ran off, one of them talking about dinner.

As soon as it was obvious that the coast was clear, Torlyn worked her way to the edge of her wagon box and jumped down, her lithe form landing nearly silently. Denloa, too, slid down without a noise. Francis stayed hidden in case anyone was still about to see them. When Maylin dropped from the edge of his wagon top, Francis was certain that not only everyone in the estates heard, but people in Ralistan and possibly even people in Salena heard him. Maylin's heavy armor may be quiet in normal situations, but jumping twelve feet from the top of a wagon-box was not normal and it sounded like someone was hammering in a smithy.

Francis laid there listening. No sounds of alarm, no running feet. He decided to risk getting down. He jumped lightly from the top of the wagon, rolling as he hit the ground and bounding up, landing in a fighting stance. Bending down, he reached under the wagon he had been riding upon and slipped his spear from its hiding place.

"Well, that was certainly exciting," Torlyn said, brushing her hair back away from her eyes.

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“It won’t be that easy getting out,” Francis grumped, “and we’ll be weighted down with the Seeresses.”

“You worry about things that have not happened yet,” Denloa observed. “Wait and see, perhaps they will all come to us once we’re inside, and we can just ride out after the fight.”

“If they all come to us inside, even if we are in a defensible position, I guarantee we will not be leaving. I heard at least two fists of guards on the gate, just as we were told at Mother’s,” Francis replied.

“Enough,” Maylin said tersely. “All that matters is that the KingSeer makes it out of here alive. Beyond that, we are as nothing.”

“If we all fall in a hallway, how exactly, is she to get out at all?” Francis snapped.

Torlyn put a hand on his shoulder. “We shall have to get her out before that happens then, won’t we?”

Francis stalked toward the side door of the stables, muttering, “You people are all completely mad.”

Smiling grimly, they followed him. Torlyn and Denloa exchanged a glance that said they agreed Francis was probably right.

Francis pulled the door open a crack and Torlyn peered through it. “No one there, the path to the rear door is clear.”

She stepped back, and Francis pulled the door wide. Maylin moved through it rapidly, running across the hundred feet of open ground between the side of the stables and the back of the house. They had agreed that this was their best option, but one hundred feet of open space was a bit much for all of them. If a guard happened to turn around, it would be obvious that the man in white armor did not belong on the grounds. They let Maylin get all the way across the open space and then counted to twenty. At about fifteen, they watched Maylin poke his head around the corner and look toward the front gate. He then raised an arm and waved for them to come. This was the easy part. At this distance from the gate the three of them would appear as though they belonged, as long as they didn’t give themselves away. They stepped out of the door, Denloa and Francis acting like they were having a heated conversation, while Torlyn closed the door and snuck a glance at the guards. The guards seemed not to even notice that they were there.

“Let’s go, don’t dally. The fools are only watching out,” she said under her breath as she walked past them.

They picked up their pace, and managed to cross the hundred feet without breaking into a run or attracting the attention of the guards.

“I am certain that Healfherd will be leading me to Dirge this night,” Francis rasped as they flattened against the wall.

Torlyn smiled. “You told me yourself once that Dirge favors the bold and the insanely stupid. This seems to be both, perhaps he will smile upon us this day.”

“I also said I was hard to kill, and here we are trying to find out how hard!” he hissed back.

Maylin put his hand on his mace. “Francis, you are one of my closest friends, you have always been there when I needed you. Now either shut up, or leave.”

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“Then lead on, sir Knight. The longer we stand here, the more certain I am that we are all dead and just haven’t fallen down yet,” Francis lamented, his voice full of doom.

Maylin gave him a stony look before he crept along the back wall, keeping lower than the edge of the high windows that lined the back wall of the manse. He stopped outside the back door and motioned for Denloa to come forward.

“Do you sense anything magik about the door?” he asked.

She gave the door a casual glance. “That it’s a door, I can tell. Whether it is protected with magik, I can’t tell you.” She reached for the door and smiled flippantly. “But I can find out rather quickly. Stand back.”

Maylin jumped backward as she pulled the door open. Nothing untoward happened; it simply opened onto a marble floored hallway heading straight into the manse.

They filed in quickly, and Denloa closed the door behind them. No sooner had she closed the door than a servant came bustling through an archway just a few feet in front of them. Maylin quickly shifted his mace to his left hand, and while she was still sucking in her breath to scream, he punched her in the face. As she staggered back, he dove forward and caught her, pulling her back to the others. “Torlyn, take her,” he said urgently.

“What am I supposed to do with her?” she asked, taking the girl from his arms.

“Make sure she stays quiet,” he hissed back at her.

Torlyn shrugged and hit the woman again, then lowered her to the ground. She pulled a length of rope from the pack slung on her shoulder and then tied the woman’s hands and legs. She ripped a strip of cloth off the bottom of the woman’s robes and tied it tightly around her mouth.

Denloa grabbed the woman under the arms as Torlyn opened the door, and then carried her outside, depositing her on the grass just to the right of the door.

“Okay then, we’re going to move on. According to the floor plans, the stairs should be on the right up ahead. If that is really where they’re keeping her, we should go up there first,” Maylin said decisively as he headed off down the hall, cautiously peering down each cross hallway they came to before moving past it.

They snuck the eight or so feet to the enclosed, cherry paneled stairwell, and crept up its length cautiously.

“If we find her and get out, are we done?” Francis asked in a hushed voice.

“We’ve been over this, Francis. There are likely other Seeresses in the building, would you leave them to an angry snake priestess?” Denloa asked.

“Right. We get her out alive, then come back and die,” Francis said acerbically. “Makes perfect sense.”

Maylin stopped at a landing on the stairs and peered around the corner. He ducked back and held up two fingers. At the motion Francis wound his way around Torlyn and Denloa and stood next to him against the wall, lifting his spear.

Maylin leaned in close to Francis’ ear. “They’re facing away from us, can you get them quickly?”

Francis peered around the corner past Maylin, pulled back and nodded once. Denloa slipped past Torlyn, coming to stand on the stairs across from Maylin, her bow

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drawn and an arrow nocked. Francis pointed to the far side of the stairwell and Denloa nodded once.

At Maylin's nod Francis spun around the corner and bounded up the remaining stairs silently. At the top, he shoved his spear into the back of the guard on the right, his spear easily piercing the man's armor and sliding between his ribs to find heart and lungs.

The instant Francis took off, Denloa sidestepped into the corner of the landing where the steps turned and raised her bow. There was not much room for error. Francis filled the right side of the stairs and the guard she was aiming at was partially concealed behind the wall at the top of the stairs. She sighted along the arrow as she pulled back, said a silent prayer to Talimaara that the arrow fly true, and loosed it at the base of the guard's skull. As she loosed the arrow, Francis pushed his spear into the guard on the right, and her target turned, his hand already drawing a weapon and starting to yell. Her arrow flew true, and his movement was nothing but a help as the arrow entered the side of his neck and cut off his scream by piercing his windpipe. He dropped his sword and grabbed at the wall gasping, then slid down it as his other hand went to his throat.

Maylin and Torlyn barreled up the stairs and into the hallway. Torlyn looked both ways before helping Francis lower the guard still stuck on his spear to the floor. Maylin didn't even glance down the right hallway, but turned left and kept walking.

"Maylin!" Torlyn hissed down the hall.

He ignored her and kept walking. Denloa glanced at Torlyn, who shrugged but quickly followed him. Denloa hurried to catch up, looking back over her shoulder at Francis to see if he was coming. The priest pulled his spear free of the dead man with a grunt before following her down the hall.

Maylin stopped outside a door with a small cabinet standing just to the right of it, and turned to wait for the others.

"She's in there," he said in a low voice, "but I don't know if she's alone."

"I open, you rush?" Francis whispered with a raised eyebrow.

Maylin nodded, not taking his eyes off the door. He backed up and let Francis at the door.

Francis put his hand on the ornate doorknob and looked questioningly at Maylin. Maylin nodded once and Francis turned the knob slowly, then shoved the door open and jumped to the left side of the door. Maylin barreled through the door, scanning the room intensely. It was apparently a suite, with a short hall inside the door that opened onto a large sitting room with two other doors in it, one on each of the left and right hand walls. There was an older woman wearing a light grey dress standing in the room, and Maylin's sense of the KingSeer directed him through the door on the right. He turned right, and pointed his mace at the woman on the left. The woman recovered from her initial surprise at Maylin's appearance and began screaming, "Guards!"

Torlyn stepped out of the hallway and pointed her sword straight at the woman's stomach. "Shut up," she snarled at the woman. The woman's scream cut off abruptly, her mouth a tight line as she stood glaring at Torlyn.

"You will not get out of here alive," she finally said, fussing with her dress.

"Then you will not either," Torlyn returned calmly, "for if your call for the guards actually brings them, my temper will kick in."

Maylin did not even slow at the door on the right as he approached. He threw it open and stepped into the room. There was a girl sitting in an overstuffed chair facing the

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window with her back to him. There was a green headband tied across her eyes. "I knew you would come," she said hoarsely.

"I would be surprised if you did not, I have sensed you since... well, for a long time," he replied, trying to keep his own voice from shaking. "We must go, they will not be pleased if they discover that I have come."

"You have killed the Priestess of Pain?" she asked hopefully.

"No, getting you out of here comes first, then I will find the others and kill everyone that interferes."

"That will be the harder part. It is not pretty downstairs," she warned.

Maylin shivered involuntarily. "Have you Seen my death?" he questioned bluntly.

"No, you are too close to me, I think. I do not wish to be alone again, please try to be careful," she replied, her voice full of anguish at the thought of being left alone with these snakes.

He went around the front of the chair to get her moving because she was not trying to do so on her own. He had heard she was young, but not that she was beautiful. He stopped for a second, looking from her light brown hair to her thin face. He reached up and gently untied the headband and removed it, looking into her deep blue eyes. Finally, he straightened and reached out a hand. "My lady, it is time to go," he said urgently.

She took his hand, and stood, turning toward the window. "I am near blind some of the time, but today my sight is amazingly clear," she said distractedly, then turned and face him, smiling as though she were seeing him for the first time. She looked down at his hand, nearly twice the size of her own. "So you are real, then. Lead on, Sir Knight."

He led her out of the room, his stride more confident and his mind clear for the first time in months. *This* is what had been born to do. This was his life, the culmination of years of both struggle and misgiving. He knew without a doubt that protecting the KingSeer was both his burden and his blessing.

Torlyn looked over as he came through the door with Diallana in tow. "Good! You found her. Now let's get her out of here."

The KingSeer stopped and pointed at the grey-haired woman. "Kill her," she said flatly.

Maylin fumbled at his belt for his mace, no question on his face.

Torlyn raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

"She has been my jailer these long months, and more importantly, she will call the guards as soon as we are gone. She must die," the KingSeer replied.

Torlyn raised the tip of her sword a little. "Turn around," she ordered. The woman turned, slowly and reluctantly.

Torlyn raised her sword up in the air and hit the woman hard in the back of her head with the hilt of her weapon. There was a crack, and the woman fell to the floor. "There, now she will not sound any alarms for a long time," Torlyn said with a smile, pleased with her solution.

The KingSeer made a face. "If you're certain that is enough..." she trailed off.

Maylin hefted his mace and looked directly at Torlyn. "It is enough, my lady, we do not kill without need, for we are not them."

The KingSeer nodded, her face thoughtful at his words. "I'm sorry I asked you to," she said quietly, looking up into his face. "I just, that is," she stumbled over the

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words, looking more like the young girl she was than the fabled KingSeer. “I do not wish to be left here, alone,” she whispered, her eyes haunted by her experience.

Maylin’s face hardened at the vulnerable expression on her face. “You will not be left here, my lady. I will die before I allow you to be taken from my side.”

Francis turned and led the way out, his spear at the ready, Torlyn and Denloa following behind. Maylin brought up the rear with the KingSeer close behind him.

As they came to the bottom of the steps, Francis held up a hand and they stopped. He pointed toward the door they had entered, and snuck a look around the corner. Pulling back, Francis raised a single finger and pointed that way again. He hefted his spear, but the stairwell did not give him enough room to hold it up and throw. He stepped out into the hallway, lifted and threw, immediately chasing after the spear. Torlyn and Denloa took off, running down the hall after him. Maylin pushed the KingSeer ahead of him, urging her forward, then turned the other way and took up rear guard, walking backwards to insure that the stairs were in front of his eyes, just in case.

The guard that Francis had thrown his spear at fell on his face, the shaft of the spear sticking out of his back, and started to scream. The scream broke off abruptly as Francis grabbed the man’s head from behind and twisted it violently. Francis pulled his spear from the man’s back, ignoring the blood that sprayed across his clothing, and continued toward the door.

Denloa and Torlyn flanked the body, each grabbing a hand, and pulled the body out the door with them. As Maylin backed through the door, Francis closed it in preparation for taking the KingSeer out to the wagons where she would be safe.

Maylin stopped a few steps outside the door, his face twisting in agony. “This was a good idea, and I agreed to it, but it won’t work,” he groaned.

“What won’t work?” Torlyn asked.

“I cannot leave her in the wagon alone. Now that I have found her, I cannot desert her,” Maylin said miserably.

“Then we leave with her and count our blessings that so few died,” Francis replied.

“No, that I cannot do either. There are many Seeresses in the basement of this house, some of them barely alive if I understand correctly,” Maylin responded.

“They torture the ones that will not cooperate,” the KingSeer interjected, her face paling as the words brought to mind images she’d rather not have seen in the first place.

“You are not offering us many options,” Denloa said flatly.

“No, I am not. If my lady is willing to take the risk, I think we must take her with us down there. I would be distracted knowing she was up here with the gate guards still alive, at least I can protect her down there,” he looked questioningly at Diallana.

Diallana nodded, swallowing. “I would rather go down there with my Knight than leave those women down there to face the wrath of the Priestess of Pain.”

“That’s just great!” Francis hissed. “Now we’re going to take a defenseless woman down into a basement full of killers and she’s the key to understanding the future! Why don’t you just toss her down the steps and shout ‘KingSeer for free?’”

Denloa sighed. “Sooner started, sooner finished,” she said resignedly.

“Yes, let us go,” Torlyn agreed quietly.

“You people are out to get killed, and I’m going to tag along because Dirge insists on heroes. When I die down there, each and every one of you can count on being

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haunted,” Francis grumped as he stomped past them to the door. He threw the door open and stomped down the hall, muttering.

“We’d better hurry, someone will notice that,” Torlyn said, exasperated.

“Yes, we’d better,” Maylin scowled, following Francis with the KingSeer on his arm.

Torlyn looked back at Denloa and stepped through the door, the other woman following.

“Stupid people want to save the KingSeer and then want to save the Seeresses and risk the KingSeer, next they’ll want to gallivant about the kingdom looking for all the Seeresses not yet born...” Francis stopped muttering as an armed guard stepped out of a side hall and called, “Halt!”

Francis thrust his spear through the man’s chest, barely slowing, and pushed the man to the floor with his forward motion, pulling his spear out as he stepped past the body.

“Idiotic ideas, and here I am leading the charge,” he continued to mutter as he turned down the side hall that led to the cellar stairs. There was another guard standing in front of the door to the cellar, and Francis channeled his anger, flipped his spear up so it was over his shoulder, and threw in one smooth motion. The guard turned at the sound of Maylin’s armor clanking as the knight came around the corner, and took the full force of the spear in his stomach. He doubled over and fell to the floor, motionless.

Francis started at the sight, he’d never seen a man do that from a belly wound, but then shrugged. He didn’t care why the man quit moving, he was just glad it had happened. He rushed forward and retrieved his spear, shoving the body away from the door with his foot.

They gathered at the doorway, four against many. If their research was anywhere near accurate, the odds were at least five enemies behind that door for each of them. That didn’t count those they had already killed or the men on the gate, who might eventually begin to wonder about the shouts and screams coming from inside the house.

“Before we go down there,” the KingSeer said, “I wanted to thank you all for what you have done. I think I understand Sir Maylin’s motivation, but the rest of you...well, I think that all of you are good people, and just wanted to say thank you.”

“It is my goal in life to die rescuing maidens, madam,” Francis growled.

“We don’t leave anyone in the clutches of a snake priestess,” Torlyn said ignoring Francis.

“And these are not just any women,” Denloa said. “The Huntress protects those who see the plan, even if she is not as dedicated to it as Shalitor.”

“Though some of us might die, my lady, if we can rescue one in ten of the Seeresses we believe are held here, or one in ten of the prophecies they have spoken, then all will be well. If we all die here, then I apologize in advance for failing in my duty to you,” Maylin told her seriously.

“Enough of this sentimental blubbering, I’m opening this door, and going to send as many of these fools as I can to meet their goddess. Are the rest of you coming, or are you going to stand here and chat?” Francis snapped, making no attempt at being quiet.

Denloa smirked. “You seem to be in an awful hurry to die, Francis.”

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“I can’t see putting it off so that I get more and more worried about it, better to get going now,” he replied as he pulled the door open, revealing a short flight of stairs down to a landing that looked over a large open space.

They stopped and looked through the door. The floor plans had shown a small cellar, perhaps forty feet in length and fifty in width. This was obviously not built according to those plans. “That’s changed a lot since the floor plans were drawn,” Torlyn observed.

“Nothing for it but to head down there and figure out what they’ve changed,” Francis said. “I’m going to kill snakes, the rest of you worry about Seeresses and tales.”

They set off down the stairs cautiously. A glowing white light from the ceiling softly illuminated the balcony ahead of them, and looking down they could tell they were at least two stories up. Denloa laid a hand gently on the handrail, noting that it appeared to shine a dark red, nearly black, in the soft light. She trailed her fingers along the top of the rail, her delicate elven fingers picking out the grain and sensing the density and make of the wood. “Cherrywood,” she murmured, “from the Langtrue Forest in Freeland Hold. Expensive to have it brought so far from its home. Difficult to work with, it is nearly hard as steel.”

“They are well funded, then,” Torlyn whispered back, knowing that meant that they had likely hired more experienced, hardened guards instead of unblooded men. She gripped the handrail running the length of the stairs lightly as they crept forward, wondering what lay at the bottom of the stairs and, more importantly, how many.

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As they crept down the stairs, even Francis was quiet. The light from the ceiling didn't vary at all, as if it was magically enhanced, or even some sort of magical light source. There were sounds echoing throughout the hall, but the size and openness of the chamber allowed for echoing and made it impossible to tell where the sounds were coming from.

At the foot of the stairs the balcony went both directions, and surrounded the entire room. The floor was still another fifteen feet below them, further down another set of stairs. As they traced the path of the balcony they could see doors evenly spaced along the opposite wall. Around the corner to their left were the stairs that led to the floor below. Francis pointed to the left, and then moved stealthily in that direction. There was no one in sight, and all looked clear at least as far as the stairway.

They crept around the corner and headed for the stairs going down. They passed a door, and noticed more on every wall on this floor. Occasionally they could see doors on the floor level also, all made of the same grey wood and with lockable iron latches.

"Where do they keep the Seeresses?" Maylin asked The KingSeer.

"In some of these rooms," she said, her eyes straying to them as they made their way to the stairs. "Some of them I've never been in, and at least one of them is a guard room. The Priestess of Pain and the prophecies are down the stairs."

"Down we go," Maylin nodded to Francis.

They turned and started down the stairs to the floor below. Francis was on the third step down, trying to see around the corner behind them when a door opened onto the balcony. A woman dressed in black pants and a red and white tunic stepped out onto the balcony, followed by two men in black leather armor with swords at their sides.

She stopped when she saw them on the stairs, but was only taken unawares for a second. "Intruders have the KingSeer!" she shouted.

"You go on, I'll hold the stairs, and I'll meet you all in the afterlife," Francis growled, turning back up the stairs and slipping past his friends.

"I'll stay with him so he doesn't get suicidal on us," Denloa told them, following Francis and pulling her bow over her head.

"Be careful," Torlyn called over her shoulder as she, Maylin, and Diallyana ran down the stairs.

"There are more doors opening, two down there, two above," Torlyn observed, a note of warning in her voice.

Maylin shoved The KingSeer behind him. "If it comes to a fight, protect her as I would," Maylin ordered Torlyn. Torlyn considered his words carefully, knowing that he meant exactly what he said. She nodded once and turned her attention back to getting down the stairs.

As they reached the foot of the stairs they heard the sounds of fighting breaking out above them. When the KingSeer pointed to a door saying, "The books are kept in there," they turned and ran for the door.

Denloa stepped up next to Francis, turned, and took aim back at the three people rushing toward her. She quickly decided that the armored men were the real threat, a woman in pants and a tunic Francis could handle, even if she had some magic at her disposal. Denloa sighted and fired, drawing another arrow as soon as the first was loosed. She took aim with the second and was satisfied to see that the first had penetrated the

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man's armor at the shoulder. He was down on one knee, trying to break the arrow off. She let loose with the second, but since they were probably too close for the arrow to pierce armor, she aimed at the man's face. This one she watched as it careened off the back of the man's head and he screamed, a hand going to the back of his head. "One down, one slowed!" she said to Francis. "One for you."

He stepped off the top of the stairs and onto the balcony to await the woman, who was still coming at them. "If you kill them all before they get here, what am I supposed to do?" he asked, annoyed.

The woman stopped just out of reach of Francis' spear. The front of her tunic had the symbol of the night-fighters of Am'Ethaan on it. Francis' eyes glittered dangerously as he recognized the crest. The woman readied herself as if she was going to fight him with her fists. Francis smiled and set his spear on the floor, not taking his eyes from her. He backed away from the top of the stairs, luring her away from Denloa and giving the elf room to maneuver in case the other man ever showed up.

"Behind you Francis!" Denloa threw over her shoulder, her bow thrumming.

The woman facing him bowed. "This one is mine, kill the elf," she called loudly without taking her eyes from Francis.

"I would have the name of the woman I killed, even if she is a faithful of the Elf-Killer," Francis said flatly.

"Grentilla is the name of the one who will kill you," she threw back arrogantly.

"Then let us not waste time, Dirge will welcome me, but I wonder if Am'Ethaan will welcome you," Francis sneered, moving in fast, already planning where to land blows from both arms and legs.

She grunted as she jumped forward and up, her foot heading for his face. Francis stepped back and knocked her kick to the side with a wide swipe of his right forearm. He kicked to the side with his left leg, and was pleased to feel the top of his foot contact her hip. She was knocked off balance, and had to flail a little as she landed. He gave her no time to regain her equilibrium, instead stepping forward and swinging first with his right hand, then with his left. Right for the face, left for the stomach.

His right fist contacted her right eye, but her head rolled with the punch, and he could tell the damage was minimal. His left hand landed very solidly in her stomach, and she made a noise as he knocked the air out of her lungs. She staggered back so that she was again near the top of the stairs, and Francis noticed that the other guardsman was now fighting with Denloa on the stairs. There was no sign of the guards that had been behind him though.

He stepped forward and kicked at the woman's head as she bent over and gasped for air, aiming straight for her face, but this Grentilla was better than he had expected. She grabbed his foot and straightened, pushing his leg as high as she could in one quick jerky movement. He had to jump in the air and tumble backward to keep her from seriously harming his leg. He fell backward and hit the floor next to his spear. The blue and white cloth attached to the head of the spear gave him heart, and he threw himself upright. He glanced to see how Denloa fared, and was momentarily pleased to see her holding her own. The guard had disarmed Denloa, but was wary of getting too close to her with his sword and so was harrying her back toward the top of the steps.

Grentilla followed his look of fear. Her eyes narrowed as she saw Denloa, just behind her and off to her right, the elf's attention completely occupied by the guard she

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was defending against. She smiled grimly as she spun on the ball of her heel, grabbed Denloa's head from behind, and jerked it the same way that Francis had done to the guard upstairs. Denloa's head spun nearly completely around, and a loud cracking sound echoed in Francis' ears. Without even thinking, he grabbed his spear up and ran straight at Grentilla, who was turning back smiling at him as she let Denloa's limp form fall to the ground with a sickening thud. The expression on her face turned to one of horror as she suddenly realized that *her* end was coming. As the spear entered her stomach with an amazing force, Francis bellowed, "You don't hurt the elf, by Dirge!"

He reversed his grip on the spear, spun around toward the guard standing over Denloa's body, and jerked the spear free, crashing the butt of the spear into the man's head as it cleared Grentilla's body. The man fell over backward and tumbled down the steps, landing with his head at an unnatural angle and not moving.

Francis quickly looked about. The guards that had been behind him were coming around the balcony and would be on him in seconds. He could see more fighting men coming from around the balcony, meaning he had a job to do, and the foot of the stairs was a better place than the top – his footing would be flat at the bottom, theirs not. He looked mournfully at Denloa's broken body and made his decision. He grabbed Denloa's bow from where she had dropped it, and sprinted down the stairs. Seeing Torlyn and Maylin near a door, he asked Dirge to shield them, then turned, kicked the body of the guard he'd knocked down the stairs out of the way and waited for those mewling guards above to try and get past him to join the fight. None of them were getting past him unless he was dead, of that he was certain. Unstringing Denloa's bow, he hefted it in one hand like a quarterstaff and held his spear in the other, ready for them. When they hesitated at the top of the steps he roared at them. "Well then? Come on by Dirge! I'll show you all the Dented Shield before you go to meet your gods!"

Maylin, Torlyn, and Diallyana had almost made it to the door the KingSeer had indicated held the prophecies when a door across the room opened. A woman with a lot of elven blood in her and a strange green tint to her skin, wearing mottled green and black robes stepped through it. From the door next to the one from which she appeared came a rat-faced man wearing leather armor with metal studs in it. He carried a crossbow and wore a scimitar, a castle sword rested at her hip. She motioned to him, and they both started across the room toward the KingSeer.

"Stop right there, KingSeer!" the woman yelled across the room. "You know that room is off limits!"

Maylin looked at Torlyn, who smiled back at him and turned to open the door. Maylin put himself between the two figures closing in upon them and the KingSeer, waiting with his mace in his hand.

The woman held out her hand as she began to run and nearly screamed, "I said stop! That room is..."

There was an immense explosion behind Maylin, and he staggered forward three steps as the concussive force slammed into his back. The room smelled suddenly of smoke, and he could hear Diallyana screaming in fear.

"Sir Maylin! My robes are burning!" she cried out, slapping at her robes with her hands and dancing about as the flames licked around the hem of her robes.

Maylin was torn between the threat ahead of him and Diallyana's burning robes. Her cries seared his ears nearly as easily as the flames would sear his skin. He tore his

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gaze from the woman approaching them to Diallana, dropping his mace and reaching for the KingSeer. He could hear fighting at the foot of the stairs, and hoped that Denloa and Francis would join them soon.

As he turned, his eyes caught sight of Torlyn down on the ground pulling a chunk of wood out of her leg. The door was completely obliterated, and the room was on fire. Maylin grabbed the KingSeer's robes and started beating them, helping her stamp out the flames. He eyed her critically. She was burnt, but not horribly.

He was startled back into action by a sibilant voice hissing behind him. "How quaint, a Knight that serves his lady. Too bad that won't keep either of you alive."

Maylin spun back, scooping his mace up from the floor. The two were right there, not ten paces from him. His expression turned to disgust as he saw her clearly for the first time. She was the most horrific being he had ever beheld. The green tint to her skin was not her only serpent-like aspect, even her features definitely appeared snakelike. She held a castle sword in her hand, and the man with her held a loaded crossbow.

"Surrender or I tell him to shoot the KingSeer," she hissed. Maylin noticed that her tongue had been split, too.

"Francis! We could use some help here!" he shouted, not taking his eyes of the woman.

Francis counted twenty or so guards cowering above him on the stairs. But only ten or twelve of them could muster enough nerve to head down the stairs to fight a brother of Dirge. He awaited them, certain that they could kill him if they tried, but trusting in Dirge to shield him while he used the longer reach of his weapons to harry them and keep them away from Maylin and the KingSeer.

They started down the stairs coming at him, two abreast. *Not very wise, no room to maneuver*, Francis thought. Good, he hoped they were inexperienced. They foolishly came within reach of his spear and he thrust out fiercely at the one on the right. The spear pierced the man's belly, but his armor interfered with Francis' strike, making it little more than a minor wound. The man grabbed his belly as though he'd been gutted, his sword clattering to the steps. Francis pulled out his spear and focused it on the other guard in the first rank, the idea of disarming the front two and stopping the advance forming in his mind.

Just as he was plotting his attack, there was an explosion and the floor shook. The men on the stairs panicked, and the one Francis was aiming the tip of his spear at stumbled forward and skewered himself on Francis' weapon. In those few seconds, with the weight of the man pushing him backward and his spear stuck in the man's gullet, they could have rushed him and he would have been lost. But half of them decided to run, while the other half stood rooted in place, their attention on trying to stay upright. As he freed his spear and pushed the body out of the way, one of the guards was shoved off the steps and fell face-first onto the cobblestone floor.

As they were trying to sort themselves out, a shout came from where Maylin and Torlyn were fighting. "Francis! We could use some help here!"

"Shouting for your little Dirgian won't help, he's busy with several of my guardsmen. Now drop your weapon or he shoots," the woman hissed at Maylin.

"I can't. No matter how many times you threaten, I cannot let you have her. Even if I could, I would not, but I can not. If we all die here, so be it, but I cannot let you have her, I will resist to the end," he gritted through his teeth.

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She lifted a hand and pointed behind him and the crossbow fired. Maylin spun in horror, watching as the bolt sank into Torlyn's right thigh with a nauseating sound. Torlyn slumped back down the shattered doorframe she had been using for support. "That's for burning my copy of the Tale!" the green-tinged woman hissed angrily. Maylin felt a pang of guilt because he preferred his friend get shot over the KingSeer.

The crossbowman was reloading, and yet Maylin didn't dare rush him for fear that the Priestess of Pain, for he was certain that was who this woman was, might step in and grab Diallana while he was wresting the crossbow from the man. He stood there helplessly as the man finished reloading, his eyes crazed as he frantically sought a way out of his dilemma.

As soon as the rat-faced man finished reloading, The Priestess of Pain pointed behind Maylin. The angle was such that he knew with a sickening feeling where that shot was aimed. He braced himself to dive in front of the shot and watched in dread as the crossbow came up and took a bead just to his left.

The man was taking his time, aiming carefully, meaning that he was going to shoot just past Maylin. *Easy enough to get a shoulder in the way*, Maylin thought hopefully. He gauged the distance and angle and thought he could get the edge of his armor in the path of the bolt and deflect the shot, rather than take the full hit in his shoulder. He swallowed past the fear of what might befall the KingSeer if he died, but he could do nothing else. He could not allow the bolt to harm her and there was no other way to stop it without allowing the Priestess to simply waltz past him and take her.

The guards were getting themselves sorted out when Francis heard the *thunk* of a crossbow going off. He glanced to Maylin and Torlyn, and decided they were in greater need than he was. Keeping half an eye on the men on the stairs who were trying to get the nerve to attack him, he sighted in on the crossbowman, watching him reload and wondering why Maylin just stood there. Finally, when it was clear that Maylin was going to let that imbecile shoot him, Francis threw his spear. He could fight without it, but against this many, he really didn't want to. It was his reach, and without it he was going to have to fight these men for real, but he saw no other solution than to let Maylin take the bolt and possibly die.

"Fly, by Dirge!" Suddenly echoed across the room, and Francis' spear hit the man in the left armpit just as he was loosing the bolt. The crossbow fired its bolt well above Maylin's head, and the spear went clear through the man, who fell to the floor in a heap.

As soon as the spear left his hand, one of the guards yelled, "Get him, he threw the spear!" Three of the guards pushed forward and headed down the stairs at him. He grabbed his mace from his belt and flailed out at the first one to get near him, hoping to scare them off. They did stagger back, but then all three – two in front and one behind – came rushing at him. Francis mentally prepared to die. Even if he beat these three, there were still more above them and he could only take so much before even he would be forced to concede defeat.

A sword slashed out at him from his left and he knocked it aside with his mace. He saw the other coming, but the heavy mace was never going to reverse and get back in time to block it, so he twisted his body instead. He grimaced as the blade sliced along his ribs, leaving a painful gash. He managed to pull his mace back around and stepped up on the first step, backhanding the blunt weapon at the guard on his right. The man tried to move back, but there was another man behind him, and he stumbled on the stairs. Francis

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hit him solidly in the side and knocked him half over the railing on the steps, his sword clattering uselessly across the floor.

Francis felt the other man's sword cut into his shoulder, felt the scrape of the weapon against his bones. He clenched his teeth against the pain and swung Denloa's bow up with his left arm, feeling the pain in his shoulder as he did so. He brought the bow down with all of his might, moving up another step. The bow hit the man who had stabbed him squarely atop his head, so hard that it split the solid bow in two, causing the man's head to bounce around as if the muscles in his neck were flimsy. A second later the man crumpled on the steps, motionless. The return stroke of his mace took the third man in the hip, and Francis smiled tightly at the sound of bones cracking. The man fell down screaming and writhing and Francis bashed him in the head with the broken end of Denloa's bow until he was silent, and then dropped the broken bow on the steps.

Covered in blood, aching from his wounds, but determined to see this through to the bitter end, he looked up the steps and screamed at the remaining guards. "By Dirge's Dented Shield, either you're coming down or I'm coming up, which is it?"

As soon as the man with the crossbow hit the ground Maylin launched himself at the Priestess of Pain, growling and swinging his mace. The smoke was getting thicker, and he wanted to end this quickly. The woman danced back a bit and swung her own mace. Maylin abruptly stopped his forward movement, put his other hand on the hilt of his mace, and hit her weapon with his as hard as he could. His mace vibrated so hard that it hurt his hand all the way to his elbow, but he smiled, satisfied with the blow as her mace flew from her hand. He didn't try to stop the swing, but spun with it in a circle, building up momentum for one massive blow to the woman.

As he spun the rest of the way around, he knew if he could land this blow she would be out of the fight, but also knew she was likely experienced enough to simply step back. He came around and saw that she hadn't moved. Maylin smiled, realizing that he probably had her.

She reached out with her left hand and muttered something under her breath. Her hand began to gleam a sickly, dull green color, and she *caught* his mace. The force of his blow should have shattered her arm to the elbow, but instead his mace just *stopped*. His body, however, did not and the weapon was ripped from his hands as he was spun around by his own momentum, staggering to keep his feet.

She laughed coldly. "Now it is a fair fight again, *knight*," she said as she threw the mace away from them.

"Weapon or no, I'll kill you before I let you harm another Seeress," he growled, circling her.

"Those who didn't cooperate had to be given reason to See for us," she replied simply, circling to keep him facing her. "The longer you take, the more of my guards amass. You will not leave here alive," she warned.

"One thing at a time," he replied unemotionally, trying to keep his face from showing his concern. He was well aware that there were more guards coming and that it was unlikely Francis and Denloa could stop them all.

"Really?" she hissed. "Here is something for you then." She waved an arm and snakes crawled from the cobblestones, the mortar between them appearing to become snakes and then slither forth. "They're poisonous, don't let any get to the KingSeer," she

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laughed throatily and stepped back as she watched Maylin try to deal with no less than eight fanged snakes slithering about his feet.

Francis sighed when the guards he was looking at could not seem to decide if they were coming down to fight him or not and kept just milling around. He pushed bodies out of the way and started up the stairs, grumbling the entire time. He couldn't wait for them to decide, he was losing too much blood out of the wound in his left shoulder. It was fight now or bind it now, but he couldn't just sit here letting his lifeblood ooze out while they discussed whether to meet him or not as if they had all *grambuled* day.

No sooner did he step past the bodies on the stairs than they broke. First one, then all four of the remaining men turned and ran up the stairs, throwing fearful glances back over their shoulders to see if the crazed priest would follow them. Francis lowered himself to the step just above the dead men and pulled out his dagger. He cut strips off the cloak belonging to one of the dead men and then created a ball of cloth with one strip, tying it around his shoulder with two more. Then he pressed it into his shoulder to stop the bleeding. He did not even bother to look behind him as he bound his wounds. This assault had been a bad idea from the beginning and it would probably mean all of their ends. If his death was coming from a cowardly guard that would kill a seated man from behind, so be it.

He half turned, and surveyed the damage both up and down the stairs. He had accounted pretty well for himself, all things considered. Of course they had given up all of their advantages and he had taken as many as he could. They had traded in their height advantage by crowding together, then foolishly came down the steps rather than jumping the edge and getting someone behind him. Francis shook his head. Apparently they'd had not a single crossbow between them. There were so many ways they could have finished him, but they hadn't. Guards the world over were just not reliable. Once you taught a man to blindly follow orders they just weren't able to come up with solutions to obstacles. Or Dirge was shielding the insane.

But he had overcome the obstacles in his way, though it had cost them Denloa's life. His eyes misted at the sight of her broken bow and he looked again up the stairs, his eyes scanning the carnage above for her body. He let his head fall to his chest when he couldn't see Denloa's body amongst those at the top of the stairs. *It must be lodged under one of the other bodies*, he thought, promising himself he'd find her on their way out if he could and return her to the forest she had loved if he lived, which seemed unlikely at this point. At least he'd die fighting, as a Brother of Dirge. A glorious death, one he could be proud of, to be sure.

Maylin's sudden yell brought him out of his reverie, and he lifted himself off the step, resigned to die in this place.

Maylin did the only thing he could think of, he started stomping on snakes with his metal boots. This was not as easy as it sounded, and he was missing them or only slightly injuring them more than he was stopping them.

"The heads Maylin! Stomp the heads!" Torlyn yelled suddenly.

"What do you think I'm doing?" he yelled back, stomping. He didn't even have time to rejoice that the skald was alive at her shout. His whole being was focused on stomping on the hissing, slithering mass of snakes around his feet.

"Maylin! The Priestess!" she shouted back.

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He looked up and recoiled from the sight. All his concern about the snakes vanished at the sight of the Priestess wielding a glittering scimitar that appeared to be made of some form of black gemstone. The sword glinted darkly in the light, not reflecting anything back, instead seeming to pull all of the nearby light into itself. The Priestess smiled triumphantly at him. “Now is your time to die, Knight,” she hissed.

She moved forward, brandishing the scimitar like she knew how to use it. Maylin could not back up without risking her maneuvering that vile blade too close to the KingSeer, so he stood his ground, calculating how best to wrest it from her hands. *Now I wish I had listened when Francis tried to teach me to take another’s weapon from them,* he thought caustically.

She darted forward and caught Maylin off guard, the blade hitting his armor in the center of his chest. The terrible screeching sound of metal rasping against metal grated against his ears, and the armor split open enough to let the sword prick his skin. Maylin knew a moment of abject fear. His armor should have turned aside nearly any blade, yet this one had cut right through it. The spot where the sword had sliced his skin across his breastbone burned like someone had just poured salt into the wound. He grimaced and twisted his body quickly, trying to wrest the scimitar from her grasp before she could pull it out of his armor, but she was quicker and managed to pull it clear as his hands reached for the weapon.

Maylin felt the burning in his chest spreading, almost like poison, but not quite the same. He was slowing down and he knew it. That one blow should not be sapping his strength, but he felt it happening and knew it was not just in his mind. She swung the vile blade again and he tried to dodge, grunting with the effort. He winced as this time it was his left leg that took the blow. Again the screeching sound assaulted his ears, and his armor split. Burning pain shot up and down his leg as he dove forward to wrest the sword from her, but again she danced back, smiling.

“You are good, Knight. Not many could stand two blows from a sword blessed by my goddess,” she hissed.

“You mean accursed, and I will kill you with it,” he gasped, but knew that it would not likely be so. He could not support his weight on his left leg any more, and his chest felt tight. He shoved himself forward, but stumbled and went down on his left knee, heaving. The priestess stepped up and looked down at him mildly. “It really was a good try, Knight. You should have taken the KingSeer and left. Though I would have killed some of the others, you’d have taken the important one. Now I have her and will still kill some of the Seeresses. You have lost all with your foolishness.”

She raised the scimitar and muttered something to her goddess, holding it high and chanting louder and louder, the chant evolving into a high-pitched hiss. The sword swung down toward him, and he had not the energy to even dive. He glowered at her with hate in his eyes. “Shalitor see you in eternal torment!” he gasped as he waited for the blade to strike, anticipating the pain but hoping it would not last long.

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The sword came down level with his neck, the power of the blow strong enough to kill him, perhaps to cleave his head from his shoulders. Maylin silently offered Shalitor a hasty apology. From behind him, something spun over his head and hit the priestess squarely in the neck.

Maylin stared in disbelief as one of Torlyn's ornate daggers vibrated where it had struck the Priestess. The priestess' scimitar fell from her hand and bounced on the floor, clattering up against Maylin's armor. She started gasping and gurgling, spinning away from Maylin and frantically trying to claw the dagger from her neck. From the color of the blood spurting from her neck Maylin knew she was dead. He ignored her and turned toward Torlyn and the KingSeer.

Torlyn was standing awkwardly next to the KingSeer, several smashed snakes lying around both of them and a growing flame licking out of the room behind her. Blood still oozed down the skald's leg from the hole left by the crossbow bolt, and she looked more than a little white in the face.

"I owed you that, and now we are even," Torlyn said wearily. Maylin blinked, still assimilating the fact that was not going to die, at least not by the Priestess' blade. He shifted his gaze to the KingSeer, assuring himself that she really was safe. She was watching him, her blue eyes wide and a frightened expression on her face. He gradually stood, his strength returning slowly. "We should go, I am not at my best," he said with a shy grin.

"I have seen better days," Torlyn admitted. "Many, many better days,"

Maylin limped over to where his mace lay on the floor and scooped it up. On his return to the women he stopped and pulled Torlyn's dagger from the Priestess' throat. The woman twitched as he pulled it out, and Maylin stared at her for a moment. He sighed, shaking his head. He couldn't leave anyone, not even her, like that, so he swung Torlyn's dagger and cut her throat completely through, ending her misery before limping back to them and handing Torlyn her weapon.

"Thank you, you saved my life," he said simply, his eyes eloquently saying what he could not.

Torlyn bowed her head, then raised it and met his eyes. "You did the same for me, back at the inn of Damside, in the barn," she said, her face darkening at the memory of the Doornian that had nearly killed her. "I couldn't get to you and didn't know what else to do. I've never thrown that well before, I was sure I was going to miss, but I was hoping it would at least stop her from taking your head."

"It was perfect, thank you. You are a handy woman to have around in a fight," he said gratefully. He looked around anxiously. "Now, let's get out of here before the beehive erupts," he suggested.

"What about the others?" Diallyana asked, her eyes darting to the doors along the walls. "They're locked in these rooms, and more like them on the floor above," she cried desperately.

Maylin drew in a deep breath, the burning in his chest not yet gone, and tried to ignore the throbbing in his leg. "We'll have to get them out, too."

He limped back to the priestess' body and searched her for keys, finding them in a pouch on her belt after what seemed like forever.

"Maylin, the fire is spreading," Torlyn warned as he stood.

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“Unless you can wiggle your fingers and stop it, there’s nothing I can do about that,” he said practically as he limped to the nearest door. He tried the largest key on the ring, and was astounded when it worked. As the door swung open he hesitated, surprised. There were eight bunks in the room, and eight women in grey, homespun robes huddled together on two of them.

“Ladies, the Knights of Antiquum are here, time to move!” he did his best to shout, and luckily it was enough. With a clamoring of voices they stood and rushed for the door.

The smoke was thickening by the time he got them all out. “Are they all full of Seeresses?” he asked Diallyana, looking at the other ten doors spaced about the basement.

“Most of them have someone in them, I know one is for torture and one is for offices, some are armories and temples, but I don’t know which,” she replied with a cough. She waved her hand in front of her, as if she could push the smoke away from her by doing so.

He took a breath. “Torlyn, find Francis and Denloa and then get her out of here. This place may go up before I can get them all.”

Torlyn looked at him with admiration. “You hold the respect of the Kin, Sir Maylin,” she said simply as she grabbed the sobbing KingSeer’s arm and headed for the stairs.

“This way ladies,” Torlyn said tersely to the other Seeresses. “Let’s get out of here.”

Maylin opened the next door quickly, discovering that the largest key was a master of some kind for after several tries it had been the one to open this door as well as the last. Inside were six Seeresses.

He hurried them out and directed them toward Torlyn. The smoke was now so thick that the stairs were barely visible. He ran, his eyes tearing at the irritation from the smoke, toward the door next to the room in which the fire had started, fearing for the safety of any Seeresses inside. Maylin ripped the door open and cringed back from the horrible sight. The explosion had ripped through the wall and sent slivers of wood careening about the room. The four Seeresses in this room must have been near the wall, for all were lying on the floor motionless, their grey robes spotted with blood. Gritting his teeth, trying not to think about the possibility that one of them lived, he headed for the next door. He did not have time to tend the wounded just now.

By the time he had finished Maylin had found an armory, a guard’s sleeping room, a temple to Delineal Filous, and over forty Seeresses. Glancing guiltily at the door with the Seeresses on the floor, he turned to the women he had freed. “Each of you grab the arm of another, we’re going up the stairs single file. Do not let go, the smoke is very thick,” he shouted, hoping they had all heard him over the growing roar of the fire as it continued to spread unchecked.

He led them to the stairs and started up them. It was hot up here, and he needed to get these women clear of the fire and the house, so he started moving faster. He reached the top of the stairs and turned left, heading for the last set of stairs leading to the main house. He had taken only about ten steps when there was a *crash* accompanied by the screams of women. “Keep going, take the first opening – not door, opening – on the right!” he screamed at the lead Seeress and headed back toward the stairs, pushing women along ahead of him and trying to hurry them up the steps.

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When he finally reached the top of the stairs his stomach lurched. The stairs, and the women who were on them, were not there. The screaming had quieted down, but there were not more than twenty-five Seeresses with him, and a gaping hole where the stairs had collapsed less than 10 feet down. Half of those he had saved did not make it out. There was no time to worry about that now, so he steeled himself and turned after the last Seeress. They were still moving along, so he was relatively certain that all was going well, but he wanted to be in the front should any trouble come along. He pushed his way past the Seeresses and headed up the steps. At the top he found Francis, turning Seeresses and pointing them down the hall to the back door where Torlyn and Diallana waited.

Maylin looked around, his head swinging from Torlyn to Francis. "Where's Denloa?" he demanded, his heart racing as he realized the elf was not here.

Francis glanced at the knight, his jaw set and his eyes dark. "Later," Francis replied tightly, and Maylin knew that they didn't have to talk later.

"Healfherd guide her to her goddess," Maylin said hoarsely before he headed for the door.

When he got there, Torlyn's eyes were bright, but she was handling the Seeresses carefully. The sound of fighting was coming from the front of the building.

"What is going on out there?" he asked, tensing at the sound.

Torlyn shook her head as she gently led yet another Seeress out the door. "Francis told the Dirgians even after you told him not to. They and some other friends of ours are attacking the front gate," she told him. "If we can get them out of here in time, we might even miss the Bowtower Guard."

"That's the last one, and the flames are getting worse in here!" Francis yelled. He ducked and began to run toward them as a piece of the door frame broke off and fell to the floor, flames leaping from it.

Maylin looked alarmed. "Is anyone else in the house?"

"No, I shouted a warning to get them all out of our way. Only one thought to resist, but Francis had just told me about Denloa, and I... I was not pleasant with him," Torlyn told him hesitantly.

Francis pushed the last Seeress out of the door shouting, "Move! The building is going to come down any minute!" As if to prove him right, the rest of the door he'd been pulling Seeresses through crashed to the floor in flames and smoke began billowing out of the opening.

"This way," Torlyn shouted as she headed toward the stables. "It's not far!"

As they rounded the corner of the house, Maylin glanced toward the gate. He almost stopped in his tracks at the sight, but managed to recover and keep moving. There, standing in the middle of the gate was Warrwraith the Dwarf, his braided beard flying left and right, a hammer in each hand, screaming, "Do you want to learn some more!" at the guards. Next to him was Enmoré, the Dwarven priestess of T'Ador. He knew that Obliq was there somewhere, too, even though he couldn't catch sight of him. Several Dirgian Brothers were tying up guards, and one was still fighting, though it was obvious the Dirgian would win out in the end. *The Knights of Antiquum may not be strong in Dilorn, but we are blessed with some of the most loyal friends*, Maylin thought, swallowed past the lump in his throat as he tried not to think of Denloa.

They loaded the three wagons with women, eight in one and nine in each of the other two, each taking up the reins on a wagon and heading for the gate. As they

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approached, Warrwraith yelled up at Torlyn, a huge grin plastered across his face. “I was a merchant once, do you want me to drive?” She waved at the dwarf and drove on as Maylin chuckled. Warrwraith claimed to have been nearly everything at one time or another, and sometimes he even had been.

They pulled the wagons out, turning north, and Maylin shouted back at the last Brother of Dirge he passed. “Meet us at the Binness Inn!” The Brother nodded once and waved to him in response.

The KingSeer shifted on the wagon seat, sitting as close to Maylin as possible without interfering with his hold on the reins. “I’m sorry so many died,” Diallyana said sadly, “but I’m glad you came, or more would have died.”

Maylin grimaced inwardly at the thought of those he’d left behind. “We lost twenty Seeresses in that house. Shalitor See that I can live to forget the sound of those stairs collapsing,” he replied stoically.

Diallyana lowered her voice. “There were nearly two hundred Seeresses in The Great Holding, Maylin,” she replied quietly. “We saved only one in ten.”

A flicker of intense pain crossed Maylin’s face before he managed to school his face into a neutral expression. “Then I am unworthy of my title, am I not my lady? I am not a Knight Protector, for I protected nothing,” he replied tightly, staring straight ahead.

Diallyana realized she’d hurt him by telling him, and she tried to take away the sting of her words. “You are *my* Knight Protector, Sir Maylin,” she told him, laying a hand gently on his arm. “You are the Armor Bearer, the KingSeer’s Knight. You protected exactly what you were supposed to and each and every one of the Seeresses you did save is more than could have been expected of you.”

He did not agree, but did not want to be dogged all the way to Id’ Elan, so he kept his peace and drove the wagon, a cloud of regret settling over his mind.

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Maylin tipped back his ale and looked to his friends.

“Thank you all for your help, it is not over, but the worst is,” he said.

“Helping you beat on a noble from this Forge-dropped place was fine with us. The rulers here are mad, the lot of ‘em,” replied Warrwraith. “I’m just sorry we couldn’t send a few of the Bowtower Guard to the fires to be reforged while we were at it”

“It was unwise of you to tweak the sergeant’s beard,” Brother Agans said with a smile.

“He tweaked mine! Is this real, indeed! No, I a Dwarf with a fake beard, what did the dolt think?” Warrwraith railed.

They all chuckled at the dwarf’s distress, and Francis clapped him on the back. “All I can say my friend is that your stumpy little body and bushy red beard were the most beautiful thing I’ve seen since last I was at Keep Dirghan. We were dead if the wagons met any resistance, between the three of us we had more holes than the wall around Old Il’Negra.”

“Yeah, well, there were a few minutes there where we weren’t so certain we wouldn’t have to come pull you up the stairs, you big oaf,” Warrwraith smiled.

Brother Agans looked at Francis for a moment, appearing to try and make a decision, and finally he asked, “It was close, wasn’t it?”

Francis made a wry face and stretched his injured shoulder, feeling for permanent damage where the sword had pierced it. “Closer than you want to know. I offered my

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death up to Dirge and charged the luckless soldiers who thought to fight the Fist of Dirge. I did it because I was certain I was dead, not because I felt like fighting more. Had I not done that, we might have been delayed enough for the whole building to come down on our heads. But Dirge did shield us, brother. This little girl," he put his hand on Diallana's shoulder, "is that important."

Seeing everyone looking at her, particularly the three gnarled stocky figures of Warrwraith, Oblig, and Enmoré, Diallana spoke to move their attention elsewhere. Having a dwarf stare at her was disconcerting. "What happened after we left?"

"We tied up the surrendered guards, but those who had become followers of the Snake Goddess knew what King Maxius was likely to do to kidnappers that kept slaves. They fought like their goddess' own fangs, trying valiantly to get past us and out into the street, to get away. But there were eight of us, and only five of them. Warrwraith and Enmoré stopped one of them quickly, and we had them outnumbered two to one after that. Brother Enselle took a cut along his neck, and did not survive, but that was our only major injury. We stayed until we were certain the Bowtower Guard could see the smoke rising from the house, to catch anyone else who tried to get out, and left." He stopped to take a drink.

"We met a messenger on the road who said that agents of Filous had corrupted a noble family and burned their house in Ralistan down, and that the King was considering outlawing the worship of Filous. We gave the man food and drink, and after a short conversation about the propriety of not pointing out a falsehood when it was right in our faces, we decided to let him believe what he believed. It seems that the noble was away, and that once he discovered his home was destroyed he told all to the King," Brother Agans said.

Warrwraith raised his mug. "Aye, and it was a tough talk to get your brothers to keep their filthy mouths shut until he left too. Had to keep reminding them that it was true... The house wouldn't have burned if not for the snakes inside," he winked and tipped back his mug.

Francis' face scrunched. "Anything that makes King Bowtower rethink his religious policies is good, and worth the slight deception."

"Tonight at sunset we will have a farewell for Denloa if you would like to come, at sunset, with a bier, just as she would have wanted. I wish we had her body to leave out for her goddess and her goddess' animals to take away, but perhaps being burnt and buried under a pile of rubble is good enough," Torlyn said.

"We'll see her off the best we can," Francis replied. "There is nothing more we can do."

Maylin began speaking slowly, as if the words were being dragged out of him. "She died to help us, but she also died fighting followers of the Elf Killer. Talimaara will greet her with open arms in the Eternal Gardens. That is all that a faithful of Talimaara can ask, is it not?"

Francis' normally angry face was pinched. "It does not matter how she died, she is dead. And I for one will miss her until the day I die. I could have, I should have saved her, but I was too focused upon my fight, and not enough on hers. What good is being The Fist of Dirge if you cannot Shield those that you care for?"

Torlyn reached out and put her hand over Francis' clenched fist where it lay on the table. "You were busy fighting, no?" she asked.

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“It does not matter,” Francis said looking down.

“Actually, it matters a lot. You saved Maylin and I with your spear throw, you fought off at least two fists of guards, and you killed a priestess of Am’Ethaan who would have hit us from behind, or worse,” she sighed. “None of us could do it all, and all of us expected to die in there, that we got the KingSeer out and three of us sit here drinking ale is a miracle that makes Denloa’s sacrifice worthwhile,” Torlyn said evenly.

Maylin looked steadily at Francis. “Saving the KingSeer was worth it. At first I blamed myself for Denloa’s death, and I agonized over the death of those Seeresses. But the Great Seeress lowered her Shrouded Helm over me in my sleep last night, and I saw a world where snakes sold copies of the Tale to all of the dark gods, and we floundered about trying to survive in a land where Kotar met his ends by killing all of the Figures in the Tale that mattered. Archduke Martin, each of us, King Kieran, even Odithea. All dead. Without the KingSeer it will be difficult for them to tie the Tale together, and since the copy we found is burnt, they may not have another, and they no longer have the Seeresses.”

“I am heartened that you had a dream to assuage your conscience, just give me some time to adjust. I do not adjust so quickly, and Dirge does not grant me dreams to make me forget that one of my dearest friends lies dead at the bottom of that pile of rubble,” Francis stood and walked out the door.

Diallana took a deep breath. “It is true, though it hurts me to know my freedom was bought with other’s lives, it had to be. The Priestess of Pain was sending out assassins to stop anyone who got in her way. She told me that she sent assassins after you,” she said.

Torlyn nodded. “And they were very nearly successful.”

“Unfortunately for them, The Great Seeress was watching out for us,” Maylin added.

They continued to talk until about an hour before dusk, then headed outside and around the back of the inn where the innkeeper and his help had built a funeral stand in the tradition of Talimaarans everywhere. It was well built, with corner posts of ash, sidebars of Ironwood, and a box of knotty mahogany held together with pegs of oak.

Maylin strode over to the innkeeper. “You can keep this here? It is so close to the inn,” he asked warily, gesturing at the short distance between the bier and the building.

The innkeep smiled at Maylin, suppressing the urge to laugh outright. “Sir Maylin, there is no body to create a smell or cause disease, and our trees are as fine as those in any forest.”

“Not to mention the notoriety that the Binness will gain by virtue of having a hero’s funeral stand,” Torlyn commented as she walked up.

The brother who had taken over the inn smiled sheepishly. “There is that small bit, but we will honor her as Talimaara wishes.”

“Of course you will brother. You are beyond simple profiteering. We trust you and your brothers to care for the stand. You have a tree to plant in it?” Torlyn told him.

“Yes, a Wizardwood shoot from Amorice. It seems fitting that the Noble Chastain ordered it shipped here especially for his estates, but since he no longer has estates, and soon won’t have a head, we were able to pick it up without having to wait for delivery.”

Torlyn laughed aloud at that. “You are certainly correct, brother.”

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It was nearing sundown so they gathered around the funeral stand, leaving the west side open so that the final rays of the sun could touch the stand. Maylin said a silent prayer to Shalitor, asking that Denloa be Seen in Talimaara's gardens with her family. When he looked up he noticed that Torlyn and Francis were both mumbling under their breaths, no doubt asking Dirge to intercede with his beloved Healpherd to guide Denloa to those very gardens.

The Brothers came out as a group, five of them, one in the middle and four in a square around him. The one in the middle carried a small tree sticking out of a bag. The tree was straight, and even at this young age the top showed small leaves of bright red. The Talimaarans believed that Wizardwood trees came directly from the Tree of Life, shoots transplanted by Talimaara to seed the world. Elves who chained themselves to trees far preferred Wizardwood for this reason, and it was fitting that Denloa have one planted upon her bier.

The brothers stopped, and the one with the tree shoot stepped forward. He opened the top of the box, and Maylin saw that it was already filled with soil. The brother placed the sapling into the box, and another brother stepped up, unlatching a square from the center of the top and removing it. Two more brothers lowered the lid, and the last poured water into the hole where the sapling poked out.

In a hundred years this would be known as "Denloa's Tree", and in two hundred it would be known simply as "Denloa". If the legend of how she died survived, some enterprising person would buy the Binness one day and rename it "Denloa's Inn". That got Maylin thinking that he might just talk to the Brothers about renaming their inn "The Broken Bow" as a tribute to Denloa.

The brothers all stepped back and bowed low to the funeral stand, forming back up into a square and walking away.

Maylin waited as first Torlyn, then Francis, and finally Diallana stepped up to the stand, poured some water on the tree, spoke quietly over the box, and turned away. The sun was nearly completely down when Diallana looked up and gasped. Maylin turned, reaching for the mace that was not hanging at his belt. *Never go unarmed when with the KingSeer*, he chastised himself angrily. But when he turned and looked for the source of Diallana's distress, he relaxed.

Walking across the field toward the edge of the woods where they stood were three of the most famous people in the world. Lord Adocso Cotarre, Lady Arial Brightband, and Archduke Martin Facia walked steadily toward him. Adocso's robes blew out around him, his long grey hair pulled back, showing his pointed ears. Lady Arial walked next to him, dressed in the formal armor of a Knight of Justice, her gold-trimmed sky blue cloak billowing behind her also, and Archduke Martin, dressed as if he were holding court.

As they approached, Maylin heard Diallana Name them. "The First Chosen," she said confidently at the old grey elf, wondering where the floppy hat she always Saw him with was hiding. Maylin nodded and offered her his name, realizing that while he may have recognized them, the young girl did not, at least not from anything other than her Sight. "The Unking," she said, nodding as the Archduke drew closer. "Archduke Martin Facia of Radael," Maylin said quietly in response. She stood staring at the woman, squinting at her before she finally shook her head in frustration. "I have not Seen that one," she said, somewhat surprised.

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Maylin's held his tongue as the three stopped in front of them all, and bowed. Maylin was awestruck. A king, the head of a Knightly Order, and the wizard that made kings and even sometimes kingdoms, bowing to *them*?

Adocso straightened and *sniffed*. "Well done my friends, the Tale needed saving, and I hear that you have saved it."

"Yes, and I am composing the song of it right now," Torlyn said as she bowed in return. Francis and Maylin followed suit.

Lord Adocso smiled at that, for some reason Lady Ariel frowned.

"I have come here to bring you a message of great import," Adocso said soberly.

"I heard once that when Adocso comes calling, say *no*." Francis muttered suspiciously.

"I did not come to ask you anything, whelp, and mind that tongue or I will be forced to turn you into a fish," Adocso snapped back.

Torlyn looked alarmed at the elf's words. "What is the message, Lord Adocso, we know you are busy," she said hastily. Maylin was amused and didn't understand why Torlyn was so nervous.

"The message is that Talimaara does not forget her Sheel-Tel, and that all elves are grateful to you for observing the forms of the burial, even without the body," he stepped past Maylin, and walked over to the funeral stand. Picking up the water he proclaimed loudly, "I water this tree that it may be Denloa's final resting place, and her guide pole to Talimaara's Gardens."

As he poured the water on the tree it began to grow. Not slowly, but rapidly. The roots pushed through the bottom of the box, and the tree grew straight and true. Adocso stepped back as the stand gave way, dropping to the ground when the tree grew too large for it to support the weight. The roots eagerly dug into the earth as the tree continued its straight growth, not stopping until it was the tallest tree in the area and the base of the tree encompassed the entire space where Denloa's funerary stand had been.

Adocso dropped the watering container and turned back to them. "We believe that the more sure-hearted the follower, the greater the tree will grow. This one is done for today, but from now on will grow as normal. Properly taken care of this tree will live for centuries more, and will grow to twice its current size. Talimaara rewards those who serve her from a pure heart." He took something from a bag hanging at his waist, and began walking around the tree, swinging his hand back and forth.

"One day a forest of trees will stand here, one for each of the Seeresses that died in that horrible place. Not just the ones who burned, but the ones who were killed there or died of torture there. Talimaara wishes that their trees grow up, smaller than Denloa, to be protected by her." He came around the tree and stopped in front of them, glancing at Archduke Martin.

The Archduke cleared his throat somewhat nervously before he spoke. "We have all lost much that was important to us. You do not become as we are and not lose much in the process. We can tell you from the heart that this must be the end of your self-doubts. Denloa died in the service of her goddess, and the Seeresses did the same. None can ask for a more honorable death, do not dishonor it and belittle their service by claiming you should have done more. They did what they must, and for you to believe any less will drive you mad." From the look on his face, it was clear that he had not yet shaken all of his own ghosts.

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Lady Arial stepped forward. "You are all great heroes, recognized by The Council of the Ages for your deeds, but they are far from complete. Return the KingSeer to the Tower of the Seeress, and then come visit me in Passrock. There I will treat you to the feast and rewards you have so thoroughly earned."

They stood for a time in awe, staring at the tree and at the only three people left alive who had been close to The Scorpions before they had all died together, ending the last Age, contemplating the importance Talimaara must place on their deeds to honor Denloa so. After long minutes, they turned and headed back to the inn.

"Where I come from, we celebrate the passing of one to their deity with a good drunk," Francis muttered. Archduke Martin threw an arm around Francis' shoulder and said, "Lead on my good man! That is how I prefer to celebrate such a passing myself!"

Adocso tapped Torlyn on the shoulder when they were nearly inside. She stopped and turned to look at him.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" he asked.

Maylin stopped at his words, and the others slowed with him.

The fear was back in Torlyn's eyes. "I forgot about that until the three of you showed up. It was so busy, and there was fire, and guards... I don't have it," she finished lamely.

Adocso raised an eyebrow. "You know that was important, don't you?" he asked.

She nodded her head quickly. "You are angry?" she asked, more meekly than Maylin had ever seen her before.

"Well, it is difficult to keep your KingSeer *sane* if she can't control the barrage of visions, now isn't it?" he asked harshly in his lilting voice.

"Here now, she saved a lot, and if you are going to blame someone, blame me. I am the KingSeer's Knight-Protector, she is but a skald that chose to help us out." Maylin said, stepping forward as if to protect her from the old elf's wrath.

Adocso looked at him mildly. "You, of all people, know she's not 'just a skald' any more than I am 'just a wizard'," he replied with a note of warning in his voice. "That shawl was nearly as important as the KingSeer and she was told that before you all went gallivanting across the world."

Every head turned in Diallana's direction as she started giggling.

"What is so funny, KingSeer? The wizard is accusing us of losing something we never had and you're giggling?" Maylin asked, clearly upset.

She lifted the edge of her robes up, and there, underneath them, was a beautiful bright purple shawl with fine gold trim. "I took to hiding it when the Priestess of Pain started killing people, and it is kind of a habit now," she said through the giggles, appearing for the first time to be the young girl she truly was rather than the most important Seeress in the world.

Torlyn breathed a sigh of relief at the sight and Adocso smiled. "Good then! I won't have to turn you all into fish!" Adocso said with a twinkle in his eye.

Diallana looked up at him questioningly. "You wouldn't really do that, would you?" she asked tentatively. "Not to the Shield Singer, anyway?"

Adocso gave her a contemplative look. If he was surprised by Diallana's use of a Name to refer to Torlyn, it was not obvious. "Why wouldn't I?" he asked slowly, aware that this *was* the KingSeer and that anything she said should be considered seriously.

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“When I See you, First Chosen, I See you with the Unking,” she began, gesturing toward the Archduke, “and with the Shield Singer.” She pointed at Torlyn. “And I’ve never Seen her as a fish,” she said seriously.

Adocso’s lips pursed as he considered her words. “I might anyway, at that,” he said offhandedly. “It wouldn’t hurt her at all, just teach her a well needed lesson for a few years.”

Arial pushed past them, rolling her eyes. “I’m going to see to my mount, and so that you are all aware, I have never seen him actually do that to anyone. I don’t believe he can.”

Diallana watched the knight curiously as she left. “I know who she is, because I have been taught her crest and I have been told something of her, but why haven’t I ever Seen her?” she mused. “She is clearly with you and the Unking and the Shield Singer, yet I do not recall her from any thing I have Seen.”

Adocso looked at the KingSeer, his expression unreadable. “Did the knight who first found you not explain the Sight to you?”

Diallana’s lower lip trembled at the memory of Pancreana. “She, that is we,” she spoke haltingly. “We spent so much time running from the snakes that she didn’t have a chance to tell me everything.”

“Hmmp,” the old elf looked thoughtful at her words. “Well, my dear, there are some Figures in the Tale you may never see. It is rare, perhaps one or two in an Age, but those that are touched by their deities are for some reason hidden from even your Sight. This could be the reason, or it could be that you’ve just not Seen enough yet. I’ve done some research on the subject, and if you consider that the Sight is granted by Shalitor, it stands to reason that if one is touched by, say Dirge, that the resulting aura placed upon the one touched would, in fact, prevent the Sight from...”

Torlyn cleared her throat and interrupted the old elf before he could get truly warmed up to the subject. “If you let him, KingSeer, he’ll lecture you for hours on this,” she warned teasingly, her nervousness gone now that they knew the shawl was safe. “Or any other subject he’s ‘researched’.”

“Indeed!” Adocso *sniffed* indignantly, but smiled patiently at the young girl. “But perhaps now is not the time for this. Another time, KingSeer. Perhaps when you are safely ensconced in the Tower of the Seeress.”

Diallana smiled and turned to Maylin. “Speaking of the Tower, shall we let Brother Francis enjoy his party, and plan for the trip to Id’Elan?”

He smiled at her, “My pleasure, my lady. Let us go.”

Torlyn walked close behind them. “If you think you are going without us, you are wrong. I will travel along on my way home, and Francis should not be alone for a while, I think.”

Maylin smiled. “I didn’t really expect that I’d make it out of Dilorn without you and Francis tagging along,” he said without turning, trying to lace his voice with irritation and failing miserably.

Others might rely on the Knights of Nordal, the Seeresses depended on the Knights of Antiquum, the Archduke of Radael trusted in the Grand Radaelian Army, and still others called for the Brothers of the Fist of Dirge in times of need. But Maylin

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trusted none of them as did his friends, and he knew that no matter what befell him, they would be there when he needed them.

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Epilogue

Diallana looked out the window of her rooms in the highest reaches of the Tower of The Seeress, staring out over the streets of Id'Elan. The city truly was as impressive as Pancreana had said it was, and for a moment the young girl was overcome by a flood of emotions at the thought of her first Knight Protector.

She reached up and idly fingered the edge of her grandmother's shawl. *My shawl*, she corrected herself. She wore it openly here in the Tower, though it had taken some convincing by the High Seeress for Diallana to accept that it really was hers and that she should wear it to aid her to focus the Sight.

Maylin and his friends had brought her and the other Seeresses from the Great Holding safely to the Tower and then shortly after had left, headed for Radael and then Passrock. Diallana had nearly begged Maylin not to leave her and though he expressed regret at leaving her side he'd patiently reminded her that there were still Seeresses who needed his protection and that he could not leave them alone any more than he had been able to ignore her when she'd been imprisoned in the Great Holding.

Diallana had adjusted after a few weeks, the kindness of the High Seeress helping all the Seeresses to feel comfortable in their new home. They weren't restricted to their rooms, nor threatened as they had been in the Great Holding, but they weren't allowed to roam the city alone either, she least of all.

She turned from the window at the sound of a voice muttering behind her, "Very interesting..."

She looked to the source of the voice, wondering what was interesting. Adocso sat in one of the chairs in this room, a pile of parchment on his lap and one piece held delicately in his hands, his creased face wrinkling even more as he squinted at the writing on the face of the parchment. He pointed to something and looked up across the room at the woman sitting in another chair. "Arial, you should read this, it's fascinating."

Arial waved her hand dismissively at the old elf. "That's your specialty, Adocso. Always yours and Redeemer's, now Torlyn's," she added, nodding in the direction of the chair where Torlyn sat leafing through a purple book. "Martin and I, our talents lie elsewhere." Diallana smiled as the blond-haired man who stood leaning against a wall nodded curtly at Arial in response to her statement.

The four had shown up this morning and ensconced themselves in Diallana's sitting room, asking her question after question for most of the morning. They'd quieted after a short repast at mid day, the old elf and Torlyn diving into the parchments and books that had been collected in her room, some containing what she'd Seen before she was rescued and what she'd Seen since then, others apparently copies of the Tale from the last Age.

Adocso sighed and looked up from the parchment. "I wonder why it is that no one ever Saw that the Kingseer would be taken?" he mused, shaking his head. "Something of that import *should* have been Seen," he mumbled.

Torlyn grinned sheepishly. "Uh, Adocso?" she said hesitantly.

Adocso's head swung around to where Torlyn sat, his eyes narrowing. "If you are going to tell me that you found something in the books from the last Age, I *am* going to turn you into a fish," he warned.

She shook her head rapidly. "No, there is still nothing in the books from the last Age," she said, lifting the one she held in her lap up and closing it. "Though I'm going to

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go cross-eyed if you make me search through them again.” She stood and laid the book in the chair and then crouched down next to the pack she’d tossed casually against the wall when she’d arrived. She pulled out a bone scroll tube and walked to where Adocso sat, holding it out to him. “Denloa found this in the farmhouse,” she said delicately, glancing to see the effect of her words on the Kingseer.

Diallana swallowed hard the mention of her home. Maylin had told her gently about her family’s demise on the way to Id’Elan and though she’d come to grips with their loss, it still bothered her to think about their deaths.

Adocso turned the tube over in hands, admiring it. “Very nice,” he murmured as he opened it, glancing up at Torlyn. “Dragon horn.”

Torlyn nodded. “That’s what we thought as well,” she said before she returned to her chair.

Adocso gingerly pulled out the scroll and read it, then shook his head, disgusted. He looked at Arial and held the scroll out wordlessly. The knight stood and crossed the room, taking the scroll and reading it quickly. She rolled her eyes and sighed, then handed the parchment to Martin before she moved back to her seat.

“This, my friends, is why it is so important that we recover what we have lost. This *one* prophecy could have saved us all a lot of trouble, had we but known of it,” he said earnestly.

Adocso looked hard at Diallana, who flinched from his gaze. She still wasn’t quite certain how to take the First Chosen. One moment he was kind and gentle, like her grandfather had been, the next he was hard and unyielding, a force to be reckoned with and not taken lightly.

“My dear Kingseer,” he said firmly. “If you should, at any time in your life, See such a thing it would behoove you to make sure such a Seeing is sent to the Tower, no matter where you may be. This whole thing could have been avoided if we had known about this. We knew where you were, we could have taken steps to protect you better had we known you were truly in this kind of danger.”

Diallana nodded. “What do you mean, no matter where I may be? This,” she spread her arms wide, “is my home now, is it not? I do not think I will ever leave this place.”

Martin laughed harshly. “Diallana, you hold back what you really mean. Though this is certainly a far more pleasant prison than the Great Holding it still is, in many ways, a prison. You feel trapped, do you not?”

She nodded guiltily. While she was honored and pleased by being chosen to be the Kingseer, she was, after all, still a young girl with a young girl’s hopes and dreams held in her heart.

Arial smiled patiently at the girl. “You will not See your whole life, Diallana,” she told her wisely. “And when it is clear you will See no more you must know you will be free to go wherever you like.” Her expression hardened as she continued, “Though I would not suggest you return to Dilorn.”

Diallana’s face took on an expression of astonishment. “You mean one day I will be able to leave? And find a husband?”

Torlyn laughed, delighted with the girl. “Oh yes, KingSeer. Not only will you be able to do so, you will be encouraged to do so!” At her confused look Torlyn explained. “Diallana, you must continue your line. You are the last of the KingSeers, you cannot

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abdicate your responsibility to bear daughters and sons who will continue what Victoria Kingseer began.”

The girl’s eyes lit up at her words, the realization that her dreams of being whisked away by some noble or knight might still come true.

Adocso laughed merrily at her reaction, having read her diary after Torlyn had given it to him while they were still at the Binness Inn in Dilorn. “Yes, KingSeer. Nobles and knights will vie for your hand, that is certain. You will want for nothing for the rest of your life, you can be certain of that.”

Diallana turned to the window again, clasping her hands in front of her. Her eyes were unfocused as she stared out over the city again, but for the first time in months it was not because of the Sight, but because they held the image of her own hopes and dreams once again.

She looked out past the city to the horizon, wondering if perhaps the next time Maylin left the Tower of the Seeress that she might join him and then blushed at the thought. But even as her cheeks turned red with the possibility, her heart beat just a bit faster at the hope that wherever Sir Maylin was, he might be thinking of her.