



Daughter of the Sun

by Lonnie Ezell

lonnie@lonnieezell.com

Read this first

This book is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 United States License. That means:

You are free:

- * to Share -- to copy, distribute and transmit the work
- * to Remix -- to adapt the work

Under the following conditions:

- * Attribution. You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).
- * Noncommercial. You may not use this work for commercial purposes.
- * Share Alike. If you alter, transform, or build upon this work, you may distribute the resulting work only under the same or similar license to this one.

* For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work. The best way to do this is with a link <http://lonnieezell.com/readers/daughter-of-the-sun>.

* Any of the above conditions can be waived if you get my permission

More info here (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/us/>).

Want the book between covers? You can at most fine online bookstores, including Amazon:
<http://www.amazon.com/Daughter-Sun-Lonnie-Ezell/dp/1430312637/>

Want to read the book wherever you find yourself? You can on the iPhone or iPod Touch:
<http://itunes.apple.com/WebObjects/MZStore.woa/wa/viewSoftware?id=295199090&mt=8>

Daughter of the Sun by Lonnie Ezell is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 United States License.

Donations

While I was hesitant to do this at first, after several readers asked if they could send a few dollars to show their appreciation, I decided that I should stop refusing your gracious offers and learn to accept a little better. Always before, I said the greatest payment they could give me was to tell some friends, whether in a blog or in person. I still agree that sharing this book with others that might enjoy it is the best thing you could do, but if that's not enough, then read on.

If you have enjoyed this book in electronic form and want to send in a donation, you can send me a few dollars via Paypal. More info here (<http://lonnieezell.com/readers/daughter-of-the-sun/donations>).

Quotes

"Lonnie Ezell introduces heroic fantasy fans into a brand new fantasy world reminiscent of the worlds of Jennifer Roberson and Melanie Rawn. The characters are well written and have depth, like Elena who possesses powers thought evil by most people, and who resists using them except in the most dire of circumstances. The world feels familiar and yet fresh, with magic and politics which, when woven together, provide an urgent and Byzantine plot that races along. This is not a book that will disappoint.

Michael A. Stackpole

NY Times Bestselling Author of *I, Jedi*

"I found myself taking what I call the dollar fifty cent tour (as opposed to the dollar tour). This means I didn't only absorb the words but stepped into your book. A tribute to your writing ability because not all authors can do that. I was in the village, in camp, in the tent with the children, on horseback, falling off cliffs, and even using the Breath at times.

"I found myself much like the kid in the Never Ending Story....closing the book to hear the horses come to a halt or swords stop clashing. Was absolutely awesome to have the feeling constantly while doing something else, that I had left some friends awaiting me on the nightstand. And as I could steal a moment, crashing on the bed to hurry and help them proceed on their quest.

"I loved it! I loved it! I loved it! So much of what you wrote translated into what life is about. Honesty, betrayal, love, disappointment, cleverness, adventure! To truly live life and absorb its potential is to have the BREATH....we all have that ability! Thanks for using yours to encourage the rest of us!

Katie

"This book pulls you in like your lungs pull in air. This book should come with a caution on it that says once you pop it open you can't stop yourself from reading it. The most wonderful thing about this book is the pictures that Mr. Ezell paints with his words. I could almost here the boots on the stone paths of Harts Haven and smell the wax in Elena's shop. The characters come alive and make you care about their well being. You want the best for them and at times I could feel myself almost willing the story along, trying to help them on their journey. It has been many years since a book has caused my heart to race and this book did it more than once. If you are looking for a fantasy book to pull you in and to wrap its reality around yours, then this is the book for you.

Jason Schulte

The Nut Gallery Review

"Before I say anything else about this book, let me warn you. This book grabs your attention like a lock jawed pit bull, and refuses to let go. It has been said that this book is NOT disposable fiction, and to that I can add my backing. With a familiar fantasy world feel, we immediately identify with the characters. Even if that means we don't have to like their motives. The power hungry duke, the fallen from grace hero, the reluctant heroine, the scared child. All are characters you may be familiar with, but they have rarely been as vivid as they are here. Most fantasy novels take one hero and focus nearly exclusively on them, and if the book doesn't we feel cheated. That wasn't the case here. Each and every character comes around slowly as you get to know them. I know that I can ramble in my reviews sometimes, but there are cases where it is deserved. I refuse to spoil any of the story for anyone wanting to read this. It should be held in your hands and experienced firsthand.

Browncoat

The Nut Gallery Review

"Of all the fantasy/romance genre, this podcast was the best. It started out fast (unlike many), developed several very complex and neat characters, and finished with fireworks.

Flyswatter (about the podcast version)

"Okay, I just happen to think this book would make a great movie! As I worked, I was totally visualizing the environment on a cinematic screen. When I first started listening, I thought the pace a little slow. I took a break and listened to some other stuff, then came back to the story and discovered I couldn't put it down.

PuddyRat (about the podcast version)

"So far this is one of my favorite books I've found here on PodioBooks. I am down to the last four episodes and I can't wait to find out what happens.

Tara Rayne (about the podcast version)

"Daughter of the Sun, by Lonnie Ezell, is worth reading. It's not your average, throw-away fantasy novel.

Chris Miller of Podiobooks.com

To my children, without whom this story would never have been what it is today.

Chapter 1

If for no other reason than the nightmares that came this time each year, Elena hated her mother.

She woke with a start, sitting up fast enough that her head swam. Brushing the damp hair out of her eyes, she took her bearings, and buried the fires of her dreams in the comfort of the stone walls. The tallow bubbled in its iron vat, filling the air with the rancid odor of boiling fat. A dozen long wicks draped over the dipping shaft, waiting to be smothered, shaped, and brought to life.

She crossed the small room, the cold stone floor waking her. She shoved the window lattice open and inhaled the moist breeze and the afternoon sun. Closing her eyes, she forced her shoulders to relax. Nothing happened last year. There was no reason to think today would be any different.

Just force yourself through the motions and everything will be okay. Nodding, she pulled the lattice shut. She shook her entire body, trying to relax muscles that seemed to be made of the same mountain that her shop had been carved from.

Reaching under the bed, she withdrew a small wooden box. Intricate patterns shimmered along the sides. She set it on the counter, and then dropped her hands to her sides. She did not know why she forced herself to do this every year. Brushing the dust off the box, she turned it around and traced the patterns of the mysterious symbols carved in its sides. Small cracks split the box from the heat of the shop. None were wider than a hair, but they hammered home the fact that her mother had died eighteen years ago.

She eased the lid open and pulled the chain out, dangling the amulet at eye level. Too large for a proper necklace, it smothered her palm. The thrumming started at once, flowing in waves through her arm, her shoulders, and out through her entire body. The amulet's heart tugged at her. She dropped it back in its box and slammed the lid shut. One finger of chain lay trapped between the wood, hanging over the edge.

How could she leave me like that? By the Mother, I was just a little girl. "Push through, Elena," she said. "No answers here."

Leaving the tallow to boil, she flipped the curtain aside, left the workshop and entered the store proper, past the half-dozen shelves of candles and the register table. One leg skewed out at an awkward angle. She made a mental note to fix the table, knowing that she would never find the time. There never was enough time for the little things. Between running the shop, raising Jocelyn, and ducking Johan, she was lucky to find time to sleep.

Grabbing the feather duster, she took to the shelves, lifting bees-wax pillars and thick tallow rounds out of the way. Not enough dust had settled from last night's cleaning to make it necessary. She cleaned it anyway. She had to do something. Her fingers slick with the oily waxes, she raised the last tallow round. It slid through her fingers. The solid thud as it slammed into the rough stone floor jolted her from her thoughts.

"Father's beard!" she cursed. As she bent to check the damage of the candle, the rising tide of voices outside shattered the silence. None were loud enough to understand yet, but they grew louder as she listened, hand hovering over the broken candle.

She moved to the front door and cracked it open. She had no idea what could be driving such a commotion this close to Tax Day. Everyone should be getting ready for inspections, cleaning and making as many last minute sales between friends as they could. It was a small town, buried as it was in the crook of the Nightshift Mountains, and no one liked to see anyone taken away to work off their debts. "Except maybe me," she thought. Very few, if any, of the villagers had forgotten what her mother was, and they held the mother's sins against the child. Now they came to her in a writhing mob that swarmed up the wide mountain road, dragging

little Derk in tow.

She wondered if her mother had felt this cold fear. "Does not matter," she said as she forced herself out of the stone building to await the mob with some semblance of dignity. She stuffed her shaking hands into the pockets of her worn breeches.

Stefan Slater moved to the front of the line. His wedding ring glinted on his hand, though his wife had been dead these three years. Behind him, Maerna the herbalist waddled along, dragging Derk by his collar. By the redness of his left ear, it was obvious Maerna had not used his collar the entire way. Fifteen others followed, arguing in small groups.

Her breath caught. In the back of the group, the black tipped spears of the Duke's soldiers swung in perfect unison. Her mind churned furiously. They were never early. No matter how hard she tried, she never managed to stay out of the notice of the other villagers, and small arguments seemed the norm on market day. Yet she had done nothing to draw the attention of the Duke. Unless the peddlers carried rumors away, calling it news.

"Elena," Stefan called out as he neared. "We be needing your expertise."

Mastering her voice, she said, "What would you be needing with candles this time of the day?"

Stefan started to answer, but a shout from the rear of the mob interrupted. "We've need of your mother's knowledge. She's dead, so here you be."

Stefan shrugged, as if to apologize for the man's lack of tact, but did not correct him. Instead, his narrow eyes watched her like a hawk following its dinner.

Her anger bubbled hot but she clamped it down. Now was not the time. Later she would picture their suffocating faces as she dipped the wicks into the boiling fats. "What do this be about?"

Stefan motioned for quiet as Maerna shoved Derk to the front.

"Derk poisoned the Duke's soldiers here," Maerna said.

"That be a problem for the Prefect. Why do you be bringing him here?"

Cries of *Chaya* rang from the crowd, and Stefan nodded. "He be accused of trying to kill the guards by using the Breath to poison their water."

Elena could not help herself. She laughed. "Derk? A *Chiy'el*? Where would he be learning this evil?"

The crowd went silent. No one wanted to be the first to accuse. They shifted from foot to foot, looking around to see who would voice their thoughts. Maerna broke the silence. "Your Mam be *Chiy'el*, dear."

Elena forced a smile, though she ground her teeth hard. "My mother died before Derk be born. Her secrets be buried with her."

"Aye, but the entire village knows your candles have a little somewhat special about them," Maerna said. A sly smile crept across her sagging jowl.

Forcing herself to meet the soldiers' eyes, she asked, "Do there be truth to this? Do one of you be sick?"

The three soldiers looked to their Captain, a good-looking man with a peaceful smile and eyes the color of the

summer sky. "They say this must be what happened," he said, shrugging.

"Don't be slipping the knot," came another yell, followed by others accusing her of poisoning the soldiers herself.

"Hang her!" a voice called out.

"Like mother, like daughter!"

"Taerana nearly destroyed the outpost!"

"Hang her!"

She called for silence but the mob was moving, thrusting toward her, the calls growing louder and angrier. She looked to the soldiers, pleading, but the Captain motioned his men back, then leaned against the cliff wall to watch things unfold.

The scent of tabac floated on the moist breeze. Hope beat back the worms in her stomach. Johan would stop them. He may treat her cruel, but he would never stand by and let her die.

The crowd parted, their voices dying as he shoved his way through. His gait was uneven and he swung his arms wildly, yelling with slurred words for quiet. Once in front, he turned his back to her and confronted the gathered mob.

"Father's Beard! Whose wool-headed idea be this?"

The villagers listened. Some still remembered that he had been a hero.

"How many of you scholars truly be thinking this wee lad capable of this? From the stories you cowards feed the children, he's probably frightened to death of the bastards."

The soldiers tensed, but the Captain motioned them still.

Elena waited, afraid to breathe.

"Stefan--how many times did this boy be helping you fix roofs? Katrin, he be running more damn errands than your workers. All for free. This child be innocent, so take your fool ideas away." He shook his head in disgust, and grumbled quiet enough that she could not make out the words. She did not think that anyone else could, either.

A voice rose above the growing murmurs, "Elena, then. We know she's *Chiy'el*." A handful of others murmured their agreement, but many seemed to be getting nervous.

Elena's breath burst free in a cloud of barely-leashed rage. The sheer nerve of these people and their accusations forced bile into her throat.

"Be thinking, Charles," Johan said. "What harm do she be bringing? She holes herself up in this fortress post and makes her candles. She never hurt no one. Go away."

Maerna spit on the ground at Johan's feet. "I don't much care how you say it, nor what you might be doing years ago. The stories say she Breathes those candles. Heard plenty, myself." She smiled a greasy, gloating smile, the last directed at the soldiers.

"You old hag. This ain't no time to be spreading lies to slaughter the competition. Get out of here."

The expressions on the crowd faded from red-hot anger or fear, to guilt and shame. Within a few long breaths, the crowd started to disperse. Derk broke free of Maerna's grip and dashed down the pathway.

Johan kicked a rock after them and spit. He started to lose his balance, but caught it before falling. The spit landed in his beard.

She looked to the cliff that bordered the path and found the soldiers waiting. The Captain watched her, his brow furrowed. The others whispered among themselves. Panic gripped her again. They should not be here. Not this early.

Smoke drifting on the breeze snapped her out of her reverie. She turned to see thin blue-gray wisps floating out of the rear windows. She ran through the doorway, almost ripping the door from its leather hinges. The dampness of pre-rain mixed with the smoke rising from her mother's box. Small tongues of blue and green flames caressed its sides. She shook her head. She had to learn to control her temper.

Grabbing a bucket of water, she doused the box. Steam billowed out, forcing her to step back. It filled her sight, blocking the rest of the room from view and...

... fires raged, pulled from the beacon fire in the nearby tower to surround the woman standing in the midst of a dozen soldiers. The men danced in and out, searching for an opening to grab her. She stuck her hands in the flame and then pulled them out, a small ball of fire in each palm. She threw them at the Duke who sat on his horse, watching, a smile on his narrow face. He doused them with a jet of water that...

... sent the steam into her lungs, the moisture forcing a coughing fit. Tears streamed down Elena's cheeks, tracing clean lines through the layer of dirt and steam that covered her face.

"Why mother? Why?" She almost choked on the words as the sobs fought for control.

"So, wife," Johan said. "Do the rumors be true?"

He said it with an angry calm. His slur was barely audible. He stood in the doorway to her back room. Her sanctuary. The simple question transformed the pain from her mother's death into arrows of rage that she spat back at him.

"Do there be any truth to the candles? Is that what you be asking?" She stomped towards him, both hands reaching to grab his tunic and shake some intelligence loose. "How long do you be knowing me? Still you have the balls to be asking me that?" Her hands shook, her fists turning white, as much from the rage as from the fear of what he might do to her in return.

Johan stood his ground, his eyes holding hers. For a breath, she saw the old hero behind the eyes. "I've been gone lately. I don't know much of what you be doing with Joss up here." He shrugged, as if it was all right.

"Aye," she said, "If you'd pulled your ass out of the bottle anytime since Rickward's death, you might be figuring it out. Instead, you be trying to drink yourself to the grave while I spend my entire day trying just to pull enough money together so your daughter can eat."

The peal of the temple bells echoed up the stone path. It would ring five more times, signaling the end of Third Quarter. Jocelyn's school was out.

"I want you out of here, Johan. This be my place. I earned the land rights. I repaired it. Made it work. Not you. Out. Now."

She stared him down, ignoring the reek of sweat and ale that hung so pungent around him. He said nothing, but considered her for a breath and then nodded.

"You be right." His breath escaped in a half laugh, half sigh. He turned from her and stumbled out of her shop. With each step, his shoulders dropped a finger width lower.

While she waited for him get far enough ahead, she dipped her hands into what water remained in the bucket and sprinkled the tallow fire. She did not want to put it out completely, just dampen it enough to keep the fats from burning and wasting. It spat and hissed at her, but she knew it would obey. She would finish the candles when they returned. Joss would talk about the day's gossip, hands waving every way and, if Elena was lucky, tell her what she had studied today.

She surveyed the room, found the amulet's box still soaking on the bench, and shoved it back into place behind the wax and berry stores. Another quick glance confirmed everything to be in its place: nothing would burn, blow, or melt away before she got back.

Jocelyn would be waiting for her at the Temple, which meant Elena had to wind her way through the village. Not a prospect she was looking forward to today. If she could keep away from the soldiers, she just might survive.

Chapter 2

The sun was just peaking over the top of the Nightsrift Mountains, though it was hard to tell. The sky reminded the Duke of a cauldron of burning blood. It was a bad omen, but he could not say for whom.

Duke Gideon Kaebal looked around, pulling on his white lace gloves, so tight they fit like a second skin. He hated this town, and everything it stood for. The village was already awake, peasants scurrying around him, their filthy tunics and cloaks flapping in the crisp fall breeze. Without a fault, every piece of so-called clothing he looked at had ragged edges and stains they had not bothered trying to remove. Their hair was the same: rough cut and dirty. Not a pure head of hair to be seen.

He lifted a hand, two fingers signaling to the soldiers behind him. He did not bother looking. They knew their jobs. They would not be here otherwise.

He paid no attention to the rutted lane in front of him as he ordered his thoughts. What would the Overlord say about the time it was taking him? Could he get more time, or was he already pushing it too far? He had not found the woman, yet. He did not even know her name, but knew that he would recognize her when he saw her. She was his passage to the throne. She just did not know it yet.

"Hector," he said to his Lieutenant who marched a single step behind him. "Any word of the Red?"

Hector cleared his throat, nervous. "No, milord. Nothing yet. We expect riders from Harts Haven today or tomorrow."

"How hard could it be to find one redheaded woman, ten to fifteen years past childbearing age?"

Hector was a good soldier. He always followed orders, often anticipating Gideon's requests. He was a brave man, a loyal man. It was a pity his parentage had left him stained with that dirty blond hair. The Blood could use someone like him to strengthen the line. It would be a shame if he had to die.

In the center of the village, amidst sweaty children, and scared villagers, was the well. Its stone wall was crumbling, like half the buildings in this pit. The thatched roof--big enough to cover a dozen people from the rain--had bare patches that would not keep a rat dry.

Gideon strode to the well, bending over the edge and peering at the water. It was hard to tell how clean it was, in the dark morning light. He expected to smell mold and the Father knew what other diseases, but found that it smelled fresh enough. It would have to do.

Taking a step back, he turned to Hector and nodded his approval. The soldiers ringed the well, their backs turned to him so they could watch in all directions. He needed to be undistracted for this.

"The bucket," he said.

Hector had already started towards the wooden crank, and reached it at about the same time Gideon asked for it. He turned it, his arms flexing as it found resistance near the top of every circuit. The bucket crawled closer, water spilling over its edges as it rocked back and forth to the beat of Hector's strokes.

Gideon leaned over the edge of the well, but not on the stone wall. He could never trust the structural integrity of any building in a shambles of a town like Rockport Ferry. Holding his right hand over the center of the well, he flexed his fingers. A blue globe of light formed in his palm. It was not bright enough to light the entire well house, but supplied enough light that he could see the entire face of the water without any harsh reflections. Several small chips of stone broke loose from the wall, hitting twice before diving into the water.

Smooth waves slipped through each other in rings, lapping against the walls. With a wave of his left hand, the water stilled. Clouds of dirt settled to the bottom in a breath.

He nodded. It would have to do.

He gathered his concentration and pulled power from the patches of grass around the well. They wilted, passing from the green summer life through the ravages of fall, and finally, into the rusty color of death. The thick smell of decay lingered for a moment before floating away on the hot summer breeze.

"Father. I am here." He mouthed it, letting the words resonate through his mind. A pulsing of pressure let him know the Overlord had heard, and would be waiting.

Pounding footsteps shattered his concentration. He turned, rage brewing a storm in his gut. They knew better than to disturb him in the mornings.

Hector stepped through the ring of soldiers and intercepted the young woman running towards them. She cradled a small child in her arms. The child's head flopped back and forth unnaturally, more rag doll than child.

"The Duke is not to be disturbed," Hector said. He planted his hands firmly on his hips. "You may bring any supplications you may have to the Black Moon Inn after breakfast. He will be pleased to see you then."

She thrust the child in front of her with both hands. He was young, not more than two years old. Boils marked his face, many of them open and oozing. His head rolled on his shoulders as she shook it.

"He did this!" she screamed. "He killed my baby!" She stood on tiptoes, holding the child over Hector's shoulder for Gideon to see. Her voice dripped with venom. "Child Killer. Murderer."

The soldiers tensed, hands settling on their weapons. They knew what could happen; they had seen it before. One crazed villager could start a riot that he could only stop by spilling blood.

Sidestepping, Hector blocked her view, and grabbed the child. Holding it at arms length, he turned it around slowly, examining it. "You must be mistaken, ma'am," he said. "This child clearly died of some disease. The Duke is only a man. He is not the Father, capable of punishing children for disobeying their parents."

The mother's eyes widened, bloodshot and crazed. She lunged past Hector, stopping just short of the ring of swords. She pointed one long, bony finger at Gideon, and then yelled. Her voice was rough with the twin fires of anger and rage. "You're a monster. No better than the fiend you call father."

Her raised voice had drawn the eyes of the villagers that had been avoiding the Duke and his men. They stood at the edge of the village Circle, some nodding their agreement now that someone had been brave enough, or foolish enough, to voice it. Others shied away, slipping to the back of the crowd where they prayed they would not be recognized.

Gideon felt the villagers turning against him, and knew that only a show of his power could cower the crowd. Stepping through the ring of soldiers, he released the globe of light and took off a glove.

A man shouldered through the crowd and ran to the woman.

"Marla," he said. His voice was stern and low, a warning. He grabbed her shoulders, trying to pull her back. She wrenched free, screaming again, this time to the crowd.

"How many children will you let him take? How many before you've had your fill? He is as evil as the Overlord you despise and curse. He's a child killer."

The man grabbed her from behind and wrapped both arms around her in a bear hug. She wrenched from side to side, struggling to break free, but was unable to slip his grasp.

"My Lord," he said, turning them towards the Duke. "Please forgive my wife. She's sick with grief and doesn't know what she's saying."

He pulled her away, commanding a young boy to grab the dead child. Hector handed the child to the boy, wiping his hands on his leather armor, then turned to the Duke. Noticing the bare hand, he shook his head and spoke in a whisper to his Lord. "They are on the verge as it is. That would only lend proof to the woman's words."

Several breaths passed in tense silence before Gideon released his gaze, nodding. They returned to the protection of the soldiers. Gideon shook his head in frustration as the crowd let out a collective sigh and spread out, each heading back to gossip in the safety of their homes.

"By the Father, Hector, you are a good man. If there is any of the Blood in you, we'll find it. First, though, find me that woman. It would do me good to get back to civilization."

A smirk darted in and back out again as quick as it had come. Hector bowed deep. "She will be found, my Lord."

Gideon turned his attention back to the well. He would have to explain the interruption to his father. The Overlord did not like waiting.

He bent over the well, the globe of light forming again in his palm, the other ready to start the Sending. Two cold blue eyes stared up at him through the water's surface. He cleared his throat, composing his thoughts. "I apologize for the delay, Lord. The peasants are becoming restless at the loss of their children."

"I heard," the Overlord said. His image wavered on the water's surface, but his gaze was steady. His voice was an ancient door creaking open, though it had never lost its cruel edge. "I trust that you can handle it." It was not a question.

"Of course, my Lord. The preparations are going well. All will be ready."

"Then you have all thirteen?"

Gideon shifted his weight to the other foot. "There is one remaining. She will be in our hands shortly."

The Overlord started to speak, but erupted into a series of coughs that wracked his body, twisting his face in pain. When he regained composure, his eyes were colder than the peaks of the Nightsrift during mid-winter.

"My patience is at an end, Gideon. Any puss-sack of a child that still has life's breath will do."

His hands crushed each other as Gideon struggled to keep his face calm. "Of course, my Lord. Yet there is one that we have heard of that may be especially pleasing. We will have her soon."

"How so?" the Overlord asked, his bloodshot eyes searching Gideon's.

"She is said to have hair the color of fire."

"How can this be? My brother is long dead, and none have worn the Red since him. Is she *Chaya*?"

The tension evaporated from Gideon. He unknotted his aching hands, and allowed a brief smile to flicker across his face. "None of the stories claim it, Sire."

"Good. Bring her to me. She would be worth the weight of the others put together. Send to me when you have her." The image of the Overlord turned its wheelchair away, signaling the meeting was over. More coughs echoed up the well as his balding head spasmed.

Taking the bucket from Hector, Gideon held it over the well, centering it on his father's head. He dropped it. The man had lived too long already. If all went as planned, he would perish before the moon was full again.

"Gideon," said the Overlord.

Gideon snapped out of his musing and grabbed the bucket's rope. Its sudden stop heated his hand even through the gloves. He smoothed his face and moved the bucket aside so he could see his father.

"Who is the woman you're so urgent to find."

"Her mother."

"Does she wear the Red, also?"

"I am not sure, my Lord. It is said that she has Breathed before. By all indications, though, she is unable to control it."

"You will kill her," said the Overlord. "Of course, my Lord."

Elena's strides chewed up the path between her shop and the central part of town. She paid no attention to the cliff that rose thirty spans to her left, or the steep, rocky slope that fell away to her right. She did not notice the growing darkness that filled the sky, did not wonder whether the mines and smelting fires had been relit, or if another late summer storm was brewing, like she would have any other day.

Visions of her mother's fires filled her mind. She refused to imagine the rumors the villagers would be passing to the soldiers as truth.

The cart path, used once to bring supplies to the early warning post that was now her shop, ended near the last guard post, now unmanned. The square tower, built into the end of the cliff, reminded her too much of a prison. Today, it seemed the eyes of the Duke watched her from the dark arrow slits.

She hurried past. Her daughter still waited for her.

Even though the soldiers were already here, the villagers continued their yearly tradition of bleaching the stones and repairing the slate roofs and wooden porches. None of them looked at her directly, but she could feel their gazes bearing down on her as she passed, head down. As she neared the small temple at the center of the village, she wove through children rolling rusted barrel hoops down the streets with sticks. When they saw her, they stopped, their eyes wide. She ground her teeth and pushed through the Temple entry.

The Outer Temple was empty. Not one child waited for their parents. Not one acolyte cleaning after the days schooling. Nothing moved. Just the cloying scent of the incense and the soot of the torches.

The mob had held her too long.

He mind churned, trying to remember how many of the black-tipped spears she had seen. In past years, a troop--no, that is not what Johan had taught her--a squad of five was the usual number. She had seen four at her shop. They could not have had time to beat her here, take Jocelyn and escape.

Her heart pounded in her chest. She dashed into the Inner Temple, normally off limits unless accompanied by an acolyte. Scanning the Temple, she saw no signs of her daughter.

Two acolytes spotted her at the same time, and headed her way, as close to a run as they were allowed. She shook her head, trying to fend them off, as she backed through the doorway, turned, and ran through the Outer Temple and out the main entrance.

Eight black boots stopped her in the threshold. They were standing still, pointing her way. The sun reflected off the spit-shined leather.

The soldiers were here for her. She scanned the crowds for a fifth soldier holding her Jocelyn, but found nothing. Mustering her courage, she examined their faces for any signs of aggression or guilt, anything that might let her know that Joss was safe.

The largest of the four sneered at her, lust flickering in his brown eyes as he ran a dirty hand through his short-cropped blond hair. His tongue ran across his teeth in a rude gesture that he must think would excite her. It disgusted her. The others paid her no attention, but scanned the villagers, keeping a close eye for trouble. They looked bored, their heavy-lidded eyes belying the coiled tension in their bodies. She had seen that same lazy look after Johan had first returned from the Rebellion. The Captain studied her. What he was looking for, she could not say, but it set her hairs on end.

Ducking her head, she slid past them.

"Excuse me, sir," Elena said, loud enough the Captain would be able to hear her, but quiet enough not to draw attention from the villagers hovering nearby.

"You seem in a hurry, miss," the Captain said. His voice was as smooth as crushed velvet, but her insides clenched into knots at the sound. She was sure they had all the proof they needed to drag her away without letting them know about Joss. Red hair was rare enough in one person, and seen as proof that one possessed skills they should not. The fact that her daughter also had red would be enough to send her straight to the gallows.

"I be sorry," she said. "I should be watching my steps a bit closer."

He said nothing and continued to study her. As the moment dragged on, she found the urge to flee harder to resist. A bead of sweat swelled on the ridge of her brow and then burst, trailing a lazy path around the ridge of her right eye. She dare not mop it, on the off chance that the Captain had not seen it. If he noticed, he would know the truth of her mother's legacy, though she herself had avoided anything to do with the Breath.

"I be just..." she stammered. "I be looking for someone. Hoping to catch them before they left."

"I believe your daughter ran off with two boys up that path, there."

She felt the color drain from her face at the mention of Joss, and turned to look where he was pointing, though she did not need to. She knew where Joss would be. Should be, she corrected herself. There are only four soldiers here. Somewhere, there is a fifth.

Gideon paced like a trapped jaguar inside his tent. The wind smashed into the canvas, threatening to untie the straps that held the tent together. He would have to lash the servants responsible for putting it up. The tent was not big enough to think in. He would have another made when this journey was over. He would have more servants at his disposal when he gave up his Duchy and made the Fire Palace his home.

"Do you think he knows?" Hector asked from his station by the door.

Shaking his head, trying to release the worry that creased his perfect skin, he stopped and stared at the slave girl lying by the foot of his bed, unseeing. "When we find the woman, she will destroy him for us. She will be found soon, I trust."

Before Hector had a chance to respond the jangle of reins and the *harrumph* of a weary horse announced the return of a rider. Hector bowed to his Lord and excused himself.

Gideon focused on the slave in front of him. Many of his Counts preferred their women with rolls of fat layered on top of each other. They said it proved their worth, and their wealth. Gideon found it disgusting. It proved nothing but their lack of control and willpower. It displayed their weaknesses as rulers for all of their people to see. Besides, a man could get lost in those mountains of flesh before ever finding the treasure her body held. He preferred them sleek and muscular, showing dedication and hard work. Feorina had once been very nearly the ideal woman, but the months spent leashed at his side had left her without any definition, and skinnier than he would like. He was not one to waste good flesh, though, and he had spent these months training her to please him in every way.

He could tell by her sunken eyes and the way her ribs stuck through the flesh that she did not have much longer. It was a pity, such training wasted, but he would not miss her emaciated body. He would save her until they found the woman and her daughter. Draining the last of her life would be the perfect victory toast.

Hector returned, clearing his throat to announce his entrance. "Good news, my Lord. We have found the woman and her daughter. They will be here in the morning."

Wiping the desire from smile, he turned. "Good news, indeed. Is there any chance that she will not be delivered on time?" His plans twisted too deep to leave anything to chance. Such finely wrought plans could unravel too quickly.

"None, my Lord. One of the leaders of the Rebellion has found a home there. The woman's husband, actually. He is of no threat, though. He is too deep in the drink to have kept his instincts or skill."

"It is a risk we cannot allow. Kill him before taking the women. Give your man a fresh horse and send him back with orders."

"The Captain has already ordered it done, sir."

"Well done. Have the men ready to ride at first light. We will depart for the Temple as soon as the women arrive."

Hector bowed and left, shouting orders before the tent flap slipped back into place.

It looked like today he would have his victory drink after all. As he drew the slaves leash toward him, he made a mental note to grab the Mayor's daughter from Rockport Ferry before leaving. There was none equal to her for miles around. Hector would come up with a suitable excuse. He always did.

After he forced the slave to strip and fold their clothing, he drew her close. Feeling her skin press against his he was instantly aroused. Her breasts had shrunk as her life had been spent, little by little, towards higher purposes, but they were still pleasant. He could ignore the way her ribs pressed roughly against his, and the way her hip bone stabbed at him. It would all be worth it in her final scream -a beautiful blending of pleasure and pain, perfectly timed with her last orgasm.

Tomorrow, he started training his new slave, his new daughter, and his new weapon. It was a grand day for celebration, indeed.

The twin monoliths of the Ladder stretched ten spans toward the sky. Covered in ancient symbols, they leaned over the top of the small pines in a giant 'V'. Branches from taller oaks and maples waved just out of reach of the two boys' hands. They stood on top of the granite fingers: Mark stood, recklessly sure of his footing and spitting insults at the girl below; Derk, on his knees for safety, waved her on and called encouragement down to her.

Jocelyn sat in the crook of the Ladder, two-thirds of the way to the top. Her breathing came in ragged gasps. Her legs screamed for her to stop. Her hands were a red to match her hair. She brushed it away from her eyes, but it did little good. The rain heavy wind whipped it back before her hand gripped the stone again.

Dark and ominous, the clouds threatened the worst storm of the season so far. The sun was halfway to dark, casting long shadows over the many sharp outcroppings. Yet she smiled big, baring teeth in a mix of frustration and joy. Today she would make it to the top. Mark would have to hold up his part of the bet.

"What be wrong, Salamander?" Mark called down to her, "Can't be making it? I knew it! No girl ever be climbing the Ladder. Never will."

"Best be getting your lips ready, Mouth."

She lunged up. One span closer to the prize. She pushed, pulled, and slid from foot hold to hand hold, but finally, breath coming in ragged bursts, blood pounding in her ears, she made it to the top. Pulling herself up next to Mark, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him to her. Quickly, before he could react, she landed a bold kiss on his lips.

He lashed out at her arms, trying to break her grip. "Eew. Stop!" Mark said, wiping his lips on his dust powdered arms.

"What's wrong?" Derk said. "Afraid you might be liking it?" He laughed hard, from the belly, and slapped his knees. His right foot caught a loose pebble, and slid off the side of the monolith. His laughter stopped, caught quick in his throat as his arms flailed for balance.

Joss spun around, one hand holding on to Mark for balance. Seeing Derk slipping, she acted without thinking. She leapt across to Derk's ledge, grabbed his arm and leaned back, pulling against his weight. For a moment, she did not think she could save him. She was sure they would both plummet to their deaths. As his weight jerked her to him, she leaned farther back.

They stopped moving, caught in the precarious balance of her father's toys: small iron figurines, their sharpened points balancing on wooden poles. They swayed for a breath before Derk managed to pull his foot up. They pulled in to each other, ending with arms wrapped around the other in silence. The stress melted in a shower of laughter as the three children tried to forget.

She stared into Derk's eyes, enjoying the safety of his embrace. She had never paid him much mind before. He was a friend, almost a brother, but she felt a unfamiliar comfort wrapped in his arms. He was handsome, with dusty brown hair and green eyes that shone like seashells in the sunlight.

His smile was bright and genuine. Nothing like the bullies that faked a smile to try to get her alone.

She shivered as Derk's smile slid away and his eyes became steel. It was the same look Johan had when he was angry. "What's wrong?" she asked, slipping her arms away so she could turn and look behind her.

At the edge of the brush, where the path opened into the Ladder's clearing, stood a soldier.

She turned back to the boys, sat down and adjusted her legs until she found a seat that was close to comfortable. Mark and Derk exchanged a troubled look, but they sat too.

Mark's voice was a harsh whisper. "You don't think he'll be causing more trouble, do you?"

Derk shook his head and whispered back, "Nah. They didn't be real interested. Just watched, and be letting it happen."

"What do you two be talking about?" she asked. "Did he keep you? Is that where you be during lessons?"

Hesitantly, Derk told her the story. They glanced often at the soldier, but, just like in Derk's tale, he just watched and waited.

"It be all your Mam's fault," Mark said. "Her and her evil powers."

Jocelyn stood, leaning precariously towards Mark. Her voice was quiet, almost too soft in the wind that grabbed at her hair. "Don't you ever be saying that again." She stared at him, unblinking, as the rage welled up inside of her, threatening to boil over. "She never be doing nothing to hurt no one. Take it back. Now."

Standing, Mark shook his head. "Everyone knows it be true."

She felt the rage spill over the rim, and she leapt at him, her hands in white fists.

Derk grabbed for her, but she ripped free.

For too many years she had been an outcast. The children teased her mercilessly, many times hurting her. She had heard her Mam and Gram called every name she knew, and countless originals. She would not put up with it anymore.

She landed next to Mark, swinging wildly. He stepped aside, ducking and she fell forward, hitting her knees and scraping her shins before plummeting through the air, her arms flailing for holds.

Elena burst through the brush as her daughters scream erupted in a wail of fear. She watched as Jocelyn's knee smashed into the top of the Ladder and she fell. The boy was off balance, his arms wind-milling as he fought to find his balance, but lost. He fell backward, too shocked to scream. The second boy stood on the other stone, mouth open wide in shock, one arm still reaching out to grab the girl who was no longer there.

Elena reacted without thinking, some primal instinct overpowering her fears. She drew a deep breath, and felt a fiery energy fill her body as she willed the children safe.

Like a slap, the winds screamed past her, pelting her with limbs ripped from the brush. The grass parted in a hundred places as the wind flew to the Ladder. The damp scent of fresh earth assaulted her. Under the children, grass ripped free of the ground to spin in circles, faster and faster until they blurred into a single vortex of wind and vegetation. No sooner had the mottled vortexes formed than the children slammed into their tops. Joss' scream stopped as she hit, but the boy finally found his voice.

Running toward them, she realized what she had done. The blood drained from her, leaving her weak and exhausted from fear and effort. She stumbled and fell to her knees, panting. Wide-eyed, she watched the vortexes, and her blood rushed back through her, bringing the chill.

"Mother, forgive me," she said. She would have wept but the tears would not come.

The wind died as suddenly as it had started. The debris inside the vortex exploded out in a final sigh. Both children dropped to the ground. The boy's scream stopped, and the silence was complete. Even the birds watched in fear, silent in the aftermath.

Concern for Jocelyn washed her fear away. Elena pushed herself off the ground, and then stumbled to her daughter's side. Jocelyn was laughing, a quiet, hysterical laughter. After a moment, the notes of excitement in her daughter's laughter sunk in.

"Joss, honey. Are you hurt?"

"Mam, you did it. You finally did it."

The terror resurfaced. She had Breathed. She was *Chiy'el*. No longer could she deny it. Her mother's curse had manifested itself in her.

"We must be getting home."

"Mam, you did it."

"Now."

Catching her mother's tone, Joss forced herself to her feet, her smile gone. For a moment they held each other's gaze, each trying in vain to reassure the other that everything would work out. Neither was successful.

Joss slid past her mother, kneeling by the boy on the ground. "Mark. You alive?"

He groaned, but he nodded.

"Joss. We have to be going." Elena grabbed her daughter's hand and pulled her away, heading down the path toward the shop.

Joss called out behind her, "He be fine, Derk."

His voice was strained and quiet enough that she could only just make out the words. "The soldier saw it all."

Elena started running, dragging her daughter behind her.

Chapter 3

Elena looked behind her every few paces, but there was no sign of the Captain or his men. She knew she was in trouble. There was only one thing that she could think to do: find Johan. He would know how to keep both her and Joss safe.

The idea terrified her.

For the last twelve years, since the death of their first child, Rickward, Johan had sunk deeper and deeper into the bottle. His rages had burst from nowhere, and now they were all too frequent. She stayed away as much as she could, working hard at her candles to support the three of them.

The stench of whiskey was strong on his last visit. She knew he would be furious about the way she acted. Furious did not begin to describe how he would react after learning that she had Breathed. There was nothing else to do. If the soldiers had not arrived early because of the rumors of her, they would hunt her now.

Johan is the best-known hero of the Rebellion, the famed Protector of the Dead. He would know how to handle this. If only she could clear the drunken fog from his skull long enough to make him understand.

"Mam," said Jocelyn. "How did you do that? I didn't know you could." Her voice quavered with the excitement of the young and foolish.

"I don't know, honey." She scanned the rock-hewn streets, hoping no one was around to hear. "Hush, now, Joss. No more questions. Not now. We've got to be getting home."

Jocelyn's hand jerked out of her mother's grasp.

Elena stopped running and turned to her, pleading. "I know, I know. We don't be having any choices."

"He'll be hitting you for this."

Searching Jocelyn's face, she found no traces of fear. Instead, her round face was chiseled with determination. "We'll make him see." She forced a smile.

"You're right, Mam. We will."

They moved along the edge of town, skirting the main pathways through the old fortress. Johan's rules came back to her slowly. No longer did they run: it would draw too much attention.

She grabbed an old water bucket from the fortress walls. It was one of fifty or sixty scattered throughout town in case of fire. Another of Johan's rules: *Always be giving your enemy an excuse to forget you. If possible, that excuse should be doubling as a weapon.* The bucket was a sad excuse for a weapon, but it would give them a head start.

She pulled Jocelyn down an alley, hushing her when she protested. Filling the bucket with water from a rain barrel, she checked to make sure it would hold. There was a small leak, but if they moved quickly enough, any trail it left would be hard to find.

She forced herself to slow down as they exited the other end of the alley. They strode along the outer wall to what once served as a gate, the iron door now rusted open. She heard no sounds of pursuit, but refused to take any chances.

She dumped the water at the edge of the rocky trail, drowning the patchy grass. Ripping a branch from the closest tree, she stirred the water into the rocky soil. The branch broke twice before she judged she had enough mud. Jocelyn squawked in protest as she rubbed the mud into her hair, but Elena hushed her once more.

"We be the only Reds for miles. Maybe hundreds of miles. This won't be passing any close inspections, but it should be throwing them off long enough."

"Who?"

Elena stopped rubbing and searched her daughter's face. There was little trace of fear. Mostly her daughter was confused. She should be frightened.

"You saw the Duke's man at the Ladder?"

Jocelyn nodded, still not understanding.

"What I did to save you and the boy--I should be hanged for that. What stories the other children might be telling you are true. At least in parts."

"I know, Mam, but why run? I knew Gram could Breathe, so I figured you could, too. I've never seen you use it before today. Why not stand?"

"Stand?" Elena's laugh was harsher than she would have liked, but she could not help it. "Your Gram did stand, and look what it be getting her. Dead. She be leaving us with nothing but heartaches. I won't be having that for you. Now hush."

After finishing Jocelyn's hair, she covered her own, and then pushed her daughter back through the gate. "If anything happens, run to the shop and be getting what supplies you can find. Find your father. He'll be knowing what to do."

"Do his stories be true, too?" Her eyes were wide in a rush of excitement.

"They were once. If he is not in a state to be helping, talk to Catti at the Inn. She'll be knowing what to do." Catti and Elena had shared many stories and tears over cups of spiced cider. Catti knew more about the family than any other person alive. She had once helped to hide the Rebels. If Johan was too pickled to help his own daughter, Catti would find a way.

They went back to the main street, their red hair now a lumpy brown. She tried to act as if she belonged, but she had never belonged here.

Footsteps echoed along the walls in front of her. Not many. Maybe only one. That would be all it took, though. One trained soldier could overpower them both without breaking a sweat. She had to take him by surprise. Backing Jocelyn against the wall, they crept towards the corner.

He rounded the corner and stopped as he saw them. Dressed in rough, weathered leathers, he had a large pack slung over his back. Beaded into the leather coat might have been a large bird, talons out and wings back, but enough dirt and grime covered it that she could not be sure. He wore his earthy hair long, and braided in an unfamiliar style. His grass-green eyes twinkled with laughter and surprise as he examined her hair. The look in his eyes said she could trust him, but he smelled of travel, and the sword strapped to his back could only mean trouble. He was a stranger to this part, not a soldier, but who knew what sorts the Duke might hire to get her.

"Elena?" he said.

He knew her name. That was enough proof for her.

She swung the bucket with everything she could muster. She swung high, towards his head, and yelled for Jocelyn to run.

Johan gulped the last few swigs of whiskey, savoring the bitter smell of the fumes. It was not that he enjoyed the drink itself, just the effects. Too many ghosts of innocent, loyal men from the Rebellion haunted his dreams and his thoughts.

No ghost haunted him worse than that of his son, though, only two years old when Johan had given him to the cursed specter. Rickward had been hurt, near to death, and the specter had convinced him that he could save his wife's life by giving the child to him. He had sought escape from those memories through hundreds of bottles, but never escaped the sound of his wailing son, or the sight of his wailing wife when he told her that her son was dead.

He threw the bottle into the forge, shattering it against the stone surface. Grabbing the towel from the counter, he wiped the beads of sweat from his face. The fire would need time to grow. He strode inside, his head hung low, his face and neck as red with shame as the forge fire.

The shock at finding the soldiers at Elena's shop had tied knots in his shoulders that a sailor would be proud of. They had done nothing to stir trouble, yet he could not shake the ice that crept the length of his spine. Something was going to happen, but he did not know what. He needed another drink. At the least, it would dull the worry and keep the shakes away.

Inside, he threw the towel on the pockmarked table, reached under the bed, fumbling about until he found the handle on the small, wooden crate. The crate was twenty years old, and carried clothes and armor while he was still in the Duke's army. The wood was still in good shape, though any luster it once might have had was gone, replaced by scrapes and bruises and the stink of mildew. There were no bottles of memory fogging whiskey in here. Only memories of a happier time. A braver time. Cursing, he almost shoved it back into its place. He did not want to remember. That time would come soon enough, but the sense of a promise to be fulfilled came upon him again, running a ghostly hand up his spine.

Instead, he heaved the heavy box onto the table. He stared at its dented latches and handle for several long breaths, unable to open it. He knew what he would find on top of the pile inside: Elena's wedding dress.

They had met after he struggled his way back to the village. Blood seeped from several wounds. He barely escaped alive when the Overlord's forces crushed the Rebellion. He found her washing clothes in the stream that marked the end of the wilderness and the start of the village proper. The last of his strength gone, he collapsed. She must have heard his fall, because he woke on the cot in her shop. She bandaged him and fixed some poultices and teas that restored his energy and healed most of his wounds in a few short days.

While he recovered, they talked about everything. She was hungry to know news from outside, but he soon realized she was nervous even leaving her own shop. He was drawn to her in a way he could not put words to. Her fear, intelligence, and the strength hiding under layers of weakness inspired the protector in him. Maybe it was the loss of the Rebellion, the sense of failure, that led him to be her protector. He did not know, but he would have done anything for Elena. He still would, even though she did not understand the sacrifices he had made for her, the sacrifices he knew would be demanded for her protection. Serving her had given him more wonderful memories than he deserved.

It all ended the day he gave Rickward away.

A forceful knock on the door snapped him out of his reverie. He yanked the crate open, laid the wedding dress on the table with the reverence of a priest and his robes, and dug until he found his old knife. The deer antler handle was polished smooth from years of use. The blade was twice the length of his hand. Its edge was notched with wear, but he would still trust his life to it.

Another knock shook the door on its leather hinges. It was an impatient knock, and ignited a warning fire that burned through the whiskey fog in his head.

Tucking the knife in his belt, he strode to the door. His hand hovered over the handle. Few customers came this way these days. Those that did were too afraid his rage would be in full swing and knocked timidly. If he did not hear the knock, they could return later when he was not so deep in the bottle.

As the knock came a third time, he swung the door wide, ready to bellow at them for trying to bust his door down. The sight of the four soldiers stopped the words in his dry throat. He let the breath out with a cautious sigh. "Can I be helping you?"

The Captain was too young for his position. He probably received the rank more for the purity of his pure blond hair than any skill. Johan let a smile crack his rugged face. He knew the advantage was his in whatever this war of words turned out to be.

The Captain tucked his thumb into the front of his belt, a move that should have accentuated both the sword at his side and the ranking stripes on his shoulder. On the Captain, it looked foolish.

Johan's eyes stayed locked on the Captain, ignoring the subtle threat.

"As per the orders of our Lord and General, Duke Gideon Kaebal of Edrea, we have business with your wife, the chandler Elena."

Chapter 4

"She's not here. She usually ain't," Johan said. He surveyed the soldiers who spread in a half-circle behind the Captain. The rage at the injustices of the Kaebal family still burned hot, and he was in the mood to pick a fight. Whatever the Duke might want with Elena would be of no good. This seemed as good a time as any to start fulfilling his promise.

The Captain's face twisted with indignation. His cheeks burned as red as the forge fires. "Do you know where she might be? The Duke requires her presence immediately."

The eldest soldier sucked a sharp breath through clenched teeth as he took an awkward step back. He caught himself before falling off the edge of the porch. A scar above his right eye puckered as his eyes widened in recognition.

Johan raised an eyebrow at him, and smiled wider. He did not recognize the man, but he was old enough to have been involved in stamping out the Rebellion. Perhaps he knew who Johan was. Having a reputation had its benefits. "If the Duke be so damned hot to get his hands all over my wife," he said, "Tell him to come take her himself and stop hiding behind children."

Blades slid from their scabbards, singing their haunting song. The older soldier laid a hand on the Captain's shoulder, a warning. The Captain shook it off.

"Bardulf," the Captain growled, "This man is to be placed under arrest. Do you understand?" To his credit, the Captain's gaze never left Johan as he reprimanded Bardulf.

"But Captain, this ain't smart. It's Johan. From the Rebellion."

The soldiers to either side of Bardulf started at the name, but the Captain only laughed. "This? This is the legendary Protector of the Dead? This man is a drunkard and a fool. Arrest him."

The soldiers strode forward boldly, though their stances showed caution. They stopped as the Captain raised a hand. Their swords remained leveled at Johan.

"Not you two. Bardulf."

Bardulf hesitated, fear dueling with duty in his eyes.

"Bardulf." The Captain's voice was well suited for command.

Bardulf stepped past him to Johan. His eyes pleaded for mercy as he reached Johan for the weapon.

Johan kept his gaze locked on the Captain. He knew by the fear shining in Bardulf's eyes that the man was no real threat. The Captain was a coward and would not attack until his troops had. The two lackeys concerned him the most.

Bardulf stepped in front of him, blocking his view of the Captain. Placing one hand on Johan's shoulder, he met his gaze, and whispered, "I'm sorry."

The Captain threw his head back as an oily laugh escaped. "You hear that, boys? He's sorry."

As Bardulf's shoulders tensed in humiliation, Johan wrapped his arm around Bardulf's, and threw the big man into the table behind him.

The soldiers hesitated for only a moment, but it was long enough.

Johan surged forward, a shoulder planted in the first soldier's chest. He grabbed the man's wrist, squeezing the nerve with his thumb, and slammed him into the porch floor. The sword dropped from his numb hand.

Slipping through the opening, he spun, hands in the air. As he backed towards the smithy. He stumbled from the heady rush of air and whiskey. "I don't be wanting any trouble," he said, "Just leave my wife be."

The Captain drew his sword and waved his men towards Johan. "It's too late for staying clean, scrapper," the Captain said.

The first soldier rushed him with a controlled sweep of his sword that was meant to cut his sword arm, immobilizing him.

Johan sidestepped, drew his knife, and slashed the man's wrist. The sword slipped in the weakening grip and he stepped out of the way as the second soldier filled his place, striking Johan's head with the flat of his blade.

Johan's sight blurred. A high-pitched whine burned at his hearing. He scrambled backwards, slashing his knife in front of him. He cursed as his back slammed into the smithy counter. Fighting the spark of pain that flared up his spine, he rolled over the counter, gripping the edges for balance. He shook his head, trying to clear the fog from his eyes as his hands felt their way along the counter shelves, searching.

Footsteps pounded across the patchy grass. The second soldier lunged over the counter at him. Pain exploded in his shoulder as the sword bit into him. He stumbled back, gritting his teeth as the blade pulled free.

His knees buckled under the pain, and he crashed into the counter. He threw his arms out to catch himself. One landed on the dirt floor. The other on the hilt of his sword.

The rustle of the soldier's uniform signaled the attack.

He rolled backwards, sword in hand, and stood near the forge. The soldier's blade slashed in front of him and cut into the countertop.

The fog cleared from his eyes, and Johan surged toward the soldier. His blade swept forward, cutting through two fingers and prying the sword loose from the counter. Spinning off-balance, it flew over the counter and blundered to a stop at the Captain's feet, spraying gravel.

"Bardulf!" the Captain roared.

Johan reversed the momentum of the sword, grabbing the hilt with both hands, and plunged it through the soldier's chest, shattering two ribs. He spun the man around, pulling him forward by the sword in his chest, and threw him into the side of the stone forge. His head crashed into the stone. He dropped to the ground, limp.

"Bardulf!" the Captain roared again.

Johan spun around, taking in the positions of the three remaining soldiers. The Captain still stood just outside of the doorway, his mouth and eyes twisted in rage. Bardulf stood, watching. The last soldier picked up his sword, swaying with indecision. A strip of cloth torn from the sleeve of his uniform was tied around his cut wrist. Blood slowly blossomed through the makeshift bandage.

"Kill him!" raged the Captain. "Kill him! Kill him!"

Smiling, Johan strolled to the doorway and Bardulf stepped aside. He turned on the last soldier and said, "The Ladder calls us all. Do it be calling you today?"

The soldier glanced to his leader, hoping for a change in orders.

"Kill him!" The Captain's neck and forehead bulged and writhed like snakes crawled under his skin. Spittle flew as he shouted the order.

Drawing a deep breath, the soldier approached.

Johan widened his stance, grounding himself for impact. He leaned onto his toes for quick reaction, and his knees started shaking. He willed his legs to stay, but weariness won. His right leg buckled, dropping his knee onto the rocky floor.

The soldier charged, sword raised overhead.

Laughing victoriously, the Captain strode towards the smithy, his sword held low, but ready.

Johan lunged, a growl escaping as he forced his legs to respond, but weariness filled him. He crashed to the ground again. He raised the sword, barely blocking the soldier's blow, as he scrambled back into the smithy. Pain tore through his arm from the impact.

The Captain jumped easily over the counter, and started his way around the forge where he would be able to come at him from behind.

Johan grabbed the shelves, and pulled himself up, commanding what strength he had to fill his legs. He could not die here. Not with Elena the prize at stake.

"Your wife should thank me for getting rid of you," said the Captain. "The way she looked at me this morning, I think she just might enjoy thanking me personally."

Johan parried as two blows slashed in quick succession. The bellows blocked most of his view, but he saw the black and gray of the Captain's uniform directly across the room, moving slowly around the forge.

A flash of steel from the corner of his eye warned him. He threw the sword up in the soldier's way, but the blow did not land. The soldier changed his blow at the last moment, sliding it around Johan's blade.

In a single, wild swing, Johan grabbed the knife from his belt and knocked the point of the sword out of the way. Carried on the wind of his swing, he spun, pounding the flat of the sword onto the bellows, shooting a cloud of burning ash onto the Captain's face and chest.

The Captain dropped, screaming and clawing at his face.

Flowing with his turn, Johan whipped the sword around, reversing his grip, and plunged it into the remaining soldier's guts.

The soldier dropped his weapon, grabbing at the sword with bare hands as Johan twisted the sword in the wound, sending convulsions through the soldier's body.

Johan spun back, glancing behind the forge. There was no sign of the Captain. He raised the sword, throwing the entire weight of his momentum and every ounce of strength he could muster into the swing. It bit deeply

into the soldier's neck, a jet of blood spraying him as the arteries severed.

He yanked the sword out of the man's neck, kicking the corpse away from him. As the man fell to the ground, he revealed the burly Bardulf standing in the doorway, sword hanging low to the ground.

Johan pressed his back against the shelves, allowing him to see both sides. The Captain was still here.

He ground his teeth together in frustration. Determination was the only thing keeping him standing. The years spent drinking had not kept him prepared. Bardulf was a big man, and the Captain, the coward that he was, would be dangerous if cornered.

Bardulf raised his sword, not in aggression, but in a wave of truce.

"I don't want to fight," he said. "Just let me and the Captain go."

Johan nodded that he could pass. He did not dare speak. If the two soldiers heard the exhaustion, they might change their minds.

Bardulf walked slowly around the forge, facing Johan as long as possible. A few quiet words were exchanged, Bardulf's voice calm and persuasive, the Captain's dripping with anger.

Johan refused to relax, fearing that to give in would be to die at a coward's hand, even though shadows stole the edge of his vision, creeping slowly over his eyes. One hand wandered to the wound in his shoulder, slipping through the tear in his shirt to feel around inside. It wasn't as deep as he had feared, but his blood and energy seeped steadily down his chest.

Bardulf had been persuasive enough, Johan found when he looked up. The Captain walked in front of him, as befit his rank, but shook off Bardulf's cautioning hand as they passed.

"We're not through with you," said the Captain, but Bardulf's expression told him that any further action would not be soon.

Johan watched as they mounted their horses and rode off, Bardulf hanging back to salute him before galloping after his Captain. As the riders disappeared behind the trees at the bend in the road, Johan dropped the sword and fell into the shelves for support.

Shadows covered his visions. He was unconscious before he hit the ground.

Every shadow held a soldier that reached out to grab at Elena as she passed. Every drop of water that eased out of the cracks in the water barrels and splashed into the puddle below was a soldier's step. Every new scent forced her to pause and consider it.

The constant wariness tied her shoulders in taut knots. Her mind was tiring quickly from the attention that was required. She did not know how Johan could have survived the Rebellion for over two years, when every day must have been like this. Yet he did, and the lessons he taught would stay with her forever.

She relied on vague memories, instinct guiding her more than true lessons. These were the days that Johan had trained her for. These were the days when the monotonous, hateful exercises and speeches he had forced her to sit through would pay off. No matter the other faults he had developed through the years, she was thankful today that he had been part of her life. She would have to tell him that when she finally saw him.

The streets were empty except for the few stragglers rushing toward the town hall in response to the meeting bells--two short clangs, one long peal. She could not remember any meetings scheduled for today, so she assumed they were about her and Jocelyn. She stayed well hidden from whoever might be passing by.

She knew that Joss was waiting for her, but Johan was closer. If the soldiers had found Joss he would get her back. That's what he did. What he used to do, she amended.

She passed through the outer gates, left open as always, and rounded the massive stone walls, taking care not to step too close to the moss growing at the base of the walls and around the timber stabbing through the rocky ground. She must leave as little trace as possible.

She clambered down the series of ledges that led to the back of their house and stopped. Something was wrong. She could sense it. Johan had insisted on being outside of the walls of the old fortress. While it provided them less safety in times of a direct attack, they could overlook the pass leading up from the mountain base, as well as see anyone from the village coming to their house.

Smoke drifted lazily up from the smithy, but she could see no movement through the rear windows. Johan would not leave the fire unattended for long. Even in his most drunken state he was still careful with the fires.

It was too quiet. There was no ringing metal as Johan pounded another horse shoe or spade into shape. There were no birds singing. The only noises she heard was the wind as it brushed through the fir tree's needles, and the quiet melody of the spring as it seeped from the rocky cliff beneath the fortress walls.

Any other day she would have found the quiet soothing. Any other day she would have reveled in the chorus the spring would sing her. Today, though, its song filled her with dread.

Following Johan's advice once again, she eased past the smithy, stepping lightly through the grass. She listened at the door, found the quiet to be complete even inside, and then unlocked the iron-bound door. She did not close it as she slipped through. She might need a quick escape.

Johan's whiskey lay heavy on the air. Maybe he had passed out. She did not put much trust to that hope, though. Johan said to shove all hopes aside in times of trouble. You are better prepared to deal with the nasty surprises life brings you.

She crept through their bedroom, glancing behind the empty, straw-filled cot Johan slept on. She moved slowly, trying to avoid making any noise. She did not dare climb the ladder to Joss' loft. It always complained when she stepped on it. Lifting herself onto her toes, she craned her neck as high as she could. Nothing but more shadows. These did not move, so she crept into the main room and froze.

Johan's trunk was open on the table, and her wedding dress had been laid to the side. A broken bottle lay on the floor across the table, but no one was here with her.

She skirted around the table, her pace quickening with fear of discovery. Nothing else seemed out of place. Digging through the trunk, she mentally checked off the items she knew he had kept in here. Years ago, she would sift through the contents, longing for better times, happier times, while Johan was away. Today, the memories did nothing to wring tears from the ice that filled her. Only one item came up missing: his knife. While it had been several years since he had dared face the painful contents of the trunk, she knew that Johan would not have taken the knife out. Ghosts from the Rebellion haunted his dreams, and the knife only uncovered the faces he tried so hard to bury.

She crept to the counter, shoving aside dirty wooden plates and cast iron cook pots. Water sloshed out of the shaving pan as she slid it across the counter and found what she was looking for. The steel straight razor lay

partially open in a thin film of green water. Grabbing it, she checked the edge by running it along her arm. Hairs slid off as easy as when Johan had first crafted it seven years ago. He never failed to take good care of anything resembling a weapon. She often thought he would be happier if swords filled his bed rather than her. Wiping the muck off the blade, she slid to the front window and peered through. What she saw froze the blood within her veins.

Two corpses lay sprawled in the yard.

"No," she said, "It can't be. Not now. He can't be gone." Ignoring the warnings in her head, she flicked the razor open and burst through the back door. It could be his killers were still around, but she would run faster than any the wind if she had to. She would defend herself if they tried to stop her.

Only Jocelyn mattered now.

Chapter 5

Johan struggled to his feet. His head swam. It was a battle just to find his balance. His shoulder burned from the cut, and itched from the dried blood.

Shadows floated across the ground as dark, boiling clouds rolled across the sky. A storm was coming, and Johan knew the lightning and thunder it brought would echo farther abroad than just in this mountain village. The lightning would not be natural, but that of the Duke and his men.

Faces seared across his mind from many nights spent drinking, trying to avoid the ghosts of lost friends. They flitted across his sight again at the thought of the Rebellion. Those three years had etched the faces of hundreds of friends and acquaintances into his mind. He should have been able to save many of them, but who was he to stand against the tide of Breath that the Overlord and his sons, the Dukes, would unleash? He was just one man.

The faces haunted him nonetheless.

At the feet of the dead soldier, he bent to retrieve his knife. The fire of his wound tore through his arm. Gritting his teeth, he shoved the pain aside. There was nothing he could do about it now. Elena was not around, and would have nothing to do with him, if today was like every other day.

But it was not any other day. Two men lie dead in his yard. The Duke's men. It would not matter that they attacked first. He provoked them, and the Duke would have his head just the same. Would they still go after Elena? He knew they would. They would never return to their Lord empty handed. Instead, they would die first.

And die they would.

The dry crunch of footsteps. In one ragged motion he grabbed the knife and spun towards the intruder. He was still weak, but the only sign he allowed was a slight waver as he stopped.

The man standing in front of him wore his road grime with pride. A mischievous light twinkled across his eyes as he stood casually, smiling at him. Johan did not need the bird woven in the beads to find his name. His was one of the faces that found him in his sleep, but was one he had never mourned.

"Raven," he said as he ran to the *Nekodah*, embracing him. His weight fell full onto Raven as another torrent of the pain rushed through him. Stronger than he looked, Raven caught him, returned the embrace and stood Johan back onto his feet.

"You never were one to be staying out of trouble," Raven said.

Looking his old friend over, Johan noticed a red mark on his face and motioned towards it with his eyes. "The lasses still don't be caring much for the Wildlander ways, eh?"

"You know it was never the lasses that minded, but their lads." Raven's smile slipped away. "I saw your wife on the way here. She sent a small lass running, hit me with a water bucket, and ran from me like I was the Overlord. Though I could have sworn your lady wore the Red."

Johan lashed out at his friend. "I won't be hearing you say that again. My family does not be wearing Breath colors."

Raising his hands in peace, Raven said, "I meant nothing by it, my friend. It just took me aside when I saw her with dirty brown, instead of the luxurious mane of fire I remembered."

"She is still as fiery as ever, I assure you. Brown, you say?" Johan looked away, lost in thought, and then smiled. "That's my girl, you didn't be forgetting me entirely, then, did you?"

As he turned back, Raven was pulling a dark vial and some clean cheese-cloth from his filthy pack.

"Which way did she be heading?" Johan asked.

"You still don't see much of her, do you?"

"Don't be sticking your nose on the anvil. We must be going." Sheathing his knife in his boot, Johan started to push his way around the Wildlander, but Raven stopped him.

"Not yet, you don't."

"I be fine, but I be betting Elena and Joss don't. We can tie later."

"You won't last till later like that. Now just hold still or my finger might slip a bit too far."

As Johan started to pull away once more, Raven shoved a finger covered in a thick, black paste deep into the slash on his shoulder. The darkness threatened him again, small points of light dancing around the edges of his vision. Sighing, he resigned himself to the wait.

As Raven wrapped the bandage around Johan's arm, he said, "Should I guess that the trouble has found its way up to these parts already?"

Johan shook his head. "I don't be knowing. They came looking for Elena. I didn't be in the mood to be telling them where she might be."

"You've heard the news?"

"News? Nothing's reached these parts. Soldiers showed two days early. They won't be leaving without what they came for."

Raven pulled the knot tight, but it caused little pain. Johan stretched his arm through a full circle.

"That's new," Johan said.

Raven smiled. The twinkle in his eyes was back as he rolled the brown glass vial in his hand, and then slipped it in the safety of the pack. "You think you can use that arm again, if you had to?"

"I could be swinging grain sacks all day. Why?"

"Acteon's gathering children again."

For one long moment Johan could not react. His breath caught in his throat, and his mind refused to grasp what Raven was telling him. The moment ended in a blinding flash of guilt and grief. They were not here for Elena.

"Joss."

Johan and Raven clambered up the fallen wall. The clatter of horses echoing down to them from Elena's shop. Johan pulled himself over the lip and stood, moving to one side to make room for Raven. He froze.

A young boy stood not ten strides up the path from them. His clothes were grimy and ripped, his amber hair matted and greasy, and his eyes held the wildness of a rabid wolf. Yet, for all that his appearance said the boy had run a hard road, his bearing was regal and proud. Johan would know him anywhere, despite the years since he last saw him.

His voice barely more than a whisper, Johan said, "Rickward?"

Pulling himself up and over, Raven grunted. "Seeing things again, are we? You really should put a cork on that nasty habit of--Father's beard! He looks just like you."

Stunned, Johan walked up the path, not wanting to raise his hopes, but unable to believe this could be any other than his son.

The boy stepped into the heart of the path, blocking the way. "Johan. The time has come for repayment."

The words ripped Johan's breath away. Not Rickward after all, but the specter.

"Nasty tricks won't be doing you good today, Betzalel. Move aside, I already be fulfilling my part of the cursed bargain." He tried to push through the specter, expecting to slide right through him, as he had twelve years ago, but the boy was flesh, and did not move.

"Move aside. I don't be caring who you are."

The boy's calm was infuriating as he stood there, silent.

Johan tried to shove him roughly aside, putting the full of his strength behind it. Again, the boy did not move.

"Your bargain is still unfulfilled. Elena cannot be saved today."

Burning with fury, Johan drew his knife and crouched, keeping his balance low, his legs coiled and ready to spring. "Move aside, boy, or I'll kill you now. The soldiers already be there. Move your shaven ass or I'll be moving it for you."

"Elena and your daughter are already gone."

Uncertain, Johan searched the boy's eyes. He had to be lying, but Johan could find no signs of it.

His knees buckled and he collapsed to the ground as tears burst free and keening escaped, unbidden, from his constricted throat.

Chapter 6

The paving stones pounded her feet, threatening to rip the worn soles of her leather shoes. The wind stung her eyes, bringing tears to the surface. It was just the wind. She would not cry. Her only baby was safe. She would make it in time.

She burst past several villagers, who took one glance at her and started whispering. Elena did not care what anyone would say about her today. None of it mattered anymore. They would spread their lies, and have their fun at her expense. She would save her Joss.

She raced up the hill and stopped several strides in front her shop.

She saw no signs of the horses she had feared would be there. It was a small stone building, one side built into the cliff that served as the fortress wall when the village had been little more than an outpost between two warring countries. A narrow pathway wound around the building and ended in a five-stride by five-stride pad she assumed was once used for storage.

She left it empty now. The path butted up against the stone building on one side, and fell off sharply on the other. The ledge was narrow enough that she did not even dare use it, though Jocelyn did. If the soldiers had hidden around back, they would have had a difficult time getting back there, at least on horse. She did not think they would bother with pretenses. Not after killing her husband.

Even after the rough abuse at his hands during the past twelve years, his loss was a strong blow. She usually deserved the blows, she knew, for pressing too hard on subjects she knew upset him. Now he was gone. She could not lose her daughter, too.

She swung the door wide and surged into her shop.

"Joss?"

No response.

Panic rumbled through her chest as she ran through the doorway to the back room, nearly tearing the blanket free from the nails. What she saw finally brought the tears to her eyes.

Dust motes danced lazily through the beams of light that cascaded through the single open window. Burning fats from the candle vat assaulted her nose, reeking of death. Smaller storage crates had been moved aside, out into the main path.

A small wooden box lay open on top of her work bench. It was centered in the sunlight, almost as if it drew the light to it by some unspoken power. The dust shied away from the box, settling instead on the table, or thrown back towards the floor. The burgundy felt inside the box still looked like it been placed there yesterday, and the intricate patterns of shell that laced its outer surface seemed to catch fire in the sun's attention.

The amulet was gone.

Running, panic stealing her breath, she sped outside, rounded the house, nearly slipped on the thin ledge, and stopped in the outdoor storage area. The rough limestone floor was bare, just like she had left it. The walls were cracked into a myriad of hand-and foot-holds. Small pieces of broken stone were scattered at the base of the wall, not quite in a pile.

Jocelyn was not there.

Maybe she had gone to the fields. Why take the amulet? She knew it was off-limits.

Elena was furious. She should have never kept it. She should have gotten rid of it when she first found it, but she could not. It was her only tie to her mother. Her mother. It was all her fault. If only she had. But that did not matter. Throwing blame would help no one.

She crossed to the cliff wall, intending to climb and find her daughter, but the clatter of horses echoed from around the house.

The soldiers.

She glanced at the scraggly hillside. If Joss was up there, and the soldiers found her here, they would surely find the fallen pebbles. They would find Jocelyn. The soldiers would kill her. The Captain watched her Breathe. But Joss would be safe.

"Johan," she said. "I need you."

Slowly, she drew a stuttering breath, summoning all of the courage she could find from every musty corner of her self, and then sprinted to the front of the shop. The echoes made the sound closer than they were. They were walking the horses, not trotting them. She should make it before they did.

She reached the front of the house just as the soldiers rounded into view. Patting her pocket, she felt the razor's reassuring weight. "Be staying away, Joss," she prayed quietly.

The smell of rain was still thick on the breeze that tugged at Jocelyn's cloak. The rock she sat on was still moist from the shower, but she did not mind. Not here. This rock was her favorite place to escape to when the other children had targeted her for the daily razing, or when her Mam was too angry. Up here it seemed that she could see the world. If she looked hard enough she figured she could probably even see all the way to the Overlord's desert and the Fire Palace. So much world out there, yet she was stuck on this mountain. Sometimes she would stand among the fields, pretending she was a giant as she looked down on the tree-like shapes of the heliotropes.

She held her Ma's amulet at arms length, dangling on its chain. No matter how hard the gusts seemed to blow, the amulet hung straight down, unmoving. She knew it was from her Gram, and what she had heard only raised more questions. Why did the amulet have this affect on her Mam? Why was her mother both terrified and fascinated by it? To Jocelyn it was a simple object that represented freedom. If it was hers, she would be able to roam the world, visiting every corner of the lands. No one would have the power to stop her.

She would get out of here someday; she had vowed that a long time ago. She was just not sure how. Maybe Derk would go with her. Together, they could see the big cities; the ruins with their mosses and hidden passageways. Maybe they would even make it to the Fire Palace, and sneak through the catacombs that were said to house thousands of people making their own life safe from the tyrant's rule. One place they would for sure have to visit was the Temple of the Sun. She had always wanted to see it, to breathe a pulse of the life that held this world together since the Sundering. The stories said it was breathtaking--a ring of pure light that shoots from the Temple every day at dusk and dawn, and made the grasses and trees greener right before your eyes. Maybe the stories were wrong, but she hoped not. She really wanted to see that.

Letting her eyes refocus, she examined the amulet as it glittered in the sun. She had snuck a look at it once

before, but had nearly been caught as her Mam returned from the market early. Now she had all the time she needed. No one would find her up here.

The amulet was a burnished bronze that glowed in the harsh afternoon light. Curious patterns traced along the outer edge. It looked like clouds that had caught fire. As she spun it, she had to change her mind. It looked like trees stretching out of a river. Whatever it was supposed to be, lines snuck out of the design into another, this one of interlacing ribbons. She could not make out the beginning nor end of the ribbon. It disappeared around the edges of the smooth amber that sat in the middle.

She caught her breath as a breeze sped past, chilling her with its touch. It was not the cold that surprised her, though. As the breeze first hit the amulet, something moved. Something alive ran across the amulet's surface.

She nearly dropped it, but knew that she would never survive that spanking, once her Pa heard about it. Instead, she drew it closer, sure that she was seeing things. The clouds engraved on the outer edge seemed to spin over the surface, pushed by the wind that caressed her cheek and left the moisture of its kiss upon her.

Breathe deeply, child, for your time is coming sooner than you know.

She jumped up, tucked the amulet into her breeches, and spun around, searching wildly for the owner of the voice. But no one was there. She ran to the three knuckles of rock surrounding her. They were the only places that someone would be able to hide. After looking behind each, she found she was still alone.

Breathe deeply, child.

It was a deep voice, rich and smooth, relaxed, yet commanding, and it was inside her head.

"This can't be," she said. Maybe her Mam was right. Maybe this thing was evil. She pulled it out again, uncertain this time. The clouds were still spinning, but now the flames flickered, too.

"Father's beard! This was maybe the dumbest thing I ever did do, I'll be putting it back, yes I will, just you see, you'll go back and then you won't be talking to me no more, and--"

Breathe deeply. The voice was insistent--angry?--and she could not resist.

It was reflex, nothing more. Wrapping the chain around the amulet, intending to tuck it away again, this time for good, she drew a long, involuntary breath, and her eyes grew so wide she was sure they were going to pop right out her head.

The flames turned blue, flickering at the bonds that held them inside the amulet until they burst in a wave of cold, blue light that flowed up her arm and splashed into her chest and head. She tried to force the evil breath out, but could not. Her lungs were as big as they could be, about to burst, she was sure, and they hurt so badly.

"Mother's teats!" she cursed. If her Mam knew she had even thought that phrase, she would wash her mouth out with wax, but Jocelyn did not care. The skin on her arms and neck crawled. Her hands were suddenly damp. Her mouth was dry. Her head threatened to explode. Her eyes were parched, but she could not blink. What had she started?

In a blink, the pain was gone. She could breathe again. She could blink, and think again. She tossed the amulet to the ground, and backed away.

Elena. This time it was a woman's voice, tender and caring, that invaded her head. *Dark times have found you, and I wish that I could have been there to teach you myself. Please forgive me for the many days away*

from you, daughter. I hope you know that I would never have missed a moment with you if I thought I had a choice. I love you more than I ever dreamed that I could love anyone.

"Gran?" Jocelyn asked, tentative. "Is that you?"

If it was, she could not hear her, but her voice continued on. *The lessons I would have shared with you I have passed on. Betzalel helped me prepare this for you, and I hope its lessons come in time. You are needed, child, and you must take up the calling. You are our only hope, now. When you need it most, breathe deeply. Always remember: I love you.*

Jocelyn could not keep the tears from her eyes. They stung as they escaped, and her throat wanted to close in on itself from the grief. "Gran?"

Kneeling at the amulet, she picked it up and stared at it. Nothing was moving. No signs of life remained. "Gran, don't be leaving. I need you. Mam needs you. Come back, please."

The amulet made no response, and she knew that she was alone once again.

It was not intended for her. It had been her Mam's name that Gran had said, not hers. Whatever had just happened was meant for her mother. She would know the answers. She had too.

Wrapping the chain tightly around her closed fist, Jocelyn ran back along the rocks, her feet moving with swift surety, while her mind raced on the possibilities.

Her Mam would know.

The soldiers walked their horses while Elena waited. It seemed forever as she forced her body still, if not her mind.

As they turned into view, she saw them leaning into each other, conferring. They stopped five strides away. They were close enough that they could reach her on horseback before she could run through the doorway, but not so close as to feel threatening. Interesting. She had expected a more aggressive strategy. There were just the two of them, though, after their fight with Johan: the Captain and the one she had heard called Bardulf.

She planted her hands on her hips, hoping her face gave away none of the anxiety that she felt. Then she waited.

The Captain spoke first. "Pardon, ma'am, but after this morning's misunderstanding, we were hoping to talk with you."

She could not help herself: she laughed. "Oh, do you just be wanting to talk? And be it talk you had in mind for my husband?"

The Captain's surprise shone on his face for a breath, before he regained his composure. Bardulf adjusted in his saddle, looking to his Captain and then back to her before speaking. "Actually, it was talking we were looking for from him." He looked to his Captain once more than sat back, ill at ease.

"Your husband was most uncooperative. It was he that initiated the confrontation." The Captain's hand slid towards his face before he could stop it. When he realized what he was doing, it abruptly dropped back to its place on the saddle horn. "Is your daughter home?" he asked, almost as an afterthought. His eyes hardened as

he leaned forward.

Johan's teachings came to mind once more: *In all but the most professional liars, the eyes be telling what the body won't.*

"I assure you that everything do be fine, here," she said, ignoring his question. "You are free to go, unless your conscience bids you otherwise."

She turned her back to them and started into the shop.

"You never answered," the Captain said. All pleasantness gone, his voice was filled with irritation and anger. "Is your daughter at home?"

She stopped, but kept her back to them. "And what would you be wanting with so young a child?" She gripped the front of her tunic hard, to keep her hands from trembling. Whether from terror or anger, she could not say.

Tense, she waited for the clatter of hooves, but no charge came. Only the ringing of a sword unsheathed. She turned to meet her attackers. She had no chances of survival other than to run, but she could not. Joss might come home while she was gone.

"By order of Duke Gideon Kaebal," the Captain said. "Your daughter has urgent business with the Duke and his father, the Overlord. We are to see that she gets there."

"My Joss? The Duke?" Elena could not believe what she had heard. She knew the Captain had seen her Breathe just this morning, yet he showed no interest in her at all. "She do not be here, Captain."

"Tell us where we can find her."

"I... I do not know. Honestly."

"Then we shall wait inside." Leading the horses to the rails in front of the shop, Bardulf looked her way, unease twisting his chiseled features.

Think, Elena. Think. They believe you to be Chiy'el. Use it.

The Captain strode past her, scabbard thudding against his legs as he walked through the doorway. He disappeared inside, where she knew that he would search the place.

The amulet. How could she have forgotten it? No. It was not there. Joss had it and she was safely away. Elena relaxed. Could she call the Breath? Was she willing, even for this? She knew the answer.

She willed the power through a deep breath, focusing her anger and fear. Nothing. She wiped her sweaty palms on her tunic. How had she done it at the Ladder?

"Please, Joss," she thought. "Be safe."

"Mam." Jocelyn's voice, strong and excited came from behind the shop. The sound of falling pebbles, broken free by the carefree climbing of her daughter. "Mam? Gran left it for you. She wanted to teach you."

The Captain burst out of the shop as Joss started her way along the ledge. His smile was triumphant, but his eyes held distrust and hatred. "Get her," he barked to Bardulf.

Jocelyn stopped at the halfway mark. Her left hand rested on the shop wall, but from her right dangled the proof of their sins.

Chapter 7

Elena could not move. She wanted to. She screamed at her legs to respond, and willed her arms to reach out to Bardulf as he ran past her, sadness in his eyes, but her body would not respond.

Her eyes wide in fear, Jocelyn watched as the huge soldier crept along the ledge towards her. He was moving slower now, watching his steps on the narrow perch.

"Run, Joss! Run!" Elena tried to scream, but no sound escaped. She was forced to watch as they stole her daughter. Hatred boiled up through her, seething through gritted teeth. She would kill them. She did not know how, but they would pay for this.

Jocelyn looked wildly around, searching for a way out, for safety. She spun on one heel, intending to run back the way she had come.

Bardulf surged forward, forgetting his footing and lunged for her. One foot slid out from underneath him as he grabbed the back of her tunic, wrenching her backwards.

Jocelyn struggled, throwing the whole of her weight into each wild swing, but she could not break free.

Trying to catch himself, Bardulf fell to one knee, his other leg dangling off the ledge. His free hand grabbed at the wall, searching for a hold.

The wrenching tug on the back of her tunic pulled Jocelyn back where she teetered for a long breath, arms flailing. The amulet burst free of her grasp, hung in midair, and then flew into the trees.

Elena heard it crash through the branches. Once. Twice. She watched Jocelyn as the momentum took her and she fell backwards. Her head slammed into Bardulf's knee, and she cried out in pain, before falling sideways, over the precipice. Elena's paralysis broke, and she bolted towards her daughter. Only one thing mattered: Joss. The rage fueled her, and she swept a fist-sized rock off the ground as she ran. The razor bounced in her pocket, forgotten.

Keeping his hold on Jocelyn, Bardulf strained against her weight as she fell below him. Elena watched his hand scrape along the rock wall, striving to keep both him and her daughter alive.

She hesitated at the ledge, arm poised to throw the rock. She could not do it. The husky soldier was the only thing keeping her daughter from falling.

The flat of a sword pounded into her fist, sending the rock soaring from her numb hand. The Captain threw his arm around her, pinning one of her arms under his, and then wrenched her back, away from the ledge. She struggled against him, but the wiry man was too strong for her.

Keeping up the act of struggling, she wrenched herself right, towards the arm holding the sword. She grabbed his hand, and spun back left. As she spun, the upper half of her body stayed behind, and then snapped forward by the momentum of her spin. She pulled hard on his free arm, throwing him off balance, then continued the spin by rolling onto the ground, using his weight to pull them both over. The Captain landed first, and she landed tight on top of him. Her muscles relaxed in relief as the air burst from him, and she felt his grip give way. She rolled off of him and stood, turning as she did to face the ledge, and then stopped.

"No," she said. "It can't be."

Where the big soldier had been, holding onto her daughter, there was only empty air. She ran onto the ledge, looking down, hoping they were still alive after the fall. The amulet hung a long arm's length below. There were no bodies.

"Let her go. We have the girl." It was the Captain's voice, distant and winded from behind her.

She turned and knew she was too late.

Bardulf was already on his horse. He held Joss tight between him and the stirrup. The soldier had gotten her cooperation with a hard blow to the head. The Captain swung a leg over the saddle, grabbed the reins and turned the horse away from her as Bardulf kicked his horse into motion.

She had let them escape.

"Take me!" she screamed, but the soldiers did not stop. Instead, they kicked their horses once more, urging them into a trot.

A sudden gust of wind caught the trees, rattling their branches and sending a chill through her damp clothes. The bronze of the amulet caught her eye and hope surged through her.

She jumped on the ledge, next to the amulet and knelt, stretching to reach the amulet. Her reach stopped a hands width from the amulet. She fought to keep despair at bay as she shoved her other hand between the shop and the ledge.

She leaned out further, straining as her hand crept closer to the amulet. With a final surge she stretched out until pain burned in her arms and shoulder. One finger tapped the amulet, bouncing it away. Two fingers caught it as it swung back. The hand wedged inside the rock slipped. The rough edges scraped at her hand. Warm blood flowed between her fingers.

Cupping the amulet in a full fist, she threw herself towards the shop, caught her balance, and then bounded after the soldiers. She funneled every ounce of energy, despair and fury that she could, she forced her legs to carry her faster than she thought possible after them.

As her pace ate up the wide path leading into town, she thought furiously, refusing anything but a solution. The amulet and the powers it held terrified her, she could not deny that, but she had no other choices.

She did not want to know what the Duke wanted with her. Her imagination conjured many possibilities, and none were worthy of her daughter. In many of them, she did not live. Elena would find a way to harness the amulet's power. She had done it once. She could do it again.

She concentrated on the amulet as she ran, willing it to Breathe a furious wind and knock them from their seats.

Nothing.

Knowing the *Chiy'el* had been strict believers in logic, often assisting in legal matters for the Kings and Emperors of their days, she fought hard to clamp down on her emotions. She imagined pebbles placed just right to catch the horse's hooves, forcing them to rear.

It was no good. The horses, the soldiers, and Joss were farther away with each step, the stamping of the horses growing fainter with each ragged breath. As she turned the corner in the road, she saw the men turn onto the main street. In just a breath or two they would be out of sight. Her mind raced through the stories, and she

knew she had only one chance left.

Unable to control herself, the dam that had blocked her fury and despair shattered and the emotions swept over her, destroying the crumbs of control she had fought to maintain. Pure rage, sheer frustration, and the pain of loss melted together into a single primal scream. An order.

"Stop!"

A hundred visions of their slaughter, capture, or maiming tore across her mind's eye. Fire enveloped them. Flesh was stripped away. Anything and everything that she could dredge from the tales was an option. Her mother, draped in a shroud of flames, pointed her thin, bony finger at the men through the canvas of Elena's eyes.

The horses and their riders disappeared from sight. Her chance was gone.

Joss was gone.

Her scream died out, echoing back at her from the canyons and mountains that formed her cruel cell, and she sagged to the ground, exhausted. Tears burst free in mighty gulps and gags.

Why had it not worked? Now, when she needed it most, it had failed her, leaving her alone once again.

On the dark canvas of her closed eyes, her mother's face stared back at her. They were not kind or caring or even full of sorrow as Elena had wanted them to be. No. Her mother's eyes pierced her with duty and disapproval.

She stood, unwrapped the amulet's chain from around her fist and threw it into the woods. It did not fly high. Instead it shot out of her hands like an arrow. She did not hear it land. She hoped it never stopped its flight.

"Taerana," she said. Her voice was low, very near the growl of a mountain lion. "I hate you for what you be having left me to. This be your fault, mother. All your fault."

The scream of a wild animal interrupted Johan's sobs. Once, he had known the cries of every animal that called these mountains home, but this he did not recognize. It was full of pain, almost that of a murdered babe.

There was even a touch of humanity to that scream, though not much. He choked back his tears, but could not control the shakes that beat through him. As the scream continued, a change in pitch brought a familiar sound to his ears.

"Elena."

He bolted up, nearly crashing into Raven, and stalked closer to the boy. "I do not be caring who you are. You will not be having me in your games this time, boy." Whatever the specter saw in his face must have been enough. He stepped aside.

Johan pushed past the boy, ignoring the shakes that refused to leave. That had been her voice, he knew it. She was still here and the specter was lying to him. He should never have trusted him twelve years ago. He burst free of the woods, at the bottom of a thirty foot climb over sheer rock. He did not even pause. He jumped onto the cliff, his feet finding purchase. He scrambled upwards towards Elena's shop. As he dragged his weary body over the edge, he searched the road. His muscles tensed, ready for a fight. No one was here.

Could the bastard specter have been right? Could she be gone already? He refused to believe it. He could not have failed again. That was her voice. She had to be here.

He ran to the shop, throwing the door wide. He ran through the empty storefront, tearing the curtain off as he entered the work room, and stopped.

Empty.

He spun in a full circle, taking every detail in. Nothing seemed out of place. Then it registered. Her mother's box was on the table. Open. She never took that out of the shop. He crossed, knowing the amulet would be under it, or on the table behind the box, covered by the open lid. Pushing the box aside, he cursed.

Nothing.

"Johan," Raven called from outside. "Does this trinket look familiar?"

He ran out to meet Raven in the roadway. Dangling from Raven's weather-beaten hand was the amulet.

"Where'd you be finding it?" Johan asked.

"Not me, my friend. The boy found it in the woods, just over there. Wouldn't tell me what the pretty thing was, but said you might be interested."

Betzalel clambered into view, pulling himself unsteadily over the cliff. He dusted his clothes off, straightened his filthy tunic, and looked around.

Johan crossed to the boy. He no longer saw his son in him, but instead, knew him for what he truly was. And for what he had done.

"You be knowing somewhat about this," Johan said.

Betzalel casually turned to him and met his eyes. His gaze showed no concern for the threat. "I should know what that is. It used to be mine."

Johan's fury erupted. He grabbed the front of the boy's tunic, wrenching the shirt tight, and lifted him up to eye level. "What gave you the right to be playing god with my family?"

When the boy did not answer, Johan shook him. "Answer me," he said, spittle covering Betzalel's face.

"I gave that amulet to Elena's mother to protect her."

"Protect her? The damned thing be killing her." He tossed the boy to the ground and paced, his fists clenched, knuckles white.

Betzalel rose to his feet and brushed himself off once again, though it did little to ease the filthy appearance. "The pain you feel, and that which your wife must also feel, is shared within my heart."

"Lies," Johan interrupted. "How dare you be claiming to share her pain? How could you? She meant nothing to you. Just be just another pawn in your twisted games. Do not be lying to me old man."

"Taerana was my lover."

Johan stopped in shock, his back away from the boy.

"If I could have given her the marriage robes, I would have," Betzalel whispered.

Johan's voice cracked as he turned to face him. "Then why? Why did you be giving it to her? Why did you be cursing my Elena so?"

Betzalel's lips curled in a sad smile. "It was not me she needed protection from. It was the Overlord, and his son, Duke Gideon Kaebal. When Taerana died, she did so trying to protect the life of your wife, and of the other children here."

The shakes had subsided, but Johan found himself still unable to trust his legs. "I don't understand." It was not all that he was feeling. How could anyone ever find the words to voice the rampaging whirlwind of feelings that swirled through him now? Yet, it was all that he could manage.

Before Betzalel could answer, Raven muttered a curse from behind the shop. "Father's beard."

Johan turned to see him leaning around the corner of the shop, peering back at them. A smile broke his face nearly in half.

"Pardon the interruption, my fine fellows, but I think the dove might not have flown too far."

"How so?" Johan strode across the ledge to meet him.

"I think our feline has climbed the wall and gone to roost. I can't say that I blame her really. Why, if it would have been me..."

"What in the three Hells do you be trying to say?"

Raven stood up straight, trying his best to look hurt, but the smile never faltered. "I am merely trying to say," he started, but reconsidered as a growl slipped through Johan's lips. "Oh, all right. You never were much for patience, were you? I think she's gone to higher ground." He pointed at the cliff, then at the loose pebbles on the foot of the wall.

Johan walked closer, bending low to inspect the patterns, and then straightened, his smile matching Ravens. Before he could say anything, though, Ravens smile vanished, replaced with a serious look that Johan knew well. It said, "Don't bother arguing with me. I'm right." The frustrating thing was that he usually was.

"Sorry, old friend. From what little you've deigned to tell me, she won't necessarily be all that happy to see you. Let me go first."

"She already hit you. She won't be trusting you after your earlier greeting."

"Ah, but you forget how much women seem to like me. Besides, I've got something to return to her." He held up the amulet where it could catch the fading sunlight.

Johan did not know if this would work, but he was forced to admit the Wildlander's plan had merits. If he was successful, and Elena did not run at the first sight of him, she would listen to Raven before she would him.

"Fine, then. Just be watching that charm of yours. If you be laying one single hand on her..." He let the words trail off, unfinished.

"Agreed. No partnering."

Raven tucked the amulet and its chain into a half-empty pouch, tied the flap and then climbed up the wall, where he disappeared from view.

Chapter 8

The sun hung upon the western hills, tracing an edge of light along the razor that Elena held in front of her. She twisted it left and right, watching the light play along the blade, the bright reflection a stark contrast with the darkness of her thoughts.

For years she had felt alone, but she always managed to push those thoughts and fears deeper away from daily tasks. She had Joss to care for, to love, to raise better than her mother had raised her. Johan kept to himself, mostly, unless he surfaced from the drink long enough to want to spread his attentions on her. He never hit her when she refused, but often his words were lashes, scarring her deeper than his blows could ever have.

She caressed the back of her arm with the razor, testing its edge. Hairs fell off freely.

Joss was her light, her life, for she knew she had no other life. Not here. She could never leave. It took her years to understand why she was so afraid to leave. It had been three years ago to the day that she had discovered her fear of the outside world. Not of the people she might meet--that would be fresh breeze in her stale life. She could start anew with no one knowing her curse, or her mother. Instead, the thought of what that world might make her terrified her. The boys that came back men after the year they spent learning in the world were often radically changed. They brought back new beliefs, new ideas. The tradition was not always comfortable, but it kept their village in touch with the rest of the world. Worse than that, though, was her mother. She had disappeared for days, sometimes weeks, and she always seemed to come back more of a stranger than before.

What truly terrified Elena was facing everything she had buried since her mother abandoned her in order to try on the new ideas and thoughts of the outside world. She found a comfort in her misery.

She turned her arm over and ever so lightly traced the veins with the razor. She was careful. She had to be. It would not do to spill blood until everything was prepared. She refused to spend her eternity caught between death and rebirth.

She could not say why she had not left Johan during the last few years. She only knew what she told herself: he still loved her. It was buried deep now, drowning in a lake of whiskey, but she knew it was there. She could see the pain in his eyes when he thought her asleep and watched her with such tenderness and sorrow, a sad smile slipping onto his face. Why he could not show her the same tenderness when she was awake, she did not understand. Rickward's death had been hard on both of them.

Perhaps she was just afraid of what leaving might mean. Perhaps she could not abandon anyone, no matter how deserving, after suffering the effects of it for so many years herself. Perhaps she was a coward. Whatever the reason, it did not matter now. For the second time in her life she was alone. This time, there was no kind lady to take her in and treat her like a daughter.

She could never face all of the villagers again. Not this time. The looks she had gotten, and the whispers she was not supposed to hear when she was but thirteen still haunted her. She could not suffer through those again. She would not. Johan was dead at the hands of the soldier, and Joss was being taken to the Duke for the Mother only knew what depraved reasons. She was well and truly alone.

She looked out over the vast expanse of mountains and forests that spread out before her, lit orange in the fading light. An owl hooted from a nearby tree, hidden by the aspen's fiery leaves. This rock had been Joss' favorite spot, where she could look out and see the world. She had found excitement in the unknowns that she claimed she would someday face.

Tears welled up in Elena's eyes and a sad smile twisted her face. Joss finally got her adventure. If only Elena could somehow rescue her. How? She was just one person, with no skills at hunting or warfare. A story trickled up through her tears, teasing her with hope until it surfaced and swept the tears aside.

When their marriage was still young, Johan would spend hours with her telling her tales of the Rebellion, of why they had been forced to rebel, and the evils of the Kaebal family. He shared animated recreations of his various exploits. She had loved to listen to him, hanging on to every word just to revel in the sound of her lover's voice. When he was feeling especially pleased with himself, the stories he told would be of him alone entering dangerous territory to succeed at missions everyone said was impossible. He said that, alone, you could blend into the enemy, and they would never think to look for you, simply because they did not expect an attack from inside their home.

She was alone. She could use this to her advantage. Somehow she could find a way to blend into their army and get her little girl back. She did not have the knowledge of war or weapons that Johan had, but she had something more, something he did not. She had years of experience at blending in and going through life unseen.

Hope swelled within her and she rose, folding the razor and placing it back into her pocket. One day, soon, it would draw blood, but it would not be hers.

Raven watched Elena from the shadows of the aspen just strides away from her. He licked his lips, tasting the salt of today's excitement. He breathed deeply and slowly, keeping his breath quiet, and relaxing so he could feel all of his senses as sharply as possible. He watched as she stared into the distance, the razor making paths along her arm. Since he did not smell the bitter stench of blood on the crisp air, he stayed where he was, watching and sensing.

As he relaxed, he forced his body into a state of awareness that had taken him years to master. At times his teachers thought he would never take it serious enough to ever be fully trained, but he trained harder than any other

student, making rapid progress once he had made the decision. Outwardly, he still played the fool, but a strength born from that decision had stayed with him all of his life.

He put his training to use now, making every inch of his body a receptor for the energies that surrounded him. They were everywhere, in everything. All it took was focusing on Elena and he could feel her energies and listen to her moods. He felt her despair as a cold, clammy energy that soaked through his skin like a thick fog, and he feared she would make use of the razor, the energy was so thick. Just before he would have ran to aid, risking any panic he might have caused her to save her life, her energy changed. The cold was replaced with a searing heat that danced along his skin like a lightning in the clouds on a rain-free night. He breathed easier, as the energy translated her decision.

She would be alive to fulfill her part in *Zera'im's* time of need. The land he called home might yet survive.

Glancing back the way he had come, he made his own decision. He would not confront her as he had said he would. He would not return to the two men behind him. They had their own differences to work through before they would be healed enough to fulfill their part.

He watched as Elena pocketed the razor and walked away. When he was confident that she would not be able to hear him, he rose and followed after her.

Chapter 9

Joss was terrified. She did not mind admitting that. Not to herself, at least. When she had the chance to tell her story later, she would tell it differently. She would tell that this was how her grand adventure had started. This was what had gotten her out of the little mountain fort of Harts Haven and let her see the world. For now, though, she could admit that the grand adventure scared her more than any nightmare.

After grabbing her, the soldiers had raced straight out of town, pausing only to situate her better. That meant tying her wrists together, wrapping the leash around the big soldier and lashing it to the saddle horn. Once she was settled, they ran the horses hard, talking very little.

The blur of the mountains gave way to the rocky hills at the mountain base. The rain started shortly after full dark, fat drops splatting on her face, feeling little different than the bugs that had slammed into her face. Before long the rain came down in sheets, forcing her eyes closed and she leaned into Bardulf's back. They slowed just enough to make safe passage along the road. She did not mind the rain much, though, since it managed to wash away the soldier's sweaty stench.

Occasionally, he would turn and check on her in quiet tones. "Do you be sore?" "Getting hungry?" and other mundane concerns. She wanted to scream at him, tell him, "Yes, you could be doing somewhat for me: take me home," but she did not dare. They spoke so little that she had no real idea why she had been taken, and her imagination was forced to create its own reasons.

She tried to ignore the thoughts, to shove away the pictures of girls stretched and split into pieces, or the Captain's hands roaming along her, touching her places that were not to be touched. She tried to bury the thoughts by watching the land transform around her, but she could not concentrate, and--when the rain came--it formed a sheet of needles that made her nearly blind anyway. She dozed when she could, but her cruel imagination fastened itself with iron claws into her dreams. She would wake, and then try to wipe the dreams away with the tears and rain, and then drift off as she could no longer fight sleep.

As the night crept by, one nightmare after another, the rain soaked her through and a chill wind turned her bones to ice. When they rounded a bend in the road and came into sight of fire, she could not have been happier. Where there were campfires, there would be food. And beds. Maybe they would be enough to pacify her imagination. She doubted it.

She came alert as she realized there must be twenty or thirty fires. Thinking back to her Da's stories she guessed on the low side: four tents to a fire; two men to a tent. At least one hundred fifty men must be camped here. Probably more.

Her stomach growled loudly as she caught the scent of faintly burnt stew. It did not even occur to ask what type of meat was in it. It did not matter. She would eat anything right now.

Few men were out tonight, but Bardulf slowed as they came to the edge of camp. The Captain waved off to his right in a complex gesture. She could not see anyone, but knew there must be sentries posted around the perimeter. Johan's stories always had sentries ringing the camp that they had to watch so they could slip through patrol. It seemed like something always went wrong when passing through the sentries. This time, however, they were known, if not expected. She heard a low whistle in reply and they passed safely through.

A new wave of excitement rushed through her: this was a real army camp, just like the stories. This time, however, she was an active part of the story, and captives were never treated well. The excitement vanished, replaced by a cold, hollow pit in her stomach.

Through the numbness of her terror, she watched as the soldiers that seemed to be sleeping turned their heads ever so slightly to watch her pass by. A wave of tension and relief seemed to follow in her wake.

Why were they glad she was here? What was she brought here for, anyway? The questions she should have been asking on the hours here crowded into her mind, overwhelming her. Her head spun, light-headed and anxious as they passed the perfect rows of tents around neatly stacked fires. Her heart caught in her throat as she saw where they were headed.

In the center of the camp, ringed by six straight soldiers, was a tent easily three times as big as the rest. The white silk shimmered in the pale flicker of the campfires as the wind caressed its softness, teasing it taut, then loose, and then taut again. Golden tassels waved in the breeze, hanging at perfectly spaced intervals around the top of the tent. Inside, a shadow paced back and forth, stopping occasionally to stare at what looked to be a table in front of it before resuming its pacing.

She knew the owner of the shadow instantly: Gideon Kaebal, Duke of Edrea and the Overlord's eldest son. A razor-sharp knife of pure terror scraped along her spine and arms, leaving her cold and shivering. She stared at the shadow, years of her Da's tales pounded into her skull repeatedly, just above her eyes.

"How did I ever be thinking this could be an adventure?" She started when she realized that she had spoken out loud, and looked up at the soldier in the saddle in front of her.

Bardulf looked back at her, his eyes rimmed with a sadness she had not expected. "It'll be all right, girl. Just you see. Just you see." He smiled at her then, a look she did not understand glinting across his eyes.

They stopped still several paces away from the Duke's tent. The Captain rode ahead to meet the soldier guarding the front of the tent. He leaned towards the soldier, speaking too low for her too hear. Turning towards the tent, he paused, as if considering, then shook his head as he turned back

to the Captain. They spoke more, still in hushed tones, then the Captain broke off and motioned Bardulf to follow.

They wound through more tents, each identical to the others, past a large make-shift pen that held more horses than she had ever seen in one place, and stopped in front of a series of tents, each placed directly next to the other. Their side flaps were tied together, forming a tunnel that ran through all of them. The tents were the same design as the others, but showed signs of age, as if they had no one to care for them. From what she could see, they curved around, forming a full circle that opened at the tent directly in front of her.

Bardulf untied the ropes that bound her, and motioned for her to dismount. He lent her an arm and lowered her down himself, making sure that she had her footing before letting her go.

"Come on, girl," the Captain said, his voice a rough whisper. "We'd all like to get some sleep tonight. Hurry it up."

As she walked nervously up to him, he threw the tent flap back and pushed her inside. The darkness and the unknown reached their icy fingers out and grabbed hold of her. She looked back to the entrance, too scared even to let loose the tears that welled behind her eyes. The Captain was already walking away. It was not to the Captain that she looked, but to the huge man she had ridden behind.

Bardulf watched her. After a long breath he waved her on.

She knew it was meant to be reassuring, that he was trying to tell her, once again, that everything would be all right. She could not believe that. Not now. Not here in the maw of the demon she knew the Duke to be. This

would not be the grand adventure she had always hoped for. Somehow, from some well of knowledge deep inside of her, she knew this was the beginning of the end.

She wanted to run to him, this big, rough man that only a short while ago was her enemy. She wanted to run to him and wrap her arms around him, and feel the reassurance and safety of his arms around her. He must have sensed it. He turned suddenly and walked away. In her mind she heard the door of her past slam shut. She did not hear another one open.

She fumbled in the darkness until she found a cot that was empty and waiting for her. She climbed in, pulled the ragged covers tight around her, and listened to her breathing and the sporadic sounds of movement around her until exhaustion won and she slept.

Chapter 10

The first raindrop splattered on the narrow, rocky path in front of Elena, threatening a full release from the dark, swollen clouds above her. She had to find shelter. This rain would come fast and hard in these hills. The chance for flash floods were great.

Her horse trailed behind her, tugging hard on the reins with nervous energy. The Duke's brand--dual crescent moons--glowed in the moonlight, seeming to slide along the horse's haunch as he shifted from foot to foot.

Something followed her. It could be anything. Had the soldiers doubled back to catch her? She had to know.

She waited at a bend in the narrow, rocky path. A crag of rock that provided her shelter. If she needed to escape, an easy climb up the cliff was behind her. She heard no voices. She heard nothing, if she was to be honest with herself. The wind was still and the night bugs' song had stopped.

No owls flew for their midnight meal. No mice skittered along the crags. Yet she saw the shadows slide along the rock face. She did not have time to see more.

As the horse reared back, spooked, his terror-laden scream echoed through the mountains. His hooves stamped onto the rock, spraying loose stone and dirt off the ledge. She watched as they fell, slamming into the sides and shattered into a dozen more pieces each. Swallowing hard, she tightened her grip on the reins. It helped to calm her as much as it helped her keep the horse from running. She pulled the reins closer and reached out an open hand, palm up, and then slowly brushed it along the horse's dappled gray head.

It snorted, his breath bursting into mist in the chilly night air, and then shook his head, pulling away from her touch.

"Easy boy," she said, forcing her voice to sound calm. She placed her hand on his neck, sliding it back to where her sack was tied on the saddle. Should the horse decide to bolt, she refused to lose meals.

He stamped his feet twice, shifting nervously as he watched her, one black eye swimming in a pool of white.

"Nothing to be worrying over, boy. It just be a goat."

The horse snorted again, as if he was trying to tell her she was full of nonsense. The worst part was that she would agree with him.

"You don't be believing me, eh?" She paused a moment, looking back along the pathway where the breeze stirred the ragged pines and cast eerie shadows along the rock wall. She patted the horse gently on the neck. "I agree. We better be getting. The sooner we be finding safe ground the better."

She stretched her arm towards the sack once more, but was two hands short. Drawing in a deep breath to steady herself, she stretched further, gaining only three finger widths.

Nervous, the horse stamped its hooves. She tried to ignore the sound of the rock chips that bounced down the cliff. Off-balance, she adjusted her footing, trying to steady herself. The ragged edge of the path crumbled under her weight. Her right foot slipped, sending a spray of rock careening down below her.

She threw her hands out, grasping for some handhold. Her groping hands found the reins, and she grabbed hold. Her body bent backwards, trying to fall but the reins stopped her.

The horse jumped. He took two steps back, the muscles in his neck bulging as it hauled her back onto the ledge.

"Thatta boy," she said, resting her weight against the stallion's flanks. She stroked its neck, hoping to calm both of them. Grabbing the sack in her free hand, she slipped the knotted end off of the saddle horn.

Lightning flashed. Thunder boomed. A shadow slid across the face of the rocks in front of them, not ten spans up the path.

The horse skittered backwards, his flank pressing into her and shoving her back. Instincts took hold of her: one foot reached back, trying to steady her, but there was nothing for it to land on. She toppled, arms flailing wide as she fell.

Pain erupted through her leg and hips as her knee pounded into the ragged rock trail. Her stomach hit next. Her breath escaped in a quick burst.

She threw her hands forward, searching for some purchase that would stop her descent. As her hands scraped against the rock, the flesh ripped from their tips. She let go of the sack of food. She did not watch as it hit the rocks and tore open, spilling its contents over the cliff.

Instead, her eyes searched the rock and dirt that slid by too quickly. The cliff was washed in light as lightning struck in the hills above her. The thunder's retort was deafening.

The shadow was there, again, on the rock face in front of her. She knew it was impossible, but knew even more that it was real. Two arms capped in long, sharp fingers reached down the rock to grab her. Scanning the blurry ledge above her, she hoped the sounds she had heard all night was someone come to help her, but no one was there.

The pounding of hooves disappeared back along the trail, desperate and frightened as they echoed back at her.

Once more, the night was day as three forks of lightning crawled across the bottom of the swollen clouds, ripping their seams and letting loose a volley of rain that enveloped and blinded her.

The flesh was ripped from her arms as she tried to stop herself, but the fall continued, aided by the new mud. She scrambled, hands and feet clawing at the rock. It was too far down. She would not end like this.

She rammed into a small ledge that almost held her weight. Before she found her breath, it tore free and the slide started again. She grabbed for the ledge as she passed, hoping what was left could hold her until she found a new purchase. It crumbled in her grasp.

She clawed at the face more, and felt a fingernail bend backwards on itself, nearly ripping out, and then the wall was gone. Pain shot through her legs, lancing her knees and searing up through her, leaving her hips numb and tingling, as she slammed into a bigger ledge.

Fearful that it would not hold, she reached forward searching for something, anything, to grab. She found nothing. No rock, no scrub or lichens. Only air.

Hope fountained within her, dousing her in new found strength and she pushed forward, her torn feet slipping on the rain-slicked rock. The rain stopped piercing her scalp and neck, then her back, and eventually she managed to pull her entire body away from the harsh weather.

She took five deep breaths as she scanned the darkness. She collapsed, her body a rag-pile on the floor, as her

head grew suddenly lighter, and her eyes rolled back, and she slept the sleep of the dead.

She woke to the rhythm of the blood surging through her skull. Night had draped the cave in a blanket of black, robbing her of even the occasional lightning flash. The Mother and the Father had stopped their fight, leaving the Mother to weep. She could not see the rain, but could hear it as countless drops thundered into the rocks outside.

Her tunic and breeches were still soaked, but the rock floor beneath her was mostly dry. She could not have been out for more than an hour or two. She stood, stretching through the rips and bruises to lessen the pain that the cold, damp rock had gifted to her.

"Father's beard!" she cursed, then breathed in deeply. "Joss, darling, what be happening to you?" She felt the tears press against her eyes, but fought them back. She had done what she must, it was not a mistake. She had followed one of the many lessons Johan had forced her to learn.

When facing an unknown enemy, always be limiting the number of opponents that can attack you at once. The odds stack themselves in your favor when you take the initiative. If you be lucky, they will be tripping on the bodies of the fallen friends.

Johan had always taken action, even when uncertain.

"Fat lot of good it be doing him," she laughed. "Dead at the hands of the tax-man."

She shook her head, trying to force the thoughts away. Johan was dead. She must accept it, and bury the tears. She could mourn him later, after Joss was safe. For now, she just had to remember his lessons. She must take action.

She walked slowly, sliding her feet along the rough floor, searching with her hands for the wall. Finding it, she pulled herself along, inch by painful inch toward the sound of the rain. When she could feel the rebound spray as drops smashed into the floor, she stopped.

Keeping one hand on the wall, she inched forward into the grey night, letting the blankets of rain pound into her head. It was refreshing, next to the aches and pains that covered her. She looked up, trying to find the light, but could not. Stepping out of the rain, she sat, letting her eyes adjust and her mind wander.

You can't be forcing your head into answers. It just don't work that way. You sometimes have to be thinking about everything else, or nothing at all, if you be wanting the answers to come.

She clenched her eyes and stood, turning back to the black cave. Her eyes refused to adjust. She could not climb down the cliff, or back up the way she had come in this weather. It would mean a sure death. She did the only thing she could do: she followed the gusts of wet air deeper into the tunnel. Perhaps she could find an answer there.

Thirty-two steps deeper in the cave, her nose crinkled in revolt, and her stomach threatened to give up what food it still had. The freshness of the rain soured into the dank, earthy smell of decay. She was held in place by fear. What could be dead or dying back in here? Worse yet, what could have killed it, and was it still around? The driving force of the wind and rain made her mind up for her.

She crouched and crept along the floor, ready to roll to the side if something should come at her. Not five steps later her foot plunged into something fleshy and soft. Her throat burned with acid. She put one shaky

hand in front of her and felt the dead flesh give way under her touch. Something small squirmed on the end of her finger, and she jerked her hand back, shaking it until she was sure the maggot was gone.

Her stomach boiled and erupted.

When the gagging and heaving had finally stopped, she sat down, resting her back against the wall. She knew the body was just out of reach, but, in her mind, it would not matter where she was in this cave. The body would be right next to her no matter how far she removed herself.

The smell was worse, with fresh gases seeping from the wound she had opened. Her stomach threatened to erupt once more, but she knew this corpse, if it was indeed human, would have no more use for whatever items he might have on him. She had nothing left to her, and would use whatever she could.

Stepping to the side, careful not to put her knees too close to the carcass, she ran her fingers lightly across the rotting flesh. Twice, she stopped as her stomach emptied, until she was gagging, heaving with nothing left to give. Finally, she felt the leather strap that she hoped would be there.

She tugged the backpack free, clamping her imagination in place as she heard the corpse rip. The rancid smell intensified and she crawled quickly away, gagging. She pulled the backpack along behind her to the cave mouth, letting the water clean away the filth, both real and imagined. She breathed in buckets of fresh air, trying to purge the carcass from her lungs.

When she was as clean as her travels would let her be, she examined her find. It was a stout pack: supple hide with one flap held by two leather thongs and wooden buttons; seven pockets circle the bottom, each with their own flap and button; the straps, though worn, were in good shape, enough of the padding left that it would still provide some comfort. Flipping the flap open, she found several rotten foods wrapped in oilcloth and unrecognizable. She threw them over the ledge.

Most of the other items were either rotted or useless, and she threw them out, also. She kept the small brass cook pot, the tongs and the pewter mug. Her spirits lifted a bit when she found the firebox, complete with tinder. With as long as they had been here, she hoped they would be well seasoned, but she feared the dampness would render them unusable. If the Mother was looking her way, then the corpse might even have a torch and some rope.

She slid open the side panel on the firebox revealing two compartments. From the smaller hole, she pulled a piece of flint and the steel striker. Laying the box on its side, she held the flint over the tinder that filled the other compartment and said a quick prayer. Three quick stokes and the tinder caught hold of the spark, smoking and burning. Gently, she blew over the embers, until the tinder caught true and flames spat out, licking the edges of the firebox.

She smiled, thanked the Mother, replaced the flint and steel, and then closed the box. Five small openings in the top and bottom let the fire breathe, and let a small amount of light out. In the darkness, the fire was like a bon fire. The cave came to life around her.

The cave walls were straight and smooth, obviously carved by man, and led past the edge of her light into the darkness. It felt like entering a tomb, carved into the earth by the hands of the dead.

Shaking off the shiver that ran through her, she inched forward, not knowing how long the tinder would last. She hoped to find something that would burn longer, if she needed to explore deeper into the cave depths.

Lit by the caress of the flame, the corpse was worse than she would have imagined. Bloated, the skin was stretched tight, a bluish-gray. In a few places the skin had punctured under the strain, and she could see the

gelatinous movement of the maggots under the skin.

He wore leather breeches and a loose-fitting cotton tunic with the symbol of a yellow hand clutching a black ladder. She recognized him. She had not met him very many times, but that symbol had always struck her as wrong. It was not for humans to control the Ladder.

He had stopped by her store, buying a few candles for his forays into the earth. They had talked for a while about religion and how the priests tried to wrest control from the humans, making their decisions for them and holding the powers of heaven in their hands. He was almost violent in his passions, his thin cheeks flushing bright as the veins in his neck tried to break free. He claimed the priests had hidden blessings they refused to tell their worshippers. He claimed they knew the secrets of eternal youth, and it lay at the foot of the Ladder. As he took a last swig from his canteen, the sweet smell of honey-mead heavy on his breath, he vowed to find the secrets, even if it meant wresting them from the hands of the dead themselves.

She hoped he would have better luck finding his secret in *Olhaba*. She was sure he had not had any luck while alive. Or perhaps the secrets proved too much for him.

A shiver climbed up the ladder of her spine, sticking the hairs on the back of her neck on end. If he had come here looking for secrets...

She forced her feet to move past the corpse, willing her stomach to behave as his reek assaulted her. She had to know. She had to find some way out of this cave.

Her foot caught on something as she passed, and her mind conjured images of his leg ripping off. When she looked down she breathed a quick sigh of relief. It was only rope.

She untangled her foot and made her way to the end of the tunnel. It formed a tee here, passages leading both directions past the end of what little light she had. On the wall directly across from her was the symbol she had feared: a single ladder crossed at the bottom with a headstone.

She remembered sitting through the priest's sermons, week after week. She always sat in the back row, not because she wanted to leave in the middle of the service, but because she was afraid of the villager's reaction. Still she came, and soaked up the teachings of the Mother and the Father.

The priest warned the villagers to stay away from the bowels of the earth. They were not meant for mortals, unless protected by the Rites of the Interners. Caves and caverns were the wandering places of the dead. It is their world, not ours, and the Mother will not look over us while in the Father's territory.

As if summoned by her thoughts, a cold breeze whipped through the tunnel. Her light flared up, and then sputtered out, laying a blanket of darkness over her. She knew it was a ghost that leaned over and blew the flame out. He wanted to dine in the dark, and she was the first course.

She took three steps back, stepping on the rope again. She shrieked in terror before she could stop herself. She was sure the corpse was reaching for her.

Grabbing the rope, she backed away until she could feel the wall pressing into her back. She dragged the rope with her as she slid along the wall to the entrance. She had to stop twice to tear it free from the corpse's grasp.

Looking back, she knew she was being followed. She could feel the prickle of its gaze between her shoulders, but there was no one there.

It took her a moment to realize that she could see the end of the tunnel. A pale, nauseous green light seeped

over the rocks, pulling itself along with shadowy fingers.

Someone--something--was coming for her. She should not be here.

On the ledge, the rain pelted her face and arms. It had not let up. Instead, it came in blankets, obscuring her vision as well as any woolen blanket.

Kneeling, she ran her hands along the edge of the ledge, praying for something to anchor the rope on. She looked back into the tunnel, terrified of what she might find. The corpse was where she had left it, slumped closer, leaning towards her. The light was brighter now. Perhaps it was forcing the corpse into action, to inch his way towards her as she huddled on the ledge with nowhere to go.

A flash of lighting showed her what she needed. She would not be stuck waiting for the dead to strike her down after all. One stride to the left of the ledge, two strides down, a rugged cedar grew straight out of the bluff before twisting and lifting its branches to the sky.

Elena.

She whipped around, holding the backpack in front of her like a shield.

The light turned the corner into her tunnel, taking the form of a naked woman. Elena could see through her to the Interners' marking on the wall.

The ghost floated slowly towards her. Cast in the sickly green light, the woman's long red hair flowed over her shoulders as if caught in a wind that did not fully reach this world.

Elena threw the backpack over her shoulders, punched her arms through the straps, and took a step back to the lip. Her left foot straddled the edge, the heel hanging out into the air. She grabbed the robe and wrapped it four times around her forearm, yanking it sharply so that several feet of slack formed beneath her.

She risked a glance back to the woman and froze.

Her features were clearer, sharper, and Elena recognized her. She was covered in puckered skin. Elena knew the fires that consumed her mother would have left those marks.

Stay, Elena. The soft voice was inside her head.

She would not condemn Jocelyn to life--or death--in the Duke's camp. Not while she still held enough breath to say differently. Her own mother, who condemned her to this life of solitude, would not be the one to take her across.

Kneeling on all fours, she slid over the ledge, the winds and rains grabbing at her. She climbed to the corner of the ledge, dragging the rope along with her, until she could go no further.

We have much to be saying, daughter. Don't leave.

"I have nothing to say." The words were forced between gritted teeth as she stretched her legs out to reach the twisted cedar. Her feet would not reach.

Her mother was just one stride away, kneeling in front of her. It could not truly be her mother, but some trick of the Father to ease her into an early grave. Her mother had never once given in to anyone. She had never kneeled for someone, never begged. She had always been strong in her beliefs, even as their fires consumed

her flesh.

The creature that wore her mother's mask reached a supplicating hand out to her.

Stay.

Elena glanced at the cedar below, barely visible in the rain, and back to the ghost. She steadied herself, nearly choking on the terror.

The ghost's hand was almost to her when it lunged, its face twisting from the sad smile into a mask of rage.

Stay! It roared, the scream echoing through her head.

Elena kicked off, jumping for the tree. The ghost's hand grabbed her wrist but found nothing. It went straight through her leaving the chill of ice in its place.

She crashed into the tree, arms flailing for a hold as her legs buckled. She could feel her balance shifting perilously to the right as her hands clutched at several small branches. Her balance upset, she toppled sideways off the gnarled tree, her hands sliding off the wet branches leaving her with a handful of needles.

She flung her arms behind her, desperately searching for something to hold on to. The rope tightened around her arm, yanking her backwards enough to slow her, until the full weight of her body pulled on the arm, shooting needles of pain through her shoulder. Her fall stopped as she was thrown into the bluff wall.

In the corner of her vision a white snake draped itself down an arms length to her left. She looked closer, and pushed off from the rock just enough to wrap her left arm around the rope.

A short prayer of thanks to the Mother escaped her lips as her weight fell on the other end of the rope, and it held. It must have looped over the cedar.

She pulled on both ends, lifting herself up to the tree. Her shoulder screamed at her to stop, to let it rest, but she knew that she could not until she sat on the tree. Maybe not even then.

Her strength threatened to flee on the final pull. Her muscles strained, burning. Her entire body howled in agony from the yank on the arm, to the scrapes from the fall earlier, and the pounding impact into the bluff.

Tears streamed from her eyes, blending with the rain that still poured from the heavens, as she gritted her teeth and screamed in frustration and rage, pulling herself up one last time. Her arms shook as she wrapped them around the cedar and pulled herself into a seated position, wedging her body between the pointed, needled branches and the rock wall.

She took two ragged breaths, her chest still heaving, before she remembered the ghost. And the rope.

Looking to the ledge, she could see the green light receding into the depths of the cave.

She unwound the rope from her right arm, flinging the end under the tree so it wrapped around. She caught the other end in her hand and tied it securely in one of the sailor's knots Johan had taught her. It would hold nearly any weight, and was used in the rigging of wind-blown ships. It was simple to untie, but only if you climbed back up the knot. She was only concerned about getting down the cliff, not lugging fifty pounds of rope around with her once she was on solid ground.

She tugged on the loose end of the rope, sliding it stride by stride out of the cave until, finally, the other end

dangled somewhere below her, lost in the blanket of rain.

The ghosts' telltale light had disappeared, but she did not dare risk waiting until morning. Even if she tied herself to the tree, it might return as she slept. She would have to risk the rain-slicked rope.

Chapter 11

Elena watched the rope disappear into the rain, and refused to allow herself to think. She had no choice but to continue down. Jocelyn was down there somewhere, in the hands of a power-hungry mad man. There was no time to think.

Tugging on the rope to make sure it was tight, she slipped her legs over the side of the tree, turned onto her belly and slid down until she found a firm grip on the rope. She hung for a moment, trying to convince herself she was just being cautious, just testing the knot one last time. Her eyelids closed tight, blocking the unknown from sight. She bit her lip until a trickle of salty blood slid onto her tongue. She spit it out and opened her eyes.

"Just testing the rope. That's all."

She drew strength in from the damp air, filling her lungs as far as they would fill, and then forced it all out in a quick explosion of breath, rain and spittle.

Loosening the grip her legs had as they wrapped around the rope, she stretched herself out to full length, and wrapped her legs around the rope once more. Resting her weight on her legs she slid her hands down the rope until they were even with her chest.

Loosen the legs. Stretch. Slide the hands. Repeat.

Occasionally the wall would reach a hand out to her, beckoning with pointed fingers of cedar or scrub. Sometimes she felt a firmer fist of rock slide along her legs, ripping her breeches further, taking small pieces of skin with it.

Loosen the legs. Stretch. Slide the hands. Repeat.

The rain ceased its incessant pounding half-way down, sputtering in erratic bursts. She thanked the Mother for finally stopping her crying, but wished it did not make it easier to see what waited below.

Her arms shook from exhaustion. She forced herself to stop and rest, holding her weight with her legs until they, too, started protesting.

She remembered Colin winning the village climb last year. He climbed Madman's Sheer with no rope to aid him. Several other boys had tried. Two died. Three fell and broke a leg, arm or rib. The rest gave up before losing any more of themselves to the crazy task. It was the first, and last, year the Sheer had been in the competition.

It was not the Sheer that stuck in her memory, though. It was the look in Colin's eyes as he stared up at it, searching for the safest path. His eyes held a determination that she had known she would never possess. In his eyes she could see he knew it was either success or death. He chose success; failure was not an option.

She had not understood how one person could hold such a fire for life, a mastery of self, as he did that day. She thought she understood now. Whatever demons prodded him into the climb, once started he had no choice.

It did not matter that her arms and shoulders, her legs and hips burned with a fire hotter than she had ever used to heat the wax. To give up was to die. To let go now was to kill her daughter.

She refused to think what would happen when she reached the end of the rope. Her hands were raw and blistering. Her breeches had worn thin, and the inside of her thighs were rubbed raw.

When she finally reached the end of the rope, it was worse than she could have imagined.

Johan did not wait for Raven to return. Raven had a way of finding anyone he needed to. They were right. There was nothing he could do for

her now. He hated that he must leave her. If what he had learned was right, he needed to stoke the fires of the Rebellion back to life. He would find her when he was done.

They returned to the house and collected the few items they needed for the coming trip: food, blankets, tarp, weapons and horses. After checking the forge to ensure the fires were completely out, they left.

Betzalel said nothing, seeming to sense his need for quiet, and Johan was grateful for it. Thoughts did not always come easily to him when this much was at stake. They seemed, instead, to form circles of logic, like the snake that twisted itself around to bite its own tail. He worked best when allowed to be in the middle of the action, reacting, rather than plotting.

One thought burned in his mind, though. Betzalel had killed his son, and asked him to do the same to his wife.

They rode in silence for several miles, the rain starting up as they came to the fork in the road. A decision must be made here, before he would know which path to take.

He signaled his horse to a stop with a gentle tug on the reins, and waited for Betzalel to notice and turn back. He tried to bury the emotions, but could not stop them from turning the question into an accusation.

"Why did I be betraying my wife twelve years ago, to save her, only to be leaving her to die now?"

Betzalel reined his horse to a stop, five strides from Johan, and looked him over, gauging him, before answering. "What you did then, was to save your wife now."

Johan could not restrain himself, years of guilt exploding in white-hot rage. "She will be dieing on her own. She knows nothing of survival. She be having no chance to defeat the Duke or his men."

His horse pranced nervously underneath him and he yanked on the reins, willing it to still. "You say she can Breathe. What good is that if she don't be knowing how? Any twelve-year old boy can hold a sword, but a soldier will still kill him without trying. You be asking me to let her die."

Betzalel remained irritatingly calm, sitting with regal poise upon his horse. "Trial is often the best teacher. Is that not how you earned your skills? And you say she knows naught about survival? She survived the last twelve years with you."

Johan drew his breath in sharply as the truth slapped him. He wanted to fight it, wanted to yell and scream, but he knew what the boy was saying was the truth. He had been blind to the damage he caused her over the years, but that same damage had made her a strong woman, indeed.

He tried to escape into the void he found just before a battle, when the odds were impossible and he had to find his inner peace or die. In that place it felt as though part of his mind went someplace safer, somewhere so remote that it was not until after the battle that feelings would return, and he would realize the danger. This time, though, as he felt that part of him leaving, something went wrong. A rumble started from deep inside his chest, reverberating through his lungs and ribs until his upper body shook. Shockwaves coursed through his arms and legs.

He looked at Betzalel, expecting him to be in the middle of some magic against him, but saw that he was looking back and forth between the two roads.

The tremor had barely subsided before another wave, stronger than the first, shot through his entire body. He tried clenching his knees against the horse to keep from falling, but could not find the strength. As quick as they had come, the tremors sank back inside of him, weaker and weaker until they were gone. But he knew they were still there, waiting.

Betzalel was staring at him, eyes questioning, as Johan looked up.

Was it Betzalel? He was not to be trusted, but had, so far, never taken any direct actions against him. He did not think the specter was responsible, but perhaps he would know what it was.

"Did you be doing that to me?" he asked.

"Do you really believe that?" When Johan did not respond he continued. "As hard as you might find this to believe, I need your help. I have no reason to harm you."

"Then tell me what it be."

Betzalel was quiet for a long moment. It seemed that he stood unnaturally still, not a single muscle moving.

"Have you had anything to drink today?" As he said it, the ghost of a smile bent the corners of his mouth.

Disgusted with himself, Johan snapped the reins and headed up the high path.

"What will we find that way?" asked Betzalel.

Without turning, Johan said, "We've got a rebellion to be starting, don't we?"

Elena stared at the cliff face in horror. The bottom of the rope dangled just below her feet, nearly ten strides from the rock face. The bluff was clear here, no scrub brush or grass growing in sight, and the rain had stopped, so she could see it all with a clarity she wished she did not have. She guessed there was still fifty strides of the cliff left before the rugged hillside collided with the stone wall. Even if she got over to the cliff face, finding purchase would not be easy.

She wanted to cry. Every muscle in her body screamed at her to rest, but she could not. There was no place to rest, and Joss needed her. Instead, she screamed in anguish and rage. She could feel the power of the scream as it rebounded off of the stone back at her, echoing dully along the ravine.

At the thought of her daughter, the image resurfaced, unbidden to play against the backdrop of her mind: Joss falling from the Ladder; the wind coming to her command and saving her life. She could do that now. She could Breathe her way to the bottom, could she not?

No. She would not fall into the trap of Breathing. Her mother had done that, and look what had happened to her. She would not end up like her mother: destroying first her mind, and then her friends, and then her only daughter.

Gently at first, testing both the rope and what strength she had left, she rocked herself back and forth, each time coming a little closer to the wall, but not close enough. She leaned further into the swing, giving it a little

more power, bringing her a little closer to the wall. Still, she was a stride away. The rope slipped in her hands. She could feel it twist. A faint creak echoed down to her, followed by the smallest of cracks. She risked a quick glance upwards, but could see nothing. She was running out of time. Any minute the tree would give way.

"Why didn't you be thinking of that? The Father will be having you, yet."

She leaned even further into the swing, burying her fears, and scanned the wall for handholds.

Crack!

The tree above gave, dropping her two hands farther down.

She drew a deep breath on the outward swing, steeling her nerves. Focusing her gaze on the landing spot, she leapt as the rope entered its closest point to the wall and felt the rope go slack.

She crashed into the wall, scrambling for the holds. Nothing. They slid across the smooth rock where the holds should have been. She splayed her feet, scraping them against the wall until one finally caught. The ledge was small, too small to hold her very long.

Snake-like, the rope coiled behind her, but it did not strike out. Instead, the coil loosened as the bottom of the rope fell deeper into the chasm and the other end snuck up and attacked her, the branch still held in its grip. She heard the branch ricochet off the wall above, and felt the spray of rock and dirt that preceded it. With a prayer to the Mother, she swung out of its way holding on by only one hand and foot until the rope and its branch were past her. She swung back flat onto the rock face, finding her hold again. She watched the rope and branch as it plummeted through the air, into the ravine wall and shattered, spraying wood chips through the damp air.

"That could have been me," she thought as she bit back the twin shudders of fear and exhaustion that shot through her.

She forced her way down, one painful handhold after another, twisting and stretching into whatever contortions the rock chose for her. After a while she forgot the pain. The numbness started in the tips of her fingers, and then crept up her arms and into her shoulders, then down the length of her body.

Below, there was still twenty strides. At her current pace, she knew that she had at least half a bell left. Probably more, unless her arms gave out and she followed the rope down. Once she made it to the bottom she could rest. She could find a soft patch of grass and lie down, close her eyes, and forget the pain, the numbness and the fear. Then she would follow the ravine to the edge of the Home Woods. She would follow Furrier's Trail to the next village. What was its name? She could not remember but the name did not matter. What mattered is that she would be able to soak in a hot bath for as long as she needed to. Isn't that how the bigger cities worked? Eternal baths and daily feasts? She knew the stories brought back by boys after their Naming Journey were exaggerations, but it sounded so good right now that she hoped they were not outright lies.

The rumble started in her fingertips. No, that was not right. From deep inside the rock the vibrations started. They spread through her, terror riding their waves.

She scanned the ravine, frantic to find what was causing it. Nothing.

A single, fat drop of rain pelted her forehead, sending a spray of smaller drops into her eye. She closed them, wincing at the imagined pain. She hated closing her eyes and possibly missing a breath to get away from whatever was shaking the rock. Lace patterns and loose strings played against the blackness of her closed

eyes. As if called by the images and patterns, she remembered the sun when the rain started. It had called for deadly amounts of rain, and they had surely gotten more than enough.

She shook the thoughts from her mind. No time for thinking, she had to get to the floor quick. Fueled by desperation, she climbed down three steps, her hands and feet sliding before each hold, but eventually finding their grip. Whether her arms shook with nervousness or in time with the vibrations in the rock, she did not know, and refused to think. She only had time to act.

Looking up the pathway she saw nothing, but the sound could not be mistaken. The dull roar seeped from the rocks as much as it pushed its way down the trail, and it was getting louder much too quickly.

She did not have time to get out of the way, but there was nothing else that she could do. She scrambled down four more steps before the water came into view. The liquid wall surged towards her, moving impossibly fast, as wagon loads of water played leap-frog, tumbling over each other to see who would get to her first.

For a short eternity she stared at the flood waters that rushed to take her to the Mother for judging. Surely, it could not come to this. All of her failings behind her, she finally had found the courage to step away from the trap she had lived in only to have it all washed away in a moment.

"Jocelyn!" she screamed, as she fought her way up the cliff face, showering the path below her with broken rock and small clods of hardened earth.

Up! Faster!

Her hands slipped in her haste, tearing more skin away. She pushed ahead, not even bothering to check the flood's progress. A part of her knew that she would never make it. She slammed the door in the face of those thoughts, locking them away as she pressed on, trying without success to block the now deafening roar.

The water slammed into her, knocking her feet loose and sucking the breath from her. Still, she held on as her feet lifted up and the flow pounded against her, wave after wave until the raging flood immersed her.

Her lungs burned, threatening to rip her mouth open in search of air. She could not hold out much longer. She had to find a way to get to the surface, to draw another breath, or she was done for. She could not climb, not against the force of the water. Her fingers slipped a bit at the thought alone. She only had one choice, and whether she would live to save her only child she did not know.

Gritting her teeth to keep her mouth closed, as much as to bear the fire in her lungs, she kicked her legs out, hoping to find purchase in the rock.

The flow was too strong, and her energy too far spent. As she kicked out, her hands gave way and the river grabbed her with its icy claws, bending her this way and that, slamming her into the wall, before forcing her further away from fresh air.

Chapter 12

The rain let up as the sun crept over the top of the mountains. The path Johan and Betzalel followed wound through the rocky terrain, at first steep and narrow, then giving way to flatter terrain and sprouting some growth along the edges. Most of the day passed in silence. Johan's mood was as dark as the rain drenched night. Betzalel seemed content to have gotten Johan into action. No words were needed.

"Where are we headed?" Betzalel asked.

"A friend of mine from the Rebellion be living in a clearing up here. We can be reestablishing our lines of communication from there."

"So," asked Betzalel, "Is he running from someone or does he just like his privacy?"

Johan considered him a moment, finally deciding Betzalel posed little threat to the rebel cause. "It be a little of both. He be a Wildlander, and his views are not very popular with the government and clergy in these parts."

They came upon a small overhang as dusk settled in. Since their destination was still several hours away, they set camp for the night. Johan tethered the horses to a nearby scrub-tree, yanking on it several times to ensure that it would hold. He coaxed off the saddles, the saddle bags, bits and bridles, and stowed them away in the deepest section of the overhang. He could bear being wet himself, but it would chafe the horses. He could not risk losing them. They were one of the best tools he had right now. That, and Raven.

He started scrubbing the horses down, when he realized the sun had dropped too far, and he was almost out of light. He found Betzalel leaning nonchalantly against the ledge, watching him.

"Be making yourself useful, old man, and get us a fire going," said Johan.

Betzalel continued staring.

"Don't be telling me your ears are going. That be too young a body for that."

Betzalel walked to a cedar that was clinging to the side of the rock wall, hanging on for dear life. He started pulling at some branches. "What happened to the Protector I've heard so much about?" asked Betzalel.

The horse whinnied as Johan pressed too hard with the brush. He patted the beast, trying to both soothe and apologize.

"I be here, don't I?"

"Only partly. Your body is here, trying to do the right thing. Even your mind seems to be here," Betzalel said, grunting as he tried to rip a branch off. "Yet there seems to be something missing. They always spoke of this presence you had. Such a glow of command that any man that would see you would follow, even into the jaws of death."

"They? You been checking on me?"

"Of course. I had to know who it was that would be fathering my body. It could not be just anyone, you know."

Johan shrugged. "No. I don't be knowing. I be just a man that did what needed doing."

"And yet, nothing has changed in the world. The Overlord still rules from the Fire Palace, and his son, the Duke of Edrea, still sits on the Throne of Horns. Many lives were wasted following as you tried, in vain, to right the situation."

Johan threw the brush. It slammed into the wall, careening under the saddles with a loud *thwack*. He stalked towards Betzalel while talking in a quiet, rage-filled voice. "You be damned right a lot of good men died. Better men than you, from what I be seeing so far. Hell, you weren't there."

You don't be knowing the kind of things they did to the families they took. Least now they be thinking twice before doing anything like that."

Johan and Betzalel were a stride away from each other, but Betzalel seemed not to notice the threat as he towered hands higher than the boy. He turned calmly around to face Johan, meeting his eyes for a few breaths before responding in that calm, irritating voice.

"No. Now they just hide it better."

"I don't be hearing no word that villages have been destroyed just to fuel their twisted Breaths. They can't be doing it without leaving tracks."

"Oh, they still leave tracks, but they take them a little at a time. Perhaps this prisoner turned slave is used up here. Who would miss her? She was in jail for an undetermined amount of time. When it is time for her release, and the family comes knocking at the Duke's door, all he has to do is apologize profusely, saying she died from a disease. He doesn't have to mention that he drained all of her life, having his way with her every night, just to heat his daily bath. He's the Duke, who's to judge?"

Johan paused. "Did you know her?"

Betzalel nodded slowly. "She was the daughter of a good friend of mine. Many years ago."

"Is that what will be happening to Joss?"

Betzalel eyed him for a breath before answering. "No. This is worse. Every fifty-four years the Overlord has to use the life of thirteen innocent children to fuel his own life."

"Do you be saying he's dying?"

"Yes."

"What will be happening if he don't get these children? Will he turn to dust, or be going to the Father naturally?"

"He is already so weak that his only power comes from those he commands. He is barely able to Breathe, and, even then, it is only the weakest of powers."

"And if he manages this..." Johan let the thought trail off, unfinished.

"Then he's back in the prime of his power. Nothing will stop him. Not the forces of the Rebellion. Not the constant underhanded politics of the Dukes. Nothing."

"What do he be planning?"

Betzalel let go of the branch he had been holding, sighing as he did. "I honestly do not know. He has something planned, has been planning it for years, if I had my guess. I could feel the disturbance in *Olhaba* before entering this body. He's been exploring, setting things in motion on the other side, but I have been unable to find out any information, tied as I am to the Temple."

Johan had been drifting through the ramifications of what he had just learned when the specter's words snapped him back to attention. "The Temple of the Sun? What do you be doing with that?"

Betzalel motioned towards the overhang. "May we sit? This could take a bit."

"Go on, I'll be getting the wood," Johan said as he removed the knife from inside his right boot. He slid past the young boy and made quick work of the tree, piling branches at his feet until he had enough for a fire.

Betzalel sat for several long breaths before answering. When he did, he stared at the ground. "Do you remember the Sundering?"

"Aye. I be hearing the same tales as everyone else. What of it?"

"I was one of the four who built it."

Johan's mind spun. He built it? But that must make him nearly...

"One thousand years old," Betzalel finished, seeming to read his thoughts. "Acteon--the Overlord--crossed us all, that day. Two of my closest friends perished at his hands, nearing the end of the Breath. I had started to suspect that he had other plans, but I could never have thought he planned this. To destroy the only thing that could save these lands from utter destruction?" Betzalel let his breath out slowly, a long, bitter sigh of pain and sorrow.

"I still do not know what he had intended that day. I was the last one he tried to destroy, but not until he was sure he could not partner with me. While he tried to convince me to join him, I fought to keep the Breath under control. As I stabilized the last remaining threads, I let myself go into the very essence of the power that holds this land together. I became a part of the Temple. Its sworn protector." He laughed, then. It was hollow, despairing. "So. It is left to the two Protectors to save the world once more, eh?"

Johan could not find the words. His thoughts were a scramble of confusion and despair. This was so much bigger than he had thought. How could he hold any hope that they would be successful? And if they could not...

"Elena."

Her name came out in a violent explosion of breath. He felt like a knife had just pierced his gut and was being twisted back and forth. "How could you let me leave her? She cannot be winning. Not against this." He could feel the heat rising in him once more, and with it the quakes.

"The only way your wife has a chance is if she believes there is no other choice. I know this isn't easy for you, but I didn't think you were one for taking the coward's way out."

The rage boiled hotter at his words. How dare he call me that? After all that I've done, all the men that have died at my word? The shakes gripped hard at his belly and spread in waves through the rest of his body. As they coursed through his head, his vision went black. When it cleared they were no longer alone.

A dozen men circled them. They did not pose any threat, they just watched, their gazes and stances pleading.

Each carried a score of wounds, some caused by sword, others by hammers or battle forks. They stank of death.

He watched them, his body shaking violently. Betzalel knelt beside him, cradling his head to keep him from cracking his skull. Grabbing one of the sticks from Johan's slackened grip, he shoved it sideways into Johan's mouth, and clasped his hand over his jaw, holding his mouth shut.

The figures never said a word. They merely watched. Some shook their heads in sorrow, others stood motionless. He could not say how long they were there, but eventually they turned away and the shaking subsided to a mild flutter. One man was left, and Johan knew him well.

"Wiatt."

The man he once knew smiled, and then faded into the night. The shakes slowed to an ebb, and then stopped. "Johan." Betzalel was leaning over him. "Can you hear me?" He tried to speak, but his throat was dry and the words stuck. All that

came out was a long series of dry coughs. When they subsided he said, "How long?"

"Thirty long breaths. Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'll be living." He eased out of Betzalel's grip and sat up. His head swam, but everything else seemed good. He breathed deeply, letting the fresh air fill his lungs. Turning to the old man he said, "Thank you," and meant it.

Betzalel smiled. "We should get some rest. First light will come early. Do you have a plan?" "We be getting a message out."

The sun slipped quietly over the mountain, painting the rocky terrain in a blood red wash. The morning air smelled crisp and damp, left over from last night's torrents of rain. Johan led the way as they crested the rise and found

themselves in front of a smooth-walled stone hut.

"This be it," Johan announced.

"Do you think he is here?" asked Betzalel.

Johan smiled back at him. "Nah. He be taking some jewelry to my wife right now."

"Raven?"

"The same."

After tying their horses off in front of the house, Johan knocked on the door, sending a flock of ravens scattering, yelling at them as they flew off.

"It never hurts to knock," Johan said in response to the Betzalel's questioning brows. "You never know what he be having set up here."

When no one answered, Johan opened the door and walked in.

The house was a single room, by all appearances, though Johan knew the Wildlander had at least one room hidden in here. If he knew him half as well as he thought he did, there was probably more. A simple rough-hewn table took up most of the room. It was shoved to one side to make room for the fireplace. Shelves lined the available walls, crowded with cooking pots, herbs, and a number of items Johan could not begin to guess at. Drying animal skins hung from the ceiling.

In the back corner sat a small square table lit by a single stream of light that filtered through the odd shaped cuts in a boarded up window directly above it. While the other furniture in the house was simple, this table was well-oiled and would have been right at home in the Duke's palace.

Betzalel walked over to it and ran one hand fondly along its edge, his eyes looking out at some far distant place or time. "A Sun Desk. It has been far too long since I have had such simple pleasures. These *Nekodah*," he said, his eyes focused once more, "They are not as simple as they appear, if Raven can be used to judge his people by."

Johan laughed. Warmth filled him at the memories of the stories Raven had told him while hiding in the caves of Alludam during the Rebellion. "In many ways, he be nothing like his people. That be one reason why he lives out here. In this," he shrugged, "It's fairly typical, from what I know of them. It seems their abilities are gathered from the sun, and the plants."

Betzalel nodded, deep in his own thoughts.

It had been years since he had visited Raven at home, but Johan quickly found what he needed. He pulled the paper out of a shelf in the back room, grabbed a quill and a vial of ink, and then sat at the table and wrote his note.

"How is this supposed to work? Just drop it in the well, and then pray that it shows up in the right hands," Betzalel asked.

Johan shook his head. "I don't be understanding it, either. From how he explained, he's mapped and diverted a series of underground channels that flow different directions based upon the tide. Depends on what Quarter you be sending it on as to where it goes."

It was Betzalel's turn to shake his head, though this time in amazement. "Incredible. Are all the *Nekodah* so resourceful?"

"You really don't know? They be serving at your Temple for centuries."

"I could not see them, physically. I was only able to feel the movement of their spirits through the place. Much of my resources for the protection of the lands comes from beyond."

Johan shivered in spite of himself. All of his life he had been taught to stay away from anything to do with the spirits of the dead. The priest hammered it to their heads that this was not their duty. Now he found himself traveling with a living, breathing spirit.

Suddenly, Johan's instincts grabbed hold of him. He stood, motioning for Betzalel to be quiet and to stay still. He listened. He did not know what for, only that something was outside. It took several breaths before he realized it was not a noise that had caught his attention, but rather a lack of.

"Someone's out there," he whispered. "Grab a carrier from the shelf behind you. Put the message inside then

drop it through the third tube. But you can't be doing it until the Bell strikes. Drop it early and the Father only knows where it will end up."

Betzalel nodded in understanding and then glanced at the Sun Desk.

Johan did not watch to make sure that he did it right.

Before he could get to the window, the door shattered, spraying the room with splintered wood. Quicker than he had seen anything move, a figure entered the room. It looked human, but its skin was corpse-gray and its eyes completely white. It was silent as it scanned the room then charged at Johan.

Johan raised his sword just in time and parried the blow which left his sword ringing, and his arm stinging.

He grabbed a chair and swung it. It shattered on the creature's raised arm, but Johan had not counted on it doing any damage. His sword followed close behind and low enough that he flowed under the beast's arm. He felt the blade plunge into the flesh. Its skin erupted, a pale green fog billowing from the rupture.

From behind, he heard Betzalel shuffling items around the shelves.

"I found one," Betzalel shouted.

Johan ducked another blow and watched in horror as the creature turned to Betzalel, and shoved its way past his blows, fending them off like they did not affect it.

"Don't be sending it yet. Has to be on the Quarter," Johan called. He risked a quick glance behind him at the Sun Desk and felt his skin turn to ice. It was still a fingers width from the Quarter.

"What is this damned beast?" he yelled.

"Father's beard! Do not breathe the fumes."

Jumping over the table, Johan planted himself between the beast and Betzalel. It could not be allowed to stop the message.

"How do I be killing it? It be quicker than anything I be seeing. Stronger."

The beast roared, the only sound that it had made. It was the scream of death. There was no other way to describe it.

Johan's skin went numb. The shakes exploded within him once more and he felt terror crash over him in a sudden wave that seared his skin with a new heat. As the warmth flowed through him, the calm he had been unable to find in years settled into place. His eyes cleared and he registered the surprise in the beast's eyes.

Just in time, he raised his sword and fended off the flurry of blows the creature flung at him. He could not believe how quick it was, but the calm that suffused him now brought with it an energy he had not felt since the last battle of the Rebellion.

He did not know how long the energy would last, but he latched on and funneled it into his attack. Leaning into the blows, putting all of his weight into each one, his strikes became a blur.

The beast parried each one, but could not manage to get any attacks of its own in. It took a step back and Johan fell forward, off balance.

The beast lunged in. Johan felt the claws tear into his side, leaving a cold rip in his flesh that burned, nonetheless.

He fell back, giving way to the beast's renewed attacks and felt, more than heard, the floor boards creak, and then shatter below the creature.

Betzalel murmured something he could not hear in a strained voice.

As the creature's flesh touched the bare earth, the rich soil formed beads of what looked like liquid metal that attached to the beast's foot and was instantly soaked into the flesh.

The creature roared, this time in pain.

Johan surged forward, renewing his attacks. One by one, it parried each blow, but each time the parry came slower. The creature's feet had turned to stone, and its legs were rapidly changing to the same dark gray.

He risked a glance at the Sun Desk.

"Now!" he roared.

Betzalel's murmur continued behind him.

Pressing forward with the attacks, each one coming closer to landing, he yelled again. "Send it now, damn it!"

Betzalel's voice continued its low drone and Johan realized why. Sinking the remaining energy into a final flurry of blows, he swept the creature's parries wider with each strike until he had the opening he needed.

He lunged in between the strokes. His sword cut a narrow arc and bit deeply into the creature's neck. He drew in a deep breath and held it as he drove the sword deeper.

Its neck opened, loosing a geyser of the green fog that hung in the air, and swirled around its flailing arms.

Johan planted a boot in the creature's stomach and shoved, wrenching his sword free. He spun, hoping the creature was dead, and raced to where Betzalel stood, still chanting. Gasping in fresh air, he grabbed the scroll case, and flung it into the chute just as the last of the tide frothed and churned its way down.

He spun, sword raised, ready for the creature's attack. None came.

The creature lay dead on the floor, its fall as silent as its battle. The green fog slowly settled to the floor, dusting the corpse and table with a sickly mask of color.

Betzalel swayed next to him. His eyes unfocused and mostly white, he wove a circle in the air with his hands, and then collapsed.

Dropping his sword to the floor, Johan caught him before he hit the ground. He laid him down gently, and checked his breathing. It was shallow and weak, but the *Chiy'el* was still alive.

After opening some windows, Johan traversed the perimeter of the home, stopping occasionally to listen as the animals talked to each other. When he was satisfied there were no other creatures, he went back inside and sat next to the man who wore his son's body.

Whatever sins the man had done to him in the past, today he had saved his life. While Johan could never

forgive the man for the lost years, at the very least, he owed him a second chance.

Johan woke to a sharp scratching on the door. Instantly alert, he checked Betzalel. Still unconscious. He grabbed his sword and crept to the window. Outside a vulture clawed at the door, trying to pry it open and feast on the corpse.

Grabbing a wool blanket from the shelves, Johan covered the corpse and hauled him outside, where the vulture watched with interest. He dragged it to the edge of the woods that surrounded the house, and returned inside. He watched through the window as the vulture hopped over to the covered corpse and peeled the blanket away with its beak. The carrion eater considered the stone corpse for a breath, looked back towards the house, then jumped lazily into flight.

Betzalel woke to a coughing fit, hacking up mucus that had caught in his lungs. Johan rushed to his side and knelt down to him. "You all right?"

"I will live."

"What happened?"

Betzalel reached a hand towards Johan, signaling that he wanted to stand. Johan grabbed his arm and hauled him to his feet where he steadied for a breath. "That creature was a *Maveth*. One of the Overlord's assassins, though I have not heard of them being in use for centuries. It seems you have an enemy you did not realize."

"*Maveth*. Dead One? Do I be having that right?"

Betzalel nodded. "You do, indeed. They are formed from the corpses of the Overlord's most trusted bodyguards, twisted by powers that reach beyond this world."

"How did you be stopping it?"

"They cannot bear the touch of the raw earth." At Johan's questioning look, he shook his head. "No, not just any earth. The earth that we walk in is too close to the surface. It's been tainted by the power of fire--the sun. The earth must be pure, untouched."

"Six feet under," said Johan.

"That is exactly right. We bury our dead six feet under not to keep them safe from the elements. Their body must be allowed to play its part in the natural cycle around us. It must be allowed to rot, and to fuel the earth, providing the life force the lands need to survive. And, yes, it also keeps them safe from the likes of Acteon."

"Can they not be killed by strength, then?"

"Or by the blade? No. When struck, the death inside of them is released in the fog that you saw. If you breathe it into yourself, it will coat your insides and eat it away slowly until you have no choice but to die. I have witnessed it. Not a pleasant way to pass."

Johan shuddered, moving towards the light that streamed through the window, hoping its fire would burn away the feeling of filth that coated his skin. "Could you be stopping another if you had to now?"

Shaking his head, Betzalel answered, "No. In this body, it is extremely difficult for me to use any powers.

What I did use will come back with rest, but now? No. I can do no more now."

"We must go, then," Johan said, turning suddenly. "If he knows where we are, then he be suspecting what we be readying to do. We must stay ahead of him."

Betzalel nodded. "I will be strong enough, but you must get the horse for me."

Chapter 13

The voices woke her, but she did not move. Not yet. She kept her eyes closed, and her breathing steady.

Think, Joss. Think. Where are you?

Then the previous night's ride sunk home. She knew where she was, but not who the voices belonged to. It was too dark to see when Bardulf had led her here. She did not have the energy or courage to explore the tent last night. Were they the voices of the soldiers, or other prisoners? Or had she died on the hillside last night--fallen over the cliff by her Mam's shop--and these were spirits surrounding her?

How could she have ever thought this would be an adventure?

She fought back the tears. Whoever was out there would see her as weak. As she fought for control, she let the murmurs form into words.

"That be it, then," one voice said. It was masculine, but too young to be a soldier. Something about the way he formed his words was wrong, too.

"Aye, Tomas," said a girl, "Thirteen it is. I expect we'll be leaving today."

"But who is she?" asked another girl. "Why would they wait so long just for her? She's nothing special." The words were spit out, like Joss was not more than a field hand and the speaker was royalty.

Joss smothered the rising anger with a blanket of caution. Just as she could not be seen as weak, she knew from bitter experience that quick to anger was no better. She would win no friends that way, and she would need friends to escape.

"Quit your hawking, Renee," Tomas' voice said. "Open your eyes, won't you. Look at her hair."

"Mother's tits!" the first girl gasped. "She wears the Red. Do you think she can..."

"Marsh Mouth," the others chimed in unison.

Not wanting to break into laughter, Joss schooled her face and sat up.

"If I could Breathe," she said, "You really think I'd be here?"

Swinging her legs out of bed, fully intending to stand, but her legs cried so much when she tried that she collapsed back onto her bed.

"You all right?" asked the boy she recognized as Tomas.

"Yeah. I don't be used to riding." At their puzzled looks, she continued. "We rode most of the night and my legs feel like someone be taking a knife to them."

"Father's--"

"Marsh Mouth!"

"What? Oh. Sorry. You mean you came willingly? You didn't fight?"

"Yeah, we fought," Joss said, more fire in her voice than she intended. Softening her voice she said, "Fat lot of good it be doing us." She took a deep breath, insulating herself from the memories, and then plunged forward. "I'm Jocelyn." She extended her hand out in greeting and forced a sleepy smile.

"Tomas," the boy said, his baby face shining with his smile. He was taller than she was, but she did not think he was much older. Maybe even a little younger. The face made it hard to say.

"I be Marsia," said the younger of the two girls. Dirty blonde pigtails sprouted out from both sides of her, pulling the skin tight and the eyes to a near squint.

The second girl looked her over and snorted, then caught herself. "I am Renee. I am in charge around here." She did not offer her hand. Instead, she wiped it against her ratty blouse and turned around, making a big show of inspecting the seven younger children huddled together at the back of the tent.

"Really? I thought that be the Duke's place," Jocelyn quipped back at her.

Renee glared at her for a moment then decided her kind was not worth the effort. She turned back around to watch after the other children.

A young boy, raven black hair cropped short and ragged, poked through the wall of the group. "I'm Bartholomew, but you can call me Barty. So I guess we get to go now, eh? That's what Tomas says, anyway. Where do you think we be going? Do you think it be nice there? Tomas says--"

"You talk too much," Tomas interrupted, rubbing the young boy's hair.

Barty clamped his jaws shut with a *clack*, and sheepishly watched Tomas to see what he would say or do, but he did not step back behind Marsia.

If she had to guess they were all close in age, except Barty. She would place him at six or seven. Old enough to be overly excited, but too young for a work camp.

"Where do you think we be going?" she asked Tomas.

He shrugged. "The ages are so different, here, I can't be rightly saying. Making a guess... to be slaves for the Duke. Maybe even the Overlord himself. Wouldn't that be something? The Fire Palace--"

Screaming erupted from the back of the tent and Renee surged forward to take care of the problem.

"Do that be a baby?" she asked.

"How could you tell?" said Marsia. "Probably to be served for dinner to celebrate such good hunting."

"Stop it, Marsia," Tomas commanded.

Jocelyn looked him over, measuring him. "Is she really in charge in here?" She nodded after Renee.

"Her? Nah. We like to let her think she is, though. Makes her easier to live with."

They both laughed.

Barty bounced forward and whispered to them, "I heard my Mam one night. Said the Overlord lived off the lives of little kids. Maybe we are dinner." His eyes were bulging as he spoke.

Behind them, the baby's howl turned to a shrill, piercing rage.

Tomas ruffled Barty's hair again. "Why don't you be helping Renee? Go on now."

He did not hide his disappointment, but went towards the back, leaving the three of them alone.

"I heard it too," Marsia said. "The farm hands got to talking one night, fired up on whiskey, and they said he'd done it since the Sundering."

Tomas broke into disturbed laughter. "The Sundering? I know he's old, but--come, now--a thousand years?"

Marsia just nodded. "They weren't in a mood to be joking, they weren't. Da had just taken to whipping Little Jo and had them all rightly annoyed. Said they hoped he didn't be living as long as the Overlord, and it grew from there. No reason to be joking at all."

Tomas shrugged it off, sloughing it to the side like so much spoiled milk.

Jocelyn was not able to push it aside so easily. It settled into her stomach, a nest of worms trying to find their way home. Most people did not believe that Breathing was real anymore, either. They liked to think it was only something the rulers were gifted with. But her Gran, and her Mam could both Breathe. She supposed she could, too, after what happened with the amulet yesterday, but she knew better than to try it here.

She had learned from the time spent around her Da to always prepare for the worst. That way you were generally surprised. She was not sure why, but something about the Overlord living off the lives of children tickled at memories she could not grasp. Something about Breathing, but she could not say what. If the Duke was taking them to the Overlord just to be killed--she would never let that happen. Somehow, some way, they had to escape. The only way that she could think of was to convince the Duke to teach her. Her Gram's memories had to be jogged loose enough to Breathe.

The tent flap was thrown aside and a soldier looked them over, his gaze stopping on her. The others had instinctively stepped away from the entrance. Away from her.

"You must be the new one. You're to come with me." He glanced to the back and yelled. "Shut that cursed baby up."

He grabbed her roughly by the arm and dragged her out of the tent. When she looked back, she caught Renee shaking her head sadly after her, a knowing look in her eyes that scared Jocelyn more than the thought of Breathing, or of seeing the Duke.

Two soldiers hauled the body of a very skinny girl past Jocelyn as she was led to the Duke's grand tent. She watched them pass, the worms in her stomach starting to chew their way through.

"Is that what I be here for?" she whispered.

She did not know if the soldier had heard her or not, but he shoved her in front of the flap, and then yanked her to a stop.

"Straighten your clothes."

She did as she was told, her emotions numb, her actions automatic.

Inside the tent was every bit as grand as the outside. A folding writing table, carved from a deep cherry and joined with gold hinges, sat along the wall to her left, loose papers placed neatly in piles, with precious stones set on top of each pile to keep the breeze from throwing them around. On the right wall, sitting under a tapestry showing the sun rising over a stepped pyramid, was the finest chair she had ever seen. It was carved from cherry, also, and had thick, purple cushions on the seat, arms and back. Two gold crescent moons overlapped each other on the head of the seat. The green carpet of grass was the perfect complement to the white silk.

The Duke stood before her, quiet and measuring, but a warm smile lit his face. A handsome man, the Duke seemed straight out of the stories she had loved as a small child--his black velvet coat, white lace shirt and black silk gloves all fit him perfectly.

"He should be in a grand court, not in this tent," she thought. She supposed, however, that this was as close to a court as he could have in the field. She stood still, not knowing what to do until the soldier shoved her to her knees.

"Show some proper respect for your Duke, child."

The Duke walked to her and knelt in front of her, raising her head until they were eye to eye. "Were you harmed on the way here, in any way?" asked the Duke. His eyes burned through her. He would know if she lied.

"No, milord," she stammered.

He continued staring, waiting for the full truth, and she finally caved in.

"Not much. Not on purpose. The horse..." She trailed off, motioning with her eyes to her legs.

His gaze followed hers, and he nodded, understanding showing in his smile. "I guess you would not be accustomed to riding so much, or so hard." He glanced toward the soldier. "That will be all."

After he left, the Duke stood, raising her up with him. "No more bowing, Jocelyn. Not from you. Sit, please." He motioned her to his throne and she balked.

"On that? I couldn't."

"I insist, dear lady. You are in need of some healing."

She finally did, urged forward by his gentle touch. When she had seated and made her self as comfortable as she could, he knelt in front of her and watched her once more, carefully.

"This may be uncomfortable, but you should not be forced to endure the hardship of being saddle-sore when you are here as an honored guest. Relax."

He placed his hands on her knees, his touch ever so light, and started breathing deeper. Closing his eyes, he slowly slid his hands along her thighs, separating them gently.

Memories of being held down at the rough hands of the older boys back home made her want to lash out, to kick and scream for help. She had only been caught once before. Two of the boys left with missing teeth and broken noses. Her legs trembled as she struggled against the urge. If she kicked him, she would not leave this encounter victorious.

"Relax. I just want to heal you."

She let her legs widen just enough that his hands could slide between them. No more. She watched his hands, unable to peel her gaze away.

When they reached the place on her upper thighs where the soreness was the worst, he stopped. She felt a cool tingling sensation that lasted for just a few breaths, and then stopped as he removed his hands and stood.

"Better?" he asked.

To her surprise she did feel better. The rawness was completely gone. She slid out of the chair, not believing it could be true. He stepped back far enough that she had room to walk a small circle before her head became light and her knees buckled.

He caught her before she could hit the ground, and placed her back on the throne.

"Careful, now," he said. "Healing always seems to take a little out of you, and the first time is always the hardest. It won't last long, though, so breathe deep and relax. Good."

He walked over to the writing table, picking up two pieces of paper and examined them, saying nothing for several breaths. When he finally did speak, his voice was quiet and thoughtful, at peace with everything.

"The stories you no doubt grew up listening to place the *Chiy'el* as beasts and murderers, do they not?"

"Yes, milord."

"They were bedtime stories, told in hushed whispers meant to scare and torment. Being such, they could never tell the truth. They were not designed for truth, but to frighten and terrify. Did they ever talk of healing such as this? Or closing mortal wounds so that the recipient should live?"

She ran through the stories in her mind, not wanting to trust the Duke. She had heard too many stories growing up, but she came to realize that none of the stories spoke of this.

"No, milord, they don't."

"You wear the Red. You can learn this." He turned to face her, his eyes searching again. "Would you like me to teach you?"

Her heart nearly stopped. Does he know?

He mistook her hesitation for refusal, and continued, his voice excited, eager. "It is not some evil force that will corrupt you. It will not destroy you, unless you let it. Is a sword evil in and of itself? No, no. It is just a tool. It can cut wood to keep you warm during the Dead Season, or protect you when you are being attacked. So, too, is *Chay*, or Breathing. Do not say anything now. Let me teach you to heal a small scratch, first, and then you can make your decision."

She nodded, unable to speak. He would teach her. She would get out of this alive. Her and the other children.

"Good. I must see to other matters today, but I will have you brought again tomorrow." He clapped twice and a soldier parted the tent flap before the second clap had stopped sounding. "She is ready to return."

She followed the soldier out, walking quickly across the wilting grass. Her mind whirled as it tried to form the

plans they would need.

Chapter 14

Elena woke to fire coursing through her body. It started in her leg, a thousand knives driving deep, just above the knee. Her eyes flipped open and she started to scream, but it caught in her throat as she saw a familiar face above her.

Earthy brown hair hung long over his shoulders, and the gentle smile still threatened her. He wore the same sweat-stained leathers that he had when she first saw him in Harts Haven.

Pushing herself up, she tried to back away, but the fire in her leg erupted and she was forced to stop. She was alive, and that was something to be grateful for, but he had found her. After all that she had gone through, he had tracked her down here. Wherever here was.

She looked around quickly, refusing to take her eyes off the stranger for any longer than she must. She was in the woods. A soft light trickled through the majestic firs and pines. This was a true forest, exactly as she had imagined they must be. Not at all like the scrub brush and evergreens that twisted along the mountainside back home.

Somehow, here in this dense forest, he had found her.

Her voice was weak, the words strained as they came out, but she was proud of how steady her voice was. "What do you be wanting with me?"

"Wanting? Oh, I'm sure I'd be getting in a bit of trouble if I wanted anything like that from you, dear. Old Johan would have my hide." His smile widened as his fingers traced the bottom of his leather tabard with its beaded bird design. When she did not smile in return, he shrugged. "Not ready for that, yet, are we? Time enough later."

He seemed friendly enough, maybe even likeable, yet she still did not trust him. He used her husband's name like he had known him when he was still alive. Still, Johan had many enemies. This man could be lying.

"Why do you be following me?"

"What will it take, my dear, for you to trust me?"

She did not answer.

"Actually, I was trying to visit your dear husband when we met so graciously. He and I had quite a few adventures a number of years back. I thought it high time I said hello again."

"You just happened to be in the area?"

"Actually, I've got a cozy hovel not far from your Haven. I'd been traveling most of the last dozen years, seeing the world, so to speak, and just recently returned home. What else? Would you care for some war stories? His favorite meal on the run? Or would you rather work on fixing that leg of yours?"

She had managed to push the pain to the back of her mind while she talked with him, but at his mention of her leg, it came back anew, twice as strong. She looked at her knee for the first time and gagged. A flap of skin the size of her hand hung loose, the meat underneath clearly visible. Somehow, it had stopped bleeding long enough for a thin skin to build over the muscle and fat. Unable to speak, she surveyed the rest of her bruises and scrapes. The knee was the worst. It was bad enough, though, that she would take days to heal enough to walk. Maybe weeks.

She looked at the stranger once more, eyes drinking in every detail. He was rough, that could not be denied, but he had a way about him. He was easy going, even in this situation. Did he truly know Johan? She would bet her shop on it, but she still could not be certain whether or not he was friend or foe. She had no choice, though. Not really. If she was to have any chance of

rescuing Joss she must accept his help. She did not have to trust him.

"What be your name?"

"Well, that is a step in the right direction, at least. My name, my lovely woman, is Raven."

"Do the beads be a raven, then?" she asked, unable to rein in her curiosity.

"Aye, my lady," he said, bowing, "It is my namesake, that is true, though a truly rough interpretation, I am sad to say." For a moment, his charm broke and he slipped into an awkward period of genuine irritation. "Must have been five, six times I tried before I got that pattern, and--oh!--the knots I made, where they should not have been. But, I am remiss. What shall we do about that leg, then?"

"Do you have anything to wrap it in?"

He spread his arms wide. "Alas, my fair dove, I carry so little on me, and left in such a hurry, that I have nothing but what you can see."

She fell back to the ground. "Aargh! Then why do you be offering to help, if you have nothing to be helping with?"

"I apologize if I gave you the wrong impression. I never meant that I would be able to help in that way, though I would be delighted to if I could. I believe I simply asked if *you* would like to work on that leg."

"Me? I can't even be standing, let alone walking. It rips at me to even sit. By the Father's beard, how am I to be helping myself?" She threw her arms wide, yanking the grass out by the fistful.

He considered her for a moment, then shrugged it away in that easy manner of his, as if to say "What harm could come?"

"As our illustrious Duke would have said, you do wear the Red, do you not?"

She sighed in irritation. "It be just a color. Nothing more, nothing less. Hair. What can that possibly be having to do with my leg? I can't Breathe."

"Can you not? Have you never had anything happen that you cannot explain the how or why of?" His gaze dared her to lie.

She knew the answer only too well. The winds that whipped around her and caught her daughter played across her mind's eye, fueling her terror and desperation. She would not become her mother. Never.

She could not say why, perhaps it was just the nearness of a friendly ear, or his easy manner, or even just the male presence, but the words escaped before she could stop them. "The wind saved my daughter from a fall that would be leaving her broken. The Duke's soldier saw it all." The sobs burst free. She could do nothing to stop them. "That's why they took my daughter. That's why I be stuck here in this cursed forest, unable to walk. They saw it all. This be my punishment. How could I ever be thinking that I could do anything, that I could be making a difference against the Duke and his men?"

"If you could Breathe the wind into a net, could you not Breathe the Earth and the Fire of the sun to net your leg together?"

"No. I tried later. When they took her. But I couldn't be doing anything to stop them."

His voice was soft enough that she almost did not hear him; his words were simple, yet they chilled her to the core. "Maybe you just need the right encouragement." From within his well-worn leather tabard, he pulled out the amulet and hung it dangling before her. "Take it. Heal yourself."

Slowly, filled with reverence and fear, her shaking hand reached to the amulet and slid it from his grasp. She held it before her, studying both sides, considering the symbols carved into it.

I have no choice.

She parted a path through the fear and focused all that she could muster on the amulet, willing it to heal her leg, to clean the wound and seal it, stitching the muscles back together and giving her back the ability to walk.

Nothing.

She reared her arm back ready to throw it away one last time, a scream building in the back of her throat when Raven leaned easily forward and grabbed her wrist.

"Perhaps you should try focusing on your knee, instead?" He arched his brows as he stared through her.

"Fine," she snapped. She would try it once just so that she could prove him wrong. If she did not, she knew that he would not let it go.

She tried again, focusing her anger and frustration on her knee. Again nothing. She started to say she told him so when he spoke once again, this time even quieter than before. She did not hear him the first time and was forced to motion for him to repeat himself.

"Relax. Let the emotions go."

Something about the sound of his voice made her want to relax. She no longer wanted to throw the amulet in his face, hoping to at least chip a tooth or two. Instead, she tried once more, this time taking deep breaths that came slower and slower, deeper and deeper.

"Keep breathing. Relax."

She did as he suggested, closing her eyes and knowing that, if nothing else, she would feel calmer and more able to deal with the situation, even if this did not work.

Yet it did work.

The fire that burned through her leg slowly turned to ice. The ice became colder and colder until it burned nearly as bad as the fire, and then it vanished.

She looked down at her knee, running a hand over where the flap of skin had once been. There was no scarring, no way to tell that she even been cut except for a warmth and a slight redness.

She turned to Raven, beaming with joy, when her head filled with the buzzing of a thousand bees and the winds of a hundred valleys.

She fainted.

Settling in close to Elena, Raven knelt with both his hands extended just above her body. He knew the process would work easier if he could actually touch her, just lightly, but was afraid that would do more harm than good to her right now. She did not need additional concerns, subconscious though they might be. Right now she needed strength, and more healing. When he convinced her to heal herself, he knew it might prove too much for her, but she had to try. Somehow, she had to be convinced that she could-- and should--master the *Chay*. She was the only one left that could save the lands.

He relaxed, breathing deeply of the crisp morning air. The calls of the birds and the movement of the squirrels faded from his hearing as he joined his life force with the energies that surrounded him. He kept one small part of his mind open for any disturbances. The rest of his concentration was focused on Elena.

He could not heal her directly. Instead, he focused on what he wanted to have happen--her bruises fading, scratches closing and scrapes mending-- and willed his own life force into a pattern that would speed her own natural healing abilities. It was slower than the methods used by the Overlord, but it enhanced and blended with the essence of the lands he was sworn to protect. It did not erode the stability away.

Seventy deep breaths later, he was satisfied with her health. He allowed his concentration to expand and to encompass the woods around

them. He let his energy resonate throughout them, testing the woods for anything that might cause them harm, much like a snake testing the air with its forked tongue. Everything was in order. Nothing was upsetting the way that the Mother had intended nature to behave.

He should check on Johan, but first one other task had to be done. He expanded his awareness, until he felt every tree bend in the wind, every leaf that landed on the water, and every footstep taken throughout all of the lands. He summoned his concentration from every piece of his essence, and looked for the familiar vibrations. When he found them, he pulled his awareness tighter and tighter until he was joined seamlessly with the others thoughts.

"Wolf," he thought to the other. "Can you talk?"

Raven waited three breaths while the leader of the *Raanannah* Legion made himself available.

"Have you news about the woman?"

"I am with her now."

"Have you gained her trust?"

"I am still working on that part, but I believe that I can. At least, enough to prepare her."

"Then she is untested?"

"She has Breathed twice that I know of, and both times only from extreme need. She resists, but will learn."

"Are you positive of that?"

"Can anyone be? You know that we have no choice in this. This land of ours has no choice. She will learn."

"I must go. Keep me informed."

Raven sent the equivalent of an arm-shake through the link, and then separated himself. He focused, then, on Johan, letting his attention slide across the land, scanning as he did so. He stopped before he found Johan, and cursed.

In a single breath, he was fully himself once more. Standing, he slung his pack back over his shoulders and wished that he had brought a horse. He could make the distance needed by himself, but never with the weight of Elena slung over his shoulders. But he could not leave her, she was too important, and the trouble he had just felt was aimed at her, not him.

They could never join up to Johan in time. It would be up to him. Only one place would be close enough to find shelter before this new storm hit.

He placed the amulet around Elena's neck, picked her up in both arms, careful not to disturb her any more than necessary, and started off at a ground eating pace. He did not know that he would make it, but he had to try.

Chapter 15

The Duke's small army marched steadily north. The pass would be easier to the northeast, but it would add half again to the distance. They did not have that kind of time. Already, the Overlord was becoming suspicious.

Turning in his saddle, he saw Hector leading two grizzled old men. They were wiry, with a cold soul shining through their eyes. They were woodsmen, mercenaries. They were exactly what he needed.

He nodded to the side of the army, and kicked his horse ahead of the other men. When he found a secluded spot, he dismounted and took off his gloves, folding them neatly and hooking them over his belt.

When the men dismounted, they knelt in front of him. Their gazes focused on him instead of the ground where they should have been. Any other day, and they would pay dearly for that.

"Has the Lieutenant informed you as to the task we wish you to take?" Gideon asked.

"Aye, sir," they answered in unison.

"And do you have any problems with this?"

"None, milord."

"Good."

He leaned over them, placing one hand on each.

"Then you have my blessing. Any crimes you commit directly relating to this task shall be pardoned."

As he spoke, he drained the tiniest tendrils of life from one and used it to cement the goal in the other. They would not shirk their tasks, now. They could not, even if they wanted to. They probably would not eat or sleep until it was done, either, but that did not concern him. They should find Elena before the lack would take a severe toll.

Removing his hands, he stood back up and put his gloves back on. "Hector will see to your payment. Half now, the remainder when you bring me proof of your success."

He smiled as he looked into their eyes. The passion and sheer force of will still shone, but they had taken on the wildness of a starving predator. Yes, they would do nicely.

He mounted his horse and rode back to the center of his army without looking back. However this game played out, the pieces were in motion, and he could do nothing to hedge his bets any further.

Hector rode up beside him and waited a long breath before asking, "Will they succeed?"

"I dearly hope not. If she can release herself to the Breath, they stand no chance against what she is capable of. If she does not release..." He let the words trail off into the rhythmic marching of his men.

She would live, he knew, and be stronger. She would follow her precious daughter and she would meet him at the Temple. Then she would kill his father. All was in motion. He analyzed every angle and found very little to worry him.

He glanced at the children behind him. Jocelyn's red hair blew lazily in the wind. Their gazes met and she smiled. It was a nervous smile, tinted with possibilities. His Breath would tighten its hold on her soon.

She would make a fine daughter, indeed.

Chapter 16

Elena snapped back to consciousness. Someone was carrying her, running with her. She could smell the pungent green of the pines around her, mixing with sweat. She struggled against him, twisting in his arms, pounding fists into his chest. He sat her on the ground. It was not a drop, she realized, but more gentle than that.

"Elena, dear, it's just Raven. Relax."

Relax.

Everything came into focus. She remembered what forest she was in. She remembered the name Raven, not just from the alley in Harts Haven, but from... when? Yesterday? Today? He had been carrying her, so the healing must not have worked. She knew it would not, but she looked down at her leg, anyway. Just to see if it had worked at all. It was healed. Completely healed, no scars remaining to show that it had ever happened.

She dropped unceremoniously to her butt in shock, awe and terror.

"I did that," she said, though the words were harsh and strained to her ears.

"Aye, my sweet dear lady. That was you. And you thought you would not be able to heal yourself. Tsk, tsk."

She raised her hands, turning them over several times before examining her arms, then feeling her forehead where the worst of the scrapes had been. Nothing. They were all gone.

"Did I?" she tried to say. "Did I do all of this?"

"While I'm not usually all that modest, I find myself not wanting to claim any assistance, but I did help. The knee was all you, though." He shrugged. "Now, if inventory is over with, I think we need to resume our pace." His voice was light, but concern darkened his eyes as he searched the woods.

"What is it?"

"Just a strong desire to find a place with something resembling a bed for the night."

"Don't be lying to me. There be something out there. What do it be?"

He sighed. "Not yet, but it is on its way. Whatever it is."

"You don't be knowing?"

"Not exactly, no, I'm sorry to confess. As to how I know, we can discuss that later. For now, let's just find some shelter."

She looked to the sky, trying to gauge how much of the day had passed, but the trees were too old, too thick to get a firm time. She guessed it to be getting late. "How much further must we be going," she asked as she stood, brushing pine needles and leaves off of her ripped breeches.

"We are getting close. Can you feel it?"

"Feel what?"

"Later," he said, grabbing her hand and hauling her forward as he bolted like a rabbit spooked by the fox.

"What..."

Two predatory figures crashed through the underbrush behind them. They were men, not wild animals, though they ran like beasts, with a speed she had rarely seen in men. Their feral smiles were warning enough.

She wrenched her hand free and surged forward, following Raven so close that he nearly kicked her as he ran. The crashing footsteps drove her forward. They wove through the trees, dodging branches by mere finger-widths.

She risked a glance behind her and found the men closing on them. She had to do something, either her or Raven, but she did not know what they could do. They could not stop to set a trap. She did not have weapons to protect them with. Raven did, but she did not know how he could stand against both of these... men.

"Ahead of us. On the right," Raven called to her, his breath coming much easier than her own ragged gasps.

She looked, saw nothing, and then started to ask him where. Then she saw it. A ring of massive oak trees, so out of place in this forest of pine and fir. She could not see around the edges of the ring, or how these trees would save them. She looked for buildings, on the ground or, perhaps, in the branches of the trees. Nothing. She could see no people to help them.

"There be nothing there but trees," she said.

"Just run. Through the oaks." He did not stop, but surged forward, glancing her way to make sure she was still with him.

She pushed herself, determined to keep up.

The pursuers crashed through the undergrowth behind her and she dodged to the right, through two pines whose branches formed a web that clawed at her. For a breath, she thought that she would get stuck, and then they gave way and stumbled forward and ran again.

Raven tore his sword free of its scabbard, as he ran between her and the men. His sword flashed bright patterns in the light that ringed the oaks.

They were almost there. Still she could see nothing.

"What do I be doing?" she yelled.

"Enter the ring. They won't follow you."

"What about you?"

"Go!"

She did, the fear in his voice driving her forward.

Fighting erupted behind her, but she did not look. Just five more steps.

Raven yelled, but it was not with pain, as she had feared at first. It was a guttural call of rage and pure willpower.

Four.

The creatures yelled back, their voices raw and guttural.

Three.

Metal struck once, twice, thudding with the impact into flesh and leather.

Two.

One.

Still, she saw nothing beyond the trees but a clearing. Would Raven survive this? What could she do?

Then she was through.

It was as if she had crossed an invisible veil. She felt nothing, but one moment there was just the clearing, the next an entire village. She turned to Raven, yelling, "I'm through."

She could hear the men speaking in some ragged language, cursing, she was sure, but she did not see any of them.

Suddenly, Raven burst through the ring of oaks twenty strides to her left, drawing breaths in ragged gasps. He spun around, raising his sword to face the men once more.

She ran to him, not knowing how to help.

He was sheathing his sword over his back when she got to him.

"What do you be doing?" she asked. He could not have just given up, allowing them to die here.

Smiling, he pointed through the trees, and then dropped to his knees panting.

The men paced back and forth on the other side of the trees, cursing and howling. Their eyes burned with anger and their gaunt figures were frightening.

Wide eyed, she looked to Raven. The way his hand was stuck to his side, she feared he was wounded. She kneeled next to him. "Do you be hurt?"

"I am well, and seeing you beside me, unhurt as well, is the most pleasant sight I have seen in many years. Except for your hair, I guess."

"My hair?"

"Don't get me wrong, it still looks good. A little wind blown, but the white streaks help to bring out the red. Very striking."

"White streaks?"

Elena knelt over a crystal clear pond in the center of the ruins, her hair pulled back and her face pressed close.

Her normally deep auburn hair was streaked with ragged patches of white. She turned to Raven, running her fingers through her hair, trying to get some of the knots out.

"You don't remember them appearing?" Raven asked.

"White hair don't be just appearing," she shot back.

Raven laughed, the sound ringing whole and true. "Oh, but my lovely lass, it surely does. Days go by, just like any other day, while the white starts creeping into our hair, and then our minds, of course, without us ever being any the wiser. Then one day we look at ourselves, or some crass soul comments, and there they are."

"And, yet, you be having none."

"Our kind never do seem to develop this problem. No. That would not be completely accurate. Actually, it works much like yours, for many, many years we can go, looking just like we did the day we reached manhood, then-- oops!--we are old." He snaps his fingers to accentuate the point, a broad smile on his face.

"Can you ever be serious?"

"Always. Can't you tell?"

She scowled at him.

He sighed.

"All right." He sat down next to her, leaning against a small holly tree, resting his head on it and looking to the sky, as if for help. "Do you remember healing your knee?"

She tensed. "Yes, but I don't be seeing what this has to do with my hair."

"Did you want answers? Yes? Good. Now listen. Women these days." He shook his head in mock horror and had the good nature to wince as she hit him in the shoulder.

"Every time that you use the Breath, it requires power from some source. This could be the grass or rocks around you. It could be another person. Unless you tell it otherwise, though, the power to fuel the Breath comes directly from you."

"How do you be knowing this? Can you Breathe?"

"No. Not really. I am *Nekodah*, trained at the Temple of the Sun before the brotherhood was disbanded. We can do some similar things, but the powers that we are taught work in a completely different manner than what you will be able to do. What you have done."

"Then you could have healed me?"

"Not directly, no. And surely no wound of that magnitude in the time allowed us. Now, do you understand what I said about the power source?"

"I think so, but what be powering it? What is the Breath?"

He sighed, nervous. "You really know nothing, do you?"

"It be nothing that I be wanting to learn. I hate it, truth be told."

"Why does it frighten you so?"

"Frighten me? No, that do not be it at all. It sickens me. If it be not for Joss, I never would be using it."

He cocked his head to the side like a curious pup. "You didn't answer the question."

She stood, walking several strides away, and drew in a deep breath. Could she trust him? Did she have any choice? No, she did not. He had saved her life already, risked his own in the process. He knew what she was, and accepted her. She turned to face him.

"My mother be so enamored of the Breath that she be leaving me for days. I guess she be studying, I don't really be knowing. I be all alone, finding food where I could, though she tried to set food aside for me. Sometimes, late at night... I don't know why I be telling you this. I've never told anyone."

He said nothing, just waited, watching with those grass-green eyes. He looked ready to wait for days, if need be.

She walked back to him and sat down. She could tell him, but she could never look him in the eyes. This was too personal. It was good, however, knowing that once this was through she would probably never see him again.

"Sometimes, late at night, I be hearing her talking. I would slip to the edge of the loft, as quiet as I could. Sometimes they be talking, sometimes I just heard laughing. I think he was the one she ran off with."

"Did you ever meet him?"

"No, but I heard his name once. Betsel... something."

"Betzalel?" he asked, his voice strained.

"Yes. That be it! Do you know him?"

Raven's breath escaped in a sharp hiss before he regained his composure. "He should not have been there. Where were we? Ah, yes, my turtle dove, you wanted to know what the source of the Breath is."

"Was he one of you--a *Nekodah*?"

"The power of the Breath," he said, ignoring her, "Is the very essence of life. Your life. The life of the trees and the grass and the sky and the stones. Everything around you is alive, and to use these powers is to harness that very life, rip it from the source, and shape it to your own will."

She gasped. "You mean, to heal my knee, I be stealing the life of something else?"

"No. Unless you will it otherwise you were using your own life."

She found it hard to think, much less speak.

Something had never set right when she watched her mother and the memories came back in vivid color. She remembered patches of dying grass in the otherwise healthy fields. One day she came home from school to find several dead rabbits in the road. That was who her mother was.

She stood and stalked away, the howls of the men outside the trees sending chills across her spine. She needed time to think. Time to not think.

Elena was ready to burst, the emotions that she had stuffed away strained at the hinges of her heart. She walked away from Raven, but had no where to go. She kicked at the broken pieces of the buildings as she wandered, her emotions simmering like a vat of tallow. It bubbled and spat, threatening to burn her, to catch her on fire. Was this place where her mother had come when she disappeared? Did she escape to the quiet here with her lover?

The red-veined marble paths crisscrossed in random patterns between seamlessly built stone buildings that were placed with no familiar pattern. Fingers of grass peeked through tiny cracks in the marble, but no creepers threatened to choke the buildings. Except for the thick layers of dust that coated the window sills, the village could have been abandoned days ago.

She dreamed of a simple life: marrying a loving husband, raising children in peace. She could have been happy in a small village such as this, tucked away from everything else. Except for what the bastards did that had lived here. That, she could not have stomached.

She wove down alleys that caught the leaves and made beds out of them for the squirrels and rabbits. Decay drifted on the breeze. It fit her mood just fine. Everywhere she went, her neck hairs bristled. She did not know if the eyes were that of the men waiting outside for her, or something else. Maybe someone still lived here after all, though she saw no signs of life. She waded deeper into the village, the light dimmer and more private.

Were these the homes? If she went through that woven wood door, would she find a sturdy bed with a comfortable mattress? Oh, how the thought of that called to her after lying on the sagging cot for so many years. Once on the bed, she knew that she would not be able to quiet the thoughts that already raced through her: is this the bed where her mother and Betzalel lay together?

Why would Raven tell her nothing about him? It was obvious that he knew him and was holding back. Who was Raven, and what did he share with this Betzalel?

The walls would give no answers tonight. She wished she could force them to give her answers, but there was only one way she might be able to do that. And she would have no part of that anymore. It had been bad enough before she learned how Breathing worked.

She breathed deep, searching for calm.

She kicked at the piles of leaves over and over again, scattering them to the winds. She did not pause to think what animal might be calling this home. She only reacted, vented, erupted. Her arms flew in wide circles, punching the air. Then she screamed as the shadow crossed over her, and the woman stood before her.

"Taerana." She spat the name out like a bad apple, not caring if she hurt the woman's feelings. "Can't you just be leaving me in peace? It never did be a problem of yours."

Her mother did not flinch. *Elena. My child.*

"Don't you be calling me your child. Not after what you be doing. Did I hold you back, is that it? Did I be keeping you from screwing him, mother? Did you hate me because my screams be keeping you awake at night? Or was I just too much to handle, just one more responsibility for the overburdened whore?"

You were never a burden to me. Never.

"Don't be lying to me. Not now. At least have the balls to be facing me with the truth. What can it hurt? You be dead."

Her mother slapped her, but it did not hurt. Her hand slid through her skin and Elena felt the icy grip of death that held her mother. Then it was gone. It did not hurt, but it calmed her more than the physical pain would have.

Don't you ever talk to me like that again.

Elena laughed, then, though she could feel Death dancing up her spine. "I never had the chance to be saying it before now. You left, remember?"

I didn't want to. Can you ever believe that? What I did that night, I did to save you.

"And what of the months and years before when you left me on my own? Did that be for me, also? Or be that for Betzalel? Yes. I heard the two of you sharing the lovers laugh."

Terrible things are coming, Elena, just as they were then. He was teaching me to Breathe so that I could save you. The Overlord wanted you then. He needed you. I would not let them have you, so I did what I must.

"And I be needing you. I didn't need you leaving me to condemn us all. I needed your laughter when I came home from school. I needed your kiss at night and your arms when the children picked on me." She could feel the tears swelling behind her eyes, and turned from her mother.

I wanted to be. I truly did, but I could not let you be stolen and used in the way he would have used you. In the way they wish to use Jocelyn now.

"Be leaving her out of this, you hear? You were not here to raise her, or see her born. Just be leaving her out of this. I will be gettin her back."

With what? A Wildlander and his sword? Let me teach you what you need so that, maybe, you can be the one to truly stop him.

Elena spun and lunged a stiff finger at her mother. "Never! I will not be leaving Jocelyn to the same fate you left me. I will not be destroying myself for the sake of the Breath."

Her mother motioned at her hair, and her voice was a whisper. *You are already killing yourself. Make it matter.*

Elena ran away, kicking up clouds of damp leaves and dirt. She followed random streets as the urge took her. The rage burned as she stalked the village. She would not abandon her daughter. She would not.

The buildings blurred behind tears, and finally she was forced to stop at an overgrown garden. She dropped onto one of the finely carved wooden benches that outlined the choking flower beds, and let the tears burst free. Her body wracked with sobs. Eventually, the flame of her anger sputtered out, leaving her dark inside.

Could her mother be right? Did she need to learn this curse that she lived with? For so long she had tried to pretend it was not hers, that it had died with her mother. The past few days had proven that wrong.

She drew the amulet out and cupped it in her hands, holding it like a snake that was ready to strike. One

thumb traced the patterns on it, round and round. How could she hope to defeat the Duke with just Raven? Was this simply a fool's errand that would end in all of their deaths? She realized that it did not matter. Johan was dead. Without Joss she had nothing to live for. She did not have to defeat the Duke, just get her daughter away. Johan had taught her enough that she could do that.

She breathed deep, determination settling firmly in her heart, and saw the pattern the flower beds made. She held her breath and held the amulet up. The patterns were the same.

She bolted up, shoving the amulet firmly into her breeches again, and went to find Raven.

The sun was low in the sky, the light casting long shadows across the wild grasses when she found him. He was exactly where she had left him. He sat cross legged, eyes closed and hands folded in his lap. He said nothing as she approached, just breathed deeply in and out. In and out.

"Do you know where to be finding him?" she asked.

His eyes peeled open and he smiled. "That I do, my beautiful lass. That I do."

"I am not yours. Let's be getting out of here."

"Before we do, we should rest. We will have problems enough in full daylight with the men out there. I don't want to try them in the dark."

As if they knew that he was talking about them, two frustrated roars pierced the night.

She sighed, knowing that he was right. She grabbed her pack, and stalked several paces away. Lying down, she used the pack for a pillow, and tried to find rest. It was a long time coming.

Chapter 17

Jocelyn woke the next morning, every inch of her body sore. The ache soaked deep into her bones, like the time she had lung fever. She sat up in bed and her head swam in the pain of a pounding headache. She could not get sick. Not now.

Slowly, she shifted the covers aside and slipped her legs out of bed. The others were still asleep except for Tomas and Renee, who sat close to each other, talking in whispers and laughing together. Tomas' hand slid affectionately along Renee's arm. She reclined her head back, her eyes closed. A whisper of breath slid through her barely open lips.

Tomas' head whipped around in shock. Quickly, he pulled his hand off of Renee and stood, clearing his throat and smoothing his breeches. His face heated to a pleasant shade of scarlet as Renee finally slipped out of her trance, saw Jocelyn watching, and walked stiffly to the rear of the tent, making a show of checking on the smaller children.

Jocelyn could not help herself, and a small burst of laughter escaped before she could stifle it.

Tomas shuffled over to her. "You didn't sleep well. Kept turning and moaning." He sat down next to her, but she noticed that he kept more space between them than he had with Renee.

Fine by her. She did not want those kinds of attentions anyway.

"By the Mother," she said, "But I do be hurting. Hope I don't be getting sick. There's just too much here that the Duke can teach me."

Tomas clasped his hands rapidly together. He thumb-wrestled himself for several breaths before tearing them apart and looking at her. His brows arched in concern.

"What do you think he might teach you?"

"He be having so much power. Surely he might be teaching me some of that."

"He abuses his power a bit too much, if you ask me."

The sudden heat in his voice took her by surprise, and she felt anger welling inside of her. "What do you be meaning by that?"

"He didn't... try anything with you last night?"

"Like what? Like what you be trying with Renee?"

He blushed but did not look away. "He took her the first night here. And several since. She was not willing."

"She looked willing enough to me."

Tomas stood. "What is wrong with you this morning? The stories are true, you know. I've seen him do enough since I've been here to know."

"And how could you be hating him so? Has he done anything to you?"

Tomas shrugged, but he glanced behind him, towards Renee.

As suddenly as the wave of anger had come, it flowed back out, a tide of emotion that she could not control, or explain. What *was* wrong with her? She had no reason to defend this evil man. Shaking her head to clear her thoughts, she rested a hand on Tomas' arm.

"I be sorry. I don't be knowing why I be acting like that." She nodded behind them. "You knew her before here, didn't you?"

He sat down, his shoulders slumping, and she perched beside him, close enough to show friendship, but with enough space that Renee need not worry.

"I did. We used to run to Perriman's Lake, just outside of Renaulds Dale, and spend long evenings there, watching stars, swimming, talking."

"Kissing?"

He looked away. "Yeah. Kissing. It was naming day. I had come to watch my older brother. I wanted him to get picked so badly. He would have appren

ticed to the glass-blower in Tekerton."

"Do it be the Duke?"

He nodded. "He rode into our village with the soldiers. We thought it was for the naming day celebration and poured extra wine for him--I had to run home to get Da's last bottle. It was a red. I should have known then. The way it sparkled in the late morning sun... I remember thinking if that was blood, I could join the Duke and drink my share of it, I wouldn't have minded at all. When I brought it to him, he spit it out and threw it to the ground shattering it. Things got hectic--I don't know what happened. I remember the soldiers grabbing me and hauling me off. I looked back when I heard my brother screaming for me to run. He was fighting his way to me. Da grabbed him. Held him back. I hated him for that."

Jocelyn nodded. She remembered the one time that her Mam had told her what happened to Gram. She could still hear the pain and sorrow in her mother's voice.

"He be doing it for a reason," she said. "You know that, right?"

"I do now. Had plenty of time to think about it lately. Didn't then, though. I just saw him holding my brother back and thinking 'Let him go! If you won't save me, let him go.'"

"He couldn't be losing both of you at once. What could they do against the Duke and his men?"

"Nothing. Found that out the hard way. My brother pulled himself free and attacked the soldiers that had me. Just his bare fists." The words died off as Tomas fought for control. She did not know what to say or do.

Tomas looked up and caught her gaze, held it with smoldering eyes. "The Duke was the one that did it. Took off his gloves. Walked behind him. Just touched him. Weren't no fireworks, or flame, or nothing. Just touched him. My brother's body wracked so hard in pain I swear he folded in half before falling to the ground. Pink foam flew from his lips as he thrashed on the ground, and then stilled. Didn't seem no one wanted to fight after that. I sure didn't. Just went limp and let them drag me away."

"There be no shame in that," Jocelyn said. "You could not have done anything else." She wrapped her arms around his neck, and held him close. He needed a friend as much as she did.

Light flared inside the tent as the flap was thrown aside and two soldiers strode through, as sure of themselves as the morning roosters. The biggest one pointed a mailed hand at her. "The Duke wants you. Now."

"Must have made quite the impression," Renee said.

"Stop it, Nene," Tomas said, then called after Jocelyn, "Remember what I told you."

As the tent flap closed behind her, the tension and fear melted away. The Duke stood before her, looking every bit the gentle father that she never had. What had she been so afraid of?

A nagging sensation tickled at the back of mind: something was wrong here.

"Jocelyn," the Duke said, "You look lovely today. How ever do you manage it under these conditions?"

She blushed fiercely. Her own father had never complimented her like that, and her mother rarely so.

"Have a seat, won't you. After all this riding, you must be sore, no matter how well you manage to hide it." He waved his arm toward the throne, and then moved aside to make way for her.

As she sat, a motion caught her eye. A large curtain hung in the middle of the tent, just behind the throne. A shape pounded into it, like a body.

Following her gaze, the Duke came and sat on the chest beside her. "Have you thought about my offer to teach you the skills of the Royal family?"

"Yes, milord, I have. I would like that very much." Her heart pounded in her chest. She was nervous about something, but it was too hard to grab hold of the thought and read it. It managed to slip away, and she forgot it.

The Duke beamed at her. "Good. I have not had such an opportunity in too long. You will be very good, I am positive. If any of the other children cause problems for you, just let me know."

He started the lesson by plucking a blade of grass and holding it in front of her. "What do you see?"

She did not know what he expected. It was a blade of grass. Nothing more. More thoughts fought their way to the surface and came full formed: the memories of her Gram's amulet held the answers to the questions that he would ask. She could not let him know how much she knew. That would be dangerous for her Mam.

"A dying blade of grass," she answered.

He chuckled. "Only partly right. Inside this simple blade of grass is the very essence of life. It is this life that you harness when you Breathe."

A dark glimmer of anxiety beat through her veins. "Doesn't that be killing it, then, to make what we want?"

His eyes grew hard, though the smile never wavered. "Nature is very strong, and will rebuild it. Have you ever witnessed a forest after a fire?"

She shook her head no.

"The grass is charred. The trees are black corpses. Years later, that same forest is more abundant, healthier than before the fire. If you hold the source of your power to that which nature has created, you will never harm a soul."

She nodded. She knew he was right, but also knew what he did not say. The Duke, his father, and his brothers never held themselves to such restrictions. Maybe Tomas was right, maybe the stories were all true. But they could not be. This man standing in front of her was kind to her. He would treat her well, if strict. Strictness was discipline, and discipline led to safety. He cared about her.

"You understand that, then? Good."

He handed the blade of grass to her, and she held it out in front of her.

"Now draw in the largest breath that you can. Can you feel the energy, the life, in that breath?"

She shook her head no. She had to keep her knowledge safe. It took all of her concentration, but she kept her Mam's image in her mind, focusing on her, on remembering her. If she did not focus on her Mam, she feared she would lose the memories.

"Imagine a white light, free from all blemishes. Now imagine the air you are breathing is made of this light. Can you feel the difference?"

She did. It was incredible--like she had just been born and this was her first breath of pure air. It was as if all the air she had breathed previous to this was stale, dank and rotting. Only this white air was pure. She could feel it rushing down her throat and into her chest and stomach, radiating throughout her body.

"Now picture the light coming from inside the blade of grass. Picture breathing it in."

She saw the light, the life, gush from the plant. It was green, not white, and held a crisper feel than the life of the air. As the green light left the plant and filled her body, she felt a tingling along her skin and saw the goose bumps form. As she let the breath out, the energy was gone.

"When the energy is not channeled to a specific purpose, it is blended with your own energy. Right now, your body is not accustomed to this amount of work and you will likely be tired after today's lesson. I recommend--"

He stood up straight and turned to face the doorway. His eyes were red-hot coals and she was glad that heat was not turned her way.

The tent flap cracked open and one of the Duke's men poked his head in.

"Milord. There is a man outside that says he must speak with you. It is of the most urgent importance."

Jocelyn noticed that his eyes flicked to the curtain behind her.

"You must excuse me, dear Jocelyn. I shall return promptly." He whipped his coat behind him and strode through the flap, nearly knocking the soldier over.

What did he have behind that curtain? She knew that she should not check. Even though he had not set down any rules for her, she knew he would not look kindly at that. Then the embers in his eyes would turn her way. A part of her would not let her leave without looking.

She rose and pulled the curtain aside just enough to see behind it. A woman lay in a large cot, on top of a purple and black silk quilt. She was folded into herself, like a baby, shaking. Her eyes fluttered open, large saucers brimming with fear as she saw Jocelyn. She shook her head in a violent "No!" She was trembling.

Jocelyn let the curtain fall back into place and returned to the throne. She stared at the curtain, praying it would stop moving before he got back.

She still held the blade of grass in her hand. It was brown and lifeless. She could hear it rip and tear and bruise as she rolled it between her fingers.

Was this what he had done to the woman? Had he drawn life from her, like she had from this grass? Had he drained her for his own Breath? She shivered. A man that would do that would stop at nothing. At least Johan had refused to hit her. Though, in his most violent drunks, he had never stopped himself from hitting her mother.

Elena.

She remembered Bardulf and the Captain arguing. The Duke had wanted them both brought to him, alive. Would he use her the same way he was using this woman behind the curtain? She did not know, but she could not let it happen. Her mother was all that she had, all that mattered. Oh, if only she would have listened better, obeyed more. If she would not have climbed the Ladder, knowing the entire time that her Mam would never approve. But she had, and now she was here. Her Mam did not have to be.

She smiled, thanking the amulet for its mistake.

Breathing deep, like the Duke had taught her, she imagined drawing the smallest amount of life out of every blade of grass that surrounded her in the tent. She did not know where her Mam was right then, but she knew the winds flew everywhere. She could find her.

Vibrant green light filled her. She pictured her Mam in her mind. She willed the green life back out of her, commanding it to fly on the winds. She told the breeze the message she wanted delivered. She did not know if it would find her, or how long it would take. She was not even sure that it had worked, but it was all that she could do.

The Duke returned and forced her back into her lessons. He placed a congratulatory hand on her arm when she got something right, and he looked at her with that gaze when she got it wrong. When the lesson was over, she was escorted back to the children's tent. She passed Bardulf and waved at him. He waved back. His smile brimmed with sorrow.

She wanted to tell him he need not worry, to ease his mind. The Duke was a good man, and he treated her nicely. She would enjoy her time alone with him, she decided.

Goosebumps chased each other along her skin. It must be the chilly night air, she decided.

Gideon watched Jocelyn walk out of the tent. She was a good learner, and full of incredible potential. He looked forward to seeing how the Red affected her abilities. What new ones would he discover by watching her progress?

His talents were internal. They worked best by manipulating objects, and people, from the inside, but hers... the Reds were always known for sheer destructive power. They could open the earth, shatter stone, or create

balls of fire that burned hotter than the Fire Palace's rivers. He understood why his father had killed everyone that could Breathe after the Sundering. Today, though, it was a different world. Once trained, she would be his strongest weapon.

One finger traced the edge of his jaw. She was hiding something. She had Breathed while he was gone, but that was not all of it. The Breath felt different than what she had been taught. That was good. She would be ready that much sooner.

He hummed under his breath as he tied the front curtain shut. Slipping his velvet jacket off, he hung it on the back of the throne, carefully ensuring that both sides hung evenly. He rolled back the inner curtain, tying it in place. His humming stopped as he watched the slave straighten from her fetal position. Her eyes flicked past him and then quickly met his.

He turned, but found no one there. Emotions slid across her eyes as he turned back to her. She tried to mask it with a smile, but she could not fool him. Not after the intimacies they had shared. Was it worry? Hope? He had thought those emotions had died long ago.

And then a thought struck him. Had Jocelyn found her? He held his breath as he scanned the repercussions it might have. Then he shrugged. It did not matter. Yesterdays Breath was nearly full strength. He had fed it more while congratulating her today.

She was nearly his daughter already.

Returning his full attentions to the slave, he ran a finger between her breasts, sliding her tunic off of one shoulder, and lost himself in her quakes.

Chapter 18

Elena awoke to a piercing scream. It was full of anger and frustration. A primal hunger rode along its edges, commanding that she come and fill their needs.

The haze in her eyes obscured the surroundings into jutting masses of stone and a ring of green. A ring. The trees. Another scream and she knew where she was. She bolted to her feet. She would not die here.

Raven still sat where had left him last night. She called his name. When he did not respond, she marched closer. She called his name again, and then crept even closer. Had he died during the night? Had the shadows that enveloped the village overtaken him and led his soul to the Fathers hand, leaving a dry husk in his place? She stretched a timid hand to his shoulder. She let it hover while she bundled her nerves together.

The fabric of his shirt brushed her hand, and then fell away. Her hand snapped back of its own accord. He was breathing. Could he be sleeping?

No one could sleep sitting up like that. Unless he was part horse. That left Breathing, or whatever it was the Wildlander's did. She would not interrupt him during that.

So she set to pacing. It did nothing to soothe her. Instead, it wound her nerves even tighter. She felt like an animal caged and waiting for the rich man's games. She knew the threat that waited for her outside. She had already met one of the threats inside this cage of trees. She did not want to meet that one again.

Light pushed its way through the trees, casting sharp shadows over the smooth stone of the buildings. The shadows reached far into the village, their fingers brushing the grass everywhere that she walked. She cursed herself for a foolish girl as she refused to step on the shadows.

She forced her mind to the task at hand. How would they get out of here? Raven had taken a wound last night and he was just trying to keep them at bay, not push his way past. She would slow him down. With his innate sense of the Mother's woods, he could slip by them on his own. He would be safe. Then where would that leave her?

Alone. Lost in a village that, she forced herself to admit, terrified her. It was not just meeting her mother that sent the chills along her back. It was what had been done here. It was the thought of a hundred *Chiy'el* living here, stealing life from the plants and animals. She refused to even consider where else they might have found their power.

She would not be a part of this. Ever.

Then she could not leave. Not by herself. Even if she made it past the madmen in the forest, she would never find the Duke and Joss. Raven claimed to know where they were, but how could he? She shuddered when the answer came to her.

"Focus, Elena, focus."

Why did these men want them so badly? Not them, her. No matter the damage they had caused to Raven, they had not tried to stop him. She was sure that if they wanted him dead, he would have been. Then what drove them to get her? Who knew about her?

The Duke. He had sent the guards to get her, but had taken Joss. Why her? Why Joss? What was it that made them so special? Twisting her long auburn hair into knots, she knew the answer.

She rushed toward the men. She had to know if her fears were true. She pushed through the scratchy branches, and stopped between two towering fir trees, pushing the underbrush aside.

Snarling, the men leapt at her, but she could not bring herself to move. She was transfixed by their feral gazes. Their movement was as smooth and quick as the flood waters that had pounded at her. They stopped suddenly, snarling in rage as they were thrown back. The village would not let them in. The sheer power of the ring of trees should have terrified her, but the victory welled up as she noticed the way their eyes sunk into their skulls, and their veins struggled to break free.

She had seen this before.

Exultant, she rushed back to where Raven still sat. She shook his shoulder, called his name and stepped back, just in case.

His eyes sprung open, blinked twice, and then focused. "What is wrong?" he asked as he stood, stretching his legs and arms in one quick flex.

"I know how to be getting past the savages." The smile that split her face was painful, but she could not help it. She could get them out of this alive, and never have to follow her mother's forsaken path.

They slung their packs over their shoulders, each helping the other ensure that all pockets were fastened tight. They could not afford to lose any of the few belongings they still had, and their flight would be fast. They swept the grounds along the inside of the trees, picking up dead wood. When they had found all they could, Raven started towards the inner village, but Elena stopped him.

"We don't be needing to go in there."

His eyes squinted for a breath, and then relaxed. He nodded. "Are you sure this will be enough?"

She nodded back. "You said you created three pits during your rest last night?"

"Aye." He pointed to about where they lay.

She could not see past the trees, but she fixed their general locations in her mind.

"They should be covered enough to escape notice, especially if they will be as focused as you say," he said.

"They will. When the others tried to overtake my mother in the village." Her voice broke. She cleared her throat and forced the emotions below. "Nothing that got in their way be stopping them. They did not even seem to be noticing."

"Everything except for those, right?"

She nodded and shifted the bundle of wood in her arms. Her mother had used the Breath to create her fire, but Elena was convinced any flame would do.

They piled their wood together, drawing out the three best branches for torches. They wrapped torn pieces of Raven's spare tunic around each.

"I knew there was a reason I didn't wash that tunic. The oils should catch fire nicely." He grinned

mischievously at her. She rolled her eyes in response. He shrugged.

Unstopping the skin of lamp oil, he drizzled it over the make-shift torches, and then poured the rest over the wood. Stopping up the oil skin, he threw it over his shoulder, tucking it tightly behind the pack.

Raven knelt to the three torches, set safely away from the rest of the wood, and struck steel against flint four times before the first torch caught. Quickly, he tucked the flint and steel into a pocket, and raised the sputtering torch from the ground.

Elena's breath caught as the flame disappeared for two breaths, and then flared into a strong flame.

He handed her the other torches, lit them, and grabbed two armfuls of the oil-sopped branches. She picked up the rest, shifting them until she found a way she could run with it.

"You plaster the first. I'll take the others. Ready, my beautiful Lady of the Flame?"

"Oh, be stopping all ready," she sighed, then grinned. "I'll race you."

She surged through the opening, scanning the land for the three-rock formation he said marked each one. When she spotted it, she turned and put all of her strength into her run. She could already hear the men crashing through the woods.

Their screams silenced as they closed in on their prey, and she thanked the Mother for small favors. She did not think the fake confidence could have lasted with their howls grating against her neck.

She dropped the wood as she reached the covered pit, spotting its edges the way Raven had told her. She raced around the edge to wait by the next pit.

She did not have to wait long. She heard the fire catch, like a breath punched out, before she reached the second pit. Raven dropped his first bundle before she finished her first breath. Daring a glance behind her she saw the plan come to fruition.

Oblivious to the danger, the men ran through the flames, their focus only on her. Spit burst from their mouths in ragged breaths, and popped and hissed in the flames as their clothes caught fire. The first crashed into the pit with arms flailing wide. Desperation roared from his lips. His hands caught one side and clamped on. The other found purchase.

Elena felt the cold grip of fear clamp onto her throat. It was not going to work. They would make it free. As soon as the thought was there, she saw she was wrong.

The second man bounded over the pit, leaping off the shoulders of the first to clear the nearest edge. The first's fingers bent back under the pressure, and he fell to the bottom with a sickening crunch.

She turned to light the second bundle--and froze as a gust of wind crashed into her.

"Joss?" She could hear her voice, but knew she was not here. Raven said they were far away, nearing Rift Cross Mountain at the north of Edrea.

The words whispered on the wind in her daughter's own lovely, frightened voice.

Raven ran past her, wrenching a torch from her hands and dropping it, the wood bursting into flame. He spun her out of the way just as the beast swung a dirty talon-like hand to shred her.

It tried to stop, tried to spin and follow, but its foot caught on the needles and stones. Its momentum carried it through the flames and into the second pit. His hands never found purchase before he hit the bottom.

They ran, wanting as much distance between them as they could. Raven pulled her farther forward, constantly watching behind them. Her legs burned. Her lungs ached for air. None of it mattered, though. Every step took them closer to Joss. Every step tugged them closer to the girl who was losing who she was; afraid she would end up a slave and a whore for the Duke.

Chapter 19

Johan breathed deeply as they rode into Jergain Falls. They had spent the last three days riding fast. They pushed the horses as much as they could, the spans eaten by the horse's hard pace. When the horses tired, they would slow them to a walk. Each slow step threatened his sanity. Each slow step was more time before he could get to Elena.

He never realized how much being around her had meant. True, he had not been a worthy husband for years, except to the bottle. But she was still there. Through all of it, she never left him, and that meant more to him than he could ever explain; more than he could ever show. And now it was nearly too late.

Though he still did not fully trust the man, he had grown to like Betzalel through their journey. They had talked occasionally, but had spent the better part of the time in silence. It was not an awkward silence, but rather that of old friends who had caught up and could now enjoy the time together. It was much like the nights when he was sober enough, and the darkness far enough inside of him, that he spent sitting on the porch, whittling a branch, and listening to his wife.

He kicked the horse forward, refusing to give in to the shakes that he could feel building. It was four long days since he had tasted the thick bitters. In those four days he could swear the Father had abandoned him to the spite of the Mother. His mouth felt thick and dry, and he had nothing but water to slake the thirst. A drink would do his nerves wonders. Just one.

The town had fallen into disrepair since the Rebellion. As he picked his way through the throng of foot travelers he noticed that many of the buildings needed new roofs. A shutter here or there tilted on its hinges. Porch rails bowed under the weight of the years. A dozen other little signs that times were hard in what had once been a spotless Mecca for the philosophers and artists. It had once been the only town where those that thought in ways different than the Overlord and the Duke could gather. It seems the Duke no longer cared for the dissension it bred.

He wondered how many of the Rebels would have survived that particular cleansing, but forced the thoughts away. He already had too many ghosts haunting him. He did not need to harvest more.

They passed a number of shops and merchant wagons selling everything from prayer rugs and beads to the latest sex oils. The smell of chicken, fried with green onions, garlic and mushrooms assaulted him as they passed the Fool's Festoon. Merchant's hawked their wares, calling out in overly sweet voices. They rode past the shops, not stopping to look at any of them. They quickly waved off any merchants that might have stolen their time, if not their purses.

He kept a sharp eye out for anyone that he might recognize from the Rebellion, or for the backwards moon that was put in store windows, or on their signs. His guts knotted with the fear that the letter had not gotten through, or that no one survived who could pull a group together. They did not need a big group, and they did not have time to build one on their own. Besides, he was honest enough with himself to admit that he did not have the personality necessary to recruit. All that he had was his reputation, and that he had squandered away.

He marked the alleys in his mind, plotting escape routes. Things had changed in the years, but many of his previous routes still existed. He watched the guards, keeping a careful eye on the rise and fall of their shoulders that might indicate a catching of breath. He watched for recognition in their eyes, but saw none.

Slipping through the crowd, a lone man grabbed at his horse's reins. He moved quietly and jostled no one as he passed them. His clothes were worn, but of a fine material, yet not fine enough to attract attention. Johan nodded his approval.

"A long journey like this must have dried the throat something fierce. Come inside, good sir. Best prices in town." He waved one lanky arm towards the Mother's Goose. Despite its childish name, Johan knew the tavern to be anything but. Nearly any form of entertainment could be had for the right price.

"I'll be thanking you sir, and I would never be passing on such an offer." He felt, more than saw, Betzalel stiffen beside him, but he ignored him. It was just one drink.

His hand shaking, Johan lifted the stein to his lips and drained it. He closed his eyes, reveling in the burn as the harsh liquid slipped down his throat. He savored the moment, knowing it would be a long time until he could allow himself another.

He set the mug on the sticky table and took stock. Two guards sat at the table in the corner, but the woman leaned too close and slipped her arm a little too casually under the table. They were not the sort of guards to be easily distracted from their labors. The air was too warm, heated by lusty men and barely clothed women. The ale was too warm, but Johan could not protest too much.

"It's been too long, Pierce," he said, shoving the temptation of the stein aside as he leaned in so they could speak a bit more privately. He nodded to Betzalel, held Pierce's gaze, and said simply, "He be with me."

Pierce nodded. He had always been good at taking orders and better at puzzling out what needed to be done.

"Did you be getting my letter?" Johan asked.

Pierce shrugged. "Wasn't too hard to find. Not that unexpected, either."

"Has the family all come to town, then?"

"Most of 'em. Some distant cousins came for the party, too."

New soldiers for the cause? They could use all of the willing people they could get. He just hoped they did not require too much in the way of training. They did not have the time for that.

Their serving wench sauntered over to the table and eyed Johan as she placed stew and bread in front of them. It was a small miracle that her

dress, what there was of it, managed to stay on her shoulders. In most other establishments their bustier would hold the dress up no matter what. He supposed the women serving here preferred easy access and comfort to social niceties.

She winked at him. "Is there anything else I can be getting you fine men?" The tilt of her head and the subtle smile did nothing to make up for the horrid attempt at a sexy gaze.

They shook their heads and waited for her to leave, pouting, before resuming their conversation.

Betzalel was the first to speak. "Do any of the cousins have experience throwing these sorts of parties?"

Pierce's response was quiet. "They wouldn't be here otherwise, boy." He looked to Johan then back to Betzalel. "This your kid?"

Johan's smile was forced as he answered. "Nah. Some stray I be picking up along the way. You'll be getting

the details later."

Laughter erupted from middle of the room, and raucous calls went up as a man dressed in simple leathers stood and headed their way. The men patted his shoulder as he left.

Johan braced for trouble, slipping his hands beneath the table, making it look like he was just wiping his hands. He shifted his foot until the dagger hidden there was within easy reach.

The man's eyes sparkled of mischief, but Johan could sense the wariness that hid behind them. If Johan had not been watching for it, he would have never seen the quick glance at his hands as they slid under the table, or the way the man's gait shifted to the balls of feet. Whatever his experience, the man was a ready fighter who knew how to handle himself.

Pierce laid a firm hand on Johan's shoulder. "Here's cousin Rafe now."

Johan relaxed, lowering his boot and placing his hands back on the table.

Pulling a chair from the closest table, ignoring the irritated glances of the table's occupants, Rafe spun the chair, sat, and leaned over the chair back, his arms resting easily on top.

"Well, Pierce, won't you introduce me?"

Pierce gave Johan's name, then paused as he looked at Betzalel, who introduced himself with a nod and a single word.

"Well, it be a pleasure, I'm sure," he said, directing his comment at Betzalel, "And, you, Johan. I've heard so much about you. You're looking at your new best friend."

Johan ignored the outstretched arm, and met his steely gaze. "I guess we'll be having to see about that, won't we."

Rafe bristled under the scrutiny. It was obvious that his ego was too big to be a common soldier in his little army. If the man was to stay on board, he would require a command. But was he good enough?

"Yes. I suppose we will. Well, duty calls. I'm sure I'll be seeing you around these parts." He stood, slid the chair back in place with a gentle kick, and strode toward the stairs.

"Was that really necessary?" Betzalel asked.

"Times past be proving that men such as him often hold darker secrets than we be caring to share." Johan's words were soft, distant. "Pierce. What be his story?"

"Perhaps we should solidify our plans in my room." Not waiting for an answer, he stood, tossed a couple coins to the wench, and strode upstairs.

"How much will you tell the men?" Betzalel asked.

"As little as possible, I be thinking."

"That won't garner their trust, you know."

"And you be thinking the truth would sound better?"

Betzalel shrugged and laughed softly.

Pierce paced beside the window as they entered the room. "He is not Edgar, you know."

Johan stopped in front of the door. This was not how he should have started reforming the Rebels. He sighed wearily. "I know. That be a stupid thing for me to do. Too much be at stake."

"And there wasn't fifteen years ago?"

"That's not what I be saying. It be different, now."

Pierce turned, stalked to within arms reach. His eyes were cautious, and furious. "Have you forgotten that you trusted me once? That I served as your First? He's been checked. His story is clean."

Pierce's voice rose throughout the questioning until it was a quiet storm. He felt the rain and wind pounding at the doors he fought so hard to keep closed. Something else fought even harder to escape, though.

His shoulders slumped and, for one moment, he looked defeated. "He be having my daughter."

The storm blew itself out in a single breath.

"So, that's how it is."

"Aye, and my wife has taken it upon herself to be saving her single-handed."

"Then why are you here? Why didn't you stop her?"

Johan looked to Betzalel for support, but the boy just looked back. He had no answers to this dilemma. This decision was Johan's.

"Because I swore an oath on the day of the Silver Moon, fifteen years ago," he whispered.

Confusion wrung at Pierce's features for several breaths, before he shrugged it away.

"Who is he?"

Johan's shoulder's rose as he took the deepest breath of his life, then let it hiss slowly out. "He is the man I be oath-bound to."

If Johan had not sunk into such a dark place, he might have found Pierce's wide-eyed display of shock humorous. Instead, he barely managed to crack a smile before nodding.

"Aye. Pierce, meet Malek Betzalel Ben Ganaliel."

Pierce was flabbergasted. "The King of the Sun?"

Betzalel acknowledged the title with a nod.

"But you're so... young."

Betzalel chuckled, though there was little humor in it.

Johan stood, took a deep breath, and slid past Pierce to the window. He stared outside, his gaze unfocused and let the sounds of the town wash over him. "We each have our reasons for doing this. I don't be thinking there be any need for them to be known to all involved, do you?"

Clearing his throat, Pierce walked over to the friend he had not seen in over a decade, and rested a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Agreed. What about Rafe?"

"We need every man that we can be getting. I've seen the way he moves. Besides," he said, a smile breaking the hard mask of emotion, "I do be trusting you. He expects to lead. Can he?"

Pierce nodded. "He's done so before. He used to be in the Duke's army. Led the First Squadron of the Third Battalion."

Betzalel's eyes narrowed as he stood. "Then why do he be here? I did not believe anyone left the employ of the Duke alive."

"Everything checks," said Pierce.

"It be settled then," said Johan. "Bring the men together tonight at the caves. We'll see what we be having to work with."

"Go on, I'll be catching up with you," Johan said as he waved Betzalel on toward their room. "We'll all be meeting just after sunset. That means we've got a couple hours until we be leaving. Relax. Do whatever it is you be needing to do."

Betzalel held his gaze, concern darkening the quiet brown eyes, but he said nothing.

Johan clasped his hands together, squeezing them tight. The shaking did not go away. Running his hands over his stubbled chin, he walked down to the bar, and ordered a rot-gut. Maybe this would be enough to bring the numb back and erase the memories. After tomorrow, he would have enough going on that he could forget all the faces. Please let this one be enough.

He relished the burn as the coarse whiskey slid down his throat. If nothing else, maybe the pain could sear away the memories.

Just for one night. Then he would stop.

He slammed the stein on the counter, ignoring the looks of the men around him, slid the proper coins, plus one, to the bartender, and turned. He held his hands before him, watching. They were steadier, but not by much.

Pushing his way through the crowd, he saw Rafe watching him from the shadows. A glint of silver tumbled lazily from one knuckle to the next, and then back again.

It was just one drink.

Chapter 20

Johan stumbled through the filthy streets, seeking solace from the visions that crashed into him. He knew people were looking at him, knew they would remember the crazy man, but there was no hope for it.

He could not do this. Not again. Already the faces swam in his vision, threatening to overcome him. Too many had died under his command. He could not ask them to do this for him again. Yet, he had no choice. Still the faces swam, bloodied and torn.

Slipping into an abandoned alley, he tucked himself behind a stack of rotting crates, ignoring the filth, and curled into himself.

The dark shimmered with enough fireflies to make the field come alive--an ocean vista, caressed by the light on the crests of the waves.

They waited, huddled in small groups throughout the field and in the clumps of trees. Most of the men and women gathered were common men: farmers, smiths, tailors. They had no business fighting a war. Yet each had given their lives to his cause--to their cause--and he could not refuse them. He was not the only one to have suffered at the Duke's hands.

Tonight was to be their first true test together.

The forest that rimmed the field flared into sudden light as hundreds of arrows were lit.

They had been found. Someone had sold their plans.

He rose, yelling for the charge. His men responded.

Dozens burst from hiding. Wielding second hand swords and spears, they charged the flaming beacons.

He tried to gather them under his arm, to pierce the enemy lines with their full strength, but the terror bred chaos.

Arrows exploded into Rebel chests, showering them with embers and ash. Flames enveloped scores of men, melting clothing and skin alike in their fierce, unnatural flames.

Tears washed down his cheeks as silent sobs wracked his body. They would not have died if not for him. Even though he had seen no sign of dissension, he should have expected it. They died because he was not prepared.

"They died for me."

They died for their families, and for what they believed in.

He looked around, his tears arrested, afraid his weakness had been found out.

Wiatt stood before him, whole and unhurt.

"By the Mother, Wiatt, I be so sorry."

You forced no one.

"I be your leader."

Wiatt looked on him, his face a mask of strength and peace. *You did more than anyone could have hoped. You earned the name Protector of the Dead. If you had not rallied the survivors and stopped the Overlord's men, the Father only knows what would have become of us.*

"Do that be enough reason to start this again?"

No. Stopping the Overlord--that is enough reason.

So many people had died. He was not sure that he could accept this. Yet what was the alternative? To sit by while the Overlord used the very souls of the people he commanded to fuel his Breathings? From the earliest age, they were taught that their mistakes were times of learning: we would have a second chance in the next life. He could not let the Overlord's selfishness and disregard for one of the basic tenets of the people's beliefs take that away. He had been right then, he must be right now.

Wiatt faded away, nodding sadly.

Wiping the tears away, Johan stood, steadied himself and headed back toward the Inn.

The town was quieting down for the evening as people settled in for the night: eating, playing games, and drinking, before starting their daily chores in the morn. The streets were emptier, except for those that found their pleasures in drinks wrapped in friendship, or in the arms of women other than their wives, as was often the case in Jergain Falls.

Johan ignored the slop that coated the cobblestone roads. He needed to see his men. He needed to get them functioning together as quickly as possible. He chewed over various techniques he had used in the past to bring the men together, throwing out more than he kept. He mused over what mysterious force could bring men together from all corners of the land, and form them into one tight-knit fighting unit, all willing to lay down their lives for their beliefs. He had no answers, but somewhere in that line of questioning he knew lie the answer to bring these men together faster and stronger than before.

So lost was he in his philosophical musings that he did not hear the scrape of boot against stone, or the sweep of wood against leather.

From deep within a silent warning shot up his spine. He spun just in time. The pipe landed hard on his shoulder, missing his head.

He continued the spin, ramming a fist into the first attacker's grizzled face. Blood erupted from the split lip. The man fell to the filthy street, his stained work clothes splattered with his own blood.

Still spinning, Johan grabbed the pipe with his free hand and wrenched it free. Dropping low, he narrowly avoided two more blows, one aimed for his gut, the other his chest.

The crunch of contact thrummed up his arm as the pipe slammed into the second attacker's fist, breaking bones.

He rose smoothly to his feet, taking a step toward the third man who stepped back, then lunged forward while Johan reversed the pipe's arc.

He rolled on his left foot, spinning. The wooden staff pierced the empty air where he had just been, missing him by a finger's breadth.

Johan wind-milled his legs, raising his body off the ground, using the momentum to whip the pipe around in a full circle at his opponent. He was rewarded with another bone-jarring crunch. He spun a slow circle, but the men were already gone. Their ragged footsteps, and muffled curses, echoed up the alley to him.

Satisfied that they were alone, Johan knelt by the first attacker's body. His clothes were simple, more the work of a farmer, or miller, than a mercenary.

He found a lone silver mark in a worn leather pouch tied to his opponent's belt. He could not say whether this was payment, or if he just happened in the wrong spot at the wrong time.

To survive, he had to assume it was a payout. That left just one question: who wanted him dead? It could not be the Duke or his father. They would have sent soldiers, or worse.

That left locals. In his mind's eye, Rafe watched him, a silver mark tumbling across his knuckles.

Chapter 21

Elena watched Raven as they walked into the small, cheery village of Renaulds Dale. Much had changed since they had first met in the shadows of Harts Hope. She had hit him. Not a great start to a friendship, but it seemed they had overcome that. He was a good man, a kind man. That much she had learned. At least, if his actions toward her so far were representative of his true self.

They had shared many stories, and many laughs, during the two days it took them to walk here. He was free with his laughter. At first, she had thought that he was incapable of being serious. During the last week and a half she had learned to read the clouds that gathered behind his eyes. The laughter seemed often a mask for more serious thoughts. What caused him to hide so much of himself?

She shrugged. They all had their secrets.

As they crossed over a lazy brook on a simple wooden bridge, Raven waved at the children. They responded with belly laughs and titters behind cupped hands as they whispered to each other.

"What do you be doing to scare those poor girls?" she asked, slapping him gently on a strong shoulder.

He turned to face her, his face serious.

Had she said something to anger him?

Then his face wrenched itself into a mask of pure comedy: brows arched sharply; one eye closed, the other wide as he could open it; his nostrils flared; his mouth wide and crooked to one side with his tongue lolling out.

She burst into laughter, not bothering to hide it behind cupped hands like the girls, but let it ring from her like the pure note of a glass bell.

His mask slipped away, seriousness drawing it tight once more. "I must check on someone. Can you find a decent inn for us?"

"Can't it be waiting until after we settle?" she asked. If he knew someone here he should be able to recommend someplace. "Besides, I don't be having any coins. Will we be staying with your friend?"

He gave her curious look. "Depending on the answers I find, we may not be staying at all."

Her breath exploded in frustration. "This be the third mystery stop you be making. What be happening?"

"Tonight." The look he gave her brooked no argument.

Exasperated, she watched him walk away.

The children laughed and pointed again.

The dresses floated and spun in beat to the women's sensuous dance inside the ring of onlookers. Shadows caressed the new grass, sputtering in the heat of the bonfire that spat at the women and grasped at the moths that ventured too close.

Elena watched the spiraling, twisting dance as the women rolled their hips at the men. In Harts Haven the dance for Mother's Night was much simpler, much more innocent. Sure, everyone knew it was a celebration of life and creation, and everyone turned blind eyes as lovers escaped to celebrate in privacy, even if their lover was not their spouse. As long as the affair did not carry on past this one night, no harm was done.

She felt the heat rise to her face as the dancers pulled men in to dance with them. The dance turned into sex, although clothes never came off.

She missed the signal. All at once couples formed in the subtle dance among the onlookers. Several men eyed her intently, their desire blatant. She slipped out of the crowd, her stomach sour. She did not bother to pardon herself--they would not have noticed.

Raven had still not returned. She hoped that nothing had happened to him. Even though she had begun the journey alone, she did not think she could face the remainder that way. He was a source of strength to her. He gave her much needed laughter and a male presence that was welcome through all the strangeness of their journey. If he left her here, she would continue, but she did not think she would survive.

Lost in the alleys of Renaulds Dale, the despair gripped hold of Elena's chest, and squeezed. Where was the cursed Inn? Where was Raven, and what did he keep slipping away for? Twice during their journey he had made a passable excuse, and slipped away to some ruins, or to Mother-knows-where in the hamlet she could not remember the name of. She asked him what he was doing, and his reasons were no better than his excuses. She let it pass, but marked it for later.

Rage boiled inside of her. He was working for the Duke. She should have trusted her first instincts and hit him harder. He was passing notes to couriers who, in turn, passed the notes to someone else until, finally they reached the Duke's hands. That was, after all, the way it always worked in the stories.

Except this was not a story. This was her life. And Jocelyn's. If he wanted her dead, he would have let the wild men take her. That only left two choices: either he was not working for the Duke and his side trips were something else entirely; or the Duke did not want her dead. She was not sure which she preferred.

She turned blindly into another alley, recognizing the tannery. If she passed the tannery, took a left at the market, and headed east a few blocks she should find the Laden Ox. Well and good, then. One mystery solved. She felt despair's grip loosen a notch.

"So," she said as she watched Raven settle onto his bed. "It be later."

He threw his arms back in mock frustration. "Aye, my Lady, but must you pull the bed out from under me like that? If you didn't want me to get any sleep you could warm the bed with me." He looked over to her with a half smile and a cocked brow.

She did not say a word. Neither did she look away.

Sitting up, he glanced at her briefly, and then stared at the floor in front of him. His voice quavered with tension. "The Rebellion is reforming. I've been hoping the old conduits would carry a message."

She held her breath as she asked. "Is he alive?"

The silence wrapped around them like a thick wool blanket. She watched the war on his face. Whatever the answer, his expression told her all she needed to know. If he was still alive, he would tell her.

"He's gone." Raven's words came in a staccato burst.

She already knew this. It should not affect her so. Still the world rushed away from her. Her head spun, and filled with all of the winds of the southern skies. Johan was dead. She knew it was so, but felt her knees go weak. She dropped onto the floor and buried her head in her hands.

Her hands. Holding them in front of her she stared at the wrinkles and age spots. Turning them over she found the lines worse. They looked... ancient.

"I am not this old," she told herself. She rubbed a thumb across the back of her hand, trying to mold her skin back to how it was supposed to be. Nothing happened. They would never be the smooth hands that pulled Johan from the field in front of her house, bleeding and unconscious. They would never be the hands that washed the field grime away, cleaned his many cuts and wrapped him gently in bandages. Never again would he hold them in his sturdy hands, caressing them with his thumbs as on their wedding night.

She bounded up and strode to the mirror. She had hated her hair before--it had made her the butt of merciless teasing when she was younger--and she hated it even more now. What had been auburn only days ago was now tarnished by the graying of age.

She turned on Raven who straightened under her scrutiny. "You be fighting with him in the Rebellion?"

He nodded slowly.

"Then you know his methods."

Again, he nodded, concern knotting his face.

"Good. Then we will be joining them."

He gasped. "My Lady, we cannot."

She cut him off. "What are the chances that the two of us can truly be getting my daughter back?"

"Slim, it is true. But we can do this. With our combined powers..."

"I will never be using my mother's curse. Never. That be leaving your powers, which, potent as they may be, will do us little in a fight. We be joining them."

"They would never allow it," he said. "Women are looked upon as more of a liability than a boon. It seems they generate too much, ah, concern among the lads, if you understand."

"Mother's tits! That be a load of horse manure, and you know it. If the men be so weak they can't be keeping their shaft in their pants, they don't be belonging there anyway."

"And yet they do hold, and often hand their lives over, because of the women and children they have left back home. They would never let you in, at least not into the lines that matter. You would never get close enough to save your daughter."

She exhaled a frustrated groan. At every turn something new nailed her back down to the birthing bed. For too

many years, she made the cursed house survive. She could damn well fight a man's war. Even if they would not let her in.

"Tell me true. Can we be doing this, just the two of us?"

For several long breaths he mulled it over. She watched as his eyes flicked to her hands and hair and she knew what he was thinking. It did not change her answer, though. Nothing would.

"I believe that we can, aye. It will not be easy, though, and there are a few things you must learn before we do this. Understand?"

She nodded. She would learn or do anything to get her daughter back.

Almost anything, she corrected.

Anguish poked and prodded at Raven's throat as he watched Elena's sobs die out, and she faded into sleep. With two words he had removed all hope from her except that of saving her daughter. That is the way it must be. He knew that. After many arguments and discussions long into the night, across half the world, Wolf had agreed and consented. No matter the cost, she must chase the Duke. No one else alive had the power to stop what the Overlord intended.

They could not say with any certainty what it was the Overlord was planning, but the dark, twisted energies on the edge of their awareness

spoke volumes. The general consensus was that the Overlord was making a push for greater power over the dead. Already, he could create the *Maveth* by infusing a corpse with the splintered souls of his victims. That, by itself, was an abomination they could not stand. If, for no other reason than putting an end to that process, the *Nekodah* would use every means available to stop him.

This was worse, much worse. If the abomination was half as strong as they feared, the Overlord could very well cause another Sundering. This time, however, there was no one left who could put the world back together.

So Raven had done what had to be done. His lie would cost him if she ever found out the truth. She was a good woman, possibly the strongest he had ever known. She did not deserve this.

Johan would understand, though. In war, there are no lines. In war, anything is possible, and everything is necessary. You can not stand on moral ground and win a war when you were outnumbered and overpowered.

That did not take the sting away from the lie. Guilt and sorrow smothered him as he watched the rise and fall of her innocent breaths.

Chapter 22

Johan struggled to control his breathing. He needed to soften it, to calm it, but tonight he could not.

He yanked on the reins as he galloped to the mouth of the valley that held Alludam. He was so focused on Rafe, that he did not watch for spies. Cursing himself a fool, he turned the horse, and rode the circuit to the mouth and back.

The Rebellion had made this their home once before and Johan had argued against using it again. Who knew what stories had been handed over to the Overlord through tortured tongues.

Nestled in the fork of the mountains that formed the north and west borders of Edrea, they had ample spots from which to watch the only pass through the mountains north into *Yaremka*. The Duke would have to pass here on his way to the Fire Palace to meet up with the Overlord. It was logical. It was secure, or had been last time he was here. It still made him nervous.

He scouted the rocky foothills, stopping to talk with the sentries posted in almost invisible outposts on either side of the trail that led deeper in. Satisfied that all was quiet, he headed in.

The mountains feet were never far apart, making for rough riding past boulders left by rockslides, but was narrow enough that an attacking army could only ride in single file. The army would be hampered even further by the ridges hidden behind walls of natural rock that had been placed over many years to provide cover for archers.

He nearly passed the entrance, it had been so long since he had trained here. A single, rough rock the height of two men covered it. He had tried to move it before, and knew that it was impossible. If the lock was not engaged on the other side, it took five strong men to move it out of the way.

Dismounting, he wound the horse through the rubble, careful of his footing. He could not afford for his horse to go lame. At the edge of the rock door he knelt, scraped his hand across the back of a small, sandy rock that had been formed by wind, water and time to resemble a ladder. He felt the sharp prick of the metal latch, cursed softly, and then tripped it. Taking two paces back, he waited.

Hawks screeched warnings as the wind tousled his hair. He waited for what seemed an eternity. The guards would have signaled, he knew that, but it still made him nervous, sitting in the open like this.

The grinding started, first a vibration beneath his feet, then gradually slipping into the low hum of a locust swarm, and the stone slid aside. Once it was open, he waited two more breaths. He could not see anyone, but that is the way that it should be. The men on the other side were waiting, watching.

Walking slowly through the entrance, he kept his arms to his side, palms up. Many of these men were new, and would not recognize him. As he entered the dark, smoky corridor beyond, the rock door ground back into place. It felt like a tomb closing around him. The ghosts that haunted him would feel right at home here. He shrugged off the frigid, deathly hand that ran up his spine. There was no time for this. He waited until his eyes adjusted, then strode forward, handing his horse to the thin man that raced toward him, eyes wide in recognition.

The clashing of swords against shields echoed roughly through the wide tunnel. Torches sputtered along the walls, keeping the entry dimly lit. He nodded in satisfaction. Pierce had everything well in hand, it appeared. Almost everything, he amended.

Men flocked to him, but paused at the look in his eyes, before turning and walking away. He knew that he should greet them, welcome them, but he could not. He ignored the dank smell of the earth that had been collected and stuffed into old crates along the side of the tunnel, a few even placed in the entrance to the tunnel that led the crypts.

"Too many ghosts here," he thought.

As he rounded the first bend, passing the cave they had built the stables into, he ignored the pungent smells that assaulted him. Twice as many torches hung on the walls, each with a metal plate to reflect the light. Glancing at the practice cave, he noted a number of faces he recognized from the Rebellion, and about the same number of strangers. His mood fell blacker.

He would estimate less than forty men so far. That would not be enough to attack the Duke and his army directly, no matter how small. That left a war of diminution as the only choice. They would fight from the shadows, tearing small pieces off the beast until they could afford a direct attack. Unless the men under Rafe's command left them holding the bag.

Recognizing the symbol on the first of the barracks doors, he shoved it open.

"Damn it! Knock," Pierce said without looking up from his desk.

"Will you be betting your life on Rafe's loyalty?" Johan demanded as he slammed the door shut behind him.

Pierce looked up from his desk, his eyes red with lack of sleep. "Johan. We've been over this. You know my answer."

Johan stopped two steps short of the desk, and planted his fists on his hips. "That was before he ordered me ambushed."

"Are you're sure it was him?"

"Positive."

Pierce stood, pacing the length of the damp room, around the stalagmite and back to the desk. "If he's dirty, I've found no hints in either his current actions or the past that I could dig up." He grabbed the papers off the desk and thrust them at Johan.

"What be these?"

"I had Clarence and Gregory do a little questioning of the other men before Rafe returned."

Johan's head jerked up. "He made it back before me?"

"Just. Went straight to his rooms."

"How will he be reacting to the questioning?"

Pierce shrugged. "He already knows you don't like him. Don't look at me like that. The whole Inn could tell by your reaction. He'll assume you're fact checking, doing your job."

"I hope so," Johan said, but he was not nearly as confident as Pierce. Rafe had a good eye, Johan would bet anything on it. His pace, stance, gaze, and mannerisms shouted that he was dangerous. Johan would much

rather have him on their side, but only if he could trust him. "I see you be getting the dirt. Any problem with the men?"

Pierce laughed. "Problems? No. They might think you've gone a bit short, but they gave no problems, aside from the same grumbles anyone digging through piles of rocks to find dirt would give. What do we do with it?"

As Johan recounted his tale of the *Maveth*, Pierce paled.

"Don't worry, it'll work," Johan said. "I be having it on the best advice."

"The boy?"

Johan nodded. "Anyone else figure out something be wrong with the boy?"

"No. He's kept to his room. Makes me nervous, him watching everything, he does, and I can't say I'm sorry to have him holing up. There has been some good-natured teasing about him exploring the crypts, though."

Now it was Johan's turn to laugh. "I don't think I even want to be asking what he be doing in there. I need to walk, see the men." He handed the papers back without even reading them.

Pierce met his gaze for a breath, and then nodded.

As Johan walked through the door, Pierce called after him.

"I almost forgot. We got a tube from your old pal Raven."

Johan's heart leapt like a gazelle into the top of his chest.

"She is well."

Johan looked for Betzalel in his room and found it neat and orderly, with the few meager belongings the boy owned laid neatly in piles.

The crypts. He would be there, Johan knew, though he dreaded going there.

He paused at the entrance to the tunnel, staring blankly forward into the darkness. His skin cooled, and sweat beaded along his arms, hands, and neck. The smell was no different here--still the damp earthy smell, tinged with smoke, the same as the rest of the caverns--but his nose wrinkled in distaste all the same. The crypts were half-full when the Rebellion had taken the caves and made them their home base. Large, rectangular holes cut into the wall were covered with stone doors etched with strange glyphs. He had always avoided thinking of who might be buried there, but now he could not help but remember. New bodies filled nearly all of the remaining crypts, their doors of unadorned stone. He ran a hand along them as he passed, remembering.

He had practiced with these men many times, shared many simple meals over small fires, talking of hopes, dreams, and reasons why they fought. They had shared memories of families and lovers, passed jokes from fire to fire to lighten the darkness of the tunnels. Now, large numbers of them shared this crypt, and haunted his dreams.

With a deep, steadying breath, he pushed himself forward into the dark. The tunnel curved to the right about

ten steps in, he remembered. If Betzalel was back there, he should be able to see his light in twenty or thirty paces. He could master his fears that long. He had done it for much longer in the field.

As he passed the first two bends, a green light danced in the tunnels ahead. It was not fashioned from any lantern, its patterns and flickers unfamiliar. Recklessly, he ran forward. The Priest's were right: this was the Father's ground and they had no right interrupting the dead's sleep.

The light grew brighter as he drew closer, its shadow dance spinning faster until it was a frantic, unformed jumble of shapes wrestling with each other. In their center was the boy who was once his son. His hands were stretched high above him; his back arched sharply. Veins strained in his neck as his head bent back in a silent scream.

For a breath, Johan did not see the thousand-year old ghost that inhabited the body, he saw only his son. A breath was all it took.

Johan charged into the boy, lashing his arms around him as he dove past.

The boy did not move. The ghostly lights caressed him, tugging on his hands, refusing to let go of their prize.

Johan's momentum finally won the tug of war. The boy broke free, and together, they lurched forward, landing by an open crypt.

A thousand screams of rage and starvation ripped through his mind, threatening to finally push him over the edge he had balanced on these last twelve years. The lights flared up, brightening until he was sure that he would be blinded.

The bodies became visible. They varied in height and weight, some with stooped bodies, their backs forming ridges of bone. Others stood tall, but not with the posture of a fighting man: their bodies had been stretched through torture. The smell of death wrapped around his mouth and nose, threatening to suffocate him. Though each ghostly form was different, they all shared one thing in common: a chain wound around their waists and chests, lead lines all attaching in the center of the mass where Betzalel had just stood. The chains all ended on one giant manacle, large enough that it would fit a man's torso.

The screams rose in pitch to a painful undulating wail before the room went dark.

Silence.

Men flocked around them as Johan hauled Betzalel from the crypts. They offered words of shock, concern, and a few too many "I told you so's."

"Bring a pail of water and some rags to his room." For several breaths no one moved. Then they all exploded into action at once, a knot of people rapidly pulling itself out of shape and forming a weave of chaos.

"And whiskey," he called after them.

As the crowd cleared, a lone figure remained. The man leaned easily against the opposite wall, a silver coin rolling over his fingers.

Without any acknowledgement, Johan passed him by.

Shoving the door open with his shoulder, he dragged the limp body in and laid him across the dirty cot.

Two men brought the requested supplies just as he finished making Betzalel comfortable. Without a word, he took the rusty pail, spilling a bit onto the floor, and set it by the head of the cot. He set the whiskey on the floor and grabbed the rags, tearing them into strips. All but one, he laid on the cot, next to Betzalel's head. The remaining strip, he folded several times over, dipped in the pail, wrung the excess water out, and laid it across Betzalel's forehead. He did not know if it would help the boy in any way, but it made him feel better to be doing something.

He motioned the other men out and waited, pacing back and forth in front of the cot. He could not sit still. The Temple of the Sun needed its protector.

Chapter 23

Betzalel woke with a gasp. Sitting up, he searched the room. His forehead shining with fever sweat, he took several deep, calming breaths, until the film over his eyes cleared, and he looked at Johan.

Johan sat on the floor by his bed, the battle over whether or not to have a swallow--just one--of the whiskey having left him exhausted. His eyes sprang up at the gasp, and he turned and waited until Betzalel was fully aware.

"What did be happening?" he asked.

"I am feeling fine."

Standing, Johan planted his feet wide, his shoulders bristling under the avoidance. "That do not be what I asked. What did be happening in the crypts?"

"The answers I searched for got a little out of hand. That is all."

Buried rage surged through Johan. Every muscle in his body tensed. He would not take it at out on this boy, on this specter, but he would have answers.

"Father's balls and Mother's tits," he said, his voice a quiet fire. "Don't be giving me a cock-run for this one, old man. I be here, doing what you say I must. I deserve to be told what in the name of the Father be going on."

Betzalel was silent, his eyes unfocused. "I suppose you do, at that." He stood, stretched, and smoothed his filthy tunic and breeches. "Do you think it would be possible to get a change of clothes? This dirt reminds me too much of being buried."

"Not until you be answering some questions."

Betzalel met his gaze and held it with eyes that rimmed with an ice to match Johan's fire. "There are more disturbances among the waiting."

"You be talking of the dead?"

"No. The souls that are not yet ready to keep the Mother company wait in a land called *Olhaba*. It lies half way between here and the Mother's domain."

Johan chuckled. "You mean the old fable of the Ladder? You don't actually be believing in that, do you?"

Betzalel's gaze never warmed, instead it grew even colder. "And where, boy, do you think I live? Do you think I have lain on leather couches, slept on feather mattresses, and walked the dew-damp grasses for the last thousand years? No, boy. I have fought for every moment, every un-living breath in the Middle Realms. I have supped with your wife's mother, on occasion. I have talked with the shades of the women that helped to build the Temple.

"All this, and much, much more I have done while struggling against the call of the Ladder that reaches from the Middle Realms, beckoning me to see how high I can reach. Could I push against the draw of Life enough to reach the Mother's hand and be pulled into her domain? I do not know. I have never tried. Instead, I have strained against the pull, shedding tears all the while, and fought off those who might harness the power of the Temple for their own greed and power-lust. I have given pieces of myself to rebuild it thrice and have grown

weaker every time.

"The Ladder exists, I see it every day. Do not make fun of that which you do not understand. Where do you think those that haunt you wander until they can reach you and try to convince you to do what is needed?"

Abashed, Johan broke eye contact, counting the cracks in the cavern floor. "I guess I always thought it was another ploy for the priests to be holding on to their power."

"Not everything is a scheme," Betzalel spit back. "Not everything is controlled by men like the Duke and the Overlord. There actually do exist, in positions of power, men like you and those you keep around you."

"I didn't be meaning..."

"You did not think, you mean. You, of all men alive today, should know the truth of it," Betzalel interrupted.

Johan cleared his throat and said, softly, "You mentioned disturbances?"

Betzalel's gaze thawed. "Strange currents are flowing through the Middle Realms. Not rivers or gusts of winds. These currents are more like tendrils, invisible to all but those *Chiy'el* who have passed, and are waiting for their chance to return."

"Wouldn't their return be bringing on another Sundering?"

Betzalel smiled. "While the Overlord was busy killing any with even the rumored ability of *Chaya* over the last thousand years, those that believe as we do have been purging the darker souls of any ability to return."

"You can be killing a soul? I thought that be impossible."

"Actually, you are correct. However, the Father, in his great foresight, created a deeper place among the Middle Realms. He knew there would be those that, for one reason or another, should never be allowed another chance at life. It seems it was initially reserved for those that had tried to make a bid at his powers during their lives. I supposed he would rather oversee those lives that would at least try to enjoy what he had created for them. Those that might make some attempt at learning something during this life. After all, it is his wife that would have to deal with them if they were not put somewhere else."

Johan's smirk was tinted more with pain than mirth. "A husband must protect his wife, eh?"

Laughing, Betzalel shook his head. "He wanted them to have some semblance of a chance left. A woman's wrath, and all that."

Johan could share this laugh. More than once he had been surprised and awed by the women he had trained. The ones that joined the Rebellion had their own reasons, and usually none that left much room for kindness. Harnessing their anger on the field, they tore into their enemies. They had been the most deadly, most ruthless warriors he had known.

He sobered quickly, though. "These tendrils, or currents. Have they been traced to the Overlord, or could there be someone else?"

"The tendrils all tie back to the rim of the Fire Palace."

Johan nodded. The Overlord would never allow someone with that kind of power to live, especially not in his own palace. He had destroyed his first daughter shortly after she hit puberty because her powers would rival

his own someday.

"What do they be doing?"

"Wherever they sink their points into, new tendrils grow. It appears he is forming a web over much of the land. Already, they cover nearly half of it. Occasionally, an incursion is fought by those of our belief against souls that had been dearest friends. More frequently, however, souls vanish. No one knows where they go. Searches always come up empty."

A shiver ran up Johan's spine. "Could he be making more *Maveth*?"

"That seems likely. The number that have disappeared is not overly high, but still there must be twenty or thirty souls missing."

"The tainted souls, if you will, is that what be happening in the crypts."

Betzalel nodded, grabbed the pail of water, lifted it to his lips, and drank deeply.

The next week kept Johan busy. Men needed training, supplies needed gathering, arguments needed settling. While he did not try to avoid Rafe, he bristled every time he saw him floating on the edge of the activities, watching. He proved to be a strong leader, capable of uniting his men well.

When Johan first visited the Earth Factory, as it had become called, six of the most trusted men hunched over small leather sacks, packing them with dirt. They laughed as they told each other jokes, spilled dirt and filled them in uneven amounts, carelessly tying them off and readying them for the next stack.

Johan sat on a rock next to them and picked up an empty sack. Well sewn and flexible, it should do just fine. He smiled warmly, greeting those he recognized by name, introducing himself to the four new faces. He joked along with them. He put on a show of courage and cheer that he did not feel. Grabbing a spare trowel, he carefully scooped some dirt, and gingerly poured it inside the sack. He packed it carefully, making sure it was tight, holding as much as it could without bursting. He never watched them directly, never pointed any method out, but observed them from the corner of his eye to make sure they were paying attention. All the while, he told them of his encounter with the *Maveth*.

One by one, they stopped their work as they were lured into his tale. It was not the quality of the tale, he knew. It was the simple truth, the fear that rang through his voice.

As he spoke, he tied the sack off, again with extra care, and tossed it from hand to hand, matching the rhythm to his words. When he was done, he threw the sack into the cave wall where it burst into a cloud of dust that coated the wall for more than an arm's length around the impact point. "That should do."

He nodded, patted the closest man on the back, smiled, and then walked off.

The murmur that started as he left was hushed and nervous.

He managed to relax a little as his boots echoed through the chamber and got lost in the sounds of battle.

Johan nodded as he watched the training in the oblong cavern.

It was naturally rounded, with a small pond in the rear corner. The steady drip of water sent echoes through the chamber. Stalagmites formed columns in the room. They were used to practice around. Crates and boulders were scattered throughout the rear to enhance that training. The rest of the cavern was left open for individual and group sparring.

It was with mixed pleasure that Johan noted their progress. Thirty men paired off in teams, sweating from the effort and, to all appearances, many were close to exhaustion. They were good, for commoners, almost as good as the grunts in the Duke's army. With the right strategies, they could be more than a match. With luck, most of them would survive.

He felt the man walk up behind him, but heard nothing except the final scrape of leather against stone as he slid to a stop. He turned to the newcomer and froze.

Rafe.

They met each other's gaze, neither flinching. Rafe's gaze held no contempt, no challenge, just the acknowledgement of one equal to another.

Putting a rein on his temper, and his paranoid fears, Johan thrust a hand out in greeting. After a breath of hesitation, Rafe latched onto his forearm.

"There doesn't seem to be any men free for sparring," Rafe said. "That's a shame, us just arriving and all."

"I guess that be leaving the two of us."

They nodded at each other, recognizing the true test that this was.

Striding to an opening on the floor, near the center of the cavern, they unsheathed their swords. The metallic rasping was lost in the clamor of the sparring around them.

Johan slowed his breathing, trying to find the quiet. It came slowly, shallowly, but it was there. He nodded, affirming the need to win, more than the belief that he should.

All of these years, all of those drinks--was he still able to lead in the way these men deserved? The last defeat still soaked his memory. It tainted the valiance of the men and women that had believed in him. This was his own test, not just a test of the cocky snake across from him.

They faced each other, both men bending their knees, keeping their center of gravity low, and the pressure on the balls of their feet. Their muscles were coils waiting to be sprung.

Rafe wielded dual short swords to Johan's single long blade. What Rafe lost in reach he would make up in angles of attack. For every attack that Johan could launch, Rafe could launch two. Johan knew his opponent was good, had known since he first saw him, and knew the twin swords could be deadly when wielded in the hands of a master. Rafe very well might be one.

Taught by the first Rebel leader, himself a master swordsman in the Water techniques, Johan had become his teacher's equal in every respect. Like the elements the sword forms were derived from, water could overcome all the other styles, except one.

Water could erode away the massive stability and anchoring of Earth, the school of swordplay taught to most beginning soldiers, and nearly all of the armies. Earth was not the most elegant technique, but the strength of attacks, and solidness of defense, lent it well to mass teaching.

The ethereal, dancing qualities of the Air schools, with their quick lunges and skillful defenses, made them a bit more of a challenge, but the very dance that formed the heart of the techniques was the downfall against a master of Water.

When Water met Fire, the results were unpredictable. Water relied heavily on a constant motion that moved the wielder through the middle of most defenses, with feints and misdirection, quick reversals and parries that would carry it through, and wear down, nearly any other style. Only Fire was more difficult to master, and more directly opposite in execution. Fire relied mostly on speed and sheer attack force. The weak defense was generally not a problem, as their attacks kept their opponents so off-balance they had little time to launch their own attacks.

From the moment of the first attack, Johan knew he had met his match for the first time in two decades.

Rafe's attack exploded in, twin swords streaking at Johan.

Expecting a momentary circling, a sizing up, the flurry of blows took him off guard. The vibrations from the blows shot through the blade, and into his wrists.

He slid the blade into the attack, scraping along the edge of one sword. Sparks showered onto the limestone floor.

As Rafe lifted the opposite sword for another blow, Johan flicked his sword into the raising blade, throwing it wide, and then slid around the closest blade, throwing it wide also.

The Rebels stopped their practice, and swept to the cavern's edge to give the pair room.

Rafe quickly recovered, a blade slashing in to guard.

Johan spun on one foot, and dropped under Rafe's attack. His leg swirled out to kick at his opponent's ankle as Rafe's sword sliced the air above his head.

Rafe side-stepped. His second sword blurred to parry just in time.

Raising in his spin, Johan flowed over Rafe's parry and caught the other blow, before his arc spun him around Rafe's side. He landed a quick jab in the abdomen with his fist. He turned on his heel, and swung in high at the shoulders.

Catching his error, Rafe threw a backward elbow punch that jabbed into Johan's arms. He ducked under the blow, and returned with a new flurry.

Round and round the dance took them, past the soldiers who watched in awe. Johan wove in and out of the spitting attacks that flared from Rafe's lithe form. They whirled and spun around the columns, over the crates. When one dancer gained an advantage, the other quickly upset the attack, restoring the balance.

Kicks and punches launched, some connecting, most not. Sparks flew often as metal creaked and screamed.

Gasps of wonder and bursts of applause erupted from the onlookers, but neither opponent heard it.

It might have lasted until one of the two men became too tired to keep up, if it had not been for six words shouted by one of the breathless watchmen.

He sprinted into the cavern and, gasping for air, shouted, "The Duke is on the pass."

Pierce barked orders as Johan grilled the soldier. They strode quickly through the cavernous tunnels, the watchman struggling to keep pace. The caverns erupted in a flurry of activity around them as the Rebels packed their gear and readied to leave.

Johan paid them no attention. "How many be riding with him?"

"Hundred. Maybe more, I guess. Not by much, though."

The Duke had over twice their number of men. If it was just the soldiers in these mountains, Johan felt confident they could destroy the army. It was the Duke himself that changed the odds.

"What be their distribution?"

"Nearly all on horse, sir."

"That be explaining it, then."

"What?"

"How they be making such good time. Anything unique about the army? Do they be traveling by standard horse? No strange beasts, or constructions?"

"No, sir," the watchman answered. "Except that there must have been a dozen children riding in the center. They were protected by a full Wing of soldiers. They must be some special children."

Johan nodded. "Yes. They be very special, indeed." He stopped. "Think very hard. How many children do there be?"

"Ah... a dozen, sir."

"Just a dozen, do you be sure?"

"One of the older girls held a babe in her arms."

"That be making thirteen, then?"

"Aye."

Johan clasped him on the shoulder and squeezed while he held his gaze, forcing a smile. "You be doing well. Now you need be packing. Seems we be having a journey ahead."

The watchman straightened at his praise, nodded, and then ran off.

As soon as he was out of sight, Johan spun and started to run to Betzalel's room, before catching himself. He could not allow his men to see him running now. They needed his confidence, not his fear.

Johan's nerves burned with the fire of lost time. They should have had two, maybe three more days of training. He needed that time to work with the men. He needed to let them get to know him. While that way

shed more pain with each drop of their blood, it gave them more to fight for. Outnumbered as they were, they needed every edge. They needed someone to look up to when the morale hit bottom. He hoped his reputation would be enough. He hoped Rafe would not disappoint.

He did not say anything as he burst through Betzalel's door and slammed it behind him. The boy left him to his silent pacing, gathering his few belongings. When Johan finally stopped pacing and told him about the children, Betzalel slowly turned.

"How confident are you of his report?"

"Something like those children, in the middle of a small army, with no women around as family to the soldiers? Something like that be standing out in a man's mind. I would have taken the time to count, even if it meant I had to be following for a distance."

A long sigh escaped as Betzalel's shoulders sagged, ripping from him the regal posture he normally wore. He no longer looked like a boy, but more the ancient being that he was. "Then we have less time than I thought. The children cannot make it to the Temple."

"I know. We be leaving as soon as everything is together. We be planning at camp tonight." A broad smile brightened his face as a thought struck him.

Bending over his pack, Betzalel shook his head. "She still has her part to play in this."

"Father's balls! And I have mine to be playing--saving my wife. Don't that be what the bargain was, old man? My child for my wife? You will not be changing the terms now."

Betzalel shot up, his back almost snapping. A wail of pain tore through the chamber.

"This better not be another of your games, old man. I be tiring of them."

Betzalel turned to him. His eyes were wide with agony.

"The Temple..."

Johan rushed over to him and steadied him. Helping him onto the cot he said, "What about the Temple? Betzalel. What be happening?"

"The Temple. My skin. Under attack. Must go. Defend the Temple." His eyes rolled back until all Johan could see was the whites. His body went limp, and he sagged into Johan's arms, a dead weight.

Johan brushed the specter's damp hair off of his face. He turned the face side to side, but gave up. What should he be looking for?

The eyes rolled back, and, after several breaths, they focused past Johan's shoulders, taking in the room. They stopped as they met Johan's. His face pinched in confusion.

Johan watched as Betzalel's face cleared, recognition in his eyes.

"Da?"

He nearly dropped the boy. It was impossible, he knew it was. And yet, here he was.

"Rickward? Do that be you?"

Johan's son nodded.

Chapter 24

The air crackled around Jocelyn's sweat-drenched face. Tiny lightning bolts danced along her skin. She tried to move, but could not.

"Mam!" she cried out, arms stretching and straining to reach her in the thick fog that surrounded them both. Tears burst from her eyes, rolled down her cheeks, and their salty moisture caressed her tongue.

She leaned forward, but the sparks grew stronger, stinging her skin, burning her in a hundred different places. They shot down around her arms, dancing round and round, and snapped at her outstretched fingers. She pulled back sharply, her hands tingling and red. Welts appeared instantly, and sobs broke loose.

"Mam," she cried again, weaker this time. She reached forward once more, hoping, praying to the Mother that Elena would hear her. The

lightning shot out again, and she snapped her hands back, folding her legs into her chest and wrapping her sore arms around them. She rocked, crying. The tears threatened to rip her apart.

"Please, Mam, help me."

The air around her thickened. The lightning disappeared in a single breath. The smell of rotting eggs threatened to gag her. She searched around to find the source of the horrid smell, but her world had shrunk to the damp gray blanket that surrounded her.

There--in the distance. She could hear it again. She looked around her wildly but still saw nothing. She could make it out this time: a laugh, but too raw to be human. Hyena? Whatever it was, it sent shivers through her body. The sound terrified her as it scraped at her soul.

She turned again to where she knew her mother to be, and reached for her. She was no longer there. The shroud of fog was solid to the touch. It pressed against her, threatening to smother her.

The sound was closer this time. Teeth snapped behind her. She spun, waving her arms in front of her for whatever meager protection they would provide.

They snapped again, almost on her.

She spun wildly in all directions, flailing at the owner of the terrible voice, but her arms hit nothing.

Suddenly, the sweat on the back of her neck dried in a fetid puff of breath as the jaws clamped down on her neck. Pain tore through every part of her. She could feel her body pulled apart, piece by piece melting into the mist. Then, as quick as the pain had come, it was gone.

Jocelyn woke to the noise of soldiers running. Their armor clanked to the rhythm of their strides. Brushing damp hair out of her face, she sat up, and felt along the back of her neck and the base of her spine.

It was just a dream.

The tent was empty, except for the three smaller children huddled in the darkness. "What be happening?" she asked as she crossed the tent and knelt beside them.

Bartholomew shook his head fast, his chubby cheeks smacking with the motion.

She reached out and rested her hand on his shoulder tenderly. She was the oldest here. It was up to her to reassure them, no matter the unease and terror that the dream had left behind. "Where are the others, Barty?"

He raised a short, fat finger and point shakily towards the tent's entrance flap.

"Outside?"

He nodded, a short burst of rapid motion.

"Did they be taken?"

He shook his head, cheeks smacking again.

She smiled at him, though she doubted he could see it much in the dark. "In that case, everything's be just fine. I'll go find them. You be staying here, okay? I won't be going far."

She waited the four breaths it took him to nod before standing. "It be all right."

He nodded quicker this time. It was working. If only she could convince herself that quickly. She took long, deep breaths as she walked hesitantly to the entrance.

She paused at the flap, one hand resting lightly on it. From the sound of it, the camp was being broken, or attacked. Taking one last breath, she pulled the flap aside and stepped through.

The other nine children were here. Tomas had his arm wrapped around Renee, who held the baby in her arms. They still did not know the child's name, and no one thought they had the right to give it one.

Marsh Mouth mumbled in excitement, and Jocelyn was sure she did not want to know what she was saying. The girl could make the soldiers in the camp blush with her vulgarities. Her pig-tails shook to the string of curses, lending her an almost comical air. They could have been enjoying the dance of the clouds as they slid across the moon, except for the ring of soldiers that surrounded the tent, spears held forward and ready.

She slid in beside Tomas. "What be happening?"

Startled, Tomas dropped his arm from Renee's waist and shoved his hands into his pockets. Pretending to check on the baby, Renee glared at her from under long lashes.

"You mean you don't know?" Tomas asked.

"Should I?"

"I just thought, with you and the Duke spending so much time together. Never mind. I heard the guards talking a few minutes ago. Seems the Duke wants to get the camp ready for a night attack." He gazed out at the soldiers. "In the next day or two, we should be crossing into Yaremka."

He waited, expected some reaction. She spread her arms in a question. "What do I be missing?"

"His brother, Chanoch Kaebal is the Duke there. I guess Chanoch has a mean temper on him that doesn't die down too quickly."

"So you think we'll be seeing trouble from him?"

"I think the Duke is wise to expect it."

Renee's breath burst from her in a disgusted sigh, and she shook her head wearily.

"Would you let off it, Renee," Tomas said.

"The Duke this. The Duke that," she whispered. "Don't you ever get tired of praising the man that stole us from our parents?"

"Our parents would have never volunteered us, not with the lies they believe about him."

"Lies," Renee burst out. "Can't you see past your own nose and find the truth. It stinks. The whole thing does. I don't care how much land the man controls, or how many children he steals."

Jocelyn had heard enough. It was a common enough argument between the two of them. Tomas was a good young man. He was strong, brave, and they shared common views about the Duke. They both understood the greater good the Duke was striving to forge out of the awful conditions that he had been handed. She chuckled as she went back inside the tent, leaving Tomas and Renee to their bickering. They would make up, she knew, and she would pull the pillow around her head to try and muffle the sounds of them making up.

Once again, the tingle of the Duke's Breath caressed her skin. He was such a masterful manipulator of what people saw, that the soldiers truly had no idea the men they were fighting against were not real. Hopefully, not too many men would be hurt in the battle. They would recover in a short while, but she hated that they had to go through such pain because of training.

Kneeling next to Barty and the two smallest children, she told him what was happening, and made sure they knew that no one would be hurt. It was just training.

Chapter 25

"This is just training," Raven said. "The real thing will be much worse."

Elena grunted as another sack, filled with soaked moss, dropped from within the pelting waterfall, and hit her on the shoulder. She could do this. She had to. The alternative was worse. She closed her eyes, feeling as he had taught her--not with her hands and skin, but with her soul. The rebounded torrents of water shoved at her, cloaking the feeling of the five sacks suspended--and swinging--above her. She relaxed, focusing her concentration on her surroundings. She swayed from side to side to the ebb and flow of the waterfall. Her soul reached outside of her body, expanding until she felt ten feet thick.

Suddenly, she felt the force of the falling sack press against her expanded soul, and dodged out of the way.

"Now you're feeling it," he shouted.

She started to relax and bask in the praise, but another pressure sprung up. She jumped back the way she had come, the sack missing her by a finger. The remaining three sacks dropped in rapid succession. She dodged, and each missed her. Just barely, but she had no new bruises.

Clapping, Raven reached a hand out to her. "Now doesn't that feel just the way a body's supposed to feel? All thick and warm and wet." His eyes beamed with pride, and his smile was close to ripping his face, she was sure.

She took his hand, and jumped across the small crevasse to dry ground next to Raven. Unable to help herself, she threw her arms around him and hugged him tightly, joy bubbling up inside of her.

She released her hold on him, took a step back, and then looked him over appraisingly. His surprised expression made it hard to keep the laughter in. "What? Do that not be the proper teacher-student relationship? If you were expecting it a bit more warm and thick, you be out of luck. Wet, that we've got."

She could not hold it back any longer. Laughter spilled out of her as she realized the wetness on Raven's shirt looked like a tripping puppy. As he moved, and the shirts wrinkles adjusted, the puppy tried to nip at something, and tripped once more.

She felt better than she had in years. Most of her life had been empty of laughter, and very little she had done since her mother died had earned anyone's approval. To have it lavished on her in Raven's easy manner made her feel alive again. That and the soreness of her muscles. The exhaustion, though, did little to help.

For the last two weeks they had forced the horses in bursts that switched between a canter and a walk. Occasionally, they gave the horses their lead, and they galloped over the roads and cart ways. They passed a number of small villages and farms. They stopped to buy, or barter, for food for themselves and oats for the horses. Mostly, though, they camped in the hot, damp night air, and passed every one they met, not stopping for conversation.

They talked little during the days. In what little time they had while walking the horses, Raven explained to her in vivid detail what she could expect. At night, he trained her on the sword, claiming she would never slice a young ladies blouse-strap with her sword work, but should be able to butter her bread without tearing it up so much that she would have nothing other than crumbs to eat. He made her walk through forests, grasslands and, now, the rocky terrain of the mountain pass, teaching her to be as quiet as she could. She had perfected none of the skills, but felt much more prepared for what lie ahead.

They were close, she knew that. Even without the children, an army marching through the narrow mountain trail would find the going much harder than they did. Within a few days she would catch up to them, and it would be time to put her new skills to the test.

She looked up at Raven, needing his lightness, his adoration. Since the third day they had ridden together, she felt his attraction to her growing. He was always the gentleman, always careful to keep the distance and separation that was proper, but she saw the glances when he thought she was not looking.

She needed to forget the twin pains of loss and fear. Just for one night.

She met his gaze and held it as she slipped in close to him and hugged him once more. This time the ebullient joy was replaced with smoldering desire, as his muscular chest pressed against her breasts. She could feel the strength that rippled through his entire body. She felt safe.

"Elena," Raven said, his voice quiet and thick. Gently, he grabbed her arms, and held her in place while he took a single step away, shaking his head.

Heat flushed through her neck and face as she realized she had misread him. "I be so sorry," she said, "I be... wrong, I guess." She turned from him as tears welled up in her eyes at the isolation that clamped around her. Everyone she cared for, everyone she loved, was gone. A giant chasm of loneliness had long since ripped through her, and for years, she had balanced on the edge, held there only by the duty and joy she found raising Joss.

Raven cleared his throat behind her. "No, Elena, you are not wrong."

She was quiet for several breaths before his meaning came clear. "I don't be understanding, then. Do there be someone back home?"

His chuckle was thick with sorrow. "No one is waiting for me. There has never been someone like that."

She turned to him, reluctant to find the truth, but desperate to hear it. "But you do be attracted to me? Don't that be what you said?"

"Yes. But," he paused, swallowing hard before continuing, "I cannot. I made a promise."

"I don't be understanding."

Four long breaths passed before he answered. Even then, he refused to meet her gaze. "I promised Johan I would not touch you in that way."

It was too much for her to hold back. She spun, and ran away from him, back to camp. She would not let that man see her in tears like this. Her husband is dead. She had to learn to deal with that. How could she? No matter how hard the days might have become, they were wildly, completely in love once. If only they could have another chance, they could find that ember of love, and nurture it until it was once more the burning flame that set the town afire with envy and happiness. Lying down, she cocooned herself in her blanket, pulling it over her head. The sobs wracked through her. Tears rained freely.

They should be together, wrapped in each other's arms. It should be Johan riding beside her during the days, training her. Together, they should save their daughter and return to the home they had built in Harts Haven. They could have a new child, raising him up to the world as a beacon of their love.

He should be wiping her tears away and holding her tight. He should be caressing her skin, and watching her

with love plain for all to see, but with a gaze only for her. So many things she took for granted, overlooked after the first year or two--she wanted them back with every cursed fiber of her body and soul. If they could have this chance, she would never pass him without touching him, or kissing him, or simply meeting his gaze, and letting him know she was still there. Just one more chance, and they could have it all again.

As she fell asleep, she prayed to the Mother that she could see him just one more time in her dreams. Just once was all she asked for. The Father answered, instead, filling her dreams with nightmares.

She woke with a start, her heart pounding, and her cheeks tight with dried tears. She pushed the blanket aside and stood. While the sun was still not up, she could not sleep any more tonight.

She let Raven sleep. He had played guard last night, she was sure.

Heat flushed her face once more, as she remembered last night. The crevasse inside her was no smaller, and perhaps just as empty, but the release of her pent up emotions had pulled her back from the edge.

She would save her daughter. She would.

She paced the edges of their camp, making her way carefully over loose rocks and boulders. The waterfall was a muffled roar.

"Elena?" Raven's voice was a whisper. "Are you all right?"

She nodded.

"I am sorry about last night," he said. He examined the rocks at his feet with a little too much interest.

"No, don't be. I be the sorry one. I should never be asking that. And I be sorry for the way that I acted after."

"There is not better way to free oneself than a thorough washing. It also gets all sorts of stains out. I know this is not easy for you. I wish I could take the pain away, but I can do little. All that I can do is get us safely to the Duke, and to make sure that we're as prepared as we can be."

"I know. Thank you."

He broke her words off by putting a finger on her lips, and shaking his head. "It is not over, yet."

They gathered their few belongings together. The brisk wind whipped the blankets as they tried to fold them. In silence, they led the horses up the trail as the first drops of cold rain splattered against their skin.

They had traveled long enough that she assumed it must be afternoon, though the rain poured around them, making travel difficult, as the waters rushed through the rocks at their feet. As often as they could, they rode the horses, letting them find their own way through the rocks and water. If they soaked their feet, the likelihood of becoming sick would be that much stronger, as they waited days for their boots to dry.

"Elena," Raven said, raising his voice to be heard over the winds, "Please don't take this the wrong way, but is your daughter old enough to breed?"

Elena looked at him, her features frozen in shock for several breaths before she could answer. "No, not yet, but I think she be getting close. You don't be looking for a wife, do you?" She intended the last part as a joke, but she winced at the harshness in her voice.

"No," he answered, serious for once. "I was trying to figure out why the Duke wanted your daughter specifically. If he is gathering children for another of the Overlord's rejuvenations, he could have taken anyone. Instead he gave his troops specific orders not to kill you or your daughter. That says that he knew beforehand you might be there. Has he ever met you?"

Elena stiffened. The Duke's eyes, as he watched her mother die, burned through her memories.

She nodded. "The rumors started long before, probably because she be always gone. They said that she be carrying on with the Father's minions, and a million other stories." She cleared her throat, trying to push past the thick ball of emotion.

"I heard some of that fancy while I was in your village. Nothing like a good tale to make the dinner go down smoothly, eh?" His face wrinkled in disgust, and he put a hand over his stomach, looking like he was getting ready to be sick.

She looked away, returning to that night.

"We heard him before we be seeing him. He rode into the Haven, dust billowing behind him like a living fog. I be asking my mother who it was. When she told me, I be in awe. A real nightmare be standing in the middle of our village. I watched the fog billow behind him, and wondered if the ground be living at his command. That don't be far from the truth, do it?"

"Not quite a truth for him. The different lines have invested so much in certain talents that their progeny tend to be strongest in those, though they could access any of the others, if only they tried."

She cocked her head to the side, eyes squinted. "What be his Line?"

"The Overlord and his sons all wear the Yellow."

She could not help but laugh. "The coward's color?"

Raven waved a finger at her. "Never underestimate a coward, though in this case, the color yellow actually refers to his hair."

"You mean all of this because I be cursed with a carrot head?"

He nodded. "If you believe in fairy tales, all men are descended from the first four of the Mother's children. Each had talents with certain of the elements."

"You don't sound like you be believing the tales. If you be serving at the Temple of the Sun, don't that be making you a priest?"

Now it was his turn to laugh. "Not as you understand them, no. And you're correct, I don't believe. Oh, sure, all tales have some grain of truth to them." He waved a hand as if brushing the comment aside. "Those that wear the Yellow might be seen as cowards, but they simply function as many military leaders do: they manipulate things from the background. Those that remain are so talented you'll be lucky ever to find their true plans."

She held up a hand in front of her. "Wait. Does that be meaning it only looks like he's gathering the children to renew his life?"

"Though my body is strong and, I dare say, handsome, my mind is not what it needs to be for this, I'm afraid."

"So you don't be knowing what he's really trying."

"You've caught me."

The thought that even the Priests of the Sun did not have any idea what was happening scared her. She had always heard of them as protectors. Then again, as a mother, she was also a protector of sorts, and she definitely did not know everything that happened around Joss, though she wished she could. She imagined Raven felt very much the same way. "We don't be talking schemes, though. What do the Yellow be manipulating?" she asked, bringing them back on track.

"They hold the unlikely power to command the very force of life in living creatures."

She shivered as they possibilities ran through her mind. "Those creatures that attacked us?"

"Correct. You even remarked at the time about a certain wildness they seemed to carry inside. The Duke's power changed who they were, what they loved. He stole their memories and gave them new ones. Memories of you, most like. Then he told them where they could find you, and he set them off. Enough fireside tales. You can avoid it no longer, my heart. Could he know of you, specifically?"

"My mother and me, we be at the shop when he arrived, so we could have stayed there and been safe. She had to go, she said. Something about having a duty. I snuck behind her, I be so scared. We edged over the ledge where we could be seeing them. The village be lit with two dozen torches. There must have been close to thirty, maybe thirty-five soldiers with him." She stopped, her breathing ragged with the pain of memory. She wiped an eye with the back of her hand.

He watched her close, but said nothing.

"They be grabbing two of the children. Shouting started as the villagers gathered. Tad, the weavers son, be yelling out and was joined by his two best friends. They tried to get the children back, but the soldiers slaughtered them. I remember wondering if that be what pigs felt when the butcher came."

She stood and paced while she continued. "My mother grew angry, I could tell by her stance. I ran to her, begging her not to be doing anything foolish. She held me to the ground. That's when she be saying she had a duty. She told me to stay and hide, no matter what be happening. Then she ran down the cliff, screaming incomprehensibly."

Wiping tears away, she continued. "The damn fool woman. Most of the villagers didn't be trusting her, and yet she be running to save them. Can you believe it? The villagers just watched. Not a one be lifting a hand as the soldiers rushed her. They didn't be needing to, truth be told.

"I'll be remembering the look on the Duke's face until the day I die, though, as the air screamed, and the soldiers were thrown back a good twenty paces. It took him a few breaths to respond, but when he did my mother snapped straight, nothing moving. It seemed she be struggling against something.

"The children suddenly lifted off the ground, flying towards the villagers. Towards safety. They dropped into the soldiers as my mother's back snapped.

"I was sure she be dead. I wanted to scream, but couldn't. Nothing be coming. I couldn't move. She dropped to the ground, twisting as she did. She be looking up at me, and mouthed something. I couldn't read her lips from that distance. The wind picked up, then. I remember because it be so cold, like death rode on that wind. But my mother's voice be coming to me on that wind. 'Run,' she said. When I didn't move, the wind be picking up, snapping my hair into my eyes. That one word be coming again, this time a scream in my ears. I don't be thinking she said it out loud, but I could hear. The Duke must have, too. He be looking my way, and I could swear he looked me in the eyes as he smiled. It be a greasy smile. Made me feel sick.

"I ran, then. As I did, the night flared into day. When I turned to see what it be, all of the soldiers be engulfed in flames. The Duke be wreathed in a ball of mist and steam.

"I heard her scream again. This time, though, the anger be stronger. More pure, somehow. I don't be knowing how else to explain it. All I be knowing for sure, is that half the village be going up in flames that night. My mother be dying in vain, leaving me once again."

She turned on Rafe. "Father's balls! Why did you be making me tell you this?" She beat a fist on her leg to accent the words.

"The question I asked required only a single word."

"Mother's tits! Yes. Yes, he be knowing I existed."

Raven's voice was quiet, hesitant. "Then he knows what blood you daughter carries."

"Of course, you dolt. A daughter be carrying her mother's blood. I be pretty sure that be common knowledge." She stopped the horse as the realization hit her. "Oh, Mother have mercy. If he be knowing that, he'd be keeping her for himself, then. Wouldn't he?"

"I'm afraid that's a very real possibility."

"And, being Yellow, he could be making her do things. Things that he could never be doing himself. How far could he be controlling her?"

"None of it will do any good until she can Breathe herself. Tell me, do the women in your family have first blood about the same age as most."

She nodded, finding it hard to think. "Though mine be coming early."

His head snapped towards her, his gaze trained fiercely on her. "How early?"

"I be Joss' age." The blood drained from her face as she remembered the whispered warning on the wind.

Chapter 26

Jocelyn woke in sweat once more from a dream she could not remember. All she knew is that it had left her shivering, tears pressing against sleep-laden lids.

The last two days had been busy. The Duke spent more time with her every day. The more time she spent with him, the more she grew to like to him. She could not understand why the other children seemed to either be frightened by him, or to outright hate him. He was a harsh task-master, she would vouch for that, but he was fair. Even kind, when he was allowed.

The worst parts of the days had been the mornings. She did not remember ever feeling this tired. And her stomach--Mother have mercy!-- how it hurt. It felt like someone shoved a knife into her guts and twisted. She refused to mention it to the Duke, though she could not say why.

Nature beckoned. She pushed back the blanket, and swung her legs over the edge of the cot. She had no cramps, but the inside of her thighs were sticky and wet. She reached between her legs, and brought her hand back out, wet with a dark, thick liquid.

The children's tent was dark, and the sun had not yet risen. Outside, she knew the campfires would provide enough light to let her see. Walking through the door, she felt numb. A part of her knew she should be scared, that something might be terribly wrong. The other part of her paid it no attention. It was not important. She parted the tent flap just enough to let light shine on her bloody hand. The sleeping gown the Duke had given her was drenched with drying blood.

Closing the flap and making sure the other children were asleep, she removed the soft nightgown and hid it under the spare blankets, making sure the blood was on the inside. She filled the washbasin with a splash of water, grabbed a washcloth and cleaned herself off, before donning another, coarser sleeping gown.

She slipped outside and relieved herself, ignoring the voice inside that screamed at her to run while she had the chance. It was paranoia, left over from the bedtime stories her mother had used to scare her when she was younger.

She chuckled, the quiet sound causing the guard to glance her way before turning back to his watch. If only her mother had known the Duke. She might have even loved him instead of that traitorous rebel, Johan. She shrugged her shoulders. Nothing she could do about it now. Her mother was probably at home sulking under the careful watch of the villagers she hated. Maybe she had finally killed herself. As for Johan, he was probably stirring up more trouble with the commoners. It would be little trouble for a man like the Duke to handle. The riff-raff that Johan would gather would be too weak to stand against them.

Sliding back inside the tent, careful not to wake anyone, she changed the sheets, hiding them with the bloody gown, and laid back down. She knew the Duke would ask her about her period. He had brought it up casually during their last lesson. She would have to put him off, now.

Things would change when she told him, and she was not ready for that.

Duke Gideon Kaebal paced in front of his 'Az discs. They sat on a mahogany table in the center of the silk tent. It had three levels that formed a small tower as it hovered in the air. Each circular board was two hands of the purest blood-veined marble, engraved with several spiraling patterns in the shape of a tree. The symbol on each level was different, but each had nodes for placing objects.

He paused to study it one more time, but his concerns were still there. Nothing had changed, as he knew it would not have. He had hoped that he would see something new. Using the 'Az discs for divination was a complex and, at times, mind-numbing task. The placement possibilities were few, but the combination of values for the relative placements of items, the values and number of letters in the name of each object presented, their exact placement in the 'Az tree, and its relation to the bottom disc, the past, or the middle disc, the present, was something he believed he had mastered years ago. Perhaps he still had, and something was missing.

He stared at the piece, held in place by a Breath that was slowly seeping the life from his newest slave. More correctly, he stared at where the piece should have been. The lava stone he had chosen to represent his new daughter did not even show on the upper 'Az disc. He refused to believe it. As things stood now, his daughter would not survive the encounter.

He rammed his hand into the boards, scattering them across the floor. Several pieces slammed into the slave.

His father would not win. He could not. That bastard had lived on the throne, pulling the strings of everyone's lives for too many centuries. His madness made him kill everyone that was a threat to him. Everyone except his children. Somehow, the senile old man could not begin to fathom how lonely it could be.

Something had to change.

Chapter 27

Johan kept a light touch on the reins of the dappled brown stallion as the small Rebel army wound their way through the pass. Glancing at Rickward, he opened his mouth, and found that no words would come.

During the two days that they had followed the Duke's army, the boy had hardly said a word. Instead, he watched the men around him, ignoring the brisk wind that threatened snow, with intense interest. Much like a wolf, Johan decided. He moved with the grace of one, too, but the horses did not react to him like they would a wolf.

He knew he should say something, at the very least the boy deserved an apology. How do you apologize for something like this? He was not sure he could survive a tongue-lashing from the boy, though the Father knows he survived his share of lashings. He was not used to fear. That was an emotion he had pushed through so many times that he thought it conquered. Now it ate away at him. Mother's mercy! He had to get through this. This kind of distraction would only get him--and the men around him-- killed. He had to master himself once more.

As he turned to Rickward, he found the boy staring at him, those snow-blue eyes boring into his soul. Destroyed with a look, all words fled.

"Why are they afraid of me?" Rickward asked.

Johan swallowed the lump in his throat. "They don't be afraid of you boy. What makes you be saying that?"

"I can smell it on them. They all reek of it."

"You can smell it?"

Rickward nodded.

"I don't be thinking they're afraid, really. More like uneasy. You be different, and soldiers don't be liking the unknown."

"I'm not under his control."

Johan started, taken back. It was like the boy had read his mind. "Whose control?"

"The Duke. He has never touched me. As far as I know he doesn't even know that I exist."

Johan chuckled. "Well, that be good. Unfortunately, we be heading right to him. He be sure to find out, though I can't be seeing how that'd be any different than him seeing any of these others."

The intensity of Rickward's gaze burned as he shrugged. "They say I wear the Red. The Duke could make me into a fine weapon."

"They?" Johan cleared his throat and seized the opportunity. "Where have you been these years?"

"Different places. Sometimes at the Temple. Mostly with the *Nekodah* and their pets."

"So it be you that's been living with them, not... Betzalel?"

Rickward's mood changed like a strike of lightning. His shoulders hunched in, and his fists grew tighter on the reins. "And what did you expect?" he snarled. "Playtime? No, *father*, I did not have it easy. The *Nekodah* cared for me until I was old enough to walk. From that point, they left me to find my own way. I ran with the wolves since I could, and learned more from them than from any human. If I had my choice I would never have come back here."

Johan knew the anger must have been there, but did not expect so sudden a change.

"Rickward, son..."

"Don't call me that."

"Father's balls! I be sorry. I didn't see another way. He promised you'd never be hurt, I swear it."

"There are more than swords that can wound. Don't pretend you want me around. You only wanted *her*."

"Damn it, boy! Of course I be wanting you. It like to killed me giving you up."

"And yet you managed it, didn't you? Let's get this straight, old man. I am not your son. I never have been. It doesn't matter a damn to me whose seed created me or what blood runs in my veins. You were never there for me. Don't expect me to be there for you."

Johan watched in silence as Rickward flicked the reins and the horse shot forward, carrying his son away from him once more. He felt the reins shaking in his hands, and looked down, half expecting to find the ground trembling in sympathetic fury and pain, but it was only his hands.

"Father's balls, I need a drink." The words escaped before he realized his mistake, and saw Rafe riding towards him.

"You hold yourself well in a fight," Rafe said as he rode his horse up beside Johan.

"Can this be waiting?" Johan growled.

"Your reflexes are good for one of your age," Rafe continued, ignoring Johan's words. "I don't think a drink would help that. You've got my respect, and that of my men. For now."

He kicked the horse into motion, returning to his squad.

Johan shook his head. "Bald hatred and barely veiled threats. Could this day be getting any worse?"

A falcon call echoed up the ravine, followed closely by the sounds of a galloping horse. Clouds of dust billowed around the rider, making a clear identification difficult, but Johan recognized the bronze faceplate on the mottled tan mare. The advance scouts were returning, and in a hurry.

"I should never be asking questions like that," he said to himself, chuckling.

The scout reined his horse to a halt, spraying rock into the men and horses. He slid off the horse before it had stopped, and knelt in front of Johan.

"Oh, get up Dermot," Johan said. "We be having none of that nonsense here. It be pompous, ill-placed, and,

by the look of your ride, it be a damn

waste of time. What report do you have?" A few chuckles filled the quiet as Dermot rose and caught his breath. "The

Duke has stopped at the foot of the mountains, less than half a day's ride." "How long did it be taking you to get back?" "About a Quarter, sir," Dermont replied, smiling. "They were setting camp

when I turned. Looks like they were expecting company." "Chanoch?" "That would be my guess. Looked like they wanted to put on a show." Johan nodded. "What be the news of the children?" "All accounted for. None harmed." He paused, meeting Johan's eyes.

"Seems the Duke has taken a special interest in one of the girls, sir." Johan white-knuckled the reins. "Damn him to the deepest bowels of the Father's realms," he thought. He looked around, blinded by the fury welling within. When his eyes cleared, he found Rafe watching him, weighing him. Relaxing his grip, he breathed deep. Smiling warmly, he clasped arms with the scout. "Well done. You should be finding food and water." As the scout led his horse deeper into the men, Johan signaled to Rafe and Pierce, and then called out to camp for the night.

-

"Do you think he is trading the children off to Chanoch?" Pierce asked, his voice low enough that it carried only to the two other men present.

"No," Johan answered. The bastard had taken a special interest in Joss. No way was he going to be allowed to trade the children off. Not while Johan still had breath left in him.

"No," Johan said. "The Temple of the Sun be under attack, and that can only be the Overlords work."

Rafe, standing silent in the background as the newcomer, leaned forward fast enough he nearly fell off the jagged rock he had perched on. "How can you know that?"

"Gideon looks to be meeting with Chanoch, who would never be allowing an attack like that to be happening without his personal attention. He wouldn't be trusting his men to be capable enough. The Duchess Tivka would never be trying this. Not from the stories I be hearing. That be leaving the Overlord."

Rafe shook his head. "I'm not arguing your logic. How do you know the Temple is under attack? We've had no messengers."

"Do you be remembering the story of the Temple's founding?"

"Sure. Old news. What's it got to do with now?"

"And you be remembering the names of the *Chiy'el* that made it?"

"Father's balls! Get to the point."

"This be the point. The names of the two women don't be mattering. The two men, though... that be the point. The Overlord be one, and the other be Betzalel. Sound familiar?"

"Sure. The Overlord used the others as a sacrifice to bind it all together. Power it, I guess. Betzalel gave himself to defend the Temple and keep it safe. So what?"

"Up until we left the cave, the spirit of Betzalel wore the boy's body."

Rafe glanced around for the boy, but did not find him. Finally, his gaze settled once more on Johan. "That boy that's been licking your heels. That's Betzalel?"

"He did be."

"Then who is he now?"

Johan turned his head toward the camp that was quickly being set, but saw none of it. "My son."

"Your..."

"The children can not be allowed to make it to the Overlord," Johan said, switching the subjects abruptly. "What be left of our world might not be surviving the aftermath if the Overlord be able to use those children."

Pierce shifted on his perch, all the while clearing his throat with one long, grinding rasp. "I have to know: are you sure this isn't just personal."

Johan struggled to control himself against the fury welling within. He clenched his teeth before noticing, and then forced himself to relax. "We can't be allowing the Overlord to go through with this."

"It's a fair question," Rafe said, his eyes burning into Johan. "After all, there's a lot of lives on the line here."

"Rafe," Pierce said, shaking his head.

Ignoring the warning, Rafe plunged ahead. "We wouldn't want a lot of lives wasted because you weren't here."

Johan spun and burst toward Rafe, grabbing his tunic and slamming him against the jagged rock wall. Around him, the noise in the camp became suddenly quiet. "Don't you be preaching to me about the costs, damn you. I know, better than you could possibly dream, the cost a mistake can be having."

Rafe watched him quietly, his eyes glittering with a mischievousness that raised Johan's hackles. "I'm aware of your mistakes," he said in a whisper.

"I've studied everything you ever did. Why do you think I've been watching you so closely now that I'm here with you?"

Johan released Rafe, but stayed close. He leaned in until his lips almost touched Rafe's ears. "I don't be knowing why you've taken such a curious study, but you be reaching the end of my rope. Why did you be trying to have me killed?"

Rafe busied himself by straightening his overcoat, but his eyes widened slightly. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Eyes tightening, Johan said, "We never finished in Alludam. Just give me one good reason, and we will finish it here and now. Understand?"

When Rafe nodded, a cocky tilt to his head, Johan returned to his seat. He turned to Pierce. "To be answering you, of course it be personal. That don't be stopping me from doing this right. The Duke can't be trading off the children. Truly, I don't think that be his plan. He has never been the type to give glory up easily."

Pierce let out a sigh, wrapped with a nervous grin, and sat back down.

Around them, the camp started clattering again, and the smoky smell of the fires started Johan's stomach grumbling.

Rafe sat down, his manner belying any tension. He sat a little closer to the others this time, his legs folded beneath him.

Pierce clucked his tongue twice, lost in thought, before saying, "You may be right. If he's not going to give them up, he could have a fight on his hands. I don't know if Chanoch would let him cross with that many soldiers. They still don't trust each other much since the spat two years back over the border towers and whose spy was caught first."

Rafe chuckled quietly, sliding a coin along his knuckles.

Johan stared ahead blankly. He had been too far out of the loop to be truly good at this game anymore. He had missed too many current events; too much gossip to sift through, and he didn't have the proper information to strain it. He hoped that he could manage this without wasting lives.

"That means we need to strike now," Rafe said. The coin had stopped its smooth path around the width of his hand, and was now appearing and disappearing, keeping a steady beat to a drumbeat that only he heard.

Johan nodded. "If we be waiting too long, we be losing our chance to Chanoch. The Mother only knows how safe the children be in his hands."

"Agreed then," Pierce said. "We leave on Second Quarter tonight. That should get us there near dusk. With luck we can be in and out before the bastard even knows we're there. Everyone in?"

"Agreed," Rafe said.

"So be it," Johan said. "We'll be making plans final during the ride. Right now I think we be needing our rest."

The others nodded in agreement. Rafe turned lazily on his heel, and sauntered toward his squad's cook fires.

Pierce hung back, waited until Rafe and the rest of the rebels were out of earshot, and then cleared his throat. "Do you think that was a good thing to do?"

"Watch him," he warned.

"I told you I checked..."

"He basically told me today the men be his, and he'll let them follow if I be watching my step."

"Sounds like something a friend of mine once told me years ago."

Johan shook his head. "Not the same. He admitted the ambush." He didn't care what Pierce's response was. There was nothing that Johan could do. They were in too far to change leaders. He was stuck with the snake, whether he liked it or not. He would just have to make sure to keep Rafe where he can do the least amount of damage, even though that meant keeping him in reserve to watch their backs.

He ground his teeth as he pulled the tent off of his horse. Unrolling it, he paused. A hard steely edge blew along the breeze. Clouds swelled and cracked overhead, their bellies heavy with rain and snow. He lifted a

silent prayer to the Mother to hold the snow off until morning, but knew she'd never listen. She seemed to delight in making sure his every request was denied. No matter, snow or shine they would get the children back before Elena could show.

Chapter 28

The moon peeked out from behind the heavy clouds. It seemed it was waiting, too, as Elena did on this cold night. She had been unable to sleep once the snow had started. It came down fast and thick like it liked to do in the mountains. She bit at a nail, grabbing with her teeth and ripping. She spit it unceremoniously to the glistening snow.

Below her the Duke's army was blurred by the flurry of snow. They were ghosts sliding along the ground, hovering around the bloody glow of campfires. With difficulty, she found the Duke's tent and another that must hold the children.

A cold, black fury sparked within her and caught. It swelled and urged her. She could run there now. She could get her daughter. No need to wait.

She looked back at Raven, sleeping quietly. If it was not for the rise and fall of his chest she would have thought him dead.

Her breath billowed as it escaped her lips, visible in the shifting moon light. She noticed that his breath was not visible, as if some magic kept his presence hidden, even under these elements.

Her shoulders sagged. She could not do this without him.

She plopped to the ground, snow crunching underneath. Wrapping her arms tightly around herself for warmth and comfort, she let the tears escape. They traced slug trails down her cheeks before thickening in the cold, and huddling together in the creases of her lips for warmth.

Her daughter was down there, sleeping in a tent that Raven said she shared with twelve other children. Did she cry? Did she miss me? Had she been ripped from the simplicity and innocence of her life, and thrust into a world of whoring and pain?

Is that what Elena could call protecting her daughter? For most of the last eleven years she had only one real reason to live. That reason was huddled amongst the ghosts below her on her way to only the Mother knew where. She had vowed before Joss was born that she would never abandon her. She would not be like her own mother. No Breath. No midnight rendezvous. She would stay with Johan until death separated them.

And now it had separated them, she realized. That did not change anything. She still had her daughter. Joss was still alive. She had to be. Rickward was gone. Johan was gone. Her Joss was still alive, and close.

They would go home soon. Together.

She wiped the slush of her tears away, brushed the snow off her shoulders and shook out her hair. She stood, crinkling the stiffness out of her nearly frozen clothing. She tugged on her boots, tightening them, and stretched her arms over her head, cracking and stretching her back.

Kneeling next to Raven, she nudged him gently. "Raven," she whispered. "Wake up."

He sat up, his eyes focused and alert.

"I wish I be knowing how you did that," she joked.

"Do what?"

"Wake up instantly, ready to go. It be taking me an Eighth before I be that alert."

Looking away from her, he glanced to the sky, and shook his head. "I think you must be mistaken there, my dear. It seems you've crossed the finish before me and--Mother's Mercy. Is that snow?"

She nodded and nudged him. "And you be calling yourself *Nekodah*? Shame on you for not recognizing it."

He grinned sheepishly. "We don't see it much up that way. Too many males yearning. Gets things heated up."

Standing, she said, "We should be going. The camp will never be quieter."

"Aye. Quiet it will be, my lady. The snow has changed things a bit, though, I'm afraid."

Her eyes snapped to his. Without realizing it, she shifted onto the balls of her feet, ready for attack. "There be--what?--a hundred men down there. They won't be noticing two more foot prints. Maybe you don't be waking as quick as I thought."

"Aye. Once in camp, our steps will be lost. Like as not, they'll never notice any difference in our prints. On the edge of camp, though..."

The cold hand of death crawled up her spine and tried to wrap itself around her head, stealing her breath and blurring her vision. No. It would not happen this way. Not when she was so close. "You can be doing something for that? Stories always be saying you Wildlanders can walk unnoticed through anything."

"I've taught you what I could these last few days. In a forest, or on the plains, I'd say you have a fair shot of pulling it off. In the snow? I don't think you're ready."

"Then we be finding another way. We don't be stopping now."

He searched her face for several breaths before nodding. "I suppose you won't be put off?"

She shook her head.

Sighing, he rose, and rubbed his hands together. "Then I think we should pack. It appears it is proving time."

Joss woke with a start. Something was wrong.

She was huddled under her blanket, curled in a ball, with her hands tucked between her legs for warmth. A chill filled her still. At the other end of the tent the baby cried and Renee rocked it. He could feel it coming, too. She stood, keeping the blanket wrapped tightly around her shoulders. In the dim light she saw Renee turn toward her, glare, and then turn her away.

"So be it," she whispered. She did not need the tramp's friendship.

Shouldering her way through the tent flap, she stepped on the cold snow in her bare feet. It bit at her skin. She glanced around for observers, and found none. A soft blue light swelled beneath her blanket, fat arms pushing past the barrier. It held bright for a moment and then eased lower and sunk into her feet, warming and protecting them.

A soldier strode around the tent corner, his pike at the ready. When he saw her, he stopped, and looked

around, confusion clear on his face. "Everything be right, missy? I thought I saw something."

The moon hid beneath its own blanket tonight, and there was not enough light to see his features clearly, but she recognized the voice instantly. He had been her savior, though she had not know it at the time, and he had treated her well ever since.

"Every thing be right with me, Bardulf," she said. As he bowed and turned to leave she stopped him. "Did you be seeing anything strange tonight?"

He shook his head. "Every thing be clear tonight. Good thing, too with Chanoch arriving on the morn. Why do you ask?"

"I don't really be knowing. Can't be shaking a feeling that something be coming."

He smiled reassuringly. "Just a dream, miss. That's all. Now you get some rest. We'll watch out for you."

"I know. Thank you."

She scanned the skies, trying to remember her dream. It was familiar, somehow, but she could not get it to swim to the front of her vision no matter how she baited it. All she could say for sure is that something was coming, and she did not think it was human.

Chapter 29

The snow crunched under Elena's foot as she crept along the outskirts of the Duke's camp. Her skin crawled with impatience. They were almost there. She almost had Joss back.

"Slowly," Raven hissed at her. "I didn't have time to put them all to sleep. Those that were already asleep will not wake. Those on watch are drowsy, and should notice less, but they still have ears."

She breathed deeply, slowly, searching the snow-crustrusted ground for any soldiers that appeared to hear her. Nodding, she started forward again, slower this time. They circled around the camp. The path they had chosen would bring them closest to the children's tent. With a little watching from the Mother, they would pass only a handful of soldiers before they rescued Joss.

Touching her arm, Raven signaled for her to wait, as he slipped through the shadows to the first guard.

Using everything he had been taught, and had honed through years of questionable activities, Raven crept up on the first guard. His feet made no sound as his energies blended with the snow.

The guard was slumped at his post, sitting on the stump of a twin-stemmed oak.

Raven smiled. Maybe he had done better than he thought.

Finding no other guards, he slipped his sword free of its scabbard slow enough to minimize the ring. He knelt in front of the guard, sword at the ready, and swore. Blood coated his neck and collar. The man was already dead.

Joss tossed and turned, twisting the blanket into a knot around her legs. Growling, she kicked the blanket free, and stumbled out of bed. Sleep would not come.

She paced up and down the aisle between the cots, ignoring the smell of unwashed children until the cold became too much. She ripped the blanket from her cot and slung it around her.

The tent was too small. Too confining. The air was filthy with dirt and sweat. It clung to her nose. She gritted her teeth in annoyance as the wind rapped on the tent walls. They buckled and swayed like waves in a lake. She pushed through the flap and was slapped by the wind's icy palm. Shivering, she sought out Bardulf. He would at least give her someone to talk to. Together, they could pass the time until the sun rose and warmed the chill, or sleep's warm grasp finally took hold. Ducking into the wind, she pushed through it as she rounded the corner of the tent.

"Father's balls, Bardulf," she said.

He was slumped against the wagon wheel, asleep.

Shaking her head, she knelt at his side and shook him gently. "Wake up, you oaf. If the Duke catches you..."

He slid sideways. His uniform grabbed the axle, holding him up like a rag doll from a child's hand.

"Bardulf?"

She nudged him hard, worry chewing at her bowels. For a single breath he hung motionless. The earth's pull finally won over and he slumped sideways, falling head first into the snow. Standing, she searched the camp.

No one moved. She knelt once more, shoved her hand through the gap in the blanket, and felt Bardulf's neck for life. Nothing.

She leaned in, forcing her way past the wall of terror that surrounded Bardulf's body. Pressing her ear against his mouth, shuddering at his cold skin, she waited. Nothing. She started to pull away, and stopped as the lightest touch of his warm, salted mutton breath caressed her ear. He was alive.

She crept to the two other guards, men she had never bothered learning names of, and checked them for life. Both were asleep, their breathing matching Bardulf's.

The beetles crawled higher into her chest. One man asleep at his post she could see. Not three. Not under the Duke's command.

A whip of energy lashed through her, thawing her body with its fiery life. It lodged in her head, searing her mind. Tears welled and flowed, freezing on her cheeks. Spikes of pain pounded into her skull. Colored stars pierced her sight. As sudden as it had come, it was gone. She fell to her knees, reeling.

"Mother's mercy! What was that?"

As Raven checked the third guard, finding him dead, a mental knot released itself.

He smiled. Joss was free.

Elena could not wait any longer. Raven had either ran into trouble or had found more to handle than they anticipated. Either way, he would understand. He would meet her at the tent.

She breathed deeply. The icy air was tainted with smoke from the campfires. As thick clouds covered the moon, drenching the night in a blanket of dark, she crept forward. She kept her steps slow and cautious, putting her weight down heel first like Raven had taught her. Each step wrung tired sighs from the snow.

The tents circled around the Duke's, ringing it in a protective circle. Tonight, though, the circle slept. She scanned the grounds around her, keeping a careful watch for any movement, listening for any sounds that did not fit with the night.

Spotting the large tent they had decided must house the children, she locked the location in her mind and crept through the maze. Seven times, she was forced to stop as the shadow of a soldier materialized in front of her. Each time she found the soldier asleep at his post. She passed campfires that burned low, little more than embers casting a bloody glow over the snow. Something was wrong. She had never spent much time around camps, but everything Johan's stories had taught her said this was not the way of things.

What was the Duke up to? Did he know they were coming tonight? Had he Breathed, learning of their attempted rescue? If so, what chance did she have? As she knelt, half-frozen in the middle of one hundred armed, sleeping men, she realized the truth. She still had nothing else. She must push through.

She breathed deeply, forcing the tension to wash away. After she had pulled herself together, she pushed

forward once more.

Johan signaled to Pierce. All was clear. He watched for a single breath, ensuring Pierce had seen, and then slipped away from the group. His scouts were good, but they had little real experience, except for Michael, and his weekly exploits into the mayor's manor for a midnight tryst. Tonight was too important to leave in the hands of a novice.

He crept along, heel to toe, pushing the pine and oak branches aside. With each step, he came closer to the camp, and what he saw sent warning bells clanging. He stopped. He scanned the camp. There had to be some movement. The Duke was too good a leader, too paranoid, not to have set guards to their routes, especially when he carried such valuable cargo. This had to be a trap. He scanned the camp once, then again. He turned, ready to return to his men, when a shadow slipped along the edge of camp. The figure was male, a veteran, by his graceful movement. A thought scratched at the back of his mind--some memory. Something about the movement.

He searched the area until the figure came into view once more. The man moved with confidence. He was not trying to be overly stealthy, but kept to the same path Johan would have taken were he in his place. Something about the movement. What was it?

Suddenly, everything fell into place.

He turned and followed the trail back the way he had come, keeping his steps inside the previous footprints he had left in the snow. When he was by Pierce's side, he leaned into his ear, whispering harshly.

"I thought you be saying Elena could not be making it here before us."

Pierces brow creased in confusion.

"Raven's in the camp."

"By the three hells! Did you see her?"

"No. But she won't be far. Raven wouldn't be letting her." He pounded the snow with his fist. "This be changing everything."

"No. This changes nothing."

Johan wanted to yell. He needed to vent. She should not be here. How could he protect her when she was charging headlong into the maw of the beast? His only hope had been in beating her to Joss, in saving her from putting herself at risk this way. His shoulders slumped forward as Betzalel's words ran through his mind. *She has her own task ahead of her.* He pounded the snow once more.

"You be right. This cannot be changing anything. Something be not right down there, anyway. The camp be dead."

"Everyone?"

Johan turned and stared at the men behind him, lost in thought. "Would you be putting your own men to sleep if you expected an attack?"

"What are you saying?"

"The Duke be no fool. He would never be risking himself like this."

"Chanoch?"

"Could be a private meet."

Pierce shook his head. "Still too much risk."

Johan watched Rafe on his horse, pacing in front of the men, talking with each of the front row in turn. At times they laughed, but the sound never carried to him. He made a good leader. If only Johan could trust him.

Turning to Pierce, he sighed. "Nothing changes. This should be making our job easier. Keep the lines. They need be flexible tonight."

Pierce nodded towards Rafe. "Still worried?"

"Do I ever be stopping? We be going. Now."

Pierce nodded, and relayed the orders through a combination of whispers and hand signals.

Johan slipped back into the woods, faster this time. Within minutes it would all be over.

Chapter 30

Gideon watched in horror as the second glassy piece of lava stone disappeared from the 'Az boards.

"No!" He slugged the boards, scattering their contents across the tent, where they pounded into the silk-woven canvas walls. All of the Breaths, all of the time spent with the girl. It could not come to this. She truly believed; he knew she did. She was his daughter!

He grabbed the exhausted slave and hauled her to her feet.

"What have you done?" Spittle shot from his mouth and pelted her face. When she flinched, he shook her. He pulled more life from her, bending and crunching her body in ways nature had never intended. Her eyes bulged, red staining the edges. She tried to scream, but no sound escaped. Farther and farther her body bent. Her arms wrapped backwards around her. Her bones snapped and cracked and she went limp in his arms. In disgust he dropped her to the floor. Draining her life as it slipped free of her body, he funneled it into the amber amulet around his neck. He shoved the now glowing amulet under his shirt, spun on his heel, and plunged into the dark night.

The damp cold caressed his face and hands, invigorating him as he snarled, "By the Father's Justice, where are my guards."

The deathly quiet stopped him. Having spent most of life either in court, or in the midst of soldiers, the quiet did not sound natural. Nothing should be this quiet. As he circled, searching, he stepped on the first guard. A grunt escaped the guard's lips as his wrist twisted under the Duke's weight, but he did not wake.

"Cursed fool. Wake up." He kicked him in the chest, succeeding only to knock him into the snow.

The cold writhed through his skin and scraped across his bones. Something else was playing on his field. Turning his attention inward, he scanned for the Breaths he had running and found that one was missing. Jocelyn's. "Maybe tonight won't be such a disaster, then. Come to me Elena."

He burst into a run. He had to beat Elena to the children's tent.

Elena stopped as she heard movement ahead of her. She lost count of the number of sleeping soldiers she had passed, and thanked Raven at every one. Now, they must be waking. She forced her steps to slow. The confidence that had built with each sleeping soldier burst. Raven would be here soon. That was all that kept her moving.

Ever so slowly, she crept around the tent. A shadow slipped across the tent in front of her. It was gone before she could identify it. She had to assume it was a soldier. But why so fast? Terror gripped her bowels, twisting and knotting them, as she realized the steps had made no sound.

"It be only Raven, foolish girl," she told herself. The words did little to calm her.

Another shadow skated over the snow behind her. She spun, hoping to catch sight of whoever it might be, but found nothing. Not even footsteps.

Small and nervous, a laugh escaped unbidden. "Just the fires playing tricks. Just the fires."

She crept past the tent, searching the darkness for anyone else, and then heard the sound again. The voice was young and harsh. A girl's voice.

She was crying in desperate pain. Elena's heart pounded faster, blood rushing through her. Tension spun into energy. She burst forward. She past the last tent and found her Joss huddled in on herself, a blanket draped over her shoulders.

Elena watched her across the strides that separated them. She was alive. It was almost more than she had hoped for. Now that she was here, though, new worries cascaded inside of her. Would she blame me? Would she hate me? Had she been abused at the hands of the monster? Shoving the fears into a deeply locked box, she started forward.

"Joss," she called.

Her words were drowned by a roar that echoed outwards from the woods.

Johan perched on a rock shelf overlooking the Duke's camp. He watched the figures darting through among the tents. He could tell by the speed of their sporadic runs, that they were neither Elena, nor Raven. It could not be the Duke or any of his men, either. He knew them too well from too many fights to believe they were capable of this. He had only seen this speed in a creature once.

He searched the woods to the side of him. The red pine and aspen had given way to the thick, leafy tops of oak and maple. Even knowing where to look he found no trace of his men.

What was he doing by himself? For a single breath, he wondered if Rafe and Pierce were right, after all. Was this too personal for him to lead? Gritting his teeth, he focused on the now. He could not allow any concerns to distract him. Now, more than ever, he needed every ounce of skill.

He flung his legs over the ledge and skated down the rocky slope, spraying loose rock ahead of him. He was no longer worried about rousing the camp. Almost, he wished they would wake. He could use their distractions.

He paused for a single breath at the bottom, searching for the creatures. No shadows appeared. Instead, he caught the sputtering flash of the signal mirrors. He should take out the mirror, but that would waste precious moments that he did not have. Johan let loose a raven cry. Pierce would know what to do.

Before the mirror had finished signaling its acknowledgement, Johan plunged into the camp. His sword screamed as he ripped it from its scabbard.

"Wake up, damn it! Wake!" he screamed.

A shadow slid across the tent in front of him and he charged. As he turned the corner of the tent he drew three small leather bags from a pouch at his side, and smiled.

"Don't be running from me," he called. "You wanted me before, take me."

Two shadows this time. Third tent ahead. He did not wait. He surged forward, rearing the sacks to the ready. A whisper in his mind, and the prickling of hair on his left arm, was all the warning he got.

Spinning, he dropped to one knee and watched as the *Maveth's* claw-tipped hand tore through the air above

his head.

Letting his arm flow with his spin, he released all three leather sacks. Without waiting, he continued the spin, dropping lower.

He heard the sacks thud against its chest. Bursting open, it sprayed rich, dark soil over it.

The creature spun at him, arms flailing wildly, every bit as quick as he remembered.

Gripping the sword with both hands, he swung at the arms, using the flat of the blade to bash the swings wider and wider.

He stepped through, kicking the creature in the now stone chest. Using the power of the kick, he launched himself backwards, rolling on the ground and grabbing two more leather sacks as he stood.

Around them, the camp started to come alive. Metal sang as the Rebels met the groggy guards on the outer rows of camp. Amidst the clamor of the building battle, a single word caught him off guard, and made him pause.

"Mam?"

Hope swept the fury and fears away. His daughter, his wife. They were alive.

Another whisper saved his life.

He lurched back, the air whistling as the *Maveth's* claws ripped through the air. He watched in horror as the moonlight rode their edge not three finger-widths from his face. Thick green pus oozed from the tip of each finger.

He pushed into the creatures swing, trying to shove the sacks in the creatures face, but they would not move. Their laces had stuck on his armor. He pulled, and sawed at them, hoping to break the lace.

The creature was too fast. Claws slashed across his chest, ripping his boiled leather armor. He rolled out of the way as an arrow slammed into the creature, lodging deep in its throat. The creature's skin hissed and popped as it turned the darker gray of weathered stone.

Ripping at its face the creature roared. Its breath was hot and fetid as it blasted Johan. Nearly gagging, he watched as the claws left scars in the stone that was its face. The claws were next, then the arms. Before he had caught his breath, the creature tumbled to the ground, a statue. One hand broke off on impact and rolled across the snow, stopping at his feet.

Johan backed away and turned, searching for the source of the arrow. Swords cut across his vision. Bodies heaved and hacked. Through it all, he saw his son loose another arrow directly at him.

Johan dodged to one side and spun. Lying at his feet was one of the Duke's soldiers. An arrow pierced his eye. When Johan turned again to his son, he found him waving him on, urgently signaling for him to go.

Johan kicked the shattered hand away from him, trying to find the direction Joss' voice had come from. When he had it, he spun and started forward.

A dozen soldiers burst in front of him and stopped. They turned as a group, each step perfectly matching the others. In one fluid movement, twelve swords raised to the ready. Twelve soldiers shifted their stances, coiled

and ready for battle.

Growling in frustration, he charged the end of the line closest to him. "Get. Out. Of. My. Way," he said as his first blow swirled around his opponent's sword. With a flick of his wrist, the sword wrenched free and flew threw the air, ripped through the side of a tent, and disappeared.

He spun to the next, and the next, prying an opening through their line.

Joss could find no words. She stared at the woman in front of her. She should be happy, should be relieved, but all of the emotions stuck inside of her.

"Mam?"

The nightmares came crashing back. Every night she had called her mother. Now, she had come. Then why could she not go to her? Why, when her hidden dream had finally come true, could she not wake from it?

Her mind tossed and turned in confusion, like a leaf thrashed about by a windstorm. This was her mother. Her mother should not be here. It was not safe. Her father would kill her. Her father... was the Duke.

Sitting in the middle of the snowy ground, wind buffeting her hair, she felt her body warm in an instant. It was like a fire raged inside, warming but not burning. Without warning the fire exploded at the front of her skull, ripping her thoughts from her. She felt them torn away, stuffed in a little box, and was forced to watch as her body responded to orders she did not give.

She stood, slow, unsteady. The blanket dropped away, and icy wind pounded through her silk nightgown. Goosebumps pierced every inch of her skin. Her head rose, facing her mother squarely. Behind Elena, she saw the man who had claimed her striding towards them.

Elena froze in terror not three strides from her daughter.

"What in the seven hells?"

The cry sounded again, lasting an eternity in that freezing camp. Her skin was going numb. She was sure her brain was numb also. It must be an animal. It had to be. But what kind of animal made that sound? It doesn't matter. Move. Move!

Her foot broke free of the snowy ground. Let the Duke deal with the cursed animal.

Joss was standing when she reached her, staring past Elena. The light was gone from her eyes.

She knelt and grabbed the blanket. Stepping around Joss, she threw the blanket over her daughter's shoulders, urging her forward as the clamor of battle erupted around the edges of camp.

"We've got to be going, Joss."

Jocelyn did not move, but continued staring ahead of her.

Elena's heart froze as she looked ahead of them.

"Mother's mercy."

The Duke strode towards them, his gaze focused on her with a queer delight.

"Well now," he said. He swept a gloved hand around him, lace cuffs puffing and flowing in the wind, seeming a part of the snow itself. "You've finally arrived. I had hoped we could meet under more... accommodating circumstances."

Swallowing hard, she stepped forward, placing herself directly between Joss and the Duke. "You'll not be keeping my Joss."

His laugh was full of gleeful irony. "Oh, my dear. I think that decision should be left to the child, don't you?" He extended an arm in invitation. "Joss?"

Elena's fists flexed at her side. This was a trick. It had to be. She watched, waiting for him to make a move that never came. She turned as a grunt sounded behind her.

Jocelyn's face was strained. Her feet inched forward, straining against some unknown power.

"Joss," she whispered. "Run. I'll stop him." She did not dare admit to her daughter that she had no way to stop him. At the least she could slow him down, distract him long enough for her to get away.

But Joss kept inching forward.

"No," she said, her head swiveling from Jocelyn to the Duke and back. "No, it can't be. You can be fighting it, honey. I know you can. Fight it. Please."

Tears welled, but she forced them back. Straightening, she turned to meet the Duke's gaze. "You can't be keeping my daughter away from me."

"It doesn't have to be this way. I am just the errand boy, really. It is the Overlord who demands the children. It is he that wishes to drain them of everything to fuel his mad passions for eternal life. Join with me for a few days."

"It be you that stole my daughter. It be you that murdered my mother."

"Such a harsh term, my dear. Murder. I remember watching you kneel among the grasses above the village. Yes, I saw you. Do you remember what it was that your mother did to me? Do you remember her burning the village down around her? She risked the lives of so many. For what?"

Elena shook her head, refusing to listen, but his words made sense. What had her mother given her life for? What had she abandoned her for? More than anything, it scared her that the Duke was making sense. "I will not be listening to your lies."

"I would consider your answer a little more carefully." He held out a hand to her. "Join me. We can stop the Overlord. The children can go free."

"All of them?"

Behind the Duke, two of the soldier's tents were ripped from the ground and thrown through the air, followed by more keening.

Startled, the Duke spun, saw the *Maveth* and called to Elena, "I believe your time is up. What is your answer?"

"Never!" she screamed.

"You should have chosen better." He looked past her, to her daughter, and flicked his wrist in what must have been a sign, though it was not a pattern she recognized.

Jocelyn could feel the Duke's control tighten around her. She felt the power growing inside, swelling larger and larger until it was near to bursting.

"No!" She would not let anything happen to her Mam.

She focused her concentration to a needle thin ray. Forcing the ray along the walls of the bubble that held her consciousness, she probed the walls, pushing and pulling. There had to be a weak spot. There had to be. She swept it around, faster and faster in desperation, as the energy the Duke had called from her seared white-hot around the edges. She felt the crystalline power of the snow bleed into the sturdy, ever present power of the earth and stone beneath her feet. It buckled and whipped as the pressure threatened to explode in pure raging flames.

There!

The bubble that held was sealed at a single point, even thinner than her focused ray of concentration. She pushed harder, harder, until she felt it bend and give way. Pushing some more, she prayed to the Mother.

The bubble burst and the searing energies flooded into her mind. The pain was unimaginable, hotter than her father's forge.

But it did not matter. She was free.

The Duke's face twisted in rage as Elena stood still, fastened to the ground with terror as she watched the blur of the *Maveth*. The creatures swatted soldiers effortlessly from side to side, but more took their place. Some wore uniforms and others dressed in rougher cotton and wool weaves. The creatures struggled and roared against the wave of men, making slow headway.

The Duke grabbed the amber amulet from around his throat, snarling in rage. The amulet winked, stealing the light around it. A glowing ball of black light covered the Duke's hand. Inside, gray bolts of energy danced and caromed off the walls that imprisoned them.

The dampened thunder of horses grew louder, like they were pounding their way straight to her.

The Duke cocked his arm, and threw the ball at Elena. Just as he released it, a shadowy blur flew into him, knocking him down.

The thundering gallop grew louder, until it threatened to deafen her. She watched in horror as the ball of night flew towards her with unerring accuracy. She wanted to move; she needed to flee. Her feet were bound to the melted snow around her feet. Her mind screamed to run, to dodge, drop, anything! But she could not make her body do more than suck at the crystalline air, shallow gasps that stung with the icy cold.

She heard movement from both sides. The thunder was almost on her now, pounding at her. She dare not look. She could not pry her eyes away from the ball of death that was nearly on her.

She watched it hurtle closer, and could hear the whine of its forced travel.

A figure crossed in front of her, and she lost sight of the black ball as Joss' blanket flapped in front of her eyes, the strings of several tassels whipping at her face.

Joss' blanket. Joss'...

"No!"

Her daughter grunted with the impact. The night exploded in a blinding clash of colors as the midnight gray sparks wrapped around Joss, forming a smoky gray cage.

She collapsed to the ground, sprays of snow pounding into Elena's legs as she rushed to her. Jocelyn did not move. Elena could not even see the rise and fall of her breathing, or the heated puffs of breath in front of her.

From the corner of her eye, she saw one of the gray creatures rake his talons across a soldier's face, the power of the blow lifting him off the ground. The creature swarmed through the opening, and sped through the open space toward her.

Kneeling over her daughter, pleading with her to live, she did not care.

The thunder was on top of her. A strong arm wrapped around her, dragging her off the ground, and threw her roughly over the horse's back.

They burst past the children's tent. The red-rimmed eyes of a young brown-haired boy stared back at her. Then they were past, winding their way through the maze of tents, and out of camp.

From the middle of the seething mass of men behind them, amidst the syncopated rhythms of the metallic cacophony, one scream pierced the noises, echoing around her, caressing her. Rage and death mashed together in that scream, so primal, so--familiar?

She gasped, hoping, but unable to believe. "Johan?"

The shadow that had her in his grasp just laughed. "I'm afraid your Johan is no longer alive."

Hope wilted.

She wanted desperately to cry, to let the tears of agony wash through her, cleansing her. They did not come. Nothing came. Every hope and fear; every wish and aborted dream; every emotion; every memory. They had vanished with the tears, leaving a colossal chasm inside her chest. She wanted to hold on, but nothing was left to grab on to.

They were all gone now.

Chapter 31

As Johan swirled among the soldiers, eddies of death flowing in his wake, the sounds of the battle raged around him. He focused on only one thing: Elena.

A slash, a roiling parry, and a lunge, punched a hole through the line of soldiers. He charged through it. Behind him, the soldiers cursed. Four men lie dead on the ground, their life soaking the snows around them. One man ran to another, less deadly, part of the battle.

Johan circled, trying to get his bearings. "Say something, Joss," he muttered, not sure which way they had gone.

"I believe we have some unfinished business, Protector." The words were spat into the brisk night air, the voice cool. He would never forget that voice. During the Rebellion, the voice's owner had waited until he was exhausted from the battle, before nearly killing him.

"Our time be up long ago."

Hector laughed, his voice melding with the bell-like whisper of his sword being drawn from its sheath. "And yet you have come to face me once more."

"Step aside, lackey. I be here for my daughter. My thoughts of you died long ago." Shifting his stance, he readied his sword.

Maveth screamed in rage and fear elsewhere in the camp. The scream stopped in a gurgle as it turned to stone.

Johan smirked as he stepped to the right, hoping Hector would circle with him, and give him the opening he needed to run to Elena and Joss. Hector stood his ground, shifting into Johan's circle and closing the gap by a step.

"Seems your gray lackeys be failing you," Johan said. "Only one be left now."

Hector did not answer. He sidestepped, closing the gap by another step. He tossed the sword from one hand to the other, then back again, confident in the fight's outcome.

Johan shrugged. If Hector truly wished to be embarrassed this night, so be it. He charged the well-armored Warlord, sidestepping at the last moment, and sweeping his foot along the ground.

Hector skipped over his leg and blocked, but Johan continued the swirling movements, stopping in a crouch behind Hector. His sword followed the momentum, rushing to the unarmored waistline. Hector spun, managing to parry the sword away just as it touched flesh.

Johan stood, reversed his spin, and launched into a Waterfall. Hector parried the flurry of blows, each closer to the ground than the last. Johan's sword swam around the blade, never able to rip it from his opponent's grasp.

His body slowly dropped to the ground with each successive blow, keeping his body blocked by his sword. When their blows were mere finger widths from the ground, Johan swung with all his force, bashing Hector's blade to the left. He spun to the right, spinning all the way around, shoving the full strength of the spin into the blow. It slammed into Hector's helmet, which twisted in place, the dent wedging the helmet so that it covered both eyes.

The warlord flailed around him, lashing out wildly at each sound with one hand. With the other, he tried to pry the helmet off, but with no luck.

The roar of battle grew louder around them. From directly behind Johan, cries went up. He spun, sword at the ready. The soldiers were too busy fighting the final *Maveth* to notice him.

The creature ripped through two soldiers, tearing a third's head off. It launched through the break in the line, ripping tents out of its way, sending them fluttering through the air in its wake.

Behind him, Johan could hear Hector still struggling. He paid him no mind, but watched in horror at the scene that was revealed now that the tents were gone.

Elena stood in a perfect circle of melted water that bubbled and popped. The hot breath of the water steamed around her feet.

Jocelyn crouched, readying herself to launch.

The *Maveth* rushed directly at them.

Between the creature and his family stood only one man: the Duke.

Johan charged as the Duke released a black ball of crackling energies at his wife. Jocelyn jumped in front of her mother, the black ball pounding into her chest.

The sounds of the battle disappeared around him. He could only hear Elena's cry as she knelt by their daughter.

Had it all been for nothing? He refused to believe it, could not allow himself to believe it. Too many years he had wasted. Too many memories.

Pulling his final earth-filled sacks from the pouch at his belt, he threw them one at a time, taking careful aim with both.

A soldier crashed into him, bowling him over. They crunched into the snow, rolling several strides before Johan managed to kick free of him. As he stood, he saw a black horse ride past Elena. He watched as Rafe leaned over in the saddle, grabbed her, and hauled her up.

Their eyes met across the field. He should have killed him in Alludam.

The soldier that had bowled him over struggled to his feet. His eyes went wide as he recognized Johan. He swallowed hard, raising his sword unsteadily in front of him.

White-hot fury seared through Johan's body. With the first swing he disarmed the soldier. Yellow blossomed in the snow at the soldier's feet before the flat of Johan's blade pounded into his head, and he slunk to the ground unconscious.

He spit, wishing Rafe dead. Bashing a stumbling Hector with the flat of his blade to the still-stuck helmet, he slipped into the maze of tents and escaped into the night, calling to his men.

Johan did not have to pace long near the towering pines before what was left of his men showed. If only there

had been another way. If only he could have saved his Joss, but he would never have escaped alive if he had carried her body away.

"Do this be all?" he asked as Pierce approached.

Pierce surveyed the men with care, then turned back to meet Johan's fierce gaze. "Aye. That is all."

Johan nodded. He glanced at the men and reckoned nearly one half of the men were missing. How many were dead? How many had abandoned?

"How many of the missing be loyal to Rafe?"

"Johan. We've already settled this," Pierce started to object, but Johan cut him off.

"Rafe be stealing my wife from the field, and galloped toward the plains."

For several breaths, Pierce studied his face with an intensity that made Johan feel uncomfortable, but he did not back down. He had held his side of the bargain.

"What about the Duke?" Pierce asked, knowing what Johan intended.

"The Father take the Duke. He be having to deal with Chanoch in the morning, and I don't be thinking that will be a pleasant reunion."

Pierce nodded, smiling as he realized the irony of it all. "The Duke should be more careful of the laws he sets into motion. To perform any violence on the other's land, I believe that is how it went."

Together they chuckled into the night, needing the release. As the mirth died away, they turned without speaking, and mounted.

He sent two scouts ahead to find the traitor's trail. No one would get much sleep tonight.

As the bloody morning sun broke over the horizon, the scouts returned with good news.

"There is a shack ahead, hidden deep in the brambles. Rafe's trail leads straight there. If they're still there, though, the horses are elsewhere."

"That would be making sense," Johan said thoughtfully. "Deep brambles and horses don't be mixing." Grabbing the men firmly by the shoulder, he squeezed and said, "Good work, men. I be thinking you've earned a rest. Join the others and relax a bit."

They thanked him and left.

The wind had pounded them all through the moonlit morning. A thin glaze of ice draped over their clothes, crackling and snapping with each movement. Ice hardened their beards and mustaches. All of the men had their spare saddle blankets pulled tight around their shoulders to help ward off the freezing winds.

They would have to rest soon, but Johan would prefer they could sleep in the warmth of the afternoon. At least riding, they could keep moving and fight off the worst of the cold.

He signaled to Pierce and together they pulled their horses to the front of the line. Following the scouts trail was not difficult in the crusted snow.

They wound along the edge of the forest scruff, young pine and firs clawing at their feet and their horses. New grass pierced the snow, struggling to find sunlight.

The soldiers shifted in their saddles, pushing the blankets aside enough to provide access to their weapons. Every head watched away from the line, surveying the young forest for any signs of Rafe or his men.

By the count of prints ahead of them, Johan decided over one half of the missing men were with Rafe. He nodded, satisfied. The losses were fewer than he expected. His men would outnumber Rafe's, though not by much.

Raven pushed his way through the line, and pulled up beside Johan as the hovel came into view. "I can feel the amulet inside."

"Do she be alone?"

"I can't tell. The snow is masking any count."

Johan nodded his understanding, and signaled the men to take position. As they spread out, encircling the hovel, Johan watched the woods.

"Where do he be?" he wondered out loud.

"It's the perfect spot for an ambush," Pierce said.

"That's what be worrying me. Keep a sharp eye, I be going in." He motioned to four of the men, dismounted, and crept forward, his entire body tensed, a serpent waiting to strike.

What once had served for windows were now covered with thick vines and dead ivy that blocked their view of the inside. Wishing they could see anything through the natural barrier, Johan took consolation in the fact that Rafe could not see him, either. They rounded the corner together, each with swords ready, but no guards waited outside.

He crept silently to the door, signaling for the others to wait. Vines blanketed the door, but they had recently been torn free. He touched his ear to the vines, careful not to disturb anything. No sound came from inside.

Stepping back, he motioned for the youngest soldier to open the door. Once they were in place, Johan counted down from three, and shot his hand forward.

The door burst open and, as one, Johan and the remaining soldiers charged through, only to stop just inside.

"Father's balls!" Johan cursed as he strode to the center of the hovel, and tore the dangling amulet off the creeper that hung down in the center of the single room.

He turned, spinning on his heel and pushed through the men, emotions simmering.

At the raised brows from Pierce and Raven, Johan held the amulet in front of him and shook his head, spitting thick bile behind him. Rickward leaned against his horse, inspecting the gut string of his bow.

"Could they have led a false trail?" Pierce asked.

"They didn't have enough time. We would have found the other trail, had it been rushed. No. They came this way. They had to." He nodded his head to the amulet that Johan was inspecting.

Rickward stepped forward, not pushing into the center of the group, but staying on the fringe. "They would have known Johan would hunt them. Rafe pushed his men hard, putting as much distance between them as he could. The amulet probably made him nervous, since he could not know if her powers came from it or not. Besides, the *Nekodah* could track her by the amulet alone, no matter the terrain."

The other two men glanced at the boy, then at Johan, and then back to the boy before nodding.

"He makes sense, this younger Protector," Raven said. "Seems he inherited something from the father after all."

Rickward slung the bow over his shoulder, and stamped off into the cold morning.

Raven looked to Johan, arms raised at his sides. "Was it something I said?"

Johan watched his son walk away. His eyes still held the same feral glint about them, but Johan thought he would have to revise his initial impression of the boy. He remembered the skill he had displayed during the skirmish, and an idea struck at him.

What was it he had said? Ah, yes. He had been raised by the wolves. Initially, Johan had been horrified by the thought of his son running the thick jungles around the Temple with a pack of wild animals. While he had made no special emphasis on the word that Johan could remember, he knew the wolves were not the usual sort of animal.

He turned to Raven. "Tell me, friend. The Wolves be from your neck of the woods, don't they?"

"Oh, come now, ye grand protector, you don't need to be hiring them--" He let the words trail off as he noticed Johan's expression. He turned and watched the boy disappear into the camp. "Ah. I see this is serious."

He cleared his throat, pondering how much to say. After two short breaths, he made his decision and plunged ahead. "It seems you are correct. Now, I haven't been back there in some time, mind you, but the last I heard, they were still based out of the Untamed Woods."

"Doesn't that wrap around the edge of the Temple's lands?" Pierce asked, pulling at the new growth that covered his chin.

"That it does. About one weeks ride, mayhap a bit less with Chanoch's permission. Though catching his attention can be a bit time consuming. Why do you ask?" He glanced back the direction the boy had gone.

"I be thinking you already know."

Rubbing his hands up and down his arms, Raven nodded. "Aye. I suppose I do at that. Once a full member, there is no way out. They take rests, now and then, but they'll always be his family."

Johan grabbed a vine and ripped it loose from the death grip it had on the pine above. "I be his family."

Raven shifted his weight from foot to foot.

Pierce turned to check the saddle, cinching it tighter.

Raven broke the silence. "If he has made his first paid kill, then you're not his family any more. All ties are broken. All families, religions, lovers: they're all left behind, and the Wolves become each of those. I'm truly sorry."

Anger boiled under the skin, transparent in Johan's voice. "How do I be knowing?"

As Raven told him, he paid only the barest of attention. He would not lose his son like this. Not before Elena had a chance to meet him, to hear what really happened. He did not know if she could forgive him, but she had to know.

Chapter 32

"Put your backs into it," Duke Gideon Kaebal screamed at the weary soldiers. The veins in his neck strained against his skin, mottled red with fury.

The camp hummed with energy, as healthy soldiers sprinted from one wounded man to the next, patching them up as best they could. Convinced they were trying to appear busy and steering clear of him, he occasionally spit out insults that did little to vent his fury, but quickened the men's strides.

Kneeling by one of the *Maveth*, he ran an ungloved hand lightly over the cold stone. He knew where the creatures came from; only one person alive could have created such beasts as these. The Overlord. His father. No one else had the experience, or interest, in delving into the foul arts of the dead. None of his brothers or sisters could stand the touch of a spirit. Over the last few years, it had become clear to Gideon that his father did, indeed, delve deep into the forbidden mysteries.

"Father take you," he growled as he stood, putting the black, lambskin glove on.

Three passing soldiers, hauling one of the dead, jumped and, refusing to meet his fiery gaze, lowered their heads and quickened their pace.

"Hector," he called softly.

Hector tucked the dented helmet under his arm and stood--back straight, legs together, fist over heart--to the Duke's side. "My Lord?"

Gideon turned, taking in the partially crushed helmet, and raised a single brow.

Hector colored, but said nothing.

"Who would you say was the target of the *Maveth*?"

Coughing to clear his throat, Hector thought for a breath, then, "It must have been the Red, sire."

Gideon nodded, turning to the creature once more, though his eyes barely noticed it. He was too lost in the complexities of the 'Az board he had destroyed earlier. If only he could examine its stories once more! There was no time now, not with Chanoch due before the Quarter Sun. Mentally, he marked off each piece and its location. Everything was in place, no pieces overlapped, or even touched, the edges of their Rounds. Everything was in place. This should not be happening! There could only be one explanation.

"He was watching us." He did not like the repercussions that could have. While his father's punishments to his children were never blatant, or permanently damaging, they were still to be feared. Gideon had too many plans in motion, too much riding on this moment. He knew that he was right.

"If I may, my Lord. If we wait a while longer, would he not pass on?"

The question, innocent enough, sent a bolt of lightning through Gideon. Some thought swam just out of reach. Something in the question held the answer.

He spun to face Hector. Anxious, and unable to hide it from his voice, he asked, "What did you say?"

Hector shifted, one hand scratching at the stubble on his chin, while the other tapped the dent in his helmet. "He would live with the Father and his precious spirits if we did not make it in time, would he not?"

Of course! "Release the children. Not so close that Chanoch would discover them. Better yet, take them to the pass and leave them there."

"Sire? Won't the Overlord have his revenge?"

"As you said, he will pass without our aid. We will, however, complete one of the duties he set us upon. Elena must die."

Nearly choking, Hector erupted into a fit of coughing that was spurred on by the icy air. When he regained himself, he searched his Duke's face for signs of madness.

"Relax, Hector," Gideon said, a smile creeping over his face. "My father has been playing us the entire time. He intends to pass to the Father's realms, but I do not believe he intends to do so as a spirit. He needs Elena's power, and that of the children. He must not have them."

"And the girl?"

As Gideon gave his orders, Hector's eyes wavered for the shortest breath before returning to meet the Duke's gaze. He saluted crisply and turned, his boots cutting a sharp swath through the snow.

Chanoch and his small army stopped thirty paces away from camp. Gideon checked the angle of the sun and nodded. Chanoch always was one for punctuality.

He motioned for Hector to accompany him, mounted his midnight black stallion, and rode to meet his brother.

"I see you, brother," Chanoch said as he pulled alongside Gideon and Hector. "May the Mother bless you and keep you. May the Father forget you."

Gideon returned the formal greeting and held his hand out. They clasped forearms, Chanoch's greaves bruising Gideon's unarmed wrist. His grip stayed steady; his face betrayed no hint of the pain. He would not give his brother the pleasure.

Releasing the grasp, Gideon turned his horse and waited. "I'm sure you could use some spiced wine to warm the bones. Please join me in my tent. We can discuss formalities there." He kicked his horse and trotted off without waiting for a reply. Chanoch would follow--tradition demanded it--and he was ever the one for tradition. Clinging to the old ways would be his undoing.

As they rode past the children's empty tent, Gideon noted a few new cuts in the silk walls. He made a note to reward Hector later.

Through the edge of his vision, Gideon watched his brother survey the camp. They were opposites in nearly every way. Why does he insist on wearing that heavy armor? He has plenty of commoners around him to fuel any protections he might need.

Chanoch halted at the doorway to the tent, noted the slashes, and looked around, taking in the wounded and the fallen tents. He turned to Gideon, his eyes narrow and intense.

"You have not brought your wars to my realm, have you?"

"I am afraid that I have. I was bringing the children to father, and it seems their special duties were frowned

upon by a few of the old militia. They followed me through the pass and ambushed me as the sun woke."

"A few men did this?" Chanoch asked, sweeping an arm to encompass the entire camp.

"They had a woman with her."

As Chanoch laughed, a roaring guffaw that shattered the quiet morning, Gideon said, "She wears the Red."

Chanoch's laugh stopped in mid-guffaw, and his face grew serious.

"I had no warning of her presence," Gideon continued.

"The children?"

"Gone. The rebels have taken them. No doubt heading home by the tunnels, or the pass."

"I do not like this."

Gideon placed his hand over his heart in mock sympathy. "I know how much you treasure the peace in your Duchy, brother. If you will let me, I will hunt them down. They have wronged me, and father, and for that they must pay."

"How will you handle her?"

"She is no longer with them. Seems the rebels are unable to stay under one command. One faction kidnapped her during the battle and headed deeper into your realm."

Chanoch's face flared to life as he pounded his gauntleted fists. "Go then, clean your mess. If I stumble across the Red, I will funnel her back to you. Otherwise..."

"I understand."

Chanoch mounted, and kicked his horse into a gallop, spraying snow-clouds behind him.

Gideon turned and barked orders to the nearest soldier to pack the camp. They had five days to kill Elena and her soldiers.

Chapter 33

Johan watched his son as he rubbed his unstrung bow with a small piece of lamb-skin at the edge of a fire, alone. Tears welled in his eyes, but he forced them back.

He pulled his cloak tight about him to ward off the chill, and strode to the fire. He kicked a log closer to Rickward and sat, stretching his legs and rubbing his hands in front of the flames. For several breathes he sat in silence, refusing to look at his son. When it was clear that the boy would not speak first, Johan said, "The Duke will be hunting us."

Rickward nodded, hanging the bow between two branches to let it dry. He took to the cow-gut string with rough energy before slowing to the same gentle care he had given his bow. "For the next five days we will have enemies at both our front and back."

"We be having a good start on the Duke, at least. He would have been forced to wait until the morning before meeting with Chanoch."

"Why would he take your wife?"

Johan bristled. He forced himself to calm, locking the emotion in an iron crate at the depths of his soul. So many things locked there... he knew someday they would force their way free, but not today, he prayed to the Mother. Not today.

"Pierce convinced me I could be trusting him," he mused.

"Do you trust Pierce?"

"With my life, many a time over."

Silence filled the space between them for uncounted breaths before Rickward broke the silence. "Why do you fight, when nothing has changed?"

Johan turned to his son and found his gaze met by the boy. Rickward held his gaze, searching for some answer in their depths. Perhaps he needed a reason to hope, to trust?

"When I started, I be running from my own ghosts."

"Your brother."

He nodded, drinking the air slowly in. How many years had it been since he had thought of this? How many times had he tried to find the words to tell his father he was sorry before he had given up and left home to join the Rebellion? He had locked the memories so tightly away that even these associated memories would not come. Yet, the day played brilliantly across his mind's eye, glaring painfully.

"He be so young, so full of energy and enthusiasm. He be chasing a butterfly. Bright orange with black stripes forming a winking eye across its back. I remember thinking it must be drunk. It weaved about so unsteadily, so much like Da. Collin chased after it, laughing as the dog ran circles around them.

"By the Father, it had been a terrible day. My temper be straining to get out. I be practicing with my bow. I yelled at Collin to stay back. Two times, maybe three. I be angry that he wouldn't listen. I shouted. I threatened. Finally, he turned around and ran out of the way, chasing that cursed butterfly. I brought the bow up and sighted, focusing on the target, forgetting all else. Mother, I should be knowing better, I should have

watched him longer, waited until I be sure he was out of the way.

"As I loosed the arrow, I watched, horror filling me as the butterfly flew across the target, followed by Collin. I couldn't say a word. I just stood there, horrorstruck, as the arrow be hitting him in the chest."

Unable to hold them back, tears slid down his face, slowing as the cold of the air thickened them, and, eventually, froze them in his mustache. He swallowed hard, sniffled, and tugged his pipe free of his belt.

"Da never was one to be forgiving. He took to beating me damn near every night until I be leaving for the Rebellion. It seemed a good place to run. I be good with the blade, and, just maybe, death would be a release from the guilt and pain that tortured me.

"Three years we be fighting, spending our nights sharing memories both painful and glad around the campfires. I realized we all be having our own demons that haunt us. Seems every one of us be running from something. Guess I decided to be playing big brother to all these other men and women."

He chuckled. "Guess my ego be growing with my skills. Turned out I be a passable leader, and there be always someone bigger that be playing the bully."

"And yet you won nothing during those three years. The Duke still reigns, as does the Overlord. They still bring their curses to life among the people."

"Do you truly be believing that? Nothing's changed? Maybe on the outside it do appear that way, but for the last twelve years most of us sleep well at night. We know he be having second thoughts before raiding a village for his tainted Breath. Those three years be buying us twelve of peace. Mostly."

Rickward watched him, weighing. For several breaths he sat there, nothing moving but his eyes, and then he nodded. "Why did you give me up?"

Johan knew this question would turn up at one time or another. He tried to brace himself, to prepare, but still found himself without the words he needed. What could he say? What excuse could ever be good enough for giving one's child away?

"They said you be dying, that you wouldn't be living the moon through one more cycle. When he came..."

"Betzalel." Rickward spat.

Nodding, Johan continued. "He had to be convincing me I be not dreaming, first. When he did, though, he be telling me such stories as to what the future might hold. They be only guesses, but his logic made sense. I tried to find holes in his arguments, the Mother knows I tried. I couldn't. Everything he said be following on the heels of the Overlord's actions. Every reason I fought the Rebellion for was there, a hundred-fold.

"When he told me your Mam was the only one able to be stopping it, I damn near choked from laughing so hard. She be such a gentle soul, your Mam. I couldn't imagine her ever striking no one. But then I remembered the stories of her Mam. Stories of the Breath. She near to razed the entire village. He explained a bit about how certain families be having an easier time using the Breath than others. He explained how their affinities with the Breath showed true through the color of their hair."

"She wears the Red," gasped Rickward.

Johan nodded, his eyes moist once more. "Aye. That she does. He be needing someone with the blood to be able to come, physically, into the world. They said you be dying." His voice broke. Clearing his throat he tried

to continue, but the words were hard to hear through an emotion-wracked voice. Unable to stand it, he stood and turned away, covering his face with his hands. He would not cry. Not now. Not when he could be accused of manipulating the boy with his emotions.

Breathing deep, he reined in his emotions and said, "If you be up to it, take three men and taper the Duke's forces."

Behind him, he heard the boy stand, and the bow slip from its branches. "I can't. I have other obligations that have waited too long."

Anguish tore through Johan, threatening to burst into wails. He burst from the fireside, refusing to let his boy see him break down.

Damn those Wolves! Damn them to hell!

Raven watched as Johan stood and turned his back to the boy. Would he prove true to the family, or would his rearing pose problems?

He sifted through all that he knew of the Wolves. They were a small group, tight-knit, and tight-lipped. They wore caution like a brand. Whenever someone posed enough of a problem, enough money would change hands, filtered through the proper channels, and within weeks the problem was gone. A very simple solution to problems that were, quite often, simple misunderstandings. The Wolves did not involve themselves in the morals of the arguments. They were merchants, plain and simple. It just so happened that their product was not fruits, grains, or rare gems. They sold death. There were none better.

He hoped the boy had not yet joined the family. If he had, removing this problem would not be so easily taken care of. He did not think he would survive the encounter. That changed nothing, though. The stakes were too high to allow a boy and his father's misplaced sentiments to get in the way.

Johan turned, cursing loud enough to be heard even in the trees where Raven watched and waited.

Johan's massive figure strode toward him. His face masked in shadows, the fire behind him making Johan glow, the burly man met his gaze in passing, and nodded once.

Such a simple movement, that nod, yet the energies that exuded from his friend forced a shudder to ripple through Raven's body. His shoulders sagged under the weight of his new assignment. Breathing deeply, he slipped noiselessly out of the trees to follow Johan to the harsh glare of their campfire. He did not sleep, though he knew the last few weeks had left him close to exhaustion. Pulling a log to the edge of the fire's reach, he sunk into a trance, wrapping calm around him like a thick wool blanket.

Wolf must be told of his brother's latest recruit, and they would decide how to handle it. He knew he was not the only one that would feel the waves of repercussions from this action.

Why could we have not found him sooner? What curse had been placed on the births of Johan and Elena that they should have to suffer this, too? He called to the Mother, seeking her aid, her wisdom. He lashed out at the Father, trying to coerce his anger free enough to take the curse from his friends and place it on him. They had suffered enough. But the Mother and Father were quiet: no answers whispered on the winds; no anger broke free in the clear night skies. The Mother watched from her perch within the moon, her face shining down on them. Spiting them.

Resigned, he lowered his eyes, wiping the tears away with a frozen glove. He coaxed the log's fading life to smooth and shape underneath him, molding it into an almost comfortable seat. It would be the first of many long nights, he was afraid.

Chapter 34

Elena rocked in the horse that Rafe had tied her to. The wind threw her cloak back. Snow and sleet pelted her numb face. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she knew she was too cold. She knew that her skin must surely be tinted blue now, but her mind was as numb as her hands, and she did not care. Everything was gone now.

She had struggled against Rafe only once, and that was when he tore her from her daughter. Slung over the horse, she had pounded her fists into his chest, as she twisted around the saddle horn. She had screamed to take her back, begged and pleaded and cried to hold her daughter once more.

Brave Jocelyn. She was too young to die for her Gram's crimes. Too innocent to suffer at the hands of the Duke. Yet, she had died trying to protect her mother.

Her daughter's bravery sat in the pit of her stomach like a net full of stones, weighing her soul down into the depths of depression. She had been so proud as she watched Joss struggle against the Duke's Breath.

Would things have been different if she had acted quicker? After all her refusals, if she had followed her own mother's path into the Breath, could she have saved Joss? Or would her life be in flames again? The questions circled through a fog of thoughts, drifting slower than winter molasses, twisting, stretching, snapping back into their original shape, nothing ever resolved.

Rafe drove them forward with the fire of a hunted man. And hunted, she guessed, he was. The Duke would not forgive him his prize.

Mental fogs cleared for a breath at the thought of the Duke. What was it he had said when he confronted her? Reaching a hand through the thick fog, she shoved sorrows aside and sifted through memories. Finally, she grabbed one, examining it quickly before it slipped away.

... I am just the errand boy, really. It is the Overlord who demands the children. It is he that wishes to drain them of everything to fuel his mad passions...

Another thought passed through her fingers, staying only slightly longer.

We can stop the Overlord. The children can go free.

Stop the Overlord? Her? Had the Duke finally stepped over the ledge into the chasm of madness? She was nothing to the Overlord. Nothing to the Duke. She held no secrets, no powers, that could stop a thousand year old *Chiy'el*. She was a simple chandler. They were all rumors, all of them. They were simple candles, just tallow and string. Nothing more. It was the mood, not magic. She was nothing. She was just a common woman. She was just...

... so tired. Her frozen bones ached at every jounce of the horse beneath her. Her mind was so tired, her skin so numb. The cold bit into her, raping her of all emotion, all thought. Her hands were tied to the saddle horn. Her legs were strapped to the saddle with a rope that cut into her waist. She had just lost something... someone...

Mother's mercy, she was so tired. Where was she?

"Father's balls, Terence," Rafe said as he pulled Elena from the horse, and wrapped her in two different saddle blankets, briskly rubbing her arms and back, trying to warm her. "Do you want her to die?"

Terence chuckled quietly. "By the Hells, it ain't like you gonna let any of us have a piece."

Rafe laid her gently down, resting her head on a saddle bag, and then turned on the rat-faced man. His entire body appeared relaxed, his voice quiet, to all appearances a man without a care. His men knew better.

Terence paled at the steely look in his eyes.

"Has the whisky taken all your memories? You do remember who she's to be delivered to, I trust."

Terence nodded slowly, fear mingling across his ratty features. He rubbed his hands together, trying to push away the sudden chill.

Rafe stepped closer, his voice a silken whisper. "And do you think the Overlord would appreciate his gift dead?"

"I'll get more blankets?"

"That would be good, yes." He turned back to Elena, and resumed warming her. He watched her face as he did, struck by her beauty. Except for her auburn hair, she was nearly the image of his wife back home in the Fire Palace, where he had served six years in the Overlord's Salamander Guard, before being sent on this mission nine months ago.

When he had first seen Elena in Harts Haven, she had been filled with such strength, though he had never dared to chance talking with her. The Overlord had made his orders clear at the time: find the woman and report back. No interferences. So he had watched her and her daughter for three days, found that the Rebellion hero was a drunk, and that neither woman appeared skilled in the Breath, though village gossip hinted at all sorts of dark secrets buried within her shop. He had found none, just wax and wicks, a few simple herbs. The Overlord had no concerns where she was involved.

Her eyes twitched in sleep, faster and faster, and he wondered what she was dreaming about. He asked himself the same questions he asked when watching his own wife, Sarah, as she slept beside him. What nightmares filled her thoughts? Was he one of the nightmares?

He closed his eyes, willing the memory of his wife's face away. "Sarah," he whispered, "Forgive me. This one last task, then we can leave the Palace. He promised me, and I think this time he means it."

Behind him, Terence cleared his throat.

Roughly, Rafe grabbed the blankets and set to wrapping Elena's nearly frozen body. She had to stay alive.

"Just this one more thing, my love."

The fire coursed around her Mam, as Elena watched from the brambles. They were thicker this time: long, red-tipped thorns stretching out to her, straining to reach her, tear her. But she was careful. Slowly, ever so slowly, she adjusted her position, trying to watch her Mam and the Duke, but the steam enveloped them again, wrapping them safely from sight.

She pulled the briars apart, forming an arch, and crept through. She could feel their hatred as they snagged at her tunic.

Suddenly, she saw the Duke, stepping his horse back through the steam. Where was her Mam? His face became clear. She froze, unable to breath. He was looking straight at her, his gaze piercing hers.

...I am just the errand boy...

No! He had brought his men in. He had ripped her friends from the arms of their parents. He had wielded the sword that dropped poor Billy and left him in the middle of the street to be trampled. She would not believe him.

The children can go free.

It was the Duke's face that spoke to her, but the voice was her Mam's.

"Mam," she cried out, her voice ripping with terror. "Mam!"

The children can go free.

She nodded, tears flowing from her young eyes. "Yes. They can go free." She knew it was true, it had to be true. Together, she and her Mam could help the children go free.

In a burst of flames the Duke's face melted away, droplets of melted skin--like the wax from a lit candle--slipped down his visage, pulling the skin away with it. Underneath, she saw her mother. But it was not her mother as she remembered her. It was the specter from the cavern, green light radiating outwards, casting a sickly glow through the rough blanket of steam and fog. There were no more bodies, no children on the street. The soldiers no longer followed the Duke's orders, but, instead, had melted into the fog, disappearing. The Duke no longer sat atop his huge, black stallion. There was just her mother's face, rotten skin flaking away like dried paint.

Her mother's voice was unchanged, the words the same, but the meaning somehow different. "The children can go free," her rotting Mam whispered to her, words lilting on the fog-drenched breeze.

Faster, much faster now, rotten chunks of skin flaked away, revealing another face below. She screamed, knowing the face, though she had never seen it before. It was a young boy, too young to wear the shadows of age along his jaw; bright red, coppery hair flowing with the mists.

Again, the familiar words, their meaning twisted once more. "The children can go free..."

The hair whipped in a sudden breeze and the face was Johan as she had first seen him. Newly washed, he was the most handsome man she had ever met, and not just because of the chiseled features and strong arms and chest that wrapped securely around her. He radiated strength and courage. He could keep her safe from all the words and stones the villagers might throw. She needed his courage then, every bit as she needed it now.

"Elena," he said, love permeating her name. "Free your children." As his face dissolved she saw a new confidence there. A confidence in her. He knew that she could do it. Somewhere deep within, she had the strength. She could feel it building, swelling with the dancing of...

... her daughter. Her beloved Joss danced before her, the wind dancing with her, twirling her cloak and hair into new patterns, lovely patterns, patterns that, perhaps, had never been seen before. Her daughter's gaze locked onto hers, filled with passion and anger and raging justice.

"Not me, Mam. Free your child." It was not the love drenched tone of Johan, or playing, knowing tone of the young boy. Jocelyn's voice held the hard edge of command. Where had she learned that? This was not a request, not a plea for help. This was an order.

"Free your child." The words startled the young Elena to her feet, mist crawling around her, soaking into her skin. Elena, older, as she must be outside of this place stood before her. Streaks of white cut the length of her hair; veins strained to break free of the thin flesh that covered her hands. She was old, but her spirit shone brilliant through her eyes.

The young Elena stood before the older vision of herself, mouth agape in awe. Such power, such confidence. That could be her. In the years to come, she could be this woman. She could be someone others would travel miles to ask advice of, not run away from with fear filling their eyes.

"Free your child." Now the voice was harsh, a clear reprimand. She looked up, and the realization smashed into her: this pride, this superficiality, was as much a trap as hiding here in the brambles, waiting for life to pass her by.

The little girl beamed in joy. She knew she was right. The older woman reached a hand out to her, running the tips of her fingers along the soft edge of her chin. She could feel the love that flowed from the older woman into her, filling her. Boldly, she met the woman's gaze and marveled at the pure, crystalline reflection of herself.

The older woman's hand stopped at the tip of her chin, but it was no longer Elena. In the blink of an eye she was Mam again. "I lost myself for you," she said. "Free yourself for them."

The words echoed through her, bouncing off her bones, colliding with one another as they grew stronger, stronger, until she felt she would burst.

Her Mam dropped her hand. It thudded into her fiery dress with the ring of finality, and she was gone, the mists gone with her.

Below her, the Duke sat atop his horse watching her, nodded to himself, and then gathered his men and the children.

Young Elena, her heart aching near to bursting, turned from the charred corpse of her mother and walked away. There was nothing she could do here. So she walked into the mists and...

... woke with a gasp of frozen breath.

She knew what she had to do.

Chapter 35

Johan squinted against the late Third Quarter sun as it bounced off of the snow, blinding. He glanced around, trying to clear his vision. Where was Rickward?

The men nestled in the snow covered trees and hedges, just outside of the small clearing. After camouflaging themselves with snow, they settled down for the wait. He nodded with approval. Even he had a hard time finding them, and he knew where they were.

Two of the three rear scouts had returned while they were breaking for lunch. What was left of the Duke's men were riding up hard on their rear. The third never returned.

"Curse you, boy," Johan muttered. "Where are you?" The twin oaks he had been stationed at appeared empty. Johan squinted, refusing to blink, as he searched the area around the tree where Rickward should have been.

"I knew I should not be trusting him." He started to spit an angry wad into the snow beside him, but caught himself in time, shaking his head gruffly. The Duke's men still outnumbered them three to one. Any mistakes would cost the men their lives.

The muted crunching of the horse's steps echoed gently through the woods. They were going slow, as he knew they would. When their forward scout had not returned, they would be on guard. They would be expecting a trap. He glanced at the center of the clearing, and smiled. They would not, however, be expecting Raven's surprise.

He watched as the horses came into view, tossing proud heads as their riders pulled them to a stop. His eyes swept the line of horses, three abreast, until they were lost in the thick blanket of trees that lined the clearing. He scanned the line again. Where was the Duke?

His eyes turned to Raven. He shrugged his shoulders ever so slightly, hoping he would understand.

In response, Raven went slack, his eyes still open but unfocused. For several breaths, he remained motionless while the enemy's horses shifted in the snow, the soldiers searching the clearing.

Johan's breath caught as he recognized the cocky man at the front of the line. The Captain. He would recognize the confidence of those sky blue eyes anywhere. Perhaps now he could repay the Captain for the troubles he had brought to his house. Now, he could take some small measure of payment for the loss of his daughter, and the trials that his wife was facing.

The Captain rose a hand, held it high for the beat of two slow breaths, then waved it in one abrupt circle.

Raven's head snapped up. He shouted the piercing battle cry among the *Nekodah*.

Johan surged forward, ordering the attack. The hairs on the back of neck made gooseflesh. He spun to meet his attacker, but slipped on the snow and ice.

A sword sliced through the air above him.

A sudden, angry whisper sped past his right ear. The arrow pounded into the soldier's throat. He was dead before he hit the snow.

Johan rolled and stood in one smooth motion. He looked across the clearing and found Rickward high in the trees, where his view was unobstructed. The boy nodded as he knocked another arrow, turned, and fired. The

soldier flew off his horse. Bones snapped as his own men's horses trampled over him.

Johan surveyed the Duke's men. A quick count confirmed his fears. He raced to the rear of the clearing, slashing at horses legs, and at soldiers, as he yelled for retreat. The Captain would have to wait.

His men responded quickly, spinning under attacks to lunge back the way they had come. As a group, they ran around the edges of the clearing, ready to spring to the trees if necessary.

He ran to the center of the clearing and stopped, feigning concern over his men. It worked.

The Captain laughed, his face shining with confidence, before kicking his horse into motion.

Johan knew his thoughts--could almost feel them--but he would not become the trophy this day. He held his ground until the last moment, his legs bent into springs waiting for release.

The Captain freed his sword from its scabbard, the bell-like warning echoing through the clamor. Behind him, several others followed, each hoping to share a part of the glory of capturing the Rebel leader.

Johan's gut screamed for him to run. He watched the horses breath explode in bursts; the Captain's sword wove small circles to the smooth rhythm of the ride.

Johan smiled as ice cracked below him.

He spun around, launching himself towards the safety of the woods.

"Coward!" roared the Captain, but his jeer cut short as ice snapped beneath his horse, echoing through the clearing like a lightning-struck tree.

Johan ran faster. He had waited too long.

A blanket of silence fell over the battle as curious animals stopped to judge their danger. For one long breath Johan felt as if he were alone, but the moment was shattered as the breaking ice roared. The horses added their terrified screams to the symphony of death.

The ice shifted under him.

Praying for Mother's Mercy, he leapt, feeling the ice fall away underneath his push. The trees came closer and closer, their scrub brush looming ever larger before him as he flew towards them. He flung his sword ahead of him to keep from losing it to whatever depths Raven's lake held. His arms flung forward, reaching, straining, stretching. He landed hard onto the wet snow.

Several small cracks spread out around him, a spider's web that grew and grew until, at last, it stopped. He held his breath, not daring to move, and focused on the feeling of the ice below him. Would it hold?

Finally, he let his breath out and crept along the ice, pausing at the smallest shift, the tiniest sounds. The nearest scrubs were only five strides away. Slowly he slid his arms along the slush in front of him, digging his fingers in, sliding his legs behind him, and pushed his way several hands closer to solid ground. Water pounded on top of the ice, soaking into his clothes. Twice more, three times, he crawled forward, before the ice gave.

He clawed his hands into the slush, praying he could find a grip solid enough to hold.

In large chunks the ice gave way, sinking quickly as the water grabbed it with soaking hands and hauled it under.

The water's icy maw bit into him with a fierceness he could not have imagined. His breath stopped short, stolen by the shock of the icy waters.

He clawed at the ledge, only to have it crumble in his grasp, the edges dissolving at the waters touch. He tried to kick, but gasped for air instead, his lungs burning with their own hunger. He flailed, trying to find something to grab onto, but found nothing.

He would not die like this. "I am not done, Mother," he cried.

As if in answer, his breath rushed back into him, searing cold, banishing the burning need. He kicked, pushing himself forward. As he tried to swim to the ledge, his body barely responding, his muscles tired and weak and frozen, he found himself laughing. "You be doing good, Raven. Too good."

He did not know how many breaths came and went, how many times he pushed against the cold that threatened to envelope him. He only knew he had to keep trying. Determination burned through him and, somehow, he managed to swim through the broken chunks of ice until he put one weak arm forward and felt a hand grab him and haul him onto shore.

Panting, freezing, he looked at the face of his rescuer. He had to know-- friend or foe? His mind went numb as he saw the familiar coppery hair, and laughed again.

He still did not know if it be friend or foe.

"How many?" Johan asked Pierce as he pulled the blankets tighter around him with shaking hands.

Pierce watched him shiver, concerned, before answering. "Three dead. A dozen wounded, but they're serviceable."

Johan exploded. "Damn it, Pierce. They be men, not tools." He shook his head fiercely, angry more at his own foolishness than Pierce's words. He took a deep breath. A wave of cold wracked through his body. He needed warmth. "Get me some whiskey."

Pierce nodded to the closest soldier, who sprinted off in search of a bottle.

"I be cutting it a bit short, didn't I?"

Pierce nodded. "That you did. Damn near all the Duke's men are dead, though. Those that survived the water, or avoided it, we took care of quickly. Thank your boy, here, for much of that. Never seen a better shot."

Rickward stood on the fringes, ignoring the cold and watching them with careful eyes.

"I thought you be unable to help," Johan said quietly, holding the boy's steely gaze.

Rickward shook his head. "I said I had other responsibilities. Never said I'd let good men die." He shrugged. "Besides, it seems there's always someone playing the bully."

Johan watched him for two shaking breaths before nodding. The warmth that radiated from his heart did

nothing for the cold that soaked his bones.

The soldier ran back, and handed the half-empty bottle of whiskey to Johan.

Slipping one hand out from under the blankets, he grabbed the bottle and lifted it to his lips. His eyes met Rickward's as he did, forcing him to pause. Too many years had been spent in the grasp of this particular demon. Too many years.

"Father's balls." He handed it back to soldier, untouched. "That be only half the Duke's men. Where do the rest be?" he asked, turning back to Pierce.

"We found a half-dozen fleeing. Two are still with us."

"Good. You be questioning them, yet?"

"Aye. One was particularly eager."

Johan's brow raised involuntarily. "Why?"

"Said he knew they were wrong since Harts Haven. Wouldn't say more, though."

"What's his name?"

"Bardulf. Sound familiar?"

Johan smiled. "Aye, that it do."

Johan strode over to Bardulf, cursing as the blankets crowded his legs and tried to trip him. Every time he kicked them out of his way, they managed to land under his feet again. If he did not think it would kill him, he would have thrown them down to rot.

Bardulf was tied firmly to a wide oak, his arms stretched out behind him. He looked at Johan with a face kept purposefully blank. A bit worse for wear, but Johan recognized him. "Why?"

"He's only got five days before..."

"Why turn?" Johan interrupted. It was the only question that mattered; any other wrinkles could be ironed out later.

"He played a good hand, the day I was conscripted. Made it sound an honorable thing, defending Lord and country. I didn't sign on for slaughter."

There was no pause before he answered. The change in directions had not caught him off guard. Most likely he was telling the truth. Johan believed him. He did not let the steel from his own eyes, though. "Why my wife and daughter?"

"Children were needed for the Overlord's Breath. Your wife was a threat."

Johan laughed. "Elena, a threat?"

Betzalel swallowed hard. "She wore the Red."

"But she never did nothing with it. Didn't even be knowing how it worked. How did she be a threat?"

"Don't know. We were never told. You know how it works."

Johan nodded. "I understand. They be a bit out of the way of the normal collection route."

"They wore the Red."

"And he be knowing a Red was in Harts Haven?"

"Two. Stories mention an earlier engagement. Years ago."

"Her mother..."

Bardulf shrugged, wincing as the ropes dug into his wrists. "Could have been. We weren't told."

His story held. He never once eyed Johan with the wary appraisal most captives did, measuring their chances at escape.

"You be hesitating at my door. Against your Captain's orders."

He nodded. "Aye. He was green. It was stupid order. Never would listen to nobody." His blood-tinged spittle arced through the air to splatter on the crusted snow.

Johan watched him for several long breaths, waiting, weighing. He was a good soldier, and would tell him when he was making a mistake. Johan respected that. It kept him honest. Never once during the long silence did Bardulf shift uncomfortably, guiltily. Johan smiled.

"You be knowing who I am?"

"Aye."

"And can you stomach being a Rebel?"

A wicked smile split the leathery face. "Oh, aye."

Johan slid the sword free of its sheath, shrugging free of the blankets, and spun. The sword sliced through the rope only a fingers width from Bardulf's hand. Reversing his spin, he sliced the rope on the other side of the tree, sheathed his sword, and held a hand out to Bardulf.

"Welcome to the Rebellion."

Bardulf grabbed his forearm in the traditional greeting and hauled himself up. The ring of soldiers stepped back. Johan knew they were being cautious, and he approved. He was surrounded by good men.

"Now, what can you be telling us of where the Duke is hiding? After all, there be only four days left."

Bardulf's face grew grim at the question. He tucked his hands behind his back, and stood at attention. "He's passed us by now. Not hiding, sir. Hunting."

Instantly, the cold that had filled Johan fled, chased by a growing fire of anger. "Hunting who?"

"Elena."

Chapter 36

For a breath, all was confusion. Soldiers scurried around Elena: rolling simple canvas tents into tight tubes; covering campfires with snow; checking the saddles on the horses.

A beam of morning sun lanced the snow several paces in front of her, blinding her as it reflected off the smooth, white surface. Her hands were pulled behind her back, a rope biting hard into her flesh. She gagged on the sweat-soaked rag that was tied around her mouth, biting hard into the corners of her lips.

She turned her head, trying to remember where she was. None of the faces were familiar.

"Cap'n. She wakes." The skinny man had stopped packing the tent in mid roll to watch her with bright, beady eyes.

A tall man, every bit as graceful as her Johan, strode briskly past the rat-faced man, patting him on the back. "You may just have earned your keep, Terence."

Spots still covered her vision from the sunlight, and she could not make out his face. Something about the voice tugged at her memories.

He knelt next to her and leaned in close. His eyes glistened with concern and joy. "My dear Elena, you have no idea how glad I am to see you awake at last."

That face. She knew that face.

She tried to speak, but could not make anything remotely like words worm their way past the gag.

The Captain watched her, holding her gaze as he spoke. "I know what you can do. I don't know how it works, but I can't take any chances. Will you promise me on your husband's life not to harm me or my men? If I even get an itch that you're trying something, I'll cut your tongue out. Understand?"

I'm afraid your Johan is no longer alive.

He had said the words to her. When?

With a jolt, she sat upright, the memories flooding over her. Joss was dead! Tears welled up behind closed eyes, but she fought them back. This man could not see her weak. Everyone she cared about was dead, and she knew what she had to do.

She slowed her breathing until she found a semblance of calm.

I'm afraid your Johan is no longer alive.

She nodded at the bastard sitting in front of her.

He leaned in to her warily, reached around her head with one hand, the other resting on the dagger resting on his leg. She had not even seen him draw it. He pulled at the knot, sliding it around to her face. Leaving the dagger in easy reach, he used both hands to untie the gag.

He tucked the rag into the back of his belt, reached down, and punched through the top layer of snow, digging in and presenting a handful of snow to her.

She looked at him, questioning.

"It will take a bit of the taste away."

She nodded, and leaned over to him, eating the snow out his hands. Humiliation burned through her, but she had been tempered by years of abuse at the hands of the villagers, and would not let this embarrassment get in her way.

The snow tasted good, and the instant the first crystals melted on her tongue, she realized she did not know how long it had been since she had had a drink. She ate it all, leaving a thin layer of ice across his hands. She wanted more, needed more, but she would not lick it from his hands.

Straightening, she looked him in the eye with a detached coldness she had never felt before.

"You said he be dead."

His smooth face crinkled in confusion. "Pardon me?"

"On horseback, you said my Johan be dead. When you be kidnapping me."

"Ah, yes. That. Well, at the time, I believed it so."

"What be changing your mind?"

"He's following us. That's why we're breaking camp in such a hurry this morn. Seems he made a bit of headway overnight."

She nodded her understanding, and watched the men hustle around her. She knew why he would keep her guarded, and why she would be feared. The fires of her mother's death danced ever stronger through her memories this morning.

"Where do we be going?"

He cleared his throat and stood, but did not sheath the knife. Under thin black brows, he watched her reaction. "The Overlord wants you."

Stunned at her good fortune, she met his icy gaze. "Then we should be going before we be detained again."

His gaze darted back and forth between her eyes, searching for the trap. Finding none, he shrugged, and then reached a hand out to help her stand before realizing her hands were still bound.

He started to step around her, but she reached up, and waited for him to offer his hand once more.

A single brow shot up, but he took her hand, and helped her up.

After helping her mount, Rafe called for the soldiers, now mostly packed, to mount up. "Whatever is not ready, leave it."

Walking back to the roll and blankets where Elena had spent the night under a lean-to, he rummaged through the blankets, stopping as the rope that had bound her fell to the snow, writhing like a snake in midair.

He knelt, grabbed the broken rope by one end, slowly raising it off the ground. Leaning closer, he twisted the rope until he could examine its end.

He tossed it away, the bitter acid of fear burning his throat.

The sooner he handed Elena over, the better. He felt like a man being squeezed into an invisible net, knowing it was there but unable to find it before it caught him in its clutches and squeezed the air from his lungs.

He grabbed the blankets quickly, not bothering to roll them. As he strode away, he risked one last glance back at the rope lying still on the snow, and then shook his head. He distributed the blankets as he ran to his horse.

"Mothers Mercy," he whispered. "She has embraced it like he said she would."

Elena rode in silence, allowing no emotion to show on her face. Her heart tore at itself, ripping and shredding as her mind raced in circles. Johan is alive. He is chasing them. She should be glad, relieved, that the death wale she had heard as she was dragged away from the Duke's camp was not his. Part of her knew it was his voice. Part of her refused to believe it was not his. She had heard the same scream on the day he had buried her son.

Rage filled her, shattering the confines she had hidden it in all these years. How dare he! She had never been allowed to look one last time at her only son. She tried to convince herself, like she had so many times in the past, that it was better to remember him with a gurgle of joy and a broad smile as he had looked up at her, grabbing at her fingers.

She forced the thought away, and held on to the rage. She would need it for what was to come. With any luck, she would not see Johan again before she had to do what she knew she must. Embracing the rage, reveling its burn, she pushed the problem away.

The men rode in silence, eyes constantly scanning the woods. Their movements stiff and wary, they tried to break the stress with crude jokes. For a moment, nervous laughter whispered on the wind, until one would look her way and the silence would return.

They were well organized, though half appeared little more than farmers. They rotated scout duty, one leaving as the previous one rode back in to report. No names were called, no signals that she could see. They knew their duties, and followed them without question. But they were afraid.

She watched Rafe, as she finally heard him called, most of all. He had a grace and confidence that spoke of great skill, and she had no doubt where his primary skills lie. The men all respected him, but she did not know if it was out of love or fear. He rode in silence, risking an occasional glance at her.

When she caught his gaze, she smiled, and he would nod, and then turn back. Something ate at him, but she had no idea what. All she could be sure of was the concern that warmed his eyes as he watched her back. Concern and something else. Sorrow, she thought.

He was taking her to the Overlord. Why? What could he possibly want with her? It was her mother that had used Breathing against his men. Not her.

Whatever he wanted from her, she knew what she wanted of him, and did not think their respective plans would mesh.

They stopped at the end of Second Quarter, the sun high overhead. Rafe rode to her, a softness to his manner that she would not have imagined from him.

"We must make the rest short. We're still being followed. The scouts say there is a stream not fifty paces to our west," he said, lowering his gaze to the ground. "I thought that, perhaps, you might like to wash."

She sighed at the thought of washing the grit and grime of her travels off. It had been too long. She nodded. "Are you not afraid I might be escaping?"

He looked back at her, his eyes determined. "If that is what you wanted, you could have done that before."

So, he knew.

She looked at the sun, one hand curled over her brow to deaden the light. It was too straight overhead. She could not figure out which way west was. She lowered her hand in frustration. She should have paid more attention while they rode.

His smile said he understood. He pointed in the right direction.

As she nudged the horse towards the stream, she heard him fall in behind her.

"I be thinking I can wash myself."

"Aye, I know that. I'm just here to make sure the others know it, too."

She waited until they were out of hearing distance and then slowed until he was beside her. "Do they know what they be doing?"

"Only some of it," he said, shaking his head. Pain flashed across his face, then was gone, wiped away by sheer force of will. "They know only that he wants you. Not why."

She turned to him. "And do you be knowing why?"

It was several breaths before he answered. "I saw the rope." He looked up suddenly, and turned to her with a smile. Leaning forward, one arm stretched out as he gave her a mock bow. "Your bath, my Lady. I am truly sorry that it could not be a temperature you would find more to your liking."

She let him change the subject, sensing a darker, painful secret at play within the man. As she watched the stream cut a path through the snow, she shivered, but there was no way she would miss the opportunity to be clean again "I be thinking I might be able to do something about that."

They dismounted, and he turned away, claiming to watch for the others.

She smiled after him before continuing through the snow, and stopped before she reached the slush at the edge of the stream. No sense falling into the water just yet.

What if the Breath did not work? She had to learn to control it before she reached the Overlord. She watched as the river pulled small pieces of ice back towards her home.

She slowed her breathing, and willed the Breath to come.

Nothing happened.

Panic clawed into her. The Overlord would have no problems controlling his.

Once again she relaxed. She didn't push, didn't force. She imagined her skin warming, a gentle fire flowing just beneath the surface. She imagined the heat forming a shield around her, warming the air and snow as it touched her. Her vision fogged over. She looked down at her wrinkled hands. It was not her vision that was fogging. Steam rolled off of her skin as the cold was heated to a fine mist.

A sad smile slipped into place as she removed her clothes and stepped into the water, careful to test each footing first so she would not slip on ice or moss. She felt the Breath fuel itself with a thin strand of life from within. Raven had tried to tell her she should not do that. It would kill her if she continued, but she refused to harvest the abundant life around her for her own simple pleasures. Maybe in a time of dire need, when something larger than herself was at stake, but not for this.

Keeping her back to Rafe, she cupped the water in her hands, running it over her. Steam billowed in clouds around her, but she did not care. The steam caressed her, seeping through her skin and warming her further. She felt her skin tingle with the odd mixture of cold and heat. It seeped into her muscles, easing the soreness and stiffness away.

"I had thought you would be younger," said Rafe.

She spun around, one arm covering her breasts and another cupped between her legs. She could not see him through the steam. "Turn around," she demanded. "I had thought you to be a more decent man, despite the kidnapping."

His chuckle mixed with the babbling of the water, sounding eerily pleasant. "Elena, I can't see a blasted thing through that blanket of steam. My Sarah always told me it was rude to speak to someone if you would not look in their face."

Abruptly, his words stopped. She could hear him tense, his breathing halting momentarily.

"And do your Sarah be proud of you?"

He did not answer. The words settled between them for bit before his breathing returned to normal. She could hear him pacing through the crusted snow. When he did speak again, his tone said that subject would be best forgotten. "I would not have thought Johan the type to settle with someone of your years."

"And just how old do you be thinking I am?"

"I meant no disrespect. You are, without any doubt, the strongest woman I have ever known."

The compliment caught her off guard. It had been many years since someone had said other than curses, much less handed so bold a compliment her way. She ignored it.

"You be a very strange man," she said, kneeling to grab some sandy grit from the bottom of the stream and scrubbing her body with it, digging it into skin, trying to scrub away years of emotional dirt. "With one breath you be handing me to the Overlord, and the next be handing me compliments."

Silence fell between them once more, and she paused in her washing to listen for him. No steps, no breathing, no sounds at all came from him. She shivered, but this time it was not due to the cold. She got the feeling that he could be a very dangerous man, indeed, if provoked.

"He said you would gain control of your Breathing before you reached him. He said it was a necessary thing, and I should do nothing to stop it. I thought you should know before we reach him."

The words halted her in mid scrub, both what they said and what they left for her discover. She heard him turn and walk several strides away. The scraping sounds she guessed to be him sitting against a tree.

The Overlord wanted her, and he wanted her at full strength. What could he be planning? Could he steal her powers? Or turn them against her somehow, twisting them until they only worked against her? So many things she did not know, so many skills that she did not have the time to learn.

Raven, where are you? Are you with my husband? Please, I beg of you, keep him away. I cannot be that strong.

Chapter 37

The icy wind whipped at Raven's hair and threatened to steal his cloak. The sun crept behind the trees, drenching the snowy forest with a blood-red hue. A bad omen if ever he had seen one.

They had ridden hard all day, never stopping, slowing the horses to a walk only when they needed to eat, or when Raven could convince Johan the horses needed rest. In truth, it was Raven who needed the time, though not to rest.

The stratagems put in place by the *Nekodah* when they were sent from the Temple two hundred years ago were playing out in front of him. He watched as layer upon layer of convoluted plans snapped into place, only to have new, unexpected layers shove their way in. He did not want to be in the middle of this. It was the reason he had not been home to *Raanamah*--the Untamed Lands--since the Rebellion.

Even as a young man, with so little experience with the minds of men, he had known this was wrong. Such complex manipulations of events left so much room for error, no matter how well thought out. Not to mention taking the control of someone's life away from them. So he left, hoping to avoid any part of it. Instead, he had become the only *Nekodah* with the necessary ties and opportunities to ensure it all went as planned. The Mother had a perverse sense of humor.

Johan rode on his left, his face frozen in a mask of fury as he sped after his wife. On his right, Rickward rode in silence.

Raven seethed in frustration. He would not harm this boy, no matter the order Wolf had given him last night. Their lives had already been torn too much by the *Nekodah's* manipulations. He would have no part in their pain, or happiness. From this day forward, he vowed to be a witness only. And a friend, should either let him when they found out his part.

Johan reined the horse to a stop, craning his neck for a better view. Behind him, the men followed his lead. Most kept their eyes trained on him, waiting for his next signal, but a few strained to follow his gaze. When he saw the triple pines intertwining in the shape of a dagger, the muscles along his back clenched tighter.

Raven blanched at the sight, and nodded his understanding. His fists white-knuckled the reins.

Johan raised a brow, silently asking if something was wrong. He did not believe him when Raven shook his head, but knew it would better be left until another time.

It seemed too much was being left for later these days.

He swung his gaze to Rickward, battling the warring emotions within. Too many things could go wrong when trust was strained like this. He would have to settle that question soon. Now was not the time, though. Now, they were out of time.

Rickward met his gaze and nodded, his face betraying no emotion.

"The Bone Yard," Pierce whispered, his voice chill with fear.

Without a word, the four drew their horses in close, Rickward staying to the outer edge like he always did. They leaned in closer, keeping their voices as quiet as they could.

"By the scouts report, they must be stopped inside the Yard," Pierce said, his voice shaking subtly.

"Why would they risk it?" Rickward wondered. "The Duke may have powers, but I don't think making peace with the dead is one of them."

"No," Raven answered. "That would be his father's power."

All eyes swung to him.

"Why do you be knowing?" Johan demanded. He watched as emotions waged their own battle across Raven's face. Several breaths passed before he saw the emotions reined in once more.

"Every river must come to an end, eh?"

"Raven," Johan warned.

Raven sighed, and then began. "It's one of the reasons I've never returned home since the Rebellion. They had to know what was causing the disturbances."

"Who's 'They'," Pierce asked.

"The *Nekodah* council of Elders. Over the last two-hundred years they've felt a wrongness growing. Almost as if the ground beneath us was sick. And getting worse."

"And they be doing nothing to cure it," Johan said. "Don't that be your jobs?"

Raven nodded sadly. "The council is not what it once was, since they were no longer allowed to be Temple Wardens. Most have survived with their beliefs intact, but in some? A wound that deep to the pride can take a long time to fester. When the boil finally pops, it oozes anger and hatred. The Council is divided. Yet all knew something was coming, something was wrong."

"So they be sending you, and others like you, to find it. What did you be finding?"

Raven shook his lowered head, his eyes touching the ground before meeting Johan's stony glare. "They sent no one. I said they were divided. When I left to help with the Rebellion, they were still arguing amongst themselves."

"Two-hundred years later, they're still fighting?" Pierce's disbelief was plastered clearly across his now red face. "They've known of this for that long, and haven't done anything about it?"

"They thought at first it was a dying forest, and tried to ignore it. Understand, it would come and go, would never stay for very long, until two years after the Rebellion started. All the time it enveloped the Overlord's lands. It is possible they hoped it would eat away at him. It has been growing ever since."

"So what did you be finding?" Johan demanded again.

"I can say only that it stems from the Overlord. Little more is known."

Johan watched him as the others waited. Something did not settle right. A whisper entered his mind, a subtle warning from the ghost inside of him.

"There be more," he said in a soft voice, knowing that whatever it was Raven was avoiding must also be

painful.

All eyes turned to Raven.

Raven nodded, his shoulders sagging. "Aye. There is more, my friend, though I'm not sure I'll be a friend when the telling is over."

"Let us be the judge," Pierce said, resting a hand on his shoulder. "We've seen too much of each other over the years, both good and bad, to kill it over a few words. Go on."

Raven looked to Johan. When Johan nodded that he should go on, he did. His voice was quiet, and even as close together as they were, Johan had to strain to hear the words.

"When the Nekodah were no longer welcome in the Temple of the Sun, ill feelings arose in some of the Elders. They wanted revenge, so they started planning. After many years, they finally devised the only plan they could. They would destroy the Temple and its guardians."

Raven watched their faces as he spoke, wondering which of these men would still trust him when this was over. Acid burnt his throat at the thought of losing the only men he had ever truly been able to call friends, but there could be no trust without honesty.

"They could never destroy the Temple," Pierce said. "All who have tried have failed. The guardians have rebuilt it at least a three times since it was built."

"They knew that. They knew they needed someone more knowledgeable in the Temple's design. There is only one who holds both the knowledge and the power necessary to bring it down."

"The Overlord," Pierce whispered.

Raven nodded. "Who better to destroy it than one who had helped build it? He had the personal knowledge of the guardians, had known them when they were still alive, and knew their weaknesses. He has more skill in the Breath than all of the remaining *Chiy'el* combined. There simply was no other choice."

"If the Overlord be wanting it destroyed," Johan said, "He'd be tearing it down long before. They could never have convinced him."

"Not directly, no." Raven paused, drawing a deep breath and letting it out so it formed a low whistle as it escaped his lips. "Have you ever watched a Raven eat?"

Confusion crossed their faces at the question, and they each shook their heads.

"They don't grab live meat and wrestle it to the ground. Instead, they find meat that is already dead, and steal it." He raised his gaze to meet Johan's and held on, unblinking. "The Overlord had experimented with the dead for centuries, trying to find some other way to extend his life. Every time, he failed. Every time, he gathered children to steal their life and fuel his own."

"The sickness you be seeing over the years."

"Yes. Twice, he nearly destroyed himself in the process. If he had somehow been deprived of the children he gathered, he would have died then, and we would not be here."

"Joss," Johan gasped.

Pushing himself past the tearing in his heart, he nodded. "Fifty years ago, he vowed to leave the dead alone. He needed to be lured into a reason to attack the Temple. It had to be something so important to him that he would break that vow. Something so tempting he could not resist." He swallowed hard, never once leaving Johan's gaze. "That's where you come in."

"I don't be understanding."

"When I found you seventeen years ago, you were nearly dead. Do you remember?"

Johan nodded stiffly.

"I was under the command of the Elders. During the week that I spent nursing your will to live back, I provided the lure the Overlord needed. I called on the spirit of one of your men, pleaded with him, until he agreed to become your Guardian. When it was done, the word was spread of your miraculous recovery. By the time it reached the Overlord's ears, it was distorted enough that he knew the answer he had been looking for all these years existed. Doubt still ate at him, though, so he watched you."

Pierce tore his gaze away from Raven, and turned to Johan. "I remember. From that day on, you never once lost a battle, until the very end. That's why we were drawn to you so. We knew, if we could just be around you, your glory would be shared with us. We hoped your inability to die would pull us through unscathed."

They watched in silence as Johan's face twisted in horror, then rage. He leapt from his horse, diving straight into Raven, pulling him from his own mount. When they collided on the ground, Raven was on bottom, taking the weight of Johan's knee in his chest. Before he could move, Johan's hands were around his neck, squeezing hard enough to hurt, not kill.

"The ghosts that be haunting me--they be your fault! Twelve years I be drinking away a problem that you be giving me. How dare you be playing with my life that way? What be giving you the right?"

Raven tried to answer, but could not. Unable to force the words past his throat, all he could do was grunt. And that just infuriated Johan all the more.

"My son and daughter be dead from your cursed meddling. My wife be on her way to die in some fool cause she never had a chance in. Do that be you, too? Did you be doing that? Will you be responsible for their deaths, too? How many before you be done? How many until you be satisfied?"

Pierce and Rickward were on him, grabbing his arms and pulling them loose. Johan fought, straining hard, nearly slipping free several times. The boy was stronger than he looked.

A number of the soldiers gathered around, swords drawn, but their shifting eyes and wary stances told Raven they did not know what they should do. Good, they would not skewer him as he tried to stand.

Raven pushed himself up, rubbing his throat. He had known this might happen, had known to expect the worst. And he had not even told them everything, yet.

Standing, he pulled his wits together and faced the still struggling Johan. "Your son is not dead."

For a breath, Raven watched Johan struggle harder, against himself this time, not the two men holding him. He knew that Johan had his own demons, and it was as much trying to run away from them, as it was to tear Raven apart, that he now struggled.

As quick as it started, the fight fled from Johan. He sagged in their arms, not even bothering to pull himself free. Gently, they laid him down. His back wrenched in wracking sobs, his face buried in his arms, yet he made no sound.

Raven walked to him, and knelt by his side, resting a timid hand on his back. Leaning close, he whispered, "It is true we would not be here now, if the Council, and myself, had not touched your life so. It is also true that your son would not be here, and your wife would never have known the years of happiness she did."

Johan's sobs grew stronger, but Raven did not relent. He continued, his voice quiet, yet firm. "How many more lives would have been lost to these foolish manipulations, had you not been there to save them. You know the answer, though you refuse to acknowledge it. Do you not?"

For many breaths, Johan did not answer. When he did, his voice was hoarse and rough. "Aye." He rolled himself over and into a sitting position as Pierce shuffled the soldiers away, giving them what solitude they could.

Brushing the snow from his clothes, and scrubbing roughly at his eyes, Johan turned to Rickward. "I must be knowing. Why did you be refusing to use your skills for us?"

No emotion showed on the boy's face as he answered. "I did use them to help you, just not in the way you wanted. I never said I would not help you, just that I had other obligations that had waited too long."

"That be no answer, boy. Do you be a Wolf, or not?"

"No. My other obligation was you."

The tension cascaded off of Raven's shoulders.

Johan stared at his son for several long breaths before nodding and turned back to Raven. "And what do your plans be now? What manipulations do you be twisting into play now?"

"Only one: your wife must come to her powers and confront the Overlord. Without her, we will all die."

Johan laughed, a brusque, hearty sound that seemed to melt the tensions all around. "Do that be all, then? Just get the girl trained and delivered in--what do we be having left?--two days before Chanoch starts his Cleansing?"

"We can not force her to do this. We can only make sure she lives long enough to have the chance. The decision must be hers. The risks are too great for it to be otherwise."

Johan arched a brow at him, but Raven answered before he could get another word in. "I am no longer with the Council. We parted ways some twelve years ago."

Johan's voice turned cold. "Then what do you be doing trying to get my wife killed?"

"We were once friends, Johan. I ask the Mother we can still be. All I have is my word that I am no longer with them. But Elena is the only chance we have of stopping the Overlord from loosing the spirits of the Seventh Hell on this earth."

"I can no longer afford to be trusting you, old friend. I be sorry."

Raven felt his heart split as Johan turned and started to walk away. Rickward stopped him with a firm hand on

his arm.

"He tells the truth, father. More so than he knows."

"What do you be knowing of this?"

Rickward did not answer. Instead, he turned to Raven as he pulled a small pouch free of an inner pocket, and threw it to him.

Raven caught it, chills racing through him as he dumped the small iron cross and a single gold coin into his palm. He caught the boys gaze, too shocked to speak.

Rickward gave an almost imperceptible nod. "Wolf sent me. Burn it, it no longer matters."

Raven watched as the boy turned and mounted his horse. The world spun around him. Wolf! He had trusted him these long years, and he had been fooled with his own manipulations all the while. Father! How could he have been such a fool? The friend he called Wolf held more than a namesake with the assassins. He was their leader. Raven knew he had just been given a second chance at life, and vowed this one would be lived better than the last. This time, the most important thing was saving his beloved lands from destruction.

He looked to Johan, who stood weighing him. "Well, then, does this mean the dates begin again?" He held the smile, but could muster no real feeling behind the jest.

Johan jumped onto his horse, turned her, and called to his men, "Mount up! We ride to the Bone Yard to defeat the Duke. Don't be worrying about the rumors. You be riding with the Protector of the Dead."

His men cheered, beating fists into armor, and swords against shields. Their hero was back.

As the soldiers filed past him, Johan called encouragements and jests to each. When they were all past, he turned to Raven.

"I don't be caring for your part in all of this."

"Johan, I..."

"Oh, shut up and be letting me talk for once, will you? Whatever you be doing in the past, is the past. I would not be alive and cursing you if you didn't be saving me on the field. I know you be speaking the truth of that. Without my Guardian helping, many other men would have died since. So shut up, and get on the cur you call a horse. You do be riding with us, right?"

Raven could not help but laugh. He mounted his tan mare and together they joined the small, rag-tag army as they entered the Bone Yard.

"One more thing," Johan said to Raven. "What happens if the Temple does fall?"

Raven shook his head. "She must stop him."

"What be happening?" Johan pressed.

Desperation filled Raven's eyes as their gazes locked. "The Sundering will finish."

Chapter 38

Elena stared in awe at the giant bones that littered the forest floor. They were brittle yellow, caked with centuries of dirt. Moss had crept up the sides, later being overgrown by blood vines. The late Third Quarter sun shone in beams that cast the bones in a soft, sickly green light tainted by the red of the ivy leaves. The green glow reminded her of her mother's ghost. She shivered.

"Do those be ribs?" she asked, unable to rip her gaze away.

"Aye," Rafe said. "No one seems to know of what, exactly, though. Said to have lain here since before the Overlord outlawed the Breath."

"There must be hundreds." Unable to resist the urge, she led her horse closer, leaning out to touch one.

Rafe grabbed her rein and pulled her horse back. "No," he shouted. When she spun to him, her face full of questions, he pulled her horse farther away.

"No one has entered the Yard proper, and returned with their full mind. If you believe the stories, this is the Seventh Hell itself."

She laughed. "And all of the spirits the Father refuses Rebirth to wallow *here* for eternity? Not much of a home."

He dropped her reins, his eyes full of warning. "I'm not saying I believe the stories, but I've seen what it has done to a man."

Elena saw his haunted look as he turned away. She nodded her understanding.

As they rode, the men spoke only in whispers. She could never make out the words, but their tone suggested more stories were being told. She shivered as she watched the bones disappear into the ancient forest. She could not get rid of the feeling they were being watched.

As the sun slipped deeper over the tops of the trees, the bones glow brightened, casting the scene ever more into a proper vision of the Seventh Hell.

Around her, the men pushed their horses harder, trying to get past the Bone Yard before full dark settled in. She watched the soldiers flinch at every woodland sound, hands snapping to sword hilts, nervous laughter as they realized their foolishness. She was glad to see it was not just her being taken in by the evening's mood.

The bones seemed to go on forever, one massive museum for a creature that was no longer alive. She wondered again at the fear that tightened Rafe's face when she had reached out to touch the bones. Was there something else that haunted these woods? She shook herself against the foolishness of childhood nightmares. Was it really that foolish? She could not find it in herself to completely dismiss any idea, not since meeting her mother's hateful ghost.

While she had not believed that to be her mother on that day--had refused to believe such a thing--she had seen too much since to brush it aside any longer. There were too many mysteries she had no answers for.

What was it her mother had wanted to tell her? What words of wisdom did she wish to impart? Perhaps she had wanted to tell her she loved her, beg for her forgiveness for that day when Elena's world had changed in a ball of fire and steam. But Elena had not been ready to hear that. She had still clung to the hatred that had sustained her for so long. Now that Joss was ripped from her, she could understand the love and sacrifice her

mother had made that day. The same sacrifice she knew she would now make, if forced to.

The night sky erupted as a dozen fiery arrows shot from the woods around them. She watched, stunned, as the soldiers around her formed a tight knot at Rafe's command.

"Elena," yelled Rafe. "To me!"

She responded without thinking, instinct kicking in at the command in his voice, so much like Johan's. She kicked the horse into motion, watching around her for the rest of the attack. The knot of soldiers parted to make room for her, but they were scattered as another dozen lit arrows burst into their midst.

"Form quads. Stay together, but not tight!" Rafe's command echoed throughout the dank woodland graveyard.

In near perfect unison, the men pulled away from her, splitting into groups of four, each positioned so they could turn to fight in any direction, all the while protecting the other three soldier's backs.

The thunder of the attacker's hooves came next, near deafening as it echoed through the woods. The Duke's twin moon insignia shone brightly in the light of their torches as they burst through the trees, swords waving.

Terror froze her in place. She could not survive this. She did not have these skills. What had she been thinking when she ran after Joss to try and take her? They must be outnumbered at least two to one.

Wiping away sweat that beaded on her forehead, she scanned the grounds for someplace to hide. She was blocked from the Duke's men by Rafe's, but what chance did they have?

Her breath exploded through her as the first swords clashed ahead of her. Gulping air, she knew she had only one choice, one chance.

The picture of her mother's flames burned against her mind. Her mother had not had the support that she now had in Rafe's men. She laughed. She would never have thought to be glad of the Overlord's aid before today.

She willed the flames to come, pictured them wrapping the Duke's insignia and spreading from there. She did not want to harm Rafe's men if she could avoid it.

Nothing came.

Panic rose through her, pinching her lungs. She backed the horse away from the maddening clamor of battle. She had to run, to find safety, or they would all die.

Turning her horse, she ran blindly into the Bone Yard.

Memories sifted through Johan's mind as he first saw the Bone Yard. A distant battle, fought hard. He had nearly died. He struggled to clear his head. Too much had happened too recently. Trusted friends had become enemies, then friends again, as tenuous as their bond might be. Enemies had become friends. What more was left before he could say to his wife his sorrows and regrets, promising her better days from this point forward? He had been a fool many times over, and cursed himself for his foolishness. But if, as Raven would ask him to believe, Elena somehow could truly save them all, then he had done what he must. Just as he had many times before. The choices were not always easy in this life the Mother had thrown him in, and he did not always make the right ones. He did stick by his decisions.

His reactions were swift when they saw the woods light up. Without seeing the details, he knew what was happening.

"This be war," he yelled to the line of weary soldiers behind him. Swords loosened in their sheaths, and armor adjusted as he watched. They were good men, all, and he hoped to spare as many as possible.

"Our first war be with the Duke. When they be done, take Rafe's men alive." He signaled the charge.

They thundered through the woods, not caring if they were heard or not. They rode low, ducking under branches, hacking others out of the way. When they erupted through the woods, they spilled onto the back of the Duke's men, hammering them into Rafe's anvil.

Unable to cover the soldiers to the man, they fought hard, forced to watch for multiple attacks.

The Duke's men had it worse. Attacked from both sides, they split their forces so that both of the rebel armies were covered evenly.

Johan slid through defenses, plunging his sword through mailed chests and necks. He gave himself over completely to the Guardian's wisdom, letting him direct his attacks and paid heed to his warnings. No weapon got close to him as he cut his way to the Duke's banner. It felt just like the first Rebellion. His laughter was chilling to hear as it rang across the field, cutting through the noise in the same way his sword covered the field around him.

Parrying a blow that would have plunged into another rebel's back, he watched as Rafe signaled his men, and the clustered formations pulled together, slaughtering the Duke's men caught between.

He strained to see the Duke. He was not there. He was not with his banner. That bastard cur had left the field. Slashing and parrying, for both himself and those around him, he scanned the field. He must be close. Johan had never known him not to enjoy these skirmishes first-hand, plying his Breath where he could, though, Mother be blessed, his powers were generally only successful through a touch, and he had little time to employ them. Johan always made sure of that.

He spotted him on the far side of the field, plunging his horse recklessly into the Bone Yard. The Guardian's warning flared. He spun and slid his sword past one man's guard, knocking his sword wide. The second attacker lost his hand before he realized Johan had turned, and Johan spun back to the first, plunging his sword through his heart.

Tearing the sword from the soldier's chest, he wheeled his horse, parrying a dozen more attacks before he was free.

The sickly green and red lights that glowed within the Yard brightened as he reached them. They lost their greenish cast and became a white so pure and bright he was forced to cover his eyes with his arm.

Blinded, the horse rammed into a solid wall, breaking its neck and slamming Johan into whatever force held them at bay. He gasped as the air was ripped from him. Stumbling, he stood, pressing against the wall. He could see nothing there, but his hands pressed against a solid surface.

"No!"

He pounded his fists into the force, then stumbled through the wall as it gave way. White spots with burnt orange edges assaulted his vision as he pushed his way into the Bone Yard, blinking frantically to clear his sight.

A scream ripped through the Yard. A scream like none he had ever heard, so filled with frustration and anger, voice ripping at a dry throat, tearing as it escaped.

He could not risk yelling, but his wife's name pressed hard against his lips. His only chance against the Duke was surprise. He must not lose surprise.

He ran forward, one hand waving in front of him against his spotted vision, the other holding the sword ready.

Gideon Kaebal, Duke of Edrea, Overlord's son, kicked his horse harder, driving it faster. He knew it was no use, but Elena must not be allowed to escape. He scanned the bones, searching, his eyes drying quickly in the bloody fog that billowed around him, tendrils reaching out to him, calling him.

Hating the necessity, he called the Breath from inside himself, unwilling to trust what he would receive from such tainted grounds as the Bone Yard. He felt the pull, the life force building inside of him. With a mental nudge, a thin tendril of Breath surrounded him, forming a small shield around himself so the fog could not touch him. They were too close to the Otherworld for comfort here, but he would not drain more of himself for the horse, nor would he drain the horse for his shield. He did not want to escape this place on foot.

Where was she? She could not be far ahead of him. He had watched from the rear of his troops as she bolted into the Yard, a terrified doe before the hunt. As soon as she had turned, and could no longer see him, he had followed.

Shapes melted in and out of the fog, ghosts of servants, mostly, reaching clawed hands out to him, trying to touch him, to rip at him. He ignored them, knowing his shield would protect him from them, too.

Only the woman mattered, now. For whatever reason, she was the key to his father's plans. He was grooming her, making her Breath blossom within her lovely bosom. His father could never be allowed to have her.

Thinking of the girl brought the hatred back, a fiery coal in the bowl of his stomach. Gideon had spent too many years under the insufferable bastard's thumb, twisted and pushed into the old man's ways. He had never been allowed to be his own person. He had never been allowed to grow into the leader of nations that was his right. Three hundred years of waiting was enough. No. It was too much. He deserved the throne at the Fire Palace. It was his birthright, and none would keep him from it, not even this puissant, untrained bitch.

He smiled as he thought what he could do to her. How good her Breath would feel as she kneeled before him, on hands and knees, submitting to his thrusts, her life draining from her. What power would be his when she finally gave it up in one final, ultimate climax? He became aroused just thinking of the sweetness of her Breath in that moment.

He shoved the thoughts away. They were addictive. They were distracting. First he had to find her.

Elena darted in between the ghastly figures that reached for her, mangled hands reaching for her. Their eyes were empty voids. They should be unable to see her, but they came unerringly at her, their garbled words sliding greasily along the putrid breeze.

She had always thought ghosts would be unable to touch living things, unable to affect their surroundings, no matter what the Twin Books said. Her horse lie somewhere behind her, dying, as a testament to the wisdom and truth in the pages of the Twin Books. His screams still echoed through the thick, bloody-green fog.

She needed to get out of this cursed place, yet could not find her way. None of the massive, pitted bones looked familiar, even though she had turned the horse around as soon as she had calmed enough to realize where she was. That was when the terror had crashed through her.

She ducked as another clawed hand slashed through the air above her, her foot slipping on the snow and ice. She landed face first in the snow.

The ghosts screamed louder, victory dripping on their ragged voices. They surged toward her as she rolled over and stared, eyes wide in terror, at the burnt and shredded corpses that stumbled closer, snarling mouths drawn wide in vicious smiles.

Like a spider, she skittered backwards, slipping on the slick ground but never stopping. As a middle-aged woman leaned in to grab her she flailed out with a foot, just missing but coming close enough to make the ghost hesitate. Taking advantage of the moment, she skittered back further until she crashed into another set of bones.

She felt the snapping and cracking vibrate through the bones and into her back, sending waves of alarm through her body. As she looked up, she knew she was dead. At least it would not be at the hands of these vile creatures.

The skull was as wide as she was long, great pointed tusks jutting at awkward angles from a pointed snout. Several teeth had rotted away during the centuries, but the dual rows of curving, pointed teeth were no less imposing. Mist swirled where the eyes should be, giving the creature a semblance of life as the misty eyes stared at her. A scream ripped itself from her lungs as it fell off balance and right towards her.

It crashed into the ground, spraying bloody-green clouds of snow sharply in to the air. Cold air rushed past her, whipping her hair around her face, stinging her eyes. She yanked her foot out of the way just in time to avoid being pierced by a broken tooth as long as her hand. Darkness enveloped her in the maw of the beast.

Shivering, she was relieved to see light still seeping through its maw. She shoved her shaking hands between the bleach-white jaws, then pulled them sharply back as the ghosts screams outside erupted once more, and several clawed hands lunged for her. Wide eyed, she sought the openings at the eye and ear holes, as well as behind her, and found ghosts surrounding the giant skull.

"Not here," she sobbed, pulling her legs against her chest, holding them tight to her. "Don't let me die here." She fought back the tears, knowing she had to be ready to take advantage of any crack in the ring of ghastly predators.

She looked up, choking her sobs so that she could hear better. Something was different, wrong somehow. She strained against the voices, struggling to find some signal, some clue. Then she realized it was not a sound, but a tingling on the skin. It started as a few individual hairs stood erect, like snakes standing on tails, tongues lapping at the air for any scent of danger. A couple more joined in, then more, until all at once every hair stiffened.

Something was coming.

"Elena."

She jumped at the familiar voice, jolting to her knees to search the area for some sort of body to go with it.

"Elena, you must come out. Hurry, we don't be having much time."

As she crawled to the skull's maw once more, scanning the ground around her for the ghosts and finding them gone, she whispered, "Mam?"

"Aye, Elena."

She stood just outside of the massive skull, staring at her Mam. So many feelings wrestled inside of her, trying to all get out at once: fear of the dead woman in front of her; anger at the years spent hating her Mam; confusion that she was here. How could that be? Mostly, though, joy.

"Mam," she burst out, "All these years, I be having so much to say."

Her mother waved a dismissing hand through the air, cutting her off. "Hush, now, girl. There be plenty of time for that later. More important things be afoot now. You know of the Overlord, I'm sure."

"Aye, of course," she stammered. "He be planning something. I don't know what it be, but I plan on trying to stop him if I can."

Her mother nodded, her dark eyes never breaking their gaze into hers. "You be able to. The training I left for you will be seeing to that."

"Training? I don't understand."

"The amulet. You received my words, didn't you?"

"Words? Mam, I don't know what you be talking about."

Her mother's already serious gaze focused even tighter on her. "Betzalel and I left instructions and training for you in the amulet. Do you be saying you never received them?"

"No. I..." Her voice broke as the memories of years of pain tried to take over. Here, before her Mam's hardened gaze she felt like a child who had been caught stealing. "I tried to avoid it. It be what took you away from me."

"The amulet? Pah! It be the Duke and my choice to protect you and the other children that took me away. Nothing more, nothing less. We left the amulet to be your guide, to prepare you for this day. Where is it now? Do you have it on you?"

Her mind reeled. Betzalel, her Mam's boyfriend. The man that had taken her mother so often away from the daughter that needed her. They had been trying to prepare her for this? If they had known this would happen, how much else did they know? As the wonders and worries collided, a realization slammed home and sent cold, angry shivers along her back.

"Did you be knowing about Joss, too, then?"

"Some things be more important than one person's life. Didn't you learn that? No matter. Let me see you, now. Stand still."

Her piercing gaze walked the length of her, measuring. She felt naked in the snow. The anger was still there, but she knew that her Mam was right. After all, hadn't she decided that the Overlord's plans must be stopped, no matter the cost to herself? So she stood still, struggling to harness the anger.

"You'll never manage like this," her Mam said, shaking her head in disgust. "Too many layers are blocking

you from the Breath."

She was about to ask about the layers, about the dream that had led her to this moment, but a burst of laughter stopped her short.

"So," said the silken voice, "We meet again Taerana. I see you did not learn your lesson the last time. Do you seek to have your only child repeat your mistakes?"

The Duke sat on his horse, his head tilted to one side so that he could see past the giant ribs between them. His horse had not survived the Bone Yard as well as he had. Claw and bite marks covered its sweaty flank, and foam coated its lips, sliding down its chin. Its head sagged, too weary to even look for grass.

The realization of where she was slammed back into her, bringing with it the terror of the night, and the fact that she was talking to a ghost. The hairs still stood all over her body and she knew that if they could they would be standing even straighter. Something was coming, and coming fast.

"Mam..."

"Hush child," Taerana said as she turned to face the newcomer. "Your timing be beautiful, Gideon." A small hint of laughter bubbled forth.

Elena thought she could make out the lines of the giant ribs on the other side of her mother. The shivers came once more, stronger now. A pressure was building around her, the colors of the yard becoming more vibrant, more alive.

Taerana glided through the ribs, walking straight towards the Duke who watched her warily, but showed no signs of giving ground. "You be on my grounds now, Gideon. Don't you know what time it is?" With every step she took, her walk looked less like gliding, and more like the walk Elena remembered.

With a start, Elena realized she could no longer make out the bones through her Mam's figure. She could hear each step her mother made as she crunched through the dirty, soggy snow. She dared a glance around her and gasped. As she watched, ghostly, transparent skins formed on the now clean bones. Heads formed on the beasts, eyes of mist watching her. She swallowed hard against the fear.

The Duke removed his gloves, one finger at a time, a greasy smile sliding across his lips. She remembered that smile, that motion. Her Mam was still moving closer, almost there. She had to stop her.

She drew in a deep breath, readying a warning scream, when the pressure that had been building tightened its grasp on her, squeezing her chest, smothering her. She gasped for air. Panic rose in her chest as, around her, the colors seemed to bleach out, bloody greens fading until the world around her was slammed into a world without color. Every bone, every leaf of grass, her Mam, the Duke--all gone in a world of pure white light.

Terror gripped her. Her mouth dried, her tongue thick and rough, sticking to the roof of her mouth. She heard the Duke, his curses seeming to come from far away. She heard her Mam's laughter at the Duke's surprise, but she could see none of it.

The whiteness that enveloped her brought her skin to life, tingling and itching with--what? She did not know how to describe it, but it quickly spread through her entire body. She felt energized like never before. She felt like she would be glowing if she could see herself in a mirror. If she could see anything. She felt... alive. Her hair relaxed all across her body, seeming to release a long held sigh.

What of the creatures around her? Were they too alive, now? Could this strange light bring them back to the

world of the living? Would centuries of anger and buried rage be taken out on the creatures nearest them?

As if they were called by her thoughts, she heard movements around her: giant, stumbling, echoing steps. Crashes. She could picture the giant heads, with rows of teeth lifting off the ground on wobbly, baby-like necks. She saw them put one foot forward, press it firmly on the ground and press, testing both the ground and their own strength, then another, and another until they were on all four legs, each swaying unsteadily from unused muscles, until they buckled and crashed into the ground, only to try once more, their green, misty eyes swirling in hatred as they watched her.

She shook herself out of the visions, cursing her imagination, when she realized she could see again. Everything was still bathed in the pure white light, but she could make out shapes, each a different color.

There! Her Mam and the Duke fought, two red-hot shadows grappling in white. Sparks showered from her Mam's hands where they gripped the Duke's throat, before he kicked her off and she stumbled back to the ground, and fell, laying still.

You must unleash it, daughter, her Mam said, speaking directly in her mind. *There be nothing to fear. Feel it all around you--the power of the Breath. The power of the Sun. Let down the layers blocking it and unleash it.*

She knew she had to, knew there was little chance of surviving an encounter of the Duke without, yet, everything that had just happened--that was happening--crowded together in her mind, mingling with the fear, overwhelming her.

The Duke laughed as he turned and nudged the horse towards her, one hand held to his neck. She could see the power being pulled from the air around him in thick white ropes that funneled into his hand, and into his neck. She watched in awe as the burnt skin at his neck smoothed, the charred skin flaking away.

How could she ever be a match for someone with his powers? What had she been thinking when she left Hart's Haven?

Don't be doubting, Elena. You have healed before.

"No! I never healed..."

Her mother's voice exploded through her head. *Stop! It was not Raven that mended your leg. That is nothing compared to the power you have inside of you. Unleash it.*

She balked at her mother's command, but from somewhere deep inside of her a memory of that night surfaced. Raven had skirted his answers about her leg. When she woke, her hair had been streaked with white. She could not explain it, had not tried, but it fit. She had drained her own life to heal herself.

The Duke came closer, his hand lowered from his neck, now mostly whole. He held both hands in front of him, palms up.

"Here we are again, Elena. My offer still stands: join with me. You are no match for him. Together, we can defeat him." With each word he came closer.

She wanted to move, but could not. It was too much. She would not lose her mother again.

She shook herself free, forcing a semblance of calm to fill her and block all of the distractions.

He was right, she knew that. She was no match for the Overlord. Mother's mercy, she was no match for the

Duke. If he was willing to help her, why should she push him away? She looked at him, at his red ghost and knew why she could not join with him.

Thin, fragile lines of energy were being drawn into him. They seeped from his hand, floated through the energy that surrounded them and were trying to form a mesh around her. She could feel it already working on her mind. She would never trust him. He had killed her mother. He had tried to kill her again tonight. The stories were true. Nothing he said could be trusted.

Panic lanced through her as another red shadow charged into view.

"Elena!"

She would know that voice anywhere. No matter the hurt it had caused over the years, she would still hear his voice in her dreams.

Her voice cracked as tears threatened to overwhelm her. "Johan?"

The web around her collapsed as the Duke spun to face the newcomer, balls of energy gathering in front of him.

Johan raced towards the red, shadowy figures. It had taken him a while to get used to this vision, but could now maneuver with ease among the giant bones.

"Elena," he screamed as he charged through the giant bones. His sword sang as it slid from its sheath, the battle cry clear in the white night.

The man in front of her turned--the Duke--and strange colors were leached from the surrounding light, drawing closer together and knitting themselves into a malevolent ball of energy.

He heard his wife mutter his name, unbelieving, but ignored it. His vision narrowed until his entire being was focused on one cause, one man.

Driven by animal instincts, he dove and rolled sideways, standing again, his sword at the ready. The other woman, the one he had taken for dead stood above him, one hand outstretched and tipped with claws. A single, bony finger pointed at him.

"Taerana?"

"You will leave her be tonight, Johan."

A low murmur came from the Duke as he turned back to Elena.

"Stand aside, ghost," he said, turning to confront the Duke once more. Again, instinct forced him to duck, and he felt the cold wind cross him as Taerana's clawed hand just missed.

"This is her battle, boy," she growled, then leapt on top of him, her movement sped along by the winds of *Olhaba*.

Before he could react, she was on top of him, her hand punching through his chest. Ice sped through him, clouding his mind as her hand squeezed his heart.

The white light of the night faded to black, his breathing stuttered, then stopped. He heard the ghost bitch utter one last command before his senses completely failed.

"Unleash it!"

Elena stood frozen. The Duke was almost to her, the energy still filling his outstretched hand. Her husband had come to save her--he was not dead!-- then her mother had killed him. Her own mother had betrayed her.

She felt the heat boil around her, the snow on her boots melting in an instant.

"I thought you were needed," purred the Duke. "Yet it seems the Overlord has played us both."

Rage boiled within. Her mother's fist--still buried in Johan's chest--told the truth her mother had been unwilling to admit. It no longer mattered, not here, surrounded by the white life. Her mother was a betrayer. Her breath rasped as she drew it in, drinking deeply of the pure, crystalline air.

For one wonderful moment, she had thought Johan alive, but the truth punched her, bruising her heart once again. His face filled her mind, his lips mouthing the words from her dream once more.

"Free your child."

The breath tumbled and danced inside her lungs, particles colliding with each other. The knowledge came to her in a sudden realization as the Duke stood before her, still in this frozen moment of clarity.

The light surrounding them was life itself, the Breath of the very ground beneath her feet made visible. The colored mists of the Duke's Breath hung suspended in time, the particles caught still in their dance, each one radiating the purity of life like tiny stars.

Joss. A momentary thought. A heart ripping loss. No longer would she watch her fiery red hair catch the afternoon sun as she danced along the path after lessons.

The anger raged on, building in this single breath, joining with the Breath and shoving aside the fears and hatred that had held it back for so long. It surged through her on the wings of her exhalation, drawing power from the deepest corners of her soul. As the breath pulled them out of their hiding, the power sung to her. This is who she is. This is who she was born to be.

"Free your children." Her voice, this time. Commanding. The older Elena from her dream. Realization pounded into her again, and she knew the price of her Breath, but she was willing to pay it. She was the only one left who could.

Her Breath exploded as time started again, a rope of fire shooting from her hands towards the Duke.

His eyes widened. He threw the ball at the flame but nothing happened. The flame rope whipped around his back, wrapping itself around his neck.

"You. Will. Not. Have. Them." The veins in her neck strained against the skin as rage fought to draw a deeper Breath, but somehow she knew that she would not be able to control that much Breath.

The roped pulled tight against his neck, searing flesh, as the Duke pulled power from the light around him. A thin knife of pure life sliced through her rope, sending it whipping back at her.

She released the energy, and then caught it again, forcing it into the ground around the Duke's feet.

"That is not possible," the Duke gasped as the ground around him bucked and surged, a maw opening under his feet, teeth borrowed from the corpses littering the Yard lined the earthen maw.

Frantically, he pulled together more life, forming a shield beneath him. He jumped away just as the maw snapped shut.

Running towards his horse, he fumbled through inside pockets in his black velvety jacket.

She followed him slowly, the maw snapping at his heels, each time barely missing one foot or the other as the Duke hopped out of the way.

He leapt onto the horse, rubbing at the medallion he pulled from his pocket. A thin layer of Breath snapped around him, as tight as the gloves he wore. Though she could not say how she knew, she would not be able to penetrate that shield.

"Fine," she said, her laughter echoing away. Even to her ears, she could not swear it sounded sane.

As the Duke turned his horse, sparing her one final glance, she drew the Breath from within her, ignoring the pain and focusing on the rage. It swelled, building until she was not sure she would stay conscious should she gather more.

"Elena. No!" her Mam yelled. "Let it go! You be killing yourself."

She wanted to ignore her Mam. She was tempted to turn the Breath on her instead, as the Duke rode his horse away, but the older Elena filled her mind once more, and she knew. The woman she had seen was not many years older, as she had thought. She was her, today. The Breath had extracted its price from her, and she was about to pay a greater price for something that could have no great gain attached to it.

Grudgingly, she released the Breath back inside of herself, directing it back to the corners she had stolen it from.

As it settled, she watched her Mam pull her hand free of Johan's chest, saw him gasp in the pure white air and cough. Her Mam had not killed him. She had done what she must to force her to the knowledge of the Breath. Her methods had been harsh, but sure.

She turned to her, wanting to thank her Mam, but found she could not voice the words. Her voice would not work. She tried to reach out to her, to touch her one last time, to tell her she loved her one last time through touch, but could not lift her hand.

She looked down at her hands, but nothing was wrong. Looking back to her mother, her head grew light, her knees weak, and she collapsed to the ground.

Around her the white wash of pure life swept away, leaving her to stare at the bloody green Bone Yard as her world turned black.

Her mother's final whispered words echoed through her.

"You done me proud, Elena."

Chapter 39

"Elena?" The words came from somewhere far off. "Wake up, Lanie."

She opened her eyes, and the figures before her were blurry, streaked, and far away.

"Mother's Mercy. You be awake." It was Johan's voice. It was Johan's face. Her Johan. Her Protector.

She blinked her eyes rapidly, trying desperately to clear her vision, to see her husband clearly. Oh, how she longed to throw her arms around him, feel his strength envelop her, protect her.

She could not make out the other voices, though she knew they were saying something. It did not matter, she decided. Johan was here.

She reached her hands up, and placed them on either side of his face, drinking in his worry-lined, sober face. It had been a long time since she had seen him like this. Too long.

Caressing his face, she murmured for him alone. "It be fine, lover. We be together again. Your face always did look a bit like a prune when you worried like that."

"You don't be looking quite yourself, either, Lanie." He did not smile. Instead the creases got deeper. "What be happening to you?"

"What do you be saying?"

"You still be beautiful, but you look... old."

She stared at him, drawn in by his words. Memories of years past made her smile. But old?

"Help me up," she said.

He wrapped his strong arms around her, and lifted her to her feet, catching her as her legs turned to water.

"Elena?"

"I be fine. Just tired." It hit her suddenly. So tired. She felt like linen after a wash, wrung and hung out to dry. "I don't be guessing anyone has a mirror?" She flashed him a smile, trying to look stronger than she felt.

Raven pulled a small steel mirror from his worn pack, lending her a supporting arm as he handed it to her. His eyes were warm with concern.

She started to hold it up, twisting it to catch the firelight, and stopped. Her hands. Mother's Mercy! Her hands. She held one up, flipping it front and back and could not credit what she saw. Once so smooth and supple, the skin had thinned. Veins were clearly visible, each straining at the thin layer of skin. Age spots stained her hands.

She glanced at the faces, hating to admit what she saw there. She hauled the suddenly heavy mirror back into the firelight, and stared. It was all she could do. No thoughts would come as she stared at some other woman in the mirror. No, not some other woman, she knew, but the face of the older Elena from her dream.

"Raven," she said, clearing her throat twice before her voice would work. "Raven, what be happening?"

"Why, my little dove, you have simply mastered your Breath, that is all." The worry in his eyes belied the lightness of his tone. "Though, I dare say, you might try pulling the energy from that around you, instead of from within yourself. I'm afraid much more of that, and we would never be able to bake you another birthing cake."

Johan broke in, a dangerous edge to his voice. "Do you be saying, Wildlander, that my wife be causing this?"

"What I suggest, my friend, is that something in yonder Yard forced her to master the Breath she has been carrying around. When she used it, though, she used her own life to fuel it instead of the life around her. A pity,

too, since it is my understanding the Duke survived the encounter."

Turning to Elena, Johan said, "The light. That be you?"

She shook her head, still too stunned to talk. The murmurs of the soldiers around her echoed the fears running deep within her. She had committed to this path, but at what cost? Could she survive the actions she knew she needed to do when each Breath cost this much? Still numb, she could not speak.

Raven answered for her. "No. The light was the Temple of the Sun."

"The Temple be four, five days from here," said Johan.

Raven nodded. "You didn't think that all of the Priests at the Temple were there for naught, did you? We were there to protect the light you saw as much as anything. I dare say, though, it should have been our first priority."

"Stop babbling, Wildlander. What be the light?"

Looking at the men around him, Raven leaned over, rubbing his knees. "I think I might need a seat for this. A drink would be good, too."

Sighing, Johan nodded to Pierce, who sent two soldiers to fetch the requested items.

Elena wanted to run, to scream. She did not care what the light was. She did not want this Breath that had been given to her, or the responsibilities that came with it. She scanned the faces around her, the men she knew, and soldiers she did not. Each seemed lost in their own thoughts and, perhaps, fears. When they saw her looking, they turned away. Some faces bore shame at their fear, others burned with hope.

She just wanted to start over, to feel Johan's arms wrapped around her like he did so often when they first met. She wanted another chance to raise her son, her daughter. She could almost hear their bubbling laughter in the crib, and their sweet, soft, sighing snores.

Why her? Why was she singled out for this duty? Was there no one else who could do this? Raven--he had power, though he claimed it was not the Breath, but did that really matter? It was more power than most had. Surely, it would be enough.

But she knew that it would not. She had seen the Duke's power and expertise in the Bone Yard, and she knew she had only gotten lucky. He had not been expecting her to Breathe so readily. Looking at her hands once more she laughed, drawing all eyes toward her, but she ignored them. The Duke had not expected her to pour so much of herself into the Breath. Did that make it stronger, somehow? Could the Breath be fueled better by some life force than others?

Shaking off a shiver, she pulled her pack over to the fire, and made a seat of it in the frozen grasses. In her mind's eye, she saw the tales that mothers told their children come to life. Babies were found, thin and sallow, ribs piercing through emaciated bodies, all around Jergain Falls. The Duke's slaves were reportedly found in much the same state. When the Overlord took children, once every fifty years, into the Fire Palace for his Life Celebration, nothing was found but ashes the servants swept away the next morning. She could no longer believe they were just stories. She had seen too much, learned too much, and paid too high a price to disregard them any longer. Until proven differently, they were all true.

Why her, she asked once more, but could not muster the indignation into it that she had last time. She knew the answer. She had been ready to die.

Now that had all changed. Johan was alive. And sober.

When the soldiers returned with a seat and ale, Raven sat on his log at the edge of the fire, rubbing his knees again. Sensing Johan's impending fit, Raven took a swig of cold ale, cleared his throat and began, making eye contact with each of the soldiers gathered around the fire.

"What do you know of the Sundering?" he asked.

The answers varied, each mumbled under breath to the man standing next to him. It did not matter, though. Raven knew none would have the proper answer.

Taking a large swig of the warmed ale, he watched the men in the growing silence, waiting until he knew he had their full attention.

"The *Chiy'el* were a curious group, always investigating one theory or another. They constantly searched for new answers, new ways to use their Breath. Many searched for ways of healing and putting the Breath to good use, others just explored."

Taking another swig, he looked at Elena. "My dear, can you tell the men gathered here just how they fueled these experiments?"

She nodded. "Every thing be having life: grass, trees, water, the very air we be breathing. They pulled the life that be around them into their Breath." She glanced up, meeting Raven's gaze.

"Very good, darling." He smiled, a private smile meant only for her, then turned back to the soldiers. "There is only so much life in the world. Much like the grain that grows in the fields. Once it has been harvested, it is gone."

"Aye. But it be growing again the next year," a cracking voice in the rear called out. The other men chuckled as his voice broke, but soon quieted, and turned back to the story.

"True, very true, and well spoken, I might add. However, what would happen if an entire city tried to live off just one grain field?"

"Never happen," called another, before he broke into a coughing fit.

Johan nodded to Pierce who handed a small pouch to the soldier next to him, telling him to take it to the cougher with a hot mug of water, not ale.

As the soldier ran off to fetch the water, Raven chuckled. "Help is on the way, boy. Hold on!" He took another swig, raising it to the soldier in back. "You are, however, completely right. Once you finish the dreaded herbs that are on their way, celebrate. Not too much, mind you. Much to do in the morning."

Johan's irritation cut through the mirth. "You be planning to tell us what this be having to do with the cursed light?"

"Right. And thank you for reminding me where I was. Not enough grain poses problems. It starves the people it is supposed to be feeding, and, worse yet, encourages the farmers to try again, planting even fallow fields. None of the crops grow well the following season, and each season after the ground becomes increasingly more difficult to plow, and produces less wheat. This cycle could continue until the fields were unable to produce anything. Not a good situation."

"The light," Johan growled.

Raven looked at him, a look of mild shock on his face. His eyes, however, betrayed his true irritation. He forced a smile into place. "Now here, friend. I don't pretend to tell you how to swing your sword, which is a good thing, since you'd probably just start missing. I would greatly appreciate it if you'd leave the stories to me."

He turned back to the soldiers. "When these all-knowing *Chiy'el* continued with their experiments, they did so at the cost of this land we call home. Their group grew, as did the number of experiments, and eventually this land of ours could not provide enough. They continued to pull the life away to fuel their Breath until the lands around them could take it no more and started to rebel. Hence, the Sundering.

"Mountains erupted in flame; giant waves toppled entire villages; the earth beneath our feet shook with such force entire villages were leveled. The lands split into three lands, each separating from the other. No one has ever found any trace of the other lands. It is assumed they simply floated out of reach of our boats.

"A young *Chiy'el* named Betzalel had foreseen this. He spoke to whomever he could, calling out the worst offenders during the Councils. Very few took him seriously, though, so he devised a plan. Three years of his life he researched, designing and building an intricate crystal globe. When the Sundering began, he gathered those *Chiy'el* near enough, and strong enough. Together, they formed a circle, raised the stone from the ground itself, shaping it and molding it until it formed a giant ziggurat that held Betzalel's crystal."

He paused, taking another drink.

Rickward's whisper caught them all of guard. "The Temple of the Sun."

Raven nodded. "Exactly. To this day it plies its trade, revitalizing all of the lands we live in, every dusk and dawn."

"That be the right time, but I don't be understanding," Johan said. "Why don't we be seeing this light every day?"

"The Temple sends a blast of raw life that spreads throughout the lands. The light you saw in the Bone Yards was a reaction with the death that lingers there. Only a very few other places react that way, and each holds one thing in common with the Yard: they are each a graveyard for experiments gone awry."

Elena gasped. "You mean those creatures in the Bone Yard be experiments?"

"Aye. For some the ultimate goal was to stop aging, to live forever so they could learn even more. Neither

life, nor death, held boundaries to their experiments."

Raven studied her, watching as a slow shiver wracked her body. Good, she understood.

"And the Overlord," Elena started slowly. "What do his plan be this time?"

Raven watched her for a few breaths, considering. Finally, not finding any encouraging words, he settled on the raw truth. "I don't know. There is a cloud of evil that has been spreading over the lands, though I can't say what it is. A person I thought that I could trust and I had been watching it spread, trying to make plans." He looked to Rickward. "It seems that he was more trying to keep tabs on me than anything." Turning back to Elena, he said, "And on you."

Elena's head snapped up, her gaze meeting his. "Me?" she said, her body rigid with fear.

He sighed, telling her of the plot the *Nekodah* council had hatched and his unfortunate part in it. As the tale unfolded, cries of disbelief and shock rippled through the soldiers. Elena seemed to grow calmer. When he finished, he sat in silence waiting for the angry wrath that had followed his previous telling. When she said nothing he glanced at Johan, trying to judge his reaction on the second hearing.

Though his shoulders were hunched with stress, he remained calm, his eyes riveted on his wife, searching her face.

Standing, Elena took great care as she smoothed her dress, then cleared her throat and looked from Raven to Johan and back. "I see. I be sure you boys have much to be planning. I be sure I be no use to you there. Good morrow." She turned, taking care not to look at anyone, and left.

As Johan stood to follow after her, Pierce grabbed his arm. "She's right. We have much to do." Their eyes locked for a breath before Johan sat back down, his shoulders slack with defeat.

Across the fire, Rickward stood, nodded as he caught Johan's gaze, and followed after his mother.

The give and take of the snow. The whistle of the icy wind as it slipped gently through the fir needles. The light cascading off the humps in the snow, creating patches of ground too difficult to look at. These were all Elena could think of. They saturated her mind, allowing her to avoid the thoughts that pressed against her.

Too much. It was all too much.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of feet behind her. She continued to wander through the trees, not caring which way she went. When the footsteps did not falter or leave, she called out. "Johan, I be needing space. Please."

"I was hoping that I might be able to lend an ear."

The voice that replied caught her off guard, and fear rose with the fierceness of floodwaters as she spun to confront the man. The man, barely more than a boy, looked somehow familiar.

He must have seen her reaction, because he answered her unasked question. "I was listening to Raven's tale."

"The Temple," she said, recognizing him now. Her shoulders and back loosened. "How did you know of the Temple?"

He shrugged. "I grew up around those parts."

She nodded, and started her wandering once more. "You be trained as a priest?" she asked as he fell into step beside her.

His laughter was quiet, but pleasant--a welcome sound on this night. "Hardly. The *Nekodah* took me in when I was young enough not to remember. They treated me well, so I stayed. Though where I could have gone, I'm not exactly sure." He let the thought hang in the air. It was obvious something was

being left unsaid.

"Did you ever see it?"

"Twice. It's beautiful. You'd never guess it had been razed near a dozen times since it was built."

"It be destroyed so often?"

"No one has managed to bring it totally down. Betzalel has done too well protecting it. He and the sisters rebuilt it each time, Breathing the power of the Pool to pull the stones from the ground."

She shuddered. "Betzalel."

Rickward glanced at her, studying her. "You know of him?"

She considered for a moment, deciding after several breaths he would be safe. He had seen and heard all that had happened in the last few days.

"Aye. Seems he and my Mam be having an affair. I think he be breeding her to get to me."

"Breeding? Are you certain?"

"No," she admitted. "But that be the feeling I get. I think he knew this be coming. Seems he be needing someone to do his work for him." She could not help the bitterness that rode along her words.

"Yet, that breeding, as you call it, gave you the Breath you have today. It is the only thing that might save us now."

"You be thinking so? Do you truly be thinking that one untrained lass can so easily defeat the Overlord? He be having a thousand years to perfect his Breath, if the stories be true."

"Aye. But you have something more powerful. You have a daughter you greatly care for whose wrongs provide you with the steel you'll need. And a son who was ripped away."

He paused at her glare, and then looked away. "If the stories be true," he said quietly.

She stopped, studying his face intently. There was more to him than she had first thought. Something she could not quite put notion to. He was more than a common soldier, it was apparent. He carried himself with much the same grace as her Johan did. His body was thin and muscular, speaking of a hard life, or at least one full of hard activity. His eyes held hurt and sadness, much as she knew her own did. That was not what struck her though. She remembered her own eyes from the dreams and his were the same stretched almond shape. She leaned in, inspecting his features closer, and gasped.

Her voice a ragged whisper, bubbling with emotions barely held in check, she said, "What be your name?"

He swallowed hard, but his gaze never parted ways with hers. "Rickward," came the hesitant answer.

"No," she whispered, her voice thick. "No. It can't be. You be dead." She stared at him, her thoughts flying too fast to catch.

He did not reply, but watched her like a deer deciding whether or not now was a good time to run.

"He told me you be buried."

Thoughts boiled fast within her head, making it spin. She could not slow them down. This was not right. It could not be real.

"Rickward?" she asked, her voice barely audible.

He nodded slowly.

Elena fled, joy and sorrow and rage warring inside her chest.

She knew she should stop running, knew that with every breath she was pushing her son farther away. Her son! She never thought this day would come, though many days she had dreamed of it while she dipped the candles again and again. Now the day was here and all she could do was run!

She willed her feet to stop, her tears to stop, but neither would. She grasped at thoughts, but could not hold on. All she could do, held captive in this cursed, unwilling body, was dodge the snow covered branches and think one single thought.

"Why now?"

It was often said the Mother and Father had a bent sense of humor. Today, she believed it.

As she broke through a wall of overgrown pines and firs, their needles clutching at her skin, she saw something so horrible that she finally stopped.

She fell to the ground, retching. When the retching stopped, she grabbed a small handful of snow and ate it, soaking the rotten tastes away. She wiped her mouth with snow, then with her sleeve. Then she stood and faced the horror once more.

"Mother's mercy!"

Covered in huge, swollen gashes, some with heads lolling to the side, others with guts spilling out, half a dozen men were strung up between trees.

She forced herself to look closer. Grabbing a stick, she poked and prodded until she found one with an emblem. She peeled the wet, blood-soaked uniform up until she could make out the insignia. The dual crescent moons.

"His own men," said Rickward from behind her.

She jumped.

She turned to him, ready to play the part of long lost mother and reprimand him for sneaking up and scaring her. As she looked at him again, though, different words found their way out.

"I be sorry for running."

"Don't be. It can't be easy."

"No, it definitely do not be easy. I wanted to be staying. To hug you. To be telling you I be missing you and thinking of you all of these years, but I couldn't."

"Don't. I understand."

"No," she interrupted. "How could you? All these years I be thinking you dead..."

"And all these years I'm thinking you didn't want me."

Her jaw dropped. "Not want you? Is that what he be telling you?"

"No. He didn't mention you or Johan much at all. When he was around, it was mostly talk of the Temple, of our lives and what he felt mattered."

"And what might those be?"

He considered her for a moment before answering. "You shouldn't judge him so harshly. He's doing what he thinks is necessary to save us all."

Sighing, she said, "I know. I be having too many memories of Mam leaving me alone to spend time with him. I know why, now, but it be dreadful hard to clear that slate."

"I know. Telling you my name was the hardest thing I've ever done."

Nodding, she turned away, leaving her back to him. "I hope," she started, but her voice broke. Clearing her throat she tried again. "I hope you don't be expecting too much from me now. I... I don't be meaning to be harsh, but I... I can't be opening my heart. Not now. Not with this future." She waited for his response, but none came. Turning, she started to explain more, but he put one finger on her lips. As he spoke, she noticed the moisture in his eyes.

"You can't *not* open your heart right now. It's the only thing that will give you the strength to do what must be done."

All the emotion she had been holding back burst forth, and she wrapped her arms around him, squeezing him tight and feeling his strong, hesitant young arms return the embrace.

"I never stopped thinking of you, son. Never."

"I know."

Could he be right? Could this broken dam of emotion be enough to face of the Overlord? It felt more like a giant anchor weighing her down.

His arms tensed. Pulling away, he pushed her behind him, and drew his sword. "Run!" he yelled.

Confused, frightened, she followed his gaze to the soldiers. What she saw chilled her to the marrow of her bones.

Chapter 40

Straining against their bonds, the corpses glared, an ethereal light burning deep within their eyes. Elena watched in horror as heads lolled unnaturally from side to side, tearing at their throats. Fresh blood spilled out of the gashes and down their chests. The clacking of their teeth was the only sound in the suddenly quiet night.

"Run!" Rickward yelled again as he darted into the line of corpses. His sword swung true, slicing the head off the first corpse. It hit the ground with a sickening thud that showered snow into the surrounding pines.

"Run, damn you!"

She wanted to, knew she should, but could not force her feet to move. She would not lose her son. Not again.

Rage boiled. Her vision narrowed until its entire focus was her son and the corpse he was currently fighting.

Two corpses broke free of their bonds, one losing a hand as the rope that had restrained him pulled free.

A wild scream pierced the night: Raven's voice was filled with terror.

He was at the camp. More corpses must be attacking camp. Attacking Johan. Her rage burned brighter, and she pulled at the Breath, summoning what strength her body had left.

Pain ripped through her gut, climbing up her back. Rickward stumbled as he turned to check on her.

"You're not strong enough yet," her mind screamed at her. She pushed herself to her feet, knowing the words were right.

Two more corpses lay dead on the ground, but the final corpses had broken free, and circled Rickward. Their attacks were swift, their dead minds not feeling the pain as Rickward fought them off. They attacked in pairs, often from opposite sides of the circle, and she could see his dodging was more luck now than skill.

Closing her eyes she felt the ground beneath her, the snow underfoot, the leaves and twigs beneath that. She expanded her senses until she could feel every blade of grass and tree root within six paces. She hoped that would be enough, hoped she would not be forced to take too much, but she was out of time.

She breathed in, feeling the life of the grasses and trees stream into her in thick ropes of energy. She pulled it up through her feet. Reveling in the pure essence of the life as it shot up her legs, spun through her chest and gathered into a ball at the top of her head, she forced it out through her arms.

She felt the fierce heat in her fingers as streams of liquid fire blasted from her hands. It pounded into the nearest corpse's back. He arched backward as the fire burned through him, shooting out his hands to the corpses on either side. The flames passed from corpse to corpse, completing the circle.

The fire lit the night as the wreath of burning corpses shook faster and faster, their skin boiling into sores that blistered and popped. Reddish-white pus oozed forth, snapping and popping in the heat. The fire was louder than Johan's furnace. Black smoke filled the air with the gut-wrenching stench of burning flesh.

As one, the corpses burst into a pillar of flame that shot towards the heavens, burning blue for a single breath before crashing back into the ground.

All that remained was memories.

Rickward cowered in the circle of melted snow, his hands over his heads, sword dropped carelessly in the mud beside him.

He was safe.

She let the Breath go, and staggered forward, catching herself on a bent pine branch.

Gasping, she surveyed the destruction. The ground was drenched in the melted snows. Dry, brittle brown leaves poked through the new mud. The trees within the circle of her power had shed bark like flakes of dry skin. Their leaves had completed their changes, and rained down around them.

"The camp." Rickward grabbed her arm and dragged her away, his voice thick with desperation.

Raven found them halfway back to camp. His eyes were huge, though his brow was creased in worry. He looked safe, though. Grabbing her by the shoulders and looking her over, his relief was evident. "You're safe."

She nodded, and then told him what had happened. Finished, she said, "You be screaming."

"My wondrous story over, I checked on the darkness the traitorous Wolf and I have been tracking. It was here, hanging like a rain-swollen cloud above us, stretching far to the north. To the Temple, unless I miss my guess."

Rickward gasped quietly, but shook his head when they looked his way.

"I decided to risk it. I examined the cloud closer, trying to find out something about this threat. As my mind entered into it I felt a piercing, like a hundred spears. They were cold, a cold that freezes your very soul. I screamed then, not from the pain, but the realization of what it was."

"The very fingers of death," Rickward whispered. His face was a mask of horror, a study in discovery.

"What do you be thinking?" Elena asked.

"Before I left to... find Raven, I overheard Wolf. I'm not sure who he was talking with. He said the Overlord was planning to blot out the sun with the dark of the dead. I'm not sure what he meant by it, though."

Raven's shoulders sagged, but his eyes were alert. "We have to break camp. Now."

"Why?" Elena asked.

"The Temple of the Sun is protected by Betzalel and, to a lesser extent, the two women the Overlord killed during the Temple's raising. They don't exist in this world, but on the other side, or somewhere in between. If he has found a way to rally the forces of the dead, he can take down the Temple from the other side."

"That's why it's never been successfully destroyed before," Rickward said.

Raven nodded. "The Temple guardians and, to a lesser extent, the *Nekodah* priests, have stopped it. They were always able to restore it. But if they are no longer defending it, the Temple is just another building."

"Why would he be wanting such a thing?" Elena asked.

"If he could cross over in the flesh, he could live forever."

"How do you be knowing this?"

"It was the *Nekodah* council's plan," Raven said.

"To cross over themselves?" Rickward asked.

"No. To get the Overlord out of the way. We could not defeat him through raw strength, so they hoped they could convince him to leave."

"And I be the bait?" Elena asked.

Raven nodded. "For the last stretch, aye. You provide the power he needs to cross over. Someone was supposed to be by you to keep you safe, though."

"That be why you're here."

"So I thought, too. Until I met your son, anyway."

"And if he be destroying the Temple," Elena said, realization suddenly sinking in, "Our lands would not hold themselves together."

"Aye. The process that started during the Sundering would complete itself."

"What did they be thinking?" Elena wondered. "They had to know."

Rickward shook his head. "They were blinded in their quest for power. Lost so deep in their manipulations, they forgot why they had started."

No one said a word as they ran back to camp.

Chapter 41

They met Pierce at camp first. Elena searched for Johan while Raven briefly explained the problem. Pierce nodded once, turned, and barked orders to the men. Elena could tell the run and the battles had the men exhausted and scared, but they followed orders without hesitation. They were good men, loyal, and would die before leaving the lands in the Overlord's oppressive grasp.

She liked them all, and wished she could find some way to get them all safely home. Too many had died already. She laughed nervously as she realized this must be much the same way that Johan felt as their leader. While she did not lead them, she still felt that responsibility was partly on her. The burden of that duty came with the Breath.

"Rough night for a ride." The voice was low and gruff.

Recognizing it, she spun around, anger already boiling, and with it the fires of the Breath. "What in the seven hells do you be doing here?"

He stepped back, his stance suddenly wary.

"I joined a better cause."

"It be a little late for that, don't you think?" She moved to grab his tunic, wanting to shake him, hit him, anything to release the pain that he had caused.

His hands struck fast, grasping her wrists.

"Listen here, Elena. I know I done a lot of bad things in my day. Ain't none to proud of them, either. But I'm here to try and set things right in the only way I know."

A hand settled lightly on her shoulder. "He is one of us, now, dear," Raven said. "Wouldn't do to hurt him on his second night."

She turned to catch Raven's gaze, her jaw muscles flaring wildly.

He nodded back at her, and she slowly relaxed, funneling a small Breath of air to press outwards on his fists, loosening his grasp. Tearing her arms free, she said, "I don't be liking it."

"She's alive," Bardulf said.

She shook her head. "I saw her die. I held her."

"She wasn't dead, just damn close. She was the Duke's favorite, she was."

"Favorite? How many more be clutched in his fist?"

"Twelve others, of all ages."

"Are they on their way to the Overlord, then?" Raven asked.

"No. Don't know details, but he didn't seem too fond of letting the Overlord get his paws on them. Must've had a change of mind after the attack. Let them all go. Except her, anyways."

"Let them go?" Elena asked.

"Turned them loose right before meeting his brother. Damn cruel thing to do, though. Didn't give them no food or water."

"What did he be doing with my Joss?"

"Like I said, seems to have taken a fancy to her. They met every night, but I don't know what they be doing."

"Training her, probably," said Raven.

"Mother's Mercy," Elena said, turning to Raven. "Remember when we be at the *Chiy'el* village? I thought it be her calling my name."

"That's when you almost let our enemies overtake us."

"Aye," she said, ignoring his remark.

"Well, that could be it, then," Bardulf said. "After the meeting, he had her taken in the wagon. She was as weak as a new born fawn. Overhead the other's talking. She's going straight back to his palace."

The hope Elena had been unsuccessful at holding back dissipated in a quick rush that left an empty crevasse.

"No matter," she said. "Nothing I can be doing for that now." She hoped it did not sound like she was trying to convince herself. She turned back to Bardulf. "You said he be changing his mind. How so?"

"Before the attack, he was bent on getting you. Training you, I think I heard him say. After? He couldn't stand you being alive. His whole tactics changed."

She turned to Raven, hoping he had an answer.

He did.

"Unless my senses have completely left me, I would say he was trying to bring you into your powers before the attack."

"Why? I'd just be a threat to him."

"Not if he could aim you at the Overlord. You must not forget that they are father and son. The Overlord had the only higher power in the lands, and our Duke had no place to go until his father was dead. It could be he wanted to hone you into a weapon against his father. He could make his bid for the Fire Palace."

"Then why would he be changing?"

"The *Maveth*," Rickward answered.

"What?" they said in unison.

"The *Maveth* were his father's weapon, not his. Though it didn't seem he was trying too hard to kill you."

"Yes," Raven said, excitement raising his voicing. "It all makes sense now. Our friendly Duke realized they were there not there to kill you, but to kidnap you."

"I still don't be understanding," Elena said.

"The Overlord needs you for his plans. When the Duke realized that, he had to try to keep you from him. The weapon he was forging was now pointing at him. Brilliant!"

Elena shot him a dark look, not quite thinking the twists and turns of these rulers' minds anything to get excited over.

They jumped as one when Pierce bellowed for the train to start moving.

She grabbed Bardulf's sleeve, holding him back as the others darted to grab their packs.

"I be understanding what you did," she said. "But I need you to be promising me one thing. When this race to the Temple be over, help Johan. Find Joss and get her back home. Promise me."

When he nodded dumbly, she turned and raced to her pack, wiping the tears that she could no longer hold back.

They trudged through the snow as quick as they could, but it was over five hands deep and forced the horses to slow. They broke free of the woods

at dawn and started passing scattered farmsteads, most with oxen and cattle ranging in the snow. They broke for lunch just past the first farm and finally broke the quiet reverie.

"Today's the fifth," said Bardulf as he sliced the roast pigeons, handing small pieces to the men gathered around the fire.

Pierce nodded thoughtfully, glancing up the road. The others chewed their meat and drank their ale quietly. The cold was sapping everyone's strength.

Johan looked around at the men, and at Elena, as they sat around the fire. He knew morale was down, and he should do something, but his mind was occupied with thoughts of Elena and he found it hard to concentrate. He would have to find some time to talk with her on the next leg. "We should be reaching the border late in the Third Quarter," he said. "What do the odds be that he be waiting for us."

Raven spit out a piece of fat and said, "The Duke wants her, but he won't risk his brother's wrath. I'd say he'll be on the other side. Probably at the mouth to the Untamed Woods."

Rickward nodded his agreement. "The *Nekodah* will work with him. Seems enough have realized their mistake that he'll find a portion willing to help."

"That just leaves Duke Chanoch. He's honor bound to give us until dusk before calling the Cleansing."

"The Cleansing?" Elena asked.

"Chanoch allows five days for passage across his lands," Raven said. "That's plenty of time for crossing. He's a paranoid man, and harsh, though very just. They say he had his own wife executed for stealing, then waited two years before taking another. He mourned her every day, so they say."

"What he's trying to say," Rickward interrupted, "Is that if we don't pass the border by nightfall Chanoch will

consider us spies, and sick his hounds on us. They're nasty beasts. Won't touch meat unless it is fresh. Twice as big as a normal dog, it's said they can track scent through a week's rain, though I'm sure that's exaggerated a bit. A squad of elite rangers, nasty men each, follow the dogs to take care of any survivors.

Elena gasped. "Don't that be a bit harsh?"

"None of the Dukes trust each other. Too much history, I suppose," Rickward said.

"The real problem be the *Nekodah*," Johan said. "Will they try to stop us?"

"The boy has already told us a small faction. I don't know how many, though. What concerns me is the Wolves." Raven turned to Rickward, motioning for his input.

"You're definitely on their list," Rickward said. "I imagine, once word gets back of our little party, that there will be a new hire."

"What do relations be like between Chanoch and the Wolves?" Johan asked.

"He won't stand for them. They fouled a hire on him a few years back and he's vowed their destruction, though he won't leave his lands to do so."

"Good. Mount up, I be having some ideas about this."

As they rode, Elena watched the troops, listening in when she could. Most was idle banter meant to lighten the darkness ahead of them. None knew if they would survive, so they were determined to enjoy what time they had.

Some talk worried her, though. These hushed conversations she could barely make out. She heard enough to know not everyone was happy. They saw this as a sure means to an early death. It did not seem to occur to them that they had volunteered for this rebellion.

She tried to push the men's thoughts away. They only brought back her own doubts. Like it or not, she had a gift that possibly no one else had. This gift could mean the difference between life and death for untold children and adults alike. It was just like Johan had said to her years ago: "The lives given during the Rebellion be a small cost for the lives we saved." At the time, she had thought he was trying to convince himself, and perhaps he was, but now she understood. Doing the right thing was seldom easy, but always necessary.

As they broke for lunch with the sun straight overhead, she could feel the tension in the men. Everyone knew they were making slow progress. Everyone knew what waited for them at sundown.

The tension flared as they prepared to mount up. She heard the angry shouts, and started to dismiss them until the ringing of swords caught her attention.

She pushed her way quickly through the mob of men that ringed the combatants. In the center of the circle, three men stepped a cautious circle around a fourth. She did not recognize the outer three, but the man crouched low in the center she knew well: Rafe. He wore several nicks on his forearms, but the others wore worse.

She watched in horror as two of the men darted in at once. Rafe stepped into the first attack as the second

sliced through the air behind him. Like lightning, his sword sliced a wrist, and then flicked to the side, sending the first soldier's blade flying. The onlookers scooted back, letting the blade plummet into the snow.

She should stop this, should do something, but whatever she did would only weaken Rafe in their eyes.

Was this how soldiers passed their time? No, she realized, he was a part of the enemy in their eyes. She knew that he was not, though, and felt powerless to stop them.

Johan appeared beside her. He grunted, and then turned to leave.

"Well," she said. "Aren't you going to be doing something about this?"

"It be working itself out."

"You can be protecting the living, husband, not just the dead." Her voice dripped with disgust, forcing him to stop.

"He be your kidnapper, wife. Let him die, if they can do it."

"And if they don't be good enough, what then? Would you truly be letting them die to satisfy your guilt?"

His voice cooled into an icy warning. "Now does not be the time."

Ignoring the cry of pain that erupted from the fighters, she glared at him. "Stop them, or I will."

She watched as his shoulders tightened and his chest drew tight. She met his icy glare with her own. She no longer cared what rage strained against his hold. It was no match for hers.

"You be winning," he said. "For now."

She stalked away as he strode into the combatants, his sword singing free of its scabbard.

Johan met up with her as she cinched the saddle tighter. The horse huffed and sidestepped, glaring back at her.

"Lanie," he said, but she interrupted him before he could finish.

"Why do you be fighting this time?"

Taken off guard, he stopped to collect his thoughts before answering. "I be starting out to save you, though other commitments be called along the way."

"Do those commitments be including your daughter? Your son?"

"Of course they do. What kind of fool question do that be?"

She forced her voice to just above a whisper and looked him in the eye. "Those men--Rafe, too--be somebody's sons."

She watched as the fight washed out of him, his shoulders and head sinking low.

"I know, Lanie, I know. I just... When I saw him ride off with you... I was almost to you. Almost to Joss." He looked up at her, his eyes full of hatred. "I vowed to kill him if he hurt you."

"But I be safe."

"He took you," he roared.

"Everyone has their reasons for how they be acting. You know that as well as any." She glanced over to where Rickward sat on his horse, turned studiously away.

His gaze followed hers, and he froze. "I never wanted that. You won't be understanding this, but I did it for you."

"Betzalel?"

Shocked, he turned back to her. "How long do you be knowing?"

"When our son mentioned his history with Betzalel, the pieces fell together."

"Lanie. All those years... I didn't want to treat you like that. That didn't be me."

She held a hand to his chest to stop him. "Don't, Johan. Not now. Maybe when this be over, but not now."

"That chance might never be mine."

She turned and launched herself onto the horse. "Whatever happens, always remember that everyone be having their reasons."

He rested a quivering hand on her knee. "Joss be alive."

She sighed, deep and painful, and studied the reins as they wrapped tight around her wrist. "Bardulf told me."

"You don't be having to do this. We can get her back. Forget the rest."

"I can't be doing that. You be knowing why."

"Lanie," he protested, but she did not hear him as she kicked the horse forward and rode up beside Rickward to wait for the troops to start moving once more.

Chapter 42

They could barely make out the broken stone wall that marked the Boundary between Yaremka and the Wildlands. It was crumbled and pocked with the passing of time. It was originally built to keep the Wildlanders out of Duke Chanoch's lands. He was glad they had left it to the ravages of time. Today, its dilapidated state could be their salvation.

He looked to his left, gauging the angle of the setting sun. "There be less than one Bell till dusk," he said.

Pierce nodded. "We've cut it close."

"Aye. Bardulf," he called. "You be sure the children would not be coming here?"

Bardulf pulled his horse closer, wiped away the snow that caught under his cap, and nodded. "The eldest boy seemed to be excited about the prospect of serving the Overlord. I expect he'll head towards the Fire Palace and try to gain service."

"Don't be guessing he knew the service that was intended of him, then?"

"None did. Least so that I could tell."

"Let's be doing this. We don't be wanting any others to be fulfilling that service, now do we, boys?" Elena said.

Johan watched her for a breath before responding. She had always been a strong woman. In many ways, she was stronger than he ever was. If he had known how strong she could be, would he have ever made the bargain with Betzalel? Or did the bargain somehow forge the strength she now needed?

The ground on this side of the wall fell away into a small hollow that crossed between the hills in front of them. He surveyed up and down the hollow. They would be visible from the wall for a long way either direction.

Perfect.

He pointed to the bottom of the hollow. "Place the fires there first, spreading a bit either direction before coming back this way. We be needing at least four rows of fire."

"That should give us about ten wide then," said Pierce as he turned to Johan. "Will that be enough?"

"It better be. Spread them wide. If you can be finding more wood, make them bigger. That will have to do. We need to hurry. The tents must be up before the hounds start the run at dusk."

Pierce relayed the orders to the soldiers at his side. They saluted with fists to hearts and a grin, as the plan started to make sense.

Before any conversation could start up, all of the soldiers able to crawled toward the designated spot, towing bundles of sticks behind them.

Raven sat atop the wall, his breath dancing in the cold night air. He could see little now that the sun had gone down, but the moon was full and shone a hazy red that made him shiver. His breath looked too much like the

mist in the Bone Yard for comfort. He truly hoped it was not a warning.

His head snapped up as three hounds bayed in the distance. The hunt had begun.

The night erupted in light as nearly forty towers of flame flashed and then settled into normal fires. He scanned the camp, watching the tents sway gently in the crisp breeze. The fires illuminated just enough to show the shapes huddled around the fires, apparently sleeping. The bodies of snow had been packed and, with his help, turned to ice. They would melt some, but would last long enough to fool their enemies.

He nodded in satisfaction. When their two opponents arrived, all would appear a normal camp, albeit one much larger than they truly had. Let them wonder.

Elena had done well with the fires. Now it was his turn.

Bowing his head, letting the tension flow from his body, he reached out with his mind. His thoughts merged with the wall, the woods behind, and the frozen plain in front of him. He sent his will into the connection and felt his mind rush through the woods, faster than the largest bird could fly. At the end of three breaths, he came to a stop.

Quickly, he scanned a wide path around his target and found him surrounded by nearly twenty men, none trained. Good. The Duke was with him. They were not far, he estimated. They should be here within a Bell, less if they rode fast.

Ignoring the protocol they normally followed, he shaped his energy into a spear and thrust it into his target. He could feel the pain as it erupted in the man's head and smiled.

"Wolf," he called through the connection. "Your assassin has failed. The Protector is with me. I would keep your dogs close this night, if I were you."

"Raven?" The query was full of surprise.

"You must truly have thought me weak, if an untried boy was your solution."

"It worked when we were children."

Raven chuckled. "Bribing a few thugs so that you could have time with Doe is not quite the same. Besides, I'm at least two hands taller now."

He felt the slight tug on the connection as Wolf tried to trace it back to his location.

Good. Let him come.

"I guess I should consider it a privilege that you will have to face me yourself tonight," Raven said.

He could feel the tug again. He cut it off without warning. He most definitely did not envy Wolf the headache he would suffer.

He watched the men around Wolf long enough to ensure they were headed this way. Reeling his energy back, he sent it the other direction, searching for the hounds and their masters. He did not have the time, but it was crucial they both arrived at similar times. He swept his vision across the frozen fields, following the sounds of their bays as their vibrations echoed through the hillside. When he found them, though, he was shocked at their speed.

He reeled the vision back as quick as he dared, his crossed legs bouncing with impatience. Once he was whole, he leapt from the wall, scraping his arm on the icy branches. He shot along the wall, bounding over branches fallen from the weight of the snow, dodging as they strained to grab his clothes and hair.

He sought for the familiar stride that allowed him to cover many leagues during a single day, but fear kept it out of his grasp.

Snow showered him as he broke through the screen of fallen branches, and into Johan's encampment. All of the soldiers were seated atop their horses, waiting for him.

For a single breath, Johan watched Raven as he gasped for air, and immediately signaled the men to move. No words were spoken. None were needed.

Raven launched into his horse's saddle and kicked the mare into motion. Riding hard, he quickly caught up with Johan. When he settled his horse into a matching pace with Johan's own steed, he said the only word that was needed.

"Hounds."

Johan nodded briskly, glancing back the way they had come.

Raven followed his gaze and nodded. He pulled the horse to the side, forced his breathing to slow, and sent his energy into the lands.

Ten breaths. Twenty. He breathed deeper and slower, calming his mind. A gust of wind answered his plea. The wind tossed the trampled snow, gusting and swirling until the trail they had followed seemed caught in a small blizzard. The wind blew farther away, letting the snow settle into place.

Raven nodded. Even he could not tell that someone had passed this way.

With a flip of his reins, he spun the horse around and kicked the mare into a gallop. If his fears proved true, their race had only just begun.

The clash of swords erupted in the distance, as the roars and screams of what must be huge dogs shattered the silence. Elena knew their plan had worked. She smiled to herself as she pictured the beauty of Johan's plan. Chanoch Kaebal and his hounds had found their camp.

To a distant viewer it would be like a much larger group of men, mostly sleeping, camped for the night before crossing the wall in the morning. Fires were lit. Figures were bundled in blankets. Tents were scattered through the camp, presumably for the leaders of this little rebellion.

They would have been cautious as they investigated, fearing to rouse such a large force. By the time they realized the whole thing was a farce, Wolf's men would have arrived, together with the Duke. They would see the camp, and the soldiers milling around and, hopefully, attack the party before they realized they were the wrong men.

By the sounds of distant fighting she knew Johan had guessed correctly. For now, at least, they were safe.

The Duke would eventually recognize his brother's men and call a halt to the battle. Once both sides realized what had happened, they would be hard on their trail. No one was willing to bet whether it would be one or

both sides following them to the Temple.

She watched the men as they galloped through the icy forest. Their eyes were full of sadness and resignation. Long faces called to her of despair, grief. They knew what was coming for them, and they knew where they headed. Most had given up a chance at seeing home again.

She knew how they felt. Reaching a wrinkled hand behind her, she drew a lock of white hair to her front so that she could see it. Even if she could give up her duty and return home with Johan and Rickward, it would never be the same. She let the hair drop, a decision made.

Easing the horse alongside the closest group of soldiers, she smiled large and confident. Their conversation stopped--about the best features of the maids back home--but they smiled back, nervous at first.

"What be her name?" she asked.

They stared at her for a breath, caught off guard, before the youngest, not much older than her own son, replied.

"Lorelei."

"Ah, but that be a beautiful name. Your betrothed?"

He ducked his head sheepishly, blushing under a handsome tan.

"Aye, I be seeing," she laughed. "Lovers, then? What do she be like?" she asked when he nodded. "Don't go being shy. I remember well the tender touches shared between lovers." Resisting the urge to look for Johan, she joined in their laughter.

"Ah, lady," he sighed, shaking his head. "She was the sweetest maid I ever met. The way she looked at me made me feel I was the only person in the room. Those eyes, and that smile. Could brighten the Fire Palace itself, it could." He gazed ahead of him, eyes unfocused as his memories played themselves across his mind's eye. "When we were alone, she used to twirl her hair around her finger, just so, as she listened to me. Never once did I feel like she was wondering if the clothes were dry."

"Go on," she prodded, "That can't be all."

"Noteventhebest," he said. "Weusedtosit up in the dark, wellpastTenth Bell, talking about how we would ride the lands together, climbing mountains just so we could see what the view was like from there. Other nights we'd sit in silence, me shaving a rabbit or snake from some broken limb, her needling a new shirt, or mending one. Never known a silence as comfortable as that."

Silence spread between them, awkward and full of expectations and fears.

"She be waiting for you when you be getting home. Just you be remembering that."

He looked at her, all memories scraped from his face. "You really think we'll make it home?"

"Of course we be making it home. She might have a few more shirts to be mending when you get there, but you be seeing her soon. I plan on making sure of that."

She held his gaze as she talked, and slipped into an easy confidence as she made her way among the soldiers, breaking quiet conversations and planting fond memories in their place. Once, she caught Johan mingling

among the soldiers in much the same way. She smiled warmly at him, her own fond memories giving a private dance for her. Talking with the men was doing her as much good as it was them.

When they arrived outside the Temple of the Sun, she realized she need never have worried about holding her faith.

Seeing what lay before them, scattered in mobs across the meadow surrounding the Temple, she wanted nothing other than to turn her mare around and bolt back to face the Duke.

Chapter 43

"Father's balls!" Johan said, turning to Raven. "What be that?"

The Temple of the Sun rose above them. The ziggurat looked like it had been carved from a giant chunk of granite by the hands of the Father himself. A flight of steps crawled up each side, ending at a platform that clutched the Sun Crystal. He knew the name would never do it justice. The Sun Crystal was actually thousands of tiny, pointed quartz held together with a maze of gold and silver wire. It caught the fading sunlight and threw it back out a thousand times brighter, lighting the plain around it as if it were Second Quarter.

That was not what had surprised him, though. The Temple was erupting. That was the only way he could describe it. Boulders of the stone burst free in a shower of lightning. First near the corner, then from the other side, then the middle. There was no pattern to it.

Raven smiled at him, though it was not the confident smile that always brightened his bearing. "Well. I can't say I've ever heard of it doing that before."

"That's it?" Rickward said.

Raven shrugged. "I'm not the Father, you know, though I can see how you might occasionally mistake me for such a grand and chiseled being."

Rickward turned back to the Temple, hiding a smirk.

The silence stretched as the men and their soldiers watched in awe and fear.

Pierce cleared his throat nervously. "What in the name of the Father could be doing that?"

"If I may have a word, Johan." Raven pointed his head to the side.

Johan did not nod, but followed him several steps out of earshot of the men. His gaze lingered on the crumbling Temple as his thoughts spun in circles. There had to be a way in. He had the feeling Elena would not stop until she saw this through. He intended to be beside her every step.

"What do you be thinking?"

"I know this be a touchy subject, but I was wondering if you might see anything else down there?"

Johan furrowed his brow at the Wildlander, and then turned to the Temple. Sparks and rock chips. He scanned the grounds around it. Nothing. He shook his head, turning back to Raven. "Why would that be so touchy?"

Raven met his gaze. "How's Wiatt?"

Johan's scowl deepened. "He be dead."

"He's also your Guardian."

"Father's beard! He be dead. He be a ghost that be haunting my dreams. What of it?"

"Do you feel any different when you fight?"

"What does this be having to do with that Temple? Or getting Elena safely in and back out?"

Johan turned and started to march away, but Raven's words stopped him.

"You don't fight alone."

Johan slowly turned to him. "What do you be saying?"

"When you fight, Wiatt is there with you."

Johan wanted to scream at him, to curse him. The words would not come. Instead, memories tripped along the inside of his skull: a tingling in the back of his neck made him turn just in time; a stroke plunging off course somehow corrects itself at the last instant. These and a hundred other moments from uncounted battles flashed through his mind. He did not want to admit it. Since he was born the Priest's told them to stay away from the dead. They must be left in peace.

"He is not just in my dreams?"

Raven shook his head. "I know it is hard for you, with the teachings you've been raised on. But you must know it was his choice. I could not force him. He chose you."

"Why would he be doing this? Why would he be giving up the chance to enter the Mother's embrace?" No sooner had he asked it, than he remembered the ghost's words to him in the alley.

You did more than anyone could have every hoped. You saved hundreds of souls that night. You earned the name Protector of the Dead.

I made my own choice that night. So did everyone else that was there. You forced no one, least of all me.

"Mother's mercy. He be telling me it then. I just didn't be understanding." Laughter bubbled forth, unbidden. "Protector of the Dead? I think they be getting it wrong. I'd be dead if he didn't be protecting me."

Raven watched, understanding glistening in his eyes. "Wiatt gave much for you. Use it."

"How?"

"Give yourself over to him. Just for the moment," Raven said as Johan started to interrupt. "See what you can see at the Temple through his eyes."

Understanding welled within Johan, bubbling forth like a stream that had broken free of the earth. The trees blocked his view. Curious, he walked back to the soldiers where he had a clear line of sight. He stepped hesitantly at first, and then gained speed the closer he got. Curiosity overwhelmed his religious upbringing.

He gazed at the Temple again, asking Wiatt to share his eyes. It was several long breaths before anything happened. When it did, he felt like a gauze had been laid over his eyes, fading the colors away until the world around him was little more than shades of gray.

His breath escaped in a hiss. "Mother be merciful."

The men close enough to hear him pried their gazes away from the strange, crumbling Temple, and turned to him with furrowed brows. Johan paid them no mind. His own thoughts spun faster than an arrow. What other

gifts could Wiatt give him? What tactical advantages could he carve from Wiatt's sacrifice? It sounded cold, uncaring, but years of watching men die on battle had taught him that a willing sacrifice should never be wasted.

He shook his head sharply, breaking his contact with Wiatt. Color flared back into his vision, color so bright it was painful. Within a breath he could see normally again.

"What is it?" Pierce asked.

Johan sighed. How did he tell them this? How could he not sound crazed? He was not sure there was a way to avoid that, so he fell back into old habits: the truth. No matter how bitter or harsh, the truth was always the best course.

"I know you men be seeing the blasts on the Temple."

It was not a question, but they nodded their heads anyway, questions forming in their eyes.

"These be souls tearing at the stone. They be black as night. Something is trying to resist them. Whatever be protecting it can't cover the entire surface."

But he knew who protected it. Betzalel. He was in there, somehow, fighting a losing battle against the spirits.

"Johan," Rickward said, placing a cautious hand on his shoulder. "What's wrong? You've paled. Like you've seen a..." He could not bring himself to finish the sentence.

Johan could not blame him. "The Overlord is inside."

"How do you know this?" Pierce asked.

Johan shook his head. "He be commanding these spirits. Somehow, we must be stopping him. If he wins, if this Temple falls, we all be in more trouble than we can handle."

"How do we stop the Overlord?" a squeaky voice called from the back of the men.

"We can't fight his Breath." Another voice, this time louder, more desperate.

Johan laughed, a true laugh filled with the joy of victory. "Do you be forgetting so soon? We have our own Breath to fight with. A Breath more potent than his cowardly manipulations. "Elena," he called. "Come here, Lanie. Let the men see the woman who will bring us to victory."

He waited, searching the small throng of men. They glanced around, searching for her. Bright smiles lit their faces.

"Lanie?"

Their smiles slipped when she did not come forward.

"Father's balls! What foolish thing do she be doing now?"

A slight soldier, once a pig-herder, pointed toward the Temple. "Look!"

They all turned to look. Johan cursed at what he saw, but forced a smile into place before turning back to the

men.

"See there, men. She be going first, and clearing the way."

Their voices raised to the Mother in a triumphant cheer. Their faces

brightened as they turned to clasp arms, or wrap their neighbor in bear hugs. Johan pulled Raven aside. "Can those spirits be harming the living?" Before Raven could reply, the cheers dropped away, leaving the field quiet

once more. The only sounds were the spirits hammers against the Temple, and

a new hammering sound. This one was deeper, more dangerous. "The Duke be here. To arms!" He turned for one last glance after his wife, inviting Wiatt to share

the view. "Mother be merciful."

Elena dove to the ground, rolling as a spirit sped past her, its clawed hands slashing the air a finger away. She rolled to the side and stood as another black spirit pounced where she had been.

They were everywhere, and they moved too fast for her to keep track of. What had she been thinking, coming here alone? Surely Johan would have known how to get past them. She shook her head, laughing at herself as she leapt out of the grasp of another. She had more weapons against this foe than the Protector of the Dead. If only she knew what could hurt them.

Her concentration slipped, and the spirits disappeared from view. Cursing, she forced her concentration to bring back the Breath that allowed her to see the dark, twisted shapes. As they slipped back into view, she threw her arms in front of her face, and stumbled to the right. The smell of death flew on the breeze of the spirit's flight.

One claw tore through her arm. She grabbed the wound, but did not feel any blood. Instead, an icy chill that ran straight to the bone burned where the wound should have been.

She ran forward, weaving side to side. She was the rabbit; they were the eagles. Rabbits only survived for two reasons: dodge first; find a hole second. Anything else was a sure death. Her rabbit hole lay ahead of her: the massive stone door set deep within the crumbling walls. She only had to survive long enough to reach it.

Looking up, she saw the giant maw of the Temple loom overhead, just paces away. She pushed herself faster, coaxing every bit of speed she could out of her old knees. Every joint burned with age. Every pulse of her blood was a hammer to her bones. Her breath caught in her chest, though it did little good.

The wind shifted, and she gagged at the foul stench, like whiskey vomit. She risked a glance behind her, and despair numbed her mind.

She would not stop here. Not now. Not after how far she had come; after how much she had given up to be here. She sputtered a prayer to the Mother. She pushed faster, just in case the Mother was too busy to answer.

Too much. Fire exploded through her right knee and she fell to the ground. Five black shapes sped past her, pulling up hard as they reached the building and shooting up to circle back and try again. They looked like a school of playful fish as they wove in and out of intricate patterns.

Peals of laughter erupted through ragged gasps of air. She was hysterical, she knew that, but there was nothing to do but laugh. She was getting too old for this. The thought pulled more laughter free of her wheezing lungs.

She glanced at the spirits. Damn it! No time to fix the leg. She pushed herself up onto hands and knees, her entire body shaking.

Above her, the building shattered in a peal of lightning and thunder.

She dove, grabbing handfuls of grass and yanking herself forward as fast as she could. One stride. Two.

It was not enough. Ragged flakes of granite showered down on her. She pulled her legs in tight to her chest. She was not fast enough. A large rock, easily the size of a man's head, slammed into her ankle. It felt like a hundred swords had been shoved through the bottom of her foot.

Victory screeches filled the air, threatening to deafen her. Equal parts lion's roar, hyena laugh, and tornado's low-pitched howl, the sound sent shivers speeding along her skin. She glanced up and found the five spirits diving at her once more, needled smiles cracking their inky faces.

This, she could do something about. As she loosed her Breath on the rock, wind battered it, rolling it off her ankle. As she screamed, the pain filling her mind, the spirits filling her sight she pictured Joss falling from the Ladder, she laughed. Why had she not thought of this earlier?

She Breathed the winds again, feeling the magic siphoning more of her life away. It did not matter. The dead could not destroy the Overlord.

The winds swept around her, lifting her and threw her toward the door. She slammed into a wall of wind that stopped her a hand width from the solid granite slab, and then slid to the floor of the entrance, still laughing.

The spirit's howls were now screams of rage. They dove at her, their green eyes pulsing in rage. She threw her arms up to shield herself. What more could she do? But they slammed into the Temple's protections.

Lightning exploded, spotting her vision. Thunder cracked, deafening in the entryway. But the spirits were held back.

She felt the drums first. Was it coming from the Temple? Putting her hands against the stone wall she waited, but felt nothing. Outside, the spirits swam in chaos, all patterns gone. Two collided and took at each other, claws slashing and teeth gnashing.

She stopped the Breath that allowed her to see them. They could not get her in here. As she caught her breath, her lungs protesting with a wheeze for every breath, she watched the field outside in horror.

Trees trembled to the beat of the drum. Steam clouds swirled through the tree tops.

The rebel soldiers--her men--burst through the trees and into the clearing. They glanced behind them in horror, and then parted as the Duke and his men tried to ride them down, bashing horses out of their way with their own beasts.

She strained to see. Where was he? She searched both parties, twice, but could not find Johan anywhere.

"He be safe," she chanted to herself, willing belief to come forward as she healed her leg. "He be safe."

The drums beat faster as Johan's men jumped onto their horses, swords and spears readied.

Fear etched his men's faces. Bloodshot eyes looked back at him, but, in many, the fear and despair succumbed to a strong dose of hope. Behind them, Elena ran to their salvation.

He wished he could believe as they did.

Pierce shouted orders to the men, and they shifted into positions, all eyes watching for the Duke and his men.

They saw the clouds of snow first. Kicked up by the charging horses, the enemy was cloaked in the living cloud. Johan strained, but could not begin to see how many they were up against. He was hoping it would be just the Duke, but the fear on Raven's face betrayed his thoughts.

Dark shapes crisscrossed inside of the cloud. Too small to be horse, too large to be dogs, Johan could not place them. He leaned forward, straining for a better look. They moved too fast.

"Mother's mercy," Raven said. "They brought the pack with them."

The pack. The assassins did not always strike invisibly. On occasion, they destroyed their mark in a manner sure to increase their legend. Starved and beaten to just before the point of rebellion, the wolf pack was hungry for blood.

Something about the Wildlands seem to grow them bigger, Johan decided as another shadow darted through the snow cloud.

Raven turned to him and whispered. "We can't hope to survive this. Not both sides together."

Johan nodded.

A horse broke ranks, and Johan turned his direction, ready to yell and scream, until he saw the rider.

"You're supposed to be lining with the other men," Johan said as Rickward pulled alongside him.

"I know the odds as well as either of you. Better, probably. These men won't hold. Not like this."

"Agreed," Johan said. "You be having any ideas?"

Rickward nodded. "I was taught the best way to win a battle is not to fight it. You said there were spirits in that field. How'd they react to Elena crossing their space?"

Johan nodded as he began to grasp Rickward's plan. "They didn't be seeming to like it too much."

"Good," Rickward said, smiling. "Let them think they're running us away, then split and hope their charge angers the spirits a bit more."

Raven nodded. "At the best, we've mainly got the pack to handle. At the worst, we've got them from both sides. Still not good chances, but it's a good plan."

"Agreed," Johan said. He turned to call the order, but Rickward stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"One condition. You and Raven go. We can do this. If we can't, so be it. Mother's going to need your help against the Overlord."

Johan met his gaze, joy and pride swelling his breast. Not trusting himself to speak, he turned to Raven, his eyes searching his old friend's.

"The lad has a point. You made a pretty speech earlier about her, but I'm not sure how far I'd be trusting her against the Overlord. He's got a bit of experience with these things."

Hesitant, not sure how his son would respond, he stepped forward and wrapped his arms around the boy. Rickward stiffened, and then relaxed and returned the embrace.

"When you be done here, meet us in the Temple. We might have need of you." Johan pulled away, not trusting himself to hold Rickward any longer. He squeezed his son's shoulder, held it for a breath, and then forced himself to walk away.

"I'll see you when we're done here," Rickward said.

Johan nodded, his breath catching. Only when he heard his son run to the battle could he breathe again.

"That's a good boy you've got there," Raven said as they grabbed their packs and swung them over their shoulders. The horses would have to stay.

"Aye. He be a good one at that." Pride rode on his words. "Now. How do we be getting in there? I don't fancy racing the spirits."

A wide grin broke on Raven's weathered face. "Did I ever tell you I led a mischievous childhood?"

As the drums stopped, the battle erupted behind them. They raced along the edge of the woods, tracing a wide path around the Temple of the Sun.

They pressed themselves hard. Elena and the Overlord waited.

She could do this. She had to. Elena kept telling herself those words over and over as she forced herself to stand. While the spirits threw themselves at the barrier of the Temple, each strike raining rock behind her, she felt along the walls for some way to get the cursed door open. There had to be a way.

She stopped. Betzalel was the protector of the Temple. Where had she heard that? Was it from her mother? She shrugged the thought away. It did not matter where she had heard it.

"Betzalel," she called out, praying to the Mother that he would hear. "Betzalel!"

She waited several breaths, straining to hear over the explosions and screams of battle. He was not going to hear her.

She pounded at the door, tears of frustration blossoming. "Father's balls! It can't be ending here. It can't."

Something inside the door clicked, and she stood straight. Who knew what lie in wait behind the door. She did not even know if it was Betzalel that had opened it.

She pushed gently on the huge stone door and stepped back. Every muscle in her body tensed, ready to run. But there would be no running away. Not today.

She could do this. She had to.

Through the crack in the doorway, a gentle light--purer than any campfire or torch had ever burned--filtered through the gloom. Bathed in the soft light, the stone floor looked vibrant, healthy, even after so many years of abandonment.

Nothing sprang out at her. No threatening sounds escaped the Temple.

She could do this. She had to.

Willing courage to fill her, she drew a deep breath and shoved the door wider.

It was nothing like the Temple in Harts Haven. The Temple back home was big--she had always thought it too big--but this was massive. Where the Temple back home had granite floors, laid together with a precise hand, the floor in front of her was a mosaic of marble, brass, and various shells and woods. She could not make out the picture the mosaic tried to show her. It was simply too large, and faded from view in the gloom.

Ahead of her, in what had to be the center of the Temple, a giant wall curved away from her in both directions.

She stepped through the doorway, placing one foot with a careful, measuring step. She did not want to set off any traps that may have been laid. When nothing happened, she took another step. She never dreamed that the trap that she did spring could even have existed.

It started in her feet. She could feel the trap's Breath pierce her feet and grab hold of her bones. It felt like icy lightning as the pain erupted and raced up her legs, every step igniting new fires inside of her. It cut through her torso, her chest. It sliced through her arms, and into her head where the real pain started.

Fists of invisible energy grabbed hold of her head and squeezed, each finger thrusting a dozen blades through her skull.

She tried to scream, but her mouth would not open. Her throat refused to let the wordless sound escape.

"So you have finally come to join me." The voice was ancient and weary, but confidence oozed from the words like puss from a lanced boil.

The creaking preceded the Overlord as two emaciated servants pushed him in front of her. They leaned hard into the wheeled throne as they fought with it, turning it until the Overlord looked directly in her eyes.

She had thought the voice was ancient, but the man in front of her looked as if he had spent countless eons in that chair. Limp, white hair fell on slumped shoulders. Skin hung loosely on the skeletal arms that peeked out from under a thick wool blanket that covered his lap. Except for the bright, intelligent eyes that peered through the stray caterpillar eyebrows, she would have sworn he was a corpse that had been waiting here for years.

The illusion shattered as his body bent in on itself in a wave, his head snapping back. Dry, rasping coughs grated her ears as his body shook with spasms. As spit slammed into her cheek, she hoped he would choke on his tongue and die.

Slowly, he wiped the blanket across his mouth, and then let it fall back on his lap. He smoothed it across his legs as he turned his gaze back on her.

She felt it pierce through her mind, and meld with the pain. She could almost feel the fingers as he swiftly sifted through her mind. When he was done, he smiled.

She had never wanted to see a corpse smile.

"Waylon," he said to the slave on his left. "Make sure Rafe's wife is well rewarded. He performed his part well."

She wanted to scream at him, to curse him. The pain still tore through her, though. Had he planned all of this? Had he manipulated them all, even his own sons, to bring her here? She shivered.

"Now, come along, Elena," the Overlord said. "You still have your part to play."

The building shook around them and they were bathed in a shower of dust. She tried to look to the source, but could not move.

As the Overlord was wheeled away, she found she was wrong. She could move. Only now she did not want to.

Her feet slid across the floor at first, adjusting each step until she was walking normally. She willed them not to move, but they would not listen. As the fire burned inside of her, she unwillingly followed behind the Overlord.

Could she end it here? Now? That is why she came here, after all. She slowed her breathing and tried to push her mind past the pain to touch the Breath. When she tried to draw the Breath, the fires flared up, dropping her to her knees.

Panting, she struggled against the pain, struggled against the Overlord's power, but it was no use. She watched her body as it lumbered faster behind the man who would destroy this world, knowing there was nothing she could do.

Chapter 44

The brambles clawed at Johan and Raven as they tugged them free of the Temple wall. They paid no attention to the rips and pricks. They were running out of time, and they knew it.

The sound of battle roared from the other side of the Temple. The barking of the wolf pack set a low note to the bell-like ringing of swords clashing. It was not pretty music, and Johan would give anything to be able to put a stop to it, but he knew they each had their part. His part was here.

"You be sure about this place?" Johan asked as he glanced around him. The Temple grounds had been cleared for a hundred strides all around. Only the base of the Temple had been allowed any growth at all. He knew that when the *Nekodah* had cared for the Temple, even this would not have been allowed.

"Aye, my beloved Protector. I know every nook and cranny."

"A mischievous childhood."

"Exactly." Raven beamed at him, momentarily pausing in his work. "You were listening."

Johan growled. "Don't be getting too excited. Keep pulling."

"You never could relax, could you?"

Johan yanked another vine free of its hold on the stones and froze. "Wiatt," he whispered, hoping his Guardian would not have traveled far. Within a breath his vision faded into grays, and he surveyed the landscape. Nothing.

Throwing the vine to the ground, he spun around, freeing his sword from its scabbard. Just in time.

"Hurry," he said. "I be getting this."

Before the sword stopped ringing, Johan was thrown back as a massive wolf launched itself into him. Blood sprayed from its snapping maw as he lunged for Johan's throat.

Johan rolled. Forcing his legs between the wild creature and himself, he kicked out. A claw tore through his arm as the wolf was ripped free, and smashed into the Temple wall.

Johan leapt to his feet as the wolf stood, shaking its head.

"Raven?"

"It's free, but it won't open."

The wolf pounced again, but Johan was ready this time. He ducked low, plunging the sword into its chest as it sailed over his head.

A good strike. Too good. The blade stuck in the bone. Johan stumbled as the wolf yelped and fell to the ground.

He tugged the blade free as another growl erupted behind him. He turned, and found himself staring at two more of the giant wolves, their fangs dripping with blood.

"It's open," Raven called. "Hurry!"

Johan crouched low, ready to spring. He had to trust his back to Wiatt. He was not sure he was ready to put that much trust in a ghost, not after Betzalel, but he had no choice.

They leapt as if ordered by one mind. Wiatt's warning sent chills down his back, and he knew they were all in the air.

He rolled to the side, kicking the chest of the closest, shoving him into the second fresh attacker. He used the kick to push himself over and back onto his feet. Without looking, he ran for the open door. Raven ducked out of his way as Johan burst through it.

He spun, lunging his sword into a wolf's snapping mouth, forcing him back. As the wolf retreated, another threatened to take its place. Squeezing in beside Raven, they shoved the door closed.

The echo seemed to ring forever in the complete darkness.

Johan shivered. It felt too much like a tomb for his taste. "I don't suppose you be having a light?"

He heard Raven scuff his hands along the walls. It sounded like a sanding block as years of grit fell onto the floor.

"You mean you didn't bring any? Shame."

Johan sighed as he felt his way along the wall, searching for a torch. He cursed as he slammed his knuckles into the torch sconce. Feeling the edges with both hands, he found it empty.

"Nothing," he said.

"Ah, well. Do you need to hold my hand for comfort, then, as we take a midnight stroll?"

Johan smiled in spite of himself. "You don't be getting that pleasure tonight. Let's be going."

They felt their way along the tunnel, frequently stumbling on the bones of small animals. Wiatt was no use to Johan in the darkness.

With each step, Johan's mood became darker. With their hands on the wall, they could feel each piece that the spirits tore free of the Temple. Judging by the vibrations, they seemed to be getting larger with each stroke.

Betzalel was weakening. How long could he hold?

Shivers of icy fear ran through Elena. This was not how it was supposed to happen. She knew coming in that he would be more powerful. She knew he would probably defeat her, but she should have had a fighting chance. She should have been able to at least get one blow at him. Yet, here she sat powerless to even speak, unless he let her. It was humiliating. It was infuriating.

Knowing it was useless, she struggled again as he watched, amusement dancing in his eyes. She willed her arm to move, she cursed it, willed it some more. Nothing. Not even the barest flicker. The blanket draped over her lap was identical to his. The robe his two half-naked servants had draped over her was a twin to the one he wore. It sickened her.

His mind brushed against hers, and he started to laugh. Instead, he erupted into another coughing fit that grated on her ears. When the spasms subsided, he met her gaze again, the amusement gone.

"They will find you," he said. "How could they leave you here, suffering all alone?" His head jerked to the side, his ancient eyes peering into the shadows. "They come."

His hand flickered up and back down, barely noticeable. The most emaciated of the servants pulled his wheeled throne back, and then pushed him into the shadows. His voice wafted on the breeze, a rusty nail pulled from an ancient coffin.

"You are brave, to have come here for me, my dear. You have no idea how foolish that bravery was, though. You had it backward. She was just a child. She was there to serve you."

Fury coursed through her, and this time he let her speak. "What would you know of a mother's love?"

His thin laugh echoed from the perfect shadows. "I know more of the Mother's love than you might imagine. One more excuse for woman's weakness. One more weakness to manipulate."

"Weakness? It be my love for my daughter, and the love of my mother for me, that be driving me here."

"Utter foolishness. Taerana and Betzalel? They were more difficult to put on the path, true, but they led you here to me. Nothing more."

She refused to believe it. He had not forced her here. He could not have.

"I will be killing you," she said.

She started to curse at him, but he clamped his hold tight. Ribbons of fiery pain tore through her. Her stomach threatened to empty, but she forced a calm to return, pulling the leash of her anger tight. If she could not talk, could she get the vomit out? Or would she choke on it?

She felt, more than saw, the welling of the power behind her. She thought she heard voices calling to her from the pool of life behind the curved wall. She forced herself calm, shallowed her breathing, and listened.

The words were still unclear, but their sound washed over her, calling encouragement to her. The voices told her to stay strong, but why should she? What chance did she have now?

Suddenly, the roof burst apart, large broken stones shattered on the marble floor.

Outside, distant screams of victory sounded. Behind her, the voices cried in pain and fury.

A thin sheen of sweat covered Johan, the salty liquid burning as it seeped into his wounds. He pushed the pain aside and focused on the door in front of them.

"It be blocked," he said. "Is there another way out?"

"None," Raven answered.

Johan spit into the darkness. "Can't you be doing something about this?"

When Raven did not answer, he spun about and reached into the darkness. Where was he?

"Raven?"

"Be quiet now," Raven answered. His voice was thin and forced. "Can't you see I'm working?"

He wanted to pace, to slam his fists into the door. Elena was out there with the Overlord. If only the rocks had piled on this side of the door, then he could do something. He turned back to the door and pushed again. Still no movement.

He felt Wiatt's warning and invited him to join with him. A cold breeze swept through him and he knew the spirit was there.

Screams suddenly assaulted him. They burst from the walls, echoing through the fabric of the Temple itself.

"Raven! We've got to be getting through now," he screamed. "Raven!"

The screams swept through him as he waited for Raven's answer. One breath. Two. He could not wait any longer.

Finding the doorway with his hands, he reared back, and then threw his shoulder into the door. Pain erupted in his shoulder where the wolf had clawed him, but it was nothing compared to the pain that assaulted him in the screams. He heard a faint trickle of rocks from the other side of the door.

He slammed into the door again, and again. Each time more rocks came loose. Suddenly, the door flew open as he threw himself into it one last time, ignoring the pain. Rocks burst free, skipping along the granite floor to rain into the walls.

"Raven," he called. "It be open."

"I'm well aware, my boy," Raven said. His breath came in ragged bursts as he jumped through the doorway. He wiped away the sweat that flowed in giant rivulets from his hair. His exhausted eyes met Johan's. "It was good of you to help, my friend."

Johan nodded. The screams were louder here, deafening. They seemed fiercest on the other side of the round room that centered the Temple. "What be in there?"

"The Pool of Life. Don't ever touch it. You won't live to regret it. Why?"

"Don't you be hearing the screams?"

Raven shook his head. He closed his eyes and held up one hand in a waiting motion.

Johan spun around, scanning the area. There were no bodies among the ruins of the Temple. Elena must be elsewhere. Overhead, light streamed in through the broken ceiling. Dust-choked rays of light pierced the gloom. Eerie shadows danced along the walls, as if they were alive and searching for prey. Black spirits clawed at the ceiling, keening in frustration.

He spun back to Raven. "Where?"

Raven's eyes snapped open. Desperation shone through the exhaustion. "The Altar. Follow me."

Johan followed as Raven sprinted across the open room.

Light erupted around them as the ceiling caved in, raining jagged boulders around them.

He jumped to the side, rolling out of the way as a chunk of the Temple twice his size shattered on the ground.

He burst up the stairs behind Raven. They buckled under another supernatural impact, and the stairs below him caved in.

"Raven!"

Johan threw his arms forward, latching onto the step in front of him. It held, but buckled under the weight, pelting him with small, dusty fragments.

Raven's head burst into view. His smile was wide with the excitement. "I knew you couldn't resist my hand. No one can."

The Wildlander latched on to his forearms and pulled, muscles bulging in his neck and arms.

Johan kicked, found purchase, and pushed himself onto the steps. They wasted no time. They had to beat the shadowy spirits to the next level.

Stretching his arm as he ran, Johan could feel the claw marks bleeding again. Dirt and stone would find its way in there. It would not be pretty, but he had no time to clean it.

As they reached the top of the stairs, Raven turned sharply to the left, and then stopped. When Johan turned the corner, Raven was straining at a massive rock blocking a large iron door.

Johan squeezed his way beside him, crisscrossed his arms with Raven's and met the Wildlander's tired gaze.

"Ready?"

Raven nodded.

"Heave."

They pulled hard, using their legs to push it further away. Slowly, ever

so slowly, it rolled away from the door. Dust rained down on them as another impact shuddered through the Temple walls.

"Heave!"

Muscles threatened to rip as they strained against the rock. It was caught on something, and they were forced to pull it both up and away from the door. Their faces turned first red, then purple, but finally it rolled free.

They fell back, rolling out of the way, as it thumped into the wall and toppled down the stairs.

Staggering to their feet, they fought to catch their breath. Gulping the air through burning throats, they watched the floor as their lungs started to function again.

Raven nodded his head at the door. "Inside."

Johan slid his sword free of his scabbard one last time. "I be hoping you'd say that."

Raven held his hand up, counting silently with his fingers, his other hand already grasping the wrought iron handle.

On three, Raven flung the door open.

Inside, outlined in heavy light, sat the Overlord. A dark cowl was pulled tight around his face, a plaid wool blanket draped over his lap. His wheeled throne sat dangerously close the edge of a large round opening that fell sharply away behind him.

With Wiatt's aid, Johan felt the Overlord's muffled energies emanating from the room in soft waves that pounded into his senses, enraging him.

He leapt through the doorway, his sword cutting a swath through the thick air.

A warning flare fired up inside of him. He turned just in time to stop a blade from slicing into his side. In a half breath, his gaze swept up the length of the sword, up the darkly tan, muscled arms, and into a face that he instantly recognized.

Rafe.

Chapter 45

As the sunlight faded, Johan and Rafe circled each other. They crouched low, snakes ready to strike. Johan's sword swept a wave-like path in front of him while Rafe's sword darted in and out, side to side in tiny movements.

Rafe wore a confident smile. "It's truly a pity that you're wounded. I was looking forward to finishing our spar."

"Elena asked me to be sparing you before," he said.

Rafe lunged. "And here I thought you were fond of me. Shame."

The room was lighter, Johan noticed. The stone itself glowed with a healthy light. With his shared sight he knew the pulse was coming. Could he use that to his advantage?

His blade flowed around Rafe's lunge, a sweeping parry that his opponent quickly recovered from.

Father's beard! Where was Elena?

The clash of swords erupted around him. From the corner of his eye he saw Pierce swinging hard at Hector. The battle lines had moved up here.

Wiatt's warning flared above him. He sidestepped into the path of danger, leading Rafe closer.

He pretended to slip, his sword swinging wide into a glaring opening.

Rafe seized it, lunging in with a speed Johan should have remembered.

He dropped and rolled. The stone boulders smashed into Rafe's sword, sending it skittering across the floor.

Johan leapt to his feet and scanned the room. Rafe dove through the fight, narrowly escaping a spear thrust.

Rickward had found a precarious high perch and was loosing arrows into the enemy with unequalled skill.

Above the boy, spirits tore through the fading stone barrier.

Johan wanted to scream at him, but there was nothing he could do. The boy would fare better up there than on the ground in the midst of the swords.

Where was Elena? She must be close to the Overlord. If he had not already destroyed her. No. He would not think that way. Could not. She was alive. Somehow, he would know if she died.

The Overlord sat rigid in his throne, watching it all with irritating poise.

Johan glanced behind. Rafe snapped his sword up and darted around two combatants, cutting a rebel's throat on his way past. His eyes never left Johan.

"So be it," Johan thought. But the Overlord would come first.

He ran to the Overlord, his entire being tensed in anticipation of his counter-attack, but the Overlord did not move. Johan could not see under his cowl, but he would bet the old man did not even blink as Johan rushed

him.

Johan's entire body screamed as Wiatt's warning shot through him. It did not matter. Whatever the problem, the Overlord was his. He raced on, parrying a spear and a sword, kicking a royal soldier clear.

He raised his sword back, his entire body still screaming with the warning.

Elena cursed the Overlord who, no doubt, was smiling that thin-lipped smile as he watched the show from the shadows.

The pressure from the Pool of Life built behind her, each breath seeming to feed it. With each breath, the room glowed a little more.

Breathing was a struggle. The air simply could not move through her constricted throat. Every time she struggled to use the Breath, her throat closed tighter. If she tried again, she feared she would suffocate.

She ignored her burning chest as Johan spun towards her, raising the sword. She tried to scream, but all that escaped was a silent croak. A day-old frog could do better.

Her head swam in the light. Her vision blurred around the edges. She fought to hold on.

She flung her head backwards, trying to throw the cowl free, but her head refused to move. The cowl did not even shift. Her face was still covered in shadows, the deeper for the light that quickly grew from the Pool.

She threw herself side-to-side, trying to rock the wheeled throne, but nothing moved.

As she struggled, she felt the Overlord's grasp tighten. He would accept no mistakes at this point in the game.

Game? What in the Mother's name was she thinking? She had not come here to play games. She had come here to die. She knew that. But she refused to go without fighting.

She summoned every ounce of life left in her body, funneling it through her constricted throat in a Breath that sucked the breeze around her.

The Pool of Life erupted around her as her throat closed completely, blocking off her last chance at life.

"Please, Mother," she prayed silently. "Let it be enough."

The room burst into blinding daylight as the Sun Stone flared to life. The brilliant energy burst through Johan. In a thought, his wounds were healed as the pure energy filled him with new life. For a breath, Wiatt's warning faded, and the room became silent.

He watched in horror as the blanket on the Overlord was brushed aside by the power of the light. It flipped, end over end, caught for a moment on the throne's arm, and then flapped past him. The hands were cupped in the lap, but they were not the Overlord's hands. They were old, older than he had seen before, but that did not disguise the truth. Too many times those hands had wrung nervously at her apron. Too many times they had caressed his face.

"Elena." The word was a silent gasp, the sound sucked into the silence of the light.

He tried to stop, willing his feet to move backwards, but he was running to fast. His arms flailed at his sides. The sword spun to the ground where it landed with a sharp clang and bounced away.

As suddenly as it had come, the pulse passed. Noise shattered the silence of the darkened room. His breath surged back through him, releasing the scream.

Unable to stop himself, he fell forward, into the throne that held his wife. The wheeled chair surged back and hit the lip of the wall that led to the pool. It tilted, hanging precariously on its perch as he shot a hand out to her. It was too late. Elena's wide eyes watched him as the chair fell into the pool.

"Elena!" He screamed in fury and anguish.

He turned, needing to lash out. The whine of metal greeted him as Rafe slashed hard. He parried, fueling his blow with blind fury. Rafe's sword burst in two, the pieces flying.

Johan smiled, the hard smile of revenge. Elena's kidnapper would die at his hands. His sword flowed around Rafe's broken blade, but it was too late. His rage had blinded him.

Rafe thrust the knife under Johan's slash and plunged it deep into his chest. Pain exploded. Tears burst free, blinding him. He staggered back, the knife scraping against bone as it tore free with a sucking noise. Warm blood spilled down his chest.

Rafe lunged again, but flew sideways as two arrows slammed into his neck and face. He spun as he was thrown through the air, slamming into a rebel soldier. They both toppled to the floor.

Johan turned as he fell to his knees, searching for his savior. Rickward was already knocking another arrow, but he never got it off.

The stone behind him shattered as the shadowy spirits burst into the room. Broken fragments of the Temple slammed into Rickward, throwing him from his perch.

Johan did not have time, or breath, to scream for help. He watched, helpless, as Rickward tumbled through the air and slammed into the stone floor. The stone fragments pounded into the stone around him, some smashing into his legs and back. Even over the roar of battle, Johan heard the bones shatter.

Rickward's glassy eyes stared back at him as blood oozed from his mouth.

Johan stumbled to his feet, oblivious of the battle waging around him. The spirits would not take his son. Not again. He lurched forward, coughing up red foam. His vision blurred, then darkened, but he forced one foot in front of the other.

Not his son. Not again.

Elena!

Chapter 46

Elena gasped for air. Her throat was loose again, but still no air came. She struggled to her side, and then glanced around in confusion.

She was no longer in the Temple of the Sun. The cracked plain stretched as far as she could see. It ended in thick, barreling fog that swirled around unseen forces. All color was washed from her vision.

Raising a shaky hand, she gasped. It was young again. All the years the Breath had stolen from her were hers once again. But her skin was painted in the same shades of gray as the dirt around her.

Where was she?

Then she remembered: Johan running at her, sword in hand; the throne toppling as the Pool of Life spread its healing powers across the land. Bathed in the waters of the Pool, her body had screamed as every piece of herself was torn away. Then this.

She was dead, then. She should cry, she knew. She should weep at the loss of years. Jocelyn. She would miss Jocelyn. She would miss getting to know her son. She shook her head and stood, brushing the lifeless dust off her clothes.

The Priests talked of a Ladder that fell from the Mother's house. It was to be her final test, but where was it? She turned a slow circle. Nothing but dry, cracked, dusty plains. From the corner of her eye she saw the mist swirl and, for just a breath, she caught mighty spires of sharp mountains forming a new cage wall. Even here.

Maybe she had to find it? Was that the test? Did she have to prove herself worthy of the Mother's notice before she could even try to climb to the Mother's embrace?

And this was what the Priests lived for: this desolate, lifeless existence?

Where was her mother, Taerana? The stories claimed your relatives would wait for you, if they could. They would meet you at the end of the light.

What light?

She shrugged, and then looked behind her, expecting, somehow, to see her son and her daughter, to see her husband, and everything else she had left behind.

Instead, the ground splintered in a thousand, multi-colored pieces. Red and white-blue lightning buzzed and wrapped a ball that blew outward, dissipating as quickly as it had come.

She ducked, holding her arms up to ward off the dust that the explosion flung at her. It caught in her mouth, sticking to her tongue. The inside of her nose was powdered with the gray dirt. She wiped a dirty arm across her eyes, hoping to remove enough that she could see without being stung by the dirt in her eyes.

Two colorful figures brawled across the gray dirt. They clawed at each other and kicked like wild animals. As they rolled across the ground, she saw first one face, and then the other.

The Overlord, in living color, sunk a clawed hand into Betzalel's colorless face, ripping free a handful of spectral flesh.

Elena backed away.

"Not here," she whispered. "Not here, too." Her hand flew to her throat, clasping it in horror. She had not had a prayer of success during life. She would surely fare no better here.

But he was distracted. He did not even know that she was here.

The two men fought on, the Overlord ripping chunk after chunk of Betzalel's flesh away. The wounds did not bleed, but oozed wisps of life that the Overlord breathed in, filling his lungs with the ancient spirit's life.

Her mind spun in circles, hoping for ideas, but none came. She was frozen in fear. If she were destroyed here, what would happen? Would she, too, be the breath the Overlord Breathed?

And then a worse thought struck her. He was still in color. He was still alive. Somehow, he had used her death, and the power of the Pool to bring him across, body and all. And he was no longer the shriveled raisin of a man he had been. The wash of the Pool had restored his youth, just as it had restored hers. What could one man with such experience do here?

What could he not do?

She turned, searching for something that she could use to stop him. A rock, a branch. Anything. There was nothing.

The fog pulled closer, forming a circle around the three of them. As it swayed and bucked, she saw people watching them. Watching her.

She could feel their eyes burning into her. "Do something," they seemed to say. They accused her for her inaction. She nodded at them. She understood. This was still her duty.

This was what she had died for.

Turning back to the center of the circle, the Overlord breathed deeply, sighing in obvious pleasure as he stretched his arms, raising them high over his head. He was an obvious target, but he did not seem bothered by it.

"Ah, Elena," he said, folding his arms across his chest. His eyes roved the length of her body, pausing at her breasts. "Youth does wonders for you. You should stay by my side, now that you have nothing to fight for."

She could not help herself. She laughed. "Nothing to be fighting for?" She looked around. "And what about these harmless souls? I should become your whore while you be enslaving them?"

His smile faded into a dangerous, feral mask. "I would not have put it nearly so harshly. Besides, these souls mean nothing to me. They are yours, if you want them."

"They do not be wild animals for capturing and selling." She spit the words out while searching for some weapon. Being dead, could she still call the Breath, the essence of life?

She reached for it, willing a tower of blue-white flames to envelop him. Nothing answered her call.

He laughed again, this time at her surprise and despair. "I had so hoped for better from you." He turned and started walking away, his hands tugging an invisible rope to him. The dust spun into a funnel around his feet. Every step he took left the ground empty. Not empty, but simply not there.

She needed time. She had to find a way.

"What do you be planning for them?" she called, hating herself as she chased after him.

"Which spirits do you speak of?" he asked without turning.

Which spirits? Was he truly mad? Before she could ask what in the Mother's name he meant, the invisible rope filled with life. It stretched out from his hands and split into a hundred smaller ropes that formed a chaotic web in the sky. Each rope spit black lightning along its length.

Confused, she watched him pull the web closer to him. At the end of each of the lines was a black, shadowy spirit. Some strained against the pull. Others clawed at the rope, trying to tear themselves free.

"Mother be merciful," she gasped.

He turned to her, then, his eyes bright with amusement. "You can keep your spirits, Elena. I already have mine."

It was hard to find her voice, but the words eventually stammered out. "What do you be using them for?"

"They are going to show me across the oceans. They were quite amenable when I said they would be free of the Father's traps, and would have their turn at vengeance." He waved a hand around them. "There is nothing here to interest me. Our land is used up. The lands left by the Sundering are surely full of *Chiy'el*. They should be stopped before they destroy their lands."

"Do you be mad? You be destroying the Temple. You be destroying our land." Was there no sense of humanity left in this monster? Did he really think he could use the very lands and heavens around them to fulfill his whims? The black spirits screamed in terror and rage. She nodded. That was exactly what the Overlord thought.

She scanned the lands, but the ground was still every bit as barren as when she arrived. She stared at the spirits that watched. Would they not help? They stared back. Waiting.

The Overlord marched away from her, unconcerned that she was at his back. He continued reeling the spirits in by their ropes.

She followed the lines with her eyes. They flowed from the spirits, into the Overlord's hands and wrapped tightly around his waist. It was as if the black rope was a part of him.

The black spirits grew closer, their screams piercing her soul. They writhed in fury at being so commanded. Elena did not think this was what they had agreed to. They were freed of their prison only to be slaves.

They would help, she had no doubt. She refused to think about what they would do after the Overlord was gone. It would not matter then.

She dared not think any further.

She exploded into a sprint. Her feet pounded into the dry ground. She kept one eye on her path, careful not to step in the Overlord's footsteps.

He spun around to face her, his face a knot of rage.

She leapt.

He dodged to one side, swinging the thick rope out of her way, but she reached out, straining for it. Her fingers grabbed hold and she jerked to a stop. She tightened her hold on the rope as her feet swung past her.

Cursing violently, he tried to lash the rope free of her grasp, but she pulled herself closer, locking arms and elbows around the rope. She bucked sharply, a rider on a wild horse, but held on.

As he grabbed for her feet with his free hand, she slipped over the rope and kicked at his white knuckles, still holding tight to the rope.

His free hand snatched at her leg once more and grabbed hold, his nails biting hard into the meat of her calf.

She swallowed the scream and kicked at his fists again, but he yanked her to him. Her hands slid along the black rope, lightning spitting from her hands. She did scream now, but not from the pain. This scream burst forth from years of bottled rage.

In her eyes, he was all of the villagers of Harts Haven. No longer would they curse her and spit in her face. He was the Duke's Captain, ripping her daughter away from her outstretched arms. Too many glares; too many curses; too many sleepless nights struggling to find a way to free her daughter from the village's cruelty. Too many nights hiding from a drunken husband who lashed out at every imagined insult. No more!

Gritting her teeth, she growled and let the Overlord pull her closer. She pushed on the rope, sliding faster too him, and slammed into his chest, throwing him off balance.

Together, they tumbled onto the ground, and she rolled over, spinning until she could get her hands on the rope as it tied itself around her waist.

She felt the bite of the Overlord's Breath as it sunk into her mind, but her rage burned through it.

He gasped as the power of the Breath poured back through him. His grip loosened for a breath, and she was free.

She swung her legs off of him, grabbed the thick cable of death and pulled. Her back arched against his weight as the cable gave the smallest fraction.

Her breath spit out in one furious burst as he swung and punched her in the gut. Gasping, she clawed at the black cable, but could not begin to fray it.

He bucked, trying to throw her off, but she would not let go.

As his arms wrapped around her, and he tugged her loose, she bit into the cable. For one horrifying moment, she thought she had lost. He would never allow her this close again. Her teeth burned. She was sure they would rip out. She would not let that happen. She bit harder and harder still. Finally, she felt the rope open up.

Her world spun into gritty darkness as the power held in the rope gushed forth. The air turned to fire as the Breath's life crashed into the very essence of death that this land was made of.

She pushed herself back, rolling over and over, farther and farther away, until the fires were out and she could breathe the cool, dusty air once more.

Lifting herself onto one elbow, she watched as the spirits descended, shrieking in victory as they dove in to take their revenge.

Blood spattered across the cracked ground as the first spirit tore through his throat. As it hit the ground, it hissed and spit, like tallow left too long on the fire.

She turned away. She could not bear to watch. As the wet ripping sounds continued, she collapsed to the ground, exhausted.

Would they come for her next? Would their talons shred her like they did the living body of the Duke, or would it be different? Would she simply cease to exist?

Part of her was screaming: get up! Get out of here while you can! The dominant part whispered to her that it was over. She had done what she had been brought here to do. Let it end.

She wept, tears falling in pools onto the barren waiting grounds.

When no more tears would come, she realized all was silent once more. She rolled over, wincing at the horror she knew would lay before her. She did not want to see what was left.

But there was nothing. In his place stood a mob of gray souls. Sad smiles cracked their dusty faces, but they called silent encouragement to her.

The mob parted, and a tall woman stepped to the front, her long white gown trailing behind. As she lifted her gaze to Elena, she brushed flowing hair to the one side.

Elena knew her instantly. How many times had she wanted this day to come? For how many years had she wanted to stand with her and yell and scream at her? But those emotions were gone. Instead, joy and love swelled

through her, bursting forth in new tears.

"Mam? Do that really be you?"

Taerana nodded. "Yes, Lanie. It be me."

Elena ran to her and threw her arms around her. She held her tight, squeezing years of loss into this single moment. She pulled away, but still held her mother at arm's length. "I hated you, ever since you be dying and leaving me."

Her mother's eyes were dark as she gazed back, unwilling, or unable, to find words. Years of pain and sorrow etched her irises.

Something about them stroked a feather across the back of her mind. She stared deeply into them, willing the memories to come. When they did, she gasped. They were Johan's eyes.

Taerana lifted a hand to her daughter's face, and ran her fingertips over her cheeks and down the ridge of her jaw. "Sometimes we must be making hard decisions."

Elena nodded softly, willing the tears away. She thought of Jocelyn, Rickward, and Johan. "I be knowing that now."

Her mother smiled, and her face lit with pride. "You be so brave, my Lanie. More so than I ever dreamed you

could become."

"You be a good teacher. Even if I didn't want to be learning."

Taerana stroked her face again, cupping her chin in her hand. When Elena started to ask her what she was thinking, her mother silenced her with a thumb across her lips. "Just let me look at you."

They stood in silence for an eternity of breaths, each memorizing the details of the other's face, and recalling neglected memories.

Finally, Taerana dropped her hands, and grabbed Elena's in both of hers. "Come now. I must be showing you something."

A note of wistfulness--or was it despair?--tainted her voice. Elena tensed, but followed at her mother's side.

With each step they took, the fog swept quicker along the ground, swirling and dancing. Elena looked back at the mob of grey souls. They all turned to her, watching after her.

The fog swept past them, as she turned to the front once more. As it cleared, her breath hissed through clenched teeth.

"What be going on?" she asked. She hated that her voice shook.

The Temple of Sun stood ruined before them. The grass, while still grey, stood proud and vibrant in a thick carpet around the stone carcass. Her mother remained silent, refusing even to look at her as they walked to the edge of the ruins.

"Mam," Elena whispered. "I don't be wanting to see this."

Taerana turned to face her, stretching a hand to point past the Temple. "Look, Lanie. Don't you be feeling it?"

She did not want to look. The Temple reminded her too much of the Bone Yard. Nothing good could be left in that tomb. She shook her head.

Her mother reached a gentle hand to her face and forced her to look. Elena resisted at first, but gave in as something new and bright and bold and joyous tugged at her heart. When she finally allowed her gaze to turn, her mouth dropped open.

On the far side of the ruined Temple a staircase rose into the bleached clouds. It seemed made of pure gold--the only color in this dead world. Rays of light beamed down, glinting of the rails that wound around and around as high as she could see. She could not take her eyes away from it.

"Do that be..." The words trailed away. There was no name that could truly do it justice.

"Yes, Lanie. Do you feel it?"

She did. It was a song of the purest love soaring along the distant breeze. She thought her heart would burst from the joy and passion the song ignited in her. It was the purest mother's embrace, in every sense.

She nodded.

"Will you be coming, too?" she asked.

"Yes, Lanie. We both be earning our chance today. Come."

Elena's gaze locked on the Ladder as they passed. She would be going home. Finally, truly, home.

They stepped through the rubble that lay scattered across the verdant grass. The wind snatched at her hair, as if the spirits that had torn it down had left their mark on the very winds.

Corpses lay scattered across the field. The new souls, like her, stood over their bodies. Several cried in disbelief, others screamed the names of their lovers in anguish. Still others stared up at the Ladder, desire and peace warring with disbelief.

Anguished keening drifted along the wind to her. She tried to ignore it--she was going home!--but something about it stopped her.

"Mam. It be Johan."

"Yes, Lanie. It do be your husband."

He may have been little enough of a husband these past years, but the pain in Johan's voice sliced deep into her.

"Should we... can we look?"

Her mother smiled at her, sorrow plain as she nodded. "Sometimes we must be making hard decisions."

At her words, the keening cut deeper.

"Mam?"

"Go look, Lanie. I'll be behind you."

Hesitant, she dropped her mother's hand, and picked her way through the rubble. Fingers of the Temple still stretched high, but their grasp came up empty. The magnificent stone building had finally been destroyed.

She passed through what would have been the main entrance. She crept through, waiting for the Overlord's power to snap her up again. It seemed that the trap could not last past his death. Sighing in relief, she picked up speed as Johan's keening halted. The clatter and scrape of the battle's aftermath was the only noise left.

When she reached the top of the stairs, she stopped. The Mother's joyous tug still pulled at her, willing her home. What would she find through this doorway that could compare with that?

She shook her head. She had no answers, only questions. After all, this was her home. This was familiar. But she was dead now. She could no longer be a part of this.

She glanced behind her, and found her mother a stride behind. Taerana nodded at her, urging her forward.

Elena took a deep breath and peered through the doorway.

Soldiers and rebels alike worked to piece together their fallen comrades. Only a handful had survived. Those still alive were blind to the presence of, or lack of uniforms. They knelt over the wounded, dribbling ale over wounds, or tying makeshift bandages tight.

She saw it all in an anguished breath before her gaze fell on her husband.

Johan knelt next to the wall, cradling a bloody, rag-doll of a boy against his chest. He rocked back and forth on his heels, completely oblivious to the blood soaking his shirt. When the boy's face flopped into view, she cried out.

"Don't be taking him!"

She raised her head to the Ladder that wound into the clouds. She could feel the Mother tugging gently at her, but she turned away.

"You be going on, Mam," she said. "I can't be leaving yet."

"You may never be getting another chance."

She considered it for a moment, but her son's dead eyes stared back at her. When she answered, her voice was soft and sad. "You be going on."

Her mother reached one hand out and placed it on her shoulder. She squeezed, and Elena knew the pain and sorrow her mother had suffered when she trained with Betzalel.

When her mother spoke, it was the voice that every mother should have.

"Sometimes we must be making hard decisions." Elena reached up and squeezed her mother's hand. "Some be easier than others."

Chapter 47

Johan gasped as he reared back, ready to cry out again. Elena stood an arm's length away. Her face radiated with a confidence he had never seen her wear. Her long hair swept in a gentle breeze. Gone were the wrinkles the Breath had pinched into her. She looked every bit the woman he had married so many years ago.

"Lanie?"

As she smiled, her face glowed with beauty and poise. She nodded and knelt next to him, placing one hand over his bleeding chest. A gentle fire coursed through him. Pain gave way to peace, just as it had on a dark battlefield so many years ago. The hand had been Wiatt's then, and the fire was one of desperation and hope. Elena's fire burned with love.

There was no sound as she spoke, even though her lips moved. Instead, the words floated into his mind. He let out a sigh of pleasure. Even her voice was like his dreams.

"Be knowing this, Johan," she said. "I forgive you."

He tried to stand, but Rickward's dead weight pulled him off balance, and he fell to his knees. He stayed down. It seemed somehow more appropriate.

"Lanie," he stammered. "I have so much to be saying."

She held a warm hand up to his lips. "I know you did what you be needing to. So did I."

She paused, lifting his face by the chin until he met her gaze. "I always loved you. Always. But now I must be going. I have more that must be done."

He started to protest, but she quieted him with a single word before breaking the contact that let them speak.

"Always."

He held her gaze for another breath, and knew, by the love in her eyes, that she truly forgave him everything. Tears burst free, and streamed down his cheeks.

Turning to their son, Elena laid one hand on his chest and the other on his cheek. She closed her eyes and lifted her head to the sky.

He could not hear the words she said, but he did not need to. The meaning was clear.

In a blink she was gone.

The boy in his arms came alive with a rattling gasp of air. He swallowed thickly, and then breathed again. And again.

"Mother's mercy," Johan whispered.

Around him, the men stopped, and stared in wonder.

Johan did not notice. His son was alive. Alive!

Wrapping his arms around the boy, he squeezed him tighter to his healed chest.

Rickward coughed again, and then pushed away.

"Dad, you're going to kill me like that."

Johan could not help it. Laughter bubbled free, and then burst forth in full-throated joy.

"Not again, son. Never again."

"I thought for sure that I would not make it."

"You didn't."

Rickward stared at him, confusion slowly settling into understanding. He strained against his father's grip, looking frantically around. "Mom. Where is she?"

When Johan did not he answer, he turned back to him, brows knitted in anguish. "Is she gone?"

Johan pulled him close once more, this time careful not to squeeze.

"No, son. She'll be with us. Always."

Epilogue

"Well, if the Mother didn't swallow the Father's balls! Look at you."

"Marsh Mouth!" three voices called in disapproval.

Jocelyn spun around to face the voice, and then yelped as a pin pierced her thigh. "Gilda!"

"I am sorry, my lady." From the look the pruned seamstress shot her, Jocelyn was sure she had not meant a word.

From just inside the doorway, Marsia beamed at her with those wide eyes and quirky pigtailed. Tomas, Renee and Bartholomew peeked out from behind her rope-thin figure. They all shared the same wide smile. Except for Renee, who kept her eyes cast down at the babe clutched tight in her arms. Some things never change.

"Mother be merciful," Jocelyn said as she stepped down from the dressing platform, ignoring Gilda's glare and not-so-quiet *harrumph*. She bounced over to Marsia and hugged her tight, then quickly pulled away. She guessed that would not be seen as proper now, either. "Look at you all. What do you be doing here?"

Marsia pushed past her, one jovial curse following another as she examined the decorations in the room.

Jocelyn backed away, finding a good spot to watch the young girl from. "Come in, come in."

Tomas attempted a formal bow, and rose, beaming at her. "We're here to help you out."

A shadow danced over Jocelyn's face, but she quickly schooled it. "What do you be saying? Help me what?"

Barty stepped in front of Tomas, brushing his shaggy, raven black hair out his eyes. "We had to go somewhere after the Duke put us out, so Tomas said we might find work here. The others wanted to go home. But not me, no sirree. Miss out living in a real palace? Anyway, Tomas said he could get us here, and we followed him, and here we are. Gosh, that sure is a nice dress."

Jocelyn cupped her hands over her mouth as laughter bubbled forth like a whiskey poured too quick.

Smiling, Tomas shrugged. "I guess that's about it, all right."

Jocelyn kneeled down and hugged Bartholomew tight, kissing him on the forehead as she stood back up.

Glass shattered behind her and she spun, her face drawn tight and emotionless in a blink.

Marsia stood over the broken vase, pink roses crossing each other as if they were seeking protection from some great evil.

Gilda was two steps behind Jocelyn. Together, they gently moved Marsia out of the way, and then bent to the broken glass. Their hands darted in, picked up a piece of the broken glass and shoved it in a pouch that Gilda had emptied of measuring cloths and pins.

They stood as one, each scanning the floor for any missed pieces.

"I think that be it," Jocelyn said. "Would you get another vase?" She hated the slight quaver in her voice. Gilda nodded sharply, glared at Marsia, and then darted from the room.

Jocelyn put her hands on Marsia's shoulders and held her gaze. "Marsia. You be listening carefully. While you be here, you must be more careful. Understand?"

Marsia nodded.

When she turned away, Tomas was at her side, hands stuffed in his pockets. "What's wrong?"

She looked up at him, forced a smile, and shook her head softly. "So what do you be helping me with?"

Tomas studied her for a breath, concern creasing his smooth forehead. As he shrugged, the tension faded away. "We're to help you prepare for the coronation. Study, clean, those sorts of things."

She jumped as the water bells chimed the Second Quarter meal.

"Oh! I must be going. Father will be upset if I be late. Wait here, Gilda will be telling you where to get your meals. And, please, don't be mentioning the vase?"

Tomas and Marsia nodded, though it was clear they did not understand. She did not have time to explain.

As she reached the door, she paused, and looked back at each of the children, even quiet, hateful Renee. Her voice shook as she said, "You will be staying, won't you?"

Tomas' eyes warmed as he spoke for the other three.

"Of course we will. You need anything, you call us. Anything, you understand."

She let go of the breath she had been holding. "Thank you all for coming."

She rushed down the elliptical stone tunnel, her bare feet sticking to the glassy black floor.

As she turned the bend, a figure fled, as if startled. The woman's long hair flowed behind her as she whipped around a corner. She had dropped a flower.

Jocelyn skidded to a stop and bent to pick up the flowers. They were white with the faintest hint of purple. Tiny blossoms clustered together to look like tiny, snow-covered trees.

She smiled. These had always been her favorite flower when she had lived with her cousins in the mountains. Her aunt always said they helped heal people and make them invisible. She used to wonder if she kept them around long enough, would the other children would stop harassing her? She never saw any difference in how they treated her, but it made her feel better anyway.

She rose and bounded around the corner, trying to catch the woman and give her flowers back. The way she had been startled, she probably needed the comfort, too.

She stopped and stared at the empty tunnel. Torches cast pools of thick light across the entire length of the tunnel. She could not remember where this tunnel went, though she had mentally mapped most every tunnel in the palace she thought. She decided it must be a new tunnel, since it stopped in a wall of cut stone.

The woman was no where to be seen.

"Father's balls!" she said. "Where could she be?" She turned a full circle and found no signs of the woman, or where she could have gone.

As the meal bells rang, she sprinted out of the mysterious tunnel and turned toward the dining hall. There would be no time to change. She was already late, and dreading sitting down with Gideon--her father, she corrected herself--for dinner.

She pushed the thoughts away as she tucked the flowers into the top of her dress and raced through the maze of halls.

She smiled as she ran, the gentle scent of the heliotrope making her feel better already. Maybe the invisibility would work on her father.

Daughter of the Sun by Lonnie Ezell is licensed under a Creative Commons
Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 United States License.
