



Trial of the Doom Sword Part 2

Book One of

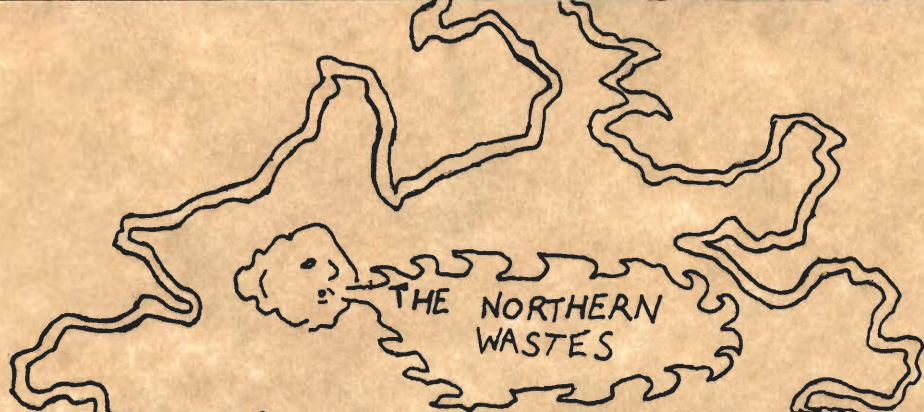
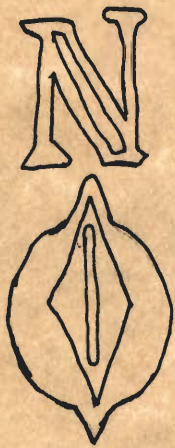
The Doom Sword Chronicles

by

Brian Schultz



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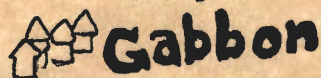


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THE Demon Prince's Stronghold

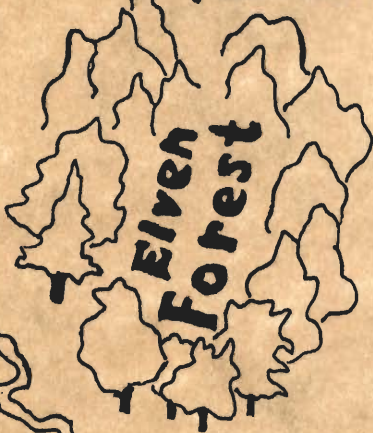


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Gabbon



Tree-Haven



Elven Forest



Dyrenh



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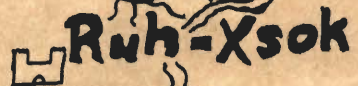
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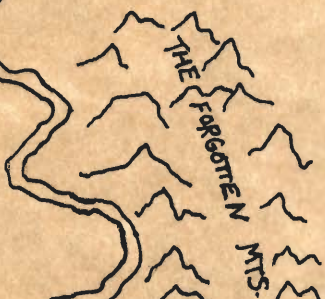
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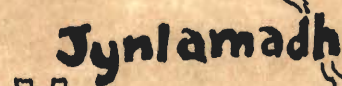
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THE FORGOTTEN MTS.



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DESERT OF LOST SOULS

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Chapter 13: A Spirit of Sense

Eighth Moon, 873 PR

Miranda tried to hide her anxiety, but seeing Cyan's chair empty only fueled her worries. *Where is he?* she wondered. She was about to say something to Garroc, who was sitting next to her, but just then Arathorn jumped to his feet.

"Get down!" he shouted, as he pushed her father out of his chair. Miranda thought she saw something dark streak past in front of her, and she nearly fell over backwards in her chair.

She got to her feet, still not sure what was going on. Her father was slowly getting up; Arathorn had hit him hard enough to send him sprawling. *What in the Spirit's name is going on?* Then she saw Arathorn trying to pull himself up, using King Trentan's chair as a support. The fletching of a large crossbow bolt stuck out from the elf's lower right side. Miranda saw the dark stain of blood spreading on the elf's green tunic, and she thought she must be dreaming. Then Arathorn screamed— a horrible sound that spoke of unimaginable pain, and the elf slumped down into unconsciousness.

Beside her, Garroc was scrambling over to the elf's side, and Rorx was shouting for the Dyrenn soldiers to get help. Miranda stood rooted, her muscles locked with fear and confusion. She tore her eyes away from Arathorn's bloody wound, and looked back along the crossbow quarrel's path. Up on a nearby rooftop, she could see two figures fighting with swords; one glowed faintly with green light, and Miranda suddenly knew where Cyan was.

Those Dyrenns closest to the King's table saw Arathorn go down with the quarrel in his side, and they started to press back against the other people in the crowd. Soon there were people screaming and shouting everywhere, all of them trying to push their way out of the square. The feast had dissolved into panic-stricken chaos.

Miranda ignored the press of frightened people; her eyes were riveted to the battle playing out on the rooftop above. She watched in horror as she saw Cyan fall to his knees, and the other figure's sword rose over his head for a killing blow. She felt like she was watching her own life come to an end as the dark blade swept down towards the man she loved.

Then the night vanished in a burst of blinding light that stunned everyone in the square to silence. All eyes focused on the nearby rooftop, where Cyan's sword blazed like a miniature green sun that lit up the entire night sky. Thousands watched as Cyan got to his feet and beat back his attacker with the flaming star of his sword. In the sudden silence, Miranda thought she could hear the shriek of splintering metal as Cyan shattered his opponent's sword. The attacker wavered and fell off the edge of the roof.

Miranda released the breath she had been holding; Cyan stood on the rooftop, outlined in the brilliant green flames like some kind of apocalyptic warrior. Miranda blinked and rubbed her eyes, but dark spots still danced in her vision from looking at the light of his sword. Then he disappeared from her sight and the false daylight vanished. Darkness rushed to reclaim its rightful place, and Miranda had to lean one hand on the table in front of her to help support herself.

She returned her attention to her surroundings as Dyrenn soldiers forced their way to the raised platform and made a bristling circle of steel around the King's table. Garroc and Rorx had pulled the white linen tablecloth off the table and were lifting Arathorn gently onto it. Miranda's father was giving orders to Captain Fissk; both men looked shaken. More soldiers started moving the crowds of people out of the way, clearing paths so that they could safely return to the palace. The feast had ended before it could even start.

Miranda went to her father's side and hugged him tightly. They both watched quietly as the dwarves and several soldiers lifted Arathorn up on the makeshift stretcher

and moved him down from the platform. The elf's face was very pale, and his dark green tunic was soaked in blood. Miranda buried her face in her father's shoulder.

"Is... is he going to..." Miranda couldn't even say the words.

"I don't know," her father sighed. "They're taking him back to the palace. My best healers will be working on him... but it looks bad."

King Trentan kept one arm around her shoulders. Captain Fissk stepped back up with a company of men.

"We're ready to take you back to the palace, your Majesty."

"What about Cyan?" Miranda asked. "We should wait for him!"

"I'm sorry, Princess, but it's too dangerous. There could be more than one assassin out there. It's best if we get you both safely in the palace first," Fissk said.

King Trentan nodded quietly, and he pulled Miranda along with him. She kept looking back to the rooftop where she had last seen Cyan, but he didn't reappear.

* * * *

Cyan sheathed the Doom Sword and the dazzling light was abruptly cut off. He blinked his eyes, trying to adjust to the sudden darkness, and started carefully back across the roof to where the trapdoor led back down into the inn. He lowered himself back down through the hatch and pulled the trapdoor closed behind him as he fell the last few feet to the floor below.

His head was still spinning from the action of the past few minutes. *The Doom Sword!* he thought incredulously. *Did it really speak to me? It... seemed like the voice was in my mind...* He remembered how easily he had battled Greystern after the voice had spoken to him, as if it had taken no effort at all. The power of the Doom Sword had been flowing through him, and the effects of Greystern's sword had vanished completely. Cyan still felt fresh and ready for anything that might happen.

He took the stairs back down two at a time in his haste to find out what had happened in the square. *Greystern said I was too late to save King Trentan*, he remembered. *I hope he was wrong!* Fear fueled his steps, and Cyan darted through the inn and out the side door in the alley. Here he skidded to an abrupt stop; something suddenly struck him as being very wrong. Cyan looked up towards the sky, and his eyes traced the edge of the inn's roof up above him. *This is where Greystern should have landed when he fell*. Cyan looked around the alley cobblestones, but except for a few foul-smelling lumps of trash, there was no body, and no trace of blood.

Cyan felt a cold bands of fear constricting about his chest. He ran out of the alley into the street and looked all along the edge of the inn. He found nothing.

Cyan took a deep breath and tried to calm himself. *There's no way he could have survived that fall*, he told himself. *Maybe I've gotten confused. He might have fallen down the other side of the building into the square*. There were groups of people moving along the street in both directions, hurrying back to their homes in fear after the assassination attempt. Cyan ignored them and ran back to the square, retracing the route he had taken earlier.

The city square was emptying out quickly under the supervision of some Dyrenn soldiers. Many of the tables and chairs had been toppled and scattered, a grim tribute to the panic that had ruined what was supposed to be a happy celebration. Cyan made his way across the square to where the King's table sat on the raised platform. Two Dyrenn soldiers saw him and moved to stop him.

"You can't go up there!" one of the men shouted at him.

Cyan turned and glared at the soldiers, and both men recognized him.

"Ah, I'm sorry... Lord Cyan. I didn't know it was you," the soldier apologized.

"Is the King all right?"

The soldier nodded, "The King's fine; your friend, the elf, pushed him out of the way in time."

Cyan felt the weight of his worries lift from his shoulders.

"But he was hit instead of the King," the soldier finished.

Like a splash of icy water, the soldier's words stole Cyan's breath away.

"Arathorn?" he gasped.

"I'm afraid so, Lord Cyan."

"H-how bad?" Cyan asked, already fearing the worst.

The Dyrenn soldier, who looked to be a veteran of more than a few years, grimaced. "It's not good. He was unconscious when they carried him back to the palace, and bleeding badly. But from what I saw, it looked like the arrow caught him here," the soldier touched a spot below his right ribcage.

Cyan nodded in understanding; he didn't trust his voice for words as he thought of his friend's wound.

"Did... did either of you see what happened to the man I was fighting up there?"

Cyan pointed to the corner of the square where the back side of the inn rose up.

"I saw him fall, Lord Cyan. He must have hit on the other side of that wall," the other soldier said, gesturing down to the side of the inn, where one of its wings formed the wall that blocked the small alley off from the square.

Cyan felt another chill steal down his spine. *Greystern didn't fall on this side of the building. He had to have landed in that alley! But where is his body?*

"Are you feeling all right, Lord Cyan? You don't look so good," the first soldier said.

Cyan ignored the man. "They took Arathorn to the palace?"

"Yes, Lord Cyan."

"I want you two to go back around to the other side of that building and look for the other man's body, all right?"

Cyan didn't even pause to thank them as the soldiers quickly rushed to obey his command. He took off at a sprint across the square towards the palace. He wished he had watched when the traitor nobleman had fallen, but the gruesome scene had been one he had not wanted to see at the time. Now he wondered if it had been so gruesome as he thought. *Could Greystern be alive? But how is that possible? Did someone take his body before I got down there? But where was the blood?*

Cyan couldn't shake the tight knot of fear that had formed in his belly. *Arathorn's wounded, maybe dying, and Greystern might still be alive! Oh Spirits, he prayed, be with us this night!!*

* * * *

Painfully bright light dazzled his eyes, even though his eyelids were squeezed tightly shut. The light was irritating; it was disturbing him. But it wouldn't go away.

Arathorn opened his eyes, and blinked repeatedly as his eyes adjusted to the sudden brightness. When his sight cleared, the elf wished he could close his eyes again and slip back into the black oblivion of unconsciousness. His mind struggled to make sense of what his eyes were showing him. Arathorn shook his head in disbelief.

The bright light came from the moon's light sparkling and reflecting off the thick blanket of white snow that covered the ground. The snow glittered and shimmered, almost too painful to even look at in the combined light of the moon and the countless stars that shone overhead in the clear sky. Though it was the heart of night, Arathorn's eyes smarted from the amount of light dancing from the snow banks. The stars seemed unusually bright, and he found that if he stared at them for too long he began to see their cold white light divide into separate beams of crimson, indigo, and violet.

He shook his head again. He could tell something was not right about all this. He couldn't ever remember the stars looking like that, and he knew the pale moonlight shouldn't be hurting his eyes. But he didn't know why he knew all that. He tried to remember anything before the bright lights awakened him, but the past seemed hidden by a gray fog in his mind.

Arathorn squinted and reexamined his surroundings. Snow-covered rocks jutted up out of thick drifts around him, and thin tendrils of snow ghosted across the white ground in the wind. *Strange*, he thought, *I can't feel the wind*. He could see the way the snow moved in the air, but not a touch of breeze tickled his skin or tugged at his clothing. *And I'm not cold!* he realized in surprise, despite seeing mounds of crystalline snow all over. He concentrated on what he did feel, and came up with almost nothing. Except for the fading pain in his eyes from the light, he didn't feel *anything*.

That realization scared him for reasons he couldn't quite grasp. He tried to ignore the strange thoughts in his head, and returned his eyes to the terrain. Up ahead of him, two giant, rocky peaks thrust up from the ground and rose into the night sky. He shivered when he looked closer at them, and it wasn't from the cold that didn't touch him. He could feel something dark and frightening at the base of those mountains, even from where he stood on the snow-covered plain.

Except for the two giant mountains, and the smaller peaks that grew up behind them, there was little for Arathorn to see besides snow-swept earth all around. He shrugged his shoulders and started walking towards the mountains, despite the unsettling things he felt when he looked towards the base of the two giants. He seemed to cover the distance quickly— *faster than it should have taken me*, he told himself. Once he stopped and looked behind him, but when he didn't see his own footprints in the snow he had just crossed, he quickly turned his head in confusion and didn't look back again.

The feeling that this was not, could not, be natural grew inside of him as he walked. Worse still, the rocky base where the two mountains grew up side by side was only a short distance away now. He could see the unnatural thing that had disturbed his senses.

Sheets of black rock, blacker than the most light-less of nights, thrust up from the snowy ground, forming a solid, smooth wall that seemed to absorb the light of the moon and stars. Arathorn drew near the ebony wall, and now he could feel the cold emanations coming from the towering, black stone. Every instinct in his body told him to get as far away from this place as he could, but for some reason the black wall drew him just as much as it repulsed him. His hand reached out to touch the black surface, and Arathorn couldn't tell if it was moving of his own will or not. His finger barely brushed the black, glasslike surface and all his doubts and fears were blasted from his mind by the overpowering sensation that numbed his whole arm and sent him reeling backwards in the snow.

DEATH...

Arathorn's arm tingled as if his nerves were being frozen and burned at the same time. The waves of pain swept right to his brain, and in their wake, the gray mists that had clouded his thoughts were ripped and torn to shreds that quickly dissipated in the shock of pain.

Memory slammed into his head in a flurry of images and sensations, and suddenly Arathorn could remember everything now. *The assassin... King Trentan! The pain...* It all flooded back in a rush, and Arathorn sorted it out as best he could. Now more than ever, he knew he shouldn't be in this place. *Wherever this place is*, he thought.

He felt a pull from the black wall, as if his touch had awakened something dark and malevolent that was now rousing to look for him. Arathorn fought the strange urge

to run back to the wall, and instead backed a few more paces away. He was afraid and confused, and wanted nothing more than to be safely back in Dyrenn...

The world spun crazily and Arathorn clenched his eyes shut as dizziness swept over him.

* * * *

Cyan was breathing heavily by the time he reached the palace gates. The guards were tense and nervous, but they let Cyan past after more than a few questions. Their paranoia and suspicion did not help Cyan's impatience to see his friend. For all he knew, Arathorn could be dying even as the guards checked and re-checked to make sure he was who he claimed to be.

When the gates finally opened, Cyan had to resist the urge to run across the courtyard to the main doors of the palace itself. Instead he walked swiftly, taking deep breaths and wiping the sweat from his face. He pushed past the soldiers at the doors before they could start in on him as well with their questions, and went straight through the halls to the King's audience chamber.

King Trentan looked up sharply from his desk at the far end of the chamber when Cyan came bursting in. His face changed from irritation to relief when he saw Cyan.

"Cyan! Thank the Spirits you're safe! We didn't know what happened to you!"

Cyan looked around the room frantically, but it was empty save for King Trentan and himself. "Where's Arathorn?" he asked, his voice choked with sudden anguish.

King Trentan's momentary relief died quickly. "He's with my healers right now."

"I have to see him!" Cyan said.

King Trentan got to his feet and met Cyan at the foot of the dais where his desk sat. "Easy, Cyan. There's nothing any of us can do for him right now. The healers will do their best; we'd only be in their way. Why don't you get some rest, and maybe you can see him in the morning."

"No! You don't understand," Cyan felt all his fears surging up in a flood of panic. "We're not safe! Greystern might still be out there!"

"Greystern?" King Trentan said in surprise. "What do you mean? Was Mykal the one who tried to kill me?"

"Greystern was the assassin. He's a servant of the Demon Prince! I tried to stop him, but I was too late. We fought, and he fell off the roof... but when I went down to the street, I couldn't find his body!" Cyan said in frustration.

"You mean he's still alive?" King Trentan asked, his face going pale.

"I don't know," Cyan sighed. "He fell from four stories— I don't know how anyone could have survived that without any injuries. I couldn't even find any blood! It was like he had just vanished!"

"Spirits protect us," King Trentan whispered.

"If Greystern is still alive, then we're not safe! He'll just keep coming after us, trying to kill us for the Demon Prince!"

"Then we'll need clear heads, and calm decisions, not panic and rash actions. Get some rest, Cyan. I have double the normal guards on duty. No one will get past them tonight. In the morning we'll know better how Arathorn is doing, and then we can start to decide what to do."

"All right," Cyan sighed, feeling the night's exertions catching up to him. "But Miranda and the dwarves are safe, right?"

"They're fine, Cyan; just worried about you and Arathorn, that's all. I told them all to get some sleep as well."

Cyan nodded and turned to leave.

"Cyan?"

"Yes," he stopped and turned back towards King Trentan.

"I'm sorry you didn't get to enjoy the feast that I wanted to give you. I wish we all could have enjoyed our respite before having to fight for Dyrenn's safety again."

Cyan shrugged his shoulders. "It would have happened eventually. The Demon Prince isn't going to sit back on his heels and give us a break. Besides," he said, patting the Doom Sword at his waist, "I learned a few things today."

King Trentan didn't quite understand what Cyan meant, but he didn't ask. He just watched Cyan leave the audience chamber. The things the young man had told him about Mykal Greystern settled heavily on his shoulders. Marcuris sighed as he sat back down at his desk and tried not to think about them, but the thoughts persisted with the tenacity of hungry mosquitoes.

* * * *

Greystern sat up with a cry.

The horrible sensation of falling still lingered in his mind, and the confused nobleman looked around him in surprise. There were no cobblestone streets rushing up to meet him with their painful embrace, only the old, musty mattress on which he was laying. He was in a small bedroom, bare of furnishings except for the bed he lay on and the old and warped panels on the walls. A faded wooden door hung crookedly on its hinges in the far wall.

Greystern got to his feet tentatively, expecting the sudden pain of broken bones or some other injury that he must have suffered in the fall from the inn's roof. But there was no shot of pain, and his body seemed fine. *I'm alive!* he thought in disbelief. *But how?*

His eyes fell to the floor where the shattered ruin of his sword was resting. A short, twisted and blackened fragment of steel was all that was left of the once lethal blade. Seeing the worthless piece of metal reminded him painfully of his defeat at the

hands of the peasant boy. Greystern kicked the sword away from him with a snarl of anger.

"Things didn't work out as well as you'd hoped, I take it," a smug voice said from the door.

Greystern spun quickly, one hand dropping instinctively to the sword that was no longer in its scabbard. His burning gaze met the calm gray eyes of the witch woman.

"Zora!" he spat in disgust. "What are you doing here?"

A faint smile tugged at the corners of Zora's lips, but it didn't reflect in her emotionless eyes. "Is that any way to talk to the person who saved your life?"

"What?"

"I could have just as easily allowed you to finish your little swan dive from that rooftop. I think I almost would have preferred to see you splatter across the paving stones," Zora mused.

"You?" Greystern managed to choke out. "You did this?"

Zora shrugged. "I was curious to see if you could pull off your little assassination attempt. I decided to watch. Lucky for you that I did, otherwise that boy would be picking through your belongings right now."

The Earl didn't know which galled him more— the fact that Zora had to save him, or that she had seen his humiliating defeat.

The witch woman smiled when she saw his wounded pride. "There's even more," she added dryly. "One of that boy's friends pushed King Trentan out of the way of your bolt. The King is fine."

Greystern glowered quietly.

"But it wasn't total loss. The boy's friend was wounded, and I felt the magic I put into the crossbow bolt take effect. He's as good as dead now."

"Was it the elf, or one of those two dwarves?" Greystern asked sullenly.

"The elf, I believe," Zora replied. "I was too busy working to get you out of there to really pay much attention to him."

Greystern grunted, his mind working over all Zora's possible motives for saving him. He wasn't sure why she had, and that frightened him.

"You're wondering why I bothered saving you?" she asked, as if reading his thoughts. "Believe me, it wasn't my first choice."

"Then why did you?" Greystern said, gritting his teeth in frustration.

"Orders. The Master contacted me. We're all to return to the citadel."

"The citadel? All of us?"

Zora frowned. "What part don't you understand? Or is it normally your practice to question the Master's commands?"

He glared at her angrily. He was half-tempted to strike her, but he could imagine what magic might be guarding her against such an attack. "Will he send portals for us?" he asked instead.

Zora shook her head. "No, and that's the odd part. We go on foot."

"You can't be serious! That journey will take weeks!"

"He said that anyone who fails to reach the citadel in two weeks' time will suffer the consequences. It's up to us to get there before the deadline on our own."

Zora's cool lack of emotion grated his nerves. He felt like he wanted to explode in rage and frustration. *First that damn boy, and now this!* he thought.

"That still doesn't tell me why you saved me from falling," Greystern growled.

"The Master also told me to make sure I found you and brought you with me. He was very explicit on what he would do to me if I failed," Zora actually shuddered in remembered fear.

Greystern nodded thoughtfully. That he could believe about their master. *But all this seems so odd. Why wouldn't he just send the magic portals like he always does?*

Why this strange summons and journey? And why hasn't he been in contact with me?

The last thought worried Greystern the most. Keeping in the Demon Prince's favor was not an easy thing to do, and those who lost his favor didn't survive long. *Have I lost his support? Maybe Zora is to deliver me for punishment!*

Greystern shook off the nagging worries and focused his glare back on the calm witch woman. It galled him to have to leave Dyrenn now, so soon after his failure. He wanted a second chance at that boy, Cyan, and all his friends. *It will have to wait*, he told himself. The Demon Prince could not be ignored.

"Well," he grudgingly said to Zora, "when do we leave?"

* * * *

Cyan stared up at the ceiling of his room in the dark. He didn't know what time it was, but he guessed it was still in the early morning hours. He wanted to sleep, but every time he did the nightmares found him and made him wish he was awake.

He had just shaken off the lingering images of the last nightmare, a particularly vile one in which Miranda had been captured by demons. Cyan blocked the bits he could still remember from his mind and got out of bed to walk around a bit. He was damp with cold sweat, and stopped to wash his face with water from the washbasin.

As tired as he was, sleep held no comfort for him now. He couldn't stop his thoughts from reaching out to the terror he felt when he imagined Greystern still loose in the city. The traitor's face had haunted nearly all of Cyan's nightmares, laughing and taunting him mercilessly. In his dreams Cyan had killed the man a hundred times, and always the Earl of Greystern had come back with his promises of hate of vengeance on Cyan's friends.

Cyan pulled a simple dark tunic over his head and stepped into his leathers. From force of habit more than anything else, he buckled on his belt and the scabbard that held the Doom Sword. He had given up on sleeping any more tonight.

Cyan left his room and padded through the carpeted halls of the palace, trying to ease his troubled thoughts. He told himself that Miranda was safe, and that Greystern could not get to them here in the palace, but it didn't help much. Shadows turned into murderous beasts about to pounce, and every faint sound seemed to be magnified and become more threatening. Cyan wandered until he found himself on the first floor of the palace, in a section of hallway he had never been in before. Despite the late hour, he saw a servant coming out of a room up ahead, carrying a bundle of what looked to be bloody bandages. Cyan hugged the wall closely, not wishing to be seen wandering around this late at night, but the servant never looked his way.

Am I in the servant's quarters? Cyan wondered. *But why was that boy carrying bandages? Could that be where they're keeping Arathorn?* His suspicions aroused, Cyan walked lightly over to the door of the room the servant had just left, and slowly opened it. The inside of the room was dark, but just enough light shone in from the hallway for Cyan to make out someone laid out on a bed. He caught sight of golden hair, and knew he had found his friend Arathorn.

As he approached the bed where his friend lay, he couldn't help but notice the elf's pale skin and the sweat beaded on his forehead. Blankets were pulled up almost to the elf's chest, but the white of fresh bandages stuck out from above the sheets. Arathorn's breathing was faint, and the rise and fall of his chest was an almost imperceptible motion under the blankets, but the elf was definitely alive.

"Hang on, Arathorn," Cyan whispered. "You can make it through this."

Cyan's hand drifted down to rest on the pommel of his sword. *The Doom Sword...* he told himself. *Somehow it healed Kazgorath- could it do the same for Arathorn?* Tentatively, he drew the Doom Sword from its scabbard. The blade glimmered faintly in the darkness. Cyan tried to remember what had been going through his mind when the Sword had healed Kazgorath. He closed his eyes and concentrated,

gradually lowering the tip of the Sword to brush against Arathorn's chest. He focused on helping his friend, trying to will the Sword's power to life. He stood there for long moments, but nothing happened. He could feel nothing from the Sword. Not even the faintest spark of power.

I'm sorry, Arathorn. I tried. Why won't it work like it did for Kazgorath? What am I doing wrong? Finally, he gave up trying and sheathed the Sword. He stood there in silence, and watched Arathorn's faint breathing. Then, he began to notice an itching sensation at the back of his neck. It felt like he was being watched. Cyan checked the room, but there was no one there. He even peeked back out in the hallway, but the servant had not returned. His nerves still seemed jumpy, but he dismissed it as tiredness and paranoia. *I must be imagining things. Jumping at shadows...*

Be strong, Arathorn, Cyan told the wounded elf. *We need you here with us.* He pulled the blankets up around the elf's neck and wiped a little sweat from Arathorn's brow with a corner of the sheet. He hoped the King's healers would have good news for them in the morning.

Satisfied that his friend was going to be all right for the moment, Cyan eased out of the room and shut the door behind him before walking back towards his own room. He glanced down at the Doom Sword at his hip and frowned slightly. *Why won't you help me heal Arathorn?* he directed the thought at the Sword.

It didn't answer.

* * * *

When the sudden dizziness faded, Arathorn realized he was no longer on the snow-swept tundra near the twin mountains and the black wall. His vision cleared and he found himself standing in the courtyard outside the palace in Dyrenn.

Now how did I get here? the elf wondered. *And just where was I before?* The answers to his questions were not forthcoming, and the elf tired of pursuing the fruitless

musings. He decided that since he was back in Dyrenn now, he should at least check on his friends before something else happened to him and he was pulled to some other place.

The main doors to the palace were closed, and ten heavily-armed soldiers were stationed at different points near the doors. Arathorn walked across the courtyard toward the palace, but the soldiers didn't stir. This puzzled him, since the men seemed very alert.

"Will you open the doors for me?" Arathorn asked the closest soldier, but the man didn't respond. The elf waved a hand in front of the guard's face; the man only blinked. "What's going on here?" Arathorn demanded angrily.

The guards kept to their silent vigil.

Arathorn tried to shove the man, but to his horror, his hand passed right through the guard. The elf leaped back with a startled cry, but still the men did not react. *They can't see me!* he finally realized. *Or hear me, or feel me. Spirits! Am I dead?* he wondered suddenly.

He could feel something drawing him to the palace, but now he was afraid. The memory of the strange black wall and its malignant call to him was still fresh in his mind. *But my friends are in there*, he thought. Gathering his courage, the elf pushed past the soldiers and walked right through the palace doors. It was an unnerving sensation, but Arathorn ignored the implications for the moment. He started to head for the stairs that led up to the second floor of the palace, but he caught a glimpse of Cyan turning down a hallway. The elf shrugged and hurried after his friend, realizing as he did that he also seemed to be moving closer to whatever was drawing him on.

He rounded the corner just in time to see Cyan slipping into a small room. Arathorn followed behind the young man into the darkened room, his curiosity piqued, yet also aware that the source of the unmistakable call was in this room as well. Cyan

was standing next to someone lying in a bed, but in the dim light from the hallway, Arathorn couldn't make out who it was. As he watched, Cyan drew his sword and held it out over the body of the person lying in bed. The tip of the sword rested lightly on the person's chest, but nothing happened.

What is he trying to do? the elf wondered as he moved closer, noticing as he did that Cyan seemed to be extremely jumpy. Cyan sheathed the sword, and then started to look around the room nervously. He even went to check the hallway. Arathorn watched his friend's strange behavior for a moment, and then turned his attention back to the person in the bed.

He was staring at his own face.

Arathorn stepped back in surprise, but somewhere deep inside he already knew the truth. He recovered his composure and looked more closely at his body. His face, *my face!*—the elf couldn't help the humor—was pale, and a sheen of sweat glistened on his skin. As he watched, Cyan adjusted the blankets and wiped his face before starting to leave the room.

Well, I'm alive, Arathorn thought, *but what good does that do me? I'm stuck out here when my body is there! This doesn't make any sense!* He took another long look at himself lying in the bed before he hurried after Cyan, having to pass through the door in order to do so. He followed Cyan all the way back to the young man's room, and he almost found it funny to see Cyan growing increasingly nervous. His friend was treading softly and looking behind him often.

Can he sense me near him? Arathorn wondered with a spark of sudden hope. He tried calling out to Cyan, but the young man didn't respond. *So much for that idea,* Arathorn thought as he followed Cyan into his room.

* * * *

It was eerie how the feeling of being watched just seemed to persist. Cyan could feel the hair on the back of his neck standing on edge, but there was nothing around him whenever he looked. But the feeling wouldn't go away.

Cyan entered his room and closed the door behind him. He took a deep breath. *You're tired, Cyan*, he told himself. *Just go to bed and try to sleep.* He fumbled with his belt as he undid it and started to hang the Doom Sword and its scabbard on his bedpost. As he did, his hand brushed the hilt of the Doom Sword and something flickered on the edge of his vision. It looked like someone was standing in his room with him.

Cyan jolted in surprise and the Doom Sword slipped out of his hands. Whatever he saw had disappeared. *Now I'm seeing things too!* Cyan scolded himself and bent to pick the Doom Sword back up. When he grasped the hilt, the shape reappeared.

"By the Spirits..." he gasped.

"Can you see me, Cyan?" Arathorn asked him. It was the elf, but he looked almost transparent, like a living shadow of himself.

"Arathorn? Is that really you?"

"No, it's Rorx in an elf costume!!" Arathorn snapped. "Of course it's me!"

"But... but how?" Cyan stammered.

The ghostly elf shrugged his shoulders. "I don't have the faintest idea. But why can you see me now, but you couldn't before? I've been following you all over the palace!"

Cyan looked down, his hands still holding the hilt of the Doom Sword. The faintest of green glows touched his hands. "I couldn't see you until I touched the Doom Sword!" he exclaimed.

"That thing has more tricks..." the elf muttered, then realization hit him. "You called it the Doom Sword! You finally accepted the truth?" he asked, eyes wide in surprise.

Cyan nodded, enjoying the stunned expression on his friend's face. "But it took more than you trying to explain to make me finally see it," Cyan said, the slightly barbed words hitting home.

Arathorn recalled his harsh words to Cyan the day before. "I'm sorry about that, Cyan," he said sincerely. "I lost my temper. "

"I needed it," Cyan waved the matter away with his hand. "Anyway, when Greystern was about ready to kill me, the Doom Sword straightened me out," he grinned at the elf.

"Greystern was the assassin? I guess we should have expected something like that," Arathorn grimaced. "But what happened to him? I don't remember much after pushing King Trentan out of the way."

"Greystern had a sword like that monster that kidnapped Miranda. I was fighting him, but he just kept telling me how it was no use to resist the Demon Prince. His sword was draining all my strength! He was ready to kill me, when the Doom Sword spoke to me! It told me basically the same thing you tried to— that I had to believe in myself. It told me to rely on it for my strength!" Cyan's eyes glowed with wonder just talking about it. "I stopped Greystern's sword and fought him all the way across the roof. His sword shattered just as he fell off the edge of the building."

"Well it's nice to know we don't have to worry about him anymore," Arathorn said.

Cyan shook his head. "I'm not so sure about that."

"What? He fell off that roof and you think he lived?"

"I couldn't find his body after the fight," Cyan said quietly. "Not even any blood."

Arathorn was quiet as he considered the possible implications. "Well," he finally said, "if Greystern shows his face again, I guess we'll have to deal with him then. There's no sense worrying about it now."

"You're right," Cyan admitted, glad to have the elf back to disperse all his fears and worries again. "But what do we do about you? Can you get back inside your body again?"

"I'm not sure, Cyan. I can feel my body calling to me, like I need to get back to it, but it almost feels like something has blocked my way. I can't really explain it very well," the elf sighed.

"We'll figure things out somehow," Cyan said hopefully. "At least I can talk to you now."

"Yeah, but who's going to believe you?" Arathorn laughed bitterly. "People will think you've gone crazy if you start claiming you can talk to ghosts! And since no one else can touch the Doom Sword without getting hurt, we have no one to back up your claims!"

"Hold on," Cyan said, remembering. "There is someone else who can touch the Doom Sword."

"What? Who?" Arathorn demanded incredulously.

"Miranda."

Chapter 14: The Coming Storm

Eighth Moon, 873 PR

Shimmering waves of heat rippled the air over the city of Jynlamadh. The morning sun was making its way up into the sky, and the full brunt of its heat and light baked down on the hard-packed, empty streets. The city was quiet, most of its people retreating to the small comfort of their homes to sleep through the heat of the day. Only the most unfortunate souls ventured out during the hottest hours of the day, unfortunates like Mussad Ra'Sheh.

Mussad tried to keep in what little shade some of the taller buildings afforded as he made his way through the deserted streets towards his master's shop. He wiped sweat from his forehead and ran a hand through his dark hair. His *ha'sif*, the soft white robe he wore, was already darkened by sweat, and its hem was stained with the red-brown dust from the hard clay streets. Mussad grimaced as he passed into a patch of sunshine; the air around him grew even hotter, making breathing difficult and uncomfortable.

Mussad turned down the Street of Wayward Fools, and grinned as he thought about how fitting the name was. His master, Allam the Seer, kept his business and home on this street, as did many other charlatans and self-proclaimed mystics. And yet, despite the name of the street and the warning it tried to give, many people came to such diviners and sages, hoping for glimpses of their futures, magic charms, and other strange remedies.

Mussad did not put much faith in such tricks. He had worked for Allam the Seer long enough to learn a little about how vulnerable people could be parted from their coins by a few phony words and a some carefully hidden effects that simulated the working of a mystic power. *Wayward fools indeed*, Mussad thought as he approached

the entrance to Allam the Seer's business, The All-Seeing Eye. The shop was a single-story building made of yellow clay bricks. A fanciful, striated red and gold eyeball had been painted on the wall next to the entrance.

Mussad pushed aside the heavy cloth that served as the door, and was careful to reach up and behind the thick curtain to still the bell hidden there. Normally anyone entering the shop would set the bell to jingling, so Allam would know he had a customer if he was somewhere in the rear of the shop where he made his home. Mussad carefully started his daily routine of cleaning the shop so as not to disturb his master, who was probably already sleeping through the heat of the day.

It was not hard work, but Allam was a meticulous man, and Mussad had to be very efficient if he wanted to escape the anger of his master. The few coins he earned for cleaning the shop helped keep Mussad's parents and his siblings from being tossed out on the streets. Every little bit helped, and he had learned the hard way that when Allam was unhappy with Mussad's work, he held back on the coins he paid. So Mussad carefully went through the shop, dusting the shelves of charms and other trinkets, polishing the assorted crystals and prisms that Allam used, and making sure the containers of colored smoke powders were full.

Mussad was finishing his polishing of the crystals when he noticed that the largest prism was missing from the shelf. Mussad knew the crystal well, it was Allam's favorite, and probably the most expensive of all the multi-faceted crystal prisms. This particular one was shaped like a coiling serpent, and when exposed to direct light, it scattered the white beams into the colors of the spectrum in a spectacular display, causing the crystal snake's eyes to glow red while the rest of its body shimmered with green, violet, blue, and orange colors. Allam had always claimed that by using this particular crystal he could cast powerful spells of divination to glimpse bits of the future, but Mussad never placed much stock in the ramblings of his master. All he cared about

was making sure that Allam's fury at finding the crystal missing did not reflect itself in Mussad's wages.

Mussad started to look around the shop, suspecting at first that his master had just neglected to return the crystal to its normal place when he had finished using it last. But after a thorough search he still had not found the crystal snake. Either Allam had taken the crystal with him into his private rooms, or else it had been stolen. Mussad prayed fervently that the former was the case as he walked to the back of the shop where another heavy curtain separated Allam's home from the business.

Mussad parted the thick blanket and stepped lightly into Allam's chambers. A small but richly-decorated sitting room greeted his eyes. Soft cushions were arranged around a low table set in the middle of the room, and sky blue cups and plates were set out on the table. A heavy scarlet embroidered rug covered the floor, gold tassels making a soft frill at the edges. Curtained doorways led off to the left and right. Mussad knew that Allam's bedchamber and small kitchen were off to the left, and that his master's private workroom was to the right. He had never been allowed to enter either before.

The sound of muffled words reached Mussad's ears, and he realized that it must be his master. *He is in his workroom*, Mussad thought. *Should I disturb him?* Before the youth could decide, a horrible strangled scream penetrated the curtain between the sitting room and Allam's workroom. Mussad started in fright, feeling his arms and neck tingling in warning. The scream faded to a low cry of pain, and then all was silent. Mussad eyed the curtain to his master's workroom in fear.

"Master Allam?" he called hesitantly. There was no reply.

Mussad tentatively stepped over to the curtain, straining his ears to pick up any sound. All he could hear was his own nervous breathing and the pounding of his heart. Mustering his courage, Mussad slipped the curtain to the side and ducked into Allam's

workroom. Except for the sound of that hideous scream still lingering in his ears, Mussad could hear nothing coming from Allam's chambers.

"Master Allam? It is Mussad. Are you in there?" Mussad hesitantly called out. He took a few steps towards the curtain closing off Allam's workroom. "Do you need anything, Master?"

There was no response from behind the curtain.

Mussad nervously licked his dry lips and crossed the last few paces to the curtain. His hand trembled as he reached out to push the thick-woven hanging aside. Fearing his Master's wrath, Mussad cautiously peeked into Allam's workroom.

"Master Al-" Mussad's voice died in his throat when he saw his Master. Allam was sprawled on a pile of ornate cushions, his body contorted weirdly as if he had been seized by spasm of purest agony. His brown eyes were wide open, bulging out of his head with a sightless gaze, and bloody pink froth leaked out the side of his gaping mouth.

Mussad stifled a moan of terror at the sight of his master's body. But what really drew his attention was the prism he had been looking for. The crystal snake sat on the floor in front of Allam's body. The room's only window had the curtains flung back and a beam of warm sunlight fell upon the crystal with blinding effect. The snake's body rippled with colors that seemed to move and pulse inside the crystal, and its eyes shone with red light. On the floor around the snake prism, strange symbols had been drawn with colored powder, and they glowed when the light from the snake crystal fell upon them.

Mussad could only imagine what had happened to his master, but just the sight of the glowing snake crystal unnerved him terribly. *Could Allam really have been casting magic?* Mussad wondered. *I always thought he was a fraud like all the others!* His frightened eyes fell to some paper scattered near Allam's body. A quill lay on the floor

next to Allam's clenched hand. Mussad realized that Allam had been trying to see into the future, and that he had been ready to write down any prophecies that came to him. He remembered seeing Allam do this for customers before, but that had always been a sham— this looked all too real.

Mussad gave the crystal snake a wide berth, and circled around to his dead master's side. A piece of paper was still clutched in Allam's left hand. Mussad worked to pry the page from Allam's dead fingers, his curiosity suddenly overriding the fear and horror he felt.

He held the page up in front of him, thankful that one of the first things Allam had done when he had taken Mussad on as his servant was to teach him to read. Mussad glanced at the paper in confusion— the words were written in red ink, but Mussad did not see any inkpot in the room. The thought had no sooner formed in his mind when he realized that the words were not written in ink at all. Allam's careful and meticulous handwriting was done in his own blood.

Mussad nearly dropped the paper in horror. He gasped for breath and could feel his heart hammering inside his chest. Almost afraid of what he would discover, he turned his eyes back to the page and began read Allam's writing:

As leaves before the coming storm, so shall we be scattered by the wind that shakes the world. What was lost shall be found again, and it shall have the power to save us from the Storm, or damn us to the greater Darkness. Beware the voice that speaks without sound, and fear the saber in the hand of jealousy.

Mussad shook his head, trying to make sense of the cryptic words. *Storms and voices? What does it all mean?* The last bit of writing became more erratic, and Mussad had to struggle to make out even a few of the words:

If... true nature... revealed... the Choice... made... from heart... for... life... to... Life... and so... just... Death... to...all...

Mussad gave up trying to read the final scrawls. Allam's words made no sense. *Probably the ravings of the old fool before he died*, Mussad told himself, trying to dispel the fear that still lurked in his heart. Mussad tossed the piece of paper aside in disgust. He wondered how he was going to explain this whole mess.

Mussad looked back at the crystal snake sitting in the sunlight. It still glowed beautifully. "At least I'll get to keep you for myself," Mussad told the crystal. "I should be able to get a lot of money for you."

He started to look away, but he froze as the head of the crystal snake prism turned to the side and up to stare directly at him. Its mouth opened in a silent hiss, showing tiny crystal fangs. Its red eyes glowed brighter.

Mussad felt helpless, trapped by the gaze of the crystal snake. He could feel a pall settle in the room, the weight of a presence of great power and malevolence. To his terrified surprise, the crystal snake began to speak.

"Delving into secrets you cannot begin to comprehend is dangerous, foolish one. Your master ignored that truth, and he paid for his stupidity. Now you shall as well. To grasp for power, one must touch the hand of evil, and so it shall always be! I have embraced that power, for I am the Demon Prince! Learn that name and fear it, young one, for it shall be the name of your doom!"

The snake reared back, its eyes glittering cruelly, and then twin crimson beams stabbed forth from its crystal eyes to burn into Mussad's vision. He screamed in agony as his world dissolved into a searing red haze, and then vanished into darkness.

* * * *

The Demon Prince sat back in satisfaction after ending the spell that had allowed him to exert his powers in far distant Jynlamadh. His confidence in his powers had returned, even after the near-fatal disaster with the Eye of Dragons. The artifact had been invaluable in keeping track of his servants, but he was not dependent on it. *My*

own powers more than suffice, he thought proudly. If there was on thing he had learned from the past, it was not to put too much trust in any one person or thing. *Inevitably, they all will fail you*, the Demon Prince mused, remembering his own harsh lessons. But the past was long ago, and he had more than compensated for those mistakes.

The Demon Prince finally felt that he had returned to his full strength. His injuries from the destruction of the Eye of Dragons had seriously weakened him, in body and in magical might. Only now did he deem himself fully recovered. Though he missed the ease with which the Eye had let him keep contact with his servants, the same results could be achieved by other magic, it just took more effort and time than before. *Hence my summons*, he reminded himself pointedly. The closest or most resourceful of his minions were starting to arrive in small numbers, but the majority of them were still on their way.

The delay it took to gather his most important servants together to hear his commands would be insignificant in light of the rewards he would reap. *I do not need all my pieces on the game-board in order to make the winning move. The outcome of this match was determined ever since the very start*, he chuckled to himself, confident that despite the few unplanned surprises, everything he had plotted would be accomplished.

A light knock on the door to the chamber reminded the Demon Prince that there were things that still needed his attention.

"Enter," he bade, pulling the cowl of his cloak over his head so that it shadowed his face.

The door of the dim chamber opened slowly, and the Demon Prince watched his favorite pupil enter.

"Welcome, Khrystana," he greeted the lovely elf woman. "You are ready for another lesson, I trust?"

"Of course, Master," Khrystana De'Faerr answered eagerly, her deep blue eyes alive at the prospect of more magic.

"Good. I will show you how to craft a spell of divination, and then you may practice on your own," the Demon Prince allowed himself a smile as he remembered the fate of the human seer in Jynlamadh. The man had been powerful, and that power had drawn the Demon Prince's attention— something that tended to prove fatal for most people so unfortunate. *Still, if Khrystana can perfect the magic involved, anything she divines could be useful to me, he thought, since my own attempts have failed.* That thought rankled him slightly, but he dismissed it quickly.

"Thank you, Master," Khrystana bowed low, the revealing cut of her tight-fitting gown offering much to view. "I have been perfecting all that you have taught me. New spells will be a welcome challenge."

The Demon Prince smiled at her enthusiasm to learn. *Who wouldn't thirst for the desire to feel the powers of magic coursing through their veins? Especially an elf!* Khrystana would be the first elf to wield magic in centuries, and he had great plans for her unique skills in the days ahead.

He beckoned her closer and started to describe the ways she could harness the power of magic to glimpse the future...

* * * *

"Miranda? Miranda can touch the Doom Sword?" Arathorn's voice rose an octave in surprise.

"Does being a ghost affect your hearing?" Cyan laughed.

Arathorn scowled.

"Yes, she can touch the Doom Sword," Cyan sighed. "That night in the gardens, before I could stop her, she had already put her hands on it. But it didn't harm her."

"You never told me that before," the elf accused him.

Cyan shrugged. "I didn't want to. The way you and the dwarves were hassling me about the Sword, I didn't feel like adding to your worries. I don't know how to explain it, but she can touch the Sword without getting burned."

"That strikes me as being very odd, especially since..."

"Since what?" Cyan asked.

"Well, since you two seem... so close," the elf said neutrally.

"You mean since we're in love," Cyan restated, unashamed to admit his feelings.

"Yes," Arathorn looked at Cyan and nodded thoughtfully. "Seems like quite a coincidence, don't you think?"

"Maybe," Cyan said, "but we don't know enough about the Doom Sword to really be able to tell. Now, do you want to see if this will work or not?"

"Of course I do! At least if Miranda can see me too, then people won't think you've gone crazy!"

"Sometimes I wonder if it's too late for that," Cyan muttered under his breath.

"Did you say something?"

"Never mind. Let's go find Miranda," Cyan said, leading the way out of his room.

* * * *

It was the first time Cyan had ever ventured up to the third floor of the palace, and he couldn't help feeling a bit like an intruder into Miranda and King Trentan's home. The fact that it was barely sunrise and he was trying to sneak into Miranda's chambers didn't help.

The stairs brought them up into a large room dominated by tall bookshelves, elegantly carved chairs, and several small reading tables. Cyan had never seen so many books in his life, and it made him aware of the kind of wealth and power that came with being royalty. Next to him, Arathorn also stopped and stared, suitably impressed.

"Quite a collection," the elf remarked.

Cyan kept one hand resting on the hilt of the Doom Sword so he could continue to see and hear his spectral friend. He nodded in agreement with the elf's assessment. He scanned the library, looking for any clues as to where Miranda's rooms were. Three different hallways branched off from the room, and Cyan could just imagine how bad things might seem if he accidentally stumbled into King Trentan's room by mistake.

"Arathorn," he whispered, "why don't you go and find Miranda's room? You can just peek inside, right?"

The elf gave Cyan a dirty look. "You want me to go spy on Miranda? What if—"

"Oh, just go!" Cyan hissed. "She's probably asleep anyway!"

Arathorn shrugged and walked down the nearest hallway. Cyan watched him go, thinking that it was funny that even though Arathorn was an incorporeal spirit, he still insisted on the pretense of walking around. The elf's "feet" never actually touched the floor, but by watching him, it almost looked like Arathorn was still flesh and blood.

Cyan decided to wait in the library room, so he could at least be near the stairs if he had to hide or run to flee the wrath of King Trentan. That thought made him grin as he tried to imagine such a scene. He hoped that sneaking to Miranda's room wouldn't become a regular occurrence, although he had to admit that the idea had its appeals. Cyan banished that thought before it could conjure up more fantastic daydreams, and he tried to wait patiently for Arathorn's return.

A short time later the pale form of the elf returned from down another hallway. He had a big grin on his face.

"I take it you found her?" Cyan whispered, a little irritation creeping into his voice.

"More or less," the elf replied, stifling a laugh.

Cyan ignored his friend, not seeing the humor of the situation. "Will you wipe that grin off your face and just show me where her room is?" If Arathorn had been solid, Cyan would have swatted him.

The elf chuckled softly and led Cyan down the far hallway. The carpet was thick and soft beneath his feet, and in the shadows of the darkened hall Cyan could still make out a few glimpses of richly woven tapestries draping the walls. Arathorn stopped before a large oak door inlaid with carvings of the Rose and Spear of Dyrenn.

"This leads into Miranda's whole suite of rooms," Arathorn told him.

"Whole suite?" Cyan said incredulously, barely keeping his voice a whisper.

"She's got her own sitting room, bedroom, bathroom, dressing room, and even a few more," Arathorn tried to keep a straight face.

Cyan eyed the elf suspiciously, but didn't say anything. "Is it locked?" he asked instead.

"I don't know," Arathorn said, passing his hand through the solid copper door handle.

"At least there's no guards," Cyan muttered, and hesitantly reached out for the handle. *Anyone else would probably be executed for this*, he thought as he gently turned the handle. He met no resistance; it was unlocked. Still holding the handle at full-turn, he eased the door open, praying to the Spirits that the King's servants oiled the hinges regularly. The oak door swung in silently, the only sound the quiet rasping of the bottom of the door sliding across a soft rug inside.

Cyan lightly stepped inside and carefully shut the door behind him. He watched Arathorn just walk right through the closed door. It was more than a little unnerving. Cyan caught the elf's attention and pointed around him silently in confusion. They looked to be standing in some kind of reception room— padded chairs and a large table took up much of the floor space, but more rooms branched off to the left and right.

Arathorn understood Cyan's silent question, and led him to the right. Cyan was forced the carefully maneuver around chairs, stands, and all sorts of furniture as he tried

to follow the elf through Miranda's suite to her bedroom. He stifled a gasp of pain when he banged his shin against a low table he hadn't seen in the darkness.

They passed through a small study and entered Miranda's dressing room. Large cedar chests and stands were placed along the walls, and a tall dressing screen walled off one corner of the room. The far wall had a large opening in it that led to Miranda's bedroom. Gossamer curtains served as the only door between the rooms, and Cyan could almost make out a large canopy bed through the sheer, wispy material. He padded softly across the dressing room and parted the diaphanous curtains before him.

His hand slipped off the Doom Sword as he entered, but he didn't notice, entranced as he was by the view before him. A large window facing south was partly open, and a warm breeze swept in, making the silky curtains billow like they were alive. It also ruffled the satiny material that hung down from the tall canopy of Miranda's bed. The first gray light before sunrise brought a fuzzy dimness to the room, and Cyan felt like he was seeing something from a hazy, half-remembered dream.

Miranda lay on her side in the huge canopy bed; green satin sheets outlined the curl of her body up to the point where they were drawn just past her waist. Her hair was a wild mass of red-hued fire spilling across her pillows, and her face was peaceful-looking in sleep. A pale silk shift hung by thin straps from her shoulders, the smooth material covering just enough of Miranda's exposed body to make her look even more alluring. One of the shoulder straps had slipped partway down her arm, and Cyan resisted the urge to reach out and slide it back into place. *She looks so beautiful*, he thought, his throat tightening with emotion.

He took a few more careful steps closer, until he was standing right at her bedside. He suddenly didn't want to wake her and spoil this vision of peace and beauty.

He had completely forgotten about Arathorn and the reason they had come up here in the first place for. He couldn't tear his eyes away from her.

A fresh breeze eddied through the room, and it carried the scent of her hair and faint perfume to him. Cyan leaned down a little closer to her, listening to the soft sound of her breathing. He was so captivated by her beauty that he hardly registered her sudden, swift movements, until the cold prick of steel against his throat drew him back to his senses.

Miranda's eyes had snapped open and the hand that had been hidden under her pillow was now pressed to his throat, the sharp edge of a small dagger poised ready to slice into his windpipe and veins in a heartbeat. Her eyes blazed with fury as she sat up in bed and forced him back a step with pressure from the dagger.

"It's not nice to sneak up on women," she said coldly, the hand holding the dagger never wavering the slightest.

Cyan realized that he was silhouetted by the light from the window, and that she couldn't see his face. *I'm lucky she hasn't slit my throat already!*

"Miranda!" he said, very conscious of the dagger at his throat. "It's me! Cyan!"

Miranda tilted his head to the side with a little more pressure from the dagger, until the gray light of dawn illuminated his features.

"Cyan! What in the Spirits' name are you doing in my bedroom?" she demanded at last, withdrawing the dagger slowly from his neck.

Cyan could feel his face growing hot. "I— I'm sorry, but I can explain. It's important, really!" he said, when he saw the doubt written in her eyes.

Miranda shook her head and the dagger in her hand disappeared somewhere under her pillows again. "I could have killed you!" she scolded him.

"I thought you were asleep!"

"Hardly," she said. "I'm a light sleeper."

"I guess so," Cyan admitted, rubbing his neck; he could still almost feel the dagger pressed against his skin.

"Now what was so important that you had to come sneaking into my bedroom?"

"It's Arathorn-"

"Oh no! He's not... he's not *dead*, is he?" Miranda cut him off, her voice filling with sorrow.

"No! He's still alive," Cyan hastily told her. "It's just that- well, he's... Oh, see for yourself!" Cyan didn't know how to explain it to her, so he just drew the Doom Sword and handed it hilt first to her.

Miranda looked at him curiously but took the weapon in both hands. "What's this supposed to- Oh!" she gasped as she caught sight of Arathorn watching them both from over by the window.

"Hello, Princess," the elf waved at her with a grin.

"Arathorn!! But... but how?" Miranda stammered.

"It's a strange story, but basically, it seems my spirit has left my body," the elf shrugged his shoulders, moving closer to her bed.

"But you're not dead?"

"My body's still breathing, if that qualifies me as being alive," Arathorn grinned, apparently finding humor in his situation.

Miranda looked over at Cyan. "You can see him too?" she asked.

"Only when I'm touching the Doom Sword," Cyan said.

"Oh," Miranda started to say, then his words registered. "The *what?*" she demanded.

"That's another long story," Arathorn told her.

* * * *

"I still can't believe you actually tried to sneak into my bedroom!" Miranda exclaimed a short while later, as she walked into her dressing room and started pulling clothes out of drawers in one of her cedar stands. Cyan tried not to watch the way the pale silk shift moved against her body as she walked.

"Well, we wanted to see if our idea would work. It seemed important enough at the time," Cyan tried to defend himself.

"Important enough that you were just standing there staring at me forever in my bedroom," Miranda laughed as she went behind the tall dressing screen. She reached up and draped the silk shift over the edge. Cyan tried not to stare.

"And here I thought someone was coming to kill me!" Miranda said from behind the painted screen. "I was ready to scream for help and start slicing into you!"

"Well I'm glad you didn't," Cyan said, one hand rubbing his neck.

"Me too. You would look terrible with your neck all cut open," Miranda agreed shamelessly.

Cyan shook his head. *She never stops surprising me*, he thought. It had taken some doing to explain everything that had happened to him on the rooftop with Greystern, but between them, they had managed to tell the story. Cyan glanced around, one hand on the Doom Sword, but Arathorn was nowhere in sight. The elf had said he was going to check on his body, a statement Cyan would have found amusing if it wasn't for the present circumstances.

"But it's just as well," Miranda went on as she changed. "I could hardly sleep anyway. I was too worried about what might have happened to you."

"I was more worried about what you were going to do to me with that dagger of yours! Do you always sleep with knives in your bed?"

"Wouldn't you like to know!" Miranda laughed from behind the screen, and Cyan was glad she couldn't see the way his cheeks colored.

"All I want to know," Miranda continued, "is when do I get to sneak into *your* room? It's only fair!" She stepped out from behind the dressing screen and posed for Cyan, one hand resting on her hip, the other ruffling her hair. "How's this?" she grinned.

Cyan eyed the brown leather leggings and deep blue silk tunic she wore. "You always look beautiful to me, Miranda."

"You're such a liar, Cyan of Gabbon!" Miranda teased him.

"And you're a wicked and dangerous woman, *Princess* Miranda Trentan," Cyan smiled back, walking up to her and sliding his hands around her waist.

"Oh, so you want to bring titles into this, *Lord* Cyan, Knight-Protector of Dyrenn?" Miranda retorted, trying to back away from him playfully.

Cyan growled in mock anger and pulled her tighter. He kissed her fully on the lips, until she grew still in his arms and returned the kiss with equal passion.

"I love you," he said softly, looking into her deep brown eyes.

"Still trying to make up for sneaking in on me?" Miranda smiled, kissing him lightly again.

"Not in the least. Next time you won't hear me," Cyan teased her back.

"Good, because I'd love to wake up and have you be the first thing I see every morning," Miranda said, reaching up and wrapping her arms around his neck.

The weight of her arms forced a small chain to dig painfully into the back of his neck. *Of course! I almost forgot! Cyan thought. The pendant!*

Cyan slipped out from her embrace, and Miranda looked at him curiously. Cyan fumbled with the gold and silver necklace holding the rose pendant. *I can't believe I forgot about this!* he cursed himself.

"What are you doing?" Miranda asked him.

"Close your eyes; I have a present for you," Cyan told her as he pulled the rose pendant out from beneath his shirt. The ruby flecks sparkled brightly.

“All right, but this better not be another trick,” Miranda warned him, but she already had her eyes closed.

Cyan said a silent thank you to Leeo Silver as he lifted the necklace and pendant over Miranda’s head. He worked it over her thick waves of hair and finally settled it around her neck. The pendant hung perfectly against her chest, and Cyan tentatively adjusted it.

“Watch your hands, boy, or else I’ll have to get my dagger again,” Miranda tried to sound threatening, but the smile on her face ruined the effect.

“Okay, you can open your eyes now.”

Miranda opened her eyes and looked down at the pendant. Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open in surprise. She cradled the intricately worked rose in her hands and looked back up at Cyan.

“It’s...it’s beautiful, Cyan!” her eyes glistened with sudden tears.

“The man who made it said he crafted it in memory of your mother. I knew I had to have it for you,” Cyan whispered.

“But this must have cost a fortune! I... I can’t take this!”

“Yes, you can. Once the jeweler found out who I was, he wouldn’t let me leave without taking it to give to you. I owe him a lot.”

Miranda gazed at the rose pendant, and held it up to her cheek. Her tear-filled eyes fixed on Cyan and the love that shone in them was almost too much for him to bear.

Miranda let the pendant fall back against her chest. “Now you did it—” she sniffed, “you made me cry.” She wrapped her arms around him and pushed him backwards until he was right up against the wall. She wiped a tear from her cheek and then kissed him— a burning, heartfelt kiss that left them both breathless. “I love you, Cyan,” she murmured in his ear. *Spirits help me, I love him*, she thought.

Khrystana De'Faerr pushed her raven-black hair from out of her eyes and concentrated harder on the wide silver bowl full of water on the pedestal in front of her. She could feel the humming sensation of magic all about her, and she reached for that power with her mind and channeled it down into the silver bowl of water that she gripped with both hands. Sweat was forming on her face from the exertion of concentrating and holding the power of the magic. But still, all she could see in the water was her own reflection staring back at her.

Khrystana sighed and started to relax her concentration as she prepared to let the magic fade, but as she did, the water in the silver bowl clouded, taking on a murky sheen and obscuring her reflection. Khrystana caught her breath and watched as an image began to form in the water. The figure of a golden-haired elven male took shape, a handsome and powerful looking figure, wearing forest colors with a large white longbow hooked over his shoulder.

Khrystana started in surprise, and with her concentration broken, the image faded back to just her reflection in a bowl of water. The elven sorceress took a shuddering breath and stepped back from the silver bowl on the pedestal. *I've seen him before!* she thought wildly, trying to wrack her memory for the image of the golden-haired elf. *But where?* The memory was elusive, but Khrystana finally recognized the elf as the figure from her frequently re-occurring dream.

Is he real, she wondered, *or did I just impress his image upon the water during the divination spell?* Now that she thought about it, the strange dream that visited her began to take shape in her mind. Khrystana closed her eyes and let the images of the dream play themselves out in her thoughts...

I am walking through tall grass that has been flattened by the passing of many horses and wagons. As I look up from my path I see him standing in front of me,

blocking my way. He looks sad, but his eyes sparkle when they look at me. He is handsome, golden-haired, and he touches a white longbow when I try to push past him.

"Get out of my way! I have an important mission I must finish!" I tell him.

He only nods at me, and refuses to let me past. I can see that the path forks behind him. "Yes," he says, "it is important."

"Then let me by!" I say angrily.

"But you don't know which way to go," he points to the split road ahead. "Which path will you take?" he asks.

"It doesn't matter," I tell him.

"Yes, it does," he says, and his eyes are weighted with the seriousness of his words. "It matters a great deal."

"For me, or for you?" I retort. I feel angry that he dares to question me. Me! The first elven sorceress in ages!

"For both of us," he says calmly, unaffected by my anger.

"How so?" I ask him, confident that he won't be able to answer. I have my mission, and nothing else matters.

"Down one of these paths, we both die very soon. Down the other..." he shrugged, "only the Spirits know."

"The Spirits?" I sneer. "We all die sooner or later, so what does it matter?"

"It matters to you," he says, staring at me as if he can see into my deepest thoughts. "It matters whom you choose to die for, or whom you choose to live for."

He steps out of my way then, and points to the two paths. "Go ahead. Choose," he tells me, and suddenly I feel afraid. I want to ignore his words, but they bite into my soul, and I don't know which way to go.

"Help me decide," I beg him. "I... I'm not sure anymore."

"I can't help you choose. I can only present you with the choice," he smiles at me then, and I feel the weight lifting from me. But before I can speak he has disappeared, and I am left standing in the grass in front of the fork...

Khrystana slowly opened her eyes and let the memories fade. Even awake, the dream's images were disturbing, and it took her a few moments to compose herself. Whenever she awoke from the dream at night, its effect on her was twice as powerful, leaving her feeling terribly afraid and alone.

The Master would abhor such weakness if he saw me now, Khrystana told herself. She steeled herself against the remembered dream and tried to dismiss the image she had seen in the water as a fluke. She prepared herself mentally and then began the same spell again, this time careful to let none of her own thoughts taint the workings of the magic.

The room filled with power, and when Khrystana looked at the water in the silver bowl again, she commanded it to show her what the future held for her. She loosed the magic, and the water turned murky. Holding back her triumphant smile, Khrystana watched as an image began to take shape in the clouded water once more.

Her exultation turned cold as the image resolved into the handsome figure of the golden-haired elf with the white longbow.

Khrystana shrieked and sent the silver bowl flying across the dank stone chamber with a blast of magic. She fell to her knees and covered her eyes, but she could still see the golden-haired elf in her mind.

* * * *

Later in the morning, King Trentan invited Cyan and the dwarves to join him for breakfast. They met once more in the private dining room, but this time the empty chair for Arathorn was a conspicuous detail.

When Cyan entered the room, both Rorx and Garroc were already there, as well as King Trentan.

"Glad ye could make it, lad," Rorx greeted him. "It's good to see that after all o' last night's excitement yer still in one piece."

"Thank, Rorx," Cyan said dryly. He nodded to Garroc and King Trentan.

"Good morning, Cyan," Marcuris smiled faintly. He looked tired, and new worry lines creased the corners of his eyes. "My healers have told me that Arathorn's condition has stabilized for now. He remains unconscious, but it appears as if he has made it through a critical period."

Cyan kept silent. He didn't see how explaining the strange situation about Arathorn to the King would help matters. It would only lead to more questions about his sword, and that would inevitably bring Miranda into the story as well, something he wanted to keep as quiet as he could. *I'll tell the dwarves, later though. They deserve to know the truth about Arathorn.*

"That elf's a tough one," Rorx said confidently. "He'll pull through."

King Trentan nodded. "I hope you're right, Master Ironshill. I fear we're going to need Arathorn's strength in the days ahead."

"You think there's trouble coming?" Garroc asked.

"I think the only question is when it will arrive," King Trentan said grimly. "Greystern's attempt on my life tells me that this Demon Prince and his minions aren't through with us yet. We need to prepare for the next strike."

"So that bastard was the assassin?" Rorx asked. "What happened to him, lad? Did ye kill him?"

Cyan fought to control a twinge of fear when he thought of how Greystern might have survived the fall. "He fell off the roof of the inn, but I never found his body."

Garroc whistled through his teeth. "Guess we'll have to finish that job some other day, and make sure he stays dead this time!"

Cyan shuddered. The power of the forces aligned against them was frightening. *But don't forget we have the Doom Sword on our side!* he told himself.

"Let's at least enjoy a good meal before we discuss such unsettling matters anymore," King Trentan suggested. He rang a small hand-bell on the table, and a servant came into the dining room from the side entrance.

"Please tell the kitchen staff that we are ready for breakfast."

"At once, your Majesty," the servant bowed and left quickly.

In no time, trays of sliced fruits were being laid out along with slices of warm, freshly baked bread. Before the diners could even finish sampling those things, plates of sizzling bacon and fried eggs were placed before them.

Cyan's stomach growled loudly, and he realized it had been a long while since he had last eaten. The food was excellent, and he quickly cleaned his plate and started on seconds. Both the dwarves were munching away, and even King Trentan had finished a fair amount of food by the time they were finished. Servants worked to clear away the dishes and Cyan sat back in his chair, content with a full stomach.

"I'm going to get fat if I keep eating like this," he said.

King Trentan chuckled. "I think that's the driving goal of my cooks! They make me work even harder these days just to stay in shape."

"Well, I wouldna mind takin' a few o' them back to Ckar-Regnock! They'd make a lot o' dwarves happy!" Rorx laughed, patting his belly.

King Trentan laughed, and for the moment they were all able to forget their fears about the future.

* * * *

Marcuris was working in his private study later in the day when the servant found him. The insistent knocking on the study's door would not go away if he pretended to ignore it, so King Trentan left his desk and opened the door. A pale-faced servant bowed hastily to him.

"What's the matter?" King Trentan asked the young man.

"M-message from Captain Fissk, your Majesty," the servant stammered, trying to calm himself.

"Come inside and tell me," Marcuris stepped aside so the nervous-looking servant could enter the study. "Now, please give me Fissk's message," he said, after he sat back down at his desk.

"Captain Fissk sent me to tell you that... that one of the northernmost scouts has returned with news. The man rode two horses to death just trying to get here as fast as he could. The scout said he saw the forward elements of a new army of monsters moving south across the plains below the hills of the Talaris Mountains. He told Captain Fissk that he could not get a count of their numbers because... because there too many to even count," the servant's voice grew quiet. "The scout told Captain Fissk that it looked like this army was marching fast and hard. They were not stopping to raid farms or anything. They just moved steadily south... on a direct course for Dyrenn."

Marcuris could see the fear in the young servant's eyes, and more than a little of it touched his own heart. He forced himself not to dwell on it. "Go back and tell Captain Fissk to send out more scouts. I want as detailed a report as he can get on this army, with updates on their location whenever possible. I need to know when they will reach Dyrenn, and what strength they will have, understand?"

The servant nodded quickly. "Yes, your Majesty."

"Good. And tell Captain Fissk to join me here at the palace in an hour."

"Is there anything else, your Majesty?" the servant asked, looking a little relieved to have some duties to keep his mind off the frightening news.

"Yes, there is. Keep this information to yourself. I don't need people starting a panic."

"Yes, your Majesty," the servant bowed and quickly left the study.

Marcuris sighed and leaned back heavily in his chair. *I didn't expect something this soon*, he thought. *I hoped we might have a few weeks to better prepare, not just days!*

His eyes fell to the framed painting of his wife that sat on the corner of his desk. *This is bigger than anything I've ever dealt with, Rose. I wish you were here with me! You always were able to find a way out of any problem. I could use your help right about now!*

Sighing, he set Rose's portrait back down. The black dragon, Kazgorath, had warned him that something like this would be coming. Marcuris had been puzzling over what to do ever since, and feasible options seemed all too few. Although he would wait to hear more from Captain Fissk, King Trentan felt that he already knew what he would have to do to save Dyrenn.

It was the most painful option of them all, but the only one that would save lives.

They would have to abandon Dyrenn to the army of the Demon Prince.

Chapter 15: Whispers in the Flame

Eighth Moon, Year of the Sword

"I might as well, Cyan! Who better to go and keep an eye on this new army of monsters?" Arathorn pointed out.

"I don't know, Arathorn. It still could be dangerous, even for you."

The spectral elf drifted closer to Cyan. "It would be safer for me than for the Dyrenns. I'm starting to get the hang of this spirit business. I just have to concentrate on where I want to go, and that's where I end up. That's how I got back in Dyrenn in the first place after being out in that strange place."

Cyan nodded. Arathorn had told him about the dark place in the snowy mountains just before he and the dwarves had been summoned to an emergency meeting with King Trentan, Captain Fissk, and the King's other advisors. "I guess if you want to. Spirits know we can't stop you."

"Exactly," the elf grinned.

"Be careful though, will you? We still need to figure out how to get you back into your body."

"I know Cyan. But until we do figure something out, I might as well make myself useful. Don't worry. I'll be back as soon as I can; hopefully with lots of information we can use."

"With what King Trentan is planning, I don't think it will matter much," Cyan shook his head.

"We have to try," Arathorn said. "I'll see you later."

Cyan watched as the spirit of Arathorn vanished from the room. He took his hand off the hilt of the Doom Sword and the faintest of green glows faded. He sighed

and tried not to think about all the things he had learned in the meeting with King Trentan.

There was a knock on his door, and then Rorx peeked his around the half-open door.

“Hey, lad. Mind if we come in?”

Cyan shook his head, and Rorx ambled into the room with Garroc right behind him. Both dwarves seemed more serious than usual, but Cyan figured that what they had heard at the meeting had affected even their merry spirits.

“Is the elf here?” Rorx asked him, peering around the room as if he might be able to spot the ghostly Arathorn.

“He just left. He’s going out to scout the Demon Prince’s army.” A small smile touched Cyan’s face when he remembered telling the dwarves about Arathorn’s strange condition after their breakfast with the King. Both had thought he was crazy at first, and it had taken Miranda to back up his story to make them finally believe. Of course, that had inevitably led him to explain that Miranda could touch the Doom Sword, which had stunned them even more. Cyan had to suffer Rorx’s “I told ye so’s” once he admitted that his sword really was the Doom Sword. Thankfully, the dwarf hadn’t asked just what made Cyan change his stubborn beliefs, so Cyan kept the fact that the Sword had communicated with him quiet for the moment.

“Oh well,” the black-bearded dwarf muttered, “Can’t see him or talk to him anyway. Stupid elf.”

“It’s not his fault, Rorx.”

“I know, but it’s right darn inconvenient. Who’s gonna be shootin’ crittters with that there bow o’ his?”

“No one, I guess. We’ll have to make do without him,” Cyan shrugged.

Garroc spoke up before Rorx could continue his tirade. "And what do you and Arathorn think of the King's plan?"

"I'm not sure it can be done, Garroc. I can't even begin to imagine how he's going to move that many people and hope to stay ahead of the Demon Prince's army!"

"Well, Dyrenn dunna have as many soldiers as it used to," Rorx pointed out. "That cuts back on the numbers some."

"Yeah, but there's still... I don't know... maybe ten thousand people in this city?"

"Around that, but probably less," Garroc corrected.

"All right, say there's about nine thousand then. How do you move that many people and keep them fed? King Trentan said they could go south to the city of Inkata, but that's still at least a two week journey, if things go well."

Garroc shrugged. "I don't see any other real options though. It's either try to evacuate everyone, or else just wait for the Demon Prince's army to come and slaughter us all."

"At least that way I'd get to bash in a few goblin skulls!" Rorx growled.

"Well, the King did say something about leaving a rearguard behind in the city to buy some extra time."

"Are ye sayin' ye want to stay behind when all them beasties come screamin' and howlin' for blood?" Rorx looked surprised.

"I don't know," Cyan admitted. "But we did swear to help protect Dyrenn. Maybe that's the way to do it."

"Sounds more like suicide to me," Rorx grinned, "but it could still be fun."

Cyan shook his head at the dwarf's eagerness. "At least we'll have a little more time before we have to worry about that. Captain Fissk is guessing it will take at least another week before the army reaches the city."

“Yeah, but it will take most of that time to get all the people and things organized for the escape,” Garroc said. “The Dyrenns’ll be lucky if they get out of here a day or two before the army gets here.”

“Bah! All this thinkin’ hurts me head! It’s late and I’m goin’ to bed!” Rorx grunted and stomped out of the room.

Cyan and Garroc exchanged glances. “He’s right,” Garroc admitted. “All this is out of our hands anyway. We just have to wait and see what happens, and be ready to act.”

Cyan nodded. “That doesn’t mean I have to like it though.”

“No, but we just have to make the most of the time that’s left to us,” Garroc said as he left the room and closed the door behind him.

Cyan considered the dwarf’s words, and thought of Miranda. He wondered how she would react to her father’s plan to abandon the city. Cyan knew what it was like to lose his home, and the more he thought about it, he realized that what was happening to Dyrenn was the same thing that had happened to Gabbon, but on a larger scale. *Will I be like Flint, and sacrifice myself so those I care for can escape?* he wondered.

The similarities were too much for him, and Cyan tried not to think about it. He unbuckled the Doom Sword from his waist and hung it on the bedpost. *Rorx was right. It is late, and bed does sound good right now.*

He washed up a little, stripped down to his small clothes, and blew out the oil lamp lighting the room before climbing into bed. A part of him wanted to go check on Miranda, but he didn’t. She was a strong woman, and she would be all right.

Cyan settled down in the satin sheets and closed his eyes.

* * * *

The next few days saw Dyrenn churning with activity.

The word of the approaching army had been spread through the city by the King's messengers, and all citizens were being told to gather only their most necessary belongings for when the time came to leave Dyrenn. Once the warning had been spread, many families began to leave on their own, and the southern gates of the city were busy with traffic.

On King Trentan's orders, the shops of guilds of the city began to work nearly night and day. Blacksmiths hammered out weapons and armor, as well as horseshoes, and wagon axles, while carpenters worked feverishly to build more wagons to haul people and supplies away from Dyrenn. Teamsters and their horses and wagons were conscripted into service, and soon loaded wagons were seen moving all over the city. Farmers brought in every scrap of produce from the fields that they could, and beyond the city walls, herds of cattle were being driven south. Weavers and tanners worked ceaselessly to make covers for the wagons and shelters for the people. Merchants provided the coins and the raw materials from their own pockets and warehouses to supply many of the endeavors. And near the walls, the soldiers trained and practiced, while some rigged barricades and traps to place throughout the city after the people had gone.

King Trentan rode daily through the city, checking on their progress and encouraging the citizens to keep working. Rorx went to work helping in the forges of the blacksmiths, and Garroc helped build barricades and traps. Cyan spent much of each day near the city walls, practicing with the other soldiers and helping Captain Fissk devise plans for the rearguard that would stay behind in the city. He saw very little of Miranda or his friends. Arathorn had only returned once so far to tell him that the army of monsters was stills days away, but that they had gathered in astronomical numbers.

For Cyan, the days blended together quickly, and the few hours of sleep he got at night were all that separated one day of sparring from the next. He hadn't even

returned to the palace since he started helping out. He had just been using a bunk in the soldiers' barracks, and eating meals in the mess hall with the other men.

On the fourth day of work, a messenger from the King found Cyan and told him that he was needed for a meeting that night at the palace. Cyan thanked the messenger and went back to his sparring with a squad of younger Dyrenn soldiers. Captain Fissk had asked Cyan to help them work on their fighting skills, and the green soldiers were starting to show real promise after all the hours of work.

When the sun was getting low in the west, Cyan gathered his gear from the barracks and ate a hasty meal in the mess hall with the soldiers in the squad he had been teaching. Most of the soldiers were his age or older, and he felt more than a little out of place trying to teach them. After dinner, he borrowed a horse from the barracks' stable and rode through the city to the palace. He had just enough time to enjoy a warm bath before he had to head downstairs to the audience chamber for the meeting with King Trentan.

He met Rorx just outside the King's audience chamber. The dwarf's face was still red and he smelled of sweat and hot metal.

"Just get back from the forges?" Cyan asked him.

"Aye. Wanted to finish another set o' arrowheads."

"Have you seen Garroc lately?"

"Naw. He's been busy makin' booby-traps and stuff," Rorx shrugged. "He's probably in there already."

Cyan nodded and opened the double oak doors to the audience chamber. Rorx followed him down the long carpeted aisle. King Trentan, Captain Fissk, another soldier Cyan didn't know, several high-ranking lords and noblemen, and Garroc were already seated and waiting for them.

"Cyan. Master Ironshill. Welcome," King Trentan gestured to the two remaining chairs gathered about the King's desk on the dais.

Cyan inclined his head to the King before taking his seat. Rorx sat back in his with a satisfied grunt.

"I know we all have been exceedingly busy, but now it's time to make the final, hard decisions," King Trentan said slowly, his voice all too serious. Cyan noted that the King had dark circles under his eyes.

"The people of the city are ready for your commands," Captain Fissk spoke.

King Trentan managed a faint smile. "If ever I doubted my people, I take it all back now. I have seen this city pull together and work harder than I ever could have hoped. Their strength gives me courage for the days to come. And I fear we shall all need that very soon. Captain?" King Trentan gestured for the soldier to take over.

"Thank you, your Majesty," Fissk turned to the rest of them. "This is Corporal Eron, one of the scouts that I sent out days ago. He has just returned to Dyrenn this night with the latest news on the army from the north's movements."

Corporal Eron cleared his throat before speaking. "Last night I watched the bulk of the army of monsters make camp a few leagues north of the western branch of the Raine River. Their camp fires lit up the plains for miles all around, and packs of Shadow Hounds roam at will in the night. My men and I have struggled to get a rough count of them, but the closest we can figure is that there are close to a hundred thousand troops in the army. And that's only a very rough estimate," the Corporal paused to let the figure sink in. "Early this morning, an advance group of monsters, about a thousand strong, crossed the Raine River ahead of the rest of the army and started moving south for Dyrenn. I rode back here as fast as my horse could bring me."

"When will this advance group reach the city?" Cyan asked.

"They were moving fast, but they're all on foot. The earliest they could get here is by tomorrow night. A day or two after that the main body of the army will arrive."

King Trentan nodded his thanks to the Corporal. "We'll have to clear the city out by midday tomorrow. The rearguard will remain behind to try to stall the advance group of the army and buy us extra time to put more distance between us and the army. Captain Fissk has already volunteered to stay and command the rearguard. He and any other volunteers will do what they can to delay the army... and see that nothing of value is left for the monsters to use," King Trentan's voice grew somber.

"And just what does that mean?" Garroc asked suspiciously.

"Our guess is that the Demon Prince plans to use Dyrenn as a base of operations for his armies," Captain Fissk answered for the King. "From here he can strike against the elves to the west, and the dwarves in the east. More forces can be staged here until they're ready to move south towards Inkata. We do not intend to aid the Demon Prince's plans by leaving him such a base."

"How are ye goin' to do that?" Rorx asked.

"We want to burn the city," King Trentan said grimly.

Cyan sat back in his chair heavily. *He's serious! He'd rather destroy Dyrenn than see it in the hands of the Demon Prince!*

"Why would you do this?" Cyan asked, amazed. "It won't stop the army of monsters!"

"No but it might kill some of them," Captain Fissk said. "When the rearguard cannot hold back the monsters any longer, they will retreat to the palace and escape through the tunnels in the cellar. The monsters will be scaling the walls and running rampant in the streets. If we can start enough fires and trap some of the monsters in the city, at least we'll have that small victory."

Rorx nodded, and Cyan couldn't believe the dwarf agreed with their plan. "Ye'll need something that burns hot and fast if ye want to really catch them critters in the fires. Me un' Garroc might be able to help ye mix up some good stuff to douse the buildings with," he mused.

Cyan wondered if he was the only one who thought the whole idea was crazy. "Captain Fissk? How many men will stay behind in the rearguard?" he asked, hoping to change the subject.

"The bulk of the soldiers will go with the citizens to protect them should they run into trouble. I'm not ordering anyone to stay behind; it's strictly a volunteer mission. So far about a hundred and fifty men have decided to stay."

Cyan looked down at his hands, suddenly feeling very aware of the choices lying in front of him. He had pledged to fight for Dyrenn, but he didn't think his oath forced him to stay behind. He could just as easily serve by going south with the King and his people. *But that's not what I think I need to do*, he told himself. *The Dyrenns will need every minute of extra time we can buy them by holding off the monsters.*

Cyan looked back up and found King Trentan watching him intently. "I... I would like to remain behind with the rearguard," he said quietly.

King Trentan nodded silently, and Cyan felt like he had passed some kind of test.

"Well, if the lad's stayin', we might as well too, eh Garroc?"

"Aye, we'll give them monsters a taste o' steel," Garroc growled fiercely.

"We'll be glad to have you all fighting with us," Captain Fissk said, nodding respectfully to each of them.

"Well, gentlemen," King Trentan spread his hands and stood up, "our course is before us. The way may not be easy, but I feel it is the only choice we have. I will send the word out tonight for the city to make ready to leave before midday tomorrow.

Captain Fissk, you and Masters Lodiggor and Ironshell can start making preparations to

burn the city. Corporal Eron, I would like you to send word to the barracks to have all the soldiers leaving with us to be ready tomorrow morning to assist in the evacuation.”

“Yes, your Majesty,” Corporal Eron bowed and turned to leave.

Captain Fissk and the dwarves were already talking about fire with one or two of the nobles listening in. Cyan turned and looked to King Trentan, meeting the King’s dark-eyed gaze.

“You don’t have to stay behind if you don’t want to, Cyan. Protecting Dyrenn means more than just fighting for the city itself. The people are what makes Dyrenn what it is,” King Trentan said quietly.

“I know, your Majesty,” Cyan sighed. “But this is where I can do the most good. We’ll hold off that advance group for you. And we’ll... burn your city too...”

“I don’t like it anymore than you do, but it will make life harder for these monsters,” King Trentan scowled. “Anything we can do to hurt them might eventually tip the scales back in our favor. One day we won’t be running anymore, and then when it comes time to stand and fight, we’ll need these monsters weak and tired. We can’t leave them shelter, supplies, and walls to hide behind. When they take Dyrenn, it will be a burned out ruin of no value to them.”

Cyan nodded, understanding the necessity of it all. He could only wonder at the kind of determination King Trentan had. *To order the destruction of your own city! How that must hurt him!*

“Thank you for standing with us, Cyan,” King Trentan interrupted his thoughts.

“We never would have lasted as long as we did without you.”

Cyan nodded silently. “Please take care of Arathorn for us,” he said.

“I will, Cyan. You have my word.”

Cyan tried to find the words to say something about Miranda to King Trentan, but the King must have read the emotions in his eyes. "She will be all right, Cyan. I will see to that," Marcuris gripped Cyan's shoulder reassuringly.

"Thank you, your Majesty," Cyan whispered, meeting the King's knowing eyes. He clasped hands with the King, and they stood there in grim silence for a moment before they each let go.

"Duty is never an easy burden, Cyan," King Trentan finally said. "Spirits go with."

"And with you," Cyan whispered

* * * *

Cyan's feet felt like lead weights as he started up the stairs to his room in the palace. He was more than a little tired from the past long days, but now doubts weighed him down and slowed his steps.

What will Miranda say when I tell her I'm staying? He remembered when she had told him that she would rather have him gone from Dyrenn than have to worry about him staying to face the danger. *And here I am, doing just what she feared most,* he thought to himself. *How do I tell her?*

He trudged up to the second floor, but didn't stop there. He climbed up to the third floor, the royal apartments. *Might as well get it over with. She'll be leaving in the morning and I won't have time then.*

Cyan passed through the library room and headed down the hallway to Miranda's suite of rooms. He came to the engraved door and paused. He realized that things might not go well, but he knocked on the door anyway.

"Come in!" her muffled voice came through the door.

Cyan eased the door open and stepped inside, closing the door behind him.

"It's me, Miranda. Cyan," he called out, not sure where she was in the suite.

"I'm over here, in the bedroom," Miranda called back.

Cyan turned to the right and walked through the sitting room and another room arranged with elegant furniture. It was much easier than trying to sneak around in the dark, and he didn't have to worry about banging his shins this time. He passed through the dressing room, where most of the drawers of the cedar chests were hanging open with clothes scattered all over. Through the filmy curtains leading to her bedroom, Cyan could make out Miranda sitting on her bed, stuffing clothes into bundles.

"Hello, Miranda," he greeted her as he pushed through the gauzy curtains. His eyes took in the jumble of things she was packing.

Miranda got to her feet and met him halfway. "Hello, yourself. I've missed you," she kissed him lightly and slid her arms around his waist.

"It's been a long couple of days," Cyan admitted, trying to savor the feel of her arms around him and the flowery smell of her hair.

"I'll say; I've been so busy trying to get everything in the palace ready to move out that I've barely had time to pack some of my own things!"

"Do you want some help?"

"And waste what little time we have together?" Miranda asked, kissing him again.

Cyan felt her kiss electrify him, but he knew he had to tell her soon or else he would never be able to deny her.

"Miranda... I— I'm staying with the rearguard," he blurted finally.

Miranda stepped back like she had been punched. "You're what?"

"You heard me," Cyan answered, hating himself for having to be this way. "I'm not going south with you and your father."

Miranda's face had gone pale, and she turned her back to him quickly.

"Miranda, I'm sorry—" he reached out and laid a hand on her shoulder.

She whirled and slapped him viciously across the face, snapping his head to one side. His cheek stung fiercely. "Don't even dare apologize to me, Cyan of Gabbon!" she

hissed, her voice thick with rage and hurt. “You *knew* this is what I was afraid of! But did you even stop to consider my feelings? No!!” Her eyes burned with anger.

“I want to go with you, really—“

“Then do it! Haven’t you done enough for this city already? Let the damn monsters have it! I don’t care!” she shrieked, hot tears running down her face.

Cyan tried to tell himself that she didn’t really mean it, but her harsh words stung worse than her slap.

“I love you, Cyan!! Please don’t do this me! Come with me instead,” her voice grew soft and inviting, and Cyan felt his resolve weakening.

“Miranda... I love you, and I want to be with you, but I have to do this. I swore to protect Dyrenn, and staying is the best way to accomplish that. The soldiers need me! We can hold off the monsters to give you extra time to get away!”

“Fine!” she snapped. “Stay with your precious soldiers! Kill some more monsters! It seems like all you really want in life.”

“I didn’t mean—“

“Get out!” Miranda screamed. “Just get out, damn you! I don’t want to see your face!”

Cyan backed up a few steps, feeling his heart twisting and ripping into pieces. His own eyes brimmed with tears. “Please, Miranda—“

“No!! Leave! I knew better than to fall in love with you! I knew you would only hurt me! Get out, you bastard!”

Cyan turned and ran without looking back at her, his own tears nearly blinding him. Her screams chased him out to the hall, and the echo of her terrible words haunted him all the way back to his room.

In her bedroom, Miranda swept the bundles of clothes from her bed in a fit of rage. Then the tears set in.

Cyan was up with the sun, but he didn't feel very rested. Sleep had been nearly impossible after the terrible visit with Miranda. His heart felt like it was tied up in knots, and it was all he could do to stop himself from running back to her and beg her forgiveness. Cyan gritted his teeth as he buckled on the Doom Sword. *So this is where duty gets in the way of what I really want*, he thought. *I wonder if this is how Flint felt?*

He stepped out into the hallway and knocked on Rorx and Garroc's doors, but neither answered. Cyan shrugged and headed downstairs. He left the palace and walked across the courtyard, noting the palace servants busy loading two large covered wagons. He spotted Captain Fissk near the palace gate and walked over to him.

"Good morning, Lord Cyan," Fissk greeted him.

"Good morning, Captain. How are things going?"

"Rather smoothly, I'm surprised to admit," Fissk almost smiled. "With the soldiers helping, the citizens seem to be fairly organized. My guess is that the city will be clear even before midday."

"Have you seen Garroc or Rorx yet this morning?"

"Those two were up even earlier than you. They were going into the city to get the supplies we need to mix up some of their dwarf fire."

"Dwarf fire? What's that?" Cyan had never even heard of such a thing.

"Master Ironhill claims that it's a mixture that will have Dyrenn burning out of control in no time," Fissk winced as he spoke. "He said they needed as much lamp oil, pitch, and dwarven spirits as they could find. I told them of several taverns where they could find the spirits."

"Just hope they don't drink it all first," Cyan grunted. *Leave it to Rorx to use alcohol!*

“He and Master Lodiggor seemed quite insistent that if we give the majority of the buildings a good splash of this dwarf fire it will do the trick.”

Cyan shook his head. *Dwarves!* he thought.

* * * *

The sun was approaching its high point in the sky as Cyan stood with Captain Fissk and a company of soldiers near the city’s southern gate. The last stragglers that the soldiers had found in the city were just passing through the yawning arch in the city wall. King Trentan watched from horseback from across the way as a few small wagons trundled by, filled with people and their belongings. Behind the King, the wagons from the palace waited for their turn to leave. Horses stamped impatiently in their harnesses.

“That’s the last group, your Majesty,” Fissk called to King Trentan.

The King urged his chestnut over to them. He was wearing his crown, one of the few occasions Cyan had ever seen the King wearing the symbol of his office. The Crown of Dyrenn was a simple gold circlet, but one up-thrust golden spike jutted from the circlet above the King’s forehead. The golden spike sparkled with a line of gems.

“Your men are ready?” the King asked.

“The dwarf fire is being mixed and applied even as we speak,” Fissk said. “The rest of the rearguard are preparing the barricades and traps in the streets. We will be ready when the monsters show.”

King Trentan nodded silently. Cyan could tell that the King wanted to stay behind.

“We will hold them, your Majesty,” Cyan said, sounding more confident than he felt.

“I don’t doubt that. Just make sure you all make it back to the palace when you can’t hold any longer. The tunnels will be your only real bet for escape. But be careful,”

he warned, "we know the enemy might be expecting something like that. They could try to find and guard the tunnel exits."

"We'll be careful," Sergeant Fissk nodded. "Those monsters will get so tied up in the streets that they won't have a chance once the fires start."

"I hope so," King Trentan sighed. "Spirits, I hope so."

The palace wagons started moving forward; some were open-bed wagons holding members of the palace staff, and others were covered wagons for some of the things that had been taken from the palace. Cyan knew that Arathorn's body was in one of those wagons, along with all his possessions, and he hoped the elf would be all right. He hadn't seen his spectral friend in days, and he was starting to wonder about him.

Cyan caught his breath as he spotted Miranda riding behind the last wagon. She was in the saddle of a sorrel mare, and the shining silver of a crown glimmered where it rested in her auburn hair. She wore jet black riding boots and dark blue riding pants. A dark travel cloak hung from her shoulders. Cyan thought he could glimpse the momentary flash of the rose pendant he had given her, but he couldn't be sure. Her face was pale, and her mouth set in a determined line. She didn't turn to look at him as she rode past.

Cyan watched her ride through the gates, and it hurt more than he could have imagined. He couldn't take his eyes off her, hoping that she might turn and look back... but she never did. Cyan ignored his stinging eyes, and forced back the bitter pain.

King Trentan's chestnut snorted and pranced. The King looked back down at them, a fierce light in his eyes. "You make them pay for this!" he said.

Captain Fissk clapped his fist to his heart. "We will, your Majesty! The bards will sing of this day!"

King Trentan returned Fissk's salute, wheeled his horse around, and then he was off through the gates after the rest of his people.

Cyan watched as the southern gates began to close. *Now it's just us and the Demon Prince's army. Spirits watch over us*, he prayed. *And Miranda too... let her know that I still love her, no matter what.*

When the gates were closed and barred, Cyan turned and followed Captain Fissk and the rest of the soldiers down the quiet and empty streets of Dyrenn. They had a battle to prepare for.

* * * *

As he watched from the top of the northern wall, Cyan thought that Corporal Eron had been a good judge of speed. The forerunners of the advance group of the army were starting to appear below the hills in the distance. It was almost sundown, right when Eron had said they would probably arrive. The sinking sun painted the plains north of the city red-gold, except where gathering black clusters of monsters approached.

As if the ground hasn't been trampled enough in the past weeks, Cyan thought to himself, looking down at the bare, sometimes scorched earth. The prairie grass still hadn't recovered from the last battle with the expeditionary force, and now they would be ground underneath the heels of the main army of the Demon Prince.

Cyan's eyes noted the new hill that rose up out of the nearby plains. Glittergloom's tomb, the mound where Kazgorath had laid his life-mate, was a huge dirt and stone hill that sloped nearly thirty feet tall and stretched for close to two hundred feet. As the first monsters drew nearer, Cyan wished he had Kazgorath fighting alongside him again. Then this thousand or so monsters would have been nothing more than an annoyance.

Cyan shook himself free of the futile hopes, and gripped the hilt of the Doom Sword tighter. *Kazgorath has his own quest to fulfill. It will be up to us to hold the city.* Garroc and Rorx stood to his right, both holding their wicked battle-axes. They both

smelled of oil and alcohol, the ingredients of the so-called dwarf fire. Captain Fissk was at his left, and the rest of the nearly two hundred volunteers were spread out along the length of the northern wall. Another twenty men stood in the street below the walls, with bows ready should they have to cover a sudden retreat. Cyan hoped it wouldn't come to that so soon. They needed to hold out longer for the rest of the Dyrenns to get farther south.

"Steady, men!" Sergeant Fissk shouted.

The first of the monsters halted just beyond the range of a longbow. Cyan recognized troops of brown-skinned goblins— the five foot tall creatures were poor fighters, but their sheer numbers made up for that. The much taller trouts, with their long, sinewy arms, vicious claws, and tough gray-green hides clustered behind the goblins in loose ranks. Driving them all forward were burly ogra, the lieutenants of the Demon Prince's forces. The tall and muscular ogra, some wielding whips and scourges, forced the goblins and trouts into some semblance of an ordered line. The intelligent, yellow-eyed ogra whipped their troops into a frenzy.

"They mean to attack us," Fissk said to Cyan. "I had hoped they might just try to stop us from fleeing until the main army showed up."

"If we want to give King Trentan any kind of time, we'll have to hold them off," Cyan replied, watching as tall siege ladders were brought up to the first waves of goblins and trouts.

"I hope we can," Fissk said, "otherwise we'll have to flee early. It'll be a waste if we have to burn the city just to stop this group."

Cyan nodded grimly.

"Hey, lad," Rorx called softly to him. "Is the elf anywhere around?"

Cyan drew the Doom Sword from its scabbard and looked around, but he didn't see the pale form of Arathorn.

"I don't see him," he told the dwarves.

"Burn me! I wish that silly elf was here with that bow o' his!" Rorx grumbled.

"This way there'll be plenty more goblins for you to kill," Cyan suggested.

"Hey, ye've got a good point there," Rorx chuckled, testing his grip on his double-bladed battle-axe.

Cyan sighed and prepared for battle. He didn't quite understand why the monsters were going to attack. *They could just wait for the rest of the army to get here, and then they'd run over us like nothing! Is this another way to test our defenses? Or do they know we're undermanned?*

On the plains below, an ogr blew a horn blast, and Cyan had to give up his search for answers as the first wave of goblins and trouls charged towards the city wall.

"Fire!" Sergeant Fissk shouted, and soldiers loosed arrows down at the charging monsters. More than three score fell writhing to the ground, but it was far from enough. A second volley of shafts arced down, finding more victims, but still the goblins and trouls came, and behind them, the ogres spurred on even more.

Siege ladders clattered against the crenellations as squads of goblins braced the crude ladders for the gangly but agile trouls to scramble up. Soldiers pushed at the ladders, trying to dislodge them before the trouls could gain the wall. Some were successful, but others weren't fast enough to avoid the swiping claws of the first trouls.

Cyan used the Doom Sword like a crowbar to lever the top of a ladder away from the wall. He didn't have time to watch the falling trouls, because two more ladders had appeared just as quickly. He spared a moment's glance, and saw that in a few spots soldiers were already fighting on the top of the wall as more monsters climbed up to engage them.

A troul's head popped into view above the rampart's edge in front of Cyan, but the creature barely had time to blink before the Doom Sword swept across and sent the

head tumbling back to earth in a spray of gore. Cyan kicked the headless corpse backwards and saw it knock two others from their place on the ladder. Beside him, Garroc and Rorx worked together to heave another ladder full of trouls backwards into space.

“Behind ye!” Rorx shouted to him, and Cyan whirled just in time to deflect the spear thrust of a goblin that had scaled the wall. Cyan forced the spear down to the flagstones with the Doom Sword and broke the shaft in half with a fast kick from his boot. The goblin stared at its broken weapon for a moment, but by then the Doom Sword was already cutting a path up towards its throat. The goblin fell back clutching its torn neck, hot blood pumping out between its stubby fingers.

Cyan felt the rush of battle calling him, and he welcomed the next troul to gain a foothold on the wall with a thrust from the flaming Doom Sword. He ignored its feeble attempts to batter him with its fists and just dumped it back over the side of the wall to land on some of its fellows below. He was only dimly aware of the bright green flames that outlined the Sword and made him stand out in the growing gloom like a beacon. He was too busy moving from one spot to another as he fought to keep the goblins and trouls from gaining too big of a hold on the wall.

Garroc and Rorx worked in tandem as their axes flashed and cut in a fast-moving blur of steel. They cut the legs out from under a troul, and Rorx leapt on top of the monster’s chest as he buried his axe in its face. Garroc split a charging goblin down the middle while Rorx heaved and pulled his axe out from the dead troul’s skull. Another troul leaped from a ladder on to the top of the wall, getting to its feet right in between the two dwarves. It reached out and grabbed Garroc’s leg with one long arm.

“Oh no ye don’t!” Rorx bellowed, tearing his axe from the dead troul he stood on, whipping chunks of brain into the air. “Ye let go o’ me buddy!” He stepped forward and sent his axe in a fast arc across the back of the troul’s legs, slicing into both its

hamstring muscles. The troul howled and fell to its knees, while Garroc severed the hand that held his leg with a one-handed chop from his axe. He reversed his swing and slammed the blunt side of his axe-head into the troul's face. It fell backward, nearly pinning Rorx underneath it.

"Hey! Watch it!" Rorx shouted, stomping a heavy boot down on the troul's windpipe just to make sure it died.

"Sorry," Garroc shrugged as he turned to meet another goblin coming up a ladder, the troul's severed hand still clutching his lower leg like some kind of grisly anklet.

Down below, the ogr's could see that they were starting to make the wall, and they sent the last group of goblins and trouls running for the ladders with cracking whips and swipes from swords and axes. Then the ogs themselves followed after their minions in a howling rush of bloodlust.

* * * *

Arathorn found the Dyrenns already several leagues south of the city, moving at a steady pace along the wide trade road that ran towards Inkata. The sun was setting and the elf had decided to check on their progress after he had finished another round of inspecting the main army of the Demon Prince.

The elf had been around more than Cyan knew, and he had listened in to the King's plans for abandoning the city and then burning it. He had also had the bad luck to find Cyan when he had been telling Miranda about his plans to stay behind as part of the rearguard. Arathorn could still remember the pain and anger in Miranda's voice as she had screamed at Cyan. He wished there was some way he could help his friend, but the limitations of his condition hindered him.

Arathorn was quickly able to locate the wagon that carried his body just from the way he felt drawn to it. Two Dyrenn soldiers rode in the front of the wagon, and inside

the covered wagon bed his body was laid out on several thick soft blankets, with more pulled up around him to keep him warm. Arathorn could sense, more than see, the bandages covering the arrow wound in his side. Even to his eyes, his face looked more pale than it had before, and sweat droplets still dotted his forehead. He wondered how long his body could last like this.

As he watched, one of the soldiers climbed into the wagon bed next to his body and struggled to force some water down the elf's throat. Arathorn realized that if he couldn't get back into his body soon, he would die from starvation, or even dehydration. It was frustrating, being able to see everything that was going on, but not being able to tell anyone, or even touch anything. He spotted Lifeseeker's familiar whiteness resting next to his body, along with his few other possessions, and he wished he could take up the bow and join his friends in the fight back in Dyrenn.

Well, I should probably go back there anyway and check on them. The advance group of monsters will probably be arriving there. The Dyrenns look to be doing fine. I guess I'll go tell Cyan.

Arathorn concentrated, visualizing the walls of Dyrenn. A wave of dizziness swept over him, and when it cleared he was no longer among the Dyrenns heading south. He was standing on the northern wall of Dyrenn in the middle of a fierce battle.

* * * *

"Lord Cyan!" Captain Fissk shouted over the clang of swords and the screams of the dying. "We can't hold much longer! I'm going to sound the retreat!"

Cyan looked up from the goblin he had just disemboweled. "What? You can't! We can't let them take us this early!"

"What else can we do? If we wait much longer we'll be overrun and we won't be able to burn the city!" Fissk danced out of the way of a goblin's sword and plunged his own blade through its eye.

Cyan looked around to either side of him. The Dyrenn soldiers were locked in deadly combat all along the wall with goblins and trouls, and even more were being driven towards the ladders below by the charging ogres. *Fissk's right*, he realized. *We just can't hold out against them.* Frustration and anger bubbled up inside him, and he spat another goblin on the Doom Sword as he tried to find a way to tip the balance in their favor.

"Damn it! he shouted in frustration, flinging the twitching goblin off the tip of the Sword. *It's just not enough!* he thought. Then he remembered the strange words the Doom Sword had put in his mind when he had fought with Greystern. *I am all you need. Find your strength in me, and never fail again.* Cyan looked from the fighting all around him, to the charging goblins and trouls below, with their ogr masters hot on their heels. The rearguard would fail if something didn't change, and quickly.

Never fail again, Cyan told himself, echoing the Doom Sword's half-felt words. More by instinct than any conscious thought, he lifted the Doom Sword and held it straight out in front of him, pointing it down at the monsters rushing to the wall. *Never fail again!* he thought angrily, directing all his frustrated rage and helplessness down through the sword. The green flames billowed and grew brighter in response.

"Never fail again!" Cyan roared, and the flames shot out from the Doom Sword in a cascade of tumbling green destruction. They blasted goblin, troul, and ogr alike into ashes. Cyan turned, and wherever he pointed the Doom Sword, the roiling green flames swept over the monsters and consumed them in a crackling, roaring inferno. Waves of heat radiated out from the Sword, and sweat poured down Cyan's face as he struggled to maintain the flow of energy. *I will not fail!* he thought defiantly, blasting another group of monsters into scattered ash. "Never..." he yelled, turning the blade to sear more screaming goblins and trouls, "...again!" One last mighty surge sent the green fire down in a torrent along the base of the city wall.

Startled men and monsters paused in the middle of battle as the emerald blaze wiped the last of the monsters from the smoking earth below the walls. The Dyrenn soldiers, seeing their salvation, cut into those monsters still on the walls with renewed fervor. In minutes, the battle was over, and the last few terrified goblins and troubles leapt from the top of the wall rather than face the deadly blades of the Dyrenn soldiers.

Cyan staggered backwards and used the Doom Sword as a crutch to lean on. He felt drained, and lowered himself to the stones when he saw that there were no monsters nearby. He took deep breaths, and tried to wipe sweat from his eyes.

Rorx pitched a goblin carcass over the side of the wall and stepped around the worst of the mess on the flagstones to join Cyan.

"By the Fireforger!" he swore. "I never seen anythin' so amazin'! Ye toasted half them critters all by yerself!"

Cyan managed a weak smile. "Thanks, Rorx."

"No wonder they call it *Geddon-Klár!*" Garroc added as he came over to them. "I didn't know it could do anything like that!"

"Me neither," Cyan admitted, his voice little more than a whisper. He had screamed his voice raw in the final moments of the battle.

"What a sight! That lovely green flame just crispin' all them beasties! Ain't never seen the likes o' it!" Rorx chuckled heartily. "Now how come ye didna do that before?"

"I didn't know it could," Cyan croaked. "It just kind of came to me."

"Fireforger's beard! Let me know the next time somethin' like that comes to ye!"

"I'll try, Rorx. Here, help me up."

The dwarves grabbed his arms and pulled him back to his feet. Leaning on the Doom Sword, Cyan turned and caught Captain Fissk's awestruck gaze.

"I... I guess we'll be holding out longer then, Lord Cyan," Fissk stammered, his eyes falling repeatedly to the Doom Sword.

"Yes, we will," Cyan said. He half-walked, half-staggered towards the closest guard tower so he could get down from the wall and find a place to wash the blood off himself. Any Dyrenn soldiers in his way hastily stepped aside. Rorx and Garroc followed after him, both chattering about the power of *Geddon-Klár*, the Doom Sword.

* * * *

Cyan found a horse trough near the barracks down below the wall. The lukewarm water helped refresh him and get a little of the blood and gore off of him, but he still felt terribly weak after the exertion it had taken to use the Doom Sword. Garroc and Rorx were a little ways off, still talking about the battle and how much fun it had been.

Cyan shook his head and stifled a yawn. His hand brushed the Doom Sword's hilt, and he nearly jumped when Arathorn flickered into view in front of him.

"Spirits! Arathorn! You nearly scared the wits out of me," Cyan hissed.

The elf shrugged. "Sorry. I've been trying to get your attention."

"Yeah? We'll I've been a little busy."

"So I see. I saw what you did with the Doom Sword."

Cyan nodded and splashed some more water on his face with his free hand. "Surprised me too," he admitted. "Where have you been these past days? I've been trying to check to see if you're around, but you never were."

"I stopped by a few times, but you were usually busy with other things. Mostly I've been keeping an eye on the main army's progress."

"When will they get here?"

"Sometime late tomorrow is my best guess. They're moving a little slower than this advance group was, but they don't stop much."

"How many?" Cyan asked quietly, not really wanting to know the answer.

Arathorn grimaced. "More than I wanted to count. I lost track after about forty-five thousand, but that was just the goblins, not counting the trolls, ogres, and other things. There's got to be close to a hundred thousand or more."

Cyan sighed heavily. "Where do that many monsters come from?"

"I don't know, but they're going to be on Dyrenn's front doorstep tomorrow evening. I hope you've planned a warm welcome for them."

"Warm enough," Cyan grunted, thinking about Garroc and Rorx's dwarf fire.

"I also stopped and checked to see how the Dyrenns were doing," Arathorn said.

Cyan perked up a little. "Yeah?"

"They're making good time. They've already put quite a bit of distance behind them."

"Thank the Spirits for that! I'd hate to think we were doing this for nothing." Cyan resisted the temptation to ask the elf if he had seen Miranda.

"You look pretty tired, Cyan. Maybe you should get some rest," Arathorn suggested.

"I must look bad if a ghost tells me so," Cyan muttered.

Arathorn chuckled and vanished.

* * * *

Miranda woke with a start.

"Easy, child," her father said soothingly. "It's time to get moving again."

Miranda met her father's eyes for a moment, then nodded and sat up. They had taken a hour's rest to give the horses a break, and Miranda couldn't believe the time was already gone. She got to her feet, feeling the muscles in her legs protesting the hours she had spent in the saddle.

It was still dark, and the only light was from the few stars that shone in the gaps between clouds in the night sky. Around her she could hear people stirring and

readying the wagons again for more travel. Miranda stretched her back, unused to sleeping on the hard ground, even with a bedroll. Her sorrel mare was tied a short distance away to the back of the wagon that carried Arathorn's body.

Miranda walked over and peeked in the back of the covered wagon bed. She could just make out Arathorn's figure in the darkness. His breathing was soft and barely audible. *Be strong, Arathorn*, she told the wounded elf. *We'll find some way to help you.*

Miranda untied her horse's reins from the wagon and led the sorrel mare a short distance before finally climbing up into the saddle. The saddle hadn't gotten any softer since she last rode, and her backside and thighs were already aching. Miranda gritted her teeth and urged the mare forward into a walk. In front and behind her, the rumble of wagons starting to roll filled the night's stillness as over eight thousand Dyrenns and their belongings started moving south towards Inkata once more.

* * * *

It was nearly mid-afternoon when Cyan finally awakened and swung out of his cot in the barracks. He yawned and went to the mess hall to get a little breakfast before returning to his post up on the wall. A few other soldiers ate quietly in the mess hall with him, but Cyan kept to himself and munched on some dry bread, thick cheese, and dried beef. It wasn't the best tasting fare, but it satisfied the hunger gnawing in his belly.

Cyan left the barracks and walked outside. A strong breeze blew his hair into a wild mess, and Cyan looked up to see large clouds moving swiftly across the sky to the south-east. When the sun broke free from a patch of thick white cloud, it quickly grew very warm.

Cyan walked over to the closest guard tower, noting the dark brown stains and smears on the closest buildings that meant the dwarf fire had been spread. He hoped the stuff would work as well as Rorx and Garroc claimed. They would need the fire to cover their own escape when the army of monsters showed up and swarmed over the

city walls. Cyan held no illusions about there being any chance of stopping the monsters this time, even with the Doom Sword. The more he thought about what he had done last night with the Sword, he wasn't even sure he wanted to try to duplicate the feat again. He had never felt so angry and frustrated before, and using that rage as a weapon had felt somehow... wrong.

Cyan shook off the disturbing thoughts and entered the guard tower and climbed the five flights of steps to the top of the wall. He stepped out onto the ramparts and took a moment to enjoy the fresh breeze tugging at him. He didn't look at the ground below the walls, where the flames from the Doom Sword had left swaths of burnt destruction, and ash that swirled in the wind.

"Good day, Lord Cyan," one of the Dyrenn soldiers greeted him.

"Good day, soldier. Do you know where Captain Fissk is?"

The blond soldier pointed further down the wall with the tip of his short sword.

"Thanks," Cyan said to the man, walking swiftly across flagstones still stained with blood from last night's battle.

"Captain!" Cyan hailed the officer.

"Lord Cyan," Fissk nodded his head. "I hope you rested well after last night's fighting?"

"Enough to face tonight's fun," Cyan managed a slight grin. "How did we come through after it was all finished?"

"Better than I expected," Captain Fissk shrugged. "We lost twenty-six men, and another forty were wounded. Most of those are in good enough shape to make it out of here on their own."

"And the ones that aren't?"

"They've been stationed as part of the fire brigade in the city."

Cyan nodded grimly, knowing that some men had volunteered to be the ones to put the torch to the city. "Have you decided what we're going to do when the army arrives?"

Fissk pointed to the bows and arrows that had been placed at points along the wall. "When they attack, we'll try to get as many shots off as we can, then we're going to make a break for the palace. I can't see any sense in trying to stop them this time, not with their numbers. We'll get to the palace and the fire brigade will start the city on fire. Then we escape through the tunnels."

"I hope it works as simply as you make it sound," Cyan said.

"Me too," Fissk admitted. "Just be sure to take either the market street down there," he pointed to a small avenue winding into the city, "or the alley over there by the tannery when you head for the palace. All the other streets have been barricaded or trapped."

"I'll remember that."

Captain Fissk nodded and walked off to check on the other men on the wall. Cyan stood and looked out to the north, one hand sliding down to rest on the Doom Sword. He wasn't surprised to see Arathorn standing next to him.

"I'm never going to get used to you this way," he told the elf quietly.

"Nor am I," Arathorn said wryly.

"Have you seen the dwarves?"

"They were making more of that mixture stuff of theirs. I guess Rorx really wants to have a bonfire."

Cyan tried not to laugh. He just wished Dyrenn didn't have to be the fuel for the fire.

"I checked on the Demon Prince's army again," Arathorn said. "They'll be here by dark for sure."

“Well, at least we bought King Trentan one extra day.”

“It will have to do,” Arathorn replied.

A nearby Dyrenn soldier looked over at Cyan curiously.

“I believe he’s starting to think you’re talking to yourself,” the elf laughed.

Cyan grimaced and tried to ignore the elf’s chuckles.

* * * *

“I see them, Cyan,” Arathorn said quietly. Even as a spirit, his eyes were better than most of the humans.

A few moments later Cyan could begin to make out a line of black coming down out of the northern hills. Other men on the wall began to sound the warning as they too saw the advancing black mass of the Demon Prince’s army.

“Now the fun really starts,” Rorx mumbled off to Cyan left. The dwarf picked up a crossbow he had found in the barracks’ armory and checked the tension on the crank.

“Stay close, Arathorn,” Cyan whispered to the elf. “We might need your eyes during all the confusion.”

The elf nodded as Cyan let go of the Doom Sword and picked up the longbow that was set in front of him. He checked the bowstring and set a few arrows on the edge of the stone rampart in front of him.

“Spirits! I wish I could use Lifeseeker,” Arathorn muttered, but no one could hear him.

They all watched as the dark wave of monsters swept down onto the plains like a black tide rushing in. They covered the ground as they moved forward, and more just seemed to keep coming from out of the hills.

“Remember!” Captain Fissk shouted. “Everyone shoot five arrows, then head down the guard towers. Take the market street or the tannery alley to the palace! Fire brigade, you run to your positions in the city and start torching everything you can!”

Cyan fingered his bow nervously as he watched the massive army creep across the plains. It was another fifteen minutes before the leading monsters were close enough to really see in the fading light of day. Gray clouds hid the sun as it set, and the steady breeze of the day was showing signs of becoming a strong wind.

The soldiers were quiet as they watched the host of monsters gather on the plains beyond the city. They covered the ground like a swarm of ants; the only place left bare was the sweeping crest of Glittergloom's tomb. The monsters seemed to avoid climbing up on the hill; instead, they began to spread out to the east and west of the city.

"Ready!" Sergeant Fissk bellowed, knocking an arrow to his own bow. The command was relayed down the wall until every soldier was ready to shoot. On the plains below them, the front ranks of the army were forming up, and Cyan could see more siege ladders being brought forward. Crudely painted banners marked different tribes of monsters in the army, and the standard bearers began to wave their banners in signals to the troops. Shouts and cries reached the defenders' ears as the monsters worked themselves into a killing frenzy. From somewhere in the rear of the great horde, the deep thunder of drums drowned out the monsters' war cries, and then the whole host surged forward in a cacophony of howls and roars.

"Fire!" Captain Fissk yelled, but the Dyrenns didn't need any prompting to shower their arrows down at the raging host.

Cyan drew back and released, and was knocking his next arrow even as the first one still was arcing down into the sea of charging monsters. He sent five arrows whistling down in moments, and then he dropped his bow and joined the rest of the Dyrenns as they moved to the guard towers to make their escape.

"Come on!" he shouted to Rorx, who was still trying to crank back his crossbow for one last shot. "We've got to go!"

Rorx shouted something Cyan couldn't make out and hurled the whole crossbow down at the monsters before hurrying after Cyan. Garroc was hot on his heels, his battle-axe bouncing against his leg.

Cyan sped down the stairs inside the guard tower and followed the soldiers in front of him as they turned down the market street. He caught glimpses of some of the soldiers cutting down side streets, some with torches in hand, and he realized that the fire brigade was rushing to send the city to its fiery end. Behind him he thought he could hear the sounds of hundreds of siege ladders being set against the walls. Cyan tried not to think about the swarms of monsters that would be climbing up those ladders and spilling over into the city. He prayed that the barricades and traps would slow the monsters long enough for the fires to really trap them.

He was breathing in ragged gasps by the time he reached the palace gate. Captain Fissk was already there directing the soldiers into the palace and down into the cellar where the tunnel entrances were hidden. Cyan joined the bellowing Captain as he looked back at the city streets, searching for Rorx and Garroc. *I thought they were right behind me!*

"Captain! Have you seen Garroc and Rorx go by yet?"

"Here they come now," Fissk pointed back down the street towards where the two dwarves rounded a corner, both of them supporting a soldier with a badly twisted ankle.

"I wondered what had happened to you two," Cyan said when they reached the gate.

"Aww, we just needed to stop and help this fellow. Tried to skip the last few stairs in the tower, he did," Rorx grinned.

Captain Fissk motioned for two other Dyrenns to help the soldier down into the tunnels. "That looks like everybody," he said.

Cyan turned to watch the last soldiers entering the palace; both the dwarves were already heading that way as well.

“Shouldn’t we wait for the fire brigade?” Cyan asked as Fissk started to close the palace gate.

Fissk glanced back at him sharply, his blue eyes filled with surprise. “They’re not coming with us, Lord Cyan.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“They volunteered knowing they wouldn’t make it out of the city. They’ll keep spreading the fires until they’re overcome by the heat or else the monsters get to them,” Fissk’s voice was measured, and to Cyan it sounded almost cold.

Cyan was reminded of Flint and the other brave men of Gabbon who had stayed behind, knowing they would never survive.

Fissk must have sensed his thoughts. “This is war, Lord Cyan. People die. But for now, we’re alive because those men out there are sacrificing themselves so we can escape. We’ll go on and continue to fight, and that’s how we will remember their bravery. That way their sacrifice isn’t for nothing.”

Cyan met Fissk’s blue eyes, and nodded slowly. “I understand,” he whispered, his voice suddenly full of emotion.

The wind gusted, and it carried the scent of smoke to their noses. “It’s starting,” Fissk said. “Let’s get to the tunnels.”

Cyan nodded and followed behind. Captain Fissk’s words had touched him deeply, almost as if it had been Flint standing there and talking to him. The smell of smoke was growing stronger as Cyan entered the palace and headed for the stairs that led down into the cellars.

Behind them, out in the city, fires were sprouting up all over, fueled by the potent dwarf fire and the rising winds that carried sparks to even more buildings. In the streets,

groups of monsters had become bogged down by barricades and the rising fires, but even as the first groups tried to turn back, they ran into more of their charging fellows who were still pouring over the walls and running into the streets. Chaos reined as many started breaking into buildings looking for loot even as the growing fires started to spread wildly. Not even the ogra with their snapping whips could keep order.

Through it all, the winds grew and the fires blazed, until the clouds above the city glowed red. The crackle of the raging flames drowned out the screams and cries as monsters began to burn and buildings began to fall into the streets in piles of flaming rubble. Sparks flew through the air, and waves of heat blasted down the streets as the city of Dyrenn turned into a fire-storm of monumental proportions.

With only the flicker of torchlight to guide them, Cyan was still thinking about Captain Fissk's words, and the fate the men of the fire brigade had chosen for themselves as he followed other Dyrenn soldiers into the tunnels.

This is war, Fissk's words echoed in Cyan's thoughts. *People die...*

Chapter 16: The Summons

Ninth Moon, 873 PR

Greystern shivered against the biting cold and hunched his shoulders even tighter to keep the blowing snow from finding its way under his cloak and down the back of his neck. “Why’d he have to build his blasted fortress in the mountains?” the nobleman muttered under his breath so his companion wouldn’t hear him.

If Zora was bothered by the cold and snow, she did a good job of hiding it. She rode a stout-looking gray pony that plodded through the snow methodically. Greystern’s own black charger followed close behind the pony, but not without the occasional snort of protest.

They had been traveling for the better part of a week, and Greystern was all too aware of the Demon Prince’s two week deadline approaching. If it hadn’t been for Zora’s spells, they would never have made it this far to begin with. The witch woman had used her magic to increase their horses’ endurance and speed, which had allowed them to cover the many leagues to the Demon Prince’s citadel much faster. Greystern was sure they were getting close to the citadel. When the wind quit howling and the snow occasionally stopped swirling, he thought he could see the snow-capped peaks of the mountains that grew up around the black fortress.

Greystern found that he was not looking forward to facing his master. He still had no idea if the Demon Prince was displeased with his failures in Dyrenn, and he dreaded feeling his master’s wrath. Zora was no help; she rarely spoke, and her cold gray eyes usually stopped any of his attempts at conversation. After spending a week and a half with the witch woman, Greystern was starting to wonder if the Demon Prince’s company might not be so bad. His master’s anger couldn’t be worse than the witch woman’s cold, unfeeling attitude. *Or could it?*

The snow squall they had been riding through abruptly ended, and Greystern looked up to see a familiar, yet still frightening, sight a short distance ahead of them. In direct contrast with the snow covered ground all about, the inky black stone wall that enclosed the Demon Prince's citadel rose up out of the earth like a circle of night. Two giant mountains reared up beyond the fortress, looking like massive guardians of the citadel. Greystern knew that no door or gate broke the smooth surface of the ebony wall or the small tower that was hidden behind the black curtain of stone. This was not his first trip to the citadel, and he hoped it wouldn't be his last either.

As usual, Zora gave no reaction to the sight of the citadel walls, but Greystern was willing to bet that she was afraid. Anyone but a fool would be afraid of their master, and fools didn't live very long around the Demon Prince.

Greystern urged his charger to a faster walk that brought him up alongside the witch woman and her pony.

"Damn me if it isn't about time," he muttered, hoping to elicit some comment from Zora.

"It's a wonder the master puts up with you. You have no patience," Zora said with enough chill in her voice to make the biting winds seem warm and balmy.

Greystern shrugged underneath his heavy cloak. "I'm a man of action, and not used to biding my time."

"So I've noticed. If the master was anything like you, his plans would have failed years ago. At least he knows how to wait for the right moment."

Greystern resisted the urge to strike the woman. He was sure she had some kind of magical defense at the ready should he try anything. He gritted his teeth and ignored the witch woman's scathing comments. *Why do I even bother?* he asked himself.

After nearly another hour of struggling through tall drifts, they reached the black wall of the Demon Prince's citadel. The stone was smooth enough to show a faint reflection of the nobleman and the witch woman as they dismounted and walked right up to the wall.

"I hate this part," Greystern grumbled, reaching up to place a hand on the smooth stone. Zora followed his example, but she hid any discomfort as the stone seemed to warm and writhe slightly against their palms.

Greystern held back a shudder of revulsion as his hand started to sink through the wall. With his free hand he grabbed the reins of his horse and pulled the stubborn animal after him. His whole body began to be pulled into the dark stone, and Greystern closed his eyes as the oily-feeling blackness surrounded him. A sense of dark power seemed to pulse all around him, and then just as quickly, he broke free on the other side of the wall. Gradually his horse emerged as well; it *whuffed* loudly and stamped its feet once they were on solid ground again.

Zora slowly stepped out from the black stone, and Greystern again repressed a shudder as he watched how the stone flowed as Zora and her mount emerged. He felt like he had just walked through a giant glob of axle grease, and even though there was no residue on his skin, it felt like he was covered in greasy slime. It wasn't the first time he wished the Demon Prince could have just had a gate built in the wall.

The courtyard inside the black walls was empty but for swirling snow and the single dark tower that reached no higher than twenty feet. From his past trips to the citadel, Greystern knew that the real fortress was underground, in the vast complex of chambers where the Demon Prince made his home and laid his plans for the conquest of Pysidia. The tower was made of the same black stone, and Greystern grimaced as he had to repeat the process to enter the citadel once more.

When he and Zora stepped out of the onyx stone of the tower walls, they found themselves in a surprisingly warm and humid chamber large enough to stable their horses in. A few torches were fixed to the walls and burned with sickly-looking yellow flames that created more shadows than light. But there was enough light to make out the wide stone stairway that led up to the top of the tower, and down into the bowels of the earth.

Greystern took one of the torches from its bracket in the wall as he started over to the stairs. He was too anxious to notice that the flames of the torch gave off no heat. Zora followed a few steps behind him as they started down the winding stairs into the heart of the Demon Prince's fortress.

* * * *

"Did everyone make it down here?" Cyan asked Captain Fissk as he stepped quickly to stay within the light from the torches a few other soldiers carried.

"Those of us left," Fissk answered. "I sent half the men down another tunnel that will bring them out southwest of the city. I didn't want all of us together if we run into an ambush at the tunnel exit. At least this way some of us will be able to escape to Inkata to inform the King that his orders have been carried out," Fissk said quietly.

Some orders, Cyan thought. Yes, your Majesty, your city has been burned to the ground, as you instructed. Cyan knew bitterness wouldn't help, but he couldn't help feeling disgusted that they had to destroy Dyrenn.

I wonder if Rorx and Garroc are up ahead of us in this tunnel, or if they ended up going in the other one? It was a little strange not having them around. He had grown used to Rorx's bold nature and Garroc's quieter wisdom. Cyan let his hand drift down to the hilt of the Doom Sword, but he didn't see any sign of Arathorn in the tunnel with them. *Maybe he's keeping an eye on the dwarves,* Cyan thought.

The musty air in the tunnel tickled Cyan's nose and made him want to sneeze. In some places the tunnel narrowed until his arms almost brushed the walls, and sometimes he crouched to avoid low spots in the ceiling. Moisture beaded on the rocky walls, and Cyan was at least grateful for the damp coolness of the tunnel. Occasional thick timbers shored up parts of the ceiling, but the tunnel looked very solid despite its age.

Time seemed to lose all meaning as Cyan followed Captain Fissk and the other soldiers along the rough, uneven tunnel. He lost track of how long they had been walking, and he never thought to keep a count on how many torches the soldiers used. Cyan was glad for that meager light at least— the tunnel was no place he would want to be in if it were totally dark. He could just imagine being lost and alone down here in the dark, and just thinking about it made nervous sweat bead on his forehead and trickle down his face.

The soldiers were changing torches yet again when they finally came to a halt. Cyan peered around Captain Fissk to see that up ahead the tunnel ended in a rock wall. He followed as Fissk squeezed his way up to the front, until the rock wall loomed before them. Nearly thirty other soldiers were strung out behind him now, but the dwarves were not among them.

Fissk ran his hands along the rock, searching for the catch that would open the great door and let them out. His hand slipped into a small niche in the stone.

"Wait!" Cyan whispered. "We should put out the torches."

"Why?" Fissk asked.

"What if there are monsters waiting out there? It must be late at night by now, and if we go out there with our torches blazing they'll see us from a mile away."

Captain Fissk nodded. "Good idea. Put out those torches," he called to the soldiers. One by one the faint lights were snuffed out, until total darkness consumed the

tunnel. Cyan waited as his eyes slowly adjusted, but even then it was still nearly too dark to make out anything. He started sweating again.

There was a faint clicking sound as Sergeant Fissk released the catch, and then the rock wall started swinging out. A breath of fresh air swirled into the tunnel, and Cyan felt his nerves relax as he was able to glimpse a bit of the nighttime sky outside. Captain Fissk was the first to step outside, and Cyan and the others were quick to follow him.

Cyan took deep breaths of the cool night air, relieved to be out of the tunnel at last. He could see enough to tell that they were at the base of a grassy hill on the edge of the plains south-east of the city. Back to the northwest, the clouds glowed a sullen reddish orange. Dyrenn was still burning.

The soldiers had spread out in a rough circle, but no sudden attackers appeared to break the quiet of the night. Cyan was glad for that, and sat down in the cool grass to rest his tired feet. Behind him, Captain Fissk pushed the cunningly-devised rock door shut.

“Now it’s on south to the trade road, and from there to Inkata,” Fissk said quietly.

Cyan stifled a groan. As much as he wanted to rest, he didn’t want to be anywhere near here when the army of monsters regrouped after their disastrous time in Dyrenn. He got to his feet and followed Fissk and the other soldiers as they walked off into the night.

* * * *

“The lad must’ve gone in the other tunnel,” Rorx told Garroc.

“I said that an hour ago, you ninny,” Garroc retorted.

“Hey now, dunna ye start name-callin’!”

“Shut up and move! Them Dyrenns are getting ahead of us,” Garroc pointed around a bend in the tunnel where the faint light of the Dyrenns’ torches flickered.

"Damn long-legged bastards," Rorx muttered as he tried to walk faster. "Dunna have enough sense to wait for us. Idiots must think we can see in the dark!"

"We can!" Garroc said irritably. He was grouchy from tripping and stumbling in the half-light of the increasingly distant Dyrenns' torches.

"Aye, but not right away after bein' out in the blasted daylight for so long. Me eyes take time to get used to the dark! Yer's too!"

"I know that, but those stupid humans don't!"

"Well just give a shout and tell 'em to—" Rorx's boot caught in a crack in the tunnel floor and he pitched forward onto his face before he could finish talking.

"Hey, hurry up back there!" someone shouted down the tunnel at them.

Rorx growled as he picked himself back up. "Damn stinkin' piss-for-brains humans..."

"Never mind them, open the door!" another voice echoed back down the tunnel.

"At least they must've found the door," Garroc muttered.

"About damn time!" Rorx said. "This is a nice tunnel and all, but I just ain't in the mood for it."

Garroc was about to say something when the sound of a blood-chilling howl echoed down the tunnel, quickly followed by the screams of men.

"Ye gods! They must've opened the door on a bunch o' Shadow Hounds!" Rorx swore as he reached for his battle-axe.

The faint light of the torches coming from around the bend in the tunnel abruptly vanished, plunging the whole tunnel into blackness. The sound of snarls and the brief clatter of steel still echoed in the air.

"Curse 'em all!" Rorx bellowed, charging down the tunnel, with Garroc right behind him. Neither dwarf remembered that the tunnel curved to the right until it was too

late. Both of them crashed into the unyielding rock wall head on, and even with their thick dwarven skulls, they hit with enough force to knock themselves senseless.

* * * *

Greystern entered the huge obsidian chamber with Zora just behind him, and tried to ignore the stares of the many sets of eyes that watched him make his way across the room. Zora didn't seem bothered by the sudden attention, but she never seemed bothered by anything.

The obsidian chamber was lit up brighter than most rooms in the Demon Prince's citadel— the pale yellow torches burned in evenly spaced wall brackets all around the room, illuminating the nearly two hundred people gathered in response to their master's summons. Greystern surveyed the room's occupants— mostly humans, but a few elves and dwarves were noticeable as well. Every race had those among it who hungered for power above all else.

He recognized some of the people in the room, but most he had never seen before. There were richly dressed men and women in the fashions of Inkata, as well as a few people wearing the traditional *ha'sif* of Jynlamadh. Greystern was more than a little irritated to see that people from the very distant city had arrived even before he and Zora had. Not all of the Demon Prince's servants were elite though— a fair share appeared to be ordinary farmers and tradesmen. Serving the Demon Prince knew no class distinction. *As far as the master is concerned, we're all equal as long as we have value to him*, Greystern mused as he worked his way towards the front of the room. Zora had disappeared somewhere into the mass of people, but Greystern didn't care. She had served her purpose in getting him here in time.

He found a place in the room that agreed with his own opinion of himself, near the front of the chamber, and tried to relax and ignore the eyes upon him. He noted a particularly beautiful elf woman nearby, and to pass the time he admired her fluid curves

and raven black hair. She gave him a glance filled with contempt and pointedly ignored him.

He didn't have long to wait. Conversation in the room died as a heavily robed and cloaked figure entered the chamber from a darkened passageway. Everyone in the room knew their master had arrived, and all two hundred people fell to their knees, heads bowed.

Underneath the deep shadow of the cowl that hid his face, the Demon Prince allowed himself a smile of pleasure as he looked upon the ranks of his devoted servants. His eyes scanned the crowd, picking out certain faces here and there.

"Welcome, my loyal servants," he greeted them, his voice reaching even to the rear of the chamber. "You have answered my summons— and passed the first test of your loyalty to me. Any who failed to be here have shown themselves lacking, and rest assured, they will not be long for this world," the Demon Prince let the veiled threat hang in the air a moment, watching the effect it had on those gathered. He enjoyed keeping his servants hanging on the slim thread of his whims and watching them struggle not to slip and lose his favor.

"Many of you have journeyed far to come here, and some of you may even wonder why I have summoned you." *Although any who actually admitted to questioning my commands would have to die*, he mused to himself.

"Let me dispel your fears and questions. Let me reveal to you the moment we have all worked so hard to reach. As I speak, my armies are on the move. Dyrenn lies in ruins—" he had to fight to keep his voice level as bottled rage threatened to surface. He had only recently learned of the trap his army had stumbled into, and though he did not know how many of his forces had perished in the fires of Dyrenn's demise, he knew it had to number well into the thousands. He forced himself to forget that inconvenience and continue, "—and soon the rest of Pysidia will suffer the same fate."

The gathered people in the room were completely silent, caught up in the words of their master.

“And now with victory within our grasp, it is time for you, my loyal servants, to go forth and prepare Pysidia for my final coming. For too long have we hidden ourselves in the shadows, lurking and spying. Now it is time to come forth and lead the land to its new destiny! Those that join with us will receive power and glory beyond imagining, but those who stand against us will be destroyed in a tide of war and bloodshed! I have called you here, the lieutenants of my hidden army! You each will have your own task to fulfill to prepare the way for my coming. Know this as my will, and do not fail me! As I send you out, spread the news of my coming to all who will listen! Let them join with us, or perish in my wrath! The seeds of our victory have been sown— now go forth! Let us reap our glorious harvest!”

The air of the chamber reverberated with the Demon Prince’s last triumphant words, and his servants trembled in awe and delight. Ten exceedingly large ogres stepped out from the shadows and began to lead groups of people away to receive their specific commands.

Greystern couldn’t help but grin as he envisioned the world as it would be under the Demon Prince’s rule. *Finally!* he thought, *we shall share in his glory!* From the ecstatic looks on others’ faces, they obviously shared Greystern’s sentiments. Greystern grinned even broader as he spotted Zora among those who seemed overwhelmed with excitement. Her gray eyes sparkled with fervent desire as a brute ogre led her and a cluster of other finely dressed men and women out of the chamber.

The Demon Prince remained where he stood, idly watching the effects his words had evoked on his servants. As the room began to empty, he spoke. He had one more task he still required.

“Khrystana. Dugan. Greystern. Remain here,” the Demon Prince’s sudden command startled the three he had named.

Greystern’s smile vanished. He thought he saw Zora shoot him a smug glance as she left the chamber. His nervousness returned, twice as strong. He turned back to his master, keeping his head down. He saw that the beautiful elf woman, and a filthy-looking dwarf had stayed behind to join him.

When the chamber was empty but for them, the Demon Prince finally spoke again.

“I have a different task for the three of you. Kneel.”

Greystern fell to his knees immediately, even without the power behind that one-word command. The elf woman and dwarf followed suit. The Demon Prince stepped closer to them, until he fairly towered over them like a looming mountain of dark power.

“Yours will be a special task that promises even greater glory when you succeed,” the Demon Prince said to gain their full attention, if he didn’t have it already. “There are several... *loose ends* that I would have the three of you take care of for me.”

Greystern felt a bead of sweat slide down his forehead and run down his nose. He was afraid he knew what the Demon Prince was talking about.

“Dugan, look up,” the Demon Prince pulled a small mirror from the folds of his cloak and showed it to the dirt-covered dwarf. An image began to take shape, that of two dwarves with battle-axes. One dwarf had a bushy black beard, the other a forked, pale brown one. “You will find these dwarves and lead them away from the human, Cyan of Gabbon. Then you will kill them.”

Dugan combed his grimy fingers through his tangled and scruffy beard. “As you command, Master!”

The Demon Prince moved next to the raven-haired elf woman. “Khrystana... it is time for you to put your powers to the test.” He showed her the mirror, and now it

contained the image of a tall elf with golden hair and a white bow. "This is Arathorn of Tree-Haven, a companion of Cyan of Gabbon. He was wounded in a certain assassination attempt—" the Demon Prince's voice grew sharp, and Greystern fought down the urge to beg for mercy right there, "—and I need to you finish the task. Kill him."

Khrystana steeled herself lest she show any hesitation in front of her master. "It shall be done," she whispered, keeping her voice level, even as her thoughts were in turmoil.

The Demon Prince nodded in satisfaction. "Take Dugan to your spell chamber and begin the magic to summon the Gateways as I trained you to do."

"Yes, Master," Khrystana murmured, and left the chamber with the dirty dwarf following her.

The Demon Prince came to stand directly in front of Greystern, and a heavy silence filled the room. Greystern felt sweat soaking his clothing.

"I hope I do not have to tell you just who I want you to kill..." the Demon Prince finally said. "But I will tell you anyway in case you are even more stupid than I imagined!"

Greystern trembled, and realized that he was within a hairsbreadth of dying if his master decided so.

"Your attempt to kill King Trentan was a wonderful piece of free-thinking on your part," the Demon Prince said mildly. "But your complete foul-up of the whole situation was intolerable!" his mild voice changed to the fury of a thunderclap. "Not only did you fail to kill King Trentan, your mistake has made it nearly impossible for my magic to find the elf that you wounded! And then, to top matters, Zora was forced to save your worthless life after you failed to destroy Cyan of Gabbon!"

The Demon Prince's fury filled the room and Greystern waited to feel that wrath strike him down at any moment.

"But..." that one word settled on Greystern like the hope of redemption, "you came closer to killing that boy than any other. For that reason, and that reason only, I am granting you your life. For now."

Greystern felt his heart beat a little stronger. *He's letting me live!*

"This time you *will* kill Cyan of Gabbon. You will bring me his sword, and you will also bring me the Princess Miranda. Is that clear?" the Demon Prince's tone left no room for misunderstanding.

"Perfectly, Master. I will not fail you this time," Greystern managed to find his voice.

"I know. Because if you do, you will die. I assure you of that. I am done being merciful with you."

"Yes, my Master."

"Good. Now, go join Khrystana and Dugan in the spell chamber and await me there."

Greystern kept his head bowed low as he backed out of the chamber. *I'm lucky to still have a head at all*, he thought in relief as he went.

* * * *

"Oh... me achin' head," Rorx groaned as he struggled to sit up in the darkness. Blue and purple spots danced before his eyes, and his skull felt like it was being pounded on by a hundred dwarven blacksmiths with big hammers. "Garroc? Where be ye?" he asked the darkness all around him.

"Not yet, mama," a sleepy voice mumbled, "I don't wanna get up."

"Garroc Lodiggor, ye son o' a goblin! Wake up!"

Something nearby in the darkness jolted at the sound of Rorx's shout. Garroc sat up sharply... and then groaned as his battered head protested. "Oww..."

"Quit yer whinin'! Mine hurts just as much as yers."

"What happened?" Garroc asked, fumbling in the darkness.

"Them idiot humans must've opened the tunnel door right when some Shadow Hounds was waitin' for 'em. They didna have the brains to wait for us!"

Garroc's groping hands found his battle-axe laying nearby. "We got to get out of here and find the others."

"Ye dunna say," Rorx muttered sarcastically as he searched around for his axe. "If they ever heard o' this back in Ckar-Regnock, they'd laugh us out o' the place. Two dwarves stuck in a dark tunnel! What's the world comin' to?"

Garroc tentatively stood up, keeping one hand against the cool rock wall of the tunnel for support. A faint breeze tickled his beard and whiskers. "It feels like that door's still open up ahead."

"Thank the Fireforger for that at least," Rorx grumbled as he found his axe and got to his feet. A brief dizzy spell threatened to send him back to the ground, but the stubborn dwarf leaned on his axe like a crutch. "Ach! Ye'd think for all their size, them humans' would have more brains in their heads! Burn me on both ends!"

Garroc ignored Rorx's curses and slowly walked towards where he could feel the fresh air blowing, using the tunnel wall as a guide and support. Rorx grumbled and muttered under his breath as he followed, taking hesitant steps in the darkness. They managed to round the bend in the tunnel safely this time, and cross the last stretch of the tunnel before it ended in a opening that was illuminated by the faint starlight outside. Dark forms lay scattered around both sides of the opening, and the smell of blood was heavy in the air.

"Yup, it was Shadow Hounds all right," Garroc said as he poked one large, furry corpse. "Looks like they were waitin' for us."

"Poor bastards never had a chance," Rorx mumbled, looking from one Dyrenn soldier to the next. Most had never even had time to draw their weapons. "They were

so ready to get out o' this tunnel they forgot about what happened to Anatolle and the Princess when they used the tunnels."

"At least they killed a few of the Hounds," Garroc offered.

Rorx just shook his head. He found a few torches the soldiers had been carrying and stuffed them in his pack. "No sense in dallyin' around here. We'll need to get movin' if we ever want to catch up with Cyan and rest o' the soldiers ."

"If they didn't meet the same kind of welcome these men did," Garroc said grimly.

"I'm sure they're fine. The lad's a mite smarter than these fellows were."

"At least help me move them all inside the tunnel. Then we can close it. It'll be their tomb."

"Aye, all right," Rorx shrugged and started to pull the body of a Dyrenn soldier the rest of the way back into the dark tunnel. They left the Shadow Hounds outside for the carrion birds.

* * * *

Greystern entered the spell chamber two more levels below the obsidian meeting hall he had just left to find Khrystana already working magic in the center of the room. The dirty little dwarf, Dugan, was backed up against the wall in order to stay out of the elven sorceress' way. Greystern stayed well back also, but he enjoyed watching the graceful elf as she finished a whispered chant and lifted her arms over her head. The air in the room seemed to hum with barely-contained power, and Greystern watched as three man-sized portals began to take shape in front of Khrystana. Each portal looked like a giant mirror in a richly gilded frame, but all three of them hovered several inches above the floor of the chamber. Khrystana stepped back and let her arms fall to her sides. The portals remained in their places.

"Well done, Khrystana," the Demon Prince stepped into the room and nodded to the sorceress.

Greystern fought to make sure his face showed no trace of envy. He had once been the Demon Prince's favorite servant, but it seemed this elf woman had taken the position from him.

Khrystana bowed low, and motioned to the three mirror-like portals. "The Gateways are ready for you to fix their destinations, Master."

Khrystana stepped away to let the Demon Prince stand before the Gateways. Greystern was familiar with the magical portals, but he had never seen them summoned before. Usually the Demon Prince had brought him into a chamber where one of the mirror portals was already waiting.

He only knew a little about the Gateways— they were some kind of powerful magic creation that allowed the caster to link various places with one another through the mirror-like doorways. Instead of showing your reflection, the mirrors showed where they would send you.

The Demon Prince finished a barely-heard chant, and the Gateways flickered brightly. Three different scenes appeared in the portals, and the Demon Prince turned to look at his three servants. He made several complex gestures with his hands, and three travel packs appeared on the floor of the chamber.

"Take your things and go. You will find scrolls in the packs that contain your specific instructions. Dugan, take the left Gateway; Khrystana, the right. You take the center portal, Greystern."

All three of them nodded and bent to pick up their packs. Greystern was surprised to see a new broadsword along with his pack. It was crafted of good steel, but he was a little disappointed to see that it was not another strength-draining sword. Shrugging, he sheathed the weapon and threw the pack over his shoulder. Dugan and Khrystana had already picked up their packs and both were stepping into their

respective Gateways. Greystern glimpsed some hills and trees in Dugan's portal, and open grassland in Khrystana's. The Demon Prince was watching him expectantly.

Greystern had traveled through the Gateways before. He knew that when the Demon Prince had first discovered how to summon them, he had used trolls and ogres for his experiments. The rumors said that many of the creatures had never reappeared after stepping through a Gateway. Those that did materialize somewhere else often ended up encased in the solid rock of a mountainside, or appeared halfway inside a tree trunk. He also knew that if he hesitated any longer the Demon Prince would take it as a sign of cowardice, and then he would be as good as dead.

Greystern bit his lip and stepped up to his Gateway. It showed him a back alley in the city of Inkata. *Why is he sending me to Inkata?* Greystern wondered as he passed through the mirror face of the Gateway. Just as he stepped into it, he thought he heard a strangled cry from behind him. Before he could stop himself, he entered the Gateway and was overcome by a rushing cascade of brightly-colored lights and the sensation of being pulled in every direction at once. The unnatural feelings seemed to last forever, and that was when he realized something was wrong.

* * * *

The Demon Prince watched as Greystern stepped into the Gateway to Inkata, and then suddenly he felt a ripping pain sear through his brain. His control over the magic of the Gateways began to slip away from him as the pain of some unknown power forced itself into his consciousness. He had a last fleeting glimpse of the Gateway— the city of Jynlamadh shone for a moment in the wildly glowing portal before all three of the Gateways vanished. Then the Demon Prince's vision was blotted out as a new scene unfolded in his mind.

A tall, young woman, her hair a mass of auburn curls, walks towards me, her face a mask of sorrow and pain. In her hands she holds the Doom Sword, its green flames flicker wildly, but the magic does not harm her. There are people behind her... a woman with green eyes and a long braid of brown hair hanging down her back is

kneeling on the floor, tears streaking her face. She is trying to shield someone lying on the floor... a young man...

As suddenly as the vision came to him, it was gone, leaving only a pounding headache to tell him it had all been real. The Demon Prince shook as he got to his feet; the pain of the vision hitting him had knocked him to the floor. The Gateways had all vanished, and for a moment, the Demon Prince wondered what had happened to Greystern. Either the man was lost in the magical limbo between places, or else he had arrived in any different number of places in Pysidia.

The Demon Prince brushed his servant's predicament from his mind. The vision he had just been shown... that was what was important. He recognized the first image of the vision— he'd seen it once before, long ago. Now he knew the woman with auburn hair was Princess Miranda. *And she was bringing the Doom Sword to me!* he thought excitedly as he remembered the rest of the vision. *But who was the other woman? The one with the braided hair? And was that Cyan of Gabbon lying on the floor? He looked like he was dead or wounded! Have I just glimpsed the future? My final victory?*

The Demon Prince forced himself to calm down. He needed to think clearly if he was to figure out the portents of his vision. He wished he knew what had caused the sudden vision, but he felt in his heart that it could be trusted. The wonderful irony of the events the vision had shown him made him laugh. *If what I have been shown is true, then Princess Miranda will betray her friends by giving me the Doom Sword!*

For the moment, his three servants and their mission were forgotten. All that mattered was the sign he had been given. *I am going to win*, he thought, *and Princess Miranda will deliver victory into my hands!*

* * * *

Just when panic was threatening to consume him, the terrible sensations of the Gateway vanished, and Greystern found himself standing in an alley between three-

story buildings. He took a deep breath of relief to have finally emerged from whatever magical realm he had been falling through. *I hate the damn Gateways!* he reaffirmed.

He reached over his shoulder to the travel pack the Demon Prince had given him. His hands found the scroll of instructions and he pulled it out and broke the dark wax seal on it.

I have sent you to the city of Inkata to prepare for the arrival of those who escaped from Dyrenn. Cyan of Gabbon should be among these refugees. You will kill him and bring his sword to me. Bring me Princess Miranda as well, alive and undamaged. Do not fail me.

As Greystern finished reading the scroll the letters flared into tiny flames that consumed the page they were written on. Greystern dropped the smoking paper and stamped out the last of the fire. Ash was all that was left of the message.

He looked up from the cobblestones in aggravation. *Killing that boy will not be easy*, he thought. He looked down the alley and noted that the street was empty of people. Waves of heat shimmered off the dusty street.

That's odd. I didn't think Inkata got this hot... and I didn't think the buildings were made out of clay brick either. Greystern wiped sweat from his face and neck. *Damn, it's hot! I've only known it to be this hot in one place... but it can't be that— he sent me to Inkata... But it is! I'm in Jynlamadh!!*

Greystern groaned and cursed the Gateways, magic, and his Master.

* * * *

Dugan Brim, the dwarven miner from Ckar-Regnock blinked his eyes furiously as he tried to clear the flashing spots from his vision. The trip through the Gateway had left the grimy miner dizzy and disoriented. To make matters worse, the morning sunshine rising in the east hurt his sensitive eyes. He was more accustomed to the darkness of the mines he worked in, and the bright sunlight stung painfully.

Huddling under the scant protection of a cluster of scrub trees, Dugan reached into his pack and withdrew the scroll the Demon Prince had placed there. He broke the wax seal and started to read:

The Gateway will place you near the location of the two dwarves, Rorx Ironhill and Garroc Lodiggor. They are companions of Cyan of Gabbon, and they must not be allowed to rejoin him. Do whatever is necessary to ensure that they do not return to their friend. Either lead them back to their homeland or kill them if they refuse to go.

The paper burst into flames, further irritating the dwarf's eyes. He threw the smoldering message to the ground and loosened his daggers in their sheaths. Grunting against the bright sunshine, Dugan started walking, looking for signs of his quarry.

* * * *

Khrystana De'Faerr walked briskly through tall grass that had been recently trampled under by many horse hooves and wagon wheels. Her keen elven eyes could just make out the distant shapes of the tail end of the Dyrenn wagon train up ahead. Sooner or later they would stop and she would catch up to them, or else one of their scouts would spot her following them. Either way, she would find Arathorn of Tree-Haven.

After the uncomfortable trip through the Gateway, it hadn't taken Khrystana long to locate the obvious trail of the Dyrenns fleeing their city. She had read the scroll the Demon Prince had prepared for her, and its words were burned into her memory just as surely as the paper they had been written on had burned. Even now, they continued to echo through her mind...

The Gateway will leave you close to the Dyrenns as they move south. Among their numbers is the Princess Miranda and Arathorn of Tree-Haven. The elf is wounded, but for odd reasons my magic cannot discern more than that about him. You must locate him and discover how he is foiling my magic. He must not be allowed to rejoin his friend, Cyan of Gabbon. Use whatever charms are needed for this. When his secrets are yours, you will kill him. Also, try to keep a close watch on Princess Miranda. If Greystern fails to bring her to me, that task shall fall to you.

It was easy to conjure the image of the golden-haired elf from her dreams now. Ever since the Demon Prince had shown her Arathorn's image in the small mirror, Khrystana had been haunted by the significance of her strange dream. She knew it was more than a coincidence that the figure of her dreams was now the elf she was being sent to kill. It seemed that the choice Arathorn had offered her in her re-occurring dream was now fast approaching.

I have come to the fork in my path, Khrystana thought as she walked after the Dyrenns. But what way shall I take? As she walked on, she could remember the poignant words Arathorn had spoken to her in her dream. It matters whom you choose to die for, or whom you choose to live for. Khrystana shook her head to clear her muddled thoughts. I must obey my Master! There is no choice for me to make. Arathorn of Tree-Haven must die! The Master commands it!

Despite her bold conviction, there was a nagging feeling deep inside her heart, and try as she might, it would not go away. Forcing her thoughts back to her surroundings, Khrystana kept walking after the Dyrenns. One way or the other, Arathorn awaited her there.

* * * *

The Dyrenn scouts tried not to stare too much as they escorted Khrystana to King Trentan's wagon. The afternoon sun was warm and made the elf woman's raven black hair shine with an even more alluring luster. Her rich blue eyes and full lips were enough to make most of the younger soldiers take a second look, even without the tight-fitting sky blue dress she wore that hugged her generous curves.

Khrystana kept the knowing smile from her face as she tried to pretend not to notice the stares she was receiving as the soldiers led her up through the procession of Dyrenns. The Dyrenns had stopped for a brief rest near midday, and that was when the scouts had finally noticed her following them south. She had told them that she was

from Tree-Haven, and that she was looking for Arathorn. One of the scouts had gone ahead to send word to King Trentan.

Khrystana ignored the dazzled soldiers escorting her and let her eyes drift around her, taking in the sight of the bedraggled looking Dyrenns. Open-bed and covered wagons carried all manner of people and goods, and many more rode horses or just walked. Most of them looked tired and afraid, and Khrystana felt a twinge of pity when she noticed a young mother trying to comfort her crying baby. The mother looked like she hadn't slept in days.

Khrystana forced herself to look away. Pity was not an emotion she had allowed herself to feel in a long time. But now it buzzed about her heart like an annoying insect. Seeing these people forced to flee from their homes by the hand of her Master made her wonder about all the promises that had been given to her. Now the Dyrenns' gazes of wonder and admiration seemed to turn into harsh, accusing glares, and Khrystana fought back a wave of sudden guilt. *What is happening to me?* She trembled at the power of the strange feelings that wracked her.

Before long, the soldiers led her up to slightly larger covered wagon. Several other soldiers stood nearby, keeping a watchful eye on anyone nearby. A powerfully built man of medium height was busy grooming a proud-looking chestnut charger. The golden circlet with the up-thrust jeweled spike glinting in his graying hair told her this was King Trentan.

One of the soldiers made a polite cough, and King Trentan turned, grooming brush still in one hand.

Khrystana bowed deeply, well aware of the soldiers' eyes distinctly following the movement. "Your Majesty," she greeted him softly.

If King Trentan was taken in by her beauty, he did well to hide it. His face remained neutral and his dark eyes met hers questioningly. "What brings you here, Lady—?"

"Khrystana De'Faerr," she supplied.

"Lady De'Faerr," King Trentan finished with a slight nod of his head to her. "Allow me to welcome you to what's left of Dyrenn," his voice held more than a trace of bitterness.

"Thank you, your Majesty. I wish I could do more than offer my sympathy for the sufferings of your people," Khrystana said, not sure if that was really a lie.

King Trentan managed a weak smile. "I appreciate your concern. Now, what brings you so far from your homeland?"

"I have been searching for an elf rumored to be in your company. Perhaps you know Arathorn of Tree-Haven?" she asked innocently.

King Trentan's face turned grim. "Yes, I know of him."

"Is he here with you?"

King Trentan was quiet for a moment before he nodded. "Over there," he pointed to a nearby covered wagon. "You'll find Arathorn there."

"My thanks—"

"Save your thanks until after you have seen him," King Trentan cut her off, his voice heavy with sorrow. "He does not have much time left with us."

Khrystana bowed and the King returned to brushing down his horse. The soldiers did not follow her as she walked the short distance to Arathorn's wagon. *I knew he was wounded, but is he that near death?* Khrystana silently wondered. She found a step at the back of the wagon and parted the heavy canvas and stepped inside the covered wagon.

"Who are you?" a young woman with auburn hair was squeezed in next to the golden-haired elf wrapped in blankets. She pulled a small canteen of water from Arathorn's lips, and fixed Khrystana with a suspicious look.

Khrystana ducked inside the confines of the wagon and knelt down next to the elf's feet. "I am Khrystana De'Faerr," she answered, trying to study both the young woman and the sleeping elf who had haunted her dreams.

The young woman studied her just as carefully. "Are you from Tree-Haven?"

"Yes. I came here looking for him," she gestured to Arathorn.

"I'm Miranda," the young woman offered, and Khrystana fought to contain her surprise at recognizing the name.

"I... I'm sorry Princess. I did not recognize you," Khrystana murmured.

"It's all right. I was just trying to get Arathorn to drink a little."

"How... how is he doing?" Khrystana asked hesitantly, her eyes falling to Arathorn. His face was pale and covered in a sheen of sweat. His golden hair was plastered to his forehead in dark wisps. His breathing was a faint whisper in the confined space of the wagon bed.

Miranda shook her head sadly. "Not well. His wound is healing, but my father's healers can't figure out why he is still unconscious."

"What happened to him?"

"An assassin tried to murder my father, but Arathorn pushed him out of the way and took the bolt meant for him," Miranda pulled the blankets wrapped around the elf back enough to show the bandages just below his ribcage. "It's all we can do to get some food and water into him," Miranda bit back the sob that threatened to well up inside of her.

Khrystana laid a comforting hand on the Princess' arm. "Don't give up hope," she whispered, and the advice seemed just as poignant for herself. *What is wrong with me?* she silently asked.

Miranda nodded silently and squeezed Khrystana's hand in her own. "I won't," she whispered. She took a shuddering breath and composed herself. "My father will want to get moving again soon. He wants to get as far from the army of monsters as possible. I should go..."

"Would you mind if I stayed here with him, Princess?" Khrystana asked as Miranda squeezed past her to step out of the wagon.

"Please, call me Miranda," she managed a small smile. "And I think he could use the company."

"Thank you... Miranda," Khrystana said softly. Miranda smiled again and stepped out of the wagon, leaving the sorceress alone with Arathorn.

Khrystana scooted closer to the elf's body and hesitantly reached out to smooth his hair. *He is handsome, just like in my dream*, she thought. *But I didn't expect to find him like this! He's so helpless!* Khrystana let her senses play over his body, and gradually she began to understand what had stymied the Dyrenn healers. She closed her eyes and summoned her magic, feeling the power well up from within and around her. She let a little of that magic slip out and drift over Arathorn's body. In her mind's eye, she felt the magic trace his body, probing for the mystery that would explain his strange state of being. The magic marked his body with a faint white glow that brought a little more light to the dim insides of the covered wagon bed, but Khrystana gasped in surprise when the magic could not find his *qith'kha*, his essence, or spirit. It was gone.

"How is this possible?" Khrystana murmured aloud, opening her eyes as the magic faded. "What happened to you, Arathorn?"

And what is happening to me? she silently added, even as she tenderly brushed his cheek with her fingers. *He is helpless— I could finish him quickly. I could— no! How am I supposed to do this? The Master said to learn his secrets and then kill him. I must obey!*

Khrystana fumbled to draw the small dagger she carried from her belt. Her hands trembled as he gripped the handle. The blade pointed down at Arathorn's chest. *Arathorn's qith'kha is gone. That is why the Master could not find him with magic. Now there is nothing left but to kill him...*

Khrystana held the dagger suspended over Arathorn. Her whole arm shook, but she pretended no to see. Her blue eyes smarted with tears. *I must do this! It is commanded!! I will kill him— He looks so peaceful... Handsome... I must! I... Oh, where are you, Arathorn? Come to me!* Khrystana threw the dagger to the bottom of the wagon bed with a clatter. She clutched her trembling arms to herself and tried not to look at Arathorn's face.

Finally, Khrystana buried her face in her hands; she could not hold back her tears of frustration any longer. She felt like she was being pulled in two different directions. *Two paths, she realized, and I cannot choose without him...*

* * * *

Cyan's feet felt like lead weights. Captain Fissk had led them on all through the night and well into the next day with barely a moment's rest. It was already after midday when Fissk finally halted on a low rise overlooking a spreading plain. Small stands of trees dotted the landscape, but it was dominated by waving grass and the hard-packed earth of the trade road running south to Inkata.

Finally, Cyan thought as he came up to stand next to the Dyrenn Captain. "I didn't think we'd ever find the road."

Fissk grinned at Cyan's relief. "It's still a long walk from here to Inkata, Lord Cyan."

"Don't remind me," Cyan groaned.

Fissk laughed as he walked off to make sure the other Dyrenns knew to take a break. Cyan shook his head and pulled his boots off with a sigh of pleasure. He wriggled his toes in the grass and laid back to look up at the sky. Thin, wispy clouds drifted high up in the air, and Cyan wondered if they signified a change in the weather.

Seeing that no one was close by, he let his hand drop to the Doom Sword's hilt.

"Arathorn?" he asked quietly.

"Right here," the ghostly elf answered. He was sitting right next to Cyan, if a spirit could be said to sit.

"Have you been out looking for the other Dyrenns and the dwarves?"

"Yup, but I haven't had much luck. I saw a few dead Shadow Hounds at the other tunnel exit."

Cyan grimaced. "I hope the dwarves are all right."

"I'm sure they are," Arathorn grinned. "It'd take more than a couple Shadow Hounds to take down those two."

"Yeah, you're right," Cyan admitted.

"I also stopped by Dyrenn to see how the Demon Prince's army fared," Arathorn added.

Cyan sat up. The elf had his full attention now. "And?"

Arathorn couldn't keep the grin off his face. "The army is still camped around what's left of the city. There's still a few small fires burning, and the monsters aren't going anywhere near the place! It's hard to tell, but they obviously lost a lot of troops in the fires. Several thousand at the very least!"

"At least one good thing came out of all this," Cyan sighed. "It's nice to know we won't have to race all the way to Inkata now."

"They're licking their wounds for now, but I think they'll start moving again before long," Arathorn said.

"We did better than we thought we could," Cyan shrugged. "King Trentan and the Dyrenns will have plenty of time to get to Inkata now."

"But you still have to catch up to them," Arathorn reminded him with a laugh that died abruptly.

"What's the matter, Arathorn?"

"I'm not sure... I feel strange."

"What do you mean?"

"It... it almost feels like something is pulling me," Arathorn grunted, and Cyan realized that the elf was already straining against whatever he felt.

"Pulling you? Could it be your body?"

"Maybe... I can't really tell. It's getting stronger"

"Don't fight it then. Maybe it's just time for you to go back into your body." Cyan forced himself to ignore the other darker possibility. *He's going to be all right!* He told himself.

"Take care of yourself, Cyan," Arathorn managed to gasp.

"I will! Next time I see you, maybe it'll be in the flesh!" Cyan forced a grin.

Arathorn smiled, and then he was gone.

Chapter 17: Traveling Companions

Ninth Moon, 873 PR

"Where the hell's this bloomin' road we're supposed to find?" Rorx asked for the third time in the past hour.

Garroc wiped sweat from his brow and looked up at the sun. It was only mid-afternoon. *We have to be getting close*, he thought. He squinted and looked south across the rolling hills and plains.

"It looks like there's someone down there," Garroc pointed to where he thought he saw someone coming out of a stand of trees.

"Maybe it's some o' the Dyrenns," Rorx suggested. "Let's go!"

Garroc hurried after his friend, trying not to run through the grass. Whoever it was Garroc had spotted, he or she had seen them as well and was walking to meet them. Garroc was surprised a short time later to see that it was another dwarf.

Rorx halted about twenty paces from the strange dwarf. Garroc joined him a moment later. The dwarf before them was shorter than normal, but had broad shoulders and thick arms. His face was nearly black in places with dirt and grime, and it was impossible to tell what color his scraggly beard was from all the dirt. He wore stout boots, patched and dirty leathers, and a grimy shirt. He had a pack strapped to his back, along with a small pickaxe.

"Nawegh, dwöf-brude! Ir noch Dugan Brim," the stranger said.

Both Rorx and Garroc were a little surprised to be addressed in native Dwarven, but they quickly recovered.

"Nawegh! Ir noch Rorx Ironshill."

"Nawegh! Ir noch Garroc Lodiggor."

"Glad am I to finally be among my brothers again," Dugan grinned, his white teeth contrasting with his dirty skin. "These lands of humans are broad and empty."

"Where're ye from?" Rorx asked curiously.

"Ckar-Regnock. I be a miner o' Clan Red Stone," Dugan replied.

"Aye! We be from Ckar-Regnock too! I'm from Clan Ringin' Anvil, and Garroc here is from Clan Bright Ore!"

"Those are good clans," Dugan grunted appreciatively. "Fortunate am I to have found you then."

"Why? What's wrong?" Garroc asked.

Dugan hung his head shamefully. "Things are not well back home. The Council o' Clans quarrel with one another and do nothin'. Rumors of monsters comin' out o' the north are all over, but nobody is doin' much without the Council to lead them."

"Monsters? In the mountains?"

"Aye, maybe," Dugan shrugged. "But the Council is too busy fightin' and yellin' to do anythin'. My Clan has sent out messengers to seek out other dwarves. We need to bring as many back home to help convince the Council about the troubles! You two be the first dwarves I've seen since leavin'!"

"This be bad news indeed," Rorx mused.

"Aye," Garroc agreed. "Without the Council's leadership things could get ugly."

"You'll come with me back to Ckar-Regnock then?" Dugan asked hopefully.

Garroc and Rorx exchanged worried glances.

"Well, ye see... We was split up from our buddies when Dyrenn fell to the Demon Prince's damn beasties. We're supposed to meet them south o' here and then head on to Inkata," Rorx tried to explain.

"Yeah, if we don't find them they'll think we're dead! We have to find them first," Garroc added.

“Ye care more about a bunch o’ stupid humans than ye do about yer own home and people?” Dugan asked angrily. “What kind o’ dwarves are ye to abandon yer folk when they need ye most?”

“Hey now, that’s not true—” Rorx protested.

“Then ye’ll come with me?” Dugan pressed.

Garroc and Rorx looked to each other again.

“We have to find out friends first,” Garroc finally said.

“Traitors! Filthy human-lovin’ traitors! To hell with ye both!” Dugan shouted, and two daggers appeared in his hands.

Rorx and Garroc reached for their battle-axes just as quickly.

“If ye want a fight, ye’ll get it!” Rorx growled at the miner.

Dugan didn’t even respond; he just charged right in at them both. His daggers darted and wove deceptively as he ran at them. Rorx and Garroc tried to catch him between both of them, but Dugan whirled and danced away on surprisingly swift feet.

“Damn it all! Hold still!” Rorx bellowed.

“Gladly!” Dugan barked back as he planted his feet firmly and threw both daggers Rorx’s way.

Rorx got his axe blade up in time to deflect one spinning dagger, but the second one buried itself in his right thigh. He toppled to the side with a grunt of pain. Dugan produced two more daggers from his boot-tops with a malicious chuckle and flicked one at Garroc as he charged. Garroc ducked to one side and met Dugan’s charge with his swinging axe. With quick swipes he forced the dirty miner back a few steps and managed to keep the dwarf’s fast-moving dagger at bay.

Dugan thrust suddenly, but Garroc stepped aside just in time and cut in with his axe, scoring a deep and bloody cut along Dugan’s left arm. Before the miner could recover, Garroc reversed the momentum of his swing and slammed the solid butt of his

axe-head into Dugan's face, flattening his nose against one cheek. Dugan staggered backwards, and blood poured down into his beard.

"Yield!" Garroc bellowed. "*Tos dok manoweh!* Throw down your weapons!"

"Never!!" Dugan roared, spitting blood. He raised his dagger in his good arm.

"All hail the Demon Prince!" he shouted, ready to spring on Garroc.

Garroc started to raise his axe to defend himself, but before Dugan could leap, the blade of another axe exploded out from his chest in a spray of blood and bone fragments. Dark red blood bubbled out from Dugan's open mouth before he collapsed to the ground wordlessly.

Rorx stood just behind the dead dwarf, balancing precariously on his uninjured leg. He wrenched his dripping battle-axe out of Dugan's back. He spat on the dwarf's body. "Take that to yer stinkin' Demon Prince, ye piece o' slime!"

* * * *

Arathorn could feel the pull on him almost like a physical touch. He had been wrenched away from Cyan and the Dyrenns with a force that he could not resist. Struggling against the pull slowed the dizzying sensation of flying, but it did not stop him. Whatever was happening to him didn't give him much time to think. He felt like he was moving so swiftly that he didn't dare open his eyes any longer. Fear gripped him as he imagined being pulled to his death.

Before he was aware of anything more, the powerful force ceased, and Arathorn had the distinct sensation of coming to an abrupt stop. For a moment he remained still, not even daring to open his eyes for fear of what he might be about to see. *Face your destiny bravely*, he told himself sternly, and he opened his eyes a crack.

The sight that greeted him would have taken his breath away if he had needed to breathe as a spirit. He looked around and realized he was in the back of a covered

wagon. Lying on the wagon bed, wrapped in some blankets, was his body. But that was not what his eyes fixed upon.

Kneeling over his body was the most beautiful elf woman Arathorn had ever seen. She had hair so black it shone with its own blue luster as it tumbled in thick waves down almost to the small of her back. Her skin was a smooth alabaster white that caught the dim light of the oil lamp that burned in a corner of the wagon. She was wearing a sky blue dress that hugged every imaginable curve on her body in a way that left Arathorn staring in dumbfounded awe. He thought he could almost hear her whispering some soft words as she knelt by his body.

Arathorn wondered if he was dead, and if this was paradise. A soft sigh escaped his lips as he watched the enchanting elf woman.

Her head jerked up at the faint sound, and Arathorn suddenly found himself staring into deep blue eyes colorful enough to put the ocean to shame. He wanted to dive into those blue depths and lose himself forever.

“You have come at last...” the elf woman whispered fervently, and the flood of emotion in her eyes made him want to weep.

“You... you can see me?” Arathorn asked in a quavering voice—praying, hoping, daring to believe.

The elf woman nodded slightly, never releasing him from the enfolding gaze of her blue eyes. She reached out to touch him, but when she realized what she was doing, she dropped her hand back to her lap and looked down to avoid his eyes. Arathorn thought he saw her cheeks color with the faintest blush.

“It was you... You brought me here,” he whispered, knowing what he said was true, but not really knowing how he could be so sure of it.

The elf woman nodded again, as if she couldn’t trust her voice to answer him in words.

“But how?”

“M-magic,” the elf woman finally spoke, and her one word washed over him like tidal wave.

“You can use... *magic?*” *It’s not possible! There hasn’t been a single elf born who was able to use magic in over a century!*

“Yes... I can,” she met his eyes, not defiantly, but more like she was looking to judge his reaction.

“I... I believe you,” Arathorn whispered softly, suddenly feeling the strong conviction of his words. “But just who are you?”

“I am Khrystana De’Faerr,” her voice was thick with emotion, and her blue eyes threatened to pull him in once more.

Arathorn thought he should recognize the name, but he couldn’t place it. “Do we know each other?” he asked. “I feel like I’ve met you before.”

A faint sardonic smile tugged at the corners of Khrystana’s full lips, and her eyes glinted with some personal knowledge that she kept to herself.

“Spirits, I’ve forgotten my manners!” Arathorn said, feeling more than a little flustered by her knowing look. “I am Arathorn of Tree-Haven, at your service, Lady De’Faerr,” he performed a half-bow for her.

“I already know your name, Arathorn,” she laughed, and the rich, vibrant sounds sent shivers through him, although he wasn’t sure if a spirit could shiver. “And please, call me Khrystana.”

Arathorn nodded this time, still wondering just what this beautiful elf woman wanted with him. The fact that she could use magic made everything that much more amazing.

“Khrystana...” just speaking her name was like a shock of pleasure running through him, “is there any chance that your... magic could get me back into my body?”

“There is a very good chance, I think. I can try tomorrow night, after I’ve rested. Summoning you here was exhausting; you kept trying to fight me the whole way,” she accused him.

“Believe me, if I had known who was pulling me here, I wouldn’t have fought a bit,” Arathorn grinned at her.

Khrystana turned her face to hide another blush, and Arathorn found himself wishing he was solid flesh so he could touch her.

“Tell me, Arathorn,” she spoke up to change the subject, “do you know what happened to you to make your *qith’kha* leave your body? I was told how you saved King Trentan, but that does not explain much for me.”

Arathorn shrugged. “After I pushed King Trentan out of the way, all I can remember before passing out is incredible pain... like being ripped from my body. When I came to, I was in some frozen wasteland near this black wall with no doors,” Arathorn shuddered at the memory. “Then when I thought of Dyrenn, I just appeared there, and then I found my body. Later, I found out the man who had tried to kill King Trentan is a servant of the Demon Prince. So it wouldn’t surprise me if it was more than a simple arrow that he used. You have heard of this Demon Prince, haven’t you?” he asked her.

It took all Khrystana’s willpower to keep her face composed. “Yes... I’ve heard something about him,” she managed to say calmly. On the inside, she was being torn apart. *He was at the Demon Prince’s stronghold! He doesn’t know how close he must have come to being captured by the Demon Prince’s magic! But that’s why the Master couldn’t find him, because he’s just a loose spirit. This is the secret I was to discover before I killed him...*

“No!!” Khrystana moaned, clutching her head. “No! I cannot do it!! I cannot! It is impossible!!”

Arathorn recoiled in shock as Khrystana leapt to her feet and vaulted out of the back of the wagon. For a few moments he just stayed there, not sure what had just happened. When he decided to go follow her to see if she was all right, he discovered that whatever magic Khrystana had used to summon his *qith'kha* back to his body had also bound him to remain very close to it as well.

He couldn't leave the wagon.

An elven sorceress, Arathorn shook his head as he thought. A beautiful elven sorceress! And me! What's the connection? This is all so strange!

Arathorn eventually gave up hoping for Khrystana to return anytime soon. He was amazed by the sudden emptiness he felt with her gone. He fastened his hope on the next evening, when she had said she would try the magic that could rejoin his spirit and his body. *Even if it works, he mused, will I be completely whole now that I've met her?*

* * * *

"Garroc, I think I be needin' a rest," Rorx said through clenched teeth.

Garroc looked over his shoulder to where his friend half-sat in the makeshift litter he had fashioned. Rorx's face was pale and sweat was running down into his beard. The bundle of rags they had wrapped around Rorx's wound was slick with blood. Garroc eased the end of the litter he was carrying down to the ground.

"I swear ye must've hit every bump in this blasted earth!" Rorx grumbled weakly.

"Would you rather walk?"

"Hey now, that's not nice! Ye wouldna leave yer old friend out here would ye?"

"What, and miss your belly-aching all the time?" Garroc chuckled. "You're just lucky that damn dwarf missed your artery, or else you'd be a goner for sure."

"Well this don't exactly tickle, ye know," Rorx gestured to his wounded leg.

"It's better than what that Dugan fellow got," Garroc grinned.

Rorx nodded modestly. "Aye, I sure got him good with me axe, didna I?"

"Not bad for a cripple," Garroc laughed.

"Hey! Ye just wait 'til I'm back on me feet! Then I'll show ye!"

Garroc ignored Rorx's continued mutterings and scanned the plains spreading out in front of them. After the fight with Dugan Brim, it had taken a little while to devise the crude litter for dragging Rorx along in, but they still had several hours of daylight left to travel. Garroc hoped they would find the rendezvous point soon and meet up with Cyan and the other Dyrenns.

"Shut up for a minute, will you? I think I can see the trade road down there."

"Eh? What'd ye say?" Rorx did his best to twist in the litter to look where Garroc was pointing. "Where? I dunna see anything."

"It looks like it's almost hidden in all this tall grass, but I think I saw the road south."

"About bloody damn time," Rorx muttered. "I dunna think me arse can take much more o' this bouncin' litter crap."

Garroc hoisted the two long poles he had fashioned from saplings, lifting Rorx up off the ground on the criss-crossing support of the thick rope he had used to tie the saplings together. "Hang on there," he called over his shoulder. "If we're lucky we'll be finding the Dyrenns before nightfall."

Rorx clenched his teeth against the first jarring pain as Garroc started dragging the litter across the rough ground. His leg throbbed with each little jolt.

"Next time let 'em just kill me! It'll be a lot less painful!" Rorx growled.

* * * *

Cyan was startled from his light sleep by the warning shout of the sentry. He sat up from where he had been resting in the tall grass and blinked his eyes free of sleep.

The sun had just set, and the dimness of twilight was setting in. Cyan got to his feet and followed a few other soldiers to where the sentry had called out from.

He found Captain Fissk with another Dyrenn soldier, both staring off to the northeast, where it looked like someone was moving through the tall grass in their direction.

"Looks awfully short to be one of our men," the sentry was saying to Fissk.

Could it be the dwarves? Cyan wondered.

"Only looks like one person," Fissk answered, and Cyan's hopes plummeted.

Only one?

"Damn it all, don't just stand there gawking! Give me a hand!" the person's shout reached their ears from across the stretch of grass.

"It's Garroc!" Cyan shouted, running through the tall grass to meet the dwarf.

Captain Fissk and a few other Dyrenns hurried to catch up.

"Garroc! Where's Rorx?" he shouted as he ran towards the dwarf.

"I'm down here!" Rorx bellowed, and Cyan realized Garroc was dragging something behind him.

"Cyan!" Garroc hailed him. "Good to see you again, lad!"

"Spirits! Rorx! What are you doing in that thing?" Cyan asked as he came up to the two dwarves. Garroc was huffing and sweating from dragging Rorx in the litter behind him.

"It's a long story, lad," Rorx sighed.

"You're hurt!"

"It's just a scratch, that's all," Rorx waved Cyan's concerns away.

"Are you two going to jabber until its' dark, or are you going to help me move this lug?" Garroc asked.

"Sorry, Garroc," Cyan grinned and picked up the back of the litter with a grunt of effort, lifting Rorx completely up in the air.

"Easy there," Rorx said in panic, clutching at the litter poles. "Dunna ye drop me!"

"Spirits, Rorx! You're heavy!" Cyan grunted.

"Me mama always said I be one solid dwarf!" Rorx chortled.

"Fat is more like it," Garroc muttered.

"I heard that!"

Captain Fissk and another soldier gave them a hand in carrying Rorx back to where the rest of the Dyrenns were waiting. They eased Rorx's litter back down to the ground, careful not to jar his leg.

"Finally! I didna think we'd ever find ye!" Rorx groaned.

"What happened to you two?"

"And what happened to the other soldiers you were with?" Captain Fissk added quickly.

Garroc shook his head sadly. "They're all dead. Shadow Hounds ambushed them at the tunnel exit."

"What?"

"We were too late to help 'em. They were so ready to get out o' them tunnels that they opened the door before we were close. The Hounds got 'em before we could get there," Rorx sighed.

Fissk nodded grimly, and walked away from them to be alone.

"But how were you wounded?" Cyan asked.

"Well, we put all the Dyrenns back in the tunnel before we shut it again, and then we tried to come find the rest o' ye. Earlier today, we ran into this dwarf who said he was from Ckar-Regnock. He wanted us to go back home with him, 'cause he said

there's all kind o' trouble brewin' back home. Me un' Garroc knew we needed to find ye first, but this dwarf didna like that. He started yellin' and throwin' knives all over the place. He got me leg with one o' his knives, but Garroc started layin' into him good. Then I finished him with me axe through his back," Rorx grinned. "The bastard was shoutin' for the Demon Prince when he died."

"He was a servant of the Demon Prince?"

"More like an assassin of some sorts, I think," Garroc said. "He didn't waste any time in trying to kill us after we said we wouldn't go with him back to Ckar-Regnock."

"I never liked him anyway. He smelled," Rorx added.

"Hey, where's the elf? Is he around?" Garroc asked.

Cyan shook his head. "A little while ago he started having this feeling of being pulled back to his body. He couldn't fight it any more."

"Well it's about time," Rorx said. "He's had it too easy just flittin' around as a little ghost. Now it can be his turn when the knives start flyin' again!"

Cyan chuckled and went to find some water and food for them, and some clean bandages for Rorx.

* * * *

Mykal Greystern, the Earl of Greystern, was sweating profusely by the time he spotted what looked to be a barely-reputable inn on a deserted street corner up ahead. The hot sun was moving well past midday, but the city streets of Jynlamadh still felt like the inside of a brick oven. He could see the heat rippling in waves off the ground and feel it sucking the moisture from his body.

Since his disastrous arrival through the Gateway, Greystern had not seen a single person out on the streets. Everyone was indoors, sleeping through the heat of the day. The yellow and white clay brick buildings seemed to reflect the worst of the heat back into the air, and Greystern looked at the small two-story inn with a sigh of welcome

relief. A worn and faded sign hung above the curtained doorway— Greystern could just make out the faded painting of a voluptuous woman, but the lettering of the sign had been recently repainted in bold green letters, naming the place as “The Dancer’s Inn”. Greystern was sure there were no respectable dancers staying in the small, rundown inn, but he pushed aside the heavy curtain that served as a door and stepped out of the burning sunshine.

The inside of the small inn looked pleasantly dim opposed to the stabbing brightness out in the streets, and the air inside was cooler, though still not comfortable by Greystern’s usual standards. The main room was arranged with a few long tables and benches and a small bar. Several other rooms were screened off from the main one by more curtain-doors. A stairway of crumbling brick was built into the side wall and led upstairs to the inn’s rooms.

Greystern walked over to the bar and pounded the faded wood with his fist. “Innkeeper! I want a room!” he bellowed.

A few moments later a short little man with greasy black hair poked his head out from behind a curtain. He rubbed his eyes and tried to stifle a yawn. “What do you want?” he asked, clearly irritated to have his sleep disturbed.

“Give me your best room,” Greystern said impatiently.

“We’re full,” the innkeeper sneered and started to duck back behind the curtain.

Greystern whipped his broadsword from its scabbard, and the ring of steel filled the inn. “I said I want a room,” he growled menacingly.

The innkeeper’s swarthy face paled and he ran a nervous hand through his hair. “Um... yes! I... I think a room has just become available.”

“That’s better,” Greystern grinned, sheathing his sword.

“Never let it be said that Ubaara does not treat his guests well,” the little innkeeper spoke nervously. “That will be five silvers, if you don’t mind.”

“What if I do?” Greystern asked, idly patting the hilt of his broadsword.

Ubaara the innkeeper swallowed. “Um... for you, good sir, the room is free of charge! Only the best! Ubaara's generosity knows no bounds! I cannot take your money!”

Ubaara kept up his nervous chattering as he led Greystern upstairs and down a short hallway. He pulled aside a thick curtain and showed Greystern a fairly large room with a pile of sleeping cushions and a chipped washstand. It wasn't much, but it was still better than the pit-hole of a boarding house where he had stayed at back in Dyrenn.

“Whatever you need, good sir, you just tell Ubaara and you'll have it in the blink of a camel's eye! Wine, women, or information— Ubaara can get it all for you!” the innkeeper smiled ingratiatingly at him, his nervous eyes flicking back and forth from Greystern's face to his sword.

“It'll do,” Greystern grunted and set his travel pack in one corner by the washstand.

Ubaara nodded his head eagerly and quickly retreated to the hallway. Greystern took off his sweat-soaked dark tunic and pulled off his boots. He sat back in the soft cushions and tried to collect his thoughts. Traveling through the Gateways always left him tired.

Tonight, after I get some rest, I'll go into the city and make some contacts. I need to find a way to get to Inkata., he thought. *There might be a few people who can help me...*

Greystern realized that he wasn't really all that tired.

“Ubaara!” he roared.

A few seconds later the innkeeper's greasy head reappeared, peeking in past the curtain. “Yes, good sir?”

"I'm a little lonely. Find me some *companionship*. And nothing cheap, otherwise it's your life."

Ubaara nodded, his eyes wide with fear. "Only the best for you, good sir! Right away! The best and most beautiful!"

Greystern relaxed a little more and allowed himself a smile. *Maybe Jynlamadh isn't such a bad place after all...*

* * * *

Arathorn had been lulled into a state of contemplation by the bouncing rhythm of the wagon that carried his body south. He could hear the sounds of other wagons nearby, the horses' hooves *thumping* the packed dirt of the trade road, and the squeaking of axles and wheels that needed more grease. All the sounds and shaking bumps blended together after a while into a background for his thoughts. Dominating all his thinking was the enigma that was Khrystana De'Faerr.

Arathorn wasn't really sure what to think about the beautiful sorceress. The very thought of her sent his emotions reeling, and it had nothing to do with the fact that she could wield magic. He remembered the way Cyan had been after first meeting Miranda, and Arathorn realized the same thing was happening to him.

This is silly! I know next to nothing about her! She's a complete stranger, even if I feel like I know her. I'm being foolish! I'm letting my heart do the thinking, not my brain! Or is it just my eyes? She's beautiful— there's no denying that, but there's more to her. At least I think there is. But how can I be sure? And what was that outburst about last night? Who was she talking to? What can't she do? There are so many things I don't understand! I wish she would just come back!

By the end of the day, Arathorn had only succeeded in confusing himself even more. It was hard to tell what time of day it was inside the dim interior of the wagon bed; the single oil lamp that had been burning last night had gone out before dawn. He

assumed that sunshine might filter through the canvas cover and provide some light, but there was no such light as of yet. *Perhaps it is cloudy outside*, he mused.

The wagons halted occasionally so the Dyrenns could take short rests, and Arathorn found himself hoping Khrystana would appear, but she never did. Instead one of the King's healers climbed in the wagon and poured a little water down his body's throat. The wagons would start to move again after a while and Arathorn was forced to wait alone once more.

Arathorn shook off his muddled thoughts. He wondered how Cyan and the dwarves fared, and wished he could go find them, but Khrystana's magic kept him bound close to his body. He was beginning to get angry that she had just whisked him away from his friends, but the prospect of being rejoined with his body helped control his irritation.

The wagons stopped for the fourth time that day. This time it wasn't the King's healer bringing him water. It was Khrystana.

Arathorn let out a soft breath, or what passed for one as a spirit, when he saw her enter the wagon. She had changed out of the sky blue dress and now was wearing dark blue leather pants and a sleeveless white silk shirt with small silver buttons running down the front. She wore black calf-length riding boots, with her leathers tucked into the rolled-down tops.

Khrystana looked around the dim interior and spotted Arathorn's spirit-form near the far corner. She met his gaze quietly as she ducked into the wagon. She had a small canteen with her and she knelt next to his body and trickled a little water into his mouth.

"Thank you," Arathorn said when she had finished. He didn't know what else to say to the elf woman. He was afraid that if he started talking he might say something he would regret later.

"You're welcome, Arathorn," Khrystana replaced the stopper on the canteen and set it aside. She fixed him with her captivating blue eyes and hooked some loose strands of her luxuriant black hair behind the gently-pointed tip of her elven ear.

Arathorn tried not to stare as he wondered what it would feel like to run his hands through her hair.

"I think I am rested enough to try the spell to rejoin you and your body," Khrystana broke the awkward silence. "If you want me to, that is," she added hesitantly.

"You didn't bother asking my permission when you summoned me here," Arathorn replied, trying to keep the sudden bitterness from his voice.

Khrystana's eyes widened just a fraction. She looked down at her hands, and Arathorn immediately regretted his words.

"I... I am sorry... Arathorn," Khrystana whispered, her voice trembling, close to turning into a sob. "It's just that I..."

"You what?" Arathorn said, more gently this time.

"I... I..."

"It's all right, Khrystana, you can tell me anything," Arathorn whispered soothingly.

"I needed you... with me," Khrystana finally breathed, her whole body shuddering. "I needed you to... to guide me."

"To guide you? I don't understand, Khrystana."

"I know, Arathorn, and I'm sorry. I... I just can't explain everything yet. Please... give me the time?" she looked up at him, and tears ran from her blue eyes down her cheeks.

Arathorn wished more than anything that he could wipe her tears away. But he couldn't. *Not yet, anyway*, he told himself. "You don't have to explain anything you don't want to," he told her. He felt odd; a spirit offering comfort to a woman.

She smiled at him through her tears. "Thank you, Arathorn. You don't know how much it means to me to hear you say that."

Arathorn nodded and moved a little closer to her. "Maybe I'll know someday."

Khrystana smiled again. "Maybe."

They stared at each other for a long, quiet moment.

Khrystana wiped her cheeks and took a deep breath to pull herself together. "I... I think we can start the spell now."

"Please do," Arathorn said gently, giving her an encouraging smile. "The Spirits know I don't want to stay like this much longer!"

Khrystana smiled faintly and moved closer to his body, placing her right hand over his heart and her left hand on his forehead.

"I will act as the catalyst for the spell," she said softly. "You will be able to enter your body with the help of the magic... through me."

Arathorn was intrigued, but didn't say anything to distract her. She had closed her eyes and her breathing was becoming soft and regular, almost as if she was sleeping. But he saw that her lips were moving, and her hands were glowing with the faintest of lights where they touched his body.

He could not hear any of the words she spoke— he wasn't even sure if she was speaking, or just forming them with her lips. But he could feel a tingle in the air, a heaviness that reminded him of the forest just before a thunderstorm, and he recognized it as a sign of the power Khrystana was gathering. He felt the slightest of tugs at his essence, much like the summoning spell she had used the day before, but gentler this time. It seemed to draw him towards her.

Arathorn watched as he was pulled closer and closer to Khrystana. He seemed to hover scant inches from her, almost able to feel her against him. He saw that her hands were shining now with light that seemed to flicker, almost in time to the beating of

their hearts. Then before he could even realize what was happening, the magic pulled him *into* Khrystana. He felt a warm, loving comfort settle around him, and though he could no longer see anything, he could sense his *qith'kha*, his spirit, touching hers for the briefest of moments. A feeling beyond his ability to describe coursed through him for the tiniest of seconds, and then he was sliding, merging back into his body through her outstretched hands. Arathorn clung to that feeling of pure bliss as he slipped into the peace of unconsciousness.

* * * *

Khrystana gradually let the magic slip away once she was sure Arathorn had been restored to his body. As the last vestiges of power faded, she opened her eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath. Arathorn slept peacefully, and his face didn't look as pale as it had before. He was whole once more.

Khrystana brushed his face tenderly with her hand, remembering the moment when their souls had touched. Tears sprung up in her eyes, but they were not tears of sorrow. Khrystana leaned down and gently kissed the sleeping elf. *The dream was right*, she thought. *It matters whom I choose to live for.*

* * * *

Miranda had tethered her horse to a wagon and made sure it was brushed and groomed for the night before she decided to take a walk among the gathered company of Dyrenns. It had been another long day in the saddle, and her legs could use the stretch. She had spent the day riding back and forth from the front to the back of the long wagon train, checking too see that her people were managing under the strains of the forced move.

Her father had been in a dark mood of late, and Miranda had taken it upon herself to become visible to the Dyrenns to give them some shred of hope. She had been surprised by the warm greetings most of the folk had given her, and she was glad

to see the Dyrenns' faces light up with a smile when she rode past. It did much to lift her spirits as well. Sometimes it was almost possible to forget the reasons why they were on the road to Inkata in the first place. But the knowledge that her home had been destroyed was never far away.

Miranda sighed softly as she walked among the wagons, horses, and people in the growing darkness. With days of hard traveling between them and Dyrenn, her father was finally allowing them to rest for the whole night. It was maybe another eight day's ride to Inkata now, and Miranda used that hope to keep herself and the Dyrenns going. Her father had sent riders out ahead of the wagon train several days ago, and she hoped that once the messengers reached the city some kind of arrangement could be made to allow the Dyrenns to stay.

"Good evening, Princess— I mean, Miranda," Khrystana De'Faerr was stepping out of the back of the wagon that carried Arathorn. She smiled in the gathering darkness.

"Hello, Khrystana," Miranda said warmly. Since meeting the elf woman, Miranda had taken a liking to her, and thought it would be nice to have another woman to talk to occasionally. "How's Arathorn doing?"

"Much better, I think," Khrystana could hardly keep the joy from her voice.

Miranda looked closely at the elf woman. "Really? Your company must be doing wonders for him."

Khrystana smiled, and Miranda thought the elf woman's eyes shown for a moment with tears. "I hope so," Khrystana said, and Miranda recognized the tone of her voice as that of someone falling in love. Miranda wondered if she sounded similarly when she talked about Cyan. Since he had chosen to remain behind in Dyrenn to fight, rather than accompanying her, Miranda had done everything she could to keep him from her mind. She was not always successful.

"You sound like you've become quite fond of him," Miranda smiled, coming to stand next to the elf woman. "I'd almost guess that was why you came here in the first place."

Khrystana looked down shyly. "Is it that obvious?"

"Just to me," Miranda laughed.

"Well, then I guess that's all right. It's just so... I don't know how to even describe it!"

"It's like you've been waiting for him all your life, knowing that one day he would just be there, and you would have no choice but to love him," Miranda said, feeling a lump forming in the back of her throat.

Khrystana looked at her sharply. "Yes... that's exactly it. How did you know?"

Miranda felt unshed tears burning in her eyes. "I think we have a lot in common, Khrystana."

"Who has taken your heart?" Khrystana asked gently.

"Arathorn's friend, Cyan of Gabbon," Miranda answered, feeling the pain return just at the mention of his name.

"Do you love him?"

Miranda nodded silently, biting her lip to hold back the sudden tears.

"And he loves you?"

"I... I guess so— I mean, yes, but it's just that he's so stubborn! He wouldn't come along with me because he thought it was his *duty* to stay behind in Dyrenn! It's not even his home! He always has to be right in the middle of everything bad that happens! Sometimes I think he never considers what that does to me. I... I said some pretty terrible things to him before we left," Miranda shook with a barely repressed sob.

Khrystana put a comforting arm around her shoulders. "I'm sure if he really loves you, then he will understand. From the little I have heard about him, I think he must be a remarkable man."

"He is," Miranda sighed ruefully. "He's wonderful! I've never met someone so... I don't know if there's even a word to describe him, Khrystana! When I'm around him I feel... so *alive*! I love him so badly... but I wish he would be a little more selfish, and less noble at times. It would make it easier on me."

"But then he wouldn't be the man you fell in love with, would he?" Khrystana said gently.

"No, I suppose not," Miranda sighed. "You're right, Khrystana."

"Why don't we find someplace more private where we can talk? You can tell me all about Cyan and Arathorn," Khrystana suggested.

"I'd like that," Miranda sniffed, looking the elf woman in the eye and smiling through her tears.

"Me too," Khrystana said, giving Miranda another friendly squeeze. They walked off into the darkness towards Miranda's wagon, with Miranda already starting to describe her first meeting with Cyan.

* * * *

Greystern gradually came awake, aware of the warm body pressed close to him. He yawned quietly and shifted in the soft cushions so he could better look at his companion. The woman's short-cropped blond curls clung tightly to her scalp, still damp from the sweat of their fevered passion earlier in the day. Her nude curves still drew his eyes, kindling a flame of lust in him once more. For a moment he wished he didn't have more urgent business, but the Demon Prince's warning of no more second chances was still fresh in his mind.

Greystern eased himself out of the prostitute's embrace, careful not to disturb her sleep. *That little worm, Ubaara, outdid himself*, Greystern mused, his eyes tracing the woman's delectable curves. He finished dressing and buckled on his sword belt. The air felt cooler, and he figured it had to be almost night. The city would be busy now, and he should be able to find someone to aid in his return to Inkata.

Greystern sighed. He would much rather stay here and enjoy the blonde's company, but he didn't dare miss his opportunity in Inkata to settle the score with that whelp, Cyan of Gabbon. Greystern left the sleeping prostitute in his room and walked downstairs. Ubaara was busy straightening up the main room, and preparing it for the evening's guests. The smell of something cooking drifted from one of the side rooms.

"Greetings, good sir!" Ubaara smiled broadly, almost enough to hide the speck of fear in his eyes. "I trust your 'company' was to your liking?"

"Very much so," Greystern grinned.

"Ah, excellent! I told you, Ubaara has nothing but the best!"

"Indeed," Greystern grunted, wondering just how much the slimy innkeeper had paid to get the woman's services. A blonde like that was rare in this city of dark-haired, swarthy Jynlams. She couldn't have been cheap.

From the only window in the main room of the inn, Greystern could see that it was quickly growing dark outside; there were already people out and about in the street. Ubaara had thrown the heavy curtain that served as the inn's door aside to let in the cooler night air. Greystern walked over to the door and peered out into the streets. Lamps were being lit on the street corners, providing soft light to compliment the cool night air. He found that he liked this backwards system of living very much.

Ubaara eyed him nervously, half-hoping he would leave, and half-hoping he would stay long enough to pay for his room and the prostitute.

"Uh... would you care for a meal before you leave, good sir?" Ubaara asked tentatively.

"No, I'm not really hungry," Greystern told the innkeeper without looking back over his shoulder. "But I could use some information."

Ubaara's eyes brightened. *Here is my chance to finally get some money from this northern im'beelah*, Ubaara thought, using the Jynlam word for 'miser'.

"What kind of information?" Ubaara asked, a glint of greed sparking to life in his eyes.

"I need to find someone who can help me get to Inkata. Quickly."

"Such information can be... costly, no?" Ubaara grinned.

Greystern turned and fixed the innkeeper with a cold stare. "What do you know?"

"What can you pay?" Ubaara countered. "You still owe me five silver for the room, and three gold for the woman!"

Greystern drew his sword and stepped towards the greedy innkeeper.

"Wait! No need to get angry! Ubaara was just jesting with you! Yes! A joke! Really!" Ubaara scuttled backwards across the room, until he backed into a table.

"Tell me what I want to know!" Greystern growled.

"Please, good sir! I tell!" Ubaara pleaded, Greystern's sword hovering just in front of his chest. "There is a man— an *Aziz*, a conjurer I know. He keeps a shop on the Street of Golden Promises in the center of the city! He may be able to help you!"

Greystern glared in contempt at Ubaara and turned to leave. Behind him, Ubaara's eyes narrowed dangerously. The little man pulled a curved dagger from his belt and leaped at Greystern's back.

Greystern had expected something like this and was even quicker than Ubaara. He spun on one foot, his broadsword leading the way, and caught Ubaara in mid-leap. The broadsword tore through the innkeeper easily, and two separate halves of Ubaara

landed on the inn floor with wet *plops*. Greystern frowned at the innkeeper's stupidity and wiped his sword on the dead man's *ha'sif*. Luckily no one was up, and Greystern went to the door and pulled the curtain into place so passersby would not see the body.

Ubaara was the only one who knew I was here, so no one would suspect me of the murder, Greystern began to think, but cold realization struck him hard. *The blonde...*

What had started out as a good evening was quickly turning sour. *It's such a waste just to protect myself*, he thought as he walked up the stairs of the inn back to his room. *But I don't need the Jynlamadh city watch after me.*

The blond prostitute was still sleeping when he entered the room.

She never had time to awaken.

* * * *

A short time later, the Earl of Greystern was strolling down the busy streets of Jynlamadh, keeping an eye out for the Street of Golden Promises. He ignored the chattering of Jynlams doing business at the shops that lined the streets and the stalls set up on the corners. The markets of Jynlamadh were teeming with people and goods, making the markets of Dyrenn seem a paltry waste. Greystern had long since given up trying to keep track of all the different items he had seen for sale. He figured that a person could buy just about anything they could think of in this city, if they had enough money.

He had passed the Street of Enchanting Delights a few blocks back, and just the few glimpses of the buildings and people he had seen down that avenue had been tempting enough for him. He now had a good idea where to find more women like the blonde Ubaara had hired. Greystern pushed the tempting thoughts from his mind as he followed the street he was on, the Street of Limitless Wants. It seemed to be one of the main market streets in the city, and there were people of various dress and wealth all over the place, buying and selling every kind of food, cloth, tool, herb, weapon, or

jewelry imaginable. It was hard to even hear himself think over the din of shouting merchants and haggling customers, and trying to force his way through the milling crowds was becoming increasingly difficult.

Most of the people were clad in *ha'sifs*, the traditional short-sleeved, light-weight, flowing one-piece garment of Jynlamadh, but the variations in color and fabrics of the *ha'sifs* were a good indicator of a person's wealth and status. Greystern noted some beggars in stained and dirty *ha'sifs* composed of ragged patches, yet he also spied men and women wearing *ha'sifs* made of silk with gold and sparkling gems sewn into the garments. One woman passed him on the street, wearing a pale white *ha'sif* that was nearly transparent. She turned down the Street of Enchanting Delights, and Greystern had to fight the urge to follow her.

He waited to see one of these richly dressed people get robbed or roughed up, but no one touched them, not even the vilest and most desperate-looking of the beggars. *Even in Dyrenn there were pickpockets and petty thieves*, he mused, *but it appears as if there is hardly any crime in this city!* Greystern shook his head in disbelief and kept moving through the crowds of people. He was taller than most of the native Jynlams by several inches, and his dark tunic, leathers, and cloak made him stick out among the crowd. There were a few other strangers he could recognize by their dress. Near one cloth merchant's stall he saw a broad-shouldered man with a well-trimmed, yellow goatee wearing a high-collared embroidered coat that marked him as someone from Inkata. At a cobbler's booth, the cobbler's flaring gray breeches and meticulously cut tunic marked him as a Ruh-Xsok trader. With the man's olive-colored skin and darker hair he could almost have passed for a Jynlam if he had donned a *ha'sif* instead of his regular clothes. But despite the presence of these other foreigners, Greystern found himself the center of many watchful eyes. He ignored the stares of the curious and suspicious alike and kept looking for the Street of Golden Promises.

The sun had fully set and the lamps on the streets provided the only light against the cool darkness of night when Greystern reached the street he had been looking for near the very heart of the city. The Street of Golden Promises was a wide avenue, large enough for several wagons to move abreast of each other, but at the moment there were only people moving down the hard-packed red clay street. Most of the people visiting the shops and taverns on the street looked fairly wealthy, judging from the bright colors and gaudy decorations of their *ha'sifs*. Only a few men that he could see carried weapons, and of those few, most carried curved scimitars belted at their waist. Greystern could tell that most of the blades were more for decoration than practical use. The hilts of some of the scimitars were worked in gold or crusted with glittering gems. Even the dark leather scabbards were tooled with fanciful patterns, and some were even filigreed in gold and silver as well. Greystern eyed the decorative weapons with disdain. His own broadsword was plain, but it served a purpose, unlike these gaudy trappings of wealth that some of the men carried. *Ubaara could testify to that*, Greystern mused with a wicked grin, *if he were still alive and not lying in two pieces on the floor of his inn.*

Halfway down the Street of Golden Promises, nestled between a large noisy tavern and a moneychanger's shop, Greystern spotted a squat two-story building that displayed strange-looking skulls and other arcane items in its large front window. There was no sign above the curtained doorway, but Greystern had the nagging suspicion he had found the conjurer's shop Ubaara had spoken of before he died. *An Aziz, huh?* Greystern thought. *How will he help me get to Inkata any faster than a good horse could?* He ignored his worries and crossed over to the shop, parting the thick curtain that served as a door and entered.

The inside of the Aziz's shop was eerily lit by candles that crowded nearly every flat surface in the chamber. Fat red ones and small violet candles were set along a countertop, and thick black candles burned from the tops of shelves that lined the walls

of the shop. Two sickly green candles burned, one on each end of a long bookshelf set into the wall behind the counter. Bleached white animal skulls hung from pegs on the walls. Some Greystern thought he recognized, but most were frighteningly unnatural. They ranged from small skulls that might have been a rabbit or cat, to larger skulls with curved horns and bony protrusions that were definitely more than simple cow skulls. Greystern repressed a shudder. In the flicker of the candles, the shadows in the empty eye sockets of the skulls seemed to dart and stare at him. Open jawbones seemed to laugh mockingly at him.

“How may I serve you?” a rasping voice broke the silence of the room.

Greystern fought to keep from hastily drawing his sword. He tried to wipe the startled expression from his face as he turned to see who had spoken. His eyes met the disturbing gaze of an emaciated older man who had emerged from another room further back in the shop. The old man was clad in a loose *ha'sif* the color of dried blood. A few wisps of white hair still clung to his otherwise bald and wrinkled head, and his face was heavily lined with age. He was thin to the point of looking half-starved, and his scrawny arms and legs looked like nothing more than skin stretched taut over bone. His head looked disproportionately large compared to his thin neck and the rest of his body, but his eyes nearly glowed in the candlelight like twin sparks of power.

“I... I am looking for the *Aziz*, the conjurer,” Greystern tried to keep his voice calm.

“Then you have found him, good sir,” the old man said, his voice dry, like two bricks being rubbed together. “I am the *Aziz*.”

Greystern swallowed a lump in his throat. *I should have known he was the Aziz! Who else could it be!* he told himself. “I am looking for a fast way to Inkata. I was told you may be able to help me.”

"Fast? Go buy one of the Sultan's racing horses," the Aziz rasped, with a wry grin.

Greystern gritted his teeth. "No, I mean *fast*. I need to be there as quickly as possible. Understand?"

The old man nodded, his bald head looking like it might snap off his scrawny neck and bounce to the floor. His wide eyes nearly pinched shut as a broad smile stretched across his wrinkled face. "I understand," he laughed, an even drier, raspier sound than his voice. "Follow me," he beckoned with one hand that looked more like a gnarled claw, and turned to go back further into the shop. Greystern checked to make sure his broadsword was loose in its scabbard before following. The skulls' empty eyes followed him across the room.

The Aziz pulled aside a dark curtain that separated the front of the shop from the rest of the building, and revealed a sparsely decorated room and a flight of stairs leading up. The old man started up the stairs, using two handrails to help pull himself along. Greystern let the old man get nearly halfway up the flight before following, his heavy boots making the stairs creak ominously.

The second story of the conjurer's shop was one large room that was bare of any kind of furniture. Unlit torches hung in brackets on the walls, and there were large holes in the roof overhead. Greystern could see whole patches of stars through some of the bigger holes. The Aziz paid no mind to the crumbling roof and walked to the center of the large chamber. In the center, the wooden floor had been replaced by bricks the color of dried blood, and Greystern was startled to see that the bricks formed a solid reddish pentagram. A shudder worked down his spine as he recognized the summoning circle for what it was. He had seen similar ones in the Demon Prince's citadel. Suddenly he knew what the strange skulls were down in the Aziz's shop. They were demon skulls.

Greystern opened his mouth to say that he didn't want *this* kind of transportation to Inkata, but it was too late already. The *Aziz* was standing at the edge of the stone pentagram, swaying in time to some barley heard chant. His bony arms were raised above his head, his talon-like fingers splayed apart as if he were grasping at the stars above. A dark nimbus seemed to gather around the *Aziz* and the pentagram as his chanting grew louder. Greystern felt the hair on the back of his neck tingle furiously as the feeling of power built in the room. The old conjurer's chanting rose in volume, a hissing guttural noise that made Greystern's skin itch. With a last sibilant crescendo, the pentagram flashed a smoky red and the smell of sulfur filled the air. As the red mist began to clear, the *Aziz* lowered his hands to his side and Greystern got his first look at his transportation to Inkata.

It stared right back at him, yellow eyes flashing with malicious light.

"What is that... that *thing*?" Greystern asked, clutching his sword hilt until his knuckles turned white.

"That is your means of *fast* travel to Inkata. It is a veermang, a demon from the Nether planes," the *Aziz* turned away from the demon to face Greystern. "It will carry you to Inkata in several days' time, faster than any horse could ever get you there."

Greystern eyed the veermang in disbelief and disgust. The demon was the size of a very large horse, but all resemblance ended there. The veermang had a pair of leathery, bat-like wings that it flapped nervously, and its long serpentine tail whipped back and forth like a cobra about to strike. It crouched on shaggy goat legs with split hooves. Its body was covered in a mix of putrescent green and brown scales, coarse hair, and long spines. Its arms and hands looked nearly human, yet it had extended claws in place of fingernails. The veermang's long, scaled neck mirrored a dragon's, but its head looked more like something that belonged to a mongrel dog, with shaggy gray

fur and a broad, long snout. Worst of all were its yellow eyes, eyes that glinted with intelligence and cruelty as it stared back at Greystern.

The old man looked to him expectantly. "It will take you where you need to go. What are you waiting for?"

"H-how much?" Greystern choked, fighting down his sudden fear.

The *Aziz* named a high price, but Greystern dug the amount out of his small coin purse and handed it to the old man without question. He was too shaken to argue. / *have to ride that to Inkata?*

"The veermang is an intelligent species of demon, even if it is not capable of human speech," the *Aziz* rasped. "Simply climb on its back and it will take you to Inkata."

Greystern nodded faintly and took a few steps closer to the darkened pentagram. The veermang watched him intently the whole time. When he crossed the pentagram's border, the smell of the demon washed over him like a filthy oil. The scent of rancid meat and sulfur nearly gagged him, coating his mouth and filling his nostrils. Choking down bile and his own fear, Greystern approached the veermang, one hand hovering close to his sword. It hissed, but made no other move against him.

Greystern reached out and grabbed a fistful of hair near the demon's shoulder-blades. Forcing his muscles to obey him, he pulled himself up onto its back and gripped its sides tightly with his legs. He fit snugly just in front of its wings.

The veermang reared back with a shrieking cry that sounded almost like a note of triumph before it flapped its bat wings viciously and launched itself through one of the largest holes in the roof. Greystern clutched its coarse hair tighter in his fists and held on for his life as the veermang burst up into the skies over Jynlamadh. It shrieked horribly again, yellow eyes glowing with wicked delight, and it angled higher and swung

north. Greystern bit back a moan as they sped off into the night towards distant Inkata.

I'd rather use the Gateways! he thought, feeling his stomach lurch.

Chapter 18: City of Brightness

Ninth Moon, 873 PR

"Riders approaching, your Majesty!" the scout cried as he reined his lathered horse up in front of King Trentan's chestnut steed. He slid out of the saddle, keeping a firm hand on the reins to keep his horse under control.

Marcuris Trentan steadied his own mount, his eyes moving from the scout to the southern horizon where the faintest of dust clouds was visible across the dry grassland.

"And?"

"They look like Inkatese cavalry, your Majesty. About fifty or so. Their banners are flying and they're heading to meet us."

King Trentan nodded to himself. *I expected as much*, he thought. *We're close enough to Inkata for them to finally take notice.* "Send word to the commanders, and tell them to have the soldiers form up in ranks on either side of the wagons. We don't want to look like frightened rabble," he told the scout, even as his thoughts mocked his orders. *Isn't that what we are? Frightened rabble running from a nightmare? With no kingdom, no army, and no home of our own anymore. Just many tired, terrified people looking for a safe place to forget their nightmare...*

King Trentan shook himself free from the disturbing thoughts. The scout remounted and trotted down the winding line of wagons and horses that stretched back along the hard-packed earth of the trade road. King Trentan directed his chestnut off to the side of the road to let the forward wagons go past. He tried not to look at the faces of his people as they passed him, some riding in the backs of open wagons, others mounted, and some even walking along the dusty road. He still had a hard time believing that Dyrenn was gone, destroyed, and that he and his people were no better than refugees looking for a place to take them in. *Like beggars looking for charity*, he thought bitterly. The strength of that emotion startled him. *Would it have been better to stay behind and fight? At least then we wouldn't be tired and hungry and thirsty all the*

time, wondering who will shelter us or turn us away. At least then we wouldn't have to hang on strings of hope, praying to the Spirits for aid. We should have fought and died!

"Father? Are you all right?"

King Trentan glanced up sharply. He hadn't realized his daughter had ridden up to join him. "Miranda... I'm— I'm fine," he managed to say. Suddenly it felt like the crown he wore weighed heavily on him. He could feel the gold circlet topped by the long jeweled spike pressing against his skull as if it would crush his brain.

Miranda pursed her lips slightly but didn't press the issue. She was riding her sorrel mare, and was dressed in dark riding pants and a light tunic. Her mass of auburn hair blew in the steady breeze; the silver circlet of the Crown Princess of Dyrenn rested in those curls and stopped her hair from becoming a total mess.

"Khrystana says Arathorn is doing better. He awakened briefly, and she thinks he is almost healed. He might even be back on his feet by the time we reach Inkata."

The good news lifted Marcuris' spirits a little. With all his other worries lately, he had almost forgotten about the elf's condition. He managed a smile. "That's good to hear. It seems Lady De'Faerr has worked wonders for Arathorn."

Miranda smiled knowingly, but just nodded in agreement.

"There are riders coming this way from Inkata," he said to her. "We should discover what kind of reception we will receive from the Circle shortly."

"Do you think they'll welcome us, father?" Miranda asked, following her father's eyes to the dust cloud on the horizon.

"I hope so, child. I hope so."

* * * *

Cyan wiped his face with the edge of his tunic and grimaced at the smudges of sweat and dirt already dotting his shirt. The afternoon sun was no help, it shone down

from a sky nearly absent of clouds on him and the rest of the Dyrenn soldiers walking in a scattered group. He squinted and picked Rorx's litter back up.

"Hot enough for ye, lad?" Rorx asked. The black-bearded dwarf still rode in the crude litter Cyan was dragging. Everyone had taken turns hauling Rorx along the packed dirt of the trade road to Inkata.

"It wouldn't be so bad if I didn't have to drag you around," Cyan grunted as the litter bounced across a rut in the road and nearly threw him off balance. Rorx made a growling noise as the jolt sent a fresh wave of pain down his wounded leg.

"Sorry."

"It be all right, lad. You're not as bad as *some* people," Rorx threw a dark glance over towards where Garroc trudged along behind them. Captain Fissk and the rest of the Dyrenn soldiers were loosely scattered around them on the road.

"Aw, quit your whining," Garroc retorted. "At least you haven't had to walk all this way! My feet feel like they're made of lead!"

"Just like yer brain," Rorx muttered to himself, but Cyan caught his words and tried to hold back a snicker. "And just how much longer do I have to be jerked and bounced around on this thrice-cursed road?" Rorx demanded, louder this time.

"Captain Fissk says if we keep pushing hard we'll only be a day or two behind the rest of the Dyrenns. They should be reaching Inkata any day now," Cyan offered.

"Humph! It ain't fair they got all them wagons and horses and we gotta walk!"

"*Whose* got to walk?" Garroc growled.

"Hey! It's not me fault that bastard dwarf stuck me leg with his knife! Ye think I like ridin' in this darned contraption? Bah! If I could, I'd be walkin' right along with the rest o' ye!" Rorx protested.

"And I'm a goblin housewife!" Garroc snorted.

Cyan was glad neither could see his broad grin. He tried to ignore the bead of sweat that started running down the side of his nose, and concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other. He tried his best to avoid the ruts and bumps in the road for Rorx's sake, but after a while the weight of the dwarf pulling at his arms made them feel like they were burning up from the inside.

"Here, Cyan. Let me take the old bag of bones," Garroc offered when he noticed Cyan starting to tire. "And you—" he said to Rorx, "you need to learn not to eat so much all the time! This would be a lot easier if you didn't weigh as much as a blasted ogr!"

"Hey now!" Rorx said. "Me muscle's weigh more than some old ogr's fat, ye know!"

"And I guess that little bulge you try to cover with your beard is all muscle then, huh?" Cyan teased, as Garroc took the handles of the litter from him.

"Aye! Table muscle!" Rorx grinned, patting his belly.

* * * *

Miranda rode next to her father, trying to keep an eye on both him and the cavalry that trotted up the road to meet them. She worried about her father— he seemed to be taking the loss of Dyrenn harder than anybody. *I hope he doesn't blame himself*, she thought. *There's nothing he could have done to prevent it.* King Trentan's hair appeared to have quite a bit more gray in it than it used to have, and his face had a few more worry lines etched at the corners of his eyes. *Be strong, father!* she urged him silently. *We still have hope.*

King Trentan waved his hand and Miranda prodded her horse closer to him. A detachment of mounted Dyrenn soldiers moved in around them as the King led them all ahead of the rest of the long wagon train to meet the Inkatese cavalry. One of the soldiers riding near Miranda carried a long staff with the Rose and Spear banner of Dyrenn flying in the breeze as they rode forward. Miranda looked up at the design

worked on a field of green and was reminded of the rose pendant that hung around her neck. She bit her lip and forced thoughts of Cyan and his gift to her from her mind.

King Trentan signaled them to rein in their horses, and Miranda saw the leader of the Inkatese cavalry do the same. The two groups eased closer to each other at a slow walk; dust, churned up from the road by the horses' hooves, blew in a cloud to the southeast. Miranda studied the Inkatese soldiers and the man who rode at their forefront. The soldiers' uniforms were dusty from their travel, but they were still recognizable as white tabards worn over chain mail. Each man had a tight-fitting steel helmet with a flaring nose-guard that reached down the center of his face, giving each a strange, fierce look. Many of the men sported beards and goatees, most of them the color of straw. They wore heavy leather gauntlets with steel plates worked into the backs, and most of the soldiers carried at least two or three weapons apiece. The apparent commander of the troop also wore a white tabard over his armor, but his was emblazoned with a design of small golden circles that interlocked into the shape of a larger circle. As she watched him, the man dismounted, removed his helmet, and bowed formally to King Trentan. He had close-cropped blond hair and a well-trimmed beard of the same color. He had blue eyes that reminded Miranda of the sky.

"Greetings from the Circle of Inkata," the leader of the Inkatese soldiers said officially. "I am Lord-Commander Jase Cail, representative of the Circle and emissary to His Majesty, Marcuris Trentan, King of Dyrenn, Lord of the Rose and Spear, and Guardian of the Northern Realm."

Miranda had rarely heard the titles of her father spoken so. It was something usually reserved for only the most formal meetings.

King Trentan inclined his head to Lord-Commander Cail. "Greetings, Lord-Commander. I am King Marcuris Trentan, and this is my daughter, Miranda Trentan,

Crown Princess of Dyrenn, and Rose of the Northern Realm. Our thanks to the Circle for your welcome.”

Jase Cail’s sky-blue eyes settled on Miranda and the Lord-Commander bowed deeply to her. “Truly you are the Rose of the North, Princess,” he said, and Miranda was left wondering whether he was being formal or sincere. Before she could think on it, Cail’s attention shifted back to her father.

“The Circle has bid me to escort you and your... entourage to Inkata,” Cail said hesitantly, his eyes taking in the long stretch of people and wagons. “The Circle awaits your arrival and is preparing places for you and your councilors in the Fortress of the Circle itself.”

King Trentan nodded his head. “Thank you, Lord-Commander. I’m afraid there is much that I must bring to the Circle’s attention once we reach Inkata. I hope that arrangements can be made for my people once we arrive.”

Cail pursed his lips thoughtfully. “It is not up to me to decide, but I trust the Circle will see that all of you are taken care of well. If I may be so bold, your Majesty, may I suggest we resume traveling? My men and I passed a good place to rest an hour’s travel back down the trade road towards Inkata. There is water, and it will have us well on our way to the city.”

“By all means, Lord-Commander. The sooner we reach Inkata the better.”

Jase Cail bowed again and vaulted back into the saddle of his horse. He shouted a command and the Inkatese cavalry moved off to either side of the trade road. King Trentan wheeled his chestnut around, and Miranda and the Dyrenn soldiers followed him back to the front of the halted wagons. King Trentan sent the soldiers to get the wagons moving forward again.

“Well, father, isn’t this what you wanted?” Miranda asked.

“I suppose, Miranda,” Marcuris admitted, “but I still don’t have to enjoy it.”

Miranda shot her father a worried look, but he didn't seem to notice. He was already watching as the lead wagons trundled down the road, passing by Lord-Commander Cail and his men. The Inkatese soldiers flanked both sides of the road like some kind of honor guard as the Dyrenns and their wagons rolled by. Miranda caught Lord-Commander Cail watching them both, and she remembered his honeyed words and the way his sky blue eyes had studied her. She hastily summoned an image of Cyan and tried to fix it in her mind.

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Arathorn gradually became aware of the steady, rolling movement of the wagon, and he eased his eyes open to look around him. Overhead, the white canvas that was stretched over the rounded frame to cover the wagon was still brightly lit by the afternoon sunshine, and Arathorn was surprised to find that he could actually feel the warm air around him. *I am back in my body!* he realized, as he became aware of the feel of the blankets pulled up to his waist. He also felt the stiffness of the wagon bed beneath him, despite the few blankets used as a thin cushion between him and the bare wood. Arathorn blinked as his eyes adjusted to the brightness of daylight and he took a deep breath of the warm air, feeling only a slight twinge of discomfort in his lower ribs. *The arrow wound*, he remembered, and gently felt around the bandages that still bound the wound.

"I see you finally decided to wake up, Beloved," a familiar voice purred from nearby. Arathorn tried to sit up, but he only managed to prop himself up on his elbows.

"Khrystana?"

"Here, Beloved," the raven-haired sorceress smiled as she knelt beside him. Her deep blue eyes sparkled, and Arathorn thought it looked like she was almost ready to cry. "Don't try to move too much. Your body is still recovering from your injury and

the absence of your *qith'kha* for so long. The weakness should fade soon enough, and your wound is healing nicely. You will be on your feet by the time we reach Inkata."

Arathorn tried to follow all her words, but it was hard to concentrate with her so close to him. All the senses he had lacked while separated from his body flooded back in a torrent of sensation. He could smell Khrystana's light perfume in the air and he took deep breaths until his head swam with the intoxicating scent of her. He studied her face with hungry eyes, trying to commit every nuance to memory, finding himself drawn to her almond-shaped blue eyes like a moth to flame. *Spirits above, she is beautiful!*

"What is wrong, Beloved?" she asked him, concern filling her voice and her eyes. "Are you feeling all right?"

"I am fine, now," he whispered, hesitantly reaching out to touch her. His fingers met the silky smoothness of her alabaster cheek, and Arathorn thrilled to the sensation of being able to touch again. *I've never felt anything so soft and smooth...* He stretched his fingers until they feathered through her raven-black hair. *She called me 'Beloved'!* he suddenly realized with a start.

"Be... Beloved?" he managed to stammer questioningly.

Khrystana took his hand in both of hers and raised it to her lips. She kissed the back of his hand and then gently turned his hand and kissed his palm. Arathorn felt goose-bumps shiver down his arm at her touch. Khrystana met his confused gaze and nodded. "Yes, Arathorn. You are my Beloved— now, and for as long as you will have me," she said softly, and now tears spilled freely down her cheeks.

Arathorn tried to speak, but found himself at a loss for words. Ignoring Khrystana's earlier admonition, he slowly sat up next to her and tenderly wiped her tears. *I wished I could do this when I was still a spirit, and now I finally can!* he exulted. Her tears were warm against his fingertips, but he hardly noticed as they locked eyes. Khrystana's deep blue orbs pulled him in closer, until he was only dimly aware that his

arms had encircled her shoulders and that their faces were only a hairsbreadth apart. He could feel her quickened breath upon his face, and feel her arms gently closing around him. It was as if the wagon around them had ceased to be. There was only Khrystana— her wonderful smell, the feel of her soft skin, the warmth of her body, the deep longing in her watery blue eyes, and finally, the most soul-touching and yearned for sensation of all... the taste of her lips meeting his.

They held the kiss for what seemed like an eternity. Arathorn felt time slow as their lips touched, and it seemed that their lives became entirely centered on that single kiss. Then, ever so slowly, Khrystana drew back, and the world slammed back into existence with heavy suddenness. The wagon jolted as it hit a rut in the road and Arathorn had to let go of her to brace himself to keep from falling back onto the blankets. The moment was gone, but the memory of their kiss remained, burning itself into his brain.

“You... you should lie back down... Beloved,” Khrystana whispered, her voice tight with emotion. “You shouldn’t...tax your strength so...”

“Khrystana, I—“

“Shhh,” Khrystana laid a finger against his lips before he could say anything more. “When the time is right, Beloved. For now, rest. I will be here with you. We will be in Inkata soon. Then we will see about getting you back on your feet. But not until then,” she added firmly, silencing any of his protests. She gently pushed him back until he was lying down again. “I will get you some food and water. You need to rebuild your strength.”

Arathorn watched her move to the front of the wagon bed so she could talk to the driver. His emotions were in an uproar, and there were so many things he wanted to say, wanted to ask her. But he kept quiet for now. *When the time is right*, he thought, echoing her words. He settled back and looked up at the canvas cover of the wagon,

not really seeing it at all, but rather, seeing blue eyes and raven-black hair, and remembering a kiss that lasted forever.

* * * *

Miranda slept fitfully, but when she finally awakened in the early morning hours, she couldn't remember the dreams that had bothered her. She told herself it was just nervous excitement; Lord-Commander Cail had said they would reach Inkata by mid-afternoon today. Even her father had seemed in slightly better spirits when they halted for the night. He and Cail had still been up talking when she had retired to her wagon to sleep.

Miranda stifled a yawn as she dressed, picking out one of her better silk blouses from the chest of clothes she had brought from the palace. She knew that when they reached Inkata she might have to accompany her father to his meeting with the Circle, so she wanted to look presentable. *And what about Lord-Commander Jase Cail?* she asked herself. *Do you want to look nice for him as well?* The leader of the Inkatese embassy from the Circle was undeniably handsome, but Miranda had managed to pretend not to see his subtle glances. She was beginning to believe he had been truthful when he had said she was truly the "Rose of the North." But ever since her talk with Khrystana, Miranda found it increasingly more difficult to fan the flames of her anger with Cyan. *It'd be easier to think of Jase Cail if I were still mad at you, Cyan, but I'm not. I just wish you were here right now...*

Miranda tried to force thoughts of Cyan from her head as she finished pulling on her supple calf-length riding boots. She could hear some of the horses being hitched to wagons outside, and other sounds of the large camp stirring reached her ears. She climbed down out of the back of her wagon and rubbed her mare down before saddling her. Miranda didn't bother waiting for a soldier or servant to help her; she was impatient to get this long journey over. *Once we reach Inkata, it will only be a few days until Cyan*

and the others catch up... if everything went as planned back home. Spirits! Please let him be safe! Please! No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't keep him from her thoughts.

She ate a scant breakfast with some soldiers gathered near her father's wagon. She could see Lord-Commander Cail's cavalry group a short distance off, their white tabards setting them apart from the Dyrenns' darker clothing. There were more clouds in the sky today, and even though Miranda knew the land needed the rain, she hoped it would hold off until they reached Inkata. She didn't want to arrive soaked to the bone, and she could just imagine the trouble the wagons might have if the trade road started turning muddy.

Despite all her impatience and anxiety, the Dyrenns didn't get moving again for another half hour. Miranda climbed in the saddle of her sorrel mare and contented herself with dropping back from the head of the column where her father rode alongside Lord-Commander Cail. She did not feel like enduring the Inkatese soldier's discreet glances and polite conversation. *I don't need to encourage him*, she thought with a rueful smile. *I've dealt with ardent suitors before. Too bad there's no fountain to throw him in*, she grinned, remembering the night she had first met Cyan.

As the morning progressed, Miranda tried to remember all the lessons she had been given and the books she had read about Inkata. She recalled the city's other name, the City of Brightness, but she couldn't remember why it was called that. She knew it was larger than Dyrenn had been, perhaps as much as four or five times bigger, and that it had been built after the devastation of the Dragon Wars. The city was governed by a council rather than a monarch, and the Inkatese ruling council, called the Circle, had thirteen members that represented the various aspects of the city's day to day functioning. Inkata was a major center for trade, with goods coming to and from Jynlamadh in the south, Dyrenn in the north, and Ruh-Xsok to the east. Even the elves

of Tree-Haven and the dwarves of Ckar-Regnock sometimes sent merchant caravans to trade in Inkata. The city was surrounded by the fertile lands of the Kindrithi grasslands, and its farms produced enough to support the region with plenty leftover to trade.

Timber was in short supply in the grasslands, and shipments of lumber from the elves and the Dyrenns provided the building materials needed to keep the ever-growing city expanding. Quarries in the Forgotten Mountains provided the necessary stone.

Compared with Inkata, she realized that Dyrenn would seem more like a country outpost than a city. She gritted her teeth and told herself that she would keep her dignity when they reached the city and not act like some poor farmer seeing the place for the first time. She grinned as she imagined what Cyan's reaction to Inkata might be. *He was impressed by Dyrenn. Inkata might very well make his jaw drop!* she thought, blocking off the nagging voice that tried to add, *If he's still alive...*

The clouds continued to build throughout the morning, until the sky was hidden by slate-gray sheets of cloud. A warm breeze still blew in from the west, but the air had the smell of rain to it, and Miranda wondered if they would get soaked before they reached Inkata. A rumble of thunder in the distance seemed to underscore her thoughts. She kept a firm hand on the reins and urged her mare back up towards the front of the wagons. *Cail will know if we're getting close to Inkata yet,* she told herself.

Miranda was drawing near the lead wagons, when she spotted a small detachment of the white-tabarded Inkatese cavalry galloping off down the trade road. She spied her father and Jase Cail still riding together and she flicked the reins to guide her mare towards them.

"Where are they going?" she asked.

Her father turned in the saddle and his dark eyes flashed between surprise at her presence and a spark of hope. "Look for yourself," King Trentan said, pointing off to the south, beyond the galloping riders.

Miranda squinted and followed her father's hand with her eyes. On the far southern horizon, something white glistened, even in the overcast light of the rain clouds.

"Inkata?" she asked hopefully.

Her father smiled at her. "Yes. Lord-Commander Cail sent some of his men to prepare the city for our arrival."

Miranda glanced over at Cail; he inclined his head to her politely, his lips curving up minutely in a smile. "It seems your long journey is over, Princess," he said, blue eyes watching her.

Miranda nodded quietly, unsure how to reply to Cail's comment without either offending the man or encouraging him. She was conscious of her father riding next to her. She turned her eyes back to the white spot on the horizon. "Now I remember why Inkata is called the City of Brightness," she said to herself, but both her father and Jase Cail heard her.

"Indeed, the whitestone used to build the walls and the Inner City have earned the city's name," Cail remarked. "Our stonemasons still use some of the original stone quarries in the Forgotten Mountains that were used to build Inkata after the Dragon Wars. Inkata was the cradle of mankind's recovery after those dark days," Cail went on. "The ancient stories say that it was from here that men spread back across Pysidia to rebuild the cities after the elves and dwarves became reclusive."

Miranda noted the obvious traces of pride in Cail's voice as he spoke of Inkata's history. She thought it sounded like he was almost bragging. The Lord-Commander kept any further comments to himself though, and they rode on in silence until the white blur of Inkata began to grow larger and more distinct on the horizon. Miranda's breath caught in her throat as they drew closer. Reading about the city was one thing, but seeing it was something entirely different.

The grassland beyond them was a patchwork of tilled fields separated by low walls of gleaming whitestone. Cottages and farmhouses dotted the landscape, and after days in the open wilderness of the plains, Miranda was thrilled to see human habitations again. She could see people out working in their fields, hoeing weeds in the long rows of green crops. Plumes of smoke rose from cottage chimneys, and she realized that soon the workers would pause for their high sun meal. Some of the closer farmers in their fields stopped to watch the first of the Dyrenn wagons roll by, their eyes wide with curiosity. Miranda grinned and resisted the urge to wave to a nearby farmer who was leaning on his hoe, watching the long procession trundle past.

Up ahead, the cottages and houses grew more clustered, until they lined the trade road on both sides. The hard-packed dirt of the trade road was replaced by white cobblestones, and the horses' hooves *clicked* sharply on the stone. People peered through windows or leaned out their doors as Miranda, her father, and Lord-Commander Cail led the way for the rest of the Dyrenns to follow. A group of children kicking a rag ball on the road scattered into the alleys between houses as they rode past. Miranda flashed smiles at the little boys watching her from the alley corners and they darted farther back, but still never took their eyes off her. *A whole new generation of suitors*, Miranda thought to herself with a sly grin, seeing how some of the boys' eyes followed her.

But what had taken her breath away still loomed high up above the clustered two and three story houses and shops. Gleaming as if the full light of the sun shone on them, towering walls rose up ahead, dwarfing anything Miranda could have imagined. Even taller whitestone towers thrust up from the walls like shining lances. Banners and pennants bearing the golden, interlocked circles of Inkata flapped in the breeze. Everything seemed to glow with its own bright light, despite the dark gray clouds that

blotted out the daytime sun. *I can only imagine what it must look like on a sunny day!*

Miranda thought, craning her neck to look up at the top of the wall and the high towers.

"This is the Outer City," Lord-Commander Cail was saying, gesturing to all the homes and shops that spread out around the glistening white walls. "There are so many people who live in Inkata that not all of them can live inside the city itself," his tone of voice made Miranda think that he liked it that way better. "Mostly farmers and laborers live in the Outer City, while the craftsmen, merchants, and citizens live in the Inner City," he pointed ahead of them to the massive, burnished steel gates that were flung wide open on their massive hinges set into a large arch in the white wall. Miranda saw chains thicker than her waist connected to the gates and vanishing off into the two large towers that flanked the gates. Soldiers in white tabards kept an eye on the flow of people that moved into and out of the Inner City, but most of them were already watching the long column of Dyrenn wagons approaching the gates. The men Lord-Commander Cail had sent on ahead were mounted on their horses and waiting just off to one side of the moving crowds.

Lord-Commander Cail drew his horse up short of the gates. The Inkatese soldiers at the gate snapped to rigid attention, their right hands moving to rest on their sword hilts, their fingers splayed apart in a salute that looked strange to Miranda.

"Has word been sent on ahead to the Circle, Shield-Leader?" Cail addressed a gate guard with one golden circle embroidered on his white tabard.

"Yes, Lord-Commander," the guard responded crisply, keeping his eyes fixed forward. "Your imminent arrival was reported as soon as your men reached the gates."

"Excellent," Cail said, more to himself than the rigid guard. The Lord-Commander turned in the saddle to look at King Trenton and Miranda. "By the time we reach the Fortress of the Circle, there will be rooms prepared for you. I'm certain the Circle will wish to meet with you soon."

"What about the rest of my people?" King Trenton asked, looking back down the trade road at the long file of wagons and horses.

A faint flicker of surprise passed across Jase Cail's face. Miranda noted it only as a slight narrowing of the man's blue eyes, as if he was fighting to conceal his obvious distaste for the lower classes. She remembered the way he had talked about the farmers and laborers in the Outer City, and she wondered if he held the same feelings for the majority of the Dyrenns who were not nobility, or couldn't buy similar status with large amounts of gold.

"My men will escort them to an area of the Inner City where they will be comfortable and remain out of the way of the majority of the city's inhabitants. If that suits your Majesty's wishes?" Cail asked, suddenly seeming cautious. Miranda wondered if Cail thought he might have offended them with his surprise at her father's concern for the Dyrenns. *Doesn't the Circle look after the Inkatese people's well-being?* she thought.

"That is more than acceptable, Lord-Commander Cail," King Trenton said, and if her father felt any strong emotion at all, he kept it very well hidden.

Jase Cail nodded sharply and turned back to the leader of the gate guards, who still stood at attention. "Shield-Leader, send word to the Fortress of the Circle that I am having the Dyrenns taken to the Monastery Grove in the city."

"At once, Lord-Commander," the Shield-Leader saluted by closing his open fingers around his sword hilt and drawing the blade a quarter way from its scabbard before turning to issue orders to his subordinates.

"That seems like a strange salute," Miranda remarked after they had passed under the towering arch that made the framework for the shining steel gates. "Does it mean something, Lord-Commander?" *I wont call him Jase!* she told herself.

Lord-Commander Cail looked happy to explain. He let his horse slow enough so he rode next to her and her father, as the rest of his cavalry command cleared the streets just ahead of them. "Did you notice how they keep their hands open on their sword hilts, Princess?" he asked.

"Yes, what does it signify?" Miranda saw that her father was also listening closely now.

"The open hand is symbolic; it means they will not draw their sword against you. When I dismissed the Shield-Leader, he partially drew his sword so that if he had displeased me he would at least die with his sword in hand. It is a sign of respect for the superior officer's authority. That way the superior officer does not have to strike down an unarmed man and lose face."

Miranda forced herself to nod in understanding, even though she didn't. It took all her concentration not to show her shock and horror at the strange custom. *Cail could have killed that man if he had displeased him? That's absurd! That guard would have let him, too! Unbelievable!*

Miranda glanced over at her father, but the look he gave her told her to keep her thoughts to herself. His small frown seemed to say "Don't judge them too hastily. Their customs are not ours." Miranda nodded almost imperceptibly and returned her attention to the city around them.

The streets were broad, easily wide enough for three or four wagons abreast, and all paved in glimmering whitestone bricks. Ornately carved and polished lampposts curled up from the street corners like silver shoots of new growth unfurling in the spring time, cradling delicate-looking blown-glass globes housing the wicks that would be lit come evening. Even the tiniest home or shop sported some of the shining whitestone, while fine-grained timbers that looked lovingly polished and varnished offset the rest. The majority of buildings, nearly all whitestone, gleamed brightly even in the dim light of

the overcast day. Spiraled towers seemed to stretch to the clouds, and other homes looked more like small palaces carved from ice or snow. At street intersections, fountains and statues filled broad plazas that teemed with people going about their business. Horse-drawn carriages passed alongside ox-pulled wagons loaded with fresh produce from the fields around the city. Some of the coaches were elaborately decorated with gilded boxes, and the horses that pulled them wore fanciful headpieces with tassels and colored plumes. Folk lined the sidewalks, some dressed in plain workmen's clothing, while others wore decoratively stitched long coats with high embroidered collars. Miranda caught herself eyeing a young nobleman in a bright red coat, with golden stags running up his sleeves, before she shook herself back to her senses. *This city is incredible!* she thought. *And we've only passed through the first few blocks!*

All around her the whitestone buildings seemed to grow right up out of the earth, and everywhere she looked there were more and more people. The colors of their clothing seemed a splashing contrast to the glaring white of the buildings, until the streets seemed more like living, moving rainbows bordered by solid white cloud-like buildings. Miranda had to rub her eyes after awhile. *I still can't imagine what it would look like under full sunlight!* Jase Cail must have noticed her wondering eyes; he glanced her way and flashed her a toothy grin.

Cail's men cleared the way for them until eventually they turned down another wide avenue that opened into a huge open plaza paved in whitestone bricks. Massive four-story buildings flanked three sides of the plaza, and the open end was a green flourish of trees growing here in the middle of the city.

"This is the Monastery Grove, King Trentan," Lord-Commander Cail said, gesturing towards the edge of the forest ahead. "These buildings are owned by the Circle and are used to house visitors to the city. Your people are free to use them,

although I fear there will not be room enough for all. The rest may draw their wagons up here in the plaza. I'm sure the Circle will see that food and water are provided in abundant amounts."

"Thank you, Lord-Commander," King Trentan nodded graciously, his eyes taking in the verdant green woods that were a distinct contrast to the white buildings. "If you will allow me time to see to my people, I will accompany you to the Fortress of the Circle shortly."

"Of course, your Majesty," Jase Cail nodded back, his blue eyes still showing a little surprise at the King's deep concern for his people. Miranda bit her tongue to keep from commenting on his apparent callousness. *Their customs are different than ours*, she repeated to herself, but it didn't really help.

They reined their horses in to the side of the street entering the plaza bordering the Grove, and King Trentan drew a few of the more senior Dyrenn soldiers aside to explain to them how to get the rest of the Dyrenns settled. When he was satisfied that the people would be cared for, he turned back to Lord-Commander Cail and nodded that he was ready to move on to the Circle. Wagons were already filing into the plaza under the direction of the Dyrenn soldiers, and Miranda spotted families starting to unload some of their belongings from their wagons. She allowed herself a small sigh of relief to finally be done travelling, but the stunning beauty and grandeur of Inkata made her think of Dyrenn. Thinking about her home, now only a smoldering ruin, dampened her enthusiasm. She suddenly felt conscious of herself and the rest of the Dyrenns, sweaty and dusty from their time on the road. *We don't fit in here*, she thought sadly. *Our home is gone*.

"This way, if you please, your Majesty. Princess," Jase Cail caught her eyes for a moment before nodding slightly and directing his horse back down the street where the Dyrenn wagons were still moving towards their temporary home. Miranda ignored his

blue-eyed stare, but she felt her cheeks heating. She wheeled her mare to follow Cail and her father. *Spirits! I wish Cyan were here!*

* * * *

The first thing Arathorn was aware of when he opened his eyes was the silence. There was no creaking of wagon axles, no *clip-clop* of horses' hooves, and not even the snap of reins or the commands of the team drivers. *We've stopped*, he thought. *Is it night already?* It was dim inside the wagon bed, but not the encompassing darkness of late evening. *No, not nighttime yet*, he mused, still lying on his back. *Then why are we stopped?*

Arathorn kicked back the blankets pulled up past his waist and relished the feeling of the prickly wool on his bare skin as he sat up. He found himself savoring all physical sensations now; they reminded him that he was no longer some disembodied spirit. He was wearing breeches, but was without a shirt at the moment. A clean bandage was wrapped tightly around his ribs, but he felt no twinge of pain from the arrow wound in his side. *Khrystana said it was healing quickly. I wouldn't be surprised if she "helped" it along a bit*, he thought, still marveling that the raven-haired beauty could use magic. There were so many things he wanted to ask her, but whenever she was around him, all his thoughts seemed to vanish in the face of her charm and stunning looks. *Not to mention her kisses*, he reminded himself, remembering the feel of her next to him. Goosebumps shivered up and down his arms just thinking about it.

"Are you cold, Beloved?" a sultry voice purred in his ear. "I can warm you back up." Khrystana's soft arms encircled his chest before he knew she had even entered the wagon bed. Arathorn was suddenly very aware of the warmth of her body pressed up against his naked back. The smell of her filled his nostrils, like ripe cherry blossoms heavy with pollen in the springtime, and wisps of her shimmering black hair tickled his bare shoulders. Warm lips brushed the curve of his neck.

“Khrystana...” he luxuriated in the way her name rolled off his tongue, sounding as sensuous and alluring as the elf woman herself. He fought against shivers of pleasure that raced through him as Khrystana’s fingers lightly traced the muscles of his chest with a feathery touch. “Khrystana, I wasn’t cold,” he managed to gasp as she nibbled on his ear.

“No? Are you sure?” the way she asked made him want to give up his senseless protests and just bask in her affection, but from somewhere deep inside he mustered the will to overcome her distractions.

“I’m sure,” he said, a little more forcefully than he intended. Khrystana sighed and withdrew her touch, and Arathorn had to stop himself from begging her to continue again. “Why have we stopped?” he asked, hoping to change the subject so he could forget about the feel of her lips on his skin again... so soft and warm... *Stop it!* he told himself, trying to hold on to his composure.

Khrystana sat down beside him, a slight smirk twisting her full lips, and the gleam in her eyes suggested that she knew how difficult she made it for him to concentrate. “We’ve arrived in Inkata, Beloved,” she spoke softly, her voice full of promises that Arathorn assiduously pretended not to hear.

“Inkata? We made it? Thank the Spirits!”

Khrystana smiled at his enthusiasm. “King Trentan and Princess Miranda went to the Fortress of the Circle with some Inkatese commander. The Dyrenns have been given a large plaza and the neighboring buildings to make their temporary home. You’ve been sleeping ever since we arrived.”

“I’ve been tired– I can’t help it,” Arathorn shrugged.

“I know, Beloved. It’s part of the healing process. But you look much better now. I think you are well enough to move about some.”

“Good. I’m tired of looking at the inside of this wagon all the time. I could use some fresh air.”

“I’m coming with you,” Khrystana said, in a tone that brooked no argument. “I didn’t spend all this effort nursing you back to health just to see you ruin it all by overtaxing yourself the first day.”

“Yes, my Lady De’Faerr,” Arathorn answered, sounding just humble enough to pass for proper submission.

Khrystana eyed him with a dangerous-looking glint to her deep blue eyes. “If I have to, I will bind you so tightly with magic that you won’t even be able to blink an eyelash without my permission, *Beloved*,” the grin that fought its way to her lips spoiled her mock severity.

“And would you use your magic to... *warm* me up if I get cold?” Arathorn teased playfully.

“I wouldn’t need it,” Khrystana said seriously. “All I would have to do is this—” she leaned forward and snared him in a kiss that seemed to turn his nerves to flaming sparks. His body was a tingling mass of fire by the time she released him. “You see?” she arched one delicate black eyebrow in amusement.

Arathorn let out a ragged sigh. He reached for a shirt to put on to cover the goosebumps that stood out on his skin.

“What? You’re not going bare-chested?” Khrystana laughed, a rich, lilting sound that lifted Arathorn’s spirits even higher. “You know I like seeing you without a shirt on, *Beloved*. Do you want me to take my blouse off too? It would only be fair,” her blue eyes sparkled with mischief.

Arathorn could feel his face turning red all the way up to the roots of his golden hair. He refused to look at her— if he did he might not have the strength to refuse her

offer. *And knowing her*, he thought, *she's probably not just teasing me!* Arathorn stifled a groan and pulled on his boots. Khrystana was still laughing.

* * * *

After the past two days of overcast gray skies and scattered rain showers, Cyan was more than happy to see patches of blue sky through gaps in the cloud cover. His clothes were still a little damp from the last brief shower earlier this morning. Captain Fissk and the other Dyrenn soldiers didn't complain about the dampness, the muddy trade road they followed, or the scant amount of food they had left. Cyan ignored the empty feeling in his stomach and forced himself to keep walking. Garroc walked beside him, taking his turn at dragging Rorx in the litter, but neither dwarf was as stoic in keeping their complaints to themselves.

"Fireforger's blood!" Rorx muttered. "Draggin' me through the mud and wet like some old carpet! If me father saw this he'd hang up his hammers and jump in his own forge for shame!"

"More like he'd die laughing," Garroc grunted, his boots *squelching* in thick mud as he searched for drier ground.

"Yer real funny, a regular court jester!" Rorx retorted, adding a few choice words under his breath that Cyan didn't quite hear.

"Both of you shut up," Cyan interrupted, before Garroc could respond back with his own comments. "Those look like farms up ahead!" he pointed to the south, where the wild grasslands gave way to a pattern of tilled fields and low white walls. In the distance, something white glittered on the horizon.

"We must be almost to Inkata then," Garroc noted.

"About damn time!" Rorx added from the litter.

Cyan studied the cottages and farmhouses that dotted the vast patchwork quilt of fields. Some had simple thatched roofs, while others had colorful tiles. Many of them

were built of the same bright white stone that made up the low walls between fields. Only the poorest looking cottages were white-washed clay bricks. Cyan saw a few farmers working around the farmhouses or in their fields, but the majority of them must have decided to stay out of their wet fields.

Seeing men and younger boys out hoeing weeds and doing chores brought back memories that Cyan thought he had buried long ago. He forced away the burning tears in his eyes, even as the memory of carrying water from the well for his mother, Cora, grew fresh in his mind. He turned his eyes away from the wheat and corn fields and focused on the slurping mud of the trade road.

As they drew closer to the city, the houses and buildings grew thicker and clustered around the trade road like one long village leading up to the rising, shining walls of Inkata that dominated the landscape. Even taller towers of glimmering white reached towards the clouds above the vast city. Cyan forced himself to blink— Inkata made Dyrenn seem like a backwater village. Every line and curve of stone spoke of grace and beauty. *It's marvelous*, Cyan thought, craning his neck to look up at the top of the shining stone wall that marked the edge of the city. In the face of the great wall and the reaching towers, Cyan barely noticed the rows of shops and homes lining the trade road as it led up to a set of massive burnished steel gates that opened on giant hinges. Guards in white tabards over chain mail kept watch over the gates. Cyan noticed that more than a few of the Inkatese soldiers were watching them closely.

"I'm not likin' how they be eyein' us," Rorx muttered softly. He had twisted in the litter to peer around Garroc's legs.

"You can't blame them," Cyan said quietly. "We've been on the road for over a week." *And I haven't had a bath in that long either.* "We probably don't look like the cleanest, friendliest people— and put your axe down!" he hissed at Rorx.

Captain Fissk led the way up to the gates, and Cyan became very aware of the number of white-tabarded guards who had turned their attention to the small group.

“What business do you have in Inkata?” a guard asked Fissk. The man’s tabard had a small golden circle embroidered over his heart, and he eyed the group of Dyrenns, as well as Garroc and Rorx, with a suspicious eye.

“We are from Dyrenn,” Captain Fissk said calmly. “We were following after the rest of our people. Have they arrived here?”

“If you’re really from Dyrenn, how come you weren’t with the rest of them? I wasn’t told to expect more stragglers from up north.”

“Stragglers?” Rorx bristled. “Why, I’ll show him *stragglers!*” With his leg healing, Rorx was starting to act more like his old self.

“Quiet!” Cyan whispered. “Do you want to make this even harder for us?”

“It’d be worth it to— ouch!” Rorx rubbed his leg where Garroc had thumped it with the handle of his battle-axe.

“There! Now be quiet so Fissk can get us inside!” Garroc growled.

They ended up having to wait nearly an hour before the Inkatese guards were convinced that they really were from Dyrenn and decided to allow them to enter the city. Even then, a small group of white-tabarded soldiers was sent along to “escort” them to the plaza where the rest of the Dyrenns were staying. By the time they were allowed into the city, even Cyan was starting to agree that Rorx’s methods might have been faster, and even easier.

Their supposed escort hustled them through the white cobblestone streets of the city, hardly giving them time to glance around. Cyan quickly lost track of where they were headed; every street corner or crossroads seemed to be decorated with statues and fountains that blurred together in Cyan’s memory. The soldiers set a quick pace and Cyan, the dwarves, and the Dyrenns were forced to hurry to keep from getting

separated in the flow of people moving along the streets. Cyan knew he must look like a fool, head twisting one way and then another as he tried to take in the strange new sights. He tried not to stare at men dressed in long coats with embroidered collars and sleeves, and especially not at the women wearing dresses with necklines that plunged lower than he had ever seen before. Unbidden, an image of Miranda wearing such a dress came to mind, and his cheeks flushed red just at the thought.

“What’s the matter, lad? Dreamin’ about yer’ lady-love again?” Rorx chuckled from the litter.

“What? Oh, no! I... I was just thinking,” Cyan stammered.

“Sure ye were, and I’m a bearded elf!” Rorx laughed loudly, wiggling his fingers like pointed elven ears alongside his head.

Before Cyan could come up with a suitable retort, the Inkatese soldiers brought them down a street that opened up into a spacious white-paved plaza. Tall white buildings surrounded the plaza on three sides, and at the far end of the plaza a wall of greenery marked the edge of some kind of park or garden. The plaza was huge, but its size was partially masked by the numerous wagons that had been drawn up in evenly-spaced rows. People clustered around various wagons; others entered or exited the large white buildings on the borders of the plaza. Cyan saw Dyrenn soldiers in their dark and travel-stained clothing scattered among the people.

The Inkatese guardsmen watched suspiciously until one of the closest Dyrenn soldiers spotted them and shouted a greeting. It didn’t take long for the whole plaza to hear the news that the last defenders of Dyrenn had arrived. With slightly disappointed looks on their faces, the Inkatese guards left them to their strange welcome.

Captain Fissk led the way into the plaza that housed the Dyrenns, but even he couldn’t force his way through the crowds of people that seemed to appear as the word quickly spread. People cheered that they were alive and well; men and women reached

for hands to shake and cheeks to kiss. But other Dyrenns frantically looked at the ragged bunch of less than forty souls, and started shouting painful questions.

“Lord Cyan! Where’s my son? Where’s my Rej? He stayed to fight alongside you!”

“Baen! Sergeant, where’s my husband, Baen?”

The shouting grew louder, until the cries of parents, wives, and children seemed to ring in Cyan’s ears. Each question was like a slap in the face, reminding him of the men who had not escaped from Dyrenn with their lives.

Captain Fissk shouted for quiet over the din. He raised his arms and bellowed for silence. People in the growing crowd of Dyrenns echoed his shout until a tense calm seemed to settle over the people.

“Please!” Fissk said, loud enough to be heard by nearly all. “I know the past days have not been easy for you. But you must understand that those of us who stayed behind knew full well that death was a serious possibility! If you do not see the faces of your sons and husbands here, it is because they died fighting so that you could escape and live! They died to save you. They burned our very homes to the ground so that the enemy would have nothing!! Their lives bought you the time to flee to safety! And the army of the Demon Prince took a harsh blow from those men! One hundred against thousands!! They will live in legend for ages to come! The Defenders of Dyrenn! Remember them, but do not weep! Carry them in your hearts with pride, for their sacrifice meant that you could live to sing of them to the generations to come!”

Fissk’s last words faded from the hushed air of the plaza. Cyan exhaled slowly—he hadn’t realized he had been holding his breath. *And Fissk calls me “Lord”. I should call him that. I could never hope to be so eloquent and... and noble,* Cyan thought. Captain Fissk’s moving words had quieted the Dyrenns, and Cyan saw men nodding their heads in agreement, and women wiping at stray tears.

“If ye two are done standin’ here like bloomin’ trees puttin’ down roots, how about us gettin’ somewhere we can get washed up? I smell worse than an ogr’s dirty feet and I’m as hungry as a fox in room full o’ rabbits! Let’s get movin’!”

Garroc snorted irritably, and Cyan shot Rorx a dirty look.

“What? What’d I say?”

Cyan shook his head. “You sure know how to ruin a moment, Rorx.”

Rorx huffed indignantly. “*Time’s a wastin’ while the meat’s a bastin’*, me mamma always said. Yer sentimental moments ain’t puttin’ food in me belly!”

“Do you always think with your stomach, Rorx?”

“As opposed to what?” the black-bearded dwarf asked. Cyan had the sinking feeling that he was serious.

Chapter 19: Meetings at the Circle

Ninth Moon, 873 PR

Arathorn took a deep breath of the scented air near a perfume peddler's cart. *It almost smells better than Khrystana's hair, but not quite*, he thought as he smiled politely at the peddler, then shook his head to show he was not interested in her wares. He turned to look at Khrystana walking close beside him, the scent of the peddler's perfume sparking a desire to bury his face in her luxuriant, glistening black hair. Khrystana caught him looking and smiled back, her eyes shining as if she knew what he was thinking. She reached over and squeezed his hand lightly before letting go.

She's amazing, he marveled. *What did I do to make the Spirits grant me such a wonder? She is beautiful! More than beautiful! And she cares for me! Unbelievable! I still don't even know how or why, or anything really for that matter. But it hardly bothers me! My heart longs for her even as I try to question her! And she calls me "Beloved!" I know she means it when she says it. She's not toying with me— I can see the sincerity in her eyes when she says it! I think she really loves me! But why?*

"Are you finished staring at me, Beloved?" Khrystana asked, her deep blue eyes sparkling merrily.

"What? Oh... I'm sorry, Khrystana," he murmured, feeling his cheeks warm.

"Don't be," she told him gently. "I'm flattered you like to look at me."

Arathorn struggled not to laugh. *She's flattered that I look at her? Nearly every man in Inkata must have a sore neck from twisting to look at her! We've been out walking the streets these past two days, and I swear she's drawn more eyes than any woman I've ever met!*

"You find something amusing, Beloved?"

"Um, ah, no, Khrystana. Nothing," Arathorn managed to say evenly.

“Good. Why don’t we rest for a while? There’s an inn across the street there,” she pointed across the busy street to a large three-story building made of whitestone like most every other building in Inkata. This one had bright green tiles on its roof, and a large sign hung from the second floor, depicting a shining star in a field of lesser lights. “The Silver Starlight” the sign read.

“It doesn’t matter to me,” Arathorn shrugged. *She’s been babying me these past two days like I’m some sort of invalid! I can walk more than three blocks without being winded!*

Khrystana pretended not to hear him and hooked her arm through his and pulled him forcibly from the whitestone sidewalks onto the street cobblestones. They wove through the press of laden carts, painted wagons, and elaborately-decorated carriages to get to the other side of the street. Arathorn saw more than a few of the wagon drivers’ heads turn to watch Khrystana walk past. She had a fluid grace that made even him feel awkward at times. Trying not to become too entranced by the sway of her hips beneath her clinging blue silk dress, Arathorn followed after Khrystana and entered “The Silver Starlight Inn and Tavern.” Like most inns, it had a large common room where patrons could sit and enjoy the food and ale, and the Starlight’s common room was plenty busy. Workmen and laborers were enjoying their noonday meals, and even a few more finely-dressed merchants and minor nobles were relaxing here as well. Young barmaids deftly walked among the tables, carrying trays of food and large mugs of frothy dark ale. A stout man was tapping a fresh keg behind the long oak bar.

Khrystana led him to a booth built into the rear corner of the common room. It was a little quieter in the back, and Arathorn was glad when he sat down, despite his earlier protests. Khrystana smiled knowingly at him as a barmaid made her way over to their booth.

"Would like something to eat or drink?" the young woman asked, flashing Arathorn a smile as her eyes flickered up and down his body approvingly.

"Do you have any *parsal*?" Arathorn replied with a polite smile.

"Of course, would you like a bottle brought out?"

"Two glasses will be fine," Khrystana cut in, her voice sharp enough to cut stone, "and that will be all."

The young barmaid hurriedly backed away from the table and Khrystana's icy glare, but not before casting a brief spiteful look back over her shoulder.

"Khrystana! You didn't have to be so rude! I'm sure she was being polite," Arathorn tried to calm the sorceress.

Khrystana snorted rudely. "She wanted to be more than *polite* with you, the little hussy!"

Spirits! Arathorn thought. *I think she's just a little possessive of me! But it almost makes sense... something about her makes me think she's been alone for a long time. So what does that mean for me?*

The barmaid returned a few minutes later with two glasses of the exotic elven flower wine. She kept her eyes carefully averted this time as she placed their glasses on the table and left without a word.

"She learns quickly," Khrystana said easily, but a glimmer of fervent passion burned in her blue eyes as she watched Arathorn and sipped her *parsal*.

* * * *

"Burn me beard, these streets are busy!" Rorx yelled over the clamor of people trying to cross the streets and the curses and yells of frustrated wagon drivers. "Where's this inn them Dyrenns told us about?"

Cyan glanced down at the dwarf in his litter and shrugged his shoulders. After they had washed up inside one of the large, whitestone buildings the Dyrenns were

being allowed to use, the three of them had left the plaza to find a place to eat. Cyan had wanted to find where Arathorn's body was, but the few Dyrenn's he asked didn't know what he was talking about. Both King Trentan and Princess were away at the Fortress of the Circle, so Cyan was forced to wait to check on his friend. The dwarves, on the other hand, were clamoring to get something decent to eat, so Cyan reluctantly agreed to accompany them to an inn a Dyrenn soldier said was close by.

Garroc was still dragging Rorx in the litter. They had cleaned and re-bandaged the dwarf's leg, but despite Rorx's pronouncements that he was fit to walk now, Cyan told him to stay in the litter. He didn't want the dwarf to get run over by a stray wagon in the middle of the crowded streets of Inkata.

Cyan craned his neck to see over some of the people in front of him. Across the road he saw a three story building with bright green roof tiles and a sign with a shining star on it.

"I think I see it! "What did that soldier say the inn was called?" he asked Garroc, stepping off the edge of the wide sidewalk into the hectic street traffic. The dwarf was hot on his heels, with Rorx still cursing up a storm with every jolt of the litter.

"The Silver Starlight, I think," Garroc had to shout to be heard.

Cyan dodged in between two horse-drawn merchants' wagons and paid little mind to the angry yells that followed him. A speeding carriage decked out in gold trim with a black lacquered finish on the carriage box never even slowed when he almost stepped out in front of it. Cyan had to jump back to avoid being trampled. The carriage driver cracked his whip in Cyan's direction.

"Nice folks, these Inkatese," Garroc said dryly, after they had made it across the street.

"Let me out o' this blasted litter! I ain't gonna be carted 'round anymore like some invalid! I'll walk into that there inn meself if it kills me!" Rorx proclaimed.

Cyan and Garroc exchanged glances. Garroc finally shrugged, "Have it your way. But if you fall, don't expect us to carry you all the way back."

Rorx awkwardly swung his legs to the side and got his feet under him. He used his battle-axe like a crutch to help pull himself up. He tottered for a moment or two, and then started limping towards the inn's front doors. His teeth were gritted, but he didn't say a word in complaint.

"Well, I'll be a goblin chef!" Garroc muttered, as he leaned the litter up against the outside wall of the inn. "That dwarf is stubborn enough to teach stones to talk!"

Cyan shook his head and followed after Rorx into The Silver Starlight. The inn's common room was nearly filled, but Rorx limped over to a table that had just been cleared near the front door. He eased himself down into a chair with a happy sigh.

"Now this be like a throne compared to that damn litter!"

Cyan and Garroc pulled up chairs to the table and waited for a barmaid to serve them. Rorx ordered a round of ale and a flipped four copper pieces on the tabletop which the barmaid quickly snatched up and slipped down the front of her blouse. When she returned with the foaming mugs, she told them that there was mutton roasting in the kitchen.

"Three plate-loads o' the mutton too, missy. And dunna let these mugs get empty, mind ye!" Rorx told her with a wink.

Garroc sighed and sipped his ale. "Now this be so much better than walking all day long!"

"Aye," Rorx seconded. "Nothin' will heal me leg faster than a bit o' the brew. May the Fireforger spit on that bastard dwarf and his throwin' knives!"

Cyan ignored Rorx's ranting and let his eyes take in the people in the common room. Some of the patrons appeared to be simple workers enjoying a meal, but finely-

dressed men and women could be seen about the room as well. Cyan even caught a glimpse of a gorgeous elf woman with raven-black hair near the back corner.

The dwarves swigged their ale with him as they waited for their food to be brought out. When the barmaid finally set a heaping plate of mutton in front of him, Cyan thought his stomach might never stop growling. He barely let the steaming meat and gravy cool before forking a bite into his mouth.

"It's— um, good," he told the dwarves around a mouthful.

Rorx was already busy chewing, and Garroc ignored him and took a swallow of ale. They all ate in relative silence, save the occasional belch from Rorx. The barmaid took their plates when they were scraped clean, and brought fresh mugs of ale.

Garroc took another big gulp of ale and blew foam out of his beard. "This Inkata place ain't half bad," he sighed.

"Ye got that right," Rorx burped in agreement.

Cyan leaned back in his chair and patted his full stomach. He looked back at some of the other patrons, and saw the black-haired elf woman getting up from her booth in the back. She seemed to be waiting for someone else to join her. Cyan turned back to the front door just as several Inkatese soldiers in their white tabards entered the door. They moved slowly past him, blocking his view for several moments until their leader decided on a table. Once they were out of his way, the elf woman had disappeared.

"Hey, Garroc? Did you see that elf woman a minute ago? It's too bad Arathorn isn't here because he probably would've liked—" Cyan's voice died off as he looked to his two companions. Rorx's mouth was hanging open, with his mug of ale raised halfway to his lips. Garroc's eyes were wide open and he was unconsciously scratching his beard. "Hey, what's the matter with you two? Did you hear what I said?"

"Ahh... lad, I think... uh, I think I just saw our spirit-elf buddy walk out with that lovely li'l elf lady," Rorx managed to stammer.

"What?"

"He's right, Cyan. I thought I saw him too," Garroc added. "It could have been Arathorn's twin!"

"Why didn't you say anything? Now they could be out in that crowd already!"

"Well, let me finish me ale and we'll go look," Rorx drained his mug of ale in one long swallow and belched loudly.

"No, you two stay here. I'll go see if they're still around," Cyan stood and hastily walked out the front door of the common room. The street was still crowded and Cyan tried to look around for a glimpse of Arathorn's familiar golden hair, or the shining black hair of the strange elf woman.

"Arathorn!" he shouted. "Arathorn of Tree-Haven!!"

* * * *

"What's the matter, my Beloved?"

"Strange," Arathorn shook his head, "I thought I just heard someone call my name."

"How can you tell amidst this crowd?" Khrystana gestured at the bustle of Inkatese people packing the sidewalks.

"Maybe it was just my imagination— Wait! There it is again!"

Khrystana strained to listen, and a few moments later she thought she almost heard the words "Arathorn of Tree-Haven" over the creaking of carts and the mutter of many people talking.

"You're right. I heard it too."

"Come on, let's get out of this crowd," Arathorn took Khrystana's hand and pulled her along behind him as he fought to make headway against the movement of the

people on the sidewalk. He had to push and shove his way to an open space near an alley between two buildings.

“Are you all right, Khrystana?”

“I’m fine, but let’s not do that again if we don’t have too,” Khrystana shuddered.

“So many people...”

Arathorn nodded, but what really drew his attention was the figure elbowing and shoving his way through the crowds toward them.

“It can’t be! Spirits above— it is! Cyan!!”

Cyan burst out of the edge of the crowd of people on the sidewalks and grabbed Arathorn in a tight bear hug. “Arathorn!! It *is* you! You’re back in your body again!”

Arathorn grasped Cyan’s shoulders and shook him heartily. “Thank the Spirits for that! But look at you! Blazes, it’s good to see you again!”

A wide grin was glued to Cyan’s face. *Arathorn’s back!!* He pounded the elf’s shoulders just to be sure he was solid. “Me? How about you! I thought I’d never see you again!”

“When did you get to Inkata?”

“Just today. We had some problems at the gate,” Cyan shrugged. “The dwarves and I went to that inn to get some food after we found the Dyrenns. The next thing I knew Garroc and Rorx were looking like that had just seen a ghost walk by! We should get back there before they come looking for us.”

“Uh, Cyan, I don’t think you’ve met Lady Khrystana De’Faerr yet,” Arathorn stepped aside and Cyan saw the raven-haired beauty he had noticed in The Silver Starlight.

She’s gorgeous! Where did Arathorn meet her? “Forgive me, Lady De’Faerr,” Cyan gave her the best sweeping bow he could manage. “It has been too long since I last saw my friend. I am Cyan of Gabbon, at your service.”

Khrystana laughed, surprising both Arathorn and Cyan. "Please, call me Khrystana, Cyan." *Cyan of Gabbon?? Then that means the sword at his hip is... the Doom Sword!! This is the boy who has been such a thorn in the Demon Prince's side?*

Arathorn offered Khrystana his arm. "Should we get back to the inn, then?"

"Of course, Beloved," Khrystana pulled away from her thoughts long enough to give both Arathorn and Cyan a warm smile. She let the two lead the way back towards The Silver Starlight.

I can't believe this is the young man who has found the Doom Sword! He seems so... normal. Nothing like what I would have expected. The Demon Prince has been thwarted by this plain young man? Incredible! Khrystana nearly jumped when she realized what she had just thought. I called him "Demon Prince", not "Master"! Hah!! I am free of your evil grasp for sure now! You are no longer my Master, you are nothing! I have Arathorn now, and nothing will take me away from him! she mentally shouted her triumph. But I will have to tell him the truth soon... I cannot deceive him forever... But I think he is starting to love me. He will understand, won't he?? Please, Arathorn!! Understand!

* * * *

Miranda stood a few paces behind and to the left of her father in a large audience chamber inside the Fortress of the Circle. A sweeping, curved table dominated the room, and thirteen people sat across from where King Trentan and Miranda stood waiting. The thirteen members of the Circle of Inkata were supposed to be the most powerful, intelligent, and influential people in the city. Miranda knew from her studies that most formal audiences with the Circle took place under the magnificent crystal dome that capped the center structure of the Fortress of the Circle, but today's meeting with the Circle was being held in a less-imposing chamber.

Her father was dressed in simple yet elegant gray breeches and a coat embroidered with the Rose and Spear of Dyrenn. He still wore the Crown of Dyrenn with its long jeweled spike jutting up above his forehead, and the determined set of his shoulders spoke volumes about his mood. *He won't be begging anything from these people today*, Miranda thought, watching her father carefully.

She had decided on a dark green dress worked with red rose blossoms along the bodice and sleeves. Her thick mass of auburn curls were pulled back to show off the rose pendant that hung from its chain around her neck. Cyan's gift to her sparkled in the light from the room's numerous oil lamps. She resisted the urge to reach up and caress the ruby pendant as her thoughts drifted towards Cyan. *Focus, Miranda!* she told herself, and directed her eyes to study the men and women gathered at the long table before her. They were a varied bunch— a stern, aristocratic-looking woman with dark brown hair sat at the center of the table and studied Miranda and her father with equal curiosity. Another woman with silver hair lounged in her seat halfway down the table. She had what most men might call a pretty face, but her eyes seemed hard and cruel from Miranda's perspective. Another larger man, dressed in fine clothes and obviously well-muscled, sat in a chair close to the aristocrat woman. He had a well-trimmed brown beard streaked with gray, and a half-smile lingered on his lips, as if he was privy to some joke that the rest of the people in the room were not. Near the end of the table, a young man dressed in a heavily-embroidered jacket yawned as if he was already bored with the whole assembly. His blond hair was elaborately combed and curled at the ends. Miranda immediately disliked him, and not just for the unveiled stares he cast in her direction.

King Trentan took a half step forward and nodded his head slightly to the gathered Circle. "On behalf of all the people of Dyrenn, I would like to extend our gratitude to the city of Inkata for sheltering us in our time of trouble," his voice was

steady, and even held a trace of pride. There was no trace of the despair that had hung on him ever since they had left Dyrenn behind, of which Miranda was glad.

“Your humble thanks have been noted and appreciated, King Trentan,” the brown-haired aristocratic woman at the center of the table returned his nod politely. “We, the Circle of Inkata apologize that we could not meet with you sooner, but know that we are concerned with the welfare of you and your people. However, what disturbs us most is the reason why you have led your people here for aid. Rumors about the events that occurred in the north float through Inkata like fog on the breeze, but we need to know the truth. If you could clarify these rumors for us, we would greatly appreciate it, your Majesty.”

King Trentan met the woman’s gaze evenly. “Dyrenn has been overrun by armies out of the Northern Waste. Goblins, Trouls, and Ogrs advance south, moving under the command of some figure called the Demon Prince. Twice Dyrenn was attacked by these forces, and twice we repelled them. But we were so weakened by the fighting that when my scouts reported an even larger force of monsters was approaching the city, we had no choice but to abandon Dyrenn. A small force remained behind to delay the army and buy us time to escape to the south. They were to burn the city to cover their own escape when the city was finally overrun. Unfortunately, I have had no word of them since we left Dyrenn.”

“Then it may be that I have some good news for you, King Trentan,” the leader of the Circle smiled. “We received a report from the gates just a short time ago saying that a group of men claiming to be Dyrenns had arrived. They numbered between thirty or forty men. Could this be the remnants of your city’s defense force?”

Spirits! Please let Cyan be among them! Please!! Miranda thought desperately. *I have to see him! I have to apologize for everything I said! Cyan!* It was all she could

do not to turn and run out of the meeting chamber. Only with the greatest effort did Miranda manage to keep her face composed.

“Indeed this is good news!” King Trentan broke out in a relieved grin. “My prayers have been answered at last!”

The aristocratic woman smiled genuinely. “Go to your people, King Trentan. They will have need of you right now. Tell them they are welcome here in Inkata. We can meet again at a later time to resume our discussions. Please, enjoy your reunion with your people.”

“Thank you,” King Trentan nodded again, a little lower this time. “The Spirits’ light shine on you.”

When both Miranda and her father had left the chamber, some of the other members of the Circle spoke up.

“It appears we will have to put up with these *refugees* for a while longer,” the young man at the far end of the table sneered, picking at the lace lining one cuff of his jacket. “I hope their stay does not become permanent.”

“You are a fool, Terril,” the man with the brown and gray beard stated. “The Dyrenns will not harm anything. There is enough room in the Monastery Grove for all of them.”

“But what of this army of monsters he talked about?” the silver-haired beauty sighed. “If this Demon Prince’s army keeps coming south, we shall have to deal with it soon enough.”

“Perhaps,” another man towards the middle of the table shrugged, obviously not worried. He was quite portly, and he dabbed at his forehead with a perfumed handkerchief.

"Enough of this," the brown-haired woman snapped. "We can decide what to do with the Dyrenns once we have more information. Until then, I will notify Lord-Commander Cail to send out scouts and reinforce the city's defenses."

No one gave voice to an argument, and the leader of the Circle stood up from her chair. "This meeting is over."

* * * *

The five of them sat together at their table in The Silver Starlight. Rorx and Garroc still hardly dared to blink as they listened closely to Arathorn telling his story. Cyan was just as caught up in the elf's tale. Khrystana sat close to Arathorn and kept one hand resting on his forearm, giving him an occasional reassuring squeeze. She was getting nervous herself. Arathorn had managed to avoid explaining how he had returned to his body, and he had downplayed Khrystana's role in everything. She could see the questions brimming in the elf's friends' eyes. *Would it matter if they knew I can use magic?* she wondered. *Will they keep questioning until all my secrets are revealed? What if they drive Arathorn away from me? Can I trust his friends— especially this Cyan? He has the Doom Sword! What if he tries to make Arathorn leave me, or worse?* Khrystana fought to keep from letting her fears run away with her, and she tried to focus back on Arathorn's voice.

"... and that's how we ended up here at this inn," Arathorn was saying.

The dwarf with the forked brown beard, Garroc, was the first to put voice to the obvious question. "But how did you manage to get back in your body?"

Arathorn shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"It is all right, Beloved. Go ahead and tell them," Khrystana whispered softly, having decided to take the chance and gamble with the truth.

"Yeah! Go ahead and tell us!" Rorx, the dwarf with the bushy black beard seconded.

"Very well," Arathorn sighed, glancing almost apologetically at Khrystana. "I know this may sound unbelievable, but Khrystana is a sorceress. She can use magic. Her magic was what made it possible for me to enter my body again."

Garroc nearly choked on his ale. Rorx swore softly under his breath. Cyan looked from both dwarves to Arathorn, then to Khrystana. Confusion wrinkled his brow.

"I... I thought you said there were no elven magic-users," he managed to say.

"I did, and there haven't been any in over three hundred years."

"I am the first," Khrystana said simply. "For the first time since the days of the Dragon Wars, an elf can wield the forces of magic once more."

Cyan scratched his face, trying to follow. His cheeks were rough. *I need to shave*, he thought absently. "So all that time Arathorn was floating around, we just needed to find someone with magic to put him back?"

Khrystana shook her head. "I don't think it would have been that simple, Cyan. Arathorn's *qith'kha*, what you might call his essence or spirit, had left his body. He would have died if he had been separated from his body for very much longer. But because I am an elf, my magic was more receptive to Arathorn's *qith'kha*. I was able to see him and use my power to merge spirit and flesh again."

"Did you ever figure out what made this all happen to him in the first place?" Garroc asked.

"I believe it must have had something to do with the wound he received when he saved King Trentan's life," Khrystana said. "I do not think it was any normal crossbow bolt that was used."

"Greystern," Cyan muttered darkly.

"Aye," Rorx growled.

"So only elven magic could put Arathorn back in his body, right?" Garroc pressed her.

"I believe so," Khrystana nodded, trying to keep her composure after hearing Cyan name one of the Demon Prince's servants. *I am different now! I have forsaken that path!* Khrystana thought fervently.

"And you're the only living elven magic-user..." Garroc's voice trailed off as understanding hit him.

"Burn me beard!" Rorx said for him, also catching on. "The Fireforger himself stomp me if that dunna smack of fate and destiny and all o' that bunk!"

"He's right, Arathorn," Cyan added. "It sounds like more than mere coincidence that you two found each other! The Spirits must have had a hand in it."

Arathorn shrugged. "You may be right. Without Khrystana, I would have died. I thank the Spirits everyday for sending her to me." The loving look the two elves shared seemed to heat the air with passion.

Spirits, they really love each other! Cyan thought, trying not to stare at the them. *I'm happy for Arathorn. He deserves someone like Khrystana. I just hope things will go as well when I see Miranda again! I need to see her! I have to apologize for how I've acted. I just want to hold her forever...*

"Ahh, young love," Garroc whispered slyly to Rorx.

"Shut yer trap and let 'em have their peace!" Rorx elbowed Garroc. He grinned wickedly. "Maybe ye'll find yerself some pretty li'l dwarf maid soon! Then ye can be just like them!"

Garroc choked and sputtered on his ale, coughing and wheezing violently. Rorx just laughed and downed the rest of his mug.

* * * *

It was late afternoon by the time the five of them returned to the Monastery Grove. Cyan looked at all the wagons gathered there and tried to remember the last

time he had slept in a bed with a roof over his head. *Even the back of a wagon will seem pleasant compared to the bare earth*, he thought.

They drew a few curious glances and friendly smiles, but for the most part, the Dyrenns were too busy to pay much attention to them. Cyan didn't mind. Enough of the Dyrenn soldiers called him "Lord Cyan" already; he did not want the rest of the citizens following suit.

"Looks like all the good places have been taken," Garroc sighed. "Guess we're sleeping on paving stones."

"Maybe there are still some open rooms in those buildings," Arathorn suggested.

"Or maybe there are feather beds waiting for all of you in the Fortress of the Circle!" a familiar voice said from behind them. King Trentan sat atop his chestnut steed and grinned down at them. A small group of mounted Dyrenn soldiers flanked the king.

"Your Majesty!" Cyan exclaimed, turning in surprise, and he hastily remembered his manners and kneeled low. Garroc and Rorx nodded politely to the King, and Arathorn bowed at the waist. Khrystana performed a graceful curtsy.

King Trentan slid down out of the saddle and handed the horse's reins to a nearby soldier. "Spirits! It's good to see you all again! Get up, Cyan! This is no time for formality! Arathorn!! By the grace of the Spirits, you're looking well!"

"Thank you, your Majesty. I would still be in that wagon if it wasn't for Lady De'Faerr's tender ministrations," Arathorn took Khrystana's hand and pulled her forward. For once, it was her turn to blush.

"Really, your Majesty, Arathorn exaggerates! I did little but keep him company as he recovered," Khrystana protested.

"Nonsense!" King Trentan took her hand and bowed over it. "Arathorn saved my life, and my thanks go out to you for helping him. You have my humblest gratitude."

Khrystana's cheeks colored a pleasant shade of pink.

“Master Lodiggor! You look well! Master Ironshill! Why are you limping?”

Rorx limped slightly as he joined Garroc in front of the King. He shook hands and gestured to his injured leg. “Well, ye see, yer Highness, it’s like this. Me un’ Garroc got separated from the rest o’ this bunch when we took them tunnels. While we were tryin’ to find ‘em, we happened on this other dwarf. He tried to get us to go home to Ckar-Regnock with him, but when we told him we couldna, he kinda got ornery and started whippin’ knives around. I ended up with one o’ them right here in me leg. ‘Course I had to kill him for that. The whole time he was sputterin’ curses and praisin’ the bloomin’ Demon Prince, that is, until me axe came burstin’ through his belly!” Rorx chuckled merrily, not noticing the slightly sick look in King Trentan’s face.

Khrystana paled when she recognized Rorx’s description of Dugan Brim. She remembered the grimy mining dwarf that had been sent to kill Cyan’s dwarven friends all too well.

“What’s the matter, Khrystana?” Arathorn whispered in her ear.

“Ahh, nothing, Beloved. Rorx’s graphic story startled me, that’s all.”

Arathorn stared at her for a moment before slowly nodding and turning his attention back to King Trentan.

Khrystana bit her lip to hold in a small moan of pain. *I hate living this lie, my love! Oh, Arathorn! I hope you will understand! But how can I tell you that I knew this Dugan Brim? The dwarf obviously failed his mission... like I did. But what about that Earl Greystern who was supposed to kill Cyan? Where is he? Did Greystern turn traitor like I did? Traitor... I never really thought of myself that way. But it was an evil trust I turned my back on! That has to mean something, doesn’t it? Please, Arathorn! I want to tell you the truth so badly that I ache at the very thought of it! You deserve to know the truth about me! But I don’t want to lose you now! Beloved! I will tell you soon, I promise, my*

love! Khrystana forced the painful thoughts from her mind and tried to focus on the discussion between King Trentan and Cyan.

“...we managed to hold off the main army’s first scouting group,” Cyan was saying, “but it wasn’t easy.”

“Hah!” Rorx laughed. “Ye should o’ seen the lad, yer Highness! He and that sword o’ his were like a fury! He blasted them critters with that green flame ‘til they were runnin’ for the hills!”

Cyan scowled faintly, and kept on with his version of the tale. “By the next evening, the real bulk of the Demon Prince’s army reached Dyrenn. We managed to shoot a few volleys of arrows before we had to run to the palace. Some of the men... they stayed behind to burn the city,” Cyan’s voice grew tight.

King Trentan nodded quietly, his eyes filled with sadness. “I know, Cyan. It had to be that way, unfortunately. They died well.”

Cyan mastered his voice and went on. “We escaped through the tunnels, but some of the men were ambushed by Shadow Hounds at the exits. Those of us left headed south after you.”

“You made good time for being on foot. You were only two days behind us,” King Trentan forced a smile.

“Captain Fissk pushed us hard,” Cyan grinned back.

“Humph! It was no fun trip, believe me!” Rorx added. “They bounced me halfway ‘cross the country in a cursed litter! The Fireforger crisp me if I ever let ‘em do that again—”

“Hello, Cyan,” a familiar voice interrupted Rorx. Dyrenn soldiers hastily stepped aside as Princess Miranda approached the group. The rose pendant Cyan had given her dangled above her blouse, catching the fading afternoon light in red splashes of color.

Cyan struggled to find his voice. In the sunlight, Miranda's long auburn curls blazed like fire, and her eyes smoldered with turbulent emotions. She seemed to glide across the whitestone plaza towards him, moving with a grace and bearing that set his heart to racing. He felt like all his wits had fled at the sight of her.

"Uh... hello, Princess," he stammered awkwardly, suddenly all too aware of the people gathered around him. *I hoped we could do this in private*, he thought, *so at least if she starts yelling at me everyone wouldn't hear...*

Miranda crossed the last few feet between them with smooth, effortless steps, despite the raw bundle of passion warring inside her. She fought to hold her composure, while her hands ached to touch his face and brush through his unruly sandy-brown curls. Miranda knew her father was watching her, but suddenly she no longer cared. After so many days of being alone, the man she loved was standing in front of her again.

Cyan started to say something, but he was silenced as Miranda crushed him close to her in a ferocious embrace, and her lips were on his before he could find the breath to speak her name.

Her kiss was a firestorm surging through his body. Cyan felt like the heat of it would sear his bones to ash and char his insides black. The feel of her body pressed tight against him was delightfully unnerving, and he savored the thrilling sensation of her. *It seemed like forever since I've held her!* he thought.

"Sweet Spirits," he breathed softly when Miranda finally ended their long kiss. "Miranda..."

"I know," she sighed, placing a finger against his lips.

Cyan noticed the number of people gathered there watching them. He felt his face heat as if the fires of all Miranda's kisses were burning him. Miranda's cheeks shone to match her hair.

King Trentan looked lost somewhere between surprise and understanding. His dark eyes sought his daughter. He looked about to speak, but then changed his mind, and coughed into his hand instead.

Rorx started chuckling, but fierce glares from both Miranda and her father silenced him. Arathorn hid his grin behind his hand, and tried to pretend not to look at his friend with a smile in his eyes.

* * * *

“You cursed beast! Where are you taking me?” Greystern bellowed over the roar of the wind in his ears. He forced himself to stare at the back of the veermang’s canine head; when he made the mistake of looking at the ground far, far below, he grew dizzy and almost fell out of the demon’s saddle. The veermang ignored his frustrated commands and kept flapping its leathery bat-like wings. Its yellow eyes glinted with obscene humor, and its dark lips curled up around its fangs in a cruel parody of a smile.

Twilight was cloaking the earth below in folds of growing darkness, and the air was growing cool. Greystern pulled at his flapping cloak and tried to snug it closer around himself. It had been days since they left the *Aziz’s* shop in Jynlamadh, but at last, the city of Inkata shone far below like a white beacon against the encroaching night. *Finally!* Greystern thought. *If I ever have to look at this beast again it will be too soon! I wonder if I could kill it...*

The veermang banked sharply and started an abrupt spiral down towards the city. Greystern clutched the saddle’s pommel and locked his legs tight around the veermang’s sides. His stomach lurched and he swallowed warm bile that tried to climb his throat.

“Filthy dog! What are you doing?” he howled, his voice shrill with fear.

The veermang ignored him and kept at its fast descent, until the whole city of Inkata spread out below them. Angling towards the center of the city, Greystern saw

white buildings flash underneath them, as well as a particularly large forested area within the city walls.

“Fool animal! Someone will see us!”

The veermang growled, a low rumble deep in its chest, and Greystern bit his tongue. The veermang slowed its pace as they crossed above a grassy border of tree-lined walkways that led up to a massive building made all of shimmering whitestone. A large crystal dome crowned the central structure of the Fortress of the Circle. It caught the final light of day in a scintillating display of color that seemed all the brighter for the darkness creeping up around it. The main structure of the Fortress was a sprawling three-story complex, and four wings branched off its corners like thick horizontal pillars of whitestone. Each large branch ended in a six-story tower that looked out over the city from each of the compass points. Lights glimmered in tower windows as well as in the domed main complex as the veermang slowed and swept down towards the top of the north tower.

Why did it bring me to the Fortress of the Circle? I need to find that fool, Cyan of Gabbon, not the Circle of Inkata! Greystern thought angrily, as the veermang fluttered its bat-like wings one last time and settled its goat legs on solid stone. Greystern swung down out of the demon’s saddle as quickly as he could. His legs nearly buckled when his boots finally had firm ground beneath them. The veermang watched him with its laughing yellow eyes.

Greystern fought the urge to punch the foul demon between its eyes. Instead he turned to survey his surroundings... and nearly jumped when he noticed the three figures cloaked in dark robes standing in the shadows nearby.

“Relax, Earl Greystern,” one of the figures spoke, in a voice that sounded too deep and garbled to be natural.

Altered voices? he thought. *But why the secrecy? They obviously know who I am!*

"Who are you?" he ventured, trying to sound bolder than he felt.

"Friends," another of the three said, in the same deep voice that foiled all attempts to guess at the speaker's gender. The robes the three wore also had hoods shadowing their faces. "We seek the same ends you do, and have been instructed to aid you."

They serve the Master? he wondered. "And how do you plan to help me?"

"The one you seek, the farm boy from the north, is staying here inside the Fortress of the Circle. We can provide you with access to him. The Fortress guards have already been given your description and name. They will not hinder you."

"How can you manage that? The Circle are some of the most powerful people in this city! Infiltrating their seat of power can't be that easy!" Greystern protested.

"Have faith," another of the three laughed. "If you have further need of us, take this," one robed figure stepped forward and dropped a small dark gemstone into his palm. "Speak the word *'ieren'* and it will bring you to us."

Greystern looked suspiciously at the gem in its hand. Its facets seemed to absorb light, rather than reflect it. "But how—?"

"It is your appointed task, not ours, Greystern. We merely were told to aid you. Now, go."

"What about that?" Greystern pointed to where the veermang still watched them all with its too-intelligent, yellow eyes.

The robed figure on the left gestured, and the veermang sank down on all fours and whined like a dog. "Leave it to us," the same figure said, its altered voice mocking. "Now it is time for you to leave us," the figure gestured again, and suddenly the world was darkening before his eyes.

“No, wait—” he tried to say, but the world shifted sickeningly, and he found himself standing in the midst of a dark alley somewhere in the lower parts of Inkata. “Sons of whores!” he swore. “I hate magic!!”

Greystern’s stomach was doing flip-flops. He took a few hesitant steps to the edge of the alley, and looked down the street. Halfway down the block, the lights of a bustling tavern shed warm light into the street. *Might as well get a drink and see what I can learn*, he told himself. *The drink will soothe my belly. Blasted magic-user!*

Still grumbling under his breath, the Earl of Greystern marched down the street towards the tavern. Plans for getting into the Fortress and eliminating Cyan of Gabbon were already forming in his mind.

* * * *

Groaning, Cyan forced himself to sit up and open his eyes. The morning sunshine made spots dance in front of his eyes, and seemed to encourage the hammers in his head to increase their pace. He was only dimly aware of the feel of the soft feather-stuffed mattress beneath him, and the tangled mess of fine sheets coiled around his legs. *Must’ve made it back to the Fortress of the Circle last night*, he managed to form a coherent thought despite the headache that pounded his skull. *Last night...* he tried to remember, although pulling up the memories was like trying to fetch something precious from amidst a pile of garbage. It was hard to focus and dredge up the past evening’s activities.

He remembered talking with Miranda and King Trentan, and from there, the whole group of Dyrenns had proceeded to celebrate the defenders’ return right there in the plaza. People had dug up instruments from their belongings, and before long the whole square had turned into one giant dance floor. Kegs of ale had mysteriously appeared, although Cyan vaguely remembered Rorx and Garroc denying any knowledge of it. He couldn’t even remember how many times Miranda and he had

danced to the sound of fiddles and flutes. People had handed him flagons of ale whenever he wasn't dancing, or whenever Miranda hadn't pulled him aside for kisses and to tell him how much she loved him. The dwarves had made friends around the kegs, and Arathorn and Khrystana had danced together before they slipped away to be alone. Cyan couldn't remember much beyond that. He had no idea how he managed to end up in this room.

It looks nice enough, he thought, admiring the fine wood grain on the bed posts and the room's large dresser and washstand. A blue porcelain wash basin was filled with water on the stand, and a large, gilt-framed mirror hung nearby on the wall. The floor was smooth whitestone, as were the walls. Golden, interlocking circles were painted in a series around the room's only window and across the richly-polished mahogany door. A simple straight-backed chair was pulled up next to a small round table, and fresh clothing had been neatly laid out on top of the table.

Thank the Spirits for good servants, Cyan found himself thinking as he unsteadily swung out of bed and padded over to the washstand. The water was cold, but it felt good when he splashed some on his face. He looked at his reflection in the mirror and tried not to notice his bloodshot eyes and tangled hair. He washed his face and wetted his hair before turning to the table and slipping into the loose-fitting pair of dark gray breeches left for him. He pulled a clean white tunic over his head before grabbing for his belt. The Doom Sword rested easily in its scabbard, hanging from the bedpost right where he must have put it last night, even if he didn't remember doing it. He fumbled a little with the buckle, but soon enough the Sword was pressed comfortably against his right hip.

He felt a little better to be dressed, and he opened the door and stepped out into a broad hallway lined with tapestries and framed paintings. He closed the door to his

room, trying to note the wall-hangings and artwork around him so he could find the room again later.

“Well, now what?” he said out loud, trying to ignore the hammers working in his head.

“May I help you, milord?”

Cyan jumped in surprise. A young servant girl had walked up right behind him while he was staring at a tapestry depicting a white stag bounding through a forest. He smoothed his damp hair and tried to collect his wits.

“Uh... yes. Could you tell me where I might find some food, and maybe... something for a headache?”

The girl smiled slightly, her blue eyes glinting as if she was used to such questions. “Please follow me, milord,” she curtsied and started off down the hallway.

“Please don’t call me that. I’m not really a nobleman, you know.”

“Yes, milord,” the girl answered, without breaking stride.

Cyan groaned. *Never ever get drunk again!* he told himself.

* * * *

Cyan picked at the food on his plate, moving bits of egg and sausage around with his fork. His appetite had disappeared as soon as he smelled the food set out for them in the small dining room in the guest wing of the Fortress of the Circle. Rorx and Garroc had already been there when the serving girl showed him the way to the dining room, and both dwarves looked as subdued as he felt. Apparently they had consumed too much of the strong, Inkatese brew as well last night.

Cyan looked up from his barely-touched breakfast as Arathorn came striding into the room.

“Cyan! There you are! I’ve been looking all over for you!”

“Please, Arathorn,” Cyan hissed. “Not so loud!”

The elf frowned as he glanced from Cyan to the dwarves before he burst out laughing. "I thought you knew better that to try to out-drink a dwarf, Cyan!" he chuckled.

"I do now," Cyan muttered, holding his head in his hands.

"And just what are ye so happy for, elf?" Rorx growled from the table.

"No reason," Arathorn shrugged nonchalantly, but his sparkling eyes spoke otherwise. "Just that while you three were getting drunk on ale, I was getting drunk on something else."

"Eh, what's that?" Garroc raised his head and tried to focus on the elf. He had clearly just entered the conversation. "Something better than beer?"

"Go back to sleep, Garroc! Ye never could handle yer beer as well as me!" Rorx admonished his hung-over companion.

"No, you drunken fools, I was drunk on—"

"Elven flower wine?" Cyan guessed.

"Malt whiskey?" Rorx tried.

"No, no!" Arathorn shook his head in frustration. "It's a metaphor! I wasn't actually drunk! I only felt drunk!"

"You mean can get drunk without e'en takin' a drink?" Garroc slurred, a confused look on his sallow face.

"No! I didn't mean it that way! Don't you know what a metaphor is? I meant that I was feeling a little tipsy because I was having such a great time with Khrystana, not having a few cold brews!"

"Oh, I get it now!" Rorx thumped the table with his fist. "Ye was gettin' yer elven-lady-sorceress-friend roarin' drunk so ye could go to bed—"

"Rorx!!" Arathorn shouted, aghast. "I did not get Khrystana drunk! We did *not* got to bed!! Just never mind, okay? Forgive me for even bringing it up!"

"Do you have to shout, Arathorn?" Cyan whispered, trying to cover his head.

“Sorry, Cyan.”

“Spirits, you’re even worse than I was when I first met Miranda,” Cyan muttered, loud enough for the elf to hear him. “You really love her, don’t you?”

“Of course I love her!!” the elf exclaimed loudly, before remembering to keep his voice down.

A sly grin stole across Cyan’s face. He tried to stifle a rising chuckle, but failed miserably.

“What? What’s so funny?” Arathorn looked curiously at his friend.

Cyan was laughing so hard now that he couldn’t even talk. He just pointed behind the elf and burst out in another fit of laughter that made him clutch his skull.

Arathorn turned around in bewilderment. Khrystana was standing in the entrance to the dining room. Her sensuous mouth had dropped open and her deep blue eyes were wide in surprise. Tears of happiness trickled down her white cheeks.

“Oh, Beloved!!” she gasped in joy. “I’ve longed to hear you say those words! I love you!!” She crossed the room as if carried by a hidden tide, flowing towards him and gathering him into her embrace.

“He... he tricked me!” Arathorn managed to gasp between kisses.

Garroc looked back up from his plate of food. “What’s goin’ on?” he asked Rorx.

“I thought I told ye to go back to sleep, ye dunder-head!”

“What? Oh, okay,” Garroc grinned lopsidedly and put his head down in his food.

“Stupid dwarf! I knew he couldna handle his beer,” Rorx muttered, surveying the room. Cyan was still chuckling and trying not to fall out of his chair, Arathorn was locked in Khrystana’s loving embrace, and Garroc was starting to snore into some oatmeal.

“What a mornin’,” the black bearded dwarf sighed, rubbing his forehead.

* * * *

By mid-afternoon, Cyan and the dwarves had managed to gather their wits together sufficiently enough to hold a decent conversation. King Trentan found them still relaxing in the private dining room at the end of the hall near their rooms. Cyan was more than a little disappointed to see that Miranda was not with him.

"I trust you are all feeling better?" King Trentan smiled, a glint of mirth shining in his dark eyes.

Arathorn grimaced. Khrystana had been so happy to hear him confess his love for her that she had gone off to find Miranda to tell her the good news. The elf shot an irritated glance Cyan's way. "As well as can be expected, your Majesty," he shrugged. He wasn't really mad at Cyan, but he did not like the fact that he had been tricked so readily.

"Aye, me head dunna feel like all o' Ckar-Regnock is fallin' down on it," Rorx added.

"Good. Because I have received an invitation from the Circle of Inkata, and they have asked that you four join me. It seems they have taken an interest in what happened to Dyrenn, and they would like to hear your reports first-hand."

"That doesn't sound like too much trouble," Arathorn said.

"All four of us?" Cyan cut in. "I know next to nothing about these people! Can't just one of us go? Or why not Captain Fissk? He was in command of Dyrenn's final defense. Let them talk to him."

King Trentan shook his head. "I'm sorry, Cyan. They specifically asked for all four of you to attend the meeting. It seems they have already learned a little about the roles you have played in these events."

"But how could they know that?" Cyan asked.

"The Circle is not a group to underestimate," King Trentan explained, pulling up an empty chair and sitting at the table with them. "They are thirteen of the most cunning

and powerful people in this city. They have eyes and ears everywhere. There is little that takes place in Inkata that they don't know about. Each of the thirteen members of the Circle represent different groups within the city. They can range from noblemen, merchants, soldiers, magic users, or even thieves!"

"And they run the city?"

"More or less," King Trentan shrugged. "Each of the thirteen members handles their own sphere of influence."

"Are they all equal in power?" Arathorn asked.

"No. They usually keep their names secret, and instead use a number as their designation. The leader of the Circle is One. The rest rank in importance right on down the line, with Thirteen being the lowest of them."

"I suppose they like to move up in power, eh?" Garroc snorted.

King Trentan nodded. "A good guess. I would say intrigue and plotting are the Circle's favorite pastime. They are always looking for ways to gain another rank within the hierarchy."

"Humph!" Rorx grumped. "And you said it would be no problem, ya stupid elf!" he accused Arathorn. "Next thing we know, we'll be all caught up in one o' their little plots!"

"It can't be that bad, Rorx," Arathorn replied. "They just want to hear what happened to Dyrenn, that's all."

Arathorn's still too cheerful from being around Khrystana. Naïve too, Cyan thought, wondering if it was as simple as the elf made it sound. He didn't even realize he was gripping the Doom Sword's hilt tightly until Rorx shoved his chair back and gingerly stood up.

"Well, if we're gonna do this, we might as well get it over with," the dwarf growled, favoring his one leg as he took a few steps.

Cyan looked over at Arathorn, but the elf only shrugged and tried to give Cyan a reassuring smile. *Stop it! You're getting as paranoid as Rorx*, he told himself as he followed after King Trentan and the dwarves.

* * * *

Greystern pushed his way through the busy streets of Inkata, barely paying mind to men in their fancy coats with embroidered collars and shining knee-high boots, or women wearing colorful dresses with voluminous skirts and ruffled lace spilling out of their sleeves and necklines. He was determined to get to the Fortress of the Circle and find Cyan of Gabbon. It was all he could think about.

We faced each other as equals once, on that rooftop in Dyrenn... I have no intention of going through that again! This time, Cyan of Gabbon, there will be no second chance to save yourself! I will cut you down before you even realize it!

The street he was following abruptly narrowed, and he noticed that the crowds of people had thinned to almost nothing. The whitestone cobbles led forward through a natural arch of dark-leafed maples and out into a flat expanse of green grass. *At last, the Fortress of the Circle!* he thought. The Fortress grounds looked remarkably different in daylight. He had not even noticed last night from the veermang's back, the thick ring of maple tree that formed a giant circle around the green. Rising out of the center of the broad green, the central structure of the Fortress rose up like a giant capped scepter, the crystal dome glittering in the afternoon sun. The Fortress' huge six-story towers, with their smooth whitestone walls, appeared to be made from purest snow. Greystern paused to admire the magnificent structure and then followed the narrowed pathway into the trees. He had only taken a few steps before a white-tabarded soldier appeared from his place of concealment behind a thick maple.

"Halt! State your name and business with the Circle!" the soldier commanded, and Greystern noted four golden, interlocking circles embroidered over his heart.

“My name is Greystern, and my business with the Circle is... personal,” the treacherous Earl scratched his salt-and-pepper flecked beard idly, while the surprised soldier took a closer look at his face.

“My apologies, milord. I did not recognize you at first,” the soldier bowed humbly.

Well, well, Greystern mused, those three hooded bastards really do control the Fortress guards! I wonder how they did it? Aloud he said, “That is quite understandable. You were just doing your duty, soldier. An honest mistake.”

“Thank you, milord! You are most generous! Would you like me to send for an escort for you?”

“No, that will not be necessary. You may return to your post,” Greystern smiled in what he thought was a benevolent manner.

The soldier bowed once more and stood aside so Greystern could pass. Greystern walked out of the stand of maples and towards the main gates of the Fortress. *If they all act like that, getting to Cyan will be easier than coddling a barmaid!* he gloated. *I'll find where he's staying inside and then I'll be back tonight to really surprise him! I can't wait to see the look on his face when I run him through!!*

* * * *

The four of them trailed behind King Trentan, who in turn followed an older man wearing the white garb of the Fortress' servants. The old servant led them through a luxuriant carpeted hallway that joined the southern wing of the Fortress with the center, main holding. From there, he led them up a meticulously-carved and polished spiral staircase. They ascended three levels, and everywhere Cyan looked, he saw signs of opulence and wealth. Fine porcelains were displayed in ornate cabinets gilded in gold. Colorful tapestries decorated the whitestone walls, as well as sketches and paintings in solid gold frames. The rugs beneath their feet were woven of thick soft material that cushioned their boots like they were walking on a thick bed of spongy moss. Oil lamps

rested in polished bronze and silver brackets on the walls, and crystal chandeliers hung from the ceiling at every intersection, splintering the light from the oil lamps into a thousand glittering shards of radiance.

"It sure dunna look like no fortress I've ever seen," Rorx snorted, climbing the last few steps to the third floor slowly. He was favoring his right leg, but showed no signs of the pain he must be feeling.

"It has been a long time since it was needed in that capacity," King Trentan said, looking back over his shoulder. He had donned the Crown of Dyrenn again, the bejeweled spike coming to a point several inches above his brow. "Now it is more of a palace than a stronghold."

Rorx grunted something Cyan couldn't quite make out. Cyan shook his head and kept after King Trentan and the Fortress servant. The old man brought them down a broad hallway that ended in a huge set of double doors. The polished oak was covered in an elaborate design of hundreds of interlocking circles that joined together to form one giant circle. The carving was remarkable, and Cyan resisted the urge to trace the designs with his fingers.

The old servant pushed on the huge doors and they swung inwards on well-oiled hinges. "The Circle will see you now," he said, bowing as he stepped out of the way.

King Trentan nodded his thanks and boldly strode ahead into the massive chamber beyond the doors. Cyan tried not to stare like some young boy and was quick to follow. Entering the chamber felt like walking into some gargantuan cavern. Instead of a ceiling, the room was capped by the shimmering facets of the great crystal dome that marked the center of the Fortress of the Circle. The afternoon sun refracted through those facets uncounted times, until it seemed like the sun itself hung above their heads. The floor beneath Cyan's boots was stone tile, and he realized quickly that the entire floor was one giant mosaic of more golden interlocked circles on a field of white and

black tile. But dominating the expansive chamber was a sweeping curve of a table that was set on a platform nearly five feet above the floor. People were seated around the table, thirteen in all, and they all faced the newcomers.

Cyan blinked in disbelief. Shimmering rainbows of light stretched down from the great dome overhead and masked the faces of every person sitting at the table. He could see their bodies, enough to judge size and maybe gender, but all thirteen faces were hidden behind a cascade of colored light.

"Welcome again, King Trentan," a woman's voice echoed through the large chamber. "We hope your accommodations here in the Fortress are acceptable."

King Trentan actually bowed his head, to Cyan's surprise. "They are very fine indeed, Lady One," he said. "I thank you for your generous hospitality, as well as for seeing to the needs of my people."

Cyan had the impression that the woman King Trentan was speaking to bowed her head in return, but it was hard to tell with the bright rainbow masking her. He could see that she sat at the very center of the sharply curved table. *And he called her "Lady One". She must be the leader of the Circle*, Cyan thought to himself.

"We have summoned you here that we may learn more about the evil that destroyed Dyrenn and may threaten Inkata," the same woman continued.

"I have brought the four you requested," King Trentan answered. He stepped aside so that Cyan, Arathorn, and the dwarves were in full view of the Circle. "I present to you Garroc Lodiggor and Rorx Ironshill of Ckar-Regnock, Arathorn of Tree-Haven, and Cyan of Gabbon."

Cyan hastily followed Arathorn's lead, and bowed his head in respect. Rorx and Garroc did as well, which was a surprise. Cyan had never exactly seen Rorx bow before, not even to King Trentan or Tree Lord Lanin.

"Welcome to Inkata, gentleman," the same woman's voice greeted them. "If you do not mind, we would like to ask you several questions concerning the events that surrounded the fall of Dyrenn."

I bet they would ask anyway, even if we did mind, Cyan thought, though he was careful to keep his face as expressionless as possible.

"Master Lodiggor," a man spoke up in a deep voice, before any of them could object, "approximately how many troops were there in this army that attacked Dyrenn?"

"Well, there was a forward group that attacked first," Garroc stroked his beard. "Probably about a thousand, but we fought them off."

Cyan was relieved the dwarf didn't say anything about how it had been Cyan and the Doom Sword that had destroyed most of them.

Garroc continued, "The next evening the real army showed up. There were so many I can't even give you a close estimate. I'd have to guess there were at least a hundred thousand though."

"You can't seriously expect us to believe that!" a different, younger man's voice cried out from one of the further ends of the table.

"Be silent, Ten!" the woman, One, commanded. "You may continue, Four," she said over Ten's sputtering objections.

"Thank you," the first man, Four, replied in his rumbling deep voice. "Are you quite certain about your... estimate, Master Lodiggor?"

"As sure as I'm a dwarf," Garroc said levelly, but Cyan could tell from the way the dwarf gripped his pale brown beard that he was angry about having his judgement questioned.

"Thank you," Four said in a clipped tone. "Now, Master Ironshill, it is said that you and Master Lodiggor together concocted a substance which was used to help burn Dyrenn. Was it not a bit hasty to burn the city without really trying to save it?"

Cyan saw Rorx clench his teeth before speaking. "Well, let me put it this way for ye," Rorx began. "A hun'erd-some men canna really hold a city as big as Dyrenn against a hun'erd thousand beasties. So rather than lettin' them critters get fat and rich off all the stuff still in the city, we figured on burnin' the city and as many o' them monsters as we could to cover our escape. It killed lots o' goblins, and it stopped 'em from supportin' themselves from the city's loot!"

"But you do not know if your plan worked! You have no idea how many of these monsters actually did perish in the fire."

Rorx snorted, "I know I wasna gonna stick around to find out how good me fire fried them critters! I dunna suppose ye would have either. Regardless, Dyrenn's a burnt-out husk and I'll wager that a bunch o' them goblins, trouls, and ogra never made it back out o' the city before they became burnt toast!"

"Thank you, Master Ironshill," Four reluctantly spoke.

Cyan shared a glance with Rorx as the dwarf shook his head and stepped back closer to their group. The dwarf rolled his eyes and tugged sharply at his beard.

"If I may ask, Master Arathorn," a gentle-sounding woman's voice breathed, "why were you not fighting along with your friends at Dyrenn?"

"I assure you, my lady, I was there," Arathorn answered quickly, and Cyan fought to keep from wincing. *No, Arathorn!* he thought, *she's tricking you!*

"Really? Then why does no one remember seeing you at the battle? And why did some people claim that you were with the Dyrenns fleeing south, injured and staying in the back of a wagon?"

Spirits, Arathorn! You've really gotten yourself in a mess! Cyan thought. *How does this woman know all these things? It's like we're on trial!*

If Arathorn was sweating about the lie he was caught in, he gave no sign of it. "I'm sorry, my lady. The people you talked to must have been confused. I was at Dyrenn."

Well, he's not totally lying, Cyan admitted. He was there as a spirit.

"Are you sure, Master Arathorn? These were credible people—"

"That is enough, Six," One interrupted. "If Master Arathorn says he was there, we should believe him."

"Very well," the soft-spoken woman, Six, responded.

Arathorn bowed his head slightly, his face so carefully controlled that Cyan could not even tell if his friend knew the danger he had just narrowly avoided.

"Master Cyan," a new man spoke up, and Cyan was forced to return his attention to the thirteen men and women sitting at the table. "You and a 'Captain Fissk' were the leaders of the soldiers who stayed behind, am I correct?"

"Captain Fissk was in command of the defense of Dyrenn, sir," Cyan said levelly. "I merely helped out where I could."

"I see," the man said. "Then tell me please, how is it that trained, professional soldiers such as this Captain Fissk and the other Dyrenns under his command allowed you, a mere peasant, to 'help out' as you so simply put it?"

Cyan flinched at the word "peasant", but he managed to keep his wits. "Some of the men seem to believe I am a nobleman or some other minor lord."

"And are you?"

"No, sir, I am not."

"Then why do these men believe something so ridiculous? Do you try to discourage such rumors, or are you the one fostering them?"

"I have never claimed to be anything but what I am," Cyan fought to keep his temper under control. "I am a... peasant."

“Thank you, Twelve,” One cut in before the man could keep pressing Cyan.

“Does anyone else have questions for these gentlemen?”

“I do,” a man said quickly. Cyan recognized his voice as the same man who had burst out and tried to accuse Garroc of lying.

“You may proceed, Ten,” One said flatly.

“Master Cyan,” Ten began, “are you at all familiar with the legend of the Doom Sword?”

How did he know to ask about that? Cyan wondered, fighting down a surge of panic. *Be calm, Cyan,* he told himself. “I can’t say that I am, sir,” Cyan lied smoothly. “Like your comrade said, I’m just a peasant. All I know are crops and farm animals,” he shrugged apologetically.

“Thank you, Master Cyan, all of you,” One announced before Ten could say anything. “You are free to leave now. We thank you for your cooperation, and we wish you a pleasant stay here in our city.”

King Trentan bowed slightly again, and Cyan hurried to follow suit. They briskly headed for the door to the chamber, with Rorx limping slightly behind them.

“Enjoy the stay,” the black-bearded dwarf was muttering sarcastically. “I’ll enjoy that like I’d enjoy an axe in me belly!”

* * * *

“They’re obviously all lying!” Ten spat after King Trentan and the others had left. When the chamber doors closed behind the group, the rainbow lights shining down from the dome were extinguished, and the Circle of Inkata was plainly visible to each other. “Especially that Cyan fellow!”

“Not to mention the elf,” Six added quietly.

“And that stupid dwarf!” Ten ranted. “A hundred thousand! Bah! He couldn’t even count the toes on his feet!”

“That is enough out of you, Ten!” One snapped at him. “The dwarf was telling the truth! And as for the elf, he was not entirely honest with us, but he wasn’t exactly lying either, I think. So until you can actually tell the difference when someone is lying to you or telling the truth, why don’t you keep your mouth shut? As for the rest, well, there are still things that we do not fully understand yet, and it seems these four were not as forthcoming as I had hoped. All of you— continue to find out what you can about these Dyrenns and especially those four— the elf, the dwarves, and that peasant boy. I want answers!”

“But that Cyan of Gabbon lied to me—“ Ten tried to start again.

“Give it a rest, Ten!” Four growled, his deep voice rumbling like thunder.

“This has gone far enough for one day, I think,” One said. “You are all dismissed.”

The various members of the Circle began to disperse, until only One and Four were left in the domed chamber.

“You did well in putting young Terril back in his place,” Four observed. “It’s a wonder the fool has even made it as high as Ten, as stupid as he is.”

“Still, I’m glad you helped silence him, Randall,” One said, standing from her chair. She brushed shoulder-length, dark brown hair out of her face. “I did not want to try to cover Cyan of Gabbon’s lie with one of my own just to appease Terril.”

“Then you do agree the boy lied?” Four asked, as he moved to stand next to One. He was a tall, solidly built man who carried himself with the air of a veteran soldier. He wrapped thick arms around One’s waist in a most familiar manner.

“I think he did. He almost fooled me, but he sounded a hair too eager for us to believe him. He has the makings of an excellent liar,” One mused.

“That is a trait you have worked to perfection, my dear Evelyn,” Four laughed, nipping at her ear.

“Randall! You’re incorrigible!”

“You need to relax more, Evelyn Naera. All this worrying has made you tense. Why don’t you let me *relax* you,” Randall’s deft hands worked out spots of tension in her neck and back, before roaming to other places.

* * * *

“That’s it! They must know we lied to them!” Cyan burst out when they were alone in the private dining room in the southern wing of the Fortress again.

“Perhaps not,” King Trentan objected. “You four handled yourselves well. You did not let them get your tempers up, and you kept to your stories. They can only harbor their doubts. To do anything else would be to accuse us openly, and they are not ready to risk offending me, I think.”

“And here I thought they would be on our side,” Garroc griped.

“The Circle does what is best for the Circle,” King Trentan said. “They’re not against us, they just want to know as much as they can about events so they can use that information to their advantage.”

“We would have been all right if I had been thinking,” Arathorn sighed. “I can’t believe I got caught like that by that woman!”

“It was an honest slip, Arathorn,” Cyan patted his friend on the back. “You were in both places! It would have been too tedious trying to explain *that* to them. They would have named us liars for sure then!”

“And what about ye, lad? Ye sure tried to pull the wool over their eyes,” Rorx grunted. “*Geddon-Klár* is not something to be talking about with the likes o’ those folks. They’d just as likely try to take it for themselves!”

“I know, Rorx. I tried the best I could to fool them,” Cyan said, one hand drifting to reassure himself the Doom Sword was still at his waist.

"*Geddon-Klár*, is it? I thought as much," King Trentan suddenly said, his dark eyes fixed on the sword at Cyan's hip. "The Doom Sword..."

Cyan was caught off guard by the King's words. "I... I'm sorry, your Majesty. I should have told you sooner. I only just started believing it myself."

Marcuris Trentan laughed, and the sound nearly made Cyan jump. "Cyan, I've heard all the stories that the soldiers tell. I've known there was more to your sword for a long time now, even since the first assault on Dyrenn. I may be getting old, but I'm not feeble-minded yet!"

Cyan managed a grin when he saw that King Trentan was not upset. Rorx was chuckling along with the King, and Arathorn just looked at Cyan and shrugged.

"What we know, we will keep to ourselves," King Trentan finally said. "The Circle can dig for information all they want, but they'll get no more from us."

"Good!" Rorx stamped his foot. "I don't trust those bloomin' idiots and their pretty lights any more than I'd trust a goblin merchant!"

King Trentan laughed, and Cyan couldn't help but grin.

* * * *

It was nearing sunset, and Cyan was still wandering the halls of the south wing of the Fortress. Arathorn and the dwarves had gone back to their rooms, and King Trentan had ridden back into the city to check on the Dyrenns in the plaza. Cyan walked around, trying to sort out his thoughts as he admired the fineries of the Fortress of the Circle.

So many things are happening, it's hard to keep them all straight sometimes! he thought. *Arathorn's back in his body, and the only living elven sorceress in Pysidia was the one who found him in time to save him!! The dwarves survive an assassin! I barely stop Greystern, but then he disappears! Can the Spirits take any bigger hand in events? It's bad enough that I found the Doom Sword! Or it found me. I don't even know which it is now! And it spoke to me! I think. What does it all mean? What is going to happen to*

us? It's bad enough that Dyrenn is gone, but now we're stuck here in Inkata with the Circle trying to dig up all our secrets!

Unconsciously, his hand drifted down to where the Doom Sword usually rested against his hip. He awkwardly felt for the reassuring feel of the dark and silvery metal under his fingers, but it was not there. He had left both Sword and scabbard in his room after returning from the meeting with the Circle. *I can barely be away from it anymore! It's like it's a part of me...* Cyan shuddered at the thought and forced his hands to his sides in frustration.

"Spirits! I think my head is going to burst if I keep thinking," he muttered aloud.

"Talking to yourself again, Cyan?" Miranda's familiar voice said from behind him.

Cyan nearly jumped out of his boots, and Miranda laughed before throwing her arms around his neck. She was wearing a long blue dress embroidered with gold thread that left her shoulders bare; the dress seemed to suggest even more than it actually showed of her shape. The rose pendant he had given her was dangling from her neck.

"You're so beautiful," Cyan sighed, pulling her closer. "What did I ever do to deserve you?"

"You don't have to do anything," Miranda smiled. "Just kiss me."

"Yes, my Princess," he grinned back at her and kissed her gently. The tender kiss grew until Miranda had forced him back against a tapestry-covered wall.

"I think you're forgetting something," Miranda whispered slyly when they paused for breath.

"What's that?" Cyan said, between breaths.

"When we marry, you'll be a Prince, and someday, a King. So do try not to mock the title," she said sweetly.

Her lips were on his so quickly that he never was able to get another word in.

Chapter 20: The Darkness Within

Ninth Moon, 873 PR

Arathorn opened the door to his room and was surprised by how dark it was inside. The oil lamp sitting on top of the oak wardrobe was out, and the room had no windows to let in any of the day's last rays of sunshine. *I must be getting too used to staying in palaces*, he chided himself. *I never even checked to see how much oil was left in the lamp! I just assumed some servant would take care of it!*

Shaking his head ruefully, Arathorn took tentative steps into the room. Even his keen elven eyes had not adjusted from the well-lit hallway to the dim room. He shut the door behind him, and the faint illumination from the hall was cut off, leaving the room shrouded in dark shadows. Even without being able to see the room very well, the elf remembered where the chair in the near corner was as he pulled his dark green tunic over his head and tossed it in that general direction. It might have been his imagination, but he almost thought he could see Lifeseeker's familiar white shape, still resting where he had leaned it next to the chair.

As he crossed the room towards the large double bed that dominated one corner, he thought he heard a faint rustling. *Don't tell me they have mice in the Fortress of the Circle!* he thought, a grin coming to his face.

"Now you're hearing things, Arathorn," he told himself. "You really must be tired."

He sat down on a corner of the bed and was starting to take off his supple leather boots when the faint rustling, like the sound of only the slightest movement, reached his pointed ears again. Goosebumps sprang to life along his arms; it felt like something was right behind him.

Arathorn jumped up from the bed and spun quickly, one hand reaching automatically for the hunting knife he usually wore on his belt. His grasping hand found

only air; he had left the knife along with Lifeseeker before going to meet the Circle. He tried to see what it was that had made the sound, but darkness cloaked his bed.

“Easy, Beloved. It is only me,” a familiar sultry voice whispered.

Arathorn did not relax an iota. Having Khrystana here in his room, *in my bed no less!*, made him grow tense in an entirely different way.

“Khrystana? What in blazes are you doing in my room? You scared the wits out of me!” he let out the breath he hadn’t even realized he had been holding.

“I need to talk with you, Beloved. It’s important,” the sad tone in her voice made Arathorn ache to comfort her. Before he could respond, Khrystana’s shadowy, shapely figure rose up from the shadows hiding her on his bed. She stepped lightly over to him, more like some gliding apparition that floated across the floor rather than walked.

Arathorn gasped softly. He could see the thin white silk shift that she wore. It barely reached past her mid-thigh, and it hung from her shoulders with only the tiniest bands of silk keeping it in place. Her raven hair hung loose in waves framing her face and tumbling down her back almost to her waist, blacker than the darkness of the room. Even in the dark, he could feel her deep blue eyes pulling at him.

“Khrystana, I—”

“Shh,” she placed a finger against his lips to quiet him. “Please, Beloved. I can bear it no longer. You must know the truth,” her voice was a breath above a whisper, but pain and sadness filled every word, until he felt tears burning in his own eyes just at the sound of her sorrow.

“The... the truth?” he whispered around the lump forming in his throat.

She gently took his hands in her own and led him back over to the bed. He allowed her to push him down until he was sitting on the edge; she pressed against him, her warm skin feeling smoother against his arm and ribs than the silk shift. Arathorn suddenly became very conscious of the fact that he was just wearing his breeches and

boots. Her warm touch raised new shivers along his arms and down his back. He tried to focus his eyes and thoughts on something else.

“Look at me,” she whispered, still a command for all its softness.

Arathorn turned back to her slowly, his eyes dragging across her bare legs shining indistinctly in the darkness, and up the rest of her that the shift did little to hide. He stopped when their eyes met; her gaze caught and held him as surely as if he were bound in chains.

“What I am going to tell you will not be easy for either of us to hear,” she began slowly, “but you *must* listen. Will you?”

“Ah... of course, Khrystana. Beloved,” he said more firmly.

He could just see her faint smile. “I love you, Arathorn,” she whispered, her voice nearly breaking.

“I love—“

“No, wait,” she cut him off. “Decide that after you have heard me out.”

Arathorn hesitated a moment before nodding slowly, uncertain and not understanding what she meant.

“Arathorn...” she took a deep breath to steady herself, “I am a vile, corrupt, and sickening person.”

“Khrystana! No you’re not! Don’t say such things!” Arathorn reached out and took her by the shoulders. “You’re wonderful and—“

“Please, Beloved!” she cried out. “Let me finish! Do not make this any harder for me!!”

Arathorn pulled his hands back as if he had been burned. He hoped the darkness hid the hurt that he knew must be written on his face. Khrystana half-reached out to him, but then stopped, and let her hands fall to her lap. He could see tears catch what little light was in the room as they slid down her cheeks.

"I *am* all those things, and more, Beloved," she finally said. "I have defiled myself in the pursuit of power. I have gloried in the suffering of others. I have... done unspeakable things," she shuddered violently. "Arathorn, my soul is a black and ugly thing! I... I have served evil. I am... was... a servant of the Demon Prince."

"No..." Arathorn breathed in horror. "No! Not you!" he turned his head, looking for a way to escape the words that tore at his soul.

"Look at me!!" Khrystana shrieked, grabbing his face in her hands and pulling him back to look at her. She gripped the sides of his head fiercely. "It is all true! I was one of his favorites! He taught me! He picked me personally for this mission! I was supposed to learn what had happened to you, and then *I was to kill you!!* I am your assassin, Arathorn!" Khrystana sobbed, still clutching him. "I was to separate you from your friends, even by seducing you if need be!"

Arathorn pulled free of her grasp. "Why... why are you telling me this?" he cried in anguish.

"Because I love you!!" Khrystana wailed. "You have been in my dreams for years, and only now do I understand why! The Spirits sent you to save me, Arathorn! As soon as the Demon Prince showed me your image, I knew my moment had come! The fork, Arathorn! The fork in the road! My two paths! I had to choose, you see! I could either do as the Demon Prince wanted, and seal myself to evil forever, or take the chance you offered me at life! You freed me, Arathorn!! When I saw you lying in that wagon, so helpless and vulnerable, I knew I couldn't hurt you! I loved you even then! I love you even more now!! My love for you is the only thing pure in me!!"

Arathorn moaned, a low sound rising up from deep inside him, a sound filled with hurt, agony, and betrayal. Khrystana did not seem to hear him; she kept talking, the words spilling out like a river released from a dam.

“Somehow he knew,” she murmured, her eyes taking on a distant quality. “He knew that I had the ability inside me. He sent... someone... to my family’s house. My parents thought he was just another elf trying to court me... He filled my heart with promises of power like I could never imagine! He told me of magic and love, and the glories I would have. He lured me from my home and seduced me with his promises. He was my lover for a time... and then I found out the master he really served. By then it was too late... I hungered for the things he had promised me! And then the Demon Prince came and took me as his pupil. He watched as I killed... the elf... and he promised me that I would be first among his servants. The power...”

“No!!!” Arathorn screamed, leaping back from her, and jerking Khrystana out of her terrible memories. “Get away from me!”

“Arathorn! Wait! I—”

“No! Stay back!!!” Arathorn shouted, backing away even as she got to her feet and followed, arms outstretched towards him.

Arathorn stumbled blindly backwards in the darkness, until he was pressed up against the chair in the far corner. His hands found the familiar curves of Lifeseeker, and before he knew what he was doing, he had a white-and-red fletched arrow strung and drawn back to his cheek. His hands trembled with the effort of holding the bow at full-draw.

Khrystana loomed before him, moving closer and closer, until the tip of his arrow brushed the silk of her shift, centered right over her heart. Tears flowed from her blue eyes, dripping onto her chest and the floor.

“Please, Beloved,” she whispered. “If you have any love left for me, end my life, here and now! Release the arrow! I cannot live knowing you despise me!! Shoot, my love!! *Kill me!!!* Beloved, *please!!!*”

Arathorn quivered, on the verge of letting the arrow fly free to bury itself in her body. His grip eased by a fraction. *Let it go, and end this! Kill her and end the suffering...* he thought. *End the pain! I— NO!!! I will not! I cannot live without her!! I cannot kill my Beloved!!! I will not do this! I must not!!*

Ever so slowly, Arathorn relaxed the tension on the bowstring. He lowered bow and arrow, and dropped them to the floor with a clatter.

“No!!!” Khrystana shrieked wildly. “Kill me!!!”

The crazed sorceress flailed at him, beating on his chest and fighting to rake at him with her fingernails. Arathorn grabbed hold of her wrists and forced them to her sides. She snarled and spat at him like a thing gone mad, but he wrapped his arms around her and gently cradled her head against his shoulder. In time, her fury gave way to wracking sobs, and he held her until she could cry no more.

“Why... why didn’t you kill me? she gasped finally.

Arathorn brushed strands of raven-black hair away from her face. He wiped at a few stray tears. “Because I love you,” he whispered. “You are my Beloved, now and forever.”

He gathered her up in his arms and carried her over to the bed. He laid her down and covered her with the soft sheets. Stroking her cheeks, he sat down near her and whispered, “Sleep, my Beloved. I will watch over you.”

When Khrystana finally settled into sleep, Arathorn still sat there in the darkness. Finally, the tears came, and he wept away the pain.

* * * *

Cyan noticed, a bit jealously, that Miranda’s room in the Fortress was much nicer than his. He shut the carved oak door behind him and glanced around the spacious room, noting the wide and soft-looking bed, the several lacquered wardrobes, and the

two narrow windows that let in the fading light of day. White lace curtains framed both windows. *My room doesn't even have a window!* Cyan thought.

Miranda tugged on his hand and he pulled his attention back to her. It was hard not to notice her, especially after missing her for so long. And *especially the way that dress leaves her shoulders bare, with her hair flowing all around...* he stopped that line of thought before he got too carried away.

"Where are you, Cyan?" Miranda arched one eyebrow at him as she pulled him over to sit with her on the edge of her large bed.

He could feel his cheeks warming. "Ah... I was just thinking."

"Really?" Miranda smoothed her blue dress, eyeing him mischievously. "And just what were you thinking about?"

Cyan knew she was toying with him, but he even relished her teasing. "Oh, nothing important," he shrugged, trying to hide a grin of his own.

"I'll show you important," Miranda sniffed, and then she was pushing him flat on the bed and burying him in kisses. Cyan pulled her down on top of him and lost himself in the feel of her near him.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything important," a sarcastic voice laughed from the door.

Miranda rolled off Cyan with a embarrassed gasp that turned into a louder gasp of surprise when she saw who was standing in the doorway to her room.

"Greystern!" Cyan roared, recognizing the traitorous nobleman immediately. He jumped up and reached for the Doom Sword, but it was not there. *Spirits curse me for a fool! I left it in my room!*

"What's the matter, Cyan? Can't find your precious Doom Sword?" Greystern sneered. He took a step further into the room. He carried a broadsword easily in one hand, and he held a large, oddly-shaped leather sack in the other. He lifted the sack

and shook it mockingly as he laughed. Cyan recognized the faint outlines of a sword inside the sack, and he instantly knew where the Doom Sword was.

"Imagine my surprise when I break into your room, all ready to kill you, only to find that you're not getting ready for bed like you should be!" Greystern chuckled.

"Lucky for me that you left this little *plaything* lying about for me to take. Just because I can't hold it in my hand doesn't mean I can't steal it away from you. And then, here I find you, dallying with the Princess like she's some common barmaid! Shame on you! And on you too, *Princess!*" he waved his sword at Miranda. "Does daddy know about this? A pity he's not here to see me take you away to my Master!"

"Why don't you give me my sword, and then see if you can? I beat you once, and I can do it again, you traitor!" Cyan snarled, putting himself between Greystern and Miranda.

"You'd like that wouldn't you, boy?" Greystern smiled, baring his teeth. "Hmm... I think not. I don't make the same mistake twice, you see. I'll kill you and then take Princess Miranda to the Demon Prince."

"You don't have a chance, you bastard!" Miranda spat. "The Fortress guards will find you before you ever make it to the gates!"

"So the little bitch has teeth, does she? Hah! The Demon Prince will teach you humility, you spoiled little whore! Come, *Cyan of Gabbon*, it's time to meet the Spirits!" Greystern advanced, his broadsword leading the way.

Even as Greystern lunged at him, Cyan grabbed Miranda and shoved her out of the way. He tried to leap aside after her, but Greystern's sword was coming too fast. The leading edge of the blade caught him near the waist and scored a deep, long gash below his ribs and across his left side. Cyan hit the stone floor, not even feeling his shoulder bounce from the whitestone; fire burned through his body and bubbled up in a

raw scream that raked his throat. He was only dimly aware of hot wetness soaking his tunic.

Miranda screamed as she scrambled to her feet. She leaped at Greystern in a furious rage, and managed to dig her fingernails into his right cheek and gouge out four bloody tracks before he smashed the hilt of his sword into her abdomen and sent her gasping to the floor.

"You'll pay for that," Greystern growled, blood dripping from his cheek. "And Cyan's death will be your first punishment!" he poised the tip of his broadsword, already wet and dark with Cyan's blood, over Cyan's crumpled body. Blood was spreading in a pool around him.

"No!!" a startled cry came from the door, and before Greystern could plunge the sword through Cyan's chest, a streaking, white blur shot across the room and pierced Greystern's left arm. The Earl of Greystern cried out in pain and staggered back from Cyan. The leather sack holding the Doom Sword fell from his hand and he snarled as he grasped his bloody forearm. A red and white arrow poked out from both sides of his arm.

Arathorn stood panting in the doorway, Lifeseeker up and another arrow nocked and ready. "Don't move, or the next one finds your heart!" he shouted.

Greystern managed a wordless growl of pain and hatred, but he stood still, eyes darting from Arathorn and his bow to where Cyan was lying in a growing pool of blood.

"Drop your sword, now!" Arathorn commanded.

"Allow me, Beloved," Khrystana said, as she slipped past him. She was still clad only in the thin white silk shift, and her eyes were red-rimmed from crying. But when she saw Greystern standing there like a caged animal, with Cyan motionless on the floor, and Miranda struggling to get to her feet, clutching her stomach, the sorceress stood a little straighter, and her deep blue eyes sparked with anger.

Greystern stiffened when he saw her.

"You! You traitorous whore!! What are you doing here?" Greystern bellowed.

Arathorn pulled back a little more on the arrow he held ready.

"Don't kill him, Beloved," Khrystana said calmly, though her voice sounded chill enough to frost stone. "He may be useful to us alive."

Arathorn nodded faintly, but the desire to put an arrow through Greystern's heart was plainly painted across his face.

"The Master will have your soul for this! He will make you wish you had never betrayed him! Treacherous wench! Damned harlot!"

"That is quite enough!" Khrystana grimaced, and suddenly the air in the room fairly crackled with energy. A glowing nimbus flared to life around Khrystana's fist, and in three strides she was across the room. Greystern only had time to gape in astonishment before Khrystana slammed him hard across the jaw with her fist. The white glow exploded in a flash of light and Greystern flew backwards through the air, crashing against the unyielding whitestone wall. He slumped to the floor and did not move.

Arathorn dropped Lifeseeker and ran over to Cyan. He frantically tore at the blood-soaked tunic, and tried to move Cyan out of the spreading pool of blood.

"Help me, Khrystana!" he cried.

"Easy, Beloved!" Khrystana was helping Miranda get steadied on her feet. "Put pressure on the wound and try to stop the bleeding!"

Arathorn wadded the already bloody cloth and pressed it hard against the gaping slash across Cyan's ribs.

"Miranda, I need you to go find the Fortress servants," Khrystana said, physically turning Miranda's head away from Cyan's sprawled form. "Have them bring warm water,

clean cloths, and a needle and thread. If they know of a healer close by, have someone go to fetch him as well."

Miranda's face was nearly as pale as Cyan's, but she nodded quickly and rushed out of the room, still holding her stomach where Greystern had punched her.

Khrystana knelt next to Arathorn. "Relax, my love. You're doing fine. You saved his life once tonight already. Let us pray that will be enough."

"Is... is he going to make it?" Arathorn asked.

"I do not know much about such wounds, but I think Greystern missed the vital parts. It is just a question of how much blood he lost. Of course, we don't know if the blade was poisoned..."

"Sweet Spirits! Please, not poison!" Arathorn gasped, keeping both blood-slicked hands pressed tight over the makeshift bandage. "He has to live, Khrystana! He has to!"

"I know, Beloved," Khrystana whispered. "Just keep the pressure on it. Help is coming."

Moments seemed to drag on forever as they tried to stop Cyan's lifeblood from spilling out of him. The smell and feel of warm blood assailed Arathorn, and he strained to hear the sounds of any help approaching. He felt like screaming in frustration. *If only I'd heard them a little sooner, or moved faster! If I hadn't heard Miranda's scream...*

Only Khrystana's calming hand on his shoulder helped him stay focused.

King Trentan burst into the room with Garroc only a few steps behind him. Two white-garbed servants followed hastily, one with arms loaded full of white bandages, the other carrying a large bowl of steaming water.

King Trentan's dark eyes took in the scene quickly, from where Greystern was slumped against the far wall, his jaw already dark and swollen, to Arathorn and

Khrystana hunched over Cyan near the bed. Marcuris' eyebrows rose considerably when he noticed Khrystana's attire.

"Garroc and I saw Miranda go running down the hallway, shouting about Cyan being wounded! Is he... all right?"

"Greystern must have surprised them, and Cyan didn't have his sword," Khrystana said, taking the bowl of water from the servant. She started wetting bandages and washing the blood away from around Cyan's wound, while Arathorn kept pressure on it. "Arathorn found them in time to stop Greystern from killing Cyan."

Garroc just took one look at Cyan lying there on the floor and ran over to Greystern's inert form and started kicking him fiercely in the ribs. "I'll kill the bastard for this!" Garroc swore.

"Garroc! Stop!" Arathorn shouted. "Leave him be! We'll deal with him later. We have to take care of Cyan first!"

"Go find Master Ironshell and tell him what happened," King Trentan said, laying a soothing hand on the dwarf's shoulder. "Just make sure he doesn't try to come in here and do worse to Greystern."

Garroc growled in frustration, but he nodded slowly. He never took his eyes off Cyan. "If the lad dies..." he warned.

"Just go, Garroc!" Arathorn shouted, switching Cyan's blood-soaked tunic for a fresh bandage. The bleeding was slowing, but the elf's eyes lingered on the dark stains on the whitestone floor. "And get a healer up here!!"

The brown-bearded dwarf ran as fast as his legs could carry him.

* * * *

Arathorn covered his mouth, trying to stifle a yawn. The eastern horizon was growing lighter as the sun prepared to climb up into the sky. Even in the pre-dawn dimness, the buildings of Inkata seemed to glow with their own white light. The elf

looked around from the three large buildings bordering the plaza, to the thick line of dark green that marked the edge of the Monastery Grove. The white canvas of many Dyrenn wagons filled the plaza, but most of the people were still asleep. A few Dyrenn soldiers watched him pass, but they knew who he was and did not get in his way.

It's been a long night, Arathorn thought, forcing down another yawn. It seemed like ages since they had all left the Fortress of the Circle and brought Cyan back to the plaza with the rest of the Dyrenns, even if it was only a few hours ago. It had taken two healers nearly three hours to clean and stitch Cyan's wound, but even they were not sure about his chances. Cyan had lost a lot of blood, and he had not regained consciousness since Greystern's attack.

Arathorn passed two more Dyrenn guards as he entered the closest whitestone building. The Dyrenns had been using the four and five-story buildings to house their families, but a room had quickly been cleared for Cyan. They had brought him here by wagon from the Fortress of the Circle after the healers had finished their work, despite their protests that he shouldn't be moved. If what Miranda had told him was true, Greystern had made it sound like none of the Fortress guards would have stopped him. No one had been willing to risk staying in the Fortress if there was the possibility of further attacks. King Trentan had quickly ordered the move. Whatever trust he'd placed in the hands of the Circle had been dashed to bits.

"If they can't protect guests under their own roof, then we're better off without them!" he had vehemently declared, and Arathorn had found himself agreeing with the Dyrenn monarch.

They put Cyan in a room on the first floor of the building, and four more soldiers stood armed in the hallway near the door. No one wanted to take chances, the Dyrenns least of all. Arathorn had already overheard a few soldiers talking angrily about the

attack on “Lord Cyan” and what they would do to anyone who tried to harm him again. Their loyalty to the young man, and their brutal desire for revenge, had shocked the elf.

But all the soldiers’ anger put together was still a pale flame compared to Miranda’s blazing rage. Ever since she had returned with the healers, she had never left Cyan’s side. Anyone not fast enough for her tastes or careful enough around Cyan had felt the rough side of her temper. Arathorn still remembered the way the Fortress servants had jumped when she gave orders, or how the healers had cast nervous and frightened glances at her when they thought no one was looking. The Princess had taken charge, and not even her father could have stood in her way.

“Has there been any change?” Arathorn asked the nearest soldier.

“No, sir,” the soldier glanced behind him at the closed door to Cyan’s room. “*She* told us that the next fool to poke his head in and ask about Lord Cyan would be cleaning horse-stalls for a year.”

Arathorn grimaced. He didn’t have to ask who “she” was. “Let me know if there’s any news,” he told the guards. “My room is at the end of the hall,” he pointed to show them.

“Yes, Knight-Protector Arathorn,” a different soldier nodded. “You will be notified immediately.”

Arathorn bit back a groan. *I finally appreciate what Cyan was going through with these people!* he thought, as he stalked off down the hall. King Trentan had found rooms for all of them—Rorx, Garroc, himself, and even Khrystana. *Knight-Protector! When did King Trentan start spreading that around among the soldiers? I hoped that would just be between us!*

Arathorn barely registered the door to his room shutting behind him after he entered. He only had eyes for the narrow bed in the corner of the room. He paused just

long enough to kick off his leather boots before collapsing onto the padded mattress. Despite all his worries, sleep was fast in coming.

* * * *

Arathorn gradually awakened to the feeling of something incredibly warm and soft pressed against him. For a few dreamy moments, he lay there with his eyes closed, relishing the warm, close sensation; then his brain began to shake off the fog of sleep and he realized someone was in bed with him. Arathorn jerked like he had been bitten, twisting in the sheets to get a look at who or what was snuggled next to him. The room's only window showed that it was mid-afternoon outside, and the daytime sunshine brightened the room enough for him to clearly recognize Khrystana's luxuriant mass of raven-black hair.

His startled motions awakened her. The elven sorceress turned lazily to face him and her deep blue eyes sparkled with a mix of laughter and love.

"Khrystana! What are you doing here?" Arathorn managed to gasp. She was wearing the same silk shift from last night, and this time she did not have the cloaking shadows of darkness to hide what the shift left uncovered. Arathorn forced his eyes to her face, desperately willing them not to trace her long, shapely legs, or note the generous amount of bosom she showed.

Khrystana only smiled and stretched languidly in bed with a little yawn. Arathorn felt his nerves tingle.

"Good morning, Beloved," she finally said, worming a little closer to where he was sitting up in the bed. "I found you here this morning, and I didn't have the heart to wake you."

Arathorn could feel his face turning crimson, but he tried to ignore it. He reached for where the sheets had been kicked back and hurried to pull them up over Khrystana's very bare legs. He almost jumped when his hand accidentally brushed against her thigh.

“You’re cute when you blush,” Khrystana said coyly.

Arathorn’s cheeks burned even hotter. “Khrystana, I—“

“Beloved, are you sure you want to be with me?” she asked suddenly, cutting him off. Her voice trembled.

Arathorn looked into her eyes and saw the sudden fear reflected there. *She means about last night*, he thought quickly, still reeling from the images his mind kept conjuring. *Those legs... so smooth...*

“Of course, Khrystana. I love you,” he told her, reaching out to take her hand. “More than anything, I love you.”

“But what about—“

“It doesn’t matter,” he silenced her this time. “That was all in the past. That wasn’t the Khrystana De’Faerr I know. Things are different now. *You* are different now.”

If anything, the love for him in her eyes grew even stronger. “Thank you, Beloved, for understanding,” she murmured.

“Nothing can come between us anymore, Khrystana,” Arathorn said, his voice thick with emotion. The desire to hold her became too strong to resist, and he gathered her close to him. Their lips met and Arathorn felt her melting into his arms with each passionate kiss. Before he knew it, he was being pushed back down to the bed and Khrystana was smothering him with kisses. His world spiraled into silky warmth and shining raven hair.

“Khrystana... I should go... check on Cyan,” he finally managed to gasp after an onslaught of loving kisses.

Khrystana’s lips turned down in a sensuous little pout that nearly broke his resolve. “Oh, I suppose you should,” she sighed petulantly, seeming more like her normal self than ever. “But I’ll be waiting when you get back,” she added quickly, with one more incredibly passionate kiss to seal it.

Arathorn just managed to stagger out of bed over to where he had discarded his boots earlier that morning. His head was still spinning from Khrystana's forceful attentions, and it was all he could do to pull on his boots without falling over. He could hear Khrystana laughing from the bed, but he knew that if he turned to look he would never be able to leave. Smoothing his rumpled clothes, he left the room and closed the door behind him before Khrystana found some new way to make him want to stay.

Once in the hallway, he took a deep breath to clear his head. *I don't know if it was the few hours of sleep, or waking up next to Khrystana that has me feeling this good*, he thought as he walked down the hall to where four different Dyrenn soldiers were standing guard over the door to Cyan's room. If they noticed that his clothes looked like he'd slept in them, they did not comment on it.

"I'm here to see Cyan. Has there been any change?"

A veteran with a pale white scar dimpling one cheek shook his head. "No word, sir. The Princess is still with him."

"I wouldn't go in there if I were you, sir," another of the guards spoke up. "The morning watch said she was in a pretty bad mood, if you know what I mean, sir."

"Oh, I know all right. But she needs some rest too," Arathorn grinned, and pushed the door open cautiously.

The room was small and plain, quite similar to the elf's own, and the bed was just as small and narrow. Whatever these buildings were normally used for, they did not include luxury accommodations. Miranda was sitting in a straight-backed wooden chair pulled up close to the bedside. As he entered the room, she turned abruptly, a fierce look fading from her face as she saw who he was.

"Arathorn? I thought it was one of those soldiers again. They're always poking in here and asking how Cyan's doing," she motioned to where Cyan was laying on the

bed, sheets pulled up to his neck. He was breathing softly, though his face still looked pale.

“They can’t help being concerned,” Arathorn shrugged.

“I know,” Miranda sighed, and the sigh turned into a yawn, “but they’ve been getting on my nerves. Every time that door opens I think it’s Greystern all over again...” she shuddered.

“He won’t be a problem, Miranda. The dwarves have him locked up in a storage room they found. There are guards at the door, and Khrystana used a spell to make him sleep until we want him awake. He won’t be hurting anyone now,” the elf said soothingly. “And speaking of sleep, it looks like you could use some.”

Miranda grimaced and turned back to look at Cyan. “I don’t want to leave him, Arathorn. Not like this.”

“It will just be for a few hours, Miranda. I’ll stay with him if that would make you feel better. If anything changes I’ll send a guard for you right away.”

Miranda sighed again, her shoulders slumping. “It’s all my fault, Arathorn... He pushed me out of the way so I wouldn’t get hurt, and look what happened to him! What if he dies?”

Arathorn put an arm around her shoulders comfortingly. “It’s not your fault, Miranda. Greystern had to have inside help to get into the Fortress like that. You and Cyan couldn’t have known what he was up to. The Spirits will see things through. Cyan has made it this long, so that has to give us some hope!”

“You’re right, Arathorn,” Miranda said quietly.

“I usually am. Now why don’t you go get some rest? I’ll keep an eye on him for you,” he gently pushed her towards the door.

Miranda stopped and grabbed his wrists. “Thank you, Arathorn,” she whispered, looking him right in the eye. “Thank you for saving him last night. I... I don’t even want

to think about what would have happened if you hadn't shown up right when you did.
You saved his life."

Arathorn hugged her briefly. "Go get some sleep, Princess. Cyan will be fine."

Miranda smiled faintly and eased out the door. Arathorn shook his head and walked back to the chair at Cyan's bedside.

"Is she gone?" a weak voice asked him.

Arathorn nearly jumped up from the chair. "Cyan? Cyan!"

"Quiet, fool. You... want her to hear you?" Cyan rasped. He shifted his head to look over at the elf.

"Sweet Spirits! Cyan! You're awake!!"

"Really? How... observant of you," Cyan managed to say.

A dark look crossed Arathorn's face. "How long were you pretending to be asleep there?"

"Not long... just enough to know she needed to leave and get some sleep," he whispered.

"She's been at your side ever since last night! She'll kill me if she knows you're awake and I don't tell her!"

"She needs her rest more than I do," Cyan said, grunting as he tried to shift some more.

"I doubt that," Arathorn scowled. "How do you feel?"

"Like I've been... drinking all night with the dwarves," Cyan tried not to laugh, but a grin tugged at his lips.

"Don't try to move, you idiot. The healers sewed up the hole Greystern tried to slice into your ribs. I don't feel like trying to keep what's left of your blood from running all over the bed sheets if you break it open again," Arathorn grinned wryly.

"I'll remember that," Cyan managed to grin.

"You're lucky to be alive," Arathorn cautioned him.

"Thanks to you, I guess."

"I suppose so," Arathorn shrugged. "Do you remember anything after you were stabbed?"

Cyan frowned. "I remember Miranda screaming... and then there was shouting, but it's all kind of hazy. I think I remember hearing Greystern swearing a lot... Who was he yelling at?"

Arathorn fidgeted in the stiff-backed chair. "He— he was yelling at Khrystana," the elf finally said.

"Khrystana? Why?"

"It... It's not easy to explain, Cyan. Greystern knew Khrystana."

"Knew her? How?" Cyan grimaced as he tried to sit up too far.

"Do remember Rorx and Garroc's story about that dwarf that tried to kill them? He was some kind of assassin, right?"

"I guess," Cyan said slowly.

"So, think then. The Demon Prince wanted us dead. He sent that dwarf to kill Garroc and Rorx, and Greystern showed up to kill you. Greystern was your assassin."

Cyan nodded slowly, his eyes carefully watching Arathorn. "And what about you?" he asked cautiously.

"I think you already know the answer," Arathorn sighed. "The Demon Prince sent someone to kill me too. He sent Khrystana."

Cyan slumped back against a pillow. Anger and confusion painted his face. "But— but she brought you back! She didn't kill you! Why?"

Arathorn leaned forward in the chair, his voice tight with emotion. "She doesn't serve the Demon Prince any longer, Cyan. She couldn't kill me when she found my body with the Dyrenns. She rejoined my spirit with my body! The Demon Prince never

told her to do that! I... I love her, Cyan, and she loves me. She doesn't belong to the Demon Prince anymore. We belong to each other."

Cyan stared at him for a long time. "I hope you know what you're doing, Arathorn," he whispered.

"I do, Cyan. Believe me, I do. She told me everything last night– that's why I was still up when Greystern attacked you! She wanted me to kill her, Cyan! She wanted to die if I didn't love her!"

"What... what if she's trying to trick you–"

"No, Cyan. There is no deceit here," Arathorn said firmly. "I believe her. She has left the Demon Prince behind her; last night should have proved that. She helped make sure Greystern would not be a threat. Her magic is keeping him asleep even now! She's on our side, Cyan!"

Cyan sighed and finally nodded weakly. "If you trust her, Arathorn, then that's enough for me. Do the dwarves know yet?"

"No," Arathorn shook his head. "I don't know how to tell them."

"It's Khrystana's secret," Cyan said, "maybe you shouldn't have even told me this."

"I know, Cyan, but I can't hide things from my friends! Not about this!"

"Things will work out, Arathorn," Cyan held out one hand shakily. "If she told you, then maybe she will be ready to tell the rest of us soon. Don't worry about it."

Arathorn shook his head with a smile. "Even bed-ridden, you still play the hero, Cyan. Spirits, but it's good to talk to you!" he clasped Cyan's hand in his own.

Just then, the door to the room opened and Miranda came walking in.

"Arathorn, I almost forgot to tell you that I sent some guards to get some food for you. I was hoping maybe we could get Cyan to eat some..." her voice trailed off when she finally noticed the surprised looks on both Cyan's and Arathorn's faces.

Arathorn hastily got to his feet. "Ah... Miranda! I was... just coming to get you! Cyan's awake and I—"

Miranda cut him off with a glare that could have blistered paint off the walls before rushing to Cyan's side.

"Cyan!! Are you all right??" Miranda didn't even give him time answer, sitting on the bed next to him and planting a firm kiss on his lips. "If you ever do this to me again, I swear I'll make you regret it, Cyan of Gabbon! Spirits help me, I will!!"

"Miranda, please—"

Miranda ignored him and hastily pulled back the covers to check the thick bandages wrapped around his middle, making sure his wound hadn't opened now that he was awake and trying to move. Cyan noticed for the first time that he was only wearing his small clothes, and he tried to grab the blankets out of her hands and pull them back up.

"Oh, don't be such a baby," Miranda chided him, ignoring the blush that colored his face. "Your clothes were a bloody mess, and somebody had to wash you!"

If it was possible, Cyan tried to sink farther down in the bed. Arathorn caught Cyan's eyes, shrugged helplessly, and chose that moment to back out of the room before Miranda remembered to be angry with him.

Chapter 21: The Price of Truth

Ninth Moon, 873 PR

“So, elf, we heard Cyan’s awake,” Rorx grinned, looking up from sharpening one side of his double-edged battle-axe “How is the lad?”

“He’s doing well, Rorx. It’s hard even to get close enough to see him, but the soldiers guarding his room are saying that he’s eating a lot. “

“Good, he’ll need to build his strength! Nothin’ better than lots o’ food to do it, eh?” Rorx laughed.

“Speaking of food, have you given Greystern any yet?” Arathorn gestured to the thick oak cellar door banded in iron, guarded by two heavily-armed Dyrenns. Despite the guards, the sturdily locked door, and Khrystana’s magic keeping Greystern asleep, either Rorx or Garroc was usually down her in the cellars keeping an eye on things.

“Yer lady sorceress was down here earlier this mornin’. She woke him up long enough for him to eat a little. Though why ye even care is beyond me. Let him rot, I say!”

“He might be able to tell us who helped him get into the Fortress of the Circle.”

“Well then, let me un’ Garroc at him! We’ll have him talkin’ in no time!” Rorx growled, fingering the handle of his battle-axe.

Arathorn shook his head at the dwarf’s enthusiasm. “Maybe. It’s up to King Trentan to decide, not me.”

“Humph! Maybe I’ll go have a chat with him then! All this sittin’ and waitin’ makes me edgy. We could use a good torture session to liven things up a bit!”

“Rorx, you worry me sometimes,” Arathorn sighed. “I’m going to check on Cyan. Miranda’s had him closeted away ever since he woke up yesterday!”

“Careful, elf,” Rorx warned. “The way Fissk and the Dyrenns are talkin’, she sounds worse than a mother bear with her cub! There ain’t enough gold in the world to make me want to stick me beard in that room with her!”

Arathorn chuckled and started heading back to the stairs that led up out of the storage cellars.

“Hey, elf!” Rorx called after him. “I almost forgot to tell ye! Yer li’l sorceress was lookin’ for ye! She said somethin’ about you losin’ some bet, and that she was lookin’ forward to collectin’ from ye!”

Arathorn nearly missed the first step up out of the cellars.

“Hey! What were ye bettin’ on? Elf? C’mon, ye can tell me!”

Arathorn didn’t stop to answer Rorx’s chuckling questions. He could feel his ears burning just at the memory of last night. Khrystana had been waiting for him in his room when he finally returned, as she had promised she would. She had brought dinner from somewhere, and even a bottle of *parsal*, the sweet flower wine from Tree-Haven, and had it all waiting for him in his room. *And that green dress she was wearing!* he thought. *Where did she get that? It was...* Arathorn tried to stop himself from picturing the way the deep green silk had hugged Khrystana’s body, but it was hard not to remember. *Spirits! I was a fool to even make that bet with her! It must have been the wine!! I didn’t mean to say “I bet you couldn’t look more beautiful even if you were naked!” I didn’t mean it like that! Honestly!! How was I supposed to know she would start taking the dress off like that...?*

Arathorn ignored the warm flush spreading across his face at the memories and focused on getting to Cyan’s room. *Maybe if I avoid her for a while, she’ll forget about the bet. She can’t expect me to do... what she did, just because I said something stupid! It had to be the wine!! Sweet Spirits! She was more beautiful!! How could I have been so stupid?*

Arathorn barely registered the guards standing near Cyan's door. He politely returned their greetings before slipping into the room. Miranda jumped to her feet in surprise, and hurriedly straightened her hair. Cyan just grinned at the elf from the bed.

"Don't you know how to knock?" Miranda tried to gather her composure and sound fierce.

"Is that how you're nursing Cyan back to health?" Arathorn asked, brushing past her with a wide grin. "And I thought he needed his rest! At least that's what the guards say you keep telling everyone."

Miranda had the good graces to look embarrassed.

"Hello, Arathorn," Cyan's smile was fading, but Arathorn could see the laughter in his friend's eyes. "How are things?"

"Good, sort of. I needed to talk to you about a few things."

Miranda looked from Cyan back to Arathorn suspiciously. "I'll go get you two some fresh water," she said, fixing them both with warning looks.

"Thank you, Miranda," Cyan smiled at her as she slowly turned to go. When the door shut behind her, he still waited a few moments before letting out a huge sigh of relief.

"You almost sound like you're glad she's gone!" Arathorn accused him.

Cyan shook his head. "It's not that, really. I just need some rest from her. She's taking this all so seriously! She practically chased Sergeant Fissk out of here this morning, and then she even insisted on feeding me! I feel like an invalid! She wouldn't even leave the room so I could use the chamber pot!" Cyan's cheeks colored. "I love her, but this is ridiculous!"

"You came close to dying, Cyan. Of course she's going to take it seriously!"

"I know, Arathorn, but that doesn't mean she has to baby me!"

“Well, it looked like you were enjoying her ministrations,” Arathorn chuckled.

“And from the bit I saw, I’d say she’s pretty thorough!”

Cyan grimaced and wiped his face with the edge of a blanket. “You’re not funny, Arathorn. What did you want to talk to me about?”

Arathorn pulled the room’s only chair a little closer to Cyan’s bed and sat down. “I just came from the cellars where they’re keeping Greystern. We’re going to have to do something with him pretty soon. I thought maybe we should talk with King Trentan.”

“I’d love to, if Miranda would ever let anyone in here. You’re lucky you surprised her like that, or else she probably would have chased you out of here like she did Captain Fissk. She doesn’t want me to be bothered with anything besides getting better. She won’t even tell me what’s been going on since the attack!”

“There hasn’t been much to tell, really. King Trentan sent a letter to the Circle explaining why we left the Fortress, but I don’t know what else he said. We haven’t heard anything back from them. The Dyrenn soldiers have been on double watches ever since, and King Trentan ordered the rest of the Dyrenns to be ready to leave in short order.”

“You think he plans on leaving Inkata entirely?” Cyan asked in disbelief. “Where else is there to go?”

“I’m not sure, Cyan,” Arathorn shrugged. “He’s been busy making arrangements with Captain Fissk and his other advisors. I think they’re getting supplies and such in case we have to leave.”

Cyan sighed and shifted irritably in the bed. “Spirits, I just want to get out of this bed and this damn room! But with Miranda always watching me like a hawk, I don’t even dare try to put a foot on the floor!”

“Cyan, where is the Doom Sword?” Arathorn broke in, before Cyan could continue his complaining. “I remember it still being in that leather sack Greystern had

put it in the night you were attacked, but in all the confusion that followed, I must have lost track of it.”

“It over there,” Cyan nodded his head towards the small closet set into the far wall. “Miranda brought it here. It’s still in the sack, but I wasn’t worried about her touching it anyway. She’s safe from its magic.”

Arathorn stood up and hesitantly walked over to the small closet. The leather bundle was in the corner, clearly containing a sword-shaped bundle. “You want me to bring it to you?”

“I... I guess it can’t hurt,” Cyan said. “Just be careful. I guess if Greystern could carry it, the magic won’t burn you through the leather. Just don’t accidentally touch the Sword.”

“I won’t,” Arathorn tentatively grabbed the top of the leather sack. He held it far out from his body, and carried it slowly over to Cyan’s bed. The bundle was heavy, and his hand was tingling oddly. He was more than happy to set it down on the bed.

Cyan sat forward as much as he could and pulled the sack closer. He reached inside the sack and found the Doom Sword’s hilt. It was in its scabbard, still looped onto his belt. He pulled it out of the sack and tossed the empty leather bag to Arathorn before easing the Sword out of the scabbard. The cool metal of the hilt felt good in his hands, and he held the blade up so that he could see his distorted reflection in the polished metal. Barely perceptible runes that seemed a part of the metal, rather than being etched on the surface, flashed into view when he looked at the blade from the right angle. The green gems on the crosspiece and the larger gem clenched in the roughly-formed fist at the end of the hilt seemed to glow with their own light.

“Cyan?” Arathorn asked nervously. “What are you doing?”

“What? I’m not doing anything,” Cyan looked over at the elf curiously.

“Cyan... you’re- you’re glowing,” Arathorn stammered.

Cyan looked down at himself; tiny green flames trickled down from where he held the Doom Sword in both hands. The flickering tongues cast a faint greenish light as they spread up his arms and covered his body. Cyan watched in awe, remembering a similar scene in the hills north of Dyrenn, when the Sword had healed Kazgorath and himself.

“What’s happening, Cyan?”

“It’s... I think it’s healing me, Arathorn! I feel... stronger somehow!”

“Spirits above!” Arathorn swore. “How can it... how?”

“I don’t know!” Cyan said, as the nimbus of fire and light around him flared for the briefest second before vanishing. Cyan’s hands were shaking when he slid the Doom Sword back in its scabbard.

“Are you... okay?”

Cyan swung his legs to the side and eased himself to his feet. He was only wearing a white tunic over his small clothes, but he was too occupied to notice. The bandages wrapped around his middle made the tunic bulge on his right side. Cyan took a few careful steps around the room.

“Look, Arathorn! I can walk around! It doesn’t hurt at all!”

“Let me see,” Arathorn shook his head and muttered under his breath, but he lifted Cyan’s shirt and started to unwrap the bandages.

“Blazes, Cyan! Look at this! You’re healed!” he pointed to the long scar just below Cyan’s ribs. There was no sign of the stitching the healers had used to close the wound, and the pale scar stood out against the new, pink skin around it. “This should have been a raw wound still!” Arathorn exclaimed. “Now it’s just a scar! It should have taken weeks to heal this much!”

“The Doom Sword healed me like it did Kazgorath. But this time I wasn’t even thinking about it! The Sword... it did this on its own!” Cyan shivered at the implications.

Arathorn shook his head. "We definitely need to talk to Garroc and Rorx. If anyone knows about this, it would be them."

Cyan had walked over to the closet and was pulling on a pair of leather breeches.

"What do you think you're doing?" Arathorn asked.

"I'm getting out of this room before Miranda comes back!" Cyan grunted, as he looked around the bed for his boots. "I don't need to stay in this damn bed anymore. I'm going for a walk in the fresh air!"

"She'll skin us both if we're gone when she gets back," the elf pointed out.

"You just leave her to me," Cyan grinned. "I can explain about the Doom Sword to her later. She'll understand. She's just been under a lot of stress lately, that's all."

"And you don't think disappearing on her will add to that stress?"

"Spirits, Arathorn! You're starting to sound as bad as Miranda! You can come if you want, but I'm getting out of this room with or without you. So quit stalling before Miranda gets back with that water!"

Arathorn sighed and waited for Cyan to finish buckling on the Doom Sword. They opened the door and stepped out into the hallway together, and the four Dyrenn soldiers nearly fell over themselves when they saw Cyan.

"Lord Cyan! What are you doing? Princess Miranda left us strict orders to keep a close eye on you!"

"Well, you can keep your eye on me while Arathorn and I go for a walk then," Cyan shrugged. He started walking down the hallway quickly to forestall any protests from the guards. Arathorn had to hurry to keep up; the Dyrenns were fast behind him.

Arathorn caught up and directed Cyan towards a side door in the building. Neither wanted to run into Miranda just then.

"You're sure you're up to this?" Arathorn asked him.

"Of course I am! Now, hurry before Miranda gets back to the room and starts raising hell!"

"You're terrible, Cyan," Arathorn told him as they stepped outside into the whitestone plaza.

"I know, but I need this. I'm tired of being confined."

"Let's at least stay out of the city proper. We can go over into those woods there," Arathorn said, pointing across the plaza to the Monastery Grove.

"That's perfect. Come on," Cyan set off, weaving past people and wagons, with Arathorn and the four Dyrenn soldiers trailing.

They made their way across the plaza, but Arathorn saw more than one person pointing or saying something to those nearby. Enough Dyrenns recognized them now that word of their appearance would spread quickly. *So much for avoiding Miranda*, Arathorn thought grimly. He also noted that many of the Dyrenn wagons looked loaded down with goods, and more than a few sat in orderly rows, with the harness for the horses laid out and ready. Others were still being arranged and readied all across the busy plaza.

The late afternoon sun broke free of some puffy clouds and made the air turn warmer and the whitestone all around glimmer even brighter. When they finally crossed the last of the plaza and stepped into the edge of the woods bordering the one side, Arathorn was thankful for the shade and relative quiet. The Monastery Grove looked to be a large forested area contained wholly within the city. Arathorn noted white oaks, beech trees, paper-barks, and even some scattered walnut trees the father into the woods they walked. The leafy canopy screened much of the sunlight and the air had a moist, green feel to it.

"It almost feels like I'm back home in Tree-Haven," Arathorn sighed.

"This is wonderful!" Cyan exclaimed, taking deep breaths of the forest air. "But why does Inkata have a forest inside the city?"

"Legend says there is an ancient monastery in the center of the grove. I think Inkata just grew up around this place, although I'm not sure if the monastery is still here or not," Arathorn shrugged.

"Well, let's go see! It feels good to be outside again, and I'm not ready to go back yet."

"I suppose it can't hurt," Arathorn sighed, wondering if Miranda had discovered them missing yet.

Cyan ranged farther ahead into the woods, and Arathorn reluctantly followed. The Dyrenn soldiers stayed close as well, holding to the letter of Miranda's commands. What started out as barely an animal trail gradually turned into a broad pathway that Cyan led them down. They climbed a small, forested ridge and followed the trail into a bowl-shaped valley full of large oaks and maples. In the center of the valley a low, sprawling stone building with faded tiles was almost hidden in the shade of several towering oaks. A dry fountain stood in a small courtyard in front of the building, and several smaller sheds flanked the open courtyard.

"I think we found your monastery, Arathorn," Cyan said over his shoulder. "Do think anyone is still here?"

"We might as well go see," the elf shrugged. Now that they had found the monastery, Arathorn had to admit that his curiosity was piqued. *Cyan's enthusiasm must be catching*, he thought.

The monastery looked old. Squat stone columns supported the entranceway, and they looked to have been covered with carvings, but most of the scenes had been worn away by the passage of time. Eroding sculpture and carvings decorated the front of the monastery as well, little better preserved than the carvings on the columns.

Arathorn tried to make sense out of what little he could distinguish, but it all seemed a jumble of strange men and women, tall cities, and odd creatures.

Cyan had mounted three, wide, stone steps that led up to a large set of tarnished bronze doors. A thickly-wound cord hung down next to the metal doors. Cyan looked at Arathorn and shrugged. He pulled on the cord.

Somewhere deeper inside the monastery a bell rang.

* * * *

Khrystana stopped short in the hallway as Garroc and Rorx approached her. Rorx broke out in a grin when he saw her.

"There ye are, lass! Just the girl we was lookin' for!"

Khrystana couldn't help but smile. She liked the two dwarves, despite their coarse language. "What can I do for you, Rorx?"

"Me un' Garroc just got done chattin' with King Trentan. He gave us permission to 'question' the traitor down below. We thought ye might like to come help."

"The King wants to know how Greystern got inside the Fortress of the Circle so easily," Garroc added. "We're gonna see how talkative he is."

"I'll make him talk..." Rorx chuckled darkly, winking at Khrystana.

Khrystana chewed her lower lip thoughtfully. *Perhaps I can be of some help*, she thought. "Lead on then, gentlemen," she smiled.

Rorx laughed. "Hah! I knew that elf had taste! Now, while yer comin' with us, would ye mind tellin' me about this bet ye mentioned earlier...?"

Khrystana felt her cheeks redden slightly, but that didn't stop her from thinking about the next time she saw Arathorn. *You can't hide from me for long, Beloved*, she thought with a smile, and began to explain the situation to them as Garroc grabbed her hand and tugged her down the hallway. Rorx was grinning from ear to ear as he hurried

after them. By the time they reached the stairs that led down into the cellars, both dwarves were laughing so hard they could barely breathe.

Rorx was still chortling when they unlocked the iron-banded door that barred Greystern's makeshift prison cell. The contingent of Dyrenn soldiers standing guard watched curiously, but Garroc had already explained that they had the King's permission to question Greystern.

They were keeping the treacherous Earl in an empty, windowless cellar. Greystern was slumped in one corner, looking for all the world like he was fast asleep. Khrystana's magic kept him unconscious so he couldn't try to escape or kill himself. His left arm was wrapped in bandages, covering the arrow wound Arathorn had given him.

Garroc easily tied Greystern's wrists and ankles with some rope he had brought.

"Go ahead and wake him now, lass," Rorx urged as he shut the cell door behind them.

Khrystana nodded and allowed herself to relax and concentrate. She let herself feel the ebbs of magic all around her and used a fraction of that power to sever the spell she had crafted to make Greystern sleep. When she opened her eyes again, the Earl was already starting to stir.

"Hello again, " Rorx grinned, prodding Greystern with his boot when the Earl didn't wake up fast enough for his taste. "We've come to have a little chat with ye."

Greystern managed to glare at all three of them despite a yawn. His eyes burned with dark hatred; they were directed primarily at Khrystana.

"I don't have anything to say to this wench!" Greystern snarled.

Rorx cuffed the side of the man's face sharply. "Watch yer tongue in front o' the lady, or else I'll be cuttin' it out for ye!" he threatened.

Greystern's glare could have sharpened daggers, but he kept quiet.

"That's better," Rorx sighed. "Now, how's about ye tell us just how ye got inside the Fortress o' the Circle so easily the other night?"

"Simple. I walked through the gates," Greystern said sarcastically.

Garroc stepped up next to the bound assassin and slapped the top of Greystern's left forearm, right where Arathorn's arrow had pierced the flesh. Greystern bit back a cry of pain.

"I hope ye plan on bein' difficult, 'cause we could do this all day long," Rorx chuckled evilly. "But if ye want to make it a whole lot easier on yerself, then ye might want to think about takin' our questions seriously, okay? 'Sides, if ye don't, we can always have this pretty li'l lass zap ye with some magic and make ye talk!"

Greystern nodded silently, his jaw muscles clenched tight. Hatred flared like fresh sparks in his dark eyes.

"Now, how'd ye get in the Fortress?"

"I told you, I walked through the gates-" Greystern repeated, without the sarcasm this time. "No, wait! The guards had orders to let me past!" he shouted when he saw Rorx drawing his foot back for a mighty kick.

"So who instructed the Fortress guards to let you in?" Khrystana spoke up. She met Greystern's hot glare with her own icy stare.

"I don't know-" Greystern started to say, but Rorx's boot in his ribs forced the rest of the breath from his lungs. He fell on his side, gasping and choking.

"Try harder," Garroc advised the Earl. "Rorx has solid boots."

Greystern nodded and struggled to sit up. He was wheezing and his face was a few shades paler.

"I.. don't know who... they were," he gasped. "They wore cloaks and hoods... and their... voices were altered somehow."

"Now we're gettin' somewhere," Rorx muttered. "How many were there?"

“Uh...”

Rorx pulled a hunting knife from the top of his boot.

“Three! There were three!!” Greystern said in a rush. “Three of them. They met me on top of one of the Fortress towers!”

“And did they give you this?” Garroc asked, pulling a small, dark gem from his pocket. It’s many facets almost seemed to absorb the light, rather than reflect it.

“No, I won that gambling in a tavern-“

Rorx clicked his tongue loudly. He dug in a pocket and came up with a flint and steel. “I’ll be right back,” he said to Garroc and Khrystana, and stepped out of the cellar.

Garroc looked to Khrystana and just shrugged his shoulders. Sweat broke out on Greystern’s forehead.

Soon, Rorx returned carrying a bundle of rags and some dry-rotted wood that looked to have been broken off some old crates. He set the whole mass down on the stone cellar floor and proceeded to start a small fire with his flint and steel. When the first tiny tongues of fire began to lick the air, Rorx took his hunting knife and let the flames tickle the tip of the blade.

“Sorry ‘bout the interruption, but would ye mind tryin’ that one more time,” Rorx grinned at Greystern, his eyes glinting with the glow of the growing flames.

Greystern licked his lips and tried to tear his gaze from the knife-tip growing hotter by the second in the fire. “I... uh, that is... the three... might have given it to me... I can’t- I don’t seem to... remember...” Greystern stammered, his face going whiter as Rorx’s blade began to shine with a faint pink glow.

“Let me see that, Garroc,” Khrystana said, taking the dark gemstone from the dwarf. She studied it quickly, probing with senses other than her eyes. “It’s magic,” she stated after a few moments.

“So what’s yer little magic bauble do, eh?” Rorx teased Greystern by spitting on the end of his hunting knife. Spittle sizzled and popped before vanishing in the heat. Rorx put the steel back in the fire.

“It... it is magic! They said it would transport me to a place if I needed them. They would meet me there!”

“How do you use it?” Khrystana asked, still holding the dark gem in her fingers.

“A word! Ah... *toidi*, I think.”

Khrystana frowned.

With a giggle of glee, Rorx leaped to his feet, the hunting knife in one hand, the tip of its blade looking a definite cherry red. Heat waves radiated from the glowing metal.

“*Ieren!!!* The word’s *ieren!!*” Greystern shouted, his voice rising several octaves when Rorx held the hot knife right in front of his eyes.

“Much better,” Khrystana nodded.

“Keep him away from me!!!” Greystern shrieked.

“Damn!” Rorx grumped. “So stinkin’ close!”

“It wouldn’t have mattered, Rorx,” Garroc sighed. “Look, he’s passed out.”

“Bloody, piss-poor agent o’ evil, if ye ask me,” Rorx snorted contemptuously as he stamped out his small fire. “Can’t even stand a little torturin’! I tell ye, they just aren’t as tough these days. Why I remember me great uncle tellin’ stories he’d heard from his pappy, and back in the old days...”

Khrystana shook her head, a slight smile turning her lips as the dwarves started their reminiscing about the days when captives took hours to break. She felt for the powers of magic and wrapped the unconscious Earl in the sleeping spell once more for safekeeping. When she finished, she stroked the dark gemstone that rested in her palm.

This might be useful to us, she mused, as she followed the talking dwarves out of the cellar. King Trentan will be interested to hear of this...

* * * *

"What are you doing? I thought we were just going to look!" Arathorn protested as the last echoes of the bell toll faded. "We don't know what's in there!"

Cyan frowned at the elf. "Will you stop worrying about everything? You're starting to remind me of Miranda! Spirits! It's just a monastery, right? What harm could there be?"

As if to answer him, one of the large stone double-doors swung partially open, and a man poked his head out. He was a full head shorter than Cyan, and his wispy blond hair was graying where it swept back along a receding hairline. A wire-framed pair of spectacles was perched hazardously on his hawkish nose. The man gave a small start when he saw Cyan standing at the door, and he blinked furtively at Arathorn and the four Dyrenn soldiers.

"Ahh... good day, sirs," the man said, pushing the stone door open wider. "I am Brother Matthias. How... how may I help you?"

Brother Matthias was dressed in long brown robes that were cinched about his waist by a length of frayed cord. A few ink stains dirtied the edges of his robe's sleeves, and one dark smudge dotted his left cheek, but he did not seem aware of it.

"Hello, Brother Matthias," Cyan nodded cordially. "I am Cyan of Gabbon, and this is Arathorn of Tree-Haven. We were just enjoying these woods when we saw your monastery. We were curious about it."

"Oh, visitors!" Matthias brightened visibly. "Not many people come to study here these days," he sighed. "But please, come inside! The Monastery of Saint Ryzos is open to all who seek knowledge!" Brother Matthias opened the door as wide as it would go and beckoned them to enter.

Cyan looked back at Arathorn and shrugged before following the monk. Arathorn grimaced and started to follow him. The Dyrenns started moving to join them, but Arathorn stopped them.

“We’ll be all right. You can wait out here for us if you want to.”

“But the Princess said-“ one of the guards started to protest.

“Cyan’s fine! You can see that for yourself. We shouldn’t be too long.”

The guards shared doubtful glances but finally nodded before settling in by the steps leading up to the monastery door. Arathorn held back a sigh of frustration and hurried to catch up to Cyan and Brother Matthias.

The interior walls of the monastery were all carved stone friezes depicting scenes of great cities and strange peoples. Brother Matthias hardly seemed to notice his surroundings; he was already explaining to Cyan all about the monastery and its history.

“Our monastery was built over eight hundred years ago, by our founder and patron, Saint Anjelo Ryzos. His lifelong dream was to establish a place of learning and worship where all people might come to find enlightenment and knowledge. Sadly, this was not to be...” Matthias sighed.

“What happened?” Cyan asked, trying to divide his attention between Matthias’ story and the intricate murals and sculptures that lined the walls of the monastery.

“Ryzos died before the Monastery could be completed. However, those who carried on his dream did not entirely share his views. They felt his need to preserve the history, art, and works of the times, but they disagreed about sharing it with the world. Once the chaotic period of the Dragon Wars began, the Monastery closed its doors to almost everyone. Since then, it seems that the world has forgotten about us. Most of my brethren have come to like it that way I’m afraid.”

“How could this building have survived the wars? Inkata wasn’t even built here until after the end of the wars! Whatever city might have stood here was destroyed in

the years of fighting!” Arathorn exclaimed. “This monastery must have been destroyed too!”

Brother Matthias shook his head and grinned. “Ryzos knew such threats might come to such a place as this. Our home was equipped to deal with such... tragedies, and still remain intact and secure. That is why the Monastery has survived all these centuries.”

“Incredible,” Cyan breathed. “You mean there are books and things here from eight hundred years ago?”

“Indeed,” Matthias nodded. “And some even much older. Ryzos wanted this place to be the greatest center of learning in the world.”

“So was it supposed to be a school?” Arathorn asked.

“No, no! A library! The Library,” Matthias’ voice emphasized the title, “is the greatest collection of knowledge in the world! Would you like to see it?”

“Of course we would!” Cyan said eagerly, before Arathorn could say anything. “But where do you keep everything? This building isn’t that large, or at least it didn’t look that way from outside.”

“You’ll see,” Matthias laughed. “Follow me,” he turned and led them down another intricately carved hallway. They passed a series of smaller rooms set with writing tables and lamps. In some rooms, men dressed much like Brother Matthias were reading or copying manuscripts.

“We have dedicated our lives to preserving the ancient texts and gathering new ones for the Library,” Matthias explained. “Many here spend their lives mastering the old languages and translating them for us. Others of my brethren travel abroad in the world and collect new pieces to add to the Library. It has become our life’s work.”

Matthias led them to a large polished marble doorway. A bronze plaque, almost faded with age, hung above the door.

“What does it say?” Cyan asked. He could not make out the unfamiliar characters.

“‘Enter and Partake of the Knowledge of the World’,” Brother Matthias recited. “Legend says that Saint Ryzos himself crafted this before he died.” He pushed open the marble door, “Ryzos must have been a prophet to have chosen those words... behold, the Library.”

Cyan followed the older monk into the Library... and gasped in shock. Bookshelves loaded with volumes of every shape and size stretched impossibly far into the distance, the shelves too numerous to count. A pleasant, white light brightened the room, but as far as Cyan could tell, the light had no discernible source. A cluster of reading tables were arranged near the door, but except for them, the room was nothing but endless shelves full of books, scrolls, charts, maps, and countless other works.

“This... this is impossible!” Cyan breathed in awe. “This room is *huge!* I know your Monastery isn’t this big!” He shared a disbelieving glance with Arathorn. The elf shrugged helplessly.

Matthias smiled at the confused looks on their faces. “Saint Ryzos was a visionary- he saw to it that we would always have room in the Library. Powerful magic-users aided in the construction of this part of the Monastery. They created a... a kind of *fold* in the fabric of reality- I suppose you could call it that, and it makes this room one vast, limitless space. There will always be more room for additions to the Library.”

“Incredible,” Arathorn whispered. “I never even heard of such a thing!”

Matthias nodded sagely. “Such feats were rare in even the days of Ryzos. This may be the only remaining place of its kind in the world. Fitting that it should be here with the rest of the world’s treasures.”

Cyan walked over to the assembled reading tables. Quills and inkpots were set neatly at each table, as well as blotters and jars of fine sand. A shorter bookshelf holding several plain, leather-backed volumes sat near the tables.

"I don't understand," Cyan spoke up. "If you have limitless space, and all these books scattered in here, how do you ever find the ones you're looking for? It could take weeks just to locate one book!"

"Not so! It's quite simple, actually. See this bookshelf?" Brother Matthias joined Cyan near the low shelf. "This tool is part of the magic of the Library. Everything stored here has been catalogued by magic. All I have to do is concentrate on the work I want, and it will appear here on this shelf," Matthias closed his eyes and took one of the leather-bound books from the shelf. Somewhere between the moment his hand touched it and when he opened his eyes again, the book had become a thicker, red, vellum-wrapped manuscript. Bright golden letters on the vellum cover named it: "*A Treatise on the Life Of Anjelo Ryzos, as written by Brother Matthias of the Monastery of Saint Ryzos.*"

"Spirits! You've written your own book?" Arathorn gaped.

"Most of us here have made some small contribution to the Library," Matthias said modestly.

From somewhere outside the Library, the deep chime of the monastery bell announced someone else waiting to enter.

"Oh! Please excuse me, gentlemen. It is my duty today to help any who come to our home. Please, feel free to stay here in the Library. I will return shortly."

"Thank you, Brother Matthias," Cyan nodded to the monk. "We would like that."

Matthias smiled and hurried out of the Library, his brown robes flapping around his legs. Cyan turned and met Arathorn's eyes, a grin spreading across his face.

“What do you think, Arathorn? Isn’t this place amazing? It’s a treasure trove of information!”

Arathorn felt Cyan’s enthusiasm kindle his own interest. *The knowledge that must be collected here!* he started to think. “Cyan, this place could have some of the answers we need! Maybe there’s something here about the Doom Sword!”

Cyan’s eyes widened and his hand dropped to the Sword unconsciously. “Spirits, Arathorn! You’re right! If there are answers to my questions, they have to be here!”

“What are you waiting for then? Try to use the Library like Brother Matthias showed us,” Arathorn urged him.

Cyan fixed his eyes on one of the plain, brown-backed volumes, and reached for it while trying to focus his thoughts on the Doom Sword. What he grabbed from the shelf was suddenly a very old-looking, faded book with a dark green cover. Despite the book’s age, both Cyan and Arathorn were able to make out the book’s title. It read: *“The Blessing and Curse”*.

“Are you sure you were thinking about the Doom Sword?” Arathorn asked him.

“Positive! This has to be a book about the Doom Sword.”

“But what does it mean? Blessing *and* curse? That doesn’t make sense!”

Cyan shook his head and pulled up a chair from a nearby table. He carefully eased the book’s cover open. The pages were yellowing with age, but were still intact. Arathorn hurriedly sat down close to Cyan and focused on the book. The first page showed the book’s title again, and underneath it was an amazingly detailed sketch of the Doom Sword. It clearly showed the Sword’s hilt, with the rough-formed fist gripping the large green gemstone, as well as the faint, spidery runes that seemed a part of the blade.

“Sweet Spirits!” Arathorn swore softly. “Whoever wrote this must have known a lot about the Doom Sword! That’s nearly a perfect sketch of it!”

"It says here it was written by Merse Fallow," Cyan pointed to a small inscription beneath the sketch of the Doom Sword. "But I don't have any clue who that is."

"Go to the next page. If this Merse Fallow person knew enough to draw the Doom Sword so exactly, then maybe there's more in this book than just somebody's speculation," Arathorn said. "Maybe this person knew about the Sword. The book's title seems to imply that."

Cyan started to leaf through pages covered in flowing script. The ink was fading in some places, but for the most part the book was readable. The early pages seemed to be a kind of summary of the history of the Dragon Wars, and near the end of a chapter, Cyan found a passage which he started reading aloud.

"Without the power of their dark master to sustain them, the hordes of goblins, trouls, and ogra fled back north across the mountains and into the icy wastes from which they had first come. But the victory was a bitter one, for much had been destroyed or lost in the long war, and the elves retreated to their forests while the dwarves sealed themselves under the mountains, leaving the humans to tend to the land once more. Mankind began to flourish, but those who remembered Melias Soulae and the Doom Sword dwindled..." Cyan stopped reading and looked over at Arathorn. "I think this is what we were looking for, Arathorn."

"I think you're right, Cyan," Arathorn said quietly. "Keep reading."

"The Chosen One and his closest followers went north, but they met scorn and disdain wherever they appeared. The mark of the Doom Sword had been put on Melias Soulae during the battle against the Dragon Lord, and he was shunned by the frightened people. An enraged mob took the Chosen One and killed him, but his followers took the Doom Sword and hid it to keep the world safe from its power..."

"Spirits..." Arathorn whispered. "They killed Melias Soulae? I've never heard that part of the Doom Sword legend!"

Cyan tore his gaze away from the words on the page. "What... what is 'the mark of the Doom Sword'? It sounds... horrible!"

"I don't know, Cyan," Arathorn said roughly; he cleared his throat nervously. "Is there more after that part?"

Cyan turned the page. "That's it, I think... wait! It looks like there's been some pages torn out here!" he showed Arathorn the ripped paper edges of the next few pages.

"It makes you wonder just what was written there. Someone obviously didn't want anyone else to be able to read the next part," the elf commented.

Brother Matthias' cheerful voice drifted through open door of the Library; he was talking to someone else.

"Hurry! Put the book back on the shelf!" Arathorn hissed. "We don't want anyone to see what we were looking at!"

Cyan nodded and shoved "*The Blessing and Curse*" back onto the low shelf. As soon as he let go, it was just a plain, leather volume again.

"So many visitors!" Brother Matthias was saying as he led a fairly tall woman with shoulder-length brown hair and cool eyes into the Library. "Three in one day! Are you here to study some more of the works of Tal'andaid, Lady Evelyn?"

"Perhaps," the woman said easily, her appraising, blue-gray eyes sweeping over Cyan and Arathorn quickly. "There are a few other things I was interested in checking up on." Something in her voice made Cyan's skin itch. He had the nagging feeling he knew her.

"Please, go right ahead, Lady Evelyn," Brother Matthias bowed slightly and joined Cyan and Arathorn near the low bookshelf. "This is Lady Evelyn Naera, a scholar who visits us here sometimes. She is one of the few left in Inkata who makes use of the Library with any frequency."

“Greetings, Lady Evelyn,” Arathorn nodded his head politely. “It is a pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Lady Evelyn answered crisply, just shy of being rude. The hint of arrogance and authority in her voice was tickling Cyan’s memories, but he could not remember seeing her face.

Brother Matthias started to say something more, but the monastery bell tolled again. Before the first echoes had died, it rang again.

“Saint Ryzos help me!” Matthias exclaimed. “How many visitors will we have today? I must go see to them. Please, forgive me again,” he sighed, and hurried out of the room.

Arathorn caught Cyan’s eyes and raised an eyebrow questioningly. He wanted to tell Cyan to get the book back from the shelf, but with Lady Evelyn there, he was hesitant.

For her part, Lady Evelyn brushed past Cyan with barely a word and took one of the leather-bound volumes from the low bookshelf. When it was firmly in her hand, the book had a dark green cover that looked old and faded. Cyan stifled a gasp of surprise when he saw what she was doing.

Lady Evelyn opened the book, it was “*The Blessing and Curse*”, and turned to the first page.

Cyan tried to shift so that the Doom Sword hanging at his waist wasn’t so obvious, but Evelyn noted the movement, and her eyes flicked back and forth from the first page of the book, the one with the sketch of the Doom Sword, to Cyan. She paled noticeably, but still managed to fix Cyan with a commanding gaze.

“How...” her voice faltered. “How did you get that... sword?”

Arathorn bit back a groan of dismay.

“Do we know each other?” Cyan retaliated. “I have the strange feeling we’ve met before.”

Lady Evelyn actually smiled. “You are more perceptive than I give you credit for, Cyan of Gabbon.”

Cyan felt a shiver of recognition run down his spine. “One,” he whispered.

Arathorn started, looking first from his friend to the formidable woman facing them. *It is her!* he thought in amazement. *I didn’t even realize!*

“Bravo, Cyan! You would make a good addition to the Circle someday,” Evelyn said with a fierce smile. “Now, answer my question. How did you get that sword?”

“We’re not in the Fortress of the Circle, Lady Evelyn, or One, or whatever your real name is! I don’t have to tell you anything,” Cyan bristled at her commanding tone of voice. “Let’s go, Arathorn,” he said roughly.

“Wait!” Evelyn shouted. “Don’t try to pretend like you don’t know! That *is* the Doom Sword you carry, isn’t it? How did you come by it? I must know!”

“What concern of yours is it? I found the Sword, not you! It is my responsibility!” Cyan snapped back at her. “And the last thing I’m going to do is stand here and chat about it with the leader of the thirteen wickedest people in this stinking city!!”

“You *found* it? I take back what I said before- you must be stupid if you expect me to believe that!” Evelyn sneered. “And you dare speak so about the Circle? I could have you thrown in chains for such talk!”

“Do your best!” Cyan shot back. “Your pet assassin failed, so what makes you think a direct attempt will be any better? The Doom Sword is mine! And it won’t be staying in Inkata for very much longer, so you won’t even miss it!”

“You think the Circle was behind all that? You dare accuse us-?”

“I dare!!” Cyan growled, one hand gripping the hilt of the Doom Sword tightly. “Greystern had to have help to get inside the Fortress, and there are only thirteen people

I know of with that kind of power! Face it, One! Not all of your precious Circle answer to you! They serve the Demon Prince!!”

“Impudent boy! I will cut out your tongue for that!”

“Go ahead and try!” Cyan started to pull the Doom Sword from its scabbard threateningly.

“Both of you stop it!” Arathorn bellowed to get their attention. “Stop it!! You’re both acting like children! Cyan, put that back in the scabbard! And you!” he whirled on Evelyn with a scowl fierce enough to set her back a step. “Stop making foolish threats!”

Cyan flushed with embarrassment, realizing he had been about to draw the Doom Sword against an unarmed woman. Lady Evelyn had the graces to look ashamed of her harsh words.

“That’s better,” Arathorn muttered in the new silence. He fixed them both with dark glares. “What’s said here doesn’t leave this room. Understand?” he prompted with another scowl at Evelyn.

“Understood,” she said reluctantly. Cyan nodded grimly.

“Good. Then you will understand that Cyan’s secret is an important one to keep. If word spread that the Doom Sword was loose in the world again, only the Spirits know what kind of chaos that would cause! He did find it, or perhaps it found him. Regardless, he *is* the one chosen to wield it, so nothing you say or do can alter that,” he directed the last words at Evelyn.

Lady Evelyn brushed at some stray strands of her brown hair. “He is the new Chosen One then,” she murmured.

“It’s not something I asked for, believe me,” Cyan said. “I don’t want to be marked, whatever that means, and killed by a mob!”

“So you do know the truth,” Evelyn nodded to herself.

"I know that someone ripped out pages from the book you're holding," Cyan replied.

"What? What are you talking about?"

"There are several pages torn out of the book, right after the passage about Melias Soulae's death," Arathorn explained.

Lady Evelyn began flipping through the pages until she got to the torn out section. "Who did this? I came to get this book specifically!"

"We don't know who did it, and my guess is that none of the monks here even know about it either," Arathorn said. "I think Cyan may be right- you have traitors in the Circle."

"That... that's impossible!"

"We didn't think an army of ogra, troul, and goblins was possible either, but they're real, and so is this!" Cyan spoke up. "The Demon Prince is real, and he has people working for him! Greystern tried to kill King Trentan back in Dyrenn, and he almost killed me here in Inkata. He serves the Demon Prince, and anyone who helps him does too, noble or peasant!"

Evelyn nodded reluctantly. "You... have a point, Cyan. But proving such an accusation will be impossible."

Before either Cyan or Arathorn could respond, a very shaken-looking Brother Matthias practically ran into the Library. "Master Cyan! You have to come immediately! There's someone waiting for you outside the Monastery."

Cyan looked over at Arathorn. "Who could it be? No one knows we're here except the guards who came with us."

"The young woman was most adamant in insisting that you come right away. She was quite rude, if I may say so!" Matthias added.

"Did you say '*young woman*'?" Cyan asked warily.

“Yes, I did. And such language from someone her age! I believe her exact words were *‘You tell that damn fool if he doesn’t get his carcass out here this instant, I’m going to take his blasted sword and spit him on it like a-’* Well, you get the point,” Brother Matthias flushed a bright shade of crimson.

“Miranda,” Cyan and Arathorn said in unison.

“You don’t mean King Trentan’s daughter, Princess Miranda, do you?” Evelyn asked in surprise.

“The one and only,” Cyan grimaced.

“She’s a tad bit overprotective of Cyan, you see,” Arathorn started to explain to Evelyn. “Why, when he was hurt, she was by his side night and day. She even bathed him and dressed him-“

“That’s enough, Arathorn,” Cyan growled, his face coloring.

Lady Evelyn tried her best to hide a smirk.

“Let’s go,” Cyan said. “Best not to get her any angrier than she already is.”

Arathorn laughed. “It’s not my hide she’ll be making into a throw rug!”

Cyan fixed the golden-haired elf with a serious stare. “If that’s what you believe then you’re crazier than the dwarves. You don’t know Miranda like I do. We’re both dead.”

Arathorn paled visibly.

Chapter 22: Fading Comforts

Ninth Moon, 873 PR

Lord Commander Jase Cail looked up from the neatly organized writing desk when the hurried knock sounded on his office door.

“Enter,” he called out, sighing and shoving a pile of commissary reports off to one side of his stout, white-oak desk. His office was small and tidily kept; strict order pleased his senses, and he drew comfort from knowing everything in his office was in its exact place in relation to everything else. The white and gold banner depicting the interlocked circles of Inkata hung perfectly level from a bracket in the whitestone walls, and the tasseled edges of the banner missed touching the smooth stone floor by an exact inch. The swords and shields on the opposite wall were polished to a sheen, and no speck of dust was allowed to rest there for long. Even the quill and inkpot on the left corner of his desk were properly set just so, not too close to the edge to risk being knocked off, nor too close to the ordered stacks of reports he had been looking at. The office spoke of rigid order and measurement, traits Jase Cail tried to cultivate in his men and refine in himself. *All things in their place*, Cail mused as the door to his office swung open on well-oiled hinges that did not whisper a sound.

A sweating soldier wearing a dust-covered white tabard stepped into the room and shut the door behind him. He snapped to attention immediately, his right hand resting on his sword hilt, fingers splayed apart rigidly.

Cail ignored the soldier for a long moment; his blue eyes narrowed slightly in irritation. Road dust marred the polished door handle, and a light trace of dirt marked where the soldier had stepped on the clean-swept whitestone floor. Summoning his full attention, the Lord-Commander pushed aside his momentary distaste and focused on

the soldier. The man had only two small interlocking circles woven into his white tabard just above his heart.

“What have you to report, Lance-Rider?” Cail finally asked him.

“News from the scouts in the north, Lord-Commander,” the Lance-Rider, a low-ranking cavalry officer, answered crisply. “They have reported seeing the army that sacked Dyrenn moving south towards Inkata at a fast pace.”

“Estimated time of arrival?”

“Several days, Lord-Commander. Perhaps three or four at their current pace.”

Jase Cail eyed the sweating Lance-Rider for a moment more. “And the scouts that brought the reports?”

“I sent them back out to watch this army before coming straight to you, Lord-Commander. You will have updates every day.”

Cail nodded slowly. “Good job, Lance-Rider. You did well to bring this to my attention so quickly,” he pushed his chair back from his desk and stood up to look the Lance-Rider in the eye. “You are dismissed.”

The Lance-Rider finished saluting by gripping his sword hilt and drawing it a quarter way from its sheath. Before he could slide it back home, Jase Cail had circled his desk and plunged a dagger through the man’s chest, the jeweled hilt sticking out from the stitching of the two interlocking circles on the man’s tabard. The Lance-Rider gasped, a bubble of blood expanding from his open mouth. Cail’s dagger had caught the corner of the man’s heart on its way towards puncturing a lung. The Lord-Commander eased the silently dying man to the floor of his office, mindful not to soil his hands in the bloodstain spreading across the front of the Lance-Rider’s white tabard.

“Order and measurement,” Cail murmured, wrenching his dagger free with a slight twist that stilled the Lance-Rider’s heart for good. He wiped the blade clean on the bloody tabard before tucking it back into its small sheath on his belt.

The Master's reign will bring supreme order, Lord-Commander Jase Cail thought to himself, proud of the quickness and efficiency with which he had silenced the soldier. Nothing can be allowed to stop chaos and disorder from being wiped clean from the earth. The Master's army will bring glorious order to Inkata, and I must be ready to welcome them!

Cail eased his office door open and called for his personal secretary, a former Shield-Leader named Brakis. "Brakis, I need something disposed of," he said calmly. "And see that someone is sent later to dust and sweep my office."

Brakis had jumped to his feet as soon as the door started opening. If the sight of the dead Lance-Rider lying in the Lord-Commander's office phased him, his face never showed it. Brakis had seen the like of it before.

"I will see to it immediately, Lord-Commander," Brakis snapped to attention, though he wore no sword at his waist.

"Thank you, Brakis. I have to ride up to the Fortress of the Circle to make several reports. See to it that no one asks any questions about..." he nodded back towards his office.

"Immediately, Lord-Commander," Brakis bowed slightly as Cail left the room, and then went to drag the Lance-Rider's body into a small storage room that he had converted just for such purposes.

Order and measurement, Brakis thought, as he rolled up his sleeves and took a cutting knife down from the storage room wall.

* * * *

Cyan started for the door leading out of the Library, with Arathorn a step behind him. Brother Matthias gave a start at the grim look on the elf's pale face. Surprisingly, Lady Evelyn caught up to them in several brisk strides, joining them out in the intricately carved hallway.

"What do you think you're doing?" Cyan asked when he noticed her following, still not breaking stride to stop and talk.

"I'm coming with you, of course," Evelyn replied, making it sound plainly obvious why she would be doing just that. "I have a stake in this now as well. The Circle is my responsibility, and I mean to get to the truth of this matter."

Cyan shrugged and strode down the hall to the main doors. At the moment, despite all the wild thoughts crashing around inside his head, all he could really focus on was knowing Miranda was waiting for him outside those stone doors. *Waiting and furious*, he corrected himself. *Spirits! Why does she have to be angry? I'm better! The Doom Sword healed me!* That line of thought quickly made him remember the passages from "*The Blessing and Curse*". *The mark of the Doom Sword? What does that mean? Why would people kill Melias Soulae? He saved the world from the Dragon Lord! It doesn't make sense!*

Cyan forced his frustrated thoughts aside as he reached the large stone doors of the Monastery. He took a quick breath to steady himself before pushing the doors open and walking out into the sudden brightness of the late afternoon sun. Arathorn and Lady Evelyn were a few paces behind him, but his eyes immediately were drawn to Miranda, pacing like a caged animal about to spring into attack. The afternoon sunshine slanted through the canopy of oak and beech overhead, creating a pool of sunlight and shadow that she was walking across, one moment seeming illuminated in golden light, and the next, dimmer and touched in cool blue-black shades. Cyan felt his heart hammering in his chest just at the sight of her, dressed in dark leather riding pants, supple calf-high boots, and a white blouse trimmed with gold thread. The rose pendant he had given her caught the light momentarily, making ruby fire against her chest. Her thick mass of auburn hair hung loose about her shoulders, swinging wildly as she turned and paced.

She stopped in mid-stride when she noticed him watching, her dark eyes flashing from anger to surprise, back to anger again.

For Cyan, it felt like the rest of the world didn't exist any more; there was only that smoldering glare fixing him where he stood. He was not even aware of Arathorn and Lady Evelyn coming up behind him, or of the twenty mounted Dyrenn soldiers who were still in their saddles and watching Miranda with something between trepidation and awe. The four soldiers who had come to the Grove with Arathorn and Cyan were trying to be inconspicuous, keeping as much distance between themselves and Miranda as possible.

"Hello, Miranda," Cyan said simply, stepping down the few stone stairs to stand on the leafy ground near her. "Brother Matthias said you were here looking for me."

Miranda's cheeks flushed red, whether in anger or embarrassment, Cyan could not tell. But he could almost feel her summoning up the energy for a skin-blistering tirade.

"I'm glad you came, my love," he whispered quickly to forestall her onslaught. "There's so much I want to tell you about. Now we can ride back to the plaza together, and I'll tell you all about what we found inside this monastery."

"If you think—" she tried to start in on him.

"Shh," he put a finger against her lips. "You look tired, Miranda. You've put too much strain on yourself these past days, trying to care for me. Now let me tend to you. We'll get you back to the plaza so you can rest. You'll see— you'll feel so much better after you get a decent meal and some sleep. I'll even tuck you in," he whispered lightly, so that only she could hear him.

He took her hand and tugged her over to where a Dyrenn soldier waited with her mount. Cyan helped her up into the saddle before she could say another word. Another soldier brought up several extra horses they had brought along, and Cyan vaulted up

into the saddle. Arathorn was climbing up as well, and another Dyrenn was helping Lady Evelyn get mounted. Her blue-gray eyes were watching him with a touch of amusement and intrigue. Cyan sighed and wheeled his horse to ride alongside Miranda. For her part, the Princess looked more than a little bewildered.

If she wasn't so tired and worked up, I never would have pulled that off, Cyan told himself. But thank the Spirits for small blessings...

* * * *

It was a short while later that they reached the sprawling plaza bordering the Monastery Grove. Cyan dismounted in front of the large whitestone building that had been serving as their temporary home, and helped Miranda slide down out of the saddle. Only face to face with her did he notice the dark circles under her eyes, and her stifled yawn ruined the dark glare she tried to direct at him.

"Let's go, sleepy," he grinned back at her. "It's my turn to play nursemaid. And I'm not taking no for an answer."

"I'm not- awwhhh... tired," Miranda yawned again. She glared at him like it was his fault, but didn't fight when he took her hand and led her inside.

"They make an interesting pair," Lady Evelyn said to Arathorn as she hopped down from her mount. "I'm not sure which is the stronger of the two."

Arathorn chuckled. "It goes in turns I think," he remarked lightly, still not entirely sure what to make of the leader of the Circle.

Evelyn nodded. "I know what you mean," she sighed quietly, and judging from the look on her face, Arathorn wondered what man she was thinking about.

"One of the soldiers should be able to arrange for you to see King Trentan, if that is what you want," Arathorn said hesitantly.

"Yes," Evelyn broke out of her thoughts. "I would like to speak to him, if possible. There is... much to think about now."

Arathorn grudgingly agreed, and directed Evelyn to some Dyrenn soldiers. He turned away, but smelled a familiar perfumed scent just as Khrystana lightly tapped him on the shoulder.

"There you are, Beloved! I've been looking for you. We have much to discuss," Khrystana smiled pleasantly, but her blue eyes were hungrily searching his face. "While you were off sight-seeing, the dwarves and I were actually doing something useful."

Khrystana grabbed Arathorn's arm and pulled him toward the door to the building. Arathorn tried to protest, but Khrystana silenced him with a quick kiss.

"Remember, Beloved," she whispered teasingly, "there is still the matter of that little bet you lost. Don't think I don't intend to collect!"

Arathorn felt his cheeks coloring. *How does Cyan do it?* he wondered helplessly.

* * * *

Cyan yawned and sat up painfully. The muscles in his neck and back were complaining to him about falling asleep in the uncomfortable wooden chair last night. He rubbed his neck and yawned again. *I must have been more tired than I thought*, he mused. He gingerly felt around the fading pink scar that should still have been a painful wound, but the flesh was whole and painless. The Doom Sword had done a good job of healing him, but Cyan still wished he knew how it worked. When the Sword had healed Kazgorath, Cyan remembered wanting to help the dying dragon, not kill it. He thought the Sword had responded to his need somehow then. But yesterday, the Sword had worked its healing before he even thought to summon its power. *Can it act on its own like that all the time?* he wondered. *But that's ridiculous! It's not alive! But it did communicate to me the first time I fought Greystern... didn't it? Or did I imagine that? What about this "mark" that it supposedly put on Melias Soulae? What does that mean? What mark?*

“Cyan? Are you all right?” Miranda’s voice broke him from his thoughts. He realized he was standing in the middle her room gripping the hilt of the Doom Sword in a white-knuckled hold. He forced himself to relax and smoothed the grimace from his face.

“I’m fine,” he managed to smile. “How about yourself?”

Miranda sat up in the room’s narrow bed, her hair a wild and tangled mass of reddish curls. A cream colored shift clung to her body tightly, and Cyan tried not to stare too obviously. She covered her mouth and yawned. “I feel better,” she said. “But I’m still mad at you for yesterday.”

“I know, Miranda,” Cyan sighed, “but I’ve explained it all to you. The Doom Sword healed me! I wasn’t going to sit in that bed after that!”

“I wouldn’t have expected you to, Cyan. But you could have at least let me know what had happened! I was sick with worry about you! I didn’t know where you were!”

Cyan moved to sit on the edge of her bed. Tears of frustration glistened in her dark eyes as she looked at him. “I’m sorry, Miranda. I really am. I didn’t mean to hurt you,” he tenderly wiped a stray tear from her cheek.

“I don’t want to be angry with you, Cyan. Spirits, but it’s so hard to stay mad at you at all! It’s not fair! I should have made you beg me for forgiveness!”

Cyan pulled her into his embrace. “I would have if you asked it of me. I love you, Miranda. No matter what happens, you can be sure of that.”

“How am I ever supposed to be angry when you say things like that?” Miranda sighed, relishing the feel of his arms holding her close. “I wish we were alone forever, so you could keep telling me you love me! I never grow tired of hearing you say that! But it never works out that way... there’s always things happening. You always have to rush off to be the hero and try to get yourself killed! Why can’t you just stay with me and love me?”

Cyan felt her words stabbing into his soul. *Why do I always hurt her?* He cupped her face in his hands, kissing her gently, hoping that for now at least, they could comfort each others' pain. "I would like nothing better than that, Miranda. I wish we didn't have to worry about monsters, and armies, and everything! But I have this," he glanced down at the Doom Sword fastened to his belt, "and I have it for a purpose. We can't ignore the rest of the world, as much as I wish we could! We just have to... make do with what we have."

Miranda growled and nibbled on his ear lobe. "Maybe I don't want to 'make do', Cyan. Maybe I want to have all of you, not just the little bits I can get in between battles... and running, and being afraid you might die!"

"You left out chasing after kidnapped Princesses," Cyan grinned, hoping to raise her spirits.

"That too," Miranda grumbled, avoiding his eyes.

Cyan sighed and smoothed Miranda's hair. "Come on my love, let's go get some breakfast. I'm sure your father will have met with Lady Evelyn by now. We should see what he thinks about this whole Circle situation."

Miranda made a face. "Can't you let my father and this Lady Evelyn take care of things? We could stay here and... make up for lost time," she smiled provocatively and tugged at the silk strap of her shift, sliding it a little further off her shoulder. The smolder in her brown eyes made Cyan suddenly aware of the warm feel of her body next to him.

"Ahh... Miranda... we should- uh, I mean, they're probably waiting for us to join them, and we shouldn't really keep them too long, and you need to get dressed-"

Miranda silenced him with a long, passionate kiss. When she finally let him go, Cyan couldn't even remember why he wanted to get going.

* * * *

Arathorn followed Rorx and Garroc into the largest of the rooms on the first floor of the building they had been using as their quarters. King Trentan was already sitting at a lacquered table someone had moved into the room, sipping tea from a blue porcelain cup.

“Good morning to you all,” Marcuris greeted them. “I’m glad you could join me this morning.”

“Mornin’ yer Highness,” Rorx said, sliding into a chair.

Arathorn yawned as he took a chair opposite the King.

“Not enough sleep last night, elf?” Rorx grinned.

Arathorn poured himself some tea and tried to hide behind his cup. *How could Rorx know Khrystana would keep me up half the night trying to ‘collect’ from my stupid, stupid bet?* He could feel his face heating just at the thought— perhaps they would think it was the steam from the hot tea.

Garroc winked at him.

Thankfully, Cyan and Miranda entered the room and saved him from having to reach over and swat the dwarf. Miranda kissed her father on the cheek and took the chair next to him; she tugged Cyan’s hand to get him to take the seat right next to her.

“I had heard you were up and about, Cyan, but this is amazing!” King Trentan shook his head. “I didn’t know you were such a fast healer.”

“*Geddon-Klár*,” Garroc murmured.

Cyan looked at each of his friends around the table before finally nodding. *They all know the truth, so why I don’t I like to hear about it?* he thought. *Everyone here knows I have the Doom Sword, and that it has... powers. Then why is it so hard for me to just acknowledge it and just say that “Yes, the Doom Sword healed me!” to everybody. Is it because I don’t want to admit that I needed the Sword? That I wasn’t good enough this time on my own to “save the day”? Did I ever do anything, or was it*

always the Sword making it possible? Cyan took the cup of tea Arathorn offered him and took a hasty swallow. Despite the sugar he saw the elf add, the taste in his mouth was exceedingly bitter.

“Burn me beard,” Rorx swore softly. “Is there anythin’ the darn thing canna do?”

“We aren’t here to discuss the Doom Sword, Rorx,” Arathorn sipped his tea.

“What we need to figure out is what to do about the Circle.”

King Trentan sat forward in his chair. “The two might be more related than you think, Arathorn. I talked with Lady Evelyn last night, and though she never actually said it, I think she suspects Cyan has the Doom Sword.”

“She knows,” Cyan sighed. “When we were at the Monastery yesterday, she was there and saw a picture in a book about the Doom Sword. It didn’t take her long to recognize the real thing. That’s when we told her about our own suspicions about the Circle being corrupt.”

“Big surprise there,” Garroc snorted.

“Me un’ Garroc and the elf’s li’l lass didna just sit around either,” Rorx piped in.

“We had a little chat with ol’ Greystern and found out some dandy things.”

“He actually told you something useful?” Arathorn asked.

“All he needed was the right kind o’... persuasion,” Rorx chuckled darkly.

Khrystana glided into the room and took a seat next to Arathorn. “Good morning, your Majesty, Princess, everyone,” she said gently. Arathorn shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He knew why she had come this morning- she had told him her intentions last night after she had finished embarrassing him with collecting on his little wager.

“Good morning, Khrystana,” King Trentan nodded to her. “I’m glad you decided to help us. Your opinion is more than welcome.”

“Thank you, Majesty, but there is something more I wished to tell you all,”

Khrystana paused long enough to gather her resolve and press forward. Somewhere

along the line she had grasped Arathorn's hand in her own, holding tightly to it, as if it was her only support. "All of you have given me your trust freely, and that means much to me. But I fear I have not been as forthcoming with you as I should have been. I count all of you among my friends, and I hope that what I have to say will not jeopardize our friendship. Arathorn was the first person I could confide in, and I can only pray that the rest of you can be as understanding as he was. And you, Cyan— Arathorn tells me that you know my secret as well."

Cyan nodded slightly, conscious of everyone's eyes shifting suddenly to him. "Arathorn had to explain some of it to me, Khrystana. He only told me because I asked about Greystern... I trust Arathorn's judgement, Khrystana," he said simply.

Khrystana managed a faint smile. "Thank you, Cyan."

"Would ye mind tellin' the rest o' us just what yer talkin' about?" Rorx interrupted.

Khrystana flushed a rosy shade of pink. "I'm sorry. It's just that... it is difficult..."

"We're your friends, Khrystana. You can talk to us," Miranda said, smiling comfortingly.

The elven sorceress closed her eyes and nodded. "Very well. I will be plain with all of you. The Demon Prince wanted Cyan and his friends dead. He sent out three assassins to this end. He sent the dwarf Dugan Brim, to kill Garroc and Rorx."

"And we know how that bastard ended up!" Rorx growled.

"He sent the Earl of Greystern to kill Cyan," Khrystana continued. Cyan caught himself touching the spot just below his ribs where Greystern had stabbed him. He fought off a shudder as he remembered the pain of the sword slicing into his flesh. The remembered pain paled in comparison with the raw emotion that choked Khrystana's next words.

"And he... sent me to kill Arathorn," Khrystana finished.

A soft gasp escaped Miranda's lips as she straightened in her chair. Rorx's mouth dropped open in surprise, and for once he was struck speechless. Garroc gripped the edge of the table tightly in both hands, until his knuckles shown white. King Trentan looked like he was about to say something, but his lips moved soundlessly for a moment before he clenched them shut with a fierce scowl. Arathorn shared a painful look with Cyan, before squeezing Khrystana's hand firmly.

"Yes, my friends," Khrystana's soft voice filled the eerie silence of the room. "I served the Demon Prince. He taught me much about the magic I now wield and trained me as his prize student. He personally sent me to learn about Arathorn's strange disappearance, and then I was to kill him when there was nothing more for me to learn," her voice was laden with heavy sorrow. "But when I first came among the Dyrenns and saw him in that wagon bed... then I knew I could not go through with it. In Arathorn I found the one thing that could save me from the dark chains that I had accepted. His love," she fixed the elf with an ardent, tear-filled gaze, "saved me from the Demon Prince's evil. For the first time in a long, long time, I felt pure again. I used my magic to reunite Arathorn's spirit with his body. I saved his life, and in doing so, I helped to save my own. "

Khrystana slowly looked around the room, searching the faces of everyone gathered around the table. There was still betrayal and shock written across the faces of the dwarves, Miranda, and King Trentan. "I know this is not easy to hear. I know I have betrayed your trust, and for that I am truly sorry. But I could not even tell Arathorn at first. I... I was so afraid of losing him if I told him the truth. I was afraid... of what might happen to me if he rejected me."

She took a deep, shuddering breath, and faced them with her blue eyes glistening. "When Arathorn returned my love, I had to tell him the truth about myself. I begged him to kill me after I did, because I did not want to live if he did not love me. But

he loved me still, and his love has washed me clean of the last traces of the Demon Prince's evil. I no longer belong to the Demon Prince. I am Arathorn's... if he will have me."

Arathorn took both of Khrystana's hands in his own. "I will gladly be yours, Khrystana, but I have one condition of my own, first," Arathorn said gravely.

Khrystana's face paled, and real fear shown in her eyes.

Arathorn pushed his chair back and knelt on the floor in front of her. "Marry me, Khrystana De'Faerr."

The fear on Khrystana's face turned to shock, and then to joy. "Yes, Arathorn! Oh, yes, my Beloved! I will marry you!!" Tears of relief and happiness trickled down her cheeks, and Arathorn's eyes glistened as he drew her up into a tight embrace and loving kiss. Gradually they broke apart, and Khrystana wiped at her cheeks with the back of her hand as she sat down again.

King Trentan reached over and took her hand. "Khrystana, it took great courage to do what you just did. I don't think I could have done the same. Your heart does you proud; I wish my own could be as strong and compassionate as yours. You have my trust still in all things. And let me be the first to lay my blessings upon you for a happy marriage. Forgive me for doubting you, my lady," Marcuris bowed his head.

Fresh tears sparkled Khrystana's cheeks. "Only if you will forgive me for deceiving you for so long, your Majesty. You are a compassionate and understanding man, and I gladly accept your blessing," Khrystana circled the table and kissed King Trentan on the cheek.

King Trentan nodded silently, wiping at his own eyes.

"Master Garroc? Master Rorx? Can you forgive me as well?" Khrystana asked.

Rorx tugged at his beard a moment before answering. "Yer a good woman, lass. Aye, yer all right in my book! Yer one o' the family now, so to speak."

Garroc nodded slowly. "I can forgive you. You brought Arathorn back to us, and you helped save Cyan. I know you're on our side now."

"Thank you, both of you," Khrystana smiled against her tears. She kissed both dwarves on the forehead. Rorx blushed all the way to the roots of his beard.

"You already have my forgiveness, Khrystana," Cyan told her. "You are one of us now."

"Thank you, Cyan. That means a lot coming from you," Khrystana's cheeks colored. The elven sorceress finally turned to Miranda, and despite everyone else's assurances, her voice quavered. "And... you, Miranda?"

Miranda flinched when Khrystana met her eyes. "I... I wanted to hate you a minute ago, but I... I can't. I love you like a sister, Khrystana. I shouldn't have doubted you."

Khrystana embraced Miranda, and both women started crying. Cyan had to turn away before his own eyes started smarting with tears. The emotion in the room was a palpable thing.

"Why don't we all take a little break and unwind," Cyan suggested. "I think we all could use it."

"Good idea, lad," Rorx said as he stood up. He hardly even favored his one leg anymore. "I could use a drink anyway."

* * * *

King Trentan gathered everyone back together a short time later in the makeshift dining room. Dyrenn servants had set plates of fruit and crystal pitchers of water in place of the morning's hot tea. Cyan took his seat next to Miranda and Garroc and waited patiently for everyone to get settled. He was surprised to see Lady Evelyn enter the room and take a seat between King Trentan and Arathorn.

"What's she doing here?" he whispered to Miranda.

"I'm not sure," Miranda shrugged. "Father spent all evening with her yesterday. They must have been planning together."

Cyan leaned back in his chair and tried to keep an eye on the brown-haired leader of the Circle. Part of him was still saying not to trust her.

King Trentan sipped a glass of water and looked around the table, his dark eyes serious. "I asked Lady Evelyn here because she knows more about the Circle than any of us do. I know it seems that the Circle has not been our greatest of friends in the past days, but we really have no proof except Greystern's words to accuse them. "

"He did more than talk," Rorx interrupted. "Show 'em that li'l bauble o' his, lass," he told Khrystana.

The elven sorceress nodded and produced the strange-looking, dark gemstone from a pocket sewn into her skirts. She held the gem up so they all could see. "Greystern said that the three people he met with gave him this. It is magic; it can transport a person to a certain destination. Greystern said if he needed to speak with these three *friends* of his, he could use this gem to be transported to a place where they would meet him."

"So we could use the gem to find out who the traitors in the Circle are?" Cyan asked eagerly.

Khrystana pursed her lips thoughtfully. "I suppose so, if these three people who helped Greystern really are members of the Circle. But the gem will only work for one person."

Lady Evelyn still looked more than a little upset at the way the Circle was being so plainly discussed. "Cyan and Arathorn explained their suspicions to me yesterday at the Monastery, but I still have a hard time believing they could be right."

"Do you know anyone else who could have helped Greystern gain access to the Fortress of the Circle?" King Trentan asked her.

Evelyn sighed. "I suppose not. Not even the Fortress servants or guards could accomplish something like that without being noticed."

"Then we have to go on the assumption that these three mysterious people who helped Greystern are from the Circle," Arathorn drummed his fingers on the tabletop. "Still, it's not much to go on. We don't know which three members of the Circle are the traitors. It could be any of the remaining twelve."

Or it could be Evelyn, Cyan found himself thinking. We don't know for sure that she's not in league with the Demon Prince.

"Sounds like we have to use the bloomin' stone to find out for sure," Rorx grumbled.

"Rorx is right," King Trentan nodded. "The gem is the only means we have to find out the truth. Greystern won't be any more help to us since the three he met with were in disguise. Using this gem seems our only option."

"I'll go," Cyan said, ignoring the furious glare Miranda directed at him. "If I can catch these three by surprise I should be able to subdue them."

Lady Evelyn shook her head even before he finished. "You wouldn't stand half a chance. I know every member of the Circle. If I went, I'd be able to recognize them immediately, despite whatever disguises they might use. Besides, seeing me might throw them off entirely."

"But they'd kill you! They won't allow themselves to be recognized and let you get away alive to tell about it!" Arathorn protested. "We might not be able to recognize them, but at least we would stand a chance of defending ourselves."

"I have another idea," Khrystana said before anyone else could jump in the argument. "I believe I could duplicate the magic of this gemstone in a way. I might be able to transport a few people to the same location once the stone has been used. It

would be like... following in another set of footprints, so to speak. That way we could send more than one person to the destination.”

“I could go first and identify the traitors, and then the rest of you could come to capture them!” Evelyn declared. “They would never expect such a snare! It would be perfect!”

“Are you sure you could do this, Khrystana?” Arathorn asked, concern filling his voice. “It might be too much for you.”

“I believe it is possible,” Khrystana shrugged her shoulders, “in theory anyway. I won’t really know until the gem is actually used.”

“It’s too risky,” Miranda broke in. “If it didn’t work, Lady Evelyn would be on her own against these three traitors.”

“We don’t have any other real options, Miranda,” Cyan tried to sound soothing.

“Who says we have to do this at all?” Miranda slapped a hand down on the table. “This isn’t our problem! It’s not our city! Why not let her deal with it?” she pointed at Evelyn. “Father, I don’t think we should try this. It’s too dangerous. We should just load the wagons and get out of this place!”

King Trentan shook his head sadly. “Where would we go, Miranda? Jynlamadh is weeks away, and Ruh-Xsok is not much better. The Demon Prince could have his agents there just as easily as he does here. No, we need to stay here and try to root out this evil. If we succeed, then we may be able to hold Inkata against the Demon Prince’s army. This city is strong, and well fortified. There are more soldiers here than we ever had in Dyrenn. Inkata could hold out for a long time. Our place is here.”

Lady Evelyn nodded in agreement. “Your father is right, Princess. Once we deal with these traitors, the rest of the Circle and I can see about mobilizing the city for war. We could stop this army of monsters, I know it!” Evelyn’s eyes fastened on Cyan. He knew she meant that with the Doom Sword they could hold off the Demon Prince’s army.

She's all too eager for me to use the Sword, Cyan thought. And she knows what that book said about Melias Soulae! It's easy for her- she doesn't have to worry about the mark of the Doom Sword, whatever that is!

King Trentan took another sip of water. "It's the best we can hope for right now, I think. We have to give it a try. We owe Lady Evelyn and the Circle that much. They let us stay here in the city when we needed their help. By finding these traitors, we will pay our debt."

Garroc nodded grimly. "Let's be at it, then."

* * * *

Khrystana had gone to her room to prepare herself for the magic she would have to use, while Cyan, Arathorn, and the dwarves went to gather their weapons. King Trentan had wanted to send Captain Fissk and some Dyrenn soldiers after Lady Evelyn, but the dwarves would have no part of that. Cyan had kept his tongue stilled, all too aware of Miranda watching him.

We have to find a balance somehow, he thought as he entered his room. She gets angry whenever I put myself at risk. I'm not doing it intentionally! I don't want to hurt her! But I feel like I should be there. I have the Doom Sword, and for whatever purpose, I can and should use it to help. I wish she would understand that!

Cyan changed into a more practical and loose-fitting green tunic that allowed him a free range of motion. He wanted to have nothing hinder him if it came to a fight. *It makes me wonder how the Dyrenns and Inkatese ever fight, wearing all that armor and chain mail!* The thin-woven tunic would not stop a sword stroke like thick chain mail might, but Cyan was willing to accept that possibility. *Just as long as I don't get too presumptuous, thinking the Doom Sword will heal me whenever I get hurt. I won't put my trust in something I don't understand.*

He finished tightening his belt and tucked a short dagger into the top of his boot for extra insurance. He had spotted Garroc and Rorx earlier in the hall; both had looked like they were ready for a small war, with battle-axes in hand, chain mail bright under their tunics, and daggers tucked all about their persons. *I hope all this won't be necessary.*

Cyan sat down on the edge of his narrow bed to collect his thoughts for a few minutes before having to return to the “dining room” to attempt their trap. He was still doubtful about just where Lady Evelyn’s loyalties lay, and he was worried about what might happen if Khrystana could not use her magic like she thought. Miranda was another worry in itself. *Spirits, I love her, but why is everything so difficult for us? The heroes in all the stories I've ever heard never had these problems! But, I'm no hero, just a fool with a sword... I'm just trying to do what I have to!*

As if thinking about her had summoned her, Miranda opened the door to his room and shut it behind her before joining him on the bed. She pointedly avoided looking at the Doom Sword.

“Promise me you’ll be careful, Cyan.”

Cyan looked into her brown eyes, still struck by how beautiful she was, and nodded. “I’ll do my best. You have my word.”

She reached across his body and put a hand on the Doom Sword’s hilt. No magic fire burned her palm. If anything, the deep green gem in the hilt seemed to glisten in the light. “We are linked by something powerful, Cyan. Don’t you ever forget that. We are meant for each other. So come back to me, you...” her voice died out and Cyan gathered her in his arms reassuringly. He kissed her hair and held her tightly.

“I know, Miranda. I will be all right. I promise.”

* * * *

Cyan held onto Miranda's hand as they walked together back to the larger makeshift dining room. Khrystana would attempt her magic from there, after Lady Evelyn used Greystern's gem. Arathorn was already there, Lifeseeker's eerie whiteness contrasting with his dark forest-colored clothing. The ever-full quiver of white-and-red-fletched arrows was slung over his shoulder. Garroc and Rorx stood together off to one side of the room; Rorx was running a whetstone along the already razor-sharp edges of his battle-axe.

The large table they had used earlier for tea was shoved against the far wall. Khrystana was the only one in the room not standing. She sat rigidly on the edge of a straight-backed chair, eyes closed and looking for all the world like she was asleep. Lady Evelyn stood slightly apart, the dark gemstone visible in her hand. For her part, Evelyn had only a small dagger in a sheath at her waist. She was only supposed to identify the traitors, it was Cyan and his friends' task to capture them.

King Trentan watched Cyan and Miranda enter together, and Cyan tried to ignore the feel of the King's eyes on him. There was no disapproval written on the King's face, but Cyan still felt uncomfortable. *Am I really good enough for his daughter?* Cyan thought. Miranda squeezed his hand reassuringly, as if she had known his exact thoughts. Cyan smiled weakly at her before leaving her side to join Arathorn and the dwarves. Miranda stood alone for a brief moment, before going over to her father. The weight of her eyes on him, made Cyan feel even more guilty and uncomfortable. *I have to do this!* he told himself. *I can help. I should help!*

Khrystana never opened her eyes, but she seemed to know everyone was ready. "You may proceed, Lady Evelyn," the sorceress said, her voice sounding oddly distant. Cyan could only imagine what powers she must be working at that very moment. His only clue that she was using magic came from the heavy, charged feeling in the air. He

exchanged nervous glances with Arathorn. Concern for Khrystana showed on the elf's pale face.

Lady Evelyn squared her shoulders and brushed at her brown hair. With a last, quick glance around the room, she held the dark gemstone up in her hand. Maybe it was Cyan's imagination, but Evelyn's blue-gray eyes seemed to linger a half-second longer on him. On the Doom Sword.

"Ieren," she said firmly, still clutching the gem.

Khrystana rose smoothly to her feet and touched Lady Evelyn's forehead. A brief flash of blue-white light danced around Evelyn's head for a moment before it vanished in a darker pulse of light that seemed to spread out from the gem she held. Khrystana stepped back as the darkness began to coalesce around Lady Evelyn in a shroud. The cloak of darkness flickered, dimmed the light in the room, and then drifted apart in fading grayish mist. Evelyn was gone.

Cyan licked his lips nervously. *The easy part is done. Now Khrystana just has to be able to send us after Evelyn to catch the traitors...*

Khrystana remained where she was standing for several moments that seemed to stretch on eternally. Cyan shifted his stance and checked the Doom Sword in its scabbard for the fourth time in as many seconds. He met Miranda's eyes, reading the worry, compassion, and fear hidden there. He wanted to smile, wanted to do something to give her some comfort, but before he could, Khrystana was moving toward him, hand outstretched. Her fingers brushed his forehead, and the flicker of blue-white light flashed around him. She moved on to Arathorn, then Garroc, and last, Rorx, each time with the flash of light marking her touch.

Cyan started to open his mouth to tell Miranda he would be all right, but a sudden feeling of vertigo washed over him and stopped his words. It felt like the world was falling away beneath his feet. He was being twisted in a dizzying spiral. His vision

flickered wildly– one moment he was looking at Miranda and King Trentan in the dining room, then all he could see was flashing blue-white light.

The world vanished.

Chapter 23: Breaking the Circle

Ninth Moon, 873 PR

Evelyn Naera stumbled, her disoriented senses still reeling as the dark mist cleared from her eyes. She blinked furiously and steadied herself, even though her mind still felt like she was spinning in circles. Her stomach churned threateningly, and only through sheer force of will did she stop herself from vomiting up the tea she had drunk earlier that morning. She focused her eyes on the dark gem she still held in her hands, but even as her vision became clear, the gem crumbled into black dust in her hand.

Clever, Evelyn mused, as she began to take in her surroundings, wiping her hands of the gem's remnants. She was surprised to find herself in what looked to be a large study. Bookshelves were built into the walls, and one arched window looked down into an inner courtyard and garden. A large writing desk was situated near the window, and several open books littered the desktop. Evelyn crossed the rose-striped marble floor to peruse the books and papers scattered on the desk. One book looked like a treatise on magical theory, and gave Evelyn her first clue as to whose study she was standing in. When she found the open ledger filled with pages of script written in a decidedly feminine, flowing hand, she knew for certain who one of the traitors was.

"You are not the Earl of Greystern," a woman's soft yet accusing voice broke the silence.

Evelyn set the ledger down slowly, fighting to contain the nervousness that fluttered in her stomach. She turned to face the speaker, fixing a cold glare on her face as she did. The sight of the lithe, silver-haired woman who faced her did not come as a surprise. It was Larice Baine, known to her peers among the Circle of Inkata as Six.

"So, Larice," Evelyn said frostily, "you consort with the Demon Prince."

"I do," Larice replied smoothly, her voice holding no trace of guilt or remorse. Black combs held her long silver locks back from her face. She was dressed in a midnight blue, satin dress that hugged her slim figure. A silver necklace with a forked lightning bolt pendant dangled above the fraction of cleavage her dress showed.

"And the other two?" Evelyn prompted.

"It seems Greystern was more talkative than expected," Larice tapped a long, lacquered fingernail against her cheek. "But the others will be here shortly." If anything, the faint suggestion of a mocking smile curved her pale lips.

Evelyn fought the urge to step over and slap that smirk off Larice's face. It would not have done any good; Larice was a powerful sorceress and doubtless could crush her with magic before she took a step. Instead, Evelyn gritted her teeth and hoped Cyan and the others showed up quickly.

Dark mists obscured two separate corners of the room. Evelyn gathered a tight grip on her emotions and waited for the cloaking mists to fade. A young man in a striped silk shirt with a flapping cape emerged from one dark cloud.

"Ten!" Evelyn spat, glaring at the young man whose real name was Terril Whesting. "You too?"

Terril's face registered momentary shock at seeing her there, but he covered it quickly with a sneer. He drew a slim rapier from his belt and flourished it as he bowed.

"So good to see you, One," he laughed. "Not quite what you expected, perhaps?"

Evelyn's eyes forgot the pompous young noble when she saw who stepped out of the other fading cloak of mist. A burly man with dark hair starting to fade to gray, with broad shoulders, and a heavy mace swinging at his hip drew her attention so suddenly that she almost took a step towards him. Love flared through her for the briefest of

moments before the pain of his betrayal shattered her resolve and crushed any hope she still felt.

“No! Randall! Not you!!”

Randall Curryn, the veteran soldier better known as Four, and also Evelyn’s lover, frowned sadly when he saw her. “Evelyn? But... I’m sorry, my dear.”

“Please, Randall, don’t do this!” Evelyn fought to keep her voice from breaking. Tears threatened to ruin what little composure she had left.

“It’s too late, Evelyn,” Randall shook his head. “You weren’t supposed to know...” He shrugged his shoulders and took the heavy mace from his belt.

* * * *

Cyan was flying through a stream of flashing colors. Something in the way the multi-hued bars of light seemed to slice past him gave the impression of incredible speed, but there was no rush of air roaring in his ears or stinging his face. And then before he could think to look about him for Arathorn and the dwarves, before the thought hardly registered in his mind, the colors slammed to sickening halt, flashing with a blinding brilliance that stabbed through his eyes into his brain.

The next thing Cyan knew, he was standing in room rubbing his eyes. He was not alone. Lady Evelyn stood a few paces in front of him, facing a woman with silver hair and a dark blue dress. A young man in a cape was brandishing a slim rapier, and a larger man with graying dark hair was testing his grip on the large war mace he carried. They were all staring at him.

“You were always full of surprises, Evelyn,” the big man with the mace sighed, a bitter smile twisting his face.

Evelyn took a few hesitant steps back towards Cyan. It was then that Cyan noticed Arathorn and the dwarves standing nearby. Arathorn was scanning the room

warily, while Rorx shook his head to clear the effects of the magical travel. Garroc growled and slapped the flat of his axe against his palm.

“Cyan of Gabbon?” Terril laughed. “You bring the peasant boy to save you, Evelyn? You have fallen far in a short time!”

Cyan frowned as he recognized the young man’s voice. It was the one called Ten who had badgered him during their meeting with the Circle. He wasted no time in drawing the Doom Sword from its scabbard. Faint green flames sprang to life along the blade.

“You want to die, peasant boy? Allow me to oblige you!” Terril grinned and whipped his rapier through a mocking salute before warily advancing.

“Enough o’ this crap!” Rorx growled. “Let’s get ‘em, Garroc!” Both dwarves charged in towards Larice, but Randall intercepted them both. A dagger appeared in his free hand, and with mace and knife twisting in a blur, he met the dwarves’ flashing axes in a continuous ring of steel on steel.

Arathorn pushed Lady Evelyn behind him and leveled an arrow at Larice. “I wouldn’t suggest you moving, my lady,” he told the silver-haired member of the Circle.

“Arathorn! Wait! She’s a sorceress-” Evelyn started to cry out, but it was already too late. Larice thrust out her left hand and suddenly a cloud of insects shot from her outstretched palm. The swarm enveloped Arathorn in a mass of stinging and biting insects and he flailed helplessly and fell backwards, his arrow flying off wide of the sorceress. Evelyn sprang forward and tackled Larice before she could cast another spell, and the two women went down in a flurry of arms and legs.

Cyan was already furiously engaged with Terril. The young noble’s rapier whistled through the air, darting and weaving like a serpent. It took all of Cyan’s concentration and skill to keep the slender, dancing blade from finding his heart. Terril grinned at Cyan’s difficulties and lunged in quickly, the rapier scoring a thin cut across

Cyan's chest. Cyan hissed in pain, but managed to punch Terril in the jaw with the hilt of the Doom Sword. Terril stumbled back, spitting blood, but he recovered before Cyan could press his advantage, and soon the rapier was dancing again, drawing more than one stinging slash or cut into Cyan's flesh.

He's too fast for me! Cyan thought. *What he lacks in strength, he makes up for with speed and agility. I have to be smarter if I want to end this!* Cyan backpedaled to avoid another dangerously close thrust and just batted away another seeking lunge. When Terril pressed in again, Cyan ducked under the noble's rapier, deflecting it high with the Doom Sword. He kicked out with one foot, and felt the satisfying, wet *crunch* as his boot caught Terril's kneecap square on. Terril screamed as his shattered knee buckled under his own weight and he fell to the marble floor. The young noble tried to force himself back up, clutching at his rapier for support, but Cyan quickly smashed the flat of the Doom Sword's blade against his skull. Terril's eyes rolled up in his head and he collapsed to the floor.

Bleeding from more than a few cuts, Cyan gasped for breath as he turned to survey the room. Garroc and Rorx were trying their best to disarm the big man with the mace, but he seemed to be holding his own against the two. His eyes shifted to where Arathorn was lying on the floor, a few stray insects still buzzing around his body. Evelyn had pinned the silver-haired woman in the dark blue dress, but even as he watched, Larice pulled a small dagger from under her skirt and stabbed Evelyn in the shoulder.

"Blazes!" Cyan swore as he darted across the room to help Evelyn. Larice saw him rushing in and before he could even swing the Doom Sword she was shouting unfamiliar words that rang with a sound of power. Cyan reached Evelyn's side, but thick, sticky webbing engulfed him before he could take another step. He thrashed wildly and tried to cut his way through the gummy mess, but the more he struggled, the more he became entangled. Sticky webs threatened to clog his nose and throat, and his legs

were already sticking together. He stumbled and fell to the floor in a writhing heap near Evelyn. He could just barely see the jeweled hilt of the dagger sticking out of her shoulder. Blood soaked her left arm, and her dark brown eyes were bright with pain. She grimaced in frustration at Cyan, but there was nothing she could do.

"Help, Rorx!" Cyan tried to call out, but webbing choked him and all he managed was a garbled, coughing gag.

For their part, Rorx and Garroc were too busy fighting for their lives against Randall to really notice the disaster that had befallen their friends. Both dwarves tried futilely to trap Randall between them, but the veteran soldier was too wily to fall for such a tactic. Twice his steel-edged mace nearly caved in Garroc's skull as the dwarf became reckless in his attempts to get too close to the whirling soldier.

"Burn ye!" Rorx shouted, his wicked, double-edged battle-axe ringing repeatedly against mace and dagger. "Lay down and die already!"

"You first!" Randall snarled, stabbing viciously at Rorx with his dagger. Rorx jumped back out of the way, and Garroc used that moment to duck in under Randall's mace and drive the curved steel spike that balanced his axe-head up into Randall's ribs.

The veteran lurched back, and still almost succeeded in catching Garroc with his mace. He tried to draw breath, but red foam trickled from his mouth. Rorx wasted no time watching; he leaped in and split Randall open like a gutted fish with his keen axe. Evelyn's lover was dead before he hit the floor.

"Fireforger's beard! The lad's in trouble!" Rorx bellowed, seeing Cyan and Arathorn both down and out of the fight. Garroc was already running towards Larice as fast as his legs could carry him.

Larice grimaced when she saw the spreading pool of blood around Four, and Ten laying sprawled near a bookshelf. She hissed more words of magic and pointed at Garroc. Miniature lightning bolts shot from her fingers and struck the brown-bearded

dwarf full in the chest, sending him flying backwards to crash into the wall. Rorx howled and hurled his battle-axe end-over-end at her, but Larice easily created a glowing protective barrier in front of her and the axe bounced harmlessly to the floor. With a gesture she willed the shield to fade, and just as quickly cast a spell that caused a giant hand of stone to rise up out of the floor. The marble fist followed the movements of Larice's own hand, and the force of its backhanded slap sent Rorx tumbling like a rag doll. When Rorx didn't get back up, Larice allowed the stone fist to sink back into the marble floor. She sighed and adjusted the black combs holding back her silver locks.

* * * *

"Khrystana? What are you doing?" Miranda had been unnerved enough to see Cyan and his friends disappear, but now the elven sorceress was starting to chant softly under her breath. "You're not casting another spell are you?"

Khrystana opened her blue eyes long enough to fix both Miranda and King Trentan with a reassuring glance. A blue glow began to spread from her hands to spill across her body. "I am going to them. They may need my help. I won't risk my Beloved's life."

"Wait! Take me with you!" Miranda grabbed for the elf woman's wrist, but the blue light surrounding Khrystana flared into blinding radiance. When Miranda blinked her eyes clear, Khrystana was gone.

* * * *

Khrystana was more accustomed to the unsettling effects of magical travel, so she was hardly dazed at all when she appeared inside Larice Baine's study. But she was more than a little surprised by what she saw. Garroc was half-buried in a pile of fallen books, the front of his tunic burned away to reveal charred chain mail underneath. Rorx was slumped in a corner, his face already coloring with a nasty bruise. Lady Evelyn was passed out on the floor, a bloody, jeweled dagger sticking out of her left

shoulder. Cyan was hopelessly thrashing inside a sticky mass of webbing. And her Beloved, Arathorn, was lying on the floor, his face a swollen mass of welts and red bites. Anger and fear sparked fires in her deep blue eyes, and she quickly noted the large man with his abdomen spilt open and his insides spilled out around him, as well as the unconscious young man with the rapier. But what drew her wrath was the silver-haired woman in the midnight blue clinging dress who was haughtily over-looking the room. Khrystana recognized the handiwork of another sorceress, and the woman's silver hair triggered Khrystana's memory. She had seen this particular woman before... at the citadel of the Demon Prince.

Larice Baine had her back turned to Khrystana, a tempting offer too good for the elven sorceress to pass up. She remembered that except for herself, Larice had been one of the most powerful magic users in the Demon Prince's service. *We'll see who is the more powerful now*, Khrystana thought angrily, gathering her concentration and reaching out for the flows of power that were as much a part of the world as the air was.

A cold blue lance of light stabbed out and struck Larice full in the back. The silver-haired sorceress spun wildly but managed to keep her feet. Khrystana frowned but didn't waste time before casting another spell. Darts of flame the size of daggers flew towards Larice, but they sparked and sputtered into nothing as they met a glowing silver barrier around the sorceress. Khrystana had only enough time to raise a pulsing, blue shield of her own before a lightning bolt crackled around her with violent energy.

"De'Faerr!" Larice spat. "What are you doing here?" Suddenly a freezing snowstorm was battering against Khrystana's shield.

"Putting an end to you, Larice," Khrystana grunted, sending a fireball of her own to explode around the silver sorceress' barrier. The marble at the edge of Larice's shield bubbled and turned red from the heat.

“You’re with *them*? The Master never should have taken you in! I should have been his pupil, not you!” At Larice’s command, two stone hands rose up out of the floor and started to beat against Khrystana’s shield. Each time the marble fists struck, blue flashes arced across the weakening shield.

Khrystana strained to hold her shield in place while at the same time causing thick, green vines to spring up out of the floor around Larice. The creepers climbed up around the silver barrier and tried to break through to the sorceress.

One of the stone hands broke through Khrystana’s shield just enough to clip her with a marble finger. It still had enough force to knock her a few steps back. Seeing her weaken, Larice redoubled her efforts. Fire storms, hail, and conjured daggers battered against whatever defenses Khrystana tried to raise. Stray hail stones clipped her painfully, and the heat from the fire attack set parts of her dress to smoking. But for all her bluster, Larice’s shield was weakening as well. Khrystana’s summoned creepers had twined themselves around Larice’s leg and were starting to climb their way towards her throat.

Larice shouted arcane words, and a sickly yellow cloud of poison vapor drifted towards Khrystana. The raven-haired elven sorceress reached deeper, gathering as much magical force as she could, and with a final push, blasted at the poison cloud with a whistling gust of magic-driven wind. The powerful gust swept Larice right off her feet, despite her fading shield, and pinned her against the far wall. The yellow gas cloud was shredded by the mighty wind, and its fading tatters enveloped Larice. The silver-haired sorceress finally fell to the floor, coughing and retching violently.

Khrystana staggered weakly, but kept her feet. The battle of magic had exhausted her already taxed strength from transporting herself, Cyan, Arathorn, and the dwarves. Still, she clung to the ebbs of magic and used her remaining strength to

dissolve the webbing holding Cyan. She slumped to the floor and crawled over to be by Arathorn's side.

Cyan spat the last bits of webbing from his mouth. Sticky gobs still clung to his clothes, but he was free to move now. Of all the people in the room, only he had been conscious to see the spectacular magical duel between Khrystana and Larice.

"Khrystana? Are you all right?"

The elven sorceress looked up from stroking Arathorn's bite-marked face. "I'm... tired, Cyan. The fight was almost too much."

Cyan forced himself to ignore the painful cuts on his chest and arms. He shook his head when he saw the bruises forming on Khrystana's arms and face from hail stones. Her dress had holes burned in the fabric by stray embers. "I'm just glad you showed up. We were done for without you."

Khrystana nodded quietly.

"I hate to ask this, but... can you get us all back to the plaza with your magic?"

"I don't think I could even get myself back on my feet right now," Khrystana sighed. "You're going to have to figure out where in the city we are and find a way for us to get back to the plaza."

Cyan nodded grimly. First he went over to where Rorx was leaning against the wall. He gently shook the bruised dwarf.

"Rorx? Rorx, are you awake? I need you now."

A few more shakes gradually brought the dwarf around. He groggily looked around the room. "What hit me?" he slurred through a swollen lip.

"Can you get up? We need to find a way out of here, and the others are hurt," Cyan told him.

Rorx waved off Cyan's helping hand and shakily got to his feet. "It takes more than one punch to keep a dwarf down," he muttered. "Where's me axe?"

* * * *

Once they had Garroc and Lady Evelyn under Khrystana's care, Rorx and Cyan together dragged Terril and Larice over next to the sorceress as well.

"What do we do with 'em now?" Rorx asked. Terril was still unconscious, and Larice had passed out from the exposure to the poison gas. "I sure dunna want to be around when this one wakes up again!" he prodded Larice with the toe of his boot.

"What if she starts throwin' spells about?"

"Break her fingers," Khrystana said levelly.

"What?" Cyan gasped.

"Break her fingers. Her hands too. She won't be able to cast anything dangerous then."

Cyan eyed Khrystana warily. He could see that she was not joking. He looked at Larice's delicate hands; her nails were painted with bright, glossy colors.

"Well, if yer that squeamish, I'll do it," Rorx pushed Cyan out of the way. A few stomps from the dwarf's heavy boots did the trick. Cyan thought he might get sick. Larice moaned deeply.

Cyan took his knife out of the top of his boot and handed it to Khrystana. "If either of them wakes up, hit them in the head with the hilt."

Khrystana nodded, and went back to tearing strips from her dress to bind Evelyn's shoulder wound.

"Come on, Rorx, let's go see what's around this place," Cyan said, heading to the only door leading out of the study. "I want to get out of here as quickly as we can. There's no telling who might have seen or heard all the commotion here."

"If we go out into the streets lookin' like this, they'll call the city watch down on us," Rorx grumbled, rubbing his bruised cheek and swollen lip.

"Then we'll just have to find some disguises, won't we?"

"Whatever ye say, lad," Rorx shrugged.

* * * *

Cyan led the way through what turned out to be a three-story house. It seemed more of a palace though, with plush carpets, gilt-encrusted furniture, and displays of golden figurines set in niches in the walls. Rorx tromped along behind him, whistling bits to an off-key tune Cyan didn't recognize.

"I'll bet me last tooth that one o' those three bloomin' traitors lives here," Rorx said.

Cyan noted a huge tapestry covering one wall; it was decorated with strange-looking symbols woven in thread-of-gold and silver. "I think you're right, Rorx. My guess is that the sorceress woman lives here."

"Anyone who was here was probably scared off when the fightin' started."

"Maybe, but keep an eye out anyway."

Rorx chuckled and patted his battle-axe as they descended a spiraling staircase of intricately-carved walnut. The ground floor was divided into several large sitting rooms. The entranceway to the house was flanked by a series of tall, arched windows that looked out into a small inner courtyard. A low whitestone wall encircled the whole compound.

"You see that building across the courtyard, Rorx?" Cyan pointed.

"Aye, what about it?"

"It looks like a stable, or maybe even a carriage house. I want you to go check it out. If they have a carriage, start hitching up a team, all right?"

Rorx looked over at Cyan suspiciously. "And exactly just what crazy idea is floatin' around in that fool head o' yers?"

"Just go take a look, would you?"

Rorx shrugged his shoulder and kicked one of the walnut double-doors open. He stomped across the courtyard, swinging his battle-axe idly. Cyan shook his head and turned to go back through the house to find wardrobes.

* * * *

Nearly half an hour later, Rorx met Cyan back up in the study on the second floor of the house. Cyan and Khrystana were busy sorting through a pile of clothing.

"Hey, I found a carriage! Got two bloomin' horses hooked up too," Rorx announced as he entered the room. "Let's get out o' this stinkin' place, already!"

"You have to put on your disguise first," Cyan told him, tossing a garish green and orange striped bundle at the dwarf.

"What? What is this foul thing?"

"It's a fool's costume. It's the only thing small enough to fit you that I could find."

"Surely ye dunna expect me to wear this?"

"Put it on, Rorx. We need to get moving, and if we go out there looking like we do now, who knows what trouble we'll find! With these we can pass ourselves off as some stupid nobles," Cyan was already exchanging his bloody, web-smeared tunic for a eye-stinging orange silk shirt woven with florid red lace. He pulled billowing, crimson pants overtop of his own breeches and finished the outfit with a long, maroon and royal purple cape.

"Ye look like a blasted popinjay!"

"That's the idea, Rorx! This is just how some rich, young noble might dress! The people in this part of the city will be used to seeing things like this. We'll blend in by sticking out!"

"Yer insane, lad! Ye finally lost it!" Rorx shook his head.

"Shut up and put on your new clothes, Rorx."

Khrystana had stepped outside the room to change out of her torn and singed dress. As Rorx stubbornly started donning the green and orange fool's costume, she came back. For once, a crimson blush painted her face.

"Now that's a dress!" Rorx laughed, causing Khrystana to color even deeper. Cyan had found a few dresses, but most of them had been too small for Khrystana's tall, willowy figure. Only one dress had come close, the pale silk and lace gown she now wore. It was entirely too small in the bodice for her, forcing an incredible display that even made Cyan blink a few times. The rest of the gown hugged Khrystana like a second skin. Cyan coughed and hastily bent to finish tugging a blue silk shirt over Garroc's blackened chain mail. Larice and Terril they left as is; both were finely dressed enough already. A colored cape was all they could find to wrap around Arathorn.

A jingle announced that Rorx had finished dressing as well. He scowled at Cyan and shook his head, the tiny bells on his green and orange fool's hat tinkling with the movement.

"I'm gonna remember this, lad," Rorx threatened.

"Me too," Cyan said, trying not to laugh. Rorx looked ridiculous in the silk costume, especially with his battle-axe. The little bells on the fool's hat jingled merrily.

"Let's get everyone down to the carriage," Cyan said, covering his mouth to hide a smile. *Between the three of us, we could pass for part of a traveling menagerie show!* Cyan thought, as he and Rorx lifted Garroc.

* * * *

"The Fireforger curse these clothes! I still say yer insane, lad! No doubt in me mind!" Rorx huffed, snapping the reins to the team. Every movement the dwarf made set the little brass bells of his fool's hat to jingling. "Look out there! Move, I say!" he roared at a pair of Inkatese men wearing high-collared coats who started to step out into the cobblestone road.

“Easy, Rorx,” Cyan admonished from his seat on the driver’s bench next to the rate dwarf. “We’re nobles, and you’re my fool. Fool’s don’t threaten people.”

Rorx muttered something under his breath that Cyan couldn’t quite hear over the *clop* of the horses’ hooves and the tinkling of the fool’s bells. *It’s just as well*, Cyan thought, pretending to look around the city in mild interest. *At least we’ve made it this far.*

He looked over his shoulder, down into the open carriage. Khrystana was doing her best to look nonchalant sitting on one of the two opposing padded benches. She had an arm around Arathorn, making it look like he was just resting his head on her shoulder. That way it hid most of the bites and welts on his face. Lady Evelyn was awake, and if her eyes shone with the pain of her shoulder wound, anyone who saw her might mistake it for a haughty glare. She had a delicate lace shawl covering the bandaged wound, with her free arm thrown around Terril’s neck to hold the unconscious traitor upright. Larice was propped up in the corner on the bench, looking for all the world like she was asleep. No one outside the moving carriage could see her swollen, black and blue fingers. Garroc also appeared asleep, or maybe passed out from too much drinking, slumped as he was in the corner next to Arathorn.

What a sight we are! Cyan stopped himself from shaking his head in amusement. He took some comfort in the fact that his plan was going so smoothly— most people on the streets of Inkata had barely spared them a second glance, and if they did, it was just to gawk either at Cyan’s eye-wrenching outfit of red, orange, and purple, or the funny-looking dwarven fool. A few of the men never took their eyes off Khrystana when they saw her ride by. The too-small dress she wore seemed a popular one among the younger men in the streets. Cyan thought he had never seen the normally-unshakable elf woman blush so much.

“Do ye have any idea where we are yet?” Rorx growled, snapping the horses’ reins again. A portly merchant carrying several packages had to jump out of the way before he was run down. Rorx chuckled as the man shook his fist and swore after them, dropping his packages all around.

Cyan sighed. Rorx seemed to be taking perverse pleasure in terrorizing the Inkatese pedestrians and other wagon drivers. *If only Inkata wasn’t so huge!* Cyan thought. *We’ve been driving around the streets for almost an hour! Where is the Monastery Grove?* He wished they could just stop and ask for directions, but how could they explain being lost when they were supposed to be nobles of the city?

“Turn left up at the next intersection,” Cyan told Rorx. He had caught a glimpse of what he thought was a familiar looking building rising over the top of a two-story whitestone textile shop. Rorx tugged hard on the reins and the horses sped around the street corner, followed by the screams and shouts of angry walkers.

“Hah! The Silver Starlight!” Cyan smacked Rorx’s arm triumphantly, recognizing the green tile roof of the inn and its sign with sparkling stars. “Follow this street and we’ll be back at the Grove!”

“About stinkin’ time,” Rorx muttered, snapping the reins some more. The carriage lurched ahead, and Cyan saw Lady Evelyn and Khrystana trying to keep the rest of their passengers from slumping one way or the other.

Rorx directed the horses around the last curve of the road and drew the carriage up to a jolting halt at the entrance to the plaza bordering the Monastery Grove. Wagons were drawn up in orderly rows, and people were busy all about the plaza. A squad of Dyrenn soldiers in chain mail approached the carriage.

Cyan swung down from the driver’s bench, his maroon and purple cape fluttering behind him. “Send someone to fetch King Trentan’s healers,” he told the nearest soldier. “We have injured and prisoners to see to.”

“What’s going on here?” Jonathan Fissk elbowed his way through the gaping soldiers. “I said- Lord Cyan? Is that you?” Fissk’s gray eyes widened, and his mouth dropped.

“I’m afraid so, Captain Fissk,” Cyan sighed. He could only wonder what new tales the soldiers might tell of him now. “I’m sure King Trentan can explain things to you later, but for now, we need to get some help for Garroc and Arathorn, and we have two prisoners for you to take care of.”

“It will be done immediately, Lord Cyan,” Fissk actually saluted, hand to heart, and barked orders to the soldiers staring at Cyan, Rorx, Khrystana, Lady Evelyn, and the carriage full of unconscious people.

Cyan let Rorx and one of the Dyrenn soldiers start the carriage moving towards the whitestone buildings flanking the plaza. He preferred to walk, even though that meant enduring more stares from the Dyrenns. By the time he reached the closest of the three whitestone buildings where his room was, he was already undoing the catch of the cape, and praying that he never had to wear such awful clothing again. He walked briskly through the halls to his room, and was pulling off the horrendous orange silk shirt even as kicked the door shut behind him.

“You’re hurt!”

Cyan jumped and fumbled the shirt the rest of the way over his head.

“Miranda! What are you doing in my room?”

Miranda ignored his question and got up from his bed and rushed over to him. She lightly ran her fingers across his chest and stomach, studying the cuts he had received from Terril’s rapier.

“It’s nothing, Miranda,” Cyan grunted in pain as she poked and prodded him over to the bed.

"Sit down and take off those ugly pants," Miranda told him, grabbing the wash basin from its stand. "These need tending. And why are you wearing these dreadful clothes?"

"It's a long story," Cyan mumbled as Miranda started washing a slash along his ribs.

"So? It's getting near dark, and you're not going anywhere until I finish cleaning and bandaging these cuts," Miranda paused in her work long enough to kiss him lightly.

Cyan was forced to admit it felt good to be back in a place of relative safety. He sighed as Miranda kissed his ear. "That's what I love about you," he grinned.

"What?"

"You're so demure," he chuckled sarcastically.

Miranda bit his earlobe.

* * * *

Arathorn slowly awakened to the feel of cool water being splashed lightly on his face. It was a sweet relief to the warm itching of his skin. He struggled to open his eyes; it was difficult because his face was swollen so badly.

"Khrystana?" he mumbled.

"I'm here, Beloved," her soothing voice answered, as she dabbed water across his face.

"I... I can't see you," Arathorn's voice trembled. "Where are you?"

"Right here," Khrystana whispered, turning his head slightly to the left.

Arathorn forced his eyes to open, and he nearly leaped out of the bed he was lying in when he saw her.

"Khrystana!! W-where did you get that dress?"

The raven-haired sorceress blushed scarlet. She was still wearing the pale lace and silk dress Cyan had found in Larice's mansion. "Do you like it, Arathorn? I was

going to throw it out, but if... if you like it, maybe I will keep it. It need's loosening in the top though, and maybe the hem could be dropped a few inches..." she stopped, realizing she was carrying on.

"You look... nice, Khrystana," Arathorn managed to say, never taking his eyes off her. "What happened after...?"

"The sorceress was too much for Cyan and the dwarves, Beloved. You were all fortunate I followed after you."

"You were there? You fought her?"

Khrystana nodded, and wet a cloth to dab his face.

"Khrystana?"

"Yes, Beloved?"

"When will we be married?"

Khrystana smiled down at him. "Whenever you want, my love."

"If I had my way, we'd be married right now, but you wouldn't want to kiss me with my face like this," Arathorn grimaced.

Khrystana kissed him firmly, just to prove him wrong. "Rest, Beloved. Do not worry about it anymore tonight. We will be married when the time is right. Sleep now. I will be with you," she stroked his golden hair gently until he drifted off.

* * * *

Lord-Commander Jase Cail wiped his hands on a fresh towel, scowling at the bloody stains he left on the white cloth. *A messy business this is*, he mused. *This makes six in two days. But nothing can be allowed to stop the Master's order from taking hold!*

"Brakis!" he called. "There is work to be done!"

The former Shield-Leader hastily entered Cail's meticulous office, careful to step around the body of another scout bringing reports.

“Lord-Commander?”

“Brakis, you are a truly dedicated man. I must ask you to help me in this one more time. My word as a soldier that you will not have to do this again,” Cail gestured to the fallen scout, eyes wide open in death.

“It is always an honor to serve, Lord-Commander,” Brakis said proudly. “Any task I can take from your burdened shoulders is a blessing I am thankful for. Please, allow me to take care of this.”

Jase Cail allowed himself a small smile. “You are a paragon of order and virtue, Brakis. I wish I had more men like you.”

“Thank you, Lord-Commander,” Brakis saluted and took the dead scout under the arms and started dragging the man out of Cail’s office. The body left a red smear on the white flagstones.

Jase Cail followed Brakis out of the office. “I have news to take to the Fortress of the Circle, Brakis. See that everything is taken care of before I return. And Brakis?”

“Yes, Lord-Commander?”

“Order comes to Inkata this day.”

Brakis couldn’t help the eager grin that spread across his face. “Thank you, sir! It will be as you say, Lord-Commander!”

Brakis bowed as Cail left the room, and then returned to dragging the scout’s corpse back into the small storage room. He laid the body overtop of the large grate covering a drainage hole leading into the city’s sewers. *It’s a good thing I had my knife sharpened after yesterday*, Brackis thought to himself. *I never would have guessed I would be using it so much!* He took down his freshly-sharpened knife and methodically set about disposing of the scout’s body. He hummed bars to a song he had heard in the streets this morning as he worked, careful to make sure that every last scrap went down into the drainage pipe. With all the scouts bringing frantic word about the army of

monsters quickly approaching, Brakis had long since gotten used to the smell, and he was becoming quite adept at dismembering bodies in rapid time.

He started whistling a triumphant marching song as he took down a hammer to start splintering bones.

* * * *

Cyan woke at mid-morning and stretched awkwardly. His fresh cuts from yesterday's fighting made it a little painful moving about, but he managed to wash up and get dressed without too much difficulty. Miranda was gone. *She must have left after I fell asleep last night*, he thought, as he buckled on the Doom Sword. He tried not to look at the orange silk shirt lying on the floor where he had thrown it last night. It hurt his eyes just looking at it.

Cyan stepped out into the hallway and started towards the room King Trentan had been using as his dining and meeting room. He had only made it a few doors down the hall when he smelled something burning. It was coming from Rorx's room.

Cyan pounded on the door. "Rorx! What's burning in there? Rorx?"

The door opened and Cyan was hit by the smell of burning clothes. Rorx grinned and waved a flint and steel under Cyan's nose.

"What's on fire?"

Rorx chuckled and pointed to the center of his room. On the bare whitestone floor, the green and orange fool's costume smoldered in a black heap.

"What'd you do that for? I thought it kind of suited you!" Cyan protested.

Rorx glowered at him. "Shut up, lad. That forsaken piece o' fabric deserved to be burned! I couldna take lookin' at it anymore!"

Cyan shook his head and backed out into the hall. Rorx was still watching the clothes burn; a faint chuckle escaped his lips now and then. Leaving the dwarf to his entertainment, Cyan hurried on down the hall, the smell of burnt silk still stinging his

nose. He knocked on Arathorn's door, but there was no answer. He had the same luck at Miranda's room.

They must all be with King Trentan, he told himself. I wonder what the King and Lady Evelyn will decide to do about Terril and Larice?

* * * *

"Larice Baine and Terril Whesting must die."

King Trentan took in the determined set to Evelyn Naera's face and grimly nodded. "I suppose you are right," he sighed.

"They are traitors to humanity!" Lady Evelyn said coldly. Her left arm was held in a sling, and bandages were clearly visible under the shoulder of her blouse, but even injured, the aristocratic leader of the Circle seemed a formidable woman. "They betrayed their position as leaders of this city, and conspired to bring about its destruction! They should be executed immediately!"

Khrystana was seated near Lady Evelyn, one hand lightly stroking Arathorn's arm. She nodded in agreement with Evelyn's words. For his part, Arathorn kept quiet. His face was looking better- the swelling was down and the bites were fading. Garroc sat on the other side of the elf, his beard and hair looking a little frazzled. Other than that, he showed no ill effects from being zapped by Larice's lightning bolts.

Miranda looked from Lady Evelyn's fierce eyes to her father's. She understood the need, but a part of her shivered at the ease with which Lady Evelyn called for executions. She couldn't remember the last time her father had ordered anyone's death. Most of the criminals in Dyrenn had been sent to work in the stone quarries up north.

Cyan entered the room and took a chair next to her. He politely greeted everyone at the table before giving her hand a reassuring squeeze. He must have sensed the mood in the air; the look he gave Miranda was full of questions. She squeezed his hand back and shook her head slightly.

"I say we take Terril and Larice with us to the Fortress of the Circle and present them to the rest of the Circle as the traitors they are," Evelyn broke the momentary silence left by Cyan's entrance. "It's time we get Inkata ready to face the troubles coming! Making the rest of the Circle aware of the danger will be important if we are to prepare the city for the Demon Prince's army's eventual arrival. I cannot think they would remain in Dyrenn. Cyan and his friends saw to that," Evelyn nodded to Cyan.

King Trentan nodded. "This is your city, Evelyn. The Circle rules here, not I. But I will accompany you to the Fortress to lend my support, for what it is worth. Mykal Greystern should be proof enough that the Demon Prince's servants can be anyone. Between him, and the two brought in yesterday, the rest of the Circle will have to see reason."

"Thank you, Marcuris," Evelyn sat back gingerly in her seat at the table. "If Cyan and the rest of you could come as well, then we will have plenty of proof for any who might still harbor doubts."

Garroc quickly nodded his assent, followed by Arathorn and Khrystana. Cyan looked at Miranda briefly before also nodding his head. Miranda tightened her grip on his hand. *I'm going with them*, she thought. *There's no way I'm letting him out of my sight again!* She told herself that she was just concerned about Cyan, and that wanting to see Greystern sentenced to death had nothing to do with it. Just thinking about the treacherous Earl made her throat tighten with fear and anger. She could still remember the terror that had gripped her when he almost killed Cyan.

She realized Cyan was watching her oddly, and she hastily wiped the fierce grimace off her face. She met his green-brown eyes boldly, and clasped his hand even tighter.

"When do you want to bring the prisoners before the Circle?" King Trentan asked.

“Immediately,” Lady Evelyn’s good hand clenched into a tight fist. “The Circle has dawdled too long as is. It’s time to act.”

Garroc pushed back his chair and stood. He tried to flatten his brown hair, but it sprang right back up again with a slight *crackle* of static electricity. “I’ll go get Rorx. We can have them traitors chained and ready to go in no time.”

King Trentan nodded, his dark eyes unreadable.

“I’ll go with you,” Khrystana said, rising smoothly to her feet. “You will need my help with Greystern.”

The room quickly cleared out after that. King Trentan went to gather Captain Fissk and an escort of Dyrenn soldiers. Lady Evelyn smoothly rose and followed King Trentan out, looking regal herself somehow, even with one arm in a sling. Arathorn and Cyan exchanged a few quick words before the elf was off after Khrystana and the dwarves. Miranda caught Cyan’s arm as he stood.

“Cyan, promise me that whatever happens, you won’t leave me again.”

Cyan blinked in momentary confusion. “Everything will be all right, Miranda,” he told her, rubbing her arms to soothe her. “The Circle will see the danger they’re in from the Demon Prince and his army, and they’ll do something about it. I almost feel like we’re winning for a change!” he smiled at her. “Inkata is a strong city! With all their soldiers, we can hold this place against the Demon Prince’s army if it does come. We’re going to win!”

Miranda tried to share in the hope that filled Cyan’s eyes, but all she felt was a cold, hollowness inside. She shivered in spite of herself.

Chapter 24: Trial of the Doom Sword

Ninth Moon, 873 PR

The sun was only just past its peak in the sky by the time Lady Evelyn led the procession out of the plaza and into the busy streets of Inkata. She insisted on riding at the head of the small column, even though ripples of pain radiated out from her injured shoulder whenever the gray mare she rode bounced her a little. Evelyn endured the flashes of pain, maintaining a cool and composed exterior, even though inside she was a seething mass of fury. *How dare they?* she thought, twisting in the saddle awkwardly to look at the traitors. King Trentan and his daughter rode a slight distance behind her, followed by Arathorn and Khrystana, with the dwarves trailing them on smaller ponies. Captain Fissk and a cluster of Dyrenn soldiers encircled Greystern, Terril, and Larice. Cyan and a few more soldiers brought up the rear. *How could they have turned on me without my ever knowing? Terril was always a hot-headed young man, but Larice? She was cool and logical! I never would have suspected her capable of this treachery! Or of using her powers like that against us! And my Randall!! Why, my love? Your betrayal hurt most of all!*

Evelyn forced her eyes back to the streets in front of her. *What's done is done. The Circle is weakened, but not broken yet! We will execute these traitors and then rally our defenses! Inkata has never fallen to an enemy, and it will not while I still lead!*

Shaking off her anger as best she could, Evelyn led their strange procession down a broad, whitestone avenue that cut towards the heart of the city. For once, she did not even notice the sparkling fountains or noble-looking statues at the crossroads they passed. Scattered gray-bellied clouds dotted the sky, occasionally dimming the bright sun and casting a momentary pall over the City of Brightness. Evelyn ground her teeth against the pain in her shoulder and focused her glare on anyone foolish enough to step

out in front of her horse. More than a few men in high-collared, embroidered coats blanched and shied away from her fierce stare.

Gradually the street began to narrow and the crowds thinned. Instead of shops lining the street, compounds cradling nobles' small palaces and merchants' mansions formed a whitestone display of grand architecture. Evelyn only had eyes for the ring of tall dark-leaf maples rising up ahead, the natural circle of forest that marked the boundary of the Fortress grounds. She urged her mare forward, under the arching canopy of maples, and King Trentan and the rest followed after her.

She had only gone a few paces when a soldier in a white tabard stepped out from behind a thick tree. Four golden, interlocking circles were embroidered over his heart.

"Halt in the name of the Circle and state your business!"

"Lady Evelyn Naera in company of King Marcuris Trentan of Dyrenn to see the Circle," Evelyn told the Fortress soldier.

"Lady Naera! Forgive me! The Circle has been asking about you. I was told to escort you to them immediately if you arrived. Please, follow me."

Evelyn almost lost her cool composure. *The Circle has been asking about me? What do they know? I have been gone for over two days now... perhaps they merely worry about my safety. Or else some fool is trying to take my place as One. It does not matter! Today, I will set them all straight.*

Evelyn kicked her horse ahead after the Fortress guard, gritting her teeth against the renewed pain in her shoulder. King Trentan and the Dyrenns followed with the prisoners. Cyan and his friends had drifted back to the rear of the group, chatting softly. In her mind, Evelyn prepared the words she would give to the remaining members of the Circle. With the testimony of Cyan and his companions, as well as the prisoners themselves, she would make the rest of the Circle see her way. She did not expect any

problems, especially with the proof they had. *We will put an end to the threat this Demon Prince poses. Inkata will stand strong!* she thought, as the white-tabarded soldier led their group up to the main doors of the great, domed, center structure of the Fortress. Servants in white opened the steel gates and more joined them to take the group's horses. Evelyn was happy to dismount; her shoulder still throbbed from the jostling she had taken.

Two Dyrenn soldiers had to help support Terril. Cyan had crushed the young traitor's knee in their fighting, and he could not walk without assistance. Larice walked alongside more guards, her bruised and swollen hands partially wrapped in bandages. Her silver hair was a disheveled mass. Greystern followed after, looking strangely emotionless, his dark eyes seemingly dead and empty. All three knew what fate awaited them.

Evelyn was surprised when the Fortress guard led her and the rest of the group up the stairs towards the top floor of the building. *He's taking us to the meeting chamber under the dome! Why is the rest of the Circle in session there?* Suddenly suspicious, Evelyn stalked after the guard up the flights of stairs and through the carpeted hallways. He brought them to the large oak double-doors that led into the domed chamber. The doors were carved with hundreds of small interlocking circles that joined together to form one massive circle. Evelyn took a breath and steadied herself before pushing the doors wide and striding boldly into the chamber where she was accustomed to having the final authority.

She was surprised to see the remaining nine members of the Circle sitting in their places at the large, curving table without the dome's magical lighting to obscure their features. Lord-Commander Jase Cail, the head of the Inkatese army, was standing before the rest of the Circle. It was clear he had been addressing the Circle; he cut off

abruptly as Evelyn and the rest of the group entered the chambers. A momentary silence hung in the air as the other nine members of the Circle noticed her.

"One... it is good to see you again," a portly man in a silk overcoat dabbed at his sweaty forehead with a handkerchief. "We were concerned at your sudden disappearance. We feared the worst."

"You can set aside your fears, Eight," Evelyn told the fat man. "I am fine."

"But what is all this?" Eight asked, waving ring-studded fingers at the Dyrenn soldiers surrounding Greystern, Terril, and Larice. "What is going on here, One?"

"I could ask the same of the rest of you, Eight. What is the Circle doing in session without me? What is he doing here?" she gestured at Cail. "We have important matters to discuss."

"You are most correct, One," Eight smiled, an unpleasant stretching of his thick jowls. He dabbed his face with the handkerchief again.

Evelyn frowned at Eight's strange tone. She decided to ignore him. "These prisoners are all charged with treason, punishable by death."

"Treason? That is a serious charge, One," another man at the table broke in. He was slim and dressed in black silks. "For what crime do you call treason on them?"

"For consorting with the Demon Prince, aiding an assassin, and assaulting a fellow member of the Circle, Two! I call for the deaths of Terril Whesting and Larice Baine! They are stripped of their positions as members of the Circle and should be sentenced to immediate execution! I have witnesses to support these charges. Does anyone oppose my words?" Evelyn's voice was clear and strong in the chamber.

For a long moment the chamber was silent. Then, quite suddenly, Eight stood up, his silk coat straining around his middle. "I oppose you, *Evelyn*. You are no longer One. You are stripped of your position and are charged with treason."

Evelyn's eyes bulged in shock and anger. Her mouth worked soundlessly before she could finally find her voice. "Treason? Are you insane? On what grounds?"

"You have conspired with enemies of the Master. You have assaulted *our* fellows, and helped murder one of them. You and your friends are sentenced to death."

"The *Master*? What are you babbling about, Eight?"

In answer, Two rose to his feet gracefully and straightened his black silk tunic. "All hail the Demon Prince," he said evenly.

Evelyn gasped.

Then, one by one, every man and woman at the table stood up and repeated the same words Two had spoken. Even Lord-Commander Cail turned to face Evelyn, a cold smile on his lips as he recited, "All hail the Demon Prince."

Evelyn's face had gone pale. Her legs almost buckled. "Traitors!!" she screamed. "You are all traitors!"

Evelyn was not the only shocked person in the room. King Trentan swore loudly while the Dyrenn soldiers drew their swords. Miranda clutched her father's hand tightly, while Larice and Terril exchanged startled looks. Cyan saw the confusion on their faces and realized they had not known of their fellows' dark allegiance. He slowly eased the Doom Sword from its scabbard. Both Garroc and Rorx held their axes in a white-knuckled grip. Arathorn pulled Khrystana behind him protectively.

"At last you realize the truth, Evelyn," Eight sighed, ignoring the sudden drawn steel in the room. "We had hoped that Randall might be able to convince you of the benefits of loyalty to the Demon Prince, but obviously he failed. No matter. Your discoveries mean nothing now. The Master's army marches on Inkata, and there is nothing you can do to stop it!

"You're sick! Do you hear me? Sick!!" Evelyn shrieked.

Eight shook his head sadly. "You have fallen far from where you once stood, Evelyn. If you would give up these foolish pretensions, you could join us. When the Master's army arrives, we will welcome it with open arms! Inkata will become the Master's stronghold! From here he can crush the dwarves in their mountain homes, and burn the elves in their forests! He will need those like us to help lead! We will be Lords of the New World as we join the Master and wipe the land clean! You do not have to die like this Evelyn! Join us, and swear your allegiance to the Demon Prince."

Evelyn shook her head in horror and stumbled back away from the table. "You're insane! You're all insane! You will burn for this, I swear!!"

"You had your chance, Evelyn," Eight scowled. "Cail!!" he barked.

Jase Cail drew his sword with a flourish, the ring of steel echoing in the domed chamber. White-tabarded Inkatese soldiers rushed into the room and pure chaos ensued.

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Cyan worked the Doom Sword through a series of blurring slashes, deflecting Inkatese swords and forcing white-tabarded soldiers back. The tip of the Doom Sword cut a gash along one soldier's arm; the man dropped his sword and hastily backed away from the fighting. Cyan was too busy intercepting another Inkatese soldier's attack to do anything else. His friends and the rest of the Dyrenn soldiers formed a tight ring around Lady Evelyn, King Trentan, Miranda, and Khrystana. More Inkatese soldiers in their white tabards entered the room and with Jase Cail shouting orders, they quickly attacked.

"There's too many of them!" Garroc roared from nearby, knocking one sword thrust aside with his battle-axe. He kicked a soldier in the knee and when the man doubled over in pain, the dwarf bashed the flat of his axe into the man's skull.

Cyan was all too aware of that fact, but with Inkatese soldiers blocking the path to the only way out of the domed chamber, he didn't see any ready solutions. The clash of steel on steel filled the room, and made thinking nearly impossible. He only had time to spare a glance over his shoulder to where the nine members of the Circle still were gathered around their table, watching the unfolding battle with great satisfaction. *I can't believe they were all the Demon Prince's servants!* he thought, batting another sword thrust aside. *How far has this corruption spread? Are all these soldiers in on it too, or are they just following orders? I don't want to kill them if I don't have too!*

While the fighting kept raging all around, Khrystana was busy chanting under her breath. She could already see that in time the Inkatese would overwhelm the Dyrenns. *I must do something to help!* she thought. *Otherwise we are all as good as dead.*

Reaching out with her senses, Khrystana felt for and found the flows of energy that permeated creation. Opening herself to the power, she focused her will and completed her spell. Searing blue lightning shot from her fingertips and arched across the chamber towards the nine Circle members who were watching the battle. One bolt struck the portly man full in the chest, burning a gaping hole through flesh and fat before the man even had time to scream. Another blew the curved table to splinters, sending sharp wooden chunks flying through the remaining traitors like a flight of arrows and spears. Torn and burning bodies were all that was left of the nine Circle members.

Despite all that, the Inkatese soldiers fought on, with Jase Cail bellowing commands at them before he charged into the fray himself. His long sword swept methodically in a dizzying pattern, and he began cutting his way through Dyrenn soldiers. A fervent gleam shone in his blue eyes as he burst through the ring of defenders, right in front of Miranda.

"Come, Princess! The Master awaits you!" Cail half-bowed mockingly, holding out his free hand to her. "You are his now, and I will bring you to him!"

"I am not the Demon Prince's!!" Miranda screamed at him.

"You cannot deny his will!" Cail said, grabbing her arm roughly and pulling her to him.

Miranda fumbled and managed to grab her small dagger from her belt. She lashed out blindly and Cail abruptly released her. He stepped back, clutching a long bloody gash across his cheek that just missed his right eye.

"Filthy whore!" he snarled, raising his sword to strike. Then he stiffened, gasped, and collapsed. King Trentan stood behind the fallen Lord-Commander and smoothly pulled the blood-smeared blade of a short sword from Cail's back.

"I never did like him," King Trentan spat. He put an arm around Miranda's shoulders. "Are you all right?"

Miranda tore her eyes from Cail's face. "I... yes. I'm okay. Thank you, Father."

"Stay close to me, Miranda," he told her, giving her a quick hug before turning to keep an eye on any other soldiers who might break into their small eye of calm amidst the hurricane of fighting.

Khrystana was already drawing more magic into her, crafting it with arcane words and sheer will. Sweat shone on her pale forehead from the effort. She threw out her hands and shining motes of light sparked out from her and landed on every one of her friends and the fighting Dyrenns. Where the lights touched them, a glow began to spread, enveloping them in a shimmering aura of protection.

"*Qin-saava!*" she shouted, and released every last bit of magic she could hold.

A violent thunderclap rocked the entire chamber, sending anyone not touched by her protective magic flying through the air. The marvelous crystal dome that capped the Fortress of the Circle exploded outwards in a spray of multi-colored fragments. The whitestone walls cracked and shuddered with the force of the thunderclap. Inkatese soldiers in their white tabards were flung all across the chamber like rag dolls.

Khrystana gasped and slowly sank to her knees. The glow around the Dyrenns faded, and they looked about the chamber in awe. Arathorn was by her side in a heartbeat, gathering her into his arms.

“My Beloved! Are you all right?”

Khrystana smiled weakly and kissed him.

King Trentan took a quick look around the blasted chamber. “Gather our wounded,” he told Captain Fissk, who was wiping at a cut across his chest. “We’re getting out of here!”

Rorx was leaning on his battle-axe and breathing heavily. “Hey! This one’s dead,” he said, poking Terril’s corpse with his boot. Sometime during the melee the young noble had taken a sword thrust through the chest. “But where’re the other two?”

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“We’ve got to get out of here before they notice us missing!” Greystern told Larice for the fourth time in as many minutes.

“I know that, you fool! My rooms in the Fortress are just down this hallway,” Larice snapped back at him.

“Why are we going there? We need to get as far from here as possible!”

Suddenly the whole Fortress rocked and heaved, sending Greystern stumbling into the silver-haired sorceress.

“Get off me, you oaf!”

“What was that?”

“Probably that bitch, De’Faerr,” Larice growled, cradling her broken hands close to her body. “Open that door!” she nodded to a carved wooden door on the right. “And don’t touch anything in there unless I tell you to!”

Greystern glowered at her but did as he was told. Larice's apartments in the Fortress were spacious and well-furnished. Strange objects were displayed on short pedestals dotting the room.

"Take that box there, the one on the fourth pedestal," Larice told him. "Open it."

Greystern hesitantly took a dark lacquered wooden box about a foot square from the marble pedestal. "What's in it?" he asked.

"We don't have time for this! Just open it!" Larice screamed at him, her normally placid eyes raging.

Greystern carefully undid the small golden latch on the dark box. The lid snapped open by itself and nearly made him drop the whole thing. A foul-smelling mist began to pour out of the box and pool on the floor in a coil of vapors. The mist pulsed and began to grow into a familiar shape.

"Not that! Anything but that!" Greystern howled.

"Shut up and get on it!" Larice snarled at him as she moved past and awkwardly climbed up onto their transportation's back.

Greystern's hands itched for a dagger, anything, to plant in the sorceress' back. He sighed and approached the waiting veermang instead. It hissed evilly at him, yellow eyes glinting. Greystern was willing to swear the veermang's canine jaws were curved into a smile.

"I forgot how much you stink," he told the veermang as he climbed up onto its back behind Larice.

With a screeching howl, the veermang bounded forward and burst through a large, colored glass window that looked down from Larice's rooms on the fourth floor of the Fortress. For a sickening moment, they were falling, then the veermang spread its bat-like wings and caught air. With lurching wing beats, it started climbing until the

Fortress and the rest of Inkata fell away beneath them. The veermang screeched and angled north.

* * * *

Cyan tried not to look at the bodies of the Inkatese soldiers strewn about the room. Heads and limbs hung at unnatural angles, and sightless eyes stared up at the gaping hole where the beautiful crystal dome used to be. At the far end of the room, on the raised dais, the blackened and smoking remains of the Circle's meeting table and the rest of the Circle itself gave off a foul smell. He thought he might be sick.

Ignoring his churning stomach, Cyan sheathed the Doom Sword and went to Miranda's side. The Princess looked shaken, but she managed a weak smile when she saw him.

"You've ruined another shirt, Cyan," she told him, sticking her hand through a six inch tear across the front of his tunic. "Another inch and..." she shuddered and pulled her hand away.

"It's all right, Miranda," Cyan whispered, pulling her close with one arm. He kissed her forehead, unmindful of anyone watching. With his other hand he eased the small dagger out of her tightly clasped fist. Blood still smeared the tip.

Miranda seemed surprised to find herself still holding the dagger she had cut Jase Cail with. She almost dropped it with a jerk, but Cyan caught it by the handle.

"What's the matter, Miranda?" Cyan cupped her chin and forced her to look at him.

"J-jase Cail... he grabbed me. He... said I was the Demon Prince's! Father killed him."

"But not before you marked him?" Cyan looked at the bloody dagger. "Spirits! You're a fighter, Miranda! I love you! As long as I'm here, the Demon Prince will never have you!"

Miranda hugged him fiercely. "Don't ever leave me," she whispered, just soft enough that Cyan didn't hear.

"Let's move!" Captain Fissk bellowed, breaking their moment of quiet. "Everyone who can hold a sword to the front! Keep an eye out for more soldiers!"

Garroc and Rorx joined Cyan and Miranda. "Ye think we'll have to fight our way back to the plaza, lad?" Rorx asked.

"I hope not, Rorx," Cyan sighed, reluctantly letting go of Miranda. "Maybe we can reach the plaza before word of this spreads."

"Let's hope so," Garroc muttered, looking about the ruined chamber.

Cyan bit his lip to stop from saying what really was bothering him at the moment. The words of the one called Eight were still buzzing around inside his head. *"When the Master's army arrives, we will welcome it with open arms! Inkata will become the Master's stronghold!"* the portly traitor had exclaimed fanatically. *Will that really happen?* Cyan wondered, as he followed the dwarves and the other Dyrenn soldiers out of the blasted chamber. *Will the Demon Prince's army really take the whole city without a fight?*

* * * *

There were no more groups of white-tabarded, Inkatese soldiers waiting in the halls of the Fortress to waylay them. Broken statues and porcelain dotted the thick carpets where they had fallen from their niches set into the whitestone walls. Only a few frightened servants moved in the luxuriant hallways, and they ducked and scurried as soon as they saw the armed Dyrenns approaching, not even bothering to finish cleaning up the broken shards of valuable artwork.

With Captain Fissk and the few uninjured Dyrenns leading the way, they descended to the ground floor and stepped out onto the Fortress grounds in short order. Colored crystal was strewn across the verdant, green lawns of the Fortress like a broken

rainbow fallen to earth. Shards crunched underneath the booted feet of Fissk's men. King Trentan still carried the short sword he had taken from a fallen Inkatese soldier in the fighting. Cyan noted that the Dyrenn monarch held the weapon easily, as if he was well accustomed to holding a blade. *Miranda said he killed Jase Cail. I never thought of King Trentan as a warrior before. I should have seen it earlier. He's as much a soldier as Captain Fissk is!*

Arathorn was walking with Khrystana, keeping a supporting arm tight around her waist. The dwarves were helping some of the injured Dyrenns. Miranda was quiet, but she kept one hand resting lightly on Cyan's arm. Lady Evelyn walked a little apart from the rest of the group, her face still an ashen color. She seemed to be walking in a daze, her eyes barely registering the path beneath her feet. Sometimes she would turn and look back at the Fortress, her eyes clouding with anger, but she never spoke a word, and kept on walking.

They passed through the maple grove ringing the Fortress grounds without being challenged. There was no sign of the guard who had stopped them earlier. Emerging from the band of woods, they followed the whitestone-paved streets back towards the plaza bordering the Monastery Grove. The streets were emptier than they should have been for the time of day. Only a few pedestrians rushed across the intersections at a near-run, and Cyan only saw two horse-drawn carts at one junction. The drivers of both carts glanced nervously at the Dyrenns as they passed. Except for them, the streets were quiet, a far cry from the usual bustle and noise of the busy city. Silence hung like a dark pall, mocking the bright whitestone buildings and cobblestones glistening in the late afternoon sun.

"What going on here?" Miranda whispered. Even then, her voice seemed too loud for the empty streets.

"I don't know," Cyan murmured, finding her hand and clasping it in his. "But I don't like it."

By the time they reached the plaza, everyone was on edge. Cyan was glad when they rounded the last street corner to see the square full of Dyrenn wagons and people. The sounds of voices and work was a welcome change from the eerie stillness of the city.

If King Trentan was put at ease by the more lively surroundings, he gave no sign. "Captain Fissk, gather all of the soldiers and have them start ordering the rest of the people. Get them ready to move," he ordered, still carrying the short sword he had killed Jase Cail with.

"We are leaving, your Majesty?" Fissk asked hesitantly.

"Yes. I want the wagons ready to go immediately."

Fissk nodded slowly, his gray eyes flicking nervously from King Trentan to the rest of their small group. "As you command," Fissk turned and started passing orders to every soldier within sight.

"Your Majesty?" Cyan couldn't hold his tongue any longer. "What's happening?"

King Trentan turned to look at Cyan and Miranda. His dark eyes gave nothing away, but Cyan felt that deep inside, the King was feeling as lost and afraid as the rest of them were. "Inkata is not the bastion I had hoped for, Cyan," he said, his voice pitched low. "I must get my people safely away from here before..."

Cyan nodded his understanding as King Trentan's voice failed him. *Will it come to that? The Demon Prince taking Inkata as his own? What about all these people who live here? They can't all serve the Demon Prince, can they?*

"Hurry and get your things," Marcuris finally said. "All of you. We may not have much time left."

Cyan felt Miranda's grip on his hand tighten. He looked at her and was sure the fear shining in her eyes must also be reflected in his own. *Spirits, keep us safe*, he prayed silently. *From what, I do not know...*

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Cyan eyed the single bulging saddlebag he had filled with his belongings. *Not much to call my own*, he thought sadly. *A few tunics, and most of those came from either Tree-Haven or Dyrenn! An extra pair of leathers, my small clothes, an old hair brush, two daggers, an old razor, a water-skin, a light coin purse, and my cloak. Besides the clothes on my back and the Doom Sword, this is all I have. It's all I am.*

He slung the saddlebag over his shoulder and took a last look around the small room in the whitestone building. *This time I didn't even get to stay here long enough for it to start feeling like home. Not like back in Dyrenn.* As he stepped out into the hall and shut the room's door behind him, he realized just how far he had come since leaving Gabbon behind. *Flint! I wish we were back in the old forge! I miss Gabbon! I miss Pinter Cray's tavern, and Harec Vinciss and Derwal. I even miss the way Kela used to chase after me! Oh, Kela! I'm so sorry...*

"Cyan? Are you all right?"

Cyan almost dropped his saddlebag. He hastily wiped his eyes. "What? Oh, Arathorn. I'm... I'm fine."

The golden-haired elf had Lifeseeker hooked over his shoulder along with its quiver of white and red arrows. He was wearing his forest-colored tunic and a pair of dark leather leggings. A short sword and dagger hung at his belt.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

Cyan nodded, wiping at a stray tear. "I'm worried, that's all. I don't know what's going to happen to us."

Arathorn clasped Cyan's shoulder and gave it a friendly squeeze. "Trust in the Spirits, Cyan. They will watch over us."

"But will they watch over Inkata?"

Arathorn met his stare and finally shrugged his shoulders. "We can hope."

"How's Khrystana?" Cyan asked, hoping to change the subject.

"She'll be fine. She's just tired, that's all. Using a lot of magic exhausts her."

"We wouldn't be here without her," Cyan said quietly.

Arathorn nodded. "Perhaps. The Doom Sword would have helped if you had needed it to."

"You really think so?"

"It always has before."

Cyan touched the Sword's hilt lightly. "I guess you're right about that, Arathorn."

They walked out of the building together, into the plaza where the Dyrenn soldiers were getting everybody situated in the wagons. Horses were being hitched and last minute belongings were still being loaded.

"Where will we go now?" Cyan asked.

Arathorn shrugged. "King Trentan hasn't said anything for sure that I know of. Ruh-Xsok is far west of here, and Jynlamadh is just as far, if not farther, to the south. That's even if he decides to go to either of those cities."

"It's not what I thought would happen," Cyan sighed. "I kept telling myself that Lady Evelyn would rally the Circle and the rest of the city behind her. I felt so sure that we would stop the Demon Prince's army here! I can't believe we're just going to leave the city like this!"

"I know, Cyan. I hoped the same thing myself. But who can we trust now? For all we know, half the Inkatese army could be corrupted! Maybe only the Circle and Jase

Cail were the Demon Prince's servants, but I don't think King Trentan is willing to take that risk."

"I can't blame him," Cyan agreed. "Not with the lives of the Dyrenns hanging in the balance."

A Dyrenn servant was leading a group of horses towards them. He bowed low when he saw them. "Knight-Protectors, I have brought you new mounts."

Cyan exchanged a wry glance with Arathorn. *We should have never agreed to that title*, Cyan thought. *We haven't done a very good job protecting anything*. "Thank you," he said instead, taking the reins of a skittish gray. Arathorn likewise accepted a black gelding.

Cyan tied on his saddlebag and patted the gray's neck. It settled down as he whispered soothingly in its ear. He was almost ready to climb up into the saddle when he saw Miranda come out of the whitestone building carrying several bundles. He handed the reins of his horse to Arathorn.

"One more to calm down?" Arathorn grinned at him, meaning Miranda.

"Something like that," Cyan shrugged, and walked over to help Miranda. He took two tightly rolled bundles from the stack she was trying to carry.

"Thank you," Miranda said softly, trying her best to avoid his eyes.

"Miranda?" he asked, following her towards one of the closest covered wagons.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm fine, Cyan," she replied, but her tone told him differently.

"Miranda, please. If it's about us leaving, you don't have to worry! I'm coming with you! I'm not going to stay behind, if that's what's bothering you."

Miranda dumped her packages in the open back of the wagon before turning to look at him. She was dressed for riding, with a practical blouse and riding pants. She wore calf-length boots with the hilt of a dagger poking up from the top of her left boot.

The ruby rose pendant he had given her sparkled faintly on her chest. A silver circlet, the reminder of her position, shone as it held back some of her thick auburn curls.

"It's not that, Cyan. It's just..."

"What? You can tell me."

Miranda hesitated, then finally nodded to herself. "I want us to be like Arathorn and Khrystana are, Cyan."

Cyan set down the bundles in the back of the wagon. "What do you mean?"

Miranda took one of his hands in both of hers. She idly traced his calluses with her fingernails as she appeared to search for the right words to say.

"I want..." she took a deep breath. "I want us to be married."

Cyan fought to find his voice, but it eluded him for several moments. "Married? You mean right now?"

Miranda clutched his hand tighter. "Now, later, I don't know! I just... I want to know you'll be with me, Cyan! I don't want to be without you! I love you!"

"I love you too, Miranda," he pulled her close. "In my heart, it's like I'm already married to you! I can't imagine life without you, and I don't ever want to lose you! But..."

"But what?" Miranda asked suspiciously.

"I *will* marry you someday, Miranda Trentan," Cyan said firmly, "but I can't just... I can't- oh, I don't know how to say it!"

Say what, Cyan? You're not making sense!"

"I want to be able to give something back to you and your father when I marry you," Cyan finally said. "I can't just marry you and live off your father's wealth and title! I don't want to be a... a *leech* like that! I am a peasant, and you are a Princess!"

"And you think that matters to me?" Miranda cried. "Do you think I see a lowly peasant when I look at you, Cyan of Gabbon? Do you think anyone here looks down on you because of who your parents were? Damn it, Cyan! You are a man! You are a

great and wonderful man! I wish you would see that! I am not something you have to *earn*!! You think all the things you've done for Dyrenn don't matter to me? Or my Father?? Spirits, Cyan! *I love you!!!* For once, forget about who *you* think you are, and realize what *others* see in you! You *are* Lord Cyan, Knight-Protector of Dyrenn! You are the most noble, self-sacrificing man I've ever known and I'm asking you to marry me!! Can't you see that?" Miranda pleaded, tears running down her cheeks. "Can't you believe??"

Cyan's own eyes were burning with hot tears. Miranda's heartfelt words were branded into his soul, and the pain of her love tore at his heart. His own love for her stabbed at him like a thousand of Greystern's swords. *Why do I always have to hurt her? Why am I torn so? Is my pride so stubborn that I cannot accept what she says? It would be so easy to do as she asks... but I would be deceiving myself then. How do I tell her that I believe what she says of me, but that I still have to prove it to myself before I can finally accept it? For the sake of my own conscience, I have to be this way!!*

"Miranda... please," he murmured, his throat tight with raw emotion, "be patient with me? I... I need to do this for the right reasons."

The way her eyes changed from tear-filled, pleading love to burning rage told him those were the wrong words to say. "The *right* reasons? Loving me is not one of the right reasons? Then what are they? Is easing your pathetic pride a right reason? Is your Spirits-cursed modesty the right reason? Answer me!! If love is not the right reason, then you tell me what is, Cyan of Gabbon!! Tell me why you're so damned important that you can't marry me! Give me one *reason* why our love isn't enough to bring us together!!"

She never hit him, but she didn't have to. Cyan flinched at each word, and the wounds they made were more painful than any sword thrust could ever be. He could

barely see her through the blur of stinging tears in his eyes as he turned away from her, her last words still ringing in his ears. *Give me one reason why...*

He took a step away from her and the wagon. He didn't see the people who had stopped their work to watch, or the ones who had been drawn by Miranda's terrible shouts. He looked back over his shoulder, only seeing her red-haired form through a veil of tears.

"You want one reason?" he choked softly. "You just gave it to me. It's you."

He turned away and walked all the way back to where Arathorn was still holding the reins to both their horses. The elf's face had gone pale, and he started to say something, but Cyan ignored him and vaulted up into the gray's saddle. He dug his heels into the gray's ribs and never looked back as it galloped out of the plaza.

He never saw all of the fury and blood drain from Miranda's face. He never heard her broken wails as she fell to her knees on the whitestone cobbles. He didn't see her desperate, outstretched hands reaching for him, begging him to stop. He couldn't feel her heart bleeding to death for him. All Cyan could see were his own biting tears, and all he could hear was the pounding of the gray's hooves on the whitestone streets—thundering in his ears and drowning out the sobs that wanted to burst from his chest. All he could feel was the hilt of the Doom Sword pressing against his side.

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Cyan was only half-aware of directing his galloping gray mount through the deserted streets of Inkata. Any conscious thoughts he might have had were swallowed in the chaos of emotion that tore at him. Bitter heartache mingled with black despair, and running in a swift current under both feelings was a burning, consuming rage. He was angry with himself, angry with Miranda, and most of all, angry with the Spirits for giving the Doom Sword into his hands.

You're the cause of all my troubles! Cyan mentally snarled at the weapon. *What have you made of me, that I could walk out on the woman I love? Is this what you did to Melias Soulae?*

"Cyan!!! Wait!"

Cyan hauled back on the gray's reins and the running horse reluctantly slowed to a trot. Over his shoulder, Cyan saw Arathorn galloping hard on his black gelding. The elf sawed on the reins and the black slowed as it approached them.

"What do you want, Arathorn?" Cyan asked, surprised by the cold fury in his voice.

Arathorn warily eyed his friend. "Easy, Cyan. I was worried about you. Miranda is screaming like a banshee back in the plaza. Won't you go back and talk to her? Please?"

"We've already talked," Cyan answered stiffly. Inside, the cauldron of emotion roiled violently. *She's crying? Then why did she drive me away?*

"Cyan, please-"

"No, Arathorn! I don't want to see her right now. All right?"

Arathorn sighed and nodded. "The Dyrenns were starting to move," he said instead.

"Good. We need to get out of this city," Cyan growled. "Let's go to the gates and make sure they're open for us to leave."

Arathorn studied him carefully before agreeing. "Let's just hope word from the Fortress hasn't spread, or else we might find ourselves fighting to leave Inkata."

"I'd welcome it," Cyan sneered, and urged the gray down the next street leading towards the city's eastern gate. Arathorn stared after Cyan for a moment before slowly following.

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Miranda sat with her back against the corner of the wagon bed, her arms wrapped around her knees, barely feeling the motion of the wagon down the whitestone cobbles. Khrystana sat placidly in the back of the covered wagon with her, deep blue eyes full of concern.

"Peace, Miranda," the sorceress whispered soothingly. "This trouble will pass. Already you regret your harsh words, and you can be sure Cyan does as well. The two of you will work things out."

Miranda absently wiped at her raw, puffy eyes. Her throat was sore from the screams she barely even remembered. "I... I hope you're right, Khrystana," she trembled. "I was awful— I hurt him so much. I would understand if he hated me."

"Cyan does not hate you. He is only upset right now. He has a good heart, Miranda. You will see."

Miranda nodded almost imperceptibly. "How do you manage it, Khrystana? How can you stand to be apart from Arathorn?"

"Manage?" Khrystana laughed softly. "Oh, Miranda! Love is not something you can so easily balance! Being with Arathorn has taught me that. When he is in danger, my heart is ready to die! But I cannot stop him from ever being in danger again. We both have to accept that about the men we love. As much as I might want to never let Arathorn out of my sight, I know that he would be stifled and confined if I was that demanding. I understand what must be, but that does not mean I like it, or *manage* it, as you say."

"But you have magic! You can fight alongside him! I'm just a burden on Cyan! He thinks he has to protect me by leaving me out of any possible danger."

"Then you both must learn to trust one another more. You must accept the fact that he is capable on his own, and he must come to trust that you are not some helpless girl. With acceptance comes greater love," Khrystana smiled warmly.

Miranda smiled. The pain she felt inside her heart lessened a little. "Thank you for understanding, Khrystana. You always know what to say."

Khrystana shook her head. "Everyday with Arathorn teaches me something new. I know myself better than ever before. You and Cyan are starting that process as well. It is a rough start, believe me! At least you were not begging Cyan to kill you, like I did Arathorn."

Miranda reached out and clasped Khrystana's hand. The two women shared tearful looks of understanding. Miranda prayed that Cyan would understand.

* * * *

Cyan reined in the gray. Ahead of him, the towering, whitestone walls of Inkata loomed like massive snow banks, dwarfing most of the buildings in the city. Even taller towers rose up from the wall like gleaming lances, and pennants and banners hung from the tops, barely stirring in the still late-afternoon air. But what drew Cyan's eyes were the massive, burnished steel gates set into a huge arch in the wall. The mighty gates were shut fast. Chains thick as a man's chest were connected to the giant steel double-doors, and ran back along and into the tall guard towers flanking the gate.

Arathorn walked his gelding up next to Cyan. "Do you think they know about the Fortress already?" he asked, nodding to the closed portals.

"There aren't any guards around," Cyan shrugged. "If they suspected anything yet, this place would be crawling with soldiers." A part of him was almost sorry it wasn't. Cyan tried to push his anger and frustration away, but the feeling remained.

"Well, it won't take long for the first Dyrenn wagons to get here. We need these gates open if we're ever going to leave."

"Come on then. We'll just have to open them ourselves," Cyan prodded his gray into a walk.

“Are you crazy? Those buildings built into the wall over there are barracks! What if some soldiers see us before we get inside the towers!”

“Do you have any other ideas?” Cyan snapped. “Then let’s go!”

“What’s gotten into you, Cyan?” Arathorn whispered softly as he urged his mount after Cyan.

They drew up right in front of the base of the left gate-tower. The iron-bound oak door leading inside was partially open. Cyan dismounted and looped the gray’s reins around a hitching post. Arathorn shook his head and followed suit.

“This might be easier than I thought,” Cyan said, easing the door the rest of the way open. A short hallway led to a central curving staircase. Several closed doors lined the hallway, but there was no one in sight. Cyan stepped lightly down the hall and started up the stairs, one hand hovering near the Doom Sword’s hilt. Arathorn resisted the urge to nock an arrow to Lifeseeker, and hurried after his friend.

They climbed flight after flight of solid, whitestone stairs, searching for the chamber that housed the means of opening the massive gates. Occasionally they heard voices from behind closed doors, but they never saw any white-tabarded Inkatese soldiers. After the eighth set of stairs Cyan was breathing heavily. It reminded Arathorn a little of climbing the stairs up the trunk of The Ancient back in Tree-Haven.

“There must be some kind of winch up here that operates those chains,” Cyan said between breaths. “We should be about level with the top of the wall now. Those chains have to enter the tower somewhere around here!”

Arathorn nodded and led the way from the stairs into the eighth-floor hallway. They only had to go a short distance before they found what they had been searching for. An open door showed them a large chamber dominated by a huge winch built into the very floor of the chamber. Coils of thick chain were wrapped around the whole top half of a shaft that went all the way up into the ceiling. Long wooden arms stuck out from

the middle of the winch shaft– braces for men to push against as they all worked to open or shut the gates. A taut section of chain angled down from the top of the winch and passed through a large gap in the chamber wall.

“It must take at least ten men to turn this!” Arathorn swore. “How are we ever going to open it?”

Cyan crossed the room to peer out one of the many arrow-slits in the chamber walls. He looked down into the streets just in front of the gate. “I can see the first wagons coming, Arathorn!” he shouted. “The Dyrenn soldiers are leading the way! They’ll be here in minutes! Arathorn?”

The elf did not answer.

“Arathorn? Did you hear me? I said the Dyrenns are almost here,” Cyan turned to see his friend peering out one of the arrow-slits that looked out over the houses and farms to the east. “What’s the matter?”

Arathorn looked back at Cyan. “I’m not sure, Cyan. There’s something going on outside the city. It looks like a lot of people are heading up the road this way.”

Cyan shrugged and turned to inspect the huge winch system. “We have to find a way to get the gates open, and fast! Who knows what the Inkatese soldiers will do when they see the Dyrenns coming?” He pushed against one of the timbers used to turn the winch shaft. It didn’t even budge. “Help me with this.”

The two of them tried to turn the winch to let out more chain. The city gates functioned by opening outwards on massive hinges; when the chain was drawn in, the gates closed. *If we can just get some slack in these chains, maybe we can open the gates enough to get the wagons through!* Cyan thought, throwing his weight against the timber brace.

“Push!!” Cyan grunted, straining against the winch-arm.

“It’s no use, Cyan! We’re not strong enough to turn this by ourselves!”

"We have to!" Cyan pounded his fist against the wooden brace in frustration.

"There must be some sort of locking mechanism holding the chain secure on the winch," Arathorn said, studying the winch more closely. "Otherwise the gates would just snap open on their own. Spirits, I wish Rorx and Garroc were here! They would know how this works!!"

"Well, they'll be here in a few minutes if we don't get this thing open! And chances are they'll have lots of Inkatese soldiers ready to meet them!" Cyan cursed. "Where do you think this locking mechanism is?"

"I don't know! It could be up on another floor or right here in front of me and I still wouldn't know what it looks like! The two of us aren't going to get this working, Cyan."

"That's not an option!" Cyan paced fiercely, studying the winch-shaft and chain.

The sound of voices drifted from out in the hallway near the stairwell.

"We don't have much time, Cyan!" Arathorn hissed.

"Go make sure no Inkatese soldiers get up here," Cyan told the elf. "I'll take care of the gate."

"What? What can you possibly do?"

"The chain holds the gate shut, right?"

"Yeah, so? We can't turn the winch to loosen the chain and open the gate! What else is there?"

"We don't have to turn the winch to loosen the chain. We can cut the chain."

"*Cut the chain??*" Arathorn's eyes widened. "Are you crazy, Cyan? Those links are made of solid dwarven steel!! A whole army of dwarves couldn't cut those chains!"

"Just go and make sure no Inkatese guards get in here, all right?" Cyan told the elf, drawing the Doom Sword from its scabbard.

"Cyan, no! It won't work! We can at least get to the Dyrenns now if we hurry!"

"You said the Doom Sword would help me when I needed it, Arathorn. Now we're going to find out if you were right," Cyan said grimly, stepping up in front of the taut section of chain just before it passed through the chamber wall and ran down to the gate. "Go!!" he shouted at the elf, raising the Doom Sword over his head in both hands.

Arathorn met his eyes for a moment, then darted for the stairwell.

Cyan firmed his grip on the Sword's hilt and closed his eyes. He could picture the mammoth chain links hanging in front of him. Solid steel as thick around as a man's chest was pulled tight with enough strength to hold the imposing, burnished steel gates closed on their mighty hinges. *They're so huge...* Cyan thought distantly.

"No!!" he growled, shaking his head violently. Without opening his eyes, he knew that green flames danced along the Doom Sword's blade. He could feel the fire racing, pulsing with power. "I can do this!"

He swung the Doom Sword with as much force as he could. The blade slammed against the steel chain with a deafening *clang!!!* Sparks skittered and metal shards flew across the room. Cyan opened his eyes enough to see the gouge in the steel chain. He felt the Sword's power and knew he could do it.

With a roaring shout, he lifted the Doom Sword and swung again. Steel rang and sparks flew. Again. Metal parted under the Doom Sword's fiery blade. Again. Cyan threw his strength behind each blow, willing the chain to break beneath his onslaught. Again. *Must open the gates!* he thought. Again. *Have to escape Inkata!!* Again. *We will not be trapped here!* He brought the Doom Sword back up, ignoring the sweat that dripped down his face. *Miranda must get free!!!* That thought rose out of somewhere deep inside him, and with it came a surge of adrenaline-powered emotion. The Doom Sword flashed down... and with a grinding screech of twisting metal, the Sword cut through the top half of a chain link. Cyan leaped back as the chain tore itself the rest of

the way and the severed half whipped down and out the chute leading to the gates. The other half lashed back to tangle around the winch shaft in a violent display of force.

Cyan leaned on the Doom Sword, panting for breath. His arms felt like they were on fire from the strain, but he had done it. A groaning rumble made him dash over to an arrow-slit to look down at the gates. Without the tension of the mighty chains to hold it shut, the left half of the gate was slowly swinging open on its great hinges. The severed portion of the chain dangled from where it connected to the gate. The first Dyrenn wagons, led by groups of mounted Dyrenn soldiers were just nearing the gates.

“Let’s go, Arathorn!” Cyan shouted as he ran out of the winch chamber towards the stairs. “Come on!!” he yelled at the startled elf.

Arathorn took one look at Cyan running towards him, with the Doom Sword still trailing flickers of green flames, and sprinted down the stairs. Cyan was fast behind him, all too aware of the growing shouts spreading throughout the tower.

A man in a white tabard overtop of chain mail ran into the stairwell from the sixth floor landing. Cyan punched the man with the hilt of the Doom Sword and elbowed him aside as he kept running down the stairs after Arathorn. More shouts followed him down.

At the third floor landing, he had to hurdle the sprawled body of another Inkatese soldier. The man was dazedly trying to get to his feet, but he ducked hastily as Cyan leaped overtop of him. He caught up to Arathorn on the ground floor, and together they burst out of the tower and ran to their horses. Cyan’s foot barely touched the stirrup as he vaulted up onto the gray’s back. He still carried the Doom Sword in one hand, and held the reins in the other. The Dyrenns were just nearing the half-open gates.

“Hurry!! Go through!” Cyan shouted at the nearest wagon driver, waving the Doom Sword to direct the man. The startled man snapped the wagon team’s reins and the horses bolted out the gates. More wagons began to follow.

“Cyan! Look!” Arathorn pointed to where white-tabarded soldiers were running out of the barracks across the way. “They look like they’re going to try to cut the Dyrenns off!”

Cyan looked to where the Inkatese were forming up into tight blocks of swordsmen. They did look like they meant to try to stop the Dyrenns from leaving. He was about ready to dig his heels into the gray’s ribs, when a crowd of people came running *into* the city through the open gate. They were squeezing past the Dyrenn wagons in a tightly packed flow, cutting right between the Inkatese soldiers and the fleeing Dyrenns.

“What are those people doing?” Cyan had to yell to be heard.

“They look like they’re all coming from the farms and homes outside the city,” Arathorn answered, spotting people carrying bundles on their backs, or even trying to herd small farm animals ahead of them.

“Whatever they’re doing, they’re stopping the Inkatese soldiers!” Cyan laughed. “Let’s go!” he urged his gray to a canter and followed a wagon full of Dyrenns out through the open gate. They moved quickly through the collection of smaller shops and homes clustered near the city walls, and with Arathorn just a few lengths behind him, they followed a wagon out from among the buildings as the Outer City gave way to fields and small clusters of trees. A few last straggling groups of families from the outlying farms were still hurrying up the road toward the Inner City. Dyrenn wagons made a steady line heading out in the opposite direction.

“Thank the Spirits these people are all heading into Inkata!” Cyan grinned, looking back at Arathorn. “Those soldiers might have caused us trouble if not for these folk! Why do you think they’re in such a hurry like that? Is there some Inkatese festival today that I don’t know about?”

Arathorn was twisted in his saddle, looking north. "No, Cyan, I don't think it's a festival at all," the elf murmured half-heartedly.

"Then what is it?"

"Death," Arathorn whispered, and pointed back to the north.

Cyan leaned in the saddle and peered to where the elf had pointed. Something dark was moving on the far horizon, and trails of smoke dotted the sky. A cold fist grabbed his stomach and squeezed. Cyan didn't know whether he wanted to laugh or cry.

Sweeping out of the north, burning everything before it, the army of the Demon Prince marched south on Inkata.

Cyan tore his eyes from the distant, dark mass and looked back at Inkata's eastern gate. The one burnished steel door hung wide open, the thick length of chain hanging useless. The last of the Dyrenn wagons were leaving the city, even as the last Inkatese farmers were rushing in to what they thought was safety. The gate hung open. Cyan stared at it, then at the army of evil on the northern horizon. All the exhilaration he had felt up in the gate tower when he had cut the chain with the Doom Sword vanished, leaving a sickening hole of horror behind. *The gate is open...*

"What have I done???" Cyan screamed.

Chapter 25: Paying the Price

Ninth Moon, 873 PR

"I've killed them all, Arathorn!!! I've killed them all!!!"

"Cyan!! Stop it! What's the matter with you?" Arathorn moved his gelding up next to Cyan's gray. "What are you yelling about?"

"The gate, Arathorn! The damned gate!! I cut the chain! They can't close it now!" Cyan shouted, ramming the Doom Sword back in its scabbard. He suddenly felt vile and unclean from having touched the weapon.

Arathorn looked from the broken gate to where the army of the Demon Prince moved in the distance. His face was pale. "It's too late, Cyan! You can't change things now."

"But they're going to die, Arathorn! Because of me!!"

"For all we know, the Inkatese were going to let the monsters in anyway! Remember what that man on the Circle said? They were going to *welcome* the Demon Prince's army, not fight it!"

"But the Circle is dead!" Cyan cried, feeling for all the world like his insides were being torn apart. "Even if they try to defend themselves now, they won't be able to! The army will find the open gate, and then nothing will stop them from taking the city!"

"You don't know that, Cyan—" Arathorn tried to say.

"Yes, I do!!" Cyan cut him off, hot tears starting to fill his eyes. "Every person in that city is already dead! Spirits help them, they're dead!! And I killed them!"

Arathorn tried to say more, but Cyan shook the elf's comforting hand and urged his horse on down the road. As Arathorn watched him ride east alongside the wagons, Rorx and Garroc trotted over on small ponies.

"Where's the lad going?" Rorx asked.

“To be alone with his demons,” Arathorn said hollowly.

* * * *

Word gradually spread among the long, Dyrenn wagon train about the approaching army of monsters. The whispers among the people clustered in the backs of wagons all told about how Lord Cyan had fought his way into the tower to open the gates in order for them to escape. No one spoke about what fate Inkata might now face. Rumors about the Circle’s involvement with the Demon Prince were starting to spread as well, and it was hard to find sympathy for the Inkatese and their plight.

King Trentan rode near the front of the column of wagons, mounted on his favorite bay stallion. Captain Fissk rode at his side, as well as a few of the minor Dyrenn nobles. Up ahead, the main eastern road met a crossroad that angled south. Marcuris could feel the nobles’ eyes heavy on his back.

“Your Majesty?” Fissk spoke up. “I need to tell the soldiers what to do so they can guide the wagons. Which way are we going to go? East or south?”

King Trentan sighed. Before he could answer, Lady Evelyn rode up to join them. Her arm was still bound in a sling, and bandages showed under the shoulder of her blouse, but she maintained an air of dignity that he admired. Her brown hair danced in the light breeze. He had been as surprised as anyone when she announced that she was coming with them.

“Evelyn,” he nodded to her in greeting. “Is everything all right?”

The former leader of the Circle silently nodded, as she slowed her horse to a walk.

“Your Majesty?” Fissk prompted him.

Marcuris found himself wishing Rose was here with him. It wasn’t the first time he had wished for such a thing since discovering the Demon Prince’s army poised on Inkata’s doorstep. *She always seemed to know what to do*, he thought sadly.

“Have your men turn the wagons south, Captain Fissk.” *South, not east. Jynlamadh, not Ruh-Xsok. It will mean more days on the road, but it will put a greater distance between us and the Demon Prince’s troops. How long will we be able to run?*

“As you command, Majesty,” Fissk bowed in the saddle and spurred his roan ahead towards the crossroads. Puffs of dust kicked up by his mount’s hooves floated in the air and drifted south on the breeze.

Marcuris turned in the saddle to address the men who had once claimed titles and lands around Dyrenn. Now they looked little different from any of the other Dyrenn refugees. Their clothes showed the rigors of their travel, even if they were made of silk instead of homespun wool. He met their gazes, and forced his voice to show no apprehension.

“Lord Thedrin, see to the supply wagons, and start devising a rationing system. Duke Morrs, you will see that all the horses are properly cared for, and that the remounts and spare team horses are especially well-cared for. We are going to need them in the coming days. Lord Lowen, you are in charge of wagon repair and maintenance. Organize the blacksmiths, teamsters, and any other craftsmen among my people to assist you. Understood?”

The three nobles all bowed and murmured assent before wheeling their horses about to see to their new duties. Marcuris watched them gallop back along the road filled with wagons.

“You really think Jynlamadh will be any safer?” Evelyn spoke abruptly.

“No place in the world is safe anymore,” Marcuris said, looking back over his shoulder to where the shining walls of the City of Brightness were growing small in the distance. *At least from here I can’t see the Demon Prince’s army anymore*, he mused.

“We could have stopped them at Inkata,” Evelyn said quietly, but the tone in her voice told what she really felt.

"Not with the corruption spread by the Circle," King Trentan murmured.

Evelyn sighed. "I know, Marcuris. That's why I came with you. All this time I thought Inkata was mine, but now I see what a blind fool I've been. Those traitors doomed my city, my people! I should have stayed with them..."

"Dying would not change anything," Marcuris told her.

Evelyn nodded and rode next to him in silence for a time. At last she spoke again, "We are much alike, Marcuris Trentan. We both have lost our homes now," she laughed bitterly.

"A stone house can be built again. The family that lives there cannot," Marcuris whispered, meeting her sad gaze.

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Cyan spent the rest of the day riding at the tail of the column of wagons. He let the gray pick its pace, only urging it on when they drifted too far from the steadily moving wagons. They had long since turned south, and the whitestone walls of Inkata had vanished on the horizon a few hours ago. Not that it mattered to Cyan; he could see the towering walls in his mind, as well as the broken steel gate that would never be closed in time to save the city. He could almost hear the screams of the women and children as ogres, trolls, and goblins flooded through the broken gates and into the whitestone streets. He wondered if they would be killed, taken as slaves, or worse.

Stop it! he told himself for the hundredth time. *Arathorn was right. It's done, and there's no changing things now! It's in the hands of the Spirits.* As much as he told himself that, it didn't ease the crushing weight that seemed to press down on him. It didn't make the pain and guilt go away.

Even after the sun had sunk in the west, and the last fading light of evening was gone, the Dyrenns still pressed on. Lamps and torches were lit, and the wagons kept

rolling along the dry road south. It looked like King Trentan would have them keep moving all night long.

It all comes back to this, doesn't it? Cyan thought. We always have to run. From Gabbon, to Dyrenn, and now Inkata. We run away while the Demon Prince keeps devouring towns and cities! How long until there's no place left to run to? By that time it will be too late anyway. The Demon Prince will have won already! But what can we do? We're not strong enough to stand and fight his armies. No matter how many monsters we kill, they just keep coming. No, attacking his armies will not solve the bigger problem. The Demon Prince is the problem. He is the one who is causing all this. He is the one we have to deal with...

Cyan reluctantly touched the hilt of the Doom Sword. Just touching it made him remember Inkata. *I trusted in your power, and look what happened because of it!* he accused the Sword. *How am I supposed to use you if I'm too afraid to draw upon your strength? Is this what happened to Melias Soulae too? Did he grow overconfident in your powers? What is the mark of the Doom Sword? What price did you make him pay for using you? What price?? Isn't the lives of all those Inkatese enough for you?*

Cyan angrily forced his thoughts away from the Sword. The battle he fought was within himself, and no blade could help him win it. He shook his head and gripped the gray's reins tighter. The horse whickered softly, and Cyan patted its neck.

"You and I might be together for a long time, boy," he murmured, bending low over the gray's neck. Its ears swiveled as he whispered to it. "I can't just keep calling you 'horse' now can I?"

The gray snorted and Cyan chuckled softly.

"Well, from now on, your name is Forger, because you and me have to keep forging ahead. Okay? Good. Forger it is," he scratched Forger's mane. "I think you and I are going to have a long road ahead of us."

Arathorn stifled a yawn as he urged his black gelding back along the line of wagons. The sun was creeping above the eastern horizon, bringing its light to the grassy scrub and small patches of forest that dotted the landscape. The trade road running to Jynlamadh angled southeast, empty but for the Dyrenn wagons and Captain Fissk's far-riding scouts. Despite the growing sunshine, the wind had a chill to it, and Arathorn pulled his forest-colored cloak tighter about him as he searched among the wagons for any sign of Cyan. He had spent most of the night out with Fissk's scouts, for his keen elven eyes saw better in the darkness than most.

Tired looking men and women watched him ride past as they tended to team horses or kept a watchful eye on running children. This was the longest rest King Trentan had allowed since making them travel through the night. Arathorn guessed that they had already put quite a few miles between themselves and Inkata.

The elf guided his horse over to a laden, open-backed supply wagon where Dyrenn soldiers were getting rations for themselves and feed for their horses. He approached the supply master, a burly man in tight leathers straining over his bulk.

"Need yer rations?" the man asked. "Got jerked beef, wheat biscuits, and some hard cheese. There's a small bag of oats for yer horse."

"Thank you," Arathorn said politely and took the proffered rations.

"Excuse me for askin', sir, but aren't yah that elf-friend of Lord Cyan's?"

Arathorn nodded.

"I thought as much when I saw yah. Can't tell yah how much most of us appreciate what Lord Cyan and the rest of yah have done for us. I said the same thing to Lord Cyan when he was here earlier—"

"Cyan was here? What time?" Arathorn interrupted the supply officer's rambling.

"Well, I reckon it wasn't more than an hour ago. He asked for several days' worth of rations for him and his horse, and I know I wasn't supposed to give that much to him, but yah just can't say no to Lord Cyan, not after all he's done for us!"

"Did he say what he needed the extra rations for?" Arathorn asked, though he thought he might already know the answer.

"Naw, I just figured he was gonna be out with the scouts for the next few days. He looked to be in a black mood, and I wasn't about to start askin' him a bunch of questions, mind yah."

"Thank you," Arathorn mumbled and turned back to his horse. *Getting extra rations before dawn? What is Cyan up to?* he thought. Arathorn packed his rations into his saddlebags and vaulted up into the saddle. He dug his heels into the horse's ribs and guided it back down the long road full of wagons. *Cyan's been keeping to himself... he'll be at the rear of the wagons*, Arathorn told himself, trying to ignore the nervous fist clenching his stomach. *Why would he take extra rations?*

Arathorn sped past the final wagons but he didn't stop his mount. His keen eyes could just make out a lone rider far ahead on the road back to the north. The growing daylight partially illuminated a man on a gray horse. Arathorn swore under his breath and pressed his horse to go faster. *That damn fool!*

Cyan turned in the saddle when Arathorn's horse started closing the distance between them. If he was surprised to see the elf chasing after him, he did well to hide it. Cyan slowed Forger to a walk as Arathorn reined his mount in next to him.

"You were just going to leave without telling anyone??" Arathorn accused him, fighting to keep from shouting. Cyan was wearing a heavy cloak and his saddlebags bulged with provisions and spare clothes. The Doom Sword hung at his waist, the green gems in the crosspiece and hilt glittering in the growing dawn light.

"I thought it would be for the best this way," Cyan said stiffly, turning his gaze back to the north. "No one would try to stop me then."

"Stop you? Just what do you plan on doing all by yourself?"

"Whatever it takes to end this," Cyan answered fiercely, gesturing all around them with one hand. "I'm through with running, Arathorn."

"You're not making sense, Cyan! If this is about Inkata, forget it! It wasn't your fault. Come on back to the wagons with me."

"No, Arathorn," Cyan shook his head. "You don't understand. I've given this a lot of thought. For once," he smiled mockingly, looking down at the Doom Sword, "I thought about something before I just rushed off to do it. It has to be this way, Arathorn. My mistakes have cost thousands of innocent lives, and there's nothing I can do about that. The Demon Prince's army is too much for us to stop, Doom Sword or not."

"Then what will this accomplish?" Arathorn asked. "Now you're running away from your friends, instead of from your enemies."

Cyan met Arathorn's gaze, his green-brown eyes full of pain. "I know... but it has to be this way. I finally know why I was given the Doom Sword, Arathorn. I have to end this, so no one will have to run anymore!"

"How? You're all alone for Spirits' sake! What happens if you run into some monsters? You're not invincible!"

Cyan laughed bitterly. "I almost started to think I was... but Inkata changed that. I believed too much in the power of this," he gestured to the Sword, "and look what happened."

"Then what will heading north do for you? There's nothing that way but death now!"

"You're wrong, Arathorn. There is something. The army of monsters is just a tool in his hand. I have to strike his heart if we want to end this."

"The Demon Prince? You can't be serious, Cyan! We don't know anything about him! We don't even know where he is!"

"Arathorn, think! You were closer than anyone to him, and you didn't even know it!"

"What are you talking about?"

"The black fortress, Arathorn! The one you told me you found when your spirit was first torn from your body! That is where he is. That's where I have to go."

Arathorn paled, remembering the terrible place in the snowy mountains. "Cyan, no!! That place is evil! Besides, it has to be far into the Northern Wastes! It will take forever to get there!"

"Somehow, I'll find a way. I have to! The Spirits have guided us this far, and I have to believe they won't abandon us now!" Cyan said. "The Demon Prince must be defeated!"

"But you don't have to do this alone, Cyan! The dwarves and I will come with you! We can do this together!!"

Cyan shook his head sadly. "No, not this time, Arathorn. The Spirits know I wish it could be that way... but no. This is my responsibility. It was why I was given the Doom Sword. Like Melias Soulae, I have been chosen for this."

"Damn it, Cyan! You never believed that junk before! If you really mean to do this, you're going to need our help!"

"Yes, but not in the way you think, Arathorn. Stay with the Dyrenns and help them get to safety. King Trentan will still have need of his Knight-Protectors."

Arathorn sighed. "You're not going to change your mind about this, are you?"

Cyan shook his head.

"I could get the dwarves and we could follow after you. You know I could track you down..." Arathorn whispered.

Cyan reined Forger to a halt. He reached over and gripped Arathorn's shoulder. "I know you could, but you're not going to. Deep in your heart, you know this has to be done. If I went with you and the Dyrenns, it would only be postponing the inevitable. Sooner or later, the Demon Prince's army will reach Jynlamadh. Eventually there would be nowhere left to run. The Demon Prince will have won. But maybe I can stop that from happening. I have to try, Arathorn!"

"I don't like the fact that you'll be alone," Arathorn persisted.

"I'll have you and the dwarves here with me," Cyan smiled faintly, touching his heart. "Flint always told me to trust in the Spirits, so that's what I'm going to do. We each have our destiny, I suppose."

Arathorn saw the resolve in Cyan's eyes, and he grudgingly nodded. "All right, Cyan... I can understand, but I don't have to like it."

"Me neither," Cyan's smile grew a little. "But if all our time together has taught me anything, it's that sometimes we have to do things even if we don't like them."

Arathorn bit his lips and nodded. His eyes burned. "What... what about Miranda?"

For a moment, the determination in Cyan's eyes wavered. "I don't know," he finally whispered. "You were right way back in Dyrenn when you told me to forget about her. I should have listened to you."

"No, Cyan. I was wrong then. She loves you," Arathorn told him.

"It... it doesn't matter," Cyan fought to keep his voice steady. "I can't stay with her *and* see this through to the end. It's one of those things I don't like, but still have to do."

Arathorn nodded in understanding. "Do you love her, Cyan?"

"More than I can bear."

"Then that is what I will tell her."

"Thank you, Arathorn," Cyan clasped the elf's hand tightly. His eyes shone with tears. "Tell Garroc and Rorx that I will miss them. King Trentan and Captain Fissk too."

"I will, Cyan. You have my word."

"And you take care of Khrystana, hear me? You and her belong together."

Arathorn nodded wordlessly, not trusting his voice to hold.

"I won't forget about you, Arathorn of Tree-Haven. Spirits grant you strength," Cyan voice was choked with emotion.

Arathorn tightened his grip on Cyan's hand. "Spirits grant you strength... Lord Cyan."

Cyan smiled through his tears and saluted Arathorn with his fist over his heart. He gathered Forger's reins and urged the gray into a gallop. Arathorn sat in the saddle and watched as man and horse gradually disappeared to the north. In the east, the sun had broken free of the horizon and was shining brightly.

Arathorn wiped his eyes and pulled his cloak tighter about him before wheeling his horse around and heading back south.

* * * *

Mykal Greystern clutched tightly to the veermang with both hands and legs. He was crouched low on its back, trying to avoid the worst of the bitterly chill wind that rushed past them. Larice rode behind him, her arms wrapped around his middle as best as her broken hands would allow. Both riders were cold to the bone, and only the scant warmth of the veermang's body kept them from freezing entirely. As it was, Greystern could barely feel his toes anymore. Snow whipped up into the air by the cold winds blew all around them, but it didn't seem to bother the veermang. It kept to its steady pace through the skies above the Northern Wastes, angling towards two giant rocky peaks that thrust up from the ground.

Greystern had lost track of the time since he and Larice had fled the Fortress of the Circle in Inkata. The numbing terror of flying on the veermang's back, along with the growing cold as they traveled further north, had dulled his wits even as the sharp hunger pangs in his belly grew. Larice had been no help; the silver-haired sorceress' acid tongue made any conversation curt and harsh. She seemed ready to blame anyone for the disaster that had led to her maimed hands.

Huddling against another icy blast that felt like it was slowly freezing his face, Greystern squinted and tried to make out the black-walled tower that rose out of the snow at the base of the twin mountain peaks. He shuddered, whether from the cold or from the fear of what lay ahead, he was not sure. The veermang screeched a raucous cry and started a dizzying downward spiral through the blowing snow. Greystern shut his eyes and hung on for dear life. He felt Larice's arms tighten around him, and he wished that somehow she would accidentally slip off the veermang's back and fall to her death.

Unfortunately, the veermang landed them safely in the deep snow inside the tower's walled courtyard. The winged demon lashed its serpentine tail and hissed while Greystern dismounted. He resisted the desire to smack the foul beast; he suspected it could tear him limb from limb in seconds if provoked. Before he could do anything, the dog-headed demon waded through the snow towards the ebony tower on its shaggy goat legs. Greystern looked to Larice, but she ignored him and followed after the veermang.

Swearing under his breath, Greystern struggled after the demon and the sorceress in the deep snow. The biting wind stole his breath and made his cheeks burn as he stumbled through a waist-deep drift. The wind-driven snow cleared long enough for him to see first the veermang, then Larice, walk through what looked like the solid black stone of the tower. Bracing himself for the uncomfortable sensations, Greystern

stepped up to the onyx-colored stone and plunged ahead. He saw nothing but darkness before his eyes, but he could feel an invisible weight all around him, nearly stifling in its intensity. Cool, oily slickness seemed to brush his skin, and he repressed a shudder of revulsion. Abruptly, he was standing in a torch-lit hallway of the same black stone; Larice stood just ahead of him, and the veermang was already shuffling down a side corridor, its head ducked and wings folded tight against its body to fit. Greystern wiped his tingling hands on his pants; even though they were clean, it felt like some filthy residue still remained behind from the passage through the stone. It was one of the many unexplainable things associated with the Demon Prince and his abode.

“What do we do now that we’re here?” Greystern asked the sorceress. “I’ve never come here unless summoned.”

“The Master will already know we are here,” Larice snapped back. “We’ll go down to the assembly room. He will see us when he so desires.”

Greystern scowled after Larice as she started down the corridor that led to the obsidian stairs. *Stupid bitch! Don’t you know that we might as well be dead already?* Pushing his thoughts aside, Greystern reluctantly followed her. He knew that his only chance for survival lay in the Master’s slim mercy. As he started down the stairs, he tried to think of a way to lay all the blame for his failures on Larice.

* * * *

The Demon Prince concentrated and felt the pulse of magical energy reverberating through the chamber go still. Gradually, he released the forces he had summoned, until the last drops of magic bled from his being. He sighed and opened his eyes, relishing the last feeling of pure life that the magic brought. The spell he had finished had allowed him to look upon his mighty armies as they worked their way across Pysidia. The magic was more difficult and time-consuming than using the Eye of

Dragons, but with the artifact destroyed, he was forced to use the other measures at his disposal. Still he was pleased with what he saw.

“Inkata is mine!!” he whispered triumphantly to himself. His magic had shown him his grandest army of minions as they rampaged through the so-called City of Brightness. The shining whiteness of the city’s walls, buildings, and streets were stained dark with the blood of its citizens. Thousands were dead, and even more taken prisoner to serve as slaves to his army. From that glorifying sight, his magic had allowed him to look upon his other two armies as they marched towards their targets. Smaller in size than the host that turned Inkata into a bastion of terror, both legions were no less deadly. One force marched to the southwest, already nearing the beginnings of the elves’ precious forests. The other was working its way southeast, entering the mountains that the dwarves called home.

The final cleansing of Pysidia is begun! the Demon Prince gloated silently. *The humans’ greatest stronghold is now mine, and there will be no aid to save the elves and dwarves!*

A shiver along his senses told him that some of his minions had entered the tower. A quickly cast spell showed him the image of Larice and Greystern descending the tower’s dark stairway. *Curious*, the Demon Prince mused, watching the two humans make their way to the large chamber where he had once gathered all his far-flung servants. *What has brought them to me unbidden? Do they bring more news of my victories?*

With a gesture, the Demon Prince caused the floating image of Larice and Greystern to vanish. He pulled his dark robes tighter around him and made sure the heavy cowl hid his face before leaving his spell chamber to make his way to meet his two returned servants. He walked easily through the dim corridors of stone, only the faint rustle of his robes and the soft whisper of his breathing disturbed the damp air.

He entered the expansive obsidian chamber without a word, and both Greystern and Larice fell to their knees when they saw him enter. They pressed their foreheads to the cool stone floor in obeisance.

“Arise, my servants,” he murmured, studying the two carefully. Greystern sweated nervously, while Larice tried to hide her fear behind a layer of cool composure. “I did not summon you here...”

“We know, Great Master,” Larice spoke first, and received a glare from Greystern for it. “We have news.”

“Cyan of Gabbon is dead, and Inkata has fallen to my army, correct?” the Demon Prince prompted her.

“N-not exactly... Great Master,” Larice stammered.

The Demon Prince growled in displeasure, the ever-constant anger in his heart bubbling to the surface.

“I had Cyan, Master! I found him and the Princess alone! He was unarmed!! I stabbed him!” Greystern blurted.

“But he did not die?” the Demon Prince said softly, his voice even more threatening than if he had shouted.

“It was not my fault, Master! The boy’s elf-friend and that bitch De’Faerr stopped me! I would have killed him but for them!!”

“What???” the Demon Prince roared, and Greystern moaned in terror. “The elf still lives? What of my Khrystana?? My pupil cannot have failed me!!!”

“It’s true, Great Master!” Larice cut in. “De’Faerr has joined Cyan of Gabbon! She has taken the elf as her lover! She has betrayed you! I had defeated Cyan and all his friends, but she appeared and bested me. They did this to me!!” she wailed, holding up her twisted, broken hands.

“He has taken my Khrystana!!” the Demon Prince howled in frustration. “The best of all my servants!”

“Let me kill them for you, Master!” Greystern begged. “I will make them suffer for what they have done to you!!”

“Worm!!” the Demon Prince bellowed. “You have failed me for the last time! You were a fool to have come here, and now you will pay for your mistakes!!!” the Demon Prince flung out his hand and called magic to him. Black flames, darker even than the stones of the chamber, burst forth from his fingers to dance around Greystern. The Earl screamed from a pain greater than that caused by any normal fire. Black flames burned Greystern’s very soul, consuming the man’s spirit in terrible agony. Dark tongues erupted from Greystern’s eyes and mouth, and his screams finally ended as his soulless body slumped forward onto the black stones.

“Master! Mercy!!” Larice shrieked, throwing herself to the floor before him. “I have not failed you completely!! Cyan and his friends may still live, but Inkata is surely yours! Your glorious army was approaching even as we fled! Your dreams still will come to pass!”

Black fire danced along the Demon Prince’s hand for a moment before vanishing. He stared at Greystern’s corpse for a moment in satisfaction before turning his gaze on the trembling sorceress. “My dreams?” he hissed. “You think you know my *dreams*? You know nothing!! All your skills, all your talent, all your powers— they are nothing beside mine!!”

“Master, please!!!” Larice wept.

“Look upon me!!” the Demon Prince shouted, throwing back the cowl that hid his face. “Look upon the face of your Master! See me, and then ask if you deserve mercy!!”

Larice’s eyes rose unbidden to stare at the face of the Demon Prince. She flinched involuntarily.

“No mercy was shown to me,” the Demon Prince said, gesturing to his face. His skin was tanned and smooth. He had a hawk-like nose, but it only gave him a stern, noble appearance. His lips were thin and hard, and white teeth showed in a macabre grin. His chin was square and firm, and he had thick black hair that only just showed traces of silver. He was a powerful-looking, handsome man with a wonderful brown right eye...but where his left cheekbone, eye-socket, and brow should have been, there was only a hole filled with sheets of green fire.

“Am I not beautiful?” The Demon Prince laughed, and there was madness in his chuckles. “Does your heart not melt at the sight of my features?”

Larice screamed, unable to tear her eyes away from the green fire that flowed where his left eye and face should have been.

“Here is your mercy, Larice!!” the Demon Prince shouted. “The same mercy given to me three hundred and twenty-three years ago by the people I fought to save!!!” He seized her by the arms and pulled her to her feet, her face only inches from his. Green fire was reflected in her terrified blue eyes.

“They called me the Chosen One, the one for whom the dwarven Kingsmiths' *Mighty Work* was made,” he whispered, madness clear in his one brown eye. “I took their damned *Mighty Work* and went to fight like the brave warrior I was! At Tarith'ellan we finally met the Dragon Lord and its armies, and battle raged until the earth was soaked in blood! But the Kingsmiths didn't know the full truth of what they sent me off to fight. They thought they had made a weapon able to kill the Dragon Lord, and so I thought as well!!! But when the grand battle between us came— then! Then was their folly shown!! Look upon the mark of my foolish trust, Larice!!! Look upon what was done to me by those I saved!!” he pulled the silver-haired sorceress closer, until green flames filled her vision. She sagged in his tight grip, unable to turn away from his visage.

“And after the armies of darkness were broken and driven back, do you know what they did to me??” the Demon Prince asked her. “They tried to kill me, Larice! They tried to kill their savior!!!”

“W-who... who are you?” Larice whispered, her voice almost nonexistent.

“Don’t you know me yet, Larice? Don’t you know the one you’ve served for these past years? You serve the man who was chosen to save the world!! You serve the man whom the world tried to kill because they were afraid of him! You serve the man who will make the world pay for what was done to him!! If only the Kingsmiths could know the truth about what their Mighty Work really did!! If only they knew that their mistakes would give me this *mercy*!!! You still do not know??” he raved, spittle flying from his mouth to strike her face.

Larice tried to shut her eyes to avoid looking into the hideous green fire that marked the Demon Prince’s face.

“You serve the Demon Prince! You serve the man who was once Melias Soulae!!!” he roared, and before he even knew it, his hands were around her throat, squeezing... squeezing... “Melias Soulae!!” he sobbed again, his knuckles white as he tightened his grip even more.

“Where was my mercy, Spirits???” the Demon Prince cried, as Larice choked to death. “If there is no mercy for me, then there will be none for the world that doomed me!!! None, I say!!”

He dropped Larice’s body onto the floor next to Greystern’s. Her bulging eyes still seemed to stare at the cascade of flames that marred his face. The Demon Prince looked at her terrified, stricken face... and laughed. He laughed until tears ran from his right eye. Nothing trickled from the left side of his face.

“They will all pay,” he breathed when his laughter finally died. “Inkata is only one city. The whole world must pay the price for what was done to me. All of them. Yes... Every living thing must know my pain. They must all suffer like I have...”

Still whispering to himself, the man who was once Melias Soulae pulled the cowl of his robe back over his face and left the chamber. The bodies of Larice Baine and Mykal Greystern still lay on the cool, damp stones, a testament to the final price of failure.

Epilogue: Pieces of Truth

“As leaves before the coming storm, so shall we be scattered by the wind that shakes the world. What was lost shall be found again, and it shall have the power to save us from the Storm, or damn us to the greater Darkness. Beware the voice that speaks without sound, and fear the saber in the hand of jealousy.”

-Allam the Seer's final prophecy, 873 PR

“And Brightness shall become darkened by blood, and the hope of the world will be swallowed in blackness. But there will come a gem to restore the light, a hand to hold the burden. The trees will dance the breaking Storm and the rose put forth a thorn. Gydor's sons will know their glory, and the sun will stand the last.

-Mussad Ra'sheh, the Blind Prophet, his first prophecy, 873 PR

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Here ends **Trial of the Doom Sword**, Book One of *The Doom Sword Chronicles*.

In Book Two, **Guilt of the Doom Sword**, Cyan struggles to reconcile his problems on his own, while his friends are drawn even further into the battle against the Demon Prince and his armies of chaos.

Appendix

An excerpt from “A History of Pysidia” by Brother Matthias of the Monastery of Saint Ryzos:

“The continent men call Pysidia, has been home to countless races since the dawn of time itself. From the earliest records, both fossil and written, it is clear that the land has known its share of inhabitants, from great societies of magical beings, to the squalid cultures of primitive people barely risen above the level of animals. Entire races have risen to dominance and then as quickly vanished in an eye-blink of Time.

Accounts of such changes here at the great library of the Monastery date back about two thousand years, and many of the older texts are written in ancient languages which have all but vanished. But one thing remains clear, and that is the fact that Pysidia has been home to many cultures over the millennia. Strife and war have forged new societies and destroyed weaker ones in a seemingly continuous cycle of death and rebirth. Even the face of the land has changed over the years, with mountain ranges rising from the earth, and whole forests sprouting and withering away. Pysidia and her history span eons, and scholars and historians can only hope to scratch the surface of that wealth of knowledge.

The Monastery of Saint Ryzos has been a home for just such dedicated scholars and historians since Ryzos himself first founded our Brotherhood almost a thousand years ago. Since then, the Monastery has become a reservoir of knowledge, and our Library houses the largest collection of written work in the known world. To keep such knowledge safe, the secrets of the Monastery have been closely guarded for centuries by the Brothers that followed Ryzos and his dream of a place where all knowledge could be kept safe during the land's darker times.

Pysidia's history has been recorded in various ways by different races, and hinges on many separate events of relative importance to individual peoples. Such

confusion and disagreement in methods of recording has been the bane of historians such as myself for ages. With much cross-referencing and enormous amounts of time, Brothers here in the Monastery have managed to merge the various records of time into one fairly accurate timeline based upon the date of the Monastery's founding. According to this timeline, our records can trace for nearly twelve hundred years before Ryzos built the Monastery, to the current day, some eight hundred and seventy-three years later. Many of the very early records are sketchy, and there are gaps in what is known about the centuries before the Monastery was built, but since the Monastery's founding, nearly complete records have been kept on all major occurrences. Gradually, the new timeline has been accepted by the rest of the realm, and the passing of years are now marked by the notation BR, for "before Ryzos", and PR, for "post-Ryzos". Thus, the Monastery currently has on record information dating anywhere from circa 1248 BR to 873 PR.

In addition to the notations, many years are also given a name by historians to denote some extremely noteworthy occurrence or event that took place during the year. (Note that these names are usually not assigned until after the year has passed.) One Pysidian year is measured by the cycles of the moon, which waxes and wanes once every twenty-four days. There are thirteen such cycles, making a Pysidian year three hundred and twelve days long. Each cycle of the moon is completed in three weeks, with a week consisting of eight days. Simple mathematics then tells us that there are thirty-nine weeks in one year.

As for events in more recent history, nothing has affected the courses of the races of Pysidia greater than the Dragon Wars of circa 547 PR to 550 PR. During this time period, a great force of evil known only as the Dragon Lord, marshaled mighty armies and attacked the large empires of the elven and dwarven peoples. The armies of the Dragon Lord, spearheaded by flights of powerful dragons, steadily marched across much of Pysidia despite valiant efforts by the elves and dwarves. During the Sixth Moon

of 549 PR, called the Year of the Dark Sun, the four Kingsmiths, the rulers of the dwarven nations, joined together and crafted a weapon of awesome power in a last desperate attempt to find a way to stop the Dragon Lord and its armies. This weapon was the Doom Sword.

During the Seventh Moon of the same year, the Doom Sword was given to a human warrior named Melias Soulae. The humans joined the battle against the Dragon Lord, and the armies of the elves, dwarves, and humans stood together in a massive battle on the plains of Tarith'ellan, which would later become known as the Desert of Lost Souls. During the battle, it is said that Melias Soulae met the Dragon Lord in combat and defeated and banished it from Pysidia with the power of the Doom Sword. The armies of the Dragon Lord were defeated without the power of their dark leader to sustain them, and were driven back across Pysidia to the far northern reaches, where it is believed their descendants still survive to this day.

About the Author

Born December 25, 1977, Brian Schultz grew up in a small town in eastern mid-Michigan, where he excelled in school and developed a passion for reading at an early age. By the fifth grade he was tackling Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and he never stopped reading fantasy fiction since. Brian was top of his eighth grade class, and later was valedictorian of his high school. At Western Michigan University, Brian studied Creative Writing and Economics, and earned his bachelor's degree in April of 2000.

Brian enjoys the work of crafting a long novel, but he also dabbles in short stories and the occasional poem. Besides reading and writing, he enjoys hunting, cross-country skiing, swimming, volleyball, and a bad game of tennis now and then.