

THORN'S CHRONICLE

— Rise of the Winter King —



**Part 2: The Lost Valley of Hutaaka,
and the Vault of the Ancients**

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Prologue: Down Lightning's Road

We ran.

When I would stumble, Gilliam's hands were on my arm, hauling me forward. The walls were chased with more and more streaks of lightning, their courses becoming increasingly erratic as they played out ahead of us. The walls seemed to thin in places, and there was naught but blackness beyond the fog.

We dared not look back.

Somewhere, the ground beneath our feet took on a different texture, the dwarven-stonework smooth surface we'd been running down becoming more uneven, and then, amidst the splashing of the water at our ankles came the harsh crunch of rough river sand under our feet.

Gilliam and I both staggered, our feet sliding nearly out from under us, and we tumbled.

"Roll!" he shouted as he went down a half step ahead of me.

The cold water was a slap in the face, a tingling shock running all the way up my left side as I hit the ground of the tunnel. Water flooded my mouth and nose, and I coughed and sputtered, remembering at the last minute to roll as I fell, to let the momentum of the roll take some of the bite from the impact.

I rolled over and over in the cold water, soaking myself literally from head to toes. The water wasn't very deep — at best two handspans, but it tugged at me as I rose uneasily, trembling with the shock of the cold and the tumbling fall, wheezing, trying to draw air into my lungs without taking in any more water.

"Keep coughing," Ana's voice said to me, as if from a great distance. "Your lungs will clear in a few moments."

I blinked water from my eyes, looking around. The moon was further along in the sky, nearly blocked by the towering walls of a mountainous canyon.

Gilliam and I were crouched along the bank of a narrow but swiftly-flowing river. The bank was lightly populated by low scrub and a few stunted trees. Those, and rocks were our only company.

"Where are the others?" Varis asked, throwing a blanket over Gilliam's shoulders. Ana helped me gather another blanket around my own.

Gilliam glanced back, where the low fog was already being blown to shreds by the gusts of cold wind.

“They should have been right behind us,” he said, through chattering teeth.

I shook my head. “Silva fell. I saw, just before this... thing... started to collapse.” I waved a shaking hand at the last of the curls of fog.

“How?”

“Arrows. Sped by the wind that carved that tunnel in the fog.”

“Is she—”

I shook my head again. “I could not say. But they were the same arrows we saw used earlier. Black shafts, black fletching.” I did not hold much hope for the girl, but I did not wish to burden them with my speculations. The girl was in the hands of the Immortals now, more than ever.

“Here!” Varis called, motioning us over to a deep split along one wall of the canyon. It looked to’ve at one point been the bed of another stream that fed into the river Gilliam and I had tumbled through — the floor was wide and sandy, and sloped slightly back towards the canyon.

We hurried out of the biting winds, Varis and Ana making forays out among the riverbank to bring back what scrub wood they could find. Fortunately, much of it was dry enough to use without my having to resort to flamework, the narrow walls of the pass only admitting the lightest of snowfall.

Though the fire was warm enough, it did little to lift the dark mood that had settled over us. We slept poorly, in shifts, but the rest of the night passed uneventfully.

Waxing crescent of the Deep Snows (on or about Kaldmont 4, 997AC)

A thick, heavy mist rose as the night dipped even colder. Sounds in the fog seemed louder, nearer, yet further away, and as if they came from every direction at once. I closed my eyes against the swirling shades of gray, and concentrated on listening. The dull crackle of the fire, the burbling rush of the river beyond our shelter, and the rattling swish-clatter of the mountain winds through the scrub were all that I could make out. Occasionally, a clink or rattle as Varis shifted in his sleep — how anybody could sleep in armor, though, was beyond me.

“How the in the name of Vanya do we find our way through this muck?” Gilliam asked over breakfast, waving a hand at the shifting, stifling mist. He drew his cloak closer about himself, and hunched closer to the meager fire. I was having to prod it along, the mist trying to stifle it.

“Not that seeing our way through this will be of any good,” Varis said, swirling the leaves in his tea cup. “We’re already lost, it can’t get much worse.”

“Lost?” Ana asked, her eyes widening. She glanced over her shoulder, at the roiling wall of fog that obscured even the break in the cliffs that was less than a stone’s throw distant. “Did you not see that tree at the turn in the river’s course? It was the same one we saw on the far end of Thorn’s Hierarch’s traveling spell.”

“I was a bit busy looking up and down river for enemies to take note of a single tree,” Varis said. “Besides, how do you know? One tree looks much like another to me.” He shrugged, then swallowed the last of his tea.

“It was— Oh, Thorn, you tell them,” Ana sighed.

“I’ll admit, I was a bit preoccupied by shivering and wanting to get out of the wind,” I said. I sipped at my own cup of tea. “And to be honest, one tree looks as much like another to me as well.”

Varis stood, then, a sharp motion that sent the plate on his knee clanging to the ground as his armor jangled about his shoulders. He scanned our small camp.

“We need to go,” he said, stooping to begin shaking out his bedroll.

Gilliam held a spoonful of overly-thick oatmeal halfway to his mouth. “Can I at least finish breaking the night’s fast?”

“Depends on how fast you want to run to catch up,” Varis said over his shoulder.

“Some enlightenment, Varis, please?” Ana had poured some of the boiling water into her camp bowl, and was sloshing it about.

“The Greenwarden pointed to the northwest last night, correct?” Varis asked me.

I nodded.

“Then that river is more likely than not the Foamfire. And *that* puts us squarely in Death’s Head tribal lands.” He tugged viciously at the straps securing his bedroll to the bottom of his pack.

Gilliam chuckled. “Gave them quite the bloody snout— Oh... ” He had some difficulty swallowing the last of his oatmeal.

We picked our way slowly upriver, Varis at the front, Gilliam treading carefully behind, his eyes seemingly only half open. But he was doing as I had done earlier on my watch — listening more than looking, for there was little to see in the mist but swirls of gray and darker gray, shadows within shadows.

We broke for an early lunch around another of the sharp turns the Foamfire had wrought through the canyon, where the approach from ahead and behind could be more easily watched.

The fog still hadn’t lifted, and our hoods and hems of our cloaks dripped with the moisture.

“Just how far does this river go? And to where?” Ana asked.

“Not many have mapped this far in,” Varis said. “Gnolls tend to eat anybody who comes even half as far in as we’ve made it.”

“Well, that’s reassuring,” the cleric said.

“And yet we haven’t run into a single one,” Gilliam mused. “That worries me.”

“I would be more worried if they started coming at us out of this fog, I think.” I said. “As far as where this river leads, well, we just need to keep following the road.”

Gilliam and Varis both glanced at each other, and then to me.

"Small, broken with age and a lack of upkeep, but there was most certainly a road here, an age ago."

"And... roads only lead to one place," Ana said.

"Cities," Varis said. "But there are no cities in these mountains."

"No human cities."

"There is nothing here," Varis insisted. "The only tales told of this part of the Duchy are of the insanity of someone going anywhere near it."

"Those red clouds over Grayback tell me another tale," I said.

"Sounds like the same tale to me," Gilliam muttered. "'Keep out, you fools!'"

"Advice you would do well to heed, fools," rasped a voice slightly above and behind us.

As one, we turned, but the throaty, rumbling chuckle had drifted off and to the right, just over our shoulders.

"Show yourself!" Varis called, and we all winced as his words bounced again and again off what we'd thought were close rock walls.

Again, the chuckle, and then more Common, spoken with a heavy accent, the words pushed around a tongue not long familiar or uncomfortable with the making of the words: "We think not, sword-carrier. You cannot attack what you cannot see. We see you quite clearly, through this mist."

"What is it you want?"

"We have already told you, fools. Turn around, skulk back the way you came. Take your Lightning Road back to wherever you came from."

"And if we do not?"

"Mashat do not seek your blood. You and yours have shown us your blades, and they are worthy. The scales between us are balanced. Khalas would still seek quarrel. We cannot tell if they would spill your blood themselves, or if they would turn you over to the Pale Walkers. Either way, it is no honorable way to die." There was a creaking of leathers, and a clattering of what sounded like bones or sticks. "But then, Khalas are all cowards, and would only show you a coward's death."

“Tell us of this Khalas, and this... Pale Walker,” Varis said, turning a full circle in the mists.

We waited several long moments, but there was no response.

“So they are gone,” Varis said, with a shrug, as he sheathed his sword.

“Not gone,” Gilliam noted. “Silent. And still watching.”

We did not turn back, but kept the river to our left, it sometimes being our only guide through the thick, cold fog.

Some time well into the afternoon, the sun shone brighter into the gorge, meaning the light went from dull gray to a brighter gray. The mist thinned enough that we could see iron-gray clouds above the rim of the canyon, streaked through with ugly, pulsing red veins. I felt my stomach clench at the sight of it.

Ana set a hand on my shoulder. “Once we discover how it is made, we will unmake it.”

An hour later, the road began to rise, hugging the wall of the canyon. It was far from easy going: the road was as broken as it had been along the floor of the canyon. Rockslides made parts all but impassable at worst, and made for dangerous footing at the least.

“Would that the dwarf brothers were with us now,” Gilliam muttered, as we pressed against the side of the mountain, inching along a stretch where most of the road had fallen away, but for a ledge two handspans wide. Gilliam, I noticed, kept his eyes firmly on the clouds above as we made our way along that perilous expanse.

As it grew darker, we came across a cave, cut into the rock as the road followed it about a sharp bend.

“I don’t have to be a dwarf to tell this isn’t natural,” Varis said, running a gloved hand over the smoothed, straight walls.

“A fire pit, and ventilation in the ceiling,” Ana said, walking a slow circle around the depression in the floor. She glanced at the remains of fires past, and then up at the deep fissure in the vaulted roof, stained black.

“And they were even nice enough to leave us fuel,” Gilliam said, dust billowing as he drew a tarp from a waist-high stack of wood, laid out across a sturdy framework. “I hope they’re not too upset that we didn’t bring any to replenish it.”

Varis paced the perimeter of the room, running a hand along the walls, tapping occasionally with the hilt of his knife. Each time, the metal rang on what sounded to me like solid stone.

“Just making sure that’s the only way in,” he said, and then hung the tarp that had covered the wood pile up over the arching doorway. “No sense in letting out too much light.”

“Or heat,” Gilliam said, as he laid down wood for the fire, and then struck flint and steel to get a blaze going.

We took turns by the tarp, listening alternately to the whistling of the wind, the crackle of the flames, or the distant hissing of a waterfall somewhere along the road ahead of us.

We were not contacted again by the Mashat gnolls, nor the Khalas, though we kept wary vigilance through the cold night.

First quarter moon of the Deep Snows (on or about Kaldmont 5, 997AC)

We set out in the dark hours before dawn, made even darker by the bulk of the Black Peaks towering above us. It was just as well, for none of us were able to get much restful sleep. Too often, I awoke to a hammering heart, sweat chilling me despite those on watch keeping the fire going through the night.

As the sky lightened and we rounded a sharp twist along the mountain's flank, we saw that the road ended — not in a sheer drop. Worse, a thin stone bridge arched out over the narrowing valley carved by the Foamfire river.

Stone fitted to stone, each supporting those around it, spanning an uncomfortably long gap over an equally long drop to the river below....

I was not the only one to look upon it with awe and dread. Ana clutched at the silver amulet about her neck, whispering a prayer.

Gilliam stood at the foot of the bridge, peering down its length.

"Well, it's seen recent use," he said, "so it must be safe to cross."

"If it's seen recent use, those users may very well be on the other side, waiting for us," Varis said.

"Only one way to find out," Gilliam said, and he sprang across the stonework with long, bounding strides.

Wide as both my arms outstretched, it still was not nearly wide enough for my liking, as I slid a foot in front of the other, eyes firmly on the rise of the bridge's arch, and then on the far side when I'd reached the middle.

Ana, I saw, did much the same, though her progress was somewhat faster than mine. Her hand never left the amulet, and her lips didn't stop moving until she set her back to the wall of this other side of the canyon.

Varis looked as if he were simply strolling down the street as he crossed the span.

"Good stonework," he said, looking back over his shoulder. "We could have used bridges like this in the passes near the Duke's Road Keep."

The day did not get much brighter as it wore on. The clouds roiled, restless, pressing lower and lower. The veins of sickly red light throbbed, as if to the slow beat of some great, corrupt heart.

We reached a wide spot, where the road swung around a fold in the mountainside, and Varis called for a rest. We were halfway through a sparse noontime meal of dried venison and hardtack when the first of the howls came echoing across the valley. It was followed by others, from somewhere above us. A tremor shivered through the road beneath us.

“Back!” Gilliam called, pushing Ana and I into the deepest part of the wedge in the mountainside. Varis hauled our gear up against the wall, then pulled his hood up, wrapping a scarf about his nose and mouth, gesturing for us to do the same.

The trembling grew to a rumble, and then a roar. Gilliam pressed my face into the cold rock of the mountain, shouting for Ana and I to shut our eyes and only breathe when we had to.

I listened to the mountain come down around us.

I do not recall if my ears rang from the cascade of rock, ice, and snow, or from the sudden silence that fell just as heavily in its wake. I saw Gilliam’s lips and mouth moving, yet heard only a dim echo of his voice, as if he stood at the bottom of the gorge.

Whether it was snow or dust from the rockfall, we were covered in it, our brown cloaks caked a pale gray. Our small corner wedge was mostly clear of the heaviest debris, but the trail behind us was lost under a vast pile of boulders, snow, and ice. The path ahead was littered with jagged scree, but was at least passable.

“What do we do now?” I heard Ana ask, as if from far away, though she was right next to me.

Gilliam held a finger to his lips, then flattened his palm. *Quiet. Wait.*

“Wait? For wh—”

Ana didn’t even finish her question before a rain of fist-sized rocks and chunks of ice clattered down upon us. We pressed as close to the wall as we could, but were still pelted. There were audible jangles when Varis was struck, and he fished around the loose snows about his legs until he came up with his shield, raising it above his head to ward off the larger stones.

Silence returned with the passing of this smaller shower, and again, Gilliam motioned for us to stay quiet. Ana and I kept close against the mountain, in case another rockfall was on the way, but after a space of a dozen long, slow breaths, Gilliam's posture relaxed just a little, and he straightened up.

There was no discussion of what to do next: we had little choice; the rockslide had sealed the trail behind us.

The cloud cover pressed lower as we pressed onward. There was not much but setting one foot ahead of the other, pressing close to the sides of the Black Peaks as winds gusted through the valley. There were several smaller rockslides, and the mountains groaned at us as we passed beneath one long open stretch. Here our progress slowed to less than a crawl, Varis pulling his cloak tight against his chainmail jack to muffle most of the sound.

As the day faded, again we came to another chamber carved into the side of the mountain, stocked with wood. It had started to rain our last hour of travel, the mountain air turning it to sleet, and even Ana was too cold and miserable to complain about having to spend another night under stone.

**First quarter moon of the Deep Snows (on or about Kaldmont
6, 997AC)**

“Up, up!”

Gilliam’s whisper was as sharp as the cold mountain air, and served just as well as any battle cry in propelling me instantly awake.

“What—”

He hissed, finger to his lips. “No noise you can spare,” he whispered. “They haven’t found us yet but we certainly don’t need to go drawing their attention.”

“Who’s attention?” I whispered back.

A howl, distant, but definitely not of the wind, drifted through the tarped-over entrance. Varis stood against the wall, watching as the cloth snapped in the wind, hand firm on the hilt of his sword.

“Hunting packs, sweeping the trail behind us. We need to move.”

We moved, leaving behind most of our camping gear, taking half-empty packs, bedrolls, cloaks, and weapons.

“Straight along the cliff wall,” Varis said, as we passed him. “Another mile, and then I saw columns, supports for another bridge across the gap. If we have to, we can hold them off there.”

I wondered exactly how Varis had seen anything once I set foot on the trail that hugged the mountainside: the clouds roiled low and angry, and the whole of the valley was choked in a thick, red-tinged fog. It was all I could do to see the trail at my feet, and perhaps an arm’s reach ahead of myself.

More howls rang from the trails below us, amplified and carried closer by the fog.

Varis led, Gilliam taking the rearguard, his eyes more on the trail behind us, bow at the ready.

I felt more than heard the passage of the broad-tipped javelin, felt the tug and whirl in the fog as the shaft sailed high, the metal point sparking as it glanced off the mountainside above us. Seconds behind it, another sailed high, hitting the wall so hard as to snap the shaft in two.

“Go!” Gilliam hissed. “To the bridge! I’ll buy us some time.” He’d drawn the feathers of an arrow to his cheek even before he finished speaking, and then released, the shaft shrieking as it cut its deadly path through the mists.

We followed Varis as quickly as we could, trying to mimic his crouched, wide-legged shuffle. It ate the distance, and we hardly felt what little weight we had left on our backs. Perhaps the thought of a javelin in the back had something to do with that as well.

He skittered to a stop, and Ana and I both nearly collided with him as the trail turned, widening. He stood before the next bridge, and we didn’t need a clear and sunny sky to tell that it had seen many a better day: much of the stonework had fallen away from the sides, and what was left was cracked and buckled, looked to be barely holding together.

Behind us, the barks and yips grew closer, more numerous.

“What are you waiting for?”

“A team of stonemasons, maybe a dwarf to oversee the reconstruction,” Varis growled, waving his sword at the ruins of the bridgeworks.

Gilliam frowned. “I thought you said there was a bridge here.”

“I said I saw the supports for a bridge. And there they are.” Varis pointed a bit lower with his sword.

“Do you think it will hold?”

“Do you want to try?”

“We’ll send Ana across,” Gilliam said. “She’s the lightest among us.”

“You’re the one that’s part mountain goat,” the girl said, edging even further away from the crumbling span. “You should go.”

Several barking howls and a clattering of wood and metal upon the stone somewhere down the trail sped along the decision.

“I’ll go first,” Gilliam said. “Slow and steady should do it. Keep your weight centered, and stay low.” With that, he leapt to the widest piece of the bridge, leapt again, and was lost in the fog.

It was three jumps before the bridge widened to its full expanse. Three leaps across hundreds of feet of open air, to land on sections of stonework made slick by the clinging fog. Were it not for Gilliam's hand on my arm, hauling me forward, this chronicle would have ended with the last entry. It was many deep breaths before the the brick I'd kicked loose made any sort of noise in the emptiness below us.

Varis landed with a very solid jangling of sword and armor.

"The next time your Hierarch asks you to go poking around for him, remind me politely decline the invitation," he gasped.

Ana glanced behind us with every second or third step across the span. We'd made our way nearly to the other side before she stopped.

"Why aren't they following us?"

"Perhaps we are at the edges of their hunting grounds?" Varis mused.

Another dozen steps gave us our answer: through the haze of mist, the bulk of the Black Peaks loomed, and between the split in the rock was a lighter shadow, flat across the top.

A wall had been built between the rock faces.

The mists thinned as we drew closer, and we saw that there were three openings: In the center, a broad, tall archway that a hill giant could have passed under without stooping. To either side of that great gateway were smaller arches, these wide enough to drive a wagon through with room to spare to each side of the wheels.

Ana let out a groan, pointing. "There's the reason those gnolls are taking their time: The portcullises are all lowered!"

Two figures were carved into the rock, standing between the gates. Easily twice Varis' height, each depicted a manlike form, with the head of some sort of dog or jackal. I nearly guessed them for gnolls, but there was nothing of their savagery in the sculpted features. These more closely resembled the slim racing dogs common in Darokin rather than the hyena-like gnollish features.

"Have you ever seen a gnoll dress like that?" Varis asked, gesturing up at the long robe-like tunic carved to garb each statue.

“Trick question,” Gilliam said. “Either that or you’ve never been to a Thyatian senate meeting.”

“Do your senators usually go to their meetings armed?” Ana asked.

Each statue bore a broad blade, the tip wide and curved, resting between sandaled feet.

“The legs are all wrong for gnolls,” Gilliam said. “These look like those of a man, but...” He crouched to peer closer. “Well, look at that... Clawed toes.” He reached forward, and tapped the biggest toe, which was nearly as big around as a melon.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to do that,” Ana said, stepping back.

“It’s just a statue. Since when has a lump of rock ever hurt anybody?”

“I seem to remember narrowly avoiding being swept from a mountainside by large lumps of rock,” Varis grumbled.

“These gates were lowered recently,” Gilliam murmured, running a hand over fresh gouges in the stonework. He looked up, squinting through the gaps in the metal bars. “The machinery looks to be in good repair.” He set his hands on the bars, at about knee level.

“I don’t think—” Ana started.

The rest of what she was about to say was lost as the statue gave a great lurch, and tore itself free of the wall with a shower of stonework and dust. The rumbling, grating, snapping of stone reverberated down the canyon, punctuated by heavy, booming thuds of its feet.

There was another sharp ‘crack’ as its arms broke away from the rest of the carved body, hefting the great slab of a sword up, over its dog-eared head.

“Vanya’s garters!” Gilliam gasped, then leapt aside as the stone sword hurtled down where he’d been standing, sending up another great shower of stone shards.

The statue hefted its sword back for another great swing, but Varis had planted himself between it and Gilliam, who was frantically trying to clear blood from one of his eyes.

“What good is a sword against stone?” Ana shouted, then danced out of the way as the statue’s sword threw sparks from the length of Varis’ blade as he diverted the swing into empty air.

Varis gave a cry as he intercepted another strike, this one diverted low. The stone sword smashed into what little railing was left on the bridge, sending shattered bricks tumbling into the river far below.

“That’s it!” Gilliam said, dashing around the statue’s exposed flank. His short swords did little more than create twin showers of sparks, but it was enough for the great statue to turn his way.

Gilliam ducked the great sword’s swing rather than trying to block it, as Varis had been doing, and he dodged backwards. The bridge shuddered as the statue took a step to follow the more agile warrior.

Ana shrugged off her pack, and threw it open, digging out a length of rope. “You’re good with knots,” she said. “Loop this through the gate and secure it as tightly as you can.”

I glanced over my shoulder, as Varis and Gilliam traded blows the the statue, dividing its attention between the two of them. Had it been mortal, surely its head would have been spinning.

“Your staff would do little good against that thing’s stone hide,” she said. “Let them take care of the fighting. We’ll work on opening the door.”

“But how...?”

She grinned, and held up the other end of the rope. She’d fashioned a loop, and a sloppy slipping knot. “We’ll play at rat-catchers.” She fed quite a bit of rope through the knot, creating a loop nearly the diameter of her arm. With a flick of her wrist, she sent it sailing towards the combat, where it landed, spread, near the great stone feet of the statue.

Varis went to one knee, the stone sword chipping as it caromed off his shield. The metal buckled under the blow, and Varis’ face went pale. The statue stepped back, raising its sword for another mighty chop, and Ana’s grin sharpened as she snapped at the rope in her hands.

I thought her mad, but then saw the small curl of the wave, perfectly matched to the height of the statue's ankle, race down the length of the line. Ana timed her pull perfectly, and the loop slithered tight around the statue's lower leg.

Gilliam saw the movement, and crowed a laugh of his own, dashing around behind the thing, his swords striking more sparks.

The statue grated, turning, stepping back.

Ana whispered a few words, and stroked her fingers over the length of rope before her. A shimmering of silver washed across the braiding, just as the line snapped taut.

I like to think it was the groaning of the statue itself, rather than the bridge, collapsing under the weight of the construct. And that the shriek also belonged to the statue, as it fell, and not the metal of the portcullis tearing free of the stone wall, following the statue to its doom hundreds of feet below.

Varis howled like a pack of gnolls when Ana pulled his shield arm back into place.

"Don't you have any..." Gilliam wiggled his fingers, "you know... miracles for that sort of thing?"

"I'll just summon up an avatar of the Flame to do the arm-pulling, then, how's that?" Ana asked. "And stop touching that bandage. You'll start those cuts bleeding again."

Gilliam tucked his hands against his sides, trying to frown through the wrappings across his brow.

"It is possible to heal without the Immortals' intervention, you know," Ana said, and tugged viciously at the knot in the sling she'd fashioned for Varis.

"How am I supposed to fight with this arm strapped across my middle?"

"You aren't. If there was to be a welcoming party, I'm pretty sure our knocking on their door would have drawn them out already. Thorn?"

"Nothing," I said from my place in the shattered portal through the wall. "Looks to be a plaza of some sort, probably an old trader's bazaar. Very, very old from the looks of it."

After Varis was back on his feet, we explored the broad plaza on the other side of the wall. Remains of some stone walls poked up from their graves beneath ancient rockslides, and I nearly tripped over several cracks in the paving stones. Carefully fitted though they were, they were still no match for the shifting of the earth, or the flexing of the bones of the mountains.

The view from the shattered gateway was remarkable — or would have been, if it weren't for the fact that much of the valley below was cloaked in long streamers of fog. Still, the few clear spots revealed grasses gone brown under the cold, and tumbled-down settlements here and there. Several copses of trees clung to various points around the valleys' rim, and the walls along the far side were dotted here and there with what looked like settlements of some sort — the regularity and size of the cuts into the rock face couldn't be natural. Perhaps some long lost clans of dwarves had settled here in distant days past?

A growling of thunder rumbled through the thick clouds above, and they seemed to writhe with the storm's voice. Several dark, bloody flickers lit those clouds from within, and then a long streak of red-shot lightning tore itself away from the sky.

But instead of lancing down to strike at the lands below, it... bent, as though wrenched from its intended path, pulled within a fold in the rock at the valley's western end. Almost at the instant the flash of blood-red lightning disappeared, the skies again let loose a hammerblow of a thunderclap. Ana and I both cringed, and by the pallor of her face and size of her eyes, I was sure she'd heard the echo of a howl in that thunder as well.

We reached the floor of the valley by means of a switchback trail that was in as good a state of repair as the bridge leading to the gated wall. Even though Gilliam roped us all together, my heart did not stop trying to either leap out of my chest or climb up into my throat until my feet once more touched firm, solid ground.

I staggered with a sudden onslaught of unease bubbling up from the dry grasses. Ana reeled, clutching at her stomach and retching. The grounds of **Koriszegy** had felt like a wound left to fester. Here in the valley, though, the land's

wounds were still fresh, still freely bleeding. The feeling ebbed and pulsed, like the beating of some great, dark heart beneath the mountains.

It took a mere dozen steps before Gilliam and Varis noticed what had taken me only one or two: the valley was quiet. More than that, it was silent. Though we saw trees in the distance, there were no flocks of birds — not even the winterlarks so common in northern Karamaikos. Eddies of wind had tugged at us as we made our way down from the rim, yet not a breath of wind disturbed so much as a blade of the brown, shriveled grass. There was little to do but follow the broken and overgrown roadway that wound into the valley.

Roads would hopefully lead towards a settlement of some sort, where we could start looking for answers.

We had to stop, nearly every quarter mile, because Ana was either sick, or she needed to catch her breath. Her eyes gleamed, as though she'd caught a fever, and sweat stood out across her forehead, despite the weather. She would not sit on any of the outcrops of rock that spotted the roadway, but leaned heavily on the shaft of her scythe. At one point, as we drew closer to one of the looming fog banks, we came upon a fountain, where the road split, running east or west. Ana sat on the edge, but leapt away with a cry when she glanced at the murky water still within the basin.

The rest of us looked, but saw only greenish, murky water. Ana insisted there had been a face, or faces, floating there, beneath the surface. A shaking hand closed over her silver flame amulet, and her breathing seemed to ease somewhat.

"Surely it's not that bad," Gilliam said. "So this place is abandoned. There are plenty of places just like this, across the Duchy. More than that dotting the Empire, but surely it's not anything to get all shaky-and-quaky about."

"You have never endured the touch of a demon, never known what it is to lose something because of it."

It was not a question, but Gilliam shook his head nonetheless, the smile sliding from his lips. He glanced up at the sky, shuddered, then looked down at his feet. Anywhere but at Ana.

We filed after Ana, as she stomped away along the lefthand fork of the road. I thought I heard a quiet burble from the fountain as I passed, but saw nothing when I glanced over my shoulder.

“What?” Gilliam asked her, an hour later, standing before what looked to be a wall of fog that stretched as far as we could see to either side of the path.

A great stone arch had been constructed over the roadway at this point, made of the same black granite as the mountains themselves, the first of many we would see. The figures along the two legs of the archway were defaced, most of the features chiseled away — a crime, for there was a story laid upon those stones. At the crest of the arch was a depiction of the sun, and birds and falcons were carved all around the top of the arch.

A step beyond the far side of the arch, the wall of fog hung, swirling occasionally in disturbances of the air too small for us to feel. But somewhere within the gray depths, the sound of running water could be heard. That at least confirmed my suspicions about from where the fog arose.

“It is natural,” I said. “There is no sorcery involved in its being here.”

“This, at least, does not bear a demon’s taint.”

“Is it true that a demon can’t abide running water?” Varis asked.

“Some. Every demon has a weakness, one they take great care in hiding. Do not put your trust in what you may have heard, for they will use that to lull you into letting your guard down.”

Gilliam nodded. “More and more like the Thyatian senate,” he said, with a grin.

The mist was thick, nearly impenetrable. We had an easier time seeing in the spiderweb-infested crypt beneath Mistamere. Our only guide was the stones beneath our feet, and even they weren’t completely reliable, so overgrown and neglected was the road. The sound of the stream betrayed us, ahead one moment, then seeming to come from the right or left the next.

“Are you sure this fog isn’t enchanted to confuse us?” Gilliam asked.

"It doesn't take enchanted fog to do that to you," Ana noted drily, tapping ahead of her with her scythe, always searching for the rasp of wood-upon-stone.

Eventually, we came to the stream, and a low arch of stone that spanned it.

"Looks sound enough," Gilliam said, and he started across, stopping as he neared the top of the bridge's rise, nearly out of sight within the swirling fog. He cocked his head. "Do you hear that?"

I closed my eyes. The silence was the first thing I noticed. Then the rhythm of the water over the stones in the bed of the stream. My own breathing, the clank of Varis shifting his weight from foot to foot. The muffled jangle of Ana's chainmail jack as she shivered.

And then there was the sloshing, breaking the rhythm of the stream. It had no rhythm of its own, no cadence.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say several very drunk men are lost and wandering about out here," Varis said.

"Thick as this fog is, there could be two or three alehouses along this road and we'd have walked right by them," Gilliam said.

"Didn't you see the signs by the road?" Ana asked with a weak smile.

"That sounds like more than just a couple drunkards," I said. It was difficult to tell for sure, but it sounded as if there were at least half a dozen of them.

Gilliam straightened, cupped his hands around his mouth.

"I don't think—" Ana started.

"Hullo, you down the river! Spare a moment for a fellow traveler?"

The warrior's shout was swallowed by the mists, and it seemed to take our fellow travelers with it. The stream resumed its normal song.

"Enough standing around," Varis said, motioning towards the bridge. "Let's be on our way."

He and Ana made their way over, and I followed.

"What is that?"

We stopped, looking where Ana pointed with the shaft of her scythe.

"It's nothing, probably a branch in the water," Gilliam said, of the shadow, a darkness against the fog curling up from the stream. He squatted down, leaning over the side of the bridge to get a better look.

The dark shape in the water moved, and Gilliam jerked his head back with a cry of surprise.

It was no branch, but a half-rotted arm, what skin was left on it a bloated grayish-green. The hand curled, pawing at the air where Gilliam had been a moment before, groping.

“Everybody down!” Ana called, and we dropped to our haunches as she swung her scythe across her shoulders, catching the end of the shaft, bringing the blade down low. It hissed and crackled with silver-white sparks as it struck the arm off below the elbow, sending the thing’s lower arm spinning into the water several yards away.

“What was that?” Gilliam asked, watching the thing sink back into the water.

“Demon-touched. Their corruption seeps into the graves, and the dead walk.”

“I saw quite a few settlements. There could be... hundreds of these,” Varis said. “Probably thousands of them.”

“Be glad this place is old, then,” Ana said. “It takes more of their essence to do this the older the corpses are. They—”

“Shh!” I cautioned, raising a hand.

The rhythm of the stream had changed again, and the lopsided splashing came again, drifting through the fog.

They came from all sides, from either end of the bridge as well as up and down stream, rotted arms outstretched, fingers turned to claws hooked, gouging. The most disturbing part — after the fact that they were obviously dead, and had been for some time — was that they fought in perfect silence. No shriek as blade bit into flesh, no groan as my staff connected with bone. Just a sizzling of silver-white energy as Ana’s scythe cut through them.

There seemed no visible effect, if we merely wounded them — they just kept coming. Varis gave one a mighty kick as it clambered over the side of the bridge, and took its jaw off. It still reached those grave-ravaged hands out towards him, clawing and swiping.

The combat seemed to draw on forever. One body would fall limp, only to be climbed over by two others. My shoulders and wrists wearied with each strike. The wounds the creatures left burned.

As suddenly as it had begun, so did it end. The fog was filled with the sharp rasp of our breathing, but we heard no sign of more of the walking dead.

Ana did not let us rest for more than a few moments. "Move," she said. "We must get out of this fog."

For once, Gilliam didn't argue.

"You said the older the corpses, the harder it is for a demon's essence to animate it?" Varis asked, as we sat around the ruins of a dining room, in a ruined house in a ruined village. The ordeal at the bridge was perhaps an hour behind us, and Ana had pushed us every step of the way away from the cold, clinging fog.

The girl chewed at her hardtack biscuit. We'd passed plenty of wild winterberry shrubs, and even an overgrown apple orchard, yet she had forbidden us to eat anything that grew here. I couldn't say I doubted her choice.

At last she nodded, frowning.

"I counted nine corpses on either side of the bridge. Plus three that Varis kicked into the stream. And four more that you finished off — quite spectacularly, I might add."

She frowned deeper at Gilliam's praise. "You counted? Amidst all that chaos?"

Gilliam shrugged. "A habit. But I think I see where Varis is leading us with his question."

"Are the corpses that old, or is the demonic influence here that strong?" I asked, voicing everyone's concern.

As if to punctuate my question, a bolt of the hellish red lightning spat overhead, the thunderclap echoing with an inhuman howl seconds later.

"Either way, they'll tear us to ribbons if we try to endure every engagement with them," Varis said.

"I can keep them at bay with a barrier, but my power is greatly weakened here," Ana said. In the months I'd known her, I don't think I'd ever seen her

genuinely frightened by anything we faced, not even the corrupted goblin, Hyazah. But this was more than a mere goblin, and her voice held an unfamiliar note of uneasiness.

“If Silva were here...” she swallowed as her voice grew thick, then sighed.

“If Silva were here, she’d insist that I carry her,” Gilliam muttered.

It began to rain shortly after we set out from the ruins. The rain froze, and I had to periodically shift my staff from one hand to the other, cracking a layer of ice from my glove before tucking it under my cloak to try to restore some semblance of warmth to my fingertips.

We kept to the road, but made sure to stay well away from the looming fog, which retreated somewhat, yet didn’t dissipate entirely, despite the rain. About the only good thing we could say about the freezing rain was that it made the muddy stretches along the roadway marginally more passable.

We paused to rest in another ruined village, huddling in what appeared to be a great hall, or maybe a barn. Time had worn away any sign of the building’s true purpose, other than its sheer breadth, most of which lay in ruin. Only one corner retained any sort of roof over it, but it was room enough that the space wasn’t crowded, and Varis wondered aloud if perhaps the builders weren’t part giant.

Another ruined village huddled in the fringes of the fog, but we passed it, opting to push along the broken road. Winding between hillocks, the road followed the gentle slope towards what looked to be a crease in the middle of the valley, much like the the dip between the pages of one of the baron’s books. The streams all converged in that depression, forming what I took to be lake — a bank of fog of that breadth could only form over a goodly sized body of water. We opted to keep to the higher lands closer to the walls of the valley.

A gentle curve in the road revealed a broad stone slab, upright, its weathered surface engraved with some sort of swirling design, marked at points by hashes and pits. The stone itself was surrounded by a ring of smaller, smooth stones, obviously carried from the stream lost somewhere in the fogs behind us. I counted twelve, each carved with a different, distinct rune. I stepped closer to get a better look, and

the stifling oppression that had permeated the valley lifted as though I'd shed a wet, woolen blanket at the perimeter of the stones. I beckoned Ana over, and the effect was visibly noticeable in the straightening of her back and shoulders. She turned a circle, her blue eyes sweeping over the rune-marked stones, and then up and down the length of the carved slab of rock.

She reached out, and her hand hovered over the surface of the stone. "It's... warm," she said, eyes widening.

I stepped closer, and felt it, as if the rock had been sitting in sunlight all day.

"I do not question, but accept this gift of the Immortals," Gilliam murmured, and dropped heavily to the ground, to sit with his back against the slab.

The sun had passed over the far rim of the valley by that point.

"The shadows will only grow deeper," Varis said, when I posed the question whether to push on.

"This is as good an omen as we are likely to get," Gilliam said, not even opening his eyes.

I could make little sense of the carvings upon the stone. They seemed to be random, and while there was repetition, it was not in a regular pattern of any sort. And rather than swirls, I saw upon closer inspection that they were almost figure-like: a man, a round swirl that could have been the sun, or maybe a whirlpool. Wavelike representations of birds in flight. A blurred relief of the dog-headed figure we'd seen in the statues by the gate. The repeated sign looked something like an eye, wide and staring, but with different strokes above or below, like lashes, or tears.

"Thorn, sleep," Ana told me, and I realized that I had my nose nearly upon the stone, the light was so far gone. "I will take the first watch, and lay wards before I wake the next."

I sank down, back to the stone, as were Gilliam and Varis, the gentle warmth of a summer afternoon enfolding me as I relaxed.

Before sleep took me completely, I thought I felt a hand — not quite human, strangely padded, a tickle of short fur on my cheek — pat my shoulder in familiar camaraderie.

Rest, that touch conveyed. That, at least, I can do for you.

First quarter moon of the Deep Snows (on or about Kaldmont 7, 997AC)

"Tell me again how this is a good thing," Gilliam muttered behind me.

Like me, he was bound and blindfolded, and we were being marched at spearpoint down an overgrown forest path. I couldn't feel my fingertips, the cords were bound so tightly. I had at least three good knots on my head from low-hanging branches, and by the sharp pain in my side, the last fall after tripping over a tree root may have cracked a rib. If it didn't, the goblin boot that soon followed probably did the trick.

"No words!" one of the goblins behind us croaked.

Literally, croaked. We'd first mistaken them for some sort of snow frog, before we laid eyes upon them. They used that basso croaking to keep track of each other in this blinding fog. Something about that particular pitch, it didn't get lost or wander about in the mists like most other sounds. We used that sound as a beacon.

We revised our froggy impression to that of a squat, bearded snow ape, when we finally stumbled across them in the fogs. What little of their skin showed through shaggy gray-white fur was a pale blue of deep ice. They weren't beards, but great fuzzy vocal pouches behind their chins, which they swelled and then belched froth that rumbling, croaking rasp.

They were outnumbered, fighting for their lives against a force of walking dead twice their size -- in height and numbers.

It was the fact that we saved them, Varis told us, before they'd separated us, that kept them from eating us right then and there.

Perhaps the hike was merely their way of tenderizing us.

It was difficult to tell how much time passed, but eventually, the air grew damp and heavy again, and the goblin at the head of the band began to croak, to be answered not long after by another chirruping croak that got steadily louder, closer, as it repeated.

Our boots once again began treading on ancient roadway. The uneven stonework wasn't so much different from the hard, cold ground we'd been hitting

when we lost our footing. I made to rise from what felt like my hundredth fall, but a boot between my shoulders kept me pressed against the bitterly-cold paving stones.

There was much grumbling and croaking between what was apparently quite an assemblage of goblins and the group that had brought us there. I could follow very little, for their dialect was unlike anything I'd heard before, but the tone was definitely not friendly.

A harsh rap of wood upon stone silenced the argument, and set my ears to ringing, as the stone happened to be the one to which my ear was pressed.

Equally harsh was the voice that rasped in a tone my mother's mother used when she caught my brothers or I (usually all of us) doing something we knew we shouldn't do. The short, sharp words were punctuated with a clattering of beads and wood. After a suitable moment of silence, the rasping-voiced goblin gave a 'harumph.' The rattling grew louder, and I felt a sharp prod in the side.

"It is not enough that He Who Brings the Snows presses his cold walkers into our lands? We have abided by his wishes. Our scouts and hunters bring him the choicest of our stores. He has his fifth of what we take in conquest. Does He Who Brings the Snows wish more? Is that why he has sent you?"

The goblin's voice sounded like a leaky bellows full of loose gravel, and it spoke what sounded like the Common of my grandsire's day.

I sucked in a wheezing breath of my own, but Gilliam's voice cut off my attempt to respond.

"Yes! He Who Brings the Snows... wishes to renegotiate."

The tip of the staff drove into my side in a sharp jab, and the breath I'd just drawn in exploded out of me, and seemed to burn the entire time.

"Your spear-carrier is poorly disciplined. Shall I have one of the tribe take his tongue for you?"

"No," I managed to gasp. "I will— reprimand him severely at the next opportunity," I wheezed, between short, painful breaths.

"I should take his tongue for even speaking of He Who Brings the Snows. But he is yours. Oh...." Here, the goblin made a clucking noise, and there was a sharp tugging at the blindfold, and I blinked, squinting as the steely light stabbed at my

eyes. I found myself thinking again of a very large, blue frog. If a frog could smile a sharp-toothed smile nearly as yellow as its eyes.

The blue skin was so wrinkled, it looked as if every bit that was exposed was wrinkle. The shaggy mane we'd seen on the goblins that brought us here was still in evidence, but this goblin had let it grow out, down the sides and back of its head, bits of bone and leather woven into the thick braids that hung from either side of its large, furred ears.

"How can Sheska be of further aid to He Who Brings the Snows, Child of Winter?"

I was already chilled through to the bone, what with the damp cold, and the icy slickness of the stones still pressing at me. But this Sheska's last words turned the blood in my veins to ice. I swallowed my fear, and pulled that ice into my voice.

"You can start by getting your spear-carrier's foot off my back and getting me something to drink."

Bones clattered, and the pressure lifted from between my shoulders. I pushed myself up to my feet, making a great show of dusting myself off.

I took the two steps to reach Gilliam. I pushed one of the goblins away so hard the creature gave a croaking squawk and tumbled to the cold ground.

"And you," I said to the prone man, "would do well to remember to hold your tongue if you ever want to raise a sword again." I took careful aim, and kicked as hard as I could, biting down as the toes of my boot connected with the crosspiece of one of Gilliam's swords. He gave a convincing enough bark of surprised pain, though I think I got the worst of the exchange.

Another goblin scabbled up to me, holding up a clay cup. It didn't steam, and I dashed it from the upturned blue hands, trusting the blindfold to protect Gilliam's eyes as the crockery exploded into shards near his head.

"My heart is not entirely made of ice just yet," I said, turning towards Sheska. "This body still needs warmth to function, regrettable as that is. You will bring me something with warmth to it, and see that my servants are similarly accommodated. They cannot serve me frozen solid. Yet."

Sheska bobbed her head, keeping her eyes on my boots. “Yes, of course, it shall be as you say, Child of Winter.” Then she turned to the goblin that had brought me the cup of water, cuffing it across the face and croaking something in their peculiar dialect. The smaller goblin scuttled off.

At another gesture from the goblin, those holding down my companions stepped back, but kept spears at the ready as Varis, Gilliam, and Ana got to their feet. I followed Sheska’s slow, shambling pace, the others following at prods from the spearpoints. I made a point to rap my own staff on the ground, giving them some clue as to their pace, and what they would be treading on.

The goblin led us to the most intact of the stone buildings, the tile roof sporting only a few holes. The wide main room was cordoned off about halfway with a heavy rug, hanging from crude hooks driven into the exposed crossbeam in the ceiling. The floor was a mass of carpets, one upon another. Large cushions were piled along the far wall, another cluster of them in a semicircle around the small hearth.

A small but steady blaze filled the room with a remarkable amount of warmth considering the chill outside. Another of the smaller goblins looked up from tending the fire, but turned back to her work at Sheska’s irritated flick of the wrist.

Several other goblins hunkered along the makeshift wall, and from the clattering of cups coming from a doorway on the other wall, at least one other goblin was at work in what was probably a kitchen of some sort.

One of the goblins by the curtain gave a short cough-like sound, and shook its head when Sheska glanced that direction. The elder goblin’s shoulders slumped, and she collapsed onto one of the cushions by the fireside.

“Sheska, too, is not made of ice,” she said with a ribbiting laugh. “Though Sheska knows that this is best for her people.” The goblin gestured towards the door with another tinkling rattle of bones.

A goblin emerged from the side room, bearing a large pitcher, and two round clay cups with curious handles — one on each side, too small to slip even a finger through. At Sheska’s nod, the goblin filled the two cups with the contents of the pitcher, which gleamed amber in the firelight. Sheska then gestured to the goblin

tending the fire, and it picked up each cup, fitting it on the end of a forked iron rod, which it then swung over the fire.

After a long silence, the goblin pulled the cups from the fire, and emptied them into another pair of mugs. Sheska took one, and handed the other to me, and I was surprised at the flowery taste of the brew, which had a peppery tingle on the way down.

Sheska chuckled, a sound a bit like a contented chicken. "Taken many years ago from fools who thought uncharted mountain passes were more profitable than the Duke's Road."

I raised my mug. "To fools, then."

Gilliam coughed, behind me, where he and the others squatted along the wall, blindfolds finally removed, and similar mugs clasped in their hands.

The plum brandy froze in my throat as a shriek erupted from the far side of the curtain partition.

If the shriek hadn't done it, the glare that Sheska directed at me would surely have sufficed, rivaling the cold outside in temperature.

She rose, turned, and shuffled quickly across the room, nearly tearing one of the rugs from its hooks as she jerked it aside. Bones rattled as she shook her staff, nearly drowning out the croaked instructions.

Varis had his head cocked to the side, listening, the frown growing deeper and deeper with every word.

There was another shriek, and a clattering of what could only be chains, manacles perhaps. Sheska's voice shrilled higher, and at first I thought her simply more frantic. But then it began to drop into a warbling cadence, joined by other, similar voices. The two attendants that had been kneeling by the partition, too, lent their voices to the rasping, croaking incantation.

The sounds of thrashing slowed, then stopped, and the high, whistling of breath slowed as well, becoming deep and regular.

I think, perhaps, it was the brandy that had me on my feet, giving Sheska back a glare every bit as icy as the one she'd directed at me.

"What is this?" I demanded.

One of the attendants was pulling a heavy woolen blanket back over a goblin sprawled atop a pile of furs that served as the room's bedding. The goblin's fur was matted, damp with sweat, and even in sleep, its toothy mouth was twisted in a grimace.

"Pazach," the aged goblin said. "One of our hunters. He brings his tribute to He Who Brings the Snows. He comes back with a sickness. Pazach was not sick when he left."

The accusation hung, unspoken, in the silence that followed.

"Tell me of this sickness."

"Pazach grows hot. Yet he shivers as a Hairless in a blizzard. The sickness invades his dreams, for he speaks as he sleeps. When he wakes, there is pain. He is violent. Were he not sick, he would be dead three times over for striking Sheska."

"So you lull him back into slumber, rather than curing him?"

"Sheska has tried! The cures do no good! Pazach will not drink the potions. Sheska calls the spirits for their aid, but they can do nothing."

"Master?"

I turned, but caught Sheska's scowl as my "servant" dared interrupt. Ana opened her mouth to continue, but I guessed her intent, and silenced her with what I hoped passed for a stern enough gesture.

"My servant is skilled with medicines and healing craft. You will allow her to examine your hunter."

Sheska's narrowed eyes widened, her froglike mouth dropping open. She glanced again over at Ana, and then up at me. The eyes narrowed again. "Why would you help Pazach?"

"My master does not wish to make an enemy of you or your people," I said.

Sheska seemed to mull the thought over, her throat sack slowly swelling beneath her chin. She let it empty in what is perhaps the biggest sigh I have ever heard.

"Very well. Though Sheska knows nothing will come of it."

"Well?" I asked, after the girl emerged from behind the partition. She shook her head.

“Whatever it is, it is not natural. Beyond that, it is hard to tell anything for certain. There is too much...” She waved a hand towards the door leading outside. “The sickness of this place clouds everything. It’s like groping for silvers through sewage, and then trying to judge where it was minted.”

“Sheska told you, you would find nothing,” the goblin sniffed. While Ana had been working, the old goblin had retaken her seat by the fire, and filled the time mending a thickly-furred vest with a bone needle and thick sinewy thread. Old though she was, her gnarled hands moved steadily, without a hint of a tremor.

Twin flashes of red-tinged light flared through the door, followed immediately by the howling reports of thunder, seeming to crash down upon the roof. On the other side of the rug-curtains, there was a harsh clank-rattle as Pazach thrashed and screamed, a sound as pained and hungry as that in the thunder overhead.

Ana and Sheska both leapt for the partition.

A low billow of frosty vapor rolled into our half of the room from the gap in the rugs, and the temperature in the room plunged. The two scrawny acolytes leapt away from the chilling fog, to huddle by the fireplace, gibbering in wide-eyed terror.

Sheska shook her walking stick, warbling and croaking the soothing spell she’d used earlier, but this time the incantation held an edge of panic. She looked left and right as she chanted, but the goblins attending the sickened Pazach were nowhere to be seen.

It was difficult to see much in the room, as it was filled to knee-high in a roiling, chilling cloud, and the rest of the air had a misty, diffused look to it.

From within that haze came more rattling, and the shadowy figure must have turned to face us. From about head-height (on a goblin, that is) burned two reddish-yellow points of light. Those points grew a bit taller, the figure straightening, and something black beneath those hellish eyes split, opening wide.

Pazach screamed again, and cold surged away from the creature, hitting like a physical blow. Ana staggered, and I, too, nearly lost my footing. Sheska was flung

into one of the rugs, tearing it away from the hooks on the ceiling, tumbling beneath the surface of the icy cloud.

Ana threw a handful of a silvery dust into the air, its shimmer swallowed by the chilling haze. The girl shouted a short, sharp word in Alphatian, and the dust flared, the mists burning away with a hiss and a faint wash of heat.

Pazach screamed, harsh glare fading, leaving only the goblin within a roiling column of fog, constrained by a circle of silver light. The two other goblins in the room lay in heaps, their skin gone pale, shining like wax. I reached out to touch one of them, but reeled back at the searing cold that radiated from the body. The sheen was not waxen... but icy. The few bits of metal adorning its necklaces and belt were rimed with frost. It had been frozen solid, in mere seconds....

“Leave them, Thorn! You have to awaken Sheska. She’s got to put this one back to sleep.”

I stumbled away, towards the crumpled carpet. A thin coating of ice cracked and fell away as I tugged at an exposed corner. I heaved again, and heard a gurgling groan from under another fold.

At least she was still alive.

Two more flares of reddish light washed through the doorway, twin hammerblows of thunder striking at the very roof above us. The mist within the column of light boiled, the twin reddish lights burning brighter, the shadowy figure thrashing this way and that. I heard Ana give a pained gasp, her upraised hand trembling slightly. She blinked sweat from one eye, but her gaze did not waver from the seething points of light within the fog.

I gave another heave at the carpet, finally exposing the bundle of cloth, leather, and fur. Sheska was pale, her eyes wide and unfocused, blinking in a daze. The arm held before her was pebbled with blisters of ice, the skin nearly indistinguishable from the patches of frost. She made to reach for it, and I quickly snatched her hand away, closing my own around it. Her fingers felt like gnarled, leathery sticks, nearly frozen.

I opened myself up to the fire, still sputtering in the hearth, and fed a whisper of that warmth through my hands. Though never as harsh as this, I’d spent enough

winters in the snowy foothills of the Black Peaks to know not to simply rub at the goblin's fingers to warm them up.

Again, and again lightning flashed outside. The howl in the thunderclaps had taken on a fevered pitch, and despite the warmth I was channeling, I couldn't help but shiver.

"Thorn," Ana spoke through gritted teeth. "I do not know— how much longer — I can—"

A crash interrupted her.

Gilliam and Varis had thrown a low table up against the doorway.

"What are you two—"

"Too quiet out there," Varis said. "Hasn't been a peep from any of the goblins out there since this light show started." He spun his sword in a short, close circle from the hip, loosening up his wrist.

"You shouldn't— fight with that arm," Ana panted.

"It's fight with the arm or lose the head," Varis said. "And speaking of which, did that... thing in there get taller?"

"Thorn!"

"I'm trying to warm her, not kill her," I called back over my shoulder. While the goblin's fingers were warmed, I did not think there was anything I could do to save her arm.

"Sheska, can you hear me?"

Yellow eyes blinked, slowly, then settled on me, and the goblin's breathing steadied. She struggled to sit, and I provided what support I could.

"Sheska raises Pazach. Takes him in, feeds him, gives him furs and his first spear." She cradled her burned arm, and lurched to her feet. "Sheska speaks for you before the clan, scars you herself. She heals your wounds, that you may go out to get worse, and this is how you repay Sheska?" She lifted her ice-rimmed arm towards the dark figure within the mists.

"I need you to put him to sleep, not lecture him!" Anna hissed.

Sheska blinked, then sighed as she spotted the two frozen goblins. She shook her head, braids and beads and bones clacking. "Sheska needs more voices. Many more, now that you have fully awakened him."

The shadowed figure flickered from view within the column of fog, and then reappeared, slamming against the shimmering wall of light. Ana gave a cry, and staggered back before replanting her feet. A bead of sweat trickled into one of her eyes, but she shook her head, black hair fanning behind her, and she straightened her back, squaring her shoulders. Her breathing, I noticed, was growing faster.

Sheska noticed it as well, and she clucked her tongue, shaking her head. She hobbled a few steps, picked up her walking stick, and began to make her way around the perimeter of Ana's shining column of light. The goblin gave a grunt and a nod, then hefted her stick, and brought it down in a vicious overhead chop.

The pillar of light flickered once, then burst asunder as if made of crystal, dissolving again into a cloud of silvery dust.

The contained fog roiled forth, dissipating before it even reached halfway across the room. Pazach gave a surprised groan, and collapsed with a clanking thud.

"Sheska is not so old and crippled that she can't still make him sleep without magic," the goblin huffed.

More of the red-tinged lightning flickered overhead, the thunder a mere growl, and Pazach writhed and thrashed in his slumber. Ana's arrowhead-shaped symbol of the Flame lay around the goblin's neck, and she had dusted a thin ring of silver powder around the pile of furs.

Through the process, Sheska grumbled and harumphed. "Shiny dust what hurts Pazach, and you surround him with it."

"He has been possessed, and the silver weakens the demon," Ana said, not for the first time. "Though I do not know how long this will last." She shuddered again. "This whole place is steeped in their essence, and my efforts are but a candle against the dark."

Sheska stopped her pacing, a crooked finger scratching idly at her throat sac. "You have seen the place of the pale stones, yes?"

"Places the cold does not touch," I said, nodding. "We spent a night at such a place."

Sheska made a sour face. "There are many such places here and there among this valley. The hunters avoid them, but sometimes find white-furs there, and have to drive them off."

"Out with it, already," Gilliam snapped, taking his eyes from the doorway long enough to glare at the goblin. "If you know of a place nearby, speak of it!"

Sheska glowered right back, and then croaked lightly in her throat. I realized that was a snow goblin's equivalent to a chuckle.

"Sheska was perhaps mistaken to call you a Child of Winter, though you wear their same colors."

I saw no reason to continue the charade, and nodded.

"You and yours do not possess the mark of chains, so you are not of the slave-takers." The goblin tapped at the underside of her frost-burned lower arm. "You do not wear the same metal as those across the river, there is no sign of the bird on your...." She clucked her tongue, and patted her breast.

"Armor?" Varis supplied.

The goblin nodded. "Yes, yes, the metal that men wear."

"Iron Ring and the Black Eagle," Gilliam murmured. "Neither good alone."

"And here they are, dancing 'round the Summerspire."

Ana coughed.

"All right, so that wasn't perhaps the most appropriate imagery," Varis said, scratching beneath his helm.

"You said there were many places," Ana said, turning her attention back to the goblin. "Are there any close by?"

Sheska bobbed her head. "Many, but most are shrouded in the fogs, where the Pale Walkers are upon the hunters with no warning. Half of Sheska's hunters have not returned, since we settled here."

"I certainly don't look forward to carving a path through those things," Gilliam muttered. "Anything that can take an arrow through the eye and keep coming...." He let the thought go unfinished, save for the shudder.

"There is one other, a place we do not go, for the snows do not reach there."

Ana glanced up. "Go on."

Sheska shrugged, waving a hand dismissively, bones and sticks rattling. "It is too far, and cannot be gone and back while the sun shines."

Gilliam snorted. "You don't go there because you're afraid of the dark?"

Sheska glowered again, rapping her walking stick in annoyance. "Not the dark. What comes in the dark."

"It was probably this 'He Who Brings the Snows' idea to expose the hunter," Ana said, as we sat aside, by the fire.

"Or hunters," Varis added. "It sounds like there is more than one tribe settling here, each with probably four or five hunting bands. There is no way to tell if this has happened elsewhere."

"With the amount of activity here, I would assume it has," Ana said. "Singly, they are powerful enemies, but weaker demons will congregate, work in groups."

"Watch each others' backs," Varis said, nodding.

Ana laughed. "Hardly. Are you familiar with the proverb of the swallow, thrush, and the eagle?"

Varis blinked, shaking his head.

"How about the man, the dwarf, and the hungry wyvern?" Gilliam asked.

Varis' face lit up with a slow smile. "Ah, yes."

It was Ana's turn to look confused.

"You don't have to outrun the wyvern," I explained. "Just the dwarf."

"That's monstrous!" she gasped.

"It's the same as the diving speed of those birds," Gilliam said.

"Well... at its heart, yes. But...." She sighed. "Men!"

"You were saying...?" I prodded the girl.

She brushed a lock of hair from her eyes. "Yes. Well, if we can get this Pazach to the place the other goblin mentioned, I think I stand a chance of driving out the demon."

"Why not do it here?" Gilliam asked. "You've gotten off to a pretty good start."

"They say there are nests of giant ants in the mountains around the Alaysian," Ana said to him.

The warrior nodded, warily. "Yes... Nasty things, best avoided."

"So you've never tried to drive off an infestation of them?"

"That's suicide, unless you've got a small army with you."

"How about doing it alone after you've rolled about in several jars of honey?"

Gilliam cracked a grin. "Now, there was the time— No, those were gypsies, not ants..." His smile dissolved into an exasperated frown. "Are you mad?"

"I would stand about the same chances against that thing," Ana said, pointing towards the restless goblin.

The grin crept back across Gilliam's lips. "Are you going to roll around in honey first?"

Gilliam cleared his throat when the silence began to grow strained. "So, tell me again why we're helping this goblin?"

Ana's stare only grew icier.

"Where do we profit in this?" the man pressed. "I've seen an exorcism or two. Years ago. In the desert. A very lengthy, flashy affair." He sat back and crossed his arms.

"You don't think I can do it."

"It did not end well for that priest," Gilliam said.

"How did it end?" Varis asked.

"Oh, he drew the beast out, and the madman was freed from his curse."

"But...?" I asked, not liking the tone in which Gilliam had ended his statement.

He drew in a deep breath. "The beast took shelter in the priest. He slew ten of the pasha's men before we— they— put him down."

Ana sat up a bit straighter, lifting her chin. "Such is the price of a weak will. He knew the risks, as do I."

Though she blinked away the tears, her voice was remarkably steady.

"Thorn? You can't—"

I raised my hands. "She will do as she will, as will you. The decision is not mine to make."

Ana stood, shaking wrinkles from her tabard. "We should leave as soon as possible if we want to keep the light."

Sheska fussed as Varis and Gilliam hefted the makeshift litter, tucking the furs tighter about the goblin Pazach. He'd been lashed in place twice over with thick leather straps, the manacles still in place as well.

"Wait!" the goblin croaked, as we made to set out. She shuffled back inside, and there was a clattering of bowls and pans. She reappeared bearing a cloth-wrapped bundle.

"Sheska coveted this, when she spoke last with He Who Brings the Snows, and he made it his gift. Sheska thinks..." The goblin's throat sac swelled and deflated as she blinked, a frown deepening the wrinkles upon her forehead. "He Who Brings the Snows did not ask for anything in return." The goblin thrust the bundle out to us, and I took it. Beneath the cloth, it was heavy, rounded along the bottom. A bowl, perhaps?

"Sheska does not wish to pay the price He Who Brings the Snows has taken."

"We accept this gift," Varis said. "What would you have of us in return?"

"Free my hunter, then visit this same price upon He Who Brings the Snows."

Varis made the best bow as he could manage. "As the ancestors bid," he said.

Sheska clucked her tongue, bobbing her head as she lifted a hand in farewell.

"You see?" she asked the shorter goblin huddling in the doorway. "If a furless one knows the old ways, there is no reason you whelps shouldn't show a bit more respect."

Westward, we trekked, until the river curved out from the woods to the north, and then we turned south, paralleling the grayish mists that hid the river

itself. I took a turn in rotation, carrying the stretcher, giving Varis and Gilliam an hours' break from the trek at a time. Though Sheska had shaken her rattle and chanted over the fighter's injured shoulder, he still favored the other, complaining of stiffness.

"Well, just hope you don't have to use it," Gilliam said, walking alongside the stretcher, and giving Ana a long glance.

He occupied his turns away from bearing the litter by hunting up what small game was available.

After three turns at the litter, the canyon hooked back to the east and the riverbed angled a bit more steeply upward. I took my turns after each half-mile then.

It was nearly an hour later, the sky going darker, when the ankle-deep snows sank to a mere dusting upon the stony riverbank. The fogs had grown thinner and thinner after the sharp turn in the canyon, and we could walk along the swiftly flowing stream with a clear view to the other side.

On several occasions, the reddish lightning flared overhead, and I nearly dropped one of the litter's poles as the goblin struggled violently.

Our journey nearly finished, we finally saw just where it was most of that lightning had gone as it snaked and flared across the skies: The canyon dead-ended at a shallow bowl-like basin. The bottom was filled with an oblong pool, spilling over to source the stream we'd followed.

The wind whistled about the canyon's end, spinning upon itself, weaving between six great stone pillars that had been erected around the pool's perimeter.

They were carved of the same black granite of the mountains, each so wide that Gilliam, Varis, and myself might have formed a ring about it, had we joined our fingertips. They were carved in even-sided hexagons, the dimensions and planes carved perfectly enough to make a dwarf weep.

But above the height of our heads, that symmetry dissolved into... well, I can only describe it as a physical representation of chaos. The angles dissolved. The perfect smoothness of the sides bubbled, warped. In numerous places, the stone looked like one of those Darokinian cheeses Varis liked so much, the ones with all the holes.

Black as the stone was, it was topped over and over again with a thick coating of soot, where sheer glassiness didn't shine through.

Our hair stood on end as a bolt of red-white light scalded from the sky, the flash of heat against our skin hotter than a summer's sunlight. The ground shook, as the thunder crashed overhead, trailing a pained and howling echo.

The demon-touched lightning had hit one of those pillars, the tip glowing a dull orange-yellow, a bit of it weeping down the side like so much wax on a candle. The clear space at man-height glowed, too, but not the orange of superheated rock. Runes of silvery-blue flickered faintly, barely visible beneath the stone.

"Look at that," Gilliam breathed, pointing with his bow.

Stones adorned the base of each column, one in the center of each hexagonal face. Blacker than the stone in which they were set, a veinwork of midnight purple pulsed deep within each crystal.

We were exhausted, after the many-hours' trek, and yet Ana pressed.

"I will need wood, enough for two bonfires, to burn for several days."

Gilliam looked up from where he'd just splashed water on his face. "You're not serious," he said, wiping the water from his eyes. "We just hiked for... five hours? Six?"

"Fine," she said. "You stay with the goblin, and I will go." She began tugging at the straps securing the hand axe to the bottom of Gilliam's pack.

"Give me that," he said, snatching the axe away. "You'll have to truss me up to get me to stay anywhere near that thing."

Another bolt of lightning sizzled across the clouds, lancing into another of the twisted columns, which glowed briefly in the same manner as had the one across from it earlier.

"We'll start with this," the warrior said, pointing the axe at a low shrub that clung to the edge of the pool. After several strikes, the axe gave a clanging ring, and Gilliam dropped it in surprise, shaking his hand.

The branch gave way, partially twisted around an outstretched arm carved of pale marble.

Several more strikes and a good deal of pulling and swearing — it turned out the scrubby little plant had long, spike-like thorns — revealed a statue of a long-haired figure, robed, kneeling by the side of the pool, one arm wrapped around its midsection, the other arm stretched over the lake, fingers spread.

We stared, partly in shock, mostly in puzzlement.

“Who would bring such a thing to a place like this?” Gilliam asked.

“Gilliam, I know it’s been a long day, but honestly, I don’t think she can hear you,” Ana said.

He scowled. “How do you know it’s even a girl?” he asked. “There are no features. I don’t think that’s even ‘hair.’” He brushed wood chips from the statue’s head, which, kneeling as it was, didn’t even reach his waist. “It looks more like... a hood.”

“Careful,” Varis said. “The last statue you touched tried to kill us.”

“It’s hard to tell much of anything, aside from its age,” I said. “For the branches to twine like that, and the weathering... If I had to guess, I’d date it at least as old as the standing stones where we spent that one night.” Those stones, the carvings, the very spot felt steeped in the ages, most likely predating even the time of Halav.

“Well,” Ana said, snapping a branch over her knee, “much as I hate to disturb your history lesson, I’m going to need quite a bit more firewood than just this.”

Gilliam and I rose, he with a sigh, me with a groan, and we made our way along the wall of the canyon, first recovering what fallen wood we could find, then working to the last of the light bringing down several stunted, wind-twisted trees that were hardly much larger than garden shrubbery.

While we worked, Ana laid out what we were able to gather into two neat stacks, each waist-high, standing half a dozen paces opposite the two stone pillars along the pool’s eastern edge.

“Very efficient,” Gilliam gasped, shrugging off the harness full of the last of the firewood. “Is that something they teach at the Citadel?”

Ana looked up from her work, wiping sweat-damp hair from her face. “These are simple bonfires. Winters were very cold in the Sundsvall slums.” She pulled at

the slip knots in Gilliam's harness and added the wood to the reserve pile that stood near by.

"The church gives weekend seminars on the building of fires used for witches and werewolves."

Gilliam glanced at the wood piles, then to me, and back to Ana.

"She's joking, right?"

It was left to Varis to prepare camp. The northern face of the canyon jutted out over a shallow depression — an ancient pool from a long-dried up spring.

Varis had dragged Pazach's litter under the shelter, and was busy stirring something in our only remaining pot which he'd hung over a small fire. Judging from the look of the firepit, and the soot caked on the stones around and above it, we weren't the first to visit here. Just the first in a very long time.

"Look at that," Gilliam said, an hour or so later, as we enjoyed a meager rabbit stew. "He tries to kill us all with that cloud of ice, and she's calmly feeding him as if he were a babe."

Ana sat by the goblin's litter, which she'd propped up. She patiently held a spoon to the creature's lips, and it groggily slurped at the stew. We were all dreadfully aware of the dull gleam of the arrowhead pendant around the thing's neck, but it seemed to be enough to keep the demon from coming to the surface. She tried to make conversation with the goblin, and Varis sat close by, translating. His hand, we noticed, did not stray far from the dagger at his belt.

Much as she wanted to begin immediately, when she nearly fell over trying to stand up, we voted to wait for first light, and split the watch three ways, rather than four.

I'm not sure how well the others slept, but I barely managed a doze between rumbling, sizzling lightning strikes and the whimpering thrashing of the bound goblin.

Half moon of the Deep Snows (on or about Kaldmont 8, 997AC)

I awoke to the sound of a spoon on the rim of our cookpot, and then a warm bowl of oatmeal found its way into my hands.

Though clear from the fiercest grip of winter, the hollow at the end of the canyon was still cold enough that a thin layer of frost coated the sparse grasses that grew along the edge of the pool. Cold winds seemed to gather at this dead end, swirling around and about, weaving through the warped stone pillars, the two with the most chaos-ridden holes in them seeming to whistle and sing in a jarring disharmony.

As the night before, Ana propped the goblin up, and made sure he tucked away a good half bowl of the oatmeal. She also made sure he drank, careful not to tip the cup too steeply.

Again, Gilliam watched with a barely-constrained disgust. "Should just upend that cup and be done with it," he muttered.

"Pazach hears," the goblin croaked weakly. "He knows the words you make."

Ana glared at the warrior. Gilliam's cheeks colored.

"Pazach does not blame. Pazach holds the same feeling. When you fail—"

"If," Ana said. "And not even that."

"When you fail," the goblin rasped, "Pazach wishes for you to end it. Pazach will not go back to harm clanmates. You will do this for Pazach?"

Gilliam swallowed his last bite of oatmeal with difficulty, but nodded.

"You treat Pazach with great honors. He does not wish for killing any of you." He squirmed, thrashing this way and that, and gave a harsh snarl. Ana merely held the cup away so he would not spill it.

How she could keep that hand steady as the goblin's eyes changed— the reddish color welling up along its lower eyelids like tears of blood that never quite fell— is beyond me. The knots in the three days' skein are tied as if by a drunken novice, so badly did my hands shake at the time.

Varis and Gilliam filled much of their days with trekking further afield to bring back more firewood. I did try to take a few turns, but they were of the opinion that Ana's ritual — and the results thereof — were far more important to the Chronicles than an account of cutting and gathering wood.

Unfortunately, there are no knots or braids for many of the sounds in the Alphantian native tongue, and the years have dulled my recollection of the exact phrasing. Too, there is the consideration of the Keeper and sisterhood of the Silver Flame; they surely would not want the exact phrasings of their most holy (and dangerous) rituals revealed. So I have translated much of what I heard into a rough approximation in the Common.

Ana began by enclosing herself and the goblin within a circle of silver powder, a good six paces wide. The two stacks of wood were outside of the circle, and Ana explained that we would have to keep the fires going, once she lit them. Passing anything willfully over the circle would break it.

Next, she placed six candles, in short, broad-based candlesticks: one at each cardinal point, and at the goblin's head and feet. She'd had Varis and Gilliam carefully arrange the litter so that the creature's head aligned with the rising sun.

"At sundown, Thorn, please light the fires."

I nodded. It was the last she spoke to me for the next two and a half days.

I'm not sure exactly what I was expecting. The leaden sky lightened slightly with the dawn, and Ana knelt at the foot of the litter, a long loop of many-sided beads woven through her fingers. The chant, voiced so softly, I nearly lost it under the keening of the wind through the rocks that towered overhead, was short, and she repeated it three times before rising, moving to the goblin's left side, resuming her posture from before, and reciting the verse again:

"Lest ZelvrenCypst etemijn lys / Lest reptos slanjen etemijin sattj"

The majority of the ceremony, I would learn, stemmed from those two, short lines.

When she'd made a full circuit of the goblin, she rose, and began walking a slow circle around him, beads slipping through her fingers as she chanted what sounded to me like no fewer than five distinct prayers. It is worth noting that unlike the Thyatian and Karamaikan recitation/repetition formula of the beaded garland, the cantos to the Silver Flame never repeated the same pattern twice, but rather, these prayers seemed to weave together into a braid, rather than simply falling straight beside the other. A sailor on one of the courier ships that run the Windrush once told me that it is the twisting and braiding that gives rope its strength, enabling it to hold many times the weight a single strand could hold on its own.

By the time Ana finished, the goblin had gone from a mere fitful tossing of its head to a thrashing that lifted the corners of the litter. I could hear the leathers straining beneath the layers of blankets.

Ana stood again at the foot of the litter, and even through the containment of the circle of silver, I felt a tingling wave of power ripple the air and wash over me.

*"Annove, kuriva, zjinna, annval deze sturvel:
eteh scuros na Cypt,
eteh ardhfal na Heilig Cypt,
eteh ancomps na Cypt in rechtav, metzegjin en sijen omnemi."*

Pazach went rigid, then thrashed his head so violently I thought it would snap clean off. Whether the demons riding the lightning and thunder were watching or not, they chose that moment to strike, three blazing bolts wrenched from their trajectory by the black marble spires. The veins within each dark crystal flared purple-black, far brighter than they'd ever shone, so bright I had to turn away.

The thunder did not howl, but screamed as it tore across the sky.

Ana repeated the same steps, circling the goblin, weaving her chain of prayers, and then delivering the thrumming command for the demon to name itself. Rather than always ending at the foot of the litter, though, she stopped two steps

further around each time, until she'd paced out twelve points. Had she staked the poor goblin, I have little doubt his shadow would have fallen on each of those points with the passing of each hour.

Lightning sizzled into one or another of the six pillars more often than not as she finished each litany; sometimes a single bolt, two at the most, some of which would fork and split, as though trying to reach the girl and put an end to her chanting.

It was to no avail, though, for the pillars inexorably drew the lightning from the sky, glowing with the intense heat and power of the strikes.

Between the power the girl built each time she completed a circle and that unleashed from the sky above, my skin positively crawled, tingling painfully as the lightning flared overhead.

Gilliam and Varis returned with harnesses full of firewood, throwing their arms over their faces and giving shouts as twin bolts of lightning seared into the stone closest to them as they approached.

"Halav's balls!" Varis swore, "We'd seen the lightning off and on all morning, but didn't think..."

"She was doing that when we left," Gilliam said, pointing. "Has she been repeating it this whole time?"

I nodded, helping to stack the wood in the reserve pile. "This will be the thirty-fifth repetition," I told them.

Varis shook his head. "And I thought reciting the order of the watch was monotonous."

"Does she perhaps think to bore the demon enough that it simply flees?"

"You do not feel it, then?"

"A shiver at the sight of that goblin?" Varis asked.

"I got a bit of a tingle from that lightning," Gilliam said. "If we'd been any closer to that stone, we might have been singed."

Varis did have a point — Pazach underwent a startling change, so gradual it seemed unnoticeable until his eyes burned, bloody half-rings limning the lower lids.

Each time Ana demanded the demon's name, it screamed its defiance with Pazach's voice, each shout coming more and more ragged.

The sun was sinking towards the far rim of the valley when the girl finally let up, slipping the ring of beads around her neck and kneeling by the goblin's side, a silver chalice seeming to appear in her hand as if by magic. She sipped from it first, and then offered the opposite side of the rim to the goblin.

Eyes still red, it snarled and spat, a froth of bloody foam spraying from its cracked lips. Ana did not flinch away from it, nor did she revoke her invitation for the goblin to drink.

It was a very clever strategy, and much as the demon fought, enough of Pazach was still in control that Ana's kindness won through and she made sure the goblin drank slowly.

We decided on double watches, one watching the camp, the other keeping an eye on Ana while one of us tried to get some sleep.

Gilliam had caught wild game while he and Varis were out, and so we had another stew, flavored with several roots and the last of our salt. As the last of the sunlight faded from the western rim of the valley, I took a brand from our fire, and touched it to each of Ana's bonfires.

They sputtered briefly, and I helped them along with a touch of my own magic until more of the kindling caught.

The orange-yellow flames illuminated Ana as she paced, her eyes barely open as she chanted a layer of prayers. She walked perfectly in step with the path she'd trodden before, the heel and toe of each boot falling precisely. I backed slowly from the twin bonfires as they began to take higher flame, and took the first watch of the evening.

As the night grew darker, a sputtering hiss drew my attention back to the circle. I'd been contemplating the swirls, loops and waves of the blue-white lettering that shone brighter with each strike of the lightning.

Ana had passed the short candlestick at the foot of Pazach's litter, and the white wax candle hissed to life, its flame tall and strong even though the wind

tugged and snapped above us, pulling motes and embers from the bonfires up into the air, spinning them every which direction.

She stopped, turning, and her prayer changed. She'd added a second barb to the lash of her command to the demon possessing the goblin:

*"Annove, kuriva, zijinna, annval deze sturvel:
eteh scuross na Cypt,
eteh ardhfal na Heilg Cypt,
eteh ancomps na Cypt in rechtav, metzegjin en sijen omnemi.*

*"Annove, kuriva, zijinna, annval deze sturvel:
eteh scuross na Cypt,
eteh ardhfal na Heilg Cypt,
eteh ancomps na Cypt in rechtav, metzegjin en sijen omnemi;
eteh ancomps na Cypt in rechtav, metzegjin en sijen vande zonskyl et stohnd
vandi telemnekh."*

Four tremendous bolts struck from the sky, without so much as a sizzling build up, and the standing stones blazed white-hot under the assault. The ground heaved, and trembled anew as the thunder slammed down with such a roar that the ringing in my ears prevented me from hearing what it was that the goblin said.

Its head was thrown back, the chords in its neck straining, the thing's chest heaving as its mouth worked. It turned, eyes shining with a red light to rival that of the bonfires, a deeper, older light than mere fire.

It looked at me, and though it could not harm me through the silver barrier between us, even still, a shadow of the power behind that glare brushed against my mind, and I reeled back, turning away from it. My hearing crept back through the ringing in my ears, and I thought perhaps the goblin was coughing, choking from the exertions its possessor had wrought on its voice.

Strong hands gripping my shoulders and another patting my back had me realizing that the sounds were my own. My throat burned.

“I know I’m not as good a cook as Ana,” Gilliam said, “but honestly, Thorn, if you didn’t like it, you could have just said something.”

Half moon of the Deep Snows (on or about Kaldmont 9, 997AC)

I do not remember sleeping, yet must have, for twin thunderclaps startled me awake. With what I saw and experienced the day before, I am glad to have no recollection of dreaming.

Within the silver circle, Ana still paced, the beads sifting through her fingers, her voice a low murmur. Though her eyes were bright, the dark smudges beneath them were clearly evident against her pale skin.

“Still the beast does not give way?”

“I lost count after the twentieth repetition,” Gilliam said. “She hasn’t gotten a wink of sleep, or had more than a few sips of water from that silver chalice.”

“I have read that ceremonies such as this are contests of will, between the exorcist and the demon.”

“That poor, poor demon,” Gilliam lamented.

Ana made one more circle around the goblin, and then knelt, again, offering the cup. It snarled, lunging against the restraints, and shrieked as its cheek made contact with the flared base of the chalice. It jerked its head back, flinching away, the wound smoking.

Rather than flinch back herself, though, Ana leaned forward, holding the cup closer and closer to the goblin’s face. It reeled back as far as it could, digging its head into the coarse ground below the litter, shaking its head back and forth, the red-rimmed eyes wide. They did not once leave the rim of the chalice.

“Lest ZelvrenCypt etemijn lys / Lest reptos slanjen etemijin sattj”

Ana’s voice rang with the power in those words, even though she spoke in a ragged whisper. Though she spoke of flame, there was no warmth to her inflection. She continued, hefting the goblet with each verse of the prayer:

“Annove, kuriva, zjinna, annval deze sturvel:

eteh scuros na Cypt,

eteh ardhfal na Heilg Cypt,

eteh ancomps na Cypt in rechtav, metzegjin en sijen omnemi.

*“Annove, kuriva, zijinna, annval deze sturvel:
eteh scuros na Cypt,
eteh ardhfal na Heilg Cypt,
eteh ancomps na Cypt in rechtav, metzegjin en sijen omnemi;
eteh ancomps na Cypt in rectav, metzegjin en sijen vande zonskyl et stohnd
vandi telemnekh.*

*Kaasinteil, kuriva: alluma mindt at kirjah, min ollen alend jenteCypt.
Ei shaadhen se suurelik, vot sivullistin, vot omaisuus.*

*Istvyekth, mektar! Istvyekth, veittaj, valehtelavat, vihollin eveet, vainojja suut;
Ankoht, vaztikolend, andama na ZilvrenCypt, kur atrasta na laitos.”*

Pazach thrashed, his chest heaving, but he had no voice left, and the demon could merely wheeze its refusals at the end of each verse.

“It has taken your voice, Pazach,” Ana whispered. “What else will you let it take? You have no need to fear this silver. Rise up, cast out the invader. Free yourself, Pazach.”

Tears welled up in the creature’s eyes, and it slowly shook its head. It gave a shudder, and the eyes went hard, cold. Brittle. The mouth that had been slack twisted into a sneer, revealing sharp, black-edged teeth, the gray gums lined blood red.

“Let this one go,” the demon rasped. “What is one goblin in a tribe? They breed like rats, and ten will replace this one when it goes.”

“No,” Ana said, her voice rising.

“Then kill it. It is one sure way to rid it of me.”

“I will not.”

“Yet you did just that at Shardhal Pass!” the thing spat. “You cut down my brothers with that accursed silver. And those others, too! Maybe one of them would do the deed you are too weak to perform.”

The thing turned, looking past Ana, and again the whisper of dark power washed across me, sliding against me like an oily sheen. Somewhere just beyond hearing, ghosts of whispers prickled at the edge of my consciousness.

“Do not listen!” I told Gilliam, who’d suddenly cocked his head. I took his arm, and gave him a shake.

“Ignore it, for it will use that as a way in.”

“I don’t... how...” he mumbled, his eyes gone glassy.

“Think of something else,” I said. “Think of...” I grasped at my own memories for something suitably distracting. “Think of those gypsies!”

Gilliam gave a shudder, sitting up straighter, and cracked a grin. “Oh, I didn’t mind being taken captive by them,” he said through the smile.

You have no power here, I thought towards the distant, buzzing voice. And the oily presence slid away.

The demon spat again, thrashing.

“Are you so weak that you must make a play for my companions?” Ana asked. “If you wish a new body, then take mine,” she told it.

The demon laughed, a sound like rolling, smoky fog. “Are you so weak in your faith that you offer me empty promises? You would do as well to simply offer up your Keeper of the Flame as my vessel.”

“I give you this last chance,” Ana said, her back straight, steel in her voice. “Depart willingly. Loose your hold on this mortal shell.”

“No,” the creature rumbled, the lips turing in a toothy smile. “I think not.”

“You mean to tell me all that was her asking nicely?” Gilliam asked.

A clattering of wood announced Varis’ arrival. “Saw the change in the weather, thought I’d hurry back,” he panted, mopping his brow.

I glanced up. So absorbed was I in Ana’s ongoing ordeal against the demon, I hadn’t even noticed the lack of lightning. Oh, it flickered and danced overhead, leaping from cloud to cloud, and thunder rumbled, as if making noise just to assure us that it was still there, still watching, still waiting.

Ana pushed herself slowly to her feet, running the first two fingers of her right hand over the rim of the goblet, a prayer visible on her lips, but whispered too softly to hear over the wind and crackling of the two fires.

The prayer done, she dashed the contents of the goblet in the demon's face. It shrieked, as the skin burned, blistering.

"Annove, kuriva: istvyekth!" Ana commanded. "Begone from the shell, and the pain will end."

The combination of the demon's snarl, coupled with the bubbling, oily laugh was even more chilling than the discordant wail as the wind gusted again, shrieking through the twisted pillars.

Ana made a sideways sweep of her arm, and the candles surrounding the goblin's litter burst aflame. Again, the demon screamed, tearing at the edges of the goblin's voice.

The flames, high and straight, untouched by the wind, blazed like molten silver.

The sun climbed from one side of the canyon to the other, and we added more fuel to the two bonfires as it grew darker. The light and shadows seemed to war with those cast by the silver candles, and it made for a mesmerizing display. While Ana's accoutrements simply glimmered under the light from the bonfires, they shone like full moonlight when reflecting the candles' flames. The girl's pale skin, too, shone stark and white, her eyes bottomless and blue, highlights of silver shining against her hair the only thing separating it from the dark of the night.

"Behold, She of Two Faces, light in the dark, shadow in the light; 'ware she for whom beauty is a blade; for she is the sister to darkness; she is the mother of night."

I glanced over at Gilliam, who whittled at one of the sticks of kindling. "A supplication to Nyx?"

"No, nothing of the sort. Just... reminding myself of certain truths."

"You could always just go jump in that pool," Varis said.

"You mean to tell me you look on that sight and aren't the least bit entranced?"

Varis shrugged. "I prefer blondes."

Gilliam snorted. "Wouldn't know it, from the state of things when we left Selenica."

"That," Varis said, with a jangle of his armor as he shuddered, "is precisely why I prefer blondes."

It felt as though my watch had just ended, and I'd set my head down on my bedroll when the blast of thunder rattled me awake. The ground shook with it; the stones all around me vibrated under the shockwave.

I rolled to my feet, struggling to fasten my cloak before the shrill keening wind tugged it from my shoulders.

I'd just reached the spot where Varis kept his vigil over Ana's ceremony when another clap of thunder slammed down upon us, and we both pressed our hands to our ears, knees buckling as the ground trembled.

I saw the warrior's lips moving, and then he simply stopped, pointing up. I followed the line of his finger, and the strength simply left my legs.

The sky boiled lower, a hellish red glowing from deep within the clouds which simply... twisted... upon themselves. The keening of the wind through the canyon could have been their voice, piercing in its agony.

Another piercing cry wrenched our attention back to the ground.

Pazach stood, one hand tangled in Ana's hair, his other clutching the hilt of a dagger, the rest of which was lost in the folds of the girl's tabard, just above the dark line of her belt.

He threw back his head, jaws open impossibly wide, all black-edged teeth and slavering, grayish tongue. His throat sack collapsed as he loosed another ragged scream, blending in a perfect discord with the wind.

His eyes blazed with a yellowish light, edged from below in deep blood red. There was nothing of the goblin left in them.

Steel sang as Varis unsheathed his sword with a fluid, much-practiced ease. I steadied my grip on my staff, though it felt slick beneath my shaking, sweating palms. Varis tensed, ready to spring, but I brought my staff up before him.

“If you charge, Ana’s circle will be broken. We will have no defense against that thing.”

“But Ana—”

“She yet lives,” I said, nodding towards the girl. Though she hung limp in the goblin’s grip, her fingers trembled, ever so slightly. I just hoped it was not a random spasm, her body’s last dying movement.

The goblin took a shambling step back, kicking over one of the candles, grinding the silver flame out beneath his bare foot. Not even a flicker of discomfort marred its twisted features, though we clearly caught the scent of burnt flesh on the gusting breeze.

“Free me!” it shouted, in a voice that rivaled the thunder. Varis and I both staggered back under the force of its demand, muted though it was by Ana’s protective circle. The warrior looked over at me, eyes wide, glinting in the firelight. He licked his lips, gone as pale as the rest of his face.

“How do we fight something this strong when its powers are chained?” the man gasped.

“I think I have a plan,” Gilliam said, seeming to melt away from the shadow of one of the pillars, fletchings drawn to his cheek as he sidled up to us, his eyes never leaving the demon and its captive.

“I can’t believe you were going to try to sell this,” Varis said, hefting the pouch he’d taken from Gilliam’s belt.

“Just be glad it’s on this side of the barrier, instead of cooped up in there where it would do us no good,” the other warrior growled. “Ready when you are, Thorn.”

I drew a deep, calming breath — though it seemed to do little good against the blanket of fear the demon seemed to be radiating. How bad would it be once the warding circle was breached? I suppressed a shudder at the thought, pushing it from my mind.

The fires. I had to concentrate on them, coax as much force from them as I could manage. I steadied my breathing and focused, willing a few sparks into my

hands, drawing the pure Element from them, urging it to grow until it felt as if my hands themselves would burst into flame.

“Ready,” I gasped, bracing myself for the blistering I knew was to come.

Gilliam drew the fletchings to his cheek once more, seemed to take less than a blink to aim, and loosed the arrow.

A brief sputtering shimmer creased the air as it passed over the line of Ana’s circle. The arrow did not slow, but streaked straight, true, embedding itself nearly to the fletchings in the goblin’s shoulder. Demon-strengthened though it was, the beast still reeled under the force of the strike, eyes going wide in surprise even as it shrieked its anger.

“Fool!” it bellowed, rising up to its full height. As we’d hoped, it threw Ana aside, and she rolled limply across the remains of her silver circle, crashing into the ivory statue at the rim of the pool. I distinctly heard a sharp ‘snap’ of what I hoped was just one bone.

The beast made to step forward, and I opened my spell up to the full force of the two bonfires, the small flickering spheres of flame leaping in size and heat as I hurled them at the creature. The wash of heat against my face seared hotter than a summer’s day, and I blinked back tears.

Varis flung a handful of the silvery dust before me as I threw the twin orbs of flame, and there was a sharp crackling sizzle, and the orange-yellow light against my eyelids softened to a muted white glow as if from a full moon.

The demon’s laughter, a sound like oil bubbling over hot coals, rose in pitch to a shriek of agony. I blinked away tears to see the goblin, silhouetted against a wreath of silver-white flame, clutching at its face, writhing this way and that.

Gilliam’s war cry blended with that shriek, as he sent arrow after arrow into the beast.

Varis took three great running strides, swinging his sword in a two-handed grip. The goblin flailed, and Varis’ blade traced a shining path through the flames, shearing the beast’s arm off at the elbow. Varis spun with the force of the blow, bringing the blade down lower, plunging it into the goblin’s side.

The creature howled, swiping at the warrior with its now-missing arm, blood gone black spattering across Varis’ face.

It staggered back, wrenching itself off of the blade, stumbling into the ivory statue. It scabbled and clung to it, trying to find its balance. It only succeeded in uprooting the statue from its seating against the edge of the pool.

Gilliam fired three more arrows into the beast's chest, and the thing toppled backwards into the pool.

Varis and Gilliam both set their shoulders to the statue, heaving it into the water after the goblin.

"That will not stop it for long," a weak voice panted from against one of the pillars.

We turned, to see Ana, clutching her side, leaning heavily against the base of one of the hexagonal pillars.

It was hard to say which of the two men whooped the loudest. Gilliam made to scoop the girl up, but Varis knocked him aside, kneeling, his hands shaking as he pressed them here and there over the girl.

"How did you— We saw him—" Gilliam stammered.

"My faith protects me," Ana rasped, through graying lips.

"Your armor helps," Varis said, revealing compressed links in the chain hauberk beneath the dagger's slit in her tabard.

"It hurts!" the girl gasped, as Varis tried to help her rise. Her gasping turned to a harsh cough, and her hand came away streaked dark with blood.

"We need to get you away from here," Varis said, glancing up as bloody lightning danced within the clouds.

"Improvised litter," Gilliam said, unstringing his bow and shrugging off his cloak. I managed to clumsily heft my staff towards him, and he caught it, wrapping the woolen cloak over it and his bow. Then he and Varis moved the girl as gently as they could onto the contraption.

No sooner had they cleared her from the edge of the pool than did its smooth surface begin to ripple.

I sank to my knees, and could feel the slightest of tremors, as though the ground was a great bell that had been struck, and still thrummed from the impact.

The trembling grew, until it could very definitely be felt, as if every horse in Ethengar were charging down the throat of the canyon.

"This can't be good," Varis muttered.

The first of the runes etched closest to the base of each pillar began to glimmer, the lines and curves filling with greenish-blue light.

"No, *that*," Gilliam said, "can't be good."

The second row of runes flickered to light. The water in the pool began to churn.

Up, and up the runes took to flickering light, as if a blue-green fire were blazing higher and higher within each column. The water's churning intensified, growing to what appeared to be a fierce, rolling boil, though there was no steam, no heat.

Just something, thrashing furiously below, a sooty reddish light throbbing in the depths.

A dark form broke the surface, features barely recognizable as those of the goblin beneath flesh charred and melted by the silvery fire. The mouth split open, loosing another shrieking roar. The sky answered with a volley of lightning the which I have never seen — bolt after bolt, lancing from the heavens, wrenched this way or that as the pillars attracted them. The regular orange afterglow of cooling stone grew brighter with each strike, going from orange, to yellow, to a white nearly as bright as the lightning itself. Even as far away as we were from the pillars, the heat spilling off them made the air hot, dry as we breathed it in, tasting of stone and storm and fire. I was not the only one to begin coughing.

The runes pulsed as the columns caught the lightning, a dim red flicker chasing through the bluish radiance. The dark stones grew brighter with each bolt of lightning, until the purplish radiance nearly rivaled that shed by the lightning

And through the spectacle, the demon thrashed and screamed, the voice coming more and more shrill, desperate. It was plain to see that what was going on was not what it had planned.

It hauled itself to the edge of the pool, making its way towards us, yellow-on-red points of light where its eyes would have been shining above charred lips,

gaping open over blackened teeth as the thing opened its mouth for another scream.

Yet when it reached the pool's rim, the runes along the two closest pillars flared white-hot, sending the creature reeling backwards, burnt arms raised before its ravaged face.

Four more columns of runes flared with the same light, and we were forced to turn away. I saw Varis curl over Ana even as he tucked his head down.

The demon's voice rose, echoing with its otherworldly, smoky resonance, and the light intensified, searing at the folds of my cloak, threatening to burn right through my arm.

And then I was left blinking away ghostly after-images of red and black and white amidst a silence so deep it rang in my ears.

The demon's shriek was gone, as was the goblin's voice behind it. The wind was still, the twisted pillars silent, even from the slightest whisper of a breeze. Not even an echo of thunder lingered.

In the space of two breaths, the air had cooled back to its previous winter's chill, and would have been welcoming, had it not stung along the creases of my burned hands.

The pool was again silent, still, save for the slightest of trickles as it poured over the spout-like lip to feed the canyon's stream.

The stones were again dark, the top half further twisted and warped. Along the bases, the black stones gleamed dully in the light from the two bonfires with no hint of their own inner light.

Ana gave another choking cry as Varis and Gilliam hefted the makeshift litter.

"With better light, I might be able to tend to some of her wounds," Varis said.

"This is surgeon's work," Gilliam said. "A simple splint and some bandages won't heal this."

Varis glowered, and glanced down at Ana, but she had lapsed into unconsciousness.

I followed behind, feeling useless. While we are taught some basics of herb lore and practices similar to the Grand Duke's army field medicine, I had to agree

with Gilliam's assessment. Besides, my hands were in no condition to be performing any kind of work.

The warriors settled Ana as gently as they could, covering her with both their bedrolls, and Varis had just turned to add more wood to one of the fires when we heard the splashing.

A small figure struggled in the water, causing a great deal of splashing, sputtering, and coughing.

Gilliam rose with an irritated sigh, turning to scowl at the water. His frown lifted, though, as he peered closer.

"That's no goblin!" he breathed, and his pace towards the round pool increased dramatically. Despite the cold, he shrugged off his cloak, struggling to work off his boots. He was down to an undertunic and breeches when he reached the pool's edge, giving the black columns a wide berth as he dove into the water.

Three or four strong swimming strokes was all it took for him to reach the floundering figure. It was a bit of a struggle as he drew near, and his shouts were choked off by as much sputtering of his own as that of the figure he was trying to rescue.

Twice, they went under, and were about to go a third time before Gilliam managed to wrestle the figure close enough he could restrain it and begin paddling for shore.

I met the two with my bedroll, throwing it about them as they emerged, coughing, shivering and dripping from the water, and together we hurried towards the fires.

"So if it wasn't a goblin, then what—" Varis' voice died as he glanced around the edge of the firelight.

The figure was small and pale, clinging to Gilliam and still shivering, clad in a gown that would be white as soon as it dried. The long, full sleeves clung to the girl's arms, molded around a familiar pattern winding and twisting from wrist to halfway up her lower arms. Long, wavy hair hung limp and dripping halfway down the girl's back, and we knew as it dried, it would waver somewhere between gold and silver, depending on the light.

“By the Immortal’s fury,” Varis breathed. “Silva? How?”

The girl drew in a deep, shuddering breath — her first that didn’t trail into a cough — and promptly sneezed into Gilliam’s shoulder.

That sneeze seemed to clear her head, for the girl stiffened against Gilliam.

“It’s all right,” he said, patting her back to make sure the last of the water was clear. “You’ll be just f—”

His last word trailed into a wheeze as the girl slammed the heel of her hand into his chest, leaping away from him even as he toppled over backwards.

“Silva!” Varis cried, rising to his feet.

“*Sprzatmi na!*” she managed to get out between sneezes.

“You’re soaking wet,” the warrior said, “get back over here before you catch your death of cold!”

“Varis,” Gilliam gasped, pushing himself up from his back.

The other man took a step towards the girl, and another.

“I don’t think you should do that,” Gilliam wheezed. “She’s not—”

“Half drowned is what she is,” Varis said, glancing over his shoulder as Gilliam righted himself.

He should not have taken his eyes from the girl.

She sprang, darting in fast and low, coming up just in front of the warrior, her hand a pale flash in the firelight. Varis’ cry of surprise was cut off as he hit the ground hard on his back, the girl sitting astride him, knee grinding into his sword hand, the man’s own dagger at his throat.

“*Kah tvam? Katam kutumba savasti?*” Her eyes were wide, wild, darting to and fro like an animal cornered.

Wide, wild. And golden.

I stepped forward, hands spread, the blisters stretching painfully as I did so.

“*Namas’te, Amara’Aatmajaa,*” I said, carefully avoiding using the Andahar family name. I bowed low. “*Aham asmi* Marcu Markovic. *Caellimi* Thorn.”

“*Namas’kaarah,*” she said, placing the emphasis on the third and fourth syllables, her golden eyes glancing ever so briefly the dark sky. Her posture relaxed

the slightest bit, and some of the fear was gone from her eyes when she turned them back to me.

"Kim vayam caellem tvam?" I asked her.

She sat up straighter, blinking rapidly, her mouth opening slightly in shock. I had a sudden fear that I'd asked something entirely inappropriate rather than her name.

"Aham... aham na jaanaami," the girl said, frowning. She sighed. *"Caellitimi Anyatama."* The frown deepened, and it was clear from her tone that she did not entirely approve of — as she put it — 'what *they* called her.'

"Anyatama," Gilliam said, rolling the name around on his tongue. *"That's pretty."*

She looked sharply up at the other warrior, eyes narrowing. The tendons along the back of her small hand stood out as she gripped the dagger tighter.

I cleared my throat, diverting her attention from Gilliam. *"Kim vayam caellem tvam?"* I repeated.

"Khurma na anumata paripathati asmaadivha," she said, and suddenly sat back, her shoulders slumping, the dagger sitting loosely in her hands. *"Asti na naamagraha."* She looked around at us.

"Is it safe to ask what's going on now?" Varis asked. *"And can someone get her off me before leaves rusty half-moons on my armor?"*

Rather than straightening up, I squatted down to be as level with the girl as possible, and gestured for her to join us by the fire.

"Dagdha hastau tvam," she said, peering from one hand to the other. *"Katham?"*

"Agni," I said, keeping a straight face.

She set her hands on her hips — a very Silva-like gesture — and regarded me for a long moment. Her stern contemplation was disrupted by another sneeze.

"Tadiiya lota etah risi," she said, mostly to herself, wiping her nose. She slowly rose from her perch atop Varis' chest. She backed away from him, settling

equidistant from myself and the warrior, as close to the fire as she could get, but well out of arm's reach.

"That is not our Silva?" Varis asked, sitting up in as nonthreatening a manner as he could muster.

"No," Gilliam and I said at the same time.

"She looks like her. She certainly fights like her." He rubbed at his hand, which was developing a large knee-shaped bruise.

"And in some cases, pups in a litter look remarkably similar," Gilliam said. "So... a sister, then? A twin?"

"I have never seen twins with eyes of different shades," Varis said, crossing his arms.

"And you've never seen a girl rip out an ogre's soul and make him dance a jig."

The warrior's eyes widened slightly, and he edged away from the girl, even though she sat a good distance from him. "Do you suppose she could do the same thing?"

"Let's not give her a reason to," I said, and stifled a yawn as best I could.

"It's late," Gilliam said, rising. "I'll take the first watch, finish drying out. You should get some sleep. That goes for you, too," he said, glancing over at the girl.

She blinked, as if coming out of a daze. "*Neh?*"

"Sleep," he said, miming folded hands beneath his cheek. "We won't hurt you."

She stared blankly at him for a moment, then nodded. "*Zayyaa,*" she said.

"You're welcome," Gilliam said, with a brief nod.

Half moon of the Deep Snows (on or about Kaldmont 10, 997AC)

I awoke to the same sound I'd heard when I took my rest after my turn at watch: a steady, industrious grinding of pestle against mortar.

Gilliam gave the girl a dark look across the campfire, stirring the pot of oatmeal a bit too vigorously than necessary.

Our visitor squatted near our packs, the contents of which were strewn about around her, laying where she'd tossed them as she rifled through what few items we had remaining. A rather bulky wooden box sat in front of the girl, and provided a work surface for her. Neat piles of various herbs and powders were ranked meticulously along the surface not taken up by the stone mortar.

She scooped out something green and pulpy from the bowl, and spread it along several of Ana's remaining bandages, and then sprinkled several powders across the resulting glop.

"Thor-n," she said. "*Atra aagacha.*" She pointed to the ground opposite the pack where she'd laid out the bandages.

Gilliam snorted as I rolled clumsily from what was left of my bedroll.

The girl pointed to the bowl beside her, in which was clear, steaming water. She'd found the silver ceremonial bowl — which sported quite a ding on one side — and was using it as a washbasin. I glanced skyward and whispered an apology to whichever Immortal this bowl had seen ceremonial service, and dipped my hands in.

The water was more than warm — it was nearly too hot, though the bowl itself did not radiate any of the heat. The searing heat soaked into my hands, tingling, stinging as I made myself completely submerge my blistered palms.

The warmth seemed to flash up my arms, tingling, and — of all things, I felt myself shivering, my arms prickling with gooseflesh.

I tried to remove my hands, but a stern look from the girl had me at least going through the motions of washing. I had to glance down as I gingerly touched my hands together under that nearly-scalding water; the jolt of pain didn't come, and I turned my hands upward, lifting them from the water.

They were whole, and smooth, without even the traces of the callouses from my many years of training, and the farming before that.

The girl gasped as well, a sound which quickly turned into a sigh as she glanced forlornly at the bandages she'd prepared. She looked from my hands, to the bowl. Then she picked up the heavy stone pestle and brought it down hard on her thumb.

Gilliam and Varis both winced when they heard the resulting 'crack.'

Pale, blinking back tears, she did not utter a sound of discomfort. But the girl's hands shook as she placed them in the steaming water. The lines of pain deepened slightly, and she showed the same gooseflesh-inducing shiver that I'd felt, and then her eyes widened. She lifted her hands from the water, flexing her fingers, waggling both thumbs. There was no sign of swelling, discoloration.

She upended the bowl, dashing around the remaining bonfire, scooping up a bowlful of the water from the pool. She returned more slowly, careful not to slosh. I thought she would bring the bowl to the fire, to heat the water, but even as I watched, a few tendrils of steam curled up from the rim, the wisps growing thicker, steadier with every step the girl took.

She knelt down by Ana's side, and looked the badly wounded girl over, frowning. I could see the indecision flickering across her features. She cocked her head, listening to the girl's deep but labored breathing, and seemed to come to a decision.

"Thor-n, kijhcit saahaay'am karoti vaa?"

I frowned. By her tone, gathered that she wanted me to do something, but I did not have the meaning of enough of the words she used.

"Bhavis'yati pibahm," the girl said, nodding towards Ana, and then bringing the bowl up to her lips in pantomime.

Gilliam frowned, but Varis set a hand on the man's shoulder. "At the very least, the girl will get something to drink. It can't do any more harm than that demon has already done her."

I eased Ana up as much as I dared. She groaned, and blinked awake, her face pinched in pain, blue eyes unfocused.

"Pibahm'ta," Silva's twin murmured, placing the rim of the bowl to Ana's lips.

Reflexively, the girl managed a swallow, and then another. A third. She sputtered her way through a fourth, and I gently pushed the bowl away.

"Enough. That will have to do," I said.

Ana slept. Varis and Gilliam left in search of more firewood. They had noticed that the afternoon was not warming as it had the day prior, and the fitful gusts of wind were coming more and more steadily, each colder than the last, it seemed.

The girl was able to pack away her herbs and powders before the wind picked up, carefully storing them in empty glass vials or folding them into triangular packets of a thin and delicate paper she found tucked into the lining of the medicine kit.

That done, she checked on Ana's condition, leaning close to hold her ear as close as she could get to the young cleric's chest. She carefully lit a taper she'd twisted from Ana's parchment, and held her fingers to the girl's throat. I saw her lips move as she counted, watching the flame eat the thin wand of paper into ash.

"Zreyastara," the girl said, tugging the blankets up to Ana's chin. *"Tastyaa upaseva'te?"* she asked, gesturing towards her patient.

I moved slowly to Ana's side, and the girl nodded. *"Aam?"*

I returned her nod, and the girl scampered off, in the direction Gilliam and Varis had gone.

"Your hands..." Ana said, some hours later, and I looked up from the work at my skein.

"Well and whole," I told her. "How do you feel?"

She swallowed, her eyes distant as she pondered. "Well and whole," she said, finally, a frown furrowing her forehead. "Though... I do not know how that could be." She struggled at the blankets, shaking her arms and legs loose, sitting up with a wince.

"You shouldn't—" I started, and moved to lay her back down.

She batted my hands away. "I have been laying for hours on that rocky ground. Of course I'm going to be stiff and sore."

"But your—" I stopped myself, wondering where I should even begin to list the injuries we'd been able to identify.

Ana took a deep breath, and pressed her hands to the side that had been inflamed and darkening with bruises up until this morning. She turned her arm this way and that, then brought her hands to her neck, turning her head and sweeping her hair out of the way.

"Thorn, I cannot see. Is the bruising bad?"

I shook my head. Pale hands pressed and probed at pale, unblemished skin of her neck and what I could see under the collar of her shift.

A stiff gust of wind skirled through the warped pillars, sending her hair all about her face. She shivered. Then suddenly blushed as she pulled the blankets up about her shoulders, huddling.

"Not to worry," Gilliam said, as he trudged towards the campsite. "We were only allowed to peel your armor off. And we were gentlemen enough to turn our backs for the rest."

Ana frowned. "Then... who...?"

Varis shrugged off his his harness full of firewood, and glanced around. "You didn't let her run off on her own, did you, Thorn?"

"You of all people should know she can look out for herself," Gilliam said. "She's still got your knife. She'll be fine, wherever she is."

"She' who?"

"No, don't tell her, Thorn!" Gilliam said, holding a hand out. He grinned. "I want to see her expression."

"Thorn..."

I held my hands up.

Truth be told, I was keenly interested to see her reaction, myself.

We were gentlemen, backs turned as Ana washed and dressed herself. Varis and I were, at least. And Gilliam was, after several choice words and a threat 'to gouge out his eyes with his own manhood.'

“So prim and upright in her silver and white,” Gilliam said with a grin. “Good to know there’s still a healthy, earthly girl in there.”

“Turn your head a fraction more and I’ll show you that earth up close,” Ana snapped. I kept my eyes on the group of columns, standing dark and ominously twisted around the mirror-still surface of the pool, and tried not to smile too broadly.

The afternoon wore on, and Ana prodded and wheedled for us to give her some hint as to the identity of her mysterious physician. We all kept silent, and she eventually stalked from the sheltered campsite to gather up the remnants of her exorcism ceremony.

The sun was nearly touching the far rim of the canyon when the girl returned, bearing a brace of rabbits over one shoulder, and her gown once more full of roots and greens. She shrugged off the rabbits as she passed Gilliam, nearly dropping them in his lap as he whittled at a twig.

“Hey!” he cried.

The girl leveled her golden gaze at him, and he swallowed whatever it was he was about to say.

Ana turned, and simply stared, her small mouth hanging slack, eyes wide with amazement. Then her eyes narrowed, her lips pursing in thought.

The girl turned as Gilliam snatched up the rabbits and stalked down to the edge of the stream to clean them, muttering the whole way.

The two stared at each other for a long moment, expressions carefully neutral.

“Similar,” Ana finally said. “Remarkably similar.”

“Well sure,” Varis grumbled, plucking a root from the bowl the girl had made of her gown and slicing them into the steaming cook pot. “It’s easy to tell the difference when she’s not sitting on you with a knife at your throat.”

“Ah-na,” the girl said, repeating the cleric of the Flame. “Thor-n,” she said, pointing to me. “Gil-yam. Va-rhis.”

Ana nodded as the girl pointed towards the two warriors, who were busy turning the rabbits over the cookfire.

"And your name is..?" Ana asked, pointing towards the girl.

As before, she simply sighed, looked upset, and told us "*Aham na jaanaami.*"

"She doesn't know? Doesn't remember?"

I shrugged. That was as much as I'd puzzled out.

"I thought she said her name was *Anyatama*," Gilliam said, around a mouthful of meat. "These are done, I think," he mumbled, licking his fingers.

The girl glared at him. "*Caellemita na!*" she said, her voice hot with anger.

Gilliam leaned back against the heat of her mood. "It's a good name," he said. "I like it!"

The girl looked around, and reached for the kindling pile. She snatched up a handful of twigs, and lined them up in a row, hands shaking. She looked up at Gilliam, and then back down at the ranks of sticks. She picked one, held it up.

"*Anyatama*," she said.

She pointed towards one of the stones ringing the campfire. "*Anyatama.*" She scampered over to Gilliam's quiver, and drew one of the few arrows halfway out.

"*Anyatama.*"

Gilliam waved his hands in a gesture of surrender. "All right," he said. "I understand. It's not a name. Thorn, what's that word for 'sorry'?"

"You mean you know it in the Common?" Ana asked.

"*Samaam.*"

"Right. *Samaam*," he said to the girl, bowing his head.

She stood with her hands balled up on her hips for a long moment, her breath slowing as her anger cooled.

Gilliam turned back to pulling the coneys from their spits, breaking them up into our wooden bowls.

A gurgling growl from the girl's stomach softened her mood further.

"*Apasara sviktraa*," she muttered, reluctantly, as she sat beside Ana.

Waxing half moon of the Deep Snows (on or about Kaldmont 11, 997AC)

"Thorn, wake up."

Ana's hand on my shoulder roused me from the sleep into which I'd just fallen. I blinked that sleep from my eyes, and she was shoving my pack into my arms.

"Your cloak liner and extra tunic are in there. You're going to need them."

The thick woolen weave peeked from beneath the rim of her hood, and flapped at the edges of the inside of her cloak. She wore her fur-lined gloves. Sitting up, looking past her, I saw Gilliam and Varis making the same alterations to their own cloaks, sitting much closer to the fire than we had over dinner just before the sun set.

"I thought we were to leave after breakfast."

She shook her head, and pointed at the mouth of the overhang. A fine layer of snow had already formed over the sparse grass. I hurried my own work at altering my cloak, amused to find that I'd tied the last few knots as "hurry" "snows" and — well, it was my own shorthand for one of Varis' more colorful curses.

"I knew the cold was creeping closer, but this..." I struggled with the last of the knots. My fingers were already beginning to ache with the cold.

I donned my cloak, slinging my pack, glancing around what little was left of the campsite. Gilliam was securing his bedroll, and Varis was tucking the cookpot into the top of his pack.

"Where is the girl?" I asked.

"She's right—" Varis turned, glancing around. "She was just here..."

A distant, hard splash stopped Gilliam as he was about to toss a handful of loose earth onto the fire. We all glanced at each other for a beat, and then Gilliam and Varis were dashing to the pool. Ana began untying the bedroll Gilliam had just bundled over top of his pack.

"Thorn, no. I need you to give the fire a little bit of a prod. We need to coax as much heat from it as we can."

Though too far away, I could hear both of the warriors' voices lifted in either concern or anger. More than likely, it was a good measure of both. There was much

splashing, more shouting. And then the two men grew silent. Glancing up from my coaxing of the flames, I saw them standing, hands on their hips. They must have been discussing something, because I saw Varis point vehemently to the distance, and then at the pool, then throw his hands up in the air.

The surface of the pool broke, and the girl struggled to the edge, clumsily. Gilliam stooped, and hauled the girl out. She was clinging to something nearly as tall as she was, and as the trio hustled back to the camp, I saw that part of that bundle was Varis' sword.

"Fool of a girl," he was fuming, as he snatched the sword from her arms, and dragged her by the arm to the fireside. Ana threw the bedroll blanket around the girl's shoulders, rubbing vigorously at the girl's hair to absorb as much of the excess water as she could before it started to freeze. Resistant to the cold as she was, her teeth still chattered, and her lips were nearing the lightest of blues.

"*Y-uddah na hiin z-zastra,*" she managed, barely avoiding biting her tongue. She rubbed her hands, then held them out for the bundle that Gilliam held.

It was a long, but narrow package of some sort, carefully wrapped in oilcloth, tied over and around again with a strange, waxy-looking twine. The knots had been put in to stay, yet the girl was able to unravel them with a few tugs. Gilliam helped her, turning the large box as she pulled at corners of the wrapping.

"It's like Yuletide," he said with a grin. Once the wrappings fell free, he carefully folded it. He frowned, looking down at the metal box the girl had exposed. "Impossible," he said, knocking on it. It made a solid, metallic 'thunk.' "It doesn't weigh much more than Varis' sword."

Varis leaned over. "What is in there that's worth going for a swim in this?" he asked, gesturing behind him at the snow that was beginning to fall heavier.

The girl seemed to gather the basics of what the warrior asked. "*Zastra madiiya,*" she answered him, shaking fingers working at the clasps of the sleek metal case. We all leaned close as the girl lifted the lid.

Lodged diagonally across the lid was a scabbard of ash, bound and worked with the same golden metal that adorned the girl's wrists. It swirled and looped from the base to tip, where it ran in three tight rings just below the sturdy hexagonal crosspieces leafed in white gold. The hilt was a simple wrap of white

leather that finished at what looked like a mounting point for a jeweled setting of some sort, of the same white gold as the guards.

Gilliam whistled. "I wouldn't want to leave such a treasure behind, either."

The bottom half of the case held a neatly-folded gown of a bit thicker weave than the one the girl currently wore. Next to that was a black wooden box, lacquered and polished to a high gloss.

With a sigh, the girl stood up, the blanket falling from her shoulders with a sodden 'plop.' She reached down, and began to straighten, lifting the hem higher and higher on her gown.

Varis and I scrambled to turn our backs. The sound of a gloved hand smacking against layers of clothing indicated that Gilliam was not quick enough in averting his eyes.

"Here, let me help you with that," Ana said. There was a rustle of cloth, and instead of hearing another, we heard an almost-metallic jingle -- not the heavy clangor of Varis or Ana's coats of mail, but... I can only describe it as what theirs would sound like if a single breath could disturb the links. There was nothing unpleasant or jarring in the noise. It was almost... musical.

"All right, you may turn around," Ana said, and we turned to see the girl clad in what appeared to be another gown. But there were differences -- the front bodice looked to be adorned with row after row of decorative vertical seams. There was no neckline -- the girl's throat was enclosed in a high collar. From a distance, she would simply appear to be dressed in the high Thyatian formal style.

But no Thyatian had ever worn a dress that gave off a metallic whisper.

Varis and Gilliam both held their hands out, hesitantly, practically drooling. The girl didn't hide the smile as she held out her arms for the two men to run their fingers over the material. The sleeves looked to be just a bit overly long. Indeed, on a normal dress, they would have been. Of course, normal dresses were not intended to protect the backs of her hands.

"Amazing," Varis breathed.

"Durin would weep," Gilliam said.

At that, the girl frowned, here eyes bright, but distant as she appeared to be trying to remember something.

“There now, enough pawing,” Ana said. She shooed the men back and wrapped a wide belt of thick white leather about the girl’s hips. The buckles were of the same white gold as the decorations on the sword’s hilt. Gilliam glanced over at the metal case.

“Gloves, but no shoes?”

The last of the items the girl took from the case was the slim black lacquered box. At a touch and a whispered word, a bluish rune flashed beneath the surface of the lid, fading as she opened the box. Within, nestled on a silken lining, was a golden circlet, fashioned in the same impossibly delicate swirling mesh as the girl’s gauntlets. It seemed barely substantial enough to keep its own shape, and indeed appeared to *flow* through her hair as she settled it across her forehead. Firelight caught the string of three gold-veined stones set along the front: a large clear gem like those adorning her gauntlets flanked by two smaller red stones.

“Should we kneel?” Gilliam asked. “If she isn’t a princess, she’s wearing enough gold to buy a kingdom. I— what’s this?”

He was interrupted as the girl pressed a small felt bag into his hand. She did the same for Varis, Ana, and myself.

“It’s beautiful!” Ana was turning the teardrop-shaped stone over in her hands. It was set in a gold mounting that appeared to be an extension of the veinwork inside the stone, suspended from a gold chain so fine, pixies could have forged it.

Gilliam appeared to be calculating the worth of his own pendant, as he dangled it before his eyes, watching the firelight play off the red-tinged facets.

The girl frowned, waving away our thanks. She mimed slipping the chain about her neck, the motions hurried, impatient.

One after another, we did as she indicated.

Even before the chain had settled about my neck, I was aware of an intense prickling against my skin, almost like the feeling during the lightning storms the previous nights. A nearly undetectable ringing or buzzing tickled at my hearing, hovering just out of hearing. The more I tried to focus on it, the further away it seemed to drift.

“If you keep doing that, you’re going to give yourself a headache,” the girl said. Or rather, that was what I heard, echoing in my mind as my ears heard her speaking her native harsh, somewhat sibilant tongue.

Varis stared, eyes wide with wonder. Gilliam seemed to be adding to whatever value he’d calculated earlier as he held the stone up away from his chest. Ana, though, pulled the chain back over her head, tossing the stone on the ground, backing away from it.

“It was inside my head!” she gasped, running her fingers through her hair. “Such invasive magic is forbidden!”

It took some time to calm Ana down, and for me to relay to her what the girl knew of how the red stones worked their miraculous translation. Oddly enough, Varis and I “heard” the girl’s voice speaking a northern dialect of Traladaran, while Gilliam heard a mix of Ylari and Thyatian. When we were finally able to get Ana to wear her amulet again, she told us that the girl “spoke” to her in Alphatian. After some experimentation, we determined that the girl’s voice was the only one to take on the “echo” in our minds. We still heard each other as we had before. Ana’s Alphatian was still as eerie and alien to my ears as it was during her ceremony, with no translated reverberation over my hearing.

The girl reached for the sword, but Varis placed his hand upon it first.

“Now that we understand each other, I would have your word that you will do us no harm.”

The girl straightened, crossing her arms, the sleeves of her dress singing against each other as she did. Though she stood only a head taller than Varis as he sat, she looked down at him as if she were a giantess.

“If I meant you harm, I could have slit your throat the night we met,” she said.

I was not the only one to shiver a bit, hearing those words from one who appeared no more than a dozen years of age.

“She’s got a point there,” Gilliam said. “She could have done us in any number of times in the night.”

“Even the starving wolf bides its time among the shadows, rather than leap amongst the flock,” Ana said.

“I have no reason to want to harm you. We seem to have a common enemy. Do not hinder my work and we will not have to cross swords.”

“Your word,” Varis pressed, crossing his own arms.

The girl sighed, dropping her arms to her sides. “I cannot give that to you. Or you,” she said, turning to me, “or you,” she continued, turning to Ana.

“Why not?” Gilliam asked, his eyes narrowing.

“I am foresworn.”

“Ah...” Gilliam nodded, a hand going to his chin. “And under what name have you made these prior oaths?”

The girl smiled, something almost sweet, but mostly melancholy. Again, she sighed. “I am bound beyond naming. Deeper than blood and bone and magic. Beyond time itself. Now give me—”

She stopped, her hand pausing as she stretched it towards Varis. She looked past the remains of the bonfire, past the six black pillars, into the sloping curve of the canyon.

Fog roiled, billowing and churning, filling the canyon from wall to wall, flowing silently, steadily forward.

Varis did not object when the girl reached down and popped the sword from the top of the metal case. She snapped the scabbard in place across her right hip, dancing forward and backward a step, adjusting the belt. She flipped the bottom of the case up, and pulled a cloak the color of winter storm clouds from a small compartment, swirling it over her shoulders and flipping her hair at the same time so both settled neatly down her back.

“Showoff,” Ana muttered, hoisting her pack. She gave a vicious tug at the cords binding the leather guard around the blade of her scythe.

The girl turned, staring at the long silver blade. She reached up, hesitantly. “May I...?”

Ana shrugged, and lowered the end so the girl could better see the curved, mirrored surface.

The girl flicked the blade's tip with a finger, closing her eyes as she listened to the note that rang forth. After a deep breath, she opened her eyes, nodding. "Yes. It is good. Nearly one hundred percent pure."

Thunder rolled, distant, but prowling closer. The girl sucked in a sharp breath as red-tinged lightning danced among the clouds.

"Not so brave now, are you?" she murmured, golden eyes watching the play of the lightning. The girl watched the clouds until the flickering dimmed, then went to the closest of the pillars around the pool. She crouched, Varis' dagger suddenly in her hand. She bent close, working the tip against one of the dark stones embedded in the black granite base.

"And you thought I was bad," Gilliam said, trading glances with Ana.

Gilliam tried to help, and got a nasty burn when his dagger nearly melted on making contact with one of the stones. He cradled his fingers, and we glanced between the girl's progress around each of the pillars, and steady creep of the fog.

She dipped each stone into the water of the pool, and dried it carefully with the hem of her cloak before slipping the gems into a pouch Gilliam lent her.

"Just one or two of those would be enough to buy nearly anything you could ever hope to want," the warrior told her.

She ignored him, working the dagger along the edge of the next black gem.

When the girl finally finished, there was perhaps a quarter mile between us and the wall of mists. And still they rolled closer.

"You must stand between the pillars," the girl said, taking one such position. "Quickly! Before the fog overtakes us."

I felt a tingling jolt as I stepped between two of the columns. The hairs on the back of my neck stood straight up, and a sudden, chill sweat broke out over my whole body. The ringing in my ears climbed in pitch, and I winced, shutting my eyes against the sudden pain. Through my eyelids, I saw flickerings of the greenish-blue light. Through the ringing in my ears, I heard the girl's voice, rising and falling in a chant of some sort. I could not make out her words, the translating stone's power seemingly nullified by whatever magic she was working.

The girl's chanting stopped. The ringing in my ears faded along with the chilling tingle along the back of my neck. Her magic, it seemed, was done. The jangling of Varis and Ana shifting their weight came as very loud sounds, as if we were confined to one of the stone shelters along the mountain trail, or holed up in one of the dank chambers beneath Mistamere. Yet we were outside, the walls of the canyon a mile away to either side of us.

I opened my eyes.

Mist curled and eddied. It was held back at arm's length by a shimmering curtain of blue-green light, along a perfect circle around the pool. Reflected along the inner surface of the half-orb of light were the outermost-facing runes of the six pillars. Six copies of the same string of glyphs or letters.

"Oh, very impressive," Gilliam drawled.

A shadow solidified out of the mists, all darkness except for two blazing points of reddish light where eyes might be. A deeper darkness yawned beneath, where a gaping maw might have been. It sprang towards the warrior, a hollow, hungry, keening wail issuing from the thing as it reached with shadowy, smoky talons.

The runes to either side of Gilliam flared, glaring blue-green against the shadow-beast, and the hungry wail melted into a pained shriek as it dissolved under the glare.

Gilliam tried to straighten his cloak as he rose from the cringing, defensive half-crouch.

He cleared his throat. "All right. That was impressive," he said. We politely ignored the tremor, or how his voice cracked.

"Do not be afraid," the girl said. "They cannot harm any of you."

"Unless this barrier fails," Gilliam moaned.

"It will not."

"Every spell fails or fades eventually," Ana said. "What is your plan then?"

"It will not fail or fade."

"So we are to just huddle here, a little flock of sheep while the wolves keep surrounding us in greater numbers?" Ana asked. More and more shadows were

coalescing out of the mist, keeping their distance from the barrier, the number of pairs of deep red eyes growing by the minute.

“There must be... hundreds of those,” Varis murmured. His eyes flicked from side to side. “They move too quickly to count.”

“Too quickly to fight,” Gilliam said.

“They number in the thousands,” the girl said, her voice matter-of-fact, distant, as though the tally of shadow beasts were of a minor concern. Her eyes were a strange, golden-green, reflecting the scintillating light simmering behind the runes along the columns. The runes along the two faces between which the girl stood were slowly lighting up, as if they were containers filling with the blue-green fire.

“So we just wait here while their numbers grow?” Varis asked. “That makes no tactical sense.”

“Ready yourselves,” the girl said. She turned to face her stretch of the barrier.

Again, the icy tingle slithered across my skin, a shock so fierce it burned, like touching iron in the depths of winter.

I felt the hem of my cloak stir, and looked back to see the water in the pool, its surface usually mirror-still, turning. Even as I watched, it turned faster, as if the cook wielding the invisible spoon were growing more and more impatient. The faster the water turned, the more the tingling grew at the back of my neck.

I glanced over to Ana, caught her eye as she, too, was staring wide-eyed at the water.

“Your swords!” the girl called, gesturing towards the pool. She had to raise her voice, for the confines of her barrier were filled with the roaring whisper of the water.

Varis drew his sword, glancing at the girl.

She pointed towards the water again. “Bathe them. To the crosspiece.”

Varis knelt, dipping the tip of his sword into the swirling water. He grunted, resetting his foot as he was nearly pulled off-balance by the tug of the water.

Gilliam crouched, plunging his blades into the water, leaning against the current.

The water cast greenish shadows over the two warriors' faces.

The girl watched the water, swaying a bit, her head moving ever so slightly side to side. I suddenly realized that she was singing — or at the very least timing something, as if to a song. I glanced over to the runes facing her. They blazed, nearing the top of the last pair of symbols.

“Rise!” she called, and Gilliam and Varis both jerked to their feet, Varis immediately falling into Thyatian military parade rest, his sword point-down between his shoulder-width feet. Gilliam assumed a deceptively relaxed posture, the twin short swords low and loose in his hands.

All three blades swirled with the greenish-blue radiance that flickered in the pillars.

“Be ready! On my mark, Varis, strike the pillar.” She indicated the pillar to her right, which was on Varis’ left.

“Ready for what?” Gilliam asked, his voice breaking again.

“To run,” the girl said.

“Run? Where?”

The girl drew her sword, the blade making a gear-like ratcheting as it cleared the scabbard. It had an odd craft to it, with hand-width serrations all along the length, as if it were broken evenly and then reforged.

“Strike!” she cried, and slapped the pillar to her left with the flat of her blade.

Varis did the same, the double chime of metal on stone ringing like a huge golden bell. Suddenly, the radius of the protective circle seemed cramped, the noise crowding us.

The section between those two columns flickered, and then the magic seemed to realign, two green walls flaring to the girl’s left and right, carving a clear corridor through the mist.

The ringing was joined by the shrieking howls of shadow beasts, caught in the glare as the magic flared brighter. Those along the path of the two walls of greenish light were simply cut in half, dissolving into so much smoke and fog.

Without a cue from the girl, we ran, Varis and Gilliam in the lead, followed by myself and Ana.

Behind us, with the lightest of steps and the music of her metallic dress barely audible beneath the sizzling crackle of the barriers to our left and right, the girl laughed as she ran.

We ran until our lungs burned. To our left and right, the shadows paced us, the more hungry or foolish among them throwing themselves into the barriers, only to be met with a spitting sizzle as they dissolved into smoke with a trailing howl.

Not all of the shadows were man-like. Some loped on all fours — or more-than-fours. Some seemed to slither while others simply... undulated. I did not look too closely at those, for they had an uncomfortable number of eyes and mouths.

When our pace flagged, the girl urged us along, her eyes bright, the gold of the circlet and her hair shining.

"Why the rush?" Gilliam gasped. "You said — this wouldn't fade or fail."

"The barrier at the pool would not. But this path grows weaker the further from the pool we go."

"So we run headlong to our doom?"

"We are nearly through, keep going!"

The sizzling hum of the barrier seemed to grow less insistent with every stride. But the fog grew brighter, and as it thinned around us, so too did the shadows within it.

Varis and Gilliam gave shouts as they splashed into a stream. Ana and I both gasped as we followed them, the water an icy pressure against our boots.

The greenish barrier flickered, sputtering, and the girl gave a dismissive slash of her sword. The barrier flared bright, then dissolved back along its own path, distant howls and shrieks bringing a fierce smile to the girl's lips.

"Was that wise?" Varis asked, panting, leaning on his knees.

The girl shrugged. "The mists are too thin here. They cannot follow us."

"Where is here?" Gilliam asked.

The river stretched out of sight into clouds of mist to the left and right, and we could not see the far bank through the fog, either.

"We haven't run that far," Ana said.

“Actually...” the girl hedged. We all glanced at her. “We’re clear of the pool’s canyon. Across this river is a town. Or was, when I was awake last.” She sighed. “If things such as prowl the mists are awake, this is not the valley I once knew, and all my work here has been undone.”

“It took us half a day to hike there,” Varis said.

“It’s no Lightning Road, but I have the means to cross smaller distances quickly.”

“Imagine how much you could make—”

“No,” Ana said.

“You didn’t even let me finish!” Gilliam pouted.

“There are things more important than money,” the young woman said.

“Name three.”

“Defending the world from this unnatural winter,” Ana said. “Finding out what is behind this lightning. Finding who did that to Pazach and stopping them.”

Gilliam stared for a long moment. “Wouldn’t that last one count as four? All right, those are pretty good,” he said, raising his hands to ward off Ana’s glower.

“Not at all what I would have mentioned, mind you, but—”

“I do not even want to think about what is on your list,” Ana said, hitching her pack and adjusting her grip on her scythe. “Which way, then?” she asked the girl.

The girl giggled, and turned slightly to her right and started along the river. “Well it is good to see that some things have not changed,” she said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Gilliam asked, glancing to Varis and myself.

As we walked, the girl sheathed her sword, which rattled as it slid home. She fished into the pouch at her waist, and drew forth one of the black gems, holding it up to a bright spot in the clouds, peering through it. She breathed on it, polished it against the shoulder of her cloak, and then fixed it with a sharp “snap” to the mounting brackets on the pommel of her sword.

It made a perfect fit.

"You have been here before?" I asked the girl, lengthening my stride until I drew beside her.

She nodded.

"It has been some time since then?"

Again she nodded. "Would that I could see the stars, I could give you the span of years. It has obviously been a long while. Your people have rediscovered the secrets of iron and steel. They still floundered with bronze when I was last awake."

"You speak as if there are still more secrets for us to find."

She smiled at that. "I will not be tricked so easily. What secrets your kind will find, they will work out on their own. Secrets without such understanding will only bring doom."

"Do you speak of the Afridhi, or of Blackmoor?"

The girl stopped walking.

"If you speak that name again, I will cut out your tongue," she said. Her expression was guarded, her golden eyes flat. The hand on the hilt of her sword was white-knuckled.

"*Samaam*," I said, bowing.

After a pause, the tension in the girls' shoulders eased, and she relaxed her grip on the sword.

"Those names were ancient, even upon my first awakening. How would you know to guess them?" she asked, as we resumed our march along the riverbank.

It was my turn to smile. "And who is to say they were guesses?"

I poked through my coin pouch until I found Silva's coin. I handed it to the girl, and saw recognition light her eyes as she turned it over and over. She squinted at the reverse side of the coin.

"Newly minted," she murmured, then handed the coin back to me.

"That was given to me by one like yourself."

"The one they called 'Silva.'"

I nodded.

"Sirens always did talk too much," she muttered.

“Siren?’ Like the singers who lure sailors to their deaths upon the shoals around the Isle of Dread?”

The girl’s look of puzzlement was nearly comical.

“You said she looks as I do?”

I nodded. “Except for eyes of silver, and gauntlets of the same.”

“How could you possibly confuse us with those hideous snake-women?” She gathered up a handful of her dress and lifted the hemline towards her knees. “Do you see any scales there?”

“No, but you called her a Siren.”

The girl shook her head. “The years are never kind to languages.” She turned at the sudden splashing behind us, the sword coming free of her scabbard with the metallic chattering song.

Gilliam brought himself up short, skipping back from the tip of the blade that was suddenly at throat level.

“Whoa! I just saw—” He swallowed, glancing my way with a grin. “Sorry, didn’t mean to interrupt your moment, but there seems to be movement—”

The girl dropped her eyes from the tip of her sword to the gem in the pommel. She sucked in a sharp breath, snapping the sword away from Gilliam and spinning, dropping into a low guard position, the sword level across her body.

“Easy,” Gilliam said. “It’s probably just another snow goblin hunting party.”

The shadows that Gilliam had seen in the mists grew sharper. Whatever it was, it was built low to the ground, and indeed walked. Another couple breaths and the mists fell away from the approaching figures.

Gilliam had guessed right: they were the squat forms of snow goblins, drawing to a halt at the edges of the mists ahead of us. The tallest raised a fist.

“Something isn’t right,” Gilliam said, glancing at the girl, and easing his hands towards the swords at his waist.

“Draw,” she said. “These are more a threat to me than you.”

“Why are they just standing there?” Ana asked as she drew nearer.

“And why haven’t we heard them croaking?” Varis asked.

The goblins’ approach had been completely silent.

The goblins' attack was just as silent, charging, overlarge mouths hanging open, yet without any sort of battle cry.

Once they closed to engage, the bloody half-circles rimming their bulbous eyes were frighteningly clear.

I kept close to Ana, knocking the demon-touched goblins aside, and she finished them off with a cold efficiency, her scythe cut shining arcs through air and goblin alike. Oily smoke boiled from the black-edged wounds as the bodies fell limp. To our right, we heard Gilliam and Varis, shouting terse instructions back and forth as they held back the press from that side. Through the blackened blood slicking the blades, I could see a ghostly greenish glow emanating from beneath the surface of their swords.

The girl shouted a harsh word that did not translate through the gem, and the the circlet at her brow began to shine with a glow like that of the sun. Her hair took the same sheen, and the goblins reeled back from the halo as if the light pained them. That hesitation was all she needed, the sword flaring with its own golden light as it cleaved through the first stunned rank.

She did not stop moving, turning, ducking, spinning, her swordwork a blend of effortless parries and vicious thrusts and slashes. Though she danced and weaved among the press, there was no wasted movement. She did not strike to wound, or cripple. And the air was thick with the boiling black smoke as the demons' influence dissolved into the Ether.

The glow surrounding the girl faded slightly, her eyes sweeping across the swathe of bodies. With a nod, she closed her eyes, and sheathed her sword, the nimbus blinking out as the hilt touched the scabbard.

Varis and Gilliam stared for a long while, catching their breath. While they had taken perhaps half a dozen of the goblins between themselves, the girl stood among more than a dozen.

She was not even winded.

"Aurora," Gilliam said.

We all glanced over to him. The girl's brow wrinkled in puzzlement.

Gilliam looked at each of us, and then at the girl. "Aurora. That is what I name you," he said.

She cocked her head. "It does not translate."

"It means... 'Child of the Sun' if I remember my High Thyatian," I said.

"'Child of the Dawn,'" Ana corrected. "Yes, we study the language of the heathens," she said, when Gilliam raised an eyebrow.

"'Child of the Golden Dawn,' actually, but either will do." he said.

The girl blinked slowly. "Aurora," she pronounced, slowly, as though wrapping her tongue around each syllable. She looked up, as if to regard the golden circlet upon her brow, and then turned her gaze down, to her hands, clasped before her. She darted her golden eyes slightly left and right, turning her arms as if she could see through the sleeves of her gown.

"Do you not care for it?" Varis asked the girl, as we picked our way upstream from the battle site.

"I am named. It is so." She shrugged. "Still... at least it doesn't sound dreadfully dwarven, like this 'Silva.'" She let out a genuinely dejected sigh. "That is no name for a Siren. Ah! Here is the bridge that I remember."

She dashed ahead of our group, ignoring Varis' shout, spinning away from his grasp.

"Aurora, wait! There could be—"

We pressed through the fog where she'd vanished, only to find her standing at the far side of the stone arch spanning the river, leaning heavily to one side.

"What is it?" Ana asked, going to the girl's side. She knelt, then gasped as she inspected the girl's foot.

"It will be fine in a matter of minutes," Aurora said, through clenched teeth.

"Burns such as these do not heal in..." Ana's voice trailed off, her blue eyes widening as she watched.

"How...?"

"It is our nature. With a little help," the girl said, lifting the hilt of her sword. The black stone set on the pommel glimmered slightly, pinpoints of purplish light away from the veinwork within, dissolving into the darkness.

We watched the redness fade, the blisters shriveling. It was perhaps ten minutes, and she was able to put her full weight back on the foot. She still did not

step from the bridge, though, but stood regarding the path, the shadows of tumbled-down buildings we could see, looming in the fog.

"It will be dangerous from here," Aurora said. "If I am to walk this ground, I will need all my concentration to work the Healing. You cannot count on my sword."

Varis hefted his blade. "With what you did to our blades, Gilliam and I should be able to handle anything that comes at us."

"The Augment is not permanent. You must fight sparingly if it is to last during your time here."

"How long is this supposed to last?" Gilliam asked.

"As long as you allow it."

"What aren't you telling us?" Ana asked, folding her arms.

"It is a simple Augment," the girl said, as if that explained everything. When she saw that none of us grasped that meaning, she sighed. "So much lost," she muttered.

"You are familiar with the workings of primitive oil lamps? The magic in your swords works in the same manner."

"They burn oil?" Gilliam asked, peering down the length of one of his blades.

Aurora glared at the warrior. "The sword is merely the wick," she said, slowly. "The Augment works on a simple polarity-based relationship."

"All right, now you've lost me, as well," Varis said. "I thought I was doing well up to the 'wick' part."

Aurora glanced over at Ana. "How can you work with them?"

"In order for the magic to burn, it needs fuel," I said. "Much like the flame of the lantern."

"Ah! Yes! You understand!" The girl's worried expression brightened.

"'Polarity-based'" Ana repeated. "Then that would mean..." Sudden understanding lit her eyes, and she practically leapt away from the girl.

"Monstrous!"

"It is a simple equation," Aurora said. "Life for death."

"It doesn't hurt," the girl said. "It's not like they even noticed it."

"Undo it," Ana said.

Aurora stared up at the girl. "I cannot. What's done is done."

Ana slapped the girl, hard, across one cheek, seemed as surprised as Aurora at the ferocity behind the blow.

"They are warriors. This is war. It is the risk all soldiers take. What I give them is a fighting chance against this enemy where before they had none. Or would you shoulder the entire burden? Four blades fight longer than one."

"I—"

"Ana, she's right," Varis said. "You cannot fight alone."

She stared at the warrior, her mouth still open.

"We risk death every time we draw a sword, anyway," Gilliam said. "This 'Augment' simply means we take a demon or two with us when we fall."

"But she—"

"She's given us a means to defend you."

"I do not need—"

I could not tell if Ana was still flushed from her anger, or it was due to embarrassment.

"How long will this last?" Gilliam asked the girl, who was dabbing at the corner of her mouth, even as the gem on the pommel of her sword sparkled anew.

"For the length of time you held your blades in the water.... I would say three, four days at the most."

"And after that, this... reverse-whatever is broken?" Varis asked.

"The Augment remains in place until it fades, or the balance tips too far."

"You mean, until we die," Gilliam said.

"I was trying to spare her feelings," Aurora said, giving Ana a dark look.

Varis nodded. "That gives us plenty of time to make it back to the gateway and through the mountains to get warning to Lord Retameron in Verge. He can then pass word along to the Grand Duke."

Lightning flashed, snaking across the clouds, illuminating the fog with a dim reddish glow. Thunder followed it, a rolling snarl reverberating through the air.

“We cannot leave!”

Ana and Aurora stared at each other, their expressions echoing each others’ just as their voices had.

Gilliam laughed.

“I can do something to lessen the—”

“No,” Ana said through clenched teeth, planting the haft of her scythe firmly, leaning heavily against it as we worked our way north and slightly east away from the village.

After the first half-mile from the river, I’d walked slowly, the girl’s hand on my arm, her eyes distant as she concentrated on keeping her feet.

Soon thereafter, she was the one slowing to match my pace, as the corruption seeped stronger and stronger from the ground with every step, until my stomach finally rebelled.

I refused that first offer of aid.

I tried to refuse again, perhaps a half mile later.

“Nonsense. You slow us down,” the girl said. She tightened her grip on my arm as I got back to my feet, and whispered a few words that the stone would not translate. After several weak-kneed steps, it was as if my awareness of the land’s corruption were stifled in a fog; still there, but distant, obscured. My stomach settled enough that it at least did not cramp.

Ana kept her back straight, her eyes set straight ahead, at the point between Gilliam and Varis’ shoulders.

“Just ask her how much her sorcery will cost you,” the cleric said.

I glanced down at the girl. “Did you—”

“I heard,” she said, her voice distant, with that sing-song cadence voices tend to get when concentrating on too many things at once. She tugged slightly at my arm, and I bent my head down closer.

"This magic does not work in that manner," she whispered. "But if you insist on compensating, then consider her ire your payment."

"You two were getting along so well."

"She is not like the rest of you."

"Well, she is much better looking."

A smile crept into the girl's expression, and she staggered.

"Do not make me laugh. It ruins my concentration."

"*Samaam*," I murmured.

"I meant that she is... different. She is... *foreign*."

That word echoed with many different words through my mind. Whatever it meant in her native tongue, many different ideas crowded their way through that single word: 'stranger,' 'outsider,' 'alien,' 'invader,' 'not of this place.'

"I would not be what I am if I was not uncomfortable in her presence."

I nodded. "All right, I can understand that."

"There is a Power about her that I do not understand."

"I think she would say the same of you."

"I only do what I can to assist. I do not intend harm. Why does she not understand that?"

"What is good for Alphaks is not necessarily good for all of Alphatia," Ana said, from several steps ahead of us.

Aurora frowned. "I do not even know what an 'Alphatia' is."

She lapsed into silence again, the gem flickering brighter, her steps more steady.

After another hours' walk, the mist thinned, sinking until it merely curled and eddied about our ankles. I wish I could say that the wear of the corruption also lessened, but it only grew steadily worse with the passing miles. Gilliam and Varis both finally hauled the shaking, sweating Ana over to Aurora, and the girl slipped further into her trance, the purplish light pulsing faster, as if mimicking a steadily laboring heartbeat.

After only ten minutes by the girl's side, Ana could stand, and after another ten she walked without the aid of her scythe.

“See?” Gilliam said, smiling back at her. “It’s not so bad, is it?”

“I know what those black stones contain. Do you not recognize them from **Koriszegy’s Keep?**”

Gilliam kept smiling. “Sort of poetic, don’t you think, her using a demon to protect you from whatever it is they’ve done to the land?”

“It makes her no worse than them,” Ana said.

“The fate we bestow upon them is far more merciful than that which awaits us at their hands,” Aurora murmured. It was only in the translation’s echo that we were able to catch all of her words, so softly did she speak.

“I have seen—” Ana began, hotly, but the girl cut her off — without raising her voice.

“You have seen but shadows of demons, ragged remnants, stragglers, mangy curs that pick at what is left in the wake of destruction left by their masters.

“When you have seen what is left after they swarm and engulf a village, choked on the ash and smoke that is all that is left of a town and all its people, worked for days on end to put out fires that burn stone and melt it as if it is wax; when you walk through a downpour of the blood of your own people... then let us speak of what you have seen.”

The haze she’d cast over the corruption burned almost completely away under her anger. I gritted my teeth, tried to ignore the oily sweat that trickled down my back. I tugged my hood closer, clutched my cloak tighter about myself, and bent my concentration to taking another step, and then another...

Aurora’s small hand tugging at my cloak drew me from my reverie. I looked up, blinking, took a deep breath. The air tasted cold, but did not have the iron tang to it that the fog carried. I glanced down, and saw coarse brown grass beneath my boots. It did not show signs of the scorching freeze. A step behind me, I saw the arc of smooth, rounded rune-carved stones.

She had guided us to another of the roadside shrines.

“Rest,” she said, and turned towards the low stone altar that stood opposite the tall standing stone. She unclipped her sword and scabbard from her belt, and

with a twist of her wrist, snapped the dark stone from the pommel. She tossed it in her hand, as if gauging its weight, then set it in the center of the bowl-like depression in the altar.

Without a word, she brought the base of the scabbard down on the gem in a sharp, overhead strike, wielding it as if it were a spear.

We all jumped at the sharp 'crack!' of metal upon stone. She brought the scabbard down again, and again.

"How are we to rest if you insist on making that racket?" Ana snapped.

"The dragonstone is spent. I cannot seal or purify it, so it must be destroyed."

"All that magic at your command and you cannot cleanse it?" Ana almost sounded smug.

"I am no Siren. I am a Shrike! Ours is not the task of binding."

Ana walked slowly over to the altar, looking into the depression. "May I..?" She reached in.

Aurora's golden eyes flashed, went wide. "You mustn't!" She made for Ana's hand, and flinched back with a yelp at a sudden burst of silver fire within the bowl.

*"Kaasinteil, kuriva: alluma mindt at kirjah, min ollen alend jenteCypst.
Ei shaadhen se suurelik, vot sivullistin, vot omaisuus."*

The silver light flared, flickered, then died, and Ana fished the black gem from the bowl, holding it between thumb and forefinger.

Aurora took the gem, holding it up against the sky. Her own frown smoothed away into amazement.

"But... you did not sing."

"It is not our way," Ana said.

Aurora stared for a long moment, eyes glimmering. I could almost see the questions piling up behind them.

"Perhaps... we can work together, after all," she finally said.

Ana grinned a grin worthy of Gilliam. "Enemy of my enemy," she said.

Aurora's smile was slower in coming, as it seemed she had to listen to many different layers of meaning in what Ana had said. She nodded, then lifted her

sword, turning it horizontal, holding it up before Ana. She bowed her head. "Any aid in the fight against the Eternal enemy is welcome."

"Keep your sword, for I am forbidden to touch any but those weapons sanctified at the Citadel. That is not to say that I do not welcome your sword at my side. And while I may not agree with your use of these — 'dragonstones' you call them?— I cannot argue with their results." She regarded the girl's offered sword for a moment longer, then shifted her scythe to her other hand. She spit on her free palm and held it out to the shorter girl.

Aurora raised an eyebrow, another smile quirking her lips. She spit into her own hand, and clasped it with Ana's.

"Well, that's certainly one way to kiss and make up, I suppose," Gilliam said with a sigh.

We rested for several hours, leaning against the large, white standing stone, soaking in the summer-like warmth it radiated. Aurora paced just inside the circle of stones. Her left hand rested lightly on the hilt, relaxed, but ready to draw at a moment's notice. She'd clamped a fresh dragonstone into the white-gold setting on the pommel of the sword, and the stone flickered and pulsed with purple motes of light.

"You shouldn't need to heal while within the stones, should you?" I asked her.

"It is a Blind working now, not a Healing." Her voice held the distant, distracted tone to it.

Green-gold light welled up from each rune as she passed, the light flowing from rune to rune, stone to stone, matching her progress around the shrine's perimeter.

"The deception makes me itch," Ana grumbled.

"You would rather the horsemen saw us and captured us?"

"What—" Gilliam began, then glanced down the road in the direction we'd come. Quiet, distant, but growing steadily louder, closer, came the drumming of perhaps four or five horses at a gallop.

Aurora did not speed up her pace, nor did she slow it, even as Varis and Gilliam tensed.

“They will not even glance our way,” the girl said.

Sure enough, the riders — men in dark leathers and simple black-banded steel helms — went by without even a glance to the side, leaning low over the necks of their mounts, short riding capes snapping behind them.

“They have gone,” Ana said, as the sound of the riders was swallowed by the mists and distance. She was rubbing at her mail-clad arms.

Aurora stopped, and the light faded from the rune near her feet, the gem on her sword going dark. “We must be on our way,” she said.

“But we just got comfortable!” Gilliam said, stretching his arms above his head.

“We must go,” the girl said, and started across the shrine, heading for the roadway.

“You can’t mean to follow those riders,” Varis said.

Aurora turned, cocked her head to one side. “Of course. This is the road to Byxata.”

“Is that where they were headed?”

She shrugged. “We are to go there.”

“Follow a group of men who’s motives we don’t know?” Ana asked.

“We won’t learn anything unless we follow them,” I said. “The more information I can gather for the Hierarch, the better he can lay his plans.”

“Come,” Aurora said, beckoning us as she turned back to the road. “It is not much farther. Perhaps another league. And then there will be no more sleeping on the ground. We will go to Nindesh’s estate.” She caught her breath. “Or rather... the estate of Nindesh’s descendants.”

“Who is—”

Gilliam threw his hands up in the air, and took several short, running steps. Despite slipping back into her trancelike state, Aurora moved quickly, as if she was eager for this trek through the demon-tainted landscape to end.

As the nausea chewed at the edges of my perception, I could not help but match her sentiment.

The roadway rose steadily, the ground becoming rockier, the paving stones becoming less and less of a ruin, and more of a proper thoroughfare. The hazy distance resolved itself into the looming wall of the valley. The road arced away from us, then rose in a sharp series of switchbacks, climbing into a wide cleft in the mountainside. Within that division between the folds of the mountain valley, a city had been partially carved from the mountains, and other buildings of the same dark granite rose in mist-shrouded ranks, peeking from above a low wall of dressed stone.

The windows of many of the buildings glowed with a warm yellow-orange light of candle and firelight, visible even as distant as we were, due to the evening shadows already beginning to claim the town.

After a brief pause, we hitched our packs higher, and started towards the switchback.

“Wait!”

Aurora’s voice was not the least bit distant, or distracted. The brittle edge of worry threaded her tone, and I at least stopped with something of a shiver.

“This is the right city, isn’t it?” Ana asked.

“Yes, but—”

“Well then, let’s see this ‘Nindesh’ fellow,” Gilliam said. “Much as I like the great outdoors, my back could use a nice feather bed.”

“No,” Aurora said. She held a hand low, in a warning gesture. “There is something... not right.”

‘*Wrong,*’ ‘*unclean,*’ ‘*dangerous,*’ and ‘*unknown*’ whispered atop each other in the speaking stone’s translating echo.

“She’s right,” Varis said, setting a hand on Gilliam’s shoulder. “All those ruined villages we passed, and then this? Think about it.”

“They fled, gathered behind walls,” Gilliam said.

“Why so few men upon those walls, then?”

I squinted. I could only make out four men patrolling the long curtain walls, the movement of the two pairs the only way I could pick them out from stone in the gloom.

“Perhaps a changing of the guard.” Gilliam did not sound convinced.

“Weapons close, hoods up,” Varis said, and pulled the lined hood of his cloak lower, his eyes on the paving stones. While they were more or less solid, they still canted at odd angles every now and then, the passing made the more difficult with the dusting of snow and patches of ice.

It would be just our luck to survive demons and goblins and the Pale Walkers only to slip on a patch of ice and break our necks.

The black walls of Byxata were not particularly high, just half again as tall as a man. But the switchback trail leading up to it had not even a shred of cover. I doubt any invading army would get much further than the first turn. Luckily, we made our way up the four turns in the road without so much as an arrow or sling stone’s challenge.

The gate was oak, banded with iron. Aurora gave a surprised-but-agreeable murmur and nod as she glanced over the defenses.

“Who goes?” barked a harsh voice from above. “Give us a touch of light, my pet. There’s a good girl.”

A dim white globe materialized above us, its weak, watery light growing steadily brighter, until it cast enough light to lift the worst of the shadows from our features.

“Hoods, please,” the man above said. Now that the light fell upon him, we could see the bright red of his wavy hair, a coppery sheen to his complexion — Glantrian stock if I ever saw it. Those features crinkled in a frown. His companion, a girl probably little older than Ana, stood next to the man, all but her head and shoulders hidden by the battlement. Her eyes were wide and dark, her features slack, as if she were in a trance deeper than Aurora’s.

“I recognize none of you,” he growled.

“Didn’t the baron’s man make it?” Gilliam asked, adding a layer of contempt to his voice to match that of the man on the wall. “Figures he wouldn’t, what with all the trouble we had getting here.”

“Your names,” the red-haired man on the wall enunciated, leaning further over. “Or I will have the girl incinerate you where you stand.”

An icy tingling across my skin became more pronounced, separating itself from the clammy sheen of the demonic taint of the land, from the cold in the air. Beside me, Ana's hand tensed on the haft of her scythe.

The glassy-eyed girl was a weaver, like Listelle and Nevinia, and she was gathering her Power.

"We have been on the road for nearly a week now," Gilliam drawled, hooking a thumb in one of his sword belts. "We've been through two avalanches, nearly drowned twice in icy water, lost both of our pack mules. We've had to fight off hordes of those shambling dead things, and then sleep on cold ground with what bit of fire we could get from all this winter-soaked wood. At this point, I may just keep quiet so I can at least die warm."

The Glantrian on the wall tipped his head back and laughed. The girl seemed to rouse from her thoughts, a small smile quirking her lips. The tingle of her Power did not diminish, though.

"So you're the Baron's men, then?"

Gilliam shook his head. "I don't give a tarnished silver for the Baron. His man, Bargle pays me, so I answer to him. And he's paying in gold, so whoever this is he's having us escort had better be worth the effort."

Gilliam gave Aurora a hard shove in the back, and she squawked as she stumbled forward. He'd managed to grab her cloak in such a way as to twist it enough to hide her sword, but cause the hood to fall back. Her hair shone, golden, then sliver as the globe of watery light wavered above us.

The icy prickling surged, then subsided abruptly.

"Michka! Open that gate! Be quick, our guests are cold, tired, and hungry."

"What are you playing at?" Ana hissed, as there came a great clanking and clattering on the other side of the wide wooden gate.

"We need information, this seems like the best way to get it. Just keep quiet and let me do the talking. Especially you," he jabbed a finger at Ana's chest. "It's going to be hard enough explaining away that tabard without you opening your mouth."

“Let me guess,” Varis said, taking the sword Aurora had unclipped from her belt. “Heavier than it looks,” he murmured. “Big dumb guard?”

“Just scowl a lot. And look dangerous.”

I straightened my back, squaring my shoulders. I shifted my grip a bit higher on my staff.

“That looks a bit more Child-of-Winter-like,” Gilliam said, with a wink.

The gates rattled open, and I took a deep breath.

Byxata — to the day of this writing — is unlike anything I have ever seen. Built into a funnel-shaped cleft in the valley wall, the city is never fully enclosed in stone. Rather, it is embraced: the main “cavern” was shaped like a great inverted bowl, the top split asunder and open to the steel-gray skies above. It seemed like every available surface was pocked with windows or balconies. Several of the residences — or perhaps they were businesses — were marvels of what I can only call reverse-terracing, following the fold of the canyon-like channel to the sky. Looking up, I saw several platforms supported by great iron chains, and long planked walkways criss-crossed the dizzying space between the canyon walls.

The ceiling of the great bowl was not freestanding, but rather was supported in at least a dozen irregular places by huge pillars of stone, each one dotted with windows and exposed stairways. Two great columns that were situated close to each other were linked at several levels by more of the swaying, planked bridgeways.

Five long streets stretched away from the main plaza before the gate, and the floor of the cavern (I can only call it such, though I’m sure Kuric or Durin would know a more ‘technical’ term for it!) was crammed with stone buildings, as if the streets were chiseled out between the great blocks of stone.

We were met by a contingent of sable-and-argent garbed guards, one with silver fringe along the shoulders of his cloak kneeling to inspect the girl. He produced a folded parchment, and checked it as he regarded Silva’s twin.

A crackling at the edge of my hearing, in the same spot as the translating echo, cued me to another working of Aurora’s. And sure enough, a cool white light

flickered within the clear gem adorning her circlet. Like moonlight on clear water, her features seemed to shine ever so slightly, a strange wavering about her eyes as she blinked, or shifted her gaze.

The captain of the guards stood, refolding the parchment and tucking it into a pouch at his belt.

“She matches the description. We will take her from here.”

“Ah, not quite,” Gilliam said. “My instructions were to hand her over to the man in charge here, and not to let her out of my sight until then. Slippery little thing, this one. But we’ve seen all her tricks. Don’t want to hand her over just to have her pull one over on you and escape. Whatever mess you made to get you positioned here, don’t go making it any worse by having to include the Baron’s prize escaping in a report back to the Halag.”

The guard’s eyes hardened, a vein in his forehead beginning to stand out.

“And don’t go weighing that against the price the Baron has on her head. He won’t pay it twice. Trust me, she’s not worth the gamble. Now, either show us to some quarters and a hot meal, or take us to whoever is in charge of operations here.”

“What seems to be the problem, Captain?”

A stocky, broad-shouldered man strode up behind the line of guards. He was of height with Varis, with hair almost the color of rosewood, sporting a close-cropped beard somewhat darker. He wore a long coat of some gleaming yellow fabric, slashed at the sleeves with bands of red. A shirt of fine linen was visible beneath the coat, a wide belt of something with alternating black-and-green scales with a large golden buckle at his waist. His dark breeches were tucked into boots that matched the belt.

“Well... what have we here?” he asked. He spoke with a distinctly Klantyrn accent, and his muddy brown eyes were bleary, as if he’d partaken of a bit too much of his homeland’s famously potent brandy. “A bit young, though. Have to go as far as Thyatis to find a buyer. I hear they like them young and pretty there...”

“If you weren’t so deep in your bottles, Golithar, you’d see that this is the one the Baron has had us looking for,” said a young woman, standing slightly behind the man. Her long blonde hair was unkept, and looked as if she’d just been roused

from bed. She was dressed in a plain grey gown, unadorned save for a shimmering sliver choker upon her neck.

I had to take a second glance — it was not a choker, but a collar, for a thin cord trailed from a complex catch to disappear up Golithar's right sleeve. His hand curled around the cord, and he gave it a vicious yank, causing the woman to cry out as she sank to one knee, her eyes closed tightly, teeth clenched against some sort of intense pain.

"Of course I know who she is," the man growled, giving the lead a twist. The woman gave another yelp, her back arching, and her hands clawing at the paving stones. "I may have to rethink allowing you to keep your name, Jolenta, if this is how you will behave before visitors."

"I am humbled, Master Golithar," the woman gasped, pressing her forehead to the stones between her hands.

He glanced down at her, sneered, then gave a dismissive flick of his wrist, the handful of cord dropping from his fist. The woman nearly collapsed, biting back a sob.

"I'll be delivering the rest of your punishment later." He didn't snarl those words, but purred them, as one might coo a promise to a pet cat or bird. There was no anger in his tone, just a chilling note of certainty. "On your feet, so we can show our guests to suitable quarters."

The woman — Jolenta, he'd called her — staggered to her feet before he could give another yank of the silvered tether.

"This way," Golithar said, turning with a self-important swirl of yellow. The guards fell in to either side of us as we followed the man, the young woman having to skip to keep up with his long-legged pace.

Golithar led us down the first avenue from our left. It wasn't far, past several short, blocky buildings to a long two-story building that looked to be carved entirely from the same piece of stone — I could see no seam, no trace of mortar. He and Varis had to duck through the doorway, and still had to watch their heads once inside.

The interior was much like the ruined home where we'd encountered Sheska and Pazach: low-ceilinged, with flowing curves of stonework, rather than angles. A long counter of glassy-topped stone flowed along the wall immediately to our right, stone cubbies behind it filled with bottles and jars — some looking quite old, others obviously more recent in origin.

Instead of goblins, though, men sat upon low stone stools, hunched over cups and tankards. They were all dressed in some variation of the Black Eagle's colors, some still armored from their watches, others bundled in robes and coats, huddling closer to one of the three hearths that lit and warmed the great room. Spaced between the wide common room were four broad camp tables and benches.

"Those roads are chilling in more ways than one," Golithar grumbled, and gestured towards the far end of the bar. "A shot or two of my third cousin's finest will put some fire back in your bellies. Might take the edge off from anything you might have... stumbled across... out in those blighted fogs." He gave a shudder, and reached into his coat, uncapping a flask and taking a long drought.

At his side, the young woman winced, making a face as if she were the one swallowing the fiery brew. Catching the look from the corner of his eye, the big man just laughed.

Gilliam took a seat at the far end of the bar, tapping the glossy surface of the counter. "You heard the man. A round of his cousin's finest."

At a nod from Golithar, the weasely-looking man serving as barkeep splashed a measure of a deep brown liquor into four small glasses. He was careful to cap and place the bottle back into its respective cubby, licking his fingers.

Gilliam handed a glass to Varis, and waved the man over to the closest of the tables. The warrior took Aurora by the arm, and sat her roughly next to him. Her sword, I noticed, was within her reach, but she and Varis both studiously ignored it, he concentrating on the brandy, Aurora on schooling her features and their layer of illusion to looking suitably weary and disheartened.

"Quite the operation you have going here," Gilliam said, his voice rough as he blinked a tear from his eye. "This has got to be the second worst brandy I've ever tasted."

Golithar laughed. "I said it was my third cousin's best, not that *he* was the best."

"No mistaking that," Gilliam said, finishing off his measure.

"You seem surprised," Golithar said.

"Bargle mentioned a 'camp.' Not an entire city."

"He didn't exactly say anything about the gnolls, or avalanches, or walking dead, either," Varis grumbled. The brandy did wonders towards making him sound grizzled and menacing.

"He never is one to exaggerate," our host said, nodding.

"Why so of the way?" Gilliam asked. "Honestly, Halag or Kelvin make for a bit more convenient ports of call."

"I like to think of things here as... inconvenient for meddlers. Not exactly the sort of place you just... wander into." Golithar's eyes narrowed as he took another swig from his flask.

I hadn't touched my glass — truth be told, the fumes alone were enough to make my nose itch and my eyes to sting. Still, the slight warmth that had provided turned suddenly cold.

"If you're not going to drink it, I will," the warrior said, then winced as he downed half of my shot.

The chill of my apprehension solidified, sliding like a spike of ice down my spine. I had enough time to draw in a sharp breath before the very air seemed to harden around me, and it was difficult to tell where the chill of the casing of air and the crawling, icy prickle that warned of a weaver holding one or more powers from the Spheres left off.

Gilliam grasped for his swords, blinking rapidly, leaning heavily on the bar. His forehead was beaded with sweat. His fingers fumbled at the hilt, and he'd almost grasped one of them before he collapsed with a groan. Behind me, I heard a jingling clatter as Varis toppled over.

Golithar shook his head, bending down to relieve Gilliam of his swords. He placed them on the bar, then peeled one of the warrior's eyes open.

"Sad, isn't it, that a man can't keep his drink?"

He waved his fingers, and I watched, immobilized, as the Black Eagle's guards moved in.

Waxing half moon of the Deep Snows (on or about Kaldmont 12 - 17, 997AC)

"Honestly," Golithar said, reclining on the bench on the other side of the iron bars, "did you expect me not to question the appearance of a servant of the Flame? This one is far, far too young to be so jaded as to make company with slavers. Still, if what they say about priestesses of the Silver Flame is true.... Well, I might be able to curtail operations here with what I make off of you."

The scraping rattle of chains against stone seemed overly loud in the large cell. Ana huddled even further into the corner, her chin tucked behind her knees. The beginnings of a nasty bruise along her cheek was visible behind her hair.

"Bit one of the guards, Aurora tells me," Varis said, following my gaze.

"You and Gilliam are all right?" I asked.

"Aside from a headache the likes I haven't had since I got into grandda's ale when I was just a boy.... I think we're in one piece. I should ask the same of you."

My shoulders ached, as did my wrists, but it looked as if that was from the pinching of the iron manacles. My eyes burned, and a strange taste coated my tongue. Slight pain pulsed behind my eyes, almost as if I'd spent too long reading by the light of a single candle.

"Most likely that is from whatever was on the cloth they smothered you and Ana with," Gilliam said, when I described the feeling to him. "It sees common use among Ylari clans. Much easier than actually clubbing a sultan's daughter."

"So civilized, those Alaysians," Golithar agreed.

"So that's it? We're to be sold into slavery?" Gilliam asked. I noticed he kept his voice very low, as if speaking too loudly would make his head fall off.

"Oh, not you," our captor said with a chuckle. "Certainly not. Not worth the price of the zzunga fruits to keep that will of yours broken." He sighed. "No, you'll go to Zadamar to fuel his little ceremony." He waved a hand in a vaguely dismissive gesture.

"Do you not know, or simply not care that he is warping the weather, and flooding this valley with demons?" Ana asked.

"Zadamar pays in gold. Handsomely. That is what I know," Golithar said. He rose, and unlocked the door. "Bring her."

Jolenta emerged from where she'd been huddled in the shadows beside the bench. The icy wash, though dulled through my contact with the iron in the manacles, still tingled along the back of my neck.

Aurora gave a yelp, and there came a fitful rattling of chains from the far side of the cell.

The prickling intensified, creeping up along my scalp, and Jolenta's outstretched hand began to shake.

"I cannot.... She's slippery as an eel!" the woman hissed, her brow furrowing in concentration.

"He said that iron would dampen her magic!" Golithar growled, clenching a fist.

"Well, if this is what she's like restrained..." Jolenta panted.

The big man frowned. "Don't be such a light touch. If she can put up that kind of resistance, then she won't break."

He raised his left hand, made a twisting gesture. The trickle of ice against my skin turned to a torrent of needles, so cold as to burn.

Aurora's yelp of surprise was choked off as she was lifted suddenly off her feet. Golithar didn't stop there, though, and with another flick of his wrist, hurled the girl into the iron bars with the force to rival a giant. The girl gave a sharp cry as she slammed back-first into the bars, held pinned against them, a good arm's length between her dangling feet and the floor.

"We can do that again," Golithar purred up at her, "or you can come along quietly."

Unfocused though her eyes were, she still managed to glare at the man, and she mumbled a curse the translation of which echoed with so many animals and bodily references my headache only increased as I tried to piece any two of them together.

The stones upon Aurora's forearms flickered to brighter life, pulsing, gold spinning through the white light. It looked as if candlelight were fighting to stay lit in a fierce wind.

Golithar's eyes narrowed, and the cords in his neck began to stand out.

I saw Gilliam and Varis both exchange wide-eyed looks.

Aurora's eyes widened, then, as well, and she thrashed about, as if she were under water. We could see her struggling for breath, growing weaker with each twist of her shoulders. As her eyes drooped shut, the dragonstones flickered and went dark, and she went limp.

Golithar straightened, and the girl collapsed over one of his broad shoulders.

"You were always a better weaver of air than I," he said, brushing a finger over Jolenta's jawline.

He hauled the cell door shut, giving the key a businesslike turn as he strode from the dungeon, Aurora over one shoulder, Jolenta following at his heel, the silver cord between them swaying out of time with their steps.

The chains and manacles were well maintained. Their mountings in the walls were relatively fresh, and showed no signs of budging, even against all our combined strength. Of course, even if we had freed ourselves of our bonds, there was no way for us to get through the iron bars — the door was securely locked, and Golithar apparently the only one with a key. The guards who brought us our meals simply slid the tray of hot broth, bread, and water through a slot on the bottom of the door barely wide enough for the cups to pass under.

Perhaps other Druids' tales are full of adventure, a battle around every corner, orc camps a-plenty for heroes to slay. Unfortunately, mine is not such a tale, and this particular portion was full of waiting, and a dwindling of hope as the days stretched on.

Ana passed much of her time in meditation, her brow furrowed as she sought connection to her Flame even through the interference of the iron binding her. I, too, meditated much of the time, and was amazed to feel that the stone around us yet lived. Oh, it had been cut, and carved out, but it was not the dead stone-and-mortar of Mistamere, or the Vaults that lined the Black Woods near Threshold.

If dwarves had not crafted this place, then who had?

After that first day, we gave up on discussing options for escape — it was quite obvious we were not going to escape on our own. Lack of weapons aside,

how did one fight against an opponent who could simply bind you in place with currents of air?

I awakened from a fitful bout of sleep to a warmth against my leg. The lump of quartz the Hierarch had given me — which the slavers had let me keep since it was ‘just a rock’ — was radiating just enough heat as not to burn me.

It shed a soft glow, perhaps as bright as a tallow candle, and across the largest facet, I could see the hazy image of the Hierarch peering back at me. His smile was warm, but seemed strained.

“I can assume that since you have had difficulty reporting back that there has been... trouble?”

“As you say, Hierarch,” I rasped. I do not think I had spoken in a day and a half, maybe two days.

“But you are well?”

“‘Sick slaves bring no gold’ as Gilliam would say, my Lord,” I answered.

“Captured, and making jokes?” Gray brows met. “The weather has worsened, by a tenfold, at least. The slower moving rivers have begun to freeze. Kelvin is now only accessible by road, and those are snowed in or iced over.”

“So the Grand Duke can only mobilize men, and perhaps mounts,” Varis whispered.

“And with no supplies, what good is an army?” Gilliam asked.

“Tell us what you have learned, Journeyman.”

I narrated an account of what we had learned, punctuated at times by Varis or Gilliam’s tactical observations. Ana chimed in with a terse recounting of the dealings with Pazach. By some unspoken agreement, none of us mentioned Aurora.

“I shall discuss your findings with the Circle.” With that, the crystal went dark and cold.

“There will be no rescue. No reinforcements,” Varis said.

“Could you work any harder to crush our hopes?” Gilliam muttered. “I don’t understand how your Hierarch can just... leave you here. He knows where you are, and that we are in danger, and yet he does nothing!”

“And how many trees do you see around here, for him to walk his Greenwardens through?” Ana asked.

“He... he could warn the Grand Duke.”

“The Grand Duke cannot just march an army up the canyon,” Varis said. “If the roads were even clear, surely the mountains are not. It was bad, just getting here. And now they say conditions are even worse.”

“Besides,” Ana said, “we are unharmed. Warm. Dry. Fed twice daily. Were it not for the chains, I would say these people treat me better than you do.”

It was some time later that my skin once again tingled, scalp itching with that icy prickling of a weaver invoking her power. Ana and I both found our hands and jaws immobilized, though thankfully they did not choose to cut off our air. Two men in roughspun traveling garb stepped into the hallway outside our cell, the strange slivery tethers trailing from their righthand sleeves, and secured to collars around the necks of another pair of girls, dark of hair, perhaps of an age between Aurora and Ana. Their dark eyes glittered feverishly in the torchlight, and they watched Ana and I closely.

Three guards in the Black Eagle’s livery crowded into the corridor, unlocking the cell and ushering us out. We were led through a series of anterooms and hallways, and then to a staircase. Surprisingly, the steps led downward, and after the fourth flight, it became clear that we had been imprisoned in one of the huge stone support pillars. While we passed numerous doors — all of iron-bound oak and of fairly recent construction — we did not see a single window.

The stale, somewhat smoky air within the corridors grew noticeably less so, and one of the guards led us through a door set within a wider archway. The fresh breeze was welcome, despite the stinging cold.

Ana groaned, as we stepped onto the wide balcony, pressing as closely to the wall of the great stone pillar as the guards would allow.

My own stomach did something of a flop as I glanced over the edge of the balcony. It tried to climb up into my throat when the gust of wind caught my cloak, tugging me half a step before I could check my balance. Ana’s idea suddenly did not look so bad.

Barely visible in the gloom, another of the vast pillars loomed, and we were led towards a rope bridge.

An ice-rimmed rope bridge, with ice-slicked wooden planks.

An ice-rimmed bridge which swayed in the gusting winds with an uncomfortable crackling and groans to rival those of Ana....

Glasslike, the ice either cracked beneath our boots, or tried to send our boots out from under us — and that usually just when the wind gusted the hardest, when scarlet lightning slithered across the sky, or a snarling rasp of demon-voiced thunder bellowed from the storm above. At every growling, rumbling boom of thunder, Ana stopped, hunching against the thick rope that served as the handrail of the rickety bridgewalk. She and I could not actually clutch those ropes, merely lean against them as best we could to keep our balance — not that that was a simple task with eighteen other pairs of boots jostling and bobbing the expanse.

I lost count of how many flights of stairs we descended. Our captors, at least, were not inhuman — they, too, were winded from the exertion, and we stopped twice to rest and refresh ourselves with clear, crisp water in alcoves that seemed designed for just that purpose. Ana and I were able to drink, our hands and jaws were released from their invisible bonds for the duration of the rests. The guards kept close watch on us: standing well within striking distance, hands ready on the hilts of their swords.

It was particularly eerie, though, watching how the two men leading the gray-robed girls treated their charges. One, the older, barely paid the girl any mind, and she did not lift the cup in her slack-fingered grip unless instructed. The other man held the cup, stroking the girl's dark hair, murmuring to her between sips.

Ana made a point to turn her back on them.

"I don't understand," Gilliam said. "It is obvious that those girls are weaving. But why do they wear those collars?"

"The same reason they collar dogs," Ana spat.

"I have never heard of such a thing," Varis said.

"How much do you think—" Gilliam started, rubbing at his chin. He swallowed his question at Ana's stormy glare.

“But, with those powers — to be able to lift a man and throw him across the room like an ogre...”

Ana turned her glare on the other warrior. “Which is precisely why the Flaems collar their weavers.”

“To weaken them?”

“To control them.”

We were again wrapped in bonds of hardened air, and led down the last stretch of winding stairs. Save the occasional murmur of one of the men to his gray-robed charge, and the clanking rattle of our armed escort, the final descent was made in silence.

We emerged in a large cave-like room, lined with rows of wooden shelving. Those shelves were lined with various sized boxes, from one that might hold a quill pen and ink all the way up to small crates, the likes of which I'd seen fine Alaysian glasswork shipped in. From the bales of hay we saw stacked along one wall, it was likely that whatever was being packed needed protection. Though, how on Mystara were they to get a crates, let alone an entire cart-load of them, out of the Valley if the passes were clogged with snow? Not to mention the damage we had wreaked upon the gate and what was left of the bridge leading up to it.

Gilliam and Varis both looked around, no doubt drawing the same conclusions I had. We were prodded past more rows of shelves, these holding metal boxes, all the same size, about a hand's width on all sides. Shelf upon shelf of them, some stacked two high. Whatever was inside them, the container masked any sort of magical radiance, but I did not get the feeling that it could be anything good.

We were not alone in the storeroom. Further towards the front, where the wide mouth of the cavern opened into a broad plaza, men were hard at work, loading crates and boxes into several horse-drawn carts. A ringing 'crack' of a whip sounded whenever the men did not work fast enough, but the distance and echoes drowned out any meaning behind the sharp words of the burly red-haired man with the whip.

One of our guards approached the work gang's leader, and after a brief discussion and much pointing, we were herded onto the low-sided cart the burly man had indicated.

Low benches lined either side of the cart, and we were pushed onto them, guards spaced between us, the weavers and their keepers seated to one side of Ana and I. At a word from one of the keepers, the broad-shouldered man driving the wagon gave a snap of the reins, and we jostled away from the loading area, across the plaza, and down the wide avenue to the main gate.

Varis' questions as to where we were being taken were met with silence. The guards pretended they did not hear, the gray-robed girls were lost in maintaining the bonds upon Ana and I, and their keepers simply sneered, and then went back to looking ahead, down the recently-restored road. To one side or another, every so often, we saw more work gangs, these men bundled in poorly-maintained furs, shoveling the worst of the snows from the road, while others threw handfuls of salt along the exposed surface.

The clouds had grown darker, crept lower since we'd been imprisoned. Where they had been a deep, steely gray, now they loomed, bloated, the color of deep bruising, a so deep a blue it looked nearly black.

The snows, too, looked... I can only describe it as "sickly." Perhaps a trick of the lighting, the sun trying to fight its way through the thick cloud cover, but the flakes were heavy, lopsided, some appearing jaundiced, others ink-stained. Then they drifted down upon brow or cheek, they did not feel as cold as snow should, and left an oily sheen as they melted. Ana's pale features took on a grayish cast, her nostrils flaring, her nose wrinkling. I could not tell if she shivered with the cold, or if it was anger at the touch of the corrupted snows.

Anger and sadness warred within me, as well. This Zadamar was turning the deepest of druidic secrets to some foul purpose. And it seemed that we were being brought to the place where the corruption in the skies and land met; looming ever closer, a black spire reached up from a rocky outcrop, seeming to simply smooth and flow upward, as though grown, not worked from stone itself.

As with the great pillar in which we were imprisoned, the Black Tower was living stone. I knew the moment we stepped from the back of the cart, the instant my boots touched the sandy floor at the base of the tower. It was alive.

And it was in great pain.

The base of the tower looked to have at one point been used as stabling. A half-dozen stalls still stood, nearly hidden behind bales of hay and sacks and boxes that no doubt contained tack and harness, oats and barley for the horses.

More rows of shelving lined the center portion of the chamber, these lower than the others, and almost entirely filled with the metal boxes. Groups of men were busy at the furthest row of shelves, removing the metal boxes from inside a larger, straw-lined crate.

“You’d think it was Milenean fire in there, the way they handle those little boxes,” Gilliam muttered.

This earned him a jab in the ribs from one of the guards, and we were led up a gap between the shelves, towards the staircase that looked to wind all the way up the interior wall of the tower.

I tried pressing close to the wall, to avoid even an accidental glimpse of the growing distance to the tower’s floor, and was lashed with a ghostly impression of the stones’ agony — fiery, searing flashes of pain, followed by an ache like that of a rotting tooth. I staggered, and were it not for one of the guards’ hands to steady me, surely would have stumbled right off the stairs.

Signs became clearer the higher we climbed: the smooth wall to our right grew gradually warmer to the touch. Not the warmth of summer sun upon stone, though, but a slick, feverish warmth that pulsed ever so slowly. The streaking in the dark granite was nearly unnoticeable, a blood-red wisp here or there. Those veins became thicker, interweaving the higher we climbed. Quite the opposite of cracks within the stone, the tangled network protruded from the wall, as if they were welts, raised from the demonic lashing of the lightning that continued, even as we drew nearer the top of the tower.

“If your storm keeps going at this pace, I will need another crop of stones.” The voice was deep, but feminine, and I almost didn’t recognize it without the smoky reverberation.

“Seven days, Jaleel. You have seen what happens to stones left for any shorter time. To push any further risks discovery. There are already intruders in the Valley. They must be dealt with before we embark on the next phase.”

The figure kneeling before the brazier nodded, the hooded back of her head bobbing. Then she turned, looking over her shoulder, as we were filed into the chamber at the top of the Black Tower.

“Oh, not to worry, First Child. They will be dealt with.” The woman’s lips turned up in a slow, catlike smile.

It was as if we were replaying a scene from many weeks ago: filed into a tower room, a great brass orrery ticking away before us, filling the majority of the chamber. The other available space between the wide windows taken up by long, curved tables filled with bits of metallurgic craftings, books and parchments.

The stonework between the chamber windows of Korizegy’s tower held black metal sconces and torches. The stonework here, though, seemed to be the source of the bulging, pulsing, cancerous veins of stone intruding on the natural black granite. Nestled in the center of each was a gaping wound in the stone, puckered and festering around a crystal of smoky, reddish stone. Each of these flickered and pulsed, the light imitating that of the coals on the brazier.

A smoky figure hovered in the gray-green cloud of smoke roiling above the brazier, thin-faced, long of hair and beard. It glanced our way, squinting, the eyes appearing to sink into deep caverns in the already gaunt features. The high forehead wrinkled into a scowl, wispy hair trailing into smoky haze as the figure turned those eyes back to the figure kneeling before it.

“What are you playing at, Jaleel?” the figure wheezed in a smoky rasp. “This was not as we discussed.”

“Yes, First Child, I believe it is.”

“You were forbidden contact with them, and were simply to oversee their transportation to the temple. Nothing more.”

“And I told you their bodies were much more valuable than their blood.” The woman rose slowly to her feet. “I have given you one who’s blood is far more valuable in exchange for these.” She waved her hand behind her, in our general direction.

“Return them to their cells. Resume your work infusing the stones.”

“No,” the woman said, crossing her arms.

“Jaleel—”

“You shouldn’t have given me something as weak-willed as a goblin, Zadarar. I told you I was waiting for a better specimen.”

“You had your chance, Jaleel, and it was clear your plan was flawed, even from the beginning.”

“Well,” she said, turning, picking up a pair of iron tongs, clacking the tips together, “I have worked through those flaws, and am ready to try again.” She pulled up her sleeve, and reached over one of the tables lining the perimeter of the room, digging into one of the sores of the wall with the pliers. There was a sickening, wet tearing, crackling sound as she pried loose one of the rust-colored crystals, as if she’d just torn a tooth from a jawbone.

“This one, I think, to start,” she purred, stepping towards us, holding the flickering, blood-tinged gem before her.

“Oh, come now,” she chided, as Ana and I both shrank away from the stone. I felt the same slick, feverish heat radiating from the stone that had infected the tower. Watching the sweat bead and trickle from Ana’s forehead, one would think it was a red-hot ingot of iron the woman held before the girl.

“This little bauble won’t hurt you... not if you don’t let it.” Jaleel turned to the two warriors, and they, too, flinched away. Gilliam frowned, and then leaned slightly forward.

“It’s not even hot,” he said, giving Ana and I a curious glance.

“You see?” The black-robed druidess teased the gem forward, just a hair, and Gilliam scrambled back and away. The woman laughed. “What is the matter? You said yourself it wasn’t hot.”

“Just because it isn’t hot, doesn’t mean it won’t hurt me,” Gilliam said, keeping a wary eye on the stone and licking his lips. “I saw what it did to that goblin you were talking about.”

Jaleel straightened then, smiling. “And how is he doing?”

“Dead. Or worse,” Varis said. “Looked pretty painful, at the end.”

The woman shook her head. “Well.... he lasted longer than I’d expected.” She glanced over Gilliam’s shoulder, at the guards. “Hold him.”

They set gloved hands on the warrior’s shoulders, the sudden pressure sending Gilliam to his knees. I heard his teeth clack together as he hit the stone floor, but his angry retort was cut off as the woman thrust the stone against the low collar of his tunic.

To hear Gilliam’s scream, and see the wool smoke and flake away in bits of ash, you would not know that the stone was merely room temperature.

“Hold him!” the woman hissed, and the icy prickling intensified against my scalp, shivering deeper down my spine. Gilliam’s thrashings ceased, though his screams did not.

A bare blade pressed against Varis’ neck, the only thing keeping him from leaping at the black-robed druidess. Ana’s eyes were wide, the chords standing out in her neck and fists, straining with all her might to break loose of the bonds of hardened air.

Truth be told, had my jaw been freed, I would have screamed right along with Gilliam.

It was a terrible, ragged sound, that did not so much tear at my ears, but clawed at them. Describing the sound, all these years later, hardened soldiers shake their heads, suggesting the sounds a man might make when rolled through hot coals, or with white hot iron against his skin. Gilliam never answered, when I asked him of the experience, reaching instead for another cup of mead, or for another toss of the dice, or took another swat at the rump of a passing serving girl.

Just as frightening as Gilliam’s cries was the icy calm with which Jaleel watched the process. Dark eyes flicked from Gilliam’s contorted features, down to

where the gem was undulating against his chest, peering closer to squint at the point where the raw flesh puckered away from the throbbing tendrils that grew from the sides of the stone, burrowing, branching, and burrowing deeper.

She watched, impassive, until Gilliam's voice finally gave out. At that point, she waved her hand, and the warrior slumped into the grip of the two soldiers, who found themselves struggling to hold the man steady. After several moments they simply gave up, and let him fall to the floor.

Gilliam scratched weakly at the stones, his shirt and hair soaked in sweat. Though the stone felt warm to me, it was obvious by the man's shivering that it was anything but. His tremors were broken by spasms, wrenching his arms or legs this way or that.

Another gesture from Jaleel, and the bonds of wind shifted around Ana and I, pressing our heads down, so we would have to close our eyes if we didn't wish to witness Gilliam's thrashing.

The dark-robed druidess stepped to one side, squatting down and brushing the sweat-soaked locks from the warrior's face.

"It really will go faster if you stop resisting," she said, addressing the man as if he were a young boy who'd misbehaved.

I could not tell if he heard her or not, but his jaw worked, his throat working, too, yet he didn't even manage so much as a croak. His eyelids flickered, fluttered. He rasped a sigh, and then the tension ran from his every muscle, and for a second, as his eyes drifted shut, it appeared as if he were blissfully asleep.

Jaleel gave a sigh of her own. "Well, it's about time." She straightened up, brushing at the folds in her robes. After she adjusted her cloak, she glanced over her shoulder, snapped her fingers.

"That is quite enough loafing around. Arise, Skagragh, that you may serve me as we agreed."

Gilliam's every muscle seemed to go rigid, his back actually arching off the floor. Like a poorly operated marionette, he turned himself over, pushed himself up to hands and knees. Then he got his feet under him, listing and checking his balance as if he'd had one bottle too many.

"I know it isn't much," Jaleel said, "but it's the best I could do on such short notice."

Gilliam was turning his hands over, flexing his fingers as if trying on a new pair of gloves.

"Quite the contrary," Gilliam said. Or rather, it was shreds of Gilliam's voice, reverberating with an echo that sounded both smoky and hard and brittle as a thin film of ice over a lake. "I find this body much to my liking."

Gilliam's shoulders straightened, his back going straight, and he turned, to glance at us.

There was nothing of the man left in his eyes. They were still grayish-green. But they were flat, expressionless, the lids beneath lined an angry, bloody red.

"Your meddling only pushes our plans back further, Jaleel." The smoky image hovering over the brazier scowled.

"Your plans, Zadamar," the woman said. "Mine are finally getting back on schedule."

"You push too far this time, Jaleel. Guards, seize her and bind her in irons."

The druidess turned. "Follow that order, and Skagrah will defend me," she told the men. They glanced at each other, then at the hungry smile that spread across Gilliam's face, showing teeth gone black, pointed, the gums lined the same fiery red as his eyes.

"He's not even armed," one of the guards scoffed, glowering at the other two. He stepped forward, drawing his sword.

I'd seen Gilliam fight, and knew him to be quick on his feet. But even I was amazed at the speed with which he moved. Three steps, and his elbow was driving into the guard's breastplate before the sword even cleared the scabbard. Gilliam's hand came down hard across the guard's wrist, and there was a distinct 'crack' of bone. The guard didn't even have time to voice his scream; Gilliam swept the blade up, slicing cleanly through the man's throat.

The guard went down with a bubbling sigh and gout of blood.

Gilliam spun the sword through a series of forms before settling into a relaxed guard.

"It has been too long since I spilled the blood of mortals," the demon hissed, its voice coming like steel over ice. "Which of them is to be next?"

"The next to offer any resistance to my plans," Jaleel purred.

"You promised blood."

"And so you have some." The woman opened up a metal box on one of the tables, then clucked her tongue. "Be a dear, Skagrah, and fetch me another bloodstone."

Gilliam's eyes narrowed, and he bared his teeth in a snarl. His knuckles went white.

"You are forbidden to harm me, remember? Now go and bring me another stone."

"I was promised blood."

"Oh, very well. You may kill one of the workers down stairs." She waved a hand, turning her attention to a book and sheaf of papers spread across the surface of another of the low tables. "Run along, now, Skragrah, and do as I bid you."

The air temperature dropped as Gilliam stalked by, his breath clouding before him as he descended the stairs, muttering under his breath in a whisper made of frost and smoke.

"You see, Zadarar? They are perfectly obedient, as I suspected. Imagine how powerful an army of them would be. They take their payment on the battlefield, making no demands for the conquered nation's treasures. Can the same be said for those mercenaries you keep insisting on hiring? Look how much coin we've thrown at that baron to the south, already. And what have we to show for it?"

"There is more to a game of King's Stone than merely smashing through your opponent's defenses to put his kingpiece to the sword. That baron is not a sword, but a shield, as you would see if you studied our games more closely. Come to the Temple tonight, and we will sit down to a —"

"The time for playing games is long past!" Jaleel slashed her hand downward, stamping her foot to doubly emphasize her words. "You of all people should know that time grows shorter. And yet you sit there and wait."

The smoky face of Zadamar billowed from frown, then flowed into something I'd once seen in my granda's expression when my brother's puppy had drowned in the spring-swollen waters of the Shutturgal.

"My plans are already set, Jaleel. My passing through this Winter will not change them. There are others who will take up this great work. And you will see that I am not leaving this world for long." Here the smoke billowed again, rolling forward, the old druid's face taking on the harsh angles of anger and impatience.

"That is all in jeopardy if you continue your foolish meddling. You will cease at once!"

Jaleel took half a step back before her superior's anger, then reclaimed that step, her back straightening, shoulders squaring.

"I will be there to take up this great work, Zadamar. You will see—"

"I see a greedy, maddened little girl tampering with a boiling kettle, about to pull it over on herself," the image spat. "A girl who should have learned her lesson the last time she did such a thing. Do those burns not still ache?"

The black-robed woman pulled her arm in, the sleeves flowing in such a way as to indicate she was wringing her hands.

"I would prevent you from such harm again, Jaleel." Zadamar just sounded tired as he spoke. Then the harshness was back in his voice as he continued: "One way or another, Jaleel, I will stop you. I would do so as your teacher and mentor, but I can also do so as your enemy. I cannot have you interfering."

The cloud of greenish-black smoke roiled once, then broke apart, drifting through the closest of the large, open windows.

Jaleel stood for a long moment, her shoulders lifting as she breathed deeply. It was difficult to tell, her back to us, whether the unsteadiness was due to anger, or shame, perhaps even fear.

She finally turned, her features composed, dark eyes gleaming as she glanced past us, at the descending stairs.

"Ah, Skagragh, there you are. I was beginning to wonder if you were going eat the poor man after you killed him."

A wave of cold air brushed past us, and Gilliam stepped into the room. His brow was slick with sweat, despite the coldness in the tower and the winds gusting through the panoramic windows.

The woman stretched her arm across the great geared disk of the orrery taking up the bulk of the room, hand open. "The stone?"

Gilliam glanced down at his hand, clenched into a tight fist, the scratched knuckles showing white under a crust of freezing blood. His other hand still held the guard's sword. With a shrug, he lifted his arm.

"No!" Varis cried, shoving the guard at his side away, and lunging for Gilliam's arm.

The red-rimmed eyes barely flicked in Varis' direction before the sword lashed out, driving into the warrior's side. Varis' cry was cut short, and he staggered back, tripping over his feet and landing against the wall, hands turning crimson in the wash of his own blood.

"Fool! He was to be next!" the woman shrieked.

"You said to take the blood of those who would interfere," Gilliam's voice said, edged in smoke and ice.

Her lips tightened into a line, but she bit back whatever reply she was about to make. Instead, she let her anger out in a frosty sigh, and strode to where Varis had crumpled, extending her hands over his own and closing her eyes, her forehead creasing as she concentrated on the wound.

There was a moment of silence, and then Gilliam turned, the sword flashing faster than my eyes could follow.

The two men didn't even have time to scream, as the sword plunged into one chest, and then tore through the other man's throat on the backswing.

The two girls tethered to them, though, did enough screaming for a chorus.

I'd been bound for so long in the hardened grasp of the air, that I almost forgot how it felt to be free of it. I have little doubt my jaw, now free, hung open in shock of one type or another.

"Don't just stand there gawping, do something!"

It was Gilliam's voice, rough, raw from his ordeal, but lacking the smoky echo, the slivers of ice. The eyes that glanced over at me burned, surely enough,

clouded with pain, but clear, the lower lids free of the bloody sign of demonic dominance.

“How....?”

Gilliam’s sword arm shook, the muscles corded, bunched, as though he were fighting against an unseen foe for control of the blade.

He was fighting an unseen foe. And losing, from the look of the way the sword’s tip trembled. I did the only thing I could think to do, given that Ana had already leapt past me to engage the dark-robed druidess.

I gave a mighty kick, sending the sword spinning from his hand, clattering down the stairs, and called what little warmth was in the room to lend me strength as I hit the possessed man in the chin.

The chamber suddenly grew quiet, as the rushing surge of my heartbeat in my ears faded. The icy winds whistled, no longer howling. The two girls in gray robes sat against the wall, clutching each other, their wails replaced with unsteady sobbing and a wordless murmur between them.

The dark robed woman, Jaleel, stood motionless, the snarl still curled upon her lips, her dark eyes gleaming balefully as she regarded Ana.

But having locked the woman in place with a magical binding of her own, Ana had turned her attention to Varis, who sat slumped against the far curve of the tower wall, his face ashen, his breathing shallow. He gave a grimace, and waved Ana away weakly.

“It’s nothing. A scratch, really.”

“Nonsense. Now take your hands away so I can inspect it.”

With another grimace and a sigh, Varis peeled his hands away from his side.

His tunic was a mass of partially frozen blood. Ana clucked her tongue, and began tugging at the edges closest the wound, ignoring Varis’ hissing intake of breath.

“Just a scratch, remember?” She didn’t even look up, her blue eyes steady as she cleared the blood-soaked cloth from around the warrior’s side. “Honestly, Thorn, what do they teach you druids of the healing arts? She’s gone and made a mess of it.”

"I did not have the knack for healing, so I was only taught the very basics. Now, if he'd broken an arm or leg, then perhaps I could help. As for the Children of Winter.... I would guess that she had to reverse her normal use of the spell. They are known for laying open wounds with a slightest of touches."

"Hold still," Ana said, and pressed her palm to the wound. Varis flinched, sucking in another sharp breath. "Oh, stop squirming. This will be difficult enough as it is without you flopping about."

"Don't they teach you proper bedside manners?" Varis gasped, through clenched teeth.

"If you want to be coddled, go find one of Chardastes' Hospitaliers. I think I saw one of heir hostels in Threshold."

"Right." Varis grunted and tried to push himself up the wall.

"Oh, sit down!" Ana snapped, bringing the warrior back to the floor with a tug on his arm. "This is nearly finished."

I turned to see what I could do about Gilliam, and nearly tripped over my own feet when I saw the burning red-rimmed gaze locked on me.

"Relax," Ana said. "I bound him with the same Holding I used on that woman. Neither of them will be a threat to us for a good while." So confident was she that Ana was walking the perimeter of the room, her attention focused on the cancerous veinwork that throbbed and pulsed along the tower's walls. She leaned close to inspect one of the recesses like the one Jaleel had fetched the stone, but was careful not to touch it.

"What do you make of it?" Varis asked. He was back on his feet, some color back in his cheeks. He looked over the large brass-gear orrery. Like the one in Korizegy's tower, this one had a black stone lodged into the silver mounting where a sapphire representation of Risia should have been. Deep purple veins within the chaotically-faceted stone pulsed with light in time with the rust-colored growths along the tower wall.

"It is a hive, but on a much, much smaller scale," she said, her voice caught between amazement and disgust. "These are incubation chambers... but they have

been tampered with. Modified." She traced the path of bright copper metal that twined over and through the veins, trailing up and out the nearest window.

"The lightning is guided into the gems that they place within."

"What did she call them? Bloodstones?" Varis asked. He frowned. "I thought they were supposed to be green."

"No. Bloodstones," I said, "in this sense, at least, are supposed to be used in the deepest, most sacred rituals. Blood sacrifices, animals, and in some cases, volunteers. That offering, when placed into a cup of obsidian, and left for a season in darkness, hardens into a stone-like consistency. It can then be ground to a fine powder, or melted for later use over high heat."

"That's—" Ana started.

"You have to understand," I told her. "It is a gift. Given, not taken. We are taught that is the source of the power. To take it would spoil it."

"Apparently not," Varis said. "If by giving, you use it for good, then by taking it, perhaps it is empowered to do evil works."

"No 'perhaps' about it," Ana said, turning her gaze on Gilliam, her eyes bright as she regarded the stone that had burrowed into his chest.

Varis hefted the guard's sword. "It's not my first choice for something so delicate, but do you suppose we could cut it out with this?"

"No! You see this? It is rooted, how deep I do not know, but deeply enough that removing the stone would most likely kill him."

"Go on, then, be rid of me, warrior," Gilliam hissed, snow and ash laid over his voice. "Dig me out. Killing this one just sets me free to seek another." The wheezing laugh choked off and the rictus of a smile on Gilliam's lips faded into a tight-lipped line. Within the time it took him to blink, the blood-red prominence was gone, leaving his eyes clear, but glittering, as if fevered.

"Best not to be rid of this thing just yet," Gilliam gasped through clenched teeth. "Caught sight of a contingent of guards coming up the road, from the northwest. A dozen, maybe more. Two gray-robos with them."

Varis nodded, then began tugging at the guards' shirts of chain.

“You can’t mean to fight them,” Ana said. “Perhaps if we surrender the woman, they will—”

“Then they will kill us without a fight,” Gilliam wheezed, his voice shaking. “As far as they are concerned, we are all in my... condition.”

“Thorn, come help me with this,” Varis said.

“No. The woman has our possessions,” Gilliam said, his breath coming short. “Through the curtains, in the wardrobe and chest beside it.” He sucked in a deep breath, closing his eyes. His lips moved, and the knuckles of his right hand whitened.

Ana bent, closing her eyes as she listened to Gilliam’s murmur. A fierce smile lit her features.

“He recites the Litany of the Way of Truth,” she said. “Probably as effective a binding as I would be able to place this Skagrah under.” Her hand strayed to her breast, where her arrowhead-shaped pendant usually hung. With a sigh, she got to her feet. “If these guards are as close as he says, you’ll need all the hands you can get for donning your armor.”

Ana’s fingers flew as she slipped leather through metal rings and cinched various straps as Varis held various bits of his armor in place.

“You would do well as a squire,” he noted. He carefully diverted his gaze as Ana shrugged off the fur-lined overcoat she’d been wearing. She sucked in a sharp breath as she shimmied up into the nearly knee-length shirt of chain Varis held at shoulder-height. “The quilted—”

“No time,” Ana said, her head popping through the top of the chain shirt. She swept her hair out, then tossed the white-and-silver tabard over her head, tugging it into place.

As if on cue, a clangor of metal against wood rolled up from the bottom of the tower.

“They won’t waste any more time with shoulders against that door!” Gilliam called from his place by the stairs.

There was a rumbling boom, not unlike thunder on a smaller scale, and the slightest of tremors shook the tower. The sound of timber and tinder raining down and the acrid smell of scorched oak washed into the room, riding on the superheated rush of air from below.

Varis tugged his sword belt into place, then slid the sword from its scabbard, working his wrist with a few twirls of the eerily green-lit blade.

“Well, it looks as though Aurora’s magic is still in place.” The warrior gathered up Gilliam’s twin sword belts, and gestured for me to take Aurora’s bulky platinum-and-gold scabbard. It was heavier than it looked, and it already looked quite heavy to me; three steps to the observatory room and my shoulder was burning from the unaccustomed weight of the sword.

And yet the girl hefted it as if it weighed no more than one of Gilliam’s short swords...

Gilliam, Varis, and I watched the stairwell. Ana watched Gilliam. The two girls in gray robes huddled in the corner, eyes wide and frightened above hands clasped over their mouths. Gilliam had threatened to do to them what he’d done to their masters if they didn’t cease their whimpering. We hoped it was Gilliam speaking, and that he was merely trying to shock them into silence.

Varis had taken a few moments to bind the dark-robed woman in manacles of iron and then gagged her with a strip torn from her own cloak.

“If you don’t like it, we could simply surrender you to those men coming up the stairs,” he told her, and her glare softened somewhat as she shook her head emphatically in the negative.

Then the waiting began. Listening to the steady clanking of dozens of armored men making their way up the twisting stairs; listening to Gilliam murmuring the Litany, at times through clenched teeth. The pauses between recitations were erratic, and if it stretched too long, Ana’s grip tightened on the haft of her scythe, only to relax when the man began whispering again.

I tried to stay still, but could not help shifting from side to side, trying to ease the uncomfortable weight of Aurora’s sword from my shoulders.

“How does she carry this thing at her waist?” I asked after moving the belt to my other shoulder.

Gilliam raised a hand and hissed for silence. I could see nothing past him, but for a dim wavering of flame-shadows in the dark square of the stairwell’s access.

The chorus of boots and armor upon the stairs had stopped.

Gilliam cocked his head, then drew fletching to his cheek in a fluid, practiced motion. He listened for a few more heartbeats, and then loosed the shaft.

The bow had hardly any time to thrum when a man’s cry echoed from below, and the darkness erupted with shouting and clanging, joined by several more screams.

A black tongue licked dry lips as Gilliam gave a frosty chuckle. It choked off, and the man leaned heavily against the doorway, his breathing quick and shallow. His hand dipped into the pouch at his waist, and the hard lines about his eyes eased, the tension draining from his features.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Ana’s shoulders slump, and she wiped at her forehead.

“Sorry,” Gilliam muttered, his voice his own for the moment. He frowned, then turned, drawing another arrow from the quiver at his waist, loosing again into the depths of the tower. There came another sharp cry from below, and then a echoes of a steadily receding shuffling.

“How long do you think that will delay them?” Varis asked.

“Until I run out of arrows,” Gilliam huffed. He clenched his hands, but that did not stop their trembling.

I counted less than a dozen shafts left in Gilliam’s quiver.

“And what happens then?” I asked, voicing the question after nobody else did.

The growing length of silence was broken by an insistent thrashing from behind us. The dark robed woman was shaking her shackled arms, and kicking at one of the orrery’s gears.

“Quiet her down,” Gilliam snarled, a curl of frost creeping into his voice. He took a deep, shaking breath. “I cannot hear what is going on below with all that racket!”

I worked my way around the room to the woman, leaving Varis and Ana to watch the stairs — and Gilliam. The dark-robed woman’s thrashing grew less distressed as I approached, and stopped altogether as I crouched beside her. She did not appear injured, or otherwise distressed. But her thrashing began anew as I rose to leave. Reluctantly, I turned back to her.

“You wish to speak?”

An emphatic nod.

“And if I release you, what is to prevent you from using your magic against me, or any of us?”

The woman’s shoulders slumped, but she angled her chin towards the dark opening that led to the stairwell.

She had a point. Killing or hindering us would only get her that much closer to the contingent of guards making their way up the wall of the tower. I found myself reaching towards the knot in her gag.

“No trickery,” I said.

She shook her head. I concentrated for a moment, and then brought forth a lick of flame from the palm of my right hand.

“I will touch this to your hair if I sense the slightest betrayal,” I told her, hoping to keep the tremor from my voice.

She shrank back, but again shook her head in the negative, the yellow-orange flame reflecting in her dark eyes, gone wide with the realization that I was indeed serious. I reached forward — with my free hand — and loosened the gag.

“I —” she coughed. “I may have magic at my disposal that will help us. Let me help!”

“A Child of Winter wishing to help others?”

“Don’t be foolish,” she hissed. “I help myself. We are all dead if we do not work together. They outnumber you four to one. You do not have enough arrows to take them all before they reach the top.”

“They still have to come through that doorway one at a time.”

“Their weavers can fill the doorway with flames. They could very well fill this entire room with fire. You felt what they did to the tower doors. It would be no more effort for them to do the same to each of us.”

That surge of power — even separated by the distance to the ground floor — had been a white-hot prickling against my skin. The reek of blasted wood still hung in the air. No doubt what was left of the doors still smoldered, a hundred feet below.

“And how can you do anything to prevent them from doing just that?” I asked.

“I cannot.”

I reached forth, to bind her gag back in place, but she shifted her head.

“Wait! I said I cannot. But *they* can.” She jerked her chin behind me.

I saw a flicker of disappointment in her eyes when I did not turn to follow her gesture.

“My mother tells me I was born in the night,” I told the dark-robed druidess. “But it was not *last* night.”

“What possible good could they be?” Gilliam asked, sparing a quick glance over at the two cowering young women. They sat huddled in each other’s arms, shivering and mewling. I was reminded of my mother’s cat. More precisely, of the two smallest kittens of one of the litters. I began to shiver, myself, remembering their fate at the jaws of one of my brothers’ hounds.

“Thorn?”

I glanced up, at the light touch of Ana’s hand on my shoulder. She smiled. Tried to, at any rate.

“If this one speaks the truth, then I think I know what she has in mind.”

“Gilliam is right. Look at them, they—”

“Even a broken sword still has an edge,” the druidess said, from her place by the wall.

“You cannot mean to simply... throw them out there at the enemy,” I said.

“Thorn, those who can weave are known to do extraordinary things with their power in trying times.” Though her chin was held high, there was more

sadness than pride in Ana's eyes. I remembered her brief exchange with the fiery-haired Listelle in the baron's study. I found my mouth suddenly gone dry.

"We don't have much time left," Varis said, breaking his silence, but not taking his eyes from the doorway. "Outnumbered as we are, we need every weapon we can get our hands on."

"They're on the move again," Gilliam whispered harshly, raising a hand for silence.

Gilliam blinked rapidly, relaxing the tension on his bowstring to wipe a trickle of sweat from one eye. Varis, too, shifted from foot to foot, leaning away from the wall with a frown. He moved to lay a hand on the wall, drawing it back with a hiss at the lightest touch.

"It's hot!" he gasped. He moved to touch it again, and Ana grabbed his arm.

"No!" she cried, just as Gilliam hauled on the back plate of Varis' armor.

All three tumbled backwards. Ana wrenched her arm free of the tangle of limbs, reaching up in a halting or warding gesture.

"*Leishemnach!*" she cried, the word nearly lost in the sudden roaring crackle as the stones around the stairwell access leapt into flame.

The flames washed over and licked at a hazy dome of silvery light that Ana had called into being, imposing herself between the worst of the flames and the rest of us.

The gray robed girls screamed, scrambling along the wall, hurrying as quickly away from the flames as they could manage.

Gilliam rose slowly to his feet, breathing long, slow breaths. He held himself up, leaning against the wall, the fingers of that hand touching one of the bulging, reddish veins.

"They are coming," he rasped, the words coming with puffs of frost from his lips. "Move away from the doorway, witch."

Ana looked back, over her shoulder. Her face was already pinched with the effort of maintaining her spell, and her pallor slid towards a grayish cast as she regarded Gilliam's red-rimmed eyes.

“Gilliam, no... you have to fight it!”

“A fight is useless so long as certain death looms over us,” the demon murmured, the sound a cold, smoky purr. “Stand aside. He wishes me to ask this. But I will allow you to choose, then, how you die. Will it be by fire, or ice?” Gilliam cocked his head to one side, the motion insect-like, alien, unlike him.

Ana’s pained expression hardened into anger, but she turned, and backed several steps away from the doorway, the hazy shield of light flickering, then disappearing at the last touch the flames from the doorway.

Gilliam’s fingers tensed against the wall, and he drew in a sharp breath. He let it out just as sharply, a plume of icy vapor streaming from his lips, interrupted by a strange clicking rasp deep in his throat.

A rime of frost spread along the length of the vein on which Gilliam rested his fingers, spreading outward, towards the doorway. It grew steadily thicker the further it traveled, until it broke away from the pulsing, reddish path, surging up and around the stones of the doorway. The coating of ice did not so much smother the flames as it ... devoured them. The crackle of flame gave way to a sizzling, and then the hard, tight sound of ice closing over stone.

It did not stop at the far side of the doorway. At a flickering gesture from Gilliam’s free hand, the ice expanded across the floor, flowing out onto the stairs as though a puddle of rushing water, freezing within the blink of an eye.

The clanging rush of the men upon the stairs came clearly to our ears, then, uncomfortably close. The sound of their boots upon the steps changed, turning to a crackling squeal of leather upon ice. The clatter of armor took an entirely different tone as the huffing of breath turned to muted, breathless grunts. Those were quickly followed by screams. The chorus of boots and armor on the stairs stopped short.

Seconds later, two crashes echoed up from far below, cutting the screams short.

Gilliam did not give the other men time to recover. He wrenched his hand away from the wall, sliding an arrow from his quiver, drawing the fletchings to his cheek even as he sidestepped through the doorway. His footing was as sure as if he walked upon one of the Grand Duke’s roads. He loosed one, then another shaft,

drawing and loosing in a motion too fast to even follow. There was a sharp thrum, and then another, and then a clattering of armor on stone. When his fingers groped upon the empty quiver, he gave a snarl, tossing the bow into the void over the edge of the stairs.

There came twin rings of steel sliding free of scabbards, and the gloomy interior of the tower came alight with a ghostly green-gold light.

Men and demon alike voiced shouts of surprise.

The light wavered, then began to bob and dance along the walls. Steel chimed upon steel.

The demon trilled a high, crackling laugh, the sound of ice breaking from high, bare branches, the sound of icy shards falling in a deadly rain.

“Go!” Varis called, motioning towards the two gray-robed girls. They simply cowered closer to the walls, edging even further away from the ice-rimmed doorway.

Ana’s sigh sounded more like a snarl, as she turned her blue eyes on the girls. She reached down, dragging one of the girls to her feet, until their faces were less than a hand’s span apart.

“Get moving,” she hissed, her voice nearly as cold as that of Gilliam’s demon. “You are free now, to use your power as you see fit. And right now, we need your help if we are to survive this. Help us. Help your sister.”

The girl’s mouth worked, like a landed fish gaping for air. After several blinks, her eyes cleared, and her back straightened. She glanced back, at the other girl, shivering against the wall, face streaked with tears.

“Macha’s, I think, is beyond reach. They were too closely entwined.”

“How bad?” Ana asked.

The girl squinted, licked her dry lips. “She holds her power, but barely. It is all that keeps her alive, I think.”

“Then you can link with her.”

The girl’s eyes widened, her face paled. “It is forbidden! We will be punished severely!”

Ana glanced down at the bodies of the two men. “By whom?”

The girl followed Ana's gaze, and I saw some of the steel leave her, her shoulders slumping. "No, I cannot..."

"You will. You must, if we are to survive this!"

"And what is there to survival, if there is nothing to—"

Ana slapped the girl, nearly knocking her down with the force of it.

"If you continue to think like that, I will throw you down those stairs myself. One way or the other, we will get to the bottom."

The ice that flowed over the stairs was nothing more than puddles by the time the two gray-robed girls started down. The ice encasing the doorway was beginning to melt as well, rivulets trickling down the sides, steaming.

Jaleel followed, bound and gagged, steadied by Ana's free hand on her shoulder. Varis and I brought up the rear.

Streaks and spatters of blood slicked the wall and stairs, but we only encountered one body, the man impaled upon his own sword. Red tendrils had branched off from the main root line that clung to the wall, and had burrowed into the man's neck, working their way up along his jawline. The two girls shrieked, when the man's free arm twitched as they passed. Ana drew her fingers across the man's chest in a serpentine sign, but the prayer she whispered was lost amidst the sounds of battle that still echoed up from below.

The rush that shivered up my spine was all the warning that the weavers had spotted us. I had enough time to turn, and then air hardened around me, pinning me against the feverish heat of the tower wall.

"Never mind the warrior, kill them!" From a landing opposite us and slightly below, one of the men holding a silver lead was jabbing a finger in our direction. The archers on the platform with him turned their bows towards us, greenish light dancing off barbed arrowheads. They drew.

And screamed, as a sudden, hard gust of wind hit them low. The men's knees buckled, and two of the three toppled into the empty core of the tower. The bow skittered away from the third man, who caught himself against the shepherd who had pointed us out.

That man — face going red as his hair — shoved the archer away with a snarl. But it was too late. I heard Ana give a cry, her voice lifting in the short, sharp invocation of her holding spell. It hadn't even begun echoing before the bonds of air fell away from me. There was but a slight tingling on my skin, the low murmur of otherworldly energy that the two girls needed to maintain whatever sort of link they held to their power.

"Go, go go!" Varis called, but we needed no urging to hurry around the stairs, putting as much distance between ourselves and the weavers while Ana's spell held them in its grasp.

At the base of the tower, amidst the ruin of broken shelving and iron boxes by the dozens, Gilliam held off a half dozen soldiers, his blades barely pausing between parries, showers of green-yellow sparks blossoming with each clashing of swords.

"Go for the doorway, we'll join you in a bit!" Varis said, and then leapt to Gilliam's aid, his own sword kindling to the same green-yellow flame.

The battle was fierce, but short. The remaining guards fought all the harder when they realized that the reinforcements above would not be joining them.

When the last guard fell, neither of the two swordsmen lowered their weapons. Varis panted with the exertion of the brief fight, and Gilliam, too, was breathing heavily. While Varis watched, wary, sword held in a low guard, Gilliam kept his eyes on the toes of his boots, his breathing steadying, the tremors easing from his hands, his fingers losing their death-like grips on the hilts. The ghostly glimmering of the blades licked lower and lower, finally winking out.

We all breathed sighs of relief when Gilliam looked up at us, his eyes their usual gray-green of fresh sage, no trace of the bloody red rimming them.

As if we needed reminding of the peril in which we still found ourselves, the lightning overhead hissed, the demonic howling in the thunder touched with a fevered edge.

“They grow impatient,” Ana said, taking her eyes from the black-garbed druidess long enough to spare a glance at the seething clouds overhead.

There were horses aplenty to choose from, picketed outside the Black Tower. Within half an hour we were underway. Jaleel, riding clumsily had been lashed to the saddle, her wrists still bound by irons, those secured to the saddle’s pommel. Her hands were too busy making sure she stayed upright to be bothered with crafting any sort of magic.

The two weavers rode doubled upon another horse, the one called “Macha’s” staring listlessly ahead, cradled by the other — who’s name we never did learn.

“I don’t care how ingenious it was, it was still dangerous!” Ana was saying, as I caught up to her and Gilliam. The warrior simply smirked.

“It worked, though. Can’t argue with results.”

“I should leave you to it,” she sniffed.

“Yes,” he said. “You should. At least until we’re free of this place. It’s strength —”

“— is poison,” she finished, cutting him off. “You may as well take one of those arrowheads and start burrowing it deeper and deeper. It will hurt a lot less coming out than will that demon.”

Gilliam had appropriated another two quivers’ worth of arrows, scattered among the bodies littering the tower. He picked absently at a thumbnail with one of the barbs on the tip of the arrow he’d been toying with. He glanced my way.

“I don’t know what she’s so worried about,” Gilliam said to me. “It’s actually not all that powerful a demon, anyway. Just slithered away when I threatened to feed it to the swords.”

“Precisely the kind of thinking that wraps you even further in the coils of the snake,” Ana said, and urged her mount further ahead.

We traveled nearly straight to the west and north, following the cross country tracks laid by the soldiers in their rush to the Black Tower. The temperature dropped steadily the further we went, and I saw Varis’ wisdom in scavenging the saddle blankets from the horses we’d set free back at the tower. We desperately needed

them, the two girls most of all. Jaleel simply scoffed when we offered one to her, content in the cold as if it were a pleasant spring afternoon. For a single second or two, I envied her, as my knuckles creaked with the effort of making my knots in the cold.

Peeking above the rim of the valley, Greytop — named Mt. Pavel by the Thyatians — huddled under the onslaught of lightning. Zadamar's storm was growing.

And we journeyed to its very center.

Varis drew our small column to a halt. A shadow in the distance, barely visible through the shifting veils of snow and ice, hinted at ruins, but on a scale equal to — if not greater than — Byxata.

"Another city?" Gilliam asked, turning to look at Jaleel.

She nodded, mumbling something into the gag.

"Ronkan," she rasped, after Ana freed her mouth.

"What can you tell us of it?" Varis asked her.

The woman shrugged. "Mostly ruins, the walls partially rebuilt. Like the villages the savage dog-men have salvaged, only on a slightly larger scale." Her lip curled. "It reeks of too much order, now. It turns my stomach to see that Zadamar has allowed so much of it to be reclaimed by Men." She glanced up at the scarlet-streaked clouds, and chuckled. "But that will be remedied soon enough."

Ana did not give her a chance to say more, stuffing the gag back in the older woman's smug mouth.

"If what she said earlier is true, then the temple lies on the far side of this Ronkan," Varis said. He glanced at what was left of the trail, rapidly disappearing beneath the fresh layer of snowfall. "The quicker way would be through it."

"We don't have time to deal with guards at the gates," Gilliam said.

"Or with capture," the other warrior agreed.

"Death might be a bit of a hinderance as well," I pointed out.

"There's that, too," Gilliam mused.

Ana was already spurring her horse towards the north.

We gave Ronkan as wide a berth as the valley allowed, skirting its north and easterly walls, hugging the steep rise of the northern rim of the valley. The worst of the winds were softened, having to roll back down the mountains, and the snows only drifted to our mounts' knees.

Perhaps another half hours' ride through the snows brought the temple into view.

The temple was carved into the very roots of the steep mountainside, great terraced steps of stone narrowing towards a broad ceremonial plaza dozens of feet overhead.

Or, that is how it must have looked, before a great rock-slide half buried it. What was left of the grand steps was barely climbable, either choked with rubble or broken and jarred askew by the quake that had brought the mountain down. Fresh rock fall littered the base of the steps, the stones bearing signs of recent working that it didn't take dwarf eyes to notice.

Broken rock and fresh gouges in the age-worn and battered mosaic at the top of the steps attested to the work that had been put into clearing away much of the rockslide. A low altar of black granite was about the only stone there which had not been cracked, chiseled, hefted or heaved aside.

Ana walked a slow circle around the altar. She dragged an arm across the snow piling atop, straightening with a sigh, shaking ice and clots of reddened snow from her cloak.

"Used. Long enough ago for the blood to freeze."

"That could have been days ago," Varis said, shrugging a big deeper in the blanket he'd added atop his cloak.

"Hours," Gilliam said, his voice shaking, eyes gleaming in the weak afternoon light. His gaze was fixed on the section of altar most exposed. "Their pain is still fresh." His hands shook as he tugged his hood closer about his face, turning reluctantly away as the cloth obstructed his view.

We at first thought that the sprawling bulk of boulders, scree, ice and snow still piled along the rear of the plaza was simply what remained of the landslide that had yet to be cleared.

Jaleel, though, motioned us towards the righthand edge of the rockslide. More steps were visible: a corner, and perhaps a length as wide as a man is tall, before being swallowed again by rubble. Jaleel kicked at a the rubble.

The sheet of ice gave a sharp ‘crack’ and then buckled. It wasn’t stone or ice at all — at least not solid ice— but a blanket, so thick with dirt and ice that it appeared to be part of the mountainside itself. Smooth, worked stone now stood exposed, age-worn engravings crusted with too much ice to be made out clearly. Two squared-off columns, spanned by more relief-carved stone above.

A doorway, yawning inward to blackness.

“Another chamber?” Varis asked.

“It seems this was just a ceremonial altar,” Ana said. “The heart of this temple lies within the mountain itself.” She glanced at the boulders, piled one atop the other, running a gloved hand over the fresh marks of stoneworking tools. She wrinkled her nose. “I think whatever is here was better left buried.”

Varis leaned through the doorway, sniffing. “I smell nothing but... age. Dust. Ruin.”

Ana held a corner of her cloak over her mouth and nose. “Koriszegy’s village is a rose garden compared to this stench.” Her grip firmed on the haft of her scythe, and she rapped the butt-end against the stone.

“*Lest ZelvrenCyp etemijn lys,*” she murmured. Alongside the clear hum singing from the blade, a soft silver light began to shine forth.

Ana’s light was not bright enough to reveal the corners of the chamber beyond, but was enough to make out the shadowy outline of the ruin of the left half of the room. We picked our way across the rubble-strewn floor, heading towards a flickering reddish light we could see looming brighter in the darkness ahead.

We were perhaps halfway through the ruined antechamber when Jaleel gave a muffled squark and stumbled. The sharp sound of her knees hitting the stone floor made me grit my teeth. I turned, and caught her before she fell the rest of the way.

“Are you —”

I did not have a chance to finish my question. Her eyes narrowed, not in pain, but with what amounted to a smile around her gag.

The rubble erupted, broken bodies shaking off soil and stone, clambering towards us, a wall of broken puppets, hands extended, intent on tearing us to pieces.

But Ana seemed to be ready. She rapped the haft of her scythe harder upon the floor, and the silver light flared. I had to cover my eyes, it shone so brightly, nearly equal to daylight.

“Min ollen alend jenteCypst!” Ana cried in a voice nearly as powerful as the light. There came a chorus of angry hisses, a sound like icy water scalding away, and the sharp tang of hot iron filled the air.

I blinked, squinting through the glare, to see the line of half-naked bodies, skin the blue-gray of frozen flesh visible beneath what was blackened from Ana’s rebuke.

“You will have to do better than that, druidess.”

Another doorway, carved with heavy, crude figures and glyphs, opened into the temple proper.

My eyes were drawn immediately to the great circle of red-tinged fire, the red a shade too bloody to be natural, the flames licking, writhing in a grotesque mockery of fire. The flames hissed, as though burning wet wood — but I knew they sprang directly from the stone itself. Their crackling was the clicking, rattling rabble of whatever manner of demon had been called here. And not just one voice, but hundreds. Thousands, milling about in the great circle, which yawned into a darkness too thick to be anything natural.

It was an effort of will to drag my eyes away from the spectacle, but I looked up, to where Jaleel was staring in wide-eyed panic.

Past the great circle of demonic flame, before an altar on a dais raised higher than the flames, another dark-robed figure stood, arms raised, pale hands standing out against his black cloak. One hand was wrapped about the hilt of a dagger, fresh blood gleaming on the blade, sliding down, over the pale hand.

In the other hand was a gobbet of something grayish-red, as bloody as the knife, quivering. My throat began to burn as I felt my stomach turn once I realized just what it was he held.

The figure turned from the dark stone altar, and cast the heart into the pit, eyes raised towards the ceiling.

“Accept this gift, my Lord of the Frozen Night! Your humblest of servants, Zadamar, bids you come forth and opens this door in welcome!”

The twisted flames leapt higher, the crackling rising a notch in pitch and fervor. The enclosed darkness roiled, turning over lazily as a soup might upon the lowest of simmers.

Zadamar slowly lowered his arms, his gaze also lowering to regard the pit with something very close to contempt. Those eyes flicked above the flames, no sign of surprise in his expression at all.

“Well, it appears that our Lord shall be well fed this day. So good of you to bring them to me, Jaleel.” Zadamar’s voice was rich, very nearly musical in its tone and timbre. Such songs he must sing! My heart weighs heavy, even today, to think on it.

His eyes were sunken, the brows long past gray, as white as the long fringe of hair that trailed from beneath his dark hood. The hand still gripping the knife trembled ever so slightly, shaking flecks of blood from the tip. Not that a few more drops on the hem of his robe mattered much; it shone with a heavy wetness in the firelight.

“Cease this at once!” Ana called. “By the light of the Silver Flame, I—”

“You what?” the ancient druid asked. “Your pitiful Silver Flame is but a candle amidst a bonfire, girl. It’s a wonder those flames have not yet consumed you.” He walked slowly as he spoke, leaning heavily on the altar behind him, paying no heed to the blood through which his hand slopped.

Gilliam’s bow thrummed. Almost too fast to see, the arrow streaked across the room. I only saw the flash of icy red light, so fast did the old druid’s hand move, cutting the arrow out of the air less than an arm’s breadth from his neck.

“Jaleel,” the old man crooned, his shaggy brows dipping in a frown. “Just how much further will you sink into barbarity? And you,” he said, turning his gaze on Gilliam. “Skagragh is not hers to give, but belongs to our Lord of the Frozen Night. You will serve me. Kneel!”

Gilliam’s hand spasmed, and his bow clattered to the floor. He doubled over with a choked off cry, then slowly straightened, grinning. His eyes shone, feverish, and sweat beaded his forehead, despite the plumes of frost in the air as we breathed.

“I am protected,” he wheezed. “Neither Skagragh nor your will can overshadow my own.” The fingers of his other hand worked, and rather than a coin, spinning across his knuckles, the broad silver pendant in the shape of an arrowhead came to rest between his thumb and forefinger.

Gilliam glanced over to Ana. “I hope you don’t mind my borrowing this.”

“I suppose I might forgive you, provided we get out of this alive.”

“That is looking to be a wider and wider stretch,” Varis said.

“Why?”

Ana’s question hung for several long moments, before the crackling whispers of the hellish flames was joined by the soft chuckle from the druid on the dais.

“Ah, youth,” he said, with a smile in his voice. “By now, any other priest of your pitiful little flame and I would be trading blows, and you simply ask ‘why.’”

“Why aren’t we trying to separate his head from his shoulders?” Varis asked.

Gilliam shook his head, and then glanced upward.

What I’d thought was a column, along the far side of the room, was a great support for an arm of some dark metal, reaching out, towards the center of the room. Directly above the circle of blackness.

Swinging ever so slightly, suspended from gleaming black chain, was a cage. A corner of cloth peeked from between the bars.

White cloth.

Zadamar glanced upwards as well. “Ah, yes. I’d hoped to save this one as a special treat for my Lord once he stepped through. I suppose she will have to do to

simply bring him, instead." He waved his hand in the direction of the base of the pillar, and two figures rose up from what I'd taken as simply more piles of rubble.

They reached forth, grasping two great cogs that rose from the floor, and began turning them, passing one to the other. With a jolt and clatter, the cage began to descend.

The corner of white cloth disappeared, and I saw a flash of golden hair and two small hands, clutching the bars.

Varis drew his sword, and made to leap towards the mechanism. Gilliam grabbed his arm.

"Think," he hissed. "If they fall, she falls faster."

"Stop."

We turned towards Jaleel. Somehow, she'd managed to work herself free of her gag.

Zadamar lifted his hand again, and the clatter of the chain stopped. Aurora's cage swung perhaps thirty feet overhead.

"I will be the one, not her." The older woman glanced up at the cage. "You have declared me already gone over to winter. I will not go on some iron-edged abomination of man. Let winter take my heart."

The other druid smiled, slowly. His nod came just as slowly. "Yes. Yes, let it be as you said. Come, child." He extended his hand, in a welcoming gesture made all the more unsettling for the sheen of blood slicking the hand, the drops pattering unheeded to the dais, over the altar of black stone.

Jaleel walked, straight-backed, past us, around the great chattering, hissing circle of demon-touched flames.

At the base of the steps leading up towards the dais, she shed her cloak. Two steps up, she'd shaken off the hood of her robe, allowing her dark hair to spill over her shoulders. Then she stood before Zadamar, hands clasped before her, shoulders squared, chin lifted, not in defiance, but showing her throat, as a wolf does to show obeisance to the pack's *primus*.

Zadamar ran a hand through her hair, as loving a gesture as I have ever seen, even as his other hand tightened on the knife. He leaned down, kissing her forehead.

“You do us a great honor, child. Let winter take your heart quickly.” He brought the knife up, his gaze going from the woman’s eyes down towards her hands as the blade caught on something.

She’d imposed one of our waterskins between them, and as Zadamar jerked the knife free, it began to empty.

Jaleel closed her hand over the stream of water, and with a hissing, snapping crackle, it hardened into ice.

“Winter take *your* heart,” she spat, reversing her grip on the spike of ice, and driving it upwards, into the old druid’s chest from below.

Zadamar’s last breath was a blood-tinged, frosty sigh. He sagged towards Jaleel, and she pushed him away, sending him toppling from the dais. There was no splash, when his body hit the inky blackness. He was simply swallowed, the surface closing over his passing without even so much as a ripple. The flames shrieked, leaping, twisting, gyrating madly.

“Hear me, Lord of the Frozen Night! I am Jaleel, she who has taken the power of your humblest of servants. He is my gift to you. I summon you! Come now to my side! Come forth, and make eternal this winter we have prepared in your honor!”

Thunder roared. Such was the force of it, we were driven to our knees, the floor quaking to meet us. I was not alone in clutching my ears, shaking my head back and forth to try to clear it from the colossal ringing.

With the bulk of the mountain atop us, I could not imagine what that sound was like in the open confines of the Valley outside.

Varis did not let the shock of the noise stop him for long. I saw him give Gilliam a shove, gesturing with his sword to the dais across the room, and then he was by my side, hauling me to my feet, waving his sword upwards the ceiling. I

knew he was shouting at me, could clearly read the instructions from his lip movements.

“Get her down! We need all the swords we can get!”

Varis and Ana charged after Gilliam, and I scrambled towards the cogwork mechanism that kept Aurora suspended above the yawning darkness.

There was the small problem of the two pale walkers. They had been huge, dark-furred gnoll brutes similar to those raiding in Verge, in life. Even in this semblance of life, they hulked a head and shoulders taller than I. Black eyes gone gray and cloudy in death, the fur matted, sloughing off in places, they reeked of spoiled meat.

Decrepit as they appeared, their claws were still sharp, as were their teeth. The corruption that allowed them to walk lent already powerful muscles even more strength, and the air whistled with the passing of those great clawed hands mere handsbreaths from my face.

It felt as though I rained blows upon soft dough, and I could have been, for all that my jabs and hits affected the creatures. They were slow, their movements stilted, spastic, nothing at all like the fluidic dance of death those Silva had animated were capable of. For which I was eternally grateful. I used their clumsiness to my advantage, dodging the heavy blows, knocking them aside and letting the momentum of the great swings carry them off balance.

As soon as I'd maneuvered them far enough away, I aimed my blows at their feet and knees. They did not change tactics, just kept swinging, and I ducked, hitting the same spots, over and over until I heard a wet 'pop' and the knee joints finally gave way.

I leapt away from the brutes, and turned my attention to the two great cogwheels. Whatever the mechanism was, it must have run under the temple's floor, the chain sheathed in the great stone pillar before me.

Two levers, two cogs. With a shrug, I gripped one of the levers and hauled back on it. I felt the mechanism catch, and the wheels began to turn, slowly.

“Nieah! Nieah!”

I glanced up, at the high voice that pierced the ringing in my ears.

Aurora's cage was rising, slowly. I leaned back into the lever, and felt the jolt as the chain stopped. Aurora voiced a squawk at the sudden stop. I gripped the other lever, leaned into it. There was a shudder through the metal bar as the wheels began to turn, slowly, the other direction. Aurora's cage inched lower.

I kept my weight against the lever. What more could I do but wait?

Jaleel flicked her blood-drenched fingers. Droplets of blood hit the flames surrounding the pit, and gave off angry, rattling hisses. Rather than be consumed by the flames, though, the droplets carried through the ring of flames, spattering on the floor before the steps leading to the altar.

The splash of flames didn't gutter and go out, though. They curled, turning back on themselves, weaving into legs, flickering red-orange torsos, writing, whiplike lashes of flame licking out where arms would have been, had the shapes been humanoid. Two, and then a third took shape, rattling and hissing. Hunched, they stumped forward on bowed legs, forming into a line. Headless though they were, twisting, gaps opened up in the flame-wrought torsos. The maws opened not to the steps behind them, though, but to darkness as deep and impenetrable as that of the pit in the center of the chamber.

The largest of the flameborn horrors lashed at Varis. He'd seen it wind up for the strike and intercepted it, knocking it aside. His eyes widened in shock at the contact, though, and his charge dissolved as his steps faltered. He pulled his arm inward, towards his body, cradling it as he spun, lashing out with a backhanded swing of his sword.

I saw his free hand spasm against his chest, the mail along his lower arm rimed with a fine dusting of ice, the armor blackened beneath it.

Gilliam dropped at the last second, the backswing of Varis' sword missing his hood by a finger's-breadth. The smaller warrior slid between the bowed, flickering legs of the smaller of the demons, and Gilliam bracing one hand against the pommel of his short sword as it tore through the junction where creature's leg met its body.

What would have been a devastating blow to a mortal foe merely caused the creature to voice an icy scream, whiplike arms lashing at Gilliam's head. They

scored the ground in the warrior's passing, but he'd turned his slide into a roll, and had already tumbled out of the thing's reach.

Two steps behind the warriors, Ana fared much better, her scythe flaring, the blade sending fiery appendages tumbling away. They'd dissolved into so much greasy smoke before they even hit the ground, but the girl paid them no mind, bringing her weapon up and around, carrying the momentum of her first attack into a second vicious overhead slash. The creature's icy wail crackled, fading into a hiss of steam as its body lost consistency, guttering and falling away from either side of Ana's silver blade.

Gilliam's swords were a blur as he barely fended off the fiery lashing of the shorter of the two creatures.

Varis wasn't managing much better, ducking and weaving to avoid the attacks of his own opponent. He was being driven back, a half-step at a time, giving ground as he parried and dodged aside. His movements seemed... off somehow. I saw him lunge as the fiery creature feinted to one side. Ana and I both shouted warnings to him, too late as a writhing tentacle slashed upwards, lashing across his side and dragging up and over his already-injured arm.

The warrior spun with the blow, and went down hard, luckily landing on his other side. His sword cut a swirling trail of sparks across the stone floor as it spun from his grip. The creature reared back, great black maw opening in a grating roar of triumph, a sound much like the avalanche we'd barely managed to escape days ago. It swung one of its whiplike arms back, raising it for a final strike.

And the roar rose in pitch, changing to a brittle wail as Ana's scythe cut through the swirling fire, sending the thing's arm flopping and writing to the floor, where it whipped itself out into wisps of acrid greenish-black smoke.

"The Augment!" Ana cried. "Your weapons are useless against them without it!"

"I've figured that out already!" Gilliam shouted back, as his sword passed harmlessly through the creature. "I can't get it to spark!"

“Skagrah interferes,” Aurora said, and her voice sounded as if it were whispering directly in my ear. “No, do not look up. Keep her attention on the battle below.”

I pulled my glance back down to the ground, but had seen a flutter of white and gold against the sides of the cage. Aurora was throwing what little weight she had against the bars, and the cage was beginning to swing.

My staff would be of no use in the fight. So I jammed it down, lodging it against the lever, keeping the mechanism open. There was the slightest of creaks from the great chainwork above me. Every second, the cage dropped lower, and the arc of Aurora’s swing grew longer.

I hurried to Varis’ side. He was breathing, coughing, but his whole body was wracked with violent shivering. There was not enough true fire or heat within the room to be of any use to me.

I closed my eyes, placing one hand on the warrior’s forehead, the other over his heart. I nearly lost the concentration for the spell at the stinging, unnatural cold that radiated from the metal in his armor.

His own’ body’s inner fire had been weakened, diminished at the cold-yet-burning touch of the demon. I reached for that flame with my own magic, coaxed it brighter. Beneath my hands, Varis’ shivering stopped, and his breathing grew steadier.

I felt a cold leather glove close over my hand.

“Thorn, enough. I am well. I am back.”

It was an effort to open my eyes, and I found Varis was crouched before me.

“Cold...” I mumbled. “Protected you from...”

“I can feel it, my friend.”

It felt as though my hand were miles away, and I could barely feel its tightening against Varis’ arm. “Magic. Needed to strike them. Aurora’s Augment—”

“No time. My sword is too far away,” the man said, and he rose. I felt a tugging at my shoulder, and there was a jarring rattle along my back. “Halav’s balls, but this thing is heavy!”

Varis hefted Aurora's blade, turned the weapon through a short series of forms. Satisfied, he tightened his grip on the white leather hilt and leapt to Gilliam's aid, his voice raised in a wordless shout.

The demon voiced an icy shriek, and Aurora's sword left tracers of greenish-gold flame along the length of Varis' stroke. The thing turned, whiplike arms lashing out, but the warrior batted them aside with the flat of the blade, ripples of green fire dancing in the wake of the impacts.

Atop the dais, Jaleel gave a cry of frustration. Again, she lifted a blood-drenched hand, but instead of flinging droplets through the chattering, hissing flames, she stretched her arm outward, over the circle, and a steady trickle of dark blood began to seep from between her fingers, to fall into the yawning pit of darkness.

Again, the flames leapt, the hissing crackle climbing to a chilling, gurgling bubbling sound, like the sound ice makes as it breaks up atop a rushing stream.

Within the pit, it seemed as if the direction of the blood's fall reversed, as something round and smooth broke the surface of the blackness, pulsing and shivering as it slithered and ebbed up along the thin stream of blood.

I could only watch, regaining my strength. What little magic I had left was all but useless here, for there was only stone and metal and ice to be used. Gilliam, too, was not having much luck. The demons' lashing tentacles kept him from simply charging up the steps towards the druidess, and he was forced to play interference while Varis and Ana chipped away at their foes.

The creeping thing in the pit slithered its bulk to roughly the height of a man, oozing and rippling as though undecided as to its final form. Folds appeared, writhing, lifting tentatively away from the main body, only to flop back, reabsorbed into the churning mass as if the thing had changed its mind.

Despite the freezing temperature within the chamber, sweat beaded Jaleel's forehead, trickled down one side of her face. With each thrash and wriggling of the... thing tethered to her by the blood, her jaw clenched, lip curling in a snarl. Her free hand tightened, and I saw blood seeping from between her fingers,

slithering over white knuckles, a single drop drop beading and falling to the blood-slicked stone beneath her feet.

With a final, violent jerk, the thing wrenched itself free, the thin stream of dark blood snapping like a seamstress' thread. Jaleel staggered back, pale, panting, her eyes wide, feverish.

Fearful.

The thing surged towards the battle, heaving and lurching to the edge of the pit with a speed I did not think it capable of, given its awkward bulk.

I croaked out a warning.

Varis and Ana turned, the flaming demons erupting in bursts of greenish and silver flames, blackish smoke boiling away with an icy hiss. With a glance and a nod, Varis took several long steps back and away, and Gilliam kept to the chamber wall, such that the thing would be caught in a deadly triangle of silver and steel when it broke through the flames surrounding the pit.

It didn't even pause, showed no sign that it even sensed the presence of the reddish flames that licked even higher than the roundish protrusion that might have been some sort of head. It pressed through the fire.

A withering rush of cold swept through the room as the flames leapt, engulfing the thing. It thrashed, lurching this way, then that, its mass roiling beneath the cocoon of flames.

It gave off a tremendous stench, a thick, cloying odor like that of something rotten, buried in ice for an age, now thawing. The surface of its... could it have been a skin?... rippled, bubbling and blistering, though the flames burned with an impossible cold.

The thing gave one final, quivering lunge, and then sank, falling from perhaps a bit more than Varis' height to that of his knees.

"That's it?" Gilliam asked, looking away from the rapidly dying flames, up to where Jaleel sagged against the altar. "That's the best you could do?" He pointed one of his swords at the mass of blackened ooze, its surface crusted, steaming where the flames had died, still burning in some patches.

Gilliam opened his mouth to say more, then his gaze darted upwards.

Aurora's cage whistled over the tips of flames surrounding the pit, missed the altar by no more than the length of — as my grandda would say — a cat's stretch.

The cage slammed into the legs of a great statue, carved the breadth of the wall behind the altar. A screech of tearing metal was nearly lost beneath the thunderous boom, and the dais was engulfed in billow of rock dust.

Gilliam winced. "He's going to be the patron immortal of limps after that."

"Keep watching that!" Ana shouted to me as she and the others rushed towards the wreckage up the short flight of stairs along the rear of the temple.

There was quite a bit of shouting, interrupted by coughing and choking. Then the hard clang of metal being dropped upon stone.

"Where did she go?" Gilliam asked, the question trailing off into a choking cough.

"Never mind the druidess," Varis said. "Halav's balls, look what the girl's done to it! Help me untangle her."

"Is she breathing? Wait, don't move her!"

I heard Varis give a strangled groan, and there was another shriek of metal. "Quickly!" he gasped.

There were sounds of shuffling scuffling, more coughing, and then a count to three.

Varis and Gilliam emerged from the heavy dust cloud, carrying a bundle of red and gold and white suspended in a cloak between them.

Aurora coughed, as they set her down. It was a thick, heavy sound, not the dry wrack that the dust cloud inspired.

"Don't try to sit up," Ana said.

"This fight--- is not over," the girl wheezed.

"We just pulled you from a pile of slagged metal and nearly liquified rock," Gilliam said. "Take a moment to collect your breath, at least."

Aurora frowned, the mask of blood and dust caking the right side of her face crinkling. She reached out with her left hand. Her right was covered in a web of blood and dust. By the curl of her fingers, it was clear that the arm was broken, probably in more than one place.

"I need... my sword," she gasped between shallow breaths.

Varis presented it to her, and she clenched it tightly, her eyes fluttering closed. The dark stone on the pommel flickered, and then burst to steady, sickly purple light. It was answered by a cool, pale glimmering from the clear stones adorning the girl's bracers, though the one on the right shone reddish, through the sheen of blood over the stone. Some of the lines of pain eased from her features, and her breathing grew slow, steady, bubbling less and less with each breath.

Varis knelt, and wound two corners of the cloak in his hands. Gilliam did the same, taking the corners near the girl's head. With a nod, the two men rose to their feet.

"What are you doing?" Ana asked.

"We're leaving," Varis said.

"But you heard her. She said—"

"We heard what she said," Varis interrupted. "And she is in no condition to fight. Nor are you or Thorn. We're all exhausted. We need rest."

"But this—" Ana gestured towards the steaming, stinking blob.

"It doesn't look to be going anywhere," Gilliam said.

"And where do you suppose to go to get this rest, then?"

"There is a place," the blonde weaver said, peeking out from where she and her sister had taken shelter behind a broken column. "To the west, not even half a mile." She stared down, as color rose in her cheeks. "My *bughael*... we would go there when he tired of the cold."

"A circle of stones, surrounding a larger, pale stone slab?" Ana asked.

The girl blinked. "No, no, this looked to be a proper shrine. With a small worship hall, and a fire pit, and cells for the keeper and priests."

"Show us the way," Varis said.

Waning half moon of the Deep Snows (on or about Kaldmont 18, 997AC)

We rode as quickly as the snows and Aurora's condition would allow. Gilliam and Ana had bundled the girl in two of the saddle blankets, and Gilliam hoisted the girl up after Varis mounted.

The blonde weaver led, Varis and Ana behind her. I rode double with the darker-haired weaver, and Gilliam watched behind our little column. Though we were both bundled against the cold, the girl still shivered against me. She whispered to herself, or wept. She slept for a while, and only then did the prickling sense of her power against my skin cease — only to return in an searing rush of burning pins and needles as she sputtered awake, breath short, eyes wide and wild.

I held her — more to keep her from falling from the saddle than to comfort her — and murmured a wordless, meandering tune. Her breathing gradually slowed, and she relaxed enough that the presence of her magic banked to merely a tingling itch. She sighed, then wept again, and I almost felt sorry that her shepherd had been killed.

Except that she would never have chosen to be here, were it not for the Glantrian's barbaric practice.

There was no ring of stones marking the boundary of the small temple compound, but the snow fell with less weight after a point, the cold not biting quite so deeply.

The roadside shrine was a long, rounded stone structure. A wall extended behind the building. Someone had lashed crudely-hewn beams in place across a couple of stone pillars that stood evenly spaced along the rear of the length of the shrine — while not running the entire length, about a quarter of what had been a stable had been restored to its prior function; a makeshift covering of pine boughs keeping the worst of the snow from any mounts stabled beneath. Relatively fresh hay had even been spread across the ground and was still partially baled here and there. We found sacks of oats and a small bag of barley. It was a tight fit, but the mounts were content to huddle close for warmth.

"Let us hope to find some sort of supplies inside," Varis said.

“It would be our luck to find the horses better cared for than ourselves,” Gilliam quipped.

By the time I’d curried the horses and seen that they each had a measure of the oats and barley, I found the interior of the shrine warming. A fire blazed in a central fire pit, and a kettle and pot hung over the flames, each bubbling. The tea smelled of clove and cinnamon, and a mix of onion and sage and a peppery venison wafted from the stew pot.

Two doorways stood to one side of the main room, both hung with blankets. Another wider arch opposite those two doors opened into the true shrine. I saw telltale flickerings of candles therein, as well as behind one of the curtained-off rooms.

Our supper continued to cook, Varis stirring the pot. The two weavers sat shoulder to shoulder, dozing.

“Ana has Gilliam confined to the shrine,” Varis said, noticing my glance. “She is with Aurora, doing what she can for the girl’s wounds. Are you well?”

I nodded. “Something warm to eat and a night’s sleep should be all the tending I need,” I told him.

I worked knots, catching up on the past days’ skeins. The dim gray light outside was sliding closer to darkness by the time Ana finally emerged. She’d tied back her hair, two long, thick silver pins holding the coiled mass at the base of her neck. She’d also shed her chainmail jack and tied back the sleeves of her overtunic. It was the first time I think I’d ever seen her arms bare. Pale, well muscled from her combat exercises, I was shocked to see a rippled, pale patch of scar tissue just below her left elbow. She caught my glance, and quickly slipped the bindings on her sleeves. She knelt and spoke quietly with the two other girls, then rose, peering into the shrine. She glanced down, at a sparkling line of silver dust running the length of the floor beneath the arch. She checked it, nodded, then finally came to sit by the fire. Varis handed her a steaming bowl, and then one to me. The blonde girl took the bowl Varis offered her, and began the slow work of coaxing the other weaver to eat. Ana watched, then set her own bowl down without having taken a bite. She rose and strode out into the deepening night. With her hair still kept back, the tears on her cheeks shone bright in the firelight.

Varis shrugged at my questioning glance. "If she wished us to know, she'd tell us," he said. "We have more important matters to discuss."

At my gesture, he continued, stirring slowly at his bowl of stew. "We need to find a way out of here, to get word of this back to the Grand Duke. Lord Retameron at the very least."

"That could be a problem," I said. "We certainly can't go out the way we came."

"Not directly. Perhaps, if we had enough rope..."

"They would never make it across," I said, nodding towards the two weavers.

"Well..."

"We cannot leave them here," I said.

Varis blinked, slowly. "They have a plentiful store here. They could hole up, wait for—"

"Wait for what?" Ana asked, from the doorway. "The passes are blocked. You heard Thorn's hierarch. The roads are frozen over and the rivers aren't far behind. We are cut off here. There will be no escape, let alone rescue."

"So you want to just wait here to die, then?" Varis asked. "We've cut the head off this snake. Let it thrash about, but I do not wish to be crushed by it."

"Even cut off, the snake's head is still dangerous," Ana countered. "We cannot account for the druidess."

"She is gone," Varis said. "Fled, injured or not, surely her power here is broken."

"Do you see any clearing of those skies? Any fewer stokes of lightning?"

Varis glanced over to me. I raised my hands. "A ceremony of this magnitude, which has been going for this long..." I could only shrug. "It isn't going to bring itself to a halt all at once." A sudden thought struck me.

"With no guiding hand, with this sort of momentum... it could run out of control, rather than just blow itself out."

Varis smacked a fist against his knee. "All the more reason to bring warning to the duchy!"

"All the more reason to return to the temple," Ana said.

"Madness," Varis grumbled. "What possible good could that do?"

"It must be resanctified, for one thing. It acts like a lodestone, a beacon drawing darkness towards it. And if what Thorn says is right.... If this ceremony is running out of control..."

They turned to look at me. I nearly choked on the mouthful of stew.

"Ana is right," Gilliam said. He leaned, almost casually against the doorway. His breathing, though, was anything but relaxed. Dark smudges stood out beneath his eyes. "We have the advantage here, probably for the first time since this madness began. We should go back."

"So that your demon can feed on the flames there?" Aurora's voice was sharp, cold, like the edge of a knife left too long in the snow. She stepped from behind the curtain, belting the heavy rattling sword about her slender waist.

Save streaks of dried blood caked into the fine links of her dress, she bore no signs of the terrible injuries from earlier. The pale stones adorning her circlet and bracers were dark, the gold veins flickering as they caught the firelight.

"Aurora, are you all right?" Ana asked, and took a step inside.

The girl stepped back, hand going to the white-wrapped hilt of her sword. "Do not come any closer," she said, her golden eyes narrowing as they regarded the cleric. "You have worked magic upon me against my will." The word 'magic' carried other whispers with it through the translating stone: *sorcery, witchery, life-craft*.

"I worked healing magic on you! I am no witch. I am a servant of the Silver Flame." Ana said, her back straightening.

"I did not ask it. I would not ask for the touch of that..." Her nose wrinkled. "It is not so pure."

"You are a fine one to talk, using a demon's life force to support your own." Aurora's grip tightened on the hilt of her sword. "That is—"

"Different? How so?"

"Necessary," Aurora finished. She relaxed her grip, and slid from her fighting stance, lowering her eyes. "We are still at war. Allowances must be made." She

flexed her left hand about the hilt. "The sooner I am able to return to service, the better. In the future, save your life-crafting for others. I am made to endure."

"You're welcome," Ana said. Her voice was nearly as warm as the night outside.

"I still don't like it!" Gilliam shouted, as we departed the next morning.

"Now I'm questioning whether or not we can trust you," Varis called back, as our mounts slogged back along the trail towards the mountainside temple. "I've never known you to turn down a chance to be alone with a girl before."

Gilliam stooped, and half-heartedly threw a snowball after us. "I can't guarantee she'll remain pure if you're not all back by sundown."

"That's disgusting!" Ana growled.

Varis laughed, nodding. "That's the Gilliam I know," he said. "I still wish she'd let us bring him along. He's a good, capable fighter."

"His demon has sealed his Augment. He is of no use to us," Aurora said, over her shoulder from the front of the column.

Apparently, Varis, Ana, myself and the blonde weaver were of use to the girl, whatever her plan was. And whatever the plan, it involved only begrudging acceptance of the weaver.

"I do not like putting my trust in... outsiders." The word echoed *strangers, foreigners, invaders*.

"It has been nearly two thousand years since my people made landfall," Ana said. "Very nearly that for the Flaemish exiles. This place is just as much our home as it is yours."

"May as well track down a couple beastmen and enlist their help in this, as well," Aurora muttered.

It was easier returning to the temple than it had been in fleeing. The road was piled with snows, but it was light, and the horses broke through it with ease. Wind still tugged at our hoods and cloaks, but it came in gusts, rather than the constant keening knives of cold that had slashed at us the night before.

We picked our way up the rubble-strewn steps as quickly and quietly as we could. Aurora's hand tightened on the hilt of her sword the moment her feet hit the ground. The stones adorning her wrists and those along the circlet winked to life after two steps. Though she voiced no complaint, her breathing came quicker, and the dark gem on the pommel of her sword kindled to a slow, pulsing purplish light.

Ana and I were both panting when we reached the plaza atop the steps.

"Are you going to make it?" Varis asked.

Ana nodded, then staggered, her grip tightening on her scythe.

"If you are ill, perhaps it would be best to turn back," the weaver said, glancing over her shoulder, towards the trees in the distance that hid the shrine.

"No," Ana said, straightening. "This must be stopped. We must—"

A great brassy note poured through the temple opening, so loud we were forced to cover our ears, leaning into the sound to keep from being knocked flat.

Three figures in dark brown robes and deep gray cloaks rushed from the doorway, skidding to a halt as they caught sight of us.

"Go!" shouted the last one through, giving the figure on his left a hard shove. He drew forth a stone-headed mallet from the folds of his cloak.

The other figure stumbled, then dashed for the far side of the plaza, where the steps led down towards the road to Ronkan.

Varis reached for a knife at his belt.

"No, take the leader!" Aurora snapped. "Leave the runner to me." She leapt atop a squat pile of rubble, the sword ratcheting as she drew it in one swift horizontal stroke. She snapped her wrist, and hissed "*Kashaa'karah!*" The blade broke apart with a burst of pale smoke and a snapping that sounded like a miniature thunderbolt. The tip lashed forward, joined to other hand-width sections of the sword by long, thin lengths of some sort of cord. The blades slashed through the runner's cloak, the cord hitting and twining fast about the man's boot.

Aurora gave a sharp tug, yanking the man's feet out from under him, sending him sprawling hard to the uneven surface of the plaza.

"Varis, eyes front!" Ana shouted.

A shower of silver-blue sparks drew my attention back to the other girl, who'd just barely managed to send the stone-headed hammer skittering along the length of her scythe, rather than slamming into Varis' head.

The other figure lunged, a gleaming knife in hand as he struck at Ana's unprotected side.

Anger seized me — perhaps it was the glee that I saw in the man's wide eyes, the short bark of laughter as he made to strike. It surged, and I felt it rush from my hands in two spheres of orange-yellow flame.

His laughter dissolved into a scream of pain as what I thought was a knife in his hand burst into a cloud of sizzling steam at the touch of one of the blasts of fire. He fell back as the other ignited his cloak. He lashed about, blistering fingers fumbling for the cloak's clasp at his neck.

There came the sound of stone-on-metal again, and I looked over to see the remaining cloaked figure batting aside sword and scythe with the head and butt of his hammer. Ana and Varis pressed forward, forcing the man back towards the temple doorway, step by step, blow by blow.

Blue-white splashes of sparks flared within the dim antechamber, washing Ana and Varis in cascades of light and shadow as the burly druid turned their attacks away again and again. Still, he continued his steady retreat, feet sure even though his attention was focused on the flashing blades of sword and scythe before him.

A surge and whisper of power against my skin, and the room brightened. The blonde girl held a hand aloft, and a wavering, watery ball of light bobbed a dozen feet overhead.

Revealing a handful of raggedly-clad figures clambering slowly, silently over the rubble along the collapsed side of the chamber.

I shouted a warning, and charged the one closest to Varis, bringing my staff down hard across outstretched hands.

The wood shivered in my grip — it felt as though I'd brought it down on columns of ice rather than flesh and bone. The thing wrenched its arm to one side, forcing me to catch my balance, and I glanced up to see those hands stretching

towards me now, its mouth opened, a cold, hissing rasp rattling from a long-dead throat.

Jagged rows of ice had grown in where its teeth should have been, and wisps of frost trailed from its jaws like some kind of supernatural spittle. The hands that clutched towards me were caked in ice, the fingers broken apart, barbs and spurs of ice too conveniently shaped or placed at the tips to be natural.

Most frightening though, were the eyes. They burned an unholy icy blue — a cold, dead, hungry light. It was that light, more than the weather or the closeness to the teeth and talons of ice that had me shivering — and not from the temperature, but from the depth of the... I can only think to call it equal parts hunger and rage. Unlike flame or fire, it did not beat against me, but instead sank through me.

We were in trouble if those claws or teeth found flesh.

A flare of silver light rippled through the room, from behind me, and Ana's voice rang in the rapidly cooling air:

"Argyro Fyiro, mehi lux!"

The ice-rimed horror that was reaching for me stalled for the space of a frosty breath, but it was enough time for me to fix my balance, and catch its claws with my staff rather than my arm.

"These things are more powerful than the last batch," Ana called.

"Why should they fear the pitiful flicker of your Silver Flame?" the burly man asked with a laugh. "I told you, it was as a candle before a conflagration!"

I saw the figure lift a hand, from the corner of my eye, saw a long tumble of wavy black hair. A long, rich black beard fell from where it had been wrapped up and out of the way as the figure swept the hood back.

Zadamar stretched to his full height, knocking Varis' strike aside with a laugh nearly as cold as the frost that poured from his mouth.

The druid's skin was the grayish-blue of solidly-frozen flesh. Muscles bulged and flexed beneath what looked like a sheen of dirty ice. He flung the cloak aside, and a hazy nimbus took its place, shrouding him in what looked to be a mantle of finely-blowing snow.

"What in the name of Halav—"

Zadamar chuckled. "Oh, no, not in Halav's name at all, but the name of—" "Cryonax," Ana whispered. Her lips seemed barely able to form the name, so blue were they.

Zadamar flinched as if struck. Varis leapt, taking another great swing at the opening, but the druid — if he could even still be considered such a thing — again swatted aside the warrior's sword with an almost absent-minded contempt.

"I will freeze your tongue and snap it from your mouth, for speaking the name of the Lord of the Frozen Night," Zadamar hissed. He strode towards Ana, hand outstretched. There was a flash of silver light, and it was difficult to tell if it was the druid or the shimmering silvery barrier that let out the sputtering hiss. The druid snatched back his hand, but not before we could see the burns, fingers cracked and oozing blood so pale it looked nearly pink.

"Pitiful though it is, the Silver Flame still burns," Ana said with a smirk.

An icy snarl, like a rattle of chips of ice in a deep well, drew my attention back to the frozen walkers. Ana was right, they were stronger than any we'd fought before. Faster, too. Fortunately, they could not grasp with their icy claws, and I used that to my advantage, sliding their blows away down one side or the other of my staff. But they regained their balance faster than the last of the shamblers I'd fought the day before. Though I was managing to keep the creature from landing any hits, each block and parry jarred at my arms and shoulders. I could not keep it at bay much longer.

"Step away next parry!" Varis shouted from behind me, and I did just that.

His sword cut a flaming arc right into the path to which I'd deflected the icy walker. Its rattling snarl climbed in pitch to a bubbling wail, as the sword's green fire sliced through the ice-crusting hide as if it were normal flesh. Steam and something blacker boiled away from the wounds, and a second downward swing finished the thing off.

"Magic, Thorn," Varis said. "Like those other creatures, that or maybe your fire are the only things that can harm them."

The blonde weaver gave a shriek, dodging back away from one of the creatures as it took a swipe at her. She raised her hands, as if to ward the creature off, and it found itself embracing sheets of flame. Like the druid outside, the creature wailed and staggered away, wrenching this way and that, fanning the flames all the higher.

The remaining walkers halted, hunkering out of reach, their eyes flickering with the hungry blue flame, burning brighter with their hatred of the fire on Varis' sword.

Another frozen walker fell in a steaming, stinking heap, the demonic power boiling away under the wash of flame I hurled. I wasn't sure how much more I could summon. The blonde weaver was in worse condition than I: Ana finally had to drag the girl behind the shelter of another sliver barrier.

Varis bore the brunt of the attacks, though. Patches of his armor were rimed with frost, scored and scorched where the things' claws had found purchase, the wounds crusted with black ice. He was nearly as pale as Ana, his sword rattled with the shivering spasms that wracked his body. Still, he somehow managed to keep a whisper of the greenish fire licking at the edge of his blade.

Ana had tried using her bursts of silver light, calling out to the Flame with some limited success. At the very least, the creatures were stunned long enough that Varis or I could dispatch them.

But more took their place, pulling themselves from beneath the ruins of the far side of the chamber, pushing up from their cold graves amidst the rubble.

And Aurora had the audacity to ask us how it was that we'd allowed the druid to slip past us.

"We should be pursuing him!" Varis said, through gritted teeth. He sucked in a breath as Ana pressed a steaming cloth to his upper arm.

"Yes, let us chase the dragon straight into its den," Aurora said. She had the hilt of her sword disassembled, and behind the weighty crosspiece was a complex meshing of crystals, gears, so fine as to've been made by pixies. She dabbed at the gears here and there with the corner of her cloak, lifting away finely coiled springs,

and blowing grit from the wheels. There was a sharp “crack” as she jerked a blackened crystal from a housing within guts of the mechanism.

“Was that a diamond?” the blonde weaver asked, eyes wide.

“It was. But now it is ruined, worthless. It is no matter.” Aurora tossed the stone aside.

“No matter?” the weaver gasped. “That had to be worth... thousands of ducats!”

Aurora sighed. “I forget that you must still dig them from the ground rather than simply make them.”

“Hold still!” Ana barked. “I cannot wrap it with you flapping your arm like a chicken!”

“They usually kill the chicken before they cook it. That stuff is burning me!”

“It’s burning any trace of infection those demons might have left,” Ana said. “Or would you prefer to wind up like one of them?” She pointed back towards the opening to the antechamber.

In the shadows, behind the glimmering line of silver dust Ana had left across the doorway, dozens of points of blue light hovered. Waiting. Hungry.

Aurora shifted through the gemstones gathered in her lap. She shifted her knee, and the stones bounced in the makeshift work surface she’d made of her dress. She picked out a red stone — a ruby cut oblong, as had been the diamond the girl had simply cast aside. She jimmied it into the tangle of gears and springs, her tongue poking from the corner of her mouth as her fingers moved.

“Thorn, the fire?”

I looked up, and saw that the meager blaze Varis had managed to coax from the scrub we could gather at the base of the temple steps was beginning to falter. I bent my concentration back to the flames, urging them higher, guiding them to the places within the branches that had not yet been consumed.

Despite the surge in warmth, a chill brushed against my skin, and my fingertips tingled as the flames grew even more steady. The weaver had turned from watching Aurora work, and her eyes had the dreamy look her kind tended to get when using their Power. The campfire ceased its sputtering, and brightened,

standing up against the fitful gusts of wind that worked around the crude windbreaks we'd piled from the ruins.

"Do not tax yourself further," Ana said, frowning at the girl across the campfire.

The girl shook her head. "This is novice work. Were Macha's here, even she could manage this much."

"At least call her by her name," Ana said. "It sickens me, to hear you speak of her as if she were a belonging, or a pet."

The other girl swallowed, shaking her head again. "If she had her own name, I never heard it."

"And yours?"

The girl stared at Ana, her gaze even more distant.

"You do not know? Were you not given one?"

"When we—" her fingers strayed to the collar around her neck, brushing it in a gesture that was almost a caress. Then her finger hooked, and she bit her lip as she tugged at the clasp, pain washing across her features. The flames wavered. "They take it, and we are made to suffer, should we dwell on it."

She huddled lower, clutching the blanket up about her neck, and stared intently at the fire, which burned brighter and hotter until the girl's breathing slowed and some color returned to her cheeks.

"Impossible," Varis spat, then sucked in a sharp breath, a hand moving to support his ribs.

Aurora arched a pale blonde eyebrow. "I would not have mentioned it as an option if I had calculated it as an impossibility."

"Gilliam is not here. Do you propose we go back for him, after you argued so much for us to leave him?"

"Certainly not. It is bad enough that we waste time arguing this point. Going back for that man would only allow this festering growth to burrow deeper."

Varis threw his hands up. "What then? We have no bow, much less a competent archer among us."

Aurora rolled her eyes — the first gesture true to her apparent age — and pushed herself to her feet with a huffing sigh worthy of any of my younger cousins. She unclasped her scabbard from her belt, drawing her sword. It rattled from its home, and she gave the pommel a sharp tug. It extended another half-hand's length with a sharp "snap." A further twirl of the sword caused two pins to drop from recesses within the hilt's extended shaft, each as wide as the base of the sword on the other end of the hilt. The girl touched the scabbard to the pommel end of her sword, and they locked together with an audible 'clack.'

"Shrikes must also be able to engage from extreme distances," she said, eyes intent on her fingers, which were turning what I'd thought was merely a decorative circular engraving at the crosspiece. The blade snapped back, angling towards the girl, as did the scabbard — becoming the top and bottom 'curves' of a makeshift bow.

She reached up, and the circular engraving spun as the girl yanked the tip from the sword, the thin wiring drawn taut as she locked the sword-tip into a slot at the base of the scabbard.

Varis stared, his disdain lost in wonderment. "Impossible," he murmured.

Aurora frowned. "Either your speaking stone is flawed, or that word does not mean the same thing in my world."

"All well and good," Ana said, still packing up her healing kit. "But what are you to do about arrows? It would be quicker to go back for Gilliam than it would to fashion anything from what's available." She waved a hand down the steps.

Aurora kept frowning. "My original quiver is somewhere under there, no doubt," she said, nodding towards the collapsed half of the temple antechamber. "But for this, I will only need one shot." She fished in the pouch at her waist, and drew out one of the black crystals.

Varis snorted. "You mean to tell me you're going to take out all those... things with a single arrow? Not even Gilliam is that good. Not even with that demon to help him."

Aurora clasped the crystal to the side of the hilt — now the handle of her bow — with one thumb. She drew her other fingers along the length of the stone, whispering the word "*Zhalyajvalita*" as she drew her fingers back to the bowstring,

and then pulled the bowstring back to her cheek with the same practiced ease as I'd seen Gilliam use.

A line of golden light flickered, then spun into being, bridging the gap between the girl's fingers and the stone.

"I suggest you all take cover behind the larger stones," she said, voice going distant as she bent her concentration toward aiming.

Aurora held the shot, the stone flaring to purplish-blue light, growing brighter by the second as we scrambled to find shelter. Her eyes narrowed, and I had to turn mine away as the stone and the golden shaft flared even brighter. But in the instant before she loosed the magical arrow, the gold of her eyes burned with a molten light equal to that of the dark stone.

She actually staggered as she released the shaft, and it left a sparkling trail of golden motes and traces of purple flame lingering in the air. The girl spun, ducking, drawing her cloak up to either side of her, the fabric blotting out my view.

The sky turned white, and I huddled in the shadow of the girl's cloak, burying my face in my hands. Even though my eyes were shut, my forehead pressed to the cold stones, the light still burned, ghostlike, in my vision.

The stones trembled, and it felt the mountain pass had as the stone and ice rained upon us on the way to this valley. The ground bucked and quaked beneath me.

The sound was unlike anything I'd ever heard — a howl, a screech, the bellow of a titan or dragon, all rolled into one. I don't know which stung worse, the debris kicked up by that howling wind, or the intense heat of it. The fires of Verge seemed as candle-flames compared to this.

And just as suddenly, it was gone. Not tapered off, as a gust of wind or the receding of the heat. Just gone. Silent, save the hard rush of my pulse behind the ringing in my ears from the sheer volume, now gone.

I looked up, into Aurora's wide eyes, gone back to their normal gold. The white stones burned brightly on her brow and at her wrists. As I stirred, she lowered her arms, and her cloak fell about her.

It looked as if it had been exposed to dragon's breath. Beneath a fine coating of ash and char, silvery metal shone in the pale afternoon light.

The ground before the antechamber doorway was blasted clean in a cone that extended well off either of the sides of the plaza.

The doorway was still whole, but looked as if it had been scoured to a nearly glossy texture. Only divots and ripples over the stone marred the otherwise uniform smoothness. Inside, much of the chamber looked to be in the same glazed condition, save for the occasional pale, shadowy figure burned into the wall or against the larger blocks of rubble. The air tasted heavily of smoke and lightning, though none lingered, and the only tingling against my skin was of the blonde weaver's power as she crept through the room at my side.

Ana and I glanced at each other at nearly the same moment. The sickness, the queasiness of stomach and nerves, was gone.

"Move quickly," Aurora said, behind us. "Do not linger, do not breathe too deeply. Do not touch anything. Not even the doorway. If you already have, throw your gloves to the far side of the chamber."

"I've never heard of any attack that simply... passes straight through flesh without leaving any wound," Varis said. "I feel ridiculous." He gave the wide cloth belt about his waist a vicious tug. He'd had to gather quite a bit of the garishly-dyed robe at the waist so he didn't trip over it.

"If Aurora says the armor must go, then I trust her word," I told him. "Magic such as that— I have never seen or felt anything like it."

"First the gold," he grumbled. "But then... my armor, too?"

"Careful," I warned him. "You're beginning to sound like Gilliam."

"Joke all you want," Varis said. "You just lost your cloak and a few coins."

"And the Hierarch's crystal," I reminded him. "But judging from the look on the girl's face and the way the stones at her wrist lit up... I think it is best left behind."

A few final adjustments to Varis' new robe, and we stepped from the alcove, into the main side chamber to which Aurora had led us.

The girl sat in the same spot on the bench, where she'd collapsed as soon as we made our way to the chamber. Three of the dark stones lay at her feet, the surfaces cracked, another in place on the pommel of her sword, throbbing in dark counterpoint to the bright golden-white light of the stones on her wrists.

I knelt, looking up into the shadows of her hood. Her face was drawn, pinched, with dark circles beneath her closed eyes. I'd seen better looking plague and winter-fever victims. Her breath was slow, bubbling, and she coughed into a kerchief, which came away stained with blood so dark as to be nearly black.

"Shall I fetch Ana?" I asked her.

She shook her head slightly, pale hair falling into her face. She brushed it aside with a trembling hand. I realized only after I'd seen it against her hand, that the lock of hair was white.

I took her hands in mine. They were hot, dry. I'd felt twigs with more substance.

"Aurora?"

"Cellular reconstruction is at fifty-five percent and climbing," she murmured. "Uric and lymph subsystems still redlined. Radiance contaminants purged to minimal levels in 35 cycles. Resurrection failsafes unlocked. Backup bindings charged and ready."

I looked up at Varis.

"She's delirious, mumbling nonsense."

"I will be fine in another few moments," she whispered, eyes fluttering open. It sounded as if she spoke through sandpaper. I lifted my waterskin.

Her eyes went wide and she batted it away with such force that it sailed a good arm's reach away, to empty itself on the floor.

"You did not drink of it, did you?"

"Not since this morning," I said.

She abruptly pulled her other hand from mine, clutching her sword close against her.

"Leave it. I told you not to touch me. Not for another few hours. Go back to the font. Wash again, but do not drink. And do not touch anything!"

I pulled my hands away from where I was about to rub them on my tunic.

"I miscalculated," Aurora said, when Ana and the weaver joined us. She and Ana both ignored Varis' withering glances. The young cleric was still decked out in her chain armor, with the silver-and-white tabard and undertunic. The weaver was still in her plain gray gown, though it was now belted with a wide woolen cloth nearly identical to that around Varis' waist.

"The strike was supposed to have detonated within that chamber." She waved a hand towards the short hallway leading to the main temple chamber. "Cryonax must have positioned more of those shock troops at the rear doorway. They triggered the explosion too soon." She bowed her head, touching the thumbs of her closed hands to her forehead. "My mistake very nearly killed all of you."

"We're all alive. We could have very well been torn to pieces by that room full of frozen zombies," Varis said. "If anything, you've kept us fresh to take the fight to Zadar, or this... Cryonax you two keep talking about."

"Honestly, I have been more worried about you, than myself," Ana said.

Aurora blushed, then shifted her feet. "I told you... I am made to endure. Though this has cost me dearly." She ran a hand through her hair. A long forelock on her left brow had gone pure white, and the remainder of her hair was shot through with jagged streaks of white here and there.

"At the risk of sounding simple-minded," Varis said, raising his hand as if we were taking lessons, "couldn't you just... you know..." He mimed drawing back a bow and releasing. "With nothing in the way this time, surely..."

The girl stared at the warrior for a long moment. She almost smiled, but a coughing fit doubled her over. She backed swiftly away when Ana and the weaver both made to support her. The spasms passed, and she dabbed at her lips with the darkly-stained handkerchief. The stones adorning her wrists shone bright, but their light was not steady.

"I have only two dragonstones remaining, and neither of them hold their full capacity." She glanced over to Ana. "No, I will not bend their use to further healing. We will need their strength for the fight against Cryonax."

The temple proper was quiet, save the sibilant whisper-chitter of the blood-red flames surrounding the pit. Our footsteps, the jangle of Ana's armor, the clatter of Aurora's sword against her hip, they all echoed, coming back to us loud across the vast dimensions of the room.

Without pale walkers or flaming horrors coming at us, I finally got a good look at the chamber. It rivaled most surface temples I'd ever seen: perhaps a hundred feet across, from the doorway we emerged from to a similar one on the far side of the room, and nearly that distance from the anteroom's archway to the huge, maimed statue that loomed behind the altar off to our left.

Four smaller statues stood off to the right, flanking corners where the chamber flared wider. They were all carved in resemblance of the main statue — tall, broad-shouldered manlike figures with sleek, jackal-like heads. Following the lines of their upraised arms, I saw that they appeared to be supporting another, higher gallery level. The stone steps leading up from the side of the chamber we were on lay in ruins, but across the chamber, another flight of steps remained unbroken.

The mosaic of the floor was strewn with rubble, ranging from large blocks that had fallen from the gallery above, down to the the fine, powdery debris left from the impact of Aurora's cage.

"Where is the cyst?" she asked.

A scorched patch on the floor marked where it had been, and that was spattered with a grayish jellylike substance.

"Well, we can follow its path easily enough," Varis said, pointing towards the slimy trail whatever had emerged from the blob had left. It curved along the floor, following the wall to our left, had oozed up the steps towards the altar, giving the gaping pit a wide berth.

We did the same, Aurora leading, Varis close behind her. I had rearguard, behind Ana and the weaver. Though there were only half a dozen steps up to the altar's raised dais, the grayish glop covered much of their entire surface.

"Be wary. It seeks to keep us off balance. Step only where I do," Aurora said. She drew her sword before she started up the steps, uncomfortably close to the far edge and the yawning dark of the pit below.

“Can’t we just burn through this stuff and charge on up?” Varis asked, checking his balance as he stepped after Aurora, placing his feet only in the spots she indicated.

“No. It burns hot enough to slag copper. If the heat did not kill us, the fumes or lack of breathable air would.”

“You sound as if you’ve done this before,” Ana said.

Aurora glanced back at the cleric, flashed a brief, fierce smile. “Why do you think there is no ornamentation here?”

“Cryonax is limiting our ability to fight,” Ana said with a frown. “Would it not be wiser to approach from the other side?”

“No doubt that path is even more treacherous than this,” Aurora said. “I prefer facing the demons that I know.”

Although we anticipated attack, none came as we reached the top of the dais. The slime coated roughly a third of it, curling around an alcove and disappearing through a recessed doorway. Across the debris from the wreckage of Aurora’s cage, another shadowed doorway could be seen, a tattered blanket separating whatever lay beyond from the main temple.

The altar was a mess — most of its surface was coated with a sticky, half-frozen crust of blood. The floor directly beneath and around the altar was tacky and half-slick with the stuff, as well. Thankfully, the grit that had settled from the broken statue was enough to ensure at least my feet would not skid out from under me.

“Varis, you will watch the far door,” Aurora said. “I will hold this one. Ana, Thorn, you know what to do.” She set herself as close to the edge of the grayish glop as she dared, sword held at a low guard.

Varis picked his way over what was left of the cage, and settled into a relaxed guard, facing the blanketed doorway.

“What shall I do?” the weaver asked.

“Stay there. Watch. Be ready,” Aurora said. I translated the girl’s response.

“For what?”

“Anything.”

The weaver swallowed, shivered, but clenched her hands. As the momentary fright smoothed from her features, the whisper of her power brushed against my senses.

Ana shrugged off her pack, rummaged through it, and pulled out several bundles. One I recognized as the box containing her ceremonial materials. Another bundle she passed to me: the cloth-wrapped silver bowl Sheska had given us.

I lifted a hand to the altar's surface, reached with my magic to the two silver candles Ana had lit. It took the space of a dozen slow breaths to gather enough of their warmth before I could set it to work over the breadth of the stone altar.

"The corruption is nearly smothering," Ana murmured. I nodded. Even that small movement was nearly enough to break the tenuous hold I had over the flames.

"A pardon," I said, to whichever Immortal watched over this temple. I released the heat all at once, and had to turn away as the collected blood sizzled and popped beneath the rush of heat.

A cloud of reeking smoke billowed forth, and then was snatched up, streaming away in a tightly contained column.

I turned, and nodded my thanks to the weaver, who smiled slowly. In moments, the altar had burned clear, and the buzz of the girl's power faded.

Had the bowl not been dented, it would have been a perfect fit.

A clear, clarion chime sounded, though I had not struck the side of the bowl. I felt that power reverberate through my hands: a powerful thrum of energy, a tingling not unlike the feel of the weaver's power.

The stone beneath my feet, the floor, the mountain itself seemed to thrum in response to the sound. As it ebbed, the mountain gave a sudden lurch, and then another. The silver tone was broken by the crackling grate of stone against stone.

I felt stone falling behind me, heard Aurora and Varis' shouts of surprise, felt the hard rain of rock chips against my back. I could not turn to see if they were all right, though.

My gaze was fixed on the four statues that faced the dais from across the room, standing a good fifteen feet tall, supporting the iron-barred viewing gallery over their jackal-like heads.

Their eyes had come alight, flickering with a deep crimson light, shot through with blue.

The temple quaked again, the sound of stone breaking from stone sounded as the thunder had outside: booming, and touched with a grating, demonic echo. The statue along the front right tore itself free, the gallery it had supported collapsing behind it as it stepped over the ruins of the stairs.

“It would seem the demons will not give up this place without a fight,” Ana said.

The statue crouched, plunging its arm into the blackness. As it rose, darkness dripped down its arm, flowing into the length of blackness stretching between the statue’s clenched fist and the unmoving surface of the pool.

As the bar of blackness touched the flames at the edge of the pool, they leapt, shrieking and chattering, surging up its length. The statue brought up the blade of flame-wreathed darkness, and turned its eyes towards the dais.

Ana and Varis both hit the stairs, charging down the side clear of the slimy gray ooze. The statue took a step, into the midst of the slime trail across the floor, but showed no reaction to the stuff. Whatever it was, it had no effect on stone.

The weaver gave a yelp, and huddled behind the wreckage of the cage. Frightened though she was, I felt a hard surge of her power as she scurried past me. The corruption of this place did not appear to hamper the source upon which the weaver drew.

Aurora spat a curse that didn’t translate directly through the stone, then darted past me, her feet silent on the stone. Instead of picking her way down the stairs, though, she gathered herself at the top step and leapt, hurtling into the air in a vault worthy of something from the Footman’s Games of Thyatis.

Her jump carried her nearly even with the statue’s head. She brought her sword around in a slashing arc, and she barked the command to unravel the weapon’s length. The momentum of her swing flung the lengthening sections of sword and cabling around the thing’s neck, the blades flaring with greenish fire as they bit into the statue’s stone skin. She rode the arc of her own momentum around behind the statue, hitting the ground and rolling to a catlike crouch, leaving the

sword to dangle down the statue's back, the hilt swinging about its knees as it turned, trying to track the girl.

"Up, go to the gallery!" Aurora shouted.

Her direction to Varis and Ana nearly cost her the hand she used to point upwards. The black blade flashed downward, but Aurora spun away, dashing between the statue's legs.

I heard the weaver behind me gasp, and I admit, my breath caught as well. Rather than charge right into the ooze she'd warned us not to touch, though, she raised a hand, and caught the wildly-swinging hilt of her sword, which began lifting her up along the statue's broad back, the segments chiming as they locked back into place.

It was nearly comical, as the statue turned this way and that, trying to shake the girl. At most she skipped a step this way or that, her size and balance outmatching the great mass of animated stone.

By then, Varis had reached the crumbling edge of the gallery. He watched for a moment, then set himself, and made a leap of his own. His sword flared a deep green, and there was a great shower of sparks as the tip of his blade grated along the statue's shoulder. Varis gave a shout, and the blade flared again, then bit into stone. His fall stopped nearly sharp enough to wrench the sword from his grip. He dangled as one hand slipped its grasp on the hilt.

The temple shook with the grating rasp of the statue's bellow, and Varis' armor struck sparks as the creature turned, dragging the warrior along the wall.

Aurora used that momentum to launch herself from the thing's back, the sword unraveling behind her as she leapt over the gaping black pit.

The chain still dangled from the great metal arm overhead, and Aurora caught herself on one of the great links. She reminded me briefly of the squirrels in Radlebb, chasing each other round and round the trees. She wound the sword's cabling around the chain a good three times before the statue lurched the opposite direction, dragging Varis back along the wall.

His grip failed him then, and he tumbled to the floor of the temple, rolling across the broad stretch before the main doors.

Aurora held onto the iron chain, both arms wrapped through one of the great links as the statue tried to press forward, to finish off the warrior. It tried to take another step, and pulled the chain taught, wrenching its head back.

Ana stood in the crumbling gap atop the gallery, from where Varis had leapt. She was not so reckless. Instead, she flung two handfuls of shimmering powder into the demon-statue's face, shouting a harsh, sibilant command.

The sparkling dust erupted into twin blossoms of silver fire. I had to turn away, shielding my eyes from the sudden, sun-like brightness. The demon's shriek again sent the temple quaking. I heard the thunderous crashing of stone, and the silver fire dimmed.

The silver light sputtered out seconds later, plunging the chamber back into the bloody, flickering gloom of the demonlights.

By then, Ana was already hurrying back down the steps, racing to Varis' side.

A rattling jangle from the chain drew my eyes upward, where Aurora had unwound her sword from the great chain. After a few swings, she flung herself from above the pit to land lightly on the back of the statue. It leaned, rigid and unmoving against the corner where the gallery met the temple wall. The eyes were dark — along with the rest of the thing's head, blackened and lined with deep cracks.

Varis' cough echoed across the chamber, as did his gasps as Ana helped him to sit. He looked around, rubbing his head.

"Did we win?"

"Barely," Ana said.

Twin roars drowned out anything else she might have said, as the eyes of the two statues flanking the main temple doorway flared. Varis and Ana disappeared under a cloud of dust and shower of rocks as the statues shrugged themselves free from the wall.

I could see hulking shadows within the dust cloud, could see movement, and regularly spaced flares of silvery light. The demons' wailing — a chilling sound like icicles dragging over stone — followed each of the brilliant bursts of light.

The silver light only increased in intensity as the dust began to drift and settle. Through the glare, I could see great stone fists hammering down. The air

perhaps ten feet over Ana's head crackled and spat flares of silver light. Sparks rained down, outlining a shell of empty air about Ana and Varis. The cleric of the Silver Flame crouched over the warrior, arms extended, a palm facing each of the statues.

Her pale face washed in the silvery light, eyes narrowed and teeth bared in fierce defiance of the looming demons, framed in stark contrast with her dark hair, Ana looked like something from an elven tale of their forbearers, a wild embodiment of the moon and stars themselves.

Gold light, wreathed in and trailing bright crimson fire lanced into the shoulder of the statue to Ana's left, blasting chunks of stone every which way, the rock glowing red-orange.

I tore my attention away from the two across the room to see Aurora, still standing atop the burnt-out remains of the statue along the righthand side of the room. She had reconfigured her weapon into its bow-form, and was drawing the string back for another shot. A point of golden light hovered just above the bow's grip. The red gems on Aurora's circlet brightened, and the tiny golden orb caught fire. Rather than flicker upwards, though, the flames spun back towards the fingers holding the bowstring to her cheek. No sooner did the tip of the flame touch her fingertips, then did she release.

The crimson bolt cut a bright path across the chamber, blossoming with a dull roar along the back of the already-wounded statue's knee.

It topped sideways with a keening roar and spray of red-hot stone, the stump of its damaged leg slamming to the floor. The statue flailed its arms, trying to take one last swing at Ana and Varis. That finished any semblance of balance it might have had, and it tipped into the blackness of the pit.

Aurora checked her aim, her balance shifting, the bow coming slightly up, and then she loosed another of the flaming bolts.

It took the other statue high in the chest, just as it drew a great fist back to strike, and the concussion of the blast spun it halfway round.

Varis scrambled to his feet, sword striking sparks along the floor as he brought it around and up, the blade flaring with green light a moment before

impact. The sword cleaved cleanly through the statue's leg, leaving a black and smoking wound, nearly severing the leg at the knee.

The remaining stone in the joint cracked, and the statue crashed to the floor on its back.

Ana and Varis both looked up, at the final statue. Its eyes flared, briefly, and then the reddish lights flickered out. Likewise, across the chamber, the fire winked out from around the golden orb, and the orb itself diminished to nothing as Aurora relaxed her draw on the bowstring. She half-slid, half-leapt from her perch. With a twist of the scabbard and twirl of her wrist, she had the bow disassembled and the sword sheathed at her waist in one flowing motion.

"Wait!" she called, staying Ana's hand at her scythe.

The shrike leapt atop the still-struggling stone figure, her footing and balance sure even though her feet reddened, smoke curling from her heels. She gritted her teeth, the stones at her wrist brightening. She drew her sword, and struck the flat of the blade across the statue's snout. A clear tone rang out — the same note that Silva sang in Koriszegy's orrery.

Aurora knelt, placing the pommel-gem against the statue's chest. The tone rang louder, amplified through the stone. Its struggles grew more frantic, nearly throwing the girl from atop it. The thing's head thrashed back and forth. I saw, as it turned my direction, that the blue-touched reddening of its eyes grew steadily weaker. The purple gleam from within the sword's pommel-gem grew steadily brighter.

I expected the sword's note to gradually lessen, but it rang clear and strong until the statue's struggles ceased, the eyes suddenly going dark.

Only when the sword's ring finally faded did the girl rise, again sheathing her sword. She glanced up at the final statue, her lip curling as she spat a word that carried many meanings through the speaking stone's translating echo: *coward, cur, slug, wretch.*

"It has fled," Aurora explained, at Varis' wary look at the remaining statue.

"If you had waited, I could have laid down a dimensional anchor," Ana said. "But instead, you insisted on blasting away at it with your..." She waved a hand at the girl's sword. "Now it has gone to ground and we have lost a prime chance at banishing it for good."

Aurora's back stiffened, her knuckles going white, the sword rattling in its scabbard. Even across the room, I could see the rise and fall of her shoulders as she sucked in deep breaths, at first coming swift in anger, then slowing as she calmed.

I cleared my throat.

"If you two are going to come to blows, at least let me get down there so I can catch some of her blood in the bowl, as we'd planned earlier."

Ana flushed, bowing her head slightly. Aurora turned on her heel, stalking around the dark pit towards the left set of steps up to the dais. The blood-red flames hushed their gibbering as she passed, the jets bending away from her, some of them guttering down to a dim red glow.

Once she reached my side, she held her arm out over the bowl, her sleeve making its oddly metallic rustle as she drew it up over the smooth golden whorls of the bracer.

"I do not need much," I told her.

She nodded, her arm not wavering the least as I moved the obsidian knife closer to her upturned hand.

The bracer suddenly took on a dull light. The gold seemed to shift, rippling briefly, like a candle caught in a sudden fitful draft, or molten metal within a crucible come to boiling.

The blade of the knife glimmered, and then flared a deep, fiery red. Heat washed over my hand, from the blade gone suddenly hot. I cried out in surprise, drawing the knife back. It gleamed white where it struck the bracer in my haste to move it away. The pain flared along with the blade, and it tumbled from my blistering fingers.

Aurora sighed, and crouched beside me, as I huddled cradling my injured hand. Her hands were cool, and the blisters tingled as she drew her fingers over them, the white stones on her wrists gleaming softly. The pain subsided as the blisters withered away under her touch.

“My apologies. The magic does not differentiate friend from foe or account for intent.”

“It would have been nice if you’d remembered that a bit sooner,” I said, flexing my fingers.

The girl frowned. “When you have thousands of years worth of memories to sift through, let us see who remembers what.” She picked the knife up from the ground and rose, turning back to the altar. A swift motion and a brief hiss of pain, and I heard a soft patter-pat of drops raining into the bowl.

I could immediately sense what it was that Zadamar had done as soon as I approached the altar. Traces of energy at the site of a ceremony, subtle differences in the air or ground, even in the fall of sunlight through the trees; all of those blend to form an impression of the spell or ceremony which can be felt by others.

The brutality with which the First Child of Winter had pursued this ceremony, the depth of the pain and terror he’d inflicted, along with the sheer number of the victims did not leave just an impression. It left raw, gaping wounds. A simple ceremony to see the transition of Nyx and Ixion’s powers, to recognize their covenant and reaffirm it, was twisted, torn, and restitched; a pendulum made into a lever.

The fabric of the ceremony was heavier than any I’d felt. Each strand was soaked in blood putrefied by its taking, rather than being offered. Each strand also bore a seething current of hatred. Rage fueled it, kept hot by fear and agony....

All of that seeped into me as I traced the patterns across my hands, up my arms, first the right, then the left. Opposite the way Zadamar would have had to prepare himself. The few drops of Aurora’s blood was barely enough for the runes and the final lines across my brow, eyelids, and lips.

I lifted my hands, and felt the tendrils of the ceremony writhe into place, intertwining with the magic I began to spin with a chant that I’d heard, season after season, had participated with but once. What should have been a light webbing of magics, something thin and gossamer as a sheet of spider’s silk was instead something thick, smothering, heavy under layers of ash and fear. Woven through

that was the sickly sheen of the demonic taint and the smoldering, reddish heat of their rage.

The oxen my father used, twice a season to pull the wide wooden plow through the farmstead's fields, were of a particularly stubborn stock. Until we reached an age just before our Shearings, it took all three of my brothers and I to keep a single ox from meandering off on its own. Just half a field left us panting, exhausted, every muscle afire and tempers not far from catching alight as well.

I felt as though I were at the reins again, the plow before me. But rather than one stubborn ox, an entire herd stretched out, each ox running at its head, nose to the ground, snorting and blowing as it charged at full speed.

I have never sung as I did on that day. Indeed, I have been incapable of such a feat since, as I damaged my voice beyond the reach of Ana or Aurora's magics. Even afterwards, the Hierarch and Baron Halaran were unable to repair the demon's scarring.

But I get ahead of myself.

The ceremony of the winter solstice begins with *Risia's Nocturne*. I could feel the echo of Zadamar's singing as I lifted my voice. The ceremony stirred, as a cat might stretch in the middle of a noontide nap, and then settled around my voice. The fabric of the spells weighed heavily against my upraised hands. While magic always took away a bit of energy as it is cast, my own spells have never carried a physical strain as did Zadamar's ceremony.

I sang the nocturne three times, and with each repetition, the weaving of the ceremony became clearer. Patterns emerged in the warp and weave of the spell's fabric. What I saw in those patterns sickened me. Pain, violence. Agony before death, not a swift and sudden relief at all, but something jagged and cruel. Worse, there was no shift, no change, only repetition, and each grew darker, colder. The dusting of demonic influence strengthening with each cycle, until the outer edges of the ceremony were caked in rotten black ice.

And that icy corruption was spreading. It was nearly strong enough to assert itself without the support of the ceremony.

I tensed my will against the bulk of the magic, and brought the last note of the nocturne around to the beginning of Ixion's *Song of the Morning Light*.

I might as well have thrown myself against one of the great stone statues and moved it. The magic of the ceremony trembled, then struck back, with a shock so great it nearly drove the breath from my lungs. I felt the spell constricting around my arms and chest, the crackling of demonic ice like the sound of the gnashing of broken teeth. I barely wheezed out the last phrase.

I fought to draw breath against the crushing pressure of the ceremony, felt my arms waver, and one knee buckled.

There was a surging of cold and heat against my skin, inside and out. Breath surged into my lungs, and the very air hardened against my back, molding around me, not to bind, but to support.

I kept singing, and the ceremony surged to strike me again, and the heat against my skin blazed forth, fiery, golden as the sun of which I sang. I opened my eyes to see the runes along my hands and arms alight. The pressure of the ceremony fell back before that golden light, and my breath was again my own.

The spells heaved, but my song was too far entwined with the magics for them to slither away to hide in the darkness and cold.

Dimly, I heard Varis curse. The room was quaking with each heave and tremor of the magic.

"Steady," he said, and I saw his hand on Ana's arm, as he pulled her away from the edge of the pit. The flames stretching away behind her shone with a silvery-white brilliance, and another just under her hand trembled with streaks of red as black smoke streamed from that flame.

The weight of the ceremony decreased slightly with each of the demonlights she consumed with her own silver flames.

As I began the second repetition of the *Song of the Morning Light*, I heard a shriek behind me, and then the cradle of air collapsed behind me. I staggered, but did not fall, but the resulting stammer in the cadence of the song cost us all dearly.

On the floor below, the blood red flames leapt with a shriek of their own, and Ana flinched backwards. Fitful red flames clawed at her lower arm. Varis threw

his cloak over the girl, dragging her to the ground, slapping at her arm. She hadn't uttered more than a cry of surprise, only voicing a cry as her breath came back to her.

"Enough! It is out!"

My brief step away from the altar saved my left arm. A heavy stone hammer whistled past my shoulder, striking the edge of the altar with such force that both the head and the section of the altar it hit shattered. Shards of stone peppered me, most of it spraying harmlessly against my thick winter tunic. I felt flashes of heat against my arm and face, though. Soon after, I felt the sharp sting and a trickling of blood from my cheek and brow.

I wanted nothing more than to turn, and see what had happened to the weaver. Or to lend aid to Aurora, as I saw a flash of white and green and gold as she leapt to my defense.

But I could not falter again in the ceremony. The demons within it were stirring, rushing over the threads of the spells towards me. Only by singing could I hold them off, turning the ceremony against them. If I stopped singing, Aurora's blood would lose its power, and I would be crushed beneath the weight of the magic just as surely as the altar had been smashed by Zadamar's hammer.

Fortunately, I was no longer his target. He lashed out with the shaft of his hammer, landing a backhanded strike that sent Aurora spinning, tumbling partway down the steps. Even as she fell, though, she lashed out with the blade, the gears within the hilt and crosspiece whining as several sections unspooled. They caught around the druid's wrist and lower arm, and Aurora used the momentum of her fall to drag her opponent after her.

It was barely enough to bring him down two steps, but that was two steps further away from stopping me from completing the ceremony.

He snarled, more a sound of frustration than malice, as he and the shrike engaged in a tug of war. It was brief, for as strong as Aurora was, the druid had sheer bulk on his side. But rather than let him turn the whip against her, she reeled in the slack, restoring her balance as he wrenched her from side to side. She drew ever closer to the hulking druid, but I had seen what the girl was capable of in close quarters.

My own recollection of Aurora's battle with the demon-infused druid is nothing more than flashes of green-gold light; distant, echoing battle cries. The rhythm of the battle changed once Varis joined. A reflection of sliver light in the edges of the bowl upon the altar was the only indication I had that Ana had made her way around the chamber and was doing what she could for the fallen weaver.

Every other shred of my concentration was bent towards shaping the words of Ixion's song, projecting their power over the tapestry of magic that Zadamar had woven over months. I felt very much like the proverbial fisherman and the leaky boat, scooping water out by the handful.

The demons chose a short break in the refrain to make their attack. Ana had prepared me for it as best she could, relaying what she'd read from other exorcists of demons of this particular type. Even still, their strike was very nearly enough to shatter my concentration. Surely, had I used blood from anyone other than Aurora, I would have been lost.

They swarmed from every direction, looking to my spell-shrouded eyes like a dense, churning blue-white fog. The breath I drew at the refrain's end was thick with their impossible cold, and that breath quite literally froze in my throat, creeping on needlelike icy claws down into my chest.

Aurora's magic burned brighter, and the cloud of ethereal demons shrilled a chorus of cries before the golden light. The light swam before my eyes, the tendrils of fog curling around and then away from the golden radiance.

A hand pressed to my back, and a shock of cold burst from slightly below my shoulder blades, so intense I nearly doubled over with a coughing fit.

Through the bright spots dancing in my vision, tinged with a reddish haze, I saw a pale, slender hand reaching from behind me, a long, thin spike of silver in a firm grip. A flick of the wrist, and the tip of the long silver needle struck the bowl, emitting a high, sweet note. The demons' fog shivered as the note struck it, and wisp by wisp, fell back, dissolving under the golden light and silver tone.

"Breathe, Thorn!"

The needles of cold sank deeper, and the only air I could get was a gasp as my lungs spasmed.

“Your power is broken, you have failed here. Let him go!”

The pain grew, from seeping cold to intense, prickling fire.

“Forgive me, Thorn, but this is necessary.” The words were barely more than a warm breath in my ear.

The brightness dancing over my eyes was eclipsed by a pale face, a tumble of long dark hair. Eyes bright and blue.

Lips pressed to mine. Ana’s breath rushed into me.

The demon and the Silver Flame tore into each other.

“No, do not speak. You will reopen the wounds. Lie still.”

It was the weaver who spoke, against whom I rested. Through the tingling chill of her power against my skin, she was warm.

I next realized that her hand was not exactly resting upon my shoulder, but was pressed to my throat, just above my collarbone. The warmth of her hand was due to the blood seeping from around a heavy wad of cloth she held in place.

Her power held me, cocooned in air made to feel soft as a down comforter. She’d blended fire into the weaving, for there was no trace of a chill in the air around us. It was as if we sat on a summer hillside. I tried to take a deep breath, to draw the warmth deeper in.

I failed.

I do not need to tell you how unsettling it was, for my heart to quicken, and yet my breathing to remain slow, steady, even.

“The healer bid me to breathe for you,” the weaver whispered, her voice a soft, distracted sing-song. “I do not know you well enough to use her method, though. So my weaving will have to suffice.”

Below us, amidst the rubble and ruin of the guardian statues, Aurora, Varis, and Ana fought the gray-skinned Zadamar. He still projected the swirling cloak of blizzards, and as such it was difficult to watch the course of the battle in any detail. Ana’s scythe shone through the obscuring snows as arcs of bright silver light, and showers of silver-blue sparks burst forth whenever she managed to land a strike. Varis’ sword cast a ghostly green light through the snows, bobbing, weaving,

lashing forth with flashes of brighter green. Aurora's sword blazed with a similar greenish light, but hers was infused with gold. Her hair, too, shone through the snowy murk, but its light leaned towards a platinum gleam. The twin points of the gleaming red stones on her circlet looked like dragon's eyes.

Each bright flash of light, whichever the color, elicited at first snarls of annoyance. As the battle drew on, the snarls became surprised cries of pain.

With each blow landed against the druid, the temple shivered, and those grew to sharper and sharper tremors.

More than once, one of my companions gave a sharp cry, and staggered, reeling, from the snowy haze that surrounded the druid. Ana clutched at her side, drew several breaths that looked quite painful, and then doubled her grip on the scythe, leaping into the fray once more.

Varis teetered at the brink of the dark, silent pit, and would have toppled in, had not Aurora snared his arm in the coils of her sword's whip-form.

Occasionally, I saw the flaring green-gold lash of her sword extended, but for the most part, she kept the weapon collapsed into sword-form, and dueled toe-to-toe with the druid, driving him away from Varis or Ana when he pressed either of them too closely.

As the druid weakened, his veil of snow and ice diminished, until it merely trailed behind him like a tattered cloak. As he became more and more visible, I saw the criss-crossing of black-edged wounds on his arm, back and torso. A black-oozing crack ran across one cheek, extending up across his brow. The eye, rather than being gummed shut, though, blazed with a reddish light almost equal to those upon Aurora's brow.

The snarls and cries of pain gave way to barks of laughter, and the druid's shoulders shook with his mirth even as he sank to one knee, panting, Aurora's crackling sword at his throat.

"Go on then," he rasped. "Finish me, and fail as you did two thousand years ago."

Aurora lifted her sword, and the flames surged brighter along its segmented length. Zadarar's smile widened, not the least hint of any fear in his remaining eye.

Ana stepped behind him, a long, thin spike of silver in her hand. It thrummed with a pure note as she thrust it between two of the flagstones.

Zadarar flinched, as if she'd driven it into his back, rather than the flickering shadow cast by the light of Aurora's sword.

"What are you—"

"We will ask the questions," Ana said, cutting him off. "There will be no death for you, unless it is at the claws of the fiend you let into this world. Do not think you can escape, Cryonax," she continued, her voice changing slightly in timbre as she addressed the demon. "You are bound here."

The druid's eyes shifted towards the doorway.

"The Radiance nearly finished me," Aurora said, her fingers drifting towards one of the locks of hair gone white. "Your host would not last, in his condition. And then what will happen to you?"

Zadarar's snarl came as the sound of ice, breaking over a stream, or lake. He lunged towards the shrike, but she danced back, and the druid jerked short, as a hound at the end of its lead.

"Your ceremony here is broken," Ana said. "Thorn completed it. It may take time, but your storm will break up."

Zadarar chuckled. "This storm shall pass, but another will come."

Ana frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Such pretty stones, that Jaleel made in her tower. They insulate us from the burning touch of the silver, did you know that? Who would ever suspect such a beautiful trinket?"

"How many?"

"Only Jaleel knows, and she is fled."

"Fled where?" Varis asked. "How? There is no easy way out of this Valley."

"No, it is not easy at all," the demon hissed. Its burning eye met and held Aurora's gaze.

"She navigates the catacombs and the warrens," Aurora said.

Zadarar continued to smile.

“Which means she has awakened the Guardian Below.”

The flames along Aurora’s sword flickered, and then disappeared with one last flare of green-gold light. She turned, pointing towards the doorway to my left, atop the altar — through which Zadamar had originally approached.

“Everybody through there. Follow the stairway to the crypt. Go!”

Her voice snapped like the crack of a whip, and the weaver flinched behind me. She needed no translation. The prickle of her magic against my skin shifted ever so slightly. The floor slowly drifted away from me as the young woman got to her feet. Her hand at my throat shook, and she leaned heavily against me — or rather, the shell of air she’d constructed about me.

“Let me go first,” Varis said, and he crossed the dais, into my field of vision. He looked down at me, a smile showing through the half-mask of rock dust and blood.

“This is nothing,” he said, dabbing at a cut upon his brow. The blood smeared a red track through the gray rock dust. He looked past me, asked the weaver if she was all right, and then nodded, checked his grip on his sword, and started down the stairs.

Varis held us at the third landing, and we waited nearly an hour for Ana and Aurora to join us. The temple quaked twice during that time, and an echo of a wail reached us from up the stairs, but Ana and Aurora never spoke of what happened in the temple. Even when I pressed them later, they simply said that neither Zadamar nor his demonic symbiont would leave the temple.

Ana and Aurora both bent their healing magics to my wounds. I wish I could say that it was a warm, pleasant sensation. Suffice it to say that Varis and the weaver both had to cover their ears in that narrow staircase.

When the healers exhausted their magics, I was able to breathe, and speak at a whisper, though both pained me greatly. The scarring would fade with time, Ana told me, but would never smooth over completely. I would never sing again.

The weaver again brought forth a globe of watery light, lifting it a good arm's reach and then some over our heads. Though not quite as brilliant as a torch, it lit nearly the same area.

"Why the caution?" Varis asked, as Aurora held us up halfway down the last flight of stairs. "Surely if Jaleel fled this way, she would have cleared us a—"

The warrior fell as Aurora jabbed a finger towards his lips.

"They were turned to Winter, then," the girl said. "Now that the ceremony is ended, they are no longer under Zadamar's thrall." She drew a breath to say more, then held it, cocking her head towards the dimly illuminated doorway.

The sound came again: a whisper of flesh against stone, a faint rustle of cloth.

As one, we readied weapons.

The figure that shambled into the light was that of a tall, thin robed figure, wearing a dark mask shaped like the hyena-headed figure from the temple above. It raised its arms, and the weaver's light glinted from golden bracelets that slid up arms shrunken and dried with the ages. The hands ended in wicked looking claws, gleaming with a fine rime of frost.

The tip of Aurora's sword dipped, for a moment, and she sighed. "I am sorry, Tsek'al-Visht." She brought the sword up in a flashing arc of green-gold fire, and the robed figure burst into flame, collapsing with a rattling, icy shrill.

The flames revealed two pairs of pillars on either end of the room, and alcoves recessed into the walls. A stone sarcophagus lay tipped into the room from the furthest nook along the lefthand wall. We hurried towards it, Varis and Ana eyeing the other niches. Nothing moved in those shadows.

Behind the bulk of the sarcophagus was an opening into the bare rock of the mountain, the cleverly hidden doorway now nothing more than rubble strewn amidst the sandy floor of a roughly-hewn passageway.

Varis made to climb over the great stone coffin, but Aurora halted him. "We must lift it," she said, sheathing her sword and working her fingers along a gap between the edge of the rim and the floor.

"What—"

"Just lift, instead of questioning! We cannot have much time."

The chamber gave a sharp jolt, and behind us, there was a clear sound of stone snapping.

"Move aside," Varis said, and squeezed past the girl into the niche. He squatted down, back against the side of the sarcophagus. "Just how high do you need this lifted?" he asked.

"Enough to drag the priestess clear," Aurora said.

I don't think I was the only one to shudder at the thought of further desecrating the resting place of the temple priestess.

"Once you raise it, I can fit a wedge of air into the gap," the weaver said.

With a few deep breaths, Varis set his feet, and then lifted. He'd managed to bring the lip of the coffin up to just above his calf when the mountain quaked again. The other side of the sarcophagus slipped, grinding over the dust and grit on the floor, and Varis' feet shifted. He bit back a curse, and his fingers lost their grip.

Aurora was just dragging the heavily wrapped body from beneath the gap. I stooped, scooping the girl away from the opening, while Ana heaved at the shroud.

The coffin slammed down with a hollow boom and plume of dust, punctuated by several more of Varis' colorful epithets.

"Is anybody hurt?" he coughed, waving his arms to clear away the age of dust hanging in the air.

"I don't think so," Ana sneezed.

A strong gust of wind pushed the dust away from us, causing a shiver to run down my back.

"Sorry," the weaver said. "I did not place it in time, so I thought this might be a suitable use for the air...."

Aurora scrambled from my arms, kneeling before the body. The burial shroud was askew, but in more or less one piece. The fine quality of the cloth was still evident beneath the layer of dust and grime from the ages.

Varis and Ana helped the girl to turn the body over, and the burial cloth fell away, revealing another tall robed figure, the face encased in one of the jackal-headed masks, this one of gold, inlaid with deep blue slats of *lazul*. More gold and several gems sparkled beneath the folds of the robes.

Aurora gently worked the figure's folded arms away from its chest, peeling up the age-stiffened edges of the wrappings about the neckline. There was another puff of dust as she pulled loose a beaded gold necklace. At its center, coming loose from the desiccated ribs with a tug, dangled a slender, blackened rod about as long as a man's hand.

Aurora gave another sharp pull, and the necklace snapped, the figure's head bobbing and clanking on the stone floor with the force of the tug.

The thing loosed an icy wail, and the hands lifted, clamping around Aurora's arm.

The girl screamed, and tried to stagger back. The thing's grip on her arm prevented her from moving very quickly, and she merely succeeded in dragging the body to a half-sitting position. The golden mask fell away, revealing a hyena-like snout, the dried flesh flaking away even as the jaws opened. Yellowed teeth snapped at the girl's sleeve, several of them crumbling away from the ancient jaw as the battle-mesh repelled the attack.

We froze, unsure of a strike — as they tugged back and forth, it was uncertain our aid wouldn't accidentally do the girl harm.

The sleeve of Aurora's gown flared a brilliant white, and a wash of golden light peeked from the edge of the sleeve. The creature wheezed a cry that was lost in a burst of flame as it fell away from the girl, the flesh curling away from blackened bones like so much parchment.

Aurora straightened, brushing her sleeves and gown off as if she wrestled with thousand year old corpses all the time.

"When I said not to give this up to anybody, I thought it was understood that did not include myself," she huffed.

Aurora paused at another intersection. It was the third we'd come to, the opening to the temple crypt long lost behind us in the dark.

She held up the necklace again, and its swinging slowed. Rather than come to rest pointing towards the ground, though, the dark metal at the end skewed slightly to the girl's right.

She took the opening to her right, and we followed her. This branch was the same as all the others: rough-hewn, but oddly smoothed walls, not the work of chisels or picks. The slightly sandy floor was uneven, sometimes rising, sometimes falling. There was enough room across that Varis did not have to shrug his shoulders, and he could stand straight, but he would be relegated to thrusting his sword if we were to encounter any more of the Pale Walkers. Ana's scythe was all but useless in these close confines.

"That is a clever device," the weaver noted. "A guide to lead us out of this maze."

"Guide?" Aurora laughed, when I translated the girl's comment. "That would assume that there is a single set path through these tunnels."

Ana groaned.

"So if it is not guiding us out, then... what is it doing?"

"Right now, I am playing at Skandaharian's bluff." We came to another intersection, this one splitting off only two more ways. Again, Aurora consulted the necklace. The ornament angled sharply back towards her, from the righthand fork. She guided us up the left at a much quicker pace.

"Tunnels such as these honeycomb the entire breadth of this valley," Aurora explained.

"What carved them?" I asked. "This is not the work of men, or dwarves. Or even of those who built Byxata."

"Something very old. The Hutaakans called it 'Kartoeba.'" The word buzzed in my head. Through the sudden flash of pain and heavy thud of my pulse, I barely made out the garbled translating whisper: '*The Guardian Below.*'

"I have never heard of a demon by that name," Ana said.

"I did not expect that you had," Aurora said, watching the sway of the blackened tip of the necklace. She led us down another lefthand opening in the passage. "It is not precisely a demon. I do not think it is even of this world. Perhaps a failed Egg. It has been around nearly that long." After a pause, she added, nearly as an afterthought "I think it has been hungry that whole time."

"So where is it now?" Ana asked.

“Hmm?” Aurora looked up as the necklace swung. It had yet to settle on any one of the three directions available.

“Where is this... Kartoeba now?”

The blackened bit of metal wavered towards the lefthand passage. Aurora glanced briefly that way, and then ushered us towards the right.

Ana crossed her arms. “Is that the way out?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Aurora said. “But this is the way we must go.”

“What makes this passage any different from that one?” Ana asked, pointing back towards the lefthand path. The bit of metal bobbed, then drifted further to the left, tugging at the necklace, as a needle reacts to a lodestone.

By all the Immortals hold precious....

“Ana,” I whispered, the words burning my throat, “if you wish for an explanation, follow the shriek.”

“I grow tired of wandering in circles down here, Thorn! She can answer now just as well as later.”

A faint waft of air, sluggish, heavy, sighed from the intersection’s lefthand passage. It brought with it a sound like the labored breathing of a consumption victim.

Ana edged away from the opening, towards the passage the shriek had initially indicated. The necklace pointed nearly straight to the left.

“Go,” Aurora said, herding us towards the other passageway. She pressed the necklace into Ana’s hand.

“Guide them as I have been. Move as quickly as you can. Never in a straight line.”

“What are you—”

“Go!” Aurora shouted. “I will buy you as much time as I can.”

The gurgling grew steadily more distinct, more and more the sound itself rather than than distant echo.

Aurora drew her sword. The tip barely cleared the edge of the passage.

“That sword is useless down here,” Varis said. He reached for his daggers.

The girl raised the sword up, the tip clanging against the tunnel's ceiling. She gave the hilt a sharp twist. The blade collapsed down upon itself, the metal twisting and fanning out as it fell, to form a much shorter, broad and wickedly barbed blade. The pommel likewise dropped, the hilt extending into a long smooth shaft nearly as tall as the shrike.

Aurora adjusted her grip on the newly formed spear, the tip crackling to green-gold flame at a whispered command.

Ana had to tug at Varis' arm to get the man moving.

"I will meet with you at the Gateway in the Vault of the Ancients," Aurora said over her shoulder. Barely perceptible, but carried by the translating whisper was her muttered "In this life, or another."

She set her feet, the gems at her wrist and upon her brow shining brighter. Her hair caught the light, gleaming like moonlight shot with gold. Her eyes flared like molten gold, and she turned her attention back to the corridor before her.

"Flame shine upon you," Ana said to the girl, and hurried us away from the intersection.

The sounds of Aurora's battle were oddly one-sided. While her battle cries and the ring of her weapon against the tunnel walls could be picked out with disturbing clarity for quite a distance, her foe seemed silent. Once or twice, I was able to make out a hissing, rattling sigh, and there came several wheezing shrills. Twice, we were forced to cover our mouths and noses as a hot, fetid wash of air from a side corridor gusted across our path, usually followed by an echoing, indistinct cry of the shrike's.

After rounding enough bends, though, eventually the sounds of battle faded. We had no way of knowing if Aurora had succeeded in drawing off the Guardian Below, or simply become another of its victims. Ana hurried us along, at a pace that did not allow for much reflection.

She finally paused longer than normal at another intersection. She lifted her head from regarding the necklace. It hung loose, not tugging at any one direction.

"Do you smell that?" she asked, leaning closer to the middle of three passages.

The air was slightly cooler. I drew on the last dregs of magic I felt available, and managed to conjure a flicker of flame from my fingertips. The flames sputtered, flickering, leaning away from the middle passage.

We'd found a way out, at last.

We huddled deeper in our coats and cloaks, pulling hoods close. Above us, the storm was aboil. The rumbling of the thunder was no longer a threatening growl. It still pealed, but the demonic echoes sounded of panic, desperation. Anger. Lightning still played across the cloud layers, frantic and flickering, but none lanced to the ground.

We weren't three steps from the tunnel's entrance when a rumbling to rival that of the clouds rippled through the valley floor. A gleam through the swirling snows caught my eye. It grew to a bright, hard glare, a light like sunlight through fresh honey, spearing from the mountainside up into the clouds. Flickers and chasers of green and red fire coursed through the beam of light, and then it thinned, winking out just as suddenly as it had flared.

The snows abruptly changed direction, pattering hoods and faces. I croaked a warning, tugging on the others' cloaks.

They took my lead and threw themselves flat not a second too soon. A blast of air, as if from one of the steam geysers in the Broken Lands, or that in the aftermath of a dragon's fiery breath attack washed over us.

The sudden heat abruptly vanished, and with a shiver, I realized that the weaver had probably saved us from a severe scalding. Fog — or rather, steam — billowed around us at a slight distance, gradually fading and drifting off, to be replaced by more and more fat drifting flakes.

We picked ourselves up, murmuring thanks to the weaver. Ana checked us over for burns, but the girl had put up her shield in time.

"Tell me that wasn't what I think it was," Varis said.

We sat in silence for the space of several long, frosty breaths.

"She's gone, isn't she?" The weaver was the one to ask. "Such a strange, brave little girl."

Ana held the necklace up, but the blackened ornament at the end of it merely tossed in the cold wind. She gathered it up in a shaking fist.

A brief sweep of the area around the tunnel's opening revealed a roadway several dozen yards away. Putting the mountain at our back, we started along the road, plodding through an ankle-deep accumulation of snow.

"This is the roadway to the shrine," the weaver said, after perhaps a quarter mile's walk. She pointed to a clump of three trees hanging over the far edge of the road. "See? The branch is freshly broken, from when I told you to turn around to—"

"Yes, yes," Varis said, silencing her with a wave of his hand.

"It should be just ahead," Varis said, nearly an hour later, "but I don't see any lights."

"Perhaps Gilliam doused the fire?" Ana asked. She didn't sound as if she even believed the possibility.

Varis drew his sword as we crept closer. There was no sign of the greenish glimmer sliding beneath the surface of the blade. His steps faltered as he, too, noticed it. Then his fingers tightened on the hilt, and he pressed himself against the side of the doorway. The blanket we'd hung across the doorway was still in place, and Varis poked it aside with the tip of his sword.

From my vantage point against a tree a bit further from the doorway, I could see nothing but darkness behind the cloth, and signed a negative to the warrior.

He pointed towards the weaver, then at the doorway, and she moved slowly from behind me, the tingling of her power against my skin intensifying. I shivered as the tingling brightened almost to an itch.

A sudden gust of wind swept from the south, tearing the blanket from the doorway, sending it flapping into the interior of the shrine.

Varis dove in after it, tucking and rolling to one side of the doorway. Shadows moved within, and then there was a bright show of sparks from the darkened room.

Ana ducked inside, rapping the butt end of her scythe on the stone floor, calling out "*Argyro Fyiro, mehi lux!*"

A clear thrumming tone sprang from the blade as it vibrated, and with the sound, the blade also began to shed a silvery light that grew steadily brighter.

“Oh, for pity’s sake, will you two stop that?”

The sounds of combat suddenly stopped. The weaver and I had made it to the doorway by then, and found Ana standing, hand on one hip.

She was glaring at Varis and Gilliam, both of whom were breathing hard, weapons still held half at the ready.

“Much better than a handshake, don’t you think?” Gilliam said with a grin.

Varis shook his head, sheathing his sword.

“Well, before the great wind came up, I had a fire banked and ready to bring back up.” He glanced around the room. Ash and glowing coals littered the floor.

“Apologies,” the weaver said, bobbing her head. She glanced around the room. “My sister..?”

“Asleep,” Gilliam said, indicating one of the blanketed-off alcoves with a nod of his head.

“I hope she was not troublesome.”

Gilliam shook his head. “Not at all. Did you know she likes shadow-animals?” He interlocked his fingers, and waggled some of them.

The weaver smiled, and excused herself to go look in on her sister.

“Varis, Thorn, do you two think you can see to the fire?” Ana asked us.

We both nodded.

“You,” she said, pointing towards Gilliam. “Back in there.” She hooked a thumb towards the shrine.

Gilliam’s grip tightened on one of his swords, and a ghost of a snarl flickered across his features, but his other hand closed over his wrist, and he nodded. There was a stiffness to his gait that grew until his leg nearly buckled as he crossed the threshold of the shrine.

Ana sprinkled a line of silver dust across the doorway, murmuring a prayer.

“It’s getting worse, isn’t it?” she asked him.

“Well, it’s not getting any better.”

Ana sighed.

Ana explained that with Cryonax's ceremony disrupted, its control of the demons that had passed through into the world was gone, and they were free to pursue their own aims.

"Demons unfettered by their liege tend to grow more powerful. They will spend some time squabbling among themselves, choosing their territories."

"Like a wolf pack that loses its alpha," Gilliam said.

"How long does that give us to act?" Varis asked.

"That depends on how many there are, how widespread they are. There are hundreds, thousands of factors." Ana shook her head. "Without Jaleel to question..." She shrugged. "It's too bad we lost your crystal link to your hierarch," the girl said to me.

"Judging from that flash of light from the mountains, I don't think we'll be heading back that way any time soon," Varis grumbled.

"We can only do as Aurora bid us," Ana said. "Go to this... Vault of the Ancients she mentioned. Unfortunately, she neglected to tell us precisely where that was."

"There is another place here, that the dog-men avoided," the weaver said, as she emerged from the cell. "Further west, against the rising wall of the valley. My *bughael*... was among those who questioned the pale dog-men." She paled, and shuddered.

"They said it was a cursed place. Haunted. They would not risk the wrath of its iron guardians for the riches in the crystal coffins."

"Riches?" Gilliam sat up a bit straighter. "Was this gnoll any more specific?"

The weaver shook her head. "It is useless. The soldiers of the Black Baron and some of Golithar's men went to this place. None came back."

"Sort of makes you wonder how far they got," Gilliam murmured, almost to himself. He stroked at his stubbled chin. "You know what they say, about the late mouse getting the cheese..."

"You cannot be thinking of actually going there!" the weaver gasped.

"Aurora gave us a key," Ana said. "So there must be a door there that we can use to escape."

“I don’t particularly like the idea of fighting my way back across this valley,”
Varis said. “What other choices do we have?”

**Waning quarter moon of the Deep Snows (on or about
Kaldmont 19, 997AC)**

I slept perhaps four hours before a hand on my shoulder shook me awake.

“Change of plans,” Varis murmured. “We need you to ready the horses.”

Though I didn’t question him, he continued. “Wards the weaver girl set have been tripped. From several directions.”

I nodded, pulled on my coat and cloak, and hefted my pack and staff. We’d readied most everything before settling in for what rest we could manage, planning on setting out at first light.

Whatever it was out there in the night, the horses did not like it one bit. They pawed restlessly at the ground, tossing their heads this way and that. My calming only lasted long enough to fit each with its bit and bridle, and then they were snorting and nipping at me in their nervousness.

Varis was already bringing our gear around as I struggled with the last horse, and began distributing it among the readied mounts. Once everything was set, we brought the horses around, and helped the two weavers to mount. The dark-haired one rode with Ana, while the blonde took point with Varis.

I rode rearguard, keeping an eye on Gilliam.

The first gray of pre-dawn was touching the top of the valley when we reached the end of the western roadway.

It was immediately apparent that the Vault of the Ancients was something far, far older than the carved archway monuments of the hutaaka. While the temple showed clear marks of working and dressing of the stonework, the doorway of the Vault of the Ancients sat recessed into the side of the valley wall. The exposed stone was weathered, but obviously smooth, as if the builders had spent decades polishing the stone.

The doorway itself was a ring of some pitted and rusty metal, green-black with age. Within the ring, wedges of the same metal all met in the center.

At the base of the door, a stout branch lay, one end splintered. No doubt the other end looked the same on the other side of the door.

“Well, we know it’ll be useless to try to wedge it open,” Gilliam muttered. He kicked the branch out of the way, and ran his hands over the door. He even tried to work his fingers into the seams between the plates, to no avail. He rapped at the doors with the pommel of his sword, and it gave off a definite ring of metal-on-metal, with a deep, resonant tone that indicated the other side was indeed hollow.

“How do you suppose they got in?” Gilliam asked, frowning at the great round doorway.

“Magic?” Varis asked. He glanced over at the weaver.

She shrugged. “It would be possible. Perhaps wedges of air, to force these apart,” she ran her fingers over the age-worn metal. “But they are far too heavy for my effort alone. Perhaps with another four of us, we could do it.”

“Or we could just use a key,” Ana said, producing the necklace from a pouch at her waist.

“By all means,” Gilliam said with a bow. “Good luck finding the keyhole.”

Varis could barely brush the top of the round doorway with his fingertips. Ana could have done so if she’d jumped. She craned her neck, staring at the greenish-black accumulation of age.

“It says something.” She squinted, then shook her head. “Aurora would have been able to read it, no doubt.”

A sudden thought occurred to me, and I fished the speaking stone from beneath my tunic. I held it up, peering through the facets, turning it this way and that. It was disorienting, partly because of the dizzying shifting of multiple views and angles, but also... I can only describe it as what felt like a sinuous shifting of my perception, as if the letters themselves were crawling and squirming around inside my head.

A clear path of view resolved within the stone, and the lettering that had appeared to be just grooves and swirls along the top of the doorway resolved into... while it wasn’t Thyatian script, I *understood* it as such.

“*Tantum personas auctoritate*” I read.

“Those with authority only?” Gilliam translated.

I lowered the stone, bracing myself against the wall as a wave of dizziness washed through me. There came a 'click' and I jerked my hand back as the stone slid out from under it. I'd inadvertently revealed a niche containing a six-sided opening smaller than even the weaver's pinky finger.

"Looks like Thorn is the lucky one," Ana said, and pushed the blackened metal ornament at the end of the necklace into the slot. It gave another 'click.' As she removed the key, the panels within the round doorframe began to grate open with a shiver-inducing squeal.

"No dwarf made this," Varis said, running a gloved hand over smooth walls of metal. Plate after plate lined the walls, ceiling, and floor, broken only by gratings along the floor, and panels of clouded glass along the ceiling, most of which were dark. Perhaps every third or fourth flickered with a bright, but cold white light.

The floor and walls thrummed, and listening at a grate revealed both a low rumbling and a high-pitched humming, though I could not make out any kind of source. A low gurgling at one grate further up the passage suddenly rose in pitch, and a gout of steam flooded the hallway. Thankfully not scalding, it was enough to soak through cloaks and sleeves.

The corridor was arrow-straight for nearly a hundred steps, and then it turned, sharply, to the left, and left again. We paused while another cloud of steam burst from beneath a gurgling section of grating, and crept forward.

Perhaps four dozen steps, and we came to another round, sectioned door. Ana fished in her pouch for the key, but it hissed open, the panels retracting as we approached. I was reminded most uncomfortable of the tales I'd heard of monstrous purple worms, with their great maws that were said to open in the same manner.

Far from a stinking worm gullet, through the doorway was a large, steadily lit chamber. As the weavers stepped through behind me, the door hummed shut.

As soon as the panels met, the lights flickered, then changed to a deep red.

"Warning." A tinny, woman's voice spoke from nowhere, causing us all to jump. "Radiance contamination detected. Proceed to decontamination chambers immediately."

“What is she saying?” the weaver asked, staring as panel after panel slid up along the walls to our right and left. The openings were perhaps a bit wider than Varis at the shoulders, and just as tall. Each seemed to lead to the same type of cell: a yellow-lit chamber, with wisps of steam curling out into the main chamber.

“Proceed to decontamination chambers immediately. This room will purge atmosphere in two minutes.”

Gilliam turned around, but the door did not reopen as he approached it. There was no socket for the key.

“I’m guessing that other door won’t open, either,” he said, pointing to another round, paneled door across the room.

“What does it mean ‘purge atmosphere?’” Varis asked.

“Do you really want to be in here to find out?” Gilliam asked him.

“Proceed to decontamination chambers immediately. This room will purge atmosphere in one minute, thirty seconds.”

Ana peered into one of the side rooms, apparently a ‘decontamination chamber.’ “It looks harmless enough. Tiled, with some metal pipes. I’m going to do as she says.” She stepped through the doorway, and instead of the metal panel sliding back down, a door of glass whisked into place. The cleric started, but gave us a thumbs up.

I showed the weaver to one of the chambers. “The voice is asking us to step into one of these cells,” I told her.

“What else was it saying? What did Varis say about ‘purging?’ What did it mean?”

“I don’t think I want to be here to find out,” I told her. “I’ll be in the chamber next to yours.”

I let go of her hand, and a glass door slid into place as I stepped back from her chamber. I proceeded to the one next to hers, and saw Gilliam lead the dark-haired weaver to a chamber, and then he and Varis stepped into their own.

The door of glass closed behind me, and I stood in a cell, perhaps a little over an arm’s length square. As Ana had said, some pipes could be seen in the ceiling, with two nozzles overhead pointing down into the room.

“Place all articles of clothing into the bin,” the tinny voice said, from somewhere overhead.

I was about to ask, but as I drew the breath, a section of the tiled wall slid forward, revealing a metal-lined bin.

I had deposited my cloak, and coat when outside, the room went dark. The floor vibrated, hard enough to set my teeth to thrumming. A sound like a giant, or dragon drawing a tremendous breath came through the glass door.

“Place all articles of clothing in the bin,” the voice repeated.

The glass door vibrated with the commotion going on out in the main chamber, and I guessed it would be a good idea to comply with the voice, lest something just as bad—or worse—happen.

After a dousing in a series of more and more noxious-smelling concoctions that rained down from the nozzles overhead, the room pronounced me ‘decontaminated.’ Another bin slid open from the other side of the wall, and I was presented with a soft towel, with which I dried myself. The bin closed, and reopened, holding a pair of white linen trousers and a tunic. Beneath those was a pair of cloth shoes with a strange leather sole. I tapped at the wall where my armor and clothes had disappeared, but the container did not reopen.

Upon stepping from my cell, I saw that Gilliam and Varis were similarly garbed. The ladies wore long-sleeved ankle-length gowns, belted at the waist.

“Didn’t get to keep yours, either?” Varis asked.

Gilliam shook his head.

I had the feeling they were more concerned with the loss of their weapons than clothing.

The door on the far side of the chamber sectioned open, and we were again faced with a corridor of a familiar design: metal-paneled walls, ceiling, and floor. The lights were in better condition, though, and alternated left and right every four or five paces.

The corridor ended in a door frame of some sort, but the recessed metal doorway would not budge. Varis slapped it with his hand, and again, there was a hollow, metallic echo from behind the doors.

"A dead end?" Gilliam asked, as we reached the end of the hallway.

"No, look," the blonde weaver said, pointing to a rounded protrusion just above waist-height. A dark six-sided hole stared back at us.

Ana fished the necklace from beneath her gown, and slid the key into the lock. There was a 'clack,' and we felt the floor shake lightly beneath our feet.

"Fine lot of good that did," Gilliam said, when nothing else happened.

He jumped the highest when a note chimed and the doors slid open on their own.

Behind the doors was another cell, much larger than the decontamination chambers. We all fit comfortably within. The walls were of the same metallic plating, but a rail curved around the three other walls.

Gilliam opened his mouth to ask the question, when the doors rolled shut, and the bottom dropped out of the room.

He did not scream quite as loudly as the girls, this time.

After a moment, it was clear that the floor had not dropped out from beneath us. Rather, the chamber itself was falling.

It was not an experience I wished to repeat.

The room slowed, and my stomach returned to normal. The sickening vertigo passed, and the doors rolled open after a brief pause.

The room we found ourselves in was triangular, with hallways leading off to the right and left. The far wall was a remarkable window, of clear glass, a single sheet as long as two men tall, and just as tall. It was trimmed in more of the burnished metal. The walls were not plated in metal, but were of the smooth, oddly-polished look of the entryway. Without the ravages of weathering it was plain to see the whorls and twists in the rock itself. Laying a hand to the wall, I could feel that though the stone lived beyond, the immediate layer was dead, as if my hand rested on scarred or burned tissue.

"I wonder what Kuric or Durin would make of this," I murmured. Would they be angered? Or excited? I shuddered to think of the immense power needed to

burn through solid stone on such a scale. What sorts of magic did these ancients have at their disposal?

"I think I'll just stand over here," I heard Gilliam say, and turned to see him walking quickly away from the great window.

I made my way over, and caught my breath as I glanced through the glass.

My stomach flip-flopped as I stared into a vast depth of a great cavern. A column of stone flowed from the ceiling, surely as wide around as... well, the only single building that came to mind was Tarnskeep. The great spire of stone disappeared into a layer of clouds.

Clouds. Beneath the ground.

As I watched, those clouds flickered with muted golden and greenish light. It grew steadily brighter, until the lights broke through the misty layer, and rounded knot-like growths along the column glowed briefly with a golden-green light, not much unlike the flames Aurora could call upon her sword.

The light pulsed, fading from one knot of stone to light another, slowly making its way to the top of the column. After a brief pause, another cycle of lights crept up the huge column, the pattern and color never repeating. One cycle was a silvery-yellow. The next, a deep violet shot through with sky-blue.

"What do you make of that?" Varis murmured.

"I could not even begin to guess," I told him.

Reluctantly, I pulled my attention away from the spectacle beyond the window. Gilliam was holding his speaking stone to his eye, squinting up at the top of the righthand archway.

"It looks the same for me," he said, taking the stone away from his eye. "I don't know how you did it."

I lifted my own speaking stone, turning it, feeling an entirely different sort of disorientation as the glyphs above the doorway slithered through my mind. Unlike before, they did not settle into anything remotely word-like.

"If it does say something, I cannot make it out," I said, gulping air and waiting for my balance to return. I braved the feeling again, only to meet the same result from the other archway.

“So we flip a coin,” Gilliam said. He patted at his waist. “That is, if we still had any coins.” He chuckled. “Robbed by a dungeon. There is a first time for everything.”

“I’m sure the Immortals are having a great laugh at your expense,” Ana said, smiling.

Gilliam gave her a grin. “The day is still young. Perhaps one or the other of these hallways leads to the treasury.”

Ana rolled her eyes.

“Right. Odd, we go left. Even, the right.” Gilliam held out a closed fist. Varis leaned in, extending his own closed fist. The blonde weaver nodded, and did the same. Her sister had settled by the window, and was staring intently at the column and its myriad flickering lights.

Ana put both her hands into the circle. “I’ll vote for her,” she said.

I added my own hand last, and Gilliam bobbed his fist with the chant “*Hjeda, tes, selahj!*”

Thirteen fingers. Gilliam frowned. “An unlucky number.”

Ana rolled her eyes again. “It’s no more unlucky than if we’d caught the dragon by the toe,” she scoffed. “Honestly, I wonder how you mainlanders function with all your superstitions.”

The hallway curved along the wall of the cavern, apparently. More of the glass paneled the righthand wall, giving us an unobstructed view of the great cloud-filled cavern.

We passed several doorways on the lefthand side of the corridor, but these appeared to be personal chambers, long since abandoned. After a long stretch without any doors, the next we passed opened into a longer room lined with several tables. Some sort of mess hall, perhaps?

We continued to follow the main passage, and came to another round door that required Ana’s key. It opened into another chamber similar to the first we encountered, but the lights did not change, and no voices greeted us. Rather than lines of smaller doors along the walls, though, we were faced with two doors, one

continuing (it seemed) out and back around the vast cavern, or another to our left, which would lead us deeper into the mountain.

“Once you choose a direction, keep choosing it,” Ana said, quoting an old dungeoneers’ proverb.

The door rolled open as she approached it. Beyond was a chamber lined with rows of metal washbasins along the left and righthand walls. Benches and hampers lined the center of the room. Waterspouts curved up from the rear rim of the basin, but there was no sign of any pump mechanism. Judging from the look of the basins, they hadn’t felt the touch of water in some time.

Ana swatted at Gilliam’s hand as he reached towards one of the spouts.

“Must you try to touch everything?”

As the door behind us rolled shut, the one at the far side of the room rolled open. We stepped through into another chamber, long like the mess hall. Six long metal tables stood ranked one after another. Something looking like a large, metallic spider curled upon itself hung above each table, suspended from the ceiling by a thick cord like that wound up inside Aurora’s sword.

“Go on, touch it,” Ana said, prodding Gilliam.

“You first,” he said, giving the many-legged, bulbous-eyed contraption a wary look.

What looked like thick ropes looped and curled around the ceiling, leading from each of the metal spiders to a long row of metal canisters set into the room’s rear wall. Below the canisters, at about waist-height, were dark windows, half a dozen, lined with dials and tiny switches and buttons. They were all marked, but I could not make sense of the runes.

Ana was peering up at the closest of the spider-machines. She reached up, laid her hand on the bulbous main body.

“It’s warm,” she said. “And... it feels like it’s alive.” She ran her hand along one of the legs, up as high as she could reach, even knocked on the shell. It did not respond, and I can’t be say I wasn’t glad that it remained dormant. Several of the folded-up appendages looked like they ended in blades.

Gilliam moved in behind her, examining the machine hanging over the next table. He leaned over, looking up at the thing’s many-eyed head. Three large eyes

were surrounded by five or six smaller ones. He reached up to touch one, and jerked his hand back as a deep red light flickered within the closest eye.

The entire beast shuddered, and a deep hum vibrated from deep inside the thing. It swiveled, legs dropping, unfolding with startling swiftness. Two swung out, the half-moon enclosures snapping around Gilliam's upper arms before he could scramble far enough away.

It dragged him closer, the thing's head swiveling down, and it emitted a series of whirrs and clicks as eye after eye peered at the warrior.

"Relax," Ana said. "Stop struggling. It's only looking. Let it look and it might let you go."

"I told you this was an unlucky direction to take," he panted, craning his head back as one of the thing's eyes nudged closer.

Another leg swiveled, the tip unfolding, revealing a long, thin stinger. It bobbed and weaved as Gilliam struggled, the motions of the needle matching his movements.

Varis had been edging along the wall opposite me, and he leapt, sliding atop the table and wrapping his arms about the many-jointed leg that held the needle. He gave a mighty twist, wrenching it away.

"Varis, look out!"

My shout was too late. Another leg dropped, jabbing another long stinger into the man's upper leg.

Varis gave a shout, kicking at the leg as it retracted. He missed, blinked several times. His eyes drooped shut. His head clonked against the table and his arms slipped from around the thing's leg.

"Is he—" the blond weaver began to ask.

"No," Ana said. She'd dropped, crouching under the table, but reached up, her fingers across the big fighter's wrist. "I think he's asleep."

Indeed, his chest moved, in great, deep breaths.

"Ow!"

The spider-thing had jabbed its stinger in just below the crook of Gilliam's elbow.

A tiny armlet snapped open from the pincers, and unfolded, depressing a white pad on Gilliam's arm as the stinger withdrew.

I jumped as one of the windows beside me grew suddenly brighter.

"What is it?" Ana asked.

"It's... it's painting with light," I said. Lines and colors were appearing on their own, as if by some illusionist's trick upon the glass. "There is more writing here." Line after line was appearing. How small and fine the brushes would have to be! An odd diagram drew itself out along one side: a ladder, twisted over and over. Bits of it glowed brighter than others, and more of the runic writing flickered into being below the picture.

"Aberration detected."

It was the tinny female's voice again, speaking from somewhere above or around us.

Another leg unfolded, reaching out, slashing upwards, and again. Gilliam's cry was cut off as he stared down at his chest.

"It missed. It only got my tunic." He laughed, nervously.

"The patient will remain still and quiet during the body scan," the tinny voice said, this time seeming to come from the spidery creature. The head turned, the eyes rotating, another cluster taking the place of the red-tinged eye. This one glowed from within with a purplish-blue light. A thin line of light traced up and down, back and forth across Gilliam's chest, where Jaleel had driven the in the bloodstone.

The light flooding the window next to me changed, and began painting a representation of the crystal, line by line. I watched, entranced, as the painting moved of its own accord, turning this way and that. After several rotations, more lines began appearing, branching away, and away, mimicking the branches or roots of a tree.

"Factoring sonic neutralization. Please stand by," the spider-thing said.

"Is that something good?" Gilliam asked.

"The patient will remain still and quiet during the procedure," the voice repeated.

More lines appeared on the window, painting over red with white.

A hatch opened on the bulbous body, and a leg began unfolding, this one ending in a tube tipped with some kind of clear gemstone. It glided into position over Gilliam's chest, the space of perhaps a thumb's width between it and the rusty red crystal. A high, droning whine began to sound from within the creature, growing higher and higher in pitch.

"Medical personnel is advised to stand clear. Move all magical components to minimum safe distance."

A shimmering circle of the red light sprang up on the floor, widening to encompass Gilliam, the table on which Varis was sleeping, and parts of the tables to either side.

The light danced over Ana, and she backed hurriedly away, moving to stand with the two weavers.

"What is it doing to the man?" the brown-haired weaver asked. Her soft, dreamy voice caused us all to jump.

"I... it looks as though it is going to do something about the stone in his chest," the other weaver said. She glanced over to Ana, who nodded. "It is going to help him."

We stood, waiting, the high nearly-inaudible whine emanating from the metallic spider the only sound in the room.

"Calls to siren control timed out. Relaying to nearest Enforcer for quarantine."

The doorway on the far side of the room cycled open, and it was filled with a hulking form, clad head to toe in plates of a metal that looked to be cold-cast iron. Blue-white lights flickered through the eye-slits of the helmet, falling on each of us as it looked slowly around the room.

Gems were worked into the armored vambraces, and lights cycled through each: red, then blue, then white, yellow, then back to the red. They did not look to be dragonstones, for none was veined through with gold.

The suit was armored even down to the hands and fingers, held within ready reach of hilts of an impressively large sword and dagger hanging from either plated hip.

The hulking man plodded into the room, the tip of its helmet perhaps three handspans from the room's ceiling. It clanked up to Gilliam, stopping just outside the red circle of light painted across the floor and tables. That light suddenly died, and the man reached out to take Gilliam's arm.

"This way, please."

It spoke with a hollow, clicking voice, the helmet giving it an extra-deep echo.

Gilliam sprang the moment the pincer-like clamps released him. He leapt, diving over Varis, turning as he tumbled, a sharp ring of steel chiming through the room. The warrior rolled to his feet, the Enforcer's long knife held at middle guard.

It turned, slowly, to face him, and Varis spun from the table, drawing the sword from the armored figure's other hip, holding the weapon in both hands, leveled at the gap between the back-plate and helmet.

"What is this place?" Varis asked. "We'll have some answers before we go anywhere with you."

The armored figure was silent, unmoving, and Varis repeated his question.

"Vulburgh harmonics detected. Tuning." The lights cycled faster along the four gemstones. After three passes, they slowed back down. "Please repeat your question."

"Where are we?"

"Medlab 3, Suspension Control Level. Please lower your weapons, or the facility will override your dragonstone credentials and authorize use of deadly force."

"Credentials?" Ana asked. "Explain."

"Bearers of dracosillicates are to be treated as Friends to the Crown and accorded all courtesies. Please, do not force us to reclassify you as threats, and dispose of you as we did the other intruders."

Varis slowly brought the sword down and away from the Enforcer's neck. He planted the blade between his feet, resting his hands over the pommel. Gilliam likewise reversed his grip on the dagger, tucking it into the sash at his waist.

"What is this 'quarantine?'" Gilliam asked.

"We must keep you isolated until a siren arrives to neutralize the symbiont."

“And how long will that take?”

The man was silent, but the lights winked faster on his gauntlet.

“*Dracosilicus noxis* shipment is currently six hundred seventy-two thousand, five days behind schedule,” came the tinny female’s voice.

“A new host can be ready in a matter of a few hours,” the Enforcer said. “However, the siren *anima* template was damaged in an earthquake approximately five-hundred thousand days past. We have already overextended our stores of dracosilicates fabricating a backup. And as you heard, the resupply shipments are overdue.”

“Sounds as if it will be a while, then,” Gilliam said, frowning.

“If I’ve worked my numbers properly,” Ana said, “this place is more than two thousand years old. Older than Alphatia’s presence here.”

“It predates Halav’s day, that is certain,” Varis said.

“How rich must they have been, to clad the walls in steel?” Gilliam wondered, running a hand along one of the great, seamless plates.

We were following the Enforcer down another hallway, this one slanting downward, running at a sharp angle away from the room he’d called the ‘Medlab.’ Several of the doors we passed through had the hexagonal keyholes, yet the doors moved aside at the armored figure’s approach.

“More importantly,” Ana said, glowering at Gilliam, “think about how old *he* must be.” She pointed towards our guide.

“I have been in service for seven hundred thousand and six days, five hours, and seventeen minutes,” the man told us.

“You don’t look a day over six hundred thousand,” Gilliam quipped.

The man’s helmet cocked to one side. “You are many thousands of days late in auditioning for jester of the Royal Court.”

“Where is it you are taking us, again?” I asked.

“The idea of quarantine seemed displeasing to you. We will arrive at Suspension Control in a matter of moments.”

“And from there?” Ana asked.

“We will gather the necessary components for a forced ejection of the symbiont.”

“That sounds painful,” Gilliam said, tugging at the flaps of material covering the stone in his chest.

“It is the only other alternative to quarantine.”

“We couldn’t do that in the chamber above?” Varis asked.

“Combat is forbidden in Medlab facilities.”

Another round door slid open, and we filed into another triangular chamber, much like that at the bottom of the falling room. The view opened into a vast cavern, but this one was much smaller than that of the great, light-infused column. A wavering pattern of green and white light shimmered across the ceiling, and I looked down to see that it reflected what looked like a lake of green, glowing liquid, the surface covered with patches of fog the same color. Something could be seen, barely beneath the surface. I strained my eyes, but could only make out an oblong, smooth and shining tube of some sort, with a darker shape within.

There were hundreds of them. Thousands, lined one next to the other, rank after rank, arranged around a central island that rose out of the center of the greenish lake. As the fog rolled away from the island, I saw upon it a circular metal ring. Tiny figures moved about on the island, armored though not nearly as bulky as the Enforcer. There were five of them, three milling about the large ring, the other two hauling one of the tubes from the depths of the lake.

“This way, please,” the Enforcer said, gesturing towards the recessed doorway that had just slid open with a chime. It revealed a familiar chamber with the railing set at waist-height.

My stomach began making flips even before I stepped over the threshold.

I had barely enough time to grip the railing and regret not simply staying above to observe when the falling sensation was gone, and the doors opened into the large cavern we’d seen from above.

The floor of uneven stone gave way to a rocky beach, and the Enforcer guided us to a thin, sandy causeway that led across the lake, all the way up to the island at its center.

We filed onto it at his gesture, and I paused, turning back when he did not follow us.

“Follow the *medicos*’ instructions” was all he said when I inquired.

The circle that I’d seen from above turned out to be the rim of a great round pool, perhaps seven feet across, forged from a single huge piece of platinum. (Gilliam, I think, nearly wet himself, looking upon it.) Six great brackets of the rough iron-like metal used in the Enforcer’s armor clamped the pool to the surface of the island, each of these anchored to the sandy ground within great blocks of ivory.

Between each pair of brackets, six runes were stamped deep into the outer edge of the pool. Closer inspection revealed slight differences in the sets of runes. Of the six, three were inlaid with silver. The other three, the letters slightly more angular, were set with gold.

We watched the three armored figures work. They ignored us, for the most part, except to usher Gilliam away when he tried to touch the great bowl.

They affixed a metal arm to each bracket, each extending about two feet over the bowl, ending in a clamp-like grip. At the brackets’ bases, where the metal was sunk into the ivory, they fitted long U-shaped bars into sockets designed for just such a purpose. Tuning forks, I recognized, similar to the one used by Bargle in Koriszegy’s tower orrery.

“What do you make of this?” Varis asked, keeping his voice low.

“A fortune, that’s what I make of it,” Gilliam whispered.

I closed my eyes, treading back, back over ages of legends. Older than the beastman invasion, older than the falling of the eastern and western stars. No, this was something legendary even to the elves, for whom Illsundal’s migration is still history. As with everything surrounding recent events in which we’d all been involved, this was beyond ancient. From the World that Was. The tale gleamed, in my memory, silver-bright.

Ana beat me to it.

“The demons’ mouthpiece.” She spoke the words through clenched teeth.

“The what?” Gilliam asked.

"Khaadak'atman," I said, hoping I'd crafted the wording right in the native Old Thonian.

Gilliam shook his speaking stone pendant. "It doesn't work when *you* speak it," he said.

"Your pronunciation is quite good," clicked one of the armored figures, in a voice similar to that of the Enforcer. "But the correct name is '*Avaat'atman.*'"

"'Well of Souls?'" Gilliam repeated the translation that reverberated in the speaking stone. "It looks to be worth quite a few of those."

One of the armored figures dragged a hose nearly as big around as my head past us, fastening it to an opening on the far side of the platinum pool. At the turn of a switch, the island gave a great thrumming beneath our feet, and the greenish liquid began to bubble up from a drain at the bottom of the bowl I hadn't noticed before. The liquid appeared semi-viscous, nearly the consistency of warmed honey.

"I'll give you ten Crowns to take a sip of that," Varis muttered to Gilliam.

"If you had ten Crowns to your name, I would. But since you don't..."

Ana sighed, and sidled over to me.

"I do not like it Thorn. Every single legend about this thing is steeped in blood and misery. This thing nearly brought down a kingdom and—"

"Nearly," I said. "But look — the legends do not mention these runes, the silver and gold. You cannot tell me those are just a coincidence."

She looked at the runes, and I could see it in her face as she understood just what they must represent. I was prepared for the look of wonder. But that quickly melted into a scowl. She turned, staring out over the lake, and crossed the few steps to the utterly still shore. Not even a ripple stirred the green-cast surface.

A good stone's throw from shoreline, perhaps six or eight feet below the surface, the rows and rows of rounded cylinders lay silent and still.

I turned, at the sound of metal scraping metal. The armored figures were lifting one of those cylinders into place between the six clamp-arms over the surface of the half-full pool.

It looked both delicate and highly durable. It was mainly panes and curves of the clear, crystalline glass, seamed by a webwork of the strange, rough-cast metal,

as if the hodgepodge of leftover pieces of stained-glass were slapped together and turned end to end. It was capped at each end by domes of the dull metal, each with a round pane of glass in the center. It was filled nearly completely full of the same slowly sloshing greenish liquid.

And within that....

I caught my breath in wonder. Ana's sharp intake came through clenched teeth, and I had to take hold of her arm to keep her from rushing forward.

"Let me go, Thorn!"

"We have not yet been given instructions. It would be best not to interfere."

"Interfere?" She pointed to the cylinder. "There is a girl in there!"

Her arms were crossed over her chest, legs drawn up, her forehead nearly touching her knees. Her hair drifted about her in a cloud, stirred to motion with the sloshing of the greenish liquid.

"She's not breathing," Ana said. "You have to get her out of there!"

One of the armored figures cocked its helmet to one side. "Of course it does not breathe. It has no need for that function yet. Now if you please, one of each of you to the left of each pylon." The man gestured towards one of the spots with a metal-clad hand.

We distributed ourselves around the great pool, as directed. Laying upon the block of ivory was a slender metal wand with a rounded tip. I picked it up, and noticed the others doing the same.

I glanced up, to see the girl in the capsule slowly revolve towards me. Something caught the light, gleaming between locks of hair from between her fingers. She appeared to be clasping something to her chest.

"On the mark of three, please strike the chime," the man clicked. He raised a hand, as a choir director might to signal the beginning of a song. The other two figures busied themselves at a low bank of machinery, leaning over some of those strange light-painted windows, hands busy with dials and switches. After several moments, the two raised their heads, nodding towards the other figure.

"One. Two. Three." The armored figure dropped his hand, and we struck the tuning forks.

Such a sweet, sweet harmony that arose. It sounded of hope, and courage. And yet, it was also the sound of loss, of a deep sadness.

The tones rang pure for several heartbeats before a grating, grinding sound joined in, sending shivers running down my arms and legs. Above me, line after line of bright white chased across the glass. In another few seconds, with a sharp chime of its own, every facet of the cylinder came apart in a shower of greenish glowing liquid, punctuated by countless shining bits and fragments of glass.

I ducked behind an upraised arm, dodging a step back as the girl hit the half-full pool with a heavy splash. The goop washed up and over the sides of the pool, shards of glass glimmering in the chamber's eerie lighting.

And as the stuff ran into the grooves left by the runes, those etched in gold began to glow, dully at first, but growing steadily brighter behind the sheen of the greenish glop.

More golden light spilled from above, and I looked up to see the light streaming from cracks in the structure of the cylinder's metal framework.

No, I realized. They weren't cracks. The surface was flaking away, in tiny bits and longer strips, as rust might be stripped from iron, or the tarnish worn away from silver or bronze.

The liquid in the pool was beginning to froth and roil, throwing up a heavy mist that obscured all but a single point of shining purplish-blue light. Drops began pattering down into the pool, steam from their striking the surface joining the fog. The drops fell faster, until streams and loops of the glowing golden metal were splashing down, lending brief gleams and flickers of gold within the green-cast mist.

Arcs of blue-white light began to spark and jump between the now-empty clamps above us. Sputtering, jumping first to one, and then arcing between two and three different metal rods. The bursts of lightning began to synchronize, until they were arcing from one pylon to another, six of them chasing each other in the same direction that the storm had turned in the skies above the valley.

From within the circle described by the lightning, there came a sudden, terrible coldness, and it seemed as though my every breath was drawn upward, into that spinning blue-white light. Against the glare, I saw what could not have been:

stars in a nighttime sky, though we had to be hundreds of feet below the ground, sheltered further by the bulk of the Black Peaks towering above the Valley floor.

Against the freezing, howling draw of the emptiness that gaped above, strands, finer than cobweb, drifted as if from the cold stars on the other side of the void. It felt as if I stood with a powerful gale to my back, the sleeves and loose legs of my trousers flapping, my hair blowing about my face. Yet those gleaming white threads drifted downward, without a hint of disturbance, disappearing into the bubbling, mist-shrouded pool, their faint white light blending with the gold and the shining point of purple-blue light that hadn't wavered the entire length of this strange ceremony.

A glimmer caught the corner of my vision, and I tore my gaze away from the spectacle to see the tuning fork turning, elongating, then shrinking. Through the howl of the portal, I could make out musical strains, the melody barely-heard.

"Another minute," one of the men at the controls said.

Beside him, reddish light painted the faceplate of the other figure.

"Fold-field breach. Six ethereals. Shall we abort?"

"*Anima* reconstruction is at sixty-five percent. The binders have not yet solidified. To shut down now risks her going berserk without restraint." The armored figure who was overseeing the pool was apparently senior to the other two.

"Eight ethereals." The red lights were beginning to blink, painting his helm alternating shades of red and white and orange. "Ten."

The man at the pool withdrew an oblong box from beneath his tunic. He placed it on the rim of the pool, and began taking out stones, holding them up to the blue-white light of the lightning, examining one, then another, and another. Irregularly cut, red and white crystals veined with gold, and a few, slightly smaller, black and veined a deep purple.

"Fifteen ethereals."

"Seventy-three percent reconstruction. Binders in place."

After another moment's consideration, the man at the side of the pool tipped the container emptying it into the greenish mists.

“Ninety percent,” the armored man said, from the side of the pool. Rather than gazing up at the howling lightning-portal, his attention was on the frothing, misty pool, now awash in gold, red, white, and purple light. It was as if a miniature lightning storm were going on in the thick mists.

Fewer and fewer gossamer strands of white light were falling through the portal. The stars flickered, dancing in and out among the blackness, there and then gone, to reappear again a moment later. I frowned. That was not familiar twinkling.

Something was passing over the stars. Several somethings, blacker than the night around them. A cold completely different than that of winter, or of the void seeped through me. It went deeper, past flesh and bone, clutching at the very soul. More and more stars were falling behind the shadows in the night. They were getting closer.

“Ninety-five percent. Ninety-seven.”

“Ethereals are nearly at the gateway. Shutting down.”

“No!” the figure at the side of the pool said, and its clicking voice held the first note of emotion I’d been able to make out.

“We cannot bring her back again if this fails. Those were the last of our dragonstones. And she is the last of our firstborn.”

The translation’s echo rang in my ears.

“Reconstruction is complete. Close the portal.”

One of the armored men at the console flipped a switch, while the other turned a dial. Above me, the lightning sputtered, and then the bolts lost their cohesion, arcing faster or slower, opening gaps between the metal clamps. The portal wavered, and began to tear, edges pulling away, revealing the cavern’s ceiling behind them. The howl of the void lessened, but over it, I heard a chorus of keening, metallic shrieks, and a hurried beating of dozens of bat-like wings. Two streaks peeled away from the collapsing portal, as if night itself came through, and two hazy shapes, all wings and tails turned, swooping up along the wall, circling to gain what altitude they could in the confines of the cavern.

A cacophony of blaring horns and a ringing of bells sprang up, a wave of sound crashing over us. The greenish lighting from the vast pool of green was lost as a harsh red glare spilled from great lamps high along the walls of the cave.

Had I not inadvertently cupped my hands as I reached up to cover my ears, I would never have heard the faint splashing, the weak coughing from within the pool. No longer boiling and heaving, the mists thinning, I could see the silhouette of a human figure within the still-faintly glowing liquid. A thin arm broke the surface, and a familiar tracery of golden loops and interlocking whorls gleamed from wrist to midway up her lower arm. Under the strobing reddish glare from above, the metal looked the color of just-banked embers, rather than bright, molten gold. Three stones were tangled among the metallic swirls: red, then white, then black, the white gleaming the brightest of the three.

I leaned against the sloped side of the pool, reaching out towards the girl.
“Aurora! This way!”

Wide, golden eyes flicked my way, but it was a darting glance. Her gaze darted up, and then she took a deep breath and plunged beneath the surface.

Something colder, darker than winter’s night streaked past, wingtips cutting twin trails across the surface of the pool. As it banked and climbed out of the dive, it gave a grating wail that drowned the alarms and bells. The translating echo stabbed into my mind, and for the space of a breath, it seemed that would be my last. Through a haze of red and white light, I could see the others clutching at their ears, eyes tightly closed. Yet across the pool, the two weavers stood, staring, confused yet seemingly unharmed.

The armored figures did not seem affected by the cacophony. A volley of brilliant white bolts sizzled from their outstretched hands, bursting with splashes of light as they slammed into the far wall of the cavern. Though they missed the flying creatures, the things screeched, twisting to avoid the blasts and having to circle higher.

The pain of the creatures’ screams lanced into my head again, and then a sharp tug at my neck made me crack my eyes open against the pain... to find that it had vanished. The girl had surfaced, and snagged my speaking stone pendant, tearing it away as she struggled to grasp the side of the pool.

I reached down, gripping her upper arm, hauling her up over the side. She slipped over the wide rim of the platinum pool, and a good measure of the green liquid came up and over with her. She lunged to one side as I was trying to steady her, and we both slid to the ground in a tangle of arms and legs.

Again, I felt the sharp, biting cold as one of the winged things swept overhead, hazy wingtips not even an arm's length away. Its effect was lessened, though, for the girl had landed atop me, and she was warm. Hot. The liquid dripped from her long, matted hair, but it was steaming, evaporating from her skin at an alarming rate.

As much heat as she was putting out, though, she shivered violently, the muscles along her jaw clenching as she tried to stop her teeth from chattering.

More sizzling white bolts lanced overhead, and the winged shadows screamed as they spun away from the volley.

I pulled the girl as close as I could, and struggled partway to my feet. Her fingers curled around the neckline of my tunic, and her legs began to spasm, and I nearly pitched back to the ground.

"Thorn! Get her out of here!" Varis pointed with the sword he'd appropriated from the Enforcer, waving it at the sandy causeway.

"Wait, don't go that way!"

Ana's shout caused me to turn, and I felt something in my knee pop as I spun, staggering towards her.

She set a hand on my shoulder.

"Flame go with you, Thorn. Let Its fire protect you against all that is Dark."

A warmth surged from her touch, and then she moved her hand from my chest to my back, giving me a shove. "Now go!"

I saw her spreading her arms, heard her shout in the hard, sibilant Alphatian tongue, and a flare of silver light at my back was answered with another keening, grating shriek and a heavy flapping of wings.

Another trio of white-hot flares soared overhead, to be joined with a sudden roar and rush of orange-red heat. A globe of orange light, rimmed and trailing flames came from the two weavers' positions around the pool.

The dark-haired weaver's aim was impressive, for when the flying beast twisted to avoid the white bolts, it flew straight into the path of the girl's ball of flame. It erupted with a thunderous roar and wash of even more heat. The thing screamed, spinning, wings aflame until it crashed into the lake, disappearing into the greenish depths.

I ran, spending most of my effort on keeping hold of the girl. Her shivering increased, and though she seemed to cool a bit, the metal around her forearms was uncomfortably hot against my shoulder and chest.

The Enforcer stepped aside as I drew near him, but his attention was fixed on the main chamber behind me. I saw him gather his fists together, winding his arms back, felt the approaching cold of the creature. I did not look back, kept running, towards the recessed doorway, but heard the hard sound of metal against hide, heard both a screech from the creature, as well as the screech of tearing metal. Then the cold drifted away.

The doors rolled open as I approached, and I skidded to a halt. Or rather, the air hardened around me, causing me to skid to a halt.

"You see, I told you they would bring her to us."

His long yellow robe smudged with soot and streaked with blood — much like the man himself — Golithar tucked a thumb into his wide red belt-sash and managed a smile from the other side of the doorway.

"Find a way to stop that infernal whimpering of hers," Golithar told me, "it grates on my nerves."

The girl still shivered, arms and legs twitching, her breathing cycling between the steady rhythm of deep sleep, and racing to a harsh panting, her heartbeat doing likewise. The white stones on her wrists flared brightest during those phases. I knew from the Aurora before that meant they were actively regenerating.

I did what I could, singing through every lullaby I'd ever learned. These soothed her somewhat. During a particularly violent fit of thrashing in my arms, I sang to her the melody that had played under the chaos at the Well of Souls, and that seemed to give her the greatest measure of comfort. It went on to become a

favorite of my nieces and nephews, and grand nieces and nephews. Ana even warmed enough to it to sing it to her children.

It would be many, many years before the warforged medic called Patches would explain to me that she was going through “transfer shock:” reliving the thousands of lifetimes over the course of the past four thousand years. Every battle, every death, every rebirth, unfolding with every breath, every heartbeat. It was no wonder when she opened her eyes a few hours later that they looked so old, so tired.

A recognition of her surroundings took hold, she pressed her head to my shoulder. “It was too much to hope the last time would truly be my last,” she sighed.

Golithar and Jolenta preceded me down another of the long, twisting metal-lined corridors. I had little choice but to follow them, as Jolenta hardened the air to the sides and behind me. I could either walk or she would simply drag me. The stabbing pains in my tailbone and back of my head taught me it was best to walk, after she abruptly softened the air behind me a few times.

The girl screamed, flinching away from the metal of the floor where she touched it as I fell, her arms and feet blistering from the slightest contact. Yet another reason I complied with the pair’s demands that I carry the girl and follow them: neither was inclined to carry the girl, and they would have had her walk, even after seeing the effect the touch of metal had on her.

The red-haired Glantrian took us to a large, square chamber. The walls and floor were scorched, and three of the heavily armored figures were slumped against the wall, their plating charred, burned completely through in places. The eye-slits of all three helms were dark.

I was guided down a short corridor, and pushed into a three-walled cell. The floor was of a smooth stone of some kind, as were the walls. The threshold was a square band of metal perhaps a hand-width across that ran up the walls, and across the ceiling.

Jolenta tossed a white smock in after me, and then gestured briefly at the empty fourth wall of the cell. A dim yellowish glow seeped from the edges of the metal strip.

“You’ll want to rest while you can. Tomorrow is going to be a busy day,” Golithar said. Then he and Jolenta left us.

A slab against one wall was made of the same smooth stone, perhaps a little longer than Varis’ height, raised to about knee-height. I suppose it served as both bench and bunk, as there was no other furnishings or features in the room. Not even one of the strange frosted-glass lights. The cold white light we got spilled in from the main hallway outside.

I turned my back as the girl donned the smock. It was cut for an adult’s fit, and what should have hung perhaps to just past knee length on a woman fell nearly to the girl’s ankles. Her hands were lost in the long sleeves. After tearing the sleeves to a better length, I was able to fashion those strips into a sort of belt. The girl used it to gather up some of the extra material so it did not hang quite so loosely on her thin frame.

“It seems odd that they would simply leave us here, unguarded,” I said to her. I leaned close to the edge of the cell, to try to see a bit further up the corridor.

“Do not touch it!” the girl said, leaping up from her perch on the bench and pulling me off balance. “We’re in the detention wards, behind a sonic screen.”

She reached out, and the air along the edge of the metal strip seemed to solidify, suddenly glowing a bright white where her fingers pressed against it. A harsh, angry buzz, like dozens of hives of bees filled the air. The girl grimaced, and pushed harder, leaning into the the space where the wall would have been. Golden sparks began to spit and dance between the curtain of air and the edge of her bracer.

She drew her hand back with a sharp gasp, and the buzzing stopped, the wall of air fading to its regular clarity. The girl retreated to the bench, cradling her hand in her lap, the white stone in the bracer glowing brilliantly, the golden veinwork pulsing, giving the appearance of very bright candlelight.

“I didn’t need a demonstration,” I told her.

"I was testing it. The woman did something to the air between the layers of the screen."

"How is it that you can understand me, without the speaking stone?" I did not want to tell her that her accent was terrible.

The girl thought it over for a moment, and then shrugged. "I just... know the words. I do not know how else to describe it."

We sat in silence for some long moments. The girl's hand twitched in her lap, and after a while she was able to move her fingers, curling them, then touching them one at a time to her thumb, biting back hisses of pain as she did so. Soon, she was able to move her fingers without any signs of pain.

"How shall I call you?" I asked her. "I am—"

"You are called Thorn," she said.

I nodded. Though she could have heard my companions calling my name.

"The raven-haired foreigner names herself Ana. The tall man is Varis, and the other man has some days left of being Gilliam."

"Amazing," I breathed.

She frowned. "Is it? All these memories crowding in my head. It is difficult sorting them all out. At the Well, you called out to me. You called me 'Aurora.' That is what you named she who came before?"

"Yes. Though—"

"Then call me that. It will help me to find her memories, here amidst the clutter." She waved her fingers at her head in a dismissive gesture.

She looked exactly as Aurora had, when Gilliam had fished her from the Maiden's Pool, save for her hair fanning out behind her as she sat on the stone bench. And her bracers. While the pattern of the weave and turn of the strands of golden metal were nearly identical, there were subtle differences along the top side of it, to accommodate two additional stones.

She caught my glance towards her wrists, and she shook the sleeves up, exposing the glittering, rough-cut dragonstones amidst the spirals and twists of golden metal. The clear stones still flickered, though their light was dim, very nearly extinguished.

“One stone, two stone,” she chanted, in a by-rote singsong, extending her pointing finger of each hand. “Red stone, black stone.” She touched each of the stones, the red on her left, black on her right, with the opposite finger. “Fire and shadow, sing me a song.

“Two stone, three stone,” she chanted, returning her hands to her lap and uncurling her middle fingers next to her still-pointing first-fingers. “Golden and white stone, candle and courage, ward me from harm.” Her two fingers rested on the middle stones of each bracer. As if playing along with her song, each gem gave a slow pulse of light that faded as she brought her hands back to her lap.

“Five stone, six stone, red, white, black stone, shrieks gone a-winging, last from the nest.”

Her first three fingers touched each of the gems, and each smoldered to light beneath her fingertips.

I stared, catching my breath.

She looked up at me. “What is it?”

“I know that rhythm, but the words are different. Changed over the— years.”

“Centuries. Millennia. You can say it,” the girl said, patting my hand. “Sing it for me.”

I cleared my throat.

She bit her lip. “Apologies. I did not remember in time of your injury.” She reached up, tracing a finger along the still-fresh scar that ran down the side of my neck, along my collarbone.

“One bird, two bird
Red bird, black bird
Cardinal and crow
Sing me a song.

Two bird, three bird
Golden and white bird
Heron and dove
Guide me home

Four bird, five bird
Red, white, black bird
Shrikes gone a-winging
Last from the nest."

Aurora shook her head. "Instructional mnemonics made into a child's rhyme...." She sighed again. "No, three and three means I must flee." She paused, then giggled.

She barely smiled the entire time I'd known her. The titter was a bit unsettling. She scooted back on the bench, leaning against the wall. She closed her eyes, drew her knees up towards her chin, clasping her arms around her legs. It was nearly the same position she'd been in while inside the glass and metal cylinder.

"You should get some sleep," she told me. Golden light seeped from between her lashes. Flares of color curled amidst the veinwork deep within the stones, as flames would flicker up from banked embers in a campfire. "Tomorrow is going to be a busy day."

Waning quarter moon of the Deep Snows (on or about
Kaldmont 20, 997AC)

The sudden return of the glaring white light startled me awake. This, in turn, set the stiff muscles along my back, neck, and shoulder flaring with bolts of pain.

Aurora half sat up, stretching like a cat from where she'd slept, curled at the other end of the smooth stone slab.

"They are coming," she said, rubbing sleep from her eyes. "Play along with me," she whispered, and then curled back up in a ball, feigning sleep.

A wash of cold prickling against my skin announced the arrival of Golithar and his weaver even before they strode into view.

"Ah, so good to find you awake," he said. "I trust you are well rested?"

"As well as can be expected," I answered. Truth be told, it was the soundest sleep I'd had in the better part of the week. My mind was clear, and I felt the comforting presence of my magics — distant due to the presence of so much worked metal and stone, but still surging through me with each breath, each heartbeat.

"And the brat? The night's rest has eased her need for whimpering and whining?"

Aurora sat blinking slowly, dragging her fingers through her hair. She looked between me, and the two figures on the other side of the sonic barrier, her features slack, eyes glittering, seemingly unfocused. When Golithar and Jolenta traded disgusted glances, Aurora winked at me.

"We have not mistreated you. We have allowed you a full night's rest. We would be inclined to actually feed you, and will give you the chance to earn the right to break your night's fast." Golithar gave the silvery lead in his hand an absentminded twitch, and I shivered as Jolenta's brow furrowed. The shiver passed, and the golden light faded from the edge of the metallic threshold.

"Straight ahead to the doors, then two lefts will take you to the mess hall," Golithar said. "If you two can manage to make it that far without any tricks, we will allow you to eat. If you cannot, then Jolenta will have to restrain you. That will strain her, and she is not nearly as useful to me in that condition. I will be displeased." He bent down, his eyes level with Aurora, who was sitting up, kicking

her feet against the side of the slab, since they did not reach the floor. "Do you remember what I did when I was displeased?"

He lifted a finger, and Aurora's left foot halted in midair.

"You will be a good girl, yes?"

She swallowed, glancing at her foot, to the man's dark eyes, and then she averted her eyes, shoulders slumping.

I have to admit, she even had me fooled for a fraction of a second.

Breakfast consisted of a bowl of some brownish-gray mush that had the consistency of clotted oatmeal and none of its taste.

"Sort of makes you wish you'd tried to run, doesn't it?" Golithar asked, when he saw our bowls were empty. I couldn't disagree with him.

I followed Golithar, carrying Aurora, with Jolenta behind me, the full length of her lead strung out to my right. He led us from the mess hall to another of the falling rooms. I nearly dropped the girl in my surprise as I was pressed upon by a great, invisible hand. Breakfast did some uncomfortable flops in my stomach, and then the dizzying vertigo settled itself, the square doors sliding open to reveal another of the triangular rooms with the large window along the long wall.

I looked out upon the vast cloud-filled cavern, but from another angle, and closer to the cloud-bank. It seemed the sea of mists rolled and heaved just a few arm's lengths below the floor of this room. The ghostly colored lights continued to meander up the nodes of the great column: red-gold, deep purple, pale yellow...

We made our way along another curving, glass-walled corridor. Far from being abandoned, as had those I'd explored above with my companions, these rooms were inhabited. Some of the faces I recognized from here and there around the city of Byxata. In the mess hall, I could count at least half a dozen gray-robed women in the brief glance I got as we passed the doorway. The further 'round the corridor, the more lived-in it began to look: boxes, sacks, barrels lined the wall. Laughter came from one doorway we passed, and a group of men were busy at a card game of some kind.

Golithar led us through one doorway, past two round-doored checkpoint rooms, and stopped before a short hall sporting three heavily-armored round doors.

One bore fresh gouges along the seams, while another was scorched, seared, the surface slightly warped. The third door was unharmed. He gestured for me to set the girl down. As the floor was of the smooth stone, I did not hesitate. Small though she was, she seemed heavier than a girl her size should be, and my shoulders welcomed the relief.

“I know you have valuables stored behind these doors,” he said to her. “My men have tried might, and our weavers have tried their magic, to no avail. Now, please be so kind as to open these doors for us.”

When Aurora gave him a blank stare, he pointed towards the three doors. “Open them!” he shouted, miming an opening of doors with the palms of his hands.

She jumped, as his voice rang in the cramped confines of the room, but crossed her arms, shaking her head.

“*Nieah*,” she said, inclining her chin ever so slightly.

Golithar did not even bat an eye at the girl’s defiance. He seemed to be expecting it. He gave a slight tug on the silvery leash. “Jolenta, persuade her.”

Air hardened about me, clogging my throat, settling inside my chest like a lead weight.

Golithar leaned down, leveling his eyes with those of the girl. “If you do not open those doors, my pet will smother your friend. Slowly. I could have her shape the air into barbs, so that he tears himself to shreds as he breathes. Would you like that?”

“I know these gems prevent lasting injury to you,” he said, pointing towards the clear, gold-veined stone in Aurora’s gauntlet. “He has no such baubles.”

My ears were beginning to ring, and tiny white lights were beginning to burst in the corners of my vision.

Aurora took a deep breath. “*Astu*,” she said, nodding. “*Astu, tata’niamat*.” She pointed towards me.

The air binding my lungs softened, and I sucked in deep breaths. I nodded when Aurora looked my way, one of her golden eyebrows arched.

“Saaja, Thorn,” she said, then turned back towards Golithar. *“Aham’asmi nuunam ugra.”*

“Yes, yes,” he said, waving towards the doors. “Now open them.”

I swallowed. She’d told me to ready myself. But for what?

“Katamaa?” she asked. She glanced from one door to the other, to the other.

Golithar’s brow furrowed. “Any of them! Stop stalling.”

The girl reached towards the round hexagonal keyhole beside the first door, the one bearing the scars from the slavers’ brute-force attempt to open the door.

“Aleva kujcikaa?”

“I think she asks where the key is.” I translated, as Golithar’s scowl deepened.

“Do you think we haven’t turned this place upside down looking for it? Use your magic to open it!”

Aurora shrugged, closing her eyes. The red gems on her gauntlets kindled to red-gold light. *“Agni, Thorn.”*

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, reaching inside for the spark of fire within me. As the temperature abruptly climbed and the white light seared through my eyelids, I dove into that spark, sheltering within it as Aurora unleashed her magic, just as Golithar had instructed.

The two weavers’ screams were lost in the dragon’s roar of flame.

The shivering sense of the weaver’s power vanished. The bonds of air holding me in place dissolved in that same instant. I blinked, trying to shake the glare of the flames from my vision. A small hand took mine, tugging, spinning me around. Through the ringing in my ears, I heard Aurora shout for me to run.

Half-blind, lungs burning from the half-inhaled superheated air, what choice did I have but to I follow? After two doorways, I realized that my ears weren’t ringing, it was another set of alarms.

“Keep running!”

The glare mostly faded into two bobbing flashes of brilliant white light amidst the corridor’s strobing red lights: the stones embedded in Aurora’s bracers. We were

running down another metal-clad corridor, dodging among crates, overstuffed sacks, and a growing press of slavers curious or panicked by the alarms.

“Your feet--”

“Easier to heal than sword wounds” she called over her shoulder.

Behind us, booming over the growing din, Golithar began shouting orders, his voice amplified by his magic.

Aurora drew in a sharp breath, and the black stones flared to life. A shock pulsed through my hand, causing my fingertips and toes to tingle for a few seconds. The air grew hazy, and the colors bled from our surroundings. Even the blaring of the alarms seemed distant, fuzzy.

The girl slowed our pace, and when it got too cramped, we huddled between two crates, shoulder to shoulder, holding our breath whenever anybody would pause too near our hiding spot.

A squeeze of my hand was the only warning I had to get to my feet and move on. I very nearly tripped, as she was already off and moving before I'd even straightened all the way up. Clearly, she wanted to break into another run, but there were still too many others in the way. It did no good to be shrouded from view if we were going to be crashing into people left and right.

The worst of it was waiting at the doorways. Each time one would open, I would tense, ready to spring through, only to have the girl's hand tighten around mine. The slavers went nowhere alone. They travelled in groups of threes and fours, most of the time spread out along the width of the corridor. Only as the doors began rolling shut did Aurora spring, darting through the rapidly narrowing gap in the doorway. Too many times for my own comfort, I felt the door clang shut right at my heels.

When we finally found ourselves in a deserted passageway, I pulled my hand free of her grasp. What few colors there were in the hallway leapt back to life in my vision, even as the girl winked from my sight. A shimmering of the air a few seconds later revealed her standing, one hand on her hip, gesturing impatiently.

“We must hurry,” she said, her voice nearly lost in her rasping of breath.

“You must rest,” I said, not moving.

“We cannot let any more of them escape.”

“And we cannot stop them if you exhaust yourself. Besides, does this complex tunnel all the way through the Black Peaks? Where can they possibly go?”

“They are traveling the corridors that lead to the Gateway controls.”

“Gateway? The one she — you — mentioned before we parted ways?”

The girl nodded, a faint smile quirking her lips. “It is amusing, how you keep tiptoeing around the death of she who came before.”

I swallowed, trying to ignore the lump in my throat.

“There is no need to grieve for her, for she is not gone. She is here. And here.” She touched her fingertips to her forehead and chest. “We continue. We are eternal.” Her sigh turned into a quiet chuckle. She stared at the threads and swirls of golden metal twined about her forearms. “They do not let us go, they do not let us forget.”

“How does it work?” I asked her.

She shrugged. “I am sure one or another of the medicos could tell you. It is all machinery and magic-this and potion-that.” She waved a dismissive hand. “All their words buzz about like so many flies. My sister was the smarter of us, truth be told. She might have made sense of it all.” She suddenly leaned forward, glancing up at me. “There, you do it again. That look in your eyes.” She cocked her head, as if listening. “You... did not discuss her much, with she who came before.”

The girl suddenly sat, folding her legs beneath her, smoothing the makeshift dress over her knees. Her back was straight, her shoulders slightly forward. Her small hands rested on her knees, but had the look of wanting to curl into fists.. Her tone of voice did not change, but the way she ended each statement left me feeling as though she’d just leveled her sword at my throat: “You wish me to rest. Fine. I shall do so. And you will tell me of your time with this one you called ‘Silva.’”

So I began, with the meeting in Tarwin’s Gap and a recounting of the dwarven brothers’ tale of their time with the girl. Aurora listened carefully, stopping me every so often with a raised hand and question. She smiled when I told her of

the encounters beneath Mistamere, of her fierce protectiveness towards the other girls we'd rescued.

"She was always bringing strays to the castle," Aurora murmured, smiling faintly. Her smile was fierce when I told of how her sister bound the demon clinging to Bargle's wretched goblin servant.

Aurora wrinkled her nose when I told her of the Baron Halaran's visitors from Alphatia. Still, she was intrigued by my description of their complex system of weavings, and that they did not wear the collars, as did the two weavers who'd accompanied us from the Black Tower.

Her eyes went wide when I told her of the razing of Verge, but she nodded as I described how Silva had dampened the flames through the dragonstones. Aurora's eyes darkened when I went on to tell of the girl's march through the gnoll army with her own glowing warpack.

Her expression finally lightened when I told of Bargle's trouble in hunting the girl through the Black Woods, and the "army of brats'" capture of the Black Eagle's lapdog.

"Golithar spoke very highly of this Bargle," Aurora told me. When she didn't elaborate, I went on, to tell of our defense of Threshold from the approaching army of demon-infested trees. The girl's eyes widened when I spoke of Silva using the girls from town to accompany her in amplifying Ana's magic.

"Just like when they had us penned up in Vestfold," she murmured.

The muffled sound of voices and jangling of armor interrupted my continuation of the tale, and I moved quickly to my feet, pressing against the wall to one side of the round doorway. Aurora stood ready across from me, the red and black gems alight on her left wrist.

The door rolled open, and a group of slavers stepped through, a woman and two men leading two hooded gray-robed figures by glittering leashes.

I brought flame to my hands, and Aurora crouched, a short-sword-length spar of black fire springing to light in her left hand.

The door rolled shut behind the slavers, and I was about to throw the globe of fire when one of the women drew her hood back, shaking out long, straight locks of glossy black hair.

“Wait!” I cried.

Gilliam and Varis both spun, weapons up. Gilliam caught Aurora’s blackfire blade against the Enforcer dagger cross-guard, actually staggering back a step before he was able to force her weapon aside.

She’d already begun spinning when the telltale shiver of weavers’ Power ran through me. The girl stopped abruptly, eyes widening with surprise, to narrow a split-second later, the golden depths beginning to smolder.

“Hold!” I said, allowing the small globe of fire in my hand to stutter and wink out. “Aurora, these are my companions.”

“I told you this was a bad idea,” Ana said, tossing her ratty brown cloak aside as if it were infested with vermin.

“It got us past most of the patrols,” Varis said.

“And gave us enough of an edge to take out the more observant guards,” Gilliam added. He tucked the knife back in his belt, and raised his hands towards the still wind-bound shriek.

The flickering blade vanished from Aurora’s hand, and when she opened her eyes, they were back to their normal shade of gold.

“I don’t believe it,” Varis said, staring at the girl as the bonds of air loosened their grip on her. I noticed that neither of the weavers took their eyes from the girl, and they retained their grip on their power. “She... she is exactly like—”

“Stronger,” Gilliam said, clutching his wrist. He gave the girl a brief nod. “Well met, twin of the twin.”

Aurora sketched a curtsey, though she did not lower her eyes. “You may continue calling me Aurora. I rather like that *sattva*.”

Ana frowned at the word, while Varis raised an eyebrow. Gilliam quirked a smile. Without my speaking stone, I was left to puzzle, as were the two weavers.

“Give it to her,” Ana said.

"I was going to," Gilliam said. By his tone, I gathered this was not the first time Ana had 'reminded' him.

Ana crossed her arms. The warrior fished at a cord that sat across his chest, pulling at it until a small sack slid around from beneath his cloak. He gave some tugs at the knots, and the bag slipped free. He handed it to Aurora, giving Ana a long, pained look.

The girl reached into the sack, withdrawing a circlet similar to the one the Aurora from before had worn, but set with three small red dragonstones. As she set the finely woven golden metal against her brow, it again seemed to flow and weave its way among her hair. She reached into the sack again, and withdrew a blackwood sheath, nearly as long as one of Gilliam's short swords. A platinum crosspiece and pommel was visible above the dark leather-wrapped scabbard. The hilt was wrapped in a matching but well worn black leather, capped by a rounded platinum pommel.

Aurora withdrew the blade about halfway, and we saw it was of the dark, grainy-looking metal. A large oval-cut black dragonstone was forged into the blade just above the guard.

"You know, we could trade, if you—"

Aurora looked up from the blade, lips pursed. By the bulging of the muscles along her jawline, I've no doubt she was biting her tongue.

Gilliam gave a nervous chuckle. "This one doesn't have much of a sense of humor, either."

"You don't want that ceremonial knife. No good in combat." Varis said. "Cold-cast metal like that is very brittle. One good strike at just the right angle, or a direct hit to that stone, and the whole blade is ruined."

Aurora turned the blade over, then over again, watching the dimly glowing veinwork deep within the stone.

"Ceremonial? This blade has seen more than a thousand years of service on the battlefield. These stones are harder than diamonds. Properly honed, they can lay open dragonscale as if it were soft butter. You saw what happened when She who came before unleashed just a fraction of the power within one such stone." Her hand strayed to her hair, and she twined a long lock round and round a couple

of her fingers. It was one such lock that had gone white with the strain of recovering from the dragonstone's fury.

"The blade is cold-cast, yes," she said, lifting her gaze to regard Varis, "but this no mere iron. I would not be able to touch it if it were. It is pulled from far deeper beneath the earth. Even deeper than we must go to find the black dragonstones." She ran her fingers along the edge of the blade. "It is probably the last of its kind."

We moved on, Varis on the girl's right, the weavers behind them. Ana kept watch on Gilliam, and I was again relegated to rearguard.

She led us through a series of switch-back corridors, each slanting sharply downward. Though braced at regular intervals by great steel supports, the walls were bare stone, smooth to the touch, almost glossy in texture. The floor was also undressed stone, with slight ruts worn along one side. The stone also bore signs of recent use.

We would not be alone when we reached our destination.

After four switches, the corridor was interrupted along the righthand side by a hollow. Opened crates had been stacked here, along with half-empty sacks. Straw littered the floor, with stalks lying at the bottom of a small stone fountain along the back of the nook.

"Rest here," Aurora said. "The water is safe to drink." She occupied herself with sifting through the wreckage of the crates. After taking a couple handfuls of water, Ana joined her, their heads close together, voices low.

"It does us no good to hurry if we will be exhausted when we arrive," Ana said. She glanced around, as all eyes were drawn to her raised voice, and color crept into her cheeks.

"Aurora wishes us to make double-time. These crates contained bloodstones, but—"

"But they did away with the packing material in order to get more on their cart," Gilliam said. "We would do similar things with Darokinian caravans, to make up for lost time."

"You mean to make haste away from the site of your raids," Ana muttered.

"They're moving faster, but not that much faster."

"They have used some of the stones," Aurora said. "They could not bring horses down here, so they are using some of their number as such."

Ana's eyes widened. Gilliam grimaced, the fingers of his left hand twitching.

"It might not be wise to catch up to them," Varis said. "One or two, we might be able to handle. But if they have more than that. Add their weavers to the mix, and our chances don't look very good."

"We cannot just let them make it through the Gate with those things."

"It does no good trying to stop them if that gets us all killed," Varis said, clenching a fist.

"We have Ana's magic, and that of our own weavers," I said. "I can fire their packing material, keep them from being able to reach the crystals. And we have Aurora's skills, as well."

Varis absently rubbed at his wrist. "Very well. But can they keep up?" He jerked a thumb at the two weavers.

But the blonde was already tugging at the hem of her sister's robe. "Macha's can work a weaving that will stave off weariness. It is dangerous if used for too long, but..."

"Use it," Aurora said, stepping over to the young women, bringing the blade up between the blonde weaver's hands. The fabric parted cleanly up to the dark-haired weaver's mid-thigh.

Gilliam whistled, though I don't know if it was due to the show of the seemingly-dull blade's sharpness, or the weaver's leg...

The cold tingle of the weavers' power was joined by an exhilarating surge singing through every muscle. I ran as I haven't run since childhood, and saw that mine wasn't the only mouth turned up in a fierce smile. Varis and Gilliam were a study in opposites, the bigger warrior's strides even and methodical — the gait of one needing to keep his steps unison so the rest of the unit would not be left behind. Gilliam, though, ran with a headlong, wild abandon, at times using the very tunnel walls to hurl himself around the corners. Ana ran in long, springing strides, like some pale doe of the deeper woods. The weavers ran hand in hand, the

blonde leading her sister in a surprisingly quick gait, I suspect augmented by further use of their weavings.

Most astonishing of all was Aurora, blazing ahead of even Gilliam, her hair aglow in a long, golden corona, the red and white stones ablaze on her forearms. Her feet did not touch the ground, but once per four or five of Gilliam's strides, and only then, the soles of her feet seemed to barely skim the surface of the floor before she was aloft again. We watched in horror as her initial leap was a strong, two-legged spring. It was only when she did not alight from it for nearly ten yards that we realized she was bending the stones to her will, touching down as a leaf adrift from a branch on a lazy autumn day, only to leap again.

We ran, and I felt the usual pangs — along my side, up and down my legs, particularly my left shin, as I'd sprained it several times in my younger days. But these were all distant, lost in a fog much as Aurora had pushed away the tainted touch of the soil of the valley above.

It was difficult to say for just how long we ran like this. It seemed for mere moments, and yet at the same time, felt as if it were a good long while. When Gilliam leapt from one wall to the next and back again before hitting the tunnel floor without losing stride, I lost count of which switchback we were on.

We passed two more resting nooks along the passageway before Aurora called us to a halt. That took some time, and we all wound up bunched against a turn, gasping and wheezing for breath, shivering as the weariness caught up to us. I very nearly blacked out for the dark spots dancing in my vision and the burning, lancinating pains in my shins.

We managed to drag ourselves up the corridor to the wide nook, less than a quarter mile from where we'd crashed to our halt, and we spent the next twenty minutes gulping handful after handful of cool, clear water.

All of us, that is, except for Aurora, who paced like something wild and caged. She would pause, glaring at us, and then look away down the corridor, only to huff and begin pacing again. Though the red dragonstones had gone dark, I noticed that the clear, golden-veined gems were bright against her pale arms.

As we rounded the next switchback, we heard the sharp crack of whips, shouts echoing back towards us, the words lost, but the meaning clear: *Quickly, faster!*

The harsh white lighting of the hallway was augmented by a flickering, ruddy light coming from the other side of a large two-wheeled cart packed to overflowing. The groaning creak of the axels was nearly as pitiful as the moans emanating from the front of the cart.

We got within bowshot of the group before one of the cloaked figures glanced back and noticed us.

“Hold!” the man shouted, turning, with a hand on his sword hilt.

“It’s all right,” Gilliam called, raising a hand. “Golithar sent us.”

“Talitha’s blessing on you,” the man said.

Gilliam laughed. “I wouldn’t wish Her blessing on my worst enemy.”

The man laughed as well, his hand finally slipping from its place on the sword’s hilt. “What news from our illustrious master?”

“The usual: make haste, no more delays.”

“I’d like to tell him he’s more than welcome to come and help push, then,” the slaver growled, jerking his head back towards the lumbering cart. “We’ve already got six Hounds hauling on this thing. We can’t go much faster than we’re already going. And his shepherds and their little lambs are more of a hinderance than help.” The man glanced us over again, and narrowed his eyes. “The Master sent six of you for that?”

“Those intruders are still running loose,” Gilliam said.

The man made a disgusted sound in his throat. “Don’t know why he’s so afraid of a little girl. A good, long knife in the ribs would have solved all his problems.”

The quickness with which Gilliam moved was startling. A dull gleam from near his shoulder, his arm a blur. The slaver’s chainmail jack seemed to melt aside at the touch of the Enforcer’s knife.

“A knife in the ribs solves quite a few problems,” Gilliam said, his voice rough, breath clouding, as he stepped over the body.

“Gilliam....” Varis’ voice was a low rumble. He held one hand out, open, but the other rested on the hilt of the Enforcer’s sword.

The shivering whisper of the weavers’ magic washed over me. The two stood alert, backs straight, eyes on the smaller warrior, hands ready to direct their power. Ana had also shifted her stance, balancing forward on her feet. Her fingers were curled into the beginnings of a warding gesture, and I had the feeling that the words to one or another of her spells were on her lips.

Aurora put a small hand over Varis’, keeping him from drawing his sword. “No,” she said. “We need his strength. Go on, Skagrah. Go drink your fill.”

Gilliam cocked his head to one side, the frown that came to his expression oddly exaggerated. “Go?” His eyes, narrowed, so that all I could see was the brilliant, bloody red rimming his lower eyelids. “If the *hant’ir-asra* wishes it, then perhaps Skagrah will just go back to sleep...”

“I have little time to bargain with you, whelp, ” Aurora snapped. “Sleep as you wish.”

Though he kept his red-rimmed eyes on Aurora, Gilliam — or rather, Skagrah— turned his head, ever so slightly, sniffing at the body that lay at his feet. His lips drew back from teeth gone yellow, showing the black-lined gums. “No no, Skagrah has more hunger for blood than slumber.”

“Then go.” Aurora gestured towards the wagon, which was still creaking down the corridor. None of the other cloaked figures had yet noticed their rearguard’s absence.

“Skagrah does not trust you,” he hissed. It took longer for the cloud of his breath to dissipate.

“Nor we you,” Aurora said. “Now run along, before I change my mind.”

Gilliam turned on his heel, sank to his haunches, and then sprang, frog-like, down the corridor after the cart.

The sharp crack of an open hand against flesh jerked my attention back to my companions.

Aurora was nearly doubled over, her face obscured by the heavy cascade of her hair. Varis had Ana's wrist in a firm grip, his muscles the only thing keeping Ana from striking the girl again.

"How could you?" the cleric of the Flame asked, her voice barely above a whisper. "If you have the other Aurora's memories, then you know how hard he is trying to keep that monster at bay, and you just let it break free and roam at its whim?"

Aurora straightened, slowly. She lifted her head, drawing her hands through her hair, pushing it from her face. Blood showed on her lip, and the beginnings of an angry bruise could be seen blossoming against her pale cheek. The stones adorning the golden weavework of her bracers were dark, their only light reflected off the facets from the harsh overhead lamps.

"I know," the girl said, her voice thick around the blood still seeping from her lip. "He is not so weak and fragile a thing as you think. Those who give themselves to those like Skagrath have given up— on family, clan, kingdom. Gilliam has not done so. You can call him back to himself."

Ana gaped at the girl, her mouth working, but her anger would not let her speak.

Aurora brought her hand up to her lip, stared at her fingers for a moment, then turned her hand, and wiped at her mouth with the back of her wrist.

"You seem to forget that I have none of my ceremonial equipment, not even my amulet of faith."

"I have not forgotten. Nor have I given up."

Ana's fists clenched. "I have not given up!"

Aurora smiled, and turned her gaze towards the sound of shouts and clanging of swords.

"Good," she said.

"Skagrath is young. Weak, as demons go. But it is not so inexperienced as to let its host be destroyed. A demon does not last long in a corpse."

"Well, that is reassuring," Varis muttered. He spun the Enforcer's sword again, loosening up his wrist.

“Not yet,” Aurora said, laying a hand on the warrior’s arm. The muscles along Varis’ jawline twitched with each echoing clang of steel, with each wordless shout that echoed back towards us.

“Enforcer weapons are not designed for demonkind at full strength. Skagrah must wear them down before you can be of any use in this fight.”

“It’s at least four on one down there!” Varis said.

“It will soon be five,” the blonde weaver gasped. Her and her sister’s hands were extended, palms out towards the battle down the corridor. “We cannot hold the other two for much longer at this distance.”

“Then get closer!” Ana said.

“No,” Aurora warned. “Any closer, and they will smell you. Their antimagic will leave you defenseless against their claws.” She turned towards Ana. “Do you wish such a fate on them?”

“Antimagic? I— I have never—” the dark-haired cleric swallowed.

“Exactly,” Aurora said, her eyes hardening. “If you do not know the steps, do not dance. If you do dance, then I lead.” This, she directed towards Varis.

He frowned. “Gilliam is barely holding his own with that dagger. At least take my sword, if you’re going to join the fight.”

Aurora shied away from the offered weapon. “No, you keep it,” she said. “It is better suited to your strength.” The girl drew the dark metal dagger, and a glimmer of purple light shone in the depths of the stone bound to its blade. The light was answered by the two stones in the girl’s bracers.

Varis and I both stepped away from her. We’d both seen what Silva was capable of with a single black dragonstone, and her efforts, this Aurora had told me, were rudimentary and childish.

I shuddered to think what the warrior class of these strange girls could do with such magic.

One of the voices in the chorus of shrieks fell silent, and Aurora finally lifted her hand from Varis’ arm.

“Now, quickly!” The words had barely passed her lips when all six stones adorning her bracers took light. In two strides, her figure burred, wavered, then disappeared.

Varis did not waste his breath with a war cry. He charged, bringing his sword up, pommel against his shoulder, as if it were a lance.

Ana called out a short prayer in Alphatian, and a silvery nimbus flared around the warrior.

I followed as quickly as I could, keeping to the lefthand wall, my right hand pressed to the stone, drawing in a fraction of the power of the mountain’s roots.

The three human slavers lay in still-spreading pools of blood. A fourth figure lay sprawled on its back, but I hesitate to call it human — its arms bulged with knots of bone and muscle, the fingers shortened, and tipped with blackened nails grown unnaturally long and thick. The head was nearly engulfed by the humped mass of the thing’s shoulder muscles. The wide red-rimmed eyes were wide open, but clouded, mouth opened wide in its death scream, a yellowed tongue protruding from between blackened, serrated teeth. Dozens of knife wounds marked its torso: slashes and deep punctures from which blackened blood still oozed.

Gilliam’s dagger spat sparks as it glanced off bony plates of armor that seemed to’ve sprouted from the forearms of one of the men. Its hands were similarly edged in spined, bony growths. A lashing backhand drew blood as Gilliam danced back a fraction of a second too late.

The brute raised its other fist for another attack, but Varis slammed into it from behind. The creature’s shout of glee at drawing blood climbed to a shrill scream as Varis’ sword plunged in to the hilt.

Even still, the thing did not go down. It turned sharply, just as Varis’ foot came down in of the many smaller pools of blood splashed across the floor. He staggered, lost his grip on the sword, and tumbled into one of the other creatures as it lumbered in for a strike at Gilliam’s open flank. It gave a bellow and went down as Varis turned his fall into a roll.

The hulking figure struggling to rise from the floor — arms gone scaly, the face elongated into a lizard-like muzzle — gave another bellow as it collapsed again. Aurora winked into view, crouched on the thing’s wide back. She lashed

twice with the knife — they could not have been very deep wounds — and the thing shrieked, the sound causing my knees to nearly go out from under me. Aurora drew the knife back, the dark gem gleaming with a steady purplish radiance. Twin streamers of what looked like congealed smoke trailed, dripping wisps of shadow, from the blade to the creature's back.

The girl gave a shout — or perhaps it was a sibilant, rasping command— and wrenched the knife back even further, drawing another shriek from the beast. Clawed fingers scrabbled at the hard-packed dirt floor of the tunnel, and the thing kicked its feet, but couldn't gain the leverage to shake the girl from its back.

The black and red stones on her wrist flared, sheathing her free hand in flames so deep a red as to be nearly purple, casting more shadows than light. She grasped the coiling tendrils of the demon's smoky essence, and gave a savage twist, the flames about her fist crackling higher.

The scream it let out then sent me to my knees, and I had to cover my ears, squeeze my eyes shut against the hissing, crackling roar.

Aurora brought the dagger around, in low, slashing through the demon's essence still wriggling below the deep red flames. The body beneath her spasmed once, then went rigid and still, its scream severed as cleanly as the smoky tendrils of demon-stuff.

The girl's eyes began to flicker with a silvery-purple light, mimicking that of the stone bound to the knife. The wisps of shadow writhed frantically, but to no avail as they were drawn into the stone. As the last of the substance trailed through her flame-shrouded fingers, the flames flickered, then vanished.

Gilliam stood hunched low over the body of the slaver Varis had grievously wounded, a spreading pool of black blood at his feet testament that he'd finished the job. The remaining possessed slaver hunkered by the other side of the cart, red-rimmed eyes darting between Gilliam and Aurora, the tip of its sword swaying towards one, then the other.

"We do not have to harm you," Aurora said to the creature.

Gilliam glanced over towards the girl. "Yes, yes we do!" Skagrah rasped.

Aurora ignored him, took a step forward, raising her hands. She uncurled her fingers from the hilt of the knife, holding it with just her thumb, the blade dangling.

“Let him go, return to your shell.”

The man’s back straightened, lip curling in a sneer, revealing yellowed teeth, edged with black gums. “You haven’t the authority to order—”

“I have bested one of your strength already,” Aurora said, cutting the demon off without raising her voice. “I have dragonstones enough to turn that body to ashes. Then where will you go? These others already bear your kind.” Aurora gestured towards Gilliam, and the two men still bound by the weavers’ hardened air.

“This one bears the protection of the Flame, as does the one who bestowed it on him. Those other girls hold a power you cannot displace.”

The red-rimmed eyes settled on me. A great pressure settled on me, and I felt myself gasping for air, felt my heart straining to keep rhythm. Everything went red in my vision, and beneath the roaring of my struggling pulse in my ears, I heard deep, murmuring whispers, edged in shadows and frost. Insistent, incessant....

I opened my eyes to the warm yellow-orange flicker of firelight. I was half-sitting against the smooth stone wall of the tunnel. Air washed across my face and I coughed at the harsh tang of smoke.

Aurora lay a hand on my chest when I tried to rise, her other hand feeling the lifebeat at my neck, moving up to my forehead. Her golden eyes did not leave mine as she worked.

A warmth spread from the hand on my chest, and the rawness in my throat lessened. I felt a sharp pang shoot through my arm as I shifted my weight.

Aurora pressed harder at my chest, her glance darting to my left arm, then returning to my eyes. “Do not move.”

“I’m fine,” I told her. It hurt to speak, and the words came out as a croak. The scar along my neck throbbed.

“No, you’re not,” Ana said, stepping into view. She crossed her arms, scowling at the shriek. “I should—”

“I told you I would undo what I have done,” Aurora said. “And I will, if he will sit still.”

I glanced down at my left arm. The sleeve of the tunic was slashed, and stiff with drying blood. I reached over to part the fabric, to look at the wound, but Aurora slapped my hand away.

“Be still, or it will not heal cleanly.”

“She does good work,” Gilliam said, rotating his arm. He smiled, either not seeing or ignoring the dark look that Ana gave him.

Healing warmth aside, my head throbbed, and I closed my eyes, watching the play of firelight against my eyelids.

I drifted off to a light slumber, disturbed by dreams of deep crimson fire and the roar of an angry mountain.

Waning quarter moon of the Deep Snows (on or about
Kaldmont 21, 997AC)

"You know I hate this," I heard Ana say, her tone that of a sulking child.

"It's worked quite well so far. I don't see why it wouldn't keep working." This from Gilliam, his voice strained.

"It's almost gotten us killed three times," Ana grumbled. "I hardly call that 'quite well.'"

"I'm just happy there were enough cloaks and the cart was in serviceable condition, given what Thorn did to things back there," Varis huffed. His voice was coming from the same general spot as Gilliam's, slightly over my head. No, ahead of me. I was lying on my back, the hard slats of the bottom of the cart jostling beneath me. That did not help the aching of my head.

"It was not his doing," Aurora said. "If you are to lay blame, then place it with me."

"I just wish he'd do more of that in a fight," Gilliam said, the smile evident in his voice.

More of what, I wondered. Taking a deep breath, and centering my awareness, I could feel the familiar warmth of my magic, coursing within me in time to my heartbeat. My brothers had laughed when I told them of the feeling. Fortunately, my mother had known what it meant, and had shown me the first steps towards mastering the power within me. Our long walks in the forests bordering the farmstead, her lessons in herb lore are still some of my most precious memories.

There was a snarl, a swirling of energies along my left arm. I did not remember it clearly, but I knew that was where Aurora had driven in her knife. Though it was much more subtle, I could feel the same tangling, scarring as in my throat.

I opened my eyes, found myself staring from the side of the cart. Aurora walked along the other side of the wheel. She was shrouded in one of the dark brown cloaks the slavers had worn, her golden hair spilling from the depths of the hood. She turned, eyes gleaming bright gold in the shadows of the hood, barely giving light to the smile that crossed her lips.

"*Samaam*," she said, lowering her eyes. "I used you to bait the demon loose."

"The others are unhurt?"

She nodded.

"And the slavers?"

"Ana and I have seen to them."

"And Gilliam?"

"He is free of Skagragh's influence."

"Then the balance is met, and I declare it even."

Her pale brow furrowed, and she cocked her head. "I do not understand. I have wronged you and must—"

"Do nothing," I finished for her. "You have no debt to me."

"I have drawn blood against you. By the King's law—"

"As a druid, I am beyond the laws of kings and nations. You acted in defense of the helpless. You have guarded the lives of your companions. You did not have to help those men, yet you did, though they are our enemies. Your works of good unbalance an act of necessary evil. I declare it so, and so it shall be."

The girl stopped, just for a step, as I finished speaking, caught her breath. A brief look of amazement collapsed into another frown.

"How did you do that?" she asked.

"I have only declared a Truth."

Her eyes narrowed, and a tilt of her head betrayed her disbelief. "That has been a power beyond mortal men."

"We have learned much, since the Great Rain of Fire."

I traded places with the two weavers, who both sank heavily against the side of the cart. They drank heavily from the waterskins we'd salvaged from the unburnt cargo.

I tried to apologize for taxing their powers so steeply, but the blonde girl would not hear of it. Her eyes were sunken, but bright. She managed a smile, when her darker-haired sister took the waterskin of her own accord.

"We were glad to do it. I do not think you understand how... how good it feels to use our powers for ourselves. Macha's, I think, will recover. I could feel her when we were linked. She has finally seen the dawn after the long night of being

severed from her *bughael*." She started to say something, and then paused, glancing at her hands, color rising to her cheeks.

"Until now, I was made to weave for destruction, killing. Hardly ever in defense of my *bughael*, and never for myself. I have burned fields, farms. Torn trees from the ground not for shelter, but to smash enemies that were not even my own. Until these past days, I have never used my windcrafting to sustain life, only to take it."

"We — I — would not have made it this far if it were not for your efforts," I told her, taking one of her hands in my own and giving it a reassuring squeeze. "My thanks seem a paltry payment for my life two or three times over."

The girl smiled again, wiped at her cheeks. "Again... I do not think you know what those words mean to us."

I had a fairly good idea, after that point.

We journeyed for perhaps another hour, following two switch-backs of the gently sloping tunnel. We rested at another of the alcoves, filled the waterskins with the clear, cold water from the fountain.

"After another turn, we will face the approach to the Gateway chamber," Aurora told us. "It is a straight run, there is no cover."

"That works out nicely if you're defending," Varis said.

"What of your veiling magic?" I asked the girl. "It worked for us earlier. Silva hid a like number of us."

Aurora pondered it, pale lips pursed as she thought. "It might work. But the chamber threshold is warded against outside magics."

"So we approach under cover of your veil, and then surprise them as we charge through the entrance," Gilliam said, swinging a fist into his open palm.

"Just the threshold is warded, but not the chamber itself?" Ana asked.

Aurora nodded.

"Then we can restrain our opponents using magic," the cleric said, and the blonde weaver nodded her agreement.

The shrike nodded again, rising from where she'd been sitting by the fountain. "A sound plan."

We bunched up, like the middle of a centipede, when Aurora stopped dead not even a dozen steps around the final turn in the switch-back corridor. She'd shown a flutter of weariness as the quiet surge of energy crackled through our palms as we each joined hands, but she'd straightened quickly enough after the veiling stabilized. It could have been my own excitement of being in the final stretch, being nearly free of this demon-accursed valley, but her steps seemed more energetic than ever as we started out.

"What's the holdup?" Gilliam whispered. "That can't be a good sign," he muttered, watching his breath plume.

"I can't work any magic like this," Ana whispered, raising her hands, taking mine and one of the weavers' along for the ride. "If demons are—"

"They aren't. This is natural," Aurora said, over her shoulder. "Natural, but unexpected."

"I thought the world got warmer the deeper you went," Gilliam said.

"It does. But we are nowhere near far enough below the surface for that sort of thing," Aurora said. "For it to be this cold, this far from the Gateway...." Her brow furrowed, and she bit her lip. The fingertips of her free hand fluttered over the handle of the knife tucked into her belt. She was counting, or working figures in her head.

"Come along, then," she said after a pause. Her steps were slower, even softer than before. I felt her hand tighten around mine, the tingling growing sharper. Around us, the veil wavered, and then things beyond it grew even hazier. It grew slightly more difficult to breathe.

Another dozen steps, and Aurora slowed even more, though we did not stop. But I felt what had given her pause — the ground, and most likely the whole of the tunnel — thrummed. I closed my eyes, slowed my breathing, and opened my senses up to the mountain's roots.

Arcs of gold and platinum and silver, the trod of feet that burned. Shadows, smoke amidst a brilliant circle of blue that led to nowhere. A burden of stones, lessening—

A sharp jolt through my hand, and a squeezing of my fingers wrenched me back to myself. I blinked, and found myself staring into hard, golden eyes.

“The mountain can tell you all about it later. You compromise my Veiling.”

The thrumming had become audible, a deep rumble, made to waver as it passed through Aurora’s magical cloaking. A point of light became visible through the hazy murk of the veil, flickering, strobing in time to the droning vibrations of the tunnel floor.

Cautious as she had been before, Aurora’s pace quickened. She offered no explanation, and we had no choice but to follow.

Her hand tightened against mine as the point of light grew closer. It was a doorway, from which poured a sharp blue-white light. Even through the screen, we could hear a buzzing, sputtering hissing.

The red-gold stones on the girl’s wrists flickered briefly to light. The air had been growing steadily colder every few steps. While it didn’t grow any warmer, the temperature ceased to drop around us. By the set of her shoulders, and subtle shifting of her balance as we continued on, I had a feeling that the girl was treading a delicate balancing act between stealth and comfort.

By the time we reached the great archway, Aurora was shivering, her forehead beaded with sweat. The snarling crackle was clearly audible, and she had to raise her voice to be heard.

“Pairs, Gilliam and Ana, Varis and the fair-haired weaver, Thorn and the darker-haired one. Triad pattern, as we discussed. The Gateway is active. Do not tread on the golden pathway. Do not approach the pylons lining it, unless you wish to feel firsthand why it is called a ‘Lightning road.’”

There was a tingling shiver as we stepped through Aurora’s veiling, a shock of cold as the warming influence of the red dragonstone fell away. I felt a third shock as I stepped across the archway’s threshold — the dim presence of my magic winked out, snuffed out like a candle, but without even a lingering trace. Just... gone. The weaver beside me gasped as well, her fingers tightening between mine, her shoulder pressing against mine. Though we stood bathed in the blue-white light

from the room beyond, everything seemed dimmer, distant, but in a way different from Aurora's veiling.

It was only three steps through the thick stone archway, and they felt like three of the longest steps in my life.

The archway corridor was lined with a slick, black glasslike stone. Obsidian? Onyx? I could not tell without touching it. Our likenesses in the black stone were gaunt, pale, the eyes overly deep, sunken and black. I felt an urge and dread to reach out, touch my own palm against the stone, to prove that it was merely a reflection rather than a ghostly presence trapped on the other side of the glossy stone, yet my stomach clenched at the thought of that hand grasping mine, pulling me through....

A bright flare of light from behind announced Aurora's presence, and I wrenched my eyes away from the walls to glance her way. Her own reflection was a brilliant presence, tall and lithe, golden hair shining, eyes bright pools of golden light where my own had been pits of darkness.

"Do not touch them!" Aurora's voice rang sharply in the confines of the archway, hit me with a nearly physical force. I hunched my shoulders against it, and the weaver jerked her hand down and away from her cloud-garbed reflection.

"Are they us? Is that... you?" the weaver whispered.

"The Gateway's light interacts unpredictably with Andahar onyx. Best not to touch it, lest you break the Fusion Boundary unprepared. Go!"

Her command pushed us as surely as her hands could have. There was another shock, as if passing through a curtain of ice-cold water, and we stepped through into the chamber of the Gateway, blinking the sudden glare from our eyes as we stepped thrice to the left. The presence of my magic jumped back to life, and I felt the familiar tingling prickle as the dark-haired weaver made contact with the source of her own power, the pins-and-needles prickling growing more excited as she drew in more and more energy.

The room, the air thrummed against me, as if the entire mountain were a great resounding bell. A multitude of shadows danced and shifted along the walls, as twin arcs of blue-white lightning jumped from one crystal to another, atop great

pillars of twined gold and platinum. The bolts coursed into a series of stones caught amidst a great archway of braided platinum, gold and silver bands, lending a fourth twining strand of lightning to the complex weave.

The archway seemed to lead to a great field of brilliant blue-white light. Its surface rippled, and I saw a wagon disappear into the light, the crackling of the lightning growing to a high, sputtering hiss. A cloaked figure paused, then stepped through after the cart, swallowed by the light.

Half a dozen more men lined a broad pathway of long golden plates. Each plate easily as wide as the main avenues of Grand Duke Stefan's capital city, and was long enough for the men to take three or four strides between each plate. A crystal-topped pylon stood at the point where two plates met, catching a stream of lightning, throwing it towards the next crystal. The men treaded the very center of each plate, I noticed, well away from the pillars.

Three more carts, and at least a dozen more men stood in a broad space before the golden pathway. Seven men along the edge of the crowd faced us, swords drawn, a distance of perhaps twenty yards between us. Barely visible behind the caravan, set far enough away so as to be clear of the sputtering lightning, a hunched and hooded figure stood before a pair of crystal-studded metallic pillars. A shaking, bandaged hand withdrew a cracked and smoking crystal from a slot, dropped it, replacing it with a crystal from the other pillar.

"Don't just stand there!" the hunched figure rasped. "Keep those carts moving! Leave these intruders to us."

Twin shivers struck me, my fingers tingling so fiercely it seemed I was about to lose feeling in them. Four of the men bearing swords froze, mid-turn, their expressions a mix of fright, anger, desperation.

Ana turned her focus from the men to the hunched figure that was slowly making its way towards us. As Varis and Gilliam moved to intercept the figure, Ana laid hands on both of them, her murmured prayer lost under the crackling sizzle of the Lightning road.

One of the carts was making its way onto the gold-paved roadway, three men pushing from behind to help the two men drawing the cart.

I drew a deep breath, reaching out towards the wooden spokes, the rounded rims of the wheel with my magic. I touched each of the spokes, and the rim of the wheel, coaxing the will of the trees from which they'd been cut back to life, if even for a brief moment.

My heart sang as they answered my magic, sprouting, reaching again for the nurturing earth, reaching towards the sky, distant though it was. Cries of surprise and frustration from the men brought me back from my trancelike state, and I saw that one of the wheels was a mass of branches and rootlets, the rim sprung, twisted back into the branch it had once been.

The men shouted, grunting and straining as they tried to get the cart to move. Aurora smiled briefly, her expression brightening as the mercenaries fumed.

The next cart in line tried to swing around the first, to make its own way onto the golden pathway. The pylon at the roadway caught a scintillating bolt, part of it arcing away from its leap towards the next crystal to course through the man standing nearest. Others dove and scrambled away as their comrade's scream was cut off as his entire body began thrashing, only to slump, steaming and limp, seconds later.

The hunched, robed figure made its way unsteadily towards us, its gait uneven, as if it were dragging its foot beneath the long, concealing folds of the floor-length cloak. It leaned heavily on a long, crystalline staff of deep blue, topped with a wavelike carving curled around a wedge of brightly polished blue-veined black stone.

The figure looked up, a crescent of deep reddish light reflecting off a dark eye. Hair gone grayish-white hung lank from within the depths of the hood. Half of the thin-lipped mouth spread in a black-toothed grin.

"I knew Zadamar would not triumph, that old fool." The voice was deep, but feminine, slurred with paralysis, thick with dust and ice. The red-rimmed eye fell on Gilliam, and the hunched figure straightened ever so slightly, the linen-wrapped hand clutching the staff even tighter.

"Impossible!" The word came out a sibilant rasp, and the hooded head turned this way and that, taking in my companions.

“Skagrah cursed your name nearly as much as he did mine,” Gilliam said. He gave the dagger in his hand a flip, catching it and holding it across his body in a defensive crouch. “I’m sure he’ll be glad to see you once we send you to the same place.”

“How? This pitiful disciple of the Flame could not possibly have—”

“I had some help,” Ana said, color rising to her cheeks at the demon’s slight. She dropped her arm, the cloak falling away, revealing Aurora, who stood in a defensive crouch much like Gilliam’s.

There was a long pause, during which the demon’s breath rasped, pluming into a heavy frost.

“This one is different from the one who did this,” the figure murmured, nodding its head, indicating the withered right half of its pale face with a linen-wrapped knuckle. “We hoped that its recklessness would see the end of it.”

“You will tell us where you have guided the Lightning road.” Aurora said.

The hunched figure barked a thick, bubbling laugh that ended in a wracking cough. Fine spittle sprayed the floor, the hard-packed dirt smoking.

“I am no whelp, as was Skagrah. I will not bend to a broken shadow. Your pitiful thousands of years pale in comparison to my lifetime.”

Varis had been circling, sidling around the figure’s blind side as it spoke. As it finished, he sprang.

The hunched figure turned with frightening speed, the staff whipping out and around, catching the full brunt of the Enforcer’s sword as Varis brought it down. The sword rang, metal screeching as it caromed down the length of the smooth blue surface of the staff. The figure twisted, and Varis’ momentum carried him staggering past the swirl of cloak. Another twist of the bandage-wrapped wrist, and the figure brought the staff down across the warrior’s shoulders. It was a hard enough blow to drive Varis to his hands and knees, wheezing and gasping for air, the sword spinning across the floor towards Gilliam.

Even as he threw his dagger, the other warrior was diving, snatching up the sword and rolling to his feet.

The demon rasped, clucking its tongue contemptuously as it batted the knife from the air with a swat of its staff. It brought the staff end over end to block Gilliam's strike in the same motion, flicking the blade aside as if it were flimsy paper rather than three and a half feet of solid metal.

"Halav's balls," Varis coughed as he scrambled back towards Ana, who helped him to his feet. "I'd hate to see what it could do with a body that wasn't half-broken."

With a glance to assure herself that Varis was all right, Aurora skipped a step to her right, then vanished with a flare of deep purple from within the stones of her bracer.

Gilliam had a better control over his balance than had Varis, and he was able to keep hold of the Enforcer's sword, his style awkward but competent as he rained blow after blow on the demon-possessed druidess. She met or turned each away with the ice-blue staff. When the sword knocked chips and gauges into the staff, the surface shimmered, flowing to become a smooth, unblemished whole.

There was a brief glimmer deeper in the chamber, nearly lost against the brilliant glare of the Lightning road's portal. Had it been any color other than deep red, I surely would have missed it, winking from a distance over the hunched Jaleel's cloaked shoulder.

A clear note rang out, a soprano tone lifting over the sputtering buzz of the lightning and the clash of sword upon staff.

The air warped, shimmered, and Aurora's Veiling shredded around her. Her slightest of pauses in confusion was all the opening the druidess needed, and the staff lashed out. The shrike barely managed to get her arms up, the edges of the wave-like decoration cutting a trail of golden sparks across hastily-raised vambraces. Had she not blocked the blow, Aurora would have been left blinded. As it was, she staggered back, off balance, glancing around as best she could without leaving herself open for another strike.

Gilliam recovered from his own shock at the girl's sudden appearance enough to press harder with his attacks, forcing the demon's attention away from the bewildered shrike.

The demon laughed, twisting Jaleel's voice into a sharp, brittle cackle. Something beneath the cloak rippled, and the demon diverted its red-rimmed eye to the mass over its right shoulder.

"Patience," it crooned, and wheezed another wet, wracking chuckle.

The two weavers' gasps tore my attention away from Gilliam's duel, and I saw that they were nearly at their limit for holding so many men in place.

I knelt, placing my hand flat on the packed dirt flooring, and urged the mountain to lend me its aid. There was a brief rumble, the slightest of tremors beneath my hand. The ground rippled at the feet of the men the weavers were holding, and the floor flowed up over the men's boots, hardening to stone in an instant. The two weavers sagged, but straightened again after gaining a few deep breaths.

As the four men struggled to loose their feet from the stone, others leapt forward, giving up on pushing their carts, drawing wickedly curved swords from their belts.

The dark-haired weaver and I had the same thought: Druidic fire burst to light in my hands, and I threw both spheres of red-orange fire. One went wide, splashing against a pylon with little effect. The other man I'd been aiming at with the second dove for cover at the last moment. The sphere hit the slaver trapped in stone behind him, and the man's screams soared over the crackling surge of flames.

I had to raise my arm against the scalding wake of the weaver's fireball. The sizzling, boiling mass of yellow-orange fire burst in the midst of the charging slavers, their screams were cut off by the concussion of the fireball's explosion. Two simply vanished amidst the flash, and three more went to the ground, rolling to smother their flaming coats and cloaks.

I dodged in front of the weaver, raising my hand against the explosion's force, pulling as much heat from the air before me as I could stand. My vision swam — it felt as if my very eyelids were cracking and peeling — and everything went white, and deathly silent.

I came to only moments later, blinking the explosion's brilliance from my vision. Through the ringing in my ears, I heard more screaming. The skin along my arms and scalp burned. I turned, to see if the weaver was all right.

She was doing just fine — back straight, one hand stretched out towards her sister, the other extended towards the closest of the lightning pylons. Her delicate mouth was twisted in a snarl.

My mouth went dry. It wasn't burns causing the pain just below my skin. The pins and needles dug deeper, and despite the heat from the fire and lightning, I shivered.

"Harm women, will you?" the girl shouted over the din. Lightning snapped and coiled overhead, as if punctuating her words. "Take my family from me? Now you try to take the only people I can call friends?"

Her voice was high, cracked from lack of use. And filled with a fury to rival the lightning dancing over our heads.

"You have taken your last."

The men left in the stone grip of the mountain threw their hands up. Other men leapt from the carts, weapons raised, shouting and jeering.

One broke, faster than the rest, sprinting to cover the distance between us, his sword raised high.

Macha's did not move, but I saw her glance dart towards the man, felt a surge against my skin as she shaped the magic that she'd been holding.

A blue-white streamer of lightning peeled away from the crystal atop the pylon, spitting and lashing like some sort of angry viper. Macha's fingers moved ever so slightly, and the lightning uncoiled, streaking the distance from crystal to sword tip in less time than it took to blink, or draw breath.

The slaver didn't even scream, just collapsed, blackened fingers twitching, his eye sockets steaming.

The slavers left broke, scrambling from the carts, pushing each other out of the way in an effort to reach the swirling blue-white portal at the end of the golden roadway.

“Cowards!” the demon screeched, slapping aside Gilliam’s sword thrust, and rapping its staff on the floor.

A thunderous boom rocked the room, and a crack snaked its way across the flooring, racing towards the knot of men and carts. Ice sprouted from over the edges of the crevice, tendrils of it working a short distance from the edge. Rather than the pure bluish cast, though, this was veined and clouded with what looked like streamers of ink or oil.

We did not need Aurora’s shouted warning to avoid touching it.

The shrike had attempted to re-veil herself, but each time, the same note rang from the depths of the chamber, and the concealment came apart around the girl.

“Do you think we do not know the secrets of your precious little stones, my dear? Hmm?”

The demon whipped the staff around, spinning, striking low, hooking Aurora’s feet from under her. Gilliam paused the slightest bit in his attack as he sucked in a sympathetic breath as the girl landed flat on her back.

She blinked, gasping, trying to cough. The clear stones began to smolder with golden light, and she pushed herself up.

Another note, this one different, harsher, a half-step higher keened from the shadows. The golden light within the gems flickered and died, like twin candle flames snuffed in a stiff breeze. The demon lashed again with its staff, striking Aurora hard along her side. The girl cried out with what little air she’d managed to gather, rolling away with the force of the impact.

We’d all heard the snap of at least one rib.

Streaks of lightning lanced from two of the pylons, arcing up into the room, sputtering and hissing as they crackled against great ducts and pipes of a dark, glossy metal. The lightning latched onto some of the bolts and supports clamping the machinery to the ridges along the ceiling and walls. It lashed and spat briefly, throwing glowing gobbets of energy and reddish lumps of superheated metal this way and that before snapping free from the pylons and sizzling away into smoke.

That brief show of light had revealed the catwalk — and the thin, blonde-haired girl crouched upon it, her eyes a hellish blend of blood-red fire and silver.

The clear gems on Aurora's wrists sparkled with fragments of golden light, only to wink out as the other girl again sang out the discordant, grating note.

This other girl's wrists gleamed with a reddish light. Not the clear red-gold of a dragonstone, but the dull, clouded red of bloodstone. One sprouted from the back of each of her wrists, the rootlike spread of the burrowing stone traced and accented by twines and swirls of blackened, barbed metal in a perversion of the delicate grace of the bracers we'd seen on Silva and Aurora.

"Varis!"

The warrior pulled his gaze towards Gilliam, just in time to catch the sword he'd thrown.

"I'm leaving this one to you!" Gilliam dodged away from a vicious swipe of the demon's staff, turning and ducking to snatch up the dagger from the floor. "I'll deal with the other one."

Varis leapt forward, keeping the demon from taking advantage of Gilliam's flight towards the stairwell barely visible in the gloom of the room's far wall.

Ana dashed around behind the warrior, barely ducking in time to avoid the demon's staff as it whistled over her head. She skidded to her knees by Aurora's side. I could see that she ministered to the girl, but her back was to me — sheltering the shriek from further attack by the demon as she worked.

Varis kept at the demon, hammering with overhead swings, taking advantage of the heft of the Enforcer's blade. For all the strength he poured into each attack, the demon brushed them aside. But the warrior was succeeding in slowly pressing the demon away from Ana and Aurora, forcing the demon to absorb the impacts on its crippled right leg. It kept having to shift its weight back to the left, taking shuffling half-steps back or risk the weaker leg buckling altogether.

Macha's gave a gasp, doubling over, clutching her head. Lightning whipped and snapped in a frenzy, arcing and sheeting wildly. I had to leap back, pressing against the black curve of the onyx entryway to avoid being struck by several stray bolts.

Varis had turned, and reflexively brought the sword up to block, and was standing, eyes wide with amazement, as two bolts spat and twisted along the length of the blade, the runes gleaming with the same blue-white intensity.

The demon, too, had paused in its attacks, the staff held high, the green streaks in the dark stone shining, matching a barely-visible shell around the hunched figure. Lightning snapped and coiled along the surface of the shield, some running to ground, others skipping off, lancing into the two metal columns, the crystals within them seeming to shine like the lightning itself. With a series of hard 'pops,' one after another of the stones cracked. One, smaller than the rest, burst apart in a shower of ice-like shards.

This caused the crystals atop the pylons to flicker, thankfully bringing an end to the wild lightning storm. The portal, too, wavered, flickering. One of the men had just stepped through when the portal winked out, and he fell, screaming, his lower arm and leg simply... gone.

Varis brought his sword around, his eyes closed as he swung. They sprang open when the sword cleaved through the greenish field, leaving a lighting-edged rend. The sword's momentum didn't slow, and the tip bit deep.

The demon shrieked, trying to twist away from the blow, and its leg crumpled. Varis didn't even wait for the thing to fall, spinning, putting even more force into his next blow.

The demon barely deflected the swing, and the sword sheared through the top quarter of the staff, sending the wavelike crest and wedge of dark stone tumbling away.

Aurora pushed herself up, away from Ana, launching herself at the cloaked figure, her pale hands twining in the cloak. She wrenched and heaved at the fabric, flinging it away.

Varis swore, and dipped his blade, gauging a deep furrow in the dirt before the huddled demon.

It was indeed Jaleel — or what was left of her. She half-knelt, her breath a rattling, wet thing in her throat. Her right forearm was laid open, the wound edged in blackend, charred flesh, oozing blood just as black. It was a miracle Varis had

struck flesh at all, so thin and wasted was the limb, curled along her side and midsection.

Her right shoulder — the entire right side of her back — was a mass of knotted, bulbous flesh. I do not think any of it was muscle. It peeked from beneath a shredded shift, long welts and boils along its surface oozing and weeping. From one particularly deep wound, a dull gleam of a bloodstone could be seen. The closer I looked, the more of them I saw.

Jaleel looked up at Varis, the angry red rimming gone from the remaining watery eye. Her mouth worked, and she croaked, weakly.

“End it.”

Varis brought the sword back. “Move,” he said, adjusting his stance.

Aurora moved, from behind the wreck of the druidess to stand before her, facing Varis. She stood as straight as she was able, and tried to raise her hands to either side, but gasped sharply, clutching at her side instead.

“Ixion burn you, girl, we can finish this!”

“No,” she said, the words catching in her throat as she sucked in a sharp breath.

“Strike her down if you must,” Jaleel wheezed. “She is just a copy, anyway. Her kind are disposable. You must... strike quickly, before the demon takes hold of me again!”

“Go on, Varis. Finish this.”

I could not believe the words fell from Ana’s lips.

Aurora glanced from Varis to Ana, her expression no doubt as shocked as my own must have been.

“Finish it,” Jaleel whispered. She turned her head to the side, exposing her throat.

The warrior checked his grip on the sword, his breathing quick. Aurora turned back to the man.

“Varis, do not listen to her, either of them!”

“I am your friend, Varis. Trust me. Kill the druidess and be done with it.”

There was something... off about Ana's voice. Why wasn't she trying to free the druidess of the demon's influence?

Varis brought the sword down, the blade held before him at eye level, the tip poised to strike.

His cloak shifted, and I caught a gleam of gold and red in the tunic's gap at his throat.

"The speaking stone!" I called, pushing myself away from the wall, running towards the warrior.

"Winna, stop this!" Aurora shouted.

A high, grating chuckle echoed from somewhere in the shadows above.

Varis blinked, glancing down the length of the blade, his expression melting from firm-lipped determination to one of confusion.

The pale-haired druidess gave a suddering breath, and toppled over, on her right side. The woman's mouth worked a few times, tried to form words. The breath rattled from her, and she did not draw another.

Ana sucked in a sharp breath, clutching at the front of her dress. She tugged fiercely at the thin golden chain, snapping it, throwing the dragonstone pendant away from her.

"Aurora!" she gasped. "Are you all right?"

I reached up and snatched the pendant from around Varis' neck. His posture eased, and he spun the sword, grounding the tip in the dirt between his feet, leaning on it, breathing heavily.

"Halav's balls," he spat. "It... it all made perfect sense."

"She was using the speaking stones as a bridge into your minds," Aurora said.

"Jaleel?" Varis asked.

"No... Whichever demon *she* brought with her, it has found a much more suitable host." Aurora was looking up, at the barely-visible catwalks that criss-crossed the ceiling.

"Little thing is fast!" Gilliam called, jogging up to us, leaning on his knees. "She ran into a cloud of steam. I'd have followed, but I didn't feel like being boiled where I stood. Slippery little wretch got away from me." He straightened, shrugging at his cloak. "Is it just me, or is it getting warmer in here?"

Lightning sputtered and leapt, errant bolts sizzling over the golden plates of the roadway leading towards the Gateway.

"It's not supposed to do that, is it?" Gilliam asked.

Aurora made a pained sound, and Ana turned, reaching towards the girl. The shriek batted her hand away.

"I am fine, thank you for your concern," she said, her eyes running over the metallic pillars. The few crystals that were left whole gleamed brightly, reflecting the gold-white light from the dragonstones on Aurora's wrists. She was standing straighter, no longer breathing in short gasps. Her moan was one of frustration.

"Because of her little light show, there are barely enough crystals left to secure a corridor."

"But we can make it back?" Varis asked.

Aurora frowned, and her fingers worked. She was counting, though I'd never seen anybody do so in such a strange fashion. Her fingers did not move in a regular left-to-right or right-to-left but instead pointed and then flexed, one finger to the next, then skipping. I gave up trying to make sense of it.

She withdrew one of the crystals from the lefthand pillar, counted, and held it before the same slot on the pillar to her right.

"I don't know how much more stress this crystal can take, so you will have to get as close to the Gate as you can."

The weavers rose from where they'd been sitting, the blonde one helping her sister, who still clutched at her head as though holding it together.

Varis hefted the sword as he got to his feet. "I suppose it'll have to do as a replacement for my father's blade."

Ana paused as she drew near the golden roadway. "What of you?" she asked. Aurora glanced at each of us.

"I..." she started, and then swallowed. "Someone must be here to place the stone, or the Gateway won't open properly."

Gilliam plucked the finger-length crystal from the girl's hand.

“Give that back!” she said, but Gilliam held the stone up, well beyond her reach. “Someone must—”

“Someone must be making excuses not to come along with us,” he said. As he spoke, he teased a long length of woolen thread from his cloak. He gave a sharp tug, and then wrapped the loose strand around the crystal at about half its length. He tied it, leaving a long end of thread dangling.

“Thorn, do you think you could hit this pillar from the Gateway?”

It was a good twenty yards between the end of the golden-plated roadway and the two control pillars.

I nodded. It would be far easier than knocking springfruit from the neighboring farmer’s trees, as my brothers and I would do in my younger days.

Gilliam slid the crystal most of the way into the slot Aurora had indicated, until the band of thick woolen thread wedged in, preventing the crystal from seating properly.

He extended a hand towards the shrike, and she took it, hesitant. We made our way towards the Gateway, the lightning cycling far over our heads.

We gathered as close to the archway of precious metals, our every hair standing on end. Or at least trying to.

I called a sphere of deep orange flame to my hand, glancing back at my companions. They each nodded. Aurora looked down and away, shifting from foot to foot.

I hurled the sphere, and it traced a long arc through the air. My aim was true, and it splashed against the pillar. The dangling thread caught the flame, and it ate its way slowly up the wool, flaring as it found more wool to gobble up and turn to ash. The restraint burned away, the crystal dropped the rest of the way into its slot, brightening with its own white glow.

Above us, lightning spat faster. The portal’s surface wavered, then flickered to deep blue light.

“Quickly!” Aurora said, motioning us through.

She squawked as Gilliam took her by the waist and carried her into the light.

I went through last, my last sight of the Vault of the Ancients of lightning touched a deep blue, the ruined carts scattered at the base of the golden road, deep blue shadows against the bright white where the road's plates.

I looked back ahead, but there was nothing but a calming, soothing light.

My last thought before everything flashed away was that at last, after weeks and months of cold, I was finally warm.