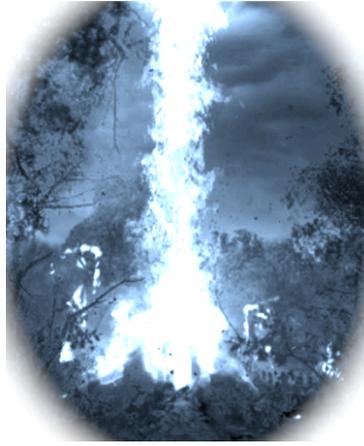


THORN'S CHRONICLE



Wake of the White Witch's Wrath

Waning quarter moon of the Deep Snows (on or about Kaldmont 21, 997AC)	2
Eve of the Chimerids (on or about Kaldmont 23, 997AC)	16
First night of the Chimerids (on or about Kaldmont 24, 997AC)	44
Second night of the Chimerids (on or about Kaldmont 25, 997AC)	137
Last of the Longwinter's Year (on or about Kaldmont 28, 997AC)	169

Waning quarter moon of the Deep Snows (on or about Kaldmont 21, 997AC)

The trip must have taken a mere step, the time it takes to draw a breath and let it go, and yet it seemed to stretch for much longer than that, as if I were dreaming it. There was no sound, nothing to see save the blinding blue-white light and the gut-twisting sensation of falling headlong off a cliff.

And then everything came back all at once: A roaring of thunder (thankfully with no demonic echo); the sound of water slapping at the sides of a boat; shouts muffled by the surge of water.

I flailed my arms and legs, found the movements heavy, sluggish. I tried to draw breath and instead got a mouthful of cold water.

Fresh water, not salt. There was no sensation of anything below me but more water. I struggled as my head went under again, flailing back to the surface. Water still stung my eyes, sheeted down my brow.

Rain. Cold rain. Not cold enough for snow, or even sleet. Cold enough, though, that I dared not wipe my eyes clear, or risk another dip into the near-freezing water. I could barely feel my fingers as it was.

"There's another one!" A gravelly voice shouted, from somewhere distant, vaguely above and behind me. "Quickly lads, fetch another net! You two! Heave, unless you want to join them in the drink!"

As I tried to cough the water from my lungs, something heavy landed about me with a dull splash, and then a great weight settled over my shoulders. I had but a single gasp of air before the waters closed over my head. Lightning, blue-white, blurred by the surge and froth of water overhead, was the last thing I saw before the darkness claimed me yet again.

A heavy hand slapping at my back brought me around, and I rolled from my side nearly onto my stomach, coughing and sputtering. I could feel the water coming from my lungs, but it was lost amidst the lashing of rain that already soaked the deck beneath me. It was good to know that the pitching and tossing was not merely a product of my disorientation.

“That’s it, son, keep coughing. Think you nearly swallowed half the lake, you did.”

The gravelly voice, hoarse from shouting, but quieter. It spoke Traladaran.

I tried to get my hands beneath me, to rise, but the heavy hand was at my shoulder. “No, son, lie still. Don’t want you standing up just to go over the rail and back into the drink. Lie still. Rest. We’ll be aground in a moment.”

As he’d said, moments later, there came a grating from below, the dull scrape of rocks upon hollowed wood, followed by a confusing babble of many voices and much shouting back and forth.

Many pairs of steady hands gripped me, for the deck was slippery, and somewhat canted to one side.

“Mind the rise,” murmured one of the men, and I picked my foot up higher, was guided down a steeply slanted gangplank to a pebble-strewn beach.

I was beginning to think that the Immortals from the Sphere of Thought had it in for me, as I nearly turned an ankle stumbling through the slashing rain, the rocks smooth and slicked beneath my shoes.

I was passed to more pairs of hands, these smaller, free of callouses but still worn by age and work.

“Come along, let us get you to the hall, where you can warm yourself.”

The hall turned out to be a heavy-thatch roofed great hall, heavy wooden planking sided halfway up with rough-quarried stone. Cavernous though the room was, several fires, both in pits and as well as two hearths kept the worst of the chill from the air.

Many pairs of dark eyes lifted as I was guided into the room, and turned just as suddenly back to steaming cups, or trenchers, or menial tasks. A pair of dark-haired girls glanced up again from work they were doing repairing a net, only to giggle and hurriedly look away.

I was led over to the smaller of the hearths by the hall’s far wall, and the huddled figures there moved aside to make room for me on the long bench.

“That makes four,” a familiar voice said, and a hand emerged from beneath the woolen blanket to tug back the makeshift hood.

Gilliam smiled, and the other two figures turned as well, Ana and Varis' familiar features lit by smiles as well.

"You look well," Varis said. "All things considered." He brought a steaming cup to his lips, and sipped. I caught the heady mix of mulling spices and the sharpness of warmed wine.

I cleared my throat, found my voice harsh from the coughing. "I am glad to see you all again." I gratefully accepted the warm earthenware cup that was presented to me by a tall gray-haired woman. I sipped, coughing again as the wine burned all the way down.

Gilliam raised his mug. "Here's to fishermen, and the best wine kopecs can buy."

I'd made my way through half the cup when the quiet murmur of conversations buzzing through the hall grew still.

I turned to see a group of men troop in, bearing tarp-wrapped nets between them. They were followed by a trio of girls, two tall, one much shorter, huddled in dripping blankets. I recognized two heads of golden hair

Several more men followed them, but had to wait while the gray-haired woman hustled the girls aside, getting them fresh blankets. I saw her speak to the two taller girls, and wasn't surprised when they did not seem to register what it was the older woman said. Being from northern Glantri, the weavers would have had very limited exposure — if any at all — to the language of the natives of the Grand Duchy.

The smaller girl translated, and the posture of her taller companions eased. Their backs were to the rest of the room, though, and they would not have eased nearly as much if they'd seen the dark looks directed their way by those in the hall close enough to overhear.

"They must have been picked up by the boat behind yours," Gilliam said, as the gray-haired woman led the three girls towards our spot by the fire.

Our reunion was interrupted by the gray-haired woman and a broad-shouldered man who's iron-hued beard still dripped. I recognized his voice as the man who'd fished me from the lake. He introduced himself as Ion and the woman, his wife Deitra.

“Well,” he said, drawing deeply from a tankard, “these are strange days. Never in all my years have so many of my prayers to Protius and Zirchev been answered. I pray for warmth for my clan and village, and this Great White Wolf loses her teeth. I pray for a bountiful catch, and this is what I get. I should have been more specific when I asked for Protius to fill my nets.”

“Your faces are not familiar to me, and I think I would remember such a handful of striking young ladies.”

Deitra slapped her husband across the shoulder, not entirely playfully. There was more flash to sparkle in her eyes. The older man sighed.

“Pardon my husband,” the woman said. “What he means to say is—”

“What I mean to say is I know your faces as well as I know your business. Men in the water amidst a sudden lightning storm isn’t so strange.” He sat forward, lowering his voice. “But for there to be no flotsam? What was your vessel’s name? Where are her captain and crew?” His light brown eyes moved to each of our faces. He sat back with a barely perceptible nod, as if confirming his unspoken thoughts.

Gilliam drew a breath, but Ion held up a broad, callused hand. “No, I will not ask your business, now that I know you haven’t brought ruin to any of my clansmen or fellow fishermen. I am not interested in your troubles, and do not want to involve me or mine in any of them.” He pushed himself to his feet, and Dietra rose as well.

He turned to leave, but rather than go with him, Dietra planted her hands on her hips. Ion drew a deep breath, looking over his shoulder at us. “Immortals alone know we’ve all had troubles enough this season. Give me any more, and I’ll cast you back into the lake.”

The older woman tapped a finger on her hip. The fisherman gave a gruff sigh. “I can offer you little more than beggar’s hospitality. We’ve been lucky to catch enough for our own families, let alone have any to share, these past few weeks.”

He trailed off, glancing again from face to face. He frowned at the blank expressions that met his gaze.

"I'm afraid the wine and warmth are about all we can spare. You're welcome to stay until the weather clears, or first light. Most of the ice has broken up, so one of the men here can ferry you to the Fogor docks.

Varis sat up straighter. "Fogor island?"

Ion nodded. "Aye..." He looked over at his wife.

"Then that would make this Fisherman's Isle?"

The man nodded again. "Are you sure you didn't strike your head on anything, my boy?"

"That bridge we saw... It would lead right over the river to Tarnskeep," Gilliam said, his face brightening. He rubbed at his arms, made to rise. "If that's the case, we can be out of your hair and on our way. The baron—"

The room went silent. Even the crackling of the flames in the fire pits and the hearths seemed to lessen. I shivered, and pulled the blanket closer.

Ion fished a long pipe from within his tunic, took his time filling it from a small pouch he wore about his neck. He lit it from a taper his wife passed him, puffed at the sharp, sweet-smelling blend.

"The only people allowed near that bridge is the shift of men guarding it, and most of them only go after a few good pints of the brew those loggers make."

"But—" Varis began.

"Boy, do not interrupt your elders," the older man barked, and he was on his feet, scowling down the length of his pipe at Varis. The entire hall jumped. "Nobody goes near that bridge, let alone across it. Nobody goes near those ruins. If you were that keen on dying, you should have spoken up before we dragged you here. Could have just left you to drown, it'd be a lot more painless."

My companions were glancing worriedly at each other, and then to me, with questions plain on their faces. As if I had any answers?

"We'll take you across the river to the Fogor docks," Ion repeated, his tone quiet, apologetic. He puffed at his pipe, the tension leaving his shoulders. He turned, and Deitra rose. They walked away together, heads close. As they strode away, I heard him tell her "Leastwise the town proper is behind sturdy, proper walls. No such luxury for us here."

Even if we hadn't been sitting by one of the hearths, our clothing would have dried relatively quickly. Ion's great hall was well built, and held the heat of the great many families gathered. Between the crackling of the fire, the pattering murmur of the rains upon the thatched roof high overhead, and the din of a dozen families, I was very nearly asleep when those sounds abruptly died.

In the time it took me to snap awake and glance around, the silence was replaced with an anxious bustle. Mothers and daughters hurriedly wound up yarn and threadwork; men shrugged into cloaks and belted on swords. Elder sons were making the rounds with tall hook-ended poles, levering shut the high shutters. Middle sons were scooping sand onto the fire pits, and the chatter and clamor rose as the hall darkened.

Some time during my doze, the rain had stopped, and as the crackling of the fires was quenched, I heard what had caused the stir: A steady, two-beat ringing of the village bell. Two rings, time for the last one to reverberate and then the pattern repeated itself. As one, we rose. Varis and Gilliam glanced around — though they wore sword belts, their weapons had been lost to the depths of the lake. Aurora looked around in some confusion, still blinking sleep from her golden eyes.

"What is it?" she asked, trying to peek around us at the bustle in the hall.

"Danger," Gilliam said. He turned, grabbing the arm of one of the men who made his way past our group.

"Friend, what is it?"

"Got no time for chat," the man snarled, tugging his arm away. "Got to get to the lakeside dock. My son is on that boat coming in." Pale-faced, he turned and pushed his way through the crowd that was gathering at the doorway.

While many of the men were making their way to the doorway, others had positioned themselves below the windows, and still more were taking up positions between the families, which were huddling in tight groups throughout the hall.

"Siege precautions," Varis murmured. He slapped Gilliam on the back. "Come on, let us see what we can do to help." And they merged into the groups of men milling about the doorway. I saw Ion's iron-gray hair bobbing up and down as

he bent to one group of men, and then another as those to which he'd spoken gathered up their swords and trotted through the doorway into the misty afternoon.

A boy of perhaps ten years plunked a bucket down before the hearth, and began to scoop sand onto the fire.

"You need to take shelter," he said as he worked. "You can keep with my family if you like." He inclined his head to one side, indicating a smaller group than most of the others spaced along the hall.

Ana crouched beside the boy. "What is happening?"

He paused, fingers sunk into the sand. "I'm not old enough to go outside. But this is important work, too." He scooped up more sand, tossed another double-handful on the flames. "Letka says they came through the fire, so we put all the fires out. That's just as important as going out to the boats." Two more handfuls of sand and the last of the flames were snuffed. "I'm sorry, but I have to go." The boy hefted the large bucket, adjusted his grip on the handle, and began waddling towards the larger cooking fire at the back of the hall.

Ion seemed grateful for our offer to help. He had us escort Gilliam and Varis, who lugged a good sized iron-bound chest down the shore, to the west of where the fishermen docked and grounded their boats.

The rocks were slick, and it seemed they were in league with the muddy shoreline to see which of them could get us to turn an ankle first.

A hard, cold wind from the east found every still-damp fold of cloth.

"Almost enough to make you wish the Iron Ring had been a bit more generous in outfitting those mercenaries," Gilliam said, as he set down his end of the chest. He drew the hood lower over his head. "They could have afforded some better-lined cloaks."

"Bite your tongue," Ana said, frowning at the warrior.

"I just may, if my teeth don't stop chattering. I wish I knew their trick."

Gilliam inclined his chin towards the two weavers, who stood shoulder to shoulder, staring out over the mist-shrouded waters. Their cloaks flapped freely about them, and they appeared to not even need them, as if this were a beautiful spring afternoon by the lake.

“Is the lake always this foggy?” Ana asked. We could see perhaps as far as a good stone’s throw and then the view was swallowed by a thick, swirling gray mist. “I had enough of this stuff when we were exploring that valley.”

At that, Aurora’s back straightened, and her gaze went from a mildly curious scan of her surroundings to the sharp, darting gaze of hawk on the wing for prey.

In the depths of the mists, a flickering, bobbing yellow light came into view, barely discernible. The heavy splash of many pairs of oars carried through the mist, seeming at once to be both very close and very distant. Up around the curve of the shore, a line of men advanced until they were up to their ankles in water, swords drawn, shields held up in a ragged shield wall. Varis shook his head.

“That’s the most pitiful thing I’ve ever seen. Their shields don’t even—”

“Shh!”

The big warrior snapped his mouth shut at Aurora’s hiss, and made to retort. But his words came out a low moan, and he stood slowly from where he’d been sitting atop the chest.

“Petra’s garters, is that what I think it is?” he asked.

The weak yellow points of light were growing stronger, the splashing of the oars coming clearer through the mists. They were not alone out there.

Swirling and darting through the gray eddies of vapor were flickers and glimmers of a deep, rich blue light.

“That is not lightning,” Ana said. She glanced down at Aurora. The girl’s golden eyes were locked on the lights in the fog, shifting to catch each flash and arc of light that revealed itself.

“The chest contains gold.” Aurora did not ask.

“Either that or lead,” Varis said. “But we were not to open it until—”

“Open it.”

“Ion said to—”

“Open it!”

Metal hinges groaned and grated as Varis lifted the lid.

“A King’s ransom!” Gilliam gasped. The chest was packed nearly to the top, and everything within was gold: cups, plates, candelabras. Jewelry and other fine

ornaments peeked from among a jumble of coins: local royals, Thyatian Lucins, daros from the north, gold coins of both sizes minted by the dwarves. Coins from as far off as the Minrothads and Alphatia could be seen in the mix as well.

“Start throwing,” Aurora said, and she plucked a pendant from the chest, whirling it over her head like a sling.

“Are you mad?” Gilliam said, reaching — too late — as the pendant whistled away from the shrike’s hand, arcing high over the lake. Aurora was going for distance.

Varis hefted a wide-rimmed chalice, then let it fly with a grunt. It splashed into the lake not too far from shore.

Gilliam snorted. “You throw like a girl.” He took up a chalice of similar size, encrusted with garnets. He sighed as he turned it over in his hands, then hurled it out over the lake. It sailed perhaps six more feet than Varis’ throw before sinking into the lake with a muted splash.

The blonde weaver picked up a matching cup, took a deep breath, and cocked her arm back. My skin prickled, as if lightning were near, and the cup flew, tumbling, even further out than the pendant Aurora had thrown. The weaver smirked at the two warriors, bobbing the slightest of curtsies.

Gilliam and Varis both laughed. “Perhaps we should leave the girls to it.”

Ana reached into the chest, but Aurora caught her wrist.

“Not you. You will need your hands free. As will you, Thorn.”

I put down the candlestick, and looked to where Aurora was still gazing.

More blue lights pulsed from the depths of the fog. But now they were clustering nearer to our position, leaving just a few swirling through the mists after the boat.

“Is it getting further away?” Varis asked. The lanterns lining the boat were growing dimmer, their light diffusing more and more in the mists.

“The fog is getting thicker,” Ana said. The candlestick the other weaver had thrown, lofted further with a touch of her wind weaving, was swallowed by the mists before it could make a splash.

“And closer,” the blonde weaver said, as her own golden projectile disappeared into the gray as well.

Aurora had given up watching the dancing blue lights, and reached into the chest, scooping an armload of coins into her gathered cloak. They jangled and chattered as she walked a slow circle around us, spilling out a trail of coins as she went. She would pause, toeing a few into place if they spun away from the circle she was describing. She finished her work, then looked up at me.

“Melt them,” she said, pointing towards the circle of coins.

“What?”

Gilliam and I both asked the question at the same moment.

I closed my eyes, drew several deep breaths. I did not need to see the coins to reach out to them — they lay upon the earth, and still remembered their link to the land, if only distantly. I turned that echo back on the cold metal, willed it to remember the fires which separated it from its earthen cradle, and then to remember further back, of its time within the earth, nestled in the warmth that stirred in the deeps. I drew gently at the spark of memory still within the metal, coaxed it and teased it alight, all the time blending the runic essence of Firnath, cupped not in my hands, but sprinkled among each coin.

I felt the rippling in the air above the ring of coins, felt the flight of the mists from the growing heat as a normal man might watch a flock of doves take flight from a stone thrown into their midst.

A colossal whelming of flame and thunder smashed through the fine webwork of magic I'd been nurturing, and I snapped back to myself under the blinding sting of a searing wash of heat.

The air had grown, thick, heavy and wet. It was like trying to breathe in one of the Atruaghin's sweat lodges. Through the steam, I saw a brilliant white glow fading towards orange from all around us.

Aurora lowered her hands, the pulsing of the red stones adorning her wrists slowing, the gleam of gold from the motes within fading. The circle of gold coins had fused into a solid — if lumpy and uneven — ring. I couldn't tell if it was the stones or the water trying to settle upon them that sizzled and hissed.

“*Samaam*,” the girl said with the slightest of inclinations of her chin.

“In a few more moments, I would have—”

“We do not have that kind of time,” Aurora said. She made to say something else, but her words were lost as the fog rolled in off the lake.

With the fog came the most terrible of wailings I have ever heard — It was a sound that grated from the tips of my hair all the way to my toenails, seemed to lay every nerve bare, and then lather them over and over with the breath of coldest winter. The icy claws of the demons infesting the temple seemed warm by comparison.

The sound drove all thought from my mind. My hands would not respond to even the base instinct to cover my ears, to try to preserve my hearing.

Worse than the sound, though, were the faces that streaked and swarmed past my eyes, which would not close: Brilliant and blue, features and shadows carved from streaks of a lighter blue light, all of it crackling, scintillating, one face blending into another, only for the first visage to appear from a different swirling collection of features. Their eyes blazed wide, the cobalt light so intense it felt as though my own eyes would ignite. But then the face shifted, into that of another man, and its mouth carried on the same terrible scream. Their mouths gaped, blazing with light so finely blue as to be nearly white; bright where they should have been darkest.

Every measure of my skin prickled, as though from spending too long under the summer’s sun, despite the clinging chill of the fog. Greenish-red ghosts of the streaming faces lingered in my vision when I was finally able to wrench my eyes shut against their glare. They still wailed, their shrieking rising and falling in pitch as they swarmed about us. Every movement seemed to drag against the weight of that noise, and every thought was clouded with the echoes of the pain that could possibly bring such wailing.

I cracked my eyes open as a hard, buzzing crackled joined the cacophony.

They had materialized claws, bones bright and shining white, wreathed in a hazy blue nimbus that could have been flesh. The talons flashed the brilliant bluish-white of lightning bolts, and poured off the same heat and light as they clashed against some unseen barrier. Sparks and streamers of residual energy arced away from the curve described by the molten and still-cooling gold. Their wails took on

an added edge of fury, frustration, and the few that tested the barrier were soon joined by more and more. The more that crowded about the golden circle, the more my skin tingled and itched, a heavier feeling than that I got when the weavers worked their magics. This, then, was something entirely physical.

“Aurora, what—” Gilliam’s voice was rough, though I hadn’t heard him coughing. It seemed that the effort to speak was nearly beyond him, and he was forcing the words out.

“Another moment, the stones are nearly primed.” The girl did not seem affected in the least. But I could barely see her against the hot white glare of the dragonstones at her wrists and brow — her hair was a blaze of molten gold, her eyes scintillating pools of silver-shot golden light. “Ana, be ready with your barrier spell.”

Behind me, Ana stood straight-backed, her face calm, composed, eyes closed, her fingers intertwined in prayer. Her skin shone silvery bright in the blue-white glare coming from the shrieking creatures in the fog, without a trace of the redness I could see blooming on my own hands and arms.

“Now!” the shrike called, and she brought her small fist down hard on the golden band that surrounded us.

Ana’s brief chant was lost as the hammerblow of thunder crashed down directly over our heads. It washed out the hungry screeches turned to screams of unearthly fright. Deafened though I was, the sound still lanced through me, chilling my blood even as my skin felt as if it were burning.

The barrier turned to a sheet of pure white light, streaming away, tearing the fog to shreds in its wake, consuming the shining, screaming phantoms as well.

The ringing silence was gradually filled with the gurgling of the lake over the rocky shore, the sound of rasping breath and harsh coughing.

I felt hot droplets against my skin, as I pushed myself up on my hands and knees, the coughing causing the bright after-images of the phantoms to jump and dance in my vision, and more droplets spattered against my hands. I turned my face up to the sky, wanting the rain to wash away some of the heat burning through my forehead, my cheeks. Though I tried to open my eyes, all I could see was the same

reddish-white light as when my eyes were closed. I bowed my head again, felt my stomach heave with another bout of coughing.

The spots of moisture against my hands were warm, thicker than raindrops. If I could have seen them, I was sure they would have been red.

The ringing in my ears obscured much of the jumble of conversations. I could make out Ana's voice, as well as Aurora's. Ion's gravelly voice pitched just below the persistent chiming in my hearing, but he spoke too quietly for me to catch more than a few words.

Honestly, I had other things on my mind: the first being the intense pains that lanced through my bones every time I tried to move. Another was a thirst that would not let me be: I was only allowed a few sips of water at a time, and those only deepened my thirst.

The worst was the coughing — once it started, it did not seem to want to cease, each spasm causing my joints to flare in agony, which would cause me to scream, which would only cascade into another fit of coughing.

I drifted in and out of fevered sleep. The burning in my face and hands had subsided somewhat. I could not move my fingers on my own; they had been bound, then. I felt similar bindings across my chest, straining as I coughed. I did not have the strength or resolve to even try sitting up. I wondered how much worse the pitching and rocking would be if I were to even raise my head. The lancing pains in my eyes and the brilliant stars that burst in my vision with each bout of coughing was enough to convince me to simply lay as still as possible.

I woke to darkness, and the coolness of a cloth against my forehead.

"Ana?" My voice sounded as cracked and dry as my lips. I could feel my breath, laboring through a thick congestion, but dared not try to clear it.

"Hush, Thorn. I am here," she said. I felt a gentle sweep of fingers over my shoulder. The cloth came away from my forehead, and I heard the trickling of water. It returned, cooler.

"The others?"

"Not so bad off as you. Now be still."

"I am trying, but the cot does not want to cooperate."

"We are on a boat, on our way to Kelvin, and thence to Krakatos."

"Are we in the hold? It is dark as the new moon's night in here."

"I had to bandage your eyes."

"Aurora's magic."

"She saved us all, Thorn."

"Next time, I think I'll ask for Alphaks' aid."

Ana wrung the cloth out, and placed it back on my forehead.

"That was a joke," I told her.

"You invite the attentions of the Destroyer by uttering his name," she said, her voice tight. When she spoke next, I heard the smile in her voice. "I think we are managing well enough on our own."

My laughter trailed into a lengthy coughing fit.

Eve of the Chimerids (on or about Kaldmont 23, 997AC)

My sight returned with the next dawn, though it looked to me as if the overcast day was bright as a summer's noon. I could sit, but Ana bid me to rest, and I kept belowdecks. The flickering of the lantern was more than enough light for me to see by, and I passed the time catching up my skeins.

When she was not seeing to Varis and Gilliam, Aurora stayed with me. Though she hadn't taxed herself nearly as much as had her past incarnation, her golden eyes were somewhat sunken, and her pallor slightly green. The girl voiced no complaint, but Ana later told me of Aurora's deep aversion to travel by any kind of boat.

It was perhaps halfway towards noon the next day when the boat suddenly gave a jolt and there came a groaning and scraping. I tumbled from my bunk, and the lantern tumbled with me, dousing me in what little oil remained in its reservoir. Fortunately, the wick was snuffed in the fall. The bandages on my hands saved me from the worst of the cuts, but I felt a sting on my cheek and brow.

I'd struggled to my feet when the clomping of many boots in the passage outside my small room stopped. The door burst open and four of the sailors glowered in at me.

"Up, on deck now," the largest — the first mate, I think — said, making a hurrying motion with his free hand.

When I did not move quickly enough, two of the men crowded in and assisted me up the steps. As I reached the main deck, I saw that Gilliam and Varis had similar escorts. Both of them were quite a bit thinner, but their color looked good, their eyes clear and alert.

The ship was surrounded by large flows of ice, and were it not for the slaps of blue-white ice, would have run aground on the western bank of the Foamfire.

Of more concern than the ice, though, were the slight, golden-haired maidens perched atop the jagged crests of the ice flows. Their skin bore a bluish cast, and their upswept eyes were of nearly the same pale blue. They were attired in the briefest swathes of what looked to be cloth (it could hardly be called armor) of delicate fish scales that shimmered in a rainbow of colors whenever they shifted

their weight. I counted a dozen of them, half of which were armed with slender tridents that bore wickedly barbed tines.

“Nixies?” Gilliam asked. “I didn’t think they were real.”

“Real enough,” said one of the sailors, his hand close to the hilt of a saber tucked into his belt.

“And more than enough of them to cast their curse,” said another.

“We’ve brought them, as you asked,” the captain said, addressing the nixie who sat cross-legged atop a shelf on one of the ice flows. She wore a thin diadem of electrum, and held a short scepter of the same metal loosely in one hand.

She nodded, briefly, and made a sweeping gesture towards us with the scepter.

You will follow the ice to the place of the landborn.

The voice, cool and trilling like a stream over rocks, rippled through my mind. It wasn’t spoken in Common, but was more of a cascading series of ideas. The word “ice” for example, actually was a series of clicks and chirps, much like the sound ice makes as it grinds against itself.

As the “voice” faded, one of the ice slabs tipped, the deck heaving beneath us as the ice crashed through the railing.

The captain made a strangled sound in his throat. “We could have lowered the gangplank.”

The nixie leader cocked her head to the side, and her smile would have been sweet, had it not shown quite so many of her needlelike teeth.

The ice pitched and rolled nearly as much as the deck of the riverboat. It was warm enough that the exposed ice held a sheen of meltwater, and the nixies took great delight in our slips and falls, their laughter like a chorus of raindrops on a clear stream. Fortunately Gilliam knew enough of the legends not to take any of the hands they offered. Turned palm up as they were, the webbing was barely noticeable.

“They are tiny things, barely taller than the little shrike. Why would those men be afraid of them?” Macha’s asked.

“One or two alone do not pose much of a threat,” Varis told her as he helped the weaver across to another flow of ice. This one tilted more steeply, and there was much hissing and clicking amongst the nixies as the two slipped and slid across it, arms waving wildly for balance. “But gathered by the half score, they have no need to fight.”

“I do not understand.”

“They are of the fey,” Aurora said. She hopped from flow to flow with barely a bobble in her step. “Their greatest defense is in their song. They taught my sister to sing. Nixie’s powers work on men as my sisters do on demonkind, though with greater effect. Ten can bind a man to their will for a year and a day.”

“Are all their warriors female?”

“They are all female,” Aurora said.

The dark haired weaver picked her way across another treacherous patch of bobbing ice. “But, if they are all female, how do they replenish their number?”

“What do you think the men are doing for that year and a day?” Varis asked. Ana slapped Gilliam’s hand as he reached towards one of the nixies.

The ice ended a good stone’s throw from shore, and we had to wade through freezing waters nearly up to our waists. Had Varis not carried Aurora, she would have been soaked nearly to her chin.

Not wanting to meet a similar fate, I focused on the rocky riverbed I could barely feel through numb feet. Only after reaching the shore did I glance up to see the line of figures: each garbed ankle to neck in a deep green cloak, all but their eyes hidden beneath stag-horned helmets and behind hunting veils of gray-brown spider silks. Greaves and vambraces of ironoak were visible when the cloaks tossed this way and that in the breeze. Leather-bound hilts angled up from waist or from behind shoulders. A couple leaned lazily against bows nearly as tall as the points of the horns on their helms.

I raised a hand in greeting, motioning Varis and Gilliam to stand down with my other.

“Hail and well met,” I said. It was difficult to get the words past chattering teeth. “Do you come to bid welcome, or to ensure that we all reached shore safely?”

“A bit of both,” the Greenwarden in the middle of the line said, tugging his veil down as he approached. I recognized him as the captain of the Hierarch’s personal guard. It seemed odd, after having spent so much time around Varis in his clanging ringing mail to hear the captain’s armor clatter and clunk.

“You look well for one half-drowned,” the captain said, claspng my forearm and clapping me on the shoulder. “I trust Nikeela and her tribe did not treat you badly?”

“She was gracious enough to allow us to troop across ice flows and then nearly freeze us from the waist down in the Foamfire.”

The warden chuckled, motioning for the rest of the Greenwardens to approach. “Be glad she did not make you swim the whole way. Or ground the ship on the far shore. She still likes you, Thorn.”

“Yet I feel this was not a social call on her part,” I told the Greenwarden. “This close to Rifllian?”

“Rifllian?” Varis asked from behind me. “We were to go to Kelvin.”

“It would seem our plans have been changed,” Ana said.

The Hierarch’s guards wrapped us in their cloaks, steadying us as we slipped and slid through the rocks and roots along the shore. The mud from the snowmelt was nearly as treacherous as the ice flows.

Rather than turning on the Duke’s Road towards Rifllian, they led us across it, into a dense thicket of the Radlebb Woods.

“So much for your feather bed at the Silver Swan,” Varis said as he caught Gilliam’s lingering glance to the south.

The other warrior sighed. “Just as well, I suppose. I’m fairly certain Prestelle hasn’t forgotten about that bet. And I’m fresh out of horses at the moment.”

He led us to a campsite, where a large fire blazed in a circle of rocks, and several lean-tos blocked the worst of the wind.

The Hierarch rose from his place by the fire, dressed in field leathers of a Greenwarden rather than his usual robes and finery. He waved impatiently as I tried to bow.

“Come sit, Thorn, and get some warmth back in you before you freeze in place.” He held out a clay cup of dark and steaming tea. I took it, sipping even before I took a seat. “The rest of you, too, come, sit and be warmed.”

His gray brows rose as he regarded the two weavers, and rose even higher when Aurora stepped into his view.

“Sister of the wind and flame,” the Hierarch said, bowing his head as he handed Ana a cup. She lifted it in response, sipping, before she sat.

“Walker of the mountains, brother to steel,” the Hierarch intoned, passing cups to Gilliam and Varis. Gilliam let a trickle of the tea spill between his feet before raising the cup and then sipping.

Varis gave the other warrior a sidelong glance, his eyes darting to the ground at Gilliam’s feet. “Perfectly good waste of tea. My thanks, your Lordship,” he said. His teeth chattered against the rim of the cup as he drank.

“I bid you both welcome, sisters of air and sorrows.” He presented two more cups of tea to the weavers, and they took them, holding the clay cups with the tips of their fingers.

“Another daughter of silver and gold,” the Hierarch mused, as he handed a cup to Aurora. She pressed her hands together, her fingertips brushing her chin as she bowed slightly. The Hierarch inclined his head in return, and she took the offered cup, smiling as she breathed in the steam.

A trickle of tea was all that was left in the pot, and the Hierarch smirked as he glanced at what had poured out into the bottom of his cup. “Well, the last pot’s leaves indicated something about visitors from afar, but I certainly was not expecting this.” He swirled his cup, then emptied it into the fire.

“Another daughter of gold and silver,” the Hierarch repeated. To me, in the Druid’s tongue, he said “This was something you did not see fit to mention when last we spoke?”

“This ‘something’ has ears and they work quite well,” Aurora said, looking up from her cup of tea. She addressed the Hierarch in lightly accented Druid’s speech. “This ‘something’ also has the means of gleaning your speech. The secret of my kind’s existence is not to be bandied about through a quartzite matrix that any hedge wizard and stone-teller can listen in on. Thorn and his companions were in the right in keeping the knowledge of my presence to themselves.”

“What witchery is this, that she could know our speech?” one of the Greenwardens gasped, face pale, his hand flexing on the hilt of his sword.

“Breregon,” the Hierarch said, his voice soft and kindly, “you would serve me best in silence, your hand well away from your weapon.”

“But, your Worship, this girl—”

“She speaks in truth, and I am humbled before the wisdom of my elders, as you should be.” The Hierarch lowered his eyes, bowing deeply before the shriek.

Ana caught the cup as it slipped from my fingers. Hierarchs occasionally bowed before the Emperor of Thyatis or Empress Eriadna of Alphatia, but not more than the slightest of gestures. Hierarchs only lowered their eyes before the oldest of the Treekeepers, and only when under the boughs of one of the Trees of Life.

The Hierarch handed the tea kettle to the Greenwarden, and bid him fill it from the Foramfire.

Aurora hid a smile behind another sip of tea. “Strange, the tricks history and the eons play on us. The Language of the Dead in a world that was now itself a dead language, and used by the shepherds of life in the world that is.” She shook her head, her expression gone from mirth to melancholy. “Death smiles on us still, it would seem.”

“Please,” Ana said to the Hierarch, “tell us what has happened in the weeks we have been away.”

The Hierarch nodded. “The weather grew worse, and then broke several days ago, which I can only assume you had something to do with.”

I rubbed at the scar on my throat, but said nothing. The Hierarch seemed to’ve already guessed what had happened.

“What did those fishermen mean about ‘ruins’ along the lakeshore? Surely some deeper evil has not stirred from Mistamere?” Varis asked.

The Hierarch’s eyes widened, and it seemed that he was going to chuckle, but then his smile faltered. “Not Gygar’s fortress, but Halaran’s manor. Tarnskeep has been laid to ruin nearly twoscore nights past.”

“That would have been the night we—” Gilliam said.

Varis clenched a fist, bringing it down on his knee. “The Black Eagle will pay ___”

“The party responsible shall be made to pay,” the Hierarch said. “Von Hendriks has seen to that, with his travesty of a trial held in Halag. He has taken the Grand Duke’s law and twisted it to his own ends.”

“As is usual. His sigil should be the snake, not the eagle,” Varis muttered.

“But what happened?” Ana asked. “None of the fishermen, nor the boatmen would discuss it.”

The Hierarch reached into a pouch at his belt, and withdrew several lengths of knotted, braided leather cord. Skeins. These he handed to me. “I will let Thorn read the accounts.”

What follows is the account by a sister in the area that night, charged with walking the trees of the Black Woods

From the account of Jaromira "Thrush" Meskovich:

“Waxing crescent of the Deep Snows:

“I thought perhaps that the lashing and flailing of the trees was at first another attempt by the forest to animate, that perhaps errant demons had escaped the blazing attack from the walls of Threshold.

“But it turned out to be the wind — a heavy, hungry unnatural wind. It was as if a great hole had been opened up in the east, and the cold winter air rushed in to fill the space. I ran, the elder of the trees aiding my progress, until I stumbled upon the Highdell road, overlooking the lake and the local baron’s keep.

“What I saw there made no sense. The lake was shrouded in a fog that should not have been — the lake and the night were both cold, the air dry between bouts of the unnatural snows. And yet there the gray mists were, boiling low across

the surface of the lake, lit from within by flickers of silvery-blue light. I would have expected lightning to lance down from the becalmed clouds above before expecting to see it dancing amidst a lake fog. I would have believed the Immortals playing at some game amongst themselves before even considering that a mortal could be responsible for such magics.

“At the edge of the fogs, at the end of the longest pier jutting from the castle’s docks, a group of figures stood, huddled around a small figure who’s hair glowed a brilliant gold, her dress a shining white to rival Matera in her full brilliance.

“The figures milled about, and then began to step off the pier, to be swallowed by the fog.

“The shouting from the walls of the keep carried my way by the unnatural winds, and the arrows the men loosed were likewise aided on their way to their targets: the last three figures left: two stout brown-cloaked figures I guessed were dwarves. They swatted at the arrows as best they could, knocking many from the air with axeheads ablaze in some fiery form of magic. All the while, they risked glances over broad shoulders to shout for the gleaming figure to flee.

“She only lowered her arms when the arrows slipped past her two defenders. Three in all found their mark before she collapsed, the light in her hair dimming to a mere glimmer.

“Roaring, twin axes raised, one of the dwarfs charged, arrows finding marks or bouncing from helm and plates. None seemed to phase the enraged figure, and he only fell when two arrows caught him in the leg.

“The other dwarf had thrown himself over the still figure of the girl, his back riddled with many shafts.

“The wind had died, when the girl fell, and the fog was retreating across the lake, whatever magic she had worked no longer holding it together. The night was far from silent, though. Men at the walls shouted and cheered, while others were making their way down steps cut in the stonework of the cliff wall that led to the docks. A portcullis at the head of the dock rattled and groaned upward, and a handful of men sprang from the darkness within.

“I was surprised, that they did not wear the tower emblem but that of the black eagle, displayed.

“Two men lifted the dwarf, after kicking his axes into the water, and a third was needed when he began to struggle. Another three pulled the other dwarf away from the girl. He, too struggled, though not as vigorously as the other.

“Both of them voiced shouts as another soldier laid hands on the girl.

“He gave a cry of his own, tumbling backwards into the water, his gauntlets ablaze with a blackish-purple flame. More fire lanced from the girl’s right hand, and the oddly colored fire caught the two onrushing soldiers in the face and throat. Their cries were drowned by the lake, but not the flames, which only dwindled as they sank to the depths of the Windrush.

“Three more men met similar fates until the cries from the dwarves got through to the girl. The fire died in her hand, but her posture was one of a wary — and wounded — wolf cub.

“A dark-cloaked figure strode the length of the dock, and the soldiers snapped to attention. The man stopped before the guardsmen holding the second dwarf, and they appeared to be speaking — the distance masked their words, but not the actions of the dwarf, who spat at the cloaked figure’s feet, shaking his head vehemently.

“The dark hood then turned towards the girl, and the body language indicated that he asked the girl one or more questions.

“She, too, refused whatever the request was, and they all stood for a long moment. The hood bobbed, as if the cloaked figure had accepted her answer, and he turned, as if to stride away.

“Two steps took him behind the dwarf, and the figure turned, a black-gloved hand grasping several of the arrows still protruding from the dwarf’s back. These he gave a heavy push, and the dwarf’s cry of pain echoed across the lake.

“The figure must have asked another question, because the dwarf again shook his head.

“The girl’s posture had straightened at the dwarf’s agony, and something at her chest gleamed, starlike. The rapid bobbing of the arrows in her side slowed, evened, as if she no longer felt the pain from the wounds, deep though they were.

“She paused, as if listening, and nodded once, though the dwarf seemed against whatever decision she had made.

“The star-like glow manifested about a strange metallic sheathing twined about her lower arm. She reached up, laying her palm over the dwarf’s chest, the glow making its way around and between her fingers, to disappear, as if sinking into the dwarf’s armor.

“A black-gloved hand snatched her wrist, snuffing out the light. Whether the girl’s cry was from shock or pain, I could not tell.

“There was another silvery flash, but this from a knife in the cloaked figure’s other hand. He dragged it swiftly across the dwarf’s throat, so fast as to avoid the shower of crimson as it sprayed from the gaping wound.

“The girl screamed, and tried to pull away, but the gloved hand held her fast. The dwarf’s blood painted her as he fell, from the crown of her golden hair to the soles of her feet as it pooled about his still form.

“Light flared red, from between the fingers of the glove, and the hooded figure flinched away, snatching his hand back and clutching it as if he’d been burnt.

“The girl fell to her knees, crying, as she attempted to stem the flow of blood from the dwarf’s throat. But it was too late. A wind through the trees joined the girl’s sobs. The lake was silent, still.

“The hooded figure’s mistake, it seems, was to laugh.

“The girl wiped at her tears, smearing the blood across her cheeks. The blood covering her arms seemed to glow as if the bracers beneath shone through it, brightest at the points where the oddly-cut gems adorned the backs of her wrists.

“The pool of blood at her feet rippled, and then blazed forth with a rich, silvery-blue light, as if it were a puddle of lantern oil touched by a candle.

“The girl did not burn, or show any sign that she even felt the flickering, ghostly flames.

“A sharp word from the hooded figure caused the commotion among the soldiers to die, and they stood, battle-ready though they glanced at the girl and each other nervously.

“The girl crouched down, and caressed the bloodless face of the dwarf. She bent and kissed his forehead, and each eyelid. She pressed two fingers of her right hand to his pale lips, and the stone on her wrist throbbed with what I can only describe as a dark light. She rose, slowly, and a shining wisp trailed from her

fingers, as if she'd drawn it from the dwarf. Though her hair and gown moved with the breeze across the lake, the gossamer tendril did not.

"The hooded figure laughed, again.

"The girl closed her right hand into a fist. The cobweb snapped free of the dwarf's lips, and snaked about the girl's bloodied wrist, swirling as it was drawn into the darkened gleam of the stone.

"The flames about her flared, climbing higher, higher with each beat of my heart — and it was beating quite quickly, more so as the blue-white glare grew.

"The girl's cry split the sky like the trumpeting of some great silver dragon. It seemed impossible that such a sound could come from one tiny mortal.

"I threw myself backwards, into the trees, pleading with them to carry me away, feeling them dissolve around me in a terrible white fire."

I had to pause numerous times to sip from my cup of tea. My mouth went dry as my fingers worked their way over the knots. Though one of the Hierarch's aides had washed the leather cords, I could still feel the gritty residue of dried blood in the knots' crevices.

"Murder by magic and necromancy," Aurora whispered. She blinked several times, sniffing, then rose to her feet and walked unsteadily away from the fireside.

Gilliam made to follow her, but Ana set a hand on his. "No," she said. "Let her have some time alone."

The cleric of the Flame turned back to the Hierarch.

"Willful causing of death by necromancy," he said. "The Black Eagle has sentenced her to death. It will be at sundown tomorrow, on the High Hill at Krakatos."

Gilliam was on his feet, actually took a step closer to the Hierarch. "You could not tell us this sooner? Krakatos is still two days away!"

"And what would you do about it?" The Hierarch asked the question plainly. He did not raise his voice.

"And you are just going to let him do this?" Gilliam asked, his fist clenching.

“The Black Eagle is well within his rights, and hasty though it was, he followed the law of the land. Special as the girl may be, she is no more above the Grand Duke’s law than any of us.”

“An appeal?”

“The accused did not ask for one,” the Hierarch said.

“Of course she didn’t, she does not speak the Common.” Gilliam looked to Ana, and then to Varis. “Your Grand Duke allows for petitions, does he not? Surely, if we—”

“We are at least five days’ ride from Specularum,” Varis said.

“We turned down the Grand Duchess’ offer of protection once,” Ana added. “Going before the Grand Duke would most likely see us next in line for a fate such as Silva’s. Had we allowed her to be taken into the Grand Duke’s custody, this would not have happened.”

“And we would not have reached the Lost Valley in time and the whole of the Known World would suffer under the hell of an eternal winter,” I said.

“Life and death are made by choices,” the Hierarch said. He looked across the fire, at each of my companions.

I excused myself from the circle by the fire, and picked my way through the trees. It was not difficult to trace Aurora’s path, haphazard though it was. She had made her way back to the river, and I found her seated on a flat-topped boulder, knees drawn up, her head nestled in her arms, which she’d wrapped about her knees. She looked up as I approached, and though her tears were dry, her eyes were still red.

“Best be careful. Ana might take you for harboring a demon if your eyes get any redder.”

She scowled, sniffled, and rubbed at her eyes with a ragged sleeve. “You followed me here to say that?”

“No,” I said. “The Hierarch is lecturing our friends on the weight of choices and consequences.”

“You have heard this lecture before?”

“Too many times.”

Aurora looked away from me, staring over the ice-riddled expanse of the Wufwolde.

“My sister is going to die,” she finally said. Her inflection was odd, caught between a question and a statement. Was she asking me, or confirming it to herself?

“That has not happened yet,” I said.

“She used magic to take lives. That is punishable by death. It is so in every culture.”

“Until the punishment is dealt out, the accused has a right to demand appeal,” I said.

Aurora sat up a bit straighter, and hope lit her features for a fraction of a second. Then her shoulders slumped again. “But you told she who came before that Silva does not know your languages. How could she petition for an appeal?”

“A technicality that the Black Eagle no doubt was counting on,” I said. Something clicked into place in my memory. All those long hours of studying the Grand Duke’s decrees suddenly did not seem to be such a waste. “In the place of the accused, family may beg the right for appeal. Surely not even the Black Eagle could deny the resemblance.”

Again, the girl sat up a bit straighter, her eyes shining as the smile crept across her lips. She stood up, and her eyes were only slightly higher than my own. “You are certain of this, Thorn? That is in the law put down by the Grand Duke?”

I nodded, and drew a breath to recite the passage in its entirety for her. But she’d motioned for silence, her eyes narrowing, her weight shifting back and away, ready to spring backwards for the boulder’s cover.

A breath later, I heard it, too:

A steady clop-clop of hooves on the forest path, a creaking of wagon wheels, a tinkling of several different sets of metal chimes.

I lowered my hands, clenching them at my sides. I slowed my breathing, the heat ebbing away from between my fingers with each steady breath. I turned to tell the girl that it was all right, only to find her gone. I leaned upon the boulder, to see if she’d taken shelter behind it, and leapt back with a start. My hand had come down on smooth, bare flesh and bone rather than stone.

The air gave a wavering ripple, and a patch of pebbles along the shore shifted ever so slightly.

“Why are you—” I started to ask.

The clopping of hooves slowed, then stopped, and the metallic, discordant chimes lingering, the spaces between notes growing longer.

“Well, here I thought myself the only traveler desperate enough to be out upon the roads. The company is most welcome and well met.” The voice was rich, deep and melodious. The speaker was a dusky-skinned Traladaran. Unlike most, he wore a short beard and mustache, as dark as the eyes above them and the curly hair peeking from beneath the brilliant purple head scarf. A large gold hoop dangled from one ear, and matched a neckpiece of similar loops, all intertwined. His tunic was a slightly lighter shade of purple than his headwrap, the billowing sleeves slashed with swathes of rich violet, over which he wore a black leather vest that seemed to be all pouches and pockets.

The man’s smile was wide, friendly, and though I’d never seen this particular Darine before, he gave off a the same feeling all of his kind did, of a long-lost friend or relative back from a long time away, coming home for a brief visit.

“Well met,” I answered him. “A fellow traveler’s peace on both of us.”

He nodded once, and his posture changed ever so slightly, his weight settling back on the padded wooden bench of the wagon. The hand not holding the reins came back into view from beneath the shaggy blanket he wore over his legs.

To say he drove a wagon is to misspeak. If the man’s clothing and accent had not given him away as Darine, the wagon — called in most of his peoples’ dialects a *‘vardo’* —left very little doubt. The main body sat high over wheels nearly as tall as I, the base half again as wide as most merchant’s wagons. The entire thing was enclosed, ledges jutting out over the wheels giving a bit more space on the inside. A variety of boxes hung from this ledge, dangling over the wheels. Windows of stained glass ran around most of the vardo’s walls, just beneath a slightly-overhanging curved roof. The chimes I’d heard hung from various places about the edges of the roof. The whole thing was painted in dizzying pattern of violet swirls and purple waves, edged and interleaved with bands of gold.

“I am happy to have your peace, friend,” the Darine said, “but tell me, do I have that of your little companion as well?”

I didn’t think that I gave her away — I certainly did not blink, and intentionally kept my gaze locked on the dark eyes of the Darine. His eyes shifted, though, his gaze darting to my left and then to my right, tracking along the stretch of rocky shore. His smile did not waver in the least, and he chuckled.

“Come now, *machika*, Shandor means you no harm, if you can promise the same. It is bad manners, hiding behind your mother’s veil. Let us speak eye to eye.”

The air wavered, then folded away from where Aurora stood. She balanced forward, the ceremonial knife held low, the point of the blade between her and the stranger. The deep purple veins within the knife’s black dragonstone pulsed a quick rhythm — no doubt in time with the girl’s heartbeat.

The Darine’s eyes widened, as did his smile. He raised his hands. “Now, now, *machika*, there is no need for claws.”

“Men should not be able to see through a Veiling,” Aurora said, her golden eyes narrowed.

“It is... a gift, of sorts. My mother could see those that would be. Her mother could see those who were. I see those who... how to say it? ‘Should be.’”

“Your blood,” the girl said, after considering the man’s words. Her tone was still thick with caution. “Swear your peace by your blood.”

The Darine man lowered his hand, leaned down from the padded bench. He kept his other hand in plain view, his dark eyes on the shrike.

When he made no further move, she glanced down at her knife, reversing her grip on it, holding it by the blade. She held the hilt out to me, and prodded me with it when I did not immediately take it.

“You do not have to use it,” she said. “Just hand it to him.”

I turned to give the knife to the Darine, and Aurora clutched at my sleeve.

“That way,” she said, motioning further to my left.

“But he is—”

“You do not want to be between us,” she said.

“He is harmless. He has already pledged that he will not harm me.”

"I would see the color of his blood, first. A demon speaking with his voice is not bound by any such oath."

"You think he is possessed?"

"I think everybody is possessed. Countless lives have taught me that."
I could not argue against her logic.

"You see? It is red, just as is yours."

Some of the tension trickled from the girl's posture. Which is to say that she lowered her hands to her sides, and the glimmers of golden light faded from the red stones adorning her wrists.

"As strange a blade as is she who bears it," the Darine murmured. He carefully wiped the blade on a deep violet handkerchief, and then wound the cloth about the gash he'd made across the back of his hand. He raised the knife towards the sky, and Aurora brought her arms up, shifting her stance to turn her profile towards the wanderer.

"Such a flighty one, your little *machika*," he said, turning his attention to me. He lowered the blade — slowly — and offered me the the pommel. "I was merely examining this exquisite opal. I have never seen one like it. Please, tell Shandor where it is you found such a marvelous stone."

"Stones such as these have been in my family for... generations," Aurora said, taking the knife from me and tucking it into the strips of cloth wound about her waist.

The Darine — Shandor, he'd called himself — nodded, though his eyes had narrowed slightly at the girl's careful choice of wording.

"So it is by my blood that I swear to you the peace of the roads. This is satisfactory, yes?"

The shrike nodded. "It is." Her fingers drifted over the worn black leather of the dagger's hilt. "I shall only draw this again in our defense."

Shandor's brows rose, and he threw back his head and laughed. "If Shandor needs to depend on a knife in the hands of a child, then times are indeed troubled."
Aurora's cheeks flushed.

"She is hardly—" I began, but the girl's heel came down sharply on my foot.

The Darine man seemed not to notice. "Now you must tell to me how a druid and his pretty *krisanthe* come to sit by the waters of the Wulfwolde along this same road as Shandor."

"There will be time enough for that along the road," came the Hierarch's voice from the other side of the path.

Shandor turned, his back straightening, and he bowed his head, bringing his fingertips up to his forehead. "A greeting to you, Father of the woods, and my thanks for easing the hardships of the roads this season."

The Hierarch nodded in acknowledgement. "Blessings of the forest folk upon you and yours, wanderer. May you know safety and swift travel under my boughs. I see you have already met your guide, Thorn. I also present to you his traveling companions, Varis of Bywater, Gilliam of the eastland borders, and Ana, Child of the Flame."

The Hierarch had suited the two warriors in the leather-and-steel of Callarii wildrunners. Cloaks of mottled greens and grays draped their shoulders, hanging nearly to their ankles. Gilliam wore two wildrunner longknives across his hips, each nearly as long as the dual shortswords he'd wielded in the Valley. A pommel crafted after leaves and trailing vines showed from over Varis' shoulder.

As surprised as I was by Varis and Gilliam's outfitting, Ana's simply stole my breath away for several moments. The elves had garbed her in the pale white robes of their moon priestesses. Beneath the pearlescent tabard and mantle, I could see plates of platinum-enameled armor. Sleeves of white-gold mail disappeared into long gloves of supple white calfskin. Her boots, too, were of the same material, banded with more enameled steel. The Callarii had swept her hair back as well, weaving it up and away from her face, held in place by a circlet of platinum and steel.

"I told you he'd stare," Gilliam said to Varis.

The Hierarch cleared his throat, beckoning Aurora and I to his side. "The elves have gifts for you two, as well," he said, and I found myself being led into the trees by a trio of wildrunners I hadn't even noticed.

"I can not repay you for this gift," I told the eldest of the elves.

He tugged at a buckle, then sliced away the excess leather.

"There is no expectation of return on this gift, forest-brother," he said. "It is we who are still indebted to you." His gray eyes settled on the scars at my throat.

I shifted my shoulders. The elven leathers were much lighter than those crafted by my fellow druids. Still, I'd been out of armor for so long that it would take some getting used to. I wondered how Varis and Gilliam could do it, with the added weight of the steel.

"Another gift," the second eldest of the elves said, and held out to me a long straight staff of gray wood. It was heavier than it looked, but worn smooth, and comfortable in my hands. I stepped back and gave the staff a turn, finding it to be wondrously balanced.

"Ironwood," the elf said. "May it serve you well in your journeys, both in support and defense."

"There is something more to this," I said. Despite the chill of the season, the wood held a subtle warmth.

The elf smiled. "You will know its secrets in time."

The last gift from the elves was a cloak identical to those given to Varis and Gilliam. A fine, sturdy weave, treated with several different types of tree saps. Not only did they serve as dyes, but they also made the cloaks resistant to water and weather.

I stepped from the small clearing back to the trail just moments before Aurora emerged from the trees on the far side of the group.

Like Ana, she was clad in a flowing tabard and cloak of grayish-white cloth that seemed to trade shades of moonlight as it stirred with her motion. She wore a plain white gown beneath, with no sign of any armor, save the golden vambraces peeking from the wide bottoms of the sleeves. The ceremonial knife rode low on her right hip, hanging from the braided leather belt in a slightly too-large scabbard.

"Such visions," Shandor breathed. He scooted towards the center of the driver's bench. "Come, come, you will share this perch with me."

The two girls glanced at each other, and then at the padded bench.

"I would not want to take the seat of your trailguide," Ana said, taking a step backwards and setting a hand on my shoulder.

“Nonsense,” the Darine sniffed. “There is the road, I am pointed the direction I wish to travel, what is there to guide? He will ride within, with his friends.”

Gilliam turned to the Hierarch. “We would make better time on those elven steeds,” he said. “Two horses, and I could—”

“The forest has provided,” the Hierarch said. He glanced up through the trees. “If it grows much later, you will lose too much light.”

“Surely, this is some sort of illusion,” Gilliam said. He poked his head out the top half of the vardo’s rear door, glancing to his left and right. Around him, we saw the Hierarch, dwindling as the road trundled away behind us, lift a hand in farewell.

I’d expected to be pinched and folded to get into the back of the Darine’s traveling hovel, and was surprised to find the interior only slightly cramped by the three of us. There was enough room for even Varis to stand, and between the bunk towards the rear and a long bench along one side, there was room for all of us to find seats.

Still, there were boxes, several small chests, and bales and bundles tucked into every available nook and crevice. Shelves ran at eye level, just above the top trim of the stained glass windows, packed with stacks of leather folios, several books, and roll upon roll of parchment. I kept expecting it to shift and tumble down upon us, but rather than a rattling jumpy ride, the vardo seemed to simply sway and bob, more like a riverboat than a wagon.

We did not speak much, each sitting, huddled with our own thoughts. I found the vardo’s motion relaxing, and caught myself dozing more than once.

A hard jangling of the wind chimes and creak of the door’s hinges snapped me from one such doze, and I found myself blinking at the stark gray light spilling through the doorway.

“Come, come my friends! It is time for a meal. Come and share the fire and the bread.”

I was not the only one to stretch and stifle a yawn.

“Do we really have time for a cook fire and....” Varis’ musings died as he stepped down the short folding ladder. Gilliam and I both nearly sent him tumbling as we piled into each other’s backs.

The tall warrior stepped aside, glancing around, a bewildered expression on his face. Gilliam was turning a circle as well, looking up and down the roadway.

It was the Grand Duke’s road, certainly. Evenly paved, wide enough for three vardos. Two long ruts through a small snow drift and a clotting of the snow between them indicated where Shandor had turned the wagon from the roadway.

The trees of Radlebb were barely visible past the gentle curve of the road.

“Thorn...?”

I glanced up the road. Smoke, several plumes, drifted from an irregular rise along the horizon. “Those are...” I began.

“Cook fires,” said Shandor, clapping us on the shoulders. “We shall reach the camps with the sundown. Plenty of time to enjoy the festivities.”

“You were sitting next to him, surely you saw how it was accomplished,” Gilliam said. At least, that is what I thought he said, around a mouthful of still-warm, thick-crust bread.

Ana shook her head. “I must have drifted off for a moment or two.” To Shandor, she said “I apologize. I missed the end of that wonderful tale.”

The dusky wanderer simply shrugged. “There are plenty more tales to be told. The ending, it is not so important. Come back over here, little *kristanthe*, and take of my repast, or you will wither away before Shandor can present you to the rest of his cousins and brothers.”

Aurora stood atop one of the large stone pylons erected along the banks of the Volaga, peering south. She held her arms outstretched, fingers and thumbs touching to form a little window. Gold shone bright from the depths of the clear stones over her wrists.

“It does not look so very different from their memories of it,” she said to me as I approached.

I squinted. At best, the rise upon which the ruins of Krakatos huddled was a lump along the horizon.

Aurora crouched, and held her little window of fingers out for me to look through. I blinked and rubbed my eyes, nearly dropping the bread Shandor insisted she eat.

The air shimmered, like it did when she moved within one of her Veilings, but only in the space bordered by her fingers and thumbs. It was as though she had cut a window in the air, and I was peering at the ruins from a much closer vantage. I glanced around her hands, and saw the fuzzy blur leap back into place to each side of her slender fingers.

“With the tents and banners, it almost looks as it did on market days,” she said. She sighed, and lowered her hands. There was a brief glimmer within the red dragonstones as her small hands clenched into fists. The cords in her neck stood out as she swallowed several times. It was several deep breaths before the tension eased from her shoulders and she reopened her golden eyes. She folded her legs beneath her, still sitting atop the stone mile marker with room to spare, and finally took the bread from me.

“My sister is to die, and they make a festival of it.”

She tore at the bread, her brow furrowed more with anger than worry. After several bites, she turned to me.

“Thorn, do you still have those strange knotted lines which tell the druidess’ tale?”

I fished about in my belt pouch, and produced the skeins.

“Read it to me again, please.”

I began to run the knots through my fingers, reciting the account they recorded. Aurora closed her eyes, listening.

We returned to the fireside to find Varis and Gilliam arguing over a diagram of the ruined citadel scratched in a spot of snow-cleared ground.

“The Manticore gate is the way to go,” Gilliam said. “Straight shot, in and then out.”

“With all those merchant’s stalls along that walk, we’ll have to carve our way through the crowds,” Varis said. “The guardsmen—”

"The guardsmen will have to fight their way through the crowds as well," Gilliam said, stabbing a long twig at the open space near one of the lines representing a wall. "We just—"

"You will do nothing," Aurora said.

The warriors looked up.

"You will do nothing," the girl repeated.

"But we want to help—" Varis started.

"I will not allow it."

"She is our friend, too," Gilliam said. "Let us at least—"

"I will not allow it!" Aurora brought her foot down on the map of the citadel at Krakatos. "I will not have you throw away everything you did in the colony to become enemies of this land that you just saved."

Shandor glanced from face to face around the fire. "You do not travel to Krakatos for the Festival of Falling Stars." It was not a question.

"Of course we—" Gilliam started.

"No, we do not," Ana said, her blue eyes level with those of the Darine.

The man grunted, nodding his head ever so slightly. "You go there to cause mischief?"

"Yes!" Gilliam said, a fierce grin quirking his lips.

"No!" Ana said at the same time, glowering at the warrior.

Shandor glanced between them. "Which is it to be?"

"There is a girl in trouble. We mean to save her from it," Varis said, crossing his arms.

"A worthy goal," the Darine said, with a sharp nod. "These fairs, there is much wine and coin to be had. Many girls, *chavi* and *raklii* alike, they do not make such good decisions when there is too much of either. They fall in with wrong people."

Gilliam nodded. "Precisely," he said. "We have word that she is in a bad place, with some bad people."

It is a wonder that the air still plumed before Gilliam's lips, with the heat in the glare that Ana directed his way. "It is true, is it not?" he asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Yes," she said, biting through the word as if it were the tough crust of bread she held in one hand.

Shandor smiled, clapped his hands. "Wonderful! There is nothing more pleasing than a riddle to ponder on the road. So. We have eaten, yes? We are refreshed? A few moments more to stretch our legs, to tend to other businesses, and then we are back to our journey."

"In Ylaruam, they stay indoors, and cover their heads if they must venture out during the night. And Immortals help you if you should look up," Gilliam said.

"You speak as if you do not share their belief," Shandor said. He'd opened the small doorway between the vardo's interior and the comfortable bench which he still shared with Ana and Aurora.

"Well, I think it's all just superstitious nonsense." He waved a hand at nothing in particular. "The fact that it happens year after year at the same time? It just... is. Like the sun and the moon and stars."

"Do not think that they are fixed and constant," Aurora said, her voice barely heard above the creak and jingle of the vardo. "They are right to be wary on the coming nights. Why the Traldar—"

"Traladarans," Varis corrected.

"Why they should celebrate is beyond me."

"A falling star is a good omen," Varis said. "For so many to appear in the skies?"

"My mother called these coming nights the Harvest of Dreams," I said.

"Falling stars represent hope for my people," Ana said.

Aurora glanced at all of us. I saw disbelief there, in her expression. For a moment, pity fluttered at the corners of her mouth, like a bird's shadow across the sun.

"You do not know," she whispered. Her voice had again gone quiet, nearly breathless. She shook her head once, the disbelief flickering again to pity, and then

to dread as she absently bit at her thumbnail. "Nothing good has ever come from a falling star." She huddled into her cloak, pulling the hood further down, and could not be persuaded to say anything more on the subject.

Her mood settled into the rest of us, as well, and I was not alone in a long space of silent pondering.

The vardo continued to sway, the chimes jangling in time to the horses' steps. Shandor was content to leave us to our own thoughts, humming softly to himself.

I glanced up as the rhythm of the chimes changed. Below the chimes, a distant cacophony of dozens of songs, singers, and instruments wafted through the small hatchway along with the chill night air.

Night air....

I rubbed at my eyes. Surely, I hadn't slept more than a few moments.

A dim reddish lamp hung from the far side of the vardo driver's bench, just bright enough to illuminate the paving stones of the Grand Duke's Road. The dim red glow was answered in the distance, dotting either side of the road.

Campfires. Dozens of them. And above them...

"Impossible!" breathed Varis. "It might be done at a messenger's pace, in the high summer, but to make it from Rifflian to Krakatos in less than a day?"

Shandor merely shrugged. "I merely follow the road. This old vardo, she goes with much more haste without the snows and ices, yes?"

"Yes..." Gilliam said, absently. He looked to be working sums on his fingers.

"She is not for sale," Shandor said, when Gilliam finished his calculations.

"Magic, obviously," Aurora said, when Gilliam prodded her for an explanation. "Perhaps, after we rescue my sister, she could explain it in more detail."

"This sister of yours must be remarkable," Shandor said. He clucked at the horses, and the vardo rolled to a stop close to a cluster of others well away from the ruined walls of Krakatos. He leapt from the bench, and lifted Aurora down.

"This sister, she is older? Unmarried, yes?"

I only wish she hadn't been draped in the shifting shadows cast from the firelight among the other wagons. I heard her laughter, heard her cover it, too late, with a cough.

Shandor gave an exaggerated sigh, crossing his hands over his heart. "Alas, we are forbidden to take wives from among the *raklii*."

Aurora stood very still as he spun away from her, to secure the step and release the locks on the rear door of the vardo.

It felt good to be out in the cold night air.

"Please, wait here while I make the introductions to the clan and my family. And, perhaps you could be making your weapons a little less...."

He smiled, teeth gleaming, as Gilliam and Varis shifted their weapon belts, turning the hilts in such a way to make drawing them still possible, but difficult.

"Yes, this is good. Shandor will return momentarily. Perhaps, if you are having any business...?"

He turned, tugging his dark leather vest into place, smoothing the billowing sleeves of his shirt.

The music drifting from the campfire faltered and then stopped, to be replaced by a babbling of many different voices, male and female, old and young. I could make out perhaps one in every five or six words, so different and obscure was the dialect of Traladaran that they spoke. There were many more harsh consonants, an odd counterpoint to the sibilance that lent a very distinct flow to their language.

My dealings with the Darine up until that point had been swapping of few stories by merchant caravan campfires. Those had been single families, of perhaps half a dozen, traveling in one or two vardos amidst the long string of merchant's wagons. They had been amiable enough, but once they left the main camp cook fires, it was made readily apparent that outsiders were not welcome to share their own private campfires.

We waited for nearly half an hour. There was no moon, but more and more stars became visible, peeking from gaps in the clouds above. If it the sky kept clearing at this rate, by sundown tomorrow, there would be but a few wisps left.

"I never thought I would see them again," Ana said. "It was almost as bad as being cooped up underground, with all those clouds piled up there."

"It will be nice indeed not to have to shovel our way out of a lean-to," Varis said.

"What do you see?" I asked Aurora, noticing that she studied the night sky with some interest.

"It is the same... but not the same. As if remembering two different dreams." She sighed, rubbing at her head with her fingertips. The white stones on her circlet flashed with a few motes of golden light.

"Are you well?"

"This happens when we try to force the memories. It will pass in a moment."

Shandor approached, leading a trio of other Darine dressed nearly as garishly as he was. The older woman who leaned on his arm was garbed in a thick red woolen dress and half-tunic of brilliant yellow. A fleece-lined vest of indigo leather, covered in pockets as was Shandor's completed her ensemble. Gold and copper bracelets clattered at her wrists, and large gold hoop earrings dangled among a mane of thick, dark hair streaked with just a hint of gray at the temples. Her orange and red-checked headscarf was unwound, and she wore it about her neck and shoulders more as a shawl.

Behind her, two men of the same muscular-but-wiry build as Shandor stood, arms folded. They were dressed in colors similar to the woman, crimson breeches tucked into dark boots, yellow tunics checked across the bottom with orange and purple. Each man wore a crimson sash, into which was tucked a knife nearly long enough to pass for a gladius. The mens' stern faces and scarred hands left little doubt as to their purpose at this meeting.

"My friends, I present to you *Vadoma* Ludja. She is my mother's sister, and our Way-Seeker for this season. *Vadoma*, I present to you the friends of which we spoke, who have come with me from the Treesingers in Radlebb."

The woman, Ludja, stepped forward, reaching out a thin, care-worn hand. Several different rings sparkled on her fingers, some plain, some adorned with gemstones.

Varis was the first to take her hand, placing both of his palm-up beneath her fingertips. He spoke his name, and made the pledge of peace between fellow travelers. He looked her in the eye, and she returned his pledge, nodding once.

She turned slightly, and Gilliam stepped up next, repeating the same ceremonial greeting as had Varis. The woman's dark eyes flashed, her brow furrowing slightly. The man behind her clutched at the knife in his sash, but the woman glanced back. She did not say a word, but the burly Darine slipped his hand from the hilt, again clasping his hands before him and looking somewhat abashed.

The woman turned her eyes back to Gilliam, her gaze drifting towards his shoulder. She nodded, almost to herself, then patted his hand in an almost grandmotherly fashion.

She turned to Ana, and rather than allowing the girl to do as the two warriors had, the old woman pressed her hands together at about the level of her chin, inclining her head before the young cleric.

Ana held her hands out, glancing at me in sudden confusion. I mimicked the woman's response, ushering her to return the gesture, which the girl did.

"We welcome your flame among us, child," the Vadoma said quietly.

The woman turned towards Aurora and a look of puzzlement flickered across her features. She leaned slightly closer to the shrike, peering intently into the shadows beneath the girl's hood, before straightening with a sharp intake of breath. Her hands clutched at her dress, and she pulled at the fabric.

Aurora's hand on the woman's arm and a shake of her hooded head stopped the old woman from dropping into a curtsey.

"But it is proper!" the woman's tone was one of deep offense.

"No man or woman will kneel before me in their own house." the shrike said. "This is your soil. I place myself in your care."

The expressions on the faces of the three Darine men, I think, were just as puzzled as those of my companions and I.

The rest of the night was a bit of a blur, after we joined Shandor's clan by their fires. There was wine, a thick spicy vintage that very nearly toppled into the

range of brandy. There were stories told, but the fog of the wine kept me from being able to keep sense of the many threads. There was dancing, and I remember that it was not the red in the firelight that colored Ana's cheeks before she turned her face away. I lost track of how many times Gilliam or Varis rose from their places by the fire to join one or another group of *chavii* — the unmarried women and girls among the families of of the clan.

Gradually, the music and laughter faded with the firelight, and blankets and cushions and pillows of garish colors and weaves were brought forth.

I remember a passing thought that the silk beneath my cheek held its warmth remarkably well, and I shut my eyes to the cloud-tattered shining of the stars, but not before I saw three gleaming streaks flash across the greater darkness above, precursors of the hundreds yet to show in the coming nights....

First night of the Chimerids (on or about Kaldmont 24, 997AC)

The dawn seemed to come after mere moments, and Ixion brought hammers and pincers with him, and seemed intent mostly upon my brow, but did not spare much of an inch of me.

I double-knotted the message to myself in the skein: Tend to armor, drink but half of what is offered, and be sure to awaken facing west.

Twice a year, in the winter and summer, Krakatos lives, even if for a few weeks' time. Rather than stone and timber, the city blooms with tents and pavilions. Commoner browns and grays mingle among the Colors of the Traladaran families and Thyatian Lords. Trade once again graces the cracked and overgrown stones of the market squares. Empty streets fill with foot traffic. The steps of the Temple of Khoronus see pair after pair blessed in marriage, for it is said to be of good luck speak the same pledges on the same stones as did Halav and Petra.

The Fairgrounds, once the last mustering place of bronze-clad armies nearly two thousand years past play host to festival stalls, where games of skill and chance are played by young and old alike. In more recent years, the Grand Duke has held tourneys in the springtime, inviting a friendly rivalry between the various Lords and Lord Commanders of the far-flung keeps.

Watching over the festivities, welcomed as old family friends, at least while the banners rise from the crumbling walls of Minas' Citadel are the various clans of the Darine, the so-called Lost Tribe of Traldar. For them, this is a time of gathering, of trading news and gossip amongst the far reaching families. Old oaths and vows are renewed in the shadowed boughs of Zirchev's Wood, a dense growth some leagues to the south. The vardos are left behind as the groups make their way there and back on foot, young and old carried as need be. They go without adornment of any kind, and always wear their most travel-worn of garb. Each bears with them but a single kopec which they give to a stranger as they make their way through the ruined and meandering streets of Krakatos, a tradition that even they are at a loss to fully explain, other than to say "it has always been done so."

As a boy, I remember the parade always brought a brief gloom to the merrymaking, as a cloud dims the sun in passing. My father would sternly rebuke

my brothers when they would snicker at the “Beggar’s Parade.” The grim solemnity of the Darine never seemed, to me, to be anything to poke fun at.

I tried rolling over, tried burying my face in the silken pillow beneath me to drive off some of the scalding of the sunlight behind my eyes, only to have the material buck and writhe away from me with a mirthful shriek.

“Such shame, *Karos*, in front of all your companions and without our speaking the pledges beneath Zirchev’s Tree!”

The voice, sweet and spicy as the wine I’d drunk last night, chased the tatters of fog from my mind. A mass of dark ringlets tumbled around dark, flashing eyes. Long, thick lashes fluttered and full lips spread in a smile that outshone Ixion’s dawn. Her fine brows drew together as her smile dissolved into a pout.

“I will be late for the pilgrimage if you do not move. Up with you, now!”

She gave a mighty tug at my cloak, and sent me tumbling away from her lap and nearly into the fire.

Varis tugged me to my feet, steadying me as the ground pitched and heaved. Gilliam pressed a warm, steaming mug into my hands, and I breathed in a woody, slightly bitter scent, touched with honey.

“Finally, a people who can brew a decent cup of *kafa*,” Gilliam said, sipping from a mug of his own. “Second best thing to cure the ills of a long night’s drinking.”

“Dare I even ask after the first?” Ana inquired.

Gilliam glanced at the departing figure over the rim of his mug.

“Friend of yours?” Varis asked.

I pulled at one of the leather cords about my neck. One of the Old Traldar *kopecs*, with the square hole in the center, was threaded through it. I closed my hand around the coin, given to me by a rag-clad Darine girl perhaps a year older than I. Would this be the fifteenth winter since? Sixteenth? With the trials and terrors of the past few months, I found it difficult to believe that I’d forgotten about Demarra.

“More than a friend, I think,” Gilliam said, giving me a clap on the back, nearly causing me to spill the steaming *kafa* all over myself.

"I don't understand how they can just.... Leave everything." Gilliam stared about the double ring of vardos. The Darine had departed without so much as a second glance at us. Up the slope, travelers from the north were still arriving, and traffic coming from Specularum and Marilenev in the south would be even heavier.

"Not even a stone's throw from the Grand Duke's road," Gilliam said. "All of them just gone. I bet there's a Baron's ransom in gold in these rolling houses. Why, an enterprising member of any number of guilds could—"

"Just what sorts of circles does your mind run in?" Ana asked, a frown wrinkling her pale forehead.

"By all means, go ahead and try to take something," Varis said. "See how you like black fingers and boils. And that's what you might get away with if you aren't spotted by any of the Darine. Then they'll just give you their Evil Eye, one after another of them. You'll never be able to roll a decent pair of dice again. Happened to a cousin of a fellow soldier when I was in the Grand Duke's army. Because of a handful of silver."

"Thorn, surely he—"

I shook my head. "Varis has the right of it. Even the Iron Ring avoids these folk. I don't think even Bargle would be fool enough to take so much as a *kopec* from any of them. It just isn't done."

"Shame on you for even considering robbing our hosts," Ana said.

"I wasn't going to... I was simply... making an observation."

"Perhaps we could make observations of Minas' Citadel," Aurora said, her eyes on the hilltop ruins. Black and silver pennants could be seen flying from the barely-visible tops of similarly colored pavilions.

"You were supposed to've been around back then. Can't you remember—"

"My sisters were the ones assigned to Petra's aid. My kind deployed along the walls."

"Daylight is wasting," Varis said.

We rose, gathered our gear, and made our way into the city of tents.

The bustle grew heavier and heavier the closer we got towards the marketplace and fairgrounds. Farmers and merchants vied for attention, calling out to the crowds to draw an eye to their wares. We had to detour around pockets of onlookers to minstrels, jugglers. Several men on stilts worked life-size puppets of soldiers in black and silver, and the crowd cried out at a clap of thunder as blue-tinged smoke billowed from the pot dashed to the ground by the black-clad man manipulating a white-garbed puppet. The puppet threw back its head as the man cackled a wicked — if theatrical— laugh.

We quickly ushered Aurora away as the crowd began to chant for a fiery justice for the White Witch.

The closer we got to the broad curving approach to the Manticore Gate, the harder it became to avoid such displays. Bards sang of fallen heroes of the Black Eagle, or of the foulest sorceries conjured by the White Witch.

“Three cronas!” barked one man, at a long, narrow stall. At the end of the red-curtained length of the booth stood a straw dummy draped in a shabby white robe. The hawker held up a child’s toy bow and three arrows, the tips capped by small cheesecloth sacks dyed red.

“Three cronas for a chance to slay the White Witch!” the man cried.

Aurora’s hand slipped from mine, as if she’d turned her grip to water.

“Aurora, no!” Ana called, and pushed her way through the crowd after the girl. Varis, Gilliam and I were not but a step behind.

I made to grab Aurora’s shoulder as she waited behind the crowd of boys lined up to try their hand at the game. She blurred to one side with a muted pulse of purplish light. We all stopped short, at the slight murmur that rippled through the crowd of onlookers. It was quickly swallowed by groans of dismay. The boy at the front of the line shook his head, and the man at the booth held out another of the oddly-tipped arrows.

The boy drew, sticking his tongue out as he aimed a bit higher than his last shot. He released, and the curtains billowed as his arrow flew wide. Several of the boys behind him jeered.

"We have to do something!" Ana hissed. There was a cheer from the boys and a flash of stage-flame as the last arrow found its mark, bouncing off the straw dummy, leaving barely a smudge of soot on the gown.

"Ten cronas! I'll bet you ten cronas my niece hits it on her first try," Gilliam said, his voice carrying over the murmur of the crowd.

"Are you mad?" Ana's eyes grew wide as her voice climbed.

"Fifteen!" Varis called. Many of the surrounding adults began to call or match the wager.

The barker at the booth paled, then smiled apologetically to the boy as he took back the bow and arrows.

"You there, girl, you are this man's niece?"

"Do you see any other girls lined up?" Aurora snapped. She'd drawn her hood back just far enough that her hair tumbled forth, but not far enough to reveal any more of her features.

"Don't know of any boy who'd wish to be caught in a dress such as that," Gilliam said.

"Unless he was from eastern Thyatis," one of the men in the crowd quipped.

"Twenty cronas!" Gilliam shouted.

"Well, come forth, girl, if you'll be trying your luck," the barker said, holding up the bow and arrows.

Some grumbling, some snickering, the boys begrudgingly parted and Aurora stepped up to the edge of the booth. The barker looked over to Gilliam then glanced down at the metal coin box.

Aurora reached out from beneath her cloak, and laid three coins along the counter beside the box.

The buzz of the crowd as side wagers were made grew silent.

The coins gleamed golden in the early morning sun.

"M'lady," the barker said, his voice shaking. "It's a mere three corona." He made to push the coins back towards her, but Aurora held out her hand.

"Consider it payment for these young men, who my uncle had you push so rudely to the side," Aurora said. "And let them take as many arrows as they need."

“O-of course, m’lady!” the man stammered, bowing. He handed her the bow, and she took it, turning it this way and that, as if she’d never even seen one before.

“No, m’lady, you hold it like this,” one of the boys said, turning the instrument over in Aurora’s hand, and placing her fingers in the proper place along the grip.

She smiled, and the boy turned nearly as red as the stone that glimmered ever so briefly on the girl’s wrist.

She took the offered arrow, and drew the bow much too quickly. She loosed even before she’d made a full draw, and the arrow sailed up and over the booth, into the thickets lining the curve in the roadway.

Men and boys alike guffawed, and Gilliam glared at the girl as he passed coins to various men in the crowd.

“Oops,” Aurora said in a small, absent-minded voice.

“Quite all right, quite all right,” the man at the booth said. “Have a dozen more arrows, just for such an occasion. Not to worry, m’lady.” He handed her another arrow.

Aurora drew again, and there was a brief scuffle as she turned at the waist. Men ducked and boys dove to one side or another.

The second arrow bounced along the length of the stall after skipping off the dirt flooring.

“Doing well, m’lady. Need three to work the charm, as they say. Let that White Witch have it with this one.”

Aurora snatched the arrow from the man’s hand, and drew the garishly colored fletchings to her cheek. Her shoulders rose with the indrawn breath, her back stiffening as she solidified her aim.

“Thorn, is that—“ Ana started, clutching at my arm.

A pinpoint of red-orange light gleamed at the tip of the arrow, answering the steady light from the stone on the girl’s gauntlet.

She released her breath, the arrow streaking into the straw-filled target without so much as a wobble. There was a flash of orange light, but the arrow continued through the dummy and into the bales of hay piled along the back of the

booth. A few wisps of smoke curled from the bale, and then flames began to lick from there as well.

In the time it took the crowd to gasp in wonder and then began to scramble back in panic, the dummy was fully ablaze, the last of the gown curling and blackening.

“Oops,” Aurora said, lowering the bow.

I raised a hand to reign in the flames before they became too wild to tame.

She set her hand on mine, shaking her head. The veins within the red dragonstone pulsed once, twice, and the flames died to nothing more than trailers of smoke.

“How could you?” Ana snapped, as we rounded the next bend in the broad avenue climbing towards the temple and citadel ruins. “People could have been hurt!”

“You missed those first two shots on purpose!” Gilliam sulked.

“He made a game of it,” Aurora said. “I will not have him or anyone else profiting from this!”

“Do you plan to do that to every attraction here? In case you hadn’t noticed, this place is swarming with guards.” Varis very nearly hit one of them as he flung his arm out to make his point.

The scarlet-cloaked soldier gave our group a long look, but turned and continued his rounds.

Aurora said nothing, but stalked away, her small hands balled into fists.

Several ranks of tents and pavilions had been set up on the broad grassy hillock between the ragged remains of a paradeway and the remains of Krakatos’ palace and temple complex. The pavilions were of argent and sable cloth, and those smaller tents not of the colors flew matching banners.

The crowds were thickest here, crowded shoulder to shoulder, lining the steps, standing on the broken walls. Some of the people simply looked out of curiosity. The closer we got to the broad plaza, the louder the mutterings grew.

“What if she does it again?”

“Not to worry. See, they’ve bound her in irons.”

“Is that really her? She’s so tiny! They said she was ten feet tall.”

“Not too close, or she’ll grab you and eat you!”

An iron cage hung from a crude but sturdy gibbet, and the crowd milled about it, kept at pike’s length by a ring of guardsmen in gleaming plate. Their cloaks were the deepest of black, edged in shining thread-of-silver.

The Black Eagle’s personal guard.

A stone’s throw from the cage, a thick wooden post had been driven into the flagstones, and passers-by threw branches down along its base. The stack was already knee-height.

“One at a time. No pushing. There is plenty to go ‘round. Just a few coppers.”

I could not say which angered me more: that someone had brought cart after cart of dry wood to the plaza, that the men were taking coin after coin, or that the lines were growing.

Silva huddled on what little of the straw they’d left in the cage, her knees drawn up to her chest. Thick irons banded her ankles, and the hem of the dress that she’d pulled tight around her was dark with scorch marks and dried blood. Her hair hung lank and tangled, hiding her features, as she rested her forehead upon her knees. A squared-off ridge of clamp-and-pin of a slave’s collar rose from the back of her neck. The blackened skin ringing the collar left little doubt that it, too, was of iron. Her wrists were red, raw and blistered, the silvery metal of her bracers tarnished a green so deep as to nearly be black where the iron touched them. Only the rise of her shoulders, the clanking of the chains joining the heavy iron manacles gave any indication that she still drew breath.

“Her skin...” Gilliam whispered. His voice was choked with equal measures anger and heartbreak. “Did they leave those irons in the forge overnight?”

“They may as well have,” I said. “She and Aurora must be part fey.”

"Part," Gilliam spat. "So it won't kill her outright. It'll just drive her mad with the pain." His hands clenched on the pommels of the longknives.

"It also hampers her magic," Ana said.

I well remembered how faint and distant my own magic had been while clapped in irons in the tower at Byxata.

"So the Black Eagle overwhelms her healing ability," Varis said, frowning as he thought his way through the logic. "If she has any magic left, it is spent to keep herself alive. One thing the Black Eagle is not, is a simpleton."

In the cage, Silva gave a shudder, lifted her head. Her pale skin was pallid, waxy. Her eyes glittered feverishly, yet at the same time were dull, distant.

"Zzonga," Gilliam murmured. "The Black Eagle dims her mind as well as her magic."

"Abominable," Ana hissed. "Where can this baron be found?"

Varis grabbed the girl's arm. "Patience."

"This is barbaric!"

"This is standard when dealing with a user of magic," Varis said. His voice was tight, but calm. "Do you wish to share the same fate? If you so much as raise a hand here, they will not hesitate to fill you with arrows laced with zzonga sap."

"They wouldn't!"

"What did you think those green-fletched arrows in the archer's quivers were for?"

Ana looked over at me, her eyes wide, pleading.

I shook my head. "There is nothing we can do. We must wait for Aurora's plan to unfold."

As the sun reached its zenith, the flaps of the largest pavilion stirred, and a tall, wiry man stepped forth. His hair and goatee were as black as the tunic, breeches and cloak that he wore. Sunlight gleamed from several rings on his fingers, and from the circlet upon his brow. The deep garnet clasped in the silver pommel of the sword at his side flashed as he strode across the lawn, guards to either side of him seeing that the crowds parted.

He stopped within the circle of soldiers surrounding Silva's cage. He waited for the girl to lift her head, and when she did, their eyes were level.

"My dear girl, I will ask once more. You stand accused of murder by necromancy. Have you anything to say in your own defense, or do you wish to voice an appeal before the people of the Grand Duchy?"

He glanced around at the crowd, a smile twisting at his lips, showing his teeth. *See how fair I am?* it seemed to say.

"I will speak!"

"As will I!"

"Me too!"

A flicker of surprise passed over the Black Eagle's face, quickly covered up by a carefully crafted mask of concerned interest.

The crowd's murmur increased to a babbling. Von Hendricks let it go on for another moment, and then lifted a finger from the pommel of his sword, motioning one of the guards forward.

The people hustled aside as the guard made his way into the crowd to where the voices had sprung.

He struggled back through the throng, herding three girls before him. Each had blonde hair of varying length, from barely brushing the shoulders of their cloaks to spilling in waves nearly half the way down the back.

They stood straight-backed before the baron, and bobbed curtseys, the shortest of them only after the girl next to her dug an elbow into her side. More silver caught the noontime sunlight. Medallions gleamed from about each girl's neck.

The Black Eagle stared down at the girls, his smile still in place.

"Well," the baron said, "and who might you be?" He squatted down, levering his sword from his hip and sliding it slightly behind him as he drew level with the tallest of the girls.

"I am Evelina," she said.

"I am Jasna," the second girl said, with another curtsey.

"I am Petra," the third girl said. "Mama named me for Halav's queen, and this is her very palace. Or... what's left of it."

The baron inclined his chin ever so slightly to each of the girls, his smile brightening at Petra's elaboration. He reached out and mussed her hair.

"So it is," he said. "And you no doubt know the importance of this place?"

The girls nodded.

"This is the Great Plaza," Petra continued, and then pointed to her left. "Petra's palace was there, and over there." She turned, pointing behind them, "that is where the temple stood. It used to belong to Khoronus but now we pray to Petra there, too." She frowned. "Do you think Khoronus minds that we do that?"

The Black Eagle laughed as he regarded the five cracked steps and jagged remains of walls and pillars.

"You can only speak the truth upon these stones," Evelina said, glancing down at her feet. "'Queen who cried o'er Hero who died, tears and blood bind our words to only be true.'"

The baron nodded, bringing his fist up to his circlet, down to his chin, and then resting it over his heart, as did everyone present, as has been the custom... well, since the earliest years after Halav. Something about the baron's stance, though, indicated that he performed the motion only from careful training, rather than any kind of belief.

He stood, slowly, and then gestured. "You wish to speak. You will do so, with Khoronus and Petra and Halav's blessings." It did not seem so much as he smiled as forced the corners of his lips upward.

"We would have spoken sooner, but it's a dreadfully long way to Fort D—" Jasna's words cut off as Evelina elbowed the girl in the ribs.

"Halag," Jasna wheezed.

The corner of the baron's eye twitched, but he nodded. "The winter has been very harsh," he said. He glanced up at the cloud-spotted sky. "But how the weather has changed since we captured the White Witch. What do you think of that?"

Jasna scowled. "She didn't do it."

The baron stood up straight, his eyes wide in shock. Were he not a baron, I might have suspected him of being amongst the many dramatists who performed here and there about the citadel.

“You know this for certain? Beyond a doubt’s glimmer?”

“She wouldn’t,” the girl said, her own back straightening.

“You have seen her work magic, have you not?”

Jasna’s level gaze up at the baron dropped to her feet. Her hands, which had gone to her hips, slid to clasp themselves before her.

“Come now, speak, girl. But know that you cannot speak falsely on this sacred ground.”

“I know,” she muttered.

“We saw.” It was Evelina who spoke, her voice faint.

“Ah,” von Hendricks said, leaning forward. He smiled again, and there was something predatory in the way he showed his teeth. “Let us hear of what you saw.”

Evelina glanced at the other two girls, who scowled at her, and then she swallowed, glancing up at the iron cage.

“She saved us,” Evelina said. “She got us away from the kobolds. She stopped the ogres from eating us. She got the tall man to let us go home. She put the trees back to sleep. She kept my village from burning down, and kept the beastmen from butchering us.”

Gilliam nudged my side with his elbow.

“Ho, ho, Thorn, I think that was the girl’s finest hour.”

I swallowed the lump I felt growing in my throat. Fine though it may have been, I feared it would only add to the burden of what she’d done at Tarnskeep.

“Please, do go on,” the Black Eagle said, waving his fingers at the girl before going back to stroking his goatee. “Tell me of the magic you saw the witch work.”

“She’s not a witch!” Petra said, stamping her foot.

Several of the guards shifted their stance, adjusting the grip on their pikes.

“Yeah, get all riled up at a little girl,” Varis muttered, his hand making its way to the hilt of his new sword. Ana rested her fingertips across his hand, and his grip relaxed, but I still saw the muscles work along the man’s jaw.

“I am eager to hear of how such a tiny girl could be capable of keeping an ogre from its next meal,” the baron said, a genuine smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“She—” Evelina started, but Jasna tread on girl’s boot, shaking her head. Evidently, she had the same sinking feeling as I.

“You are bound to the truth, and bid to speak by a baron of the Duchy, who also speaks for the Grand Duke’s law,” said one of the guards.

The law. Of course! This was what the Hierarch was hinting at while we sat by the fireside. I began to push my way through the crowd.

There came a rippling in the air beneath the cage, and Aurora stepped from the shadows with an irritated shake of her cloak.

The Black Eagle’s guards voiced several oaths that were not suitable for the ears of the young ladies present, pike heads snapping level with the shrike’s throat.

She gave the blades no more than a cursory glance, her hood turning towards the girls.

“You three,” she said. “Do not speak another word, and go back to your families.”

“But we—” Petra started.

“You may go now, or keep talking and heap more wood upon that pyre.”

The girls grew silent, staring at their boots.

“You will identify yourself at once,” the Black Eagle said, his back straight, hand on the hilt of his sword.

“Move along, now,” Aurora said to the girls. “If that man is fool enough to draw steel, I do not wish to risk any of you getting hurt. I do not think my sister would very much like that idea, either.”

“What is she playing at?” Gilliam asked. He’d followed me in my rush through the crowd, and made to push past me into the square, but I gripped his shoulder.

“Let us see how this plays out,” I said.

“Are you mad? She’ll be—”

"She'll be fine," I told him. "We had little chat about the finer points of the Grand Duke's laws."

The Black Eagle made a show of removing his hand from his sword, crossing his arms so as to get the most flutter from his silver-edged black cloak.

"I know all about this witch's little following," the baron said, "and I have had just about enough of the meddling. These are not affairs for little girls to trifle with. This is not a game, we will not be serving tea, we are here to see justice is done. And you will remain where you are," von Hendricks said, stopping the girls as they turned. "I have not given you your leave.

"So," he said, turning back to Aurora, "which one are you, hmm? Brynne? Katarin? Fiala, maybe? I know all of your names. Halaran listed each of you in his missives to my cousin. I should have all of you clapped in irons for conspiring with that traitor of the realm."

A good portion of the people gathered muttered or gave sharp exclamations. It was readily apparent that Baron Halaran had many supporters in the crowd. The three girls glanced worriedly at each other, and then cast their gaze out among the crowd. Gilliam watched carefully, noting where it was the girls looked. He tugged at Varis' cloak, made a few hand signs, and they began pushing their way through the crowd.

Aurora reached up and drew back her hood. "I claim the accused as my sister, and hereby lay claim to my right to appeal her case."

The hush swept through the crowd, quickly followed by murmurs of speculation. A ghost of a frown passed over the Black Eagle's brow, which he masked in a hastily erected look of concern.

"A 'family resemblance' can easily be fabricated, either by magic or stage paint and putty," the baron sneered. "I would have your names, and your country of origin."

As if from nowhere, a small, stoop-shouldered man in a deep brown robe appeared by the baron's side, a large tome clutched in one hand. He thumbed

through it, propping it open in one hand, an ink well precariously balanced on two outstretched fingers. He dipped a quill, and held it poised over the page, his bushy brown eyebrows raised in anticipation.

"I am—" Aurora began, and then stopped. She cleared her throat. "I am—" Again, her next words were cut off. She took several deep breaths, and then tried again.

"I am named Aurora by men, as my sister has been named Silva by the dwarves."

The quill bobbed as the little man scratched away in the book. He glanced up at the girl, and then at the baron.

"Your country of birth?" the scribe asked.

After a pause, Aurora said "Blackmoor. Though, I suppose, technically it would have still been 'Thonia.'"

The scribe hiccuped a laugh, nearly sloshing ink over the page. He chuckled one more time before his voice trailed off. I thought his scrawny neck would snap, so quickly did he raise his nose from the book.

"I do not know how you have circumvented the truespeaking," the baron said, his voice icy, "no doubt more foul magic like that of your... 'sister.'" Von Hendricks gave a flick of his fingers. "Guards, take these waifs into custody, and have them brought to my pavilion. Find the others, as well. "

"I wish to have a Lawspeaker present!" Aurora shouted, as the guards closed around her. "I demand a Lawspeaker, in the name of your Grand Duke!"

The guards paused, glancing again at their baron, and he motioned furiously for them to continue.

One of them reached into a heavy leather satchel, producing a thickly-braided rope. As he flung it, though, I saw it fan into a closely-spaced net. The other guards ducked away as it settled heavily over the girls. At first, they struggled, staggering under the weight, and then under the added weight of the sickeningly sweet, pungent zsonga fumes.

"Little girl," the baron said, staring down his nose at the weakening shriek. "Do you just expect me to wag my fingers and produce a druid? I tell you what, I'll

have my scribe produce one from his hat, along with some bunnies, one for each of your friends. Your stalling tactics are merely burning sunlight. The witch will burn with the sundown, and if you do not answer my questions, you will join her.”

There was a great press of bodies as the guards worked to disperse the crowd. Ana and I gave up trying to force our way through, and rather just let the people flow around us. It took nearly twenty minutes for the square to clear enough for us to make our way further towards the village of tents that had sprung up on the unpaved hillock curving around the plaza.

“Thorn, where has Silva gone?”

I glanced over towards the wooden frame from which Silva’s iron cage had been suspended. Several long links of chain dangled from the great arm, but the cage itself was gone.

“You there, move along!” A pair of black-cloaked guardsmen approached, hands on their swords.

“Are you deaf as well as—” The other guard nearly swallowed his tongue as I threw back my cloak.

“You will take me to your baron,” I said to the men. I was unfamiliar with the thread of power that thrummed through my voice. Ana also took a half step away, her fingers shying away from my arm.

The guards did not even speak, eyes wide, fumbling between a bow and a salute, then strode past us with gestures to follow.

“Thorn? What has happened here?”

“Aurora has invoked the rite of the Lawspeaker,” I told Ana. “It hails back to the earliest days of the Traldar. With so many clans spread over so much land, chiefs would often make their own laws, and those were as varied as the men who made them. While the druidic orders were originally founded to keep lore, as the most learned and traveled, so did the druids come to mediate disputes between clans, tribes, city-states.”

“But... your voice. Those men...”

“It is temporary,” I said, smiling despite myself. “It is tied to the land, and the people. While I carry the mantle as Lawspeaker, I have a certain amount of

privilege. I can compel men to speak the truth in my presence. It is more a suggestion than a compulsion. It does not rob men of their free will, and those who wish to keep their secrets will still be able to do so."

"And those who wish to lie will likewise do so," Ana said.

I nodded. "The power is not absolute, nor is my ability to tell truth from falsehood."

Ana smiled. "I begin to see my part in this."

"I will listen to the evidence the Black Eagle used to reach his decision, I will hear arguments against it from the accused, weigh it against the laws of the land, and then reach a final decision. I will be honest, though, Silva's case does not look promising. Strange as it may seem, the Black Eagle could very well be in the right."

"The man makes my skin itch," Ana said, shivering. "'The most powerful tool of evil is a honeyed tongue wrapped around a hollow truth.'"

Ana and I paused within arm's length of the Black Eagle's pavilion.

"—assured me this would go smoothly," I heard von Hendricks say. He spoke with the cold edge of patience worn thin as onion paper.

"Only your Thyatian roads are so straight and level. This road of you have chosen, it is coarse. It is rough. One does not send an army for upkeep of a hidden way, no? We expect stones in the path, my dear baron." This was a woman's voice, deep and rich and smooth, carrying the strange inflection of vowels common to Sindhi speakers of Thyatian.

"You said the brats would seal her doom. They were doing remarkably, until that... *sister* appeared and overturned the turnip cart!"

"The cards spoke of one fair of hair with a gift of silver seeing your plans to fruition," the woman's voice purred. "They could refer to these thralls of the witch. I still think they point to the witch herself. You gain much standing with your cousin by playing his game. A measure more of patience."

"If that cur and his men hadn't bungled the operation in Halaran's holdings I would already be seated at Stefan's right hand. Now I must put on this... show that gets more costly by the day. I could have hired two armies for half the cost of this mess."

The woman laughed. "Try marching the army of hobgoblins that coin would have bought this close to the capital. Merrymaking and a festival do more to win the people to your side than threats and a sword."

"The smiling makes my teeth ache."

A chorus of chains approaching ended the conversation. Three guards prodded the line of girls towards Ana and I. Manacles of iron bound each girl's wrists, one joined to another by an arm's length of chain. They blinked sleepily, bemused smiles on their lips as if they were still savoring a dream that hadn't fled with waking.

Aurora stood at the rear of the line, her hands bunched into white-knuckled fists, her eyes feverish and unfocused. The golden shards within the clear crystals adorning her wrists sparked and flickered unevenly.

Ana made to reach towards the girls, but I tugged at her sleeve, shaking my head ever so slightly.

"They are safe. To harm them would jeopardize his entire proceedings."

We stepped into the Black Eagle's pavilion, following Aurora. The girls were shepherded over to a long bench to the left of the entry flaps of the tent, while Ana and I stepped to the right.

The baron's tent was very large, nearly the size of the great hall of Tarnskeep, with other rooms partitioned off to either side. The roof peaked in two places, those posts taller than an ogre. Several layers of thick scarlet carpeting had been laid over the winter-barren grasses, and the Black Eagle seemed to've brought his furnishings from Halag with him. The benches, the tables, chairs were all cut of thick, blocky wood, already dark beneath an even darker stain, all hard angles and straight lines, accented by dark twists and bands of cast iron.

Ludwig von Hendricks reclined in a large, high-backed chair that seemed more at home in a throne room. This was the only piece of furniture with any adornment, the broad back of the chair above the baron's head decorated with an onyx eagle rampant within a silver shield the size of a serving platter. Points of orange and red light glinted upon the mirrorlike polish of the crest, reflecting the

smoldering coals of several of a number of dark iron braziers set about the circumference of the room.

The baron kept the tent positively stifling.

Sitting at the baron's side on a low three-legged stool was an older woman, with the darker complexion common to the wandering Darine. A good helping of gray shot through her thick wavy black hair. Her face was wrinkled with age, and yet none of them seemed to be in line with any sort of expression of mirth, or joy.

While the baron wore all black edged with silver, and his tent bore dark furnishings and the deep wine red carpet, it seemed the woman was making up for all the other missing colors at once: the toes of red leather boots peeked from beneath the hem of a long green dress, which itself was heavily embroidered in rich blue thread. The pattern swirled up the leftmost seam of the dress, disappearing into a wide sash dyed a brilliant yellow. She wore a yellow-fringed woolen vest paneled in orange over a scarlet blouse nearly the same shade as the baron's carpeting. Wound about the woman's neck and shoulders was a shawl of cream colored silk.

Unlike all the other Darine I had seen, she still wore a cacophony of gold bracelets, bangles, and charms about her wrists. Glints of gold peeked from the folds beneath her scarf, and several golden hoops hung from each earlobe.

Our eyes locked, and I felt the slightest of tremors of power brushing against the back of my neck, tickling up and down my spine.

I nodded to her, briefly. She did not return the gesture. I turned my attention to the baron, noted that for all the boredom he'd worked to show in his features, his dark eyes were sharp, alert.

"Your Lordship, I am Marcu Markovic, called Thorn, journeyman chronicler of the Third Circle in the northern Radlebb. I present myself to you as Lawspeaker."

The Black Eagle nodded in return, sipping a rich red wine from a crystal goblet he kept on a low granite-topped table by his throne. His eyes swiveled over the rim of the glass, regarding Ana.

"And this one?"

"I bring Ana, a priestess of the Silver Flame, from the Citadel in Sundsvall, as my Truthfinder."

The baron took another sip from the goblet, too late to hide the beginnings of a sneer. He didn't bother to keep it from his voice, either. "Another foreigner, and a woman. No, barely more than a girl. Surely you could do better than that. I'm sure there are a number of brown frocks out there among the rabble." He sighed, then drained his goblet. "Well, one cultist is as good as another, I suppose. Very well. Let us get on with this, shall we?"

"If I may, my Lord?" Ana asked, patting at the pouch at her waist.

The baron wagged a finger, and one of the guards stepped forward. He grunted in disdain when all she produced was a white wax candle and a smaller white leather pouch.

"There is plenty of light in here," von Hendricks said. Even so, he gestured for the guard to bring forth a taper from one of the braziers.

Ana held the candle above it, then settled the candle in the puddle of its own wax upon a low table. The guard touched the taper to the wick, and a clear, golden flame rose forth. The girl opened the small white pouch, sprinkling a circle of silvery sand in a circle around the candle. She whispered a word, and the flame stopped its dancing and fluttering, standing straight and tall. She flicked another pinch of the silver dust at the flame, and it flared, growing higher, the light changing from golden to bright, molten silver.

The baron watched this, black-gloved fingers drumming on the arm of his chair.

"I am Ana, servant of the Flame, come from the land of Alphatia," the girl said, speaking directly to the candle. The flame did not waver even though she stood directly next to it, still close enough that her breath could have put it out.

"I am Empress Eriadna, of the—" The flame guttered, fluttering as if struck by a stronger disturbance than just the girl's breath.

"Well, isn't that something?" von Hendricks asked, his tone bemused.

"Silverburn," the woman next to the baron said. "I have seen it used many times, for good and ill." At this, she narrowed her eyes slightly as she regarded Ana. "Still, it is as reliable a scale to weigh truth as a Darokinian lending house would weigh out gold."

"Very well."

"Then you accept the means my Truthfinder uses?" I asked the baron.

"Yes!"

I nodded. "Then where would your Lordship like to begin?"

"You will tell me your name," the baron said, leaning forward in his chair.

"I have the right... to see my sister," Aurora said, through clenched teeth. "I wish to see her."

"Not until you provide me with proof of your identity. Give me your names. Yours and that of your... *sister*."

"I cannot do that," the shrike mumbled.

The silver candle flame did not waver.

"You ask her, then, druid." The baron waved a hand at me. "Perhaps your voice will persuade her."

"You and the girl with the eyes of silver are sisters?" I asked her.

Aurora nodded. "We are."

"She does not speak falsely, my Lord," Ana said.

"That was not what I—" The words came out nearly a snarl.

"Your Lordship, the Law is satisfied. You must allow them to speak." Much as I hate to admit it, it felt good, turning the Law back on the Black Eagle. Two could play this game.

He sat back on his dark throne, tapping a finger on the broad arm. After several moments of sulking contemplation, he wagged a finger at one of the guards, who turned and raised the entrance flap of the tent, barking orders.

After another wait punctuated by the irritated (and irritating) tapping of the baron's fingers on the arm of his throne, six more guards stepped into the pavillion.

Silva barely managed to stand upright between them. A long post was held by two of the guards, crooked in the siren's arms and fed behind her back. Her wrists were manacled before her, the thick iron links drawn taught by the tension in her arms.

The collar about her neck had been changed, still just as thick as the one she'd worn in the cage, but two more guards bore thinner shafts of dark wood, the

tips joined to either side of the collar. A twist of one or the other of those poles would snap her neck in an instant.

The remaining guards bore short-shafted spears with broad barbed tips of dull metal. Iron, not steel.

Aurora rose to her feet, her clouded eyes sharpening. Her fists tightened once more, the flickering golden glimmers from the stones at her wrists steady.

The guards standing by the girls snapped their polearms across each other. Silva's guards forced the siren to her knees, wrenching the collar downwards, forcing her eyes towards the carpets.

"How. Dare. You!" Aurora hissed each word, her eyes beginning to smolder with a deeper golden light than that which shone from her bracers.

"Nieah."

The word came out a gasp, barely more than a breath. Aurora turned back towards her sister.

"Let me see her," the shrike said.

"She is there for you to see," the baron said.

"She is wounded."

"She is a witch and must be prevented from using her powers!"

"She is my sister and she is hurt and I will comfort her!"

The shrike's voice rolled forth with a nearly physical presence. It pressed against me, and I saw Ana, too, blink at the sudden wave of power.

The baron sat forward, waving his hand before him, as if to brush away a gnat.

"If you speak again in such a manner, I shall take your tongue," he said, his voice cold and level.

"You may approach the prisoner," I said. "You may speak with her, but may not aid her in any way."

"She is hurt!"

"The Law states that prisoners are to be kept in a manner in accordance to their crime," I said, running through the Grand Duke's Articles in my mind. "She has used magic, and therefore is kept in such a manner as to dissuade her using it. The Grand Duke has not made considerations for one of sidhe blood."

"I do not need to touch her, though it would make things simpler," Aurora said, giving the baron a dark look. "But I must be closer."

"You will not aid in her escape?" I asked

"I will not."

Again, the silver flame did not waver.

"Oh, very well," the baron said, waving a hand. "But I will have you in just such a collar if you try any of your tricks."

"I would speak with my sister in private."

The baron sat up straight, scowling. "Be glad I have let you—"

"Your Lordship, they are entitled to private conference."

"You mean to evict me from my own tents? To leave these two witches unguarded? What kind of a fool do you take me for, Lawspeaker?"

"Only one who keeps to the laws of the land, your Lordship," I said. It was an effort to keep the smile from my lips. "I shall be present, and will intervene if necessary, and will call your guards at the first opportunity."

The baron's scowl deepened, but he sat back on his throne. "Very well. I think it is nearly time for lunch. You have one hour."

It would have been the simplest of things, to call the heat from the braziers' coals or the cold from the bones of the hilltop into the brittle iron of the manacles. The cracks and weaknesses in the metal were many.

Aurora's invoking of the rites of the Lawspeaker were as much for her own protection as my own. While my concern for the two sisters was still there, it was distant, diffuse, as the lights from the lanterns on the fishing boats on the fog-shrouded Lake Windrush.

The shrike made a slow circle around the siren, golden light from the stones on her wrists still bright, her eyes sharp.

"I should call the guards," I told her.

"I have used no magic. They have no right to shroud my mind as they have my sister. I pose no danger here."

The silver-blued shadows danced along the walls of the tent.

Aurora stopped. "Just... how much does that flame know?"

“As much as you and I and Silva,” I told her. “You’d best make use of the time the baron has given.” I bit down on the ‘until sundown.’ Distant though my concerns were for the two, particularly for Silva, they were still there, and even fogs have swirls and eddies of clarity. Going over what I knew of the events, I could see no loopholes, no gaps in the Grand Duke’s laws, save his appearance and pardon. Such an event was as likely as it was precedented.

Aurora knelt by her sister’s side, her hands hovering so very near the other girl’s cheek. She moved to stroke her hair, drawing back as the dangling iron links swung too close. The shrike made a small, frustrated sound, finally reaching for Silva’s hand, clasping slack fingers in her own.

“Thorn, she is so cold! What has he done to you, my little sister?”

“*Agrajhmiti ya catur nimesa,*” Silva murmured, the words heavily slurred.

“This is not right. She is speaking the Northern dialect of Thonian. We are not supposed to do that when dispatched to another continent. We adopt the speech of the first sentient we encounter.”

“She speaks as she has since I met her,” I told the girl.

Aurora carefully brought her fingers to the girl’s chin, raising her head so they could look eye to eye.

Their expressions, both of them, were symphonies of emotion: relief, fear, elation, anger, joy... all of these and more etched themselves one after another. Were it not for Silva’s grayish pallor and sunken eyes, it would have been as if each stared into a looking glass, one beneath the moon, the other the sun.

My mother tended to many of the births, in and around Stallanford, and more than a few of those were twins. Good friends of my elder brothers were one such pair, and they seemed to share a strange bond, exchanging more than just glances with their glances. I remember rushing home from play as pirates along the river, the elder of the boys dropping his stick of a sword, calling to us that his brother was in trouble. Indeed, we found him curled beneath a fallen tree branch, where he had tried to climb even though he was supposed to be abed with a fever and chills. My mother told me that this was not uncommon in twins.

How much could these two share in a glance? With a touch?

After a long silent moment, Aurora sat back, her breath hitching in her throat. She wiped at her eyes, not seeming to notice the angry red welts left on her cheeks by the touch of the manacles or chains. These did not last overly long, as the white stones upon her circlet glimmered to life.

"It is true, Thorn. As it said in the druidess' account. She does not challenge her fate. She embraces it."

"But if you and she are alike, then she will come back, will she not?"

Aurora shook her head. "She is somehow... broken, Thorn. She is not linked to the others. I must be very close to feel *her*, yet I know where each of my other sisters are at all times."

They spent the remainder of the hour seated, knees touching, hands joined. Aurora's grip was tight, nearly white-knuckled, while Silva's hand sat slack in those of her sister.

The Black Eagle returned, stepping from another room partitioned off from the pavilion, the older Darine woman on his arm. He made sure she was settled on the small stool by his great black throne before he sat. He wagged a finger at one of the guards, and the three girls from around the Barony were led back into the tent, seated as before on the long wooden bench.

"So, you have spoken with your sister," von Hendricks said.

"I have, your Lordship," Aurora said, turning to face the baron, rising with a slight curtsy. "I humbly withdraw my request for appeal, and submit my sister to the punishment your Lordship has deemed necessary for her crimes."

My breath caught. Ana let out a gasp, and the three girls cried out in protest. Jasna actually made it to her feet before a guard could push her back down to the bench with a snarl.

"Very well," the baron drawled, waving his hand. "The accused will be returned to confinement. The rest of you may return to your families. And you," the baron pointed to Aurora, "will remain close by under the eyes of my guard. I will have no interference from you."

Aurora nodded. "I will not interfere with your justice."

Well, at least I can be satisfied with the knowledge that she did not blatantly lie to the Black Eagle.

We stepped from the baron's pavilion into early afternoon sunlight.

No sooner had we cleared the edge of the muddy hilltop then did a flurry of cloak-and-dresses streak away from the crowds, nearly bowling me over.

"Master Thorn, you must come quickly! They—" The girl's voice came in sharp gasps, whether it was from the running or the strength of emotion behind her words was hard to say. Her eyes were red and swollen, and tears cascaded down her cheeks. It took a moment for me to recognize Katarin — the girl training to become Eltan's Spring's Wisdom after her mother.

"The guards— they are going to take the swordsmen— They sent me to get you and Mistress Ana. You must come quickly!"

"Where? Which way?"

"The market plaza," the girl said, tugging me along after her.

We ran. Or tried to. Mostly I had to force the crowds apart. The press of people grew thicker, and their mood more agitated the closer we got to the lower market plaza, and Katarin led me straight towards the thickest knot of people, where the voices were loudest.

"Here, now, come away from there, you! Just give it back, now!"

More than one guard was shouting more or less the same instructions from many sides of an open space around two overturned tables. Four men in black cloaks over eagle-engraved breastplates stood with swords drawn, the tips pointing towards Gilliam and Varis. The warriors' scabbards were empty, their swords lying behind the Black Eagle's guardsmen.

At the edge of the open space, several flashes of blonde hair and silver caught my eye. A guard closed on one of Silva's army, and she spun, something glittering arcing away from her hands, to be caught by another girl in the clear. After a moment's watching, it became clear that several games of "keep the treasure" were being played.

One of the guards anticipated a throw, and leapt, batting one of the treasures from its flight. There was a ring of metal on stone, a flash of silver against the pale afternoon sunlight, and the guard bent, reaching for the trinket.

The haft of Ana's scythe came down hard against the back of the guard's hand.

"Why you—" he started.

"Do not touch it!" Ana said to him, and his other hand froze in place, where it had been making a grab for the bauble.

Katarin scurried away from my side, darting out to snatch up the pin in a handkerchief. I saw a dull glimmer of red against the white cloth and looked looked over the edge of the crowd.

"Forget the girls," Varis was telling the guards watching him. "You need to get after the others who've made off with that jewelry."

"Wouldn't have had that problem if you hadn't upended those tables, now, would we?" the guard asked with a sneer.

Katarin danced away from the crouching guard as he tried to grab for her, and she emptied her handkerchief into a leather sack that sat by one of the table's legs.

"We're not taking them," she told another of the guards. "We're trying to return them!"

"See here, miss, taking what doesn't belong to you —"

"It's not theft when you're returning it," she said. "I know the Grand Duke's law, and we are to be afforded immunity in cases such as these."

Katarin's mother was teaching her well.

"See here, we will see to that," the guard sputtered.

"You have no gloves," Ana said, making her way up to the guard. "You will not touch a single one of these, and will instruct your men to do the same, unless their hands are gloved."

The guard's back straightened. "I will not be ordered about by a couple of— of girls."

But Ana was not listening to him. She turned, glaring over the table at the merchant, a small man with rather large hands and a shaggy mop of dark hair.

“Where did you get those?” she asked, rapping the butt of her staff against the stones by the sack of jewelry.

The man brought those big hands up to cover his face. “Please, mistress, I don’t mean no harm. Just trying to make an honest living.”

“Where?” she asked again, her voice only slightly warmer than the air on which it carried.

“You have to understand, there’s good profit in these trinkets. For you... only ten kopecs!”

“I am not interested in buying. I need to know where you got these.”

The man frowned at her, over his fingers. “Oh, now. What’s to say you won’t go to my source, set up your own stall, and—”

Ana brought the staff down again, this time between the man’s feet. The man nearly leapt up and over the table. Several of the guards winced.

“I am no merchant,” Ana told the man, as she leaned over him. Her amulet of faith dangled just above the man’s eyebrows. “Do you see this? Do you know what it is?”

The merchant frowned again. “Well, it doesn’t look like anything I sell. If you’re not satisfied with it, I’ve got one here, that—”

“I am not interested in buying,” Ana repeated.

“She may not be, but I am.”

I turned, to see Aurora squeezing past the last of the spectators.

The merchant nearly knocked Ana over as he scrambled over the table, towards the girl.

“Mistress, my apologies for the... disarray.” He glanced over his shoulder at Gilliam and Varis, giving the two of them the darkest of looks. “If you give me a moment to lay them all out again, I am sure you will find one that pleases you.”

“There is no need for that,” she said. She did not even look at the man, but was instead scanning the clear area around the tables. Another of Silva’s army scooped up a glittering bauble in a handkerchief.

“A moment, mistress, is all I need to—”

“I will buy the entire lot.”

The merchant's babbling stopped, mid-stream. His eyes actually bulged.
"M'lady?"

"All of them. Take a count of what is here, as well as those you have already sold, as well as those gone missing." Her fingers slipped into the pouch at her waist, and she produced several thick golden coins.

"Best not to show too much of that, your ladyship," huffed a black-cloaked guard as he muscled through the crowd. "Between the gutter rats following from Specularum and the infestation of Darine, you'll be lucky to keep that gown on your back, you go calling attention to yourself like that."

I am always amazed how polite men — especially merchants — get in the company of even a single golden coin. Would they have addressed Aurora as a queen or empress, had they seen the fortune in gemstones she used to repair her sword while we traveled through the Lost Valley.

The merchant practically drooled. Aurora snapped her fingers, and he blinked, his gaze finally moving to her eyes. He gave a shudder, stepping back.

"Your inventory," she said. "Quickly!"

She may as well have cracked a whip, the way the man jumped at the word. He dug through the tangle of dark tablecloth, finally producing a long wooden tablet. The man looked it over, chewing at his thumbnail. He set the tablet down, and fished out a metal strongbox. He gave it a shake.

"Two score, less ten sold," he said.

Aurora waved a hand towards the two swordsmen. "You two, right this table."

Varis glowered at the girl, and glanced down at the two swords still leveled at him.

"Release those men. They have done no harm here," she said to the guards. The reddish stones on her wrists glimmered for just a moment, and the guard's own scowls at being ordered about suddenly faded. While they didn't sheathe their swords, they stared at them as if wondering how they'd gotten into their hands. They glanced over at the merchant.

Aurora didn't need to use any magic on the merchant, simply rubbed two of the thick Blackmoorian coins together. "No," he said, his voice somewhat distant. "No harm done at all."

The two warriors went first for their swords.

"Those can wait. This cannot," Aurora told them.

"I've seen you throw a goblin across a room," Gilliam said. "Remind me why you're having us do this?" He and Varis heaved the thick-cut table back upright.

Aurora smiled sweetly at him.

"Right," he said. "Golden rule."

Ana upended the sack, and carefully picked apart the tangle of jewelry and trinkets with one of her long silver picks.

"Nineteen," she said.

Katarin dropped another one onto the tangle.

Aurora drummed her fingers on the tabletop. "Twenty to account for," she whispered to herself.

Silva's army lined up across the table from the shrike. I counted seven heads of blonde hair.

Aurora frowned at them. "What?"

"Our sister wished us to be here to aid her," Katarin said. "You are her sister, and so ours as well. We will aid you to the best of our abilities."

She regarded the girls for a long moment, her golden eyes darting to each of them. She seemed to reach some sort of decision, closing her eyes and shaking her head. "I thank you for your offer, but your abilities will not be enough," she told them.

Several feet stamped, and seven voices tumbled one over the other.

"But we want to help!"

"We belong to the Order of Petra! It's our duty to help!"

"Her obligation is ours, since she can't do anything to help!"

Ana turned to me, an eyebrow raised. "Save Threshold, capture a wanted fugitive, and now this?"

“Don’t forget we also helped you escape the —” Brynne dug an elbow into the side of the girl beside her, cutting her off.

“Ixnay,” Brynne said, jutting her chin towards the guards. The other girl blushed.

Aurora frowned, cocking her head to one side. “What is an ixnay?”

The girls burst into giggles, and the shrike seemed about to fume, but turned her gaze instead to the bloodstone jewelry. She shook her head.

“Twenty pieces.” She glanced up at Ana. “How many could you track?”

“One, perhaps two, if they were powerful enough. But with this many people, this much ground to cover...” She shook her head as well.

Two of the girls, the youngest two, were jumping up and down. “We can cover a lot of ground! We’re small, we can squeeze through the crowds. And we know what to look for!”

“And what is it you might be looking for, my *Karos*?”

Demarra’s voice was a warm breath in my ear, and was followed by a playful nip. Only the fact that she’d locked her hand about my wrist kept my feet on the ground as I gave a start.

“Halav’s balls, woman,” I gasped, rounding on her. “I have been through the Hells this past two weeks. Do not sneak up on me like that, unless you want a face full of flames.”

She quirked a smile at me. I turned again as Gilliam and Varis both cleared their throats.

“The lady has been behind you nearly since we got here,” Varis said.

“We were wondering when you would notice her,” Gilliam said. He looked over to Varis. “You owe me three silvers.”

The girls giggled. All of them.

“Trinkets such as these?” Demarra asked. She did not reach for any of the pieces on the table. “They are very well made. I might wish to buy one myself.”

The merchant leaned slightly away from the woman. She was clad in a worn, patched tunic over a skirt of several layers of some wispy, gauzy fabric. It was hard to tell if the fabric was worn out, or if it was supposed to have the slits and slashes

that flowed one way against the other, lining up at times to reveal a shapely expanse of—

“Save your coin for a better pair of boots,” the merchant snarled. “These aren’t for sale to the likes of you.”

“Should we point out to him that Aurora isn’t even wearing boots?” Gilliam whispered to Varis.

Guards as well as a few of the bystanders snickered at that.

“Well, your Ladyship.” Demarra flowed into a deep curtsy, and held the position, her hair brushing the flagstones. “I would do you the service of finding these trinkets which you seek.”

“Find their way right into her—”

“Your business is finished here,” Aurora said. A subtle weight hung on her voice, one I was familiar with from my few times at court. “Take up your strongbox and scurry off. And should you see this merchant friend of yours who was so eager to be rid of these, you will tell him I am most interested in his inventory.”

The merchant bowed, scrabbling for the money box resting at his feet. “Yes, of course, your Ladyship. How shall I instruct him to find your Ladyship?”

Aurora narrowed her eyes, her pale lips drawing back. For a fraction of a heartbeat, I was struck with the powerful notion of a she-wolf, on the trail of newly scented prey. I half expected the girl to tip her head back and howl.

Instead, she simply said “I shall find him.”

The merchant paled, turned, and fled.

The shrike bent low, taking the Darine woman’s hands in her own, bringing the woman upright. “We would be honored if you would so us this service.”

“In Zirchev’s name, then, my Lady,” she said.

“Just let it not turn out like last time,” Aurora said.

Demarra winked. “We shall see.”

Then she, too, was gone, laughing as the crowd partied hurriedly for her, spectators’ hands clutching at pockets and purses.

“There were seven of us, we could help more than one of her,” Petra pouted.

“Six,” Varis said.

Katarin looked down the line of girls. "Jasna." She spoke the name nearly as a curse.

"She slipped off after our merchant friend," Gilliam said. "Would you like me to...?"

Gilliam looked at the two guards standing watch over him. They glanced over at their sergeant. He grunted.

"No trouble from either of you," the soldier said.

Gilliam bowed, scooping up the twin longknives. He sheathed them with a flourish, and the crowd parted for him nearly as enthusiastically as it had for the Darine.

Aurora reached for one of the overturned benches, and Varis and I moved to it before she could settle her grip on it. We righted it, and then dragged another over to the other side of the table.

"There are demonstones loose out there, and you are going to simply sit here?" Ana asked. "We should be—"

"Waiting," Aurora interrupted. "The Dara and her kin will bring the missing... items... back." The shrike glanced meaningfully towards the guards, and the crowd they were dispersing. "There is no need to cause undue panic."

"But they—"

"Are the folk best suited for this sort of task," Varis said. Ana took a seat next to the warrior, and I sat next to her. Aurora sat to my right. The six girls took seats opposite us.

"You have pretty hair," Petra said to Ana. "Mine is plain and boring and blonde."

"She is from Alphatia," Katarin said.

"I didn't think the highborn cared enough about the world to take the vows of the order of the Flame," Evelina said.

Ana blushed, shaking her head. "Highborn? I certainly am not."

"But all the pureblooded Alphatians have hair of midnight and skin and eyes of ice. Aren't all of them of the ruling class?"

"I suppose I could rule if I so wished," Ana said. "But I have no lands, and certainly no subjects. I have no money, so I could not even buy a title, as seems to

be common here on the continent." She shrugged, but smiled. "My options appear to be somewhat limited."

"You miss nothing," Aurora said. "Rulership is a burden I would not wish upon my worst enemy."

"How do we know we can trust these Darine?" Ana asked. "The people, the merchants, they all treat them as if they are all thieves or worse."

"My da says they steal children away in the night," Petra said. "He thought it was the Darine took me, until Ma pointed out that it wasn't anywhere near their season to come through."

"They are a wandering folk," Katarin said. "Mother says it is because they lack a land of their own that people distrust them. The roads are their home, and it is said that they cannot camp twice in the same spot during their lifetime."

"Why do they wander?" Ana asked.

"The Immortals put a curse on them when they abandoned their nation," said Brynne.

Ana looked over to me. "Thorn, is this true?"

"We know they left these lands during the early years of the Beastman invasions. They wandered the far Sindhi deserts for the next four hundred years, and then returned. As far as Immortal curses go..." I shrugged. "We know they revere Zirchev, though the relationship appears to be somewhat... unorthodox. It is not something that Demarra and I have ever discussed." I could feel heat creeping into my face. Discussion was usually the last thing on Demarra's mind.

"They do not wander," Aurora said, when the silence stretched overly long. "To wander would imply that they have no destination in mind. And you could call their condition a curse, I suppose. It is a curse they willingly accepted."

"They knew of the invasion, they had seen it in Zirchev's Stones."

"Stone," Katarin said. "There is only one. The Eye of Traldar."

Aurora sat back, regarding the girl with a look a teacher might give an impertinent student.

"Describe this stone for me," Aurora said.

"Everybody knows what the Eye of Traldar looks like. It is yellow-orange, like the eye of a dragon, set in a frame of gold."

“It is red, shot through with gold, though when it glows, it would appear orange,” Aurora said. She pushed her arm forward on the table, and the stone above her right wrist took light.

“There are many such stones, though they were rare in Traldar’s age, nearly nonexistent today.”

Half a dozen pairs of eyes widened.

“You mean to tell us that the artifact of legend is one of your dragonstones?” Varis asked.

“You can see the future in it?” Petra leaned nearly halfway across the table.

The red dragonstone flickered and went dark. “It is not quite so simple,” Aurora said. “If the stars align just so, or if a lengthy ritual is enacted... then the veil parting present and future lifts for a very short time.”

“Could you—”

“No.”

“Not even just a—”

“No,” the shrike said.

Petra sad down with a huff, crossing her arms. “You just don’t want to show us.”

Aurora smiled. “It is no small task. Tell me, do any of you have a diamond of perfect clarity?”

“Of course not,” Brynne said. “Where would we—”

“They need to be of perfect clarity, each cut to a very specific angle.”

“They?” Petra asked.

“We would need at least three, though the image sharpens and the depth of temporal focus increases with each priming.”

Aurora began ticking items off on her fingers. “The ingredients for the mixture applied to the eyes would need to be located, if they even still grow these days. Those viewing would need to fast...”

Petra waved her hands at the shrike. “Never mind. It’s too much trouble!”

Aurora quirked a smile. “Your namesake said much the same thing.”

"You knew Queen Petra?"

"My memories are... entwined... with one who did."

"What was she like?"

"Is Halav as handsome as the tapestries and stories make him out to be?"

Aurora leaned low over the table. "I must swear you to secrecy if I speak of any of this," she whispered. "Have I your solemn oaths that you will not speak of this to anybody but those of us at this table?"

"What about Jasna?"

"Well, she should not have run off, now, should she?" Ana said.

"Swear upon your medallions if you agree," Aurora said.

Each of the girls did so.

"Halav was a very fine looking man, perhaps even more so than the stories do him credit. And very charismatic. Petra was... very strong-willed. She was kind, and generous, and very loyal to those she called friend, and to those she served as Queen. But she was also very possessive and intensely jealous.

"They spent the night before Halav's battle with the beastman king apart. She came to Halav's tent the next morning and had to fish him out from under the princesses of several other city-states and tribes.

"Let us just say that had the beastman king not done the Traldar king in, Petra surely would have."

Varis gave a snort of a laugh. "The tales say that she and Zirchev brought him back to life."

Aurora nodded, smiling. "She hadn't finished berating him."

The laughter around the table was interrupted by the approach of a dusky-skinned man with dark hair. He was dressed in well-worn traveling clothes of garish-but-faded colors. He strode up to Aurora, and went to one knee, bowing his head.

"By Zirchev's will, have I brought to you that which you seek. Let this service be a grain of sand towards our patron's forgiveness."

Aurora took the plain white handkerchief the man held out to her. "You did not touch it?"

"No, Vin Zletja Solijma."

"And you give this to me freely?"

"It holds no place in my heart, and is my gift to you."

"Then let our scales be balanced and the edge of Death and Phelia and Odir's wrath be dulled."

The man pressed Aurora's knuckles to his forehead before he rose, backing away. He waited for the shriek to turn her gaze away before he departed.

Aurora unwrapped the handkerchief, and added two pins to the collection on the tabletop. Bloodstones, each perhaps the size of a pea, were worked into the star-flower design of silver.

Over the course of the afternoon, men and women of Demarra's clan approached, and the exchange would be repeated. The Darine recovered seventeen pieces.

As the sky began to bleed towards pink and orange, Demarra sought us out. There was a swirl of skirts as she settled on one knee before Aurora.

"We have a problem," she said. Unlike the other Darine, she met Aurora's golden eyes. "It would be best if you saw for yourself."

Ana gathered up the tainted jewelry and we left the market square, following Demarra steadily west and slightly north. Every now and then she would pause, running her fingers over the same spot on the underside of her wrist through the sleeve in her tunic. As we passed through shadows, I could have sworn I saw glimmers of bluish light through thin points in the fabric.

Petra was not so discreet as to simply look and wonder. "What's that?" she asked, pointing.

Demarra slid her sleeve up, revealing what I'd thought for ages to simply be a tattoo emblazoned across the bottom of her wrist. The edges of it smoldered with a reddish light, the main lines burning a brilliant, silvery blue. It looked to be a collection of strokes and loops, not a rune or glyph or sigil, but something more... wild, primitive.

"It is the Seeker's mark," she said. "All of my clan bear it."

"The artist who painted it there is a master," Varis said.

“Paint?” Demarra’s brows rose. She shook her head. “No, no, it is no vulgar skin-painting. It is as much of us as is our hair or teeth or nails. We are born with it, all of my line.”

“It’s magic,” Petra said. It wasn’t exactly a question, but Demarra nodded just the same.

“Zirchev guides me to that which I seek through this mark. For others, he aids their travels. Others have a mastery over beasts or the weather. The different clans have different talents. Some bear more intricate markings than others. My cousin Svenka bears a similar mark all along her lower arm, and can pick a path through the most difficult terrain, whereas all I can do is find a specific thing or know which direction it is I face even in total darkness.”

“If I had that mark, I’d never lose my slippers,” Petra breathed.

We came up to another tight knot of people. One man pushed past us at our approach, his eyes wide.

The crowd gasped as one, and above them rose a familiar voice:

“I said let her go!” Gilliam shouted.

“Not until she gives me back my property.”

My heart seemed like it wanted to crawl up my throat. It was Silva’s voice, but rimed with a roughness like broken ice.

“Silva?” More than one of the girls whispered the name, and they glanced at each other. As one, they wriggled their way through the crowd. We plunged through after them.

“The runt has taken something that belongs to me. Thievery must be punished, mustn’t it? I think taking the finger she would put that ring on will suffice.”

Silva held Jasna, one of the girl’s arm twisted about behind her back, the other arm held outstretched, pale fingers curled around the girl’s wrist. Corners of white linen peeked from a balled-up fist.

Except that Silva was wearing a woolen gown the shade of drying blood. What at first appeared to be black trim at the base of the sleeves was not fabric, but blackened, barbed metal. Rather than the high collars we were used to seeing on

her and Aurora, this gown was cut low — not immodestly so. A silver pendant hung about the girl's neck, the bloodstone nearly matching the dye of her dress.

Jasna winced. The would-be Silva must have given her arm a tug.

"Give it back and this will stop," she hissed in the girl's ear.

Her eyes were the same moonglow silver, but they seemed to carry the faintest of reddish sheens, as Matera does riding through eclipse-shadows.

"Let her go!"

"Why are you hurting our sister?"

"You aren't supposed to touch them! You told us not to!"

"Girls..." I tried to catch their attention, but a dozen eyes were on the pair struggling in the clear spot of stone.

Gilliam stood a short distance away, one sword half-drawn, his other hand outstretched, warning the girls back.

"That is not your sister," he called back to them, his own eyes not leaving the figure in red.

"Of course she is!" Petra shouted back.

"No..." Katarin said. She touched the side of her head. "She is not speaking to us *here*."

Jasna's hand twisted, and then she stiffened, giving another sharp cry.

"Do not think to pass the trinket to one of your friends, unless you wish them to take your place."

"Those are not Silva's eyes," Brynne said. "Hers are not so hard. So cruel."

"Be careful, *sister*," Aurora said, as she stepped away from the crowd. "You're beginning to present."

The thinnest of lines of red shone from the lower eyelids of the girl opposite Aurora. She gave a snarl, then took a deep breath, her back straightening somewhat. The glimmer of redness faded. Her expression flowed into something calm, composed. She smiled, and I gave a shiver. Had she not held a girl before her with a grip that could break one or both arms with the simplest of motions, I would have been fooled by the sincerity.

The grip encircling Jasna's wrist tightened, and there came a hard, distinct 'crack.' Jasna — to her credit — did not cry out, but her eyes widened, the muscles

along her jaw bulging as she bit back the scream. Her fingers spasmed, and the white bundle fell from her grip.

Silva's twin gave the girl a shove, sending her sprawling so she would have to catch herself on the broken wrist. She fell with a scream, and Ana rushed to her side, along with two of the other girls.

The girl was quicker than Gilliam, dropping to her haunches and fishing something delicate and silver from the handkerchief. She held it between her thumb and forefinger, turning it this way and that, and I saw it was a silver ring set with three round-cut bloodstones. She slid it onto her right-hand ring finger. The left already bore a similar ring.

Gilliam turned his dive for the ring into a roll, the longknife coming clear of the scabbard, whistling as he brought it down in a backhanded strike.

The girl caught it with her forearm, the blade sliding cleanly through, as we'd seen Silva do with the guard in the Black Woods.

But the blood that dripped from the tip of the blade as it emerged from the girl's arm was black, not red. The paving stones hissed and smoked where the droplets fell. The gown's sleeve smoldered as it soaked up the dark blood.

She smiled, the expression harsh and feral. The teeth she exposed looked much sharper than those I remember being in Silva's mouth. She gave a low chuckle, the same jagged ice-like brittleness to her voice.

"My thanks for the gift, son of the mountains and sand." She leaned down and pressed her lips to his.

Gilliam tried to scramble backwards, the heels of his boots scraping for purchase, but the girl had entwined her left hand in his hair, her knuckles white. She brought her right arm around, dragging the blood-slicked longknife up the side of his neck, over his cheek. Her eyes gleamed silver and hungry through the spray of blood, and then she let him fall away.

In the split second my attention wavered from the girl to Gilliam, shadows thickened, gathered around her, and she was gone...

"Gilliam!" Ana made to dash from the side of the whimpering Jasna.

Aurora stopped her with an upraised hand. "No, stay with the youngling."

The warrior was curled on his side, redness welling and seeping from between his fingers as he tried to staunch the flow from his throat and cheek at the same time. It was difficult to tell if the bubbling of his breathing came from the wound in his neck or from the blood that oozed into his mouth.

"Fire, Thorn," Aurora said, kneeling at my side by Gilliam. "Quickly!"

I glanced around. There was very little to work with. The stones were cold, the air not much warmer. Gilliam's lifeblood steamed in the air.

"Can't you...?"

"Mine is not natural flame, it will do him no good. Quickly, Thorn!"

An icy shiver jumped across my spine and brilliant orange light burst off to my left. Macha's approached, bearing a crude torch fashioned from a stall awning support and part of the fabric of its overhang. Distantly, I was aware of a merchant shouting curses.

The chaos of voices faded in my hearing as I reached out to the flame with one hand, drawing its heat forth and pushing it through to my right hand. I pressed the cold away, reaching deeper into the flame, felt the heat intensify in the palm of my hand.

In the corner of my vision, I saw Aurora turning the ceremonial knife over and over in the flame, the blade gleaming a dull red.

"Hotter, Thorn!"

"There is not much to work with here," I said through gritted teeth. Already, the balance was precariously close to tipping further than I could right.

I was vaguely aware of Aurora shouting for Varis, telling him to hold Gilliam down. At the edge of my hearing, I could hear the girls' wailing, asking why Silva had done such a thing.

I reached out for their anguish, and found the spark I was looking for. More than one of them was angry: Jasna's burned brightest: blue-white. I blended that with the guttering torch, and felt my palm tingle as the flame in it rose higher.

All my attention was focused on keeping the balance the hair's breadth from tipping, keeping the torch from going out while pulling as much heat from it as I could. Gilliam thrashed and let out at least one cry as Aurora worked. The gleam of

the gem on the knife's blade was a starlike twinkle in my narrowed vision, the clear gems' golden glow mingling with the light of the steadily sinking sun.

The setting sun.

"She's stalling us, keeping us away from the pyre."

I don't know how loudly I said it, or if the words even passed my lips. My concentration wavered, the balance tipped, and searing agony coursed over my hand, cold rushing up through the soles of my boots. Fire and ice clashed somewhere about the point of my shoulder as the spell crumbled.

"Are you sure you are all right?" Ana asked.

I nodded. "I am fine. Singed, but unharmed." I glanced back over my shoulder, where Gilliam leaned heavily on Varis' shoulder. "He's the one you should be worried about."

"I don't remember the hill being this steep," Gilliam wheezed. He was still very pale, his steps uncertain. Despite the cold, sweat trickled from his brow.

Aurora had done a masterful job with her healing, leaving only the finest of white lines running from his chin up to his cheekbone. The two white dragonstones had blazed like miniature suns for nearly half an hour, and her shuffling gait and slumped shoulders showed the strain the magic had put system.

We made quite the sight, as we climbed the hill: The right arm of my tunic was scorched, burt through at the wrist, the leather vambrace charred and cracked. My breeches were soaked at the knees with blood. The hem of Ana's gown was likewise stained.

Blood spattered Varis' greaves, and Gilliam's cloak and the left side of his breastplate were coated in the stuff. The girls trailed behind them, walking in pairs. The blonde weaver was deep in a quiet discussion with cobbler's daughter — Irina, I think her name was. The dark-haired weaver's head was bent towards Brynne, who was punctuating her whispered story with quick motions of her hands or fingers. Jasna, with her arm in a sling, and Aurora looking as though she'd waded knee-deep through blood brought up the rear.

For once, we did not have to force our way through the crowds.

"Are you sure about this?" I asked Aurora, as we pushed closer to the edge of the crowd. A heavy rope barrier had been set up, with von Hendricks' guards stationed every four or five feet. They had to break from their position to press a spectator back or chase a child who'd slipped away from a parent and then under the barrier.

"She bested the Egg of Coot twice. She fended off the Skandaharans on the Downs and beat the Afridhi back from the very gates of Blackmoor, at the same time. She has sent the Iron Duke away with his tail between his legs on numerous occasions. If my sister has allowed herself to be captured, she has some strategy in mind."

"And she did not tell you her plan?"

Aurora smiled a warm smile. "Now what would the fun be in that?" Her expression fell, her eyes clouding. "She does not know of the... Other one, though. She'll be a spanner in the cogs, as the gnomes would say."

We looked up at the quick flash of silver. Another girl was in position, further around the great circle of people.

"I think Gilliam would have used another phrase for that."

"A real pain in the... neck?" she suggested with a grin.

Gilliam coughed, trying to cover a chuckle. "I just have one question," he said, looking down at Aurora, his face suddenly a picture of stern inquisitiveness.

"Where *did* she learn to kiss like that?"

The crowd didn't exactly go silent as the steady low drum beat began, but it did subside from a dull roar to an eerie susurration.

The Black Eagle's personal guard appeared, six of them leading Silva. It was the same arrangement they'd used to bring her to the baron's pavilion: two supporting the long pole behind her back, two more holding the staves attached to the collar about her neck, two at the rear bearing iron-tipped, barbed spears. Chains clanked and scraped at the stones as she shuffled forward in the zonga-induced haze.

She put up a token resistance as the guards reworked her chains to lash her to the tall post amidst the firewood and tinder. They were hesitant to grasp her

arms, even though the bracers and dragonstones were covered in a heavy wrapping of some sort.

The Black Eagle strode from his pavilion, his cloak rippling. Whether the thread-of-silver gleamed with the sunset or the flickering of the torch he held in one hand was difficult to tell.

“My people,” he said. He could have had druid’s training, so well did he pitch and project his voice. “For, though I know many of you are not of my own Halag, still you are my cousin’s people, and therefore my own.” He bowed, a hand over his heart. The crowd gave a surge of a cheer.

“In the name of my cousin, our Grand Duke, this witch has been tried and found guilty of the highest of crimes. It comes to me, now, with a heavy heart, to deliver the sentence that comes with such a terrible act.”

He turned, the cloak fanning out behind him with appropriate dramatic effect. The brown-robed scribe scuttled up to the pyre, book open, quill poised.

“Have you any last words?” Ludwig von Hendricks asked of Silva.

She said nothing, instead leaning her head back, staring up at the darkening sky.

Someone in the crowd shouted “Let her burn!”

Standing before us, Evelina drew a deep breath, gripped her medallion.

Another and another voice took up the cry, repeating it, over and over until it became a chant. The baron raised the torch high overhead, lowering it just as the last of the sun dipped beneath the horizon.

“May the Immortals show you mercy,” the baron murmured, as the wood took to light.

The crowd’s chant ebbed, dying out as the flames grew higher.

Surely, Silva had a plan. As Aurora said, she could not have allowed herself into this position if she did not have a way out.

She did not struggle, but seemed relaxed, at peace, staring up at the sky. I followed an ember, curling upwards on the rapidly heating air. There was a brilliant yellow streak across the sky.

The Chimerids were beginning their fiery race across the sky.

Aurora tugged at my sleeve.

"Thorn," she hissed. "The date. What day is it?"

I told her, but she frowned and shook her head.

"Your Thyatian calendar makes little sense. How many days past the solstice is that?"

"Year's Long Night would have been the fifteenth, some nine days ago."

"We must stop it," she said. "We have to get her out of there!"

"See here, missy, you gave your word to the Baron that you would not interfere with his justice." I'd nearly forgotten about the black cloaked guard. He stood less than a spear's length away from us.

Aurora ignored the guardsman. "She cannot die here! She must not!" She gripped the hem of her dress, made to shoulder her way past the few people who stood before us.

Varis and I both made to grab her, but her figure wavered and she blinked from view.

"Ah, ah, my dear," came an oily voice just ahead of us. Aurora stumbled backwards, visible, her arm in a firm black-gloved grip. "You made a promise to my liege the Baron, and I intend to see that you keep it.

"I find a little fire to be just the thing on a cold winter's night like this. Just sort of... warms the soul, doesn't it?" Bargle asked with a warm, wide smile.

Aurora tore her arm free from the man's grip, and turned to go, only to find her way blocked by crossed spears and drawn swords.

"You shall not interfere," Bargle said, the warmth gone from his voice.

"My promise to your baron is void," she said. "That is not my sister."

Bargle stood up straighter, a pained look on his face. "Oh, she would be so upset to hear you say that. After all, you share the same blood."

Aurora pointed again. "That is not Silva!"

The man glanced over towards the fire. It was creeping slowly up the pile, snapping and popping. His eyes narrowed as he looked back at Aurora.

"How? How did you know?"

"Her vibration is very strong. Stronger than that of my sister."

From the boundary of the fire, I caught a glimmering of silver. Then another, and another. They came from six other positions, cascading one to another. Some sort of message in the flashes of light from their medallions?

“Does your baron know you’ve swapped my sister for that... thing?”

“Jaelle would be hurt, to hear you speak of her so.”

Gilliam gave a snort.

“Guards,” Ana said. “You will take this scoundrel into custody. We will take this up with the baron himself.”

“No,” Bargle said. “We won’t. These men are loyal to me.”

One of the guards adjusted his grip on the long spear. Firelight reflected off the thick band of silver on his finger, studded with three small bloodstones. The plain silver clasp on another’s cloak had been replaced with a starflower sporting four bloodstones at its center.

Ana wrinkled her nose. “So they are still men?”

Stars streaked overhead, in singly, in pairs. Below, a few flashes of silver, but their numbers were fewer, the positions changed.

“Be ready,” Evelina whispered.

The flames on the pyre licked at the hem of Silva’s gown— no, it was the other one, Jaelle, Bargle had named her. Smoke and embers danced around the girl, but it was not enough to hide the smile as it curled across her lips.

“I do not understand,” Varis said. “If she — it — is as bad as you say, then shouldn’t we just let her burn? It seems to me that this problem rights itself.”

Aurora shook her head. “No! The death of the shell, the body, frees her... *dala’tma* to journey to the nearest Collector.”

“The demon would ride or follow,” Ana said.

The shrike nodded. “The entire system will be corrupted. Every secret laid bare to our enemies. Every one of my sisters’ locations made known to their kind. Every *ksthra*....”

“Surely they foresaw the possibility of this happening.” Ana said.

Again, Aurora nodded. “It has happened before, but we had Reapers. Containment pools. But she means to strike the heart of the system, the First Tower.”

"There is one of these 'Collectors' closer than the Valley?" Varis asked.

"Much closer," the shrike said, looking up. Another handful of stars streaked across the sky, yellow and orange.

"At your command, sister," Evelina whispered.

"We cannot wait another moment."

"Do we have a plan?" Varis asked, somewhat bewildered.

"Let Silva's little sisters handle the guards," Aurora said. "You and Gilliam must keep the tall man busy."

"I cannot let those girls—" Varis started.

"Remember the Black Woods," Gilliam said. "They're a lot tougher than they look."

At Aurora's shouted signal, everything seemed to happen at once:

Varis and Gilliam leapt at the bard's back, taking the man down as his gaze was intent upon the fire. The Black Eagle's guards had time to shift their stances, perhaps raise a sword, and then each stiffened, voicing a grating cry of agony and rage. Silva's army materialized from the crowd beyond us, and they leapt on the backs of the men, their silver medallions pressed firmly to the back of the soldiers' necks. Several of them went immediately to their knees, while others turned and thrashed, attempting to throw the girls away.

I took the opening, charging through the crowd into the plaza, Ana and the weavers at my left.

We fanned out around the pyre, and the girl Bargle had named Jaille glared down at us, through the sheets of flame. Her eyes were bright silver points, flecked with embers that were not from the fire around her.

"You are too late," she said. Her voice crackled, but it was the sound like ice, not fire. "I will soon be free to ascend to the Throne of Stars. How fitting that I should be able to bring about the fall of your precious seals on the very eve of the anniversary of the Great Sundering."

"You want to burn so badly, let us help you," Ana said. She flung two fists full of glittering silverburn into the flames.

A sprinkle was enough to cause a candle flame to take on the silvery light for nearly an hour. A few pinches could turn a campfire brilliant and silver for the same amount of time.

The pyre did not so much roar as give a deep rumble as it flared, bright as the sun. The flames, which barely reached the tip of the high post at the center of the conflagration, soared to the height of a fire giant's brow.

Ana threw her arms wide, began the sealing chant in a voice like thunder, overshadowing even the brittle icy screams of the demon trapped within the column of silver flame.

I could feel the wood, being gobbled hungrily by the white-hot flames. It would not last but several moments. I planted my feet, staff held out before me. The crowd was transfixed, some with awe, some with terror. I reached out, to their fear, their terror, pulling the heat of those emotions into myself, twining them into a thread that I channeled out through my staff into the fire before me.

The tingling shock of the two weavers' magic came as a distant prickling on my skin, and the air stirred about me. They were creating a wall of air and wind, pulling the intense heat from the flames away from us, and also feeding the fire, which consumed so much air, it was creating its own draft.

I saw flashes of silver on the far side of the white-hot fire. The girls were making their way through the crowd, over to the wood-seller's wagons.

A shadow writhed within the column of fire, a dark stain, features limned with a bloody red, mouth opened in a roar that was devoured by that of the silver flame.

The emotions of the crowd surged, and I had to shift my balance against the sudden torrent of energy that flooded through my spell. I felt it strain, fray, and bent my focus towards holding the magic together for just a few moments longer.

The emotional wave ebbed, but another rolled in after it. But it was not more fear, or terror, but rage. It coursed around me, through me, the energy using me as a conduit. It poured into the silver flames, and the column of fire gave a great flare, widening, driving the four of us back several steps, the wash of heat bleeding through the weavers' wall of wind.

Movement at the corner of my eye caused me to turn, and my magic very nearly buckled.

The crowd at our backs watched us with eyes rimmed deep red. Some hefted makeshift clubs, others had taken swords or spears from guards lying along the plaza's edge, several of whom lay in steaming pools of blood.

"Surely you did not think I only gave one merchant those pretty baubles?" the demon hissed from within the flames, the voice like a handful of shaved ice down my back.

The shadow within the silver flames lashed, back and forth, and Ana's voice broke. It wavered, but she did not cease chanting.

Over the roar of the fire, I heard a voice, one of the girls. She chanted a counterpoint to Ana's spell. Another voice joined in, and the prayer, frayed, began reweaving itself as voice after voice took up the chant at a different point along the cadence.

The demon roared, flinging itself against the wall of flame, but instead of reddish-black scoring, bursts of silvery-blue flared, causing the demon's cries to twist, writing from anger into genuine pain.

"This was not the plan!" Aurora shouted, staring at the flames.

"*Yojanra'sti tava sarvadh bayaghari, anjuah,*" came a sleepy voice from the far side of the pyre.

The shriek's eyes widened, then narrowed, even as color rushed to her cheeks. "I would like to see you do better, given what I had to work with!"

Silva's laugh trailed into a thick cough, accented by the heavy jangle of iron.

Aurora ran to her sister's side, crossing the dozen steps' distance in what seemed more like three strides. The air between them seemed to ripple, and there was a sudden, sharp smell of rain and lightning. The fragment of silence at their meeting was interrupted by the bell-like ringing of irons falling away and a sharp, wheezing intake of breath. The five white dragonstones Aurora wore burst into light, a warm, candle-like glow offsetting the quietly roaring silver fame beside the two sisters.

“Rodama na karoti, Lea,” Silva murmured, patting Aurora’s longer golden hair.

Aurora brought a hand up over her sister’s shoulder, wiping at her eye. She did not seem to even see the blazing golden light spilling from the crystal adorning her gauntlet. *“Who’s crying?”* she asked.

Had I not watched the transformation, I would not have thought that the silver-eyed girl who stepped away from the long embrace was the same person. Her hair, lank and tangled, tossed and rippled as if caught in a summer’s breeze, the waves and ringlets regaining their body and luster. The blackened skin about the girl’s wrists and neck fell away under the glare of the stones, revealing pale, unmarred skin. The ugly greenish tarnish vanished as golden light danced along the swirls and curves of Silva’s bracers.

Her face, thin and hollowed by weeks of captivity, lost its grayish pallor, the dark smudges beneath her eyes gone even as she blinked, as if simply brushed away by her long lashes. The rattling in her lungs lessened with each breath, and she straightened.

She patted her sister’s long hair again. *“Alam,”* she murmured. *“Itara karomi.”*

Silva stepped away from her twin, a finger on her chin as she glanced around the plaza, her brow furrowed in thought. The gleam of the clear dragonstone at her neck shone through the ragged remains of her sleeve, flashes of the silvery metal catching the light as the material billowed in the wind. She glanced at the boundary of winds the two weavers created, giving it an odd, appraising look. After a moment’s consideration, she nodded to herself.

She looked up, and two pairs of silvery eyes locked, through the curtain of white fire.

“Anjuah,” she said. *“Pratidyate etah asura! Niriyasti! Krta’tini. Krta’ti pratijna’ti.”*

“Surrounded by a mob of demons, just waiting for their master’s command to pounce, and she’s trying to reason with it?” Gilliam asked.

“Not with it,” Aurora said. *“With the part of it which is... ours. Hers.”*

“Do you really think that will work?”

"It's kept the demons from attacking thus far," the shrike said.

"Pratiryudate, anjuah'mi!" Silva called.

The demon roared, but its answer was joined with another voice, raised in a clear, sweet note.

I'd heard it sung before, in Koriszegy's tower, and upon the walls of Threshold.

Seven more voices rose, and a complex web of melodies rose into the deepening evening.

The column of white fire flickered, without the other girls' chanting to bolster it. Ana's voice broke again, and amidst her coughing, the flames died down to their natural level, though still flashing silvery-white. The other siren stood against the central post, shoulders hunched, eyes gleaming reddish-silver through the tangled mass of her hair. The manacles, blackened by fire, hung loosely on her wrists, a few lengths of charred chain dangling, swinging as the girl's arms spasmed.

Around us, as one, the first ring of red-eyed festival-goers stirred. They straightened, eyes going past us, towards the figure amidst the flames.

Jaille's note choked off in a gurgling chuckle.

"You will not banish me that easily," she hissed.

"What have you done?"

Were I not a chronicler, I would have been pleased to hear the tremor in the voice of the Baron of Halag.

"Prevented another Rain of Fire," Aurora said.

The baron stared, wide eyed. His slack expression curled into a sneer. "Preposterous," he said. "You will release these people at once from... whatever curse you have laid on them."

Aurora and Silva stared at each other, their own expressions shocked mirrors of each other.

"Matiska'ziin akarot zagka etani vayam rahati'i?" Silva asked, gesturing with her hand to encompass the crowd around us.

Aurora planted her hands on her hips, frowning at her sister. "He is a baron. You must address him with respect."

Silva pointed back towards the Black Eagle. *"Sah varta'te utsikta ziin —"*
"What did Father teach us about speaking of others?"

"Vadati na, ce zathayati," Silva mumbled.

Aurora nodded.

The baron cleared his throat. "You will release them or I will fill the lot of you with bolts."

"How many have you got?" Gilliam asked.

Von Hendricks blinked. "What?"

"Boltmen. Bolts. How many?" Gilliam repeated.

"Shall I have them target you last so that you may count?"

"The zsonga sap," I said, seeing where Gilliam was going. "Your Lordship, your men need to use the green-fledged arrows on as many of those with reddened eyes as possible."

The look on the baron's face was... priceless. It would have been more enjoyable, had not several in the crowd nearest me straightened up, hefting makeshift clubs and staves.

"Open fire on... townfolk and farmers? You begin to sound like that madman Bargle!"

"Your Lordship," said one of the baron's personal guard, "we haven't the manpower to put this many down if they should —"

"I will not be threatened by a peasants and rabble. This little display will not stay the course of justice. Captain, you will clap all of these conspirators in irons and remove them from this plaza until justice is done!"

We, all of us, readied weapons, but Aurora withdrew her hand from the hilt of her dagger. The stones adorning her wrists were glowing, pulsing. The central, larger of the three dragonstones on her circlet shone with a pale, moon-like radiance.

Within the flames, Jaelle chuckled.

I do not think it was the stone's gleam that washed the color from the shrike's face.

"Go," she bid us. "Go with them now, all of you."

“But we cannot—”

“You cannot stay here!”

The girls’ voices stopped, and they blinked, glancing around the circle they’d formed, looking slightly dazed.

“*Dráva,*” Silva said to them, the same haunted expression on her face. She made gentle but urgent shoo-ing motions with her hands. She glanced at her sister, and they both looked to the sky.

Aurora’s dragonstones were pulsing, cycling, the pattern growing faster. I felt my heartbeat increasing as I watched the stones. Something in the air felt... different. Not like the demons’ cold, nor the prickling energies that bled away from a weaver’s magic.

We filed away from the plaza by twos, each of us holding a small, trembling hand of one of Silva’s army. Small as she was, I had to catch my steps to keep up with young Petra, who only looked back to glance up at me. Her face was pale as the twins, her eyes shining with some fragment of knowledge gleaned from her connection to Silva, perhaps?

Her lips moved, and I bent all my effort towards listening to her beneath the clatter of armored steps beside us, the cold crackling of the flames behind us, the babbling of the crowd.

I shivered, and not with the cold when I finally was able to make out just what it was she was saying.

I did not recognize the words, but by the sound and inflection, she was speaking High Thonian.

From what little I’d learned from Silva, the second syllables were numbers, decreasing with every iteration.

She — and probably each of the other girls — counted backwards.

We huddled in the baron’s pavilion. Aurora had invoked my status as Lawspeaker again, and we were left unbound but sworn to remain under guard until such time as von Hendricks returned. Ana, the weavers, and the twins were sworn to use no magics to aid in any kind of escape. Aurora had sworn that she and her sister would raise no magics against any of the baron’s men

Half a dozen guards lounged around us, at first wary, but then quickly growing bored when none of us tried to make any sort of escape attempt.

Silva and Aurora sat, knees together, heads bowed so close their foreheads touched. They spoke quietly, urgently, in the High Thonian, so quickly I could not make out more than a word here or there.

Ana fidgeted, continually casting a glance towards the flap in the canvas that had been knotted shut when the baron left.

One of the guards saw her looks, and he gestured menacingly with a hand at the hilt of his sword — at least, until Varis and Gilliam made similar gestures.

Macha's and the blonde weaver sat shoulder to shoulder, seemingly asleep. But I saw a glimmer through their lashes, and felt the itch of their power, held at but the slightest of trickles.

I bent my head towards them.

"Ladies, you know I cannot allow you to raise your magic to do harm here. We are all bound—"

"We did not speak those vows," the blonde weaver said, her voice low, nearly a breath. It did not keep the ferocity of her words from coming through, soft as her voice was.

"We are—"

"We are defenseless without the Power of the Spheres. We have no shepherd for protection, you saw to that. Your oaths have no power over us. Your traditions do not bind us. These do," she said, sliding her thumb behind the collar and giving it a shake with what little power there was in the band around her throat.

"The collar precludes the swearing of oaths?" I asked.

"They bind us to the other wearer."

"Completely," Macha's added.

"So you would never feel the touch of a demon's presence?"

The blonde weaver smiled. "Felt? Yes. But they are unable to attain any hold, no matter what promises they whisper. They scatter as leaves before a strong wind when we are one with the Powers."

"You have given us the greatest measure of freedom since we were collared," Macha's said, laying a delicate hand on my arm. "You cannot take back that gift."

A guard prodded me with the butt of his spear.

“Is there a problem here, Lawspeaker?”

I rose, slowly, shaking my head. “They are frightened, that is all.”

His lip curled. “Don’t know how you can stand it, being surrounded by all that weakness. Look how they tremble. And these whelps.” He nudged one of the girls with his foot. She sat at the periphery of the group, evenly spaced around us. They had all refused to be sheltered in the center of the group like Varis had wanted.

“Can’t you stop that muttering of theirs?” the guard asked. “It’s giving me the —” He cleared his throat. “A headache.”

“They were not bound to silence, and will speak as freely as they like,” I said. I should not have, but I smiled at the man.

He snarled, glaring at the girl as he lifted the haft of his spear.

I set a hand on the metal greave, pulling fire from the braziers and sending a trickle of it into the metal— just enough that he felt it through the leathers.

“If you raise so much as a finger against your charges, I will burn it and the rest of you to a cinder.”

The guard snatched his arm away, backed away, his face pale, but his eyes narrowed.

I deliberately turned my back on the man, kneeling before the girl he’d been about to strike. Her eyes were distant, as if she were looking straight through me. Her lips moved, her words barely even a breath.

“*Zat’sethya astasasti*,” she whispered.

“It’s Magda, yes?” I asked her.

She nodded, the slightest dip of her chin. She kept counting. “*Zat’Sethya septhasasti*.”

“You are well? He did not hurt you?”

The slightest of shakes of her head.

“What is it that you count?”

She whispered the next number in the sequence, her gaze rising towards one of the peaks in the roof of the pavilion.

I patted her shoulder, stepping past her to the twins, kneeling down beside them.

"I need to know what is happening out there," I told them. "Why are we not out there trying to save those people?"

Aurora looked up from a scintillating reddish glow. Her and Silva's red dragonstones projected some sort of wavering image upon the air. I recognized the swirling, spidery script of their native language, even though I could not make any sense of it.

"You needn't worry about them. We have a problem."

"Those people—"

"Are possessed, yes. As I told you, *they* will be fine. *We* will not." She pointed at the red-tinged runes shimmering between her and Silva. The silver-eyed twin was still poking at different rows, dragging lines of symbols here and there, and frowning.

"I cannot read your script," I reminded the girl.

She sighed, and waved her fingers. Her half of the image... slid, and the brightly glowing lettering seemed to melt, becoming lines of a representation of the hilltop fortress. A red-orange circle grew over the hilltop, covering the area about where we sat, as well as the plaza outside. A quarter of the temple and ruins of the palace were also encompassed by the circle.

Silva made a surprised noise, and prodded a few more columns of the runes. The orange circle widened.

"You're sure?" Aurora asked her. The siren gave her sister a flat stare.

"From bad to worse," the shrike muttered.

"I'm guessing we do not want —"

"*Vatu!*" Silva said, moving a finger away from the runes to point towards Aurora. The shrike's eyes had gone distant, her features slack, as if she were daydreaming.

"If we're in as big a pot of soup as she seems to think, is now really the time for daydreams?" Gilliam asked.

"*Eshaa cintyati,*" Silva said, giving us a stern 'shushing' gesture.

After perhaps a minute, Auora stood. Every guard in the pavilion leapt to his feet, weapons readily at hand, their eyes on the girl.

"The cisterns," she said. She blinked, as if suddenly awakening from a dream, glancing around.

"Up, all of you!"

"Here, now, you can't just —" one of the guards began.

Silva glared at the man. The red stone at her wrist glimmered, and the sword he'd readied in his hand crashed to the ground, forming a deep dent in the piled carpets.

The guard bent to retrieve it, and his face went red with the effort of his tugging at the hilt.

"What have you done?" he sputtered.

"Hinder us, and you will all die of the Wasting. Stay here, follow us if you like if you wish to survive."

"*Zatapajka*," the girls whispered.

"Less than half a Turning," Aurora said.

"You can't order us—" another of the guards spat.

"They offer you a chance to survive," Varis said. "You get no such guarantee if you get in their way."

The guard's slack expression twisted into a sneer. "You won't escape." He turned, and yanked at the knots of the pavilion's entrance.

Aurora didn't even give the man a second glance. The ceremonial knife was already in her hand, and with an underhanded sweep, she slashed through the western wall of the tent.

Silva ducked through, and Aurora motioned for us to follow.

"Go. She knows the way. Quickly!"

The dark stone on Silva's wrist began to shine with a purplish-blue light, and her form began to waver. One by one, the girls stepped through the opening, joining hands, and their forms, too, began to shimmer and dance, as if being viewed on the surface of a lake.

I took Ana's hand, the last of our group to file through.

I was brought up short when a guard's gloved hand closed over mine.

“They said to guard you, but not where exactly to do it, right?” the man asked with a wild-eyed grin. He shrugged. “And can’t do much guarding as a dead man. Let the sergeant go and run for his reinforcements. The rest of us’ll take our chances with the witches.”

For having been ill, Silva set a grueling pace. The crowds seemed distant, watery shadows against the deepening darkness of the night. She led us along the fringe of the crowds, down the sloping hill, to the ruins of the base of the citadel’s walls.

It was about at that point that the shouts and alarms began to go up from the hilltop pavilion. It did not slow Silva’s pace, nor did it quicken it. To go too quickly across the uneven snow-covered grounds, in the deepening twilight, with the added obscurity of her Veiling would have doomed us to tangling each other up with turned or broken ankles.

Torches bobbed in the distance behind us. It was one thing to Veil us from sight, but the same could not be done with our trail through the snow.

The sharp crack-whistle of loosing crossbow bolts broke the muted quiet of our flight. A bolt sparked and shattered against the stone wall less than a stone’s throw behind us.

“They fire blind, keep going!” Aurora hissed. She was a brighter blur in the night on the wall above us, keeping pace with us, hopping lightly between the gaps in the stones as if skipping through a meadow on a sunny spring afternoon.

A quiet tingling surge of power washed down my spine and the snows behind us suddenly burst upwards, a wall of whiteness and icy winds skirling away towards our pursuers. The mens’ howls joined those of the wind conjured by the weavers.

Another minute’s dashing, and Silva suddenly slowed. Broken walls jutted from the snows ahead, and she led us carefully through a series of what could have once been homes or workshops of some sort, clustered along a bend in the fortifications. We came to a sheltered hollow, and I was surprised to find that it was a darkened opening, not shadows.

The weavers directed another short burst of wind through the opening, clearing snow from ancient, well-worn steps leading down into the hillside. The stone was cold around us as we made our way down the cramped stairs, around a turn, and into a long, low-ceilinged chamber. A number of large stone-lined wells dotted the floor, one wide enough that it could have been another of the strange pools like we'd seen in the lost valley.

"Into the water!" Aurora shouted. "Be ready to dive."

The guards glanced at each other. Varis and Gilliam were already struggling out of their cloaks and boots, unbuckling weapons.

"It's the middle of winter," one of the guards said. "We could catch our deaths from the cold in that." He pointed to the nearest of the wells.

"If you wish to live long enough for the chills to claim you, then dive!" Aurora shouted. "The Throne aligns."

I sucked in a deep breath, and plunged into one of the pools. The crippling shock from the intense cold was about the only thing that kept the air from rushing out of my lungs. It was colder even than the waters of Windrush Lake.

The fluid silence was broken by a roar that was felt more than heard, and fell like the hard slap of a dragon's tail upon the water. It pressed against me from all sides, causing my ears to scream with a sudden painful roar as the water seemed to want to rush into my head. The darkness of my closed eyes was suddenly bright with streaks of yellow and gold, white and silver, as if the starshower above had decided to join me in the freezing depths.

A sharp jolt, heard as a harsh bubbling in the waters, snapped my awareness back from the brink upon which it teetered.

My lungs burned for air, and I made slow, clumsy kicks. It seemed to take an age to reach the surface. But the surface met me like a cold slap in the face, and I thought for a moment I had been transported back to the rain-tossed waters of the lake.

The surface of the pool heaved and tossed. I realized it was the entire chamber that heaved and tossed.

It was pure instinct that had me reach out to the bones of the hill, to call up its strength around the chamber, shoring up the faults in the stonework around us.

The white light spilling from the doorway was swallowed as that opening collapsed. I felt the stones buckling around me, as if my own bones were straining, about to break. My own shout was lost as I took in a mouthful of water. Through my coughing and retching, I could hear the cries of the girls and my companions. I bent my will to the cold around me, pushing it into the stones, reinforcing them with bonds of ice.

The quaking settled, and we were left in darkness, the sounds of coughing, sobbing, and the lapping of the icy pools the only sounds in the sudden silence.

I made to reach for fire, but a small hand on my wrist stopped me.

“No, let me.”

A bright golden light sprang from the stones on Aurora’s wrists. I looked around to see my companions helping each other from the pools. Several of the guards lay in gasping heaps on the floor, coughing heavily.

At the far end of the chamber, I saw Silva, bent low over the girls, looking over each of them for injuries, her face lit from below by the gleaming pendant about her neck.

“Is everyone all right?” Varis’ voice managed to make it from between chattering teeth.

“If you call being half-drowned and deafened all right, then yes,” Gilliam said, his voice ringing through the chamber. Or perhaps it was just in my ears.

“I think Hamdal does not look so good,” one of the guards said.

“Back away from him,” Aurora said.

“But he—”

“Step away!”

The soldier reacted to the tone of the order with an almost instinctive jolt.

The light from Aurora’s gauntlets shone on heavily tarnished armor. The man wheezed and gasped within it, but the rattling of his lungs had nothing to do with his having swallowed any water. His skin shone with a yellowish waxy pallor, and

his eyes glittered feverishly from sunken, darkened sockets. The man turned his head to cough, and dark blood flecked the stones.

The shrike shook her head. She knelt, adjusting the guard's cloak, folding his arms over his chest.

"But you said not to—" the other guard began.

Aurora turned to him, held her hands out. They were badly reddened, blistering where the folds of the cloak had gathered between her fingers. But beneath the candle-like gleam of the two white dragonstones, the blisters withered, the flesh peeling away to reveal healthy skin beneath.

"My kind can recover from this. Yours cannot." She glanced over at the guard, who's rattling breath was coming in shorter and shorter gasps.

Ana, shivering, still wringing out her hair, huddled nearby. "Is there nothing to be done?" she asked.

Aurora shook her head. "I have made him as comfortable as I can. He is too far gone for the help of your Flame. Perhaps prayers, to aid him on his way to become one with Ferros."

"We need to get out of these wet clothes, some warmth," Varis said.

"What would we burn, down here?" Aurora asked. "Between the smoke and the fire gobbling up the breathable air, how much longer do you think we would live?"

"Allow us," the darker-haired weaver said. She closed her eyes, and the icy tingle of her handling one of the Powers of the Spheres added to my shivering. She made a delicate, dismissive gesture with her left hand, and was suddenly standing in a puddle of water, her hair, gown, and skin completely dry.

"Sign me up for some of that," Gilliam said, nearly biting his tongue. Another gesture from the girl, and the warrior stood in a similar state, staring down at his hands and arms in amazement, grinning. "Bit of a tickle, but even better than standing under Ixion's glare in the Alaysian summertime."

The weaver, Macha's, bobbed a slight curtsy, the slimmest of smiles on her lips. Within moments, all of us were at least dry, and pulling cloaks tighter around ourselves.

While the others dried, Varis and Gilliam and I looked over the collapsed stonework blocking the steps up to the citadel. The stones and blocks were wedged in tight, and a probing of the surrounding stonework indicated to me that any attempt to move them would bring even more of the chamber down around us.

“So we survive their Throne of Stars only to die of cold or starvation or a lack of air?” Gilliam asked. “Not exactly the way I wish to go.”

“You’d rather go like that?” Varis asked, pointing to the dark bundle laid out by one of the pools.

“Why don’t we just go through here?” one of the girls asked. Petra crouched by the far corner of the chamber, and was staring upwards at a crack that ran halfway up towards the ceiling. The gap at the base was perhaps half as wide as the girl’s shoulders.

“I felt a cold draft when we climbed out of the pool,” she said. “You can still feel air moving about.” She wiggled her fingers before the dark cleft in the rocks.

I laid a hand on the stone. This fold in the rocks was older, more stable. It had flexed rather than breaking, had sent the brunt of the power from above further down into the bones of the hillside, where the anchoring stone could consume the energies.

“It is sound, and I feel wider spaces beyond. Dead stone, the work of Men.”

“*Idam kim?*” Silva asked, her hands on her hips, leaning slightly towards her sister. Aurora was staring at the break in the stonework with a slightly sickened expression, but coupled with a questioning confusion.

“There is... something there. A memory, but... I cannot reach it. It keeps slipping away. Something interferes with the thoughtshare matrix.”

“Will it lead back to the surface?” Varis asked.

Aurora thought a moment. “Now, perhaps, with the shifting of the land. But an age ago, the places beyond were sealed, and what was below consigned to the darkness.”

“What was left?”

Aurora squeezed her eyes shut, her hands going to her temples. Her brow knit. A trickle of blood seeped slowly from her nose. The shrike's eyes fluttered open and she dabbed at her upper lip.

"Alam," Silva said.

"No matter how I align my thoughts, the memories just will not come into focus."

"Well, whatever lurks in there couldn't be worse than the fate that awaits us if we simply sit here staring at the walls," Gilliam said.

Aurora and Silva were able to widen and reinforce the opening with the combined magic of their red dragonstones, leading us into what had once been some sort of tomb. Stone slabs lay across the floor, huge solid slabs different from the stone of the flooring itself. If there was any sort of decoration on them, dust and cobwebs obscured any such designs. A sharp glance and word from Ana kept one of the soldiers from running his gloved hand through the dust.

An arched opening led to a cramped corridor, the walls lined with niches, nearly every one of those obscured by drapes of webbing and more dust.

The blonde weaver had called forth one of the watery balls of light. With the thickness of the cobwebs and dust, there is little doubt we would have smothered ourselves had we used torches, even if we'd had them.

I had heard there were catacombs beneath the ruins, but had no idea just how extensive they were. After several turns and the passing of a number of larger burial chambers, I was thoroughly lost. The wandering, pausing at intersections while Aurora glanced back and forth was eerily reminiscent of the warren of tunnels beneath the lost valley.

Fortunately, we were not pursued by some gibbering monstrosity, though to see Ana's complexion and watch her nervous glances behind the group, one would not think this the case at all.

Far from being frightened of the maze-like confines beneath Krakatos, the other girls stared in wide-eyed wonder. Every now and then, one or another would trail her hand along the wall, careful to avoid the resting nooks. Beneath the echoing clatter of armor and the creak of our leathers, I could hear the girls

murmuring old Traladaran prayers. Some of them sang snippets of the Song of Halav. Though they did not seem to discuss it amongst themselves, some would sing the same verses, their voices twining, and the stones around us seemed at times to vibrate in harmony, as if the webbing dangling above us were the strings of some ancient instrument, the girls' voices some sort of invisible bow. Unfortunately, the girls could sing no more than a verse or two before the cascading dust had us sneezing and coughing.

One of the soldiers made a cutting remark when Evelina sang the first of the verses. The chuckle of the other two guards was cut short as the report of a slap echoed down the corridor. The rest of us stopped and turned.

"These are our ancestors," Katarin snapped. "Spit on the graves of your own dead if that is your way. If you cannot look upon the dead with respect and honors, then do not raise your eyes from the floor."

"It's just a story," one of the guards said, the chuckle still in his voice. "A fairy's tale—"

Another slap rang down the hall, and this time, it was delivered by Aurora. She'd made her way back towards the men when our pace had slowed. She pointed to the niche to the right of the guard's head, three rows up from the floor.

"Nikolev," she said. "He died holding off three beast men while his family fled up this very hill, their village burning around them." She pointed behind the soldier. "Three rows down, his son Richev, who was killed two days later when boulders hurled by the beast men collapsed the section of wall he was defending. You stand upon the bones of Balichorius, who was chieftain of his tribe but refused burial among the clan-chiefs."

The soldier practically jumped away from what I'd thought was a decorative flooring stone.

Another of the guards, though, narrowed his eyes. "You can't know that. You're just making it up," he said.

"How well do you know the Song of Halav?" Aurora asked him.

"Well, we don't exactly sing it in the Baron's halls," he sputtered. "I've heard a few verses."

"The fifty-seventh," Katarin said.

One voice in seven parts lifted, the girls' reciting the verse, passed down, they say, from Zirchev himself:

*On Petra's walls we stand. We fight
Shields high against the Beast Men's might
Her maidens aid us, with Fire and Song,
Silver and gold lend strength to our bronze.*

Varis scratched his head. "I always thought that verse silly. Such soft metals would do nothing to strengthen bronze."

"You hear that, dear sister?" Aurora said over her shoulder. "He calls us soft and silly."

Next to me, Silva lifted her nose and sniffed, turning away from the warrior. "I didn't—" he started.

"Three flights of sirens and two platoons of shrikes perished in the forty years of war against the beast men," Aurora said. "I hold every one of those deaths here." She pointed to her head. "Just as I can recall every death on the walls on that last day."

"I have seen what you and your sister are capable of," Varis said.

"Aye, and so have we." The tone of the guard who spoke was nowhere near as apologetic as Varis.

"*Vartamhe nash.*" Silva said, after nearly an hour's trekking down corridors and crossing through several larger burial vaults.

"We are *not* lost," Aurora said, frowning at her sister. But she took longer in glancing back and forth between the left and right-hand corridors that branched just ahead of us.

"Perhaps we could toss a coin," one of the guards said.

"Or play 'odds and evens,'" another of the guards said, holding out a clenched fist.

"Or we could blunder into places that were sealed two thousand years ago for very good reasons." Aurora snapped.

The guard folded his arms. "What is sealed up down here other than some moldering old bones?"

Aurora opened her mouth to reply, but whatever she was going to say stuck in her throat. She clamped her jaw shut with a frustrated growl, turned towards the crossed passages.

"We must go this way," she said, pointing ahead.

"It seems to me like you've been avoiding the lefthand passages," the guard said, his arms still crossed. "Which means we keep going the long way 'round."

"I take the safest route," the shrike said.

"The witch is right. We are lost," said the other guard.

"We are not lost," Aurora said, again. "The stairs up lie below the temple, which is half a mile that way." She pointed down the lefthand passage."

"And we've been snaking through side passage after side passage?" the guard asked.

"I take the safest route. The most direct path is also the most dangerous.

"If you know where the dangers are, surely you can bypass them."

"And reveal them to those they were meant to keep here in the dark? Yes, that makes perfect sense."

"There is nothing down here but the dead!"

Aurora nodded. "Yes, now you begin to see. You cannot fight the dead, not with your weapons. You cannot kill that which does not live. You cannot defeat it. But if you do not awaken it, you do not have to fight it."

"Shh!"

This, from Jasna, at close to the center of the group. Those of us before her took a few more steps before turning as the clanking of the guardsmen came to a halt.

The girl stood, poised on her toes, eyes closed, head cocked slightly to one side. She took a few swift silent steps, coming even with the twins. She cupped her hands behind her ears, frowning with concentration.

"I don't—" Gilliam began, but was shushed by about half the group without Jasna having to do it.

I closed my eyes, set my feet firmer against the paving tiles, willing my senses to ease into the rock.

Vibrations, somewhere ahead of us. Footsteps, two pair, one quick and anxious, as a caged animal might pace, the other lighter, but more relaxed. I could even feel the stirring of the air against the stone, but was not able to make out what the two voices might have been saying.

Another pair of vibrations rolled through my senses, as if I were standing before a Khantes war drummer. I snapped my senses away from the stone, blinking just in time to see the twins waver and wink out of sight as they dashed silently up the corridor.

There was a clattering of armor behind me. I turned, to see Gilliam and Varis restraining the guardsmen.

“Unhand us this instant or face the baron’s justice,” the bigger of the guards snarled. “I knew all along this was just some ploy to let those two witches escape! You won’t—”

His shout was brought up short as Varis smashed his fist against the center of the guard’s breastplate.

The three guards’ struggling ceased as I felt the shivering rush of the weavers’ power play against the nape of my neck.

“Shall we gag them, as well?” the blonde weaver asked, her voice somewhat distant, her eyes glittering under the wavering bubble of light.

“If they shout again, yes,” Varis said. “But the damage is already done. Whoever else is down here knows they are not alone.”

“Five hundred,” Gilliam said, looking down the corridor. There was no sign of the twins. I could feel, faintly, their presence upon the stones, but the tingling itch of the weavers’ power made the stonedelving difficult, more painful the further away I tried to reach.

“Do we wait longer, or follow?” Varis asked.

“I say we—”

Ana's words were cut off by a sudden sharp tremor rippling through the corridor, followed by a fierce wind howling up the corridor, shrieking through the way we'd come.

"Duck!" she finished, pushing the girls to either side of her to the floor as she sprang for the front of our group.

I flung myself into one of the corners, curling about one of the girls covering there.

I had but a few beats of my wildly hammering heart warning before a hot wind roared back at us, followed by a billowing wall of red-orange fire.

A hard silver light rimmed and danced among the tongues of flame as they snaked and coiled around Ana's position, slightly ahead of me. She staggered, her outspread hands curling into fists, hiding her face in the crook of her arms as the flames shattered the hasty barrier she'd erected against the blast.

I caught the flames along the length of my staff as they whipped past the girl. I held one end braced against the stone floor, trying to draw as much heat from away and channel it deeper into the hillside. Unlike the fires of Verge, there was nowhere else for the flames to go. It was as if we stood in the very jaws of the dragon as it loosed its fiery breath.

The ironwood went from deep red to a brilliant orange, and there were thankfully only a few moments of pain before my hand went numb against the wash of heat.

"You cannot do this alone!"

I turned, to see the flames, billowing in the reflection of a pair of wide, brown eyes. Auburn hair, lit with red and orange as it tossed in the scorching wind of the fireball's advance.

The tingling surge of Macha's Power drowned out the inferno that was nearly upon us. I felt as if I would burn from the inside out, and the flames would be made of impossibly flickering shards of ice. The shiver was a hard spike of barbed ice rushing down the nape of my neck, down my spine, blossoming upward into my skull, racing down my arm.

And just as suddenly, it reversed itself, melted as the fireball washed over us, flowing down my arm in a tingling, stinging rush, to circle about my wrist, just above my free hand.....

Up. And over. Let it flow over and around us.

Macha's voice seemed to whisper at my shoulder, just behind my ear, though she was a good two arm's lengths away.

Flow? Fire raged, it did not flow. Water flowed.

There is no difference. Part the threads around us, weave them between us, over us. Merge them with my sister's threads of Air. Do not look. See.

Lashing, writing in the billow of the flames were... threads. Hundreds of them, thousands, whipping every which way. They tangled over the length of my ironwood staff.

Gleaming, bright sky-blue, were bands of cool, refreshing wind, bending and swirling around us. Channels, as if we were clumps of land amidst some great delta.

I touched my staff to the nearest band of wind, and the threads flared, from red to orange, feeding hungrily on the air....

... but also being pulled away, as threads of flax are spun and wound up on a spindle.

I called the flames to me, and they fairly leapt towards my hands. I felt Macha's hand behind mine, her fingers twined with mine, felt the threads of her power burning through my fingers. I drew the flames, but she tugged at those lashing threads.

My heart hammered in my chest. Working with fire was always a delicate balancing act, for it was a temperamental beast, fickle and prone to fits and starts. To lose focus for a fraction of a second could cause a spark to bloom into a wildfire.

Macha's had no fear. Her heartbeat was slow and steady, as if she slept amidst the most pleasant of dreams. I felt her focus, sharp as the edge of a finely cut crystal. I felt her fingers twitch, saw the red-orange strands bend to her

ministrations, watched the chaos flow into order, winding amidst her sister's blue-white weaves of air.

The flames diminished, channeled away from us, around us, roaring in a twisting column of fire low to the floor, bound well away from the webbing lining the ceiling.

The moment ended, snapped like a tailor's thread, and I found myself blinking, gasping for breath, my throat painfully dry, eyes stinging.

I scrambled over to Ana.

I tried to, at any rate. A sudden rush of exhaustion flowed through me, surging up my arm, settling like leaden weights over my shoulders and in my feet. It was suddenly all I could do to draw my next breath. Blackness hovered around the edges of my vision, and even blinking was an effort.

"I am sorry," I heard Macha's say. "It was the only way." This time it was her true voice, spoken from some ways away, from the other end of a long silver cord that bound her to the bracelet she'd slipped over my left wrist.

"Ana—" I managed.

"The foolish girl is singed, but otherwise unharmed," the blonde weaver said. "I managed to wrap her in a shell of air before she fell.

I pushed myself up against the wall, my legs still trembling. The scrape of metal against stone caused me to glance down at my left wrist. Despite the superheated air around us, the bracelet was cool and slick against my wrist.

My breath caught, and a shadow of feeling fluttered about my stomach. I glanced down at Macha's, and her blush deepened as the feeling slithered away. She bent further, to place her forehead against the stones at my feet.

"No!"

The weaver jerked to a halt, and one would think I'd hauled on the length of cord that joined us, wrist-to-neck.

Surprise and confusion swirled in her eyes, as her traditions met with my refusal.

I'd barely thought to tell her to simply rise, and she was making her way to her feet, leaning heavily against the wall. Her exhaustion pressed against me, though not as heavily as before.

"Thorn, we need to move."

I looked up from the girl's brown eyes, blinking.

Voices, harsh, sharp, echoed up the corridor, accompanied by the clashing of metal upon metal.

Lights flared, as we rounded the bend in the corridor, following the source of the echoes. Our shadows were painted in the stark blue-black of moonlight, only to bob and shift, a deeper black edged in red as a green-gold light bloomed from another angle, further in the room. Between the two, a third light washed out our shadows in the sickly violet-red of the moon eclipsed.

A broad, low-ceilinged burial chamber opened before us, but bearing stone sarcophagi rather than the usual simple slabs marking graves along the flooring.

A large clear area might have once held an altar of some sort, but it's stone lay scattered about the room, the stones blackened and still smoking.

Aurora and the false-Silva danced amidst the rubble, trading blows, the flames lining their weapons bursting into showers of light and sparks with each contact. Aurora's dagger was wreathed in green-gold flames, and she'd conjured a diamond-shaped wedge of solid flames the same color over the length of her other forearm. It spat a gout of green sparks as Gilliam's longknife rasped across its surface, trailing streamers of oily blacklight edged in the seething red.

The eyes of the siren Bargle had named Jelle matched that reddish light. She reached forth with her free hand, the nails of that hand grown long and black, but Aurora batted the blow aside with the flat of the dagger's blade.

The siren screamed, a grating, gravelly howl, her palm charred and blistered.

"Not that one, fool!" Jelle rasped. "I said third from the left!"

In the shadows behind the battle, Bargle leapt away from one of the sarcophagi, his hooked nose barely a finger's breadth away from the blue flames that washed from the air just in front of him.

In the backlight of the flames, the air rippled, showing flashes of white and silver and gleaming golden hair before disappearing.

Bargle swiped a shortsword across the lid of the sarcophagus, but it whistled through empty air. He turned a circle, his dark eyes darting this way and that.

“Ixion burn you, you little witch!”

Jaille ducked under a vicious golden slash, drove her shoulder into Aurora’s chest, sending the shrike staggering. Burning red eyes turned towards the bard.

“Must I do everything for you?” She drew a deep breath, and the grating rasp of the demon’s voice smoothed into a cool, silvery note, ringing from her throat.

Atop the sarcophagus to which the demon had directed Bargle, the air rippled, then fell away from Silva, who crouched at low defense upon the lid.

She blinked, glancing down at the black dragonstone on her wrist, which had gone dark.

Bargle lunged with a snarl, the sword held in two hands before him.

Silva tried to turn with the strike, bringing her left arm up, but the red gem’s glimmer died as Jaille changed the pitch of her note.

There was a grating of steel on stone as the siren and bard toppled from the sarcophagus. Gold and red light flashed across streaks of blood trailing from the lid.

Seven voices lifted in a cry of despair, and the girls ducked and twisted away from our grasp, charging across the chamber.

Jaille’s note trailed into shrill laughter, but it was brought up short as Aurora slammed into the demon-infused siren with the fiery golden shield, bringing the edge of it up under the pale chin. Jaille crashed backwards, amidst the broken stump of stone that was all that was left of the altar.

Ana gave a sharp, sibilant command in Alphatian, bringing the haft of her scythe down on the stones. A silvery tone rang forth, sweeping across the room. The demon howled, turning and thrashing her feet as the sound washed over her, throwing soot-streaked arms up to shield red-rimmed eyes from the silver light that shone from the scythe’s blade.

I ran after the girls, the two weavers steps behind me. While the Power of the blonde weaver still felt like an icy prickling over the nape of my neck, I did not feel

the secondary tingling of Macha's Power. Or rather, I did not feel it upon my skin. I felt her feeling of it, a summer-like warmth radiating from her middle, concentrated just below her stomach. Ghostlike flickers of colors and threads danced at the corners of my vision. Dim red tangles lingered against the the stone of the floor and sarcophagi. Each movement of the stale, damp air sent a surge of blue-green threads across my vision. All around us, deep browns and blacks emphasized the strongest points of the stone in which we were cradled. And bright white threads burned at the core of each of my companions, brightest in the girls racing ahead of me.

Jaelle's threads were frayed, tangled up in something... not black, just... not there. Aurora's threads were twined with threads of gleaming gold. I had a feeling, could I see Silva with this strange new vision, she would likewise be twinned with silvery threading.

The girls' battle against the bard did not go as it had in the Black Woods. Their initial rush was enough to drive him away from the siren, but he was still armed, and came dangerously close to wounding several of the girls with a wide, low slash of his short sword.

But the girls had spread out around him, a pack of small, blonde, blue-eyed wolves, and he could not focus his efforts on any one of them.

I saw blue threads brighten around the bard, felt the icy prickle of the blonde weaver's Power increase, watched the threads weave about Bargle's wrist as he made to strike at one of the girls. His snarl briefly tipped into a look of surprise as he pulled himself off balance as the momentum in his swing dragged to a crawl.

Jasna darted under the blade, throwing her hip against the man's long leg, bringing her knee up into his.

It was almost amusing, watching him fall towards the floor, his movement brought short as his arm — still bound in spinning blue threads of power — stayed where it was. Only after his shoulder gave a 'pop' did the threads dissolve.

As in the Black Woods, girls piled atop him, pinning him at shoulders and knees and elbow.

Behind us, Aurora and Jaelle continued their battle. While Aurora outmatched her twin in strength of arms, the demon-infused siren had the

advantage of her song, which she sang and hummed, either diminishing Aurora's use of the dragonstones, or enhancing her own attacks.

Silva's thick, bubbling cough was nearly lost in the din of battles. Her eyes did not leave her sister, and it was clear she wanted to sing, but she could not draw more than the sharpest of gasps for breath. Her entire left side was soaked in blood, though the pool in which she lay was surprisingly small.

Macha's lay a hand across the siren's breast, and the summer's warmth brightened through the connection to her collar. Her dreamy expression crumpled to one of worry. Fear.

"The sword has punctured her lung. She drowns in her own blood."

I lowered my hands over the wound, reaching out with my magic, coaxing the fading spark of life to light. Weak, fitful, it guttered. I poured more energy into the spell.

"It will not take," I muttered. "As if—"

"See," Macha's said.

I squinted, and the threads appeared again in my vision. Silva's thread of light was dim, and somehow... shortened. My own magic, a dance of white lights, sparkled about a length of threads that were not there. And the threads shortened as I watched.

"What does this mean?" I asked.

Macha's ignored me. Her brow furrowed deeper, the warmth flared, painfully so. Threads of bright white energy manifested from nowhere that I could see, coursed around her hands before her fingers could work them into a delicate and complex pattern over the bloody froth that seeped from Silva's side.

In my enhanced vision, Macha's weaving and the threads of Silva's life energies danced a tug-of-war.

The harder Macha's pulled, the hotter her power burned.

"What are you doing?"

The blonde weaver's question came like a slap across the face. Had I not been connected to Macha's, she no doubt would have done just such a thing. She

stood over us, her Power pressing down upon me as Macha's burned white-hot inside of me. The blonde weaver's eyes blazed nearly as hot.

She knelt, reached over Silva and laced her fingers with those of the other weaver, her attention refocusing on the task at hand.

It was like a wave of frigid water from the Northern Sea rushed through me. The intensity of Macha's Power was suddenly quenched, only to brighten again, growing even brighter, but without the fiery burning from moments ago. It felt different, as well, a globe with two centers, rather than one, but still perfectly balanced.

Silva shuddered, gasped, her back arching.

"Turn her, Thorn. Quickly!"

I eased the siren onto her right side as gently as I could. I felt her convulse, and she began to cough, a thick, wet sound.

I pressed my hand to the girl's left side, my hand slipping on the blood before another shuddering breath sealed my hand against the terrible wound. Warm blood pulsed against my fingers with each wrenching cough.

Through the warmth of the bracelet's link, I felt a flutter ripple through the fabric of the weavers' magic. Macha's despaired.

"It is not enough," she murmured.

"Go, I will hold her."

Ana stood outside a circle of silvery powder. Jaelle cowered within, curled into a ball beneath the scythe's silver light.

Aurora dashed towards her fallen sister, the shield dissolving in a trail of green-yellow embers.

"What has he done?" She went to her knees, looking over Silva's pale form. Her expression mirrored that of Macha's as she saw the blood, still bubbling up from between my fingers.

Aurora shook her head. "No, no, not here, sister. Not here, of all places." Her small hands pressed against mine, trembling, and the golden veins within the stones on her gauntlets flickered to light.

Silva thrashed, nearly jerking away from my hold over her wound. Her cry of pain choked off as she began to cough. I pressed harder, my hand slipping as fresh blood forced its way through my fingers. Aurora backed away, the dragonstones' light dying.

She turned, her eyes blazing as she strode over to the bard. The girls cowered away from the shrike's anger, but did not leave their places pinning Bargle to the floor.

He looked up at Aurora with a smirk.

She ignored it, stooping to pick up the short sword from where he'd dropped it.

"Be careful you don't cut yourself on that," the bard said. "We wouldn't want you to end up like your sister."

Aurora turned the sword this way and that, peering down the length of the blade. It gleamed with an oddly reddish cast, a good half the length of it blackened with Silva's blood.

"What is this?" she asked.

Bargle chuckled.

"What is it?" the shrike shouted. She brought the sword up, and the girls screamed, two of them dashing away from their places on the bard's shoulder and arm.

The bard merely smiled his smug, oily smile.

"A test," he said. His dark eyes shifted to look past Aurora, to regard her sister, who still struggled beneath my hands. "One that I shall pass, and she will fail."

"Mistress Aurora, I have heard it called 'red steel.'" The girl sitting on Bargle's leg looked up at the shrike, though her head was bowed. I recognized her as one of the girls who'd helped us slip past the Black Eagle's guards at the Hook and Hatchet in Threshold. Fiala? Anya?

Aurora turned, and, seeing the girl flinch, lowered her arm, giving the sword an unconscious spin around her wrist as she grounded the point a good distance from her foot.

“Tell me more,” the shrike said. After the briefest of pauses, she added a “please.”

The girl shrugged. “I saw it, once, at Father’s inn. A dark-skinned man had a thin sword made of that same metal. All he would say was that he traded a fortune for it in Slagovich... wherever that is.”

“To the west,” I said. “Past the Great Wastes, on the Gulf of Hule. Demarra has spoken of it, a few times. Not highly. ‘A hive of scum and villainy’ were her exact words.”

“Father did not serve the man more than one drink,” the girl said.

“It still does not explain how you came to possess such a weapon.” Aurora had turned her eyes back to Bargle.

“It was a gift from my Lord, the Baron,” he said. “One of the first made by that new smith of his. Not bad work. Even with a mangled hand and one eye, a dwarf can still out-smith the rest of the baron's armorers.”

Katarin approached, hesitantly, kneeling beside me. She did not shy away at the blood that soaked through her dress.

“I think...” she began, and then drew a deeper breath. She placed one hand over mine, pressing down harder. Silva gave a sharp gasp, but Katarin kept the heavy pressure over my hand as I tried to ease up.

She put her other hand over the weavers’ linked hands, bit her lip, then let go her pent up breath.

Dizziness roiled through me again as the balance of the weaving shifted, tipping to balance on three points. Another buzzing itch shivered across my spine, a sudden, spiky burr.

“Gently,” the blonde weaver said. “There is no need to throttle it so.”

Katarin blushed, bowing her head slightly. She squinted, and the icy prickling lessened. Her smile was brief, before her expression went stern. I felt her presence mingling with the webwork of glowing white threads. The two weavers gasped, their power surging as the pattern began to unravel.

“Gone and made a right mess of it,” she muttered, shaking her head. She glanced over at the two weavers, blushing again. “It was a good start! It’s just...”

“Macha’s and I know only the very basic elements of healing,” the blonde weaver said.

“The very basics,” Katarin muttered, frowning. More of the pattern of threads came apart.

“Perhaps we could teach each other?” Macha’s suggested. I felt a distant pang of injured pride at the girl’s barb.

“Watch,” Katarin said. The strands began to shift, and she pulled in threads of blue and red and brown.

I became little more than a chiurgeon’s orderly, holding Silva down as she thrashed under Katarin’s careful manipulation of the weaving magic. At one point, the wound grew so hot the blood gave off a red-tinged steam.

Aurora made to approach at Silva’s first stirring, but the other girls clutched at the shrike’s gown.

“She is as our sister. We would never hurt her.”

The golden-eyed twin turned her attention back to Bargle.

“You will follow her, if she dies,” the shrike whispered.

He merely smirked up at her. “Honestly, I did not mean for her to bleed quite so much. A few drops was all I needed.”

The sarcophagus lid nearest us gave a shudder, and then another. Dust and grit showered down over the weavers and I as the stone slab began to grate aside, grinding towards us.

Gilliam and Varis dashed around us, catching the edge of stone, trying to heave it back into position.

Their boots began to slide across the flooring stones.

“This isn’t working,” Varis gasped, glancing down at us.

“We cannot move her,” Katarin said.

“New plan,” Gilliam said. He ducked aside, sweeping up my staff. He jammed it into the crumbling sealing material between the sarcophagus and its lid, and again until it seated itself.

“Heave!” he called, and threw his shoulders against the length of the staff.

The slab began to tip, and Varis set his shoulder against its leading edge, his face reddening as his leg muscles bunched.

The stone tipped further, crashing down into the sarcophagus, raising a choking cloud of dust. The two warriors stumbled back, coughing and choking, waving at the air before them.

“I think—” Gilliam wheezed, “that took care of whatever wanted to pay us a visit.”

The words were not even out of the warrior’s mouth before the grinding of several more lids filled the chamber.

The room shook with each that lid smashed to the ground, raising an ever-growing cloud of dust and powdered rock. The girls gave short cries, dashing away from their places upon the bard as one of the slabs shattered close by. They circled around where we worked to keep Silva alive, hands linked, facing outward.

Aurora stood her ground, placing herself between the nearest of the sarcophagi and her sister, merely turning her face away from the flying chips and shards of stone. Bargle scabbled backwards, into the cloud raised by the falling stone.

But the shrike was not watching his progress. Something dark loomed upward from the faint outline of the stone coffin. Broad across the shoulders, an ill-defined head... whatever it was, it was not human.

“Wrap’d in his cloak, red with the blood of the sons of Traldar
Did the Queen decree Flaghr be entombed midst those he had slain
That they might wait, and watch, and rise to defend the stone
at the maiden’s bidding on the day the Beast Man king should walk again.”

Petra whispered the verse, but small as she was, standing nearly next to me, her words came clearly to my ears in the hush that followed the last of the falling sarcophagus lids.

“That was just in the Song to keep children from being naughty,” Jasna whispered. Tense though her voice was, it did not waver.

“No, it was a warning,” Aurora said.

“Foreseen in Zirchev’s Stone, as was Halav’s death. I never thought to be here to see that day, though,” I said.

“I never liked that verse,” Varis growled. He glanced over at us, briefly, and then shifted, catching sight of another shadow rising amidst the swirling dust.

“That doesn’t look like one to be on our side, either,” Gilliam said.

“The maiden seems closer to joining the dead than bidding them to rise.” Bargle’s voice trailed into a wheezing chuckle.

“Do not look at me,” Aurora said. “I will need all of my magic for defense.”

“These things were bested with bronze,” Gilliam said. “What chance do they have against elven steel?”

The figures lurched forward, clear of the obscuring dust. Ana’s silver light fell age-blackened bone and metal, the hunched posture and elongated skull protruding from an iron-banded leather helm making it clear that they were gnolls. But these stood a good head and shoulders taller than even the black-pelted brutes we’d faced just north of Verge.

Aurora hissed as the skeletons raised weapons. They looked to be bars of blackened metal, but it became clear as the light fell on them that they were ancient, squared-off swords. Iron swords that, coupled with the elongated, emaciated arms had a reach greater than the girl’s height. With only the bejeweled dagger, she would be terribly exposed in melee.

“Ana?” Varis asked.

The cleric shook her head. “Save your worry for them,” she said. “They cannot cross the silver threshold.”

Indeed, the skeletal figures completely ignored Ana and her captive. The deep blackness of their hollow eye sockets focused on Varis, Gilliam, and Aurora.

The two warriors closed, moving to flank their opponent. Its bony head swiveled, then disregarded Gilliam as he worked his way around the thing’s unarmed side. It made several clumsy swipes at Varis, but he dodged the first, sending the second grating off the length of his sword, throwing his own weight into his blade. But the hulking skeleton would not be tipped off balance so easily.

Gilliam leapt with a triumphant cry at the huge opening in the thing's defenses, and he brought the long knife down where the heel tendons would have been on a living opponent. Rather than slice, though, he struck blade-downward, intent on separating the thing's ankle joint.

His plan was only half-successful: he managed to wedge the knife's length between the bones, but it merely turned, and the skeletal hand sweeping down to cuff Gilliam hard across the jaw, sending him reeling.

Varis took that opening, striking upward with an underhanded cut, aiming for the gap between the thing's elbow and where the iron greaves ended. His sword clanged hard off the bone, and he barked a curse.

"It's like striking iron!" he huffed, giving his sword a turn to loosen his wrist.

Even with her dagger aflame, Aurora was having no better luck. Her only advantage was her size and speed against the slow, jerky movements of her skeletal opponent. The dagger grated against bone, screeched against iron, the green-gold flames guttering and dying when they splashed against the age-crusted armor.

The dagger's edge erupted in flares of green and gold as Aurora turned aside blows from the thing's iron sword. But she lost ground, the weight and power behind the attacks causing her to shuffle back a step at a time to divert some of the energy. If the thing managed to make contact, it would shear the girl in half.

Dizziness swept over me, coupled with a hard shiver, and I sat back, my hands slipping away from Silva. Katarin had taken my place, and she gave me a reassuring nod.

"The two of them can shoulder the burden," Macha's said. "Others need our strength."

Images flickered through my mind, thoughts not my own.

"It could work, yes?" Macha's asked. "Macha used a similar tactic against the metal-clad horsemen."

"Your shepherd was not a very nice man," I said.

"None of them are," Macha's said. My stomach turned at the depth of the wave of despair bubbling up through the strange collar-and-lead connection.

My feeling of Macha's warmth intensified, and her steps slowed, as we edged back and around where Aurora fought to keep the towering gnoll skeleton at bay.

There was a surge of heat, as Macha's thrust her arm down. A trailer of liquid fire streamed from around her fingers, snaking across the floor in a smoking, hissing rush. She jerked her arm up, snapping her wrist, and the fire lashed up, the tip of it coiling 'round the armored greave as the skeleton brought its arm back for another devastating strike against the shriek.

I brought my own fire to bear, tracing the rune *Fernath* in the air before me, and willing its power through the conduit, using the contact Macha's had given me through her lash of fire.

She gave a cry, her knees buckling. Blistering pain flared up from my wrist even as I caught her with that arm.

Concentrate! You must hold the rune! I heard her voice in my mind, felt her push my focus away from her, forcing my attention back to the fading rune. It reignited as my concentration wrapped around it once more.

Her pain lessened, then washed away under a surge of pride.

The greave steamed in the cold air, the metal around the lash's contact deepening from red to orange.

There came a muted clang of metal on metal, and then a harder ring of iron on stone as Aurora brought her dagger up along the glowing line of heated metal, shearing the greave in half as though it were butter. She ducked and scrambled under the thing's clumsy swing.

The gnoll skeleton did not look back, but instead took a step towards the circle of girls surrounding Silva. Joined hands tightened, and eyes went wide, but the girls did not cower or give ground.

Fire seemed to be the only thing to get the creature's attention, so I focused the rune's magic in my hands, hurling two globes of flame straight at the center of its back.

They were nothing more than small bursts of flame against the armor, but it was enough to divert the thing's attention. Aurora danced around it, striking twice

at its knees, each time the blade's greenish-gold flames washing over the bones with little effect.

She ducked another wide swing of its iron sword, and then it bent, bony jaws snapping closed over the shrike's cloak. It gave a twist of its neck, sending the girl skidding into the slowly-settling dust cloud on the other side of the chamber.

I threw another handful of flames at the skeleton, catching it full in the bony face, and it stumbled back, waving at the lingering traces of flame along its snout.

It ducked towards us, jaws snapping. But Macha's was expecting it to do just that, and she spread her hands before the thing's jaws, her fingers curling in a complex pattern.

Heat bloomed in the space between her hands, a swirling, churning ball of flame growing, spun of pure threads of Energy. It burned hotter than anything I could conjure with the rune, made of the scraps of power drifting off the Sphere itself. Not even the size of a clenched fist, I wondered at how much power was in the much larger spheres she'd thrown at the dark beasts in the depths beneath the Lost Valley.

She tugged her hands apart, and I saw the threads constraining the sphere of flame snap, timed perfectly to send it streaking into the thing's open maw.

A dull roar shook the chamber, mixed with a grating howl. The skeleton toppled on its side, the bones twitching and shaking before collapsing under the weight of the heavy iron armor.

A rush of elation sang through the bracelet, and she turned, eyes and smile brighter even than when she held her power.

We did not have more than that moment to savor our victory. Varis gave a shout, going down on one knee under the weight of the other skeleton's overhand strike.

The girls screamed as the thing's next strike missed, slicing the space just above where Varis had thrown himself flat on the ground, and plowed through the stone sarcophagus next to the group.

I shouted, expecting the worst, but watched chunks of stone and blackened bone bounce and spin away from a curving of the air surrounding the girls.

The blonde weaver had separated her hands from Katarin's, her face lined with strain as she held the shield of air in place against the rain of stone.

One of the stones gave a reddish spark as it careened off the barrier, and as it tumbled across the room, lights glimmered off facets, not roughened edges.

It bounced, coming to a stop before a pair of travel-worn boots.

Bargle stooped, picking up the stone, which was large enough to fit comfortably in the palm of his hand. He blew on it, wiping dust and grime from its surface, polishing it against his brown tunic.

"One down, two to go," he said. He drew two fingers across the longest facet of the stone, and a sheet of flame burst away from either side, racing towards the far walls of the chamber.

Ana leapt away at the last second, as the flames coursed through her silver barrier. The silvery light winked out, and she stumbled, coughing and batting at the smoking, glowing ends of her long hair.

Bargle and Jaelle were both lost behind the red-gold wall of fire.

The gnoll twisted, sword poised to hammer again against the blonde weaver's dome of air. It lifted its muzzle, bony jaw opening up in what probably would have been a howl, had it an actual throat, and it lumbered away, iron plates clanking as it charged towards the flames. It did not slow, plunging through the curtain. In the fraction of a moment the fire parted, I saw a flash of brown cloak and golden hair: Bargle had the demon-infused siren over his shoulder, and ran for the doorway at the far side of the room.

"We have to go after them!" Varis wheezed. He was leaning heavily over his knees.

"The only place we're going is up," Ana said, her breath coming in short gasps.

"But he—" the warrior protested.

"The flames are consuming most of our air," the blonde weaver said. "In a matter of minutes, what little is left will be poisonous."

The girls moved quickly, fashioning a stretcher from their cloaks held tight between them. Katarin stayed by Silva's side, her hand clasped with that of the

unconscious siren. Silva breathed on her own, but they were short gasps, and her color did not look at all good.

Gilliam stood at another doorway, motioning us over. He'd sheathed Bargle's short sword at his waist, and Aurora stood on the other side of the doorway, giving the man a dark look. It was apparent they'd been arguing, but they shelved their disagreement at our approach.

"A fine lot of good you were," I heard Jasna say to the Black Eagle's guards, who brought up the rear of our column. "Aren't guards supposed to, oh... I don't know... keep people from getting hurt?"

"We're just here to make sure you don't escape the Black Eagle's justice," the bigger one said. "Nobody said a thing about fighting somebody else's fights."

"If I wasn't holding this stretcher, I'd show you a fight," Jasna muttered.

The guard laughed, but it sounded a bit forced.

I grew dizzy as we reached the middle of the staircase, but after a few more steps, the air lost its iron-like smoky tang. The breeze that brushed through my hair was cool, and came from the top of the stairs, rather than the hot rustle from below.

"Hold," Aurora said, as we came to a small rectangular chamber. It was lined with long stone work surfaces, the walls engraved with intricate glyphs and diagrams. Two low stone altars stood roughly equidistant from each other to each side of the wide doorways.

Torchlight bobbed in the darkness beyond the far door, several torches, and the clatter-jangle of metal and chain armor rang closer, along with the tromp of many booted feet.

"Back!" she called, motioning us to head back down the stairs. The dagger burst to light in her hand, and the two red stones about her wrists began to smolder.

Gilliam and Varis made to press forward, but she motioned them back as well. "Stay with Silva. I will cut a path through."

I felt a shiver brush along my spine, followed by the awareness of Macha's warmth as the two weavers opened their connections to the Spheres. I glanced around the room. The stone around me had been carved, crafted. Useless, the

living stone too far to easily grasp. I would have to make do with the fire from the approaching guards' torches, then.

"Why did we stop? What's going on up there?"

More than one girl voiced complaints, amidst several pleas to get to the surface as quickly as possible.

"Be ready," Aurora hissed down at us. She eased into a middle guard position, but shifted her balance to the tips of her toes, readying to charge.

The torches bobbed closer, the echoing jingle of armor making it impossible to tell just how many approached.

They grew closer, torchlight shining off brightly polished helms and breastplates. Golden shoulder clasps gleamed bright in the yellowed light. Good pitch torches. Even gaps in the boots' cadences, picked out even among the echoes. Deeply colored cloaks, a dark color, but not black. Regular angles on the fronts of the helms, upright, not slanted.

"Aurora, wait! These are not—" I began.

Gilliam and Varis pushed past me, even as the shrike took her first running step.

The ring of metal on metal seemed unnaturally loud in the relatively cramped confines of the funerary chamber.

Gray-brown and deep blue cloaks spun, the green-gold light of Aurora's flames shone along the length of highly-polished steel. Golden hair, too, spun as the shrike clashed with the first of the figures through the doorway.

Blades sang as they slid apart, the taller figure driving Aurora back. They circled each other, each in a low guard.

"M'lady—" one of the men at the opposite doorway said.

"Not now, Desmond!"

Aurora sprang as the blue-cloaked figure briefly glanced aside at her comrade.

"Petra's garters, girl, is this how you welcome reinforcements?" The words came at a wheeze as the gleaming long sword barely turned aside the shrike's dagger. A deep blue leather glove reached up and tipped the helmet back.

"Shrike, stand down! She is an ally!" Varis snapped.

Aurora skipped backwards, still at guard. Between gulps of breath, she glanced at the blue-cloaked figures in the doorway, Varis, and her opponent, who breathed even heavier, shaking out her sword arm.

"Aleena," Gilliam said with a smile. "What's a girl like you doing in a crypt like this?"

Aleena sheathed her sword with a shaking hand, rotating her shoulder after the blade slid home. "I should have known you lot would be tangled up in this."

"It's good to see you as well," Varis said with a nod.

"Step aside," the knight of the Griffon said. "Bargle slips further from my grasp the longer you stand in my way."

"It's a maze down there," Gilliam said. "You'd need the whole Grand Duke's army to search those catacombs, and chances are he's already found another hole to slither out of."

"You saw him, then?"

Gilliam nodded. "Bloodied his nose for you."

"But he is not among you?"

Gilliam shook his head.

"So you let him escape?"

"Hold, now, we didn't *let* him do anything," Varis said.

Aleena sighed. "Step aside. We can at least ensure that he didn't get away with the stone."

She saw the glances Varis, Gilliam and Aurora exchanged.

"You let him escape with the stone?"

This time, it was actually a question, voiced more out of disbelief than uncertainty.

Gilliam shrugged. "Not to worry. A stone that size... He'll have a hard time fencing something like that."

Aleena's back straightened, even as her cheeks began to redden. Her gloves creaked as she balled both hands into fists.

“That was the Eye of Traldar!” she shouted. She took several deep breaths, closed her eyes, bowing her head. She lifted it after several steady breaths, her expression calm, composed.

“Guards, take them into custody. Full irons and collars. And watch out for that one.” She pointed towards Aurora. “She may look small, but she hits like an ogre.”

Varis gripped Aurora’s shoulder. “Stand down. These are Knights of the Order of the Griffon. They are Silva’s best chance for aid.”

The shrike let out a slow breath, and turned the dagger, offering it hilt-first to the armsman who collected our weapons. Having seen the notches it put in Aleena’s sword, he held the thing in two fingers before dropping it into the sack.

He took a half step back as Aurora raised her hands, but she just glared at him as she removed the golden tiara. Golden threads seemed to unravel from her hair, but it could have been a trick of the torchlight. She dropped the circlet into the sack.

“The vambraces, too.”

“That would be... unwise,” the shrike said.

The soldier glanced over at another, the taller man who’d tried to speak up earlier. He clanked over, leaning down to meet Aurora’s eyes.

“Come now, little one. Let’s get those pretty baubles off.”

The golden veins came alive in the two red stones as his hands drew nearer the bracers. He jerked his fingers back as the leather of his gloves sizzled, reaching for his sword.

“I told you it was unwise,” Aurora said, her tone like that of a stern parent rebuking a child. Her gaze did not waver, not even to glance away as he went for the blade. “Draw your sword and I will activate the black.”

“You do not address a Knight of the Griffon in such a manner, you little w—”

“Desmond!”

He straightened at Aleena’s call.

“M’lady, this child---”

“Do not make the mistake of treating her as you would a child. Did you not hear a word my uncle said? Do you want her wild magic running rampant through the Duchy?”

“This ‘child,’” Aurora said, giving the knight Desmond a disdainful glance before turning her attention to Aleena, “humbly begs your aid in restoring her sister to health.”

Aleena frowned. “Sister? Then you are not—”

I beckoned for the girls behind us to come forward.

There was a stir among the soldiers as the group came into view. More than one hand went to a sword hilt, Desmond’s included.

“Two of them?”

“Twins?”

“This wasn’t in the baron’s briefing.”

“Weavers,” the knight hissed. “Openly channeling in defiance of the Grand Duke’s —”

“Oh, stuff it,” Aleena said, rolling her eyes at the man’s outburst.

“I like it no better than you do,” Aurora told the knight. “But their magic is the only thing keeping her alive. Unless you would do better, you will not interfere.”

“M’lady Halaran,” the knight sputtered, “did you hear that? She is our prisoner and yet she gives us orders, as if—”

“Did I not tell you to stuff it, Desmond?”

His back straightened, and he drew a breath, but Aleena raised a hand.

“How do you think Lady Adriana will react when I tell her you ordered this poor girl’s — this poor child’s— death?”

The knight paled, then blushed. He turned, waving a hand and barking orders.

“You four, with me. The sooner we get her to the surface, the sooner we get these weavers under iron.”

The four guards fell in around the girls, the two weavers, and myself.

Desmond frowned. “Where do you think you’re going, druid?”

I lifted my left wrist, letting the lead dangle. He glanced at it, following its length up to the collar around Macha's neck. His gaze flickered over towards Aleena.

"And what do you make of this?" he asked her.

"Uncle Sherlane was right," she said, her eyes sparkling in the torchlight. "These are indeed interesting times."

We emerged from the funerary chamber into bustling chaos. Khoronus' temple had been converted to a field hospital: row upon row of cots and blankets lined the ancient stones of the temple's main floor. Great swathes of canvas were strung between the pillars. Clerics wearing the twelve-pointed star of the Church of Karameikos moved back and forth among row after row of wounded. Some were still, and required little more than an adjusting of blankets. Others thrashed and wailed, held down by laymen while the blue-robed priests of Chardastes did what they could for the terrible burns. The air was thick with the smells of their poultices, but it still did nothing to cover up the sickly smell of burnt flesh.

"What happened here?" I asked the question, as the girls stood, frozen in shock.

"Magic and death," the knight Desmond said. At his urging, we moved along the periphery of the great hall, towards the largest knot of blue-robos. The girls quickly averted their eyes as we passed bed after bed of bandaged victims. None of them rested peacefully.

As we approached, one of the clerics looked up from washing her hands. Middle aged, her hair trailing from its bindings, she heaved a sigh, but her expression changed when she saw it was not another burn victim.

"Here, now, set her down quickly. Gently. That's it," the woman directed, as the girls maneuvered their makeshift stretcher towards a low stone slab. She smiled at the girls. "It's all right. You children go and rest now. Your friend is in Chardastes' care now."

Rather than retreat or find a place to sit along the walls out of the way, the girls hurried over to where the lay clerics were busy cutting bandages and grinding herbs.

Katarin and the two weavers only reluctantly released their hold on the powers that had been keeping Silva alive. It was only after the woman began her chant that the warmth of their combined powers faded from my awareness, the tingling itch easing from the nape of my neck.

Again, I felt a surge of exhaustion wash into me through the bracelet. As quickly as it came, so did it disappear, and I was left with the usual aches of a day's long journey. But Macha's shoulders still slumped, and her eyes held the glaze of one gone too long without sleep or sustenance. Katarin, I noticed, leaned heavily on the blond weaver's arm, the taller girl patting the younger's shoulder, murmuring something.

Lay clerics approached us, bearing steaming towels and bowls, directing us towards a canvased off section where we could refresh ourselves.

We found four guards in blue and white tabards waiting as we emerged. Each bore a pair of heavy iron manacles.

"If you please, ladies," one of them said, jangling the chains. "And gentleman," he added, giving me a nod.

The two weavers and I extended our arms, but Katarin folded hers, tucking them tight against herself.

"Young lady," the guard nearest her said, his voice pained. "Please—"

"I will not," she said. "There are people here who need help. I can help. I cannot do that if you put those on me."

"Young lady, you are—"

"I am a Wisdom's daughter, very nearly a full fledged healer in my own right. Some of these people are my townfolk and neighbors and I will help them." She stamped her foot, and I felt two icy bursts scatter down my spine, and then there was but one shiver.

Katarin stood stock still, her eyes wide, her face a mix of worry and confusion. The guard stepped forward and wrestled her hands into the cuffs, bolting them shut with a vicious twist.

The girl glanced over at the blonde weaver. "What happened? He should have been held still! Why didn't it work?"

“The weave you were about to throw at that man would have taken his head off, not bound him in place.”

Katarin paled. “I didn’t—” She glanced over at the soldier, who was just as pale behind his helmet. “I wouldn’t—”

“You *would* have,” the blonde weaver said, her voice was not the least bit gentle. “Had I not held your power behind a shield, this man would be dead, and likely these others would have slain us all as a result of your childishness. A weaver *never* uses her power in anger, no matter how right she may *think* she is. It is only used to harm another as the very last defense of the weaver’s own life, that of her Warder, or those unable to do help themselves.

“Your newfound power is not some toy to take out and play with whenever you please. It is a tool, like a sewing needle. Or a sword,” the weaver said, glancing at those hanging at the waists of our guards. “You must learn the difference between the two, and how to handle each before you go charging about waving them around.”

“She is lucky,” Macha’s said, as we sat along the temple’s rear wall, under guard. “I had no such guide, when I came into my power. Not until—” She swallowed, glancing away, blinking. I felt the ripple of shame and disgust through the bracelet, gone as soon as it surfaced.

My mother and then the druids of Radlebb had overseen my training. It took nearly a year just to be able to keep the focus to control a single candle’s flame. I could not imagine learning to control fire magic on my own. Not knowing what — if anything — I could say to comfort her, I made do with reaching over and laying my hand over hers, which she held clasped over her knees.

A tingle of surprise shivered up my arm, followed by a warmth not unlike how it felt when she held her power ready. The feeling vanished at my somewhat startled intake of breath.

“We should sleep,” the weaver said.

The night was not getting any younger. Above us, through the gaps in the white canvas tarps, the Chimerids streaked across the sky, amidst a swirling of snowflakes.

I blinked. Snowflakes, when the night was clear?

But my weariness overcame my curiosity, and I drifted off to sleep, my back against the stones of Khoronus' great, ancient temple.

Second night of the Chimerids (on or about Kaldmont 25, 997AC)

I awoke for what must have been the third or fourth time. I was sweating, despite the chill of the night, breathing as if I'd been chased. I'd dreamed it, hadn't I? Images flashed again, fading even as I tried to remember them: hiding in a hollowed-out tree, a guttural baying, and squinty blood-shot eye peering through the opening, lupin jowls curling in what passed for a smile among their kind...

"Bad dreams?" the blonde weaver asked, from nearby. Katarin slept with her head on the weaver's lap, and the older girl stroked similarly blonde hair.

I nodded, slightly, not wanting to disturb Macha's, who leaned heavily against me, her head on my shoulder.

"Not of my own dreaming," I whispered.

"The collaring links the two wearers together," the other weaver said. "Feelings, impressions can be passed back and forth. Sensations. I suppose it not too far a jump for dreams to wander, as well."

I raised my hand, letting my tunic sleeve fall back, revealing the strange silvery bracelet. The surface looked entirely smooth, broken only where the lead connected. The lead, too, looked oddly smooth, glossy. Almost... fluid, though locked in the shape of a finger-width cord perhaps the length of my own and Macha's arms if we linked hands.

"We do not know how they are made," the blonde weaver said. "The Tower has never been able to recover one for study. Until now."

"Do you think they will find a way to remove it?" I had tried to remove the collar from around Macha's neck, but my fingers and head burned in nearly blinding agony when I tried to loose the catch. I got a double-dose of it, the pain feeding back to me through the bracelet.

"They must." Her free hand balled into a fist.

Katarin stirred, and the weaver resumed stroking the girl's hair, growing silent.

I tried to sleep again, to awaken twice more from dreams of fire and heartbreak before Ixion chased away the last tatters of the night.

We were brought a simple but hearty porridge, escorted again to the wash basins, and then led through two of the draped flaps of canvas that led to the temple's front steps.

I expected to see a blackened section paving stone, where the Black Eagle had constructed the pyre. I expected a slight tang of smoke to fill the air, expected the charred remains of the fire to still smolder.

The entire plaza smoldered, the paving stones warped and bubbled, seams between the stones either fused together or curled upwards, as leathers will do when laid across a hot iron before being stitched into place.

Of the pyre, there was no sign, save perhaps a darker smudge of ash against the gray of the flagstones. The gibbet, the stalls, the first rows of pavilions along the grassy hillock across the plaza were simply gone, the muddy swathe of ground hardened, baked and cracked as if we stood under a high summer sun. There were still footprints, gouges in the ground where tent-stakes had been driven in, marks where braziers and benches and tables had stood. I shuddered to think what had happened to all that.

The air did not taste at all of smoke, but held a coppery tang. My tongue tingled with the feel of it, and it sat heavily across my shoulders, stirring the hairs across my scalp. I resisted the urge to scratch at the tingling that seemed to press against my palms, the soles of my feet.

I felt Macha's presence at my back, felt her hand on my shoulder, another slipping into my left hand, trembling, until I squeezed it.

"What happened here?" she whispered. It did not seem appropriate to speak in anything but a hush.

A figure stepped from what remained of the King's Hall, bordering the third side of the broad, blasted courtyard to our left. Early morning sunlight glinted off white hair, sparkled amidst the golden threads describing the wheel of fire in the center of the blue and yellow twelve-pointed star on the white tabard.

Baron Halaran waved us over, indicating that we should keep to the steps, crossing the unmarred corner of the plaza in order to reach the steps leading up to the King's Hall. The very air seemed to buzz, thrumming inside my head, pushing against my eyes and teeth all in completely different directions. I did not need

Macha's urging to stride as quickly as possible across the blistered stones. Katarin and the blonde weaver fairly ran after us.

I reached forth, clasping hands with the Baron. His grip was firm, warm. His eyes were bright, and he smiled, but it came through a grim and haggard expression.

"Thorn, I am glad to see you safe. I have been in contact with your Hierarch. I will have to let him know that you somehow managed to survive this...."

He sighed, and glanced out over the devastation.

"What happened here, your Lordship?" I asked.

He frowned. "I was going to ask the same of you. But please, come in, away from this. There is much to discuss. Much that needs... settling."

He looked away as he said that last word, leading us across a short expanse of open stone past the pillars that lined the front of the one-time palace of the King of Krakatos. A small side chamber, its walls mostly intact, served as the Baron's office. Several camp chairs had been set up, surrounding a broad table filled with maps and a book of figures. A brazier in the corner kept the worst of the stone's chill from the air. Most importantly, the last of the itching, coppery-tasting uneasiness faded away even before we stepped through the gap in the wall left by men and not age.

"I know you, and you as well, Katarin," the baron said, with an inclination of his head towards the girl. She blushed, and bobbed a small curtsy. "Please, won't you introduce me to your two friends?"

"My Lord Baron Halaran of Threshold, Patriarch of the Church of Karameikos serving the lands of the northern Grand Duchy..." I drew a breath to continue, but the older man coughed, and waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. A glimmer of amusement kindled through the bracelet.

"May I present to you Mistress Seraphina of —" A surge tingled up my arm. I glanced over at her, and she looked at me with tears brimming in her eyes.

"You never did mention the name of your village," I said to her.

She shook her head, blinking, wiping at her eyes. "It— it doesn't matter. It is very small. Very small," she repeated, dabbing at her eyes again.

I motioned towards the baron, giving my hand a shake to try to chase away the tingling. The fingers were very nearly numb with it.

The baron took the girl's hand as she curtsied. "Glantri," he said. "Boldavia?"

"Yes, your Lordship."

The baron waved his hand again. "Come now, none of that. Raise your eyes, my dear, they are such a lovely shade."

She did so, hesitantly, glancing over at me. I gave her a nod. I saw the baron's eyes dart to the silver choker about her neck, follow the sweep of the silvery lead up to the bracelet on my left wrist. He nodded to the girl, releasing her hand and arching an eyebrow at me.

"It... it was a necessity, your Lordship," the weaver said, her tone apologetic. She had seen the look, as well.

"A story I am sure to be glad to hear one day," Halaran said with smile that was partly bemused, but mostly reassuring. "And this lovely young lady?"

"She is—" I began, but Katarin interrupted me.

"My Lord Baron, I present to you Saoirse, a Magia of the Azure. And my teacher."

The baron took the blonde weaver's hand, and they shared a quizzical glance at the younger girl.

Halaran let the weaver's hand go, and knelt beside Katarin. He murmured a brief prayer, passing his hand over her head while his other hand clutched at the silver amulet engraved with Ixion's wheel of fire. He stared into her eyes for a long moment, then nodded.

"You have your parents' permission for this tutelage?"

Katarin shuffled her feet, glancing down at them. "Well..."

"My Lord Baron," Saoirse said, "the girl has only just now come into her power. She shows a remarkable strength for healing. Her friend was at the brink of death, and she snatched her back."

"This is true?" the baron asked the girl.

As if her blush was not answer enough, she nodded, murmuring a "Yes, my Lord. I didn't— I just—"

Halaran took her hand in his, patting it. "Now, there is no need to be afraid. You did not do this in the name of any of the Immortals?"

She paled, her eyes widening. "There wasn't time. My Lord. Silva was— I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"No, quite the contrary," the baron said. He smiled, squeezed the girl's hand. "You did mean to. With all of your strength."

"But— Father says.... He says that it is for the Immortals to decide. He says it is wrong to—" She hiccuped. "I'll repent! Name the penance, I'll do it three times over!"

The baron raised an eyebrow. "Three times? No, just once will be enough."

Katarin swallowed, wiped at her eyes and straightened her back.

"In order to repay this debt, I do so order you to begin tutelage in your newfound power, and to be ready to lend your aid to others in times of need."

"I will, my Lord. I—" She stopped, blinking.

"Good. Let it be settled then. You and Magia Saoirse shall be my guests. You will accompany me back to Threshold once my business is finished here."

"But... But I—"

"You have saved lives, Novice Pevnoruk, of your own bidding, with your own strength. The Immortals cannot be angry, for they have given you this blessing." He rose, and kissed the girl's forehead. "And I shall have words with your mother about your father's ... misunderstanding."

"So... I'm not in trouble?" she asked. She glanced up at the sky. "I won't be struck down by rays from Ixion if I—"

Halaran gave a chuckle. "No, my dear. Now, if you don't mind, Thorn and these two ladies and I have other things to discuss. The price of your lessons, among other things. I would like for you to return to the temple and check on our friend."

Katarin nodded, sketched a quick curtsy, and dashed from the makeshift office. A guard clattered after the girl, calling for her to wait.

"Your Lordship—" I began, but the baron waved a hand.

"Please," he said. "I had more than my fill of formalities while trapped at court."

"The Grand Duke's justice," I said, thinking aloud.

Baron Halaran laughed. "That of the Grand Duchess, actually. It seemed I was not prompt enough in my missives to her Grace."

"So, you are not...?"

"In hot water with Stefan?" The baron laughed again. "Goodness, no. I was waiting for the weather to lighten up before I traveled to Specularum. Though, I suppose it is a good thing I left when I did."

"Tarnskeep," I said, swallowing against a sudden dryness in my throat.

A slight frown furrowed Halaran's brow, and he sighed. "Fortunately, the staff had all vacated. Though the loss of men is indeed sad, for they merely followed the orders of their baron, I for should be thanking Silva."

"Thanking her? But she—"

"She kept several very valuable items from hands that would turn them to a purpose not their own. I offered to pay wergild to the solders' families, but Stephan's cousin insisted on his 'blood price.' I—"

The baron was interrupted by a voice, ringing clearly through the King's Hall.

"I said do not touch me! How long have you been standing guard there? Too long, if you're coughing like that."

There was a jangling of chain mail, and a cough as a guard appeared at the doorway, standing behind Aurora.

"My Lord, I have brought—" The man's words were interrupted by another fit of coughing.

"Get this man out of his armor and put him to bed," Aurora said, her golden eyes on the baron, but her finger pointing behind her.

"I'm fine, my Lord," the man said. He seemed short of breath, and his eyes had a glassy cast to them.

"I think perhaps you might do as this young lady says, Ladislav. Have the captain rotate another man in for..."

"No more than a half watch," Aurora said. "Not wearing all that... metal." She wrinkled her nose.

The baron nodded. "As she says, Ladislav."

The soldier bowed, giving the shrike a puzzled glance, and left us, grumbling that it was just a little cough.

"Your Lordship, may I present to you—" I started.

"You know," the baron said, "your sister bowed."

"Wena was always a stickler for formalities," Aurora said. "Besides, you were upon your own lands. Though your words may be law here, you do not rule."

I could not tell if the baron was more shocked or amused.

"Tell me, Thorn, was she this rude to the Black Eagle?"

"Fairly close."

Halaran chuckled. "At least I know it is not just me, then." He gave a sigh as he rose to his feet. He crossed his arms over his chest, bowing low to the shrike.

Her golden eyes widened, flickered towards me, for a brief moment before refocusing on the baron. She reached forward a hand, touching her right to the baron's left, near his right shoulder, and he straightened.

"*Namas'te*, Sherlane Halaran," she said. "It does me good to see that not all of the barbarians have forgotten the old ways."

"I have been called Aurora, after another of my kind of the same name. 'Shrike of the Fourth Guard of the House Defender attached to Colony Bellerophon, thirty-seventh iteration of the Progenitor's fifth shard' is rather a bit of a mouthful." She quirked a small smile.

The baron and shrike each took seats. Halaran regarded the girl for a long moment.

"Well, perhaps you could answer some questions for us," the baron said. He freshened the ink on his quill, wiping away the excess from the tip with an offhand sweep against the rim of the ink well. When the shrike did not immediately decline, he continued. "Two columns of light in the Duchy, in each case a girl with silvery gold hair at the center of events. Deaths and injuries in both cases. Magic of a magnitude and type we have never seen before."

Aurora's golden eyes did not leave the baron's face, her expression carefully composed, almost calm.

"We would appreciate it if you could shed some light on these events," the baron finally said. He held the quill over a fresh sheet of parchment.

"You have asked no questions," Aurora said, after the silence stretched to the breaking point.

"Why should I not have the both of you burnt at the stake for witchcraft, as Ludwig would have done?"

"Because you are not as big a fool as he."

To his credit, Halaran did not smile, though the corners of his mouth hinted at it.

"Do as you like with me," the shrike continued. "This body has stood against giants and dragons and has not broken. Another iteration shall follow."

Aurora leaned forward, setting her fingertips on the edge of the baron's camp table. "But if you should raise sword or fist against my sister, then you will invite the wrath of the Throne of Stars above, and what it does not finish off, *I* will."

A ring of drawn steel and flurry of deep blue cloak was all the announcement we had of Aleena's presence. She stood as close to the baron as she could, staring down the length of her longsword, the tip of which hovered less than a finger's breadth from the shrike's throat.

"You dare to threaten a baron, and a patriarch of the church?" she hissed.

Twin flares of red-gold light pulsed from the gems on Aurora's bracers, and Aleena's sword wrenched from her grasp, slamming to the floor so hard the stones chipped with the impact.

Sera gave a start, a shiver spiking up my arm and down my spine at the sword's muted 'clang.'

"A sword stayed draws no blood," Aurora said, her voice just as cold as that of the Knight of the Griffon.

Aleena's face flushed red, but I could not tell if it was anger or shame that colored her cheeks. She crouched, her hand stopping just short of the hilt of her sword.

"What did you do to it?"

Aurora did not watch the other girl's hand, but gazed steadily into Aleena's eyes, which were level with hers.

"Nothing I cannot do again."

The baron set a hand on Aleena's shoulder. "Leave it there, my dear."

"But Uncle, she—"

"She defended herself against a very real and present threat," he said.

"But she—"

"The man who took the stone gets further away the longer we sit here," Aurora said. "And draws closer to the next."

Aleena's shoulders slumped, and she hung her head. Wisps of curly golden hair drifted from the battle braiding that kept her locks swept up under her helmet. Her head snapped up, and she glanced up at the baron.

"How does she know about the stones?" Aleena turned, her eyes wide as she regarded the shrike. "How do you know about the stones?"

"To be fair," I said, "just about every Traladaran youth knows the *story* of the Eye of Traldar. But like Halav's sword and shield, its whereabouts have been lost to the mists of time."

"They were sealed in the temple an afternoon's hike south of Zadreth. Everybody knows that," Aurora said, waving her hand dismissively. "The Eyes are known to us because we were their stewards. There were five, taken from the colony's armory to find their way into the hands of the Traldar, and thence scattered over this entire backwater continent."

Aleena rocked back on her heels. "You mean the treasury."

Aurora gave me a sidelong glance before directing her attention back to the knight. "I took the shape of my words for this iteration from a druid. I did not misspeak."

"My research led me to believe there were but two gems," the baron said. "Yet you say there are five." He held up a hand as Aurora glowered. "I trust that Thorn knows his numerals," he said with a smile. He clasped his hands again on the desk. "It was this research that the Black Eagle was after in occupying Tarnskeep. That his man Bargle has the Eye means he has found my work."

"I find myself in a very awkward situation. Your... sister... has been accused and found guilty of numerous deaths by magic. By your own admission, the both of you have perpetrated that crime here again. Your companions stand to be branded as accessories to your crime, and share your punishment. The Grand Duke himself has placed the burden of judging and deciding of your fates in my hands.

"We have seen the results of Ludwig's rather heavy-handed attempt at justice. And you have made it rather clear that any further attempts to harm your sister will make this look like a Beast Day revel."

"Uncle, you can't seriously be considering bending to this child's threat," Aleena said with a scowl. "Allow me to —"

"No," Halaran said. I have heard very few words spoken with such finality. "I will not risk losing you to a trial by combat. And I will not risk losing such a valuable repository of ancient knowledge.

"I would offer you a chance to repay your debts to the Grand Duke by way of service to him."

Aurora sat back. "I can swear no oaths—"

The baron raised a hand. "We require no oath, save your word."

The shrike nodded. "That, I can give. What would your Grand Duke ask of my sister and I?"

"Pursue the Black Eagle's man. Stop him. Bring us proof that he acts on Ludwig's orders."

Aurora sat, silent, her eyes distant. Did she communicate with Silva, somehow, or simply ponder Halaran's request?

"We cannot do this alone," Aurora said. "We will require swords."

"I would send you with the two of the finest Knights of the Griffon," the baron said.

Aurora shook her head. "I require swords I can trust." She diverted her gaze towards Aleena. "Tell me, what are to be the fates of the Traladaran and the Thyatian?"

"Exile for the Thyatian, and the other warrior faces the same, unless he wishes to work off the debt through military service."

"I shall take them. They are both useful in a fight, and there will no doubt be plenty of those in the future. We will be leaving these lands soon enough, so you will get your exile. Let the Traladaran return after his service with us and consider his debt repaid. That is, providing he survives."

The baron sat back, made a few notes on the parchment before him. "Very well, it shall be as you say. Are we agreed, then?"

"My sister and I will not be able to maintain ourselves and two warriors. We shall have need of a *medico*.

"Aleena can serve in that —"

"I shall take the young servant of the Flame."

"She—"

"Your Grand Duke was going to eject her from these lands as well, was he not?"

"He was. As well as this one," the baron waved the quill pen in the direction of the weavers.

"We will have need of one with magical arts, where we plan to go."

The baron sighed. "Let me guess...."

Aurora turned towards us. "Which would you prefer, Seraphina? Exile and certain death or to journey with my sister and I and nearly certain death?"

Though I felt Sera's back stiffen, a bubble of warmth welled up through the bracelet, and she smiled, going so far as to chuckle, even.

"Well," she said, "since you put it in such terms... I would go with you. But..." She glanced over to me. "I am bound to go where goes my *bughael*."

"Thorn?" Aurora asked.

I shrugged. "Much as I would like, I must return to Radlebb. I have skeins to transcribe." I lifted my left wrist. "I must sort this out with the Hierarch, as well."

"A shame," Aurora said with a sigh of her own. "Your talents could prove very useful."

"Just where, precisely, do you intend to go?" Halaran asked.

The shrike brought a finger to her lips. "There are still unwitting thralls about. I would not make any more competition for the goal. If your research inclined your

thinking towards the north, then I will simply say that you were following the right tracks.”

The baron nodded. “You are certain you do not wish to have Aleena—”

Aurora shook her head. “No. I would ask a boon of her in my sister’s name, though.”

“And why should I help you?” the knight asked.

“Because I have spared your life twice this past night and morning.”

The girl’s mouth gaped open, as if the shrike had struck her hard across the sternum.

“When next you raid Halag to visit your father, you will find this Black Eagle has a new blacksmith. Silva would have you free him. He would willingly work with your knighthood, or serve the Baron Halaran until we return.”

“See here, I will certainly not—”

“If you free Durin, he will be able to use his talents to free others.”

Aleena paled, and then, as color crept back into her cheeks, a smile grew on her lips.

“There is one other thing,” Aurora said.

Aleena crossed her arms.

“The armory. It must be destroyed. We cannot allow the Black Eagle — or anybody — to have these weapons of red steel.”

Aleena nodded. “Very well. Uncle?”

Halaran looked up. “Hmm? Sorry, dear, I was busy with this writ and was not paying attention.”

The knight and her uncle shared a long look, and then he returned to his writing. “You are a grown woman, and will make the decision you believe to be right.”

Baron Halaran dismissed us, and Aleena followed us from his makeshift office.

“This has not exactly been the most joyous of Festivals of Light,” Aleena said, as we approached the palace steps.

“Yes, watch the remnants of the world I knew burn above you and be joyous,” Aurora said. She gave Aleena a backward glance, and then darted off down the steps, the gems adorning her circlet and bracers taking to golden light as she headed straight across the warped and buckled plaza. I could not help but notice the blackened, steaming patches she left in her wake.

“She is determined not to like me,” Aleena said.

“She has not exactly been in the best of moods since our arrival from the Valley,” the blonde weaver said.

“Given how things have unfolded since then, I do not think to blame her,” I said.

“I wonder if their little light show effected the baths,” Aleena said, scrubbing a hand through her hair. “I could use a good long soak.”

A tingle rushed up my arm, and I glanced over my shoulder, to see Sera’s eyes gone suddenly wide and bright.

“Did... you say ‘baths?’”

The tingle became an itch.

Aleena peered at the two weavers. “When was the last time either of you had a decent bath?”

I was dragged to the north, where the baths nestled at the foot of the hillock at the southern edge of the artisan’s district.

Three springs welled up from somewhere deep beneath Krakatos, two of them collecting in natural pools, the third feeding the cisterns which had sheltered us from the poisonous light from the Throne of the Stars. Marble and brick work laid down in Halav’s day had survived, and what parts of the wall didn’t were lined with a wooden framework draped with canvas sheets for the duration of the festival. Crews manned the furnaces — still in working order after two thousand years— and the heated water cycled through half a dozen man-made pools chiseled into the rock.

There were no separate pools for men and women, though there were half-partitions between most of them, it was more to keep the heat in than for privacy.

A sharp tingle surged through my arm.

“Um...” Sera began.

Aleena looked up from unfastening her cloak.

“There is no curtain?” the blonde weaver asked.

Aleena laughed. “Whatever for? Surely by now you have seen a man unclothed.”

Both of the weavers blushed, and I felt a nervous ripple from the bracelet.

“The druidic orders are not celibate, are they, Thorn?”

“It is not encouraged,” I said, “but—”

Aleena’s eyes widened slightly. “They are not like the Paladins of Mitra, are they?”

“The orders do not encourage nor discourage couplings. While several hierarchs remain single, there are others who have been happily wed for many years. The orders see no difference between them.”

“Judging from how he danced with the Dara the other night, I think it safe to say Thorn knows his way around—” Saoirse started. A tingling surge along my skin, a brief glow of warmth through the bracelet, and the weaver’s words suddenly stopped, her face going blue.

She her hands up, fingers spread in the spellcaster’s universal sign of surrender, and she began to breathe again. A sharp tang crept about beneath the current of nervousness drifting across the bracelet.

“Well, there you go,” the knight said with a shrug. “Nothing either of you hasn’t seen before, and wouldn’t appreciate.” Aleena began unbuckling her armor. I kept my back turned as best I could, but the quiet, tingling heat radiating through the bracelet spoke volumes of the weaver’s sense of propriety.

We were provided with long cloth towels by the women attending the bath’s outer rooms. The weavers’ collars drew some strange glances, but the women at least had the kind sense to save their whispers until after we left.

The baths were nearly empty, and we took the pool furthest against the hills, where the water was the warmest. My own sense of relief and relaxation was mirrored through the bracelet.

Nearly an hour later, after dips in progressively cooler baths, I found myself sitting along one of the stone benches, wrapped again in wool and leathers. The weavers sat next to each other, Saoirse running a wooden comb through the other’s

hair. They whispered back and forth to each other, and I'd nearly drifted off when the pair's giggling brought me back to wakefulness.

"And if you cut me off like that again," Saoirse was whispering, loud enough for me to hear, "I will tell Thorn that he can remove the bracelet any time he wishes."

If their giggling hadn't awakened me, the sudden spike in the bracelet's temperature would have.

We parted ways with Aleena, and made our way back to the makeshift hospital. The girls of Silva's army were still busy assisting the lay clerics, cutting, washing, and folding bandages. A crowd of blue robes clustered about a familiar flickering golden-white glow. Several more clerics drifted over to the group as we approached, peering over shoulders.

"Amazing. I have never seen it's like."

"Yet you say you beseech no Immortal for this aid?"

"Whence comes a power such as this, if not from Chardastes?"

"The greatest of minds have studied these stones, and still cannot unlock their mysteries," Aurora said. "Now quiet down. I must concentrate if it is not to scar."

Saoirse began lecturing on her observations of Aurora's dragonstones, and Sera and I continued down the rows of bedding. Another huddle had formed, separated a bit from the rest of the patients, this one of the younger patients, or youngsters whose parents were among the wounded.

They sat in a circle, around a web-like design that had been scratched into the floor with a bit of chalk. Dozens of chips of stone and pebbles were scattered about, seemingly random, but all placed where strands of the web met.

Silva was sitting up, her complexion pale as ever, but not the least bit gray. Her lips even held a bit of color, as did her cheeks. She took shallow breaths, favoring one side as she leaned closer to the game's surface.

"*Saaja?*" she asked, glancing left and right at the faces around the circle.

"Ready?" Katarin translated, to a nodding of many heads.

Silva held out both hands, fists clenched. Twenty-two more fists joined hers.

*“Musti upari musti
Dyo upari bhumil
Upari, adha, antar.
Eka, dva, tra.... Gatta!”*

As she chanted, the dozen pairs of hands wove an intricate pattern, hands next to each other bumping, bobbing, circling one about the other. At the last line of the chanty, the fists swam in unison, left, right, and left again, and then each presented a number of fingers, not unlike Odds-and-Evens.

There was a pause, and all the children circled around held their breath.

“Fifty-one!”

“Sixty-three!”

“Fifty-nine!”

“Ah! Bhavatu! Abrhan’ta!” Silva said, nodding and pointing to the youngster who’d just spoken.

A counting game, I realized, one where they could not use their fingers, since they had to keep them held out until the correct answer was guessed.

The winner looked down, and began sliding the stones in front of him along the strands of the web, back and forth, ever closer to the center. When he finished, he scooted aside, and left his space in the circle to the girl who’d been huddled at his left shoulder.

And the play began again.

A cheer went up from the children as one of them worked his collection of stones into the very center of the web diagram. It was quickly hushed under a half dozen stern glares from blue-robed priests.

Silva sat up a bit straighter, untying the purse at her waist. She rummaged around in it, producing one of the heavy-edged golden Blackmoor coins. She held it out to the boy.

His eyes widened. “That’s gold!” he gasped.

“Bhavatu,” she said, nodding. “Yes. Gold. Yours.” She looked over to Katarin. “It is not... good?”

The Traladaran girl bit her lip, shrugging.

The boy took the coin, hesitantly, as if Silva would snatch it away at the last moment.

"Yours," she said. "I have..." she frowned, groping for the words. "Much. For all." She gestured around the circle.

The boy sketched a clumsy bow. "Thank you!" And then he was off, running, waving the coin in the air. "Papa! Look what I won!"

The hospital erupted in chaos. Priests were in a furor at the disturbance. The adults immediately swarmed about the boy. There was much pointing in our direction. The gathered children began elbowing each other to get towards the spot in the circle the boy had vacated.

Silva tried to quiet the group, finally taking a deep breath that caused her to wince.

"*Vatu!*" She brought her hand down flat on the temple's floor, the red stone flaring briefly on her wrist. The stones on the board leapt at the ripple that coursed through the ground.

Ana could have invoked her shell of silence, so complete was the hush that fell across the chamber. The only sound was Silva's short, pained breathing.

A tall, broad-shouldered man separated from the crowd of adults, stalking up the aisle towards the siren.

Blue-black light pulsed, and Aurora materialized in front of her sister, bringing the man up short with an upraised hand.

That was her intention, at any rate. He scowled, and tried to bull his way past the golden-eyed girl.

From somewhere behind me, I heard Gilliam and Varis both groan.

"Now he's done it," the bigger of the warriors said.

Fortunately for the children, the man's curse was cut short as the air whooshed from his lungs.

"I suggest you stay down, friend," Varis said, laying a hand on the man's shoulder as he struggled to rise.

Aurora had turned away from the stranger even before the glow had faded from the stones adorning her wrists, huddling next to Silva, their foreheads very nearly touching.

"I... think the game is over," Katarin said, and began ushering the children away. "I will find each of you later, to give you your prizes," she said, as a murmur rose from those who's greed was greater than their fear.

I hurried to intercept the group of clerics and other adults approaching, lest they end up like the big man, or worse.

"Makeshift as it is, this is a house of healing!" I recognized the woman as the healer who'd taken over Silva's care.

"Silva meant no harm. She was trying to keep the children's minds from their troubles," Kararin said.

"We heard chanting over here," a woman said. "What if she had been putting these children under some sort of spell?"

"She would never—"

"This one is already under her influence," one of the priests said. He was quite tall, but his hood hid most of his features. "Probably had to resort to using gold when her words weren't having any effect."

"It was a game," I told the man. "The coin was a prize."

"Gold? A prize for a child's game?" asked one man.

"Where does a girl her age get solid gold coins?"

"Brought it up from those tombs below, I'll bet," another man said. "Giving out cursed treasure, is she?"

"Thorn—"

I glanced over my shoulder. "Aurora, please," I said. "This is—"

"Their eyes, Thorn. Look at them."

"They must have been at the edge of the crowd. Or further down the hill," the shrike said.

I looked, closely, at each face in the crowd. Three pairs of eyes rimmed with the slightest of traces of red. And the tall man... was nowhere to be seen.

“The girls are strangers here, as am I,” Ana said. “And I assure you, she has put no magic on any of the children. Their minds, at least, are unclouded. This is a house of healing, as you said.” Ana nodded to the older cleric of Chardastes, and the woman blinked, as if struck by a sudden thought. Or awakened from a daydream. “But it is also a temple. Shall we all pause for a brief prayer?”

The three men edged backwards, working their way to the back of the small crowd.

The priestess of Chardastes turned, spreading her arms, facing the rest of the crowd. Clerics and townspeople alike bowed their heads. The three men kept backing away. As the cleric began a simple prayer of thanks, the men turned and fled.

“That could have turned very ugly very quickly,” the priestess said, later over tea. The instigators gone, the crowd of parents quickly came to their own senses. Silva insisted on rewarding the players in her counting game, and while some of the adults took the offered coin, many declined, or turned around and handed the coin to the priestess.

“I still believe it a bad idea to move the girl so quickly. She needs more rest, and perhaps a final blessing that her health come back fully into balance.”

“I will travel with her,” Aurora said. “Her stone, and my own will see her to full health along the way.” The shrike turned her wrist this way and that, watching candle light dance across the facets of the gold-veined gem.

Still, the priestess frowned. “I do not like it. I would never release a patient under my care until I was assured of her full health.”

“We endanger your people by being here,” Aurora said. “The... ‘Deceivers’ as you call them, will follow us if we depart. The sooner we are on our way, the better off we will all be.”

And so it was settled. We would depart in the morning, to the ferry landing, where the baron had a skiff to take us out to one of the Grand Duke’s longships moored in the deeper waters of the Volaga.

Waning crescent of the Deep Snows (on or about Kaldmont 27, 997AC)

We parted ways at Rifflian, the Baron continuing north to his holdings, with Saoirse and the ranks of Silva's Army (who spent the entire two days' trip until Kelven arguing over whether they were to be called 'The Defenders of Threshold,' 'The Company of Maidens,' or 'The Handmaidens of Petra.')

Silva pressed something into each of the girls' hands, whispering in their ears as she kissed each on the cheek before we departed down the gangplank, while Aurora watched with a frown. They had had their own arguments, growing so heated at one point that thunder growled in the low-hanging clouds that still clung to the skies, though I felt no inclination of the weather to turn wet or stormy. More than one of the Grand Duke's sailors made the sign against witchcraft, when they thought one or another of the twins was not looking their way.

Saoirse and Sera's parting was a bit more tearful, and I did my best to push the feelings that welled up through the bracelet to the back of my mind.

Although I was expecting a greeting of some sort from the Order, the half score Greenwardens waiting at the dock came as a surprise.

"Marcu." He did not incline his head, and Breregon's smile was not welcoming, but wolfish.

My blood ran colder than the Waterholde.

"No," I said, as I felt the glowing warmth begin to radiate up my arm, touched with an echo of my own fear. The heat abated, but did not entirely dissipate. I inclined my head to the Hierarch's aide.

"I did not expect such an escort," I said to him.

"Fewer than six could be bested by magic. I decided to take no chances." Breregon rested his hand a bit too casually on the hilt of his sword. He glanced behind me. "Your companions are welcome to stay at the Swan, if they wish to wait for you."

Aurora stepped to my side, Silva to the other, slipping beneath the silvery lead.

“We would speak with the Hierarch, and will accompany Thorn.” Aurora put a heavy emphasis on my chosen name.

Breregon hesitated, but only slightly. “The Hierarch is... otherwise disposed,” he sniffed. He lifted a hand — not the one on the pommel of his sword — and turned to go.

“Then we will have to interrupt his council,” Aurora said. I shivered at the layer of frost she’d lathered over her tone.

The Hierarch’s aide turned back, arching an eyebrow. “I do not think you understand,” he said, slowly. “He is cloistered. With the Elders, and will be until the turning of the new moon. He left strict instructions that they are not to be disturbed. Under any circumstances.”

“They no doubt deliberate the importance of the disappearance of one of the wandering stars,” Aurora said, speaking just as slowly, her inflection a perfect mockery of Breregon’s tone. “We will save them the puzzlement. Besides, we have need of your Hierarch’s expertise in potions.”

The Greenwarden’s jaw dropped. He took several tries before he could speak. “You will not disrupt a Conference of Druids to ask for a mere philter!”

Silva coughed, and I could nearly feel the heat of Aurora’s gaze as she looked aside at her sister. The silver-eyed twin waved off her concern, but we both saw the spots of blood upon the handkerchief before she folded it away.

“You will take us to your Hierarch,” Aurora said. The words rang with a steely note of command.

Breregon seemed not to hear it. “I know your kind’s secret,” he sneered. “You are a copy. A shadow. And I do not leap at a shadow’s beck.”

“If you know our lore, then you will know that ‘my kind’ do not sicken.”

The smug defiance slid from the Greenwarden’s face as he looked from one twin to the other.

“Did I hear her rightly, Thorn?” Ana asked.

“She doesn’t need a druid,” Gilliam whispered. “I knew a man in Landfall who had a recipe for the best hangover cure. Some Dwarven firebrandy, a shot of Shire pepper oil, and a twist of lemon. Works wonders for coughs, as well.”

It was less than an hour’s hike to the Moot’s Grove. Four great oaks grew in a depression between three hillocks, one at each point where the hillocks met, and another in the center of the small bowl, forming a nearly complete dome of branches and leaves. One hillock was shorn and weathered into steps, which also served as seats whenever a Moot was held, which hadn’t been in mine nor the current Hierarch’s lifetimes. Nowadays, the place was used for secluded meetings, when Hierarchs and Elders of the various orders came together for discussion or debate.

Brerregon led the way in silence, save the occasional order to one or another of the Greenwardens accompanying us, or to speak with another warden at the various checkpoints along our route. We met with crossed pikes at the Grove’s entrance. The Hierarch’s aide engaged the two guards in a long and heated discussion. He gestured our way several times, but the pikes did not part. Finally, he threw up his hands, storming back towards us, shaking his head.

“They will not bend,” he said. “And it is not as if they do not know who I am.” He looked down at the twins, and shrugged. “You will just have to wait for the new moon, as I said earlier.”

Aurora and Silva glanced at each other for a long moment. Silva seemed about to speak, even managed to start to say something before her sister raised a finger, golden eyes smoldering. Silva frowned, then heaved a world-weary sigh.

Aurora crossed the path, and the pikes closed before her. I did not hear the exchange, but the girl made a few rather expansive gestures, the first towards the grove, and then another in the direction of the greater Radlebb woods. She tapped her foot, and the antlered helms turned toward toward each other. One of them shouldered his pike, turned, and walked stiff-backed into the grove. He returned perhaps ten minutes later, retaking his place on guard, snapping to attention as the Hierarch approached just a few steps behind.

He did not look pleased, as he looked down at Aurora, and then up over her head, towards the rest of our group.

He looked... older. Weary. His eyes hardened as they swept over me, and again, I felt the chill settle in my stomach, as a sheet of ice forms over a river, or lake. A ghostly tingling of the same sensation crept up my arm from the bracelet, and I felt Seraphina's hand slip into mine, giving a squeeze.

I swallowed, but dared not look away from the Hierarch. His jaw clenched, beneath his graying beard, and he gave the slightest of sighs, his shoulders drooping ever so slightly. His grip tightened on his staff of office, and he gestured for us to follow him, not glancing behind as he retraced his steps into the Grove.

Breragon glowered at Aurora, who smiled sweetly up at the man, no trace of smugness in her features, but a glimmer of it dancing in her eyes.

"Did she threaten the Hierarch with fire, or was it lightning?" I asked Silva.

She gave the slightest of smiles. "*Dvitaya*," she said.

Both. I should have guessed it.

I recognized the Elders from Riverfork and Achelos, and nodded greetings to them. Their brows furrowed, bushy eyebrows growing closer above eyes as stony as those of the Hierarch. Only the Eldress of Dymrak showed any sort of favorable reaction, if you can call quirking a gap-toothed smile, only to hide it behind long-nailed fingers "favorable." Her black eyes glittered, hungrily, it seemed, lingering on the bracelet and lead.

The crone sucked in a sharp breath when those eyes finally flicked towards the twins. Another smile crept across wrinkled lips, and she darted a sideways glance at the Hierarch.

"My apologies, Gregorev." The woman's words — she spoke in the Druid's Speech — came out sounding like broken glass, her breath trailing a hitching wheeze that I presume was a laugh. "It would seem that legends do, indeed walk."

"Children?" Elder Ivonov rose to his feet. "We discuss ill omens and events that could see an end to all the work we have done over the past thousand years, and you would interrupt that for... for these *children*?"

“The druid and his... sorceress I could forgive,” the Elder continued, “since we will be dealing with them shortly. But we have not come to consensus about the meaning of the missing star above the eastern mountains.”

“Ivan, before you say anything more,” the Hierarch said, not without the slightest of smiles, “you should know that the golden-eyed of the twins—”

“Is fluent in what you call the ‘Druid’s Speech,’” Aurora said.

Elder Ivonov’s eyes widened, but he did not sit back down. “Children should address their elders in the appropriate manner,” he said, biting off each word.

“Yes,” Aurora said, nodding. “Yes, they should. You may start by bowing.”

The Elder’s cheeks did color, then, but it was a flush of anger, not embarrassment.

“Before you dine further on your foot, Ivan,” the Hierarch said, before the other man could open his mouth, “Thorn, would you be so kind to introduce your companions to this Lesser Council?”

“My Lords, and Lady,” I said, bowing to each of the three Elders, “I introduce to you those with whom I have been traveling these past few months: Warrior in the tradition of the new generation of Karamaikan, Varis, formerly of the Grand Duke’s army.” He stepped forward and gave a bow, then fell into the military parade stance.

“Beside him,” I continued, “Gilliam, of northern Thyatis.” He nodded towards the council members.

“The Servant of the Flame is Ana, of the Citadel in Sundsvall. We are all of us in her debt, as we would not have survived the troubles without her aid.”

“Flame shine upon you,” she murmured.

To my surprise, each of the Elders responded with a soft “And on you as well.”

“The weaver, Seraphina of Glantri, recently freed from captive service of the Iron Ring.”

“And taken of a new shepherd, it would seem,” Elder Ivonov growled.

"It was by necessity. My choice, not his!" Heat flared up my arm at Sera's outburst.

"That will be discussed later," the Hierarch said, silencing Ivonov with a look.

I waited for the girl's anger to ease, and then gestured towards the twins. "My Lords, my Lady, I will have to allow these two to introduce themselves."

Aurora glanced at her sister, and then took a step forward and away. "Elders, Eldress, Hierarch." She nodded to each of them, then drew a deep breath. "I stand before you, Shrike of the Fourth Guard of the House Defender, attached to Colony Bellerophon, thirty-seventh iteration of the Progenitor's fifth shard. I have been so named in this incarnation as Aurora, as was She who came before me.

"And this," she continued, taking Silva's hand, and pulling the girl to her side, "Is the Heiress of the Second Empire, Stewardess of Thonia, Conquerer of the Afridhi Rose of Dawn, Guardian of the First Throne of Stars. Rise, and bow before Princess Rowena Andahar of Blackmoor."

Silva looked almost as shocked as the rest of my companions. Even still, we found ourselves going to one knee. All of us, that is, except Elder Ivonov.

"Impossible!" Ivonov snapped. "*Rowena and Leansethar* is a fairy story. They never really existed. Why... if they did, they would be.... thousands of years old by now. There are barely any *dragons* that old."

"There are four," Aurora said. "Three of which we know personally. Shall we summon them, that they may corroborate my claims?" She made to raise her arm, but Silva — it would be difficult to think of her by any other name — gripped her twin's arm, holding it firmly by her side.

"*Nieah*," she said, with a hard look. "*Idanim na'asti, Anuja*."

"There is only 'now,'" Aurora whispered. "Yours grows shorter with every breath. We cannot waste it in coddling these ignorant barbarians."

Silva slapped Aurora, hard enough across the cheek to cause the shrike to turn her head with the blow.

“*Vadati na, ce zathayati*,” Silva hissed, repeating the lesson her sister had reminded her of back at Krakatos. My knowledge of Ancient Thonian was sketchy at best, but I was pretty sure it amounted to my mother’s advice: “It you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all.”

She turned towards the Elders. “*Anjua* — my smaller sister has...” Silva glanced over to me. “*Samaam*? You... make it speak how?”

“Sorry,” I coached. I would definitely need to spend quite some time working on the girl’s grasp of Thyatian sentence structure.

Silva nodded. “Yes. That is its sound.” She turned back to the druids, and bowed, yanking on Aurora’s hand to make her do the same.

“We... are..” She began, and paused, searching for the words.

“Humble before you,” Aurora finished.

“Yes,” Silva said, nodding as she straightened. “That is its sound.”

She glanced my way and winked.

Igorov crossed his arms. “So she knows a smattering of Ancient Thonian. She could very well be from one of the sidhe tribes still on the Isle of Dawn, could have picked it up from there. We waste time with these pretenders. We should be discussing the importance of the missing star.”

“That ‘missing star’ is one of the twelve Thrones,” Aurora said. “The third to have fallen since the Remaking.”

“Legends. Again? You have it backwards, dear child. The *adults* tell their *children* the tales when it is time for them to *sleep*. There is no place for fairy stories in this conference.”

The shrike’s fist clenched, the two red stones adorning her wrists kindling to light. Silva hummed a note, and the dragonstones went dark.

“It was the First Throne,” Aurora pressed. “Nothing else explains my sister’s presence here.”

“So the Sleeper wakes,” the Eldress murmured.

“Not you as well, Solorena,” Igorov groaned. “That old song—”

“That ‘old song’ comes to life before our very eyes.” The other Elder, Connor of Riverfork, finally spoke. “Among so many others. Tell me, Igorov, did you not sing *Leansethar’s Lullaby* to your children?”

The Elder of Achelos sputtered, hunkering down a bit in his robes. “What has *that* old rhyme got to do with any of this? The stars--”

“Please, sing it for us,” Elder Connor prodded, the ghost of a smile quirking a corner of his mouth. “Unless you have forgotten it.”

Igorov sat up straight, his eyes flashing. “My beard was going gray before you even began growing yours,” he said. “If you think that I’ve forgotten a song in my old age—”

Connor folded his arms. “You stall, Elder.” He looked up at the Eldress, Solorena. “I know you know the song. Perhaps you could refresh our fellows’ ailing memory?”

Igorov flushed red beneath his beard, all the way up past his bushy eyebrows. He practically leapt to his feet. Rather than shout though, he lifted his voice in song, a rich, alto that seemed too large to come from so frail an old man:

*“Take me away from time and season
Far and away we sing with reason
Prepare a throne of stars above me
As the world once known will leave me*

*Take me away upon a plateau
Far far away from fears and shadow
Strengthen my heart in times of sorrow
Light the way to bright tomorrows”*

Aurora rocked back on her heels, her face gone pale, her golden eyes distant.

“What is it? What has happened to her?” Ana asked, pushing past me to kneel at the shrike’s side.

Silva lifted her sister's hand, which was slack in her own. "She is safe. The sing, it takes her away to the past. Very deep. Very far.

"She sing it for me, at Father's house upon the black stone. When I am... not right. Hurting with the fevers. Our mother sing it for us when we were made here." She rubbed at her stomach. She sighed, squeezing her sister's hand, and she looked up at me.

"Your words. They are difficult in making. They are not made for that to sing."

"Now, then, before the two of you come to blows," Elder Connor said, glancing first at Igorov and then at Aurora, who'd regained her composure, and glared knives at the Elders, "I would have us dig at the root of this intrusion. We have heard your theory of the missing star, and will take it into account in further discussions. You also came to ask a boon of us, feyling. Be quick about asking it that we might get back to our discussion of other matters."

Aurora took a moment to tamp down her frustration. After several deep breaths, she turned to the Hierarch.

"I would humbly beg this Hierarch to beseech the Callarii for shelter beneath the boughs of one of their Trees of Life for my sister, that she—"

"*Nieah!*" Silva gasped.

"That she might shelter there until I can find a working Lightning Road—"

"No! No, no no! *Chadat'mi tvam abvhani'ya. Gopya'mi tvam abvhani'ya!*" Silva slashed her hand in the air, a clearly negative gesture.

"We kept you asleep, away from this world so it could not infect you!" Aurora shouted. "It has grown worse, so thick that even the dragonstones cannot keep the taint from your blood. If you do not shelter beneath a Tree of Life, you will die. I have seen too many claimed by the Wasting. I will not let you suffer through it."

Silva's fists clenched, a ripple of golden light pulsing through the red stone over her left wrist. "I have more... strong than you think. You are not to keep me in the towers like that time. I can fight. I will fight. This world is mine and I will fight for it!"

They stood, backs straight, shoulders squared, eye to eye. It was a long stretch before Aurora spoke.

"You are one of the Progenitors."

"*Atah, uttarad'yitva'mi,*" Silva said. "I have ... responsible."

"You endanger yourself. Thus, the entire world."

"The world has... much dangers already."

"The long sleep has not made your head any softer."

"I have had the sleep for.. too much time. I will not go back."

"Your magic—"

"The dragon's stones will protect me."

"They are barely enough. My armament is barely enough!"

Silva drew a breath to continue arguing, but it caught in her throat, and she began to cough again, doubling over with the severity of the fit.

"It is the first of the signs of the sickness," Aurora said, the edge of irritation gone from her voice. "It will only get worse, without help."

"The stones—" The clear stone at her throat shone with a brilliant golden-white light.

"Even those are not enough," Aurora said. "You need a Treekeeper's care. Shelter beneath a Tree of Life."

Silva shook her head. "*Nieah,*" she rasped, through blood-flecked lips.

"If she will not seclude herself with the elves, there is another way," the Eldress said.

"No," Igorov snapped. "I know what you would suggest. I will not endorse it." He crossed his arms.

"Nor will I," Aurora said, much to the Elder's — and everyone's— surprise. "It is far, far too dangerous. For either of you." The shrike glanced between Silva and I.

I felt Sera's confusion, though Gilliam beat her to the question.

"What under Ixion's sun are all of you rambling on about?" he asked.

Igorov narrowed his dark eyes at the man, but Elder Connor spoke first.

"Our apologies, Son of the Mountains and Sands. The Elder of Achelos objects to the notion of raising druid Thorn to the ranks of the Greensingers. He no doubt has his own candidate in mind for the available position."

Igorov huffed, shifting where he sat on the stone of the grove's hillock.

"This could make it so I am not to ... how to speak it? Be secret among the treefolk?" Silva asked.

Ana's brow furrowed. "I have heard the term, but do not know the details."

"Like servants of the Flame, Greensingers work to cleanse the world of the demon's taint," the Eldress of Dymrak said. "Where your priests work among the populace in the cities and towns, Greensingers do so among the communities of the sylvan folk, where there are no Trees of Life or Treekeepers to slow the spread of the corruption."

Ana smiled. "It sounds to me like a very satisfying calling."

"It is a lifetime of hard work," the Eldress said, nodding. "At once very satisfying, but also saddening. There are so many too far gone, that we simply cannot reach in time."

"There is nothing more frightening than battling a fey given over to the insanity of the Wasting," Igorov said. "That is the final duty of a Greensinger: to aid the fey until such a time as to end them, before they can fall to the darkness. If—and I do not say I believe this feyling's claims—but let us suppose those truly are mythical dragonstones on her wrists. If they—and thus, *she*—is powerful as the legends claim, you cannot expect this journeyman to stand against such power. She will burn him to cinders without two moments' thought. We would save ourselves much trouble if we simply—"

Aurora's hand tightened on the knife at her hip. The two red stones smoldered on her wrists, the gold in her eyes brightening.

"I will make cinders of any who would threaten the Progenitor."

“And will you be able to carry out the Greensinger’s task, when the time comes?” Igorov asked, not batting an eye at the very real danger in which he’d placed himself.

“That time will not come. That is why she must stay in the neutral zone beneath a Tree,” Aurora said, easing the grip on the begemmed knife and glaring at Silva.

“How...” Silva paused, frowning as she struggled to piece the words together. “How far is ...the road? The path?” she asked. “How much of steps is this journey to the dark places?”

“Nobody will be making cinders of anybody else,” the Hierarch said, looking down at Aurora. “We fully realize the danger that your sister is in, and will do what we can to help, as we would for any of her kind. What of you? Do you require the same aid?”

“Not as yet,” the shrike said. “The blood of my kind has been... insulated... against the corruption. I simply need a fresh cache of black dragonstones, since She who came before detonated hers in defeating the Kartoeba beneath the Valley.”

“And we all know how common *those* are,” Gilliam said.

“Let us hope you never have to sacrifice yourself in such a manner,” the Hierarch murmured.

“Let us hope that the other Kartoebas are not awakened by foolish power-hungry druids,” Aurora said.

“There are more of those... things?” Ana asked, shuddering.

“Your aid?” Silva asked.

The Hierarch looked over to me.

“We will need to outfit you with a Soul Gem,” I told Silva. “You will need to wear it beneath the full moon for it to properly attune. After that point, it will ease the strain of the demonic corruption. There are elixirs the Hierarch can prepare that will also draw out some of the taint, until we can find a suitable crystal and the moon aligns herself properly. It is not a cure,” I cautioned her.

“Shelter beneath one of the elven trees is the—” Aurora began.

“No!” Silva stamped her foot. “I am no songbird. There will be no cages.” She looked to the Hierarchy, and dipped into a deep curtsy. “Please, I humbly accept the aid you can give to me.”

“The Imperial Princess—” Aurora sputtered.

“The Imperial Princess has every aid this Hierarchy of Radlebb can offer.” He turned to me. “I hope all of my druid brethren may aid you in such a manner.”

I sighed. No rest for the weary.

**Last of the Longwinter's Year (on or about Kaldmont 28,
997AC)**

I awoke from dreams of flame to the sound of Sera's quiet weeping. The ghost of woodsmoke clung to my nostrils, my eyes feeling of gritpaper though the night was cool and clear. My heartbeat began to slow, as the earth beneath my fingers told me of no sign or trace of the roaring inferno that awakened me.

I sat up, saw Seraphina huddled in a ball on the other side of the great tree's root that separated us. Her face was pressed to her knees, lost further in the fall of her hair, but there was no need to see her face to know she wept. Her body shuddered with each breath.

"Sera?" I called, softly.

My arm stung at the surprise that surged from the bracelet. For a moment, my mouth tasted of ash and acrid smoke and... another scent clung to the memory pressed upon me, and my stomach turned, partly from the smell but mostly from the wave of revulsion that coursed through the bracelet along with the memory.

Like the tidewaters of Marilenev Gulf, the feelings rushed away, leaving me with only a distant notion of the weaver's presence in the back of my mind.

With the ghostly flames gone from my mind's eye, I could see Sera peering at me from behind her knees, her eyes wide, red rimmed, as if I were some wolf come to devour her.

"I am worse than possessed," she said, her voice still thick with tears. "No demon compelled me to burn my whole village to the ground."

"No," I told her. "The demon that compelled you was on the other end of that collar."

"I have done terrible things," she whispered. "Fire and stone... Men and the things of their making cannot stand against it. I have used the two most sacred things to you druids to take lives. So many lives." She turned away. "I do not know how you can even bear to look at me." The ashen taste crept into my mouth again, my stomach roiling in sympathy with Sera's.

I concentrated, and pushed those feelings back through the connection. Then I rose, and walked around the niche in the roots where the young woman huddled, kneeling down to take her hands in mine. I knew that my feelings would flow to her through the strange bond she'd forged in giving me the bracelet, but... I am a druid. To have something, to hold it, to feel it gives us certainty.

"The fact that you can still feel what you feel, after the burden of years, tells me you are in a far, far different place than demons, be they ethereal or tethered to you through this... device.

"You were there, when I wrestled control of the ceremony away from the demons of winter. They know nothing of remorse, or regret. The only tears they are interested are those they can coax from others. They have none of their own, not for their own kind, not for men or weavers, be they guilty or innocent of any crimes."

Heat welled up, in a spot just above my stomach. "I did not always do just because my *bughael* willed it. It was not always done under orders."

Again, ghostly flames chased across my thoughts, and images danced in the play of the shadows: darkened tents; figures, lit from behind by smoky red-tinged light; the bracelet, left amidst the mats and pillows; a calloused finger diverting her eyes from the gleaming metallic band...

I felt my stomach turn, and this time, the sensation was entirely my own.

The flames and images disappeared, as if made of smoke and shredded by a sharp gust of wind. The warmth seeped into my stomach, settling it.

"You are not at all like them," Sera said. She looked up, over my shoulder, wiping at her eyes. "We have company."

Ana stood at the edge of the clearing, Aurora at her side, glowering up at the priestess.

"Can we go now?" she asked. "Every moment we wait—"

"It cannot be done without Thorn," Ana said. She looked over to me. "I, at least, was worried we would awaken you, but I see that is not the case."

"Trouble?" I asked, helping Sara to her feet.

“Aurora seems to think so,” Ana said.

“I know. Now, quickly.”

Aurora led us down one of the paths, towards the lean-to where she and her sister were quartered.

Silva tossed, kicking at the blankets of her bedroll, crying out as she scratched at the ground.

Ana knelt by the girl’s head, wrestling as she struggled against the cleric’s grip.

“It is no use. She will not awaken,” Aurora said.

Ana peeled back one of Silva’s tightly-shut eyelids. A sickly purplish-silver light shone, swirling, from her eye. Aurora sucked in a sharp breath. The swirling light grew faster, even as we watched.

“Cover your ears!” the shrike called.

Silva’s back arched, and she let out a shriek. The sound hit like a hammer, and had we not clutched our hands over our ears, I have no doubt the sound would have hurt much more than it did.

And as it was, the pain was enough to drive Sera and I to our knees, bright lights bursting behind our closed eyes.

The terrible sound continued, far longer than I thought possible, and then a ringing, deafening silence dropped over the sound.

I squinted, saw that Silva still thrashed, her mouth open. But Ana’s arrowhead-shaped symbol of her faith gleamed brightly against her breast, her fingers clasped between a prayer and a gesture towards the wailing siren. A dark bead of blood clung to her upper lip, her face drawn.

“What was that?” Sera asked. I could barely hear her through the throbbing ring in my ears.

Aurora motioned us away, pulling Ana after her.

“Now you see why we could not wait?”

“What is happening to her?” Ana asked. Her voice was raw, scratchy.

“The darkness burns in her blood. It is growing to become more than she can control. If we cannot awaken her, she will begin to fade. Her screams will become more powerful. The demons would harness her voice, and make a weapon of it.”

“Is that... even possible?” Sera asked.

“You have heard of the banshee?” Aurora asked.

“The weeping spirit?”

“Druidic legends tell of the groaning spirits,” I said, thinking back on the lore and lessons from some of my earliest days of training. “They are said to roam the borders of Alfheim. The ghostly remains of elven mothers who have lost their children to some tragedy or another.”

Aurora shook her head, glancing over to Ana, but the cleric merely shrugged. “I have heard the word, but only since I have come to these shores. If these exist on Alphatia, then we have not encountered them.”

“Then you are lucky,” the shrike said. “Your lore is wrong, as is to be expected.” She sighed. “So much lost.”

She straightened, suddenly, and the begemmed knife was in her hand as if by magic. Her golden eyes flicked from shadow to shadow in the trees around us.

“Show yourselves!”

Dozens of long green cloaks materialized, what I’d thought to be branches actually the sharp points of antlers adorning bark-skinned helms. Swords were held at the ready.

“You dare to bare weapons— iron weapons— in our presence?” The dragonstones smoldered to life on Aurora’s wrists, and her fingers spread, hooked, by her side.

“Be at ease, Daughter of Gold.” The Hierarch strode from a pool of deeper shadows. A gesture of his hand sent the swords back into scabbards beneath the green cloaks. “If they did not act to protect me, I would not have raised them up to Greenwardens.”

Aurora’s posture relaxed, but only slightly. The stones did not go dark.

“My sister is in no condition to tame these dragonstones,” the shrike warned.

“Precisely why I have come,” the Hierarch said. “I bring you my three most potent treatments. Have her drink these, and she will have perhaps another week.”

Aurora frowned. “You said she had more time.”

“Your sister, it seems, is a special case. I performed the Balancing twice. It was not in error.”

“And the Soulstone?”

“I have my swiftest messengers afoot, but even they will take three days.”

“We cannot wait another cycle, if all you can buy her is a sevendain.”

Silva’s fit was nearly another hour in passing, leaving the girl exhausted, drenched in sweat. The Hierarch left, taking the Greenwardens with him. They were replaced with the Dyrnak Eldress’ Diaphanous Guard, a contingent of dark-eyed dryads, and I was quickly escorted away as they made preparations for Silva’s bath.

Sera and I were led to the common clearing, where several of the lay druids worked over the cook fires, stirring at rows of clay pots, or turning rounded flatbreads over on the great cooking stones.

There were no trestle tables, no benches, just a long stretch of dew-wet grass dotted with reed mats. As we passed, a young druid passed us a clay bowl of porridge and a leaf-wrapped bundle containing several wedges of bread. It was no great problem finding Gilliam and Varis, who’s armored figures stood out against the robed and hooded druids.

“Morning greet you,” Gilliam said, pouring cups of cool water for Sera and I.

“And you as well, I said, pouring out a trickle of water into the grass before I sat.

“Ylari custom,” Gilliam said, seeing Sera’s puzzled look. “Greetings, partings, any type of thanks is always begun or ended with an offering back to the land, in the hopes that the Garden will bloom all the quicker.”

She folded her gown about her legs as she sat. “Do you really think that will come to pass?”

The warrior shrugged. “It can’t hurt to try, can it?”

"How is she?" Varis asked.

"I would not give you the hope of saying she is better. The Hierarch's elixirs need time to work."

"Do you think it's true? That she is truly the First?" Gilliam asked.

"It would answer quite a few questions, make sense of several puzzles." I held up my fingers. "She does not speak a known, living language, as does her sister. She knows customs long faded from memory, as the Baron Halaran pointed out. She can use magics unheard of in the modern age."

"It is certainly not the magic I know," Sera said.

"First or not, she is hunted and alone. In need of aid," Varis said. "Imperial Princess or beggar, we cannot simply leave her to fend for herself."

"I would not want to get on her bad side, seeing what she's done to her enemies," Gilliam said. "And if she is an Imperial Princess..." He grinned. "Just think of the rewards."

"Don't go counting your crowns before they've crossed your palm," Varis said.

"Count them? I've already spent them!"

We ate in silence, another of the lay druids bringing us bowls of winterberries and the yellow-gold apples originally grown in Darokin.

I nearly lost a finger carving one of the apples as a spike of anxiety tensed most of the muscles along my left arm, the fingertips stinging.

The two warriors gave Sera disapproving looks.

"You ruined the surprise," Gilliam said, but his scowl was ruined as the corner of his mouth turned up.

A rustle of linens and wool, accented by a silvery jingle met my ears a moment before Demarra planted herself next to me on the reed mat. She reached over, bracelets rattling, and plucked the slice of apple from my hand, eating it in too disturbing a manner for so early in the morning.

"It is no fun sneaking up on you, my *Karos*, if you have eyes now always at your back."

My fingers began to sting again, but it was more than anxiety gnawing and itching at the back of my skull.

"It is always a pleasure to see you, Demarra," I said. Or tried to, since the Dara shoved the uneaten half of the apple slice in my mouth as I tried to greet her. It was crisp, sweet and a bit tart for a moment, before the taste bled away to ash. I tried to push my awareness of the weaver into a corner, but the apple still tasted too sour for its type.

Sera had set her half-finished bowl of fruit on the mat at her knees, her dark eyes looking straight through me to the woman to my right.

"You must introduce me to your friend," Demarra purred.

"Dara Demarra of the Kaledresh, I introduce you to Seraphina."

The Dara batted her lashes. "That is all?"

"Yes," I said.

Demarra leaned to the left, the neckline of her linen blouse slipping over one shoulder. Several golden chains, decorated with golden disks, swayed from her neck. She reached across my lap, taking my left hand.

"And what is this?" she asked, running a finger over the bracelet. She sucked in a sharp breath, drawing her finger back as if shocked. I don't think it was my imagination, but I saw a glimmer of blue-gold light from Zirchev's mark on her wrist, glimmering between the many bracelets.

Steady warmth was building in my stomach. The ghost of feeling from Sera. Her eyes were still set on the Dara, but her gaze had gone slightly distant.

Demarra tensed, her whole demeanor changing. The movements were subtle, but sitting as close to me as she was, I could feel her balance shift slightly away. Her nearly-black eyes narrowed.

"*Karos*? What manner of gift has she given you?"

I held up my left hand, letting the silvery lead dangle from the bracelet.

The Dara's eyes widened, ever so slightly. The heat of Sera's power grew, ever so slightly, like an itch getting worse in that one spot just out of reach. Richly painted lips pursed, and then turned up in a smile. She flowed back, away from me clapping as she did, bracelets jangling.

"Ah, my *Karos*, at last you have taken a wife! We must drink!"

"What? No, that's not—"

Ice tingled, shivering along my spine.

"Sera, no!"

The feeling stopped, the glowing warmth snuffed the instant I gave the order.

Demarra kept smiling. "Such a useful tool for a husband."

"Your Hierarch invited me," the Dara said, anticipating my question. "Well, not me, precisely, but those of my clan."

"You have a Soul Gem?"

Demarra plucked a winterberry from the bowl in my lap. "I might," she said.

I snatched the berry from her fingers. "Either you do or you do not."

She pouted, leaned past me to regard the weaver. "He became so serious when he took up his journeymanhood. A pity you did not know him some few years ago, before he took up the staff and started making all those knots. We had such fun at the Festival of Lights. One year, after the Procession, we—"

I cleared my throat. Seraphina's ire and curiosity buzzed about in the back of my head.

"No, please do go on," Gilliam said. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "We are keenly interested."

I held my hand out to Demarra. "If you have the gem, I will take it."

She sighed. "I do not."

She grinned as I closed my hand into a fist, laying her fingertips across the back of my hand. It tingled as Seraphina's irritation began winning the duel of feelings

leaking through the bracelet. Demarra traced a swirling pattern across my hand, and it burned from beneath the skin as if she dragged hot needles. It was only with intense concentration that I was able to dampen the sensations.

“I have given the stone to your Hierarch. I would not wish to interrupt your breakfast for such menial chores as fetching and delivering.”

I made to rise, but Demarra clasped my hand in both of hers. Her dark eyes bored into mine.

“One can be forgiven, for it was not your making.”

“I have not forgotten our promise,” I said. My hand strayed to the copper piece that lay against my chest.

Demarra’s hand moved up, towards my cheek. Her fingers shifted, and traced the line down the side of my neck. “How can you be her Greensinger when she has taken your song?”

I swallowed. The scarring suddenly felt tight.

“There are ways other than song,” I said.

“The Old Ways. I could just open your throat right here, right now. It would probably be less painful.”

Seraphina’s power bloomed before I could react, and I felt the edge of air harden as it whisked by my cheek. Demarra snatched her hand away, a bit of lace from the cuff of her sleeve fluttering to the ground, the threads shorn through, cleaner than any razor.

“You will do no harm to my— to Thorn,” the weaver said.

Demarra looked through the shimmering blade-like presence between her and Seraphina. She leaned forward, until her hair brushed against the plane.

“I am not the one you need worry about, my dear.”

I spent the remainder of the day in quiet meditation and contemplation of the various accounts of other Greensingers. Though I removed the odd silvery bracelet,

I still had the vaguest of impressions of Seraphina. Was it possible to be aware of her presence because of her absence? I know no other way to explain it.

Just before sunset, I departed the groves, wandering the game trails and selecting the ingredients I would need for the ceremony with the next dawn. I was aware of Demarra's presence, though she did not say anything to disturb me. Our eyes met, occasionally, as I worked, but she said nothing, only watched.