

True to his word, Pellin left the next day, taking Allta and Mark with him. Toria stood in the small stable yard behind their hiding place and watched him go. The twists and turns of the streets would more than hide his intended direction.

“Strange,” she murmured to herself.

“Lady Deel?” Fess asked

She started. So lost had she been in her own thoughts that she’d forgotten Fess still stood by her. She turned, struck again at how impossibly young he looked for the burden that Aer had placed upon him, for the burdens he had taken upon himself. For a moment she considered demurring, but there would be few opportunities for unguarded conversation on their trip north and despite her position within the Vigil, she needed companionship as much anyone.

No. She was Elanian, born and bred. She required companionship more.

“Lady Deel?” Fess prompted again.

“I was just thinking how, after leading the Vigil these past months, I’ve never seen Pellin so sure of himself,” she said. “It seems ironic.”

Fess almost smiled. Almost, but not quite. “Ironic that he seems more decisive in following the fayit’s guidance than he ever did enforcing his own?”

She nodded. “Yes. I hope he’s not making a mistake.”

“It is kind of hard to argue with someone who’s been alive so long that they make Pellin seem young by comparison,” Fess said.

“Does age equate to wisdom?” she asked.

He gave her a direct look. “I’m in no position to answer. Very few in the urchins live long, Lady Deel. They die from the wracking cough that comes in winter, or they’re caught stealing from the wrong man. Even if they live, age forces them to move on from the urchins and join their lot to the thieves’ guild or the night-women where the chances of a long life are just as thin.”

His simple, bleak assessment roused more in her than he’d intended and she blinked to clear her eyes. “That seems a very wise answer to me, Fess. Perhaps if we survive this war, we can venture north and west to Bunard once more and see how Lord Dura’s bargain fares.” To secure the aid of the urchins during the slaughter of Bas-solas, Dura had wrung a concession from the church: they would adopt as many of the urchins as possible into homes where the children might find love and a future.

He nodded. “I’d like that, but I have the feeling that the city and the people in it will be as strange to me as I would be to them.”

“We should pack,” she said turning away. “The road ahead is long and there are arrangements to be made before we leave.”

Chapter

Toria Deel rode next to Fess as they headed north out of Cynestol. Though she hadn't spent as much time with the young urchin as Lady Bronwyn, she couldn't help but notice the marked change in his personality since he'd been the unwilling recipient of both Balean's physical gift and Bronwyn's gift of *domere*.

The laughing carefree boy rarely seen without his smile had disappeared as if he'd never been. He rode at her side and might have been a ridiculous parody of the stoic vigilance of one their guards had he not been in earnest.

What had happened to him?

She considered the question. The most obvious answer might be true, that Fess's part in the death of Balean had altered his view of the world, fracturing his image of himself in ways that couldn't be reversed or restored. As tempting as that supposition was, she didn't wholly believe it. During the festival of Bas-solas, Fess had helped defeat Laewan. Along with the other urchins, he'd temporarily accepted the physical gift of the Vigil guards and had used that deception to kill Laewan.

Laewan had been corrupted by Cesla. He'd shown physical gifts and was barely defeated by countless dagger strikes from Fess and the other urchins they'd employed. Yet afterward, Fess had shown no change to his personality. What was the difference?

Unbidden, a memory came to her from her own past, of Pellin, praise Aer. She didn't think she could deal with any more memories of Cesla just yet. *"Never underestimate the power of a question, Toria Deel. Next to our gift, it will reveal more than any other tool or stratagem, and it's more honest."*

She mused, rocking back and forth with the steady stride of the horse beneath her. Questions were indeed powerful, but what should she ask? She already knew what had happened to Fess, Bronwyn, and Balean on their journey to the Darkwater. Any query she posed would merely confirm the facts she'd gleaned from Fess when she'd delved him, and facts wouldn't serve her. The knowledge lay deeper.

She huffed. Obviously, but first she would have to get him talking. He wore his newfound reticence as easily as his former garrulousness. "

"Fess?"

"Yes, Lady Deel?" he answered with her title, as he always did, but without breaking his survey of the landscape. She would have to find a query of sufficient importance to overcome his reluctance to speak.

"Tell me, what do you think of Ealdor's instruction?"

His brows lowered, and his expression assumed a gravity that she prayed would never look natural on that boyish face. "From what vantage point do you wish me to consider the question?"

This had surprised her as well and she understood why Lady Bronwyn had been drawn to him. When the former member of the Vigil had taken on Fess as apprentice, Toria had assumed it to be due to pity, like an old woman caring for a cat she'd found on her doorstep. But Bronwyn had seen more. Fess had a turn of mind that would make him a fine scholar, if he lived.

"All of them," she answered.

He made one last check of the horizon before turning to her. "Assuming that what we think is true, actually is, Ealdor's appearance is frightening. The fayit is willing to surrender an immortal existence to warn us of the threat to the forest."

A familiar misgiving, one that she'd felt a decade prior, returned. She chose, reluctantly, to voice it. Perhaps honesty on her part would be returned. "I find it difficult to trust him."

"Ealdor?" Fess appeared surprised. "How so?"

She broke away from his gaze. "He reminds me too much of Cesla, all secrets and cunning, telling us just enough to do as he wishes, but not enough to know everything we need."

"I was under the impression everyone practically worshipped him as the second coming of Iosa," Fess said.

She tried to ignore the flippancy behind the reply, but it struck too close to the mark. "Perhaps we did for a while." She shrugged. "Everyone except Pellin and Bronwyn. Cesla's power in the gift was like nothing we'd ever seen before."

Fess blinked. "I didn't know the gift came in different strengths."

She sighed; this was a familiar conversation, though not with Fess. "It doesn't, at least we don't think so, but Cesla's talents and temperaments seemed to be perfectly suited for the gift we carry. His gift of others, for example, was almost frighteningly strong."

"It sounds like the Mark would have liked him."

She shook her head. "I doubt it. Cesla was skilled at manipulating those around him, but neither he nor they would have called it that. With a gesture and smile, perhaps a casual touch on the arm or a friendly pat, he would turn the rest of the Vigil's disagreement into support. For centuries he ran the Vigil like a kingdom, where his word was law."

"That doesn't sound like Ealdor at all," Fess said.

She smiled, but there was little humor in it. "You wouldn't think so, and they look nothing alike, yet if the fayit are to be believed, they possessed all the gifts and talents and temperaments at once. I find myself mistrustful of being moved about on the ficheall board like a pawn."

Fess's expression sobered. "Isn't that what Aer does, Lady Deel?"

"As is his right," she answered without thinking. "Cesla and Ealdor are not Aer."

"It seems to me, the end result is pretty much the same."

"Then why consent to follow Ealdor's instruction?" she asked.

A stand of cedar trees off to the left of the road drew his attention for a few moments before he answered. "It does seem strange that he gives the same task to both of us, but surely you must admit that finding Lelwin and Wag carries some importance."

Guilt thrust a dagger into her gut and then took the time to twist the knife. She should have done more, should have found a way to bring some sort of healing to her apprentice, but she would not let her guilt force her into an even greater mistake. "I find it hard to see Lelwin and Wag as anything other than inconsequential at this point." She held up a hand as his eyes widened in shock. "Don't mistake me. I desire healing for Lelwin and the restoration of the sentinels as much as anyone, but it's difficult for me to see how they can be so pivotal in the fight for the forest. I think Lelwin would be as satisfied with killing allies as well as foes, so long as they were men, and Wag's sister has been stripped of her gift. Modrie can hardly do more than eat or drink. She's just an oversized dog now. A single sentinel, while formidable, can hardly safeguard the entire forest."

She turned in her saddle to face him. "Ealdor obviously failed somehow in his own task. Why should we follow his instructions?"

He shrugged. "I don't know what else to do. Willet trusts him."

That man had a vault, but she closed her mouth around the rebuttal. "Yes, he does, but Lord Dura gives a depth to the word 'reckless' that I've never encountered before." She waited

for Fess to reply, but it appeared the topic of the fayit and his instructions had come to its end. She spoke before he could clothe himself in his stoicism. “Fess, why don’t you smile anymore?”

“Lady Deel?” For a split second, he met her gaze before resuming his former scan of the horizon.

She sighed, had hoped the simple earnestness of her question would shock Fess into giving her an unguarded answer. “The lives of those within the Vigil are long, Fess.”

“So Lady Bronwyn told me.”

“Too long for you to deny yourself,” she said softly.

Instead of acknowledging her observation, he turned her question back on her. “Who were you before you became one of the Vigil, Lady Deel?”

“A postulant of the Merum order in Elania.” She took a deep breath. If this was what Aer required of her to restore Fess to himself, she would comply. “I was young, not much older than you when I came into the gift. Before that, I spent my days in study and service, but I had no plans to serve the church with the rest of my life. It’s customary in Elania for young women to receive their education from the church when they are young, but most depart after a few years to pursue marriage or trade. I had no gift that would have elevated me to the nobility, but I did possess talents for self and others. That drew the attention of the bishop in Elania and eventually, the Eldest of the Vigil.”

“And what would you have done with your talents had you not joined the Vigil?”

“Fess, I was practically a child,” she said. “What does a girl of sixteen know?” She almost laughed. “I thought I wanted to be a sculptor’s assistant. The marble of Elania is prized for its white color veined with specks of copper that give sculptures an almost life-like cast. I thought nothing could be more beautiful.”

He nodded, but showed no inclination to answer and she waited in silence, hoping its weight would be enough to prompt him.

“Why don’t you smile anymore?” she asked again and settled herself to wait. Minutes went by as they rode and he performed the ceaseless scan of the landscape, searching for threats.

Perhaps a mile later, he spoke, a single sentence that negated any further attempts at conversation. His voice carried just enough breath to make it to her ears. “Because I’m not happy.”

Two weeks later they came in sight of the first camp of soldiers still a hundred leagues south of the forest. Neat rows of tents and cook-fires lay in a broad valley to the west of the main road near the border with Caisel. Men and women busied themselves maintaining weapons and currying horses while teamsters argued with quartermasters.

“Orderly,” Fess said.

“Professional soldiers.” Toria pointed to the flat space of ground near the camp. A few soldiers drilled, the clash of weapon ringing across the distance. “If these were conscripts, the training ground would be filled to overflowing.”

“Why are they here?”

“They’re on their way to the help patrol the forest.”

Her apprentice shook his head. “They’re not on their way anywhere, Lady Deel. Look at the ground around the tents and the latrine. They’ve been here a while.”

She followed his point to a point outside the camp where men had dug deep ditches on the downwind side of camp with crude wooden barriers between them. The breath she pulled

carried a hint of autumn and she let it out with a sigh as she nudged her horse forward. “Let’s find the meaning behind this.”

“Lady Deel? They don’t know us and probably won’t take kindly to our questions.” He paused. “And Ealdor must have known they were here. His instructions didn’t even mention the Aille army.”

“If the fayit were all-knowing, Fess, we wouldn’t be on the verge of losing the north,” she said. “Aille has the largest standing army on the continent. We cannot hold a cordon around the Darkwater without it.”

The stiffness of his posture radiated disagreement, but by his own choice he saw himself more as a Vigil guard than as a member of the Vigil. That choice constrained him to obedience. “Is it safe to approach them, Lady Deel?”

She patted the pack cinched to the saddle behind her. “It’s an army, Fess, and any army travels with a priest from one of the four orders, usually one from each.”

“Why?”

“Because when men fight, men die. However they might scoff when they’re alive and the prospect of death is only an abstract consideration, dying men crave the last blessing before they find the grave or the pyre.”

“How does that help us?”

“The Vigil has operated in near-anonymity for centuries, and for the most part we hold ourselves apart from the affairs of others, but on occasion we require access to those affairs. All of us carry letters of introduction and authority that open doors to the information we require.”

“When do I get mine?”

She checked his face for the smile she expected, but nothing showed beneath the wooden expression he’d adopted since Bronwyn’s death, and her heart sank. “In truth, you should have them already. That you do not is an oversight on Pellin’s part.”

“Understandable,” Fess said. “He’s been busy.”

She nodded. “At any rate, do not call me by my name once we are among them.” She pulled a lightweight white robe from her pack and slid it over her head, pulling her wealth of black hair free, but leaving the hood down.

“You’ll need to go similarly attired,” she said.

“Which order was Bronwyn’s favorite?” he asked.

Her eyes burned for a moment, but she blinked the unexpected grief away. “In truth, I don’t think she had a favorite. She’d lived so long that she knew all of the orders equally well and she loved them all.” Seeing her answer had failed to give Fess the direction he’d wanted, she amended her it. “I know that she and the Chief of Servants, Brid Teorian, shared a deep friendship.”

He nodded. “So be it.” A moment later, he sat by her attired in a used, but functional robe of brown. Fess bowed in her direction from atop his horse. “How may I serve you, Toria Deel?”

She searched his face and tone for mocking, but found none. “Your company is service enough, Fess, only remember not to use my name. There is a risk, however slight, that it might be recognized by those in command.”

They rode into camp, but other than nods of acknowledgement, they received little notice. “If memory serves, the priests should be housed somewhere near the middle of the camp, close to the captain.”

Rows of tents drifted by and amid the bustle she noticed men and women sharpening weapons and playing bones. The grass next to their canvas dwellings had already turned yellow

and withered. They came to a tent, somewhat larger than normal with the intersecting arcs stitched into the thick oiled fabric. She pointed to the universal sign of their faith and dismounted, tying her horse's reins to one of the tent stakes in the ground.

Fess followed her into the shadows where three people dressed in robes of red, blue, and brown lounged, read, or wrote according to their inclination. At seeing them, the three priests rose and the portly man in red bowed a slight inclination from the hips that might have been nothing more than a gesture of idle curiosity.

"Greetings, I am Sorin," he said.

"Talar," said the woman in blue. She had violently red hair.

"Melwin," said the tall man wearing brown. A healer's leather satchel lay on his bunk. "How may we serve you?" he asked Fess.

Fess returned the gesture. "I'm Fess. This is Liria Sal."

The Merum priest grinned. "That's an impressive name from history and one difficult to live up to."

Inside, Toria seethed, but Fess had already made the introduction and she forced herself to shrug and plaster a wry smile on her burning face. "An unfortunate circumstance of birth I'm afraid. My father must have had some issue with my mother at the time he named me." She plucked her robe. "My family has a long history of serving the Merum church. Inadvertently, I have father to thank for my membership in the Vanguard." She gave Sorin a pointed stare. "It's the one order that encourages a thorough knowledge of fighting for all its adherents. After being named for the most famous courtesan in Elanian history, I grew up finding the idea of violence not quite so repugnant."

The Merum priest covered his smile with a cough, but the Absold and the Servant wore looks of incomprehension. "Let it pass," Sorin said to them. "Melwin is better mannered than I. What service can we render?"

Toria nodded and felt a bit of the fire recede from her face. "Information. Your encampment has the look of permanence. Is there some reason you are camped so far south of the forest?"

"Ah," Sorin said. "Our good captain has entertained that very question from our companion from the Vanguard every day since we arrived. The answer never varies. His orders dictate that he not move north from this spot."

She shook her head. "Nonsense. You're camped on a flat stretch of pasture. You haven't even taken the high ground and if a larger force comes upon you from the east, they'll pin you against the river. You'll be lucky to save half your forces."

"The east isn't the captain's concern," Talar said. "It's the west."

Toria shook her head. "Not Caisel, surely. They've been on good terms with Aille for hundreds of years."

"No," Sorin said. "Not Caisel."

"Owmead?" Fess asked.

None of the priests moved. "Has King Rymark made threats?"

Sorin shrugged. "Not overtly, but the borders here in the north are thin and our commander suspects him of treachery. His appetites are well known."

Toria grit her teeth until they hurt. "What are his orders?"

Sorin shook his head. "With the death of Queen Chora, the commander is acting under his own authority."

“Where’s his tent?” she asked, then winced at the tone of her voice. As far as these priests were concerned, she had no right to issue commands in their presence.

Sorin stiffened, but Melwin nodded and pointed north. “Two rows up. It’s twice the size of any other tent in the camp. You can’t miss it.”

She bowed her thanks and left with Fess in tow. Outside, she rounded on him. “What, in the name of all that’s holy, made you choose that name?”

He shrugged away her anger. “It’s obvious that you’re Elanian,” he said. “And I don’t know many Elanian names. Lady Bronwyn had me read a lot of church history, but all the other names I thought of were even more famous than that one. My apologies, Lady Deel.”

She shook her head. “Don’t use that name. Call me Lady Sal.” If he had laughed, it would have been better. At least her embarrassment would have broken the shell of stoicism he wore, but he stood there, appearing neither contrite nor amused. “We have to get these men moving. Rymark’s lines are going to be as thin as a blade of grass without them.”

“How are going to do that?”

She sighed. “I don’t know yet. I should have worn red. That would have allowed me to bluff my way into speaking for the archbishop. With Chora’s death, he’s the ultimate authority. Pellin’s no longer in Cynestol and I have no means of contacting Lord Dura.”

“They must have carrier birds,” Fess said. “Could you send a note to the archbishop?”

She nodded. “Under what pretext, Fess? I’m wearing the white of the Vanguard and I am, as you say, obviously Elanian.” She twitched the reins of her horse north and sighed. She didn’t notice that Fess hadn’t followed her until a moment later, but when she looked around, he was gone.

He appeared a moment later, riding out from behind one of the tents and wearing a red robe of the Merum.

“What are you doing?” she hissed. “If anyone saw you change robes, we’ll both be accused as spies for Rymark.”

He plucked his robe. “No one saw me, Lady Sal. With a little luck, we’ll be able to send a message to the archbishop under my name.”

She kept her voice low as she pulled her horse in beside his. “You’re not in the urchins anymore, Fess. You can’t take risks like this. It’s reckless.”

He shrugged and for the barest instant, she thought a ghost of a smile turned his lips up at the corners. “In the urchins, if we didn’t take risks, we starved. Is this so different?”

She forced herself to nod to a passing soldier. “You’re one of the Vigil now. If you die, so may thousands, tens of thousands, of others.”

Chapter

Toria Deel followed Fess into Captain Stan's tent, chewing a vocabulary that would have done any of the soldiers camped around them proud. Fess walked ahead of her, not bothering to hide the impossible grace that came with his physical giftedness. A dozen gazes snapped their way as Captain Stan and his subordinates, seated at a long table rudely constructed from a pair of trestles and a number of oak boards, noted their entrance. A quartet of guards drew weapons and barred their way.

Stan, seated at the head of the table, rose, grinning as though Fess and Toria had engineered their entrance to offer him a moment's diversion. "What is your business here?"

Fess stepped forward until the steel of four blades nearly touched his throat. "*Your* business here is done, Captain Stan. By the order of the archbishop, you are to move your men north and sequester access to the Darkwater. No man is to enter the forest or leave it alive."

Stan eyed him, his smile slipping until it became more speculative than amused. "I trust you have orders to verify this, priest?"

Fess shook his head. "You know why those orders cannot be written, Captain Stan. Doing so would acknowledge that you'd been operating under different orders until now. If you require additional confirmation, I am ordered to send a carrier bird to Cynestol."

Captain Stan laughed. "Are you now? You're bold, I'll give you that, but I think I'll require more immediate proof of your identity."

Fess smiled, but that predatory grin bore no resemblance to any similar expression he'd worn before coming to the Vigil. Reaching up, he pulled the crimson robe from his shoulders to reveal his functional travel-stained clothing. And his sword.

"I don't know you, friend," Stan said. "Raise your hands so that my guards can disarm you, or I will have them cut you down where you stand."

Toria watched her apprentice as he obeyed the captain's command. Over a hundred years of being guarded by the most gifted and dangerous men on the continent alerted her to subtle changes in his stance that Stan and his officers never noticed. One of the guards stepped forward, his sword dipping out of the way so that he could reach for Fess's belt.

She watched, time slowing as though she'd somehow managed to delve all the inhabitants of the tent at once. Fess's buckle came loose; the sword in the guard's hand, the five guards all relaxing as the lone threat was rendered harmless, their stance no longer as vigilant, and their swords dipping.

Fess blurred into motion, grabbing the nearest guard's arm and landing a blow to the temple. While the first man began his descent into unconsciousness toward the ground, Fess shifted left so quickly that he moved inside the striking arc of the two swords on that side of the tent. The blades might have shifted a few inches before his fists struck and a sound like overripe melons hitting the ground sounded in the tent.

The first guard had yet to strike the ground and two more were following, but the remaining guards were turning to their right and fighting to bring their swords in line. Toria watched as the two drew breath to yell for reinforcements, screams that never sounded. Fess shifted back to his right, landing a brutal kick to the gut of one guard that sent breath exploding from his lungs, then blurring to punch the remaining man in the solar plexus.

Both men were down and unconscious from blows to the head a moment later.

“Silence means survival, Captain,” Fess said in a voice that might have been Allta’s or Bolt’s. He pointed the sword at the captain’s throat. “You are expendable. If you don’t know who I work for by now, you’re a fool.”

The captain licked his lips, his face fligid. A single vein throbbled across his forehead. “What game is Hradian playing at? Does he think he can supplant Bishop Gehata with that fool, Serius?”

“The games you refer to are none of your concern, Captain Stan,” Fess said, “getting this army on the move to patrol the forest is.”

The captain’s gaze darted to the sword still pointed at his neck to Fess’s unblinking stare and back again. He shook his head. “Not without confirmation of the orders.”

Fess nodded in approval. “Very good, Captain. I believe we’ve come to the central point of our discussion at last. You are going to get out of your well-cushioned chair and we are going to your quartermaster where you’re going to send a carrier bird to Cynestol to confirm your new orders.”

Toria watched Fess favor the captain with a smile that carried all the warmth of Bunard in winter. When the captain paused, she spoke into the tension of the silence, her voice smooth with assurance. “Come, good captain. There is hardly any harm in confirming your orders with the cathedral.”

Stan rose, moving past the subordinates on his left and around the table. He looked down at the five unconscious forms splayed in different positions on the floor of his tent. “You attacked my men.”

“Nonsense, Captain,” Fess said with a smile that showed unexpected warmth. “I merely instructed them in the price of lowering their guard. Gifted men walk among us. Not all of them are on the path of righteousness.”

The captain nodded.

Fess sheathed his sword, but stopped to shake his head as the captain stepped in beside him at the tent’s exit, casting a look toward her that Toria almost felt. “I think it would seem more natural for the captain to have a beautiful woman at his side, rather than an overgrown boy, don’t you think? Besides, I don’t want you to be overly tempted to rouse the camp, Captain. No one can move fast enough to save you.”

Fess laughed as if he’d made a joke.

Then he looked at her hands.

The quartermaster’s tent lay on the southern edge of the camp where it commanded a sea of wagons, horses, and supply tents that kept the camp functioning. As they approached, half-dozen wagons rumbled away, light on their axles. Empty.

A man inspecting tack saw them coming from twenty paces away and by the time they arrived, the quartermaster, a heavily jowled veteran with too much beard and little hair to go with it, stood in front of them, bobbing his nervousness.

“I need to send a carrier bird to the city,” Stan said.

The quartermaster nodded before he scurried into his tent before returning with a writing plank, a quill pen, and several slips of narrow paper. “If you’ll write your message in duplicate, sir, I’ll have the birds sent this very hour.” He licked his lips, glancing toward Toria and Fess. “Will you be expecting a reply, Captain?”

Stan nodded, frowning. “Almost immediately.”

Toria pulled her gloves and fanned herself with them, pretending, as she waited for the right moment. When the captain finished, handing the papers and the board back to the quartermaster, she reached out.

“Thank you, Captain. I apologize for my companion’s exuberance in the performance of his duty. He is young, but we are all on the same side, after all.”

The fingers of her right hand came to rest on the back of his wrist. A flow of memories pulled at her and she touched the nearest, a neutral-colored memory on the surface of Stan’s thoughts.

Bishop Gehata’s face sprang at her, at him, dark with the coloring of Aille, and cold against the backdrop of the red robes of his office. “You will stop well short of the forest, Captain, and you will not move until you receive orders from me to do so.”

He nodded. “To what end, your excellence?”

The bishop’s face darkened and the wisp of gray beard that covered just his chin quivered in sudden indignation. “You question me? Is it not enough that you have your orders?”

Civilians, he thought, never understood the importance of flexibility in the field. “No, your excellence. A plan often lasts right until the moment it’s implemented. Then it must be changed to meet the unexpected.”

The bishop digested this for a moment before he nodded. “If we are to re-establish the preeminence of the Merum church, good captain, then we must ensure that we are the last power remaining at the end of the day. Let the other kingdoms expend themselves fighting the Darkwater. Monitor their progress. Don’t let them fail, but don’t waste your men or resources helping them succeed.” He tapped full lips with an age-spotted hand. “The evil of the forest provides an opportunity for the mother church to bring the kingdoms of the north back under her control.”

“And the other orders?” the captain asked.

The bishop smiled. “The evil of the forest necessitates cooperation among the orders such has never been seen. It will be a simple matter to bring each of them under the authority of the Merum, provided they reach a certain amount of, ah, extremity to their circumstances.” He smiled. “We’ll even allow them to retain a measure of their own forms of belief, but they will follow the dictates of Cynestol. They will be reabsorbed into the faith they disdained so long ago. Those are your orders.”

This, he understood.

Toria broke from the delve, her heart pounding against her ribs. Searching frantically within her mind, she sifted through the last moments of her conversation with Captain Stan for the last thing she’d said. What had she said?

“Thank you, Captain,” she bowed as they set their feet toward the main encampment once more.

They retraced their steps, Toria pretending to enjoy the captain’s company while Fess remained two steps behind. When they arrived back at the captain’s tent, Fess and Toria bowed, signaling the captain back inside. For his part, the captain appeared relieved beyond measure to be rid of their company.

They had just mounted when the tent flap opened and Sorin, the Merum priest they’d met earlier in the camp stepped forth. The jolly expression no longer graced his features and without it, his face had descended into lines of piggish anger.

“Captain,” he pointed at Fess. “That man is an imposter.”

Fess chuckled, the picture of ease. “Doubtless, the good priest is referring to the fact that I’m no longer wearing my brown robe of service.” He bowed. “I have one of each, used for those occasions when the service of the church commands it.”

Captain Stan raised one hand to mollify the priest. “They are from Cynestol, Sorin, with messages from the cathedral.”

Sorin’s face tightened in contempt. “You’re a fool, Captain. Bishop Gehata would hardly trust his messages to one of the Cosp.” He reached into his robes and withdrew a shard of yellow stone, its precise cuts catching the light. “You see,” Sorin said, “he has no need of messengers or carrier birds.”

From behind the surrounding tents, men stepped into view holding loaded crossbows.

Chapter

Two of the guards bound Toria then Fess, using enough rope on him to restrain a bull. Even after they'd finished with their bonds, a pair of guards remained to stand watch over them with their crossbows pointed unwaveringly at the center of their backs.

"You should reconsider this course of action, Sorin," Toria said. "Nothing good can come of this."

"You seem favored with wit, Liria Sal," the priest said. "Did you believe that the struggle for the archbishop's miter would be without casualties?"

"And I take it you intend to make us, two members of the clergy similar to yourself, sacrificial pawns?"

Sorin shrugged, his face the picture of necessary regret. "War is defined by the presence of casualties."

"I'll have to remember that one for Bolt," Fess said, "though he's probably heard it already."

"Who?"

Toria's mind raced, searching for some way to persuade Sorin or Captain Stan to delay their execution. "Consto Tueri," she said. "You may have heard the name. He's in Cynestol now, searching for the next heir."

Sorin wet his lips. "You lie."

Toria shook her head. "I do not. I've worked with the last errant for years. The cosp came to us two weeks ago, courtesy of the archbishop and sought his help when Queen Chora was threatened."

The priest looked at her and shook his head, his upper lip curled in disdain. "Now I know you lie. The archbishop couldn't have sent the cosp to you. Vyne suffered a stroke weeks ago. He hasn't made a decision on his own since."

Toria tried to absorb this information without showing the panic on her face. "Then use your brains, Sorin, if you have any. If Vyne couldn't have sent for Tueri and Bishop Gehata wouldn't have, then someone else within Cynestol is speaking for the archbishop, vying for the right to guide the Merum." She allowed some measure of her anger into her gaze. "You would do well to plan your next move carefully, Sorin. If Gehata fails to win his way to the archbishop's seat, you will be held responsible for our blood."

Sorin regarded her, tapping his lips with one finger in thought. After two minutes in which the silence in the tent had become oppressive, he spoke. "I think not. Once it is dark, the good captain will kill you." He paused. "In my defense of course." He nodded to Fess. "You brought a physically gifted assassin with you packing a robe from each order to complete your deceit and sought to hinder us from our mission to guard the forest."

Toria shook her head against her panic. Sorin's plan held just enough elements of truth to succeed. "It won't work, Sorin," she said. "The truth is known by Aer and it has surprising ways of being revealed."

Sorin laughed. "Yes, well, thank you for that. I'll make sure to commit your wisdom to pen and parchment so that I don't forget it." He turned to the captain. "We'll wait for dark. I will come back to you to celebrate *haeling* here in the solitude of your tent. That will give us the privacy we need to set the stage."

He strode to the tent flap to glance outside. "That gives you perhaps an hour, Liria Sal, for you and your partner to commend your deceitful spirits to the mercy of Aer." Then he left.

As soon as he'd left, Toria turned her attention to the captain. "There's no need for you to share in Sorin's demise, captain. You can still escape his fate."

With the two of them bound, the captain allowed himself a measure of laughter. "His fate is to be the right hand of the archbishop. Mine is to be commander of the combined armies of the north. Do you have something better to offer? Your name suggests you might barter your body for your escape." He pursed his lips. "You're well-favored." He shook his head. "But women are drawn to power. Once Gehata is raised to the Merum seat, I will no doubt entertain any number of offers."

He turned away and walked around the table that served as his desk. Seating himself, he poured a generous glass of spirits and propped his feet on the table to await dark.

At her side, Fess bowed forward to touch his face to the ground. A moment later, his voice sounded throughout the tent. "The exordium of the liturgy is this: The six charisms of Aer are these..."

"Quiet," the captain said from his chair, "or I will kill you before your time."

Fess rose and regarded the captain from his knees. "Would you deny a man his last prayers, Captain?"

Stan's smile never touched his eyes. "Yes. If Aer deigns to hear the cry of a pretender, I'm sure he will hear a whisper just as well."

Fess nodded and bowed his face to the floor of the tent once more and began the exordium from the beginning. After the coda, he paused.

"Toria," he whispered, "hear me."

She bent forward to place her head next to his. "I'm here."

With his face still pointed to the earth, she heard him roll through a portion of the prayer for the dead and for a moment she thought he'd assayed a jest, but in the middle without breaking its cadence, he spoke to her again. "My hands are bare."

She recited a portion of the prayer before responding. "It is doubtful you will get the opportunity to delve them before they kill us and my hands are covered. I cannot free us."

He continued the prayer from the point she'd ceased. "I don't need to touch them," he whispered. "I only need to touch you."

With a shock, she realized his intention. She rose to a kneeling position, watched the captain pour himself another drink. She would have to find some way to bring her skin in contact with Fess's hands, but her robe and gloves covered everything except her face.

"Captain," she said in a small voice. "I don't feel well." She wobbled on her knees as if she were about to faint.

"Not to worry," Captain Stan said without so much as shifting his feet that were propped on the table or looking her way. "I can guarantee your indisposition is temporary."

She crumpled towards her apprentice, her face coming in contact with his hands, cold from the lack of circulation. Clenching her muscles against the rest of the fall, she held the contact as long as she could, but the angle was wrong. She felt herself slipping away from his cold touch even as she heard him speak the right of blessing. Fire roared through her muscles and her slide stopped. With a short jerk of her arms, half the strands of the rope binding her broke. Another flex and the rest of them snapped.

Stan's head jerked at the sound and he worked against the effects of his drink to stand and draw his sword at the same time. No one who'd risen to the rank of captain in the army of Cynestol was ungifted, but the captain's gift couldn't compare to her own. In the space of time it took him to draw his sword, she had torn her gloves free and closed within arm's length.

Lashing out, she destroyed the first set of memories she saw, those he'd just made. She released her hold to see him blinking in confusion, trying to reconcile her presence before him with the memories of her kneeling beside Fess. Doubling her fist, she struck him above the temple, catching him as his eyes rolled. After she'd placed the captain back in his chair, she freed her apprentice. Outside the tent, all was still. No sign or sound of their struggle had been detected. Fess stood to face her.

For a moment something lightened in his expression as if by striking the guard she had removed a burden and she remembered what she'd forgotten to ask him on the way north. "Why aren't you happy, Fess?"

He stared. "Now, Toria Deel?" he asked. "Is the question of my happiness of such importance to the Vigil that we must risk being recaptured to answer it?"

She cocked her head. "In the time it took you to offer your evasion, you could have answered it."

"No," he averred. "I could not." He sighed. "If we somehow manage to win our freedom, Lady Deel, I will offer you what answer I may." He pointed to the captain. "What do you propose to do? We cannot leave the tent without alerting the guards posted outside and as soon as the sun sets that abominable little priest is going to return to preside over our execution."

"We could use the captain and the priest as hostages," she said.

Fess shook his head. "I thought the goal was to get this army moved north."

She sighed. There would be no escape from what she had to do, what she would have to teach Fess to do. If consolation could be found it would be that this particular violation would not be as egregious as implanting conflicting memories in their wellspring. "The road to hell is paved with rationalization," she murmured.

"Lady Deel?"

She straightened in an attempt to accept the burden of her guilt. "If we can take the priest unaware then I can plant a false memory in his mind, one that shows him receiving a command to move the army north."

Fess eyebrows rose toward his thick mop of flax-colored hair. "You can do that?"

"Yes," she said, "though I've never attempted a memory implant quite this complex. If Pellin were here he could do it better. Cesla and Elwin even more so. They created the dwimor, after all." She beckoned to him. "While I am working with the priest, you will need to implant a similar set of memories into the captain. Then—"

A whisper of movement outside interrupted her. "Quickly," she whispered. "Sit as though you're still bound."

She darted to a position next to the tent flap, pressing herself into the shadow. A moment later, Sorin entered through the flap, holding the implements of *haeling* in his hands. He stepped through, noting Fess's bound form on the floor and a seemingly drunk captain at his desk. Some breath or motion must have warned him. His head whipped toward her, his mouth open in preparation to scream. The bread and then the wine tumbled from his hands.

She lunged, catching the pitcher in her left hand. The plate with the bread, she ignored. It would make no sound against the earthen floor of the tent. While the plate still fell, she grabbed the priest's left hand with her right and lashed out with her mind.

He sagged in her grip and she lowered him clumsily to the floor, sloshing a bit of the wine on his vestments. She placed the pitcher of wine and the fallen bread on the captain's table and secured the tent flap. If they were interrupted, they would have no choice but to attempt to

flee. At least with the opening secured there would be a moment's warning before they were discovered.

She signaled to Fess who crossed over to her. Before he could object or acquiesce, she placed her hands on his head and recited the liturgy of blessing to return his physical gift of beauty to him. The sensation of speaking while falling into a delve was one she'd never felt before and was more than a little difficult. In fact, she wasn't sure she'd succeeded until she lifted her hands and a wave of fatigue washed over her.

"Why did you give Balean's gift back to me?"

The interior of the tent spun in her vision before it steadied. "Because, of the two of us, you are more equipped to use it. Now," she gestured toward Sorin's prone form, "here is what you must do." And she explained the process of implanting a memory into another's mind.

"That's all?" he asked when she was done.

She nodded. "Once you are in the delve, it is a simple matter of repetition until it sticks, but the process is not without risk. If any real memory remains which conflicts with the false one, the mind rebels violently."

"What happens?" Fess asked in a subdued voice.

"The one who received the memory experiences a few moments of pain during which the false memory is expelled."

Fess's brows lowered in consideration. "Is there no way to ensure the memory is retained?"

She shook her head against her own recollections. "No, not with a false memory." A moment later she regretted her choice of words.

"But what if you used a real memory, a memory from someone else?" he asked.

She busied herself with some inconsequential task that allowed her to turn away from him without answering, but his voice followed her.

"Lady Deel?"

She swallowed. "It is something not spoken of any longer in the Vigil," she said.

His gift allowed him to come up behind her without her knowing. That was the only explanation for the nearness of his voice. "What does it do?" Fess asked.

Knowledge is power, but wisdom is sorrow, she quoted to herself. "If placed correctly, it drives the user insane. They inevitably die shortly thereafter. It's forbidden, Fess, I will not teach you how to do it."

"I don't want to know," he said. "When was the last time you did this thing?"

Turning to face him, she accepted the burden of whatever judgment or censure might appear on his face. "On the trip north with Lelwin."

But the stoic reserve of the Vigil guard had returned to him. Nothing showed in his expression that she could interpret with any certainty. "Implanting these false memories into the priest and the captain sounds much like running a two-man bluff. We'll need to make sure the memories are in agreement."

They talked through the next hour, working the details of the process and the memories they would implant. Then they spent another hour or more delving the two men, destroying every memory they could find that disagreed with the implanted fiction they'd created. When they finished the interior of the tent waved in her vision and she wobbled on her feet. Sweat dripped from her face.

"The stone," she said sitting heavily next to Sorin's unconscious form. Realization of what lay ahead roiled in her stomach like bad meat. As quickly as fatigue allowed, she searched

through Sorin's vestments until she found the scrying stone he'd used to contact Bishop Gehata. Pulling her own stone from inside her cloak, she wrapped its cousin with it and tucked them away. No one would hear Gehata if he tried to contact Sorin.

"How long will they sleep?" Fess asked. His face was pale from the extended exercise of their gift, but his physical ability provided him some measure of relief.

"An hour," Toria said. "Perhaps a bit more. Their minds will need some time to assimilate the new memories in the same way a grieving man requires sleep to heal."

"Then it would be best if they woke to find themselves at Stan's table with their hands close to their drinks," Fess said. While she rested, he staged the interior of the tent, removing all signs of their struggle and captivity and setting chairs around the captain's table.

Toria took a deep breath. "We'll have to accompany Sorin and the captain north to the forest."

Fess cocked his head, his question and protest obvious.

"The memories won't hold without us," Toria said. "If Sorin or the captain encounter too many conflicting memories, their minds will rebel and the false narrative we've created will be rejected. Their minds will treat it like an infection."

"But we destroyed their memories of us," Fess said.

She nodded. "Yes, and those memories can't come back. But their implanted memories will be at odds with the recollection of others. Unless we go through the camp and do the same with everyone who's seen us, the risk of discovery remains."

"So why should we stay?"

She tried to give him a reassuring smile, but risk and fatigue kept the muscles of her face slack. "To keep the good captain and his priest as isolated as possible until we gain the north." She sighed. "This will be your training ground, Fess. Each day, possibly several times a day, you and I will have to purge the memories that might interfere with our purpose, both in the captain and Sorin as well as their advisors."

She watched him take a deep breath and let it out slowly. "You know, the Mark and I worked together a few times on a bluff or a con. One of the first things you learn is complexity is the enemy. A bluff that's too complicated is sure to fail because something is bound to go wrong sooner or later."

Toria nodded.

Fess shook his head. "What we're trying to do is ridiculously complicated."

"Cynestol has the largest army on the continent, Fess. If we don't get these men to the forest, they cannot hold."

He took a deep breath. "I've read through the liturgy Bronwyn gave me, but there weren't any prayers for lost causes. We should probably add some. We're going to need them."

Chapter

Toria Deel rode between Captain Stan at the head of the army as it slowly unwound from their latest camp to continue their journey north. She resisted the urge, again, to turn and signal Fess where he rode just behind her among the clergy, no doubt within arm's reach of that toad of a priest, Sorin.

Surprisingly, Fess had insisted on accompanying Sorin on the slow journey north to the Darkwater. This, despite the fact that Sorin's mind had required more frequent delving to keep the implanted tale they had woven from unraveling.

"Yes," Fess had agreed. "If there is a threat to our discovery, it will come from Sorin. All the more reason I should be the one to accompany him." He'd touched his robe as he said this, patting the spot where he kept his daggers.

"You cannot kill him," Toria ordered.

His response still stunned her.

"Can't I, Liria Sal? If his mind awakes before I can subdue it, how many men will fall to the poison of the forest because I didn't strike down a priest who's already forsaken his vows? You keep telling me how many thousands will die if I fail."

She shook her head. "The Vigil is subject to the church, Fess. It is not for us to pass judgment on her priests. There is precedent involved. If Sorin is guilty of breaking his vows, our proper course is to bring charges to the archbishop."

"Which one, Liria Sal?" he asked. She couldn't help but notice the absence of her title. "The one who lies on the edge of death, incapacitated by a stroke, or the one who seeks to use the war against the Darkwater to rule the world?"

Robbed by his verbal riposte of any effective argument she made what answer she could. "It doesn't matter. To use our gift against the church is to claim authority over her. It signals the end of the Vigil."

He'd shrugged. "Then blame me. Call me a rogue or a rebel or an untutored thief, but if Sorin denounces me, he dies. If I strike quickly enough, you may yet escape. To the rest of the camp, Sorin is nothing more than a priest assigned to the army, a man whose responsibility is to preside over haeling and speak the liturgy for the dead and dying. If I strike him down, my actions will seem inexplicable, especially if I free all of the memories I've gathered in my mind. I will seem insane, taken by the forest."

Her horror and shock left her dumbstruck. Fess used the opportunity to walk away.

At Captain Stan's side, she took advantage of a turn in the road and checked among the following army for her apprentice. Perhaps twenty paces behind, just after the coterie of officers who attended to the captain, she caught sight of Sorin's crimson robe billowing softly in the breeze accompanied by the blue, white, and brown of the Absold, Vanguard, and Servant priests. She glimpsed Fess in their midst, his arms wide in the midst of some tale then saw all of the priests throw their heads back in laughter. Even Sorin.

That evening, they made camp along the bank of the Mournwash, still fifty leagues from the Darkwater. She'd hardly dismounted when Fess beckoned to her from the spot where the priests waited for their tent to be set.

"Is this safe?" Toria asked him.

In another time he would have smiled. "Safety is for people with nothing to gain or lose, Liria Sal." He rubbed a hand across his eyes, his fatigue obvious. "I wanted to know how many more days it will take to shepherd this army to King Rymark's care."

She sighed. "It's an army. Five leagues a day is slow compared to a single rider, but not for an army."

"How far are we from Cynestol?"

The question caught her by surprise, but she took a moment to consider his motive for asking it. "Perhaps a hundred leagues. Why?"

Fess's eyes narrowed in obvious thought. "Then I believe we will run out of time. As you said a single rider can cover much more ground than an army. How long will it be before Bishop Gehata sends a rider, or riders, to see why Sorin has ceased communication?"

Fess's gaze flicked to her left just before she heard the footsteps behind her.

"Liria?" Captain Stan called. "Why have you not come to our tent?" The look he sent at Fess was withering. "What interest could this boy be to you?"

She turned, forcing a gay smile to her face to accompany the laugh and dancing gaze. "Why, captain, I do believe you're jealous. Fess is my friend, after all."

His scowl deepened. "You know I don't like to see you in the company of other men. Come away."

She nodded and curtsied, shooting a smoldering look at the captain before she rose. "Might I have your permission to engage our young priest here in a matter of correspondence? There are letters I wish to send to Elania."

His scowl evaporated beneath the fire of her gaze and his expression turned eager. "Of course, Liria. How could I refuse you anything?" With a last look of warning for Fess, he strode away.

Fess's eyebrows climbed in surprise. "Liria? You allow him to call you by your first name only? I thought that was for..."

"Lovers," she finished for him. "Yes." Her face reddened. Explanations were not required, but if she wanted to gain his trust, she must extend it. "I determined that the easiest way to keep the captain's memories in my control was to implant memories within his mind that he has taken me as his lover. The name you elected to use for me made it an obvious gambit."

Fess cocked to his head to one side. "How did you know what memories to give him?"

She blushed. "My dear Fess, there is much to bear to with the gift of domere. Our mission requires that we partake of the lives of those we must delve. I often feel like an intruder," she said tapping her head, "but within the sanctuary I've constructed in my mind are the memories of hundreds of lovers in more intimate detail than they could ever express in word or song or painting. It was a simple matter to reach into some of those and construct a believable tale for the captain. It distracts him and allows me to control his memories with a minimum of effort."

Instead of the laughter or condemnation she expected, Fess grew somber, almost mournful. "It's a pity I can't use such a device on Sorin. His mind is wearisome." He shook his head. "Why would a man with such an overweening arrogance ever take the vows of a priest?"

Intuition, like an unexpected lightning bolt flashing from horizon to horizon, jolted her. She knew why and how Fess had lost himself. "This is why you never smile any more, isn't it, Fess?" She lifted one hand to touch his face. "You don't *want* to see into the hearts and minds of people."

He didn't cry, but the muscles around his eyes grew tight with the effort of holding back tears of frustration and rage. "Oh, Toria Deel," he whispered, using her real name in the extremity of his grief, "you are in hell. Aer hasn't gifted you, he's condemned you to the same fate he suffered himself. You bear witness to the worst sins mankind has to offer and the worst of

it is, everyone is utterly wicked. From the highest priest to the lowliest farmer, there is nothing but darkness in the heart. I know it.”

She shook her head. “What have you done, Fess?”

Tears leaked from his eyes. “I delved them. Nobles, peasants, priests, laymen. I delved them all. Their minds are littered with rage and envy and murder and every sin you could imagine.” He waved his hand at the camp around them. “They’re swimming in filth they can’t even see.”

Her throat closed around her reply and she would have wept for him, but mercy of that sort wasn’t what he needed. “You knew this already, Fess. You lived the evidence of it every day you were in the urchins. You knew.”

“No,” he said, shaking his head in an attempt to deny her. “That’s just it. I didn’t *know* and I don’t want to know. I want to believe people are basically good. I want to believe they’re just ignorant or misguided or acting out of their own hurt and pain. I don’t want to *know* that they’re evil.”

She closed the distance between them, stripping off the gloves that covered her from the ends of her sleeves to fingertips, the soft leather sliding from her skin. Reaching out, she took his hand. At first he clenched his fist, preventing her from removing the glove that kept him imprisoned in solitude. She didn’t fight him, had no strength to compare with his, but when she grabbed his smallest finger and pushed, he allowed her to straighten it.

“Please,” he said.

Whether in denial or acceptance, she didn’t know, but she continued to straighten his fingers until his open hand rested in hers. With a jerk, his hand was bare. “It is traditional for existing members of the Vigil to delve each new apprentice or addition. We don’t usually allow new members to delve those who have carried the gift for any real length of time.”

She forced the next words out, but she could no longer meet his gaze. “Not because of the weight of memories; we can keep those locked away. It’s because we don’t want new members to know what you already know. We don’t want them to realize just how much of you the gift requires. Every man or woman who comes to gift of domere, regardless of religious order, gradually comes to believe in the inherent wickedness of the human heart.” Against the weight of a hundred years of accumulated memories and shame she lifted her head to meet his gaze.

“But you already know that, don’t you, Fess?” She gripped his wrist, guiding his fingertips to the back of her hand so that he could delve her, but keep his mind private in return. His eyes widened as the gift took him. He didn’t speak into her thoughts or try to implant his memories and because he did not, she had no sensation, no awareness of his presence in her mind.

She made no attempt to hide her most intimate thoughts. There would be no way for him to absorb all of her memories, but those that lay closest to the surface, her loves, her passions, her lies, her shames, would be completely open to him. Her face burned at the thought of what he would surely see. She would have compared it to being caught naked in her bath except this was exposure of a far deeper level. This included not only her physical form, but her emotional and spiritual being as well.

After a few minutes, longer than she would have expected, he withdrew. With so much time in the delve, there would be very little her apprentice would not know about her. She stepped back and met his gaze, giving him space to condemn or not as he chose. In the end, he did neither. He merely waited.

“Of those living,” she said to fill the silence, “only the eldest, Pellin, knows me more completely than you.” She knew what he’d seen, what he couldn’t help but see.

“Do you expect me to view you differently than others I have delved?” he asked.

“No,” she said with a shake of her head. “I know who I am, Fess. With the gift, I can’t help but know it. I expect you to view me exactly as you have the others because I know what thoughts and impulses course through me.”

“Then why?”

“Because those dark desires are not me. Don’t you understand? You thought people were inherently good, but the truth is so much bigger than that. People are inherently evil, filled with greed and envy and hatred, naturally unforgiving of even the slightest insult or injury. The fact that we can choose to do good over and over and over again in spite of our darker selves is a miracle. It’s a gift of Aer that has nothing to do with the exordium or domere.” She lifted her hands in supplication. “Oh, Fess, you shouldn’t be disheartened or discouraged. You should be amazed.”

He didn’t respond and there was nothing else for her to say. She left him there to make her way to Captain Stan’s tent. Perhaps she imagined the lightening of his countenance as she turned away.

Chapter

Toria Deel rode at Captain Stan's side for the next three days, playing the part of the infatuated lover, fawning over and for his attention while she cringed inwardly at every touch and gesture he bestowed on her, his beloved property. Murmurs from his subordinates reached her ears, grumbling at the pace she'd induced the captain to set. Lieutenant Fiore spurred his horse forward to ride on Stan's left and for a blissful interlude his hand left her skin, his constant gestures of ownership interrupted.

"Captain," the lieutenant nodded his respect, "we must give the men an opportunity to rest."

Relieved as she was that his hand no longer wandered the fabric covering her thigh, she regretted the absence of his touch. His response would be beyond her control and she could not now reach for him without the motion seeming contrived. Stan frowned, his mind trying to reconcile opposing ideas. "Why are we pushing such a hard pace, lieutenant?"

Fiore frowned, shaking his head in incomprehension. "You ordered it, captain."

Stan paused then gave the lieutenant a tentative nod. "Yes, we must make the forest as quickly as possible," he said, parroting the command she'd given him.

Fiore pointed behind them to the vast ranks of horse and foot soldiers trailing behind them. "But, captain, the foot cannot keep this pace, marching until dark every day and rising before dawn. We're starting to lose some of them and the rest will be in no shape to fight for days once we attain the forest."

Captain Stan raised a hand to his head. "Curse this pain. Will it never stop?" He wobbled in his saddle before steadying. With a shake that twisted the lines of his face into a grimace, he pointed to the army following. "Call a halt, lieutenant, immediately. This haste is unneeded. There's no battle at the Darkwater that requires it. Our orders are simply to cordon it off." He paused to look at the landscape, his expression confused. "And send Sorin to me as soon as my tent is up." Lieutenant Fiore gave his captain a sharp nod in obedience before wheeling his horse.

"The same pain?" Toria asked him. She didn't have to pretend her concern. The constant imposition of false memories against Stan's real ones created more than just mental tension within his mind. His body's reaction to them, like a splinter within his thoughts, was damaging his brain. If she continued, the captain would certainly suffer a stroke, perhaps minor and of temporary damage, perhaps not.

He nodded, reaching up to squeeze the muscles at the base of his skull. "I hate to ask it of you so often, but could you work your magic on me again? Even my healer's touch can't compare to yours."

"Of course, my captain," she nodded, using the pet name that never failed to bring a smile to his lips, until now. She dismounted. "We needn't wait for the tent."

"No," he shook his head. "The lieutenants are dissatisfied with the orders of my command. This is a poor time to show weakness."

Fatigue made the muscles in her legs tremble like a crone's, but she forced her steps to his side where he still sat his horse and reached up to touch his naked wrist where it showed between the end of his sleeve and his glove. She bowed. "As you command, my lord."

Boring through his gaze and into his mind, she stood over the stream of memories that comprised his consciousness and found those that created the conflict, sweeping along the river like a knot of driftwood after a flood. Within the flow, she sighed. Each time the logjam of contradictory thoughts had grown, reflecting the gestures and statements of his subordinates as

he issued orders in contravention to their expectations. And each time it took longer for her to bring some semblance of harmony to his deliberation. With a groan that surged up from the depths of her exhaustion, she set about untangling the mass of memories and emotions that threatened the captain, working to bring his glamour back into harmony.

The origins of the Vigil were lost in antiquity, hidden in the mists of earliest time on the southern continent, but she doubted whether this had ever been an intended use of the gift. Now, she would have to contrive some fiction to visit Captain Stan's lieutenants and create a story within their memories that would allow them to continue their race to the north.

When she exited his mind, she found herself still standing by him as he sat his horse. She took a step away, then another, but on the third she hit a depression in the ground and her knee twisted to the side, bringing a gasp of pain. The world pitched in her vision as she fell.

Candlelight illuminated the green oiled canvass of the tent walls. She tried to rise, but her vision spun and she slumped. A tall man with kindly gray eyes and a long face hovered over her, wearing the brown of the Servants. "Stay still. You're not going to go anywhere." He glanced behind him and she followed his gaze to where three men stood across the tent, Captain Stan, the Merum priest, Sorin, and Fess, dressed in red and standing at Sorin's side.

She searched for the name of the man who loomed over her. "Melwin."

He nodded with a smile that most patients probably found comforting. "How long have you been running on chiccor root, Liria Sal?"

It took her a moment to realize the Servant used the fake name Fess had given her on their arrival. The truth would cost her nothing. "Days."

His brow furrowed. "I fail to see the need for such extreme usage, regardless of the strength of the captain's...infatuation." He cast a glance at the captain before meeting her gaze and a flush of heat that began at her neck crept its way upward until it lit her cheeks.

When she didn't answer, the healer shrugged. "Regardless, you can't keep up this pace." "I have to."

He shook his head. "What you have to do is rest, either with the army or without it. Either you must stay behind and let the army and the captain proceed without you, or you must change your, um, daily habits to something a bit less strenuous." He dug into the heavy leather satchel all of the Servant healers carried with them and produced a vial of heavy yellow syrup. "I'm going to give you a bit of orrin sap to help you sleep. It's mild, but you won't be doing anything except resting tonight."

A memory tugged at Toria at the sight of the vial, pushing through her fatigue, but she had never studied the healing arts as intensely as Bronwyn had and the thought refused to crystalize into recognition. Melwin mixed a generous splash of the syrup into a cup of water and lifted her neck and head so she could drink.

She would have refused, but she couldn't think of a plausible reason without rousing suspicion. Besides, she had already cleared Captain Stan's head of resistance. Fess would have to manage Sorin.

She bent her head to drink, expecting to smell the soft scent of lemongrass healers mixed with such potions to disguise the acrid taste and aroma. Instead, she smelled vinegar. Recoiling, she tried to push the drink away, but Melwin's hands clenched, his fingers pressing between her jaws until he forced them open.

"Drink, Liria Sal," he smiled, "if that's your name." His face clenched with effort. "You will sleep for a long, long time."

The liquid cascaded down her throat, burning as it removed the lining. She coughed, trying to spew the heavy narcotic from her throat, but Melwin covered her mouth and nose, cutting off her air until she swallowed.

The room spun as Melwin removed his hand allowing her to breathe once more. A well opened beneath her mind, pulling her down as the room narrowed to a point. With the last of her strength, she tried to lift her hand to draw Fess's attention, but her arm hardly moved from the coverlet.

"Fess," she said, her voice croaking. "Pray with me."

She had no idea if her apprentice heard. The long, long fall from awareness took the room and light and sound away until only the descent remained.

Within her sleep, dreams came. For some reason she thought she should remember, but couldn't, she tried to push them away, to achieve some form of lucidity. Pellin walked past her, ignoring her calls to reveal his intentions, above him, floating like specters from the tales, were Cesla and Elwin, speaking into each ear. Behind them all came Bronwyn, her face disguising the depth of emotion that had always lain just beneath the surface.

Toria pushed them away, trying to clear space in her mind, but for what, she had no idea. She only knew that she must.

But no one came.

Out of the darkness of her dreaming, two more figures came, Laewan and Jorgen, their faces composed, but carrying traces of horror in their eyes, as if their escape from life had yet to erase the terror they'd endured. Behind them, following, came Willet Dura, his expression as hard and unyielding as if it had been carved from granite. His posture held all the coiled potential violence of a Vigil guard and his eyes glittered like chips of agate. Each hand held a dagger ready to strike. One pointed toward the two dead men and the rest of the specters that had already passed, but the tip of the other he held above his own heart.

Trailing behind Dura came four others, hardly more than children. First came Rory, the leader of thieves, moving with such grace even as he skulked that it bore witness to his gift. A quintet of daggers danced among his hands, their blades flashing as they spun around and across his fingers. Then came the Mark, his face already leaner, though still boyish. Ficheall pieces floated around his head, moving as though they'd come to life to play their game.

She would have called them back if she could have, would have kept them from passing into darkness, but they vanished into the distance until night swallowed them. The next figure passed, its gaze filled with the fire and hatred of accusations. Lelwin.

Toria would have wept if her dream allowed it, but she could only stand while the vision of the broken woman stood in front of her, fingering a dagger as her eyes cast about, seeking vengeance she would never find. The horror turned its accusations toward her and Toria closed her eyes against it, squeezing them shut while she covered her face with her hands, unable to face her failure.

"Toria Deel, look at me."

A man's voice. She heard a man's voice.

She pulled her hands away and stared. Fess stood before her, his face somber. "Is it really you?" she asked. "Are you real?"

His brows drew together as he pondered the question. "What answer could I give you that you could trust?"

She could have cried with relief even as the drug she'd been given threatened to snuff this level of consciousness. "The healer, Melwin, drugged me. He said it was orrin sap, but he lied. He forced me to drink distilled herridin root."

Fess shook his head. "I don't know it."

"Not by the healer's name, you wouldn't," she said. "In the cities they call it 'ghost water.' I won't be conscious for days. Without my reinforcement, Captain Stan's mind will revert. He'll take the army back south. "

His face darkened until it became a storm. "What do I do?"

"Run. Take me with you if you can." The walls within her mind wavered and Fess's form shimmered with the absence of defined solidity like a sheet of falling water. "Melwin knows I'm not Liria Sal." Before she had finished speaking, he faded, his form shifting from waving insubstantiality to mist. Then he was gone. Before the blackness of total unconsciousness took her, she had one final instant in which to be afraid. In large doses, herridin root was fatal.

Fess stood from Toria Deel's bedside, his face set in the mask he'd worn since he'd come into Bronwyn's gift. Melwin stood at his side, searching his expression, but he allowed nothing more to show than the mild concern a friend might feel for another. "Thank you, healer. I had no idea the journey north was taking so much of her strength."

Melwin nodded, his gaze neutral but still fixed upon his face.

Fess gave him a slight bow. "Would it be possible to petition Captain Stan to hold our position here until she recovers?" He watched as something of intensity or scrutiny faded from the healer's regard.

"I'm sure he would consider it," Melwin said with a smile made the more sinister for its perfectly acted sincerity.

"Thank you," Fess said. He left Toria's side and made a show of crossing to where Stan and Sorin conferred about the pace of the army. Several times at Toria's side he had considered passing his physical gift to her again to allow her body to shake the effects of the drug, but Melwin had stood at his side. The rite of passage would hardly have gone unnoticed.

Yet there was an additional reason to hold it. The presence of the gift allowed him to keep Sorin's mind under control without exhausting himself as Toria had. When Gehata had sent the two men north in charge of the Aille forces, it had been Sorin who had been in charge. At each touch his mind fought to free itself from Fess's control, struggling to reestablish the reality that lay behind countless other memories.

More than once, Fess had considered rendering Sorin incapable of resistance. It would be a simple matter; all he need to would be to destroy all of Sorin's memories back to a given point in time. Melwin and the other priests would assume Sorin had suffered a stroke. Truth be told, it would be less harmful than a stroke since only the memories were involved and not the physical tissue of his brain.

He hoped and doubted. Bronwyn's insistence upon his education served to undermine him now at the point of decision. Just as Aer was composed of three personalities, according to most theological thought man himself was composed of three inseparable parts; the body, the soul, and the spirit.

Most theologians reckoned an injury to the body as the least significant, a broken bone or even the loss of a limb of less consequence than an assault upon the soul or the spirit. Admittedly, he planned just such an assault. He shrugged inwardly. The excision of months of Sorin's memories would hardly impact his personality. Sorin had walked the paths of life for at

least four decades. The loss of a few months would still leave his behaviors and opinions intact; indeed, it might undo some of the decisions that had led him to this point. It was just barely possible Sorin would come out of the delve a kinder, less ruthlessly ambitious priest.

Had Fess not been in the company of the captain and the subject of his thoughts, he would have snorted in contempt at his own supposition. Each delve had shown him the expanse and depth of Sorin's ambition. A few months would hardly scratch the man's veneer.

The air in the tent became stifling as Fess considered the last possible effect, Sorin's spirit. This scared him the most precisely because he knew the least about it. While all of Sorin's body and the vast majority of his personality would remain intact, what would happen to his spirit? None of the books Bronwyn had given him to read contained an answer. Few of the authors had been in the Vigil and therefore could not know such an attack to be possible. Of those that had known of the gift he exercised, none had gone beyond theoretical musing when it came to the gift's impact on another's spirit.

Fess shifted, noting Melwin's gaze upon him where he stood, waiting for an opportune moment to petition the captain. "Ah," Sorin exclaimed. "Good Fess, you have the look of someone with a question to ask."

He bowed, offering the customary inclination of an acolyte to a priest and a bit more. "Yes, Father, but the question is for Captain Stan, if he will permit it."

Sorin's brows rose in puzzlement, but a knowing grin lit his face. "Captain?"

Stan nodded his permission. "Speak, acolyte."

"Healer Melwin believes it will be some time before Liria Sal recovers," Fess said, his gaze on the ground inside the tent. "Would it be possible for us to hold our position here until she does?"

From beneath his brows, Fess watched as the captain and the priest considered, their expressions alternating between confusion and effort. The captain wavered on his feet and Sorin's hands fluttered over the surface of his robes, moving toward the hidden pocket where he'd kept his scrying stone.

Chapter

During his four years in the urchins, Fess had run countless bluffs on merchants and clergy visiting Bunard. In that time he'd learned to spy the signs of discovery, a squint when the expression should be open, a hand shifting toward a dagger, a tone of speech that carried forced camaraderie.

With an effort, he drew a breath that was no faster or deeper than the ones before it and waited as he watched Stan and Sorin digest his question. Curse it! He should have known better than to phrase it that way. Now both men would be wondering why the army had been moving in the first place.

He glanced behind him. Melwin still watched him, his eyes glittering like chips of polished black stone, his knees bent and his weight on the balls of his feet. A bit of the fog that had clouded the captain's gaze for the last week left and Stan's face narrowed in suspicion. Sorin, frowned, obviously sensing something amiss in the tent, but unable to name it.

The captain's hand lifted—a prelude to accusation.

Fess shifted his feet first, changing his stance just enough to watch Melwin's reaction. Slowly, he reached for the captain's hand, pretending for the moment that Stan offered nothing more than a customary grip of support.

In the space of time between heartbeats, Melwin exploded into motion, launching himself across the intervening space like a dart. His feet left the ground and his right hand blurred into motion as he reached behind his back.

Stan and Sorin's eyes registered the movement, but Sorin had yet to move and the captain's mind was still too fuddled to interpret the explosion of violence within the tent. Knowing Sorin to be the least of his threats, Fess pivoted, coiling.

Jumping to meet Melwin's attack with his feet, he reached for Stan's outstretched hand and made contact.

The world disappeared as he sank into the captain's mind. Without sifting through Stan's memories he reached into the river that flowed at his feet and struck, slashing at all of the memories the captain was currently experiencing. He had no idea what damage he might be doing, but he couldn't spare time for anything else.

His fingers left the captain's hand as the tip of Melwin's dagger entered his calf. Changing the direction and momentum of his kick with a wrench that made his joints pop, he moved with the dagger strike.

But Melwin's attack couldn't be avoided. Steel sank into his flesh in the time it took him to move his leg away as fast as the dagger moved toward him. Fire flared through his leg. He wouldn't be able to stand.

Reaching, down he grappled for Melwin's knife hand, praying.

Instead of withdrawing, Melwin redoubled his attack, striving to twist the dagger in Fess's calf, counting on his gift and Fess's injury.

Not knowing that he strove for a different goal. His fingertips brushed Melwin's wrist and his vision narrowed to a point as he fell through the healer's eyes. He aimed a slashing blow at the river, took only enough time to see multi-colored strands of memory wither and fade to nothingness before letting go.

Pain shot through his leg as the tent became visible again. Stan and Melwin slumped or tumbled toward the ground, their bodies shocked by the blows to their mind. Sorin's gaze had widened until the whites of his eyes showed all around.

“G—”

Fess’s hand closed on his throat, cutting off the priest’s air before his call or commotion could be heard outside the tent. For the third time he struck, destroying Sorin’s memories floating at the surface of his awareness.

Silence filled the tent.

He reached down with a shaky hand and pulled the dagger from his calf, gasping as the edge broadened the cut. Blood poured from the wound, its red mimicking the wine they would have used for *haeling*, but, while heavy, the flow didn’t pulse with the pounding of his heart. Working as quickly as his wound allowed, he stripped Sorin of his crimson stole, pulling the linen tight as he wrapped his leg.

Four unconscious bodies bore witness. Without haste, he wiped his hands clean on the inside of his robe then positioned each of the men in chairs around the interior of Captain Stan’s tent, hobbling as he carried each body to its resting place. Melwin’s body proved the most difficult. The supposed Servant healer carried unexpected bulk, the denseness of his muscles testifying to the presence of his physical gift.

He had no idea how long he had until the men revived or some subordinate intruded, but at least they wouldn’t find him in pitched battle with the captain and the priests. Unfortunately, he hadn’t a clue what to do next. His use of the gift had been the stroke of a broadsword instead of the incision of a scalpel.

He checked his wound. The bleeding had slowed, but it was doubtful Sorin would want his stole back even if he happened to learn its fate. Limping to Toria’s side, he sat on the ground next to her cot and took her hand in his.

Memories flowed past him, but there was no vision of her within to greet him or give him advice. His mind recoiled at the thought of a lengthy delve, but he sifted through her memories with the studied concentration of a jeweler at his craft, searching for a way to repair the damage done to Sorin and the rest without revealing the truth.

After a seeming eternity in her mind that might have been mere minutes in the waking world, he gave up. Toria possessed over a hundred years’ worth of memories, most of them locked behind doors he wouldn’t breach. He turned, sitting on the ground with his back to her cot. If he’d been within reach of Melwin, he would have kicked him. “Kreppa,” he muttered. He had seen within Toria’s mind the knowledge that Melwin might have killed her.

Even now, her breath seemed shallower to him than it should. Their bluff—no it had been too complicated for that, it was a ridiculously complex con—had blown up in their faces like bad alchemy. “I should kill the lot of you and take my chances.”

He spied Melwin’s bag still on the ground next to Toria’s cot and paused, considering. Perhaps their plan could be salvaged. Bronwyn had been knowledgeable enough to be considered a healer herself. Melwin’s impersonation might hold the implements he needed. At the least, he needed to stitch up his leg to speed his healing.

Opening the bag he found a full set of healer’s equipment: boiled silk thread, gut thread, chiccor root sticks and extract, herridin, paverin, and a host of other potions and herbs in small stoppered bottles. Working with as much speed as his gift allowed, he threaded a needle with black silk thread and smeared paverin extract over the flesh around the cut in his calf. His needlework would leave a considerable scar, but it would keep the wound from reopening. When he finished, he wrapped the wound with clean linen from Melwin’s bag before adding Sorin’s stole as a second layer.

Toria.

He counted her breaths in time with his heartbeat. Too few and too shallow. The pulse in her neck that should have been strong and vibrant had turned sluggish. He thought of giving her a dose of chiccor root syrup, but Bronwyn's admonishment of the unforeseen consequences of mixing medications haunted him. He glanced at Melwin's body, unconscious in a chair to the side. "You're trying to kill her," he murmured. "Any judge in Bunard would send you to the hangman." An emotion he hadn't let himself feel since Bronwyn died, a protective instinct, turned his thoughts crimson. "I should turn your mind into pudding and let you live, *kreppa*."

As he watched, Melwin stirred, the depth of his hidden physical gift working to heal him. With a savage lunge off his good leg, Fess crossed the tent to bring his hand back into contact with the fake healer's skin.

As the exercise of his gift began to take him, he pulled back, jerking his hand away. That this contemptible excuse for a priest had tried to kill Toria, there was no doubt. "Humph. If that's what you really are and not just some hired killer with a gift." He hesitated, his past conversations with Bronwyn and Toria acting as both goad and brake to his decision. For all the indifference he'd witnessed from the church during his time in the urchins, he'd seen commitment from them as well. Since joining the Vigil, he'd learned that Dura's desire to help the orphaned children and the night-women of Bunard had sprung from his thwarted desire to be a priest.

He looked at his right hand, the one he used whenever he delved another. In it he held domere, the power to judge. What was it Bronwyn had been so fond of saying to him during their theological discussions? "Oh yes," he said, remembering, "it's not the judgment of Aer that draws us to him, it's his mercy."

He looked at Melwin. "But I'm not supposed to show you mercy. I'm no priest, I'm magistrate and hangman. How did you come to suspect us, I wonder." Decided, he reached for him again, shaking his head. "I'm going to regret this. Every experience I've seen, every tale I've read tells me there's a price to pay." With a sigh he took hold of Melwin's hand, absurdly, the hand that had held the knife, and entered his thoughts.

Moments later he emerged, moving with as much haste as his calf allowed toward Captain Stan and the Merum priest, Sorin. His mind screamed with weariness. He'd been warned, with shockingly vivid examples, of what would happen if he tried to delve too many people in too short a time. Even with his gift to aid his recovery, he could feel the beginning of fatigue-born pain at the base of his skull.

Moving across the tent to Toria Deel, he sat by her once more to rummage through the healer's bag at her side. When he found and verified he held paverin syrup, he took a dose that would have a normal person asleep within minutes.

Then he recited the rite of blessing and put his hands on Toria's head for the instant it took to give her his physical gift. He had no way of knowing how quickly she would be able to fight her way back to consciousness, but she would no longer have to deal with Melwin's suspicions. Or those from Stan and Sorin for that matter.

Fog enveloped his senses as sleep came for him. With his last moments of consciousness, he checked the interior of the tent, hiding anything that might give away his ruse in Toria's pack, including Melwin's dagger and Sorin's bloody stole. He didn't know if he'd bought safety or execution, but it was the best he could do.

He poured himself into the closest chair and passed out.

Chapter

Toria Deel woke in the middle of the night, her eyes snapping open to some perceived sound, real or imagined, that served to send her heart racing so that its beat rocked her where she lay. Four others filled the tent, all men. She realized this before the question of how she could know it occurred to her.

Fess.

She fumbled around the tent despite her gift until she found a candle and the means to light it. Striking flint to steel, she defied the urgency of her racing heart to take stock of her situation. Melwin, her prisoner, sat in a chair with Captain Stan across from him and the priest, Sorin, on his right. A cup rested in front of each man, the dregs of wine still discoloring the bottom, but over a hundred years of living told her that they hadn't drunk themselves into a stupor.

She turned to where Fess had collapsed, his body, curled into the last remaining chair. By the flickering light of the candle, she could see bruises of fatigue beneath his eyes. Her own strength, growing minute by minute, testified to what he'd done.

"Clever boy," she murmured. "The urchins are made of stern stuff." She bent to place her bare hand on his cheek, the gesture more intimate than her usual preference for the neck or wrist. It seemed appropriate to try and comfort him in his grief. The tent dropped away as she entered his mind.

A moment later she emerged, shaking her head in amazement at what she'd seen within his mind. "Oh Fess, do you have any idea how rare and wonderful you are?" she said. He didn't hear her of course. The drug he'd taken prevented it. The rest of the men still slept, though Melwin would undoubtedly wake first. While he still slept, she crossed to him and ordered his memories as much as she dared then did the same with Stan and Sorin. Haste gnawed at her.

She snuck from the tent and wandered the camp until she found the object of her search, a momentarily untended watch fire that still burned. Crouching to warm herself, she inched closer, searching the darkness beyond with her enhanced senses. No one stirred. Quickly, she drew her knife and cut Sorin's bloody stole into pieces before shoving them into the embers and then adding wood to disguise the burning cloth. She stayed by the fire until the stole had been consumed. No one came out of the darkness to accuse her.

By the time she returned to the tent the eastern sky had lightened to charcoal and the call of birds could be heard across the fields. Melwin stood inside, eyeing the men about him, his hand gripping a cup with dregs of wine. He turned on her, shaking his head.

"I don't drink," he said, his eyes narrowing. "Not ever. What did you do to me?"

She shifted enough to reach for her dagger on the inside of her cloak. The flap to the tent stirred and another man entered, wearing the uniform of the cosp and signs of hard riding. "You were supposed to bring me your report hours—" He stopped, eyeing her, his surprise at seeing her upright obvious.

Melwin wobbled the cup still in his hand.

"You fool," the man said. "I didn't send you here to drink." With a snarl, he drew his knife and advanced, his gaze drifting to Fess as he came. "You didn't kill either of them?" he snarled. "Gehata will be displeased. I'll take them with me, but get this army moving south."

Melwin placed his cup on the table as if he were still surprised to be holding it. "We're supposed to go north to fight, Koriks."

"Did Gehata tell you that?" the man rasped.

Melwin still wobbled on his feet, but the fog in his eyes cleared a fraction. “Gehata. He talks to Sorin.”

“Then search him and find the scrying stone,” the cosp rasped.

Melwin nodded weakly but moved to the slumped form of the priest where he still sat with his head resting on the table. After a thorough search that revealed nothing but empty pockets, the fake healer moved to Captain Stan and repeated the process. “It’s not here.”

“Then wake them, you fool.”

Melwin’s motions grew more confident by the second, more assured as his gift fought to clear the fog in his mind. Something in his real memory must have clicked back into place. By the time he had both the captain and the priest, Sorin, awake, he held his sword in his hand.

Sorin blinked at the crowd in the tent, his troubled gaze giving evidence to his confusion.

“Where’s the stone?” the cosp ordered. In the moment he turned, she interposed herself between the men and Fess, pulling his sword. The cosp took a step toward her and she crouched, dagger and sword out front, her arms and legs coiled. Something in her demeanor or stance gave him pause.

“You can’t mean to escape,” the cosp said.

“She’s the captain’s woman,” Sorin mumbled.

“You fool,” the cosp snarled back. “She’s a spy who’s managed to trick you into moving the army.” With his free hand he put two fingers to his lips and whistled. Soldiers filled the entrance of the tent and beyond, cutting off any hope of escape.

The cosp eyed her, his gaze filled with derision and triumph. “The new archbishop, Gehata, commands this force. Surrender the stone or I’ll have you killed now.”

Fess still slept behind her and she looked at the mass of sword points, beaten. “You would sacrifice the entire north for the ambition of one man?”

The cosp took a step toward her with Melwin coming after, the points of their sword trained on different lines, one high, the other low, determined to make quick work of her. “I won’t ask again,” the cosp said. “Surrender the stone.”

“If the choice is to die now or die later,” she mumbled to herself as she dug into the depth of her tunic for the stone.

“Later is better,” came a groggy voice from behind her.

She tossed the heavily wrapped shard of diamond to the cosp who backed away, his sword and eyes still forward, to hand it to Sorin. “Call him,” he demanded. “If you are too simple to remember his orders then perhaps a reminder is in order, though I doubt he will be pleased.”

Sorin, his fleshy face pale, unwrapped the stone and held it up. “Your eminence,” he called. “This is your faithful servant, Sorin.”

The cosp snorted his derision.

“Bishop Gehata,” Sorin called louder. “What are your orders for the army?”

“Who’s there with you?” a voice demanded from the stone.

Fess’s hand came to rest on her shoulder. “I’m sorry. We should have run.”

She reached for his hand unmindful of the fact she wore no glove to protect her from her gift. The expression on the cosp’s face stopped her.

“The captain of your force, Stan, is with me along with Melwin, a cosp messenger and two priests who joined our company.”

“I want their names.”

“That’s not…” the cosp said, but his voice trailed away.

“Bishop Gehata is imprisoned and faces trial for the murder of the archbishop and the queen. This is Bishop Serius,” the voice commanded. “

Toria side-stepped the cosp and the fake priest Melwin, her sword and dagger still points out, to get within range of the stone. “This is Toria Deel, your eminence. A young man named Fess is with me. If you command in Cynestol now, then you know who I am.”

“Soldiers loyal to Cynestol, you will submit to the authority of the church in the person of Toria Deel.”

Violence erupted in the tent as Melwin and the cosp tried to cut their way clear. The cosp rounded on Toria and she found herself pushed to the limit by his attack, but the purity of Fess’s gift blunted each strike. Snarling his frustrating, the cosp turned, striving to cut his way through the press of soldiers at the entrance. Half a dozen men went down before the weight of men and blades stopped him.

He fell beside Melwin’s lifeless body.

Captain Stan faced her, his sword still in its sheath. “I am loyal to Cynestol, no matter who commands; else I would have tried to escape with those two.”

“Or you might have simply recognized impossible odds when you saw them, Captain.” She held out her hand to Sorin, gesturing for the stone. “Bishop Serius, the army is secure.” She gazed around the tent at the men arrayed there, men who had willingly put the north at risk. It would take time to weed out the officers who couldn’t be trusted. “For now.”

A lieutenant stepped forward, an improvised bandage on his upper arm. She recognized him as the one who’d begged the captain to slow the army for the sake of the foot. “What are your orders, Toria Deel?”

She pointed to the priest, Sorin. “Take him, but don’t kill him. I will determine his guilt or innocence in due time. The captain will ride with me.” She turned to face him squarely. “Get this army moving and send a messenger north to the forces under the command of King Rymark. Let him know we are coming with all due haste.”

She rode beside Fess later that morning as the army trudged northward. Empowered by the physical gift, her body had burned off the last of the effects of Melwin’s poison. Fess rode next to her, his eyes half-lidded from fatigue, but he seemed in no hurry to reclaim Balean’s inheritance. With a signal, she had the soldiers around them withdraw out of earshot.

“I need your counsel, Fess,” she said.

His eyes opened until he looked almost completely awake. “You want me to pass judgment on Sorin.”

She sighed. Within, she had hoped that their escape might serve to restore some measure of joy or happiness to him, but his dour turn of speech remained. “I cannot,” she said, “though I would spare you the decision if I could. When I delved him, most of his recent memories were gone, destroyed in your fight with Melwin. Since I spent my time keeping Captain Stan under control, I have no idea what was in Sorin’s heart.”

He shook his head. “It never changes. Everyone is under judgment.”

“Did he mean to kill us?” she pressed.

Fess laughed, but it bore as little resemblance to his prior disposition as it was possible to imagine. She flinched at the sound of scorn in his voice. “Of course he did.” He turned in his saddle to face her. “Do you want to know what was in his mind?” He shook his head. “I have it locked away, but I can feel its taint like a skim of foulest oil floating at the surface of my mind.”

“Then we will deliver him to Bishop Serius for execution.” She had no answer for his deeper question, but within the space of her thoughts, she lifted a prayer to Aer, for Fess’s soul.

They rode north for the next week until she could almost smell the corruption of the Darkwater. When they were still a day away, a cloud of dust in the distance hit her with foreboding like a blow.

“Men,” the lieutenant said. “A lot of them.”

Fess roused himself from his book to follow her gaze. “I’m no captain, but I don’t think armies retreat when they’re winning.”

She shook her head. There was nothing for it but to meet them and hear their report. Three hours after noon, the two armies met.

Chapter

King Rymark's tent could have been twin to Captain Stan's. The main difference was the men who occupied it, Rymark and Ellias held the gift of kings for their respective kingdoms, Owmead and Moorclaire. Two more different men would have been difficult to find. Short and clean-shaven, Rymark dominated the space within the tent with the intensity of his personality. Quick gestures and a darting gaze created the impression of a man whose diminutive stature barely contained the force of the personality within it.

While Rymark stalked about the tent as though he searched for some hidden enemy, Ellias stood to one side like a plinth of granite, tall and broad-shouldered as a blacksmith. His demeanor and gaze testified to a temperament of thoughtfulness or observation rather than the passion which ruled King Rymark. Yet for all their differences, the two kings seemed at ease with each other.

Besides the two monarchs, only she and Fess occupied the tent. Trusted guards had been posted to keep anyone who desired to pry well away. "We didn't expect to see you for another day," Toria said.

Rymark nodded, the disgust at having to retreat before an enemy, any enemy, written on his face. "You have King Ellias to thank for that." He shook his head. "Thankfully, the move was pre-emptive. If our greater distance from the forest means it takes us longer to fight, then it also provides us with a measure of safety and time to set our camp."

None of what Rymark said made any sense to her. He noted her confusion and gestured toward Ellias. "He'll have to explain it."

Instead of responding directly, King Ellias of Moorclaire strode to the tent flap and beckoned. A moment later a captain in the red and green of Moorclaire strode through the entrance carrying several rolls of parchment and laid them on the rude trestle table that dominated the tent. But when they were unrolled, only one of them showed a map. The others were filled with the arcane symbols of the mathematicum.

Fess bent at her side to peer at first the map then at the other papers. "What is it?"

Toria sighed. Members of the Vigil rotated among the kingdoms, changing location every ten years to keep their prolonged lives from being noticed. Twice, she'd served within the demesne of Moorclaire, ranging from Loklallin to the eastern border of the forest. The kingdom's passion for the mathematicum was well known.

"It's the national language of Moorclaire," she said. "Pellin is more suited to it than I."

Ellias chuckled. "The other kingdoms of the north often jest that our pursuit of the arcane beauty of the mathematicum has addled our minds. It's just possible they might be right." At Toria's start, he stroked his chin. "Are you surprised, Toria Deel, to find that I own a sense of humor?"

Before she could help herself, she nodded, but Ellias only chuckled again.

"Well, you're not alone."

"Yes, yes," Rymark cut in, "monarchs have souls. Any number of my subjects would be surprised as well, but to the point, Ellias?"

"Ah," he nodded. "We cannot hold the cordon around the forest."

His pronouncement hit her all the harder for the offhand way in which he said it. Rymark grunted at her reaction. "Disturbing, isn't it?" he asked. "The way he talks about the end of the north as if he were wondering whether or not to have mutton for supper."

"Explain, please," Toria said.

Ellias nodded and pointed to the map, one thick finger tracing the edge of the forest. “The cordon surrounds the Darkwater on three sides beginning at the northern end in Frayel and running south through western edge of Moorclaire where it turns to run west through the northern tips of Aille and Caisel. From there it turns north through Owmead and Collum before it stops again at the mountains of the northern waste.”

“The Darkwater forest covers too much territory to quarantine effectively, Toria Deel. At sunrise this morning, after King Rymark and I communicated with our fellow kings and queens, I realized it has become mathematically impossible to keep those who desire to enter the Darkwater in check given our current positions.”

Toria nodded in acknowledgement, but not agreement. She knew the boundaries of the forest better than anyone living with the exception of Pellin. And Cesla. She banished that thought from her mind as soon as it appeared. She pointed to the map where the Sundered Hills ran along the western edge of the forest. “This portion of the cordon should be the easiest to guard,” she said. “The border is longer, but the Sundered Hills offer some protection. All Cailin has to do is safeguard the passes between the hills for the length of Collum and Owmead.”

Rymark crossed his arms over his chest. “If only that were true.”

She jerked.

“The corruption of the forest has grown to encompass all of the hills, Toria Deel,” Rymark said, “not just at the southern end. Without the advantage of the terrain, we cannot hold. Already the forces of Collum are thinning, men and women deserting to search the forest for gold and worse.”

A memory, unwelcome and unbidden, rose in her mind. “Aurium,” she breathed.

“Aye,” Ellias said. “My daughter has recovered a few slivers of the forbidden metal from those they’ve fought and killed from the Darkwater.”

Rymark grimaced. “Queen Cailin assessed her situation all too well. With the forbidden metal at stake, it’s only a matter of time before someone gets the clever idea of hauling some serious tools into the forest and mining it in truth.”

Fess pointed to the map. “But if you fall back, you’ve expanded the front you have to man.”

Ellias nodded, but Rymark’s eyes blazed as if Fess had offered him a personal insult. “Don’t you think we know that, boy? The forest is growing. If we don’t fall back, it might swallow our encampment.” Huffing in disgust, he strode to the tent and issued a curt command to one of the men outside. A moment later, a lieutenant in the army of Owmead entered carrying a small tree that had been uprooted.

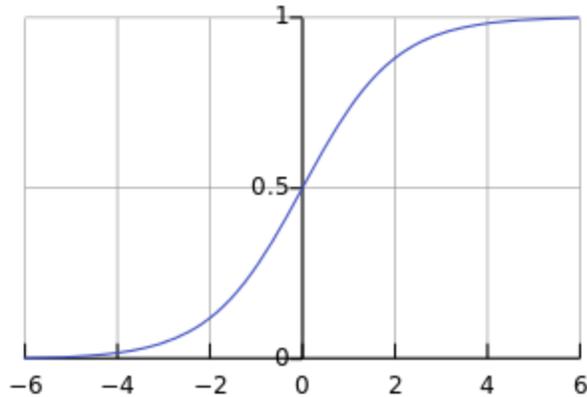
Black spots marred the each of the leaves.

Rymark nodded to Ellias. “It was his idea to survey the boundaries of the forest by planting saplings close to the known boundary.” He sighed. “It was leave or die.”

She waited for a moment, unsure if the quip had been intentional, but Rymark had already turned his attention back to the arcane writing on the parchments. “It took Ellias some time to convince me, but our losses are like a plague.” He shook his head. “Perhaps you should explain, Ellias. I’m more comfortable with tactics and strategy.” He snorted. “As if we had any.”

Toria stifled her surprise at Rymark’s rare show of humility. Ellias sorted through the stack of parchments, his expression thoughtful, until he found one more smudged and yellowed than the rest. “I think this would be the best place to start.”

He pointed to a section of the parchment that contained two horizontal lines with a sinuous curve that joined them at the lower left and ran to the upper right.



“This is a model of the Darkwater’s infection according to the mathematicum,” he said. He put his finger on the curve between the second and third vertical lines. “This is where we’re at now.”

Toria had undertaken some rudimentary studies of the mathematicum a few decades ago when she was last placed in Moorclaire, but her talents ran more toward others than logic and space. Even so, she recognized the curve. “I’m familiar with it,” she said. “The healers call it ‘the plague curve.’ It goes by other names.”

Fess pointed to the first half of the curve where the curve grew progressively steeper from left to right. “I’ve heard merchants talk about this. They called it the usurer’s trap.”

Ellias nodded his approval. “Perceptive and correct. The left hand side of the curve describes that, but to grasp the whole, think of a single moneylender within a small town composed entirely of debtors.”

“Everyone would have to see him sooner or later,” Fess said.

“Exactly,” Ellias nodded. “At first his profits would be fairly small, but they would be growing quickly. He might have two customers the first week and four the week after, but by the third week he would have eight and then sixteen.”

Ellias caught her eye. She knew what would come next. “The usurer might not suspect what must happen. He might commission a grand estate based on his ever-increasing profits. He doesn’t see the problem.”

Fess nodded. “Sooner or later the entire town will be in debt to him. His profits will stop growing when he’s used up the entire population.” He looked back at the curve and Toria saw his face grow pale. “You’re saying the infection of the Darkwater is like that?”

Ellias nodded. “The infection of the forest is like the moneylender and we’re the populace of the town. It’s early yet, but we’re locked in a battle that’s going badly.”

“Can we win?” Toria asked.

Rymark and Ellias exchanged a glance and both men sighed. “The issue is still in doubt, Toria Deel,” Rymark said. “We are still in the early part of the curve and have yet to reach the point of no return.”

Fess pointed to the exact middle of the diagram where a point on the curve lay halfway between the two horizontal lines. “Is that here?”

Rymark’s voice rasped within the tent. “I wish.”

Ellias shook his head. “By that time half our forces are infected. No. To defeat the forest, the poison’s momentum must be halted well before that.” He pulled an artist’s charcoal stick that had been sharpened to a fine point and drew a line that just touched the curve near the left end

where it turned up to grow steeper. “If we reach this point, the war is lost. The momentum behind the infection will be too great to stop.”

“What form has this taken?” Toria Deel asked.

Rymark chewed his lip, angry, before he answered. “Men from our ranks and the rest of the armies have sneaked into the forest to hunt for gold. We have no way to discover who these sentries are until they go insane. If we’re fortunate, we manage to kill them before they cause too many casualties. At some point our forces will be too thin to reliably quarantine the forest.”

“At some point,” Rymark echoed. “Tell them the rest, Ellias. They need to know.”

But the king of Moorclaire shook his head. “There are too many variables. The calculations are not sure.”

“Not sure?” Rymark gaped. “How many times have you and your advisors been wrong so far?”

Ellias sighed. “None.”

“Despite my best tactics and most fervent prayers,” Rymark said. He turned to face her. “Congratulations, Toria Deel. The war has accomplished what Pellin and his brothers strived and failed to do for decades. I’m now a very religious man.”

“Nothing gets a man’s attention,” Fess murmured.

Rymark laughed, harsh, loud. “Like the prospect of death,” he finished.

Instead of joining the king in his amusement, Fess shook his head. “We finish it differently in the urchins.”

“How so?” Rymark asked, still smiling.

“Like a knife in the ribs,” he said.

A portion of Rymark’s grim mirth remained. “This one is honest enough for my tastes, Toria Deel.”

She nodded even as she managed to stifle a sigh. “Do those who venture into the forest strike singly or do they coordinate their attacks?”

“Their strikes are random, Toria Deel,” Ellias said.

“They’re like an alchemist’s experiment gone wrong,” Rymark growled, “explosions of violence at night that kill a squad or more before the one infected can be put down. The deaths are bad,” Rymark growled, “but the impact on morale is worse. Soldiers must trust those they fight alongside to be effective. That trust is waning. When it’s gone entirely, we’re going to have mass desertions on our hands.”

“And what of the army of Cynestol?” Fess asked. “Will that help?”

Ellias pursed his lips, his gaze returning to the chart. He reached out to draw a new horizontal line above the topmost one. “The addition of men will delay the inevitable, but if we cannot find a way to fundamentally change the properties of the curve...”

“Then the north will fall,” Toria said. “Where’s the weakest stretch of the border?”

Rymark considered the map, before answering. He looked unsure.

“Is something the matter, your majesty?” she asked.

He pulled a deep breath. “Months ago I would have told you the least defensible part of the border would be here,” he pointed to the southernmost portion of the Sundered Hills.

“Why is that?” Fess asked.

“Two reasons,” Rymark said. “First, Boclar has never had an overly large standing army, certainly nothing as large as Aille’s. And second, the land here is just rolling hills. They offer cover to approach the forest, but aren’t high or steep enough to deter access. Plus, they’re close

enough to the northern portion of Aille and Caisel. That area is dotted with towns filled with people who would like nothing more than to make a dash into the forest for gold.”

“It sounds like you’re the beneficiary of good fortune,” Fess said, but there was no smile or hint of jesting on his expression.

Rymark nodded, his eyes narrowing. “I don’t trust luck I don’t understand.”

Ellias nodded as well. “Agreed. The guards along that stretch of the border report fewer incursions into the forest than anywhere else.”

Toria looked at Fess. “Send orders to your men that we’ll be coming. Master Fess and I will be leaving at dawn.”

Chapter

Late the following day, before they could depart Rymark's command, Toria felt as much as heard Pellin calling her through the scrying stone she carried. With a nod to Fess, they made for a nearby copse of trees that would shield them from accidental observation. Together they held their stones before them.

"Hear me, Toria Deel," Pellin's voice came from the stone.

"I hear you, Eldest," she said. A heartbeat later, Fess added his assent to hers.

"I am here as well," Brid Teorian's voice announced. "Where have you been, Eldest? I've had half the Servants on the continent scouring every kingdom for you."

"Then it should come as no surprise that I'm currently on the southern continent," Pellin said.

A stream of invective poured from the stone. Fess's brows rose in appreciation. "I haven't heard some of those insults since I left the urchins. The Chief has a very ecumenical vocabulary."

"Are you done?" Pellin asked when the Chief paused to take a breath.

"For now, Eldest, but this isn't done," she snapped. "You have a responsibility to safeguard the forest and I fail to see how it entails going to the southern continent."

"You will," Pellin's voice held notes of confidence Toria had seldom heard before. "With the help of the honored one, I think I've learned how to cure Lord Dura of his vault."

Her heart leapt at the announcement before she caught his phrasing. "Cure, Eldest? Not break?"

"That's impossible," the Chief said.

"I'm surprised to hear you say that," Pellin said. "Don't we say that with Aer all things are possible?"

Toria's heart struggled to find its rhythm as tears gathered in her eyes. "But that means it was always possible. Oh Aer, what have we done? How many thousands have we broken and thrown away? We could have saved them."

Either Pellin had already worked through his grief and culpability, or he'd shouldered enough guilt in his long life that more hardly mattered. Regardless, his voice came through the stone, strong and assured.

"Grieve later, Toria Deel," he said. "Ealdor told me to find what was inside Lord Dura's vault. I think we have the means to do so. I need you and you, Brid Teorian, to get word to him in Cynestol."

The Chief of Servants muttered imprecations, but managed to curtail herself a moment later. "That's just the point, Eldest. Lord Dura is no longer in Cynestol. He's on his way to the forest. He claims he's found a way to summon the fayit to help fight Cesla."

"That's insane," Toria Deel blurted. She never got the chance to explain to the Chief exactly why.

"Yes, well, that's not the worst of it," Teorian said. "According to Queen Earendella, the summoning requires all the kings and queens to be present, except Elania, of course. Evidently, the gift of kings provides him with six pure gifts."

Toria stared at the stone in shock. Of course, it had been right in front of them all along.

"Brilliant," Pellin said. "Wait, what happened to Boclar?"

The Chief of Servants voice grew brittle. "It seems that the king of Caisel staged a raid into the forest to take back his daughter. I'll let them give you the details, but it earned him a vault that Dura broke. I think you can see what happened after that."

Toria leaned toward the stone. "But that would mean he found Chora's heir."

"Yes," the Chief said. "It would mean that. Congratulations, Eldest. Lord Dura has managed to leave a trail of wreckage that will take you centuries to cleanse."

Toria's mind reeled. "Where are Cailin and Brod?" she asked. "Surely, the regent of Collum has more sense than to take the heir to the forest."

"You must be talking about someone else," the Chief's voice grew brittle. "Cailin is as reckless in her own way as Dura. They're on the western edge of the forest. They broke camp this morning, but only managed to make about five leagues."

"Listen," Pellin's voice commanded, and for a moment he sounded like Cesla or Elwin. "You have to get word to Cailin and the rest of the kings and queens immediately to get away from the forest."

"That shouldn't be too hard," the Chief said. "I'm traveling with her." A heavy sigh came through the stone. "I'm too old for this nonsense. Why is it so imperative to get away? The cordon around the forest hasn't reported anything more than occasional skirmishes for weeks now."

Toria's stone grew still and she could sense the Eldest gathering his thoughts. "When we broke Leof's vault, we broke it from inside."

"Who?" Toria asked.

"A dwimor we found outside of Cynestol," Pellin said. "Mark persuaded me not to kill her."

"You left one of those things alive?" the Chief said. "Have you been taking lessons from the reeve, Eldest?"

"You forget yourself, Chief," Pellin snapped. "The defense of the forest is in my hands and if Aer wills, my gift will go to Mark. It was his devotion that saved Leof and allowed us to deliver her from her vault."

Toria didn't speak. She had never heard Pellin assert his authority that way before, not with any of the rulers or heads of the church.

"Your pardon, Eldest?" the Chief said. "Why are we in danger?"

"Because the evil that is held captive in the forest knows we have the tools to defeat it," Pellin said. "Ealdor told me the secret to defeating Cesla was hidden inside Dura's mind. If he can call the rest of the fayit, the knowledge Ealdor placed within his vault will defeat Cesla. The Darkwater knows, Chief. Along with the honored one and another member of the southern Vigil, we fought it for the duration of an entire night within Leof's mind. And we won."

"I will have Cailin get in contact with the other rulers immediately," Brid Teorian said.

"Before nightfall," Pellin said. "Cesla won't wait a day before he strikes. If Dura is correct, then Cesla only needs to capture one of the monarchs to prevent the call to the fayit. Now, if you would be so kind, I need to speak to Toria Deel and Fess alone."

"Speed," the Chief said. "My heart tells me time is not on our side."

Toria paused for a moment, giving the chief time to wrap her shard and put it away, but it was Pellin who spoke first. "Where are you on the task Ealdor gave you?"

Toria glanced at Fess, searching for some sign of condemnation, but he wore an impassive expression as if he had no need for any other. "We were delayed, Eldest," she said. "We came upon the Aille army a hundred leagues south of the forest, held there as a tool for the

Merum church to reassert its power. It took us some time to deliver the army to Rymark's command." She waited for him to speak. When he didn't, she confessed the rest of it. "It was my decision, Eldest. I mistrusted the mission the fayit gave us."

She heard him sigh through the stone. In its own way it carried as much condemnation as a railing accusation. "My heart tells me we are in midst of Cesla's last desperate gamble to be free. Secrecy avails us little at this point. What did Ealdor tell you to do?"

"He told us to find Lelwin and Wag," she said. She would not say commanded.

"That's all?" Pellin asked after a moment.

"Yes, Eldest."

"Do you have any idea where they are?"

"No."

"That answer is unacceptable, Toria Deel," Pellin said. "I don't care if you have to search the memories of every soldier patrolling the forest, I want Lelwin and Wag found. That Ealdor was willing to expend part of himself to give you that information meant we would need it. Have I made myself clear?"

"Yes, Eldest," she said.

"Fess, you will ensure that Toria Deel obeys not only the letter of this order, but the spirit as well. You are a member of the Vigil first, and a holder of a physical gift second."

Fess dipped his head as if Pellin were there in the woods with them. "Yes, Eldest."

The shard of green diamond went silent and tucked it away in her cloak as if she could hide her embarrassment.

"What are your orders, Lady Deel?" Fess asked.

Elanians were known for their fiery temper. She knew that, but the knowledge did nothing to take the heat from her face at being called up short by Pellin. Yet she expected more from herself than to simply mimic the behavior of her countrymen. For the love of Aer, she'd had over a hundred years to learn at least a measure of obedience. Perhaps later.

"My first order is that you shoulder your burden as a member of the Vigil," Fess. "The gift didn't come to you by Bronwyn's design. She only recognized what Aer intended."

The fingers of one hand twitched in an attempt to brush her assertion away. "Chance."

Her tone turned withering. "Don't be childish. You know better. Bronwyn chose you to be her apprentice and then died, purposely, without passing it onto you. You should never have gotten it, but Aer stepped in and brought the gift to you anyway. Do you want me to ask Ellias to calculate the probability of such an event? I have no feel for the mathematicum but I know impossibility when I see it. Aer chose you."

"I didn't want it."

"No one does!" She clenched her teeth. "We only think we do. Then we discover exactly what you have. Do you think you're the first to be disappointed by what you've seen in your fellow man? You wanted to believe they're good. You should have known better."

Struck, he tried to retreat into his stoicism. "Very well, Lady Deel. Your decision to force the Aille army north was a mistake. You chose to expend our time and energy on moving an army whose commander would have died regardless. You should have listened to Ealdor. Besides the fact he's older than you, he occupies a frame of existence we can only guess at. This is the price of your pride."

She nodded, though his challenge rankled. "Better."

"Do you have any other commands, Lady Deel?" his voice imbued her title with mockery.

She chose to ignore it. “Yes. Give me your hand. I’m going to show you something I’ve hidden behind my walls for months. I haven’t let anyone see this, but you will.”

He didn’t move. “Why?”

She shrugged. “I could give you any number of reasons. Why not? We’re nothing more than animated dust and burdens need to be shared. I’m tired of dragging a secret around with me.”

“Why do I feel like none of those are the real reason?” he asked.

“Because you’re insightful,” she said. “The truth is I’m tired of you wallowing in your self-pity and depriving me and the rest of the world of the hope you brought to us. The gift doesn’t make you precious, Fess. You make you precious, just the way Aer made you. Imagine it, a boy who grows up in the urchins who managed to find joy in everything. You have no right to let your self-pity stand in the way of such a gift. Yes, I said gift.”

He laughed at her, but the sound carried no joy, only breath. “Do you think I want to be like this?”

She nodded. “You are choosing this. It might not seem that way to you, but you are. You’ve wallowed in your grief until the tears dried and there was nothing left but self-pity.”

Her words struck him like axe blows bringing down a tree until his expression crumpled. “I don’t know how to get back,” he cried.

“Oh Fess,” she said, enfolding him in her arms and putting her head on his chest. “You were like a breath of wind that captured our hearts. Let us love you.”

“Bronwyn loved me and she died.”

She reached out for his hand. “We all die. Here, let me show you something sad and foolish and funny.” She took his wrist and guided his hand to her cheek. Then she opened the locked door where she’d stored the memory she’d taken such care to keep secret.

She didn’t see the pupils of his eyes dilate as the gift took him, but he grew so still he might have become one of the cedars that sheltered them. When he came out of the delve. He held her, his embrace willing and voluntary. She thought she might cry, but he needed more than that. She let his warmth cover her, a welcome hearth-fire on a cold night.

Then she laughed. “Ridiculous, isn’t it?”

He chuckled. It sounded ghostly, like a man who’d never made the sound before, but it loosened after a moment. “This is funny to you?”

“Elanians are possessed with an ironic and rather tragic sense of humor compared to the other kingdoms,” she said, knowing Fess had to realize that wasn’t the whole truth. He’d delved her. He couldn’t help but know.

“I have so much to learn about courage,” he said, “but less now, than a few moments ago.”

Then the tears did come and she clutched at him until she could laugh again. Pushing away, she started back to the encampment. “Come. We have to pass along Pellin’s warning. Then we’ll need to requisition horses for the ride west.”

“Why west?” Fess asked.

“I think Lelwin and Wag are hiding in the Sundered Hills.”

Chapter

“Why would you think they are there, Toria Deel?” Fess asked her.

She gave him a look of approval. Pellin had ordered him to shoulder his responsibility as a member of the Vigil, an order with which she agreed. That responsibility included such questions. “Kings Ellias and Rymark had a map marked with all of the attacks from those who’d entered the Darkwater, nothing more than skirmishes at his point, but there was a pin marking the location of each one. One portion of the map was noticeably free from those, a section along the southern portion of the Sundered Hills.”

He digested this in silence for a few moments before nodding. “She has Wag with her.”
“Exactly.”

Three days later they hit the southernmost tip of the hills. Together, they had delved every man or woman they could get to at each observation post along the way. Rymark’s orders to kill any man or woman with gold or caught returning from the forest had worked. Only one man had been to the Darkwater. She shivered with the memory of his vault, torn to pieces now along with the rest of his mind.

“We could have tried to heal him,” Fess said.

“Agreed,” she nodded, “but Pellin didn’t tell us how.” She half-expected some circuitous condemnation, but none came. Fess had yet to return to his former self, but his practiced detachment seemed a thing of the past.

“Why didn’t he?”

“I think it was to keep us from attempting such risks. It took Pellin and Igesia, the strongest men in the gift and another to break Leof’s vault. Before we attempt to heal Lord Dura, we need to know more,” she said.

“It keeps coming back to him,” Fess said.

“Yes.” She nodded. “I don’t think I’ve ever been more wrong about someone’s importance in my entire life.”

“Give it time,” Fess said. “You’ve only lived for a century or so.”

They gave the barren hills a wide berth and turned northwest, guiding their horses along the road that ran from the northeast tip of Owmead into Caisel.

“Men,” Toria Deel. Fess pointed. “Soldiers, mostly on foot.”

She waited for her normal eyesight to reveal what his physically enhanced gaze had already seen. When it did, she gasped. “That’s a retreat.”

He shook his head. “There’s no one pursuing them,” he said.

Some threescore men and women were tracking due south, away from the forest in a ragged line. “We need to know the meaning of this,” she said, digging her heels into the flanks of her mount.

“Something’s not right,” Fess said. “I’m not sure what, exactly.”

When the soldiers saw them, seven peeled off from the rest of the group to intercept them. Fess’s hands slid beneath his cloak as Toria rode forward to meet the leader, a man wearing the markings of a sergeant. One arm hung useless, cradled in a dirty sling and a bloody swath of cloth covered a wound in his left thigh.

“Keeping a safe distance costs us nothing, Toria Deel,” Fess said.

She reined in her horse at ten paces, and Fess pulled his mount close enough to be in arm’s reach. “What news?” she called to the leader.

The sergeant limped to a stop, favoring the bandaged leg. "They came boiling out of the forest just north of the Havilah." He shook his head, dazed. "We had no idea so many had managed to sneak into the forest."

Toria leaned over to whisper to Fess. "It's as Ellias said. Cesla showed us what we expected to see."

"Where did they strike, sergeant?" she asked.

"Right for the main encampment. The patrol sentries never knew what hit them. The watch fires along miles of the cordon were out before we knew they were there." His eyes showed the whites all around at the memory. "Then they were among us, fighting like gifted." He pulled a shuddering breath and broke from her gaze to peer at the rolling hills surrounding them. "There's some say the evil's gotten loose from the Darkwater and walks among us."

The men and women behind the sergeant nodded their agreement, gradually spreading out to better hear the tale. Fess stiffened at her side as he tried to keep his gaze everywhere at once. "They were after someone in your camp, sergeant," she said.

Before could complete her question, Fess pulled her toward him, his grip crushing despite the gloves he wore. "Toria Deel, how many soldiers do you see?"

She tried to pull her arm away before the import of his question came to her. "Six."

"There are nine!"

His sword flew from its sheath, came whistling toward her and for an instant she watched it come for her, staring as her mind worked to understand. Then with a wrench that made his joints pop, he twisted and the strike changed direction so the flat of the blade hit her horse.

Motion exploded beneath her and within the soldiers. The horse leapt and she felt the displaced air of a dagger as it brushed her hair. She pitched sideways in the saddle, clutched at the horse's mane to keep from being dragged.

One of her legs slipped from the stirrup and she clung to the side of her horse as bounded away. Hooves thundered near her head. Ignoring them, she worked to catch a glimpse of Fess, but everything kept moving, reducing her vision to flashes of steel and crimson. Screams and curses filled the air, following ropes of blood that erupted from everywhere.

Growling, she strained to kick her other foot free from the stirrup, but the horse kept moving against her. Another dagger came whistling her way. She watched it tumble end over end for her torso. She couldn't move.

Her mount bucked against her weight, twisting, and the dagger sailed past. Cursing, she kicked free of the stirrup and plummeted toward the ground away from the bucking horse. She tried to roll with the impact, but she landed poorly. Something in her shoulder her shoulder popped and she gasped, working to draw breath. Her lungs wouldn't inflate. A shadow blocked the light of day, but when she rolled, it was just a cloud.

Her vision narrowed to a tunnel before she managed to catch her breath. When she got her feet beneath her, Fess stood with his back to her, the point of his sword at the ready position.

But everyone else was down.

She walked toward him, noted the tension he still carried.

"Toria, stay back," he yelled. "I can't be sure all of them are dead."

Her shoulder hurt too much and he carried too much fear for her to correct him for using only her first name. Dwimor had hidden within a group of wounded, and more than one. She stopped, was about to order him to return to her, before she thought better of it.

There seemed to be no immediate danger and Fess had trained enough with Allta and Bolt to learn the rudiments of being a guard. Now, he needed to learn how to lead. “What should we do?”

“What are your orders?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I hurt my shoulder when I fell and I can’t see the dwimor.”

He backed away from the men and women scattered across the ground and then circled to his left. “Stay behind me. I’ll check each of them.” He pulled a dagger with his free hand and crouched by the first body, pressing his fingers to the throat. “Dead, but I can’t tell if this was a dwimor or a soldier.”

“Check the eyes,” she called, “and tell me the color.”

“They’re brown.”

“A dwimor’s eyes are clear,” she said. “It has something to do with their true memories being emptied.” She tried to raise her arm, but pain lanced through her shoulder. “Pellin could explain it better.”

He moved to the next body, checking for a pulse before he thumbed open an eye. He started, and she jumped, her heart skipping a pair of beats, before he peered more closely. “Kreppa,” he breathed, “but that’s strange to see.”

The next three bodies, two soldiers and one dwimor, were dead as well, but when he knelt to check the next body a pulse, a groan drifted up from the grass. Without pausing to wait, Toria stepped toward them. “The eyes?” she asked.

“Green,” Fess said.

She paused to search for her horse. It had stopped about a hundred paces away and was now grazing contentedly. “I’ll get my pack.

Fess cocked his head to glance at the wounds. “He’s not going to live, Toria Deel.”

She swallowed against her disappointment. “I can make him more comfortable.” She turned away.

Violence exploded behind her. “Down!” Fess screamed.

Steel rang beside her head and she saw light glinting off a flash of daggers. She dove forward into the grass. Pain shot through her injured shoulder and she gasped. Spots danced in her vision. No! She fought to stay conscious, but pain blackened the landscape.

Silence descended as awareness faded. She fought to stay conscious but the long fall into darkness took her.

She came to moments or hours later to the whisper of wind through the grass. Steps. She heard steps coming toward her. Pushing with her good arm, she managed to roll over, but she couldn’t get her feet beneath her. Gripping the hilt of her dagger with her good hand, she hid the blade behind her forearm. If Aer and luck were with her, she would get one chance at the dwimor, an enemy she wouldn’t see.

Fess’s head moved into view above the waving stalks of grass. “Are you well?”

Sobs of relief poured from her and she shook her head. “I’ve dislocated my shoulder.” When he knelt by her to take her arm, she stopped him. “In a moment. What about the others?”

“They’re all dead, but for the man I told you about earlier and he’s only a few moments from it himself. The third dwimor waited until your back was turned to strike at you, Toria Deel.” He paused. “It chose to make an attempt on you even though I was closer.”

“I heard steel,” she said.

Fess nodded. “The dwimor threw a dagger at your back. I don’t know if the throw would have landed, but I had a dagger in hand and managed to knock it aside with a throw of my own.”

A hint of a smile, a real smile, played at the corners of his mouth that made her want to weep. "Best throw I ever made in my life."

She laughed, wanted to savor this moment of his return to joy, but time was slipping from them. She shifted and sudden pain painted the world in charcoal. "You must delve the dying man. Above all we need whatever information he has about the forest before he dies." A thought struck her. "Fess! You must leave his mind before he dies!"

Toria slipped into a semi-conscious state, drifting there where time either dragged or raced by in increments tethered to her pain. Her shoulder felt wrong, the unnatural pull of tendons urging her to push it back into the socket, but she would need Fess's help.

After hours or seconds, his shadow blotted out the sun where she lay in the grass. "My shoulder's dislocated," she said. "You're going to have to put it back in the socket. I can't ride like this."

He shook his head. "I don't know how to do that."

"I'll tell you," she said, "but you'll need to see the shoulder to know when it's back in the socket. Hopefully, I haven't broken anything." She reached up to untie her cloak and unbutton the first few buttons of her shirt. But when she shifted to bare her shoulder, pain lanced across her vision as black lightning. "You'll have to cut away my shirt."

When he didn't move, she looked up at his face to see him struggling visibly with his discomfort. "What's the matter?"

"I'm afraid of intruding on your modesty, Toria Deel."

She started to laugh, but the pain made her gasp. "Fess, this isn't a courtship or a seduction, and if you'd ever seen the sculptures that decorate the halls in Elania, you would know that modesty is not much of a national concern." She forced him to meet her gaze. "I can't put my own shoulder back in place. If you see anything that makes you uncomfortable, look away."

He nodded and cut away her shirt until he could move her arm freely, using her cloak to keep the rest of her torso covered. "What do I do?"

"Do you see the indentation where my shoulder should be?"

"Yes."

"When that's gone, we'll know it's back in place. Move my arm out to the side until it makes a right angle with my body. Then pull gently until the socket slides back into place." She licked her lips. "I might scream when you do. No. Let me correct that. I'm going to scream, but keep pulling until it slides back into place."

With his right hand he grabbed her wrist, but before he moved her arm, he let go and stripped his glove from his left hand and took a moment to survey the landscape, his eyes searching for threats.

"Fess, what are you doing?"

He didn't answer, instead putting his left hand against her bare ribs. Numbness, spread through her shoulder at his touch and she watched his pupils dilate as he delved her. Her arm shifted at her side and she felt a tug that slowly increased in pressure. Above her, Fess's breath came in short pants. Then there was a gentle popping sound that she heard within her body as well as out and Fess released her arm.

His breath came in ragged gasps.

Gently, she shifted her arm until it was cradled across her chest. Still, there was no pain, only a mild sense that something in her shoulder was different. "I have another shirt in my pack. Most of the pain should be gone now that the shoulder is back in the socket." When he didn't

move she reached across with her good arm to pat his leg. “Fess, I’m going to have to feel this sooner or later.”

With a nod he let go and red flared in her mind. A cry tore its way past the clench of her teeth before she could stop it, but after a moment, she adjusted. “Perhaps later would have been better.”

“I’ll get your horse,” he said.

He stood with his back to her while she worked her way gingerly into a whole shirt then helped her to fashion a sling. “What did you see in the soldier’s mind?”

“Their outpost was wiped out.” He shook his head. “Men and women with vaults poured past the watch fires and hit them. Before they could signal for reinforcements, they were gone. When reinforcements arrived the next morning they sent those too injured to fight back to get healing.”

“Was there any hint of his mind about Lelwin or Wag?” she asked. Had she been wrong?

“Perhaps. There’s a spot in the Sundered Hills that the soldier feared, a defile where they found bodies of villagers.”

“How far is it?” she asked. The thought of riding made her nauseous.

“About a day’s ride from the outpost.”

Chapter

Two days later, they hit the outpost after encountering increasingly frequent patrols. Above her on the rise of a long hill from which she could see the Darkwater sitting like a threat of plague on the horizon, a group of rectangular tents sat with the picket line and the latrine stationed to the south, downwind.

“Look,” Fess pointed at the palisade surrounding the perimeter. “There are spots all along the defenses that have been patched. The attackers tore right through it.”

She nodded. “It’s like Bas-solas. The evil of the forest provides those who go there the semblance of strength.” She shook her head. “But this attack doesn’t make any sense. Once used, those attackers are so sorely injured that they’re useless.”

“Perhaps the attack was a ruse, Lady Deel.”

“How so?” she asked.

“The dwimor we discovered on the way here ignored me. It never realized I was young enough to see it. It looked right past me and made a throw for you.”

“You think Cesla knew we were headed this way?”

He nodded. “Which means there’s a traitor in Rymark’s camp.”

She searched for a hole in his reasoning, but couldn’t find one. “I have to get word to Rymark,” she said. “It will be a simple matter for him to find them. There aren’t that many officers he holds in confidence.”

Fess shook his head. “How so? There’s no one there delve them.”

She smiled. “King Rymark, for all his faults, is anything but stupid. I would imagine he would immediately arrange for several sensitive communications to be disseminated.”

He nodded. “If he can control who’s present when he orders them he can find his spy.”

The sun still stood a few hands above the horizon and Toria breathed a sigh of relief as they stopped just outside the makeshift fence. They had time. A pair of guards came forward, their halberds shouldered and expressions serious.

Toria handed her reins to the surprised man. “Who’s in command?”

The man saluted. He might not know her, but he recognized authority, however it might be concealed. “Lieutenant Dreogan.”

When he didn’t move, she gave him a level stare. “Get him for me.”

The man stuttered his apologies and ran toward the tents. A few moments later, a thin whippet-like man came her way. She pulled the letter Rymark had given her and handed it to him, watching as his lips framed the contents.

The lieutenant frowned. “It just says you’ll be inspecting the men.”

Toria nodded. “At a time of my choosing, Lieutenant, and that time is now.”

“Assemble the men,” the lieutenant ordered the sentry.

In a matter of minutes, several rows of men were assembled, staring ahead with the stoic impassivity she’d come to associate with career soldiers. Or maybe it was boredom. “Lieutenant, arrange the men based on how recently they’ve patrolled the Sundered Hills a day’s ride from here.”

“Lady Deel,” Fess said after the lieutenant stepped away. “Do you mean for us to delve all these men? Lady Bronwyn told me it was possible to delve no more than ten or so a day before exhaustion set in.”

Hearing the name of the dead Vigil member, a fixture in Toria’s life for the last hundred years, struck her like an unexpected blow to an injury. “She was correct, Fess. The limitations of

our gift require judicious application. In this case, it's fairly simple. Rymark and Ellias said the evil of the Darkwater had been behaving randomly. Now we find that it's not."

"Do you believe that?" Fess asked.

"I'm not sure," she admitted, "but it's all we have to work with. A year ago, I would have said with certainty that the longer it had been since someone had been to the forest without going insane, the less likely it was they'd been infected."

Her apprentice and guard nodded. "You're going to delve the most recent patrols since they're the most likely to be infected."

"Exactly," she said. "And you are going to delve a random selection of men from the older patrols. While I search for the corruption of the forest, I want you to see if you can find any other hints of Lelwin or Wag in the vicinity."

The lieutenant returned a moment later. "They're ready for your inspection."

With a gesture of acknowledgment, she accompanied the lieutenant to the front of the lines. She stepped to the first man, a short, blocky veteran from Owmead with enough scars on his face to show he'd survived at least one prior war. He stood at attention holding the shaft of his halberd with the butt ground against the inside of his left foot. She made a pretense of examining him and then the weapon, letting her fingers brush against the back of his hand.

Mere seconds later she emerged from the delve. The sergeant in front of her could hardly be considered a paragon of virtue, but there was no vault in his mind and no knowledge of anyone else in the company having been to the forest. She moved to the next man, a tall man hardly thicker than his weapon, and repeated the process.

The exercise of her gift showed her the same result and she took the energy to probe a bit more deeply. When she emerged, she turned to the lieutenant as if taken by a random thought. "How are you ensuring none of these men are venturing into the Darkwater, lieutenant?"

He stiffened at the question and stopped just short of saluting her again. "The orders came down from the king himself, my lady. The commanders at each outpost would be held personally responsible. If any man of my command ventures into the forest, it's me that pays the price. The previous commander of this outpost failed in that duty."

She nodded. "Yes, lieutenant, I'm familiar with King Rymark's predilections. He's quite insistent on discipline within the ranks, but exactly how did you ensure none of your men went to the forest?"

The lieutenant nodded. "I check the bunks every night at a random time, my lady. If a man's not in it, it's his life."

"And how many have you killed?"

His eyes narrowed and he gave a short quick nod. "Only one, my lady. After that, no one ventured from their bed after nightfall except to relieve the men at the watch fire."

"What about deserters, lieutenant?"

He swallowed. "Four. I sent out patrols to search for them. If they've gone into the forest, they haven't come back out again."

She turned away to delve the next man in line, the lieutenant following. She stumbled coming out of it, and not for the first time she envied Fess his physical gift that allowed him to double the number of times she could use the gift.

"You have no other explanation for why this portion of the cordon is so quiet?" she asked.

The lieutenant shook his head. "No, Lady Deel."

“Very well,” she said. At the back of the formation Fess continued the pretense of inspecting the men. She turned to head back to their horses. Nothing. Aside from the occasional villager they’d caught during the first days of the cordon, none of these men had seen anything. Of course, they’d only been here a day, sent from an outpost a few miles farther north.

“I and my guard will stay here tonight,” she informed him. “Please have one of your men tend our horses. We’ll leave at first light.”

Fess finished his nominal inspection and returned to find her sifting through the few potions she carried in her pack. The pain in her shoulder had intensified throughout the day, though she couldn’t be sure if that was due to the ride or if she’d broken it in the fall.

“We’re staying here?” he asked.

“I need rest,” she said. “Tomorrow, we’ll head for the defile that seems to have everyone so scared.”

“Are we safe here?” he asked.

She considered the question before answering. “I believe so, at least for the present. We’ve delved most of the men and have no evidence of a vault and I don’t believe Cesla has so many men or women at his command that he can afford to throw another attack at us.”

He dipped his head, though whether her explanation satisfied him, she couldn’t tell. “I saw something during the inspection.”

“What was it?”

“I delved the cook,” he said.

She pursed her lips. “Why would you do that? He never leaves the camp.”

He shrugged. “Intuition? Whimsy? I’m not sure, but he was one of the few that survived the attack. Somebody’s been stealing food from this outpost.”

“Does he know whom?”

He almost smiled, she would have sworn to it. “No, but his memories of the food stores carry a scent, something the cook dismissed, but I think I recognized it.” Now he did smile.

“Dog, or more precisely, Wag.”

“He’s here?”

At his nod, she had to fight the impulse to mount her horse. Impatience tugged at her. “It’s simple enough to test. We’ll head toward the defile and the forest at first light.”

She remembered forcing herself to eat in the privacy of the tent she’d been assigned with Fess, but had no memory of completing the meal or of laying down to sleep. Nonetheless, when she woke the next morning, she saw Fess standing watch with his sword in his hand, facing the opening of the tent as if he expected an attack at any moment.

“Didn’t you sleep?”

He shook his head. “No. I thought it best to wait until there are fewer people.” His shoulders lifted a fraction before they settled again. “As well, I checked the cook’s stores a few times during the night to see if Wag or Lelwin were there.”

Vigil guards had always confounded her. Their unswerving loyalty and willingness to regularly drive themselves beyond normal human endurance daunted her. “You have to sleep sometime.”

“I know. If we find Lelwin and Wag, I’ll be more than happy to let them stand guard while I rest. I’ve readied the horses. I thought it would be a good idea to pack extra food for Lelwin and Wag. I took the liberty of paying the cook from your purse.”

He helped her into her saddle and fixed the reins so that she could manage with one hand. They set out toward the rising sun. “The soldier’s memory of the defile was less than confident,” Fess said. “How will we find them?”

“I’m hoping that if we venture close enough to them, they’ll find us,” she said. “A sentinel can recognize scents over absurd distances. I think Wag and Lelwin will come to us.”

“That’s assuming they wish to be found,” Fess said.

She understood the mournful tone in his voice without explanation. Lelwin might have no desire to surrender her vengeance. “Yes.”

Five hours later with the sun at its zenith, Fess reined in his horse to point at yet another narrow canyon that led east through the hills. “There,” he said. “The soldier’s memory contained something very like that stand of trees at the entrance to the defile.”

She tried not to get her hopes up. This would be the third such defile they would search. The first two had been barren of any life except for scrub and grass growing where dust had gathered.

They cantered toward the opening and she veered toward the trees, urging her horse forward until she sat beneath the branches. She reached out to strip a branch of its leaves, examining them in the palm of her hand. “They’re healthy,” she said, letting them fall to the ground. “Though it’s impossible to say how long they’ll stay that way. If we must, we can camp here tonight without fear of the Darkwater taking us.”

The walls of the canyon blocked the sun and the contrast brought gooseflesh to her skin. At a nod from Fess, they dismounted to lead the horses through the narrow defile, hardly wide enough for them to walk abreast. Then the smell hit her, the cloying smell of rotting meat. At first it was only a hint, but the wind shifted and it became a hammer to her senses, strong enough to taste as well as smell. She bent double, vomiting as thousands of memories within her mind broke free for an instant.

She was herself, delving a farmer who’d killed his entire household then lived with the remains, unaware that he was the murderer. She was a sergeant in Owmead’s army from eighty years ago, a grizzled veteran whose soul screamed in agony at the sight of the dead littering the field in the Vale of Blood. She was a healer, powerless to stop a plague that had raged out of control in Caisel fifty years before. With a mental wrench that brought tears, she pushed the memories away, locking them behind their doors.

“Torja Deel, can you hear me?”

She blinked her eyes clear and nodded. “Smell is the most...evocative of the senses,” she said. “Its links into our memories are the strongest and can be the most difficult to control. Too many of the memories I have stored are linked to the smell of death. They overwhelmed me for a moment.”

“There are bodies ahead,” she said as they continued their advance. “And more than a few I think.”

He nodded. “For any villagers seeking gold in the forest, it would be enough to make them choose another route.”

“Yes,” she said, “if that was Lelwin’s intention. I think she would be more likely to lure them here and dispose of the bodies.”

She watched his expression and for a moment it twisted as though he meant to argue her grim assessment, but then the rictus of his mouth relaxed into lines of resignation. “So what’s happening here?”

“I won’t pretend to knowledge I don’t have. Regardless of the bodies or the reason behind them, Ealdor’s admonition remains.”

They turned a corner at that moment and stopped. “What was it you were saying about remains?” Fess asked.

Ahead of them bodies were scattered, in some places stacked high enough to fill the defile. For a moment they appeared to shift impossibly within her vision until she realized it was the fluttering of black wings she saw, vultures gorging themselves. What the birds didn’t cover, flies did and the buzzing sound worked at the walls of her mind, as if it tried to pry her memories loose.

Fess threw his arm across his face against the stench and pointed. “There’s a narrow path through them. These were placed here, Toria Deel.”

Trying not to breathe, she opened her pack and lifted a stoppered bottled of spirits loose along with two lengths of bandaging cloth. Pouring the thin liquid across them, she handed one to Fess and put the other against her nose and mouth. “It won’t block all the smell and it will probably make us a bit light-headed, but at least it will allow us to pass through.”

They picked their way through the improvised charnel house, Fess waving his sword at the flies and vultures that showed too much interest until they came clear some thirty paces later. Upwind of the corruption, she lowered the cloth and tested the air, then breathed in relief.

“Did you notice the wounds?” Fess asked her.

She shook her head. The air itself had been so foul she felt as if she needed to bathe. “I tried not to.”

His eyes narrowed in thought. “The few bodies that I recognized as women all had their throats torn out.”

“Wag,” she said. “I’ve only seen a sentinel kill twice in my hundred years with the Vigil. They strike with terrifying speed and ferocity and almost always for the throat.”

Fess accepted this information with aplomb. “The men died from dagger or sword wounds,” he said. “All of them.”

“She’s claiming them,” Toria said. How could she heal that depth of hatred?

After a hundred paces the narrow canyon twisted, running northeast. Busy with picking her way across the gravel and stone on the floor, she wouldn’t have seen the sapling that had been placed in a niche in the sheer walls if it hadn’t been in direct sunlight. “Look,” she pointed.

“It’s a tree,” Fess said.

“It’s a bation sapling,” Toria replied. “They can take root almost anywhere, but you don’t see them this close to the forest.” She searched for words. “It’s almost as though they don’t like it.” She knelt to inspect it. “And someone was careful to place it where it could grow.” She touched the ground beneath the sapling, careful not to disturb it. The earth was moist and loose. “Somebody brought dirt here for it from outside the defile.” She looked up and saw Fess nod. “Lelwin’s here,” she said.

“And she’s keeping watch on the boundaries of the forest to make sure it doesn’t take her unaware,” he said. “So at least part of Lelwin is in her right mind. I hope it’s the part that recognizes us as friends.”

Chapter

Toria continued to lead her horse behind Fess through the narrow walls of the canyon, the distance marked by the presence of bation saplings that had been placed at intervals. There were no more bodies, but there were often dark splotches of black where blood had dried on the rocks.

“Fess,” Toria called. “Stop.”

When he looked back at her she pointed to a sapling just above eye level that managed to catch a bit of sunlight. Most of the leaves were splotchy with dark spots. A few were completely black. “I think we passed her.”

He looked at the leaves. “Hopefully.” He gave the walls of the canyon a sour look then glanced overhead. “There must be a cave or a crevice deep enough for them to hide in nearby.” He shook his head. “I have flint and steel but I didn’t bring torches.”

She grabbed the sapling. It came away in her hand almost without effort. “This will do for a short while if we wrap the bandages we used before around it. Now we just need to find her hiding spot.”

They walked past it twice before Fess noted a spot in the canyon wall where the shadows appeared just deep enough to hide a cave. He went so far as to put his hand out. When it disappeared into the shadow up to his shoulder, he backed away. “I think this is it.”

She handed him the makeshift torch and he put it on the ground and wrapped the spirt-soaked bandages around a knob on the truck. With quick strokes of his dagger, he lopped off the branches then lit the torch with a pair of strikes with his flint and steel.

“It’s too narrow for the horses,” he said.

They weighted the reins with a pair of rocks and entered the darkness.

It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the guttering light of the torch.

“Bones,” Fess said. He knelt and retrieved a discolored splinter of bone from the floor then sniffed it. “Chicken.”

“Go away.”

There’d been no warning, no sound or movement prior to the voice coming from the dark. Toria tried to peer past the sphere of light cast by the torch, but nothing but rock and darkness were visible. The voice had been guttural, hoarse, the voice of someone who hadn’t spoken in a long time, a voice impossible to identify.

“Lelwin?” She and Fess edged forward.

“Go away,” the voice repeated, “if you want to live.” The gravel tone of the voice cleared enough to be recognized.

Toria edged forward. “Lelwin, Come out into the light.”

Laughter bounced from the rock. “Light is the dream that vanishes with the coming of the dark, but no matter how much light you kill, more always comes. You can kill and kill and kill until the color of blood has leached into your hands like dye and the smell of it has seeped into your skin, but more dark comes. Inside and outside, more dark comes.”

Lelwin’s voice dropped into a sibilant whisper. “More dark comes,” she repeated over and over again.

Toria edged forward to the limit of Fess’s torch, but Lelwin stayed beyond reach of the light.

“If your purpose is to offer us up as an easy target, Toria Deel,” Fess said, “you couldn’t find a better way than to have us stand in this puddle of light. If she throws a dagger, I won’t have enough time to block it.”

“If she truly meant us harm she would have attacked us already. She needs our help.” She reached out to grab Fess’s arm, urging him forward.

“I said to go away!” Lelwin screamed.

Toria flinched at the impression of movement in the dark then curled, trying to cover her head and torso. Steel clattered against the floor of the cave, the ring of a dagger followed by a second. “Let go of me.”

A low growl came from the darkness and the sounds of struggle, the sound of blows landing. “Let go!”

Instead of moving forward, Fess retreated, his free arm guiding Toria to a spot behind him and they worked their way backward to the entrance of the cave. Toria emerged into wan sunlight that failed to touch the bottom of the defile, but still managed to hurt her eyes. Fess followed, tossing the torch to one side, his hands ready.

Emerging after, Wag came, dragging a figure that struggled and cursed and fought, but try as she might, Lelwin couldn’t free her arm from the sentinel’s mouth. Wag released her then sat on his haunches, filling the entrance to the cave, preventing Lelwin’s retreat.

The former urchin curled on the ground, hiding her eyes from the light. “It isn’t real,” she said. “No matter how much it hurts, it isn’t real.”

Toria stripped the glove off her good arm and knelt, half expecting Fess or Wag to protest, but they merely watched. The gift took her and the walls of the narrow canyon faded from awareness as she dropped into Lelwin’s mind.

A moment later she emerged. “Oh, Lelwin,” she whispered. “What have you done to yourself?” She looked up to see Fess waiting. “You are part of the Vigil, as Pellin said. Delve her.”

He shook his head. “She knows me, Toria Deel and what my touch means. And I am a man. Would you inflict this last indignity on her?”

She nodded, but inside, her heart was slowly tearing in two. “Does not a surgeon cut through healthy flesh to remove what is unhealthy?”

Fess nodded. “Did Iosa, Aer’s son, not say ‘I will shelter the guttering flame and bind the wounded heart?’”

Toria nodded. “That is my point, Fess. If Lelwin is to obtain healing, she must learn that not all men are evil, and that a touch may be used for good.” She nodded to the figure, curled on the ground. “Better you than any other.”

Fess swallowed. “Have you done such a thing, Toria Deel?”

At her nod, he shook his head, not in judgment, but in sympathy. “Is this what it means to be part of the Vigil, to have to be willing to sacrifice yourself over and over again for the sake of others?”

“Yes, that is exactly what it means.”

Too many thoughts flickered behind his eyes for her to pick any of them out. “There are countless souls in the north,” he said. “Bronwyn’s gift went free. Why me?”

“Because Aer knew you could bear the burden,” Toria said. “There’s a time for reflection, Fess, but this isn’t it.”

He knelt, stripping off his glove and put his hand on Lelwin's head. Some instinct must have told the girl of his touch, because she sobbed and flinched as though he'd branded her. A moment later she rolled away, screaming.

"NO!"

She came to a crouch, gripping a dagger so that her knuckles blanched.

"What did you see?" Toria asked him.

Fess sighed. "She has a vault, a scroll that lies beneath the river of her memories."

Toria nodded, impatient. "Yes, yes, but what did you see in her memories?"

He looked at her, his gaze panning back and forth as he sifted through her memories.

"The cave," he said. "It goes under the forest."

"Far under," she said, "if her memories can be trusted." She sighed. "That's a very large 'if.' Her scroll is huge."

"How does this help us?" Fess asked.

She shook her head. "I don't know, but that Ealdor must have known what would happen with Lelwin is beyond doubt. There are only so many coincidences I can encounter before I have to acknowledge his prescience."

"But the cave is useless to us, Toria Deel," Fess said. "If her memories are correct it took her three days to come beneath the center of the forest." He lifted his hands in defeat. "She has a vault."

"The vault is dark," she said, "and large, but it's not black."

He shook his head. "I don't know what that means."

She sighed. The blame for Lelwin's fault didn't rest on her, but there was no escaping her responsibility that led up to their capture at Treflow. "When someone, especially someone young experiences horror, their mind will often take those memories and shut them away. This is why we refer to the black scrolls within those unfortunates as a vault. It's a hiding place where they've locked part of their past away." She shook her head as she gazed at Lelwin's curled form. "But it doesn't work, not really. The mind and the body might forget the injury, but the spirit knows. The spirit always knows." She lifted her head to catch Fess's gaze. "Lelwin no longer remembers the horror inflicted upon her on our trip north. She only knows her need to kill any man she sees and that their touch is danger."

"Can we break her vault without killing her?" Fess asked.

Toria nodded. "Of course we can. She's the one who made it, and it carries no eldritch power like a vault from the Darkwater, but that would be a living death for her."

"Why?"

"Because in destroying the vault we would forever place those memories beyond Lelwin's ability to heal." She nodded at the girl curled in the dirt. "We would doom her to live like this for the rest of her life, her memories fractured, clouded with bloodlust."

The sun inched lower, casting the canyon in purple light. They would have to leave soon. Her gaze fell on Wag where he sat on his haunches, guarding the entrance to the cave. "Healing for Lelwin will take time and will have to wait, but perhaps there's another way to confirm her memories."

She stepped over to Wag. His eyes, a light gray of a cloudy sky in winter, watched her with that almost human intelligence. She put her hand on the bristly fur of his head and fell into his mind, so much more than an ordinary dog's.

"Greetings, mistress," Wag said. "How is master? Will we hunt together soon?" An image of Lord Dura came with the question.

She started at the tone so that she almost came out of the delve. *“Greetings, Wag,”* she answered, mirroring his formality. *“I think you will hunt together again quite soon. Thank you for defending the forest from those who would try to enter it.”* She gave him the memory of the bodies piled in the defile.

“Thank you, mistress,” he said. His response carried the impression that he’d dipped his head in the canine equivalent of a bow. *“But those we killed weren’t coming into the forest. They were leaving it. Lelwin claimed most of the man-things for herself. We thought it best to put them where those entering the forest might see them and think better of it.”*

“Wag, I saw the image within Lelwin’s mind of this cave. She remembers it extending down beneath the ground and to the very heart of the Darkwater. Is this true?”

The equivalent of a dog’s shrug came across the bond. *“It may be, mistress. There were no scents of danger farther into the cave, so I did not prevent her explorations. The pack is forbidden from entering the forest. I had no sire or dam to ask, so I thought it best not to pass the boundary.”*

“Why did you come north with Lelwin?” she asked.

“The city is a place for the two-legged pack,” Wag replied. *“This one was with the master’s pack and promised the hunt.”*

“Did you tell the master you were leaving?”

An emotion that was not quite amusement came through the link. *“On the lope north, I’ve noticed the man-things with their partings. They attach much ceremony to it.”*

“Thank you, Wag,” she said and lifted her hand from his fur.

“We have a decision to make,” she said to Fess. “Wag can’t confirm if her memories are true.”

He glanced at the cave in the dying light. “Which leaves us in the position of having to interpret Ealdor’s intent. He told us to find Lelwin and Wag.”

She sighed. “But he didn’t tell us why. Nothing is ever easy.”

Fess shrugged. “I’ve known that ever since I became an urchin.”

The last of the sunlight left the floor of the canyon, moving from Lelwin’s curled form to drift up the rock walls like a dying hope. When the light left her, she straightened, uncurling before standing to regard the pair of them with assurance, but without recognition.

“That you’re here in daylight tells me you’re not from the forest,” she said, “but that you’re here at all means you’ve passed the bodies.” She pulled her dagger then flipped it so that she held it by the blade, ready to throw. “So you’re either hunting gold or guarding the Darkwater. If your answer doesn’t convince me, I’ll kill you,” she said to Fess.

His gaze never shifted, but he pitched his voice to carry to Toria who stood behind him. “Why doesn’t she recognize us?”

“Her vault is open,” she said. “This is the reason behind its size. Lelwin has created a new personality to protest herself.”

“Don’t use that name!” Lelwin hissed.

“What name would you have us use?” Toria asked.

“I am Drifan,” Lelwin said.

“That means ‘hunter.’”

Lelwin gave her a single nod “And it fits me, as you will see.”

“We’re here to guard the forest Drifan,” Toria said, “as are you.”

“What proof can you offer?”

In front of her, Fess shifted his weight to the balls of his feet, his posture coiled. "First," Toria answered quickly, "we are present here at the last light of day. We couldn't have come from the forest so quickly."

Lelwin nodded, but maintained her throwing grip on the dagger. "I concede that much is true, but perhaps you're here seeking gold."

"And ignore the bodies piled across the floor of the defile as a warning?" Toria asked.

Lelwin's shoulders curled a fraction then relaxed. "Greed bleed's the sense from a man," she said, "or a woman." She brought her arm back, ready to throw.

Toria lifted her hands, the fingers spread. "If we were hunting gold in the forest you wouldn't be seeing us. We were already past you, Lelwin."

"Don't call me that!" Her arm snapped forward and the blade leapt for Toria like lightning. It came spinning The hilt, Toria prayed, let me get hit by the hilt.

Movement flashed from the side, nothing more than a blur. Lelwin's dagger clattered off to the side.

Lelwin's eyes narrowed in disbelief. "He can't possibly do that."

"Unless he's gifted." She worked with her one good arm to free her purse and tossed it to Lelwin. "Feel the weight, Drifan and look inside. There's gold. I have no need to pan the streams of the Darkwater and Fess. We're here to guard it." She pointed over Lelwin's shoulder. "A few score paces past your cave there's a bation sapling whose leaves mark the edge of the Darkwater's corruption. You placed it on a shelf of rock to catch the sun. All the leaves show at least some of the disease, but those to the east, nearest the forest, are black."

Lelwin lowered her arm. "They'll be coming," she said, "but we have a few moments."

"I need to know about the cave, Drifan," Toria said. "How far does it extend into the Darkwater?"

For the first time since she'd adopted Drifan's personality, Lelwin appeared doubtful. "It comes to an end. I know this because the air is still and old, but I never came to it. I carried enough torches for two days. When I burned through half of them, I came back." She shook her head.

Curiosity and disappointment fought for Toria's attention, but she pushed them aside. "How long were you in the cave?"

Lelwin's brows narrowed. "It's as I said, two days."

"And you departed at sunset," Toria said.

"How did you know that?"

Toria shook her head, refusing to answer. Telling Lelwin's alternate personality would only anger her. Instead she motioned to Fess who came back to her. Keeping their gaze on Lelwin, they stepped away. "The night passed on her while she was beneath the forest, but she doesn't carry the Darkwater's vault."

He nodded. "If her memories are true, Toria Deel."

"They are," she nodded. "Wag's memories confirm them."

"No," Fess said, "Wag's memories confirm that she was gone for two days, not that she was within the boundary of the forest." He shrugged. "Even so. What are we supposed to do?"

She lifted her hands. "Why ask me, Fess? You know as much as I. Bronwyn loved reading children's rhymes and stories." When he nodded, she went on. "Did she ever tell you the story of the man who tried to escape his destiny?"

"Several times. 'He met his death on the road he took to escape it.' I never liked it."

She almost laughed. "We have that in common then. It's impossible to interpret Ealdor's intent. He told us to find Lelwin and Wag and assumed we would know what to do once we had. I'm starting to find the fayit's advice inconvenient."

Wag, content to lie by the cave, came to his feet, his nose pointed up the trail. A low growl, a hint of thunder, escaped from his throat.

"They're coming," Lelwin said. She retrieved her dagger and pulled its twin.

"Torja Deel," Fess said. "You should wait in the cave until the threat has passed." He turned to the Wag. "How many?"

The sentinel lifted its nose, scenting. He cocked his head at Torja and Fess, whining.

"He's never done that before," Lelwin said. "Wag, how many?" she asked, but the sentinel again.

Northeast, toward the Darkwater, a howl broke the air. "They heard us," Lelwin said.

With an oath, Torja crossed to Wag and put her hands on his head. "*How many do you smell?*"

"A large pack, Mistress."

An image came across the link of a pack running across the field. There might have been fifty or a hundred. The picture kept changing.

"They've never sent so many before."

"Fess," Torja said as she came out of the delve, "there's too many."

He looked back down the defile, away from forest. "If we run, they'll chase us down."

"What about the cave?" Torja asked.

But Fess shook his head. "There even less to work with there. We need light, Torja Deel." He cast a glance at the walls of the canyon. "Thank Aer, they're too sheer to climb or they'd flank us. This is as good a place as any. Stay behind us."

In the last fading light of dusk, they came pouring around the bend, moving like a flood. Lelwin stepped forward, her hands flashing. The men and women at the front of the wave saw the daggers coming and dodged, flowing like water to the sides of the canyon wall or leaping like insects to avoid them. But most of the blades took the ones following after and four went down, thrashing.

A space opened and Fess leapt into it, his sword whistling as he struck the front rank. They tried to escape, but the canyon hampered their movement. In the space of a breath, four more were down and the rest paused, pointing at them and massing together.

"We need light!" Fess shouted. With savage kicks, he shoved the dead and dying together to make a mound that blocked the way.

Torja grabbed the remnant of the torch they'd used earlier and hurried back to her horse to douse it with spirits. Scores of damned souls howled behind her.

"They're coming," Fess yelled.

"I'm out of daggers," Lelwin said.

"Torja Deel!" Fess yelled. "Light!"

Her hands fumbled with the flint and steel, shaking so that they merely clinked together without force. Screaming at her fear, she clashed them together, slipping and driving the jagged edge of the flint across the back of her hand. But three sparks flared with the color of the moon and fell onto the soaked rags.

Fire flared into the deepening night and she whirled holding the torch aloft. Light fell across a vision from a nightmare. Fess stood surrounded by a mass of bodies wielding swords and daggers, spinning and darting so that he could hardly be seen, but there were too many

blades coming for him. Only Wag's intervention kept him alive. The sentinel bounded from wall to wall of the defile, fangs ripping through the air. Both the guard and the sentinel wore lurid streaks of blood.

Lelwin stood a few paces behind them, crouched as one-by-one more of the enemy leapt over Fess and Wag to behind them. A pair of bodies lay beside her, taken by luck or providence, but she wouldn't last. As Toria watch two more came vaulting out of the night, obscene imitations of insects, to land.

Spinning, she thrust the torch into the air. Screams of pain and growled curses echoed from the rock walls. A pair of bodies thudded to the rock beside Lelwin, and curled to protect their eyes from the light. Lelwin dispatched them with a pair of thrusts as Toria ran by, holding the torch aloft with her good arm. Fess and Wag retreated half dozen steps, backing over the bodies stacked around them. Fangs and sword filled the air with blood.

The enemy backed away from the circle cast by Toria's torch. "Are they retreating?" Fess shook his head in the argent glow. "I don't think so."

Lelwin scurried from body to body in a crouch, searching for daggers. "They never retreat. Even when they're down to their last man, they keep coming. Some compulsion is driving them from the forest."

Fess held up a hand. "Listen." Distantly, the sound of ripping cloth came to them. "That's it. They're making head coverings to shield themselves from the light."

Toria nodded. "Then we need more of it. Make a pile of all the dry cloth you can find." Returning to her pack, she pulled the last of the spirits along and ran forward where Fess and Lelwin had made a loose pile of shirts and cloaks. Blood stains marked most of them. Screams came from just beyond the light.

"They're coming."

She waited with the torch held behind her, peering into the darkness for hints of motion. Then they broke into view, a flood of insanity that covered the floor and walls of the canyon, howling for blood, too many for Fess and Lelwin, torchlight or not.

Toria set fire to the pile of cloth and drew her sword.

Fess screamed at her during a brief lull. "Toria Deel! You have no skill to match this. Withdraw I cannot keep you safe!"

He was right, but there were too many for him and Lelwin and Wag to combat. The press of those from the Darkwater strove to push them back from the fire. By its light she could see others ready with dirt and rocks to put it out. One of them, a man whose head covering had slipped, flung up an arm against the glare and she lunged, taking him through the chest. Screaming against the pain, she yanked his cloak off with her bad arm and added it to the fire.

"I will fight as I can!" she yelled back. "We must hold with the light or be swarmed under."

Fess looked on the verge of refusing then nodded. "Stay with the fire. I'll throw you fuel as I can."

Lelwin had run out of daggers and her sword work barely matched Toria's. Together they worked to guard the flanks while Wag and Fess labored against the attack. If the fighting came upon them like a flood, it also held eddies, brief moments when Toria could snatch a cloak from one of the fallen and add it to the fire.

Then Lelwin pointed. "I see the end of them!"

In a last rush, the enemy came at them. Fess's sword disappeared, vanishing with the speed of strikes that Toria never saw. Lunging toward the fire, she stabbed a burning shirt with

her sword and flung it at their attackers. Flinching in response, they never saw the blows that killed them.

It was done.

Chapter

Lelwin collapsed, breathing in gasps with her head down, one hand on the ruff of Wag's neck. The sentinel sat on his haunches, his panting alternating with scenting the air. Toria staggered to his side. "Are there any more coming?" she asked out loud, putting her hand on his head.

"There is too much blood in the air to be sure, Mistress, but I don't smell any more from the direction of the forest."

"Will any more come tonight?" she asked Lelwin.

The girl gazed at her, unseeing, before she answered. "So many. Why were there so many?"

Fear and hope waged a war within her chest. "The forest is scared, afraid that we've found a way to fight back."

"Have you?" Lelwin asked.

"I hope so. Will they come again?" She repeated.

Lelwin hung her head, sweat dripping from her face to splatter against the dirt and rock of the canyon floor. "They never have before. It's always just been one group, but never more than five or so. Nothing like this."

Fess came to her side. A makeshift bandage of some dead man's cloak bound a wound on his thigh. Past that it was impossible to tell if any of the rest of the blood on him was his. "We can retreat to the cave. Wag will alert us if any more of them come."

Once inside the cave, Toria waited until Lelwin had curled herself into the pile of cloaks that served as her bed. Then, before sleep could take her, she knelt at Lelwin's side and offered her hand. "Thank you, Drifan. If not for you and Wag, Fess and I would have been overwhelmed."

The girl looked at her hand. Toria thought that she might refuse, but the weight of silence built within the moment until, with a brief nod, Lelwin gave her a quick handshake.

Toria fell once again into Lelwin's mind, but this time the memories she saw belonged to Drifan. Sorting through them until she found what she wanted, she replayed them over and again, watching in wonder. Then she let go.

"Sleep well," she said and moved away. She slept, careful to keep the weight off her left shoulder. There were still nearly twelve hours until dawn. The fight had only lasted a few minutes though it felt as if an entire day had passed. Despite the pain in her shoulder, sleep took her almost immediately.

"Toria," a voice called almost immediately. She opened her eyes to see light streaming across the entrance to the cave. Beside her, Lelwin stirred and opened her eyes, her expression acknowledging recognition. Fess stood by the entrance. Warm yellow sunlight streamed into the canyon from the east, catching the red highlights in his blond hair.

She rolled from her makeshift bed with a gasp of pain. Her left shoulder had swollen in the night. Stepping across the uneven floor of the cave, she cradled her arm with her good hand. "I'm going to need a sling. I won't be able to ride like this."

His eyes widened a bit in surprise. "Are we leaving then? What about the cave?"

She shook her head. Even that motion sent red flares of pain lancing across her shoulder blade. "There's no need. I delved Lelwin while Drifan was awake. I know where the cave goes."

"How do you know the memories can be trusted?"

She sighed. Lelwin's knowledge carried a burden and a responsibility, but not one she could or should carry alone. "Here. I'll give them to you." She gestured to Fess's bare hand.

Throughout her time in the Vigil she'd noticed that different members of the Vigil preferred different points of contact. Dura, she recalled, usually opted for a touch across the neck, tenuous, as though he hesitated to intrude. Her own preference was for the wrist. It mimicked a common gesture of greeting or familiarity between women and also between women and men.

Several times now she'd seen Fess delve others when the touch didn't need to be disguised. He would lift his hand so that his fingertips caressed the cheek in a gesture he couldn't possibly know mirrored that of lovers.

"Why do you do that?" she asked just before his skin touched hers.

"Do what?" he asked.

"Exercise your gift by touching the face of those you delve," she said.

His eyes softened. "Mo—Lady Bronwyn delved me that way. Somehow it made the act of seeing into my memories seem more like a gift I was offering her rather than knowledge she was taking." He shrugged. "It made me feel special."

She smiled. "I see. It's very," she groped for the word, "familiar."

It took a moment for him to understand. "Should I not?"

She gave a soft laugh. "I'll leave that decision to you, but you're young and well-favored. The gesture could be interpreted in ways that might surprise you. With me it is acceptable and I thank you for wanting to honor Bronwyn that way."

The skin of his hand was rough with dirt and calluses, but the caress against her cheek was soft and it warmed regardless. An instant later his fingers left her face and he stared in amazement.

"What was all that?"

She shook her head. "Confirmation, I think, or not, but I doubt Lelwin could have simply contrived such memories."

His eyes still held the wonder from Lelwin's memories. "The people we fought last night, were they looking for this?"

"It's impossible to know," she sighed, "but we have to hide it. It offers Cesla an access point from outside the forest."

"What about the noise?" he asked.

She started. "I didn't hear anything except the sound of air moving through the cave."

His brows furrowed. "I thought I heard the clash of swords."

Her heartbeat quickened. "I'm a fool. I scanned through her memories looking for images that were important. I must have skipped over those sounds. Give me a moment."

She went back through Lelwin's memories, working to stifle her impulse to skim through them, listening. There. She heard the sound. In a flash, she understood Fess's mistake even while she regretted it. To be sure she continued through the rest of Lelwin's memories, searching for that same resonant strike of metal against metal.

She opened her eyes to see Fess looking at her. "Who are they fighting?" he asked.

"They're not fighting," she said. Her last meal sat on her stomach like lead and for a moment she thought she would vomit. "You've never been to war, Fess, and your exposure to swordplay has been minimal, so your mistake is understandable. That's not the sound of fighting. What you're hearing is the sound of pickaxes against metal, a very special metal."

"Aurium?"

She nodded. "And now we know why it's forbidden in the liturgy to own it. Someone is trying to open Cesla's prison."

He stared at her, but his eyes moved in minute increments, betraying the fact he replayed memories behind his gaze. "Is that all the liturgy is?" he asked. "A set of rules put forth by Aer and the fayit to keep us from freeing the fayit?"

The same question had occurred to her, and more than once. The discovery that the liturgy had been written, designed, by the fayit had rocked her faith the way an earthquake shifted foundation stones without immediately toppling the structure. "No," she said. Because she could not speak from knowledge or surety, she spoke from faith. "I believe the liturgy is more of a love story than a battle plan. There's far too much sacrifice in it for me to believe anything else." She pointed to the crack in the canyon wall. "We may need to come back."

He nodded. "I can mark it so that we can return. Bring Lelwin out. I'll gather enough rock to close up the entrance and hide it."

It took longer than she expected, even with the strength conferred by Fess's physical gift, but by noon, they were on their way out of the defile, Lelwin and Toria riding double with Wag loping alongside Fess's horse.