Tree of Life

Part I

Tree of life

Part I

E. F. Daniels

P. L. & E. F. Daniels

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To my family, with gratitude and love

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Chapter 1

A Stolen Treasure

Against the blowing wind a young woman travelled through the night, nothing more than a thin shadow blending into the oppressive darkness. She was enveloped in a heavy cloak, clutching a small child to her like stolen treasure. With no moon or starlight to brighten the countryside, the only bastion in the encircling blackness was a small wayside inn. Dim light spilled out from its windows, and the smell of beer hung heavy in the air, along with the rich scents of roasting meats. As Daenara drew nearer she could hear raucous male laughter.

The brawling voices died as Daenara flung the door open. At several plain, unvarnished tables were scruffy travellers, and, standing behind the long unpolished counter, a stout man paused from cleaning an old mug. She could feel their displeasure at her intrusion, along with their lewd curiosity.

"Well, don't just stand there letting in all the cold, woman!" one of the seated men said. "Shut the god-damned door!"

As she made her way toward the counter, she could feel their eyes follow her, not hostile, but intrusive. Her son, with his arms tight about her neck, did not once rouse his tired face but clung to his mother in a way that saddened rather than warmed the heart to see. A certain air of neglect and weariness, a sense of lost station, hung over her. She kept, therefore, a cautious reserve.

Only one other woman was present, a short, buxom person who was likely the innkeeper's wife. She was busy over a hot

oven. The air was filled with greasy smells. The innkeeper, resting on one elbow, bent over the counter toward Daenara. He abruptly offered her a meal and a room. She accepted only the room and a bed, much too weary to eat.

The inn-keeper charged her seven gold pieces. Daenara frowned at this, but did not argue the point. She placed the money on the inn-keeper's thick, fleshy palm, taking a large iron key in return. Without glancing back, she headed toward the small, shadowy staircase that disappeared round the corner. The men called to her, asking her to let the boy sit and drink with them a while. She ignored their entreaties and disappeared up the stairs as quickly and soundlessly as she could. Not till she had reached her room and fastened the door did she relax and set Deacon down. The room was sparse and uninviting with a small bed, a small table, and a wash basin, but it was warm.

She stripped off both their heavy cloaks and retrieved a chunk of herbed bread, neatly wrapped in cloth, from her bag. Meanwhile the little one surveyed his surroundings, clinging all the while to his mother's dress. He looked dazed and wide-eyed, turning back to his mother, desiring to be held again. He raised his arms to her, but she instead placed a piece of bread in his hand, urging him to eat.

His face sombre and serious, he ate without enthusiasm. Daenara partook of nothing herself. Her gaze settled on the small child who seemed like a little stranger to her, he was so quiet. She thought of the man they had fled, and she suddenly felt exhausted and ready to cry. She gently brushed the crumbs from Deacon's mouth. "Had enough?" she asked, in a voice tight with subdued emotion. Deacon nodded, handing back the half-chewed bread.

They soon crawled into bed. Snug against his mother, Deacon fell asleep immediately. She, however, lay in wretched wakefulness, her mind full of anguished thoughts. The bed was hard, the drab bedclothes coarse and heavy with dust. Her whole body ached, and she wished to roll over to get comfortable, but she dared not move, not wanting to wake Deacon, who even in his sleep clung fiercely to her. Nerve-worn, she could

feel herself flinch inwardly with each burst of muffled laughter that came from downstairs.

Lying rigidly on her back, she felt an ache in her breast. Silently she wept out all the sorrow that had pressed against her heart these past months, her only comfort the small, fragile weight that lay bundled warm in her arms. Soon her son's steady breathing lulled her into sleep.

When she woke it was morning. Deacon's arm was slung loosely over her neck, his head turned away from her toward the wall. At moments like this she felt her heart would burst for love of him. He was so sound asleep that he didn't stir when she gathered him up. She was anxious to get to the Imperial city. There they would be safe.

Downstairs was empty, save for the few stragglers who had passed out at their tables in drunken stupors. With Deacon cradled fast in her arms, Daenara passed silently and unnoticed. Again they ventured out onto the road.

The day was almost spent by the time they reached the outskirts of the Imperial city. Scattered over the gentle, green slopes were stands of trees filled with game. No villages were along the way, but they passed an increasing number of small homesteads and farms.

Soon the sun began to die behind mountains thickly covered in fir trees. Fortunately the paved road provided easy footing. By nightfall they had reached the Angora river; the river extended in the same direction as the road, all the way up to the city gates. Daenara was weary, but her step was strong with the knowledge she had almost reached the city. She could see two brilliant flames burning at the front gates like welcoming beacons. She could also see the homestead and stables further up by the water's edge. The dim friendly glow gave her a sense of returning home.

A husky male voice suddenly cut through the dark and made her stop, her heart caught in her throat. "Evening, citizen," said the hulking city guard, stepping out from the shadow of a tree. "The gates to the city are closed at night. Don't despair. There is an inn not far back. It'll suit you and your little one just fine."

"I know the gates are closed. I was hoping you could make an exception and have them opened for me?" Daenara said. She was desperate to see her brother, and informed the guard of his high position in the Imperial legion. "Thaemon is his name. You perhaps know him?" she asked eagerly. The guard's stern face softened.

"I know him," he said in a gruff, but friendly voice. "Go on. Mention my name to the men at the gates, and they'll let you in."

Daenara used his name and instructions, and was supremely relieved when the men admitted her. Even at night people wandered the handsome streets of the Imperial. Soft light issued from flames in open caskets and lit the streets all through the night. Every so often she saw a guard patrolling.

The city was divided into three districts: the markets, the residential, and the elven gardens. The latter was by reputation the most beautiful of all city gardens. Many years ago, when the Imperial was still young, elves had constructed the gardens as a gift for those humans who had fought bravely alongside them, though no elves actually lived there. Only the wealthiest could afford to reside in them, and only by invitation could one enter.

Daenara went directly to her brother's fine home. Mindful not to sound too alarming, she rapped on the door and waited expectantly, huddled with Deacon not so much to keep warm as to supress her nervous shudders. Presently she heard quick, shuffling steps. The door opened, and Berrel, a short, well-rounded woman, stood in an inquiring manner.

The matronly servant looked out from under thinly plucked brows. She gazed at Daenara without recognition, before she exclaimed in a surprised and reproachful tone, "Daenara! Good heavens, child, did you walk all this way? Come in, come in. Let's get you out of the night air."

Somehow, among the small woman's flustered attentions, Daenara managed to catch sight of Thaemon. Upon the sight of his sister, his face at once became serious and questioning. Behind him, huddled in the doorway, Thaemon's wife shared her husband's anxious interest.

Daenara set the little one down, but no sooner had she done so than he turned back with raised arms in mute appeal. She gathered him back up, and he clung to her neck sullenly. Thaemon placed a considerate hand round his sister's shoulder. The other rested on the back of the boy's head.

"Where is Luseph?" he asked. "Has he been unkind to you?" Thaemon assailed her with questions. In his fierce perplexity all considerate thought for the travellers seemed lost. Finally his wife, Clara, placed her hand on his arm, and spoke kindly to Daenara.

"You must be tired. Come rest a moment." Her voice was soft and pleasant.

In the dwelling-room the two women sat opposite one another in comfortable chairs. Deacon sat, heavy and dozy, bundled in his mother's lap. Thaemon stood over by the fireplace. His face was solemn, and his eyes were fixed on his sister. He was a tall, proud man, respected by all who knew him for his integrity and inexhaustible kindness. Nobility, pride, and discipline all marked his features.

Clara also was well respected. She was a delicate woman with a proud bearing. With a steady, well-practiced hand she poured out the tea, placing the cup on a side table by Daenara. The room was richly furnished and exceedingly still and quiet. Clara and Thaemon had two children, a boy and a girl. Cedrik was Deacon's age, while Brielle was two years younger. Daenara knew they had already been put to bed.

With languid caresses she continued to brush Deacon's hair back from his face, hoping to lull him to sleep. Clara asked Deacon, "Is there something you would like, perhaps some warmed milk?"

By way of answer he turned inward, and buried his face as though the offer had offended him. He would not let her touch him.

The two women exchanged bleak smiles.

"He's tired," Daenara said.

"I've got water heating," Berrel said, coming to the doorway. "You can have yourself a nice hot bath in a moment." She stood with her hands on her ample hips. Daenara thanked her, then looked up and caught her brother's troubled gaze set on her.

"Have you been to see Mother yet?" he asked.

"No. I came directly here," she replied.

"Better to wait, I think, before mentioning this to her."

The mother they shared lived further out from the Imperial in a small homestead. Thaemon's father had died years before, while Daenara had never known hers; he had left when she was only a baby. Thaemon's father had raised her as his own.

Drawing a long, considering breath, her brother seemed about to resume interrogations; when Daenara said in an imploring voice, "Perhaps it is best we retire for the evening?"

"Yes, yes. You are tired," said Thaemon. "Get to bed. We shall talk more in the morning."

Warmed by hot baths and comfortable in fresh changes of clothes, the travellers settled into a soft bed. The room was spacious and pleasant in temperature. Two glass doors, covered with light drapes, led out to a balcony that overlooked the paved streets. Daenara had often stayed here with Luseph on their visits. Now the room seemed foreign and empty. Beneath the blankets she bundled Deacon warm to her breast.

Downstairs the next morning the house was alive and buzzing with excitement. Thaemon's two children were more than welcoming. In the kitchen Clara was preparing breakfast. It was a spacious, meticulously clean, and well organized kitchen; shelves lined the walls with large containers of spices and baskets filled with vegetables. The children had taken their place at the table, exerting all their energies on Deacon, who was entirely incommunicable. Brielle, like a little mother at two, commenced stroking his face and kissing his cheek in an officious, though well-intended manner, while Cedrik offered him a variety of good things to eat, as though he were a baby or some small animal.

While Deacon was engaged in timidly fending off the advances of his cousins, Thaemon took Daenara aside into his study. He frowned when he saw the strange burn mark round his sister's wrist; it was as though a red-hot bracelet had seared the flesh.

"How did you come by this?" he asked, taking her wrist to examine it.

"His hand," Daenara said, suppressing a shudder. "I could not tell you what shone in his eyes."

"Daenara," Thaemon said. "This is magic." She nodded gravely, not understanding the full extent and nature of this calamity, but enough to consider Luseph had put himself and his family in serious danger. Uttering a vicious oath, Thaemon let her hand drop, and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Tell me everything," he said, slumping into his chair.

Daenara remained standing. She knew little, but told him what she could: that an odd man had come to the door of their home one morning, and that he brought a letter for Luseph. From the moment Luseph received it, he shut himself up in his room for days at a time, not so much as seeing the sun. He had become strange and secretive, and frightfully cold toward herself and Deacon. Then one evening when she ventured into his study he turned on her in sudden violence. She took Deacon from him the same night.

"It is an unnatural thing to steal a child away from his father," said Daenara. "I know not if it is a crime I have committed, but there is no other means. We must not stay with him; Deacon must never breathe the atmosphere of that cursed house. It has been a burden to come here with this most unnatural misfortune. Whole days and nights I have considered what should be done, but there was nothing save confiding in you. Next to our mother you stand as my most faithful, truest friend."

She had spoken with such nervous energy that now the false strength went from her utterly. She sank down into a chair and closed her eyes. Thaemon leaned forward, gently took her hand, and kissed it. Her tears overflowed, and she wept in silence for some minutes.

Thaemon watched her.

"Do you know what the letter was in relation to?" he questioned at last, "or who it was from?"

Daenara shook her head.

Thaemon insisted she stay with him until the matter was sorted. Gratefully, she consented, though she didn't know what he meant by "sorting" the matter, and feared he didn't know himself.

Chapter 2

A Shadow Of Doubt

The Imperial university of magic rose spire-like towards the sky. A pretentious structure, the most beautiful in the city, it contained the greatest collection of knowledge and power in all of Gonriel, being home to the council leaders, a group of twelve powerful mages who ruled the vast lands as they saw fit. There had been under their ruling peace for many years, and any conflict now seemed only to reside in the council itself. Travon, the arch mage, ever tightened his grip on the other members whether they willed it or not, gaining greater control and pushing heavily toward a dictatorship under his rule. It was not to be had.

Here Thaemon took his concern over Luseph. Crimes with the use of magic were punished harshly. He was not able to speak directly to the council members, but the steward of the guild told him the matter would be looked into. However, Thaemon got the impression they thought it a small priority. He would be left to safeguard his sister and her child from harm.

Settled in a bed next to Cedrik's, Deacon lay holding the hand of his mother, who was crouched down by the bedside. Through the dark he looked at her with uncertain eyes. "I don't want to stay here," he said in a hesitant voice, almost a plea. Daenara knew he wanted to go home.

"It will be all right," she said in a weak, comfortless tone, keeping her voice hushed, so as not to wake Cedrik sleeping untroubled. "It will be all right," she repeated to Deacon more confidently. The gentle pressure from his hand crushed her inside. He looked as if he dared not move, like a child frightened of the dark. "Go to sleep now," she said, brushing back the hair from his face, but his blue eyes stayed opened, wide and unhappy; they were asking her, waiting for her to make it all better. Leaning over, she kissed his solemn cheek and tasted a salt tear on her lips, whether his or her own, she could not tell.

The following days were quiet and uneventful, but Daenara had an irrepressible urge to take Deacon and run. She told herself she was anxious for no reason, that he could not hurt them here, but she began to suffer from vague, half-forgotten dreams that left her shaken. These dreams had even begun to haunt her in her waking hours, wisps of dark visions; smoke, blood, fire. Faceless men wailed in pain and agony. Deacon cried out for her.

After those frightful images Daenara woke with a sharp breath. In the dark she became conscious of a little form lying beside her. Sometime during the night Deacon had crept into bed with her, as he often did, whether for his own comfort or hers. Only half-awake, with his arm around her, clinging to her, Daenara felt the disconcerting sense of reversed roles; of him protecting her.

"You look tired," came Rosa's voice to Daenara the following day. Rosa was the daughter of Clara's dearest friend. She had seen Daenara in the market district, pushed her way through the crowd, and came to walk at her side.

At this time of morning, the markets were flooded with people. They walked proudly and wore fine garments. As usual the city priest preached damnation at the front of the cathedral, which stood out brilliantly white in the morning sun. His dirty robes, barely more than rags, gave him more the appearance of a peasant or a drunkard than that of a holy priest.

"I do not sleep well," said Daenara, partly distracted by the priest's rantings. "I wish he would be quiet."

Rosa was a tall girl and very slender. Her narrow face gave her a pixie appearance at times, and her hair looked lightning-scorched, yet it was becoming. She chewed on the side of her cheek, gathering an idea. Then she suddenly said, "You should try the hot springs. They are very relaxing. It's what the elves bathe in, you know, all the minerals and such, very good for your skin. Or, you could go to the seer."

"Where?"

"The seer," Rosa repeated. "She can see your fate, but she is also a wonderful herbalist. She grows a variety of herbs just outside of the city. She is, shall I say, not an ordinary sort, but she is very good. My cousin Mertha once had a growth the size of a . . . well, let's just say it wasn't pleasant, and the herbal remedy did wonders for her. I'm certain she could give you something to help you sleep."

"I will consider it."

"No you won't," Rosa said, laughing. She kissed Daenara on the cheek and said, "Stay happy," as she ran off to meet a group of giggling girls.

The afternoon sun set Daenara's hair ablaze, revealing the red undertones in her warm brown hair. Undisturbed by her presence, grazing in the glade, were several placid deer and a fawn. Occasionally one would lift its head and return her gaze with docile brown eyes. The air was laden with the sweet scent of honeysuckle and spring wildflowers.

So bewitching was the sunshine and fragrance that she was freed of all troubling thoughts, and reminded of the brightness of day. Reclining on the grass, she watched with increasing joy as Deacon endeavored to catch flying insects. Not wanting the sensation to ever leave, she closed her eyes and let the feeling, along with the sunshine, sink deep into her as a kind of transfusion of warmth and life. She was not long here; then, the insidious creeping of dread came. Slowly, confusedly, she arose. She was suddenly fiercely alert. A horrid hush had befallen the woods. She was alone.

"Deacon," she called, trying to suppress the note of desperation. Repeatedly she called, her voice hollow and barely audible.

The whole world seemed to wheel round and round before coming to an abrupt halt. A black figure, standing on a small rise, silhouetted by the glare of the sun, she painfully recognized as Luseph. Deacon lay peacefully in his arms.

Stepping forward, she stumbled and fell. Pushing herself partly up, she saw that Luseph was gone. She gasped as a voice from behind came so near she could feel the hot breath on her ear.

"You cannot keep him from me!" Turning, she stared up at Luseph. His expression surprised her, for instead of hate there was grief. This was Luseph as she had known him.

"Luseph," she whimpered, penitent. His face turned cold; accusing eyes pierced her in a thousand places; and she found she was deprived of the strength to stand. He would take Deacon from her. "Give him to me," she said nervously, stretching forth her hand.

Luseph made no attempt to catch her, and she fell piteously into the cold, damp earth. Weeping in frustration, she tore at the grass. Her bowed form was shaken by the violence of her emotion.

Pain turned to fear as she raised her tear-stained face to find her husband gone and in his place a stranger. He was thin, draped in black robes, his black hair smoothed back from a stern brow. He peered down at her with eyes she had never before seen in a living man, glazed and icy, revealing nothing of a soul within, yet he seemed to burn with some intense enthusiasm, or, it could be with hate.

"Listen to what I have to say." His voice was frightening in its lack of resonance. With a purposeful movement, he reached forward a pale hand. In abject fear and defiance, Daenara scrambled back from him, shaking her head. He paused and clasped his hands passively in front of him, yet there was something deeply threatening, deeply alarming in his forbearance.

His face, at once unfamiliar yet familiar, seemed terrible. Suddenly his eyes flared like blue lightning, and Daenara felt an intense heat ignite across her skin, causing a burning in her body which she felt would set her on fire, but it was the man who suddenly combusted into a blaze of vivid flames. She saw he was shocked and in terrible pain as his flesh was slowly consumed while he was still standing upon his feet. In desperation, mingled with some horrifying attempt toward affection, he staggered toward her, clutching at her, trying to draw her into him. She screamed. He would draw her into the flames and she would be burned alive with him. Frantically she tried to crawl away, but she was held.

In her utterly wretched state, Daenara cried out to Luseph for him to help her, but he did not come. She wondered with alarm if he could not hear her screams or whether he had left her to wallow in pain and misery.

Daenara awoke to darkness, with a vague pain as if she had really been seared. She was momentarily disorientated. A sly wind blew the curtains, and for an instant, she thought she saw a dark form hidden behind the light folds. But it was only momentary.

Close at her side a small voice mumbled indistinctly. As her thought and vision cleared, she saw Deacon at her bedside, his face dark and blurred with sleep. With trembling hands she reached out for him to come to her. Rubbing the hair from his

eyes, he crawled into bed beside her. She clung to him, rocking him, and murmuring almost fiercely, "He cannot have you."

Much later, when she was certain Deacon was asleep, she carefully slid her arm out from underneath him. She went out onto the balcony. The cool brush of night air was at once calming. Down below she could see the city guards patrolling the streets. She recalled how her home village and surrounding fields would be engulfed in darkness at night. Here, where it was always bright and always awake, she felt some sense of security. It was here she had first met Luseph, but he had been anxious to move away to someplace quiet, and so before Deacon was born they went to a small village, and were happy. A dark shadow of doubt loomed before Daenara. Staying at her brother's home indefinitely was not an option, nor was going home.

Chapter 3

Intrusion

Janet, an old friend of the family, discovered that Daenara had returned, and was anxious to see her. She wished to give Daenara her former job at the book emporium, and extended an invitation for her to dine at the elven gardens, where Janet resided. Although Daenara was hesitant at the idea of leaving Deacon—the old woman had requested she not bring the child—she was very keen to take back her position and accepted the invitation.

However, that very same day, Daenara had been troubled by dark images; every sound seemed to set her on edge like a sensitive, care-worn nerve. She attributed this anxiousness to lack of sleep and so decided, against her better judgment, to take Rosa's advice and visit the seer.

Daenara left Deacon at her brother's—she would trust him to no one else—and took a walk outside the city gates. By the river little bugs hovered over wildflowers. Ripples every now and then appeared on the surface, as fish took snaps at them. Lara Gully, a tiny slip of a woman, barely taller than her eldest child, was out gathering blossoms. Her horde of children, scattered at the riverside, created a beastly amount of noise, slapping at the water as they tried to catch fish. As Daenara paused to watch, she felt an ache of longing.

Lara's house was further down the road, but she often came up near the city gates to speak with the guards. Kahn, the broadest and possibly most dim-witted of all the guards, re-

ceived most of her attention. He had a broad grin on his face as he watched her. Occasionally she would stop to yell at the children splashing about too wildly. When they had ignored her for the last time, she hitched up her dress, much to Kahn's delight, and went into the water to drag them out by the scruffs of their necks.

She received little help from her husband, a brutish sort of man, who lived at the tavern more than he did at home. Lara didn't seem to mind, but then half of her children belonged to Kahn. Everyone but her husband seemed to know this.

Despite the commotion, sheep grazed lazily, along with several fat brown hens. They went flying in a mad fluster when Daenara walked through. To the far left of the gates was a small beaten path, which Rosa had instructed her to take. It led Daenara into a part of the woods that a shadow hung over even in the daytime.

Here was a tall, dark house, a lonesome, bodiless thing that seemed slightly crooked in structure, having a leaning appearance that if looked at for too long gave a sensation of light-headedness. It was not because the earth beneath was unstable, but because the wood itself seemed to bend and groan with life of its own. Greenish-grey smoke billowed out of the motley stone chimney, and filled the air with mysterious spices.

Daenara stepped up to the long, secretive-looking door; she raised a hand to knock, but the door opened of its own accord as if pulled by an unseen hand. The hall was dark, lit only by a single candle. A strange wind, as soft as it was foreboding, swept along the polished wood floor and rushed through her skirt. At this moment she lost courage and turned to leave, when sweeping out from a side room came a beautiful olive-complexioned woman. She wore a long billowy dress the colour of pale blue ice. It fell from her slender shoulders most exquisitely. Her dark hair was lit with highlights, as if the silver moon perpetually shone down upon it.

"Welcome," she said, her voice vacant and distant, as if it rose from the depths of water, like a spirit from the sea. She slowly turned, as if having no sense of time, and led Daenara through to a large room, which would have been horribly dark if it had not been lit by a brilliant fire in the hearth. It had a

strange mingling of old and elaborate furnishings from many different lands: fraying rugs, stone jars and mortars, quaint and ornate chests, and mysterious dark bureaus.

With a fluid gesture, the seer offered her guest a seat. In a leisurely manner she unhooked the kettle from the fire and poured a cup of tea. Each and every movement was precise and deliberate.

Once seated, the seer finally looked at Daenara, making her shift uncomfortably. There was something intensely mystical about the smoky, heavy-lidded eyes and full dark lips of the seer. The seer had an indiscernible expression but then inhaled deeply. A sudden twitch in her neck gave an odd contrast with her earlier fluidity.

She spoke in a deeper voice than she had previously, far more commanding. "What is it that you seek?"

Uncomfortable with the entire situation, Daenara said, "I want only to purchase some herbs . . . to help me sleep."

The seer, with those shadowy eyes, looked at Daenara, probing and searching. "There is a veil over your mind," she said, "something hidden."

It was then Daenara decided to make the most of her visit and stammered, "I have been having dreams. They come to me more like visions. I want to understand them."

The seer seemed to liven at this prospect, and she produced a small, sharp knife that had been tucked away somewhere in her dainty bosom. "Give me your hand." Daenara shrank back, protectively holding her hand as if it had already been stuck. "You may command me only to the extent in which you are willing to obey me. Now give me your hand."

The softness in her expression redeemed her sharpness, and Daenara felt compelled to obey. Squeezing shut her eyes, she held out her palm, waiting for the pain, but she felt nothing more than a little sting on the fingertip. When she reopened her eyes, a pinprick of blood showed on the tip of her finger. The seer placed a drop of it in the tea and swirled, taking care not to spill any. Then she downed the concoction.

Her eyes instantly rolled upward, and her lids fluttered closed. Daenara waited nervously as the seer's eyes darted under their lids, back and forth, as if she was dreaming. Then

the seer spoke. "You run from something." There was that strange tic again. She remained in her altered state as though searching through thoughts and memories. "A man robed in black. You feel his presence only in the blackest recesses of your mind. A man with eyes of blue flame."

Here the fire went dark in the hearth as if suddenly snuffed out by the breath of her words. Everything in the room seemed to shift, as thin light from the narrow window took over as the only source of light, and Daenara suddenly felt several presences in the room. They crowded round her; she felt them brush against her skin like a breath of ice wind. In voices that seemed nowhere and everywhere, they murmured indistinctly, but their tone conveyed fear and awe.

Daenara rose sharply to leave, but a strong hand took her wrist. The seer held her fast.

"The man you love—and the man you fear—are one and the same, and he is dark—dark and terrible. He knows the dead, and the dead know him," whispered the seer, as if she spoke from deep under water, which she could not rise above. Daenara was afraid. She knew that the seer was using a form of necromancy and that it was an illegal practice. Slowly the shadowy eyes fluttered open, and Daenara felt the strange presences slowly disperse, fading back into the walls, dark corners, and shadows. The air was once again empty.

"I have something for you," said the seer in her usual voice. She released Daenara and went into a back room. Daenara waited, holding her wrist. She glanced round the room, fearful anything spectral should come out from its hiding place.

In a moment, the seer returned, carrying two neatly wrapped tiny packages. She offered one first. "This is to help relax you. Drink it before you sleep at night." Then she placed the second package in Daenara's hand. "This is used for strong warding spells. Place it in front of your door, and no one who means you harm shall be able to enter." Daenara nodded wordlessly. For a moment she thought she saw fear in the seer's eyes.

Once she was outside, the world seemed normal again. Daenara felt as though she had come out of some strange dream. The further down the path she walked, the better she felt. The air was alive with the trilling of birds, busy in their daily ac-

tivities. Soon she could see the city walls and Lara with her children. The sight was welcoming, and Daenara hastened her step, anxious to be home.

The whole experience left her sufficiently shaken that she cancelled her prior engagement to dine with Janet. After several days passed with nothing eventful occurring, Daenara began to relax again. She had been faithfully taking the herbal remedy and at night slept well. A rose was returning to her cheek. Janet noticed this over the passing days and again extended the invitation. Rosa had the long and tiring task of convincing Daenara to go, repeatedly reassuring her.

"Even the wisest among us must be wrong sometimes." Rose smiled as she spoke. "My mother was once told by a seer that she would come into the fond company of a singularly handsome man and would be betrothed at once." Daenara stared blankly, not understanding. "She married my father two days later." The last response drew a slight smile from Daenara, as she thought of the short, round baker, who, though tenderhearted, was hardly singularly handsome.

After much persuasion Daenara agreed to go to the dinner. Dressed in an elegant evening gown, her hair pinned up simply and gracefully, she gathered Deacon into her arms for the last kiss of the evening.

He was a little hesitant and distant with his mother, being unaccustomed to seeing her done up so extravagantly, and her perfume, a pungent scent of wildflowers, was unfamiliar to him. It had been a gift from Rosa. Clara took him from Daenara's arms, trying to offer him sweets as a consolation for giving up his mother for the evening, but he flatly refused. His attention set greater value on what his mother was up to.

The door closed behind Daenara, shutting out the light and Deacon. She could hear Clara speaking reassuringly to him. Daenara hated leaving him. She felt as though she was abandoning him. In her hand she clasped the pouch of warding herbs. Gathering her dress round her legs, she squatted down at the doorway, and taking a handful of the herbs, sprinkled them across the threshold. As she did so she caught, out of the corner of her eye, a guard staring at her with an odd look of bemusement on his face. Slowly, he turned his head aside, feign-

ing disinterest in her peculiar behavior. Hurriedly she stood and surreptitiously placed the pouch in a geranium pot.

Her shoes clicked on the cobbled stones, as she made her way to the gates of the elven gardens. Two guards were posted there. Slipping them a piece of parchment that allowed her entry, she waited nervously as the large, heavy doors were cranked open. Once inside, Daenara could hardly believe only a single stone wall separated the city from this ethereal Eden. There were so many intricate hidden paths and steps that led to secret little haunts of wonder and enchantment that to look for someone here would be like playing hide-and-seek.

Evening tranquility had settled over the gardens, inviting Daenara to stroll awhile. A hushed sense of peace and harmony came over her as she drifted through an archway of marble pillars, roofed by pale blue flowers, that cascaded like a fragrant waterfall.

Laced throughout the gardens were stone and timber homes that, while somewhat humanized, were endowed with refined elven characteristics. Hidden pathways led to private courtyards, and blossoms cascaded over balconies and silver railings—their sweet scent lingering in the still evening air. Little white flowers that looked like bells arranged up a delicate stem graced the edge of a majestic pond with water flowing down from smooth rocks. The elves believed water should always be living and never allowed to stagnate.

Finally Daenara arrived at Janet's immaculate dwelling. It was charming and elegant. Growing up the walls were thick, woody tendrils, adorning the stone with purple, pendulous blossoms. In the front door were two long narrow windows, with ornate wrought iron climbing up the glass like flowering vines. An exceedingly well-dressed man, with a stiff neck and proud tilt of his head, admitted Daenara with a rehearsed greeting.

Inside was not quite what she had expected. It was a fine home, the sort anyone should be proud of, furnished with deep colored woods and rich reds, but she had somehow expected it to be more elvish and less human. Being in such a stately home, Daenara felt an uneasiness and a need to put on a certain pretense of propriety. Quietly she walked down the hall, observing the elaborate hanging tapestries. Through a large archway, she

saw into the dining alcove. A long table was set elegantly for two. She was on the verge of clearing her throat when Janet came sweeping out from the kitchen. In her hands she carried a long, silver platter, upon which was a succulent cut of meat on a bed of fragrant herbs.

The elderly, prominently-featured woman greeted Daenara with keen pleasure. She had silvery hair, like finespun cobweb, taken up into a becoming roll and fastened with a pretty jewel. Apart from the servants, Janet was all alone in the big house and was happy to have company. She enjoyed being the hostess, pouring out wine and serving dinner in a well-bred manner. The evening progressed delightfully, but Daenara was persistently distracted by strange, intangible feelings that made her grow restless.

Back at the house Clara sat in the dwelling-room, quietly knitting. Thaemon had put the children to bed and had just sat down in his favorite chair with a cup of bitter coffee when a sharp knock was heard at the front door. Thaemon had barely opened it when a group of men barged their way through as though they were expected. At the unexpected intrusion, Clara stood with a sharp exclamation of surprise.

The men were all dressed in matching robes and equipped with swords. Thaemon immediately identified them as Imperial Guardians, an elite group of magic-users, also trained in the use of weapons. They were utilized by the council to enforce laws and investigate crimes related to magic. Pulling his wife protectively to his side, Thaemon asked, "What is the meaning of all this?"

He directed his demand at the tall man with shoulders squared in a militant posture, who appeared to be the commander of the group. His name was Aéoden. He approached Thaemon with the same patronizing politeness he would a regular civilian, while several of the other men dashed upstairs.

"My children are up there!" Thaemon said, starting forward, but his path was barred. Frustrated and helpless, he returned to his wife's side. She looked at him with a pleading expression, for him to do something, but he was as helpless as she.

* * *

Janet was chattering away happily, not yet realizing her words were unheard. A strong feeling had possessed Daenara, as if something terrible were taking place. "Are you all right, dear?" Janet inquired, pouring wine from a silver carafe. Daenara rose from her seat in a feverish manner. Hurriedly, she thanked her hostess for the lovely evening, and insisting she was not feeling well, excused herself. Full of an intangible fear that something evil was about to befall her son, Daenara began to run.

At the house, it was not long before the men came downstairs and stated that the child was gone. Thaemon's face darkened, and he suddenly tore up the stairs, with such a fierceness it would have taken several men to stop him if they had tried. Bursting into Cedrik's room, he felt his heart stand still. He saw that Deacon's bed was empty. Cedrik stood, dazed and afraid, in the middle of the room. Without a beat missed, Thaemon collected up his son, then his daughter too, who had wandered into the hallway, abruptly awakened.

When Thaemon had placed his children in the care of their mother, he accosted Aéoden, and demanded the situation be explained. Here the front door suddenly flung open, and Daenara flew hectically inside. She stopped dead. She was surrounded by strangers and saw Clara huddled up with only two children. Thaemon stood at her side looking tortured. Daenara felt the hot blood rush to her head and rapidly drain again and would have collapsed if not for the strong arms of the guard who stood nearest.

Chapter 4

The Quest

A cup of tea was untouched, growing cold at Daenara's elbow. She sat listlessly, with spent grief. Her brother, crouched down by her legs, had a pained expression of failure and anguish. After some standard comforting words, and a solemn promise that her son would be retrieved, Aéoden and his men were making their exit when Daenara unexpectedly caught their attention with a sharp intake of breath. An expression of shock struck her features, as if she stared at something only her eyes had power to see. Thaemon clutched her hand, his fretful words lost. Presently her eyes, veiled with tears, blinked back from vacancy and turned sharply upon him.

"I saw him," she said. Her face drained of colour and in a quivering voice, she went on to describe the structure and surrounding area in her vision.

"Cheviot Priory," one of the men said. "That's in Terroni, south of here."

The men had all appeared the same to Daenara when she first set frantic eyes upon them, but she saw now this one was different. He was tall and slender, with fair hair that was rather long, a graceful mouth, and a strangely delicate completion that a woman might envy. But there was a greater difference in him even than his lighter skin and finer features. There was a distinct difference in his bearing and movements, a graceful efficiency. When he turned his eyes on Daenara, she faltered to see how blue they were and how exceedingly clear. She could not mistake he was elven, and heard him addressed as Éomus.

Another man close to Aéoden, in terms of rank, suggested they should bring her along, with the explanation she could be useful in their efforts, considering her ability and close association to the innocent. Aéoden, after musing a moment, addressed Daenara directly. "Are you certain of what you saw?" She nodded but was in a great deal of confusion, having little knowledge in the ways of magic. "Your vision, can you determine present or future?"

"No."

"It's all right." Aéoden turned to one of his men. "If what she saw was accurate," he said hesitantly, uncertain as to whether he was dealing with a gifted woman or a distraught mother; "then it means he's most likely still in that region. He won't risk evanescing again. Go quickly, then return and tell me what you discover."

The man, like vanishing wind, was gone from their sight. Aéoden stood waiting, without any betrayal of anxious anticipation. He was, however, anxious, knowing it was risky for his friend to evanesce alone. It was impossible to know who might sense the location of the individual transporting. After many minutes the man returned. Unfortunately he hadn't encountered the necromancer believed responsible so was not able to intercept him. There were, however, sufficient signs to know Daenara had been accurate, and he informed Aéoden the necromancer had continued on further south.

They started that same night. Daenara was given her own horse and could ride well. She was quiet and obedient and did not prove to be a taxing addition to their party. Her visions, which seemed to have lain dormant most of her life, would force themselves on her at will and often were hazy and abstract, so that she could not clearly see the underlying meaning. She was by degrees learning to leave herself receptive to them, and was able to focus with greater clarity on the images before her. She seemed open to every psychic breeze, and felt the effect of every wind upon her. At times she had to shut her mind or the visions would drive her mad.

By the emergence of the pale crest of the moon, a camp had been set up. The men were all very proficient and went about their business effectively, leaving Daenara to stand about without offering much assistance. Very soon a fire was made, and a hot meal was had virtually in silence. Daenara's gaze was fixed on the dancing flame. Without her husband, without her child, the sense of loss was heavy on her. Infrequently she lifted her gaze to pass across the brave men who would reunite her with her son.

There was another besides the Elf who stood out plainly against the rest. He was a ghastly looking man and wore dark robes very different from the others, without the addition of armour or weapons. His skin was sallow and sickly. She would have felt sorry for this emaciated husk of a man if not for the evil that pervaded him. She could detect the hollowness of his nature at once and wondered why he would be on this assignment. He stood in private counsel with Thedred, the man who had first suggested Daenara come along.

"There is a veil over her mind," said Goran, incapable of speaking above a whisper. "I cannot read her. Someone, might we guess who, has placed a very good ward upon her mind. However, her fortunate ability and her relation to the child suggests quite plainly she is indeed of Riven blood."

"Perhaps you should make certain," Thedred said. His attitude was that of a man who had a dreadful task but reluctantly accepted it as a necessary evil.

Daenara found it difficult to refrain from shuddering when Goran's attention turned upon her, forcing her to avert her eyes.

"What is it that keeps you two muttering over there?" Aéoden asked with a touch of reproach, noting that their secretiveness bothered the woman. The two men had evidently finished their counsel and after their addresser's reproof, rejoined the camp. Thedred had the look of one deeply troubled, which in turn troubled Daenara. She wondered what they were keeping from her.

"Do not surrender yourself to despair," came a quiet voice, with a pure and graceful accent. Having seen she was distressed, Éomus took a seat at her side. He did not place a hand on her, but his very presence was caressive and soothing. "So long as

this ill fate befalls you, we shall be at your side." His gracious words were full of authority. His eyes held hers with sincere affection. Éomus was eminently handsome, every feature graced by purity and knowledge. His eyes were strange and beautiful, and something besides the moon lit them. Elven eyes are transparent, and what one truly sees in them is the light of their soul.

"Will no one explain to me what my son's place is in all of this?" Daenara finally asked quietly.

"Deacon is a Riven," Aéoden said. "Were you aware?"

"No. I don't understand."

"Rivens are a feared race, although mostly considered nonexistent now, being so few in number. They're an ensorcelled race, prone to magical abilities, much like yourself. We originally supposed that it was Luseph himself that was Riven, but I suspect now perhaps it is you that provides the blood that flows through your son's veins."

"It is because of this he was taken?" Daenara asked, having no idea she and her son were of this particular race. She suspected it was her elusive father whom should be thanked for this unknown and unique heritage. "Why did he not take me instead?"

"There are many reasons," said Aéoden; "Your mind might make the process that he intends more difficult than needs be. Perhaps the blood they need for their black ritual must be male. There are too many considerations to mention."

"His blood?" Daenara said with alarm. "Do they mean to take his life?" Aéoden gave her an uncertain look, and her face became pale as death. She could feel the fear enveloping her like a noxious atmosphere, taking all her air, suffocating her.

"I know too little in the ways of necromancy to say," said Aéoden, with a sobriety that did not ease any of her fears.

"It shall not come to that," said Éomus, who had been quietly sitting at her side all the while with a grieved expression.

"Luseph would never let them . . . " she said but could not finish, striving to stifle herself with her hand, which was covering her mouth.

"There is time yet," said Goran irritably. "Luseph must wait for his masters to deem the correct moment, before he proceeds.

Our knowledge of their attempt was the only thing that forced them into sooner action, and not all blood rituals involve death. It is a delicate process. I assure you he will await his moment."

Daenara kept herself as collected as possible, so that she might further be informed. "And what does he hope to gain by this?"

Aéoden drew breath as though he had much to say. "Luseph was a scholar of magic at the university, and a former Guardian, years ago; I knew him well. His whole life was devoted to necromancy. He would shut himself up in his room for days and afterwards would be strange.

"He spoke of disembodied voices that would speak to him incessantly, making him peculiar and unapproachable; which probably explains why he left the order. When the arch mage suddenly banned necromancy, for reasons we were never told, Luseph was ruined. He had returned to his room and everything, everything down to the last scrap of parchment, had been taken and burned. His life's work all gone. He, along with many other necromancers, left the university. It was rumoured they relocated somewhere hidden so they could continue their studies, and even more disturbing rumours were that they had a plan to overthrow Travon. They hadn't been taken seriously until a source came to us, and we were informed they had discovered a Riven."

Aéoden remained quiet and allowed Daenara to process all that he was telling her. "I still don't understand; how is Deacon to help them?" she asked with an impatience induced by fear.

"Riven blood contains certain imbuing qualities," said Aéoden. "And it is our belief they will be using this trait to restore a man who was long ago vanquished from this earth, a man who is the embodiment of purgatory. He could be vanquished but not killed. For many years he has been incarcerated in a city that burns eternally. Travon bound his power so that he could never escape, but if his strength was to be restored, he could break bounds and be brought back into existence. He would kill Travon."

Late that night Daenara lay alone in her tent, her mind in turmoil. She had been bereaved when she had left Luseph, as if she had lost him to death, for the man she once knew no longer existed. Now upon hearing all Aéoden said, she began to doubt whether she had ever really known him. She had always depended on Luseph to have the strong arms that would protect her. Now, not only was she without his comforting embrace, but he was in fact the hand against her. Any remorse or fear of doing him an injustice vanished. The feeling of isolation overcame her, and she began to weep. The surrounding darkness seemed to be inhaled with every sob, till she felt she would drown in darkness.

Chapter 5

Quest Continues

Daenara's mind was impregnable, Goran had discovered irritably. Without her knowledge he tried on several occasions to break the barriers and find the true source of her ability, but the protection charm was impervious. Goran thought Luseph had put the concealing spell on her, but it had been done by a man with whom he was entirely unfamiliar. When she was first born, before her father left, he had given her this single parting gift, as much for her protection as his own. It was not good for Rivens to make their presence known in a world that was against them.

After his many failed attempts, Goran believed he was weakened because he was already convinced of her heritage and wasn't using enough effort, but then his determination not to be outdone by a charm made him exert all his efforts, and still he failed. He had become so put-out that he almost decided to simply lie to Thedred, who had been so insistent that he know for certain.

Thedred was a good man, but had almost a fanatical devotion to the arch mage. He would do Travon's bidding in the good faith that Travon knew what was best for the collective masses. The individual did not matter. Gonriel's great lands were proof of Travon's competence. Thedred was, however, considerably uncomfortable with the task he had been assigned. He quailed inwardly when he thought of it. He had been instructed to dispense with both mother and child. The arch mage was determined to wipe out every last Riven that walked the earth.

* * *

The sky was bright and clear. The spring weather had began to grow pleasantly warm. The land was open around them with green rolling meadows, and the sun shone bright upon them, but the sun could not warm Daenara's face. Leading their horses by foot, the travellers slackened their pace a moment for brief repose. Éomus led his beautiful white horse by Daenara's sturdy brown mount. Neither said a word to one another, but Éomus's presence was always a great comfort.

Behind Daenara, several horses back, Goran's sallow eyes were fixed intently on her with an expression of sheer determination. Goran had come very near to giving up, when at last he broke through. He had done so, so unexpectedly that he gasped when he suddenly came upon the intimate recesses of her mind—seeing images and memories that flicked through his own mind in rapid succession. The memories were all, of course, useless to him, and he pushed them aside irritably. They were not what he needed to see.

Feeling a sharp pain, Daenara suddenly clutched her head. He hadn't been in her mind long, but long enough to gain the information he needed. The subconscious mind holds a vast resource of knowledge. It knows intimately the nature of one's own being, down to the very last cell. Rivens' magical energies are interwoven with the lifeforce that infuses each and every one of their cells. It is the source of their strength, which is why mages of other races simply cannot muster the same power and energy levels of which a Riven is capable.

When the sudden headache had passed, Daenara glanced back at Goran as though she sensed he had been tampering with her. His gaze remained flat and arrogant, though his mouth slowly peeled back into something akin to a smile. A sickening sensation grew in her stomach; the sight of him always left her with a feeling of abhorrence. She turned her eyes front again and saw Éomus was looking at her. His expressions were so subtle it was often difficult to determine what he was thinking, but always did he look on her with kindness, and he took pains to make certain she was comfortable.

"Are you well?" asked Éomus, seeing that her complexion had waned. She nodded wordlessly, her gaze directed up-

ward as though she were listening. The breeze carried dull and mournful moans that resolved themselves into wails and shrill cries. They were faint and barely audible, as though heard from a great distance. Daenara did not know any animal that could have produced such chilling, torture-laden wails.

She had heard them periodically over the past days, but mostly felt them. The men had said nothing, and she wasn't certain if they even heard them or whether it was in her mind. "Something comes for us," she said to Éomus, fearfully. "I don't know what it is—but it comes to us with malice."

"Wreavers. They have been tracking us for days."

"Wreavers?" she asked, responding to the concern she felt within Éomus.

"Necromantic monsters," said one of the Guardians, with a look of loathing. "They walk like men, but they're soulless beasts, brutal and mindless. A single scratch is all that is required to spread their vile poison coursing through your body. Even the meanest among us could not bear the pain. Men have been known to cut their own throats to escape it."

Later that afternoon, by a cool stream, the travelling party wet their lips and rested on its grassy banks. Daenara crouched down by Aéoden who was washing his hot-red face. "Who is that man?" she asked him quietly, looking at the sickly man who drank from a water bag painfully slowly, not taking more than the most meagre sips.

"Goran." Aéoden almost spat. "He's one of the necromancers that stayed true to Travon, or rather feared to go against him. Now he sets his talents on worming his way into people's minds like the treacherous little maggot he is. Both mind manipulation and prying are illegal practises, except when we utilize them for investigation. He's often very useful, which is why that unfortunate creature accompanies us. Should he bother you, tell me, and I will see that he repents it."

Aéoden continued to wash his face and neck, drenching his hair entirely. Daenara rose to her feet. "It's growing warmer," she said. A soft wind brushed her face and softened her strained features.

"It's going to become more so," Aéoden told her. "The tracks we've been following have persistently led south toward the Surian desert.

"No," Daenara corrected with such blatancy as to cause Aéoden to pause midway and look up at her with curiosity. Wiping the water from his eyes he rose to full height, looking at her. "I see snow," she said absently, her eyes lightly closed. "Mountains laden with snow and frost—and rising taller than the rest, a great mountain, and a dark structure obscured in its mists."

Aéoden rubbed his brow frustratedly. "Are you certain?" Without waiting for a response, he said, addressing no one in particular, "We have been deceived; we are going the wrong way." He impatiently took the reins of his horse.

He had come to trust Daenara's visions. She had warned him of dangers and guided him and the men safely through unknown and treacherous terrain. They had been deceived; the tracks had been false. Necromancers have many deceiving powers, such as illusion, and can make things appear as they are not, even to a trained eye.

"Let us proceed now. We have lost too much time." Aéoden said.

"In which direction are we to go?" asked one of the men.

"The only mountains to have snow this time of year are in the realm of Illésmore," said Éomus, assisting Daenara to mount.

Aéoden nodded. "We go north," he said, settling himself in the saddle. In an attempt to make up for lost time, they had not taken a break in many hours and rode into the night over dark fields with only the stars to light their path. They eventually set up camp in a dark wood. An unfortunate boar on a spit had become dinner for the evening. As she partook of something to eat, Daenara found her attention again drawn to Goran and Thedred, even though the two now sat apart and seemed to speak little.

Goran had lost interest in her entirely, while Thedred had his eyes always upon her—always with the same dreadful look of remorse—eyes always slightly averted as though he could not bear her gaze. His face was heavy with some burden. His

haunted glances made her deeply uncomfortable. He, at times, gave her the feeling he wanted to get her alone with him, where she would not have the safety of the other men. His strange attitude pressed against her already weary soul and made Daenara feel as though she would wilt with the pain of it. Her arms ached to hold Deacon, to feel his warm little body against her own. She feared that he was afraid and alone.

Not far from Daenara, another's heart was aching for hers and had a great desire to soothe her. He stood with his shoulder against a tall tree, never far from her. He settled kind, pale eyes on her with grave interest. He could see that she grew paler and fainter with each passing day, but the absence of bloom on her cheek did not diminish her beauty in Éomus's eyes. Her loveliness was of the earth, warm and natural. The soft glow of the fire touched her face, bringing warmth back into it.

Presently, a hand gently rested on Daenara's shoulder. It was the whitest as well as the lightest ever to have been laid on her. She looked up into the face of Éomus. He smiled down on her with the look of promised alleviation, and she felt herself soften at his touch.

"This will all soon be at an end," he said, and the calm intensity of his voice held her with a sense of assurance. "You will again, very soon, behold him and take him into your arms. This is all just a terrible dream from which you are soon to wake." A deep frown creased his otherwise smooth brow. "I pledge my life on it." The moment he removed himself from her side, it was as though a light had been extinguished, leaving her in darkness.

Later, when the men were settling into their tents, Daenara noticed Éomus vanished deeper into the woods as quietly as the breeze passing. She had in fact noticed that every evening, wherever they might be, Éomus would silently steal away to be on his own for a time. She followed him this evening, treading softly through the moonlit trees. The soft sound of rushing water came to her ear and led her to where water flowed down from rocks and collected in a pool of shimmering water. Éomus stood at its edge. The moonlight outlined his slim well-proportioned figure.

She could hear him speaking softly in a language that was of the earth, the trees, and the wind. The words flowed from his graceful lips reverently as though in prayer, though his face was not down-bent but raised to the night sky. His luminous features were smooth without any sign of care. The meaning of his words eluded her but were nevertheless healing. Without making her presence known, she listened long to him. Her face rested upon her hand as she leaned against a tree. The lilting, melodious words filled her with a deep sense of calm.

"Does it bring you comfort?" he asked quietly. The unexpected address brought her back with a slight start. She believed that the trees must whisper to him, for she fancied she had made no sound. Yet still he knew she was there.

"Yes," she said in a half-whisper, feeling somewhat ashamed. It was after all his personal moment. Perhaps he wished to keep it for himself, but his expression when he turned toward her was of pure tenderness.

"It is an invocation requesting strength and guidance," he said.

Amid this deep quiet Daenara felt an unspeakable anguish arise within her heart. Until now she had borne the despair with unfaltering courage. Tears gathered in her eyes. "I cannot let my son die." Her voice was scarcely a whisper.

"It will not be a grief you will have to bear," he soothed. He extended a slender hand toward her. "Come to me."

The moment her hand was laid in his, she was drawn gently into his embrace. Not the finest silks nor satins could compare to the feel of his touch. Caressing her lovely hair, words were spoken from his lips in a melodious tongue. Daenara looked into the pale eyes with their unfathomable depths and felt a hushed sense of peace. Éomus lowered his face and let his words fall on her lips, kissing her deeply as if he meant to take upon himself all of her sorrow. In the moonlight they stood serenely radiant, with their heads bent together.

Chapter 6

Luseph

Far in the northern lands of Gonriel, a bitter everlasting winter had gripped the lands. It was a wild and formidable terrain, with harsh winds and jagged mountains, covered in frost and snow, peeking up through thick fog. Rising from this cluster of mountains was an isolated mountain, on whose summit was a dark spire-like temple. Within that terrible structure things half-living, half-dead, and entirely unholy, walked its halls.

Luseph's study was a large, comfortable room, where rows of books, thickly bound in leather, lined an impressive case. Thick rugs were splayed across the stone floors, along with richly carved furniture that carried with them a forlorn smell of things ancient and forgotten. Luseph stood by a fire that burned steadily in a gaping fireplace, with his hands clasped behind his back. He was dressed in fine black robes, with a high stiff collar that fit tightly and neatly against his white throat. A man with cunning eyes came to stand at his side.

"You did not bring his mother," Luseph said, in a tone that did not seek to disguise his displeasure.

"It turned out to be an impossible task. And my first priority was the boy, as you instructed," he reminded Luseph with a shade of patronization, which quickly died as the latter turned on him. For a moment the man was uncertain, but Luseph's attention was soon drawn to the small boy curled fast asleep in a leather chair.

For a long time he looked at Deacon. No expression of tenderness showed on his features, yet still he looked, as one might look on a precious item. Presently, Deacon awoke from this unnatural slumber and seemed afraid. Luseph stepped forward. He knew Deacon looked on him without recognition; his face was hardly his own. The sleepless nights and strange dealings with the dead, had all sufficed to dissolve any likeness to his former self.

"Do you know who I am?" asked Luseph and beckoned the trembling and bewildered child get down and come to him, but Deacon shrank away. Luseph did not endeavour to comfort him but knelt down, placing a hand on each armrest either side of him, as though to box in the fretful little fox. "Do you know me?" he repeated. His eyes shone like moonlit ice.

Deacon recoiled against the backrest as though he could sink into it and escape.

"I'll tell you now. You are my son, and you are going to assist in making the world a grand place." Rising to his feet, Luseph lifted Deacon from his seat and set him down. "Let me look at you," he said, taking a seat and drawing Deacon to stand before him. Gently, he pushed back the dark hair from the sullen face, and the blue eyes, timid and wet, lifted to examine the examiner.

"Do you still not know me?" Luseph asked in a softer tone, and taking the little hand in his own, placed it to his cheek, all the while looking intently into Deacon's face to detect any sign of recognition. There was none. And Deacon again began to grow fretful. Luseph rose sharply, letting Deacon's hand drop as though he had lost all interest in his existence. He moved to the window, where he stood, silent, with his back towards them.

"Shall I have him placed somewhere for the time being?" asked the man.

"No. He stays with me," Luseph said, in a way that left no room for discussion. With a slight incline of his head the man left father and child alone. Deacon retreated to the leather chair. A prepared tray of food had been set on a side table. At his heavy writing table Luseph sat silent in his deep seriousness. Fixed intently on nothing, his grey eyes looked frozen, directed

at his son. The only sign that his mind was working was the slow rubbing of his fingers. From under bent brows he could see that Deacon trembled.

Though he appeared indifferent and was cold, very cold, Luseph was not bad-tempered toward the child, and the child was not ill-natured. However, under the circumstances, Deacon kept Luesph in a constant state of disquiet, refusing to eat and fretting for his mother. In his worked-up state he often used a form of speech that was mostly incomprehensible to Luseph, which frequently resulted in one cursing and the other crying.

Forsaking his chair Deacon uttered a teary and miserable appeal to see his mother. Luseph pinched the bridge of his nose. Since Deacon had awakened he had proved a tiresome creature. "Cease whining!" Luseph said with an impatience amounting nearly to anger. His outburst subdued, but did not cease, Deacon's misery; the brave little chest heaved a dignifying sigh. Coming to crouch down at his level, Luseph stretched out a hand, dragged the boy roughly between his knees, and embraced him sternly.

"Hush, now," Luseph said with curbed ferocity and rose with Deacon gathered up into his arms. The father that remained in him had a strong desire to comfort the child. For many minutes he held Deacon till he felt the fearful, rigid body finally succumb to exhaustion and slip into a heavy sleep.

In Luseph's bedchamber was a sturdy dark wood bed, its red silken covers embroidered intricately with gold thread. A tray of half-melted candles emitted the feeblest light. Luseph slept in a chair, while Deacon was tucked into the large empty bed. The door was securely fastened, so there was no fear of him breaking bounds, but Luseph's repose did not long last before he sat up wearied. His fist pressed to his lips, he watched, silently, the child who slept in his bed.

Luseph was regretful of the life Deacon should have had and remembered with bitter clarity his own miserable childhood. He thought of his family that spat at the mere mention of magic and any thought of him studying it. It was for this very reason Luseph had moved to the Imperial city; to further his education in the ways of magic, and the moment he did so, he had lost his family.

His own brother had beaten him. He thought of his sister and how the only affection he could expect from her was a hard slap. His father would do everything but foam at the mouth should even the slightest mention of magic be uttered under his roof.

His mother alone understood him, but even she failed him—she perhaps most of all, for even with her understanding, she still turned her back on him. She was not willing to risk the sacrifice of her husband and other children for his sake. And so it was through bitter tears that she impressed on him that should he walk out that door, he should not bother to return.

He left without turning back, a boy of not quite sixteen. He had no family, but he had a home, the university, and so it was for many years until Travon had destroyed all he had worked for.

Luseph recalled a conversation he had with his Necromaster and the futile frustration he felt. In the dim musky room Luseph had stood before the old mage with the full face of youth and determined eyes; under his robes was a strong young body, and sheathed at his waist was a long sword. The contrast between the young mage and the frail older mage—with his bony hands and sallow skin—was considerable.

Luseph bore his gaze with a rigid dignity but inwardly shrivelled under the disapproving stare. The withered eyes sneered at his bronzed skin as though it were a brand of inferiority. The old man did not believe one could achieve his full potential while dividing his time between magic and weapons.

"Arch mage Travon is a powerful man who has many loyal to him. It would not be a fight we would win," he had finally said to Luseph, who came to him in distress in regard to banning necromancy.

"Ah, I see," said Luseph, hostile. "It is not respect you show, but fear."

The Necromaster had responded cruelly, which ferocity Luseph bore with unflinching courage. After this he left the university and tried to live a normal life, which he achieved with Daenara for several happy years, until the Necromaster sent him a letter informing him of their location, and what they intended—Travon's downfall.

Having grown uncomfortable in his chair, Luseph moved to stand by the narrow window. Beyond his reflection was a stretch of night. His thoughts went to Daenara. He knew how desperate she would be and desired that she should be here with him. Her touch he longed for, yet he knew it would be difficult to make her understand. There was much pain and suffering for both of them yet.

In his study the following day, Luseph stood before the fireplace, lost in thought. He forgot for the moment the silent little presence that occupied the room with him. Presently, a young man entered the study. Preston was his apprentice. He was a youth of not more than sixteen years of age, though with his untainted self-assurance and arrogant disposition he appeared much older. Luseph treated the youth often harshly, though, at times, with the kind of pride that a father might have for a son, and Preston was eager to please Luseph.

"You require of me?" asked Preston, taking little notice of Deacon.

Luseph said, "Take the child. He's in your care."

Preston's eyes turned onto Deacon with undisguised aversion; for a considerable length both regarded one another with uncertainty.

"Take him, you idle boy!" Luseph spoke with a measure of sternness. "I have warned you."

Preston's straight shoulders seemed to fall slightly, as if he was unimpressed with the task. With great reluctance he took Deacon by the hand and led him out.

Into a small dark room Preston took him. It was a storage room of sorts but hadn't been used for a long time. It smelled of stone and dust and of daylight trapped too long. "You're going to have to entertain yourself," said Preston, lighting a small candle, which served only to cast haunting shadows on the empty walls. "You can sit there." Preston indicated the only chair in the room.

He started for the door, when Deacon commenced pleading and crying again. "Quiet! Your mother isn't here, you snively little nursling. If you were more of a lad and less of a lass, I would give you a flogging," he said, lifting Deacon up under

the arms and plonking him down on the chair. “Now sit there, Misery.”

Preston then closed and locked the door behind him, paying no heed to the muffled sobs from the other side.

Chapter 7

A Loud Cry

Through a narrow rocky valley, the travelling party were compelled to dismount and lead their horses on foot. The ground was broken and uneven and had become slippery with ice and snow. Swirling above them the sky was dark and gloomy. Their heads bowed against the stinging wind they trudged on. Éomus had given Daenara an elven-made cloak, which kept her body exceptionally warm, but her heart was cold with despair.

The arctic breeze was restless. It did not only affect Daenara, but the entire party of men. The horses, too, were restless, tossing their manes, their breath misting as they whined with unease. Daenara and Éomus suddenly stopped, which in turn halted the rest of the party. They both felt the effects of evil.

Several small grey rocks tumbled down the side of the left wall, drawing everyone's attention up toward the cluster of large rocks. A shrill wail pierced the icy air and rang sharp in their ears. Daenara's horse reared so violently his reins were wrested from her hands. She tried in vain to calm the beast by clutching at his reins and speaking kindly. The men drew their swords in a state of readiness. Daenara sufficiently calmed the distressed animal to retrieve her sword, a gift from her brother that would not have been given in vain.

"Be not far from me," Éomus said hurriedly to Daenara. His silvery blade shone like sharp light on ice, drawn and ready. The words had only just fallen, when from high up on the walls came descending down on them, like a great flood, a mass

of hideous brutes that bore grotesque resemblances to men. A brilliant burst of sheer energy erupted from the readied Imperial Guardians with the power of their collective will and blew apart the first descending wave, like an explosion.

Pooling down from both walls came these wretches, their leathery grey skin almost as thick as armour. They were relentlessly hideous. It seemed impossible that they should have the intelligence to wield swords. Nevertheless, they did each have a menacing-looking blade, and they rushed forth with a great thirst for blood.

The Guardians struck many down before the brutes could even reach them, throwing liquid-like spheres of energy that shattered bones and blew off limbs. A protective wall of force was also established, which slowed the Wreavers' advancement as though they were running underwater or against great winds. It was not long, however, before the narrow valley was flooded and a fierce battle raged between the two opposing forces. The monsters had the greater number, but the Guardians fought with the ferocity of the gods against the ferocity of the devil.

In the midst of it all, Aéoden drew on an immense amount of energy, fuelled by the fever of battle that burned in his chest and propelled a dozen Wreavers violently through the air. The vicinity round him was cleared briefly before he was again assailed. With a slash of his blade, Aéoden cut deep into a brute's exposed chest, then followed the stroke with another from his metal gauntlet, striking the wretch full in the face, mangling it into a blur of bloody flesh. Not far from him, Thedred hurled a shaft of heat which pierced the shoulder of another like a spear. His action prevented Aéoden from being struck from behind, and both men exchanged a brief acknowledgement of kinship.

Éomus was a fierce fighter. He cut down many foes, leaping over one to get to the next. Because of his lightness, speed and nimbleness, he was not easily matched. More than once he shouldered and slashed a foe attacking Daenara. She drew blood with the swing of her own blade with clean and precise strokes.

Man and monster fell without discrimination in one confused, bloody mass. The cold flash of magic along with the clashing of steel was chaos round Daenara. Love, anger, hate,

all rose in a storm within her, and a strong wind, which her own being seemed to conjure from an unconscious source, began to gather, becoming so fierce her own hair lashed and stung her face.

Her eyes were as dark as the storm that raged round her and showed great penetration. For a moment she stood motionless, this volatile atmosphere tearing about her imposing form. Its tremendous gusts scattered the brutes in her path like leaves in a gale. Soon the destructive winds spent themselves; her body suddenly depleted of strength, she staggered backwards a little and found her back against the rock wall.

She started violently as one of her comrades suddenly slammed against it, very near to her, his blood staining the cold rock as he slumped, broken, to the ground at her feet. Frozen in terror, Daenara saw the monstrous thing that had tossed the unfortunate man gaze up hideously in her direction.

The hulking mass of advancing force, that seemed to crush all in its path, covered the short distance between them in an instant. Daenara cried out as the sharp pain of its embedded claw stabbed into her shoulder and spread down her arm like a thousand shards of ice through her veins. Seized by its vice-like claw, Daenara sank to her knees, panting, like a wounded lamb in the clutches of a beast. Her sword dropped from her hand and clanged to the stone.

The sounds of battle were far off and distant as she looked up into the abominable face of her captor. The smile that twisted its lips was the smile one wears when he has securely fastened his victim and relishes the moment of victory, before he savagely ends the torment. The brute raised its bloody sword over Daenara's head, ready to strike; then suddenly the hideous features contorted with pain and a wail of rage. Daenara's gaze fell to where a sharp blade was stuck through its belly from behind. She was released, and its claw having been the only thing holding her up, collapsed with a breathless gasp to the icy ground. Aéoden wrenched his blade from the monster, and before it could turn, lopped its hideous head clean off the rest of its form.

"Éomus!" he called wildly as he knelt at the fallen woman's side, the sleeve of her dress drenched in her own blood. Her

glassy eyes strayed about without focus, looking upward to the grey sky swirling above with gloomy malice. High above her she saw a single drop of rain fall. Slowly it fell—and seemed to fall and fall—like a silver bead streaming down, before she felt it cold upon her face. The single droplet ran down the side of her marble cheek before many more fell. The cold drizzle she could not feel, nor any pain, save for the pain of knowledge. She had failed Deacon. He would be alone.

Even as she lay there with the rain on her face, the battled continued fiercely. Through her haze she saw vaguely a figure bent above her. The brightness of his countenance seemed to blind her; she closed her eyes against it, yet still through closed lids could she see that brilliant white. It engulfed her in its serene brilliance and a warm light suffused her, surely, softly, beautifully.

When her wet eyelids fluttered open, her lashes heavy with rain, Éomus was kneeling over her. She saw fading from his hands the effulgence that transfused life from himself into her. His face was solemn and grave; to heal one must give something of oneself, though it is always replenished a thousand-fold. Looking up into his face, Daenara opened her pale and trembling lips, but not a word came. He gathered her into his arms and took her to his horse, where he assisted her up into the saddle and quickly eased himself behind her. He spoke words to his horse and the beautiful beast started off with clean, easy strides, leaving the battle behind.

Save for the last few determined brutes, most of the Wreavers lay in a bloody mess over the wet, rocky floor of the valley, stinking and putrefying the atmosphere. It was not long before they were slain, and the victorious party caught up with Éomus and Daenara.

They stopped at a village situated snugly in the hollow of cold mountains. The village was composed of a small number of sturdy stone cottages, with slate roofs powdered with snow. In a cosy tavern that smelt of smoke and burning wood, they took rest and food. The hot little room was packed full. The few locals here seemed pushed up against the wall, holding their mugs of ale with looks of displeasure, eyeing the well-

dressed intruders, who were overwhelming in their uniformity and proud militant air. Few travellers ever came this way and the locals enjoyed their solitude.

Daenara shrank close to the fire, her face pale and clammy. Éomus, sitting next to her, took her cold hands between his own.

"You will carry that wound for the rest of your life," he said. His face was untouched by the harsh conditions, but his eyes were full of care and unhappiness.

"Better to have let her die," Daenara heard one of the men say in a hushed voice to one of his comrades, in tones of pity and fellow feeling, sympathetic with the knowledge of her inevitable death.

Aéoden leaned against the wall with his arms folded across his chest, looking at her with compressed lips. Without addressing her, as though she were already dead, he spoke to Éomus. "We cannot take her further; she'll have to stay here until we return. She can be of no more assistance at this point in any case and would be a hindrance," he said, not unkindly. "One of the men will stay behind with her until our return."

Éomus was not difficult to convince. It was his preference that she stay here and be safe. Thedred volunteered for this. Daenara was not entirely comfortable with him but had hardly the strength to object, and although she would have preferred Éomus to stay, she knew he would be greatly needed in fulfilling their task, since he was the only healer among them. Éomus and Daenara parted with a brief farewell; with an evanescent whisper of his devotion and a promise of his returning not alone.

Alone in her room, Daenara fastened the door. She stood a moment with her arms clasped round her body. It was night, and she was exhausted, but she could not sleep nor lie down. She was pervaded by a vast fear as she thought of Deacon in the clutches of dark mages, helpless against the perverse dealings of black hands. Thedred stood posted outside her door in the hallway. She could hear him pace restlessly.

Thedred was in the clutches of his own hell. His mind was hot with confused thoughts. He felt he could not bring himself to take her life and paced violently as he struggled with himself. He was used to witnessing the most gruesome of deaths and

tortures, but this was all too close to home. He thought of his own young wife and child who awaited him. Goran, he knew, would not be suffering the same restlessness as he waited to extinguish the life of the child. Thedred knew the wretch would find some perverse pleasure in the task that he himself had assigned. The thought made him ill, yet he had a fierce sense of duty he could not ignore.

Daenara soon heard the heavy tread stop dead. She could almost feel his presence standing directly outside the door. The silence and the intense stillness was somehow more unsettling than the restless steps. The pulse in her neck seemed to pause as her gaze fastened onto the handle of the door, waiting, a sense of anxiety rising within her. But there was nothing.

A feeling of weariness took her, and she sank down on the edge of the bed. She sat there for a good moment with her face buried in her hands, and then slowly she raised her eyes. She had heard a gentle scraping noise at the door, a drawing of bolts. The latch to her door slid slowly across. She rose cautiously as the door quietly opened. There Thedred stood, pale and haggard, like a man who was suffering greatly.

"What is it?" she asked nervously. "What is wrong?"

For a moment he did not answer but held her fixed with eyes that were intent and feverish. A bead of sweat gathered on his brow. His strangeness filled her with a sense of dread and urgency. His presence seemed to take up every space in the room, so that she felt she had nowhere to move. She remained perfectly still, feeling any sudden movement would provoke him and seal her fate.

"Forgive me," he said breathlessly.

"Thedred," she implored, retreating a step.

In a stride or two he had seized her. He grasped her firmly behind the neck.

"What are you doing?" she cried. "Let me go!"

She struggled against him with palms, elbows, and fists, but he held her close as one might restrain an hysterical lover. A strange tingling emitted from his hand behind her neck, and a sensation of numbness invaded her body. It was as though her very blood had run cold. She was helpless in his embrace and would have sunk to the floor but for the powerful arms that

still held her close. Silently her pleading eyes held his with an unswerving steadiness, willing him to stop, but he closed his eyes against her and rested his forehead upon her deathly face as though he might weep.

Frozen and staring, she was unable to move, but inwardly she was desperate. She could feel her lungs closing and gasped for air through numb lips. It was almost done when the candles suddenly died, and all became dark. She felt the strange hold on her relinquish and his body stiffen. She searched frantically for his face. There was just sufficient light for her to see him, ghastly and unrecognisable, his mouth gaping open in a silent cry. His eyes had shrivelled in their sockets until they were but two black holes, and the skin on his face had become tight-drawn, so that it was almost skeletal.

He released her and crumpled at her feet, nothing more than a ghastly corpse. Behind where he had been standing, Daenara saw in the shadows a shape of blackness. She choked and gagged, stooped over. The dark figure advanced from the shadows like a ghost from her past. Black robes completely draped his pale body.

"Luseph," she gasped, as though she had not used her voice in a long time, her body trembling in pitiful weakness. "What have you done?"

He laid his thin fingers on her, and they were as ice upon her flesh. "You need not fear me," he said in his pale voice. It was the last thing she heard before the world went silent and she felt herself sinking into a vacant blackness, an incredible gulf of emptiness.

Chapter 8

Evil Walks

In blind darkness, the first of Daenara's senses to return was her sense of smell. The poignant scent of leather hung heavy in the air. When her vision cleared and the shadow dispersed, she found herself sitting a chair. Luseph stood over her as though he had only just placed her there. She recognised she was in a study. It was a comfortable room yet for all its furnishings still felt hollow and stark. To the left of a writing table was a secretive-looking door; to the right was a small series of stone steps leading up into his bedchambers.

"This establishment," Luseph said, going over to an impressive bookcase, "is dedicated to the collection and preservation of all necromantic knowledge." He ran his hand affectionately across the leather spines. "It's important that you understand why I'm doing this." He turned his eyes, which gleamed like ice, toward her. "I have spent my nights and days in darkness, because I believe I can make things right."

He spoke passionately, but his face was inanimate, set cold with a single purpose and determination. Thought, suffering, and perseverance had all been at work upon his features so that the gaunt face could scarcely be recognised as her own husband.

"Where is Deacon?" she asked, rising unsteadily.

"He is safe and well," said Luseph, simply and unaffected.

"For how long will he be?"

The sting of accusation in her voice, along with knowledge of what was to come, caused Luseph to turn his back, resting his hand on the bookcase, his dark brows knitted. "Do not lose faith

in me, Daenara," he said and showed evident signs of suffering. Seeing him thus distressed Daenara restrained the words of scorn that burned on her lips. Her face suddenly waned.

"How can I not?" she asked. "I don't know who you are anymore."

"Yes, you do," he answered quickly, his voice low and tense. "I am the same."

"No, you are not!" she said in almost a cry. "I never saw a person so changed in all my life!"

There was a heavy weight in the air before he answered. "I am only doing what I must."

"Will you let me go to him?" she asked without any hope of him granting her request. He did not answer. His neck was stiffened—set stubbornly against the misery of his position. At length he turned round, with a look almost mournful. He went to her, and as he drew very near, she held her place with faltering courage. He raised his hand to touch her, but with such heavy constraint on himself that his hand trembled, and catching himself up, he clenched his fist and placed it to his lips. He held her gaze with unspoken words, searching the depths of her being with the cold, blue flame in his gleaming eyes. She turned from him with sudden aversion, looking downward.

His iron will still holding its required position, the purpose which dominated his mind still unbroken, he could not soften to her, but nor could he inflict violence. "Would you like to sit by the fire?" he asked, tentatively.

"If you wish it," she said, as if against her will.

For a moment or two Luseph held back before following after her. His heart was beating fast. There was a great deal of sorrow in his pleasure of having her with him. Presently, he seated himself opposite. He did not look at her but stared into the flame. He had become slighter, more spectral. An indefinable alteration had come over him and his entire manner. Something in him, inhuman and immovable, disturbed her.

"He shudders when I touch him," Luseph said at last.

"Because he fears you," she answered, her voice like a whip in the soundless room. "Because you would use him in your game against Travon, who has done nothing but—"

"Travon is a fool," Luseph muttered between clenched teeth and rose sharply to his feet. "He limits man of his potential and condemns him to a life of subordination. His dictatorial arrogance will have us all prostrated before a single master." Luseph had considerable command over his countenance, but the control cost him, the strain evident in his features. He shook his head with incredulous bitterness. "At what a tremendous height above the rest of us does Travon place himself. In time he will bring suffering upon the land."

After a moment he regained composure and looked long and hard at Daenara. She sat rigid in her chair, panting, with eyes set on him as though she would destroy him.

"Do you honestly believe," said Luseph, dispassionately, "that those men would deliver Deacon from evil, when Travon would have every last Riven annihilated? He hates them. Fears them."

Daenara blinked, uncertain. An attempt had been made on her life. She could not, however, believe that Aéoden or Éomus had any part in it. "Travon would kill you and Deacon with his own hands if he were less of a coward. Life has little meaning to him beyond his own gain."

"And what of you?" Daenara asked. "What is your fascination with death?"

"Life is where my fascination lies; to understand life you must also understand the mysteries of death."

"You are not so very different from him," she said. "You show to perfection how easily idealism can twist into cruelty that you would use your own son—"

"I would not hurt him!" Luseph broke in passionately.

"I do not believe you!"

"I would not. Not more than is necessary to achieve what must be achieved." Then, suddenly careworn, his expression waned. "Come." He beckoned in a wearied way. "Be not far from me. Come nearer to me."

When Daenara made no move, he crouched down before her and clasped affectionately the inert hands that rested in her lap. His features had softened, but always was this underlying mass of cold, unliving darkness beneath the surface.

"At the end you will see that this was all necessary," he said, officiously.

"The end never justifies the means," she said, hating him for his cold blood. Then, low and trembling, "I despise you." Yet even as she spoke her heart was breaking. Not a muscle in his body moved, not one whisper of breath showed that he was living, only he stared with an intensity that was menacing. She was shuddering slightly and looked back at him with dark eyes.

"Take care," he said, with a coolness that from any other man might have been anger. He left Daenara to sit dazed and alone, disappearing behind the secretive door. The instant it was shut behind him, Daenara was on her feet and at the door to the study, which she was surprised to find not fastened, and slipped out. Luseph evidently cared little that she wandered the building and had taken no pains to fasten the lock.

Without a thought of where she was going Daenara went purely by feeling. Torches lining the walls were barely sufficient to bring luminance to the terrible place, and she had not yet come across any living person. Black forms—shapeless and mute—glided past every now and then: ghostly shapes that drifted without purpose. Each time one passed, Daenara closed her eyes. She was loath to consider what other night-wonders inhabited this abominable place. Most of the doors were locked, and from behind some she could hear the inhuman wails and mournful bellows of tormented creatures. They drew the deepest pity from Daenara and made her all the more desperate to find Deacon.

She came across a majestic archway with strange and frightful carvings. Beyond the archway was an enclosed garden. Odd things grew here that filled the air with the pungent, earthy scent of resin and plant life. Several people clad in black and purple robes gathered herbs, performing the task devotedly. She left quickly again, unnoticed. Walking down a hallway Daenara observed two men slumped on a stone bench. At first she thought them dead, for their bloated bodies were limp and partially decayed, their clothes tattered and torn. She was horrified to discover they were not.

She checked a scream that leapt to her throat, as the bodies rose to their feet in a dozy, ungainly manner. To see corpses en-

dowed with life made Daenara's abhorrence of the place become all the greater. They slowly started toward her. Their brains seemed stupefied, like men walking in their sleep. The ankle of one of them rolled gruesomely under itself in a dreadful limp, as though the bone itself was broken, but there showed no signs of pain in the lacklustre eyes, which stared forward apparently without sight. Deep droning moans issued from their gaping mouths without articulation or any sign of comprehension.

As they advanced down the hall in their gruesome fashion, Daenara stood aside, pressing against the wall. As they passed, the odour of decay and damp earth was oppressive. She quickly moved on round the corner. There, leaning next to some door, was Preston. He was talking casually to a young woman when he looked up and saw Daenara. Pushing himself off the wall, he dismissed the girl and addressed the newcomer with a touch of patronization.

"Are you lost?" he asked. "Perhaps I can help you find your way back."

That he had been the only one to notice her gave Daenara the impression that the youth knew something. She confronted him and demanded what they had done with her child. Preston remained passive and smug. She pushed past him, frantically grasped the door handle, and shook it impatiently.

"Open it," she demanded.

Unhurriedly, Preston unlocked the door for her. He barely stood aside as she pushed through and tumbled into a dark room. Her heart sank to find it empty. Preston stepped into the room behind her.

"It is perhaps wise," he said, "that you do not bring my master's anger down upon yourself. Allow me to return you to him."

The arrogance of the youth's composure infuriated Daenara. "What have you done with him?" she demanded. The outburst of passionate feeling struck Preston with an intense force, and he was hurled against the wall out in the hallway. Slumping down, he was a moment stunned. He soon recovered, and with his hands splayed across the wall for support, slowly drew himself up. Daenara was doubtful now, startled by her own outburst. Preston advanced with a tense walk and clenched

fist. She stumbled back from him. He caught her arm roughly. He had meant to strike her, but in the same instant compelled himself to regain control over his temper.

"Do not anger me," he said, jerking her toward him. In no gentle fashion he escorted her back to Luseph's study, and shoving her over the threshold, closed the door, leaving her alone.

Luseph was still shut up in the strange room. She could hear hideous and convoluted speech and Luseph conversing in some black tongue to whatever made such tortured intonations. She started when the door suddenly opened and Luseph emerged. He looked strange and abstracted, as though dwelling in the nether regions between life and death.

He sat wearily at his writing table, in silence, eyes drawn under dark brows. Presently, he raised an open palm to indicate the door behind her. Daenara turned and saw it open. Preston entered and held the door open briefly for another. Daenara's heart leaped when she saw the little treasure she cherished so dearly wander into the room. She uttered a sob, and in an instant was on her knees, smothering him with kisses and frantic caresses, in between searching his body to see if he was still intact.

All this kissing threw him off balance, and he would have fallen, had not the loving arms that held him gathered him up into a fierce embrace. Deacon could only sob and answer his mother's caresses by clinging to her, hiding his face. Any efforts to speak were stifled with sobs, too broken and incoherent even for his mother to understand.

Daenara sank to the floor with him in her lap, his arms wrapped tight about her neck. There she held him, and there he remained. Her mouth buried in his hair, she spoke hushed words to him, so quiet no other ears could hear, to which he would nod silently in response. He cried so hard that she felt his body convulse with each sharp little inhalation long after he had quieted and stilled. He settled close against his mother's bosom. There he clung with a sense of protection and security. Too young to understand the nature of this frightful occurrence he showed only relief now that he was in her arms. His only fear was of her going away.

He became heavy and dozy, and Daenara found herself lulled into peacefulness, comforted by the small weight she nursed in her arms. This feeling of safety was but transient, and a fear came to her heart. Preston stood over them. Daenara looked up at him with a gaze of stupefied terror. Unable to move, she cleaved to Deacon. As if for the first time the knowledge of his misfortune had become apparent, she uttered a little cry and, beginning to tremble, stammered a few frightened words. Preston paid no heed and reached down and lifted Deacon.

With a broken, sobbing sound, she said, "No, please." Reaching for Deacon, trying to cling to him, her very senses seemed parting from her with terror. As if suddenly awaking from a fearful sleep, Deacon roused. He began to cry and became highly excited. The spectacle of his mother's anguish made him struggle fearfully, sobbing as if his little heart would break.

Luseph appeared calm and unaffected by the cries and entreaties, giving no indication of the emotions that convulsed him inwardly. He arrested all her attempts and, with an uncompromising hand, sat her down into a seat. The moment he removed his hand, she leapt to her feet, but the door was shut and Deacon gone. Turning round, she looked to Luseph with an expression of agonized entreaty that was more painful for him to see than the most bitter of tears. Luseph's expression remained unmoved, but his heart was like ice into which a searing rod has been thrust. His resolve, however, did not fail him. He looked at Daenara with an expression that made her go very white. As he started purposefully for the door she cried after him and clutched at his arm, though something in his manner told her there was nothing in his nature she could appeal to. He paused, then, shaking her off, slipped out the door with a painful grimace. Though his intentions did not falter for an instant, he was very sorry for the pain he was about to inflict on his son.

Daenara went for the door but was suddenly seized by the wrists and held with dry, dead fingers. One of the abominable undead men had her in his grasp. In her confusion she hadn't noticed how it came to be there. In fright she slowly sank down, so low that if the creature had suddenly released her, she would

have fallen to the floor. The horror of its face had her transfixed with some sick fascination, so that she could not remove her gaze from its eyes that were so devoid of life yet so fixed with purpose.

Chapter 9

Reunited

Daenara saw all too clearly the absence of any warmth or life to make an appeal to in the creature. Kneeling before its gruesome body, her wrists held in the deathly grasp, her thoughts ran wildly, searching for means to facilitate an escape. She was frantic at what cruelties and violations, practised by dark mages, might be inflicted upon Deacon at that moment. She could feel they were doing something to him. She sought to clear her mind and consciously draw on that hidden source of strength which had sometimes come in her greatest need, but she was prevailed upon by an overwhelming sense of some violent situation approaching.

She glimpsed flickering images—the surface rippled so that she could not see clearly. Then, in the form of a terrible vision, she saw that Aéoden and his men had made successful ingress. They were fighting and being destroyed by the same cruel force that would destroy Deacon. She felt that it was happening this moment. She went cold, trembling as though suffering from fever. She could feel the magnified commingling of hate, fear, and agony.

The tumult of her mind was painfully great, but amidst all this she grasped one image and saw it lie clearly before her: Luseph writhing in a state of wretchedness, his flesh burning. She could almost feel his pain as her own. She knew he was dying. Then suddenly she could no longer feel or sense him, not a shadow or glimpse, as if he had been torn out of being

into infinite silence—dark vastitudes where she could not reach him. She was cut adrift, blinded by chaos.

Her face was bent between her raised arms, eyes squeezed shut against the hideous images, but they stayed vivid in her mind's eye, a seemingly endless sequence of frightful images of bloodshed. Then something amid the turmoil brought Daenara's cowering mind back to the room. Looking over her shoulder, she saw that the door to the study was being pushed open. For some reason that opening door fascinated her, and she forgot the confusion in her head. She gave a gasp that ended in a sob.

Éomus, in one fluid movement, entered, and with a precise swing of the blade, lopped the monster's hands clean off at the wrists. Its body stumbled back, but its horrible fingers stayed persistently clasped round her wrists. Éomus turned quickly to her. For the moment he looked not how he used to. His face was pale and drawn, his eyes wide and dilated, so that only a thin rim of ice-blue was left. He cut the dead, clinging hands from her, then confronted the decayed being. It had recovered balance and came at him, with no sign of rage, but with a single focus and unstoppable purpose to kill him. Éomus took off its head, then applied the finishing stroke and cut it down at the legs.

Here Aéoden shouldered his way through the door with tremendous energy. In his arms was Deacon. Daenara received Deacon into her arms with profound, unthinkable gladness. She clutched him with fierce determination that nothing would again separate them. She looked over at Éomus and Aéoden. Through the merits of their blood they had delivered Deacon from the hands that would do him harm. Aéoden did not stay; he dashed out into the hallway where he faced the trouble that had followed him.

Daenara quickly set Deacon on the floor, and, crouching down, sought any injury to him. There was a considerable amount of blood on his cheek and clothes. She was relieved to discover that it was not his own. She noticed, however, that the palm of his left hand was bleeding from a clean, straight cut.

Éomus had already set to work on preparing a portal spell, through which he meant for them to escape. Meanwhile Dae-

nara bundled up the little one's injured hand with a torn piece of her dress. His eyes, fixed on her, were unemotional, unresponsive. His face was ashen and expressionless like one greatly overwhelmed. Her fingers trembled so violently that she had a great deal of difficulty tying the knot. The full impact of the shock she had suffered was now upon her. Soon she felt strong hands on her, aiding her to stand. She lifted Deacon into her arms.

"You must come quickly," said Éomus, trying to lead her, but she laid a detaining hand on his arm.

"We cannot return to the Imperial," she said, hastily. "Travon—"

"Word has been sent of his treachery," said Éomus. "He and Goran shall be held accountable. All is well! Trust me! Come quickly!" Taking Daenara by the arm he hurried her forward, leading her to the oval void that was like a split or opening in the atmosphere itself. Holding her son tight in her arms Daenara stepped toward the swirling mass. The air bristled round her with a charged energy, and turbulent winds blew her hair wildly about. Through the glare she could not see through to the other side, but Éomus assured her it would take her promptly to the safety of her brother's home.

She drew a shuddering breath. Within the next few steps she would be out of this terrible place. Standing on the threshold, Daenara stole a lingering gaze at Éomus with uncertain eyes. His face told her he would not be accompanying her. She feared it would be the last time she would see him.

"Look to the north—there you shall see me coming to you," Éomus said. Then: "Daenara," catching her arm as she turned. "It was Luseph who spared your son's life, at the cost of his own."

Daenara faltered. The knowledge of it struck her with emotions that she could not yet identify. She nodded wordlessly, then stepped through the portal. Instantly she was engulfed by wind and light, passing through atmospheric layers, temperatures and pressures. The air she breathed was very thin and took away her consciousness.

Daenara awoke to comfortable silence. Gentle rays of afternoon sunlight shone through the glass doors of her room. Thaemon was stationed next to her bedside, deep concern along with relief in his countenance. By degrees recollection forced itself through Daenara's mind. Sitting up, immediately alert, she asked where Deacon was. Half-rising from his chair Thaemon eased her back down, telling her to rest, and assuring her Deacon was safe with Clara. Daenara reluctantly lay back, finding her strength was depleted.

Soon Clara appeared at the doorway, leading Deacon. His injured hand had been bandaged properly, and a bruise showed on his forehead, but he was otherwise unharmed. Daenara sat up with outreached arms for him to come to her, and he quickly availed himself of the privilege. Having Deacon in her embrace, her body as well as her heart was warm, but it was not to last.

"Has Éomus returned?" she asked Thaemon, expecting disappointment.

His look of concern deepened. "They have not yet come back."

After this time Deacon became withdrawn. He showed little interest in any but his mother, and would not suffer her to leave him even for an instant. Thaemon had tried to explain to his children that Deacon had lost his father and impress upon them that they must not provoke or harass him with many words, but let him be quiet.

Bearing a tray of tea and toast, Berrel slipped into a dimly-lit room. All was quiet, the stillness not one of content rather of mournful reflections. Daenara stood by the window holding Deacon, both covered by a large blanket as though winter had come. She pressed her lips against his temple in a motionless kiss. His face marked with care and trouble, he looked not so much her baby as her companion in misfortune—two reclusive creatures belonging to nothing but each other.

"How are we this evening?" Berrel asked, setting down the tray. Her sympathy was energetic, when they wished to be still. "Perhaps later you might like to sit downstairs for a while?" she said, taking the blanket from round their shoulders in her robust way and laying it folded on the foot of the bed.

"Perhaps," replied Daenara, half-heartedly brushing Deacon's hair down, as though to make him look more respectable.

Berrel was about to pour the tea, when the door slowly creaked open, and peering in were two inquisitive little faces, looking slightly guilty. Daenara beckoned them in, but they stepped inside nervously. They looked to Deacon with bright questioning eyes, not understanding his unapproachableness.

"Won't you come down and say hello to your cousins?" asked Berrel, looking at Deacon. "Aren't you glad to see them?" He was unresponsive, his strangeness causing the children to be silent. "There, see how they fret for you?" said Berrel. She meant this as encouragement, but it rather sounded as reproach. She sighed with deep resignation. "Your mother's arms will grow tired, holding you."

Daenara felt Deacon grow tense, and his arms tightened, as though the words had been a threat to cheat him of her. "Perhaps we shall come down afterward," she said, her tone dismissive.

"Right, then," said Berrel, and taking herself out, ushered the children along with her. Once alone Daenara placed her little one in the arm chair by the fire. For a moment she gazed down on him with troubled eyes, trying to read his darkened thoughts. Words were seldom passed between them anymore, and though he would not be without her, Deacon had become much less affectionate, coiled tightly within himself.

"Will you not eat something?" she urged. He only shook his head and did not lift his face. "Shall I read to you?"

He did not answer. She watched him with increasing pain. He seemed so strange and distant she could scarcely refrain from crying. In the glow of the fire he sat quiet, staring absently. His face was solemn and grave beyond his years. He had been accustomed to evil at too young an age. Daenara felt convinced that he was greatly changed.

"Deacon," she said softly. "Come sit with me." She held out a hand to him, her voice gentle and persuasive. Obediently he slid from his chair, and she lifted him up onto her lap. She pressed her lips to him and felt something inside her die, feeling that a piece of him was lost to her, never to be restored. She kissed him softly over the eyes, cheeks, and his entire face. The

full realization of how very near she had come to losing him was upon her. Deacon glanced up at her wistfully. She smiled bleakly, kissing fondly the little fingers that reached up to touch her lips. She had nothing to say to him, no comforting words. Though his face was serious and enigmatic he was still only a baby.

The fire burned very low. For the past hour he had lain absolutely still, his face turned against her breast, peaceful and trustful. She sat calm and awake, looking down on him heavily. Her back began to grow stiff, yet she did not wish to move and felt strangely rested. At last she lifted him in her arms and drew herself out of the chair. Placing him in bed, she watched a moment to see if he would stir. When certain he was in a sound sleep, she fetched a light shawl and ventured outside.

The moon was obscured by a thin veil of clouds. Daenara made her way down past the stables and the inn. She crossed the large stone bridge and went into the fields. The trees were dark in the distance. She drew her shawl closer around her shoulders, looking upward, searching the pretty sky. Stars glittered high above her in the heavens. Yet she felt immensely alone, ever her thoughts on Éomus. She knew he would come, if he lived.

A low breeze rippled through her skirt, lonely, silent, and desolate. Then, as she looked toward a great bright star to the north, a sweet breeze blew and brought with it a new hope. A great expectation rose within Daenara, delicately, like a flower blooming in spring after a frosty winter. The scent lingered in the night air, and there, coming over a gentle rise with a steady, even stride, was Éomus. His countenance was serene, free from all care and trouble, and shone with benevolence and grace such as to dim the stars.

Vibrant with suppressed excitement, Daenara waited breathlessly. How slowly he came to her. Only a few more steps and she would be in his arms. Daenara flung herself about his neck, and with irrepressible joy was lifted to his chest and kissed with the sweetest, tenderest of kisses. Éomus had borne many winters, and had a great capacity to love. While Daenara was many, many years younger than he, she was capable of inspiring deep devotion, for her soul was aged greater than her body, and she was true and kind.

"My heart is not fleeting and changing as the wind, but ever enduring," said Éomus. Their heads bent intimately toward one another, Daenara listened to his soothing accents with a pervading sense of undying love.

Chapter 10

Elven Realm

Many years had been filled with happiness for Daenara after her joyful reunion with Éomus. He had taken her and Deacon to live with him in Loriendale, a most glorious place with a hushed sense of peace. The moment Daenara entered into the beautiful woods she had been immersed in a sense of well-being, induced by the beauty and rareness of a place so natural it possessed a kind of reverence. The stillness all so calm and soothing a repose, an intensity of rest and quietude.

Soft light issued from lamps illuminated the woods like captured moonlight. Evenings were sacred to the elves, a time for reflection and connecting with one's higher self. No evening passed without a graceful hymn that lingered on the breeze, soothing and uplifting. In the days the woods were filled with a strange radiance that filtered gold though the foliage.

There were rushing waterfalls of crystal purity, ferns laden with silver dew, elegant trees that seemed to drape and sweep down for the single purpose of caressing the earth. Fine dwellings were interwoven through nature with exquisite harmony. The structures were built around the existing landscape, embracing the trunks and branches of the elven-trees, but stabilised by significant stone pillars on the ground—causing no harm to the trees. Elves have an affinity with all living things, and a deep reverence for life.

Both men and women who dwelled here were equally matched in their clear, unchanging beauty. Their countenances were illumined with an inner light. Among them was Éomus's

sister, Ellendria, whose whiteness outshone them as the moon outshines the stars. She possessed the air of a celestial being, with grace and benevolence. Her grey eyes were profound in their depths and shone with the light of the everlasting.

Daenara strolled leisurely out onto the marble terrace overlooking a garden. The fair light of the sun graced her unbound hair which fell in waves over her bare shoulders. Although Daenara had aged twenty mortal years, she was still a beautiful woman, pale and delicate in health. Her melancholy spirit only enhanced her fragile loveliness.

The silver railing was smooth and cool under her hand, the air sweetly scented with flowers. Down below in the garden she could see Deacon conversing with an elfmaiden, into whose golden hair were woven white flowers. Standing together, among trees laden with white and pink blossoms, the two were as morning and night: she, bright and fair, and he, dark and still.

There was considerable conservatism in his manner and proud command in his bearing. Yet he seemed to grow mildly agitated as he conversed with the elfmaiden. She, however, remained patient and lofty. Her gentle gaze settled on the trees rather than on him. They stood near enough to one another that a passing glance might perceive them lovers, but there was a division between them greater than that between their bodies.

Daenara withdrew inside. The room itself was splendid with a lofty elegance. She was preoccupied arranging flowers in a vase when Deacon unexpectedly joined her. His kiss brought a smile to her lips. "I see Mariwen has arrived home," she said.

He nodded. "Just this afternoon."

Daenara looked up over the flowers at her son. He stood leaning against the table, with a frown on his brow, as he brooded over thoughts of the elven-girl.

"I expected you might be spending the rest of the day with her?" Daenara mentioned this in passing, but implications in her tone darkened his mood.

"No," he answered, idly. "These ones are beautiful," he said, reaching over the table and taking a rose from the arrangement; roses were his mother's favourites. Not being a flower person

himself, he found they were the only ones he took pleasure in, perhaps because of her.

Daenara smiled as he looked absently at the flower, twisting the stem between his fingers. She knew where his thoughts lingered. “I do very much like her,” she said.

Deacon glanced up at his mother, then turned his face aside. “She has treated me with nothing but cold vanity,” he said. Always there was a controlled stillness in his voice. “She’s not so different from the rest of them,” he muttered, returning the rose.

He often spoke of elvenkind with an aversion Daenara could never understand. While she knew the elves had a very different manner of expressing themselves, she could not understand Deacon’s estrangement from them, as he had spent most of his life among them.

Daenara was grateful for all the elves had done and could not share his dislike, but she no longer took it upon herself to correct him. She was weary, and the more she tried to defend them, the more his disaffection seemed to grow, but this newfound coolness toward Mariwen she wondered at; he had always had an affection for her. Daenara could almost guess why. Nevertheless, she did not question him and left him alone though it hurt to do so.

Deacon was tall and strikingly handsome, with coal-black hair and keen blue eyes. Taking himself over by the window, he gazed out with a discontented air. In spite of his guarded nature it was not difficult for Daenara to see that he suffered. There was frustration and pain and a desire to escape.

A restlessness had come upon him, a haunted sense of incompleteness. Always he had this feeling that he was missing something in the world outside. Time passed here without account, as though he walked in a waking dream. At times he was overwhelmed by a feeling of being shut in by the trees, trapped in a world in which he felt he had no part. He had no outlet for his frustration and suffered the strain of withholding himself. To see his mother in a state of such fragility caused him to struggle with all his soul to spare her his burdens.

His eyes so dark and intent, Daenara could not help but be reminded of another. The concept of Deacon’s future was so

inseparable from the painful image of his father that she was afraid; she feared that the fate which took her husband would overtake her son. Grave premonitions haunted her, though her health did not permit her to see them clearly, leaving a vast and nameless fear for him.

"You become more like him each day," she observed, in a wistful tone of affection, along with the stronger undertone of fear.

Deacon looked round at her. "Let us not speak of him." He was trying for gentleness but was unable to keep the bitterness from his voice. The thought of his father roused his more violent emotions.

"I have dreams sometimes," Daenara said. "Dreams as I used to have of your father; only they are about you." She looked to him fretfully. "I fear I will lose you as I lost him."

A slight cough had him at her side instantly. "Mother, you are ill and not strong enough for this agitation," he said, leading her over to a chair.

"He was not always that way," she said, sitting down.

"The afternoon is fine," Deacon said, desiring to spare them both the unhappy direction in which the conversation was turning. "Would you like to walk a while? I will go with you if it pleases you."

"He was a good man once," she said.

"Do not speak of him. Rest. Please."

"Will you bring me some water?" asked Daenara, seeing him distressed, wanting to give him a task.

Though he had only vague remembrance of his father, Deacon had been sufficiently informed to loathe any talk of the man with whom he was far too closely associated. Éomus and Daenara had kept nothing from him, knowing that if they did not tell him, they must attempt to conceal it from him, which he would have no doubt perceived as betrayal.

Deacon fetched a glass of water for his mother. His hand touched hers as he steadied the glass and he thought how frail her hands suddenly appeared to him, yet they were as perfectly soft as he remembered them in his childhood. It distressed him that the veins were becoming more prominent; they seemed almost swollen beneath the translucent skin. She suffered still

the poisonous effects of evil. The elves had sustained her all these years, but she had grown weaker each passing one. At times she frightened Deacon, falling into terrible fevers from which she recovered more slowly each time. Watching her slowly wither made his chest ache with a persistent and constant pain. It hurt him to see her fade away, while the elves remained unchanging.

Sipping the water, Daenara spoke no more of her foreboding, but Deacon could see she was still afflicted with dark thoughts. Drawing a chair up very close to hers, he seated himself and took her hands firmly in his own. "I'll not make his mistakes," he said, determined, placing her hand to his lips. Her eyes that met his with appreciation looked tired but retained their strength.

Deacon arose the minute Éomus made his presence known and gave him only a brief and cool acknowledgement. Deacon's thoughts about the elves were often inaccurate and unreasonable, but for all that, he at times touched onto the truth with painful accuracies. He thought them frozen in their perfection, and elves did, at times, act disdainfully towards the younger races. However, many elves themselves would be the first to admit they were not free from vices. They were aware that, while time brings forth understanding and wisdom, just because a being is old does not mean that he is wise.

He gave his mother's hand a parting pressure and took himself outside, taking a solitary walk as he often did. He felt insignificant here, his existence seeming to account for nothing. He was envious of the more finished race that surpassed him in speed and strength and longevity. It seemed a cruel trick in nature that not only had they more time, but they excelled at a quicker rate, far beyond what humans could hope to achieve. Unlimited desire but limited means seemed a permanent condition of humankind.

Rivens were a proud race, and this trait had found itself in Deacon. By sheer brute force he could bend magical energies to his will, but he had yet to learn how to focus his efforts so as not to expend unnecessary energy. He had often thrown himself into a fever, driving himself to the absolute limits of his endurance. His magical energies were interwoven with his

lifeforce, and they were drawn on simultaneously. This was his unique source of strength. However, where an ordinary mage might only exhaust his magical resources, a Riven could deplete entirely his lifeforce and end his own life.

Finding a comfortable place alone in the woods, Deacon sat down against a tree. The wind was laden with fresh woodland scents and seemed to give reprieve from his thoughts. His attention was caught by an odd little bug that settled on the back of his hand. A faint, one-sided smile touched his lips. The bug had furry little feelers and feet that gave the appearance of boots. He watched with gentle fascination as it crawled along his finger, unaware of its observer. Suddenly it flew off but did not get very far. It had got itself tangled in an intricate net of silk thread.

Crouching down for closer observation, Deacon watched as the spider rapidly secured its prey. Seized in the sticky thread, the insect did not stand a chance against the swift-moving spider. Its legs all buckled up as the venom began to immobilize it, yet still it fought vigorously for its right to live.

Deacon would remove it from the web, but to save the life of the insect would be to take away the sustenance for the spider. With a dark expression of pity, he watched the insect struggle. He thought it a flawed system that life must take life to sustain itself. The ceaseless and monotonous buzzing drove him half-wild. With a flick, Deacon set aflame his own hand, meaning to put them both out of the misery of existence, when he saw not far off, Mariwen drifting through the trees.

Immediately he clenched his fist, snuffing out the flame. She had not yet perceived him there and strolled leisurely in the fair day, evidently with light and pleasant thoughts. Wearing a dress of the palest green she was a lovely vision to behold.

Chapter 11

Mariwen

Deacon turned to make his way through the woods in the opposite direction, hoping that Mariwen would not see him. He felt too often with her the sting of disappointment. However, he had betrayed his presence by the slightest noise, and she called to him, asking if he would join her. The lilting musical voice cut through him like smooth glass, yet he found he could not deny her request.

Together they walked along an intimate path under an arch of trees. As Mariwen walked contently, Deacon steadily regarded her, his mood intense. He envied her sense of belonging. She was content and happy here. This was her home. Every aspect of the woods appeared to delight her, and he was jealous of everything that took her attention away from him. He desired that he should be the source of her pleasure.

"You look as though you belong to the wood," he said, bringing her attention to himself. Her solitary musing was a great bitterness to him.

"I do," she said smiling, "and I shall spend all my days here."

As she moved away to touch one of the trees, Deacon let his hand gently catch the skirt of her dress, letting the light folds slip though his fingers. He watched as she kindly fondled the draping foliage. In her every movement was beauty and subtlety. Despite his aversion to the elves, her loveliness was the one beauty to captivate him. She was not grave like the others but free and elusive as the wind. For many years he had known

Mariwen but seldom did he see her. She dwelled often in the realm of her father's people. Her absences only increased his longing for her.

"We should seek often to be alone with nature," said Mariwen, resting her hand on the tree, "and she will whisper to us her secrets."

"She does not wish to speak to me nor share her secrets."

"You must be patient."

"To what end?" he asked, frustrated.

"She will in time," replied Mariwen, rejoining him. "But only so far as you are willing to listen."

The conversation threw him into a peculiar state of agitation, and they were quiet for some time. Quite absorbed in her he was not content to walk at her shoulder. He wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her. He did neither. Something in her manner was always capable of keeping him at a distance. Not once had he laid a hand on her. There was an ever present divide between them he could not close, though he desperately wanted to.

He marvelled, not without some bitterness, at the hardness of her heart, despite her fair and yielding form. Soon his gaze shifted from Mariwen—to look upon her gave him a longing in his heart that only caused him pain. She glanced over, and Deacon knew she saw the same dark, disappointed look she had often seen.

"Upon what thought does your mind linger?" she asked. "I see sadness in your eyes."

Deacon, conscious of growing pale, was annoyed at himself for revealing any sign of weakness. He glanced at her, then away from her questioning gaze. Finally he spoke brutally plainly. "I was thinking how much I want to leave here."

"Why is it that you wish to leave?"

"I cannot breathe here," he said with a look of ill-disguised aversion. "But I cannot abandon my mother."

"Her health fails her still?"

Deacon nodded once, leaving his head inclined, and compressing his lips painfully.

"Do not despair," she said sorrowfully. "Your mother is strong and here we have the best healers in all the world." After

a moment of silence, Mariwen asked, "Is she content here? Your mother?"

"She is."

"Then why are you not?"

Deacon exhaled discontentedly before answering. "There is nothing here for me, beyond my mother. She alone keeps me from leaving."

The last he spoke almost insolently, searching Mariwen's face for any sign of hurt. There was none, and his face grew hard.

"There is nothing here for you?" she repeated plaintively.

"There is nothing," he said cruelly. She had caused him so much suffering it was easy for him to be cruel.

"Does she know this is your feeling?"

"I would not burden her," he said simply, but the cost of his effort in sparing his mother was plain on his face, and Mariwen felt a great affection for him in that moment. Gradually their walking slowed until they stopped entirely and stood facing one another under the mottled shade of the trees.

"What makes you so miserable here?" Mariwen asked. "What is it you seek?"

"I don't know," Deacon answered. Besides her, he didn't know what he was looking for. "Glory, honour, renown," he said, as though they were standard aspirations of men. "I want to be far from the wretchedness of common existence." The last he said with a kind of disgust, a fear and detestation of mediocrity.

"What is common about your existence?" she said with a smile.

He had no answer, and she could see how he suffered.

"My mind is restless, I hardly know for what," he said at last. "The days are passing, and I have not yet fathomed for what purpose they are given to me. I have a longing, a craving, and I cannot tell for what. Do not tell me to listen for it in the rain or the whisper of the leaves." He was restless and intolerant.

"You must be patient. It is our greatest defence against sorrow and our greatest virtue," she said in a tone that irritated Deacon in his present mood. He wanted comfort, and she gave him counsel.

Mariwen was young, younger than he, but she thought him to have young eyes as yet and believed she should lead and correct him. Deacon thought it did not bother him, but deep below the surface he was nettled. He hated her way of patiently dealing with him and her lofty sense of superiority.

"And how do you suppose that?" he asked, trying to keep his temper. "I consider patience neither sustaining nor praiseworthy."

"Patience enables us to bear all things," said Mariwen, "and is the foundation for all the virtues. Therefore, it is the greatest. It is what my people have always endeavoured to maintain."

Deacon frowned. "It must be very easy to be patient when you are gifted with time," he said with a sharpness that silenced her. Mariwen lightly rested her open palm on his cheek, and he felt his chest expand with a rush of fresh air, filling his senses with the scent of the woods. Closing his eyes with relief, he hadn't realized how hard-clenched he was until softened under her tenderness.

"Do not give way to hopelessness," she said. "In time all things will come into our understanding."

In her expression was such sweetness, Deacon began to feel confident in her affection for him. Her fingers brushed over his cheek, light as a feather. The pleasure which her touch afforded was rarely felt by him. The very notion of holding her made his blood beat fiercely. It was so strong a desire he felt he would burst out in brutality, but he would rather go without her forever than do her any harm and knew a strong hand would only drive her further away from him. He would have to be patient and pin her delicate wings subtly with a gentle hand.

Chapter 12

Ailment

In a grove of immense trees Deacon stood, trying to quiet his mind. A stream of sunlight filtered brilliantly through the golden foliage. A carpet of leaves lay at his feet. Lightly, he laid his hand upon one of the thick, stately trunks, and with an audible sigh, waited; listening. There was nothing: no divine wisdom, no whisperings, nor any such revelation, only an intense silence that seemed to envelop him. Presently there was a slight stirring, a breezy whisper, imperceptibly soft, more of a sigh, lost almost amongst the rustling of the leaves. Always just a little out of articulative range, it was too elusive for him to grasp.

Standing alone Deacon felt that his presence was an intrusion and that Nature was withholding from him, denying him. The more he seemed to press her, the more she would turn from him. His presence was nothing to her. She was laughing at him.

Deacon took himself down to the part of the woods where the elves forged weapons. Thankfully, no one was there. When Deacon was not with his mother he often came here and laboured all through the day, crafting all manner of things. There were two reasons he worked so decidedly hard: one was to keep himself occupied and his mind free from painful reflections, and the other was to exhausted himself, so that he would sleep through the ghastly, deathful nights, when he was alone with only his thoughts.

With rapid expertise, Deacon turned and hammered the red-glowing metal. His hair, heavy with smoke and sweat, fell into

eyes that were intent and concentrated. The sleeves rolled up above his elbows showed muscular forearms covered in a sheen of sweat. His hands, covered in smoke-smudge, were strong and fine, capable of works of great skill.

He had forged two fine swords for his cousins, Cedrik and his younger brother Derek, who was born much later. For their sister, Brielle, he had beautifully crafted a delicate bracelet from the finest of materials, though she was probably fit to wield a sword of her own. It had been several years since he last saw his cousins. His mother could not endure the journey even by portal, which Deacon had sometimes used to visit by himself when she was not well enough to accompany him, but it was a form of travel he rarely used. He despised being dependent on using Éomus's magic.

Although his visits to the Imperial were few in number and short in duration, Deacon enjoyed every moment with his cousins. Many times he would resolve that this time he would not return to the elven realm, that he would stay with his cousins, seek his own fortune, and take the road he would choose. But then he would think of his mother and her ailing health, left behind to endure without him, and his resolve would fail him.

"Choose your mode of death," said a young, tall elf, with the steel of his blade held at the throat of Deacon. Deacon looked at Lufian with a blank fixed expression. He saw the shining mockery come over Lufian's face. "Do not become discouraged. You may yet find means to defeat me . . . or has Éomus's training been all for naught?"

Deacon watched him steadily. Then, with a slow motion, he willed a similar weapon to his hand. Lufian gleamed for a moment with pleasure, as if the gesture was made specially to please him. Then he assumed a ready pose. Though it was a pointless exercise, Deacon could never resist a challenge from Lufian, so the two men began to spar.

They were very dissimilar. Lufian was narrow, very thin and fine. Deacon was much heavier and more solid. He had a frictional, invincible kind of strength, whilst Lufian seemed to have a fluid, subtle energy, almost intangible, that worked against the other man with uncanny force, like a spell. He

wielded the sword in a tense, fine grip, with quick, dazzling movements, and with such agility and dexterity it was difficult for Deacon to maintain a competitive pace.

With a swift, sudden motion, Lufian flung Deacon's weapon out of his grasp to the ground. Lufian had not broken a sweat, had not a hair out of place, and was clear and white, but Deacon was flushed red and tense. He seemed astonished. Lufian with the tip of his boot flicked the sword up into his hand and offered it back to Deacon. Deacon stood a moment, sorely affronted; then, with a sudden volcanic speed, he snatched the sword and the contest resumed with greater intensity than before.

Lufian, with a lightning twist of the wrist, sent Deacon's weapon hurtling through the air. "Once again," gloated the elf, his point levelled at Deacon. Both glanced down at the weapon lying far from reach. Swifter than thought, Deacon brought it to his grasp with an outreached hand and threw his shoulder into Lufian's chest.

"It surprises me little that you should have to resort to magic!" snarled Lufian and again knocked it out of Deacon's hand. A slight fatigue showed at last on Lufian's clear brow. Deacon was much more exhausted. He could scarcely breathe any more. He snatched up the hilt of his sword, then, without apology or word of any sort, strode away.

"It's only a game!" called Lufian. He gave the sword a flip in the air and re-caught the handle, a smile crossing his fine lips. In truth, he hardly liked the human, and the sport always gratified his pride.

The sun was beginning to fade, illuminating the woods with the golden hue an autumn sunset lends. Before returning home to his mother, Deacon scrubbed himself clean of the smoke-smudge and grime over his face and arms. Fresh and clean, the evening air cool on his skin, he dashed up the pearlescent stairs leading to the house held aloft by strong branches of the elven-trees. It was a magnificent home with many open rooms, allowing plenty of air and light. Deacon found his mother half-reclining on a long chair beneath a canopy; one look at her and instantly he knew something was wrong. She was listless and pallid in completion. Even the sight of her son failed to rouse her.

* * *

A long fever gripped Daenara and left her so weak that there was little hope of full recovery. Her days passed in a state of listlessness sad to witness. Deacon did little else but watch over her, staying at the bedside, as though he could will her back to health, and loathed every moment that did not find him at her side. The elven healers had done all they could for the present. There was nothing for him to do but wait.

Éomus was downstairs. He put himself aside for the moment, leaving Deacon to spend what precious time he had left with his mother. She had declined into a state of unconsciousness, and it was not certain she would recover. Éomus had offered to retrieve Deacon's uncle, but he wanted no one.

In the subdued light of night, Deacon sat by his mother, leaning over her bed. He lay with his cheek on his forearm, his face near to hers. There he waited, motionless, with eyes dark and tender, his countenance grown wan and grim from watching and grief. Her sleeping face was smooth and peaceful. His fingers wandered over her cheek pitifully. He had difficulty convincing himself that he was losing her. Her existence was so very much a part of his own.

"Do not leave me," he whispered, as one murmurs unconsciously in sleep. There were long intervals between the lift of one breath and the next, so that he feared each was the last. He put his fingers to her lips, tinged a strange hue, and shut his eyes tightly to prevent himself from being overcome.

He soon became aware of Éomus standing near at his side. Slowly sitting up, Deacon pinched his fingers into the corners of his eyes and recollected himself before facing him.

"You should get some sleep," Éomus said, resting his hand on his shoulder in a fatherly gesture. "The human frame cannot endure."

Deacon set his jaw against the reference to human frailty but said nothing. Sick with pain he rose feebly. He stood looking down on his mother miserably. He didn't want to leave her, and sleep was not something attainable, but he knew also that Éomus needed to be with her for a time.

Éomus watched the young man whose look was becoming more inverted each passing day and felt deep concern. He loved

him as well as his own, but there was a film of ice between them that he could not break through. He could foresee Deacon closing himself off further still. He feared that Deacon would be consumed to the point of self-obliteration and that he would lose him along with Daenara.

"Deacon," he said, "loss is a natural part of existence. We mustn't forget those around us who still live."

"You speak as though she is already dead," said Deacon quietly, but with burning vehemence.

"No—but you grieve as though she were. And I fear you are in danger of being overcome by dwelling excessively on the pain."

For a moment the two men stood opposite each other: one tense and resentful, the other grave and aggrieved.

Daenara stirred slightly. Both looked down on her and decided to take their conversation out of the room.

"Profuse sorrowing," said Éomus the moment he closed the door behind him, "destroys the strength of the body and the health of the mind. And, if you're not careful, it has an embittering effect on the soul."

Deacon turned very cold and hard. It was not in his understanding how Éomus could appear so calm at such a time. His eyes remained fixed on Éomus, expressing hurt and anger as he spoke. "How can you carry on with your usual composure and feel nothing, while the woman you claim to love lies dying in your bed. Are you so cold in your perfection!"

The serene brow showed dismay at last. "You have mistaked me all this while," Éomus said, in a tone of plaintive reproof. "I live with breath as you, feel want, taste the bitterness of grief. I am subjected to these as you! Only I do not understand why you should add further affliction to grief by turning from me." He stepped toward Deacon but did not touch him, saying with an expression deeply afflicted, "Why are you so anxious to be from me when I need you now the most?"

For the first time Deacon felt a tide of affection for Éomus come over him. Only by the clenching of his jaw and the unshed tears in his eyes could it be told how much moved he was.

"Will she die without regaining consciousness?" he asked at length.

"I am unable to say."

The two stood in the hallway, momentarily wordless.

"Take comfort," said Éomus, resting his hand on Deacon as he spoke. "In times such as these we must turn to higher realms for guidance and courage. May they be your strength when sorrows bear down hard upon you."

Deacon wanted none of it. What were these gods that they should do as they please with the frail beings they created?

The next morning Deacon rose unrested. His whole being seemed beaten down. Coming to stand at his mother's door, he knocked lightly; hearing Éomus tell him to enter, he pushed it half-open. The morning sun poured in on a made and empty bed, and for an instant his heart ceased to beat. Abruptly he pushed the door fully open.

He saw Éomus standing by the balcony, and sitting there also was his mother. Almost he lost his breath in relief, and as she rose unsteadily, he closed the short distance between them, taking her in his arms. Only for a moment she held him and kissed him, then withdrew to look at his face. She hadn't much strength to speak and said, trying to sound quite normal, "You look a terrible sight." She touched her fingertips to his face, rough and unshaven.

"You look beautiful," he said softly, overcome. She smiled wearily, and he helped her back into the chair. Her movements were unsteady and full of suffering, killing all joy and relief for him. He would have taken the pain himself if he could.

Chapter 13

Ill Informed

In a vast room splendidly furnished, Éomus stood at the side of one of the elven leaders, Aldar, a dignified man with high cheek bones, pale eyes, and flowing silver-grey hair. He said to Éomus, "If my counsel is to be heeded, nothing shall be kept from him. However, the choice lies with you." Éomus looked a moment as if he might protest, then looking resigned, inclined his head.

Out in the hallway Deacon waited, anxious to know why he had been summoned. Aldar would not have sent for him with reference to any small matter. Nevertheless he retained his composure, his eyes fastened on the door, which was soon opened to him. When he entered he found himself in the presence of the two elven men. Aldar had his back turned, facing the window, while Éomus looked grieved. Deacon stood a moment, waiting for one of them to speak. Great windows displayed a beautiful view of woodland and a magnificent flowing waterfall. However, such a prospect did nothing to dissolve the tension in his heart. He feared they were to inform him of something regarding his mother.

"Perhaps you should seat yourself," said Aldar.

Deacon did as he was instructed. Both the elven men looked upon him, and there was an intense silence, as if they feared to tell him something crucial. "If there is anything that I hate, it is a mystery," he said, trying to keep from the angry impatience that deep anxiety breeds.

"You must prepare yourself for distressing tidings," Éomus told him with dismay.

"Whatever I must bear."

"It has come to our recent attention," began Aldar, "that a man whom was long looked upon as being dead . . . " he paused, seeing the young man's face had become very pale.

"My father," said Deacon, haltingly, and with the intensity of a hate that had been nourished over many years. "He still lives."

"The council betrayed none of this to any outside their own. It was by mere chance we discovered Luseph's circumstance."

Deacon sat silently as the truth slowly came upon him. Black cloud after black cloud shrouded his mind, until his entire countenance was as dark as his thoughts. "Does she know?" he asked, thinking of his mother.

"Yes," said Éomus.

"Why did she keep it from me?" Deacon asked, though he could guess why. A dangerous thought entered his mind and his whole manner immediately changed, becoming feverishly determined. "Where is he?" he demanded through compressed lips, the heavy beating in his chest making his words uneven. Éomus had a look of misgiving and did not speak. Deacon rose agitatedly to his feet, not liking to have to look up at them. He repeated more forcefully, "Where is he?"

"Luseph chose to retreat to the country for his confinement," Aldar said calmly. "There, eyes shall seldom see him."

The elven men were looking at Deacon with closed expressions, and he could not fail to understand that they were disinclined to reveal the location of his father. "You have no confidence in me," he stated angrily.

"Pause a moment, regain your clarity," said Éomus, concerned by the feverish flare of Deacon's eye and the unnatural calm of his manner. He was trying for the appearance of composure, but his whole attitude betrayed deep resentment. Not a muscle of his face relaxed as he spoke.

"What was the punishment before his confinement?"

"His punishment was self-embraced," said Aldar. "His body was shattered and destroyed to spare your life." As he spoke,

Aldar took himself over by the window, a gesture intended to quench conversation.

"Which he endangered to begin with," Deacon said, not letting it be ended there. "It is because of him that she's dying! He must be punished!" His voice rose a pitch higher when Aldar refused to face him.

Éomus spoke calmly. "He has been punished."

Deacon's gaze shifted furiously, and he said, low and hateful, "On his terms. Where is the justice in that?" He looked at Aldar again. "You say he has been punished, but the only person who has the right to say so is the one who suffered the injustice."

"Self-reproach is the bitterest of all punishments," said Éomus, maintaining his calm. "Think of the wound to his conscience, the inward suffering and torment he must bear."

Deacon choked back some harsh words and started for the door.

"Deacon," Éomus called to him. He paused but did not turn, his back rigid. "Rise above your father's mistakes, or fall into shadow."

Deacon's chin fell to his chest in a kind of angry defeat. Then he left.

He did not return home directly but found an isolated part of the woods, where he stood overwhelmed with rage. A sense of injustice burned within his chest, and he could think of nothing but killing the man who shared his blood but not his spirit. Night fell, and it grew dark all around him. No beast could have torn at him more mercilessly than did his own outrage. He could feel the hate so intensely within him that it must find vent or it would consume him. Then came a voice as soft as the evening breeze, almost whispering his name. Lifting his gaze Deacon winced as though stepping out of dark shadow into strong light. Coming toward him through darkened trees, like a pure ray of light, was Ellendria, whose white radiance and beauty defied all description. She was many years older than her brother and was almost an ethereal being. When elves have accomplished all they can on this plain of existence, they transcend it and resonate with higher realms.

Resplendent in a white flowing gown, Ellendria was the embodiment of grace and stillness. She spoke nothing, but

Deacon found her grey eyes directed toward him in a way that gave him the uneasy consciousness she was reading his innermost thoughts. Under her gaze he stood unnaturally, tense and hostile. Feeling his mind intruded upon, he sought to banish all dark reflections.

"Our deeds carry terrible consequences," Ellendria said. "Be mindful of such thoughts."

Deacon's expression darkened. There was hate in it. Her intrusion provoked him beyond all endurance. He did not suspect his thoughts revealed their blackness through his features.

"Should you allow them to persist," she said, "they will exercise mastery over you, until such that you cannot avoid attempting to fulfil their desire."

A rage filled slowly within him like some consuming, scathing poison. Before her lofty superiority he felt subdued, bowed, and emasculated. He braved her eyes and said bitterly, "Why should I not? All those years I have wanted to kill him and now I can. Why do you look concerned for me? I will make him suffer and be glad for it. He has brought it upon himself."

"Those, perhaps, will be the feelings in the first moments, but time will prove the reality of the evil, and then there will be no satisfaction, no rest. The pain will turn so far inward you will begin to lose all sense of self, till there is nothing left of you but a vague memory. Carry that always in your mind."

A beam of moonlight shed cold silver over her features, and Deacon looked away from her pale eyes. There was a fire in them, but it was the cold, silver–white fire of the moon, which he felt she emitted against him. Her persistent gaze stung him with sharp, cold flames, and he wanted to be away from her; feeling her brilliance would destroy him as light destroys darkness.

"After everything he has done, I'm supposed to let him walk free?" he asked.

"We cannot change the past," she said, her voice intensely calm.

"No. But we can see that justice is rendered, wound for wound."

"You do not seek justice. You design to gratify your own will."

"It matters little what I want," Deacon said, defeated, his manner deceptively calm. "Éomus will not tell me where Luseph is. Damn him! That miserable coward hides away, while my mother must fight for her life!"

He looked up at Ellendria with eyes black with torture. Not for an instant did her countenance lose its look of grave patience, and a wild desire flared in his chest. He wanted to lay hold of her, hurt her, till he forced a cry of humiliation. His rage became so black and so powerful within him that for an instant he felt as if he might destroy her. He wanted to rend her apart, make her into nothing.

Inwardly Ellendria shrank from him, though he hadn't so much as advanced a step. It was the felt darkness in him that affected her. She was afraid of him in that moment, and the knowledge of it was both pleasure and shame to him. He stood seething with his poisoned thoughts, and for a moment entertained the wild idea of seizing Ellendria in his hands. Impassioned to the point of intolerable anger, with no outlet, he was past the point where he could risk standing here another moment. With visible effort he suppressed the half-mad desire to force from her some sign of emotion, anything but this white-cold perfection, and made his way home.

Quietly he stole into the house like a guilty shadow. Inside he moved stealthily for fear of disturbing his mother, but she was already awake and waiting for him, cast in subdued light. He was passing the doorway when she called his attention to herself.

"You've been gone a long while," she said, pensively.

"I know. I'm sorry." He drifted into the room. He could tell from her expression that she was aware he knew about his father. Wearily, Deacon rubbed his lip. He could see that she wanted to talk. He glanced back at the door that would lead him to his solitude, which he desired more than company at this moment, then inhaled deeply, resigning himself. Dragging up a chair, Deacon sat opposite his mother, his knees on either side of hers.

"So you know," he said plainly. He did not want to be impatient with her. Waiting for her to say something, he sat

uneasy. Not once did she lift her gaze from his hand that she held in her own.

"I don't know if it is within me to forgive him," she said weakly, passing her fingers over the scar on his palm. "But you have to understand it was never his intention to hurt you as he did."

Deacon saw, from her face and from the nervous clasp of her hands, that she was deeply distressed, and took her hands to still them. "It's not myself that I care about—" His mother's gaze lifted to meet his, and upon seeing her comprehending grief, he was unable to finish the sentence. His expression hardened, and with a startling suddenness he was angry again. "He should have been protecting you!" He rose sharply to his feet, tearing his hand away from hers. "Why is everyone protecting him!"

Daenara sank back in her chair and looked up at Deacon with helpless and aggrieved eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said, inflicting a brutal rubbing on his face. "I'm tired. I will get to bed."

Deacon took his leave with a brief kiss on his mother's lips. Not attempting to keep him further, Daenara remained awhile, her heart aching. She could feel him losing himself to hate.

From the balcony that extended from his room, Deacon looked out over the woods illumined by the soft glow of night-lamps, which shone like silver stars in the trees. It was a beautiful and serene atmosphere. Down below he could see elves carrying hanging lamps, singing their hymns, while drifting with such royal sagacity throughout the peaceful trees. Elves, requiring only a few hours' repose, sang long into the night.

Deacon inhaled deeply. Certain flowers here only bloomed at night under the moon and filled the air with a heavy, pungent perfume, which seemed so a part of the darkness it was as though he breathed the night itself.

The woods here were elegant and opulent, but Deacon was hardened against their beauty. He was living in what many believed perfection, yet he had a persistent sensation that behind all that beauty and flowers and appearance of harmony and happiness, lay treachery. Nature had become his antagonist. Living among the elves, Deacon was acutely aware of his mother's and his own mortality and lived bitterly beneath the

shadow of time. The elves were blind. They did not know what it was to age and die.

Far from these woods there was a tree, an immense and ancient tree, that Deacon had been told of over the years. It was said that this tree was the physical manifestation of life's essence, haunted by the elemental spirits that govern all of nature. They could not be seen but felt intuitively by those who allowed it. Their bodies, made of an etheric substance, could not be killed. However, with disastrous consequences, their connection to one another could be severed. The source of their connection was this great and tremendous tree. If it was to be destroyed they would be separated from one another. Nature would despair. Sometimes, when his fury was roused against the elves, dangerous thoughts entered his mind. Deacon indulged his fancy but did not for an instant believe he would go through with such an unforgivable act.

Chapter 14

An Elven Celebration

In a moonlit garden a graceful gathering of elves came together to celebrate the earth. Otherworldly music, wistfully arresting and enchanting, was carried on the breeze and filled the woods with its lilting allure. Neighbouring elves from Myrthwood and Evandale had joined the divertissement, and the garden and entire surrounding woods were filled with elegant, informal gatherings of those who had not seen one another for long intervals. Ellendria and Aldar were also there. They maintained a certain manner that was owing to their station but otherwise faded in with the many others.

Daenara sat by the edge of an elegant fountain, overflowing with water glistening like liquid silver. Éomus was at her side. She wore a lovely gown the colour of primrose. Not far from her Deacon sat, dark-clad and handsome, on stone steps that led down into the garden where little fire-flies hovered, glowing gold in the night. Throughout the garden a sumptuous banquet was laid out on platters of fine silver. Serving-maidens presented themselves when needed, keeping the glasses flowing with wine.

Sitting alone, forearms resting on his knees, Deacon was withdrawn, distant and watchful. The object of his attention was Mariwen, who was in the handsome company of Valdur and Aldur, the sons of Aldar and Ellendria. Mariwen was quite different to those she gathered with. Her face sweet and luminous, she was like the glory of morning, while they had the grace of evening. Every one of her movements, the way

she put her lips to the fine rim of the glass, and the way she touched Valdur's arm, Deacon watched. His face was passive and expressionless, but he suffered.

Occasionally his gaze would shift to his mother and he would feel glad. She looked at peace and comfortable, listening to the elves' lilting intonations, which seemed to bathe her soul in their beauty. She sank a little against Éomus, and he caressed her hand and arm with the lightest brush of fingertips. Deacon grimaced to himself and turned his gaze aside. He had an unfathomable aversion to Éomus touching his mother.

All the elven children, who were not very childish, played about the garden, and Deacon was obliged to move his glass of wine from the step several times so the children could pass. It happened often enough that Deacon finally decided to abandon his seat and stood up. The moment he did it seemed Mariwen suddenly noticed his existence, for she immediately looked his way, and with a sweet smile came forward, weaving through the crowd unfalteringly to get to him. He stood watching her come toward him and felt a flush of heat. He thought her love the most precious a man could possess.

She took his hand and led him unhesitatingly toward the company she had momentarily abandoned. Although Deacon would rather she had led him into the woods so they might be alone, he yielded to her will, half-dazed. The haunting music ever drifted through the air, but a sweeter music played in his ears, and he was blind to all else but the maiden drawing him. It seemed to Deacon that the party's spirit had affected her, for she was exquisitely interested in him, glancing often over her shoulder, eyes adance with the sparkling lights of the stars.

Deacon came back to a sense of himself, to find he was welcomed into Mariwen's gathering of friends. He did not share their gracious enthusiasm, and for a moment the gentle group was oppressed by his dominating presence, conscious of his cynicism. Condemned to their society, he stood, silent and inscrutable, but he had the loveliest of consolations. Mariwen was at his side. Occasionally he looked down at her hand that hung so near to his. It lay there so near, yet out of his reach. He wanted to take it up and claim her and have every right to her.

The conversation at last broke off. Mariwen, leaving with Aldur, asked Deacon to join them. He declined, remaining where he was, hoping she would remain with him. She chose instead to leave, and Deacon felt a stab of jealousy. To keep the indifference in his attitude was a challenge.

As the evening drew on Deacon saw that his mother had become excessively weary, the bloom worn off her cheek, and his heart grew sore. Her frailty was a cruel, piteous contrast to the undimishing beauty of the elves. As he looked at his mother with troubled eyes, she happened to look over at him and gave a soft, reassuring smile. Therein was his stability, comfort, and sustaining warmth. He felt a flush of love for her and returned the smile with his own.

The hour was late, the minutes dragging on endlessly. Deacon sat with his hands hanging lifelessly between his knees, head down, absent and engrossed in thoughts that were soon forgotten. His attention was captured by several elven maidens who drifted subtly into the garden like mist of the moon. They carried with them white flowing veils. Their lovely forms were draped in pale gowns, so light it seemed moonlight itself clothed them.

They did not, as any human maiden would, observe with pleasure the effect of their beauty, but were devoted to the pleasures of dance, scarcely aware that they were not alone. The night air became alive and vibrant. To the enchanting music the maidens danced, their slender limbs like branches swaying in the evening breeze, gracefully manipulating the veils, which seemed an extension of themselves. There was a graceful fluidity of movement in the dance, entrancing and mysterious.

As though caught in a dream, in a sort of mesmeric state, Deacon watched the unison of flowing femininity. Their beauty affected him subtly, like the night air he breathed, and seemed to awaken his blood. They had his attention, yet they had no possession of his heart. They were vague and unreal to his eyes, too faultless and devoid of any flaw, too utterly elusive. He had been with women of his own kind. They had not been so nearly flawless, or changelessly divine, but they were tangible. He could submerge himself in them and feel responsive warmth and life.

Deacon was so immersed in his occupation, he had not seen his mother retire. When finally he turned his attention, he saw the seat that previously occupied her was empty. He saw Éomus lead her away. She looked unwell, her face white and her movements unsteady. She seemed strangely remote and clinging in his arms.

Deacon didn't follow directly but remained for the end of the dance. Later, he started up the stairs to his home and paused mid-step. He saw on the balcony his mother standing with Éomus, clasped against him, their words low and intimate. In his arms her whole aspect and spirit seemed so at peace and in accord with his, her face so unblemished, that Deacon hoped it might be the promise of returning health. Yet a doubt, a vague feeling of disquiet came to him. In his soul rose despair. He felt weak and rested his hand on the rail to support himself, his heart failing.

Éomus bent and kissed Daenara. The closeness of body and spirit and the everlasting tenderness shared between them was apparent in that moment, and Deacon felt suddenly moved. Swiftly and unnoticed he drew away from the house as if it were a sacred temple in which he had no right to enter. He ventured back into the woods, wandering wherever his will would take him. Coming to a bridge that was serene in the evening light, Deacon's step faltered and his pulse quickened. Mariwen was there by herself. In her he saw promise of satisfying his discontent. He could go to her in pieces and she would make him whole.

He quietly joined her. They stood together, looking out into the luminous night. It held little charm for him, but she was entranced. To her clear sight the night was more beautiful. Down below water shimmered and sparkled. Though he was very near he felt as though he was looking at her from a thousand miles away. Her eyes looked far out, lost in a maiden's dreamy reverie. "It is wonderous, is it not?" She always spoke of evenings most sacredly.

"Yes," he said but found it impossible to fix his attention upon the view, whilst beside him was this angelic form. Never before had she looked so lovely to him. Bathed in soft light she

possessed an unworldly beauty. She glanced over her shoulder as she spoke.

"It is unfortunate the most beautiful part of the night is often missed by humans, lying in their beds."

Deacon hardly attended to her words, merely absorbing her presence. He stood a moment undecided, looking at her adoringly, his heart filled with a hot pain and yearning, so that his entire chest was one painful ache. Hesitantly, he raised his hand to smooth down her hair, which fell in golden waves to her waist, but let the hand drop quietly back down to his side. She did not see. He resented this divided attention, jealous that she could be so content within her own mind, feeling as though she had wandered into a warm enclosure and left him standing out in the cold, doomed to be always on the outside looking in, always waiting, always restraining himself.

He was silent and disappointed. She held herself aloof and beyond him. He wanted her to say something meaningful, to caress him, but she would do neither. Done with waiting, he let his hand stray over to hers on the railing and cover it affectionately. He leaned against her, pressed so very close that she could feel his body, the inert weight of his soul full upon her, bringing her down. He could feel her resistance but was encouraged she had not withdrawn. He stole his hand softly round her waist, pressing her more against him. He was tired of subtle and decided to commit himself irrevocably.

"Do you wish to be with me?" he murmured in her hair, his tone soft and appealing. He was breathing heavily. "I know a place we can go."

She withdrew and saw that he was looking down on her with eyes that spoke of a necessity and urge of the blood no woman could misunderstand. Bending his face very near to hers, he was at the point where in the next moment he would have sought her mouth, but she instead spoke. At the first sound of her voice he flinched, though not visibly.

"Look not to me for companionship," she said sorrowfully, but with a reproach to the sound of her voice that angered him. For a moment he stood breathless. His hand remained on her, but the caress had gone out of it. She could feel his hurt and

unhappiness and knew not what she was to do with him. She was hastening away when he caught her back.

"Why?" he asked, perplexed. "I have not met your equal," he said, intimately, believing perhaps she required reassurance of his devotion. She was unreceptive, and he began to fear now that she was capable only of pleasuring in things of the mind and would never receive him. "You will not have me?" he said, half-tenderly, half-bitterly, something fretful and appealing in his voice. "You do not desire me?"

It was his final effort. He raised his hand toward her lips, but she gently imprisoned it in both her hands. She would not take pleasure in him beyond common discourse. Her heart did not lie with him, therefore neither would her body. Elven kind were deeply committed to those they would make their own, and sought companions who desired to spend the full span of eternity with them, rather than those who would inconsequentially pass them by, giving a fleeting glimpse of joy.

She spoke gravely. "I desire that you should not suffer any hurt or illness and that you should know happiness."

Slowly, he disengaged his hand. She had now made it clear that, whatever he was seeking, he would not find it in her. As she touched his face he strained away, feeling now that she had played with him.

She left him, downhearted and angry, standing alone in the middle of the bridge. The cold light of the moon cast lonely prospects into view, and he felt a vast emptiness all around him and in him.

Chapter 15

The Darkening Of Deacon

When Deacon returned home he was grateful the house was dark and silent in sleep. Éomus and his mother had retired, and he went directly to his own bed. There he lay motionless on his back, conscious only of the great ache in his chest. There was no help for it. This pain was not due to injured vanity but the knowledge that the woman in whom he had placed all his hopes was lost to him forever. Soon his thoughts and emotions became numbed through excessive pain, and finally he succumbed to sleep.

That night in his bed Deacon struggled as though entangled in a hateful dream. It was the same dream that had come upon him often enough. Fighting his way through a vine-entangled wood, with hanging thorn trees, he groped his way toward his mother. The vines had caught her, twining about her wrists and ankles, clinging to her neck, climbing up even to her lips, they cluttered and choked her throat, so that she could not breath. She would be taken from him. He tried to get to her, but try as he would, the tangled mass held him. He fought desperately, wildly. He could not get to her. Finally he broke loose and emerged. Sharp thorns scratched and cut him, even as he tore them from her.

Deacon struggled into consciousness. His thoughts went immediately to his mother, accompanied by an indescribable urgency to go to her. Though he never believed he had inherited his mother's gift of foresight, this dream had impressed on him feelings of dread so strong he couldn't ignore them.

Deacon came to an abrupt stop outside of his mother's chamber doors, trying to decide whether he should disturb them. He had almost talked himself out of his concerned state of mind, but the dread still possessed him. Finally he tapped softly on the door. He was surprised when it opened immediately. Éomus with the gravest expression ushered him in, and he saw his mother lying on the recliner.

Deacon approached her hesitantly. She looked frightening—her face strained and ghastly, with eyes that rolled about without recognition and were never once brought to focus. Her mouth, slightly opened, seemed to gasp feebly for breath, her lips a ghastly hue. Deacon knelt down on one knee, taking her hand.

"Mother, I'm here," said the young man in a choking voice, but she was unconscious of his presence. Momentarily her gaze passed over Deacon, but the sight of him did not rouse or comfort her. Their connection was already broken. Gripped with a numb fear, he could only rub the back of her hand aimlessly. He was helpless to revive her, and he feared what was happening to her body. It seemed she was invaded by some cruel, corrosive evil that was destroying her internally. It was out of his control. Something he could not fight against was taking her away. A helpless terror was rising in him. He glanced back over his shoulder at Éomus, but grief gripped his throat and he was unable to speak.

"The healer has been sent for," Éomus said, knowing what Deacon's eyes were asking for.

Deacon was only vaguely aware of Éomus standing at his side. Everything around him had dissolved from his vision and become blurry. There was only her. He clutched at her hand frantically and placed it on his lips. "Do not leave me here alone." He spoke through clenched teeth, so fiercely it would have been taken for anger if not for the break in his voice and the suffering in his eyes.

The healer was not long in arriving. He did not go to Daenara, but stood at a little distance, watching with a grieved expression that frightened and frustrated Deacon.

"Why do you stand there!" he cried over his shoulder. "Help her!"

The healer exchanged concerned glances with Éomus, then settled his gaze heavily on the disconsolate young man, still clasping his mother's hand, but standing now to face them, a fierceness in his bearing. It seemed a painfully long pause before the healer spoke, and Deacon grew anxious and perplexed at his delay.

"It has come time now," the healer said slowly, with all the regret one would feel in such a position, "that we no longer prolong her life, but her death."

Deacon at once took his meaning, and looking from under dark brows, said, dangerously calmly, "That is not your choice to make." He trembled visibly now. "Do not let her die."

Éomus and the healer remained fixed, with no sign of yielding. Releasing his mother, Deacon took several impassioned steps toward them. "I have practised your ways. I have done everything you have ever asked of me." Angry tears flew into his eyes. "Now help her!"

For a moment the room was deathly quiet but for the sound of the rasped and laboured breathing of the dying woman. Anger suddenly gave way to grief, and in utter desperation, Deacon turned to Éomus. "Don't let her die," he pleaded. Éomus was torn with an evident conflict within himself. "Éomus," said Deacon, an agonized appeal. "Help her. Please."

There was a collapse in his voice, and all the pride had left his features, replaced with a look of such bitter grief it cut Éomus deeply. He looked down at the strong hand that clasped his arm and said to Deacon, "Wait outside for the moment, and I will help your mother." His voice was so low it was barely audible. Deacon was rendered stunned momentarily; then feeling some sense of relief, he nodded. A look akin to admiration was in his expression as he looked to Éomus with thankfulness.

"All right," was Deacon's breathless reply. With great reluctance to leave her, he obeyed, casting a mistrustful and angered glance toward the healer as he left.

Dragging in long, restorative breaths, Deacon walked down a little way from the house, pacing like a caged wolf, suffering the torment of inaction. Though it felt an eternity, he had not long been here before being approached by a young elven healer. The gravity of his expression alerted Deacon before words were even spoken. He set off at a dead run, tearing up the pearlescent stairs to his mother. Pale eyes were turned on him the moment he entered, elven healers gathered round the bed, all looking toward him with grave expressions. He stood panting and stunned. He was too late. His mother lay lifeless.

Caught in a grief too complex to articulate, Éomus could only look to Deacon with commiserating eyes, filled with infinite sadness. He thought now, upon seeing Deacon's face—knowing he was too late—that perhaps he had made a mistake in sending him out, but he knew also that Deacon would have interfered.

Deacon did not go over to his mother but stood motionless, vaguely conscious of hands being laid on him consolingly and voices expressing their sorrow. His face remained closed and set. No tears came to his relief, and without uttering a single word, he turned and left the room.

In the grove where the elves gathered to mourn Daenara, Deacon was not to be seen. From the shadows where he stood, he could hear the elves singing, a strange blending of exultation and sadness. Their accents were pure and perfect, like crystal touched by moonlight. The powerful notes of their harmonizing reverberated throughout Deacon's being and continued steadily to build in intensity with each painful throb, until an acute pain rose from the farthest recess of his soul and gripped his throat so tight he could not draw an easy breath.

It became almost impossible to contain the swell of emotions, expanding, till he felt his heart would rupture inside of him. His eyes strained painfully under the pressure of tears denied their release. He felt as though something vital had been taken from him, never to be returned. The elfmaidens' crystal voices thrilled along the cords to his heart and lacerated it with their perfect pitch. With a bleeding heart, Deacon stole silently into the night.

* * *

Much later, Éomus became deeply concerned for Deacon. He had not seen him in many hours and ventured out into the woods to find him. There he was, leaning with his shoulder against a tree, his arms clasped round his body, head down-bent. He looked as if he had been standing in that same position a long time, and Éomus thought he never looked more alone and never more estranged. He did not lift his face at Éomus's approach. Finally he spoke in a mixture of question and accusation.

"It was never your intention to save her," he said, his voice strangled in his throat. "Was it?" He raised his eyes to meet Éomus with an unswavering enmity.

It was a moment before Éomus could find his voice. "It was her time," he answered.

Nodding silently, Deacon dropped his chin again, pressing his lips shut. Tears gathered in his eyes, and he turned his head sharply to hide them. The release of emotion in company hurt him as it hurts a man. He suddenly looked up. "Damn you." He choked with rage. "Damn you and the rest of your kind."

Éomus stood disconsolate, not daring to approach Deacon, who had returned to his former posture against the tree, only not with a desolate misery in his bearing, but a fierce animosity, a stiffness in the neck and shoulders of a man on the brink of violence.

"It was not a falsehood when I said I would help her," said Éomus. "She did not die suffering."

Deacon understood now Éomus had used magic to either ease her suffering or perhaps to end her misery swiftly. Either way he cursed himself for leaving her alone with the traitors.

There was a long interval of unbroken silence, before Éomus said, "I will leave you now and let you seek counsel."

"I care nothing for your deities," Deacon muttered. An injustice still burned within him. "Tell me. How is it that you can worship them so blindly when they will permit a man who could not be more loathsome, more contemptible, to live and breathe, while my mother lays cold in the earth?"

Éomus knitted his brow and said bleakly, "Our minds are finite, and our understanding has limits."

Deacon sneered at that unsatisfactory answer and again looked away.

"This world has many failings," said Éomus. "But take comfort that it is a temporal existence and preparation for what is to come." He paused a moment, feeling he was failing Deacon. He could not bring him comfort. "The future will hold joys for you, now unseen and unknown. Do not let the tears in your eyes blind you to them." Deacon shifted slightly at his words but would not not look up. "You may go see her yet. We'll not say our last goodbye till your family is here to take part."

"I will not be here," said Deacon.

For a considerable time neither spoke. Then Éomus said, in grievously low tones, "You will for the rest of your life mourn her earthly presence. But would you, if the power were in your hands, take her from the joyous regions in which she now resides and have her return?"

Éomus waited, looking at Deacon helplessly. Deacon remained silent. He would not look at him. Éomus left with reluctance. One's courage is tested to its utmost limits when left alone in grief, but he felt there was nothing more he could say at present.

Chapter 16

The Dawn Of A New Beginning

Numbed and disconnected from any thought or feeling, Deacon lay wide awake. Thankfully, it was to be his last night in the house. Éomus had offered, almost implored, Deacon to let him send somebody to inform Thaemon of his sister's passing, but Deacon insisted that he go himself.

The dawn of a new morning came. After the heavy, unrefreshing sleep of exhaustion, Deacon left the house early. Dew clung to the foliage, and the air had a crisp chill. The moment he set foot outside, Deacon grimaced. The brilliance of the streaming morning sunshine seemed to mock his anguish. Swiftly, and with bowed head, he went through the woods. None of the elves spoke. Silently he passed, and it was as death itself had passed, blackening their realm.

He went directly to retrieve a sturdy beast for the journey. There was a fierce black thing for which he always had an affection, a beautiful mare, well-groomed and strong. With committed intentness he saddled her up. His bags, packed and ready to go, lay at his feet.

"You are determined to do this?" He heard Éomus ask from behind, disappointment in the tone.

Deacon briefly glanced back and answered tersely, "Yes." His mood was tense and dangerous. He hadn't wanted to see Éomus before leaving. He hadn't wanted to see anyone.

"How long until you are to return?"

"I will remain in the Imperial for a time, so don't fear the earth has swallowed me whole, when I do not return directly."

Both men turned their heads when they heard approaching footsteps. Coming toward them through the trees was Mariwen, her eyes full of care as she looked upon Deacon, who refused to look at her. She stood, uncertain, almost timid, as he aggressively and mechanically readied his horse.

"How can you leave Éomus at such a time?" she asked, a slight reproach hidden in her attitude.

"I'm certain he will bear his burden better than I do mine," said Deacon. "After all, the elves have always been beyond the ailment of human sentiment." He turned his face to Éomus as he spoke, his expression leaving no doubts to his meaning.

Then he turned back to Mariwen. He could not bear her presence; it made him feel insane. "Why are you still here?" he asked, suddenly showing some frustration and only just now looking her in the eye, his anger faltering briefly when he saw the hurt in them. He turned from her, stooping down. He hauled his bag up onto the horse and fastened it, trying to remain blind to them both.

"Deacon," she pleaded, drawing forward.

He grew still on a sudden, both hands on the back of the horse, and said, "Do not stand near to me. I cannot breathe the air where you are." He kept his face partly averted but spoke so vindictively, she stepped back, stunned as though he had physically stuck her.

Éomus reached a gentle hand and drew her to his side, not trusting Deacon in his present state of mind. Mariwen could scarcely refrain from tears, looking at Deacon as if she thought him very much changed.

"I will look forward to your return," Éomus said confidently as Deacon mounted, but Éomus knew that he had no intention of returning. Deacon dug his heels brutally into the beast's side and set off at full speed, without so much as looking back.

Deacon's mind was emptied by the rhythmic pounding of hooves on the ground. The vast landscape passed him by monotonously. Dark clouds enshrouded the sun, and a dull shadow came over. The atmosphere was in motion, a deep restlessness. A damp wind stung his face as he went through a shroud of misty rain, but he rode on unfalteringly. There was a deep rumble of distant thunder, and Deacon spurred his horse to go faster, as if he could outrun the impending storm.

Into the Imperial city, the city that never sleeps, Deacon finally arrived. He had ridden strong, barely stopping along the way, but now was so tired that dark circles showed through the bronze under his eyes. He made his way to his uncle's house, the same house where he had spent many nights in his childhood.

In a stone courtyard with a well-cultivated garden, prim with its formal beds of flowers, two young men sparred with swords. They were both dressed with a great deal of care and taste. They had sandy blonde hair, and their complexions, fair by nature, had been burned brown by the sun. Both were handsome in a well-bred way and looked considerably alike. Their sister lounged on a garden-bench, watching them. They were not well-matched in their sparring. Cedrik was by far the superior swordsman, his movements more contained and controlled and with a subtlety which lends itself to accuracy. At only twenty-four, he moved and fought with the experience of one many years older. So exceptional was his skill that he had been accepted into the Imperial legion and had served for the past seven years. He bore an unblemished reputation, always conscious of his father's expectations of him as eldest son.

Derek fought like an artful fighter but one who in his rage forgets all his skill and fights recklessly. He did not have the patience and perseverance to perfect his technique. He had a convinced assurance about himself that was almost remorseless, and he was tireless in efforts to project a great deal of masculinity, yet for a young man he was quite pretty, with full lips and lively blue eyes. He was well-known as a bit of a scoundrel but had some fine redeeming qualities. He also had a certain charm the women adored, and he adored them.

* * *

"You leave your heart open to me too often," Cedrik said to his brother. "I could kill you easily, which I might have considered had we not the same mother. You're a disgrace!" he said in good-natured raillery.

Brielle called to Derek, "You're like a great ox—charging in like that! Show some finesse!"

His sister's remark flared Derek's temper, and he fought all the more recklessly, swinging his sword wildly and making lunges clumsy from fatigue. Cedrik laughed. "I swear you would make an ox seem a model of agility," he said, ducking swiftly as Derek's sword slashed wildly over the top of his head.

"He'd be better off fighting with his head. He might actually do some damage!" said Brielle. Derek's teasing could put her in a fit of rage, and she enjoyed getting back her own in a subject most sensitive to him.

Hot and intent, Derek made no retort. They continued to spar passionately when, without warning, both swords were torn from their hands and dropped like leaden weights onto the stones with a loud clang. They were both stunned, staring blankly at one another; then they heard a familiar voice call to them. "Don't injure yourselves!"

They recognized it immediately and, glancing up, saw Deacon coming toward them. Despite his weariness from travel, he had an easiness and a grace, a token of his elven heritage. The elven-made cloak he wore was a deep green—the colour of dead-green foliage. It looked thick and durable, yet possessed the softness of the finest fibres. Under his arm he carried two swords.

The brothers half-ran to met him, followed at a much slower pace by Brielle, who always had the merest hint of animosity towards Deacon. She loved him, really, but was a little afraid of him, and he had the habit of getting her brothers into mischief.

Cedrik and Derek clasped Deacon's arms and shoulders in excitement. None of them were compelled to embrace, but they huddled together, happily engaged in banter and good cheer, despite the strangeness of separation between them.

Deacon stood back and looked at his cousins with fondness. "It must take a long time to dress in the morning," he com-

mented, looking at all the buttons in their attire. He said to Cedrik, "You've gained some weight."

"It's called brawn," replied Cedrik with the quickness of good humour.

Deacon half-smiled, then said, "And you, Derek, you've outgrown your brother almost by an entire foot."

"And he does not tire of reminding me," said Cedrik, putting his hand on his brother's back.

Here Deacon gifted them with the swords.

Expressing a little sigh of appreciation, Cedrik took the sword firmly in both his hands. It was light but exceedingly sharp and felt good in his grip. It was a finely crafted weapon, the blade inlaid skilfully with decorative silver. Derek ran his hands appreciatively over the fine detail.

Just as much care had been taken with the bracelet Deacon had crafted for Brielle. The young men parted to make way when she approached nearer. Deacon smiled down at her affectionately. She was tiny and delicate. She could have fit in his arms twice. With her dark hair and sharp features, she looked more like his sister than she did her own brothers. Looking up at him, she chewed on the side of her cheek, uncertain as to whether she should embrace him. Deacon's manner was less restrained when with his cousins, but he maintained a certain reserve that verged on coldness.

She was reluctant to accept the gift he offered, but a glance of the handsome eyes, and a small imploring gesture, had her, in spite of herself, holding out a wrist for him to clasp the bracelet.

"What mischief do you intend getting these fools into now?" she asked with a wry smile, fondling the pretty jewel at her wrist.

"Actually, I'm here to see your father," Deacon said. His voice was thoroughly self-assured. "Is he about?"

The siblings exchanged glances.

"He's in the house," said Cedrik with a slight frown. He squeezed his sister's hand she had placed in his. The three of them followed Deacon up to the house.

Inside Deacon had faded feelings of familiarity that left him with the nostalgic, unsettling feeling of being almost home, all the more cruel for having been so close. Although he was

welcomed warmly as one of the family, he still felt he was a stranger, misplaced.

* * *

Thaemon was as he had been in youth, handsome and dignified. He rose from his seat when he saw his sons and his daughter with their visitor enter the room. Deacon did not want any formalities or ceremony. Almost passionless, he told of his mother's passing.

Thaemon had half-expected this news. It did not lessen the pain. For a long interval he stood with his hand resting heavily on Deacon's shoulder, his head bowed. He was trying for composure and would not speak until he had obtained it. Deacon waited immovably. There was no shade of emotion, nothing perceptible of the grief and anger struggling in him.

"You have seen your grandmother?" Thaemon asked, at length.

"I will leave that for you."

"Éomus must be struggling." Thaemon swept a hand over his eyes. "When will the ceremony take place?"

"The moment you arrive," answered Deacon, with an odd note.

"You will not be attending?"

Deacon glanced up darkly.

"That's unfortunate," said Thaemon, leaving it at that.

Cedrik stood back with his brother and sister, none of them speaking a word. From the next room Clara came in, evidently having heard. She was not perturbed in the slightest by Deacon's removed nature and put her arms about him. Deacon stiffened at the openness of affection, but he didn't mind. Slowly, he allowed himself to become enveloped in her tenderness. He hid his face against her shoulder and wrapped his arms tight about her waist. Closing his eyes he took a moment free from grief and weariness. She smelled sweetly and vaguely of perfume.

She so well supplied a mother's part it became a substitute more painful for its nearness, since it mocked Deacon with a false resemblance to his mother. Her warmth, her softness, each touch of which seemed perfect, became so unsatisfactory as to cause positive misery. He stood several moments, clinging to the cruelty of her tender sympathies.

Then, feeling overcome, he stood back, and she brushed her hand over his forehead, saying, "You look utterly spent. Let me fix you something to eat." She had such an anxious mother's voice that he felt he would fall to pieces if she kept fussing over him as she did, but he compelled himself to stay in command, looking down at her with a tight-lipped smile.

"You know you are welcomed to stay here for as long as you please," said Thaemon, laying his hand on Deacon as he spoke.

Deacon had arrived without the intention of staying even a night, but his cousins persuaded him into remaining a few days. Thaemon and Clara had taken Brielle with them to attend the burial, while Cedrik and Derek insisted on staying behind. It did not take the boys long to convince Deacon to get out of the house and go to the tavern. It had been so long since Deacon had had ale that he almost lost his taste for it, but he needed to get out.

As they entered the tavern, they were eyed with a certain amount of suspicion from the few number of patrons—their gazes lingering on Deacon. No emotion is more fixed in common minds than dislike and fear of anything unusual, and Deacon, having spent most of his life in the elven realm had acquired an indefinable otherness.

The young men stationed themselves at table in a quiet corner. Cedrik ordered three mugs of ale, which the girl brought promptly. They each put the frothy drink to their lips but after only a single sip, placed it down again. Their tankards sitting untouched on the table, they sat in heart-stricken silence, surveying the laughter and activity as though it was impossible for them to participate.

"I'm travelling to Cheydon," Deacon said, as though it had been working in his mind all the while.

The brothers looked up at the unexpectedness of the statement. Something was final and determined in his tones.

"What's in Cheydon?" asked Cedrik.

"There is a mages guild there," replied Deacon.

"Why not apply for a scholarship here?" said Cedrik.

"Because it takes too much time to apply here," Deacon said with some irritation, not at Cedrik, but at the thought of going through the university's formalities and procedures.

"It will take no longer than your travel time to Cheydon," Cedrik said. "And here you can have the benefit of superior resources."

Deacon, annoyed, took a sip of his drink. The truth was he had no intention of going through any official institution. He wanted access to scrolls and books, and unlike here, the Cheydon spell book emporium was open to the public. Cheydon had a reputation among magical institutions as being far more lenient and observing far fewer rules and regulations than any other place. Things went on there that the university frowned at, but the city was so remote it was often overlooked.

Deacon's driving purpose was to discover the secrets of divining, quickly, and in his own manner. It was the only way he thought to find his father. He would not share his purpose with Cedrik, knowing no good would come out of it. Too many questions he was not prepared to answer would be brought up.

"I don't want to be confined to the university's rigorous schedules and formalities," he said finally. "I will be glad to just spend some time on my own, studying as I please."

"When do you mean to return to the elves?" asked Cedrik, taking a sip of ale.

"I don't mean to," said Deacon without looking up, bitterness in his voice.

Cedrik left it alone. Deacon's tone left no room for argument. His mind was made up and he wanted to leave for Cheydon as soon as possible.

In spite of himself, Deacon spent several days more at his cousins home. It did him good. He seemed able to breath more freely here. He had regained his usual clean, clear-cut look. His bronze skin was warm with a healthful glow, and his eyes were clear and alert, but not for an instant did he forget his purpose. Restless to move on, he soon informed his keepers that he would be leaving the next morning.

It was early when Deacon left the house. He was walking down toward the stables outside the city, when Cedrik caught

up with him. Breathless still from running, Cedrik said, "I'm going with you."

Deacon stopped dead, and turning, was about to speak, when he spotted Derek from over Cedrik's shoulder, coming up the rear like a hopeless laggard. Slung over his shoulder was a hazardously large bag. Deacon glanced at Cedrik almost fearfully, and said, "No." Then he looked down and saw that he also carried a bag.

"We're no longer merely cousins, but brothers," said Cedrik. "Trust me to stand by you in misfortune." He slapped Deacon on the back, giving way to a masculine embrace.

Soon Derek arrived. He yawned and shook his head as if to gain some senses and said, "Can we first get some coffee?"

"You can get some when you return home. You're not coming with me," said Deacon. "Neither of you."

But neither budged.

"Sorrow such as this was never meant to be borne alone," said Cedrik stubbornly. Deacon knew that they would have their way. A bright smile broke over Derek's face, knowing they had won.

Chapter 17

Way To Cheydon

Derek was more than half-disappointed when they passed the first inn. "But think of the coffee," he protested, trying to sound persuasive. "Hot, smooth, sweet!" Glancing backward from his horse, he watched the inn get further away. Cedrik and Deacon ignored him. Both feared it was to be a long journey. They had not yet left the Imperial region, and already Derek was whining.

Cheydon was a considerable journey, and Deacon seemed determined to get there in the least amount of time possible, pushing the horses as hard as he could without killing them. He scarcely spoke along the way, his mind preoccupied with thoughts he was unwilling to share. Cedrik and Derek could not help but notice his focused intent. Almost they thought him inhuman. He had incredible endurance and wanted to keep going, even when they were near to falling off their horses from exhaustion. Besides his Riven blood, something else was driving him forward, some hidden determination that made Cedrik uneasy. He felt his cousin was not being entirely straightforward with him.

"Say nothing to him," Cedrik said to his brother, when he saw the temptation to ask questions and involve himself.

"He's damn-well possessed!" said Derek, as loudly as present company would permit.

"Leave it be."

"You leave it be," said Derek. "I'm going to speak, talk some sense into him."

"You haven't any to spare. Leave it."

"Fine!" So far it had not been an adventure as Derek had hoped, but proved monotonous. They had been riding relentlessly, and without any of the roguery and daredevilry that redeems the discomfort of journeying.

Finally Cedrik and Derek joined forces against Deacon and convinced him they needed rest. Just off the road, in among the trees, they stopped. It was not very cheery, the three of them so tired they did not spare a moment for speaking. Each went directly to his own bed and slept under the stars.

Sometime during the night Deacon was awoken by a faint sound. Alert in an instant, he lay covertly watching the intruder. It was a little hobgoblin. The ears were pointed, far more prominent than any elven ears, and seemed too big for its head. A mischievous snarl on its greedy lips, it rummaged through their bags, excited over the spoils. Maintaining silence, Deacon glanced over to his cousins, sound asleep, and smiled in cynical amusement; despite their keenly trained senses, they were blissfully unaware of the meddler.

Having had enough of watching the vile thing go through their bags, touching all their things, Deacon, with a whip of his hand, brought down a vine round its neck like a noose. Instantly it was strung up in the tree, feet kicking wildly. Its shrill scream had Cedrik and Derek up with a start. They saw Deacon standing before the wretch strung up by its neck. It was disorientated and lashing out at all directions with a blunt short knife, till it started to lose consciousness and just hung there, slowly dying. It twitched and squirmed.

"That's enough!" cried Cedrik, making a move to cut it down. Deacon prevented him with a firm hold, letting it suffer for just a moment longer; then he released it. The hapless

creature crashed to the ground in a small bundle, and scurried wildly into the night, without any treasures, but with its life.

"What's the matter with you," Cedrik said crossly, shaking off Deacon's hand.

"I was merely teaching it a well-deserved lesson," said Deacon flatly.

Cedrik made no answer, but Deacon noticed him exchange a glance with his brother.

Cedrik was concerned for his cousin. He at times seemed to have two opposite natures within him, both extreme; one was a reserve that would have him so silent one could almost forget his existence, the other was this eruptive rage. The inflammability of his blood was alarming. Derek often joked that Deacon suffered from a maniacal illness of sorts, and now Cedrik was beginning to feel certain it was true.

Thick and gloomy clouds delayed the morning sunlight. The young men were reluctant to get up after their interrupted night. When they had finally roused themselves Cedrik approached Deacon, not without some apprehension. He waited a moment, meditating upon how to open the conversation. "Is your desire to go to Cheydon because of your mother?"

Deacon was bent down at his bags. He looked at him with a puzzled expression and deflected, "Isn't that a strange question?"

"It seems an odd thing that you would choose at random such a remote place to continue study. It is unlike you." Deacon held his gaze in silence until Cedrik was made uncomfortable and even stammered. "What I want to know is, whether your reasons to go are connected with her last wishes or something, I don't know. Is there something else? Are you holding up as well as you think yourself to be?"

Deacon's answer was tinged with the slightest suggestion of amusement. "I think you are suffering more than myself. Do you want to sit down? Why do you forever want to be discussing my feelings like a woman?"

Cedrik was too serious to enter into any banter and said, "I don't know what it is to lose one so near to the heart, but maybe you could try to explain to me? I think your mother's passing should not be left—"

"I don't wish to speak of her," Deacon said, abruptly and fiercely, as if stung with pain. He stood and moved away.

"You won't say one word in confidence to me?" said Cedrik, half-exasperated. "Speak—you may have the most entire confidence in my sympathy and secrecy."

"Cedrik, don't mistake me," he said, turning upon his companion with an angry impatience that was wholly unaccountable. "I've told you the state of things. Conjecture, suspect, speculate as you will, but I'll be damned if I'm plagued with it."

They ate breakfast virtually in silence. As they were packing up ready to leave, Deacon eventually broke the silence, putting his hand on Cedrik's shoulder saying, "Are we at ease with one another?"

Cedrik pursed his lips, then grew resigned. "Yes," he said, knowing the futility of pursuing it further.

"Good," said Deacon. "Then let's proceed and not waste another minute on it." All this talk seemed wasted time for him.

The landscape between them and Cheydon was a bleak, treeless region, with leaden skies overhead. Along the way they passed many scattered villages with thatched roofs, the people generally unwelcoming and suspicious. Harsh lands bred harsh people.

Sitting dead-tired on his horse, Cedrik placed the water bag to his lips and taking a long considering drink, surveyed the dismal stretch of land. Dark masses of distant hills obstructed their view of Cheydon like a massive wall intended to fortify it against bleak winds.

"If we push through we can make it by nightfall," said Deacon. The beautiful beast beneath him stomped its hoof impatiently and appeared more restless to move than himself.

"Fine," said Cedrik.

At last they arrived, reviving slightly with the promise of amenity and creature comforts. For the night they stopped at a large two-story inn, situated just outside the city. It had been a ridiculously long journey, and Derek was never so happy to be off a horse. His mind ran solely on thoughts of comfort: a hot meal, good bottle of wine, and a nice soft bed.

Inside was not quite as they had hoped. They entered a large, yet unaccommodating room that smelled of damp, rotting wood and humble to the point of being a place of misery for any well-bred young man. It was full of all manner of people from different lands, most of them dangerous in their appearance. Thankfully, the companions were received with no interest. There were travellers enough, at least half as mysterious as Deacon, passing through here at all times, so that they compelled little attention.

At the counter they were attended by a robust woman, who, if she had not been wearing a dress, might have been mistaken for a stout man. Even so, Derek had to be mindful how he addressed her. They found the cost for accommodation ridiculously cheap, being accustomed to Imperial prices, but because of the state of the place, they would have been opposed to paying any more. After taking their money the woman left, and a stocky brown-faced man took her place. Over his barrel-like stomach he wore an apron covered in unspeakable filth, and he had dirty-brown hands, with worn and blackened nails, that spoke of a hazardous lack of personal hygiene.

"What is it that I can get you to eat?" the innkeeper said gruffly, wiping his hands on his apron as if he meant to clean them. Cedrik's face paled. Being an Imperial guard he had come in contact with filth before, but never was he so immediately faced with it. He was sufficiently disgusted that he could not bring himself to eat anything prepared by this man's hands. He looked fretfully over at Deacon who seemed detached and uninterested in anything being discussed, then at Derek who watched with amusement all the unusual people, (most particularly the half-pretty waiting-maids) and knew neither his cousin nor his brother would be of any assistance.

Cedrik blurted out something incoherent to the innkeeper and nearly tripped over Derek in his haste to usher him out. Deacon followed behind them in his quiet manner.

"What are we doing?" said Derek, annoyed.

Cedrik said to Deacon, "We are not staying here. Let's find something in the city." He was thinking of his younger brother, not desiring to subject him to less than ideal conditions.

"It's late," said Deacon calmly. "You'll find there aren't any rooms available."

Cedrik scoffed at the notion, and the two stood discussing it, while Derek, looking up at the stars, listened. His hands tucked under his arms, he swayed, shifting his weight from foot to foot. The nights here were quite cold.

"For the love of . . . can we just go, please?" he snapped at last.

"Yes, let's move," said Cedrik.

"All right," said Deacon, as if foreseeing the consequences.

Aside from the open courtyard at the entrance, Cheydon was somewhat oppressive and secretive in its design. The buildings were joint structures, huge stone blocks running parallel along narrow streets. The only signs of division between dwellings were the heavy wooden doors, and above them, small balconies.

Away from the city, almost a small village in its own right, was a collection of dank wooden cottages, scattered by a massive lake. They didn't bother to explore that far but instead went to several inns in the city, in search of a comfortable room and uninfected meal.

When they discovered there were no rooms available anywhere and that they could not buy a hot meal because the kitchens were closed, Derek almost had a breakdown, clasping his fingers and pressing them back hard against his forehead, as if he would snap them off.

"Why do I ever listen to you?" he asked his brother.

"You don't; you wouldn't be here in the first place otherwise," said Cedrik drily, tucking his hands under his arms to keep warm. In the centre of the empty streets the young men stood huddled and shivering. It was late, dark, and cold with misty rain. Cedrik was annoyed. As limited as the city was by comparison to the Imperial, he hadn't expected it to be so unaccommodating.

"Well, we'll go back and see if those rooms are still available," said Deacon. "If not, we'll be sleeping under the stars." He spoke without any particular inflection, but Cedrik knew Deacon was thinking him a fool. Despite limited exposure, Deacon had been to enough small cities along the way to know that

they were quick to close down at night, and rooms were quick to fill, especially at locations that entertained a lot of travellers.

They returned to the inn. Fortunately, two of the rooms were still available. Unfortunately, they had to pay for them a second time. The Inn keeper had feigned forgetfulness. Cedrik didn't bother to try to reason with the brute, but paid the extra.

As though expecting an attack from all four corners, Cedrik and Derek stepped cautiously into the room they were to share. Standing side by side they stared blankly round the bleak accommodation. It was meagerly furnished and small. "Not much larger than a rathole," thought Cedrik. There weren't even any chairs around the old table in the corner. And there was a horrid smell.

"What is that?" said Derek, almost fearfully, his voice muffled through his forearm.

"You'll become accustomed to it soon enough," said Cedrik, deliberately not returning Derek's incredulous stare. "Don't concern yourself. We'll find another place in the morning."

Tossing their bags unceremoniously to the floor, each went directly to his own bed. Cedrik stripped the bed of its sheets and remade it before climbing in. He wanted to make certain it wasn't crawling with any unfavourable nighttime companions.

Derek's thoughts were filled entirely on things edible. He thought of his mother's steak pies—tender steak with plenty of rich, thick gravy—and felt suddenly sick for home.

Much later, Cedrik still lay awake. Rats were in their room. He could hear them scurrying in the dark. He heard Derek mumbling curses in his half-sleep and was reminded how much he hated sleeping in such close quarters with his brother. Derek was inclined to dream dreams where he himself was the hero. Worst of all was a mournful wind that perpetually howled. So monotonous and despairing was the sound that Cedrik, feeling a little desperate, stuffed the pillow over his face. He wondered if Deacon had fared any better with his room.

Chapter 18

New Friend

The first sight that greeted Cedrik's eyes in the morning was Derek lying in a tangled mass of blankets. It never ceased to amaze Cedrik how it was possible for Derek to not injure himself during the night.

Pleased that morning had come and that they had somehow survived, they went into Deacon's room, only to discover his bed empty and no sign of him. Downstairs many of the men had moved off. Deacon was not among those that remained.

"Perfect!" said Derek. "This is just perfect! He brings us all this way, then decides to leave us for dead. I wish he had of done it back at the last village; we could've at least avoided Misery and his death-food," he said, glancing over at the brute of an innkeeper.

"Keep your voice down," warned Cedrik, noticing eyes turn upon them. "He hasn't left us. He's just damn-well . . . gone off somewhere."

"Truly?" asked Derek, in a tone that earned him a clip up the side of the head.

While they discussed what they should best do, pieces of straw persistently fell onto Cedrik's shoulder. Impatiently he would brush them off, but they persisted. Stopping in mid-sentence he cursed and looked upward to determine the source of his annoyance. A body came crashing through the roof and landed hard at their feet. They jumped back with a start, staring down at a youth. Not long was he on the floor before he

struggled to his feet with several startled oaths flying from his mouth. For a moment he stood waiting, feeling himself over.

"Blast almighty, boy!" came a booming voice from behind. "I don't pay you to make bigger holes than what I started with!" The innkeeper pushed his way past, looking up at the gap in his roof. "Damn me," he said with awe. His expression then turning murderous, he set his eyes on Cade.

"I'll mend that one next," said Cade sheepishly, dust and debris laden in his red-brown hair.

"Like hell you will! Out!" the innkeeper roared, pointing to the door with a thick, dirty finger. Without waiting to see if Cade obeyed, muttering savagely, he pushed his way back past the brothers, who scrambled to get out of his way.

"I still get paid, don't I?" Cade asked in his most winning tone.

"Out!" came the thunderous reply.

Cade's shoulders slumped. "I'm not in any pain, thank you! Great baboon . . . fix your own damn roof." Cade turned, and a mug of ale was thrust in his face from a concerned and considerate patron. "Ah, thanks. I've got a hellish thirst," he said. He knocked back the frothy drink, the universal medicine in these parts, and wiping his mouth, fixed his attention on the two men staring at him, stunned.

After the initial shock had passed Cedrik approached him. "Are you injured?"

"Apparently not," said Cade with a one-sided smile, touched if not amused by Cedrik's genuine concern.

"That was quite a fall." Cedrik looked up, shaking his head. "Are you certain you're in no need of attention?"

"I'm fine. Fate has always dealt kindly with me."

Cedrik raised his brows. "No doubt."

"That was funny," said Derek, who had not yet spoken. Cade looked at him as if only noticing him for the first time.

"Not very," he said. "And now I don't get paid."

"Here," Cedrik said, reaching into his pocket.

"Hey—hey! Put it away," said Cade, indignant. "I don't need handouts."

"Sorry. I just . . . " Cedrik stumbled, aware he had insulted the stranger, but the youth's smile returned almost immediately.

His gaze ran down the length of them. They looked rather tight-laced and polished.

"Not from around here, are you?" he asked, friendly. "Let me guess. Wynnstan, no, no, I have it. Imperial?" Cedrik smiled with some embarrassment along with pride. "Thought as much." Cade winked at him. "Come on. Let's get out of this hell-hole, and I'll—"

The innkeeper's voice came booming again. "Out!"

Cade closed his eyes, then, reopening them, finished his sentence. "And I'll show you around."

Speaking as if he had known them all his life, Cade took them into the city. He was in the habit of rough speech. A common-looking fellow, not unattractive, he had the lean muscular look of one who was not disposed to a single occupation, but rather did many different forms of activity. Not strung to any great purpose in life, his attitude was as unexceptional as his features. When Cedrik could get a word in, he gave Cade a brief description of Deacon and asked if he had seen anyone fitting.

"Much earlier, maybe," answered Cade. "I couldn't tell you where the fellow was heading."

"There is an emporium he was looking for, spell books and such. Where is that?" asked Cedrik.

"Right. One of those," said Cade without any disrespect. "I'll take you. You'll most likely get lost."

The streets maintained a languid feel, filled with the citizens of Cheydon. A solemn people, not unfriendly, but somewhat mistrustful, their mood was as colourless as the sky. Many were strangers to the city, aloof and mysterious.

The spell book emporium was situated in the city centre, looking no different from the many emporiums, save for the two large and impressive doors. It was musky and dimly-lit inside, so spacious it felt empty, with shelves of books that one could open to any page and be fascinated by the strange words. All was quiet. Only visible were people with bowed heads, absorbed in their studies.

"It's as if somebody died," said Derek grimly, his voice a touch loud for the soundless atmosphere.

"Take a look around," said Cade as if he were the owner of the place. "He's bound to be in here somewhere. Mind yourselves; you don't want to be upsetting these sorts."

The boys split up and went down the quiet passages in search of their fourth companion. Their purposive presence mildly disrupted the readers, who gave disgruntled gazes that lifted briefly, before again turning down to books fondly held. Disappointed to discover Deacon was not here, Cedrik and Derek parted ways with Cade, thanking him. "Watch out for yourselves," he said with friendly caution. "There are untrustworthy people here. You Imperial boys will get done over."

Not knowing where to start, the brothers decided to return to the inn and wait for Deacon.

In their room Derek lay on the floor, feet up on the wall, aimlessly tossing pieces of dry bread at the ceiling, which bounced off onto the floor. Cedrik had left him several hours ago again in search of Deacon. It was hard for Derek, who had never known boredom, to sit and do nothing. Aimlessly he waited.

Returning after having being gone such a while gave Cedrik a new perspective of the room. He didn't know how, but Derek had somehow managed to put it in an even worse state than when they had first arrived the night before. Tankards were strewn across the floor, and Derek's bed was covered with the entire contents of his travel pack.

"You're really living it up," Cedrik said, kicking Derek with his boot as though he were a beggar or drunkard.

Derek groaned. "You have a strange notion of what living it up means," he said, sluggishly dragging himself up. He and Cedrik looked down at the bread scattered on the floor at their feet. Derek shrugged. "The rats will eat it."

Cedrik tossed Derek a small, greasy bag that contained sweet cakes he had bought in the city, then slumped down onto his bed.

"Food!" cried Derek, taking out a sticky morsel. Never had sweet cake tasted so good. He ate enthusiastically, mumbling through mouthfuls just how good. Looking at Cedrik, he slowed his chewing, then halted altogether. "You don't suppose something unfortunate has happened to him? Do you?"

Cedrik glanced up and gave a short laugh. "If anything unfortunate is taking place, you can be certain he's the cause of it." He shook his head with a weak smile, but Derek could see his concern.

That evening they began to suffer restlessness, arising from their prolonged confinement. They came very near to killing one another before lapsing into a dull and moody silence. When he could take it no longer, Derek said. "I am going out for some fun!"

Cedrik laughed recklessly. "It's raining, and the streets are deserted."

"I don't intend to stand out in the streets," Derek said petulantly. "I was thinking something more along the lines of a tavern. Perhaps get some dinner and maybe some damned entertainment."

"You please yourself."

"You're not coming?" Derek said, disappointed.

"No."

"Cedrik, I need to get out. I can't stand a minute longer in this forsaken room."

"I said, please yourself. If you want to go, then go! What, you want me to hold your hand?"

"Couldn't hurt."

Cedrik's eyes flicked up. "Go!"

Derek was half-way down the road when he heard his brother call from behind. "See if you can't find some entertainment that doesn't involve me getting hurt." Derek stopped and turned back.

"Eh?"

"I said—"

"I heard what you said. What do you mean by it?"

"I'm tired of taking your thrashings," said Cedrik, half-serious, half-playful. "You get the women. I get the beatings."

Derek groaned and turning from Cedrik, continued toward the city. "The husband incident?" he said as if bored.

"To name one."

"One! You've taken the brunt of my error, once! Is there nothing new?"

"Once!" Cedrik echoed recklessly. "Don't make me list the times I've stepped in and prevented a beating from ruining your life. You're pain enough in my ass that I could beat you myself." Derek gave a snort that was almost a laugh. "I still can't return to that tavern," Cedrik said. "He said he would hunt me to the ends of the earth if ever I showed my face again!"

Derek slapped his brother encouragingly on the back. "Luckily for you, the idiot thinks the ends of the earth is just past Borg's tavern."

Talking in this way, they entered a tavern. Its only patrons were rough men, interested only in their own company. They had mean-looking expressions, and Cedrik's shoulders slumped in defeat. "How about I just deck myself now, and we can call it an evening?" he said to Derek, who was scanning the room with disappointment. He thought it looked poor company. There was no gambling, no laughter, and the women looked a little too much like their male counterparts.

"Let's move on," he said.

"Why?" asked Cedrik, relieved but surprised.

"The women here frighten me."

Cedrik was about to laugh aloud; then he looked and saw that his brother was serious, which made him laugh harder, only inwardly. They went into several places and suffered the same disappointment. After a meal at one of the more respectable taverns, they ventured back out into the evening. The lamps didn't throw much light, and there were no city guards to be seen. So there they were, astray in the streets of a strange city without thought of what to do, where to go, or where their cousin was. It was deserted and lonesome.

"What kind of a city is this?" Derek said, frustrated when it began to drizzle again. He was thoroughly missing the Imperial, where the sky was always blue and there was always something interesting to amuse him.

They had just about given up on any chance of entertainment for the evening, when they round a corner and glimpsed, a little way off, a night-wanderer. He had such a quick, sure-footed step and eagerness about him, Derek thought for certain he would lead them to some excitement. Cedrik only agreed to

follow because he was afraid he might be required to put the youth back in his place.

The stranger went out of the south gates and down toward the black lake, where the wooden cottages were. Situated in the middle of the black, unstirring water was a small isle. On it was a dark, impressive structure, amid perpetual mists, and deadened trees that never put forth green leaves. It was a lonely, cathedral-like building. Cedrik and Derek were curious about it, lurking there across the way, but did not pause long. Their guide was fast disappearing down among the obscure shapes of the houses.

Unwittingly, he led them to an alehouse, which was bursting with mirthful laughter. He accompanied a group of young men who stumbled out from the place, laughing and shoving one another. Derek at once felt responsive excitement, and seeing Cade in amongst them, pointed him out to Cedrik.

"There's Cade! Let's go talk to him!"

"Let's not," said Cedrik drily. "They look a sorry lot of trouble-makers."

"Don't be such an old lady, Cedrik," Derek said, forcing Cedrik to follow and keep pace with him. At their unexpected approach, Cade looked up in surprise; then a smile broke across his half-dazed face.

"Hey, it's the Imperial boys!" he said, vague with drink. "I see you've still got your clothes on."

Derek glanced down to see that he did and blinked, not understanding the comment.

"I thought you city boys would have been taken for all you were worth and left naked for dead by now," said Cade, his tone unintentionally condescending. Derek laughed uneasily, while Cedrik's brow was furrowed deep by the insult. Among them all he was the most skilled fighter and probably could have given them each a bruised head and ego to take home, but he let the comment roll off his back.

The rest of the trouble-makers were bored by the place and were already off, heading down the length of the lake, falling over one another in drunken foolery. Cade didn't follow directly but said to Cedrik, "Your cousin, he's into magic-using isn't he?"

"Why?"

"I think I know where he is."

Cedrik knitted his brow. "Where?"

"I'll show you."

"Where are we going?" asked Derek, running to keep up.

"The woods," said Cade.

"The woods? I can hardly wait." Derek didn't bother to disguise his lack of interest.

Nevertheless, he went along. Cedrik followed with an easy stride behind. Not far ahead the youths were tumbling and tripping over each other in their mad excitement, till they came to a sudden stop at the edge of the dark wood. Within was a gloom, deep and sombre, that bespoke of evil things. The trees impending over them, none dared venture past the border. Only one among them seemed unperturbed. He watched the others for sport, waiting to see what they would do. The youths unconsciously drew nearer together. The pervading quiet was far more frightening than anything they had ever heard.

"Some say these woods take people," one of them said.

"Shut up, Jerret," said Cade.

"Well, why don't you go in!"

"Ladies first," Cade said smugly, then turned. "That's you, Derek."

Derek shot him a narrow look.

"We are not venturing in there," said Cedrik in his most stern tone. He felt they were in bad company and thoroughly mistrusted what they were up to.

"I'm telling you," said Jerret, nervously, "something is wrong with this place. People go missing."

"Tales to scare boys into behaving," said another.

"Yet convincing enough that most people avoid the trees at most costs," said Jerret.

"I've been in there before," said Cade blandly. "If you want me to hold you . . ." His words trailed off, offering his hand to Jerret who slapped it aside. With mutual jeering the youths ventured into the darkness, leaving Cedrik to stare after them.

"Derek. Get back here!" he called in his most commanding voice but was ignored. "Curse it all," muttered Cedrik fiercely, as he plunged in after them.

The trees, dark and stately, were evenly spaced and made easy passage. Cedrik and Derek trailed behind the others. They could see their forms just ahead, huddled closely together, nudging and whispering to one another with muted jeering, as though fearful of waking a slumberous thing.

Derek could not suppress a shudder. The woods seemed haunted with an unfriendly cold, and had elements of dread that those even with a lesser imagination than himself would feel. There was an unstirring silence that could almost be heard breathing in the darkness, as though the trees would reveal themselves as something more than silent observers. From within shadows they seemed to pass hushed whispers amongst themselves, secretly, then, fading away, were again silent.

Derek began to feel strange influences creep over him, almost as though the woods wanted him to leave his companions and wander farther into hidden places. He held off the peculiar desires, and glanced at his brother every now and then, to see if he had any of the same feelings, but Cedrik's face was inscrutable and set like steel. His gaze roamed fiercely about, as if he anticipated danger at every turn.

Derek caught sight of something that made him stop and squint. He thought he had glimpsed movement. "Did you see that?" he whispered urgently.

"No. Keep up. This was your idea," said Cedrik, looking forward at the backs of the other men. They had become quiet, but were still high-spirited and animated with the thrill of dread.

Keeping closely beside his brother, Derek peered into the surrounding gloom with an anxiousness amounting nearly to terror. He felt something was with them. He could not see it, but its presence was very real. It emerged in a secret way, moving with them and watching. It was drawing nearer, closing in upon them. The air became thin, and Derek knew it would very soon reveal itself to them.

A sense of dread rose within him, growing hot in his chest. He was straining to hear. At last he came to such a state of terror that the slightest of sounds would have brought his heart into his mouth. Breathing hard, he dared not look over his shoulder, lest he should see the nocturnal object of terror standing at his

back. For a moment his eyes closed. He hoped it was but the shadow and wind deceiving him.

Something had moved stealthily within the shadows; a shape of blackness, insect-like. During its nocturnal prowling it had observed the youths and became curious. Creeping through the branches of the trees, it moved unnaturally and with difficulty, yet secretly as with purpose. It watched them, peering down through the foliage. Its black and featureless face was expressionless as a spider, with bulging yellow eyes, unwholesome and cunning. Protruding from the back of its head was a single great horn, black and sleek as the rest of its preternatural body.

Something must have gone terribly wrong with the laws of nature for such a creature to exist, keeping to the shadows like things that are born ashamed of themselves and wish never to be seen.

Derek drew a shuddering breath. He knew he was in serious danger of forever disgracing himself with a shriek.

"This is it." He heard one of the boys say, breaking the vile spell that had hold of him, and he was relieved when they came to a stop. The fear dispersed and was quickly replaced by the thrill of adventure.

"We're here," said Cade. "This is where it all happens."

Chapter 19

Underground

They stood in a clearing in the wood. "This is where what all happens?" asked Derek, vaguely expectant, looking around and seeing only trees. Then he heard one of the youths speak strange and incomprehensible words. Everything seemed to shift; the air around him rippled unpleasantly, and he began to feel lightheaded. A slight tremor deep within the earth was so subtle he thought he was imagining it, when there came a soft rumble from somewhere, and he felt the earth vibrate violently beneath his feet, forcing him to brace himself to keep balance.

"What the—" Derek broke off with a cry. The ground was breaking and shifting, collapsing in on itself, layers upon layers falling away. Jolted into action, the young men scrambled—running upon elusive ground that perpetually crumbled beneath their feet. It was falling too quickly for Derek to even see where his brother was, and he made a leap forward, but his foot found no support and he fell, digging his fingers into the earth, and with a final effort tried to pull himself up. He wanted to cry out with fear but choked it back. Dust was getting into his mouth and eyes. He had not gripped onto anything stable and soon fell away with the crumbling mass.

After a considerable drop, he found himself facedown on a stone floor, along with the others. He could taste earth in his mouth and could hear loud sounds from a crowd of enthusiastic people somewhere close by. The boys staggered to their feet. They were in a stone chamber of sorts and could see dimly

down a narrow corridor. From high above pieces of rock and dirt showered down as the earth reclosed.

Derek looked down at his grazed hands; they stung and burned as if he had run them over fire. Then he felt his brother's hand heavy on his shoulder turning him round.

"Are you hurt?" asked Cedrik, dusting him down.

"No. You?"

"I feel like my back's broken. Whichever mad fool uttered those accursed words, I'm going to break his back."

"That would be me," came a voice behind. Over his shoulder Cedrik saw a young man with a smug smile. His eyes flickered and rippled with a peculiar hue. Cedrik muttered something derisive about magic-users and ruffled the dust out of his hair.

"Where are we?" one of them asked. The sounds of collective cheering could still be heard.

Cade called to them, "This way, lads," as he turned and disappeared round a corner, with a haste betokening great excitement.

"I think I have dirt lodged in my brain," said Jerret, snorting into the sleeve of his shirt, as he and the others followed after. The rough passageway led straight on, and they discovered at the end that an illusionary wall masked a passage.

Walking through it, they found themselves in a large stone chamber, and were almost engulfed by the blind enthusiasm of a crowd of young men, cheering at something happening in the centre. Cedrik estimated there were at least two hundred of them and wondered where they had all come from. Shouting as loud as their lungs would allow, the fools cried out encouragement and curses alike.

Cedrik could see flashes of magic. He had lost sight of his mad companions but kept close to his brother as they forced their way through the moving bodies, keeping an eye out for Deacon. Hoarse shouts rang in their ears. As they neared the centre, they glimpsed at what the youths cheered, and could guess what they were up to.

"Magic duelling is illegal!" Cedrik's voice of alarm did not rise above the excited cries, and no one, including his brother, paid any notice. Masculine energy charged the air like an intoxicant. Derek was exhilarated, feeling the thrill of dan-

ger like a drug that rushed directly to his head. His insides churned. Cedrik did not share his enthusiasm and seemed overwhelmed by the volatile atmosphere, surcharged with the fumes of adrenalin. All this exertion and these violent passions, radiating within the enclosure, made the temperature stifling, yet the young men seemed determined to enjoy themselves despite the inconveniences caused by noise, heat, and overcrowding.

Spells blistered the air and turned it static. Then a loud clap, as if lightning had struck something, resounded throughout the chamber and excited an overwhelming response from the crowd. Cedrik pushed his way through to the middle, where two young men were hemmed in on every side by rioting youths. The vague anxiety he had felt soon changed into a great dread. He had found his cousin.

In the intensity of his concentration Deacon appeared blind to all but his opponent. Calmly he stood, gathering thousands of tiny charged particles into his open palms, till they became one great mass of destructive energy that spat and thrummed between his hands. The prickling sensation swept over Cedrik, and he watched Deacon suddenly hurl the mass, backed with the full force of his shoulder, at his opponent. Only just rising from the last assault, the youth was sent a distance into the crowd, which scattered to move out of the way.

"Deacon!" called Cedrik. But his voice was drowned down and lost among shouts.

"He's been here for hours!" said someone next to him, in a tone approaching admiration. "No one can bring him down!"

"I can bring him down," Cedrik muttered fiercely and took a step forward, but the person put out a detaining arm.

"I wouldn't," was the warning. Cedrik turned on the man, but something in his face told him to pay heed. Reluctantly Cedrik stood back, watching to see the outcome.

Refusing to remain down, the youth disentangled himself from the crowd, tense and with clenched fists. He had enjoyed the most unbounded reputation for being undefeated, and in coming to a fixed determination that this reputation would remain intact, he again proceeded forward, but Deacon, with one single stroke of his arm, hurled him again, dashing him with great force against the wall. The youth was relentless, getting

to his feet each time and returning with unfailing perseverance. They both were wearied, particularly Deacon, who had been taxing his powers of endurance several hours longer. He faltered momentarily, doubled over in pain, and his opponent took advantage of the moment.

Humiliation fuelling his animosity, he strode to Deacon and made a pass at his head with a clenched fist, but Deacon deftly evaded the stroke, seized him by the collar and fetching him forward, tossed him to the ground. He tried to stand, but Deacon brought down his fist, striking him with such force he was rendered momentarily senseless.

"This is ridiculous," said Cedrik, seeing that it had degenerated into a mere fistfight. Determined to break it up, he started forward, but the same person prevented him. Cedrik, exasperated to hostility, was at the point of taking a swing at somebody himself, when there was a sudden flash of blinding light. Quickly he turned, only in time to see the opponents had been tossed to opposite ends of the chamber. Both lay motionless a moment, then, neither willing to be thwarted, rose to their feet.

The youth was the first to revive. His hands broke into flame, and as he strode forward he hurled flashes of fire, one after the other, toward his tormentor. But no flame could reach Deacon. With downward swipes of his hands Deacon snuffed them out in an almost impatient fury, as though the youth's arrogance annoyed him. He wanted more. He wanted to push his endurance to its limits. This boy was nothing to him. Extinguishing the flames took very little toll on Deacon and enabled him a moment's reprieve, so that his energy now served him anew.

Cedrik and his brother watched in mute awe Deacon's tremendous display of power. He always executed his magic with full command and mastery, but the fever of rage began to burn in his chest, and he let his pain rain down on his opponent, as if under the direction of some cruel force. So savage was he with the youth, they feared Deacon would utterly destroy him.

With a storm of the fiercest blows, Deacon drove his opponent backwards until he was looming over him, releasing all of his accumulated misery in a fiery barrage upon the youth, who, finally weakened beyond endurance, sank to his knees,

barely shielding himself from the full force. Deacon positioned himself directly over him, the heat of his anger raining down on the youth.

Cedrik was trying to decide the best course of action to take, but then the fiery torrent suddenly ceased to pour forth. Deacon waited, breathing heavily. No longer could he hear the crowd for the pounding in his ears. He was consumed by the violent ecstasies that pulsed through his blood. His eyes, dark and concentrated, stayed fixed upon those of the youth, whose own breath was far more shallow and fast.

Cedrik waited in suspense, fearful of his cousin's inflammability. It was too late to react, when he realized Deacon was not reconsidering. Gathering his strength for the final blow, Deacon drew on an intense amount of power. He could feel, with satisfaction, the pulsing force course through him like lightning, igniting each cell. Waves of energy travelled over Deacon's limbs and engulfed his entire body. He felt intensely the pressure build within him, until it was impossible to contain. He was on the brink of releasing it, when slowly he lifted his eyes to see his cousins, to see a striking similitude between the brothers as they stared with expressions of horror, but he was past the point of being able to hold back. The pressure came upon him before he could gather his forces for control, and suddenly, all his blood exulting in his release, it was discharged.

Giving a sharp cry, the youth slumped to the ground. Heavy convulsions shook the body; then it was still. The nostrils gradually filled with blood. With his heart slamming, Deacon stood back from the form sprawled there, inert. Diminutive blue threads of energy writhed across Deacon's body. Some of the more violent sparks singed and burned his flesh, but he was oblivious to them. His entire frame shook with the adrenalin coursing in his blood, and his breath came in ragged gasps. He had quickly consumed his energy by reason of its very violence.

He dragged his hands down his hot face. Sweat stung his eyes. He felt relief and a deep sense of gratification, but to see the broken form who had paid the cost for his release shocked and distressed him.

When it was noticed the youth did not stir, a deep silence filled the room. No one dared approach the motionless form,

who now had blood trickling down from his nose into his slightly opened mouth. The horrified stupor lasted only a few moments, before whispers passed round, and Deacon felt wide eyes staring.

Suddenly his strength abandoned him entirely and he pushed through the crowd with an urgent need to get out. Cedrik and Derek lost sight of him as he staggered and stumbled through the men who stood dumb and reluctant to move. A number of his friends gathered about the unconscious youth until finally, and at last, he came to.

When Cedrik saw that the youth had escaped death, he and Derek quickly threaded their way through the crowd after Deacon. Coming to stand in the small stone chamber where they had first arrived, they stood looking upward, wondering how it was they were supposed to get back out. They had not seen how Deacon managed to leave and were relieved when Cade caught up with them.

"How, for pity's sake, do we get out of here!" said Derek. Then feeling anxious and frustrated, he commenced bouncing up and down, hoping to trigger something into action.

"We need to get out," Cedrik told Cade with some urgency.

"Wait here. I'll get Bayne," said Cade, and went to retrieve the obnoxious magic-user. When they returned Bayne said the strange words Cedrik thought to be the most damnable he had ever heard, and without any warning he and Derek were drawn up as if by a powerful vacuum.

Their arms and legs flaying wildly, they felt as though falling upward, and continued this ascent with sickening speed, fearing they would be crushed against the earthen ceiling, but somehow it was soft and they broke through. They seemed to over shoot, however, and were again falling down, when they hit the hard ground, lying flat on their stomachs. Groaning with pain, they dragged themselves up, bruised bodies aching.

Again they found themselves in the dark wood. Not far from them was Deacon, leaning heavily, with his head on his forearm, against a tree. He wore his heavy elven-made cloak, yet still appeared to suffer from the unnatural cold.

Cedrik's anger was up. He went to Deacon and said almost into his ear. "Have you gone mad? You could have killed him!"

Pushing off the tree with difficulty, Deacon turned to face them. His countenance, deathly pale, drew Cedrik's sympathy, and he said with less force than before, "You didn't kill him. But you easily could have." At this, he had hoped to see relief in his cousins face, but Deacon, feverish and weak, said nothing and showed no sign of relief or remorse. Again Cedrik grew cross. "Have you no regard for life, then? Your own, even?"

Deacon only stared with a sardonic, almost cruel gaze. Cedrik regarded him with mingled anger and pity. He was hunched over as though sickness beat down on him, and Cedrik saw now that he trembled.

"I know you're trying to kill your pain," said Cedrik with a pleading reproach. "But you're only killing yourself. You can't keep—"

"Tell me!" Deacon demanded with sudden energy. "Must everyone feel the need to counsel me on grief? This is my pain! And I will deal with it in my own way," he said, as though a wave of exhaustion had taken all strength from his voice.

"You—" Cedrik's reproof died as he looked at Deacon and saw his lips had become stained with blood. "Your mouth," he said with sudden alarm.

Deacon went white and staggered as if about to fall. Reaching out a hand, Cedrik tried to support him, but Deacon shoved it aside. "Get away from me," he rasped, wiping blood from his mouth with the back of his hand. His body, stooped over, was racked with pain. It was so severe Cedrik feared Deacon would lose consciousness. Deacon sagged against the tree for support. He was pasty white and sweating with the chills.

Cedrik and Derek looked on helplessly. They could see that their cousin was sinking in more than one way.

"You look like you just went twelve rounds with a stone wall," said Cade from behind. He went boldly over to Deacon. "You'll be all right." He clapped him heavily on the back. Cedrik and Derek winced with sympathy. They knew for him, being Riven, it was far more serious than if any other mage had overtaxed himself. Deacon didn't move but swallowed hard and looked as if he might throw up.

"How does that boy fare?" asked Cedrik, wanting to draw Cade's sympathetic attentions away from Deacon.

"Ah, the lad's fine," said Cade. "These fights can often get brutal. I once saw a fellow I know get three fingers blown clean off. The poor beggar can't count past seven now." Cade's laughter died when no one else accompanied him. He sighed. "Well, we should move on before trouble comes looking for us. Your hero here just nearly killed one of the Nolan brothers, and they're pretty mean when you get all five together."

Cedrik frowned. "Perfect."

Cade looked as though it was all a joke to him. "Come back to my place," he said, his tone brisk and certain. "You can get your things from the inn when morning comes."

"Where do you live?" asked Derek.

"Down by the water. Come on." He shook Deacon into mobility. "Let's get you out of here before we have to drag your carcase out."

All four moved off through the wood. Deacon lagged behind, arms clasped round his shoulders. Occasionally Cedrik glanced back to see if he was still with them and couldn't help but feel eerie. Deacon appeared dark and strange as he passed silently through the shadows of the trees.

The cottages were all locked and darkened in sleep as they weaved their way through to Cade's home. The night air was heavy with the smell of damp vegetation. Quietly, the boys stepped up onto the porch. Cade turned the handle and put his weight against the door, but it didn't budge. Stepping back, he said incredulously, "The old hag locked me out again."

"Old hag?" Derek echoed, keeping his voice down.

"My grandmother," said Cade. "We'll have to go around back." The boys shuffled out of the way as he turned and went back down the steps.

"You live with your grandmother?" Derek whispered, as they made their way round the side of the cottage. They stopped at a stone half-wall that enclosed a small piece of land, which served as a backyard. Cade and the brothers vaulted over easily, followed by Deacon, who climbed up and dropped over the side with a grunt of pain, pulling his cloak protectively about himself.

Cade knelt down by the house and found that the basement door was bolted on the outside. He rattled it in frustration.

"What now?" asked Cedrik in a low, impatient voice.

"She locked this one, too," said Cade. Then, motioning to the lock, he turned to Deacon. "Can you?"

"Don't," said Cedrik and laid a firm hand on Deacon. "Why did she lock you out if you are welcome?"

Cade didn't appear to hear the note of mistrust but stood up, turned to Cedrik, and said, in a fierce whisper, "Because she locks the door at night when she goes to bed. This is not so friendly an area, if you haven't yet found that out yourself."

"Why haven't you a key?" said Cedrik, mildly.

Cade sighed sharply. "She doesn't like me coming home in the night. Which is why I haven't a blasted key!" He looked sheepish for a moment. "It's a kind of punishment for if I'm home too late," he said, looking about himself as if bored.

Cedrik ground his jaw, thinking. It didn't seem likely that Cade would invite them back to a place where he had to force an unlawful entry.

Cade bent down and picked up a sturdy rock. "This is going to cost me," he said, stepping forward as if he meant to put it through the glass window. They heard a clink of chains and turned to see that Deacon had unlocked the door to the basement.

"Ah, good!" said Cade, tossing the rock aside. He stooped down and heaved open the wooden doors. "Well, move on," he said. "Let's not wait for this one to drop dead." He led the way down the few steps into a basement filled with wooden boxes and storage cupboards and up a stairwell into an unlit corridor.

Feeling cramped, Cedrik thought the house to be as dreary as the inn they had swapped it for, but when Cade opened the door he saw a neat room, with a fire burning low, and a kettle on the hob.

"Are you certain this is no trouble," Cedrik began, but dropped into silence. Cade indicated, with a nod of his head, his old grandmother sleeping in a chair. A frayed blanket was draped over her thin legs. The boys immediately lightened their step and, like thieves in the night, made their way toward the staircase.

Cade had got one foot on the first step when his grandmother stirred. Almost bumping into one another's backs, they froze as if caught in some act of mischief. Sitting forward in her chair, she couldn't clearly see in the subdued light. Not wanting her to be afraid, Cade said casually, "Go back to sleep. It's only me. Some friends of mine are going to stay with us awhile."

Cedrik almost swallowed his tongue. He would never speak to his mother so presumptuously, and quickly added, "If it doesn't prove an inconvenience."

Cade shook his head with a look that said: "Belly-crawler."

Cedrik's good manners were lost on the old woman. She gave a derisive snort and stared. Her gaze lingered particularly on Deacon who, looking ill, kept his head down, his lips white and compressed. Standing, he began to grow excessively weary.

"Get away now." She waved her hand and closed her eyes, sinking into her arm-chair. "Mind you don't keep one another awake with your foolishness," she muttered, as though speaking to children. Cade stared blankly at the old woman, sound asleep as though she hadn't once stirred, then turned swiftly and led his guests up stairs.

In the dark room, Cedrik's foot caught on something that almost sent him down. He cursed and stood still until he could see. When their host struck a light, Cedrik saw they had entered a room in the most astounding disorder, worse than Derek could ever hope to achieve. Deacon was sufficiently disgusted but crashed into the bed on the far side. It was the only one free from clutter.

"That's my bed," said Cade, but Deacon had fallen into a sleep that was more like unconsciousness. Looking incredulous, Cade set to work clearing off the other two beds. Cedrik and Derek watched him toss everything onto the floor, adding to the general disorder. "My brothers used to share this room with me," he said to make conversation, recklessly tossing things over his shoulder.

"There's only three beds," Derek said with dismay, knowing he would be the one to have to sleep on the floor with the rats.

"One of you can sleep next door in my sister's room," answered Cade simply, then threw a dirty shirt at Derek's face. "I'm the only one left with the old woman."

"Where is she now, your sister?" asked Derek, aghast at the idea of sleeping in a bed belonging to someone deceased.

"One of my sisters," said Cade, "lives with my parents. She stays here sometimes. The rest are round and about. My brothers and sisters all sort of went their own ways."

"Just how many brothers and sisters do you have?" asked Cedrik.

"I have three brothers. Five sisters."

Cedrik gave a little sound of disbelief, amazed at how so many people could have lived under the one roof. "Where are your parents?"

"They moved to a place west of here called Broom. Heard of it? It's only a three-day ride, so I see them more often than I would like. The others not so much. I don't even know where two of my brothers are living. But I couldn't leave. The old hag needs me, you know?"

Cedrik smiled to himself. It was evident Cade loved his grandmother, though he would thrash anyone who said so.

"Besides I like it here," said Cade. "I've got work, and my girl's here. I don't have a need to leave." He stood back from the cleared beds. "Take your pick."

"I'm going to sleep in your sister's room," said Derek, taking himself out the door.

"Touch any of her things, and I'll break your fingers!" Cade called, then turned to Cedrik who was watching Deacon. "He'll be right when morning comes. You'll see."

Cedrik pulled back the covers to his assigned bed. "It is good of you to let us stay here."

"Not a problem," came Cade's sleepy answer. "The mage isn't going to try and murder me in my sleep or anything is he?"

"Only if you talk in your sleep," said Cedrik.

Cade cast Deacon one more fearful glance before putting out the light.

Chapter 20

Tavern

Cedrik was the first to wake and was restless. He hadn't anywhere to go. He would not go downstairs to where the old lady was until Cade could accompany him. He had doubts she would remember him from the previous night and wanted to avoid either a fainting spell from her or a broom beating for himself. Soon he was stepping carefully over the clutter with the intent to wake Cade. He stood over him and saw with both amusement and alarm that he was gripping a knife in his hand as if it were a stuffed toy.

"Do you always sleep with a weapon in your hand?" Cedrik asked, clearly and distinctly, standing back so the sleeper didn't wake with a start and stab him.

Cade groaned and tugged the blankets up over his shoulder. "Only when there's a mage sleeping in the bed next to mine."

Derek appeared at the doorway. Usually it would take his mother to drag him out of bed by his ankles, but evidently the activities of the previous night had given him a new perspective on the city. Squinting out from under his blankets, Cade said, "You boys up and ready to go, already?"

"We should probably retrieve our things from the inn," replied Cedrik, sitting down and putting on his boots.

It was a slow and painful process for Cade to get up and moving. For a long moment he sat on the edge of the bed, stooped over. "Give me a minute," he muttered in a gravelly voice. He glanced over his shoulder at Deacon bunched up among the blankets. "See, he knows it's not yet time to get up.

It looks like death took him instead of sleep—look at him." He picked up something to toss at Deacon, but Cedrik caught his wrist.

"Better to let him sleep," Cedrik said.

They made their way downstairs to the small, cluttered kitchen. There they found a hot breakfast waiting for them and ate as only boys know how. The coffee was hot and strong, and a heaped-up dish with sausages, crispy bacon, eggs, and hot fried cakes was far more pleasing than meals such as Cedrik and Derek had previously made acquaintance with. Grateful for the old woman's hospitality, Cedrik offered his and Derek's assistance in any way that might prove useful.

"Don't get all fancy. Just eat," she said and picking up a broom, set to her house chores and let the boys have their breakfast in peace.

"You worked some magic on her. Normally she would have set to work any man staying in her home," said Cade, putting another spoonful of eggs onto his plate. "You lads can stay here as long as you need. There's no rush for you to take off."

"If it's not a problem," said Cedrik, "we could find a place more suitable to us in the city if need be?"

"We don't mind the company," said Cade.

"All right, then," said Cedrik, pleased. He liked it here. No one would describe the cottage as grand, but there was something altogether homely about it.

Cade wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his shirt. "There aren't any rules to abide by here. Only mind you don't aggravate the old woman. She can kill a man within five yards of her tongue. Understand?"

"Understood," said Cedrik uneasily, looking over to see if the grandmother was hearing them, but she was wholly engrossed in her housekeeping.

"If you don't mind my asking," said Cade, "what are the two of you doing so far from home? You surely didn't come all this way to enjoy Cheydon's fine weather, now did you?"

"We came here because Deacon wanted to," said Derek.

Cade blinked vacantly a moment. "So you mean to say you just follow him around like two little slaves, wherever he goes?"

Cedrik gave a short, uncomfortable laugh. "No. We only recently suffered misfortune in our family," he explained. "Deacon was most affected by it."

"Ah, I see," said Cade. "So you're keeping an eye on him, making certain he doesn't lose his mind and start blowing people limb from limb."

"We just didn't want him to be alone at such a time," was Cedrik's brief reply.

"He's not like either of you," said Cade. "You certain he's your cousin, and someone's not just having a go at you?" Casually, he resumed breakfasting and without lifting his face asked, "What side is he from?"

"His mother is sister to our father," replied Cedrik, assuming that was the question asked.

"No, I mean which elven realm, North or South?" Cade looked up from his plate, chewing, and looked from one to the other, waiting for an answer.

"Northern," answered Cedrik with a bewildered expression. "How did you know?"

Cade shrugged. "He's got that look. There's something a little peculiar about him, if you don't mind my saying so, I mean even for here. We've had elves before, dark elves mostly, mind you, but they do come here sometimes. Is he one of them? Half-blood or something?"

"No," said Cedrik. "He lived in Loriendale, but he's got no elven blood."

"He lived in Loriendale?" Cade looked impressed. "What business has he with the elves then?"

"His mother was wedded to one of them," was Cedrik's brief answer.

"I have a cousin who's been to the elves, once or twice," said Cade. "Not to any such place as Loriendale, but he's been to Evandale, so he tells me. More likely he had one too many and stumbled into the woods, thinking they were the elves—probably made it with a few trees."

The brothers said nothing. They thought it best to leave that one alone.

Some hours later Deacon awoke. He was glad to find himself alone. Tossing aside the covers, he struggled from bed, suffering unpleasant aftereffects. His foot hit something, and he looked down to see that his bag had been placed there. Retrieving a few personal items, he crossed over to the washbasin to splash his face with cold water. He shaved and made himself neat, as usual, then made his way downstairs.

He found himself in the company of the old woman jabbing at tangles of cobweb. With all the cleaning she could give the cottage, it would still have been but a place of torment to any woman of refinement. She hadn't yet noticed Deacon, and as she turned, her elbow knocked the ceramic vase off the table. Instead of shattering on the floor it remained suspended. Startled, she looked up to see him standing at the base of the staircase, his hand outstretched. Without apparent effort he kept the object still until she, not without some unease, plucked it from the air and placed it back to its rightful position.

"You're down disgracefully late, boy. Your friends have already come and gone again," she told him.

His countenance remained impassive and unfathomable. Straightening her frock over her thin frame, she regarded him with uncertainty and was notably uncomfortable at being alone with the young mage. She had heard of the things they could do: summon apparitions from the nether realms, induce madness with illusion, even bind one to their will and force them to do their bidding.

Hot and flustered, she brushed a frail hand across her brow. It was not entirely inconceivable that her face might once have been rather attractive, though the persistent scowl made it difficult to ascertain what she would have been like in youth.

"I'm stuck with you, am I?" she asked, resuming her usual gruff indifference. Pushing past him, she said, "Come to the kitchen." She was a great deal shorter than Deacon but led him into the cluttered little space with all the authority of an overbearing parent. "Sit," she said and drew out a chair from the breakfast-table. Deacon did as asked. The old woman set a heaped-up plate in front of him. "You're lucky I kept anything for you. It nearly went to the dogs."

Tying an apron over her frock, she let him alone and set to preparing the afternoon meal. Into a large iron pot, atop a wood stove, she threw coarse cuts of meat and roughly chopped potatoes. She worked hurriedly and with agitation, as though it was all a bother to her. Often she glanced at Deacon as he struggled through the breakfast she had kept warm for him. He was far more quiet than the others, yet she was strangely more conscious of his presence.

"I need something from the cellar. Shan't be a moment," she said briskly, drying her hands on her apron.

"Shall I go with you?" asked Deacon.

"So you can speak, can you?" she said, antagonistically. "I was beginning to think you were one of the gods' special sort." The comment drew a slight, bitter smile out of Deacon. "What are you smiling for?" She waved her hand at him. "Eat your damned breakfast."

"I'm not particularly hungry."

She leaned against the table, stared critically at his face, and said, somewhat repulsed, "You're a sickly-looking thing, aren't you? I've seen things lying on their backs under my cupboard look healthier than you."

Deacon smiled to himself. A shade of contempt darkened his face. His look of illness was a sort of shame to him.

"You've been ill, haven't you?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied coldly.

She straightened herself. "Well, I don't suppose you'll be much use to me, will you? Doesn't matter. I wouldn't trust you anyway. There's a lot of your sort around here. All trouble-makers. Don't go making trouble for yourself now, you hear?"

Deacon dropped his eyes again; an insolent humour curved his lip, and he knew she had an impulsive urge to box his ears.

"Eat!" she said, muttering to herself as she left him to go down into the cellar. When she returned, Deacon was gone. He had left nothing for her to clean after him, and she was surprised and pleased to discover that he had fixed things about the kitchen that had been long in need of attention and which Cade had promised to get around to and never did.

For the remainder of the day, Deacon occupied his time at the spell book emporium, lost among scrolls and books, which he consumed with an insatiate hunger. Often he was frustrated and found much of it scarcely adequate. Finally he found something that took his particular interest. He purchased the book and returned to the cottage and his cousins.

An abrupt silence greeted his appearance. The boys, lounging rather than sitting, looked up uncomfortably. It was just as though he had walked in on some plot against him. For a moment he remained in the doorway. Changing to a sitting position, Cedrik nodded to the book. "What have you there?"

"Nothing that would interest you," Deacon answered as he entered the room, failing to acknowledge the other two. "I see we are to stay here?" he remarked, observing that all their belongings had joined Cade's clutter on the floor.

"You might as well. There's not much better, and here you can stay without cost." Cade spoke with his usual cheer.

Tossing the book down onto his designated place of sleep, Deacon barely acknowledged having been spoken to. Heavy with disappointment, he lay down. After a long silence, Cade proposed a drink and dinner at the tavern.

Well-occupied with himself Cade stared into the mirror. With a rough hand he brushed down his hair that would not lie flat, no matter how he pressed it. Cedrik and Derek watched his vain attempts. They were dressed in the newest and finest cuts, all in perfect order, and all becoming. Deacon was half-reclining over on his bed, book in hand. He glanced up occasionally at Cade, who had spent the past half hour going through numerous changes of garments.

"I have to get myself some new clothes," complained Cade, then turned to Cedrik. "Let me wear one of your shirts."

"Why?"

"It'll make me appear as if I have more coins in my pocket," he said, catching the shirt Cedrik tossed to him. As he slipped it over his head, he caught Deacon's disparaging look. "What?"

"When a man spends his energies on appearing to have, he's all the while losing the precious little time he has in which to

actually have," Deacon answered without lifting his eyes from the page.

"Pfft. You, my friend," said Cade, turning to resume grooming, "are in desperate need of some togetherness with the fairer kind. And good strong ale," he added, the drink being his remedy for almost every ailment. "Come with us."

"No," answered Deacon.

Cade ignored his irritability and took the shirt off. "I don't like this one," he said to Cedrik. "What else do you have?"

"Is this really necessary?" said Cedrik, tossing another.

"I've got little more than myself to offer," said Cade. "So at least if I can appear to have a little more, I stand a chance at grabbing a woman's attention, and perhaps a little more if I can get away with it. A rich man is never unattractive in the eyes of a woman, now is he?" Dressed in Cedrik's raiment he had the air of a scrounger who had contrived to give himself a respectable look.

"Surely women are not such fools as to prefer the gold over the man," offered Cedrik mildly.

Cade shrugged. "Who can say? They're unfathomable creatures when you come to consider their strange impulses and reasonings. They're all mysteries, and that's the way I like to keep it. Look too close and you'll lose an eye."

"Haven't you a dozen sisters? Have they not given you some insight into the feminine mind?" said Cedrik.

"Five, and no," answered Cade, making his voice as dry as possible.

"I thought you said you had a girl already," Derek gave Cade a sporting jab in the ribs.

Cade lifted an elbow to defend himself. "Do that again and I'll poke you in the eye. She is my girl. She just doesn't know it yet." He shrugged and rolled his shoulders as if uncomfortable in his borrowed clothes. "Right. Now we can go."

He turned to Cedrik and Derek, draping his arms over their shoulders. "I'm going to introduce you to some real women, my friends, not those showpieces you city lads call women. These ones will put hair on your chest." He looked over at Deacon. "Come with us. You need to eat, don't you? And you don't want to stay here with only yourself and the Crone."

Deacon closed the book with a lazy movement of his hand.

"I'll introduce you to some friends of mine. It'll be a good time, you'll see," promised Cade, when Deacon rose to join them. "Only don't start any trouble with your madman tendencies. And don't, for the gods' sake, frighten all the women with that accursed stare of yours."

Deacon fixed him with a dark look.

"Right," said Cade briskly. "Let's go! Wait, you're bringing that?" He pointed to the book in Deacon's hand. "You mad tortured bastard."

The tavern was rowdy and busy. The innkeeper rushed back and forth filling tankards for many thirsty patrons, while the waiting-maids hurried about, weaving in and around the tables, mopping up spills, refilling empty mugs, and serving dinners.

"It's loud in here!" shouted Cedrik, hinting that he wished to be somewhere else.

"Bloody unendurable!" Cade said with a laugh, pushing past people. At a noisy table near the fire, they joined a group of Cade's friends, some of whom Cedrik recognized from previously. Cold drinks were promptly ordered for the new arrivals, and Cedrik and Derek were very soon at their leisure.

Deacon remained quite separate, absorbed in the pages of his book, occasionally shifting his gaze to watch the dancing flames in the fireplace by which he had stationed himself. He was at his ease, yet was a stranger in the room. Preferring to keep a clear mind, he drank very little and kept to himself. He found no satisfactory company in the slow-moving brains of the village lads and took no pleasure in any of the pretty waiting-maids who frequented the table for conversation and sometimes to steal a kiss from their lovers.

A pert little waiting-maid sat on Cade's lap, putting her arms about his neck. From her forward manner, Derek presumed her to be the object of Cade's affection, when only moments after she left, another pretty thing took her place, sitting on his lap in the same familiar attitude. Her hair was tied in a ribbon with an annoyingly tight knot. "Take it out," she said, turning her head from him to see.

Cade, preoccupied in trying to untie the knot for her, wasn't conscious of Derek laughing at his frustrations. He was starting to perspire from the heat, which made his fingers stick and pull at her hair. Growing impatient, she was trying to tell him how he should do it. That increased his irritation. It wasn't until he finally threatened to cut it out, reaching for a knife, that she removed herself, shoving his head aside as she passed. When the ribbon situation had been resolved, the girl returned to Cade and commented on his different apparel.

"You like it? I think it looks good," he said, seeming unware he had lost her attention to Cedrik.

"He thinks this new look is going to somehow win Adriel," said one of them at the table. The girl looked upon Cade contemptuously.

"Except, isn't it true that once a man has won a woman, he no longer wants her?" she said. "It's born into you lot, isn't it?"

"No man ever has to win you, loved one," Cade said.

Her eyes narrowing, she flicked the remnants of ale from an almost empty tankard over his face. She gave a little cry of delighted protest as he suddenly reached across and dragged her onto his knee. "You're only jealous," he said, playfully struggling to keep her detained in his arms.

When she had finished her happy interaction with Cade, she went boldly over to Cedrik with the hopes of igniting discourse with him, and by her look, a vast deal more. Her face was fair enough for his taste, his blood had beat up the moment she brushed past him, but Cedrik was a little startled that a woman would give herself so freely. It was his belief that any woman worth having would hold herself at a higher price. A man must prove himself worthy if she is to be won.

His polite reserve did little to discourage her. With a nymph-like coyness she took a seat next to him and put her feet up on the table in a relaxed manner, crossing one boot over the other. Cedrik cast down his eyes, assuming a blank look and deliberately avoiding her gaze. He thought a world of trouble looked out from those eyes.

Giving him a sugary smile, she said, "Well?" She had noticed him glance at her uncovered legs.

"Well, what?" asked Cedrik with innocent sincerity.

"Will you offer to buy me a drink?"

Cedrik glanced over to a nearby table, at which he presumed sat a jealous lover, and said, "I think he'll be buying you a drink." He motioned with his head over to a man with an angry vein running down his forehead.

"That's my brother," she said. "He's only jealous."

"Jealous?" repeated Cedrik. "What has he to be jealous of?"

"He doesn't like me speaking to men."

"I see he has no quarrel with speaking to women," Cedrik observed.

She smiled. "So, will you buy me a drink then?

Cedrik shifted uncomfortably in his seat and reached for his drink. "Angry brothers and alcohol never mix well with me."

"You don't like me?"

"For certain I do—who could not?"

"You have a woman waiting for you?"

"No."

"Maybe you would prefer to go someplace else?" She waited for his response with arched brows and parted lips.

"I'm not stopping in Cheydon for many more days," he explained. He was perspiring. She gave an amused laugh, believing him to be afraid, and with heavy, languid movements took her legs down from the table. She had a very flattering way with men, and it was not long before she had deserted Cedrik in favor of another.

Derek, while busy trying to project calm disinterest, was half in love with every pretty girl in the tavern. One in particular caught his attention. She had her boot planted on the chest of a ruddy-faced patron, pinning him to his chair, while she balanced in one hand a tray of drinks, not caring that her skirt had fallen back to reveal a good deal of lily-white thigh. Grinning like a fool, the man reached out a grubby hand to touch her. With a savage push of her boot she knocked him backwards off the chair. She continued to attend tables without being bothered by the commotion she caused.

She strongly appealed to Derek. He watched her dealings with the men with raised brows. She was unaffected by their crude ways, clipping them sharply into line. Each person in

Derek's party lowered his voice whenever she passed and sat uneasy as if he feared he might be tossed out.

"That little fire-tongue will bleed you, Derek," said Cade, noting the woman had captured his attention. But the caution did not deter him, nor did watching as she sweetly beckoned a man forward with one finger, then caught him a sharp smack across the mouth. Several unkind remarks were muttered about her at their table.

"What's her name?" Derek asked, excitedly.

"Who?" asked Jerrett.

"That woman you've just been on about." He motioned to the redhead.

"Lorali," answered another. "Mind what you say to that one, otherwise there'll be a whole lot of pitiful sobs . . . and they won't be coming from her."

For Derek, when it came to women there was never a long delay between design and execution. He downed the last of his liquid courage and made his mind up to approach the fiery redhead. He moved forward decidedly, weaving his way through the many spirited figures, determined not to return until the object of his affections was obtained.

"She's going to bleed that little beggar," said Cade, leaning back in his chair, laughing, till his eye caught Cedrik's sharp look. The smile dropped off his face and he adopted a blank expression.

Assuming an entirely different manner with her than he had with the boys, Derek approached the fiery waiting-maid. She kept busy tending to tables and brushed him off as if he was nothing more than an annoying insect. She didn't seem to care that he had addressed her by name.

"Don't speak to me," she said, when he attempted to introduce himself.

"This is my first time here to Cheydon," he said.

"Hopefully it'll be your last," she answered.

Derek stood with a perplexed expression, as though he couldn't understand what she had just said to him. Being refused was a new and disagreeable experience for him. "That depends on you." He followed after her.

"That thought was late in coming to you," she said in her rather sarcastic way, leaning over a table to retrieve a pile of dirty plates. She didn't bother to look at him.

"Here, let me take that for you," he said, very gentlemanly.

"No. Get off." She lifted her elbow to push him aside.

When finally she remained still, standing at the counter, Derek took the opportunity to speak with her, believing the hecticness of her occupation to be the cause of hostility toward him. "I'm from the Imperial city," he said, hoping to impress her. "My father and brother are both—"

"I'm finished for the evening," she called out to the innkeeper, tossing her apron behind the counter. As she turned to leave, Derek stood in her way.

"Permit me, at least, to see you home," he offered in his most winning tones. "You're likely to meet rude company along the way, dressed as you are."

The last comment provoked a response he wasn't expecting nor prepared for. Suddenly and savagely she turned and inflicted a storm of verbal abuse upon him, the insults spilling unchecked, till the poor youth knew not where to look. From a safe distance the others sat back watching the pitiful spectacle, laughing themselves into coughing convulsions. Their merriment was aided by the considerable consumption of ale. Having no other notion of how to react, a curve of amusement came to Derek's lips.

"Oh, don't smile." Cade put his hands over his face as if he couldn't bear to watch.

Soon they saw a despairing frown cross Derek's features. Evidently she had said something that was not favorable to his vanity. He stood bewildered, with helpless hands. He had not much experience with these sorts of women and their tempers. To be refused in such a manner was killing. His own inner self, still shaky and adolescent, was easily crushed.

As her finishing note, she poured a full tankard of beer down his front. Then she pressed her lips hard to his and followed the assault with an even harder slap to the cheek. She left him dazed and confused, not knowing whether he wanted to laugh or cry.

From the table Cedrik watched with a creased brow, arms folded over chest. He had half a mind to have a word with her; she had gone out of her way to humiliate Derek. "That was uncalled for," said Cedrik crossly.

"I doubt he's so heartbroken he'll never turn to another," said Deacon, also watching. His passivity belied his annoyance at the drunken, exaggerated foolery.

Upon the dejected youth's dismal return, Cade laughed, slapping him on the back. "That went well!"

Derek rubbed the back of his neck as if it ached. "She called me some very harsh names."

With the remains of his pride, Derek took a place near to his cousin and decided he would stick to ale for the remainder of the evening. Deacon glanced up from over the book. "What are you doing?" he asked, as Derek fell into the seat opposite with unnecessary effort and noise.

"Came to see you," said Derek. "I've given up on women for the night." He lounged back and rested his boot on the edge of Deacon's chair. Deacon gave a tight-lipped smile and pushed Derek's boot off.

"Don't speak to me," he said, his eyes returning to the page.

"That's twice I've been told that in one evening," Derek complained. He chewed on his lip, looking at Deacon.

"What?" Deacon looked up impatiently. He could feel Derek watching him.

"What are you trying to do here?" asked Derek, peering over.

Deacon sighed audibly, irritated by all the noise and movement. "I'm trying to familiarize myself more thoroughly with these words."

"Words?"

"Words of a particular form," said Deacon. "Different syllables and sentence structures put your mind into different states, as do hand gestures and verbalizing. These here are the most effective in bringing the consciousness to the desired state."

"What?"

"The phrases focus the mind more efficiently toward the desired objective, so there is less demand physically." Derek sat uninformed, chewing his cheek. "It's about focusing the mind

to an extreme point so that you can communicate your will. The more I learn how to do this, the less taxing it is on my body."

Derek nodded sagely. "In other words, it's as if trying to give directions to someone who doesn't know your language. You'll eventually get them to understand, but it would take less effort if you could speak their language."

"Something of that nature," Deacon agreed. "Mages of exceptional skill need neither to verbalize nor use hand gestures to achieve their objective."

"I thought all this came naturally to you?"

"Anyone with the right application of his mind can control energies."

"Will you teach me something?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't want to be the one responsible for unleashing you into the world," said Deacon in a tone of banter, contrary to the seriousness of his mood.

A young woman with warm chestnut hair and warm brown eyes had observed Deacon. Throughout the evening as she went about serving tables, she stole coy glances in his direction in hopes of attracting his attention. He appeared not to notice, but he knew. She watched as he sat there, intent, his eyes concentrated on the page, his mouth pressed shut as if he were angered. Finally she caught his attention. He glanced straight at her. She felt herself flush under that gaze, brief as it was. She was both fascinated by and afraid of his otherness—that underlying strangeness that set him apart from his companions.

When she finished serving another round to the members of his party, she ventured over to address him personally. "Here," she said, handing him a drink. "This will help loosen your tongue." For a brief moment the hands of both remained on the tankard, but she hadn't the courage to touch his hand. His intense eyes looked up from dark brows. "You haven't spoken all evening," she said, timidly.

"I have done," he replied.

"Not to me," she said with a shyness she thought became her. As she smiled down on him, Deacon noticed for the first time how attractive her flushed features were. He smiled, then

looked down again. His heart was too sore and his mind too heavy to enter into any discourse with her.

Hugging an empty platter to her breast, she did not detain his eyes a moment from the book. Her attention was fixed upon the nape of his neck, where the dark hair ended and the tanned flesh ran smooth. She was keenly interested in him. His manner was quiet and guarded, but it did not require keen eyes to detect the hidden inferno. Standing there above him, she felt awkward. He was not having her. She shifted her weight several times, not knowing what to say. His intense reservedness was like to his pushing her back with a hand.

Lounging in his chair, Derek watched as Deacon actively ignored the beautiful woman. He thought it was strange; more than strange, it was inhuman. "Don't worry about him," Derek said, getting her attention. "He doesn't talk to anyone, not even his own cousin." He slouched down and pushed Deacon's boot playfully with his own.

"You're cousins?" she asked, surprised.

"I could tell you a few stories about this one," Derek said, glancing at Deacon, who gave no response more than a slight crease in the dark brow. Happy to be close to Deacon without the strain of speaking to him, the woman continued the pleasant exchange with the more approachable one. Not once did Deacon return the glances she was constantly directing towards him as she spoke. The drink had loosened Derek's tongue and got him to spilling stories.

"Don't make her suffer through any of your distorted tales," Deacon said.

"I like them," she said.

"Perhaps then you should sit. He'll go on and on, now that you've permitted it."

The young woman almost beamed, happy to have won a word from him. "What is it that you're reading?" she asked, reaching her hand forward.

"I wouldn't touch that!" said Derek, as if fearful of what might happen. She held back her hand, rather startled, looking at Derek with frightened eyes, waiting for him to explain.

Deacon looked up. "She can do as she pleases," he said, the mildness in his voice akin to politeness.

"What will happen if I touch it?" she asked.

"Place your hand there and I'll show you," said Deacon, almost affectionately.

She liked his voice, which was deep and handsome, and she liked his heavy-lidded eyes, which were blue and dark, and which looked at her with a strange intensity. She crouched down at his side. She could not resist touching the book and his hand that held it firmly. She felt a low current run from the book through to her, a strange heat striking through her flesh, so that her very blood seemed to run warmer. Almost it was dreadful. Dimly she knew it, even as it sent little thrills of delight through her.

"Isn't it a strange warmth?" she murmured, shifting to get nearer to him.

"Energy radiance," he answered.

A warm and secure glow from the fire gently enveloped them like the comfort of a blanket. For a time the noise and irritation was pushed aside, and only the gentle crackling seemed heard. Deacon brushed his thumb lightly against her hand covering his, as though languor bound them and softened them to one another. Talking quietly, she remained at his side. She was kneeling, bending forward to be near him, but he remained passive, giving her the minimum of his attention. Derek had sometime before returned to the table, giving Deacon time alone with the unfortunate young woman. After a time she stopped speaking, finding he did not answer. It seemed he had forgotten her, his eyes fixed downwards, reading.

She contented herself to watch him in silence, with waning interest. In a moment she placed her hand on his thigh, but it won from him not a spark of interest. She removed her hand and sat back, her eyelids sinking a little with annoyance. Deacon could sense her boredom and irritation, yet continued on as if entirely absorbed. In times past he would have had his fair share of interest and perhaps gone away with her for the night, but a change had passed over him. Desire was dead inside him. She was scornful of him and his removed nature and left without a parting word, evidently upset. His gaze lifted and followed her, but he didn't care that she had left him.

Harassed by the noise, Deacon found it difficult to maintain concentration. Finally he closed the book and set it aside, resting forward with his arms leaning across his knees. He watched the young men at the table trying to impress their jeering friends. Derek was the centre of attention. They had entered into a game with him, their objective to make him drunk. They wagered on who could drink the most without becoming overcome; in this way they succeeded in getting him to drink to excess. Just short of eighteen, he was at the foolish age where incitement was easily achieved.

Although he took pains to appear blind to it all, Deacon sat solemn with a clenched jaw, keeping himself in check. Inside he was burning. The room had grown intolerable.

Derek was handed a small drink that he had never before tasted, a vile drink that made his mouth and stomach feel on fire. He held it hesitantly to his lips. He could almost feel it burning before it even touched them.

"Get it down you quick," said Cade, slapping him on the back. "Don't let it touch your tongue," came the belayed warning as Derek knocked it back. There was a brief moment when his face drained and he looked as if he might be sick, but he came around. He scrunched his face. The drink stung the tongue and warmed the throat, so that he could scarcely breathe for a time. He gagged and spluttered as the hot liquid rampaged down to his stomach that filled with a resonating warmth, which, once settled, was not entirely unpleasant.

"What is that?" asked Derek, impressed, his eyes watering. The stimulating effects had him wanting more. He had another, and another, till the sensations were suddenly no longer agreeable, and he lay back in his chair with a groan. By the end of it he was such a sorry-looking wretch that Cade and the others left him alone, laughing aloud in their rowdy fashions.

Cedrik frowned at his brother's lack of self-control. The sorry youth clutched his head in both his hands and complained of the pain. Cedrik had no sympathy or patience for him. "You've made quite a fool of yourself," Cedrik said. "I think now we should go."

He was answered by a pitiful groan.

The women who had been watching Derek fawned over him. His hair was ruffled from their persistent, indulgent attentions. One offered to retrieve for him something to eat, another clutched his head against her, his face and nose crushed up against her breast. She released him abruptly when he announced he was going to be sick.

"Come on. Get up," said Cedrik, trying to get sense out of his insensible brother. Derek lay half-sprawled over the table, plastered to immobility.

Tormented almost beyond endurance, Deacon became feverishly annoyed. His forbearance reaching its limits. The laughter and chatter at last became so obtrusive he rose in agitation. "Get up, you drunken fool," he said to Derek, assisting him to his feet roughly by the back of his collar. Derek was about to protest to his rough handler but saw that his blood was up and he was in no mood to be played with. He knew that Deacon would physically drag him out if need be. Several women in their party complained and tried to persuade Deacon to let him stay longer.

"Help us to convince him," they pleaded with Cedrik, who looked helplessly from one woman to the other.

Deacon turned and left Cedrik to their persuasions. Stepping out into the street he came suddenly upon two girls, who clinging to one another, weak with laughter, stopped as though they had encountered a dark impervious wall. The smiles fell from their lips and quickly they made a wide berth round him. The girls, on their way into the tavern, squeezed passed Cade and the brothers on their way out, Cedrik supporting Derek's bent-over form.

Chapter 21

Dark Procession

The smell of damp earth hung heavy in the night air. The young men sat quietly on the bank of the black lake, upon which the moon shone down, quivering like liquid gold.

Cedrik sat on a rock. Derek lay at his feet, his arm bent across his eyes. He felt as though he had been beaten and wondered if they had not taken to him with a stick while he was in his stupor.

"The night's quiet," observed Cade, looking up at the stars dimmed by wisps of clouds.

"Not quiet enough," complained Derek, feeling sorry for himself. He had vomited so violently he was convinced that his last hour had come. Moaning like a man who is dying, he thumped his booted foot against the rock.

"Will you stop doing that?" said Cedrik, pushing his boot away. "Why must you always have your feet up all the time?"

Derek didn't answer but rubbed his face miserably. After a moment he said, "When strength returns to my limbs, I'm going to thrash you, Cade."

Cade laughed heartily. "Ah, they all say that the first time."

Standing quite apart from the others, Deacon stood with his shoulder leaning against one of the rocks, looking out across the still, black surface of the lake, the book clutched to his chest. Certain elusive scents drifting in the air forced upon him sentimental yearnings for the happiness of home, but he had lost the single entity that had any semblance of such a place. Along with her, his home was lost and buried.

The thought of it hurt so terribly he could scarcely bear the ache that spread from his throat down and around his heart. Reflections of Mariwen also came undesired upon him. He thought with bitterness how devoted he had been, how willing he was to support and yield to her, desiring that she should belong to him. Now he felt only broken feelings, fragmented too utterly to give their meaning to him. With effort he banished all thoughts of her. He would not go back to her.

"It's a pity some of the girls didn't accompany us," Derek said, sobering a little in the night air.

"You're ill," Cedrik reminded him.

"I don't care."

"You would've cared when you made them cry, heaving up as you were."

Derek gave a short grunt of a laugh, then frowned, his stomach rolling with remembrance.

"I don't know what you lads would've done with them if they had come with us," said Cade. He gestured at Derek. "This one can't keep his drink down, and you, Cedrik, turn away perfectly good women who fairly throw themselves at you." Cade looked disgusted. "And this one here! He's got eyes for nothing but that accursed book!" Deacon glanced in his direction, but made no remark. "You're a disgrace, all three of you."

"And which happy lady is yours to lay claim to?" asked Cedrik. "You seemed to have several."

"Ah, no. The gods save me from it. One is more than enough trouble for what she's worth." Cade puffed out his cheeks, then said: "The lucky lass wasn't there tonight, unfortunately. I'll have to borrow this again." He held out the front of Cedrik's shirt from his chest.

"You may keep it, if you like."

"Just as well; I spilt gravy on it."

Cedrik smiled, then his face became serious. "What's that place over there?" He nodded across the water at the foreboding structure obscured by cold mists and sickly trees. He had been looking at it for sometime and wondered what it was.

"I won't take you over there," said Cade, rather scornful.

"It looks like a temple of sorts," said Cedrik.

"It's dedicated to Demise."

"The goddess of death?"

"That's the one."

"It's a dark form of worship."

"It's morbid," said Cade. "A breath away from necromancy, if you ask me."

At the mention of the dark art Cedrik glanced over to Deacon, aware of his cousin's intense dislike, but Deacon looked out over the water without any sign of having heard. Nearly overcome by the emotion roused in him by the memory of his mother, Deacon turned and made his way back toward the house, leaving the others to stare after him. A morbid silence fell over them. Cedrik bit his lower lip, wondering if he shouldn't have a word with Deacon, just the two of them alone.

The air in the woods was half mist, half twilight. Nothing stirred. If there was any life here it was hushed and hidden. All the trees stood well spaced from one another and were stately despite their mournful appearance. Within the gloom, Deacon knew a quiet grove in which he spent long hours of solitude, finding these woods to be the only place sufficiently quiet for him to escape and become entirely absorbed in his study, without fear of interruption.

Clapping shut the book, Deacon sat with fevered frustration. He had tried to divine for Luseph several times and had failed. Each time he set his mind to it, the necessary concentration would elude him. Thinking of his father, he found his mind became unclear and hot with temper. A vague memory, surcharged with horror and dread, forced itself upon him. His very soul revolted against the remembered contact of his hands. The violent images seared into his consciousness with a permanent scar. He hated his father passionately.

The night was quickly drawing in. Deacon was heading toward the cottage, when he heard Cade's voice call, "Where have you been!" He turned and saw that they were down by the water. Hesitating a moment, not certain if he wanted company, he made his way toward them. "Where's your book?" was the first thing Cade asked, noticing that he did not carry it with him.

"I have no further use for it," said Deacon simply, coming to stand next to Cedrik, who aimlessly tossed little rocks out into the lake.

"Do you think it wise to disturb the water?" asked Deacon, after a moment.

"Why, there's nothing in there, is there?" Derek said, turning to Cade as if to seek assurance.

Cade shrugged and tossed a stone in anyway.

"You've been gone for hours," said Cedrik as he clutched Deacon's shoulder and gave an affectionate squeeze.

"I know," said Deacon, brushing a hand over his brow wearily, his face down-bent.

"How much longer do you suppose to stay here?"

"I don't know how long I'll remain, but you and Derek are free to leave whenever you wish it."

"We've got nothing impending to return to," said Cedrik. "I think Derek is enjoying himself, in any case."

Both looked affectionately over at the younger one as he leaned over the water as far as he could without falling in, trying to see through the darkness to the bottom. "What are you doing down here from the house?" asked Deacon.

"Hiding from the Crone," answered Cade without explanation.

"How about we go to the tavern for just a little while?" suggested Derek, bored.

"How about I hold your head underwater for just a little while?" asked Cedrik.

As the evening progressed they lapsed into a dejected silence. Derek lounged against a rock, persistently tossing little stones at his brother, opposite. "One more . . . " threatened Cedrik. Derek smirked, but tossed aside all the stones. Letting out a discontented sigh, he lay his back against the cold earth and stared up at the stars. The evening mist from the lake cast mournful reflections into the minds of the young men. One in particular was deeply affected. He stood with his shoulder against the boulder, staring out across the mass of water as if forgetful of his companions. Silent in his deep absorption. Then over by the woods something caused Deacon to glance up, and at once riveted his attention. So still as he was, his slight

start caused the others to look around also, and, catching their breaths, see what he saw.

Keeping to the shadows by the edge of the woods, a dark procession of priestesses passed down toward the water, their majestic gowns trailing behind them. Each wore a fine black veil drawn down over her face, and each held a small bowl with a flame reverently between both hands. Haunting in their dark similitude, there was an element in their beauty that gave a sense of dread. As they passed, one of them turned, without moving more than her fine neck, in the direction of the awe-inspired observers. Among her dark kind it was evident she was not one of them. Though she looked as they looked and moved as they moved, she was separate from them, isolated by her own singleness, a quality of being on her own, of not belonging to any living soul.

All four men looked at her, but it was one man, and only one, at whom she looked. And though outwardly he remained the perfect exemplar of stillness, Deacon could feel his breath quiver within his chest with every beat of his heart. He alone was the figure to draw her attention. He could not clearly see her features lost to shadow, but he saw, looking from beneath the veil, her beautiful penetrative eyes turned toward him. Unconscious of anything outside of each other, they gazed on one another with an intensity that excluded all else.

Observing the exchange, Derek turned hastily to his cousin. "Who is she?" he asked, an eagerness betokening great admiration.

Silence was his answer.

"Deacon? . . . Deacon, who is she?" Derek repeated, rather breathless. "Who are they?" He turned to Cade, finding no response from the other.

Cade took a moment to answer. "Dark priestesses, servants of death." His voice was low and scornful.

"Priestesses?" Derek repeated, excitedly.

"Only in your dreams have you seen such beauty," said Cade with a peculiar mixture of admiration and abhorrence.

Derek's persistent questioning broke the spell on Deacon. Coming to a sense of himself, he cast down his eyes. After a brief time he again looked up, but she had since turned her

face and did not cast a single glance backwards. Down by the water's edge the priestesses waited with a reverence so still and silent that the night itself seemed to withhold its gentle breathing. The absence of sound about them was uncanny, not quickly forgotten. They were not left to stand here long before what they waited for made its presence known. A lonely boat, gliding through the black water, came toward the shore with secret purpose.

As the priestesses waited, their young admirers were straining their eyes to make out the features which the veils obscured. They each possessed a cryptic, evanescent beauty and a sombre grace that was more effective than beauty itself, an unnatural stillness in their bearing. Cedrik stared as long as politeness would permit, while Derek was shamelessly obvious in his interest.

"What do you suppose they do over there?" he asked.

"Unholy things," answered Cade. "Few that I know ever go there to worship."

"I think I might go and worship," said Derek.

Cedrik almost laughed. "Since when do you pay homage?"

"I think now might be the time to start."

"I wouldn't," said Cade. "Sometimes the men who do go over, don't come back."

"Because they can't, or because they don't want to?" asked Derek. He couldn't help but notice the gowns the priestesses wore were more clinging and attractive than solemn worshippers would usually wear.

"They belong to a black form of worship," said Cade. "Some say they offer sacrifices."

"Animal sacrifices?" asked Derek, scrunching up his face in disgust.

"Human."

"Mustn't be," said Cedrik, as if correcting him. "Any living sacrificial offering is illegal."

"I'm only telling you what I've heard," said Cade. "In any case they're ill news. It's best to steer clear from them entirely."

"Why?" asked Derek, not convinced that the loveliness he saw before him could be as treacherous as proposed.

"Because they are evil," said Cade. "They aim to destroy you for the sheer pleasure of it. Take my word for it, those women will rip your heart clean out of your chest, then leave you to bleed to death like a whimpering little wretch. Why do you think no one goes into those damned woods!"

"Except you and your trouble-making friends," Cedrik said.

Cade laughed. "Well, can't hide behind our mother's skirts forever, can we?"

Cade had cast such a cloak of mystery about the priestesses that Derek craved to uncover it. His curiosity tortured him to such a degree that he could scarcely resist going and speaking to one of them. Nevertheless, he restrained himself. "They're a little frightening," he said, quietly.

"Isn't that what I have just been telling you, damn it!" said Cade, frustrated.

"I have no doubt they're a great deal superior to you lot," said Derek, wanting to go over.

"That fact alone hardly proves them saints," said Cade. "They have robbed men I thought impervious, of their senses. I had a friend who I once respected a good deal. It was pitiable to see the state he was reduced to when he became infatuated with one of those creatures. She played with his mind and tortured the poor beggar till he was senseless, out of his mind."

"Where is your friend now?" asked Cedrik.

"He left several years ago. He sort of went mad. I haven't heard from him since. Take my word for it, it always ends badly. In any case, they're forbidden to the likes of us. Their order has taken the path of chastity. They're bound to certain peculiar vows. Not that it matters to me. I would sooner bed the mage." He said this with shuddering disgust, looking over at Deacon, but he seemed little conscious of anything outside of her.

On its arrival the priestesses boarded the boat. Night-mist obscured the hems of their dark gowns which trailed behind them with haunting smoothness. Deacon stood tensely, watching with evident interest.

"I'm glad to see their witchery holds no power over you," said Cade, his voice becoming dry and sarcastic. "And after everything I've just told you."

Deacon turned his eyes slowly upon him and said in a tone of remonstrance, “I prefer to form my own opinion, based on my own observations.”

“What observations!” exclaimed Cade. “That was a rare thing you just beheld. They never come out of that torture fortress, and they’re as likely to poison you as they are to speak to you!”

As if not hearing what he had said, Deacon fixed his attention on the lonely boat, bearing the priestess toward the isle.

“It always ends badly.” Cade shook his head. “Love her from a distance if you must, but don’t touch.”