

*Joseph Hunt * Alan Adams*

BLUE DHARMA



THE STORY
OF ANAIYAILLA

*As told by
two convicted of murder*

BLUE DHARMA

THE STORY OF ANAIYAILLA

*Joseph Hunt * Alan Adams*

You hold in your hands book one of the four-part **Inner World Series**. This epic recounts a struggle between good and evil as it took place in a distant part of the universe, on a planet not unlike our own. Enmeshed in the struggle are souls of surpassing brilliance and souls almost wholly eclipsed by depravity. Demons, Elves, and other creatures most people deem mythical abound. Wars open with the pages and are spread before the reader. Yet, the Inner World Series is ultimately about human societies and human hearts, how they fall, how they rise, the price of their redemption, and the manner of their salvation.

Joe Hunt was the leader of the fabled Billionaire Boys Club and Alan is his cell mate.

SPIRITUAL/FICTION

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BLUE DHARMA:
The Story of Anaiyailla

BOOK ONE OF THE INNER WORLD SERIES

A TALE TOLD BY TWO CONVICTED
IN **THIS** WORLD OF MURDER:
JOE HUNT AND ALAN ADAMS.

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This novel is a work of fiction. All names, characters, places, and scenarios hail from the author's imagination – they are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or people, alive or dead, is purely coincidental.

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BLUE DHARMA:
The Story of Anaiyailla

CONTENTS

Editor's Introduction	vi
Foreword	viii
Maps	viii
World	x
Erebia	xii
Druunhaelen Mountains	xiii
Preface	xiv
Prologue	xv
Chapter 1: The Paladin, the Hero, and the Dragon (10/18/9449)	17
Chapter 2: Lori (10/21/9449)	39
Chapter 3: Anna (1/30/9450)	55
Chapter 4: He Who Knows Evil, He Who Knows God, and He Who Knows Neither (2/25/9450)	72
Chapter 5: Starmaker (3/4/9450)	89
Chapter 6: To Reach Them (3/5/9450)	118
Chapter 7: Bravery or Folly? (3/10/9450)	146
Chapter 8: Darkness and Revelation (3/10/9450)	165
Chapter 9: Trial and Triumph (3/10/9450)	183
Chapter 10: Requiem (3/11/9450)	218
Chapter 11: A Divine Blessing (3/16/9450)	229

Chapter 12: Reunion (3/17/9450)	249
Chapter 13: Reverberations (3/17/9450)	269
Chapter 14: The Knights of Baeza (3/18/9450)	275
Chapter 15: A Rainy Night (3/18/9450)	293
Chapter 16: The River Druun (3/23/9450)	300
Chapter 17: Thisbee (3/25/9450)	321
Chapter 18: The Ninth Hellfire Gem (3/26/9450)	351
Appendix A: Glossary	367
Appendix B: A Brief Timeline of the Conflict	374
Appendix C: Phonetic Key to Selected Names	381
Appendix D: Musical Score to “Starmaker”	382
Afterword	384

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

One of the authors, Joseph Hunt, was the leader of the notorious “Billionaire Boys Club,” or “BBC,” in the early 1980s. His life has been the subject of three books and a miniseries that was seen by over fifty million people. He is the only California prisoner to have successfully represented himself in a capital murder trial. He is doing time on a separate case, also a murder charge. His supposed victim, Ron Levin, a con man who owed Mr. Hunt millions, has never been verifiably located. Levin was out on bail on twelve felony counts when he disappeared. Reports keep coming in that Levin is alive. Mr. Hunt maintains his innocence.

Before his arrest, Mr. Hunt attended USC, and was a floor trader on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. He occupies himself now with his ongoing challenge in federal court to his conviction, helping other wrongfully convicted prisoners regain their freedom, the stock market, handball, and Kriya Yoga. Insights gleaned by Mr. Hunt from his two-decade study of the “original Christian teachings” as expounded by the great Indian Master Paramahansa Yogananda are one of the distinguishing features of the Inner World Series.

The second author, Alan Adams, pleaded guilty to a double-murder and was sentenced to life without the possibility of parole in 1993. A few years before, he was a promising student who had his eyes set on the Air Force Academy in Colorado. Through his own life, he knows the path to Hell, having walked it to the point of murder, nay beyond. His journey back began in 1993, when he read Atlas Shrugged, by Ayn Rand. Her “objectivist” system of ethics broke across his consciousness as a revelation. As a product of the public school system, it was the only reasoned exposition of a moral system that he had ever been exposed to. The first consequence within him of Atlas Shrugged was a flood of remorse. He realized not just the wrongness of his actions but the depravity of his very state of mind. He decided he was not fit to live. Though he resolved himself to die, God had other plans for Alan. This series, in a sense, traces his inner journey back from Hell, and into the light.

Book Two in this four-book series is half written and will be pub-

lished in a year. Also in a year, Blue Dharma: The Insider's Guide to the Criminal Justice System will be published. It is a handbook for suspects, arrestees, defendants, and convicts, filled with tips and anecdotes drawn from Mr. Hunt's twenty years behind the wall. Neither criminal defense attorneys, nor prosecutors, are going to be happy about what he has to say. Yet, what you will find in the book, they won't tell you—and his advice may make a difference between hard time and freedom.

Mr. Hunt decided to write Blue Dharma: The Insider's Guide to the Criminal Justice System, after realizing that he had a unique vantage point on criminal defense. Like many others, he had the experience of hiring defense attorneys, only to lose at trial (more than 96% of criminal defendants do). However, when facing murder charges in another case and jurisdiction, he chose to represent himself—and won. It was a seven-month trial in which he called to the stand 107 witnesses, 20 of them experts. NOVA did a special on the groundbreaking computer simulation he presented in the defense case-in-chief.

During the course of a decade spent in county jails fighting those two capital cases, Mr. Hunt coached six men who were also representing themselves to victory. During the ensuing decade in prison, Mr. Hunt wrote habeas petitions that have sent eight lifers home. He has also read the transcripts of well over a hundred murder trials. It is from such sources and experiences that the Insider's Guide is drawn.

Hunt's petition seeking to overturn his life-without-possibility-of-parole sentence is now pending in the U.S. District Court, Central District of California. (See Hunt v. Kernan, CV 98-5280 AHS(AN).) For those interested in learning about that case, a package of the key pleadings can be obtained through bluedharma.com.

—The Editor,
Blue Dharma Press

P.S. The poem at page 232 is based upon a poem written by Yogananda.

FOREWORD BY JOSEPH HUNT

The collaboration with Alan Adams on this series has proven to be one of the more rewarding experiences of my life. Starting with Alan's seed-thought seven years ago, it has grown far beyond our first expectations. Now, with the story-boarding complete for the books that will complete the "Inner World Series," the two of us are hard at work to take our readers with us to the amazing conclusion in Book Four.

I would like to express my deep appreciation to my wife, Jamie; Swami Kriyananda; Jyotish and Devi Novak; David and Asha Praver; and Ananta and Maria McSweeney—all of the Ananda Church. So, too, my heart is filled with gratitude for K.O., T.A.H., B.R., L.R., William Gilg, and William DiVita. Thank you so much for your help and inspiration. Thanks also to Gianna Rocha, the proprietor of Bright Eyes (www.brighteyes.org), who worked with the manuscript, was responsible for the design and the layout of the book, and was an important resource in the logistics of getting this work published. Stavra Ketchmark was our copy editor. Many thanks to her for her contribution.

Martin Williams, a fellow lifer, wrote the song Starmaker (see, post, pp. 95 & 382) and generously allowed us to incorporate it into the book.

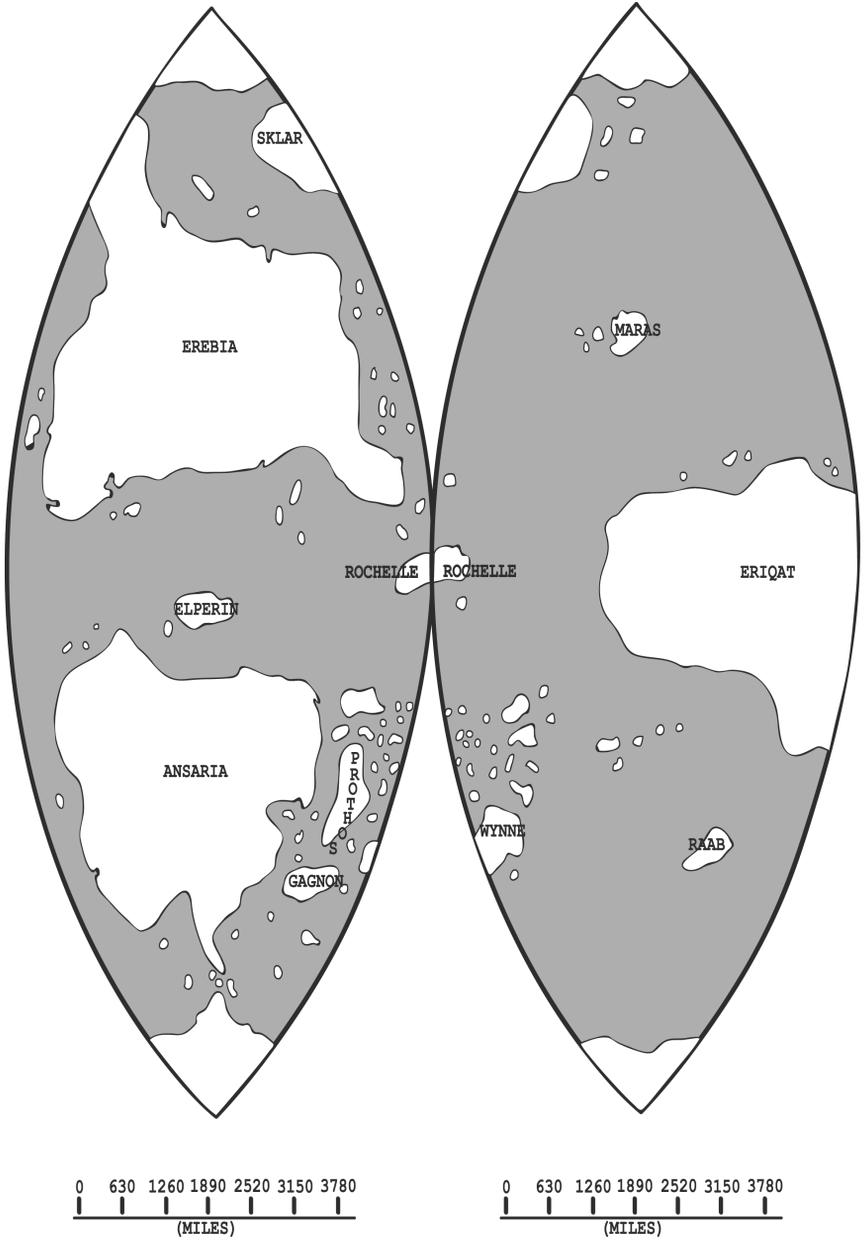
For those who think the life of a high-security prisoner is limited to riots, shankings, trips to the hole, swigging pruno, ogling pinups, and plotting escape ... this book will serve as our rebuttal.

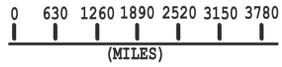
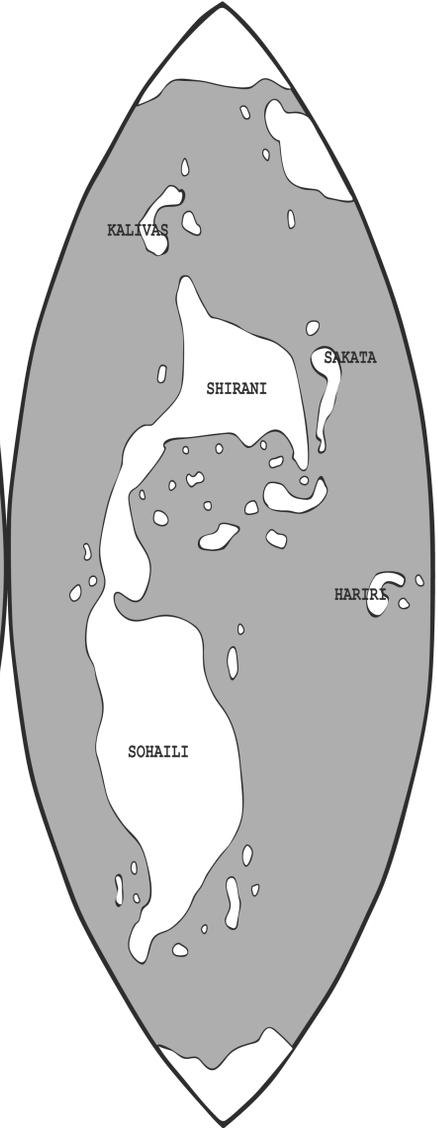
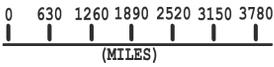
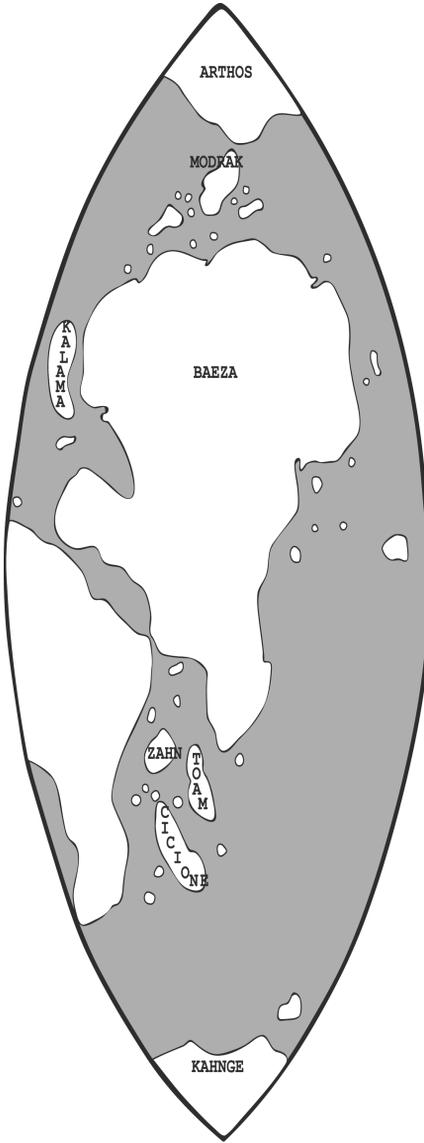
Finally, a word about the title. *Blue* is the color of prisoners, but it is also the color of this planet and the astral world. *Dharma*, from the Sanskrit root *dhri*, "to uphold or support," in simple terms, means religion or righteousness. In a deeper sense, it refers to the eternal laws that uphold the divine order of the universe and of man, its microcosm. It is written that Man should perform virtuous *dharma* so that he can free himself from the laws of cause and effect and thereby realize his true nature as spirit. The concept is explored in the Bhagavad Gita and in the book in your hands. I especially recommend the delusion-shattering translation of the Gita by Paramahansa Yoganada, the great yogi-saint from India, and author of the greatest book I ever read: The Autobiography of a Yogi.

—Joseph Hunt, bluedharma.com

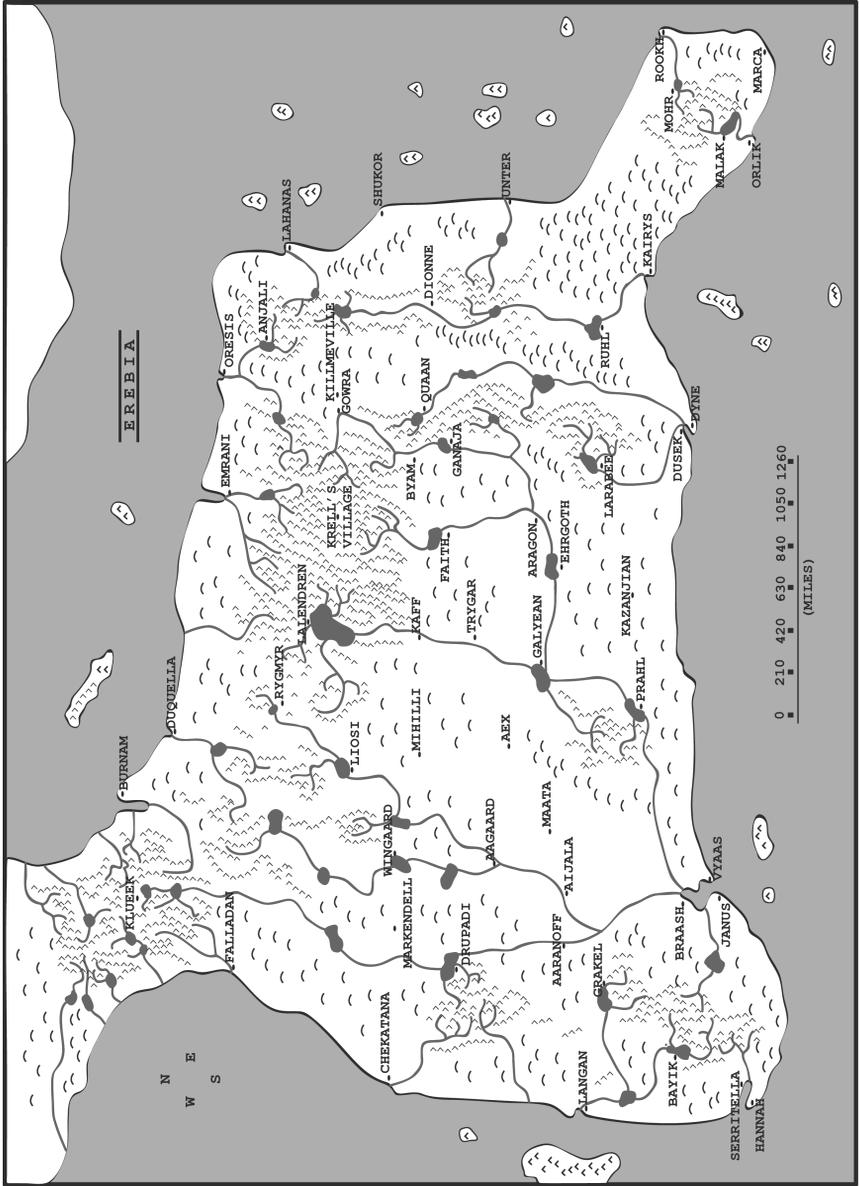
Maps

World Maps

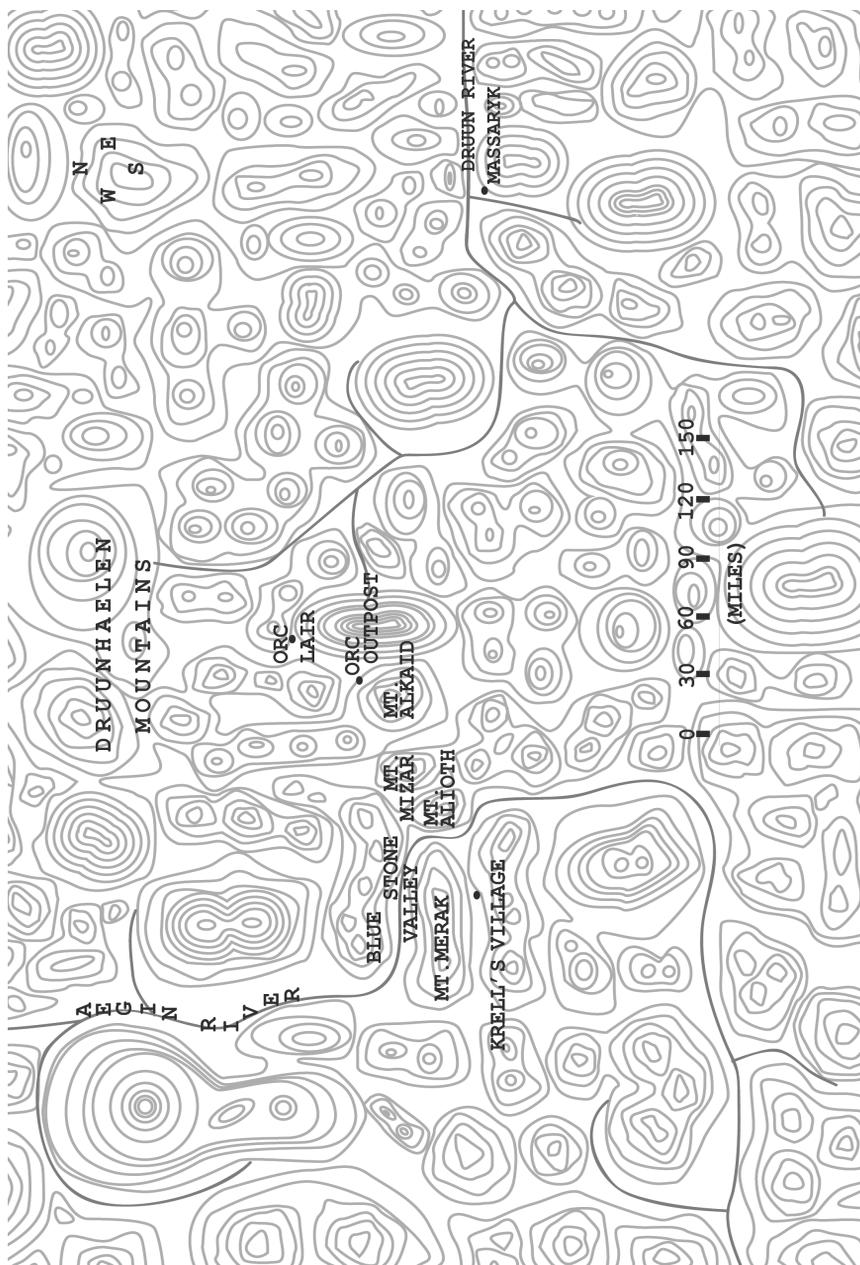




Erebia



Druunhalens



PREFACE

Consider the infinite dimensions of space and time....

Do you, fellow traveler, really believe that our imaginations can exceed in scope what is, was, and ever shall be? Will you persist in believing that our dreams range beyond the bounds of our Maker's?

If, as we contend, they do not—indeed, cannot—then the world told here is true.

Imagine that.

—Joe Hunt & Alan Adams

PROLOGUE

“We stand at the Temple Mount, victorious.’ Her voice flew on ethereal currents across ruins, plains, and hills. ‘But this fight is not over. We must remain within the fortress of God, his holy word, our constant aid and comfort. The Demon Lord will return to claim the Earth, but I am his opposite, and he cannot exist here without me. Even on my word, this Duality is ordained. Whensoever he shall return, if mankind remains true and firm, the love and light of God shall check him, the heavens shall open, and the Earth shall swallow him up.’

“As a cascade of crystalline light fell from a slate-gray sky, inundating her earthly form, Arwen was transfigured. Standing revealed, a Seraphim of the Lord, she called forward her dearest companions: the great wizard, Achea Artexerxes, his charred Foundation staff gripped tight in his hands; the implacable warrior, Dirk Steyn, his enchanted sword still glowing blue; the majestic sorcerer, Ronaldus Magnus, wrapped in robes of imperial purple; the exalted Saint Thomas De’Maaktborn, radiant with competence and humility; as well as others of her court, including George Quadtrium, Damson Prager, Dion Hewitt, Celine Coulter, and Vinson Laffer.

“She spoke again, her words now only for us: ‘My dear, dear friends, I shall leave now. By the Will of God in me, I must take these gems from this world, even though, one day, man’s inconstancy will draw them back into manifestation. It is left to you to fashion an ark for the covenant made this day, one proof against the ravages of time and oblivion. When the Demon Lord returns, the flame of hope must still burn in the hearts of the righteous. I reveal to you now that I am the love and light of God made flesh, and this I foretell: in the final hour when the Lord of Hell again walks the Earth, I shall return, and by the flame of Heaven burning, so shall I lift the lowest of the low to the highest of the high.’

“Turning to Achea, she said: ‘Your will is strong, but your heart is clouded by passion. If you will wait for me, I will take you to Heaven, and dispel your delusion.’

“To Dirk, she said: ‘Your loyalty and courage has rippled through the fabric of the universe, thrilling the Angels on high. Never falter, oh my beloved, even if you fall amidst the massed ranks of Hell, for as you call to me in God, you shall be delivered and you shall abide with me—forever.’

“To Ronaldus, she said: ‘Devotion such as yours is the summons of the Light. You are now duty bound to carry its torch unto the end. Establish a church as its vessel on Earth.’

“To Thomas De’Maakthorn, she handed The Word from around her neck. Hold this for me, and charge it to your heir, and he to his heir, until the last of your line shall restore it unto me.’ ”

—quoted from Arwen’s Flame

*“The dreamer awakens to this world;
the saint, from this world, to God.”*

—Ursa the Summoner

CHAPTER 1

THE PALADIN, THE HERO, AND THE DRAGON

“What troubles you?”

Darius stopped. Chest heaving and sweat marking his face, he sheathed his sword. The speaker stood in the stone archway, draped in a black cassock, its cowl betraying nothing of her face.

“I have failed Her, Priestess.”

“So, you are finally beaten, Darius?” She stepped forward, obscuring the light from the small lamp at the entrance.

The chamber felt to him like a tomb—musty, hot, close. Her words bled anew his anguish. He did feel beaten. The last of his line, it was his duty to fulfill the Prophecy. Yet, he could not. He had failed his family, his proud bloodline, his Order, the Priestess, and, most unforgivable to him, he had failed Her.

“She came to me last night.”

“And?”

“And ever with her back to me, she spoke: ‘As the Dragon takes flight, the final hour is upon us. You must enter the Light. You must find me. Come to me. The Word must be restored. Fulfill the Prophecy. There is no more time.’”

The Priestess stood still while Darius paced in front of her. “What will you do?”

His callused right hand went to the hilt of his sword and lingered there. “I must restore the sacred relic to Her, yet I know not where it is. I must bring it to Her, yet I know not where She is. She bids me enter the Light, yet it spurns my every advance. Yes, Priestess, I have failed. She has consumed my heart since that first vision of Her nineteen

years ago. Now there is nothing left for me without Her. In obedience to Her will, I have trained, I have fought, and I have bled. Yet, I find myself no closer to fulfilling Her Prophecy than the day the Demon Dreuth-sur confirmed my role in it, killing my family and making me the last of my line, but also stealing The Word from my Order. She said there is no more time, but the relic is gone and I cannot find Her. My head reels and I can think of nothing else. Forgive me.”

The Priestess drew back her cowl to her hairline, revealing an aged yet unlined face. She looked upon Darius with kind brown eyes. “Paladin, there is nothing to forgive. The passion that rises, seemingly, to crack your mind is born in love. Think ye that such love can fail? Nor will it ever be forsaken. Steady yourself. Now tell me again, what were Her words last night?”

“As the Dragon takes flight, the final hour is upon us. You must enter the Light. You must find me. Come to me. The Word must be restored. Fulfill the Prophecy. There is no more time.”

“Paladin, you have been reasoning backward from the Prophecy, rather than forward from Her command. Say again what She first commanded.”

A shiver ran up his spine as he considered Her words. “You must enter the Light,” he answered.

“Yes, you must enter the Light. The rest will surely follow. Now, She has given you a command. What must you do?”

“Enter the Light.”

“So, then, let us see why it refuses you.”

Darius bowed, then retreated to the back of the chamber and sat cross-legged on a prayer mat. As she approached, he looked past her to the flickering lamp on the far wall. His eyes became unfocused in the gloom, and he closed them.

“What troubles you?”

“Failing Her.”

“Is that all?”

“There is nothing else, Priestess.”

“Can you see the Light?”

Darius focused his mind to a point inside and at the center of his forehead. “Yes, it warms and protects me, though its source is just beyond my grasp.”

“Do you perceive the Light streaming down through your consciousness, flowing through your spine, and warming your heart with liberating joy?”

“No, Priestess, I do not.”

“Why?”

He pondered the question as he had a hundred times before. He struggled to look deeper into his heart. “I don’t know,” he said at last.

“What if your actions, or those of your fellow knights, though conceived in righteousness, bring suffering to the innocent? Does that not trouble you?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“I understand my place. I am so fashioned that I must continually choose, but as to what comes of those choices, God alone has sway. The Light has written His laws into the fabric of the universe, inviolable save by Grace, the knowledge of which is in Him and by Him alone given.”

“You accept no responsibility, then, if your arrows go astray?”

“Yes, to improve my aim. But by the Light, evil is opposed. If in that course, suffering arises, only the Lord of Hell will rejoice.”

“Does your obedience to the Light require you to be merciful toward one who has murdered your kin?”

“Yes.”

“Will you do so if all is lost and the world is about to be consumed by darkness?”

An image flitted through his mind of the Demon Lord lying helpless at his feet while a curtain of darkness surged toward him. “Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because as I cannot live without breath, I cannot live without mercy. It is a part of me now. And as mercy emanates from God’s Light, inevitably, a pure act of mercy will be vindicated by Him.”

“Does your compassion run as deep as your mercy?”

“Yes.”

“When your best friend betrays you and sabotages the world’s last hope, apparently condemning all to darkness, will you have compassion?”

His heart skipped a beat at the question, but the answer came read-

ily enough. “Yes.”

“Why?”

“He will need compassion in such a dark time. But there is more: Compassion comes of the Light, as heat with flame, and for the sake of my own well-being, I will not be inhospitable to the Light.”

“Will you forgive him?”

“As I have known sin, yet feel forgiveness in the Light, so I will offer forgiveness.”

“How do you reconcile mercy with the sword?”

“Love and forgiveness are mercy only to the receptive. For the rest, the only mercy is the sword. There is no good in allowing those wedded to evil to flourish and dominate; neither to them, as it would but entrench their perversity, nor to those who would suffer at their hand.”

“You are earnest, young Paladin; yes, I see that. But which king sits on the throne of your heart? Your loyalty to the Light, or its unconditional love for you and all of creation?”

He hesitated, unsure.

“Are you now, this very instant, communing with the Light on the altar of your consciousness?”

“No,” he whispered, brow furrowing.

“Have you attained conscious rapport with the Divine Will, the wellspring of Sorcery magic?”

“No.”

“Paladin ... there has always been time for you, but now there is no more. She has called you; you must obey. Prepare yourself.”

He sat there in silence, eyes still shut, trying to collect himself. He was staggered by the implications of her words. For several minutes, she did not ask any more questions. *Why doesn't the Light infuse my consciousness?* he wondered. *Why does that intimate touch with the Divine elude me? Why can I not find the path to Her?*

“Paladin, are you content to fail, alone and estranged from the Light—from Her?”

“To be estranged from Her? Alone? To fail? No.” His voice broke.

“Then be true to yourself. What is it that you want?”

“I want to be one with the Light, so that I may find Her.”

“Child, how is it that you are worthy of so great a boon?”

He thought of the austerity of his military training, the first shock of battle against the Demons, the steady resolve that grew to replace it; he thought of the scars that crisscrossed his body; and he thought of the anguished cries of his Soul in the long watches of a novitiate spent in seclusion and prayer. Last, he thought of the Paladin’s vows, and the celibacy he voluntarily undertook—for Her.

“Right now I don’t care whether I am worthy, Priestess. I don’t care anymore. I don’t. I only know that I ... I want.”

“Suffer the little children to come unto me....” Her voice was barely audible.

“What?” He heard a rustle of fabric and felt a puff of wind, as if the Priestess had passed her hand over his head.

“Shhh, Child. The end of your exile approaches. Do as I say. Focus your consciousness on your forehead, at its center, just above your eyebrows. Hold your gaze there. Concentrate only on your longing. You must be resolved not to move until the Light answers the call of your Soul—no matter what.”

“But what if it does not answer?”

“Then, so long as you are conscious, you will not move. If your heart can be satisfied by anything other than the Light, why would it yield to your suit? You must set aside everything. Gently push away any thought that tries to invade that single point of devotion. She has told you what you must do. Concentrate only on that point until the Light manifests in you and your heart’s desire is fulfilled.”

An awesome solemnity overtook him. With adamant resolve he renounced everything, even the possibility of changing his mind. There was nothing left for him in this world if he could not fulfill the Prophecy. The long-suppressed agony of his quest overcame him like a tempest, engulfing his mind, sweeping it away. Yet something remained. Immersed in the intuitive perception of his Soul, resolving not to move for as long as it took, was possible—and he did so. Focusing his consciousness into a single point, waiting there, a willing sacrifice to Her, he saw a light. The same light that had often come to him, shining, enveloping him, but never yet a part of him.

He did not know how long he remained there, beyond mind and time, but the light suddenly grew bright and infiltrated his conscious-

ness. He became conscious of his body, even while most of his awareness remained above and beyond it. He felt a tingling in his spine, rising to his head. Then a brilliant light flooded him. Silhouetted far off at its source was She. He could not discern any features, but for the first time She was facing him. And he was also entering the Light, not just aware of it, but streaming into it, becoming one with it. He was himself a radiant being formed of the intensifying Light. Every cell in his body danced in ecstasy.

“Long have I awaited your ascension, Dear Friend,” Her voice sang. “Your devotion, and that of your lineage, has carried through time, sustaining the Prophecy and protecting The Word. It is so even now. Watch for my return. Fear not, The Word will be restored. The path of duty is the path to me. Follow it and we will walk together unto the end.”

She was gone then, leaving behind the glorious Light. In it, Darius perceived The Word, and understood it was by the unstained loyalty of his ancestors, culminating in him, that the magic seal was sustained, protecting it from the Demon Dreuth-sur.

When the brilliance subsided, the Light remained perceptible, shining everywhere, within and without, warming his consciousness and his heart, a part of him now.

“You have entered the Divine Light of God,” the voice of the Priestess floated through his consciousness, “and in this state of grace you will find that your simple word and your will are binding on the universe.”

Remembering his duty, Darius focused on her words and felt an unaccustomed power welling up his spine.

“That is the spring of Divine Will. It will rise stronger in you the deeper your devotion in this form of meditation. Let it suffuse you; acquaint yourself with it; become one with it.”

He focused his thoughts on the strange energy flowing up his spine and felt a connection. A multitude of unfamiliar insights and sensations revealed a malleable force awaiting direction. He marveled at his new faculty.

“What you feel is a manifestation of harmony with Divine Will. What would you do with it?”

“I would express it.”

“So do it! Chase away darkness and fill this place with His Light. Visualize the brilliant light of the Divine shining around you. Align that thought with the Divine Will flowing through you.”

He did just that and felt energy flow through his veins, coalescing in his hands. Holding up his right palm, he sensed a force rise above it, though still connected to him. He perceived the Light of God channeling through him, carried along by Divine Will, up and through his palm.

Opening his eyes, Darius saw a point of light above his head, shining down upon him. Looking around, he saw the stone chamber lit in dazzling brilliance.

“Congratulations, Darius De’Maakthorn, Grand Knight of the United Kingdom of Baeza, and now, truly, a Paladin of Light!” She let her cowl drop completely, and shook free her long plaits of gray hair.

“Thank you, High Priestess.” He reached for her hands, and felt them, smooth and supple, take his.

“You see, Paladin, you have not failed.” The Priestess looked into Darius’ eyes. Then, with one last squeeze, she released his hands. “She commanded that you find the Light, and you have. Now go to Her.”

“She came to me again, just now, but facing me, as never before.”

“You know, then, where you must go?”

“She said, ‘The path of duty is the path to Me.’ ”

“So She has returned?”

Darius recited the verse: “ ‘In the final hour when the Lord of Hell again walks the Earth, I shall return, and by the flame of Heaven burning, so shall I lift the lowest of the low to the highest of the high.’ Yes, she has. She told me last night the final hour is upon us. She spoke of a Dragon taking flight. My duty takes me with the ships to Erebia, to fight the Demon Lord. She will be there. So will the Dragon. I will find Her.”

“And the sacred relic?”

“She said: ‘Fear not, The Word will be restored.’ ”

* * *

“Krell, Krell, wake up.”

Krell opened his eyes, blinking away the sleep. Anna was standing

above him, just a shadow in the darkness.

“What’s wrong, Anna?”

“There’s something out there, somewhere inside the village.”

Krell hesitated. “The wolves are still asleep.”

“I know.”

He sprang from his bed and brushed past her, reaching for his furs. If something got past the wolves...

“I was having trouble sleeping, so I decided to pray,” she said as Krell hustled into his furs. “I was deep in meditation when I felt ripples of will and intention brimming against the expanding sphere of my peace. I followed them with my intuition; that’s when I saw the eyes.”

“Eyes? Where? What type of eyes?” He strapped up his boots.

“I don’t know. I just had a glimpse, but they were real. And, Krell, this is the strangest part: They were looking back at me. It was unmistakable. I was startled right out of my meditation.” She paused. “It’s prowling about in the village. I can still feel it.”

Krell froze and listened to the sounds of the night: the panting of Bane just outside the cabin could be felt, not really heard; the music of crickets; the subtle rasps of a critter’s claws on a tree branch—nothing unusual.

“I can’t sense anything.”

“It’s there, I’m sure of it.”

Krell took his axe from the wall and slid its handle through a loop on his belt. Slinging a leather harness and baldric over his broad shoulders, he cinched down two daggers crisscross on his chest and secured his longsword in its sheath down his back.

“Well, I’ll check it out.” He pulled on gloves and walked through the curtain separating his corner of their home. Anna followed him to the door.

“You better stay...” Krell saw the gleam in her eyes through the darkness. “Well, you can’t go out like that, Anna.”

“I’ll be fine.” She looked up.

“You say that with a straight face, standing there in a nightgown and furry moccasins?” He sighed, pulled his winter coat off its peg next to the door, and wrapped it around her.

“You’re such a good brother.” She snuggled into it, nearly lost in its hood and folds. “And so big.”

Krell caught a flash of his sister's teeth amidst the fur trim of the hood.

"Now, sis, this is serious."

He opened the door but paused a moment. Reaching to the side, he pulled his longbow from the wall. He glanced at the arrows in the side-mounted quiver and adjusted one with his thumb. "All right, let's go see what these ripples you felt are all about."

The night air was scented with pines, cold and still. Silhouettes of cabins and buildings stood like apparitions amidst the trees in a darkness perforated by the beams of a million stars. Bane rushed up and shoved his wet nose into Krell's hand.

"What's out there, boy? You've been chasing fat rabbits in dreamland, haven't you?" He ruffled the wolf's ears and stroked his head with both hands.

Anna took a deep breath. "It's that way." She pointed north. "I don't sense hostility. I feel intelligence and purpose. Like..."

"What?"

"Like it's searching."

Krell stood still for a moment, then went over to the cabin next door and thumped on a wooden post with the heel of his right hand. The cabin shook. "Urg. Get up." He spoke firmly into the wall. "Urg!"

"What?" replied a muffled voice from inside.

"There's something stalking around out here. I'm going to check it out. Meet me up at the circle."

"What?"

Krell could tell by the tone of Urg's voice that he had heard loud and clear. Turning back to Anna, they started up a path between the trees and cabins. Bane scouted forward. The center of the village was dark and quiet.

Krell walked with a quick step. *So, there is an intruder about?* he thought. It wasn't likely to be hostile. *What could sneak by our wolves? Perhaps fairies? Or—*

"Do you think it could be Elves you're feeling?" he whispered.

"Oh, you think so? That would be wonderful." Anna turned a pirouette, then grabbed Krell's baldric in both hands and looked directly into his eyes. "I shall scold them for neglecting us these last few years. Oh, Krell! Do you think it's truly them?"

“Well, I was asking you,” he chuckled, taking her hands and holding them high as she turned another pirouette. “You’re the one who says something’s out here.”

Anna stopped at his side and leaned into him. He put his arm around her. “I really have no idea what type of creature the eyes belong to,” she mused. “All I know is I was meditating, my heart bursting with love; I felt at peace with the universe. Then I felt this...” She paused, thinking. “...vibration or rippling. It was like a sound, but I couldn’t hear it—I felt it in my heart.”

Bane was sitting on his haunches in the village circle, looking at them with his head cocked to one side. Rays from the coals in the community fire pit outlined his fur in light.

“It’s still that way.” She pointed north toward the smithy at the other side of the circle.

Krell walked with Anna past the fire to the edge of the clearing. Bane joined them, snorting and frisking about, but when Krell held the flat of his hand up, Bane froze. So did Anna.

Beneath the buzz of insects around the fire pit, the hooting of an owl, and the rasp of crickets, Krell felt something deep and rumbling. He couldn’t hear anything; he just felt it in his bones. It was straight ahead. Krell lowered his hand, palm level to the ground, and Bane dropped to his belly. Then Krell crept forward, peering along a footpath that snaked away into the dark of the forest.

He saw them: two pinpricks of light, about seven feet off the ground. Eyes. Pulling an arrow out and notching it to his bowstring, he crept closer. A shape formed. It was the biggest bear he’d ever seen, just sitting there on the path with forepaws up and tongue lolling out. *How could a bear sneak in here past the wolves?* he thought. Bane was still oblivious to its presence. “What in the—”

The bear started to move and Krell whipped the bowstring back, taking a dead bead on its heart. Bane was up and barking, specks of foam dotting his lips.

“A little late to be outraged, isn’t it, boy?” Krell muttered, holding his ground and sighting with one eye along the shaft of the arrow.

The bear ambled into a swath of starlight. Krell shifted his aim as it moved. The cords of his bowstring hand stood taut. Beyond the head of his arrow, Krell could see a silver-white band of fur running

from its snout, between its ears, and down its back. It was a huge bear, maybe fifteen hundred pounds.

Several other wolves from around the village were now in full throat. Krell was about to take the shot when Anna said, “Don’t.”

As if on cue, the bear pulled its tongue in, licked its nose, and looked straight at Krell. Then, it fled. Krell relaxed his bowstring and secured his arrow in the quiver, shaking his head.

“Hmmm. A bear that goes sightseeing in a village of bear-hunting Humans. They are smarter than that. What do you make of it, Anna?”

“I don’t know...although I have this feeling that I should.”

A burst of intense barking erupted from along the path of the bear’s flight.

“All right, I’m going to follow, see if there’s more to this story. Tell Urg what happened.” Motioning to Bane, he said, “Come on, boy.”

“Just don’t try to kill it,” Anna called as Bane took off after Krell.

He ran up the footpath and passed the village garden on his left. Ahead were the last few cabins of the village. Four wolves were on the path, barking, front legs stiff, and old man Croghan was with them in just his breeches, brandishing a sword and holding their leads.

“What the hell?” he shouted, punctuating each word with a sword thrust.

“That’s what I’m going to find out.” Krell streaked by with Bane.

Stopping a little ways on, where a patch of starlight illumined the trail, he found the bear’s tracks. “You got the scent, boy?” He rubbed his hand in the dirt.

Bane sniffed and barked.

“All right, go!”

Bane took off and Krell followed. They held to the footpath until it began to narrow and edge eastward around Mount Merak. Bane then followed the scent off the path and to the left. The bear’s trail was taking them north, straight up the mountainside.

Despite the steep climb, Krell moved quickly, his body dropping into an efficient rhythm of motion and breath. He paused every few minutes to listen for sounds of the bear, but heard nothing. Bane seemed to have the scent, so he persisted.

After an hour, the trail edged westward up the mountainside.

Though the bear was out of sight, he continued on, loping where the ground was firm, but slowing to negotiate several fields of scree. Another hour passed and he reached a lesser crest. Beyond it lay a ravine, then Mount Merak resumed its ascent. Krell was sweating profusely, but his six-foot-five frame was in its prime. He grunted in satisfaction, feeling the sweet sap of stamina coursing through his limbs.

Still no sign of the bear. *Could Bane have lost the scent?* he wondered. He just couldn't imagine any bear traveling at this pace.

Opening his belt pouch, he removed a candle and tinder box, then pulled his flint and steel from a pocket. He knelt and lit the candle. Half a minute later he found tracks. They were fresh and they were big, just like the ones back at the village.

"Well, I guess you've got the right scent, boy. Sorry I doubted you."

Bane was already halfway up the far side of the ravine, and staring back at him.

"Woof," the big wolf barked as it rocked on its paws and tossed its head.

That's going to be a hard climb, he thought; the Blue Stone Valley lay on the other side. "Too bad I didn't bring my fishing line." He looked at Bane. "You wouldn't turn your nose up at a trout, would you, boy?"

He put the candle away and followed Bane. The trail was canted steeply for several hundred feet before it started to edge back around the mountain's right side. He encountered dozens of such switchbacks as he climbed. By the time he reached the ridge of the mountain, almost an hour later, his thigh muscles were complaining. There was still no sign of the bear.

After a brief rest he followed Bane down into the valley. The trail fell away, north by northeast. The stars were fading with the coming of dawn.

Unease swept over him. Following the trail for a few more minutes, his disquiet became alarm. Stopping to listen, he realized the birdsongs were opening with an undertone. It was not the call of a carefree dawn. Something was happening—or about to happen.

He decided to break off the pursuit and find a spot with a view. The trees were thick, but about a hundred yards up the mountain he spotted a crag where he'd have a panoramic view of the valley, now

bathed in the day's first light.

"Bane," he called to his wolf, "come."

Bane bounded back, lapping Krell's hand with a hot tongue. "Stay...stay." Krell pointed to the ground.

Bane dropped, flattened his ears, and laid his head on his paws, but watched as Krell slung his longbow over his shoulder and across his back and took off up the mountainside. Krell skirted the boulders at the base of the outcropping and climbed up between the trees on the steep hillside next to it, coming around to its top. The rock crag jutted out from the mountainside and was crowned with a large slab of granite, ending in a sheer drop. He walked out. The valley from end to end lay before him, with great snowcapped peaks to the north and west beyond. The Aegin River sparkled hues of yellow, green, and blue below. To either side, the forest carpeted the land, offering almost complete concealment to the creatures that ranged beneath.

Leveling his gaze, Krell found himself whistling softly and shaking his head. The bear he had been tracking was sitting in plain sight atop a rocky ridge across the valley. He could see the almost iridescent white stripe down the middle of its head and back. It was staring back at him, forepaws up, tongue lolling—as though it had been expecting him.

But for what? And why? How had it gotten all the way across the valley? It wasn't possible. Besides, spotting the bear from this crag, only to find it observing him from the opposite ridge, was uncanny. *Whose game have I been playing?* he wondered.

Taking his longbow in hand, he crouched at the edge of the bluff. The warmth of the morning sun barely registered, but beneath his furs, sweat began to run down his chest and sides.

Something was definitely in the wind. He could feel it. It was almost as if a forest fire was sweeping this way. But there was no smoke. The ancient forest would show him something if he was patient. He was sure of it. Had he been tracking the bear, or was the bear just the bait? Should he return to the village? Was he sitting in a trap?

Movement in the sky drew Krell from his reverie. Shifting his crouch, he peered just north of the rising sun. The mesa at the far end of the valley made a halo of the sunlight shining in from beyond the horizon. Backlit by those rays, six creatures emerged over the crest of the ridgeline. They were scarlet.

The sound of creaking leather accompanied his reflexive grip on the longbow. His other hand sought reassurance from the handle of his short axe. Only the low rustling of leaves in the wind could be heard as an intensifying silence spread across the valley.

A pit opened in the bottom of his stomach as he watched them come. Four of one kind and two of another, each of their wings opaque and ribbed. Two of them appeared humanoid. The other four made him think *Reptile*, though the word didn't quite sum them up.

They flew straight down the valley, bouncing with each flap of their wings. But no monster from Krell's worst nightmare could match the horror of their approaching forms.

Still in a crouch, Krell shrank away from the edge of the bluff, the crunch of his boots against the sandy boulder distinct as the wind dropped off. The air became still. A hucklethorn bush growing out of a crack in the rock concealed him as he fitted an arrow to his longbow. Krell watched them come, wishing he was with Bane amidst the cover of trees.

Each of them had horns. The horns of the two humanoid ones were spiral, while the horns of the other four were curved. Long, flat-bottomed tails slapped at the air behind as they labored at flight. The two humanoids were blockish, almost half as wide as tall. The bodies of the other four were slightly smaller.

Krell felt terror boil up inside as they flew closer. They wore uniforms of some sort, as scarlet as their scales. The muscles of their limbs bulged. Talons and fangs appeared as daggers. They reeked of evil and exuded an aura of unassailable power. To fight them would be madness, yet to run would invite their attention.

Animals don't wear clothing, he thought, struggling to master the impulse to flee.

A brilliant flash of light in the sky to the north seized his attention. Some creature of unimaginable scope had reflected the sunlight into his eyes as it rose above the mountain crest on the opposite side of the valley. It was hard to discern its shape, the light reflecting from it was so bright. Its size held Krell in utter disbelief. Nothing but the moon itself loomed so large over the Earth. The most massive trees were dwarfed beneath it.

The bright reflection of the sun angled away as the creature leveled

out. Its ascent slowing, its shape was clear. Wings spanned hundreds of feet. Its body was long and sinewy, with large hind and forelegs, every inch covered in bright golden scales. A head as large as a bull elephant's body, with large teeth jutting from an extended jaw, swiveled menacingly on a long neck, then pointed straight toward the scarlet creatures.

The Dragon, for Krell knew it could be nothing else, sailed, wings outstretched, toward the opposite side of the valley. Its neck and head craned farther and farther to its right, ominously locked on the six monsters who were now even farther up the valley toward Krell. "Sweet mother of God," he muttered.

The monsters turned in the air and began to hover, facing the Dragon. Just as the Dragon reached the midpoint between the sides of the vale, its wings began to lash the air and its body rolled, causing it to bank ninety degrees and accelerate down the valley. The six monsters turned from the Dragon and fled, manically beating their batlike wings.

Still, the Dragon was faster. Each flap of its wings sundered the air with a titanic ripping noise. It seemed to be right on top of its quarry in seconds, only a few hundred yards away from where Krell crouched on the bluff.

The monsters spun around in mid-flight again, facing the Dragon as it bore in on them, and closed ranks. They made their stand with arms extended, bolts of lightning racing from their clawed hands into the Dragon. Percussive cracks of rent air shook Krell as he watched the scene as if in a trance.

Flying on, the Dragon appeared unfazed. The six tried to scatter as a geyser of greenish gas erupted from the Dragon's open jaws. Then the four reptilian monsters were falling from the sky, shrieking freakishly, thrashing about, their wings, uniforms, and limbs disintegrating as they fell. Every hair on Krell's body stood on end. One of the two humanoid monsters writhed in the claws of the Dragon while the other fled straight toward the bluff—and Krell. Unnoticed, his bow slipped from his hand, the sound of its fall lost in the bedlam.

Krell could see gaping holes in the fleeing monster's wings. Beyond it, the Dragon had the remaining monster in its claws, ripping it to shreds and flinging bloody gobbets of its carcass through the air. Then

the Dragon was after the last one. Folding its wings in on its body, it accelerated, heading straight for the treetops. Just as it seemed sure to crash, its wings shot out from its sides and, with a mighty thrust, sent it climbing and wheeling back toward the ridgeline. Less than a hundred feet away, Krell watched as the Dragon caught the last one in its claws; then it thrust itself skyward. Dust and leaves swirled around Krell, forcing him to shield his eyes. As quickly as he could recover, the Dragon was two hundred yards above, rending the monster with its tremendous claws.

Hovering overhead, the action of its wings fed the storm below. The struggle was soon over. Chunks of carrion and shattered bones rained down. One piece of the monster caught Krell's eye. It was shiny and falling toward him. A muscular, red-scaled forearm and claw with long talons appeared to be clutching a large and radiant crystal. Krell barely twitched as the claw slammed the ground next to his left side, a malodorous black liquid splattering him. His eyes remained fixed above. He could swear the sovereign beast was looking straight at him. Then, as the Dragon flung the monster's head away, it twisted in the air like a cat, whipping its wings with thunderous force, and hurled itself back toward the far side of the valley.

Krell watched as it flew. It disappeared behind the ridge across the valley, rose again as it flew over mountains to the north, then descended, vanishing. Several minutes passed before Krell could pull his eyes from the horizon.

Standing up, Krell fought the urge to examine the crystal at his feet. Dread afflicted him in nauseating waves. Not for an instant did he consider his presence on this remote crag mere happenstance. Neither the strangely marked bear that he had pursued, nor the surreal pace it had kept, nor the phantasmagoric battle he witnessed had any precedent in his experience.

Until today, he had considered himself a master of this wilderness. Until today, Dragons had not been real; they had existed only in myth and legend. Monsters had seemed manageable to Krell, like Orcs and Goblins, whom he found to be disorganized and stupid. He felt his life and destiny reeling out of control. Something had contrived through that bear to put this crystal at his feet. And for whatever arranged this, Krell felt fear, both for himself and for his people. A power of unfath-

omable capacity had entered his world for an unknown purpose.

He knew if he looked down, his world would be forever changed. But what else could he do? Walk away? He looked first to the ridge across the valley; the bear was gone. Taking a deep breath, he could hear his sister tell him: “The world is as God wills.” The sound of barking reached him from below.

He looked down.

* * *

When Krishna woke, he was once again surprised to find himself alive. He should have passed away many thousands of years ago. Of course, he hadn’t been doing much but sleeping all that time.

Shuddering from snout to tail, he roused energy into his long-dormant muscles, the walls of his lair trembling as he stretched. Piles of treasure tumbled in the darkness. Over a few mouthfuls of gold coins, he wondered at how long it had been. It felt like five years since he was last awake. It was hard to tell. That made it, what, almost five hundred years since he was last out of his lair? Something like that. It was so long ago; it was at a time when life had meaning—when there were still quests to be hazarded and mysteries to unravel, when there were still things to be learned about the world.

Now all he did was sleep, waking briefly every few years or so. For the last thousand years, every time he turned to sleep, he wondered whether he would wake again. Yet here he was, still living. Dragons have long lives, but he had lived far longer than any other.

Rolling over on his side, he tried to find a comfortable position amidst his treasure. Millennia of seclusion had dwindled his hoard, though, and he had just eaten the pile of coins on which he had been resting his head. The weight of his massive body drove his shoulder and hip into the flat rock floor.

“Ah, the ignominy,” he sighed, scraping together loose coins, goblets, jewels, antiquities, and the like, making the best of what remained. He slid a solid-gold table over from the wall. A second later, the matchless carvings on the crossbars and legs were mangled as the antique table collapsed beneath his head. Krishna grunted and laid still. The wreckage of the once-grand table was more comfortable than the

stone beneath it.

As he prepared himself to drift back into sleep, he thought, *Surely I will not wake again. By the scales of Chitrangada, I hope not.*

Minutes passed away, yet he did not sleep. Something pecked at the back of his mind, something he hadn't felt in a long time. He tried to clear his thoughts, but there was no escaping it. He was feeling an itch to spread his wings. Now, that's something he had never expected to do again: fly. But there it was. He didn't think he could sleep unless he satisfied that whim. Maybe it was just time to get up.

As he rolled to his feet, treasures clattered against the stone floor, scattering about the room. A priceless mirror set in a crystal frame exploded into a thousand pieces as a swipe of his tail caught it when he twisted around. Reflexively pulling away, his tail whipped to the other side of the chamber, smashing a large chest. Thousands of rubies, pearls, diamonds, and pieces of splintered mahogany cascaded onto the floor. Just as he was telling himself to be more careful, he somehow managed to step on a venerable golden throne decorated with an array of plum-sized opals.

"Now how did I forget that was there?" he mumbled, finally completing the turn. Pausing, he focused his mind and called forth a little magic, causing a soft white light to fill the cavern.

He surveyed the wreckage and shook his head in sadness. "What does the universe want with me?" he sighed. With nothing left to learn or experience, why was he still here? It seemed so unfair.

He began to leave the main chamber, almost slithering along the passageway. Reaching a dead end, he called forth a stronger magic. The stone floor before him slid away. Dipping his head into the opening, Krishna felt icy waters pulling at him. He snaked his body forward and down into the darkness, engulfed. Swimming by rote through convoluted channels, he reached an exit that was far too small. Again, he focused his mind and called forth magic. The great boulders constraining him sank into the Earth, and he swam out into the lake beyond.

Krishna emerged from the depths to behold the pantheon of a familiar galaxy. Large black waves, filigreed in starlight, rippled away from him, gliding toward the distant shore. He inhaled the alpine air, then let out a mellow rumble. The sounds and smells of the forest stirred old memories as he swam toward land.

His massive forelegs touched the lake bottom a hundred yards out. He stood, and water cascaded from his golden scales. With just a few steps he was looming over the shore from the shallows. He rose up on hind legs, towering above the shoreline, and unfolded his mammoth wings.

Sounds of life burst from the forest as Krishna stood rampant. Owls hooted, wolves howled, squirrels chattered, and the underbrush rasped as panicked deer abandoned their night beds and sought to force an escape.

It was five hundred years since he last spread his wings. Long-dormant energies effervesced through him. Breathing deeply, he savored the moment.

Then, crouching down, Krishna sprang upward with volcanic force. His golden wings fed on the air, sending him soaring into the night sky. Circling around in a wide spiral, Krishna flew higher and higher until he was level with the mountain peak under which he had slept for so many years.

He stretched his wings and went into a glide. *Where to go?* he wondered in peaceful thought. *When I was a juvenile, Alpha Centauri beckoned. I dreamed of journeying there. Now it's the black of space that calls: pierced in all directions by starlight, but ever and undiminished—black. How soft and yielding it looks this night.* “Might as well return home and sleep,” he sighed out loud, his voice rolling across the land below like the timpani of distant thunder.

Then he felt it, a gentle tugging at his heart. He opened his eyes and gazed south. The dim outline of a mountain chain lay there. He felt drawn by—by curiosity? *But that cannot be*, he thought.

Krishna rode the air, still as a statue, staring at the horizon. Could there be something in that direction he had never seen? Something he had never experienced? Swooping down and to the south, he flew low around and between the mountains, searching. For what? He had no idea.

Several times he decided to go back, but each time his heart would skip a beat at the thought. So he pressed on, weaving through the valleys and around the peaks, ever southward. Dawn awakened under a cloudless autumn sky as he flew, the sun's first rays spattering brightly off the snowcapped peaks.

Again he thought of turning back. This illusory quest had to end sometime. And perhaps this nameless craving was all there was to it. He had heard that one nearing death often experienced a final burst of energy as the soul prepared to quit this world. Maybe his ancient soul needed just one more flight before it would be ready.

As he was thinking this, a high massif loomed ahead, abruptly closing the gorge he was coursing. Two vigorous wing flaps increased his speed and elevation. Just before he reached the steep mountainside, he banked skyward; a thrust of his wings sent him soaring over.

Beyond lay a wide valley. From low on the horizon, to his left, the rays of the morning sun streamed down the length of the expanse and reflected brightly off his lustrous body. Krishna, however, found his gaze fixed on the other end of the valley and the six foul beasts marring the pristine vistas of his world.

Krishna was not confused. He knew what they were: two Pit Fiends and four Pit Beasts. The most powerful Demons of Hell, short of the fabled Archfiends themselves.

Krishna's heart seethed with anger as he leveled out. He began to glide toward the opposite side of the valley. Only his neck moved, his head tracking to the right as he stared at the red-scaled Demons.

The Demons hovered, staring back at him. Old memories stirred in Krishna as he neared the midpoint of the valley walls. Visions from their evil lives flashed through his mind. His rage galvanized him—and he was after them, wings ripping at the air.

In his younger days, these six Demons would have been a match, but Krishna was older and more powerful than any Dragon he had ever known or heard of. The magic energy bolts flung at him by the Demons were useless. As the six scattered before him, he expelled a giant cloud of corrosive gas, sending the four Pit Beasts tumbling from the sky, disintegrating. Krishna snatched one of the Pit Fiends in his gargantuan claws and ripped him to shreds, undeterred by the Demon's magical defenses.

The last of the Demons fled, crippled and howling, toward a steep bluff on the valley wall. Krishna flew after it, dropping from his claws the shredded remains of the other Pit Fiend. Then, with folded wings, he plummeted earthward, only to deflect his dive at the last moment with a few massive wing thrusts. At the base of the large outcropping,

he caught it, impaling the Demon in his claws. His momentum carried him two hundred yards beyond, where he hovered, dismembering it.

Krishna noticed the fiery gemstone clutched tightly in its claw. He wondered if it might contain some magic that could aid the creature. Then, as he tore the Demon's claw from its flailing arm, he thought about where he should put the gem in his treasure hoard. He watched it fall, still clutched in the Pit Fiend's disembodied claw, all the way to where it landed at the edge of the bluff. There was a certain quality to that gem he couldn't quite identify. He'd never seen another like it. Perhaps it was a channel for some ethereal force.

In the meantime, the Pit Fiend had managed to dig one of its remaining claws under a scale on Krishna's forearm. He felt a burning pain as its evil magic coursed into him. In fury, he bit down on the Demon's head, ripped it from its shoulders, and flung it down into the valley with the rest of its mangled corpse.

The sulfurous taste of its blood was disgusting. Turning north toward his home, Krishna sped back across the vale and over the ridge. He flew quickly, coursing the gorge, then skimmed the mountaintops until he spied a large lake.

He swooped down and hit the water at its deepest point like a comet. Waves rolled forty feet inland in all directions. Sputtering, spitting, and incanting ancient oaths, Krishna churned the water into a froth. After thoroughly washing the foulness from his mouth, he sprang into the air and took flight again. Weaving through the maze of mountains and valleys, he made his way home, scanning the horizons the whole way.

He flew once around the perimeter of the lake at the base of his mountain lair, craning his neck both left and right. Then, settling into the lake, he continued his inspection. The sky was a brilliant blue. The verdure of the trees and bushes was at its peak. Countless animals peered at him from the trees and foliage. All so beautiful and wondrous, yet he felt a melancholy descending. He had found nothing new, just some beasts of Hell he knew all too well.

Sinking below the lake's surface, he swam to the depths and entered the labyrinthine waterways beneath the mountain. Using his magic, the large boulders rose from the mountain's roots to resume a forlorn guard at the entrance to his lair. Krishna swam on, climbed

out of the icy waters, and entered the passageway. The stone floor slid back into place behind him as he crawled down the relatively small corridor to his home.

Finding a comfortable spot amidst his treasure, he was ready to resume sleep. *Surely I will not have to wake again*, he thought.

Then a picture came to him. The gem as it fell. He had forgotten to collect it. An odd thing for him to do, especially given his penchant for treasure. Curling his neck around to prop up his prognathous jaw on a claw, he pondered this oddity. There was something uncanny about this. Did that spectacular gem have anything to do with the pangs that had roused him? Or were those just an eccentricity of age? No gem, no matter how magnificent or unique, justified such exertions. Or did it? After five hundred years, why had he felt like flying today? Why had he felt drawn south? And by what profane design were six—six!—of Hell's greatest abominations doing on Earth?

As he closed his eyes, Krishna furrowed his brow in thought. Somehow he had forgotten to grab that gem. Why—why?—how had he forgotten it? He did not overlook such details. Two Pit Fiends and four Pit Beasts on Earth is a grave matter. Weren't they wearing uniforms? Some primordial magic must have been manipulated to pull those Demons through the Great Barrier. That gem probably held some answers.

An interesting puzzle, he mused. Pondering it a bit too long, he drifted off to sleep.

“I asked the Lord, our God, why He let His people suffer. And the Lord answered me: ‘You talk of suffering. What suffers? Surely not that which is made in my image.’ ”

—*Saint Sevannah,*
The Testament of Angels

CHAPTER 2

LORI

Alloria Ellissaya’s chest heaved, but nothing followed. She stared at the ground, but didn’t see it. She felt it would be better to just die. At first she had looked to her faith for strength and guidance, but hopelessness had overcome her still. Nearly everyone she knew was either dead or captured by the Demons; and who could bear knowing what was happening now to those captured? She couldn’t.

How could this happen? Anjali had been as powerful as it was good. August wizards and sorcerers from all over the world had gathered there. How could it have fallen so easily? How could it have fallen at all?

Alloria tilted her head back and looked up at the midnight sky. Tall pines swayed ever so gently in a soft breeze. The moon and stars were partially obscured by patches of cirrus clouds drifting south. She closed her eyes and took a deep pull of the cool night air, registering with near indifference the ramiform sensation of it within her lungs. Only the burble of the creek winding around the rock on which she sat reached her. She concentrated on the sound. The patter of the spray against the rocks, the zealous croaking of distant frogs, the buzzing of insects, and the chattering of a few nocturnal creatures blended in her mind like instruments in a symphony.

She sat entranced for several minutes, releasing her mind in rest for the first time in days.

Off in the woods, something began fussing about. She opened her eyes and saw a fawn about thirty feet away, poking its head out from between some fern leaves. *It doesn't seem right that it be so peaceful*, she thought; not when her people were enslaved—or dead. Not when it seemed there was no hope. Not when the world was doomed.

Only last week the Demons and their armies were half a continent away at the city of Faith. And Faith fell four years ago, just four years after the Demon armies first arrived in Erebia. Alloria had once assumed the Demons caught everyone by surprise and had believed that, with adequate preparation, people would beat them back to the sea. Though she'd heard they took lands to the west, and rumors the Demons were in control of all the lands beyond the seas, she'd never believed they would actually reach Anjali. After all, it was one thing to take a Human city, but quite another to take an Elven city.

Now all seemed lost. It was just a matter of time before the Demons got her, too—before the Demons got everyone. Her whole body trembled with the cold, alien reality.

The fawn darted into the woods.

“Run, little fella, run. Run with all your heart,” she whispered, choking on the last word.

She pulled her knees to her chest, hugging them, and began rocking back and forth. Her golden-red hair spilled over her shoulders as her head sank to her knees.

Remembering the events of a month ago, she visualized the legendary Human wizard Sorrell Gilliam flying into Anjali on a pure white Pegasus. The rumor was that he had with him an object of ancient magic which the Demons coveted, an object which had to be kept from them regardless of cost. Anjali had been thought safe. It was commonly believed it would take months for the Demon armies to redeploy toward eastern Erebia, then many more months before they could stage to reach Anjali.

But they did not need to redeploy. She remembered the day all too well. The sky had been mottled with Demons. Some had flown on their own wings; others had been riding beasts that looked at a distance like giant flying weasels. Carrying many more, there had been dozens of wyvern, smaller cousins of the fabled Dragons. One Demon had seemed fifty feet tall. Fireballs and red bolts of energy had rained

down on the city for hours.

Alloria was lucky. She wasn't in the city when the attack came, but in the woods just outside, returning from Nahiri. Her brother, Anduihil, was with her. They watched aghast as anyone who tried to flee the city was incinerated. The clamor of the city dying could be heard most of the night. By morning, Demons were patrolling Anjali, both on the ground and in the air.

Raised voices from the camp in the woods disrupted her reverie. Anduihil and the other men were arguing again. They debated what to do next. Futile, she thought. There was no "next." The magic wielded by the Demons was too powerful. The largest one seemed indestructible. The amount of punishment it absorbed as it breached the city wall was astounding. Plus, hundreds, maybe thousands, of Goblins emerged from their warrens beneath the Dykonor Mountains in aid of the Demons. With them, thousands of Orcs swarmed, eager for the spoils of war. Nahiri and Saxon'ta had been razed. Chain gangs of captives from Saxon'ta had already been brought to Anjali.

The victorious hordes were now searching the woods for survivors, and her brother and the others were trying to plot a counterattack. All ten of them. Alloria let out a shuddering sigh. She just wished it was over.

Movement started in the woods behind her. Suddenly alert, she heard the approach of soft footsteps.

"Lori?"

It was her brother, Anduihil.

"Lori, what are you doing here?"

"I couldn't stand all that arguing." Alloria did not look up. Her face was hidden by the fall of her hair.

Anduihil sat down on the rock close beside and drew her toward him, hugging her. Alloria rested her head on his shoulder and crossed her legs, leaning into his embrace.

"I know what you mean. It doesn't seem that any of their ideas have hope of working."

"That's because they don't."

"Well, there must be something we can do."

"There's nothing. It's hopeless, Andy."

He didn't say anything; he just held her, letting the minutes drift

by. Finally, he said, “I need you, Lori. I need you to be strong. You’re smart, smarter than any of those guys, and they know it. They’ll listen to you. We have to make a decision. We can’t just wait here for them to find and kill us. Pelias thinks we should go to Oresis or Lahanas. The rest want to fight, try a rescue, or just pick at them from a distance. I don’t know what to do, Lori, but I’m not ready to give up.”

“We might as well give up. Don’t you get it, Andy? It’s over. We can’t possibly fight these Demons. And even if we could make it to Oresis or Lahanas, we would probably find they’ve fallen, too. Whatever magic the wizard Gilliam brought here in safekeeping from the Demons is now in their hands. Do you know what all this means? The Demons weren’t even trying to take eastern Erebia, but as soon as they had a reason, then”—she snapped her fingers—“like that, they were here and took Anjali. It means the rumors about the lands overseas are probably true. The entire world is under their despotic rule, and it’s only a matter of time before the rest of Erebia is, too.”

Andy grabbed her by the shoulders and twisted her around to face him. He took her hands in his. “Lori, my dear sister, I can’t begin to tell you how much I love you.” Tears rolled down his cheeks, though his voice remained controlled. “I’ve admired you my whole life. You’ve been an inspiration. Wherever I go, I’m proud to say, ‘I’m Alloria Ellissaya’s brother.’ People know you and respect you—not just because you’re the daughter of Asophus and Althea Ellissaya; not just because you’re one of the few who have ever been able to learn both wizardry and sorcery magic; but because of your active compassion, your love, and your caring. You live most of the time among people in need. You teach them about the sacred and share your love of God with them. People revere you.”

“Yes, I remember that woman, too.” Tears of her own were standing in her eyes. “But it doesn’t change reality. The garden where she lived is overrun; the lives she tended, trampled. Its beauty was rare, but proved fragile. We’re doomed.”

Andy gave her his best smile. “That’s the thing, Lori—I see just the opposite. I guess what I’m trying to say is...well, you know how you always tell people, the circumstances in life are unimportant, but how we face them is; that this life is just a journey intended for our betterment; that the dreams of this world are divinely orchestrated? Well, then, for

many of our people, the journey on this world has come to an end. Where their souls are now, we cannot say. For many of those who remain, the journey on this world is going to be under dreadful conditions, as slaves to the Demons. Yet the opportunity for their souls to learn and grow closer to God will still be there. Am I right?"

She nodded, brushing the hair from her face.

"And that's all our life here is really about, isn't it? Don't you recall your own maxim: 'If you forget that this is Earth, not Heaven, you'll end up worshipping not God, but suffering?'"

"Yes," she said softly.

"Well, the way I look at it—since there's a good purpose behind the struggles of this world, God's intention for us must be different than what we witnessed at Anjali. Yes, we could be killed or captured tomorrow; but, as long as we are free, I have hope. I hope we will have a role in sending the Demons back to Hell. That we are free tells me we retain a power and purpose in the divine plan. Such is my faith. The example of your life instilled it in me. I have no idea what our role will be, but I stand ready, awaiting my cue. I want to learn and grow closer to God with you—even if that quest takes us through intense suffering. I'm resolved to journey with you in this world in faith that the choices we make will be profoundly meaningful. And I am confident that our righteous resolve will bring us closer to God."

While Andy was talking, Alloria straightened her back, leveled her jaw, and lifted her eyes to his face.

"And one more thing." He swept his right hand to the sky, pointing. "I believe you're the reason God has chosen a different path for us. I can't imagine how our actions will contribute to the defeat of the Demons, but I believe they will. Your heart is heroic. In its quality is a seed of hope. But regardless of what comes, I will face it as a spiritual challenge. You taught me to see the world that way. That resolve, learned as a child at your knee, is the ark of my faith. And I thank you for it; I do."

Alloria threw her arms around her brother and hugged tightly. "Thank you, Andy. Thank you. I feel much better now. You're so right; there is hope. Thank you for restoring it in me."

She hugged him like that for a moment, rocking slightly, feeling vitality rise within. Ideas began to come. Possibilities she had not yet

considered presented themselves. Her native confidence regained her heart. Then, inspiration took her.

“I’m back with you, Andy,” she said at last.

He stood up, pulling her with him. “Well then, do you have any ideas for what we should do next?”

“Yes, I think I do.” She looked into his eyes with deep affection.

“Then let’s go back to camp,” he said, resting his right arm on her shoulders.

The rest of the Elves were sitting around the campfire, quiet and gloomy, as they returned.

Alloria found a spot with Andy next to the fire and sat down. Brynn, young and handsome—and, at five-feet-four-inches, tall for an Elf—looked at Andy apologetically, made an aborted attempt to speak, then finally managed, “Hey, sorry about that. My worry for my wife is constant. I feel I must do something. I did not mean to imply anything.”

“It is understandable, Brynn. I accept your apology. These are anxious days for us all. You have not determined a plan, I presume?”

“It seems hopeless, Anduihil. We may have to split up,” Pelias said.

“That is exactly the wrong course of action,” Abajian said heatedly. “We must stay together and try to find other survivors.”

“Abajian’s right,” Kian, the eldest Elf among them, said. “We shall need more people to have any chance at mounting a rescue.”

Ry’danen and Sinon were about to add their opinions to the debate when Alloria spoke: “I have something to say.”

Ry’danen and Sinon checked their tongues, then with the rest of the Elves, leaned forward. She was the most distinguished member of the group, and its only woman, and she hadn’t made her views known.

“Our struggle with the Demons is cast,” she said. “Either we win or they win. Right now, their victory seems certain. I believe the rumors are true about the lands overseas. The Demons control them all, or at least most of them, and they have already taken well over half of Erebia. They have defeated and now occupy the greatest Human kingdom in our land, Aagaard, and its black fortress, once thought impregnable. They have demonstrated to us how easily they can take a

great city such as Anjali.”

Alloria removed her jacket and stood up, looking at each of them. Her eyes reflected the dancing flames of the fire and a soft radiance held to the surface of her glorious golden-red hair. Her pale green dress somehow looked elegant.

“We cannot defeat their armies with anything our kind has at its disposal, I assure you. Nor will this war be won by killing a few of them here and there. We’re going to have to discover some ancient magic, or strategy, to which they’re vulnerable. We’re going to have to find some way to break their power. I have no idea what would work against them—at least not now. But if we aspire to defeat them, we must discover a means. I believe that should be our purpose. We owe it to Elvenkind and our loved ones to try. We cannot solace them by loitering here to be captured or killed. We cannot go home. I propose we go to Lalendren.”

“Lalendren!” Abajian and Sinon lifted their heads in unison.

“Lalendren is nearly fifteen hundred miles away, and that’s in a straight line.” Kian raised his brow. “Plus, we’d have to cross lands controlled by the Demons to get there.”

“No. We’ll go through the Druunhaelen Mountains.”

“Forgive me, my Lady, but it’s impossible.” Kian shrugged his shoulders. “A thousand miles through that wilderness? With winter coming? And the lot of us rigged for a jaunt in the countryside?”

“That’s just the point, Kian.” Alloria looked straight at him. “No one hazards them anymore. Yet they are the scene of our legends, the birthplace of our people, and the ancient seat of our power. That’s why we must go through them. Those ‘impossible’ legends and the lessons they teach may be our best hope. Isn’t it said that the Temple Mount stands somewhere amidst those peaks? And wasn’t it at the Temple Mount that the Demon Lord was banished to Hell by the heroes of our past? Is it not said that the exalted wizard Achea Artexerxes rests there with his Foundation Staff? And what about Dirk Steyn and his legendary sword, the one they called Holy Avenger? Could not that broadsword be entombed with him? Ten thousand years ago, great powers converged to defeat the Demon Lord; might they not be coiled there still, at the site of the last battle? In the Testament of Angels, it is written that so long as the lessons of the Temple Mount are not

forgotten, Mankind shall rule the Earth. I say we must find the Temple Mount!”

“You speak of the Temple Mount?” Nakula, a novice wizard, snorted. “Countless adventurers, wizards, and priests have searched for it. Many never returned. Those who did came back empty handed, telling tales of wraiths, traps, labyrinths, and monsters. I say the tales of invincible weapons are just stories to entertain children—no more!”

“Perhaps our story will one day likewise entertain children.” Alloria arched one eyebrow and held Nakula’s eyes with a steady gaze. “The question is: Do you, Nakula, have the determination to join with us in this desperate enterprise? We all know our fate if we remain here. If our lives are to count against the Demons, our deeds must become as impossible as our legends. I propose Lalendren because that’s where most Elves will go as the Demon armies advance. Lalendren, as the greatest Elven city in Erebia, will likely be our last stand. We will get there through the Druunhaelen Mountains and, God willing, along the way, we will find proof of His favor.”

Alloria felt strong and vibrant. She could sense they had heard her, and the more she spoke, the stronger her conviction became. She continued: “The presence of the Demons among us is blasphemy. They belong in Hell. There has to be a way to drive them back. The greatest wizards and sorcerers of our time have not yet figured out how. But the responsibility is not theirs alone. The affront is to our freedoms, our kin, and to Divine order. To be meek as the sacred is despoiled is shameful sin. Therefore, we are agreed it is our duty to contest these outrages, and, in respect of our own lives, to sell them dearly.

“The primordial powers that separated Hell from Earth were invoked in an ancient time. If there is anywhere on Earth where we might find the keys and levers of those powers, it will be in the Druunhaelens. And so I propose we go through them—and then on to Lalendren to stand with our people.” She stopped, looking around at them all.

“I’m with you.” Pelias nodded.

“As am I,” said Brynn.

“Me as well,” added Sinon.

“I am also with you.” Abajian stood and bowed.

“You have my service, my Lady.” Ry’danen formally inclined his head.

“And mine,” said Sallus.

“I’m at your service.” Nakula met Alloria’s gaze.

“As am I,” Parzen joined.

She turned to Kian, who stood. He walked up to her. “Lady Alloria, you are everything I have heard about you, and more.” He knelt, took her delicate hand in his, kissed it, and withdrew.

Andy stood and wrapped her in his arms. “You are amazing. Thank you,” he whispered in her ear.

“I say we leave tomorrow morning, due south,” Kian spoke to everyone, “and go deep into the woods. We’ll want to avoid all roads and open spaces to get as far away from here as possible. I don’t think we should start west until we pass the Dykonor Mountains.”

“What about supplies? We’re not supplied for that kind of travel,” Brynn said.

“It’ll be tough, for sure. But we’ll forage and improvise. I have experience trekking mountains. The outlying towns aren’t safe, but if we function as a team, I think we’ll make it.”

“How long do you think it will take to get to Lalendren?” Pelias asked Kian.

“Well, with winter approaching, and never having heard report of anyone traveling through the Druunhaelen Mountains...I’d say, well, I can’t say. It will take months; that’s for sure.”

Andy sat down with Alloria next to the fire as the rest of the Elves discussed details and recounted to each other what they knew of the lore of the Druunhaelens.

“I’m back to being scared, Andy. I just can’t help it,” she whispered, leaning into his shoulder. “I can’t believe that speech I just gave. What got into me? Do you really think we can make any difference? It just seems so ridiculous.”

“It’s not ridiculous at all. And I do believe, because the Demons can’t win in the end. They’re going to be stopped somehow.” He ruffled her hair affectionately. “So why can’t we have something to do with it?”

“You’re hopelessly optimistic,” she said, “and I love you for it.”

“Oh, and Lori? That was your heart talking. I told you it was heroic.”

Sitting with Andy for several minutes, she tuned out the conversa-

tion and enjoyed the warmth of the fire. She was on the verge of falling asleep when Parzen stilled everyone with an urgent whisper.

“Quiet. I heard something!”

It was the distant sound of stomping boots: the report of crushed twigs and leaves.

“Quick, put out the fire,” Abajian hissed.

“Ah, it’s no use. They’ve got hounds,” Kian interjected. “I can hear the whining of the pack. They’ve got our scent.”

“What do we do?” Brynn asked.

“Well, first things first: Pack up all your stuff—and quickly.”

All the Elves jumped to it, packing their meager belongings and grabbing their swords and bows. Alloria put on her jacket, then secured her spell books and sundries in her haversack. Donning her cloak, she slung it over her shoulder. Andy was packed, sword on hip and bow in hand. She noticed Kian hadn’t moved.

“Kian, what are you doing?”

“I think there’s about two, three dozen of them. The sounds are too heavy for Goblins. Must be Orcs. God help us if they’re Demons.”

“Do you think we can fight that many?” Andy asked.

“We have to.” Kian raised an eyebrow at Anduihil, his tone steady.

The rest of the Elves were ready. The footsteps grew closer. Everyone stared at Kian. He seemed to be engrossed in tamping down some leaves with the toe of his boot. Then, turning his head and looking to Alloria, he asked, “My Lady, what kind of magic do you know that might be of assistance?”

“I can cast a Sleep spell—and Finger-Lightning.”

“The Sleep spell is good. Keep the Finger-Lightning in reserve. What about you, Nakula? Can you cast Sleep?”

“I don’t know Sleep. I can cast a Color-Spray.” His eyes strayed to the woods.

“Okay, good, but eyes front. Now, Anduihil, you’re a blademaster, yes?” Kian asked.

“Yes.”

“All right. Alloria and Nakula, behind those bushes—and be ready with your spells.” He pointed toward the woods opposite the oncoming footsteps. “Everyone have your arrows notched and ready. Anduihil, Sinon, and Ry’danen, go with Alloria and Nakula. Be ready with your

swords as soon as you loose your first arrows. You two, run as soon as the sword-fighting begins.” He pointed at Alloria and Nakula. “The rest of you spread out among the trees and use your bows; do not engage hand-to-hand; run if they try to close with you.”

“You three are the best swordsmen.” He turned back to Anduihil, Sinon, and Ry’danen. “It’s your job to distract them from the bowmen, and give Alloria and Nakula a chance to get away after they cast their spells. You’re only supposed to distract them. Dazzle them with your swordplay as our archers pick at them from a safe distance. If their losses from the arrows and the spells don’t break their will, then take to your heels before you are overwhelmed.”

“What about you?” Andy asked.

Kian stepped from their midst and stood by the fire, looking into it. “I’ll be right here to make sure the hounds die.”

“You’ll be killed.” Alloria’s mouth hung open and her eyes sought his face, but he did not turn.

“No time to argue. They’re on top of us. Meet up at Widow’s Peak—go!”

A din of voices erupted just beyond the perimeter of their camp. They heard, “Ban’ak Fy, Ban’ak Fy!” *There’s a fire, there’s a fire, in Orcish.*

The Elves scattered to their stations. Kian sat down on a stump next to the fire. A shortsword lay beside his left hand, and his longsword was in his right. He seemed to be using it to better arrange the logs burning in the fire.

Alloria crouched behind some shrubs thirty feet away. Nakula was next to her and Andy knelt right behind, arrow notched on bowstring. Her heart thumped wildly. *How can he be so nonchalant?* she thought, looking at Kian.

A moment later the bushes and shrubs on the other side of the camp shook as Orcs emerged into the firelight. Three black mastiffs on leashes had the lead, each one three feet tall at the shoulder, with large, sharp teeth in maws slathered with drool. As for the Orcs, they stood about six feet tall. Their swinish noses, big and turned up, protruded above their lower jaws, which jutted out to give them bulldog-like underbites—with visible canines to match. Their eyes were bloodshot, their ears big and flappy. Their skin color varied from a milky orange to a sickly green, and they appeared to be covered in coarse hair. They

wore cheap armor and carried spears, swords, or axes.

Kian spoke when the first few came into view. “All this for me? I’m flattered. Word of my powers must be spreading.”

The Orcs came to a stop. One of them spoke to the others in Orcish and they guffawed. Alloria counted fifteen of them and could tell there were more behind in the woods. The mastiffs stood just a few feet from Kian, growling and straining on their leashes. He sat there as though about to deliver the punch line of a very good joke.

“Now,” Andy whispered to Alloria and Nakula.

Focusing her mind, she called forth the Sleep spell and triggered it. Magic flowed and coalesced at her fingers. She could hear Kian saying, “Well, let’s discuss the terms of your surrender, shall we?” as she cast the spell into the midst of the Orcs. Six of them slumped to the ground. In the same instant, a prismatic array of light sprang from Nakula’s fingers, and five more collapsed.

Everything after that happened in a blur. Kian’s longsword was deep in the mouth of one of the dogs—she hadn’t even seen the thrust. Arrows whizzed through the air and Orcs staggered, clutching their wounds. She saw Kian on the ground amidst a knot of Orcs, his shortsword buried in the neck of a second dog. Andy, Sinon, and Ry’danen stepped out from the bushes with their swords flickering through the air, quicker than her eye could follow. Orcs charged, towering over the Elves as they closed in. Andy wove and cut through them with precision, somehow ahead of their every move.

“Should we go?” Nakula asked.

No, she thought. At least a half dozen Orcs staggered away injured. Several had fallen in battle, in addition to eleven down from the spells. None had yet rushed the bowmen, and though Andy, Sinon, and Ry’danen were outnumbered three or four to one, their lithe swordplay had checked the advance of the Orcs. Then Alloria noticed another group of Orcs standing in disarray at the edge of camp. The biggest of them cuffed an Orc to his right, then began to harangue the rest of them, stabbing his finger repeatedly in the direction of the bowmen.

“No!” Alloria called forth her Finger-Lightning spell and triggered it, casting the silver bolt of light at the big Orc organizing the rest. It struck him in the face and he reeled back, blood dripping from his eyes, ears, and nose.

The Orcs around him bellowed and retreated pell-mell. A volley of arrows ripped into the ones left behind, and those that still could, turned and ran.

Alloria rushed out from the bushes. Andy and Ry'danen wrestled the Orc she hit with her Finger-Lightning to the ground and hogtied him. Sinon was poised to give the coup de grâce to an Orc too crippled to flee. Then she saw Kian on the ground, five feet from the fire. All three mastiffs lay about him, motionless. She rushed over and fell to her knees. He had several deep wounds to his body, but he was breathing—barely.

Kian opened his eyes. “My Lady, did we prevail?”

“Sshh.” She felt for the sorcery magic, for the harmony between her spirit and The Source. A warm vibration began moving up her spine to the base of her skull, and The Source opened before her. As she looked at the astral pattern of his body, she formed a healing spell in her thoughts. Resting hands on Kian’s chest, she channeled the magic, focusing on where the movement of his life force was being blocked by his injuries. A soft glowing light enveloped him, and his wounds began to close.

Abajian knelt down beside her. “Will he recover?”

“Yes, I think so. He just needs rest.”

The grisly sight of Sinon slitting the throat of an unconscious Orc attracted her attention. “Is that necessary?” She wheeled on him.

Without answering, Sinon walked over to another Orc, then bent down and twisted its head, exposing its throat. “Ask Kian when he recovers,” he said as he stabbed it in the jugular.

“We shouldn’t behave like them. Can’t you just run them off with the rest? They’re surely no threat now.”

“I am sorry, but I cannot do that. In the end they will only harm someone else.” Sinon kept his eyes down and away from her as he moved to the next one.

She didn’t have the will to argue anymore and couldn’t stand to watch. Pools of blood spread underfoot. Andy and Ry’danen interrogated the hogtied Orc; Ry’danen seemed to be speaking Orcish. Other Elves checked the possessions of the corpses. She became aware of an acrid stench and her stomach turned. *I have to get away from this slaughter,* she thought.

She looked down at Kian. His eyes were closed and his breathing good. She checked his wounds. None were bleeding.

“Are you okay, Alloria? You look pale.” Abajian rested his hand on her shoulder.

Alloria stood. “Yes. I just need to get away from all this killing. Make sure he’s comfortable, will you?”

“Of course.”

She walked into the woods. The sight of Sinon butchering the now defenseless Orcs hung in her mind. She understood the justification, but it was still wrong. *There has to be a better way*, she thought.

She went back to the little creek where she had been sitting earlier that evening. Easing her haversack to the ground, she sat down on the same rock. The depression and hopelessness were gone, but so was the elation and excitement that had replaced them. Now she just felt sad.

She crossed her legs and sat still. Concentrating her mind, she prayed. She prayed for wisdom and love, for forgiveness and strength. The minutes rolled by as her love of God carried Heaven, and returned to her like the rapture of a chaste kiss.

* * *

Vlockor, Demon Lord of the Nine Hells, finally pulled himself free from the rubble under which he had been buried. His left arm was missing from the elbow down and there was a hole in his chest, clear through to his back. *Good thing I moved my heart*, he thought, *or I might not have recovered from that first blast*.

His powers were drained. The fight with Malthus had been cataclysmic. Anger raged through him as he thought about it. From the Death Legion he had dispatched three squadrons of a thousand airborne Demons, each led by an Archfiend, to three cities in search of the Human wizard Sorrell Gilliam and the Ninth Hellfire Gem. The Elves at Lalendren had rebuffed the assault, while the assault on Emrani, though successful, had yielded neither Gilliam nor the gem.

It was at Anjali that Gilliam had been found. Vlockor had watched the battle for Anjali unfold through an enchanted crystal basin. Through the same medium he was able to communicate with Draakvaar, the Archfiend in charge of the attack. Vlockor had been engrossed in the

management of the battle. Just as it climaxed, Vlockor's second-in-command, the Archfiend Malthus, ambushed him, blasting a ray of dark-light straight through his back. Malthus had thought to try to crown himself Demon Lord just as the ninth gem was captured.

The dark-light wounded him grievously. In desperation, Vlockor invoked his subjective time continuum magic. Within the continuum, it had taken hours to subdue and kill the traitor, though several days passed in the world beyond. Paradoxically, it was from the objective transpiration of those days beyond the continuum that he gained the strength to recover and win the fight that raged within it. The north tower of Fortress Aagaard had been demolished in the process.

Contemplating the battle's aftermath, Vlockor looked first to the slate-gray sky, then to the smoldering ruins about him, then to the still standing main battlements of Aagaard, looming monolithically above him like a portent of the world's doom.

The wind tousled his black robes. "Malthus," Vlockor said wistfully, "don't think I don't understand. I was once in your position, but I did not miss..."

Looking again to the sky, he noticed Spyrus, his chief war coordinator, flying toward him over the rubble. Vlockor couldn't allow himself to be seen in such a weakened condition. Calling forth what little magic remained to him, he filled out his arm and the hole in his chest with quasi-matter.

"My Lord, what happened?" Spyrus asked as he flew up. "I saw explosions within the fortress and then it began to collapse in slow motion. It's been coming down for days. Everyone I sent in was ripped to shreds."

Vlockor turned sharply on Spyrus. "You waste the staff I've given you?"

"My Lord...I did not know...what..." Spyrus turned his palms up and spread his fingers.

"It was a time continuum, you idiot," Vlockor said, wondering why Spyrus hadn't been in the tower when Malthus moved against him and why he hadn't come to his aid himself. He'd smash the fool's face and interrogate him if the attempt wouldn't expose his weakened condition. "Is Balezaark here?"

"No, my Lord." Spyrus fidgeted. "He's still at Winggaard, I believe.

You left me no instructions to recall any Archfiends in such a circumstance as...this.”

That's a relief, Vlockor thought. With Malthus dead, Balezaark was next in line. It wouldn't have taken much to finish him while he was contending with Malthus. Balezaark would not pass on an opportunity to become Demon Lord. “What about Draakvaar? Has he reported?”

“No, my Lord. All the communication magics were in the north tower, so I haven't been able to contact any of our forces in Anjali. I'm having more crafted now, but they won't be finished for days.” Spyrus paused. “Of course, now that this...time continuum...is over, you can contact them yourself.”

Vlockor didn't have the power for that kind of magic right now, and that last comment made him wonder if Spyrus was beginning to suspect how weak he was. Vlockor darted his right arm out and grabbed the massive Pit Fiend by the neck.

“Where were you when Malthus turned on me?” His words came out in a measured cadence as he pulled Spyrus to him until they were eye to eye.

“I swear I didn't know anything about it. Malthus told me he was to lead another attack on Lalendren and I was to put together a squadron for him,” Spyrus blurted out.

“Since when did you start taking orders from Malthus?” Vlockor's voice didn't betray the extraordinary effort it took to maintain his grip. Even though Spyrus was half a foot shorter than his own nine feet, the Pit Fiend outweighed him by several hundred pounds. Drawing on the dregs of his strength, Vlockor tightened his grip.

“I—I wasn't. I just assumed you...ordered it,” Spyrus croaked.

Vlockor felt he looked sufficiently scared and tossed him aside. “I want all this rebuilt immediately.” He pointed to the rubble beneath them. “And set up my quarters in the south tower.”

“Yes, my Lord.” Spyrus got up, bowed, and flew off.

“If only they were loyal,” Vlockor said aloud. “Fear has its limits.”

*“What then is love, that God would
send it against the mailed fist of Hell?”*

*—From the Catechism of the
Baezean Church of the Light*

CHAPTER 3

ANNA

Cellestillena flitted through the forest with as much speed as her diaphanous wings could provide. Because she could magically levitate, that was fast, as her wings needed only to provide thrust, not lift. It was the delightful singing of the Human girl that drew her on. As she neared the village, Cellestillena invoked her invisibility magic. Darting unseen through the treetops, she settled next to a high branch at the edge of the clearing where the villagers were gathered.

Over a hundred people were arrayed around a bonfire. They were absorbed, listening to the song of a golden-haired girl at the western edge of the clearing. There, standing on a little platform in front of a building, was the most transcendently beautiful being Cellestillena had ever seen.

Not wanting to draw attention to her position by making the branch sag, she maintained her levitation magic, only using the tree to steady herself. Folding her wings down her back, she listened. The girl’s voice was exquisite—in fact, enchanting. She was quite sure there was something magical about it. Cellestillena could not speak the language of these Humans, but she did not need to. The girl’s vibrant consciousness broadcast the meaning of the song better than words ever could.

The song was about love, amaranthine love, expressed as enraptured faith in the spiritual beauty of Creation. Through the vibrations of the song, Cellestillena felt initiated into an ecstatic harmony with the universe; it was beyond anything she had ever known. It became

imperative to her heart to find some way she could directly communicate with this girl, but the thought of being seen by Humans, let alone openly approaching them, made her frightfully skittish. Yet just to hover about her later, unseen, would be delightful. Could she content herself with that? Ah, no. Cellestillena mused that only a being of profound goodness could carry such love in her voice. They simply had to meet.

When the song ended, Cellestillena waited a few moments to see if she would sing again. However, it didn't appear she would. Cellestillena was fearful the village wolves would catch her scent. Unfolding her wings, she withdrew through the treetops into the wilderness, heading for home.

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"That was lovely, Anaiyailla."

"Thank you, Chief Dyllass."

Taking his muscular arm, she stepped off the little platform onto the hard-packed dirt. Several people came up and thanked her for the song as they passed on their way out of the village circle and on to their cabins.

Clan Chief Dyllass Finigan led her to a bench and sat down. "Ughh. I'm getting old, my dear." He slid his hand into hers. "Would you join me for a few minutes?" Raising a pipe in his other hand, he said, "I'm going to have a few more puffs before I settle in for the night."

"Of course," she agreed, sitting beside him.

"Anaiyailla," he patted her knee, "how much thought have you given to whom you're going to marry?"

"I don't know. I guess not much....The young men are earnest, but I haven't been much interested in romance. I've focused on the spiritual path my mother showed me."

"And that's very good"—he turned to look her in the eyes—"but you'll be turning nineteen, what, this spring?"

"Yes."

"And aside from Lisi—who's still holding out for Krell—you're the oldest unmarried girl in our village." The Chief dropped his chin a few inches but held her eyes. She noticed he was no longer smiling. "It's

time for you to start thinking about who you're going to marry.”

Anaiyailla returned his gaze, reflecting. She had never considered living with anyone other than her brother, Krell. Since their mother's death ten years ago, he had looked after her. Unlike anyone else in the village, he understood the spiritual pursuits that were their mother's legacy. She couldn't imagine getting that kind of support from anyone else.

“You're a special girl, Anaiyailla,” he continued. “Your wisdom goes well beyond your years. I'll understand if you find the young men here a bit immature. Don't feel you have to limit yourself to them.” He paused to draw on his pipe, then exhaled a long plume of smoke. He leaned back on the bench. “You may well find yourself agreeable to a more experienced and thoughtful man, and our custom does allow me to grant a dual marriage. As you know, I have allowed a number of them because we lost so many men during the Orc wars. And, right now, of course, including you and little Naomi, we have two more young ladies to marry than we have bachelors, so that option is fully open.”

Anaiyailla found herself squinting as a tendril of smoke from Chief Dyllass' pipe bowl reached her eyes. “Well, I'll give it some thought, if you'd like,” she said, but found herself wondering instead why such sweet-smelling smoke tasted bitter.

“That's good.” A smile formed amidst his thick white beard, and he gestured with his pipe at the cabins beyond the circle. “It's important to the village you find the right man. I'm sure, with some thought, you'll know who that man is by spring. If not, I'll help you choose. We'll find someone who will both be good for your heart and provide you and the village with some beautiful babies.”

She was startled by his bluntness. It was clear she was being given no option, and the set of wrinkles around his wizened eyes said he had already decided upon her future husband. She sat calmly and silently, staring out into the fire, and wondered whom he intended it to be.

“You see your brother over there,” he went on, motioning to the southern arc of the circle, by the village bakery. Krell was there with Egina, Dauphine, and Lisi. The girls were laughing, their attention wholly on Krell. “I trust that when spring arrives you will not continue to disappoint the village as he has.”

Anaiyailla pulled her chin in and turned back to the Chief. “You think Krell is a disappointment?”

“Don’t get me wrong, my dear. We all love Krell—it’s just that he’s twenty now, and he should have married long ago and given the village some children. Fifteen is the normal age. He has six young ladies to choose from, and they would all love to marry him. Three of them would already be married if they weren’t waiting for him to decide.” The Chief looked across the circle at Krell. “I even told him he could marry two or three, if he was having trouble committing to just one.”

She noticed the Chief’s pipe had gone out. He was still looking at Krell. Studying his face, she felt his sadness in her heart. It surprised her. She had thought he was angry. “Why does it matter so much?” she asked, placing her hand atop his. “I’m sure he’ll marry someday. I think he’s always expected to marry someone more like our mother.”

“Anaiyailla,” he said in his most affectionate voice, “you and Krell are special. There’s something in your blood. Your mother carried it from the time she lived with the Elves. I don’t know what it is, but Krell is faster and stronger, and probably even smarter, than any other man in our village. And you, well, you’re an Angel, my dear.”

She could feel the sudden burst of love in his heart as the wrinkles around his eyes softened. “Our people suffered greatly during the Orc wars,” he continued, “and disease has taken its toll; there are only one hundred twenty-three of us now. But when the Elves returned your mother, Nyanja, to us after she had been taken by Orcs so many years before, it was the beginning of hope for our people. She gave us an ally and friend in the Elves, and she gave us you and Krell. Without Krell, the Orc wars might still be going. And everyone believes you are the cause of miracles, like the sudden recoveries from dire illness and injury that occur around you. Then there are your uncanny premonitions. Since you started midwifing three years ago, we haven’t lost a single baby, which is a miracle in itself. So, you see, you and Krell represent hope to our people, and we look forward to the wonders your children might bring.”

Anaiyailla put her hand to his scarred and grizzled face and stroked his cheek. “Thank you, Chief Dyllass,” she whispered, “for sharing your heart with me. I can feel your love and it is beautiful. I will think about what you have said, and I will ask God for guidance. And I will

also talk to Krell about the matters of his heart.”

“You really are an amazing girl.” He took her hand from his cheek and kissed it. “Thank you for understanding a thick-tongued and stubborn old man. Good night, and pleasant dreams, my dear.”

Anaiyaila stood up with him. “Good night.” As he left, she started toward the footpath that led to her cabin. Most everyone was gone except for several still gathered around the fire, and a few in conversation at the edge of the clearing. A young man trotted up from the fire as she reached the path.

“Would you like me to walk you home, Anna?” he asked with a smile.

“Thank you, that would be nice, Galvan.” He fell into step beside her. The path turned to avoid the bole of a large tree and continued on into shadows beyond.

“Your songs are so uplifting,” he said. “They keep getting better and better. Yet if someone had asked me after any one of them, I would have said it could not be outdone. How is it possible?”

“My mother used to say: ‘God is in the singer, the song, and the audience—tasting of His inspiration.’ But I’m just as surprised as you, Galvan, how that inspiration grows. It is sweet of you to tell me. Thank you.” Then, laughing, she said, “So, is there a reason you needed to get me alone like this?”

“My...my mother asked me to give you thanks for the scarf you made her. It is beautiful, and she is quite grateful.”

“I’m glad. I enjoy making them.” She glanced at him sidelong, noticing that he was pushing his palms across the hips of his trousers. She sensed he wanted desperately to share his feelings toward her. As they walked in silence, she took his arm in hers. “Now, you promised to help me find my cabin, Galvan.”

“Believe me, I want nothing more.” They both chuckled. “Ah, here it is, just where you left it...But wait, Anna—don’t go quite yet. You make me tongue-tied. You are just so beautiful. You know...I’ve been building my own cabin, and...I...I was wondering if you might come to see it. I would enjoy spending that time with you.”

“I’ll come, Galvan”—she stepped up onto the threshold stone—“tomorrow. Perhaps you can help me write a song.”

“Write a song?” He raised his eyebrows.

“Indeed. All you need do is tell me what you’re feeling, and show me—through your work. You will enjoy it, on my word.”

“I’ll be looking forward to it.”

“Wonderful.” She returned his smile. “Good night, Galvan.” She watched him turn. His first step was almost a skip. *Perhaps I’ve eased his heart*, Anna thought.

“Good night, Anna!” he called out over his shoulder as he disappeared into the night and the trees.

The warmth inside the cabin was welcoming, emanating from coals still burning in the little fire pit at the center of the building. Anna expected that when Krell came home they would talk for a while, so she placed a log on the fire and lit some candles. Unwinding her muffler, she glanced around, thinking how natural and peaceful the little home she shared with Krell was. The arrangement of their belongings created a warm living space. She wiggled out of her jacket and hung it on the wall next to the crowded bookshelves near her bed, then sat down and removed her shoes.

Flames began capering on the new log in the fire, their light chasing shadows all around the room. Her golden hair turned lustrous as she neared the fireplace, where she removed her blouse and thick woolen skirt, setting them aside on a chair. The lush skin of her arms and thighs contrasted pleasingly with the rough cloth of her plain undergarments and long socks. Then she knelt on the bear skin in front of the fire, sitting back on her heels. With her wavy hair flowing over her shoulders, she rested and warmed her hands in front of the flames.

The talk with Chief Dyllass had her thinking about her mother. She was feeling both the pain of her death and the joy of recalling her. It happened when she was eight years old, but she could remember with perfect clarity their final encounter at her deathbed:

“Our time has run out, Anna,” her mother said. “Stay with me for a while.”

“Don’t go, Momma,” she pleaded. “What will I do without you?”

“I will always be with you—in your heart.” She smiled, reaching out from her bed to stroke Anaiyailla’s hair. “You need not fear. Remember, God has a purpose for you, and so long as you have faith, trusting that your life is His perfect gift to you, it will be so. Such is His honor; it could not then be otherwise. He has blessed

me throughout my life, in good times and bad times, for I have ever drawn closer to Him. My life here is almost over, and I feel Him nigh, come to take what's His: my heart. Dear one, have faith—no matter what you face when I am gone. It will always prove an opportunity to grow closer to your Heavenly Father.”

“I will, Momma, I will.” Anna’s eyes misted over with tears as she held her mother’s hand tightly.

Nyanja then closed her eyes, regaining in repose something of the regal beauty of her youth. All signs of her illness were effaced as a suffused joy overspread her countenance.

“Oh, Anna,” she said, reopening her eyes. “God is here with us now. The thief of hearts has come for mine at last! I can see Him and feel Him and He is so beautiful. He loves you so much, Anna. I can’t describe the immense joy I feel right now in His embrace. I am happy beyond words.” She paused and took a shallow breath, her eyes sparkling like water in the sun. “The light is lovely,” she continued. “It spreads across my tongue like the nectar of a thousand blossoms. The purpose of my trials is clear. I pray you will find your path in God’s love and journey to our home, where I know you will find me. The kingdom of God is pure bliss, my child, and He yearns for every lost soul to find their way to Him, the uttermost spirit. He is so great, yet so humble. He serves us. Through the call of virtue, honor, beauty, intuition and Human love, He beckons—yet offering in these no more than the slightest intimation of His great light. It is cool and bright, like the crushed essence of a million moons. To look upon it is to crave Him with every surge of one’s heart. But I cannot forget you, little one. I love you so much. I will never be far. Trust in His wisdom and I will always be with you. God is center everywhere, border nowhere—so too now, me, by His grace. Pray with me now, that you may always find God’s blessings at every turn.”

Nyanja then touched Anna on the forehead above and between her eyebrows, saying: “God has planted His seed in you.”

Anaiyailla clutched at her mother’s hands as they withdrew and watched through standing tears as Nyanja was enveloped in a soft light that coalesced into a halo over her head and then ascended toward the empyrean.

The tears that then fell had been from deep sadness, but the tears falling now were of fathomless joy. Her mother’s journey here on this Earth ended in the matchless felicity of God’s love, and every day thereafter, Anaiyailla aspired to that same consummation in Him.

That moment framed her life. It was the greater context of all her

thoughts and actions. She wondered how that might change if she were to marry and have children. It is the attachment to things as they are, she thought, that causes pain from loss and sows fear of the unknown. It is attachment that draws a person from God. “I must let go of my attachments if I hope to understand God’s wisdom and share in His joy,” she whispered.

Looking around her home, Anaiyailla realized just how strongly attached to it she was—an attachment she was suddenly determined to be free of. Standing, she retrieved another log and placed it on the fire, then secured the cooking grill in its brackets. She felt a need to cleanse her body in preparing her mind to withdraw from worldly attachments.

She filled a large cooking pot with water and placed it on the grill above the fire. The picture of her mother near the fireplace held her entranced for a few moments as she crouched there, a feeling of loneliness closing in. With the heat of the fire sinking into her bare flesh, she sought to steady herself by imagining it was the presence of her mother’s spirit warming her, and remembered her mother’s pledge: She would never truly be alone.

Anaiyailla walked to her bed and pulled out a cedar trunk from beneath it. Lifting its latch and sliding back the trunk’s crossbar, she pushed its lid open. The clothes were preserved against mustiness and moths by a sachet of equal parts rose, for fragrance, and odorless blackroot, for the pests. The clothes had been given by the Elves to her and her mother long ago, back when they were in the habit of visiting. Momma lived among them in the five years after they rescued her from years of slavery amidst a tribe of Orcs.

It was with the Elves that the taproot of Momma’s faith in God had reached her soul. And, even after Nyanja died, the Elves continued their annual visits. About six years ago, however, they stopped coming. Though Krell once scoured the countryside as far as a three-week trek westward, no sign of an Elf had since been found.

Holding up a small dress, Anaiyailla admired its refined beauty: light blue with white lace fringes, soft and smooth. She had worn it as a child. Another light blue dress at the bottom of the trunk was her mother’s. The two were a set. Leaving her mother’s folded, she set it on the bed. She hadn’t been in this trunk in years, desiring to preserve

its contents for a special occasion. But there were little girls who would fit into her old dresses, and making presents of Mom's clothes would spread joy throughout the village.

She stood up from her bed and checked the water. The cold was gone, but it wasn't quite warm, so she went back to the trunk and sorted through the other clothes. In subdued shades of red, blue, green, brown, and yellow, there were blouses and skirts; shoes, sashes, and underwear; little lace gloves and adorable little hats—all made by the Elves out of a wonderfully durable fabric that was yet a supple delight against the skin.

When the water warmed, she took the pot and placed it on the counter next to the bathing stool. A small, blue-tiled alcove served as their shower. It was recessed into the back wall and had a drain in the floor at its center. Anaiyaila pulled the curtain closed, sealing the alcove from the rest of the house. Stripping off her remaining clothes, she sat on the stool and began pouring the warm water over her head with a ladle. She luxuriated as the water sank into her hair and flowed over her shoulders, trickled down her back, around the swells of her breasts, and over her torso and legs. After making a thick lather by massaging soap into her hair, she wet a washcloth, saturating it with the suds. Then twice she scrubbed herself thoroughly. The sensations of the bath were a tonic for her spirit. As she worked, she felt more and more free. She imagined her affections for the material circumstances of life flowing away with the bathwater.

The complete cleanliness she felt toweling dry was emancipating, and as she sauntered from the bathing alcove to her bed, she thought about how it might be for her to wear the flower garlands and white of a new bride. Picking out some of her mother's dainty undergarments, she put them on. Then she slid into her mother's blue dress. It rested on her like a loving embrace, and savored of the rosy aroma of the sachet. She had never before considered disturbing her mother's clothes. They had been held sacrosanct out of fear of spoiling the one tangible link to her mother. But, standing here now, she felt secure at the foundation of her life—in her soul. She found a pair of feather-soft slippers and put them on. Then, placing the rest of the clothes back in the trunk, she slid it over to the foot of her bed. Tomorrow she would go through and decide to whom the garments would go.

Anaiyailla was sitting up on a stool with her back to the fire, combing her hair, when Krell returned. She first heard him outside, talking to Urg. The door opened and he stood there a moment at its threshold, gaping at her.

“Don’t just stand there, silly, you’re letting out all the heat,” she said, cocking her head to one side and almost giggling.

Krell stepped inside and closed the door. “Is that Mother’s dress?” he asked rhetorically. “You look absolutely gorgeous. I mean, it just doesn’t seem right that the prettiest and smartest girl in all the world would have to be my sister.”

Placing her hands on her hips and drawing her cheeks in slightly, she said, “Thank you, but you are too kind.” Then she dropped the pose and smiled, showing off her flawless white teeth.

Krell hung up his coat and unstrapped his weapons. “So, what’s the occasion? Have you decided to make use of all those old clothes?”

“Yes, I decided I have become too attached to them. It’s time to move on.” She resumed brushing her hair as Krell removed his boots. “So, what have you been up to? I saw the girls pawing all over you, as usual.”

“Yes,” he chuckled, “but I mostly talked with Urg. We must do some deep reconnaissance, find where those Orcs live. He discovered some tracks out past Vulture’s Canyon two days ago. That makes three sets of tracks now, all within two or three days of our village. We can’t let them reestablish themselves around here.”

Anaiyailla sighed. “Does this mean you will be fighting again?”

“Well, I hope not. First we must find their lair and see if they intend to expand in our direction. Perhaps those tracks are just part of an aberrantly large hunting circle.” He walked over to the kitchen area and filled a cup of water. “We don’t even know for certain they are Orcs; they left booted tracks. Other clues, though, point to Orcs, so it’s a good bet.”

“When do you plan to go?”

“Oh, perhaps a week or two. I don’t believe it’s urgent just yet.” He guzzled his water and replaced the cup. “But I sure don’t like it. First, there were those monsters. Then, this gargantuan Dragon leaps straight out of legend into our world—and, of course, the crystal. And now we start finding Orc tracks. No, I don’t like it at all.”

“Have you told Chief Dyllass about the newest tracks?”

“No, I’ll tell him tomorrow. He’s not thinking straight. I can’t believe we’re holding on to that crystal. After I’ve taken care of these Orcs, I’m going to take the crystal someplace where I can learn its history.” Krell leaned against the kitchen counter and stared into the fire with narrowed eyes.

She could see he was getting angry. “What do you mean take it someplace? There is nowhere else.”

“We both know there are great cities beyond our mountains. The Elves told us all about them. We have the maps on the shelf. I mean to go, and keep going, until I find out about that crystal.”

“Chief Dyllass won’t let you go, you know that.”

“Chief Dyllass won’t be able to stop me.”

A frown flashed across Anaiyailla’s face.

“Anna,” Krell flipped his hands, “I’m tired of waiting for Elves to show up. It’s been six years. I want to know if something happened to them, and I want to see more of the world. And that crystal...it doesn’t belong here. It’s dangerous.”

“The Elves have come around from time to time, you know, just not every year like they did for Momma. I wouldn’t be surprised if they showed up again soon.” She set her hairbrush down and walked over to him. “And they’ll probably be able to tell you everything there is to know about that crystal.” She looked into his eyes and touched the side of his jaw with her hand.

He rocked forward off the counter. “You’re right, let’s not talk about this now. It’s a ways off, and I haven’t made a final decision.” He extended his arms to her shoulders and looked her over. “Well, let me see you. My, how my sister has grown up.”

She took his hands in hers and posed, one foot forward. “Do you like?”

“You look terrific. Stunning, really. All I can say is if I saw another girl half as pretty, I’d marry her.” He let go of her hands.

“I’ll bet you would.” Anna smirked at her bachelor brother.

“Is that how you see it, eh? Well, here”—he motioned with his finger—“turn around for me.”

She complied, turning a pirouette. “Does my outfit meet with your satisfaction? Surely there is someone in the village you’d like to see it

on?”

“Hmm. Well...perhaps. But you know what would help?”

“What?”

“Well,” he said, seeming to ponder, “lift your arms up.”

She looked at him askance, wondering what he was up to.

“Come on, help me picture her in it.” He urged her on with an earnest look.

She could tell he was up to something, and as soon as she began to lift her arms, his hands darted to her sides and began tickling. She squealed and tried to squirm away, but he stayed with her all around the cabin, tickling mercilessly. Abandoned in laughter, she collapsed on her bed. Krell moved in, cornering her against the wall, leaving her with no defense—even in flight—and flailing hopelessly.

A feeble “stop, stop” with a few tears became her best defense. Krell finally relented. Ruffling her hair and pinching her nose, he sat back, giving her some space. She took a moment to gather her strength and wits, then sat up and leaned against him, still quite out of breath.

“Now look, you’ve gone and messed up my hair,” she pouted.

“Don’t worry, I’ll fix it.” He started pawing through her locks.

“Oh, stop that,” she giggled, pulling away. “Use the brush if you want to fix it, but don’t make me laugh anymore; my ribs couldn’t take it.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said cheerfully, retrieving her brush from the rug next to the fire.

She positioned herself with her back to him, and he sat down and began brushing her hair with long, careful strokes.

“So, what were you and Chief Dyllass discussing?”

“Well...” She wondered where to start. “One thing we talked about was how to find you a wife.”

Krell let out a sigh. “I already had that squabble with him. I told him I’d get married when I was good and ready to get married.”

“I know you don’t like people telling you what to do. But he did set me to wondering how you feel, you know, deep in your heart.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, brush suspended in midair.

“How does it make you feel to think about getting married, about leaving our home here and living with another woman?”

She sat in silence with him for a while, waiting for his answer, as he

resumed brushing her hair. She sensed he was trying to reason it out, no longer focusing on Chief Dyllass. “Don’t think about it,” she urged, “just tell me how you feel.”

“I guess it makes me feel...I don’t know, scared. You mean everything to me. I wouldn’t want things to change between us.”

“My love for you, brother, will never change, but it is inevitable our circumstances will.”

“I know, but that is not the only reason. I feel that if I get married, I will be tied down. I want to see the world. Marriage would end that dream.”

“I see what you mean, but you know how much our people need you, do you not?” She was thinking about what Chief Dyllass had said. “And besides, how could you think of running off and leaving me?”

“Well, actually,” he laughed, “I imagined we would run off together and live with the Elves. If they would just listen to my advice, we would all leave here and find a better home.” He put down the brush and began massaging her shoulders. “But I will never leave you. I wouldn’t go without you—at least, I wouldn’t stay gone.”

“Not everyone is as hale and strapping as you. A long march would be hard and dangerous for some of our people.”

“I know, but in the long run it would be better if we found a safer place.” He lightly worked his knuckles over her shoulder blades.

She leaned forward over her crossed legs and rested her forehead against the bed, letting him massage her entire back. “Oh, that feels wonderful,” she sighed. “You’re not going anywhere, brother. Not unless you can teach someone how to do that.”

After thoroughly kneading her back and neck, he stopped and patted her hip. “There you go.”

“Hmmh, thanks.” She turned around to face him. “Tell me, putting everything else aside, if you were going to get married right now, who would it be?”

“Oh, Anna, I don’t know. Lisi, I suppose. I don’t know if I could face her if I married someone else.”

“What about Naomi? She’s quite smart—and attractive.”

“Naomi?” The expression of his face showed his interest had been piqued. “She hasn’t come out yet, has she?”

“Oh, yes, she has,” Anaiyailla said gaily, “and she’d be perfect for

you.” She reached up and pinched his short beard between thumb and forefinger. “She’s adventurous, inventive, and smart. Plus, she’s fierce. She’ll give you a good challenge.”

“Yes, she would be a good match,” he mused. “She’s spirited. But Lisi would kill me, I fear.”

“Well, you could marry them both.”

“I don’t know,” he paused, thinking. “I suppose—but—hey! You are wily, my beloved sister. How’d you trick me into this? I never said I was even ready to marry.” He gave her an affectionate shove, knocking her flat on her back.

She squirmed as he loomed over her, poking her stomach. “You’re holding something back,” he said. “What else did you talk about with Dyllass?”

“I surrender! I’ll talk,” she said in a titter, and he sat back to let her up. Pushing up to a sitting position, she tried to think of a way to tell him; a way that wouldn’t send him charging off to wring the Clan Chief’s neck. “Well, we also talked about me getting married.”

Krell froze. “What?”

She paused, hesitant to say it. “He gave me until spring to choose someone.”

“Spring?” he snorted. “That’s a mere two months away. Anna, you know you need not marry if you don’t choose to, don’t you? In fact, tomorrow I will have it out with Dyllass.” He looked off into the fire, his jaw muscles causing the beard at his jawline to bristle. “The nerve!”

“Please don’t say anything to him. I am considering it and I don’t want to start any trouble.”

“I will not let him force you if you’re not ready.”

“Thank you.” She smiled and reached out to touch his arm. “I’ll let you know if I’m not ready.”

“Wait.” He held up his hand. “Don’t tell me you actually have someone in mind?”

“I never said I had someone in mind. I just said I am considering it. Marriage does seem like the natural next step for my life”—she poked him in the chest—“and you can’t hold off the girls forever. We’re going to have to make some changes sometime.”

“But you do have someone in mind. I can tell.”

“Well...” She really didn’t want to tell him she believed Chief

Dyllass intended to make her the second wife of an older man. Besides, nothing was certain. God's plans outrank everyone else's, and she had yet to pray and ask His guidance.

"Tell me," he urged.

"Truly, I am not certain. I want to pray on it and think about it. It may be there's no one I'm willing to marry, but if I choose someone, a man like Luuek would be likely."

"Luuek?" Krell sputtered. "He's over forty—and he has two wives already!"

"I didn't say I was going to marry Luuek," she parried. "I was just giving an example. Besides, he is tall and handsome, and he's smart. I remember Momma was quite fond of him."

Krell looked at her with sad eyes. "Well, if you choose to get married, it is your business alone. But please let me know if it's not your choice, and I will end it."

"I give you my word, Krell." She pressed the palm of her hand against his chest. "I will not get married without you knowing exactly how I feel about it."

"Thank you." The look on his face betrayed a deep weariness as his eyes lost their focus.

"What weighs on your mind, brother?" She felt the slow, steady beat of his heart against her palm. "Tell me."

He took her hand in both his rough ones and gently traced her fingers. "I think we must leave." He spoke softly and gravely. "But I won't leave without you. If you get married, then I can't leave. Which means I might as well get married, and we'll both be trapped here."

"Why is it so important that we leave? There is much good that we do here, and our people rely on us for many things. We can't just abandon them."

"It's not about abandoning them. It's about living to see another summer. I've been urging them to leave this place for a long time. It's not safe here anymore, and I'm worried I won't be able to protect you." He reached out a hand to the side of her face and wove his fingers into her hair, stroking her cheek with his thumb. "Or our people. The day that crystal fell at my feet three months ago, everything changed. It's not just about my wanderlust anymore. Anna, you have no idea: Just one of those monsters could slaughter everyone in our village, solely

with its claws—have no doubt. And they use magic. I saw them conjure bolts of energy out of thin air. Then there’s that golden Dragon.” A look of complete stupefaction came over Krell’s face. “How could anything so gigantic exist without the whole world knowing? Ah, Anna, my head aches. The Elves told us Dragons were just a legend. They were so very, very wrong.”

She wrapped both her hands around his right palm and returned his gaze. “I feel your caring and love for our people deeply,” she said with profound affection. “You bear a heavy burden. I’m glad you’re sharing it with me. You look to me more magnificent than ever. Whether or not you can protect me and our village rests in God’s will, but your heart is as it should be.”

“You know, when Father was killed by the Orcs, I was eight years old and you were just six,” he said, his eyes unfocused and body still. Only his mouth moved: “Mad with grief, I ran into the forest until I was lost. I swore then I would protect our village, you, and Mother. But what happened three months ago has convinced me our village has been drawn into play amidst powers beyond our comprehension. I alone was witness to them. Either side in that battle was beyond anything we can withstand. That crystal fell at my feet for a reason. We are involved—like it or not. And if we just sit here, as Chief Dyllass seems disposed to, and go on as if nothing happened, we will be overrun. I believe the reason we haven’t seen Elves for six years has something to do with those monsters. If we are to have any chance, I must find out what’s going on.”

Anaiyailla’s heart overflowed with love. She had no idea he was carrying such a weight. Rising to her knees, she leaned in to him and hugged tightly. “Why don’t we pray together and ask God to guide us in making the right decisions?”

“Yes.”

She let him go and sat cross-legged on the bed, facing the fire. Krell did the same. “Oh Heavenly Father,” she whispered softly, closing her eyes, “creator of the universe, in Your infinite wisdom, we ask that You bless us and guide our wills, our thoughts, and our actions. We pray that we never lose the light of Your inspiration. Rid us of attachment to worldly desires. Bless us to feel Your strength and love wherever we are. We ask now to see and to feel and to know Your love. If,

by Your wisdom, our path is to be hard, we pray we meet it fully in the nobility of spirit which is Your image within our hearts. We thank You for the blessings You have already conferred and for the time we have had together. Thank You for this life. We live by Your light; we pray by Your light—and Father, when it is our time, may we die drenched in Your light.”

Concentrating on the soft bluish light budding within her forehead, Anaiyailla lost herself in devotion. Time fled. A warm, uplifting vibration infused her body. Her body became like stone as she watched the bud open, acquire a golden halo, and then reveal a pentagonal star at its center, silver-white and luminous. As she watched the coruscating star, she knew intuitively God would always be with the two of them and, by their faith in Him, that their choices would be leavened with wisdom.

When she finally opened her eyes she saw the fire had burned down to embers. Krell was propped against the wall, sleeping. Reaching past him, she grabbed the thick blanket at the foot of her bed and unfolded it. Then she tipped him over onto his side.

“Sshh, go back to sleep,” she whispered as he began to mumble and wake. After changing into her night clothes, she snuggled in next to him, pulling the blanket over them both and closing her eyes. Thinking of that white star, she fell asleep, confident that whatever their journey, it was guided by God.

*“Those who worship lesser gods
go unto them. God’s devotees
go unto Him.”*

—*Saint Sevannah,*
The Testament of Angels

CHAPTER 4

HE WHO KNOWS EVIL, HE WHO KNOWS GOD, AND HE WHO KNOWS NEITHER

Light from a small crystal sphere embedded at the end of a six-foot staff filled the dank earthen chamber. The staff was two inches in diameter and pulsed with omnifarious intaglio images of weapons, skulls, monsters, and scenes of livid torment. It was leaning against the edge of a rickety desk and belonged to the man sitting there.

The man was not entirely a man: He was half Human and half Orc. His long coarse hair, dull orange hide, flat upturned nose atop a protruding jaw, and fat lips were common to a half-Orc; his big round eyes, too—save only the yellow ring around their pupils. However, the small horns jutting from his temples, the callused skin, and the taloned nails belonged to neither of his forebears. Those features were acquired in becoming Hellsworn to Lord Vlockor. His clothing was of quilted silk, all black, which befitted both his infernal allegiance and his usual disposition. Yet today, he was pleased.

The sun of good fortune was ablaze overhead once again. His mind raced with prospects of attaining greater power. A few short years ago, he lived right here in the Druunhaelen Mountains among a rustic tribe of Orcs, nothing more than a lowly half-breed son of an unknown father and a Human slave girl. Now the path to becoming one of Vlockor’s favored, and to having an entire kingdom to rule, seemed plain.

Step one was to get rid of the Pit Beast, which is why he had a

map of the Druunhaelens on his desk. He couldn't risk having such a formidable Demon around. The Beast would weigh minutely the advantages in treachery, just as he would if their roles were reversed, so he had designed a scheme to marginalize it.

He was going over the scheme in his mind when his thoughts were disturbed by the creaking of the guard gate, followed by footsteps from down the corridor and a tap at his door.

"Lord Kripa, the Beast is on his way down," said an Orcish voice from the other side.

"Let him pass," Kripa ordered.

He felt his heart beat a bit faster. Even though he was technically the Beast's superior, he hardly felt so in his presence. And he knew how much it galled the Beast to have to take orders from—of all things—a half-Orc.

The thudding footfalls of the Beast could be heard coming down the corridor. Kripa resisted the urge to take hold of his staff. He was determined to appear nonchalant. He certainly did not want the Beast to suspect that he was being manipulated into irrelevancy, rather than usefully deployed.

When the old wooden door began swinging open, Kripa looked down at the map as though in deep concentration. The Beast stooped down and literally had to squeeze through the doorway.

"You summoned me," he stated in a baritone that was close to a growl.

Kripa casually looked up at the Pit Beast. Crouched on all four limbs, his jaundiced eyes were, nonetheless, nearly five feet from the ground. Wings folded in on his body covered much of his uniform, making his midsection bulkier than the four-foot width of his shoulders. With teeth bared in a reptilian jaw, he achieved a look that was particularly unsettling in close quarters. His displeasure with having been made to worm his way through all the narrow corridors and passageways was obvious.

"I've made a change in plans." Kripa held his face expressionless as he stared at the Beast.

The Beast stared back at him, not bothering to conceal his malevolence.

"Well then," Kripa continued, raising one eyebrow in mock amuse-

ment, adding a hard edge to his voice and pointing at the map, “I’m detaching you to set up a base over here. There should be some Goblins in this region, so I’m sending Crovex with you. Once you get the Goblins organized and a stronghold established, I want you to set up outposts here, here, and here.” Kripa tapped his finger at each place on the map.

The Beast appeared oblivious; he hadn’t twitched a muscle or given any sign he was even listening. This was a key moment. The Pit Beast was supposed to be his personal advisor, and it was crucial to circumvent any notion that his orders from Vlockor precluded him from leaving Kripa’s side.

“Questions?” he asked peremptorily. “Or shall I just send you on your way?”

“That area is beyond Lord Vlockor’s field of interest.” The Beast shuffled forward a few inches.

“Well, I think quite the contrary.”

“You think?” He wet his nose with a broad black tongue and then snorted.

Kripa thought he smelled like ox—probably its last meal. But Kripa was pleased. The Beast had taken the bait. “Yes, it’s what I think,” he said with confidence. “Lord Vlockor put me in charge, not just because I know these mountains better than anyone else, but because I can think.” He tapped a taloned finger to his head for further emphasis.

Kripa watched as the Beast’s foreclaws dug into the dirt floor. His fury was obvious. *Good*, thought Kripa. *The anger will cloud his judgment.*

“You see,” he pointed toward the map, “Lord Vlockor is interested in finding the ninth gem. Correct? And right here there used to be a large community of Elves. As you know, Elves make a point of knowing what’s going on around them. Even though this is beyond the area Lord Vlockor planned for us to search, it’s unlikely anything as significant as the murder of four Pit Beasts and two Pit Fiends could have occurred without these Elves hearing of it, knowing of it, or having had something to do with it.”

A spark of interest flashed in the Beast’s eyes, and Kripa knew he was hooked. “Now,” he continued, “they may or may not already know about us, but certainly they’ll know when Overlord Bahrack arrives with his Death Legion. With the strongholds we’ve already set up

here and here,” he indicated, pointing at the map again, “and the one I’ll personally see to here, we can cut off what would be their escape route. I’m sure Lord Vlockor will be pleased we thought ahead and contained a potentially valuable source of information.”

“We’ll be stretched thin.”

“Well, this is our chance for elevation to a higher rank in service to our Lord. We must unlock the enigma of the gem’s whereabouts. We must learn what the locals know. We can’t get ahead in this world by hedging. Besides, unless we encounter whatever silenced the missing Pit Demons, we’ll be fine.” Kripa opened a desk drawer and pulled out a folded piece of paper. “Just stick to the mission; organize the Goblins and set up a stronghold.” Kripa stood. “Don’t go stirring up trouble. There are ancient powers in these mountains.”

Handing over the paper, he said, “I’ve written out your orders. I’ll be keeping just one Wizard Demon and ten Soldier Demons—and the Orcs. You’ll take Crovex and his Goblins and the rest of the Demons. Use all the Beastspawn to ferry the troops. I won’t be needing them until after I’ve set up the stronghold right here.” He looked down and tapped a spot on the map. “When Overlord Bahrick is on his way, I’ll contact you and we’ll fly back to Masseryk to greet him.”

He then rolled up the map and handed it to the Beast. “You’re to leave immediately.”

The big Pit Beast crumpled the papers in his claw. “Very well,” he rumbled, then turned and squirmed back through the doorway.

Kripa waited until he heard the guard gate close behind the Beast, then grabbed his staff and walked out into the corridor. *That couldn’t have gone better*, he thought. Around a bend in the tunnel, in the opposite direction of the guard gate, was a solid wooden door. He walked to it and unlocked it with a key from his pocket.

In the chamber beyond, three Orcs lay dead, the blood from their recently slit throats still pooled on the hard-packed dirt. Kripa entered the room and closed the door. The light from his staff filled the chamber. His gaze fell upon the skull against the far wall. It was about two and a half feet in diameter, excluding the large spiral horn on one side and the remnants of one on the other. It was a Pit Fiend’s skull.

The three scouts lying dead on the floor found it in the Blue Stone Valley. Luckily, they placed the skull in a sack and came straight to him

to report their discovery. Under interrogation, each swore they had told no one else about it. They had to die, of course. He couldn't risk a leak.

The magnitude of the find, and the latent opportunity for his aggrandizement, was not lost on him. His instructions from Lord Vlockor had been merely to organize the local Orc and Goblin populations and to set up strongholds based on his knowledge of the region. These tasks were completed. It was Overlord Bahrick and his Death Legion who were to operate out of these strongholds and to discover what became of the missing Pit Demons—and ultimately, to track down the Ninth Hellfire Gem.

Kripa just needed his ten-year run of good luck to hold a little longer, and he would get a lead on the Hellfire Gem before Overlord Bahrick arrived.

Walking over to the skull, he examined the holes along the side with the broken horn. There were five, each about three inches in diameter, all in a line. He speculated that a row of teeth had caused them, but couldn't imagine a beast so large.

Furthermore, just a few miles south of the Blue Stone Valley lived a clan of Humans. To Kripa, it was an opportunity to pay them a visit, long overdue, to settle old scores, even while searching for the gem. He would have sought this revenge anyway, but they might have some information that would lead him to the Hellfire Gem. And there would be the pleasure of torturing the men as their women looked on—or vice versa.

* * *

Darius De'Maakthorn sat in lotus posture, deep in prayer. "The path of duty is the path to me," She had said. It was his duty to fight the Demon Lord, but in what role would he be most effective? He was growing so adept in sorcery magic that he was beginning to consider giving up the sword to devote himself to The Faith. He would not be the first Paladin to become a cleric, and he was asking God, through Her, to guide his choice.

Darius felt the cool, smooth metal of the amulet between his palms. It was the one given to him by his priestess shortly before he

left Baeza. On one side was the sword; on the other, the likeness of Saint Sevannah. The amulet was the talisman of all Paladins, a reminder of their duty as warriors and their obligation to uphold The Faith. Swordplay would never overcome the Demon hordes. Though such a thought was apostasy to the Knights, Darius knew it to be true. Again, he weighed the question: Should he lay down the sword?

My Beloved, he asked, quieting his heart, *how am I to serve You? You foretold the return of the Demon Lord, but You also said that if our faith held, the Earth would swallow him up. My Love, as we approach our final hour, I stand in Your service and ask that You guide me. How best may I serve this cause? Make plain my path.*

Darius kept his thoughts focused on Her, sitting still, his mind quieting, going beyond words, forgetting even his prayer, lost in devotion.

The light that came over his consciousness was familiar, yet more subtle than the Divine Light that enabled his use of God's shakti. It was interpenetrated by soft bluish rays of exquisite subtlety. Breathing and heartbeat slowed, then ceased. He lost awareness of his body as a silver-white star appeared before him. The star gave way gradually to the glowing form of a woman standing against an opalescent luminosity in which all creation trembled. It was Her.

"I have come with your answer, dear friend," She sang to him.

Only for the second time was She facing him, but this time he could see Her clearly. She was surpassingly beautiful, clothed in flowing white robes of damask, a blue stole draped over Her shoulders. At the ends of the stole were symbols in silver: the sword of a Paladin on one side, and a circle within which was an eye on the other. He knew intuitively She was appearing in Her astral form, a Seraphim of the Lord, His love and light manifest.

"Sir, are you all right?" A distant male voice reached him.

Darius was undistracted. He remained in rapt adoration. She beckoned. He knew his path was in Her service forever.

"Sir?" the voice sounded again, this time louder.

The Angel was everything to Darius. She drew near, the silver-white light that was Her substance growing brighter, piercing him everywhere at once with Her love. Then, in a dazzling flash, the epiphany was over, yet never to be forgotten. This time, Her light had mysti-

cally etched awareness of Her on every level of Darius's being. He remained locked in meditation, cocooned in peace, savoring the blessings received. He knew his answer.

"Sir, it's been hours. How long do we have to do this? When do we get to the real training?"

With eyes yet closed, Darius shifted his attention to the man speaking. Darius realized he could see him plainly, and from all sides, at will. He could also see the other nineteen recruits, scattered about the large tent as they were. Only one of them, Alfred, was still trying to meditate, following Darius's lead. The others were talking or fiddling with swords and armor, while some were playing cards. Darius realized he could also see several people outside the tent, five of them loitering, and three passing by. Beyond them, things became hazy. He knew what this was: spherical vision. By it the objects of the world appeared translucent, rendered so by his awakened spiritual eye. Only the most advanced Paladins ever attained this faculty. The scripture came to him: "If thine eye be single, then thy whole body be filled with light." It was a gift of his Angel.

Darius opened his eyes.

"Well, sir?" the man before him asked. "How are we going to defeat the Death Legion this way? Our bodies will go soft with all this sitting and praying. We came on the promise that we would be taught to fight like knights."

The man's words registered, but Darius remained preoccupied. He dropped his gaze to his hands, where they rested, palms together, fingers steepled, pressed at the thumbs against his chest. The amulet was sandwiched between them. His palms felt sunburned. Curious, he opened his hands, letting the amulet drop on its chain against his tunic. For just an instant, he saw the silver-white light of his Angel effervesce across the surface of the amulet as it broke contact with his skin. There, plainly branded on his left palm, was the likeness of Saint Sevannah; on his right, the sword of his Order. Again, an answer. The brand of the talisman upon his palms made clear the path. He looked up at the man who had challenged him.

"You have much to learn, restless one." Darius spoke in even tones. "Specifically, reverence for that which can be the means of your salvation." Darius stood. "Bring me a blindfold."

The man returned with a strip of cloth. “Blindfold me.” Then he held out his right hand. “A training sword.”

After the wooden sword was placed in his hand, he addressed the men: “I know you recruits are eager to fight as we knights from Baeza do, so that you may defend your people and your lands. I applaud your courage. But without the hand of God guiding you in honor, compassion, and mercy, the sword will lead you astray. I will demonstrate why you are being taught techniques of self-mastery. Pick up your weapons. I will allow myself just two minutes. If you work as a team, you may hold me to draw; otherwise, you will be overwhelmed, bruised and smarting from the flat of this wooden sword.”

“Come on, sir, with a blindfold?” one of the men asked in disbelief. “Not even a...”

“Begin!” Darius raised his sword, seeing through the blindfold the flash of silver-white light springing forth from the brand on his palm to envelope it. With his newly acquired spherical vision, he saw every man in the tent scramble for their training weapons.

It took little over a minute to beat the fight out of all twenty men, many of them left doubled over and groaning.

Darius removed his blindfold. “Tonight I want you to study your spiritual guidebooks, and be prepared for prayer, meditations, and some sparring on the morrow. Take heart, lads. There was once a time when I could have been whipped in much the same way. Alfred has distinguished himself this day. He is now your squad leader, subordinate only to John and myself. That is all.” Darius turned and gave his training sword to his squire, John. “Your command,” he said, looking into John’s eyes. “Instruct Alfred on his role.” Then Darius picked up his weapons and kit and walked out into a cold wind coming off the ocean. Behind him the men had formed ranks and stood, saluting. It was dusk. He had been in the tent most of the day.

Weaving his way through hundreds of tents of varying sizes, he made for the harbor. The Baezean expeditionary fleet was moored there: six galleons and fifteen longships. Every day after training and maneuvers, he went to see them from the railing atop the palisades. Darius walked briskly and they soon came into view. He reached the rail and closed his eyes, savoring the salt air. The sounds of waves, birds, distant voices, and the rustle and snap of Baezean banners in the

wind pleasantly merged in his consciousness as if they were coming from within.

The silver-white light was there, too, now seemingly inherent to his consciousness. The memory of Her astral form washed over him in fresh waves of awe and wonder. Darius noticed then the warmth emanating from Her image on his left palm. He looked at it and saw the faintest flow of silver-white light. Was there more to Her answer?

Darius drew his sword. Focusing upon the brand on his right palm, he felt the warm light build, and then with a flash, his longsword was iridescent with silver-white light. Looking at his left palm, he wondered, *And what do you do?* With sudden inspiration, he held his palm to the horizon, then wheeled about until, when facing south, a point of light far off in the distance appeared. She beckoned. It was his path, and She would guide him.

* * *

Anastas Mikoyan was basking in a dreamlike torpor when the chiming of a bell drew him alert. With one girl stretched across his chest, pampering his face and neck with kisses, and the other girl indulging him elsewhere, the ringing bell outside his tent was unwelcome.

However, it wasn't unexpected. He had anticipated a messenger tonight, the precise reason he had left the bell outside.

Taking a deep breath, he gently extracted himself from the grasp of the two girls, then clambered from the bed to don his robe. Playful noises and pouting faces reproached him as he walked away to the tent entrance. Undoing clasps, he pulled the thick canvas to the side.

"Darius!" he exclaimed upon seeing the man standing outside. "Come on in."

Anastas held back the flaps of his tent. The big man ducked inside, the rings of his chainmail shirt tinkling as he moved.

"It's good to see you, old friend." He let go of the flaps.

"I see this is not a good time," Darius said. "I will come back later."

"Nonsense, Darius." Anastas clapped him on the shoulder. "We haven't had a chance to talk since we left Baeza." He noticed Darius was standing tall, a sparkle in his eyes. Obviously he had good news to

share. "I'll put my boots on and we'll go outside."

Striding over to the table at the center of the tent, Anastas whisked away a cloth from a small stone statue. The light shining from it sprang forth and filled the tent.

"First, let me introduce you to Miah and Selinda." He motioned toward the girls sitting on the bed, coquettishly concealing their state of undress with a sheet. "I expect to be leaving tomorrow, so I decided to say goodbye properly to my friends here." The girls giggled and rolled their eyes.

"Ladies." Darius squared to them and gave a slight bow. "I apologize for the intrusion," he continued, pausing and glancing archly at Anastas, "for the both of us."

Anastas could only laugh. It was subtle and worked on different levels. Darius was in good form.

"Miah, Selinda," he said grandly, and with a flourish of his hand, "let me introduce to you Sir Darius De'Maakthorn, Paladin of the Light and Defender of Grace."

"Oohh," they both cooed, wide-eyed. "A real-life Paladin?" Selinda said wonderingly. It sounded more like "A weal wife Powaden" in her dialect, but understandable, nonetheless.

"Yes, Darius and I made a great team fighting the Demon armies back in our homeland." He walked over to the girls and sat down on the bed next to them. "The mere presence of a Paladin on the battlefield instills terror in evil hearts"—he paused, stepping into a boot—"and lifts the spirits of all who are good."

"Nonsense," Darius said. "Rather, it is Anastas who should be extolled. He is as staunch a warrior as any within the ranks of the Knights of Baeza. I say that on my honor as a Paladin. Yet, ladies, my friend in this mood would describe a sapling as if it were a giant oak. I imagine you have already discovered as much. In short, he flatters me beyond my virtue; quite as zealously, in short, as he has favored yours. Why, I do recall last winter that he—"

"Stop! Stop!" Anastas croaked, nearly doubled over with laughter.

"Ah, well, my dears." Darius stroked his goatee as he reflectively eyed Anastas. "It seems he cannot finish what he has started. Just look at him. This mild levity has been at a loss to his standing. No harm then if I steal this diminished swain away for a few minutes? I promise

you he shall return the better for the delay, upright again, and with his recent mood well in hand.”

This declaration was met with more laughter from Anastas.

“Oh, we don’t mind,” Selinda said sweetly. “It’s an honor to meet you.”

“Yes, don’t leave on our account,” Miah added with a coy smile.

Sliding on his other boot, Anastas stood, not bothering to lace them up. He was still trying to compose himself. “I’m sure you can entertain yourselves,” he said to the girls, while he wiped his eyes. “I’ll be right outside.”

As Anastas put on his finely cut and embroidered cloak, Darius stepped toward the girls and drew himself up to his full height of six feet, five inches, then bowed slightly at the waist and straightened again. “If I may offer you some advice,” he said in a mild tone. “There is more than one way to fulfill yourselves and find enjoyment. Take advantage of our presence here to complete yourself in more than just the corporeal sense.” He motioned toward Anastas. “When my wizard friend here is gone, ask for Minister Samael; he’ll show you delights unparalleled.”

Anastas noticed the rosy adoration with which the girls looked upon Darius and couldn’t help but give him his due: At least he tailored his preaching to his audience.

With a similar bow, Darius then spun on his heel, and Anastas followed him outside. An eerie presentiment of dread swept with the wind over Anastas. Glancing upward, he marked the gibbous moon, misty in a cloud-covered sky, while a blast of northern air nipped at his exposed skin as if it had tiny icicles for teeth. Surrounding them, a field of tents stood—seemingly deserted in the darkness.

“So, you’re leaving tomorrow?” Darius asked.

“Yes, I expect to get the deployment orders tonight.” He paused and feigned a smile. The futility of the war made his participation ironic. His people fought on with unbowed faith and optimism when, ultimately, nothing they did mattered; and here he was, risking his life in what was, for him, little more than a charade. “You’re going to love this,” he continued. “We’re going to a city about six hundred miles south of here called Killmeville.”

“Kill-me-ville?”

“Cute name, yes?” he snorted, shaking his head. “It’s a lawless city controlled by warlords and clans and the like, including those of Orcs, believe it or not.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“But I am. It’s a haven for exiles and dissidents from various kingdoms, a city with numerous independent power bases, from the despotic to the virtuous, all existing symbiotically. Our mission is to go there and force them to choose sides—and then to destroy those who choose poorly. There’s potentially a large number of competent warriors and wizards we can win over. But first, we must throw down our gauntlet. Focus their minds with an ultimatum: They’re either with us or they’re with Vlockor. We’re betting most will side with us.”

“How did I not hear about this?”

“It was only decided last night, and there are only about fifty of us being detached. We can’t spare more. General Ramseyer and the Head Counselor are still trying to analyze what we know and develop a strategy.”

“Well, speaking of ‘what we know,’ since our ships docked I’ve been so busy organizing and training the locals that I don’t even know what we know.”

“Well, based on what we do know, I don’t know that you really want to know what we know.”

Darius laughed. “You know,” he said, “if I don’t know what you know, then how can ‘we’ know what you know?”

“Touché. Too bad Vlockor will not allow this affair to be settled by oral argument. I tell you true, Paladin, you’d ravage him.”

Darius grinned, then his voice turned serious: “Don’t underestimate the power of the forked tongue. I reckon he’d be as formidable in such a contest as on the battlefield.”

“Yes, all too true.” Anastas matched his friend’s tone. “From what we gather, Vlockor’s armies here are superior to what we faced back in Baeza. They’re not just larger, but here in Erebia, Vlockor has so many Demons that they regularly serve as his vanguard in battles. He has half this continent, basically all the southwest. Do you want to hear something truly frightening? About four months ago an Elven city just two hundred fifty miles southeast of here was attacked and occupied by a legion of winged Demons. At the time, the closest element

of Vlockor's armies was some fifteen hundred miles from the city. Apparently, they flew the entire way—and that's a tactical capability we've never had report of before. This is not to mention that almost simultaneously a Dwarven city some six hundred miles west of here was attacked and conquered from the sky, also by a legion of Demons. Finally, in the last couple of months, Vlockor's ground forces have pushed east. There is only one kingdom between us and his armies that can offer even token resistance, and, by all accounts, it's being overrun as we speak."

"What about the other Elven and Dwarven cities? Any indication why Vlockor leapfrogged them?"

Anastas shook his head. "None."

"Well, I suspect Vlockor will be in for a shock when we triumph over him."

Anastas wasn't sure if Darius really believed that, but he knew most of the priests, clerics, and Paladins did. A good number of the rank and file knights did, too. It never ceased to amaze him how many people bought into the lunacy that by faith in God they would inevitably overcome the Demons.

"Certainly," Anastas said, "if Vlockor had any sense he'd see right away that his vast armies here don't stand a chance against this fly-speck contingent from an alliance that wasn't able to vanquish even the relatively puny armies he left behind in Baeza. Why, he should flee screaming back to Hell, tail tucked between his legs, while he still has the chance."

Darius laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. "Now you're making sense. You see, all it takes is a kernel of faith to bring such intuition as makes even the inscrutable plain. Evil, inherently, is a losing strategy. Vlockor and his Demons are evil incarnate. Therefore, though he is winning, he can't. I'm glad you finally see that."

"Great, a syllogism, dubious in its major premise, species-centric in its minor premise, that ends in a paradox," he said caustically, wondering if Darius truly believed reality could be distilled to such a simple formula or if he merely continued to rib him.

"Anyway," Darius went on, "what I came over to tell you about is the breakthrough I just had."

"Oh?" Anastas noticed again the indefinable shimmer in his

friend's eyes.

"I spoke with God today."

Anastas felt that weary sensation in his gut he always had when one of his compatriots began to prattle about God. He was perplexed, though, because Darius knew he didn't care for theology and, being a good friend, never preached to him. "I thought you always 'talked' to God." Anastas held his face expressionless.

"Yes, I pray to God all the time. Today I received an answer."

His earnestness did not move Anastas. "Well, tell me, then. What did he say?"

"He sent me an Angel. I believe it was Saint Sevannah, Herself, in astral form. She blessed me with spherical vision, and branded my palms with both sides of the talisman of my Order." Darius held up his palms, revealing on one the sword of the Paladin, and on the other, the image of Saint Sevannah, both wrought intricately in phosphorescent pinstripes of silver-white. "By this"—he held up his left hand to the south—"She is guiding me to the south. And with this"—he drew forth his sword with his right hand, silver-white fire rising from it to engulf the blade—"She has endowed me with the power to strike down Vlockor's Demons."

"By the bones of Achea Artexerxes! My magic-sense has not registered such power since last I stood before Lord Vahle and Queen Alballa. This is grand news, indeed. Plus, you say you have attained spherical vision? Why, Darius, think! There has not been a Paladin so adept in sorcery magic in centuries!"

"Now I know you posit a scientific explanation for this—"

"There is, Darius, my friend; there is. I assure you."

"—but I must tell you, fresh from the actual experience, you're wrong. God spoke to me, sending me this Angel, who graced me with power. God is beyond your science, and evil evaporates in the face of His rampant brilliance. Oh, Anastas, does it really surprise you that God—the uttermost spirit—eludes definition by your 'wizardry science'; or that you've failed to isolate Him in some alchemist's flask?"

"Well, that aside," Anastas said, "the important thing is that you're now a Paladin of unrivaled accomplishment. You deserve a promotion to Captain. In fact"—he nodded toward his tent—"I think you should celebrate. Selinda seemed quite taken by you."

“No, not even close.” Darius shook his head. “Besides, I *am* celebrating. It is ongoing, taking place in my heart, and giving every indication of lasting a lifetime.”

“Well, I tried to share. All this talk of God had me feeling unselfish—or daft, I don’t quite know which.” Anastas threw his hands up just as a light appeared behind Darius.

A boy had emerged from around the corner of a tent carrying a lamp. He was one of the locals who had volunteered as a page. The boy came straight for them.

“Excuse me, sirs, I’m looking for—” He looked down at a clipboard in his hand. “—Ah-naz-tus Me-coy-an?”

“Well, you’ve found me,” Anastas said.

“Oh, excellent. These directions were so confusing.” He held out the clipboard. “Please sign this.”

Anastas took the clipboard and withdrew a small inkpad from an inside pocket of his cloak. He pressed the signet ring on his finger onto the pad, then pressed it against the paper.

“Thank you.” The boy took back the clipboard.

Taking out a letter from his pocket, he handed it over. Then, with a slight bow, he took off running the way he had come.

“Well,” Anastas slapped the letter against his palm, “here’s the deployment order.” He broke the seal and opened it. “How about bringing that light over here?”

“Certainly.” Darius moved next to Anastas and held up his sword.

Anastas scanned the letter and saw it was what he expected. Then he noticed, in the list of names assigned to the squadron, “Captain Darius De’Maakthorn, Paladin of the Light.” The “Captain” made him look twice, because it was only a few minutes ago he had said Darius deserved a promotion to Captain.

“Well, it looks like we’ll have plenty of time to talk after all,” he said. “You’ve been assigned to the mission, and been given that promotion, Captain.” He handed the letter over to Darius. “No doubt some little page is out frantically searching for you with your orders and promotion right now.”

Darius looked over the letter. “I think God’s trying to get your attention, Anastas. We’re headed south.”

“I’ll admit that it is an eerie coincidence, but it’ll take more than

that.”

“Well, I better track down my papers and get ready.” Darius handed back the letter. “My Angel directed me south, and now that’s where I’m going. I challenge you to concoct a scientific explanation for that. Tell me tomorrow what you come up with, old friend—but until then, I bid you good night.”

Anastas shook Darius’s hand firmly and watched him disappear into the darkness. It certainly was true that without the Baezeans’ strong faith in “God,” they would have been enslaved by Vlockor long ago. In that sense, their faith proved useful. That’s why the Wizard Guild supported religion, despite the science disproving some of its tenets. Plus, there was the added advantage of additional spell-casters. The science of it hadn’t been fully delineated, but there were workable theories: It had everything to do with the psychological effect of irrational, hence unshakeable, faith, combined with consummate resolve. Together those attributes seemed to enable a person to tap into deep magic flows and create spells by merely thinking of them.

What Darius imagines to be God’s handiwork is akin to the innate spell-casting of Pit Beasts, or the virtuosity of idiot savants who are able to perform feats of wizardry, memory, mathematics, or dexterity without mediation of their conscious mind, Anastas thought. In other cases, the prodigy arises from an evolutionary adaptation—the effects of which, at first blush, are so remarkable as to evoke awe and wonder. Who, for example, is not staggered at first sight of a whale or an elephant?

Tut, tut, Darius. You are dear to my heart and a great warrior, but too credulous by half! Once the Wizard Guild figures out the exact science of sorcery, he thought, our wizardry will be ten times as powerful.

Yes, if there is to be any hope to survive Vlockor, it must come from figuring out how to scientifically control the sorcery magic used by priests. Even if the mechanism was discovered tomorrow, though, Anastas was hard pressed to imagine a reasonable scenario in which it would alter the inevitable. There wouldn’t be enough time to propagate through the ranks the new techniques. Vlockor was just too powerful at this point to be stopped.

Anastas shrugged his shoulders. “I might as well enjoy what I can while I can,” he said quietly. Grabbing the outside bell from its hook and ducking inside the tent, he saw Miah and Selinda still on the bed,

in sensuous repose.

“Darius has his Angel; I have mine,” Anastas said aloud, smiling at them. The girls laughed.

He refastened the clasps on the tent flaps, then went over to the girls. Miah sat up, smiling, the covers sliding from her shoulders, exposing full breasts. Anastas felt the heat rise in his loins as he gave himself over in enchantment with the exotic look of her golden-hued skin and long, silky black hair. Selinda sat up next to Miah as he kicked off his boots and tossed his cloak to the side.

Selinda had her hands on Miah’s shoulders as he let his trousers fall to the ground and sat down on the bed.

“What did the Paladin mean about more than one way to find enjoyment?” Miah asked.

He was taken aback by the question, what with his mind on other things—such as the stunning look of their unclothed bodies. “What?”

“We’ve been talking,” Miah said, “and we want to learn more about what the Paladin was saying.”

“Yes,” Selinda said. “What is ‘co-po-re-al’?”

Anastas exhaled through his teeth. He would have to repay Darius for this one. “That is just nonsense.” He leaned in to kiss Miah.

“Oh, you don’t mean that,” Selinda said soberly. “He’s a Paladin.”

“Yes,” Miah squirmed away from his lips, “he said something about delights we’ve never known before. What does that mean?”

Anastas sighed. “Let’s talk about this later.” He moved in for another kiss.

*“Man? Weak? Puny?
Well then, consider the stars...
Yet greater still than stars,
the image of God within man.”*

*—Saint Sevannab,
The Testament of Angels*

CHAPTER 5

STARMAKER

The distress gripping him was like nothing Krell had ever before experienced. It seemed as though a shroud of darkness enveloped him, cinching in, constricting his heart—every beat of which spread a pain of unmitigated sorrow, loss, and anger. It was as though death were already upon him, and the cause of it, burning like coals in his mind, was ever before him. Indeed, even now as he slept, the horror of it played out on the screen of his subconsciousness.

With the unblinking, unclosing eyes of the dreamer, he saw again fresh Orc tracks on the other side of the Aegin River. He and Urg tracked them, and five days northeast of their village they found a ramshackle structure. It was typical, shabby Orcish work, but clearly new construction. There weren't many Orcs, just a few in and about the building, and so they returned home to discuss the matter with the village council.

After days of discussion it was decided the Orcs simply had to go before they established a bigger presence. He, Urg, Galvan, Krug, Quinn, and Tyr, the best warriors in the village, were sent to drive them off.

They set out. Several days later, on a late afternoon, the six of them hid in the brush around the Orc lair, ready to attack. However, the Orcs were nowhere to be seen. It was then Krell felt the first tendril of doom rising serpent-like up the length of his spine.

They waited an hour to make certain they were not walking into an

ambush before Krell approached. With sword in one hand and battle-axe in the other, he peeked into windows and peered through cracks. Nothing but silence and emptiness met his stealth.

Motioning for the rest to join him, they slid through the half-open front door, checking carefully for traps. They searched the compound and found it empty of life. Strikingly absent were any underground passageways, a common aspect of Orc lairs. It was just this building with no signs of any female or juvenile accommodations. Krell could reach only one conclusion: This was not a lair, it was a raiding outpost.

The presentiment of doom grew more palpable. Left to their own devices, Orcs didn't have outposts. They weren't that systematic.

Looking around the building more closely, he found a stack of papers inside a small chest. There was writing on them, apparently in Orcish. The discovery was also disconcerting. He had never known Orcs to read or write. Most chilling was the map. It depicted the three mountains between the outpost and the Aegin River, the Blue Stone Valley beyond it, and the environs of his own village on the other side of Mount Merak. Written in that area was "bauerens," which he knew meant "barbarians" in Orcish.

Stuffing the papers in the inside pocket of his vest, he ordered a search of the surrounding area for signs of where the Orcs had gone. Though he probably spoke enough Orcish to phonetically decipher all the writing, the rising panic he felt told him that exercise could wait.

Twenty minutes later, he heard the call: "Krell! You had better come look at this."

About a mile north of the Orc outpost and over a hillock, Galvan had found a recently made trail. When Krell arrived, he could see it had been made by scores of booted feet, obviously representing a far larger contingent than those that lived at this outpost. He could tell from the state of the trampled bushes, broken branches, and tracks that the trail was made about three days ago. They moved in a southwesterly direction, which, if maintained, would lead to the Blue Stone Valley, and his village just beyond.

"My God," he whispered to himself as an icy horror gripped his heart.

The sudden recurrence of that sickening sensation broke Krell's

dream. He was fully awake, a sheen of cold sweat upon him. Breathing deeply, he sat up. The dawning sky appeared deceitfully tranquil to his troubled heart, and he took a moment to take it in. Everything was still in shadow except the peaks of the mountains. Just coming into the light high up on Mount Merak was the outcropping where he had been four and half months ago when that damned crystal had fallen at his feet.

Standing up, he winced from the aches and pains of his body. “Wake up,” he growled. “We have to get moving.”

The eyes of Urg, Galvan, Krug, Quinn, and Tyr snapped open, the haggard peace of their sleeping visages rapidly shifting to the set jaws and beetling brows of grim resolve. *They are good men*, Krell thought. *Not one would hesitate to stand in fire to defend kith and kin.*

Krell stared out into the turbulent Aegin River as everyone worked themselves to their feet and made secure their weapons. He had pushed them hard since they found the Orc trail, even beyond what their desperation alone made possible, trotting for thirty unbroken hours and covering most of the distance home. Stopping so close to their village for food and a few hours sleep had been the most bitter decision of his life, but he hadn’t been sure that even he could have made it across the frigid river without cramping, much less the others, after all that marching. And in their exhaustion, it would have taken them twice as long to travel the remaining distance as it would today.

“What do you think?” Urg asked, walking up next to him.

“I’m hoping we can make it home in six hours. I’m scared to death at what we might find.”

“Me, too, friend. Me, too.”

Krell let his chin fall to his chest, saddened. While they had been traveling around the southern edges of Mounts Alioth, Mizar, and Alkaid to get to the Orc outpost, the Orcs had taken a route north of those mountains to get here. He had determined from the trail there were well over one hundred of them. He knew his village didn’t stand a chance.

Lifting his head up and squaring his shoulders, he turned to everyone. He saw firmness and resolution in their eyes. “Let’s go.”

Taking off down the hill at a trot, they each leapt into the water and swam to the other side.

When Krell pulled himself from the river and acquired the trail, his last hope was dashed. He had hoped the tracks would continue into the valley, where they would have to go over Mount Merak or take the long way around to get to the village. Instead, they turned due south where the Aegin River left the valley, between Mount Merak and Mount Alioth. They had taken the shortest route.

* * *

“Set up sentries and keep everyone close. We’re not far from the barbarian village now. Eat lightly. We attack in one hour.”

“Yes, Lord Kripa.”

“I’ll be working some magic. Make sure I’m not disturbed.” Kripa dismissed the Orc Chief with a wave of his hand.

“Yes, my Lord.” He bowed, then turned and hurried off.

Kripa stepped into the small building and closed the door behind him, resting his lurid staff against the wall. It was ironic, he thought. The barbarians had so thoroughly routed his brethren they no longer bothered to even man their outposts. Now, here he was staging an attack from their abandoned perimeter. Sweet revenge, indeed. There would be suffering, and he could hardly wait to inflict it. A cackle escaped his throat at the prospect.

Then, reaching a hand into an inside pocket of his cloak, he withdrew one of the books stored in its extra dimensional space. He sat down at the table and thumbed it open to a chapter titled “Sphere of Secrecy.”

After perusing several pages, he closed his eyes and opened his mind to the ramiform flows of magic from which all things derived substance. He saw them entwined with each other and fuzzy as they always were at first. He carefully studied the flows until he could clearly identify each field of magic. Then he began combing through them with his mind’s eye, patiently unwinding them, one from the other. His arms and fingers danced around in the air before him as though physically manipulating the magic.

When all the magic fields were separated, he carefully began peeling tiny threads from the different flows using nothing more than the strength of his will and intellect. His thumb and forefinger would pinch

together in the air as though performing the task, but it all occurred in his mind. Though these outward gestures were unnecessary, the motion sharpened his focus as he visualized unraveling the patterns of magic into a fluid fount from which he could draw.

Next, he bent and folded the threads in new patterns and started connecting them, one to the other, in the requisite sequences. He occasionally looked down at the book, making sure his weaving of the spell conformed to its blueprint.

The work took nearly an hour to complete. When he was finished, a magnificent tapestry of magic-field formulae floated at the forefront of his consciousness, with only his concentration preventing it from dissipating. It was the same spell he had woven and imprinted upon his mind three times yesterday, but he needed four of these spells. Since he was near the limit of magic he could safely imprint upon his mind, he either had to cast this one now or lose it.

Taking four small gemstones from a pocket, he triggered the intake mechanism at the beginning of the spell. Flows of magic began coursing through the woven threads, quickly building within him a force like a ball of energy. In mere seconds, the spell was fully charged and he directed the complex field of its energy into one of the gemstones. Simultaneously, a perfect silence enveloped him, canceling out not just the sounds of his surroundings but the smells as well.

Kripa then called forth from the recesses of his consciousness one of the three identical spells he had woven and imprinted upon his mind the day before. The magic-field formulae again floated at the forefront of his consciousness. Triggering the intake mechanism, magic flooded through the woven threads and built up the magical energies prescribed by the spell. He sent them into the second gemstone, then repeated the process with the two remaining Sphere of Secrecy spells.

With that done, he returned his spell book to its pocket. Leaving the four gemstones on the table and seizing his staff, he left the small building. The Orcs were gathered about, and the half-wits within the spell's area of effect were plainly anxious and bewildered. The Demons were off by themselves, as usual. The Orcs knew better than to crowd them.

Kripa walked several yards away from the building until he was free of the spell's effects. The sudden return of all the sounds and

smells about him was mildly disorienting; his nose twitched in irritation. He hadn't really noticed before just how noisy and rank Orcs actually were. It was no wonder they had never been able to catch the barbarians by surprise.

"The troops are ready, my Lord," the Orc Chief said, rushing up to him.

"Good. There are four gemstones on the table inside that building. Nothing within fifteen yards of each of them can be heard or smelled. We attack as planned."

"Yes, Lord Kripa."

The Orc Chief began to turn, but Kripa stopped him by placing the point of his staff against his shoulder for a second. "Make sure your men understand they are not to leave the Sphere of Silence until the barbarians actually see us."

"Of course, my Lord."

"The spells will last only about an hour, so assemble the groups quickly."

"Right away, Lord Kripa." He bowed, then turned and rushed about, frantically ordering the Orcs into groups.

* * *

Sitting cross-legged on a little mat, Anaiyailla was at her favorite place, engrossed in the picture of sylvan serenity reflected on the crystalline surface of a small pond. Overhanging the water, appendages of thick green foliage looked to her as though ready to impart a deep affection. Standing about like guardians of the pond were moss-covered boles of aged trees. In their boughs and amidst the underbrush, vivid birdsongs accompanied splashes of multi-colored feathers. Overhead, branches swayed in a soft breeze, fragmenting the rays of the midday sun, causing them to dance about in gentle rhythms on the forest floor. These perceptions, carried along by the distant murmur of flowing water, were granted unrestrained access to Anaiyailla's heart.

While the late winter air nipped at her cheeks and fingers, Anaiyailla was otherwise warm, bundled thickly in a wool cloak and a heavy fur jacket. She watched tiny fish in the pond glide to and fro, and intermittently chatted in mock seriousness with a squirrel crouched on a

branch just a few feet away. On her lap were several pages of coarse paper. She had just written the words to a song.

The song was a reflection of the unsettled emotions that beset her since Krell set out to drive off the Orcs. Krell was right. An unseen power was at work about them. She had sensed its presence for several days. Her song expressed the call of her soul. It was a prayer in lyric verse.

By the light of the noonday sun, she shuffled through the papers and reviewed her composition. It was written in Elfish, though only she and Krell, among their tribe, understood the language. Elfish words had seemed more appropriate for some reason, and rereading the verses now, she decided upon a melody for them.

She sang:

*“Time after time,
like someone of two minds,
I leave you.
Though high in the stars of the night,
I see you.
And though I be lost,
like a sailor storm-tossed,
I will pray
To the one who created the stars.
And I say:*

*“Starmaker, Starmaker bear me.
I see the works of your hands.
Starmaker, always be near me,
As near as the sea is to sand.*

*“I see the stars.
I wonder how far
To reach them.
And I see the children of God,
with no one
To teach them.
And I see the end of the world*

*most every day.
It makes me lie down in the dark of the night,
And I pray:*

*“Starmaker, Starmaker bear me.
I see the works of your hands.
Starmaker, always be near me,
As near as the sea is to sand.*

*“I hear thy name,
Ever the same.
Come take me
To the place beyond mind and breath;
Wond’rous Heaven—
Oh so high,
And tell me of my life and why
You raised me.
To the lover who made me for Himself,
I do pray:*

*“Starmaker, Starmaker bear me.
I see the works of your hands.
Starmaker, always be near me,
As near as the sea is to sand.”**

As her voice subsided, she thought: *I do see the work of Your hand, and it is glorious.* Closing her eyes for a moment, she breathed deeply, surrendering to the maker of stars.

“That was so beautiful.”

The soft voice from across the pond startled Anaiyailla. She opened her eyes and gasped, seeing no one. “Who’s there?”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” the disembodied voice spoke again. An instant later, a girl appeared out of nowhere, floating just above a fern at the water’s edge. “I’ve listened to you sing before, but I do not understand your language. I had no idea you knew Elf.”

Anaiyailla was astounded. The creature before her was completely without clothing, and had three pairs of wings, each clear but veined

*see App. D, p. 382

like those of a dragonfly. Her appearance was youthful, with delicate Elfish features. She was about four feet tall and thin, with long, shimmering black hair. A soft, golden glow seemed to radiate from her unblemished skin.

“Who are you?” Anaiyailla asked.

“My name is Cellestillena. I am a Sylph.” She flung her arms out in a salutation and fluttered her wings. “May I ask the name of the one who sings so enchantingly?”

Anaiyailla smiled and blushed. “My name is Anaiyailla, but most people call me Anna.”

“That is a name fitting for such a lovely soul.”

Anaiyailla stared at the Sylph in amazement. Her spiritual vibration was unmistakably virtuous. Already, she felt the sort of rapport between them normally reserved for old friends.

“Thank you.” Tucking her legs in, she sat on her heels, her face a picture of delight and anticipation. “Do you live nearby?” Anaiyailla set her papers to the side.

“Not far through the air.” Cellestillena smiled and fluttered her wings, gliding out over the center of the pond. “I come through this area regularly in hopes of hearing you sing. Divine Mother has lent you Her voice. There is a magic in it I find irresistible.”

Anaiyailla cast a downward gaze at the Sylph’s reflection in the pond. “You are too kind,” she whispered. Her heart beat fast, and she wondered what this encounter might portend. She felt a yearning to reach out and touch the fairy girl floating just a few feet away. Only her sense of decorum stayed her hand. “I am thrilled to meet you, and I want to thank you for the gift of joy your presence has already brought to my heart.”

With clasped hands under her chin, Cellestillena offered an endearing smile. “Oh, somehow I knew talking with you would be as joyous as listening to you sing.” Her slender legs dangled a few feet above the water as she leaned forward. Wings fluttered momentarily and she floated to within a couple feet, her unadorned body hovering just above Anaiyailla. “I would be glad to share friendship with you.”

Anaiyailla was looking up. “Oh, that would be so delightful,” she almost sang, her voice a sweet melody. Then, leaning forward a little, she rose to her feet, her eyes never leaving the Sylph’s.

Cellestillena seemed to glow with enthusiasm as she looked down, now only a foot above Anaiyailla. “You know, your voice is almost impossibly enchanting. I believe it must be that you and Divine Mother are very close.” Then, motioning to the papers at the ground, “That song you just sang—did you also write it?”

“I wrote it this morning.”

“You did?” She seemed amazed. “Such profound words I have rarely heard, and you sang them like you had done so a hundred times.”

“I have a talent with singing and songwriting,” she said, wondering if the Sylph was truly real. “It isn’t very practical, but I love it.”

“That is no mere talent. And what could be more practical? As I listened to you sing, I felt a tender ache grow within me: a longing to know Divine Mother’s purpose behind the mysteries of life. Then you finished it off in jubilation, intimating sweet revelation. I found it glorious.”

No one had ever given her songs such serious consideration. Letting gratitude show in her expression, Anaiyailla’s gaze affectionately embraced Cellestillena. The Sylph was close enough now that if she leaned forward, she could reach out and touch her. She wondered: If she did so, would she fly away? As she thought this, the contrast of the Sylph’s nakedness with the frigidness of the air struck her. “Aren’t you cold?” She mimed a shiver.

“Oh, not at all.” Cellestillena’s wings changed their angle momentarily and she floated closer, arms extended outward.

Taking the tiny hands in hers, Anaiyailla tilted her head back and looked into the Sylph’s green eyes, bashfully aware of the smallish, perfectly formed breasts just a breath away.

“You see?” Cellestillena’s wings slowed to a stillness.

Anaiyailla was astounded. Not only were Cellestillena’s hands warm, but she could feel the warmth expand into her own. The air about her lost its icy chill, and in moments, her nose and cheeks were as they would be on a summer afternoon.

“That’s marvelous,” she said breathlessly. “How do you do that?”

Cellestillena looked at her with an angelic smile, her face aglow with joy. “It is just a simple magic,” she said. “It is a part of me.” She then floated lower until their eyes were level. “I feel the strength of your soul, Anaiyailla. I have never before felt such purity in another

person, and I have met many virtuous people.” The last she said with deep tenderness, the sincerity of which was confirmed in her eyes.

Anaiyailla gazed back as blood rushed to her cheeks. The look on Cellestillena’s face, however, quickly overcame what embarrassment she felt—such was the felicity and ease radiating from the Sylph. Playfully curving her lips and gently squeezing the Sylph’s hands as an expression of appreciation, she responded: “Well, thank you. I do pray to be an instrument of Divine Mother’s goodness and grace in this world. I’m glad that some of Her light has come to you through the window of my soul.”

“Oh, it has!” Cellestillena fluttered her wings a little, drifting even closer. She raised her hands to Anaiyailla’s face, fingertips brushing against the skin. “My magic allows me by touching a person to see the goodness of their soul; and with you, the experience is rapture.”

Her heart beating excitedly, Anaiyailla suddenly noticed herself flush with heat. Reflexively reaching to her collar, she undid the top button of her cloak. “Goodness,” she breathed heavily, “I’m feeling a bit warm to be dressed like this.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Cellestillena drew away. “I should give you some room. My magic will cause you to overheat in those stuffy garments.”

“No, don’t go.” Anaiyailla reached out and grasped one of Cellestillena’s hands in both of hers. “I’ll just take off my jacket and cloak. Perhaps we can sit and talk together? I am enjoying the summer-like warmth you bring me.”

Cellestillena smiled affectionately. “Even as you say,” she bowed her head, “I will be happy to sit with you.”

Undoing the buttons of her cloak, Anaiyailla slid it off and dropped it at her feet. “Besides,” she shook her hair free, “I would not be too sorry to be able to traipse about as you do without need of attire.”

Smiling with candid joy, Cellestillena began circling around, her wings beating rapidly. “Oh, your hair is lovely,” she said excitedly. “You should never have it covered.”

Anaiyailla could feel the Sylph’s fingers gently caressing her hair from behind as she undid her jacket buttons. She turned her head, but Cellestillena kept circling until she was back around in front, her wings coming to a stillness once again. “Tell me.” Anaiyailla dropped the jacket down by her cloak. “You appear out of thin air, your touch is

like sunshine, your scent is of flowers, and your eyes are captivating....” She stopped, casting her gaze along the Sylph’s body, then continued, “You are innocent, artless, and shameless—yet soft and sensuous, and you astound me with compliments beyond the endurance of modesty. Are you truly real?”

A quiet smile greeted her question as Cellestillena reached her hands up to Anaiyailla’s face. “I can assure you I am,” she said, just inches away.

Drawing in close, the Sylph’s lips touched hers. Anaiyailla closed her eyes and could see an ethereal form of Cellestillena bathed in light. She knew, without thinking, the luminescence displayed the Sylph’s closeness with God, and with their lips pressed softly together, she could feel the divinity in her.

It lasted only a moment, then Cellestillena drew away. “That was a vision of my soul, similar to the way yours appears to me; only yours is far brighter, like that of a Seraphim, an Angel of the Ninth Heaven.” Pulling her hands from Anaiyailla’s face, she continued, “You see, among my kind there are no males, and we Sylphs express friendship and soul-sharing in this way. My astral form is akin to that of a Spiriti Amanti, or Principality, an Angel of the Third Heaven.”

Anaiyailla gazed upon her with wonderment, still absorbed in the experience. Cellestillena’s face became meek. “It is your goodness that attracts me like a moth to flame.” She reached out to touch Anaiyailla’s hair. “But I forget my customs may be strange to you. I hope I have not made you uncomfortable.”

“Oh, not at all. Divine Mother is the giver of all gifts, don’t you think? And Her gift to me in your presence is glorious. In fact, you make me feel so carefree, I cannot imagine being troubled in your presence. Thank you so much for allowing me to see your astral form.” She then stepped back and pointed at the prayer mat. “Won’t you sit with me? I have so much I’d like to share with you.”

“I’d be delighted.”

“Wonderful, then.” Anaiyailla spread out her cloak next to the mat.

Cellestillena asked, “I’m curious, can all your people speak so richly in Elf?”

“Well, no.” Anaiyailla sat down with her legs crossed and feet

tucked beneath her thighs. She looked up. “Actually, only my brother and I can speak it.”

Cellestillena’s wings propelled her forward. “Oh?” she questioned, beginning to descend.

Anaiyailla gazed up in near disbelief. The vision before her seemed surreal. The Sylph floated in midair, completely nude, her beauty highlighted by rays of sunlight filtering down through the trees. “You see,” she continued, “before we were born, our mother was taken by Orcs. Elves rescued her and she lived with them for a time. After she returned—and bore me and Krell—she taught us their language and the way of those who love Divine Mother.”

When her feet touched down upon the mat, Cellestillena smoothly folded her legs, sat back on her heels, and looked up with an infectious expression of childlike enthusiasm. “Then we are blessed”—her hands reached out to Anaiyailla—“for it seems Divine Mother has gone to great lengths to prepare us for this moment and each other.”

Anaiyailla took the Sylph’s hands in hers. Instantly, the warmth that had begun to ebb returned, and the frigid air became mild once again. “We are blessed,” she affirmed with a smile. Then after a pause, “Cellestillena, tell me...”

“Yes?”

“If there are no male Sylphs, then how do you reproduce?”

Cellestillena’s face clouded. “We Sylphs mate with males of other species, though I dread the day it might happen to me.” Lifting her hands from Anaiyailla’s, she leaned forward, gently brushing fingers along Anaiyailla’s cheek. “I don’t know how you can live with them,” she continued. “Males are smelly, hairy, aggressive, and scary.”

Anaiyailla laughed merrily. “If that is how you feel,” she said, “then why would you ever mate?”

“I prefer not to think about that. It frightens me. You see, without my magic I am helpless, and someday it will fail me. Once it does, only by mating will it return.”

“I am so sorry,” she whispered. “I can tell it is a difficult burden for you. If ever you are in need of aid or advice in that respect, I will be happy to help.”

Cellestillena rose up on her knees and leaned forward, briefly kissing Anaiyailla before sitting back again. “I’ve met Elf maidens over

two hundred years old, but to me, you are older than anyone I have ever known.”

Anaiyailla tilted her head. “What do you mean? I am not yet nineteen.”

“Your body may be young, but your soul is not. Your soul possesses such depth and wisdom. Have you ever—”

Just then, a shadow seemed to pass over Anaiyailla’s heart, and she looked sharply to the right.

“What’s wrong?” Cellestillena asked, worry evident in her voice.

The shadow was like nothing Anaiyailla had ever felt. “I am not sure,” she said weakly. “A dreadful sense of unease has overtaken me.”

They both looked around, seeing and hearing nothing amiss. Then a bird darted through the trees, chirping anxiously. Other birds took flight.

“It seems you are not the only one alarmed.” Cellestillena’s voice was calm. “But I do not have any sense of the cause.”

Anaiyailla felt a chill in her heart that drew her eyes again to the right.

“What is it?” Cellestillena looked along with her.

“Nothing, I guess.” She was unconvinced. “But it feels as though something is lurking out there. We should go.”

They both began to rise, staring in the same direction.

“Oh,” Cellestillena squeaked.

The spectacle of Orcs emerging from the brush, without the accompaniment of sound, startled Anaiyailla. Her shock cost her precious seconds. More and more Orcs came into view, but nary a sound could be heard. Several of them gestured toward her.

“Run!” Cellestillena’s voice rang out.

Scrambling, she saw the Sylph floating in the air, panic awash in her eyes. Her wings began buzzing as she darted off through the trees. Anaiyailla ran after her.

The crunch of boots and harsh voices could suddenly be heard in pursuit. She looked over her shoulder and saw several of them bearing down on her.

She tripped and fell. Before she could get up, she was seized. Her arms were trussed behind her back and a scabrous hand grabbed her

under the chin. A big Orc, smelling pungently of rotten meat, looked her over lecherously, speaking something in Orcish.

Suddenly his voice vanished, though his mouth kept moving. She realized then that it wasn't just his voice that had vanished; she could neither hear nor smell anything at all.

Looking past the Orcs that surrounded her, Anaiyailla hoped Cellestillena had made good her escape.

* * *

Cellestillena flew as fast as she could through the trees, overwrought. She saw the Orcs grab Anaiyailla, and fear mastered her. Before she could even think of helping, she saw a man in black robes cast a spell. Indecision at the sight of him nearly cost her freedom. His magic lashed out to ensnare her.

Able to resist it, she fled and hadn't looked back. Now, as she flew on, shame tormented her. She had abandoned her new friend without even trying to help. While the thought of turning back reverberated in her mind, she could scarcely bring herself to stop this mad dash through the forest, much less turn around. She kept thinking she was honor-bound to try....

If only she hadn't panicked, she thought, her magic might have been able to buy Anaiyailla enough time to get away. Even now she could help, except the fear instilled by the black-robed man was too great. Perhaps she should fly to Anaiyailla's village and tell them. Perhaps Anna's people could save her. But Anaiyailla said they couldn't speak Elf, so how would she tell them? If she could find her brother... But men frightened her too much, and she wouldn't know who he was anyway. Completely dismayed, she kept flying, fretting all the while.

The worst part of the ordeal was the sight of Anaiyailla being grabbed by the Orcs. It was emblazoned upon her mind. The horror of everything it meant pierced her heart with a pain she could not yet manage. It was that pain that kept her flying. Instinctively she flew as far from its source as possible.

Several minutes later, she glimpsed something through the thick foliage that disrupted her frenzied thoughts. It was a young Elf maiden kneeling in prayer. With wings beating against the air in an abrupt ef-

fort to check her momentum, she managed to stop and fly back. She had not seen an Elf in this area for years. What a welcome sight it was.

“Elf maiden!” she cried, sweeping in close. The Elf opened her eyes, seemingly unmoved. “Many Orcs came from nowhere,” she continued in a rush, “and grabbed my beautiful friend. It was so awful and I can’t believe it happened and I didn’t even hear them coming and I didn’t even do anything to help and I feel so awful; oh, how could this happen? And there was a man in black robes who nearly ensnared me with his magic, so I fled and kept flying and they got Anaiyailla and I wish I would have done something to help but I didn’t, and they got her and I don’t know what to do; oh, how could something like this happen? Everything was so peaceful and I didn’t even hear them coming....”

* * *

The Sylph rambled on, her grief manifest. Compassion swelling in Alloria’s heart made her want to comfort this stricken creature in any way she could. What struck her, though, was a certainty her prayers had just been answered. That’s why she sat calmly, listening. Every day she prayed to the Divine for a chance to help all those struggling against the Demons. This time, though, just before this Sylph had arrived, she felt in the Divine Light a rapport with her prayer. Though there was no express connection between her prayer and the Sylph, she believed there was by implication.

Reaching out, she touched the Sylph on the arm. The Sylph stopped talking and blinked tears from the corners of her eyes. “Is your friend an Elf?” Alloria asked.

“No. She is a beautiful Human girl from a village nearby,” the Sylph replied, regaining some composure.

“Do you think it’s too late to help your friend?”

“I don’t know.” The Sylph trembled.

“Would you like to try?”

“Oh, yes!”

“Then you wait here while I get my companions.” Alloria rose to her feet. “If she can be saved, we will do so.”

A relieved “Thank you, Elf maiden” followed as she hurried back toward camp. She ran straight into Andy before she got there.

“Lori, are you all right?” He caught her in his arms.

“I’m fine.”

“I thought I heard voices.”

“You did. We have to move right away. Get everybody ready. Quickly. I’ll explain as we go.”

He looked her in the eyes for a second. “We’ll be ready in a minute.” He turned and rushed through the bushes.

Alloria went back to the Sylph, who still floated in the air where she had been left, a look of both worry and hope on her face. “They’ll be here momentarily.”

A faint sound of barking could be heard at that moment. She and the Sylph both listened as it grew more intense.

“The Orcs must be at my friend’s village, where they have many wolves.”

“There must be great numbers of Orcs, then.”

“Oh, there are, but I didn’t even hear them coming. They were utterly silent.”

This was beginning to sound like a complicated task. Hopefully, Kian would be up to it. “What is your name, little one?”

“Cellestillena,” she said, a tormented look in her eyes.

“My name is Alloria. I’ll need to know everything you can tell me about the Human village and about the Orcs.” She could hear some of her band approaching, just beyond the trees. “Just lead the way. You can tell me as we go.”

* * *

Kripa walked with his chest out, staff held high. The village was secure. Taken by surprise, the barbarians were overwhelmed; his magic had prevented their wolves from giving warning. While their resistance had been valiant—bolstered by the fierceness of their wolves—it was to no avail. Only small groups still held out, and by the sounds of it, only two wolves were left to be put down. Dozens of the barbarians had been captured, mostly women. Most of the men fought to the death, robbing him the pleasure of torturing them. Still, he was

pleased.

It was now time to see if these barbarians had any useful information. Before him knelt an old man, flanked by two burly Orcs. “So, you are the barbarian leader?” Kripa asked.

The man looked up, blood streaming down his face, and spat on the ground near Kripa’s feet.

Kripa smiled. “You would do well to cooperate here, for the terms of your captivity are at stake. It can be bad”—he motioned with his staff at the several others trussed up behind him—“or it can be truly sadistic. Now, do you or do you not lead this band of murderers and bigots?”

The old man raised his eyes to Kripa’s. “Whatever your evil designs, you will get no cooperation from us.”

“Bold words. You can be assured I will test that resolve.” Kripa strode over to the other prisoners and yanked a golden-haired girl to her feet. Her arms were bound behind her. It was the one they had captured outside the village.

“Such a pretty girl.” He hauled her by her hair to a spot in front of the old man. “Surely you would not want to see one of your sluts hurt over something so trivial as admitting whether you are or are not the leader?” He ran a taloned nail along her cheek as he held her hair from behind.

The old man scowled. “I am Clan Chief Dyllass Finigan.”

“Tell me then, Clan Chief, what do you know about Demons?”

“I know I am looking at one.”

“Of course. But how about big ones,” he motioned expansively with his staff, “with enormous wings.” The man’s eyes flashed with a flicker of recognition and excitement gripped Kripa.

“I know nothing of what you speak.”

Kripa summoned a nearby Orc and shoved the girl to him. “Falg, cut off an ear and throw it in this uncaring old criminal’s face.”

Falg pulled a dagger from his belt and knocked the girl to the ground.

“Nooooo!” the old man screamed and tried rising from his knees as Falg’s blade moved in for the cut.

The two burly Orcs slammed the Clan Chief to the ground. Several of the other prisoners began screaming and struggling with

their guards.

With a motion of his hand, Kripa stopped Falg's blade. Unrest from the other prisoners was brutally put down. "It is a simple game, Clan Chief," he said. "For each question you won't answer, you intentionally sacrifice a body part from the girl."

Struggling back to his knees, the old man stared at him, his face unreadable. "What is it you want?" he asked finally.

"An answer to my question."

The Clan Chief's eyes seemed to narrow as he knelt there, motionless. Just as Kripa raised his staff to give the go-ahead to Falg, he spoke up: "If it's that crystal you're after, why not just say so?" he asked, his voice suddenly confident.

Kripa was taken aback. This old man knew about the gem! What luck! An intimation of the riches and power Lord Vlockor would bestow on him surged through his mind. "Tell me what you know of this...crystal." As soon as it was said, he knew he had betrayed its importance to him.

"I could lead you to it, if you agree to let my people go."

Conflicting emotions beset Kripa: on the one hand, fury at himself for letting this barbarian read his purpose, and, on the other, jubilation at the prospect he could actually hand Lord Vlockor the Ninth Hellfire Gem, rather than just clues.

Of course, he cautioned himself, this old man could be bluffing. Clearly he knew something of its existence, but that could be it. Something killed those Pit Demons, and it wasn't these barbarians. This old man's desperate gamble had revealed Kripa's true purpose, and he was trying to use that information to strengthen his position.

Kripa's boots crunched against the dirt as he took two steps over to where Falg crouched over the girl, a boot on her back, wrenching by her wrists her outstretched arms behind her. Those assembled were transfixed. No more barking of wolves could be heard; just the sounds of a few skirmishes with villagers still at large beyond the village circle. He knelt down and took the dagger from Falg, then positioned the girl's head so that he could cut out her eye. He was going to have to make an example of her. However, looking at her now, he felt reluctant to do so. A whiff from her hair rose to him. It smelled like flowers.

"What are you doing?" the old man cried, struggling against the

Orcs controlling him. “Are you insane?”

“You tried a gambit on me, Clan Chief. You asked a question; you presumed to negotiate. You knew the rules. You wagered a part of her body. Now your strange priorities will cost her—hmm—an eye, I think. Then, perhaps, we can return to the game.”

“If you hurt her, I swear I’ll die with the secret.”

The old man managed to sound convincing, but Kripa knew it was a hollow bluff. After seeing what was going to happen to this girl, the Clan Chief would beg to give whatever information he had before it happened to anyone else.

As he was about to use the blade, a single tear fell from the girl’s eye. She did not struggle.

“All right, all right,” the old man wailed, shuffling forward on his knees. “You can have the crystal. I keep it hidden in my home.”

Kripa’s heart skipped a beat. Dropping the dagger, he spun toward the old man. “It is here?” he asked.

“Yes, yes,” the old man said.

“Show me.”

The two Orcs lifted him to his feet and he nodded toward a path at the other end of the clearing. “It’s this way.”

Two Soldier Demons were just then leading five more prisoners from that very path to the clearing. “Any deception, Clan Chief, and I’ll tie the heads of those five to your neck in a sack, the better for you to contemplate your callous heart.”

“It’s just a hundred feet down that path,” the old man said, his head hanging low.

“Let’s go,” Kripa ordered. The two burly Orcs gave him a shove and three more Orcs fell in behind.

The Demons released their prisoners to the Orcs guarding the rest and fell in line with Kripa. “There is virtually no resistance left,” one of them said, “though I’m sure some escaped into the woods.”

“Good, come with me then.”

The old man led them down the path a short distance to an average looking cabin. The door was already broken down. “It’s in here.”

Kripa sent the two Demons in first, then followed. The old man was escorted in by the Orcs. Kripa’s heart thumped heavy in his chest. It made no sense that these barbarians could actually have the gem.

Those Pit Demons didn't just drop dead, leaving it to be found by these rustics.

"Where?" Kripa saw a desk and some large wooden chests filled with books. The chests had already been ransacked. *Probably religious books*, he thought.

"In a box, underneath a floorboard," the old man said, pointing with his chin toward a desk in the far corner.

The two Demons flung the desk away and found a loose floorboard. One of them withdrew from beneath it a small box. It had no lock.

"Open it," Kripa ordered.

He did, and inside, nestled amidst some straw, was a translucent red and orange gem, its colors continually shifting in depth and brightness. It was several inches long and shaped like an egg. Kripa withdrew it from the box and held it in his hands. He was stunned: the Ninth Hellfire Gem.

* * *

Krell had been hoping beyond hope it was not too late. He had decided after crossing the river to make straight for home, a course that meant going up and over the southeastern slope of Mount Merak. The Orc tracks headed around the mountain on flat ground, which, at a normal pace, was little more than a day's march to his village. They had gained two days, and the Orcs were just a day ahead now. It was a slim hope.

He had pushed hard up the mountain then, but coming down the other side, his hopes were dashed by the distant sound of barking. Dozens of wolves from his village were in full throat.

To him that sound meant two things: first, that his tribe was not already annihilated, as he feared, but second, that he was nevertheless too late. It took him only an instant to internalize the situation, then he surged into a full run. Ducking, dodging, and leaping through the underbrush, he cascaded down the mountain with feline fluidity.

Urg, Galvan, Krug, Quinn, and Tyr were unable to keep pace. Soon, he could only hear his boots crunching against the forest floor and the wolves ahead. As he closed the distance, their barking faded.

The wolves were dying.

The thought then of what was happening to his people—to Anna—engorged his heart. He felt as though time had slowed. The most secure footing and the best route through the thick foliage seemed as clear to him as if he were merely walking. Through some dimensionless link, panoramic images passed through his mind of his people lying dead; of blood running thickly from gaping wounds; of screams, pain, and rage; of shock and despair. In this altered state, he moved with a speed and grace beyond the capacity of Human intention or will.

By the time he reached flat ground, just a few wolves still barked. Tears left his eyes only to be caught by the wind and the trailing mass of his thick hair. Soon, he broke through the brush onto the eastern trail from his village. He moved like a rock skipping over water, leaving only an evanescent tracery of puffs above the dirt to mark his passing. But despite his speed, one by one he marked the abrupt deaths of the remaining wolves—and each he knew and loved—as their distinctive voices were extinguished. Only the lamentations of a few women remained in the air.

The reality of what awaited him hardened his face until in its rigor it looked like a death mask. It also built in him a fury the likes of which he had never known. Without even realizing he had taken them up, his sword was out and tightly gripped in his right hand, his battle axe in his left. He was going to kill them all. He was going to kill them all, but a voice of reason kept saying there was only one chance, one hope to save any of his people: to find the Orc Chief and kill him.

The first cabin of the village came into view, and with it, the sight of five Orcs standing over a woman's body. It was Lisi. A gout of blood stained her dress. A knife was still clutched in her hand. Bane lay dead at her side.

With tears misting his eyes, a roar rose from his gut, arching into a blood-curdling howl at his throat, rending the air with agony and rage. A tremendous energy coursed through his nervous system, enlivening his every muscle, invigorating his mind, and magnifying his senses. Five Orcs swiveled to look at him, dumbfounded, as he streaked by. His mind collapsed into his one ambition: *Find their leader and kill him.*

Vaulting a dead wolf, he rushed on. The sight of two lifeless bodies

ahead buffeted his heart. Just beyond, three Orcs rushed toward him from a cabin on the right. Krell swerved wide to the left. The nearest of the three moved to intercept him with the swipe of a sword, but Krell cut back, veering inside the swing. That Orc's sword swished through thin air. Krell barreled into the second one and simultaneously drove his sword through the chest of the third. He spun off the impact as the second Orc tumbled to the ground. Swinging his axe, he clipped the first one in the back of the head while his sword pulled free from the third. Continuing to spin in a complete circle, he ran on, leaving all three Orcs on the ground.

With long strides, he darted past four more, two on either side of the path; they were too indecisive to block his way. A fifth Orc attempted to swing its sword, but Krell rammed into that Orc and plowed it over. The collision hardly broke his stride.

Beyond a bend in the path and around several mature pine trees was the village circle. Krell saw movement through the brush and guessed he would find his target there. Before he made the bend, several Orcs emerged from behind the pines, running toward him.

He ran full speed into the lot of them, parrying with lightning reactions sword thrusts on both sides, before lowering his shoulder. Bodies went flying. Krell stayed on his feet. As he straightened his back, he drove his left elbow up under a chin, snapping its owner's head back. Then, driving his left hand down and turning his wrist, Krell cleaved that Orc from neck to sternum with his axe. There were eight of them, three on the ground, and another on the way.

On his left, an Orc drew back its sword, but Krell spun and lashed out with his own, slicing the Orc's face directly below its nose and unhinging its jaw. With a backhand swipe, Krell sank his axe into the chest of another and then kicked an Orc in the throat who was struggling to regain his feet. Two Orcs then attacked his flank. Ducking one sword and parrying the other, he yanked his axe from where it was buried in a falling Orc's chest. With a powerful grunt, he swung it across his body at the Orc's neck on his right. It ducked, but the twisting blade gouged out its temple. Krell allowed his body to follow the stroke of his axe, but too late: A blade furrowed his side. The Orc holding it paid with his nose, his jaw, and three fingers of his right hand—cleanly separated from his body by the arc of Krell's avenging sword. Unchecked, Krell

continued to pivot amidst his foes, thrusting his sword through the solar plexus of another—thus stopping the blow about to be delivered and draining the premature glee off the thwarted Orc's face. Krell then kicked the Orc off his sword, knocking him back into another. Leaning back, he avoided a sword thrust and countered with an upward swipe of his axe. The advancing Orc raised its arm and Krell heard the crack of bone snapping. Rolling backward to regain his feet, ducking and spinning, Krell kept his sword and axe swinging in wide arcs.

Looking back the way he had come, he saw five more racing toward him, one in front, four behind. Knowing there was one left uninjured behind, he stepped forward, avoiding the blade aimed at his head, then hurled his axe at the Orc leading the approaching squad; the blade planted square in its chest. While diving to the left to elude the rest of the squad, Krell drove his sword in an arc that cut another one across the stomach, spilling a mass of steaming purple and yellow entrails on the dirt. Rolling as he passed behind the other three, he retrieved his axe from the squad leader's chest and quickly reengaged, cutting another down while parrying with his axe a riposte to his neck.

The three remaining Orcs stepped back, fear naked on their faces, even as one slipped in the entrails of his fallen comrade. Krell could hear more coming from behind and a commotion rising ahead at the village circle. He thought again: *Find their Chief and kill him.* With a growl, he rushed forward. The Orcs fell back.

Rounding the bend in the path near the village circle, he collided with three more Orcs. Their split-second indecision proved fatal. Krell skewered one and cracked another's head with the haft of his axe. The third he simply bowled over, stomping its throat as he sped into the village circle.

He took in the scene without pause. There were approximately three dozen of his people, mostly women, hogtied on the ground in front of the smithy at the northern arc of the circle. He saw their eyes go wide at the sight of him. Perhaps as many as two dozen Orcs guarded them, or were in their vicinity. At the other side of the clearing next to the meeting hall were four humanoid creatures Krell had never seen before. Each was nearly as tall and muscular as him, with horns jutting from their temples. Their skin was red, though with a dark undertone, as if fresh blood had been spread on soot. At the center of the clearing

by the fire pit were ten Orcs. One of them had the size, bearing, and garments of a leader. The death of that Orc was his only hope.

Krell sped straight for him, and the Orc Chief backed behind his retainers even as a giant Orc covered the Chief's retreat by stepping forward and hurling a spear. Released thirty feet from Krell, the spear came straight for his chest. Krell took it in stride, deflecting the missile with the flat of his axe. Closing, leaning low, the cords standing taut on his neck, he roared from the depths of his soul, roiling the air with leonine fury. He leapt at the lead Orc. Flying through the air, Krell swept his axe to the left, smashing the giant Orc's shield aside, even as the sword in Krell's right hand, held low and angled up, sought the Orc's gut. Impaled, the giant Orc grabbed Krell's steel right below the hilt. The sword had to be abandoned. Even as he did so, Krell dropped to a knee and one hand, narrowly avoiding the blades that crossed above him. Rising, he rammed his shoulder into another Orc's gut. Wrapping the Orc up and lifting, Krell surged through the mass of Orcs, propelled by the inexhaustible strength that possessed him. Cuts to his arms and hip barely registered.

Breaking through, he tossed the half-dead Orc at the leader. The body hit the Clan Chief at the knees, knocking him flat on his back. Krell leapt forward and was about to bury his axe in the Chief's face when his eye caught sight of a winged monster flying out over the clearing. It was humanoid and scarlet in color. Horns jutted from its head. Though not nearly as big as the ones the Dragon killed, it was clearly of the same kind.

It all made sense to him at that moment. This was because of the crystal. The Orc leader was not the head of the snake, but merely an agent of some greater power—a power beyond his present capacity to reach, let alone kill. He knew then it was the end of him and his people. While an inexpressible sorrow descended over him, his resolve steeled for a final defiance.

With all his might he hurled his axe, sending it whipping end over end. As it tore through the air, a sizzling sound, like that of ripping paper, could be heard. The monster twisted and the axe grazed past its chest, tearing into its right wing and shoulder.

The monster began tumbling from the sky and Krell sprang forward, narrowly ahead of several Orcs who were in mid-pounce be-

hind. Jerking two daggers from sheaths strapped across his chest, he was on top of the monster the moment it crashed to the ground. In one coordinated move, the dagger in his left hand entered under the monster's chin and continued up into its brain, while the dagger in his right hand slit its throat.

Krell wanted to cut off its head and throw it amidst the rest of them but could feel through the ground the impacts of hobnailed boots converging. He rolled to the side just as a sword came down, slicing the carcass of the monster instead of him. Boots were all around, and Krell surged to his feet, rising up between one Orc's legs and toppling it onto its head.

He was surrounded. The Orcs were everywhere, as well as those four muscle-bound monsters with the horns. Krell fought with fury, his daggers exacting a terrible price. He fought, his blood and theirs like a gathering mist in the air, until he could fight no more. Then he was on the ground, his limbs unstrung, too weak to stop the final blow.

"Elves!" someone yelled.

"Elves!" came the cry again.

* * *

Kripa was nervous. He possessed a talisman that could bring him fantastic wealth and power. First, though, he had to get it into the hands of Lord Vlockor—without getting killed. It was a task that appeared increasingly perilous.

He had just seen a barbarian warrior perform a feat he would have rated impossible: felling a Wizard Demon on the wing, and slaughtering two Soldier Demons and nigh a dozen Orcs. It was freakishly beyond what should have been—without magic—possible. Several of the captives had managed to scramble away. Now, Orcs in the southern part of the village were screaming about Elves.

Mark it well, Kripa thought, and remember: Something wrested this gem from two Pit Fiends and four Pit Beasts, and that something may be on its way to reclaim it right now. While only an army of Elven wizards could have possibly taken the gem in the first place, any number of Elves on the heels of that berserker posed an imponderable threat. It almost made him wish he hadn't sent the Beast away.

“I am not about to have my glory stolen,” he reassured himself, gripping tight his staff and connecting his mind with the magic stored therein. Whatever may come, only death could wrest the gem from his hand.

“Ogen!” he called.

The Orc Chief hurried over, disheveled from his near-death experience with the berserking barbarian. “Yes, Lord Kripa?”

“We’re leaving. Call your men and bring the captives.”

The Orc Chief withdrew a small horn from his pocket and blew it.

Kripa called the two surviving Soldier Demons. “Let’s go.”

He led his entourage through the clearing as Orcs began pouring in from all directions. The ones from the south informed him there were Elves everywhere. It made Kripa irritated with himself for having killed the Clan Chief. He had been efficient, dispatching him quickly as a token for cooperation, but the Clan Chief probably could have provided information about these Elves.

Two Soldier Demons then came trotting into the clearing from a southern trail. “What’s the situation?” Kripa asked.

“I can’t tell how many,” one of them said, “but there appears to be a great number of them, and they’re using magic.”

Ogen now had the Orcs organized into groups and the prisoners up on their feet. He sent one group down the eastern trail, and Kripa began to follow. “Let’s go,” Kripa ordered again. Ogen shouted at the Orcs, then loped along behind Kripa.

As they stepped over the dead Orcs strewn about at the head of the trail, Ogen looked at Kripa and gestured back at the clearing. “It was that crazy barbarian,” he said.

* * *

When Alloria reached the clearing, she was struck by the sight of all the bodies surrounding that big Human warrior. Apparently, he had killed them all by himself: a Wizard Demon, two Soldier Demons, and eleven Orcs. *A tremendous feat*, she thought. Plus, there were two more dead Orcs by the fire pit, and three more by the eastern edge of the clearing, which he may have been responsible for. Astonishing. She

hurried toward him, but Andy hissed at her.

“Lori, wait! Kian hasn’t yet indicated it’s safe.”

She hesitated. Kian’s strategy had worked brilliantly. She, Nakula, and the Sylph had used relatively simple illusion magic to create fleeting images of Elves, lightning bolts, and fireballs. Darting from bush to tree, the rest had fired arrows. To the Orcs it had seemed there were ten times as many Elves as there actually were, and they had fled—but not without their captives, as hoped. Kian had been adamant that no one engage the Orcs up close or go out into the open, lest they risk revealing the ruse. But when she noticed the warrior’s chest rise and fall, she couldn’t help herself.

When she got to him she couldn’t believe he was still alive. He was slick with arterial blood and seemed to have gaping cuts everywhere. Her heart surged as she realized he might yet be saved. Summoning her sorcery magic, Alloria found harmony with The Source and cast a healing spell upon the magnificent fallen warrior.

* * *

Krell was floating in a sea of light. He could feel nothing, and there was nothing distinct to be seen, heard, tasted, or smelled. While there was a sense something disastrous had just happened, he could not recall what it was. Nor could he remember anything about who he was, or where he came from. He was not even sure what he looked like. Just at the edge of his consciousness, though, was an impression of something more than the soft light that surrounded him. He tried to puzzle out what it might be. He wanted to know, but peace and tranquility beckoned, offering release from any notions of a more complicated existence.

He was ready to let go when he noticed something distinct: warmth. With the warmth, he was able to slowly perceive his form. He had a body. There were arms and there were legs. As he concentrated on these things, he suddenly remembered being in combat and having fallen. And with those thoughts, he recalled something else: vision. He had eyes, and he opened them.

What he saw was the face of an Angel looking down upon him. The fall of her red hair framed the exquisite beauty of her face; her

smile brought comfort. Her lips began to move, and Krell recovered something else: sound. He could hear her speaking to him in a gentle voice. “You are a hero, young warrior,” she was saying.

Memories flooded him then, and he remembered the transcendent rush down Mount Merak, through the forest, and out onto the eastern trail. He remembered the charge into the village and his battle with the Orcs and the monsters. He remembered he had died.

“Are you God?” he asked.

The Angel’s face seemed to soften, and he noticed tears form at the corners of her eyes. “You have not died, young warrior,” she said, “and you have saved many of your kin.”

With that, Krell remembered the last thing he had heard as he fell, and realized this Angel was an Elf. He also remembered what he had fought for.

“Anna! Where’s Anna?” he asked anxiously. He tried to get up, but found he could not.

*“The road to madness is paved with
unvarying stones. What are these stones?”*
—From the Catechism of the
Baezean Church of the Light

CHAPTER 6

TO REACH THEM

Shifting his gaze from the sky, Kripa stared down at the river. The cool silver moonbeams glittering across the water’s surface were as nothing to his disinterested eyes. It still struck him as fantastic that he, Kripa—a lowly half-breed—had recovered the Ninth Hellfire Gem. Yet it plagued him with a persistent worry: Luck this good surely must have a price.

He had arrived here in a forced march from the barbarian village, traveling all through the day, the night, and now into the hour before dawn. Twice, he had detected magic behind and amidst the trees. Unable to discern its nature, he pressed on. With the key to Hell on Earth in his pocket, he expected a counterattack; his thought was that with the river at his back his tactical position would improve.

Seeing the raft coming back across the river, Kripa headed down to the water’s edge, flanked by Soldier Demons and Orcs. On the raft, five Orcs pulled hand-over-hand along a rope tied taught between trees on opposite sides of the river. When the raft reached the bank, Kripa climbed aboard, followed by his retinue. It was the makeshift raft of logs they had lashed together for the first crossing, and it nearly sank below the surface from their weight. A railing held everyone in place as the raft shimmied and pivoted unpredictably in the rushing water.

On the other side the Orc Chief, Ogen, was waiting for him.

“My Lord, your tent is ready.”

Kripa nodded his head, then turned to the Soldier Demons. “Stay vigilant. Watch for any sign of Elves. When the crossing is complete I want one of three on sentry duty.”

“Yes, Lord Kripa,” one of them said.

The raft started back across the river while Kripa followed the Orc Chief to his tent. It was pitched a hundred yards from the river.

“See that I’m not disturbed unless Elves are detected.”

“Of course, my Lord.”

Kripa ducked into the tent and reached his mind out to a magic-spell pattern tethered to his staff. Triggering it, magic flowed through the intaglio markings to the crystal sphere fused at the staff’s end, which began to glow. Then, pulling two spell books from a pocket in his robe, he sat down on his bedroll. Rest was a luxury he could not yet afford. He thumbed through one of the books to a page titled “Send Message.”

Before he got started, however, he found himself in an internal debate about whether to order the Beast to return. He needed the Beastspawn commanded by the Beast to fly his retinue to Aagaard and Vlockor; yet it was probable the Beast would try to kill him and take the gem if it was given the opportunity. The question, then, was which was more dangerous: traveling by foot, thereby hazarding a fight with Elves, or risking the Beast’s treachery? Unsure, Kripa closed the book and decided to postpone the decision.

Opening the second book to a page titled “Shielding,” he focused his concentration on the eight known fields of magic and prepared his mind for spell-casting. For now, he needed spells that might be useful against Elves. When each field of magic was separated, he began weaving tiny threads from the different fields into the intricately defined field formulae he had in mind.

Twenty minutes later, he wove a thread of enchantment magic around his completed spell. The tapestry of magical commands began to fade from the forefront of his consciousness as the spell became imprinted in the recesses of his mind. A single thread of enchantment magic trailed back to hook itself at the edge of his vision next to the threads of other imprinted spells.

Kripa flipped through his book to another spell. This one was Dispel Magic. He took a moment to study it, then began weaving together threads of magic to the specifications shown in his book. When finished, he imprinted it upon his mind and put away his books. Standing, he took hold of his staff and exited the tent.

The crossing was complete. Many of the Orcs were curled up on the ground, sleeping. The prisoners were huddled together, also sleeping—most of them. Those who weren't glared at him. One pair of those eyes belonged to that golden-haired girl. He was looking for someone to interrogate, and seeing her reminded him of that fairy he nearly captured outside the barbarian village. The golden-haired girl had been there, and he knew Elves often worked in tandem with fairies. She would be a good place to start. He needed to know what he was dealing with before deciding whether to summon the Beast.

"My Lord?" The Orc Chief came rushing up to him out of the darkness. He was bleary-eyed, and slime oozed from his snout. "Do you need something?"

"Yes." Kripa pointed at the prisoners. "Bring me that golden-haired girl."

The Orc Chief sniggered, showing grayish, doglike teeth. "She's ripe, ain't she?" Then he ordered two of the Orcs standing guard to fetch her.

When they brought her into the light of his staff, Kripa could see she was shivering. It was cold, and she was dressed in only a damp shift.

"Well, my dear," he said, looking her over, "your Clan Chief spared you harm earlier. You will have to fend for yourself now."

He took her chin in his taloned hand. "Let's start with something simple: Tell me your name."

The girl looked up at him with steady eyes. "Anna."

"Tell me, Anna, how long have you been working with the Elves?"

"I have not seen an Elf in years."

Kripa raised his voice until it was loud enough for all the captives to hear as he slid his hand to her throat, squeezing. "Insolent girl, your life as it was is over, and you have no one to protect you. Your kind has ever allied with Elves, taken the best land, and abased my people. Your men have now paid the blood-price for this arrogance. Out of compassion never shown us, we have spared women and children. You will be given a chance to make reparations. But if you persist in denying us even the truth, I will torture you and all of them." He motioned toward the rest of the captives.

“But it is true,” she rasped.

“And I suppose you’ve never seen a fairy.” He sneered as he let go of her throat and drew a knife from the sleeve of his robe.

“I had only just met her for the first time,” she said serenely as he put the knife to her cheek.

Kripa was irritated. She was tougher than the Clan Chief. “This is your last chance, girl: Tell me about the Elves.”

“But I don’t know anything,” she whispered as he pressed the blade into her skin. Kripa was puzzled. She didn’t seem scared. She seemed sad.

Taking the knife and placing it under the collar of her dress, he cut it to the side and down her sleeve. The fabric fell away from her left shoulder. “I think we’ll just have some fun with you before we get to the real torturing. Maybe someone else will feel like talking.”

Just then, Kripa sensed a surge of magical energies, reminding him of the magic he had detected during the march. He looked around and saw bushes trembling. The branches of the trees swayed unnaturally. He stepped back and something caught his foot. It was a root curling up from the ground. Striking it with his staff, he managed to pull free just as a tree branch swept down. It struck him, and he felt branches wrapping about his arm. Tendrils from a nearby bush also reached out and clutched at his leg.

Tugging at the thread of an imprinted spell, Kripa concentrated on the magic-field formulae that sprang to the forefront of his consciousness. He triggered the intake mechanism and magic carried through the spell, building its energies at his fingertips. A searing flame burst forth from his fingers, and Kripa burned himself free.

“This way!”

The words were from a female voice and they were spoken in Elf. Kripa zeroed in on the point from which they emanated: about twenty yards toward the river and perhaps ten feet above the ground. He saw Anna, hands still tied behind her back, running toward the voice.

Kripa knew they would be out of range in seconds. Pulling on the thread of his Dispel Magic spell, he triggered it the moment its formulae appeared in his consciousness. Then he cast the magical energies at a spot about ten yards beyond where he had heard the voice. He could see the shockwave of the spell as it detonated and saw something fall

to the ground. “Got it!” he yelled.

Calling several Orcs to him, he approached, skirting the edges of the magically animated plant life, which had the Orc Chief and Falg wrapped up like mummies. Chief Ogen shouted for someone to cut him free.

“Go find that girl and bring her back,” Kripa ordered the Orcs who had just reached him.

Other Orcs now milled about, and four Soldier Demons came sprinting up. “Ogen! Relax! The spell will wear off shortly. The rest of you keep quiet and watch for Elves. Call out if you see anything.”

Then he took the four Soldier Demons and walked toward the river. Soon, just at the edge of the light from his staff, a small body came into view, crumpled in the sand. As he approached, he saw it was that fairy creature. She was on her side, wings listlessly protruding from her back, completely nude. She was still alive.

Kripa pulled forth his Shielding spell and knelt down, wrapping a hand around the crown of her head. Casting the spell, he sent the magical shield into her and sealed it around her mind. Employing this magic was tricky, and he had to slowly feel his way around the periphery of the fairy’s consciousness to make sure it was done properly. He extended it around her spine and her heart and locked it into place. That would hold her for now, but unless he decided to kill her, he would have to use a more permanent magic later.

As he stood up, he saw Orcs leading Anna toward him.

* * *

When Cellestillena regained consciousness, she remained still, trying to assess her situation. She could hear Orcs all around and found herself fighting the impulse to gag. They smelled like rotten cheese. There was a metallic taste in her mouth, which she attributed to an ache in her head. Her hands were tied behind her back. One of her six wings felt sprained. And she was cold. Gently reaching her mind out for her magic, she realized why: She was shielded from it.

Her heart began to beat rapidly as fright rose in her. Alloria had warned her, told her to wait, saying they would pursue together. But how could she endure the thought of Anaiyaila in the hands of these

ghouls? She had told Alloria she only wanted to see if Anaiyailla was okay, that she would fly right back. But she hadn't. No. Oh, no. She kept following—watching, trying to figure out a way to rescue her. Being invisible and able to fly, she had felt somewhat safe. Many times she almost turned back to tell Alloria how many there were. Yet she had just kept telling herself, “A little longer, a little longer...”

When she had seen that black-robed wizard cutting Anaiyailla's dress, she acted impulsively, using the magic she should have used when Anaiyailla was captured. Then she had been hit with that burst of anti-magic.

Now her worst fears were realized. Not only had she failed to help Anaiyailla, she had been captured. And she knew better. She knew to flee males, especially ones of this wicked species. She was going to suffer.

Stricken within and without, she tried to find harmony with Divine Mother, to ask for her blessing, but she could not concentrate. She was too distraught. She again tried to reach her magic, but the shield held firm.

When a rough hand touched the tender skin of her belly, she could not help but squeal. An Orc voice spoke excitedly and the hand pulled away. Shortly thereafter, a crunch of boots in the sand announced the arrival of someone else. Cellestillena kept her eyes shut, fearing to behold this new menace.

“Open your eyes, Elven spy,” a harsh voice spoke to her in Elfish.

She dared not; she was too frightened. She just lay still on her side, wishing it all away. But the presence of the one who spoke loomed over her. She could hear his breath—oh, so close—and smell the leather of his boots. Then a hand grasped her between the legs and she felt sharp nails cut into her flesh. She squeaked and opened her eyes, squirming.

The black-robed man kneeling over her responded by tightening his grip. He needn't have bothered. As the unearthly light from the staff in his other hand fell across the cruel landscape of his face, Cellestillena froze in terror. Horns jutted from his forehead, and his skin appeared callused, chapped, and bumpy. His features were similar to an Orc, but not as pronounced. Cellestillena was most affected by his eyes. With a yellow ring around their pupils, they seemed to be devoid of natural feeling. She read only ambition and cruel intent.

“You will cooperate or I will hurt you,” he said, shaking her. “Do you understand?”

“Yes!” Cellestillena whimpered.

The man pulled his hand away and stood. “You are spying for the Elves?”

Cellestillena considered the question. Her impulse was to tell him what he wanted to hear. “Yes,” she said.

“How many more spies do the Elves have out here?”

“It was just me,” she mumbled, watching his face closely. He frowned and she worried he was not pleased with her answer. “I wasn’t even supposed to be here,” she continued in a rush. “I should have gone back long ago.”

“Gone back? For what?”

“To tell them what I saw.” She figured he would take that as true.

“Why didn’t you?”

Cellestillena could tell he already knew the answer. “Because of my friend.” She dropped her head.

“This is your friend?” He stepped back and indicated behind. She saw Anaiyailla just at the edge of the light, sitting on the ground with a big Orc standing by. Anaiyailla was sopping wet. Strands of hair hung limp over her face and across her exposed left shoulder.

“Yes,” she sighed, struggling to a sitting position.

“And you realize I will dismember her if you lie to me?”

Stricken at the thought, Cellestillena nodded her head.

“So, I will not find any more spies out there?”

“Oh, no, I swear,” she looked up, eyes wide. “It was just me.”

The man tipped his staff and placed the end of it under her chin. “Just what were you and your Elven friends doing at that barbarian village? Passing through?”

She noted the tinge of sarcasm with the last question and knew he wouldn’t believe her if she said yes. “No,” she said weakly, worried that a single wrong word would get Anaiyailla killed.

“Then what were the Elves doing there?”

Cellestillena wondered how she was going to get through this. She didn’t know what he expected to hear, but she knew she had better figure it out. Lowering her eyes, she caught sight of Anaiyailla again. She seemed calm and somehow appeared regal. Sitting straight, head

up, shoulders square and eyes closed, she looked to be in prayer. The sight instantly dispelled much of the anxiety Cellestillena was feeling, and a fog seemed to lift from her mind. If she fished, she thought, he might give clues. She just needed to give vague answers until she figured it out.

The end of his staff started to feel hot against her chin. “Answer the question.” He raised his voice.

Returning her gaze to her captor, Cellestillena thought about what she knew: He was the leader and he was a wizard. He commanded Orcs as well as some monsters with which she was unfamiliar. Alloria called these monsters “Demons,” and they were alien to these mountains. They must have a purpose for being here, but what? Whatever it was, it must be important to have come such a long way. *And if it’s important, it’s plausible Elves would have an interest in it. Fish*, she decided.

“The Elves were there to observe it.” She dropped her shoulders. She noticed right away the flash in his eyes and saw his hand slide into a pocket of his robe, as though to touch something. Whatever it was, he already had it, and it fit into his pocket. So, all the questions about Elves—he’s worried they are coming to take it. She was beginning to feel confident she could get through this.

“It?”

“I never saw it.” She paused, thinking. *It must be powerful to be important to one such as him*, she thought. “All I know is the Elves believed it held great power.”

The black-robed man removed the end of his staff from her chin and set it back against the ground. “How is it the barbarians came to possess it?”

Cellestillena could tell by the way he said “barbarians” that he held the Humans in contempt. The implication was that he felt them too weak to have “taken” possession of it by force. Yet he seemed to fear the Elves.

“The Elves were concerned it was evil,” she said, figuring it must be so if he was so interested in it, “and did not want to be corrupted by it.”

She sensed he was pleased with her answers. A little more and she might deflect his wrath—for now, at least.

“How did those Elves get it in the first place?” He twisted the

point of his staff in the dirt between her legs.

She could tell this was a dangerous question. “They didn’t. They were just supposed to be here to keep an eye on it. I heard there was a terrible battle.” She held her breath, studying his reaction. He seemed to believe her story.

“How many Elves were there at the barbarian village?” He pulled his hand free from his robe pocket and placed it on his staff beside his other hand.

“Fifty,” she lied. It was a believable number.

He stood there for a moment, silent, looking into the darkness. Then he looked back down at her. “You have begun your captivity well. The more you cooperate, the less pain you suffer.” Turning, he spoke something in Orcish to a nearby guard, then walked away.

* * *

As Krell pulled his sword free from the Orc’s chest, it seemed to him to be at least the fifth time he had killed this particular one. He tried to think how this was possible, but it just didn’t make any sense. He had been battling these Orcs for what seemed like hours, and was so very tired. He knew Elves were helping in the fight, though he had yet to see one. Several times he was sure Urg and the others were about to join the battle, but always a wall of Orcs was between them. He had been injured so many times now, he couldn’t imagine how he continued the fight. Every time he suffered what he was sure was a mortal wound, there would be the glow of soft warm light, healing him. He would turn to look for its source, but the light would melt away like mist in the wind.

Now, as he hacked his way through several more Orcs, he saw again that scarlet monster hovering above the ground with its wings beating too slow to give lift. *Why won’t the accursed thing die?* he wondered as he charged forward, burying his axe in its chest. He pulled it down and was stabbing it when a rush of Orcs bore him to the ground. Then he was on his feet hacking and killing the Orcs. He heard the cries of Elves, and he went into a frenzy seeking them. As much as he tried, though, the Orcs kept slashing at him, blocking his way. His body was wracked with pain and fatigue.

Where was Urg? Galvan? Surely they should be here by now. Then, as he was cutting down that same Orc he had killed so many times before, a light drew his eyes upward. This was new. He looked toward it and then felt his body fall. The Orcs swarmed him. He couldn't move. He tried feverishly to get up, but his limbs wouldn't respond. The light, like a dove descending from Heaven, bore in on him and he focused on it. As he did so, the Orcs began to fade away and an Angel was beside him, holding his hand. He opened his eyes.

The shock of wakefulness—of being alive—was tempered by the gentle warmth of light against his face as it filtered in through a window, revealing an unfamiliar room. It had a feminine touch to it, and he knew the fully dressed teenage girl laying half on and half off the low-set bed he was in. Her name was Naomi, and she clutched his hand, still asleep.

The torment of his dreams faded against the reassuring setting around him. Yet an underlying anxiety persisted. *How many people are dead*, he wondered. *What happened to Anna?*

He tried sitting up but was rebuffed by intense pain. Naomi began to stir, her head rising, her eyes opening.

“You're awake.” She smiled.

Krell could see trauma in her eyes. The slackness around them suggested profound sadness despite the smile. Her pupils—too wide, sluggish, almost lifeless—looked unfocused, as though afraid to acknowledge the world about her. He wanted to press her with questions, but restrained himself. Her appearance told him she needed comfort and reassurance, not a military debriefing.

“You've been here all night?”

“Yes.” Her voice was just a murmur.

“Thank you.” He squeezed her hand.

Looking at her steadily, he gave a warm smile, opening his heart to her. The corners of her eyes twitched, and her face trembled ever so slightly. In that moment, he could feel all her grief. He drew it in, squeezing her hand tight. A moment passed as their hearts exchanged the silent confidences of shared loss; then Naomi's grief seemed to recede.

“Would you like some water?” she asked, straightening up and brushing tears from her eyes.

“Yes, thank you.”

She reached for a pitcher on the nightstand, but Krell interrupted her: “Naomi, be a dear and help me up first.”

“The lady Elf said you need rest.”

“It will be all right, Naomi. I’ll let her know it was my idea, if she asks.”

He started to sit up and she braced herself, allowing him to pull against her hand. There were needle-sharp pains of protest throughout his body. He winced, but overruled them. As the blanket slid to his waist, he realized he was naked.

Naomi pointed toward the nightstand. “I went to your cabin and fetched you a fresh set of clothing. The others were ruined.”

Krell saw on the floor next to the nightstand his boots, sword, axe, belt, and daggers. They were arranged neatly with the blades of the sword and daggers in their sheaths.

“I cleaned everything.” Naomi followed his gaze. “These straps here were cut”—she showed him—“so I fixed them.” She took the pitcher from the nightstand. “It’s lemon and honey; I’ll get a cup.”

“That’s my favorite mix. I am so thirsty—I will have the whole pitcher.” He drained the pitcher into his mouth and handed it back. “Forgive my manners. Thank you.”

His heart was heavy. She hadn’t mentioned Anna, yet her fate was something Naomi should know. The news couldn’t be good. His heart burned at the thought that she might be dead. Tears began to well as he looked at Naomi.

She knelt alongside the bed, looking back at him. Tears built again in her eyes. “Thank you,” he said, “it was good of you to look after me. I appreciate it, and I know Anna would as well.”

Naomi lowered her gaze, staring at her hands. “They would have had me, too,” she said softly, “but when you came it caused so much confusion I was able to slip away. A dozen others did, too, but most didn’t. Two of them had Anna. That was the last I saw of her.” She looked up, tears running down her cheeks. “I’m so sorry.”

Krell felt his heart skip a beat as adrenaline coursed into his system. The thought that Anna was in the hands of Orcs was horrifying, but at least she was alive! With life there was hope. And now there was a mission more imperative than his grief.

Naomi's face was full of sorrow. He reached out to her and wiped away a tear with his thumb. Her voice cracked as she spoke: "What are we going to do? There are so many dead."

"What about your father? Your mother?"

Her head shook back and forth miserably. "They're all dead. Father, Mother, Hanigan, Ealum. Even Hanna. Chief Dylass, too."

Krell clenched his teeth and fought back a wave of anger. *Not in front of Naomi*, he thought. *Revenge will require patience.* "We're going to make it through this," he said, stroking her hair. The corners of her eyes softened, and her face gradually relaxed. "What about Urg and the others. Did they make it?"

"Galvan's dead. Krug's hurt, but the lady Elf attends to him. Urg, Quinn, and Tyr are all right."

"What about the Elves? They're still here?"

"Oh!" She perked up. "You just reminded me; the lady Elf said to fetch her as soon as you woke." Bounding to her feet, she spun toward the door, her light brown dress springing up and whirling with her. Halfway out, she stopped and turned. "I'll be right back," she said, and was gone.

Pulling back the bedding, Krell swung his legs to the floor. Searing pain ricocheted throughout his chest and abdomen. An ugly gash on his right bicep made the arm nearly useless until it healed. Gritting his teeth as he dressed, he relieved himself in a chamber pot. Cringing against the pain, he sat back down and began to put on his boots. His mind was occupied with the various decisions that loomed. *The Elves will be crucial*, he thought. *I will need their counsel and probably their help. There were more than just Orcs in that raiding party. And now, with Chief Dylass dead, the position of Clan Chief will be open. In fact, it will likely be thrust upon me. But Clan Chief of what? How many people have survived? And would it be right to take every able-bodied man and go in pursuit of Anna and the other captives? That might well prove a futile gesture. Don't I have a duty to the survivors to regroup and ensure the tribe does not perish?*

The sound of soft footsteps interrupted his thoughts. The door opened and Naomi swept into the room, followed closely by an Elf maiden. Shorter than Naomi by several inches, the maiden stood just five feet tall. She was delicately formed, with lustrous red hair flowing down over her shoulders and a travel-worn green dress of quality that

clung to her in a way that accentuated her eyes and her femininity.

“Lady Alloria”—Naomi motioned at Krell—“may I introduce to you Krell; that is, I should say, Aukrellian Rath Arakan.”

Krell started to stand, but a blinding pain streaked through his abdomen. He sat back down, hiding the discomfort as best he could. “Pleased to meet you, Lady.” He spoke to her in the Elven tongue, the long-unused words sounding strange to his ears. “You may call me Krell.”

“You may call me Lori. I had the impression our language was not known among your people.”

Krell did not understand her at first, but then got past the unaccustomed accent. The Elven words she spoke suddenly made sense. “Just myself and me—my sister.” He stumbled over the words. “Under un—strange...happenings. I have not...spoke...Elf in years, but I read from Elven books often.”

“I am impressed.” She switched to his language, but with the same refined accent.

“You are not from this region.” He spoke in his own language. “Can I presume you are not here at this dreadful moment by coincidence?”

“You are astute.” She took a step forward to stand just a few feet in front of him, her eyes nearly level with his as he sat there. “Yes—and no, to answer you. I believe God has a design, a hand in this encounter. I do not believe it coincidence. But, inasmuch as we had no knowledge of your existence, nor any knowledge of the presence or motive of those who attacked you, and were bound elsewhere, then by deduction alone it would appear to be coincidence.”

Krell was transfixed by her green eyes. Their look upon him was steady, confident, radiating a spiritual vitality that also found expression in the liveness of her body and the grace of her carriage. He was hardly even aware of Naomi standing beside her.

“I know you have questions,” she continued, “and want to see to the welfare of your people, but will you allow me to first examine your wounds? They were very deep, and you really should not be up and about just yet.”

“I’m sure they will heal in time,” he said, inwardly struggling from the pain of getting dressed. “But thank you. I appreciate your kind-

ness. I really should see my people. They took prisoners, and we have many dead, and we must decide what to do.”

He was about to get up again when a flicker of recognition registered in his mind. “Were you the Angel who pulled me back from death?”

“I was the first to reach you when the Orcs fled.” She stepped up in front of him, her thighs almost touching his knees. “What you did was heroic, and without a doubt you are the leader here now. But you will need to be strong. I can help with your wounds. Perhaps later we can talk about the attack and make plans. I wish to help. I hear there is more to the story than yesterday’s attack.” She reached out to his shirt. “May I?”

Krell wanted to be strong for his people, to get up and take charge right now. He needed to assess their losses, gather information, and find out what help the Elves would provide, if any. But he also knew he needed time to heal. He had already overextended himself. “Of course,” he sighed, her nearness pushing other thoughts aside.

As Lori began to undo his shirt buttons, Naomi sat down beside him, saying, “She’ll be able to help. Miracles of healing happen wherever she goes.”

Krell studied Alloria’s face as she opened his shirtfront. Her skin was pale, far more so than that of his people—and if memory served him right, even more than that of the Elves he had seen in his youth. It made for a dazzling contrast with her ruddy lips and silky red hair. Behind her green eyes, he sensed a strong and seasoned will. Oddly, he found himself musing that she would make a good wife.

“Oh, my,” Alloria sighed, and Krell felt a flash of embarrassment as he thought for a moment she had surmised the course of his thoughts.

“You’ll have to lie back down.” She looked into his eyes and placed her palm against his chest. “You’ve aggravated your wounds.”

He looked down and saw blood seeping from cuts on his chest and stomach. She was right. He suddenly felt weaker. How was he going to rescue Anna? What hell might she be suffering? If he was to do anything, it would have to be soon, but he couldn’t even move.

Naomi helped Alloria get Krell’s shirt off, and they moved him back onto the bed. The cut on his right bicep had reopened and spilled

blood down his arm. He was feeling faint. The strength he had mustered to get up and get dressed had ebbed.

“Is he going to be all right?” Naomi asked with a quick intake of air between clenched teeth. Alloria knelt by the bed.

“I believe so,” Alloria said, eyes sparkling with a mysterious light as her fingers began to probe near each wound. “If God wills it.”

Krell stared at her face, woozily musing about what a fine wife she would make, when he felt warmth infuse his body, beginning at her fingertips. There was a soft white nimbus surrounding each of her hands, and it stayed with them as they moved, touching his wounds in succession. When she finished and looked at him, her smile glorious and her eyes alight with joy, Krell realized the pain had vanished.

“What—what, what happened?”

“I asked God to heal your wounds...and He has.”

Elation and wonder gripped him. He tensed his muscles and found them to be working and pain free. He started to sit up, but collapsed, still exhausted.

“Your wounds are almost completely healed, but your life force has been gravely taxed. Some rest, and you’ll be fine. I had hoped to speak with you, but later; rest now.”

Rest sounded good. Sleep was an even more attractive idea. He was vaguely aware of a sheet and blanket being drawn over him and his boots coming off, voices chattering. He succumbed. A vision of Anna appeared in his mind. Then a vision of Orcs: snout noses, canine jaws, orangish skin, yellow eyes, hair—muscular and mean. The Orcs had Anna. He had to go. He had to do something. But he couldn’t move. He was losing the thread of consciousness. He strained to move his arm, to open his eyes, but there was nothing.

Then a scream rose from the depths of his mind, carrying along with it pain, frustration, and anguish. It grew louder until it burst forth and split the air. His eyes snapped open and he saw the room again, still lit by the early morning sun, the sound of his shout reverberating in the cabin. Naomi and the Elf lady were by the door staring at him, transfixed, eyes wide. What was her name? Alloria. He sat up. Every muscle in his body pleaded fatigue but nevertheless obeyed the strict command of his will. There was no pain. He flung the bed sheets to the side and swung his legs to the floor, relieved to find he had not

been completely undressed.

“Naomi,” he said, looking her in the eyes, his voice commanding, “please go tell Urg to gather every able-bodied man in the village circle. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

She nodded her head, not saying a word, then opened the door and ran off.

“Lady Alloria,” he continued as he snatched his shirt from the nightstand and put it on, “I must thank you, but there is much to be done. You are welcome to join me if you wish. All of your people are. It was not just Orcs who attacked us; perhaps you have some knowledge that can aid us.” He slid a foot into his boot and laced it up.

“Yes, I will join you,” she said as he worked his other foot into its boot. “The Orcs were being led by Demons.”

“Ah!” Krell laced up his boot, then looked at her. “So you know of these monsters?”

“Unfortunately, yes.” A shadow seemed to pass across her face. “They are on the verge of conquering the entire world, though what they would be doing out in this wilderness I have no idea.”

Krell gathered his belt and weapons and began putting them on, standing. He felt exceptionally weak, but willed his spine straight and his shoulders back. “I do,” he said gravely. “I think I know exactly what they were after.” He walked up to her, looming tall above. “First, I want to see whether or not they have it. Perhaps your arrival thwarted them.”

He led Alloria out of Naomi’s room and onto the pathway in front of the house. Tall trees stood everywhere, forming a canopy above, though sunlight made its way through the branches in streaks and splashes here and there. Everything was quiet, eerily so. To the left was the village circle, only fifty feet away, where it could be seen through the tree trunks as if through the mouth of a tunnel. Naomi came jogging into view and hurried up to them.

“I told him,” she panted as she came to a stop. Her eyes were wide and her face flush.

Krell recognized the look, the transition from feeling helpless to hopeful. She expected him to know what to do; to make them all safe again; to give instructions on what needed to be done. “Good. Now why don’t you prepare breakfast for us, including our guests.” He mo-

tioned toward Alloria. “Get some of the other girls to help. It is vitally important we keep up our strength. We’ll all eat together this morning.”

“Of course. Right away!” She turned and ran back toward the clearing.

“It’s this way”—Krell motioned in the opposite direction—“if you’d like to walk with me.”

“Yes, thank you.”

He led her down the path a ways and she asked, “What are you going to do?”

“Well, first I’m going to tell you about the fiery crystal, the monsters, and the Dragon.”

“Dragon? You saw a Dragon?”

“Oh, yes. Then I need to find out what you know of these things. Then I—”

“Krell! Oh, Krell.” The voice of a middle-aged lady interrupted. The lady came rushing from a home on the left side of the pathway to greet them. “You’re unharmed! What a relief. We were all so worried. What are we going to do?” Her eyes were red-rimmed and hollow, and her face etched with lines that Krell didn’t recall being there.

“Eri, I need a list of all survivors, and the condition they’re in,” he said instantly. “There’s work to be done. Someone has to hunt, set traps, tend the gardens, milk the goats. Gather all the ladies into a council. Decide who’s to do what.”

“Right now?”

“Yes. And everyone’s to eat breakfast at the circle. I sent Naomi to prepare it. Make sure she has the help she needs.”

“Certainly, Krell.” Sorrow was still plain on her face.

Krell reached out and touched her shoulder. “There’ll be plenty of time for grief. Right now, I need you. The other women will respond to your leadership. Set an example for them.”

“Yes. Yes, of course. I will not let you down.” She turned and intercepted another lady who was just coming up to them from her house down the pathway. “Amys,” she said spiritedly, “come with me; I need your help.”

Amys greeted Krell and Alloria, then the two women bustled off, disappearing into Eri’s home. Krell led Alloria further down the path-

way to a cabin with its door staved in.

“This was Clan Chief Dyllass Finigan’s study,” he told her. “The crystal was hidden here.” He went into the cabin, followed by Alloria. The wreckage in the room told the story. Dyllass’ desk had been thrown against a wall, exposing the secret compartment beneath. The box that had held the crystal lay ajar in the middle of the floor.

“So, they have it,” Alloria said.

“Yes.”

“Will you tell me what it was—and its story?”

Krell turned and looked at Alloria. She stood in the doorway, so small yet so large in the hope her presence fostered. “On the verge of conquering the world,” did she say? He had known the crystal to be of great consequence, and had guessed that its presence here would bring disaster. It had. He had let Chief Dyllass check his impulse to get rid of it. Now Anna was in the clutches of Orcs and Demons, and so many of his people dead.

Vengeance. Visions of a vast army led by an ancient king broke across the field of his consciousness, and his gaze shifted involuntarily to three cedar chests at the back of Dyllass’ study. Though their lids were thrown back, the stacks of leather-bound journals they contained appeared largely undisturbed. *In their rush to obtain that crystal, they have neglected the method of my revenge*, Krell thought. He then turned his mind back to Alloria.

“I had planned on telling this story to an Elf just as yourself—only far away from here, the crystal in hand, and my people safe from the powers who covet it.”

He moved over to sit in a chair, feeling dizzy, but stopped, realizing that if he gave in to that impulse he might not be able to get up again. Exhausted, he closed his eyes for a moment, only to find himself stumbling into the wall. Catching himself, he opened his eyes to find Alloria shoring him up. Expecting her to tell him he needed to lie down and rest, he said, “I’ll be fine, thank you.”

“I know” is all she said, looking up at him.

Krell steadied himself and leaned against the wall, passionately willing strength into his body. She had been holding on to his arm, but now let go as he regained his balance. *I will be strong*, he told himself. *I will find a way to rescue Anna*. After a moment’s rest, he looked down

at Alloria, only to find himself mysteriously enraptured. Held by her piercing green eyes, he felt energy effervescing through his nervous system. Minutes fled in that invigorating communion....

“I marvel at you, Lady Alloria. Recently butchered, yet I stand here whole, abounding in vitality. Tonight, I will pray God grant me the solace of repaying your kindness. Now, let me tell you my story. Then I must see my people and decide what to do, and how to do it. I will want your counsel. I am also brimming with questions.”

She smiled warmly and touched his shoulder lightly. “Call me Lori. And I will help. These Demons are the bane of all free people. They razed my city. We have common cause against them.”

Krell recalled that pivotal day several months ago, picturing in his mind the monsters and the Dragon. It suddenly seemed like yesterday. “That winged monster, that Demon in the village circle. I nearly cut its head off. You saw it?”

“Yes. Those are called Wizard Demons. The wingless ones are called Soldier Demons.”

“But there are other Demons—bigger ones?”

She nodded her head. “They are called Pit Beasts. There are even more powerful ones called Pit Fiends. Both types come from the nethermost pit of Hell.”

Those names seemed to fit, Krell thought. “It was four and a half months ago,” he began. “I was several leagues north of here, surveying an adjoining valley, when I saw six of those Demons fly into the valley from the east. Four of one kind and two of another—probably your Pit Beasts and Pit Fiends. They flew westward down the spine of the valley. They were perhaps halfway when a Dragon crested the ridgeline at the far wall of the valley. The Dragon was...well, bigger than anything that flies possibly could be. Its wings spanned hundreds of feet and it was at least as long. Its body resembled a lizard’s, with an extended, snakelike neck. Scales like beaten gold covered its entire body.” He paused, awed anew at the memory of it, then continued. “It attacked the Demons with some sort of vapor cloud which rushed from its mouth, enveloping them. The four Pit Beasts fell from the sky, their wings and limbs melting away. The Dragon then tore one of the Pit Fiends apart with its claws, while the other fled toward me. The Dragon caught the second one right above me, a moment later. It just

hovered there, methodically dismembering the Demon, flinging pieces of its carcass about. Its wings created a maelstrom that nearly blew me off the bluff. Then it flew back across the valley and over the ridge; and then on, over the mountains beyond, disappearing for good.”

He paused a moment and she asked, “You could point out its location and heading when last you saw it?”

“Certainly. That is just part of the story, though. Only four people—myself, my sister, Chief Dylass, and his wife—know about the second part: the part about the crystal. You see, when the Dragon was shredding that last Demon, a large crystal fell from the sky, landing right next to me. It was still clutched in one of the Demon’s claws. It was about this big”—he indicated with his hands an egg shape about six inches in length—“with hundreds of facets. Orange and red colors continually shifted within it. I knew in my bones the crystal forebode trouble, and that only with knowledge of it would I be able to protect my people. I intended to seek counsel from Elves, though I knew not where to find them.

“Chief Dylass opposed my departure, however, and winter was coming. I chose to wait until spring. We kept the crystal a secret. Now my village has been raided.” Krell watched her. She stared vacantly out the door of the cabin. “What is it?” he asked.

“It’s just that...you said four and a half months ago?” He nodded, and she continued. “It was about that time the Demons attacked Anjali, my home. Some object of tremendous potency had just arrived there. It was said that the Demons coveted it, viewing it as crucial to their ultimate plan.” Her voice was impassioned, but the cast of her eyes remained remote. “The Demons had a known pattern of attack using ground armies, with Orcs and Goblins to the fore. At the time of the attack on Anjali, their armies were more than a thousand miles away. We thought we had time. Then their squadron arrived. The attack on Anjali was all Demons, all airborne. Evidently, they came for that object, whatever it was.” Pausing, Alloria tapped her lower lip with her right index finger several times. “Your village would be right between Anjali and the Demons’ home base.”

Krell nodded. “So you infer the crystal that fell at my feet was the object that led to the sack of Anjali, and that its possession may well allow the Demons to complete their domination of Erebia?”

“No, Krell, that’s not quite it.” Her eyes locked on to his. “Of the entire planet.”

* * *

Alloria sat on a rock overlooking a mesa, the cemetery ground for Krell’s people. She was tired. The ground here was very hard; only a few trees dotted the landscape. Amid a few elaborately constructed monuments there were cairns everywhere, neatly piled together. Most of the cairns had been raised long ago, but forty-one more had been added today: twenty-three for males and eighteen for females. Eight of the dead were children. Thirty-nine Orcs had been thrown off a cliff. All the wolves were to receive proper burials later.

The most prominent feature of the mesa was a strangely symmetrical, steep-sided hill that stood like a sentinel over the cairns and tombs that invested it in all directions.

It was mid-afternoon and Alloria soaked in the warmth of the sun, resting. Krell was addressing his people for a final time, giving instructions. When he finished, they began to drift away toward the village, everyone except the eight men he had chosen for the chase.

“He’s quite a man, for a barbarian,” Kian said, walking up to her. He was sweaty and grimy like everyone else, having helped with the burials.

Krell stood next to a boulder, one approximately eight feet tall and perhaps five feet wide. The men were there with him. Some of the Elven men, Andy, Sinon, Ry’danen, and Nakula, were there, too. Krell talked as his team began to move smaller rocks away from one side of the boulder.

“He is quite a man, but he’s no barbarian,” she said as Kian sat next to her. She looked upon Krell with undisguised admiration and wonder—both for his decisive leadership and for the astonishing information he had furnished. In her mind’s eye, she saw anew the first moment she laid eyes on him, as he lay wounded amidst a slaughter of Orcs and Demons. She had known then his quality. Such a feat revealed more than skill in combat. It bespoke a pitch of courage, will, and fidelity rare in this world. After she had healed him earlier this morning, she had been amazed as he pulled himself out of bed,

dressed, and stood tall before her; days of unconsciousness would have been normal after that ordeal.

Then he had thrilled her with the story of the Dragon and the crystal. A Dragon—and she hadn't doubted his story for an instant—that could destroy six Pit Demons so easily! It was just what was needed in the war. Astonishing! Dragons were commonly scorned as myth. This would be news welcome in the Great Hall of Lalendren.

The report about the crystal had also set her mind afire. She recognized the synchronicity of the events she and Krell witnessed. The Demons that attacked Anjali likely pursued Sorrell Gilliam because of the talisman he was rumored to have with him. That talisman could have been this crystal Krell pried from the Pit Fiend's claw. These Demons would then have been flying it back to Aagaard and Lord Vlockor when they were waylaid by the Dragon. This would explain why Demons invaded this section of the Druunhaelen Mountains and led a pack of Orcs against Krell's clan. They were searching for this crystal, lost to them because of a Dragon—a Dragon that, on common belief, did not exist.

Excited, she had rushed to tell the others. Soon, they were intently discussing strategy. Search for the Dragon, some said; others, pursue the crystal. Even continuing on to Lalendren for help had been debated. Krell and some of his men joined the discussion. It grew heated. Alloria hadn't been sure what to do. Finding the Dragon could prove crucial; it would be a natural ally. But what chance was there of finding it, let alone brokering an alliance? Who's to say it would not kill them just as it had the Demons? Overtaking the raiding party in a quest to take back the crystal was also an option, but with what chance of success? So few of them were capable of fighting: just eleven Elves and perhaps a dozen Humans. They would face scores of Orcs and an unknown number of Demons. Were there more Wizard Demons? Unknown. Were there any Pit Demons? Also unknown. That the party had fled when surprised by her band of Elves was of little comfort—they had already obtained what they were after. Wresting the crystal from them would be an entirely different matter. If it came to that, they would fight to the death. So perhaps seeking the Dragon was the more reasonable choice. Then there was the Sylph. Alloria had become increasingly worried about Cellestillena. She should have been back

from her reconnaissance. Only magic could have prevented her return, which meant there was probably at least one other Wizard Demon with the Orcs. What to do?

Amidst the general debate, she had noticed Krell staring at her. His eyes were intense. There was resolve and certainty in them. They bore into her, searching for—for what? Support. *Yes, I will support you*, she had thought, trust filling her heart. She had sat up straight and nodded.

Krell had taken to his feet, towering above everyone, uncommonly gifted by God and nature: broad shoulders, blue eyes, blondish hair, cropped beard, rippling muscles, handsome by countenance, and majestic in deportment—an august presence. “My people, honored guests, please listen,” he said in a solemn chord. Everyone hushed. “We have deliberated. Now is the time of decision. First, we will see that our dead are buried. Second, twenty-seven of my people—twenty-two of them women—were taken by the Orcs and their Demon puppet-masters. We will not leave them to the whims of those fiends. Third, they cannot have that crystal. Given its importance, it must be denied them. Too many have died, here and at Anjali, to let them have it without further challenge. Fourth, the Dragon. I will draw a map showing precisely its heading and location when last I saw it. This should be taken to the place you call Lalendren. Thus, this vital information will not be lost should we fail. Last, my people, we cannot remain here. Over half of us are dead or captured. I will be taking the eight most able-bodied men with me. Even if we succeed, our clan will be too weak to long survive here. So, the rest will make their way to Lalendren with all the information we have about the Dragon and the crystal.

“To give the wounded a chance to recover, those going to Lalendren will depart in two weeks. That will also give the strike force time to succeed and return. Regardless, no one stays here more than three weeks. Krug will be in charge, providing he’s able. I ask our Elven friends to leave my people one or two guides, with the rest of your party to come with me.”

“Now, hold on just one minute,” Abajian started before Alloria stood and cut him off.

“Krell is right,” she said. “After the carnage at Anjali, we, of course, cannot let the Demons have that crystal. We Elves went into

the Druunhaelens in the hope of finding something like the crystal. The assistance of Krell and his warriors may prove invaluable in getting it back. And, of course, it's sound policy to send someone on to Lalendren with all the information we've learned."

"An attempt at recovering the crystal, though, is a fool's mission," Ry'danen insisted. "Even working together, we haven't enough warriors for any chance of success."

"If you are right," Krell faced him, "then we will fail—and with us, perhaps, Lalendren, as the Demons bring to bear their new weapon upon it. But, my friend, may it never be said in the halls of that storied city, that the Elves and Humans here—" Krell paused, pointing with awesome gravity at the ground. "—conceded inferiority to Orcs and Demons. I say Orcs are stupid and cowardly. We are neither. With the right plan, and just eight of my men and eight of you," he looked around at the Elves, "we can rout two hundred of them. As for the Demons, I have seen their mettle and found it wanting."

He paused, his eyes continuing to sweep those assembled. "Now, we have our dead to bury. We must give chase before they get too far ahead of us." He walked off then and began organizing his people. Soon, the area was humming with activity.

Yes, he has won us all over, Alloria thought, still marveling at how masterfully the dissenters were converted. She remembered how Kian had counted the Orcs likely felled by Krell. Of the thirty-nine Orc dead, twenty-six had been found along the grisly trail that culminated with Krell's body, not including two Soldier Demons and a Wizard Demon. Astounding. Yes, if he could inflict such casualties without any discernable plan, his assertion that their combined forces could rout scores of Orcs rang true. Even Ry'danen and Abajian found ground for hope in Kian's accounting.

"Now, why do you suppose they're doing that?" Kian asked, interrupting her reverie and bringing Alloria back to the present.

Krell and the others had removed all the rocks from one side of the boulder and were now working the other side, some pushing, some levering with pry bars. *They're moving the boulder,* she thought. *But why?* "I don't know," she said at last.

"Well, whatever the reason, I will lend a hand." Kian jumped to his feet and started toward them.

The boulder soon began to move. Alloria decided to go see what the men were up to. She walked slowly, threading her path respectfully among hundreds of cairns. Kian was helping now, and the boulder seemed about to topple. As she neared it, the men gave a great heave and it broke free of the Earth, rolling and slamming down onto its side. Beneath a cloud of dust, the crew let out a cheer. A gaping tunnel in the ground appeared where the boulder had been. Alloria walked up and joined those gathered around the mouth of the passage. With them, she stared into the gloom.

The entrance to the tunnel was about six by four feet, with a flight of stone stairs leading down. The steps were steep, each one about two feet below the one above. Krell took the lead. After just two steps, only his chest and head were above ground. He stopped, looking at Alloria.

“Would you like to join me, my Lady?” he asked, holding out his hand. Then including everyone, he said: “Of course, you are all welcome. Come if you wish.”

Alloria took a step forward over some rocks to stand next to the tunnel. She was on the right side adjacent the top step. Leaning forward, she extended her hands and he caught them both in his right hand. She stepped into the hole and nearly floated down to the second step, supported by his arm. She looked up at Krell, comforted by his presence and intrigued by this unexpected and exciting mystery.

“What is this place?” she asked, hands still in his, pleasantly conscious of the strength she sensed in him, both physical and spiritual.

“The tomb of our clan patriarch.” He stepped down, their eyes suddenly level with each other.

Still holding on to his hand, she hopped, landing lightly next to him. “And what are we doing?”

“Our clan is at an end here.” He stepped down again. “And there is the matter of my inheritance.”

Alloria looked with curiosity at Krell’s face, but it was impassive. Again, she hopped down, clutching his hand. They continued on, twenty steps in all, the others coming behind. They reached a stone landing. Light penetrated just far enough to hint at the presence of a chamber before them, one about thirty feet square and fifteen high. Amidst heavy shadows, a large sarcophagus occupied the center of the

room. Krell pulled a flint and steel from his pocket and soon a torch was lit in a bracket next to the entrance. He started to lift it from its bracket, but the ancient wood crumbled with the torch into a fiery heap on the floor.

“This is elaborate for a small clan living in the wilds of the Druunhaelens.” Alloria walked into the room while others emerged from the stairwell behind. She ran her hand over one of the walls. This masonry was the work of a master. It was nearly seamless. As her eyes began to adjust, she recognized the outlines of massive strongboxes, large vases, arms, and armor lining the walls of the chamber. The air was dry but smelled slightly of metal and oil.

Krell pulled out a dagger and pierced one of the burning pieces of wood. “Yes, our clan is small, but our patriarch was a King.” He began lighting the many torches hanging in brackets around the chamber with the burning ember.

As light rose in the room, Alloria stood in front of the sarcophagus and read the plaque: “Here Lies King Rath Riordanall—Thus Passes the Glory of the World.” The others circled around, gazing in wonder at the secret trove. Alloria looked at one of the vases and saw it was brimming with gold coins.

“There is no other way to do this: Let us remove the lid.” Krell stepped to the head of the sarcophagus. Several of the men gathered along one side of it and began sliding the stone lid to the side. The grating noise was loud off the walls of the chamber. With a heavy thud, the lid fell to its edge. A scent like rotting leather rose in the air.

Alloria squeezed between Andy and Sinon at the side of the now open sarcophagus and looked in. Wearing a suit of armor was a mummified body, its bony hand still clutching the hilt of an enormous sword that ran from its chest to its feet.

Urg broke the silence. “So, Krell, the stories are true?”

“Yes. Yes, they are.” Krell reached into the sarcophagus and gently removed the finger bones from around the hilt. Taking up the sword, he tapped it on the stone edge of the crypt. A subtle hum emanated from the struck blade as it shed the centuried dust. When it stopped humming, it gleamed as if newly forged. It was in pristine condition.

“What stories, Krell?” Alloria asked, her eyes locked in fascination on the sword.

“Nearly six hundred years ago,” he began, “Rath Riordanall, though of lowly birth, became the most feared King and conqueror in all the land. He wielded a mighty sword and fought at the head of his army. He was merciless, cruel, and implacable in battle. The legend is that his sword spoke to him and drove him to wage a continual war against all the world. After each battle, after the pillaging and raping, he would be racked with guilt. But the sword would speak to him, extolling the awesome splendor of war, and glorifying the martial virtues, driving him mad with battle lust.

“It is said, after one particularly brutal siege, one that left dead the innocent civilians of a once great city, the King was so distraught with guilt that he abdicated power and immediately banished himself on pain of death—all before the sword could enthrall him again. King Riordanall, taking his sword and his most loyal retainers and their families with him, retreated to his birthplace in these mountains here, because he knew it to be the most isolated and wild place in all the continent. With no armies and no one to fight, he focused all his energies on the sword. The sword urged him to go back; told him he could rebuild his armies, regain his lands and extend them. But, it is said, he could be heard talking to the sword, telling it over and over: ‘not until I have conquered you.’”

Krell turned the sword over in his hand, staring at it.

“Despite its history, you intend to use the sword?” Kian asked.

“Yes. And anything else down here that will tell against our enemies.”

“Aren’t you afraid of what the King’s sword might do to you?” Alloria sought his eyes.

“Afraid?” he laughed harshly. “I am his lineal descendant. Actually, it suits my intent, quite as much as it suits my blood. The Demons have willingly spread war across the world. Their overweening wickedness has raised a new cause in Heaven. A golden Dragon has been seen in the sky. I say it’s time to rebuild the hosts of King Rath Riordanall and send them rampant against the Demon armies. I have studied the King’s campaign journals. They will rue the day they roused what has slept for centuries in these mountains.”

He raised the sword above his head. Every eye in the tomb followed as light from the guttering torches danced mellowly along the

ancient blade.

“You doubt the existence of a higher consciousness—let alone a soul. Tell me then what level of your familiar consciousness so effortlessly conceives the three dimensional, true to life, scenes of your dreams?”

–Saint Sevannah,
The Testament of Angels

CHAPTER 7

BRAVERY OR FOLLY?

It was a few hours past sunset and Alloria was struggling to stay awake. The last four days had been difficult as Krell pressed a relentless pace. Sitting here now in ambush—quiet, motionless, exhausted from the march—was too much. She pitched forward, beginning to slip out of consciousness, then caught herself, jerking upright again.

“Are you all right, Lori?” Kian touched her arm. He was sitting next to her.

“Yes. Yes, thank you. Just make sure I don’t doze off.” She said it in a wan voice, feeling chagrin at her exhaustion. Four hours ago Krell had returned from a scouting mission to tell them the Orcs were just a few miles away.

“The entrance to their lair is at the base of a rock bluff.” Krell had painted the picture with gestures to match his words. “On either side there’s a lookout post in a tree, twenty-five feet off the ground. There are several cantilevered shanties in front of the entrance. None of them are in use.” He had then looked everyone over, as if to gauge their readiness. “The time of reckoning is upon them. Their tracks are a few hours old; they have just arrived. It’s too bad we did not catch them above ground. Now the fighting will be in close quarters. There are added risks, but not ours alone. For them, escape will be difficult. This too: We have the initiative. It falls to us now to rescue our people

and avenge our dead.”

“And we shall do it.” Kian had walked up to stand beside Krell. Alloria had watched them become friends, each finding in the other the qualities that warriors value in their comrades. Over the last four days, she heard them discuss some of the battle strategies and fighting tactics Krell learned from King Riordanall’s campaign diaries.

Inspired by Krell’s reconnaissance report, they had jugged the last few miles, arriving here at dusk to set up an ambush. It was to occur several hundred yards from the lair, just off the worn trail. Krell and Kian wanted to take some Orcs alive in order to obtain the layout of the tunnel complex and the disposition of forces billeted within. Alloria was essential for the ambush because of her Sleep spell. Nakula, the other spell-caster among them, was napping a short distance away, and not due to relieve her for another three hours. There were eighteen of them in all: nine Humans and nine Elves. Sallus and Parzen stayed with those who remained at the village, and would lead them to Lalendren if Krell’s raiding party did not return within three weeks.

Alloria closed her eyes for a moment and was nearly absorbed in sleep when she heard a whispered voice behind: “Kian, you should get some rest. I will take the watch.” It was Krell. He knelt beside Alloria and Kian, then popped a berry into his mouth.

“Are you sure? It’s been only a few hours,” said Kian, also in a whisper.

“Thank you, my friend, but a few hours was all I needed.” Tossing his last four berries into the air, Krell juggled them through a few rotations, then swept them into his mouth, and winked at Kian.

Kian rolled his eyes. “As though I’d let a clown stand guard while I slept.”

Krell and Kian grinned and strained to keep from laughing while Alloria giggled and shushed them.

“Actually, I think you would, dear friend,” Krell managed to say, fighting for composure.

Kian threw up his hands. “You have me there,” he said as he got up and walked off in the direction of his bedroll.

Krell settled in next to Alloria. “How are you holding up?”

“Barely,” she sighed, too tired to resist the urge to lean into his big, warm body. “Even while laughing I wanted to fall asleep.”

“Then why don’t you lay your head and doze.” He wrapped a comforting arm around her.

“I mustn’t.”

“Nonsense,” he said mildly. “I’m certain I’ll hear any Orcs approaching in plenty of time to wake you before they arrive.” He offered a wry smile. “It only takes a few seconds to cast your spell, yes?”

“Yes, but if I fall asleep now I may not be able to wake up. At least not enough. I’ll need to be fully awake to cast the spell.”

“And you are now?” he chuckled. “Here, relax. Relax,” he whispered soothingly as he stroked her hair. “You’ll wake. If not, I’ll pinch you. Just don’t shout.”

“Thank you,” she mumbled. “Just make sure...” Her voice trailed off as sleep overcame.

At first, the jostling seemed like a natural occurrence, so she ignored it. Then she began to wonder why it wouldn’t stop and vaguely remembered it was supposed to mean something. It dawned on her: She was supposed to wake up!

She did, willing her eyes open and her mind into wakefulness. A big hand shook her shoulder. The crunch of boots and Orc voices came to her from a little ways off. She lifted her head from Krell’s lap, suddenly feeling alert. The Orcs were nearing. She focused her mind, concentrating on her magic sense, and found the thread of enchantment she was looking for.

Krell pointed the index and middle fingers of his right hand at his eyes and looked to hers.

She nodded. Several seconds later, a column of Orcs came into view, silhouetted in the darkness, the heat of their bodies perceptible to her Elven eyes, which were sensitive to a broader spectrum than those of Humans. First three, then five, then seven, then ten. Too many. There were still more.

Krell dropped his right hand decisively.

She pulled on the thread of enchantment magic and the formulae of her Sleep spell sprang into her consciousness. Magic burned through the spell as she triggered it, its energy flowing to her fingertips. She cast it into the midst of the Orcs and five of them slumped to the ground. An instant later, a prismatic stream of light covered the Orcs and five more went down. That was Nakula’s Color-Spray spell.

How long was I sleeping? she wondered.

Though she had not noticed his departure, Krell was gone. He had sprung out into the path. Others from their group were with him. The remaining Orcs died in almost total silence.

“That went well,” she heard Krell say.

“Yes, that’s fifteen we will not have to face later, and we have ten to interrogate,” Kian was saying as he began to bind and gag their prisoners.

Alloria emerged from the shrubbery. The Orcs, dressed in ratty smocks and breeches, wore no armor. A few had crossbows, and they each had some other weapon: longsword, shortsword, axe, or spear. *These deaths were necessary*, she thought. *We are at war.*

* * *

With the arrival of a dawn unheralded in the humid and musty depths of the Orc lair, Kripa woke, feeling comfortable at long last. The arduous march left him little time to think. Throughout it, he found himself checking the Hellfire Gem to reassure himself it was still there. His constant dread had been that something—perhaps Elves, perhaps worse—would try to take it back. Now the forced march was behind, and he felt mounting confidence in his plan. The Beast would be here soon. Only a few more spells to prepare. *How*, he wondered, *could I have been so lucky?*

Climbing from his bed, wizard’s robe still tightly bound about him, Kripa laced up his boots in the darkness. The weight of the gem noticeably shifted in the lapel pocket where it was stowed. Kripa smiled as he snatched his staff from next to the bed and activated its crystal knob, filling the room with light. Kripa then walked to the door and opened it. The Orc guards standing outside his quarters blinked blood-shot eyes at him and simpered, bearing yellow fangs—hardly a courtly greeting given their porcine faces. Each of them wore plate armor and had a sword, daggers, spear, and a crossbow.

“My Lord?” They bowed their heads to him.

“Nagrek, fetch some food and wine.”

“Yes, my Lord.” The Orc hurried away down the dimly lit corridor.

Kripa left the other two at their station and followed the same corridor a short distance to another door. He went inside and relieved himself in one of the buckets there, indifferent to the stupefying odor in the room. Back in the corridor, he went to the storage room where he kept the Pit Fiend's skull. Opening it with a key, Kripa used his staff for illumination. The skull was over in one corner under a tarp. The golden-haired girl and the Sylph were in the opposite corner, clutching each other, sleeping. He had taken quite a liking to this girl, Anna. He could remember none so stunning in all his life, and he had been to several big cities. *Strange such a flower would grow out here*, he thought. It wasn't just her beauty. It was something in her eyes that made him want to rape her. Only the preoccupations of the march had kept him from forcing the issue. There would be time enough soon; just a few spells to prepare first. *Perhaps I'll make you my queen after I help Lord Vlockor bring Hell on Earth*, he thought...*if you learn gratitude. But first you'll have to be broken. Yes, my barbarian princess, you don't know it yet, but it's a woman's nature to end up craving what pleases the man who dominates her. Oh, and how I am going to dominate you!*

Nagrek came back down the corridor with a steaming platter of food. Kripa slammed the door, locked it, then made a hasty adjustment of his robe. He led the Orc back into his room as his blood cooled.

"I'm not to be disturbed," he told Nagrek. "I'll be working some magic."

"Yes, my Lord." He bowed and backed out. Kripa closed and locked the door, then sat at his desk and withdrew a spell book from a pocket in his robe. By the time he ate, the venison was cold.

* * *

Anaiyalla was startled awake by the slamming of the door. Hearing the lock click in the door, she thought it might open again, but it didn't. The room was dark. Only at the doorjamb was there even the faintest glow. She was propped up in a corner with Cellestillena snuggled in her lap. A faint aroma of roast venison made her stomach growl.

The march had been hard on everyone, especially Cellestillena, who was not used to hiking. The Orcs had been brutal to anyone who lagged. The pace proved especially cruel to the six prisoners under

ten. These children barely survived the beatings that were intended to motivate them. Somehow everyone made it. Upon arrival, all but Cellestillena and herself had been put in cages. The two of them had been marched deep into the lair and locked in this room. Exhausted, sleep overtook them at once.

Cellestillena stirred slightly but did not wake as Anaiyailla petted her, feeling the chain “Lord Kripa” put around the Sylph’s neck. Cellestillena said it was blocking her magic. Even though it was thin, it was seamless and they had not been able to break it. Since her capture, Cellestillena had been afflicted with bouts of terror. Anaiyailla and the other prisoners had done their best to comfort her, and pooled together enough clothing to keep the Sylph from freezing.

As they marched, Cellestillena had told her about Alloria and the Elves, how she found the Elves and how they fooled the Orcs into overestimating their numbers. Anaiyailla remembered the Orcs shouting about Elves just before they left. It was right after Krell had charged, taking on all the Orcs by himself. She recalled seeing some of the prisoners escape in the chaos. But she hadn’t, and she saw Krell fall. Anaiyailla, at first, believed him dead, but Cellestillena thought otherwise: “Lady Alloria used her healing magic on that one, the one who killed the winged Demon and all those Orcs. Before I left to find you, Alloria said she thought he would survive.”

Leaning her head against the wall, Anaiyailla fervently prayed it was true, then drifted back to sleep.

* * *

Alloria completed the weavings of the spell, then opened her eyes, holding the formulae intact at the forefront of her consciousness. Stored in the recesses of her mind were ten other spells. This feat required her to retain thirty-five standard “spell-pages” of formulae. It was already more than she would usually dare imprint. The power-thread of each such spell tapped the reservoir of her life force. Imprint too many and she risked collapse. This last spell was meant to be cast right away, not imprinted, and then the assault on the Orc lair would be under way.

It was five hours since they had captured the Orcs; three hours

since sunrise. All the men were assembled and waiting quietly for her and Nakula to signal the completion of the last spells. Her brother Andy leaned against a tree, lost in thought. Krell circulated among his team, checking equipment and making sure everyone knew their role. He radiated a fierce confidence that was contagious. Alloria thought his blue eyes were more arresting than she had ever seen them. Tracing the square line of Krell's jaw with her eyes, she found herself imagining what he would look like wearing a crown and at the head of a vast host.

Stimulating her imagination, Krell was in full battle harness. His longsword and axe were strapped to his belt. Two daggers were rigged crisscross on his barrel chest, and two more to his boots. A thickly staved longbow was hung from the back of his left shoulder, and the sword of King Rath Riordanall was wrapped in a sheet and fastened down and across his back.

Kian, too, looked formidable. At just over five feet, he was not much taller than most Elves, but far more muscular. His years, though not so many as to make him old, nonetheless gave his face maturity. He sat next to Nakula, festooned with weapons, face set and determined. A picture of Kian calmly facing the Orcs and their mastiffs a few months ago flashed through her mind. *We owe him so much*, Alloria thought.

Nakula was a relatively young wizard, fifty years old—approximately thirty in Human years—and short, barely taller than Alloria herself, with close-cropped black hair, dark eyes, and a nose too big for his face. He looked at her. Alloria realized he was telling her that his final spell was likewise complete.

Lord, Alloria prayed, they are all so brave. May Thy love shine forever on the sanctuary of their hearts. Amen.

Alloria nodded to Nakula and he began to cast. He gestured with both hands, fingers extended, toward Kian, who began to shimmer, then disappear. Knowing what to look for, she could still see his outline, the greenery behind him subtly distorted. Then she cast her own invisibility spell upon Krell. He too disappeared.

“Are you ready?” She heard Krell's voice.

“Let's go,” Kian replied.

A few leaves rustled at their passing, and the two men were gone.

It has begun, Alloria thought. Ever since dawn, Krell and Kian had been drilling the other men on tactics and strategy, going over and over what was to be done, how it was to be done, and why, all the while she and Nakula prepared spells. The plan was bold. The eighteen of them were attacking a lair of nearly three hundred Orcs, counting only the males. It sounded mad, but both Krell and Kian believed it would work. The captured Orcs had talked. Their Chief and the “Great Lord Kripa” returned yesterday around noon. Several of the Soldier Demons, about five to ten, returned with them. None of those captured had seen any winged Demons with Kripa. Some other winged Demon, which they called “the Beast,” was reportedly bigger than an ox. It had been gone almost two weeks, along with all the smaller winged Demons, twenty Soldier Demons, and the winged creatures they rode. The Goblins had gone with them, but the rumor was they and the Demons would return soon.

These captured Orcs said they were just a routine patrol. They would soon be missed, so the assault had to begin right away. The hope was it would be over before any of the absent Demons returned. The intel on the tunnel complex had formed the basis of Krell’s plan. The outcome would turn on how successfully they maintained the initiative. Krell let everyone know: Fail to maintain the battle tempo, and they would be forced on the defensive and overrun.

She and Nakula had cast upon each of the Humans an Armor spell, something all the Elves already had. It was strong enough to divert a poorly struck blow.

There had simply been no time to identify the specific powers of the three magical rings they found in King Riordanall’s tomb. Identifying their powers would perhaps require days of spell-casting. Fortunately, the magical properties of some of the artifacts from the tomb were apparent.

The magic cloak found there was resistant to being cut and repaired itself when it was. She was wearing it now, all the men having insisted she do so. She sensed it had other powers, perhaps, but would have to discover them later. A magic longsword and magic dagger both sliced more easily than any normal blade could. Krell gave the longsword to Urg and the dagger to Kian. The suit of plate armor over the skeleton of King Riordanall went to Urg. He was loathe to accept it, but Krell

insisted. It was as light as cork but as impermeable as a thick sheet of steel. A magical shield, equally light and strong, was large enough to shelter any of them. The Human named Tyr had slipped its straps over his right gauntlet and was holding it now.

Additionally, two magical rucksacks with extra-dimensional, weightless space in each of their compartments turned out to be indispensable. They were capable of holding by volume twenty-five times what an ordinary pack of the same size might. Much of their supplies were stowed in these, as well as a twentieth of the dead King's treasure, making travel easier. As for the longsword of the King, Alloria had only determined that it possessed a surpassingly powerful magic. There was more to it than the irresistible keenness of its blade.

Alloria's thoughts were interrupted when she heard the signal, the mimicked trill of a rare bird. Tucking her spell book away, she was on her feet. Andy was beside her as everyone moved out.

"I just want to say it once more, just in case: I love you, sister."

Alloria sought his eyes, soberly considering the implication. "I love you too, Andy." Rising to her toes, she kissed his temple. Then the two fell in with the others.

Soon, the bluff was visible in front of them a couple hundred yards away, slightly uphill. The trees and foliage were sparse, obviously having been foraged by the Orcs. Ramshackle structures were built up against rocks at the base of the bluff. The lookout posts in the two trees were crude and blatant. As they raced forward, a horn in one of them began to sound. A tenth of a second later, it fell silent.

They split into two groups, heading straight for each lookout, just as they had rehearsed. Their advance provoked neither further alarm nor arrows. No Orcs were seen at the windows. Before they reached the tree, there was a whistle. It was Krell.

Alloria could see a slight distortion of the air in front of a large rock. Her squad followed her to him.

"All are dead here. Let's join the others."

They passed several shacks, all of them empty and most not fully enclosed, as they moved toward the large tree at the other side of the bluff. They were met by the other squad as they arrived. Alloria noticed her hands were clenched. She shook them out, silently telling herself to relax.

“Friends, this part of our plan is complete,” Krell told them as the teams merged. “Let us continue on.”

As they moved, Krell and Kian could be seen just as radiant heat becomes visible when coming off hot metal. Intentionally lagging behind them, Alloria and the rest of the team passed through a maze of boulders to the base of a sheer rock bluff. Beyond it was a steeply canted canyon wall, with a cave entrance at the foot of the bluff. Two Orcs lay next to it, face down in the dirt. Their heads were nearly hacked off. Alloria resolutely pulled her eyes away from the spectacle.

So far they were proceeding as planned. Krell and Kian, under cloak of invisibility, snuck up to the cave entrance and killed the guards, whose job was to relay warnings from the lookout posts to those inside. Krell had then given the birdcall signal for the attack. Next, Krell and Kian ambushed the Orcs in their sentry posts, quickly dispatching them. Seconds later, Alloria and the rest of the group arrived, in case reinforcements were needed.

At its entrance, the cave was large, fully eight feet high and nearly that wide. Once inside, however, Alloria found the width and height varied haphazardly. Krell and Kian led the way, still invisible, though the spell would wear off soon. Next was Tyr, holding the magic shield. She and Nakula were to the rear, near Andy.

Light from the entrance faded as the tunnel turned and twisted downward. At the front, Krell had a pendant upon which Nakula had cast a permanent light. Burlap muted its glow. Urg, slinking forward in the middle of the group, had a similarly damped pendant-light. With her thermal vision, Alloria could tell the air at the ceiling was significantly warmer than the lower air, an indication the Orcs had chosen, as was their habit, the crudest ventilation system imaginable. It also meant there likely was no other way out. Alloria found herself fighting an urge to look back toward the tunnel entrance.

The rock-walled tunnel appeared natural except at its floor, where stones had been carefully placed to flatten it or create steps as needed. Then the rock came to an end altogether and the tunnel continued into the Earth. From there on, it was level, carefully excavated and constant in height and width, about seven feet from floor to ceiling and six feet wall-to-wall.

Alloria could hear raucous voices ahead, the clamor of which

ranged louder as they approached. Then she and Nakula were beckoned to the front. Krell and Kian were there, both of them now visible. There was light ahead. It emanated from beyond a bend in the tunnel.

“Ready?” Krell whispered to them.

Alloria was suddenly conscious of the heavy beating of her heart. Soon they would be noticed and the alarm would sound. Her nose twitched in irritation from the violently offensive odor filling it. Was it the smell of rotting carrion? Or vomit? Or just the smoldering raunch of creatures that have a taboo against bathing? *I can actually taste this stench*, she thought wryly; *it tastes like bile. Must this fight take place in a maggot-infested, vomit-splattered, garbage hive?* She worked her tongue against the roof of her mouth. “Steady, girl,” she told herself, “think of the captives; think of the mission; think of Anjali.”

Trying to focus her eyes, she made an unsuccessful effort to see Krell and Kian’s faces in the darkness, though her thermal vision showed their outlines clearly as heat patterns. Even watching them in this way, she was comforted. They radiated competence. Kian was farthest up the tunnel, right at the bend, his sword in one hand and the magic dagger in the other. Krell was right in front of her, his masterly presence seeming to span the tunnel. The sword from the scabbard at his belt was in one hand, his axe in the other. The rest were crowding close behind. She could hear the sibilant sounds of weapons being drawn slowly from their sheaths. She saw Nakula signal with a raised fist, and she nodded her head in answer.

The Orcs were loud now. It sounded as though there must be dozens just ahead. Their talk was in the tone of ribald banter and jesting insults, though she could not understand the words spoken. She thought she could hear the sound of dice or bones being thrown.

“Cast your Sleep spell first.” Kian’s whisper could barely be heard. “As soon as it’s cast, wave us forward. Nakula, you follow me and Krell. Stay close to the wall and direct your Color-Spray to the Orcs on the right side of the room. Be smart. Don’t risk yourselves or use your spells needlessly.” He pressed his back to the wall and waved Alloria forward.

Passing Krell, she stepped to him and whispered in his ear: “Oh, wonderful. Seventeen men and you decide to send the only woman

present out first.”

Krell grinned, then whispered back: “Ah, show some compassion, Lori. Let those condemned wretches have a glimpse of Heaven before they die.”

Oh, he's smooth, Alloria thought, noticing the raillery with Krell was steadying her nerves. She stepped carefully then, inching her way forward into the bend, her breathing shallow and her face flushed. Much to her consternation, she found herself wondering if he really thought she was that pretty.

The room full of Orcs was now no more than forty feet away, and well lit. She could see a sliver of the room where the corridor opened into it. Slices of two tables were visible with several Orcs sitting at them. The ones at the left were playing cards. She could not see what the others were doing. They were oblivious.

Seeking out the thread of enchantment magic anchoring her imprinted Sleep spell, she pulled it forward. The magic formulae sprang before her and were quickly consumed, turning raw magic from the ether into the specific energies dictated by the spell.

Alloria cast it into the room, then waved to Krell. As she pressed against the wall, she saw several Orcs slump at the tables. Krell and Kian surged past, Nakula in tow, then the rest of the caravan: Tyr, Sinon, Ry'danen, Quinn, Abajian, Urg, Andy, and the others. Pelias and Brynn were to the rear, bows in hand. She followed. Pandemonium broke out, laced with the panicked shouts of Orcs. Nakula was at the end of the corridor with his back to the left wall as the last of their group ran by. Pelias and Brynn stopped just inside the room and began firing arrows. Alloria rushed up and stopped alongside Nakula, just in time to see the last of the Orcs slain. Most were still groping for weapons as they died. She saw Krell dispatch three with such speed and primal ferocity that she unconsciously drew back. Andy was pulling his sword free from an Orc's chest as it slumped to the ground. The last two Orcs alive in the room were killed cowering under a table in the back. Silence ensued.

The room was forty feet wide, and the passageway in which she stood was at its midpoint. It was thirty feet to the back wall, and floor to ceiling nearly ten feet. Wood beams spanned the ceiling in six-foot intervals, supported by posts at the walls. Smoke could be seen float-

ing between those beams. On the back wall were two wood doors, and there were doors on each of the sidewalls. Lanterns in sconces lit the room.

Two of the four large tables in the room were overturned, their stools strewn about. Knocked over mugs, spilled food, and gaming pieces lay amidst the dead Orcs. There were perhaps as many as three dozen of them. Wounds gaped. Pools of blood formed all about. Alloria found herself feeling queasy.

“Kill them,” she heard Krell say, and saw him motion toward the Orcs who had been rendered unconscious by the Sleep and Color-Spray spells. As men sprang to it, Nakula stepped forward and cast a spell at the door to the right on the back wall. It was a Hold Portal spell, and it would bar passage for thirty to forty minutes—or until the door it reinforced was battered to smithereens.

According to the Orcs they had interrogated, the main barracks were behind that door. The door on the left side of the back wall led to a pantry. The door on the left sidewall led to a large chamber packed with ice—their freezer. The door on the right sidewall led to the remainder of the lair: the prisoner cages, the main kitchen, billets for the elite guard and their chieftain, and the quarters of the “Great Lord Kripa” himself.

“How can you trust this information?” she had asked Krell when they were formulating the plan.

“It’s simple,” he said. “Several of them gave the same story independently. Either they’re telling the truth or a prearranged lie; most Orcs are too dense to remember a prearranged lie, even if they thought of such a thing beforehand—which they wouldn’t.”

“But why, given the scope of their lair, didn’t they come up with a more defensible design?” she asked, perplexed.

“Again, that’s simple. By our standards, they’re idiots.”

Krell now had a key ring in hand. He began trying keys in the door on the right sidewall. It opened. There was an unlit corridor beyond.

“Let’s go,” Krell ordered, and disappeared into the dark.

Everyone followed. Alloria went last. She could hear Orc voices and pounding behind the magically reinforced door on the back wall. Kian was waiting, and a wave of relief swept her as he closed and locked the corridor door behind them.

“Okay, seal it,” he said.

She faced the door and called forth her Wizard Lock spell. It was similar to the spell Nakula had cast on the other door, only this one was a little more powerful and would bulwark the door permanently—even if its thick planks were smashed—unless the whole door to its foundations was also pried away. She cast it and the magic enveloped the door, sealing it tight. She turned. Kian was still with her; everyone else was well down the corridor. He took off and she followed.

They were trapped now, Alloria realized. They would either succeed, die, or be captured. Ahead, the corridor sloped slightly down with support beams every few feet. A light was at its end. Orc voices gave way to dying shouts and primal screams. The corridor opened into a room half the size of the previous one. In the middle of the far wall was a corridor, and Tyr was right at its entrance, blocking it off with his magic shield. Alloria could see beyond him ten or twelve feet to a half-open door. She heard the twang of a crossbow from beyond that door and the heavy *thwock* of a bolt shattering against Tyr’s shield. Nakula was behind, peeking around the side of the shield to cast a spell.

Looking around, Alloria saw doors on both sidewalls of the room. The one on the right side was open, and the men were fighting in the corridor beyond it. On the floor were six Orcs, two still in their death throes. The middle-aged Human named Malcon sat against a wall, coughing, clutching an arrow stuck in his gut.

“Back! Now!” Krell’s voice boomed from down the hallway beyond the open door.

People backed away and Urg, Andy, and Sinon returned to the room, followed by Krell. He slammed the door shut.

“Seal it!” Kian jumped clear.

Alloria’s arm shot out as she cast her Hold Portal spell upon the door. “Done.”

At that very instant, the door on the left sidewall flew open. Five Orcs rushed in. The men engaged them immediately. Alloria backed up and raised her hands, ready to cast her Finger-Lightning spell.

Beyond the five was a short hallway. Kian, Abajian, and Quinn bested three of the Orcs as Brynn backed away, wounded. Krell leapt into the fray, manhandling and skewering one of the Orcs, then took

off up the hallway from which they had come. Alloria's eyes were wide open, darting about. Just in time, she saw two Orcs at the end of the hallway leveling crossbows. She cried out, pointing in their direction. Krell twisted up against a wall as the Orcs fired. Urg, who had just brought down the last Orc in the room, took both bolts in his chest. As Krell rushed forward, the enemy archers withdrew behind the door at the end of the hallway and slammed it shut. Krell barreled into it, but it held. Alloria felt feverish. Sweat was running down her face and between her breasts.

“Nakula, Lori! I need this door opened!”

According to their information, somewhere beyond that door was the stockade where the prisoners were held. Alloria started to go, but Nakula stopped her.

“I'll go. You take care of the wounded.”

“Thank you, Nakula,” Alloria said, feeling a rush of gratitude toward him and the rest of the men. *I don't know how they do it*, she thought.

Nakula went into the hallway, Kian, Andy, Quinn, Ry'danen, and Sinon with him. Urg pulled the two flattened crossbow bolts from the breastplate of his armor.

“God bless you, King Riordanall.” He shook his head in wonder, then joined the others in the hallway.

Nakula forced the door with a Knock spell and the men poured through. Only Tyr and Pelias stayed behind with Alloria and the wounded, Brynn and Malcon. Brynn's wound was not critical, so she went to Malcon. He was in bad shape, sitting stoically up against the far wall right next to the passageway there. As she knelt by him, she could hear Orcs pounding on the door sealed by her Hold Portal spell. The kitchen, butcher shop, and smithy were beyond that door. The spell was holding, for now.

“The Orcs shot him with a crossbow through a hatch in that door.” Tyr pointed. “Nakula's spell slammed the hatch shut. I heard an Orc yelp—which explains those.” On the ground beneath the hatch were the top segments of four fingers.

Alloria reached her hand up under Malcon's shirt to where the arrow was protruding. Pushing the image of those severed fingertips away, she searched for harmony with The Source and found it. Its

brilliant light blossomed in her mind and she became, with it, a living prayer of healing. Magic flowed in her hands and into Malcon. Thus augmented, she could feel the astral architecture of his body reassert itself. The arrow came out easily when she pulled on it, and Malcon let out a great sigh of relief. It was over. She looked at him. He was pale, but his eyes were wide in amazement. He touched his wound, but found it closed and only modestly tender. She also noticed her body had cooled and her pulse steadied.

“How? How? My God! I thought I was done. Thank you, Lady Alloria. Ha-ha! It’s unbelievable! But Krell and the others...I must get back to them. Where’s my sword?” He saw it on the ground and grabbed it.

She stood with him. Tyr clapped him on the shoulder. “Ha! What? Is old Malcon back from the dead and ready for another go? Good.” Alloria silently gave thanks to God.

She went back to Brynn. He braced his left arm against his chest. She looked beneath, moving his arm and shirt out of the way. The six-inch cut went from his left shoulder to his nipple. It was just a half-inch deep, but a tacky bloodstain, like dark red lacquer, had spread as far as the front pockets of his trousers.

“You can move your arm?” she asked, not wanting to exhaust herself concentrating on non-fatal wounds. The hardest fighting was still ahead.

“Yes, yes, I think so. It’s not too bad, really.”

First, Alloria sprinkled some pulverized bark with coagulant properties in the wound. Then she undid two long strips of cloth from around his waist—she had made everyone wrap cloth strips around their waists for just this purpose—and proceeded to make a pressure dressing over the wound.

“Thank you, Lori,” he said, testing his arm.

Tyr and Malcon peered warily at the door on the right-hand side-wall. Orcs pounded on it furiously from the other side. *I wish I had a spell to silence them*, Alloria thought.

“How long will it hold?” Tyr inquired.

“Not long at that rate.” Alloria pointed to a couple of planks that showed signs of buckling.

“What do we do if it gives way?” Malcon asked, as he repeatedly

spun and regripped the hilt of his sword.

“We’ll have to fight. Krell’s plan requires us to hold this room until he returns. I’ve another spell, but I’m even more worried about this quiet one.” Alloria pointed to the passageway Nakula had sealed with a Hold Portal spell. There was no sign of their enemies in that direction, but beyond that door were the quarters of their Chief and Lord Kripa. Supposedly, only Demons and high-ranking Orcs were allowed in that section. How many of them were there? Because the Orcs they interrogated were mere foot soldiers, they didn’t know. At least two or three dozen, certainly.

Alloria was particularly worried about this Lord Kripa. He was a wizard of some sort and their captives had spoken of him with awe. What kind of magic would he use against them? Was he now trapped and cut off from the rest of the Orcs? Could there really be only this single connecting corridor?

“They’re coming! They’ve got them!” Pelias stood at the open door on his toes, waving his arms. “Hurrah!”

Alloria could hear them. Looking up the corridor through the two open doors, she saw Kian, Andy, and Quinn leading a band of Krell’s people at a fast trot. They streamed into the room, more than twenty of them: women, girls, and a few boys. The newly liberated were filthy, disheveled, bruised, bleary-eyed—yet relief was writ large on all their faces.

“Papa!” One of the girls rushed into Malcon’s arms.

Alloria’s eyes kept pulling back toward the right-hand sidewall. The door there boomed and creaked under the Orcs’ assault. The incoherent bellows that carried through cast a pall on those rejoicing. The room was crowded now, many talking in a high state of excitement. Kian and Andy reached Alloria’s side.

“No one was hurt,” Kian said. “There were only five Orcs back there.”

Krell came last into the room, glistening with sweat, his chest rising and falling steadily. “Quiet! Listen,” he said in the bass register of his voice as he raised a bloodied sword. “First we’re going deeper into this lair, but we’re all getting out of here.” Everyone lifted their eyes to his as he walked through the crowd. He stopped next to Alloria. “I want you all to do exactly as Lady Alloria tells you. We have some fighting to

do and it will be dangerous. Pick up any weapons you find in case you have to fight, and, if you do, give no quarter. Be quiet; be disciplined. Our clan has ever triumphed over the Orcs. Now, as you can see, we are reinforced by our brave and true friends, the Elves. We have a plan. On my word, this will soon be over. Now, form yourselves into fighting groups of five, just as you have been trained.”

Krell turned his attention from the crowd and looked down. Alloria saw worry in his eyes for the first time.

“Your sister?”

He shook his head. “The one called ‘Lord Kripa’ took her, as well as the girl with the wings—Celleste.”

Alloria clutched a handful of Krell’s vest below his heart as she looked to his eyes. He did not meet her gaze. Krell looked at the door to Lord Kripa’s quarters. “I’m sorry,” she said, still looking at him. “At least we know they are still alive. We’ll find your sister—and Cellestillena, too.”

“Yes, my friend, we will.” Then: “Men! Over here!” He called the fighters to the passageway on the far wall.

As they discussed strategy, Nakula came up to Alloria. “You open the door. I’ll Wizard Lock it after we move through.” Then he motioned toward the women. “How about an illusion spell? Shall we use one now?”

“Yes, let’s do it.” Alloria picked out a competent looking middle-aged woman. “What’s your name?”

“Samantha.”

“Samantha, ask them to line up in rows facing this way.” She pointed toward the other women and children. “We’re going to do a magic trick.”

Nakula began casting as Samantha helped Alloria line up the rest. His Phantasmal Force spell gave each of the women and children the appearance of a male Elf, complete with swords and bows.

“This is just an illusion,” she continued as her subjects looked around, scrutinizing each other’s appearance. “Pretend to fire arrows at any Orcs you see. I’ll tell you what to do afterward.” She turned to Krell. He had a dagger in each hand, as did some of the others. The rest had bows ready.

“Begin,” he said.

She looked down the corridor. A rough-hewn but solid door stood ten feet into it. Orcs still pounded away on the other door. She put that out of her mind. Nakula would have to make sure it held long enough.

Activating her Knock spell, she flung it at the door. It sprang open, sprawling a couple Orcs backward into others. Beyond those struggling to regain their feet, she saw a cluster of Orcs, each with a crossbow, their mouths agape. A salvo of arrows ripped through the air toward the Orcs as she readied her last Sleep spell.

*“God has so fashioned us that we cannot
suffer save by our own consent—yet,
most give that consent freely.”*

—*Saint Sevannab,*
The Testament of Angels

CHAPTER 8

DARKNESS AND REVELATION

Anaiyailla awakened to the clink of the door lock. Kripa stood there illuminated by the light of his staff.

“You, Anna, come here.”

She couldn’t. Though adrenaline poured into her blood and her stomach twisted inside, she remained still, cradling Cellestillena, who began to wake.

“What is it? What’s happening?” The Sylph lifted her head and squinted in the yellow light from Kripa’s staff.

“Anna. You will come here. Now.”

The violence in his voice sent fresh tremors through Anaiyailla. She had dreaded this moment. Cellestillena squirmed as Anaiyailla tried to ease her to the floor.

“What’s happening?” Cellestillena’s voice was small and frightened.

“I have to go,” she told her, full of sadness and wondering if she would ever see the Sylph again.

“No! Don’t go!” Cellestillena clutched at Anaiyailla’s arm as she stood.

Her eyes were adjusting to the light now, and she could see, not just feel, the withering intent in Kripa’s eyes. A shaft of ice seemed to press against her heart. “I must.” She turned back to Cellestillena, holding her right palm against the Sylph’s cheek. “There is no other way.” Then she turned and started toward him, her legs numb, her heartbeat rising in her ears. She thought she might faint.

“Please don’t leave me.” The Sylph’s voice was barely audible.

Anaiyailla faltered, but her knees held. She glanced back at Cellestillena, who stood in the corner, wringing her hands. She looked so much like a child, though she was oldest among them. Folded and tucked beneath the plain brown shirt she wore, her wings trembled.

“Will I be coming back?” Anna asked.

“So you two want to stay together, eh?” Sadistic mirth laced Kripa’s words. “That might be interesting... Maybe next time.” Then he was moving. In an instant he was at her side, his clammy hand wrapped about her neck. “But you...you, my beauty, will obey me. Instantly. Or others will pay.” He pointed his staff at Cellestillena. “As a child, I amused myself by pulling wings off butterflies—understand?”

“Yes.”

“What?”

She searched desperately for the cause, and found it. “Yes, my Lord.”

“Good. That’s a start.” He grabbed her wrist and led her from the room, locking the door behind.

Anaiyailla found herself in a dim earthen corridor. Kripa took her by the wrist again, then pulled her along to a door guarded by three Orcs. She shrank from their leers as Kripa propelled her through the doorway, then closed and locked it behind them. The room was drab and spare. A bed resting two feet off the ground, a desk, and a trunk were all it contained.

Kripa leaned his staff against the wall next to the bed. The light shining from its crystal knob was the only light in the room. He turned to her and walked close. She shivered involuntarily, watching the shadow he cast moving across the wall in front of her. Kripa was several inches taller than she was, almost as tall as Krell—though not nearly so broad in the shoulders. His dark brown hair was matted and hung in dreadlocks over his ears and down to his shoulders. His eyes were slightly larger than a Human’s, and rounder too, with a ring around the pupils that held a hint of blue. His jawline was long and sharp, and the hair growing along it short and prickly. His nose was hideous: flat, upturned, and roundish, its color darker than the rest of his face. His skin looked coarse and rough and had a dull orange hue. The horns at his temples were curved like thorns on a rosebush, only larger, and juttied

up through his hair. He grinned and she could see that his front teeth were sharp. Anaiyailla thought he looked ugly—and lethal.

“Now, how could such a beauty blossom in these unforgiving mountains?” Both his hands went to her face and caressed her cheeks. His nails were long and hard, like talons, his skin rough and calloused. Then his fingers slid around through her hair to the back of her neck, his thumbs stretching under her jaw. He tilted back her head and leaned forward to kiss her. His rough lips grated against hers. She did not resist his long slimy tongue as it probed. He tasted and smelled of wine.

Anaiyailla’s heart beat heavy in her chest. She was helpless, alone, scared—and wondering what she should do, if anything. Kripa broke his kiss, though he still held her head firm in his hands.

“Are you ready to obey me?” he ordered, his eyes boring into hers.

“Yes, my Lord.”

“You will be warm, compliant, and pleasing.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“You will give me pleasure.”

“Yes, my Lord.” Anaiyailla wanted to scream.

“If not, one of your people will pay the price.”

She felt herself withering under his stare, wishing she could wilt away into nothingness. His face became even more distorted, and anger flared in his eyes. Then she remembered. “Yes, my Lord.” A single tear fell from the corner of her left eye.

Kripa stepped away. “Undress yourself.”

Anaiyailla felt a sudden constriction in her chest, but forced herself to breathe and it eased somewhat. A glance at his eyes and she discarded the fleeting thought to disobey him. She undid the sash at her waist, then unhooked the buttons up the front of her dress. Her whole body shivered as she pushed the fabric away from her shoulders. The dress fell from her arms and to the ground. She removed her breast support, keeping her eyes lowered, then slid her underpants to the floor. She stepped out of them and crouched down, unlacing her shoes, first one, then the other. With a supreme effort, she stood again, naked and exposed, then kicked off her shoes. She forced herself to look up at him. His gaze was sharp and critical. He stood there impassively, arms folded. Then he licked his lips.

“Turn around.”

She turned and faced the door, clutching her arms against her stomach. Anaiyailla wished there was some way out of this, but knew there was not.

Kripa grunted. “Very good.”

She turned back around and sadly watched as he removed his black robe and slung it over the chair at the desk. Then he undid his belt, removing with it the sword at each hip. He unstrapped two small knives from his forearms and tossed them on the desk with the swords. Unbuttoning his shirt and tossing it on the desk, he then slid off his undershirt. His chest was covered in thick brownish hair, which thinned a little at his midsection. His muscles were taut and his body strong. Everywhere his skin looked rough and callused. He turned the chair around at the desk and sat down, facing her.

“Come here.”

She went to him, arms folded over her breasts, painfully conscious of her nakedness. He said nothing, just stared into her eyes.

“Yes, my Lord?” She was trembling.

“Who is your master?”

Her mind shouted: *My master is the Lord, the Lord in Heaven and Creator of the Universe!* But she thought of Cellestillena and said, “You are, my Lord.”

“You are to be warm and sensuous, not cold and frightened.”

“Yes, my Lord.” She continued to shiver, almost shake, in spite of herself.

His cold eyes scanned her body. “Take off my boots,” he said at last.

Anaiyailla knelt down and unlaced his boots. As she did so, she could see the knives strapped beneath his pant legs, just above his ankles. She did not even consider going for one. She pulled off each boot and remained kneeling, her eyes down.

“Kiss me.”

She couldn’t. She stayed just as she was, frozen. *Oh, this can’t be happening, this can’t be happening!* The inner screams rose and compounded in her mind, paralyzing her.

Kripa sighed. “Very well. I will send for one of your people and torture her to death in your presence. Nagrek!”

An Orc's voice could be heard through the door, responding. Anaiyailla, still crouching and now panicked, looked at Kripa. "I'm sorry, my Lord, I'm sorry. I will do whatever you want, of course. It's just that I've never done this before and I don't know what to do. My Lord, please. I will do whatever you want."

The voice from beyond the door could be heard again. Anaiyailla looked up at Kripa, eyes pleading. He shouted a couple words in Orcish, then to her: "I give you one more chance before I take my pleasure in substitute by flaying and then dismembering one of your people."

"Thank you, my Lord, thank you." There was a moment of silence as he stared down at her, his eyes implacable. She knew she had to move. Her heart thumped loudly, and she could feel a pulsing in her head. Slowly, she stood up. Then she leaned down to him, placing her hands on his shoulders, and put her lips against his. She parted her lips for his tongue, and he grabbed her and sat her sideways on his lap. His hands wrapped around her and drew her in tight. She melded with him pliantly and could feel him throbbing against her buttocks.

After a while he pushed her away. "On your knees," he said.

She slid off his lap and went to the ground on her knees. Kripa spread his legs apart and she knew what she was to do. She paused momentarily, but decided against waiting for him to give the order. She unhooked the buttons on his trousers and worked him free of the garments. It was much larger than she had expected. Tough looking and callused, it resembled a misshapen cudgel and smelled like a dog that had been left in the rain.

She put her lips to it and shuddered involuntarily as his hands went to her head. She wondered if she should refuse to cooperate with this evil—just go limp. Make him do whatever he was going to do. Endure whatever she would have to endure. Refuse to give him anything; make him take what he wanted. Oh, she wanted to so badly, but she just couldn't. He would torture others to make her suffer if she did not comply.

But isn't he going to do horrible things to the others anyway? Whatever I do? Wouldn't it be better to just tell him I'll not cooperate with his evil? Do your worst! No. I could not bear to see someone tortured to death when I could prevent it by giving my body. The one torture is more awful than the other. Besides, every moment he is with me is a moment he is not free to work his evil on someone else.

Perhaps that is why God has placed me here. Perhaps he can be persuaded to spare the others, maybe even let them go, if I become what he clearly wishes. Is it so clear what he wants from me? Yes. I can sense it. He wants love. He wants love, though he doesn't believe he can ever be loved. He is attracted to me because of my closeness with God, and God's love. Partly, at least. Yes. That is why he does not simply take me, but wants to kiss me—and me to kiss him. Or am I deluding myself? No. It is more than lust, so there is something to work with. I just have to figure out how to do it.

Her thoughts were interrupted as she found herself gagging, the mechanical and mindless rhythms of her lips and tongue broken. He had pulled her head toward his groin. Then he was standing and pulling her to her feet with him. She forced down the bile she felt rising as he pushed her onto the bed.

Stepping out of his breeches, he was on top of her. The bed was lumpy but soon forgotten as he forced himself into her. He was not gentle. A terrible pain tore at her loins as he entered, as she was opened for the first time. She cried out. He began a rocking motion, his weight heavy. Tears were at her eyes and starting down her cheeks. She looked up. The set of his face was grotesque. He gazed back at her and grinned, a lecherous smile that showed that the depth of his exhilaration was in the height of her pain. His thrusts turned uncompromisingly violent, and the hurt threatened to escalate beyond endurance.

Throughout the ordeal, Anaiyailla wept, sometimes silently, sometimes openly. *Oh God oh God oh God why is this happening to me?* she asked over and over. *What have I done? What must I do?* She tried to forget the pain but could not. She tried to concentrate on Godly things—love, compassion, and forgiveness—but the terrible reality of her torment kept intruding. She was forced to be fully present. Kripa took his time, and as he did, she began to resolve herself to make something good come of this. I will, she told herself. I exist in God's divine plan, and God is good. He has chosen my path. I will walk it and I will find Him.

Eventually Kripa was spent. He came to rest atop of her, perspiring heavily. His weight was crushing, and she labored to breathe. Then his arms were under her and his weight lifted. Hands grasped her head and tilted it back, his lips pressing hard against hers. She felt herself rising. His arms held her close to his body and then she was sitting

and straddling his lap. His kiss was intense and he held her tightly. He moved his lips to her cheek, then to her ear, and then to her neck. A moment later, he pressed her head to his shoulder and she rested it there.

“You did good, my pet. Very good.” His voice was strangely mild and coddling. “Yes, there is something different about you. Something special. I think I will allow you to ask a favor.” He stroked her hair with one hand while rubbing her back with the other. “But ask wisely,” he added, his voice more in its usual harshness, “for if I refuse the favor, you will not get another.”

Anaiyaila’s first impulse was to ask for him to let her people go. But his “ask wisely” admonition rang in her ears. Obviously, he would not release anyone. Her second impulse was to refuse to play his game. She remembered the sadistic joy on his face as he had stared down at her, at her tears and her anguish. Why should she play his game? But then she remembered her resolve to find the good. Perhaps his offer of a favor was actually a plea for help. A plea to help him from his wickedness. She then knew what to ask.

“I would like to know more about you,” she said softly, her head still resting against his shoulder. “About your parents, where you grew up, what it was like. Yes, I would ask that.”

Kripa embraced her a little tighter and she heard a moan in his throat. “Yes, I will grant you that, my pet,” he said in self-conscious magnanimity. His lips were on her again, on her neck, kissing. Then he said, “I grew up not far from here. I do not know my father; he was one of many Orcs, I suppose. My mother came from your village.” His kisses moved up to her cheek.

“Oh? What was her name?”

“I don’t know. She disappeared when I was young. All I remember is that everyone called her ‘whore.’ ” His lips brushed against hers and then he was kissing her with passion. Before she knew it, she was on her back and he was moving inside her again. It was with less violence this time, and he kept his lips pressed against hers.

This time, she was better able to cope. *Could it be true*, she found herself wondering over and over, *or just a strange coincidence? I wonder how old he is. But it couldn’t be true.... It’s possible, though.*

When he finished, he laid with her for a few minutes—on top of

her, though not so much as to crush—and stroked her. Then he got up.

Anaiyailla was relieved. *At last*, she thought. She had wanted to ask some more questions but did not sense the timing right.

“Perhaps we’ll talk some more later, my pet.” He got up from the bed.

Anaiyailla moved her knees together, feeling some relief at closing her legs at long last, though the pain in her loins remained intense.

He looked back at her. “Would you like that?” His voice was again devoid of feeling.

“Oh...yes—” She hesitated. “Yes, my Lord.” She sensed the title was again required.

“We’ll have plenty of time later. The Beastspawn will be here shortly and we’ll fly back to Aagaard. If you continue to please me, I might make you my queen.” He stood over her, gazing up and down her body. “Would you like that?”

“Oh, yes. Yes, of course, my Lord.” She tried to sound sincere.

“Hmmp.”

He turned and started to dress. Anaiyailla sat up in the bed, keeping her knees together and sitting back on her heels. She gathered a loose sheet from the bed and wrapped it around herself. The pain had been sharp. She hadn’t expected it. She had known it wasn’t going to be the pleasant experience everyone talked about with a consenting union, but this had been far worse than anything she imagined. Her pelvis was still wracked with pain, so she pushed such sensations to the back of her mind and tried to focus on what she should do.

She turned her thoughts to God, saying a prayer to herself: *Dear God, let me be at the center of Your love, Your kindness, Your forgiveness. Let me be at the center of Your mercy and Your compassion. Let the light of Your wisdom guide me and show me the way to You. Let me understand by that light the good in the path You have set before me. Oh, my God! I pray to understand the good in what I just experienced. I trust in the infinite wisdom of Your design, and I pray for understanding. As You are wise beyond comprehension, I trust in You. Oh dear God, I pray that Your love guides me, I pray for Your kindness and—my God—I pray for Your forgiveness.*

As she continued her prayer, she began to feel better. The pain left her body and the anguish left her soul. Her tormented thoughts drifted

away and her mind felt relaxed and alert. A warmth began welling in her heart. She felt it like a vibration throughout her whole body. She felt light and free. *Oh, thank you, God, for blessing me...I feel the ocean of Your love rising within me; Thou and I are one.*

Her prayer continued and she became aware of Kripa again. Though her eyes were closed, in her exalted state, she could still see him clearly. His clothes and weapons and boots were back in place upon him. He slid his arms into the sleeves of his robe and wrapped it about himself. Then he withdrew from a pocket a large crystal gem. It had shifting red and orange colors. Anaiyailla knew this was the crystal that had fallen to Krell several months ago, the one Krell believed would bring disaster to their village. Kripa held it up in his hands, licking his lips, gazing at it with avaricious delight.

“Ah, the Ninth Hellfire Gem,” Kripa cooed quietly. “The key to Hell on Earth. Vlockor will give me a kingdom for you....”

As he spoke to himself about the power and wealth he would soon attain, Anaiyailla wondered what to do about him. *Dear God, she continued, what shall I do? How does he fit in Your design? What is my purpose with him? What is his purpose with me? What is Your purpose with us?*

In a flash, an answer came to her—or, The Answer. She did not know which. She just knew what it was, or was told it—or figured it out. Again, she did not know. What she did understand, in a thought that came to her whole and complete, was what God wanted with Kripa, what He wanted from all souls of His creation: for them to turn fully to Him, in love and in truth, forever. She understood God’s love was without border, limit, or stop; that it extended to all souls—even Kripa’s. *Yes, God even loves Kripa.* Anaiyailla understood. Hating Kripa would be like a veil between her and the eternal, oceanic love of God—an offense to her own soul. To be truly surrendered to God, she, too, would have to love Kripa, not as one Human to another, but as God loved him.

But how could she? Kripa the rapist, murderer, and sadist? He had murdered her friends, her family. He had twice raped her, and aspired to again. *He will murder again. He will cause terror and mayhem, and enjoy it. I hate him. But I mustn’t. I must forgive him. God’s forgiveness dwarfs sin. Who am I to be wiser than God? Yes, I will forgive him. As I feel the warmth of God’s love coursing through me now, I forgive him. Thank you, God, for blessing me with*

Your guidance. I forgive him. But love? How can I love him? He is evil and vile. But God loves him even so. Does He? Yes, because His love is coextensive with His omnipresence; and because every soul is forged by God, and drawn from His substance. But I can't extend such love to him. Not as he is. He must change first. But doesn't he already seek change? Of course his soul yearns to know God. Doesn't he long for power, knowledge, happiness, security? The quintessence and acme of each of these rests in God. He just doesn't know the way home. I should help him find God. Didn't he already reveal to me that desire? Not by any explicit act on his part, but somewhere deep inside, his soul reaches out to me. He does desire God's love, for there is no other. He was seeking it through me. He just doesn't know it. Can I offer my love to him? I don't know. Yes. I can. So, do I? Yes. Yes, I love him. But do I really? No, those are just words. Oh, God, please help me see, please help me understand....

Anaiyailla looked deep and saw a brilliant, multifaceted light. It flowered at her forehead and consumed her whole mind. Limitless energy flowed in an irresistible tide down her spine, engorging her chakras. Every fiber of her being vibrated joyously. She felt like she was accelerating, even while she sat motionless; like she was flying, but there was no wind. The glory of God's love suffused her, and she suddenly understood the boundless joy God feels when one of His children turns to Him. That joy brought tears to her eyes. She was home. Memories of other lives arose plain before her. Were they hers? The memories revealed the evolution of a soul, paths taken and tragedies endured—to get here? Memories of a millennial journey, of places she had never been and never seen; of people she had never known. Was she viewing the peregrinations of her soul, remembering its past? Could it be?

She was aware of Kripa again, the gem still in his hand. He looked at her, wide-eyed. *Yes, Kripa, I love you. Even you. One day you will find God and it will fill me with joy. Yes. Even you, Kripa. I love you and I extend it to you.*

“Yes, I love you,” she said in the sweetest, most God-intoxicated tones she had ever sounded. She felt the love and joy conferred by God reach out through her to Kripa, a radiant flood even he could not resist.

Kripa looked upon Anaiyailla with wonder—oh, so serene and beautiful was she. She almost seemed to glow. She looked...angelic. When she said, “I love you,” his heart had seemed to stop, and drop. *What is she doing?* he wondered. Somehow he knew she meant it, that she really did. The look on her face was so open, so joyous. But it couldn’t be possible. Something was not right. *Why would she say that? It can’t possibly be true. How could she possibly love me? And why would I care anyway? As long as she obeys....*

The avalanche of joy that hit Kripa shook his consciousness to its very foundations in Hell. Thrills of bliss surged and effervesced through all the strands of his heart. Blast it! He could hear the girl saying it again, “I love you.” He looked at her, saw her joy. *Is this love? How astounding. How wonderful it feels.* Then he noticed the grimy sheet wrapped around her, and remembered what he had done to her. *How despicable,* he thought, and he felt...what? Compassion. Yes. And he felt sorry for her. Then guilt smote him. Why did he do such an awful thing? Surely she deserved nothing but respect. He remembered the look on her face, the pain and the tears as he violated her. He remembered the glee he derived from it. It sickened him. He felt a rending in his heart, and he moaned, burning with shame and grief.

Kripa now felt himself on a precipice. Before him was this girl, and she was radiant. Before him was love. Kripa could see and feel and hear that love. In it, he experienced a joy, an exalted happiness, more precious than any state he had ever known. In it, there was neither loneliness nor hatred nor fear nor emptiness. From that place, he was witness to an expansive continuum of peace, contentment, and fulfillment. It was the place he should have sought all his life. And it was familiar. He remembered now. His mother had shown it to him when he was young. She had showered him with love; she had possessed herself with happiness and joy despite the awfulness of her surroundings. This girl, Anna, was showing him again, offering it to him.

Behind him, however, the raven abyss of his blasted life was plain. He saw, within that abyss, propaganda, murder, rape, looting, and torture. He saw the pleasures derived from those crimes revealed: petty, consumptive, and hollow thrills, whose only effect was to lead him away from the Heaven of love. He saw the loneliness and unhappiness

of the abyss, no matter the conquests or the wealth achieved. He saw himself as he skulked from place to place seeking the temporary gratifications that had always seemed so grand, now revealed so pathetic. He could see himself as he took pleasure in the suffering of others, could feel again his glee while killing, raping, and torturing. Those images were now loathsome and vile. In the abyss: never love, never joy—just unending alternations of boredom, avarice, excitement, and lust.

Now, standing between Anna and the abyss, he felt crushed beneath a millstone of guilt and remorse. How had the stark depravity of it all escaped him? Looking at Anna he could see how impossibly glorious it was to be good. Yes, good. In goodness, he could see the path to love and joy, fulfillment and peace, contentment and happiness. But he deserved none of it, for he had sown nothing but the Demon Lord's seed: disease, hate, fear, grief, sadness, loneliness, shame, death. He groaned. How could he have been so blind? How could he have thought the path to happiness lay in the gratification of an endless number of base desires? The faces of countless victims rose up to confront him, livid with the torment in which he left them.

He wanted to step over to the good, to be embraced by love, to leave behind his evil, but the agony, sorrow, and anguish of his victims stood in his way. They hounded and confronted him, and he felt their pain. Their pain. The pain he had wrought. He cried out, a choking anguished cry. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry...I'm sorry," he mumbled. He pulled at his hair; tears fell—his heart burning. He believed it was not enough, could never be enough. Nothing could atone for what he had done. Nothing. He could never enjoy love. All that was left to him was the other side: pain, fear, loneliness, anger, shame, sadness, and sorrow. It was all he deserved.

"Lord Kripa! Lord Kripa!" Nagrek's voice cut through, along with the banging of a fist on the door. "Lord Kripa! We're under attack! Elves!"

Kripa felt the ecstatic joy and wonder of love slipping away. The precipice was crumbling. He was falling back into the infernal abyss: Vlockor's world of evil. He did not want it. He recoiled.

"Lord Kripa!"

He looked at Anna, still angelic and radiating unruffled love and joy. He wanted goodness. He wanted to be good.

“We’re under attack!”

But the love she had shared with him was fading. Stygian darkness rushed up to reclaim him. Would he remember the light? He could feel the ingrained tendencies of his mind reasserting themselves, eclipsing the awareness of his soul.

“Lord Kripa!” The voice pulled at him.

Was there no other way? Must he remain loveless, perpetually consumed by evil? Why not step forward into the light? He focused his eyes on Anna. She appeared to him to be the essence of all beauty. Remorse for what he had done to her pierced him anew. Worse, he realized he lacked the willpower to not hurt her again. *Oh, please, don’t let me be evil. I want to be good!* But he wasn’t—and knew it. His victims harried him like a mob of savage dogs. He could never be good—they wouldn’t let him. He could never be loved. The moment this experience ended, he would be as he ever was: a walking abomination—and more, an apostate. He could feel the brilliant spark of his soul, which could thrive only in goodness, plummeting into the abyss, dropping like an anvil into a black, bottomless sea. He was too weak.

“Lord Kripa! We’re under attack!” The evil tormented his mind. “They’re trying to steal the gem!”

He knew he was lost. “I’m sorry,” he said to Anna. “Please forgive me.”

The glow around her intensified. Her eyes sparkled. “Oh, I do. I do forgive you, Kripa. You are forgiven.” She spoke in honeyed cadence. “You are loved—always. Know that. Believe that. It is love that cannot be lost or surrendered. Of course you are forgiven.”

Kripa felt his soul expand, felt the evil retreat. Her love touched him again, filling him with joy. She beckoned. Goodness beckoned. All he had to do was reach out to it and he would be welcomed. And succored. “I am forgiven?” he asked, palms extended, unbelieving. “But all I have done...it’s unforgivable.” The mob of his victims was still in full throat, still demanding his eternal torment.

“All is forgiven,” he heard her say with an air of finality.

Joy overwhelmed him as salty, hot tears flowed down his cheeks, to his lips, and off his chin.

“Lord Kripa! We’re under attack! It’s the Elves!”

Kripa didn’t care. *Let them come*, he thought, *for I am joining the king-*

dom of the good. Anna reached out to take his hands. He started to reach back and then he shrank in horror. Vlockor appeared wraithlike before him—in his mind. “You are Hellsworn. You swore your soul to me, and it now and forever belongs to Hell!”

“Nooo!” Kripa shrieked to himself.

“Yes,” the imperious voice of Vlockor roared. “I own your soul. To you, the pleasures and pain of Hell are promised, but the dimensions of Heaven are forbidden. I forbid them!”

Kripa wailed in torment as all the black thoughts and deeds he had ever committed overwhelmed him. The love and joy and forgiveness was lost to him now, blocked by his oath and allegiance to Hell. Did he really think he could escape his past, escape what he truly was? Escape his oath to Hell? The light was receding. Now just a spark, it was dying and he was losing himself to evil. He struggled, convinced now it was hopeless. He had doomed himself. He remembered kneeling before Lord Vlockor, swearing fealty to Hell and allegiance to the Lord of Hell. Vlockor’s magic had coursed through him, binding him to his oath and granting him Demon strength, steel-like talons, toughened skin, and a bull-like virility. There was no escaping that contract. He had bartered his soul away. It no longer belonged to him.

To be tantalized with love and forgiveness—how cruel. The world is cold, harsh, and one must be colder, harsher, to survive. Love is an illusion; joy and happiness, a mirage. They come from nothing, are made of nothing, and so they fail the onslaught of reality. Only the weak choose them, forever pining for what might have been. The strong seize what they want. Sensual pleasures, exhilaration, and pride are ever available to them—like the thrill of making a girl squirm from your manhood and having her, nevertheless, profess to love you. With that thought, the spark winked out, vanished.

“Lord Kripal!” Nagrek’s voice called through the door, his fist pounding.

“Gather the elite guard beyond the gates!”

“Yes, my Lord.”

Kripa suddenly noticed his hand was smoking. It was the Hellfire Gem. Reflexively, he dropped it and it clinked against the hard dirt floor. His mind focused. *The Elves*, he thought. *It’s their magic.* “You’ll not get this gem back!” he snarled aloud. Then he knelt and touched one of his talons to it. A shock streaked up and into his hand, branch-

ing out along his nervous system, burning everywhere it went. He cursed. Snatching the girl's dress from the floor, he bundled up the gem and stuffed it in a pocket of his robe.

He looked at her. With tousled hair and rosy cheeks, she was more alluring than ever. *A little after-sex glom*, he thought amusedly, then wondered if his infatuation had been real or some transitory effect of Elven magic. *It doesn't matter*. Whatever it was, it had failed. *Love? What a farce*. He turned his mind to the problem of the Elves.

Taking up his staff, Kripa strode to the door and unlocked it. Several Orcs and Soldier Demons milled about the corridor. They turned and nodded to him deferentially.

"Falg!" he called to the nearest Orc.

"Yes, my Lord?"

"You're in charge of the girl."

"Yes, my Lord."

Chief Ogen came into view, trotting as he rounded the bend ahead, several others with him. Ogen was six-foot-six, two hundred fifty pounds, and one of the most capable fighters among the Orcs. Four fangs jutted out from behind his lips, the points of the lower set coming level with his porcine nose when his mouth was closed.

"Lord Kripa!" He skidded to a stop.

"Well?"

"They're just outside the First Guardpost. We've got it barricaded. Two dozen of the guard wait with crossbows in case they break through. The other twenty are placed in front of the Second Guardpost. Nagrek said you ordered the elite guard to withdraw behind the gates to this wing of the tunnel complex; it's being done now."

"Good." Kripa wondered whether he should attack or wait until they came to him. Better wait, he thought. "Let me know when they've broken through the First Guardpost."

Nagrek came barreling around the bend and ran up to them. "My Lord, they're coming! There are scores of them. The Second Guardpost is under attack now."

Kripa weighed his options. He knew little about the enemy's strength—but enough to be worried. They were making short work of his defenses. He made up his mind. "Have everyone rig for travel," he ordered Ogen.

“But there’s no way out, my Lord.”

“There is if I say there is! Just do it, and quickly, before the last guardpost falls. Anyone who’s not back behind the inner gates by then is to be locked out, no exceptions.”

“Yes, my Lord.” Ogen saluted. “What about our women?”

“Leave them.”

Ogen barked orders and ran off, others with him.

“Well, don’t gape,” Kripa said to the Soldier Demons and his personal guards. “Get your traveling gear!”

They hustled off to various doors along the corridor, saying “Yes, my Lord” as they took their leave. Kripa saw Falg hauling Anna with him, and it reminded him about the Sylph. He went over to the store-room and unlocked it. She lay cowering where Anna had left her and moaned as he strode up. He grabbed a handful of her shirt and snatched her from the room, carrying her like a piece of luggage. Nagrek’s room was nearby and he took her to the opened door.

“This one’s your responsibility,” he told Nagrek, who was stuffing his pack full. “She dies before the Elves get her,” he added, tossing her into the room.

Kripa went back to his room and pulled two large packs from his trunk. Dragging the packs to the corridor, he left them in the charge of a Soldier Demon who waited there, packed and ready. Kripa waited as the rest gathered. Then Chief Ogen arrived, shouldering a large pack and shoving everyone aside as he hurried to Kripa’s side.

“They’ve broken through to the inner gates,” Ogen said.

“I have in my custody a powerful talisman bound for Lord Vlockor, as you know,” Kripa announced loudly. “The Elves must not be allowed to have it. You will protect it with your lives. Prevail and there will be gold and promotions to be had. Though I’d enjoy massacring them, our orders are to return to Aagaard with the talisman. I’m going to create a way out and leave our enemies a mystery. Follow me and stay close.”

Kripa led them to the end of the corridor: a dead end. Then he called forth his most powerful spell, the one he had only recently mastered, called Protean Relativity. Unlike most other spells, this one did not produce a consistent effect but, rather, placed in a wizard’s hands a malleable energy that was responsive to his will.

It was his trump card and he hated to use it. His plan had been to hold the spell in reserve to use against Dreuth-sur, the Pit Beast, if needed. When the Beast arrived, he had intended to order him to seek out the Elves and destroy them under the pretext that such a mission was necessary to safeguard the gem. If the Beast obeyed, Kripa would have taken all the Beastspawn and flown the gem to Vlockor in Fortress Aagaard, leaving the Beast behind. If the Beast mutinied, he would have used the Protean Relativity spell to kill him, then fled just the same, to Aagaard. But now these Elves had spoiled his scheme.

Triggering the spell, raw magic consumed the intricate spell formulae, then coalesced into a luminous ball of inchoate energy hovering above his upturned hands. He sent it into the dirt wall before him, commanding it to turn the dirt ethereal. As it did so, a wave of relief swept over him. He had never had an opportunity to assess the limitations of this spell. Directing a corridor in an upward direction, he led everyone forward. He could feel the dirt through which he walked, like a continuous succession of cobwebs. It took a few minutes, but eventually he walked clear, into the light of day, trees standing tall all around. As the last of the Orcs emerged from the ground, the dirt once again became solid, as it had done progressively the whole way up.

“Your magic is strong, my Lord.” It was one of the Soldier Demons. Magic impressed them more than anything.

Kripa looked at him. He was nearly six and a half feet tall, with a gaunt face and powerful muscles. His skin was reddish-black and very tough. Two six-inch horns jutted from his bald head, and small, nub-like ones jutted out through the skin from each of his cheekbones and his chin. He had big pointed ears, fangs that jutted up and distended his lower lip, and red eyes. His clothes were ratty, but his two swords were of good quality. He had a large pack slung over his shoulder. There were seven others just like him.

Ogen addressed him: “It is an honor to serve under your command, my Lord. They’ll never figure out what happened to us.”

“Perhaps not,” he said. “Everyone, gather close.” He pulled forth a small pouch from a pocket. It was filled with dust. He sprinkled a pinch over each of their heads: the eight Soldier Demons, his ten personal guards, Ogen and his eighteen elite guards, Anna and the Sylph, and himself. It was a magic dust of tracelessness. For about an hour,

they would leave no signs of passage.

*“Only heroes pass the pearly gates.
Think ye that kindness alone will
qualify you for Heaven? The worldly
may be kind, but the unyielding essence
of heroism is the soul. It is the ‘I Am.’ ”*

—*Saint Sevannah,*
The Testament of Angels

CHAPTER 9

TRIAL AND TRIUMPH

Hungren Dreuth-sur, or “the Beast” as he was known to most, landed in front of the Orc lair. With him were nine Wizard Demons and ten Beastspawn—each of the latter carrying on their back two Soldier Demons. Late yesterday afternoon, he had received the magically broadcast message from Kripa: “Return to the Orc lair with the Beastspawn immediately. Immediate evacuation to Masseryk required.”

It was a perpetual irritant to him to have to take orders from this swaggering half-Human quisling. And it provoked him further that he could not learn to cast the wide variety of spells that Kripa could. He could not, in fact, learn any spells. The ones he knew came unbidden, the spell formulae generated somewhere inside by faculties he did not understand. What he did understand was that he was more powerful than Kripa, and could rip him to shreds with little trouble; therefore, he should be the one giving orders. He was a Pit Demon, whereas Kripa was an insolent, womb-born mongrel suffered by Vlockor to have a role in the coming of Hell on Earth. That the command of this expedition had been weaseled out from underneath him galled Dreuth-sur no end.

Shaking off that irritation as the Beastspawn made their landings, Dreuth-sur recalled his exhilaration when he was chosen to lead the expeditionary force into the Druunhaelen Mountains. Lord Vlockor

had spent weeks sequestered in his fortress, using his vast magical capacity to trace what had happened to the ninth and last Hellfire Gem. When he emerged, he revealed that the six Pit Demons who had custody of the gem had been killed somewhere in the Druunhaelen Mountains, and that the gem was still there. He could not discern what killed the Pit Demons but was certain the gem had not been moved in a while. Locating its position in the Druunhaelens more precisely would take months of scrying, providing its location did not shift. Overlord Bahrick and the Death Legion were to secure the whole region to prevent the gem from being moved.

And that had been Kripa's opening. He insinuated himself into Lord Vlockor's confidence, claiming detailed knowledge of the Druunhaelens and such connections as would allow him to rapidly organize the local Orc and Goblin populations.

Having witnessed Kripa's machinations, Dreuth-sur was resolved to kill him, and would do so the moment he was sure Lord Vlockor would no longer care. *How dare Kripa order me around, Dreuth-sur thought, me—one of the original Demons brought to Earth through the Great Barrier nearly two hundred years ago! Me! One who fought countless battles at Lord Vlockor's side.*

He twitched his nose. Someday, even Vlockor would pay for this indignity. Dreuth-sur secretly possessed a relic of ancient power that could enable him to dethrone the Demon Lord. He needed only to find its key, which he believed was right here in these mountains, hidden in the lost Temple Mount. If Vlockor only knew...

Upon learning of this relic, Dreuth-sur had arranged a transfer to Baeza, where he hunted down the Order that kept it and killed all its acolytes. Then he transferred back, and maneuvered himself onto this mission, so he could search for the Temple Mount—and the key. That half-nosed Kripa was a hindrance, but Dreuth-sur was confident in his eventual success. He would grow his powers and join the ranks of the Archfiends, and with this relic and its key, he would become Demon Lord.

Dreuth-sur shook his head, astonished at how some Pit Demons managed to get themselves killed in this soft world—like those six who were detailed to transport the last Hellfire Gem to Aagaard. Stupid. No one among their enemies could kill him. In nearly two hundred years,

they had failed in every attempt.

As the Soldier Demons dismounted around him, Dreuth-sur noticed something amiss. An unusual number of Orcs milled about near the entrance to the lair, and he smelled blood on the wind. Glancing at the lookout posts, he inferred they were the source of the smell. Then he noticed the nearest Orc, obviously wanting to speak to him, so he ambled over on all fours, wings folded in on his body.

“What happened here?” He deliberately bared his teeth and ran his fat, black tongue across them.

“Wh-we...we’ve been attacked. By Elves!”

“And?”

“Th-th-they’re still in there, Gr-Great Beast Lord.”

“Then why aren’t you in there fighting?”

“Be-be-because they, they’ve barricaded, they...they’ve barricaded themselves in the lower section, my Lord.”

“Cowards!” He flared at the Orc, pleased to see it almost sink to its knees. “Is Kripa in there?”

“Ye-yes, my Lord.”

Yes, he thought, I like this very much. Perhaps the Elves will kill him for me. Then I'll kill the Elves. Regardless, today Kripa's officially dying at the hand of an Elf—even if I have to take a severed Elf arm and ram it down his throat. Dreuth-sur laughed, pleased with the visual image that sprang to mind. Then he noticed the Orc was hiding something.

“What else?” His voice was a low rumble.

“It-it...It’s rumored...rumored th-that...it’s rumored that Lord Kripa...Lord Kripa found what the Great Lord Vlockor is looking for.”

Dreuth-sur froze. He felt his brain seethe in its case. Stunning! How could Kripa have...

Suddenly it made sense to him. Kripa had discovered where the gem was, sent him away on a ruse so that he could seize it, then found himself hounded by Elves and had to call for help. *Oh, he's a clever one. He must have realized I would kill him; for, of what importance was he to Lord Vlockor once the gem was found? That's why he let me have most of the Demons. His scheme was to obtain the gem, secretly return it to Lord Vlockor, and then take sole credit. Dirty treacherous miscegenation! Skulking bastard! I'll make him watch while I feed his balls to one of the Beastspawn.*

“You were conspiring to hide this from me, were you?” he roared in a towering rage, turning his attention back to the hapless Orc. The Orc’s eyes bugged, his mouth gaped, and he wet himself, even as he feebly shook his head in negation. But Dreuth-sur could not be mollified. He grabbed the Orc’s head from the top, wrapped his left foreclaws down its neck, and impaled it with his other foreclaws, right at its collar. Grinding talons into the Orc’s neck, he pulled and twisted until its head came off. Then he hurled its skull against a rock with such vigor that it exploded: blood, brain, and bone flying everywhere.

“All you cowards,” he roared at the Orcs who stood about him, frozen, staring in terror, “get back in there and fight or I’ll slaughter you where you stand!”

The Orcs moved, surging toward the cave through the mass of boulders at the base of the rock bluff. Dreuth-sur followed them with his Demons, leaving two Wizard Demons and four Soldier Demons outside with the Beastspawn.

“If any of those maggots run, kill them,” he bellowed before disappearing into the fetid cave.

* * *

Krell did not know what lay beyond this door, but he did know that for the first time his enemy had a chance to prepare. That thought was like a wasp circling his head. Still, there was but one thing to do. He signaled Lori.

Responding to her magic, the door flew open. Tyr followed a volley of their arrows down the short corridor, the full body shield he held in front blocking most of the hallway. Krell heard the percussive *thwack* of crossbow quarrels shattering against its magic. He and Urg followed in close order, and the three of them plowed into the surviving Orcs on the other side of the open door. The room at the end of the hall was just ten feet wide and fifteen deep. A dozen Orcs waited in ambush there, with even more choking the passageway beyond.

Several Orcs had arrows sticking out of them, and they were reeling from the initial rush. Then a cluster slumped to the ground under the influence of Lori’s Sleep spell. Krell pressed the attack, using his daggers in close quarters. At his onslaught, the Orcs at the front caved

in, causing a crush of bodies in the ranks behind. Krell could hear Orcs cry out as they cut each other in the scrum.

These Orcs were well armed but could not wield their weapons in the rank and slippery press of their own bodies. Krell was not so hampered. With a dagger in each hand, he slit throats; slashed shoulders, thighs, and hands; and found seams in their armor. Urg was there, too, with Kian, Andy, and Abajian. They all used daggers, as Krell had counseled. Tyr stayed back, keeping his shield between the Orcs and the rest of the raiding party, protecting them from crossbow bolts.

It was unnecessary. Krell heard the shouts of “run” and knew the Orcs immediately ahead had been routed. At Krell’s call to his bowmen, he, Urg, Kian, Andy, and Abajian stepped to the side, and arrows flew into the backs of those fleeing. *Kill them now, or face them again later*, he thought. Krell then led the charge after them, trusting Alloria and Nakula to make sure the women and children were safe, trusting in the effects of the spells they said they could cast.

* * *

Alloria led the women and children through the door and into the small room, the illusion magic upon them unraveling as they moved. Nakula came last, closing the door and casting a Wizard Lock spell upon it. The door was solid, made of thick beams reinforced with iron. Now their immediate worry was the Orcs to their front.

Alloria followed the men, leading her charges down the dark passageway. It sloped down for fifty feet, then leveled out. Brynn and Pelias were waiting where a branching corridor went off to the right. It was a relief to see them again. They continued past, Brynn telling her they would keep watch. The corridor they were in then turned left. *How will we ever find our way out of this maze?* Alloria wondered.

Ahead about forty feet was one of their men. It was Andy, waving them forward. Alloria went to him, passing a short hallway on the left that opened into a large room. Further ahead, she heard fighting. Andy led her from the corridor into a short hallway on the right that opened into a large chamber, eighty by forty feet.

“Krell said to wait here.” He gave her a quick hug. “I cannot believe we are doing this.”

The women and children were now filing in. The chamber was lit by four chandeliers fashioned of antlers and glowing stones. There were tables, chairs, benches, and cupboards in useful arrangements throughout the room. Alloria saw the Human, Quillan, slumped in a chair with crossbow quarrels sticking in his leg and chest. Ry'danen was next to him, a severe gash across his face and left eye. Five Orcs lay dead in the room.

In a back corner were nearly twenty Orc women and a few children. Alloria had never seen their females before. All of them wore hooded black robes, but their hoods were pulled back. She was surprised to see they were far more Human in appearance than the males. Judging by the abject way they cowered, their apparent victimization, they had no intention of interfering. Nevertheless, their presence made Alloria nervous. *I pity them*, Alloria thought, *but right now they're just one more thing to worry about.*

Alloria turned her attention to the wounded men, silently praying that Krell and the men with him were unhurt.

* * *

Racing down the dimly lit corridor, Krell heard the Orcs he was pursuing stop and raise a call to fire. He instantly pressed against the wall and allowed Tyr to lead with the shield. Quarrels flew, smashing against Tyr's shield and ricocheting off the walls. After the volley ended, Krell charged again, ignoring the superficial wound to his neck caused by a shard from a shattered quarrel. He, Urg, Kian, Tyr, Sinon, and Abajian killed them all. The corridor was simply too small for the rest to get any action. No one with Krell seemed badly wounded, though Tyr and Sinon were bloodied. The Orcs had been guarding a solid wooden door, reinforced by iron. It was closed and locked tight, and set back at the end of the corridor on the left-hand side.

They'll make their stand behind this door, Krell thought. The Orc Chief and this "Great Lord Kripa" must be reached soon. With those heads in hand, the rest of the Orcs would scatter. But it must happen soon. Krell did not want to think about what would happen if the other Demons and the Goblins returned while they were still in the lair. *We have no choice but to force this door down, even though we have no idea what is*

waiting for us behind it, Krell reasoned.

Looking over the men, he saw two were missing: Quillan and the Elf, Ry'danen. Andy would be back with Lori, Nakula, and the women and children in that large chamber; Brynn and Pelias were on guard behind them at a fork in the corridor. That left eleven men to take on however many were behind this door. But first it had to be opened.

"Nakula!" he called down the corridor. "Door!"

Krell took a deep breath, praying he was right, worried sick for Anna. *Dear God, let her be okay*, he thought as he pulled the splinter of wood from his neck. The combat had gone well so far, but if there were Orcs behind any of the closed doors they had left in their wake, their situation would be perilous. They were stretched and vulnerable, and until those two heads were in hand, disaster was just an ambush away.

"Same as before?" Kian said to him, looking at the door.

"Yes," Krell answered, then looked at Tyr, who was wrapping cloth around his midsection. "Tyr, are you well enough for battle?" There was a great deal of blood.

"Do not let the blood fool you—I will fight, friend," he said stoically. "It is but a flesh wound." He hefted the large shield.

Krell looked him in the eye. "Your word on that?"

Tyr nodded, resolute. "Yes."

Nakula came jogging up then.

"Is everyone ready?" Krell looked around and everyone nodded. "My friends, this is it. You know the stakes; you know what we must do."

"This is the last time I'll be able to do this," Nakula said, "then I'll be down to one Color-Spray and that Firewall spell I told you about. But here goes."

A moment later, the locks clicked on the door and it flew open. Tyr charged through, leading with the shield, Krell and the others following. It opened into a room ten feet by fifteen feet. Corridors led away from the far wall and the right-hand sidewall.

To everyone's surprise, the room was not defended. Krell assessed the situation. Down the corridor on the right could be seen a couple of Orcs toting large bundles. Along the corridor straight ahead a few Orcs were moving away, looking back over their shoulders, also carry-

ing bundles. There were no Orcs in this room.

Krell was especially worried about magic, but there was nothing to be done about it. He charged ahead and the Orcs ran. He passed branching corridors, both left and right, then a door a little further along on the right. *We're in trouble*, he thought. The cave complex was much bigger than he'd imagined. *The Orc Chief and "Lord Kripa" could be anywhere*. Their backs were exposed, and the women and children were vulnerable. Yet, if they were to rescue Anna and the Sylph, all they could do was press forward.

The corridor began to slope down. Krell overtook a fleeing Orc, killed it with his axe, then resumed his sprint. The corridor leveled out, and Krell saw a steel gate being closed up ahead. Two Orcs slammed into it, shouting. Krell was there in an instant and killed them both. Through the gate, he could see another ten-by-fifteen-foot room. At its far wall was yet another gate, this one open, with a passageway beyond. Two Orcs stood at the mouth of that passage.

The Orcs had crossbows, and they leveled them. Krell snatched up the lifeless body of one of the Orcs he had just killed and used it as a shield. Both quarrels slammed into it.

"Cowards! Where's your leader?" he snarled at them in Orcish. Then he saw him: the Orc Chief. Emerging from a passageway on the right side of the room, he had a large pack over his shoulder. Krell recognized him from the village, the one he had been about to kill when that Wizard Demon had flown out over the village Circle.

The Chief looked at him and Krell saw the shock of recognition. At that moment, Kian rushed up, joining Krell at the gate.

"Let's go!" the Chief yelled and took off through the far gate.

Krell stepped back and hurled a dagger. It whirled cleanly through the bars of the first gate, but grazed a bar on the second gate as one of the Orcs swung it closed. The dagger deflected harmlessly into the corridor beyond. Krell hurled his other dagger at the Chief as the second gate was being locked. It flew cleanly through both gates, but one of the Chief's retinue got in the way as he turned to follow his leader. It sank into his back and he fell. Without a backward glance at his fallen retainer, the Orc Chief disappeared down the corridor. The last Orc finished locking the gate and took off after him. Krell swore.

Kian quickly picked up a crossbow from one of the dead Orcs and

shot. The quarrel went through both gates and sank into the back of the last Orc's neck. He crumpled in a heap on the floor of the corridor.

"They must have a secret exit." Kian slammed the crossbow to the ground in self-evident frustration.

"Yes." Krell tested the gate and found it solid.

Urg and Abajian ran down the corridor toward them. "Everything is secure back there," Urg said as he arrived. "There were only a few of them; they're all dead now. As is Trever. One of the Orcs wore a disguise, a black robe of the kind they force their women to wear, and cut Trever's throat when he looked away."

* * *

Back in the large chamber with the women and children, Alloria tended to the wounded. Quillan was lucky the quarrel had lodged in a rib bone. She had been able to remove it and heal the shallow wound, as well as the one in his leg. Ry'danen had healed nicely, too, though she was not sure he would regain sight in that left eye.

Hearing a rush of booted feet in the hallway, Alloria turned and saw several Orcs charging into the room. They were big, each about six feet tall, and she suddenly felt tiny. *Oh, God*, she thought, *something's gone wrong!* Fangs jutted from their mouths and the swords in their hands glittered in the light as they were brought to bear.

Andy leapt into their path, but there were too many. He took one down and dodged two blows, but others surged past. Alloria gathered her wits and cast her Finger-Lightning spell. The tiny bolt hit one in his chest and he crumpled. The women and children from the village rose as one and, with Ry'danen and Quillan, met the onrush, all of them swinging their swords furiously, but two Orcs cornered Alloria against a table. As one grabbed her, she cast her Electrocutation spell, causing him to shriek and fall away, convulsing. The other one then raised his sword. The blow never came. The Orc collapsed. Alloria saw Samantha, the woman who had helped her with the Illusion spell, standing there in his place, a bloodied sword in her hand. Pelias and Brynn were to either side. The Orcs were down, all eight of them.

"Lori!" Andy rushed to her side. Blood dripped on his shirt from

cuts to his face and scalp. “Are you all right?”

“Yes. But you...you’re hurt,” she said softly. Ry’danen and Quillan seemed all right, though Ry’danen tried to staunch the flow from a gash along his left forearm. Some of the little girls were crying. The Orc women still huddled together in their corner.

“It’s not deep.” He loosened the strip of cloth at his waist. “I’ll just bind it.”

Alloria took the cloth from him and began to clean his wound. “Where did they come from?” she asked.

“I don’t know.” Brynn sheathed his sword. “We heard fighting and came running. They must have come from down there.” He pointed in the direction the rest of the men had gone. “No telling how many of them are lurking in this labyrinth.”

The cut along Andy’s left cheek was to the bone and would leave a scar, but the jaw muscles were undamaged. Some coagulant powder and several stitches closed the wound. She then went to Ry’danen to bind up his arm. The Humans and Elves fell silent as she worked, but three of the female Orcs in the back of the room had begun to point at the fresh corpses and wail.

“Those three seem to have lost someone they cared about,” Alloria said.

“Yes, but what are we to do?” Samantha asked, still holding her sword.

“Let us find Krell and the others.” Andy walked out to look down the hallway, then turned back. “We should be there when it ends—either way.”

“I agree,” Brynn said and paused in thought. “Let’s hope the attack on our position here does not mean our friends are dead. Lori?”

Alloria did not want to think of that possibility. “Well, we all know there’s only one way out of here. I say we move.”

“I suspect they just passed these up in pursuit of the leaders,” Andy interjected. “It is most likely over by now.”

“Yes, hopefully. We should go then.” Alloria finished bandaging Ry’danen’s arm. “That corridor back there, it’s been quiet?”

“Yes. We saw some females looking out into the corridor, so it must be living quarters down there. If any males are left among them, they’re cowards,” Brynn answered.

“Right, let’s go,” Alloria said. Then turning, she addressed the women: “Ladies, follow us and remain close together. We will join with the men. Hopefully, we’ll be back within sight of trees and mountains soon.”

She, Andy, Quillan, and Ry’danen led the way. Brynn, Pelias, and Samantha said they would act as a rearguard.

“Brynn,” Alloria said as they started into the corridor, “perhaps you or Pelias should check on the door, see how it’s holding up?”

“I will see to it,” Brynn said. He turned and went the other way down the corridor.

Alloria waged an internal struggle to stay calm and collected. It was difficult, what with uncertainty as to “Lord Kripa’s” powers, and the surety of only two “wizard locked” doors between them and the two hundred still-living Orcs in the upper regions of the lair. Bracing her will, she led the way down the corridor, hoping to see Krell and Kian at every turn. “God, please help us,” she whispered. “God, grant us that we rescue Anaiyailla and Cellestillena and live to see the light of day.”

The corridor was long. They passed six doors staggered along its sides as they went. Andy checked each door. They were all locked except one. It opened into a sizable room, unlit, and filled with casks, bales, and crates. It smelled of fermenting berries.

“Perhaps those Orcs we just cut down were hiding here,” Andy said.

“Yes, that must have been how it was.” Alloria smiled at her brother, taking strength from his optimism. She reached out and touched the hair at the nape of his neck with one hand.

The Human, Malcon, came running out of the open door on the left. “Oh, Lady Alloria! They need you. I was sent to fetch everyone.”

“We’re all here, thank you. Is it over?” Alloria asked.

“Papa!” A little girl from behind ran up and jumped into Malcon’s arms. “I’m so scared!” She buried her head in his shoulder.

Malcon gripped his daughter protectively. “I’m afraid not, Lady Alloria. We must overrun their gates. This lair goes deeper than we thought.”

“Well, lead on then,” she said, both relieved and disappointed. He turned and led them to the end of the corridor, holding his little girl. Alloria picked her way through the carnage. Clots of Orc bodies lit-

tered the passage. A few still clung to life but were immobilized by their wounds. The smell of blood rose above the general stench of the lair. In the room beyond, Trever lay on the ground, covered in blood, lifeless. Two Orcs lay near him, blood still bubbling from a wound to the chest of one of them. More butchered Orcs laid in the hallway to the right. To the left was a desk and chair.

Casting her eyes toward Trever again, Alloria thought: *Rest easy, brave Trever, we'll be back to bury you beneath the wind and stars; rest easy, sweet man, we won't leave you in this suffocating horror.*

Malcon pressed on. Alloria followed. Ahead she could hear banging. Soon, they passed two corridors branching from either side. Three Orcs laid in the hallway to the right. One of them was still alive, propped up against a wall, his right arm hacked off right below the shoulder, a pool of blood beneath. *I suspect Krell did that*, Alloria thought. *They should never have touched his sister.* The maimed Orc appeared to be in shock. His eyes were open, but unmoving, and his mouth worked silently. She forced herself to look away. To the left, she saw a hallway; it was short and led to an open chamber. Further ahead on the right was an open door. Sinon and Abajian were in the room there, searching it. They came out with a stack of sheets and joined her group as it continued down into the Earth.

"We think they must have a secret exit," Sinon said to Alloria as they hurried along. Krell and the rest of the men could now be seen ahead. "They were fleeing when we came through that door back there, and they all had packs."

"Oh? There's an exit? What a relief it is to know that," Alloria said.

Krell and Urg stopped pounding on the gate as the other men parted to let her through. Looking ahead, she saw the gate beyond the one where the men were gathered.

"I already used my other Knock spell," she told them. "I can open only one."

"Open this one," Krell said without hesitation. "That Orc down there has the keys in his hand. Perhaps we can hook his body with these sheets somehow and drag it back to that second gate."

Alloria looked down the corridor beyond the second gate and saw the Orc. He was about twenty-five feet from the gate. Keys lay in his

lifeless hand. Pulling up her Knock spell, she cast it on the first gate. The lock clicked and it swung open, creaking eerily. Now she had just two spells left: a Hold Portal and her illusion spell, Spectral Force.

As they moved toward the second gate, she was struck by an idea. Kian was tying sheets and Krell was attaching them to a bent metal object. "Wait," she told them. "I have an idea." She called Malcon to the front. He was still holding his little girl. She looked like she might be small enough. She was about five years old.

"Let's see if she can slip through the gate and get those keys for us." Alloria petted the girl's hair.

"Oh, I see." Malcon looked at the gate and seemed to weigh the situation. "Sweetheart, we need you to help us. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Papa," she sniffled.

He took her to the gate and set her down. Alloria knelt next to her. Behind Alloria, Ry'danen, Kian, and Quillan took up stations with their bows at the ready.

"Hello. What's your name?" Alloria asked.

"Chelsea."

"What a lovely name, Chelsea," she told her, pushing back hair from the girl's face. "Do you think you could do us a rather large favor?"

Chelsea nodded her head.

"Can you see those keys over there," she pointed, "in his hand?"

Chelsea peered through the bars. "Yes, ma'am."

"We need you to get them for us."

She looked up to her father and he nodded to her after glancing toward the archers and Krell. "Go ahead, Chelsea; you can do it."

"Yes, Papa." She started to wriggle through the bars and nearly made it, but her head became stuck. She began to squeak, but Krell grasped the two bars and pulled at them in opposite directions with his enormous strength. They bowed and the girl was through. Chelsea scampered up to the dead Orc and stood over his hand. She tugged on the keys, but they didn't come free.

"He won't let go," Chelsea piped, looking back at them.

"You can do it, honey," Malcon said to her. "Try again."

Alloria was worried. She could see doors on either side of the corridor about thirty feet farther, and more beyond. What if the Orcs

hadn't fled but were waiting there in ambush? Chelsea looked so small and vulnerable—what if Orcs were to suddenly emerge from those doors or come from around the corner farther up? She would be helpless.

Then Alloria realized how vulnerable they all were, crowded so close together. *How stupid I am*, she thought. *I know this “Great Lord Kripa” is a wizard of some sort, so I know what he might be capable of. But Krell doesn't. Kian doesn't either. Not really. None of the men do. Except Nakula. Oh, how stupid of me! I should have briefed them on spells that could be cast at us. If that wizard were to suddenly appear and cast a fireball, we'd all be incinerated.*

Chelsea pulled on the keys with all her strength. Abruptly, she flew backward and landed on her bottom. The keys were in her hands and she wore a triumphant smile on her face.

“Krell!” Alloria tugged on his shirt. “We should not be gathered together like this. That wizard's magic could be used to great effect on us if we give him a compact target.”

“You are right. Thank you, my Lady,” he said, then took the keys from Chelsea as she ran back to the gate. He unlocked it and swung it open.

Alloria scooped Chelsea up in her arms and kissed her, then hugged her tight, feeling greatly relieved. Krell gave orders, explaining that they would advance in staggered groups of four. She saw him retrieve two of his daggers and stow them in his vest.

“Oh, you're a good girl,” she said to Chelsea. “A very good girl.”

* * *

Brynn moved quickly, retracing their steps, intent on seeing if the last door Nakula had sealed was still intact. After negotiating several upward-sloping corridors, he heard scores of Orc voices and pounding on the door. Stepping over corpses as he went, he warily approached it. Despite a crack in the window shutter, it otherwise appeared quite solid. *Without Lori's and Nakula's magic*, he thought, gingerly laying a hand on the door, *this whole mission would have been impossible*. It looked like it would bear up for a while.

Brynn was about to leave when the Orcs on the other side became quiet and their pounding ceased. Pulse racing, he went to the door and

peaked through the crack in the window shutter, half expecting to see a bloodshot eye staring back at him. Instead he saw a group of Orcs in the room, on their knees, looking at the passageway on the far wall. *Now, that is disturbing*, Brynn thought. The Orcs remained that way for several minutes as Brynn watched. Then movement could be seen in the passageway on the far wall.

Brynn gasped in horror as the Demons came. The Orcs shrank away, abasing themselves. Brynn was transfixed. First came some Soldier Demons; next some Wizard Demons; then, finally, the Pit Beast. Terror boiled up inside Brynn at the sight of it. He took to his heels, fleeing. He had to tell the others.

* * *

Krell looked down at a woman's shoes and undergarments, knowing them to be his sister's. Large veins stood engorged on his neck. The knuckles on his right hand showed white where he gripped the hilt of his sword. Trying to hold his emotions in check, he calculated where she might have been taken. From the second gate, Krell's squad had charged up the corridor in a rapid and organized fashion, the trailing men checking the doors on each side of the passageway. Stopping briefly at the forty-five-degree bend where he had last seen the Orc Chief, he had spotted a large alcove about twenty feet square with table and chairs in the middle. Around the bend, the corridor continued in a straight line, four doors on either side of it, ending in a cul-de-sac. Seven of the eight doors had been either open or unlocked. They had found neither a single Orc nor an exit. Sweat formed in beads on Krell's forehead as he considered the implications of these facts.

"Krell!" Kian called from the corridor. "I've almost got it."

He went out to the corridor and down to the locked door. Kian chipped away at the wood around the lock with the magic dagger from King Riordanall's tomb. Other men came out of rooms where they had been searching for secret exits. Alloria now led the women and children up.

"Keep them back," he said to Alloria, then to the men: "Be ready."

Kian stepped away from the door and Krell kicked it. It flew open

and Kian, Krell, and Urg rushed in. It was empty except for the Pit Fiend skull, and there was no other exit.

Brynn's voice rang out: "Kian! Krell!"

Krell and Kian ran from the room into the corridor.

"Demons!" Brynn yelled, still running. "Two dozen of them, scores of Orcs—and I saw a Pit Beast."

Krell looked around at everyone and saw panic rising in the eyes of some. "Where?" he heard himself say calmly.

"In—in the upper section still." Brynn halted, breathing hard. "At least, when I left they were. That door won't hold a minute against that thing!"

I've killed us all, Krell thought, remembering the Demons he had seen in battle with the Dragon. *God only knows what will happen to Anna now. I let grief master my judgment. My sister will be enslaved like Mother was, and made to bear their children—and the rest of us are doomed.*

No! The word burst within his brain like a thunderclap. He didn't know where it came from, but while it still reverberated within, he felt his resolve harden and become settled—irrevocably. He would rescue his sister. She would not be their slave. *God is the final power, not these Demons. Oh, God*, he prayed, *I lift my eyes to Thy glory. Fill Your chalice, my heart, with Your power. Save Your people from humiliation and deliver us from evil. Amen.*

"There must be a secret way out of here." He spoke loudly and clearly to everyone. "Search for it. Search the rooms, the corridor, the floor and the ceiling. Search for it. Everyone!" He emphasized the last word, looking at Alloria and the women behind her. "Kian, Nakula, come with me."

He took off at a run down the corridor, past the women and children, around the bend and through the gates. With Kian and Nakula trailing, they dashed up the sloped passageway to the metal-reinforced door, still ajar, as they had left it. He could hear the Orcs coming. Stepping through the door, he looked down the long corridor to the right. Orcs, two abreast, marched toward them. Kian and Nakula came to a stop behind him. The Orcs were no more than a hundred feet down the corridor, closing fast.

Krell stepped back and slammed shut the door. He found its key hanging on a peg behind an adjacent desk. Snatching the key, he locked

the door.

“Options?” Kian asked.

“Well, I believe it’s unlikely they are coming to surrender and sue for terms.” Krell half smiled and shook his head. “Consider their options: They could advance behind a barricade of shields, spears bristling, until we are pinned to a wall; they could burn us out; trade arrows and spells with us, until we run out of both; or they could bury us alive.”

“So why are you smiling?” asked Nakula.

“Well, militarily speaking, we have two advantages.”

“Such as?” Kian prompted.

“Well, first, we are cornered; and, second, it may have escaped your notice, but by God, you two are magnificent.” Krell looked at Kian and Nakula as if seeing them for the first time.

They stared at him for a second, then the three broke into laughter.

“You joke, but I think it’s time to get away from this door,” Nakula said, already backing up.

“Yes,” Krell and Kian said in unison.

The trio left the room and went into the corridor as the column of Orcs reached the door. It rattled, and soon the Orcs were cursing and shouting.

“Well?” Kian asked Krell.

“Let’s wait a moment.”

They stopped about forty feet from the door. Corridors branched to either side. The one on their right led to a large chamber, like a common area. The corridor on their left was about seventy to eighty feet long.

A piercing Orc voice broke through the tumult of the others: “Make way for the Beast!” Silence ensued.

“Well, it’s coming,” Krell said flatly, understanding the Orc words, as did Kian.

“The Pit Beast?” Nakula had fear in his voice.

“Yes,” Krell looked at him. “Have you any magic you can use against it?”

“I’ve only a Color-Spray and the Firewall spell I told you about earlier. They are useless against a Pit Beast.”

Krell took some keys from a pocket and handed them to Nakula. “Then go to the gates. Lock them if we do not make it back.”

“You’re going to fight it here?” Kian asked incredulously.

“No.” Krell loosened his bow from its straps on his back. “But I fully intend to make sure it is taking this personally.”

“Be careful of its magic.” Nakula twisted the keys in his hands. “It can fill this corridor with fire—and I don’t even know what else.”

“Indeed. One shot, then we’re running.” Krell reached for his bow and began to check the tension on the bowstring. “You should go now.”

“Good hunting.” Nakula turned and ran back down the corridor.

Kian had his bow in hand and was checking it also. “I’ve been honored to know you. You’re an incredible warrior and a natural leader.”

Krell rested the end of his bow on his boot and shook Kian’s hand. “Tell me that again, friend, when next we taste the sun, and I will declare God has defeated our enemies because he would not have your word questioned. I am not great. But my sister...she is. We must live. You must meet her. Kian, believe me, she is worth all this. Now, let’s get a little farther back, don’t you think?”

“You read my thoughts.” Kian clapped Krell on the shoulder.

They went back twenty feet to where a door opened into a large room and the corridor behind them began to slope downward. The room was where Sinon had found the sheets.

Krell notched an arrow to his bowstring and leveled his bow. Kian followed suit.

“I keep hoping to hear someone shout that they’ve found the exit,” Kian said, “but, if there was one to be found, I believe it would have been discovered by now.”

“The Orcs went somewhere with my sister.”

“My guess is that the exit can only be opened with magic.”

“Then we will have to fight our way out.”

“That doesn’t appear possible, you know.”

“Yes, I know.”

At that moment, the door flew toward them with a tremendous crash. Dust and debris filled the corridor. When it cleared, Krell saw the Pit Beast standing in the blown doorway, a presence menacing beyond comprehension. It looked invincible, and the sight of it in such

close quarters sent tremors through Krell's musculature. It was four feet wide at the shoulders, which were nearly five feet off the ground as it crouched on all fours. Its head was reptilian, featuring a long jaw and large, fanglike teeth. Two curved horns jutted up from the top of its scaled head, each about a foot long. The scales covering its body were all red. Its muscles were huge, each of its forearms having nearly the girth of Kian's body. A stumpy black nose stood out prominently at the front of its upper jaw, its glowing red eyes set a foot behind it.

Conquering the awe that had swept over him, Krell aimed for the nose and let his arrow fly. His arrow went a split second before Kian's. Krell saw clearly their flight. His tore through the air on an almost flat trajectory from his thick-staved bow. Kian's arrow took a higher arc, whisking by just inches from the ceiling at its apex. Krell's arrow flew true and imbedded itself up to the fletching in the Pit Beast's nose. The Beast galvanically convulsed backward and reared, gouging the ceiling with its horns. Kian's arrow stuck in its exposed neck.

It let out an ear-hammering roar, yet even as it jerked back, it raised one of its clawed hands. Krell saw a ball of fire appear above its palm. He and Kian moved at the same moment, diving into the room to their left as the ball of fire came at them like a comet. It whistled past the doorway and down the corridor as they rolled into the room. An instant later, the hallway was an inferno and flames poured in above them. Krell kicked the door shut and then stood up, patting out the flames on his pant legs.

Kian jumped up, too. "What a shot!" he exulted. "Did you aim there?"

The inferno raged outside the door. "I wanted to give it something to remember us by," Krell said grimly.

With a sudden clap of air, the inferno winked out, followed by the searing sound of flames at the door. Krell didn't waste a second. "Let's go." The door shattered beneath his boot. Leaping into the hallway, he raced away from the Beast, with Kian close behind.

Fire licking at the wooden support beams lit the passage. Glancing back, Krell saw Orcs streaming toward them, but the corridor's downward slope took him and Kian out of the sight line of the Orcs and soon they were through the lower gates. Krell came to a stop just beyond the second gate as Nakula closed and locked the first. Orcs could

be heard surging toward them. Nakula retreated to the second gate and locked it just as a mass of Orcs slammed into the first.

“My God,” Kian said hoarsely, “those Demons are sending all the Orcs at us first.”

Krell was thinking the same thing. He somehow had to find a way to kill the Pit Beast. It was all to its advantage to send scores of Orcs at them. They would be rammed into the nethermost wall, pinned by the sheer press of the Orcs, and then slaughtered. The Pit Beast wouldn’t care how many Orcs its strategy killed. Krell knew the fate of his people depended on upsetting its plans and regaining the initiative.

Looking into the small room between the gates, he could see the corridor leading from it to the left, and wondered if he should go there. Then, perhaps, if the Beast came forward to break down the gates, as it had the door, he could rush from the intersecting corridor and confront it. Yet the Orcs would know he was there and their actions would betray his presence to the Beast. Even so, it might be the best tactic left to him.

“We should go,” Kian was saying.

Krell was about to have Nakula open the gate, and take his chances between the gates, when another idea struck him. He remembered Nakula’s Firewall spell, and that Lori still had her illusion spell. It was the overwhelming look of fear in the ranks of the Orcs that gave him the idea. If they could be made more afraid of us than the Pit Beast...

“Yes, let’s go,” he said, and the three of them turned and hurried down the corridor.

Alloria was waiting for them at the bend. “There’s nothing. We’ve found nothing.” Her eyes were haunted.

Everyone frantically scraped and tapped at the walls—from the alcove at the bend all the way to the dead end of the corridor. The tumult back at the gates rose ominously.

People began to stop what they were doing. They looked at him expectantly.

“Lori, what magic have you left?”

“Only a Hold Portal and that illusion spell, Spectral Force.”

“Tell me again what the illusion spell can do.”

“It is the most powerful illusion magic I know. It has sight, sound,

smell, and thermal effects. Within a certain area, I can make almost anything appear to happen or exist, though the more intricate and complex I make it, the more difficult it is to make it seem real. It can be very effective against weak minds, but against Demons—I don't know."

"Can you make an illusion of an Elven warrior—moving, speaking, and appearing to use magic?"

"Certainly. It is easier to manipulate images I have seen many times in real life."

"Nakula, your Firewall spell—could you make a wall of flame all along the side of this corridor?" He pointed back toward the gates where the Orcs were still making a ruckus.

"Yes—that is, I can make a wall of fire extending a hundred feet—and limited to my line of sight."

Krell remembered Lori telling him the same thing—that most magic could be used only where the caster had a line of sight. *It might be enough*, he thought.

"Here's what we're going to do," he announced to everyone. "Lori: When they break the gates, you'll make an illusion of as many Elven warriors as you can, right here at the bend. Make them tall, like me, and as fierce as you can imagine. Make a light glow from them, or better, bathe them in flames, especially their swords. And have them chant, 'Boonek banen Fy.'"

"What does that mean?"

"It's an Orc superstition; it means 'the eternal fire has come.' I'll tell you about it later. 'Boonek banen Fy,' understand?"

Alloria repeated the words. "Yes, I understand," she said.

"When the Orcs reach the bend—if they do—I want them to appear to burst into flames whenever they get near one of your illusory warriors. Remember, 'Boonek banen Fy.' Nakula: At about that time I'm going to want you to cast your Firewall spell."

* * *

Hungren Dreuth-sur was still back at the door. The arrow in his neck had been insignificant, but the one in his nose was infuriating. He had broken it off trying to pull it out. Now it felt like a foot of its shaft

was embedded there. It was making his eyes water and sent white-hot streaks of pain shooting through his head. He planned on removing it later and shoving it up that Human warrior's nose.

The Orcs were massed in the corridor ahead, and there were more lined up behind. He had left three Wizard Demons and five Soldier Demons at their backs to make sure none fled. The other four Wizard Demons and eleven Soldier Demons were with him, waiting in the side corridors just ahead.

"All right, make way," he said disgustedly to the Orcs around him, as he started for the corridor.

"Make way for the Beast!" one of the Orcs called out.

Orcs pressed themselves against the walls, fitting themselves between the timber beams spaced every few feet, as Dreuth-sur made his way past them. He walked on all fours and the other Demons fell in behind. Given his bulk, some of the Orcs could find no way to step aside. They crouched down on the ground and he walked over them, kicking gratuitously as he went by.

When he reached the gate, he snarled at the lead Orc, "Well?"

"They went straight that way, my Lord." He pointed down the corridor beyond the second gate. "A Human and two Elves."

Dreuth-sur had all his senses trained on the corridor ahead. He tried to ignore the pain flaring from his nose. "Nothing down there?" He pointed at the corridor leading off to the right between the two gates.

"No. We did not see anyone go that way, my Lord."

Looking carefully ahead, he could see clear down to the bend in the corridor. He could sense no magic or anything invisible. Then he stood on his hind legs and drove himself at the gate. It buckled and gave way, chunks of stone crumbling from the walls as the gate slammed against the wall.

"Go!" he ordered the Orcs, pointing to the side corridor.

They squirmed past him and hurled themselves down the open corridor on the right. Soon the lead Orc came back. "All the rooms are empty, my Lord."

He snorted—which caused black ichor to seep from his nose onto his lips. He was certain beyond any doubt that he could easily kill any Human or Elf, or any number of them if need be, but he was going

to have to be careful not to let them have any more easy shots at him. *Damned Orcs!* he thought suddenly, hating the claustrophobic feeling down here. *They live in underground shitholes like sewer rats!* He moved into the room between the gates.

Dreuth-sur studied the hallway ahead again, still sensing nothing. Then he went forward and grasped the second metal gate in his foreclaws. He braced himself and pulled. A loud grinding could be heard as the stones cracked and dust filled the air, but it held—barely. He gave another pull and the whole gate came loose in his hands.

“Go!” he ordered the Orcs, dropping the gate to the ground.

As the Orcs streamed past, Dreuth-sur saw two tall Elves come forward from around the bend, about a hundred feet down the corridor. They seemed to be bathed in light—some magical protection, he thought—and they wore shiny chain armor with impressive looking swords and daggers at their hips. Their clothing was immaculate, in green and gold, and their hair was a high tone of silver. They looked fierce and competent. *Fancy, haughty bastards! I’m going to enjoy destroying you,* he thought, as he cast a Fireball spell and sent it streaking past the Orcs. It detonated right in front of the Elves. The inferno raged for a few seconds and the Orcs pulled up short. Then the fire winked out and the Elves were still standing there, seemingly unfazed, only now the light that had surrounded them was burning. It made their appearance look, well, downright fiendish, Dreuth-sur thought.

The Elves then unsheathed their swords. A bright fire rose from the brandished blades. Dreuth-sur cast his Electric Bolt spell, sending bolts of lightning forth from his hands. He yelled at the same time for the Orcs to charge. Bolts slammed into each Elf, and they staggered slightly as the electric energy exploded, sparks flying everywhere around them. But, again, his magic was to no lasting effect. An angry growl formed in the base of Dreuth-sur’s throat.

Both Elves then began a chant: “Boonek banen Fy, Boonek banen Fy.” *The Eternal Fire has come, the Eternal Fire has come.* The Orcs hesitated, but those behind pushed the front ones forward. Then fire shot from the Elves’ swords and the lead Orcs burst into flames. There was screaming, and then some began to shout “Kruulll! Ruunnn!”

Dreuth-sur roared at the Orcs, “Stand and fight, you gutless turds, or I will kill you all myself!”

The Orcs were petrified of him, so they balked, recovered themselves, and surged back toward the Elves. Even those behind the Beast streamed past and pressed ahead into the corridor. When the first wave of Orcs came upon the Elves, they burst, hissing and popping, into flames, like pine trees in a forest fire.

As the Elves continued to chant amid the crush of Orcs, a sheet of flame shot out from one Elf's sword, stretching floor to ceiling, racing down the length of the left side of the corridor. The Elves' chant became louder: "The Eternal Fire has come! The Eternal Fire has come!" The Orcs along the whole corridor screamed as they were scorched.

"Kruullll!" they cried en masse, followed by, "Boonek Fy!" *The Eternal Fire!*

The Orcs turned and began to flee. Dreuth-sur roared at them, "Fight! Fight you worthless asses!"

Berserk with fear, they kept running from the flames, and Dreuth-sur killed them as they came. But that did not stop them. They were unhinged. The Orcs behind took up the chant of "Run!" and "The Eternal Fire!" and soon they were all fleeing. Dreuth-sur shouted to his Demons, "Kill them! Kill the traitors! Kill them all! Kill every single coward!"

Despite his ruthlessness, some Orcs managed to get by. This made him even more wild. Soon the room was clotted with dead and mangled bodies. Most, however, were burned to death in the corridor. The stench from the disemboweled was appalling. The Orcs behind Dreuth-sur had almost all gotten away, though some of them lay dead, as did one of the Wizard Demons and one of the Soldier Demons. Damn! Dreuth-sur cursed to himself. "Kripa will pay for this debacle."

Looking back down the corridor, he could see the Elves standing impassively at the bend, even as the left side of the corridor continued to rage in flames. *Pretentious Elf faggots!* he thought, flinging Orc bodies to the side. *Let's see whose magic is stronger.*

His Dispel Magic spell came before his mind, the vast number of symbols and characters meaningless to him. He cast it and the symbols and characters gave rise to a ball of energy, which he hurled down the corridor. It exploded in front of the Elves and, to his astonishment, they vanished, as well as the section of the firewall touched by the explosion. Then it dawned on him. *Idiot!* he told himself. It was an

illusion. He had been taken in by a hoax. He thought he was furious before, but that was nothing compared with the rage that overtook him now.

“So, you want to play with fire!” he yelled down the corridor in Elven. “Then the legions of Hell will see that you burn!” He bellowed a deep and ominous laugh, projecting a magical aura of fear with it.

* * *

The Pit Beast’s aura commandeered Nakula’s magically created inferno, transmuting it, in the minds of most of those trapped, into a menacing presence, now seemingly in league with their enemies. The heat from the fire could be felt as plainly as its ochre glow could be seen from around the bend. The smoke began to thicken and the smell of burning flesh carried to them on it. The pop and crackle of boiling Orc gristle was loud, but louder still was the Pit Beast’s ghastly cackle.

“What shall we do now?” Lori asked Krell, her anxiety plain.

In contrast, Krell was still exultant. *The whole garrison of Orcs routed, with just two spells! Amazing! But now it’s time for the Demons,* he thought grimly, turning his attention to Lori’s question.

His gaze was steady as he looked around at everyone. “We will kill them,” he said, his voice level and firm.

“But how?” Nakula’s voice broke in fear. “Our magic is nearly exhausted and that monster appears unkillable.”

Krell could see his people slipping into shock. He drew himself up to his full height, squared his shoulders, and leveled his gaze, taking them all in. “Hear me now.” He raised his hands, his tone solemn. “Forget your own lives; forget you had husbands, wives, lands, goals. Here on this cross of time and space, we have only one identity: We are the Children of the Light. We are the representatives of the high races of Men and Elves and we shall give no quarter. We fight now, as others of our kind will fight, either to prevail or to inflict such grievous losses as shall combine, with those inflicted by our brothers and sisters elsewhere, to drive the Demon Lord and his minions from our planet. It is them that should fear. If we die, what of it? For such cause as we served in coming here, the gates of Heaven will gape wide to receive us. For them, there is nothing but the abyss.” Still standing tall, Krell

dropped his head, letting his hair fall forward, curtaining his eyes.

His voice came then as if from afar. “Can darkness dispel light? No. I tell you, no. Is there a greater power than God? No. I say no.” Then, lifting his head, and in rising voice: “Think you that Angels have deserted us? What say you all?” And by a chorus they denied it with him. “Think that we are alone in this? Say it: no!” Their voices rang out louder in response. “Are we without hope? No!” The room boomed as they roared their defiance together. “Did the Demons prevail against our ancestors? Did God give them dominion over us? No! No! No! No!” Krell could hear the din of them stomping their boots in agreement, and all blades save one were out. “I say we shall avenge our dead and teach them awe. I tell you: Our ancestors rise again—through us!” Krell then drew the sword of King Riordanall from where it was wrapped and fettered at his back. He held it before him and turned its blade for all to see. Its tempered alloy shown with a pale blue light and gave off a hum like a nest of bees. “These monsters from the Pit can be killed—I have seen six such struck from the air in a trice and I have killed three Demons myself. More of them will die shortly.”

“Give us the order of battle,” Kian said. “We stand ready.”

Krell caught and held Kian’s eyes. There passed between them an understanding born of love, respect, joy, and honor—a wordless bond such as can be known only by warriors who are joined irrevocably in a desperate enterprise.

Krell then turned to the others and, taking a deep breath, analyzed what he knew. “Lori,” he said, his voice low, “you and Nakula will take all the women and children to the far room. Cast your Hold Portal spell on the door. The rest of us will take positions in the remaining rooms.” Addressing the others, he added, “Remember what Lori said, most magic requires a line of sight to use, so engage them at the doorways. They are flesh and blood, and they will die. Let’s see how much good their Demon magic does them with their heads rolling on the ground. Strike hard, strike fast, and strike without fear! Kill the winged Wizard Demons first. Be bold and they will have no time to bring their magic to bear.”

Krell gazed at them each in turn and was relieved to see fear being replaced with resolve. He raised King Riordanall’s sword up in front of him. It felt natural in his hands, and his muscles began to tingle

with energy. “As for the Pit Beast,” he added in a deep half-growl, “I will slaughter it myself. Just make sure you kill the other Demons. Remember, they come to kill us all. We cannot negotiate our fate. So there is nothing to fear. Either we are all dead already—or they are. Choose life with me! Stand and fight! For Lalendren! For God! For the Light!”

A healthy chorus of suddenly determined voices surrounded him: “I won’t let you down Krell!” “I’m with you, Krell!” “Let’s do it!”

“All right, Merideth, Lissy.” He looked at all the women. “All of you go with Lori and Nakula to the far room.” Addressing the men: “Choose your rooms,” he told them. “There are fourteen of you, so two to a room.”

He turned and went to the bend. The flames burning in the corridor beyond were bright and hot and the smoke was thick, filling the area with the smell of burning carrion. Peering through the haze and flames, he could see a squad of humanoid Demons, some with wings, marching toward him from about sixty feet down the corridor. The Pit Beast was in the rear. The Demons seemed completely indifferent to the flames. Krell was sure they saw him, and he turned and ran. An explosion of fire erupted behind him at the bend and he felt adrenaline spill into his veins. *That was close*, he thought.

“They’re coming; let’s go!”

Everyone cleared the hallway and Krell went into the room nearest the bend. Urg and Sal were there with him. He closed the door. Urg was vibrant, a baleful and resolute look on his bearded face, his green eyes glittering. The other magic sword from King Riordanall’s tomb was gripped solidly in Urg’s right hand, a dagger in his left. He was twenty-five and only a few inches shorter than Krell, strong and quick. Of their clan, he was second only to Krell in fighting skill, which is why Krell insisted he wear King Riordanall’s magic armor. Sal was not nearly as good a fighter, but he was good with the bow, which was ready in his hands. He, too, looked determined. No one said a word.

Krell was as focused as he had ever been in his life. He could feel a bounding, primordial energy revving through his body. He would stay alive, he vowed. It was the one and only way to find and rescue Anna.

Footfalls and muted voices could be heard. Krell sensed the Demons filling the hallway, passing by the door, positioning them-

selves. He could almost feel the Pit Beast holding back, remaining just beyond the bend in the corridor. It had to die. The sword of King Riordanall felt alive in his hands—it was a two-handed broad sword, though he was big and strong enough to wield it with one. Subtle, cold blue flames now danced along the length of the blade.

“Let—there—be—Hell!” Dreuth-sur’s pronouncement shook the chamber, each word echoing with concussive force.

Krell moved at the very moment the Pit Beast’s voice began rumbling. He was out the door and swept his sword upward, from low and to his side, seeking his first target. He barely noticed the startled look on the nearest Wizard Demon’s face as its head tumbled from its shoulders.

Krell took in everything in an instant. The corridor was filled with Demons—most of them the wingless Soldier Demons—and there were about twenty in all. The Pit Beast was at the bend, about forty feet away, a sheet of flame stretching out from its hands. In addition to the two at his side, eight Demons were between him and the Beast.

The nearest Soldier Demons pounced, but Krell stepped inside the sweep of their swords and took them to the ground. The sheet of flame raced down the corridor, stretching floor to ceiling. Krell bounded back to his feet, but not so fast as the claws of one of the Demons, which managed to rake his right calf before he moved out of reach.

He confronted the fire with the only thing he had, his sword. Kneeling and swinging it over his head—the tip of the blade scraping the eight-foot ceiling—he slashed the fire along its leading edge as it reached him. An explosion of sparks met the blade, its dancing blue flames now blatant. The fire quit its advance, though it continued to burn between himself and the Beast.

Krell knew Demons were at his back, knew he was about to be impaled. Ahead, three Demons choked off the six-foot-wide corridor as they rushed forward. Time came to a standstill for Krell. Music began to sound in his mind. It was Anna’s voice, and it was full of vigor and hope, intoning words of glory and triumph, singing a song their mother had learned from Elves. It was Krell’s favorite song. Other voices seemed to take up the chorus, strong and powerful, intimating a crescendo to come. They seemed to be real. Were they emanating from the sword’s blade? He did not know, but he sprang forward with

fantastic agility and speed. He drove the oncoming Demons back into the flames, flicking the massive broadsword side to side as if it was no heavier than a rapier, cutting down all three. The flames were all around, and he could feel their heat against his skin, but strangely, it struck him as irrelevant. Only one thought filled his mind as the chorus swelled within: “Lav’f theenthone shon! Lav’f theenthone shon! Lav’f theenthone shon—Val’lee’ah!” *Light of creation shines—glor’i’us!—the Pit Beast must die.*

As he leapt past the shredded bodies of those three Demons, he smashed, in passing, the head of another with the butt of his sword. Before him now stood a Wizard Demon, bathed in flames, its hand outstretched, a magic light forming there. Krell maimed the conjuring limb with a lightning-fast thrust, then, turning the edge of his sword as he drove forward, decapitated the wizard. With unbroken momentum, Krell shouldered the still-standing corpse into the lance of an oncoming Soldier Demon, then twisted away. A backward swipe of his sword caught the latter at the nape of the neck. Now only two Demons remained between him and the Pit Beast. Krell parried their thrusts as he closed, then dove at their legs, toppling them. Catlike, regaining his feet, he swung his broadsword as he went by and sprang for the bend, reaching the alcove there. It was twenty feet wide to his left.

A bolt of light sprang from the Pit Beast’s hand, and Krell twisted to parry it with his sword. A loud crack and explosion erupted as the bolt ricocheted from the blade and struck the wall beside Krell. Rock and dirt tumbled. The smell of brimstone filled the air. The Pit Beast lunged before Krell could bring the sword back around. Its claws raked for Krell’s neck, but he twisted just beneath their swipe into the wall to his left. With the claws of its other hand, the Beast started a stabbing motion toward his gut, but Krell intercepted it with a reflexive chop of his left arm, diverting the blow. Nevertheless, he found himself pinned against the wall.

The Pit Beast was massive. Its head was about eighteen inches wide, thirty inches long, and twenty-four inches high—though sloping smaller from pate to snout—and its head was only a foot away from Krell’s own, looking down from above. Beneath sallow horns, its red eyes burned bright. The teeth in its gaping maw were like a double row of knives.

Krell could tell it intended to bite his head off. As he tried to raise his sword, the thing's tail whipped forward and wrapped around his right forearm. Its jaw opened wide. Krell could still hear the glorious chorus sounding in the depths of his mind—"Lav'f theenthone shon Val'lee'ah!"—and he was now sure its tempo also resonated from the sword. In a move so deft as to be invisible, Krell used his left hand to pull a dagger free of its sheath on his chest and stabbed upward as the Pit Beast bit down. The dagger dug into its palate and the Beast jerked backward. Krell then twisted, slashing with terrific force at the end of its tail, severing it. Dropping the dagger, Krell swung the sword up with both hands, aiming for its neck.

The Beast narrowly avoided the blade by springing backward into the alcove, where it landed on all fours. It could be seen there shaking its head back and forth, its brilliant red eyes bulging. The two Soldier Demons he had toppled were up and charging from the corridor on the left; Krell knew he could not waste any attention on them. He catapulted himself forward from the wall and leapt at the Beast, swinging his sword ferociously. With reptilian quickness, it leapt right back at him, getting inside the arc of his swing and blocking his arms. Krell avoided the Beast's teeth by tucking so as to bring his boot up against its jaw, but was knocked backward onto the ground as the Beast barreled pell-mell over top of him. A thunderous crash followed as the thing slammed into the wall, crushing the two Soldier Demons that had rushed to its aid.

Krell rolled, then sprang to his feet as the ceiling caved in above the three Demons. As the Beast shook its head and shoulders free of the rubble, Krell could see a large rock resting on the collapsed head of one of the Soldier Demons. The other could not be seen at all amidst the dust and debris. Krell lunged. His sword cut slick and deep through the Beast's hindquarters as it pulled itself from the falling rubble. Two more Soldier Demons then came at Krell from the corridor. He whipped his sword up from hip level and caught the first Demon under its raised sword, slicing up through its armpit, severing its entire right shoulder and head from its torso. With the hilt of his sword, he blocked the other's blow, then jumped behind it and shoved it right into the Beast—which had just lunged for Krell's exposed back. The claws intended for Krell impaled the Demon, which crumpled, its

eyes locked in disbelief on those of the Pit Beast.

On the verge of being pinned by the Beast's bulk, and with no room to swing his sword, Krell pivoted toward the alcove. He made it just ahead of the Beast's claws. Then he stumbled—intentionally—down to his hands and knees, sword flat on the ground facing his feet. He raised the point up and drove it backward just as the Beast attempted to leap on him. The sword dug deep into its breast as Krell twisted around onto his back. Krell gripped the sword tightly in both hands, expecting to drive it home. But using its wings, the Pit Beast managed to stop and roll to the side. Then they were both on their feet, facing each other in the alcove: Krell nearest to the corridor leading to his people, the Beast nearest the corridor leading to the gates. Both were breathing hard. A sheet of glossy black blood obscured the scarlet scales of the Pit Beast's chest.

Krell wanted desperately to end this so he could go back and help the others. Still, he resisted the urge to charge, wary of the monster's speed. Its luminous red eyes sized him up as it shook itself. Krell held the sword steady in front of himself, pointed up toward the Beast.

“What's the matter, you oversized dog, got a stick up your nose?”

The Beast's nostrils flared and it lunged forward, swiping with its right arm. Krell stepped under the thrust and to his left, while he drew his sword in tight to his body—narrowly avoiding the Beast's left claw, which snaked out and snatched for his wrists. Then, all in one motion, he jerked his sword down and to the side, cleaving the Beast's right claw from its outstretched arm. He spun to the Beast's side and raised the sword for a killing blow to the neck. As he brought the sword down, though, the Beast's wing shot out from its body. The sword ripped down through the wing, severing the thick main bone. Krell was flung to the back wall, severely jarred, but held onto the sword and quickly scrambled to his feet, ready to fight. The Pit Beast, however, had taken to its heels, bolting down the corridor toward the gates.

* * *

Dreuth-sur had decided it was time to regroup. That enchanted sword had cut through him like butter, and that inferior Human should have been dead five times already. Though he still viewed victory as

inevitable, Dreuth-sur realized that continuing the fight underground had exposed him to unnecessary risks. He chose a strategic retreat.

The magical fire in the corridor had gone out now, though the wooden support beams still smoldered. As he loped along, Dreuth-sur ran his bulk into some of the burning beams, causing them to collapse behind. He laughed, hoping the tunnel would cave in on the Human. His laugh turned to a shriek, though, as his mangled right wing caught on a jagged metal beam. It whipped him around to a complete stop as flesh ripped and several of the smaller bones in that wing snapped. The twisted metal of one of the broken gates pinioned him. The gate had pulled up from the ground and jammed crossways into the hall, where it held firmly to his wing.

As Dreuth-sur righted himself, he saw the Human charging down the corridor after him, the blue flames still bright on his sword. Dreuth-sur planted his legs and shoved off with all his strength. A terrible rending ensued and three quarters of his right wing ripped off, but he was free. Then he was running again, missing most of his right wing and claw, his forelimb, chest, and nose burning with pain. *Damn these tunnels! This would never have happened, Dreuth-sur seethed, had I caught that arrogant ape aboveground.*

He went through the door where he had been shot with the arrows and hurried down the long corridor to the right. Looking over his shoulder, he saw the Human still in pursuit. Dreuth-sur redoubled his efforts, caroming around corners all the way out. The whole distance the Human kept gaining, and that terrible ringing song coming from the Human's blade kept growing louder.

As he emerged from the cave, he bounded to the top of a boulder and leapt, activating the levitation magic which made his enormous weight as light as feathers. He floated out over the rocks and boulders at the base of the bluff and landed in the clearing beyond, exhilarated to be in the open, exhilarated in knowing that the Human was now doomed.

Orcs lay dead everywhere, mostly females. The Beastspawn and the Demons he had detached outside the cave were scattered about, chasing down the Orcs and killing them without quarter.

"Demons!" he bellowed in a roar as he spun around. "To me!"

The Human was leaping from rock to rock, making straight for

him. Dreuth-sur cast his Hold spell and flung it. The energy flew and wrapped about the Human. In a moment, he would be cinched tight, completely unable to move. But that moment never came. The Human just shrugged off the magic, the way an adept wizard would have, and resumed his advance.

Amazed anew at the barbarian's prowess, Dreuth-sur leapt high into the air and away, reminding himself he had only one claw with which to fight. As he floated to a landing some eighty feet away, he tested his wing and found there was no way he could fly with just one. *Never mind*, he thought, knowing his wing and claw would regenerate in a few days. Three Beastspawn now flew toward him, one of them ridden by a Soldier Demon. A Wizard Demon named Grunal also flew near.

"Kill him!" he ordered, pointing at the Human, who was charging again.

Grunal cast a fireball, but the Human shattered its magic with his sword. Then, pivoting and rolling, the Human slashed open the belly of a Beastspawn clear to its throat as it tried to descend upon him. The Human doubled back as that one collapsed, springing from the ground to its back, and then into the air at another Beastspawn that hovered too close. The big, winged animal dropped in a heap as its head rolled away. The Human landed lightly, whirling the sword; the sword resounded with the rising strains of the barbarian's insufferable battle song. Dreuth-sur could almost understand Elven words in its intense vibratory ring. Yes, he could: "Light" and "Shines." And "Glorious." Typical enemy propaganda. Dreuth-sur seethed. *We'll see if it sings a different tune once it's mine.*

More Beastspawn swooped in, investing the barbarian on all sides, some ridden by the remaining three Soldier Demons. The other Wizard Demon would soon reinforce them. Dreuth-sur readied his Electric Bolt spell, waiting for the Human to turn its back and salivating at the closeness of the kill. The Human was finished.

Two Beastspawn closed from the ground, another from above. Grunal cast another spell from where he hovered. Dreuth-sur was ready to cast his. Then, in a blur of motion, the Human retrieved from his vest and threw a dagger. The weapon disappeared on contact with Grunal's forehead. As the Wizard Demon fell to Earth, the

Human rolled beneath one of the two Beastspawn on the ground—thereby avoiding the diving attack from another above—and slashed his blade through its throat. Then he was on his feet, splitting another Beastspawn’s head in two.

The moment was perfect. Dreuth-sur cast his Electric Bolt at the Human’s exposed back. The bolts of light streaked from his outstretched claw. As if sensing the attack, the barbarian spun, slashing his sword out in a wide arc. The blade intercepted the bolts to the accompaniment of bell tones and a bright blue flash. Dreuth-sur recognized, in horror, that the bolts were streaking back toward him. They struck him and he reeled from the shock, fighting the disruptive effect on his vision, organs, and muscles, smelling ozone and burning scales. Knowing he was in mortal danger, and exercising his ancient, battle-hardened will, Dreuth-sur fought to regain control of his faculties.

The Human was right on top of him, his sword slashing. Dreuth-sur rolled and felt the sword cut through the hump of muscle below and behind his neck. He regained his footing, though, and was about to leap away when the sword slashed into his hind leg above the knee joint. It cut clean through. Dreuth-sur skidded forward along the dirt as his leap collapsed. He righted himself as best he could, getting his good leg beneath, blood gushing from his transected thigh, and made a desperate lunge at the Human who was bearing down on him once again.

The sword came down as they collided. Dreuth-sur tried to twist away as it sliced into his left shoulder, his massive bulk driving the Human back. Enraged, he bit for the barbarian’s neck, but missed. His teeth raked into the Human’s shoulder, though—but not deep enough to catch. Somehow his enemy was able to squirm away.

The sword was coming again, and Dreuth-sur’s left arm was now useless. He swung with his right—the one without the claw—and sent the Human tumbling backward. And then he pounced, using one leg and a wing to move. He was beyond thinking or caring, only wanting to kill. The Human was on his back and Dreuth-sur was going to fall on him and crush him, sword or no sword. As he fell, the blade came up beneath his jaw and cut through his tongue to the top of his snout. The Human rolled away as Dreuth-sur crashed to the ground, the pungent taste of his own black blood hot in his mouth. Gagging, he

pushed himself up with his clawless right arm and his good left wing. Then he was looking at the ground; then the sky; then the ground again; now the sky. Then the world stopped spinning and he could see Beastspawn nearby, standing and staring, motionless and aghast. The surviving Demons were there, too. One Wizard Demon and two Soldier Demons. No, three. *What are they looking at?* Everything faded away....

* * *

Exultant, Krell stood over the Beast's decapitated head, long blue flames streaming from his blade as it resonated in a glorious crescendo. Reveling, triumphant, he held it aloft and roared at the Demons surrounding him. Six of those enormous winged steeds still lived. Each was similar in appearance to the Pit Beast, though more equine in body type and posture. Their heads were comparable in size and shape, but longer and without the horns. They were covered in fur mottled with patches of white, gray, and brown. Their legs and feet were like those of a predator, though long and skinny, in contrast to the Pit Beast's thick-muscled limbs. Each was about six feet tall at the shoulder, and four of them were being ridden by Demons. The surviving Wizard Demon hovered nearby. All the Demons stared at Krell in wonder—or horror. The six winged steeds salivated heavily and seemed to be preparing to charge.

Then the Wizard Demon called to them and they all sprang into the air. They flew higher and higher, then out of sight to the east.

Krell looked over to the cave, his chest heaving and his heart still racing. Clouds of smoke billowed from the entrance. He ran straight for it.

*“Do not cry, do not cry.
My blood has spilled,
And I am on my way.
Have I not served you all my days?
So wish me well and on my way.”*
—Ancient Elven Threnody

CHAPTER 10

REQUIEM

When Alloria awoke, it was with the realization she was in motion and her head was lolling back. The tangy scent of wild, open places called to her. First, she opened her eyes, feeling no strength in her body. A lavishly blue sky shone above, fringed at all sides by the rich green of tall trees. With a supreme effort, she lifted her head. Her heart fluttered. It was Krell who carried her. His appearance was shocking. Still shiny clots of gore splattered his singed face, hair, shoulders, and vest. A patina of dust lay upon him, streaked at his face by sweat. A faraway look haunted his eyes. The blue of them trembled, then dropped, seeking her face—then her eyes.

“Thank you,” he said, his voice soft and caring.

What for? was her first thought. Then she remembered, and she was astonished she was alive. “We...we made it?”

He smiled. “Yes. Thanks to you. You made the right decision at the right time.”

“But, how many...”

“Ssshhh. You should rest now. That’s a nasty cut on your head, little warrior. We’ll talk later.” He laid her down softly. Covers were pulled over her. She saw they were at the makeshift camp they had pitched outside the Orc lair before the attack. Most of the women they had rescued were here with them.

“The Pit Beast...it’s dead?” she managed to ask.

“Yes.” He looked into her eyes, the hint of a smile crossing his

lips.

“The crystal? Your sister?”

He shook his head. “Nothing yet. They had to have gone somewhere, so we’ll keep looking.” He tucked her in and saw that a jacket was comfortably positioned under her head. “Now, get some rest. We’re going to need you strong and healthy. I’ll be back in a little while.”

He stood and was gone. Alloria closed her eyes, suddenly realizing how much her head hurt. She could hear people shuffling around. She could hear the wind in the trees. A crow cawed nearby, its voice sounding harsh, like a Demon’s. Images of the battle in the Orc lair opened to her mind’s eye. She recalled the battle screams outside, with fear verging on hysteria in the women and children as they huddled in the farthest room. There had been just two beds, some trunks, a table, and some chairs—precious little cover. After she had cast her Hold Portal spell on the door, the waiting became unbearable. She and Nakula prevailed upon them to remain quiet, but when the pounding on the door began, many of the women burst into tears.

After a couple of tremendous blows, however, it stopped. She listened. Sounds of the fighting and the dying reached her. She remembered how she felt: She could not endure it; could not endure waiting for the men to be killed; could not endure waiting helplessly for the end.

She turned to those with her: “They’re dying out there. Let’s not wait for the Demons to burn or torture or rape us. If we are to die, let it be with our men—helping them. Be not afraid; fear is a tool of the Demons. Only fear holds us here when we know what we must do.”

There was a general assent. Most of them held a weapon of some sort, picked up from fallen Orcs along the way, as Krell had instructed. The two oldest boys among them, eleven and thirteen years old, brandished swords with enthusiasm. Many of the women held their weapons grimly. Alloria read determination in their faces.

She turned back to the door and touched it. The magic there responded to her and released its hold on the door. Nakula stepped up beside her and she exhorted everyone to charge. Then she opened the door and rushed into the corridor. Silhouetted by the fire raging eighty feet away, she saw scarlet-scaled Demons overwhelming the men. Directly in front of her was a Wizard Demon. A magic bolt streaked

from its hands and struck Abajian.

With her knife in hand, Alloria charged. The Demon spun, ready to hurl more magic. It stood six feet tall and was not as big or strong as the wingless Soldier Demons behind it. But its wings and fierce eyes made it look far more dangerous. Its horns were each six inches long and its claws were like arrowheads. She felt doomed, but Nakula's Color-Spray spell streaked by her and seemed to stun it for just a moment. The Demon's spell fizzled at its fingers, and Alloria crashed into it, driving her knife deep into its solar plexus. As its hot blood gushed over her hand, a crush of bodies from behind toppled them to the ground.

That was the last she could remember before waking up in Krell's arms, and it was her last thought before she succumbed again to unconsciousness.

When she woke, it was to the very first light of dawn. She noticed she was not alone—the little girl, Chelsea, was snuggled up next to her under the blanket.

"She was worried about you, so I told her she should stay with you, that it would help make you better." It was Krell. He had cleaned up and was now sitting on a rock a few feet away. A fire burned within a ring of stones behind him. "It seems to have worked. I'm glad you're awake."

"How long...?"

"Yesterday and through the night is all. I just woke up an hour ago myself. Yesterday was difficult."

Alloria sat up and looked around. She saw that Samantha and a few other women from Krell's village were up. Others were asleep, wrapped in blankets. She could see none of the men. "Where..." She couldn't finish the thought. She knew there had to have been many deaths. *Oh, God, let Andy be okay*, she pleaded fervently. What would she do if Andy was dead—or the others? She was afraid to find out, afraid to ask the question, afraid of the heartache she knew was coming. She felt tired—very tired. Krell watched her, his eyes kind. He seemed so composed and resolute. She could feel his compassion reaching out to her. "Tell me." The tone of her voice and look on her face conveyed the entire meaning.

Krell closed his eyes, paused, then opened them slowly. "Most of

the women and nearly all the children survived. Of the eighteen, it's just me, you, Kian, and Urg. I am sorry. But we few survivors, we owe it to you and your kin.”

All that registered with Alloria was that her brother was dead. Her beloved brother. He had been there for her—always. Now, he was gone; so, too, Pelias, always thoughtful and practical; and handsome Brynn, so friendly and kindhearted; Sinon, proud and sometimes harsh, but charitable; Abajian, impulsive and rash, but a good friend and loyal; Ry'danen the perfectionist; and Nakula, smart and honest, always nervous, but in an endearing way. Lost, too, were many of Krell's people: Tyr, who was big, strong, and fearless; Quinn, who was witty, dashing, and irreverent; Malcon, who had just been reunited with his daughter, only to be lost himself; Sal, Trever, Chad, and Dillon, all of whom she barely knew, yet had grown so fond of. And Andy. Andy was dead, his unyielding optimism now lost to her; his happy face, always a comfort, just a memory. Now she was alone in the world, the last of her family gone forever.

Sorrow and anguish gripped her heart and tears filled her eyes. Chelsea stirred at her side and began to sit up, looking forlorn. The poor girl has just lost her father, Alloria thought, her own grief aching in her breast. Sobs broke deep within her body. She looked up at Krell, her vision bleared, and he was there at her side, hugging her.

* * *

Vlockor, Archfiend and Demon Lord of the Nine Hells, sat in his royal study behind an enormous ornate and gilded desk in Fortress Aagaard, smoking his favorite cigar. On the desktop before him were several crystals and orbs, along with loose pages of magical formulae. Deep in concentration, studying the magic, he had been working on new ways to locate that last and oh-so-elusive Hellfire Gem. But now he leaned back in his chair, blowing an occasional—and nearly perfect—smoke ring toward the cherubs on the murals of the vaulted ceiling over his head.

For millennia now, he had skulked in Hell, plotting a return to Earth, plotting for the day when he would wield ultimate power over all life. It would be a time when all beings would worship him as God,

THE GOD. Their God. Now his time was nigh; his mantic intuition told him as much. He only needed the ninth gem. Then he could bring down the Great Barrier, ending the separation between Hell and Earth, and, in turn, compounding his power and rendering him truly immortal. Living under the sun of his completed power, knowing him to be the arbiter of life and the chief administrator of every official boon, aware that he could enter the sanctum of their minds, he imagined that all the beings of Earth would come to cherish him. His ascendant power eclipsing God, they would pray to him, not just fear him.

Among the multitude he had conquered in the two hundred years since he had passed through the Barrier, so few actually worshipped him. Most were just cowed, still hoping to somehow be rescued, and secretly praying to God for salvation.

Soon, though, he would no longer have to rely on Orcs, Goblins, and other demi-Human races to enforce his laws. Soon, all Hell would be here, and he would be able to identify every illegal prayer on the planet, and ruthlessly suppress it. He would then receive the ardent love, devotion, and emulation inevitable in the subjugated for that which they perceive as the final power. Over millennia, he had worked out in intricate detail the laws conducive to the perfection of a society composed of selfish and inferior beings. Soon, the absolute authority to propagate his code across the Earth would be in place.

With just the few who now worshipped him he had been able to draw on new magical powers—powers similar to those employed by the clerics and priests of this world, who could wield magic without need of spell formulae, whether woven or innate. With possession of the final Hellfire Gem he would become omnipotent on Earth. But that final Hellfire Gem was proving elusive—much more so than any of the first eight. The gems themselves were impervious to any scrying or location magic, but he knew they had telltale effects upon the auras of those encountering them. With diligence and patience, some of these effects could be traced, even from afar. He would find it in the Druunhaelen Mountains, or, if it managed to escape his net, the aura of whoever took it would make locating it possible. In just the last few days, he had divined traces of its passage, allowing him to narrow the scope of the search.

Even so, he was having a hard time being patient. To have lost it

while Malthus was trying to dethrone him was a bitter memory. Because of that would-be regicide, his metaphysical rapport with the commanders of the battle at Anjali was broken, leaving that idiot, Greeghan, to make a decision on his own. And what does Greeghan do? Stupidly attempts to fly the gem back to Aagaard without a full military escort. To Vlockor, it was no excuse that the battle at Anjali was raging and the outcome in doubt. For Greeghan to leave the battlefield to strike off on his own was simply reckless. Even more disquieting to Vlockor, however, was that the final gem was lost somewhere in the wilds of the Druunhaelens, mystic home of the Temple Mount, on the steps of which he had been defeated and banished to Hell nearly ten thousand years ago.

A sound like thunder at the door caused Vlockor to look up. It was the knock of Overlord Bahricks, Pit Fiend in charge of the Death Legion—and the search. He had sent for him.

Vlockor raised a hand and the huge polished-steel doors swung open. Bahricks rumbled into the chamber and raised a massive, muscle-padded fist in salute.

“You sent for me, my Lord?”

Bahricks was ten feet tall, but squat, nearly five feet wide at the shoulders and four feet at the waist. His legs were like pilons, his arms as thick as an Elf’s body. His head was an oval, about two and a half feet long and two feet wide; his mouth, a maw nearly stretching from ear to ear with rows of serrated teeth like those of a shark. A set of spiral horns protruded from the sides of his head and enormous ears stuck out as if he were crossbred with an elephant. He was covered in metallic red scales and his pupils glowed scarlet, backset by an orange glow emanating from where the “whites” of Bahricks’s eyes should have been. From his back protruded giant wings; unfurled they would reach from the floor to about five feet above his head, but they were now folded in on themselves. His red and purple general’s uniform fitted in well-tailored cuts.

“Show me the progress of the Death Legion.” Vlockor did not look up, appearing fully engrossed with tamping out his cigar in the ashtray on the desk.

Bahricks approached and then traced out a square in the air with one of his claws. A glowing line lingered behind the claw, and when

the square was complete, a pale red light filled it. Bahrick reached into it with his hand, which progressively disappeared on contact with the square, only to reemerge holding a rolled sheet of parchment. He opened it and spread it on the desk. It was a map.

Vlockor slid his cigar and ashtray to the side and looked up.

“The bulk of the Legion has now marched nearly two hundred miles northwest from Byam, well into the southern ranges of the Druunhaelen Mountains,” Bahrick said. “I have twenty thousand troops massed throughout here.” He tapped a claw on the map. “It’s one thousand Kreen, four thousand Demons, four thousand Orcs, and four thousand Gnolls. The rest are Goblins, Lizard Men, Ogres, and the like. Maintaining supplies is a problem, but we’re managing. I’ve dispatched one thousand Demons and two thousand Hobgoblins to join the contingent as it marches south from Emrani. They’re here now”—he again tapped the map—“well into the northern ranges.”

“What about Kripa and Dreuth-sur?”

“I contacted Kripa two weeks ago. He claims to be ahead of schedule. He has recruited about three thousand local Orcs and Goblins. They are constructing bases in a ring around this central region. These twelve marks here”—his claw tapped the map—“represent the bases that are already operational. The natives under Kripa are building up supplies and quarters for our troops.”

“How long before the troops will be in place, then?”

“I calculate that in three weeks the troops will have reached here.” His talon traced a line across the southern part of the Druunhaelen Mountains. “The troops from the north will be here.” Again, his talon indicated where. “Then I’ll start using the Beastspawn to ferry troops to these bases in the east and west while we continue to march north and south. Within another week, the entire region will be sealed off.”

“Good.” Vlockor pointed at the map. “I’ve eliminated those mountains here in the north. The gem may have been moved recently, but perhaps not far. Regardless, we proceed as planned. Now”—he motioned at the crystals and orbs on the desk—“take these and give them to your commanders at various points of the net. They’ll help me hone in on the gem.”

Bahrick quickly scooped up the items and placed them in the square of space still floating in the air beside him. “I’ll be leaving in one week

to join the troops. Anything else, my Lord?”

“No.”

Bahrick rolled up the map and stowed it in the square, which disappeared with a wave of his hand. He then saluted and left.

Vlockor got up. The vaultlike doors to the balcony swung open before him, and he walked out onto the polished obsidian parapet. Looking at the distant horizon he smiled to himself. *Soon*, he thought. *Soon, the whole world will be mine.*

* * *

Alloria watched from a distance as Krell said good-bye to his people. She stood there in the traditional garb of an Elf maiden, her plaited red tresses and long traveling cloak animated by a brisk wind. In the sky above, dark clouds blew in from the north. Tree branches rustled, and leaves tumbled past her feet. It smelled like it would soon rain.

It was now an hour past noon and all the dead were buried. Seventeen of them had died in the lair, including two women and one of the boys. Twenty-three of Krell’s kinsmen had been rescued, though neither Krell’s sister nor Cellestillena were among them. And they had failed to retrieve the crystal, the primary goal of the mission. Yet Alloria did not believe it should be judged this way. She knew it had been spiritually right action, and she was at peace with their choices. While mundane life is circumscribed by birth and death, honor is enduring. The pain of their losses was absorbed, experienced, and treasured in her heart. She reviewed what she knew of each of their lives, silently appreciative of the lessons the fallen learned and gave.

Shortly before the burials, she looked upon her brother a last time and was relieved to know his face was peaceful in death. Then she cried and prayed—and said good-bye to him. It was when she said good-bye that peace came. His enthusiasm and optimism came alive in her heart, and she embraced the blessing, remembering his life with reverence. Realization that his sacrifice was good and noble and unavoidable, save in cowardice and disgrace, brought her deep comfort.

She prayed then, replenishing her harmony with God. Feeling complete, she saw to the wounded, of which there were many—including herself. With God’s grace, she was able to heal most every wound,

drawing upon a fount of magic nearer The Source than ever before. Those ministrations worked upon her like a tonic. Flush with the joy of serving others, she committed herself to giving everything she had, as long as she had it. And she agreed with Krell, they must go on.

Krell walked up to her now, his back to his people. His face was grim, but his eyes keen. *How does he do that?* she wondered. *One moment he is soft and approachable—anyone’s best friend; the next, majestic—a dread king of the ancient order of mankind.*

Behind Krell was Urg, carrying Tyr’s shield. Urg was to lead the survivors back to the village, where Sallus and Parzen waited to guide them all on to Lalendren. She, Kian, and Krell were to continue onward, seeking the crystal, Krell’s sister, and Celestillena.

“Are you ready?” Krell asked as he came to a stop in front of her.

Alloria simply nodded, her arms folded against her chest.

“You will tell me about your sister?” She looked up at him as the wind whipped his shoulder length hair about.

“Of course.”

“It is hard losing so many friends and family so quickly—so violently—and with so little solace.”

“Yes.” Krell’s voice was steady.

“I believe we did the right thing.”

Krell appraised her with his eyes, then stepped forward and wrapped his arms about her. “Thank you,” he said, holding on.

Alloria could feel the strong, steady beat of his heart as he held her. She relaxed into his embrace, thinking of nothing but him. Then he released her.

“You have given me what I need to continue. I am not nearly so sure of myself as I appear. Though my mind has repeatedly told me we did no more than what we had to, the image of your brother would rise before me, and my heart would not listen, but trembling, remained in fear of your reproach. Thank you. The sadness of our loss will remain, but by your grace, it will not diminish me.”

Alloria smiled and brushed Krell’s cheek with her hand. “You still owe me an explanation,” she said.

“Yes?”

“‘Boonek banen Fy?’”

“Ah, yes,” he sighed wryly. “Orcs have a superstition about an eter-

nal fire. They believe once it catches you, it never lets you go, never lets you die, and burns you forever.”

“But how did you know about it—that it would work?”

“I didn’t know, but we had little choice. You see, before I was born, my mother was held captive by a tribe of Orcs for several years. As I have mentioned, she was later rescued by Elves, who eventually returned her to my clan. She returned with two trunks laden with Elfish books, the gifts of a grateful sorceress upon whom she attended while she lived among your people. She made my sister and me read those books until we knew them by rote, and supplemented them with stories drawn from her personal experience. The Orcs believe this ‘eternal fire’ was created by Elves for the torment of captured Orcs. It’s why they prefer to live underground. Great forest fires have swept these mountains, and the Orcs hold to the superstition that those fires originate in the mystic fire set and tended by the Elves for their eternal suffering.”

They stood together in silence for a moment, waiting, reflecting upon the last few days. Then Kian approached, emerging from the trees to the north.

“Anything?” Krell asked.

“A few more sets of tracks, singles and doubles. Nothing to indicate a group. I’m afraid Lori may be right; they must have used magic to mask their trail—or they flew. Did you find anything?”

“I did,” Krell answered, “though I am not sure how much it will aid in finding Anna or the crystal. Still, it may be significant. I found a leather-bound case in one of the saddlebags of those winged steeds. It contained the Pit Beast’s belongings: its title, rank, commission from Vlockor, and letters of marque, also signed by the Demon Lord. There was a map showing a number of other Orc and Goblin lairs, and what appeared to be its personal journal. It had many gold coins—”

“Anjali Royal Crowns,” Alloria interjected without thinking, angered at the thought of those Demons using money plundered from her home.

“Most intriguing, though,” Krell continued after a pause, “was the large book.” He looked to Alloria.

She caught Krell’s eyes, then turned to Kian. “It is titled *The Order of The Word*, in the script of the Old Tongue, and is sealed with a

powerful magic that I cannot break. Obviously, neither could that Pit Beast.”

“*The Order of The Word?*” Kian asked.

“I’ve heard of it,” Alloria said. “But all I know is that its existence has something to do with the end of history.”

A moment of silence, then Kian asked, “So, what now?”

“We’ll go east,” Krell said firmly. He stood rock-still, looking off to the east as though he somehow knew where they had taken his sister. “Those maps you found in there”—he looked toward the cave entrance—“they indicate an Orc lair to the east, two or three weeks away. That Pit Beast’s map has an ‘X’ marked as ‘headquarters’ in the same area. The Demons flew in that direction. We’ll follow.”

“And pray,” Alloria added.

*“I have seen that great light and
I shall tell you a secret: There is an
end to every suffering.”*

*—Saint Sevannah,
The Testament of Angels*

CHAPTER 11

A DIVINE BLESSING

Anaiyailla could barely stay on her feet as the Orc named Falg led her by the rope tied about her neck. She was exhausted. This was the seventh day since Kripa had led them out of the Orc lair. They traveled at least sixteen hours each day. Despite her strong constitution, Anaiyailla did not know how much longer she could keep up. Poor Cellestillena had long since been unable to continue. After Nagrek realized that cuffing her did not improve her speed, he carried her most of the time, accommodating the Sylph in his capacious backpack.

The pace was fast and the terrain rough. They forged their own path through the forest and across steeply canted fields of scree. The footing was often precarious and the obstacles to their passage incessant. Streams and rivers were forded, and often the underbrush was oppressively thick. Even the hardy Orcs showed signs of fatigue. But it was especially rough for Anaiyailla because she had no shoes, just her wool socks—which were disintegrating—and that sheet from Kripa’s bed. Nevertheless, her peace remained undiminished by the suffering of her body, thanks to the matchless felicity of God’s presence. To her it was like sight coming to the blind or sound to the deaf. Through her prayers, the floodgates of joy had burst in her soul, and she had been transported on waves of indescribable ecstasy. Words that had been merely symbols to her—bliss, immortality, eternity, truth, divine love—had become the manifest core of her being, the essence of life, the only reality.

While she had always believed deeply in God, and treasured ex-

periences affirming her beliefs, she had never felt so securely in The Divine presence. In that dark pass, alone with Kripa, physically subjugated and defiled, she had sought God, trusted in the perfection of His design, and she had been rewarded with understanding. She had realized, not just with her mind, but with every fiber of her being, that this life was merely a passage for her soul, an opportunity to grow closer to God—or not. It was her choice. She could focus on finite things such as pain, fear, hate, and loss; or on godly things such as love and forgiveness. She had chosen God, and been magnified in His love. The splendor of her self-discovery was so vast, she felt centuries, even eons, of slavery, torment, or misery were as nothing, if by such means this bliss was obtained. Sin, sorrow, pain, anguish, death—these were but words now, words without adhesion, words swallowed up by joy.

The realizations that these deep, everlasting founts of joy existed in every heart, that this immortal life underlay the apparent mortality of humanity, and that this eternal love enveloped and supported every part of creation had burst upon her with a surety that caused her heart to pour forth in a flood of praise and gratitude. She then spontaneously offered to Kripa God's love and forgiveness, and saw how God, at her behest, had intervened. She shared that passage with Kripa as the glory of God's goodness and the wickedness of his life were starkly laid before him. The whole universe then appeared like a bubble floating in the ocean of her consciousness, bathed in God's love—a love that shamed the noblest Human affection: eternal, unconquerable, all-satisfying love! She learned that all beings were destined to discover this love. She urged Kripa to step forward and accept God in his life, and rejoiced to see the goodness of his soul struggle for release from identification with his sinful past. She saw him struggle for salvation. She saw with certainty his soul was worth saving. And, though his evil tendencies reasserted themselves, the crisis of that hour made straight the path for her own life: to spread the glory of God's love, especially where it was least manifest. It was a purpose that continuously welled within her heart as joy.

In the seven days since her ordeal, she had sometimes been freshly overwhelmed by the goodness of God, replete with visions of saints living throughout the world and in high astral realms. Her breath would stop at such times, and all fatigue, weariness, and trauma would leave

her body. The awe she felt in that communion would be accompanied by a perception of absolute stillness within and without. Underlying her reborn consciousness was a divine certitude that all was well with the world, that everything was leading to a consummation in cosmic consciousness and immortal bliss.

Now, whether her circumstances be overtly happy or sad, for so long as she would live, Anaiyailla was resolved to walk through life with this glory of The Divine triumphant in her thoughts. And so it was even as she was being led along by Falg. She looked for opportunities to bring the light of God to Kripa and his companions. She did not lament her captivity; rather, she relished the chance to bring God into the lives of the desperate and the fallen.

Though her success so far was limited, she believed she had planted an irresistible seed in Kripa and was making inroads with Falg—Falg, who now stood next to her. He had stopped, as had everyone else.

“We’re taking a short rest,” he told her.

Anaiyailla said nothing. It was nearing dusk, and they had stopped near a stream. Large rocks speckled the landscape. A cluster of big-leaved trees created a cool pavilion near the water, the underbrush thick there amidst the boulders. The scent of pine sap from higher elevations was on the wind. Falg eased his pack from his shoulders, then sat on a flat stone. After Nagrek set Cellestillena down, the Sylph ran over to Anaiyailla and they hugged. They both had ropes tied to their necks.

“How was the pack today?” Anaiyailla asked, looking down at Cellestillena and stroking her hair.

“Better than trying to keep up with you giants,” Cellestillena whispered, smiling bravely.

“Here.” Falg accosted them. “Fetch me some water.”

He held out a wineskin, and Anaiyailla took it as he unhooked her rope from his belt. Then she took Cellestillena’s hand and looked to Nagrek for permission.

“Fill mine, too.” Nagrek tossed a wineskin at the Sylph’s feet and dropped her rope on the ground.

Anaiyailla led Cellestillena toward the stream, the ropes from their necks trailing along in the dirt. She knew better than to leave Falg and Nagrek’s sight, so she went to a nearby section where the rocks were

large and the vegetation relatively sparse.

The stream varied between ten and fifteen feet wide and looked to be no more than two to three feet at its deepest. As they knelt by the water, she looked for Kripa and saw him standing apart from the others, as usual. He was apparently working on his magic. It was his habit whenever they stopped. Since fleeing the Orc lair, he seemed obsessed. Anaiyailla wondered how she could assist his soul. He was so close to choosing salvation back at the Orc lair.

“Nagrek’s been more gentle with me since you talked to him,” Cellestillena said.

“Thank God. I’m so glad.” Anaiyailla pushed Falg’s wineskin into the cold stream. She smiled as a small school of slate-gray fish darted by her feet in close formation. “Never forget, Celleste.” She looked the Sylph in the eyes, her voice serious. “No matter their offense against you, so long as you hold to the love of Divine Mother in your heart, the torment will pass and Mother shall make of it a gem for the crown of your salvation.”

“Yes, I will remember. I promise.”

“It’s love, faith, forgiveness, and the knowledge that Divine Mother is the final power that will keep your soul safe—not fear, doubt, and hatred.”

“Oh, Anna, fear sometimes overwhelms me; pray that I remember.”

Anaiyailla reached up and touched the Sylph’s cheek, loving her spirit. “I’ve been working on a song for you.”

“Oh?” Cellestillena’s eyes lit up.

“It’s short. It goes like this: ‘Sing songs that none before have sung,’ ” she began. Her voice trilled soft and low, pitched just for Cellestillena’s ears, caressing the sibilant tones.

*“ ‘Spin thoughts no mind before has spun
Set goals no one has dared define
For all those lost, shed tears divine
To claim unending peace, persist
Claim him your own who’s oft disclaimed
Love all with love none can resist
And face this life with strength unchained.’ ”*

“Oh, that was wonderful.” Cellestillena grinned, eyes sparkling. “I love it. Will you sing it again?”

“Of course. But later.”

The wineskin was full now and Anaiyailla put the stopper in, then set it aside. Holding back her hair, she leaned down to the water and drank deeply. It tasted of the high snows. Anaiyailla splashed some water on her face and neck and felt refreshed. She caught Cellestillena drinking and splashed her. Cellestillena giggled prettily and splashed her back. Happiness flooded Anaiyailla, and she thanked God for the blessings of this tender moment. Then she glanced over her shoulder and saw Falg eyeing them suspiciously. “We’d better go back,” she said. Cellestillena gave her a mock frown of sadness.

Anaiyailla kissed the Sylph on her cheek, then stood, adjusting her makeshift dress. Cellestillena stood also. She looked adorable in a thick brown shirt, which was too big for her, with long socks drawn up past her knees. Her wings, folded down her back, could barely be discerned beneath a thick shirt, and her long, raven-black hair glistened, though not quite in the way it once did.

With wineskin in hand, Anaiyailla led the way back to where Falg and Nagrek were sitting. A few other Orcs sat around, but most were spread out along the stream, as were the Demons. Falg chewed on a piece of dried meat. She handed him the wineskin and he took it. He held out a piece of jerky to her.

“No, thank you.” She shook her head.

“You want your fruit, now?”

“Yes, please.”

Falg dug into his pack, then withdrew an egg-shaped fruit and tossed it to her. She caught it with both arms. It was brown, about nine inches long and six inches wide. Its skin was thick and tough. They had taken several of these two days ago from a strange-looking tree Anaiyailla had never seen before. This was the last one. The Orcs had eaten some, but didn’t seem too interested so long as they still had meat and bread.

“Would you open it for me, please?” Anaiyailla asked.

Falg grunted and whipped his sword from its scabbard. Anaiyailla placed the fruit on the ground and quickly backed away as the sword

came down and split it in two. Retrieving the pieces, she handed one to Cellestillena. Then they sat together, cross-legged, on a rock. The inside of the fruit was white and soft. She dug out a chunk with her fingers and ate it, enjoying the tangy, sweet sensation.

“I do hope we encounter more of these delicious treats,” Cellestillena whispered, eating happily. “I simply cannot bring myself to eat meat.”

“I’m sure we won’t have to. There’s plenty of fruit and berries around.” Anaiyailla swallowed another mouthful. “If we spot them, I’m sure I can get Nagrek to pick some for us—or let us.”

“Oh, I hope so. You think Nagrek’s not so bad as some of the others?”

“Not right now.”

“What are you saying about me?” Nagrek’s voice cut into their conversation.

Anaiyailla looked up at him. She had been speaking with the Sylph in Elven. “I was just saying that if we come across some fruit, you would let us pick it.”

Nagrek shrugged, then continued his conversation with Falg in Orcish.

“What did he say?”

“He heard us say his name, so I told him about the fruit; he’ll let us get some.”

“Oh, good.” Cellestillena ate a few more bites, then dropped her head. “It’s been so long since I could use my magic that I can hardly remember what it was like,” she sighed dolefully.

Anaiyailla looked at her affectionately. She brushed the back of her fingers across the Sylph’s hair. “I remember quite well. You floated in midair like an Angel from Heaven. You radiated warmth that turned winter to summer. You moved about like a will o’ wisp, and your mere touch allowed me a vision of your most excellent soul.”

Cellestillena smiled back. “Thank you. I hope I’ll be able to use it again someday.” She fingered the claspless chain around her neck. “If only I could remove this, I could become invisible and fly away.”

“You will. Someday.”

“Oh, truly, do you think so?”

“I’m sure of it.” Anaiyailla patted the Sylph’s hand. “The ways of

divine love are not always easy to forecast, but I believe this will only be temporary for you.”

Cellestillena’s face lit up at her words, but then she saddened. “But what about you? I would feel awful to leave you.”

“I am in the hands of Divine Mother. We both are. Don’t fret over it.”

“You are right, worry is pointless—but so difficult to resist,” Cellestillena said with a slight lisp. After a pause, she added, “How much farther do you think they’re going to take us?”

“I don’t know. I could ask.”

“Do you think that’s wise? They’re so tense and angry.”

“Yes, they get angry. But it can be rewarding to overcome that anger. Somewhere beneath it, the divinity in their soul awaits the day of His coming.”

“I don’t know how you can be so positive.” Cellestillena had wonder in her voice.

“Divine Mother’s love shines equally on all Her children, no matter how wayward. I emulate Her as best I can.”

Anaiyailla then looked up at Falg and Nagrek as they talked, not completely understanding their words. She waited for an opportunity to interject. They were large, over six feet tall and more than two hundred pounds each, with arms disproportionately long for their bodies and foreheads sloped backward—though only a little.

“What do you want?” Falg asked abruptly as he noticed her stare.

“I was just wondering how much farther we have to go.”

“We’ll get there when we get there,” he said in hard tones while staring at her hips.

His face flushed and he started to turn away, but Anaiyailla had another question: “Do you know where we’re going?”

A flash of anger lit his eyes, then he said, “It’s none of your business where we’re going.”

“I see.” She looked down. “I was simply curious. I thought perhaps you might know of our plans. I get the impression that you are not from these parts.”

“No, I’m not. I wouldn’t live out here like a barbarian. I come from Killmeville.”

“Oh? Is that a city? I’ve always wondered what a city would be

like.”

“Yeah, it’s a city. There are many thousands of Orcs and other people there. But you have to be tough to survive.” He inflated his chest.

Anaiyailla acted impressed. “Is that where you learned to speak my language? There are people like me who live in Killmeville?”

“There are some. But we keep them confined to their own area.”

“Is that where we’re going?”

“I am. You’re going where Lord Kripa decides to take you.” His eyes narrowed again and his lips drew back, revealing greenish teeth. “If it were up to me, you and your stuck-up friend would be spreading your legs and lips for every one of us here, and at Killmeville you’d whore until you were too used up to be worth anything. Then I’d sell you to Goblins. I’m sure they would find some more uses for you.” He spat on the ground, then looked at Anaiyailla. “It’s what all your kind deserves. You see, I’ve been to school and know the truth. All this land once belonged to Orcs. Humans and Elves came from across the seas and brought war and disease. You took our ancestral lands by massacre for your cities and farms. Since then, you’ve held them through the protocols of your elders and by conspiracy. Your people are sick. I’ve heard about your rituals: how you drain the blood from our babies and make it an offering to your Gods.”

Anaiyailla bore the venomous words with a serene look on her face. “Would you like to hear the song I’ve been working on for the both of you?” she asked in a happy voice.

“Huh? Are you stupid?” Falg seemed perplexed.

“A song?” Nagrek’s face was also a picture of bewilderment.

Anaiyailla smoothly rose to her feet and approached, standing in front of them as they sat. She began singing to them, her voice soft so that the other Orcs around could not hear well. Looking at each in turn, matching her expressions to her words, she sang:

*“Glory in your power
And hold aloft your sword
Seek to make me cower
Free to smile no more
In glee you hurt me both*

*With viciousness and pain
 At tears of mine you laugh
 Not once but thrice again
 The sharp bite of your words
 More sharp than all your claws
 Tear at me with anger
 Reduce me to mere flaws
 The cold glint of your eyes
 When they look down on me
 I see in them the hate
 That you wish me to see*

*“You tie a rope around my neck
 You kick me when I fall
 Weeping, crying, my life’s a wreck
 You have no shame at all*

*“Laughing at the pain I feel,
 Joyful at the tears I shed
 In my wounds it does reveal
 Goodness from your thoughts has fled
 So it is that on this day
 Your evil has arisen
 To this, all I have to say
 Is that you are forgiven*

*“For I can plainly see
 Your soul is not remorseless
 From evil you can be
 An Angel new to goodness
 Wicked fangs and talons
 Are meaningless to me
 I pray your soul will rise
 Let not this evil be
 Peaceful in God’s glory
 Joyful in His caring
 His grace will make you one*

*With love never-ending
Soul of yours in torment
No different from my own
We are by Him created
Our lives our God has sown*

*“You must not think that all your sins
Doom your soul to fire
Awareness dawns and goodness wins
God will you inspire*

*“Revel in a tender touch
Exult in a simple glance
Bemoan not a tear so much
Naught was lost in sin’s long dance
So when it comes, the Lord’s day
Your goodness verily shines
To this, all I have to say
My Love, My Joy, Divine”*

As Anaiyailla finished the song, her face was alight with joy. Nagrek and Falg looked upon her with unmitigated wonder. She could tell her aura had reached their souls. For the moment at least, the anger, hate, and evil thoughts that had been plain on their countenances were absent. Instead, there was mildness and openness. Her heart was moved.

“Thank you. Thank you both.” She looked from one to the other. “Thank you for listening and sharing with me your reaction. It fills my heart with joy to see you both open yourselves to a ray of God’s love. I hope you will allow me to show you more.”

Nagrek shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t mind if you want to entertain us.”

Anaiyailla smiled, seeing the glint of his heart beneath his words. Falg, too, looked interested. “The true path to happiness is wonderful,” she said, “and you have both taken a first step. Remember this feeling, this craving for goodness, when next you are angry or disappointed. To become aware of your soul, and of God who created it,

will fill you with power, power beyond all your dreams.”

“It hasn’t given you much power,” Nagrek scoffed, though not so harshly as would be normal for him.

“No?” Anaiyailla put hands on her hips. “I have more power than you realize. You haven’t even the power to be happy. You’ve been searching for it all your life, but it’s always just one more drink of wine, one more gold coin, one more sexual conquest away. But reflect: You never get there. No, you don’t even understand what power is, nor true freedom. You are oppressed by habit. But I can show you true freedom. And I can show you power that can free you from Lord Kripa and Chief Ogen. You can be your own men.”

Falg chuckled. “Big talk for a slave.”

“Yes.” She said it simply, standing tall, lifting her eyes and absorbing herself in love of God. Then the moment was broken. Chief Ogen shouted in the Orc tongue that it was time to move on.

Orcs and Demons began bustling about, collecting their packs and reforming ranks. Two of the Demons started hacking away with axes on a tree near the creek.

Half a minute later, Falg said, “Okay, it’s time to go.”

Anaiyailla turned back to Cellestillena, who still sat cross-legged on the ground. She took the Sylph’s hand and helped her to her feet.

“What did you do?” Cellestillena asked, eyes wide and curious.

“Inspired by Divine Mother, I taught them a lesson through song. I think it touched their souls.”

“Oh, it did something,” she whispered, “because I saw them change before my very eyes. At the end there, when you looked up to the sky, they couldn’t take their eyes off you. There was reverence on their faces. Reverence! It was thrilling to witness. I knew your voice was magic from the first moment I heard you singing in your village. You have the enchantment magic.”

“Anna!” It was Kripa. He leaned against a tree about forty feet away. His hand was extended toward her with his finger moving in a come-hither motion. She looked back at Falg and he released her rope.

“We shall talk more later,” she said to Cellestillena, then walked over to Kripa.

“Yes, my Lord?” She stood before him.

“You’ve been behaving yourself.” He stated it as an observation.

“Yes, of course, my Lord.”

He stared at her for a moment, saying nothing, and Anaiyailla stood confident against his gaze, secure in herself. Then he said, “Tonight you will sleep with me.”

Anaiyailla felt unfazed by his statement. She was prepared to endure anything without losing sight of her soul, or her purpose in life. “As you wish, my Lord.”

His eyes appraised her a moment longer. “Perhaps I’ll let you sing for me,” he said.

She heard the reflective note in his voice and knew it was the recollection of the goodness of his soul that prompted the request. “I’d be happy to, my Lord.”

Suddenly there was a loud cracking sound as the tree the Demons had been chopping succumbed to their assault. It crashed across the stream, making a bridge.

“I haven’t had time,” he said, extending a hand to her cheek, “but I’ve been watching you. I like what I see. We’ll have plenty of time to be together, my pet, once we get back to Aagaard. Now, return to Falg. It is time to move on.”

“Yes, my Lord.” She turned away.

Falg was waiting for her. He took hold of the rope trailing from her neck and tied it to his belt. “Let’s go,” he said.

She followed him to the creek and they soon made their way across, going over the fallen tree. Cellestillena waited on the other side with Nagrek.

“What did he want?” the Sylph asked.

“He wants to spend some time with me tonight.”

“Oh,” Cellestillena sighed worriedly.

“I will be fine.” Anaiyailla smiled reassuringly. “I’ve learned a method that will keep me from harm. I’ve told Divine Mother that I’m no longer confused by the sometimes distressing disguises She wears. Kripa speaks, but I direct my replies to ‘my Lord’—omnipresent divinity. Kripa wants me to sing tonight, but when I sing, I’ll sing to my true love—God, in the aspect of Divine Mother.”

“Yes!” Cellestillena’s voice was excited; then in a whisper, “Use your magic on him.”

“Don’t you see? It’s not magic.” She chuckled, feeling lighthearted at the Sylph’s enthusiasm. “It is simply that the specific honor of Divine Mother prevents Her from allowing one truly in Her presence to be hurt against their will. But I do suppose the inspiration I feel by grace of Divine Mother can have magiclike effects on people.”

“Oh, yes, it is magic. Divine Mother grants the use of magic sometimes. You did not know?”

“Well, no. Is that where your magic comes from, Divine Mother?”

“I can use some magic through Divine Mother. Most of my magic is a different kind of magic, though. It’s innate.”

“Perhaps you can...”

“All right, we’re moving,” Nagrek interrupted. He and Falg took off with the rest of the group.

“Oh, I forgot,” Cellestillena said hurriedly as she and Anaiyailla started after them. “You see over there?” She pointed to the left. “It’s a bramble dew bush.”

Anaiyailla looked and saw it partially hidden amidst some boulders near the creek. “Nagrek, Falg,” she called to their escorts. “May we pick some fruit from that bush?” She pointed. “We won’t delay you long.”

They looked at each other. Nagrek shrugged, then Falg said, “All right, but be quick.” He spoke to another Orc nearby in Orcish, then he and Nagrek took them both over to the bush. Several hand-size fruits hung there, though each was defended on all sides by thorned branches.

Anaiyailla began to push the branches away to get at the first one, but Nagrek stopped her. “I’ll do it.” He stepped forward. He had a mailed glove on his hand, and he snatched several of the fruits and stuffed them in a bag. Then Falg helped him put the bag in his backpack, and the two Orcs led her and Cellestillena away. They jogged until they caught up with the group, and then fell in pace with them.

The sky darkened as they marched, and soon the first stars could be seen in the patches between the trees. Anaiyailla held to the rope on her neck with both hands, allowing Falg to pull her along.

As night took hold, she contemplated her upcoming encounter with Kripa. She went over and over in her head a song she had been working on, adding some lines and deleting others. She really hoped he

would not make the mistake of trying to force himself on her again—hoped she could somehow bring out the goodness in him right away, and perhaps lead him to full redemption in the Light.

Dear God, she prayed silently to herself, I know there may be other considerations, but I nevertheless ask that Kripa's soul be saved from his evil. I know he cannot be saved except by the free choice of his own heart. Therefore, my prayer is that You show him favor, and help him see how much he hates being evil. He was so close. I realize he has much to learn, that a soul like his might need a very long time, but, if it be Your will, then I will lead him unto You. If he could see Your power and glory contrasted with the shallow pretensions of this "Lord Vlockor," I'm sure the goodness in him would win out, and he would weep in joy, forever shunning evil.

Dear God, she continued, I pray that the crossing of Kripa's path with mine be for the salvation of his soul. I pray that the salvation of his soul will prevent this "Hellfire Gem," the "key to Hell on Earth," as he called it, from being given to this "Lord Vlockor." I pray that my next encounter with him will bear that fruit, rather than more suffering, for I wish to spread the joy of Your Love. If it be for the liberation of his soul, however, that I suffer, then I will endure it and never lose sight of You.

Dear God, Divine Mother, and Creator of the Universe, Anaiyaila continued her prayer, I pray to be guided in Your wisdom. I pray to be guided by You in all my actions. I pray that You help me see the correct path to take, and the right choices to make....

A vibration suddenly moved through Anaiyaila's entire body. She felt it as the most blissful experience imaginable. Then it rose beyond what was imaginable. She was free—her soul with God—and she knew unalloyed joy. Bliss broke like serried waves on the endless shores of her being. God was speaking to her, not with words or thoughts, but she understood Him. He was saying that the time was not now. She reveled in the experience, feeling wholly emancipated from her body. *I accept Your will,* she thought. Then consciousness of weight, distance, and proportion began to return, and she slowly became aware of her body again. She noticed that she was not moving. Looking around, she saw she was alone. Trees stood all around, mute apparitions in the darkness.

Sounds of movement came from ahead: many shod feet against the Earth and the rustling of bushes. They were fading. Soon they

were gone, and all she could hear were a few crickets and some branches creaking eerily amidst the soft murmurs of their leaves. She noticed a small set of eyes looking down on her from high in a tree. Farther up she could see the silver light of the moon sifting through the treetops. The chill of the air rapidly began to cool her as she stood there, motionless. An owl hooted somewhere in the distance.

“The time is not now,” she repeated softly to herself, and shed a tear as she thought of Cellestillena. “I pray for your well being, lovely Sylph, and I am sorry to leave you. But the time for me and Kripa is not now. Goodbye.” Then she coiled up the ten feet of rope trailing from her neck. She turned and began to run with a will back in the direction from which they had come, swiftly passing over the freshly blazed trail.

Her body and muscles felt inexplicably rejuvenated. Nevertheless, she had to slow to a jog, and then a fast walk, as the night wore on. Soon she was back at the stream and passing over the fallen tree. As she pressed on, she gave thanks to God and prayed that Angels be sent to protect Cellestillena.

* * *

When Cellestillena woke, she could still feel and hear the steady footfalls of Nagrek and the other Orcs. She was curled up in Nagrek’s backpack, the bag of brambledew fruit and a few of Nagrek’s things in her lap. Nagrek started carrying her about an hour after they left the stream.

Lifting her head, Cellestillena looked around for Anaiyailla, but did not see her. Surprised, she looked again. She saw Falg, but not Anaiyailla. Her heart skipped a beat and she wondered if she was dreaming. How could this be? Where was Anaiyailla? She found herself both delighted and terrified. Did Anaiyailla escape? She must have! But how could Falg not notice? And what would she do without Anaiyailla to comfort and protect her from these Orcs?

She couldn’t have escaped, Cellestillena told herself. The Orcs wouldn’t let her. Someone else must be leading her. Then she remembered what Anaiyailla had said about Kripa tonight. He must have her. Cellestillena looked up over Nagrek’s shoulder, but could not see

Kripa. He was too far ahead. Yes, Cellestillena thought to herself, both relieved and saddened at the realization: She's with Kripa right now.

Several minutes later, though, when the column came to a stop, Cellestillena realized her first surmise was correct. Anaiyailla was not with Kripa, nor with anyone else.

* * *

Kripa stood by as two Orcs began putting up his tent. It was not yet midnight but he had decided to stop. He was exhausted, as were his soldiers. A tiny stream here would provide fresh water. Plus, he was looking forward to giving his full attention to Anna.

Until now, there simply had been no time for that sort of gratification. The sixteen hours of marching each day was exhausting enough, but there were also a number of spells to weave and cast after each day of travel. His first need had been to weave another Protean Relativity spell, which, because of the spell's complexity, took him nearly three hours. The next day he had tried contacting the Beast, still hoping to use the Beastspawn to fly out of here with the gem. His Send Message spell had failed to connect. This necessitated the weaving and casting of two more Send Message spells directed to Wizard Demons with the Beast. All that effort proved futile. He concluded that the Beast and the other Demons were dead, probably killed by the Elves who had attacked the lair. This both pleased and sobered him. It meant there would be no quick way out of the Druunhaelen Mountains—and it also meant he had been wise to retreat.

At their next rest, Kripa tried contacting Overlord Bahrack, but, as expected, the Overlord was still beyond the range of his magic. Thereafter, he had turned his attention to weaving a number of defensive spells—spells that might help him elude the Elves should they catch up with them.

He planned to continue the forced march all the way to Masseryk, where, if need be, he could take a boat down the Druun to Gowra—just eighty miles from Killmeville. He knew the Death Legion was on the way, and Overlord Bahrack was sure to set up headquarters at Masseryk, so he could arrange there a large escort of Demons for the flight to Aagaard. Then he would personally deliver the Hellfire Gem

to Lord Vlockor. The thought of the riches and power that would fall to him made his mind race. All he had to do was avoid the apparent fate of the Beast.

Regardless of what might happen in the days ahead, there was nothing more he could do. He was as prepared as possible. He could not later be reproached for spending a little more time with that fetching barbarian girl.

At first, he was convinced that what happened between them back at the Orc lair was some trick of Elven magic, possibly caused by a spell the Elves had placed upon the Hellfire Gem. This surmise was supported by the fact that he still could not touch it without receiving a severe shock. Now he was not so sure. There persisted within him a lingering impression of the love and joy she had shown him. He could remember feeling remorseful at what he had done—he could remember actually craving to be good.

He found these recollections profoundly embarrassing and struggled to repress the associated memories and feelings every time they came up. Although the theory that he had simply been touched by a mind-affecting spell would explain the experience, he was unable to detect or sense any such magic working within or around him. If it was not magic, he wondered, could the experience have been real? Though that seemed improbable, earlier today he watched as Anna sang to Falg and Nagrek, and saw how both Orcs had gone soft in the face. He had cast a Detect Magic spell, but found no magic at work. He had wondered: What power did this barbarian peasant have? She had evoked in him feelings of love, guilt, remorse, and joy. How, if not by magic? And as much as he tried to repress it, he felt pangs of desire to re-experience the joy—and even the remorse—she had made him feel. Tonight he would probe her for answers—one way or another. *Ha!* he thought. *It will be fun—a taste of even greater rewards to come.*

The two Orcs finished raising his tent, and the other Orcs and Soldier Demons laid out bedrolls. Kripa looked around for Anna and saw that the last of the Orcs were just now coming into this grassy clearing where he had ordered camp pitched.

He recognized Falg and Nagrek in the starlight as they emerged from a grove of trees. A few more Orcs trailed behind, but he did not see Anna with any of them. The Sylph, however, was curled up in

Nagrek's pack, as usual.

Kripa felt his head throb as disbelief and anger clashed. "Where's your charge?"

The Orc stopped dead in his tracks and his hand whipped to his belt. Despite the darkness, Kripa could see the blood drain from his face. He looked behind, then back at Kripa, and began stuttering nonsense. Kripa took a step forward.

"My Lord, I...don't know. Sh-she was right here...tied to my belt." Falg turned to the Orcs behind him. "What happened?" he said excitedly. "You didn't see what happened to her? Where did she go?"

The three Orcs behind him just shrugged their shoulders, looking confused. Falg turned to Nagrek, who eased his pack from his shoulders and set the Sylph on the ground. "Nagrek!" he wailed.

Nagrek stared back at him blankly. "I don't know. I didn't see..."

Kripa walked closer, his feet swishing through the grass as everyone else stood motionless. "You let her escape."

"My Lord..." Falg faltered, looking stricken. "It must be magic.... Perhaps the Elves? No one even noticed she was gone!"

"But, especially you. How could you not notice?"

"I...I don't know. It couldn't have happened long ago. I'll get her back. I swear it."

Kripa located the thread of enchantment magic he was looking for and pulled it. Instantly, the complete magic-field formulae of his Jolt spell sprang before his mind. He triggered the spell and raw magic burned through the symbols and characters in a flash. With just a thought, he flung the bolt of energy that had built at his fingers into Falg. The Orc dropped to the ground, convulsing. In his throes, he bit off a third of his tongue. Blood gushed out between his clenched teeth. His eyes went wide and then he was still, even as a wet stain spread across the front of his trousers.

The stridulations of crickets and the rustling of leaves suddenly seemed loud as everyone stood motionless, waiting. The fetid smell of Falg's manure rose amidst them. Kripa was in a fury. He could not fathom how she could have escaped—and none of these fools had noticed! If there was magic involved, if the Elves had caught up with them, then why just her and not the Sylph? Why would they not have attacked while they had the initiative?

Kripa turned to the Sylph. She stood beside Nagrek, looking terrified. “You,” he said to her menacingly, speaking in Elf, “where is Anna?”

Her eyes darted all about and she quailed. “I-I don’t know...my Lord.”

Nagrek backed away, and Kripa loomed over Cellestillena’s skinny, four-foot frame. “Lies will get you hurt, little spy.” He glared down at her. She lowered her eyes and said nothing. Kripa grabbed her hair, tilting her head back. “Of course you know what happened, so you will tell me. Now.”

There were tears at her eyes but she suddenly stopped trembling. “I don’t know what happened to her,” she said with a controlled voice. “I was sleeping in Nagrek’s pack. But if I did know, I wouldn’t tell you.”

Kripa jerked on her hair and wrenched her head back even farther. She squeaked but otherwise remained calm. “Oh, you will tell me,” he snarled and flung her to the ground.

Before he could do anything else, he sensed a surge of magic. At first he felt panic, thinking the Elves were attacking, but then he recognized the magic as it bore in on him. It was the powerful telepathy spell of Overlord Bahrick.

“Kripa, report.” He heard the voice of the Pit Fiend in his head.

Kripa spun and found Chief Ogen standing nearby. “Send three Orcs after the girl; keep a close watch on the Sylph,” he told him as he brushed past Ogen and went to his tent. He ducked inside and closed the flap, then concentrated on the magic. A concise flow of evocation and enchantment magic flowed into his mind, and he heard the words again: “Kripa, report.”

Kripa studied the flow of magic as it appeared in his mind and saw the thread of enchantment magic trailing from it. He mentally tugged on it, and the flow of magic reversed. “I am here, my Lord.” He formed the thought and felt it carried away by the magic.

The flow reversed back to him and he heard the words, “I will be arriving in one week. Are you ready?”

Kripa was bursting with excitement. He tugged again on the thread of enchantment magic and the flow reversed again. “My Lord.” He etched the words on the screen of his mind. “I have recovered the

Hellfire Gem. Dreuth-sur is dead; the Beastspawn are lost. I am pursued by Elves. I have just a few Soldier Demons and Orcs left. I need immediate reinforcements.”

A long pause followed, and then the flow reversed back to him. “You are sure you have the Hellfire Gem?”

“Yes.”

“Where are you?”

“I am about one hundred miles northwest of Masseryk, heading there on foot.”

After another pause, the Pit Fiend’s voice poured into his mind. “Continue on your present course. I will dispatch a squadron of Demons from the Death Legion to find you. Keep the gem safe.”

The flow of magic unraveled and was gone. Kripa was ecstatic. Overlord Bahrack would have to inform Lord Vlockor immediately, which guaranteed he would get full credit. All he had to do was survive just a little bit longer.

*“This world will go on like this,
night and day in ceaseless alternation.
Best pray to God that He change your heart.”*

*—Saint Sevannab,
The Testament of Angels*

CHAPTER 12

REUNION

“My Lord, I’ve important news.”

“Yes?” Vlockor, sitting at his desk, motioned for the big Pit Fiend to enter.

Overlord Bahrack stepped through the foot-thick, polished-steel doors. “I have just spoken with Kripa. He says he has recovered the Hellfire Gem.”

Vlockor displayed no reaction to the words and was inwardly calm; there had been too many disappointments in his long life to get prematurely excited. “Tell me exactly what he said.”

“He is approximately one hundred miles northeast of Masseryk, and headed there on foot. He has the Hellfire Gem. Dreuth-sur and the other Demons are dead, except for a few Soldier Demons. He is pursued by Elves. That is all. I dispatched from the Death Legion two Pit Fiends and twenty Pit Beasts toward his position, as well as a complete airborne division of Demons, as soon as I broke contact with him.”

“Which Pit Fiend is in charge?” Vlockor asked evenly, as though they were discussing a routine matter.

“Na’gorth.”

“How long before he reaches Kripa’s position?”

“He has nearly three hundred miles to cover, my Lord. The Pit Demons could be there in perhaps ten hours, though their magic would be strained. Perhaps twice as long for the rest of the Demons.”

“You will leave at once.” Vlockor took pen and paper and began

writing out orders. “Take with you another Pit Fiend—Tendritz—and twenty Pit Beasts. And Draakvaar. I will send Balezaark with more Pit Demons from Wingaard to meet up with you. Balezaark will command. Make your best speed. I will coordinate with Na’gorth to see he gets the gem safely back to the Death Legion. You will get further orders once you get there.” Vlockor finished writing out the orders, then placed his magical seal upon the paper. He handed it to Bahrick.

“As you say, my Lord.” Bahrick took the paper, then turned and strode from the room.

With a mere thought, Vlockor triggered magic spell patterns on the doors and they swung shut with a noise like the closing of a vault. Then he allowed himself a smile. Hell on Earth was near. His eyes fixed on the large mirror hanging on the stone wall across the chamber and he began to call forth his scrying magic.

Standing up from his desk, he walked over to the mirror. It was big, fully twelve feet high and six feet wide. Its frame was pure gold, embedded with dozens of large diamonds. Vlockor did not even take note of his reflection as he sent a cataract of magical energies pouring into the mirror. The diamonds acted as conduits, sucking in long threads of divination magic from the ether. He pictured Kripa in his mind, from his physical characteristics to every personality trait he knew of the half-Orc. Fleeting and indiscernible images began flashing across the mirror as it drew in ever greater amounts of magic, searching for the object of Vlockor’s thoughts.

It took less than a minute before a solid image began to form. Vlockor could see Kripa as he sat in a tent, a spell book open in front of him. Kripa looked up, apparently sensing the magic.

Vlockor augmented the outpouring with a powerful stream of evocation magic, which rode the carrier wave through the mirror and established a telepathic link.

“Kripa,” Vlockor spoke out loud, “I am told you have great news for me.”

Kripa bowed his head hastily. “My Lord,” he said excitedly, “I do. I have recovered the Hellfire Gem. It is a relief to hear from you.”

“Show it to me.”

Kripa reached into an inside pocket of his robe and withdrew a large cloth bundle. He set it in front of him and unfolded layers of the

cloth. The Hellfire Gem was there, the unmistakable red and orange fire pulsing vibrantly within its numerous facets.

“The Elves have placed upon it some type of magic I cannot dispel. A ward of some sort.”

Vlockor was not the least bit concerned with a magic ward; there was no magic on Earth stronger than his own. The sight of the gem, though, was galvanizing. “What is your situation? Is the gem safe?”

“The gem is safe as long as I live, my Lord, but I have reason to believe those who took it from your Pit Demons in the first place are on my heels. I am ready for them, though. If they attack, I will be able to slip away unnoticed. I’ve prepared magic spells for just that purpose.”

“Tell me how you recovered it.”

Vlockor saw Kripa’s eyes flick up and to the left, and then settle and narrow. “A small tribe of barbarians had the gem, my Lord. I took it from them. Elves counterattacked immediately. They apparently left the gem with these barbarians because they were afraid of its power.”

“Dreuth-sur was with you?”

“No, my Lord. He was setting up one of the final outposts in preparation for the Death Legion’s arrival. The Beastspawn, Goblins, and Wizard Demons were with him, so I was on foot. I escaped to a nearby base and sent a message for him to return. I wanted help transporting the gem to safety. My position was attacked by Elves while he was in transit to the base, but I managed to slip away before the Elves could recapture the gem. I’ve been traveling on foot ever since. That was seven days ago. I have been unable to make contact with Dreuth-sur or any of the Wizard Demons with him. I presume they were killed by the Elves when they arrived at the base.”

Vlockor could tell Kripa was dissembling on some level. “What are you keeping from me?” he asked severely.

“Nothing, my Lord.” Kripa’s voice became shaky. “I have recovered the gem for you; I am at your service. What would you like to know?”

“How did you know these ‘barbarians’ had the gem?”

“I did not know, my Lord.”

“So it was by happenstance that you recovered it?”

“Not entirely, my Lord. I had set hundreds of Orcs and Goblins to search for any signs of the missing Pit Demons. Circumstantial evi-

dence suggested to me that these barbarians may have seen them. I realize now I should have sent for Dreuth-sur, and sent a message to the Death Legion, but I am familiar with these barbarians, and I hardly expected any real information out of them, much less the gem itself. I had them targeted for slavery anyway, so I took their village. I had no idea there were any Elves in the area.”

“Yes, you should have reported any information regarding the Pit Demons or the gem immediately, no matter how insignificant.” Vlockor raised his voice threateningly. “Never try to deceive me. That is a quick way to get yourself killed. Your personal ambition infected your decision.”

Kripa bowed his head and bit his lower lip. “Yes, my Lord. You are correct, of course. I had hoped to gather information that would earn me rewards, but I should have passed along any relevant facts immediately. I chose instead to first follow the leads I had gathered in fear Dreuth-sur would move in to take credit for my work. I apologize, my Lord.”

Vlockor smiled to himself. It was a sensible choice for someone in his position. This Kripa was smart. “Good. You have nevertheless done well. You will be rewarded richly.”

“Thank you, my Lord.” A grin broke across Kripa’s face.

“But first you must keep the gem safe. Will the Elves attack?”

“I am not sure, my Lord. But if they do, I can buy myself at least twenty-four hours. I will not be an easy target to acquire.”

“Make sure of it, then. A squadron of Demons will arrive to collect you and the gem in ten to fifteen hours.” Vlockor cut off the link with Kripa and began searching for Na’gorth. A few seconds later, he watched in the mirror as the Pit Fiend flew through the night, lit by the moon and stars.

“Na’gorth,” Vlockor spoke into the mirror, “tell me—how are you progressing?”

“Everything is well, my Lord,” the Pit Fiend responded as his expansive, leathery wings rocked back and forth against the night sky. “We’ve been flying for less than an hour. Our destination, as I understand it, is about one hundred miles northwest of Masseryk, somewhere near the base of Mount Moraith. We will need to rest twice before we can get there.”

“You must get there as quickly as you can,” Vlockor said intently. “The lesser Demons and Beastspawn can rest when their magic fails them, but you and the Pit Demons will press on. Is there any wind?”

“A little, my Lord. To the north, so it is helpful.”

“Good. I will be checking in with you periodically, and will guide you to the exact location. Make good speed.”

“I will, my Lord.”

Vlockor refocused his magic. The image of Na’gorth faded from the mirror as his concentration turned to Winggaard. He could not lock in on his target, though, so Vlockor inscribed his personal insignia with the magic flows and waited for Balezaark to drop his shield. Several seconds later the Archfiend’s image appeared in the mirror.

“Yes, my Lord?” Balezaark wore a fine purple robe draped around his stocky form, providing an ugly contrast to his deep red skin. His eyes glowed brightly in the deep-set sockets of his reptilian face, and his long, curved horns tilted forward as he bowed his head in deference.

“The last Hellfire Gem has been found. You are to escort it back to Aagaard.”

“Ah, that is profound news, my Lord.” Balezaark looked up, a grin revealing ranks of sharp teeth. “This moment has been long awaited. What am I to do?”

“You will leave immediately to take field command of the Death Legion. Draakvaar and Bahrick are leaving from here. Rendezvous with them and see that the gem arrives here safely. It is being carried by a half-breed hellsworn, Kripa, who is near Moraith in the Druunhaelens. Na’gorth has been sent to fetch him and start back. Make good speed, Balezaark.”

“Yes, my Lord, and thank you for the commission.” A smarmy smile creased Balezaark’s fat face. “I can hardly wait to see the dawn of Hell on Earth.”

“Yes.” Vlockor then closed the flows of magic streaming into the mirror. He walked back to his desk. “Yes,” he repeated and allowed himself a smile. Soon this world would be his to shape and mold. Soon his vision for the proper organization of all life would become reality.

For Krell, the six days since the battle at the Orc lair had been disheartening. He had blindly struck east, the direction the Demons had flown, there being no other clues. With each passing day, his fear that he would never see Anna grew more formidable. He was tormented by thoughts of her life as a slave to those fiends. How could he hope to find her in the vast sweep of this wilderness—let alone the world beyond—when he had no tracks to follow, and when those who had kidnapped her employed magic and winged Demons?

But then, late in the sixth day, he discovered some freshly made booted tracks. He found them as he came down from the mountains into a large valley, and had followed them eastward with Lori and Kian until darkness masked the trail. With the morning, they followed the tracks to a marsh where Krell discerned one set among them that was small and unbooted. *They must be Anna's*, Krell thought. They were no more than a day old. Thereafter, he had pursued with renewed vigor, traveling fast on a path that his quarry had forged.

Now it was midmorning. A sparse layer of clouds drifted slowly in a bright blue sky as Krell loped relentlessly forward amidst the boles and shadows of tall trees. Lori and Kian trailed miles behind, unable to keep pace.

For several hours, Krell's path had taken him over rolling hills. As he approached the crest of one of them, he beheld an emerald green meadow. It sloped a few hundred feet down toward a small creek at the base of the hill where the next hillock rose. Next to the creek were three does. They seemed to be surrounding something. As a sudden breeze swept the hillside, Krell saw the glint of golden hair amidst the grass.

He flew down the hillside. In a twinkling, he reached the deer—which, amazingly, did not flee. Instead, the three does positioned themselves between him and what Krell could now see, truly, was Anna.

“Anna...” Krell whispered.

The deer stood firm as he approached, until he stretched his hand out to them. They sniffed, then scampered away.

“Anna...” Krell repeated as he knelt and took her in his arms.

Relief and joy overwhelmed him. She was alive. Through all the dirt and grime, she was more radiant than ever. With a flick of his

knife, he cut the rope from her neck and her eyes opened and sparkled, embracing his. A winsome smile of ease and grace played across her face.

“Oh, my big brother...you found me...” she whispered, her smile angelic. Tears gathered in her eyes.

Krell hugged her tight, burying his head in her hair, sobbing, overcome. “Anna, Anna—they killed Lisi and Bane. There has been so much death. I was lost without you.”

Anna held him, rocking slightly, petting his hair. “I know,” she murmured. “I know.”

* * *

Alloria reached the top of the hill and saw the girl sitting with Krell. Excitement gripped her, and she and Kian hurried down the hillside to join them.

The girl met their approach with the loveliest blue eyes. “Elves!” she exclaimed, her voice full of happiness and her expression a study in rapture.

Alloria was enthralled. A matchless harmony stole over her as she felt her heart settle in Anna’s presence.

Krell stood and then helped the girl to her feet. She was sheathed in a tattered, grimy sheet, cinched at the waist. Dirty, she was—and her hair a mess, but her beauty was transcendent.

“This is my sister, Anna,” Krell said. “Anna,” he spoke to the girl, “this is Lady Alloria, and this is the great warrior Kian.”

“I’m pleased to meet you.” Kian gave a slight bow, lowering his backpack to the ground.

Alloria followed suit, saying, “Please, call me Lori. I must say, seeing you warms my heart. We have only made it this far due to the love and will you inspire in others, principally your brother.”

“Thank you both.” Anna bowed her head. “Krell just told me of your sacrifice for our people. My gratitude is overflowing. I will be an advocate before God for the salvation of your souls and for those of your dead.”

“Thank you, Ma’am,” Kian said solemnly. “You do us great honor.”

Alloria nodded in agreement, struck by the profound serenity expressed in Anna's deportment. It was as though Anna was enjoying just another in a string of endless days replete with happiness. "Your ordeal must have been dreadful," she said, "yet your spirit is in full flower. In that, you amaze me. May I ask how you escaped?"

"By God's grace," Anna said wistfully. "I prayed for His favor and the next thing I knew they had just left me behind. They still have Celleste, though, which pains me deeply."

Alloria felt her throat tighten at the mention of Cellestillena. "She was with you?"

"Yes. She told me about you." Anna's face took on a saddened expression. "I worry for her. I wish I could be there for her right now. She must be terrified. Oh, Krell!" Anna suddenly turned to her brother. "I must tell you about Celleste. She is a Sylph. She floats in the air, has wings like a dragonfly, a touch like sunshine, and is the most lovely and gracious creature you could ever imagine!"

"Is...was she okay?" Alloria shuddered, contemplating anew what those beasts might do to that innocent sprite.

Anna turned back, her face now grave. "Her body is unbroken, though she is shielded from her magic. I fear for her spirit. She will not long survive without her magic."

"How many of them?" Krell asked, his voice grave.

"There are twenty-nine Orcs and eight Demons. Plus Kripa." She looked up at Krell. "Are we going after her?"

"Yes," Krell turned to her and took her hand. "I would like to send you back to the village, but that won't be possible. The thought of possibly leading you back to captivity or to death is tormenting me right now, but we must stop them. The Demons are waging a war to enslave all people, including us. It was that crystal they came for. We can't let them keep it."

"Be not anxious over my fate," Anna spoke serenely. "It is with God. As for your quest, you are right. They must be stopped. I heard Kripa talking about the power of that crystal."

Alloria felt her heart skip in anticipation of an explanation for all that had happened: for the blitz on Anjali; for the obsession those Demons had for that crystal; and for the sacrifices that they had made to recover it.

“What did he say?” Kian asked.

Anna looked at both Alloria and Kian. “He called it the Ninth Hellfire Gem.” Looking back at Krell, she continued. “He said it was the key to Hell on Earth and that Vlockor would give a kingdom for it. He said once this Vlockor had it, all opposition would be futile.”

Looking to Alloria, Krell asked, “Is that as bad as you imagined?” Mirth colored his voice.

“That’s quite bad,” she rejoined dryly.

Kian turned away and looked at the sky. “There’s nothing like having the weight of the world on our shoulders.”

“The weight of the world is not upon us,” Anna said as a Monarch butterfly alighted near the crown of her head, then flew off. “It is under us. The responsibility to keep it there has always been God’s. Our concern should be for the emancipation of our souls. That object can be achieved by fidelity to God in thought and deed. The world is perfectly conceived to quicken the faithful. It has no other purpose.”

The surety with which she spoke struck a chord in Alloria. *Who is this girl, so young, yet speaking as though steeped in centuried wisdom?*

“What, then, should we do now?” Krell asked.

“God wants all souls to strive for Heaven, and to rebuke the wiles and coercions of Hell. Evil must not be suffered to run riot where it can be opposed. This contest has come to us uncourted and unwanted. Yet to shrink from it would be dishonorable. Those called as warriors to defend the arrangements of Heaven will be magnified in their souls by their willing service. Indeed, this righteous cause comes to us for the benefit of our souls. Will we turn aside? No. Forbid it, Almighty God! Imagine living outwardly so as not to offend the wicked, or in retreat and hiding. What could be more painful than the endless inner humiliations of lives founded on lies or cowardice? So then, pursue we must, and join the battle as best we can.”

“My life on your words, my Lady,” Kian said. “I was willing, but now I am sworn to it.”

Alloria nodded her head. “Yes, and with my kinsmen, so too myself. Your transparency to the light of God is inspiring. I feel His love within more intensely as we speak. I will enjoy your company on our quest very much.”

“And I yours.” Anna laughed infectiously. “I simply adore Elves!”

“Here, Anna.” Krell knelt next to his pack and began rummaging through it. He withdrew a pair of small shoes and some undergarments. “I found these in the Orc lair. I never thought to bring any of your clothes when I left the village.”

“Oh, splendid.” Anna took the shoes and garments from Krell. “And I never thought I’d see these again.”

Alloria reached down to her backpack and picked it up. “I have some extra clothes you can wear,” she said, “and some soap. We should go to the creek and get you cleaned up. Krell and Kian can get some food ready. You’ll need your strength.”

“You’re Angels from Heaven.” Everyone grinned. “That’s exactly what I need. Let’s go.”

Alloria took the hand Anna extended and they headed for the creek. Alloria began to feel a familiar energy rising in her spine. It was the same energy, the same life force, she felt in her deepest meditations while praying to God. It was the energy she drew upon to use sorcery magic. She sensed it emanating from Anna, and as they reached the creek, it grew stronger than she’d ever before experienced, filling her with the honey of Divine love.

She looked wide-eyed at Anna. “Have you any idea how powerful your connection with God is?”

Anna turned to face her, serene, the perfect picture of an Angel, despite all the dirt and grime. “I do feel His rapture now constantly. If this body is consecrated, it is by my heart’s devotion to Him.”

“Yes, it is. Your mere touch has brought an intensification of my own connection with God. I suspect that some great purpose of God is at work.”

Now blushing, Anna squeezed her hand, then looked around at the meadow near the creek. “I am so happy. This moment, saturated in devotion, feeling God’s presence, and sharing it with such a lovely Elf maiden—I am nearly overcome.”

Alloria squeezed back against Anna’s hand, watching her face intently. When Anna turned back to her, she said, “There,” pointing to a spot where some shrubbery grew alongside the creek, “let’s go over there.” Leading the way, Alloria set down her pack on some grass between the shrubs and the water, checking to make sure they were sufficiently concealed, then sat down herself. Anna sat beside her.

Alloria opened her pack and removed the haversack with the extra-dimensional space. She opened one of its two small compartments, pulling out a bundle of clothing and a bag of bath items. "This should get us started," she said. "I even have a razor in case you need it."

Anna was looking quizzically at the haversack. "How did all that fit in there?"

"Oh," Alloria picked it up and handed it to her. "Look. Krell pulled this from the tomb of your King Riordanall. It's magic. There were two like this; Krell has the other."

"Amazing!" Anna gazed into the open compartment. "After our mother died, Krell often read at night from the King's campaign journals; there were dozens of them. But he never talked about what he learned. I had no idea there were items with magical properties in the King's tomb!"

Alloria undid her bundle of clothes. "I'm afraid these will be a little small for you." She held up a wrap skirt and a night shirt, "but perhaps we can make them work. You can wear the night shirt like a blouse, and we can move the buttons on the skirt."

"They'll be perfect." Anna put the haversack aside and examined the garments. Then she put them down and removed her tattered socks. "Now it's time to play!"

"Oh, you poor girl," Alloria lamented as she saw all the cuts, blisters, and scrapes on Anna's feet. With soap and a washcloth in hand, she stood and took two steps over to the water's edge. "Come over here and let me clean those cuts," she said as she knelt.

Anna came over and gingerly stepped into the water, then turned around and sat down on a flat rock that rose just above the surface near the creek's edge. "Ooohh," she exhaled heavily. "It's cold, but refreshing!"

Alloria reached down and lifted up Anna's left foot from the water and began to meticulously clean its wounds. "This must be very painful for you."

"I hardly notice. In truth, God has overwhelmed me with such love and joy, I only notice the pain and discomfort if I try."

"That is a very special blessing, indeed."

"Yes, it is. He was there for me in my darkest hour and saved me with His light." She paused, looking off into space, then continued.

“And you? Krell said you and Kian are the only two of nine Elves to survive; it must be difficult, to lose so many.”

Alloria started with the other foot, then looked up. “Yes, it was. My brother was one of those who died.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“I have made my peace. He has gone to God now.”

“Yes.”

Alloria finished cleaning the cuts on Anna’s foot in silence. Then she reached for her sorcery magic. The Source opened before her instantly, vibrant, with energy waiting to be directed. She lifted up both of Anna’s feet and formed a healing spell. With a thought the magic flowed, and in moments, Anna’s feet were healed.

Anna sucked in her breath in astonishment, then inspected her feet. “How astonishing,” she said as she looked up at Alloria, eyes wide. “They’re healed!”

“Yes,” Alloria smiled broadly. “That was just a simple spell.”

“Magic,” Anna’s voice was full of wonder. “You must have to study long and hard to learn magic.”

“Well, yes. But that spell was sorcery magic.”

“What’s that?” Anna asked, turning her feet this way and that.

“Well, simply put, it’s magic gifted by God when working in concert with His will.”

“You mean like an answered prayer?”

“Very much so,” Alloria answered with a laugh. “I can see you’re halfway there already. In fact, your life force is so incandescent with God’s light that you could rapidly learn how to cast some simple spells yourself—with a little instruction, of course.”

“Really? Is it that easy to learn magic?” Her face was a picture of enthusiasm.

“It is not easy,” Alloria gazed warmly back into Anna’s eyes. “Sorcery magic requires authentic dedication to, and harmony with, God’s will. Most people can never achieve that degree of fidelity in one lifetime. You, however, already seem to be there.”

“Ah, I think I see: A sorceress is a channel into this world for God’s light?”

“Here.” Alloria chuckled at Anna’s enthusiasm, and placed the soap and washcloth on a flat rock next to the water, “first things first.”

Then, standing, she said, “I think I’ll wash up, too. It will feel good to wash the trail off me.” She undid the buttons of her cloak, the magic one from King Riordanall’s tomb, and removed it as Anna leaned down and splashed in the water.

“I can scarcely believe how wonderful this day is.” Anna undid the tie at her waist and unwrapped herself from the old sheet. Standing, she tossed it to the shore. Now, completely nude, she looked to the sky with arms stretched high, breathing deeply. “Thank You, God, for this blessing,” she said with reverence as she stood in the fullness of her statuesque youth. “Thank You for bringing Krell back to me, and for Lori here—who, in such a short time, is already like a sister. Thank You for all Your love and grace.”

Watching, Alloria felt transported. To be possessed of such immaculate joy and faith at a time like this! And to express it with such unabashed enthusiasm, completely bare to the world, made Alloria feel innocent and carefree herself, and eager to follow suit. Crouching, she unlaced her shoes, then stepped from them as she stood. While unhooking her dress buttons, she watched as Anna turned and stepped to the center of the creek where the water was deeper. As Anna dipped beneath the surface, Alloria shimmied out of her dress, exhilarated at the kisses of cool air upon her bare skin. Then she stripped off her undergarments.

When Anna came up, Alloria could see the water sparkling brilliantly in the sunlight as it cascaded from Anna’s hair and down the smooth contours of her body. “Aaaaahh.” Anna let out a long breath, then breathed deeply while sweeping hair from her face. “That water is glorious!” she exulted as she came back to the shallows, almost shimmering as she moved.

Alloria found herself transfixed. Anna’s Human form and complexion were exquisite, and she was possessed of a beauty unmatched by even the loveliest of Elves. Positively radiant with joy, Anna looked at Alloria as the sunlight glinted about her like a halo.

“Well, aren’t you going to join me?” Anna asked sweetly, then reached for the soap and washcloth.

Alloria joined her at the creek’s edge, wincing as she stepped into the icy water. “It’s so cold! This is liquid snow—not water,” she sputtered gaily, feeling at ease for the first time in months.

“I think it feels delightful.” Anna worked soap into the washcloth. “Just wait until you get all the way in; it’s invigorating.”

“Oh, no.” Alloria shook her head. “It’s too cold for me.”

“Pishtosh!” Anna said playfully, wading back to the center of the stream. “It’s quite nice—try it!” She bobbed and splashed.

Alloria took a few steps, but, as the water reached her thighs, she could stand no more. “It’s utterly freezing,” she complained, tucking her elbows in and clenching her hands beneath her chin.

Anna gave her a quizzical look. “But, really, it’s not. You must try.” She extended her arm.

The magic there was suddenly apparent to Alloria. A soft translucent light enveloped Anna’s hand. Alloria took it in hers and felt a warmth infuse her body, chasing away the frigid barbs of the water.

“Come,” Anna urged, pulling, “it’s not so cold.”

There was simply no guile evident in Anna’s demeanor. “You do not even know you are using magic,” Alloria asked, wonder in her voice, “do you?”

Anna paused briefly in puzzlement, then said, “I do not know how to cast spells.”

“And yet you are using magic. I have heard of this; it means your connection with Divine will is immensely strong. With practice, you will be able to wield great power.”

“I don’t understand. What magic?”

Alloria stepped to the center of the stream with Anna, where the water rose up to her waist. “This water is freezing, but you have used sorcery magic on yourself, and just now on me, to make it feel mild.”

“How?”

“Well,” Alloria smiled, “apparently you have achieved a harmony with God so seamless, even without instruction and training, that the movements of your life force and consciousness cast spells—without you even realizing it.”

“Oh...” Anna seemed to reflect, then smiled broadly. “Marvelous!”

Alloria laughed. She looked up at Anna—who was almost a foot taller—and gazed into her guileless blue eyes, wondering at what power this girl might yet wield. “Yes, it is marvelous.” She let go of Anna’s hand. She stood still for a moment, allowing the image before her to

settle into memory. *The actions of God's grace are unforeseeable and ever new*, she thought to herself, feeling His presence acutely. Then she dipped down beneath the water, relishing its now cool and refreshing caress.

When she rose, Anna still stood there, her hair now abounding with soap suds as she massaged it in. "This soap is fantastic," she beamed, holding out the bar.

Laughing, Alloria took it. "I purchased it in a small town just before we entered these mountains." She began to rub it into her own hair. "It smells like honeysuckle, don't you think?"

* * *

Krell lay flat on his back amidst the grass, resting. He had caught seven fat trout upstream and they were now cooking on the fire. Plus, Kian had a soup stewing. They, too, had taken baths and returned to camp much refreshed. Lori and Anna, though, were still not finished cleaning up. Krell could hear their feminine murmur and glimpse movements a short distance away, beyond the shrubbery next to the creek. *Women!* he thought, still basking in relief and joy at having found Anna alive and well. A moment of calm and a break from the chase were not unwelcome, even though he knew they must not linger too long. As he looked up into the soft blue above, he felt and enjoyed a deepening sense of tranquility.

When a flock of birds took to the sky from trees picketing the eastern hilltop, Krell cast a sharp glance that way. He saw a deer suddenly appear on the ridge, pause, and then speed off to the north. Then two jackrabbits came bounding down the hillside.

Krell sprang to his feet.

"What is it?" Kian sat upright near the fire.

"We may have company." Krell gathered up his weapons and quickly strapped them in place: longsword and hand axe at his hips as he buckled on his belt, two daggers crisscrossed on his chest and King Riordanall's broadsword down his back as he slung his baldric over his shoulders and hooked the clasps. Daggers strapped to the side of each boot were already in place. "Tell Lori and Anna to get ready to move." He picked up his longbow and sprinted off.

He leapt a narrow part of the creek and began running up the

eastern hillside along the trail the Orcs had forged the day before. The trail angled slightly to the right, toward a depression in the crest of the hill. The trees there grew in clumps, sparsely scattered across the terrain. With bushy tops rising fifty to eighty feet in the air, they cast long shadows away from a sun already low in the eastern sky. Krell kept his attention focused ahead as he ran hard, covering several hundred yards in a couple of minutes. As he neared the top, he slowed. Amidst a clump of trees, he stopped to listen.

The faint whipping sound of quail taking wing carried to him from beyond the crest. Krell strung his bow and removed one of the ten arrows from the quiver. With the arrow notched, he moved forward.

From the crest he could see miles of hilly terrain surrounded in all directions by steep mountains. The trail left by the Orcs was plain; the knee-high grass down the hillock was trampled where they had passed. Backtracking their trail were three Orcs. They were single file, about fifty feet apart. Their heads were down as they walked; their carriage conveyed weariness. The nearest was still fifty yards away. He knew the one to the rear would be the squad leader.

Krell studied the landscape for any sign of more Orcs beyond the next hill, but could sense nothing of that sort. Nor could he read any indication of subterfuge in the manner of those approaching. He took a moment to center himself; then, when the first Orc was about thirty feet away, he stepped out from the trees and drew back the bow. The Orc looked up and saw him, and then his eyes bulged as the arrow sank to its fletching into its Adam's apple, right above the collar of its armor.

Another arrow was notched as the first Orc sank to his knees, choking, his face already turning blue. Krell let his next arrow fly just before the second Orc dove to the ground—narrowly avoiding the missile—and rolled into the high grass.

Krell readied a third arrow as the last Orc turned and ran. Taking careful aim, he released it, and the arrow struck the Orc in the back of his right thigh, causing him to tumble to the ground.

With a dagger in each hand Krell rushed downhill to face the second Orc, who was loading a crossbow. Before the Orc could aim, Krell threw a dagger. It struck to the left of the Orc's sternum. Krell moved on, drawing his sword as he looked to the third Orc. That Orc leveled

a crossbow, and Krell veered behind a tree. The bolt missed. Krell resumed his charge. The Orc fumbled with another quarrel, but abandoned the attempt and drew his sword as Krell approached.

Krell slowed and circled, sizing up the Orc. This one, like the other two, was more muscular than average—and taller, too, standing about six feet, four inches. His eyes were large and yellowish, and the leathery skin of his face was a dirty brown. Fangs jutted from the lips just below a piglike nose. Long matted hair hung limp as he hobbled about, the broken shaft of the arrow still embedded in his leg.

The Orc growled and made a half-hearted stab with its sword—which Krell easily parried as he stepped to the side. The Orc tried again—and again—and each time, the blow was casually deflected. A premonition of defeat flashed in his eyes. Krell, with a flick of his left hand, sent a dagger into his foot. When the Orc jerked his leg up, Krell delivered a crushing blow to his face, and he fell. Krell loomed over the Orc, retrieved his dagger, kicked the sword from his hand, and pointed the tip of his longsword at the dazed Orc's neck. King Riordanall's broadsword remained strapped to Krell's back.

"Who's your leader?" Krell asked in the Orc tongue.

The Orc spat blood on the blade. "Filthy Human!"

Krell slapped the side of its head with the flat of his blade. "Who's your leader?"

The Orc swatted the blade away from its face and went for a knife at its belt, but Krell kicked away the knife before the Orc had a firm grip on it. "Who's your leader?" Krell yelled. He began kicking the Orc in the ribs, head, and face, stomping him back to the ground repeatedly. "Who's your leader?" Krell asked a final time, driving the tip of his sword into the Orc's shoulder, pinning him to the ground.

"Why should I talk?" the Orc snarled.

"If you don't talk quickly, my Elven friends will arrive—and they will burn your skin from your bones and keep you alive with magic."

Krell saw the Orc's eyes quiver at his words. "So?" he snarled defiantly.

"I can pull this sword from your shoulder. I can help you atone for your sins—if you talk. And I can set you free."

The Orc's battered face twitched, and gurgling sounds came from his throat. His mouth opened and closed.

“Who’s your leader?” Krell asked again.

“Chief Ogen.” The Orc’s eyes rolled wildly.

“Stupid name. He can’t be important.” Krell spat. “Does he lick the boots of Lord Kripa? What were the three of you doing?”

When no answer was forthcoming, Krell twisted his sword in the Orc’s shoulder. “Tell me!”

“We were sent to find the girl,” the Orc choked.

“Ah, the girl.” Krell peered down at the Orc, resisting an impulse to castrate it. “I’ll bet you’ve all had your way with her; can’t wait to get some of her again, huh?”

The Orc moaned. “She was Lord Kripa’s girl.” He winced as Krell leaned on his sword. “He wanted her back. He killed Falg for letting her escape.”

“So, where is Kripa now? Is he waiting for you to return with the girl?”

“No,” the Orc croaked.

Krell slammed his foot down on the Orc’s chest. “You’d better unburden yourself, and quickly. The Elves will be here soon, and they won’t be interested in what you have to say—only in making you suffer for your sins. Where is Kripa? Where is he going? How will he get there? When will he get there? How were you to meet back up with him? When? Where? Tell me. Now!”

The Orc swallowed hard. “There—there’s a town a few days to the east.” He bit his lip savagely. “It’s by the river Druun. I have orders and a map—here in my pocket. Get your sword out of my shoulder, okay?”

“Show me,” Krell said curtly.

The Orc reached his left hand over to his right jacket pocket, wincing and grunting as Krell kept his sword blade imbedded in his right shoulder. The Orc withdrew his hand and held up some parchment.

Krell took the parchment and pulled his sword from the Orc’s shoulder, then unfolded the papers. There were two: one had Orcish writing and the other was a crudely drawn map. He studied the map, seeing where Masseryk was marked next to the river Druun. Several mountains were also depicted. He looked at the mountains to the east, then back at the map, and was able to correlate them. Then he studied the other paper. The Orcish writing was difficult to understand. He

was nevertheless able to discern that it was some type of order for a boat, addressed to a “Commander Fling.”

“What is this?” Krell waved the parchment in front of the Orc.

The Orc licked its lips, then swallowed. “It’s my orders—if Chief Ogen and Lord Kripa have already gone, then I am to take a boat, and take the girl to Killmeville.”

“Is that where you’re from, Killmeville?” Krell asked. He saw an arrow pointing from the right-hand edge of the map.

The Orc nodded his head.

“How is it an Orc from Killmeville came to be way out here, stirring up trouble?” Krell asked, his foot still on the Orc’s chest.

“It was Lord Kripa,” the Orc sputtered, “he, he...a couple months ago he came with these Demons. and...and he hired my Chief—Chief Ogen—to help him organize the Orcs here. And to set up bases. Lord Kripa was looking for something.”

“And he found it?”

“Yes.”

“And where’s he taking it?”

“To—to Lord Vlockor.” The Orc coughed, turned his head, and spat some blood from his mouth.

“Were you and your Chief going with him?”

“N-no, we’re supposed to go back home.”

“How was Kripa to get to this Lord Vlockor?”

“I...I don’t know.”

Krell stuck the tip of his sword under the Orc’s chin. “You can do better than that.”

“He”—the Orc coughed, blood flecking his lips—“he has these winged beasts—Beastspawn, they’re called—and I suppose he could fly on one of them. But they’re not with him right now.”

“Are these Beastspawn at Masseryk?”

“I...I suppose.” Relief swept the Orc’s face as Krell pulled away the blade. “But, I don’t know.”

Krell looked back at the map, thinking about what he should do with this Orc. There probably wasn’t much more to be learned from it. “Who was in charge,” Krell asked, “Kripa or that giant Demon, the one that looked like a reptile?”

“Lord Kripa was in charge.”

Krell grunted, remembering that Demon and what it had taken to kill it. *When we catch up*, he told himself, *I will have to be careful of this Kripa. If he is powerful enough to command that thing...*

Unable to think of anything else of value this Orc might know, Krell decided to bring the interrogation to an end. “Who gave the order to attack the Human village?”

The Orc’s eyes shifted uneasily. “It...it was Lord Kripa, of course.”

“How do you know? Wasn’t it your Chief who told you what to do?”

“Uh, yes, but Lord Kripa ordered him. That’s what we were told.”

“Was Kripa there when the Human village was attacked?”

The Orc swallowed, then said, “Yes.”

“You saw him?” Krell prodded.

“Yes.”

“So, you admit you were there?”

The Orc’s eyes quivered as Krell waved his sword in front of its face. “Well, uh...I, I...”

“You helped murder my people.”

“I...”

“You can’t deny it.”

“But...”

“I find you guilty of murder,” Krell declaimed, “and hereby sentence you to death. I bear witness that you have paid for your worldly sins.”

“Wait! I remember you. Back at the village, you killed the Wizard Demon and almost killed our Chief. But you’re dead. I watched you die! How...?”

Krell’s sword flashed, separating the Orc’s head from its body. “We’re even, then. You are free to go.”

*“If nothing could be other than as it is,
then everything isn’t anything at all.”*

—Achea Artexerxes,

The Foundations of the World

CHAPTER 13

REVERBERATIONS

Nagrek quivered in awe as the great Pit Demons flew over the trees. They came straight in, landing in the clearing fifty yards from where the Orcs were gathered, a mass of red-scaled monsters, frightful beyond belief. Their heavy breathing could be both heard and felt as it ominously displaced the silence all about. Kripa walked forward to greet them while Nagrek got on his knees and bowed low with the rest of the Orcs.

There looked to be about twenty of the reptilian Pit Beasts, each of them virtually indistinguishable from one another. They bristled with power, arrogance, and malevolent evil—just like the one Kripa and all the Orcs had called “the Beast.” Even more terrifying—as if it were possible to be more terrified—were the two Pit Fiends. Nagrek found his body shaking uncontrollably as he peered up from where he had been bowing his head to the ground. Each of the Pit Fiends stood some eight or nine feet tall. At the shoulders, they were five or six feet wide, their arms and legs as thick as small trees. Their giant wings had a span of some thirty feet when not folded in at their backs. Where the two Pit Fiends stood, the grass withered and fell away, smoking.

When one of the Pit Beasts looked straight at Nagrek, he put his face in the dirt and kept it there. He was aware of Kripa speaking with one of the Demons but could not hear what was being said. Then he heard Kripa call to Chief Ogen. As his Chief got up from the ground, Nagrek risked a sidelong peek, still shaking at the sight of the Demons milling about. The thought occurred to him that any one of them could, on a whim, easily slaughter them all.

As Chief Ogen walked forward, Kripa produced from a pocket in his robe a stout sack—which was too big to have come from there. It was as big as Kripa’s head, and Nagrek’s ears perked up when it was tossed to the ground, the clink of coins carrying in the air.

“Your payment—in full,” Kripa said. “Your Clan Lord will be paid separately, as agreed.”

“Thank you, my Lord.” Chief Ogen bowed his head.

“If your men find the slave girl, Anna, there will be a bonus. Keep her unmolested. Along with your gold, you will find a packet containing your commission, under the fiat of Lord Vlockor and the Death Legion, to take possession of my slave and return her to me.”

“Yes, my Lord, of course.” Ogen again bowed his head, then pointed over toward Nagrek. “What about that one?” The Sylph was crouched behind Nagrek’s pack, half hidden.

“That one’s yours,” Kripa chuckled. “Do with her as you please.”

“Let’s go!” Kripa then yelled to the Soldier Demons who were grouped together away from both the Orcs and the Pit Demons.

Kripa turned and walked back to the Pit Demons. The Soldier Demons followed. He climbed onto the back of a Pit Beast, as did the Soldier Demons, then all the winged monsters sprang into the air. They flew low above the treetops and were soon out of sight.

A moment passed and then a few crickets could be heard. “All right!” Chief Ogen yelled. “Pack up your things. It’s time to go home!”

A raucous cheer erupted as all the Orcs came to their feet. Nagrek was standing, too, feeling giddy with relief at the departure of the Demons. They had been nothing but trouble. Chief Ogen came right up to him, looking down at the little Sylph. Nagrek turned around. She was kneeling there, a blank look on her face as she stared with unfocused eyes. The rope from her neck was securely fastened to his belt.

“Well,” Chief Ogen said, “now that Lord Kripa no longer wants her, it’s time she starts earning her keep, eh Nagrek?”

Nagrek was not certain why, but he felt no enthusiasm for his Chief’s implication. In fact, he realized he felt annoyed by it. He offered only a noncommittal grunt.

“But she’s so small. She might rip,” the Chief continued, laughing crudely and grabbing his crotch. “I intend to find out, though. I’ll let you be second,” he nudged Nagrek, “that is, if she’s still in one

piece.”

With his left eye twitching and a sudden sick feeling in his gut, Nagrek realized he couldn't let this happen. He didn't know why, nor could he comprehend why he cared, especially because it was precisely what he had wanted to do from the beginning. All he knew was that he must divert Chief Ogen from his purpose.

“You know, Chief,” he said, his voice low and conspiratorial, “a creature such as this is extremely rare. I expect someone back in Killmeville would pay a fortune for her.”

The Chief's eyes lit up. His mouth hung open. “You're right,” he said. “How stupid of me. I hadn't even thought of that.”

“But,” Nagrek added, “we'll have to keep her unspoiled.”

Ogen reached down and grabbed her shirt around the neck, pulling her to her feet. Then he pulled her shirt up over her head, leaving it stretched over her arms. “Spread your wings,” he said to her.

The Sylph just looked at him blankly.

“She doesn't understand,” Nagrek said. He reached out to her and gently touched her wings. “Spread them.” He motioned with his arms.

Her wings spread out from her back. There were six of them, three to each side, attached between her shoulder blades. They were translucent with a silver lattice structure, each about two feet in length.

“Yes,” Ogen said, half to himself. “She'll bring a fortune. Good thinking, Nagrek.” He slapped him on the shoulder. “You keep a close eye on her; you're in for a hefty bonus.”

When his Chief left, Nagrek motioned for the Sylph to put her wings down, then slid her shirt back in place. He patted her head, wondering why he felt this way.

Ever since the Human girl had mysteriously disappeared last night, he had experienced unfamiliar and uncomfortable emotions. He couldn't get it out of his head how, just yesterday, she had stood before him and Falg talking about power. She said she could show them power beyond their imagination; that they didn't even have the power to be happy, nor the understanding of what power was; and that she could show them a power that could free them from Lord Kripa and Chief Ogen. He and Falg scoffed at her, of course, and he could remember Falg telling her, “Big talk for a slave.” But now Falg was dead

and she was free.

There was much more to it than that, but Nagrek couldn't figure it all out. He just knew he didn't want anything to happen to this Sylph if he could prevent it. He couldn't help but think there were powers at work here that he did not understand, and he didn't want to get on the wrong side of such powers—such powers as had ordained the girl's escape and caused Falg's death.

Yes, Nagrek thought, remembering the three who had been sent by Lord Kripa to recapture Anna, I'd bet silver against copper we'll never see those three again.

* * *

Cellestillena was trying her best to do as Anaiyailla had instructed. Even though she was feeling overwhelmed, she told herself that she was not alone, that she was in the presence of Divine Mother. It was a difficult spiritual practice, given her circumstances.

While Anaiyailla's escape had thrilled her, it had also left her alone. There was no one to talk to among the Orcs. She felt abandoned, though she told herself Anna would never do that. Without Anaiyailla's unbounded love of Divine Mother, and without her unfailing optimism and joy, Cellestillena felt on the verge of despair. After more than one hundred years of charmed and untrammelled liberty, it was simply crushing to be held captive, let alone by such brutes. Yet when Anaiyailla had been with her, she felt happy and hopeful, despite the circumstances.

Now, even as she tried to keep her thoughts on Divine Mother, she felt her will breaking. Last night had been especially difficult. Normally, she and Anaiyailla would have slept together, wrapped tight in that sheet Anaiyailla wore as a dress, keeping each other warm. They would have whispered of beautiful things and, wrapped in Anaiyailla's arms, she would have forgotten where she was. But last night, all alone, she had been deathly cold, shivering and sleeping fitfully. Her only recourse would have been to snuggle close to Nagrek, but that she could not do. Then this morning she had awakened to a new terror: Her magic was gone.

The chain Kripa had placed around her neck had been shielding

her from her magic, but she had still been able to sense it and feel it. Now, her magic was gone completely. Even if she could get this chain from her neck, she would still be without her magic, helpless. She had been afraid this would happen, and it had. Her mating gene had activated, and her magic was now lost until she mated. While it happened to all Sylphs, she knew it occurred very rarely, and maybe only once in the long life of a Sylph, if the Sylph was careful. But close proximity to males was said to encourage estrus, as Cellestillena now knew firsthand.

What further calamities loomed? Cellestillena wondered as she waited. She tried not to think about it. She would focus on heavenly thoughts. She had promised Anaiyailla.

As she tried again to do so, she became aware of Nagrek speaking to her. All the Orcs were leaving and he seemed to be telling her it was time to go. It was odd that he would, she thought. She would have expected him to just yank on the rope. While she looked up at him, he said something else, but she couldn't understand. Then he patted her head again. Turning, he started off with the rest of the Orcs, and Cellestillena followed. All morning, she thought, Nagrek had been uncommonly gentle with her. She wondered why as she trailed behind.

"If you want to be nice," she said to herself, "you could release me—and get yourself killed, like Falg."

Thinking of being free, though, she realized that even if it were to happen, she was without her magic, and she would inevitably end up as food for some lion, tiger, or bear—or some other denizen of this wilderness. All sorts of dangerous predators lurked out here: giant spiders and snakes and other large reptiles and insects; Goblins, Bugbears, and Ratbeasts, and many more—all of which knew to avoid a party of well-armed Orcs. But a lonely Sylph without her magic would attract them like a beacon.

That thought made Cellestillena think again of Anaiyailla, likely alone and helpless. *Divine Mother*, she prayed, her heart fluttering with worry, *please protect and look after Anaiyailla. She is dear to me, and there is nothing I wouldn't give for her. I would gladly endure any cruelty so she could be safe and free. In all my one hundred twenty-three years, never have I met a soul so dedicated to You. Never have I met a soul so perfectly attuned with Your divine love. Never have I met a soul who drew me so close to You. With all my heart, I pray for*

her safety. Such a soul must surely have a greater purpose in this life. I pray You are with her, protecting her and guiding her.

As she prayed, Cellestillena began to feel a warmth in her heart. She understood what it meant: Her prayer had been answered. Happiness sprang to life within her at the realization. Her footsteps felt light and she felt enveloped in a comforting joy.

Walking on, she smiled openly now, remembering Anaiyailla's eyes—and her face and her smile and her aura of heavenly goodness. *Such a wise soul, she thought, in such a young body. Surely, Divine Mother has placed her here for a reason. For wisdom so great to be found in someone so young, the divine hand of our Mother must be at work. Thank You, Divine Mother, for allowing me time with her. I will cherish it always.*

Cellestillena continued on with a happiness mounting in her heart. She was not alone, and anything she might face would be worth the time she had spent with Anaiyailla.

*“The war you were born to is won or
lost within. Name the opposing generals.”*

*—From the Catechism of the
Baezean Church of the Light*

CHAPTER 14

THE KNIGHTS OF BAEZA

*M*aris snorted and shook her head as a gust of wind whipped down the trail, picking up dust and leaves. Anastas Mikoyan, son of a Human knight and Elven sorceress, and now a Counselor of Wizardry to the Knights of the United Kingdom of Baeza, patted her neck to calm her down as the gust subsided. The steady beat of hooves continued as Anastas looked to the overcast sky. A storm was blowing in. It would rain soon.

Directing his gaze forward, he settled back into his saddle, hoping they would reach their destination before the rain. Riding up in front of him were Captain Darius De'Maakthorn, Paladin of the Light, and Anais Nin, High Cleric of the Light. They rode side by side, the Human on the left and the Elf on the right, speaking quietly to each other. In front of them rode Captain-Major Kadlec Marr and the High Counselor of Wizardry, Balian Eckles, both Human. Further up, Field Commander Kaelin Peck, an Elven knight, led the procession with five knights—all Human—and Counselor Cidera Sharr, an Elven wizardess. The rest of the cavalcade rode behind Anastas.

In all, there were fifty-two of them: one captain-major, one captain (and Paladin), one field commander, two commanders, and three subcommanders; one high cleric, two clerics, two ministers, and three priests; one high counselor, two counselors, one first advisor, and two advisors; and thirty knights. It was a large number of high-ranking officers for such a small regiment, but the mission was important, and experience was needed more than numbers on this one.

Anastas knew they were not far from Killmeville now. For three

weeks they had been riding south from Oresis, the last two of which had been through dense forest.

That forest was giving way to the industriousness of man as they neared their destination. The trees here were thinned from logging, and the trail they followed was now a hard-packed road, with various paths branching off. In the past two hours, they had passed three small groups of travelers going north, each of which had slunk into the brush to avoid them.

Rain fell, but never for more than a minute. The procession continued. Wind blew erratically as the clouds above grew thicker and darker. More travelers were out and about here and buildings could be seen off to the sides, built well away from the road, with stout walls protecting them. Most looked like small fortresses, with defensible battlements built from stone. Every passerby steered well clear of their cavalcade and cast suspicious glances. Eyes began to appear in distant windows and heads appeared in the crenellations atop fortified walls. Far in the distance to the south a castle donjon could be seen rising into the sky.

Nearly everyone Anastas saw was Human, though he did see two Dwarves. A few people with their heads shrouded appeared to be half-Orcs. Anastas looked carefully for any sign of magic. They expected to ruffle some feathers. There would almost assuredly be a fight before the day was out.

At the front of the procession one of the knights held aloft the Baezean banner, red and blue with a castle and knight pictured, and the words *Honor*, *Duty*, *Faith*, and *Glory* blazoned one at each corner. Each knight wore matching full-plate armor of the highest temper, with the Baezean crest painted on each breastplate. They rode experienced war-horses complete with plate barding. The officers—excluding the wizards but including the sorcerers—wore uniforms, their rank signified by the gold bars on their collars. The Counselors and Advisors—the wizards—each wore matching light blue robes with a small Baezean crest. All together, they were a small but formidable military unit, and one obviously rigged for battle.

As they rode on, the scent of baked bread and roasting meat reached Anastas. The fortified houses became more numerous, there were more people about, and ahead he could see businesses lining the

street. The tension in the air mounted as they approached, making the monotonous clip-clop of the horse's hooves seem eerie on the wind.

To the right was a medicine shop; opposite to it, a lumberyard. Then a diner and a tavern stood side by side, while on the left, a weapons store and an armor store advertised their wares. Between them was a smithy. A little farther ahead another road branched off to the left. There at the corner was a two-story general supply store. A few people stood on its porch, gawking at them. Opposite to the supply store was a large three-story inn, with stables in the back. The buildings were constructed with a blend of stone and wood.

The street emptied as they approached, but faces could be seen peeking from windows and around corners. A boy came running out of the diner, stopped, and stared at them with wide eyes. Then a woman came after the boy, scooped him up, and carried him back inside.

In front of the inn an old man stood, his back bent, leaning on a gnarled staff. Anastas looked him over carefully, for he appeared to be the same man he had seen just a few hundred yards back, standing amidst some trees off the side of the road. He wore an old gray cloak and his white beard was a foot long. Frizzy, sparse white hair hung to his shoulders. In a strange contrast, his eyes were sharp, intelligent, and bright green. He was the first adult not to grow squirmy at their approach.

Anastas had not sensed any magic in use thus far, but his magic sense was good for only a few yards. He reached his mind out to his staff—a four-foot wooden rod with a spiked copper ball at one end and a retractable blade in the other—and conducted raw magic through the Detect Magic spell program embedded in the mahogany. Directing the spell's effects to himself, he then concentrated on the old man. There was magic about him; it enveloped him and swirled around his staff. Upon further study, Anastas was able to determine that the old man had a protective shield about him, and a flow of divination magic that stretched to the sky.

“Excuse me, sir,” the Field Commander said to the man as he brought the procession to a halt. “I am Field Commander Kaelin Peck of the Knights of the United Kingdom of Baeza. May I inquire of your name?”

The old man looked up from beneath a craggy white brow. “People

around here call me Eagle Eyes,” he said. “Can I help you with anything; lodging for your party, perhaps?”

“Perhaps. We are looking for people of Honor and Faith, people who follow the Way of the Light, people who will stand against the coming darkness. If there are such here, it is with them that we plan to stay.”

The old man’s eyes went from the Field Commander and swept the entire column of knights. Anastas saw a keen discernment in those eyes and locked with them for an instant before the old man looked back up at the Field Commander.

“If there are such people,” he said, “I am not so certain they would want to be found by you.”

Darius, who had been whispering with the High Cleric, broke ranks and trotted his horse up to the old man. Anastas saw a sudden surge of magic swirl about the man and prepared himself to cast, his spell ready to trigger the preprogrammed anti-magic shields on every member of his party.

“I am Captain Darius De’Maakthorn, Paladin of the Light,” Darius said to the man. “My good sir, men of goodness must step forward, or by their passivity, evil will flourish. War is coming; we are here to determine who will fight with us and who will fight against us. There is no room for neutrality. If you know of no good men who would step forward of their own initiative, then we will have to set such an example that no one can remain long on the sidelines.”

“In that case,” the old man grinned, flashing perfect teeth amidst the whiteness of his beard, “I have in mind a place I could send you, though I can’t imagine a warm welcome. You see, the powers of this city could not coexist without at least feigning mutual neutrality, myself included. However, if I understand your purpose correctly, I would send you to see Count Scillieri, for it is there you are most likely to find what you are looking for.”

“Is this Count Scillieri a man of honor and faith? Will he stand with us against the Demon armies?”

“No.”

Darius laughed, then briefly bowed his head. “You have a keen mind, good sir, to read our intentions so plainly. I suppose you will direct us to this Count Scillieri?”

“His estate is not hard to find. Take this road”—he nodded toward the one that branched off to the left—“and you will find it on the south side. Be warned, though, he is an important power in this city.”

“Thank you, you have been very helpful,” Darius said formally, then: “I ask you now, knowing our purpose as you now do, will you stand against the Demon armies or against us?” The question was posed as a challenge.

The old man held Darius’ gaze steady, then said, “I suppose I have furnished an answer to that question already. Perhaps when next we meet it will be more clear.”

The magic swirling about the man redoubled its intensity. Anastas was ready with a spell, but saw there was no need as the old man whipped his cloak over his head. It was an alteration magic. From where the man once stood, a large eagle flew off into the sky.

“Kaelin, lead the way,” Darius said to the Field Commander, then walked his horse back into line as the procession started down the road on the left.

“What do you suppose was his game?” Anastas asked as they started moving.

Darius turned back to look at him. “It doesn’t matter,” he said, “though I suspect he means to help us. I did not sense evil in him. Besides, if this Count Scillieri is a significant power, then he will suit our purpose perfectly, regardless of his welcome. I suspect that old man read our purpose truly, and his suggestion will prove helpful.” He looked down the road. “Let us get this over with before the rain starts in earnest.” A light drizzle was falling, its sound masking all others, save for the blowing of the horses, and the crepitation of their battle harness.

Anastas looked to the sky. Eagle Eyes was nowhere to be seen. As they turned down the road to the left they passed a bordello and another tavern, and then another inn, this one small and shabby. Farther on, they saw a tannery and a tailor’s shop, followed by a bakery, a slaughterhouse, and finally a theater hall. People were about, but they melted back as the regiment approached. The road twisted a little to the south as it bore due west. On the north side of the road the trees and bushes were sparse. Dozens of horses could be seen grazing in a large pasture behind a sturdy fence. Two large barns stood in the

fenced pasture, and a big house could be seen farther up, fronting the road.

To the south side of the road rose stands of large trees. Behind the trees, a fifteen-foot high stone wall could be seen about one hundred feet off and parallel to the road. Through breaks in the treetops, the white castle donjon they had seen before was still in view to the south, silhouetted against the slate-gray sky. It was not a particularly big one by Baezean standards.

As the road angled slightly to the south, it drew closer and closer to the large stone wall. The trees were thinner here, and behind the wall could be seen a three-story keep. It was built of granite and was approximately two hundred feet side to side and one hundred feet deep. A little farther up the road was a gate in the wall, set back fifty feet from the road, and a gate tower rising thirty feet above it. The gate was made of thick iron bars and, when open, was drawn up into the tower above. In big block letters, carved in the stone arch above the gate, was written "Count Scillieri."

The knights gathered in front of the gate. No one said a word. Darius walked his horse to the front, ten feet from the gate, the Field Commander and five knights with him. The gate was fifteen feet by fifteen feet, its bars set six inches apart. Two guards stood on the other side and several more guards could be seen behind windows in the gate tower. Four more guards stood atop the wall to either side of the tower, each holding a crossbow.

Anastas made an effort to sit nonchalantly in his saddle, even as he watched carefully for hidden dangers, and established conscious rapport with the magic spell programs embedded in his staff. With the regiment now at the ready, most of the knights were in front of him. He, as was true of the other wizards, was responsible for making sure they were not caught off-guard by an attack, especially a magical one.

As he scanned each of the guards, he detected no danger beyond the arms they carried. Two of the guards were half-Orcs. He was almost certain he caught a glimpse of a Hobgoblin up in the tower. The rest of the guards were Human. Beyond the gate was a courtyard, which led to the keep, about fifty yards from the gate. The front entrance to the keep was up a short flight of steps, where two large iron-bound wooden doors sealed off the archway there.

“I require audience with Count Scillieri,” Darius told the two wide-eyed guards at the gate.

Just then a door could be heard opening from behind the left-hand pillar of the gate’s tower. A tall bearded man stepped out and walked up to the bars. He wore fine chainmail armor with a well-wrought longsword at his hip.

“Count Scillieri does not see unscheduled visitors,” he said with a firm voice and steady gaze. “If you wish to request an appointment, you may leave a message with me.”

“Deliver this message to your master forthwith,” Darius spoke with authority: “The Baezean military is at his gate. He will give us entrance or we will admit ourselves.”

Anastas saw the bearded man blanch, though he tried to mask his anxiety with a stern face and steady eyes. “Max,” he said without taking his eyes from Darius, “go tell Barclay I require him at the gate.”

The guard next to him looked as though he were confused, looking first to Darius, then said, “Yes, sir, right away, sir.” He turned and hurried off into the courtyard and toward the keep.

The bearded man took a firm stance and placed his hand on his sword hilt. “You should be careful with your words, stranger. Neither should you imagine that the castle of Count Scillieri stands alone. In this city, one needs friends, not enemies.”

“When the time comes”—Darius walked his horse forward—“you would be wise not to choose us as an enemy. I have had conversations like this before. The Knights of Baeza speak plainly. You should measure our words as carefully as we choose them. We have not crossed oceans with trepidation lest we make enemies; we have come to find our enemies—and defeat them.”

“Well, then, for the sake of your mission, I should hope you do not make an enemy of Count Scillieri. No enemy of his has long survived.”

“It is for your sake and the sake of his men that we engage in this parley,” Darius said with a sudden mildness to his voice, though it remained loud enough to carry to the men on the walls. “Count Scillieri is a provincial power. Your true Lord is God. There can be no honor in standing opposed to His Host or failing its summons. If your Master’s path is in darkness, quit his service and stand aside. Surely then, mercy

and grace will find you. You've had all the days of your life to do the right thing; however, fail in righteousness this day, and it will prove your shortest."

"We shall see." The bearded man took a step back. "Mr. Barclay will be here shortly. He speaks for Count Scillieri."

As they talked, Anastas carefully watched the keep, watched as the curtains behind nearly every window moved. People peered out at them. Whatever magic this Count Scillieri had at his disposal was unknown. It might assail them from anyplace, but especially from the sight lines of those windows. Anastas contemplated the order of the spells he would use when it started. As he did so, the guard came hustling back from the keep.

"Mr. Barclay says he will be here momentarily, sir," he said to the bearded man.

"Good, resume your post," he told the guard, then addressed Darius. "A moment," he said with a brief incline of his head.

Darius said nothing. He sat still on his horse, as did the rest of the knights. A light rain continued to fall as horses stamped their hooves impatiently, and the creaking of leather and metal contributed to the tension in the air. The muted voices of guards could be heard. They whispered to each other as more began to assemble in the courtyard in front of the keep. Bystanders gathered on the road to either side of the knights, though at a distance.

On the wind, the smell of burning pitch reached Anastas. He imagined the tower was designed to allow vats of it to be poured on unwelcome visitors. Then large entrance doors to the keep opened and an average-sized man dressed in black robes strode out, flanked by eight men in shiny chainmail armor. Anastas sensed a magical field.

Reaching his mind out to his staff, Anastas triggered again the embedded Detect Magic spell, and used the resulting force to probe the energy emanating from the approaching officer. He saw right away that it was a protection magic, and one of high quality, though it was protecting only him.

Darius turned in his saddle and looked back at Anais Nin, the High Cleric. "The weather could not be better, don't you agree?" he asked, glancing briefly at the sky.

"If you like thunderstorms. In ten minutes, I say, you will find

yourself in your element,” the High Cleric responded, then pulled his horse away from the group, followed by two knights.

Darius looked to Kadlec Marr, the Captain-Major.

“You have the reins on this one, Captain,” the Captain-Major said to him.

Darius turned forward as the black-robed man neared the gate.

“I am Barclay, First Lieutenant to Count Scillieri,” the black-robed man announced. “What is your business here?”

Anastas looked Mr. Barclay over and didn’t like what he saw. Barclay’s eyes were shifty, his hair greasy, his face gaunt, and his lips thin. He carried a two-foot long metal rod in his hands.

Darius took a moment before responding. “I am Darius De’Maakthorn, Paladin of the Light, Captain in the Baezean military representing the Knights of the United Kingdom of Baeza, duty and honor bound to serve the Way of the Light, to vindicate the glory of righteousness by order of the Supreme Commander, Lord Vahle, and to spread the faith for our Elven queen, Lady Alballa. We require use of this land as a base for our operations in this city.”

Mr. Barclay’s face contorted and his eyes darted about erratically as he looked over the regiment. Then he licked his lips and twisted the rod back and forth in his hands. “That is out of the question,” he said finally. “If you’ve no other business, then I say to you: good day.”

“That is the wrong answer, Mr. Barclay,” Darius said forebodingly. “I will be even more clear with you. We are at war with evil. The Demon Lord of the Nine Hells freely roams the Earth, and his armies are on the way here, bent on subjecting every living being to his will. We arrive here to peremptorily force, first upon you, and soon upon everyone, a choice between good and evil. Do you choose to fight with us or against us? If it is with us, then open your gate; if it is against us, then we will be forced to destroy you before your new master, the Demon Lord, arrives with his armies and co-opts you in his service.”

“What you say is insane,” Barclay hissed between his thin lips. “Count Scillieri serves no one, not you, and certainly no Demon Lord. I have never heard anything more outlandish. This city will eat you alive, no matter how much power you think you have. Now be gone; this gate will not open for you.”

“I assure you, Mr. Barclay, this gate will open.” Darius pulled his

sword from its scabbard and held it aloft. A silver-white light shone from it, enveloping Darius and his horse. “You should ask yourself, is that the answer you wish to give for your Master? Do you choose evil over goodness on his behalf?”

Barclay’s face twisted in anger, his eyes narrowing to slits. “You are making a fatal mistake, Captain of...of...whatever. I will consult with Count Scillieri.”

He spun and barked at the bearded man, “Raise the whole garrison.” Then he addressed the men who had escorted him from the keep: “You four, stay here. You”—he motioned at the other four—“come with me.” He stormed off toward the keep, followed by four of the men in chainmail.

Two dozen men now stood atop the wall to either side of the gate tower, all armed with crossbows in their hands and swords at their hips. Their armor was shoddy, especially by Baezean standards. Four of them were half-Orcs.

Darius lowered his sword and sheathed it. The nimbus around him and his horse winked out. Anastas relaxed a little as Mr. Barclay disappeared inside the keep, though he kept a weather eye on its windows in case a preemptive magical attack was launched.

“If your master follows the same course as his First Lieutenant”—Darius lifted his powerful voice to Count Scillieri’s men on the battlements—“you needn’t join him. The option to choose the path of the Light is personal to each soul and inalienable. If your heart sees us and rejoices, do not allow fallen men to speak for you. Those who choose goodness over evil will be welcomed by their true brothers.”

Whispering among Scillieri’s men along the wall and behind the gate intensified. Anastas could see the fear in their eyes. Continuing to watch for threats, he glanced down the street in both directions at the large number of bystanders now gathered, assessing the potential of an attack from those directions.

Just twenty yards away, he saw the High Cleric as he sat still on his horse, hands uplifted to the sky. Anastas focused with his still active Detect Magic spell and saw the powerful sorcery magic enveloping the High Cleric, tendrils of it spiraling upward to the clouds. He knew the powers the High Cleric was invoking; the main elements of the battle plan had been finalized hours ago, even though they hadn’t yet known

precisely who they would confront. The magic he was using would draw lightning from the clouds. It was a powerful spell the Baezean military had used to great effect many times, for the lightning was real, not magic. Thus, a ward that protected against magic would be of no avail, as this Count Scillieri would soon find out.

Thinking of the sorcery magic, though, Anastas experienced the frustration that arose in him whenever he reflected on magic of that type. Sorcery magic was far more powerful than wizardry magic, yet for countless generations the operating principles of it had resisted scientific documentation—and this despite the focused attention of the greatest adepts of wizardry magic. Though many priests, ministers, and clerics had learned to tap into fields of sorcery magic, their powers were limited, and often proved haphazard and unpredictable. The religious believed that God granted use of sorcery magic to those who are faithful—a superstition, as so many before it, that Anastas knew would one day fall before that great engine of Human progress: the scientific method.

Two thousand years ago the legendary wizard Charren Darwil had shown how a certain region of the brainstem near the top of the spinal column could draw energy from the ether. His studies showed that people of faith, whether it be in God or some other irrational belief system, were able to establish a degree of intentional rapport with that portion of the brain more frequently, and consequently could sometimes wield sorcery magic. However, the magnitude of their gift, and its use on any specific occasion, seemed closely tied to the person's irrational belief system and emotional state. The existence of such idiosyncratic variables had led to notable battlefield disasters. Accordingly, since Darwil's discovery, sages of wizardry had spent lifetimes trying to develop a unified theory that would yield the scientific equations to control the magic—without the mediation of the brainstem and such imponderables as faith and an individual's inner sense of "worthiness." With those equations, wizards would then be able to control the sorcery magic and bring it fully to bear. It could so greatly increase the power of the Baezean wizards that they might be able to rout Vlockor and his Demon armies, and send them back to the infernal plane from which they hailed.

In his youth, Anastas himself had put many years of thought into

a solution, but he had since grown weary of the pursuit. His research led him into a labyrinth of paradox and dogma from which he barely escaped with his sanity. Now he regarded the conundrums of sorcery magic with a bafflement overgrown by years of irritation and resentment. Yet, tactically, whatever limited use the priests, ministers, and clerics were able to make of the sorcery magic was welcome. Without it, the Knights of Baeza would long ago have perished against Vlockor's armies.

As he saw the magic at work in the hands of the High Cleric, Anastas had difficulty controlling his bitterness. It was so vexing! The only people who could use the magic were the ones who ignored the truths of science—in favor of a belief system that existed only in their heads. It didn't even matter if it contradicted in some particulars the beliefs of other sorcerers. Maddening! The irony of these circumstances was not entirely lost upon him. In a sense, he was crippled by reason and they were empowered by irrationality. Hah!

Shaking himself free from his inner diatribe, Anastas refocused his mind to the task at hand. There would be a battle soon, though it should be over quickly. Nothing here indicated that this Count Scillieri was capable of withstanding a Baezean military regiment.

The front entrance to the keep opened once again, and Anastas watched as Mr. Barclay came back out, this time followed by what appeared to be the good Count himself. They were accompanied by twelve guards, as well as two others in wizard robes. The Count was dressed in fine raiment, bright red and orange. He had a sword at his belt and bracers on his arms. He, Mr. Barclay, and the two others in wizard's robes were each enveloped in magic, almost assuredly protective shields. They were too far away for Anastas to try to discern more precisely the type of magic, but it scarcely mattered.

The Count and his escort stopped midway in the courtyard. "I am Count Scillieri, Lord of this manor." The man in bright clothing spoke in civilized tones, loudly and clearly. "Mr. Barclay informs me you are from a distant land and seek refuge here. I am prepared to forgive minor improprieties because you are strangers to our ways, but I cannot admit you, for I am at war with no one. I can, however, arrange for a place where you and your men can stay. Perhaps we can even become partners by some future arrangement, but for now, this is all I can of-

fer.”

“Count Scillieri.” Darius’ voice carried clearly as the light mist continued to come down. “I am Darius De’Maakthorn, Paladin of the Light, Captain in the Baezean military, representing the Knights of the United Kingdom of Baeza, duty and honor bound to serve the Way of the Light, to vindicate the glory of righteousness by order of our Supreme Commander, Lord Vahle, and to spread the faith for our Elven Queen, Lady Alballa. I am here to inform you we require use of your land as a base of operations in this city. We do this only because of dire necessity. Your land, and this entire city, is all but forfeit to the Demon armies that even now gather over the horizon for its conquest. As we understand it, some—perhaps most—in this city will not resist the Demon armies, but will in fact be absorbed by them. This we will not allow to happen. Therefore, Count Scillieri, you must choose: You will fight with us against Vlockor and his armies, and allow us entrance, or by your refusal, tacitly concede your intention to stand with Vlockor against us—in which case, we will destroy you on the spot.”

“How dare you present threats and demands!” the Count flared. “You have no authority here. I can have you crushed like bugs. This is my land, and I have powers and alliances unknown to you. You are bold, but just fifty; you are surrounded and in danger of losing your lives. Relent from this ramping foolishness and withdraw.”

“If that is your answer, then I must assume you expect to survive Vlockor’s onslaught by cooperating with him.” Darius gave the hand signal for the spell-casters to begin, the High Cleric having just ridden back into formation. “I give you only a moment to reconsider. This is world war and, at that, one to the death. There can be no neutrals. A good man would count it no loss of authority to answer the call of God’s legions. Finally, I remind you we fight on the side of the Light.”

Anastas immediately began casting, using a conduit spell to direct raw magic into the spell programs embedded within the armor of every knight and horse. Anti-magic shields sprang forth. Other magic was in use from the other spell-casters, making their military unit nearly impervious to attack—at least for the duration of the spells.

It was evident that Count Scillieri was fully aware of the sudden use of magic by the widening of his eyes and stiffening of his back.

One of the wizards at his side whispered in his ear and the other appeared to cast a spell, though of what, Anastas could not tell. Scores of armed men were now gathered in the courtyard.

“Why me?” the Count yelled back. “Why my land? What concern is it of yours?”

He was stalling, and Anastas could tell what he was thinking: He was wondering if he really had enough men to withstand an assault by this group of foreigners; wondering who sent them against him in the first place; and considering whether he should let them in, after all—and kill them as they slept or poison them. Anastas also knew what the Count would ultimately conclude: It was too risky to let them in.

“You, because we have chosen you to be first,” Darius announced in a clipped military baritone. “Your land, because it suits our purpose. It concerns us, because we refuse to live as slaves to Demons; so, we are at war. We are at war with the Demons; therefore, we can give no quarter to those who would assist the Demons. Now, make your choice, you are with us or with the Demons!” Darius pulled forth his sword and held it aloft, its silver-white light expanding again to envelope Darius and his horse. The sight of its nimbus against the rain and the drab grays and browns of the environs was spectacular.

“You talk big, foreigner, but we outnumber you six to one and I have many, many allies in this city. You will not enter!” He spoke with the full might of his voice. “I defy you.” Then he bellowed, “Lower the inner gate! Ready the pitch!”

A loud click in the gate tower was followed by the churning of gears. A thick, ironbound wooden gate began to fall just behind the bars of the outer gate. Just then a bolt of lightning came from the sky and struck Count Scillieri where he stood. When the blinding flash cleared, the gate was closed.

“Charge!” Darius yelled. His horse sprang forward and the rest of the knights followed. They charged right through both gates, and a cataract of flaming pitch. Those defenses had been rendered ethereal thanks to a spell cast by the High Counselor.

As Anastas rode into the courtyard, he saw that Count Scillieri’s torso lay where he had been standing, blackened and smoking, his head and limbs blown off. There were several others like that, including the two wizards. The knights charged into the ranks of Count Scillieri’s

men amidst a steady barrage of arrows from the wall and from the battlements atop the keep. These were deflected by shield spells. Anastas loosed a fireball on a group of archers atop the keep. Still more archers fell to the magic of the other wizards among the knights.

“Stop!” It was the kettledrum-like voice of Kadlec Marr, the Captain-Major. He stood above the smoking torso of Count Scillieri. “Stop!” he boomed again and again—and everyone did so. “Look at him. Look! Your master is dead, struck down by the powers of God. Lay down your weapons and you will be shown mercy.”

A moment of stillness ensued. Sheets of rain swept the courtyard and its battlements. Scillieri’s men searched the faces of their superiors. The only other sounds that could be heard were the creaking of leather and the stamping of horses. One by one, Count Scillieri’s men began to lay down their arms.

* * *

“Captain De’Maakthorn?”

“Yes.” Darius looked up from the map of the city he was studying.

“We have company at the gate, sir.” The knight delivering the message stood beneath the ornately carved doorway to the late Count’s study.

“How many?”

“Scores, sir.”

“Tell Mr. Peck we’re going to the gate.”

“Yes, sir.” The knight saluted and hurried off.

“Phase two.” Anastas rose from a couch near Darius. He slapped shut the gold-embossed, gilt-edged book he had been studying and slid it onto a shelf of one of the large bookcases that dominated the room.

“Yes.” Darius took up his helmet from a nearby desk where it had been resting on a bust of the late Count Scillieri. “Let’s go.”

“My word, Darius, so that’s what you’ve done with the late Count’s head.” Anastas theatrically appraised the bust. “Dare I ask what you’ve done with his legs?”

“Better that you don’t,” Darius retorted, leading Anastas from the

room. “But I’ll tell you this: They ended in defeat.”

“Too true, Paladin, too true,” Anastas laughed, “a worthy pun—yes, I see.”

As they walked, Darius gathered his thoughts. It was only two hours now since they had taken the keep, and there was much work to be done. All of Count Scillieri’s men had been rounded up and confined to the barracks out back. Most had simply surrendered, though some had managed to flee over the manor’s outer wall. Which ones required jailing and which ones were fit to serve the Way of the Light remained to be determined. Right now the servants were in the process of being interviewed and vetted by the High Cleric, Anais Nin, who had an exceptional talent for reading people’s souls. So far, everything had gone smoothly. However, some backlash was to be expected.

Darius quickly gathered up several spell-casters and met Field Commander Peck in the grand entrance hall, where he had gathered with fifteen knights.

“We proceed at Code Two, I presume, sir?” Kaelin Peck asked as he saluted Darius.

“Yes.”

The Field Commander called out orders in martial cadence as the tall, thickly planked front doors were opened. Ten knights exited and fanned out, followed close by two wizards. The Field Commander went next with the two priests and three knights. Minister Connell and First Advisor Deo’na, an Elven wizard, followed with the last two knights. Darius and Anastas exited last, walking down the steps into a steady rain. Above, from a second floor window, the High Counselor of Wizardry was positioned to cast any spell that might be needed.

Darius walked confidently into the courtyard, trusting the training and skill of his fellow men. Above, the cloud-covered sky was darkening as the day drew to a close. They proceeded to the gate in combat formation, fanned out and expecting trouble.

Darius used his facility of spherical vision to survey the visitors beyond the wall and gate of the castle. Satisfied with what he saw, Darius called out to the knight in the tower: “Raise the inner gate.”

The solid, ironbound wooden gate slowly rose as the knight above turned the gears. When the gate was up, Darius could see scores of horsemen beyond the bars of the outer gate, and gathered around it.

At the front of them was a tall dark-haired man with a proud bearing, neatly trimmed beard, and sharp blue eyes. He wore exquisitely crafted light plate armor and rode what appeared to be a thoroughbred stallion, about a hand taller at the withers than any Darius had ever seen. The rider looked to be in his early forties.

“Captain Darius De’Maakthorn?” he asked.

“I am he,” Darius replied.

“Pleased to meet you,” the man said. “I am Prince Isaac Newwen of Aagaard. I have been told you come from a land beyond the seas to fight the Demon armies. Is this true?”

“It is,” Darius said solemnly, “but we also come to destroy those who would cooperate with the Demon armies.”

“Yes,” Prince Newwen smiled, “I see. And I congratulate you on your recent progress, though I know of several magnates in this town who are apoplectic. Count Scillieri was involved in many lucrative business deals around here.”

“You said ‘of Aagaard?’” Darius asked, already liking this man a great deal.

“Yes.” His face settled and became grave. “I live here in exile. My father betrayed his kingdom and handed it over to Vlockor with barely a fight.”

“I take it, then, you are willing to stand against Vlockor’s armies?”

“I always have been, but I have seen those dread armies up close. To say they are formidable is an understatement. Fortress Aagaard could have held out, but for how long I do not know. While on the run, I surveyed many strongholds and concluded none were sufficient to withstand the Death Legion. When I heard of your arrival a few hours ago, and heard of your boasting, I laughed, for I had lost hope. But then came word of how masterfully you bearded Count Scillieri in his own den. I am here because you have rekindled hope in my breast. Tell me there are more like you and I shall step off this horse and hug you like a brother.”

“Of course there are.” Darius pointed at the Baezean banner now flying above the gate tower. “My people, under our Supreme Commander, Lord Vahle, in union with the Elven Queen, Lady Alballa, and in dedication to the Way of the Light, have held Vlockor’s armies at bay on our home continent for almost one hundred eighty years. No

longer are we playing defense, though. We have crossed the oceans to bring the fight to him, to destroy him and send him back to Hell.”

“Well,” Prince Newwen smiled broadly, “I would not have believed it yesterday, but your action here inspires me.” He whipped out his sword and held it aloft. “You can count me as a friend, Captain De’Maakthorn. I have brought with me one hundred good men from my homeland. Another three hundred and fifty are at my estate. They represent the flower of my father’s once proud army. I offer you my services, and would dearly love to discuss strategies, and, of course, to learn more about you and your people.”

“Then you are welcome, Prince-Newwen-of-Aagaard-in-exile,” Darius said and offered a crisp salute with the fingertips of his right hand to his temple. Then he shouted to the gate tower: “Raise the gate!” Darius, a Paladin of the Light, could sense the goodness and righteousness in Prince Newwen as surely as he could sense the evil that had reeked from Count Scillieri and his First Lieutenant, Mr. Barclay.

When the gate was up, he waved Prince Newwen in. The Prince called to the horsemen behind him and led the cavalcade through. True to his word, the Prince leapt from his horse, and threw himself into Darius’ arms. Tears of joy stood in his eyes as he clapped Darius on the shoulder and called him “brother.”

“Well, Anastas,” Darius said later, “I told you God would send us allies before the day was out. It looks like you owe me five pieces of gold.”

Anastas laughed. “Lucky guess, my friend, lucky guess. I was certain it would take at least a day.”

*“A ripple in the pond, the arrangement
of the falling rain, an arrow in flight—
fated for your chest...
Chance? Random? Don't you know?
This universe is a dream of God's.
Do things happen by chance in your dreams?”*
—Saint Sevannah,
The Testament of Angels

CHAPTER 15

A RAINY NIGHT

It was raining. Krell found a dry seat on an old log near a large tree and stared at the ground, burdened by worry and doubt. Since finding Anna yesterday morning, he had fallen steadily from a peak of elation. Now that the single-minded focus of rescuing her was gone, the tribulations ahead and the odds against success weighed upon him. Plus, he worried about Urg and the other survivors of his village making a dangerous trek through the mountains and then on to Lalendren.

Should we be with them? he wondered. Should he and Anna go back to catch up with their people? In light of what Anna said, that was not to be. They still had a task they were honor-bound to: recovering the gem. Many had given their lives in this quest, including Lori's brother; their sacrifices should not be in vain. And they were just a day behind on the trail of those who had it—just a day behind.

Yet overtaking their quarry would not be easy. They had pushed relentlessly for two weeks, traveling at least two hundred fifty miles eastward from home over broken terrain. The pace had exacted a cruel toll on their bodies. If he were by himself, Krell had no doubt he could catch the Orcs in two or three days, but going off alone was not an option. First, he was not going to leave Anna; and, second, he would need Lori's magic and Kian's sword if he hoped to retrieve the

gem. However, their pace would slow as their trail injuries and fatigue grew more serious. It would take days of rest to naturally recover their strength, days they did not have.

Krell looked around in the darkness as the downpour continued—mostly missing him because of the thick canopy of leaves directly above. Trees were everywhere, standing in the night like a spectral audience to his deliberations, their branches soughing in the rain and wind. Krell reached into a pocket and withdrew a small bundle. He unwrapped the cloth and light sprang from the pendant nestled within. It was the one Nakula magically imbued with light before they attacked the Orc lair, only now the enchantment waned and its light was much diminished.

Movement near his leg caught his eye. A fuzzy brown spider, about half the size of his hand, crawled out from the log beneath him. It was deadly poisonous and probably attracted to the light. Krell lifted his foot and pushed his boot against the log, smashing it.

It simply wouldn't do to become so single-minded in quest of the gem that one or more of his party fell prey to a poisonous spider or snake, or was killed by some tiger or bear, or pack of primates. Each day he made sure their path was clear of such dangers—a demanding task given the speed at which they were moving. Lori, he reflected grimly, couldn't raise the dead, and death often came suddenly in the Druunhaelens.

Just today, Krell had backtracked their trail and caught a tigress stalking them. The thought that Lori or Anna could have been ambushed from the rear while he led the way had infuriated him, and had cost the tiger an arrow in its rump. It seemed now that two or three times every day he found some dangerous predator lurking near or around the trail they followed. From a thirty foot python hanging in the tree branches above, to a small poisonous spider, if he and Kian missed just one it could imperil their mission, or worse.

The gravest attack on the trail so far occurred five days ago when a pack of mantis beetles swarmed him. He was scouting about one hundred yards ahead of Lori and Kian when he heard the sibilant workings of their too greedy and too optimistic mandibles. He found them massed on either side of the trail amidst dense brush. Scurrying, jumping, and flying, they had attacked, at least ninety of them, with armored

bodies the size of halved cantaloupes. He had maimed a score of them with his daggers, but found himself with his back to the bole of a huge tree, surrounded. Fortunately, Kian had rushed up to help. Fighting on two fronts, they were able to rout the surviving beetles. But what if he had missed them and they swarmed Kian and Lori instead? It could have been a disaster.

Krell sighed. He would stay vigilant. There was nothing more he could do. Somehow it would all work out. They would catch Kripa and recover the gem. They would rescue Anna's friend. He would keep Anna safe.

Anna. Thinking of her filled him with wonder and worry. She was different now. Very different. She was more mature: in the way she talked, in the set of her eyes, and in the way she carried herself. She was also happier than he could ever remember; so much so that he could not help but feel the same way in her presence. In fact, everything in her presence seemed to brighten and thrive, including flowers and leaves. Lori said it was God's presence manifested through sorcery magic. She said it was stronger in Anna than in anyone she had ever encountered. To Krell, that was both bewildering and thrilling. He didn't know what to make of it. What he believed were the limits of his world had all come undone.

As he sat quietly in the rain, thinking, Krell asked himself: What fresh wonders lay in store?

These ruminations were interrupted by the sound of soft footfalls against the wet Earth. He waited for them to reach him.

"Krell?" Anna's voice chimed like the opening note of a sweet song.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Yes."

Krell stood and turned to her. She was wrapped tight in one of Kian's cloaks with the hood pulled over her head. Light from the pendant in his hand showed her face clearly, revealing sparkling eyes and shiny locks of golden hair beneath the hood of her cloak. Krell could not check the smile that broke on his face and the warmth that bloomed in his heart.

"Let's go, then," he said, thanking God she was safe.

Walking with her to the tent he felt strangely happy and carefree.

I've been worrying like an old woman, he thought.

When she ducked inside the front flap, he followed, tying it closed behind them. The tent was sturdy, ten by ten feet, and made from durable canvas. It would have been too heavy and bulky to carry if not for the two magical haversacks they had taken from King Riordanall's tomb.

Inside, Krell had to duck beneath the sloping top. Kian was already curled up and asleep in the back, a feat he managed to do effortlessly, and first, every night. Lori was sitting up, her legs crossed with a blanket pulled up to her torso. Framing the rare beauty of her face, her lustrous red hair was loose, flowing down and over her narrow shoulders. She opened her eyes and smiled. Krell felt his heart drop.

"I'm glad to see your smile again," she said softly. "All we need now is to trim that beard."

"There's no time," he said as he removed his cloak and tossed it in the corner.

"There will be time," she said assuringly. "If not, Anna and I can trim it in your sleep. Our hero must look his best at all times."

Krell tried to hide what he knew must be a goofy grin as he sat down to remove his boots; Lori had a way of turning his habitual confidence into self-conscious embarrassment. She was so refined—and exotic—that he felt unsure how he should behave. If she were a girl from his village, he would just take her in his arms and kiss her, but a regal Elf maiden? It was out of the question.

"I see that look on your face," Anna said from where she sat next to Lori. "Is my big brother bashful all of a sudden?"

"Me?" Krell said incredulously as he unlaced his boots. "It must be the fatigue. You're seeing things."

He heard them whisper to each other and they both giggled. Smiling, Krell slid off his boots and placed his weapons at his side, then wrapped his pendant back up in its cloth. A muted light next to Lori still filled the tent. Spreading out his blanket, Krell turned back to them.

"Well, good night," he said.

"Good night, Krell," they said in unison from where they sat next to each other, looking like Angels.

Lori covered up her light and Krell settled into his blanket. "Good

night, Kian,” he spoke lightly, knowing the Elf was sound asleep.

“Dear God,” Lori began, softly reciting her nightly prayer, “please bless us with Your truth and Your wisdom. Please guide us through our troubles with Your infinite love. We thank You for bringing us together, and pledge to serve You faithfully in whatever may stand before us. We see Your hand in all that exists and trust in the wisdom of Your plan. Amen.”

Krell rested quietly as Lori and Anna snuggled down just a couple feet away. He could barely discern their breathing as raindrops pattered against the tent, the sound soothing and rhythmic. *God*, he thought, *I’m going to sleep. It’s your watch.* Sleep quickly followed.

* * *

Anaiyailla listened to the raindrops as she rested, concentrating on their patter as they fell against the canvass tent. It seemed she could almost hear the transcendental intelligence behind them speaking to her, imparting a wisdom as yet encrypted. She felt their ciphers registering and gathering in her mind. Somehow she knew they carried a message she was meant to spread to others. There was an urgency to it—that, too, she understood. She knew they would have to be swift.

But what was the message? she asked, trying to concentrate more intently. To whom was she supposed to impart it? She knew some of the answers, of course—at least she thought she did. But she also sensed there was much more to it than she could currently grasp. *Be steady*, she told herself. *Be patient. All will be revealed in its due season.*

She marveled at the miracle of God’s creation: so vast and complex, but rooted in stupendous simplicities. Everything that existed did so through the ghostly vibration of God’s will, leavened by the reflection within it of His transcendent consciousness. Everything in existence thus derived from an inspired design. The universe was the manifestation of infinite wisdom and limitless love. Its seed, the vibratory “Word” of God, was simple. Yet its effects in the physical universe could be so confusing.

Anaiyailla wanted to pass beyond that confusion. At times she felt so close to perfect clarity that the world seemed as nothing but a translucent dream. When she slept, she dreamed; when she woke, she walked

in God's dream. This exalted state, of being awake within God's cosmic dream, had often been hers since she was raped. There were times now when she felt as though she were someone else, someone much older, someone who had lived countless centuries and who was only here in this world for a specific purpose. Sometimes memories that were not her own would drift across her mind, vague and indefinable, leaving impressions of an unbreakable faith and a diamond-bright will. It left her feeling she had an obligation to seek her mission in this life, to seek what she was here to accomplish or set right. And somehow she knew the patter of the raindrops were an indivisibly eloquent part of the mystery; part of an infinitely complex design that was also eternally simple. If she could only reach that perfect communion with God, all veils would fall.

She listened again to the music of the rain. The rhythms of the drops spoke a language that registered somewhere in her mind, perhaps through one of the anachronistic memories that came to her unbidden. Still, she felt a vague comprehension. Most notably, she felt the urgency. They would have to be swift.

How to be swift? she asked herself, when they were all so fatigued. As she lay there seeking clarity, listening to the raindrops, she became aware of the gentle heartbeat of Lori, who lay peacefully at her side. The Elf maiden's shallow respiration conveyed the tiredness in her body and her need for rest. As she continued to listen, she heard the same message in the heavier breathing of Kian and Krell, just a few feet away.

Rest. They all needed rest to be swift. Anaiyailla remembered then what Lori had said: that through her attunement with God and the supremacy of God's will, she had already worked some sorcery magic. With that thought Anaiyailla felt a calmness descend upon her mind, a complete tranquility. She turned her soul to God, with all her love and devotion for Him. A brilliant multifaceted light then appeared to her and infused her mind. She knew she was with Him.

Dear God, she prayed, if it be Your Will, bless us tonight with the stamina we need to be swift. Let us wake in the morning refreshed; let our bodies be healed and continuously recharged by the boundless energy of Your willing presence within us. Tonight, I have heard Your song in the rain, and now in Your presence I understand. I will do what must be done.

She sensed a surge in the brilliance of the light streaming into her mind. Every cell of her being began to vibrate. She felt absorbed into a state of pure bliss. When it faded, Anaiyailla was aware once again of the rain as well as Lori's heartbeat, which had, along with Lori, drawn closer. The Elf maiden was snuggled up against her side with an arm reaching across her body.

With just the faintest light escaping through the cloth cover over one of the magic pendants, Anaiyailla could see in the outline of Lori's face a beatific smile. In her breathing, she could now hear an echo of God's vibration. Listening further, she could hear the same in the respiration of Kian and Krell. With a smile and a heart full of joy, Anaiyailla leaned her head against Lori's and drifted into sleep.

*“Can evil vanquish good? Or good, evil?
So why then should a prince make either
his goal?”*

*—Ceci Dobyns, Circa 9245,
Royal Curriculum Philisophica.*

CHAPTER 16

THE RIVER DRUUN

The sun was brilliant. Just a few puffy white clouds lingered here and there in what was otherwise a fathomless blue sky. Above, the leaves of the forest rustled gently. Below the branches, squirrels and other little creatures went about their business. Krell took no notice. Reaching into his haversack, he withdrew the map he had taken from the Orc several days ago. He glanced at it, then looked back down the mountainside through a break in the trees. There could be no doubt: He was looking at the river Druun; on the far side was the city of Masseryk.

It was almost noon on the fifth day since the rain had started; five days since they woke to find themselves miraculously refreshed—all the aches and injuries from two weeks of forced marches washed away. From that day, they had set off with fresh legs and abundant energy, pursuing the Orc trail with enduring vigor. They had steadily gained ground through two days of off-and-on rain and two more days of clearing skies.

The tracks where Krell now stood were no more than ten to fifteen hours old, meaning the Orcs had arrived here at Masseryk late last night. Assuming the Orcs were in town, they had finally caught up.

The town below was a mile away, about half a mile south of the river. Buildings—Krell counted forty-three—were visible, but many more likely could not be seen because of the trees. A cluster of buildings were located by the river, near a dock and nine boats.

One of the boats caught Krell’s attention. It was larger than the

others, with twelve oars at each side and a mast and sail at its center. There was also activity on it. He studied the craft while several Orcs carried boxes aboard.

Krell heard the approach of footfalls from behind and he turned, waving to Kian, Lori, and Anna. "Over here." He indicated with his hand for them to stay low. The three of them bent down and hurried over to where he was crouched behind some shrubbery.

"Oh, my, look," Anna whispered as she came to his side.

"Have you seen any Demons?" Lori asked.

"No, none. I've been watching that big boat down there. It looks like they are preparing to leave."

"What do you think," Kian asked. "Masseryk?"

"Yes," Krell held up the map, "and that is the river Druun."

"What should we do?" Lori sounded both distressed and hopeful. "We can't just traipse in there."

"I haven't yet decided." Krell put the map back in his pocket. "Greater study of the situation will provide a better idea of what we're up against. Reconnaissance is our first order of business."

"Look!" Anna suddenly exclaimed, pointing. "It's Celleste!"

Krell followed her finger. About one hundred yards from the dock a group of Orcs exited one of the buildings. Among them was a girl.

"Yes," Lori chimed in excitedly, "I see her!"

Krell was a bit confused. They had said this Celleste was some sort of fairy creature. "She's just a girl," he said.

"Oh, she's no girl." Anna turned to him, her voice lively. "She's one hundred twenty-three years old. She's a Sylph; her wings are folded beneath her shirt." She turned back to watch. "What are we going to do? How are we going to rescue her?"

Krell, too, watched while the Orcs took Celleste straight to the big boat. "I don't know yet, but we can't afford any mistakes. There appear to be far too many Orcs here to take them head on. I think our first priority must be to find Kripa and that gem."

"If there were Beastspawn here," Kian said, "he may have already left with it."

"Dear God," Lori's voice was worried, "let us hope that has not happened. If it has, it could mean the end for us all; the end for everybody."

“I would not worry, Lori,” Anna said quietly. “We cannot be sure of God’s plan. All we can do is try our best and trust in His wisdom.”

“That suits me,” Krell said as he began to run various scenarios through his mind. He watched as the group of Orcs with Celleste boarded the boat. Then, from a different building near the dock, another group of Orcs emerged. Krell recognized the bigger of them as the Orc Chief he had first encountered at the village Circle, his clothing and deportment marking him clearly.

“That’s the Orc Chief,” Anna pointed. “Ogen is his name.”

“Yes, I see him,” Krell said bitterly. Chief Ogen and his entourage went straight for the boat.

“Look.” Lori pointed to the boat. “They’re manning the oars.” She turned straight to Krell. “What shall we do?”

Krell closed his eyes for a moment, thinking. Then he made up his mind. “First, we’re going to get down by the river bank. Kian, I want you to lead Lori and Anna down there. Make sure you stay where the trees are thick so you can’t be seen. And be careful, there may well be Orcs over on this side of the river. If you run into any, deal with them quickly. Lori, do not hesitate to use your magic. We can’t have them knowing we’re here.”

“What about you?” Kian asked.

“I’m going to stay here a little longer to keep an eye out for Kripa. If he gets in the boat or the boat leaves, I’ll be right behind you. Otherwise, I’ll wait until you get to the bottom.”

“Do you know what he looks like?” Anna asked.

“Black robes, half-Orc, big shot—I’ll recognize him. Now go. And be careful.”

As the three of them started off, Krell continued to watch the dock area and the town. There were no signs of Kripa or any Demons. Meanwhile, the Orcs down on the dock continued to ready the boat. Krell watched for ten minutes, but when the gangplank was hauled in he knew it was time to go. Kripa and Chief Ogen were splitting company, or had already split company—or perhaps Kripa was already on the boat, below deck, the whole time; it didn’t matter now.

Krell took off after the others, moving quickly down the mountainside. He followed Kian’s trail, their footsteps plainly visible in the soft Earth. The path Kian had chosen was a good one, the tall trees

offering concealment from the riverbank and the town beyond. As he went, Krell saw several trails cut horizontally into the mountain. He stopped at the first and found both Orc and animal tracks, none of them recent. After that he moved fast, running flat out down the mountainside. There were fallen trees, thick shrubs, and even an area of loose shale, but Krell sped by it all without mishap. He caught up to the others just as the terrain began to level out.

“Did the boat leave?” Kian put away the sword he had just drawn.

“They had just pulled in the gangplank,” Krell said, breathing heavily.

“Oh, no, poor Celleste.” Anna came up to Krell. “We were so close to rescuing her.”

“We still are.” He hugged her with one arm. “Now, let’s keep going.” Krell led the way at a walking pace as he channeled his skill and experience to detect any dangers that might be ahead.

A few minutes later, they were looking out over the river, one hundred fifty yards away from the dock. The boat was gone. Krell crouched amidst some underbrush and crept closer to the shoreline for a look down the river. He saw the boat a mile downstream, its sail deployed and oars rowing.

“What now?” Lori asked as she came up on his shoulder.

Krell looked back to the dock. There were eight boats. Two of them were about half the size of the one that just left and the rest were half again in size or smaller.

“Can you use your spell, the magic that made me invisible?” he asked.

“Yes, but I don’t have it imprinted. It will take me about twenty minutes to weave the spell.”

“That’s fine,” he said, trying to think everything through. “Can you make it last longer?”

“Perhaps,” she said, “but it wouldn’t be much longer, even if I can.”

* * *

It had been two hours since Krell left, and Alloria was anxious. *What if something went wrong?* she thought for the hundredth time.

“Krell will be fine,” Anna said, seeming to read her thoughts.

They were sitting on a rock where some tall reeds concealed them from the riverbank. For Alloria, the all-day wait had been difficult. With each passing minute, Cellestillena was farther and farther away. Yet it would have been rash to act without knowing where Kripa and that gem had gone. There had been no other viable option. They needed information, and their only chance to steal one of those boats covertly would be after nightfall, anyway.

As the day wore they saw several small rowboats dock, each of them off-loading sacks, probably of food. Just before dark, Krell swam across to Masseryk.

Now two hours into the night, a sound nearby caused them to look downstream. Kian whipped out his sword.

“Kian?” It was Krell’s voice.

A moment later Krell emerged from the brush. Kian clapped him on the shoulder. “Good to see you back, my friend.”

A wave of relief swept Alloria. She started to run to him, but paused as Anna started to do the same. Anna grabbed her hand and they went to him together. He wrapped them up in his arms. His clothes were wet. He felt cold and smelled of mud and marsh grass.

“I’m glad to be back,” he said. “We have a boat about a half mile downstream. I swam with it down the shoreline before coming across to make sure I wasn’t seen. As for Kripa, he never arrived. Some Demons passed through here almost two weeks ago: one Wizard Demon, a few Soldier Demons and some Beastspawn. I would guess they are the ones I saw go east back at the Orc lair. Five days ago, they left heading south.”

What about the gem? Alloria wondered as he let go of her and Anna.

“Do you suppose the Demons that left here five days ago were somehow contacted by Kripa, and that they picked him up?” Kian asked.

“I don’t think so. My source was certain they left bearing south, and five days ago we were northwest of here.”

“So it’s possible Kripa and that gem could still be out here somewhere?”

“Possible, but I’d rate it unlikely. He was a few days ahead of us

when Anna escaped. It's more likely that he took another route."

"Then what are we to do?" Alloria asked. "How are we to find Kripa and that gem before he delivers it to Vlockor?"

"I don't know," Krell said. "We could backtrack the Orc trail and hope to find if Kripa's tracks diverged, or I can try to capture someone here a little more important who might know something."

"I think we should leave the matter of the gem to God," Anna announced. "We still have a Sylph to rescue."

Alloria was torn. She longed to rescue Celestillena, but Andy, Pelias, Abajian, and the others had given their lives trying to intercept the gem. And if what Anna had learned from Kripa was true, rescuing Celestillena would only postpone the inevitable for her.

"But if that gem gets back to Vlockor"—Kian seemed to be speaking Alloria's thought—"then what will it all mean anyway?"

Anna's voice was subdued, her face visible in the moonlight. "Everything we do with the spirit of God in our hearts is meaningful, Kian. Do you not feel Him now? The mere thought of delivering Celleste from the evil that seeks to subjugate her fills me with joy."

"I must say that I agree," Kian said, "but couldn't the same be said about keeping that gem from Vlockor?"

"The gem?" Anna curved her lips mirthfully. "But it has no soul. Celestillena does. Her location was revealed to us. Chance? I think not. Plus, we know how to follow her—not so the gem. Regardless, I am not certain that gem is so important anymore; why, I don't know. But, if it is, I suppose God could always just conjure a stupendous golden Dragon to stop it from reaching this Vlockor, no?"

"Oh, now you are just talking crazy." Kian's eyes sparkled as he looked at Anna. "Nevertheless," he said with a courtly flourish of his hand, "she makes perfect sense; wouldn't you say, Krell?"

Alloria looked up at Krell again. With his eyes focused on his sister, his face was alive with wonder. "Shall we go, then?" Alloria said to him.

"Of course, my Lady," Krell said mildly, favoring Alloria with an arresting flash of his big blue eyes. He turned and went over to his pack and the weapons.

Watching him as he strapped his gear in place, Alloria puzzled over that engaging look he had just given her. Was it affection? And why did

he call her “my Lady”? Was that how he thought of her—as his? Her questions made her realize she had begun to look upon him in a possessive way herself. Had he noticed? She wondered. *What does it mean?* Actually, every day since she first laid eyes on him, she had admired him. Willpower, strength, confidence, leadership, courage, and grace of such caliber as she had never seen in one person before. But what did that mean? After all, he was Human and she, an Elf. Though he was many years younger, he would grow old while she was still in her youth. Yet, what of that? There might not be much time left for either of them to grow old. Looking upon him now she could not deny that to be loved by him would be deeply satisfying. But would it be right? Perhaps it was just the emptiness she felt at losing her brother so recently. They had been so close, and she had relished the affection he had showered upon her.

“Let’s go.” Krell started off.

Alloria picked up her pack and followed with Anna and Kian as Krell led them downstream along the shoreline. As she walked, she continued to muse upon her relationship with Krell. He was a friend, certainly—a trusted companion, a leader, and a hero. He was all those things to her. But was he more? Did she want there to be more? Perhaps, she told herself. But, perhaps, she was just weary and suffering with frayed emotions. Was it the right time to ponder such things, anyway? She just couldn’t get it out of her mind, that look he had given her—and the way he had addressed her.

A few minutes later they reached the boat. Krell had partially beached the craft. It looked to be twenty feet long and eight feet wide at midship. It had a square back but narrowed to a point at the prow. There were two oars on each side and a rudder in the back. Inside the boat was an Orc—gagged, hogtied, and hitched to the middle bench between the gunwales.

“You asked me not to kill when I could avoid it,” Krell said to Anna.

“Oh, thank you.” She hugged him. “I am glad you took those words to heart.”

“What are we going to do with him?” Kian asked.

Krell shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. Make him row, I suppose. Let’s get aboard.” He picked Anna up in his arms and lifted her

over the side. "Lori?" He turned to her and held out his hand.

"Thank you." She smiled up at him and placed her hand in his.

He gave her that same look again, his eyes cherishing her. Then he spun her around and lifted her, one arm supporting her knees, the other beneath her shoulders. A moment later she was standing next to Anna at the prow of the boat. They moved to the stern and sat down as Kian and Krell started pushing the boat into the river.

"Go ahead," Krell said to Kian, indicating he should get in the boat, "my feet are already wet."

Kian leapt in. Krell kept pushing, wading in up to his thighs, before he too climbed aboard. Once in, Krell dropped his pack and went straight to the fore oars, which he then used to guide the boat downstream and toward the middle of the river. They were on their way, heading dead east.

The Orc was tied to the middle bench between the oars, which were designed to be employed by two people, one at each side. The fore oars were close to the prow, where the boat was just four feet wide, and looked designed to be employed by one person.

Alloria watched Krell as he rowed. He was facing the back of the boat, and his powerful arms and back pulled them through the water smoothly and quickly. Light from the moon and stars shone just enough to illumine his features. His hair was wet and hanging limp above his shoulders, and his short beard looked frizzy again. He was so much more rugged and masculine than male Elves, who, by comparison, looked almost effeminate. But his eyes were as sharp and intelligent, and could be as soft and alluring, as any she had ever seen. Gazing at them now she saw he was looking straight at her, and she suddenly considered the emotion he must have seen on her face. She looked down, feeling herself blush.

"Let me take over," she heard Kian say to him. "You should get dry."

Alloria noticed that Anna had moved over near the Orc. She leaned down close to where he was tied to the bench, whispering to him. Kian replaced Krell at the oars.

"Well, what shall we do with him?" Krell spoke to Anna as he sat down on the bench where the Orc was tied.

"I think you should untie him."

“Why?”

“So that I can talk with him.”

Krell said nothing for a moment, then: “I don’t think that’s wise. I could remove his gag, though.”

“No, I’d like him untied.”

Alloria saw the slightest slump in his shoulders, and she thought she could tell what he was thinking: One more thing to worry about.

“You realize untying him could well imperil his life?”

Anna looked at him seriously. “Krell...please. I don’t ask lightly.”

“Very well,” Krell said, then reached over the Orc and began untying knots. He sat the Orc up and undid more knots.

The Orc looked straight at her and Alloria felt her skin crawl. He was a hideous beast. His eyes were yellow; his nose big, black, and piglike; his lips thick, puffy, and slimy. His chin was pugnacious and covered with wiry hair, his skin orangish, pockmarked, and spotted. Several sharp teeth jutted up from his lower lip, and his hair was long and matted. Plus, he was thick limbed and strong—though not so much as Krell. He looked dangerous.

Krell tied the Orc’s hands in front and dropped a line from them, anchoring him to the bench. Then, he got right in his face. “Need I even say it?”

The Orc shook his head. Krell stared at him a moment longer, pushed his forehead lightly with his open palm, then picked up his pack and came to the back of the boat with Alloria. He sat down on the bench with her, facing the Orc. Anna sat on a bench built along the boat’s side, between the back and middle benches, just a couple feet from their captive.

“I will wager that you have never felt loved in your entire life,” she spoke softly to the Orc, “but I would like to show you that you are.”

The Orc said nothing. He seemed to twitch his nose in irritation and averted his eyes, but Anna drew them back to her.

“There is a soul inside you, created by God. That soul is glorious. You don’t see it, because you have been submerged in wickedness your whole life, but it is there. I can see it. It is God’s eternal gift; all you must do is claim it. Allow me to lead you to it, and you will know love, for God loves you, and I love you, too.”

Alloria saw the slightest spark in the Orc’s eyes. He opened his

mouth as though to say something, but then just grunted and acted disinterested. To Alloria it looked like a façade. As she watched Anna, she was sure that she could feel sorcery magic at work.

“I’m not sure what she’s up to,” Krell said softly. “That thing is what it is. It’ll never change.” He unlaced his boots, though his eyes never left the Orc.

Alloria turned her attention to Krell as Anna spoke quietly to the Orc.

“If there’s anyone who could turn an Orc to God,” she said, “it would be your sister.”

“Yes, perhaps.” He pulled off a boot and dropped it on the deck.

Picking it up, Alloria found it was heavy and saturated with water. She dumped the water over the back of the boat, then did the same with the other boot. Then she took his socks, soaped them, and washed them in the water flowing by.

When Krell stood to unhook his baldric and belt, Alloria knelt down by his pack. His longbow and the broadsword from King Riordanall’s tomb were tied to its sides. Opening the pack, she pulled out the magical haversack. She then opened one of the side compartments where she knew he kept his extra clothing. She rummaged until she found a towel, socks, trousers, underwear, and a shirt.

She looked up at Krell. He stood, balanced against the rocking of the boat, his belt, baldric, and all the weapons attached to it hanging in his hand as he stared at Anna and the Orc. Alloria looked and saw that Anna held the Orc’s hands in hers as she whispered to him:

“...is nothing but a dream. There is no evil you have done that cannot be undone if you will just draw closer to the source of your life. Embrace the Light that I know you now see....”

Alloria glanced at Krell. She could see that he was shivering. Taking hold of his arm, she stood up in front of him and began unbuttoning his shirt. “You’re shivering, Krell,” she admonished. “Let’s get you in some dry clothes and warmed up.”

“Fine.” He dropped his weapons to the boat deck and took off his shirt. His eyes remained fixed on the Orc.

“Here.” Alloria handed him the towel and took his wet shirt. She draped it over a gunwale and picked up his dry shirt. She stood in front of him, feeling a little unsure of her balance as the boat swayed in the

water.

He toweled himself dry, seemingly oblivious to her ministrations—though she found herself very aware of him. He was so much taller than she. Her eyes were level with his chest, which was covered with a thin layer of fine, short, brown hair. While Elves do not have body hair—or facial hair—on Krell it seemed to enhance his masculinity. She found it appealing.

When he finished with the towel, she took it and handed him his shirt, which he promptly donned. Then she handed him his dry trousers and underwear. “You can do this yourself,” she said.

Krell’s eyes looked down at her this time. “Oh, sorry,” he said, taking the clothing. Again, Alloria felt those eyes enveloping her, like an embrace. It lasted only a moment, then they resumed their vigil over the Orc. “I must keep my eyes on this Orc.”

“Of course.” This thought then came unbidden: He was exactly what any woman—or Elf maiden—would want.

Just then, he reached for the hooks on his trousers—and paused. She noticed his eyes glance back down at her and she quickly turned around, feeling herself blush again. Kian was still rowing, slow and rhythmically. Anna was still with the Orc, though she was no longer talking. The Orc was slumped, his head down. Was that a tear on his face? Alloria looked closer and thought for sure she saw tears. Anna had one hand on his forehead, the other at the back of his head. She appeared to be praying. There was something majestic about her, Alloria thought. Alloria watched for a few moments, then gazed into the night. The silhouettes of mountains and trees were drifting past. On the water all about, the moon and star light danced in ever shifting patterns. Alloria wondered what Anna had shown the Orc to so move him.

When Krell sat back down on the bench, Alloria turned around. He put on his dry socks then rummaged through the magic haversack, pulling forth a thick jacket and a pair of soft shoes. He looked up. “What? Are you making sure I do it right?” A pleasant, almost happy look on his face became a smile.

“Yes,” she told him, returning his smile. “I worried for two hours while you were across the river all by yourself.”

“Well, I suppose I should be glad to have such a regal and gorgeous

Elf maiden to worry over me.” He stepped into the shoes. “Of such things men only dream.” He stood, picking up his belt and baldric, and began to strap them into place.

“To have you to worry over is a treat.”

With his longsword and hand-axe at his hips and his daggers across his chest, Krell slid into his jacket. “Thank you. You flatter me,” he said, then: “I’m going to do some rowing to get myself warmed up. Perhaps you should get some sleep.”

“Yes, I will try.” She waited as he gathered his belongings and went to the prow of the boat, glaring menacingly at the Orc as he passed by.

“You should get some sleep, too,” he told Kian as he took over at the oars. “One of us will have to always be awake as long as this thing’s on board.”

“Right. Wake me when you need me.”

Kian walked to the stern with Alloria. Krell began rowing, his movements attracting her eyes unconsciously.

“Are you going to sleep, too? Or do you have other plans?” Kian asked as he sat down on the bench, arching one eyebrow.

Alloria realized what she was doing and took her eyes off Krell. “Not right now, but go ahead and get my blanket out as well.”

As he did, she watched Anna let the Orc rest its head in her lap. *I couldn’t do that*, she told herself, still repelled by the look of the beast. Such love, she knew, was purely divine, but...

Alloria took her blanket when Kian handed it to her, then went over to Anna and sat down. Anna looked at her with brilliant eyes and a joyful face. Alloria felt stirring within her, a heavenly vibration, the joy of it breaking over her face as a smile.

“You are truly amazing,” she said to Anna.

“God is amazing. I asked Him to help me save this Orc’s soul, and He gave me the power to reach through all the deceit, confusion, and evil of this sick mind, and I was able to summon his soul and show him the glory of his life in God.”

“So...”

“So,” Anna positively glowed, “he embraced God and rejected the wickedness of his past. For the first time in his life, he understands righteousness and has embraced it.”

“This may be the greatest miracle I’ve witnessed.” Alloria looked down at the Orc’s face in Anna’s lap. His eyes were closed and he appeared to be sleeping. Then she looked over at Krell, who stared darkly at the Orc while he rowed. *It must be hard for him*, she thought. His every instinct would have had him kill the Orc on sight, or dump it overboard, or at least keep it securely bound. Nevertheless, his trust in Anna overcame.

“What was he saying?” she asked, remembering that she had heard the Orc mumbling something in Orcish to her.

“He was saying that he was sorry; apologizing for his sins. It was much more than what he said. I could understand his thoughts. It was like I was in his mind. He truly embraced God’s love.”

“That is incredible, Anna. I hope this reformation lasts.”

“Oh, it will—at least so long as he is in our company, I’m sure.”

“How can you know all this?” Alloria’s voice was filled with astonishment.

Anna looked at her, eyes serious. “Because God knows everything, and when He was working through me, I understood.”

Alloria felt her heart swell with love. “You are phenomenal, Anna. Just eighteen years old, but with a heart that could save the world. I have devoted myself to God for more years than you’ve been alive, and I have been trained by great mages. Yet I could not come close to using sorcery magic as profoundly as you just did, nor would I have even thought to try and save an Orc’s soul.”

“Oh, but the depths of God resound with joy for all souls that embrace Him, especially the wayward ones.”

“Yes.” Alloria felt hot tears running down her cheeks. “Yes, I was privileged to witness this miracle.” She leaned in and hugged Anna, who returned the embrace, then she reached for her blanket. She saw Kian watching them as he lay in the back of the boat, wrapped in his own blanket.

“I’ll have to see it proved to believe it,” he said. “A godly Orc?” Then he rolled over on his side.

Alloria spread her blanket around her shoulders and Anna’s. As they leaned on each other, Alloria closed her eyes, listening to the roiling water, the steady splashes of the oars as Krell rowed, and the soft double-beat of Anna’s heart. Soon, she was asleep.

When she woke it was to a dawning sky. Anna was close at her side. Just a foot away, Krell was wrapped in his blanket and sleeping. Vague memories from the previous night returned to her, and she remembered being carried to the stern of the boat; she remembered clinging to the arms that held her; she remembered tossing and turning against the hard boat deck; and she remembered being held in Krell's embrace. She remembered how comforting it felt and how she longed to stay there forever. Then she realized that most of it wasn't a memory, but a dream she'd had during the night.

Alloria sat up. Kian was perched on the middle bench, and the Orc was rowing at the front.

"Good morning," Kian said softly.

"Good morning." She looked around, taking in the grandeur of the landscape.

"Did you get a good sleep?"

"Yes, I slept well, thank you. How about you?"

"Oh, I slept wonderfully well. I look forward to more later." He motioned to Krell. "He's been out nearly four hours."

Alloria took a deep breath and felt herself quite refreshed. At her side, Anna stirred.

"Good morning," she said as Anna opened her eyes.

Anna yawned and stretched her arms. "Good morning," she smiled. Then she sat up. "Good morning, Kian."

"Good morning, Anna."

"Good morning, Dohr," she said to the Orc.

"Oh, uh, good morning, good Lady Anna," he said, his slurred words barely understandable. He was dripping with sweat.

"Oooh, it's so beautiful," Anna cooed as she looked around at the trees, the mountains behind them, and the sparkling water of the river. "Isn't it?"

Once again Anna's effulgent expressions lifted Alloria's heart to soaring joyfulness and she smiled broadly. "Yes, it is lovely. Very much so."

* * *

Thirty-six hours after they had started down river, the morning

sun shined mellowly on Krell's back as he rhythmically stroked oars through the water. Though the current was slow, they had compounded its speed by rowing continuously. Krell reckoned the distance by the Druunhaelen Mountains as they steadily diminished on the horizon to the west. Allowing for the turns in the river, he still figured they had traveled one hundred miles. *Well*, he told himself, *I'm finally away from home and exploring the world, though many people I dearly cared about are dead. At least Anna is with me*—a recurring thought that often caused him to give thanks to God.

Looking at her, a smile crept across his face. She sat with Lori on the middle bench. They both faced to the north, looking off the side of the boat, one behind the other, with Lori reaching around Anna's waist and holding her hands as she explained how to use magic. Lori called it sorcery magic, or as she explained it, the vibration of God's will.

Though he never commented, Krell paid attention to everything they did. Apparently, Anna learned quickly, far more quickly than Lori thought possible. Last night, to Lori's delight, Anna had created a soft light that enveloped them all—banishing the chilling breeze and wrapping them in warmth. It had lasted for an hour, but Krell had not needed that experience to realize she possessed magic powers.

It was the effect she had on the Orc that had convinced him. The Orc, Dohr of the Clan of Ogen, truly seemed to be, well...good. Krell still did not trust him, of course, but he couldn't deny that Dohr was a changed Orc. He simply did not believe an Orc of Dohr's caliber had the capacity to be so cunning as to convincingly feign honor and candor while remaining an evil swine.

Yesterday morning when they made a brief land stop, Dohr had gotten on his knees before them and begged forgiveness for his wicked ways. He had confessed his sins—which Krell would have rather not heard, for his confession to drunken participation in a gang rape had reminded Krell of what he believed befell Anna. Dohr had been convincingly earnest, crying and wailing continuously. Anna had forgiven him, as did Lori. Kian had followed suit, and Krell had as well, though only after an appealing look from Anna.

The rest of the day Dohr had been happy, rowing as much as his stamina allowed and talking freely about everything he knew. It was

the intelligence thus supplied that Krell had found particularly useful. He learned that the Ogen Clan was the most powerful of its kind in Killmeville, at least two thousand strong, and that Chief Ogen—the one they were chasing—was the first son of the Clan Lord, Tyrus Ogen. Dohr said that a few months ago Ogen made an agreement with Kripa to send a few hundred Orcs into the Druunhaelen Mountains in the service of Kripa. That was why Dohr came to be stationed at Masseryk, a town run by Ogen's cousin.

In Killmeville, he said, most Orcs live in one area, called Orctown. Most of the rest of the city was occupied by Humans, though there was a significant number of half-Orcs, as well as small communities of Dwarves, Goblins, Hobgoblins, Gnolls, Ratbeasts, and Lizard Men. To get to Killmeville, if they couldn't overtake Chief Ogen en route, Dohr said they could take this river to the town of Gowra, which was mostly Human, and then go by foot another eighty miles east to Killmeville.

Krell hoped that he wouldn't have to go all the way to Killmeville. Rescuing Celleste from the heart of Orctown sounded difficult. Yet unless Chief Ogen tarried along the way, catching up with him was unlikely. Ogen's boat, with its sail and a crew of oarsmen, would undoubtedly be faster than theirs. Even if they caught up, how could he rescue Celleste without risking everyone's life? For now, all he could do was keep rowing. And listen.

Krell focused on Lori as she spoke to Anna:

"...takes more than just the thought, even if it doesn't seem so. Most spells are complex. Thus, the more you understand how a process or force works, the more likely a spell that interacts with it will succeed. If you understand how the body works inside, for instance, your healing spell will be more effective. You will also find that a rapport can arise between you and the powers you invoke—that they will, in effect, speak to you, if you let them—and that such rapport will enhance the effectiveness of your spells. From what you told me, that's exactly what occurred with Dohr. Somehow, you accessed the Akashic Record—how is beyond me—and it told you of his soul, and of its karmic debt, which allowed you to direct the magic appropriately. So you clearly have an intuitive grasp of the key principles. Application in other areas can work the same way. Protection spells can be very useful, but they use the inherent powers behind all manifestation in a

much different way....”

Krell smiled as he watched Lori. He had been bewitched by her from the start, but he had also been intimidated, for she seemed an untouchable princess: urbane and regal in manner, a sorceress from the great Elven city of Anjali—and, to boot, so very beautiful. In the last three weeks, he had also come to know her more personal attributes: warmth, charm, humility, wit, devotion to God, and courage. A more appealing woman, he could not imagine. Particularly endearing to his heart had been the way she had taken recently to looking upon him. With an affectionate and tender look in her eyes, combined with a pleasant, even inviting curve of her lips, she had completed the conquest of his heart.

“Look!” It was Lori, and she was pointing over his shoulder.

Krell paused his rowing and looked back. A rowboat several hundred yards away was coming upstream. Of greater interest, though, a couple miles downriver there appeared to be several larger boats at a dock on the shore.

Moving quickly, Krell shipped the oars and called for Kian and Dohr to wake as he began strapping weapons in place.

“They look like Orcs,” Lori said as Krell finished buckling his belt and baldric.

Kian was up and getting ready. Dohr was up and looking worried. Krell untied his bow from his pack and quickly strung it, then dug a bundle of extra arrows from the main compartment of his magic haversack. Ready, he turned and studied the boat heading toward them, using his hand to shield his eyes from a sun that was still low on the eastern horizon. It was a rowboat similar in size to the one they were on, though it had three oars to a side. Krell counted twelve Orcs on board. The boat was about halfway between the north shore and mid-stream.

“Lori, Anna,” he said without turning, “put your hoods over your heads. You, too, Kian.”

“What about me?” Dohr asked.

“You’re fine. Just have a seat.”

As the distance closed, Krell saw that the other boat was staying its course near the north shore. “Kian,” Krell said as he took a wide stance at the prow of the boat, “steer us closer to the south shore.”

Krell heard Kian release the rudder handle from its lock, and soon their boat began to edge rightward. The other boat stayed on course and, as yet, none of the Orcs in it had brandished any bows or crossbows, though they all watched just as closely as Krell watched them. Soon the other boat was only one hundred yards downstream, then fifty yards, then they were even. They passed each other more than a hundred yards apart, on opposite sides of the river.

“Dohr,” Krell said, “come take the oars.”

“Yes, um, sir.” The Orc came forward. Krell moved to the back of the boat with Kian, sitting down on the side bench, facing the north shore.

The other boat was still rowing upstream and was now a few hundred yards away. Krell turned his attention forward again. One of the boats at the dock looked like it could be the one from Masseryk.

“Lori, do you think that’s the one?”

“I believe it is, Krell. I think we’ve caught up again.”

As they drifted closer, a small fortress came into view atop a hill several hundred yards inland; another hill covered with trees had obscured it. Other buildings could be seen inland from the dock, as well as many smaller boats.

“Dohr,” Krell said as the Orc rowed. “Is this Gowra?”

“No, sir,” he said between strokes. “Gowra is much farther, uh, down the river. This is Thisbee.”

“Thisbee?”

“Yes, Thisbee. I, uh, I been here before. It’s a good place for an Orc. Many, um, mostly Orcs here. Even though Colonel Thisbee—he, uh, he runs things—he Human.”

“There are other Humans here?”

“Sure. Orcs and Humans, um, get along most of the time. But Colonel Thisbee runs things. Don’t like, uh, trouble. Bad for business.”

“What about Elves?”

“Oh, no. No Elves here. Elves, uh, not welcome. Orcs don’t trust Elves.”

Krell continued to scan the dock, the boats, and the whole town that came into view. They were less than a mile away, and he was now sure that one of the three big multi-oared galleys at the dock was the

boat from Masseryk. The other two were of a different construction, though of a similar size. There were also at least two dozen other boats and several dozen buildings. The buildings lined an inlet that stretched toward the fortress.

“Can you get to Killmeville from here?”

“Uh, sure, but Gowra is much closer.”

“Do you know of any reason why Chief Ogen would start for Killmeville from here, rather than Gowra?”

“Uh, well, the Ogen Clan does, um, have property here. Gowra is mostly Human, but Ogen Clan has friends. Does business there.” Dohr shrugged. “Don’t know, uh, Sir Krell. Gowra is much closer.”

Lori came back and sat with Krell as they drifted nearer to Thisbee. “Well, what do you think?”

Krell could see dozens of people out and about the boats, the dock and the town. At this distance, though, he still could not tell the difference between Orc and Human. “They could simply be taking a break from all the travel. This could be our best chance, especially if Humans live here as well. We’ll just continue our course for now, though. You and Kian can’t let yourselves be seen, so keep your hoods up. You, too, Anna.”

As they floated on, three boats suddenly came away from the dock. Each was twice the size of their boat, with five oars to a side and a small sail. Krell’s heart began to race as he considered options, but each of them turned away, and, with oars rowing, moved swiftly east down the river.

Holding course down the south side of the river, Krell saw Orcs on the boat from Masseryk. He counted ten of them on the deck. Up in the town Krell saw mostly Orcs, just as Dohr had foreshadowed, with a few Humans among them.

There was one main street, ending at the dock and running parallel to a tributary of the Druun west of town. The big fortress on the hill, half a mile inland, marked the other end of it.

Krell could see that most everyone in view at least glanced at them as they floated by. No one stared. The locals seemed intent on their own business. They passed on the other side of the river with the four piers that composed the dock about two hundred yards away. Krell sighed deeply, thinking. He didn’t like any of the plans that came to

mind.

“Dohr,” he interrupted the Orc’s rowing, “ship the oars.”

“Yes, sir,” Dohr said, breathing hard as he lifted the oars from the water and retracted them.

“Well?” Lori asked.

Krell looked around. Anna sat on the middle bench, looking at him, as did Dohr from the front bench. Kian turned forward from the back bench where he had been watching the town. Lori was right next to him on the side bench, looking up at him.

“Well,” he said, “before we can do anything, we have to find out where they’re keeping Celleste, if she’s even here. So, once again, it comes down to reconnaissance. I’ll go into town and see what I can find out.”

“Uh, I could go.” Dohr looked at Krell expectantly. “I’m in the Ogen Clan. I could, um, I could find out everything.”

Krell narrowed his eyes as he looked at the Orc. “I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he said, yet wishing he could trust him. Dohr could be very valuable, especially in reconnaissance.

The Orc slumped back. “Okay.”

“Why not?” Anna asked.

“I may have forgiven him, but trust is another matter.”

“Let him earn it then,” she said, eyes firm and steady as she looked at Krell’s.

“I just, uh, want to help,” Dohr added.

Krell reconsidered. He could see that Anna was sure of herself. “Kian?” he asked.

The Elf looked soberly at Dohr for a moment. “If he betrays us, we would have to abandon our boat and fight or flee over land. That galley could run us down with no problem.”

“Those are my thoughts, too.” Krell looked straight at Anna. “I saw horses as well as dogs in that town. Not only would we fail to rescue your friend, we would face great peril.”

“I swear,” Dohr said, “I, uh, I swear to God I, uh, won’t betray you. I just want to, uh, help. I, uh, I want to, uh, atone for my sins. It would, uh, be nothing for me to, uh, go in there and ask questions. I’m one of them.”

“We can trust him,” Anna said.

“Lori? You agree with Anna?”

“I believe Anna is right. I think he sincerely wishes to help.”

Krell looked at Lori then back at Anna. “How can you be so certain?”

She smiled, her face reflective. “Evil never gives up trying to corrupt one’s soul, but Dohr here will no longer be easily deceived by it. A splinter of the heavenly vibration has worked its way deep in his heart. Evil has much work to do before it could be dislodged.”

Krell looked back. Thisbee was getting farther and farther away as they drifted. Ahead, the three boats that left in front of them were well down the river. He scanned the north shoreline, looking for a place to land. About a mile downstream he could see a marsh with thick, tall reeds.

“Very well,” he said.

*“Therefore, I beseech thee, oh Lord,
be manifest to Thy children, fallen
and virtuous alike.”*

—*Saint Sevannab,*
The Testament of Angels

CHAPTER 17

THISBEE

When Nagrek woke, he found himself greatly refreshed. The brutal pace of the march through the Druunhaelen Mountains had worn on him. Of course, it didn’t help that he had topped it off with a night on the town and a few too many tankards of mead. Even so, it made three good nights of rest in a row, including the night on the river and the night in Masseryk.

Sitting on his bunk, he scratched his head and rubbed his face. With light streaming in through the cabin’s small porthole, it took his eyes a moment to focus. The cabin was small, about eight by six feet, and barely six feet high. It smelled like stale cheese. Celleste was beneath the porthole, her back to the wall. She was wrapped in a blanket and looked sad. *Poor little thing*, Nagrek thought.

Nagrek reached in his pocket and pulled out his keys, which were tied to a loop in his breeches. Sliding off the bunk and spinning around on his knees, he unlocked the drawer beneath the bunk, then pulled it out. His sword and his three knives were in there, as well as his jacket, backpack, and boots. There were also several oranges and a moldy block of yellow cheese. He had bought the fruit for Celleste the day before; the cheese was for him. He took an orange and handed it to her. Then he strapped on his weapons and shrugged his arms into his jacket. After lacing his boots, he relocked the drawer.

“Stand up,” he told Celleste, motioning with his hand.

She did, clutching the blanket around herself with the half-peeled orange in her hand. Nagrek reached down and took the blanket away,

leaving her naked; her clothes were locked in the drawer.

“Spread your wings.” He again motioned with his hands.

As she did so, sunlight from the porthole refracted through them, projecting vibrant pastel variations on the wall. Nagrek liked viewing her this way, naked with her wings spread. There wasn’t a hair anywhere on her body, except for the long, lustrous black hair of her head. Her breasts were not very large by Orc standards, but firm and perfectly formed. He found himself growing more and more attached to her, which stoked an uncomfortable internal debate. Was he going soft? Or crazy?

All she should be to him was something to use, abuse, and throw away—or to sell for a great sum of money as he had convinced Chief Ogen to do. But Nagrek felt no interest in doing either. The thought of selling her truly irked him. Why he wanted to keep her, though, he couldn’t figure. She was terrible breeding stock. Only four feet tall, it would be a wonder if it was even possible. Besides, he didn’t even feel that way about her. The only constant in his mind was that he didn’t want her to get hurt. Why he even cared about her comfort was bewildering. Why did he? Not too long ago he wanted to hurt her. The only explanation he could think of was that it had something to do with Anna—something she said, or something she sang, and the way she had just disappeared. He found himself expecting some great power to swoop in for this Celleste, and worried that he would be judged for how he had treated her. But none of that made any sense.

Nagrek shook his head. He was tired of thinking about it. Giving her back the blanket he patted her on the head.

“Thi bine uone nove vien,” she said in a soft, sweet voice.

“Yeah, you too,” Nagrek said, wondering what in the world she had said.

He unlocked the cabin door, then relocked it from the hallway. The guard there greeted him.

“No one is to go in there, you hear me?”

“Yes, sir,” the guard said, “I understand. Chief Ogen’s orders. Only you are to go in, and that girl in there is not to be harassed or to leave this ship.”

“Correct.” Nagrek went up to the main deck. Several Orcs lounged around, playing dice, and several more stood smoking on the poop

deck behind him. The pungent smell of crayfish and onions cooking reached him from the next boat over.

The sky was mostly clear, and the morning sun just a couple hours away from noon. It was a beautiful day.

Nagrek went to the rail and pissed over the side of the ship. “Aaahh,” he sighed as the accompanying shiver passed, and he watched his cloudy yellow stream spatter into the murky water below. Then he had the gangplank put out, and strolled on to the pier. His boots knocked solidly against the wooden planks as he strode toward the dock and then on to the town’s main street. Gargill’s diner was there, and he went to it.

Inside, the diner was dark, smoky, and all but deserted, just a few Orcs scattered about, and a poker game going at a center table. Nagrek sat at the bar.

“What can I get you?” the bartender, a grizzled old Orc, asked.

“Some gruel, with some chunks of meat. And an ale.”

“Sure thing, sir.” The bartender poured him an ale, then shuffled off.

From out of nowhere a scantily clad girl sidled up next to him. Looking in the mirror behind the bar, Nagrek could see she was a mixed breed, half Orc and half Human. “Hi, soldier.” She brushed her shoulder against him.

Nagrek looked her over. She was clean-smelling and good to look at, but as he thought about it he decided he’d much rather try something softer and smaller, something with finer, more delicate features. “Hi, sugar,” he said.

“Are you interested in a ride?”

“Maybe,” Nagrek considered. She really wasn’t too bad, and the Orc in her seemed to be mixed just right. Still, he had on his mind something else. “Do you have any Human friends?”

“Well, I might,” she said. “You looking for something young and soft, something you can make squeal? Or are you just looking for something a little finer?” She said the last while tracing her fingertips across her cheek.

“Young and soft.”

“Well, I know a girl like that, but she’s not cheap. She doesn’t do Orcs for less than five silver. For a goldpiece, though, she’d bring her

younger sister.”

Five silverpieces! Nagrek groaned to himself. One goldpiece? Crazy. He had only seven silverpieces and thirty-three coppers to his name. Of course, he was due thirty-two silvers upon arrival in Killmeville, plus a goldpiece as a bonus for the mission; and that’s not to mention the cut Chief Ogen promised him upon selling Celleste. He could be rich. Plus, Chief Ogen was talking of promoting him. However, getting back to Killmeville was becoming questionable, given the news that came in from there last night. *Maybe if I talk to Chief Ogen, he’ll give me my money now*, he thought. *After all, he’s got that big bag of coins from Kripa*. Thinking of that bag made Nagrek drool. Was it all gold? he wondered.

“So, does that sound good?” she asked.

Yes, it sure does, Nagrek thought. “Maybe tonight,” he said. “How can I find you?”

“Just ask for Misty,” she grinned, then walked away.

The bartender brought his bowl of gruel. Nagrek checked and saw there were several good-sized chunks of meat.

“That’ll be two coppers.”

Nagrek fished in his pocket and tossed two copper pieces on the bar. As he started eating, another Orc came in, looked around, then sat at the bar beside him. Nagrek looked at his clothing and saw that he was Ogen Clan.

“Hey, um, you came on that ship from, uh, from Masseryk, right?” the stranger asked as the bartender returned. “Ale, please,” he said.

“Yeah.” Nagrek shoveled food into his mouth.

“I’ve, uh, I heard wild stories,” he said. “Um, you one of them out in the Druunhaelen Mountains?”

Nagrek saw a goldpiece in the Orc’s hand as he gave the bartender a quality copperpiece. “Give me, uh, one, um, one of those meat bones, too,” he told him.

The bartender looked closely at the copper, then smiled, showing a mouth full of rotting fangs. “Sure thing, sir,” he grinned, then took a meat bone down from the wall and handed it over.

“Yeah, I was out there,” Nagrek said, suddenly interested in this Orc—especially in where he was coming upon such money here in Thisbee.

He looked at Nagrek with respect. “You, um, really been through it.”

“Yeah, you don’t know the half of it,” Nagrek chuckled.

“Um, name’s Dohr.” The Orc extended his hand.

Nagrek took his hand and shook it. “Mine’s Nagrek.”

* * *

The sun was directly overhead when Krell spotted Dohr walking down the road. He was sporting a new sword and dagger, for which he had been given money. A sack full of supplies hung over his left shoulder. From his perch in the tree, Krell stepped out onto a branch and angled his mirror against the sun: one flash, two flashes, three flashes. He waited. The return flashes came from across the river, nearly a mile downstream. Krell looked down the trail to make sure Dohr was by himself. Nothing seemed amiss. He gave two more flashes, then waited until he saw the boat emerge from beneath willow trees overhanging the water’s edge on the south side of the river.

Krell had liked the potential advantages of using Dohr for reconnaissance and information gathering, but there had been too much to lose to just trust that this Orc would not betray them. So Krell had taken precautions: After sending Dohr on his way, he had sent Kian, Lori, and Anna to the opposite bank, then followed the Orc to the edge of town. He had then backtracked and found this tree where he could oversee the road as well as the river. If Dohr had betrayed them, at least Kian, Lori, and Anna would have been safe on the other side of the river. And even if the Orcs had sent a galley, horsemen and dogs to ambush them downstream at the reeds, he would have had time to find a suitable place to swim across and join the others.

However, it seemed that Anna was right, for which Krell was happy. Jumping down from the tree, he came up behind Dohr. When the Orc heard him, he spun, fear in his eyes. Then he relaxed.

“Oh, uh, Krell, you scared me. What, uh, are you doing here?”

“Everything went well?” Krell asked.

“Well, um, yeah. I got...”

“Celleste is here?”

“Uh, yeah, but also...”

“Great. Tell me about it later. Let me have that sack. Okay, let’s go.”

Krell took off jogging down the road and could hear the Orc running behind. He didn’t want to linger on the road. While in the tree, he had seen Orcs passing in both directions, both on foot and horseback. He had also seen boats plying the river, and he wanted to get to the marsh to make sure no one was observing their boat as Kian rowed it into the reeds.

With a steady and easy pace, Krell reached the marsh in less than ten minutes. He wasn’t breathing hard, but Dohr was gasping.

“Will you make it?” he asked with a friendly chuckle.

“A minute ago, I wasn’t, uh, so sure.” Dohr was bent over with his hands resting above his knees.

Krell led Dohr off the road and through the tall, thick brush at the edge of the marsh. He scaled a small tamarack tree. From that vantage point, Krell could see the boat was nearly to the reeds. Kian rowed, and Lori and Anna were aft. The river widened at this point, with thick borders of marshland and trees, leaving over a mile of vegetation between them and the dock at Thisbee. Krell looked upstream and downstream. A loon’s call came over the water. They were alone.

Dropping from the tree, Krell waded into the marsh toward the boat, pushing through the reeds as he went. “Kian,” he called out, “throw the rope over here.”

“Here you go.” He heard Kian’s voice, then saw a rope sail above and fall into the reeds. Krell grabbed it and pulled. Soon he was looking at Kian’s face as the boat came into view. Kian hopped out and helped him pull. Dohr came up and helped as well. When the boat was firmly lodged on the muddy bottom and well hidden by the reeds, Krell went to its side and lifted Anna and carried her back to solid ground. Then he returned for Lori.

A few seconds later, Krell set her down on dry land with the others. “Now, Dohr.” he turned to the Orc. “Tell us what you’ve found.”

“Uh, yeah, uh...” He dug in his pocket and pulled out some coins. “Here”—he held them out to Lori—“the leftover money.”

“You keep them,” she told him kindly. “After all, we are using your boat.”

“Really?” he said, astonished. “But this is, uh, so much....”

“Keep it,” she repeated.

“Well, tell us,” Krell said, impatient.

“Well, yes, uh, as I said”—he looked at Krell—“Celleste is here.”

Anna jumped in place and clapped her hands together. “Oh, wonderful!”

Lori smiled, looking relieved.

Dohr looked at Anna. “I found, uh, Nagrek, like you said. I, uh, recognized him, uh, right away, when I saw him.” Then he turned to Kian: “And I did that thing, uh, with the gold coin, just like you said, Kian. You should have seen how eager he was to, uh, tell me anything I wanted to know.”

“So...” Krell prompted.

“Oh, yeah, sorry. Anyway, uh, she’s being held inside the ship. There’s, um, about fifteen or twenty Orcs on board at any time. Chief Ogen is staying, uh, at Ogen Clan, uh, manor. Almost a hundred of my old clan here.”

“When are they leaving?” Krell asked.

“Oh, um, that’s the other thing. It’s all the talk.” Dohr suddenly looked excited. “They’re not leaving, uh, at least not anytime soon. Word came in two days ago that, uh, there might be war in Killmeville. Chief Ogen wants to, uh, wait for more information.”

“War?”

“Yeah. The story is that, uh, some foreign army came and attacked. They killed one of the Ogen Clan’s allies, uh, a count...Count Scillieri.”

“A foreign army?” Lori asked, very interested. “Who?”

“I believe they said, uh, they called themselves ‘the Knights of, um, Bay, um, Eeza.’”

“Baeza?” Lori crinkled her eyes.

“Yeah,” Dohr said, “I think that’s it.”

“What’s that?” Krell saw the puzzlement in Lori’s face.

“I don’t know.” She looked up at him. “But Baeza is on the other side of the world.”

“The word is that they, uh, claim they’ve, uh, come to fight the, uh, Demon armies,” Dohr added.

“Well,” Krell smiled down at Lori, “that is unexpected news.”

“Yes.”

Anna went to Dohr and touched his shoulder. “You did well,” she said. “Thank you.”

Krell went over and sat on an old, fallen tree. They were in a little alcove, with the tall reeds of the marsh between them and the river, and tall, thick brush behind and all around. Kian came over and sat with him.

“Trying to think of a plan?” he asked.

“I have some ideas,” he said, “but as usual, I don’t like the risks.”

“Oh, Krell,” Anna came over to him excitedly. “I nearly forgot. I learned a new spell.”

“She’s amazing,” Lori said to him. “I’ve never heard of anyone learning so fast. She’s already more powerful than I am, and I’ve been doing this my whole life.”

Anna knelt in front of him, then put her hands together and closed her eyes.

Krell frowned. “What are you doing?”

“Just watch,” Lori said.

Krell sat still, watching Anna’s face—it was the very image of enthusiasm. She opened her eyes and placed her hands on his pant legs. A band of light appeared. Moving her hands down, water began draining to his boots and then to the ground. She moved her hands to his boots and the phenomenon repeated with them. In seconds his feet and legs were dry. She looked up and smiled.

“See, isn’t that wonderful?” she asked.

“Yes, truly.” He felt his pant legs and boots. Bone dry.

“I learned to do it while we were waiting on the other side of the river. I thought it might be useful, what with you always jumping into the river.”

“This is great. I can’t wait to see what else you’ll learn.”

“I just did what Lori has been teaching me. Oh,” she looked at Kian and summoned him over, “let me do you while I still have the magic at my fingertips.” She placed her hands on his pant legs and boots and the water shed from them the same way. Then she knelt in front of Dohr and did his. Dohr watched Anna work with a look of reverent astonishment.

Krell was still running scenarios through his mind when Anna stood back up, a triumphant smile on her face.

“There!” she said. “All dry. Now is it time to rescue Celleste?” She clasped her hands together, looking like the girl that she was, rather than the sagelike sorceress she was becoming.

What am I doing? Krell thought to himself. How am I going to keep Anna safe? How long before tragedy strikes?

“Dohr,” Krell said to the Orc, resolving himself to be as careful as possible, “tell me about the dock. Are there guards of any sort?”

“Oh, well,” the Orc began, thinking, “yes, there’s, um, something like six guards there. Yes, I think I saw, um, three Orcs and three Humans. They would be, uh, Colonel Thisbee’s men.”

“We’ll need to consider that,” Kian said to Krell. “Thisbee’s town. Thisbee’s dock. We’re not just up against those Orcs.”

“You’re right. That’s why I feel unsure. Even if we rescue Celleste, we’ll have to do it without bringing Thisbee’s men down on us—not that being hunted by the Ogen Clan wouldn’t be bad enough.” He turned back. “Dohr, where does the Ogen Clan stay—how far from the dock?”

“Oh, well, uh, the Ogen compound is up near the, uh, castle. It’s like a small village.”

“And that’s where most of the Ogen Clan stays, right?”

“Yeah.”

“What about Thisbee’s men?”

“Uh, mostly at the castle, but, uh, they’re all around. Orcs and Humans.”

Krell was beginning to settle on a plan. He needed just a few more details. “Now, there are no gates or walls, right? People come and go as they please?”

Dohr scratched his head. “Yeah, I guess. I, uh, came straight in and out.”

“There are no gates that could be closed at night?”

“No, no gates,” Dohr shook his head.

“Good.” Krell stood up. “You bought the cloaks?”

“Yeah, they’re in the sack.”

Krell turned to Lori. “Can you cast four of those invisibility spells?”

“Yes.” She looked up at him with her sharp green eyes. “But it will take time.”

“We have the rest of the day,” he said.

“Remember, though,” she added, “I can only imprint so many spells at once before I get overloaded. To imprint four invisibility spells, I’ll have to get rid of others.”

Krell went through the plan in his mind, thinking of the magic he would need. “Fine,” he said, “in addition to those four, I need three of your sleep spells and two of those spells that open locked doors.”

“I can do it,” she told him.

“Good. Here’s the plan then: We’ll go in tonight; except Anna—you’ll stay here. Lori and Kian, you’ll wear these old cloaks Dohr bought. Hopefully, at night, no one will notice that you’re Elves. We will not be staying long enough for anyone to discover you, anyway. Lori will cast invisibility spells on me, Kian, and herself. We’ll have about ten minutes from there, right?”

“Yes,” Lori said, “ten minutes is about right. The spells might last a little longer.”

“Okay,” Krell continued, “invisible, we sneak past any guards at the dock. Lori will put to sleep the Orcs on the galley. We’ll board and silently dispose of every Orc on the boat. One call for help and we’re in trouble. We find Celleste; Lori casts her last invisibility spell on her. Then we leave. All in under ten minutes. Dohr’s job will be to distract guards or anyone else, if necessary. If any of the Ogen Clan heads for the boat while we’re there, stall them. If anyone hears any noise from the boat, distract them. When we’re clear, we come straight back here. Now, we’ll have to expect that a boat full of dead Orcs won’t go unnoticed through the whole night, especially if we don’t get away cleanly. We’ll have the whole Ogen Clan and probably Thisbee’s men after us as well. Our escape will be to take our boat downstream as far as we dare; then, before any of those galleys descend upon us, to scuttle our boat and go on foot on the south side of the river. Hopefully, they won’t find our trail.”

“It is a fine plan.” Kian stood, looking up to the sky. “But mistakes or bad luck on that boat and we’ll be in trouble.”

“Even if things go terribly wrong, with invisibility we should be able to escape. But, I agree, it is risky. We could take another day to get more information. I could go in there myself for a look.”

“That might be best,” Lori said.

“What if we can do it without any killing?” Anna asked, walking up to Krell, her blue eyes sparkling.

“I don’t know how we could do that,” he said mildly. “We need some time for our escape, and those sleep spells don’t last long—yes?” He looked at Lori.

“Yes.”

“So, even if we managed to put every Orc to sleep on that boat with Lori’s spells, they would wake and our escape time would be very short.”

“I mean, what if we can get Nagrek to just bring Celleste to us.”

“I’m interested,” Krell told her. “What do you have in mind?”

Anna put her hands on her hips and smiled bewitchingly. “I know Nagrek. I’ve seen the spark of his soul; I could bring him to God. With what Lori’s been teaching me, I’m sure of it.”

Krell thought for a moment. It would be far more simple if... “I like it, Anna—if you can do for Nagrek what you did for Dohr here, and, if Nagrek has the authority to bring Celleste off that boat without having to justify his actions, it’s a better plan.”

Lori put an arm around Anna’s waist. “I think it’s a great idea,” she said. “If we can pull this off, we won’t run afoul of Thisbee, and the Ogen Clan would simply think one of their own was responsible.”

“Plus,” Anna said with delight, “we could bring another soul to God.”

Krell looked over at Dohr. “What do you think? Could Nagrek just bring Celleste off that boat without immediate suspicions or anyone asking questions?”

“Uh, I don’t know.” Dohr tugged on the lobe of his right ear and bit his lip. “When I talked to him, he, um, said she was very, uh, important to Chief Ogen. That she was worth a lot of money. I, I don’t remember, but I, I think he, uh, might have said something about, um, about—yeah, I remember now—I said to him, it sure would be neat to see this, uh, fairy girl from the Druunhaelen Mountains, and he said, um, no one was going to see her because, uh, Chief Ogen ordered that she be locked in the boat.”

“Well, there goes that plan,” Kian said.

“Perhaps not,” Krell said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the map and the orders he had taken from the Orc back in the

mountains. “If Chief Ogen ordered her removed from the boat, Anna’s plan would work.” He unfolded the parchment with the orders. Chief Ogen’s signature was at the bottom. “Can we forge an order?” He handed the parchment to Lori.

Lori looked it over, then back up at Krell. “Brilliant!” she smiled. “I think I can do this. This seal is unsophisticated, and I’m a practiced calligrapher, you know....”

“Sure, whatever that means,” he laughed.

* * *

Nagrek sat at a bar and sipped his ale, wondering what he should do. He had talked to Chief Ogen earlier, but had been only able to pry two silvers out of the cheap two-faced cheat. Ogen had said the two silvers were only because he was being promoted to sub-Chief soon.

“No one’s getting money right now,” Ogen had said, “not until I find out what this war talk in Killmeville is all about. But rest assured, Nagrek, you’ll be a rich Orc when we sell that Sylph. I’ll give you ten percent.”

That sounds great, Nagrek thought, *but what does it do for me now?* He was considering whether he should go find Misty and pay five silvers for a Human girl. But five silvers was too much. He wasn’t rich—yet. He could get a shapely Orc girl for a couple coppers, but, for some reason, he was thinking that he’d rather spend the night holding an incomprehensible conversation with the Sylph.

“Hey, Nagrek!”

Nagrek turned and a grin quickly broke on his face. “Dohr!” He reached out and bumped fists with the Orc.

“I’ve been, uh, looking for you.”

“Well, I’ve just been sitting here for the last hour. What’s on your mind?”

“You know that, uh, businessman I told you about?”

Nagrek’s interest perked right up. He had asked Dohr about those fancy coppers earlier, and had been told about some mysterious guy who would pay to get things done.

“What things?” Nagrek had asked.

“Well, uh,” Dohr had stuttered, “I really can’t say, uh, if you know

what I mean.”

Nagrek had caught his drift then, and now Dohr might have a proposition for him. “Yeah, I remember,” he said.

“Well, uh,” Dohr began, “I know I shouldn’t have told him, but, you know, how else are Orcs like us going to make a little extra money?”

“Told him what?” Nagrek narrowed his eyes.

“Well, uh, you know. It’s like...,” Dohr leaned in close. “I, uh, I told him about the Sylph you caught in the Druunhaelen Mountains.”

“I told you that was a secret.”

“Well, brother, uh, I know, but...”

“But what?” Nagrek asked testily, though he was intrigued.

“But, well, he, uh, he gave me a few silvers, you see, just for information. So I told him.”

“And?”

“He’s very interested. He said he would give you a goldpiece to just talk to him.”

“What?” Nagrek couldn’t believe what he just heard.

“Yes. And I get five more silvers.”

Nagrek was picturing that goldpiece he had seen in Dohr’s hand earlier today. Clearly the Orc knew somebody with money, but a whole goldpiece just to talk? “He’s going to give me a goldpiece just to talk with him?”

“Well, uh, yes. That’s what he said, and he always does what he says.” Dohr lowered his voice to a whisper. “I think he’s, uh, very interested in that Sylph. He, uh, I think he want to talk about buying her or something. I don’t know for sure. He, uh, don’t tell me. He just told me he’d give me five silvers if you come talk to him. Said he’d give you one gold.”

Nagrek didn’t need to hear any more. “When does he want to see me?”

“Well, uh, right now, I guess. I’ll take you there?”

“Yes.” Nagrek gulped down the rest of his ale and stood. His mind buzzed with visions of gold. If this guy was willing to pay a goldpiece just to talk, then what might he be willing to pay for the Sylph? His mind reeled at the thought. *I might be able to get twenty percent from Ogen if I find the buyer*, he thought to himself. The thought of selling the Sylph,

however, suddenly made him feel sick. He wanted to keep her. Shaking his head, trying to clear it, he followed Dohr out of the tavern and into the night.

Dohr led him in the dark down Main Street to Thisbee's best inn. At the entrance to the suites out back were two burly guards, a Human and a Hobgoblin.

"I am with Master Krell," Dohr said.

"Go ahead," the Human said, opening the gate.

Nagrek followed Dohr through the gate, feeling the hateful stare of the six-and-a-half-foot-tall Hobgoblin. Dohr led him to one of the cottages out back and knocked on the door.

"Come in," a voice from inside called out.

Dohr opened the door and went in. Nagrek followed. The room was dark and, just as Nagrek realized something was wrong, he was driven to the floor and there was a knife at his neck.

"Make a sound and you'll bleed," the voice said in Orcish.

His hands were tied behind his back and his weapons removed. Then a light filled the room. Dohr was standing off to his side with an Elf.

"You scum!" he hissed at Dohr. "You filthy clan-traitor! Working with Elves!"

"I said be quiet!" The man with the knife at his neck waved it in front of his face.

Nagrek shut his mouth and looked at him. He was a strapping Human with intense blue eyes. The man hauled him to his knees.

The Elf had moved over to a window. "It's all clear," he said in the Human tongue.

A door opened up on the side of the room and Nagrek's jaw fell open. It was Anna, and with her, an Elf maiden. It seemed his heart stopped for a moment, then he was choked with a swarm of thoughts and emotions. He knew he was going to die, but somewhere inside he hoped for mercy. After all, he had been good to Celleste, hadn't he?

"A-Anna," he stammered. "I-I swear, I swear I have not hurt her. Celleste is fine. I swear. Please, you must believe me. Chief Ogen wanted to rape her, but I convinced him not to. I swear. She has not been hurt. I have been protecting her. I swear."

As she walked forward, words stopped coming out of his mouth,

even though his jaw kept moving. The way she moved, the way she looked, made Nagrek weak inside. A glow was about her, a radiance so sharp that it stung his eyes to look upon her—yet he couldn't look away. The deep blue of her eyes held him transfixed. All but paralyzed, he watched her approach. The golden yellow of her hair and the rosy tint to her cheeks completed in his mind the notion that she was royalty. She was smiling, but he imagined it was in anticipation of revenge.

I'm going to pay for what we did to her, for what Kripa did to her, he thought in panic. *I'll pay for all of her people that we killed.* He mustered the strength to look away as she came closer still, but the swish of her skirt sounded loud in his ears. When he raised his eyes a little, he saw only her soft blue blouse, hugging her body tightly as if it was too small. Her breasts pressed out firmly against the fabric, and there was a sliver of her midriff showing beneath it. She smelled like wildflowers. *Strange that I am so afraid of her,* he found himself thinking.

She knelt in front of him and waited until Nagrek looked her in the eye. “Do you remember what I said to you in the mountains?” she asked softly, almost intimately, her eyes suspiciously kind.

“I, uh, yes,” Nagrek muttered. “I didn't believe you then, but after you escaped I...thought differently. Since, I have thought a lot about it. Please...mercy. I have been good to Celleste, because of you, I think. Please, I'll do anything.”

“Will you invite God into you life?”

Nagrek blinked, feeling overwhelmed and confused.

“Open your heart and you need not ever be alone again. Let me show you God; let me show you His limitless love; let me show you my love. It is more powerful than anything in the world. Will you do that for me?”

“What? What?” He faltered, slowly grasping her words. “You want to help me? Me? Yes, anything. I'll do anything you say.”

A soft light enveloped her hands. She raised them to his face. When she pressed her fingers to his forehead, it felt like they went right through. Nagrek was overcome by a surging, ever mounting joy that beggared the sweetest moments of his life. A brilliant light streamed into his mind, and every fiber of his body vibrated with a liberating sensation he had never experienced or imagined possible. He felt as light as air, and was sure he was floating. A peace and tranquility ca-

ressed his every thought. Tears streamed down his face and neck. Then an image formed within the dazzling light, and it became the only thing he knew.

The image was Anna, though all he saw were different shades of brilliance within the light. Even so, that it was her presence was undeniable. As he wondered if his eyes were open, he felt drawn as if down a well of consciousness inside himself. He could see a new image, and he knew he was viewing his soul. To his astonishment, it was inexpressibly beautiful. Happiness and joy gushed there, and love. He felt the love rising to him, drawing him closer, and he surrendered to it. When he became one with it, he experienced a transcendent shift in everything he had ever believed. To love—why, it was glorious!

“I love you, and God loves you, Nagrek.” It was Anna’s voice, but he could not tell whether he had heard the words or whether they had always been in his mind. He looked for her and she was still there, her image bathed in light, more lovely than ever. However, he now saw her with the intuition of his own soul. A realization of the preciousness of her life engulfed him. He felt love rise in his heart and surge toward her and knew he would sacrifice anything for her—give anything to protect her.

She smiled at him, her face heavenly. “Isn’t God’s love glorious?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Then accept Him as your own—and as your true Father. Allow me to show the way.”

“Of course.” Nagrek thought. “I had no idea such joy was possible.”

“The journey will not be easy, Nagrek. Just remember that God’s love is eternal and everywhere.”

Nagrek slowly became aware of himself again; of who and what he was, of where he’d been and of what he’d done. As this awareness grew, he recoiled from it. He sought desperately to cling to the love and joy, the peace and tranquility, he now knew came from the well-spring of God within his soul.

“I want to live with God,” he wailed softly through tears. He opened his eyes and saw Anna kneeling before him, wreathed in glory, and he realized he was a shambling monster beside her. Somehow untied, his hands flew to his shirt, tearing at it; then to his face, to hide

his shame.

“You will.” Anna gingerly guided Nagrek’s hand away from his face. “But you must hold firm to God’s love, and face your past. He placed you here at this time and in this form to learn. Will you take the opportunity?”

“Yes.”

“Then come with me.”

This time Anna’s glowing hand touched his chest, over his heart. He lost the sense of his body again, as the waters of his consciousness rushed to his heart, and then fell, as if into and down a bottomless well. Nagrek understood Anna was guiding him back into himself. He saw, felt, and re-experienced the deeds and thoughts that had been his life. The beauty of his soul receded before the onslaught, but the knowledge of distinctions he had never before understood was now plain in him: right and wrong, good and evil.

* * *

Krell rested, pondering this power his sister had over Orcs. With Nagrek, it had gone much the same as it had with Dohr. Nagrek beat his chest, cried and wailed, and begged forgiveness. He repudiated his evil deeds and pledged himself to goodness. He swore to look to God first for guidance, and lamented his blindness and wicked ways. Crumpled, head in Anna’s lap, he wept, apologizing profusely to all those he had hurt in his past.

“I forgive you,” Anna had said, “and God forgives you. That is why this has happened to you. Take my gift of unconditional love and embrace it. God loves you so. His joy in you now is overwhelming. This is your true destiny: from God you came, for God you live, and to God you return. From now on, no evil can command you, for you will always have God with you. This is true power; this is true freedom. No longer will you be subject to the compulsions of clan, kin, heredity, and habit. You are free to live life to please your eternal soul.”

Shaking his head, Krell wondered how Anna obtained this power, this ability to bring Orcs to goodness. From God, she would say. But Lori could not do this, and she was devoted to God as well. If not for Anna, he would have just killed Dohr after he had gotten information

from him, then consigned his body to the river. Instead, the Orc was now functioning as a valuable ally. Already Nagrek had agreed to help free Celleste, and had told them how to address and word the order that Lori would forge.

Krell leaned forward over the table and took another apple from the basket, glad he had heeded Anna's counsel. He bit into the fruit, savoring the fresh, sweet flavor. For three weeks he had primarily eaten dried meats, dried vegetables, and hardtack brought from his village—all packed away in King Riordanall's magic haversacks. There just had not been much time to forage, though he had occasionally come across edible fruits and berries. As he took another bite, he thought about buying some more fresh food before they left. However, it was four hours past nightfall, and Lori appeared almost finished with the forgery. They would have to make do with the provisions they had, for now. If things continued to go smoothly, they would be on the river with Celleste before daybreak.

So far, the mission was without a hitch. First, they stowed their big weapons in the magical haversacks, then they had walked into town. With Lori and Kian wrapped in old, oversized wool cloaks, hoods up and heads down, no one had been able to tell they were Elves, especially in the dark. Though they had drawn some stares, Krell had simply scowled at anyone who might have thought about approaching them. The only person who had not been deterred was the old lady who sold them the basket of fruit. The innkeeper was a perfunctory, middle-aged Human who had merely asked his name and the status of his companions, to which he had answered with his name and identified Anna as his wife, Kian and Lori as his servants, and Dohr as his guide. He paid a goldpiece for the best suite for two days—which reminded him...

"Kian," Krell looked over to the Elf, "what was it you were saying about paying too much for the fruit and the room?" It had made no sense, because they had bags and bags of gold, silver and copper coins from King Riordanall's tomb.

"Oh, right," Kian sat up. "I should have told you before we came into town, but I just didn't think of it. You see, money is dangerous. People want it. If you're loose with it, people will take you for a patsy—which will invite them to cheat you, steal from you, or rob you. Loose

money invites unwanted attention. You wouldn't know this from living up in the mountains, but money will buy you 'friends' and it will attract enemies. It's best to never flaunt it, never overpay, and always drive a hard bargain."

Kian reached into his pocket and put a handful of coins down on the table. "Look," he continued, "two silvers for that basket of fruit was grossly overpaying. Five coppers would have been better, but you probably could have gotten it for two or three."

Krell followed Kian's point, but haggling with an old lady? Krell nodded. "Explain for me, please, the importance of haggling the old lady down to two coppers."

"First of all, that old lady ripped you off. How do you think a person like that survives in a town like this? She knows people, has friends. She's selling fruit, but she survives by being useful. It's a good bet she'll tell people she gypped you. Soon, the whole town will know. And what will they think? If an old lady can fleece you, then surely they can, too. People will scheme in various ways, from picking your pocket, to selling you things at inflated prices, to kidnapping and murder."

"Yes, I see." Krell reached out and picked up a silverpiece. "Tell me what these things are worth."

"Well, a silver is worth twenty coppers, and a gold is worth twenty silvers. And these coins from your King's tomb are very high quality, worth up to twice as much as a typical piece. As far as knowing how much to pay for something, that takes experience. You have to learn to read people. If you walk away and a seller doesn't chase you down, then they were probably offering you a fair price. Otherwise..." Kian shrugged his shoulders.

"Thank you," Krell said, "I understand." He went back to his apple and finished it off, then watched Lori as she worked.

She stood at the other end of the table, papers spread before her. Her light red hair was tied back. As she leaned over, she revealed her high cheekbones and pointed Elven ears. An aura of intensity and competence was about her. When she moved, Krell couldn't help but notice how her breasts shifted beneath the green fabric of her dress—a dress, he realized, that was old and worn. Anna wore Lori's only other set of clothing, so they both needed new clothes, a thought that favored them going directly to this place called Gowra—after rescuing

Celleste.

“Done!” Lori proclaimed.

* * *

Sleeava sat outside the Bloody Pumpkin, a whorehouse, waiting. She was a patient and clever old lady. When Olwen Nemed finally came out, she waddled up to him the way she had on so many other occasions.

“What can I do for you, Sleeava?” the burly half-Orc asked.

“I just thought you might like to know,” she said, “about some strangers who came into town tonight.”

“Yes, I heard. They’re at the Druunscape Inn; I plan to check them out tomorrow. What about them?”

“The big Human gave me two of these”—she held up one of the silverpieces—“for a basket of fruit.”

Olwen took the silver and examined it. “I haven’t seen one of these before,” he said. “Looks old, but a first-rate piece.” He handed it back. “Very interesting. Anything else?”

“Yes. Two of his companions wore hooded cloaks and wouldn’t show their faces, though I tried to get a peek. They were short, one no more than five feet; perhaps they were youths, or women, or maybe not. Very suspicious, I thought.” She gave him a meaningful look. “Plus, he had an Ogen Clan Orc with him, one I did not recognize.”

“Anything else?”

“The big Human wore daggers on his boots and was light on his feet, but I didn’t see any other weapons. That is all.”

“Thank you very much.” Olwen extended his hand, giving her a silverpiece.

* * *

A little more than five minutes after Dohr and Nagrek left, and Krell still marveled at how Anna could so transform the character of an Orc. A few hours ago, Nagrek had been hissing at Dohr for betraying him; now he was thanking him for the betrayal, and was on his way with Dohr to free Celleste. He offered thanks inwardly to God as he

retrieved his longsword, axe, and vest dagger from one of the haversacks. Kian did likewise from the other.

“Okay, let’s go.” Krell opened the door. Kian and Lori were hidden beneath the deep cowls of their cloaks, following. Anna was at their side. She, too, had the hood of her cloak pulled over her head, though only to her hair, not past her face.

Krell kept his eyes and ears tuned for danger as he walked, but there were no sounds of metal on metal or of crossbows being handled, nor anything else that seemed out of place. When he arrived at the gate, he opened it and walked through.

“Good evening, Master Krell,” the Human guard said to him. “Can I help you with anything tonight? Are you leaving already?” He glanced at their packs.

“No, I plan to return,” Krell said equably. “I rather like this inn.”

He walked out to the street and turned for the dock. The town was dark, with just a few lantern lights in the buildings to either side. There was enough starlight to make the way clear, though. As he walked, Krell saw a lumberyard, an apothecary, a supply store, stables, a smithy, a tavern, and another inn. Only the tavern and the inn were open. To the left was the road out of town that led to their boat. Ahead, over two hundred yards away, the river could be seen by the starlight sparkling on its waves and by the silhouettes of the boats rocking gently against its surface. Krell passed a casino, another tavern, a cobbler shop, a tailor’s store, and a stonemason’s place. A weapons store and an armory were followed by a butchery, a tannery, a bakery, then a bordello, and another tavern. The wood and stone buildings were mostly one-story structures, though some had a second floor. Few people could be seen; none, so far, in the street. A moment ago, Krell had heard some horses on the street far behind them, but no longer. Ahead, the silhouettes of three people could be seen approaching from the dock, one much shorter than the other two.

“Do you think that’s her?” Anna asked, clutching his arm.

“Let’s hope.”

A few moments later he could see it was Nagrek and Dohr, and with them was a person no more than four feet tall, shrouded in a thick cloak.

“It’s her!” Anna whispered heatedly in his ear.

Krell held her arm, keeping her from rushing forward. “Do not make a scene. Act nonchalant. Let’s just collect her and go.”

When they met, a small voice beneath the cowl said breathlessly, “Anna!” Nagrek let go of her hand and Anna knelt and hugged her tight.

“Everything went, uh, perfect, Krell, no problems,” Dohr said. “Nagrek, uh, just showed them the order, walked in, and, uh, got her. No problems.”

Krell felt eyes watching them from a darkened window. “Let’s go.” He took Anna’s arm; Anna, in turn, held on to Celleste, and led them back the other way.

Just in front of them, two Orcs stumbled out of the bordello, a fat, sloppy female in a red bodice and a blond wig waving them on from the doorway. They seemed oblivious as they staggered down the street.

“Hey, you,” the Orc-whore called to Krell. “We got a real fine mixed breed that’ll blow your mind. Half price. We buy, too, if you got any females to sell. For Humans, we pay good price.”

Krell wasn’t sure if there was enough light for her to see the look he gave her, but she quickly vanished inside and closed the door.

“Those poor people,” Anna whispered to him. “What a miserable existence.”

The road out of town wasn’t much farther. However, Krell could see they weren’t going to make it. He had heard the whinny of some horses and then the clip-clop of hooves on the street before he saw them. He could see them now, though, as they trotted down the street toward him. Five horses and riders.

“Lori, Kian, be ready,” Krell said evenly as he turned his head. “Dohr, Nagrek, don’t do or say anything unless I address you.” He turned forward. “Stay behind me,” he said to Anna.

The horsemen went around the two drunken Orcs in the street and rode directly toward him, five abreast and two paces from one another. The one in the middle was a half-Orc, and the one on his right a Human. The other three were Orcs.

“Evening, stranger,” the half-Orc said as he reined his horse to a stop. “My name’s Olwen Nemed, Chief of Security to Colonel Thisbee. You’re the one who goes by the name of Krell?”

“Yes.” Krell made note of every weapon on each rider: swords and daggers, crossbows hitched behind each saddle. The half-Orc looked competent, the Human less so, and the Orcs looked like common thugs.

“It’s late for a stroll, don’t you think?” The half-Orc scrutinized each of them in turn.

“Yes, I agree,” Krell said flatly. “It’s been nice meeting you, Olwen Nemed. We’ll be retiring for the evening.”

“Oh, I wasn’t implying that you need go.” He pulled on the reins and his horse shook its head, backing up a step.

“Nevertheless, as you said, it’s late.” Krell made a move forward, to the side of the half-Orc’s horse.

Again the horse shook its head, this time snorting as well, as Olwen jerked the reins. “No need to be hasty,” he said. “You know, the formalities must be observed.”

“Such as?” Krell smiled.

“Just curious, you know, as to what your business is here in Thisbee.”

“And why is that?”

“Oh, well, because I could help make your business go smoothly, whatever it might be. You know, there are always complications, and a guy like me can be useful.”

Krell laughed. *I see what you mean, Kian*, Krell thought to himself.

Olwen grinned and wrapped the reins he was holding around the pommel of his saddle, freeing his hands.

“Very well, Olwen Nemed.” Krell’s voice turned serious. “I do have business and I wish it to go smoothly. Perhaps you can help me.”

The half-Orc smiled. “I’m sure I can. After all, this is Colonel Thisbee’s town, and I’m his Chief of Security. What can I do for you?”

“Well,” Krell said, “I imagine Colonel Thisbee is not an easy man to get an appointment with, but I’ll bet you could arrange that.”

“I could,” Olwen said noncommittally.

“You could, perhaps, even put in a good word, yes?”

“That depends....”

“Well, given my business”—Krell looked at the half-Orc with a steady gaze—“I may well need an appointment with your boss, and,

if you could be available to make that happen at the appropriate time, perhaps we can come to an agreement.”

A cunning grin formed on Olwen’s ugly face. “This is possible. What do you have in mind?”

“If you agree to this, then I give you a goldpiece now, and another when you’ve delivered.”

“I don’t know,” Olwen said as his horse stamped its front feet. “You ask a lot.”

“Fine. You’re not interested. I’ll approach your boss more directly. We’ll be on our way,” Krell said.

“Now, now, I didn’t say no, but you don’t tell me your business, or who your companions are. Why are they shrouded?”

“I will tell you what you need to know when I am ready to talk to your boss, but my property is no business of yours.”

“I see.” Olwen shifted in his saddle. “It almost seems as though you have something to hide. That could be dangerous, and hardly worth only a few goldpieces.”

“It is worth that, but no more.” Krell scowled as he flipped a gold coin up to Nemed. “Now, do we have a deal, or shall I take my gold back?”

Olwen looked at the gold in his palm, then looked over Krell’s shoulder. “You two, aren’t you Ogen Clan? You know Chief Ogen is in town—does he know what you’re up to?”

Krell broke in with a weary note in his voice that suggested he was at the limit of his patience. “Look, it is late. My arrangements with the Ogen Clan are between me, its Chief, and the Demon Lord. If neither briefed you, and you think that was an oversight, bring that up with them. As for me, take your chances and meddle if you wish. You have seen my metal.” Krell nodded toward Nemed’s hand. “I assure you, you will find it safer and more profitable to keep it than test it. So, I ask you, Chief of Security Olwen Nemed, would it not be better to take up your ‘formalities’ at a decent hour? Or must we handle all this in the dead of night?” Krell shifted his hand ever so slightly toward his longsword and fixed Nemed with a gimlet eye.

As he watched Nemed struggle with his options, Krell cursed himself. *If I had thought to have Lori forge an order using the papers found in Dreuth-sur’s trunk, this wouldn’t be a naked bluff.*

“I should think that won’t be necessary,” Olwen said placatingly, his eyes straying to the hilt of Krell’s sword. “Forgive my manners. You are right, this is neither the time nor the place to bring our business to a close. We have only just met. I should let you folks get some rest. Just one more thing. To make the arrangements you request, gold will have to pass one other palm. My boss has a Chief advisor. Consider well what you ask of me. Take this one back, or pay me sufficiently for the introduction and audience you seek. I think another goldpiece would suffice.”

“I will give you another”—Krell pulled another from his pocket, flashing it—“but in return you must do one more thing for me.”

Olwen frowned. “What?”

“Until I return, you and your men must speak nothing of tonight.”

“You ask a lot with this last thing.”

“You have intruded upon important affairs. You will be silent this way or another, but you will keep your mouth shut.” Krell spoke with finality in his voice. “Besides, your position in this town might make you useful for a long time to come. Usefulness can be golden. It can lead to unexpected advancement. Consider your future. As you know, there are great powers at work in these lands now. Chief Ogen understands. Do you? Do we have an understanding? I will know if you try to cheat me. Consider it a test. Pass it and there may be more work for you; fail it, and, well...”

Olwen grinned broadly. “Deal,” he said.

Krell flipped the coin to him and he snatched it from the air.

“Let’s go, boys.” He waved to his men as he turned his horse. The five of them started off down the street.

“That was terrific, Krell,” Anna said as she took his arm.

“Let’s go,” he said.

* * *

Alloria felt an overwhelming sense of relief as they started back down the Druun. Taking off that thick cloak, she looked up to the night sky, so vast and full of mystery, and breathed deeply. *Thank You, God*, she said to the heavens, feeling it with all her heart.

Anna helped Cellestillena out of her cloak, and the Sylph looked up at them with the most vibrant relief imaginable. “Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you,” she gushed, raising her arms over her head and stamping her little feet. “I am so happy to see you again!” She wrapped her arms around Anna, then came to Alloria and did the same. “I am so sorry I didn’t come right back like you said,” she looked up with big, dark eyes. “Look what I got for it!”

Alloria hugged her. “But you’re safe now.”

“Oh, yes, thank you, thank you, thank you.”

“Four others were called by God to aid in your rescue,” Anna said as she removed her own cloak.

Cellestillena’s dark hair whirled as she turned to face the front of the boat. Krell was in the back with them, just a few feet away. He was unhooking his weapons and was soaked up to his chest, having just pushed the boat out of the reeds. The two Orcs were at the middle bench, both rowing. Kian rowed at the front bench.

“This is my brother, Aukrellian,” Anna pointed, “but please call him Krell.”

“Thank you, Krell,” Cellestillena said meekly, holding on tight to Alloria.

“You are very welcome, Celleste,” he said to her in Elven, sitting at the side bench.

“Nagrek, of course, you know,” Anna said. “Tonight he accepted God into his life. He confessed and renounced his sins, and he has pledged to atone for them by obedience to God. His assistance was invaluable.”

“Thank you, Nagrek,” she said softly.

“She says thank you,” Anna said to Nagrek in the Human tongue.

“Oh, no,” Nagrek huffed as he rowed. “I must thank her, and all of you, for saving me. I have never felt so happy in my life.” He continued rowing with vigor and enthusiasm.

“Nagrek says thank you, Celleste,” Anna interpreted into Elven. “Helping to rescue you has given him more happiness than he has ever known before. Now, Dohr here, like Nagrek, has turned to God and renounced his sins. He has been very helpful.”

“Thank you, Dohr.” Celleste managed a shy smile.

“She says thank you,” Anna interpreted.

“Tell her, uh, it has been my pleasure to, uh, help.” Dohr kept rowing, falling into Nagrek’s rhythm.

“He says it has been his pleasure,” Anna said to Celleste as the Sylph offered both Orcs a smile. “Finally, there is Kian. You’ve met him, right?”

“I saw him back at your village, but I did not meet him. Thank you, Kian,” she said, her voice a little more lively and favoring him with a curtsy.

“You are welcome, Celleste.”

“And thank You, Divine Mother.” Celleste clapped her hands together again and again and looked into the sky.

Anna scooted over on the back bench and kissed the Sylph on her forehead. “I am so happy to see you again. My heart is overflowing. I love you so much.”

“Oh, I love you, too,” Celleste dove into Anna’s arms.

“I shan’t lose you again.” Anna petted her hair.

Cellestillena sat back up, sitting between Alloria and Anna.

“Let me see if I can call upon God for a magic spell,” Anna said to Alloria, then carefully walked over to Krell as the boat swayed in the water.

“Where are the other Elves?” Celleste looked up.

Alloria felt a pang of sadness as she suddenly thought of Andy and the others. “They were all killed back at the Orc lair,” she spoke solemnly, “except for two others besides Kian and myself.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.”

“Thank you. It was a terrible battle. We fought Demons and hundreds of Orcs. Krell killed a Pit Beast. We did rescue the other captives, though. Sallus and Parzen went with Anna’s people. They’re heading for Lalendren.”

“Oh, Lalendren!” Celleste’s eyes opened wide. “I’ve seen it before, though, of course, from afar. I’ve never been in it. It’s magnificent!”

“Yes, so I’ve heard.”

A sound of water pouring onto the deck filled the air as Anna used her newfound magic to drain Krell’s clothing dry. Then she proceeded to do the same for Kian and both Orcs.

“Anna has been learning to use magic at a rate unprecedented in all my experience,” Alloria told the Sylph as they watched.

“Oh, I know,” Celleste said earnestly, “she is infused with it. Her voice rings with power.”

Anna came back, stepping carefully as the boat rocked gently in the river. Krell soaked up the water on the deck with a towel and wrung it out over the side.

“Perhaps we can remove this from your neck now,” Anna said as she sat back down, fingering the chain around the Sylph’s neck.

“Oh, that would be wonderful, do you think you can?” she said in a rush. “Of course, it won’t matter now.” Her face was suddenly sullen.

“Why not?” Anna asked.

Celleste looked at both Anna and Alloria, her eyes big in her small face. She got up on her knees and leaned into Anna, whispering into her ear.

“Oh,” Anna almost seemed to chuckle. “That’s not so bad.”

“What?” The Sylph looked incredulous. “It’s awful!”

“But how do you think you came to be here?” Anna put her hands to Celleste’s face. “I think it’s a blessing!”

Celleste squeaked in dismay and sat back down.

“What is it?” Alloria asked.

Anna leaned over the small Sylph between them, and Alloria did the same, leading with her ear. “Celleste has entered a state of estrus, which prevents her from using her magic,” Anna whispered. “This state will not end until she mates and is with child.”

“Oh.” Alloria felt blood rush to her cheeks. She knew virtually nothing about Sylphs. “But why does it upset her so,” she whispered back. “Because of her magic?”

“Males frighten Sylphs,” Anna whispered, “though the loss of their magic is even more upsetting. Unless she wants to do without her magic, she will have to find a mate.”

“Oh.” Alloria fidgeted with her dress and caught herself involuntarily looking at Krell. She looked back at Anna. “Can she find a mate away from the mountains?”

Anna grinned and drew the Sylph close, ruffling her hair. Celleste giggled. “Certainly,” Anna muttered softly. “Most any male will do, so she told me. You see, all Sylphs are female, so they mate with other species. They cannot relate to male energy at all, which is why they are so frightened of them.”

“I had no idea.” Alloria smiled in spite of herself. “That’s fascinating.”

Celleste got up on her knees again, between them, looking abashed. “Enough, let’s please not speak of it anymore.” She fingered the chain. “If we can’t cut this off, it doesn’t matter.”

“As you wish.” Anna kissed the Sylph’s cheek. “Krell, would you see if you can remove this chain from Celleste’s neck?”

Krell set down the blanket he had just pulled from his pack and looked up. “My pleasure.” He slid from the bench and loomed in front of them, kneeling on the deck. Celleste whimpered and scooted back into Anna.

The stricken look on Krell’s face almost made Alloria laugh.

“It’s all right,” Anna said to him, smiling, “she’s just skittish.”

“I’m sorry,” Celleste said timidly. “You moved so fast it scared me.” She sat back up and held the chain. “See, it has no clasps.”

Krell leaned forward—slowly—and looked at the chain. “Do you have some light?” He looked to Alloria.

“Of course,” she said. Her pack was by her feet. As Alloria leaned down and fished out her pendant light, Krell turned toward Kian.

“Let me see that magic dagger.”

As Alloria came up with the light, she saw Krell nonchalantly snatch the dagger from the air after Kian tossed it to him. She unwrapped the cloth from the pendant, and light filled the boat.

“Now, turn your head.” Krell motioned with his hand.

Celleste looked straight at Alloria, closed her eyes, and they clutched hands.

“Hold still,” Krell said, and Anna leaned over and held the Sylph to her body. Krell grabbed the chain with one hand, stretching a section between his fingers, then carefully placed the dagger’s blade against it.

Alloria noticed Krell’s muscles tense around his neck and jaw. The biceps on his arm bulged, and his forearm shook lightly. One moment. Two moments. Then there was a soft red flash. Krell held the broken chain in his hand. “There.” He scowled at it. He scooted back to his seat on the side bench and tossed the dagger back to Kian.

Celleste put her hands to her neck. “Hooray!” she smiled. “Thank you, Krell.”

Krell smiled back. “You’re welcome.” He held up the chain. “What

do you want to do with this?”

“I don’t want it.” Celleste shook her head.

“Perhaps we’ll have time to study it later. I’ll put it with that magically sealed book Krell found in Dreuth-sur’s trunk,” Alloria said, reaching for it.

“So,” Krell said. “I was thinking, we should continue on to Gowra, where we can pick up some supplies.”

“Then what?” Alloria asked.

“Well, I’m interested in learning more of these knights from Baeza, but it would mean going into a potential war zone, and one not known for its friendliness to Elves.”

Alloria looked Krell firmly in the eye. “I am intrigued, as well.”

“Kian?” Krell asked.

“If they’ve come from the other side of the world to fight the Demons, then I’m all for meeting them. Besides, we have valuable information that needs to be passed along to any capable ally.”

“Yes, of course: the gem and that Dragon. Nagrek? Dohr?”

“I’m with you,” Nagrek said.

“Me, uh, too,” Dohr agreed.

“Anna?”

Anna looked down at Celleste. “I’ll never leave you, no matter what,” the Sylph said.

“I think we’re in agreement,” Anna said. “First, it’s Gowra for supplies.”

“Then, it’s onto Killmeville,” Alloria said to Krell.

“Yes, Killmeville.”

*“If people are free, they will ever be unequal.
Therefore, freedom is the root of injustice.”*

*—Vlockor, Demon Lord of the Nine Hells,
Meditations on Social Justice.*

CHAPTER 18

THE NINTH HELLFIRE GEM

Fortress Aagaard. Kripa had been here before, but never with such pomp. He approached from the broad back of a Beastspawn, flying hundreds of yards above the ground. Around him squadrons of Beastspawn carried Soldier Demons. Wizard Demons flew by the score under the power of their own wings. Dozens of Pit Beasts filled the air above, below, and about him, as well as seven of the mighty Pit Fiends. One of those, Overlord Bahrick, flew twenty yards astern of Kripa. Two Archfiends also flew with them: Draakvaar and Balezaark.

Draakvaar was out in front, a monstrous red-scaled presence in the sky. He was no less than fifty feet from head to foot, his wings spanning twice that distance. Thick and relatively short reptile legs hung like crooked stumps beneath his body as his lengthy flat-bottomed tail sailed about, riding on the wind. His long arms lay tucked against his sides, the swordlike talons on each claw occasionally glittering in the sunlight. Atop his rangy neck sat an enormous reptilian head that restlessly swiveled about, scrutinizing everything. Horns the size of elephant tusks crowned Draakvaar’s head.

The other Archfiend, Balezaark, was not so imposing, though that could only be said in comparison to something so prodigious and hideous as Draakvaar. Balezaark was twelve feet from head to foot and, unlike Draakvaar—whose body was completely unadorned—Balezaark was finely dressed in purple and blue quilted-silk robes. His large head and fat face were similar in structure to a Human’s, but with a distinctively reptilian brow and jawline. Though he had wings, he flew on a giant beast similar to the Beastspawn, but larger. While Balezaark had

spent most of the journey in the middle of this airborne corps, as they approached the fortress he came to the fore.

Fortress Aagaard was a vast and thickly walled structure built from polished black granite. It was more than a mile and a half long from north to south and varied in width, from about a mile and a quarter at the north end, to a convex mile at the south end. Two large rivers flowed from the north and ran east and west of Aagaard, coming together in deep, contained channels at its south end. The sheer, crenellated walls ranged between one hundred and one hundred fifty feet high. Within them were ten main military and governmental structures, each rising higher than the walls themselves. At the south end a thick cylindrical tower rose three hundred and fifty feet into the air. A similar tower at the north was now a pile of rubble, though reconstruction was under way. North of the fortress, and between the rivers, multi-story buildings occupied several square miles. Transport ships and fishing boats choked the rivers. Vlockor's legions were insatiable.

Draakvaar and Balezaark led the squadron of Demons toward the south end of the fortress. Between the convex wall and the confluence of the rivers, a beautifully landscaped park bloomed. Fruit-bearing trees grew in neat rows, as well as berry bushes and grape vines. Sculpted hedges bordered various plots of vegetation. Starting from the gates of the fortress, an immaculate roadway of fitted white flagstones stretched all the way to the confluence of the rivers, nearly a mile to the south. Lining the sixty-foot-wide roadway were hundreds of statues—stone, marble, bronze, copper, silver, and even gold—of men, women, Elves, animals, and monsters. Dozens of stone ponds were filled with clear water and fish in all the colors of the rainbow. Standing along the sides of the roadway were thousands of troops. Soldiers of various species stood ordered in rows, ten deep, wearing pristine uniforms.

Kripa was awed by the scale and martial splendor of it all. As he swooped in on his Beastspawn, he surveyed the soldiers lining the roadway. There were Humans, Orcs, Goblins, Hobgoblins, Gnolls, even small contingents of fallen Dwarves and Elves. Standing taller than the rest were the Ogres, Trolls, and Bugbears. When Kripa landed right behind Draakvaar and Balezaark—Overlord Bahrack at his side—he saw small contingents of Lizard Men and Minotaur to either side. No

matter the race, they stood rigidly at attention. Kripa was exhilarated. They had been turned out in regimental dress to honor him.

The fortress was just two hundred feet away, its walls looming above them. Still more soldiers could be seen atop the battlements. Kripa walked his Beastspawn forward behind the two Archfiends as the rest of the Demons landed behind. The gates to the fortress, each seventy feet tall and forty feet wide, stood open. The top of the gate was arched, and as Kripa began to walk beneath it he could see two inner gates drawn up into the equally massive superstructure above. One was made of iron bars with giant spikes pointing down, and the other was solid metal. Beyond them was an open courtyard. Had King Newwen of Aagaard resisted Vlockor, Kripa thought, this fortress would not have fallen except at a terrible cost in blood and treasure.

The courtyard was two hundred yards long and about one hundred yards wide. Lined on all sides with stone buildings—much like fortresses in and of themselves—they rose over one hundred feet on either side, complete with battlements and parapets. The end of the courtyard was marked by the giant architecture supporting the south tower. By itself, that tower was a magnificent castle. In the courtyard, ranks of Soldier Demons and Wizard Demons stood at attention, along with hundreds of Kreen warriors.

The Kreen were a unique species of mantis. They stood six to eight feet tall and eight to ten feet long, walking on four legs and able to wield weapons with four arms. Insect in every way, they were not known for their intelligence, but rather for their fighting skills. The sight of them made Kripa uneasy. If they had existed in this world prior to Vlockor and his Demon armies, Kripa had never heard of it. Who was to say what went on behind their multifaceted eyes?

In the center of the courtyard was a large fountain. Lounging around its oval retaining wall, on plinths, amidst decorative columns and caryatids, were dozens of insufficiently attired slave women, both Human and Elven.

As the two Archfiends went around opposite sides of the pond, the creature upon which Balezaark was riding suddenly lashed out, its head whipping toward the pond on a long neck. With one bite it snatched up an Elf from between two columns. Most of the women flinched, but none fled, as the beast began to chew. The sound of

crunching bones and blood splattering on stone disgusted Kripa. *These brazen monsters are given too much license*, he thought. The procession continued on as though nothing had happened. Soon, only the sound of claws loudly clicking against stone could be heard.

Kripa was beyond the fountain now and nearing the large iron gates to the South Tower. In front of the gates was a spacious terrace and a flight of twelve steps. The two Archfiends stopped. Kripa looked up at the stupendous tower soaring into the mid-afternoon sky. The top was nearly one hundred feet in diameter, but it was supported by ever larger sections below.

The cast iron doors began to swing open—they were each at least thirty feet tall, twenty feet wide, and two feet thick. Standing there in the archway was the Pit Fiend Spyrus.

“Welcome, Lord Balezaark, Lord Draakvaar.” The words rolled out of his monstrous mouth with a sound akin to the grinding of boulders. The Pit Fiend stood eight and a half feet tall and five feet wide. With tree trunks for legs, it looked immovable as he stood there, draped in a red robe that matched his crimson scales. Fangs and talons glistened and his eyes burned between spiral horns. “Welcome, Overlord Bahrack,” he continued, “Na’gorth of the Pit, welcome. And, of course, a special welcome to you, Kripa. Lord Vlockor invites you into the Great Hall.”

Balezaark dismounted from his beast and began climbing the steps. Draakvaar followed, taking several steps at a time. Dismounting from his Beastspawn, Kripa went forward with Overlord Bahrack. In front of them Draakvaar had to stoop through the gateway.

As Kripa followed, he saw a magnificent hall with thick gilded columns supporting a vaulted ceiling—one just high enough to allow Draakvaar to stand. The hall was more than two hundred feet wide and three hundred long. About two dozen Pit Beasts were lined up between the columns on either side, and Kripa counted six Pit Fiends among them. Censers emitting vapors of brimstone were in sconces on the walls—but *then the Demons prefer it that way*, Kripa thought. *The acrid haze makes them feel at home.*

At the back of the hall, a dais was raised ten feet above the floor. On the dais sat a golden throne emblazoned with rubies and diamonds. Upon it was Lord Vlockor, Demon Lord of the Nine Hells.

Kripa had seen him once before when he had become Hellsworn. He had been one of several kneeling before the Great Lord of Hell, swearing allegiance, and feeling Vlockor's magic course through them, binding them to their oaths and granting them some minor demonic powers. Kripa had grown small horns, which helped in channeling magical energies; his skin had toughened and coarsened, giving him some of a Demon's resistance to fire; his nails had lengthened and hardened, giving him talons; his muscles had grown, giving him an accession of demonic strength; and his manhood had increased, giving him more size and potency, and a Demon's sexual appetite.

As he now walked across the smooth marble floor, Kripa felt his heart beating ponderously in his chest. His mind went blank as he found himself standing before the dais. He was all alone where he stood; the two Archfiends and Overlord Bahrick were behind him now. Instead of the unmixed elation he believed would attend this moment, he also felt trepidation.

"Bring me the gem," Vlockor said. He sounded calm and relaxed; his manner was civilized.

As Kripa started up the steps, it occurred to him that the end of the world was just moments away. With this ninth and final Hellfire Gem Vlockor would be able to completely dissolve the barrier between Hell and Earth, bringing forth the entire population of Hell, and enabling Vlockor to draw upon the full amplitude of the source of his magic: the Satanic force within the universe. Every living being would be subject to his will, just as Kripa already was. Of course, for Kripa this was all to be desired, for he would be one of the privileged, having his own domain to lord over, with subjects in his thrall, and perhaps a fortress not unlike this one.

Kripa nevertheless felt fear mastering him as he took the final step onto the dais. Then—for just an instant—a thought flashed through his mind: Rather than Hell on Earth, wouldn't it be better to be with that golden-haired barbarian girl—free to let her teach him about love, goodness, compassion, and mercy? Remembering where he was, the thought brought panic. As adrenaline poured into his bloodstream, he ruthlessly suppressed the thought, intensely concentrating on its opposite: Oh, yes! Once there was Hell on Earth, he would track her down and teach her about subservience, servitude, and slavery—all to

his every whim and desire. He was relieved to note the sadistic thought had steadied him.

Kripa reached into his robe pocket and withdrew the gem. It was still wrapped in the girl's dress. He shook himself, appalled because the thought of her and her goodness would not go away. Then he unfolded the fabric, being careful not to touch the gem, for it burned with a soul-awakening vibration, as it had ever since the Elves had attacked back at the Orc lair. Actually, Kripa realized for the first time, he had not been able to touch the gem since he had rejected the opportunity to join Anna in goodness.

"The Ninth Hellfire Gem," Vlockor said magisterially. "At last."

Kripa took a step forward, holding it out, the fabric of the dress covering his hands and wrists.

"So, Kripa." Vlockor looked down from his throne with a grin. "A man of low birth, you have nevertheless acquitted yourself with distinction. Your hard work on behalf of the New World Order will be rewarded. Soon, all will have a confirmed livelihood in the collective, giving meaning and worth to every citizen's life. Soon, all races will cooperate in an orderly planetary society, hence one wholly free of bigotry. With the rise of a final power, war shall no more be seen on the land, there to litter the Earth with corpses, to waste the wealth of nations, and to bereave the women and children of the dead. Soon the reasoned decisions of judges and civil servants, not mercantile prowess or birth right, will be the basis of the allocation of scarce world resources. No longer will the business elites be allowed to grow fat on the labor of the poor. The wealth of society will be harnessed to support the health and productivity of its citizens. And in defense of the inalienable right to well being, a right that our government is organized to vindicate, the citizenry will be empowered to avoid senility, enfeeblement, and incurable disease—conditions that long have offered a callous affront to their dignity.

"In this New Order, society shall shoulder, not shirk, its duty to its children. No longer will the failings of the parents be visited upon them; no longer will the children of the elite have special advantages. Rather, all shall be raised and nurtured through a universal system of education that will administer to each an equal chance to fulfill their assessed potential.

“The paramount economic and social rights of the individual have ever been the cause of injustice, while the right of different cultures, creeds, and species to be free from defamation has never been accorded the preeminence that it deserves. These errors will be rectified.

“We will build a better world, and you, Kripa, will be an important part of it thanks to your dedication and strong will. Now, let us begin.”

Vlockor rose from his throne and stepped down to the dais. Kripa felt his knees go weak but managed to lock them before he fell. By comparison to the other Demons, Vlockor’s outward appearance was not nearly as impressive. Nevertheless, an awesome magnetism about him left no doubt as to who was dominant.

Vlockor stood nine feet tall and was thin compared with the Pit Fiends, who were of similar height but far larger in bulk and mass. Vlockor’s frame was quite humanoid, save that his arms were disproportionately longer and his hands disproportionately bigger. As for his wings, they too were relatively small compared with those of the other Demons; Kripa could barely tell that they were even there, folded as they were behind his back. Vlockor’s pale red skin was smooth, in contrast to every other Demon’s scaled or rough hides. His face was humanoid as well, despite his large, pointed ears. The horns on his head curved up, less than a foot in length, sticking through a mass of fine, scarlet hair. Vlockor’s eyes shone with a brilliant intensity—red, orange, purple, and yellow all at once, the colors in distinct circular bands. He wore a long dark robe that extended to his boots.

Kripa held the gem higher as Vlockor stepped forward. The Demon Lord’s oversized red hand stretched out to retrieve it from the fabric of the dress in Kripa’s hands. Sizzling and popping noises erupted as Vlockor’s hand closed around the gem. Kripa noticed a perceptible tremor in the Demon Lord’s arm, and saw smoke emerging from the fingers. A minute passed. Silence reigned in the Great Hall. Suddenly the gem fell and clattered loudly against the green marble of the dais. Smoke billowed from Vlockor’s open palm, and Kripa sensed rage building within the Demon Lord even though his face looked calm. The distinct smell of charred flesh reached Kripa’s nose.

“This vibration beset the gem when Elves attacked the Orc lair, you said?” Vlockor’s voice was blandly inquisitive—as though nothing

at all was amiss.

Kripa bowed his head, trying not to shake. “Yes, my Lord.”

“Let me see.” Vlockor’s voice drew Kripa’s eyes up. “Open your mind and reveal what you saw.” Kripa knew it was not a request.

Vlockor’s hand extended out toward Kripa, and he felt the Demon’s magic fall like a cataract of power on the crown of his head. Compliant, he registered clearly the command for him to remember when the gem had begun to vibrate. The memory sprang forth and Kripa saw himself standing in the earthen room of the Orc lair, cradling the Hellfire Gem in his hands and salivating over the power it would bring him. Then suddenly there was Anna, telling him that she loved him. The recollection of what transpired replayed in full detail. The guilt and remorse he had felt at his wickedness consumed him again. The resplendent beauty of goodness, of God, beckoned—again. Love and joy were no more than a choice of free will away. All he had to do was leave behind his wickedness, his evil—which he greatly desired to do, for it sickened him.

As the memory played forward, though, he saw again how the evil within had obscured his soul and driven him back to darkness. It was at that point the gem in his hands had burned him.

His memories then turned further back in time under the prodding of Vlockor’s will.

He relived the sack of the Human village and the finding of the gem, then his flight with it as Elves counterattacked. Subsequent recollections ensued sequentially. Soon he was reliving the rape of Anna. Next, he saw himself again as he held the gem while Anna sat in surreal splendor and matchless grace on the bed. Vlockor advanced the memory to its end once more, and Kripa realized now that it was Anna, not Elves, who had infected the gem with this persistent vibration.

Vlockor’s magic withdrew from his mind, and Kripa found himself again in control of his thoughts. He imagined that Vlockor would now kill him. It was his fault the gem was enchanted by Anna.

When he finally spoke, Vlockor sounded reflective. “You did well, Kripa, to have resisted her spell. I know this girl; a lesser Demon would have succumbed.”

Kripa was dumbfounded. First, that he was still alive; second, that he had received praise for what he thought would be the forfeit of his

life; and third, that Vlockor knew Anna. “I don’t understand,” he said tentatively.

“Of course you don’t.” Vlockor spoke as though this were all expected, dismissively waving the back of his hand toward the ceiling. “This girl and I have a history, one that is thousands of years old. But this time she has come too late. She is young and her powers are yet weak.” Vlockor spoke with a relaxed confidence, then pulled a scroll from his pocket. He unrolled it and a flash of red light streamed from his eyes onto the parchment. “Spyrus!” he called, and in seconds the Pit Fiend was up on the dais.

“Yes, my Lord?”

Vlockor turned the scroll around. Pictured on it was the perfect likeness of Anna as she sat on the bed in that dank chamber after being raped. “This girl is Arwen Saharta. Make copies of this; we will be directing our attention toward capturing her.”

“But, my Lord, Arwen Saharta? How is this possible?” Spyrus asked in astonishment as he took the parchment.

“It is possible because it is, you fool!” The rage that erupted with Vlockor’s voice seemed to fill the Great Hall to the rafters. The audience of notables shifted uneasily, and Kripa nearly stumbled backward down the steps.

“Of course, my Lord,” Spyrus sputtered.

“For now, I want her alive,” he said, eerily resuming his previous poise. “Kripa.”

Kripa composed himself as best he could. “Yes, my Lord?”

“You located and recovered the ninth and final Hellfire Gem. And, unlike others who met their doom in the Druunhaelen Mountains, you brought it here where it belongs. You have shown cleverness, determination, and an ability to resist the siren allure of Arwen Saharta. You have done well, and I sense your magic growing stronger. You shall be promoted to Overlord status. You will act as Chief of Operations in the search for Arwen, and you will answer only to Overlord Bahrack and his superiors. Balezaark, you will return to Wingard to collect your airborne command, then join with the Death Legion. Draakvaar, you, too, will go with the Death Legion.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“Kripa,” Vlockor continued, “step forward and accept your pro-

motion.”

Kripa swallowed hard. “Yes, my Lord.” He stepped forward.

Vlockor’s arm came out and his hand rested upon Kripa’s head. The magic that ensued jolted every fiber of his body.

“Surrender your will to me.” Vlockor’s voice echoed in his brain.

“I surrender, my Lord,” Kripa said, not knowing if he said it or merely thought it.

“Swear anew your fealty and allegiance to me, Lord of Hell.”

“I swear fealty and allegiance to my Lord Vlockor, Lord of Hell.”

Kripa felt the magic constricting him, coiling about his spine and his brain. Then he felt pain. Great and suffocating pain. It existed everywhere at once and slammed through him in pulverizing waves. When it ended, Kripa was stunned to find himself still among the living. He was standing in front of Vlockor, though Vlockor seemed to have shrunk a little. Then he realized it was he who had become taller. Flexing his arm, he realized that he was also stronger. Just as quickly he noticed that the flows of wizardry magic looked far brighter and deeper in his mind’s eye than ever before. Finally, feeling atop his head, he found that his stubby horns had grown to at least six inches.

“I have enhanced your magical abilities, Overlord Kripa,” Vlockor said. “Few denizens of this Earth have ever achieved such a status. You are to be commended.”

“Thank you, my Lord.” Kripa bowed his head, pride brimming within him. “I will serve you well.”

“Yes, you will. Now, Spyrus here will take you to our library of magic. You will find there much that will complement your new magic powers. Bahricks, have your squadron prepared to leave tonight.”

“Yes, my Lord,” the Overlord said.

“I will brief you all then.” Vlockor scooped up the Hellfire Gem with a box he produced out of nowhere, then strode away behind the throne and through a doorway there.

* * *

Alloria was perched astern, legs crossed and back supported against the boat’s transom as it swayed gently in the river. With a notebook in her lap, she was engrossed in the intricate formulae of her Identify

spell. In her left hand was one of the three magic rings from the tomb of King Riordanall, and she probed it with the divination and carefully crafted evocation magic that her spell provided. She was oblivious to everything else. Every twenty or thirty seconds, her spell revealed yet another of the magic symbols programmed into the ring. One by one, she wrote them down, the gallery of evening stars providing sufficient light.

This was the second of the three rings. On the first, she had expended several hours drawing out its ciphers, a task completed earlier in the day as they traveled down the Druun from Thisbee. Deducing their overall effect was a task for another day. Now she was no more than an hour from completing her work deciphering the second ring. Already she had filled more than three pages with magic symbols. They would tell the story of the ring's power. She was halfway through the fourth page when she began to lose control of her spell.

It started with a wild fluctuation in the divination magic, a surge that nearly burned out her spell. Just as suddenly, however, it waned, as though the magic was redirected by a powerful force. Alloria found it took all her concentration to keep her spell from unraveling. As she struggled to maintain it, she felt another surge, and then it too waned.

Alloria worried about losing her spell. It would take hours to cast another and advance to the same place in the ring's programming. That worry, however, faded as she began to contemplate the implications of those surges: Another magic was at work. Letting go of her spell, she opened her eyes and looked around. Kian was at the front of the boat, rowing. Dohr and Nagrek were at the middle bench, both resting against either side of the boat with their heads lolled forward in sleep. Krell lay in the back, his feet by the middle bench and his head just a foot away from where Alloria sat near the rudder. Anna and Celleste slept next to Krell, the Sylph snuggled in close to Anna. All about, everything was quiet. Starlight glistened on the water, framed by the dark outlines of the trees that lined either shore.

"What's wrong?" Kian asked, the oars he was rowing trailing in the water.

"I'm not sure." Alloria spoke softly, then calmed her mind and sought for harmony with God, gateway to the sorcery magic. *Dear God*, she started, a short prayer to focus her thoughts, *I look to Your wisdom*,

love, and boundless joy, in the limitless power of Your will, and ask that I see what You see, feel what You feel, and do as You would have me do.

She repeated the prayer, feeling fervently every word in her heart and quietly rejoicing in the intimacy of God's omnipresence. A moment later she felt the familiar vibration rise up her spine and then The Source opened before her: a soft blue light visible to her inner eye at the center of her forehead. Forming a Detect Magic spell in her mind, conceptualizing its functions and effects, she then drew upon The Source—and the sorcery magic of God's will responded, acting in harmony with her thoughts, and producing a functioning spell.

Opening her eyes, she was able to see clearly all eight fields of magic as they flowed seamlessly in ephemeral waves through the air, the constituent elements of both the wizardry and sorcery magics. Each of the fields appeared to her as a different color, soft and translucent, all eight of them existing everywhere simultaneously and individually visible only with profound concentration and focus. She was also able to see the workings of a wizardry spell. It was everywhere she looked, drawing heavily on the divination field, and less so on the conjuration field. While the fields it drew upon placed it in a particular spell category, the specific purpose of it was, nevertheless, beyond her ability to discern. That it was a stupendously powerful spell, though, was obtrusively apparent. In all directions, more divination and conjuration magic were being drawn from each square yard of space than she could ever hope to summon herself.

"Well..." Kian prodded.

Alloria blinked, refocusing the magic fields to the background of her vision. "There's a spell at work about us." She spoke softly, reflectively. "I believe it could be some sort of detection or location spell, but it could also be any number of other things that are beyond my ken. It's immensely powerful, whatever it is."

"Are we in danger?"

"I don't know. Not presently," she said tentatively. "I think."

"Could someone from Thisbee be looking for us? Could a spell like this come from there?"

"I suppose..." Alloria's voice trailed off as she wondered if there was something more she could or should do. If she hadn't been operating her Identify spell, she would not have been aware of this other

spell at work about them. Which made her think: Was this other spell actually directed at them or just operating generally in this area?

Focusing on the magic fields until they again appeared superimposed upon her field of vision, she studied the magic as far out as she could see. As their boat floated downstream she could see that the threads of magic being drawn from the divination and conjuration fields grew stronger as they approached, then weakened as they passed. It was definitely reacting to their presence. What else it was doing was a mystery.

“What’s going on?” It was Krell’s voice, somewhat thick with sleep, but engaged nonetheless.

“Lori says there’s a magic spell at work about us,” Kian told him. “She’s trying to determine what it is.”

Krell snorted in disgust.

Just then, Alloria noticed that above them threads of magic were being drawn from the alteration field as well. Whether it had just started, or whether she had simply failed to notice it earlier, she did not know. However, as she watched further she could see that the phenomenon was intensifying.

“What is it?” Krell asked.

Alloria knew the worry on her face must be evident. Alteration magic, especially in conjunction with conjuration magic, could be very dangerous. She was about to suggest they get to shore when, all of a sudden, the draw on all three fields faded until it was barely perceptible, and then abruptly winked out.

“What the...” Krell’s voice trailed off.

“...now that I see,” Kian said almost simultaneously.

Looking down, Alloria noticed what had drawn their attention. A soft, translucent light enveloped Anna. It was expanding, and it soon enveloped Celleste as well, both of them still snuggled together in sleep. Alloria could not detect the faintest hint of magic in use.

“Lori?” Kian queried.

“I don’t know,” she said. “It’s not magic. And whatever magic was about us seems to have been checked or withdrawn.” Then, in silence, she watched as the light slowly expanded to envelope Krell, and then herself. She sucked in her breath as the light overcame her. At that instant, Alloria perceived enormous amounts of abjuration magic being

drawn and fed into the light.

“What?” Kian and Krell both asked in unison.

Alloria smiled as she began to arrive at a partial understanding of what was happening. Abjuration magic, she knew, was what shield and protection spells were made from. “My best guess,” she looked at Krell and then Kian in turn as the light expanded farther to envelope Dohr and Nagrek, “is that we are now quite safe.”

* * *

Vlockor sat at his desk in the study of the former King of Aagaard. Several hours had passed since Kripa’s interrogation, but he still seethed with rage. *So close!* he anguished. Being unable to hold the gem, much less break the spell upon it and use it, was infuriating to the point of madness. Staying calm in the Great Hall had taken all his willpower. Nothing could defeat his magic, yet before all to see he had been defeated. Every assault of his magic had failed to dislodge that treacherous vibration from the Hellfire Gem—which was no less than what he expected when he learned it was Arwen Saharta’s work. Though he had wanted to smash Kripa for allowing that witch near the gem, his better judgment had prevailed. Clearly, Arwen could have spoiled the gem at any time. She was playing a different game, and Kripa had done well to thwart her charm and escape with the gem. Still, it had been a jarring twist. At this very moment, Hell should reign on Earth. Instead, he was left glowering in frustration, trying to puzzle out how to gain control of the Ninth Hellfire Gem.

Of course, Arwen’s spell could be undone. No spell was impregnable. But how long would it take? And what kind of magic would he need to accomplish it? What if his plans were more than just a little delayed. What was Arwen’s end game?

He would just have to figure it out. Vlockor stood and walked out onto the open terrace. He was high in the south tower, the whole black monolith of Fortress Aagaard below him. To the east, the shadowy figures of the airborne battalion of the Death Legion receded as they flew away into the night sky. *Yes, my dear Arwen,* he said to himself, *somehow you have returned. But how can you hope to stop me this time? I already have all nine gems, with nothing left but to unravel a single spell. So, what will you do?*

Where can you go? Where are your armies? You have already failed, Arwen. My legions will hunt you down. You have no more than ten days before they are upon you. Do you think that a trifling spell upon the gem can stop me? Not even the Great Barrier itself could stop me, and your magic is no stronger than it. Just as I manipulated Earthlings to defeat the Barrier, so, too, will I defeat your spell. And, of course, there is always one person who can remove your spell: you, Arwen. When we meet this time, it will be to my undying pleasure. You should not have returned. Hell on Earth is inevitable.

The Death Legion's airborne battalion was now completely out of sight, even to Vlockor's powerful eyes. He turned and went back to his study. There was work to be done.

Inside, Vlockor stood before his scrying mirror, channeling enormous amounts of divination, conjuration, and alteration magic into it. He tried again to locate Arwen, this time searching only for reverberations of her presence. Earlier he had found her, but she shielded herself before he could lock on to her location. Somewhere just east of the Druunhaelen Mountains was all he had gotten.

You cannot hide from me, Arwen, Vlockor said to himself after an hour of work had yielded further results: She had been in a small town by the Druun river—there was magic used there that could only be hers.

Vlockor then set about writing a spell, one that might aid in manipulating a priest's sorcery magic. Since it would be days before Arwen could be captured, even if he knew exactly where she was, he was not going to wait idly for that to happen. With or without her capture, Hell on Earth was coming.

* * *

When Anaiyailla woke it was early in the morning. Her companions were already awake. Looking over the prow of their boat, she saw dozens of other boats in the river and a large town ahead. "Gowra?" she asked.

"Yes, we're here," Lori said, sitting right next to her in the back of the boat. "We thought you might never wake."

Anaiyailla took a deep breath, recalling dreams so vivid and substantive they seemed indistinguishable from actual memories. "Yes," she said, "I had an interesting night."

“I can imagine.” Lori placed a hand on her shoulder. “I hope you tell us about it.”

“It all seemed so real,” she started, her voice reflective as she sifted through the various images and memories from her dreams. Faces were there of people she had never known, yet their features, personalities, and histories were so clear in her mind that she could not imagine them being anything but authentic memories of actual people. Then there were the circumstances in which these people appeared, ranging from peaceful and joyous, like in the course of preaching the truth of God among those in need, to the horrific, as in the midst of awesome battles against legions of Demons. She could also recall herself in these dreams acting as someone she was not: magnificent in command, implacable, leading warriors and wizards into battle, and wielding indomitable power. One dream, though, stood out more than the rest....

“I saw Vlockor last night. He had the Ninth Hellfire Gem, and he was looking for me.”

APPENDIX A

GLOSSARY

Aagaard: This massive black fortress was the capital of the largest Human kingdom in Erebia. It fell to Vlockor's armies without a fight, and now serves as the Demon Lord's base of operations.

Alloria (Lori): An Elven sorceress and wizardess, she flees her home in Anjali when Vlockor's Demons invade and conquer it in their search for the Ninth Hellfire Gem. Her resolve to find a way to stop the Demon Lord leads her to Krell's village in the Druunhaelen mountains, where she finds a mission and allies worthy of her loyalty.

Anaiyaila (Anna): Krell's younger sister, a vibrantly beautiful woman with an enchanting voice, she brings to the fight one thing the Demon Lord cannot defeat: the love and light of God, a force beyond Vlockor's ability to thwart or taint. And, though unaware of it herself, it is her prayers that wake the Dragon Krishna and send him into the skies near her village.

Anastas Mikoyan: A half-Elf, half-Human, wizard in the Baezan military and good friend of Darius, Anastas fights the Demon armies even though he does not share the faith in God of his countrymen. While proficient in wizardry magic, his hopes rest with the more powerful sorcery magic—as yet unscientifically employed by the priests and clerics—for he believes that only through its mastery can the Demon Lord be stopped.

Anduihil (Andy): Alloria's younger brother, Andy loses his life in the Druunhaelen Mountains defending her.

Anjali: This Elven city north of the Dykonor Mountains in eastern Erebia was the home of Alloria and Anduihil. It fell to an airborne squadron of Demons shortly after the Ninth Hellfire Gem arrived there.

Archfiend: The Archfiend is the most powerful of all Demons. They possess genius-level intelligence and are powerful magicians. Their numbers are limited, and they range in shape and size from Human-like to gargantuan monsters.

Baeza: A continent on the other side of the world from Erebia, it is the homeland of the knights of Baeza. Baeza was invaded by Vlockor nearly 180 years before the events chronicled in this book, and about 20 years after the Demon Lord came through the Great Barrier and seized the first Hellfire Gem. Through 40 years of war, Vlockor battled disciplined and resourceful armies of the continent until he found there the second and third Hellfire Gems. He then left in search of the fourth gem, leaving a formidable army to finish conquering the mountainous northern region of the continent, a task at which it failed.

Beastspawn: A Beastspawn is the offspring of a Pit Beast crossed with a large mammal, usually a horse. It has large wings and a small innate magic that allows it to fly. Talons, sharp teeth, and a slightly reptilian look mirror those of a Pit Beast, but the Beastspawn usually has the fur and body structure of its mammalian parent.

Cellestillena (Celleste): A Sylph who befriends Anaiyailla, she becomes an ally of those trying to thwart Vlockor's efforts to find and retrieve the Ninth Hellfire Gem.

Chief Ogen: The first son of the Ogen clan lord, Tyrus Ogen. Chief Ogen travels with Kripa into the Druunhaelen Mountains, bringing along hundreds of warriors from his clan.

Darius De'Maakthorn: A Paladin of the Light and Captain in the Baezean military, Darius's faith in God guides and inspires him in the fight against evil. Darius is the last of an ancient order charged with the preservation of a talisman that once belonged to Saint Sevannah. (See Prologue.) Darius and his countrymen have come from the other side of the world in a desperate attempt to stop Vlockor from recovering the final gem.

Dragon: An ancient race from a bygone epoch, Dragons are so rare and prone to such long hibernations that most doubt they ever existed.

Dreuth-sur: One of the original Pit Demons Vlockor brought through the Great Barrier. He is arrogant and powerful, and despises Kripa for usurping what was rightfully his command: the mission into the Druunhaelen Mountains to recover the Ninth Hellfire Gem.

Druunhaelen Mountains: A vast forested wilderness in northern Erebia, the Druunhaelen Mountains are home to the Dragon Krishna, Krell and Anaiyailla, Cellestillena, Kripa—and the fabled Temple Mount.

Elf: Elves are shorter and slighter than Humans and are said to be related—the probable offspring of Humans and fairies. They are fair and comely, and tend to have long lives. Elves usually prefer to live in isolated communities in forested lands, but there are many who associate freely with Humans. The Elves and Humans of Baeza have formed an especially strong alliance, a bond necessitated by the need to defend against Vlockor's armies.

Erebia: A continent in the northern hemisphere of the world. The site of Vlockor's search for the Ninth Hellfire Gem.

The Great Barrier: A vibratory force that separates Earth from Hell, the Great Barrier is not visible in the physical world, nor does it have a conventional location; it simply keeps the physical manifestations of the two planes apart. Under certain conditions, or by mastery of abstruse magic spells, a person can see through the barrier into the other plane, and with greater refinement even breach the barrier, though almost invariably in a nar-

rowly circumscribed way. For a denizen of one plane to breach the barrier and cross into the other plane requires the assistance of a denizen of the latter. Further, except in the case where a Hellfire Gem is used, any such breach is only temporary.

Hellfire Gem: There are nine Hellfire Gems. Their physical manifestation on Earth occurs whenever the predominate consciousness of Earthsouls turn from the goodness, the spirituality, and the lucidity necessary to ensure the harmonic ascendancy of the Earth plane.

To an Earth-being, a Hellfire Gem can tantalize with the specter of infinite power, but only an Archfiend from the Nine Hells can actually use a Hellfire Gem. In possession of one, such a Demon can employ it to keep himself on the Earth side of the Great Barrier, as well as to draw from the Nine Hells a certain number of other Demons. Additional gems exponentially increase the number of Demons an Archfiend can draw through the barrier. With all nine gems the Great Barrier can be completely dissolved and all the denizens of the Nine Hells can be raised to the Earth plane. An Archfiend can also use a Hellfire Gem to bind willing Earth-beings into allegiance and obedience to his will. Those bound are known as “Hellsworn.”

The Hellfire Gems, existing as they do only as a result of a preponderation of the bad, or material consciousness on Earth, can be affected by proximity to the good or spiritual in varied and unpredictable ways.

Hellsworn: A Hellsworn person is an Earth-being who has voluntarily sworn an oath of allegiance to Hell in the presence of an Archfiend in possession of a Hellfire Gem. This oath overwhelms such a person with the collective consciousness of Hell. Functionally, the Hellsworn are reduced to mere ego-based consciousness and, so, are overrun by all the basest desires to which flesh is heir.

Kian: An experienced Elven warrior, Kian travels with Alloria after Demons invade and conquer his home city, Anjali.

Killmeville: This is a moderately sized, sprawling city located in the forested plains and hills between the Druunhaelen and Dykonor mountains. The city is home to various humanoid races that coexist through trade, despite mutual distrust and fear. There is no law save for the rules imposed by the local lords. It is to Killmeville that a small Baezean military unit has been detached to defeat those who would support Vlockor and to recruit those disposed to fight against him.

The Knights of Baeza: The only military force in the world to have held off Vlockor’s armies, the Knights of Baeza sail to Erebia in a desperate bid to stop the Demon Lord from acquiring the Ninth Hellfire Gem. They are an efficient and experienced fighting force, whose officer class is heavily composed of sorcerers and wizards.

Kreen: This monster resembles a mantis—only one six to eight feet tall. It can wield weapons in its clawed pincers, but is only semi-intelligent. In pitched battle, it is a fierce opponent. The Kreen is a race created by Vlockor's magic, adapted from an insect he found prowling the deserts of Eriqat—a continent across the eastern ocean from Erebia—when he crossed the Great Barrier 200 years ago.

Krell: Anaiyailla's older brother, Krell is a charismatic Human warrior possessing extraordinary strength and willpower. He lives within a small community deep in the Druunhaelen Mountains, far removed from the conflict enveloping the world—that is, until he finds himself in possession of the Ninth Hellfire Gem.

Kripa: A shrewd half-Orc wizard, Kripa's drive for glory leads him back to his birthplace in the Druunhaelen Mountains as a commander of an expeditionary force. His orders are to create a forward base of operations from which Vlockor's armies can project power and recapture the Ninth Hellfire Gem.

Krishna: An ancient golden Dragon of immense size and power, Krishna is drawn from a centuries-old slumber in his underground lair deep in the Druunhaelen Mountains. His excursion from that lair prevents the Ninth Hellfire Gem from being delivered to Vlockor—diverting it into the hands of Krell and his people.

Lalendren: This is the largest and grandest Elven city in all of Erebia. It is located in the western ranges of the Druunhaelen Mountains, just north of Crystal Lake. Lalendren acts as a beacon for those fleeing Vlockor's armies and has already withstood one assault by his Demons.

The Nine Hells: This is the home world of Vlockor and his Demon minions. It exists on a separate plane than Earth, yet both are closely related through the dualism of the two primary forces of the physical universe. As such, Earth and the Nine Hells are “out of phase” with each other, and kept separate by the Great Barrier. Of the two primary forces (think: good vs. bad, spiritual vs. material, or lucidity vs. delusion) it is, of course, the bad that was to be dominant in the Nine Hells and the good that was to be dominant on Earth. Neither, however, reigns supreme in its respective plane.

Oresis: A Human city located on the shores of the icy northern waters where the Knights of Baeza make their first landing in Erebia.

Orc: This race is distantly related to Humans and, in silhouette, an Orc could pass for a Human, but Orcs generally are less intelligent and tend toward baser and more materialistic lives. By any standard, even their own, Orcs are ugly. They usually have fangs, piglike noses, and sickly colored skin—orange or yellowish, or sometimes a dark green. Orcs have long faces, fat lips, and very coarse hair. They can often be found living in subterranean lairs, but

can also form urban communities and associate with Humans.

Paladin: A title given to a Baezean knight who has shown himself not only to be a formidable warrior, but to possess wisdom and charisma, and an ability to use sorcery magic.

Pit Beast: This Demon weighs anywhere from four hundred to two thousand pounds and can stand up to ten feet tall, though its preferred posture is on all fours. Its teeth, claws, and talons are like knives, and its forearms are long, strong, and dexterous. The Pit Beast's head is reptilian, like an alligator's, but with a shorter jaw and a much thicker cranium. Long curving horns protrude from the top of its head, and its eyes burn red to match its red-scaled body. Its wings help it to fly, aided by the monster's levitation magic. While the Pit Beast can cast many powerful spells, they are all innately generated, because it lacks the high intelligence needed to weave spells.

Pit Fiend: This Demon is the greatest and most terrible of all the Demons, short of the Archfiends themselves. The Pit Fiend stands seven to ten feet tall and weighs up to fifteen hundred pounds. They are humanoid in that they have two arms and two legs and stand upright, but the massiveness of their bodies and the profound differences in their biology puts them in a genus of their own. A Pit Fiend's head can have many forms, but always with a large mouth, sharp teeth, red-orange eyes, great spiral horns, and a countenance etched by every wicked desire. Large wings fold in around its red-scaled body when it is not in flight, and it sports talons the size of daggers. The Pit Fiend is highly intelligent and has mastery of numerous magic spells, both innate and personally crafted.

Soldier Demon: Lowest of the Demons, the Soldier Demon is not particularly intelligent. They are humanoid in form, typically standing six to seven feet in height and weighing two hundred twenty-five to three hundred pounds. They appear as large and grotesque male Humans with hideous orange-red skin, blackened and hardened by fire. Their features are obscenely exaggerated: noses are fat, large, hooked, or snoutlike; ears stick straight out, are very large or very small, or are long and pointed; chins and brows protrude; often, small horns jut from cheekbones, knees, elbows, shoulders, and knuckles; teeth are foul and fanged; lips are fat; muscles bulge monstrously; fingers are long and clawed; large horns protrude from the skull; and they have other similarly unsavory attributes.

Sorcery Magic: More powerful than wizardry magic, sorcery magic is seldom mastered and little understood. It exists everywhere and lies in all things, but, unlike the wizardry magic, it is not tethered to the astral or physical worlds. Sorcery magic usually draws from the causal (or ideational) realm and is, thus, subject to the laws thereof.

Within this realm are two broad forces, each of which vie in perfect du-

ality for the allegiance of the evolving consciousness. These two forces can be understood as good and bad, spiritual and material, or even lucidity and delusion. When a person's life force, or soul, vibrates in consonance with one of these two forces—most commonly with just an aspect thereof—it begins to become possible to access and use sorcery magic. However, accomplishing this harmony is problematic because the laws governing consciousness transcend the physical world.

Thus, attuning the vibratory state of one's soul with either of the two forces is not a matter of engaging in any specific actions or in mastery of any physical or natural phenomena. It lies in one's connection to the macrocosmic consciousness of the universe, within which operates the microcosm of each soul. In this manner, the sorcery magic is available to individuals who act congruently with a purpose of one of the two primary forces of the universe.

Religious disciplines offer the most reliable path toward this end, and the magic is commonly known as "The Source" to those for whom it is revealed. The extent to which a person can draw magic from The Source is dependent upon the person's attunement with the conscious force from which the magic arises, and the person's ability to advance an objective of that greater consciousness.

To use this magic, a person must learn to create spells, a process that can take little more than a thought when the desired effects of the spell in relation to the laws of the physical universe are well understood—and, as has been noted, when the spell is congruent with a purpose of the greater consciousness from which the magic is drawn.

The highest form of sorcery magic comes not from either of the two primal forces, which together comprise the ideational universe, but from the progenitor of the material, astral, and ideational aspects of those three planes: the Light of Creation. Only the greatest of saints have ever achieved harmony with this, the ultimate source of magic.

The adept in this highest form of sorcery magic learns to draw life force (or prana) from the ether and to cloister that energy in their cerebellum, heart, and deep spine. Some learn to draw so much prana that they appear to have a halo, blatant even to the uninitiated. Engorged with prana, the astral and causal faculties of the seven energy plexuses of the body (i.e., chakras) become manifest, including the ability to use the astral and causal counterparts of the five physical senses. For example, the astral faculty of sight allows an adept sorcerer to see the eight fields of magic. (See "Wizardry Magic.")

Sylph: A very rare creature, a Sylph lives far away from all organized communities or societies. They are always female, and stand just four feet tall when fully grown. Sylphs possess exquisite beauty, resembling small, but ex-

ceedingly fair, Elf maidens, and have clear dragonfly-like wings. Their innate magic powers protect them from the elements and predators, but they lose their magic as a mating mechanism, forcing them to reproduce so as to regain it. While Sylphs prefer to mate with Elves, with the union negotiated through the agency of Sylphs or Elf maidens, most any male of any of the human species (e.g., Elves, Orcs) will do. The offspring is always a female Sylph.

Wizard Demon: This Demon is Human-like in form, but it also has large wings that enable it to fly. The Wizard Demon is moderately intelligent, some of them more so. They are able to use wizardry magic, casting both spells that are innately generated and ones that they fashion themselves. Their features are much like the Soldier Demon, but less exaggerated. They are not as big or heavy, nor nearly so strong, and the redness of their skin stands out more because it lacks a black undertone.

Wizardry Magic: More commonly used, known, and understood than sorcery magic, wizardry magic is a natural force in nature. It permeates everything, existing in the air, amidst solid objects, and even the vacuum of space. Like a chemical reaction when certain molecules are mixed together, wizardry magic exhibits real effects when bent and molded in specific patterns. These patterns are known as spells, and there are eight known fields of primordial magic from which spells can be composed: Enchantment, Divination, Evocation, Illusion, Alteration, Conjunction, Abjuration, and Animation.

This magic is employed in differing ways. For some, such as Cellestillena and Dreuth-sur, the spell patterns are generated by their subconscious, like an expressed trait of their DNA. For others, such as Anastas and Alloria, the spell patterns must be generated consciously, a trick that requires the awakening of the astral senses, intelligence, patience, and much practice. To generate spell patterns in this way, a person must first learn to “see” the magic as it travels through the ether—an ability that is closely related to one’s perceptual intelligence. Once a person can “see” all eight fields of the magic, the next ability that must be learned is to harness “threads” of the magic, and to bend or fold those threads into the specific patterns desired, which requires strong force of will and deep concentration. And, of course, one must know in what patterns to bend and fold the magic for it to be of any use.

The process by which spells are created and then stored for later use is known as “imprinting.” An imprinted spell stays in a person’s mind until called forth and used—unless they are jarred into dissolution by some type of trauma.

APPENDIX B

A BRIEF TIMELINE OF THE CONFLICT

NOTE: The years are dated from the founding of the Baezean Church of the Light, which occurred several years after the defeat of Vlockor and his Demons at the Temple Mount, in the time of Arwen Saharta, Achea Artexerxes, Dirk Steyn, Thomas De'Maakthorn, Ronaldus Magnus, and other great saints, wizards, and warriors.

9250: A powerful fallen wizard, Ceci Dobyns, discovers a Hellfire Gem in the treasure room of his master, the aging and feeble King Asiano, who rules over the Kingdom of Babak in Eriqat. Dobyns, driven by dreams of exploiting the preternatural magic he senses in the gem, steals it and attempts to gain mastery over it.

9253: Ceci Dobyns' attempts to manipulate the magic of the Hellfire Gem led him straight to Hell, where he began communicating with Vlockor by means of an esoteric spell. When Vlockor convinces Dobyns that the magic of the gem can be his by opening a gate to Hell and casting a mindlink through the gem, Vlockor comes through to the Earth side of the Great Barrier and takes control of Dobyns' gate-spell through the mindlink. Overmatched, Dobyns kneels before Vlockor, offering up the Hellfire Gem and himself as Hellsworn. Then, taking control of the gem, Vlockor begins bringing other Demons through the Great Barrier. Dobyns recruits others of like mind in the Kingdom of Babak to become Hellsworn.

9254: Vlockor is able to discern with his powerful divination magic that the next nearest Hellfire Gem is approximately two to three thousand miles northeast in the neighboring continent of Baeza. Dobyns, meanwhile, assassinates King Asiano and assumes the kingship of Babak as Vlockor's puppet.

9255: In the desert sands north of Babak, Vlockor discovers a large insect species. His magic is able to transform it into an even larger, semi-intelligent, mantis warrior. Known as the Kreen, Vlockor begins breeding himself an army of these warriors.

9256: As Vlockor recruits Orc populations from the outlying areas of Babak, making Hellsworn of their leaders, he and Dobyns are forced to quell an uprising in the kingdom. Before the year is out, Orcs openly police Babak alongside troops loyal to Vlockor and Dobyns.

9258: Vlockor begins waging war on the surrounding kingdoms. He brings from the north the Kreen armies he had been secretly building, helping him achieve stunning victories.

9261: Vlockor has conquered half of Eriqat, and his armies are growing.

9268: Vlockor has conquered all of Eriqat except the Dwarven mountain fortress in Korshok.

9271: Vlockor begins his assault on Baeza, sending thousands of small ships and boats across the Straight of Rymar with his armies of Orcs, Goblins, Kreen, Demons, Humans and Dwarves—most of the latter two impressed. King Gabrielle (of Windsor province in southern Baeza), however, was not caught unaware, and his knights would have turned back the assault, save for the treachery of King Tulac (of Shantar Province) on his eastern border. King Tulac had made a deal with Vlockor in exchange for power and reward, and had become Hellsworn. His treason set King Gabrielle into retreat, costing the latter the greater part of his kingdom.

9272: Vlockor secures a toehold in Baeza. Controlling the two southernmost provinces of Windsor and Shantar, he begins scouring the landscape in search of the Second Hellfire Gem, using his magic to narrow the possibilities, and eventually determines it is north of the lands he controls.

9276: Vlockor's forces are engaged in furious warfare with the Baezean knights of the kings to his north, and are having great difficulty gaining ground against their disciplined and resourceful forces. Further confounding Vlockor is his inability to find any more potential traitors willing to become Hellsworn for the rewards he can offer.

9280: Feeling certain the Second Hellfire Gem must be in Basalari, the capital of the Kingdom of Greylock, Vlockor personally engages in battle to break the stalemate. Shortly after Basalari falls, the second gem is found in the rubble. Vlockor immediately uses the gem to bring more Demons through the Great Barrier, replacing the ones lost in war and then some, the power of the two gems together working exponentially (i.e., where one gem could draw through the barrier one Pit Fiend, two gems could draw four, and three gems could draw nine).

9292: Vlockor is in solid control of the southern third of Baeza as he continues to wage war, his magic having narrowed the location of the Third Hellfire Gem to a province in northern Baeza.

9332: After forty years of fierce warfare, Vlockor finally captures the Third Hellfire Gem, finding it in a squirrel's nest in a northern province. The Demon Lord has control of nearly two thirds of Baeza now, and he immediately begins using the third gem to draw from Hell hordes of fresh Demons, more than replacing the ones lost in war. Meanwhile, all the still-free northern provinces of Baeza have united under Lord Vahle, Supreme Commander of the Knights of Baeza, and his new bride, Queen Alballa of the Elves, the High Sorceress of the Light.

9333: Vlockor determines that the next nearest Hellfire Gem is somewhere thousands of miles off the eastern coast of Baeza, in the far-off con-

continent of Shirani. He sends scouts to investigate the defenses and politics of the land, while he commissions the construction of the ships—all the while persisting in his efforts to subdue all of Baeza.

9340: Vlockor sets sail to Shirani. He has not yet conquered all of Baeza—indeed, the mountainous northern provinces under Lord Vahle and Queen Alballa remain stoutly defended—but he is impatient to get the fourth gem. His fleet carries to Shirani over thirty-three hundred Demons, ten thousand Kreen, four thousand Orcs, and around one thousand others, such as Ogres, Hobgoblins, and Human knights that have chosen to become Hellsworn. In Baeza, he leaves behind roughly three thousand Demons along with myriad Kreen, Orcs, Goblins, Hobgoblins, and impressed Humans, Elves, and Dwarves. Vlockor delegates control of the army in both Eriqat and Baeza to Ceci Dobyns, who is charged with conquering the rest of Baeza. When Vlockor's ships arrive at Shirani, his expeditionary force promptly takes the port city of Chalfin. Thereafter, he sets about to conquer the continent as he searches for the Fourth Hellfire Gem.

9356: After sixteen years of conquest by both war and capitulation, Vlockor has defeated and enslaved most of Shirani, a land less sophisticated and organized than Baeza. The fourth gem is delivered to him by an Elven wizard, Endoloren Hosallor, who becomes Hellsworn rather than face persecution or death. Endoloren found the gem deep underground in the ancient tomb of a Dwarf king. Vlockor lost more than a thousand Demons and half his Kreen through the years of fighting in Shirani, but his ranks of Orcs and other monsters, as well as Humans, Dwarves, and Elves, have swelled with both volunteers and those impressed into service.

9358: Vlockor sets sail down the western coast of Shirani, toward the southern hemisphere of the world, where his magic has indicated the next nearest Hellfire Gem is located, somewhere in the continent of Sohaili. He leaves behind sufficient forces to hold Shirani while he uses the fourth gem to draw from Hell more and more Demons every day. Vlockor's arrival in Sohaili brings the fall of the great city of Aspinwell in the northern kingdom of Salmerin.

9366: Vlockor remains on the warpath, looking for the next gem. His armies stand at over forty-five hundred Demons, four thousand Kreen, as well as a swelling number of indigenous forces. However, the resistance here is fierce—the years of war in the adjoining continent of Shirani had inspired a robust and spirited military buildup for defense against his arrival. Vlockor sends for more Kreen from Eriqat.

9369: Dozens of large galleys and longships arrive with twenty thousand Kreen. Vlockor moves his headquarters to the newly conquered fortress of Aelseth as he continues to push southward.

9390: Vlockor has all of Sahaili subdued, but has yet to find the Fifth Hellfire Gem.

9401: The Fifth Hellfire Gem is found deep in the Earth of a snow-covered mountain peak.

9402: Vlockor's magic tells him the next nearest gem is thousands of miles east across the ocean from Sohaili, in a land called Ansaria. He wastes no time in setting sail, his fleet of large ships carrying over forty-six hundred Demons, fifteen thousand Kreen, and thousands of Ogres, Orcs and other loyal troops. Throughout the voyage, he continues to swell the ranks of his Demons by using the fifth gem to draw more and more through the Great Barrier. The fifth gem allows him to bring from Hell twenty-five times the number the first gem allowed.

9403: Vlockor's fleet arrives on the western shores of Ansaria, and his armies quickly lay waste to the port city of Eagan and the surrounding kingdom.

9405: Vlockor has control of southwest Ansaria. The Sixth Hellfire Gem is delivered to him by a young half-Elf wizard who had discovered it years ago during his travels, but had not known its significance until Vlockor's arrival. The young wizard then agonized over what to do with it, but ultimately chose the riches and privileges being offered by the Demon Lord.

9406: Vlockor uses the sixth gem to bolster the numbers of his Demons. His magic reveals to him that the next nearest gem is in Ansaria, somewhere in the northeast.

9407: Vlockor continues building up the Demon contingent in his armies. They now total seventeen thousand and are growing, as he moves to solidify control in southwest Ansaria. Though he has lost several thousand Kreen in warfare, the ranks of his other warriors have swelled with local Humans, Orcs, Goblins, and the like—both the volunteers and the conscripted. Meanwhile, the Seventh Hellfire Gem lies in the hands of King Aszorothe of the Herron Empire. Knowing of the Demon Lord's plan—to bring Hell on Earth by acquiring all nine gems—King Aszorothe vows to thwart it. He gathers all the greatest wizards, sorcerers, warriors, sages, and people of God in the land, and has devised a plan. As part of the plan, he allows a distrusted nobleman to overhear of a false plan intended to draw Vlockor into a precipitous attack. The ploy works. The nobleman goes to Vlockor and tells of King Aszorothe's plan, and the Demon Lord indeed launches a premature assault. King Aszorothe springs the trap, routing the Demon Lord's armies, in the process killing ten thousand Demons, thousands of Kreen, and many more thousands of his other troops.

9408: Vlockor's armies are driven back to his stronghold in southwest Ansaria, where they hold off King Aszorothe's forces.

9409: Vlockor solidifies his hold on southwest Ansaria and continues to use the Sixth Hellfire Gem to draw Demons through the Great Barrier, rebuilding their numbers to over eleven thousand.

9413: Vlockor's armies go on the offensive, forcing the allied forces under King Aszorothe to retreat.

9428: Through fifteen years of methodical warfare, Vlockor's forces control all of Ansaria, except Aszorothe's kingdom in the northeast. The ranks of Vlockor's Demons have been reduced to just under ten thousand, but the numbers of his Orcs, Ogres, Goblins and the like have burgeoned, as well as those of the conscripted Humans, Dwarves, and Elves. Even the ranks of Kreen have grown, by sparing use of them in battle to allow them to breed.

9431: Vlockor takes Aszorothe's kingdom by launching a multipronged assault from land and sea, and by using his Demons and the Kreen more aggressively than before. King Aszorothe and the Seventh Hellfire Gem, however, are nowhere to be found.

9432: Vlockor learns that King Aszorothe has taken the gem to one of the many islands off the east coast of Ansaria, and prepares his forces to invade.

9433: Vlockor captures Prothos, the largest of the islands, and begins to besiege the others.

9438: Vlockor finally corners King Aszorothe on a small island and captures the Seventh Hellfire Gem. The King made the Demon Lord pay dearly for this victory. Nearly two thousand of his Demons perished in and about those islands, as well as many more thousands of his other troops. As for King Aszorothe and his praetorian guard, they escape through a spectacular ruse.

9439: Vlockor's magic locates the next nearest gem, the eighth, somewhere in the continent of Erebia in the northern hemisphere above Ansaria. Vlockor sends scouts as he prepares his fleet for the voyage, and he begins using the seventh gem to rebuild his Demon armies.

9441: Vlockor sets sail—leaving behind over two thousand Demons in Ansaria, along with the bulk of his other forces—and lands his fleet in Erebia at the twin cities of Dusek and Dyne. With him are over eleven thousand Demons, ten thousand Kreen, three thousand Ogres, five thousand Orcs, and thousands of others. Dusek and Dyne fight, but they are no match for Vlockor's hordes.

9443: The kingdoms of Larabee, Ruhl, and Kairys fall to Vlockor's armies as Orcs and Goblins and the like flock to the Demon Lord's banner. The Eighth Hellfire Gem is delivered to Vlockor from the treasure room of the Elven King of Larabee.

9444: Vlockor's magic discerns that the last gem is somewhere in western

Erebia.

9446: Bringing hordes of Demons through the Great Barrier with the seventh and eighth gems, Vlockor begins to roll through Erebia, conquering kingdom after kingdom. He takes Fortress Aagaard, the largest fortress in the world, with barely a fight, as the mere sight of Vlockor's armies—twenty-four thousand Demons, nine thousand Kreen, and tens of thousands of Orcs, Ogres, Hobgoblins, and the like, as well as tens of thousands of conscripted forces—cows the King of the mighty fortress.

9447: Vlockor sets Fortress Aagaard up as the main seat of power as he sends armies out to conquer the rest of western Erebia in search of the last gem.

9448: King Aszoroth makes land at the port city of Orlick, Landon Republic, in the southeast peninsula of Erebia. With him are several ships and a thousand of his surviving troops.

9449: All of western Erebia is under Vlockor's control, and his ranks of Demons have swelled to over thirty-three thousand. Meanwhile, the Knights of Baeza have captured Ceci Dobyms, the wizard who first allowed Vlockor through the Great Barrier almost two hundred years ago, and who has been in charge of Vlockor's forces in Eriqat and Baeza since the Demon Lord left in search of the other gems. The aging Dobyms, kept alive by magic, tells all he knows about the gems, the Great Barrier, and Vlockor's plan to bring Hell on Earth. Lord Vahle and Queen Alballa decide that they must stop the Demon Lord. They commission all their ocean-going ships to carry troops to Erebia, and begin construction of more, even though such action significantly weakens their defenses against the Demon Lord's forces, still arrayed against them in Baeza.

9/8/9449: Sorrell Gilliam, a great Human wizard and former advisor to the now Hellsworn King of Aagaard, tracks down the Ninth Hellfire Gem where it had been cast into the mouth of an active volcano. Gilliam retrieves the gem from the molten lava, and, on the wings of a Pegasus, takes flight toward the still-free lands of northeast Erebia, where his good friend King Sahadeva rules over the Elven city of Anjali.

9/10/9449: Following the same leads that Sorrell Gilliam had followed, Vlockor's minions descend upon the volcano and search in vain for the last gem.

9/20/9449: By thorough interrogation of every source that led to the volcano, Vlockor discovers that it was the wizard Sorrell Gilliam who retrieved the Ninth Hellfire Gem.

10/3/9449: Unable to locate Gilliam because of the wizard's shield spell, Vlockor dispatches airborne squadrons of Demons to three cities to which he believes the wizard may have fled: Lalendren, Emrani, and Anjali. Each

squadron of Demons consists of one Archfiend, five Pit Fiends, fifty Pit Beasts, five hundred Wizard Demons, five hundred Beastspawn, one thousand Soldier Demons, and several wyvern carrying selected Hellsworn warriors.

10/8/9449: The mighty Elven city of Lalendren rebuffs the assault, sending Vlockor's Demons back in retreat.

10/12/9449: Emrani falls to Vlockor's Demons, this mercantile city of Dwarves and Humans mounting only token resistance.

10/14/9449: Vlockor's Demons fall upon Anjali and find there the wizard Sorrell Gilliam. The city is well defended with many powerful wizards and sorcerers, as well as many great warriors, most of whom have gathered there at the behest of Gilliam himself. However, several Pit Demons manage to recover the final Hellfire Gem during a pitched battle—a battle that seemingly costs the life of the Archfiend Draakvaar, though he ends up recovering—and decide to take flight, hoping to carry the gem back to Aagaard.

10/18/9449: Here begins Chapter One of Book One of the Inner World Series, *Blue Dharma: The Story of Anaiyailla*.

APPENDIX C
PHONETIC KEY TO SELECTED NAMES

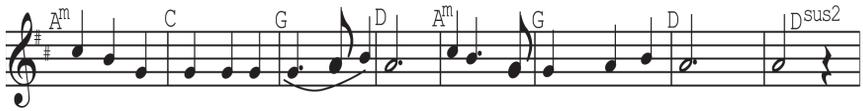
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Abajian:	Ah-bah-she-en
Achea Artexerxes:	Ah-chay-ah Are-tuh-zerks-zees
Alloria Ellissaya:	Uh-lore-ee-uh El-liss-say-uh
Anaiyailla:	Ah-nye-yale-luh
Anna:	Ah-nuh
Anais Nin:	Uh-nay-iss Ninn
Anastas Mikoyan:	Uh-nass-tess Mih-koy-un
Anduihil:	An-dwuh-hill
Anjali:	On-jol-lee
Arwen Saharta:	Are-when Suh-hart-tuh
Baeza:	Bay-ee-zuh
Bahrack:	Baw-rick
Balezaark:	Bale-zark
Cellestillena:	Sul-es-til-len-nuh
Cidera Sharr:	Sid-err-uh Shar
Darius De'Maakthorn:	Dare-ee-us Duh-mock-thorn
Dohr:	Door
Draakvaar:	Drock-var
Dreuth-sur:	Drooth-sir
Druun:	Droon
Druunhaelen:	Droon-hale-en
Erebia:	Ear-ebb-ee-uh
Kaelin:	Kay-linn
Kian:	Key-un
Kripa:	Cree-puh
Lalendren:	Luh-len-dren
Masseryk:	Maz-er-ick
Nagrek:	Nag-grek
Nakula:	Nah-cool-lah
Naomi:	Nay-oh-me
Nyanja:	Nye-an-juh
Ogen:	Oh-ghen
Riordanall:	Rec-ore-dun-all
Ry'danen:	Rye-dan-en
Scillieri:	Silly-airy
Sinon:	Sigh-nun
Sorrell Gilliam:	Sore-el Gill-ee-um
Spyrus:	Spy-russ
Tyr:	Tier
Vlockor:	Vlock-ore



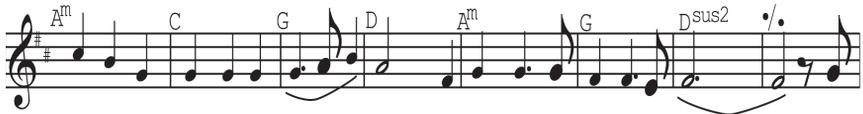
and I see the end of the world most ev-er-y day



makes me lie down in the dark of the night and I pray



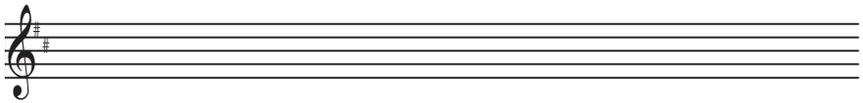
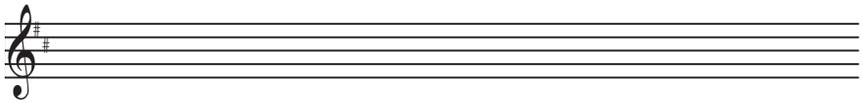
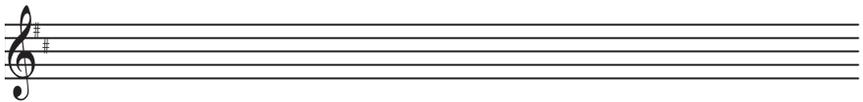
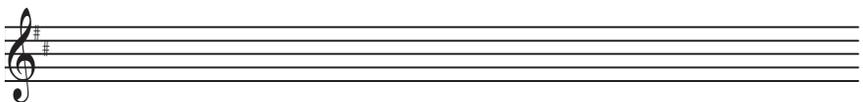
Starma-ker Starma-ker hear me I see the works of your hands



Starma-ker al-ways be near me as near as the sea is to sand as



near as the sea is to sand.

AFTERWORD

SOON TO BE PUBLISHED BLUE DHARMA: THE RETURN OF SAINT SEVANNAH

In Book Two of the Inner World Series, Blue Dharma: The Return of Saint Sevannah, Anaiyailla is revealed as the return of Arwen Saharta, a legendary sorceress who ascended to Heaven ten thousand years before. News of her return begins to spread hope throughout the world.

But Vlockor's armies have the advantage. He unleashes the Death Legion, led by Draakvaar and Balezaark, on Killmeville. Both commoners and lords are forced to choose sides. The best and worst qualities of mankind come into stark relief amidst the political and military maelstrom.

As battle is joined, the great Dragon takes wing, ancient allies rally to Anaiyailla's defense, and Krell is compelled to make a terrible sacrifice.

Book Two lifts the veils between Heaven, Earth, and Hell. Its readers will be privileged to witness the way of salvation, the abiding power or love, and the true value of sacrifice. They will see the levers and mechanisms of the Hellsworn laid bare.

Book Two is harrowing, edifying, and uplifting. You will not emerge unscathed.