

## Chapter Nine

**N**ight's cold hand held the traveler in its grip, yet the bitter air appeared to have little affect. Frigid wind, originating from the snowy Northlands leagues to the north, cut across the traveler's path, howling as it sliced through the grove of trees in the distance as if it was warning visitors away. Beneath a star-filled night sky that was blotched with heavy clouds, long, lithe strides carried the traveler along the dried bed of what had once been a raging river; now, however, only rubble and aged waterlines gave any indication that one of nature's most potent forces had flowed there.

Following it for a time, the traveler eventually left the shelter of the riverbed and emerged into the open. As the traveler did so, a sudden gust of wind set the traveler's cloak flapping about wildly, exposing a feminine figured clad in dark leather armor. Securing her cloak and hood about her, she paused at the edge of the grove and eyed the towering oaks and ironwoods warily. An owl hooted in the distance and the woman's eyes narrowed within her cowl; concealed within her cloak, the glove on her right hand creaked softly as she fingered the hilt of the slender, gently curving blade at her right hip. After an extended moment of tense silence, she cautiously entered the grove.

Save for the slivers of moonlight that managed to filter through the thick branches of the barren canopy, darkness ruled inside the grove. Soft earth, still damp from the rain two days previous, muffled her light footfalls to the point of near silence, but she knew that did little to hide her presence from the nocturnal creatures of the grove. Oddly enough, though they were active, they seemed unusually hesitant and suspicious as their bright eyes peered intently at her from within the deep shadows. Their demeanor aside, she knew the animals of the grove were no threat to her, and, more importantly, she was glad for their presence. There was an aura about the night that had her on edge, and she welcomed anything that would give her an advantage on such an evening.

The wind suddenly picked up, rattling the treetops and moaning like a wounded animal, causing the hairs on the back of her neck to stand up. The symphony of the grove slowed to a stop and she came to a halt, her hand tightening about her sword hilt. Letting her cloak hang loosely about her frame, she opened her mind and reached out with her senses. Carried on ribbons of ethereal blue energy, a torrent of information about her surroundings flooded her senses. She could hear the insects scuttling about in the underbrush, and she could feel the eyes of a pair of owls watching her from the treetops. In the distance, she could sense a pack of wolves loping through the woods to her right. Suddenly, she felt the wolves pause and look her direction, their fangs bared in a snarl.

*With movements so fluid that they seemed unnatural, she spun and drew her katana in one motion, the gently curved blade biting deeply into the stomach of the tall creature that had crept up behind her. Her assailant fell to the ground with a muted howl as it tried to catch its guts and stuff them back inside. Two other humanoid figures rushed at her from her left in a vain attempt to flank her. With deft motions, she danced into them, her katana becoming a blur of movement as she forced the second attacker's sword high, spun low and slit open the third attacker's belly. Black blood streaking her blade and dampening the earth, she rolled to the side to avoid the second attacker's vicious overhand chop. As she came to her feet, her right hand darted upward, launching a tanto skyward. Her second assailant had recovered by then. Turning to face her, the body of a fourth attacker tumbled from the tree branches and landed with a thud on the ground between them, the tanto buried in its right eye. The second assailant had just enough time to stare at the body in dumbfounded surprise before her sword licked across its neck, removing its head from its shoulders.*

*Breathing softly, she stood in the center of the carnage with her katana at the ready. Though it took only a few seconds, it seemed like minutes crept by as she searched her surroundings with her senses, probing for other assailants. Now that the presence responsible for the tension in the air had been removed, the woodland natives were beginning to once again move about fearlessly. Satisfied that she was safe for the moment, she bent over the creature with her tanto buried in its eye and retrieved the short blade. She had gleaned an idea of what had attacked her right before the fight started, but a closer inspection of the corpse confirmed her suspicions and made her stomach twist with cold dread.*

*Dark, molted skin was stretched tightly over a high-cheekbone face that was fitted with pure-black, almond-shaped eyes that now stared off into oblivion. The creature's long, pointed ears were heavily scarred as if they'd been chewed on endlessly. Greasy black hair and a large, hooked nose were accented by enlarged upper and lower canines. The attackers' bodies were elongated and somewhat out of proportion, as their arms and legs were too long for their slender torsos. No identifying marks could be found on their black leather armor — but she didn't need any to know what they were.*

*With a disgusted scowl, she meticulously cleaned the black blood from her katana and tanto with her assailants' clothes. Once she was positive the blades were clean, she checked herself for wounds and any trace of the black blood. Finding nothing but a few specks on her pants, she gently took hold of the currents and summoned small, controlled flames over each spot. The tiny flames burned hot and bright for an instant, burning tiny holes through her pants. As she let go of the currents and the flames winked out, she could see the extent of the damage to her pants and cringed with a bit of regret; while the holes were small and hardly something to be embarrassed about, the pants were ruined. However, it was a small price to pay to ensure none of the blood came in contact with her skin.*

*Standing, she sheathed her blades and eyed the bodies as her mind chewed on what the corpses implied. She didn't like what such a brazen attack could mean. She had known something was wrong well before she'd entered the grove, but she hadn't been able to detect what was causing the sensation. The fact that her attackers had gotten the drop on her was appalling; such a thing shouldn't have been possible, but the bodies at her feet told a different story. Even in death, the disgusting corpses seemed to either consume or repel the blue ribbons of energy that were visible to people like her, creating hard-to-detect dead spots within the currents. Normally, she would incinerate the corpses to cleanse the land of their taint, but she had no desire to announce her presence to any other would-be assailants that could be in the area; she could easily return and dispose of the infectious bodies once she had finished with her current task.*

*Shredding one of her attacker's cloaks, she carefully wrapped up the severed head and secured it before continuing on. Caution now weighing her steps down, she moved deeper into the grove, her path carrying her toward the center of the woods. The head she now carried was proof that events were growing significantly more serious than she had believed.*

*The flickering, bluish-silver moonlight was soon joined in its dance by an orange glow that reflected off the naturally polished bark of the ironwoods. Someone had lit a fire at or near her destination. While she knew her compatriots awaited her there, the attack had left her nerves rattled just enough that she continued to proceed with caution. The orange radiance began to glow more vibrantly and welcome waves of heat began to reach her, which told her that a large bonfire burned in the clearing near the center of the grove. As she drew closer, she could just make out two voices over the roar of the bonfire. Halting within the shadows at the edge of the clearing, she carefully examined the area.*

*Bathed in dancing orange light, the clearing was nearly sixty paces in diameter and surrounded by trees on all sides. There were two men standing on the far side of the bonfire, their attention focused on their conversation. One was a human of short stature, whose thickly muscled frame combined with his lack of height to make him seem unmovable. Black hair, with the slightest hint of purple in its highlights, was cut short and framed a handsome, masculine face and black eyes. A blue wool shirt, black leather pants and calf-boots fit his body loosely, allowing him freedom of movement. There was a broad grin on his face that was shattered as he belted out a rich laugh, possibly at a joke she couldn't hear from her position.*

*Turning her gaze to the other man, her attitude began to sour.*

*The taller of the two was a darlion. His hair was more akin to a long white mane, and the rest of his body was covered in short umber fur that looked astonishingly like skin from a distance. Long, pointed ears swept back from his head and were capped with tufts of white fur. His lean-muscled frame was clad in a plain black doublet over a gray shirt, and his long, deceptively powerful legs were*

encased in wool stockings and black knee-high boots. To his credit, it helped make his sharp, feral features and crystal-blue eyes, which were set slightly wide astride a broad and rather flat nose, seem more devilish than they already were. Like his companion, there wasn't a visible weapon on him, but she knew better than to underestimate the two – which further soured her mood. Both the knowledge that they should have sensed her assailants and the casual way they went about their conversation rubbed her raw.

Undoing the knot on her makeshift sack, she strode forcefully into the glade, bringing the conversation to an abrupt halt. With a flick of her wrist, she sent the head rolling along the ground before anyone could react to her arrival, the macabre trophy coming to rest near the fire. “Either of you want to tell me what in the hells this was doing here, and why neither of you noticed?!” her normally soothing, beautiful voice rang out with angry accusation.

As the darlion moved around the fire and crouched down to examine the head, the human glanced at the holes in her pants with curious suspicion before he too moved to the other side of the bonfire. In the firelight, the head was even more grotesque than in the dark – boils that looked ready to burst dotted the head generously, and bulging veins scoured the dark flesh like aged parchment.

The darlion stood up quickly, hissing violently at the head. “Where did you get that!?” he demanded, his baritone voice rife with shock.

“You tell me!” she retorted as she tossed back her hood. Thick hair, the color of a radiant blue sky, tumbled down her back as she freed her hip-length ponytail. Her slightly up-tilted eyes were narrowed, their sky-blue hue burning with anger. The full lips of her tanned, heart-shaped face were pressed together firmly – only slightly ruining her plain, yet lovely features – below her high cheekbones and slender nose. She crossed her arms beneath her modest, but full breasts in anger. Digging her fingers into her upper arms in attempt to fight her building rage, she glared at the darlion and barked, “I was ambushed in the forest by four of them! What, in Corith’s name, is going on?!”

The darlion snarled. “I don’t know! We wiped them out!”

She scoffed in disgust. “I know that! I was there when we destroyed the last of their nests! There shouldn’t be any way for them to still exist!”

The darlion scowled darkly. “Well – apparently we missed something!” He nudged the head with a boot. “This also makes me rethink the reports I received from Darius.”

Her eyes narrowed further and she planted her hands on her hips. “What reports?”

The darlion met her gaze before stating, “He said his scouts reported seeing elfin-like creatures skulking about the forests and mountains of late. Furthermore, he reported that the remains of the units that had engaged and been

*slaughtered by the creatures looked twisted and bloated as if suffering from a virulent poison. He even asserted that Cat fell victim to them.”*

*“Damn you, Darkon!” she roared, her eyes flashing and hands clenched at her sides. “And you didn’t think to inform the rest of us?! It sounds like we’ve got a serious problem on our hands – not a few stray blackhearts or an army of mundanes to deal with! What were you thinking!?”*

*“The same thing you would have, Kara!” he spit back. “Rumors and hearsay! I was there too! And as far as I was concerned – we wiped those abominations from the face of Kylir! We all know Warrick is in the north, and it was easy to assume he killed Cat, not a long-dead abomination! But this,” he gestured to the head, “has sinister implications when added to the reports.” He gave Kara a grim, determined stare. “I won’t take it lightly, Kara. I swear – I’ll deal with it personally.”*

*By this point she had moved closer to the bonfire and was warming her hands; it was a pointless gesture as the cold did not bother her, but it was an old habit that made her feel just a bit better. Darkon’s promise had assuaged her anger with him somewhat, but it did nothing to relieve the dread gnawing at her gut. “And what about Darius? This changes the situation there drastically.”*

*Darkon nodded. “I agree. Since I now have to look into the reappearance of blackhearts, and you two have other duties, this leaves only Greatjon. I’ll have him leave immediately.”*

*Kara stared at him in disbelief. “Greatjon . . . ? Are you serious . . . ? You’ll only be adding fuel to the fire!”*

*Up to this point, their companion had remained silent during the exchange, but he finally felt the need to lend his voice to the conversation. “I agree with Kara, Darkon,” he declared in his smooth, somewhat cocky voice. “We all know Greatjon’s feelings toward the Vale. He’s likely to do something foolish and make the situation worse.”*

*Darkon shook his white-maned head. “It can’t be helped. If Darius is under siege by these abominations, then I need Greatjon there. Your task is too important to delay, so Greatjon will have to do for now. Besides, Cat’s replacement is in Darius’ care – and we cannot afford to lose her.”*

*Kara remained silent for a moment before muttering, “I don’t like it one bit. . . . But it shall be as you say, Darkon.”*

*Darkon eyed the other man, “And you, Mat? Do you object?”*

*Mat shook his head and grinned. “None whatsoever. Greatjon might make a mess of things, but he’ll do the job. Besides, it’s what his Order was created for, and I’m anxious to hear what you have for us. It should be a great deal more entertaining than keeping watch on King Drugal day after day.”*

Darkon gave a succinct nod. “Good. Then I won’t waste anymore of our time. Let me be blunt with you both – as of last month, the darling High Council voted unanimously to end all military aid. Their memories are long, and they want nothing to do with our conflict anymore. I fear, before we see an end to this, they will withdraw from the world as the elves did before them.” The unhappy news fell on Kara and Mat like a stone wall, leaving them with dismay splayed clearly on their faces. Darkon noted their worried expressions and shook his head. “I’m afraid that isn’t the worst of the news, given Kara’s ‘gift’ to us. We’re all aware of the large force that has been cutting a swath of carnage through the mountains for the last few months. Cat should have been enough to secure the mountains, but with her death and with this,” he waved a hand in disgust at the blackheart head, “as evidence, I am forced to assume that blackhearts make up a portion of the army.”

“Any estimates on what Darius is facing?” asked Mat.

“Roughly eight-hundred strong were accounted for, according to the report. However, if there are blackhearts lurking about . . . then that means something far worse is marching with this force. At this point, it should be roughly a week before the army reaches Castle Blackstone, but I fear the worse. Even if Greatjon were to leave tonight, with Portculim travel suspended, I fear he may get there too late.”

A glum silence threaten to enshroud them as the weight of Darkon’s words set in. Given the rumors and evidence they had to work with, it wasn’t a stretch to presume that Warrick was at the head of the army. They all understood the implications of such an assumption – especially Kara and Darkon.

With a wave of his hand, Darkon seemed to dismiss the thoughts. “But that’s not your concern right now. You two have a very important task ahead of you. There have been disturbances in the flow of fur’gan that would indicate there are Gifted beginning to come into their own unlike any the world has seen in . . .” he chuckled. “Well, a very long time. Yorien and Trina’s crystals have shown signs of resonating to the disturbances, but I dare not risk a Search by Warden or Seeker at this great of a distance. Therefore, I have made arrangements for the two of you to travel to Triclose. Once there, find them and protect them.”

“Us?” asked Kara with an upraised eyebrow. “You want Wardens to Search? Are you mad? If there are any others on Triclose, we’ll stand out like a blazing beacon! We could easily send Seekers instead!”

Darkon nodded. “I know Kara – but it is the fear that our enemies are gaining an unbeatable advantage that drives me to send the two of you. I know that Seekers could easily find the Gifted, but they would be no match for a Warden in a battle. I need two of my best there – we cannot afford to lose these two.”

Mat scoffed. “Great,” he muttered sarcastically, his enthusiasm for the task slipping away. “So you want to send us off on a task someone else could do, when we could be put to better use achieving our goals by helping Darius.”

*Kara thought Darkon's words over with a heavy heart before replying, "As much as I hate to admit it, Mat, Darkon is right. We're short on manpower – and with only interim Preceptors leading the Uthariyan and Osterias Orders, they're practically of no use to us."*

*"I know," protested Mat. "But isn't the overall goal more important? If we can save Darius and find Luthur's crystal, won't that make everything else meaningless?"*

*Kara sighed and gave him a small, reassuring smile. "I know it seems that way, but if we're outmatched, we won't stand a chance of finding it as we battle for our lives." Her eyes dropped to the fire and her voice softened. "Besides, it's what Damion would—"*

*"Don't speak his name!" bellowed Darkon with a hiss. "Don't you dare invoke that traitor's name!"*

*Kara looked up, her blue eyes glinting with fury. "He's not a traitor, Darkon! And you know it!"*

*Darkon held his hands wide and scowled at Kara. "Then what is he, Preceptor? Tell me that! What do you call a man who vanishes without a trace and abandons his friends and responsibilities?"*

*"That's not true! Darius said—"*

*Darkon cut her off again with a scowl and dismissive wave of his hand. "Darius said! Bah! The man is too old fashioned, and Damion was like a brother to him! He said whatever he could to save face! No – Damion took Luthur's crystal and abandoned us, of this there can be no doubt! He is a traitor, plain and simple! If he ever grows the stones to show his face, I'll be there to cut off his cowardly head!" he hissed violently.*

*Mat took a step back as Kara and Darkon stared daggers at each other. He'd born witness to many of their arguments over the years regarding Damion, but never did he sense fir'gan stirring like it was. Fearing that this time it would come to blows, he forced a pleasant grin and said, "Come now, let ghosts lie in the past. Neither of you will convince the other of your viewpoint – and you both know it. We have real enemies to battle in the now. Infighting will just do us harm, agreed?" For just a moment longer it looked like violence might ensue, when – finally – the tension went out of their bodies and the flow of fir'gan in the clearing settled down. "Good," he stated as Kara and Darkon continued to glare at each other. "Now, where are we to leave from?"*

*Darkon gave Kara one last glare and turned to Mat. "Your ship, the Blue Trident, will sail from Durathan at noon two days from now and put in at Haltbo. Good luck to you both, and may Corith guide you well." Reaching into a pouch on the back of his belt, he removed a coffer and held it before him for all to see. He spared one last glance at Kara before tossing it to her. As she caught the*

*coffer, he kicked the blackheart head into the fire, a foul stench quickly filling the air as the flesh burst into flames, and spun on his heel before marching off into the shadows.*

*Mat watched Darkon's hasty retreat with a dour look while Kara reverently examined the container in her hands, each of them ignoring the stench filling their nostrils. Finally, Mat shook his head and returned to the other side of the fire. Crouching down, he retrieved his sword belt and then stood. As he belted it on and settled the sheathed, matching broad-bladed shortswords at his hips, he smiled ruefully.*

*Kara caught his expression out of the corner of her eye and looked up. "What are you grinning about?" she barked.*

*"You've got to be more careful around Darkon, Kara," he chided. "You push him like that, and he's eventually going to bite. Take me for example," he pointed to his swords. "I'm one of the few that actually disarms in his presence as he likes. Simple things like that could go a long way toward easing the tension."*

*Kara ran a hand lovingly over the bone coffer, her eyes enthralled by the opalescent colors that danced across the ironwood-bound bone surface. Her heart and mind suddenly heavy with the weight of the crystals that resided in the specially made and very rare coffer, she sighed and tucked it into a pouch on her belt before she folded her arms under her breasts and hugged herself. Realizing that Mat was expecting a reply, she said, "I know, but," she growled in frustration, "he's infuriating. I don't know what he has against Damion — but there is no way Darius lied to us. Damion would never betray us. . . . He just wouldn't." She waved a hand in the direction Darkon had vanished. "Hells, he didn't even inquire if I'd gotten blood on me!"*

*He recognized the firm conviction in her voice, and knew there was no way he could convince her otherwise; therefore, seeking to lighten the mood, he quipped, "So . . . that explains the holes in your pants. And here I thought you were trying to set a new fashion trend." The glare Kara shot him told him that his attempt at humor was ill-conceived. Shrugging as if to say he tried, he then said, "That may be, Kara, but I'm sure it just slipped his mind." Kara snorted, but Mat ignored it and added, "As for Damion . . . I'll just have to take your word on it. Besides, I care that you're okay. I don't want to ever witness that kind of death." He laughed then, looking up at the stars as he suddenly realized something. "Corith be good! I wasn't even born when that mess went down, and I've got to listen to you argue like two old fools!"*

*A smile broke through Kara's sour mood at the comment. "You're what now? Ninety? Don't worry — in a few centuries, you'll start sounding just like us," she quipped dryly.*

*Mat barked a jolly laugh. "Corith forbid!" Shaking his head in amusement, he then added, "Well, let's get going, you old crone. I haven't been to Durathban in a while, and I do miss it so much."*

*Kara shook her head with equal amusement. Waving her hand toward the bonfire, the flames went out with a hiss as a wave of fir'gan smothered it, casting the clearing in sudden darkness. "You just miss the women," she stated knowingly.*

*Mat grinned at her as the light quickly faded from the dying embers. "I do indeed. I do indeed."*

She awoke from her attempt at meditation slowly, the memories of that night slowly fading away. Her sky-blue locks hanging loosely about her like a veil, she sat cross-legged in the center of the gently rocking cabin that she shared with Mat. Despite the cold temperatures, her naked body was covered in a sheet of sweat, the light from the two lanterns secured on the walls reflecting off her tanned skin. Her blue eyes were slightly glazed as she opened them and tried to focus on her surroundings. She had been trying to meditate and purge her excess rage as she had been taught centuries ago, but the memory of that night kept popping up and ruining her efforts. Her anger with Darkon had grown over the years since Damion's disappearance, and Darius' seclusion within Blackstone had left her as the only significant voice of opposition to Darkon's views. However, Mat was right when he had said that she needed to back off. At the rate they were going, it would definitely come to blows sooner rather than later.

Remaining seated for a moment longer, she took a couple of slow, deep breaths to steady herself as she let the currents of fir'gan wash over her. She then climbed to her feet and padded past the small anchored table and its pair of anchored chairs. Reaching the far wall where her hammock and clothes were, she retrieved her pack and began to dig through it. Though the temperature and weather didn't affect her or Mat in the slightest, they always maintained their charade with a normal outward appearance. Given the frigid temperatures onboard the *Blue Trident*, moving about the boat without winter garb would draw unwanted attention and raise questions they were in no position to answer.

Finding a spare shirt, she quickly toweled off with it before dressing. She slid on thick wool stockings before pulling on a matching long-sleeve tunic, both of which were dyed a dark-blue. Fur-lined boots fit snugly about her feet, and heavy leather gloves, that were the

envy of some of the sailors, fit her hands as if they'd been perfectly tailored for her. Gathering her thick hair at the nape of her neck, she tied it off with a purple leather thong before securing her thick black cloak about her. Once she was sure she looked like freezing was a concern, she exited the cabin.

The *Blue Trident* was a large cargo vessel, nearly two hundred and fifty feet from bow to stern. Three thick masts supported large white sails that eagerly swallowed up the wind to propel them on their journey. She was crewed by thirty men, most of questionable rapport. Her captain was a grizzled old sailor who claimed to run an honest business transporting cargo. Kara knew better, though. Aside from taking on the occasional passengers, the *Blue Trident* served as a smuggler's vessel, her captain ready and willing to transport nearly anything without question . . . for a small fee, of course. The captain also served willingly at Darkon's beck and call, which was why he'd been so willing and able to leave port without taking on full cargo. Kara chuckled to herself as she made her way from the bowels of the ship and up onto the deck. She had a sneaking suspicion that before they had left port, the captain had somehow managed to stuff the ship's hidden holds full of goods that either had been banned or were becoming harder to acquire on Triclose. After all, where there's war, there's coin to be made.

Sunlight and bitter winds greeted her as she set foot on deck. They had been at sea for a week, each passing day that they moved north and west brought colder temperatures, and with it, freezing rain and spray. The ship's crew was already busy with their routine for the day by the time she made her appearance. Though the crew of the *Blue Trident* was garbed against the cold and use to these conditions, it did little to reduce the difficulty of their tasks nor the pain that came with it. Some of the crew were on their knees scrubbing the salt and wash from the deck, their body heat preventing the water soaking their pants from turning to frost, while others were high on the masts and rigging, attending to routine repairs and checking for any damage the weather may have wrought. A handful of sailors were busy breaking ice off the boat that had formed overnight, their mallets, daggers and picks chipping away at the dangerous buildup. There was a constant battle with the ice this time of year, and the sailors always had to be diligent with it, else the ship could become too heavy and capsized.

Looking about, Kara saw no sign of the aging captain as she made her way to the aft of the ship and ascended the stairs of the wheelhouse to the accompaniment of hammers and picks chewing away at the ice. She nodded in greeting to the bundled-up helmsman, a short burly sailor with more hair on his head than teeth in his

mouth, as she walked past the sheltered wheelhouse to the railing of the quarterdeck.

Dressed in a loose white wool tunic and snug black wool breeches, Mat was leaning against the rail, his dark cloak and boots displaying a smattering of frost. He turned at her approach and grinned, showing off his pearly teeth. “Well, well. Decided to join the waking world?”

Kara smirked at him as she ducked beneath the boom of the mizzen mast and came alongside him. Leaning on the railing, watching the wake behind the boat, she informed him, “Darkon ruined my mediations again, so I thought I’d get some fresh air and clear my head.”

Mat gave her a friendly pat on the back and leaned his back against the rail, his vision focused off in the distance before the ship. “Don’t let him get to you – he’s too old and too cranky for his own good. Besides, once we’re on Triclose, the distance will keep him from bothering you too much.”

Kara nodded and took in a deep breath of the clean, salty air. “It can’t come soon enough.” Sighing, she eyed Mat. “I heard from him last night.”

Mat arched an eyebrow. “Oh? What did our glorious leader have to say?”

Kara rubbed her hands together, remembering the short, terse communication. “It’s not good. It’s been a week since Greatjon was sent to Blackstone, and he hasn’t received any word from him.”

Mat shrugged and tried to give her a comforting smile, though his own mood and thoughts reflected hers regarding Darius and Greatjon’s situation. “Come now, I would think no news would be good news. Maybe they’ve just got their hands full.”

Kara shook her head, her blue hair gently riding the breeze about her. “I wish I had your enthusiasm, Mat. But I’ve been at it too long,” she said dejectedly. “If one of us fails to report in a situation like that, then nothing good can come of it.” She sighed deeply. “Blackhearts, moving armies, dying Wardens . . . and not a single overt sign of the Darkness’ intent. I can’t help but think we’re missing something. I feel like we’re flailing about like children. I . . .” She shook her head, then continued softly, “I miss the old days. . . . I miss Damion and Luthur’s leadership . . .” she trailed off into a somber silence.

Mat looked at her with concern before turning and placing a comforting arm about her shoulders. “Don’t get all glum on me. This is my first trip to Triclose, and I don’t need you turning it all gloom and doom on me. We’ll do our job there – enjoy a few of the sights of course – and get home so we can put an end to all this suffering.”

She gave him a weak smile. “The enthusiasm of youth, eh?”

He laughed and rubbed her shoulder. “I do my part to keep you all from feeling your age.”

Kara smiled brightly at him. “I really hope you can keep that outlook, Mat. I truly do. Anyways, I’ll contact Darkon one more time before we make port. Hopefully he’ll have good news for us then.”

Mat smiled reassuringly. “I’m sure he will.”

She nodded and turned her vision back to the rolling sea as she thought to herself, “*With the way things are going, I hope you live long enough for age to become a problem, dear friend.*”

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Snow. Pure and untainted, it falls without bias upon the land and the creatures that roam it. Animals are not safe from the beautiful white powder, nor are the families that huddle about the fire that provides a false sense of security. For if the fates deemed it, snow could change from a beautiful creation to a deadly mistress. Yet, not all are affected by the white chill. Far to the north, where winter’s grip had already tightened upon Solarson, the denizens of the land had long since grown hardened to winter’s deadly harbinger. Embracing winter like one would a lover, they faced the trials of winter head on, determined to survive the worst the season has to offer.

Deep within the treacherous White Fang Mountains resides a fortress of immaculate and haunting design. A sixty foot stone wall – its vertical surface encased in a thick sheet of ice, which only added to its sturdiness and beauty – stands as a silent, impassive guardian over a flowing, cathedral-style keep. Two round towers flanked both the gatehouse and the lone wall as the barrier crawled across the open valley between the towering mountains that protected the fortress’ flanks and rear. Battlements, manned by the heartiest of men and women, surmount the proud wall like a glorious, ice-sheathed crown. Across the exterior surface of the stone barrier were cunningly cut arrow-slits, their artistic design equaled by the murder-holes lining the interior of the gatehouse tunnel; each feature was cleverly designed to appear ornamental while providing a nearly unassailable venue from

which to defend. However, it was the building that the mountains and wall stood guard over that was the main work of art.

Extending deep into the mountain, many wondered how such a beautiful piece of architecture could end up secluded deep in the seemingly impassable mountains. Ice-covered towers of black stone leapt skyward, their roofs protected by blue clay shingles and trimmed with gargoyles. Balconies adorned the towers and the keep alike, their heavy doors shut tight against the cold. Massive buttresses, whose sweeping arches were home to majestic icicles, provided support to the towering structures, while stained-glass windows lined the walls of the main building's lower floors, delivering an array of vibrant color to the drab gray of both the mountains and keep. Yet, amongst the majesty of the fortress, it was the simplest of the windows that caught one's eye without fail. Set above two reinforced bronze doors on the building's main face, the large, round window was made of eye-catching, bright-red glass. There was nothing artistically remarkable about the portal, yet its ability to enrapture was undeniable.

It was safe to assume that the architects of the fortress would have considered the windows lavish enough for a fortress that wanted to balance the martial with the artistic, but upon closer inspection, the keep still held a few surprises. The entirety of the lower third of the keep's walls was adorned with the most intricate of carvings that ranged from powerful dragons to the simplest of flowers, leaving the upper reaches of the keep as the only surfaces untouched by an artisan's hands. Even more surprising than the carved walls, the interior of the keep was more palatial than martial. Brightly lit, the rooms within the keep were designed with comfort in mind; many of the walls were plastered or wood-paneled, and hardwood or lush carpet were the predominant floorings of choice. Where the rooms or halls were left raw, thick rugs and tapestries were used to enliven the atmosphere. Yet, while the keep was draped in luxurious trappings, it was still a military structure, making what was arguably the most surprising feature of the keep very ironic – the halls of the keep were home to grand works of art and libraries full of tomes that most scholars could only imagine studying.

However, before it was possible for anyone to enter this sanctum of art and knowledge, much less venture close enough to observe the wall carvings or view the eye of red glass over the keep's doors, guests and residents alike would have to pass through the massive gate set in the frozen wall. The lone, towering gatehouse harbored two massive steel doors that were nearly two feet thick and etched with breathtaking scrollwork by artists long forgotten. Be it

winter or summer, the gate guardians were not only nigh impenetrable when sealed, but they swung on impossibly silent hinges, the secret of which was known only to the keep's master.

Once through the gate, people were then greeted by the one feature of the keep that might be more enthralling than the red stain-glass window. Ten feet in diameter, and positioned in the center of the courtyard so as to be the first thing one would see upon entering the grounds, was an elegant white marble fountain. In vivid contrast to the fountain, the ground beneath it was paved with expertly-fitted black stone in the shape of a thirty-foot circular disk. When flowing, pure mountain water would rain from the mouth of the majestic dragon rearing skyward at the center of the filigree-carved basin, the bubbling liquid providing ample water for the keep's residents. During the winter—as it was now—the water would be allowed to freeze, creating a breathtaking ice sculpture.

There was an awe-inspiring beauty to the keep people called Castle Blackstone, and its residents took pride in their home. Normally, they maintained it with care in the summer or the harshest of winters, keeping the castle in pristine condition and alive with activity. Yet now, in these dark days, the bailey was oppressively quiet, and it seemed as if only soldiers and refugees roamed its snow- and mud-covered grounds. The keep's smithy was silent, and the protective wall were eerily somber. Within Blackstone Village, which occupied the far side of the small woodland that separated it from the castle, very few of the villagers ventured outside; those that did, moved quickly and with purpose. Despite their hardy constitutions, tensions were high and spirits low for the people of Castle Blackstone. For while the trials and tribulations of winter could be viewed as disheartening and possibly deadly, the denizens of Blackstone and the vale it occupied knew only one enemy was truly fatal and worthy of such soul-sucking apprehension –

Man.

From the southeast the armies came, snaking their way through treacherous passes and canyons, up dangerous inclines and down slippery slopes packed thick with snow and ice. Led by both men whose souls were darker than a moonless night, and creatures born of the most twisted of imaginations, they moved through the winter-locked mountains with methodical efficiency – plundering, raping and killing their way to their destination. They took their time in their macabre journey, basking in the debauchery and leaving no soul alive. They lived by a doctrine that was a twisted parody of a code of honor that was older than any living creature could imagine. Forged in a time that most considered myth, when honor was a man's

life and the Darkness was just a fleeting shadow, the code had been corrupted to the point that only those that lived by it could be deluded into thinking it meant anything. Their perversion was of such a reprehensible nature that it could be viewed as none other than pure, unequivocal evil.

However, for every evil there is a good. Maybe not the purest good one could want or imagine, but a good never the less.

Within the castle that was the army's target, resided one of the few that had tried to withstand the growing night. Simply known as Darius to his subjects, he had once been a priest of the strictest vows before his dark past and search for redemption ushered him down a path very few were capable of surviving. When the armies arrived on their wave of destruction and debauchery, the populace turned to him for protection. With open arms and a foreboding edge to his eyes, he welcomed the people within the gate. For weeks, people fled to Castle Blackstone in search of shelter and protection, bringing with them tales that bore the weight of horrors beyond comparison. Each successive story further hardened Darius' resolve and darkened his soul until it seemed like it would absorb all the light and warmth within him.

The gate remained open night and day until the army that had massacred its way across the mountains reached the vale Blackstone occupied. On the afternoon that the army arrived in the Vale, Darius, with a voice as cold and hard as the ice coating the wall, ordered the massive gate closed, cutting off hundreds of stragglers from sanctuary. Caught between the defenseless village and the towering wall of Blackstone, some of the refugees decided to take their chances within the woods, while others returned to the village with vain hopes of defending it. With revolting zeal, the invaders hunted down and slaughtered every man, woman and child that remained outside the wall regardless of their age or gender. As the army went about its macabre mission, buildings were put to the torch, and agonizing wails climbed into the air, ripping the depths of one's soul asunder.

Through it all, Darius stood atop the protective battlements, bearing silent witness to the horrors. Opening his senses to the currents, he seemingly could feel the pain of the tortured, the stark terror of the imprisoned, and the agony and wails of the raped as the currents were thrown into chaos by the carnage. To his enhanced senses, the howls of glee from the invaders were crystal clear, sickening him and making it ever-so tempting to withdraw his senses – but he did not. Instead, he forced himself to bear witness to the tragedy that played out unapologetically before him, for it was the least he could

do for the fallen. He would have wept, but instead, he kept his face impassive. Strength was what his people needed now, and he would be that for them.

Suddenly, with his enhanced senses bringing the macabre scene into focus, his eyes found a target for the rage building in his stomach and the reason for which he had proceeded with callous caution. Hard faced and bald, a raven-wing tattoo covered the left side of his target's head like a badge of honor. Crimson-enameled armor encased the giant of a man that strode among the invaders, urging them on in their depraved celebrations while shoving his massive axe in the air to their cries of victory. Darius could see the fir'gan swirl about the man like wildfire. He knew there were only a handful of people on the wall that could see the ebb and flow of fir'gan as he could, and he was glad for that minor blessing. Even he was terrified by how the ethereal blue ribbons of power responded to the bald man's presence. But what truly rattled his soul, was the mind-numbing realization that the crimson barbarian was only tapping a small portion of his power.

The man suddenly stopped and turned his vision toward Blackstone's wall, his red eyes immediately focusing on Darius. He could see Darius just as clearly as Darius could see him; knowing this, he flashed Darius a broad, sadistic grin and reached out along the currents, probing for Blackstone's master. Their minds touched for the briefest of moments, but it was enough for a single thought to be shared between them –

It was a good time to die.

Darius desperately wanted to unleash his rage upon the man and bring the same type of carnage to the invaders' ranks that they had bestowed upon the terrified refugees huddled behind Blackstone's wall. However, aside from the terrifying power residing within the crimson-armored man, there was a necrotic presence slithering its way through the attackers' forces that made Darius' very core go cold with dread. The miasma he sensed would mean a painful and agonizing death for even one as powerful as he. To his chagrin, he had already seen one friend felled by the miasma, and he knew that to risk the same fate would surely doom everyone within the keep – and that was a risk he was not prepared to take. Yes, he would bide his time and await the help he knew would eventually come. He could only pray that it would not come too late.

Not far to the west, nearly a week after Darius and the crimson-armored man locked eyes, a lone figure ran through ankle-deep snow as if it was merely an illusion. A thick, plain brown cloak and

hood concealed his features, and provided protection from the weather even though he had no need for it. The hilt of his large claymore jutted over his right shoulder, its claw-shaped steel pommel gleaming dully in the moonlight, while his dark-brown eyes stared intently from the shadows of his cowl. The eyes seemed empty of joyful light, hinting at vile and dark deeds that would give most people nightmares for the rest of their lives . . . and possibly even after death. Peering into the distance, his eyes observed the slick rock surfaces that lined the pass he was traveling through, alert for any sign of activity. He did not fear the deadly animals that roamed the mountains – his companion had seen to it that no such creature would bother him – nor did he fear attack, for his nearly six and a half feet tall, thickly muscled body would deter most men. However, he knew there were enemies ahead that would not be so easily dissuaded.

His conscious told him to be cautious. His dark dreams elected for retreat. But his soul saw things differently. His soul – one that teeters on the fine edge between good and evil – demanded that he move forward, seeing in his objective a release for years of torment and anger. It was a simple choice for most people – listen to their dreams and flee in the face of what could be certain death.

He, however, was not most people.

He chose, instead, to listen to his soul, the one thing he believed he could unequivocally trust. Despite caution having tempered his pace of travel to this point, he decided he could risk a bit more speed. Quickening his pace slightly, he plunged forward with the reassuring weight of his claymore on his back and his soul howling like a wolf in anticipation.

Hours later, night fell and he continued on tirelessly. His mind told him that food and rest was needed, but he knew he could march on for days without such necessities. However, he gave in to common sense for a moment and, without losing stride, he lowered his cowl. Rust-orange hair, which was gathered in a horsetail at the nape of his neck, bounced about his handsome, solemn face as he pulled a biscuit from the pouch at his waist with a gloved hand and brought it up to his wide mouth. The biscuit was cold, hard and tasteless in his mouth, but he knew the nutritional value it held far outweighed how tasteless it was. Finishing his meal, he pulled his cowl back into place and hurried onward.

Bright, twinkling stars and bluish-silver moonlight set the snow aglow, illuminating the path before him. Soon, the pass he was following ended, and he found himself ascending treacherous and impossibly sheer mountainsides. Not once did he have to pause to

search for proper handholds or footing. Instead, his hands and feet sank into the frozen rock face as if it was a soft cake, steam rising into the air each time his fingers and feet dug through the ice and into the stone. With as cold as it was, the holes froze over as soon as he removed his large hands and feet. Hour after hour slid away before he realized he had climbed most of the night away. Eventually, he came upon an outcropping that provided him a view for miles around and offered him an opportunity to rest and stretch.

Scrambling atop the outcropping, he stood up and turned away from the mountain, letting his eyes take in all before him. Endless open sky and howling winds greeted him, threatening to take his breath away. For as long as he could remember, he had always liked such nights. The cold reminded him that he was alive, and the vastness of the starlit sky reminded him of just how insignificant he truly was. At any other time, he would have let the humbling awe that the vista inspired wash over him, but he couldn't afford to do so now. With the knowledge that there was no time to truly enjoy it, he allowed himself to bask in the vista for a moment longer, the biting wind revitalizing him. As a deep, heartfelt sigh escaped his lips, he finally turned away from the breathtaking view and continued his climb.

By the time he pulled himself onto the relatively flat surface of the mountaintop, the sky to the west was beginning to brighten and a light snow had begun to fall. All about him, patches of ice and snow dotted the unyielding stone, potentially making footing dangerous. While he didn't fear injury, falling upon the unyielding stone would still hurt; therefore, with quick, cautious strides, he picked his way across the mile-wide mountaintop. Even with his guarded pace, it was a quick trip and he soon found himself standing motionless at the edge of the mountaintop. With the sun at his back, he let his eyes drink in the sight before him.

Flowing out into the unending expanse below him was a view to rival the one of a few hours past. Beneath the gentle snowfall, snow-capped mountains sprawled out in all directions as far as the eye could see, their peaks glistening dully in the new day. Hardy mountain birds dotted the sky like specks of ash as they searched for a meal. Except for the occasional bird cry or gust of icy wind howling through the pitiless peaks, everything was silent and at peace. Letting his eyes drift over the mountain range, they eventually came to rest on the towering peaks that he knew guarded his destination. Eyes widening with dread, the details of the once beautiful scenery suddenly took on a new meaning.

Where once the snow-capped peaks were just that, now they were mourners. The birds that were simply in search of a meal, now were carrion crows hungrily circling a battlefield. As for the wind that once howled through the peaks as nature intended, it was now a mournful dirge for the dead. This transformation of perception seared itself into his mind as his eyes drank in the orange glow emanating from the north side of the Vale. Letting his eyes drift upward from the glow, cold dread gripped his heart as he followed the columns of sinister black smoke that rose toward the heavens like snakes slithering from a burrow. It was clear that the situation had grown far worse than his original information had indicated, and he could feel his throat constricting with rising anger. He had hoped to find that the situation wasn't anywhere near as bad as reported. He was even prepared to walk into a dangerous and possibly dire situation that he could potentially rectify – but he had not been prepared for this.

The Vale was burning.

## Chapter Ten

**T**he sun began to dip below the eastern horizon as the bitterly cold wind of the White Fang Mountains blew in from the north, cutting deep and adding to the misery of the survivors huddled within the protective confines of Castle Blackstone. Yet, there was one man that stood unaffected by the cold. Hidden within the shadows of a copse of trees on the northern side of the Vale, his brown eyes – rage simmering in their depths – drank in the devastation that had befallen Blackstone Village. With the shadows providing a measure of safety, he watched the invaders moving through the village as if they owned the place. Soldiers drunk with victory and booze stolen from the village tavern stumbled about, their loud bluster and bawdy songs easily reaching his ears. His nose twitched as he caught the scent of a miasmatic presence amongst the soldiers. He had yet to see or locate the source, but he recognized the scent and it raised his hackles.

Screams broke the air near endlessly in a horrifying symphony of pain and agony as the soldiers tortured and raped their captives for entertainment, drawing a dark scowl from him. The depraved acts he had witnessed in the last few hours reminded him of a time so far gone that the memories almost seemed false – if not for the fact he had lived through it all. The ghastly sights had been enough to tempt him to rush headlong into the ruins of the village, unleashing his rage in a wave of destructive retribution. However, the foul smell filling his nostrils and the presence lurking just on the edge of his senses held him in check, reminding him that there was more at stake than rage-filled revenge.

A sudden but gentle nudge at his hip drew him from his dark thoughts. Reaching down, he patted the large, muscled neck of the direwolf. “Too much like old times, eh girl?” he whispered in his deep voice.

The massive black- and gray-splotched direwolf gave a low growl in response before wheeling and padding quietly into the woods. It still amazed him that his childhood friend and companion could move with such stealth while weighing as much as three men. Moving to follow with the silent toe-heel stride of a darlion, he caught up to the direwolf and trotted silently alongside her. Even without the help of wet pine needles and soft ground, no one would have noticed their movements.

Stars began to punch holes in the sky and fires sprang to life in the invaders' camp as night fell. As the ruins began to glow brighter with the added firelight, it forced the two travelers to slow their pace as they moved from copse to copse, skirting westward around the village in search of the unbroken woods standing between the Blackstone Village and the keep. Soon, night had taken complete control of the sky, and the volume of bawdy songs and torturous screams increased as the invaders' camp broke into a haphazard celebration. He frowned at the antics, his stomach twisting with anger at the grim source of the revelry. The brief surge of fury pushed him to move faster. The direwolf, sensing his urgency, ran ahead to make sure their path was clear.

Their roundabout journey was agonizingly slow and done in complete silence, the sounds of celebration and rape accompanying them like an unwanted overture. During one close pass to the ruins, he came to a halt in an uncomfortably small thicket, his attention caught by a scream of such terror and agony that it felt like a fist had hammered into his heart. Sending his companion ahead, he crouched amongst the shadows, his eyes seeking the source of the cry.

Just on the edge of town, framed by the dancing glow of firelight, was a young girl – barely a woman – being viciously raped by a trio of soldiers drunk with booze and power. Red welts, teeth marks, bruises, and numerous bleeding cuts covered her naked body like a second skin. Blood tricked down her garishly bruised inner thighs in what seemed like an impossibly constant flow. The three soldiers had her bent over a pile of crates as they took turns abusing and violating her in every way they could imagine with enthusiastic zeal. Where many would have succumbed to shock long before this or accepted their fate, her constant screams and sobs of painful and heart-wrenching agony showed that some part of her still fought to endure and survive the horror. He didn't know if he should respect her inner strength or pity her. It was clear that some part of her believed she would and could survive, but he knew better – she was as good as dead once they were done with her. Unfortunately, until that moment arrived, she was the bastards' toy and pain would be her eager friend. Impulse and his code demanded that he interfere with the repulsive act, but common sense held him in check. Despite the many horrible acts being committed and how it angered him, rushing headlong in there would be a costly mistake.

Suddenly, she screamed in agony as her head was jerked back violently by the thug having his way with her. One of the other soldiers emptied the bottle of alcohol he'd been drinking all over her back, setting her wounds afire and ripping a throat-shredding scream

from her. The soldiers laughed gleefully, truly finding pleasure in the girl's terror. That final act of depravity settled it for the traveler. While he couldn't brazenly assault the invaders and risk failing his mission, he could do something for the girl.

Setting his jaw, the traveler reached out along the currents of fir'gan he could see swirling before his eyes and built up the air around the girl's throat. With a slight growl, he hardened the air and squeezed it violently, snapping the girl's neck. Her tormentors laughter stopped as they realized her screams had ceased and her body had gone limp. If they were surprised or disappointed, they didn't show it. With a few laughs and shrugs of the shoulders, they hitched up their pants and moved on, leaving her desecrated body slumped over the pile of crates.

The traveler paid little heed to the soldiers as they moved off, his gaze enthralled by that of the girl. Already bereft of life, her empty eyes were focused on him in a way that made his breath catch in his throat – it was almost as if she was thanking him from beyond the grave.

*"Sir, the castle wall is ahead,"* a deep, feminine voice stated in his head.

The telepathic communication hammered into his skull with more force than a blacksmith's hammer, shattering the illusion and drawing a hiss and cringe of pain from him. "Not so loud, Lina," he growled softly.

*"Sorry, sir. I—"* she started to respond with the same intensity before catching herself. *"That was a noble thing you did for that girl,"* she finished with less aggressiveness.

He shook his head to clear the cobwebs before responding. *"It was nothing,"* he thought softly, sadness caressing his words. Shaking his head again, he asked more firmly, *"Now, what have you found?"*

*"I made it to the edge of the woods. There's a minimal guard on the wall – I'd say about twenty or so sentries. There's also no sign of the enemy between us and the castle, though it smells like there was a clash recently. You can enter the woods and approach without worry."*

*"Thanks,"* he thought as he started off at a trot, his connection to Lina guiding him in a southwesterly direction, and was soon clear of the village.

As he entered the woods and quickened his pace, Lina's voice entered his head again. *"By the way, sir?"*

*"Yes?"*

*"The humans inside the wall smell worse than you do."*

He smiled briefly at Lina's attempt to cheer him up. *"Thanks for that. You're not being fair, though. They've been trapped in there for days and hardly have the means to do anything about it."*

When he finally caught up to the direwolf, she was looking back at him with an amused glint in her yellow eyes. "What are you looking at, Deralina?" he chided playfully in a whisper.

Deralina cocked her head in amusement before turning and trotting out of the woods and into the clearing that served as the final stretch to Blackstone's wall, leaving the man to catch up.

Before either of them had gone more than a few paces into the expanse of open ground, their presence was noted and the sentries along the wall began to stir. Though they were still a good two hundred yards from the wall, they could just make out the voice of a sentry as he shouted, "Halt! If you move any farther, you'll be shot!" As if to emphasize his point, the battlements began to fill with archers and footmen. A few torches were even lit in anticipation of a full-scale attack.

Deralina's sharp ears could hear the creak of the bowstrings as the archers readied their bows. *"They're serious, sir,"* was the message that seeped into the man's mind.

*"You don't think I know that?"* he retorted.

*"I just thought—"*

*"Kill the chatter, Lina. We need to get inside before our friends in the village grow curious as to what is causing the commotion."* He glanced around even as he finished the thought, gauging the distance to the wall. Even with elevation on their side, the archer's bows would begin to lose accuracy at this range. However, he would bet good coin that Darius had enchanted the bows to bring the woods into range, and he had no desire to test that theory by moving forward and creating an incident.

Before he could decide on a course of action, the sentry shouted again, "Who goes there?"

The man cringed again. Without his enhanced senses, he would have had a hard time hearing the man at this distance, but that wasn't his main concern. While he did not believe the invaders could hear the commotion, the increase in noise and light was eventually going to draw unwanted attention – and that was unacceptable. Gathering fir'gan to him, he used it to project his voice so the sentries on the wall would hear him as if he was standing next to them, eliminating the need to shout and further decreasing the odds that the in-

vaders would notice the commotion. “Tell your master that the Knight of the Bestyne Order is here to speak with him.”

He could see that his declaration immediately sent a wave of excitement through the men on the battlements. It was safe to assume that hopeful thinking had spread rumors of rescue through the masses gathered behind the wall, and his arrival would only lend credence to such hopes – much to his chagrin.

Fifteen tedious minutes of nerve-racking silence followed before another sentry appeared on the battlements accompanying a frail figure. The direwolf and her master perked up when they saw the new arrivals. It didn’t take either of them long to realize whom it was and just how dire the situation they had walked into was.

*“Can you feel it?”* came Deralina’s sorrowful thoughts.

*“Aye,”* he replied softly, his face sinking. *“He’s dying.”*

He could see the fir’gan gathering about the frail figure, sputtering like a fire gasping for air, and suddenly a question was voiced by a hoarse voice as if it was right next to his ear, “Who approaches Castle Blackstone?”

The tall, powerfully built man took a step forward and lowered his cowl so the frail man on the wall could see his face clearly with his fir’gan-enhanced vision. Touching his fist to his chest in solemn salute, the rust-orange-haired man replied, “Greatjon Durmont of the Bestyne Order.”

A brief moment of silence preceded a hoarse, despondent reply. “Approach the gate, Sir Greatjon. Be welcomed to Castle Blackstone, and bear witness to our final hours.”

The small study was dark except for the roaring fire in the hearth built into the left-hand wall. In recent days, the room had been cleared of all furniture except two plush high-back chairs. A simple table had been brought in and now sat between the occupied chairs, two full crystal glasses and a decanter of dark liquid sitting on it. At one time, the room had served as Darius’ study. Greatjon could remember the days of his youth when he would sit in this very room receiving his schooling from the wise man that had raised him. Sadly, the study now felt like a mausoleum – dark and depressing, it somehow felt like it too was fading like its master. The stench of death permeated the room as it did the entire castle. The smell was enough to make Greatjon want to vomit, but he fought down the urge for the sake of his old friend.

Leaning back in his chair, Greatjon's brown eyes gazed thoughtfully into the fire. Deralina was curled up at his feet, feigning sleep. Darius' condition was a heartbreaking shock for them both. They had expected to find him healthy, albeit stressed from the current situation, but neither of them had been prepared for what they had found. Pale and skeletally gaunt, Darius' black hair hung limp and oily about his shoulders, and from the depths of sunken sockets, his brown eyes appeared dull and listless. A thick bearskin robe was wrapped about his frail frame despite the presence of the roaring fire. He had become so shrunken that both the robe wrapped about him, and the chair he was sitting in, seemed to be trying to swallow him whole. More disturbing to Greatjon was how the currents of fir'gan behaved around his friend; instead of flowing through and around him freely, they seemed to be avoiding him like a high-class parade sidestepping a leper.

Outwardly, Greatjon face was impassive, showing no signs of the remorse and sadness he felt. In his heart, however, he wept for his old friend and mentor. No man deserved such an agonizing death – especially one as noble and as cherished as Darius. However, the world was not fair; it was a cold and dangerous mistress, bereft of concern for the labels and status of people. This lesson was learned – and learned early -- if any of their kind had any hope of living for a long time.

With the finality of their conversation weighing heavily on his mind, Greatjon glanced over at his shriveled mentor and asked softly, “Are you sure you want it this way? I can have you out of here this very night.”

Darius shook his head weakly and coughed slightly, dark blood staining his lips. “I'm sure,” he answered hoarsely. “I'm too far gone at this point. The blackheart's poison is a death sentence . . .” he tried to chuckle as he eyed Greatjon, but it only resulted in a dry cough, “for all but a few. At best, I have one more day.” He smiled weakly. “It's the perfect case of irony – you think you've got till the end of time . . . and then a small cut dooms you.”

A small, sad smile touched Greatjon's lips. “I'm sorry.”

Darius waved his apology off weakly. “Don't be. It's not your fault that Darkon gutted your Order after Damion and Valisiana vanished. Besides, even if there was still a full-blooded Bestyne Preceptor, I'm too far gone to be cured.”

Greatjon nodded, knowing Darius spoke the truth. “Then is there anything I can do for you?”

“Ay—” he started to say before a violent coughing fit ripped from his lungs, causing Deralina to perk up and Greatjon to lean over to aid him. Waving him off, he let the fit subside before resuming. “Aye. Don’t worry about me. What you should be concerned with, is keeping mine and Cat’s crystals out of Warrick’s hands.”

Darius had mentioned this once already, and the weight and implication of the words once again crashed squarely on Greatjon’s broad shoulders, weighing his spirit down. “I can do that,” he said solemnly. “But what about your people?”

Another coughing fit racked Darius’ body, but he seemed oblivious to it as he stared into the fire. Finally, when the spasms passed, he spoke with a great sadness filling his words. “I first came to these mountains when I was only seventeen. I was a young monk full of visions of piety and purity, with designs on bringing Corith’s word to the masses. I even was further blessed to be the founder of the Simoria Order and establish this castle. I have watched the people of the Vale grow, marry and die for longer than I can remember.” He paused for a moment, sinking into silence. When he did continue, there was a calmness to his words that seemed to reflect his acceptance of his fate. “When the first Blackstone was destroyed all those years ago, I feared that all the villagers had been wiped out. The thanks I offered to Corith when I found survivors – and when I found you – was great. Despite my failings, I have been blessed, Greatjon. I have known great men and evil men. . . . I have seen the best and worst that life can offer. . . . I have no regrets. . . .” A mournful sigh turned to violent coughs as he trailed off.

When the fit passed, he continued. “Now, I have two favors to ask of you. First, is this,” he reached a skeletal hand into his robe and pulled forth a gray crystal and then a purple crystal. Light pulsing dimly within each one like a slow heartbeat, each crystal was about the size of a man’s fist, and both appeared to be missing a pair of tiny slivers.

Greatjon couldn’t hide the shock and horror he felt upon seeing the crystals. “You’ve already severed your ties to your crystal? Corith be good, Darius! How—”

Darius shook his head weakly. “Strength of will. Besides, I couldn’t risk my crystal becoming tainted – such a loss would be unacceptable.” He coughed violently and had to take a few deep, phlegm-filled breaths before continuing. “Now then, I want you to take these and protect them. I have no Seeker amongst my men now, so someone else will have to do it. If you would – I wish that Caldain Forsandi be given the task.”

Greatjon's heart broke as he stared at the crystals, the finality of Darius' act striking home. "Caldain?" he asked softly. "Damion's man? This is rather . . . odd. Besides, Darkon will be furious that you would entrust a traitor's man with such a task."

Darius shook his head as he handed the crystals over. As Greatjon reverently accepted the crystals and placed them within a pouch at his hip, Darius said, "I've taught you better than that. Damion is no traitor and you know it." He sighed and softly beseeched, "Please – see that Caldain gets that crystal. He is the best there is."

Greatjon nodded slowly, knowing Darius would not deceive him. "Very well. What about yours and Cat's crusaders?"

Darius paused for a moment as if to gather himself, then stated bluntly, "Both destroyed. The corruption had run too deep before I thought to separate myself from my crystal, and its strength was needed to keep me alive." He shook his head. "Too much of the blade's fir'gan has been used for it to re-form. I believe that Cat's crusader fell victim to this as well." He coughed roughly. "I had to take precautions, so I had the vessels destroyed. I simply had to, Greatjon. I didn't know. . . ."

He nodded, understanding Darius' dilemma. "*So that's what's been keeping him going,*" Greatjon thought before asking aloud, "And your other favor?"

Darius' pain-filled eyes stared lazily into the roaring fire. "My men know how to get the survivors out, but there is one I wish you to find and protect. This is possibly more important than protecting the crystals."

"Couldn't this person get out with the others?" Greatjon asked in puzzlement.

Darius coughed and replied hoarsely, "Possibly. But she is . . . special."

Greatjon perked up. "She?"

"Aye – she. I've been observing her for a while; I noticed her potential long ago, and I've seen her connection to fir'gan grow over the years. She is a Gifted, Greatjon. When Cat died, I knew Corith had blessed me by bringing her to me."

"She's Cat's replacement," Greatjon stated with absolute certainty.

Darius nodded. “That she is. It didn’t take a Seeker to see just how strongly Cat’s crystal reacted in her presence.” Darius reached out a skeletal hand and grasped Greatjon’s forearm tightly. Looking directly into his eyes, Darius spoke with the unflinching authority Greatjon had come to know and respect. “You will find her and protect her. Tell Darkon nothing of this – keep her existence quiet and train her in secret.”

Greatjon stared at Darius in confusion. “Are you feeling alright? None of us may find Darkon’s presence appealing, but to deceive one of our own in such a way is treasonous.”

The intensity in Darius’ eyes grew and his grip tightened. “You will be responsible for her, Greatjon – no one else! Damion vanished for a reason, and Valisiana said she feared for her life before she disappeared! I have never trusted Darkon, and nothing has been right with the world since Luthur’s passing! Darkon may be our leader, but I fear we are treading down a path where the reward may not be worth the danger! Swear to me you will do as I ask, Greatjon!”

Greatjon continued to stare at Darius, wondering if the fire burning in his eyes was intensity or fever. Finally, he nodded slowly. “I swear.”

“Damn you, Greatjon – swear it!”

Taken aback by the outburst, Greatjon could only believe that Darius was deathly serious. While he didn’t find Darkon as obnoxious as the others did, he had long ago learned to trust Darius. Nodding sternly, he consented to Darius’ request. “By blood, by honor and by deed, this I swear – I will protect her with my life, and do hear-by take full control of her training. My life will be hers.”

Darius nodded and fell back in his chair, a chain of violent coughs stealing his intensity and energy. “Ask the captain,” he coughed again, “where Aseria Mitsurea is.” A stronger coughing fit struck, forcing him to double-over as blood flecks burst from his mouth with each chest-rattling convulsion. Greatjon bolted upright, startling Deralina as he moved to aid his friend. Darius held up a hand, forestalling the offered help. “Go!” he cried weakly. “Find her and get everyone to safety! My time is nearing its end and yours is just beginning! We must not fail!” He sank back into his chair, exhaustion weighing him down.

“I’ll keep her safe, my friend,” Greatjon said remorsefully before he stood and gathered his cloak and claymore from next to the hearth. “Rest well. Lina – come.”

Greatjon and Deralina made their way to the study’s door, but before they could leave, Darius’ weak voice called out, “Remem-

ber – protect her and protect the crystals. If . . . if you ever encounter Damion, tell him I’m sorry it had to end this way. Tell him that I . . . that I always appreciated everything he did for me.”

Greatjon leaned his head against the doorframe and closed his eyes, his heart aching for his friend. “I will, Darius,” he replied sorrowfully, “I will. May the Light illuminate your path.” With solemn silence, he and Deralina exited the room, the door closing with a profound click of finality.

Darius sat there for a time, his thoughts lost as he stared into the fire. Finally, he whispered a reply . . . though there was no one there to hear it. “May Corith guide you as well . . .” the corner of his lips tugged upward for a moment, “my friend.”

Greatjon slung his heavy brown cloak on over his padded leathers and slid his claymore home over his right shoulder as they moved through the barren and cold halls of Blackstone, his mood matching the chill. Every one of the main hallways of Blackstone sported vaulted ceilings that consumed the light of the lamps hanging at even intervals along the walls. At one time, art and furniture had adorned the halls; now, however, every resource had been deemed expendable and the luxuries had been removed to help fuel the fires keeping the refugees warm. It was just another depressing detail that made Greatjon’s heart feel like his happiness was being devoured in the same fashion that the vaulted ceilings consumed the lamplight.

As they strode through the upper halls, barren walls were soon broken-up by leaded-glass windows that were taller than two men standing upon each other’s shoulders. Moonlight spilt through the portals, adding its airy bluish-silver glow to the warm lamplight. Normally the sight of a full moon and a star-filled sky would cheer Greatjon up, but on this night, it seemed more like the moon and stars were keeping a mournful vigil. His mood must have been palpable, as two guards making their rounds quickly made way for the fierce direwolf and dour man. Neither Greatjon nor Deralina paid the two men any heed as they continued past them and stepped upon a winding staircase of blue marble that would take them from the upper floors directly to the main floor.

As empty as the other floors – the refugees having been restricted to the courtyard in an attempt to prevent prying eyes from discovering Darius’ fatal condition – the main floor maintained the eerie, sorrowful atmosphere of the rest of the castle. Making their

way in and out of the muted pools of color cast by the stained-glass windows, Greatjon and Deralina remained mournfully quiet.

Eventually, feeling that the woeful silence had gone on for too long, Deralina broke the dour hush between them. *“It won’t be the same without him,”* came the mournful, telepathic condolence.

“No it won’t,” was his flat, vocal reply.

*“I’m truly sorry, Master. He was a great man,”* Lina added, emotion making her normally bright, telepathic voice seem fraught with deep heartache and loss.

Greatjon nodded numbly in response.

They finally reached the large double doors that served as the main entrance to the castle. The sturdy bronze panels were pulled open by two chainmail-adorned guards, granting them passage into the cold, star-filled night. Neither Greatjon nor Deralina felt the cold like the residents of the Vale, but the cloak and thick clothing kept up appearances. As they moved across the courtyard toward the barracks at a solemn pace, it was impossible to ignore the despair permeating the air. All about the courtyard, refugees were packed into every available space. Some of the people moved about their makeshift camps lethargically, some slept, and others were huddled about the numerous fires that burned brightly, trying to absorb what warmth they could.

Whatever their activity, for the greater portion of the refugees, coming to terms with the events of the past few weeks was proving difficult, if not impossible; one only had to see the empty, bleak eyes of those that sat staring into oblivion to grasp the depth of their trauma. The sights and sounds they’d born witness to were more horrific than any of them had ever imagined possible. Nearly everyone had lost a loved one or friend in the attacks or on the harsh trek to Blackstone, but death was something they understood and accepted as inevitable. It was the extent that the invaders had gone to that had rocked them to the very core of their being. No matter how dangerous, deadly or twisted they thought humanity could be, none of them had thought anyone or anything capable of such malevolence. Darius had done his best to help them contend with the tragedies; however, once he fell ill, the villagers had lost their one bit of solace and had once again been left to cope on their own.

Deralina sniffed at the air as she glanced about, smelling the fear and anxiety on the air. *“Do they have to be sacrificed?”*

“Have to? No,” he muttered. “But it may come to that.”

*“Is it the same as last time?”*

“Unfortunately.” He sighed deeply. “Let’s go see the captain and find out where our new charge is.”

Finding the captain was the easiest thing they had done all night. Greatjon’s first instinct was to check the captain’s office, which he recalled being in the main barracks; however, on the off-chance that he happened to be somewhere else, Greatjon inquired of one of the many soldiers roaming the grounds about the captain’s whereabouts. Not surprisingly, they eventually found themselves standing in the entrance to the captain’s office, their objective seated at his desk and deeply engrossed in mapping strategy. A lone candelabra lit the room, exposing it to be a very plain and barren space except for a paper-laden desk, a chair for guests, and the simple chair that the captain occupied.

The bald and grizzled captain, a thickset man of fifty summers with jolly bright-green eyes, looked up when the two entered. A broad, gap-toothed grin spread across his visage when he saw their familiar faces. Standing, his chainmail hauberk rattling, he said with enthusiasm, “Well I’ll be a— Greatjon! I’d heard you came sneaking in! How have you been? Please, have a seat! Have a seat!” The two men clasped wrists before Greatjon sat in the lone extra chair. Eyeing Deralina as he returned to his seat, the captain quipped, “How ya been, Deralina? Eh? Still hanging around with this old loser?” Deralina barked a gruff reply, drawing a laugh from the captain as he replied, “Thought so.”

The smile quickly vanished and he sighed, his tone turning serious. “So what brings you two back home? I trust you’ve already seen Darius?”

Greatjon nodded grimly. “Tell me what happened.”

Grant sighed. “As stupid as it sounds, it was a damn accident. They were simply pelting the walls with arrows; wasn’t anything more than harassment, and only those foolish enough to stick their heads above the wall got wounded. From what I gather, Darius was mad and wanted to vent his rage in some fashion.” Shaking his head, Grant rubbed his face. “Long story short, he scythed down most of the archers, but managed to get himself nicked by a damn arrow in the process. Just our luck that it was a Corith-be-damned blackheart arrow. Had to be the only one, too; none of the other wounded fell ill.”

Shaking his head at the absurdity of it all, Greatjon pulled out the gray crystal for the captain to see. “Well, as you can see, Grant . . . the situation is not good.”

Captain Grant shook his head and swore. “Never thought I’d live to see that, but I guess it was to be expected. I guess this means we don’t have much time left, eh?”

Greatjon nodded, returning the crystal to his pouch. “Indeed.”

Grant ran a hand over his baldhead before scratching at his chin. “Not good. . . . Did he leave any final orders?”

“Aye,” Greatjon nodded again. “He asks that we holdout long enough to get as many of the villagers out as possible.”

Nodding thoughtfully, Grant replied, “Oh, aye, I was expecting that. We’ve been clearing the tunnels beneath the castle since Darius was wounded, just in case it came to this.” He laughed cynically. “Morbid that we’d already be prepared for the worst, eh?”

Greatjon shrugged indifferently. “It was always Darius’ way. Prepare for the worst and hope for the best.”

Grant snorted. “Well, hoping didn’t do us much good – those damnable blackheart abominations saw to that.” He snorted again in disgust. “Two dead Wardens and an army of nightmares beyond our wall. I’m glad you’re here, Greatjon – but alone, I don’t think you can do all that much. Maybe if Darius hadn’t sent Lan on a fool’s hunt for Damion we might stand a chance with you two.” Sighing and shaking his head, he added, “Well . . . what’s done is done. No sense in bemoaning the past, eh? So, is there anything else that I should be aware of?”

Greatjon couldn’t help but grind his teeth both at the mention of Darius’ long missing Knight, and at once again hearing Damion’s name spoken aloud. It seemed to him that tragedy after tragedy could be laid at that man’s feet. Taking Grant’s advice, he cast the line of thought aside and turned his focus to the present, saying, “You’ll be in charge of the wall. Darius wants me to see to the refugees’ safety. Also, there’s one person in particular he wanted me to find.”

The captain barked a sarcasm-laden laugh. “Well – that shouldn’t prove *too* difficult. As you’ve seen, we have just a *few* people crammed in here,” he drawled.

Greatjon stared at him gravely. “This is important, Grant. Darius deemed her survival more important than anything else.”

Grant nodded apologetically. “Aye. Aye. Well then, lad, who’s this prize of yours, then?”

Greatjon leaned forward. “Her name is Aseria Mitsurea. Darius said you could point me to her.”

The captain smiled dryly and shook his head. “Figures as much. She won’t be hard to find at all. You see – she’s a darlion.” Greatjon blinked, taken aback by the statement, drawing an amused smirk from Grant. “Oh, aye, I see Darius didn’t mention that. Aye, she’s a darlion, and a bit of an odd one at that. When all the others left, she decided to stay. Honestly, never seemed to get along with her own kind very well. Quite a looker, I might add . . . if you’ve got a thing for the exotic.”

Greatjon shook off his shock and pressed forward. “Where is she?”

Grant motioned outside. “She’s on the battlements. Scares the men to death, the way she perches on the merlons like its nothing.” Grant paused, gauging Greatjon before asking, “Tell me something – why’s she so important?”

Greatjon stood and moved to the doorway. “She’s Cat’s replacement.”

Grant nodded and sat back in his chair. “Ah, I see. Well then, the best of luck to you and her. Now get out of here. I’ve preparations to make, and I suspect very little time left to do it in.”

Greatjon smirked. “Thanks,” he said as he turned to leave.

“Greatjon,” stated Grant.

“Yeah?” he replied, looking back over his shoulder.

“Sorry we had to meet again under such circumstances. I would’ve liked to share that bottle of ale you promised me all those years ago.”

Greatjon smiled sadly. “Me too.” With those parting words, he and Deralina left Grant to his work and made their way back into the cold night.

The battlements were crowned with thick crenels and merlons, and a twenty foot wide ironwood wall walk providing sturdy footing. Twelve unlucky watchmen patrolled sixty-foot sections of the wall, each of them bundled against the cold and bitter wind that blew about the top of the towering fortification. Fires burned in braziers in each of the towers, warming those lucky enough to have a moment to escape the wind-battered wall. The guards inside the West Tower, warmed by the brazier and tired from a long day, paid little heed to the rust-orange-haired man and the gray- and black-

spotted direwolf as the two ascended the tower and made their way onto the battlements.

Cold wind cut mercilessly into anyone taller than the nearly six foot tall merlons, which Greatjon was. Closing his eyes, he smiled, allowing the wind to relax and refresh him. He needed time to think and to make a report to Darkon – though he had no idea what he would say. However, the night was not quite over. Relaxing his mind, he told Deralina, *“Let’s go find her.”*

The three guards they passed as they trekked across the battlements acknowledged them with two slight nods, which Greatjon returned curtly. After a short jaunt, he finally spotted his target and slipped a hand into the pouch where the two crystals now resided. By touch alone, he could distinguish between the two; as a result, his hand quickly settled on the one that had formerly belong to Cat and he felt for its pulse. To those like him, the extent to which they could feel a crystal’s pulse was a gift unto itself. However, no matter how skilled one was, a crystal’s owner could be found simply by measuring its beat. The closer a crystal was to its owner, the faster the beat. Seekers were so skilled at reading a crystal’s pulse that they could find an owner from leagues away with no assistance, whereas a Warden or Knight would need to amplify the ability with fir’gan, exposing their presence to would-be enemies. However, on this night, Greatjon had little need to enhance the reading – the crystal hummed with life, beating strongly as it neared its would-be host.

Crouched on her haunches, the darlion balanced on her toes atop a merlon near the gate tower like a living gargyle. The strong wind whipping across the top of the wall buffeted her long yellow-blond hair about her, but there was no indication that the wind gusts disturb her balance.

Greatjon stopped before they reached her and held a hand down in front of Deralina’s nose to halt the direwolf. *“Why don’t you go and find something to eat,”* he suggested.

What he could only interperate as a laugh came back to his thoughts. *“I was about to suggest the same. You know how much darlions smell like cats to me,”* she replied playfully before turning and loping back the way they had come.

Greatjon continued on slowly, trying to think of what to say. The responsibility that would soon be placed on her shoulders could not simply be dumped on her. He needed to get her out of the castle and somehow convince her of the truth about her existence and the world itself. Most people went about their lives oblivious to what was actually happening around them in the shadows, which made it difficult to bring them around to the truth. He sighed to himself. No one

ever took life altering news well – especially when it asked you to abandon everything you had ever known. His thoughts continued to mull on this until he drew close enough to make out her features.

Her face was slender and attractive in the cat-like way of the darlions. Lightly accentuated cheekbones and a slender, flat nose graced her face with exotic and alluring angles. Long ears, their tips capped with tufts of white fur, swept back from her head, adding to the feline grace of her face. Her long yellow-blond hair – which was in actuality fur – would have hung to her waist when at rest, and her bangs would have just reached eye level. Her face was covered in fur short enough to be mistaken for skin if not for the white color and small accent stripes of yellow. Though she appeared to be slender underneath her fur cloak and leather armor, Greatjon was sure she was blessed with the whipcord muscles of her people that would give her strength and grace that belied her slender build.

As she turned her head in his direction to scan the horizon, it was her eyes that demanded his attention. Large and almond shaped, her blue-lavender eyes were like brightly lit, warm pools as they gazed out toward the glow of the burning fires in Blackstone Village. Though darlions rarely stirred lustful desires within him, Greatjon felt that a man could drown in those eyes.

*“Is that a sense of lust or passion coming from your cold heart?”* came the telepathic taunt from Deralina.

*“Awe at a beautiful sight in dark times.”*

*“It will stain.”*

*“That’s the sad part.”*

Greatjon shook his head and steeled himself before approaching and stopping next to her. She was short for a darlion; had she been standing on even footing with him, she would have only come up to Greatjon’s chin. For a moment, he just stood there, waiting to see if she would notice him. When it became apparent that she was either oblivious to his presence or ignoring him, he decided to speak. “What do you see?” he asked suddenly.

Though startled, she kept her balance as her head whipped around to focus her bright eyes on Greatjon. “Excuse me?” her musical voice chimed.

“What do you see?” he asked again.

She gave him a quizzical look, baffled by both the sudden arrival of a complete stranger and the odd question. “Why should I answer?”

“Because I asked.”

She looked him over, her ears twitching. “You’re the Bestyne? Right?”

He nodded. “I am. And a friend of Darius as well. Greatjon Durmont is the name.”

She nodded. “Well then, Greatjon, I would suggest being watchful. The last friend of his to visit lost her life to that crazed, red-armored man’s demon-spawned creatures.”

Greatjon flinched visibly at the narrative.

Raising an inquisitive eyebrow, she asked, “Did you know her?”

He nodded solemnly.

“Ah. . . . Well, I was friends with her while she was still alive. A beautiful brunette and an animal with a blade. Cat certainly carved her fair share of the enemy to pieces before she went to Corith’s embrace.”

Greatjon smiled sadly. “Aye, that sounds like her.”

The darlion stood and stretched, her back arching gracefully, before nimbly hopping from the merlon to the walkway. Looking up at him with her bright eyes, she nodded in sympathy. “I’m truly sorry you lost your friend, but if you’ll excuse me, I need to be getting some rest while I can. Corith only knows when they will decide to attack in full.” She started to go around him, but quickly found her path blocked as he stepped in her way. Impatient, she hissed her irritation and motioned for him to move with her gloved and armored hand. “Would you please move? I’ve got better things to do than play games!”

Greatjon reached out and grabbed her firmly by the shoulders. “Sorry – but my business with you hasn’t ended.”

“Look,” a fierce light began to burn in her eyes, “I don’t have time for this! I need to rest and–” she tried to shake his hands off, but found them to be as immovable as a mountain. She gave a violent shake but could barely budge the grip. “What the hells?” she exclaimed looking up into Greatjon’s eyes, surprise and confusion written clearly on her face. “Who in the hells are you?”

“I told you,” he said sternly, “Greatjon Durmont. I’m a friend of Darius.”

“If you’re really a friend of his, then you’ll let me go!”

Two guards from the gate tower peaked out to see what the commotion was about, but a firm look from Greatjon sent them back to their fire. Turning his attention back to the darlison, he said, "I can't do that – Darius has put me in charge of you."

She stared at him in amazement. "He did what? I don't think so. I am his charge! He wouldn't do that! Now let me go! I want to speak to Darius about this treatment!" She tried to wiggle free again – to no avail.

"Darius is dead," Greatjon stated bluntly, bringing an abrupt end to her struggles.

Sagging in his grip, her eyes grew wide with a mix of horror and sadness as she whispered, "What did you say?"

"Darius is dead," he repeated firmly, his words softened by remorse. "His final orders were to place you under my protection."

She blinked in disbelief and shook her head. "I knew he was sick, but . . ." she shook her head again before looking back up at Greatjon with sad eyes, tears welling in the corners of them. "You're telling the truth, aren't you?"

Greatjon nodded and slowly released his grip on her shoulders. "I'm sorry, but it's true."

She shook her head again as she struggled with the news. "I'd heard whispers that his condition was fatal, but I never thought. . . ." She suddenly shuddered and sighed before finishing weakly, "He was always so strong." Closing her eyes, she gathered herself before looking Greatjon in the eyes. "You say that he placed me in your charge?"

Nodding, he answered softly, "Aye."

"Darius had always taken a special interest in me. He was even responsible for me meeting Cat. They'd made mention of special training for me, citing my work ethic and skills, but I'd never would have thought their interest would run so deep as to assign me a protector." Her brow furrowed. "Why would he do that?"

Greatjon leaned against the wall. "The fact that you know of my Order leads me to believe he's told you some about who we are. Correct?"

She nodded. "He did, but he always seemed a bit elusive. When his friend died, his interest in me grew; he started to tell me more, but then . . ." her throat clenched as her train of thought led her thoughts to Darius' death, "then . . . he fell ill . . ." she finished

and shrugged weakly, tears slipping from her eyes. “That was that. I haven’t spoken with him since then . . .” she trailed off. “Guess I never will,” she whispered as Darius’ death continued to sink in.

Greatjon nodded. “Then let me give you the short of it. Each of our Orders has a hierarchy, and when one of those positions is left vacant, it is left to the rest to fill it. When Cat died, her position of Preceptor and Warden was left vacant. You, Aseria Mitsurea, have been chosen to fill her position.”

All thoughts of Darius’ death vanished as Greatjon’s declaration cut through the fog of loss threatening to engulf her mind. She stared at him blankly, not quite sure she’d heard him right. “Me? An Order Preceptor?” she asked slowly. “I know you are joking now. A position of such importance should always go to the next in line, not some outsider.”

Greatjon stared at her firmly. “It doesn’t work that way. Our ranks are determined by our skills and our destiny – if you want to call it that.” He sighed and folded his arms across his chest as she smirked in disbelief and shook her head. “You are what we call a Gifted.”

“Gifted?” her brow furrowed in puzzlement as she wiped her eyes clear, her tears quickly drying up as her focus shifted. “I’m good with a bow, sure, but I wouldn’t call it something so grandiose.”

Greatjon shook his head. “That’s not what I mean. Have you ever heard the term fir’gan?”

“Fir’gan? Now you’re bantering about terms normally heard in sermons,” she said with a bemused chuckle. “It’s nothing more than a youngling’s tale.”

Greatjon pushed away from the wall. “No, it’s not. Fir’gan is the lifeblood of all things – and it is very, very real.” Before she could retort, Greatjon held up his hand, palm upward, and brought to life a small fireball with barely a thought.

Aseria yelped as it burst into existence, the young flame hissing and spitting as the strong wind fought to extinguish it.

Overcoming her surprise, she leaned forward to investigate it, awe and amazement written all over her face. “How did you do that?” she breathed, her melancholy thoughts completely banished by the display and replaced with disbelief.

Greatjon closed his fist, extinguishing the flame with a hiss. “Fir’gan. I am like you, Aseria. I can see and control fir’gan – I am a Gifted,” he stated bluntly.

She stared back at him, still mired in disbelief. “I’m not sure I can swallow all this. Why me? Why now?”

Greatjon turned to face the glow of the fires burning in the village and pointed into the distance. “What do you see?” he asked in answer to her question.

She looked at him quizzically. “If you’re asking me if I can see fir’gan – I don’t. What I do see, however, is an army of invaders who have attacked and raped this land and its people for no other reason than to indulge their blood lust as humans seem to always do.” She hesitated just a moment and then asked, “What do you see?”

Greatjon’s brown eyes stared in the direction of Blackstone Village coldly. “I see a man who’s done this before. I see an army that kills every man no matter his age and rapes every mature woman – including those who have barely begun to show signs of womanhood. I see depravity on a tremendous scale, and I see everything that is wrong with humanity and a mockery of Corith’s will.”

Despite similar assertions, she stared at him, aghast at what she had just heard. “How can you speak with such coldness about such horrid things?” she hissed with a mix of disbelief and anger. He turned his gaze on her, and she could see the pain of countless years gazing back at her. She’d seen that look before in Darius’ eyes, and had never fully come to terms with how one could carry such a burden.

Words spoken with a calmness that belied the rage burning behind them, he said, “Because I’ve seen it happen before, and I know the army and the man you face. None of us stands a chance against a man like him in our current situation. If you choose to believe me and trust me, then one day you might be strong enough to face such a demon.”

“Who is he?” she inquired.

Greatjon turned away from her, ignoring the question. The currents, both within the keep and toward the village, were beginning to behave in a foreboding manner. Fighting down a growl of anger, he said, “This castle will not see another night. If you wish to live and truly make a difference against atrocities such as what has befallen this Vale, then meet me in the courtyard in five hours – there are things about you that you need to know.”

Before she could respond, his long strides had carried him down the battlements, leaving her to digest his cryptic words.

The fire had burned down to glowing embers, casting the study into deep shadow. Darius sat silently in the shadows of his chair, watching the fire slowly die as if it was a mirror of his own life force. Ever since the blackheart's arrow had nicked him, he'd been slowly dying. If he had been normal like those he had fought to protect for so long, he would have suffered a horrible but quick death. Instead, because of the small amount of poison in his system, his gifts had kept him alive for much longer than he had any right to be. However, his choice to break the bond with his crystal had seen his illness accelerate, drawing him closer to death's embrace. He didn't regret the choice in the least. By severing the connection, he had saved his crystal from the corruption that would have consumed it had he died while still bonded. A violent cough disturbed his motionless body, forcing black blood onto his lips, the despoiled liquid sliding down his chin. He didn't bother to wipe it away; he no longer had the energy or the care to do so.

A bright blue light burst forth from the shadows at the back of the room, illuminating the study for moment before quickly fading. There was a moment of silence before a soft, mournful woman's voice gently said, "You should have called me."

For a moment, Darius' eyes lit up and a smile tried unsuccessfully to creep onto his face. "I know," was all he managed.

The shadows in the back of the room shifted and a long, strong feminine figure separated from the inky depths. Moving in front of Darius with silken, animal-like grace, she crouched on her haunches so she could peer into his eyes. Placing a graceful, four-fingered hand on his lovingly, she said mournfully, "I am so deeply sorry, my beloved."

Though it was difficult to smile, his eyes did for him what his lips were struggling to do as he tried to make out her features. The shadow's hid much, but he could see her sharp bronze-colored features and long, swept-back ears. Golden eyes, with their vertical pupils, glowed in the dying firelight as they met Darius' lovingly. "Not your fault, Love."

Her sleek head shook resolutely, her thick black hair shining dully in the dim firelight. "It is – I should have been here with you! I never should have—"

Darius reached a hand forward and weakly stroked her high cheekbone along one of the white stripes he could make out on her tanned skin, relishing the feel of her soft, almost fur-like flesh. She leaned into the gesture and closed her eyes, tears beginning to stream down her cheeks. "Shhhhhhhhuush. It's all right. None of this is your fault," he whispered consolingly.

She sniffed and opened her eyes. “No! It is! I ran when I should have fought! I left you alone in all this!”

Darius forced a smile, draining his energy even more. “My dear, sweet Valisiana – you have a heart too big for your own good. If you hadn’t run, you would be dead and so would our child. Darkon would have seen to it that our . . . violation of protocol was fixed. Because of what you did, you lived – as did our child.”

She smiled and tried to laugh with joy, tears streaming down her cheeks, but failed completely. “You are the brave one, my dearest. You helped keep me and our child secret and safe. For that, I will be eternally grateful. . . . And your son would be too, if he knew of our sacrifice.”

Darius gave the briefest hint of a smirk and nodded slightly. “You have watched over him, yes?”

“I have, from a distance,” she said, reassuring him despite knowing that he was well aware that she always had. She smiled again, white teeth and elongated canines visible. “He’s like us all too much. He . . . he even has a wife of his own, and she is with child! We’re going to be grandparents, my love!”

The news forced another weak smile from his battered body and a tear of joy escaped his eye. “Thank you for that news, my love. I am at peace knowing that our future is in good hands.” He gave her cheek one last loving stroke before dropping his hand to his lap, his strength slowly fading. “I have one last thing to ask of you, my dearest.”

Valisiana nodded enthusiastically. “Anything.”

Darius gestured weakly to the shadows to his right. “There is a hidden coffer in the wall over there. Mine and Cat’s crusaders reside within. Take them and guard them until such a time that new and trustworthy masters are found.” He coughed violently. “I will not risk more crusaders falling under Darkon’s will.” Valisiana nodded, squeezing Darius’ hand firmly to let him know she understood. “Go now,” he whispered. “If you remain too long, you may draw unwanted attention. Keep our child and his family safe. Don’t let them become a target of his unwarranted rage.”

Darius could feel tears dripping onto his hand as she cupped it in both of her hands and brought it to her soft lips, kissing it with a passion that conveyed the profound sense of loss she felt. “I will miss you, my love. Kylir will be a darker place without you.” She kissed the skeletal hand deeply one last time, no longer bothering to fight back the tears.

With movements that were extremely tentative despite their grace, she stood up and walked back into the shadows. Darius could hear the familiar click as the hidden coffer was opened. There was a brief rustle and a suppressed yelp of sadness as his beloved retrieved the swords. A moment of silence followed, and then the flare of blue light returned for a brief period before it winked out and she was gone.

Darius turned his gaze back to the dying fire, tears of joy running down his cheeks. He could pass in peace now, without fear for his family or retribution for their transgressions. His son lived and was to be a father soon – he couldn't ask for more. As the fire slowly died, he offered a silent prayer that his son could be the father that he had never been. Slowly, ever so slowly, his breathing slowed and his eyes grew heavy. Then, as the last of the embers in the hearth died, he could almost hear the castle moan with loss as the last of his breath passed from his body.

With the gentlest of smiles upon his withered lips, he slipped into Corith's gentle embrace.