

Warders Of The Gate

By

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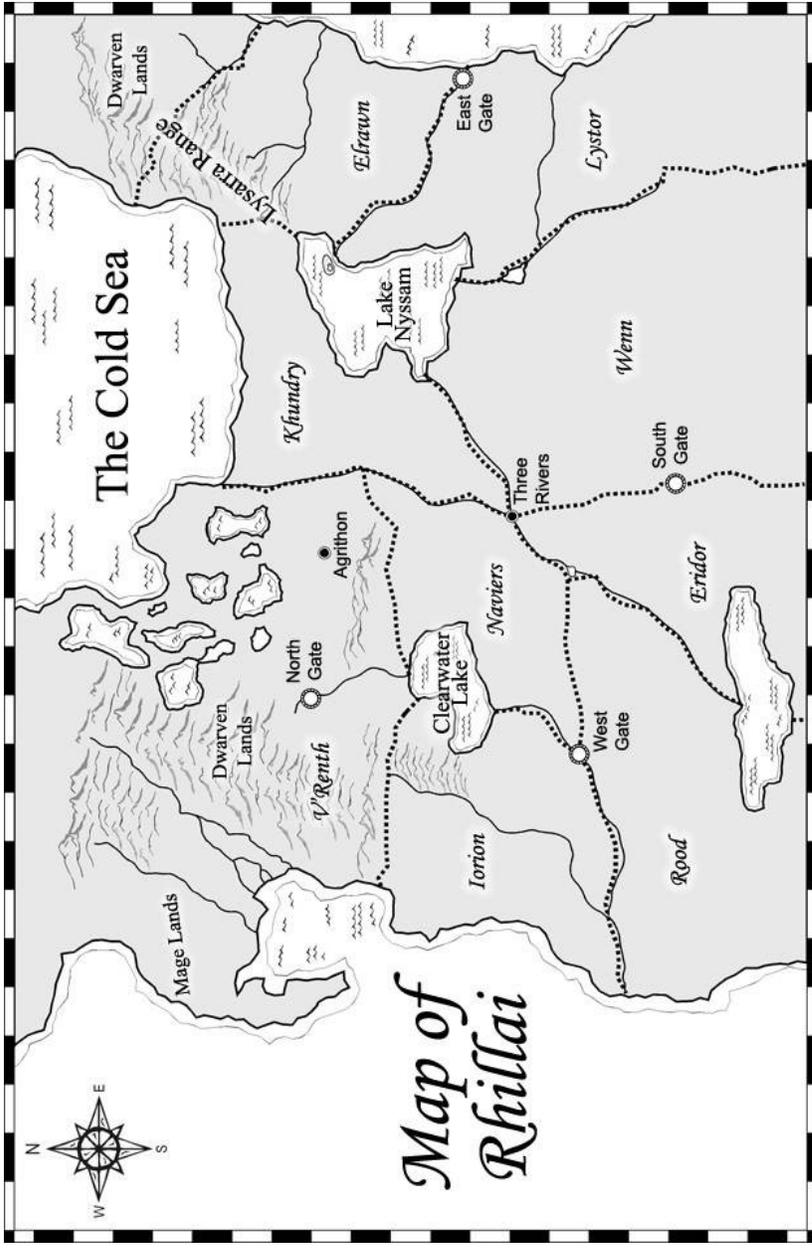
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INTRODUCTION

This is the second edition of *Warders of the Gate*. The first edition was published by Arctic Wolf Publishing, however, that novel is now out of print and Arctic Wolf has closed its doors.

CHAPTER ONE

Diving from the sky, the hawk quickly folded its wings, making them sleek along its body for a few seconds. Then, suddenly, the hawk outstretched them, as it arced slightly upward, parallel to the ground. It soared over the small field below and into the forest, where it confidently twisted and turned to avoid the trees. Spying its prey, it gave no cry as it brought its claws forward to attack the eyes of a wooden dummy set up for the purpose. The hawk's momentum continued to carry it forward and, after executing the swift blow to the fake enemy's eyes, it quickly refolded its wings as it sailed over the dummy's head. Rolling in the air, the hawk's form blurred and changed to a man. The human landed, rolled twice, stood, and turned around quickly.

"Well done, lad," a deep rumbling voice chuckled from the forest. Stepping from behind a tree, a large man, tall and broad shouldered, strolled toward the dummy. His hair was a dark brown with a full beard and mustache that hid much of his face. "You're small and quick. Use that to your advantage."

"And you, Gillun? How would you deal with the dummy?" the lad asked, dusting some dirt from his trousers.

Gillun stepped closer to the dummy and, as he did, his form suddenly blurred and changed. A throaty growl erupted from his new form, as a large paw swiped the head from the dummy's body. The bear brought its other paw raking down the front of the dummy leaving four deep, running scars from top to bottom. Changing back to a man, Gillun walked over to pick up the severed head.

"It is only a dummy, Tian," he stated matter-of-factly, holding up the head that began to empty of its straw contents. "A real foe will not stand still and let you rip the top of his head off."

Gillun turned and forced the dummy's head back onto the wooden post, the wood exposed in the throat area. "Another run, and this time attack the throat. It means not changing into human form right away. I want you to snap the stick in half, and change to human form before hitting the ground."

Tian nodded obediently as he promptly changed into a hawk and flew away. Gillun watched as the hawk made his way out far enough to gather the required speed on its return. A moment later, the hawk sped toward the dummy. The hawk spread its wings wide as outreached claws clutched the stick and snapped it in two. However, unlike the last attack, the hawk lost control of its landing and fell towards the ground. Tian changed but not quickly enough to gain his balance. He landed solidly on his rear and then fell backwards.

Gillun's laughter echoed through the woods. "You did what I said," he replied between laughs. "But I should have explained that I wanted you to land on your feet!"

"I knew what you wanted!" Tian said hotly, springing up from the forest floor.

"What then? You thought you'd show me a better way of recovering?"

"No, I ... that is..." Tian stuttered and started to laugh also, as he pictured what he had done.

"We'll try this again tomorrow, if your back side can handle the punishment," Gillun chuckled as he turned to leave.

"No, I'll try again today. And I'll keep trying until I get it right," Tian said stubbornly.

"Well, lad, I'll leave you to your practices, then. It is nearly my turn at the gate, and I need some supper," Gillun said.

As Tian changed and flew away once again, Gillun started along the well-used path and left the practice area. Within minutes, he came to an open field, with an assortment of cabins laid out before him. He walked towards the center of the village, and toward one of the larger structures.

"How fares the boy?" called out a male voice before he made it to the cabin. Lost in his thoughts, the words startled him. He looked around for a face even though he recognized the voice.

"He does well, Malerak," Gillun informed his friend, smiling. "He's almost as stubborn as you are, but unlike someone else, he hasn't crossed over to tenacious. He knows when to quit. And he is fast in the change, though he doesn't realize it, yet."

Malerak chuckled. "Did he land on his feet?"

"No," Gillun replied, laughing. "Do you remember Merith when she was training?" Malerak nodded. "She would start the change just after she grabbed the stick, so she couldn't land on her feet for the longest time. Even now she is hard pressed to make a landing. The lad didn't start the change until he was halfway to the ground, and he almost made it."

"Maybe it is because he is a hawk and she is an eagle?"

"Could be," Gillun replied, shrugging. "Who cooks for us today?" he asked as they approached their destination.

"Pryth does. With the help of Samma."

"Oh!" Gillun said with raised brows. "Interesting ... Do you think there is something between them?"

"I don't know," Malerak shrugged.

"Bah! Were you as good at rumors as you are at fighting, I would know the whole story!" Malerak smiled and bowed slightly at the compliment. "Have you eaten?" Gillun asked.

"Not yet. Although with Pryth cooking, there should be some excellent meat at the table."

"What are we waiting for, then?" Gillun asked.

"Not me," Malerak replied with a slight smile as he started toward the dining hall. Gillun's long strides pulled him alongside Malerak as they reached the cabin.

They found the room crowded with men and women, most eating at the long tables that filled the room. At the far end of the cabin, a set of doors led to the kitchen. Gillun and Malerak made their way to the doors while greeting those they passed.

"You were right. I smell roasted meat," Gillun said entering the kitchen. "And it's a savory smell at that." Pots were set over several fires. A brick oven was set into the wall on the opposite side of them.

"I already fixed your plate, you old bear," Pryth grumbled from behind a pot. "It's on your table." Gillun looked outside the door to a small table where Pryth had pointed, spying a plate full of fruit and vegetables.

"You expect me to eat that?" Gillun asked in absolute horror. He whirled around to say a few choice words to Pryth to find the old man grinning from ear-to-ear. Gillun's expression immediately softened. "I must be getting old if you're starting to get the better of me. Now where's my real dinner?"

"There's stew in that pot. I'm not a handmaiden sent to serve you. So get yer own bowl," Pryth retorted as he went back to stirring his vegetables.

"Where is Samma? Shouldn't she be cleaning?" Gillun asked, holding back a grin as he helped himself to the stew. Before Malerak could warn him, Samma whacked Gillun in the back of the head with the broom handle.

"What --" Gillun started to say as he turned around.

"I'll give you a cleaning!" Samma told him, shoving the broom tip into his gut, knocking the wind from him. He almost dropped his bowl.

"We'll just get our food and leave, Samma," Malerak said quickly as he edged around her to the pot. Gillun followed suit. Both quietly filled their bowls and hurried back to the main room.

"She's a sneaky one," Gillun said as he sat down. "I didn't even hear her step up behind me." He plopped his spoon into the bowl and stirred it around, checking to see what was in it.

"If I hadn't caught movement out of the corner of my eye, I wouldn't have known she was there either. She is a sly one. I wonder if the traits of the animals merge into the human, or the human has the traits of the animal before he is chosen."

"Perhaps a little of both," Gillun suggested with a smile. He lifted the spoon and sipped the broth. Between spoonfuls, he muttered, "This is good."

"Perhaps," Malerak agreed on the former. "Your turn at the gate?" he asked as he ate. "Mmm, I'm going to miss this good food," he added stuffing his mouth.

"Yes," Gillun replied. "In fact, after I'm done, I'm headed there. You?"

"I stopped here on my way to the North Gate. In fact, I have orders to pick up Tian and take him with me. We leave tomorrow."

"So soon?" Gillun asked, shocked. "And with Tian?" He was silent for a moment, and then said, "I supposed he's ready. It just seems like only yesterday that he arrived here for training."

"He is ready, isn't he?" Malerak inquired, wanting an official seal of approval from his trainer. He had no desire to take along a youngster who wasn't ready for what might lay ahead.

"He's as ready as he'll ever get, I suppose. Besides, the elves didn't just give him the changing, but trained him some before sending him here so we could do the rest, now that they have given us the responsibilities of training the new Warders." Gillun sat down his spoon, suddenly finding the roast stew less appealing. "I was just growing fond of the lad, too. And getting used to having you around. How long at the North Gate this time?"

"A while. Not sure how long. But it's quieter up there. Nothing like here with all the travel and trading going on, and I prefer it quiet." Malerak paused. "However, my orders are to manage the gate."

The comment brought a smile to Gillun's face. "You? Managing a gate? Why, next thing you know, I'll be replacing the old wolf himself."

"You might indeed," Malerak said with a mischievous glint in his eye. "When Tichal gave me my orders, he said he was thinking about taking a vacation. I suggested that you fill in for him."

Gillun's jaw dropped. "You're joking?" he asked, leaning back.

"Maybe. Then again, maybe not," Malerak grinned. "I imagine you'll find out when he takes his vacation."

"Why you --" Gillun began, waving his spoon at Mal.

"Gillun! I did it! I landed on my feet!" Tian shouted as he burst open the door. Gillun turned and laughed as he saw the excessively pleased look on the young man's face.

"Tian, lad," Gillun chuckled, "I never doubted you. Now get some food from the kitchen and hurry it up. It's almost time for my shift and there's someone here I want you to meet."

Tian's nose perked as he finally noticed the smell of roast wafting in from the kitchen. "It's dinner time already?" he asked as he bolted for a bowl.

"Young and stubborn," Gillun sighed. "He would still be out there if he had not succeeded. Reminds me of someone else I know."

"I wouldn't know who you're talking about," Malerak grinned. Tian returned from the kitchen carrying a large bowl of stew and some bread.

"Tian, this is Malerak," Gillun said as Tian took a seat next to his trainer.

The boy tried to mumble a respectful greeting, but his mouth was full of fresh bread.

"I'll be late for my shift, so there's no time for long introductions, I'm afraid," Gillun said. "It seems Malerak has orders to take you with him to the North Gate."

Tian immediately stopped chewing, his eyes wide. Somehow around the mouthful of food, he managed to get out, "North Gate?!"

"We leave tomorrow," Malerak informed him. "Unfortunately, that only gives you the rest of the evening to pack." He saw Tian swallow and open his mouth, ready to burst out a string of questions. Malerak held up his hand to silence the boy. "We'll have plenty of time for your questions on the way there. Right now, I've got other things to discuss with Gillun." He rose from the table. "Enjoy your meal, and I'll see you bright and early tomorrow at first light."

"But --" Tian started, eyes still wide with shock.

"Don't worry," Gillun said, slapping the boy reassuringly on the back. "I've known Malerak a long time, and he'll take good care of you. I'll stop by after my shift so we can say our goodbyes." With that, the two men turned towards the door and left the baffled boy behind.

"So I assume there's more to this than Tichal just simply telling you to oversee the North gate?" Gillun asked as Malerak accompanied him to the gate.

Malerak sighed. "War, if the rumors prove to be true."

"There is always war," Gillun scoffed. "The duchies are always battling over territory claims, fields, tax rights--you name it. Even the dwarven clans never stop warring."

"Eridor and Wenn have stopped fighting."

"Really?" Gillun exclaimed, taken aback. "They've been warring with each other for, why for fifty years at least. Eridor has such strong ties to the seat of the last High King. And you say they've stopped fighting? And that there's still a threat for war?"

"Yes, but there's more. Lystor has stopped raiding Elrawn. Khundry has made a trade agreement with Wenn, while Iorion and Naviers still squabble."

"Well, I would say that's good news," Gillun said. "With Eridor and Wenn at peace, and Khundry in trade agreement, we might actually be close to having a High King again. The Kingdom knows we could use one."

"Except there's more to the story," Malerak warned him as they took a sharp turn in the road. "Rumor has it that a mage is uniting these duchies. Think about it, Gillun. Both Eridor and Wenn have tyrants for Dukes, who rule their duchy with fear and force. Khundry is little better, but now some mage may be uniting these three. Rumor also has it that Lystor is close to being the fourth. Put the pieces together. Eridor and Wenn border the South Gate. Lystor borders the East Gate. It would not take that much to overrun the small Warder forces at those gates."

Gillun stopped in mid-stride. "They wouldn't dare...would they? That would bring the full force of the elven army down upon them. No one in their right mind goes up against the elven army!"

"But control of those gates would mean the elves would have no choice but to concede to the demands of the holder, or take them back by force. If the four duchies unite, that's going to be a very fierce war. Although, I have no doubt that the elves would ultimately win. And if the gates are left alone, it will be a war for the seat of the High King."

"So Tichal truly believes that, either way, there will be a war soon?" Gillun stated more than asked. "No more petty skirmishes, but a full fledged war?"

"Yes. And I go to the North Gate to prepare it, and to find where the duchy of V'Renth stands amid all this. The North Gate is the only gate to stand in a duchy and not along the border. Which, if V'Renth is with us, makes it harder to take. If it's against us, then the North Gate is in a pretty vulnerable position."

"What about Elrawn, Iorion, Naviers, and Rood?"

Malerak kicked a pebble, disgusted with the subject of the conversation. "Iorion and Naviers are still fighting each other, but if war breaks out, I believe they may call a truce and stand together. Rood would probably join them. The real question is, would they have the time to gather enough forces to fight? And Elrawn is little more than a sparsely populated duchy bordering the dwarven lands. They are too far removed to be much of a threat to anyone."

"Surely these duchies know what we know?" Gillun asked. "They can see what is happening, too."

"Yes, they know. Why they aren't doing something about it, I don't know. Who can say what goes on in the minds of dukes -- except for the dreams of being High King. They're all politics and intrigue."

The two finally reached the Gate and Malerak gazed upon it. "It still inspires awe in me," he said staring at it as Gillun promptly relieved the Warder on duty and watched him head back to town.

The Gate was a large arch that towered far among the treetops and was wide enough for several wagons to pass though side-by-side. Carved in the archway were many runes that glowed and flashed various colors. It gave the Gate an eerie effect, as the gateway itself was black as the darkest of moonless nights.

The four gates of the Kingdom were constructed by the elves to allow passage to and from their world. The elves then drafted the original Warders to guard and open their gates, searching for certain children, with an affinity for magic, throughout the kingdom. The children were taken to the elven world and trained to fill their roles as Warders. Those first Warders were special. The elves wished to keep the Warder numbers restricted, so they used their magic to give the first generation of the gatekeepers a very long life span. And so, the first Warders were created. But many years later, the elves realized that some Warders were growing weary of their duties, and so they began to train other generations. However, the following groups of Warders retained normal life spans.

The magical talents common to all of them were the change and the required training. Each Warder could shape-change into an animal -- a certain and specific animal. Some of the first among them could even speak with the animals. Others had training that was equivalent with that of the elves, which made them very fierce warriors indeed.

Standing before the gate, Malerek heard the familiar voices in his head. The elves communicated from the other side of the gate by their gift of telepathy. There was a caravan of elven merchants waiting to proceed.

The other Warder on watch placed his palm upon the gate, and the blackness of the gateway shimmered. The darkness slowly gave way to a bright mirror that reflected the road and trees on the Kingdom's side. The mirror then wavered and rippled as the elven caravan rode through.

"Lan Naesa rui Warder thrales," the caravan leader said. (Family Naesa honors the Warder.)

"Shidha mika," Gillun replied. (An elven thanks)

Malerak watched the caravan go by. He had seen so many of them in his long life, for he was one of the first generation. Turning back to Gillun, he drew him aside, not wanting his conversation overhead by the other Warder.

"Tichal wants to see you," Malerak informed him.

"Well, that doesn't surprise me after what you've told me. When?"

"In six days. Tichel's been meeting with most of the first ones and giving them various orders. Mine, of course, keeping the North Gate safe and operational. I don't know who would, or even could, attack the North Gate. It's in the mountains with one windy road leading down from it to the river below. The dwarven lands lie just north and no one has ever attacked them. Only the mountain tribes live around the gate and they are few and far between, but it is my gate to guard. I've never been sure why the elves put it there in the first place, except maybe to trade with the dwarves."

"I don't supposed you have any idea as to what I am to do?" his friend asked.

"No clue. Tichel didn't allude to anything else. Just gave me my orders, which included sending you to him. However, he did say that after he talked with all the first ones, he was going to South Gate."

"Things are that serious?"

"Tichal believes they are. You'll probably end up managing this gate or filling in for Tichal when he goes south. That's my best guess."

"Where are all the first ones?" Gillun asked.

"Heh," Malerak huffed. "Who can ever keep up? Why?"

"Just wondering," Gillun replied. "It's been awhile since I've seen everyone."

"Well, Tichal is at Three Rivers. I think Bromm is there also. Talia is at the South Gate. Emry is at the East Gate. I'm not sure where Dansi and Gregory are. And who knows where Kerri is right now. She's always traveling somewhere, following her visions, though I do miss seeing her."

"She saved me from a nasty injury with one of her visions. I don't doubt her at all," Gillun said, sticking up for his colleague.

"Neither do I," Malerak agreed. "But she's a hard one to find when you want her. The last I heard of her was that she was headed up to the dwarven lands above the North Gate. She was the first to talk to Tichel and you'll be the last. If she is somewhere around the North Gate, I'll pick up her scent and track her down."

"She was the first? You think she had a vision and told Tichel about it?"

"I don't know," Malerak said. "Tichel didn't mention it, but he's like that. He'll only tell you what he thinks you need to know. It's a failing of his."

Gullun laughed. "And how many times have you told him that?"

"Too many to remember and too many fights after that," Malerak grinned. "It took me awhile, but I finally learned to keep my mouth shut about it. Neither one of us will back down, so it's best to accept each other and go on with our lives."

"Wisdom from the fearsome and tenacious Malerak?" Gillun asked, eyes mockingly wide and a grin spreading across his face.

"I respect him as a leader," Malerak said, ignoring Gillun. "Even if I don't agree with all of his decisions. He's more than proved himself in the past."

"True enough," Gillun agreed. "And we've had some bad battles, too."

"We might be in for some more," Malerak said with a sigh. "I've seen enough. Why can't we have a lasting peace?"

"Greed, power, corruption, lust," Gillun said. "Just to name a few. We'll always have fighting as long as we have those." He stopped and turned to look at the gate. Both of them could feel the energy in the air. Then they heard whisperings from the far side and Gillun moved to open the gate.

"They're in a hurry," Malerak said, stepping aside.

"Indeed," Gillun said, quickly placing his palm upon the Gate. The portal opened and elven warriors on horses immediately galloped through. Once clear of the gate, they urged their horses into a full run. Fifteen riders came and went without a spoken word.

"I think they know something we don't," Gillun said, closing the gate. "It's just a small scouting party, but I'd bet each gate had one come through. Let me check." Gillun placed his hand back upon the gate. Instead of opening it, however, he utilized the magic of the gates to telepathically talk to the Warders on duty at the other portals. A minute later Gillun removed his hand. "Yes. Each gate had a similar party come through."

"Well, whatever it is, the elves must not view it as that bad if that's all they're sending," Malerak said.

"Six days, you said?" Gillun asked, changing the subject.

"Yes," Malerak answered. "Be there in six." Gillun nodded.

"Looks like the rest of the Warders are showing up," Gillun said, looking down the road.

"We did show up a little early," Malerak said. "As long as there is one."

"As long as there is one," Gillun repeated. It was a tenet of the Warders. There must be one at each Gate at all times. Only a Warden could open the gate from this side.

"I should be going," Malerak said. "I need to pack and get some sleep before daybreak." He paused for a mere moment. "Fare thee well, Gillun," he said looking into friend's eyes.

"Fare you well," Gillun replied. Both men realized that this could be the last time they saw each other, but they kept their thoughts concealed. Malerak turned, and slowly made his way back to town. Two Warders turned around after he had passed and stared at him.

"That was Malerak," one whispered, but loud enough for Gillun to hear.

"Really?" the other asked.

"I think so."

"I thought he'd be bigger, with the rumors about him and all," the other said. Both turned and started walking towards Gillun.

Malerak heard them, too, but didn't show it. He took his time walking back to town. It was one of the few warm days he would get to enjoy before his arrival at the North Gate. He looked down at the many prints left in the dirt by horse, wagon and man. "A path well traveled," he murmured, wondering just how many times he'd walked this road.

He wondered how many more he'd get to walk it.

CHAPTER TWO

The slack in the thick chain slowly dissolved as Gryam began his long walk upwards. The mine's walls ran slick with dampness and moss. This part of the mine ran close to an underground river and because of that, Gryam wore special shoes. He couldn't very well pull his cart out while slipping on the wet ground, so his shoes held small spikes that allowed him to dig into the earth and gain a hold while he pulled the cart full of ore.

As dwarves go, Gryam was considered fairly normal. His muscular body, covered with scars and reeking from irregular bathing, barely reached four feet. His long, ragged hair hung down to his shoulders, complimented by a scraggly beard full of dirt and pebbles. His face was chiseled and hard, and he was stubborn to the very core of his being.

However, there were a few differences that made Gryam stand out among his race. His strength was legendary among his kin. They called him Vhaedaeha, which means 'mule-team'. Instead of using the creatures to pull his cart out of the mines, Gryam did it himself. He prided himself with his abilities, but at the same time, he very much hated the nickname that was given to him, for he was no mangy mule. Gryam was also undefeated when it came to wrestling. But his most whispered about attribute was that he had no family in town. Dwarves were very family oriented and to not have family around was very peculiar.

"Vhaedaeha, indeed," he muttered as he dug in and started to pull his ore-laden cart up the sloping passageway. "I am no mule," he grunted as his muscles bunched and corded. The chain had clinked initially, but was silent as the slack lessened and the squeak of the cart's wheels began.

Gryam's special boots made his job easier as he stomped each foot into the ground and used the spikes to keep from slipping backwards, especially on the wet ground. The cart was full of the Maker's Ore, which made it extremely heavy. It would have required at least two mules to pull it out, but with the ground being damp, the animals would have been useless. That was one reason why Gryam had taken the abandoned mine -- he knew he could pull the cart out. The primary reason was that he knew there was ore still in the mine, even though his kin had abandoned it long ago as being barren.

Once the water started seeping through the walls, all the dwarves promptly abandoned it. No one wanted to chance breaking through to the river, or to have a section collapse on them from the loose earth. Gryam's own mine had played out awhile back and he was stuck with either finding a new site, which meant digging from the ground down, or taking ownership of the abandoned mine. As soon as he ventured down into the passageways, he knew there was ore. River or not, he was determined to bring the ore out of that place.

Once Gryam's ascent started, there was no way to stop. The sloping passageway wouldn't let the cart just sit still, and Gryam couldn't just hold the cart there while he chocked it. No, he had to make the trip all at once without resting. Two and a half hours later, Gryam finally saw the light of day with sweat dripping from his face, chest, and arms. Only the tree sap that he had applied to his palms had kept the chain from slipping through his hands.

His head throbbing, his eyes burning from sweat, his legs wobbling, his arms tight, his fingers stiff, and his back full of pain, he emerged from the mine into the bright sun. When the cart slid slightly downhill into the holding area, resting against two large chocks, Gryam finally let the chain fall from his grip. As he caught his breath, Gryam looked out over the valley before him and watched his kin hustle and bustle about.

The town spread out on the bottom of the valley. Dwellings of wood, stone, and a mixture of both littered the land, with most congested in the center. A large stream ran between two hills, emptying into a small lake next to the settlement. Various holes dotted the hillside all around the town. These were the openings to the mines.

"Hoya, elana!" Gryam managed to shout, albeit not very loudly. A young dwarf just down the hill stopped and looked up. The mining was left to the men, but dwarves old enough to carry water buckets were quickly enlisted for the smaller tasks. The boys diligently delivered water, food and equipment to the dwarves working the mines. In some instances, they also helped to ferry the ore from the carts to the smithy.

"Holai, eldena," the youth yelled back, acknowledging Gryam as someone who had passed from being an eligible adult male into the later ages where they weren't interested anymore in raising a family. Rarely did a dwarf take a wife after reaching eldena, although it had been done.

"Give me some water, elada," Gryam said, wiping the sweat from his brow. Everyone thought he had just entered the age of eldena. After burying two wives, he was glad to be considered at that point in his life, because no one would question why he wasn't married. Dwarven life wasn't an easy life and loss of family members was a common occurrence.

Gryam stood, stretched, and rested while waiting for the water. His pride wouldn't let him sit and relax, although his muscles were screaming for just that. The young dwarf raced to him with a canteen of water.

"More, eldena?" the boy asked. A black shadow was just starting to show around his cheeks and chin, indicating his facial hair would soon appear. His nose was straight and unbroken. Gryam looked closer at him. Most dwarven youths had their nose broken from fights before they learned to run. Either this boy was avoiding fights or he was very good at fighting.

Gryam took a mouthful of water and swished it around in his mouth. Slowly, he let it trickle down his throat. Once gone, he lifted the canteen and drank the rest of the water. "How many fights ye been in?" Gryam asked him.

"Why do ye wanna know?" the boy replied, peering at Gryam with dark eyes.

"Impert'nent, aren't ye?" Gryam stated, fixing the boy with a hard look. The two stood, locked in stares, until the boy looked down. No one had ever made Gryam look away in a contest of stares.

"Ye need an apprentice," the boy said, looking up after a few seconds.

"Ha!" Gryam laughed, amused at the lad's directness. "Boy, no one wants to be my apprentice. There's a reason they call me Vhaedaeha!"

"I want to be your apprentice," the boy said. A light burned behind his eyes, and Gryam saw the truth of his words. His expression quickly grew serious.

"Answer me this, then. How many fights?"

"Nine," the boy replied proudly. "I won them all, easily, and now no one will fight me. None of the other elada, that is."

"Hmmp," Gryam grimaced. "Time to find out just how good ye are, boy. I need a drink. Come along, then." Gryam started down the hill towards the closest tavern.

"I am elada. I'm not allowed in the taverns." The boy hurriedly followed his elder.

"Yer my apprentice. You'll go where ye want until someone makes ye stop," Gryam grumbled. "I ain't had a beer or a brawl in a few days and I'm itchin' fer both."

Taking one of the many paths down the hill into town, Gryam wondered just what he was doing taking on an apprentice. If the boy could hold his own and if he was as smart as he

seemed, then maybe he'd be worth it. And just maybe, the boy would be able to help him with his girisa, his duty to make right that which was wrong.

"Where are we going?" the boy asked. They made it to the bottom of the hill and walked towards one of the gates into the town. All around the town and at the base of the hill where the majority of the mine's were, a large, earthen and stone wall was built. It served two purposes. The first was to stop any and all out of control carts from crashing into the town. The second was a defense against invaders, although no one had ever attacked the town. The wall stood ten feet high and was five feet thick. The outside was built of thick, square stones while the inside was filled with dirt. The stone came from a quarry just outside of town and the dirt came from inside the mines and from excavations around town.

"What's yer name, boy?" Gryam asked. "I'll still call ye boy, but if'n yer an apprentice of mine, I'll need to know yer real name."

"Verl Tokenkeeper," he answered. "Son of"

"I know who yer family is," Gryam interrupted gruffly. "Yer family holds money for trading with humans. Life a luxury and ye wanna be my apprentice?"

"Yes," Verl answered firmly, his lips set hard together. They had reached the flat portion of the valley and were nearing the town.

"Pickaxe," Gryam said.

"What?" the boy asked, eyebrows arched.

"Thar," Gryam pointed. "Closest tavern and one of the rowdier ones. The Pickaxe." Verl looked and saw the tavern. It was basically a log cabin, built with thick tree trunks and a thatch roof. A sturdy oak door stood on one side; Verl could see just one window on another wall. A sign hung on a post. Peering closely, Verl could make out a pickaxe painted on the battered wooden sign.

As they were approaching the door, a dwarf stumbled out, mug in hand. He looked up at them and squinted. After wiping his dirty sleeve across his eyes, he looked at them again. "Grry'm?" he slurred.

"Aye," Gryam answered, heading straight for the door.

"Gryam!" the dwarf yelled. Seemingly sober, he yanked open the door and hollered Gryam's name inside, before slamming the door shut as he once again spun on his heel. "Yer comin' 'ere?"

"No, I figgered I'd walk right through tha place on my way across town, ye daft lump a coal," Gryam rumbled.

"Aye, aye," the dwarf just nodded. "Don't leave too soon, aye. I'll fetch some and be back quick as a pick strike!" He ran off into town.

"Bring as many as ye'd like," Gryam mumbled as he stopped before the door. He turned to his new apprentice. "Ye'll go in first."

"Me?" Verl asked.

"Aye," Gryam replied, crossing his arms.

"They'll be waitin' ta jump me, won't they? Soon as I walk in the door," the boy said.

"Aye."

"And with it day out here and probably dark in there, I won't be able to see much, will I?" the boy asked.

"Ye have the lay of it, boy. Yer sharp and that's good. Now we both know yer smart, but now we'll see how good yer are at fightin'," Gryam told him.

"They won't be holdin' back because they'll think it's you," the boy sighed. Not waiting for an answer, he put his hand on the latch. Opening the door as fast as he could, he quickly stepped inside. As he did, he stooped low enough so that his body was only half as tall as Gryam. A dwarf, thinking to body slam, promptly sailed over him and rolled outside. Another dwarf to his right grabbed his arm. Spinning, Verl grabbed an elbow and flung the surprised dwarf into another. Next, two dwarfs were barreling down upon him, intent on tackling him. Verl jumped high and brought his knees up to his chest. The two dwarfs flew below him to crash into the hard wooden wall. He landed atop them.

"What's this!" Gryam yelled as he stepped inside, dragging a dwarf. He tossed the dwarf aside and took an account of the room. "Well, I'll be dung on the track," he chuckled. "Why, boy, there's five dwarves on the floor and yer still standin'." Gryam looked around and then stepped outside to look at the sign. Walking back in, he said, "Fer a second there, I thought we were a might confused and came to the boarding room for the babes."

"Hoy now," a dwarf hissed. "No need ta be insultin' us tha way."

"Aye," echoed another.

"Who's the boy?" asked a third. "By the look a him, he's an elada. He ain't allowed in here."

"Ye gonna throw 'im out?" Gryam asked. "I think the five on the floor ain't gonna be any help ta ya."

"Luck, tha's all," a dwarf spouted.

"Oh, aye," Gryam smiled. "Why, you was thinkin' it was me comin' through tha door and weren't holdin' back a'tall. In steps tha boy inta that mess. Aye, lucky it was. Lucky it wasna me! I'da had ya all on tha floor!"

"Famed be the day one of us brings you low, Gryam! I'm a thinkin' today's that day!" a dwarf bellowed and charged. Not wanting to be left out of the minute possibility of bringing Gryam defeat, the others dropped their mugs to join the fray.

With a mighty swing, Gryam laid the first dwarf out flat in the air. Two dwarfs found themselves catching their airborne friend while several others attacked from the side. Verl glanced down and saw that the two below him weren't going to wake soon, so he happily launched himself at a group of dwarves.

One dwarf threw a punch at Gryam's head. Twisting just a little and using his wrist to deflect the blow, Gryam moved to the dwarf's side. As he did so, he entangled the dwarf's arm. Gryam spun where he was and the unfortunate dwarf almost couldn't keep up as he was flung around in a circle. The others backed away, not wanting to get hit by a two hundred-pound body going full out.

Timing their moves, three dwarves caught the circling dwarf and pulled him away from Gryam. Instead of fighting the action, Gryam smoothly went with it. There was one difference, however. Gryam added some of his own weight and a whole group of dwarves went down into one big pile as Gryam's laughter echoed throughout the room.

"Hyaaaaa!!!!" a dwarf cried as he leapt upon Gryam's broad back. As the dwarf tried a chokehold, Gryam placed his fingers between his chin and grasped the dwarf's elbow. Pulling down, Gryam tucked his chin down as far as he could. Quickly, he used his other hand to grasp the dwarf's other elbow and then, while turning, Gryam pivoted outward. The dwarf had no realization of where Gryam had disappeared because the floor came up fast and hard to greet him.

Laughing and spinning, Gryam grasped and threw another dwarf into the unorganized mess of bodies around him. This was play to him and he was having a grand old time.

"Enough!" someone shouted. "Gryam! A mug! On the house!" That someone was the barkeep, a burly old dwarf with a long, gray beard.

"Eh?" Gryam said, stopping. "On tha house, ye say?" Everyone else stopped and looked at the barkeep.

"Ye know they'll never win, Gryam," the barkeep said. "So why'n'cha stop and have a drink?"

"I am a wee bit thirsty, now tha ya mention it," Gryam mused. "Aye! A mug on the house, it is!" Amidst groans of being bruised and amidst groans of seeing their chance at possible victory leave their grasp, the rest of the dwarves slowly settled down to the various tables scattered throughout the room. Some had to pick up their chairs or tables, because the fight caused a great scattering of bodies and furniture.

Just as Gryam lifted the mug to his lips, the door flew open and the drunken dwarf returned. A dozen or so dwarves stood behind him. Looking around, they realized they were too late.

"Ach! Too slow," one wailed. "Ah well, I'm here. Might as well get a mug of fine ale." There were murmurs of assent as the group entered and searched for open seats. Talk of the fight could be heard throughout several conversations.

"What about me?" Verl asked as he sat down next to Gryam. The barkeep looked at him closely.

"Yer nose ain't broke," he said. "But I saw ye with those five, so I know ye ain't no coward."

"He's my apprentice," Gryam said. A hush fell over the tavern. Those still talking suddenly stopped to see why the rest were quiet.

"I'm a bit daft in me old age," the barkeep said. "Could ye say that again?"

"Tomas," Gryam said, looking into the barkeep's eyes. "Ye heard me as did most everyone else. But I'll say it agin. He's my apprentice. Now give him a mug and let's celebrate a good day!"

"Hoya! A good day, indeed!" someone shouted.

"Here," Tomas said, sliding a mug of ale to Verl. "On the house. Never thought I'd see tha day, old Gryam'd take an apprentice."

"Threes," a dwarf said. "Fate always gives us threes. This is one. What are the other two, Gryam?"

"Hoya!" someone else shouted. "'Tis true. What of the other two?" Dwarves started banging their mugs down on the tables and chanting, "Hoya." Tomas waved his arms in the air to get their attention. After a few minutes, it was quiet again.

"How'n are we supposed to hear the other two with all your chantin'?" Tomas asked the crowd. Turning to Gryam, he asked, "Are there two more?"

"I reckon there's another," Gryam nodded. He tilted his head back and took a large swig of ale, nearly emptying the mug. Smacking his lips, he ran his sleeve across his face. "I found the vein today and brought out the first cart of ore."

"Blessed Khaliana!" Tomas hissed, invoking the Goddess of the Earth, the Maker of all things. "She gave up some of Herself ta ya?"

"Aye," Gryam answered. "I've a cart load of the Maker's ore sitting at the mouth of the mineshaft. That's me second of ta three."

"And the third?" someone called out. Rumbling echoes carried across the room as they waited for Gryam to speak.

"Eh," Gryam muttered finally. He couldn't think of a third and was at a loss on what to do. Searching his memories, he couldn't think of anything that had happened today, which would fill in for one of three. He knew that if he couldn't find something that had happened, he would have to make something happen. "Blast," he hissed. "The third is I'm buying a round for all here!"

"Hoya!" several dwarves shouted amidst mumblings and whispers and some gasps.

"Aye," Tomas spoke. "That'd complete the three! A round for all!" He began filling mugs with ale, but only after refilling Gryam's. It was rare that a dwarf spent any money on another dwarf outside his family. Even rarer was when a dwarf spent money on something frivolous, such as ale, for other dwarves. Gryam had just done such a deed and it was considered one of three by all. Fate was satisfied and no ill would befall Gryam.

Hours later, Gryam and Verl stumbled to their homes. Gryam told Verl to be at his mine at sunup to start working.

The day dawned bright and blue. Not a cloud could be seen in the sky and the sun shone down with a fierce intensity. Gryam sat in front of his cart, looking down the hill, and watched Verl climb towards him. The boy was slightly unsteady and a groan or two escaped his lips on his way up the hill.

"Ye had more'n yer fill last night," Gryam grumbled. "What good're ye gonna be?"

"I'll do what needs ta be done," Verl answered as he stood next to Gryam.

"And more," Gryam added, standing up. "Now, ye'll be takin' this ore to the smithy and tellin' 'im ta clean it up. I don't want nothin' else done ta it, ya unnerstand?"

"Aye," Verl replied. "But which smithy? And the whole cart at once?" Verl's eyes grew a bit wide at the thought of hauling the large, ore-laden cart down the hill.

"What'dya think, ye daft sapling?" Gryam laughed. "That I jus' got me first apprentice and I'm a wantin' him run over by an ore cart? There's a smaller cart inside tha mine that ye can use."

"Oh," Verl said with a sigh of relief. He stepped around Gryam and entered the mine. Gryam turned and started to follow him. As he walked past the cart, he reached inside and grabbed a long, solid, tubular steel bar. At one end the bar was pointed while the other end was flattened. Gryam used the bar while mining. The pointed end was good for starting a hole, while the flattened end was good for chiseling or prying.

"And take it ta Selmy," Gryam told the boy as he entered the mine. "Tell him he can have one hundredth of the cleaned ore as his fee. And tell him I'll be needin' ta rent his shop for about a month."

"What?" Verl asked, pulling the small cart. "What'cha need his shop fer?"

"Just do what yer told," Gryam muttered, stamping the bar into the ground. "Selmy'll probably tell ye when he looks at the ore, though." Mumbling, Gryam started down the long shaft. "Oh, and come down ta the bottom and find me after yer first trip. Jus' stay straight on the main shaft and ye'll have no problems."

Gryam heard the boy long before he saw him. Verl's footsteps echoed throughout the mineshaft. Gryam used the boy's presence as an excuse to take a break. He leaned his bar against the wall and wiped the sweat from his brow.

"Watch yer step, boy," Gryam warned. "Ye get closer to me, the ground gets wetter."

"Aye," Verl acknowledged as he came into view. "So I noticed. Is it safe?"

"I wouldna say she's built fer sleepin' in, but she's held up fine so far," Gryam growled. "What'd Selmy say?"

"He said aye," Verl replied. "He said 'twas a fair price for the cleanin' of the ore. He said for another hundredth, you can rent the smithy."

"He didn't tell you about the ore, did he?" Gryam asked, noticing the boy's quiet nature. If the boy had known, he wouldn't have been this still.

"No," Verl answered. "He said if you sent me, it was you who'd have ta explain. And he also said you must be getting daft in yer old age fer givin' him a good price for the cleaning. No hagglin' at all."

"I've a feelin' time's a drawin' short fer me," Gryam said. He held up a callused hand to ward off questions. "Ye'll be getting yer answers. Just be patient." Gryam pointed to a section of wall and said, "Take a pickaxe and chip me some of that lighter colored ore."

Verl looked around and noticed a small pile of tools. He walked over, grabbed a small pickaxe and then went to the wall. Tapping gently, he edged a lump of the ore out of the wall. Gryam would stop him at times and instruct him on how to use the pickaxe better or where to strike or when to lever the ore. Finally, the lump was in Verl's hands. Looking at it, he saw that the lightly colored ore ran throughout the lump. The ore was much harder than a rock and didn't break when hit. The rock, dirt, and other ores that had mingled with the lighter ore had kept it all in one big clump.

"Do ya know it?" Gryam asked, watching the boy. "The main ore," he added for clarity.

"It's what we use to make tools and weapons, isn't it?" Verl asked.

"Aye, that it is," Gryam answered. "Now, there's another lump agin that far wall. The one where I've been diggin' today. Dig a lump out of there. Mind ye, watch the seepage in the wall. It'll turn yer strikes from its slickness."

"Aye," Verl said and moved to the far wall.

"Mind ye," Gryam warned, "if there's somethin' larger comin' at ye, get out of its way. If a boulder falls, ye don't want to be between it and the ground."

"Aye," Verl said.

"Learn the ways, boy," Gryam began. "The ways of livin'. Ye won't just learn how to mine, but how to fight and how to live. If a wagon full of ore is barrelin' down tha hill at ye, are ye gonna stand in its way?"

"No, but that's common knowledge. Everyone'd --"

"Yes or no fer now, boy," Gryam interrupted. "Now, if part of yon wall starts falling toward ye, are ye gonna let it topple on ye?"

"No."

"Aye, ye won't and ye know it. Just the same, if a giant is rumblin' toward ye, are ye gonna stand there in its way?"

"A giant? But --"

"Yes or no, boy," Gryam growled, crossing his arms over his chest.

"No."

"Aye, ye'd better not. And if ye've gotten to a hard ore, are ye gonna hammer at it all day, trying ta pick it out of the wall?"

"No."

"Aye, ye won't. Ye'll hammer out sections of it where it's softer. Clay, dirt, shale, those'll all give up their hold easily enough. Will ye stand and batter at a thick shield all day, tryin to shatter it?"

"No," Verl answered, beginning to understand the similarities in mining and fighting.

"Aye," Gryam said, "I see the glean in yer eye. Ye've got to apply these to every day livin', too. But that'll take awhile. Now, go get me that lump."

"Aye," Verl imitated his mentor. "Strike not the hard ore, but the soft sections around it. Stand not in the way of a larger force, but move aside." Verl remembered his earlier instruction with the pickaxe and set about to dig the ore out of the wall.

Hours later, the lump was in Verl's hands. He looked down at it and although it resembled his earlier find, this ore was somehow different. He looked closer at it and turned the lump over and over again. "It's different," he told Gryam. "There is a slight glitter in the ore itself. As if it isn't pure, but is mixed with something else."

"Ye're half right, boy," Gryam said, moving to stand next to Verl. "It is different, but that ore is pure, glitter and all."

"What is it?" Verl asked, handing the lump over to Gryam.

"'Tis khalite, boy," Gryam answered, plopping the lump back into Verl's hands. "And I'm right thankful to Khaliana fer givin' it ta me. I've a feelin' we're in fer some bad times soon and we're gonna need all the help we can get."

"Khalite," Verl said, sucking in his breath. "This is what makes magical items? This is what makes unbreakable weapons? This is Khaliana's tears hardened from the heat of the inner earth?"

"Aye," Gryam laughed. "Although it isn't unbreakable. Nearly so, but it can still be broken. As fer the magic ye'd have to track down a mage ta get that into it."

"I thought all the mages were gone," Verl said, still staring down at the treasure in his hands.

"Nay, boy. There are some still around. They're a hidden lot that's fer sure. But if ya know where ta look, ye can find a few." Gryam kicked a rock and grumbled, "And ye can search the whole kingdom and not find the one ye want."

"What?" Verl asked, looking at Gryam.

"Never mind," Gryam said, curtly. "We've got some diggin' ta do. We'll need to get as much ore out of here as we can before Khaliana closes this shaft forever." Grabbing his bar, he looked at it closely. There were chips and dents and scratches along it. It was slightly curved in several sections from perpetual prying and its smooth surface often slipped in Gryam's hands. "Aye, we need as much as we can get," he muttered, heading for the wall. Working and teaching Verl, the two of them started digging the valuable ore out of the mine. Only for a lunchtime meal did they stop.

Near the end of the day, the large cart was only a fourth full. Getting the ore out of the earth was a much harder thing than Verl had ever imagined. Gryam showed Verl how to hold the cart and then told the boy to pull it out of the mine.

"But it isn't full," Verl griped.

"Aye, 'tis true," Gryam said. "But what if the mine collapses overnight? We'll have lost that much ore. Better to pull it out to the opening than to leave it here." Verl sighed and started pulling the cart up the incline. Gryam stood behind and helped when the boy truly needed it.

"It'll be good to get home," Verl said, plopping down at the mine opening after the cart had been secured.

"We've still got things ta do, boy," Gryam said, picking the ore out of the large cart and putting it into a smaller cart.

"Why are you moving it?" Verl asked.

"We'll need the big cart in the morning to put more ore in. No sense in carrying this ore back down there and then hauling it all the way back out."

"But you did," Verl said. "I watched you. You'd haul the big cart of ore back down into the mine. Not this one, but the one before."

"Aye," Gryam muttered. "That I did, boy. That I did. There's a reason for all things. But ye'll not know them all. Now help me move this ore." Verl did as he was told.

"Home now?" Verl asked, but somehow knew that the answer would be no.

"Now we train," Gryam said, smiling. "I've a nice large room at the house just for that. Let's go, boy."

"Train?" Verl whined. "I can barely stand."

"Good," Gryam replied. "Ye won't be using yer muscles as much, then. C'mon, boy, the sun's just about down." They slowly walked downhill towards a gate in silence. Verl's legs and arms felt like rubber and his muscles trembled at every step.

"Ye did good today, boy," Gryam admitted. "But don't let that get ta yer head!"

"Aye," Verl said, smiling with pride. He instantly forgot about his limbs and trembles and started looking forward to the training session.

Walking through town, dwarves would stop and ask Gryam if he was going to a tavern. There was a long-standing bet on who would finally best him. No one had claimed the prize as of yet, but everyone was looking for a chance at it.

Entering his home, Gryam made straight for the fireplace. There was a small pile of coals left from the morning and Gryam stoked up a new fire by adding a few small logs. Above the fire hung a black pot and the aroma from the stew could be smelled from across the room.

"Smells good," Verl said. "Do we eat now?" He looked around and saw a sparsely furnished room. There was a small table and two chairs against one wall. A washbasin stood against another. There were two doorways out of the room, not including the one in which they had entered. One room looked like it led to a bedroom, as Verl could see a simple bed in it.

"After. I'm just gettin' the fire started to warm the stew. Straight through that doorway," Gryam pointed, "is the trainin' room." Verl took the hint and walked into the room. This then was where the second doorway led.

On one wall was a rack of weapons. Everything from a dagger to a two handed sword hung on the rack. Spears and polearms of various designs stood in a rack to the right of the swords. Maces, flails, and axes hung in a rack to the left of the swords. Some of the weapons, Verl had never seen before.

"Ye fought fine fer a bar fight," Gryam said, stepping into the room. "But if it'd been a real fight, ye'd be dead."

"Huh?" Verl sputtered, turning around. "Dead? But there were five of them and I was the one standing!"

"Aye," Gryam agreed. "But they were expectin' me and were tryin' ta bring me down by force of bodies. Had they been expectin' you, they'd a done it different. Ye used the element of surprise well, but it was still a bar fight. No one aims ta get anyone killed in there. The intent is submission, not death. Ye know how to move and dodge well enough, but ye've got to learn how to strike and block and defend and attack. More importantly, ye've got to know how ta use yer opponent against himself."

"Which weapon will I use?" Verl asked, looking again at the wall. Gleams in his eyes lit the fire of youth inside him and he yearned to hold a sword.

"Those aren't fer ye," Gryam said. "Those are fer me to use agin ye as ye learn defenses."

"Huh?" Verl said, surprised. "Then what do I use?" Disappointment started lining his face.

"First, we'll learn with none of the weapons. We'll learn open-hand how to attack and defend. Then, when I've a notion, we'll move on ta those on the wall." Gryam stood straight and looked at Verl. "Ye ready?"

"Ah " Verl muttered.

"When ye're ready, the proper reply is, 'Aye, I'm ready'," Gryam answered. "Ye can call a halt at any time. Ye can pat out at any time. Ye can call it a night, if'n ye need to. At the end, I'll ask ye, 'Shall we stay our hands for the night?' and ye'll answer, 'Aye, let us stay our hands for the night'."

"Aye, I'm ready," Verl said. Gryam grinned.

"Good. Now, strike straight at my gut." Verl nodded and walked up to Gryam. When he was in range, he cocked his hand back and let fly with a straight punch. Gryam stepped slightly aside and Verl's hand struck empty air.

"Stand not in the way of a larger force, but move aside," Verl repeated from earlier.

"Aye," Gryam chuckled. "Ye remembered. Now then, there're several ways ta move after ye get out of the way. All depend on the attacker. If'n ye pull back yer hand fer another go, and then I'll follow ye. Now, slowly, boy, punch again and bring yer hand back into that cocked position."

Verl did as he was told, but this time, when he brought his hand back, Gryam had placed his hand on top of his own and added some weight. By the time Verl's hand returned, he was rocked backwards on his heels and just about ready to reach out and grab something to keep from falling.

"Wha?" Verl asked as he finally took a step backward to regain his balance.

"Ye fergot ta move out of the way," Gryam said, smiling and knowing the boy couldn't have even if he had wanted.

"But," Verl stuttered. "But, I couldn't. What did ye do?"

"I pushed me energy through yer body as soon as I touched ye," Gryam explained. "But ye'll not understand that fer awhile. Come, we'll work with that and ye can feel it again." For the next hour, the Gryam trained Verl. It was Gryam who called a halt to the night, however.

"Shall we stay our hands for the night?" Gryam asked, standing straight and looking at the boy.

"Aye, let us stay our hands for the night," Verl replied.

"Let's eat," Gryam said, clapping a hand on the boy's shoulder. "I'm hungry and I can smell the stew from here."

After devouring the stew, Gryam sent Verl home. Drawing fresh water from an outside well, he filled the washbasin and started to clean up. "Another one," he sighed. "Khaliana what am I doin'? Am I doin' right in takin' on another apprentice? Ah, Khali, do ye approve of it even amid my quest? I feel somethin' stirrin' in the kingdoms. Something bad. And I feel that I'll be leavin' soon. I don't know why or where, yet."

Finished getting clean, Gryam went to his bedroom and flopped down on the bed. "Just give me a few months, Khali, ta teach the boy. Fer when the evil comes, he'll be ready." He started to relax, and then suddenly groaned. "Ach! The mage!" he blurted out. "I've got ta send fer the mage." Groaning, he turned over and got out of bed. Going over to a chest on the floor, he opened it and pulled out a small, rectangular mirror. Sitting on the bed, he put the mirror in his lap and looked down into it.

"Ye there," he asked.

"Who calls?" demanded a voice while the mirror only showed Gryam's reflection.

"Gryam."

"Gryam?" the voice repeated. "That short, ugly, stupid dwarf who couldn't lift a feather held down by a boy?"

"Aye," Gryam laughed. "What other Gryam is there? Ye think it'd be the tall, handsome, prince Gryam? And that feather was held down by fairly strong mage, no matter that he was a boy." In response, a face appeared in the mirror. Light brown hair flopped about as the man shifted into view. His piercing blue eyes looked back at Gryam once the mirror's image cleared. The man had a hawklike nose and beneath it grew a small moustache. A goatee adorned his chin. "I like the hair hangin' beneath yer lip. But ye'd think ye could grow more."

"I meant it to be like this," the man huffed. "And that hair on your face doesn't look like it grew any."

"It's good to see you, too, Dale," Gryam said, smiling. "It's been too long."

"That it has, my good friend, that it has," Dale replied. "To what do I owe this rare pleasure?"

"I've found some," Gryam told him. Dale gasped and drew closer to the mirror.

"You've found khalite?" Dale asked, mouth open and eyebrows raised.

"Aye," Gryam answered. "Enough to do what I want and more."

"Enough for what I need?" Dale asked.

"Aye," Gryam nodded. "Though I'm gonna need ya ta do some extra work."

"Oh?" Dale asked. "Like what?"

"Just get here," Gryam said. "And we'll discuss it."

"It will take me awhile," Dale said.

"Aye, I know it. I've felt it in the air. Somethin's stirrin', ain't it?"

"Yes," Dale said. "Something very bad is moving about. I don't want to attract its attention, so I won't use anything major to travel."

"Heh," Gryam grunted. "Too bad ye aren't a warder that could change and fly without using magic."

"Speaking of," Dale said, letting the sentence hang there.

"Best not to speak of it, yet. Get down here and we can talk."

"I'll start out tomorrow. Where are you?"

"I'm halfway between the North Gate and where the Challenge River splits for the first time. There's a small Dwarven mining village called Basin. Ask for directions from some of the other villages when you get in the area. Mention my name and they'll show you the way."

"Got it," Dale said. "I've fixed your location on my map with the help of the mirrors. It'll take me a few weeks to get there."

"I'll be here," Gryam said, and then added, "You used the mirror to find my location? You can do that?"

"I know where all my artifacts are. I can find each one whenever I want. Why?"

"Can other mages know where I am by using the mirror?" Gryam asked.

"Oh!" Dale blurted. "No, no. Only I can do that. Other mages shouldn't be able to detect it unless you're using it. You still haven't found Ryalla? He couldn't elude you by knowing where the mirror is, if that's what you're thinking."

"Aye, that'd be my thoughts. Yer sure?"

"There's always a way to do something, Gryam. When I get there, we can take a look at the mirror and see if it's sending out any residual magic. And get the khalite ready, just in case we start running out of time."

"Travel safe, boy. And don't worry about the ore. It'll be ready." Gryam promised. Dale didn't reply as the mirror clouded and then returned Gryam's reflection. "Just a few months, Khali, just a few," he sighed.

CHAPTER THREE

Alisandra gathered her attendants and walked to her garden. Her castle was luxurious and she kept a large number of servants to keep her home looking grand. Tapestries depicting feats of valor by knights hung in reception chambers and dining halls while those depicting beautiful landscapes captured from across the realm hung in hallways. At every possible place, windows were open to allow light in. At rooms and hallways where no windows were, mirrors were hung to allow the light to reflect into darkened areas. When that failed, magical globes of light hung from the ceilings and shone with a bright glow to cast long shadows upon hard stone floors.

While what burned in Alisandra's heart was greed and power, she strove for beauty and light about her. In that, she herself was beautiful. From her own magic, she reformed her physical body to that which pleased her the best. And it appeared that her form caught the attention of most men she met. As with most problems she faced, her solutions were more than adequate.

Long, golden hair flowed around her head in waves, to fall softly around her shoulders. When she turned or bent her head, a single lock would fall out of place to cover one eye. She would toss her head and softly blow it out of her way and use her deep blue eyes to look endearing to whoever was there, as if the lock had a mind of its own and she could do nothing about it. She wore low cut dresses that showed her ample cleavage when she leaned forward. Her waist was slim and accented her curvy figure. At times, she would wear shorter dresses and tight blouses to show off her luxuriously long legs, curvy figure, small waist, and bosom. When she did, men faltered with mouths open not knowing which part to stare at. She would smile with her full lips while a twinkle lit her eyes and men would clamor for her attention. Men were such simple creatures, she knew. Give them something soft and beautiful and then show them a little attention and they would do almost anything for a single promise of things to come.

Smiling, Alisandra opened the large double doors to her garden. Her twelve attendants waited behind her as she stood and admired the view. Cascading waterfalls caused echoes of splashing water to resound amongst blooming fruit trees and flowering shrubs. A pebble walkway wound its way throughout, branching at times, only to find its way back again to the main path. In the center of it all was a small pond and a wooden gazebo.

"Come girls," she said with a clap and walked towards the gazebo. "Today, we begin our journey. Today, we start our plan for selecting a High King. One that we will control in the end." The attendants silently followed her. Each was skilled in some sort of magic, although all together, they still could not rival Alisandra. There were only two mages alive that could rival her. Of those two, she thought about one of them daily, sometimes good and sometimes bad.

"Prepare the pond," she ordered. Several girls went about cleaning the outside rim, removing debris and replacing fallen rocks. Others used fine nets to filter the debris out of the water. A few remaining girls cleaned the gazebo, careful not to go near the chest sitting in the center of the table. They could all have used magic to go about their chores, but here in the garden, everything that could be done by hand, was done that way. Alisandra used strong magic around the gazebo and pond and she was careful not to let other residual magic interfere.

"Is it time to prepare the chest?" Iralla asked, taking her place on the far side of the pond. The rest of the women were taking their places around the pond, also. They stood at an equal distance from each other so that there was a circle of them gathered around the water. The pond was small enough that if needed, they could reach out and clasp hands, but that was usually only in dire circumstances.

"Right now, we will glimpse the world again," Alisandra explained as she stood in her place, with the gazebo directly behind her. "We must be sure that what we've found will follow our orders and will also be able to complete the task assigned it."

"And if they cannot?" Macy asked.

"Then we search for ones that can, silly child," Alisandra rebuked. "I will not be rushed. That's the easiest way to fail. Remember that, girls. If you have to rush, it should be because the only other available option is sure failure." Kneeling down to the pond, she traced symbols in the water and started a small chant. The ripples both gathered together and crashed against each other as she continued. The other women took up the chant as Alisandra continued to draw runes in the water. "I will direct the conversation," she told them when she finished. "You will search for signs of loyalty, treachery, truth, falsehoods, and anything else that will help us determine if they are the right choice." She stood up and watched as the ripples slowly faded away.

The pond surface changed from reflecting the garden to an inky blackness spotted with small lights. The light blurred and moved around faster and faster until the whole surface was nothing but blurs.

"Vhasstraa," Alisandra called into the pond. "Vhasstraa, it is the appointed time." The pond started to clear to show an alien landscape. Looking into the water, it seemed as if one was looking from a large height down upon a vast plain of barren soil, rock, and dead trees.

"Where art thee, Alisandra?" came a gravelly and monotone voice from the other side.

"I have entered some distance from you this time, Vhasstraa," Alisandra answered. "Give me but a moment and I will find you." As a bird flying over the land, the picture in the surface moved. Controlling the direction, Alisandra moved about the land. Once she encountered forms of life, she dropped lower to get a closer look.

"Death," Vanessa said. "They carry death around them as if it is a trusted companion." Forms began to focus more clearly. Several human-like creatures seemed to be chasing a small animal. The creatures were tall and gaunt with a brownish tint to their wrinkled skin. It seemed as if an old dead tree had grown on them as a covering. Their long legs carried them along in a loping manner and long arms ended in taloned hands. There were three of them and each carried a sword. They were hunting the animal.

"Don't be fooled by appearances," Alisandra warned. "They may look fragile and weak but their cruelty is unbounded and their penchant for death is unmatched. As fighters they could probably take on three of our common soldiers before being brought down."

"What of an elven fighter?" Macy asked. She always asked questions the others would, or could, not ask.

"An even match, I deem," Alisandra replied. "As for the dwarves, we shall know that if all works out as planned."

"I grow impatient with thee," Vhasstraa cried. "Come hence!"

"Good thing he can only hear you when you want him to," Vanessa said. "Or rather, a well added enhancement to your spell."

"Hush, girls," Alisandra said, "and concentrate. I'm going to jump to where he is." To the pond, she said, "Can you see me now?" The scene changed in the water instantly and a bedroom showed forth. In the center of the room, another of the creatures stood.

He was much like the earlier creatures except he stood straight and tall and an air of power moved about him. He instantly looked towards Alisandra. "I know you're there, girl," he growled. "Show yourself."

"As you wish," Alisandra smoothly said. She flicked her hand.

"Aaah," Vhasstraa said in a long slow breath. "Living here, I forget what beauty looks like. I can't wait to allow that pleasure to assault my eyes directly." Smiling, he grabbed a goblet from a table and drank from it.

"Vhasstraa," Alisandra said, smiling also, "do I detect a threat in your words?"

"Girl," he said, "if you do not detect a threat in what I say, then you're as dense as you are beautiful. I know who and what I am and I do not hide it like others. I know what I have done to this world and I remember all of it. And in that I find great pleasure and an enormous amount of fun." He laughed and Sian gasped.

"His teeth are the color of his skin," Sian said.

"They are the perfect predator," Alisandra instructed them. "They blend in very well with their surroundings. An army of them could be out among their countryside and you wouldn't know it. What I'm wondering is if they'll stay that way or change when they enter our world." To the pond, she said, "Vhasstraa, are you ready?"

"Yes, girl."

"You should try another title," Alisandra said, dully, "because that one does not affect me. There are more important things than to get angry over something someone on another world calls me." She smiled one of her pretty smiles.

"Noted. And your smiles or beauty won't alter my judgments." He smiled back. "We have the gateway built and tested from our end. If what you tell me is true, there should be no problems when it opens on your end. I have ten aralka ... hmmm ... aralka is a term denoting the size of an army unit. All counted, somewhere between three and five thousand warriors. I have ten aralka standing by the gate. They are also an elite force with half of them mounted. I also have ten ... war beasts for lack of a proper word ready. They are large and formidable fighting creatures. And no, you may not inspect them. Any of them. We each must keep some secrets."

"Be ready, then," Alisandra said. "The gate on your end will glow a short time, an hour or so on our world, before it opens. I expect you to get all of your warriors into our world. You have studied the map I have provided?"

"Yes. These dwarfs. You say they're a worthy conquest?" Vhasstraa asked, plopping into a chair. He swished the liquid in his goblet.

"Very much so. And if things don't go completely as planned, you will also have elves. I do not know all of your strengths, but my guess is that you would be overmatched then."

"Good," Vhasstraa sighed. "I haven't had much fun on this world lately. My boys haven't had decent training in awhile. The Arlimna have hidden and I haven't been able to find them."

"Arlimna?"

"You called it a dragon."

"Aaah," Alisandra breathed. "I remember seeing it. It was huge and looked very dangerous. How did you subdue it?"

"Easily, I'm ashamed to say," Vhasstraa said. "It seems we Hynan have an innate magic that literally nullifies all the magic in the Arlimna. Strangest thing I've ever seen and I've been on a lot of worlds. These Arlimna can't use magic, can't use their breath, can barely fly, and become sluggish when they get around us. The more of us there are, the worse things become for the Arlimna. We had a single Arlimna attack an aralka and it just died once it landed in the middle of them. We used to keep them around for sport and entertainment. I've captured hundreds of their offspring and studied them. Truth told, Alisandra, I don't mean study, I mean tortured and dissected. I haven't found any reason why they're ... allergic to us." He laughed and drank the rest of the liquid. "Now go. I know what I need to. I will see you on your side soon."

Alisandra waved her hand and the pond returned to normal. "Girls, the gazebo," she ordered and turned towards it. "Jhedda, take notes." She waited until they were all seated in the Gazebo before she continued. "Tell me your thoughts."

"We don't have enough information," Macy said. "We didn't see very many of his fighters in earlier talks, he keeps secrets, he tells you he's straightforward, but he can't be truly that and still be a leader of that kind of race. He must have deceptions and lies."

"Perhaps," Alisandra said.

"I would agree with Macy," Vanessa said. "He probably has more warriors or other kinds of creatures than the ones he's told us about. Otherwise, why wouldn't he let us see them?"

"We will watch from our side as the gate opens. Should we decide that there are too many of them, we will shut the gate."

"What if the mages shut the gate before they can come through?" Macy asked.

"It has a timed lock to keep it open for at least an hour that I doubt they will be able to overcome. Given time, they could, but with the Hylnan streaming through, they won't have that time. We have the keys and can shut it at any time, though. When the gate activates, it will be as if we were on the very top looking down, so we can see everything that transpires on our side." Alisandra looked around at each attendant. "If there is anything that you think of, let me know. Anything at all, small or big." The women nodded. "Let's go to the castle, then," Alisandra said. "We have to get ready for the visiting Dukes. I want each of you to study them and let me know your choice for who you think would be the best High King. Who would be the best puppet for us?" She smiled and walked out of the gazebo. "What a beautiful day." The twelve women followed her as she strode through the garden and made her way to her castle.

Pushing her chair back, Alisandra got up from behind her desk and went to a tall rectangular mirror that hung on the wall. She looked at her reflection and smiled. Long blond hair that hung down to her shoulders, bright blue eyes, and deep red lips gave her a very attractive look. Her dress was made of fine silk and fit tightly against her body from her neck to her waist. From her waist down to her ankles, the dress was loose and pleated which allowed her to walk freely. The front of her dress was unbuttoned several buttons down to reveal the curve of her breasts, and a necklace with a faceted blue gem hung between them.

She had purposefully chosen the dress and the necklace, for her meetings with the dukes. She wanted everything in her favor and the revealing clothing would help. The gem would draw their attention to her body and disrupt their thinking. After all, what man could resist a woman that looked like this, she thought.

With a wave of her hand, three men walking through the hallways of her keep replaced her image. She watched as her servant led the two men towards the room she was in now. Passing her hand over the mirror again, she heard them talking.

"I don't like being here," the small man said. His features were sharp and his hair cropped short to accentuate the high cheekbones and angular jaw.

"Neither do I, Fenton," his companion agreed. He was larger and bordering on obese. His face was round with fat cheeks and wide thick lips. He wore a large cloak to hide his overly large belly and thick swollen legs. "But for the seat of High King, I will bargain with this woman."

"It might not be you, you know. The bargain allows us all a chance, Stephen," Fenton said. "And just as it allows us all a chance, so do we swear fealty to the one who is chosen. Remember that, too."

"If we all survive," Stephen warned.

"Please wait here," the servant intoned dully as he stepped through a door, closing it behind him.

"I still don't like being here without guards or attendants," Fenton repeated.

"The chance to be High King is worth leaving them behind," Stephen said.

The door opened and the servant ushered them inside. The room was large and decorated in a pleasant manner. Three windows were on the opposite wall with the center window consisting of stained glass. The design was of a maiden sitting on a bench in a rose garden. It was brightly colored and cast varying hues of color into the room. Curtains adorned the other two windows, and several tapestries hung on the walls. Vases of different types of roses were placed around the room.

But the woman sitting at the desk gave the room an air of charged energy. The colored hues of light that shone through the window made it seem as if she had an aura of shifting and blending colors. Long brown hair cascaded down around her shoulders while her light hazel eyes and red lips highlighted her face. She smiled at the two men and bade them to sit.

"You may leave," she told the servant, her voice soft and pleasing. "Ah, my gracious Duke Stephen Wenn and Duke Fenton Eridor. I trust your journey was short and without troubles?"

"It was," Stephen answered. "You are the one who sent the messengers to us, Alisandra? Where are the others?"

"To the point, I see," she said. "I am Alisandra and I am the one that sent the messengers. I hope they didn't find you at too awkward a time," she said smiling. She'd watched through magical eyes when each messenger delivered her message to each duke. "I've already spoken with the others. You two are the last. Please," she said holding up a hand, "they are still in the keep if you wish to confer with them. The ones that stayed, that is."

"Not all stayed?" Fenton asked.

"You expected them to?" she smiled. "Dukes Bene Lystor and Nikole Khundry are here. The good Dukes John Naviers and Rachel Iorion chose to leave, as I expected. The duchies of V'Renth and Elrawn are too far north to matter. And Duke Thaddeus Rood ... well, that's a personal matter that I'll take care of."

"Four of us? Will that be enough?" Stephen asked.

"Three of you would have been enough," she answered, "With my aid that is. Tea?"

"No, I want this business done," Stephen said.

"I see. The South Gate lies between your duchies. Can you take control of it?"

"Yes," Stephen said. "It would mean diverting some of my better warriors, but I can take it."

"Good. The East Gate will be taken by Bene."

"What of West Gate and North Gate?" Fenton asked. "Our duchies are not close to them."

"That, my dear Fenton," Alisandra purred, "is my responsibility."

"How will you gain control of the gates?" Stephen asked. "We must control all four gates or the elves will march through any open ones. Fighting the rest of the duchies and the elves would be a losing battle. And what about the elves that are already here?"

"And the dwarves," Fenton piped in. "What of them?"

"Bah! The dwarves fight amongst themselves constantly. They are of no consequence. The elves are the true threat. The northern duchies can be conquered only if the elves do not fight."

"You speak true," Alisandra replied. "I have placed my men in positions to take the remaining two gates. Once they are in my control, I will destroy those gates. The remaining

elves should not be a problem as long as you hold control of the East and South gates. Should it worry you, Fenton, I have plans to deal with the dwarves, also."

"You aren't going to tell us those plans are you?" Stephen asked.

"No. Do you doubt my capabilities?"

"Your messenger slipped past my guards and arrived in my personal quarters while I slept. Were I to doubt your capabilities, I would end up dead."

"What about the mages?" Fenton asked.

"What about dragons and giants, you might as well ask!" Stephen chided. "The mages are a myth, I tell you!"

"They are not," Alisandra corrected him. "There are mages left in the world." Stephen looked at her with doubt in his face.

"Not a myth?" he asked, perplexed.

"No," she replied. "There are a handful of mages left, but no need to worry about them. I will send them a gift that will keep them occupied for some time."

"Not a myth, yet no one has proof of their existence. Even were they real, why should we worry about them? They have never shown themselves to this point, why would they do so now?"

"I worry because should they decide to interfere, they would be more powerful than the elven armies."

"That is hard to believe," Fenton replied. "The elven armies..." He didn't get a chance to finish his sentence as the stone floor beneath him disappeared with a wave of Alisandra's hand. Fenton fell through the hole and landed softly on the floor below, but only because Alisandra needed him alive and whole.

"I am a mage, and that," she said pointing to the hole in the stone floor, "requires little energy to accomplish."

"You say there are a handful of mages left?" Stephen said while looking down through the hole. "Just how many is a handful?"

"Even one would be a challenge for you to overcome. I will handle them. They are arrogant and that will be their downfall. For now, do as I ask and when all is over, there will only be four of you to choose a High King from. That, my dear dukes, is a much better chance than you have without me."

"Yes," Stephen agreed. "When will you let us know to take the Gates?"

"I will send messengers to you --"

"Ah," Fenton interrupted, "about those messengers. Who are they?"

"Why, my adorable Duke Fenton," Alisandra cooed as she bent at the waist to look down on the duke. She didn't have to look at Stephen to know he was staring at her, now fully visible, breasts. She smiled, knowing that these men were putty in her hands. "Those were Shadissins."

"By God!" Fenton gasped. "They do your bidding?"

"Let's just say, we have a mutual agreement," Alisandra replied. She straightened and walked over to Stephen. Taking his arm, she turned him towards the door. "I hope that this visit will take your mind off of your worries," she whispered in his ear. "And should you find something that strikes your fancy, maybe we can reach some agreement." He stopped and looked at her. It bordered on a stare, but her beauty transfixed him. A small glob of spittle escaped the corner of his mouth, but he didn't notice it. She opened the door for him and a servant stood there waiting. "We'll talk more at dinner," she told him and nodded toward the servant.

"I'm to take you to your room and attend to any wants that you have, milord," the servant said. She was young and cute with long brown hair and blue eyes. Her skin was very pale and she bordered on skinny. Stephen stepped through the door and placed his arm out. When the servant took it, they walked down the hall.

"Alisandra?" Fenton yelled. She walked back to the hole in the floor.

"A servant will be along shortly to take you to your room," she said.

"The Shadissins, Alisandra. I do not like them," he told her. "Is there nothing else to use besides those things?"

"You know about them?" Alisandra asked, her curiosity tingling.

"Yes."

"Do you fear them?"

"Any sane person would," Fenton replied haughtily. "I would rather not have them in my castle again." He knew he was pressing his luck. She could easily kill him. The hole in the floor and his light descent proved that.

"I would have to make other arrangements to communicate with you. Nothing that I couldn't do, really, but it does require more work and some magic," Alisandra said. "It would give the girls a chance..." She let the sentence drop as she gave it some thought. "All right, Fenton," she finally said. "But I warn you that if I think that you're going to cross me, I will send the Shadissins and not as messengers. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, I do. I don't like the threat. I'll do what I tell you I'll do. But I may not do much more," Fenton angrily replied. The servant appeared and waited for him.

"We'll talk later," Alisandra told him. He let the servant show him out of the room. Alisandra waved her hand and the floor reappeared. "He's got more willpower than the others," she seemingly muttered to herself.

"Yes," Macy said, becoming visible. "I get the impression, though, that he would be the best choice out of the four to be High King. He wasn't bedazzled with your beauty either. Oh, he's a man and he stole glances at your body when you weren't looking. But nothing like Stephen. Did you see the spit? Ugh." She shivered and puckered her mouth in distaste.

"I didn't even want to touch him," Alisandra said. "Ugh is right," she said, laughing. "Hopefully the servants will sate their appetite and I won't have to shatter their lustful dreams by denying them myself."

"You could enchant them and make them believe they had a great time with you," Macy said, an evil grin on her face.

"Perhaps. If it would further our goals," Alisandra said, smiling. "Only then. Now, go check on all the dukes and on the preparations for dinner."

"One thing," Macy said. "What if Vhasstraa has some way of holding the gate open when we go to close it? What if he brings more of an army into our world than we want? What if he conquers the dwarves, elves, and men? What if things go horribly wrong?"

"Good points," Alisandra agreed. "Let me ask you this. What's the worst that can happen, short of us dying?"

"Our world becomes like Vhasstraa's world," Macy answered.

"Then what would we do?" Alisandra asked. Macy played with a lock of her hair, twining it around a finger as she thought. Her tongue ran across her full lips.

"Survive," Macy said.

"Yes," Alisandra said, laughing. "Think about this. How many worlds are out there that we can cross over to?" Macy's eyes grew wide.

"Oh!" Macy blurted. "We'd just cross over to another world!"

"Now, go check on things," Alisandra ordered. Macy walked towards the door.

"I'm glad you asked those questions," Alisandra told her. "Even if I knew the answers, I'd rather you ask. If you have more, let me know."

"Yes, oh, omniscient one!" Macy said after she had turned around. She gave a sweeping bow and then ran out the door laughing.

"Girls," Alisandra chuckled. "To be young again," she sighed. "But with magic, who needs that? I can look as young or as old as I want." She walked over to her desk and sat in her chair. "Skinny, average, or fat," she said and her body changed to accommodate her words. "Small breasts, average, or large." Again, her body changed. "Young, adult, or old." She held up her hands and a mirror appeared. "Ugh! Definitely not pleasing." She waved her hand and the mirror vanished and she returned to her previous body. "Enough play, I guess. It's time to send the box and set the trap."

CHAPTER FOUR

Tian met Malerak on the outskirts of the Warder town. Malerak was sitting quietly, looking down the small hill at the town, watching warders come and go. He felt more at ease alone than he did among people, even his own kind. Part of that was his fear of what he would do if he let the animal out. It killed and he couldn't control it.

"What are you looking at?" Tian asked, glancing down the hill.

"It's always the same," Malerak replied, letting his own thoughts go. "I've lost count of the times I've been here, but the place never changes, only the people. I'm not sure if that's good or bad."

"Why?"

"Everything changes. It's the way things work. But we haven't. We're still the same as when the elves first made us," Malerak said, sighing. He grabbed his pack and stood. "Time to go," he said as he turned to walk the Lake Road.

"This takes us to Clearwater Lake, doesn't it?" Tian asked, stepping beside Malerak.

"Yes. It'll take us a while to get to the lake. Then we can either travel by boat to the far end of the lake or keep to the Lake Road and walk around the lake. Either way, we have to go to the northern part of the lake."

"How long will it take us?"

"We'll walk in the mornings, rest in late afternoon and evenings and change shape to travel at night," Malerak said. "It'll be quicker. We should make the lake in eight days. Ten at the most."

"Ten days?" Tian asked, amazement shining in his eyes. "Is it really that far?"

"Be thankful we aren't just walking it," Malerak said. He shrugged his shoulders and continued, "I can't recall the last time I walked the whole way. Probably take three months, though."

"How long is it going to take to get to the gate?" Tian asked, dreading the answer. He kicked at a clump of grass.

"Twenty four or twenty five days, I would guess," Malerak answered. "Say ten to the lake and another few days to travel around the lake to the north side. Then we'll probably use the Gate Road rather than take a boat up the river. And we may take a detour or two which will lengthen our traveling time."

"Detours?"

"You ask too many questions, you know?" Malerak growled. "Yes, detours. If we take one and you don't recognize it, I'll let you know it for what it is. Other than that, you'll just have to wait."

"You don't have to get all huffy about it," Tian said with a slight whine in his voice.

"Don't get soft-skinned on me," Malerak huffed. "If you do, you'll spend all your time feeling hurt and abused. I'm blunt and I don't have any tact, so accept me for that."

"What if I can't?" Tian asked hesitantly.

"You're out of your safety zone right now," Malerak explained. "Everything up to now, you've had time to adjust. You made friends and you established a comfort level. In one day, we've changed all that. I don't expect you to accept me instantly or to not be thrown off balance by what's happened. But the sooner you do accept the changes, the better off you'll be."

"But --"

"Enough," Malerak said, cutting his sentence off short. "The quicker we get to the lake, the better."

"How about some history?" Tian asked.

"Didn't I say enough?" Malerak huffed.

"Yeah, but you also said something about accepting someone for whom they are," Tian countered. "I ask a lot of questions." His grin went from ear to ear.

Malerak stopped, scowled at him for a second and then laughed at the goofy face on Tian. "You have me with my own words." He turned and started walking again and Tian fell in step beside him.

"So ..." Tian said.

"Yes, yes," Malerak sighed. "History. The short version of it, though. I'll tell you about things you are probably going to need to know. There are quite a few races scattered throughout the land. The race of men seems to be the most populous, although no one really knows exactly how many dwarves live in the northeast mountains. There are nine duchies ruled by men. There are places within some of the duchies that really aren't ruled by men, but that isn't important right now. Let's just say there are nine duchies and nine dukes.

"The current duchies have become divided into two groups: those who will do anything to become high king and those who try to rule their duchy as best as they can. Duke Fenton Eridor, Duke Stephen Wenn, Duke Nikole Khundry, and Duke Bene Lystor fall into the first category. Duke Ariel Elrawn, Duke Mattea V'Renth, Duke Rachel Iorion, Duke John Naviers, and Duke Thaddeus Rood fall into the second category. Now, there is one distinction amid that second category. When alliances are built, V'Renth and Elrawn usually stay neutral and don't involve themselves in any duchy quarrels."

"Quarrels?" Tian asked.

"There are always quarrels between the duchies. Sometimes they resort to violence, sometimes to political sanctions, and sometimes assassinations. Until there is a High King named, the duchies will forever be at some kind of war with each other."

"Why don't they just choose a High King, then?" Tian asked.

"Heh," Malerak snorted. "I wish they would. And they've tried, but everyone wants the power that is the High King. Everyone doesn't want anyone else to have that power, so they feud over who should be chosen. So far, no one has come forth with either the political strength, an army massive enough, or have elvish support to get chosen. Any one of those three would do it, though, especially having the support of the elves. Once there is a High King, we usually have peace in the land for about a hundred years. Something always happens to the High King, alliances fall apart and no one is chosen as a replacement."

"Now, the dwarves," Malerak said, changing subjects. "The dwarves are a hardy lot. But their lifestyle makes them that way. Dwarves don't believe in ruling over land all that much, so they don't have duchies. Instead, they have clans. Each clan has a leader and the clan is usually made up of family members of some sort. They stick together, so that if you insult one member, you insult the whole clan. That causes constant fighting between clans. You only have three activities in a dwarven community. The first is work, the second is drinking, and the third is fighting. Dwarves work at all vocations from foresting to mining to smithy to banking and they work very hard at whatever they do. Because they work hard, they like to relax and socialize at the same time so they tend to stay at the pub or inn for a while. Of course, when they aren't doing either of those, they're usually fighting with another clan. It's rare for any of them to kill each other, but they will go so far as breaking bones.

"Once a High King is chosen, the dwarves choose a Grand Leader or some such title. It always changes, but they choose one so that they have a leader who is equal to the High King. At that time, all dwarves are one clan and they, too, have a lasting peace."

"Sounds like we could sure use a High King," Tian remarked. "Why don't the elves just support someone so that there isn't so much fighting and trouble and danger?"

"You've been to their world," Malerak answered. "How much did you really learn about them?"

"Not much," Tian said.

"Yeah, me either and I've lived a lot longer. Who knows why they do the things they do? I quit wondering a long time ago."

"I don't remember much before I went to the elves' world for training," Tian said. "Now that I'm here, I find that I really didn't know that much at all before I left. It seems like there's a lot of trouble in the land."

"Yeah," Malerak said. "And it's getting worse. Something's going to happen. I just don't know how soon."

"We'll be at the North Gate. I heard there's nothing up there but mountains."

"In the eyes of men, there isn't anything there worthwhile, but it's the most valuable place in all Rhillai," Malerak informed him. "There are creatures living there that no man has ever seen in a long time or maybe not ever. The first Gate was built there. The waters that flow down from the mountain are bright, pure, and clear. It's been peaceful for longer than I can remember except for the dwarven clans farther north, but they're always fighting with each other. There isn't anything there that men want to conquer, so we get left alone. But ..."

"But what?" Tian asked.

"But I had a talk with Tichal and he wanted me to get the North Gate secure. That's the first time we've ever talked about trouble there."

"Then why aren't we taking a boat and getting there sooner?" Tian asked.

"Because I hate water," Malerak growled. "And we wouldn't get there sooner. We'll cover more distance at night when we change than we could have in a boat. Plus, you get to see all the land between here and there, you'll get to meet some of the people at the inns, and in the towns they'll get to meet you. And one day, after traveling the road enough times, those people will actually smile at you. There's been too many times when people have hated and feared us because we're the unknowns. We try to change that and help people here and there."

"How many times have you traveled this road?" Tian asked.

"Enough so that whole generations of villagers know me," Malerak said softly. "It isn't an easy thing living so long. You get to meet and become friends with a lot of people, but you also watch them grow old and die."

"I wish I could live a long life," Tian said.

"Maybe," Malerak said. "Maybe it's worth it and maybe it isn't. I wasn't given a choice and neither were quite a few of us. Some accepted the fact that we weren't going to die anytime soon and some couldn't handle it. They took the easy way out. Some of us fell to war and disease. There aren't very many of us left now."

"How did it happen?" Tian asked.

"No one knows. We were all taken by the elves as children, changed by the elves, and then when we got to being an adult, we just kept on living. The weird thing is that there are others in the land that have lived longer than we have. All of the mages as far as I know, some dwarves, the Shadissin, and a few other beings that I've met here and there all have lived a long time. As

far as the rest of us can guess, it's the magic of this land that's caused some to live longer lives. Since none of us have died of old age, we don't know if we're going to live forever or just a very long time."

"If we could find that magic and recreate it, we could all be very rich," Tian laughed.

"We're already rich," Malerak answered. When Tian gave him a lost look, Malerak continued, "We work for the elves and they pretty much give us what we want."

"Why don't we live better?" Tian asked, incredulously. "We have sparse furnishings, just enough clothes, and no luxurious castles."

"You've only seen the Warder Town at West Gate. But, I'll let you know now, Warder Camp and North Gate aren't any better."

"But -" Tian said.

"Let me finish," Malerak interrupted him. "You haven't been to Three Rivers and our places there. We have some of the finest furnishings of anywhere, but only because we have to deal with dukes and barons and such. Overall, most of us like the simpler things. There are some of us that like living royally and you can usually find them at Three Rivers." Malerak harrumphed.

"Like who?" Tian asked.

"Well, Tichal is there, but he's like me and Gillun. He's there to keep the other warders in line at Three Rivers so that they don't lose sight of whom and what they are. I just pity Tichal sometimes because he'd rather be at the North Gate and he's stuck in a large city.

"There's a village just up the road. We'll stop and visit until evening. Then we'll walk a bit and change and travel through the night. We'll be at the North Gate before you know it."

"The villagers really liked you," Tian said as they left.

"I've helped them out quite a bit," Malerak said. "I taught a few of them how to mend bones, farm better, build sturdier walls, eh, well, a lot of things. And the people I taught passed their knowledge on to their children. Then I'd come back and help and teach them some more. I'd usually teach some of the younger men how to fight in case they got summoned to fight in any of the wars. I like to think that quite a few of them came back alive because of that." They were walking along the main road and the village was quickly disappearing behind them under cover of night.

"No one has ever said what you are," Tian muttered, afraid that he might be pushing his luck. Malerak liked his privacy.

"No," Malerak replied. "There hasn't been that kind of animal around for a very long time. From what I could find out, they lived mostly up north and were about the best predator alive, even now. People back then used to call them Wyrgrs. I don't know how the elves choose which animal to merge us with. Maybe they don't choose at all. Maybe we have an innate connection to an animal. But, when the elves changed me to become a Warder, a Wyrgr emerged." Malerak sighed. "I was told later, after my training was done, that I had killed five elves. Even now, they treat me with a guarded respect that they give to no one else. I was the only one to kill on first changing. Then again, that might be because after me, they were a lot more cautious."

"I don't remember anything about the first part of my stay there," Tian said. "I can only remember later when I started training and after I was able to change."

"Wait," Malerak interrupted. He listened for a moment and cocked his head. "Quietly, change and get to a top branch." Tian didn't hesitate and was in a branch quicker than Malerak would have imagined. Mal moved quickly off the road and then slowly pushed through the thick brush on the side of the road.

With a snort, Malerak laughed and walked back to the road. "Come on out, Kerri. I know it's you." A woman emerged from the brush. She was small, lithe and graceful. Her hair was a multihued brown. Her soft lips were turned up in a large smile while her green eyes twinkled full of life.

"I was hoping to find you before you got to the North Gate," she said and jumped into his arms, wrapping hers around him.

"I missed you, too," he told her. She hugged him tighter, kissing him deeply.

"Wow," Tian sputtered as he changed back to human form on the road.

"This is Tian?" Kerri asked when she was done with her kisses, finally turning her head to look at him.

"It is," Malerak replied.

"He's a quick one," Kerri said, dropping down to stand on her own. "I heard him change. I doubt I could catch him."

"Heh!" Malerak laughed. "Take that as a compliment. She can catch anything she wants to."

"I caught you," she teased and looped her arm in his. "If I can do that, yes, I can catch anything," she laughed.

"We were planning on making some good time tonight, but I guess that's out now," Malerak sighed.

"Quit being serious," Kerri chided. "There will be time for that later tonight. All too much time. Right now, I want to have fun and spend time with you. I missed you!"

"Should I head back to the village?" Tian asked. He was blushing.

"Not that kind of fun," Kerri said, smiling. "Although, if there's time later..." Malerak rolled his eyes.

"I'm sure you can find something to keep you occupied later," Malerak told Tian.

"But right now, I want to run and play," Kerri said. "We'll change and play a sort of tag-like game," she explained. "You'll have the advantage because you can fly. So, we'll set the rule that you can't fly higher than the treetops. One of us will run and the other two have to catch them. Whoever catches is the next runner. I always start." She changed and was off. Tian was in the air just a split second later. Malerak laughed and followed. Kerri's cry of disgust came a moment later.

"I see this will be a challenge," she said disgustedly. "Fair enough. You caught me, now you're the runner." And they were off again running and flying through the forest.

"You have the speed, darlin' Mal," Kerri said, relaxing by the fire. "But I'm definitely more agile."

"Yes," Mal agreed. "And Tian here is both quick and agile."

"Then why did you two stay the runner longer than I ever could?" Tian asked.

"Because we don't rely solely upon speed and agility," Malerak explained. "We use cunning, guile, and our minds, too."

"I have to go soon," Kerri said. "I'm sorry." She was looking at Malerak sadly.

"I knew you had news," he said. "Still, I'm glad you're here. What is it I need to hear?"

"I've seen war in the duchies. There are a lot of people dying. There are horrors loosed upon the world. I've seen the slaughter of dwarves. I can't sleep at night without seeing something die horribly."

"Do you know when?" Malerak asked. He moved next to her and wrapped his strong arms around her.

"Soon," she said. "Within days, weeks, or months, maybe. Not more than a year, though. But it's more than that."

"You're shaking. This is really bad, isn't it?" He pulled her even closer. She fell back into him but didn't completely relax.

"Yes," she said. "I've seen some of us die. I've seen some of us hurt. I've seen us hiding from something dark and evil. I don't think many of us live through the coming war."

"What about the elves? They protect us," Tian said.

"The Gates are shut," Kerri said. "The elves aren't there to protect us."

"You told this to Tichal, didn't you?" Malerak asked.

"Yes. He's making preparations and trying not to alert whatever evil is out there," she answered. "I have to go north and find a Dwarf named Gryam. He'll have a mage there who has some answers to my dreams. I think those answers may save a lot of people, including us."

"So, nothing is really set firm, then?" Malerak asked.

"The specifics can change," Kerri said. "But overall, there are going to be a lot of people dying."

"Any specific warnings for us?" Tian asked.

"Beware the shadows," Kerri said. "All I see are shadows around you both."

"We'll be careful," Malerak promised. "I won't leave so soon after you've caught me," he said, smiling.

"You better not," she warned, looking into his eyes. "There's too much at stake."

CHAPTER FIVE

A large, stocky man strode down a hallway at a brisk pace. Reaching a t-intersection, he yelled at the wall in front of him, "Gali, I'm coming in!"

"Carter? Is that you?" replied a yell from the other side of the wall. "I've puzzled the door! See if you can open it!" Laughter echoed from within.

"I don't have time for that!" Carter yelled. He looked at the wall and it appeared to be one long wooden panel with one-inch wide trim patterned in diamonds on top. The diamonds were all the same size. With a flourished wave of his hand, he started forward only to pull up short. There was no doorway. "Gali!" he yelled. "Open the door; I don't have time for this!"

"Couldn't just create a doorway, now could you," Gali yelled. "Puzzle it out!"

Carter sighed. He wasn't going about this the right way. With a thought and a smile, he yelled, "What is small, square and locked?"

"A box, silly," Gali replied. "Now try the door again!"

"Let's say it is a box," Carter teased. "Let's say that one has been sent to us with no mention of who sent it. And let's say some don't know what it means. Isn't it puzzling that someone knows where we are, but we don't know who that someone is?" Carter felt the energy before he saw the doorway appear.

"Tell me you didn't do that just so I'd make the door appear," Gali said, curiosity shining in his eyes.

"No," Carter said. "Arthur explained it all to me and then sent me to get you."

"Did he say what the box was?" Gali asked. His tall, thin frame could not hide any of his excitement. He loved puzzles. Moving his long legs, he nearly raced down the hallway. His companion, unable to keep up at a walk, started to run.

"Gali!" Carter yelled. "Either slow down or I'll lift you off the ground so you can run in place!" Carter wasn't a small man, but his stocky frame and thick muscular legs kept him from moving with any amount of speed. Although there wasn't an inch of fat on his body, his muscles bulged and flexed and generally kept his arms out away from his body.

"But Carter!" Gali whined as he stopped and turned around. "They don't know what it is! You said so!"

"I said something has arrived and no one knows who sent it or exactly what it means. It's a small chest, Gali."

"See!" Gali said, turning to resume his pace down the hallway. Tapestries depicting luscious green landscapes covered the walls, but were ignored in the haste of the two mages. "They don't know what it is! It's a puzzle!"

"Gali," Carter sighed quietly and started to run to catch up to his companion.

"I bet it's in the safe room," Gali said, taking turn after turn in the maze of hallways. The maze of hallways was built as a deterrent to intruders in an effort to stop them from reaching the mage's private rooms. The hallways continuously shifted and reshaped themselves. Only the mages given access to the spell could navigate the maze.

Turning a corner, Gali burst into the safe room. In the twenty by twenty room, four men and two women stood around a table. There was nothing else in the room, except for a small chest on the table. An older man on the far side of the table lifted his eyebrows and smiled. "Ah, Gali. I must say that was record time."

"Let me see it, Arthur," Gali said and pushed two of the people aside to look at a small wooden chest. "Sandar's Oak. It's strong and able to hold powerful magic. Metal trim covers all

corners and from the looks of it, possibly the opening, too." Gali pushed mages out of his way as he circled the table examining the chest visually. "Who brought it to this room?"

Stroking his long, wiry beard, Arthur replied, "None. And none have touched it. It appeared here on the table in this room."

"Here?" Gali chirped. He stepped back and looked around the room.

"Already done," Tarae said. Tall and gangly, she didn't feel comfortable standing straight so she normally slouched. But her eyes were piercing and showed no sign of weakness. "We did multiple scannings of the room, the energy lines, the fields of magic, and any changes made. We can tell someone disturbed the field to put the chest there. So, it was someone who has been here before."

"Not necessarily," Arthur rebuked. "Someone of power could have done this."

"No one we know has that kind of power," Carter said, moving around so he could see the chest.

"Several of us combined," Gali said. "We could do this." He returned his gaze to the box.

"Yes," Arthur agreed. "But it wasn't a combination was it, Gali?"

"No," Gali said. "Not unless they were very close. Twins perhaps. The energy signatures on the magic used to open the field and to place the box here appear to be very similar."

"So, we have one person who did this. That tells us nothing, really. We still don't know who or why."

"A trap," Gali said. "If it was from someone we could trust, they would have made themselves known. If it was someone currently active in our small group, they could have placed it anywhere. But the safe room is the only place someone not active could get to."

"What shall we do, then?" Arthur asked. The rest of the group had been silent up to this point. They knew that Gali had better skills at breaking puzzles and that Arthur had more insight into what decisions would be safest.

"Take it outside," Carter suggested. "Away from inside our home. Who knows what would be unleashed when we open it."

"Do we open it?" Arthur asked. "We could just send it away somewhere."

"No," Gali said. "Besides endangering whoever found it, it was sent to us as a trap or a test. We should determine what it is and who sent it so that we will have the knowledge to combat future events."

"How do we get it outside?" Tarae asked. Murmurs around the table repeated the question.

"We carry it physically," Gali said. "There is magic inside the chest but it won't be activated until it's opened. Physical relocation will do nothing to set it off." No one questioned his assessment. Gali was the puzzler just as Arthur was the wise. Carter was the stone for he delved in Earth magic. Tarae was like the volcano for when she worked magic, the heat of it nearly knocked one down. Each mage usually specialized in one area, although some did more. Gali picked the chest up and carried it out of the room. "Arthur," was the only thing he said.

"Done," Arthur answered. "The maze has been stopped. You have a straight hallway to the outside." Everyone followed them to the doors.

"Oh, does it have to be so gloomy?" Bowen rasped and threw both his arms up in the air in disgust. Tree limbs grew and twined down the hallway, the ceiling gave way to an open, blue sky, and the floor changed from hard wooden planks to soft, lush green grass.

"Bowen!" several mages cried.

"Well, it is a sight better," Gali giggled. "No harm done. Unless you're directing something at the chest, it won't be affected."

"Would've been nice to know that before Bowen changed the hall," Carter sighed. "Who knows what sets off that trap?"

"Oh," Gali said, nearly running down the path in anticipation, "I think I do."

"Do not open it until I say," Arthur warned. "There are preparations I want to make first."

"As long as we'll open it," Gali said, hugging the box tighter. They passed through the large oaken double doors and walked from the magical blue sky to the real open blue sky. The only difference between the two was the tingle of energy stopped as they walked past the doors. The trees beside the path thinned quickly and a field appeared. Golden grain sparkled and waved in the sun and wind. The field was atop a small hill.

"Wait," Arthur ordered. They all stopped and turned toward him. "First, there will be only three of us on the top of that hill to open the box. Three more will wait here at the beginning of the field. And all others will wait inside, viewing us with magic."

"Who?" Carter asked. "Who goes to open, who stays, who is left inside?"

"Ah, let me see," Hanni said. She was small and slightly plump, but not so much that she appeared fat. More so, that her curves were accentuated above average. No one really knew why the mages took the shapes they did. In their lifetime, though, they seemed to cover them all. "There are six mages not physically present here. That leaves eleven of us."

"Gali, Carter, and I will open the chest," Arthur said. "Gali to open, Carter to be our solid ground when the trap is sprung, and I to ascertain what to do. Tarae, Allan, and Stephen will wait outside. That gives us a forceful backup. The rest will gather inside."

"I wish Dale were here," Carter sighed.

"I'll gather the others," Hanni said, going back inside. Bowen followed her. The rest moved to their places.

"Yes," Arthur agreed. "Dale would be able to tell us more of what will happen when the chest is opened."

"He's the only one who has found the solution to all the puzzles I've given him," Gali added.

"I didn't know that," Carter said. They had reached the top. "All of them?"

"Yes. He has a keen mind that sees through many puzzles and illusions."

"Time to open it," Arthur said. Energy buzzed and surged around him. Carter closed his eyes and a boulder lifted from the ground to give them solid footing. As it broke free from the ground, the top flattened and leveled off.

"I am ready," Carter said.

"It's really simple," Gali chuckled. "All that magic around it creates a fog of a magical field whenever I try to probe a way to magically open it." He set the box down on the stone. "The more I try to find the right way of magically breaking the seal to open it, the foggier the energy field becomes. The only way to open it, then, is by the physical and not the magical." He laughed. "It's so devious and yet so simple." He flipped the small latch up and pried the lid open.

The blast moved them forcefully back thirty feet. It wasn't just magic, but the chest itself changed and grew larger in an instant. It expanded and changed. Its magic wasn't lethal and the three were merely displaced physically. Where the chest once sat, an enormous magical gate stood. It was fifty feet tall, fifty feet wide and three feet thick. Silver, glowing metal framed the gate and a black pool of bubbling liquid flowed all inside.

"Close it!" Arthur shouted. "Quickly!" Too late, for Vhasstraa stepped through and evil followed. The Hynan plunged through. Four broke off on each side and touched the gate.

"It is secured, my lord," they said. "It will not close."

"Get back!" Carter roared. A stone golem rose in front of him and began swinging its large, massive arms. Hylnan were tossed left and right.

"Ignore the golem!" Vhasstraa screamed. "Kill the mages!"

"Close the Gate, Gali!" Arthur yelled as he sent a small tornado through the Hylnan. It threw broken bodies into live ones. The force of the twister mangled limbs and rent torsos.

"Our magic doesn't work as strongly here. I can't counter it alone!" a Hylnan mage said. "Brethren, unto me!" Several Hylnan grabbed hands and the tornado disappeared. Archers drew back and let fly a barrage of arrows at Arthur. They flew straight and true into a fiery shield suddenly appeared in front of Arthur. The arrows were incinerated.

"Counter them!" Vhasstraa hissed. He stood straight and tall, wind whipping at him but failing to budge him at all. More and more of his troops streamed through the gate.

"To the keep," Carter yelled. "We must fall back!" Gali and Arthur turned and ran with Carter. Two more stone golems sprang up to cover their retreat. "That's it," Carter sighed. "That took more than I thought I had." With a rasping breath, he stumbled to the door.

The look of terror on Tarae's face forced Arthur and Gali to turn around just as they reached the door. "Trogu," she whispered. Stepping through the gate, hunched over, a huge creature appeared. Large octagonal scales of greenish-gray covered its body. The head sat directly atop the shoulders and it turned its head all the way around in a circle to assess the surrounding area. There was an eye set on each side of its head and two more eyes in the front. Two muscular arms grew out of each side of its body and it gracefully moved on two large legs. It held a tree-trunk sized mace and strode straight toward the stone golems.

"Burn them, Tarae," Arthur said. "Burn them all. Gali, we must shut the gate. Allan, Stephen, save your strength. We'll need it to punch our way through to the gate once Gali knows how to close it."

"I know," Gali answered. "We must remove those four mages that are touching the gate. Then we must crush the gate physically with force. Compress it enough that none can enter. Then we can find a way to fully close it."

Screams of the burning Hylnan reached them. They looked up to see the Trogu dispatching the last golem as fire spread all around it. The Trogu used its bottom two arms to grasp the golem's arms tight against its body. The upper right Trogu arm raised its mace high overhead and crashed it down upon the Golem's head, crushing all. The men burned and died all around, but the Trogu was not touched. Another Trogu stepped through the gate and stood to the side to guard the gate.

"We cannot flee," Arthur whispered. "But we must send some to warn the world. Gali, Allan, Stephen, you must close that gate. Take Tarae and do it! I'll get the others." He turned and ran through the door.

A third Trogu stepped through and beside the gate to guard it. Hylnan warriors continued to flow through the gate. The first Trogu sauntered toward the mages.

"Fire does it no harm, concentrate on the men, Tarae," Gali ordered. "Allan, see if you can use force to crush it. Stephen, create a path for us with air and try to sweep those mages from the gate. It is suicide to enter this fray physically. We use that which we wield the best. Arthur will return with the others to continue the attack."

"Ware!" Stephen cried and flung his hand. A wave of air brushed by them to knock aside a volley of arrows. "We contend with men, monsters and mages! And you want us to just give you a path to yon gate?" The Hylnan swarmed around the gate.

"Break, break, break, break," Allan chanted, his concentration on the Trogu advancing toward them.

"Stop them!" Vhasstraa screamed and the Hynan charged.

"I ... said ... break!" Stephen cried out and there was a loud crack, as if a large, dead tree snapped and fell in the forest. The advancing Trogu gave a yell and fell, clutching its right leg. Stephen passed out and fell to the ground.

"Weaves and waves, fields and staves," Gali spoke. "Tall and thick, strong as brick. Amaze the field!" Tall, thick strands of grass grew immediately. Throughout the whole field, nothing could be seen but the grass. Inside it, many paths crisscrossed to form a very large maze. "We have bought ourselves a little time. They will have to solve the puzzle to find the way through the maze. We can move around the side and get to the back of the gate. Hurry!"

"Yes, hurry," Arthur said, stepping outside. Behind him came the rest of the mages. Turning, he nodded his head and three mages fled. "Warn them all!" Gali and Allan ran for the gate. Carter cradled Stephen and gently tried to wake him. Arthur, Tarae, Bowen, and Enna stood and waited for the enemy. "Prepare yourselves," Arthur warned. "Once they find their way, we won't have much time."

"Wait," Vhasstraa whispered. "Two of them are branching off from the others and are headed for the gate. They think we are trapped within. Let the two get farther from the others and we will ambush them. Then, we will turn our attention to the rest. Send the two T'hoghu to kill the two mages. We'll use enchanted arrows to keep the others busy while the Waharei come through. They will deal with the rest."

As Gali and Allen approached the far side of the gate, the field of grass disappeared and the two Trogu attacked. Gali reacted quickly and reached out to touch one of the Trogu. "Fog," he said and sent a mental fog into the Trogu's mind. It bellowed and swirled its head around, trying to shake free. The second Trogu was too quick and backhanded Allan. The cracks of his bones resounded in Gali's mind as Allan sailed through the air. Gali ran to the two Hynan that were touching the gate. Before he reached them, something stepped in his way. A leathery hand reached out and touched his chest, stopping him instantly. He looked up and gasped, "Wraith." The thing smiled as it drained his life.

Arrows reigned down upon Arthur and his friends. Even as they poured more energy into their shields, arrows slipped past to strike them. Bowen cried out and fell with two arrows in his leg. "Avenge me, my friends," he whispered upon the wind. The trees around the field swayed and whistled and they passed his words along to all of the forest. An arrow struck Bowen in the chest and another in his eye.

"Illusion is harmless only if one knows it is an illusion," Enna whispered. She closed her eyes and focused her will upon the Hynan. "The air is sharp ... tight ... not enough ... constricting ... grasp for breath." All around, the Hynan began to gasp and they found it hard to breathe.

"T'hoghu!" Vhasstraa yelled. "Kill them!" He turned to a group of nine mages. "Counter this! Now!" His orders snapped them out of the illusion and there was a loud pop in the air as they negated the magic.

On the other side of the gate, tens of thousands of Hynan waited their turn. Hundreds of T'hoghu and Waharei waited. Thousands of mantid-like creatures chattered and readied weapons. But, standing over all were ten large war beasts. Each one was fifteen feet high with

massive plate-like scales covering their bodies. They had four short legs, a spiked tail, and tusks that curled up and around their mouth.

As Vhasstraa had planned, each set of warriors took turns going into the gate. The Hynan went first to secure the gate, followed by T'hoghu as support. After that came a few Waharei in case things went bad. Should things look grim, the mantid-like Gorum would be turned loose to go through. Things were going well on the other side. It was on this side where the surprise attack came.

The adult Arlimna flew straight into the waiting army. Hundreds of huge, snarling dragons dropped from the skies. They hit the ground and cleared an area around the gate. The innate magic inside them faded ever so quickly by being that close to the Hynan, but since they were all there together, some magic remained to keep them alive. They couldn't use magic and they couldn't use their breath, but claws shredded bodies, tails bludgeoned, and fangs punctured. The Gorum war beasts were let loose and bodies that were caught between them and the Arlimna were either crushed or battered. The screams of the Hynan were drowned out by the snarls and growls of the Arlimna.

The Arlimna fought and died but they kept pushing and clearing an area in front of the gate. By the time they cleared a large enough space, only about seventy were alive. Viciously, they renewed their attack. As their wounds and the magic of the Hynan killed them, they smiled, for they saw their children swooping down and flying through the gate. Hundreds of young Arlimna sped through the gate to life and freedom, bought by the death of their parents.

CHAPTER SIX

Standing in front of his mine, Gryam peered out into the darkness and watched for signs of movement. He knew the boy was out there somewhere. Their last training session had dealt with stealth and how to move without attracting attention. Gryam had tried to explain that it was all in one's attitude and that one just had to blend in with all the regular background noises and movements. It didn't always take being silent to be stealthy. Sometimes one had to make noise or at least certain noises to be stealthy. Verl had not understood, but that was expected. It wasn't something one could become adept at overnight.

Gryam opened his senses and merged with the night. The cacophony of crickets washed over him and then he filtered it out. The wind rustled through the grass and the trees and he filtered it out. A tiger owl burst through the air to snatch a mouse from the ground and Gryam sensed an interruption in the flow of nature. Verl had been scared by the owl and had made a small noise. It wasn't loud, but it was enough to silence the crickets surrounding him. The owl had heard also and veered off in another direction after grasping its prey. A small field mouse chirped its displeasure at having spotted Verl and disappeared down a hole in the ground. Gryam took in all these things and more and he knew just where Verl was. After that, it was simple to watch the boy as he made his way up the hill. Gryam took mental notes on what he did well and what he did poorly so that he could work on them both in their next training session.

"You saw me," Verl said as he noticed Gryam staring at him. Getting up disgustedly, Verl tramped the rest of the way up the hill.

"Don't be gettin' like that. Yer mind's not alert," Gryam warned. "Ye've got ta stay alert all the time. Even when ye think ye've lost. Especially then."

"Aye," Verl mumbled, walking softer. "When did ye spot me?"

"When that owl scared ye, but we'll talk about it all later. Now, we have other work."

"Before the sun is up?" Verl asked.

"Aye, boy. This is tha first time ye've been here with me before daybreak. 'Tis a magical time, day break. Time when tha world changes. Time ta give yer thank to Khaliana fer all she's done," Gryam explained. Verl stood silently watching him. Gryam pointed to the East. Verl turned and saw the black sky give way to a dark purple. As the minutes crept by, the purple changed to red and orange and finally when the sun rose, the blue sky forced its way into the air.

"Khaliana," Gryam spoke, awe trembling his normally gruff voice. "I greet ye and await yer return with open arms. Ye have my undying love and devotion still and I stand here this break of day to renew that vow."

"What did that mean," Verl asked after a few minutes of silence had passed. Gryam turned to him. A reflection of the sun's light off of the moisture in Gryam's eye sparkled in Verl's eye.

"'Tween you and me," Gryam stated. "In the blackest day of me life, Khaliana rescued me. I dunna mean in some mystical sense, boy. I mean she physically was there. And fer what she did, I gave her my total heart and soul."

"Yer saying Khaliana's real?" Verl stuttered, mouth gaping wide.

"Aye, boy. As real as you and me standing here now."

"But, no one else has ever seen her," Verl argued.

"No one ye know," Gryam said. "'Til now."

"Real ..." Verl said slowly. His eyes glazed over and he stared off in the distance. A bright gleam shone through his eyes and he looked at Gryam. "Is she as beautiful as they say?"

"No boy, she's more beautiful than that. She'll fix ye where ye stand with her beauty. Spit'll run down yer chin 'cause ye forget ta close yer mouth. Just when ye can't stand it any longer, ye chest'll heave from yer not breathing. Ye'll have to look away and that's when her presence overwhelms ye.

"I couldna stand it, driven to me knees from Her. Twasn't a force, ye see. Not like a hammer hitting an anvil, mind ye, not at all. It was the waves of love and peace and content and a feeling of an acceptance no matter how evil ye thought ye'd been or done. I'd had evil throughout me mind and heart and soul afore She came. Had I the power, I would have destroyed the world with me hate. But then Khaliana stepped in front of me. From naught, she was just there and I lost all control. I didna have ta love Her, but I couldna stop from loving Her."

"What happened, Gryam?" Verl asked. Concern covered the gleam in his eyes.

"Something horrible, boy," Gryam sighed. "But the horror has not yet ended." He shook his head to stop any more questions and turned towards the mine. "Time fer the here and now, boy. Time fer work and learning." He started down into the long, dark corridor and the only sound was his bar tapping the hard, cold ground.

Verl followed, silently, allowing Gryam his time alone. It wouldn't be long before they would start mining the ore. Down they went, along the main passage until the last split. Then it was into the left hand passage. "Gryam?" Verl said. "Where are we going? Ye said never to go this way. 'Tis too dangerous."

"Aye," Gryam agreed. "That I said. But a nagging feeling of doom has been plaguing me and it's getting stronger. I'm thinking we must mine this branch." He stopped and turned to Verl. "Remember all I taught, boy, fer this is where death waits. The water runs strongly through these walls down here, the rock is unstable and shale runs throughout. Ye even think something will collapse, ye say it. The line between living and dying is naught but a thought thin. Ye understand?"

"Aye," Verl said, gulping. "Yer wanting only khalite?"

"Aye," Gryam said as he turned around. "As much as we can get."

"But we forgot the cart and my tools are down the other passage."

"I've left a cart down here and I brought yer tools down here earlier. I wanted ta make sure things weren't worse down here. 'Tis bad, aye, but with Khaliana's blessing, we'll get a cartload out." Water seeped out of the walls and made the ground slick. Scattered piles of loose dirt and rocks could be seen from where they'd fallen from the walls and ceiling. They reached the end and found the cart and tools. There was more khalite here than in the rest of the mine. Verl's eyes grew wide just looking at the veins of the ore. He grabbed his pick and turned to a wall. They started to fill the cart, but it was slow going. Each piece of ore had to be carefully pried from the walls and it was hours later when they had finally managed to get one fourth of the cart filled.

Gryam knew every sound a pick made when it hit. He knew the sound of it striking hard rock, shale, coal, clay, and a thousand other materials. So when Verl's pick struck a resounding clang, Gryam knew it was time to leave. "Stop, boy!" he yelled. "Not another strike!" Get yer tools in the cart, quickly!"

Verl didn't ask a question and didn't hesitate. He saw the water start to run out of the hole he had made and tossed his tools in the cart as Gryam grabbed the chain. Pulling the slack out, Gryam started up the mineshaft, gaining speed as he went. Verl had just managed to get in front and was hard pressed to keep ahead of Gryam.

"Faster boy!" Gryam yelled. There was a loud crash and a tremor rumbled throughout the passage, causing both to slip and stumble. A roaring of water could be heard behind them. "I'll not lose the khalite! Move boy!"

Verl ran as fast and as hard as he could. Gryam matched his pace pulling the cart and wishing the boy had just a bit more speed. He could hear the water behind him and it was rising fast. "I've no need fer a bath, boy, so if ye can pick up the pace a bit, I'd be abliged," Gryam huffed.

Pushing himself harder, Verl managed to gain some speed. His breath was starting to come hard and he knew he couldn't keep this up for long. To say anything would be to waste his breath, so he kept quiet and ran upwards towards safety and dryer land.

Verl's strike had managed to break through to a crack in the earth. The crack was unstable and several water streams ran throughout it. These streams were branches off an underground river. The strike opened a rift just wide enough to allow a small cave in. The cave in opened a hole beneath one of the streams. As water rushed into the rift and into the crack, it washed away other unstable areas and opened another hole into a second stream. The third stream followed not long after and punched a hole through where Verl had struck. Water ran hard and strong from above into the shaft to flood it.

The water reached the back of the cart, but Gryam didn't go any faster. He would rather lose the ore than Verl. If it came down to that decision, he'd let the cart go and help the boy out of the mine. But he hoped it wouldn't come to that. "Yer ore's getting wet, boy!" he yelled, but Verl could go no faster. They reached the split and the ground rose sharper. Verl slowed, but so did the water as it spilled down the right passageway. "We've bought a few minutes, boy. Khaliana help us, it'll be enough."

"I'd ..." Verl huffed, "like ... to ... see ... Her." He passed another split and continued up towards the opening.

"No," Gryam whispered, "ye'd do better not ta have cause ta meet Her." Daylight filtered in ahead of them and they knew they were close.

Huffing and wheezing, Verl stopped running when he stepped into the open air. He wanted to fall down, but he knew that would only cause more pain. Instead he walked in circles as he regained his breath. Gryam seemed as if he'd just walked out of the mine. Small beads of sweat peppered his forehead but there were no other clues that he had just run, pulling an ore cart.

"I... know," Verl began, "why you used to take the cart of ore back down into the mines. I know now. It's to build up your muscles and stamina to do what you just did." His breathing was almost back to normal.

"Aye," Gryam answered, smiling. He was watching Verl intently.

Verl looked at him and knew that he was waiting for something, something from himself. He had missed something, but what? He replayed the whole incident over in his head and then he knew! "My ore!" he yelled. "Ye said my ore!"

"Aye," Gryam laughed. "Now that we've averted a watery death, let's find an inn and celebrate. 'Tis the last day of mining this mine. Oh, the water'll not rise too high, but it'll cover all the khalite."

"I've been yer apprentice fer three months now," Verl said. "Three months today. Cause to celebrate fer that, too!"

"Ye've named two. Fate must be given three to ward off disaster," Gryam warned.

"Oh," Verl said, at a loss for words. Gryam waited a few seconds and then smiled.

"Dunna worry, boy," Gryam said. "The third is I've a visitor coming this evening. His name is Dale and his visit is a cause fer celebration! Ye pick the inn."

"The first one we both entered, the Pickaxe."

It was midday and no one had ever thought Gryam would come out of the mine early, so they reached the inn and entered with no trouble and no fighting. Tomas was behind the bar, staring at them with his mouth open. The other dwarfs shifted in their seats to see who had entered.

"Aye, ye daft bunch of larks," Gryam said to all in the inn. "I've come ta town early and ye weren't ready. Ye've lost another chance to lay me low." Laughing, he walked to the bar. "A round fer all, Tomas. I've three causes for drinking and Fate has given us merriment!"

"That's twice now ye've bought a round, Gryam," Tomas warned. "Fate must have another and in this inn, else ye'll anger Him and disaster will strike." Smiling, he continued, "So ye'd better get ta having three more celebrations so ye can come back in three months. A round fer all!" He started filling mugs and tankards, but the warning struck a chord in Gryam. The throb of doom echoed in his soul.

"If this is me last few days," Gryam thought to himself, "then I'll pass them as I've passed all my days. Greeting each day with Khaliana and striving ever ta bring the evil ta its knees. If I can ever find that blasted evil mage."

"Yer frowning, Gryam," someone called out.

"Eh?" Gryam muttered. He looked up and saw most everyone was watching him. Huffing, he grabbed a mug of ale and gulped it down. Riverlets of ale ran down the sides of the mug to flow in his beard. "And that," Gryam belched when he finished drinking, "is cause ta frown! The thought of looking down into an empty mug!"

"Ha!" shouted several dwarves. "I'll drink ta that!"

"What's yer name?" Tomas asked, looking at Gryam's apprentice. "Ye never did say yer name last time ye were here."

"Verl. Verl Tokenkeeper."

"Well, Verl Tokenkeeper," Tomas said, sliding a mug of ale his way, "drink up. Yer always welcome here. Yer still an elana, but any dwarf that'd work with Gryam fer three months ... well, that's a dwarf I'd welcome in me inn anytime!"

"Thank you," Verl stuttered. "I --"

"Drink up," Gryam interrupted, not wanting the boy to say something that would embarrass him. Verl grabbed the mug and drank it down in one gulp. "One act of good should be met with another," Gryam said watching Verl. "Know all here that not only have I been training the boy, Verl, in how to mine, but I've been teaching him how to fight. As long as the doors are open to Verl here, so shall the open challenge to best him will be. And if he can best me apprentice, ye know ye've got a good chance of besting me!" Verl nearly choked out the last of the ale.

"Open challenge?" Verl said. He started to ask if Gryam was insane, but then thought about it again. It was something his teacher had given him to surpass and show that he was indeed learning the lessons well. "Aye," he smiled. "Open challenge."

Several hours later, Gryam and Verl left. Gryam was staggering slightly, but Verl could barely walk straight. Gryam helped him to his home, but stayed out of sight when Verl entered. Not wanting Verl's parents to think their son couldn't handle himself, Gryam let Verl stumble to his door alone. Gryam didn't know what the eldena Tokenkeepers would think of their son

drunk, but he imagined there would be a lot of explaining done in the morning. Chuckling, Gryam turned and made his way home.

There was a light on in his house. In the safety of the Dwarven village of Basin, there would be few, if any, dangers. Had it been any other dwarf, the chance of there being danger would have been zero. But Gryam was old, older than any dwarf in Basin knew, and he'd made powerful enemies in his lifetime. Instead of just assuming it was Dale, Gryam silently approached his home. As he was blending into the night, Dale opened the door, smiled, and waved his friend inside.

"It's just me," Dale said. "I've brewed us a nice mug of elven cha. It'll take the fuzziness out of your mind from those mugs of ale."

"It'd take twice as many mugs fer me mind to be fuzzy," Gryam growled. "But the cha sounds good, ye old trickster. Ha!" Gryam laughed and sprang forward, "Been too long, my friend!" He ran and grabbed Dale in a huge bear hug and squeezed.

"Ach," Dale wheezed. "I'm no dwarf, dwarf! Ease up."

Letting go, Gryam stepped back, smiled, and took a long, hard look at Dale. He was tall, somewhat on the skinny side, and his goatee was kept cropped short. His brown hair, however, was long and tied back in a ponytail with three leather wraps. High cheekbones, deep blue eyes, and sharp angular nose filled out the rest of his face. "Let's get some cha," Gryam said as he entered his home and closed the door. "Yer a great sight fer old and tired eyes."

"It's been too long, hasn't it?" Dale asked, getting the cha. He handed a mug to Gryam and then sat at the table. "Same old Gryam. This house looks like it's barely lived in. Until you get to the back room and spot all those weapons." He grinned. "Still value training more than gathering trinkets, eh?"

"Aye," Gryam said, smiling. "Training fer the body, the mind, and the spirit is worth more than all the trinkets I could ever buy. Tell me, do ye gather trinkets or do ye study magery?"

"Aye," Dale mimicked. "I'd take magery over most trinkets, although some trinkets are worth gathering. I found the pile of khalite and created what you wanted. It was easier than I'd thought since you'd refined the ore. I also took some for my own use. Everything I made has magic in it. Look in your training room."

Gryam went to the room and returned holding a shiny, new mining bar. It was exactly like his old one, except it was straight and showed no mars or nicks. "It's light as a feather," Gryam said with wonder in his eyes.

"Yes, and it has a few other features, but we'll have time to go over that later. I looked at the mirror. I'd say that a mage could track you by it. Sorry about missing that." Dale took a sip of cha. "I overlooked that."

"Ye dunna overlook much," Gryam said. "I dunna blame ye. I should have thought of it myself long ago. Probably why I canna find him." Gryam put the bar back in the training room and returned to a more serious topic.

"Gryam," Dale sighed. "Even I can't find him. He's got a lot to answer for. Most importantly is the murder of your family, I know. But he's done other things and other people are still searching for him. It's like he's dropped off the face of this planet."

"Aye," Gryam agreed. He took a seat opposite Dale and set his mug of cha on the small table.

"There are other matters," Dale said seriously before Gryam could say anything else. "Serious. Important. And I think evil."

"Evil?" Gryam asked. "What're ye calling evil?"

"I don't know," Dale answered. He took another sip of cha. He breathed in and exhaled slowly. "But something is coming and it's far, far worse than anything we've ever seen before. Evil is the best description I can find. And my nightmares are agreeing."

"I've sensed something bad in the air, but I've been thinking it's fer me. I've lived a long time and I figured it was me time," Gryam confessed.

"No," Dale replied, his tone firm. "I can't tell you when you'll go, but I know this is something else. It's something to do with all of us, with this whole world."

"Not me," Gryam said, breathing a sigh of relief. He picked up his mug and drank the rest of his cha. "Then what is it?"

"First, let me tell you about my nightmares. I think they're more than just a type of dream. They're too vivid and detailed."

"Yer seeing the future?" Gryam stood. "More cha?" When Dale nodded, he took both cups and refilled them.

"I know others who see the future and it's never clear or certain. I know mages who've tried to see it, but again, it's never clear or certain. Some have better odds, although I've only heard of a few." Dale noticed that Gryam was standing still, looking at a window. Turning, Dale nearly jumped out of his chair. There, perched in the window and watching both of them intently sat a Ferrenis. It was a medium sized feline with thick luxurious fur. The Ferrenis smiled and a row of long, sharp fangs glistened in the lamplight. The Ferrenis was a night hunter and brought down its prey with just one bite. A neurotoxin flowed through two front fangs and paralyzed its victim within seconds. A strong injection would stop a heart.

"There's something different here," Dale said, keeping still. "Its aura is not the same as most animals." The Ferrenis hopped down from the windowsill to the floor and changed as it did so. What landed on the floor was a woman.

"Warder," Gryam said with a chuckle. "Should have known."

"I am Kerri," the woman said. She was small, lithe and graceful and a glint of mischief twinkled in her eyes. Her hair was a multihued brown and matched the coat of the Ferrenis. Here green eyes also matched the feline night hunter. "My visions have brought me here," she purred as she drifted to Gryam. She sniffed him and took a cup of cha from his hands. "You are the warrior and the bridge between two worlds." She took a sip of cha and moved to Dale. Sniffing him, she said, "And you are the mage. The one who slams shut the door."

"Your entrance was rather, um, timed perfectly," Dale said, smiling. He took the mug of cha from her hands. "Thank you," he told her and saw that she understood the multiple meaning.

"Here," Gryam said, offering another cup of cha to Kerri. She accepted it gracefully and sat in his chair.

"Time is short," Kerri said, looking at Dale. "But my visions have led me here and I must hear of your nightmares. There is something there that I must know."

"Let me get something ta sit on," Gryam said while he brought a stool in from the other room. "I'll not be wanting ta miss this."

"My nightmares," Dale said, sipping cha and closing his eyes. With eyes still closed, he continued, "There are ... things. Things I have never seen before. The closest I can describe these things are something from legend. Dragons. But not quite how you hear them described. No, these things are smaller. They're mostly dark, subdued colors. Grays, blacks, dark browns, dark purples, mostly dark. They're multicolored and they blend in with a rocky mountainside perfectly. The scales that cover them are hard, so hard. Blades do not dent them, spears slide off, and arrows break. Their head is triangular with a long snout. Fangs are sharp with two pairs

that are longer in the front. Sharp, bony horns sprout out from the upper jaw on each side. Their neck is short but very flexible. A hood permanently spreads out around the sides, almost like our desert cobra. Rows of sharp, pointy spines flow down from the back of the head to the end of the tail. The largest ones are on its back. It can stand on two legs or four. The back legs are larger and stronger, though. It has four toes on its foot, spread out evenly. The front legs end in two large claws with a smaller, opposable one opposite them. The wings are large and leathery looking, but they're as hard as the scales. They fold in to the body and blend in so that you don't notice them. Their eyes are bright. It's the brightest thing about them. They are pure, bright colors from gold to silver to blue to violet.

"But the one thing that stands out about them is their hatred. It overflows my dream and permeates every breath I take. It smothers me and washes over me until I gag and almost vomit. It is a hatred born of long abuse and it turns them into vicious killers. I can't see whom they are killing, but they rend and tear and growl. I see magic of some kind trying to bring them down, but it doesn't work. I hear no screams of the dying, but I see the dragons and I know there is no quarter given. Just when I think it's too much to handle, they take the fight to another level. From their mouth spews forth a fire that melts rocks. Then I hear the screams and I can't stand it. That's when I wake up." Dale opened his eyes and drained his cup. "If they come to this world, I won't be the only one to hear the screams."

"Yes!" Kerri hissed. "That's it!" She stood and locked gazes with Dale. "These dragons, as you call them, are not what they seem. Do not pass judgment on them so quickly. You must remember that for it may save lives. And you, warrior --" she suddenly stopped and turned to Gryam. Dale stood at that moment and Gryam hesitated.

"It's started!" Kerri wailed. "No time! No time left for the living!"

"Nooooo!" Dale screamed. "Dead, dead, dead."

"What is it?" Gryam shouted, not knowing who to turn to. "What's going on?"

"You must go," she commanded Dale. "You must shut the door! Shut the door! Fly!"

"Dead," Dale cried, tears running down his face. He looked to Kerri, nodded once, and then disappeared from the room. Kerri turned to Gryam and waves of tears ran in rivers down her face.

"I am sorry, warrior," she said. "I see pain and death and screams and I see ..." she sobbed and could not continue. Slowly she regained her composure and said, "I see a great sorrow in your past, in your present, and in your future. And ... and there is naught I can do to stop it. You are the warrior and it is your pain and sorrow that will create the bridge. It is sorrow that drives you to open the Gate. It is your greatest sorrow that holds back the evil." She seemed to just slump as if she had no energy to stand. "I have to go now for there are places I have to be if we are to save this world." She jumped and in midair changed to the Ferrenis and was out the window and gone from sight in a blink of the eye.

"Why is it I'm always left holding the cup of cha and wondering what's going on?" Gryam muttered and drained his cup.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The wind blew softly, creating small waves in the pond. Whispers ran through the trees and bushes. "Aah," Sian sighed. "It's so beautiful here."

"Are we going to quiet the wind?" Jhedda asked, taking the hand of Gina. Gina was the youngest there. She was short and thin with chubby cheeks and pouty lips but when she smiled, her whole face lit up and sparkled.

"No," Alisandra answered. "We'll conserve all our energy. We may have need of it." She sat down on a small stool and motioned for the girls to sit around her. They all found comfortable places on the ground in a semicircle and waited. They were all young and in different stages of their magical development. Some had been with Alisandra for years and some a few months.

Jhedda, red haired, freckled all over, gangly, and shy, sat next to Gina holding her hand. Sarah, Traci, and Erin were training to alter physical features, so they looked alike. One of them would alter a feature and the other two would try to match it exactly. Right now, they had long blond hair, bright blue eyes, a slender body and long legs. Alisandra smiled at them and said, "Beauty isn't too hard to accomplish. Maybe we should shift your training to old hags and men."

"You wouldn't!" Sarah rasped.

"I would if I thought you were ready for it," Alisandra winked. "But not yet. Once you're able to change your attributes quickly, we'll work on actions and personalities. Then, maybe I'll have you try being a man."

"That might be interesting," Traci said with a wicked grin.

"They're moving the chest," Alisandra said. "The pond, girls. Let's watch." They all turned to look at the pond and the reflection of the surrounding area slowly faded away. In its place was a long hallway full of trees and sun. "They're leaving the keep and taking it outside. So far, we've managed to guess their decisions correctly. I know Arthur and he won't want everyone around the chest when they open it. But who will he send?"

"Gali, for certain," Macy answered. "And two more. Two who will be like foundations for him. They'll be powerful enough to counter whatever happens." She sat to the left of Alisandra. Of the twelve girls, Macy was the oldest and had been training the longest. She had mastered how to alter her physical features, how to become invisible, and how to psionically alter people's minds. She was outspoken and brutally blunt at times. Her body was large, but not excessively fat and her face looked like chiseled stone. She was in a warlike mood and her physical body reflected it. "But they haven't found an answer to what the box is. Otherwise they'd attempt to destroy it."

"They'll open it," Alisandra said with a nod. "Then the fun begins. With Dale gone, they won't have a clue as to what kind of trap we've sent them."

"You just didn't want to put Dale in danger," Macy said. Several of the girls gasped, but Alisandra merely sighed.

"Yes," Alisandra agreed. "But, more importantly, he's the most perceptive. Between him and Gali, they would have certainly figured out what the chest truly was."

"Why do you still favor him?" Macy asked. Alisandra nodded toward the pond and they all turned their attention to it.

"I'll answer that later," she told them. "But they're about to open the chest. Now, we'll see what Vhasstraa brings."

They watched as the chest opened into the gateway. "Power!" Iralla hissed.

"There!" Alisandra pointed to the Hylnan mages stepping through the gate. "Something is wrong!"

"Close the gate!" Macy said, standing.

"No!" Alisandra yelled. "No matter what, we need his army in this world. We'll deal with it later. For now, watch and learn." As the mages went to each side of the gate, the pond suddenly reverted to normal.

"He's tricky," Macy said. "Fall back to secondary monitoring?"

"Yes," Alisandra said, smiling. "Vhasstraa may think he's smart, but never underestimate a woman." The girls concentrated and the pond refocused on the gate once again, but this time from a distance and a different angle.

"Vhasstraa leads his men," Iralla said, pointing to him. "So far, it's only his army. Where are his surprises?"

"There's one," Macy said. "Trogu. Legends come to life."

"They may look like our Trogu, but I'll wager they aren't exactly the same," Gina added. "Nor are those stone golems any match for the Trogu."

"Fire doesn't harm it," Iralla said. "I'll keep notes on all that we see."

"Ah," Alisandra said, "look. They've snapped its leg bone. Fire may not work, but it can be hurt."

"What are they doing?" Sian asked. She watched as the Hylnan stopped and just waited.

"Oooh," Macy said, grinning. "It must be Gali's mind tricks. But the Hylnan aren't affected."

"No, they aren't," Alisandra said. "But Gali doesn't know that. They're walking into a trap." Alisandra stood and pointed, "Look! Wraith."

"Vhasstraa's surprises are finally showing up," Macy giggled. "And poor Gali is walking right into them."

"Ouch," Sian said, cringing as the Trogu hurtled Allan through the air. "I bet that hurt."

"Something is wrong," Alisandra said. "The Hylnan have stopped coming through the gate."

"Look at Vhasstraa," Macy said, pointing. "He knows it, too. He's sending some back through the gate to find out what's wrong."

"More than that," Alisandra corrected. "He's sending them back to find out what's wrong and he's sending a change of orders. Now we'll really see something interesting come through."

"Dragons!" Gina yelled. "Look at them!"

"Kind of small, aren't they?" Sian said. Most of the girls stood and stepped closer to the pond.

"No, this isn't what was planned," Macy said. "Look, the dragons are flying off into the forest."

"And Vhasstraa had a slight shocked expression on his face," Alisandra said, agreeing. "He didn't plan that. Remember, he used to hunt these things. No, this must be the young dragons that he talked about."

"They must have fought their way to the gate to escape their dying world," Macy said. "I'd wager that what we saw come through was the last of them."

"Anyone have a count?" Alisandra asked. "I was too busy watching Vhasstraa."

"No," several girls muttered.

"I'd guess at least several hundred," Gina said. "But I can't be sure."

"What's happening now?" Jhedda asked. "Oh! Oh! Oh! What is that!" she screamed pointing.

"That is impressive," Alisandra said as they watched the Gorlum war beasts come through the gate. "These are fairly easy to count, eh girls?"

"Yeah, two," Macy answered. "Lucky it wasn't fifty of them."

"And those?" Erin asked, pointing to the mantid-like creatures running though.

"It looks like we'll have several new species on this world, girls," Alisandra said. "Let's shift our view and see if any mages still stand." The view in the pond shifted and zoomed. Bodies lie on the ground. "Not all of them. Some escaped. Find out who died and who is missing, girls. Keep track of everything that comes through. I'm going to send messages that it's time to take the gates." She turned and walked toward keep. "Traci," she called back. "Come with me. You can learn how to send your image over distances. We'll need to do that to alert Fenton. We'll use the Shadissins for the rest." Traci ran to catch up to Alisandra, a grin from ear to ear.

"Thank you," Traci said. "Does this mean that my training will shift?"

"Yes," Alisandra said. "You've done fairly well with altering and changing things. We'll work on illusions now. It's a completely different aspect to magic and one that's more dangerous."

"Is this what the Shadissins use?"

"No, yes, maybe," Alisandra said, laughing. "No one really knows what they are, let alone how they do the things they do. Like now, we have one walking with us." Traci stopped, shivered, and looked around.

"You're perceptive," the Shadissin said, becoming visible. "When did you know I was there?" He was tall, thin, and dressed in a very dark gray outfit that covered most of his body. Gloves covered his hands and he wore a mask that covered all but his eyes. Either his skin was darkened or he had used a covering, but the skin that could be seen matched his clothes. His eyes were black as night.

"Now, my dear," Alisandra said, grinning. "You know a girl never tells her secrets."

"No," the Shadissin disagreed, "you just don't want us to know how much you know of what we can do." Although his mouth couldn't be seen, you got the feeling he was smiling.

"No names, no identities, all mystery," Traci said. "Doesn't that get boring?" The three continued walking.

"Stop," the Shadissin said. They stopped again. "Here girl," he said, reaching out to touch her. She didn't see his hand or have time to react as he gently pressed a finger on her arm. The entire world disappeared. There was nothing but blackness. There were no sights, no sounds, no movements, and no sensations. It was as if everything was frozen in a darkness that didn't care. And then she heard a voice whispering to her, "This is what we are. This is the baseline of our life." Slowly the world returned in a myriad of colors and sights and sounds and smells. She gasped and it was like seeing the world from brand new eyes. The sunlight glittered and sparkled in the air, the birds chirping were a sharp cacophony in her ears, and the pine trees smelled wonderful. "Now, tell me, is this boring?"

"So beautiful," Traci whispered.

"A lesson well given and hopefully well learned," Alisandra warned. The Shadissin laughed. Traci looked confused. "He touched you before you even knew it," Alisandra said.

"Oh," Traci stuttered. "I thought you meant..."

"No," Alisandra said, cutting her short. "The other lesson that was learned was that the Shadissin found out a bit more of our weaknesses." She turned to the Shadissin and said, "Ever probing, but the real question was did you learn anything of our strengths?"

"Weaknesses are easy to discern, but to find the strengths and the knowledge of how to neutralize them ... aaah, that is priceless," the assassin replied.

"Not going to tell, are you?" Alisandra asked, smiling. "We will all keep our secrets close. Come, then, we've got messages to send." The three of them continued walking to the castle.

"What shall I take back with me?" the Shadissin asked. "There are other matters to attend to for us. What priority do you want?"

Alisandra stopped and said, "You don't want to go into the castle. Why?" The assassin merely smiled and gave a small nod to acknowledge she was right. "Time to take the gates. Send it to Stephen, Nikole, and Bene. You can take the North Gate as soon as possible. I don't want any Warders left alive. We'll send messages to Fenton and Thaddeus. The North Gate has priority. The rest are messages and can be sent within a few days."

"As you wish," the Shadissin said and disappeared. Alisandra didn't want to watch him and give away any idea of just how much she knew of their powers, so she turned and strode into her castle. Traci followed her inside.

"You're mad at me, aren't you?" Traci asked. She passed through the entrance hall and Alisandra waved the servants aside. She continued through to a large dining room. A huge oak table stood in the center of the room with fourteen chairs around it. Tapestries hung on the wall and rugs were placed methodically on the floor.

"No," Alisandra said. "I wanted the Shadissin to think I was mad at you. I never expected you to be equal to him. Not yet. But I wanted to see his strengths and he knew that." Passing through the dining room, she turned a corner and walked up a set of stairs. "In the end, I didn't learn anything new and I don't think he did either. But we both affirmed some of our guesses."

"Do we have to use them? I know you said that they're the best we can find, but couldn't we have used someone else?"

"We aren't using them," Alisandra corrected. "We're giving them a chance to do what they love to do. If we had chosen someone else, they would have taken that as an insult. We possibly could have had them as an enemy." She opened her door and walked into her office.

"Oh," Traci muttered, stepping into the room.

"I think they would have enjoyed that and were silently hoping we didn't employ them. If anything, they love a challenge. That's why I sent them against the warders. Now, get a chair and let's contact Fenton." Traci moved a chair over to the desk as Alisandra sat in her own. "I just want you to astrally ride along with me. I don't want you to try anything right now, just watch and try to see what I'm doing. When we get to Fenton, he won't see you at all. For you, this is just a learning experience. Understand?"

"Yes," Traci answered. She scooted up to the edge of the seat and then rested her hands on her knees.

Alisandra leaned back in her chair and relaxed. "I'm reaching out psychically to touch you. Can you feel it?"

Traci fidgeted as she closed her eyes. "No," she said finally.

"Relax and sit back," Alisandra whispered. Traci did.

"Oooh," Traci said. "My right hand. You're touching my right hand."

"Yes. Now relax, but reach up and clasp my hand. Yes, that's it. Relax and let yourself float." Alisandra took Traci's hand and led her out of the castle and onward to Fenton. They reached his home and flew through walls to find him in a training session. "Watch and learn, Traci. If you know your enemies strengths, you can find a way to neutralize them." They watched Fenton spar with a weapon's master. He was good and used his small size and speed as

advantages. And when the weapon's master corrected him, he took it gracefully. "I don't know how controllable he'll be if we use him as a High King. Ah, there goes the trainer. Time to show ourselves." Alisandra shifted her focus and appeared before Fenton. Fenton didn't blink as he ran his sword through her.

"Uh," Fenton said. "Sorry. I didn't know it was you." He saw that his sword swished through Alisandra's form. "It would be nice if you'd give someone advance warning."

"You didn't want the normal messengers," Alisandra told him. She moved away from the sword. "So, you get what I want. Now, I don't want to spend all day here. It's time."

"Short and sweet," Fenton said. "The others were notified?"

"Yes, contact whoever, do whatever, but get those gates under control as soon as possible."

"Yes, oh wise and supreme master," Fenton said, bowing. When he stood up, he was smiling. "Lighten up," he said. "I'll do what I said. No need to get all serious."

"If we don't get control of those gates quickly enough, you'll wish you were dead. Elves have a very, very dreadful sense of retribution."

"Then I should go and attend to matters," Fenton said. He nodded his head, turned and walked away.

"Hhhhhnnnn," Traci wheezed as she was suddenly thrown back into her body.

"You weren't paying attention to me, Traci," Alisandra said. "That headache will be a reminder for next time."

"Augh," she cried. "My head feels like it's going to explode. What happened?"

"Fenton will work with Stephen to take the South Gate. They will make sure that the Warders are dealt with. Oh, they'll keep one or two as prisoners, but the rest will be killed. The Shadissins will take the North Gate. They'll kill all the Warders there. That leaves the East and West Gates. Bene of Lystor will take the East Gate. He has some Shadissins to help him."

"And the West Gate?" Traci whispered. She used both hands to massage her temples and head. "Is our plan working?"

"Yes," Alisandra answered. She leaned back and closed her eyes. "Thaddeus of Rood once ruled, but he was replaced years ago." She smiled. "It was a very good arrangement. Our friend Ryalla was in trouble and on the run from a dwarf."

"Gryam," Macy said as she entered the room. "Ryalla killed Gryam's family and Gryam has been hunting him since." The rest of the girls followed her into the room.

"Yes," Alisandra said. "Ryalla was afraid of this dwarf and we wanted Thaddeus replaced. Now Ryalla looks like Thaddeus and Gryam can't find him. A very great working arrangement, especially since Ryalla is going to use Rood's troops to take the West Gate, kill all the Warders, and destroy the gate."

"The South will be the only gate to survive?" Macy asked. "That hasn't changed, right?"

"The Hynan will destroy the North Gate on their way south into Naviers. Lystor will do their best to destroy the East Gate, but we don't know if they'll succeed. Ryalla is powerful enough to destroy the West Gate. Once all the gates are under our control, I'll send some of you to help destroy the East Gate. In the end, the duchies of Rood, Eridor, Wenn, and Lystor will protect the South Gate. The Hynan will have control of duchy Naviers and possibly Iorion. They'll have killed most of the mages and the dwarves and destroyed the North Gate. The Shadissins will kill the Warders at the North Gate and the East Gate. We'll use some of the armies of Rood, Eridor, Wenn, and Lystor to kill the rest of the Warders, including those at Three Rivers. After that, all we need to do is pick a High King and let things settle down."

"Sounds easy enough," Macy said. "But we're putting a lot of faith on other people."

"Yes," Alisandra said. "Which is why I've decided to make a small change in our plans. I'm sending some of you out to help take the Gates."

"Who?" Iralla asked. The girls were jittery and nervous. Most of them had never gone out on their own before.

"Dianna and Erin will go to Ryalla. You are to let him know that I'm sending you to help with the small stuff. Do not interfere with his decisions. Just keep an eye on things and if it's worth mentioning, then let me know. I want you to leave tomorrow morning. Macy, Jhedda, and Gina will go to Bene Lystor and tell him you are there to help. Let him know that you are my eyes and ears. I want everything to go as planned. You can make small changes on your own, but consult me for major changes. Leave tomorrow morning, also. I want the rest of you to start scrying on the North Gate, all four Warder villages, the dwarven communities, and keep watch over Vhasstraa's army. I'll attend to the South Gate personally. Now, go and attend to your duties."

CHAPTER EIGHT

"There it is, Tian," Malerak said, pointing down the hill. "That's Warder Camp."

"I've been meaning to ask you about that," Tian said, standing next to him. "The West Gate has Warder Town and the North Gate has Warder Camp. Who named these places? And what drugs were they using?" Looking down at the small village, it was hard to imagine it as a camp. The houses were built of wood and looked ancient. The roads in the town looked made of some kind of slate.

"I named this one," Malerak laughed. "And no drugs. When I started this place, it was but a camp. What better name for it?"

"And the others?" Tian asked.

"I'm getting to that part," Malerak huffed and started walking down the hill. "I've told you about the elves and the gates. But what I didn't say was that the North Gate was the very first gate. The elves wanted an outpost as their first gate into this world. They wanted someplace out in the wilderness so that they could scout and determine if this world was worth contacting. They created the Warders to guard their gates. I was left here in charge until enough Warders could be trained to maintain two gates. When that finally happened, Gillun took half of them and went with the elves to build the West Gate. Gillun named it Warder Town. He thought it funny at the time. And so, each gate was named in that fashion. The East Gate has Warder Village and the South Gate has Warder Outpost. You can say it's a joke directed at me for naming this place the way I did." He smiled, lifted his hands palm up and shrugged his shoulders. "Had I known it would last this long, I would have called it something else."

"How many live here?" Tian asked.

"We have the smallest number since the North Gate doesn't see a lot of trade go through it. And like all the Gates, the Warder population is never stable. If we aren't on duty, we tend to travel a lot. But, there are usually about twenty Warders here."

"Twenty? That's all? There were about a hundred at Warder Town."

"Yes," Malerak said. "Probably more like a hundred and fifty. The West Gate and the South Gate get the most trade through them. The South Gate has about a hundred and fifty, too. The East Gate has about fifty or so."

"Malerak!" a Warder called from the town. "Is that really you?"

"It's me! Who else would travel all this way to this desolate place?" Malerak shouted back.

"You'd better be coming here to say you're taking charge of the gate!" the Warder yelled. "Else, you can just turn around and go away."

"Ha!" Malerak laughed. "I'd stay whether you wanted me or not, you old goat!" As they walked closer, Tian could see the Warder. He was tall and gangly with long flowing white hair around his sharp and angular face. He sported a goatee, which was also white.

"Oh, so you've brought the one in charge, then?"

"You wish, Ben!" Malerak laughed. "Then you'd drag me even further north into some wild scheme to dig gems out of the earth."

"You just don't want to be rich," Ben snorted and huffed. "Now are you here to take command or not? And who did you bring with you?"

"Yes, I'm here to take command and don't get all happy about it," Malerak said. But no sooner than he had said it, Ben jumped and shouted a great gleeful yell. When he was done, Malerak turned and said, "Tian, there are no civilized people up here." He turned back to Ben

and said, "Ben, this is Tian. Tian this is Ben, an old goat who's been around almost as long as me."

"Keep an eye on him, Tian," Ben warned. "He'll slip away quiet like and leave you at the gate for hours alone."

"Once!" Malerak yelled. "I did that once in all the time we've known each other and you still won't forget it."

"Give me something else to complain about," Ben said, laughing. "I could bring up the time you dragged me up the side of the mountain chasing ghosts of long dead animals."

"Oh no," Malerak said. "I think complaining about slipping away is good enough."

"Ha!" Ben yelled, slapping his thigh and laughing. "You know me too well. Now, I imagine you're tired and hungry. Come on and we'll find something to eat."

"Anything change since I've been away?" Malerak asked, walking alongside Ben. Tian followed behind them.

"Whispers at the Gate," Ben said. "Something's happening but I don't know what. Up here, you don't get a lot of information about the lower world. You know something, don't you?" They reached a cabin and entered. There were two tables and a few chairs in the main room. In the only other room, a small fire crackled and a large black kettle hung over it. "We ate about an hour or so ago, but there's some left and it should still be warm."

Malerak grabbed two clean bowls and ladled out some soup. He handed a bowl to Tian and then he went to the other room to sit at a table. "I've talked to Gillun, Tichal, and Kerri."

"Eh?" Ben said, sitting. "When's the last time you talked to all three in the same year? Something must be going to happen."

"Gillun was at West Gate, but left to talk to Tichal. Tichal is going to South Gate and Gillun will either fill in for him or go back to West Gate. Kerri talked to Tichal and that's what started all this. Tichal sent me here to prepare. He thinks the duchies are going to go to war."

"They are always fighting," Ben said. "That isn't new."

"No, but this is different," Malerak said. "This will involve all of them and probably the Gates."

"Bleck," Ben spat. "Don't you have any good news?"

"Kerri found us on our way North and we spent some time together," Malerak said.

"She still look as good as ever?" Ben asked.

"Yes, and we're sort of together," Malerak said. Ben's eyes flared wide.

"Well, kick me off the mountain," Ben said and slapped his thigh. "When did that happen?"

"Few years ago. It isn't common knowledge, so don't go spreading it around."

"Whew," Ben said. "You want me to keep a secret? When's the last time I was any good at --" Malerak's glance stopped him from finishing his sentence. "Yeah, I understand." There were times when Ben got away with teasing Malerak and there were times when he couldn't.

"She told me to watch the shadows and to be careful," Malerak said.

"Shadissins," Ben whispered. "Being careful, watch the shadows, coming war, they all point to Shadissins."

"That's what I thought, too," Malerak sighed. "We have to prepare."

"No one can prepare for them," Ben said. "I don't even know if we can defend against them. How many are there? What can they do? We've all heard the rumors, but what's true and what isn't?"

"We've been around forever, Ben, and we still don't know a whole lot about them," Malerak said. He was done eating and pushed his bowl away from him. He leaned back in the chair, let his head tilt back and closed his eyes. "Kerri said there would be a lot of people dying."

"Had a party of elves come flying through on horses a little while back," Ben said. "I figure you know about that, though. Gillun reached out through the Gate and I was the one here. He said his gate had the same thing happen."

"Yeah, I was there. They looked like a scouting party."

"I wondered if they came through to round up the elves that were here and bring them back home," Ben said.

"I hadn't thought of that," Malerak said. "That puts a new spin on things, though. They have us here to guard the gates; maybe they want to sit this war out?"

"I think we should gather up all of the Warders in the area and start preparing," Ben said. "First thing tomorrow I'll go out and find them."

"You know the Ekapa tribe better than anyone else. Do you think they'd help us?" Malerak asked.

"Heh," Ben huffed. "There's an interesting question. We've helped each other out enough times, but never in a war. We've never asked for help, do we start now?"

"We've never had to fight Shadissins," Malerak said.

"No, we haven't. I'll talk to the tribal council. At the least, we can get some good antidotes from them. I know the Shadissin use poisons routinely."

"Yeah," Malerak said. "But will it matter? If they're coming here to take the Gate, they won't use any poison that has an antidote. They'll use something really nasty that can't be cured."

"Any chance is better than none," Ben said. They heard a snort and turned their heads towards Tian. He was sound asleep and starting to snore. "Youngsters," Ben puffed. "We'd better get him bedded down."

"I'll take him and a few others and check the Gate out tomorrow," Malerak told him. "See if there's anything more we can do to protect it and ourselves."

"Shadissins," Ben whispered as he stood. He nudged Tian and woke him. "C'mon, youngling, we have beds for sleeping. You don't have to stay in a chair all night." Tian slowly rose and followed him outside and to another larger cabin.

Bright and early, Malerak woke Tian. Tian squawked a bit in surprise, but then was wide-awake. "C'mon, we have a Gate to check," Malerak said. Tian followed him quietly out of the bunkhouse. Outside, two warders were waiting for them. "Nystus and Drey, this is Tian." The sun was just rising and there was a purple hue to the sky.

"Hello," Tian said. Malerak started walking. All three followed. They left the camp and started along a path that wound through the forest. Once inside, the trees blocked out the rising sun and it was mostly shadows.

"Morning," Drey said. He was medium height and somewhat thin with tufts of hair wildly placed. His green eyes shone even in the gray of dawn. "Bobcat."

"Eh," Nystus said and nodded her head. She was skinny and about as tall as Tian. Her hair was sleek and hued. Her face was angular and her nose was sharp. "Kestrel."

"Hawk," Tian said.

"Great," Drey said. "I have to put up with two birds of prey. You two will probably be off flying by mid morning while I'm stuck down here." He sighed.

"Be proud of what you are," Malerak said. "The other side of the mountain is rarely better than the side you are on."

"Sure," Drey said, grumbling. "You can say that. You're Malerak. I'm just some unknown warder."

"I was once that, too," Malerak said. "Anyone can be great."

"How am I supposed to become a great legend like you if I'm stuck way up here in the North away from everyone and everything?"

"Greatness comes from within," Malerak said. Drey gave a humph and was quiet the rest of the way. Tian and Nystus would secretly cast glances at each other when they thought the other one wasn't looking.

"There is the Gate," Malerak said, pointing down the path. There was an opening ahead of them and the Gate stood against a huge flat rock. From the rock, a road wound down the mountain to the river below and then followed the river to Clearwater Lake.

"I want everyone to survey the area around the Gate and then come up with some suggestions on how to defend the Gate," Malerak told them. "We could be fighting men, beasts, or Shadissins, or maybe no one at all. But we have to be prepared for what an enemy could do, not what he might do."

They spent all morning going over strategies and defenses. All the while they were there; nothing came or went through the Gate. Close to mid afternoon, they walked back to Warder Camp for lunch. Malerak ate with Ben and caught up on what they had seen and done. Tian left with some newly found friends after they ate.

"The Gate can't be easily defended against Shadissins," Malerak informed Ben.

"I know," Ben said. "I've been up here longer than you. I know most of this area well. We could create some kind of defense against men and horses, but Shadissins won't attack like that."

"We'll have to play their game of hit and run," Malerak said. "Let's go outside. These chairs aren't very comfortable and it's nice and sunny. I'd like to sit on the grass and take in the sun."

"Sounds good," Ben said, getting up and going outside. Malerak followed and found a nice, sunny patch of grass and plopped down onto it. Ben found a nice, soft, thick area of grass and lay down on his back in it. He put his hands behind his head and stared at the big, blue sky.

"Do we defend the Gate and the area around it? Or do we attack from a wider area?" Malerak asked. They talked about the pros and cons of each situation until late afternoon.

"Malerak!" Tian called, running toward him. He jumped into the air and as he did so, he changed forms into that of a hawk. The hawk cried out in pride as it flapped wings strongly to keep it airborne.

"Must be youth," Malerak mused as he watched the change. It was abnormally fast. The hawk gained a few feet of altitude and then pulled in its wings and dove toward the ground. Turning somersaults in the air amidst the change, Tian finally landed on his feet near Malerak.

"I've been practicing," Tian said, proudly. His shoulders were drawn back and his chest was puffed out.

"So you have," Malerak said, standing up. "Can you do that with a volley of arrows coming at you?"

"Huh?" Tian said, his chest deflating a little.

"That was all well and good for practice, but when you've got death coming straight at you, you don't have time to show off. You either live or die, but it'll be decided in a fraction of a second. That's what we train for - to give us more of a chance at life in that small amount of time." A few other Warders had gathered around after seeing Tian flaunt his skill. Ben smiled and knew there was a harsh lesson coming.

"Wouldn't quickness in change give me that edge?" Tian asked. "Gillun had me training to speed up my change."

"Training is done to build skill, but don't confuse training practices with real life applications. In training, you are building a basis for fighting and you're learning techniques. In combat, it should all come together and there won't be thinking or action or decisions or defense or offense. It will all be one." Malerak looked into Tian's confused eyes and knew he'd have to physically demonstrate to get the lesson through.

Malerak turned and asked the Warder to his right, "What's your name?"

"Harris," the man replied. He was tall and skinny with a somewhat rounded face. He had a fluid and graceful way of moving.

"Some kind of cat, aren't you?" Malerak asked.

"Yes," Harris replied. "I'm one of the mountain cats."

"And you?" Malerak asked another standing nearby.

"Fenn," he replied. He was a big man, full of muscle. His neck was thick and his arms were larger around than Malerak's legs. "I'm a lowland's bull."

"Would you care to help teach this youngster what I'm trying to tell him?" Malerak asked with a twinkle in his eye. "You might learn a thing or two yourself."

"Yes," Harris replied. It was rare to get a combat lesson from the famous Malerak.

"Yes," Fenn agreed also.

"Clear an area, then," Malerak said. Two other Warders moved back while Harris, Fenn, Tian, and Malerak stayed where they were. "One short combat exercise. Either tap or say yield, but no quitting until either all three of you yield or I yield."

"Agreed," Tian said, grinning.

"You may change, but I won't," Malerak said, watching their eyes go wide. "It's to keep things a bit more evenly matched." He smiled. "Begin when you wish." And then he waited, but he knew Tian would be the first to strike.

Tian lunged and changed at the same time. Malerak moved slightly to the side and grabbed one of the hawk's wings. Spinning in a circle, Malerak used the hawk to attack the other two Warders. On the first pass around, the hawk's other wingtip poked Fenn in the eye causing him to step back and shout in pain. On the second pass as Tian was changing back, Malerak threw him into Harris. Both of them went down, with Tian landing face first and Harris landing on his back. With a swift punch to the midsection, Malerak drew the breath out of Fenn and knocked him down. Jumping in between Tian and Harris, Malerak landed with his knee on the back of Tian's neck. Reaching down, he swiftly locked his right hand around Harris's throat. Turning slightly, he watched Fenn.

"Yield," Malerak growled. Fenn started to rise. "Stop," Malerak commanded. Fenn stopped.

"Yield," Harris weakly sputtered. Tian managed to twist his face out of the ground and spit out, "I yield."

"These two would be dead before you could save them," Malerak told Fenn. "And if this were real combat, I'd have killed you seconds after these two and before you even had the chance to get up."

"Yes," Fenn acknowledged. "I yield."

"Accepted," Malerak said, grinning. "Now gather round." He moved to let the other two up. Tian got up and brushed the dirt from his clothing. Harris massaged his throat as he got up. The other two drew closer and Fenn just stood.

"Mistakes?" Malerak asked.

"Why wouldn't you have killed Fenn before dealing with the two on the ground?" one of the Warders asked.

"The two would have recovered by that time and then I'd have had to deal with two instead of one. Good question, though."

"I think Tian made a mistake going for your face," Fenn said. "I knew he was going to attack you first and thought I'd use that as an advantage. But Tian got in my way."

"No," Malerak corrected. "I put Tian in your way. I knew he was going to attack first, too. When he did, I used him as a way to fend off both of your attacks while at the same time I used him to attack you. Offense and defense in one movement is the key to combat. As for Tian's change, Tian," Malerak said, turning to him. "If you would have used the change as a diversion and let the other two attack, that might have worked. You're quick in the change. You could have faked a change, and then dropped your attack while changing back and as the other two attacked me, you could have attacked then. But, you committed a full attack in the middle of a change. You aren't quick enough yet to pull that off successfully."

Tian thought about what Malerak said and replayed the fight over in his mind. "You would have been dealing with the other two and I might have gotten in a good attack then. Instead I didn't think about working as a team, but more of a free-for-all." Malerak nodded.

"It's good that neither of you changed," Malerak told Fenn and Harris. "You didn't have the time. But if one of you had me occupied, then one or both could have changed depending on the situation. And it isn't about speed. You saw how quick Tian is in changing. I know that you're quick, Harris. Fenn, I wouldn't think you're quick to the change are you?"

"No," Fenn replied. "That's why I didn't change."

"I was able to gain the advantage because I off balanced all three of you. That's what gave me the time to successfully position myself to end the fight. But off balancing isn't the only thing. First you get your opponent off balance. Then you initiate a movement and then the finale or kill. If you try to initiate a movement, like Tian did without the off balance, you will fail."

"But we've been changed by the elves to be better at combat," Harris said. "Against men, we'd still win."

"Maybe," Malerak said. "Will you bet your life on that?"

"Well ..." Harris said. "I guess not."

"Good," Malerak said, turning to walk away. "Keep up with your training. And remember that men aren't the only ones in the world that you'll come across."

CHAPTER NINE

Pushing himself until the wind felt like razors across his face, Dale flew just above the mountaintops watching the terrain blur beneath him. He couldn't tell if the wind caused the tears to cascade down his cheeks or if it was the pain of feeling his friends die. His thoughts didn't linger long as he knew there were some still alive. He closed his eyes and pushed himself harder. Opening his eyes and his mind, he took stock of his location. It wouldn't be wise to suddenly show up in the middle of the danger.

He felt a disturbance in the energy ahead of him and slowed. Lifting higher to a better vantage point, he looked to the distance. Something huge and long was traveling towards him. As he neared, he saw that it was an army. He felt a foreign magical probe hit him and instantly neutralized it. The magic swept through him rather than stop to define him. Whoever had sent the probe wouldn't be alerted that he was there. Still being careful, Dale dropped down and out of the way of the army's path.

An army had attacked his friends. Being out of the way, Dale pushed his speed up again, but not to the point of being reckless. "Where did this army come from," he asked himself quietly. As he neared the keep that they all called home, he was hit by a wave of strong magic. Something was ahead, next to the keep, and using extreme magic. Dale slowed and then landed atop a hill overlooking the area. The hill was covered with old, tall trees, so he had to walk among them until he could get a better view.

The wind picked up some as he landed. The trees moaned and twisted. Dale felt an anger rising around him. "Bowen?" he asked. "Bowen, are you here?" No one but Bowen could make the trees come alive. He had a power with the forest no one could equal. Something was causing the forest to come alive with hatred and anger. It had to be Bowen, but where was he?

"Dale?" a soft voice called.

"Bowen?" Dale asked as he quickly looked to his left. He saw Carter propped against a large Oak tree. Cuts, bruises, and blood covered his body and clothes. His face was gaunt and ashen.

"No," Carter sighed. "Dead."

"What happened," Dale asked as he knelt beside Carter and checked his friend's wounds. "You'll live," he told Carter.

"Don't feel like it," Carter said and coughed. "Thought I was dying for sure."

"Not yet, old friend," Dale said. "Let me try something."

"Be careful," Carter warned. "They can detect magic."

"First we'll get you better, then we'll worry about them," Dale said. He gathered a small bit of magical energy from the forest and transferred it to Carter, healing some of his injuries. The forest seemed to know what was being done and added to it. Dale jumped when the extra magic flowed through him. Carter's body healed and quickly returned to normal.

"I didn't know you could do that much," Carter said. He looked rested and refreshed and more of his strong self.

"I didn't," Dale said. "The forest did most of that."

"No," a voice whispered through the wind. "I did that."

"Who?" Dale and Carter said together.

"Give me a moment," the voice sighed. Slowly a form coalesced in front of them. As it solidified, they began to recognize the figure.

"Bowen?" Dale asked.

"Yesssssss," the wind hissed. "A moment more ..." His form solidified and Bowen stood in front of them. "I'm not physically here," he explained.

"What happened?" Dale asked.

"Do you mean below or me?" Bowen replied. Anger, magic, and power radiated from him. Dale and Carter looked at him. This Bowen looked, talked, and acted like the old Bowen, but there were minor changes that eluded their understanding.

"You," Dale said. "Then we'll get to what happened below."

"I was murdered," Bowen said. "I don't remember anything at all about my death. I just know that I died and I was filled with rage and anger and hatred. I didn't want to go and leave my friends there against those horrors. I flung magic around me in my rage, trying to return. I don't know what transpired, but somehow my being was stretched out and overlaid with the forest. I became a part of all of it. My magic, my being merged with all the magic and life of the forest."

"But you're still dead?" Carter asked.

"In a way, yes," Bowen replied. "But in a way, no. I can appear like this, a physical person. I can touch things, but I don't think anything can touch me. I have boundaries and can't leave this forest. But that covers a wide area."

"The anger I feel is coming from you, through the forest?" Dale asked. "No, that isn't right, is it? You really are the forest. The anger is from all of it."

"You always could see through to the solution to any problem," Bowen said. "Yes, we are angry. But right now, I don't know what to do. There is a power here that is unimaginable, but I don't know how to access it or use it."

"So your rage increases with your frustration," Dale said. "The army is marching right through the forest and you can't do anything because you don't know how yet."

"Yes," Bowen growled and the trees groaned. "But when I do, I will rend them limb from limb."

"We have to close the Gate," Carter said.

"Let's take a look," Dale said and they walked a short way to get a better view. He saw the Gate and the scattered remains of the battle. He saw a huge green-gray beast with four arms and two legs sitting on the ground. One leg was stretched out straight and some men appeared to be attaching a splint. Using slight magic, Dale shifted his gaze and looked closer. The men weren't men at all, but something entirely new that he could only guess came through the Gate.

"We received a box filled with magic in our safe room," Carter started to explain. "Gali naturally wanted to open it. Arthur thought that there were enough of us there that we could handle anything. Oh, how proud and arrogant we were." He leaned against a tree and tears started down his face. "We thought we could do anything, Dale. We thought we could control whatever was in the box. I can see now how arrogant and stupid we were."

"I'm sorry I wasn't here to help," Dale said. "I got here as fast as I could when I felt ... when I felt something was wrong."

"Look," Bowen said, pointing to the Gate. "More come through. We have to close it."

"We'll have to crush it by force," Carter said.

"Bowen, is there anything you can do?" Dale asked. "Can you uproot a tree and animate it down there?"

"No," Bowen replied, fire still burning brightly in his eyes. "Not yet. But I believe I can have the trees lift dead logs and throw them. There are a few trees in range and a few old oaks that might be able to throw farther."

"That's a start," Dale said. "Have your trees gather the logs and deadwood. Carter, can you create some golems?"

"I'm better now, but not fully healed," Carter said. "I'll create two." Dale cocked an eyebrow. "One might not be enough," Carter explained. "And if it kills me, I'll give you two."

"Don't push yourself too hard," Dale said. "We may need more magic later if we fail at closing the Gate."

"The trees are gathering," Bowen said. "It took some manipulating, but I have a better understanding of what I can do. We'll be ready when Carter creates the golems."

"Have them throw the logs at that Trogu first, then the men. Carter, I want one golem to attack the Trogu and one to attack the men. We'll need all of that so that we can get to the Gate. We'll have to take out those that are protecting it first."

"They can use magic," Carter said. "And they're fairly adept at it. We all thought that Gali had them confused in a mental maze but they weren't. Just another arrogance that doomed us."

"We'll try not to make those mistakes again," Dale said. "We attack to kill. We won't have time to be merciful. Once we take care of the guards, then we'll have to use one of the golems to help break the Gate."

"I'm ready," Bowen said.

"Let's do it," Carter said and started concentrating. The Forest, at first, found his gathering of magic an intrusion and started to block it.

"No," Bowen whispered. The Forest stopped and then started to add to Carter's magical energy. Two large, solid stone golems clawed through the ground. They rumbled down the hill towards the enemy. As the Hylnan saw them and screamed warnings, large logs and deadwood rained down upon them. The Trogu tried to stand but its broken leg wouldn't allow it.

One golem headed straight for the Trogu and proceeded to pummel it. The other golem swung wide its massive fists and Hylnan were thrown broken and battered to the ground. The two Hylnan mages stepped away from the Gate and attacked the golem.

Dale flew in from behind the gate and stopped right behind the mages. He lifted his hands and bolts of white-hot energy sizzled outward to the Hylnan mage's heads. They screamed and grabbed their heads with their hands, only to find even more pain as their hands burned, too. The stench of their burning flesh filled the air and almost gagged Dale. But he poured more energy into the attack and both mages dropped dead and burned to the ground.

Carter sent his spirit into the golem attacking the Trogu. He pounded it furiously and at each crack of the Trogu's bones, he smiled. It was dead, but he kept pounding it until skin gave way to a bloody pulp. The other Hylnan ran for their lives, scattering like the wind. Bowen kept at them, using the trees to swing branches and logs until each one of them was killed.

"Quickly, Carter, the gate," Dale yelled. He was at the Gate and was trying to close it magically. "I don't know if I can do this and I don't know if anything else is going to come through," he yelled. Carter, still in the golem, whirled and trotted to the gate. The second golem lumbered over. They stood on each side of the Gate and started pushing toward each other. Dale backed up as he heard the energy crackle. "Run!" he yelled, taking his own advice. The golems were pushing the physical sides of the Gate inward towards each other and compressing the magical Gate. When both sides touched, the Gate exploded.

"It's closed," Dale said, stepping out from behind a large Sycamore tree.

"How can you tell?" Carter asked. "There's too much dirt and debris and dust to see it."

"The magic and energy is gone," Bowen said.

"Oh," Carter replied. He sat down. "I can't feel it and the golems are gone. We still should make sure."

"Let's go, then," Dale said, heading towards the area. Carter and Bowen followed him.

"Dale," Carter said, his voice quivering. Dale stopped and turned around. Carter had sunk to his knees and was cradling a broken body. Bowen stood over him, tears running non-stop down his face. Dale stepped closer, but couldn't see who it was because Carter was rocking back and forth, bawling.

"We should have waited," Bowen sobbed. "We should have waited."

"Carter?" Dale said tentatively, not wanting to see the face of the dead. If he didn't see them, he could hope that they survived. His sunken and heavy heart told him otherwise. Carter opened his arms and Arthur's face could be seen.

"What do we do now?" Carter cried. His square and chiseled face was cracked with grief and despair. "We are lost without him."

"The others are here, too," Bowen whispered. "We have to find them and make sure."

"What?" Carter said, holding Arthur tightly and not wanting to let go.

"We have to make sure that they died and moved on," Dale said. "Bowen didn't. There might be others." Bowen turned and slowly walked away.

"I can't," Carter said. "I can't do it. I can move rock and stone, but my soul can't take much more of this."

"Dig the graves," Dale said. "Dig them deep and dig them well. Put them inside the keep in the garden area. We'll build a monument to remember them. To remember them at their best and brightest. We'll find them and bring them to you." He turned and went to Bowen. Bowen was standing down looking at a body.

"I never knew I looked like that," Bowen said. "I remember the arrows now. It doesn't feel right looking down at me."

"I can do this," Dale said. "I can carry your body into the garden."

"No," Bowen replied. "No one can take as loving care of me as me." He bent and picked up his body and carried it into the keep. Dale searched and found the others. They buried them all: Arthur, Bowen, Gali, Allan, Stephen, Enna, and Hanni.

"Sama, Enan, and Kalis escaped," Carter said. "At least I hope they did. Arthur sent them away at the beginning to warn everyone."

"The trees are telling me that the army is marching south and east," Bowen said, changing the subject.

"That's about where I came from," Dale said. "They're heading for the Dwarves. We'll have to warn them!" He started to fly away.

"Wait!" Carter said, standing. "You need to know what happened. Someone out there tried to kill all of us and nearly succeeded. You're the only one I know who can see through it all and find out who it is."

"He's right," Bowen said. "We need to find out who did this so that we can be prepared for the next attack."

"Tell me," Dale said, turning back to them. "Tell me everything from the beginning." Carter started but when he got to the box appearing, Dale interrupted him.

"Describe the box," Dale said.

"Gali said it was built from Sandar's Oak," Bowen replied. "It had metal trim all around it."

"What kind of metal?" Dale asked. Something about the box was familiar, but he couldn't quite remember what.

"Platinum," Carter replied. "We checked everything out thoroughly before we opened it. It only had two materials, Sandar's Oak and platinum."

"The only area where Sandar's Oak grows is in the southern parts of Eridor and Wynn. Most of the platinum mines are in Wenn. That could mean it was someone from those areas," Dale said. "Most of us love boxes and magic, so that doesn't help much. That box seems familiar, though."

"But who do we know that has that strong of a magic to create that box?" Carter asked. "Several of us together could have, I guess."

"Together!" Dale cried. "She wouldn't!"

"Who?" Carter asked.

"Alisandra," Dale replied.

"It couldn't be her," Bowen scoffed. "She isn't nearly powerful enough."

"No," Dale said. "You're wrong. You're being arrogant again. You have to look at this with an open mind. I saw her at Three Cities. Well, I saw a group of very beautiful women first. We started talking and I asked where they were from. That's when Alisandra showed up and said that they were all together. She was different. Something had changed her and I could feel the magic being held in check inside her. I think she was trying to hide it from me."

"But why?" Carter asked.

"I don't know," Dale said. "But that's when she showed me the box she had just bought. It was the same box that was sent to you. I'm sure of it. I think she was taunting me with it and I didn't realize it. But now I do."

"Why would she give herself away?" Bowen asked.

"Maybe she's as arrogant as us and thought we'd all be dead, except for Dale," Carter said. "She had to know he wouldn't be here or else he would have recognized the box."

"I don't know," Dale said. "When we find her, we'll ask her. Provided she's still alive at that point."

CHAPTER TEN

Gryam was in the mine early surveying the damage. All of the lower shafts were completely flooded and many of the upper passages were under water. "Useless," he muttered, heading to the opening. "Now I'll have ta find me another mine," he grumbled. "I'd just up and go me way, normally, but I've got Verl ta train."

He walked out of the mine shaft just before the break of day and found Verl there waiting for him. "I was wondering if ye were gonna make it," Gryam said.

"Ye didn't hear me, did ye?" Verl asked, smiling.

"I'm old and daft," Gryam grumbled. "Me hearing aint' what it used ta be." The dark sky began to lighten as daybreak approached.

"Khaliana," Gryam said. "I greet ye and await yer return with open arms. Ye have my undying love and devotion still and I stand here this break of day to renew that vow." Both stood and watched the wonderful sunrise.

"I'll meet her one day," Verl said.

"Eh?" Gryam said. "Be careful what ye wish fer. Ye'll get it but there'll be a price ta pay. Sometimes, that price is too high."

"Any hope fer the mine?" Verl asked, changing the subject.

"No," Gryam spat. "But, we'll train most of the day instead." They started down the hill.

"Why don't we just start another mine? Or use one that's abandoned?" Verl asked.

"We could," Gryam agreed. "But I need a break and ye need ta train."

"Why?" Verl asked. "I'm better than any here, 'cept you."

"Don't get huffy," Gryam warned. "Ye may be better'n most, but ye still have a lot ta learn. This village is remote and ye haven't seen the rest of the world."

"I favor those two small swords," Verl said, changing the subject again. "Do ya think I could get two made out of my khalite?"

"If Dale were here, aye," Gryam said. "But he left in a hurry last night and didn't even take his things. When he returns, we'll see about yer blades."

"Do I still have ta work with the rest of the weapons?" Verl asked. He was tired of working with weapons he didn't like.

"Yer a stubborn one," Gryam said. "If'n we had time, I'd make ye work with them. But, fer now, we'll concentrate on the blades." Verl grinned.

They took a break at noon for a small lunch and then quit in the afternoon. Verl never complained about the long hours of training and seemed to soak up everything that Gryam taught. Gryam was impressed at how well Verl did.

"Given a few years, ye'd be almost as good as me," Gryam said.

"Just almost?" Verl teased. "Why, give me a year and I'll be better."

"Ha!" Gryam laughed. "Ye ego's as big as yer head, boy."

"Why haven't you used yer new bar?" Verl asked.

"It's khalite," Gryam said. "I dunna know what it can do. And it'd shatter most of the weapons I have. 'Sides, ye should know how to work something well afore ye use something made of khalite. Ye get to rely upon the khalite too much and ye ferget yer training."

"Because the khalite weapon shatters normal weapons?" Verl asked.

"Aye. What use is training if'n ye can bludgeon through most defenses with khalite? Until ye come across someone who is good at fighting. Then ye khalite will be useless."

"What say we walk ta the Pickaxe slowly?" Verl asked.

"Ye had a full day of training and ye want ta keep going?" Gryam asked. "Ye know that by walking slowly, it'll give 'em time ta gather and prepare fer you. The Pickaxe is on the other side of town."

"Aye," Verl said, grinning. "Ye train, but then ye should apply it ta see if ya understood what ye learned."

"Don't go quoting me, boy," Gryam growled, then grinned. "But, aye. Let's go." The walked out of Gryam's house and slowly took in the nice weather.

"Hey!" a dwarf yelled. "Ye goin' anywhere special?"

"Pickaxe," Gryam and Verl yelled. They could hear murmurs of several dwarves. Then they heard running feet. "So it begins," Gryam said, grinning. They didn't get very far when a group of dwarves ran past them.

"Tomas will have to build a bigger place," Verl said. "They won't all fit in there." Gryam snorted in laughter. A few moments later a group of dwarves came running towards them.

"Now, that's something I haven't seen in awhile," Gryam said, laughing. Then he caught something in their mannerisms. "There's trouble, boy. Look to their faces."

"Gryam!" one yelled when they neared. "Old Sindra's boy just came runnin' in white as a ghost! He said his farm was attacked by an army and they're headed here!"

"Prepare for what could happen," Gryam told them. "Not what might! Get goin' and arm yerselves, ye daft bunch of larks! Don't chatter with me all eve!" They turned and ran for their homes to get their weapons. "C'mon, boy, ye might get ta use them blades fer real." His eyes held his worry in check as they turned and ran for his house.

"To the Pickaxe," Gryam said after they had armed themselves. "The field beyond is where they'll most likely come through, thought they'll top the hill first. But the road is the easiest way down and it goes through the field." They ran and other dwarves joined them. All in all, the small village of Basin held a total of about three hundred dwarves. Most were assembled around the Pickaxe. "Did ye send scouts?" Gryam asked.

"Aye," Mayor Etindel said. "But none have returned."

"It's bad, then," Gryam said. "Give me archers over there," he yelled pointing to a slightly higher portion of ground. There was a stone wall between it and the field. "Use the wall as cover." The dwarves carrying bows moved to the area and formed lines. Gryam may have told them where to go, but they knew how to set up and fight. "They'll most likely come down the road. Give me fifty ta climb the hills and hide in the mines. Ye'll come out when their rear is exposed." Dwarves muttered and stepped forward. They ran up to some of the mine openings and slipped inside. "And give me five to scout ahead. Make sure ye are in site of each other and the last is in sight of us at the top of the hill.

"Ye with spears and such, take a position halfway in the field. The rest of us will be behind ye," Gryam said. "Ye'll break any charge and we'll hold the line when they come." He turned to Verl and said, "Ye stay close ta me, ye unnerstand?"

"Aye," Verl answered. He was nervous and jittery, but from fear or delight, Gryam couldn't tell. The five dwarves had topped the hill and one had stayed there. It wasn't long before all five stood at the top of the hill again. One left and ran down towards the group. The other four stayed in a defensive position. Hynan warriors attacked them, but the dwarves held their own.

"There are many," the dwarf huffed when he got to Gryam. "Best guess is over a thousand." There were gasps from around him.

"Aye," Gryam muttered. "Too many, but too late to retreat. I know we sent runners to warn other villages already, but give word to some more runners to stand ready on the opposite side. Have them go when they get a good view of the army or if they think they're in danger. Tell them to spread word to all the dwarven villages about what they see."

"Aye," a dwarf replied and left to see that it was done.

"Hear me," Gryam shouted. "Ye see them on the top of the hill. Ye know what comes. But ye also know we're dwarves! Time to put aside all grumblings and stand as one! Comes an army to bring us down, but aught they'll find is one dwarven family to lay them low!" There was a roar of agreement that shook the hills. "With hammers and bows!" Another roar. "With picks and spears!" Another roar. "With Dwarven fist of might!" A chant of Drachym Ha Ohm spread through them and gained in strength. They all took up positions and waited. None of the dwarves at the top had survived and the Hynnan warriors had started down the hill.

The Hynnan were methodical and organized. They strode in rows of ten down the hill and walked into the dwarven spears. As one, they brushed aside the outreaching spears, but the secondary spears caught them. Hynnan fell wounded and dead as yet more took their place. The massive advance pushed the dwarves back.

Then the arrows flew from the archers and struck the middle ranks of the Hynnan. There was a brief lull in advancing Hynnan that allowed the dwarves to dispatch the front rows. But more Hynnan streamed into view and two Trogu topped the hill.

"Legends come ta life," a dwarf said. "Blessed Khaliana, save us."

"Aye," Gryam agreed, gripping his new khalite war bar. The battle had yet to make it to them, but it looked like it wouldn't take long. Another volley of arrows flew but this time, they broke in midair. Atop the hill were Hynnan mages. "There's yer three. An army, Trogu, and mages all stacked against ye."

"Aye, but we're dwarves," Verl said. "They cannot stand against us."

"Keep close," Gryam warned and then the battle reached them. Gryam blocked a strike and slid his bar down onto the Hynnan warrior's head. The seemingly light war bar bashed his head in with little effort. Gryam spun the bar and shoved it into the midsection of a Hynnan. It was like striking air. The khalite went through armor easily. Gryam couldn't take time to admire the fine weapon because he was striving to not only save himself but also Verl.

The Trogu started down the hill and the dwarven warriors came out of the mineshafts and attached them. It was a tough and fierce battle, as they had to fight Hynnan and Trogu at the same time. Some would block the Hynnan and allow others to strike the Trogu. Then they would switch when the tide of battle changed. More Hynnan came over the hill and the land was awash in blood and bodies.

Gryam dodged and struck, moved and parried as he blocked strikes aimed at him and Verl's back. Verl deftly worked his two blades in front of him and killed any Hynnan that advanced into his space. But he was young and untested in battle, so he didn't cover his back as well as he should have. Gryam did his best to keep him protected.

The dwarves on the hill managed to kill one Trogu before they all died by the Hynnan, but the second Trogu strode quickly down the hill. More Hynnan attacked. The Trogu's surge into the dwarven group shoved them all apart. Verl was separated from Gryam.

"Verl!" Gryam yelled, searching for him. He caught a glimpse of him in front of the Trogu, sliding left and right and lashing out with his swords. He was laughing and taunting the Trogu. Whether from his words or from the Trogu's useless efforts to hit this small object, Gryam wasn't sure, but the Trogu became enraged and lashed out all around. Dwarves and Hynnan were swept

aside by the massive arms. Verl moved like a ghost that couldn't be touched, which enraged the Trogu even more.

"Khaliana!" Gryam yelled. "If ye'd save us, now would be a good time!" Gryam fought his way toward Verl. Hynnan would block his way and attack, but Gryam was old, tough, and a veteran of many battles. The Hynnan weren't a match for him.

"Ha!" Verl yelled. "Yer a smelly one!" He swung one sword hard and swift at the back of the Trogu's leg. His blade sunk deeply, severing muscle. The blade stuck and Verl let it go as the Trogu roared. As the Trogu bent down to remove the sword, Verl drove his last one straight into its eye. The Trogu toppled dead at his feet. Verl laughed, looking down at its lifeless eyes, but never saw the Hynnan behind him.

"Verl!" Gryam yelled. He was almost there. He could make it. The Hynnan was preparing to strike. Gryam threw the war bar like a spear at the Hynnan, but he was just a fraction too late. The Hynnan's strike was true and the blade went through Verl's back into his heart. "Nooo!" Gryam screamed as his war bar reached the Hynnan. In a flash, he was there, reaching down and pulling the war bar out of the dead Hynnan. Verl was face down in the dirt. Rage overcame him. He screamed and screamed as he killed Hynnan after Hynnan. Clouds of red swirled in his vision yet he saw clearly. His warbar was like air in his hands, swift and deadly. Seemingly endless, more Hynnan marched over the top of the hill to attack.

"You can hear them, can't you?" a woman said, looking up onto the face of a tall cliff. "I know you're there." Tentatively, an Arlimna flew down to her. It was a mult-hued dark gray and tan with bright green eyes. It looked at her and she could feel its sorrow. "I know that you lost your family to those monsters." It started to turn away.

"Wait," she pleaded.

"Khaliana," it whispered.

"Yes," she said. "I am."

"Why not you?" it asked. "You save them."

"I am forbidden," she replied, tears starting to roll from her eyes. "I can not intervene in major events or else all others like me would do so."

"We die," it said.

"Please," she begged. "They are my children. Can you not hear them dying?"

"We die," it said again, as if offering that explanation as an apology. They believed that any contact with the Hynnan would cause them to die.

"No one else can help them," she said. "It is only a small force broken off of the main army, but it is too much for them. If you helped, we could win and save them." Another Arlimna flew down to them. It was gray and orange with red eyes. It flipped its tail as if annoyed.

"We go," the first one said.

"Where?" Khaliana asked. "They are here on our world now. There will be nowhere to hide." The grey and orange Arlimna huffed.

"We go," it repeated and turned to leave. A great cry of despair and loss echoed through the mountains to them. Khaliana sank to her knees and wept. The Arlimna in the cliffs fluttered and hissed. They felt Gryam's pain and knew it to be equal to their own. From him, they felt their loss anew.

"I am Lorryn," the gray and tan Arlimna said. "Feel the loss," Lorryn cooed.

"That was Gryam," she said, looking into Lorryn's eyes. "He is the light and sun and star of my children and I love him dearly. If you do not help us, he will die, too."

"We die," Lorryn said.

"I know," Khaliana cried. "But there are no others."

"Help us," Lorryn said. "Help them."

"I can do a small thing," Khaliana said with hope in her eyes. "I can allow you to bond with my children such that there will be a magical link between your souls. The magic here is not the same as your world, so it might protect you." Again, Gryam's screams rocked the mountains and Lorryn hopped back from the pain and loss. "That will be the bridge," Khaliana said as she reached out and touched the Arlimna. She mentally united Lorryn and Gryam, but their pain and loss united their souls. Lorryn's roar echoed along with Gryam's screams.

"Coming, Gryam," Lorryn mentally told him. She roared again and then the whole of the Arlimna roared with her. The mountainside shook with the force. They took wing and flew.

"Very well played," a man said, appearing after the Arlimna were gone. He gave a short nod to Khaliana.

"Thank you," she replied curtly.

"You couldn't just offer to help them. You had to make them ask. And you did that with enough time to save your precious dwarves."

"I don't care for these Hylnan," Khaliana said, fire in her words. "But the Arlimna belong to me now."

"Five hundred or so small dragons are nothing," the man replied. "Keep them." He disappeared.

"It is a fine line we walk to save those we love," Khaliana said and disappeared.

Dale made it to the village as the last of the Hylnan force topped the hill. He ignored the warriors marching down and concentrated on the few mages standing atop the hill. He hit them with fire and lightning and force until their battered and broken bodies were thrown aside. He landed on the hill to survey the battle and find where he could help the most. It was turning into a massacre. The dwarves had retreated and put their backs to a large wooden building. Here and there, a dwarven archer still fired into the Hylnan.

Then another scream of rage and pain echoed from below and Dale saw a lone dwarf standing amidst the main Hylnan force, landing blow after blow upon them. "Gryam," Dale whispered. He was about to fly down and help when he saw something pour out of the sky - his nightmare come alive. He started to attack them when he remembered Kerri's warning. Something told him to stop and watch and he listened to his inner voice.

Four Arlimna flew straight down and grabbed Gryam. They hissed at the Hylnan and lifted Gryam away. Then the rest of the Arlimna flew down upon the Hylnan to strike again and again with fang and claw. They used hit and fly tactics to keep safely out of range of the Hylnan weapons and magic. But they found a surprise.

As one, the Arlimna roared in the sky. They had found that the magic of the Hylnan had not affected them. Rage, hatred, and vengeance burned brightly in their eyes. They flew as one and hovered above the Hylnan. As one, they opened their mouths and breathed burning hot fire down upon the army. The Hylnan screamed and burned and fled and died. The Arlimna hunted them down and ravaged them. Memories of their fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters burned in their minds as they vented their rage upon their tormenters. The Hylnan found nowhere to hide as Dale watched the viciousness of the Arlimna permeate the battle. The Hylnan screams never ended until death claimed them. The Arlimna used sharp teeth to rend bodies and powerful claws to strike mercilessly. Dale heard the cries and saw the horror, but it wasn't until the stench of burning Hylnan flesh made its way to him that he gagged and vomited.

"Put me down, ye loony birds," Gryam yelled as he was lifted into the air.

"Please, Gryam," Lorryn said into his mind. "You need to be free of the area for us to attack."

"Who are ye?" Gryam grumbled. "I don't need yer help."

"We need yours," Lorryn said. "Let us help." They set Gryam down a safe distance away and then flew back to the group.

"I don't need yer help," Gryam muttered and started walking back to the battle. The Arlimna attacked and Gryam was impressed with their coordination and tactics. He wasn't yet to the battle when the Arlimna roared and breathed fire down upon their enemies.

"Merciful Khaliana," Gryam said, stopping. He felt all of their pain and loss now, for his had muted somewhat with the ferocity of the Arlimna's attack. He rejoiced through them as they took their vengeance. "Ye have the heart of a dwarf," he whispered.

"We do now," Lorryn said.

Gryam walked over to the battle area but couldn't get too close. The heat from the fires and the stench was strong. He skirted around it to make his way to the dead Trogu. He bent down and picked Verl up into his arms. Carrying him over to the Pickaxe, he lay him gently down on the grass. Sitting down next to him, he hung his head low.

"We'll make a site fer him next ta the inn," Tomas said. "It'd be an honor if ye'd let me do that." Gryam nodded.

"Fifty of us could only bring down one," another dwarf said. "But I saw him out there with that Trogu and I knew the Trogu didna stand a chance." They all gathered around Verl, forgetting about the Arlimna.

"Aye," said another. "I tried ta make me way over ta help, but we were in the thick of it."

"I'm sorry, Gryam," Dale said as he reached them. "I got here as fast as I could, but was too late." Gryam looked up and Dale saw the grief in his eyes but saw no blame.

"I remember the first day he came into the Pickaxe," Tomas said. "I'd never seen a thing like it except fer Gryam." Many nodded. "And he stood out there and killed that Trogu by himself. He was a hero."

"Aye," a dwarf agreed. "That he was. The hero of Basin battle."

"He wanted to meet Khaliana," Gryam whispered.

"I didn't want it to be this way," Khaliana said in a soft sweet voice. Dwarves scattered to let her through. She was bright and beautiful and all stood in awe. Some dropped to their knees and began weeping. Others were speechless and dumbfounded just standing and staring. Not one could bring themselves to look away, nor could they speak.

"Why didna ye save him?" Gryam asked, keeping his head down deliberately.

"I tried," Khaliana said. "You know I cannot interfere directly. Will you not look at me?"

"No," Gryam stated. "If I look up, ye'll just take away me grief and pain. And I dunna want ta let it go. I dunna want ta forget again."

"There is someone here you should meet," Khaliana said, changing the subject. "You've already talked. Don't you think you should be graceful enough to actually meet her?"

"Promise me ye won't take away the pain?" Gryam asked, grit and rock in his voice. "I need it ta keep going. There'll be other battles and I need that." His hands clenched so tightly that his fingers cut deep into skin.

"I know," Khaliana said and Gryam stood up. He looked up at her and she was still beautiful, but not overwhelmingly so. Lorryn flew down and landed beside Khaliana.

"Lorryn," Gryam said. Lorryn nodded her head. "Ye speak well enough in me mind. Ye dunna have the tongue fer speech?"

"Not well," Lorryn spoke.

"They are the Arlimna," Khaliana said to the assembled dwarves. "They've lost their family just as you have and I have given them sanctuary among us. They have a special spiritual bond with us. I don't know how many will bond as Lorryn and Gryam have, but don't be surprised or shocked when one does. They're shy, so try to make them feel at home. We'll need to work together if we are to survive the dark times ahead."

"Thank you," Gryam said, understanding that Khaliana had saved them all. She smiled and then walked past him. She effortlessly picked Verl's body up and cradled it gently in her arms. Gryam turned and watched her.

"He'll be with me," She said. "I'll take good care of him."

"Ye better," Gryam said, defiantly. Her force made him step back but he didn't falter.

"I said I would," She replied and Gryam went down to his knees from Her forceful presence. He gritted his teeth and stared at her. His anger and loss burned fiercely and he pushed himself upwards to stand in front of Her. Just as quickly as it appeared, her force disappeared, leaving Gryam lurching forward. She caught him with her soft, delicate hand lightly placed on his cheek. A tear started forming in Gryam's eye.

"No," he yelled and stepped back. "Ye canna have it."

"Not yet," She corrected him. "But one day, you'll let go of all that anger."

"Until then," Gryam said. "'Tis mine."

"Yes," Khaliana sighed. "Until the next time, my son," she said and disappeared. The gathered dwarves were freed from their awe and started talking about what had just happened.

"Just when I thought I had seen everything, someone like Khaliana shows up," Dale sighed. "At least she gave us hope, but we have to talk. A lot of things have happened."

"Help us with those who've died," Gryam said. "Ye'll make the going easier fer us."

"Anything," Dale answered. They spent the late afternoon and evening burying their fallen. A few select gathered at the Pickaxe afterwards.

"Ta Verl," Tomas said, lifting his mug.

"Aye," the rest shouted and they drank heartily. Dale drank with them.

"What news do ya bring?" Gryam asked. The rest listened intently.

"The army came through a magical gate and attacked my friends. Many died. The rest are scattered. What you fought today was just a small offshoot of the main army. They are marching towards North Gate, letting small parties attack dwarven villages along the way. I don't know what they'll do when this one doesn't come back, but we need to warn the Warders."

"Word went out to the other villages," Gryam said. "I hope that they retreat rather than fight. We'll need to gather all to fight them."

"Word went to the East," Tomas said. Gryam nodded but didn't explain that it meant word had been sent to the dwarves living in the eastern portion of the country.

"We will meet to the northeast of here at Fallen Lake," Gryam said. "We'll send word for the rest of us to meet there. Then, when we've gathered an army, we'll march south to attack."

"I hope enough survive to make an army," Dale said. "You'll need it."

"Aye," Gryam agreed. "'Tis a long hard road ahead."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Murray works in the computer field and also writes novels. He has written short stories for the E-Zine, Dargonzone (<http://www.dargonzone.org>) and had been published by Arctic Wolf Publishing (<http://www.arcticwolfpublishing.com>).

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