

The Dragon's Eye, Joel Borelli

The Dragon's Eye

By Joel Borelli

Chapter 1

There was a hoary haughtiness to his gaze, like the frosted window in the steeple of a church. He didn't belong here. His clothes were plain, for a lord. Yet they bordered on extravagant for the smoke-filled tavern that smelled of stale ale and sweat. Someone hammered on a dulcimer in a far corner while bawdy lyrics in a drunken voice kept time. He was too young for this place as well. He was tall and gangly lean, as though his girth were two summers behind his length. He leaned on the corner of the scarred wooden rail as he disdainfully surveyed the tawdriness of the patrons. His dark hair was pulled neatly back with a braided leather cord. His dark eyes penetrated the smoky room to see things others surely missed. I could see he possessed a rare intelligence for one so young. If he were more than seventeen summers I would eat my lambskin boots. And he was dead if I did nothing.

I watched and I waited.

Smoke from the poorly ventilated fireplace occasionally wafted into my little slice of paradise, a dark corner of the Laughing Mule.

A surly group dicing erupted in an argument that quickly turned violent. Fists flew first, followed quickly by the thump of Big Baor's club. Big Baor was the hired tough keeping the patrons in line. He was big. He mostly kept them from killing each other. Though the freedom and adroitness with which he wielded his thick, knotted club of oak made me think the point moot. In this latest quarrel Big Baor's club settled the argument evenly. Two men were dragged dazed and bleeding to the street.

They may kill each other outside tonight, yet their death was no concern of mine. The young lord had entered over a candle mark ago and held my attention. He waited and watched with equal parts disdain and morbid curiosity the baseness of his surroundings. He was waiting for someone.

The room looked back at him. Some cast a furtive glance, others ogled hungrily, but all let an eye wander over this young man so obviously out of his element. That is, all, but two men sitting at the other end of the bar. They appeared not to notice him at all. They were hard looking men standing out in a room full of hard looking men.

This young man perked up as a new stranger entered the dingy room. He caught the stranger's attention with a wave. The stranger nodded, waded through the crowd and sidled up to him. He was a big man. Not like Baor, but wiry, and slender and tall. Not thin like the younger man, rather he was an oak branch whittled into shape by weather and wear, lean yet strong. His clothes were those of a woodsman or hunter. They were travel stained and worn. He wore a short, curved sword at his hip as well as a long thin dagger. I was much too far away to hear what was said. A draught of ale arrived for the

hunter. Their heads were lowered together, voices I'm sure pitched for their ears only. This new stranger pulled up suddenly. He angrily pushed off the bar. My finely dressed youth grabbed him by the arm, earning him a glare from the stranger for his trouble. Whatever he said kept the hunter from leaving. He turned back to the bar and they talked another few moments. The youth pulled a hefty purse from his cloak and placed it on the bar. The surly stranger snatched it up and quickly hid it within the folds of his own cloak. He looked around, yet everyone was looking anywhere but at him. I could see the curse on his lips for the young fool. I watched the young man bristle in indignation. The stranger pulled a piece of parchment and mashed it into the young man's chest angrily. He pushed away from the bar, heading for the door, his hand gripping the bone handled knife at his belt. Eyes followed hungrily. Most eyed the sword and knife, and decided the purse wasn't worth the price. Except for the two men that had ignored my young friend earlier. They both looked at him as he left. They shared a glance with each other as the stranger left the tavern. One of them stood and made his way hastily to the door.

I stood to follow but the pull of my ring urged me to stay. I sat down. The hunter would have to take care of himself against the cutthroat. I watched the young man unfold the parchment. He stared at it for a long time before finally folding it into a pocket in his tunic. The second cutthroat had gone back to his drink, unconcerned. Another man well in his cups bumped into the young man. He apologized profusely and stumbled off. It earned him an irritated glare from the young gentleman. I slipped out from behind my seat as the drunkard stumbled by my table.

"A drink my good man?" I offered, stepping in his way and motioning to a chair.

The drunkard pulled up looking sharply at me. For a brief moment he didn't seem so deep in his cups. Then the glossy look returned to his eyes and he swayed a bit. "Migh' be a fine idea, migh be no'," he said. "Migh' be I ough' a be on me may, I mean way," he slurred.

It was an excellent performance.

I leaned forward, eyeing him dangerously. "You can leave, but not before I get the young lord's purse," I said.

Gone was the glassy look, replaced with a wary one. One I've seen plenty on cornered men.

"You're mistaken sir," he said. "If you'll excuse me," he finished and tried to shoulder by me.

I grabbed him by his elbow. With my other hand, I slipped a dagger against his midsection. "I will gut you here if you insist," I threatened.

He froze and then cursed and said, "Bloody stone fool I was, thinking I could get a little coin for my troubles. Here!" he sputtered, tossing a purse on the table with a loud clink. Heads turned. "Now release me!"

I let him go and he scampered as quickly as he could out the door. I scooped up the purse and cursed under my breath. It was lighter than it should have been for a purse full of coin. I opened the drawstrings and looked inside. Round pieces of tin clinked together. "Fool!" I muttered, dropping the useless bag back on the table. I returned my attention to the young lord, but he was gone. "Stone fool indeed!" I swore.

I took a step toward the door when a young lady stepped in front of me, barring my way with a smile and doe eyes. Her dark hair was tied back in a flowing tail. She

wore loose fitting breaches gathered at the waist and ankles. Her shirt was the same airy material, the strings lacing up the front from her navel hung loose at the collar, and clung to her lithe frame, accentuating her figure well. Contrasting nicely, she wore her sleeves tucked into a thin steel band at her wrist, with strips of steel running up her forearm to a second band just below her elbow. I had seen these before, a sort of barrel-stave wrist greave. She wore the same running from her ankles to her knees.

“Hello my handsome fellow,” she said, eyeing me up and down. “And where might you be from, for you’re certainly not from Ishalem?”

“I’m from afar and have no time for idle talk with women,” I said and put a hand on her shoulder to push her aside. Her smile set into a grimace and her eyes went steely. I could feel the point of a dagger on the inside of my leg, just beneath my crotch.

“Another move and I’ll cut you,” she threatened, her voice pitched low. “Two ways for it to end. I slice sideways,” and I felt the pressure of her blade on my inner thigh. “And you bleed out after cutting that vessel in your leg, or I slice up,” and now I felt the blade rise uncomfortably into my crotch. “And you live life as a eunuch. Tell me, which would you prefer?”

“There is a third way,” I said remaining calm, despite the awkward pressure of a knife in my groin.

“Do tell,” she cooed.

“You can put the blade away and I let you leave with your life,” I said. “I have no quarrel with you and if you seek one with me be warned, it will not end well for you.” I cast a look toward the door, growing impatient at this delay.

She looked to the door as well. “Perhaps you tell me what you want with the young master and I’ll let you be?”

“You’re his-,” I was going to say ‘man’ but I settled for, “in his employ? Then you truly are making a big mistake. I mean him no harm.”

“Then why do you ogle him from across the room,” she asked, “and then move to follow him after he leaves. And who was that so-called drunk who paid you in coin just now? Did he hire you to kill the young master?”

I scoffed. “Take the coin and ask yourself how much death you could buy with it?” I challenged.

She looked at the bag I had left on the table, leaned over and scooped it up. Hefting it in her palm she said, “It’s big enough to purchase a life.”

I scoffed again. “Does it feel heavy enough to you?”

Irritated, she hefted the bag again but now her eyes narrowed. Keeping pressure on my inner thigh, she pulled the drawstring with her teeth and looked inside. Now it was her turn to tease. “It appears you were duped,” she laughed.

Her laugh tinkled like crystal chimes swaying in a lazy summer breeze. It is strange to think such a thing about a woman with a knife to your groin. Yet I found her voice pleasant. “You mistake my intentions and have entirely missed the two toughs that were watching your master from the other side of the bar.” I glanced over at the second man, and realized he was gone. I stifled a curse and said, “If you care about your master you should let me go now. They both are gone, as well as the so-called drunkard who stole whatever information your master just purchased. I thought it was his purse, which

he gladly let me believe the truth, and fed me this bag of tin to buy time to escape. Your master will not survive the next candle mark if he faces those three alone.”

Her eyes narrowed dangerously, but I could see the confusion. “Two at the bar?” she said and looked over her shoulder. When she turned back to me her eyes sparkled as though she were privy to the joke. “I know the two you speak of and they never glanced his way,” she said.

The way the flickering candles and firelight danced in her sparkling eyes, it was like watching the reflection of stars in a rippling pool of water. The image was broken by the clear sound of steel against steel, carrying from outside. We both looked to the sound. She cursed and sprinted to the door, artfully dodging her way through the crowd.

I shouldered my large frame through the throng angering several patrons along the way. By the time I made it outside all I could hear were dashing footsteps off to my right. The street lamps cast a weary, flickering light. I sped after the sound of footsteps and heard a clamor ahead, steel upon steel.

The young lord materialized through the night before me. He held his sword ready, that curved blade favored by Ishalem warriors. The young lady stood at his back. I got my first good look at the knife that threatened my manhood. It was a sleek, shiny blade with a slight curve to it, the length of my forearm. She had an easy grip on it that told me she knew how to use it.

I was surprised to see the six men circling them. A bigger surprise was the drunken cutpurse standing apart and watching intently. Two of the six were the men from the end of the bar. The other four were strangers to me. Hired toughs are hired

toughs, no matter the city. Only their complexions changed. All had those long curved scimitars drawn.

Everything next happened in quick succession. The men fainted and slashed. The young lord was awkward with his defense, but not terrible. He was trained, but unused to practical fighting. The young lady impressed. Her training was obvious as I watched her kick away one stab, spin and slice another attacker and then pull her young lord away from a blow aimed at removing his head from his shoulders.

I arrived and things happened faster. The first to engage me reeled away with a crushed nose and a gash in his thigh. A second man slid off the tip of my sword in a heap, to bleed to death there in the dirt. The next was wary, and he benefited from his caution. He left running, unarmed and bleeding from several small wounds that would require only minor stitching.

Looking for my next victim I was surprised to see two more running off as the sixth lay dying from a stab wound from the young lady. The young lord's blade was clean, but he sat in the dirt. That left the seventh man, standing off to the side. I turned to him.

“And why are you still here?” I asked.

He crouched warily and edged away from me, a blade in his right hand.

The girl shouldered beside me and I pushed her back. She grunted in disapproval.

The seventh man laughed, a mirthless bark. “She will taste my steel in her turn,” he taunted. “You all will, you fool of a Defender!” he cursed. “You will pay for this interference, I swear on the Stone!” Pointing his dagger at the young lord he said, “I am

not through with you either.” He gave me a last scathing glare and fled, disappearing quickly into the night.

After a stunned moment of silence I spun, aiming my blade at the young lord.

“Who was that?” I growled.

“Mercy!” pleaded the young lord. “Mercy please, sir! Don’t kill me!”

“Fool!” I spat. “I’m here to rescue you.”

“Rescue me?” he stammered and stood, brushing himself off. “Who sent you, my father?” He shared a knowing glance with his lady friend.

“I doubt it. Who’s your father?” I asked.

“The King sir. King Koram,” he replied.

“Stone fool of a night I’m having,” I said to myself. “I suppose that makes you the First Prince?”

“No sir,” he replied nervously. “I’m Second Prince, Krane. And in your debt,” he added with a glance at the bloody mess around him.

“And you must be one of his protectors?” I asked the girl.

She stood up straight and proud.

“She is,” replied the Prince.

“You must take me to your father,” I ordered.

Krane paused, deliberating. “I will,” said Krane, “But, he cannot know what happened here tonight.”

“Tell me why?” I asked.

“Because I am here without his knowledge or consent,” he replied.

“Prince or not, I would think a young man might come and go as he pleases,” I said. “A man’s son was attacked however, and that might concern a father. It most certainly would concern a king.”

“And yet it must be so,” replied Krane. He straightened to his full height, nearly that of mine, and assumed a haughty posture. I’ve seen it on princes everywhere. He was young though, and ruined the pose with a slight shuffle of his feet and absently smoothing his clothes. His dark eyes looked calculating, far more than his years might suggest. Yet they were nervously flitting about the night, from me to the carnage in the street and all around.

I wanted answers.

I asked, “Tell me why that cutpurse followed you outside when he already stole your purse in the tavern?”

Krane looked confused and absently touched where his purse would have been within his tunic. “I, I didn’t have a purse for him to steal,” he said.

“He must have seen you give that fat purse to the hunter,” I said and watched his surprised reaction. “You attract attention by the way you dress and carry yourself,” I commented. “Is it any surprise you drew the attention of those willing to harm you for profit? So tell me, why did he follow you outside if not for coin?”

I waited as Krane brooded over my question. I knew he was hiding something. I needed him to share whatever he knew.

“I don’t know,” said Krane haughtily. “You might have asked one of them before killing them and running them off.”

“And you might have chosen not to lie,” I said. It was my turn to loom. “I am a Defender of the Citadel.” He didn’t exactly quake at my revelation. That I am the last Defender might have something to do with that. I remembered a time when a Defender would have garnered respect wherever. People feared to anger an agent of the Citadel, feared to anger a wizard or his warrior. I wear the ring and wield the sword. The former takes me, the latter protects me and the Mother delivers me. It is in these three things I trust. Indeed, it is in these three things that I am. Yet these three things meant very little these days.

Krane stepped back. “I meant no disrespect my lord Defender,” he stammered. “I had no idea you were a Defender.”

“That is not the point!” I growled. “You couldn’t know. No one would. And yet, that cutpurse knew. Did you hear him? He named me Defender and promised I would pay for my interference. There are very few people that would know a Defender on sight. One that would threaten a Defender and assault the Second Prince of Ishalem in the same night is not to be trifled with boy. So I ask you one final time. Why did the cutpurse follow you outside and attack you?”

I could see Krane’s resolve hardening. The chance of him telling me was rapidly dwindling. I had to be direct. “What was on that parchment you purchased from the hunter?”

Krane’s countenance slumped. He sighed and said, “It was a map.”

“A map of what?” I asked.

“A map to Raven’s Roost,” he said.

The name meant nothing to me. “The name means nothing to me.”

“Do you know of the Dragon’s Eye?” he asked.

“That, I am familiar with,” I said. Indeed, what person associated with the Citadel and her wizards wouldn’t be familiar with the Dragon’s Eye? “It was the magical amulet of the Grand Master Carmodan, one of the five wizards to overthrow the evil renegade Roigan. What does the one have to do with the other?” I asked.

“Grand Master Carmodan was from Ishalem,” explained Krane. “Before he died he returned to Ishalem and hid his amulet, the Dragon’s Eye, somewhere in the mountains to the west and north of here, called the Dragon’s Teeth. Legend says to find the Dragon’s Eye one must first find the Raven’s Roost and the road will be revealed.”

It was my turn to sigh. First the Staff and Stone of Trumain and now the Dragon’s Eye of Carmodan. The past was coming quickly for me. For us all. “Is that what he was after, the map? Did he get the map?”

“He never asked for it,” replied Krane patting his tunic pocket protectively. His expression changed to one of panic. He slipped his hand inside and desperately felt for something that was no longer there. “Oh no,” bemoaned Krane. “It’s gone. He must have taken it.”

“That cutpurse was no cutpurse, I’m afraid,” I said.

Krane looked confused. “Than who was he?”

“He can only be one thing,” I said quietly. “A Druid Lord.”

Both Krane and his young lady protector had the sense to shiver.

Chapter 2

“A Druid Lord,” Krane said dumbfounded.

“Take me to your father. He needs to know about this.”

“Know about what?” asked Krane, nervous once more.

“About the Dragon’s Eye,” I said.

Krane looked down, abashed. “He does Defender.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, surprised.

“My brother left in search of-,” he began.

“Enough!” interrupted the young woman testily. “He need not know our family’s business.”

“Family?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

Krane laughed mirthlessly. “You caution my wandering tongue as your lips roam freely sister Senka.”

“So you are his sister and his guardian. Trust is easier that way,” I observed.

“I am the Royal Sicar,” she said raising her chin defiantly.

“The King’s Blade?” I translated the word. They nodded. “Tell me about your brother,” I ordered.

“My brother Joram left in early Spring in search of Raven’s Roost, and hasn’t returned. Our last message from him was nearly five moons ago. All fear he is dead. All except my father, and us two,” he added staunchly.

“Our brother is a very resourceful man,” said Senka.

I asked the obvious question. “How did he go without a map?”

Krane replied, “He had one. He was going with another woodsman. A friend of the hunter I met tonight. This hunter was the only other person who knew where to find Raven’s Roost. It took me some convincing and in the end a lot of gold, but he gave me the map.”

“And why don’t you want to share this information with your father, the King?”

“Because he doesn’t need it,” explained Krane. “This hunter already gave him the map. They are organizing a party that will leave within a fortnight in search of Raven’s Roost and my brother.”

“I don’t follow,” I said, confused. “Why would you need to buy the map if your father already owned it?”

“Because my father forbade me to go,” he said.

“And you plan on going anyway? You should listen to your father,” I said bluntly. “I need to speak with him.”

“I will bring you to him,” he said.

His tone changed. I detected a bit of calculation and his eyes revealed the same.

“But?” I said, leading.

“But only if you talk to him, tell him he must let me go with the search party,” pleaded Krane. “Surely a Defender arguing on my behalf would sway him.”

I didn’t think so. Not many gave me the respect Defenders were once accorded. “You may be surprised to find he doesn’t hold me in the same regard you do,” I said.

He nearly fell to his knees pulling on my arm. “Please,” he begged. “I cannot be left here to rot. He’s my brother.”

I sighed. “Take me to him and we shall see what happens,” I said.

Inside a candle mark we were sitting in King Koram’s private sitting room. King Koram was a tall man, broadly built and in his early middle years. He had dark hair that fell in lush curls about his shoulders. He had a touch of gray at his temples as well as in his thick beard. He wore a loose-fitting tunic of fine yellow silk and comfortable looking tan doeskin leggings tucked into fine leather boots turned down at the ankles. The king sat in a high-backed cushioned chair, gilded with enough gold that it might easily be called a throne. That it was raised on a dais was no mistake either. Even in his private chambers King Koram preferred a royal vantage from which to consider his petitioners. I sat on a low backed cushioned chair of excellent quality, as did Krane. Though Krane spoiled the comfort by fidgeting nervously under the intent gaze of his father. Senka was left in the antechamber like a common servant. Mirrored stand lamps in the corners provided plenty of light that danced among the bejeweled furnishings one would expect a

King's private chambers to be adorned. A servant poured wine for the king. Krane refused. I accepted the wine. In my experience, kings drank excellent wine.

“So tell me why I have the honor to meet a Defender at such an odd hour of the night?” he asked. His question might have been for me but his withering gaze fell on his son. Krane wilted beneath it.

“I go where the Mother sends me Your Highness,” I replied. “She sent me to Krane,” I paused a brief second and watched Krane squirm. I knew he feared me revealing the night's details. I left them out, for now. “Who brought me to you, Your Highness. The why is clear to me now I am here. The Second Prince tells me your eldest, the First Prince Joram is at present lost to you and you are planning to send a party in search of him.”

Krane began to breath a little easier. However, King Koram's expression soured. He did not like the bitter taste of my words. Yet they were true.

“And so I am,” said King Koram. “Yet I have not asked the Citadel for aid. Indeed, I do not believe help is necessary. I fully expect to find my son and his party stranded in the upper peaks of the Dragon's Teeth, perhaps pinned down by weather or thwarted by a rockslide. Nothing for which I would consider a Defender to be necessary.”

“And yet I am here,” I replied, sipping the wine. It was delicious. “I would ask Your Highness to please allow me to accompany your party. I may be of some assistance to them or to the Second Prince along the way.”

Krane visibly perked up at my suggestion.

“You may be to one but not the other,” replied King Koram tersely. “My petulant son here will not be accompanying the search party. He will remain here.” Krane’s countenance drooped once again. “You are most welcome to remain with him and see what aid you may be in his hour of need,” he added sardonically.

I watched Krane’s ears burn. His father was angry with him. Perhaps for continuing to push him to be allowed to go. In my experience, kings do not like to be pushed, especially by their own children. And in my experience it is usually those children that do most of the pushing. To Krane’s credit he held his tongue.

“You are most kind Your Highness,” I said. “Yet I hope to convince you to send me before they leave. And when exactly does the party intend to leave?”

King Koram glared at his son and then turned his stern gaze on me. “Originally my plan was to send them off in a fortnight. Yet I think now I will send them sooner. Perhaps three or four days from now.”

Krane looked like he swallowed a spider.

“Well then I must press my case as often as I can in the coming days,” I said. “In the meanwhile, I thank Your Highness for his time. If I may take my leave?” I said standing.

King Koram nodded. “You will stay here in the palace as my guest,” he said. He wasn’t asking.

“You honor me Your Highness,” I said with a bow.

“Ishalem has always held the Citadel and her Defenders in the highest regard,” he said convincingly.

He may have even meant the words. It was always difficult to tell with royalty.

“I thank you Your Highness,” I said with another bow. “When may I call upon Your Highness and the Second Prince again?”

“You may call on the Second Prince whenever you see fit,” he replied. “As for me, I am far too busy with the Summer Solstice festivities to offer any commitments.”

I guess I would see him when he called for me, unless I pushed the issue. “As Your Highness wishes,” I said with a bow, and allowed myself to be led from the room by his servant. The King never mentioned where his son was going or why. That disturbed me, but more so the fact he never asked me what I knew.

The next day I woke early and tried calling on the King with no result. I searched for Krane also but with the same result. So I dithered the day away wandering the palace until midafternoon. Suddenly, I felt the Calling, my ring compelling me to move. The ring of a Defender was special in many ways. Magical. There were many Defenders of the Citadel. That is the name given to any soldier enlisted in the Citadel’s army. Yet there were far fewer true Defenders: the name first given to those who wore the ring. And those who wore the ring were always paired with a Guardian, a wizard of the Citadel. At its peak of power the Citadel boasted thousands of true Defenders. Now I wonder if they had the rings for a hundred. Last I checked, I was the only one wearing a ring in scores of years.

Ah, the rings. They were mage-forged by the Citadel’s wizards and they have many magical qualities I have found good use for over the years. Yet the Calling, as it is named, is the least favorite of mine. The Calling, originally used by the wizard a Defender was paired with, to summon his sword when he needed him most. When a

Defender lacks a wizard to be paired with the ring functions with a will of its own. I believe this is the will of the Mother, creator of all. Even the wizards who created the rings admit they never intended this power to manifest. While many share my view that it is the will of the Mother, others argue it is something less, and yet still more than random.

And so this morning I found myself dressing and looking out my window westward, across the palace grounds and into the city, to where my ring was now calling me. I strapped on my sword belt and knives, but left the rest of my belongings in the room provided to me by King Koram.

I met Senka in the corridor outside my room.

“Good day Defender,” she said pleasantly. Her words were soft and supple, and breathy like the summer wind. She looked at my weapons and arched an eyebrow. “And are you off to challenge a man? Today, of all days, that is bad form. Ishalem men respect the Festival of the Sun with peace and blessings, saving the fighting for the rest of the year.”

I smiled. “I challenged the sun yesterday to shine as bright as your eyes, but it failed so I am off to carve it out of the sky.” I was jesting, and in no way considered myself a poet, but my words affected her. Her ears turned crimson and she turned her head for a moment before turning back defiantly.

“Then you must end the sun forever more,” she declared.

“No matter. The world still has your smile,” I said with a bow. I moved off before she could reply or rap me over the head. I wasn’t sure which might occur and didn’t wait to find out.

Outside the palace the city was alive with the festival, yet I could not shake the oppressive feeling coming over me with the Calling. I knew where I must go. My ring pulled me toward the Heart of Ishalem, also called the Dragon's Lair.

I stepped carefully into the Dragon's Lair, a massive bowl carved out of the earth in the center of Ishalem. The bowl was perhaps four furlongs across, and pleasant, filled with exotic flowers and trees and benches and trellises. A rather beautiful public garden that would hold a thousand people without feeling crowded. Stone walls crowned the lip of the bowl and there were arched gates at the compass points. The path dropped away on steep stone steps ten men could walk abreast on before reaching the bottom of the bowl. From my vantage I could see the other three gates and identical steps leading down to identical paved paths all leading to the center of the bowl. At its center stood a magnificent statue. It was the Heart of Ishalem or sometimes called the Dragon's Heart. Its magnificence was neither in its intricacy nor in its resemblance to a heart. It was rather ordinary in shape, like that of an egg, and it was of a deep red hue and looked to be covered in large scales. But it was extraordinary in that it was Grown from stone in an age long ago. It pulsed with its own light from within, like the beating of a heart. It was where I was being drawn. My ring pulled me like iron to the lode.

It was late afternoon now and as the sun sank to the horizon the Dragon's Heart seemed to soak up her last rays with every throbbing beat. This was the third and final day of the Festival of the Sun, Ishalem's celebration of the summer solstice, yet it was so much more.

People thronged around me, coming and going as I took deliberate steps down into the bowl. Ishalem was a prosperous city in a nomadic land. Her people were proud.

They were in high spirits on this day, the culminating of their festival. Faces were bright and their normally hot tempers were tamped for the moment, like the banking of coals for the night, only to be blown to life the next day. I knew it was considered bad form to challenge a man to fight during the holiday and her people embraced it. Where a jostling in a crowd might normally set off a duel, now would solicit scrupulous apologies and blessings bestowed upon each other and their families. There were singing and dancing and instruments of all types adding to the cacophony of the crowd.

I walked forward, drawn to the Dragon's Heart. Every step was filled with dread. My own heart quaked with the oppressive beating of that red heart growing larger with each pace. The crowd thickened the closer I came, but I was a head taller than most of the people of Ishalem – than most people really. Men and women flowed by to my right as I found myself caught in the river of people streaming to the center of the bowl. It was tradition on the summer solstice to come lay your hands on the Dragon's Heart and say a quick benison to the Mother. Those moving away passed me with a glow of peace it seemed, and a spring in their step. Those walking toward the Dragon's Heart did so with a sense of excitement and anticipation barely held in check.

The Dragon's Heart itself was as tall as a man. It rested on a raised circular dais with five wide steps that circled around. Reaching the bottom step I could see the egg shape was slightly tilted and somehow stayed in position with only a hand span of its bottom resting on the dais. Grown stone was done with magic, and the amount of magic it would have taken to make the Dragon's Heart was great indeed. I didn't think there was a wizard alive today that possessed such strength to do this now.

A horn sounded behind me, but this close to the Dragon's Heart, my focus was intense, my ring almost seductively urging me to step forward; the call of the siren to my ill-fated end. And I could only step forward, the noise of the crowd and the horn call behind were a mere buzz in my head now. The world receded around me as my focus remained fixed on the statue. I stepped up to the Dragon's Heart and was surprised to find words etched upon it. No one seemed to pay them any attention, as likely they had read them many times before. For me, I had only just laid eyes on this terrible beauty. I reached my left hand forward over the first word, but did not touch it. I could not touch it. I could feel the power of my ring preventing my hand from reaching the surface. Instead I read, and as I read, I passed my hand over every word. I stepped sideways as the words wound around the Dragon's Heart.

Dragon's Heart Grown of stone,

Ishalem's fate yet unknown

Upon a midsummer solstice

The Mother will give notice

Lay your hands upon the heart

Pray your peace does not depart

For a day will come

When peace is done

That Princely touch

Will break the clutch

The path revealed for all to see

Past returned from memory
The way is fraught with obstacle
The blessed only face the peril
And the Dragon's Eye will see again
Yet with whose vision and to what end?

“It is beautiful, is it not?” asked a young man to my right. “And so very cryptic.”
he added with a hint of frustration.

I nodded and glanced at the young man. It was Krane. I was taken aback for a moment in my surprise. I hadn't expected him here, yet with the Calling, I wondered now if I shouldn't have from the outset.

He wore the loose, airy tunic of the land, a colorful sash of fine purple silk tied at his waist above flowing silk trousers gathered at his ankles above sandaled feet. He wore a purple gemstone tied to his forehead by a leather thong.

I said nothing, as my mind was still aflutter under the lure of the Dragon's Heart. I could feel the power pulsing from within it and the draw was so strong now I could barely resist throwing myself upon it, arms wide.

“Legend tells us the Dragon's Heart was carried here by a dragon,” explained Krane, dry washing his hands. “Carmodan's dragon, so the story goes, though there do not appear to be any accounts of Carmodan ever having a dragon, much less using one to carry such a thing.”

I shrugged. “I have learned over my many years that legends and myths often bear striking resemblance to truth,” I said.

“It is tradition to touch the Heart and pray,” said Krane. “I have done so many times, and yet today... today I feel I should run from here.” He chuckled, a nervous child against an unknown fear in the shadows. “I see you also haven’t touched it,” he commented.

“I feel as though I shouldn’t either,” I said, though not telling him my ring would not let me.

He laughed again. This time a short bark as though scoffing at the silly fear that held his hand in check. “Then let us borrow the other’s courage and touch the Dragon’s Heart together,” he suggested.

He reached out his right hand and pausing a finger’s width away, smiled an encouraging smile for me. I stretched my left hand back out and met his gaze. There was something in the young man’s dark eyes. Intelligence surely, but something more, as if knowing that the next instant would change everything and there was nothing you could do but proceed.

We touched together and the world spun in fury. I felt a searing of my hand as though I had thrust it into the glowing embers of a fire. Yet I could not remove my hand. I felt my ring flare and was aware of another source of magic. The young man to my right was staring agog at his own hand pressed against the stone. I felt the stone beneath my fingers tremble, as though something moved within. Something blocked the light of the sun and the heart beat a fiery red that cast its glare upon Krane’s face. My own face felt hot, as though the sun had been blazing down upon me for days on end. Lightning flashed once, twice, and a third time all in quick succession. Each bolt hit the Dragon’s

Heart, yet the young man and I were not affected. With each strike the Heart cracked, and after the third crack the Heart broke apart in three pieces.

My hand was released from the spell that held it, and I jumped back reflexively and nearly fell down the steps. My young friend did the same. The sun returned to the sky and the Dragon's Heart was no more. Within the three shards of stone stood a small stone podium. Atop the podium rested a scroll, all of the same piece. It had words etched upon it. My young friend and I stepped between the shards of stone and read:

Searching for the Dragon's Lair

A task the gifted only dare

Rise and march from Dragon's Fall

Head held high and standing tall

March West and North and West again

A treacherous path you must attain

To Ravens Roost you first arrive

Lucky those who leave alive

Trust not the Thought your head may hear

Believe in only Memory

Here the black of night

Is on the right

The white of day

Leads one astray

“Who are you?” I asked Krane, never taking my eyes from the scroll.

“I am Krane,” he said in a shaky voice. His eyes also remained fixed on the words before him. “Second Prince of Ishalem.”

“What are you?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I am just a man. Why are you here?” he asked, eyes narrowing suspiciously. “What does all this mean?”

“I don’t know just yet,” I said, though I had an idea. “You and I must talk.”

Another horn blew and I finally looked around me. There were soldiers ringing the Dragon’s Heart, facing outward, a protective ring for their prince. Not that there was anyone trying to reach him. The people that thronged about moments ago had backed away, scared of being struck by lightning themselves. A nervous murmur ran through the crowd.

“The Dragon’s Heart is no more,” whispered Krane. There was sadness in his voice and a hint of fear. Then his nose twitched and he said, “What is that smell?”

My nose twitched too. “Down!” I shouted as I grabbed him by the arm and pulled us both tumbling down the steps. Springing to my feet I shouted, “It is a Draghan!”

There was a terrible screeching and the guardsmen that ringed the Heart were shouting and pointing up. I looked in time to see the Draghan alight on the top step. It screamed, a blood curdling sound that sent the soldiers stumbling backward. Looking up I spied a second creature circling, larger than the Draghan. It swooped down and landed on the opposite side of the Heart. It had the body like that of a lion, and its claws scrabbled for purchase on the stone steps, its giant feathered wings thrashed sending everyone reeling backward. Its head was that of a giant eagle and it craned its feathered

head and opened its beak unleashing a deafening cry, scattering the crowd. It was a Gryphon, another magical creature brought to heel for evil. A man slid off its back and his mere presence made me shiver. He was dressed in black. Helmet and greaves and breastplate shimmered with an unnatural sheen. His steel shod boots struck the stone with a menacing crash like that of a hammer on the anvil in the forges of Hera Hona. A silver spider with two red diamonds adorned his breastplate. I recognized the sigil. It was the Finch Spider, deadliest of spiders. Here was the deadliest of men. He looked disdainfully at me, and then Krane, scowling. I recognized him from the tavern the other night. Gone was the pretend drunkard and before me stood one of the most powerful wizards the world had ever seen. Also one of the deadliest.

I regained my feet and pulled Krane up to his, hauling him back several paces until we were amidst his guardsmen. Without warning one of them rushed up the steps with a shout, his sword drawn. Aiming a deadly blow at the Draghan, his sword flashing in the fading light. It never fell. The Draghan, a creature bred in Hera Hona, was covered in black scales, and stood twice the height of a man. It had leathery wings and a long snout with wicked looking teeth. Serpentine eyes sat at the bridge of its nose and gazed out malevolently at us. Red scales on its chest told me it would breath fire, but the soldier knew no such thing. Before I could shout a warning the Draghan reached a hand out and snatched the soldier by the neck and threw him like a child's doll down the steps at us. I grabbed Krane and dove to our left as the lifeless soldier crashed into the others. It screamed a terrifying challenge. Leaping down, wings spread wide, it landed among the soldiers.

Pulling Krane back I circled him away from the creature's bloodthirsty rush into the guardsmen. I drew my sword and said, "You can stay if you want, but a wise man would run." I thought he was a smart young man, but he stayed. "Then stay back!" I warned, moving in.

The creature was tearing apart Krane's soldiers. Twenty good men were hacking their useless blades on its scaly hide as it raked talon tipped fingers, lashing a wicked looking spiked tail to and fro, howling with delight at its carnage. I cursed my luck at leaving my shield with the rest of my things. I ducked under a poorly aimed blow and slashed at its side. My sword had teeth, mage-forged to battle just such a creature, biting deeply into its side. This time it howled in pain and whirled to see what it was that caused it such pain. Diving over its lashing tail I rolled to my feet. It faced me now and moved with deadly quickness, its slash meant to tear me from head to toe. Spinning left I narrowly avoided its deadly claws and slashed its outstretched arm above the joint. I felt my sword slice to the bone and leaped backwards as its other hand snatched the air where my neck was a moment ago. I crouched, waiting. Howling with pain the beast clutched its wounded arm to its side and folded its leathery wing over it protectively. It didn't flee. It crouched warily, and I could see those eyes considering what sort of foe I was that could bite so hard and remain out of reach. I knew I was dead though if the creature unleashed its fiery breath. I glanced over at the soldiers, but it looked as though half were dead or dying and the others were trying to drag Krane physically away. That was good. No more would die unnecessarily.

It closed with me again, but this time with much more controlled aggression, swiping carefully with its good arm. I jumped backward, dove to my left and rolled away

from a second swipe, and barely reached my feet when it dipped its wing, smashing it against me, sending me sprawling. I lost my grip on my sword and watched it skid away. Helpless on my back I watched the beast as it prepared to pounce. Things slowed down, as if the moment of my death would take a lifetime. I watched it spring and I pulled one of my daggers free. I heard the twang of a crossbow and saw a bolt lodge in the creature's chest. Not deep enough to hurt it, but it stopped the beast just short of me. It reared its foul head back, howling and yanked the bolt free. It looked beyond me for a moment and I scrambled to my feet.

“Shield Varek!” someone shouted and I turned in time to catch a small round shield banded in steel. I turned and raised the shield just as the creature leaned over me and opened its maw, spewing a thin stream of fire. I crouched behind the shield. Small though it was, it was enough to deflect the flames from engulfing me, though I could smell the wooden shield burning. It grew so hot I thought I might drop it lest my arm be burned from the withering heat. To drop it was death though, so I held on and grimaced through the pain for what seemed an eternity. It was only a few long moments however, and when the flames ceased, I dropped the ruined shield engulfed in flames and stabbed my dagger into its left eye while it loomed over me. It reared back, howling in agony, and I scuttled back, my dagger dripping its blood. I felt my sword and scooped it up. It would not be able to breath its fire again any time soon, of that I was certain, but a wounded beast is often unpredictable and ferocious in its defense. I watched it clutch at its eye before it screamed at me again. I thought it would lunge for me, but instead it leapt backwards and spreading its wings, took flight. I heard the twang of the crossbow

again and saw another bolt strike the creature, this time bounding harmlessly off its back as it flew off.

I turned my attention to the man in black. He sneered once more and then turned his attention to the writing on the stone. He reached out with his hand and I could feel the power course through him and into the stone. I watched as the stone began to glow red and then it bubbled, and finally began to melt away until nothing was left but a heap of misshapen rock.

He turned his gaze on me and said, "Be warned Defender. The Spider has arrived." His voice was raspy, yet somehow mesmerizing, oozing with a venomous quality that was lulling and terrifying all at once. "Tell your puny wizards to hide their heads in the sands of Ishalem lest they become entangled in my web and feel my sting."

"Thorodruin," I said, naming him.

"Well met," he said with a dip of his head. "Pray we don't meet again," he said before turning and leaping upon the Gryphon's back. The Gryphon crouched and then leaped forward, wings spread wide, forelegs outstretched, reaching for me. I leapt to my right as its claws raked the air where I stood a moment ago. As I rolled I sprang to my feet and aimed a slash at its hindquarters, but it veered out of harms way and took to the air in slow sweeping circles. It gained a height above the lip of the bowl and arrowed away west, after the Draghan. I watched them both soar off, losing them in the setting sun.

I fell to a knee, exhausted.

Chapter 3

“Mother’s blessings be damned, you sure can find trouble where none should be,” said a voice. “You could find your neck on a chopping block just taking a nap.”

I recognized that voice. I got to my feet and turned with a smile. “And you are developing an uncanny talent for saving my neck from the axe in the nick of time.”

I stepped toward my friend and we gripped forearms. “Nesral,” I said warmly. “Your timing is ever perfect, and today, unlooked for but most welcome. But how did you find me?” Nesral was a fighting man. A Captain in Minao’s army, leading a cavalry regiment, he was short and stocky. His blond hair was a little longer than I remembered it, but his smile was warm.

“You are a hard man to track,” he said with a smile. “After returning to Riverside and sending word to Minao, I waited for word from my King and hoped to see you ride into town with that young boy Slarech in tow. Well as you know, you never arrived, but

my King gave me leave to go after you so off I went. I figured the Citadel would be the place to look and sure enough you were there, but you had left only a fortnight earlier. I was glad to know the boy was safe and so I set off after you, though no one knew where you were heading. Next time tell someone, eh?" he chided.

I chuckled and said, "Had I known, I would have, good friend."

"Well, as I said, you are a hard man to track, but not impossible. You strike quite the figure, so from the Citadel it was simply a matter of stopping in every village or town and asking about you. Town to town, village to village I rode and asked. I rode hard, and thought today was the day I'd find you. Lucky for you I was right."

I smiled again and said, "Lucky indeed."

"So what in the Mother's name just happened?" he asked.

I surveyed the carnage. There were five soldiers that lay dead, and another ten that might be. Krane and his surviving guard returned.

"What in the Mother's name just happened?" echoed Krane. "What were those creatures?" he stammered.

"They are deadly beasts bred in Hera Hona and brought to heel by wicked men like that one." I answered.

"And who is he?" he asked, absently brushing himself off.

"He is who he said he is," I replied. "The Spider. Does that name mean nothing in Ishalem?"

"It does," he said in near apoplexy. "But it is a name whispered by the fire by elders looking to scare children into behaving. Legend and myth, not a man I ever expected to see face to face."

“Legends and myths are often true,” I said. “Sometimes the tales are skewed by time and the tellers, but usually they hold at least a thread of their true nature.”

“Then he was, is,” he stammered again. “He is a Druid Lord?”

“Thorodruin himself,” I said. “Known as The Spider for spinning his wicked webs.”

“I thought they were destroyed,” he said. “If they were ever even real,” he added in disbelief.

“Only defeated,” I said, “and imprisoned for a time. Now he is free, as are the others.”

“What does he want with Ishalem?” he asked.

“Nothing as yet,” I said. “So long as Ishalem wants nothing with him. But make no mistake. He will turn his attention to Ishalem when he feels the time is right.”

I surveyed the pile of stone in the center of the raised dais. There was nothing left of the scroll or its words. I sought to recall them, but my memory failed.

“He wants us to leave him alone,” I said, “and he wants those words on that scroll to be forgotten. Unfortunately, I cannot remember them exactly. Can you?”

He nodded. “Searching for the Dragon’s Lair, A task the gifted only dare. Rise and march from Dragon’s Fall, head held high and standing tall. March West and North and West again. A treacherous path you must attain. To Raven’s roost you first arrive. Lucky those who leave alive. Trust not the Thought your head may hear. Believe in only Memory. Here the black of night is on the right. The white of day leads one astray.”

“You have a good memory,” I said.

“I never forget,” he replied. “I need only read a page once and I can recall it perfectly. Or see a picture and recall it in perfect detail. It has never failed me.”

“Then that is well, for I believe it is important. Do you know what it means?” I asked.

“Not really,” he said. “Dragon’s Fall is also out of legend. We call it the Widow’s Walk, for those that take the pass never return. It is a pass high among the Dragon’s Teeth that leads to a cursed valley none would ever enter willingly. Yet what lies within is unknown to me at least. Perhaps a scholar might have a better answer,” he shrugged.

“Do not dissemble with me Krane,” I warned. “The valley does contain something of value,” I said. “Something Thorodruin wishes to find and keep for himself, otherwise he would not have destroyed the scroll,” I said pointing at the melted heap of stone.

“What is it?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Not here. We must talk, you and I,” I said. “Is there somewhere we can go?”

“To the palace,” he said.

“Then let us go,” I said. “I fear time is short.”

Chapter 4

Ishalem was isolated from most of the world. The city lay to the east end of a valley protected by the Dragon's Teeth, a treacherous mountain range that stretched south from the Green Sea before turning east. Like the gaping maw of a dragon, those teeth curled east and north like the lower mandible to snap up Ishalem in her jaws before drinking at the Green Sea yet again.

We were in the palace now, back in the King's private chambers for the second time in as many days. I sat on a cushioned chair. Nesral fidgeted in a chair beside me. He was a soldier, a Captain in the Minoan army, and a good one. He saved my life once before in the Crag. But he was not accustomed to sitting with Kings. Krane sat across from me and to his left sat King Koram.

“Do tell me what you make of all this?” said the King, clearly irritated. He had not yet gone to witness the Dragon’s Heart and perhaps did not really believe what he had been told.

“The prophecy of the Dragon’s Heart is now upon you,” I said. “Do you know what the Dragon’s Eye is?”

King Koram nodded. “It is a relic of an age gone by,” he said. “Some say it is magical, possessing a power that will shake the earth. Some say it is our birthright to one day wield this power.”

“You are close,” I said. “It is a relic of an age gone by. It is, or was, the amulet of the wizard Carmodan, a Grand Master of considerable power.”

“As I said,” agreed King Koram.

My memory was long and I cast back to the days after the renegade wizard Roigan was defeated, imprisoned somehow, along with the Souless Seven, the Druid Lords that wreaked havoc upon the world in their quest for domination. “Carmodan hid the jewel before his death. He set protections about it to keep the unwary and foolish from gaining possession of it until the time was right for one man to again wield its power,” I explained.

“And you believe you are that man?” asked King Koram skeptically and with a little anger as well.

“No,” I said and turned to Krane. “I believe it is him that is meant to wield the Dragon’s Eye.”

King Koram scoffed. “It is mine by right and I will see to its power myself.”

I shook my head. “Are you a wizard then?” I asked.

King Koram pursed his lips, but his silence was answer enough.

“Your son possesses the Gift,” I said.

Krane blanched, visibly upset at such a declaration. Or perhaps upset by the public declaration.

“You insult me and my family,” said King Koram, his anger rising. “My son has no such curse.”

I remembered the touch we shared against the Dragon’s Heart. I remembered the awestruck gaze of Krane upon the stone. I turned to him and asked, “Did you feel anything when you touched the Heart?”

Krane opened his mouth and then closed it without a word. He tried again, yet still no words came out. Finally he managed, “There was something.”

“What did it feel like to you?” I asked.

“Enough!” shouted King Koram. “I will hear no more of such nonsense.”

But Krane continued talking. “It was as though I could feel the stone itself, alive.” His words were filled with a wonder, one I recalled from personal experience. “And not just the stone. I could feel the wind, rushing by in a passionate swirl of life. The trees and grass were thrumming with life as well. Birds and beasts were all in wonder at the moment, as though they knew what was happening and were... were happy.”

King Koram looked upon his son again, this time with fear and trepidation. “You must not say such things my son,” he said querulously. “You cannot have the Gift.”

“I felt something father,” he said turning his wondrous eyes to him. “It was as though I were connected to everything and everything to me. I could feel what the wind felt, what the trees felt, I could sense the world differently.”

“Enough, I beg!” he said.

“I still can,” said Krane closing his eyes, and I could feel him reaching out for his power.

“You must take care,” I said to Krane. “You know not the danger in wielding such power. You must go to the Citadel and there you will learn how to control it.”

“He will do no such thing,” stated King Koram flatly. “He will remain in Ishalem.”

“He will go to the Citadel – eventually,” I said. “But first he must get the Dragon’s Eye. It cannot wait. The scroll unveiled is a clear sign complete with directions on how to find Raven’s Roost, and thus the amulet. If we do not go now, I’m afraid someone else will.

“And who might that be?” asked the King icily.

“The Spider,” I said.

Now it was the King’s turn to scoff. “You would have me believe fireside tales have come to life in the middle of my own kingdom?”

“I would have you believe the truth of what your son’s eyes have seen,” I said. “And if you don’t believe him, then perhaps the bodies of his guardsmen slaughtered by the Draghan may convince you.”

The King blanched at that. He must have heard their account by now and couldn’t dismiss it out of hand.

“The words on the inner scroll were directions,” I said. “Directions on how to get to Ravens Roost.”

“Ravens Roost,” said the King with a sigh. “Another name from out of legend. And to what end would finding Ravens Roost bring me?”

“One step closer to finding the Dragon’s Eye,” I replied. “It was foretold a day would come, a Prince would touch the Heart and the future revealed. That day is upon you, upon us all,” I implored. “You cannot avoid the future, for the future is now.”

The King glared at me, but my words struck to the truth of the matter.

“I will recover the Dragon’s Eye,” avowed the King.

“And that is why you have sent the First Prince Joram into the Dragon’s Teeth, is it not?” I asked. “Let us go and find the First Prince and then on to find the Dragon’s Eye.”

The King scowled and I thought he might order my head on a lance. “I have no intentions of letting you or anyone else gain possession of it.”

“I have no desire to possess it,” I said. “In fact, I would have no use for it. As I said, I believe it is for your son to use. Or at least to gain and perhaps be passed along to another. Only the Mother knows.”

“Father,” interjected Krane quietly. “I do not understand everything that happened today. Yet I know that for me life has changed.”

He paused and again I felt him reach for his power. The lure of that touch would be strong. I opened my mouth to caution him again, but I felt him pull back.

“You may not wish to admit the truth father,” he continued. “But I have the Gift.”

“Curse!” growled the King.

“No father,” he said firmly. “It is a Gift. I feel...I feel as though my whole world has changed. No, the world itself is the same, but my place in it is different. More connected, and for what reason? Surely Sir Varek speaks the truth. I must be the one to get the Dragon’s Eye.”

His words were spoken with a longing and an excitement that he could barely contain. He was full of wonder and amazement at his newfound Gift and I imagined that he viewed the whole circumstance as something of an adventure, like only a youth could romanticize.

“It will be a difficult and deadly undertaking,” I cautioned. “There will be death before the amulet is found. Perhaps many deaths. It is not something to take lightly.”

“Indeed,” said King Koram. “I must think upon this before I decide what must be done.”

“There is only one decision,” I insisted. “You must send your son and I to find the Ravens Roost, and from there, the way to the Dragon’s Eye.”

The King scowled. “Enough! I will send for you when I wish for your council Defender. As for you,” he said, turning to his son. “I forbid you from leaving the palace. Until I figure out what to do about your...”

The King let the word hang in the air unspoken.

“Gift,” I said.

“Go!” shouted the King. “All of you!”

I stood and bowed my head. "As you wish." I turned and walked out of the room. Nesral stood, bowing awkwardly and followed me. Krane stood and paused a moment before following after.

Senka was waiting outside. Her flowing black hair was tied back at the nape of her neck, and her large brown doe eyes smiled. Her white silk blouse was laced up the front, yet untied at the neck. Her pants were of the same silk material gathered at the waist by a silk sash of the royal purple. The legs were gathered at the ankle above leather sandals. The barrel stave greaves were gone leaving the soft supple material to accentuate her lithe frame. She was a flower among the desert sand. "If it pleases you Sir Varek, I have new quarters prepared for you and your man. I have already arranged for your things to be brought."

"Lead the way," I said and fell into step behind her. Her hips swayed as she walked and I found myself content to follow her.

Krane caught up to us and fell in between Nesral and I.

"You mustn't let my father keep me here," he pleaded.

"Come Prince, you should heed the words of your father, if not the King," said Senka in a rather scolding manner.

I was surprised by her words, and more so her tone.

"Hush my sister," said Krane dismissively. "I know where my allegiance is, do you?"

She dipped her head in acquiescence but her smile grew tight.

To Krane I said, "You know what you ask of me?"

He had the sense to look abashed.

“You yourself claim I am the one who must find Ravens Roost,” he implored.

“Find the Dragon’s Eye.”

“True,” I said. “But that doesn’t mean alienating your father and the entire Kingdom of Ishalem in the process.”

“But there must be something you can say? Something you can do?” he begged.

“I leave my faith in the Mother’s capable hands,” I replied. “If you are indeed meant to find Ravens Roost, find the Dragon’s Eye, than the Mother’s will shall come to pass. What I say or do will make no difference.”

“Than I shall be locked away in a tower and be forgotten,” he said despondently.

“There is no way my father will allow me to go on this adventure.”

I stopped short and turned to face Krane. He was nearly my height and in another year or two might grow to be taller. I wanted to see him gain that height. “This is not some glorious adventure. Death lies ahead. You must have faith in the Mother,” I said firmly. “And listen well when I tell you not to test your power. For power it is, in every way. You do not know what it is you touch, nor how to make it bend to your will.”

“Then teach me,” he pleaded.

I laughed. “Sooner ask a fish to teach you to fly. I can only warn you to take the greatest care.”

Krane’s countenance slumped. “Then I am lost.”

I thought for a moment. “Do you have a library?” I asked.

Krane nodded.

“Good. Go to it and find all the books you can on the Gift. Anything at all that might help you to understand what it is you now possess, and how you might control it.

Whether or not you go to the Citadel, whether or not you gain the Dragon's Eye, you have the Gift now and at the very least you need to learn how to use it without killing yourself or those around you."

Krane brightened at this idea.

"And while you are at it, find out what you can about Carmodan and the Dragon's Eye," I instructed. "I believe the Mother has plans for you in this regard and you should make what preparations you can."

Gone was the hoary haughtiness I saw from him in that tavern. Krane smiled now with the youthful exuberance I saw from him in his father's chambers.

"This is not some grand adventure," I warned again. "If you find yourself seeking the Dragon's Eye, be warned. You will find disappointment and heartache along the way. Death will follow in your wake and all you hold dear may suffer. Indeed, your brother may already be dead and you wish to follow in his steps? You may find the Dragon's Eye. You may hold it in your hands and feel its power. Make no mistake. You will be forever changed. Your entire life will be forfeit. For, to wield such power comes with it great sacrifice. Steel yourself. For the boy I see before me is not ready for such sacrifice."

I signaled Senka to continue and left Krane to stare after me as we continued on to my quarters. She left me with a smile outside my quarters.

"Anything you require you need only ask," she said with a smile that brightened an otherwise gloomy day. "Simply ring the bell and I shall come," she added, and closed the door on me. There was a bed along the left wall and another along the right, and a table with a wooden chair by the window opposite the door. A washstand stood in one

corner and a wardrobe of fine craftsmanship stood in the other. Our things were placed on the beds. I sat down on one bed. The same thought kept recurring to me.

“He’s not ready,” I said.

“Are they ever?” asked Nesral.

Chapter 5

Two days passed without incident. I was not summoned to see King Koram, nor was I permitted to seek an audience. The third day dawned with the familiar pull of my ring. It was time to go. Nesral and I packed our things and rang for the servant. Nesral had several different servants tend him. Senka was the only servant that tended to my needs. She was beautiful to look at. And helpful, to a degree. She took me wherever I wished to go, with the exception of to see the King. Whenever I asked for that privilege she simple replied ‘he is busy, he will summon you when he has time.’

Senka opened the door and smiled. It was a pleasant smile with perhaps a hint of something more. She would be a nice diversion in other circumstances. Today I had other plans.

“Can you take me to the King?” I asked.

She shook her head no.

“Then please have my things brought to the stables and have Volare saddled,” I requested. “I must be leaving now. You can pass on my thanks for his Highness’ hospitality?”

It was the second time I noticed her composure slip. Only slightly, for a brief moment, a worried look passed over her face.

She smiled at once and nodded, and scooped up my pack. “I will see to it right away Sir Varek.”

She was smooth and her smile was warm. I watched her swish out of my room and thought again about what a pleasant diversion she might be.

“I will meet you in the stables Nesral,” I said. “I have one thing I must see to before we leave.”

“Be easy on him,” he said.

Nesral was ever incisive. “I will.”

I thought about finding the King on my own, but decided to stop by Krane’s chambers to say goodbye and leave him with some positive words. I hadn’t seen him since the summer solstice, though not for lack of trying. I had sought him out everyday and everyday his servant greeted Senka and I at the door to tell us he was indisposed. I was worried that first day and said so until I heard Krane himself shout from within, ‘Tell him I will see him another time! I have my head buried in a pile of books!’

The next day was the same as the first. He was indisposed, busy with his studies. Today his servant opened the door, and he looked nervously about. I supposed not seeing Senka made him a bit uptight.

“He is again busy Sir Varek,” he said and moved to close the door.

I put my hand on the door and stopped him. I thought he might scream with the panicked look he shot me. "I am leaving and wish to say goodbye," I explained.

"I am instructed to turn everyone away unless there is a dire emergency," he said haughtily. "I assume you leaving is not such an emergency?"

"Tell him to go to the Citadel," I said with a sigh. "Go and learn and live the life he was meant to live. And tell him I said be well," I added. I liked the young man after all. For the short time I knew him he seemed smart and sincere and I truly wished him the best. His servant nodded curtly and shut the door on me once more. Another sigh and I went to the stables.

Volare was being saddled and my pack was lying by the stable door. I picked it up and strapped it behind my saddle. Giving Volare a soft rub along his neck I cooed in his ear and climbed into the saddle. I nodded my thanks to the stable boy and clucked Volare out at a walk. Nesral fell in beside me astride his horse Gilly, a stocky mare that looked like she had staying power. We made it though the city, out the west gate and onto the hot dry road that cut westward through the valley of Ishalem.

By the time the sun rose high in the sky and hot, the city's walls and towers were long lost to the horizon behind. Water was a luxury in the arid valley, but the road we travelled had several wells along the way. Wells that were dug and kept clear and clean so that men and commerce could thrive here. As the sun dove to the horizon like some majestic shining eagle, we paused at one to water Volare and refill our skins. My ring called me west, yet it was east I found myself staring. A cloud of dust rose in the air from the road recently travelled. By the size of the cloud I estimated anywhere from ten to fifty horseman were coming. Riding hard.

“Might be five, might be fifty,” said Nesral reading my thoughts. “What shall we do?”

“There is nothing for us to do but wait. They will be here soon. If they are after us, then we will face them here,” I said. “We are well watered and rested, and they would be tired and thirsty from riding hard. If they are after another, well, somehow I do not think that is the case.”

I finished watering Volare and began cranking the well in earnest. It was a simple device that used scoops chained together and slung on a pulley system down to the water below. Crank the wheel and up comes the water to be dumped in a low, wide basin. Clever. In addition, there were a network of basins, each with a simple board that when removed allowed the water to flow into another basin. These basins stretched away and circled around, enough to water a hundred horses at once and room to spare. I removed several boards before I started cranking. By the time the horses arrived I had filled several basins with clear, cool water.

I sat down on a small stone bench beneath a slanted wooden canopy designed for shade. Nesral stood fidgeting with the straps of his saddle. I pulled up my scarf, newly wetted, to cover my nose and mouth, and waited. As the men and horses arrived in a cloud of dust, I shielded my eyes and heard Volare stamp his foreleg once in disapproval. I opened my eyes and watched the dust drift away in the lazy afternoon breeze.

When I looked back the lead rider loomed over me. He was dressed in white linen, loose and airy. His face was covered by a scarf caked with the dust of the road. His black eyes were sharp. His dark hair was tied back away from his weathered cheeks and brow. He sported a silver circlet with a silver medallion affixed to his forehead. The

medallion told me he was an officer in Ishalem's army. The silver spoke of his rank. The symbols on it undoubtedly said exactly his rank, though I had no idea. There was a touch of silver in his hairline as well.

He looked to Nesral and then to me. "You are the Defender Varek Hai?" he asked in a raspy voice.

"Well met good sir," I said rising and pulling my scarf down to my throat. "I'm afraid I don't have the honor of your name," I said with a smile for he and the twenty-five men all dressed in traditional Ishalem style. Loose-fitting airy tunics of light-colored cloth gathered at the waist by colorful sashes and hanging over their baggy trousers gathered just below the knee and tucked into goatskin riding boots. All bore the scimitars of this land hanging at their waist, as well as wicked looking knives and daggers and short bows of horn or wood. They lacked the armor of soldiers on campaign, but they were soldiers nonetheless.

Their leader spoke. "I am Gorgamesh," he said. "Sent by King Koram to bring you back to Ishalem."

I did not react to the name, yet I knew it. Gorgamesh was one of the most respected commanders alive, anywhere. His reputation was nearly unparalleled; cunning tactician, clever commander, brutal fighter, and ever a winner. There are few men alive I would hesitate to engage with. Here before me sat one.

I bowed low. "I am honored that his Highness summons me. Even more so with whom he sends. Yet I am afraid the Mother has summoned me also."

Gorgamesh nodded. “My service is to the King of Ishalem, anointed by the Mother. His orders come from his mouth but the words are the Mother’s own to me. You may return to your quest after we return to Ishalem.”

He wasn’t giving me an option. And with twenty-five soldiers at hand, there was nothing for me to do. “How can I say no to the King under such... encouraging circumstances,” I acquiesced. “I have filled the water basins for your men,” I said pointing. “Surely you have time to water the men and horses before we return?”

Gorgamesh nodded to his first and the soldiers wheeled their mounts around, deftly maneuvering them up to the basins for water, leaving themselves several basins to fill skins and wash faces. Gorgamesh himself dismounted and pulling a skin from his horse he splashed water on his face and then drank deeply. Squinting at the sun he motioned us beneath the shade.

We both sat and Gorgamesh said, “Defender, I appreciate your readiness to accompany me back to Ishalem. I know you have other matters to see to, but my king is in need.”

“That is curious,” I replied, “because the last we spoke your king seemed content to let me wander his halls without purpose. At best he encouraged me to wait on the whims of the Second Prince.”

I noticed Gorgamesh blanch at the reference to Krane. “Something has happened to the Second Prince since my departure?” I asked. I worried he tried something foolhardy with the Gift and hurt himself or another.

“The Second Prince is missing,” he said.

Chapter 6

It isn't easy to catch me by surprise, but Gorgamesh's news did just that.

"What has happened?" I asked. "How long has he been gone?"

"We don't know for certain," he replied. "Sometime yesterday or the day before. His servant is likely being flayed alive now by the King, looking for answers."

I wondered if the King would go to such lengths or if it were only an expression.

"I don't think it will come to that," said Gorgamesh, reading my thoughts. "His servant has the spine of a worm and the conviction of a muddy puddle. He will tell him everything with the first nudge." He took another gulp from his water skin and said, "It may not save his hide from a lashing, but King Koram has been...less than reasonable these last days."

Gorgamesh chose his words carefully. "It is not my place to speak of the affairs of Kings and Princes," he said. "But the First Prince has been gone for too long. Those with any sense believe him dead."

Gorgamesh's tone didn't seem to put his self in the senseless category. He looked closely at me to see how I followed his words before continuing.

"How did you come to meet the Second Prince?" he asked.

I was aware of the intense scrutiny as I responded. "The Mother calls and I come," I said. It was evasive and Gorgamesh bristled.

"Tell me how you met Defender," he asked pointedly.

There was little to be lost in keeping most of our first meeting from Gorgamesh, and perhaps something to gain from sharing with him at least parts of that night. "I first met the Second Prince outside the Laughing Mule," I explained. "He was in need of my help and I helped him."

"I know the Laughing Mule. It, and the Tanning District, are no place for the Second Prince," said Gorgamesh. "So he was attacked then, perhaps by several cutthroats looking for a fat purse and you came to his rescue."

"Something like that," I said.

"Or perhaps he was there meeting someone?" asked Gorgamesh.

"If so, it happened before we met," I said dancing carefully around the truth.

"And what happened at the Dragon's Heart?" he asked pointedly.

There was nothing to be gained in keeping that meeting from him. In truth, he probably already knew and was looking for confirmation of the wild tales of demons and dragons that were flying around Ishalem these last days.

“We met at the Dragon’s Heart, though not by design,” I said. “We touched the Heart together and his magic triggered something. The Heart was rent by lightning and within was revealed a scroll.”

“And the creatures and their master?” he asked.

“A Draghan and Thorodruin, riding a Gryphon,” I said. Gorgamesh twitched at the name. “You know of him then?” I asked.

“You believe it was him?” he asked, though his tone said he already believed it himself.

“Had he been a simple man dressed the same I would have trouble believing,” I said. “But with beasts of Hera Hona doing his bidding?” I left the rest unspoken.

Gorgamesh left it at that. “Mount up,” he said. “We ride now.”

It was early the next morning when we returned to Ishalem. Nesral was instructed to remain at the stables while I was immediately escorted into the palace gardens where Gorgamesh left me for a brief time alone. Then I was pleased to be brought before King Koram. He sat alone on a cushioned bench beneath the shade of a white pine. My pleasure was short lived.

“Your Highness,” I said with a bow.

“Sit,” he ordered tersely.

When a King asks you to sit, you sit. Especially an angry one. Yet I did so unhurriedly, a subtle reminder he was not my liege.

“To what do I owe this honor Your Highness?” I asked.

“Where is my son?” asked King Koram.

“I believe somewhere in the Dragon’s Teeth Your Highness,” I replied. “And as I said before, I would be pleased if Your Highness would allow me to accompany the search party when-,”

King Koram cut me off. “Not the First Prince,” he said. “The petulant one, Krane, who refuses to listen to his father and King.”

“I do not know Your Highness,” I said.

“I know you were keeping something from me in our first meeting,” stated the King. “Something to do with Krane and how you met. Tell me.” He spoke in the commanding tone of a King. I was unsure how I should tell him his son had left on his own in search of his brother.

“I know he was planning on running off on his own,” said King Koram. “Fool son that he is, he thinks he can do things on his own. That is why I denied him the map.”

I decided on the truth. Most of it, at any rate. “Your Highness,” I began. “Your son Krane was involved in a transaction that night we met in which he obtained a new copy of the map to Raven’s Roost.”

King Koram cursed beneath his breath but motioned me to continue.

“He was beset by,” I paused, carefully considering my words. “Several cut throats,” I settled on. “They were after the map, though how they knew he was purchasing it is beyond me.”

“And you know this because?” prodded the King.

“I know this because the Mother brought me to the Laughing Mule to protect your son,” I explained. “And I did, but you must know that he didn’t retain the map.”

“Did he get a look at it?” asked King Koram. “The map?”

“I believe he glanced at it for a few moments,” I answered, recalling Krane’s behavior in the tavern that night.

“Then he needs nothing more,” said King Koram in consternation. “He can remember things with just a glance,” he explained. “A single page of text he can recall exactly, with only a glimpse. His memory is remarkable.” The King’s words were grudgingly approving. “He will know that map until his dying day. Of that you may be certain.”

“Yet he wouldn’t set off on his own, would he?” I asked.

“He has threatened for many days now,” said the King. “Ever since I denied him the chance to go with the search party. If I had known he had designs of obtaining the map I would have locked him in the dungeons to keep him safe from himself.”

“It appears the Mother had me on his trail when your Gorgamesh caught up with me,” I said. “Would the King allow me to return to the Mother’s task?”

The King stared daggers at me for the thinly veiled insult. “I will,” he said grudgingly. “But you will have your wish as well. Gorgamesh himself will lead the search party for the First Prince. They leave immediately and you may accompany them if you wish. One word of warning though Defender,” he added in a most threatening tone. “Stay out of Gorgamesh’s way. He leads the party, not you.”

His threat fell on deaf ears. “Your Highness,” I said carefully. “I go where the Mother directs me. In all things she leads. Your Gorgamesh should know this and be careful he doesn’t interfere with her plans. Again.”

King Koram bristled and I thought he might actually rise up and strike me. After several long moments he mastered himself. He said, “My apologies Defender. I am not myself. My son is...”

I thought he might say ‘cursed’, but he didn’t.

“My sons are gone from me and what father would wish to find his self suffering such a fate? If it pleases you to assist Gorgamesh in any way, it would please a King, and also a father.”

I nodded at his sudden contriteness. “I will do what I can Your Highness. When do we leave?”

“Gorgamesh is waiting at the West Gate now,” said King Koram. “You will leave at once.”

Chapter 7

I collected Nesral and met Gorgamesh at the West Gate. We departed at once, riding back into the blistering heat of Ishalem. The party was far greater than I imagined. There were a hundred horsemen, all armed in varying degrees. None wore any visible armor other than perhaps a leather vest or cuffs. There may be armor stored in the massive train of pack animals, wagons, and servants that accompanied us. There were a dozen covered wagons, some filled with servants, others with food and supplies. There were thrice as many donkeys and pack mules, all heavily laden, and more servants leading these on foot. Our party moved slowly. I rode at a walk next to Gorgamesh at the head of this giant expedition. Nesral followed behind me. It would take us five days to reach the Dragon's Fang, Ishalem's westward fortress guarding the mountain pass into their valley.

“What do you know of Raven’s Roost?” I asked Gorgamesh as Ishalem disappeared behind us.

“I know we must find it,” he said simply. “It is the only hope of finding the Prince.”

“May I see the map?” I asked.

Gorgamesh shrugged and pulled it from a pocket. “Here,” he said handing me a small rolled parchment.

I unrolled it and held it up for inspection. “Not much here,” I said. “No more than a spot on a map and no roads leading to it.”

“That’s the way of it,” said Gorgamesh.

Two men spurred their horses one to either side of me. They were older men and not dressed at all like warriors. Their gray hair was tied loosely at the nape of their necks. They both had long gray beards that hung half way down their chest. Both had leather thongs tied into their beards. I recalled the fashion. In Ishalem this signified they were scholars of note. They both had long noses and bushy eyebrows, and sharp, knowing, dark eyes.

“You must be the Defender,” said the man to my right. “Is it true you wear the ring?” he asked.

I nodded. “Well met,” I said sarcastically.

The man on my left said, “Forgive my friend’s rudeness. His eagerness has always been a shortcoming. My name is Habonite Mamoud and my rude friend is named Tamor Latouri. You may call me Hab,” he finished with a friendly smile.

Tamor scowled at Hab, but favored me with a smile.

“You wish to see the words and the map?” I guessed.

They both shrugged indifferently. “No,” said Hab. “We have studied them as much as any. There is really not much to look at. The Dragon’s Fang of course is where we ride to first.”

“Yes,” agreed Tamor. “And from there we ride north and west and hope we wander into the Raven’s Roost in the mountainous vastness that is the Dragon’s Teeth.”

“You do not seem hopeful?” I commented.

Hab scowled at Tamor. “You must forgive him My Lord Defender. ‘His bowl is ever cracked and leaking,’ as they say.”

“And you are then?” I remarked with a raised eyebrow.

Hab smiled. “It follows logically that our good First Prince Joram would have taken his men on the same northern westward march from the Fortress of the Dragon’s Fang which we are planning on taking. Likely the same path our Second Prince is currently on. And therefore our Princes will leave us a trail to follow.”

“Indeed,” agreed Tamor. “But whether that leads us to Raven’s Roost is any one’s guess. The legend is an old one My Lord Defender. Yet for all the ages none have ever found it. And not for a lack of trying either.”

“Please,” I said. “Call me Varek.”

“Very well Master Varek,” said Hab with a short bow in his saddle and then with a smirk toward Tamor he said, “You see his bowl is leaking yet again.”

“It is not a leaky bowl,” he said irritably, “but a sound flood wall that I stand upon when I say this. After all, it is the truth.”

“Ah, the truth,” said Hab. “Yet the truth is Raven’s Roost has been found. And likely our First Prince has broken us a nice trail to it.”

“Likely a trail, but to where is still the question,” argued Tamor. “Raven’s Roost is a spot on a map only.”

“A spot sworn on by the King’s own Hunstman Parrouni,” countered Hab. “You would doubt his veracity?”

“I would doubt his veracity about nothing when it comes to hunting,” said Tamor. “Yet Raven’s Roost is nothing to do with hunting. It is a thing of magic and legend and that it has remained hidden all these years is more than coincidence.”

“And yet legend itself speaks of Raven’s Roost being sought and found when the time is ripe and the Citadel and her Guardians have need,” said Hab. I caught the flicker of his eyes toward me.

“You make my argument for me,” chuckled Tamor. “The Citadel and her Guardians will be the ones who find Raven’s Roost. Not the First Prince of Ishalem or anyone else.”

“The one does not rely upon the other,” said Hab sourly. “And do we not have a Defender of the Citadel accompanying us?”

“Enough,” said Gorgamesh. “You banter like old women. It is a wonder the King sees wisdom in two such pecking hens.”

“The King sees wisdom where wisdom flies,” said Tamor.

“Yes, and these old men are wise owls, not pecking hens,” added Hab.

It was the first I had heard them agree upon anything. “Well it seems there is an argument for either being true,” I said, earning a smile from both men. “Or perhaps there is another truth entirely,” I added, earning a scowl from Gorgamesh.

“And what might that truth be?” asked the scowling Gorgamesh.

I shrugged. “I do not know,” I said simply. “What I do know is that the Mother does things Her way and in Her time. Better to seek Her will than to make your will the way.”

Gorgamesh nodded. “That I can agree with,” he said.

The two old men nodded as well.

“I am curious Varek,” said Hab innocently, “Why do you believe the Mother has called you to Ishalem?”

I shrugged. “I do not know,” I said.

“Quit dissembling,” said Tamor. “You have been a Defender how long?”

I shrugged again. “The honest answer is I do not know. A very long time.”

Hab rejoined, “Then you have been Called many times, is that right?”

“Yes,” I said. “Yet the why isn’t always as clear as the where and when.”

“Hmmm,” said both men fingering their beards.

“Then you must guess as you go,” said Tamor. “Please then, favor us with your best guess.”

“Yes,” echoed Hab. “Your best guess then.”

“I believe the Second Prince needs my help,” I said.

Both men looked rather surprised.

“The Second Prince you say?” asked Tamor.

“Why would the Second Prince be in need of a Defender?” asked Hab.

“Wouldn’t logic dictate the First Prince be the one you should be helping?”

“I let logic guide me only so far. It is the Mother whom I put my trust, and I do not presume to know the mind of the Mother,” I said again. “You asked and I say I believe it is the Second Prince Krane who needs me. I may be wrong. As I said, it is very difficult.”

The two old men fell silent, rubbing their beards thoughtfully. They excused themselves shortly after and rode off with their heads together. I watched them leave, riding their horses directly through the heart of our traveling procession, apparently too involved in their own discussion to worry about running headlong into a pack mule or soldier. Brays and curses followed them. Before they disappeared from my sight I noticed one servant on horseback deftly maneuver around the two. The servant gazed up at me, only eyes visible from the tightly wound scarf covering face and head. There was something familiar about the gaze, but the servant turned and followed the two scholars and like smoke on the wind was gone.

“Do those two actually like each other, or do they only like to argue?” I asked Gorgamesh.

Gorgamesh chuckled knowingly. “You seem to have the way of it. I’m not sure even they understand if their feelings are genuine fondness for one another or fondness for the argument only. Myself, I am afraid to ask the question for fear of the ensuing debate.”

I expected the two scholars to verbally accost me again at our camp that evening. I erected my tent nearby Gorgamesh, to be at hand should he need me, but to be aware of

his planning as well. I didn't trust him to include me in everything. After all, he was only instructed not to hinder me, and to accept my help should he deem it necessary.

Nesral erected his next to mine, and afterwards asked, "Care to teach me how to use that sword?"

I was surprised. "Nesral, you know how to use a sword," I said.

He barked a laugh. "I do indeed, but I've seen you use yours and both are like nothing I've ever seen before. If I picked up your sword now and tried to fight with it I'd probably cut off my own leg."

He was probably right. "Maybe so, but still, you don't have a sword like mine to use."

He kicked the dirt at his feet and then said, "Mother help us Varek, but you have two of 'em, and if we end up seeing half of what we saw up there in the Craggs, I'd surely love to use one of yours. You saw those soldiers back there in Ishalem. They have some mighty fine swords. Big and strong and sharp and they hacked away at that Draghan with all their might and didn't even nick the Mother forsaken thing. Half of 'em died trying. But yours? You step in and start slicing it up like pudding. And I'd only be borrowing the sword, not like I'd want to keep it," he added sheepishly.

I considered him for a moment in silence.

"In all my years, and there have been too many to count Nesral, I have never been asked by someone to borrow one of my swords, let alone teach them to use one. It's true, I have two, and can use them both together should I find the need, but in truth it is usually more effective to use only one. But you know the relationship a man has with his sword?"

Nesral nodded, and said, “Yeah, I figured it wouldn’t be a good idea.” He turned a downcast head and started to walk off.

“Wait,” I called and he stopped and turned. “I asked you a question.”

He stepped back to me and straightening up said proudly, “It is like another limb, an extension of you. And something you treat as if it were a part of you.”

“Good,” I said. “That was lesson number one.” I stepped into my tent and emerged with both swords. I tossed him one and said, “Lets get to work.”

We stepped away from the camp and I began with the basic forms. Nesral knew them, or most of them anyway, though perhaps by different names.

“Half speed Nesral,” I said. “You really will cut off your leg with that sword if you aren’t careful.”

After a candle mark we took a break. Nesral wiped the sweat from his brow and said, “This blade is light as a feather.”

I agreed. “It is, and stronger than any steel. You are good with a blade,” I said and then added with a smile, “for a cavalryman,”

He chuckled. “I should skewer you with my lance for that.”

“Still, I think half speed for a few days until you get the weight of it,” I instructed. “Until then, we will count your limbs after every practice.”

We started up again and after a while a small group wandered over to watch. We worked for another candle mark and then stopped for the evening. After we ate we turned in, resting for another long day in the saddle. And the next day was just that, long and by days’ end we were saddle weary. Stretching for a bit first, Nesral and I started up again with the blades.

After a short while a group of around fifty swordsmen assembled nearby, yet there were four clear factions, each led by a man with braided hair. In Ishalem, a man with braided hair was considered a Master of the Sword. A man would stop cutting his hair when he began training with the sword. The more experience he gained, the longer his hair grew. When long enough to tie back, they would, using a leather cord. The more training, the longer the hair, the more cords were used in tying back one's hair. This continued until one earned the right to braid his hair and be called Master of the Sword. Of course my hair was braided. In other lands the braid simply meant warrior, or soldier. Nothing so grand as Master of anything.

These four began barking orders and each group drew their long curved scimitars popular among soldiers of Ishalem and began working through forms. They moved as one. Or rather, the four groups moved as four separate limbs, as they worked different forms. If you focused on one group it was a beautiful, graceful display of skill, much like a dance. Because they were working alongside each other, yet working different forms, it looked more like the flailing of the arms and legs of a dying man. Thrashing about with no coordination.

During a break Nesral and I relaxed and watched them work. It was easy to recognize the familiar forms and I mentally critiqued the students, for they must be students of the braided Masters. Many of them had multiple leather cords tying back their hair. Occasionally I would point to a particular mistake and explain to Nesral what the correct form would be, but for the most part their training seemed decent and practical. I thought they would go through their forms and then practice against each other. Instead, they formed four separate circles and the Master of each stood in the

center. They barked at their students and their students began attacking. Stabbing and slashing and jumping and twisting, the Masters always bested their students. It was all very amusing. Until I realized that the performance was for me.

The more I smiled, the more I noticed the Masters scowling. Their scowls at first were cast sidelong my way. Yet I chuckled after one Master's particularly contrived show of skill over a student without a single leather cord in his shoulder length hair. The Master blocked a slow and awkward overhand slash, spun and kicked the student's blade from his hand and spun again to thump him on his bare head, sending the poor student reeling. It was laughable to think that in a real fight a real swordsman would simply stand still as a statue while his opponent spun to kick his weapon out of his hands, and even more comical to imagine a real swordsman to remain still as a statue while his opponent spun yet again to thump him over the head.

Needless to say my chuckle earned me a deliberate scowl from this Master. As he scowled I could hear him cursing, though he was a bit far to understand exactly what was said, it was clear he was baiting me. I smiled, but didn't move. The other Masters stopped to see what he would do. He took a step towards me and stopped.

Gorgamesh stepped beside me and said, "Enjoying the show?"

I nodded, but didn't take my eyes off of the angry Master who hesitated. He turned back to his men and began barking even louder, angrily working his students through useful exercises for novices.

"You shouldn't," he said. "They mean to intimidate you. Perhaps even bait you into a fight."

"They'd be baiting a bear to come and play," said Nesral acidly.

I ignored Nesral and raised an eyebrow to Gorgamesh. “And you approve?”

He shrugged. “In Ishalem, our warriors are prideful people. You, an outsider, wear the braid of a Master of the Sword. That, in and of itself is a challenge to those that earned it. If that were all it would be enough, yet you wear what they consider a toy blade a child might use for play. And you stand among them and teach another to use a toy. They find themselves wondering if you deserve the braid. And you also come bearing the title Defender.”

He paused to gauge my reaction. After seeing none he continued. “You may think the title means little in Ishalem, and perhaps for many it does. But for many, especially those willing to fight, a Defender is one many would like to measure themselves against. Katuru,” he said with a nod to the Master I had insulted with my chuckle, “Katuru is one such person who would like nothing more than to challenge you so that he could say he bested a Defender of the Citadel and grow his reputation.”

“There was a time when a man wouldn’t dare. You believe he could best me?” I asked.

Gorgamesh shrugged again. “It matters not what I think. It only matters that Katuru thinks he can. Therefore I say it is only a matter of time until he tries. He will look for the slightest of slights to issue a challenge so beware.”

“And you would allow this?” I asked, oddly amused by his ambivalence to the whole situation.

“I must allow it,” he explained. “It is his way. It is our way. That is why I warn you. You may not agree and may wish to avoid confrontation as our...guest.”

“Are you suggesting I avoid Katuru? Avoid the others?”

“I am suggesting only that you be aware of the culture you are steeped in at the moment.”

As the sun set quickly behind the mountains, the swordsmen ended their practice and moved off to their own tents. Gorgamesh smiled and left me alone with my thoughts. I spent the next few candle marks considering how I might possibly avoid killing one of these Masters of the Sword. Short of leaving now, I couldn't see how.

The next day, after our march concluded, I staked Volare with the other horses as usual, but decided to care for him myself, rather than let one of the handlers do so. Nesral did the same. The horses were staked downwind, which in Ishalem was almost always to the east or southeast. This night it was southeast, putting them to the rear and to the south of our westward marching party. I wasn't trying to hide. Yet, it was no coincidence it was as far away from my tent as I could make it. I really didn't want to hurt anyone. It didn't matter. The Masters of the Sword and their students found me and decided to work their forms nearby.

After washing Volare down, I began brushing him. Soon after, the arrival of the Masters of the Sword and their students earned quizzical stares from the horse handlers and other servants. I tried not to pay heed, yet the occasional grunt or groan or ringing of steel I found myself stealing a peek.

Katuru and his men were closest to me again, and they were all much closer than before. So close in fact that the horses were becoming skittish. When one of the handlers said something it earned him a thump across his back as Katuru chased him off.

I had to fight the urge to thump Katuru myself. I smiled and handed my reins to another and said to Nesral, “Come, let's go back to our tents and we can work our forms

there.” The chuckles followed me. Even though I knew they were meant to goad me, I could feel my anger rising. I strode away without looking back.

Moments later, I slowed, some curious feeling coming over me, as if I were being followed. I turned sharply, expecting to see Katuru following, perhaps even rushing after me. Instead I saw a lithe figure in white dart behind a large wagon not far behind me. I ran back and around the wagon, only to find the desert evening stretching away. There was nobody. I circled the wagon and looked up and down the path between wagons and tents that I followed. There were people of course, but none that looked like the figure following me.

“What is it?” asked Nesral.

“I’m not certain,” I said, though I had an idea.

I continued on my way, periodically looking back to see if my follower would slip again. I was disappointed when we reached our tents without incident.

At the end of the third day’s march I decided to wander the encampment. As usual, Nesral followed. It was a sprawling affair, starting from the water well and spiraling outward. There was no rhyme or reason to the encampment. Certainly nothing military, though the soldiers’ camps were neatly laid out in a small grid. As for the rest, servants and tradesmen camped as they saw fit, a tent here and a wagon there. There was no fear of attack in this their’ own land, so there was an air of exuberance of an almost celebratory quality. Pipes and flutes and other instruments all played as people laughed and sang and danced about.

We wandered along, taking in the sights. The pungent smell of cooking teased my nose and tickled my hunger. The people of Ishalem were a carefree people. Living

in their protected valley, albeit a mostly arid, sun blistered land; they were sheltered from the problems of other cities and lands. I envied them.

I saw them before they saw me. Katuru and the rest of the swordsmen were walking purposefully in my direction, though I pulled Nesral and we slipped behind the travelling forge of the blacksmith who was elsewhere at the moment. We slid into the shadows and watched as they strode by, Katuru and the rest casting searching glares about them. Any eyes they met were immediately diverted to the ground, their persons suddenly interested in something somewhere else.

After they moved off, we stepped out and headed back to my tent.

“I don’t know why you bother hiding from him,” said Nesral.

“I don’t want to hurt him,” I replied.

We ate alone and in peace. Eventually Katuru and his men found me. Seeing me sitting with Nesral at my campfire they formed a half-circle just around the small fire. Katuru swaggered around the fire to stand before me.

Looming over me he said, “I see our Defender is taking his ease. Perhaps the ride has been too much for his delicate rear?” His jibe elicited chuckles from his men.

I ignored the jibe and the chuckles. “I see you have the gift of discernment,” I said. It was my way of handing him a backwards insult. Like so many men who are more muscle than mind, he didn’t catch on.

“Than perhaps you would like to cross swords with me, work some life back into those muscles, eh?” he asked eagerly. “Only for sport of course,” he added with a sly smile.

“I’m afraid not dear Katuru,” I said with a touch of drama. “As you guessed, my day has been a torturous one in the saddle, dust in my face and the sun on my brow. I’m afraid I can barely stand.”

“Could it be that you are simply afraid of the prowess a Master of the Sword of Ishalem wields in his blade? “Do not be afraid, Defender. I will not harm you. Much,” he finished with a chuckle.

“Indeed how could I be afraid of such a thing from so honorable a man?” I teased back. His thin lips said he might be catching on. “And yet it remains true that I am too weary from our road to offer any semblance of a fair fight. Perhaps another time then?” I said dismissively.

He didn’t know what to say. When he stood there staring stupidly for a moment I added, “Good then, it is agreed. We shall practice our swordplay another time then.” I stood and offered him a slight bow and then entered my tent. By his silence he stood there for nearly a minute, probably wondering what just happened. Then I heard them leave, punctuated by a hearty chuckle from the group, likely laughing at a joke at my expense. Yet what does it cost me if I cannot hear it? I went to sleep that night feeling good about our fourth and final day on this hot tramp through the desert.

I was wrong to feel good. I rode at the head of our party, next to Gorgamesh, Nesral as always by my side. We were several candle marks from reaching the Dragon’s Fang that afternoon when the four Masters of the Sword rode up, two to either side of me. The one closest to my right bowed slightly and spoke.

“My pardon Defender,” he said with the stiffness of one not used to begging another’s pardon. “My name is Willham. These are my brothers of the sword, Bandar, Kaofouri, and Katuru.”

The three others gave a small bow of introduction, Katuru’s the merest dip of the head. Willham was himself gray of hair. The other three were much younger, their braided hair long, but still dark to match their eyes.

“I am Varek,” I replied. “And you need not ask my pardon.”

He offered another short bow from his saddle, a mere dip of his shoulders forward. The other three made no such attempt. Katuru actually scowled at me. I sighed at the brashness of youth. My sigh made the others scowl. Such is my life.

“You use that toy for a weapon?” asked Kaofouri insolently.

I glanced mildly at Kaofouri. “Many have wondered that very same thing,” I said and paused for a moment before adding, “As I slid the tip into their breast.”

Katuru spat on the ground and said, “Slayer of children likely. You wouldn’t last ten score heartbeats with me.”

I looked Katuru in the eye and replied, “You’re right. It wouldn’t take me half that time to kill you.”

Katuru spurred his horse around to face me. He drew his sword and pointed it at me. I reined Volare in.

“I am Katuru Bengali, Master of the Sword,” he seethed. “You will answer for your insult and see the folly of your words.”

“I am Varek Hai,” I said quietly. “Defender. I’ve killed more men with my sword than a hundred of your Masters of the Sword. Do not attempt to measure yourself against me. You will find yourself short. Perhaps by a hand or a head.”

I watched his face turn purple. I didn’t want to kill this young man. I looked to Gorgamesh who simply shrugged. I had hoped he would have tried to calm his man down.

Katuru screamed and dug his heels into his horse. His horse leaped forward and looked to pass me on my right. Katuru aimed a slash at me as he passed by, but his sword sliced only air. I deftly wheeled Volare back and left. My trained horse took the opportunity to take a bite out of his horse’s rear flank as Katuru flailed at empty air. His horse squealed angrily and Katuru wheeled him about wildly, struggling for control.

I still hadn’t drawn my sword. Katuru regained control of his mount and charged again. Ishalem horses are a sturdy breed, yet small in stature. Volare was several hands taller and stronger and as fast as he was, he was still trained to fight, not run. Volare was very well trained and I took full advantage. I reared him as Katuru moved to pass by and Volare landed a crushing blow to the neck of Katuru’s horse. The blow drew blood and caused his horse to veer unsteadily away. I remained harmlessly out of Katuru’s reach.

“You hide behind the skill of your horse!” he shouted angrily. “I will kill you the moment you dismount!”

I was tired of Katuru’s antics. I dismounted. I didn’t want his horse to suffer any more.

“You surprise me Defender,” said Katuru sliding from his saddle. “Your bravery is noted. For that I will finish you quickly.”

I stood, my left leg forward, right slightly apart and back. I still hadn't drawn my sword. Katuru paused, waiting for me to do so.

"You wish to defend yourself?" he asked.

I said, "I wish to keep this fight fair."

Katuru turned purple again then charged at me. His movements were slow, predictable, and easy to defend. I slid to my right and twisted my upper body as his flailing sword whistled by me. With my twisting momentum I drove my fist into his side as he passed. Hard. So hard he turned in his fury and realized suddenly that he was in extreme pain. He fell to one knee and clutched his side. I kicked him in the chin. I watched his eyes roll into the back of his head before his body hit the ground. I stepped over his unconscious body and took his sword and untied his scabbard from his hip. Sliding it home I tied it to Volare's saddle and mounted up.

Gorgamesh chuckled to himself. Willham, Bandar and Kaofouri nodded, but said nothing. The crowd that had gathered stood hushed.

"Tell this Master of the Sword when he awakes he can have his weapon back after he begs my forgiveness," I said.

My eyes met each of theirs in turn. Then scanned the crowd to see how many would tell the tale of this fight. In a sea of faces, many covered by scarf, I thought I spied a pair of familiar eyes. They disappeared quickly.

Gorgamesh barked an order and the crowd broke up. Kaofouri and Bandar dismounted to tend to Katuru who lay still even as our troop began moving again. Willham fell in beside me on my right, Gorgamesh to my left.

“I am sorry for Katuru, Defender,” said Willham. “He is always the shortest distance to the hottest fire.”

I nodded. “I know the four of you came to provoke me,” I said, noticing a subtle flinch. “One or more of you may still.” I added, and gave him a sidelong stare as we rode.

He sat straighter in his saddle. “You are correct Defender,” he said, without remorse. “Perhaps on both, though for my part I am satisfied in your skill with the sword.”

“Yet you haven’t seen me use the weapon?” I argued.

He and Gorgamesh both barked a laugh.

“Only a man with supreme confidence in the use of a sword would dare face another drawn blade empty handed,” said Willham. “Especially if he had a blade at hand. Tell me Defender, why didn’t you use your blade? You see already that perhaps Kaofouri or Bandar will seek to test their steel against yours. They will make you draw and fight. Better to have done so with Katuru and be done altogether.”

“You seem wiser than your peers,” I replied. “Tell them when I draw my blade, it is to kill, not to measure my strength. I would have killed Katuru today had I wished him dead. I do not wish him, or any other dead. We are all the Mother’s children. But know this Willham, I will kill Katuru or any other who challenges me from here on. I do not wish to, but I’m afraid I will have to before long. Tell them.”

Gorgamesh said, “Tell them I’ll kill them myself if they draw on another member of this party. We are bound on a journey that may end in enough bloodshed. We need not water the earth ourselves.”

Willham nodded and heeled his horse around and galloped off.

“I think you may have stopped Kaofouri or Bandar from challenging me,” I said.

“But Katuru will want vengeance. I have seen his type before.”

“Then he will die,” shrugged Gorgamesh. “Either at the tip of your sword, or mine. He is no use to me if he cannot obey.”

I shrugged in return. After a few moments of silence I said, “I believe you have an interloper travelling with the servants.”

Gorgamesh glanced my way. “And who is he?” he asked, but to my surprise, his tone wasn’t one of concern.

“It is a she,” I stated, recalling those eyes riding above the scarf covering the rest of her face. They were eyes I well remembered.

Gorgamesh grunted and asked, “And who is she then?”

“She is dressed as a servant, but I know her as the King’s daughter,” I said.

“Senka.”

Gorgamesh simply said, “Pay her no mind.”

“Do you think that wise?” I asked. “Letting the King’s daughter run off, when his two sons are missing as well?”

“You think the King doesn’t know?” asked Gorgamesh.

That surprised me.

“He sent the girl to help,” continued Gorgamesh. “She is my knife in the dark. The blade you never see that stabs you in the back.”

“She is the Royal Sicar,” I said. “I wouldn’t have thought back stabbing would befit a Princess.”

“It wouldn’t befit a Princess,” explained Gorgamesh. “But that is exactly the purpose of the Royal Sicar. From the moment she was born her title of Princess was forfeited. She will never be a Princess. Her job is to serve the throne.”

“From the shadows?” I asked.

“She is the Royal Sicar,” said Gorgamesh, looking me sternly in the eye now. “The rough translation is King’s Blade, but for centuries, Kings of Ishalem have used them as assassins. She is well trained in fighting, poisons, deception and intrigue. She may be the most dangerous person traveling among us.”

I thought about that last statement. Gorgamesh himself was a deadly warrior. His reputation passed far from his land. If he thought her dangerous, I should also.

A horn sounded ahead.

“They have sighted the Dragon’s Fang,” said Gorgamesh. It will be nice to sleep in a bed.”

I agreed. “Indeed, I could use a proper bath too.”

“We all could,” he said.

“There is something on my mind,” I began, a little unsure of how to proceed.

“Go on,” said Gorgamesh.

“Well it appears we have an odd search party on our hands,” I said. “You have the four Masters of the Sword and their followers, plus you have a Knot of your own soldiers. Why the scholars, Hab and Tamor? And why the Royal Sicar? I see no need for them?”

“Perhaps the need hasn’t arisen as yet,” replied Gorgamesh cryptically.

“You also have the King’s own Mason, Woodsman, and the Smith, complete with a travelling forge. What is it you expect to find up in the Dragon’s Teeth?”

Gorgamesh shrugged. “You are mistaken. I have brought *two* Masons, Woodsmen, and smiths. I have also brought the best two with a bow, spear, and wrestlers.”

“You appear to be ready for anything, though what that anything might actually turn out to be eludes me at present.” I was hoping he’d provide a clue. From the start they had been keeping things from me, all of them. From the Second Prince Krane, to King Koram, and now Gorgamesh it seemed.

“I also wonder how long you have been planning this search for Raven’s Roost?” I asked. I had hoped he would be honest with me, but he said nothing. “It is only now that the Second Prince is missing that this is now a search party. It would take a lot longer than a day or two to assemble such a party, no?”

“Ah, I see the Dragon’s Fang,” Gorgamesh said pointing, avoiding the subject.

“Yes,” I said. It cut an impressive appearance against the backdrop of the mountains behind. A single white spire arching slightly as it rose from the horizon. “It truly looks like the tooth of some great beast.”

“Yes, like a dragon?” asked Gorgamesh.

“Have you ever seen a dragon?” I asked, knowing the answer.

“Myth only, I presume,” replied Gorgamesh.

“Now perhaps,” I said. “Once, perhaps not.”

“You’ve seen them then?” asked Gorgamesh.

I shrugged. “Perhaps. I am not the only one who can keep secrets.”

Gorgamesh chuckled. “Hit, Defender. Well said.”

But instead of opening up, he left off.

As the tower grew tall before us Gorgamesh spoke. “You will be entering the fortress of the Dragon’s Fang, gateway to our land and one of Ishalem’s most spectacular possessions. And also one of it’s most private. Outsiders are not usually granted access. Captain Pitar is upset you are being allowed to spend an evening under his auspicious roof. Do not cross him. You would do well to stick close to quarters when left on your own. Stray but a little and...” he let the thought hang.

I nodded, suddenly very curious about what secrets the Dragon’s Fang held. It appeared Ishalem was full of secrets. Secrets I hoped to learn, needed to in fact. Hopefully without losing my head.

Chapter 8

Gorgamesh was right. The Dragon's Fang was impressive. And by Captain Pitar's icy welcome I might be better served camping outside its walls.

The pass that the Dragon's Fang protected cut through the rock of the rugged mountains, leaving high, smooth walls to either side and so narrow, wagons must travel single file.

The fortress was a single spire that seemed to have sprouted from the very earth it sought to protect. It stood between two high stonewalls that spanned the width of the narrow pass on each side, north and south. It was the gateway into and out of Ishalem, the only way through the Dragon's Teeth, that treacherous mountain range that sheltered Ishalem from the rest of the outside world. Once inside the wall there were several smaller structures, barracks and stables and workshops and even a small inn. The Dragon's Fang tried to appear as any other town, but the spire itself ruined the effort.

I said it sprouted from the very earth, yet that pales in comparison to the reality of its magnificence. It was a single rock shooting upward from the ground. Not carved, no. This stone was Grown, magically. It curved slightly, resembling that fang it was named for, widest at its base and narrowing to a definite point high in the sky. At its base it occupied several acres of land, blocking the pass. The only way through is actually entering on one side and exiting on the other. The pass itself was a long, narrow, high-walled canyon that allowed only a few horses to walk abreast. It twisted and turned as it wound through the mountains. There were perches carved into the canyon walls at intervals along the way where soldiers could sit, bows at the ready to rain down upon an enemy that thought to force the pass. Of course a person or several persons could make their way through the mountains around the fortress unseen, but the terrain was difficult. A large force would only come through the pass or circle leagues around the mountains to try and enter the valley.

We were welcomed into the walled yard by an older man in uniform as servants scurried about holding reins and helping the travel weary dismount.

“Good journey Gorgamesh,” said the man, one hand outstretched in welcome while the other rested on his considerable midsection.

“Good welcome Captain Pitar,” replied Gorgamesh amicably grasping forearms. “I see the duties of the Dragon’s Fang continue to weigh heavily upon you,” he teased with a pat to his own midsection.

Captain Pitar jovially responded with a rub of his significant belly saying, “Ah, the sacrifices we make to serve our lord and land.” That got a chuckle from everyone.

Pitar welcomed the scholars next and then the Masters of the Sword, though he stopped after Bandar and said, “What of Katuru? I heard he was to accompany you?”

Willham’s gaze flickered my way, but Gorgamesh said, “It appears Katuru has slunk off in the night after a hard lesson rather than returning to see the wisdom of his folly.”

I slid out of my saddle and untied Katuru’s sword. “His blade made the journey,” I said and offered it to Captain Pitar. “You should keep it until he comes to claim it.”

Pitar reached for the blade with a disdainful look for me. “And you are?” he asked.

“I am Varek Hai,” I said with a short bow.

“I know Katuru well,” he said, nodding to acknowledge my bow before hefting the sword, adding, “and I think he would sooner give up his hand than leave this sword in another’s. How come you to have it?”

I didn’t wish to embarrass Katuru more, especially in front of someone who perhaps had a great deal of respect for him. Gorgamesh took the issue from my lips.

“He is the instructor of the hard lesson Captain,” said Gorgamesh. “He is the Defender King Koram has asked to accompany us.”

“Well met Defender,” said Pitar handing the sword to another. While he nodded amicably his tone belied his words.

I waited as Pitar welcomed the rest of the party and then we entered the Dragon’s Fang. I had passed through the Dragon’s Fang on my way to Ishalem, weeks ago. As a lone traveller I was only allowed through the tunnel connecting the pass to the other side. Now I was actually inside the fortress and as amazing as it was from the outside, it was

far more so on the inside. Everything was of the same piece of polished white stone. Stairs and niches, banisters and pillars, all Grown of a single piece of stone, and all more ornately designed than the finest mason could imagine. In fact, before I was led off to my room I saw both Master Masons running their fingers over every fine detail with reverence and awe etched plainly on their faces. We were told to wash the dirt from the road and meet in a candle mark in the Great Hall for a welcome and farewell feast all in one.

The foyer we entered had half a dozen archways, each but one with a staircase leading up. As Nesral and I were led up one, I noticed Senka carrying a bundle through another archway off to my right, following Bandar. Again, I could only see her eyes, but they met my gaze and I could almost imagine a fierce pride, and then something else. Did they soften? She turned and the moment was gone. I allowed myself to be led upstairs.

It took a Grand Master of considerable ability to grow something as simple and as small as a chair from stone. To think of the power behind the spell to create this immense fortress, I was amazed. I didn't think there was a person alive today who could truly appreciate what this fortress represented. The closest perhaps were the two Master Masons. They may never look at their own work the same again.

I washed the dust from my head and hands and changed into clean breaches and shirt and headed downstairs. I found Nesral waiting nervously for my arrival. A servant met us in the foyer and led us through the one arch without a stair. It was a long, straight hallway and had several passages branching off to either side. We travelled the hallway to its end, where it debouched into the Great Hall. It was a large, round room with tables

in a circular design, and five levels up. Starting at the outer edge and parted in different intervals on each level, so one would have to walk a quarter circle to reach another part in the tables to reach the next level up. At the center of the room stood another large stone structure. From where I stood it looked like some kind of twisted trunk of a wasted tree sprouting from a rocky outcropping. Curiously, the two scholars were up there studying it closely.

Nesral said, "Looks familiar, doesn't it?"

"Disturbingly so," I replied.

"What do you think of the Dragon's Fang?" asked Gorgamesh who had come in behind me.

"Impressive," I said, "Though I'm afraid I do it little justice. The strength in magic it must have taken to Grow this entire structure is truly awe-inspiring."

"Come then," he said and entered the spiraling tables to head to its center above. "You must see the heart of it all." He pointed to the twisted bole of stone and said, "The scroll Defender. It has its own...allure. Come."

As we wound our way up, each level getting closer I could see more clearly the marvel before me. As I gazed, the center of the room was eerily similar to the Dragon's Heart back in Ishalem. What I took for a tree was in fact a scroll. It came up from the center of the room and twisted around twice. What I thought was the rocky outcropping was actually a perfectly formed egg that had been split open into five perfect pieces and from the egg sprouted the twisted scroll. Like the Dragon's Heart, after it was split apart. It was a hand span in width and the words on the scroll were etched perfectly. I could almost feel the magic pulsating from the scroll.

“Read it,” urged Gorgamesh. The two scholars nodded and stepped back, giving me free access.

I stepped up and went to the beginning. It read:

Searching for the Dragon’s Lair
 A task the gifted only dare
 Rise and march from Dragon’s Fall
 Head held high and standing tall
 March West and North and West again
 A treacherous path you must attain
 To Raven’s Roost you first arrive
 Lucky those who leave alive
 Trust not the Thought your eyes may see
 Believe in only Memory
 Here the black of night
 Is on the right
 The white of day
 Is gone astray

The first of four you must endure
 Is to cross the vaunted Dragon Moor
 The Raven knows the way

The second are the Anakim

Progress here is likely grim

The Raven knows the way

Third is barred by beautiful breast

Flowing hair and feathery crest

The Raven knows the way

Fourth and final on the Dragon's Isle

The Dragon's Lair, the Nargun's pile

The Raven knows the way

“Astounding,” I whispered. “It is similar to the Dragon's Heart scroll, but contains more. Has this always been here?” I asked.

“Indeed,” agreed Hab and Tamor together. They shared a look, and I felt an unspoken agreement to not answer my question.

“Have you ever seen its like before?” asked Hab.

“Do you know what it means?” asked Tamor.

I shrugged. “You are the scholars. Far better equipped to parse these words than I, a mere soldier.”

“Not any mere soldier,” said Gorgamesh. “A Defender who wears the ring and wields the sword. One who may have seen such magic as it happened.”

He was right to a certain extent. “I have seen many feats of magic, some fantastic, some terrible to behold. Nothing quite like this Dragon’s Fang and this scroll. As for the words,” I reread them and said, “I can only guess at what they might mean.

“Please,” urged Hab. “Favor us with your guess.”

“Well first, it appears to be directions,” I explained. “Much like the scroll back in Ishalem, it is instructions on how to get to Raven’s Roost.”

“Very good,” said Tamor. “We agree on that much anyway.”

“Well, if you read it right, than there are four obstacles one must navigate. The Raven knows the way,” I commented. “I imagine it means the Raven must be consulted on how to navigate these...obstacles.”

“You may be correct,” murmured Hab, feathering his beard.

“Of course he’s right,” argued Tamor. “How else would you read that? But what of these...obstacles you say?”

I was curious now and peered closer at the words. “There is the Dragon Moor. Probably a lake of some sort. It gets confusing after that,” I said. “I do not know what the Anakim are, and the third is deliberately vague. ‘Beautiful breast, flowing hair and feathery crest’,” I read. “Something of beauty, a bird perhaps?”

“Excellent deduction,” exclaimed Tamor.

“Our thoughts exactly!” agreed Hab.

“What of the last?” asked Gorgamesh.

“Well the last references the Dragon’s Lair and a Nargun’s pile,” I said. “I’ve no idea what it means, but it may refer to some kind of climb one must make to reach the Dragon’s Eye, but not before dealing with a Dragon?”

“Yes,” said Tamor. “We seem to agree on these points. The Raven knows the way.” He rubbed his beard thoughtfully. “The Raven holds the key.”

Hab nodded. “I agree. It is the Raven that holds the answers in how to pass these challenges, overcome these obstacles if you will, and attain the Dragon’s Eye.”

“That’s if you believe the Dragon’s Eye actually exists,” said Gorgamesh.

“It is real,” I said. “Or was. I don’t know what happened to it.”

“Grand Master Carmodan is the one who made the Dragon’s Fang. It would follow that he made this scroll, left these words,” said Tamor.

“Have you thought of consulting the Citadel?” I asked. “Surely the Council will have an opinion. If Carmodan did create the Dragon’s Fang, and this scroll, they might even have his own explanation in plain words.”

The two scholars eyed each other nervously.

“What of your predecessors?” I asked. “Surely someone over the years has posed the question to the Citadel?”

Hab cleared his throat nervously. “This is a rather new discovery,” he said.

“New?” I said in disbelief. “The Dragon’s Fang has been in your possession for generations. How can you say this is a new discovery?”

Tamor said, “The scroll was within the Dragon’s Egg. Only thirteen moons have passed since it, uh, since, um,”

Hab interjected, “Since it hatched. Say it Tamor. The egg hatched and from it came the scroll.”

“Wait,” I said, “You mean this was revealed on the previous midsummer night?”

He turned to me. “Yes, so you see, it is only recently that we have seen the scroll and being a distant and well guarded land we felt like it was ours to...decipher.”

“You mean keep for your self,” I said.

They fidgeted only slightly before bristling a bit.

“We had plans to report our findings to the Citadel after the First Prince Joram returned with the Dragon’s Eye.” said Tamor haughtily.

“Why was the First Prince sent when surely you agree that a wizard must be the one to find the Dragon’s Eye?” I asked. “Is the First Prince a wizard?”

“No,” they said together, before Tamor continued. “It is all very simple. The egg, uh, hatched on the First Prince’s twentieth name day. We took that as a sign that he was to recover the lost jewel. Nothing says that the Gifted *must* be the one to find the stone. We discussed this at some length and felt that one with courage and resources should be able to pass these obstacles. The scroll never speaks to magic being necessary to reach the Dragon’s Eye.”

Hab went on. “Our interpretation is that the words were meant to discourage those who have no claim to it.”

“And the First Prince has a claim?” I asked.

“Well,” said Tamor, “he has as much as any in this land. He is the First Prince and rightful heir to the throne of Ishalem. He is bestowed with the Mother’s Grace and who better than one of our own to retrieve it.”

“Ishalem has been entrusted with the Dragon’s Fang for a reason,” continued Hab. “We believe the Dragon’s Eye is ours to find.”

Seeing my expression sour he added, “Once he returns with it, then we will, well, I’m sure the King will do what he must. For the Citadel of course.”

I didn’t really believe the King had plans to turn the Dragon’s Eye over to the Citadel. “I imagine you would,” I said sardonically.

A bell rang, clear and bold, a signal for everyone to sit.

“Come,” said Hab and Tamor together, ushering me to a seat nearby.

Hab said jovially, “Let us break bread and share ale and discuss the marvels we shall see on our road ahead.”

Tamor’s enthusiasm was tempered though, saying, “And hope we have the courage, fortitude, and resources to survive.”

I now fully understood why the search party was constructed as it was. They did not know what the words meant and wanted to be ready for any circumstance.

The food was spicy and aromatic. Goat and chicken were the primary platters passing up and down the tables. There were several hard, pungent cheeses that I did not care for as much. There were fruits I recognized and others I didn’t, all palatable, if not pleasing to the eye. The ale they drank was strong and men were free in washing down their meal with it. The night was a raucous event. Tomorrow morning’s departure was celebrated as the beginning of a great adventure. One that would bring great acclaim to Ishalem and those warriors who were departing were regaled as heroes as though their return was a simple formality. That their First Prince had disappeared and we were likely to bring back his bones – if we came back at all – was a subject never broached. That the Second Prince might also be in danger ahead of us seemed not to concern anyone either.

I glanced at Gorgamesh who nodded soberly before turning back to his conversation with Pitar. Perhaps those two were not so caught up in the revelry after all. They let their men have their moment, but their reserved countenances spoke to their own feelings on the matter. I spent my time eating and gazing at the scroll, wondering what the Raven might tell us.

“I wonder what the Raven will have to say?” said Nesral.

“Whatever it says, we should pay very close attention. It may end up saving lives, our own not the least,” I replied.

“I think I will turn in,” said Nesral pushing his empty platter away. “These men look forward to grand adventure with not a care for the danger ahead. The fools are losing themselves in their cups as if they have just returned with the Dragon’s Eye.”

“I have no desire to lose myself in my cup this night,” I said. “I will leave as well.” I pushed away and with one last look at the scroll I followed Nesral out.

My room was spare, a simple affair, and one level higher than Nesral who was housed with the servants. Mine was meant for a traveller of little significance, but suited me fine. It had a bed with a straw mattress that was comfortable, and even had a small feather pillow. One curtained window overlooked the courtyard below. To the right of the window stood a washstand and small mirror. To the left was a small writing table and chair both of sturdy wood, an oil lamp and flint its only decoration. My swords and pack were in a heap on the floor beside it.

The room was dark as I entered. A sliver of moonlight sliced through a slit in the curtain. I paused, door half open, letting the torchlight from the hall dance around me into the room. There are times when one feels the presence of someone or something.

This was one of those times. I could barely discern the writing table in the darkness to my left and the sliver of moonlight sliced past the washstand to split the bed in two pieces. As my eyes adjusted to the gloom I could see no one. That didn't mean I was alone.

“Come,” I said quietly. “There is no need to hide. Let us light the lamp and have a good look at one another.”

I paused, left hand still on the door handle, every muscle tensed. I knew not who or what was here. There were two places to hide, behind the door or behind the curtain. I would choose the door if I were lying in ambush. I gripped the handle of my knife, but did not draw the blade. I thought the curtain twitched, but the shadows danced in the flickering torchlight and it was difficult to be sure.

No one responded. I counted several heartbeats of silence and then in one swift motion threw my shoulder into the door. The heavy wooden door slammed harmlessly into the wall. I pulled my dagger free and threw it at the window. Muted by the curtain it bounced off stone behind it and clattered on the floor.

“Hold!” whispered a voice in my ear.

I felt pressure on my inner left thigh. I tensed but did not move.

“Two ways for this to end,” the voice whispered. I could feel the hot breath just behind my ear. “I slice sideways,” and I felt the pressure of a blade on my inner thigh. “And you bleed out after cutting that vessel in your leg, or I slice up,” and now I felt the blade rise uncomfortably into my crotch. “And you live life as a eunuch. Tell me, which would you prefer?”

“There is a third way,” I said.

“Do tell,” whispered the voice seductively.

I slowly turned, unafraid. The knife slid away. “You put the knife down and we talk,” I said.

Senka stood before me, defiance in her eyes. And something else I recognized.

“What makes you think I’m not here to kill you?” she cooed. A tigress cooing is something to behold.

“Two reasons,” I shrugged. “Had you wanted me dead you would not have said a word. Instead you would be slipping away right now while I drowned in a pool of my own blood.”

“And the second,” she said smiling coyly. It was the tigress again, and I the wounded prey she was playing with before eating.

I lay a hand on her cheek and pulled her lips to mine and kissed her. It was a soft meeting of lips. I thought she might pull away, but instead her hand tangled in my braided hair and pulled my lips hard against hers. She pushed me in and kicked the door shut with her foot. In that sliver of moonlight our passion flared. I don’t remember exactly how we undressed in that silvery glow, but in moments we were naked and struggling against one another on the bed. First, I on top of her and then her flipping me aggressively over and mounting me. The tigress again.

Afterwards we lay in each other’s arms, she stroking my chest and I twisting a curl of her hair on my finger. She whispered to me, “How could you be sure I wouldn’t kill you for kissing me?”

I yawned, tired from the day and the exertion. “Only two reasons to visit me here,” I said. “And since you didn’t kill me...”

I let the thought hang unspoken. After a few minutes I yawned again and asked, “How did you get from the window to behind me so quickly?”

She tsked and said sweetly, “And you would have me reveal my secrets? After one night of lovemaking?” she asked with a yawn of her own. “No my dear. It was good, but not that good.”

I chuckled and drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 9

She was gone when I awoke. I met Gorgamesh in the courtyard where the men were mustering for our departure.

“Katuru arrived after you turned in,” he said.

I shrugged. “Did he get his sword?”

Gorgamesh nodded. “He left shortly thereafter. I asked him if he were coming with us, but he cannot forget his shame. In his mind, he has been dishonored and will likely look to redeem himself. Vengeance is his goal I’m afraid.”

“He will try to challenge me again?” I asked.

“No,” said Gorgamesh after a pause. “He will come at you I’m certain, but the how may not be honorable. He will strike like a snake in the grass. I tell you this so you will be on your guard.”

I shrugged. “Then it will not end well for him.”

“Blood will flow,” said Gorgamesh. “The ground will drink deep before this adventure is through,” he said with resignation.

With little fanfare we exited the Dragon’s Tooth and headed on our way. I rode at Gorgamesh’s side, Nesral as always right beside. We were near the front as the company followed a winding trail up into the mountains. North and west we made our way. Scouts were ahead of us, but no one anticipated an enemy attack. We were tracking our quarry. Our enemy was the terrain and distance we must cover while trying to find something hidden for generations.

Days passed, and our road became nothing more than game trails heading in the direction we hoped would bring us to Raven’s Roost. The one constant was a snowy mountain peak off in the distance, often shrouded in clouds, but sometimes, on a clear morning, it loomed large and ominous.

We found signs of others who passed before us. Campsites abandoned several moons ago. On the fifth day we encountered a fresh campsite however. It was only a few days old, and small, perhaps only one person. Hab and Tamor were encouraged, and even I had to agree it was likely the Second Prince Krane. My ring was pulling me forward and in the same direction as the trail we followed. We were high up in the mountains now and the path led us sharply up toward that snowy peak. I noticed the nervous glances among the men, directed at that snowy mountaintop. Gone was the brashness of the feast within the Dragon’s Fang.

“It is the Widow’s Walk,” said Gorgamesh, sensing my curiosity. “The men know of it from tales at their grandfather’s knee. It is a pass no one dares for fear of where it leads.”

“And where is that?” I asked.

“No one knows for certain,” he replied. “The land beyond is said to be haunted. Tree sprites and ghouls and creatures of dread and evil live there if the tales are to be believed. I suspect there will be many dangers we will encounter, and I would not be surprised if some of those tales prove true. Until recently, none but the King’s own hunters have returned, and they only come with us now at our King’s urging.”

“What did they see?” I asked.

“Nothing they wish to talk about,” he replied. “They say the trees themselves have eyes and the animals are wicked and ill tempered, even the squirrels.”

I chuckled. “Am I to worry about squirrels assailing me now?”

Gorgamesh shrugged. “I would worry about everything once we cross that pass. And I would stake my life that what we find will be things we shall never forget.”

“And you are sure that this is the way to Raven’s Roost?” I asked.

Hab said, “We are as certain as we can be without having been there before that it must hold Raven’s Roost.”

“Yes,” agreed Tamour, “North and west and north again leads one only to this pass and this pass has been avoided for fear of what is on the other side of the mountain.”

“It logically follows that Raven’s Roost must be there,” finished Hab.

“What of the King’s Huntsman, Parrouni?” I asked. “You have him with you, no?”

Gorgamesh said, “He accompanied the First Prince. I have another, Hunstman Degou with us. He is Parrouni’s equal and friend. He has not made the pass, but has discussed at length with Parrouni the path we must follow to find Raven’s Roost.”

“I should like to hear from him,” I remarked.

“We will,” assured Gorgamesh. “Once we clear Widow’s Walk, we shall rely upon him quite a bit.”

The Widow’s Walk was a high narrow pass over the top of the mountain. It was little more than a ledge with enough room for a cart, but it was broken and tilted, so one felt one might slide off into the abyss to our right. It forced us to a near crawl with all the wagons in our train. The wind howled and as we crested the pass a storm blew in. Snow began falling, tiny flakes at first, and then growing larger until they whipped about in a near blanket of white that blotted out the very air in front of our noses. The ground became treacherous, as horses and men slipped constantly. We pushed on as darkness began to fall with the snow.

“We must continue,” said Gorgamesh to one of his men complaining of the cold. “We cannot camp on this ledge. We would freeze to death up here.”

“I agree,” I said, “though we may freeze anyway.”

It was nearly the middle of the night when the pass finally gave way to forest. The snow was ebbing now too, as we continued now on a downward path. We lost whatever trail might have been before us under the snowfall, but to a man, we wanted to find a safe spot before stopping. Soon we came upon a mountain stream, partially frozen over and gurgling contentedly through a small clearing in a wood of stunted pine.

“We camp here,” ordered Gorgamesh, and the men quickly set about their tasks. Fires were started and tents erected and men shook off the cold as they huddled around cook fires and ate quietly. It appeared no one wished to talk about where they were now. No one but Gorgamesh that is.

He called the men around him. “We have entered that part of the Teeth that few have come to in many a lifetime,” he began. “We must have a care to what we do, what we say, and especially,” he paused for effect as his gaze scanned over his men. “Especially for what we might find. Disturb nothing that needs not to be disturbed. Take care of every step and every breath. We are no longer home. Be strong. Be brave. Be smart. Do as I say and I will see us through this and by the next moon you will regale your family with tales of your bravery.”

The speech buoyed the spirits of his men and they set about camp with a renewed vigor, and a caution one might expect around the unknown. I thought it a good speech, though in truth I wasn’t so certain there would be much regaling.

Gorgamesh read my mind. “They will be lucky to live through the next fortnight,” he said for my ears only. “We all will.” He looked about the shadowy clearing and into the night beyond. “The very air seems different,” he said. “As though it was meant for someone – or something – other than us.”

I nodded. “There are things in this wood that resent our presence,” I said. I could feel through my ring the dissonant pulsing of life. “I think our numbers protect us to some degree, but you were wise to caution your men. Things here are not what they seem.”

“What do you believe?” he asked, genuine curiosity in his voice.

“I cannot explain exactly,” I said, “but a rock may not be just a rock, nor a tree a tree. Even the squirrels,” I said with a glance toward the trees, “would have us leave,” I finished quietly. It felt like the Great Wood in that magic was all around. But where the Great Wood was the Mother’s blessed realm, this was something darker. Maybe not evil,

but something with ill intent. It felt as though we were intruders and that at any moment we might be set upon as such and sent on our way back or worse, left for dead. I said nothing of this to Gorgamesh.

A cry from the west edge of camp set us running, swords drawn. I reached the tree line where a soldier stood over another, lying in a pool of blood.

“What happened?” asked Gorgamesh.

The soldier looked up and said, “It is Hampoor. He is wounded. He was...he was attacked by...” his voice trailed off in apoplexy.

“By what!” urged Gorgamesh. “Come Jardin,” he urged. “This is not your first time off your mother’s apron strings. What happened?”

“It was a giant sand crab,” said Jardin. “We were looking for firewood and it charged from the brush, stung him and started to drag him off. I stabbed it. I think I wounded it, but I’m not sure. It slipped back into the wood.”

I could see Jardin was visibly shaken. I had no idea what a sand crab was though.

“What is a sand crab?” I asked.

“They are scorpions,” said Hab materializing behind us with the rest of a crowd. Most of the soldiers had come running when they heard the shout. “They are common in the desert, but I would not expect to see one here. And they are small, usually a hand span in length. Large enough to drag a mouse perhaps, but not a full grown man. What really happened?” he asked Jardin.

Jardin turned to Hab and said, “You call me a liar? I will stake my honor on what I saw. It was as tall as my waist and its tail reared higher than my head. Look!” he said, pointing to Hampoor. “The wound from its stinger is plain to see.”

We looked. Hampoor was unconscious and his chest was barely moving with breath. His belly was a bloody mess. It looked like he had been stabbed with something larger than any sword I had ever seen. There was no point in trying to save him.

I knelt down and lifted his tunic. The wound oozed blood, and was perfectly round.

“I have seen men impaled on stakes before with wounds like this,” I said. “Usually, the stake is still in them or can be found nearby.”

“There are no stakes here,” said Nesral.

Jardin spoke to Gorgamesh. “I lunged in and slashed the monster and it released him. It spun and tried to sting me too, but I jumped back in time. I must have hurt it, because it skittered away into the trees. By the Mother and the sun in the sky, I tell you the truth.”

“I believe you,” I said.

Gorgamesh nodded. “I as well Jardin. Get yourself cleaned up and back to camp.” He turned to Willham and said, “Guards all around in pairs, no one goes anywhere by themselves. It appears we are prey in this wood. We must make ourselves prickly and hard to catch.”

Hampoor shuddered and wheezed and then gave up his spirit.

“Someone bury Hampoor,” ordered Gorgamesh and walked away.

The men were on their guard that night. Word spread of the giant scorpion and Hampoor’s death and by morning the story was it was a pack of wild scorpions that had attacked and killed him.

Yet still, the next morning dawned bright. The sun's heat warmed our bodies, though not our spirits and the men broke camp with nervous chuckles for the previous night's fear. Daylight lent a certain a sense of normalcy and did not offer the specter of uncertainty the darkness held. Still, it was difficult to forget Hampoor was dead. Our march was dreary and fearful, as the strange forest seemed to threaten at every turn.

It was no surprise we made good time as we wound our way steadily down into a wide, long valley. By midday we had shucked our warmer clothes in the newfound warmth. Green returned in grassy swaths and flowers bloomed, strange and beautiful. Even the squirrels scampered as squirrels do, and by evening, all dread seemed to dissipate.

Our peace did not last.

Our trail funneled us down into a long ravine that twisted out of sight. As we neared the start our scouts came galloping back. They had a harried look, but also one of confusion.

"What word?" asked Gorgamesh signaling a halt.

The men looked at one another as if not knowing what to say.

"Out with it!" ordered Gorgamesh angrily.

"There is something down there," said one.

"Yes," agreed the other.

"Well what then?" asked Gorgamesh impatiently.

"It is hard to say," said the first.

"Loaren," said Gorgamesh sternly, "You have scouted for me for how long?"

Never have I known you to dissemble. What have you seen?"

“I don’t know sir,” replied Loaren. “I believe them creatures of some kind. Small in stature, and pale, though I did not see any quite clearly.

The second scout spoke up. “Loaren speaks the truth of it. We saw these creatures hiding in the rocks to either side, though they appear to have gone to ground.”

“How many?” asked Gorgamesh.

“Hard to say,” replied Loaren. “I saw only a few before they disappeared. They may have fled before our numbers or they may simply be hiding and waiting.”

“And you Tragar?” Gorgamesh asked of the second scout.

“They are small and furtive sir,” he reported. “I don’t know what they intend, but they have either hidden or fled, there is no way to be certain.”

Gorgamesh thought for a moment, gazing intently at the path ahead.

“Our way lies ahead,” I said, feeling the pull of my ring forward. Though I felt the pull, my ring didn’t necessarily alert me of danger. Many times I have followed the pull of my ring into mayhem. “We should proceed with caution until we are certain we are safe, but there appears no other route we might take.”

“Gather the soldiers,” ordered Gorgamesh. “How narrow does the way get?”

“It is wide enough for ten horses,” said Loaren. “It runs steady and straight for about four furlongs before opening up into a wide valley of open fields and flowers.”

“Yes,” agreed Tragar. “Lots of flowers. Looks as peaceful a place as any I’ve ever seen.”

“I want the servants and their train in the center, single file,” ordered Gorgamesh.

“And I want Willham and your Fist with me at the point.” Willham nodded and

Gorgamesh turned to Kaofouri. “Kaofouri, take your Fist and guard the rear.” Kaofouri

nodded and spun his horse and rode off to obey. To Bandar Gorgamesh said, “Bandar, I want you to string your Fist to either side and protect the flanks. Our people our strong, but they are not soldiers. Guide them back if we are attacked and outnumbered.”

The soldiers formed up, leaving the rest of our party to pull wagons and carts tightly together with the pack animals to the middle. Servants clutched knives or staves, clubs and even a few swords, but they did not have the look of fighters. If we were attacked, I feared for their safety. Yet what choice did we have?

When the men were ready Gorgamesh signaled them forward, he at their head and I by his side. Nesral loosened his sword in its scabbard, leaving the sword I loaned him strapped to his saddle behind him. He shrugged at my glance. “We haven’t practiced on horseback yet,” was all he said.

We didn’t go three strides before one of the strangest creatures I have ever seen leapt upon a rocky outcropping at the head of the ravine. It was short, perhaps in might reach a head above my waist in height. It was a pale gray, as though it had never seen the sun, though the light of day did not appear to affect it any. It was human like in form, in that it had two arms and two legs and a head with two eyes a nose and mouth. Yet its eyes were widely set and large, with big black orbs for pupils. Its nose was long and hooked, gnarled like an old branch, and its long pointy ears sprouted from low on its head. A tuft of wiry black hair sprouted from the top of its head. It was garbed in raggedy cloth breeches that were frayed below its knobby knees, but wore a fine leather vest. Completing the contrast was a large silver chain that sparkled gloriously, dangling from its sinewy neck. It wore a silver crown crusted in multicolored gemstones. The silver crown was tarnished and dull, as if it never felt a rag rubbed against it.

“Halt ye travellers!” it shouted. Its voice was pitched high like that of a child, though its wrinkly face spoke of years beyond most mortals. It raised its arms up, one hand grasping an old branch, the other splaying long fingers wide. “Welcome to the sacred—oops!” it squealed as it slipped from its perch and tumbled to the ground before us. The tarnished crown rolled to a stop at its wide splayed feet.

It jumped up spryly, belying its gnarled appearance, brushed itself off and scooped up its tarnished crown and settled it crookedly on its large head before continuing as though nothing had happened.

“Welcome to the sacred valley of Hurg! Are you friend or foe?” it asked.

“What sort of Mother-forsaken creature are you?” asked Willham.

The creature turned its gaze on Willham. It might have been a sneer or it might have been a smile, it was difficult to tell but its tone was unctuous. “Mother-forsaken? No, not that, surely. Perhaps forgotten, yes, but not forsaken. No never. The Mother provides.”

It turned back to Gorgamesh and said, “She provides us many things... and guests from time to time, yes she does. Would you care to answer my question?”

“We come in search of friends who passed before us,” replied Gorgamesh. “If you have let them pass without harm, then we are friends.”

“Many come to the sacred valley of Hurg,” replied the creature. “All friends leave of their own free will and without the harming of a single hair on one’s head,” said the creature, which then cackled mightily as if at its own joke.

Gorgamesh dismounted and stepped forward. “My name is Gorgamesh,” he said. “Who are you and what can you tell me of my friends?”

The creature bowed low and said, “Your highness, welcome to the sacred valley of Hurg. As to your questions,” he paused with another sneer for Willham, “I am a Gnome. I am Hurg, King of the Gnomes. Welcome to my valley.”

“I am neither king, nor royalty,” replied Gorgamesh tersely. “I am sent by my King to find our friends. Perhaps you have seen them?”

The gnome looked confused. “You are not a king?” he questioned. His demeanor changed, and he began dry washing his hands. “You have the most, the most,” his whole body started to quiver as if overcome with excitement. “The most wondrous crown,” it stammered staring almost hungrily at the silver circlet and medallion on Gorgamesh’s forehead. Hurg actually started to reach for it before pulling its hands back. It closed its eyes and the quivering subsided. When it opened its eyes it appeared to have mastered its self. “Well, King or no, you are welcome in my beautiful valley. Most welcome indeed,” he said casting a last furtive glance at the medallion. “You shall be my guests and rest for a while in her pleasant fields, yes? You shall all rest!” it proclaimed waving its stick high and over our party. “Yes, you look weary and have travelled far. Come! Come!” it urged and spun on its heel and began walking. It tripped clumsily and fell forward. The gnarled branch broke into pieces as Hurg fell and when Hurg arose, it picked up the pieces and began muttering under its breath. Hurg was trying to put the branch together, but after a few hopeless attempts it cast it aside.

“Come!” it said with a toothy grin, as if nothing unusual happened and scampered ahead.

Our party did not move and Gorgamesh stood there staring at Hurg as he trundled along. Finally Hurg turned and realized we had not moved to follow and came scampering back.

“My Lord,” he said quizzically. “Why do you hesitate?”

“I must know of my friends,” replied Gorgamesh.

“Oh, if they came,” said Hurg with a mischievous smile, “they most assuredly left, and in fine fettle too, I’m certain.”

“You say if,” said Gorgamesh, “yet I must be certain.”

Hurg studied Gorgamesh for a moment and then said, “Well, tell me then, who are your friends and I will tell you of their visit.”

“They would have come separately,” said Gorgamesh, choosing his words carefully. “The first would have been Joram, a young man of twenty summers. He would have been travelling with twenty or so of our people. Joram is tall, olive skinned with dark hair and eyes.”

Hurg rubbed his chin with a bony finger and thumb. After a brief pause he asked, “And the second?”

“The second would have been alone or with another, we are uncertain,” replied Gorgamesh. “He goes by the name Krane and is a tall lad of seventeen summers. Dark hair and eyes, yet slight of build.”

“Yes! Yes!” said Hurg gleefully. “I remember them well! They were here of course. Yes, the latter not two days ago and the former perhaps several moons ago.” He shuddered and said, “That one was not happy about his restful visit. No, not happy at all!”

“And why would he be unhappy?” asked Gorgamesh, eyes narrowing.

Hurg appeared not to notice the scrutiny and shrugged, saying, “I cannot say. He rested well, as all our guests do, and left, but he left with curses and slanderous words against us. Oh, Hurg was happy to see him leave, yes, happy indeed!”

“And the second?” asked Gorgamesh.

“Oh the lad,” he said with a smile. “He was blessed by the Mother and rested well indeed. He left with smiles and blessings upon us,” he said sadly.

I detected a note of disappointment. “You sound as though that is a bad thing,” I commented.

Hurg turned to me and shrugged again. “The Mother’s will is hers, and mine is mine. They do not always agree, yet I must respect the Mother, no?” he said cryptically.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Hurg gave me a strange look and said, “I mean what I say and I say what I mean. What else is there to explain?”

“You let them pass unharmed?” asked Gorgamesh.

Hurg gave an exasperated sigh and said, “Must I continue to repeat myself? Of course they left unharmed. They rested well and went on their way,” he said with a smile. He then added, “And a little lighter on their feet for their restful visit too.”

He cackled again as if at his own clever joke. It was disconcerting, but I didn’t detect a lie in his words. I wasn’t certain we were getting the entire truth, but I felt as though Hurg might be being honest with us. What choice did we have but to believe him?

Hunstman Degou rode up beside Gorgamesh and pitched his voice low. "I must caution you Gorgamesh. Parrouni has spoken of these Gnomes and has warned me against trusting them."

Gorgamesh said, "What has he told you?"

"Not much, I'm afraid," he replied. "Only that they are not to be trusted."

"Why would he not say?" I asked. "Surely he would have something to tell you if he warns against them?"

"Yes," agreed Gorgamesh. "There must be something."

Degou looked uncomfortable as he replied, "I do not know any more than that. I asked him the same as well my lord. He refused to answer, only telling me not to trust them."

"And yet he returned unscathed?" asked Gorgamesh.

"Yes, unscathed, but not unaffected," replied Degou. "I believe something happened to him. Something that might affect his honor perhaps, but not his health."

"He was embarrassed then," I said. "And unwilling to admit his own folly." I thought of Katuru. "It seems a common failing of the men of Ishalem."

Degou bristled, but did not reply.

Gorgamesh turned to Hurg. "What choice do we have but to believe you?" said Gorgamesh, echoing my thoughts. He climbed upon his horse and said to Hurg, "Lead us on Hurg, King of the Gnomes. But be warned. Should you harm a single hair on anyone's head I shall take yours from your neck as payment."

Hurg looked aghast. “Oh my Lord, no, you should not have reason to fear for a single hair. Not for all of your hair, no. Please, come and rest for a while before you follow after your friends.”

And with that Hurg turned again and scuttled ahead.

Gorgamesh turned to Willham and said, “Eyes open and be ready for anything.”

Willham nodded and Gorgamesh heeled his horse forward, the rest of us following.

“What do you make of him?” asked Gorgamesh of me.

“I believe he speaks the truth,” I said cautiously. “Yet I don’t believe we get the whole of it from him.”

“I agree,” said Gorgamesh. “I only hope we do not learn the whole truth the hard way. Would that Parrouni had given us more,” he lamented.

Hurg scampered along, surprisingly agile, yet oddly clumsy, if that were possible. He would scamper over rocks and logs, yet trip over nothing. It was almost comical. Yet the whole time Hurg appeared happy and unaware of his ungainliness. At one point he stooped and picked up a gnarled and rotting branch and raised it high. “Yes!” he said to himself. “You will do nicely!” before continuing on.

The way was straight and pitched slightly down hill. The ravine walls were high and steep, covered in loose scree and scrub and would prove difficult to scale and impossible for horses and wagons. The only way out was back or forward. Now and again I spied one of those creatures following along atop the ravine on either side. Never showing themselves as more than a grey blur before disappearing behind a rock out of

sight. I could feel the tenseness in the soldiers, and even worried a little myself. Should they attack from the heights, we would be slaughtered. Yet an attack never came.

After a candle mark the ravine walls sloped away and we found ourselves overlooking a wide valley that stretched away. It was beautiful to look upon. The grass was knee high and dusted with bright purple and red flowers, strange and beautiful, and the lea rolled away out of sight, with the mountains in the distance providing a majestic backdrop to this peaceful valley.

“Who would have suspected such tranquility existed so deeply lost in the Dragon’s Teeth,” said Nesral.

Hurg cackled. “Yes, tranquil indeed! She is beautiful, is she not? Come! Come!” he urged. “A little further along and we can stop and rest those weary bones!”

I saw no sign of a village, or any dwellings of any kind. Not even a path through the meadow to indicate travel and perhaps a destination. We simply rode along. I noticed Hurg muttering to himself again, and he began shaking his newfound staff of brittle wood from side to side. It was curious, but I found myself distracted by the beauty of the place. The flowers were bright as if their colors were new to me and my nose began to clot with their heady aroma. Our line began to widen and horses were allowed to wander. I looked back and saw some of the men were actually starting to loll in the saddle.

Nesral yawned deeply next to me and said, “It is so very relaxing. Makes me wish for a pillow and a good soft bed of grass.”

“Yes,” cooed Hurg softly. “Rest. Rest in peace and worry not.”

I shook my head vigorously, trying to loose the cobwebs that were forming in my head and found myself yawning too. Something was tickling the back of my brain, scratching away at the little consciousness that remained. I realized I was slouching and forced myself to sit up straight. It took more energy than I imagined. I began to slump again almost immediately. I reached through my ring and was surprised to feel the presence of magic all around me. I saw Hurg's eyes narrow suspiciously at me. Perhaps it was the power of my ring, but I was gifted a moment of clarity and was alarmed.

Nesral slipped from his saddle and said, "Just a moment or two," before lying down. His horse stopped dutifully beside him.

I pulled a kerchief from my saddlebag and tied it around my face, covering my nose and mouth.

"Do not fight it," said Hurg.

I knew we were in trouble. Men were dismounting and lying down right where they were and some even fell from their saddles to lay still in the grass. Gorgamesh himself fell from his saddle. I called to him, but he only smiled. I turned Volare back the way we came and dug my heels sharply into his sides and with what little strength remained to me I clung to his neck and let him have his head.

I saw creatures like Hurg suddenly pop up from the tall grass and race after me, but heard Hurg shout, "Leave him be! He is blessed by the Mother!"

It was the last I remember before waking up, still clinging to Volare's neck as he stood at the mouth of the ravine. The cobwebs were gone now and I realized we were ambushed, but unlike any ambush I've ever seen. Hurg had somehow called upon magic to put our party to sleep, but to what end? I felt certain he meant us no harm, which

could only mean one other thing. I looked at the sun and was surprised to see it low on the horizon. I had been asleep for half the afternoon. I checked my things and satisfied all was in place I pulled the kerchief tight again around my mouth and nose and turning Volare around again I galloped back into the meadow.

I found Gorgamesh and the rest fast asleep in the meadow where I left them. I dismounted and checked on Gorgamesh first. Gently rousing him from what appeared a peaceful slumber, he awoke confused.

“What is it?” he asked. “Where am I?”

Then he remembered and sat bolt upright. “Stone fool I am,” he cursed and stood up and looked about. “Are they alive?” he asked.

“I believe so,” I said. “You are the first I roused.”

“What did that Mother-forsaken creature Hurg do?” he asked.

“I’m not sure exactly,” I said. “It was magic, that much I know.”

Gorgamesh rubbed his eyes and then ran his fingers across his head and said, “My diadem? It must have fallen off.” He then looked around in the grass, but to no avail.

“I don’t understand,” he said quizzically.

“I think I do,” I said. “Let’s rouse the others and see what else might be missing.”

“Ah,” said Gorgamesh, understanding. “The thief stole it. So that was its game then. Yes, let’s rouse the rest and see what price our trust in Hurg has cost us.”

We roused Nesral next who was equally confused, but he recovered quickly and began helping us with the others. In a short while we had the group up and Gorgamesh ordered them to quickly take stock and be ready to ride.

The men and servants were unmolested physically but Willham, Kaofouri, Bandar, Tamour and Hab all reported the same thing.

“We were robbed my lord,” said Tamour.

“Yes, we were, “ agreed Hab. “Yet it is a curious sort of thievery that has occurred.”

“Yes, curious,” concurred Tamour.

“Thievery is thievery,” said Gorgamesh angrily. “What could possibly be so curious about it?”

“Well,” said Tamour, “This Hurg, and apparently these gnomes have eyes only for silver.”

“Silver?” asked Gorgamesh.

“Yes,” replied Hab. “We have been stripped bare of anything silver. From buttons to forks, and of course the silver coins.”

“They didn’t touch the gold?” asked Gorgamesh.

“No,” said Willham. “My men had the gold. Perhaps they were afraid of one of us waking and striking them down and decided against it.”

Bandar bristled. “My men had the silver and they took it all,” he said, anger rising. “Does that mean they had no fear of mine? You insult me Willham.”

“Be easy Bandar,” said Gorgamesh. “This is curious indeed. What else was taken?”

“Nothing my lord,” said Kaofouri. “Food and supplies, wagons and carts, everything is as it was, that is to say, everything is there. It has all been picked through.

Including the gold,” he said with a stern look at Willham. “You failed to mention that your chest of gold was emptied, coins spilled about.”

Willham had the sense to look embarrassed.

“Why the silver?” asked Gorgamesh.

“You saw Hurg’s chain,” said Nesral. “And that tarnished silver crown. And you had to be blind not to see the greed in his eyes when he spoke of your diadem. These gnomes must value silver for some Mother-forsaken reason. We may never know why, but we can be thankful they didn’t take everything.”

“I think you are right Nesral,” I said. “Everyone is correct in their assumptions, with one exception. I don’t believe the gnomes are forsaken by the Mother at all.”

“What do you mean?” asked Gorgmaesh.

“You recall Hurg saying Krane was blessed by the Mother, right?” I asked. He nodded and I said, “Well those words don’t sound like someone at odds with the Mother, do they? And further, do you recall his disappointment regarding Krane? I believe Krane’s gift kept him safe somehow. Either they sensed it and respected it or perhaps they tried and his gift thwarted their attempt to steal from him.”

“Perhaps,” agreed Gorgamesh. “We may never know, but one thing is certain, if I see Hurg again, I shall take his head from his shoulders as payment for his crimes.”

I let it go. Gorgamesh, like all of Ishalem, was prideful and did not take the slightest of slights lightly. Stealing in Ishalem was not a slight affront and could cost a man his hand if caught.

When the party was finally ready Gorgamesh asked, “So where do we go now? There are no roads and no signs of our Princes.”

Tamour said, "I believe we must turn west again. The prophecy?"

"Yes," agreed Hab. "West and north and west again. We travelled west until we reached the Widow's Walk. That brought us due north over the mountain, and then down here. It follows logically that west would be the direction we must ride."

I reached through my ring and felt the pull westward. "I agree," I said. "I feel the Calling. West."

"Then west it is," ordered Gorgamesh and we struck off toward the setting sun. "Ware the gnomes and should you spy one, capture it. I would have answers if I can."

The ride through the meadow was easy and there were no incidents. No signs at all of Hurg or his gnomes. We came upon a forest as the sun dipped behind the mountains ahead and Gorgamesh ordered a halt.

"Full guard in shifts," he said, leaving the details in the capable hands of his men. "We ride at dawn."

The men were nervous camping at the end of this strange and magical meadow, and who could blame them. Curiously, once they lay down, they slept fitfully and without incident. We greeted the sun in high spirits and feeling refreshed. I could sense the relief in the men, and perhaps even a little gratefulness. All the silver in our party was taken, and in return we were given safe passage and a restful slumber; not a trade any would have made entering the meadow. But leaving, it now seemed a small price to pay.

Tragar came riding up as we were preparing to move.

"We found another campsite," he reported. "A score of men and horses, though old. Likely the First Prince rested there. It is just north of us, a half a league. There are fresher signs in the same camp. Perhaps a lone rider spent the night there."

“How old?” asked Gorgamesh.

“One, maybe two days,” said Tragar.

“That is well,” he said. “Lead us Tragar.”

We picked up the trail at the abandoned campsite and entered the wood.

“Tragar, Loaren take two men with you each and scout the trail ahead and to either side,” ordered Gorgamesh. “I don’t want to be surprised by anything in this wood.”

He cast a distrustful glance at the forest. We all did. It was old. Giant oaks and elms and ash and pines were draped in moss and vines. The undergrowth was a tangle of brush and scrub that somehow managed a stunted growth beneath the canopy. Fortunately, the trail had already been broken by the First Prince else our travel might have been slower.

Entering into the forest was stepping from bright morning to twilight. This shadowy world was eerie and quiet. The air was stale and a feeling of oppressiveness bore on us all. Nerves ran high and men were jumping at the slightest rustle. The chatter of squirrels and chirping of birds were replaced with strange calls and caterwauls of whatever inhabited this wood. No one spoke, for when one did, his voice would carry like a shout, in spite of the closeness of the place. Everyone was on edge, and I myself half expected some strange beast to come leaping from the scrub at any moment. Yet we rode the entire day without incident and when the time came to stop, Loaren came riding back alone.

“There is something up ahead sir,” he said to Gorgamesh.

“Well,” said Gorgamesh. “What is it?”

“A clearing,” said Loaren.

“A spot to camp?” asked Gorgamesh.

Loaren shook his head. “I thought so at first, but as I circled from the woods I found a gate of sorts. Perhaps it was a gate at one time anyway. All that remains now are two stone pillars and an arch between.”

“And this bothers you?” asked Gorgamesh.

“The whole forest bothers me sir,” said Loaren, clearly nervous. “The clearing is large and there is something in the center. Something I cannot quite discern. It appears like two stone pillars with statues atop. If that was all, I would have entered, but this whole wood has me wary. I have travelled far in this world, and even these mountains, and I have never been more afraid of the unknown than I am now. I would say go around. Take a wide berth. As wide as we possibly can, yet I think this may be what we are looking for.”

Chapter 10

“Raven’s Roost,” said Tamour.

“So soon,” said Hab. “And so easily reached.”

“We shall see,” said Gorgamesh. To Willham he said, “We camp here. I want a perimeter set and guarded. Tell everyone to be ready to move at a moments notice.” He turned back to Tamour and Hab and said, “Who will accompany me?”

“We shall,” they both said eagerly in unison.

Gorgamesh turned his gaze on me. I nodded.

Nesral spoke up. “I’ll come as well, if it pleases you.”

Gorgamesh nodded his approval. “Then take us,” he said to Loaren.

“I shall come too, if it pleases my lord?” said Senka, suddenly appearing on horseback. Her words deferred to Gorgamesh, yet her tone said anything other than her coming was unacceptable.

I found myself waiting for her to look my way, and began to wonder at the longing I felt for her.

Gorgamesh nodded and Loaren led the way.

Senka was dressed as always, though now she had her greaves on again. She bore no weapons openly, but I imagined a dagger or two tucked away. The thought of searching for them brought back the memory of her lithe body gleaming in the moonlight.

As if reading my thoughts she turned to me and smiled.

I imagined my ears burned, but I managed a smile and fell in behind.

We reached the archway and Hab and Tamour immediately began discussing the craftsmanship.

“Curious,” said Hab.

“Indeed,” agreed Tamour. “It is simple masonry, and while perhaps well made, I would have expected more.”

“You think it should have been Grown then?” asked Hab.

“Yes,” said Tamour dry washing his hands.

“Perhaps this is not Raven’s Roost?” offered Hab.

“Maybe,” said Tamour. “Or perhaps we have been thinking Raven’s Roost was created for the search, when all the while Raven’s Roost was here before Carmodan.”

“I’ll be a Stone blind fool if it means anything,” cursed Gorgamesh.

Hab and Tamour looked annoyed.

“It is very significant,” offered Hab.

I said, “Yes.”

Everyone turned to look at me.

“It means answers may be found here, and not just regarding our quest,” I explained. “If Raven’s Roost predates Carmodan, he simply uses it as a marker along the way. Find the Raven’s Roost and ask the questions he left clues to and we shall find what we seek. Yet any question might be asked and answered.”

“Ah,” said Gorgamesh, “I begin to understand. “

“Yes,” said Hab. “Answers.”

“Yet who made Raven’s Roost then?” added Tamour, “And to what end?”

“We won’t find any answers out here,” said Nesral.

“He’s right,” I said and heeled Volare through the archway and into the clearing, muffled cursing followed me, along with Nesral clucking his horse Gilly after me. I didn’t turn around, but I felt sure Senka was next, followed by Gorgamesh and the others. The two pillars loomed large as I slowly approached. Strangely there were dozens of statues all about the clearing. There was no rhyme or reason to their’ placement, like you might find in a garden. I studied them as I passed them, men and women both; some warriors, some peasants, perhaps lords and ladies and mothers and wives. I started to get an eerie feeling.

“Seems like they are all horrified,” whispered Nesral.

“Mmm,” said Senka. “And without hope. Look at the tears etched so plainly on their cheeks.”

“Nearly all appear to be crying,” remarked Tamour.

“Yes, and all are on their knees too,” said Hab curiously.

“Their creator is a magnificent craftsman,” said Tamour. “A shame to waste such talent on this terrible garden, this monument to tragedy.”

“What is their purpose?” asked Gorgamesh. “Why create such things and leave them here?”

I didn’t answer. I reached the center of the clearing and the two pillars stood large before me. They were twice my height and perched atop each was a raven, one black and one white, carved in great detail from stone. I felt like their eyes were watching me, though they seemed to sit in a quiet and stately repose, overlooking this clearing as if it were their kingdom and they its king and queen.

At the base of the two pillars there was a large fountain, though no water issued forth. It was a bowl, much like a washbasin, with a stone back. Upon a closer look there were words etched in the stone.

“Look here,” I said. “There are words. It reads: ‘The Gifted ask, the Ravens answer. Put to task the Necromancer. A drop of blood will work in kind. You must be strong, firm of mind. Answers come to you alone, accept the truth or turn to stone.’”

I looked about the clearing at the statues with a different eye and felt pity.

“They must have heard an answer they could not bear,” said Nersral.

“How many came here with hope for answers only to have the truth of their situation crush their spirit?” asked Senka.

Gorgamesh pointed to one statue nearby. "Here is Lamar. He was Joram's second," he said sadly. "He had a wife and two boys. What would drive a man like him to give up?"

"I do not know," I said. "But I would take great care in choosing your questions."

I thought about my own life. Countless years spent in service to the Mother and her Citadel. Always without clear understanding and often without knowing what to expect, from day to day even. Even now, I wonder if I might survive this latest task the Mother has set me upon? The thought of knowing the answers I found intriguing. What would that do to me though? What other questions might I ask? When would my death come upon me? How would it come? Would there be an end to my life as a Defender and a new life after? Perhaps love and marriage and a family of my own? I was suddenly overwhelmed with emotion as these ideas swept over me.

I shook them off and looked around. I could see by their expressions that my companions were all struggling with similar thoughts. Our own inner demons can be our worst enemy. I have seen many strong, proud men sink into despair, struggling against these demons of their own creation. This garden was simply another proof that we all must face these demons. The tragedy here is that these people did not need to face them alone in the wild. They must have had families, friends, beloved, that would help them weather the storm.

"I think some things are better left unknown," I said. "Come, who will ask our questions?"

Gorgamesh was the first to shrug off his own thoughts and said, "You have the gift Defender?"

“In a manner of speaking,” I replied. “I might be able to use my ring to ask questions.” I did not address his fear of doing the asking himself, though I could see it in his eyes.

I met the gaze of each man and woman that came here. I wasn’t sure any had the courage. Gorgamesh and Nesral were clearly disinterested, but had a look of resolve to stay and see this thing through. Loaren fidgeted and his eyes wandered back toward the gate or the ground or anywhere but at the ravens. I could see he wanted to be elsewhere. Hab and Tamour were fingering their beards thoughtfully. They might consider it. I still wasn’t sure I myself possessed the courage. With a sigh I said, “The Mother has brought me this far and through far worse. I shall trust in her to see me through this.”

I gathered my thoughts and dismounted. I approached the statues on foot. My companions dismounted as well. I stood before the statues, back straight, chin tilted up. I felt strong. I felt ready. I felt there was no way I would end up on my knees in tears, frozen in stone forever. I felt through my ring and touched the power and not really knowing how I did it, I touched that power to the stone basin before me. The Ravens stirred. The white raven was the first to speak.

“How many come to us just like you?” it sneered, its voice unctuous. “Proud and strong. Hah! And look how they end Defender,” it sneered, casting a wing out over the statues of past petitioners. “Weeping and gnashing of teeth, crying at the truth of their weakness, desperate for answers they cannot stomach. Look about you!” It leaped down from its perch and stood before me, wings spread wide. I could feel its hot breath on my face. It reeked of death. “They are many and they all stood before us just as you do now. Will the truth of your life turn your heart to stone as it did theirs? Will you weep forever

in this lonely garden over the lost future, the wasted past and the pathetic present you live in?”

The black raven stirred. It hopped down to stand next to the white raven. I looked into its eyes and felt a terrible pain there, as if those eyes had suffered all the world’s tragedies.

It spoke with a regal tone and said, “Come Defender, pay no heed to my brethren. He delights in the demise of dreams. Ask us your question and brace for your truth, but keep the Mother’s grace in your heart and you shall leave with a smile.”

I found my heart racing. So many questions I could ask, so many answers I could have. I found myself thinking of my mother and brother, long since dead. Are they okay? My service to the Mother, was it, is it all in vain? I opened my mouth to ask and the white raven leaned eagerly forward. I shut my mouth and closed my eyes.

Steeling my resolve I opened my eyes and asked, “We seek the Dragon’s Eye. The first of four obstacles is the Dragon Moor. Do you know the way across?”

The black raven nodded and said, “Yes the Dragon Moor is one of four you must clear. The way is paved, but you must pay the toll.”

The white raven cackled wickedly, “Pay the silver dragon or find yourself swimming with the fin folk. Can you swim Defender?”

“It is true,” said the black raven. It had a regal tone in stark contrast to the white raven, and waxed poetic in its response. “The first of four you must endure is to cross the vaunted Dragon Moor. The Dragon’s Lair you wish to see, then pay the Silver Dragon fee, and pass the Fin Folk barring Dragon’s Isle, and cross the Moor in single file.”

“Yes,” cackled the white raven. “The dragon must be paid else the fin folk will not let you pass. You do not ask,” continued the white raven, “but I tell you anyway. Only six will survive the Dragon Moor to reach the Dragon Isle. Would you like to know the unlucky six?”

I shook my head, though my first thought was of Nesral and then Senka. There were six of us here now and I wondered if the raven was simply baiting me.

Nesral spoke. “Damn these ravens, why don’t they answer?”

I said, “They are speaking. You cannot hear them?”

Gorgamesh said, “Not a word. Though it appears they might be trying to talk, not a sound has reached my ears.”

“Foolish mortals,” said the white raven. “Answers are for those with the courage to ask, not cowards that run from the truth. Tell him he may ask in his turn if he finds the courage.”

I ignored the white raven and said to my friends, “The answers are for those who ask and those alone I suppose. Though I can share them with you once I am through.”

I turned back to the ravens and asked, “How do we reach the Dragon Moor?”

“Follow the river,” said the black raven.

“Yes,” said the white raven. “The river will be your guide from here to the Dragon’s Eye.”

“Who or what are the Anakim and how may I overcome this second obstacle?” I asked.

“Questions all good, yes,” cooed the white raven. “The Anakim are ogres of the Dragon Isle, made of the Dragon Stone of the earth, stronger than your steel, and as long as they remain on that Dragon Stone they cannot be bested.”

The black raven said, “Tis true, Ogres of great strength reside, whilst standing on the mountainside. Hope you find them above the ground where ogres’ strength becomes unsound.”

“Death lies before you,” said the white raven. He hopped over to me and arched a wing above me, craning its neck forward to whisper in my ear. “You wish to hear who will die, crushed in the fist of the Anakim?”

I shook my head again. “What is the third obstacle; beautiful breast, flowing hair, and feathery crest? What manner of creature will we face?”

The black raven said, “The Alkonost await you.”

“What is an Alkonost?” I asked.

“Beautiful creatures,” replied the black raven. “The body of a beautiful maid, the head and crest of a majestic bird.”

“More truth awaits the brave here, but you dare not hear the song of the Alkonost or all is lost!” cackled the white raven.

“True their song is deadly, beautiful too. Block thy ears and turn thy head lest you find yourself dead,” said the black raven. “But gain the falls and safety at last, and then a drop of blood to pass and gifted one more truth – *the truth*, at last.”

“More truth awaits you if you survive the song of the Alkonost,” said the white raven, turning its steely eyes on me once again. Its gaze seemed to penetrate mine and I imagined it could see my heart as plain as the look on my face. “Truth is ever a danger to

the weak. There are many weak folk with you now Defender. Would you like to know who will survive the song of the Alkonost? And who will smile, sinking to their death beneath the sweet summons of her beautiful voice? I have the answer Defender. I have all the answers.”

I shook my head again and forged on. “What is our fourth obstacle? What is the Dragon’s Lair, the Nargun’s Pile? How do we defeat the dragon or scale the Nargun’s pile?”

“Ha, ha, ha!” cackled the white raven gleefully. “The dragon is unconquerable! To ask how to slay it one might ask how to slay the sun! Ha! The dragon will stare at you with his one good eye, while the Nargun does what a Nargun does, which is to destroy any that come within the dragon’s lair.”

The black raven said, “True, the dragon has but one good eye. Indeed, of the Dragon only the Eye exists yet the eye is clutched in the Nargun’s fist. Stone and strong it waits attack only to turn your weapons back. What keeps the Nargun in its Lair? Why, the weeping of the Mother fair. A tear is all you need to pass to break the Nargun’s will like glass.”

“Brave and strong the Nargun is,” declared the white raven, “your sword is magic, but a toy to his. Your blade cannot harm the Nargun. No blade can. Pray the Mother’s tears save you, for that is where your mercy is! The Nargun has killed many. You will see. Its lair is littered with the bones of the fair. Will yours join the Nargun’s pile? Ask Defender and you will know.”

I shook my head again. It was tempting. I could learn anything I wanted.

“Your mother?” asked the white raven. “Your brother? I can give you answers. Answers you will not get from any other; not even the Mother. Ask Defender and know. Know the truth.”

Its voice was seductive, its words, oh so tempting! I felt the aching in my chest as though my brother still lay dying in my arms this moment. I could feel my mother’s pain as she lay, succumbing to the changing into a Vorg, hear the anguish in her voice as she urged me to run, run and hide.

I turned to the black raven. “Why does your white brother tempt me so?”

The black raven turned a sad eye to me and said, “It is his way. He thrives on anguish and pain.”

“And you? What do you thrive on?” I asked.

“I thrive on life and beauty and love above all,” said the black raven.

“And how do you gain these things?” I asked.

“When you see the truth for what it is, and can make life better, for you, for others, that is how you gain these things. That is my reward,” said the black raven.

“Will he give me the truth?” I asked, pointing to the white raven, whose piercing eyes looked to rake my soul.

“We both speak the truth, but the words we speak may not always be the truth you seek,” said the black raven.

“What does that mean?” I asked irritated.

“Men are different creatures,” said the black raven. “They often hear what they want to hear, not the truth. Thus, the words you hear are the words you want to hear, not necessarily the words spoken.”

“More dissembling! Have you both given me the truth here today?” I asked.

The black raven smiled sadly. “Yes, but have you really heard it? I believe your ears have listened, but has your mind heard?”

“Yes!” hissed the white raven. “You have indeed heard our truths. Mine above all you should heed for in mine lay the key to your past, and the possibilities of your future. Now come Defender, ask your question, ask the one that haunts you most,” it whispered and leaned forward, craning its neck to look hungrily into my eyes with its black orbs that seemed to slice to my soul. “Ask that question you desperately need answered. I will give you the truth. Ask Defender and know!”

I found myself shaking visibly and realized I was on my knees before this beautiful, wicked creature that loomed over me with hungry eyes that wished to swallow my anguish with a twisted delight. I wanted to know about my brother, my mother. Were they truly safe in the Mother’s arms? I need only ask and I would have the answer.

I buried my head in my hands and stifled a scream. I knelt like this for some time, wrestling the demons in my mind. Finally I stood. I gave the white raven a scathing look and said, “Be gone evil bird, carrion of souls. You have sown enough seeds of doubt here today. I will not let you have my weeping soul adorn your garden for eternity. I know the answer to my question, in my heart of hearts. And that is enough.”

It was then I realized the white raven was now looming over Senka who knelt before it, tears in her eyes, her fist dripping blood from a cut in her palm. She must have asked her own questions and now struggled with her own truths. What answers might she be looking for, I wondered?

The white raven arched its neck and let out a triumphant cackle and I saw Senka's head dip as if defeated. I stepped up and placed a hand on her shoulder. She was ice cold and still as stone. I don't know what I did, but I felt power leach from my ring into her and I leaned over and whispered in her ear. "Do not surrender to their twisted words," I said. "Be strong, I am here for you."

I felt her tremble and a surge of warmth flowed back through my hand from her. She leaped to her feet and cursed, "The Mother take you!"

She stormed off, angrily and I let her go. I wondered though, was she talking to me, or the ravens?

The Raven's resumed their perches without a word, and with a last shiver went still.

"Any one else have the courage to ask?" asked Gorgamesh.

I surveyed our party. Nesral shook his head emphatically. Hab and Tamour seemed to consider, but also shook their heads. Loaren climbed upon his horse, answer enough.

"Do you have the answers?" asked Gorgamesh of me.

"I do," I said. "But let us be gone from this place before I reveal them."

"Agreed," said Gorgamesh.

We mounted up and Senka returned, climbed upon her horse and followed us without a word. She did not look at anyone, but I could not help feeling she especially avoided my gaze.

We returned to camp after dark and gathered by the fire, all but Senka, who kept on through the camp to wherever she might spend her nights. Food was brought and we ate as we talked.

“So what are the obstacles and how do we defeat them?” asked Tamour.

“Yes,” agreed Hab. “What answers have you received?”

I went through my questions and the Ravens’ responses several times over and in great detail. After everyone was satisfied with my recounting, our discussions began in earnest as to how we should proceed.

“The first is the Dragon Moor,” I said. “It is guarded by the Fin Folk and we must pay a toll or we shall not pass.”

“It sounds like there is a Silver Dragon that guards the way,” opined Hab.

“Yes,” agreed Tamour. “And we pay the dragon the toll and are granted passage, else the Fin Folk will bar our way.”

“What is the toll?” asked Hab.

“I do not know,” I replied.

“You did not ask?” Tamour said irritated. “How could you not ask?”

I felt chagrined at not thinking to ask. “Perhaps you wish to return and ask them yourself,” I said. “As for me, I did not think to ask. Perhaps I should have, but perhaps the dragon will tell us itself?”

“What need does a dragon have of Fin Folk to bar our way?” asked Hab.

“Couldn’t it simply kill us itself?”

“Or kill us out of hand without asking at all,” scoffed Tamour.

Gorgamesh interjected before things escalated. “It is enough for now. What of the second obstacle?”

I recalled their words. “The white raven said they are ogres made of Dragon Stone, stronger than steel and cannot be bested, yet the black raven said their strength above ground is unsound.”

“It is all riddles,” said Nesral exasperated. “Do they live under ground then? Or on a mountainside? Or perhaps in a cave on a mountainside? Must we pass through this cave on our way?”

“I do not know,” I said.

“And you didn’t think to ask?” tsked Tamour again. “You should have given more thought to your conversation with the ravens,” he chided.

“And you can always go ask them yourself,” I said, more irritated with myself than with Tamour.

Gorgamesh again interjected. “And the third? What are the Alkonost?”

“They are creatures unlike any I have ever heard of,” I explained. “The body of a beautiful woman and the head of a majestic bird.”

“Great! More birds!” said Nesral.

“And how do we defeat them?” asked Hab.

“We must beware their song or words at least, it seems,” said Tamour.

“And gain the falls, whatever that means,” I said.

Tamour started again, “And you didn’t think-.”

Gorgamesh cut him off again. “Enough Tamour. It must wait until we find them, but I suspect there will be a waterfall we must reach or go over.”

“Or through,” said Hab.

Gorgamesh said, “We must face these creatures without seeing or hearing them is seems.”

“Why would have been nice to know,” chided Tamour again.

“And the last?” asked Gorgamesh.

“The last is no more clear than the first three,” I said. “I asked it what the dragon’s lair is and the Nargun’s Pile and how might we defeat it. There is an unconquerable dragon with one eye and a Nargun which destroys all that enter the dragon’s lair.”

“I don’t like the sound of your sword not harming it,” said Nesral. “I have seen that blade carve creatures not of this world. What must a Nargun be to be unaffected by such a weapon?”

“I think we might be confused by the words,” offered Tamour. “I don’t believe there is a dragon here, just the Nargun. Remember it is the Dragon’s Eye we are after. I believe the Nargun guards the eye, not a dragon. You cannot kill what doesn’t exist.”

“Excellent point!” agreed Hab. “No dragon! Yet the puzzle remains. How to get the Dragon’s Eye from the Nargun when we cannot defeat it?”

“Puzzles and riddles!” said Nesral. “Likely we shall end up a pile of bones for trying.”

“A tear is all we need,” said Tamour. “That’s what the raven said. Perhaps we simply cry and the Nargun has mercy upon us?”

“I would not count on such a thing,” said Gorgamesh. “Yet, the words were spoken in truth by the ravens, so perhaps it is true.”

“We must find the Nargun first and perhaps then we can answer this riddle,” I said. “Faith in the Mother is required I suppose.”

“We shall see,” said Gorgamesh. “Was there anything else?”

I hesitated.

Gorgamesh pressed me. “Do not hold back Defender. Lives depend upon it.”

“They said only six will survive the Dragon Moor crossing,” I said. “And they offered to tell me which six.”

“And you didn’t ask?” said Tamour in his most scathing voice.

“They offered to tell me *‘the unlucky six’*, and I thought it moot,” I replied.

“Better not know your death awaits you, no?” I asked.

“I for one would know,” said Tamour.

“Than go ask yourself,” I shot back, tired of his biting comments. “If you possess the fortitude.”

Tamour looked away. I had cut to the heart of it and knew he did not possess the courage.

“Let us rest tonight and be off at first light,” said Gorgamesh. “We can parse these words while we travel. Perhaps more will be revealed after a good night’s sleep.”

Chapter 11

Morning came and by their looks, no one rested well. I myself found little sleep, tossing and turning as I mulled the ravens' words. Gorgamesh sent out Loaren to find the river we must follow as the rest of us broke camp. Loaren returned in a candle mark.

"It is due west and runs southwest from here," he said.

"Then let us go," ordered Gorgamesh.

It didn't take long to find the river, and the trail of the Princes before us left no doubt we were on the right path. By midafternoon Loaren came riding back with a look that said we had reached the Dragon Moor.

"It is just ahead," he reported. "A wide lake stretches out of sight north and south. Across, is an island perhaps, but it is far across and no sign of a bridge or ford. Our princes continued their march south. I returned to report, but sent Tragar on to follow their trail."

“Good,” said Gorgamesh.

We rode in silence. Reaching the lake we turned south. The trees on our right were silent sentinels, watching over the quiet lake on our left. The gentle lapping of the water on the shore kept pace with our feet while the forest on our right loomed quietly over our march. Men glanced from the trees to the water with a sense of disquietude and spoke in hushed whispers, as though afraid to disturb the very air we breathed.

“I don’t see any dragons,” whispered Nesral.

“Nor do I,” I said. “And for my part, I hope we don’t.”

Gorgamesh said, “Now would be a good time to tell me what you know of dragons.”

I chuckled. “I imagine I know as much as you. I’m afraid that I have never seen one, nor spoken to any that claim to themselves. Legend says Carmodan rode a dragon into battle, though I never witnessed it. I suspect it only the grandiose tales woven around victorious campfires.”

Gorgamesh shook his head. “Well, we shall learn together it seems.”

Our shadows grew long before us. Finally, in the evening dusk, we came upon Tragar. He was standing at the foot of a stone bridge that stretched out into the water. His horse was standing near, chomping on a tuft of grass by the forest edge. We dismounted.

“What do you make of it?” asked Gorgamesh.

“Tis a bridge,” said Tragar. “But look, it appears it dips below the water about midway across for perhaps twenty paces and then emerges to continue across.”

“Is the bridge broken then?” asked Gorgamesh.

“I haven’t set foot upon the bridge sir,” replied Tragar. “I felt it better to let you decide if we should cross or not.”

“Well, we must cross,” said Tamour.

“Yes,” agreed Hab. “But where is the silver dragon we must pay?”

“Exactly why I didn’t try,” said Tragar.

“Perhaps the dragon is gone away, or dead?” said Willham.

“Would you risk you life on that?” asked Tragar.

“I would face a dragon to keep my honor,” said Kaofouri testily.

“There are signs of a camp,” I said looking about. “It appears our Princes spent some time here.”

“Yes,” agreed Tragar. “They spent a considerable time here by the looks of things. Perhaps weeks before they departed.”

“What would keep them here so long?” wondered Tamour.

“A dragon would keep me from crossing,” said Nesral.

“A dragon would send you running, and any with you,” said Hab. “It would send us running as well. They would not have camped for any length of time with the threat of a dragon attacking.”

“Well thought out,” said Tamour. “Therefore, there is no dragon. Then I say we can cross in peace.”

“What of the Fin Folk?” I asked.

“Well, we can deal with them if we must,” said Kaofouri. “Dragon or Fin Folk, they can both feel the bite of my blade.”

“You would force the crossing?” asked Gorgamesh.

“I would rely on my skill as a swordsman and fighter,” replied Kaofouri. “But I will sit on my hands if my liege desires it of me.”

“Sit on your hands then, at least for tonight,” said Gorgamesh. “We camp here for the night. Keep away from the water and the bridge. No one sets foot in either.”

The men set about making camp methodically. There were several fire pits made of stones worn smooth by the water. Logs were dragged from trees and sat only on the one side of the fire, giving us a view of the water.

“These were laid out like this by the First Prince,” I commented. I sat on a log gazing over the fire out at the water. “No one sat with their back to the water.”

“Would you turn your back on that lake?” asked Nesral.

“I would wonder why the forest wasn’t an equal concern?” I opined.

“The lesser of two,” said Nesral.

Gorgamesh sat down next to me. “What do you make of this Dragon Moor?”

I thought for a moment. “I believe we shall cross the moor, though not without incident and not without the loss of life.”

“Are the ravens’ words that sure?” he asked.

“They speak the truth, or some version of it,” I replied. “But I feel a danger lurks beneath the waters that we cannot combat.”

“The Fin Folk then?” said Gorgamesh. “If they live, then they can die.”

“They live, but they live in the depths of that lake,” I said. “Would you fight them under water?”

Gorgamesh shook his head. “No.”

“I would slay them from the shore or the bridge,” said Kaofouri walking up to our fire. “I am not afraid.”

“Kaofouri would leap into a dragon’s maw for glory and honor. He might even earn them, but what good is glory and honor when one is dead,” I said.

Kaofouri scowled. “You talk like a woman afraid of the shadows at night.”

It was meant to insult me, but I was tired of his bluster. “I would chose my battles more wisely,” I said. “There is no way of crossing without going in the water,” I said pointing. “Twenty paces across, and we know not how deep. Must we swim, or can we wade? Will the horses get skittish when the Fin Folk appear? Will they leap into the depths of the lake and drag us with them? No, I think I would plan on peacefully gaining the other side. If possible.”

“And there is still the dragon to contend with,” said Nesral.

Tamour tsked. “I think it is safe to say there is no dragon.”

“That is one man’s opinion,” replied Nesral. “I for one am not so eager to ignore the danger of a dragon.”

“It is logical,” said Hab. “There must not be a dragon, else we would have seen signs of one by now, if not actually seeing one.”

“Perhaps it rises from the depths as well,” I offered.

That silenced the group for a time.

“We shall see in the morning,” said Gorgamesh. “We will find our dragon and cross that lake as our princes did before us. Try and rest everyone. It will be a difficult day tomorrow. I know that much at least.”

Nesral and I left for our tents. As I said good night he said quietly, "I'm sure they made it this far, their princes. But I'm not so sure they made the other side. If they did, how do you figure they did it?"

I shrugged. "I do not know. I do believe at least the Second Prince has made the crossing."

"Your ring?" asked Nesral.

I nodded. "I can feel the pull. It is difficult to ignore. I feel we are close. As though we might have caught Krane this evening had he chosen to stay the night on this side. But he made it across. And if he did, than so shall I. We," I added.

Nesral scowled. "I know what you meant and I'll be right there beside you if I have to tie myself to you to avoid being drowned."

He dipped his head and ducked into his tent and I gave the Dragon Moor one last look before entering mine. Such a calm, peaceful lake. I would hate to die in it.

Dawn arrived and with it a sense of trepidation. Everyone kept one eye on the lake and the other the sky. Most have heard tales of Dragons and Fin Folk, likely by the fire on a dark night, tales meant to scare one. The idea one of these creatures might swoop down from the mountains or rise up from the lake was unsettling, and doubly so when one considered we must overcome them to continue.

I found Gorgamesh sitting by the fire. Willham, Bandar, and Kaofouri were there, as were Tragar and Loaren. Senka was there as well. She spared me the briefest of glances and returned her attention to the conversation.

"I will ride the bridge to the water's edge," said Loaren. "I will see what I see and come back."

“I will go with you,” said Kaofouri. “I will take my men as well. Nothing will harm you while I am with you. But I will cross if I can.”

“I will go also,” I said.

I would not be refused, however Gorgamesh only nodded and said, “I thought you might. Anyone else feel the need to go?”

Nesral appeared by my side and said, “Me.” He nudged me in my ribs with an elbow and added, “Shall I bring a rope?”

We shared a chuckle while the others looked confused at our byplay.

“I will go also,” volunteered Hab to everyone’s surprise. “What? I should like a look at these Fin Folk and perhaps a Dragon.”

“Then go. Cross if you feel you might safely, else report back,” ordered Gorgamesh. “May the Mother protect you.”

Everyone nodded somberly except Kaofouri. He patted the hilt of his sword and smiled, “I will trust my steel.”

We fetched our horses and pointed them across the bridge. It was an odd departure.

Kaofouri and his twenty men mounted up and rode ahead, not waiting on the three of us. He called back, “If you don’t hurry, you will have to find other means of safe passage across.”

“Stone fool,” muttered Nesral.

I nodded to Gorgamesh and turned Volare onto the bridge. Loaren and Nesral joined me, one to either side. Hab followed behind me. As Kaofouri and his men thundered ahead we went at a trot. The bridge was level stone, well made and worn

smooth by the weather. It was wide enough for five to ride abreast with a little room to spare.

After a few paces Volare whickered nervously, and tossed his head. Not much, but for as well trained as Volare was, this was akin to him rearing in fright. Nesral was cooing softly to Gilly and rubbing her neck trying to calm her, and Loaren and Hab were jerking on their reins trying to keep the horses moving forward. The water swirled to my right, as a fish might stir the water without breaking the surface. Except, this fish was big. I could have leaped into the center of the swirl and touched the its edges with my arms outstretched. Another swirl happened in the water to our left. We all eyed the water nervously. It was murky, its depth unknown. Even in the light of day, the sun's rays did not penetrate its dark surface. The water swirled to either side again. I thought I caught a reflection beneath the surface, very much like the scales of a fish. A very large fish.

We caught up to Kaofouri and his men at the end of the bridge, if you could call it an end. The bridge wasn't destroyed as we might have thought. It simply angled down beneath the waves. We could see the stone extend out toward the other side, just beneath the surface.

Kaofouri stood staring at the water, his men shuffling nervously in their saddles and looking out across the moor. All the horses were stomping and shuffling, whickering nervously and tossing their heads.

"It wouldn't reach my knees," I said dismounting. Nesral and Laoren dismounted also.

"I agree," said Hab, "yet we can only see a few paces out. It might go deeper."

"It might," said Kaofouri. "I shall see."

Kaofouri dismounted and handing his reins to one of his men, he drew his sword and stepped to the waters edge. We all stood watching as he stared about at the water. It was calm. No swirling of fish. It was smooth as glass stretching off into the distance. Kaofouri stood so long I thought he might not step foot in that water after all.

Suddenly he called to the lake, “Dragon! I am Kaofouri, warrior of Ishalem and wish to cross! Come and take your toll if you dare!” He brandished his sword and stepped both feet into the water and stopped.

We held our breath as Kaofouri looked around, sword ready to strike if need be.

I heard Hab exhale and say, “Well, I don’t see a dragon?”

Kaofouri turned to us with a smile and said, “It is as I suspected. Nothing more than an old wives tale meant to scare. There is nothing—“

The water swirled to our right and the surface broke with a loud splash. Everyone stepped back, including Kaofouri, who retreated back out of the water, though he stood ready to fight. Rising up from the depths was a man, or what might pass for one I supposed. From the waist down it was submerged, yet above the surface was the torso of a man, complete with arms and head, though that is where the resemblance ended. It was pale of skin and looked slick. I imagined it would feel slimy like a fish if I were to touch it, though I had no desire. It was well muscled and broad of shoulder. Its arms were thick and its hands appeared long of finger. The fingers themselves were tipped with long, talon-like nails and with webbing in between. Its head rested on its thick neck yet it’s face was not like that of a man at all. It had a wide mouth and thick lips that didn’t close, exposing sharp pointy teeth. Where the nose should be were two small oblong shaped holes. Its two eyes were large, bulbous things with dark orbs for pupils, and

bulging forward from bony ridges that ringed them. It had hair of a sort, though it looked matted and thin and tangled with seaweed that clung to its shoulders.

“You wish to cross?” it said and I could see gills like a fish flexing on its neck. Its words were clipped and came out in a gurgle, as if it were talking underwater still.

Kaofouri cleared his throat before saying, “We do.”

“Then you must pay the Silver Dragon,” it replied

Hab stepped forward. “My name is Habonite Mamoud, chief advisor to King Koram of Ishalem. Who do I have the pleasure of addressing?”

“I am Arapin,” it replied. It stared back with unblinking watery eyes that were disconcerting, yet unthreatening.

Hab paused, perhaps expecting a title of some sort, but he recovered his composure and said, “There is no Silver Dragon.”

“Then there is no passage,” gurgled Arapin.

Now Hab showed his vexation. “How can we pay the Silver Dragon if there is no Silver Dragon?” he asked angrily.

Arapin didn’t appear to react to Hab’s tone. It said, “The Silver Dragon is for you to find and for you to pay. It is of no concern of mine how or where you find it.”

“You speak in riddles,” said Hab. “Is there another Fin Folk I might meet with to discuss the matter? A superior?”

“There is nothing to discuss,” gurgled Arapin. “I speak plainly. You pay the Silver Dragon before you cross.”

“And you would stop us?” asked Kaofouri.

“Yes,” gurgled Arapin who startled us by leaping out of the water and diving back in, revealing a long scaly body ending in a split tail, exactly like that of a fish. In a moment Arapin reemerged to face us again, its bulbous eyes staring blankly at us.

“If you try and stop me I will be forced to harm you, perhaps even kill you,” threatened Kaofouri.

Arapin turned to Kaofouri and shrugged. “I care not.”

Kaofouri growled angrily and said, “Very well then.” He mounted up and ordered, “Wedge,” and his men obediently formed up, he at the head. The edge riders had swords drawn and the interior of the wedge knocked arrows in their horn bows.

“Careful,” I warned Kaofouri. “You should not provoke it.”

Kaofouri never took his eyes from Arapin as he snapped back at me, “Cowardly Defender, you should return to your mother’s apron strings until you find the courage to be a man.”

As if unaware that Kaofouri meant him harm Arapin turned to me and said, “A Defender? It has been many seasons with many scatterings and a great many fry since I have spoken with a Defender. Well met,” it said with its first semblance of emotion, weak though it was.

“Forward at a trot,” ordered Kaofouri. “Kill anything that gets in your way.”

I sighed and watched as Kaofouri and his men rode into the water. They were half way across when the water erupted on either side. Fin Folk leapt out from either side like giant fish feeding on flies at the surface. First one, then another, and they kept coming. The first crashed into the side of the wedge just behind Kaofouri. We watched in horror as the soldier’s sword arm was bitten off in a fountain of blood. And then the

feeding frenzy began in earnest. The water bubbled and blood sprayed and men and horses screamed as wave after wave of Fin Folk broke the surface and took part or all of a soldier or horse into the depths of the moor. Fin Folk were injured also, by arrow and sword, but there were far too many.

Kaofouri realized his mistake and turned around, urging his men back, but it was too late. He was knocked from his saddle only a few feet from us, and slid off the bridge in front of Arapin, who had remained still throughout the assault. Arapin watched with that vacant stare as Kaofouri scrambled to climb back onto the bridge.

I lunged forward and reached a hand out to Kaofouri and he grasped it. I pulled him half out, but watched Kaofouri's eyes widen before he was jerked from my grasp. With a cry he slid into the water and disappeared. Arapin never moved.

I stepped back out of the water and looked beneath its surface for any sign of Kaofouri. The rest of his men and their horses were gone, dragged beneath the water. There was gear floating like flotsam from a shipwreck, but no other sign of their attempt. We watched in silence, I for one hoping someone might surface and survive.

“What have you done?”

Arapin said, “They refused to pay the Silver Dragon. They have met their fate. Do you wish to cross?”

I nodded. “We do, but where is the Silver Dragon?”

Arapin shook its head. “If you cannot find the Silver Dragon to pay than you shall not pass.”

Hab stepped forward. He tried to sound resolute, but watching Kaofouri slaughtered with such ease caused his voice to crack. “Did others recently pass?” he asked.

Arapin nodded. “There were others.”

“How long ago?” pressed Hab.

“One just a sunrise ago,” replied Arapin.

“Alone?” asked Hab.

“Yes,” replied Arapin.

“And he was given passage?” asked Hab.

“He had the Silver Dragon to pay,” shrugged Arapin. “We let him pass.”

Hab turned to me and asked, “Is it possible our young wizard could conjure a dragon?”

I scoffed. “I doubt he could conjure a butterfly,” I said. “He has powers, yes, but he knows not how to use them, and even if he did, I have never heard of such a thing.”

“Well he must have made it across?” argued Hab.

“Yes,” I said. A thought occurred to me. I turned to Arapin and asked, “You said he had the Silver Dragon to pay. Did he have it with him or did it come after him?”

Arapin laughed, a bubbly sound, and said, “Of course he had it with him. How would it come after him?”

“Stone-headed fool I’ve been!” I cursed and strode over to Volare. I dug into my saddlebag and pulled out my purse. Untying the drawstrings I spilled some of the coins into my hand. I grabbed the one I was looking for and turned to Arapin. “Is this the silver dragon we must pay?”

Arapin nodded.

Hab said, "Ah, I see."

Loaren and Nesral said together, "I don't understand."

I turned to them and said, "Hab was correct, there is no dragon. Look," I said holding out the coin. "It is a silver crown."

"So what?" said Loaren.

"Well many years ago they were called dragons by some. So you see, we pay the silver crown to the Fin Folk and they let us pass," I explained.

Hab turned on Arapin. "How many will that silver crown allow us to cross?"

Arapin said, "One silver dragon for one person."

"And the horses?" asked Hab.

"Horses don't pay," said Arapin with another bubbly laugh.

"We shall return," I said to Arapin. To my companions I said, "Let's get back to Gorgamesh."

Arapin said, "Very well," and dove into the water and disappeared.

We mounted up and rode back at a trot.

Hab asked me, "How many silver marks do you have?"

"I don't know for sure, but I'll wager I have only six," I said, remembering the Raven's words.

In seconds we were back on land, Gorgamesh, Senka, Tragar and Tamour gathered around us as we dismounted.

"Gorgamesh looked back over the bridge and asked, "Did Kaofouri cross?"

Hab said, "He and his men tried, and paid with their lives." He then recounted our tale.

After, Gorgamesh cursed. "All this time we thought a real dragon awaited. Well thought out Defender," he said.

I spilled the contents of my coin purse out on my hand and pulled out the silver coins. "Six is all I have," I said ruefully.

"I have a chest full of silver," said Gorgamesh.

"You had a chest," corrected Tamour. "Until the gnomes took it, remember?"

"Mother forsaken creatures!" cursed Gorgamesh. "I will have their heads, every last one of them for this."

Hab chuckled. "This is a pretty little pitfall Carmodan has placed on our quest. We need the silver to pass the moor, but the gnomes are placed to take the silver before we arrive."

"Wait," said Gorgamesh. "How is it that you still have silver if every last scrap of silver was taken?"

I recalled the incident. "I realized almost too late what was happening and before I was overcome by the gnome's spell I fled on Volare. I ended up succumbing anyway, but I was back in the ravine by then. Perhaps they thought I kept going."

"Coward!" shouted someone.

Everyone turned to see Katuru stride forward. His sword was drawn and pointing at me. "I knew you were a coward. You ran while the rest of us were robbed. You will pay in blood for this!" he sneered.

I stood very still as Wilhelm stepped in front of Katuru and stopped him.

“Are you a coward as well?” asked Katuru. “How can you let this coward live after admitting he abandoned us to our fate?”

No one answered, but I could see the others struggling with their decision.

“Out of my way,” seethed Katuru.

“I do not wish to kill you Katuru,” I said. “If you persist, that will be your end. I bested you once before. What makes you think you are the better man today?”

Katuru turned purple. “Is there no man here that will see justice done?”

I looked at Gorgamesh but he only shrugged. So much for him taking the head of the next person who drew swords on a member of our party.

“I will stand with you,” said Bandar drawing his sword. “Cowards are not tolerated, but killed or driven away.”

Everyone stepped away from me except Nesral. I drew my sword and told Nesral, “Step away friend. You are not ready for this fight.”

“I am here if you need me,” he said reluctantly stepping away.

Katuru howled with glee as Wilhelm shrugged and stepped away.

Katuru and Bandar tapped swords and smiled at each other before turning toothy grins on me.

Katuru sidled to my right while Bandar circled left. They would rush me from two sides. I pulled my long slender dagger and gripped it in my left hand, drew my sword with my right, and set my feet. Bandar circled left until I could no longer see them both. I kept my eyes on Katuru, but listened for Bandar. I thought Katuru would be the first to charge. I was wrong.

I heard the gravelly sand churn as Bandar surged toward my back. I turned smoothly and met his charge, deflecting his sword with mine and slashing with my knife. Bandar lunged away from my knife, off balance, but unhurt. I heard Katuru behind me and I spun to meet his attack. He moved slower, with a caution born from experience, and his blow was controlled and probing. I heard Bandar behind me and blocking Katuru's first slash I spun again to face Bandar. I heard Katuru close even as I blocked Bandar's overhand blow. I slashed again with my knife but Bandar managed to lunge away again. I spun to face Katuru and managed to bring my sword up in time to keep my head on my shoulders, but his blade slid off and nicked my shoulder, drawing blood. Katuru smiled.

I would not survive if I let them dictate the pace. Katuru would slowly bleed me. Bandar attacked again, but this time I sidestepped and spun, leaving them next to one another. Before they could separate I attacked. Bandar's blade fell from his wounded hand and Katuru stumbled backward as I continued to press him. I drove him closer and closer to the water's edge. He was not bad with the sword, but I was better. And relentless. I would not have him rise up like a snake in the grass before me again. I would finish him now and he knew it. I drove him onto the bridge and back. He bled from several wounds and his jaw clenched with determination, but I slashed and cut his leg, then kicked his other leg and he fell into the water. He scrambled to grab onto the bridge and pull himself up, still clutching his sword with one hand, but the water swirled. Emerging from the water rose Arapin. The creature calmly asked if Katuru had the Silver Dragon.

Katuru looked at me and said, "A coward has your silver dragon. I have your death," and he turned and slashed at the Fin Folk. The creature merely swam back out of Katuru's reach and watched him flounder around. Katuru managed to tread water for a moment before being jerked beneath the surface by some unseen hand. He never resurfaced. The Fin Folk dipped its head again and dove beneath the surface.

I stalked toward Bandar who had fallen to his knees clutching his sword hand. The blood flowed freely and unless he could use his left hand, he would be useless for some time.

"Rise and defend yourself," I ordered.

Bandar shook his head. "I am beaten," he said. "I have no quarrel with you."

"You claim I am a coward, yet you refuse to fight me?" I said for all to hear.

"I have seen the error of my ways and find no fault in you," said Bandar.

Gorgamesh stepped forward. "It is over then," he said. "Bandar will not throw his honor away by continuing this petty quarrel. Come Defender, let us plan our crossing instead. These, Fin Folk, seem formidable indeed."

They had all seen Katuru disappear while Arapin watched. They knew there were more beneath the surface. I looked about and saw every eye on the water.

"He will throw his life away as well, should he feel like pursuing this with me," I said. But I sheathed my sword and walked away. Gorgamesh followed as I strode out onto the bridge, the only place I could be certain to be left alone.

The water swirled but nothing broke the surface.

Gorgamesh said, "You have six silver dragons," he said. "Tell me, which six would you bring across?"

I thought for a moment. “Myself, Nesral, Senka, Willhelm, you and Hab,” I said. “Yet any who come, should come of their own free will. Who would you see?”

“You have the right of it,” he said. “I would have chosen the same. When should we cross?”

“You are acquiescing to me?” I asked.

“I believe you should lead this expedition from here,” he said. “I’ve been on many a campaign and know a good leader when I see one. More to the point, we are entering a realm where fantastic creatures only heard tell of by the fire live and breath – and kill. You are a Defender. Who better to help us face what lies ahead? To see us through?”

I nodded. “We cross immediately. Let us pack as much food and water as we can before we cross. There is no telling how scarce food or water may be. Send the rest of these poor souls home too. There is nothing they can do from here.

In moments we were mounted and riding onto the bridge. Reaching the end we stopped and waited. The water swirled and Arapin appeared again.

“You wish to cross?” he asked.

I nodded.

“You have the silver dragon?”

“I have six,” I said, holding them up in my closed fist. I dismounted and handed him the loose coins.

He held them in his open webbed palm and nodded. He threw them out into the water and said, “Six shall pass,” and dove into the water.

I mounted up again.

Nesral said, “Is that all? Mother forsaken creature didn’t even keep them.”

“I care not what he does with them,” said Gorgamesh. “I only care he keeps his word.”

“Let’s go,” I said, and heeled Volare forward. The others followed. Twenty paces felt like an eternity. The horses sensed the Fin Folk and were skittish as they waded across. The water swirled to either side, but there was no other sign of the Fin Folk. As the stone bridge angled back up out of the water I let out the breath I hadn’t realized I was holding. I heard the others do the same.

“Well, now what?” asked Gorgamesh.

Chapter 12

I reached through my ring and felt the magic resonating from inland. Creatures lived here like nothing I've ever sensed or seen. I could also feel the Calling. Somewhere west, northwest was the direction we must go.

"It is this way I said," and heeled Volare at a walk. The others followed.

Hab rode up beside me. "The Anakim are next," he said.

I nodded.

"Ogres of great strength," he continued. "I have been trying to parse the words of the Raven and I think I may have an idea."

"That's why I brought you," I said.

"I believe they must live underground," he explained. "We must find them in a cave."

"Perhaps," I said.

“Well, the Ravens said to hope we find them above ground where they imply they might be killed, but why place an obstacle in our way if all we have to do is stay out of their cave?” he said.

“I agree,” I agreed.

“Well, then we must need to pass through the cave, do we not?” he opined.

“Otherwise, they are useless defenders.”

I nodded and he continued. “The landscape is mostly scrub and rock,” he said. “But the horizon west looks like it rises somewhat. Perhaps there we will find our cave and the Anakim.”

“Perhaps,” I said. “But I sense the strange and magical all around. Do not let your guards down,” I said to everyone. “There may be other dangers we must survive before we find the Anakim’s lair.”

I was wrong. By early afternoon the terrain became hilly and our path wound between large and crumbling rocks and hillocks. We rounded one scrub-covered hill and picked our way carefully through the rocky terrain when a huge pile of rocks several paces ahead appeared to move. I stopped and held up one hand and rubbed my eyes with the other. I watched it and after several long moments I decided my eyes were playing tricks on me. Then something happened I never expected.

The pile of rocks rose up and turned and we got our first look at the Anakim. It was made of dark red rock, like most of the boulders we had passed, but this particular one looked like someone had shaped the rock into a vaguely human-like form. Head and arms, torso and legs, all shaped from the same earth. It stood twice my height and thrice

as thick. Its face was split with a crooked grin, no nose and two dark, deep set eyes that widened when it saw us, then narrowed maliciously.

Without warning it charged, lumbering forward, and in three great strides it closed the distance. We scattered. Nesral got a shot off with his crossbow, but the bolt snapped harmlessly off its chest.

I veered left and in one smooth motion drew my sword and slashed at the creature as I darted by. My sword bounced off its arm, much as if I struck an ordinary boulder, leaving the barest of marks, the shock of it hurting my hand and arm.

“Do not close!” I shouted, knowing that if my blade did not harm it, theirs’ would only break.

The creature appeared confused as we split in different directions. Perhaps it was my attack that decided its’ course. It turned and lumbered after me. It was surprisingly agile for such a large, ungainly looking creature and I was nearly snatched from my saddle by a giant stone fist. I ducked and gave Volare his head. I hoped to lead it away and lose it, and circle back for the others. The terrain was my undoing though. Volare stumbled and nearly fell, and I flew over the saddle landing hard on my back, the wind knocked from my chest.

From my back I looked upside down as Volare regained his feet and sped off. My breath returned with a heave. The Anakim stopped and watched Volare, looked at me, and then again at Volare, apparently trying to decide which of the two to go after. It chose me and with its lumbering gait closed the distance in a few strides.

It was enough distance that I managed to roll over and regain my feet. I still held my sword, but it didn’t matter. I tried to strike it again with the same result and was

back-handed by the brute for my trouble. I landed hard once more, but this time I rolled to my feet and ran. I could hear the creature behind me and knew I could not outrun it. I became the rabbit instead, darting around bushes, and leaping over rocks, managing to keep just out of its reach. But I was running out of breath, and knew it only a matter of time until it caught me. I prayed to the Mother for strength.

My strength was gone, however, and leaping over a particularly large boulder I caught my foot and tripped. I stumbled and turned and from my knees I instinctively thrust my sword up at the creature as it jumped over the same rock. It felt like an eternity as I watched the massive creature leaping through the air toward me. I thought it must weigh ten times that of a man, and would crush me underneath it. Instead I felt the tip of my sword pierce its chest as though it were soft clay instead of solid rock.

The creature howled in pain, but my sword sunk deep. Its momentum still carried it into me and I was knocked aside as I tried to twist away. I hit my head on a rock, but I somehow managed to hold onto my sword and jerked it free as the creature rolled past me. Everything flashed bright white and starbursts went off behind my eyelids. I thought I would die then, at the hands of this single-minded creature. I braced for its deathblow. It never came.

Soon the stars cleared and with it my vision returned. I sat up groggy, but whole and looked over at the Anakim. It lay on its back, still as the stone it was carved from.

I got to my feet and stepped cautiously over. Its dark eyes were glossed over, a look I had seen before though not on such a creature as this. I sat down on another rock and rested, letting my head clear and my strength return. Then I stood and began whistling for Volare. Nesral found me, leading Volare. Hab was with him.

“Mother’s blessed!” exclaimed Nesral. “How did you manage to kill it?”

“It jumped over the same rock I tripped over and I stabbed it,” I said. “Above ground they are vulnerable, but it meant when they were off the ground, not up from underground.”

“Clever turn of phrase from the Ravens,” said Hab.

“Yes, we must be very careful in how we interpret what they’ve told us,” I replied. “Where are the others?”

“Here,” said Gorgamesh, with Senka and Willham, unharmed.

“So you killed it,” said Gorgamesh, and after explaining how he nodded.

“You think that’s the only Anakim?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Probably not. We must be very careful not to stumble into another one.”

Hab dismounted and immediately began studying the Anakim. He touched it and prodded it, and even tried to move it.

“Fascinating,” he said. “It is just a rock, and if I didn’t see it I would never believe it was alive.”

“Let’s go,” I said. “I feel time is short.” My ring was pulling me steadily west, northwest, but the Calling felt stronger, something I always equated with time or necessity.

We mounted up and followed the sun on its descent. The island was quiet, and there was no sign of life beyond the scrub and trees. It was as if birds and beasts alike were repelled by the area; some basic instinct to stay clear of danger. The ground began rising sharply toward the plateau before us. The rocky terrain was disconcerting. I half

expected every stone we passed to come alive. By my companions' nervous glances I guessed they felt the same.

The eerie silence was broken suddenly by a thunderous boom followed by what sounded like a mountain crumbling down. The ground itself shook and then went still. We got our horses under control and came together in the fading light.

"I believe we may find more Anakim ahead," I said.

The others nodded.

"I will scout ahead on foot," I said. "Wait here for a candle mark and if I don't return, assume the worst and continue. Head west-northwest. We are close to catching the Second Prince. He is within a day's ride, I'm certain."

"I will go with you," offered Nesral.

"No friend," I said. "Stealth is important and two are easier to spy than one."

I went ahead on foot, creeping from rock to rock in the lengthening shadows. It wasn't long before I found them, the Anakim. I crept up behind a large boulder and looking beyond saw eight of the creatures moving about. They were all of the same height as the first Anakim I killed. They looked remarkably similar, as if they were cut from the same mold. Or perhaps sculpted by the same sculptor. They remained within a rock-strewn depression about a furlong wide that bordered a rocky cliff to the west. One of the creatures bent over and picked up a huge boulder the size of a small horse and threw it at another Anakim. The intended target let out a booming roar much like the one we heard moments before and smashed the flying rock in mid air with a fist.

Fascinated, I watched as two others appeared to bump into each other and where a person might offer apologies and beg pardon, the creatures turned on one another and

began to grapple. They struggled back and forth until one stumbled and the other scooped it up and slammed it down hard on its back with another raging howl, and the ground shook. I expected the fight to continue, but the victor simply wandered away and the loser stood and wandered off as if nothing happened. The others never even looked their way. They appeared mindless.

I felt through my ring. I needed to gain that plateau. The Anakim stood between the cliff and I, but why not simply go around them, I thought? The cliff stretched away to either side, but appeared steep. Yet right there behind the Anakim I could see a steep trail that switched back several times as it rose to the summit. There might be another way up, but I doubted it. My instincts agreed with my ring. I must somehow elude the Anakim and gain that height. The sun finally dipped behind the plateau and darkness enveloped me. I crept away and returned to my companions.

“So what shall we do?” asked Gorgamesh, after I had explained my findings.

I looked ahead to where I knew the plateau was, an inky darkness on the near horizon, stars twinkling overhead. I thought I caught the flicker of firelight, but from this distance it was impossible to be certain. I imagined Krane atop that ridge sitting by a fire and contemplating his next move.

“We cannot hope to elude these creatures at night,” I said. “We do not know the terrain, nor their’ ability to navigate it, or the darkness. I suggest we lure them away at dawn and circle back to take the trail while they are gone.”

Nesral grunted. “Good a plan as any,” he said. “Who will be the rabbit that pulls these stone hounds away?”

“I will,” I said. “I will get their attention and get them to chase me. There is a copse of trees to the north that we can make unseen. You can hide there and it should give you a view of the area. I will lead them away south. Once it is clear do not hesitate. Get up that cliff and out of sight. I suspect we are safe once we reach the plateau, but I do not wish to find out if their protective instincts include chasing us up there.”

“And how do you plan on getting up?” asked Nesral.

“Leave that to me,” I said, trying to sound confident. “My plan is to lure them away, lose them, and return before they do and take the switchback trail.”

After a cold meal and no fire we turned in, taking shelter in a stand of pine far enough away and thick enough to hopefully keep one of the Anakim from wandering through. We kept a rotating watch just in case.

We met the sunrise with tired eyes. I myself did not sleep well, having already tangled with one Anakim and narrowly escaping with my life, I wondered how I might fare against eight. It didn't make for a restful night. What we found in the stand of fir did not promise a good day.

We entered the stand of fir trees from the north we made our way south, leading the horses and looking for a vantage. Lying just within the copse from the south was a man, stretched out on the ground dead.

Gorgamesh stepped forward. “It is Nahir,” he said.

“Who was he?” I asked.

“He rode with Joram,” he replied. “An accomplished warrior and not one I would expect to be left like this,” he lamented.

I squatted beside Nahir, getting a good look. His head was a bloody ruin on one side and his left leg was crushed from the knee down. I stood and scanned the ground to see if someone might have carried him.

“There are no signs anyone brought him here,” I said. “It appears he was wounded and dragged himself here to die.”

Just then Nahir coughed, blood spitting from his mouth and his eyes flickered.

Gorgamesh squatted down beside him. “Nahir,” he said, hoping.

Nahir’s eyes focused and half his face smiled. The ruined half oozed blood.

“Gorgamesh,” he coughed, choking out the word.

“Be easy Nahir,” he said. “You are safe now.”

Nahir chuckled, blood dribbling from his half ruined mouth. “I am safe from all this world’s harms,” he said. “I am beyond help.”

Gorgamesh took his hand in his. “What happened here?”

“Brutes,” he wheezed. “No thought...just destroy...everyone.”

“What of the Princes?” asked Gorgamesh.

Nahir closed his eyes, wheezed, and shook for a long time. I thought he might reach the Mother’s embrace before he could tell us.

His eyes opened and he said, “Brutes...slaughtered...Joram...cliff...”

“Was Krane with him?” asked Gorgamesh.

“Second Prince? Why?” he choked.

“Never mind,” said Gorgamesh. “Did anyone make the cliff?”

Nahir closed his eyes. His ragged breath was fading. He opened his eyes again and said, “Joram...cliff...save him...brutes.”

He gave a last ragged breath and went still. His eyes remained open but the light was gone. He was dead.

“We must bury him,” said Hab.

“We cannot,” I said. “There is no time.”

“But we cannot leave one of our own to the foul birds and beasts of this cursed island,” he insisted.

“We must,” said Gorgamesh. “Nahir is cradled in the Mother’s embrace now. His bones are of no consequence against the life of our Princes. If we survive, we shall return and give his remains the respect he earned as a soldier of Ishalem. Come Defender,” he said to me. “What next?”

Standing over Nahir we looked south from the eaves of our hiding and could see the Anakim, milling about as they were yesterday. “Our plan remains the same. You will wait here while I circle wide to the south and approach from there,” I said pointing. “I will get their attention and lead them off. Waste no time once they are gone. Gain the height and wait for me if safe to do so. If not, go on. I will find you if I can.”

If I’m alive, I thought.

I left them and the copse from the way we entered. I circled wide around to the south and scouted the terrain for quite some time. I was looking for places I might hide or double back unseen. There were few possibilities, and not very encouraging unless I managed to gain quite a bit of separation. There was nothing for it however, so I said a prayer to the Mother for courage and speed and made my way ahead north to find the Anakim.

When within bowshot I loosed an arrow. It struck one of the Anakim, splintering to pieces but it got their attention. I shouted for good measure, but they were already lumbering my way. They didn't exactly move fast, but they covered a lot of ground with their long strides. I turned Volare and trotted off southward. I dared not push him faster in the rough terrain. I had learned that lesson yesterday. The Anakim were surprisingly agile and even with their' lumbering gait they steadily closed the distance. I made it to a large cluster of trees I hoped to hide in. I circled around the trees and out of their sight before riding into them.

Once inside I dismounted and led Volare to the north and out again. My ruse worked. I could just barely see the Anakim moving south beyond the trees. I mounted up and hurried back, proud of myself. My pride was short lived, as there remained one Anakim at the base of the cliff, barring us from gaining the switchback. Gorgamesh was trying to lure the ogre away, but it would not leave. Instead it hurled rocks large enough to crush him should one find its mark.

I surveyed the small depression that seemed to be the boundary, to which this ogre was restricted, either by spell or simple intelligence. The ground was littered with the bones and weapons of dead men. By the tattered clothing I guessed they were Ishalem men. The birds and beasts must have feasted only a few days ago.

I left Volare at the edge and drew my sword. With the Anakim's attention on Gorgamesh to the north I was able to creep in behind it. I put myself behind a large boulder I was just able to see over and called out. The Anakim turned sharply and looked around. It didn't see me and so I shouted and waved my arms. My plan was to have the Anakim leap over the boulder after me, but the creature lumbered around it and so I

circled around the rock, keeping it between us. I waved Gorgamesh and the others on as the creature chased me round several times before stopping in frustration. It let out an angry bellow like an avalanche and slammed its fist into the rock. The rock split in two and the ogre pried the stone apart with a giant heave. I ran, heading for another rock to keep between us, the ogre on my heels.

This boulder was smaller though, and as I scrambled behind it the ogre jumped over it, but I was too slow with my blade. I managed to slash it while it was airborne but only scored its arm. My sword left a gash I could have put my arm in up to my elbow, but it didn't bleed. It howled in rage, but didn't appear hurt. I scrambled around the stone again and the creature slammed its fist into the rock, this time breaking it into several pieces. I ran again, looking for the next stone to hide behind. I managed to duck behind it as a stone the size of my head smashed into it, erupting in a shower of broken shards. Searing pain shot down my sword arm from my shoulder and I looked down to see one of those shards lodged in my arm. Before I could think to remove it the Anakim was after me and I scrambled around the stone, frantically trying to keep it between the Anakim, and I. Again, I frustrated it and it smashed at the stone, but this time the stone did not break. The creature jumped over it, meaning to crush me as it landed. I lifted my sword, but my wounded arm was slow and weak. I knew I wouldn't be able to hold it steady and braced for the crushing blow. I heard a cross bow and saw the bolt strike the Anakim in the chest as it descended. I also saw the flash of steel to either side of me as Willhelm and Gorgamesh both leaped forward and stabbed at the creature.

As I feared, my blade was turned aside, my arm too feeble to hold firm, but Gorgamesh and Willhelm both pierced the creature in the chest before it crashed into us.

I was knocked backward and landed hard, the breath rushing from my chest and stars blurring my vision. When my sight returned I was greeted by Gorgamesh and Willhelm leaning over me.

“Are you able to stand?” asked Gorgamesh.

I wheezed, trying to get air into my lungs.

They reached down and hauled me to my feet. My breath finally returned and I gulped in the beautiful dusty air. “Thank you,” I said.

“No time!” said Willhelm. “The others are returning. To the trail!”

They sprinted to the trail and I whistled for Volare. He trotted over. I mounted up and rode after them. The creatures howled and I could feel the ground shake beneath their thunderous footsteps. Gorgamesh and Willhelm were back on their horses and half way up the switchback. I urged Volare on and made the base of the trail climbing the cliff just as the Anakim returned to the depression. I pushed Volare as fast as I dared and prayed the Anakim would not climb after us.

My prayers were answered as I made the first turn and watched the ogres stop at the base and howl in anger. But they didn't follow. Instead they reached for stones and began throwing them at us. The rocks were smashing off the side of the cliff around us, shards of stone flying dangerously about. Volare nearly skittered off the trail, but somehow we all managed the summit without being crushed by one of the stones.

We moved back from the edge and out of sight and the Anakim gave up throwing and howling. Peering back down we could see they were milling about, much as they were when we first saw them. As quickly as they went after us, they forgot all about us.

I was sure some sort of spell compelled them, but it had its limits apparently. I thanked the Mother and then clutched my wounded arm.

Hab came over and I sat down, feeling dizzy as my arm throbbed.

“We must remove the stone and clean that wound,” he said. “It’s going to hurt,” he added.

“Do it,” I said and turned my head away. I didn’t want to see him pull the shard out. I felt it though, and I nearly passed out from the pain. Hab cleaned it and I was surprised to see him pull out a needle and thread for sewing up wounds.

“I have done this many times,” reassured Hab.

I clenched my teeth, but said nothing.

Gorgamesh handed me a flask and said, “Drink.”

I gulped down a creamy, yet fiery liquid that burned my gullet and said, “What was that?”

“Fermented goat’s milk,” he said. “A little goes a long way.”

“I have a long way to go,” I said, and took another gulp.

Hab finished sewing and then wrapped the wound in clean strips of cloth.

“How do you feel?” asked Gorgamesh.

“Like I fell down that cliff and hit every rock on the way,” I said.

“Can you travel?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Good,” he said. “You were right. We are close to catching the Second Prince. He camped here last night. He left with the sunrise I imagine.”

“Then let us go,” I said and climbed one-handed onto Volare.

Nesral rode beside me. "Can you fight?" he asked, looking at my sword arm resting limply on my saddle.

"I can if I must," I said. "I am better with my right, but I can use my left if need be." I reached through my ring and funneled a trickle of its power into my wounded arm. It was a trick I learned a long time ago. By evening my arm should be well enough to use.

We followed the prince's trail into a thick wood. Once in the trees our going was slow until the trail led us to a stream. From there a path followed the brook upstream, room enough to ride single file. Gorgamesh led the way as the ground steadily rose.

In a short while the forest gave way to a clearing and here we stopped. The grass was green and lush as the stream emptied from a small pond fed by a small waterfall. Strange and beautiful flowers bloomed and even birds sang in the eaves of the trees. It was peaceful and restful and we dismounted and drank from the clear water.

"We should stay for a moment," said Gorgamesh. "It feels safe."

I doubted how safe it was, but there was no imminent threat. "Let us have a bite to eat and then move on," I said.

We ate and stretched out on the soft grass and let the sun warm us. The gurgling stream, birds singing, insects buzzing all joined in a peaceful chorus that lulled us, easing our tension. The birds' lilting song began to change, growing stronger, filling the air with beautiful music. I began to imagine a flock of birds perched on a limb together, necks craned to the mid-morning sun. I had to find them. I stood and wandered away. My steps led me forward, the song filling my ears. The scent of flowers was exquisite and the feeling of peace was nearly overwhelming. The song grew louder and I knew I was

close. The grass was soft, the breeze warm and comforting. I took another step and suddenly couldn't hear a peep. It was startling, and I shook my head vigorously and realized I was standing neck deep in the pond. I couldn't hear the bird song anymore and despite my alarming location, I was disappointed. I turned and saw the others standing in the water as well, shaking their heads and rubbing their ears. I called out to Senka who was nearest to me. I could not hear my own voice and her response was a look of confusion. We had all gone deaf.

It was then the Second Prince stepped from behind the waterfall and strode into the clearing.

Chapter 13

Krane hurried along the shoreline to where our horses stood abandoned. I could see he was agitated and was talking to us, though his words fell on our deaf ears. When he reached us, the noise of the world came thundering back and we all wobbled beneath the onslaught of sound.

“Fools!” chided Krane. “Did you not ask the Raven’s of the Alkonost?”

Almost immediately I felt the song begin to gather my thoughts, pulling me again toward the water’s edge. I had to fight the urge to dive back in.

“We did, but we did not understand them entirely,” I replied.

Gorgamesh said, “My Prince, thank the Mother you are alive!”

“I am,” said Krane.

I detected a tone in his voice that was not there in Ishalem. There was a level of maturity, a knowing from experience that was present now. And the haughtiness that was there had grown also.

“You were nearly drowned all of you,” he said angrily. “Would have drowned had I not saved you.”

I shook the song from my head again and watched as Hab walked to the waters edge, already under the Alkonost’s spell.

Krane chided, “See, already you fall prey to its song.”

He stretched a hand out and made a large circular motion and the world was silent once more. Hab stopped and shook his head.

“How did you?” asked Gorgamesh.

“The Gift,” said Krane. “I possess it, or had my father not told you?”

Gorgamesh shrugged. “I had suspected as much. How else would a lad of seventeen summers manage to come all this way alone? Are you alone?”

“How do you keep the sound out?” I asked. “Before we could not hear each other, yet now we can?”

“It is the same trick really,” said Krane.

I could sense his pride.

“Before I simply...hardened I suppose,” he reasoned. “Yes, hardened. I hardened the air around your ears only. You were separate and in the water and that seemed to be the best way to help. Now, I have hardened the air around us all, keeping the song without, while we are safe within.”

“Clever,” said Hab with suspicion. The use of his Gift was not something many trusted, though he managed proper thanks. “We are in your debt.”

“Yes,” said Senka. “And we are come to take you home.”

Krane laughed. “You are come to take me? As though I am a child escaped from his mother’s apron strings?”

He laughed again. Hab squirmed, but for the rest of us, we simply stared at Krane.

“I am no longer a boy, and will not be treated as such,” said Krane in that full haughtiness he possessed.

“We are not dragging you away my Prince,” said Gorgamesh. “But your father, the King,” he said by way of reminding Krane of his position. “Has sent us to see you safely home.”

“And what of my brother?” said Krane. “Were you not sent for both of us?”

“We were,” said Gorgamesh, “But I’m afraid the worst must have happened. Should we not return with one Prince if we can?”

“My brother lies through the falls even now,” said Krane.

“He lives?” I asked.

“He lives, though he is in a precarious position,” said Krane. “I was about to try and save him when I realized the Alkonost was singing again.”

“Does its song not affect you?” asked Hab.

“It can if I let it,” said Krane. “But it is simple to break the spell for me. Not so simple for you.”

If that wasn't a subtle enough reminder that we needed Krane more than he needed us, the song of the Alkonost returned. It was only for a moment and then Krane waved his arms again and we were once more under his protection.

"You needn't remind us of your ability," said Gorgamesh. "I will not forcibly make you return."

Krane chuckled. "I don't think you could. However, I do appreciate the sentiment. The spell traps us within its barrier, but also trapped is the air we breathe. I must remove the spell and freshen the air else we will all pass out as if we were strangled."

"Your brother's position then?" I asked.

Krane looked to me and said, "I thought about letting you fend for yourselves. My brother is safe for the moment, but trapped, and weak and weary as well. I thought a Defender might prove useful in rescuing him."

Already plotting and planning like a Master of the Citadel, I thought. "Then let us see what we can do? How do we pass the Alkonost?"

"The Alkonost lies within the falls. There is a small grotto and steps leading up into another chamber. The Alkonost stands in the grotto. Once you pass through the falls the Alkonost is quite amenable."

"Then lead us my Prince," said Gorgamesh. "I shall be pleased to return with both my King's sons."

"Let us pray to the Mother we return," said Krane.

Gone was his confident demeanor. Something scared him on the other side of that grotto.

“What lies within the other chamber?” I asked.

Krane paused and then said, “The Dragon’s Eye. And a Nargun.”

“What is a Nargun?” asked Hab.

“I do not know. I have never heard of such a creature, but one thing is certain. It is ferocious and singularly focused. I do not know how my brother managed to gain his position, but he is undoubtedly trapped and perhaps too weak now to save himself. Come, you shall see with your own eyes.”

Krane waved his arms again and the song of the Alkonost briefly returned before all sound left us. Krane led us, skirting the water’s edge until we reached the falls. The now silent waterfall was slightly taller than I and stepping through this watery curtain, we found ourselves in a small grotto. Standing to one side was the Alkonost and we clutched our weapons. Senka produced a dagger and stepped between Krane and the creature.

“Hold, Senka,” said Krane. “I told you the Alkonost is amenable. It will do you no physical harm, but beware. She will talk of things you may be better off not knowing.”

“What do you mean?” asked Hab.

The Alkonost spoke. “Welcome travellers,” it said in a mellifluous voice. The creature was as tall as I and from the neck up, golden feathers ruffled slightly as it spoke. It had piercing golden eyes and a beak like that of an eagle. From the shoulders down was the body of a beautiful woman, ivory skin gleaming, naked and unabashed. “You have reached me and so I must offer answers. One question may be asked and one answered truly. A drop of blood is the price, and not so very dear for the truth.”

Senka stepped forward. “I wish an answer,” she said defiantly.

I wondered at how quickly she stepped forward. I think the others did as well, by their startled reaction.

“But I wish the answer to be my own,” she demanded.

I thought her gaze flickered to me, but Krane stood beside me. It could have been him she glanced at.

“So shall it be,” said the Alkonost. “Ask your question, oh daughter of Kings, mother of warriors, blade of light in the night!”

Cryptic words, I thought, but that was all we heard. I could see Senka talking, but could not hear a word. We stood in hushed silence, waiting for the conversation to end, wondering what words were spoken. It is a strange thing, curiosity. I would not have wondered at all what words were being spoken had Senka not requested privacy. Yet because she wished them her own, I had a burning desire to know. But her lips were facing away from me and though I could see the Alkonost speaking, a bird’s beak does not lend itself to interpretation.

After a few moments that seemed to drag forever Senka turned and pushed by Krane and I, and stood facing the falls. That she was angry was obvious, but I couldn’t help feel a certain sadness coming from her too.

Krane stepped to her and gently laid a hand on her shoulder. “I suppose you received your answer sister,” he said kindly. “I warned you about asking, but I too could not refrain. I suspect your words were no kinder than mine.”

She turned and wiped a tear from her cheek and said, “Kindness is not something I am comfortable with. I am the Royal Sicar. I live to serve the throne of Ishalem. What more could I require?”

Her gaze fell on me for a moment and the sadness I sensed flashed briefly on her face. I stepped forward, wanting to offer comfort, but she held up a hand and her expression hardened.

“I would offer you my help in anything you need Senka,” I said, hoping she would let me.

She mastered her emotions and said icily, “As I said, I need nothing.” To Krane she said, “We have wasted enough time here. Let us get our brother.”

Krane nodded and said, “Follow me. And whatever you do, do not cross the footbridge. We are safe this side of it. The other side is where the danger lies.”

Krane led us to the stairs in the back of the grotto, rough-hewn from the stone and steep. There was no light, and we stumbled forward blindly following the person ahead. I counted thirty steps and we reached a landing and the passage turned right. Light shone ahead.

“Courage now,” said Krane.

He lead us through the passage. It turned right again and in three paces opened into a huge round chamber. The ceiling was perhaps fifty spans high and there was a shaft of light from a hole above that sliced the darkness and chased the shadows to the far edges. Through the shadows I estimated the chamber was perhaps a furlong across. The ground dipped and swelled yet was surrounded with water, much like a moat. The water was ten paces across and ran from the chamber through a cleft in the rock to our left. Before us was a small footbridge of stone that spanned the water.

Throughout the chamber rose pillars of stone, thick at the base and pointed atop, and ridged, not smooth. Hanging above were the same pillars, thick at the ceiling, yet

tapering to a point. I have seen these before, in very old caverns. Water drips and deposits sediment and the sediment form these natural pillars. They were all about, and in many places, they were of one piece from floor to ceiling.

Yet in the center of the chamber, where the light bathed brightest, stood something I had never seen before. It was a dragon. It was easily ten spans high and thirty long. It had a long tail with spikes at its tip. Its wings were spread wide, perhaps another thirty spans from tip to tip. It crouched wings spread wide as if ready to take flight. Its head was at the end of a long, serpentine neck with more spiked ridges running its length. Its mouth opened wide revealing long, wicked teeth half as tall as a man. Curiously, it had only one eye, a bright green orb that caught the light from above and splintered into shafts of green.

I gasped. We all did.

“Is that the Nargun?” asked Willham.

Krane chuckled. “No. That is Rufus, the dragon of of Carmodan.”

“Rufus?” I asked.

Krane looked disappointed. “I thought you might have heard of him,” he said. “I researched Carmodan as you suggested, and found a tattered text that spoke of Carmodan riding this dragon into battle.”

“Will it harm us?” asked Senka.

“I think not,” said Krane. “It is stone, and still as the mountain around us.”

“Where is the Nargun?” asked Nesral. “And your brother?”

Krane laughed mirthlessly. “He rides the dragon, though it takes him nowhere.”

Upon closer inspection I could see a figure clinging to the neck, just behind the head of the dragon, some ten spans from the floor. I mistook it for just another ridge on the dragon's neck.

Krane said, "Can you see him?"

Senka nodded and moved to the footbridge.

"Hold," said Krane. "There is the Nargun to contend with yet."

"Why does Joram stay there?" I asked.

"He is safe there, for the moment," replied Krane. "I have called to him, but he must be weak. I hear words but I cannot make them out. He is weak and hungry I am certain, and thirsty as well. The only thing I am sure of is he continues to ask for water."

"Where is the Nargun?" asked Gorgamesh.

"He lies in the shadows beyond," said Krane. "Waiting."

"Waiting?" asked Hab. "For what?"

"For someone to cross the bridge," said Krane.

"Have you crossed then and seen this Nargun?" asked Gorgamesh.

"I have," said Krane. "When first I saw Joram, I rushed forward. It nearly cost me my life. The Nargun came charging from beyond and I fled. I barely made it across the bridge and nearly fell down those steps back there trying to make my escape, yet the Nargun did not follow me out of this chamber. In fact, I don't know how it could. It is massive."

"What is it?" asked Senka, a dagger appearing in her hand. "And how can I kill it?"

“I don’t know that your knives will harm it dear sister,” said Krane. “Maybe so, but I think not. I feel it though, and it is a thing of stone. Similar to the Anakim. Yet so much more...complete.” he said.

“Then perhaps it will die like the Anakim,” I said.

Krane glanced at me and said, “You killed the Anakim? I did not think that was possible?”

“Two of them,” I said. “They are vulnerable when in the air. Jumping or leaping their hide can be pierced. We managed to kill one by luck and the other with some cleverness. But they are formidable, if mindless.”

“Then you did better than me in deciphering the words. They do have a mind though,” said Krane. “I can feel the link between them and the Dragon’s Eye, but I don’t know the how of it, nor how to sever it.”

“How then did you pass them by?” asked Hab.

“For me, it is nothing,” shrugged Krane. “The Gift is a wonderful thing, and though I only scratch the surface of my ability, I feel as though there is nothing I cannot do with just the right...touch. They were easy for me to avoid.”

“Where is the Dragon’s Eye?” asked Nesral.

Krane laughed again. “Why it *is* the dragon’s eye,” he said. “That green gemstone is the amulet of Carmodan. Does it not look pretty?” he opined sardonically.

“Perhaps one of us can sneak ahead without alerting the Nargun, rescue Joram, and seize the eye,” said Hab.

“Perhaps,” said Krane. “But I think not. I returned when I realized the Nargun had not followed me. Cautiously. The Nargun had not retreated into the shadows

however. It paced on the other side of the bridge and when I poked my head out it howled. Its bellow was so deafening I thought the ceiling would come down upon us both. But it did not attempt to attack me. It will not cross the water. I believe it is tied here to the Dragon's Eye, forever enslaved to protect it."

"Would you stake your life on it?" I asked.

Krane gave me a withering stare. "I have already. But I shall prove to you now. Courage," he added, and stepped onto the bridge.

Breathless, we watched as Krane strode to the other side.

Suddenly the ground shook and materializing from the shadows at the far end of the chamber came the Nargun. It was a man, or the shape of one at least. Like the Anakim, it had two legs, two arms and a head. Yet where the Anakim were an amorphous, half-finished creature, the Nargun was far more defined. It was perhaps five spans high and heavily muscled in proportion. Its stride brought it quickly toward us. It was reddish-brown in color, as the stone in this cavern. It had large brown orbs for eyes and in three thunderous leaps was nearly upon Krane.

I drew my sword, but Krane stepped calmly back over the bridge to our side and turned to stare at the creature. It let out a bellow that shook the chamber and sent everyone stumbling backward.

Everyone except Krane. Krane stood in the face of this creature and stared. The Nargun might have leaped over the river had it chosen, but it remained on the other side. It issued another roar, an open challenge to test our strength against its might. Krane only stared at it intensely. He studied it, as though it were a puzzle he needed to solve.

The Nargun began to pace, staring greedily across at us, but making no effort to reach us. The Nargun's features were incredibly life-like. It looked like the stone of the earth, yet as it strode, its muscles flexed and its chest heaved as if with breath. Its movements were fluid and smooth, like a warrior with deadly grace. It held in its right hand a stone hammer, intricately carved and massive. One blow from that would crush a man. Where the Anakim were merely shaped like a man, this Nargun appeared to be a man. Even the eyes blinked, and it scowled across the water at us, its face the picture of anger and contempt. It bore a helm and wore a breastplate with a studded kilt that hung just above the knees. They were made of stone and looked as though the Nargun wore them, though in truth Nargun and armor might be all of one piece.

“You see,” said Krane. “It does not attempt to attack us. I believe the spell that made it keeps it there.”

“Then we must lure it away,” said Hab.

“But to where?” I asked.

“Perhaps we six might lead it off while Krane reaches the Dragon's Eye and Joram,” suggested Willham.

“And then what?” asked Gorgamesh. “You saw how quickly that thing moves. Should we be fortunate enough to lead the Nargun away, Joram is injured and weak. Even now I hear him shout for water.”

I could hear it to. The faint echo of the word water and I could see Joram waving one arm while clinging to his perch with another. The Nargun heard him too and moved off. I watched as it reached the dragon and looked up at Joram. It did not try to climb

after him. It stretched out its hammer and tried to prod Joram from his perch but could not quite reach him.

“It is stronger than us,” said Krane. “Bigger, faster, stronger, and bent on destroying anything that crosses into its lair. I know I could fathom a way if I only had time.”

“Well we must be smarter then,” said Senka, a knife appearing in each hand. Before anyone could respond, she ran across the bridge and straight at the Nargun.

As soon as she stepped foot on the bridge the Nargun turned. Seeing her running at it, the Nargun lifted its hammer and let out a thunderous bellow. Then it charged her.

I ran across the bridge myself, sword drawn, after Senka. She was fast though, as was the Nargun. I heard the others shouting behind me, but didn't dare take my eyes off the Nargun. In two heartbeats it met Senka, and aimed a sweeping blow of its hammer. Senka was ready though, and agilely leapt over the hammer as it whistled by and she rolled forward. She came up on one knee behind the creature and slashed a knife at its ankle. I heard it strike stone and saw Senka's eyes narrow in frustration. I knew she hadn't hurt it.

The Nargun turned and brought the hammer back around, in a broom like motion and Senka leapt back, once more dodging the blow. But the creature knew how to use the weapon and took that sweep and brought the hammer up and over its head with all the momentum, aiming a killing blow down at Senka. She dove to her left, the blow barely missing. But the ground shook from the force and she stumbled. The Nargun swept the hammer right and hit her from behind, sending her sprawling.

I reached the Nargun and slashed at it with my sword, yet it too only rang on stone, harmlessly bouncing off its arm. It was enough to distract it though as it turned to me and howled. I ran behind a tumbled down pile of rocks. My only thought was to play a cat and mouse game.

I hated being the mouse.

The Nargun was bigger, faster, and stronger. Senka was right. I must be smarter. The creature leaped over my cover and I slashed it in midair, hoping it could be harmed like the Anakim. I was disappointed when my sword rang harmlessly once more against its leg.

I ran, just as the hammer crushed the ground where I stood a moment ago.

I dodged from one pile of crumbled stone to another as I headed toward the center of the chamber. These piles looked like the rock formations had fallen from the ceiling. They were big enough that the Nargun couldn't get a clear blow at me as it raced around them. I dodged another blow and headed for the dragon, the Nargun hefting its hammer and following. I could see Senka had regained her feet. My anger flared when she headed after us. I saw the others as well, and prayed to the Mother that I could keep the Nargun distracted long enough for Krane to rescue his brother and retrieve the Dragon's Eye.

I ran behind the dragon, and ducked under a wing, thinking I would gain a slight advantage. The creature was big, but not stupid. It went the other way and leaped over the dragon's tail and I ran headlong into it. It thrust the hammer at me like a sword and I sidestepped the blow and dove between its legs. I rolled to my feet and turned to face it.

The Nargun brought the hammer around with a sweeping blow meant to crush me between it and the dragon's flank. I instinctively brought my sword up to parry and felt the full might of this creature. The hammer struck my sword and knocked it from my hands, which went numb from the shock. My sword bounced off the stone dragon and landed at my feet, but the creature lifted the hammer over its head and aimed another crushing blow.

I heard Joram curse and watched as the creature blanched suddenly as if struck. It looked up at Joram and howled. It took two steps back, and let out an angry growl that echoed like a rock fall in this cavern. I looked up at Joram. His left leg was matted with blood and I wondered at how he clung to the dragon's neck without falling. How long had he been stuck there? Clinging to life, likely unable to run for the bridge should the chance even arise. I watched him sling his empty water skin at the creature. It leapt back again and smashed the skin with its hammer. I took the moment to grab my sword.

"Water!" croaked Joram.

The creature turned back to me and stepping around the water skin as if it were a snake it came at me again. This time I had no intention of meeting its blow. I must be smarter.

The creature hefted its hammer, ready to strike, when Joram leaped from his perch onto the Nargun's back. Brave, but foolish. The Nargun reached a hand back and plucked Joram from its back and slammed him down between us. The Nargun raised its hammer, but suddenly Senka jumped up and grabbed its arm. Willham appeared and struck the Nargun with his sword, yet it bounced harmlessly off. In rushed Nesral, stabbing futilely at the creature's leg. Gorgamesh rushed forward, grabbed Joram under

his arms and began dragging him off. The creature slammed Senka against the dragon and she fell in a heap. Then it swept Willham aside with a glancing blow of its hammer that sent him sprawling. I tensed, waiting for it to strike, hoping only to dodge and run.

Suddenly the earth rose up between the Nargun and I. The Nargun howled as the rising ground took shape. I could sense the magic through my ring and knew it must be Krane. The earth took the shape of the Nargun, though in size only. It held no detail, but it had its own hammer. It swept the hammer down at the Nargun, but the Nargun met the blow with its own hammer. The Nargun's hammer was the stronger, shattering the other to bits and sending shards of stone flying.

I ran for Senka. She was unconscious, but breathing. I scooped her up and ran for the safety of the bridge. Gorgamesh was nearly there, dragging Joram. Willham regained his feet and his weapon.

The Nargun struck Krane's creation again and smashed it to pieces. It turned to Willham who stood bravely before it. The ground next to him began to rise up, forming another stone giant, but the Nargun attacked Willham. The first blow was glancing as he deftly dodged to his left, but the Nargun was so fast, it came around again with its hammer and caught Willham squarely in the chest. The blow sent him flying. So hard was the blow I knew his spirit would leave his body before he ever hit the ground. I prayed the Mother would shelter him in her warm embrace.

Then the second stone creation of Krane hit the Nargun with its hammer, but the hammer simply broke apart on the Nargun's back. The Nargun turned and smashed this new stone giant into pieces with a single blow of its hammer.

I reached the bridge at the same time as Gorgamesh and I ran across and lay Senka down, then returned and grabbed Joram's legs and helped Gorgamesh carry him to safety.

"Water," croaked Joram again.

"Yes," said Gorgamesh. "You shall have your water now that you are safe."

"Not...me...fool!" he gasped, weak and weary. "The...creature. It...is...afraid,"

I suddenly understood.

"The Nargun is afraid of water!" I exclaimed. "That was what happened out there, wasn't it?" I asked. "The few drops of water you had left were enough to distract it; make it pause."

Joram had only the strength to nod.

"Our skins are on the horses," said Gorgamesh.

"Where is Nesral?" I asked, realizing he and Krane were still out there.

We all turned to see Nesral scaling the dragon's back. Krane stood halfway between the bridge and the pillar, arms half raised and moving as though he were forming something in his hands. The Nargun paused in confusion just long enough to allow Nesral the same perch Joram once held, safely out of the Nargun's reach.

"Mother help him," said Gorgamesh. "He's going for the Dragon's Eye."

We watched as another stone creature rose up and attacked the Nargun. Once more, the Nargun easily dispatched it. It poked up at Nesral once and realizing it could not reach him, it turned on Krane.

"Run!" I shouted, and I ran over the bridge.

Gorgamesh and Senka followed. Krane remained focused, though he did start backing up. Another stone giant rose up before the Nargun. This time the Nargun smashed it with a fist before continuing on.

Krane turned and ran, the Nargun following. Gorgamesh, Senka, and I passed Krane and met the Nargun's charge. I dove right, barely avoiding a blow from the Nargun's hammer. Senka and Gorgamesh circled left. The Nargun struck at Gorgamesh, but he managed to dodge the blow. Senka lunged forward and slashed the Nargun's ankle again with her knife. Same result, though this time she continued past the Nargun and out of reach of the hammer that whistled by had she tried to step back instead.

I liked the idea and so I did the same, darting by, slicing at the creature's leg and running on. Gorgamesh did the same. We were like a wolf pack, darting in on our prey. We weren't hurting the creature. Instead we were keeping it busy and frustrating it. It turned and whirled with each harmless strike and tried to hit us with the hammer, always a little off and a little late.

Smarter, I thought.

Then the creature crouched and spun its hammer in a circle, catching Gorgamesh as he darted forward. Gorgamesh jumped trying to avoid the strike, but it landed a glancing blow. Even a glancing blow from the creature was deadly, and Gorgamesh went flying.

Another stone creature rose up again and went after the Nargun.

Krane was suddenly by my side.

"Run," he said. "We must get over the bridge to safety and find another way."

“Water,” I said. “The Nargun is afraid of water. *‘A tear is all you need to pass, to break the Nargun’s will like glass.’*”

“Of course!” exclaimed Krane.

The Nargun smashed Krane’s newest stone giant and turned to us. Senka darted in again, once more distracting it. The Nargun was ready for her now and swept its hammer the other way this time. Senka went sprawling and I ran forward. The creature jabbed at me with the haft of its weapon. I wasn’t ready for it and it nearly cost me my life. I twisted hoping the blow would miss, but it hit my shoulder. It knocked me spinning, my sword flying from my hand and I landed hard. The creature lifted the hammer and I knew this was it. My life would end here.

Nesral leaped from the dragon’s neck and grabbed the Nargun’s hammer with both hands as the creature hefted the weapon. The blow never fell, as the creature felt the weight and looked quizzically at it. Realizing Nesral was attached, it shook the weapon and Nesral went sprawling too.

We were done. I made it to my knees, but I was dazed and exhausted. Nesral lay on his back and Senka stood on wobbly legs. The Nargun looked at me and actually smiled. The cat had finally wounded the mouse and now it was time to end the game. It howled with wretched delight and lifted its hammer once more.

Then I saw its eyes narrow at something behind me. I turned, thinking to find Gorgamesh or Krane or both, mounting one last desperate attack, but what I saw was a funnel of water moving across the cavern. It was as tall as the Nargun and wider. I had seen something like this before, on the sea. Waterspouts would rise up in stormy weather and would smash ships to pieces. This was not as large, but I thought it might be enough.

The Nargun wanted nothing to do with it and began backing away; all thoughts of finishing us had left it. The waterspout raced past me and enveloped the Nargun. I could no longer see it, but it let out an anguishing wail.

I regained my feet. Gorgamesh arrived and said, "Are you well?"

I nodded. I was thankful to see Krane helping Nesral to his feet. He looked like he has had better days, but so did we all.

Senka tottered over and I held an arm out to help her, but she pulled back and said icily, "I'm fine," then collapsed into my arms.

I stroked her hair gently for a few moments and felt her relax into my embrace. Then she pulled back and said again, "I'm fine," though without the same derisiveness.

"Have you killed the Nargun?" I asked, looking at the waterspout as it spun and whirled only paces away. The wall of water was moving so fast it was impossible to see through.

Krane said, "No. I only have it trapped. It is afraid of water, though I do not know if water can actually harm it. I can hold the spell for a time. Long enough to get safely away."

"Then let us get the Dragon's Eye and be gone," I said.

Krane looked up at the Dragon's Eye. We all did. From this distance we could make out the jewel as it sparkled in the shaft of light from above.

"How do we get it down?" asked Gorgamesh.

"It is hanging by a chain," said Nesral. "I tried to grab it while I was up there, but I could not touch it. Some type of magic held my hand."

"It must be me," said Krane.

His voice was quiet, anxious. His face bore that out with tight lips and focused eyes.

He climbed the dragon easily, reaching the head and reached over and plucked the chain from its peg, the gem spinning and sparkling. Everyone flinched, even I, though nothing happened. Krane climbed back down, holding it tightly in one hand.

“Well that was easy,” said Nesral.

“Yes,” agreed Hab. “I might have expected some sort of trap.”

“There is none,” said Krane. “I would have sensed it, even if I wouldn’t have known what it was or how to dismantle it.”

He then put the chain over his head and settled the egg-sized green emerald on his chest gently. He then closed his eyes and I admit I held my breath.

His eyes snapped open wide, filled with wonder and his tense lips parted in a huge smile.

“It is amazing!” he said. “It is like touching the Gift, but so much...more! It is as though the Mother poured all of her magic into this one stone and it is there for me to use. A bottomless well of power,” he finished in a quivering voice.

There was something else in his voice I detected. I sensed a voracity there that worried me.

“You must be careful with that power,” I cautioned.

Krane’s expression relaxed and that look and tone disappeared. “Of course,” he said. “I will not use it unless I must.”

“You must now go to the Citadel,” I said. “They will teach you how to use your power and they will decide the use of the Dragon’s Eye as well.”

Krane gave me a suspicious glare. "They would take it from me?" he asked.

I shrugged. "I do not know," I answered. "I do not know if they even could. But the Council will decide what is in everyone's best interests. Until then, you are its keeper. Use it wisely and with great caution."

I saw the suspiciousness slowly dissipate from Krane's face.

"I will," he vowed. "Let us go then."

We crossed the bridge and found Joram awake. Krane knelt by his brother and asked, "Are you well enough to travel brother?"

Joram shook his head. "My leg is surely broken. I cannot walk. I could ride, but that would be painful. Yet, I have felt this pain for days now. It has become a part of me. Perhaps I could manage."

Joram's breeches were stained red on the left leg, just below the knee. Krane produced a knife and gently cut away the cloth. When he peeled it off the wound Joram swooned and lost consciousness. There was bone protruding from his leg. Then the blood began to well up and flow.

"He will not survive the next day," said Hab. "Not without proper attention, and maybe not even then. It is a wonder he survived this long at all."

"He must not die!" said Krane, his voice breaking in anguish. "He cannot!"

Gorgamesh laid a hand on his shoulder and said, "The Mother's will be done my Prince. We shall comfort him as we can and take him home."

Krane's chin quivered as he fought his emotions. Then his face set and he reached forward, laying both hands on Joram's wounded leg. He closed his eyes and I felt the magic surge within him.

“Careful Krane,” I warned.

Then we all watched in amazement as the bone slipped beneath the flesh of his leg and the flesh itself began to come together. In a few short moments it was over, the wound healed. Blood still covered his leg, but the bleeding had stopped. Suddenly a trickle of water shot from the moat and cascaded over Jorams leg and Krane washed his brother’s leg with his own hands. The tenderness he showed his brother was moving.

Nesral whistled.

Senka gasped.

Hab said, “The Mother’s Blessing!”

Krane stood and said proudly, “He will not die today. Though we must carry him. I do not know how long he might sleep.”

“You have saved him,” I said. “Well done.” Then I added gently, “But you might have killed him just as easily.”

“He was dead if I did nothing,” replied Krane.

“True,” I agreed. “But you might have hurt yourself as well.”

“But I didn’t,” snapped Krane. “I am no child. You need not scold me like one.”

“You are new to your power,” I said calmly. “In that regard you are very much a child, despite the power you wield. I only wish to impress upon you that there is danger there, not just for others, but for you also.” And before he could reply I said, “It is done, let us be gone.”

Thankfully, Krane let it go.

Gorgamesh said, “Let us collect Willham and bury him by the lake.”

I nodded and Gorgamesh and I went and carried the lifeless Willham across the bridge.

“What of the Alkonost?” asked Hab.

“The Alkonost is gone,” said Krane. “I do not sense it. I cannot say where or how, but it is gone. We are safe.”

We carried Joram and Willham down the stairs. The grotto was empty. The Alkonost was indeed gone. We passed through the waterfall and out onto the grassy swath to where our horses waited. We buried Willham in the fading light and then decided to camp here.

Nesral paused before ducking into his tent. “Are we safe from the Nargun here?” he asked.

Krane said, “I have released the spell of water trapping it. It remains inside. We are safe.”

He couldn't have been more wrong. Yet it wasn't the Nargun that would threaten us.

Chapter 14

We woke refreshed and lazed about the glade, bathing in the cool water and drying in the sun. The rode home was still a long one that lay ahead, but for the moment we all decided to enjoy the peace and tranquility this place offered after our arduous ordeal.

Remarkably, Joram was up and walking about as though his leg was never broken. Joram looked very much the older brother to Krane. Same dark hair, dark eyes, one could see immediately that they were kin. There were differences though. Joram stood a hair taller, and was thicker in build. Joram had an easy smile, while Krane seemed to strain to find humor. Joram spoke easily with Gorgamesh and the others, while Krane seemed always aloof, or even defensive. Joram had the natural air of authority that engendered respect and admiration. I'm sure his deeds were well known

also, allowing others to give their respect and admiration easily. Krane bore an air of aristocracy, as of one raised to know respect was his, not through action, but by birthright. He was only now coming of age, and seemed to always be aware of his youth, even if others paid it no mind. Because of this, he was easily slighted and often quick to point out his position. And there was something more, something subtle about his behavior that I noticed. He seemed to have aspirations. He was raised the Second Prince and that alone would always make him subordinate to Joram. I didn't detect any ill will toward his brother. In fact, he displayed a great affection for him. Yet there was something about Krane that made me think he wanted more. And now, with his Gift, I could see he knew that more was coming. And he yearned for it. He might become a great wizard. He might become a Master of at least one of the five Gifts, and perhaps a Grand Master, one who masters all five. But he would irritate and alienate people on his climb. I sighed. So it must be.

After bathing, I dressed and set about braiding my hair when Senka came up to me.

"Let me help," she offered.

I could tell something was on her mind. I nodded and waited for her to speak as her hands deftly wove my hair into its tight braid.

"I feel I must confess something to you Varek," she began.

Her voice was timid, her demeanor unsure. Not at all like the tigress I knew her for.

"Does it have to do with the Raven's and the Alkonost and the questions you asked?" I asked.

She flinched only slightly. “It does,” she replied quietly. “Or more specifically, with their answers. There,” she said. “Your braid is done.”

“You need not share them with me,” I said turning to face her. “They were for your ears only.”

“I know,” she said, averting her eyes. “But I feel you should know. I asked about us.”

I nodded, suspecting as much. I was surprised to feel so strongly about her. In all my years I have been with many women, beautiful, powerful, and seductive. Yet I never felt about them quite the way I felt now about her. I wanted to tell her right then how much I cared for her. I even opened my mouth, but she pressed a finger to my lips.

“Hush, Varek,” she whispered. “I must say this. I have committed the pinnacle of sin for one in my position. I have fallen...” Her voice cracked and she took a deep breath. “I have fallen in love with...with you. It is forbidden that I form bonds of any kind with others, be they simple friendships or passionate lovers. It could be used against me, and thereby, against the throne of Ishalem.”

She paused for a long stretch. I could see her gathering not just her thoughts, but her resolve as well. Her hands rested gently on her stomach as if the very act were calming to her.

“I considered leaving my position,” she continued. I could see the conflict in her eyes. “That would be abandoning my King and kingdom. I would live forever in shame, an outcast certainly. I likely still will. And I thought I might live with that, if I could have you, but then the Ravens. And again, the Alkonost. They speak the truth and the

truth is, you love another. I cannot have you. And yet, I will always have a piece of you.”

She must have seen the confusion on my face. “There is no other,” I said, confused. I opened my mouth to pour out my heart to her, but she once more lay a finger on my lips, stilling my tongue.

“Even if there were no other,” she said sadly, “I could not ask you to abandon who you are. As I have my commitment to the throne of Ishalem, so too are you committed to the Citadel. I don’t see how to reconcile the two.”

“I would not ask you to abandon your position,” I said, sadness welling up inside me. “And it is true, I know not where the Mother will call me next. But there must be a way for us to...to...to love one another.”

My words brought tears to her eyes. “Thank you for that,” she said, wiping her eyes. “That is the second thing I will always treasure.”

I started to get angry. Not at Senka, but because she was hurting. I understood how she felt. All my years dedicated to the Mother and the Citadel, I knew what true sacrifice meant. That she felt that sting now, and that I was her sacrifice, angered me.

“I have sacrificed much,” I said, “And yet I feel in my heart that there must be a way.” Then I threw her words back at her. I regretted them immediately. “Why should you feel any obligation to the throne if you will be cast out regardless?”

Senka flinched, and I said, “I’m sorry. I should not judge your life or choices you make for your family.” Her curious choice of words made me ask, “What is the other thing you will treasure?”

“You don’t understand, I know. I thought about telling you everything, but there is nothing to be gained. You belong-“

She was interrupted by a shout from Krane.

“Swords!” he shouted. “We are under attack!”

We all leapt to our feet and raced for our weapons. I grabbed my sword and ran to Krane. “Where?” I asked, looking for the enemy.

“They...it...whatever it is, is evil and is coming for us from the east,” he said. “I do not know what it is but I sense it.”

I didn’t question the how. I have spent enough time around wizards to trust their senses.

“How close?” I asked, and before he could answer the forest erupted, snarling Vorgs screaming death and hate pouring forth. Hundreds rushed forward, filling up the grassy swath between the lake and the forest.

“Back to the falls!” I shouted and everyone ran for the falls.

We reached the narrow ledge that led to the waterfall and stopped.

“What are they?” asked Krane.

“Vorgs,” I said.

“They feel...almost human,” he said quizzically.

“They are,” I replied. “They once were people, just like you and I, but have been turned through the evil of the druid lords into Vorgs. The word means half-changed.”

“Why do they stop?” asked Gorgamesh.

It was true. They stopped at our tents. The horses spooked and ran, but the Vorgs were tearing apart our campsite. They made no move toward us however and after

turning our camp into flotsam, they milled around. They were within a bowshot, had we the weapon to use. Mine was strapped to Volare and Nesral's was surely on Gilly, both horses running through the forest.

A screeching howl from above alerted us to three creatures circling downward. Two landed first in the clearing, between us and the Vorgs. The dark, leathery skin and wicked looking snout I recognized as Draghan. The third I remembered from Ishalem. It was a Gryphon, and as it touched the ground it let loose a deafening screech that had us covering our ears. Sliding from its back was a tall man dressed in black. The silver spider with red diamonds adorned his breastplate and was all I needed to see to know who stood before us.

"Thorodruin," I said.

Krane remembered as well our meeting at the Dragon's Heart. "What do we do?" he asked.

Thorodruin strode a few paces forward and held up a hand as in parlay. "You have done well young prince," he called. "I congratulate you on your recovery of the Dragon's Eye. Now give it to me before you hurt yourself."

Krane stiffened, as he usually did when rebuffed by an elder. "I am no child," he said, but his voice cracked, giving him the lie.

Thorodruin laughed, a sound like a blade dragging slowly on a strop. "You are new to your Gift and but a child to me in more than just years. I shall take it and kill you all, or you can give it to me and I shall let you and your friends live. You are outnumbered and trapped. What would you choose?"

"I see a third option," said Krane quietly.

I sensed him tensing, as if to pounce, but not physically. He was gathering his wits to strike with magic.

The others sensed it too, and we all gripped our weapons tight and readied ourselves.

Thorodruin laughed again. Then the sky opened up and a bolt of lightning arced down. Thorodruin lifted a hand the bolt dissipated in the air above him. “You cannot best me boy,” he said.

Another bolt shot down and again dissipated with a wave from Thorodruin. Two more attempts and then Krane slouched. I could see he was tired. So could Thorodruin.

“You are running out of time, boy,” he said. “Will you give it willingly or shall I have my Vorgs take it?”

“You will have it from my cold, dead fingers,” said Krane, drawing his sword.

“So be it,” he said, and the Vorgs howled. Thorodruin stepped back and with a simple wave his Vorgs charged forward.

Suddenly the woods erupted again, this time with a dozen Anakim. The Vorgs turned, confused, and even Thorodruin looked surprised. The Anakim waded into the Vorgs, smashing and crushing with fists and feet. The Anakim were ruthless. Scores of Vorgs were destroyed before Thorodruin recovered from his shock. Suddenly the Anakim were lifted from their feet by magic and though they flailed about, killing any they might reach with a flailing fist or foot, they were now vulnerable and the Vorgs began to kill them, one by one. As quickly as it began, it was over.

Thorodruin turned to Krane and said, “I underestimated you boy. That was a pretty trick, but not enough to win the day. Surrender or die!”

“Never!” shouted Krane.

With a wave the Vorgs charged us again. We braced ourselves, and when the Vorgs reached our narrow ledge they could only come at us a few at a time.

“Take Krane into the falls,” I said to Senka. “He will be safer inside.”

I leapt to the fore and began to fight. My sword was busy, and Nesral stood by me with my other mage-forged sword, deftly stabbing and slicing. Joram too was there as was Gorgamesh. I had time to glance back and see Senka and Hab were dragging Krane reluctantly toward the falls.

The Vorgs were too many however, and as quickly as they died, another took its place. We were being pushed back ourselves and would have to retreat or be overwhelmed.

A thunderous boom came from behind us and the ground shook. The fighting stopped as we struggled to keep our feet. Rocks and dirt rained down upon us and we crouched warily. I turned to see the air thick with dust, a cloud obscuring the hillside that we would retreat into. I imagined it was no more, but through the cloud of dust I could not say.

“What magic is this?” shouted Gorgamesh.

I thought Thorodruin had destroyed our escape. The Vorgs did too and quickly raised their furious cries and charged with renewed fury. But I glanced at Krane and saw him smiling. Suddenly the sun was blotted out, a shadow passing over us from the mountain. Out of the cloud of dust leapt the Nargun. It landed among the Vorgs before the narrow ledge. It wielded that hammer with devastating precision, crushing and scattering Vorgs with every blow. One of the Draghan lunged forward, wings spread

wide, talons outstretched. The Nargun raised its hammer in defense and the Draghan tore at the Nargun's arm, while at the same time its hind legs reached forward to rake the Nargun's torso. What would have ripped apart a person, harmlessly scratched at the Nargun. With its free hand the Nargun grabbed the Draghan by the throat. It thrashed at the Nargun with its spiked tail and clawed frantically with its talons. It even let loose its fiery breath, but all to no effect. The Nargun slammed it down at its feet and crushed it with a single blow from its hammer.

Without missing a beat, the Nargun continued to unleash its deadly fury on the hapless Vorgs. The second Draghan attacked, this one unleashing its toxic spew that would eat through steel. It hit the Nargun full in its face, but the Nargun simply shook it off and then crushed the Draghan with another single blow of its hammer.

Thorodruin began his own assault on the Nargun. The water from the lake sprouted up. Another swirling waterspout like we saw Krane conjure. The Nargun saw it and stopped its assault. Unlike Krane's conjuring, this waterspout formed itself into a warrior as well. Stunned, I watched in awe as this new, amorphous water warrior strode from the lake and attacked the Nargun.

Rather than running, the Nargun stood its ground. This new creature wielded a sword of water and with it struck the Nargun. The Nargun raised its hammer in defense only to have it sliced neatly in half. The next blow from that sword severed the Nargun's arm. A third took the Nargun's head from its shoulders and the Nargun pitched forward. It did not bleed, but whatever life it possessed, had now left it.

The Vorgs renewed their attack with howls of delight. They sensed it was nearly over.

So did I.

The dust had cleared and the mountainside I imagined destroyed was not. The Nargun smashed a hole above in its escape, but the falls appeared unaffected. I hoped the way inside was still clear.

“Into the falls!” I yelled.

The Vorgs pressed their attack as we edged back. Nesral took a stab wound to his side and lurched back. Joram stepped into his place beside me. He killed several Vorgs before he too took a blow to his head that brought him to his knees.

I spared a glance back and saw Senka and Hab dragging Krane through the falls, into the chamber behind. I hoped they could find another way out.

I turned with a renewed fury and fought the Vorgs. I could at least purchase them time. Gorgamesh leapt in front of Joram, keeping the Vorgs at bay, urging Joram to his feet.

There were too many. I knew we could not last. I had a moment of reflection amidst the chaos of battle. The scene before me slowed. I stabbed, parried, blocked, and lunged. The whole while thinking this was the end. Of my life, my service to the Mother and her Citadel. I was not saddened, and that was a surprise. I was resigned. It was almost a relief, but not quite. Something in me would not give up. I kept fighting. It was who I am, what I am. A soldier, nothing more. For the Mother, yes, but still, only a soldier. I lived as a soldier, and somehow I found it fitting I would die as a soldier. Yet still, I could not reconcile that thought. I did not want to die at the tip of a sword. I wanted to grow old, with a family of my own. With my children and their children gathered round me. A wife to hold my hand and comfort me in my last moments.

So I fought. And thought of Senka.

I didn't fight for long.

The hillside burst asunder behind me. Where the Nargun smashed a hole in the hillside, this new destruction was much larger. The ground shook so hard we all fell to the ground. I looked up at the hillside, dazed. The entire top of the hill was rising upward, boulders larger than me flying high. Dirt and debris fountained upward in a huge cloud.

And from the cloud flew a dragon.

Rufus had come to life.

The dragon circled once then swooped down, raking its talon tipped claws into the ranks of Vorgs. I saw then Krane clinging to its neck, just behind the head. As he flew by I could see a triumphant smile on his face. The dragon lashed its tail as it careened by, taking out large swaths of Vorgs before it beat its huge stone wings and soared upward once more.

Our enemy scattered.

Thorodruin mounted his Gryphon and rose into the air.

The dragon turned again and dove once more into a sea of Vorgs running every which way. Suddenly, a stream of fire fountained from its jaws. The flames were intensely hot and the destruction was immediate and complete with every fiery breath. And still, the dragon snatched up Vorgs in its talons as it swooped by and tossed them from high in the air. Its tail lashing about with every pass, it killed wide swaths of Vorgs. In two passes the clearing was littered with the dying Vorgs, the flames consuming them utterly.

The dragon turned in mid air and dove at Thorodruin, stone jaws snapping. Thorodruin deftly maneuvered the Gryphon out of reach. A bolt of blue shot from Thorodruin's hand as the dragon passed and struck the dragon in the hindquarters. The blow sent the dragon reeling. Somehow, Krane managed to stay astride the stone beast as it rolled in midair. It righted itself just before it crashed into the tree line and beat its wings furiously as its underbelly and hind legs snapped the tops of trees completely off as it regained height.

It turned in a wide arc and dove back at Thorodruin. Jaws spread wide as flames erupted once more. I thought they would consume Thorodruin, yet the Gryphon was agile and Thorodruin no stranger to steering the beast. It veered away from the stream of fire and another blue bolt shot from Thorodruin's hand. This time the dragon dipped a wing and the bolt glanced off its backside, barely altering its flight. The dragon turned again, but its sheer size did not allow it to maneuver like the Gryphon, which darted past it again. Another blue bolt struck the dragon on its flank and the dragon reeled from the blow and very nearly crashed into the hillside above me.

Krane managed, somehow, to control the dragon and the beast turned again to face Thorodruin. The Gryphon darted right and then dipped left, but this time, Krane was ready. The dragon veered away, yet turned its gaping maw as it passed and released another stream of deadly fire. A blue bolt leapt from Thorodruin's hand, but he hadn't anticipated the fire. Even as the blue bolt struck the dragon, the flames very nearly enveloped Throdruin and the Gryphon. It managed to dive beneath most of the fiery stream, but did not pass entirely unscathed.

Thorodruin's blue bolt sent the dragon crashing into the clearing among the dying Vorgs. I thought Thorodruin might finish Krane and the dragon, but instead, the Gryphon beat wobbly wings and circled up. The dragon had crashed in a heap, but in a moment regained its feet. It leapt into the air and beat its wings. Suddenly, the Gryphon flew away east, Thorodruin hunched over and clinging to the creature's back. The dragon was slow in gaining height and by the time it circled around and headed east, the Gryphon was out of sight. I thought Krane might pursue Thorodruin, but was glad to see the dragon turn once more and return to the clearing. It landed, ungracefully, and the ground shook under the sheer weight of it.

It was over. The Vorgs were dead or scattered. Thorodruin was gone. The dragon dipped its head and Krane slid off the creature's neck. He strode forward, victorious, yet I could see the toll the flight and fight had taken. He stumbled twice before reaching us.

The dragon's serpentine head swayed from side to side, as if looking for something. Its eyeless gaze was unsettling. Then it went still.

Then Krane fell to the ground, unconscious. Senka rushed forward and cradled his head in her arms. I stumbled over.

"He lives," she said in answer to my unspoken question.

"He needs rest above all," I said. Then I tended Nesral's wound while Gorgamesh helped stem the blood from Joram's temple.

"Mother's Grace upon me," said Gorgamesh, wrapping Joram's head in cloth strips torn from his tunic. "I would never have believed it had I not seen it with my own eyes."

Krane stirred and sat up.

He looked over the battlefield, the dead Vorgs littering the once peaceful scene. He turned to us and I could see the last remnants of the boy prince fade away as the wizard warrior within him came of age.

Joram said, "You truly are Gifted by the Mother my dear brother. We must go back to Ishalem now and decide what to do with the Dragon's Eye."

Krane stood and scoffed at his brother. "You would order me still?" he said derisively. "Anakim and Nargun do my bidding. I fight astride a dragon. I have vanquished a Druid Lord and you would treat me as a child?"

"I only mean--"

Krane cut off his brother with a wave. "I know what you mean. What you all mean. Now you shall hear what I mean. The Dragon's Eye is mine. Any who would seek to take it shall meet the same fate. Does anyone hear wish to take it?"

It was a challenge to us, direct and bold. I could see the desire in Krane's eyes for one of us to try.

I stepped forward. "Krane, you have the Dragon's Eye. None of us can use it, and I for one have no desire to try and take it from you. I only hope you come with me to the Citadel."

"Why?" asked Krane icily. "So they can take it from me?"

"You are lucky that Thorodruin knew not how to defeat the dragon. You surprised him, but that aside, you must go because you need to learn how to use your Gift," I reasoned. "Without instruction you may very well kill yourself, and others

around you. I know you wouldn't do so on purpose, but the power you wield is great and terrible. If you cannot learn to control it, it will be the end of you."

Krane stared at me, his dark eyes menacing. I had stared down many a wizard though, and met Krane's gaze with my own steady one. Finally, Krane shrugged and said, "I had planned on going to the Citadel all along. Where else would I go?"

"You should come home," said Joram. "Your family needs you."

Krane laughed mirthlessly. "You know not the temperature of our father's anger now," he said. "I don't think Ishalem is home for me any longer. I must go where I belong brother, and that is surely the Citadel."

"But-" began Joram.

"No brother," said Krane, suddenly softening. "I am happy you are safe. You are First Prince and heir to the throne. Your place is by father's side. Mine is now elsewhere. Tell him...tell him I love him and will visit when I can."

Krane turned to me and said, "Let us leave at once. Everyone is in danger as long as I remain. Thorodruin will return, and perhaps with the knowledge of how to defeat the dragon. We must make all haste to reach the Citadel."

Krane turned to the others and said, "Thank you. For everything." He embraced Gorgamesh and Hab and even Nesral. Then strode forward to Senka and embraced her warmly, brother to sister. He said, "Dear sister, I know what the Alkonost said, for the Ravens mocked me with you and your plight."

Senka blanched and I saw something I never expected to see in her eyes. Raw fear. And her gaze flickered my way and then she studied the ground before her.

“Fear not sister,” he said kindly. “Your secret is safe with me. Return to Ishalem with Joram. If things go well you shall live in peace. If not...come to the Citadel. You will always have a place of honor with me.”

He let her go and strode off. “We must find the horses,” he said.

I stepped toward Senka, wanting to embrace her myself, but she held a hand up and said forcefully, “No!” And then softer, “Please, don’t. It is hard enough already. Go. Live the life you were made for Varek. Just remember me, that is all I ask.”

She walked away and despite her words I moved to follow, but Joram stepped between and said, “Let her be Defender. I know not what happened between you, but I know women. And she will need time. See my brother safely to the Citadel and then return to Ishalem. By then you will see a different Senka.”

Nesral stepped beside me and said, “He’s right. Give her time. She will be better for it. Let’s fetch the horses and go.”

“You are coming to the Citadel?” I asked.

“Is there another place I might become a Defender?” he asked.

I wondered what Senka was not telling me. It hurt to see her in pain, and I couldn’t help feeling I was to blame. Yet despite the ache in my chest, Nesral’s intentions buoyed my spirits. Perhaps I would not be the Last Defender much longer.

The End

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