

THE WATCHER'S KEEP

The Triadine Saga - Book 1
by Timothy Bond

PREVIEW SAMPLE

The Watcher's Keep is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Reader Comments

“Very enjoyable read. Tim’s storyline ranks right up there with some of the classic fantasy writers such as Brooks and Goodkind. Excellent first work.” - F.C., United States

“I was drawn into a world that I could not have imagined and wanted to keep reading just to stay there! I loved the characters and missed them when the story ended.” - J.M., United Kingdom

“The Watcher’s Keep is an engaging story with delightful characters. I did not want to put it down even for a minute. I cannot wait until the next book in the series to find out what my new friends are up to next!” - D.D., United States

“A breadth and depth of story that will keep you engaged for many long, enjoyable hours, more in the vein of Robert Jordan than Tolkien. “ - J.H., United States

“It’s all here: expansive scenery, gripping action, colourful characters, sinister plots and magical wonder. In this first release Tim has set the stage for an enchanting, world encompassing tale and I cannot wait to read the next installments.” - D.W., The Netherlands

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Thank you for your serious consideration.

Tim

The Keep

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Prologue

The Triadine Saga is a work of fiction, however it has been translated from the Elvish annals known as the Menta Renjunkai Paklanta. These chronicles were recorded over several centuries, first by the elves of the Aren in the city of Archaille before the Breaking, and then latter in the hidden elven city of Alpenvail. At the end of the Second Age, the writings were recovered from the mountain city and they were completed in the city of Palladium on the Fireheart Sea by the elves of the Dresda. Some of the slant is therefor toward the elves as victims or heroes when in fact they may have played a lesser role than contained within.

Scholars also disagree with the translation of Menta Renjunkai, with opinions varying as to whether it refers to the time just before The Breaking, or from a period of time even earlier in history. In this writer's opinion, it refers to both and its original historical reference was to the time before the rise of humans, when elves and dwarves lived in close proximity to one another, each serving a different purpose to the benefit of both.

I must apologize in advance for some of the translations in this saga, as many of the words from the original Elvish do not have equivalentents in English, and approximations had to be made for the storyline to make sense. In particular distances, time and days of the week have been converted to modern units in many places in order for the reader to make sense of the story.

Your indulgence of these small adjustments is appreciated.

I hope you enjoy the story.

Timothy

One

Peter lay very still in the tall grass, his closed eyes barely filtered out the bright afternoon sun. This spot on the Southern slope of their secret hill let him soak up its warm rays until he was lost in his own world. Earth smells gently rolled over him, a hint of mint and clover, the comforting scent of fertile soil.

Tall pine, cedar and hemlock trees were dominant in this part of the forest and small clearings such as this were rare and to be cherished, especially when they captured the afternoon sun. The tall, slightly brown grasses of late summer gently tickled and tugged at the back of his neck – not quite annoying him enough to make him rise, but managing to bother him sufficiently to keep him from really enjoying an afternoon nap.

“Alex,” Peter sang out finally, frustrated that he was unable to really get any sleep. “Are you still trying to talk with those silly birds? Don’t you know tiella birds don’t talk by now. It was just your imagination as I have told you over and over again.”

He could tell he was starting to get to his sister. "No one can talk to birds! Quit wasting your time on them. What you should really be doing is studying your lessons, like me. Brother CadreSean will be most upset with you if you don't show improvement soon."

"Studying, huh? You have your lessons written on the back of your eyelids?" Alexandra raised up a small smooth stone and tossed it in his general direction. It missed of course – if she had intended to hit him she could have easily done so – but it was close enough to his head to get his attention. What followed next was a frantic race around the fringe of the woods, brother chasing sister through the spindly trees at the forest's edge, first in mock anger, then with shouts of raucous laughter, both children reveling in the last days of too short a summer.

"Peter stop it!" Alexandra laughed, too exhausted to continue at last. Peter grabbed his sister tightly around the waist and tumbled both of them into the ferns and soft grasses at the base of the hill. Winded, an even match twin against twin, they were laughing now so hard that their sides were quite ready to burst. How soon it would all end, these lazy days of childhood. Neither was quite ready to let it all go and grow up.

It all had to end of course. Harvest time was nearing, and with it came autumn, followed inevitably by the long cold winter. The only real joy for the twins in the winter time, was that Lake Estonan would freeze over from the Abbey to the edge of the Misty Woods, and they would be able to play games and fish on the ice for a full moon cycle or more. Some years only the shallow bays would freeze and the inlet and outlet would remain open, supporting a river of moving water, running black and cold through their frozen playground. These

years were few and far between. From the chill air that drove down the temperature a few nights already this season, this year was not likely going to be one of those warm winters.

Very soon it would be too dark in the evening to walk in the woods or play children's games in among the trees. By this time next year there would be a real job for Peter. He had reached the age where boys became young men, and he would have to labor in the service of the King.

Peter would not have hard labor in the stone quarries like most of the boys of Alnen his age. He was lucky. Brother Cadresean had secured for him a position in the Abbey as a scribe. His pen was fair and he kept a steady hand. He would do well in his new profession, even if he did not decide to join the Order. The hours were long but the work was clean, and warm in the winter, and of course, very boring for a young man with eyes on the world and lust for adventure in his heart.

Alexandra would not do much better in his eyes. She would go to work with Molensa in the kitchens of Lord Berrol's keep in Alnen. This was not bad work, but certainly not what she had been educated for. The keep was not the castle in Solenta. Lord Berrol was not the King, and Alexandra's position as a kitchen scullion would certainly not serve to propel her to the Royal Court, of course she never really wanted to go there anyway – that was just the talk of a sixteen year old girl.

Alexandra was an exceptional student at the Abbey, in spite of her brother's teasing. She particularly excelled in history and the arts. She wanted so much to be a teacher or a healer, but only monks were allowed to be teachers, and only after long and careful training

in the Abbey of Saint Julean in a remote location on the coast of the Arithe Ocean – to cleanse the mind of the heretical knowledge one might pick up in the world.

As for being a healer, none were being taught the potions, herbs and runes of healing these days outside the Royal Court. These were skills reserved for a few select monks in direct service to the King. Those who were natural healers were forced to practice their arts in secret, lest they be drafted in service and taken from their villages. Alex showed some aptitude for healing in her studies at the Abbey, but Molensa made her hide her natural talent so as not to stand out from the other girls.

The twins were nearly identical, though of course Peter was a boy and Alexandra a girl. Both had blonde hair. Peter's hair was shoulder length and generally tied back in a pony tail. Alexandra's hair was long, down to her lower back, and most of the time she kept it in a single braid. Both had green eyes, striking and with a slightly almond shape. Bodies were slight of build yet muscular, with both children being active and enjoying activities out of doors. Their skin tone was slightly dark, like they were always in the sun even in the middle of winter.

"We really must be going now, it will be getting dark soon," Alex said quietly. She enjoyed her brother's playfulness, knowing in her heart that these days were drawing forever to a close. "If we stay here much longer," she added, a grin spreading slowly across her face, "Molensa will certainly have Bairden beat us and send us to bed without supper."

She was joking of course. Their guardians loved them as dearly as if the twins were truly their own children. The heavy set stone

cutter and his wife were always watching out for Peter and his sister, doing their best to see that they wanted for nothing in life. Bairden it seemed, more than Molensa, was bothered that the twins had no friends among the other children in Alnen. He knew the reason of course, the twins were different from any of the other children in the hamlet. He only wished he could explain it to them. In time, Molensa would tell him as he lay beside her at night, his frustration at their isolation stabbing him like a dagger, it will all be made clear to them when the time is right.

* * *

"OK Alex, let's go. I'll race you to the stream!" Peter was already off, shoving his sister aside to get those extra few steps he needed. She was fast and lithe in the forest – they both were – and they would be out of the trees and to the edge of the stream that led them home in just a few minutes.

"Peter you awful cheat!" Alex shouted as his backside disappeared through the trees, "I will still beat you. And I will get even with you for this." She did beat him home as she promised, and quite handily at that, but she did not have an opportunity to get even.

Two

A fire was already laid in the hearth when Alexandra and Peter finally arrived home. Supper was on the table and Molensa was just starting to pour some wine into a simple iron goblet at the head of the table. Peter noticed there were two extra place settings, each sporting a goblet of wine. There was also an intricately carved white hazel wood staff cradled in the stand next to the door. The staff sported a bronze wolf's head pommel, brightly polished and well worn on the top. He knew what this meant, they both knew.

"Oh, there you two are at last," Molensa said, appearing a bit more annoyed than they felt she should be. "I thought you would both go to bed hungry this night, you stayed at the Abbey so late after lessons." Molensa was a large woman. Not obese, but clearly someone who enjoyed eating good food. Her silver hair was pulled back and tied with a scarf as always.

Peter knew immediately they had been caught. "We did not stay late after lessons today," he said quickly. "We were... we did not go to the Abbey this morning. We were out in the forest, near to the

Silver Stream waterfall."

"Were you out in the woods with that old hermit again?" Molensa asked pointedly.

Neither of them could lie to her, she could read it in their eyes, and besides, she wouldn't really care. "Yes, we went to visit Karoel," Alexandra spoke up. "We wanted to spend some time with him before the Harvest begins. We did not mean any harm, we just wanted to hear more stories about the Old Days, before the world was broken and the Great Rift was formed."

Peter joined in, "From the time when there was still magic in the land, and there were elves and wizards and dwarves and dragons and griffins and —"

"Enough! That will be quite enough of that!" Molensa barked, glancing quickly toward the closed kitchen door. "I will not have you speaking such prattle. Brother Cadresean will be disappointed that you two have not learned your lessons better than this. There are no such creatures as dwarves or dragons, there never were, and there will be no more such talk in this house."

She was not really angry they knew, just cautioning them. Talking of the Old Days was considered blasphemous in the Church, and was not allowed anywhere in the lands of King Leondis Tarbane. You most certainly did not speak of such things with a Julean monk in the house, bound by the laws of their Order to report all such heresy directly to His Holiness the Archbishop in Solenta. Compromising Brother Cadresean was not going to happen tonight if Molensa had anything to say about it.

The heavy door to the kitchen opened slowly and three men filed through, engaged in a quiet discussion. The first was Bairden

Oldsted, the master of this house and guardian of the twins. Bairden was a large man by human measure, with dark, strong, weathered hands that had long held a chisel and hammer in the service of the King or his Lord. His face was kind, with wrinkles set deeply around his eyes – as much a sign of his nature as his deep belly laugh. His face was partially hidden by a thick growth of beard, which always seemed to shelter an escaped fragment or two from the stonework of the day. Today was no different.

The second man was much smaller, dressed in the plain brown robes of the Julean monks, which made his pale skin appear almost ashen. He sported a wild shock of jet black hair that seemed to have been pasted across his high forehead. He could have been a wraith next to the two larger, healthy men.

He was a stranger, though the children had seen him before. He was a recent arrival at the Abbey, and they knew him to be from the Royal Court – a counsellor of some worth attached to the Church. Not a High Counsellor to be sure, and not truly a monk or a priest, if you can believe the back room gossip at the Abbey, but a man who was obviously feared by the local Brethren. The whispered dread that swept through the monastery was enough for the children to appreciate Molensa's earlier actions and caution. The staff at the door was his, they knew, and it was reported that he used it to discipline some of the less pious monks.

The last man to enter was dear Brother Cadresean. His enormous brown robe, ruffled and wrinkled as usual, was tied awkwardly around his equally enormous belly, and he was chewing on some scrap of the upcoming meal that he had stumbled upon while the men were talking privately in the kitchen. His normally rosy cheeks were particularly

pink this evening, and his shaved head wore a gloss that made it gleam like highly polished marble. He liked to sample the fine wines and ales that the Abbey produced, and it appeared he had been imbibing this evening already.

"Ho, ho there you little lost lambs, have you been playing tricks again on a poor bedraggled monk," Cadresean bellowed at the children. Sheepishly he glanced toward the pale little man who had moved over in front of the fire, and who pretended he had not heard, or just ignored this roaring greeting for Cadresean's favorite students.

"Ahem, I mean where have you two been all day," speaking more now as befit a monk of his Order, and the Head Master at the Abbey in Alnen. "You have worried your dear mother sick, and you have missed your lessons today on top of it."

Mother? Alex wondered to herself, Did he mean Molensa?

As Peter opened his mouth to reply, Molensa piped in quickly, "I am so embarrassed Brother. I had forgotten until just this very minute that I sent the children on an errand today, to Hilldale to pick up the makings for tonight's dessert. I know how much you appreciate a bit of sweet fare after supper, and there was not a pound of fine chocolate to be had anywhere in Alnen. I am so deeply sorry to have caused you to worry. I must be losing my faculties in my old age."

"That's right," chimed in Alexandra, "chocolate and almonds for bearded crumb pie, Brother. Your favorite dessert I believe. Mother, I am surprised at you, forgetting that you sent us on such an important errand." Alexandra decided to play along with the ruse, without really knowing why.

Peter looked around confused, first at Alexandra, then at Molensa. He was just about to open his mouth and disagree when, *"Don't say a word Peter,"* Alexandra said to him in the silent speech that the two of them had secretly shared as long as they could remember. *"Keep quiet and let's see where this is going. I am afraid of this pale little man from the Royal Court. He frightened me at the Abbey and he is even more frightening here, now. Not only that, but Brother CadreSean called Molensa Mother! He of all people certainly knows better than that."*

Three

Dinner had been a somber affair, although the meal itself had been excellent as usual. It might have even been bit over indulgent for the sake of Brother Bannis, as the honored guest had been introduced. Molensa was a marvelous cook who learned to prepare exquisite food while working in Lord Berrol's Keep. She baked fresh black bread, roasted lamb with whole yellow onions from the market at Hilldale, steamed fresh carrots with sweet new potatoes from their own small garden and served them in a honey glaze. These were complimented with sliced wood mushrooms compliments of the hermit Karoel that were smothered in the morning's butter.

The meal had been accompanied by a special vintage Julean wine that Brother CadreSean had thoughtfully brought along with them from the Abbey. A fine treat compared to the rather tart fruit fermentations that most of the villagers were used to. The Julean Order of Monks were famous for their fine wines and ales. They sold them to help finance the upkeep of their many Abbeys, and to contribute their share of taxes to the coffers of the King. The

Brotherhood were also well known for their able consumption of the beverage as well. Cadresean kept their reputation alive, drinking more than his fair share of wine this evening.

Thin, pale Brother Bannis was explaining his recent arrival and presence in the village, in a high pitched nasal voice that only further convinced Alexandra that he was not to be trusted.

"His Holiness, the Archbishop in Solenta," Bannis whined, "has sent me on a special secret errand to Lord Berrol in Alnen." Bairden raised his eyebrows slightly at this, all the while stroking at his beard, and knocking loose small remnants of his days labor.

"Since the Lord is out hunting for a few days," Bannis continued, "and I particularly dislike traveling around the countryside chasing after truant Lords, Brother Cadresean and I decided to pay a visit to a few of the King's most loyal subjects that live on the outskirts of the village." At that Cadresean awkwardly squirmed in his chair, noticeably uncomfortable at being included in the plotting of this trip to the outer edges of the hamlet.

"Brother Cadresean has always raved about your cooking dear lady, and it seemed only fitting that we stop by to enjoy your culinary talents," he continued in the same wheezing, whiny voice, not seeming to notice the other monk's uneasiness. "When we heard the news that the twin children of Bairden the Stone Cutter had not shown up at lessons today, why we decided to rush right out here to help locate the little ones, and kill two birds with one stone as it were. We are so happy to see that they are home safely and are not harmed in any way."

He seemed to be very pleased with himself for the story he had

just told. No one in the house appeared to actually believe him, however they all politely nodded as Bairden mumbled words of agreement and thanks for this show of concern. Bannis seemed not to notice, still apparently absorbed with himself at the tale he had just woven to cover his real reason for being here.

"Ahem," Brother Cadresean cleared his throat while settling back in his chair, seemingly eager to change the subject, "Do I recall you saying that there was bearded crumb pie for dessert." He suddenly went pale as the last words cleared his lips. "Oh, ah, I mean, ah, that is if you—," His stammering was accompanied by a steady reddening of his cheeks and forehead that clearly measured his embarrassment.

"I'll get it!" cried Alexandra rising, "Peter, come help me in the kitchen."

Groaning, Peter started to protest, "But certainly you can—"

"Come with me into the kitchen. Now Peter," she cut him off privately as she stared into his bright green eyes. Peter arose, with a silent protest, and both children went quickly through the heavy door and into the kitchen.

"Okay, what's going on Alex?" Peter whispered loudly, once they were alone in the kitchen. "Why all of the sudden the private words, and what was with the strangeness in everyone at dinner tonight? And why did Cadresean call Molensa Mother?"

"I don't know, but I am frightened. It has something to do with that Brother from Solenta, I'm sure," Alex replied. "It is also not like Cadresean to be so quiet during a meal. And did you see him eat? Hardly one plateful, and you know how big his appetite is. All he did was drink and refill his mug several times. I've never seen him

ignore a plate of lamb like he did tonight."

They both smiled thinly at her attempt to break the tension, but were clearly ill at ease.

"Now help me with this dessert, and do not say anything foolish. You bring along that bowl of cream and the extra plates." As she reached the door Alexandra smiled and turned back to her brother and whispered, "You know, I do not think our gentle tutor believes we have any bearded crumb pie out here. He will certainly be relieved to see this. It is fortunate that mother went to Hilldale earlier in the week after all."

Four

Later that night, as the crescent moon slipped into view through the trees outside the second story window of the sleeping room the twins shared, the sound of hoof beats came to them from the roadway below. This was not the same sound as the old draft animal that drew the cart bearing the Julean Monks back to the Abbey earlier this evening, but was rather the awkward, unsteady pounding of an overtired animal, bearing a heavy burden after an arduous journey.

The front door to the house was opened and closed quickly, accompanied by muffled sounds of greeting and the shuffling of heavy boots on the wooden planks below. Soon another horse and rider entered the lane to the cottage, and the ritual was repeated. Two more times within the hour the door was opened to admit travelers – not all apparently arriving by horseback.

"Peter, you awake?" Alexandra quietly asked her brother, who was lying on his pallet across the room from her.

"Yes," whispered Peter. "How many have come in since we were sent to bed?"

"I counted two on horseback and three on foot."

"Three? I only heard the door open twice for visitors on foot."

Peter challenged lightly.

"Yes, but one of those times, two people entered – at least I think it was two. They were very quiet, I had to strain to hear their footsteps, but I am almost certain I heard two enter together."

Alexandra answered somewhat more confidently.

The twins shared another secret – they both had excellent hearing. Alexandra's hearing was a bit more developed than Peter's, she could distinguish faint sounds with more certainty than he. Peter never tired of testing her abilities at this when they were alone, often dropping stones clutched in his hand and challenging her to count them as they hit the ground, with her eyes closed of course. She was almost always correct in her counting – except when Peter cheated.

"Alex, I'm going to open the door so we can hear what they are saying." Peter declared.

"Peter don't you dare! That would be spying."

"I can't stand being closed in up here and not knowing what is going on downstairs," Peter stated in hushed defiance. "I'm going to prop open the door so we can listen."

Peter quietly crept from his sleeping pallet to the door, over more protests from his sister, and slipped out of the room and into the hall. There was no one else upstairs, and he could clearly hear a familiar voice making a point in the room below. He propped the door open with a vase of dried flowers that was on the landing at the top of the stairs, and went back to lie in the dark and listen.

* * *

"...and I say it's too dangerous," the familiar voice continued. "They are too near to Tarbane to be safe now that his interest in the Prophecy has been ignited." The children recognized the speaker as Karoel the woodsman, their mentor and lifelong friend.

"No, I disagree," Bairden was speaking now. "we can't panic like finches at a feeder when a cat appears, every time we hear rumors from Solenta."

"Rumors! Finches at a feeder! " This time it was Brother Cadresean's voice they heard. "How can you say these are just rumors this time! Did you not tonight feed the King's Spymaster right from your own table? Did he not come to Alnen right after the so-called rumor that the midwife Ornwen had returned to Solenta?"

His words were flowing now hurriedly from his lips. "Did he not come rushing right out here to your cottage when he found that two children, twins in their sixteenth summer no less, were missing from lessons at the Abbey? I say we move them now! Move them to Tibouli or Caergana, to one of the other Abbeys where they may be kept safe from harm."

"No, not to Tibouli or Caergana," a new, unfamiliar female voice declared. This voice was different from any the twins had ever heard. It was almost lyrical as its speaker continued her argument. "Your other Abbeys will certainly be watched Brother Cadresean. You have done a fine job up till now, hiding the Chosen Ones. It is time they are gone from here, from under the nose of the enemy."

"No, not the enemy, Lynntania, but merely a pawn of our much greater foe. But yes, I agree it is too dangerous to stay here any longer." This was another vaguely familiar voice, a man's voice, but one that the children could not place. "We will take them out

tomorrow night, after the others arrive. We will not go to another Abbey, or even another settlement in the lands under Tarbane's rule. It is time they travel to Alpenvail, to meet with the Council."

* * *

"What is going on Peter?" Alexandra asked, her voice hushed, rising on her pallet to stare across the dimly lit chamber at the form of her brother lying in the shadows. "My head is spinning, I am so confused. They have to be talking about us, and the King, and that strange monk Bannis. What is this Council and did you hear? Alpenvail, the hidden city of elves Karoel speaks of in his stories!"

Peter had no more understood what they just heard than his sister had. She had always looked to him to explain things she did not fully comprehend, so he took his best stab at it. "Well, as I see it Alex, we are going to be traveling tomorrow, and we are not going to be taking part in the Harvest this year." As soon as he spoke this, he knew it was a dumb thing to say. It certainly did nothing to ease her concerns.

There were quiet sounds of departure now from the rooms below, and it was obvious to the children that the meeting was breaking up, the travelers were not staying the night. A decision had apparently been reached and there was to be no more debate.

* * *

"Bairden," Karoel said with obvious concern in his voice, as he lifted his long handled axe gently from its resting place by the door. "We will all be staying at my cabin tonight. Tomorrow, I will come and lead the children to the first meeting place, where we will wait for three days before continuing on. We will then regroup at Kalystra before we travel into Lumin. The others obviously cannot be

seen in the village by day, so they will go on ahead to be sure there is no danger on the road."

Bairden nodded and clasped Karoel's right arm securely in his own. "They are my life good friend. I will trust them to you until we meet again. Molensa and I can be there before a fortnight has passed."

"I know I don't have to say this," Karoel added, "but be absolutely certain you are not followed."

"We will not be," Bairden replied. "I can easily disguise the journey as another visit to the Eastern marble quarries, and I often take my wife along on extended trips when there are no upcoming celebrations at the Keep. I will make the arrangements to travel to the quarry at Firerock tomorrow morning."

"We are still weeks away from the Harvest Festival so no one will take notice we are missing until many days have passed. By the time we are missed, our trail will be too cold to follow. CadreSean will spread the story that the twins have gone to Caergana Abbey to further their studies, and no one will doubt that at this point in their lives."

Five

Night turned quickly into dawn for the twins, as they discussed possible meanings of the strange conversation they had overheard. The mysterious discussions had been tossed back and forth between the two of them until they were not exactly sure what they had heard, and what they had imagined in their attempts to explain it all. Surely the light of day would bring clarity and understanding to what was a most confusing state of affairs.

Peter and Alexandra went down to breakfast early – at least as early as they dared. As eager as they were to find out what last night was all about, they also did not want to let their guardians know that they had been eavesdropping.

Peter had quickly rushed out into the hall last night, barely in time as Bairden started up the stairs to retire, to replace the pot of dried flowers he had used to prop open the door during their brief period of lawlessness. No one had noticed that the dried flower arrangement was now on the opposite side of the landing from where it had been yesterday.

"Good morning Molensa," the twins chimed together as they entered the kitchen.

"Good morning dears," their guardian answered cheerfully. There was nothing unusual in the way she carried herself to give away the events of the night before. "Would you like a hot breakfast today? There are no lessons you know." She asked the same question, and made the same statement, every day there were no lessons.

Neither twin was hungry, they were both too excited to eat, but they decided it best to follow along and not do anything unusual.

"Yes, please," Alexandra answered for both of them, continuing the ritual, "a hot breakfast would be very nice, thank you. There is quite a chill in the air this morning. It is getting to be more like autumn all the time."

As the children sat down to a breakfast of cinnamon flavored porridge, punctuated with slices of fresh apples, fresh baked bread with blackberry jam, and juice from the manito tree in their garden, Peter asked, barely able to contain himself, "Where's Bairden this morning? Is he not joining us for breakfast?"

Molensa casually looked up from the breadboard, where she was making black bread for the afternoon meal.

"He has gone to the Lord's Keep," she offered, "to make arrangements with the Master Stone Cutter for a trip to the Eastern marble quarries. The local marble is not coming in at a very high grade, and the King has commissioned a new table for his throne room. The Eastern quarries have opened a new vein of blue-green stone and Bairden will need to approve it for quality before it can be shipped here for working."

The room was silent for a moment when Molensa added, "Are both

of you wearing your pendants today?"

"Yes, ma'am," Peter answered absently. They always wore their silver-green pendants. Every day of their lives since both of them could remember, this was the only rule that the two of them never violated. Neither twin really knew why since they stretched nearly every other rule in the house. Why would she ask?

Alexandra glanced meaningfully at Peter before speaking next. "Are we all going to the quarries together this time? The harvest is beginning and there will be no more lessons for a few weeks. "

"No dear," Molensa answered in the same unassuming tone. "You and Peter will be helping Brother Cadresean get the Abbey in shape for an inspection by His Holiness the Archbishop during the Harvest Festival, and then you two will be going on to the Abbey at Caergana across the lake to study for several weeks. Neither of you will be working the harvest this season.

"He has agreed to pay you full wages if you work hard, plus room and board. We can use the extra money to lay in provisions for the winter. I will be traveling east with Bairden, and the monks will take care of you while we are away.

"Brother Cadresean will be here shortly to pick you up. I've packed a travel bag for each of you, sitting there by the kitchen door."

Well this made no sense at all to either of the twins, and Peter was about to open his mouth and object to needing anyone to take care of them, when-

"Come on Peter. We need to go somewhere and talk," Alex spoke silently to her brother. *"We have to figure out what is really going on here."*

Six

"It must be us they were talking about." Peter stated adamantly, as he and Alexandra walked absently toward the little stream running behind their cottage. "When they said *The Chosen Ones*, who else could they have been talking about?"

"I don't know," Alexandra retorted, "but why send us to the Abbey this afternoon if we are supposed to be leaving tonight? And why not just tell us we are going with Karoel if we are not going to leave with them?"

"Yes," Peter continued for her. "Molensa even said that she and Bairden will be traveling to the Eastern quarries, at least we heard that part correctly last night. But why not prepare us for a journey if we are going away as well?"

Alexandra dropped sullenly to the ground beside the little stream. Peter propped himself lightly against a rock facing the smoothly running water.

"If it isn't us," Peter started slowly, "then we have to go along and help out with whatever danger that Molensa and Bairden are

in. We can't just let them go off into the night and disappear. We have to go with them either way."

He was proud that he had thought of this. He wasn't about to be left out of any adventure if he could help it.

"I don't know what to think Peter," his sister answered. "If they wanted us to go with them, surely they would have asked. If we go with them uninvited, we will just be an extra burden."

Alexandra did not share her brother's lust for adventure. She would rather read about a dangerous quest than ever attempt one herself.

A long silence ensued that took both twins away into separate worlds. The soft sounds of water lapping against the rocks in the stream brought an answer to Peter's lips.

"Karoel!" he almost burst as he shouted the name. "Karoel will tell us. He will know exactly what is going on. Isn't he supposed to take the *children* to wherever it is they are going? We still have hours before we are supposed to go to the Abbey, let's go ask him! And besides," he hurriedly added, "the mysterious travelers stayed with Karoel in his cabin in the woods. They might even still be there. We can be there in less than half an hour if we run!"

"Wait Peter. Brother CadreSean is going to be here any minute. We cannot go off to visit Karoel."

"We need to be fast! This will be our only chance to go Sis. Come on!"

Peter was suddenly as excited as a child on his naming day. There was no way Alexandra could refuse him. The pair struck off through the trees toward the woodcutter's cabin. They took a path that cut straight through the heart of the forest, avoiding the road

that rounded the marsh that was the headwaters of the little farm stream. This well traveled path, which they traversed on countless visits to see their friend and hear his stories, might well have saved their lives today.

Seven

Even before Peter and Alexandra arrived at Karoel's cabin in the forest, they could sense that something was very wrong. The normal plume of light blue smoke that spoke of the frugality of the cooking fire within was missing. In its place was a billowing, writhing column of angry black and gray that served simultaneously to hide and reveal the awful reality of the destruction in the clearing.

"By the Gods Peter!" Alexandra whispered as they stepped into the clearing where the proud little cabin once stood. "What could have possibly happened here?"

"I don't know," Peter answered, a slightly glazed look in his eyes, "but whatever happened I can say that it was not an accident, and whoever caused it has not been long away. Look over there!"

He was pointing rigidly to a broad cedar tree that stood near the roadway leading to the cabin. Pinned to the tree at about the height of a man on horseback were the bloody remains of what appeared to be two small people.

By the gruesome look of things, they had been stripped of

clothing and then pinned to the tree with a pair of short swords, thrust one each through their upper arms while they were still alive. In some unimaginable form of torture, they were hacked at repeatedly until they were both quite dead and totally unrecognizable.

Dark swatches of blood ran down the tree from what remained of their bodies, pooling and congealing in the now deep red-black earth at the base of the tree. Bits and pieces of former body parts added to the muck that was stirred up by the hooves of many horses. The stench of death was both awful and to Peter, a little exhilarating.

Alexandra fell to the ground and wretched when she realized what that macabre scene before them held. Peter forced himself to walk slowly closer to the execution tree, a sort of morbid curiosity had set in at his first real experience with death. What an ugly sort of death it must have been, if any sort of violent death can be otherwise. The victims must have screamed terribly before the end. He should have been more horrified by the sight, he knew that, but it was more fascinating than frightening for the boy.

"Alex," Peter said softly, when he returned to her side a few moments later. She was still on her hands and knees, now dry heaving from the lack of anything still in her stomach. "Neither one of them was Karoel, I am pretty sure." He swallowed hard and continued, "I think they were both... elves. They were small and had pointed ears, at least what was left of them, and their hair was golden in color under all that blood. These were in the bushes next to them, they must have been wearing them... before... before they..." He held up two finely woven hooded cloaks that shimmered in the morning light filtering through the trees. The color of the traveling cloaks was not fully distinguishable, each seeming to shift ever so slightly in hue as the

light struck it at different angles. One of them had a gash in the shoulder, still damp with the blood of its wearer.

"Oh Peter, what's going on?" sobbed Alex. "Where is Karoel? Is he... is he dead too? By the Gods, what do we do now?"

What they had to do next was obvious, at least to Peter. They had to take down the mutilated bodies of the elves, if indeed they were elves, and bury them properly. Although he had no idea what a proper burial really meant, he knew enough to be sure that hanging from a tree in the forest next to the now smoldering remains of a woodsman's cabin was not proper for any man... or elf.

Alexandra managed to harden herself to the task at hand and between the two of them, they lowered the remains of the small bodies to the ground and proceeded to dig two graves. These had to be shallow graves, as they only had the short swords to dig with, and besides, neither of them wanted to remain for very long near this place.

When the graves had been dug near the horse trampled location that was once the vegetable garden, and the bodies had been wrapped in the remains of their clothing and carefully lowered into the holes, Peter held the two elven cloaks in his arms and hesitated.

"Alex?" Peter asked, looking across the graves at his blood and grime covered sister. "Do you think we should bury these along with the bodies?"

"What?" Alexandra asked absently.

"Should we bury the cloaks with their owners? It seems a shame to place such fine garments into a hole in the ground. Besides, you never know when something like this may come in handy. If these are truly made by elves, they might be magical or—"

"Oh Peter just stop it! I don't care what you do with those stupid cloaks. If they are magic, they certainly didn't help their owners any. Can't we just get out of here!"

"I'm... I'm sorry Alex," Peter said, "I... Why don't you go back down the trail to the stream and clean yourself up. I'll finish here and be along in a few minutes."

Alexandra turned and walked slowly back down the trail through the woods. She was still in shock over the sight in the clearing, and her head was spinning with the events of the past twelve hours. If she had not walked this trail a thousand times before, she might have wandered off into the woods and been lost. For a moment she thought she heard her name called by a woman. The voice was faint and she looked around confused, but no one was there.

Peter bundled one of the short swords together with the elven cloaks and placed them aside. He finished filling in the shallow graves and said a few words to help guide the souls of their new occupants to heaven, if indeed that is where elven souls went after they died.

In a final, vain effort to find something that might help him decide what to do next, Peter walked through the now burned out remains of the woodsman's cottage. In one corner of what had been the kitchen, there was a long thin bundle wrapped tightly in cloth that, although still smoldering, appeared to have survived the inferno.

Peter brought the charred bundle out onto the grass and carefully laid it open. Inside were a gleaming white short bow and a fletch of equally brilliant white arrows. "I never knew Karoel to use a bow," Peter thought out loud. The bow was loosely strung with a single thin strand of extremely strong cord. He carefully added these

new treasures to his bundle of cloaks and sword, and took off down the trail to catch up to his sister. "You never know when something like this may come in handy," he found himself saying for the second time today.

Peter stopped once, a short way into the trees and stopped, thinking that he heard something stirring behind him. A hard look back at the clearing and the smoking wreckage of the cabin revealed nothing, so Peter turned again and was off after his sister.

Eight

Their long walk out of the woods was in complete silence. The twins had scrubbed the dirt and dried blood from their skin and clothing in the refreshing waters of the silver stream, but the bath had done nothing to cleanse their minds of the horrible events that had taken place at Karoel's cabin. Alexandra did not notice that Peter was toting a bundle of strangely colored cloth.

As the two of them finally cleared the trees, Peter stopped suddenly in his tracks.

"Alex," Peter almost whispered in alarm. "If the reason that Karoel's house was burned and those two... elves... were killed was because of the meeting in our house last night, the people who did this might have also have known of the meeting." His eyes were wide and the color had drained from his cheeks.

"RUN! Peter RUN!" Alexandra seemed to suddenly snap out of a dream. "We must get home! Molensa and Bairden might be in danger. Oh RUN Peter!"

She was already twenty steps ahead of her brother through the

wispy brown grasses and soft white daisies, when Peter finally made his legs react to the pounding in his heart.

"Oh by the Gods," Alexandra voiced wordlessly. "If anything has happened to them while we were away... Oh why do I let you drag me all over creation Peter!"

* * *

When the house finally came into view, nothing at first appeared to be out of the ordinary. There was no plume of black, writhing smoke reaching up to the heavens. There were no bodies skewered to the trees that lined the lane. No armored horsemen hacking and slashing at helpless victims until all that was life in them drained out and soaked into the earth.

All that there was, was silence.

"Molensa! Bairden!" It was Alexandra that first burst into the house through the outside door to the kitchen. "Molensa! Molensa!"

There was no answer to Alexandra's cries. No one was here, no one at all. Peter burst through the door behind her, red faced and completely out of breath. His ears were pounding with the racing of his heart, so loudly in fact, that he could not have heard anyone answer Alexandra's cries if there was anyone there to reply.

"Whe-heh-where? Wha-ha-what?" was all he managed to say, before he dropped his hands to his knees and tried to catch his breath. He was panting and gasping for air like some wild beast after a race for its life. He slumped his bundle off his shoulders and onto the wide pine board floor.

The inside of the house appeared as if it had been ravaged by a whirlwind. The kitchen table and chairs were overturned and sprawled across the floor. One of the chairs was badly broken, it's legs

splintered and thrust upward at odd angles, and everything in the room was lightly dusted with flour that had been scattered from the morning's baking. The heavy door between the kitchen and the main room of the house had been dragged down from its hinge pins, to lay off-kilter across the opening, partially obscuring what lay beyond.

What was through that doorway, in the main room of the house, was not spared from whatever had nearly annihilated the kitchen. The shelves lining the outside walls had all been cleared; the once neat rows of books and the carefully displayed knickknacks lay scattered and broken throughout the room. The drawers from the oak desk where Molensa kept the household records were unceremoniously upended, their contents hopelessly unsorted on the hardwood floor among the shards of crystal and pottery that once held memories of places and people visited through the years.

There was what appeared to be drying blood on the wall and on the floor by the front door, where the remnants of the cloak rack were disjointly leaning against the stone wall.

"Peter, this looks like blood!" Alexandra cried out, bending over the slowly drying stain by the door. "Oh by the Gods! Molensa! Bairden!"

"Hold on a minute Sis," Peter replied calmly. "We don't know for sure that anything has happened to them. This could be anything, it doesn't have to be blood. And besides, Bairden is off with the Master Stone Cutter, and Molensa is... Molensa is..."

The two children looked at each other and panic set in again. They raced across the broken room and dashed up the stairs, taking two at a time. The upstairs sleeping chambers were as ravaged as the rest of the house, with all the doors either wrested from their

hinges or otherwise severely battered. Nothing escaped whatever demons of destruction had been here.

Clothing was rent apart and heaped in the corners of each room, as if the damage were done in a search for something of extreme importance that may have been sewn into the lining of a winter cloak, or the inseam of a pair of riding breeches. Nothing was left undamaged, or not searched.

After the twins had gone through every room, including the root cellar beneath the kitchen floor, searching for a sign that Molensa and Bairden, if he had been here, had escaped before the wreckage had begun, they were satisfied only that the two were not lying dead or dying in some corner of the cottage.

* * *

The twins had now walked out to the barn and observed that the level of damage that took place inside the house, had not been exercised out here. Although there were obvious signs that the building had been searched, and there was no trace of any of the livestock that should have been in the pens, the barn itself had come through with only minor damage.

"Peter do you hear that?" Alexandra asked suddenly.

"Hear what?"

"Horses, at least three of them, maybe four. It must be Bairden and Molensa come back for us."

Alexandra turned and started back for the barn door when her brother grabbed her hard by the arm and pulled her back.

"No, Alex!" he cautioned, "It might be the ones who did this, come back to finish the job they started. Up to the loft, quickly."

Reluctantly at first, desperately needing to believe that the

riders on the lane were friends, she finally gave in, and together they climbed quickly into the hay loft. They crossed over to the sliding door that offered a view into the barnyard below. The horsemen were still too far away to see or hear them, thanks to Alexandra's early warning, so they slid open the door and proceeded to bury themselves in the loose hay just below the opening's ledge.

"Corporal Harlen!" a rough voice bellowed out from below.

"Yes, Captain," one of the riders snapped in return.

"Take two soldiers and search the barn and the other outbuildings. Sergeant," he said to another rider in the group, "you bring the other men and come with me to the house."

Three horses continued steadily onward toward the barn, as the other riders dismounted and stepped up to the porch of the now disemboweled cottage.

"There are at least seven of them Alex," Peter silently chided his sister, *"you only counted three."*

"At least I heard them before they were on top of us." Alex answered him curtly, and out loud. "If we had waited until you had heard them, we would have been back out in the yard already and have been found out for sure."

"I wish I had my bow, or at least my new sword," Peter added, "I left them on the floor in the kitchen!"

"What are you talking about? What bow?" she questioned, "And what would you do if you had a bow or a sword, leap down and fight seven armed soldiers on horseback? You would end up just like the dead elves in the forest."

* * *

The three riders had dismounted and entered the barn below the

twins. The stall doors were being thrown open and the barrels of grain and fodder steadily turned on to their sides.

"Private," the one called Harlen ordered, "check the loft."

"Oh my God Peter, there is no place to go!" Alexandra silently whimpered. *"We are caught for sure!"*

As the soldier named Borgen reached the top of the ladder, the captain called out to Corporal Harlen from the house.

"Hold on Corporal. The mark has been carved into the door here. This place has already been searched, and not in a very tidy manner from what I can see. Must have been King's Elite who were ahead of us this morning. Mount up and let's get on to the next house."

"Just as well," the one called Harlen muttered under his breath, walking back into the light through the wide barn door. "I don't like this matter one bit." He continued his remarks a bit louder now. "Why we have mustered the entire garrison to search for two children is beyond me. You would think that they were worth more than all the gold in the realm, the way that Bannis fellow is conducting this search. What did they do to make them so darned important, anyway?"

"I don't know and I don't care," replied the captain coldly. "We will search every house surrounding the village as we were ordered. The sooner we get through this, the sooner we can get things back to normal around here. Now mount up and let's get on with it."

"Borgen!" Harlen called up to the man in the loft, "Let's go! This place has already been searched and the brats are gone already."

The soldier had been two steps from the rigid bodies of the terrified twins, covered too loosely with straw to really hide effectively, at the window end of the dimly lit loft. He was methodically prodding the lumpy piles of dried grasses with the tip

of his broadsword in an attempt to ferret out anyone who might be hiding there. The children's breathing had stopped and both were sure that the soldier would hear the pounding of their hearts – or else stab them squarely in the back – when the order from below turned him from his search.

"By the Gods!" Peter spoke silently to his sister. *"By the Gods."*

* * *

After the soldiers had left and the sounds of their horses had faded away, Peter and Alexandra climbed down from the loft and swiftly crossed the yard to the rear door of the cottage. They went back inside and stood for a moment, staring at the mess that used to be their tidy little kitchen.

"Peter, I am terribly frightened." Alexandra said softly, sitting on a chair that she had rescued from the disorder, while stroking absently at the pendant hanging from its fine gold chain around her neck.

"I'm scared too Sis, but we have to get out of here and find Bairden and Molensa," then he added solemnly, "that is if they are still alive."

Peter sat across the now upright table from his sister, fingering the short sword he had pulled from his bundle on the floor, now laying on the table in front of him. He had not noticed earlier that it was extremely lightweight and had not one scratch on either its handle or blade; both were as smooth and highly polished as if they had been newly forged; and this after serving as a shovel used to bury its former owner.

"If we cannot find them," Peter said now absently, "we must continue on to Alpenvail ourselves, to meet... to meet with the Council or whatever. It's what they would have wanted, what they were trying to do."

"Alpenvail!" moaned Alexandra. "How will we ever find our way to an elven city that does not even exist! Alpenvail is part of a fairy tale that men like Karoel tell to children to make their eyes pop out. And besides Peter, we don't even know if we are THE Children, that all this fuss is about. For all we know, we are late to our Harvest Festival jobs at the Abbey, and Brother CadreSean is starting to worry about us already. Bairden and Molensa could be well on the road to the Eastern quarries, just like they said they were going to do. We are the only ones who are not where we are supposed to be."

"Alex, there are no other options, we must be the children they were talking about. Don't you see, we cannot go to the Abbey, the woman we heard at the meeting last night made that clear. If we go now to any Abbey, we will certainly be caught, and most likely turned over to the soldiers who burned down Karoel's house and killed those two elves."

"You don't know that soldiers burned Karoel's cabin. It might have been robbers, or outlaws, or even, even... And those two men were not elves. You don't know that, they could have been just small men... could have been..." her voice trailed off as the truth of Peter's statement hit home.

"Besides," Peter continued, "Brother CadreSean was one of the men at the meeting here last night. If the soldiers knew about Karoel, they certainly must have known about him. The Abbey is definitely out of the question."

* * *

It took the better part of the next hour, but Peter finally convinced Alexandra that the only choice was to travel to the East. They agreed that they would go first to Hilldale, where they would seek horses and assistance from long time friends of the family. Here they would hopefully find their guardians on their way to the quarry as planned. If they did not, from there they would make their way to the Eastern Lumin Mountains, where they hoped to find Alpenvail, the city of elven lore. They talked briefly of Kalystra, but neither of them had any idea where it might lie. They at least knew if Alpenvail existed, it was in the Lumin Mountains, although that information would hardly serve as a map.

The more he argued the point, the more convinced Peter became. "It all had to be true," he thought to himself. "There can be no other meaning to all of this. We are The Children."

If Peter had known exactly what they were in for, he would likely not have been as eager to begin this adventure.

"Come on. Let's go now," Peter insisted. "We can go hide in the sugar shack down by the stream until dark, but we need to get out of the house before anyone else comes here looking for us."

The contents of the traveling packs that Molensa had packed for them earlier that day were spread around the kitchen floor. The twins quickly packed what they needed, went out the kitchen door and across the dooryard to a narrow path that led down to the remote sugar shack. There they waited till dark, talking together about what this all could mean – trying to work out in their heads what was going on around them.

"Shhhh. Peter," Alex shushed her brother, "I just heard someone

call my name. A woman's voice. Sounded like the same woman we heard last night."

"Huh?" Peter looked at his sister, puzzled. " I didn't hear anything."

"I swear I heard my name. Almost like you were talking in my head, but with a woman's voice. I thought I heard the same voice when we were at Karoel's cabin. After... after-," she couldn't finish the sentence, the horrible sight of the dead elves still etched in her mind.

"Just that imagination of yours again Alex."

"Sh! Listen." Both the twins sat quietly. "Nothing now. I guess it was just my imagination after all. I'm so jumpy with all that's going on. I don't understand any of this Peter."

"Neither do I Alex. That's why we need to find someone and get some answers. Something big is happening, I can feel it. I just don't know what it is."

Nine

The predawn climb up one thousand steps from the valley floor to the Pinnacle of the Rising Sun was still invigorating for Fynnteal, even though he had done so for most of his long adult life. Through countless years the elves had occupied Alpenvail, their secret city hidden away in a deep valley high in the Lumin Mountains east of the Arithe Ocean. Each morning since the beginning of the age, the sun had been met by a Priest or Priestess of Lumin without failure.

Every sunrise on the mountain, the Priests and played their part in the ritual to bring light and warmth to the valley below, driving away the high mountain winter and preserving the Valley of the Elves in perpetual spring. The Priests would open the gates of power and allow the sun to enter. The sun would gladly enter and grace the earth below with her life giving warmth and light.

The morning rites were as much a part of the way of life for the elves of Lumin as were eating and sleeping. Not once in more than ten centuries had the sun not answered to the magic of the runes and the song of the Priest or Priestess who climbed the peak to greet her.

Today would be no different.

"Alnomentae Hekearnah.

Rethaysau, Rethaysau.

Starnomenea Earthosen,

Domenti Rethaysau.

"Alnomentao Heirkonen

Rethaysau, Rethaysau.

Starnomeneo Earthosento,

Domenaei Dometri."

The Priest stood tall in his flowing silk robes, singing the age old words that were the Rites of Spring, and signing before him with his bejeweled right hand. The runes of magic hung stationary in the air, drawing power from the stones set into the priest's rings, as they slowly formed from the magic, shimmering ghostly white against the gray, cloud-filled sky. The meaning of the words had been lost over the millennia, as they were cast in a language not of this world, however they had been dutifully sung by the loyal priests and priestesses since the time the world was broken.

As the singing and signing drew to a close, a bolt of blue-green lightning exploded from the top of the glistening white tower high in the center of the valley below, and streaked toward the peak where Fynnteal stood. The sigil that were the runes of power flashed through every color of the rainbow before they finally faded away, and the air was charged with so much energy that Fynnteal's body hair stood on end. The feeling energized the old priest. The Rites were

successful one more time. She would come, and there would be no winter in the valley today. This is what kept the old priest alive. The excitement of this moment filled him with the very energy of life.

Ten

Alpenvail is the crowning achievement of the elves currently living in the land of mortals. It's polished stone towers and graceful spinnerets, even on the lowliest of public buildings, gleamed with gold and silver in the morning light. Flowers of every kind and color imaginable were always in bloom in the well tended gardens that lined every walk, painting the breeze with their pastel mix of perfume.

Structure after beautiful structure rimmed the valley floor, each trying in vain to outshine it's neighbor, each in turn serving to draw one's eye the full length of the vale to where the Palace of the Queen rose majestically, overshadowing the lesser jewels in the crown. The Palace was not only beautiful, it inspired awe even in the elves who had seen it every day of their lives. The outer walls were sheathed in flawless white marble, each stone set so perfectly that not a crack or imperfection could be seen.

The twin towers in the center of the massive courtyard were

covered with a living shell of floral magnificence. The Queen's Tower was cloaked with climbing roses in every shade of red imaginable, the individual plants sprouting from ornately carved boxes attached at every necessary vantage point on the tower's walls.

The King's Tower was a perfect compliment to his Lady's, with climbing irises, their white and blue flowerettes intertwined in an ever raising spiral, drawing the viewers eyes helplessly to its peak. At the uppermost ramparts, a floral bridge spanned the towers, red intermingled with blue and white, joining the Queen to her King in all their glory.

Along the Southern walls of the hidden valley, the famed Terraces of Alpenvail were set right into the side of the mountain. These mystical gardens rose well over a thousand feet from the valley floor, and hosted plants and trees long since vanished from the world outside the valley. The fruits of this garden fed the population of the city and the year round spring meant that nothing was ever out of season.

Mulberry trees blanketed the slopes in the extensive silkworm farms on the Northern terraces, which provided the elves with their primary garment making material. The need for heavy woolen or animal hide clothing had been eliminated through the powerful sun's magic, and fine silks were preferred for covering, as well as for showing off fine elven features. The fabrics were died with crushed flowers and the bark and fruit of plants growing in the vale, so the bright colors of spring were echoed in garments worn throughout the city. Even the robes of the Elven Priests were colored green with the essence of the forest peony, and seemed to glow of their own accord as they scurried around in the predawn light.

Birds of all species nested freely in among the spiraling towers and citadels of the elven paradise. From the high flying falcons, trained by men of the outer world to hunt for sport, to the golden-crowned tiella bird who served as the Queen's messenger, throughout the valley birds of every species had been known here.

Bees too were plentiful, and filled a special niche in the lives of the elves. The bees provided honey. Honey would be considered by many, the single most important food item in the diet of an elf. Honey is consumed raw; it is cooked into almost every food; it makes it's way into cakes and breads as well as candies, and serves as the accent to almost every meal. An intoxicating golden elixir is made through a special fermenting process using honey combined with grapes from the Eastern slopes.

Honey is also traded via the King's city of Kalystra, the water-city of the elves hidden deep in the Misty Woods, for all manner of goods from outside the vale – the most prized of which served the other major vice of the elves – chocolate. Through this elaborate and secret trade route, the silks of the elves have been sent to the far corners of the world, although almost no one from the world below truly knows their origin.

No uninvited visitor has gazed upon the shining towers of Alpenvail since the first stone was set in place before the Breaking of the World. The Elven city was successfully and completely hidden away in the mists and frozen waste of the towering and imposing Lumin Mountains, the great Eastern shadow of the Western world, and this was exactly what it's residents wanted.

Secret trails ran both in and out of the valley, for the elves did trade discretely with the world outside, but these were known

only to a few, and most of those were elves living in Kalystra, or selected residents of the vale itself. No humans or other mortals were privy to the paths that led into, over or under the treacherous passes, and all dealings with them were done through old, secure family ties and blood bonds that, if broken, would be cause for immediate and painful death.

The elves living here enjoyed the peace of isolation, a calm and soon to be shown false peace.

Eleven

Turbin had been waiting patiently for the right moment to act. His service to the Lumin Priests was favored by most for the intense and faithful manner in which he carried out his duties. Turbin had always been the first to step forward, volunteering for a difficult or dreary task, and never complaining, even when that task meant traveling to the world below to deliver a message or parcel to Kalystra.

Most of the other acolytes preferred to stay in the valley, where things were calm, and quiet, and safe. Turbin was most suited to this duty, as his elven features were not as pronounced as other elves. He was small in stature, but his ears had very little point to their tips, his eyes were hazel, and his hair a soft brown. Facial hair – unknown to elves – was also present in the way of a slight beard that the elf had to scrape off his chin with a razor sharp knife every morning. Far, far in the past, his ancestors were rumored to have bred with humans, however this was most often spoken in

secret, as Turbin was sensitive to this potential taint of his elven blood. Most believed that a union of elf and human would be sterile and the activity was forbidden. Turbin did not know if this part was true, as he had never lay with a woman, but he didn't really care.

This particular morning Turbin's patience and suffering had paid off. He was asked to go to the Tower, to polish the Stone that was his only real goal in life, his only reason for being.

"Your Holiness" Turbin bowed deeply, as he addressed the priest standing in front of him in flowing green robes – who had asked for him by name from among all the acolytes in his service.

"Rise, my young friend," Fynnteal bid him as he placed a strong lean hand on the young elf's shoulder. "You have been selected to polish the Stone this day," he spoke solemnly. "Take this key, and go directly to the Tower. The supplies you need are there already. The sun is still low in the sky, and this is the perfect time to tend to our most precious elfstone."

Fynnteal removed from around his neck, a golden chain bearing a single intricate key, and placed it lightly around the neck of the acolyte. The key was covered with fine runes, etched into the curved shaft and covering every bare surface.

"Return straight to me when your task is completed," the priest added, looking directly into the younger elf's sparkling hazel eyes. "Do not linger any longer than is absolutely necessary, and stop for no reason on your return trip. Do you understand?"

"Completely your Grace," Turbin answered calmly, dropping again to one knee and lowering his head to hide his face. His moment come, Turbin was deathly afraid that his excitement would be give him away. Fynnteal, if he noticed, only thought the young elf expressed his

excitement and honor at being asked to perform the most favored acolyte task in the valley.

* * *

"Now is the time," Turbin swore silently to himself. "Now is my time to finally serve my true Master!" Turbin had to take a quick side trip to his quarters to collect a few items, and hoped that along the way he would not be discovered. He had been instructed to go straight to the Tower, however this could not wait. He hoped the ancient priest had not seen him duck into the building on the way by, but would simply plead that he needed to use the privy should be discovered not already on the way to his task.

* * *

The short walk to the White Tower, standing sentinel in the Menta Renjunkai – the Monument to All That Was – seemed to take forever. There could not be more than one hundred paces between the green marble temple complex that housed the Faithful and the base of the Tower, but each step echoed painfully in the ears of the young acolyte as he strode them in silence.

Turbin stood before the Tower door, staring into the runes that covered it completely. No one in Alpenvail could read the language of the runes any longer, but Turbin had been taught which ones to touch as he inserted the key in order to be let into the tower and not to be killed on the spot by the power of the stone. The protections of the Tower were many, and had guarded the Stone for more than a thousand years.

After touching the runes in the proper order, Turbin slowly inserted the finely made key into the lock of the only entrance to the tower. Turbin could not help but feel awed at the beauty of the

White Tower, whose walls were as smooth and flawless as glass. Indeed they likely were of made of glass, since the stone of which they were wrought was said to have been created by the power of the Triadine itself, before It was broken and sent to the far corners of the world for safekeeping. He was going now to touch one of the elements of the most powerful talisman to ever be created. Touch it, and steal it.

Once inside the solid glass-stone door, Turbin did as he had been instructed, over and over again during the long years of apprenticeship he had endured to get close to the stone – he closed and locked the door behind him. The upper door would not open if the lower door were not shut and locked. The interior walls glowed softly from the light of the sun outside, and actually appeared to him now to be semi-transparent, allowing light to filter through their mass to illuminate the stairway within.

He climbed the stairs, counting silently as he did so, their polished smooth surfaces offering to throw him back down to grave injury if he did not pay the utmost attention to his footing. This was a stair not to be tread on lightly, and one that could be defended by a single elf from above if needed, as no enemy would be able to gain sufficient purchase to charge upward before being knocked off-balance from any sort of defense from above.

Four-hundred-fifty-seven steps marked the top of the tower, where again the golden key was required to gain entrance to the open roofed chamber at its apex. The landing here was narrow and smooth, and the mere outward opening of the door was almost enough to knock Turbin off his feet and send him plummeting to injury, or possibly even death on those alabaster risers. Had it not been for the golden door pull that had just now served as a critical hand hold, his task

may have been ended even before it was begun.

Turbin passed through the upper, rune-less door and pushed it closed behind him, again sliding the key into the lock and turning until he heard the tumblers click, sealing himself out on the tower with the Stone. The chamber walls were also smooth as glass, which he had expected even before he actually saw them. The ceiling was open to the sky, blue and bright above now, and the walls stopped just above head height. Turbin resisted the urge to raise himself over the wall and peer down to the valley floor below, fearing that if he did, his uneasiness in matters of height might cause him to swoon and make his downward journey all the more difficult. It would be hard enough as it was, that he already knew.

What Turbin saw when he turned into the center of the open space for the first time, literally took away his breath and forced his heart up into his throat. There on a simple gray stone pedestal in the center of the Chamber of the Stone, stood a glistening, green elfstone, more brilliant than anything he could have ever imagined. The stone shone with a radiance that would dazzle the very Goddess of the Sun, should She stand here beside him and view it Herself. In addition to its brilliance, the Stone was covered in the most intricately carved runes that interlocked and intertwined, leading the eye around and around until you had to stop following it or lose yourself in it's depths.

The light pouring over the walls of the chamber seemed to fill the Stone with silvery green liquid. The radiance was amplified to such a degree that Turbin was nearly blinded as he was drawn deeper and deeper into it's depths. There was something absolutely addictive in the light at the center of this magical jewel, and Turbin finally

forced himself to turn away, afraid that he might be lost forever in the seductive abyss. Cleaning the Stone had to be done early in the day, as by high noon the chamber was so bright, that the task was virtually impossible.

* * *

Turning to the task now at hand, Turbin attempted to remove the stone and place it in the cloth bag that he had brought along for this purpose. The stone would not budge from its resting place. There was a narrow, elongated hole bored cleanly through the middle of the stone, although you would never know it when viewed from the side, as it in no way distorted the stone's clarity. There appeared to be something protruding part of the way into this opening from the pedestal below, effectively locking the gem into place.

Turbin worked on loosening the green jewel for as long as he dared, and then decided he could wait no longer.

He pulled back the sleeves of his tunic to reveal on his wrists wide seamless black metal bands that appeared to absorb all of the available light. Nothing reflected from the ebony surface, and their mere appearance suggested something evil.

Turbin held both his arms before him, palms up and level with his heart. He stood facing away from the Stone, the sun at his back and eyes tightly closed.

"By the powers that formed the world, the sacred words to be spoken, I call out to thee oh Lord and Master," Turbin began quietly. "Guide me that I may succeed in my quest.

*"Alnauck-veriath,
numen-terli,*

alnauck-veriath,
ramen-ramack!"

He opened his eyes and stared at the space between his out-thrust wrists. As he did so, the light in the chamber dimmed slightly, then all around him went black. He was still awake and his eyes were still open, but he was no longer viewing the Chamber of the Stone in the Tower in Alpenvail.

"What is so important that you dare risk calling to me from the heart of the City of Elves!" A darkly sinister voiced boomed out in his mind.

Turbin fell to his knees, still seeing nothing in the darkness.

"Master," he began excitedly. "I have the object of my quest within my grasp. I have touched its surface and felt its power."

"What?" the voice cried in surprise. "You have the Stone in your possession?"

"Well, not exactly my Lord, but it is right here in front of me. I stand alone in the Tower. I can reach out and lay my hands on its emerald surface."

"Then why do you wait? Why do you not bring it to me this instant!" The dark voice demanded, the surprise in his voice turning to real anger.

"It is," Turbin feebly offered, "it is... stuck. I may not budge it from it's resting place, though I try with all my might!"

For a moment there was silence. A silence that Turbin felt might swallow him up forever.

"Turbin," the voice said softly, "place your wrists against the stone, one on either side. Be sure your hands are making contact on

both sides of the stone, and your skin is not touching the stone at any point."

The darkness faded just a little, and Turbin was able to locate the stone behind him and comply with his Dark Master's wish.

"I am in position, my Master" he said when he felt he was in the correct place.

The earth beneath the tower seemed now to tremble slightly. The stone grew hot to the touch, but Turbin could not remove his wrists. Hotter and hotter the stone grew, until Turbin felt the flesh burning from his arms beneath the metal bands. He could smell his roasting limbs and imagine the flame engulfing him and burning him to a cinder right there and then.

When the pain was beyond anything he had ever felt before, even the excruciating pain that he still remembered from the time the Bands of Obedience were first fastened to his wrists, a brilliant flash of light and a powerful blast threw him free of the Stone of Power and across the chamber, where he crashed heavily into the door.

"It is done," the voice of his Master called to him wearily. "The stone is free. Now bring it to me as fast as you can."

The light resumed its normal intensity as the darkness faded away, and Turbin raised his hands to his face to rub away the pain caused by the brilliant flash of light. He stopped and stared at the wrist bands now directly in front of his face, expecting to see the scarring from the intense heat he had earlier endured. There was no damage, no skin burned black and flaking off the bone, no blisters binding the bracelets to the skin with their seeping ooze. Nothing but the black bands, absorbing any light that hit them, as they had looked for all these years.

A shadow passed quickly across the turret of the tower as something moved between Turbin and the sun. Turbin looked up quickly, instinct driving his actions. A lone bird of prey, possibly a falcon, was soaring on the wind high over the valley, apparently searching for his next meal in one of the hapless field mice hundreds of feet below. It gave a piercing cry and leveled off toward the West, quickly out of sight behind the half walls of the tower.

Rising, Turbin returned now to the stone, whose brilliance was dimmed by a white powdery residue that coated its many faceted surface, and filled in each of the runes so they were completely obscured. He easily removed the gem from its place of rest and dropped it into the cloth bag. Before he left the chamber however, he placed upon the pedestal a rune covered black stone that his Master had given him to set in its place. This new stone now swallowed all the light in the chamber, in the same manner as did the bracelets Turbin wore on his wrists, and filled the tower with a feeling of dread.

Turbin placed the cloth bag in his private chambers before he returned the Tower key to Fynnteal. When questioned by the priest on the successful completion of his task, Turbin smiled broadly and answered, "Yes your Grace, I was completely successful in my task." Fynnteal made a mental note to check on the work of the elf after the Rites the following morning. He liked the eagerness in this young acolyte, he must remember to recommend him for advancement into the Priesthood.

This was the last time anyone in Alpenvail laid eyes on the young elf Turbin.

Twelve

The next day dawned gray and cold. Queen Lilliene had not yet risen from her eider-down sleeping platform in the Chamber of Roses, when her door burst open and three crimson robed figures practically flew into the room, their silken, hoodless garments flowed wildly behind them in their haste.

"Arise! My Queen, arise! Awaken! Come quickly!" the leader of the trio shouted in alarm. "The sun! The sun does not rise!"

The Queen descended slowly from her resting place, shaking the sleep from her head and ignoring the terrible breach of protocol on the part of her attendants. She slept late today in part because of a late night celebration, where she had clearly had too much honey wine – something she was seeming to do more and more these days. Her long golden hair fell loosely over her shoulders, as she had unbound it for sleep.

She allowed her still panicky household staff to lead her out on the balcony adjoining her bed chamber. On the veranda, the normally

warm breezes that gently caressed everything in the valley, had been replaced by a harsh, frozen, biting wind that threatened to tear the skin from their very bones. The roses that climbed upward from the carved flower boxes at her feet were wilted and covered with a thin layer of frost.

"Go back inside, quickly," the Queen said calmly turning back, the frantic look in her eyes belying the calmness in her voice. "Where is Fynnteal?" she asked the squire sternly, "Why has he or one of the others not gone to the Pinnacle today? Why have the Rites not been performed?"

"Your Majesty," the squire answered, bowing his head and dropping to one knee as he regained his lost composure, "Fynnteal is dead. He reportedly was swept down from the peak by an angry blast of wind. His neck and back were broken in the fall."

"Though that is unfortunate, we must send another to sing the Rites of Spring at once. Go to the Menta Renjunkai right away and—"

"My Queen... oh by the Nordae," the squire interrupted, rolling his hands over and over in his lap, again forgetting his station. "My Queen," he started again, "before Fynnteal died, he told the two attending him that the Rites had been performed. He said he had repeated them twice – after the first singing had not formed the link between Stone and Sky. They say he spoke the following words as his last breath passed his lips, 'The fire did not come... the wind ... the wind came in its place. A cold wind... A wind of death. Tell the Queen I sang the Rites and the fire did not come. It did not come... The Stone. The Tower...'"

* * *

The Queen stared absently out the rose colored windows past the

veranda to the valley beyond. There was a fine white powder now starting to fall from the sky, colored pink from the hue of the window glass. The wind came in fits and starts, swirling the whiteness around until it looked like the fine spray that flew in all directions when ocean storms drove huge waves to crash to their deaths against the knees of the Lumin Mountains far to the East.

The unimaginable had happened. It was snowing in Alpenvail.

* * *

For the next two days, the elves fought off the onslaught of winter. Another priest had been sent to the peaks to call forth the Rites of Spring, and he too failed. The Tower of the Stone was no longer accessible. The door runes failed to activate and no one could enter or climb the smooth outer tower walls.

The Queen was at a loss for what to do. She had managed to scry her daughter in Kalystra, and help was on the way. The only option left to her was to evacuate the valley, to take her people down to the land of mortals – evacuate to the King's city of Kalystra. They were organizing to leave now, however the elves living in the vale were not a traveling people. They were used to lives of leisure and were slow to abandon their beautiful city.

Each day the storm grew worse. By the third day it was raging so heavily that just to see a dozen feet ahead was nearly impossible. The cold was intense and the snow had built up to waist deep in many areas. It was time to go now before they would be trapped in this valley forever.

If any of the elves in Alpenvail had not been busy trying to stay warm and to protect what little they could from the sudden onslaught of winter, a winter that had already dropped enough snow to

smother all the gardens in cold white death, they might have seen a small flock of delicate golden-headed birds circle the Tower of the Queen one time before heading north into the teeth of the storm to disappear into the white death that closed in on the city.

She prayed to the old Gods that some of her precious birds would get through. She had a sinking feeling that the Prophecy was in play now. The dwarves would be critical in fighting the great evil again. Their portion of the Triadine would be needed, and the Stone would have to be restored to power – if that was at all possible.

Right now the elves had to get out of the valley, before it became their death. She prayed to the Nordae that her husband was sending help now. None had yet arrived, but it was time now to leave with or without help from below.

Thirteen

Turbin had spent the rest of the day after he had stolen the Stone, trying to assign himself to an errand that would take him out of the valley. By evening, it was clear he would not be granted official leave to go down by one of the guarded paths that led from Alpenvail to the world below. It seemed that there were no errands to be run today to the City of the King. The only option left to him was the ancient tunnel that his Master had informed him existed in the Eastern valley wall.

It took him the better part of the night to locate the entrance to the long forgotten Way between Alpenvail and the Eastern sea. The route was once heavily used to shuttle trade goods back and forth between the early elven settlements on the shoreline far below, and the high elven city.

* * *

The last of the conflicts with the humans all but annihilated the fishing villages that perched on the islands and beaches beneath

the Mountains of Lumin. Only a few human settlements remained, and they were focused on feeding themselves on this harsh and rugged coast, and not into exploring the seaside mountains. Since that time, the way became unused and ultimately forgotten, its valley entrance long obscured in an overgrown copse of cedar and elderberry. Its former use for trade with the Southern dwarves and cities to the East was long abandoned and the elves had all moved into the city to escape the intrusion of humans outside of their secret valley.

Although once quite heavily traveled, with tramways running parallel to a generous path where five elves could walk abreast, the tunnel now had fallen into a state of disrepair, a sign of the centuries of disuse and neglect it had suffered. In places the rubble that had fallen from the ceiling and the walls allowed only passage on hands and knees. In these places Turbin would push his bundle ahead of him and slither through as best he could.

His path was to take him beneath the mountains to an exit above the white cliffs that were pounded by the sea to the East. During the long period of its abandonment, the tunnel had been populated by many creatures of the perpetual night, and there were many side tunnels that one could lose one's way upon – the apparent homes, or byways of some burrowing animal.

* * *

During the long journey through the darkness, his path lit by the golden light cast forward from one of the magical lamps of the elves, Turbin had only one goal in mind. Once he delivered the Stone to his Master, his mind would be released from the constant torment he was under to complete this most important task.

Turbin had with him a rune lantern, one of the few allowed items

from before the Breaking that used rune magic. The runes were simple and the gem inside was very slowly eaten away by its use. His lantern used a simple quartz stone and would last for several weeks of use, though Turbin was able to speak the words to activate and deactivate it himself, extending its life. He was not a magi, but he did understand a few simple runes and their use.

Turbin did not realize of course what his action in the valley had precipitated behind him, he only knew he had to reach his Master immediately and was not to delay. His driving thought was simply that his suffering of nearly fifty years was about to end.

He had no way to judge the amount of time that had passed since he entered the abandoned tunnel. There was no cycle of the sun or the moon, no water clock to gauge the passing of the day. He wandered ever downward, trying as best he could to remain on the main path. Occasionally he took a wrong turn that would lead to a dead end or off into a passage too narrow for the elf, each time losing hours and maybe even days, while his spirit slowly wasted away.

He ate sparingly from the scant foodstuffs he had brought along with him, mostly consisting of honey laced way bread and a little dried meat. It was not possible to provision himself from the Temple kitchen for this trip, so he had to make do with what he could grab quickly, and this meager fare had been all he could muster. One large handful of overripe elderberries added to the mess, stripped in haste from the overgrown brambles at the tunnel's entrance.

Water was not a problem, as many springs had seeped through the walls and ceilings of the old broken tunnel, pooling in the blackness and running ahead of him on their path down out of the mountain. Turbin drank deeply and often from these pools, knowing that water at

least would keep him going and let him extend his provisions a little. The water however teased him and added to his confusion. As the trickles of water sought the fastest way down to the sea, they would often head off into a side tunnel that led to nowhere, and offer Turbin no guidance in his flight.

At one particularly bad moment, Turbin again summoned the vision of his Master to plead with him for help. The contact came quickly, as the Master was anxiously waiting to hear his news. The Dark Wizard was obviously pleased with his thrall, and was unable to contain his excitement during the exchange.

"I will send a special servant to meet you at the seaside entrance to the Old Way," the Dark Wizard told Turbin as he broke the link.

"Wait, Master!" Turbin cried out. The link faded slowly in and out as he spoke. "Please Master, send me something to guide me through the maze of passages that have taken over the road through the mountain," he pleaded. "I am weakened by my task, and I am having a difficult time finding my way."

"How is it you light your way?" The Dark One questioned.

"I carry a rune lamp from the elven city, My Lord"

"Hold the lamp tightly between your wrists and I shall make it guide you true."

Turbin clasped the oblong lamp firmly between the obsidian bands on his wrists. The soft golden light of the elven lamp was immediately extinguished. In its place, beginning as a dull red shimmer in the hollow place between his arms, a ribbon of bright, blood red fire swept down the path before him, etching its signature into the very stone as it passed, casting the tunnel in a haunting

fiery glow. The quartz stone shattered violently, breaking the bond between Master and Slave, and as it did, the red path on the floor in front of the tormented elf slowly began to fade to black.

Desperate against losing his way again, and becoming totally blind in the what he felt had to be the heart of the earth, Turbin snatched up his precious bundle and raced after his quickly receding guide. The pace was almost more than he could bear, given his condition and the rubble that still occasionally blocked the tunnel before him. His internal drive to freedom from the bondage of a lifetime was all that kept him moving.

Onward and onward the red glow pulled Turbin. On through the maddening darkness, even when the pain in his legs threatened to drag him to his knees. Now on bleeding hands and knees, scrambling through low passageways that appeared freshly hewn by the blast of the red messenger that was sent before him. Now stumbling on again wildly, back on his feet, while the blackness in his heart threatened to smother him and pull him into nothingness. On, endlessly on, a race against the death that the coming of his private night would surely bring.

As the last trace of red fire faded from the path in front of him, Turbin fell hard to his knees, sure of defeat at last. He slowly raised his head to look forward, straining his eyes against the darkness. Far ahead of him, through the inky blackness, Turbin thought he saw the twinkling of stars. As he lay panting on the cold, wet stone, the sound of surf crashing into the rocks far away drifted to him. Struggling painfully to his feet, with first one tentative step, then another, he finally stepped free of the tunnel and stood alone, on a wide ledge high above the pounding surf, hundreds of feet

above the ocean, free of the false night that had held him captive for untold hours, and surrounded by countless pinpoints of starlight.

Turbin's sudden exodus from the cramped spaces of the tunnel into the openness of the world beyond filled his head so quickly that he reeled with the rush of it. Fearing he would swoon and plunge to his death on the rocks in the surf below, he staggered back against a large boulder standing beside the entrance to the Old Way; at least he thought it was a boulder—.

"Hello there, elf," a deep voice rumbled coldly behind him.

Turbin practically jumped out of his skin, as the boulder moved around him and momentarily blocked out the stars.

"Who? What?"

"Our Master sent me, puny one," the void above him seemingly spoke again, deep, rumbling, practically moving the earth with its words.

As the darkness swept past him and the stars reappeared, Turbin vaguely remembered this voice from a time long past, a time of great pain.

"Gurkinshka," he spat bitterly at last, remembering the pain that the beast inflicted on him the last time they met. When the magic fire bound him to the Master through the black bands of pain he wore around his wrists. "Worm!"

"Why yes of course you pitiful slave, I'm glad you remember me."

The great dragon reared to his full height, flexing his body to ease the stiffness he felt from his long vigil at the tunnel's entrance. His enormous wings fanned the air around them, causing great clouds of dirt and rocks to be raised, and nearly blasting Turbin off the face of the cliff.

"What – ptah, ptah – brings you here – thtew – out of your hole in the South? Ptah. Why do you come?" The elf asked finally, spitting small rocks and sand from his mouth as he spoke.

"Why to deliver the stone to My Lord, as if you didn't already guess." Gurkinshka moved closer to the little elf, causing all the stars to again be snuffed out of the sky. "Now hand it over to me so that I may get off this blasted cliff. I have been waiting here far too long, risking discovery by the humans that fish the waters below. For two days and nights, since you stole the Stone from the elves I have been stuck here. I warned him about using elves in matters as important as this. Elves have absolutely no sense of direction under the earth, and are completely helpless in the dark. I don't know why he did not just fly on my back into the Valley of the Elves, and snatch the Stone from it's pitiful tower in the first place."

Both of them knew that their Master was not able to leave his prison. The dragon simply liked the sound of his own voice, and to express his apparent superiority over the Dark Wizard – in this small thing at least. As the great flying worm spoke his litany, Turbin slipped out from under the beast and edged his way across the cliff. The ledge narrowed to the point where both elf and dragon would not fit. Here Turbin felt somewhat safer, although the ever present danger of falling to his death on the rocks below weighed against the building anger against the dragon that stood before him.

"I will deliver the package to my Lord without any help from you worm!" Turbin announced, trying his best to sound confident and defiant.

The dragon hissed his answer slowly, his hot, putrid breath pouring over Turbin, nearly buckling the elf's knees. He continued

moving down the narrow sliver of rock ledge, closer to where Turbin stood quivering. "You will release the bundle to me you little fly, or I will tear your flesh from your bones, and crush your remains beneath me, just for the pleasure in it!"

Turbin felt his options were narrowing as fast as the rock ledge beneath his feet. The ledge in this direction was just about spent. The dragon was not about to let him hand carry the package to the one who could release him from his bond and his pain. His plans of fifty years were not turning out like he had imagined they would.

"NOW ELF!" Gurkinshka thundered, stomping his massive rear foot down on the soft stone beneath him. The ledge rumbled and began to collapse, sending sand, rocks, ledge, and finally dragon tumbling toward the surf below.

The dragon was caught off guard by the fragile nature of the cliff, but he was a creature of the air, and was able to catch himself effortlessly, avoiding a nasty fall.

Turbin clutched frantically at the rock wall behind his back, as he watched the cliff at his feet slowly crumble into the abyss. As he scrambled to save his skin, the bundle that was his future, his very life, fell from his grasp and plunged toward the sea.

The beast was on it in a flash, skewering the package in a mighty talon and then quickly winging his way south in the darkness, back to his lair in the home of his Master. All Turbin could do was to stare in anguish, as the great black featureless shape faded into the night, casting a haunting laugh into the darkness behind him.

Night faded away ever-so-slowly into dawn, as the purple blackness of the sky was muted into gray, and then finally into a faint cobalt blue. The first rays of the golden-red sun slipped over

the wave-crested horizon and warmed Turbin as he stood frozen in fear with his back against the cold stone of the cliff, afraid almost to breathe with the fear of falling.

As he looked down beyond the remnants of ledge beneath his feet, the reality of the situation grasped him tightly around the throat. The fall would certainly relieve him of his pain, it would most certainly relieve him of his life, and painfully, if the shards of cliff staring up at him were as dagger-sharp as they appeared from this distance.

Lightheadedness threatened to take over Turbin's senses, as his severe fear of heights was now amplified by the apparent hopelessness of the situation. Here he was, high on the chalky cliffs above the swirling waters of the Eastern ocean, with no chance of being rescued. If by some chance he were rescued, if his saviors were elves, he would most certainly be put to a horrible death for what he had done in the valley above. If he were found by humans – well everyone knew that they were barbarians, and his fate would again be sealed.

Pulling all his strength together, all the long years of inner torment gathered together into a burning desire to end his pain, Turbin forced the fear of falling down into the depths of his existence. He edged slowly across the cliff face, easing back along the shattered stone, clutching to the remnants of the ledge, back to the entrance of the tunnel. Just as he reached the opening, the last of the shelf beneath his feet began to crumble. As the tearing of stone threatened to release the cascade of fear waiting just beneath the surface of his awareness, Turbin forced himself to leap toward the gaping hole, and landed half-in and half-out of the opening in

the side of the mountain.

Lurching further into the protectiveness of the Old Way, Turbin at last was safe from falling, safe from death on the rocks below. All of his anger, his pain and his fear were released at once in a blood curdling scream that ripped through the silence of the morning. There was only one path for Turbin now, and that path led due south, beyond the Broken Land, beyond the Southern wastes, deep into the earth, where pain had first bonded him to the Dark Wizard. The only release to his searing inner pain was there – and the Stone had been delivered, as promised, even if not by Turbin himself.

“I will have my freedom,” he whimpered softly, drifting into exhausted sleep. “I will be set free... I must reach the Master and then I will be set free...”

* * *

In the waters far below, fishing boats manned by men both young and old from the villages along the shore were plying the waters for their supper. No one heard the agonizing scream from far above. No one noticed the predawn struggle between dragon and elf that ended with the theft of the Stone by the mighty dragon. The little boats moved down the nearly deserted coast in silence, dragging aboard their catch and going on about the business of a normal day. For many others, the day was anything but normal.

Fourteen

"Shhhh, get down!"

Alexandra and Peter lay quietly in the dense brush just below the level of the road, as another small group of soldiers passed noisily by above them. The moon was in crescent and was dodging in and out of clouds that threatened rain.

"This is really getting ridiculous Peter!" Alexandra silently picked at her brother. She was obviously not fond of diving blindly into the brush whenever they heard anyone approaching from either direction. This time they had not even been able to get back to their feet before the next group came by.

When the soldiers had passed out of earshot, Peter turned to face his sister through the weeds. "You're right Alex. I'm getting tired of all this myself. Who would have thought that there would be this many soldiers out looking for us. But what choice do we have? Should we just let ourselves be caught?"

"It wouldn't be so bad if it were only the soldiers," Alexandra added, climbing out of the brambles and ignoring her brother's

questions, "but so far we've been driven off the road by three drunken fisherman returning to the docks, an old man driving an ox cart half full of vegetables, and a single horseman on what must have been extremely urgent business, racing along at a speed that would surely kill him if he should fall. We barely got out of the way of that one, he came on so fast. And we still don't know for sure that they are looking for us!"

Peter joined his sister now on the roadside, stumbling to his feet and brushing the dirt and sticks from his bundle of elven treasures. "We have been over and over this. They are looking for us. I don't know why, but it cannot be for good," Peter sighed. "You know Sis," he continued, "I almost lost these cloaks twice tonight. In the dark, you can hardly see them at all. Once I had to grope around on my hands and knees until I just stumbled into them. Maybe we should put them on and..."

"No! Absolutely Not! I will not be caught dead in one of those robes after... I don't know why you even brought them with you, I..."

"OK, OK, it was just an idea," Peter replied sullenly. "I just thought that they might help us hide, at least a little. They do appear to be made to keep the wearer hidden."

* * *

The thirty minute walk from the twin's cottage to the main road had been uneventful. This was not the case however for the road that wound around the lake and headed east toward Hilldale. What would normally have taken the twins just over two hours to travel on foot, tonight took them almost four.

The road was thick with soldiers on horseback apparently searching for them, merchants returning to their homes, and the first

of the late night revelers returning from the Bale and Block, a local watering hole and inn at the edge of the lake, about halfway between Alnen and Hilldale where the road splits off either toward Hilldale, or crosses the bridge over the Thelan River, on the road to Tibouli Abbey at the Eastern end of the Lake.

The twins had waited in one of the small sheds on the edge of their property until well after nightfall, then headed out on the main road down to the lake. They had planned to pass the Bale and Block before midnight and then on to Hilldale before morning. In Hilldale, Harmon Englot and his wife would certainly know if Molensa and Bairden had passed through on their way to the quarries at Firerock. Alexandra even sheltered some hope that they would run into their guardians in the house of their long time family friends.

Three figures were ambling toward them on the road ahead, just out of sight, but not out of earshot. "Quick Peter, over here," Alexandra nearly pulled her brother off the road. The twins took shelter behind an old wooden building that had served as a roadside vegetable stand for many years.

"...and did you see what that worm did to Brother Joel?" one of the men was saying. "Why he smashed him right in the face with the butt end of his walking stick. That surely was not warranted."

"It just isn't right," a second man offered. "I don't care if he IS from Solenta. That doesn't give him the right to treat us like animals. We run the finest Abbey in the province, and the Archbishop knows it."

From their discussion, the twins surmised that three men were monks from Alnen, and had also obviously been down at the Bale and Block, partaking in a bit of ale or wine. They also seemed very angry

at something, or more correctly at someone.

"That Bannis sure came to power out of nowhere," the third priest added to the discussion. "I served in the parish at Court for ten years and I never once ran into him, or heard his name. It seems to me quite odd that he should just suddenly arrive and have such an influential position as he has."

"Yes, it cannot be right," the first priest added as they faded slowly down toward town, out of earshot of the children. "Rumor is that he came up from the South, from down among... down where..."

The voiced faded away, and the priests were finally gone.

"Did you hear that Alex?" Peter's eyes were wide. "They were talking about Bannis, that priest from Solenta that came to dinner at our house with Brother Cadresean. They don't even trust him, and they're monks!"

"I don't like this Peter," Alexandra said quietly, coming out from behind the old shed and staring after the monks in the darkness. "I don't like this at all."

By the time the two fugitives had reached the Bale and Block, the inn had just closed down for the night. Most of the patrons had left and gone their own way – many of them sending the twins diving into the ditch as they passed – and the only lights that still shone were the candles in the windows of overnight guests, and the proprietor, who lived in a room in the back. It had to be well past two in the morning, though neither twin had any real idea of the time.

There were however two men sitting silently on a bench in the darkened porch of the inn, completely hidden by the shadows as the

twins approached silently up the road, the crescent moon hidden behind some heavy clouds.

"I'll say it agin'. I don't think there are any missin' children, I tell ya," a gruff, half drunk voice suddenly bellowed out from the darkness of the porch.

The twins bolted off the road and into the heather. If the man had not suddenly spoken, they would have been right on top of them in a matter of moments.

"What was that? Did you hear that?" Asked the second man, in a much higher voice, and one not nearly as thick with drink as the first.

"What was what?" The first man questioned. "I didn't hear nuthin', and I don't see nuthin' but dark, dark and more dark. I told you Aron it was jus' plain stupid to sit out here in the dark. An now the bottle's all gone, an' that old fool innkeeper ain't 'bout to open up an' sell 'nother one..."

"Quiet you fool! I'm sure I heard something coming up the road. This could be our ticket out of this place. If these are them children, we won't have to go back to that scum Randi ever again. Come on!"

The man named Aron rose quickly and bounded lightly over the rail and onto the dusty road. The first man stumbled up and nearly fell down the stairs in his attempt to follow. Both men were dressed all in dark clothing and were almost invisible against the shadowed porch, even though the children knew exactly where they were standing.

"*Peter, they've seen us,*" Alexandra spoke in Peter's mind, her silent voice shaking with fear.

"No, Alex," Peter replied silently. "They're still not sure we're here. The one named Aron thinks he heard something that's all. Now keep still."

Aron whispered something to the other man, then the two of them split off to the shadows on either side of the road. Aron moved off to the left side, silently, swiftly like a hunter. The other man was clumsy and mumbled constantly to himself, as he stumbled down the rough road edge on the right side, directly in front of the twins.

"I don't see nuthin' Aron. You were jus' imaginin' it were them kids." The first man muttered, just loud enough to be heard by his companion across the road – and by the twins.

"You may be right Jackie," Aron answered, barely loud enough to be heard. "But let's walk down the road a ways first. Keep a sharp eye out to your side. If it is them kids, they's worth a small fortune to that Priest."

As Aron moved in and out of the shadows on the road opposite the twins, something flashed in his hand and caught Peter's eye. *"Alex, don't even breathe,"* he said silently. *"The one named Aron has a knife or a short sword in his hand."*

Peter didn't have to see her to know the look of terror in his sister's eyes. She had seen the glint of steel in the pale light of the crescent moon as well, and knew exactly what it meant.

The big man named Jackie was nearly on top of the twins when he caught his foot in a rut in the road and slammed down onto the dirt. "Ooof! Gods be damned! I thinks I broke my ankle Aron!" Jackie hollered out to his partner in the dark.

The drunkard had fallen in the roadway, not more than two arm lengths from where the faces of the twins were hidden in the thick

heather. Alexandra could smell his ale-tainted breath. Peter clutched awkwardly at the elven sword pinned beneath him on the ground. Sharp heather poked at the back of Peter's bare neck, forcing him to squirm just a little where he lay.

"You big clumsy oaf!" Aron cursed as he crossed the road to help his portly friend, sliding his knife back into the sheath at his side. "Get up you lazy sloth and keep lookin' for them kids. You ain't hurt nothin' but your pride. Now get up!" A swift boot in the side brought a low grunt from Jackie, and slowly the man rose to his unstable legs and he continued to wobble down the road.

"I know it's broke Aron, I can feel it wiggle when I walks." Jackie protested in vain as he staggered on into the darkness, away from the hidden twins.

"It ain't broke I tell ya." Aron hollered as he walked with less enthusiasm back to his side of the road. "If it was broke, you would still be a laying in a heap in the dirt back there. You sure wouldn't be walkin' or nothin' with it. An' besides, as much as you drank tonight, everything wiggles when you walks."

The two men continued to argue back and forth as they walked away down the road in the darkness. They seemed to be as intent on their argument over broken bones and the nature of human anatomy as they were on finding the twins. Peter and Alexandra heaved a unified sigh of relief as their would be captors drifted out of sight around the first bend in the road.

"OK, let's go." Peter ordered, a little too soon for Alexandra's comfort.

"Not yet Peter," she replied, "we should wait a while longer. See if they come back."

"And what if they do," Peter insisted, "and they take up their positions on the porch again. We'll never get by them. We'll still be laying here come morning for all the world to see."

Alexandra gave in under protest, and the two of them rose quietly, stealing their way up past the inn, keeping to the shadows, and looking over their shoulders at every noise behind them.

* * *

The next hour went by without interruption. The twins managed to shake a little of the fear that had gripped them at the inn, and even stopped for a brief moment to eat a bit of the food that they had brought with them from home. It wasn't much, just some black bread and dried meat along with nuts from the winter stores, but when washed down with some ale, both children felt warmed and more confident.

The two talked quietly together as they walked on into the night.

"Peter," Alexandra asked softly. "If we don't find Molensa and Bairden in Hilldale, will we go on to the quarries at Firerock?"

"No," Peter answered thoughtfully. "We know that the trip to the quarries was just a ruse. We have to ask about Alpenvail, or Kalystra. See if Harmon knows where we can find these places. There has to be someone who knows how to get there if he doesn't. Maybe we can ask at one of the hunting lodges that Bairden took us to when we were kids. Maybe someone there will--"

"Someone's coming! Get Down!" Alexandra rushed a warning, cutting her brother off mid sentence. This time they were not fast enough. The men on horseback rounding the corner behind them had definitely seen them. Peter exchanged a frightened look with his

sister, and they both leaped over the ditch off the road and into the woods. "Run!" he shouted, more for the sake of doing something than prompting his sister into action, Alexandra had already pulled away from him and was ahead by two paces – lengthening her lead in the enfolding darkness of the trees.

The two of them ran blindly into the woods, away from the road and into the protective arms of the forest. Both children could see better in the dark than most, and they managed to avoid the head high branches that threatened to smash them silly and leave them lying helpless on the ground.

They were chased for some time by the two men on horseback. Their pursuit was forced to abandon their horses and follow on foot, lighting torches to illuminate their path. The torchlight was an eerie orange glow, and danced around the trees behind the twins, serving to drive them faster into the unknown darkness of the woods to avoid being captured.

At one point Alexandra was certain she heard the men call out to her and Peter by name. When she told this to Peter, he doubled his efforts and both of them pulled further away from the men coming on from behind.

The sounds of pursuit slowly faded, finally dying off completely, and still the twins ran. They continued to wind and twist their way into the blackness of the forest, as if the trees themselves could shelter and protect them from all that had transpired this day. Only when they could go no further, the adrenaline in their bodies totally used up, did they drop to the forest floor to rest.

After a few moments, Peter spoke first, his heart still pounding

in his ears. "Alex, do you think those were the same men that we saw at the inn?"

"Who else could they have been? They must have picked up our trail and followed us up the road. Once they were on horseback they would have been able to catch up to us with ease."

"Do you think they have given up?"

"Not on your life," Alexandra replied defiantly.

"They knew our names."

"I know," Alexandra was solemn. "We could be in even more trouble than we realize."

After they had rested for a few moments, Peter stood and offered his hand to his sister still sitting on the damp earth. "We need to keep moving Sis."

He helped her up and they walked on deeper into the darkness. They had no particular direction in mind just now, but only the thought that they must keep moving foremost in their minds.

Fifteen

Karoel and Rendil started walking down a trail behind the cabin, just after first light. There was just enough daylight to see the path as the two walked along, the woodsman with his axe hanging at his side.

"Where are you taking me?" Asked the old wizard.

"I have something to show you. It's only a short walk, maybe thirty minutes and we will be back. It's important."

They continued up the trail into the forest, headed away from the cabin and up a small hill. Just then the sound of horses and shouts of men could be heard coming from behind them in the clearing back through the woods.

"The elves!" both men shouted in unison.

Karoel drew his axe and started back through the trees. Rendil joined him a few paces down the path, both men moving quickly but silently as they could toward the cabin.

When the two of them reached the edge of the clearing, they saw

a score of mounted, armed horsemen riding wildly around the little cabin. The riders were being showered with arrows from the opposite side of the clearing, where two of the elven guard had taken a defensive position between a couple of large cedar trees. Here they could fire their deadly arrows and stay clear of the horsemen and their long swords. Many of the soldiers had already fallen, and the chaos of battle had taken hold around the cabin.

The woodsman and wizard were just about to rush into the melee, when a soft female voice from the woods on their right froze them in their tracks. "Wait, please stay here," she insisted. Lynntania and Aldaine were almost invisible in their traveling cloaks, standing motionless against the shadowed trees. Aldaine had a white arrow knocked in her bow, resting quietly at her side.

"But we must help them. They will be killed!" Karoel insisted, brandishing his axe. The scar under his left ear was fire red with his growing rage.

"Yes, they will. They are prepared to die," Lynntania said softly. "It is better that they die here and we escape, then we are all killed and our quest is ended." Lynntania held two pale green pendants by their chains in her hand at her side – they gently swayed back and forth as she spoke.

"But we must fight them!" Karoel was almost shouting now. "We can take these soldiers. There are only twenty of them. We can rush them from behind, take them by surprise. We can—"

"No," Lynntania was firm. "My guards have sacrificed themselves so that we may escape. We must leave them now so that their sacrifice is not in vain."

On this she slipped the elfstones into a pouch in her tunic,

turned and moved off into the woods, along the trail that Karoel and Rendil had earlier taken. Aldaine was close behind her Princess, her arrow returned to its quiver and her bow lightly slung over her shoulder. The elves moved steadily away from the grizzly scene behind them and quickly faded from view. The two men stood alone at the edge of the trees and watched them go.

"Come Karoel," Rendil touched the big man on the arm. "It is already too late. The Princess is right, we can't help them."

"I can't let the soldiers search the cabin Rendil. My notes and journal are there and if they can decipher them, they will know everything. I must at least try to destroy the journal." Karoel started to enter the clearing, when Rendil pulled him back.

"Let me help my friend," Rendil offered. "Stand away."

The old wizard pulled up the sleeves of his cloak, and held both hands out at arms length in front of his face. He started to chant, quietly at first and then louder and louder, while at the same time drawing intricate intertwining patterns in the air in front of him with his fingers. The shapes he formed slowly became visible and then seemed to take on a life of their own. They danced back and forth between his hands, first orange, then red, then finally bright white. The runes burned hot with wizards fire. Rendil spoke one final word of command and the sigil exploded forth with a flash that raced out and engulfed the side of the cabin closest to them.

Shouts went up from the men around and inside the cabin as it was quickly aflame, but no one had noticed that the fire had leapt forth from the edge of the woods. At the same time, a horrifying scream came to the two men from across the clearing. One of the elven guards had been caught, apparently the elves had exhausted their

arrows and gone forth with their short swords in hand. He had eviscerated his captor before going down. The two elves were no match for the mounted men with their heavy long swords, however they were doing their best to buy their Princess the time she needed to get away.

Both fell in minutes, but managed to take a good number of the horsemen with them, either by bow or sword. More than half of the Kings men lay dead or wounded. Both elves were now gone from their sanctuary between the trees, and more screams were emanating from inside the circle of soldiers that remained. These screams were not those of men however, but the painful death of the two valiant elves.

"Come Karoel, we can do no more here," Rendil spoke softly to his friend. "The Children are clearly in great danger if the Kings men are here."

The two turned their backs on the carnage at the cottage in the woods. Black smoke was billowing skyward and the heat of the magic-enhanced fire could be felt even from this distance. More screams could be heard from the elven guard as Karoel and Rendil now raced away to join the princess and her remaining guardswoman. Karoel swore to himself that the deaths of these valiant elves would be avenged. His commitment to their task was now stronger than ever, if that was at all possible.

The two men caught up to the elves in short order, and Lynntania allowed Karoel to take the lead. They continued up the trail, over a few hills and across a small creek, working their way higher into the hills behind Karoel's home.

After about thirty minutes, Karoel stopped at the base of a large tree, knelt and reached his arm deep into a hidden cavity at

its base.

"Here it is," Karoel said, pulling his arm from the hole. "I have kept the Stone of Almendon safely hidden away all these years, waiting for just this time." He presented a small bundle of cloth to the wizard, neatly wrapped and tied with string.

Rendil took the bundle and sat down cross legged on the ground. "This has been buried out here in the woods for what, twenty years? One of the most precious gems in the world, just stuffed into a hole in the earth?" He carefully unrolled the package and let it rest on his lap. There was one object sitting squarely in the center of the soft brown cloth. He raised it up held it between his thumb and forefinger, right before his face. "So this is the Stone of Almendon, removed from the Crown of the Triadine. Your father was wise beyond his years to take it when he had the chance."

"It's a beautiful piece of workmanship," Lynntania said quietly. "It was crafted by Silverbeard himself, with help from the Nordae. He was a craftsman with no equal among the dwarves."

"It is beautiful in its own way for sure. I don't think that anyone ever noticed my father replaced it in the crown," Karoel said quietly. "Certainly no one said anything while we were at Court. I'm sure if Leondis had ever suspected, he would have made a great fuss over it. And no, it was not buried here for twenty years, but it's been here ever since we determined that the twins were indeed the Children of The Prophecy."

"I'm not sure Leondis would have made a fuss anyway Karoel." Rendil offered. "I doubt that he even realizes the significance of what he calls the Crown of Solenta any longer. He sees it as the symbol of power over the Kingdom of Men, that's all. The greater

purpose of the Triadine is only a fairy tale in Solenta these days, and one not spoken of as its heresy in the eyes of the Church."

"The human King is a fool," spat Lynntania, "however we will use that to our advantage."

"Even so old friend," Karoel replied to Rendil, "I'm glad that we have at least this small part of the Triadine safely with us. If only your father could have secreted away the entire Crown and not just the key stone."

* * *

When Karoel, Rendil, and the two elves reached the edge of the woods behind the house of Bairden the stone cutter, they knew that they had arrived too late. Armed men were searching the barn and outbuildings, and sounds from inside the house indicated that a search was underway there as well. From the shouts coming from the farmhouse and the outbuildings, it did not seem that the searchers had found what they were looking for. It seemed most prudent for the little band of travelers to simply wait.

In a little more than a half an hour the men searching the house had left on horseback, and Rendil and Karoel came out of the woods to see what had been left behind. Lynntania and Aldaine waited quietly for them, hidden back in the trees.

The door to the kitchen was standing open. Rendil stepped slowly through into the destruction, with Karoel quietly coming in behind. "What a mess," Rendil remarked as the two of them surveyed the damage. "You go upstairs and search the sleeping rooms, I'll check out the root cellar and the barn. Search for any sign that the children or Molensa were here when the King's men arrived. We have to assume that Bairden is well on his way by now. Molensa was going to

stay and wait until the twins were safely away, then join him after a short stopover in Hilldale."

Karoel nodded and silently went into the main room of the house, walking through the kitchen door which was blocked open with debris. Rendil lifted the ring in the floor that opened the door to the root cellar. He descended the ladder and looked about by the light streaming in through the open hatch. All was quiet down here, and although the room had obviously been searched, it had not been destroyed as had the rest of the house. He started back up the ladder to the kitchen, when something caught his eye. Carved into the back of the cellar door, almost too faintly to be seen, was a single rune.

"Karoel, come down here!" Rendil shouted.

There was a sudden crashing of timbers in the room above. Rendil climbed partially out of the cellar doorway, just as it came crashing down on top of him, sending him into darkness.

* * *

When Rendil regained his senses, Karoel was standing at the top of the ladder, calling his name. Rendil's head was still spinning from the beating it took where the falling cellar door had cracked him, and the figure of his friend reeled above him like a specter.

"I'm too old for all of this," was all the wizard managed to say between moans.

"...and apparently one of the soldiers had stayed behind in ambush." Karoel was saying.

"What's that you say?" Rendil was rubbing his head with both hands and not really listening.

"One of the soldiers stayed behind," Karoel offered again. "He jumped me when I returned down the stairs as you called my name. I

turned my head toward the sound of your voice just in time to see him flying through the kitchen door toward me. Apparently he pushed the kitchen table over on top of the entrance to the cellar just before he jumped me."

"What happened?" Rendil asked, still somewhat dazed, but now making his way up the ladder and into the kitchen. "Where is the man now? I'd like to ask him a few questions."

"I'm afraid he is not going to be any use to us. He surprised me so completely that he was dead before I knew what had happened. I am sorry my friend. He will be able to answer no questions."

Karoel helped Rendil up out of the cellar and into the main room of the house. They had to cross under the kitchen door, now knocked completely off its hinges and askew across the opening. The Kings Guard was sprawled across the front door of the house, his own sword still grasped tightly in his right hand. Karoel's axe was clasped tightly in his left hand, however the head was buried to the handle in the man's chest. He did not die easily, and had spread blood over the floor and wall in a vain effort to get out the front door.

"I found no sign of the twins or of Molensa in the rooms upstairs," Karoel commented, as he retrieved his axe and wiped the blood on the guard's leggings. "The rooms were trashed just like down here, but no other signs of a struggle."

"Oh, that reminds me. I am getting old!" Rendil said quickly, and he turned back toward the kitchen, and the cellar door. "Here, carved into the bottom of the cellar door. Someone left a message."

The two men were back now in the kitchen, standing over the opened cellar door. Carved faintly into the wood there was a sigil. It was primitive, and one that Rendil had only just taught Molensa

and Bairden the night before, but its message was clear. The twins had not been captured by the soldiers. They at least had not been here when the soldiers came. Molensa had not been so lucky, as she had been hiding in the cellar when she carved this sign, and the additional markings to indicate that she had gotten away safely were not to be found.

"We have to get that dead guard out of the house. When the others come back for him, we must at least keep them guessing as to his fate," Rendil was speaking calmly to Karoel as he obliterated the rune on the door with his knife. Even though no one else would likely see it or understand it's meaning, you could never be too careful.

"Let's take him back with us out to the woods and figure out where to go from here," Karoel offered. Rendil agreed and the two of them went swiftly about the business of hauling the body and sword of the dead guard out the back door and across the field into the woods.

"If Molensa is caught by the Kings Guard, how do we know that she will not give us away?" The question was asked by Aldaine.

It was Karoel who answered. "I have been living here for fifteen years, keeping an eye on the twins and helping to keep them safe. Molensa and Bairden love these children as if they are their own. The sacrifice that Molensa made when they were born – giving up her own child passed off as the stillborn child of the Queen – should be proof enough that she will not betray our quest."

"Karoel is right Aldaine," Rendil added. "Molensa will protect the safety of the children with her life. She will not betray us to the King, under any kind of torture."

"Very well," Lynntania spoke directly to Rendil. "We must go now and find the children. They must be taken to the Council immediately,

as soon as we can find them."

"But we can't just abandon Molensa to the Kings Guard!" Karoel was livid. "They will torture her!"

"You said she will not speak," Aldaine questioned. "Are you now changing your position on the matter?"

"No, of course not. She will not betray us. It's just... She will be killed. She will..." Karoel's eyes glazed over slightly as his voice faded away. He thought of the sacrifice that the two elven guard had just made, the lost companions of the Princess standing in front of him, and grew somber. "You are right," he finally added. "Sacrifices must be made for the better good. We must go on. Where do we start? Where would the twins be if they were not in the house?"

"Lynntania," asked Rendil. "Can we scry them? We have the Stone of Almendon."

"I don't know if the Stone is close enough to pure elfstone to be used this far from Kalystra," Lynntania offered slowly, "but we will try."

* * *

The seeing was very difficult. It took all the magical energy the old wizard and the princess could manage to get even a dim view of the twins. They were together, this much they could see, but where they were was still uncertain. They seemed to be surrounded by a fog or smoke of some kind. They were afraid, but unhurt. The princess could often sense the feelings of her people through the power of the elfstones many of them wore around their necks, and was fairly certain that they were physically all right.

Lynntania tried once to speak to the twins. They apparently did not, or could not hear her. They had never been taught after all to

speak or hear across great distances. Even though they wore their own elfstones, they did not know how to draw on their power. Apparently the Stone of Almendon was not enough to let her get through to them.

The seeing was exhausting for Rendil. As the vision started to fade, the wizard rolled over backward onto the ground and sprawled out flat on his back. It was all he could do to roll onto his side and drag himself up against a log for support. The princess was much more adept at this kind of magic, and was already on her feet and preparing to leave.

"Aldaine and I will go back to my father's city and scry the children properly from there. Once we locate them, we will send an elven guard and have them brought back to Kalystra for safety. From there, we will all go on to Alpenvail to a meeting with the Council. I will try to speak with them every so often as we travel. This can be done without the aid of any additional magic if they are calm and attuned to their inner voice."

With her proclamation, the elven princess and her guard were quickly off along the edge of the human settlement, keeping to the forest so as not to be seen. They were completely out of sight in only a few moments, leaving the wizard and the woodsman alone with the dead King's Guard.

"Rendil?" Karoel was staring off absently into the trees where the two elven women had vanished. "If we can't start off after the twins right away, what do you say we go after news of Molensa? We can go into town and snoop around for news of her and Cadresean." He turned to face the wizard, eyes narrowing. "Besides, we don't yet know if the priesthood has been compromised. That is information we really have to have."

"You're as politically astute as ever old friend," Rendil answered, "and besides, in my current condition there is no way I could keep up with those elves. I need a horse. Mine is, or at least was, back at your cabin – well at least what is left of your cabin. I'm not up for all this traipsing around the countryside on foot." Rendil rose now, unsteady still on his legs, weak from channeling the magic in the Stone of Almendon. "Maybe you would like to go back to your place and get my horse for me. After all, I am an old man."

"Old man!" Karoel gave the wizard a playful slap on the back that nearly sent him toppling to the ground. "For an old man, you have the energy of ten younger men. Why I have seen men in their prime who could not keep up with you on foot or on horseback. Come on *old man* and let's go liberate a couple of the King's new horses. From the looks of the barns and corrals around the village, the soldiers have been taxing the good people of Alnen for their services again."

Under continued protests the gray-haired wizard finally agreed to go with the younger woodsman. They carried the King's Guard a short way into the woods, and dumped him in a shallow ditch, after Rendil first removed his overgarments and helm and placed them into his knapsack. On questioning from Karoel, Rendil replied simply that they may come in handy. The two men started off on foot toward Alnen proper, where they were sure to find the King's mens now loosening their belts and partaking of the local food and ale – without paying of course. They would also pay a visit to the Abbey by way of the kitchen door, and try to determine the whereabouts of Molensa and Cadresean. They were sure that Bairden had gotten off safely earlier in the morning and was well on his way to Firerock, then Kalystra.

Two simply dressed men walking the streets and back ways of Alnen did not attract attention in these times, so Rendil and Karoel drifted through the streets of the hamlet, stopping into taverns and inns to listen discretely to the soldiers talk of the days events, or asking questions at a few secret doors along the way. The general information they gathered was not particularly interesting, although they had finally heard the official reason that the King had sent so many troops to this part of the country. It seems that the rumors of war in the South had grown beyond rumors and a few of the scouts that the King had sent to the lands beyond the Great Rift had indeed returned and reported preparation for war. The King was mustering all able bodied men of the region to be trained as soldiers in defense of the Kingdom. The livestock was being confiscated to feed the new troops, and a major portion of this fall's harvest was to be sent along to Solenta after it was brought in. A number of the King's men were being left behind to ensure that these last orders were followed out completely. It also seemed that many young men were being passed over for military service, as long as their fathers were able to pay the necessary taxes directly to the King's Guard who were doing the recruiting.

The most interesting bit of information was overheard just after midnight, as Karoel was discussing the days events quietly with a large man dressed in forest clothes, seated in a dark corner of one of the more rowdy drinking establishments in town. A group of local guardsmen, working directly for Lord Berrol at his Keep in Alnen, were well into their ale and talking loudly at a table near the center of the room.

"An' I says it ain't right! They ain't no better at soldierin'

or at guardin' then we is, jus' 'cause they lives in the same city as the King!" The guard making this statement was now standing, or at least trying to stand, and was waving a heavy ale mug around in the air in front of him.

"Sit DOWN Eron!" another man at the table insisted. "The place is crawlin' with Solentians."

"I ain't gonna sit, an' I ain't gonna give up my duty to no Solentian toads. If there's political prisoners to guard in my Lords dungeons, then I ought to be the one who guards 'em. Why should we leave the work in the dungeon to them worms and then go chasing all over the countryside after some fool lost kids? I ain't no truant officer, I am the Head Jailer for the High Lord hisself!"

With that last proclamation, the now fully inebriated jailer raised himself up as straight and as tall as he was able, then spun on his heel to face the doorway. He then promptly passed out and fell like a beech tree to lie face down in the filth on the tavern floor. The King's Guard who had risen to accept this challenge, roared with laughter and turned back to their ale and their women.

Karoel and Rendil had heard plenty. The twins were still on the lamb, and the King's men that were searching for them had been joined by the local soldiers from the Keep. This would make things all the more difficult, since there were almost a hundred men in the service of the Lord in Alnen, and they were locals who knew the countryside well. Even more interesting than the fact that the twins were still on the loose, was the news of political prisoners in the dungeons and the fact that the locals were not being allowed in to see them. This could only mean that these political prisoners were known to the Lord's Guard, and that might mean Molensa and CadreSean.

Rendil had been sitting in the opposite corner of the room from Karoel and his companion, and had been nursing the same mug of ale most of the evening. He waived the innkeeper over to settle his bill – the main portion being the lubricant that had plied the news from the Lord's Guard at the big center table – and signaled to Karoel to meet him outside. Karoel leaned close to his friend and spoke a few quiet words, clasped his arm tightly, then rose to join Rendil on the street in front of the inn.

"Marion has been to the Abbey," Karoel spoke of news from his friend. His eyes were set deeply into his now furrowed brow. "There has been no news from CadreSean since he left for our meeting at Bairden's home. Marion asked as many questions as he dared without rousing suspicion, but no one knew anything. Since CadreSean had been last seen with Bannis, it was assumed that he joined the Solentian Priest on his trip into the field to see Lord Berrol. Berrol however returned from his hunting trip today, and neither Bannis nor CadreSean were with him.

"I do hope the good priest has managed to stay clear of all this and is making his way to Firerock. I fear however that he has not, and all is not well. There is no way we are going to get into the dungeon to verify if the political prisoners are Molensa and CadreSean or not. Let's procure ourselves some mounts and go after the twins instead. If they are being held prisoner, Marion and the others will be able to find out better than we can. I'll set them to it, and we can be off."

"Don't forget the horses. I'm not going any further on foot this night," complained Rendil.

"No worries *old man*," Karoel replied.

Preview Ends

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Dedication

To Haidee, who provided the inspiration for me to complete this novel, which was more than two decades in the making. Your support and confidence in my ability to complete the series and bring these books to print made it all possible.

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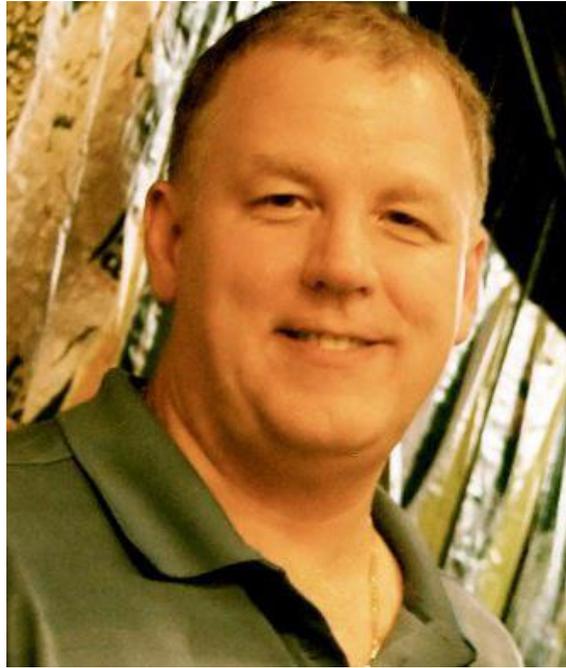
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About the Author



Timothy Bond is an American living in Penang, Malaysia.

He often travels to the Upper Aren on weekends, where he has a condominium at Eagles Reach.

When he is not writing, he can be found paddling his canoe on Lake Estonan or running the rapids of the Lower Estonan River.

Timothy is currently planning a hike through the Sikyu and Lumin Mountains, so he will be out of touch from civilization for approximately eight months after the release of this, his first book.

He has often spoken of joining the order of Grenadine Monks and serving at the Abbey in Caergana, where he could live out his life in quiet scholarship – either that or be an astronaut.

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